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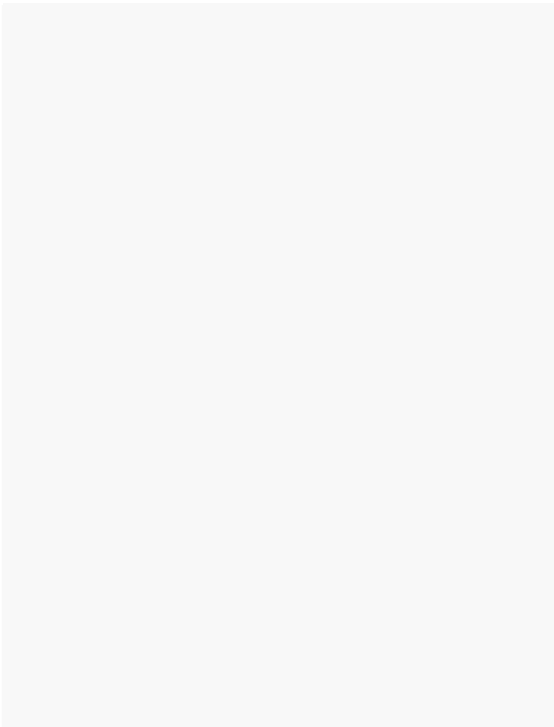
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The History and Archeology of Bethsaida

Kristen Sibold

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Presidential Scholars Senior Thesis



About one mile north of the Sea of Galilee, in the Jordan River delta, stands a twenty-acre archeological mound known as et-tell. This ancient site has been under excavation since 1987, under the direction of Israeli archaeologist Dr. Rami Arav. In 1989 the Israeli government officially recognized et-tell as the site of Bethsaida, the third most frequently-mentioned city in the New Testament behind Jerusalem and Capernaum (“Bethsaida” 1). The rich history of Bethsaida began long before the New Testament was written, and archeological discoveries provide scholars with a first-hand look at what life was like over two thousand years ago.

The first settlement at Bethsaida comes from the early Bronze Age (3050-2700 B.C.E.). Not much is known of the city from this period, except that it was surrounded by a stone wall. The city itself was relatively large, comprising an area of nearly 20 acres. An abundance of basalt stone was strewn throughout the region that was used for building. There was a spring at the southwest base of the hill on which the city had developed, providing fresh water for the city’s inhabitants. In addition, the settlement was in close proximity to the Sea of Galilee, which offered travel by boat and many resources for fishing.

The second settlement occurs in Iron Age II (1000-586 B.C.E.), roughly the time of the Israelite monarchy in the Old Testament. The city had become a rather substantial settlement (Ben-Tal 1), still enclosed by city wall. Archeological excavations have revealed sections of the wall appear to be over twenty feet wide, an unparalleled figure which exceeds that of Jerusalem for this period (“Bethsaida” 3). A magnificent four-chambered gateway has also been discovered, with paved entry and well-preserved threshold allowing passage into and out of the city.

To the north of the gateway was a large public building complex, consisting of a temple and royal palace joined together by a paved plaza. The discovery of a Phoenician-style bulla (used to seal letters) demonstrates the importance of Bethsaida, and its influence by Phoenician

culture. The presence of an Egyptian *pataikos* suggests trade relations also with that country (Strickert

15). These finds point to a rather substantial settlement during the Iron Age period for which there is no rival nearby.

One would expect a site so prominent to have been mentioned in the Old Testament. Yet the name "Bethsaida" is missing. However, the mention of the fortified city "Tzer" in Joshua 19:35 fits both in terms of location and possible description as a fisherman's city. At the time of the early Israelite monarchy, this region was known as the land of Geshur. The Geshurite King Talmai gave his daughter Ma'acah's hand in marriage to King David (2 Sam 3:3). Their son was the well-known Absalom, who led a popular revolt against his father using the Geshurite capital for three years as his base (2 Sam 13:37-39). The continuation of the name Ma'acah among wives of later kings of Israel suggests the a close relationship between the Geshurite kingdom and the Northern Kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 15:2, 10, 13; 2 Chron 11:20; 15:16).

