

## **Bethsaida In The Gospels: A Dynamic Portrait**

Nancy Mason  
Department of History  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
220 Stanger Street  
Blacksburg, VA 24061-0117

Faculty Advisors: Dr. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon

### **Abstract**

This paper will examine the usage of a town called Bethsaida within the contexts of the Gospels, other first- and second-century literature, and archaeology. The four Gospels are unique historical and literary sources, generally recording similar events and serving, in many cases, as sources for one another. They are interconnected in such a way that, if the same subject is discussed and narrated differently by each of the authors, motivations likely exist behind why an author changed, or omitted, what his forerunners wrote. Many idiosyncrasies exist within the four Gospels in respect to their references to the town of Bethsaida. Mark considers Capernaum to be the hometown of Andrew and Peter, while John lists their home as Bethsaida. In Mark, Jesus asks the disciples to head to Bethsaida after the feeding of the 5,000, while in Luke they are already in Bethsaida when the 5,000 are fed. It appears that Mark, the original Gospel writer, portrayed Bethsaida as Gentile, whereas Matthew, Luke, and John painted a Jewish picture of Bethsaida. A similar shift seems to occur in non-biblical literary sources that mention Bethsaida during the first and second centuries (Josephus, Pliny, Ptolemy): from a Gentile to a Jewish place and from a non-Galilean town to a Galilean one. Additionally, the archaeological record at Et-Tell, which has been identified as Bethsaida, appears to show an influx in its Jewish presence beginning around the first-century BCE. This differing evidence, with shifts in literature showing up around the first-century CE and shifts in archaeology showing up around the first-century BCE, could make sense if we consider that a shift in reputation takes significant time, even in the modern world. Thus there appears to have been a shift in both Bethsaida's relationship to Galilee and its ethnographic and metaphorically geographic reputation that can be seen in the Gospels, other first- and second-century writings, and the archaeological record.

**Keywords:** Bethsaida, Gospels, Archaeology

### **1. Introduction**

The four Gospels are unique historical and literary sources, generally recording similar events and serving, in many cases, as sources for one another. They are interconnected in such a way that, if the same subject is discussed and narrated differently by each of the authors, motivations likely exist behind why an author changed, or omitted, what his forerunners wrote. Many idiosyncrasies exist within the four Gospels in respect to their references to the town of Bethsaida. Mark considers Capernaum to be the hometown of Andrew and Peter, while John lists their home as Bethsaida.<sup>1</sup> In Mark, Jesus asks the disciples to head to Bethsaida after the feeding of the 5,000, while in Luke they are already in Bethsaida when the 5,000 are fed.<sup>2</sup> In Matthew, Luke, and John, Bethsaida appears as representative of the Jewish community; in Mark, Bethsaida represents the Gentiles. These differences, all involving the Gospel of Mark, are increasingly noteworthy when one considers that, according to the theory of Markan priority, Mark was the first Gospel to be written and served as a source for at least Matthew and Luke—and possibly also for John.<sup>3</sup> It appears that Mark, the original Gospel writer, portrayed Bethsaida as Gentile, whereas Matthew, Luke, and John painted a Jewish picture of Bethsaida because of a contemporary shift in the reputation of Bethsaida. A similar shift

seems to occur in non-biblical literary sources that mention Bethsaida during the first-century: from a Gentile to a Jewish place and from a non-Galilean town to a Galilean one. Additionally, the archeological record at Et-Tell, which has been identified as Bethsaida, appears to show an influx in its Jewish presence beginning around the first-century BCE.<sup>4</sup> There appears to have been a shift in both Bethsaida's relationship to Galilee and its ethnographic and metaphorically geographic reputation that can be seen in the Gospels, other first-century writings, and the archeological record.

## 2. A Gospel With A Gentile Bethsaida

### 2.1 Mark

Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd  
(Mark 6:45, NRSV, here and throughout). They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him (Mark 8:22).

Mark, writing in approximately 70-75 CE,<sup>5</sup> mentions Bethsaida twice, once in 6:45 and again in 8:22. In particular, 6:45, along with its surrounding context, has been a topic of interest to scholars due to Mark's unique use of geography in this passage. Notably, there appears to be a consensus among scholars, despite their various interpretations of the passage, that Mark employs "Bethsaida" to represent the Gentiles and Jesus' ministry to them.

