

The Case for Bethsaida after Twenty Years of Digging

The Case for Bethsaida after Twenty Years of Digging:

*Understanding the Historical
Jesus*

By

Elizabeth McNamer

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PREFACE

In 1980 my husband and I took our five children to Israel. My son Bruce was entering his final year of high school. We would have him for one more year at home. Soon the others would follow. They would be leaving home and exposed to the big world and other ideas. Bill and I wanted to firmly establish Jesus in their minds by visiting the land where he had lived out his life.

We spent several days in Jerusalem. We tramped the streets which he had trod; prayed at the room of the Last Supper near Dormition Abbey; watched for an hour in the Garden of Gethsemane; re-lived his trial at the church of Gallicantu, once the home of Caiphas the High Priest, the place where the rooster crowed. At the Church of the Holy Sepulcher we attended early morning mass, which was said by a young American priest at the site of the Crucifixion, and lit candles at the place of the Resurrection. Deirdre made her first holy communion at the Ecce Homo convent. We sang carols at the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem where the children each bought a nativity set. In Galilee we stayed at the Italian convent at the Mount of Beatitudes where we made a retreat. We went to Nazareth, read the Scriptures of all that had happened there, visited Cana, Sepphoris (where Jesus may have built), found Chorazin and spent a long time at Capernaum. We picnicked on the beach where he had built a fire and prepared a breakfast of bread and fish for his apostles. But we found no Bethsaida. The nuns with whom we were staying on the Mount of Beatitudes, told us that the place where he had performed so many miracles had never been found. Nobody knew where it was. Part of the picture was missing.

Twelve years later when all of the children had left home, I presented a paper at a conference in Denver. Dr Richard Freund, a Jewish Rabbi, was there. When I asked him what he was doing for the summer he told me that he was going to dig at Bethsaida.

"But there is no Bethsaida" I said quickly and knowingly.

"Oh yes there is. It has just been found."

"How do I get there?"

"Get a group of students together and come."

Thus, serendipitously, began what was to become the greatest venture of my life. The next year, I took eighteen people to Israel, where we

worked under the direction of Dr Rami Arav. I caught what we now refer to as the “Bethsaida bacillus” and I knew I could never leave. I became a director of the Bethsaida Archaeological Excavation and I have taken students to Bethsaida every year since.

As a professor of Religious Studies, specializing in the New Testament, I had long been aware of the importance of place in understanding the life of Jesus.

I am an alien from Ireland living in America, married to an American and raising American children. I often find myself innocent of American ways and traditions and make all sorts of mistakes. When Bruce told me he was going to the prom, I did not understand that it was a dance. The only prom I knew was the wall that ran along by the sea where I went to school and where people promenaded every morning. I was unfamiliar with words such as sophomore, varsity and cheerleader until they popped up at a PTA meeting and someone explained. I did not understand why Americans translated everything into Latin: janitor for doorkeeper, exit for way out, elevator for lift. Nor did others understand many of my idiosyncrasies or expressions. Only when Bill and the children went with me to the little village in Ireland where I grew up were they really able to understand me. We went to my old home, cooked the way we used to cook over an open fire; lit the oil lamps that gave us light; examined the little radio where we gathered each evening to hear about Hitler and how the war was going; gathered floribunda roses in our garden; milked a cow in the field at the back of the house; got our water from the pump in the village square; bought sweets at the shop where I used to purchase four toffees for a penny; went to the school I attended and where a meagre fire burnt to keep us warm; attended mass at the church where I was baptized; visited my mother’s grave where her bones and those of her mother and father lie beneath the earth; walked the thistled lanes that I used to run. Only then did they have an understanding of my childhood and how different it was from theirs.

Place is all important in recreating the life of anyone. And so is time. Many children in my village in the 1940s went to bed hungry since food was rationed and we were constantly being reminded that there was a war going on. One girl walked three miles to school barefoot every morning because leather was scarce and needed for the army. We were physically punished for misspelling a word, or saying it in English instead of Irish. Children who lived at a distance often brought a penny so that they could buy a piece of bread at the bakery for lunch. We were reminded to “think of the starving children in Europe” at every meal. I gave up having sugar in my tea when I was four and persuaded my brother Michael to do the

same although we had no idea how it got to the starving children in Europe! Sacrifices had to be made. The outcome of the war was not certain. Sometimes a young rebel would lift his right arm and say “Heil Hitler” and then run for his life, chased by a fierce grandmother. My father trained the local defense force just in case Germans should arrive. The LDF, as they were called, marched down the hill-road to “Left, right, left, right” with a host of would-be soldiers behind them. My mother headed the Red Cross where all the women of the village gathered on Mondays to roll bandages to be sent to the war hospitals. We learnt how to knit socks for soldiers at the front, although we were never told what the front was! Men gathered in pubs in the evenings to discuss the latest battle. Life in Ireland in the 1940s was far different to the lives my young American family had experienced.

