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BIB201 – New Testament
Dropbox – Byzantine Bethsaida MOTB Event

Byzantine Bethsaida and the House of St. Peter

In this lecture, Dr. Steven Notley who is distinguished professor of New Testament and Christian origins at the New York City campus of Alliance University and director of the graduate programs in ancient Judaism and Christian origins, started with the topic Finding the Lost City of the Apostles before going to the Byzantine Bethsaida and the House of St. Peter. He showed the lost cities of the Bible like the Megiddo, Ekron, Capernaum and Chorazin which was 150 years ago no one knew anywhere those sites are. They were destroyed, abandoned and forgotten. But now, due to rediscovery they are now available to visit.

One of the earliest explorers to visit the Holy land, Edward Robinson, identified Bethsaida Julias with Et-Tell, 2 kilometers from the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee and to the east of the Jordan River, which was excavated since 1987. A few years later, another scholar Gottlieb Schumacher suggested an alternate site, El-Araj. Schumacher problem with Et-Tell was its distance from the lake. It is about 3 kilometers from the lakeshore. During the 19th century, Schumacher was saying it is too far away from the lake to be a fishing village which was one of the fundamental problems of the site. Some of the scriptures like Mark 6:45, "Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida", describing it near on the lakeshore. It only means that the identity seems to be close to the water. Archeologists said Et-Tell suggested that the solution was the lake is considerably higher than today. They started digging at Bet Habek which is also called El A'raj in Arabic for deep investigation of the sites.

Bethsaida disappears from the pages of history at the end of the 3rd Century. It has been unknown in Rabbinic Literature. But Bethsaida was once again mentioned by Theodosius after its silence in 200 years. It was once again on the map. Moreover in 2016, they found glass tesserae which was made from gold. Suddenly, it started a conversation that there was a church. It was discovered as the church that has been visited by a Bishop named Willibald from Einstatt, Bavaria. And from Capernaum he went to Bethsaida from which came Peter and Andrew. There is now a church where previously was their house. To continue, they uncovered mosaics from the church of the apostle as they dig and convince that this is the church that Willibald had witness. In 1921- 1922 the assessment of the archaeologists that the ancient pilgrims says that a church or basilica was built in Capernaum on the site of the house of St. Peter. It was the Octagon at Capernaum.

In addition, Dr. Mordechai Aviam, a professor of archaeology in the Kinneret College on the Sea of Galilee in the Land of Israel Studies Department, as well as the founder and director of the Kinneret Institute for Galilean Archaeology, explore with Dr. Notley the historical and religious implications of the 5th and 8th century basilica excavated at Khirbet el-Araj (Bethsaida) from 2019 to 2022. They discovered reused pillars from the Roman Byzantine period in the Medieval structure and later known as a 12th century sugar industry. With coins from the first to third centuries and ceramics from the first century BC, they have only discovered buildings and chambers that date to the Roman era. In the lowest layer of these peripheral squares, limestone containers were discovered, which are typical of Jewish inhabitants. There is little likelihood that the el-Araj site was inhabited beginning in the first century BC and most likely started as a Jewish hamlet. The presence of a public, elaborately adorned bathhouse during the Roman era indicates urbanization of the previously rural site.

In this presentation, the team led by Dr. Notley and Dr. Aviam, discovered so much during their excavations during the six seasons of their project. From 2014 shovel survey up to 2022, which was named by the excavators, "the Church of the Apostles".