The third settlement of Bethsaida occurs in the Hellenistic age. Although nothing is known about the settlement from literary sources, it appears that Bethsaida was a flourishing city during this period. Coin finds provide the best evidence – two coins from Phoenecia and one from Athens suggest that Bethsaida was not an isolated city.

During the Roman period of settlement (around the time of the New Testament), Bethsaida was under the rule of Philip, the son of King Herod. The gospel of Luke (3:1-2) designates Philip's rule as comprising the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, of which the only two cities in this region mentioned in the New Testament are Caesarea Philippi and Bethsaida.

As a son of Herod the Great and Cleopatra of Jerusalem, Philip was one of his few children to survive Herod during his later years of paranoia and terror. After Herod's death in 4 B.C.E., his kingdom was divided among his three sons, who were each given the title "tetrarch." To Philip was given the Golan region in the north.

Philip's tetrarchy was the poorest of the three in economic resources. This is confirmed by the poor metallic content of his coins. His building projects have left less than spectacular remains – no columns, statues, decorated architecture, mosaics, and the like have been found. During Herod's reign, he had offered the exemption from taxes and tributes as an enticement to settle in this region. Later, Philip resumed taxation on a modest level. He had the reputation of being a very popular ruler. It is not surprising that his popularity led to the use of the name Philip by his subjects, as in one of Jesus' disciples from Bethsaida. Philip completed a long tenure in office, continuing to rule after the resurrection of Jesus.

The first part of Jesus' ministry is concentrated in the Galilee, in the tetrarchy of Philip's brother Herod Antipas (Mark 1:14-6:13). At a certain point in his Galilean ministry, Jesus was perceived as a threat to Antipas, and was feared to be John the Baptist raised from the dead (Mark 6:14-16). When Jesus received word of Antipas' growing hostility, he departed from the Galilee by boat for "a lonely place" – probably the less populace region near Bethsaida – where he would reflect on this turn of events (Mark 6:30-32). Matthew 14:13 directly links Jesus' decision to cross the sea to the report about Antipas' growing hostility toward him. The resulting attempt of Jesus to seek solitude near Bethsaida is thwarted by the crowds who follow him on foot. Jesus reacts in compassion, leading him to feed the multitude (Mark 6:33-44), and to follow them back to Galilee after a night alone on a nearby mountain (Mark 6:45-52).

From this point on, Jesus moves in (Mark 6:53-7:23 and 7:31-8:12) and out of the Galilee (Mark 7:24-30). He soon ends up in Bethsaida once again where he heals a blind man (Mark 8:13-26). Jesus sojourns for some time in the Golan, the territory of Philip, allowing him to reflect on his ministry and to set his face toward Jerusalem (Mark 10:1) and his inevitable arrest and death (Mark 11-15). There was no subsequent restoration of a Galilean ministry, only a short stop passing through in secret (Mark 9:30-31).

Nowhere do we have a report about Philip's attitude toward Jesus as we do concerning Antipas. However, a close analysis of Jesus' itinerary does suggest that Jesus at least felt more

comfortable in Philip's territory during the latter stages of his ministry. This also fits the general tolerant spirit portrayed by Philip.

Bethsaida, more than any other town, can rightly be called the Home of the Apostles (Strickert 18). Specific references in the New Testament link three disciples of Jesus to Bethsaida: Simon Peter, Philip, and Andrew. Later traditions also connect James and John, the sons of Zebedee, to Bethsaida. No other location can make such a claim about the disciples (Strickert 19).

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) do not connect any disciples with particular towns or regions, as Jesus was with Nazareth. However, in the fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John, he identifies three disciples with the city of Bethsaida: "Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter" (John 1:44).

This identification of Bethsaida as the home of three disciples is interesting for several reasons. First, it raises prominence to Philip, a disciple who does not really play a major role in the Synoptics (Strickert 20). Second, it mentions Andrew and Peter as if it were already common knowledge that Bethsaida was the home of these two brothers (Strickert 20). What is interesting is that these names occur at the top of all lists of the Twelve, indicating their importance (Matt. 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:14-16; Acts 1:13).

