# Richard A. Freund

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## Archaeology, Material Culture, and Judaism

I do not want to miss the big picture about the use of archaeology and material culture in the study of the Bible and Ancient Judaism. If Judaism is a construct that has developed over the past two-to-three thousand years from biblical religion it is important to show how these developments take place. Often it is a fairly subtle interpretive literary journey that takes the students from a biblical institution to a post-biblical ritual or law. Biblical Judaism is not the same as post-biblical Judaism, and simple forays into the material culture of the Bible and post-biblical Judaism can drive home this point much quicker than semesters of literary analysis. In-class slides, videos, and Internet visuals help but lack the concreteness of demonstrative material culture. Field (excavation) studies provide a different form of learning than can be experienced in the classroom. I have been teaching ancient Judaism using archaeology and field excavations for almost two decades with amazing results and enthusiasm from my students. My work has been almost exclusively in Israel, but I have toured with my students in Jordan and Egypt to fill out their educations. Archaeology is an exciting and hands-on way to introduce often skeptical and jaded students to an exciting and “real” study of the Bible and Judaism. It is impossible to give them the same “feeling” for the reality of the history they study only through books and from sitting in a classroom.

For students, the fact that objects and writings from antiquity can be found in their original and pristine state means that they are “objective” objects, i.e., verifiable, quantifiable, and therefore true. Nothing could be farther from the reality of the situation in the study of material culture. The “rocks, linens, wood, beads, metals” do not really “speak”; objects and writings are only intelligible through the process of subjective interpretation, and this process is open to speculation and reasonable hypothesizing. But alas, the “imagined” notion of archaeology is so much stronger than the actual study of archaeology that it gives archaeology a more objective feel than, say, the thousands of years of interpretation that biblical and rabbinic texts have enjoyed. As a teacher, I wish to exploit students’ inherent interest in the unknown (“mystery”) aspects of archaeology but at the same time to lower the expectation level by telling students that interpretation is a part of the process.

The other aspect is to realize that the main “nuts and bolts” of archaeology are not the big discoveries but the small pieces of evidence: research in ceramics, petrology, dating through paleography (when written materials are available), or C14 studies (for organic matter remains). All these are analyzed through comparative and complex mixes of anthropology, sociology, biology, chemistry, and related sciences that add up, slowly, to a larger picture of group, a society, a city, a tribe, or an individual. The cumulative argument of archaeology, often missed by the cinema and popular culture, creates a picture that, unlike the interpreted model of the rabbis and later Jewish historians, is almost always an unknown to the archaeologist at the beginning but which ultimately becomes clear through hypothesis and evaluation. It is a wonderful model for teaching about religion and how religious research accumulates to give a picture of a whole group.

## From Theory to Practice

Archaeology usually means the study of antiquities or ancient artifacts as ends in themselves. Biblical archaeology is the study of these artifacts in light of the literary texts that are associated with the Bible. My definition of the “Bible” is somewhat unorthodox: I include in my course any texts that may affect our understanding of the Bible’s meaning and, especially, our understanding of the material culture at the sites at which we work. Our “archaeology” often involves anthropological studies of local indigenous customs and life, but the main part of our study in the field involves teaching what artifacts tell us *about our site*. The sustained interaction — seven hours per day, five days per week — in close working environments in the field-classroom lends itself to teaching not only about the artifacts but also about how texts relate to artifacts.

While some archaeology is done in laboratories and some in libraries, the cornerstone of all biblical archaeology is field excavation. The whole sense of “discovery” that we try to animate our students to understand in our courses in the classroom is the goal of this process of field excavations. This is not the place to explore some of the traditional goals of archaeology but certainly into the very recent past, the goals of field excavation were geared more for pure research ends rather than teaching. Professional archaeologists would hire laborers and often just supervise their work in the field. They then would take the finds back to a lab, analyze them with the help of experts who often were not with them in the field, and then write up the results for the archaeologist of record who ultimately would write a final report. These results were used in turn by literary scholars of the Bible.

