

# Where is Biblical Bethsaida?

By Bryan Windle

Everyone loves a good mystery! In the world of biblical archaeology there are many mysteries to solve, one being the location of the town of Bethsaida. Lost to history centuries ago, two sites are currently the leading candidates as the true location of this biblical town. This article will explore the evidence for the two leading candidates, et-Tell and el-Araj, to determine which site is the likely location.

## Criteria for Bethsaida

Before beginning, it is important to examine the descriptions in the Gospels and other ancient writings to define what we should look for.

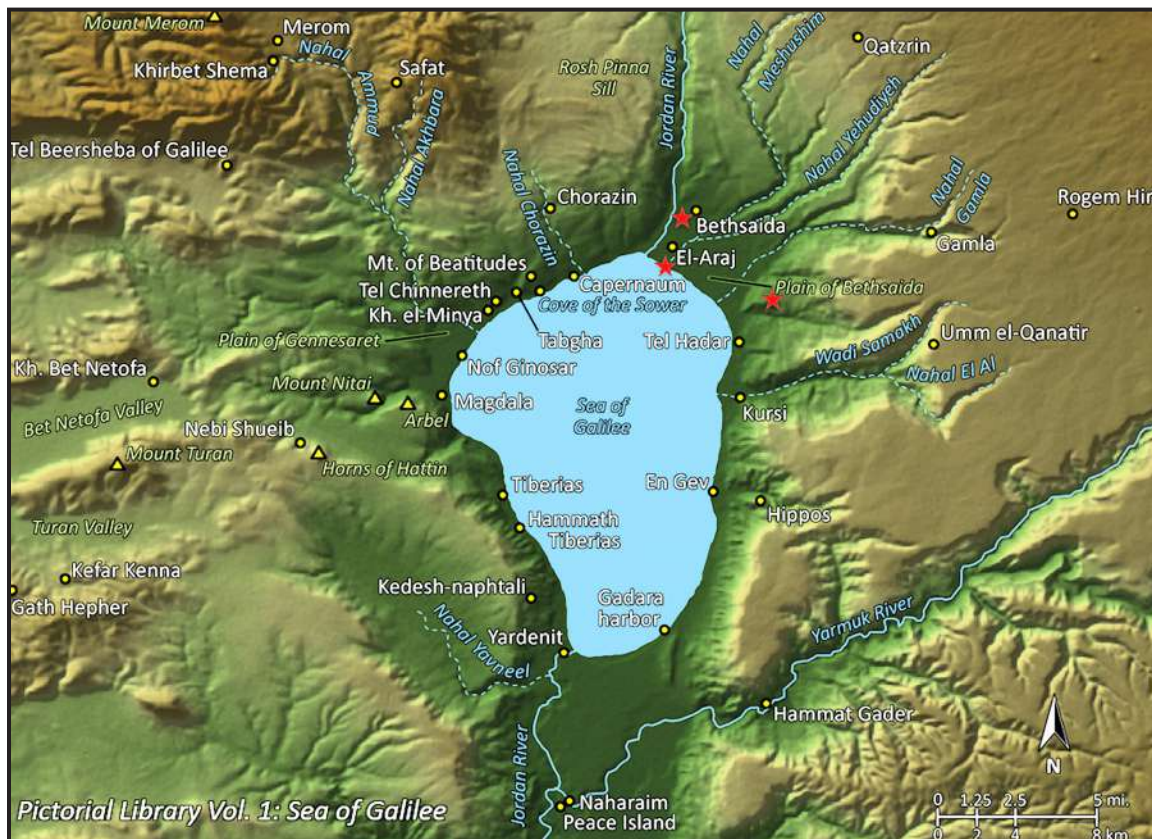
**Geography:** Located on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee...

- Mark 6:45 says, “Immediately he [Jesus] made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida...” implying that the village was on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.
- When Jesus pronounced his woes on the villages that had not responded to his message, he specifically centered out Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, which would indicate these three were relatively close to each other. Thus, Bethsaida should be found on the northern end of the Sea of Galilee.
- After the feeding of the five thousand, which Luke locates near Bethsaida, the disciples got into a boat and “started

across the sea to Capernaum” (Jn 6:17). Since Capernaum is on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, this would place Bethsaida on its northeast shore.