Jesus too was bound by place and time. His childhood was spent in a backwater hamlet of about one hundred and fifty people in the hills of beautiful Galilee where often caves served as homes. Palestine was incorporated into the great Roman Empire and governed by puppet kings. Jesus must have heard his family complain of the terrible taxes imposed by the Romans and heard of the plight of those who tried to rebel. Did he hear talk of a messiah who would come to set them free? Was there ever talk of how Mary had conceived him before she was married to Joseph?

Did he ever fear missing a spelling in class?

Archaeology throws light on how life was lived in antiquity. The pottery, coins, jewelry, artifacts, buildings, wine cellars, grinding stones, seeds and spores help us to put together how ancient people functioned. And the literary research that is required puts us in touch with their feelings and their fears, and causes us to ask questions to which there often is no answer.

Jesus visited Bethsaida on many occasions. As I walk through the site today I imagine him walking there. He was a builder, a “techton” specializing in dwellings made by volcanic rocks, which are abundant in that area. Once, in my early years at the site, a helicopter landed and a man got out. He asked if he could have a rock. I told him he could and invited him to dig with us. He said that the helicopter was costing him \$750 an hour and he had to get going! I expect he was doing some project on Jesus and wanted a feel of the rock with which Jesus worked. Artifacts mentioned in the gospel accounts have been found almost daily. In those early years, I always seemed to be saying “But Jesus said.....” much to the consternation of Rami, our Jewish archaeologist! A large grinding stone provokes the words “Two women will be grinding” and indeed it took two women to move the stone. Oil lamps recall the parable told by Jesus of the

ten virgins. Wine jugs recall the last supper. Boat anchors re-echoed “I will make you fishers of men.”

After twenty years of digging and investigating the literature of the time, Jesus comes fully alive in Bethsaida. He visited here often. Many miracles (according to one source, fifty three) were worked here; most of the apostles (possibly even nine) came from Bethsaida and he deliberately chose these men to spread his message; his mother’s sister, Salome, lived here with her husband Zebedee; it was probably in Bethsaida that he met Mary Magdalene and other women who followed him to his crucifixion; the artefacts that we find speak his words; the first church may have been in the house of James son of Zebedee, at Bethsaida. Jesus was fully aware of the Herods and their political policies. Early Christian pilgrims to Israel sought out Bethsaida as being of importance. But it had not been rebuilt after the Roman war, as had other towns associated with Jesus’ ministry. Furthermore, an earthquake in the first part of the second century had changed the topography. The river Jordan had changed its course, and the Sea of Galilee had changed its dimensions. The site we excavate is one-and-a-half miles from the sea rather than on the coast. This was too far to make it viable for fishing.

For almost two thousand years Bethsaida remained hidden. Fortuitous in a way, since everything that we find there goes back to the time of Jesus. He walked the streets that we are unearthing! This alone makes the case for Bethsaida.

On the last evening on our family trip, as we stood looking over the Sea of Galilee, Sarah said “I hope that Jesus will always be as alive for me as he has become on this trip.”

Truly Jesus comes alive in the places he trod.

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORY OF ET TELL: THE SITE OF BETHSAIDA

On the last day of the summer 1996 excavations, a probe done by volunteer Reggie Bollich revealed that a stone floor lay eight feet down from where we had been digging. Reggie emerged from the hole in which he had spent three weeks, dripping with sweat and looking like a chimney sweep but as excited as if he had just been given a glimpse of paradise. I will never forget the look of devastation on Reggie's face as he realized that he was within reach but could not achieve his goal, since we left on the morrow! The following summer, a new crew performed the promethean task of handing buckets of debris down the hill, sifting through everything before discarding it and sending the buckets up again until they collapsed with exhaustion! This group would not see the results of their labours. The gates, the largest ever unearthed in Israel, and the throne room of King Talmi revealed themselves to us over the next several excavation sessions.

The site where Bethsaida now stands is in the fertile crescent, the five hundred-mile route that connected Mesopotamia and Egypt, the great civilizations of the day. There is evidence of habitation here as far back as the Bronze Age, 2000 BCE. Statues of Egyptian gods, Pataikos and Bes,¹ dropped along the way by some weary travellers, suggest trade between the two civilizations.

The Geshurites (a Canaanite tribe) inhabited the land long before the arrival of the Hebrews in Israel at the beginning of the Iron Age (around 1200 BCE). This was their chief city. In the Old Testament it is classed among the places not conquered by the Israelites.²

¹ Pataikos was an Egyptian dwarf god of protection. Dwarfism was common in ancient Egypt and dwarves were accorded high status from the Old Kingdom onwards. Bes was a protector of the household and of women in childbirth as early as the 26th dynasty (2686–2181 BCE)

² *Yet the Israelites did not drive out the Geshurites or the Maacathites; but Geshur and Maacath live within Israel to this day* (Josh. 13:15).