Elizabeth Struthers Malbon's theory, as presented in *Narrative Space and Mythic Meaning in Mark*, is that Mark was symbolically representing Jesus' outreach to the Gentiles with the disciples trips from their homeland on the west side of the Sea of Galilee to the foreign eastern side. Malbon states, "the 'foreignness,' as it were, of these cities and areas is more crucial in Mark's Gospel than their precise location or Jesus' exact itinerary in reaching them."<sup>6</sup> Specifically of Bethsaida, she observes, "Bethsaida is clearly marked in the text as being on 'the other side' of the sea (6:45; 8:13, 22) from Galilee, that is, beyond the borders of Galilee."<sup>7</sup> Again speaking of the whole, Malbon concludes that

Jesus is sought out by multitudes from both sides of the home/foreign, Jewish/Gentile boundary; that the Markan Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee, repeatedly crosses this boundary and ministers openly to residents on both sides. Perhaps the Sea of Galilee—and Jesus' relation to it—best represents this mediation narratively. The sea forms a natural boundary on the east of Galilee, but it does not keep Jesus in bounds ... The Sea of Galilee, the supposed boundary between the Jewish homeland and foreign lands, becomes instead the bridge between them.<sup>8</sup>

According to Malbon's theory, the spatial accuracy of Mark's writings was not nearly as important to Mark as the message he was trying to send: Jesus was reaching out to the Gentiles. This is further supported by an aspect of ancient geography in general, as expressed by Carl Savage: "The new geographical understanding of the Galilee is, in fact, already present in the ancient literature. By extension, then, even the biblical material should perhaps be seen as metaphorical 'mindscape' or 'theoscape,' setting a stage for a cognitive understanding of the perspective of the author rather than an objective sense of 'real' place."<sup>9</sup>

Werner Kelber, although coming from a different perspective than Malbon, similarly argues for a Gentile Bethsaida in Mark. In *The Kingdom in Mark*, Kelber argues that Jesus and the disciples began prior to 6:45 on the west side of the Sea of Galilee. After Jesus' command for them to go ahead of him to Bethsaida, which Kelber asserts is on the east side, he argues on the basis of the Greek word *peran* that they actually do make it to the other side, although he acknowledges that Mark states that they land in Gennesaret, which is on the West. Kelber attributes this seeming contradiction to the rearrangement of traditional material. According to Kelber, this journey signifies that "the Kingdom has arrived in full on the eastern shore."<sup>10</sup> On the basis of Jesus' extending his ministry across the sea and thereby nullifying racial distinctions and "metaphorical geographical" divisions, Kelber suggests that, for Mark's Gospel, both sides of the sea become "Galilee." Still, Kelber observes a distinction between the Jewish western side and the Gentile eastern side within the Gospel of Mark: "The eastern side, and everything it stands for, has become Galilee. The differences between Jew and Gentile, west and east, are nullified, and the Kingdom's drive to cover 'all of Galilee' is consummated."<sup>11</sup> Bethsaida, of course, lies on what Kelber would consider the Gentile east side of the Sea of Galilee. Based on the work of these scholars, it seems that the theory of a Gentile Bethsaida in Mark has strong support in the scholarly community.

### 3. Gospels With A Jewish Bethsaida

#### 3.1 Matthew

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes (Matthew 11:21).

Matthew, writing between 80-90 CE,<sup>12</sup> mentions Bethsaida only once, as a rebuke against the Jews. Several aspects of this passage make it apparent that Matthew is using Bethsaida to represent the Jewish people. First, he references Bethsaida in conjunction with another Jewish place, Chorazin. Secondly, he contrasts that pair of Jewish places with a pair of Gentile places, making the main point of the rebuke obvious: a contrast between the Jews and Gentiles.

Additionally, this Jewish representation of Bethsaida in Matthew fits with themes consistent throughout the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew repeatedly expresses bitterness toward the Jewish leaders who are depicted as “destined for God’s condemnation (15:13; 23:33).”<sup>13</sup> At times, such as 11:21, Matthew extends this bitterness to the Jewish majority for not understanding the Law in relation to Jesus as the Christ as he does. As a rebuke of a Jewish Bethsaida, this passage fits perfectly with the bitterness of Matthew. Were Bethsaida Gentile, however, this passage would not make sense at all in the overarching context of the Gospel.

#### 3.2 Luke

On their return the apostles told Jesus all they had done. He took them with him and withdrew privately to a city called Bethsaida (Luke 9:10).  
Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes (Luke 10:13).

