Bethsaida—A Response to Steven Notley

Rami Arav

The following is a response to Steven Notley, who in this journal challenged the identification of Bethsaida with et-Tell located north of the Sea of Galilee (2007), which has been suggested since the nineteenth century, particularly by Edward Robinson (Robinson and Smith 1841, 3:307–9),[1] and confirmed by the Bethsaida Excavations Project (BEP) (Kuhn and Arav 1991, 77–106).

Unlike his criticism in former publications (Rainey and Notley 2006, 356–59), in which no alternative site for Bethsaida was proposed, here in *NEA* Notley suggests returning to the identification of el-Araj as Bethsaida (2007, 222), first postulated by Gottlieb Schumacher in his nineteenth-century survey of the small site situated on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (1888, 245–46).[2] For an entire century, the question of who got it right had been occasionally debated (e.g., Avi-Yonah 1984, 152; Pixner 1985, 207–16), yet none of the proponents of either

position attempted to survey or excavate the sites in order to find a solution.

In 1987, I conducted a series of excavations and archaeological surveys at el-Araj and et-Tell. The results of the former, including drawings of the sherds of pottery and glass found *in situ*, were published (Kuhn and Arav 1991, 93–94, pl. 2:6–9). There I reported that 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. Ground-penetrating radar tests, carried out on the entire site of el-Araj, also indicated that there was only one level of occupation (the Byzantine one), with nothing below this stratum other than beach sediments (Shroder, Jol, and Reeder 2009).

"A Shortage of Early Roman Remains"

One of the main arguments that Notley raises is the "shortage of early Roman remains" in the BEP reports (Notley 2007, 224). "Shortage" is a relative term, and the question should be: Shortage compared with what? It seems that this comment derives mainly from when the Roman remains are compared to the abundance of finds from earlier periods, namely, the Iron Age and the Hellenistic period. Indeed, the site of et-Tell during

Figure 1. Bethsaida, aerial photo looking to the south. The remains of a Hellenistic Roman residential building are in the foreground of the picture. Courtesy of the Bethsaida Excavations Project. Photograph by Sky-View.

Theories in Archaeology Today

Figure 2. Early Roman glass found at Bethsaida. Notice in the foreground a fragment of a glass similar to the one discovered at the Cave of Letters. Courtesy of the Bethsaida Excavations Project. Photograph by Christine Dalenta.

these earlier periods was larger and yielded more remains than the early Roman period (fig. 1). This observation, which has also been made by BEP researchers, should not preclude an identification of et-Tell with Bethsaida. If I interpret Notley correctly, he would say that, if Bethsaida was a village, granted rights of a *polis*, there should be more finds and Greek features from the urban phase compared to its slightly earlier rural phase. This argument sounds reasonable. Bethsaida turned "urban" in 30 C.E., so the change should be noticed *immediately before and after 30 C.E.*, not between the Iron Age or the Hellenistic period, and in the Roman settlement at large. In this case, the question should be: Does the archaeology of et-Tell provide evidence of changes leading toward it becoming a *polis* before and after 30 C.E.? The answer is unequivocally yes. A transition has been recognized in almost every aspect of its material culture, including settlement pattern, architecture, numismatics, pottery, and glass (fig. 2). The truth is that the Roman material from Bethsaida is not that meager. Thus far two Ph.D. dissertations have been published on the Hellenistic and Roman finds at Bethsaida, presenting dozens of plates and finds from the first century (Fortner 2008; Savage 2011). The amount of Roman material surpasses that found in Capernaum, Chorazin, Nazareth, and Khirbet Kana combined. The past season alone yielded a rare gold coin of Antoninus Pius dating from 138 C.E. (fig. 3).

What Do We Know about Bethsaida from Historical Texts?

The historical texts directly pertaining to Bethsaida are few and consist mainly of those from Josephus, the New Testament, and rabbinical sources.

