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***“The Enigma of Bethsaida”***  
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On the road around the north end of the Sea of Galilee, just east of the Jordan River's mouth, stands a sign pointing to the location of Bethsaida. It recalls the town mentioned in the gospels that was the home of the disciple Philip and a fishing community on the shore of the fresh-water lake.

Bethsaida is less than five miles to the east of Jesus' headquarters at Capernaum, and the gospels imply that he visited often. Mark 8 places Jesus' healing of a blind man there and hints at several other miracles. Nevertheless, Jesus' parting shot is a curse: “Woe to you Bethsaida! ... For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago.” (Luke 10:13)

But Bethsaida has long been an enigma. At the time of Jesus' ministry, Bethsaida was in the kingdom of Herod Philip. In 30 A.D., he rebuilt it as a city and named it Julias after Caesar Augustus' wife.

Despite its importance, the location of Bethsaida/Julias has long been unknown. No ruins large enough to be a city lie along the shore in this area. In 1987, Rami Arav, an Israeli archaeologist, led a team from the University of Nebraska at Omaha and other schools to the site of et-Tell, which he identified as Bethsaida.

There was one problem. This large hill was two kilometers from the lake shore. Shouldn't a fishing town be on the shore? The excavation team made two discoveries that supported its claim.

First, they found the remains of fishing gear, such as nets and hooks, along with boat implements from the first century. Second, et-Tell sits near the Jordan, and geologists determined that the river began silting up in the fourth century. Over centuries, the river created the flat, alluvial plain that sits between the site and the present shoreline.

Despite 28 years of excavations, the teams working with Arav have uncovered only about 3 percent of the site. In addition to some first-century houses, archaeologists have uncovered some Roman-era temples from the time of Herod Philip and later.

But the main discoveries come from the 10th century B.C., long before it was called Bethsaida. This was the city's heyday. The entire hill was carved into a series of terraces upon which to build houses, and its crown was surrounded by a solid stone wall.

Approaching the city, the main road led to a large gate, with tall towers on each side. Just inside the gate lay the city's main courtyard. This is the only large open area, and everything from trading to trials to worship took place here. A four-chambered inner gate separated the court from the residential area.

The gate's chambers, two on each side, stored foodstuffs purchased from farmers who brought them to the market in the courtyard. Archaeologists found wheat in two of them, used in bread baking, and barley in a third, probably for brewing beer.

So what was this large ancient city? This was the capital of the kingdom of Geshur. Up to the 11th century B.C., this had been one of the many tribal areas with which the people of Israel interacted. King David interacted with it, marrying the daughter of one of its kings.

This was the point at which the site's monumental fortifications were erected. The kingdoms around it were building or rebuilding fortified cities: the Israelites, Philistines and Phoenicians to the west of the Jordan Valley; the Ammonites, Moabites and Edomites to its east; and Damascus, Tyre and Sidon to the north. The Geshurites followed suit.

Bethsaida's walls and gates protected it for two centuries, until the armies of the Assyrian Empire arrived under King Tiglath-Pileser at the end of the eighth century B.C. His forces destroyed the city, burning the gate and then leaving a garrison to pull down any remaining fortifications. It remained unoccupied for many centuries afterward.

So perhaps Bethsaida has now been found. But decades of excavations have revealed less of the first-century Jewish city of the New Testament, and more of its foundations and importance from a millennium earlier as the non-Jewish kingdom of Geshur.