Statue of Pataikos

It was built as a capital city with two strong walls for protection against the enemy. The outer wall reached a height of thirty feet and its gate faced north. A paved courtyard separated it from the inner wall, whose gate faced west. Towers flanked both gates. Inside the main gate were four large chambers. One contained a variety of pottery. The other three were used for storing grain, barley and wheat. The Bible recommends:

Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns. Deuteronomy 14:28

One sunny day, as I was showing some visitors around, a young football player from Nebraska came up to me and said “We have found a bull’s head.” Since the Nebraska team is called the Bulls, I thought he was making a joke but followed him back to where he was digging. There, under our feet, lay the top of a large stèle with what indeed looked like a bull’s head carved in relief. We all stopped to gaze. Then someone noticed other pieces strewn around, like a scattered jigsaw puzzle. Put back together, the Moon God proudly looked up at us, happy to be restored after twenty-seven hundred years of lying in the dirt! Awe, fascination, disbelief swarmed around us. Silently and reverently we gazed at this icon, venerated by a people from so long ago.

The Moon God had once guarded this city. In ancient times, the moon was considered of more importance than the sun. It brought light into darkness and was thought of as the creator of the world.



City Gate

To the right of the gate leading into the city was the high place where the stelle of the Moon God once stood. Before entering the gates, one offered a sacrifice of wine, milk or incense to this god on its “high place.” We found the utensils used for this purpose just a few steps outside the gates. Orna Cohen, the foremost restorer of ancient monuments in Israel, hastened up from Jerusalem to see our Moon God. The footballers loaded the pieces into our rickety wheelbarrow. It was to go to Jerusalem with Orna, and it can now be seen in the Israeli Museum, far from its provenance.

It was to this city that King David came to find a wife. He was ruling then from Hebron, a much smaller city. An alliance with this powerful city ruled by King Talmi would increase his status. Did he worship the Moon God, as one was required to do before entering the gates? Talmi gave David his daughter Maacah for a wife. Poor Maacah had little say in her marriage. She would have to leave this beautiful place where she had spent her childhood, and move to another city with a man she does not seem to have even liked. She and David did not get along but they did produce Absalom and his sister Tamar.³

³ *Sons were born to David at Hebron: his firstborn was Amnon, of Ahinoam of Jezreel; his second, Chileab, of Abigail the widow of Nabal of Carmel; the third, Absalom son of Maacah, daughter of King Talmi of Geshur (2 Sam 3:1-4).*

David had other children by other marriages. They were not well behaved. Amnon, the oldest of his sons, raped his half sister, Tamar. Absalom then killed Amnon. The Old Testament tells us that, probably afraid of reprisals from his father, Absalom ran away from home and went to live with his grandparents for three years:

But Absalom fled, and went to Talmai son of Ammihud, king of Geshur. David mourned for his son day after day. Absalom, having fled to Geshur, stayed there for three years. (2 Sam 13:48-5)

The unfortunate Absalom had an unhappy ending. He raised an army to fight against his own father. A battle was fought in a locality west of the Jordan. Absalom's army was put to flight. Absalom, who had an abundant head of hair, was riding on a mule when his hair caught in a bough. The mule moved on and he was left hanging. One of David's commanders, Joab, thrust a spear through Absalom's heart. When news was brought to David he burst into tears:

Oh Absalom, my son, would that it were me instead of you. (2 Sam 18:33)

Parents never lose their love for their children, no matter how ill-behaved.

This Geshurite city thrived for centuries until the Assyrians arrived from the north in 732 BCE. Arrowheads, evidence of its destruction by the Assyrians, were found aplenty. The fire set by the Assyrians was hot enough to melt mud brick. We found soot from the fire in chamber four. The Assyrians kept records of all their conquests which were depicted in bas-relief on their palace walls at Nineveh. In the British museum, one such bas-relief shows a group of people being taken away into exile as the Assyrian chariots and battering rams are poised in front of the high wall. Nearby grows a palm tree. It may well be a depiction of our Geshurite city since palm trees did not grow further north. This, of course, is just guessing but it may well have been the case.

The settlement remained in ruins for three centuries until the time of Alexander the Great. Then another city, Bethsaida (house of the fishermen) arose from the ashes. This Hellenistic site fell to the Greeks, the dominant culture of the time. For another three hundred years Bethsaida was a thriving fishing town on the banks of the Jordan River. Anchors and assortments of fishing equipment attest to this. Many unfinished fishing weights suggest that there may have been a factory to produce them. We have found wine jars from the island of Rhodes, which produced the best wine in the world.

The Book of Sirach reminds us:

What is life to a man without wine? It has been created to make men glad.

Romans eventually supplanted the Greeks as the superpower. In 67 BCE, Roman General Pompey reached Syria and established it as a province for Rome. The general was invited into the insignificant state of Israel to resolve a quarrel between two Jews contesting the high priesthood. What should have been settled over the weekend turned into a five hundred-year nightmare. The Romans considered the invitation permanent. When the Empire came to the aid of a smaller state, it formed an alliance that was irrevocable and any attempt to negate it was regarded as rebellion. The dispute between the two Jewish parties was resolved. One of them was allowed to rule a small territory in name only. It was Rome's custom to place a friendly "client king" on the throne of any country on their borders that they had no wish to govern. Antipater, a man who had proved himself a friend to the Romans, was put in charge. He became the father of a man who would become an even greater friend to Rome, Herod the Great. The Romans had come to Palestine and they would remain there, looking down their noses at the inhabitants until their Empire fell in the late fifth century.