Luke, writing somewhere between 85-95 CE,<sup>14</sup> mentions Bethsaida twice, once during the feeding of the five thousand and again in a rebuke against the Jews. The second reference made to Bethsaida in the Gospel of Luke appears to be an echo of Matthew 11:21. Luke probably received this wording either from *Quelle* (or Q, the hypothesized sayings source behind the overlaps between Matthew and Luke that do not appear in Mark) or from Matthew himself. Notably, Luke does not significantly change the wording, implying that he agreed with the wording he received. Luke keeps the pairing of Bethsaida and Chorazin, a Jewish city, suggesting that Bethsaida was Jewish in his view as well as in Matthew’s. Also like Matthew, Luke contrasted the pair of Jewish cities with the same pair of Gentile cities, Tyre and Sidon. This, similar to Matthew, suggests that the point of this passage was to compare the Jews to the Gentiles. However, Luke, unlike Matthew, seems hopeful for the Gentiles more than bitter toward the Jews. In Luke’s mind, it seems, this was all part of God’s plan, not something to grieve about. Still, only a Jewish Bethsaida would make sense in the context of the Gospel of Luke.

In his first mention of Bethsaida, Luke is beginning the story of the feeding of the 5,000. A theme consistent throughout both the book of Luke and the book of Acts, presumably written by the same author, is the Jewish rejection of Jesus and the movement to the Gentiles who accept his message.<sup>15</sup> For the most part, Luke seems to save scenes with Gentiles for the book of Acts. Luke-Acts conveys an overarching story of Jesus ministering to the Jews, his rejection by their leaders and many others, and the message later being presented to the Gentiles, of whom many accept him joyfully. Luke is the only author besides Mark to mention that Jesus and his disciples go to Bethsaida. Considering that Luke’s sources included Mark’s Gospel, it seems likely that Luke must have taken this idea of a journey to Bethsaida from Mark. But consider the placement of Bethsaida by Luke. Luke places Jesus and the disciples in Bethsaida during the feeding of the 5,000. In Mark the feeding of the 5,000 is directly prior to the Markan Jesus’ instruction for the disciples to go to Bethsaida, and in Luke it is prior to the “Great Omission.” The material omitted at this point in Luke narrates, in Mark, the disciples’ journey, starting from Jesus’ command for them to go to Bethsaida in 6:45 and ending with their eventual arrival there in 8:22. Luke seemingly skips over the content in the middle and places Jesus and the disciples in Bethsaida during the feeding of the 5,000 in order to avoid the extensive journey—through Gentile locations—to get there that is narrated in Mark. When discussing this journey section in Mark, the Markan “detour,” Malbon says that, “Narratively, it would appear that Jesus works in at least two stages to enable the disciples to ‘see,’ to perceive the scope of his ministry, to understand that there is bread for the people on the east as well as on the west of the sea, for Gentiles as well as for Jews.”<sup>16</sup> Given this illustration of Mark’s

significance, it makes great sense that Luke, who for the most part saves a recounting of a Gentile ministry for the book of Acts, would omit this section. By having Jesus and the disciples arrive in Bethsaida prior to the feeding of the 5,000, Luke skips the entire Gentile “detour” and journey to Gentile Bethsaida in Mark and presents one feeding, of 5,000 Jews at Jewish Bethsaida, leaving a trace of his Markan source in the reconfigured geographical marker.<sup>17</sup>

### 3.3 John

Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter (John 1:44).  
They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we  
wish to see Jesus” (John 12:21).

John, writing somewhere between 90-110 CE,<sup>18</sup> mentions Bethsaida twice, once describing it as the city of Andrew, Peter, and Philip, and again as Philip’s home town. The first instance, 1:44, portrays Bethsaida as home to three of Jesus’ disciples. The disciples, Andrew, Peter, and Philip, all notably Jewish men, would likely not have been presented by John as having come from a Gentile town.

The second instance, 12:21, describes Bethsaida as “Bethsaida in Galilee.” This mildly ambiguous wording makes determining its exact meaning problematic. Βηθσαϊδὰ τῆς Γαλιλαίας, translated as “Bethsaida in Galilee,” could be read as an indication that John may have been differentiating between two different Bethsaidas, specifying the Bethsaida in Galilee. The Greek form, the chorographic genitive, however, could also be used to describe the relationship between Bethsaida and Galilee. In other ancient examples, this case form is used either to differentiate or simply to describe or emphasize. Herbert Smyth’s *Greek Grammar* provides two examples of the use of the chorographic genitive in ancient writings, both from Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (5<sup>th</sup> century BCE).<sup>19</sup> In the first case, Thucydides writes about “the Locrians in Italy” (3.86). The Locrians were a Greek tribe, and some of them left their homeland in Greece to settle in the Greek colonies of Italy.<sup>20</sup> In this instance, the case form was used to differentiate the Locrians in Italy from the Locrians in Greece. In the other example provided by Smyth, Thucydides uses the chorographic genitive in reference to “Oenoë in Attica” (2.18). There are two Oenoës, but both are in Attica.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the chorographic genitive in this case is used descriptively, not to differentiate one place from another. Thucydides was a fairly canonical example of Greek grammar for the time and thus is a fairly reliable source.<sup>22</sup> The use of the chorographic genitive provides little evidence to answer decisively the question of whether John was merely describing Bethsaida or specifying the Bethsaida in Galilee as opposed to another Bethsaida elsewhere; thus it leaves open the possibility that “in Galilee” is not specifying one Bethsaida of two or more. Since evidence in the Gospel of John appears inconclusive and otherwise explainable, it seems unnecessary to invent another Bethsaida. It may have been simply a descriptive phrase not intended to create deeper meaning.<sup>23</sup>