The association of these three disciples with Bethsaida is consistent with our knowledge of the community. Philip's name is quite appropriate since the region around Bethsaida was governed by the rather popular son of Herod, also named Philip. The names of all three of these disciples are Greek in origin, in contrast to all the other disciples who have Semitic names. It can then be assumed that a Greek education was available and the Greek language was spoken in this region. Therefore, it is not surprising that when Greeks wish to see Jesus, they make use of Philip and Andrew as intermediaries:

Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and

Philip told Jesus. Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for life eternal.” (John 12:20-25, *NIV*)

In addition, it is hard to imagine the success of Simon Peter’s missionary journeys to Antioch, Corinth, and Rome without some knowledge of the Greek language. Even the attribution of the name “Peter” by Jesus implies some knowledge of Greek.

In the Gospels, Jesus often traveled by boat, across the sea, to Bethsaida. For instance, in Mark 8:31, before Jesus went to heal a blind man at Bethsaida, he got into a boat and “went across to the other side.” Likewise, the expressions “they went across” or “to the other side” occur in connection with the miracles of Jesus feeding the five thousand and walking on water. In this context, Bethsaida is mentioned explicitly in both Mark 6:45 and Luke 9:10:

Before feeding

Matt. 14:13 – He withdrew from there *in a boat* to a deserted place by himself.

Mark 6:32 – They went away *in the boat* to a deserted place by themselves.

Luke 9:10 – He took them with him and withdrew privately to a city called Bethsaida.

John 6:1 – Jesus went *to the other side* of the Sea of Galilee.

After feeding

Matt. 14:22 – He made the disciples get *into the boat* and go on ahead *to the other side*.

Mark 6:45 – He made his disciples get *into the boat* and go on ahead *to the other side*, to Bethsaida.

John 6:16-17 – His disciples went down to the sea, got *into a boat*, and started *across the sea* to Bethsaida.

Upon return to land

Matt. 14:34 – When they had *crossed over*, they came to land at Gennesaret.

Mark 6:53 – When they had *crossed over*, they came to land at Gennesaret.

John 6:21 – The boat *reached the land* toward which they were going.

What is most significant is that Bethsaida is consistently described as “on the other side” or “across the sea” from the various cities on the western shore. Travel to Bethsaida was often expressed in terms of “withdrawing” from the crowds and heading towards a deserted place where Jesus and his disciples could be by themselves.

In order to properly understand the expression, “across the sea,” it is important to note the geography of the area. The Galilee (referring to the land west of the Sea of Galilee) and the Golan (land to the north and east of the sea – including Bethsaida) are separated by the Jordan River flowing from the north, which empties into the sea. The river cuts a gorge which rises up quickly on both sides, making crossing by land nearly impossible (Strickert 36). Therefore, the only method of travel between these two regions was by boat, on the sea.

Bethsaida had ready access to the sea. In Jesus’ time, the Sea of Galilee came up to the base of the small hill on which Bethsaida is located, and a dramatic gulf of water separated Bethsaida from the Galilean land to its west. Geological evidence points to the settlement as located on a peninsula sticking out into the sea (Strickert 42). It was, in fact, *on the other side*. By placing Bethsaida on a peninsula, this would make the city completely separated from the Galilean lands to the west, and would be consistent with literary sources expressing that people would *get into a boat* and *cross to the other side* to reach Bethsaida.

Bethsaida’s port provided easy access, by way of boat travel, to the important cities of the Galilee including Tiberias (John 6:23), Capernaum, Gennesaret, and Magdala (Strickert 45). With the wide, deep mouth of the Jordan River hindering travel connections by land to these cities of the south and west, access could only be found across the sea.

The name Bethsaida means “House of the Fisherman,” or, “Fishertown” (the prefix *Beth* means “house,” while the rest of the Hebrew name refers to fish). From the beginning, Bethsaida, as a city on the sea, was known for its fishing. In the Old Testament, fishing was not given much attention, though it is presumed that Bethsaida is included in the designation of 4 fishing towns around Lake Kinneret [Sea of Galilee] (Joshua 19:35).