Bethsaida appears in the Bible as the home of Peter, his brother Andrew, and Philip, the three fishermen who became Jesus' disciples. Jesus visited this place and performed miracles, among which was the healing of a blind man (Mark 8:22). The Gospel of Mark refers to Bethsaida as a village (*kōmē* in Mark 8:23), not as a city (*polis*). This fact correlates with Josephus's description of Bethsaida as a village (*kōmē* in *Ant.* 18.28) when Philip, the son of Herod the Great, elevated it to the status of a Greco-Roman city (*polis*). Josephus recounts that Philip did so by relocating people there and reinforcing the city and its walls. Philip also renamed the place Julias in honor of Livia (Julia Augusta), the wife of Augustus and the mother of Tiberius

Figure 3 (right). A rare gold coin of Antoninus Pius minted in 138 C.E. Only three similar coins are known in numismatic literature. Courtesy of the Bethsaida Excavations Project. Photograph by Hanan Shafir.

(Kuhn and Arav 1991; Kindler 1999, 245–49). Numismatic evidence shows these changes took place in 30 C.E.

In 34 C.E., Philip died, leaving Bethsaida's new construction in its infancy (perhaps one of the reasons why Bethsaida-Julias never managed to thrive as a Greco-Roman city). This important fact, previously noted by few scholars (Smallwood 1981, 116 n. 45; Avi-Yonah 1984, 65, 152), can be deduced from two different independent sources and may serve as a clue to what can be "expected" of a *polis* such as Bethsaida-Julias. First, Josephus never mentions a city council for Bethsaida (*boulē*), such as existed in Tiberias (*Life* 64); second, Bethsaida-Julias never minted coins. Thus, Bethsaida-Julias failed to reach the minimum economic status required to support minting. As a result, Bethsaida-Julias never developed institutions found in other Greco-Roman cities such as theaters, a stadium, or a hippodrome, which required substantial investments. It is, there-

fore, unrealistic to expect a place like Bethsaida-Julias to bear features of such a Greco-Roman *polis*.

Rabbinical sources add very little to our knowledge of Bethsaida (Freund 1995, 267–302). The Mishnah reports that at Tzaidah (commonly accepted as Bethsaida) there was an abundance of fish, that the emperor Hadrian was served pheasants caught there, that it was located on the border of the Land of Israel, and, strangely enough, that some pagan cult objects are buried under a heap of stones ('Abod. Zar. 3). Do they refer to the Roman imperial cult temple at the site that was lying in ruins since the end of the second century c.e.? Contrary to Pliny the Elder, who never visited Bethsaida-Julias and yet narrated that it was a "pleasant city" (*Nat*. 5.71), these sources do not render any information indicating that it is a Greek *polis*, except for the buried pagan cult objects. No other Greco-Roman features are mentioned in this place. Byzantine and medieval references to Bethsaida, as already been observed by McCowan in 1930, are biased by New Testament references and problematic.

Do the Finds at Et-Tell Converge with the Historical Texts? The Settlement Pattern History

The site situated on et-Tell and identified with Bethsaida was founded in the tenth century B.C.E. on a basalt hill extending from the Golan Plateau. The size of the city (20 acres), its fortifications (two parallel walls, of which the interior is 6–8 m wide), its enormous gate—the largest ever found in the southern Levant—and its palace indicate that this site served as the capital of the Aramaean kingdom of Geshur. This kingdom was annexed by the Aramaean kingdom of Damascus in the ninth century B.C.E. and was conquered by the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III in 732 B.C.E. During the conquest, the city was thoroughly destroyed, and a high heap of debris covered the large gate. Until the third century B.C.E., the city was nearly deserted, and there are only a few poor walls, pits, and pottery subsequent to the destruction and prior to that time.