For example, as a current resident of Blacksburg, Virginia, I often call my home by that name when telling others where I am from. This is not necessary to distinguish my Blacksburg from another Blacksburg, nor is it used to emphasize Virginia; it is just the arbitrary title I have assigned to my home—although, it would help anyone not familiar with Blacksburg place it in the state of Virginia, whose location is more widely known. Likewise, perhaps John meant nothing more than to identify Bethsaida, using “Bethsaida in Galilee” as its name. However, another more substantial possibility for John’s inclusion of this odd phrasing would be to emphasize the Jewishness of Bethsaida at a time when Bethsaida may have still been considered even less Jewish than the unorthodox Galilee. This, of course, presupposes that Galilee was not a “Galilee of the Gentiles” as some have supposed it to be. Carl Savage argues that archeological evidence in Galilee indicating a strong Jewish presence challenges the idea of a Galilee of the Gentiles.<sup>24</sup> Based upon other writings from around John’s time, it seems as though Bethsaida must have only recently been added to Galilee at the time John was writing. As an area on the border of Galilee and nearer to more Gentile areas than Jewish areas, Bethsaida was probably far from being a prime example of pure Jewish culture. Emphasizing its inclusion in Galilee may have actually made Bethsaida appear more Jewish, rather than less. Even though Galilee was not considered orthodox in the first century, it was still more Jewish than pagan territory. Therefore, perhaps the purpose of using the additional “in Galilee” was to emphasize its recent assignment to Galilee.

## 4. First-Century Literary Sources With A Gentile Bethsaida

### 4.1 Josephus

But when the Roman Empire was translated to Tiberius, the son of Julia, upon the death of Augustus, who had reigned fifty-seven years, six months, and two days, both Herod and Philip continued in their tetrarchies; and the latter of them built the city Cesarea, at the fountains of Jordan, and in the region of Paneas; as also the city Julias, in the lower Gaulonitis. Herod also built the city Tiberius in Galilee, and in Perea [beyond Jordan] another that was also called Julias (*Jewish War* 2.9.1).

This [last] country [Trachonitis] begins at Mount Libanus, and the fountains of Jordan, and reaches breadthways to the lake of Tiberias; and in length is extended from a village called Arpha, as far as Julias. Its inhabitants are a mixture of Jews and Syrians. And thus have I, with all possible brevity, described the country of Judea, and those that lie round about it (*Jewish War* 3.3.5).

(*Jewish War* 3.10.7)

(*Jewish War* 4.8.2)

He [Philip the Tetrarch] died at Julias; and when he was carried to that monument which he had already erected for himself beforehand, he was buried with great pomp. His principality Tiberius took, (for he left no sons behind him,) and added it to the province of Syria, but gave order that the tributes which arose from it should be collected, and laid up in his tetrarchy (*Jewish War* 18.4.6).

He also advanced the village Bethsaims, situate at the lake of Gennesareth, unto the dignity of a city, both by the number of inhabitants it contained, and its other grandeur, and called it by the name of Julias, the same name with Caesar's daughter (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.2.1).

At the same time also there came forces, both horsemen and footmen, from the king, and Sylla their commander, who was the captain of his guard: this Sylla pitched his camp at five furlongs distance from Julias, and set a guard upon the roads, both that which led to Cana, and that which led to the fortress Gamala, that he might hinder their inhabitants from getting provisions out of Galilee. As soon as I had gotten intelligence of this, I sent two thousand armed men, and a captain over them, whose name was Jeremiah, who raised a bank a furlong off Julias, near to the river Jordan, and did no more than skirmish with the enemy; till I took three thousand soldiers myself, and came to them (*Life* 71-72).