There is quite a different picture painted in the Gospels, where the fishing motif dominates. At least one parable and several miracles are centered around fishing:

- “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering *fish* of every kind; and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad fish they threw away. So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matt. 13:47-50)
- When they came to Capernaum, those who collected the two-drachma tax came to Peter and said, “Does your teacher not pay the two-drachma tax?” He said, “Yes.” And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, “What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?” When Peter said, “From strangers,” Jesus said to him, “Then the sons are exempt. However, so that we do not offend them, go to the sea and throw in a hook, and take the first *fish* that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for you and Me” (Matt. 17:24-27).
- Now it happened that while the crowd was pressing around Him and listening to the word of God, He was standing by the lake of Gennesaret; and He saw two boats lying at the edge of the lake; but the fishermen had gotten out of them and were washing their nets. And He got into one of the boats, which was Simon’s, and asked him to put out a little way from the land. And He sat down and began teaching the people from the boat. When He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon answered and said, “Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but I will do as You say and let down the nets.” When they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of *fish*, and their nets began to break; so they signaled to their partners in the other boat for them to come and help them. And they came and filled both of the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus’ feet, saying, “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” For amazement had seized him and all his companions because of the great catch of fish which they had taken (Luke 5:1-9).

Jesus even teaches from a fishing boat:

- He began to teach again by the sea. And such a very large crowd gathered to Him that He got into a boat in the sea and sat down; and the whole crowd was by the sea on the land (Mark 4:1).

It is not surprising, then, that early symbols of Christianity are the *ichthus* (Greek; meaning “fish”) and the anchor (Strickert 48). At least four of Jesus’ disciples (associated with Bethsaida) were known as fishermen by trade: Peter, Andrew, James, and John. They were called while engaged in fishing, and their calling is described in terms of fishing for people:

As He was going along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. Going on a little farther, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who were also in the boat mending the nets. Immediately He called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went away to follow Him (Mark 1:14-20).

Finally, following the resurrection of Jesus, no fewer than seven disciples are described as returning to fishing:

Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will also come with you." They went out and got into the boat, and that night they caught nothing. But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. So Jesus said to them, "Children, you do not have any fish, do you?" They answered Him, "No." And He said to them, "Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat and you will find a catch." So they cast, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish. Therefore, the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord." So when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped for work), and threw himself into the sea. But the other disciples came in the little boat, for they were not far from the land, but about one hundred yards away, dragging the net full of fish. So when they got on the land, they saw a charcoal fire already laid and a fish placed on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have now caught." Simon Peter went up and drew the net to land, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples ventured to question Him, "Who are you?" knowing that it was the Lord... This was the third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead (John 21:1-14).

The fishing artifacts discovered at Bethsaida have been plentiful. This collection provides the best selection of fishing equipment from any one site around the Sea of Galilee, and is extremely helpful in understanding ancient fishing practices. These artifacts also clearly demonstrate that Bethsaida was a fishing village.

The discovery of a large number of net weights at Bethsaida points to the prevalence of fishing by net in this region (Strickert 49). There were several different types of nets used on the Sea of Galilee. The **cast net** was operated by a single fisherman, and extends twenty to twenty-five feet in diameter. Small stones or lead weights were attached to the net, which pulled the net to the bottom of the sea. This is the type of net mentioned in the previously mentioned call

narrative of the disciples. Recall that the disciples have been casting their nets in a circle around them, and then Jesus calls them to cast their nets for people (Mark 1:16-20). The discovery of an unrolled lead weight at Bethsaida indicates that the cast net was probably manufactured in Bethsaida itself (Strickert 50).

The **seine net**, or **dragnet** is another type of net used when fishing. This was a commonly used type of net that created a long “wall” of net, which was spread about a hundred yards from shore and then pulled to the shore by two teams of men. The gospel accounts imply familiarity with this type of net. Jesus refers to the seine net (dragnet) in the parable of the net where the fishermen must separate out good and bad fish (Matt. 13:47). An in the account of the miraculous catch of fish after the resurrection, many details suggest that the disciples were using a seine net. For example, John 21:8 states that the disciples were positioned about one hundred yards off shore and that they were dragging their nets to shore. The team of seven fishermen would also be appropriate, as would the use of two boats mentioned in similar accounts (Luke 5:7).

Similar accounts also mention the tearing of nets (Luke 5:6). This must not have been uncommon, as James and John were preoccupied with mending their nets when they first met Jesus (Mark 1:9). Several bronze and iron needles, typical for net repair, have been found at Bethsaida.