The conquest of Alexander the Great in 333 B.C.E. created a new era of "globalization" with economic opportunities that resulted in an impressive return of prosperity to the entire region. As part of this rising prosperity, the site of et-Tell was resettled. Finds such as pottery, glass, and coins indicate that the settlers came from the Phoenician coast, and pollen analysis shows that the main economy of the site may have been flax cultivation, necessary for the lucrative dyed-garment industry of Tyre and the Phoenician cities. This Phoenician colony thrived, as indicated by the construction of large courtyard houses, along with the silver coins, jewelry, and fine wares (fig. 4) recovered therein that were brought into the colony. However, this situation did not last long. The conquest of the Hasmoneans in about 100 B.C.E. put an end to this prosperity, and it seems that the majority of the inhabitants abandoned the site. The reason
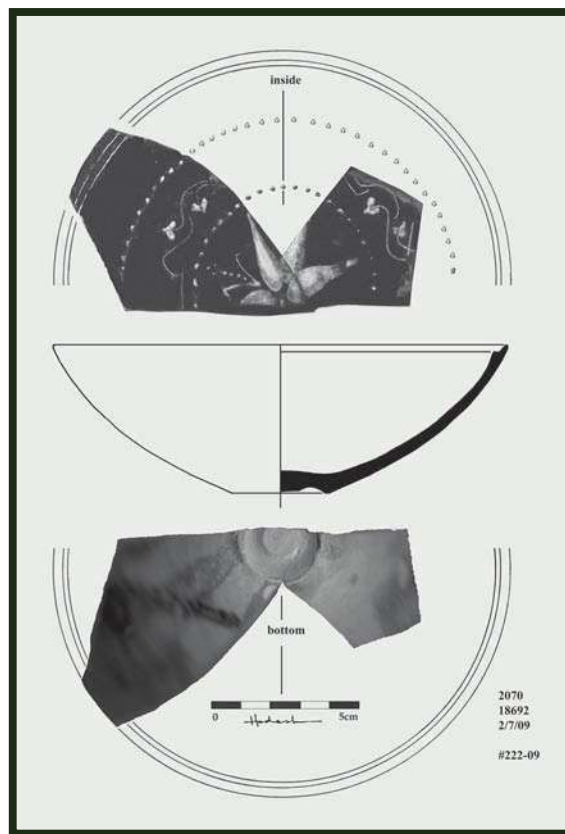

Figure 4. West Slope Ware bowl from Bethsaida dating from the Phoenician occupation of the site. Courtesy of the Bethsaida Excavations Project. Drawing by DreAnna Hadash.

for this may have been the Hasmonean policy of coerced conversion to Judaism. The Phoenician settlers would have had to choose between conversion and desertion, and most selected the less painful choice, returning to Phoenicia. With this, et-Tell diminished in size, particularly in the northern end of the tell.