Terra sigillata, fine Roman pottery, shows up in the kitchens from this period, indicating that these people were not living in poverty. In the first century this would have been a fairly comfortable place to live despite the Roman occupation of Israel.

The city of Gamla can be seen from Bethsaida. It is poised on a rocky ridge in the Galilean hills. Here originated the Zealot movement started by Judas the Galilean in 6 CE. They preached that God alone was the ruler of Israel, not the Romans, and that no taxes should be paid. In 66 CE, a revolt against Roman rule was started in Gamla by the Zealots. It was a foolish thing to do. The Roman army was invincible. Rome's greatest general, Vespasian, was sent to deal with the situation. He did so with ruthlessness and efficiency. Some five thousand zealots committed suicide by throwing their children down and then jumping off the Gamla cliff as the Roman army approached.⁴ But the Roman war spread throughout the country. General Vespasian was so successful that his soldiers declared him Emperor and he returned to Rome leaving his son Titus to take his place.

We know a great deal about this period because of the writings of Josephus, a Jewish general in the army that fought against Rome and was sent to defend Bethsaida. In his story about his life, he tells us that had he not been thrown from his horse and sprained his wrist during one of the battles, and been taken for medical attention to Capernaum, the history of

⁴ Josephus, *The Jewish War* IV, 1-83. Gamla has not been rebuilt since.

the world would have been changed! Be that as it may, in the long run he turned traitor and joined the Romans. It is said that he sat with Titus, watching the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. He was taken by Titus to Rome, ensconced in an apartment, and told to write a history of the Jewish wars. He did so, and also wrote a history of the Jews and an account of his own life.

General Titus destroyed Jerusalem. Whether he intended to destroy the Temple is often questioned. It was one of the most magnificent buildings in the world. Some say it caught fire by mistake. But destroyed it was.

The rest of the country lay in ruins after the Roman wars. Most of the towns in Galilee – Nazareth, Capernaum, Chorazim, Bethsaida – were devastated. In 135 CE an earthquake in Galilee threw the whole topography into disarray. The Jordan River changed its course. The Sea of Galilee acquired different dimensions. Pliny the Elder, an amateur geographer, tells us that at the beginning of the first century the sea was fourteen miles long. Now that sea is eleven. Bethsaida, which had been right on the seafloor, was now one and a half miles away. This made fishing impractical. Bethsaida did not rebuild. Other cities associated with the ministry of Jesus – namely Capernaum, Chorazim and Nazareth – did eventually rebuild. But Bethsaida remained in ruins. And so it still holds the secrets of what life was like in that first century when Jesus lived.

After a second uprising by Bar Koshoba in 135 CE, the Jews were expelled from Jerusalem. They were sent out into the Diaspora to live out their religion in the sinful world. What was left of Jerusalem was rebuilt and renamed Aelia Capatolina in honour of the reigning Emperor Hadrian (Aelia was Hadrian's family name). Roman temples were built to blot out the places sacred to the Jewish people.

Bethsaida, a long way from Jerusalem, remained hidden until 1988 when excavations began. It now reveals its treasures to the world.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SEARCH FOR BETHSAIDA THROUGH THE CENTURIES

After the Roman wars Bethsaida was not rebuilt. An earthquake in the second century completely changed the topography of the land. Bethsaida had originally been situated on the seashore.¹ After the earthquake it was too far removed from the sea to make it viable for fishing.

For two-and-a-half centuries, Palestine remained Roman. It would become Christianized only after the Roman Emperor, Constantine, became Christian and declared Christianity a legal religion. This was in 314 CE.

But from the beginning, pilgrimages have been made by Christians to Israel. A pilgrimage is a journey to a holy place, where the pilgrim wishes to get to the centre of his religion and thereby to be changed. Eusebius, an early Christian historian, tells us that Bishop Miletos of Sardis made a pilgrimage in 160. Bishop Alexander of Cappadocia went there in 216 as a result of a vow he had made. Helena, mother Constantine, was a great promoter of pilgrimage. She made a pilgrimage to the holy land in 325 and built churches over many of the places associated with Jesus.

Saint Jerome writes of the importance of pilgrimage:

Just as one can understand the Greek historians better when one has seen Athens or the third book of Virgil when one has sailed to Traos or Sicily so we also understand Scripture better when we have seen Judea with our own eyes, and discovered what still remains of the ancient towns; that is why I myself take care to travel through this land.²

His devotee and protégée Paula writes:

We shall enter the cave of the Saviour, weep at the sepulchre, kiss the wood of the cross, ascend the Mount of Olives.

¹ Pliny, *Natural History* 5.15.15.

² Jerome, *Praef In Lib Paralip*.