One of the most significant finds at Bethsaida is a small clay seal. The seal depicts a *hippos* boat, a small boat that was used in shallow water. This is perhaps the type of boat referred to in John’s gospel, when he mentions that there are no small boats for Jesus to travel to the other side after the miraculous feeding episode at Bethsaida (Jesus then walks on water to reach the other side):

The next day the crowd that stood on the other side of the sea saw that there was no other small boat there, except one, and that Jesus had not entered with His disciples into the boat, but that His disciples had gone away alone. There came

other small boats from Tiberias near to the place where they ate the bread after the Lord had given thanks. So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor His disciples, they themselves got into the small boats, and came to Capernaum seeking Jesus (John 6:22-24).

The clay seal itself was likely used to stamp jar handles, which then denoted the jar contents as salted fish. While this was a thriving industry among other towns of the Sea of Galilee, there is no reason to believe that Bethsaida did not partake in it as well. In fact, when Jesus multiplied the loaves and the fishes to feed the five thousand at Bethsaida, the original Greek word used meant “salted fish” (Strickert 57). The salted fish used in this miracle likely came from Bethsaida.

There has been another recent archeological discovery concerning fishing, though not directly related to Bethsaida. In 1986, after a long drought when the Sea of Galilee was at its lowest elevation, members of Kibbutz Ginnosar discovered a boat in the mud in an area usually submerged. This discovery caused quite a stir, because it is the only ancient vessel ever found on the lake, and the process of removing it was rather exciting – the excavators were forced to battle the rising lake waters caused by the resurgent rains.

The boat proved to be over 2000 years old, dating to the first century. This puts the boat in action around the time of the Gospels. The boat has a Bethsaida connection. One of the coins discovered in the excavation of the boat is a coin of Philip. This is significant because Philip’s coins were meant primarily for local circulation within the Golan region. Therefore, it is quite possible that passengers on this boat had embarked from Bethsaida before it sank near Ginnosar (Strickert 61).

Life in Bethsaida centered around the home. The architecture of these houses was impressive. They were attractive yet durable, made of limestone and basalt stone that was found throughout the region. The Gospels frequently speak of the daily life that takes place in such houses (Strickert 65). People would gather there to eat and drink, others would work on the roof, women would grind meal, and others would be in bed sleeping (Strickert 65).

The citizens of Bethsaida lived in relatively simple houses consisting of one or two rooms, with a small courtyard in front. One such house uncovered at Bethsaida was basically a square structure, measuring about 21 feet by 21 feet. The main room, or *traklin*, was the dining room. This was an area where family members sat together and where meals were taken. They usually sat on the ground around a small raised platform, though the room also had three couches for reclining. Light was provided by oil lamps or streams of natural light from the outside.

A doorway in the east wall of the *traklin* led to the slightly smaller *kiton*, or bedroom. Residents often slept side-by-side on straw mattresses unrolled on the floor. Beds were also used, though this was a sign of luxury.

The roof, which was flat, was probably made of large timber covered by reeds and clay. It was possible to break through this material, as demonstrated by the story of the paralytic let down to Jesus from the roof:

Being unable to get to Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him; and when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic was lying. And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:4-5).

This type of roof required maintenance. The homeowner would patch the holes, then roll the roof with a stone roller, several of which have turned up at Bethsaida (Strickert 67). The rooftop was used for numerous domestic activities in the warm summer months, and also for storage and drying of fruits and vegetables. Peter is described as going to the rooftop to pray (Acts 10:9), and it was also considered a good place to study (Strickert 67).

The excavations at Bethsaida have also uncovered two courtyard style houses (Ben-Tal 1). This type of house included a courtyard surrounded by the various rooms of the house. A stone wall separated the courtyard from the street, creating a large private space for the family's domestic activities while in a comfortable outdoor setting. The addition of a courtyard denoted a higher class status, since it provided a larger living space. One courtyard style house at Bethsaida was

nicknamed “the fisherman’s house,” because of the various fishing equipment found in the courtyard. This large, spacious courtyard provided ample space for activities such as repair of fishing nets and sails and storage of equipment. The inhabitants of this house had a high quality of life, as indicated by the discovery of 156 shards of imported Roman fineware, including fishplates and finely decorated pieces of Roman Eastern Terra Sigillata pottery (Strickert 71). Half these pieces of fineware were found in the courtyard, demonstrating that daily life was centered around there.