**Topography:** Located near a desolate hill or mountain...

- According to Luke 9:10–17, the feeding of the five thousand took place near Bethsaida. Matthew and Mark’s Gospels state that this event occurred in a “desolate place” (Mt 14:13, Mk 6:35), while John records that it occurred on a mountain or hill (Jn 6:3)
- A plain would also be located nearby, as Josephus describes in the battles he fought nearby.<sup>1</sup>



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**Map of the Sea of Galilee** shows the locations of et-Tell (labeled as Bethsaida) and el-Araj, the two leading candidates as the site of Bethsaida.



**Archaeology:** Artifacts/structures found related to fishing, Jewish and Roman occupation in the first century, and a Byzantine church...

- Artifacts related to fishing—Bethsaida literally means, “house of fish,”<sup>2</sup> so we should expect to find artifacts and bones related to the fishing industry.
- Jewish artifacts from the first century—Bethsaida is described as a village (*kōmē* in Mk 8:23). The picture one gets reading the Gospels is that Bethsaida was a typical Jewish village, with people coming to hear the rabbi’s teaching and hoping that he would heal them (Mk 8:22).
- Roman artifacts from the first century—Josephus records that Herod Philip “provided the village of Bethsaida on lake Gennesaret with the dignity of a city, by increasing the multitude of its inhabitants and by the other honor of naming it Julias, the same name as Caesar’s daughter.”<sup>3</sup> Thus we should expect to find some structures of a typical Roman *polis* in the archaeological record.
- A Byzantine church—Bethsaida was the home of Philip, Andrew, and Peter (Jn 1:44). In 725 AD, Willabald, Bishop of Bavaria, described coming to Bethsaida and seeing a church that had supposedly been built over the house of Peter and Andrew.<sup>4</sup> While the discovery of a Byzantine church is not conclusive proof (it would only indicate that the Byzantines *thought* it was the location of Bethsaida), it would be one more piece of evidence.

## The Case for et-Tell

In 1838, Edward Robinson explored the area and identified et-Tell as Julias-Bethsaida. Excavations began there in 1987 under the direction of Dr. Rami Arav and his team. Over the past 30 years, the Bethsaida Excavations Project (BEP), as it is known, has unearthed the remains of a significant Iron Age city. The site also

has evidence of occupation during the Hellenistic, Hasmonean, Herodian and Early Roman periods, as well as in the later Mamluk and Ottoman eras.<sup>5</sup> It was Arav’s identification of et-Tell as biblical Bethsaida that really drew attention to the site.

In his landmark article, “Bethsaida Rediscovered,” in the January/February 2000 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Rami Arav laid out his case for identifying et-Tell with Bethsaida. With the recent discoveries at el-Araj, another site that has been put forth as Bethsaida, Arav has doubled down on his belief that the true location of the hometown of Peter, Andrew and Philip (Jn 1:44) is at his site. Let’s analyze these claims in the light of the above criteria.

## Geography

Et-Tell is located 3 km (1.5 miles) from the shore of the sea of Galilee. How can a fishing village be so far inland from the water? Arav and his team explain this apparent problem through geology:

Up against the base of the et-Tell mound, we found lake clays containing crustacean microorganisms. At one time, Bethsaida was right on the water! Further work has refined that finding. At the base of the tell lie terraced deposits of gravel and boulders on top of the lake clays. Carbon 14 dating of bovine bones and other organic matter underneath the boulders has yielded a date between 68 and 375 C.E. We believe that a cataclysmic event, probably the major earthquake of 363 C.E., swept a vast amount of basalt boulders, rock, gravel, soil and artifacts across the plain on which et-Tell lies, cutting Bethsaida off from the shore.<sup>6</sup>

## Topography

It is difficult to determine what the topography looked like 2,000 years ago, especially if the cataclysmic earthquake proposed by the BEP team changed the landscape as much as they’ve

proposed. However, there are numerous plains and hills which would hold large numbers of people,<sup>7</sup> as required by the account of the feeding of the five thousand and the battles Josephus describes.



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**Fisherman’s House at et-Tell:** This structure at et-Tell has been dubbed, “The Fisherman’s House” by the excavators of et-Tell, due to the fishing artifacts found within. It dates to the Hellenistic era and may have been in use in the early Roman period.