Josephus writes about Bethsaida-Julias seven times, five of which are presented here. The first five mentions of Bethsaida made by Josephus are in the *Jewish War*, written in 75 CE.<sup>25</sup> In the second of these five, Josephus states that Julias [Bethsaida] marks the boarder of Trachonitis, and that the population of Trachonitis consists of both Jews and Syrians. This simple description, attributing the majority of the population to neither group, indicates that the population was certainly mixed, and perhaps fairly equally mixed between Jews and Gentiles. Additionally, this observation was made by an outsider, meaning that his writings are somewhat indicative of the reputation of Bethsaida and Trachonitis, perhaps more than the facts about them.<sup>26</sup>

The first mention of Bethsaida in the *Jewish War* states that Julias was established by Philip after Augustus' death. Here Josephus also places Julias in lower Gaulonitis, showing that Bethsaida is not yet considered to be in Galilee. Philip was given rule over this territory upon Augustus' death. Josephus is writing about actions occurring around 4 BCE with the death of Herod.<sup>27</sup> Since Josephus was writing about more concrete past events, one can perhaps assume that his writings are more indicative of how people in his day viewed the past than of how people in his day viewed the current conditions, that is, his writing here represents a subjective view of the past, not a commentary on the present. Therefore, his writings may be more reflective of the reputation of a past condition than of a present condition of Bethsaida.

The sixth mention of Bethsaida is in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, written about 93 CE.<sup>28</sup> This mention is similar to the last mention in *The Jewish War* in that it describes the same events and was written as a record of the early first century CE. Josephus adds some details here, however, and states that Bethsaida was made a city and renamed Julias. He also states that this was in honor of Julia, Caesar's daughter. Taken as an action reported of the very early first century CE, this comment seems to suggest that the reputation of Bethsaida and its leader Philip, in Josephus' mind,

were based on pro-Roman and pro-Gentile actions (honoring Caesar), not actions that were pro-Jewish, even though the members of the Herodian dynasty were Idumean Jews.<sup>29</sup> This is a small indicator that perhaps Bethsaida had the reputation of being a Gentile area, or at the least that it was not viewed as an area dominated by Jews.

The third and fourth mentions of Bethsaida (*The Jewish War* 3.10.7 and 4.8.2) simply utilize its location to describe the local terrain. The fifth reference there, however, states that, upon the death of Philip the Tetrarch in 34 CE, all of his territory, presumably including Bethsaida, was added to Syria.<sup>30</sup> The last mention of Bethsaida is in his autobiography, written between 93-100 CE.<sup>31</sup> Bethsaida was probably a key location for the transport of goods from Galilee to Gaulonitis, given its position in relation to the regions, the river, and the lake. Josephus's statement in 71-72 of the *Vita* likely meant that Sylla's forces blocked Gamala and Cana (in Syria<sup>32</sup>) from receiving provisions being transported from Galilee via Bethsaida.

## 4.2 Pliny

[The lake of Genesara] is skirted by the pleasant towns: of Julias and Hippo on the east, of Tarichea on the south, a name which is by many persons given to the lake itself, and of Tiberias on the west, the hot springs of which are so conducive to the restoration of health (*Natural History* 5.15.69).

Pliny wrote about Bethsaida only once, in 77 CE.<sup>33</sup> Pliny does not say Bethsaida is in Galilee, so perhaps it had not been added to Galilee yet. He does not even categorize it with another nearby Galilean town mentioned, Tiberias. In fact, he instead mentions it in conjunction with Hippos, later renamed Sussita. Carl Savage describes four sites on the border of Galilee, including Sussita, as “clearly Hellenistic pagan sites that continue into the first century.”<sup>34</sup> Additionally, Savage goes on to describe the early parallels between Bethsaida and Sussita. He claims that they follow a similar pattern of almost no Persian finds and a resurgence in material culture around the third century BCE during Ptolemaic expansion. At that point, however, Savage states that their archeological paths diverge since, “Sussita does not have the significant transformation of the site's material culture from pagan to Jewish as we recognize at Bethsaida.”<sup>35</sup> The site of Bethsaida is approximately 19.5 km from the site of Sussita and only 23.4 km from Tiberias, so there is not a big difference in closeness; therefore proximity is probably not a sufficient explanation for Pliny's choice of categories.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, Bethsaida, presuming its location at Et-Tell,<sup>37</sup> is as far to the north of the Lake as Tarichea is to the south, and yet, remarkably, Bethsaida is still categorized by Pliny as an eastern town in combination with Sussita and not as a northern one, apparently giving some priority to the East/West categorization.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps Pliny's categorization is a reflection of Bethsaida's unchanged reputation from the days that it and Sussita shared material culture. This seems increasingly likely when considered in terms of the theory of metaphorical geography, which, as expressed by Carl Savage, is “somewhat more than a geographical understanding, but includes an ethnic component.”<sup>39</sup> Likewise, Eric Stewart states, “Space, in this type of geography, is thoroughly imbued with the characteristics of its inhabitants, while at the same time it endows those people with its own characteristics.”<sup>40</sup> Thus it becomes apparent that, if this theory is correct, ancient geography contained within it ethnography. If two places are placed together geographically, it follows that they likely also hold an ethnographic connection to one another. Here, the only pairing described by Pliny is that of Bethsaida and Sussita. Pliny's choice of categories here could be an indicator that he viewed Bethsaida as more similar to the pagan Sussita on the East than to the Jewish Tiberias on the West.

