

36 Bethshan

Names (also known as)

Beth-shan, Beth-shean, Bethsane, Beisan, Scythopolis (Greek)

Etymology

Strong’s H1052 – “House of ease”; compound word of *bayith* - house and H7599 – *sha’an* - at ease, quietness, rest, be secure.

Scythopolis means “city of Scythians.” Scythian in Greek means “foreign origin, to be rude or rough.”

Location/Description



Beit She'an is a city in the North District of Israel which has played an important role historically due to its geographical location at the junction of the Jordan River Valley and Jezreel Valley. It has also played an important role in modern times, acting as the regional centre for the numerous villages in the Beit She'an Valley Regional Council.

The ancient city ruins are now protected as an Israeli national park, known as Beit She'an National Park.



Scriptural references

Old Testament

Josh. 17:11,16; Jud. 1:27; 1 Sam. 31:10,12; 2 Sam. 21:12; 1 Kings 4:12; 1 Chron. 7:29.

New Testament

Col. 3:11 – “Scythian “ – Bethshan was once called Scythopolis – “city of Scythians”.

Brief history

Bethshan is noted for its ample supply of water. Wadi el Jalud passes around the north of the tel, and Wadi el Lab to the south providing almost an encircled city. This would make the attending of market gardens an easier task, and led to a comfortable and secure city to live in. The water is regarded as similar in supply to that of Damascus. In addition the location of both wadi's gives additional elevation to the tel which stands around 200 feet above the surrounding area, and consequently forms a natural citadel. The gate was on the steep northwest corner.

During the time of Saul the Philistines controlled Bethshan, an important trade route to Damascus. So following the death of Saul and his sons, their bodies were hung on the walls of the city, and the head of Saul on the outside of the Philistine temple to Dagon (1 Sam. 31:7). Their armour was displayed in other temples scattered throughout the city (1 Chron. 10:10). The approach of the men of Jabesh-Gilead from the south through Wadi el Jalud to the gates and the main street where the bodies were no doubt publically exhibited to all entering the city (2 Sam. 21:12). The noise of the rushing waters within the wadi providing some cover for their courageous endeavour. The death, and final return of Saul's, and his sons' bones, becomes a national parable. Following the 'death' of the nation, described as a carcass (Matt. 24:28), the Jews were scattered throughout the

Roman world. This was a dry place, and is described as a wilderness (Rev. 17:3) where Israel would remain as ‘dry bones’, a witness to a body requiring resurrection. Thus their sojourn would be in a place like Jabesh-Gilead (“the dry witness”), where the headless Saul and his sons were buried. For a period, the nation was under threat of national extinction, but the connection to the promises kept national identity alive (Gen. 15:11; 2 Sam. 21:10). David, the beloved, sought to return the bones to their national heritage, with Saul returned to Ziph (“the rib”), where like the creation of Eve, a new body is fashioned for them. This parable is expanded in Ezek. 37; **“And ye shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves, and shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land. I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land”** – Ezek. 37:13,14,21.

Scythians and Russia

The Septuagint translates Judges 1:27 - “the city of the Scythians”. The Scythians were a people originating from the far north, now part of modern Russia. The Scythian incursion into the Land to rule Bethshan is a foretaste of a greater battle when the ruler from Rus (Ezek. 38:2) will invade Israel again. The northern reaches of Scythia were considered the northern boundaries of the Greek Empire.

The celebrated Bochart about the year 1640, observed, in his elaborate researches into Sacred Geography, that Ros, or Rosh, is the most ancient form under which history makes mention of the name of Russia; and he contended that Rosh and Meshech, properly denote the nations of Moscovy and Russia. "It is credible," says he, "that from Rosh and Meshech (that is, the Rhossi and Moschi) of whom Ezekiel speaks, descended the Russians and Muscovites, nations of the greatest celebrity in European Scythia." We have indeed ample and positive testimony, that the Russian nation was called Ros, by the Greeks in the earliest period in which Herodotus informs us that the name Scythse was a name given by the Greeks to an ancient and widely extended people of Europe, who had spread themselves from the river Tanais, or Don, westward along the banks of the Ister or Danube. The Greeks

observed that those who afterward subdued the Roman Empire, were the stock from which the present race of people in Europe seem to be descended. And again: "The Scythians of Herodotus appear to have extended themselves in length from Hungary, Transylvania, and Wallachia on the westward, to the river Don on the eastward." Thus the testimony of Herodotus and Josephus is in perfect agreement concerning the progress of Magog and Gomer.