Throughout the centuries of Christianity, many pilgrims kept journals. One of them came to light in 1884 when it was found in a monastery in Italy and is known as *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrim*. It is a lively little journal consisting of 47 short chapters. The beginning and ending are missing, but Egeria leaves us in no doubt as to where the sites associated with Jesus were. The main purpose of her visit was to see the physical sites of biblical events, so she is of great interest to archaeologists.

Most pilgrims concentrated their efforts around Jerusalem, since travelling into the hinterland was dangerous and difficult and exhausting. Nonetheless, many did venture north to be where Jesus had operated, and Bethsaida was among those places visited. There are about one hundred extant accounts of pilgrimages before the fifteenth century.³ Many of the accounts mention Bethsaida. It was associated with the miracles of Jesus and a place, along with Capernaum and Chorazin, which Jesus condemned:

If the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon they would have repented. Matt. 11:21

An ancient manuscript, quoted in a ninth-century text, mentions that fifty-three mighty works were performed at Bethsaida. It is the place of the curing of the blind man in Mark's gospel. Luke's gospel gives it as the site of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (the most important miracle of Jesus). John mentions it as the home of Peter, Andrew and Philip.

The pilgrims' accounts show that it was difficult to find. This is hardly surprising. The name of the place had been changed. It was renamed Julius by Tetrarch Philip Herod to honour the wife of Augustus, Livia Julia, in approximately 30 CE.⁴ The topography of the region had changed because of the earthquake. Pilgrims looking for Bethsaida would no longer find it on the Sea of Galilee where a fishing village was supposed to be. This did not prevent them from trying, though their accounts often leave us more confused than anything else.

Theodosius, an Englishman who visited in the sixth century says that it is six miles from Capernaum and fifty miles from Baneas (Caesarea Phillipi). The venerable Bede, safe in his English monastery and quoting from other people's diaries, talks about "*a grassy place, a fountain, near Tiberius.*"

³ However, there is but one recorded between 637 and 1099: that of the English pilgrim Willibald. These dates coincide with the Islamic takeover of Palestine and the start of the Crusades.

⁴ Josephus *Ant.* 18.2

A Russian Abbot, Daniel, who visited in the twelfth century, says “*it is further from Magdala in the mountain, a ‘verst’ from the sea on a place covered with grass.*” This of course could be anywhere!

A monk, Theodoric, also in the twelfth century, says rather helplessly: “*It is four miles from Chorazim.*” An anonymous pilgrim, known as Pseudo Beta, pronounces: “*the Sea of Galilee begins between Bethsaida and Capernaum. Bethsaida is four miles from Chorazim.*”

Father Richaldus de Monte Crucis in the thirteenth century records that “*it is close to the Sea of Galilee*” (a fairly safe guess). Similarly, Jacques de Vitry in 1227 tells us that it is “*near the sea of Galilee.*” He wasn’t taking any chances.

Bouchard of Mount Zion in 1280 writes:

It is on the road from Syria to Egypt. In ancient times it had a watercourse leading from the river which Josephus calls the little Jordan which runs into the Sea of Galilee halfway between it and Capernaum. Traces of it may be seen to this day.

Odoric De Foro in 1320 proclaims that Bethsaida is near the lake, four miles from Chorazim. Marino Sunuto, re-echoing others, is somewhat vague: “*It is on the highway.*”

Jocabus de Berora 1335, locates it five miles from Magdala, above the Sea of Galilee, while Niccolo de Poggibouse in 1347 tells us that the Sea of Galilee is below Bethsaida.

Ludolph Von Suchem places Bethsaida in Galilee:

a noble rich country, with plains, hill, pastures, grass and other good things with exceedingly fruitful and pleasant valleys.

The same pilgrim mentions that all the towns were deserted and look as though they were never of much account!

John Polner made a map in 1422 and listed Bethsaida as one of the ten cities in the Decapolis (it certainly was not!). Polner might be wrong but he is never in doubt:

One league east of Bethsaida is the place where Christ stood on the seashore and said to the seven disciples ‘Children have you any meat?’ His footprint can be seen on the stone.

Galilee is nearly all flat and plain country. On one side it adjoins the Holy Land wherein stands Bethsaida; on the other is mountainous Samaria.

One wonders if he dreamed it up!

A *Guidebook for Palestine* written circa 1350 describes the feeding of the five thousand as taking place “two miles from Capernaum as you go down the mountain and then two miles from the descent.” Try finding that spot with your compass and mile measurer!

The search is further complicated by rumours of a church. Tradition has it that Helena built a church at Bethsaida. The first pilgrim to mention a church was Willibald, in 723. Over seven hundred years later, in 1485, Father Francesdo Suriano also mentions a church but places it on the Sea of Galilee. Father Bonifacus de Stephanis in 1551 again mentions a church, as does Johannes Cotovicus in 1600. No church has been found at the site, but we will keep looking.⁵

Bethsaida is possibly most important as the home of the apostles. John’s gospel (1:44) mentions that Peter, Andrew and Philip came from Bethsaida. Theodosius, a pilgrim in the sixth century, added that it was also the home of John and James, the sons of Zebedee. Several later pilgrims also attest to this. And still other traditions add a further name: James, son of Alphaeus. A guidebook composed in 1130 by an author using the name of Fetellus tries to straighten things out by saying “*From Bethsaida came Peter and Andrew, James and John, and James the son of Alphaeus.*”

There were two James among the apostles: one was son of Zebedee and the other son of Alphaeus.