The second courtyard style house in Bethsaida is called “the winemaker’s house.” A well-preserved, spacious kitchen is on the east side of the house. Among finds in the kitchen were an oven, a number of grinding stones of various sizes, and much kitchenware. Outside the house was uncovered an undisturbed wine cellar with four complete Hellenistic (Greek) jars and one cooking pot. Three iron sickles, the kind used for grape harvest, were also found. The inhabitants of this house also had a rather comfortable lifestyle, as there were numerous finds of imported fineware.

The New Testament records several miracles of Jesus performed in or near Bethsaida. The multiplication of the loaves and fishes, also known as the feeding of the five thousand, is the only miracle which occurs in all four gospels (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:31-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14). The miracle is an act of compassion that Jesus has for people who have found themselves in physical need, because their spiritual hunger has led them to leave their homes in search of spiritual food. Following an afternoon of spiritual nourishment – teaching and healing – Jesus then provides the physical nourishment necessary for their long walk home.

Taking them with Him, He withdrew by Himself to a city called Bethsaida. But the crowds were aware of this and followed Him; and welcoming them, He began speaking to them about the kingdom of God and curing those who had need of healing. Now the day was ending, and the twelve came and said to Him, “Send the crowd away, that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside and find lodging and get something to eat, for here we are in a desolate place.” But He said to them, “You give them something to eat!” And they said, “We have no more than five loaves and two fish, unless perhaps we go and buy food for all these people.” (For there were about five thousand men.) And He said to

His disciples, "Have them sit down to eat in groups of about fifty each." They did so, and had them all sit down. Then He took the five loaves and two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed them, and broke them, and kept giving them to the disciples to set before the people. And they all ate and were satisfied; and the broken pieces which they had left over were picked up, twelve baskets full (Luke 9:10-17).

These events have connections to Bethsaida. While only Luke explicitly places this miracle at Bethsaida, the other three accounts are in agreement that the location for the feeding was reached by boat. Prior to the feeding, Jesus and his disciples are described as embarking by boat and going ashore. Afterwards Jesus sends his disciples away by boat.

The same three accounts also speak of "the other side" (Matt 14:22; Mark 6:45; John 6:1) and of "crossing over" (Matt 14:34; Mark 6:53) and "going across" (John 6:17). The place of origin is not mentioned by name, but the Synoptic Gospels imply that they began on the western shore in the territory of Herod Antipas, whose growing hostility has led to Jesus' decision to withdraw for a while. These accounts, therefore, are in agreement that the feeding took place on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Another similarity between the different accounts of the feeding episode is that the crowds who wish to follow Jesus travel not by boat, but on foot. There is a slight variation in the different accounts:

Matt 14:13 – But when the crowds heard it, they *followed him on foot* from the towns.

Mark 6:33 – Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they *hurried there on foot* from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.

Luke 9:11 – When the crowds found out about it, they *followed him*.

John 6:2 – A large crowd *kept following him*.

At the end of the feeding Jesus dismissed the crowds while he sent his disciples away by boat. Therefore, the site is one accessible both by land and by boat, and within reasonable walking distance.

The Synoptics imply that the crowds walk to the site of the feeding, they hear Jesus' teaching, many are healed, they are fed, and they return to their homes – all in a single day. With all that occurred, it is hard to imagine a journey of more than six to eight miles each way. If those coming from the western shore of Jesus' departure on foot, up a steep incline, and with people who were sick and injured, the likely destination could not be much further east of Bethsaida.

The accounts also give a number of other details concerning the location. Although the site was near the sea, it was also hilly. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus ascends a nearby hill at the end of the feeding (Matt 14:23; Mark 6:46). In John, however, Jesus climbs a hill at the beginning and the crowds ascend to him (John 6:3). Another detail is that the place where the people sat was grassy (Matt 14:19). John notes that there was a great deal of grass (John 6:10) and Mark notes that it was green grass (Mark 6:39).