**Top Right:** Aerial view of et-Tell, one of the sites proposed as biblical Bethsaida. It has been excavated continuously for over 30 years.

**Middle:** A decorated stone that the excavators of et-Tell have proposed is the lintel from the Roman-era temple at Bethsaida.

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### Archaeology

The BEP excavated a residential quarter at et-Tell, and unearthed two houses from the Hellenistic period that may have been still in use in Jesus' day. They dubbed one the Winemaker's House, because it had a wine cellar in which were found four large wine jars. The other house was named the Fisherman's House, because they discovered lead net weights, anchors, and fishhooks within it.<sup>8</sup> In addition, parts of Herodian oil lamps and stone vessels—the hallmarks of a Jewish village—were discovered at the site.<sup>9</sup>

The BEP has also uncovered a structure, which they identify as a temple, that they believe was repurposed to honor Julia-Livia, wife of Caesar Augustus, after whom the new Roman *polis* was named.<sup>10</sup> Arav describes it this way:

On the highest part of the mound, atop debris of the Iron Age city gate, there was an old Phoenician temple built in the second century B.C.E. (or perhaps late third century B.C.E.) that was in ruins during the time of Philip.<sup>11</sup> Philip rebuilt it and converted it into a Roman-style temple by diverting its opening from the north to the east and



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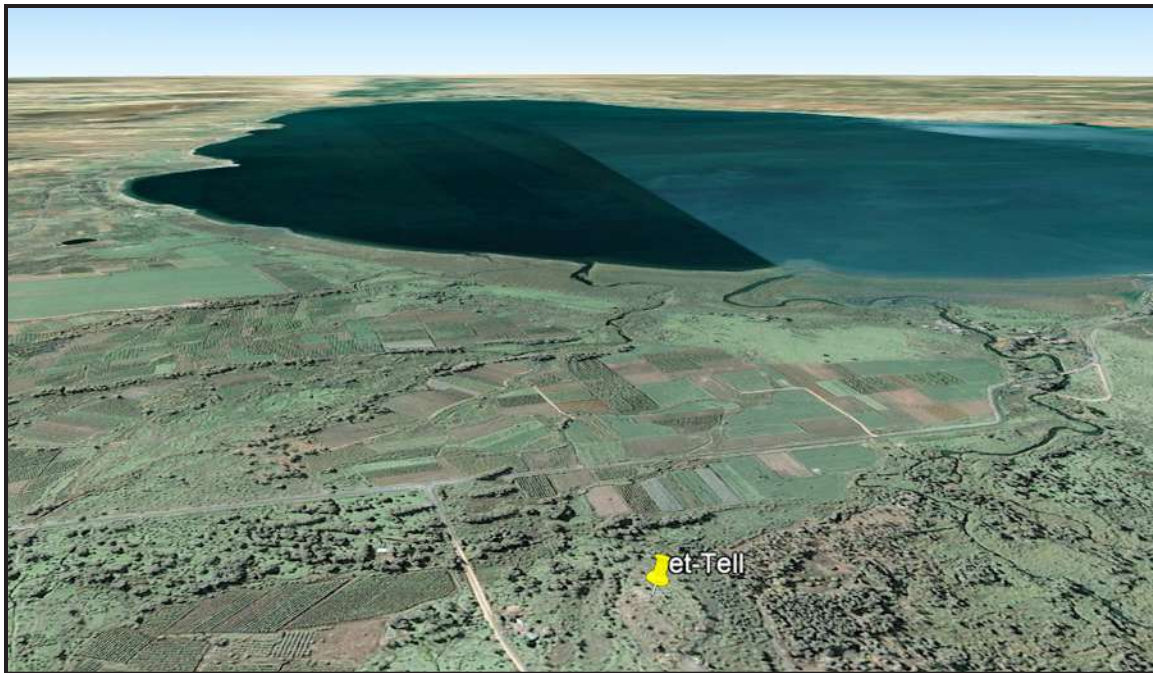
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Titus Kennedy

**Roman Temple at et-Tell.** This structure has been proposed as a Roman temple in connection with Bethsaida's transformation from a village to a Roman *polis*, as mentioned by Josephus. Many scholars have pointed out that this building lacks the size and grandeur of other Roman temples from the first century.