Other accounts also inform us that James, son of Alphaeus came from Bethsaida. Matthew was also a son of Alphaeus, and Jude was a son of James. Another tradition notes that Simon was a brother of Jude.⁶ This would make Bethsaida home to nine of the closest friends of Jesus and make it the most important site of the earliest Christian community.

An Englishman, Edward Robinson, visited Palestine from 1838 to 1852 and published *Biblical Research in Palestine and Adjacent Regions* shortly thereafter. Robinson is regarded as being the first to bring the current discipline of archaeology to the Holy Land and is credited with pinpointing numerous long-lost sites. It was Robinson who first suggested that Et Tell was Bethsaida.

Father Bargil Pixner, a Benedictine monk and resident of Israel, travelled all over Galilee attempting to identify places associated with Jesus in the early 1960s. The Golan Heights, in which Et Tell is situated, was then in Syrian territory. When the Six-Day War with Syria ended in 1966, the area became part of Israel. Father Pixner hastened from his

⁵ Stewart (trans.), *Library of the Palestine Pilgrims Text Society*.

⁶ Some ancient Christian writers say that Simon and Jude went together as missionaries to Persia and were martyred there.

monastery at Tabgha to this site, only to find signs everywhere: “Mined. Do not trespass.” Undaunted, he saw some cows traveling up the hill and walked in their footsteps. As he did, he collected a few shards of pottery that had been dug up by the Syrian army. Back in his laboratory, he found that they were Roman and dated to the time of Jesus.⁷ Based on Edward Robinson’s account and his finds, he felt that this was the likeliest place for Bethsaida. Pixner published numerous articles which aroused the curiosity of scholars around the world.

Eventually, a young archaeologist, Dr. Rami Arav, came to see him. There was another contestant for the site of Bethsaida: Tell Araj on the shore of the lake. Dr. Arav did a probe at Tell Araj in 1987 but it revealed no sign of habitation before the third century CE. Tell Araj could not be Bethsaida.

Excavations started at Et Tell in 1987. The locus and the abundance of artefacts found there correspond with what is mentioned in the gospels in relationship to Jesus. There is now no doubt that this site is indeed the ancient town associated with his ministry.

The search for the historical Jesus has occupied many Bible-in-hand persons in the last century and a half. The topography of Palestine has been gone over with a fine comb, distances measured and meditated upon, in an attempt to establish with some certainty where it all happened.

A short time spent in Bethsaida gives us a better understanding of Jesus and the milieu in which he operated.

And as Saint Jerome reminds us:

*We understand Scripture better when we have seen Judea with our own eyes, and discovered what still remains of the ancient towns.*⁸

⁷ Personal interview with Father Pixner in June 1995.

⁸ Jerome. Comm. Isa. (:1

CHAPTER THREE

BETHSAIDA: A PLACE FOR HEALING

One of the main occupations of Jesus was healing. The evangelists record his healing of lepers, paralytics, cripples, the blind, the deaf and dumb, those with demon possession, a woman sick with fever, and one suffering from a haemorrhage. They also speak of his raising the dead.

The Arabic name for Bethsaida was Tel eShafi which means “mound of healing.” Jesus performed many mighty works in Bethsaida. It is recorded in an apocryphal text, now in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, that Jesus performed fifty-three mighty deeds at Bethsaida. Most of these were probably healing. Saint Luke laments that had the deeds of power done by Jesus in this town been done in Tyre and Sidon they would have been more appreciated.¹

Illness and death and how to deal with them have occupied man from the beginning of time. There is much evidence in antiquity of attempts to cure illnesses. Confirmation has been found for skull surgery in Egypt as early as 5000 BCE. There is also evidence of teeth being extracted and transferred to the mouth of another in the third millennium BCE.² Herodotus wrote that the Mesopotamians, in the fifth century BCE, brought out their sick into the street. When people came along they offered the sick man advice either from what they personally had found to cure such a complaint, or what they knew of someone else being cured. No one was allowed to pass a sick person without asking him what ailed him.

The Code of Hammurabi (1800 BCE) describes fees that were paid according to the status of the patient. The code also indicates that surgery was performed and that surgeons were able to mend broken bones.

¹ *Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But at the judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades* (Luke 10:13).

² Sabbatino, “History of Psychosurgery”.

Assyrian handbooks found in the libraries of Asshur and Nineveh indicate that surgeons were able to do plastic surgery, replacing noses that had been cut off as punishment.

The practice of medicine reached a highpoint in Greece during the time of Hippocrates in the fifth century BCE and it became a profession for which one needed a certificate.