This drop in population seems to have lasted until the time of Herod the Great, when during the second half of the first century B.C.E. the Romans attempted to solve the problem of pirates and marauders along the international trade routes. The responsibility for the security of the region was given to Herod in return for his ruling it. He settled Galilee and the Golan with Jews sent from Judea. Herodian coins, oil lamps (fig. 5), and limestone vessels (fig. 6) found at Bethsaida indicate that, analogous to other sites in Galilee, it was repopulated by Jews from Judea with an orientation toward Jerusalem. This population, smaller in size than the earlier Phoenician one, constructed new homes on the summit of the site and occupied and renovated some of the old deserted Phoenician houses (fig. 7). Unlike the Phoenicians, however, the main occupation of the Jewish Bethsaida settlers appears to have been fishing. Hundreds of fishing implements were discovered at the site, includ-
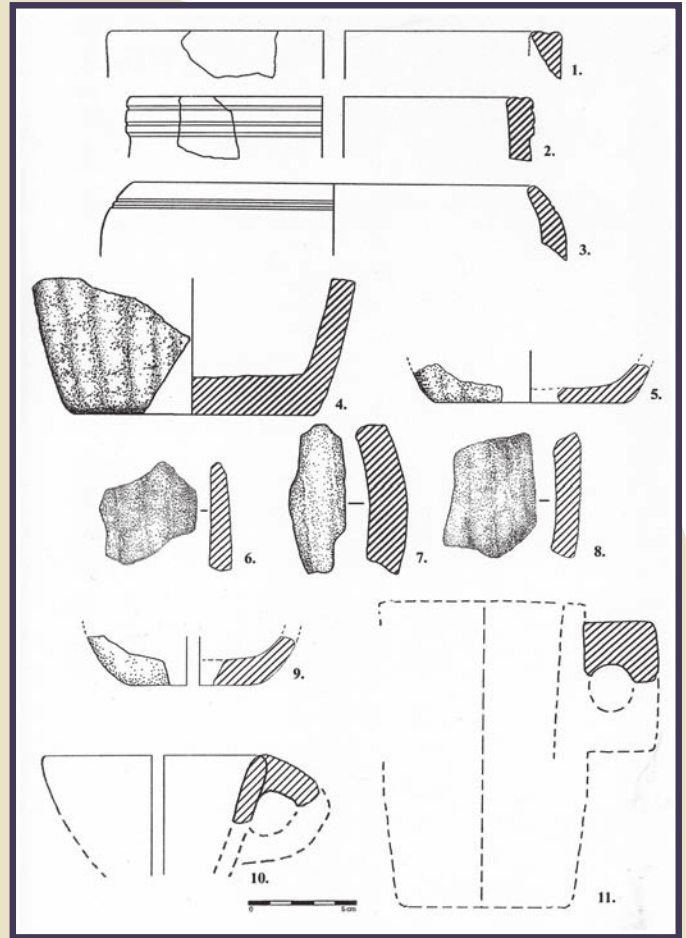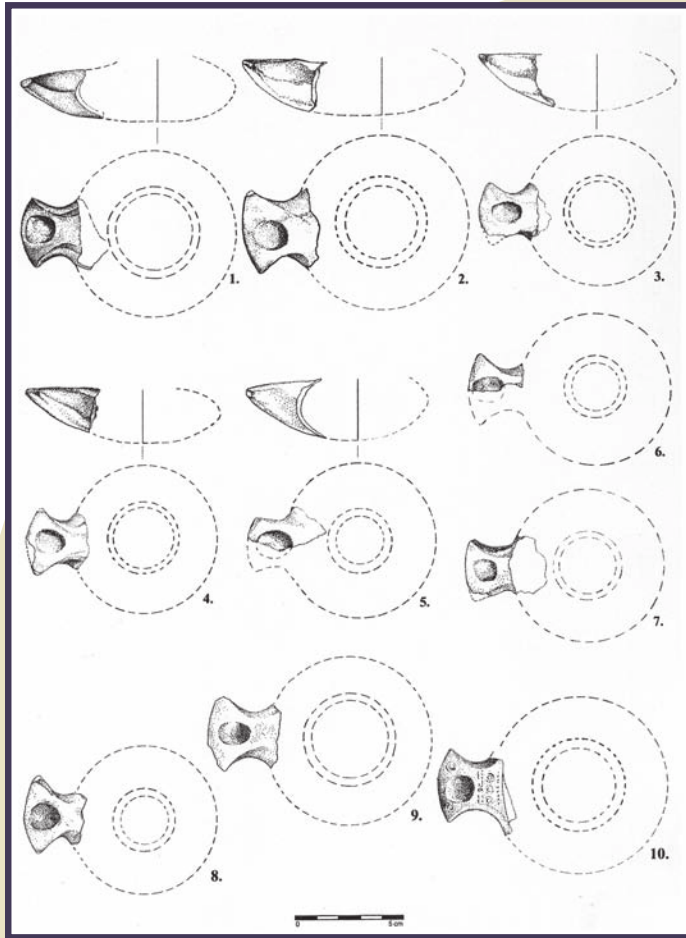
Figure 5 (upper left). First-century C.E. oil lamps from Bethsaida. Petrographic analysis proved that the clay was taken from the vicinity of Jerusalem. Courtesy of the Bethsaida Excavations Project. Drawing by DreAnna Hadash.

Figure 6 (upper right). Limestone vessels from Bethsaida. These vessels are the hallmark of Jewish settlement. Courtesy of the Bethsaida Excavations Project. Drawing by DreAnna Hadash.

Figure 7 (left). A Roman-period house with paved floor. Courtesy of the Bethsaida Excavations Project. Photograph by Hanan Shafir.

Figure 8. Lead net fishing weights. Hundreds of these objects were found at Bethsaida, testifying to a thriving village of fishermen. Courtesy of the Bethsaida Excavations Project. Photograph by Rami Arav.

ing lead and stone net weights, fishing hooks, anchors, and line sinkers (fig. 8). Some of the fishing implements indicate that at least some were manufactured on-site. This entire assemblage indicates that fishing was not a hobby but rather a living.

This, then, is the village in which Peter, Andrew, and Philip and perhaps the Zebedee brothers were born and raised. Their occupation as fishermen was not at all unusual. As was attested by our finds, most of the inhabitants were fishermen. This is the place that was visited by Jesus, who called for his disciples to become "fishers of men" (Mark 1:17).

