

Excavations at Tel Beth-Shemesh -- 2015 and Other Musings -- 4a

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The weekend before the last week of the dig! We went to Jerusalem on Friday to do some final routine shopping (spices, tea, etc.), but were not permitted to enter the Old City because it was the first Friday of Ramadan. The roads were tightly shut off and we had to change our plans. I am scheduled to present a series of lectures at the annual Harding Bible Lectureship in September 27-30. The theme for this year's discussion is on Jesus' parables. The director, Dan Williams (Vice President of Church Relations), has asked me to give information on the backgrounds/settings of the parables. Some of my weekend efforts have focused on gathering information and photographs to use in those presentations. Frank and I had planned after the excavation to visit a relevant site near where we stay, but given this snag in our plans we decided adjust accordingly. The site has no direct biblical significance, but it was established during the 4th century B.C., after the Israelites returned from their exile (ca. 539 B.C.) and continued to be occupied generally until into the 5th century A.D. The site apparently grew to its largest capacity just before the first Jewish revolt which ended in 70 A.D. and the ruins tend to reflect that time period. My primary interest was to see the well-preserved grape/wine press at the site. As we entered the site we were impressed with the remains, which showed a well-constructed and well-planned town layout with some twelve cisterns, four miqvaot (i.e., Jewish ritual baths/baptisteries), buildings, and a building that is thought to have been a synagogue. An elaborate tomb was accessible, but it was difficult to enter the main chamber. The Israel Antiquities Authority had invested much time and money to reconstruct the site, but I am told that few people visit it (in spite of no entrance fee!)—no one was there when we went and the main evidence of presence was in the form of dirt bikers who had driven around the area.



Etri is located on the ridge beyond the southern ridge of the Elah Valley (where David and Goliath's encounter occurred), but it is off the "beaten path." The view around the site was serene and quiet with almost no evidence of any nearby modern development (the panoramic photo, above, faces south; the central hills of Judah toward Hebron appear in the far distance).



The second photo (upper left) shows the solid construction of the site. While extensive reconstruction has occurred, careful scrutiny shows that the buildings were solid and the reconstruction reflects the same sophistication of the original building techniques.

The tomb complex of burial cave III reflects the social stratification of the citizenry of Etri. The photo (upper right) shows the primary chamber of a cave sepulcher. At least three carved chambers graced the walls of the interior of the tomb (the niche in the middle of the photograph is opposite the entry; to the right in the photo you can see part of the chamber in the left hand wall [I do not know if there was a fourth one in the wall of the entrance, since we did not descend any further into the tomb]).



We looked at several ritual baths. In miqveh XI (photo above right, I am in the entrance), at least twelve warriors of the site had been thrown for burial with their equipment and apparently at least one of the warriors had been decapitated as indicated by the cut marks on his vertebra. Perhaps in a twist of contempt, this mass burial and beheading by the Romans during the Bar Kochba revolt (ca. 135 A.D.), the deceased were thrown into the ritual bath that was part of what likely was the synagogue.



After searching around the site, we located the grape press to the south of the site overlooking the valley to the southeast. It consisted of a treading basin, from which a channel directed the grape juice into a deep vat from which the workers would dip the liquid into the respective storage and aging containers. The photo (left) shows Frank Wheeler, Jerry Culbertson and me pretending to crush the grapes.

When we were about to leave the site, we noticed two gazelles (one in photo right). They scrutinized us from a distance for a while before prancing away. We do not often see such wildlife, but in this fairly deserted area and was not particularly surprising.



The next day, we headed to the desert about 25 miles southwest of Beer-sheba to a site called Horvat Shivta (also known as Subeita in Arabic, apparently the original name; Sobata is its Greek rendering; Shivta is the name in Hebrew). While the site had been identified by A. Musil, more refined examination was conducted of the site by the joint work of C. L. Woolley and T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of “Lawrence of Arabia” fame, who was an accomplished archaeologist for the time). During the 1930s, excavations at Shivta were sponsored by H. D. Colt (son of the gun manufacturer) and the dig house that remains (now used as a restaurant; photo right) has an inscription which reads: “Good fortune. From his own funds Colt built [this house].”