## 5. First-Century Literary Source With A Jewish Bethsaida

### 5.1 Ptolemy

The interior towns are...in Galilaea: Sapphuri [Sepphoris], Caparcotni [Capernaum], Iulias [Julias], Tiberias (*Geographia* 5.15).

Ptolemy, according to Eric Stewart, was one of the most scientific geographers of his time. He sought to focus primarily on surveying and astronomy and to remove ethnographic and fantastic elements.<sup>41</sup> This likely explains the lack of detail provided about the places he noted as compared with his earlier counterparts. However, Stewart states that Ptolemy, due to a lack of resources, was unable to use the elements he valued so much and instead was forced to

base his work upon the observations and records of travelers that were “full of details about peoples and the social significances which they bestowed upon certain geographic features.”<sup>42</sup> Additionally, Stewart notes that Jewish tradition lacked a scientific approach. Even though there were Greek geographers, like Ptolemy, who approached geography scientifically, Stewart asserts that the vast majority of Greeks had a cultural interest.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, while Ptolemy may not have mentioned it, the categorization of Bethsaida as being in Galilee likely also held social connotations known to the broader world. Ptolemy, writing throughout his life between 90 CE and 168 CE,<sup>44</sup> shows that society viewed Bethsaida not only as a part of Galilee, one of the few cities mentioned in Galilee, suggesting that it was probably well known that Bethsaida was in Galilee at this point in time. This categorization of Bethsaida is in contrast to John, who perhaps felt the need to clarify—or just to stress—Bethsaida’s location in Galilee. Since space and reputation were so closely tied in the ancient world, a spatial classification such as this had broader social insinuations. The reality of social implications accompanying geographical categorizations seems especially likely considering that, according to Stewart, “Human Geography in antiquity involved stereotyping. The inhabitants of certain regions ... were thought to share similar constitutions and characters.”<sup>45</sup> Therefore, Bethsaida, as a Galilean city, would be thought to share the characteristics common to Galilee as a whole. Notably, this would have been true during earlier times when Bethsaida was also a part of Galilee, likely a little before John’s time, perhaps before the time of Matthew and Luke.

Ptolemy definitely considers Bethsaida in Galilee, and he also mentions it in conjunction with other Jewish places. Here Tiberias and Julias are classified together. Notably, they were classified separately earlier in Pliny’s writings. This change could indicate a shift in the metaphorical geography of the time. Boundaries were much more fluid in the ancient world, and, with the ethnographic component so deeply tied to the geography, it seems likely that a shift in geographical categorization would be accompanied by a shift in ethnic reputation. Regardless of any broader implications, there is a clear definitive shift of the presumed location of Bethsaida into Galilee from the time of Josephus and Pliny to the time of Ptolemy.

## 6. Excavations

Since 2003, Dr. Rami Arav has been leading teams to excavate the then newly discovered site of Et-Tell, which has been identified as Bethsaida.<sup>46</sup> One of the lead excavators, Carl Savage, has written specifically about Bethsaida in the first century CE. He argues that around the first century BCE there was a shift in the population of Bethsaida from Gentile occupation to Jewish occupation. His timeline shows that Bethsaida and the entire region of Galilee were destroyed during the first phase of the Assyrian campaigns in 722 BCE. He notes that, “It was during the first phase of the Assyrian campaigns in the entire region of Galilee that there was a generalized destruction of settlements. All major excavations note this destruction in their reports and many indicate that, like Bethsaida, the settlement did not recover from this event and remained unoccupied for an extended time.”<sup>47</sup> Then there was not much of a population in Bethsaida during the Persian period, except for maybe a small military outpost. Later, there was a repopulation of Bethsaida from the Phoenician coast, and during the Hasmonean period around the first century BCE there was a Jewish resurgence.<sup>48</sup> Savage’s argument is based upon a new approach to archaeology made famous by Eric Meyers that is based mostly on pottery and the spread of pottery from Galilean sources as opposed to imported pottery.<sup>49</sup> However, some scholars dispute this new archeological approach, such as Doug Oakman.<sup>50</sup> Savage asserts that there was a shift from Gentile to Jewish occupation a couple centuries or so before the shift I have shown in the literary record.<sup>51</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