This was a very inefficient way to get the results out to the public, and the workers/students were seen as one of the least important links in the chain of information collection. Even when

massive numbers of volunteer student laborers have been used in some major archaeological projects of the past thirty years, such as the excavating of Masada, the City of David in Jerusalem, and Caesarea, often the educational or teaching possibilities were subordinated to the research goals of the excavation. Today the situation is different: the value of educated student laborers increases research goals. Archaeology is a tremendous opportunity for teaching and learning about the past and about the scientific method of how we know anything about anything in the modern world.

There is no misleading those of you who have never been on an excavation. Excavations are carried out by manual labor; we may be assisted by a tractor for heavy-duty jobs but the bulk of the work is done by individuals who lift, sift, clean, and sometimes remove rocks and dirt. Work in the field consists of excavating, recording, photographing, and surveying. With proper supervision and training, students can do any of these tasks. A tell (mound) is divided into a network of squares measuring five by five meters. Each square or architectural unit is known as a locus. As soon as architectural units are observed, the excavation is carried on accordingly. Walls, floors, etc., are carefully excavated and cleaned for reconstruction. Finds are collected in baskets. Preliminary analysis of finds is done daily at the site. Finds, baskets, and the development of each locus are recorded on a locus card and a field diary. Individual students work their way through the different tasks so that at the end of a three-week session they have done almost every task from lifting rocks, excavating, measuring, recording, and surveying, to recording, pottery analysis, and explaining finds.

Three to five students are assigned to a locus. Each has an advanced student or staff member who is a locus supervisor. Each area in the mound has a faculty area supervisor skilled in the techniques of keeping the daily log, supervising the actually digging, and doing on-site evaluations of the thousands of pottery pieces found every day. Pottery is cleaned and sorted daily and students take part in this task also. Students with more years of experience and training are assigned square and architectural unit responsibilities under the direction of faculty area supervisors. Students leading other students may seem to some of us as a very poor model for work, but having students involved in decision-making and role modeling for other students is a very effective tool in the field. Above the area supervisor is the chief archaeologist or director of excavation. The expedition staff also includes a photographer, a surveyor, an architect, a recorder, a restorer, and a variety of experts from different disciplines including geography, geology, botany, zooarchaeology, history, and biblical scholarship. The project director oversees all of the different disciplines, research agendas, faculty and student assignments, and frees the director of excavation to assess archaeology rather than monitor educational and research assignments.

In the excavations in which I have been involved, first as staff and later as director, education of students has been the primary issue, with the research agenda ultimately served by this new

method. Weekly surveys of work on the tell are made, during which the current progress in each area is summarized by student representatives of individual loci. Students are often trained to do even the “crucial” daily log. It is the detail-oriented jobs that give the students the sense of what material culture is and how archaeology is an interpretative discipline that starts with an objective assessment of the piece under examination. It is also a new type of “discovery.” I often tell students that their field excavation locus is a laboratory unlike any other lab that they will ever encounter. It is a lab where the experiments may never be run again: the moment that a piece of physical evidence is uncovered is the only moment that it will be in that position for interpretation ever again. So they must learn to get it right the first time. We do not require that student volunteers have previous training in archaeology, and trained students or professionals are welcome as long as they are able to work in the collaborative atmosphere with untrained students.

## Biblical and Talmudic/Rabbinic Archaeology

While the word “Bible” or “biblical” in a course catalogue tends to bring students into an archaeology course, it is the ongoing tradition of literary information such as “talmudic” or “rabbinic” that more accurately defines the relationship between biblical texts and the material culture we employ in understanding Judaism at sites around Israel and the Middle East. The Bible and archaeology have an unusual relationship. The Bible gives literary information that describes a material culture and time period and talmudic/rabbinic archaeology attempts to do the same thing through the lens of literature that may be hundreds (or thousands) of years later that the original “biblical” period. It is the lens that is both misleading and enormously important to understanding the development of Judaism. Biblical archaeology stretches over thousands of years of changing literary texts and influences; talmudic archaeology is Roman period archaeology (in Israel) reflected through the lens of later literary references in post-biblical rabbinic settings of Babylonia, Egypt, North Africa, and elsewhere as the rabbinic texts were edited, redacted, and placed into their final form. Post-biblical Judaism is the interpretive exercise of later rabbinic figures commenting on earlier biblical traditions and attempting to define biblical material culture in this new interpretive setting.