However, in ancient Israel, all illness was considered to have resulted from a violation of covenant stipulations. We read in the book of Deuteronomy:

The Lord will send upon you disaster. Panic and frustration in everything you attempt to do until you are destroyed and perish, the Lord will afflict you with consumption, fever, inflammation, with fiery heat and drought, and with blight and mildew; they will pursue you until you perish. 28:15-22.

And priests seem to have been the healers, as indicated in Deuteronomy 13:

If someone has on his skin a scab or pustule or blotch which appears to be the sore of leprosy, he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of the priests among his descendants. (Deut. 13 1ff)

When a man loses the hair of his head he is not unclean merely because he had a bald spot ... but when there is a pink sore on his bald crown ... the priest shall examine him.

Recent scholarship shows that what was regarded as leprosy was not related to leprosy as we know it today (Hansen's disease). Psoriatic arthritis has many of the same symptoms as leprosy. It is a genetic, chronic disease for which there is no cure. Leprosy was a generic term covering a wide variety of skin diseases that were regarded as being unclean. No skeletal evidence of true leprosy in ancient Israel has been discovered.³ But in 1984, a mass grave was found by the Jordan containing 400 skeletons massacred during the Persian invasion in 614 BCE. Many had been suffering from tuberculosis, leprosy and other chronic diseases. It is speculated that they had come to that place, possibly from Egypt, with the intention of being cured in the Jordan. It is thought that this could have been the site for the curing of the ten lepers by Jesus (it is also the place of the baptizing of Jesus by John).

³ Several cases were reported in an Egyptian oasis dating to the Hellenistic period.

The Bible is full of references to lice. Exodus 8:115-17 talks of lice infecting man and beast in Egypt. Archaeological evidence shows that head lice infected the population of Israel. Examination of fine combs found among artefacts from the Dead Sea shows that head lice and lice eggs were prevalent.

It is thought that infectious disease was the single greatest threat to life in antiquity, with epidemics killing half or more of the population in large cities.⁴ The raising of sheep and goats was a significant part of the economy of Jerusalem, and doubtless parasites were carried by these animals.⁵

While they were able to identify the origins of some illnesses, such as those caused by too much alcohol or eating, they considered illness to be caused by sin and tried to exorcise the demon causing it. Demons were often seen as the cause of illness. Casting out demons was a widespread form of healing. In many New Testament instances of demon possession, the tormentors are noted in the plural, “legion.” Was this what we would call today “mental illness”? Jesus was involved in curing many demon possession illnesses.⁶ The Jews referred to the Bible to determine and diagnose health problems:

If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians. For I am the Lord who heals you. Exodus 15: 26



Unguent Jar

⁴ Ortner and Putscher, *Identification of Pathological conditions in Human Skeletal Remains*, 105.

⁵ Cysts found in a body in Jerusalem were parasites and caused Hydatid disease (tapeworm).

⁶ The Bible is filled with cases of illness and disease, but it is evident that many of the “illnesses” were simply “impurities.”

The Talmud mentions over four hundred plants which were used as pharmaceuticals. Among them are cumin and the gum of the terebinth tree. Balsam, which was made from the sap of a plant identified as a “commiphora opobalsamum,” was the most expensive of pharmaceuticals. Josephus calls it the most precious of ointments and says that it was produced near Jericho, which is close to Qumran.⁷ Some scholars believe that a structure at Qumran may have been a furnace that heated water to process the balsam plant. Two forms of fragrance were manufactured: the sap was made directly into an unguent, “opus balsamun”, the most expensive form of the product. The other product was made when the branches of the plant were cooked in water in big baths. The resulting juices were mixed with olive oil. The product was called aromatic oil. (Mary of Bethany anointed the feet of Jesus with genuine aromatic nard which Judas insinuates was bought for three hundred silver pieces, a year’s wage!)⁸ Another curative indigenous to the Holy Land is aloe, which was applied to boils and used for pest extermination.⁹

Josephus wrote of the Essenes:

They are scrupulous students of the ancient literature. They are ardent students in the healing of diseases, of the roots offering protection, and of the properties of stones.

We are told by Robert Chaney¹⁰ that three basic principles were followed by the Essenes in their healing. “First, it was believed that divinity was expressed in the plant kingdom as an antidote for the illnesses of the human kingdom, that for every illness there existed a palliative in a root, leaf or bark of a tree or plant. The Essenes were herbalists in the highest sense of the word.

A second method of healing was to make use of healing stones – pieces of various kinds of rock. The power of such stones in influencing magnetic fields under the direction of one who is versed in this type of therapy became common knowledge at a later period and is still being used today. The Essenes also created salves from natural sources. The clay and spittle Jesus prescribed for the blind man may very well have originated from this source.

⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities* 14: 4.1.

⁸ A jar with the word “balsam” written on it in Hebrew letters was discovered at Masada.

⁹ Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloe with which to anoint the body of Jesus.

¹⁰ Chaney, *The Power of your own Medicine*.