During the time of Josiah the Scythians under their king Madyes invaded Israel having crossed the Caucasus in 632 BC. They were convinced by gifts from Psamme-tichus to return, which they did after plundering, especially the temple at Ashkelon. They remained a presence in Asia for a period of 28 years before retreating, but left a legacy of their invasion at Bethshan in the name of the town - Scythopolis.

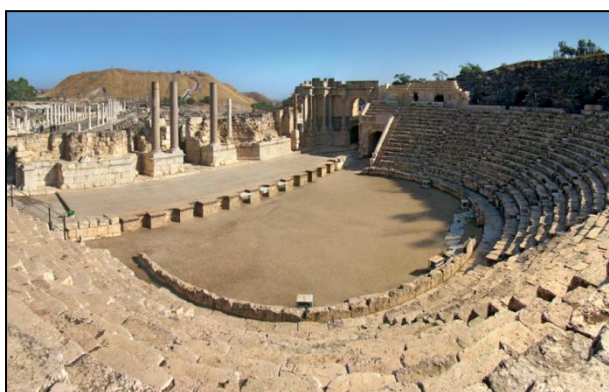
The impact of their voyage was to be profound. Their ravages and foraging, and the death of Ashurbanipal, left a weakened Assyrian kingdom to the north, allowing the development of two great powers - that of Cyaxeres the Mede and Nabopolassar in Babylon. This development meant that Israel and Syria were now directly threatened.

The Assyrian capitals had been protected by Egyptian mercenaries, and out of chagrin and national pride, and to secure Egypt's position on the world scene, Pharaoh Necho marched north to confront the new powers, only to be defeated at Haran and spectacularly routed from Carchemish southward (2 Chron. 35:20; Jer. 46).

While this point of history marked the premature death of Josiah (the great stalwart of faith for Jeremiah), the rout at Carchemish 4 years later marked a point in his work where

it became plain that the previous prophecy of the threat of Babylon had become real, and that Yahweh’s words were reliable. Jeremiah mentions the return from exile in the land of the north during a prophecy in the time of Josiah (Jer. 3:18). Although this is likely to mean a return from the captivity predicted in Babylon (see Jer. 1:14), it is possible that a small number of captives were taken by the Scythians, and highlighted the real possibility that captivity was possible. The movement of the Scythians along the Via Maris meant that Jerusalem and Judah were left relatively unscathed and explains the importance of controlling Bethshan. The absence of this story in detail in the Bible is remarkable and bears testimony to the certain message of Huldah regarding peace in Josiah’s time (2 Chron. 34:27,28).

Much later, Judas Maccabeus crossed the Jordan, took Ephron, and then marched to Bethshan. The Jews who lived there indicated how accepting the town of Bethshan had been to them. A request for this to continue was made.



In Roman times, Pompey marched against Aristobulus here, coming from Pella, and restored the Jews into the city after putting them under tribute. Vespasian sent the third legion to rest at Scythopolis in AD 66. Following the rebellion of the Jews, 30,000 were killed at Bethshan in AD70.

The Decapolis

A group of around ten cities formed a loose alliance (Matt. 4:25; Mark 5:20; 7:31). The exact number and nature of the alliance varied with time so that in the time of Ptolemy they numbered 18. The cities were to a degree independent of the tetrarchy, and minted their own coins, raised local taxes, but answered directly to the Syrian governor.

Spectacular temples, hippodromes, amphitheatres and roads are features of many

of these cities including Bethshan, many sharing the dark black basalt rocks from Golan and Bashan in their construction. The most spectacular amphitheatres are at Bethshan and at Bosra (Syria). According to Pliny, these cities were: Scythopolis (Beisan), Hippos (Susiye), Gadara (Umm Qeis), Pella (Fahil), Philadelphia (Amman), Gerasa (Jerash), Dion (Adun?), Canatha (Qanawat), Damascus. Also included is Abilla (south of Yarmuk) and Abilene or Abilla in the Barada gorge. Gadara is also mentioned in Scripture, not as a city but as an administrative area (Matt. 8:28).

The challenge of ease

The history of Bethshan under Canaanite, Israeli, Egyptian, Philistine, Scythian and Roman rule was one of security and ease at the cross-roads of a prosperous region. Like similarly proud nations and cities to whom Yahweh says - **“Arise, get you up unto the wealthy nation, that dwelleth without care, saith Yahweh, which have neither gates nor bars”** (Jer. 49:31), the inhabitants of Bethshan were rarely ready for imminent threats to their comfort and ease.

The warning to the servants of God in these prosperous and ‘easy’ latter days from the history of Bethshan is - **“But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; And shall begin to smite his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken; The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of, And shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth”** – Matt. 24:48-51.

Sources:

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(Compiler – Peter Boon)