Google Earth

**Google Earth image showing the distance from the Sea of Galilee:** This image shows how far et-Tell is from the shore. Its distance (approximately 3 km) has always been a significant problem with the identification of et-Tell as Bethsaida, a fishing village.

decorating it with reliefs, dressed stones (the only structure at the site bearing dressed stones), and a marble floor, of which we have found a few remains. The lintel of the temple was decorated with meander and rosettes, recalling the decoration used by his father, Herod the Great, in the Jerusalem temple. These decorations followed the Augustan style and allude to bounty and prosperity, a propaganda hallmark of the *pax Romana*. Overall, the temple was discovered in a very poor state of preservation. Its dressed stones, floors, and decoration were almost all looted. It is likely that much of it was taken to Chorazin, situated only five miles west of Bethsaida.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, several religious objects were found around this structure, including two bronze incense shovels, a bronze ladle, two bronze bowls, a highly decorated oil lamp filler, and several high-quality jugs and juglets.<sup>13</sup> The excavators at et-Tell believe these to be evidence of an Imperial cult at the site.

All of this has led Rami Arav to make the bold claim that et-Tell “contains more evidence for its identification with Bethsaida than, for example, Capernaum, Cana, or Chorazin.”<sup>14</sup>

## Problems with et-Tell

Despite the discoveries at et-Tell, and the fact the Israeli government has declared the site to be Bethsaida, not all scholars agree. Todd Bolen summarizes the difficulties with this identification succinctly:

There are many problems with the identification of et-Tell with Bethsaida, including:

- Distance from the Sea of Galilee
- Elevation of the site, about 20 feet (7 m) above the level of the lake in ancient times

- Lack of ancient remains from the 1st century A.D., including significant pottery and coins
- Lack of buildings from the New Testament period. After 30 years of digging, excavators have identified only one Roman period house and another building they identify as a Roman temple. This latter identification is dubious.

In short, there is little to commend this site as being the Bethsaida mentioned by Josephus and the Bible.<sup>15</sup>

One of the main arguments against et-Tell being Bethsaida is that it is located 1.5 mi (3 km) from the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Despite the explanation put forth by the excavators at et-Tell, this continues to be a significant stumbling block to their identification. Mendel Nun, an expert on the ancient shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, counters the BEP’s explanation of a cataclysmic event separating et-Tell from the shore:

Shroder and Inbar’s theory contradicts the accepted geological explanation of how the shore of the lake was formed. It also contradicts the archaeological evidence. The creation of plains around the lake was, in fact, a result of erosion—mud and rocks were carried by streams through valleys to the lakeshore...The Beteiha Plain was created not by some catastrophic geological event, but by the erosion deposited by the Meshushim, Yehudiyeh and Daliyot Streams, the three streams that flow into the plain.<sup>16</sup>

As to the BEP’s discovery of lake clays containing crustacean microorganisms, it has been pointed out that, while the plain may have been under water between 2,700 and 1,800 years ago, this wide 900-year gap does not prove that it was under water in the narrow timeframe of the early first century.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, recent excavations at el-Araj have clearly demonstrated that it was occupied in the New Testament era. If the Bethsaida plain was

under water up to the base of et-Tell, as the BEP excavators claim, then el-Araj would have been submerged. The fact that it was not is significant evidence that the et-Tell was a considerable distance from the shore of the Sea of Galilee even in the first century.

For Steven Notley, a historical geographer and one of the men behind the el-Araj excavations, in addition to the distance from the shore of the Sea of Galilee, another significant issue is one of urbanization: there simply isn't evidence at et-Tell of a village becoming a Roman *polis* as described by Josephus.<sup>18</sup> In fact, the archaeological record at et-Tell during the first century seems to exhibit the opposite. Rather than evidence of a larger, more Romanized population, et-Tell appears to have become smaller, with fewer Roman artifacts. Using the BEP's own excavation reports, Notley has shown that the amount of fineware, ceramics and coins drops significantly in the Roman era. He concludes:

the dramatic decline in fineware is characteristic for the pottery, coins, and structural remains and indicates a visible decline in all aspects of material culture at the beginning of the Roman period. So, while two large Hellenistic private homes are prominently displayed,<sup>19</sup> only one small, poorly attested Roman period house is presented in the excavation reports. This meager state of affairs in the Roman period at et-Tell stands in irreconcilable conflict with the historical picture of Bethsaida-Julias in the first century of the Common Era, when Josephus reports the city at its zenith in size and prominence.<sup>20</sup>

