

# BETHSAIDA

Bethsaida, meaning “house of fishing,” was located on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee by the inlet of the Jordan River. Josephus wrote about such a place that was given the status of a “city” (*polis*) by Herod Philip (4 B.C.—A.D. 34) as well as the additional name “Julias” to honor Emperor Augustus’ daughter (*Antiquities* 18.2.1; see *Wars* 2.9.1; 3.10.7; *Life* 72). In the New Testament, Bethsaida was an important place for Jesus’ ministry. Three of his disciples, Andrew, Peter, and Philip were all from there (Jn. 1:43-44; 12:21). Jesus fed the 5,000 near Bethsaida (Lk. 9:10-17; see Mk. 6:44-45). From that location, he walked on water to his disciples who were in the boat (Mk. 6:45-52). The Lord also opened the eyes of a blind man there (Mk. 8:22-26). The alluvial sands in the area of Bethsaida likely form the background of the parable in which the foolish man built his house on the sand (Mt. 7:24-27). Jesus condemned the people of Bethsaida, along with those in Chorazin and Capernaum, because they refused to repent after seeing his many miraculous signs (Mt. 11:20-24).

The exact location of Bethsaida, however, is disputed. While there are scattered ruins of several villages in that area, two main sites have been favored by archaeologists. The first is et-Tel, which is about 1.5 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. Evidence of earlier settlements has been found at this location, but it seems too far inland to be the “house of fishing.” Some suggest that either the location of the shoreline or the course of the Jordan River has shifted over the past two millennia, which would account for the distance from the water. However, this contention is not convincing to many. Archaeological discoveries at et-Tel include the winemaker’s house and the fisherman’s house. The winemaker’s house features a wine cellar in which four large wine jars were found. The fisherman’s house yielded lead net weights, fishhooks, and anchors.

The second site is el-Araj, which is on the shore of the Sea of Galilee; this would have been a prime location for the “house of fishing.” Archaeologists have discovered a Roman bathhouse there, which would be expected for a *polis* in the Roman period. They have also found possible remains of a Byzantine church building (with mosaics), perhaps venerating the traditional home of Peter and Andrew. At this point in time, el-Araj is the more favorable location for Bethsaida.

It could be that el-Araj, et-Tel, or some other site was known as Bethsaida in the ancient world. It is also possible that more than one place was known as the “house of fishing.” Perhaps some discovery in the future will bring clarity to the exact location of the city.