

2016 TEL BETH-SHEMESH, ISRAEL EXCAVATIONS - Report #1 (and other events)

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The anniversary of the birth of the Lord’s Church... . . .and what does this have to do with this work? The Bible indicates that on the Day of Pentecost after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles, who ushered in the church of Jesus (Acts 2). While we arrived on Friday, June 10, we anticipated the preparations for the Israeli observance of the Shabbat (most of us refer to it as Sabbath). People remarked about the holiday and when they would mention it, I always heard “shabbat,” knowing that it was imminent. We noticed what seemed to be extraordinary activity, people checking in to hotels (I had problems finding reservations months ahead of the weekend), and major traffic snarls entering Jerusalem (which usually occur anyway, but these were worse than usual). When we checked in to the hotel, the clerk said we could park anywhere as long as we would not block someone—such an instruction is extraordinary. He revealed that we would get no tickets until Monday at 8:00 a.m. I was curious, “It is Shavuot,” he said—I again heard shabbat. He said it is a holiday until Monday. I finally recognized that it was “Pentecost”—the Hebrew word for the festival is Shavuot! While we would be at the tel working on Sunday—Shavuot—it would be also our first day of worship for a few of us—on the anniversary of the establishment of the Lord’s church. We were not be in an upper room, but in a small room with some ten people gathered. I focused the discussion on the occasion of the church’s establishment and Jesus’ interest in our spiritual well-being.



On Saturday evening, we made a point to go to an overlook to watch some of the activities associated with Shavuot. It was interesting watching the gleeful celebration of the Jews as they rejoiced over the Feast of In-gathering. A rather jarring moment came when the Call for Prayer for the Muslims chimed in at the same time as the church bells rang in addition to the loud vocal celebrations from the Jews at the Western Wall—a strange cacophony resonated through the air. The visual scene was wonderful with the golden lights on the Dome of the Rock and the glow of the lights on the Al-Aqsa mosque both with the lights of the Western Wall in the foreground (see photo above). Oh, that these religious groups could at least get along with some element of civility! Pray for the peace of Jerusalem (Psa 122:6)!

Our work began on Sunday as usual and we accomplished a good bit toward cleaning the site. Through the first few days, the volunteers did a better job cleaning the winter wash and removing weeds than we have ever experience before! Our focus this season is to try to expose more of the Late Bronze Age palace (ca. 1350 BC) that we exposed in the 2005-2009 seasons in addition to making headway to uncover the southern half of the “temple” from the period of the judges (ca. 1100 BC) that we uncovered in 2013-14. The Late Bronze work was the main emphasis of our work last season when we just reached the top of the destruction debris that rests on the palace floor—we are poised and ready. The major obstacle that we must address is finally to measure and record the large olive press that obscures the access to the palace. Fortunately this problem only exists in one square—the other two may quickly proceed to the palace.

The material that rests over the temple, however, is more substantial. There is no chance that we will reach the temple this year. One of the squares has never been excavated at all and the material immediately below the surface is the destruction level associated with Sennacherib’s campaign into Judah in 701 BC—400 years after the palace’s construction! It will take some time to remove the overburden. The recovery of two *lemelek* store jar handles, however, elicited much excitement (see right). *Lemelek* means “belonging to the king;” this inscription was on the stamps that Hezekiah authorized to be put on certain store jars apparently to be used to store food-stuffs and goods in



anticipation of the Assyrian threat.¹ Not only is there excitement to find an inscription, but to find one that connects almost certainly with the Bible is doubly exciting!

We often have visitors and among the group the first week was Ray Vanderlaan whose videos on the Bible are frequent teaching tools in churches across America. He has come by the site every year for the past four years and we have become friends. It is always good to see him (attached is photo of Vanderlaan, Karl McLarty of Searcy and me).



The majority of the time of our work at the site has involved clean up and preparation to proceed into the debris. The clean up was partly a result of over fifteen years of dormancy in much of the area that buries the temple. We are poised to penetrate into that debris now.

¹The Bible's summary of Hezekiah's reign (2 Chron. 32:27-30) mentions accomplishments of Hezekiah, among which was the construction of what we customarily identify as Hezekiah's tunnel—a water channel to secure the Jerusalem water supply from Assyrian sabotage (cf. 2 Chron. 32:1-4). In addition the text explicitly notes his stockpile of grain, wine and oil (2 Chron. 32:28). Most scholars believe the *lemelek* store jars were the containers in which these commodities were stored, probably in anticipation of Sennacherib's potential campaign—which was accomplished against most of the cities of Judah.