In his response to Notley, Rami Arav points to the supposed Roman temple as evidence of Bethsaida's conversion from fishing village to Roman polis. Even this identification is questionable, as other scholars have pointed out that the structure the BEP team identified as a Roman temple lacks the fine stonework found in other Roman temples built during that era. Even Arav admits "the temple was discovered in a very poor state of preservation," theorizing that "Its dressed stones, floors, and decoration were almost all looted. It is likely that much of it was taken to Chorazin, situated only five miles west of Bethsaida."<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, there is no definitive archaeological evidence at Chorazin to support Arav's theory.

## The Case for el-Araj

In the 19th century, Gottlieb Schumacher countered Edward Robinson's claims that et-Tell was Bethsaida by suggesting that el-Araj was a better candidate, as it was not located so far away from the shore of the Sea of Galilee.<sup>22</sup> Early archaeological surveys produced conflicting reports. In 1987, Rami Arav conducted a shovel survey and a ground-penetrating radar survey at el-Araj and declared, "The excavations at el-Araj yielded only one stratum dating to the Byzantine period. Under that single stratum there was only sterile sand without any remains indicating human inhabitation."<sup>23</sup> In 1990, the Israel Antiquities Authority commissioned a surface survey of el-Araj, which found pottery and architectural elements that dated to the Late Hellenistic and Roman periods.<sup>24</sup> Since 2016, systematic excavations have been taking place at el-Araj under the direction of Professor Mordechai Aviam, of the Institute for Galilean Archaeology at Kinneret College, Israel, which have provided a better understanding of the site.

## Geography

El-Araj is located on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, approximately 650 ft (200 m) inland. In the spring, due to the winter rains, the sea level rises to its maximum seasonal level so that the water table rises and seeps into some of the lower portions of excavated squares. Mendel Nun believed that the water level of the Sea of Galilee is one meter higher today than it was in ancient times. Nun explained that, according to ancient sources, about a thousand years ago a second outlet for the Jordan River opened near Kibbutz Degania, and the older one silted up. This newer outlet was smaller and was unable to handle the increase in the lake's water level, which caused the rise.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the ruins of el-Araj would have been slightly farther from the shore in ancient times and not as prone to flooding.

## Topography

There are numerous plains and hills in the surrounding area which could hold large numbers of people.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the account of the feeding of the five thousand, as well as the battles Josephus describes taking place on the plains near Bethsaida-Julias, could have occurred in the area. It should be noted that, while et-Tell would have been situated about 1.5 mi (3 km) and about 20 ft (7 m) above the level of the lake in ancient times,<sup>27</sup> the topography of el-Araj seems to match what one would expect of a fishing village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

## Archaeology

The El-Araj Excavation Project (EAEP), which began to dig in 2016, has unearthed numerous finds which clearly demonstrate that people occupied the site in the first century AD. Archaeologists dug beneath the Byzantine layer and initially encountered 40 cm of loose soil and silt from the Jordan River. As they continued to excavate, they discovered a Roman layer immediately beneath the layer of silt.<sup>28</sup> Both pottery and coins have securely dated the occupation of this level from the first to third centuries AD.<sup>29</sup> Significant finds included a coin minted by the Emperor Nero<sup>30</sup> and portions of several knife-paired Herodian oil lamps. Since these types of oil lamps were only produced in Jerusalem during the Second Temple period, they indicate Jewish occupation at the site during the first century.<sup>31</sup> In addition, numerous fishing weights and even a chalk stone fishing weight mold have been unearthed.<sup>32</sup>

In 2017, the excavators at el-Araj uncovered the remains of a Roman-period bathhouse. A Roman brick, tesserae, a partially-intact mosaic, and broken clay tubuli (ceramic heating pipes) all point to the fact the site grew beyond being merely a first-century fishing village. For Steven Notley, Academic Director of the EAEP, this is evidence of the type of urbanization that one would expect to see in a Roman polis, as one doesn't find Roman bathhouses in Jewish villages.<sup>33</sup> The implications of this find have had far-reaching effects. The Roman-era mosaics from the bathhouse were discovered 654 ft (211 m) below sea level, 9 ft (3 m) lower than the level of the Sea of Galilee was believed to be in the first century. The EAEP concludes: "Quite literally, our geographical understanding of the Sea of Galilee in the first century CE must now be rewritten in light of this season's results."<sup>34</sup>





HaDavar Yeshiva, El-Araj Excavation Project

**Aerial View towards the Sea of Galilee:** In this screen capture from the video, “Why el-Araj?” one can see the proximity of el-Araj to the Sea of Galilee and other ancient villages.



