

The Museum of the Bible hosted a lecture entitled “Byzantine, Bethsaida, and the house of Peter” with two speakers, Dr. R. Steven Notley, of Alliance University, and Dr. Mordechai “Motti” Aviam, of Kinneret College on the Sea of Galilee, presenting some of the findings from their work in Israel, on the topic of finding the real Bethsaida. Traditionally, it is held that a church was built over the house of Peter and Andrew. Dr. Notley gave a general historical overview of the city of Bethsaida, spoke on what led to the project, and ended with early, and exciting findings from their dig project at el-Araj. Dr. Aviam, the archaeological expert of the pair and originally a skeptic of the project, spoke from his field of study providing more and more compelling evidence for their dig site.

Dr. Notley spoke briefly of the history of the site of Bethsaida and what led to the dig project at el-Araj. In the Biblical accounts, Bethsaida is the home of Andrew and his brother Simon, and also Philip. Over the course of history, the actual location of Bethsaida was lost in time. Recently, historians, archaeologists, and scholars alike have narrowed the location of Bethsaida to 3 potential sites. This lecture, for the sake of brevity, discussed 2 of the 3, el-Araj and Et Tel. Et Tel was identified by New Yorker Edmund Robinson in 1838, and has been excavated since 1987. Mr. G. Schumacher identified a second location, el-Araj, and pointed out a problem with etTel, its location with respect to the lake, about 3 km away. Bethsaida, from ancient sources, is regarded as a fishing village, and three kilometers is a ‘long way to carry your boat’ as they say in Oklahoma. Finally, the anonymous pilgrim of Theodosia, years after Theodosius, recorded a log of his travels in his journal saying, “and then to the house of Peter which is now a basilica.” This, and other factors, led Dr. Notley away from etTel to el-Araj where he enlisted the help of archaeologist Dr. Mordechai Aviam.

Dr. Aviam was originally skeptical of the dig, but as the material evidences from el-Araj began to be unearthed, his skepticism conversely was buried under the pile of history from Byzantine artifacts 2m under the soil to the recent Roman pieces found further down and from other sites at el-Araj. First, a Byzantian inscription containing the words “chief of the apostles” was recovered from the site. The addition of Roman pieces lend further credibility to the site being the real Bethsaida as Josephus Flavius, a Jewish Roman historian, noted the village underwent transformation under the reign of Herodias Philip, son of Herod the Great.

The discovery of Roman pieces from bathhouses and at least 4 actual Roman coins with the visages of 3rd century Roman emperor Diocletian continue to add credibility to the claim that these scholars have found the lost city of Bethsaida, home of Peter and Andrew.