The other significant detail is that the site is described in the Synoptics as “a deserted place” or “a lonely place” (Matt 14:13; Mark 6:31,32,35; Luke 9:12). This phrase is to be emphasized since it occurs three times in one account. When Jesus said, “Come away to a deserted place” (Mark 6:31), this would imply that the destination is a well-known place. The crowds are aware of Jesus' destination and set out to meet him there.

If we assume that Bethsaida is the location for the feeding miracle, a likely point of encounter between Jesus, who arrived by boat, and the crowds, who arrived by land, was not at Bethsaida itself but at a location north of the town. The travel of Jesus and his disciples included crossing the sea by boat, docking at Bethsaida harbor, going through the city, and hiking north of Bethsaida on foot. This would realistically put the two groups coming together at a junction north of town. It would also explain Mark's reference that Jesus already saw the crowds as he was getting out of the boat. The road around the sea is located on the high ridge of the western side of the Jordan River, and thus makes it possible for continued visual contact between the two groups.

A location north of town would also explain Jesus' reluctance to send the crowds into Bethsaida for food. For those traveling on foot, Bethsaida was not on their itinerary and would lead to a detour and an addition of several more hours. By feeding the crowds and directly sending them on their way, they could reasonably return to their homes that same night.

The meal of bread and fish is especially fitting for a location near Bethsaida. As a fishing town, one would naturally expect the presence of fish. Although the Synoptic accounts use the general Hebrew term for fish, John uses a different term denoting dried fish, a possible export of Bethsaida (Strickert 122).

Other than Jesus and his disciples, the characters in this miracle story are not identified in the Synoptic accounts. John, however, includes a discussion between Jesus and Philip concerning the difficulty of feeding such a large crowd. Another disciple, Andrew, locates the boy with the loaves and fish. This is quite appropriate because these are the disciples from Bethsaida. And in identifying Andrew as Simon Peter's brother and repeating the name Philip three times, John reminds the reader of his introduction that linked the three disciples together and established their origins at Bethsaida (John 1:40).

The feeding episode is followed in three gospels with the account of Jesus walking on water:

Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away. After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening He was there alone. But the boat was already a long distance from land, battered by the waves, for the wind was contrary. And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified and said, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter said to Him, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." And He said, "Come!" And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind stopped. And those who were in the boat worshipped Him, saying, "You are certainly God's Son!" (Matt. 14:22-33)

The disciples have left by boat – the only available boat according to John 6:22. The crowds have departed. Jesus remained behind for a quiet evening alone in prayer on the hillside.

The disciples' travel is hindered by the typical strong winds on the sea. At the same time, Jesus began to make his way back to the western shore, on foot. He does not travel on the road, but makes his way by the sea (Mark 6:48; John 6:19). Mark's comment, that Jesus was "going to pass them by" (6:48), suggests that Jesus' intention was merely to reach the same destination on the western shore (Price 304). Yet as Jesus sees his disciples in trouble, he comes to them on the water bringing calm in the midst of storm and courage in the midst of doubt (Strickert 124). They arrived at Gennesaret, and Jesus began teaching in the Galilee.

Mark 8:22-26 presents the story of the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida:

They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Can you see anything?" And the man looked up and said, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking." Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Then he sent him away to his home, saying "Do not even go into the village."

In this account, Jesus crossed the sea by boat with his disciples and arrived at the town of Bethsaida. As Jesus is passing through, a blind man is brought to him for healing. Jesus leads him outside of the town where he heals the man by spitting on his eyes. The man receives only partial sight and says that what he sees is like trees walking. After Jesus laid his hands upon his eyes, the man then was able to see. Jesus then sent him home instructing him not to return to Bethsaida.

In the ancient world the blind were often forbidden from the acceptable circles of society, and were joined with the lepers and lame as outcasts. The blind were stigmatized by their disease, and forced to live as beggars near cities. As the major population center in the southern Golan, Bethsaida likely had a large number of beggars (Strickert 128). It is, then, not out of the ordinary to find a blind man waiting for Jesus in a town like Bethsaida.

Like most travelers coming to Bethsaida, Jesus probably arrived at the harbor. The most likely gathering place for beggars was the harbor area, for there they would meet the many travelers arriving by boat. Jesus took the beggar's hand and led him away from the distracting crowds to heal him.