Zachary Wong

**Chalk limestone** fishing mold created weights that were pressed around a string of fishing net, allowing a fisherman to cast it more accurately. The design was a mark of ownership, much like branding a cow. An expert demonstrated how this would have been made by constructing a duplicate of the fishing mold, melting lead in a small kiln and making lead strips, similar to the ones that would have been used in the first century.

In 2019, the excavators of the EAEP announced that they had unearthed a Byzantine structure, which they identified as the Church of the Apostles, written about by the Bavarian bishop, Willibald, in 725 AD.<sup>35</sup> Well-preserved mosaic floors, a fragment of the marble chancel screen decorated with a wreath, and many gold-gilded glass tesserae, likely from a wall mosaic, all point to the structure being a Byzantine church, say the archaeologists.<sup>36</sup> In the structure, which faces east-west, the mosaics unearthed this past season were mostly black and white, but began to transition to more complex colored mosaics. Notley says this indicates they are transitioning from the southern rooms of the aisle into the nave of the church.<sup>37</sup>

The discoveries at el-Araj have clearly demonstrated that the site was occupied in the first century AD. Arav himself now admits this fact, but suggests that the site was the camp of a group of Roman military mercenaries under King Agrippa II, which he says Josephus describes as being in the area.<sup>39</sup> Further excavations will clarify whether this was the site of a temporary military camp or a village that had been promoted to the status of a Roman *polis*.

Another argument raised against el-Araj is that the site is too small to be identified as Bethsaida-Julias. The EAEP team has responded to this objection by opening new squares that are farther away from their initial excavation squares. In 2018, they excavated a new area about 50 meters east of the Roman bathhouse and discovered the remains of Roman-era structures

## Problems with El-Araj

Numerous objections have been raised to identifying el-Araj with biblical Bethsaida, but with each season of excavation they appear to be falling, one by one.

Rami Arav, the lead excavator of the rival site, et-Tell, was vocal for many years that his probes at el-Araj revealed no evidence of occupation beneath the Byzantine structures. He wrote:

Of the various candidates for Bethsaida, only et-Tell was occupied around the time of Jesus, in the Hellenistic (332–37 B.C.E.) and early Roman (37 B.C.E.–324 C.E.) periods. This past season we conducted a ground-penetrating radar survey of the alternative site of el-Araj. Beneath the Byzantine (324–638 C.E.) level lies nothing more than beach sand.<sup>38</sup>



Zachary Wong, El-Araj Excavation Project

**Roman bathhouse:** This structure was identified as a Roman-period bathhouse. A portion of the mosaic from the structure was still intact.



**Top Right: Area A, the main excavation site at el-Araj.** el-Araj is the other primary site that has been proposed as biblical Bethsaida. Excavations here began in 2016 and have been running for four years.

**Middle Right:** The remains of a Roman-era pottery jar unearthed at el-Araj.

**Bottom Right:** A Roman-era dwelling was unearthed in Area C, about 100 meters north of the main site. The excavators say this is evidence of the size of the settlement at el-Araj in the first century AD.



El-Araj Excavation Project

3 meters below the surface.<sup>40</sup> In 2019, they moved 100 meters north of the original excavation squares to what they call “Area C,” and again immediately found Roman-era structures.<sup>41</sup> They have concluded, “These findings indicate that el Araj was, in fact, a large settlement and not merely a single bathhouse on the shore of the lake as some have claimed.”<sup>42</sup>

Others have suggested that any pre-Byzantine archaeological remains at el-Araj washed down from et-Tell. This may have been a viable theory when the only Roman-era remains were visible on the surface. However, the discovery of a Roman bathhouse and other structures from the same era that were unearthed in-situ have put an end to this argument. Moreover, it would seem strange that only the Roman-era remains washed down from et-Tell and none of the Iron Age remains did (there are no Iron Age remains at el-Araj). Whatever the site was, it was clearly occupied in the first century AD.

