

Bethsaida (Βηθσαιδᾶ, *Bēthsaida*, בֵּית צִיְדָה, *beith-tsoydaḥ*; “house of fishing”). A fishing village located on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. The hometown of the disciples Philip, Andrew, and Peter.

Biblical Relevance

The Gospels mention the town of Bethsaida by name seven times (Matt 11:21; Mark 6:45; 8:22; Luke 9:10; 10:13; John 1:44; 12:21). Three of Jesus’ disciples, fishermen by trade, were from Bethsaida. For example: “Philip was from Bethsaida, the hometown of Andrew and Peter” (John 1:44 HCSB; see also John 12:21). However, Matthew 8:5, 14 suggest that Peter (and possibly Andrew, as well) had moved to Capernaum at some point.

Jesus performed several miracles in Bethsaida, including:

- Feeding the 5,000 (Luke 9:10–17);
- Healing a blind man (Mark 8:22–26);
- Walking on water (Mark 6:45–51).

Jesus also condemned the town of Bethsaida (Matt 11:21; Luke 10:13). The Gospels portray the townspeople as fickle and narcissistic; although they saw Jesus’ miracles and received His blessings, most people did not believe in Him (Matt 11:14–24).

History and Location

In the early first century, Bethsaida was under the jurisdiction of Philip the Tetrarch (r. 4 bc —ad 34), one of the sons of Herod the Great; Philip allegedly was buried there. Josephus—a military commander at Bethsaida during the Jewish War—mentioned that Philip “advanced the village” and renamed it “Julias” after Augustus Caesar’s daughter Julia (*Antiquities* 18.2.1, 4.6; *Jewish War* 2.9.1; 4.7.2).

Two sites have been suggested as possible candidates for Bethsaida: Et-Tell, about 1.5 miles (2.5 km) north of the present shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, and el-Araj, much closer to the shore. Both sites are east of the Jordan River and west of the Meshushim River, and both were initially excavated in 1987. Findings at Et-Tell attest to its occupation in the Early Bronze Age, Iron Age, Persian/Hellenistic Period, Roman Period, and medieval period. The only evidence found at el-Araj was a single level from the fourth to sixth centuries ad (Arav, “Et-Tell,” 187). As a result, Arav and Freund concluded that Et-Tell was the more likely candidate for Bethsaida’s location. Ongoing research at Et-Tell since 1987 have made it one of the longest continuous excavations in Israel.

The greatest objection to identifying Et-Tell as Bethsaida is its present distance from the Sea of Galilee. Geologists at the Bethsaida Excavation Project identify three factors that likely increased the site’s distance from the present shoreline (Shroder and Inbar, “Geologic Background,” 90–91):

- Tectonic activity uplifting the region about 5 feet;
- Flash floods over the past two millennia carrying in significant amounts of sediment, raising the plain, and moving the shoreline farther out (see Shroder et al., “Catastrophic Geomorphic Processes,” 169, fig. 21);
- Ancient water levels possibly being slightly higher due to down-cutting in the Jordan outlet from the Sea of Galilee (this did not likely effect a large drop in the water level, since other harbors from the New Testament period are at approximately the same level).

Archaeology

The major archaeological levels at Et-Tell indicate that the site was primarily occupied during the Iron Age and the Hasmonean and New Testament periods. Major levels include (Arav, “Preliminary Report, 1987–1993,” 6):

- Level 1—Scant material from the Middle Ages to the present (ca. ad 500–1500);
- Level 2—Four phases from Early Hellenistic to Early Roman (333 bc—ad 67);
- Level 3—Babylonian and Persian periods (587–333 bc);
- Level 4—Iron Age IIC (723–587 bc);
- Level 5—Iron Age IIB (925–723 bc);
- Level 6—Iron Age IIA (1000–925 bc);
- Level 7—Early Bronze Age II (ca. 2500–2300 bc).

New Testament Bethsaida

The remains of New Testament Bethsaida are located almost on the surface, with very little debris above them. As a result—and because the site is so easily accessible—much of this period’s stonework was taken by later inhabitants of the region. In addition, Syrian soldiers dug defensive trenches across portions of the site during the Six Day War (1967), disturbing the remains in several areas.

Archaeologists have found the remains of what is thought to have been a Roman temple (Arav, “Preliminary Report, 1994–1996,” 18–22). Also among the finds was a bronze incense shovel possibly used in the temple, although Freund has suggested that it may have been used in a Jewish synagogue instead (Freund, “Incense Shovel,” 413).

Two well-preserved houses of the New Testament period are of particular interest. The “House of the Fisherman” produced a large number of fishing-related items. These included several different types of lead fishing weights, iron fishing hooks, large bronze and iron needles for repairing nets or sails, basalt fishing net weights, and basalt anchors (Fortner, “Fishing Implements,” 269). The “House of the Vintner” was a courtyard house. In addition to fishing-related artifacts, finds included a cellar for wine jars, iron sickles, three iron grape hooks, a *strigilis* (a Graeco-Roman tool used to scrape dirt and sweat from the body), iron nails, jewelry, a cosmetic spatula, a spearhead, and an iron key. The discovery of a potsherd with a crudely incised cross next to the doorway of the main residential room of this house might indicate an early house-church (Appold, “First-Century House Church?,” 383).

Just to the west of the mound at Et-Tell, a large, deep spring connects to the Jordan River by way of a large pool and a deep channel. Remains of a basalt boulder wall along the pool attest to the existence of an anchorage (whether as part of a channel or an open bay) during the New Testament period (Shroder and Inbar, “Geologic Background,” 82–85).

Old Testament Bethsaida

Based on archaeological findings, Arav has suggested that Bethsaida was likely the capital of the Old Testament region known as Geshur (2 Sam 15:8; Arav, “Comprehensive History,” 38–39). Extensive Iron Age (ca. 1000–587 bc) remains at Et-Tell attest to a fortified city that had the largest city gate yet discovered in Israel. In and around this city gate, five different high places were discovered (Arav, “Comprehensive History,” 17–24). Most of these high places included either an uninscribed basalt stela (a tall stone slab), an altar, or both; one included a basalt stela depicting the moon god in the shape of a bull, similar to others found at the nearby cities of Tell Ashri and Awas.

Udd, K. J., & Winstead, M. B. (2016). [Bethsaida](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.