Comparatively, the Bethsaida settlement pattern history is not exceptional. Several scholars (e.g., Berlin 2002, 57–70; Weiss 2007, 15–60) have observed that this pattern was common to many Galilean Jewish settlements. None developed into a Greco-Roman *polis* during the first century, and none exhibited urban Greco-Roman features. Moreover, Berlin suggests that the finds indicate a great sense of resentment toward Romanization. Not even Sepphoris looked like a Greco-Roman *polis*; it remained a large village during the entire first century (Weiss 2007, 19). First-century Tiberias (including the theater) is still quite elusive, and a full assessment depends on the field reports yet to be published.[3]

As mentioned above, in 30 C.E. Philip Herod elevated the village to a status of *polis* and, in an attempt to take part in the Roman imperial cult, renamed it Julias. These attempts were not only verbal but were followed by physical changes. Philip populated the city, reinforced its walls, and dedicated a small shrine in honor of Livia (Julia Augusta). Remains of this reinforcement were discovered in the excavations, including many segments of the old Iron Age inner city wall that were rebuilt and augmented by Philip (fig. 9). 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 (Kuhn 2000, 228). Philip rebuilt it and converted it into a Roman-style temple by diverting its opening from the north to the east and 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 (fig. 10). The lintel

Figure 9. A Roman-period house abutting the Iron Age city wall (within black frame). Courtesy of the Bethsaida Excavations Project. Photograph by Sky-View.

Figure 10. The Roman temple marked in black frame. Courtesy of the Bethsaida Excavations Project. Photograph by Paul Bauman.

of the temple was decorated with meander and rosettes (fig. 11), 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.

Undoubtedly, the priesthood was also assigned to the temple, and it seems that it functioned until the mid-second century C.E., when it was demolished and much of it paved over. The religious objects retrieved from the temple were found in caches (*favissae*) around the temple and included two bronze incense shovels (fig. 12), a bronze ladle, two bronze bowls (perhaps *paterae*), a highly decorated oil lamp filler, and several high-quality jugs and juglets (figs. 13–14) (Arav 1999, 22; 2006, 162–65). Evidently these vessels were part of a Roman imperial cult set similar to one found in the Cave of Letters and another, originally from Jerusalem, that is on display at the Royal Ontario Museum (see Hayes 1984).

The End of the Settlement

When Bethsaida was first built in the tenth century B.C.E., the Sea of Galilee covered much of the Bethsaida Plain and reached the slopes of the mound.[4] Landslides resulting from earthquakes blocked the flow of the Jordan River and created high dams. When the dams were broken, water and silt ran off, filling the plain and creating shallow lagoons, pushing the seashore further to the south. Remnants of these lagoons still exist in the southeastern edges of the Bethsaida Plain in Zakki and Majrase. The process of withdrawal of the northern shores did not end in antiquity. On the contrary, it is seen even today: the blockage over the southern end of the Hula Lake, running into the Jordan River, was blown up in the early 1950s, and now silt freely runs into the Jordan estuary creating a rapid expansion

of the northern shores. During the flood of 1969, the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee advanced 50 m into itself in only a few days. El-Araj, which until recently was on the waterfront, now sits a few hundred meters away from the seashore. So, a major catastrophic flood in the fourth century C.E. (perhaps a result of the major earthquake of 363 C.E.) filled up the plain with silt, and many of the lagoons disappeared (Shroder et al. 1999, 115–74). Apparently the fishermen at Bethsaida realized that the shore had permanently retreated and left, moving closer to the sea. The rise of el-Araj is almost contemporary with the abandonment of et-Tell.

Why the Identification of Bethsaida Matters

If historical, numismatic, and archaeological records indicate that Bethsaida-Julias never became a Greco-Roman *polis* in the fashion we see, for example, in the Decapolis cities of Hippos, Gadara, Abila, Pella, and Scythopolis, and if et-Tell contains more evidence for its identification with Bethsaida than, for example, Capernaum, Cana, or Chorazin, what, then, is the real problem of et-Tell being Bethsaida? Why does it matter?