Finally, numerous scholars have urged caution in jumping to the conclusion that the Byzantine structure is in fact the Church of the Apostles. In the “Bible History Daily” column for the Biblical Archaeological Society, Samuel Dewitt Pfister wrote:

Are the architectural remains uncovered at el-Araj the historical Church of the Apostles? It certainly could be; there is no competing archaeological evidence to suggest the historical church could be at another site, and indeed the location of this church appears to synchronize with Willibald’s. However, there is no incontrovertible evidence pointing to the remains uncovered at el-Araj as the Church of the Apostles and I would be skeptical of making such a claim before archaeologists can conduct further excavation of the structure.<sup>43</sup>

Others have pointed out that, to date, there has been no announcement of telltale structural elements, such as an apse, that would identify the Byzantine structure as a church. The EAEP have plans to address these issues by unearthing the rest of the Byzantine structure, beginning next season. Mordechai Aviam, the



Zachary Wong, El-Araj Excavation Project



El-Araj Excavation Project





Zachary Wong

In 2019, part of the mosaic floor was unearthed at el-Araj. The excavators have identified the structure as a Byzantine church, possibly the one that is mentioned by Willibald, a bishop of Bavaria who visited Bethsaida in 725 AD.

lead archaeologist of the EAEP, has excavated twenty Byzantine churches in his career, and most of them have had inscriptions, which held clues as to which biblical people or events the church was honoring.<sup>44</sup> He is hopeful that future excavations at el-Araj will produce a similar inscription.

## Summary

Over 30 years of excavations at et-Tell have demonstrated that it was a significant city in the Iron Age, and that people occupied the site, albeit with a much smaller population, during the Early Roman period. The evidence for it being biblical Bethsaida, however, is questionable at best. In the first place, it is too far from the shore of the Sea of Galilee. And secondly, despite the BEP's prominent display of two Hellenistic homes (the "Fisherman's House" and the "Winemaker's House," which may have continued in use in the Early Roman period), and the tenuous identification of a structure as a Roman temple, the site simply lacks the significant Roman-era finds one would expect given Herod Philip's conversion of Bethsaida from a village to a city.

The El-Araj Excavation Project has only four seasons of digging under their belts, but has made promising progress. It is clear that people occupied the site at the time the Bible, and Josephus described Bethsaida as being an active village. Some of the finds also point to urbanization in the Roman period. The excavations are still in their infancy, however, and much work is needed before a positive identification can be made that el-Araj is indeed Bethsaida-Julias. At this point, there have been no significant finds that would contradict such an identification, and several that may actually point to it.

Another possibility is that both sites were part of the ancient city of Bethsaida-Julias. Perhaps el-Araj was the site of the fishing village of Bethsaida, in which Jesus and his disciples ministered, while et-Tell was where the wealthy people of Bethsaida-Julias

lived after it was converted to a Roman polis. Other cities, such as Jericho<sup>45</sup> and Livias<sup>46</sup>, appear to have covered two separate archaeological sites. Furthermore, in 1852, Edwin Robinson noticed that people lived near Bethsaida in goat-skinned tents, but used the higher mound of et-Tell for storage.<sup>47</sup> Such a scenario may explain the large size of the houses at et-Tell as well as the discoveries of Roman remains at el-Araj, indicating that the modest fishing village experienced the most noticeable upgrades.

For now, it is reasonable to conclude that it is doubtful et-Tell alone was Bethsaida-Julias. El-Araj, on the other hand, is a serious candidate as Bethsaida, the hometown of Peter, Andrew and Philip (Jn 1:44) and the village that Jesus actively ministered in (Mt 11:21). It may have been incorporated into the new city of Bethsaida-Julias along with et-Tell under Herod Philip, as described by Josephus.

*Endnotes for this article can be found at [www.BibleArchaeology.org](http://www.BibleArchaeology.org). Type "Endnotes" in the search box; next, click the "Bible and Spade Bibliographies and Endnotes" link; then page down to the article.*



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