The third method of healing in which the Essenes were extremely well versed drew upon the healing powers of the invisible worlds around them. They acquired mastery in manipulating these healing powers of the superior spheres.

Those who study the historical Jesus suggest that his family may at one point have belonged to the Essene group. Might he have learnt healing practices from them? The high fever of Peter's mother-in-law may have been caused by chronic malaria. Jesus healed her as he did others, by touching her. The Essenes also practiced healing through touch. The apostles used anointing oils in healing, as noted in Mark 6:13 and Luke 10:34.

Jesus twice cured blindness (Mark 8: 23-25, and John 9: 15-16) by putting mud on the eyes. Diseases of the eye were a common affliction in antiquity. Doctors could remove cataracts from the eye by the simple procedure of inserting a needle and pushing off the film. This did not give complete sight but allowed the patient (usually blind since birth) to see shadows. Mud may then have been applied to protect the wound like a sticking plaster today.¹¹ Physicians applied a plant derivative, collyrium, in lotion form as an eye cleanser. It was stored in the form of long sticks and, when needed, was combined with water to form a paste. The Egyptians used mud from the banks of the Nile River. The Jordan River was thought to have curative properties. Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army, had been cured of leprosy by bathing in the Jordan (2 Kings 5). Howard Clark Kee notes that saliva was frequently used to treat boils, leprosy sores and eye diseases.¹²

Wine was also used for medicinal purposes. Paul suggests wine for Timothy.¹³ The Good Samaritan poured wine and oil into the wounds of the injured man.¹⁴ Pliny suggests applying wine to scorpion, spider and bee stings. Plenty of wine was available in Bethsaida.

¹¹ Personal inter view with Dr. Charles Morledge, optometrist. Billings. January 16 2006.

¹² Kee, *Medicine, Miracles, and Magic in the New Testament*.

¹³ 1 Tim. 5:23: *Stop drinking water only. Take a little wine for the good of your stomach, and because of your frequent illnesses.*

¹⁴ *He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him (Luke 10: 29-37).*

We have found no latrines but we have found a channel for running water near the physician's house. Perhaps, as was the case with the Essenes of Qumran, latrines were built outside the village.¹⁵

Hot springs were known for their therapeutic effects. Two therapeutic hot springs are mentioned repeatedly in ancient literature: those of Tiberius and those of Galarza. It has been suggested that many of the sick people who flocked to Jesus had in fact come to the famous hot springs at Tiberius for a cure. The pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem was such a place. It was here that Jesus commanded the paralytic to walk. A pagan healing shrine to Asclepius was later located in this place, under the Roman ruins. Asclepius was the Greek god of healing. Temples to Asclepius, often in remote places, were visited by those who could afford to make the journey to them (much as with health spas today).



Several archaeological sites have produced implements used in ancient Roman surgery. Instruments found include a long curved scalpel. The shape of the handle suggests that it was used for probing and manoeuvring small pieces of tissue more easily. The ancient doctors also used hooks, which came in two basic varieties: sharp and blunt. Blunt hooks were primarily used as probes for dissection and for raising blood vessels. Sharp hooks were used to hold and lift small pieces of tissue so that they could be extracted and to retract the edges of wounds. Bone drills were used to remove diseased bone tissue from the skull and extract foreign objects, such as a weapon, from a bone. Bone forceps were used to extract small pieces of bone that would be otherwise difficult to remove with fingers. Catheters – long metal tubes – were used to help open up blocked urinary tracts. Bone saws, specula and syringes are among artefacts found at various sites. At Bethsaida we have found jars for expensive unguents (possibly collyrium or balsam) and several artefacts used in healing.

¹⁵ *You shall have a designated area outside the camp to which you shall go. With your utensils you shall have a trowel; when you relieve yourself outside, you shall dig a hole with it and then cover up your excrement* (Deut. 23: 12-13).

Jesus used the emotional approach, curing by touch or by word, often declaring that it was the faith of the victim that had healed him. He did use mud for the healing of blindness. One thing he did change was to declare that disease was not caused by sin. Thus the victim was spared the added burden of guilt.

The words and deeds of Jesus come alive in Bethsaida. I find myself, as I walk through the site, wondering how many builders had broken toes! Salome, mother of James and John, lived here. Tradition has it that she was a midwife. (Apocryphal literature has her present at the birth of Jesus). She would have had her work cut out: about a third of women died in childbirth. Many children died before reaching one year of age.

Bethsaida, situated as it was beside the River Jordan, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, had a mild climate that would have been conducive to health. It has been suggested that the building of the temple to Livia Julia by Philip Herod had something to do with healing, as the nearest temple to Asclepius was very distant. Temples were often associated with healing. The apostles started curing the sick right after Pentecost. It has been suggested that Christianity spread so quickly because it offered free medicine! Did they learn their methods from Jesus himself? Many of the apostles came from Bethsaida. Did they learn by observing his methods? Were some of them cured by him? Jesus was a builder. Did he administer first aid to those who had minor accidents while building?