It seems that the problem is quite profound and connects to the question of the extent of the Hellenization of Galilee during the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E. This question has, of course, many more implications: Was Jesus a Hellenized Jew or not? Which leads to the question, did he speak Greek? Was he educated in a *gymnasium*? Was he familiar with Greek theater? Was he fluent in the Greek Cynic philosophy so popular in this period of time? Did he read Homer, Plato, or Aristotle? Was he

Figure 11. A lintel from the temple dedicated to the cult of Livia-Julia at Bethsaida. Courtesy of the Bethsaida Excavations Project. Photograph by Rami Arav.

Figure 12. An incense shovel from a cache near the temple. A similar shovel was found in the Cave of Letters. Courtesy of the Bethsaida Excavations Project. Photograph by Christine Dalante.

Figure 13 (above). A group of pottery vessels from a cache near the temple. Courtesy of the Bethsaida Excavations Project. Photograph by Christine Dalante.

Figure 14 (right). Fineware jug from a cache near the temple. Jugs like this played a role in the temple cult of the emperors. Courtesy of the Bethsaida Excavations Project. Photograph by Hanan Shafir.
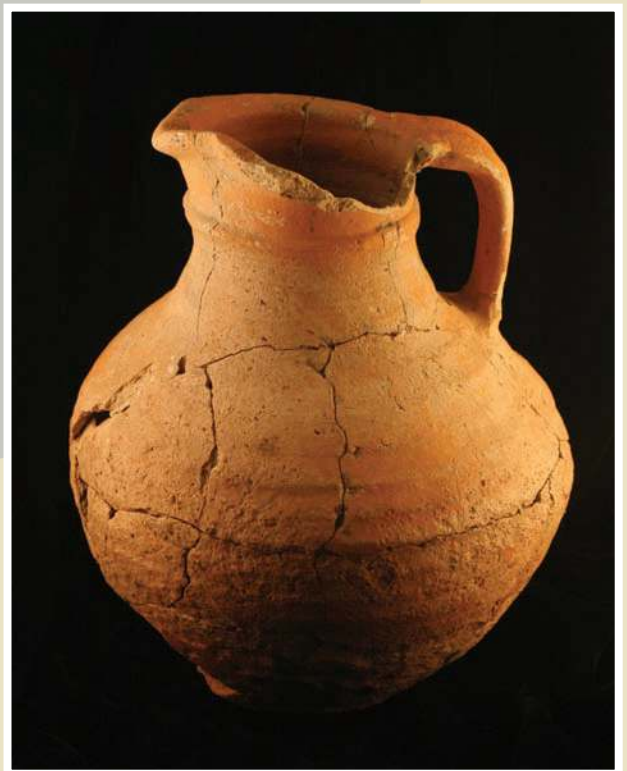
Jewish at all, or was he an offspring of the "Galilee of the Gentiles"? Biblical scholars and historians have wrestled with this problem for a long time.

For decades now, most scholars have believed that "Gentile Galilee" is more a myth than history and that Jesus was a Jew, not a product of this literarily constructed entity. Hence, the question now asked is not whether Jesus was a Jew but, as a Jew, how Hellenized he was. Yet, contrary to the archaeological evidence, it seems that there are still some scholars who adhere to the theory most recently suggested by Burton L. Mack (1988), which purports that the environment of first-century Galilee was predominantly Hellenistic or Greco-Roman. This theory, based on textual analysis, seems plausible at first glance. According to Josephus, Tiberias had a stadium, Magdala had a hippodrome, and Capernaum, according to Notley, was a "city laid out with Hippodamian (orthogonal) street plan" (Rainey and Notley 2007, 229). However, this theory does not match the archaeological data. Notley, for example, observed that Josephus cannot be taken literally when relating Greek-style installations (Notley 2007, 226). Tzaferis's excavations at the Greek Orthodox section of Capernaum demonstrate that the Hippodamian grid pattern of Capernaum cannot be dated earlier than the Byzantine period (Tzaferis 1992).

Most scholars agree that Jesus visited no more than four places in Galilee: Nazareth, Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida. Of these, Bethsaida is the only place accessible by archaeological excavation in which substantial pertinent material was discovered and was not heavily destroyed by later occupations. However, as stated above, the archaeology of et-Tell suggests that, despite its elevation to the status of a *polis*, the settlement remained bare of any major Hellenistic features, apart from the existence of a small Roman temple.