Jesus focused his ministry on an area called the Evangelical Triangle (Price 304). This designation is associated with an area linked between three towns of Bethsaida, Chorazin, and Capernaum on the northern part on the Sea of Galilee. It is in this area that Jesus taught and performed most of his miracles. Nevertheless, Matthew and Luke preserve a "woe saying" of Jesus in which he condemns these communities for their lack of faith:

Then He began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre in Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgement than for you. And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted into heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades, for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgement, than for you." (Matt. 11:20-24)

The towns of Jesus' day were compared to ancient cities with a reputation for evil deeds. Just as those ancient cities were destroyed, so also the three cities of Jesus' day were condemned (Price 304).

This saying points to a flurry of activity not reported in depth by the New Testament writers (Strickert 136). For example, absolutely nothing is reported about the ministry of Jesus in Chorazin apart from this saying. Yet it would be a mistake to think that Jesus' ministry in Bethsaida, as also in the other cities, was limited to only a few miracle reports. This saying points to an extensive ministry by Jesus around the Sea of Galilee.

Is there evidence for other miracles to be connected with Bethsaida? One episode that fits the context of Bethsaida is the story of the miraculous catch of fish in connection with the risen Jesus' appearance to seven disciples (John 21). The disciples have gone back to their

former lives, careers, and homes after the resurrection. Under the leadership of Peter they return to the Sea of Galilee and a night of fishing. Like many miracles, the story does not indicate a specific location, although it is natural to assume that Peter would choose to return to his home, Bethsaida.

The city of Bethsaida reached its height of glory in the first century, after the resurrection of Jesus. However, it soon came to an end. The “woe sayings” in Matthew and Luke hint that Bethsaida is on the road to destruction. Evidence from archeology points to the cause of the destruction of Bethsaida.

The end of Bethsaida’s history came shortly after the New Testament period (“The Story” 2). Although a city had existed on this site from the Bronze Age, Iron Age, Hellenistic, and early Roman periods, there is no sign of occupation in subsequent periods. Early Roman structures are consistently found directly below the surface, including the two complete courtyard-style houses (the “winemaker’s house” and the “fisherman’s house”). Following the Roman period there are no signs of later building, and a portion of the site subsequently was used as a cemetery.

The possibility of an earthquake as the cause of destruction for Bethsaida is quite high, considering the Jordan Rift is a major fault line. The evidence of twisted walls throughout the site, and particularly the fallen roofing stones and collapsed shelving is quite fitting for earthquake destruction (Strickert 163). In addition, remnants of two major landslides have been discovered north of Bethsaida. It appears that extensive rains and earthquakes caused these landslides to dam up the Jordan River. With continually built-up pressure, the force of the water then broke through with such a force that massive debris was carried down the river, adding to the city’s destruction.

It was not uncommon for cities destroyed by earthquake or war to be rebuilt and reinhabited. However, this did not happen at Bethsaida. The most likely explanation is that the geological and geographical changes rendered the site no longer inhabitable and profitable to

build on. Bethsaida's history had been connected with its access to the sea, serving as a center for the fishing industry and as a harbor for boat travelers heading north and south. With its harbor destroyed, both means of livelihood had come to an end and the settlement was abandoned.

Today the site of Bethsaida is over one mile from the shore of the Sea of Galilee ("Bethsaida" 3). Geologists John F. Schroder, Jr. and Moshe Inbar note that these dramatic shifts are due to three natural causes. First, Bethsaida's location on the Jordan Rift fault line has led to a gradual passing of two continental plates, so that Bethsaida has moved to the north while the Galilee has gradually shifted to the south. Second, the instability of the land on this fault line has led to periodic earthquakes and to shifting and upward pushing of the land. Third, the natural movement of the Jordan River has carried tons of silt, boulders, mud, and debris from the northern valley to be deposited in the plain below. The combination of these last two factors, periodic earthquakes and the debris carried by the River Jordan, have brought about dramatic changes on the shoreline.

On a personal note, I am so thankful for the opportunity I had to excavate this lost city. The chance to visit such a historical place, and hold this history in my hands, is simply astounding to me. Perhaps what I will remember best about Bethsaida, however, are the friendships I made while on the dig -- friendships bonded together through Jesus Christ. It is because of Him that I had reason to study the history and archeology of Bethsaida.

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