Shivta is about 12 miles (19 km) northeast of the traditional site of Kadesh-barnea, which played significantly in the history of Israel’s wandering in the wilderness (cf. Num 13; 20; Deut 1).¹ As you visit the site and consider the terrain (photo below right), it is somewhat easy to understand the Israelites complaining about their surroundings and the lack of food varieties that they had experienced back in Egypt (cf. Num 11:5; this, of course, in spite of the fact that they were free and that the Lord had provided for them). Sobata/Shivta is in a desolate area that has no springs—all the water is by catchment and collected into cisterns. Murphy-O’Connor states that

the rainfall in the area averages only 86 mm a year (= ca. 3.5 inches)! The brochure by the Israel Nature and Parks Authority (author: Ya’acov Shkolnik) suggests: “The Negev was probably more humid and rainy at that time than it is today.” (yes, probably, but almost





these pools. The archaeologists excavated one of the pools and left the other for later investigation. Flights of steps at the corners of the pools provided access to the collected waters. We wondered how hard it was to keep these pools filled since they are open to the atmosphere and questioned how much water would have been lost to simple evaporation. Remnants of the channel system still appear; these would normally have been covered (photo next page, top right).

certainly not overwhelmingly).

The origins of the site appear to have focused on the incense trade from Arabia to Gaza and el-Arish. With the eventual development of the maritime trade of incense, the overland route's importance diminished somewhat and the people began to rely more heavily on local agricultural production. However, the agricultural endeavor, also, had to rely heavily upon careful water management. The site was established in the Early Roman period and continued into the Byzantine and Arabic periods (ca. 1st-9th centuries A.D.).

The town is impressively built with generally wide lanes and the walls are preserved quite well, with some reconstruction (photo top left). Because of the paucity of wood in the area, the roofing was done with slabs of stone and in some places these are still intact (photo middle left; note at the top of the photos the slabs spanning from the wall to the top of the arches. The distances that these slabs can span are typically limited, thus requiring frequent arches to permit the people to build).

In addition to the cisterns that dot the site, two large pools dominate the central part of the town (photo bottom right; you might get some impression of the size of the pool by noting me standing beside one of the flight of steps which descended to the water level). Covered conduits directed rain water into



Three church buildings dominate the landscape of the town. When the so-called “Arab Conquest” took place, the newcomers took care not to disturb the Southern Church building nor the baptistery that flanked it. Instead they built their mosque immediately beside the church building and apparently the two groups of people lived side-by-side in relative peace. The Southern Church is thought to have been built in second half of the 4th century A.D., but it was crammed into a pre-existing space which did not permit a full, proper construction of traditional church building design.



A Northern Church (photo right) was built about the same time, outside the city limit; its construction reflects the full tradition of church buildings of the time. Both the Southern and the Northern church buildings preserved baptisteries in adjoining rooms. These were carved out of single blocks of stone and were designed for immersion (photo lower right; this baptistery is from the South Church). To utilize



immersion in such a desolate area where water resources would be a premium implies their understanding that the Greek word *baptizo* (baptize) meant “immerse” and did not yet entail the ideas of merely sprinkling or pouring.

A third church building exists at the site and is called the “Central Church.” It was built in the late 6th or early 7th century A.D. and had no baptistery associated with it. It is not clear if this reflects a definitional shift in the understanding of the word *baptizo* or if the congregants would have gone to one of the other baptisteries to perform the rituals.



IN the survey work mentioned in the footnote, I was able to see some of the catchment areas that had been part of



the agricultural pursuits of the inhabitants of Sobata. These consisted of low dams across the wadis to restrain the flow of water and permit the plants to grow from the deep water resources. This agricultural enterprise apparently was quite lucrative as implied in the presence of the large grape press facility. The photo (left) shows the upper terraced area where the grapes were crushed. Two drains channel the juice from the upper terrace into the twin vats below. One of the drains is in the middle of the terrace and the other preserves the juice from the rest of the terrace through a small drain hole along the edge of the platform (this hole is visible in the low wall about 1/3 from the top of the photo between the two arches). The second photo (left) shows the two openings, which directed the juice into the channel which drained then into one or both of the larger in-ground reservoirs (the holes are the larger square hole in the middle of the photo and the small hole immediately above it). The implication of the mass of production is impressive. I would assume that the wine was a supplement to the limited water supply of the area.



(I must divide this final report into two parts since it is quite large. –dw.m).

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¹ In July, 1985, I worked with Dr. Steven Rosen of Ben-Gurion University in a survey project in this area. Dr. Rosen introduced me to Horvat Shivta. I had not returned to the site until this year. During that survey, we would freeze our canteens overnight and begin work at 5:00 a.m. and walk until ca. 1:00 p.m. By 1:00 p.m., in spite of the insulation on the canteens, all the ice had melted and the water was basically an ambient temperature of probably about 100 degrees or so. My sympathies with the Israelites in their desert trek. I would hope, however, that my faith would have permitted me to endure the trial for the prize later.