

On Thursday January 26, 2023, Professor R. Steven Notley and Dr. Mordechai Aviam archaeologist presented *Byzantine Bethsaida and the House of Peter* at the Museum of the Bible. The pair discussed the seemingly unlikely collaboration. They examined, explained and analyzed their work together. Professor Notley discussed early attempts to identify El Araj called Bethsaida. He noted descriptions given in the Old Testament of the site and changes to the Jordan coastline. According to Schumacher another site, Et Tell was too far from the lakeshore to be a fishing village and suggested that El Araj with its closeness to the lake was a more suitable location for Bethsaida. After thirty years of digging nothing from the Roman period was found at Et Tell. Herod Philip had transformed Bethsaida into a small city, evidence of urban life, he renamed it Julius. In early 2002, it was decided that Et Tell was not Bethsaida, debates continued. In 2014 Professor Notley and Dr. Aviam collaborated on the excavation of El-Araj. A survey of digging and sifting of the soil was conducted and evidence was found to suggest that there were settlements from the Roman, Byzantine, Islamic and Crusade periods. This evidence encouraged Dr. Aviam to work with Professor Notley; he liked the dual opportunity to work on the archaeological dig and to understand how historians work. They continued to investigate El-Araj as a strong contender for Bethsaida. Work began at a site where it was reported in 1929 that a visitor saw a colorful mosaic. Two meters underground colorful mosaics were discovered, the workers were not aware of its significance, they filled up the ground. Discovering a mosaic would help to determine if it were from the Byzantine church period or from an earlier Roman period. In 2016, an excavation began again. In 2019 at the end of the season, braiding, typical of the Byzantine period was discovered. This convinced them that this was the church visited by Willibald, since there was no other church mentioned by Byzantine visitors to the Holy Land. In

2020 there was no digging, they returned in 2021 to discover a monumental church, identified as a basilica because of the architecture: apse faced east with two columns in the center, evidence of the remains of a synagogue. There was a question in regards to the pottery found and how it got there. The digging continued and squares were placed to mark the ground. The first layer revealed evidence from the thirteenth century Crusade period; evidence of sugar cane facilities, sugar had been brought from India to the Israel/Jordan area. The geography of the land (heat and water) provided ideal conditions for sugar cultivation and was a great location.

There was also evidence of Byzantine walls. A church, pottery, coins, other artifacts were jars and oil lamps. The search continued in between the Crusader walls, looking for an inscription, center of the apse, a picture of a bishop's inscription was found, evidence of a church. Dr. Aviam noted last summer a crane removed the Crusader wall. On the last day of the dig, a family cleaning the mosaic discovered a hard layer of limestone, a complete medallion, no letters missing, a Greek inscription of the word apostles. A joyous moment for Dr, Aviam, Willibald was confirmed. The site was left covered, the inscription given to a Professor for translation. Some of the stones lifted from the Byzantine monastery revealed 5<sup>th</sup> century coins. A Roman layer 1.5 meters below revealed pottery, coins, pipes, from the 2<sup>nd</sup> /3rd centuries. A fenestrated tubuli found only in Roman baths, in cities not in villages. Was there a change from village to acropolis? Stone vessels were found too, evidence of Jewish life. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> season, geologists cleaned the soil, a silver denarius was found, glass bottles, cooking pot, oil lamp, Agrippa 11 coins, and fishing weights. Electromagnetic waves used to survey the grey areas revealed that white spots were walls. The synagogue proved to be a Byzantine period synagogue. The goal is to raise funds to hire workers so that the work could continue.