Despite all this evidence, some would still argue that Jesus belongs in a Greco-Roman milieu and probably taught in a Greco-Roman *agora*/forum clad with marble, adorned with Corinthian, Doric, and Ionic capitals, situated on the top of slender Greek marble columns, and supporting spectacular highly articulated architraves and pediments. In this Greco-Roman atmosphere, Jesus would lecture in Greek about the kingdoms of heaven and Hades, argue using Stoicism and Cynic philosophies, and make use of Greek theater terminology.

Alas, this stage does not appear in accord with the archaeological data. Physical evidence shows that the Jesus of Bethsaida most likely looked like a local Jew, far different than any Hellenistic archetype, and, as implied from Berlin's research, was likely to have been hostile toward the Roman Empire (2002, 67). Perhaps like the members of the Dead Sea Scrolls sect, if he knew any Greek, he deliberately would avoid speaking it. He undoubtedly strolled in the narrow lanes of a humble flat-roofed fishing hamlet called Bethsaida, a village built of black basalt fieldstones, plastered with mud and straw, and detached from external glamour. Apart from the small Roman temple built by Philip, the son of Herod, no trace of urban Hellenization was seen on his horizon. It was rural, simple, and thoroughly Jewish.

Notes

1. In order to reconcile Bethsaida in the Gaulanitis mentioned by Josephus and Bethsaida in Galilee in the Gospel of John 12:21, most nineteenth-century scholars maintained that there were two places by this name. Robinson, presuming that the Galilean Bethsaida should be located at the Plain of Ginosar, suggested in 1852 that et-Tabighah (Tabgha) was the Galilean Bethsaida (Robinson and Smith 1856, 359). However, he always identified Gaulanitis Bethsaida with et-Tell.

2. Schumacher suggested that the Bethsaida of the Gospels is located at el-Araj and that Julias was founded about 2 km away on et-Tell. Although not supported by documents or finds, this hypothesis was accepted by some (Avi-Yonah 1984, 152).

3. Notley correctly noticed that very little is preserved from first-century Tiberias (Rainey and Notley 2007, 228), yet he expects Bethsaida to have a theater "such as Tiberias" (Notley 2007, 226). However, the theater in Tiberias is thus far dated from the second century c.e., and most probably the triumphal gate dates from the campaign of Hadrian (Bernett 2007, 229–30).

4. Contra Notley, who argued that, if the level of the Sea of Galilee reached the slopes of the mound, the water would have covered the "shoreline promenade" at Capernaum, Tiberias, and Kursi (2007, 223). However, the floor level of the lake was deeper, not the level of the sea.

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Response to Notley's Comments

John F. Shroder Jr.

Notley's criticisms of work on Bethsaida do not cite the geosciences and have misrepresented basic elements (Arav, Freund, and Shroder 2006; Shroder and Inbar 1995; Shroder et al. 1999, 2009; Banker, Shroder, and Inbar 2009). His comments regarding shorelines do not take into account that these changes were inevitable, given (1) the active Upper Jordan River Delta, (2) the major fault there that uplifted and downwarped the land, and (3) the unstable water levels. As our research has documented, we propose that a landslide about sixteen hundred years ago dammed the Jordan Gorge upstream and produced a breakout flood that overwhelmed the port with high-energy flood gravels on the surface below the tell and above fine-grained lake clays. Such clay can be deposited only in quiet water, proof positive that the lake was then at the base of et-Tell. The clay in Bethsaida Plain directly below Bethsaida was dated at 2455 B.P. and a leg bone of a gazelle found in the clay at 2,035 radiocarbon years ago. This equates statistically to a calendar year range of 2,700–1,800 years ago. The landslide that unleashed the last flood of gravels was younger than that but has some problems with its radiocarbon dates; we think it probably occurred during the well-known earthquake of 363 C.E. Thus the "about two thousand years ago" is when the clay there was the most accurate thing to determine when the bay was at Bethsaida. Elsewhere nearby were other dry planar areas upon which Josephus could have fought. Notley's "critical height disparities" are negated in light of the geological changes of land and lake levels. Another issue is el-Araj, across and into which we have done extensive surveys with ground-penetrating radar and backhoe-dug trenches to find nothing but sterile or flood-disturbed sediments devoid of significant archaeological material (Shroder et al. 2009). El-Araj lacks both the spatial extent and temporal depth to be related to ancient Bethsaida.