Our differing evidence could make sense if we consider that a shift in reputation takes significant time, even in the modern world. For instance, take into consideration the State of Texas. Texans have the reputation of being a tough, independent people. If, however, that began to change, and Texans became complacent and lost their backbone, it would take at least a generation or two before the reputation in people’s minds began to change. This trend can also be seen in relation to many negative social ideologies, such as racism and sexism. This same idea would have applied to the ancient world. Just because Bethsaida experienced a Jewish resurgence, does not mean that the population shift would be represented in literature right away. In fact, it would have taken much more time for the reputation shift to occur in the ancient world with significant limits in the areas of communication and transportation. Additionally, Savage states that Bethsaida was likely “less Jewish” in the second and first centuries BCE than in the first century

CE, adding, “it is clear that Bethsaida had a largely Jewish population in the early first century CE. In any event, therefore, those that dwelt in the site were, at least for a preceding few generations, ‘behaving Jewishly,’ to use Marianne Sawicki’s term.”<sup>52</sup> The literary evidence also indicates a shift from Gaulonitis to Galilee as the region of Bethsaida. Perhaps Bethsaida’s incorporation into Galilee, in addition to the passage of time, could have contributed to the reputation shift being seen in the literary record during the first century CE. Such an accounting of the archaeological evidence and the literary evidence—both biblical and beyond—helps us make sense of the dynamic portrait of Bethsaida in the Gospels, from the Gentile Bethsaida of Mark to the Jewish Bethsaida of Matthew, Luke, and John.

## 8. References

<sup>1</sup> Mark 1:29; John 1:44. I am using the title “Mark” to represent the anonymous author of the Gospel of Mark.

The same also holds true for the uses of the names “Luke”, “Matthew”, and “John.”

<sup>2</sup> Mark 6:45; Luke 9:10

<sup>3</sup> Mark Allen Powell, “Mark” in *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011), p. 601.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Freund, *Bethsaida in Archaeology, History, and Ancient Culture: A Festschrift in Honor of John T. Greene*, edited by J. Harold Ellens (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), p. 44. Carl Savage, *Biblical Bethsaida: An Archaeological Study of the First Century CE* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2011), p. 137.

<sup>5</sup> *HarperCollins Study Bible* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), “Introduction to The Gospel According to Mark” by C. Clifton Black, revised by Adela Yarbro Collins, p. 1723.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Narrative Space and Mythic Meaning in Mark* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers Inc., 1986), p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> Malbon, *Narrative Space*, p. 42.

<sup>8</sup> Malbon, *Narrative Space*, p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> Savage, *Biblical Bethsaida*, p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> Werner Kelber, *The Kingdom in Mark*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1974), pp. 57-65.

<sup>11</sup> Kelber, *The Kingdom in Mark*, p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> *HarperCollins Study Bible*, “Introduction to The Gospel according to Matthew” by David L. Tiede, revised by Christopher R. Matthews, p. 1760.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Allen Powell, “Matthew” in *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011), p. 615.

<sup>14</sup> *HarperCollins Study Bible*, “Introduction to The Gospel according to Luke” by Dennis C. Duling, p. 1666.

<sup>15</sup> *Harper’s Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), “Acts” by Carl R. Holladay, p. 1078.

<sup>16</sup> Malbon, *Narrative Space*, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> This is the interpretation of Malbon, shared in private conversation.

<sup>18</sup> *HarperCollins Study Bible*, “Introduction to The Gospel according to John” by David K. Rensberger, revised by Harold W. Attridge, p. 1815.

<sup>19</sup> Herbert Weir Smyth and Gordon M. Messing, *Greek Grammar*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), § 1311, p. 316.

<sup>20</sup> “Locris,” *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th ed. <http://www.questia.com/read/1E1-Locris/locris> (accessed June 9, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Liddell, Henry George, and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon—with a revised supplement 1996*. Oxford: Calderon Press, 1996.

<sup>22</sup> This is according to Dr. Andrew Becker.

<sup>23</sup> It should be noted that John 2:11 uses the chorographic genitive to differentiate between two different Canas. However, evidence remains inconclusive because Thucydides also used the chorographic genitive in two ways. Simply because John used it in one way in one instance does not mean that he could not have used it in another way in another instance.

<sup>24</sup> Savage, *Biblical Bethsaida*, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> *Josephus*, translated by William Whiston (London, England: Ward, Lock, & Co., 1879), p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> In *Antiquities* 17.8.1, Josephus differentiates between Trachonitis and Gaulonitis on the one hand and Galilee on the other. This shows that he believes them to be independent places. Given the flexible nature of ancient

---

geographical boundaries, this is an important distinction. Luke 3:1 also distinguishes between the regions of Galilee and Trachonitis. This shows that the differentiation was likely more broadly known and used.

<sup>27</sup> Fred Strickert, *Bethsaida: Home of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1989), p. 79.

<sup>28</sup> *Josephus*, p. 26.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Millar, *The Life and Transactions of Herod the Great* (Edinburg, UK: West Bow, 1782), p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Strickert, *Bethsaida*, p. 79.

<sup>31</sup> Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee and Rome: His Vita and Development as a Historian* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1979) p. 103.

<sup>32</sup> Josephus mentions elsewhere that he believes Gamala to be in Gaulonitis (*War* 2.20.6 is one example). He also mentions a Cana in Syria, which is possibly the only Cana he mentions (*Antiquities* 15.5.1 is one example) because he never mentions a Cana in Galilee. Josephus also previously states that Bethsaida is in the potentially overlapping regions of Trachonitis and Gaulonitis.

<sup>33</sup> Pliny, *The Natural History of Pliny*, translated by John Bostock and H. T. Riley (London, England: H. G. Bohn, 1855-57) p. viii.

<sup>34</sup> Savage, *Biblical Bethsaida*, p. 58.

<sup>35</sup> Savage, *Biblical Bethsaida*, p. 58.

<sup>36</sup> [This is the author's estimation from maps.](#)

<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that not all scholars are in agreement about the identification of Et-Tell as Bethsaida. See R. Steven Notley, "Et-Tell is not Bethsaida," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 70, no. 4 (2007): 220-230.

<sup>38</sup> In fact, Bethsaida may have even been much closer to the north of the lake than Tarichea was to the south. Scholarly opinion, beginning with William F. Albright, "Contributions to the Historical Geography of Palestine" *The Annual of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem* 2/3 (1921): 1-46. Albright places Tarichea at a location at Magdala, north of Tiberias. This placement recently came under debate once again when Nikos Kokkinos protested this conclusion in "The Location of Tarichea: North or South of Tiberias?" Nikos Kokkinos, "The Location of Tarichea: North or South of Tiberias?" *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 142, 1 (2010), 7-23. Following the opinion of Albright, however, Bethsaida would have actually been much closer to the north than Tarichea would have been to the south, making Pliny's categorization of Bethsaida in the East even more peculiar. Additionally, Fred Strickert, in his book *Bethsaida: Home of the Apostles* (p. 3), provides a different translation of Pliny: "There are four lovely cities on the Sea of Galilee: Julias and Hippos in the east and Tarichaeae and Tiberias in the west." This may be Strickert's own translation (no source is given), and, if correct, this alternative translation further strengthens the position that Pliny saw a specific separation between the east and the west of the lake.

<sup>39</sup> Savage, *Biblical Bethsaida*, p. 22.

<sup>40</sup> Eric C. Stewart, *Gathered Around Jesus: An Alternative Spatial Practice in the Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke and Co., 2009), p. 92.

<sup>41</sup> Stewart, *Gathered Around Jesus*, p. 65.

<sup>42</sup> Stewart, *Gathered Around Jesus*, p. 67.

<sup>43</sup> Stewart, *Gathered Around Jesus*, p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> Ptolemy, *Geographia*, translated by Edward Luther Stevenson with an introduction by Joseph Fischer (New York, NY: Dover Publications Inc. 1932) pp. xiii, 128.

<sup>45</sup> Stewart, *Gathered Around Jesus*, p. 62.

<sup>46</sup> Freund, *Bethsaida*, p. 44.

<sup>47</sup> Savage, *Biblical Bethsaida*, p. 52.

<sup>48</sup> Savage, *Biblical Bethsaida*, pp. 50-58.

<sup>49</sup> I am thankful to Halvor Moxnes (via e-mail correspondence with Malbon) for sharing some of his views, which I have relayed in this section.

<sup>50</sup> Savage, *Biblical Bethsaida*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>51</sup> However, his conclusions are based on excavations as yet incomplete at Bethsaida (Et-Tell).

<sup>52</sup> Savage, *Biblical Bethsaida*, p. 135.