I first read about talmudic archaeology in the paperback book *Archaeology, the Rabbis and Early Christianity* by Eric M. Meyers and James F. Strange (1981). It is a small book that attempts to systematically explain the archaeological method in relation to the development of rabbinic Judaism. In the early twentieth century, Samuel Krauss had produced his two-volume *Talmudische Archaeologie* (1910-1911) and his *Synagogue Altertümer* (1922), and Samuel Klein had published *Beiträge zur Geographie und Geschite Galiläas* (1909), but in these works, one finds a familiar problem also found in biblical archaeology, viz.,

the linkage of exact talmudic stories and information with places and artifacts identified at a site or vice-versa. This type of identification system proves to be inadequate or theologically weighted in the case of the Bible and is even more problematic in the case of talmudic information.

The importance of the comparison is that it allows for the student to see for him- or herself the possibilities of how traditions may be retrojected into the past to give a later development in Judaism greater authority. Sometimes it does the opposite, by preserving a significant piece of information about an artifact that is only maintained within the later literature. An example from my own excavations at Bethsaida will clarify my position and show how it has provided us not only with excellent teaching moments in archaeology but also a pedagogic model for how archaeology and especially field studies allows students to participate in the greatest gifts that the academic study of religion can provide: discovery, and the critical reasoning skills for interpreting the discovery.

## Bethsaida: A “Jewish” City by the North Shore of the Sea of Galilee

Bethsaida presents a case in biblical and rabbinic archaeology that has no parallel thus far. We rediscovered the site in 1987 and have spent the past sixteen years trying to understand its significance. At the start of the excavations we discovered large quantities of Roman pottery, indicating that this was an active site in the first century. It is perhaps the best example of a village — later a city — in which most scholars believe Jesus had been active, that has been accessible to total archaeological investigation. Many other sites that have such a close relationship with Jesus and the apostles were identified by the Church in the fourth century CE and made into “religious sites” with Byzantine churches and monasteries attached. Bethsaida apparently was abandoned in the third century CE and its location lost for a variety of different geological and geographic reasons that we have been unraveling with our students over the past decade.

It is a city that may have been critical to the rise of the early Jesus group since, by some accounts, as many as six of the apostles are placed there in the first century, and the New Testament places many of the miracles and Jesus’ earliest activities there. Our rediscovery of the site has been a wonderful opportunity to have students share in the discovery not only of the site but of how one assesses the significance of material culture when a city has not been continuously occupied for nearly two thousand years. We have been bringing students to our Bethsaida Excavations Project since 1987 and one question that continually has been asked is “What makes this a Jewish city in antiquity?” The city is mentioned in the ancient Jewish historian Josephus Flavius’s writings, in the New Testament, in rabbinic writings from the Mishnah through the Talmudim, and even perhaps the Hebrew Bible, so it is clearly connected

to Jewish life. But what specific artifacts make a city Jewish? The answer to this question may help us understand the larger religious questions that are of interest to the academic study of Judaism and Christianity: how “Jewish” was early Christianity in Israel, and what was the nature of Jewish life in places far from Jerusalem in the Second Temple period?

First, we always assumed that it was a “Jewish” city because of its location in close proximity to other Galilean and Golan Jewish cities of the same time period located along the same roads and pathways around the Sea of Galilee. Although there are non-Jewish cities in the area, our identification became a working hypothesis. We did not know whether Bethsaida ever had a Jewish majority population and therefore the search for its Jewishness was complicated. We asked basic questions of ourselves and of the students, such as what makes the material culture at Bethsaida “Jewish” or “pagan” (since there were presumably no “Christians” in the first-century city)? What type of Jews were these Bethsaida Jews? Were they “rabbinic Jews” who saw rabbinic law as the defining factor for their lives or were they a marginally Jewish population who rarely encountered rabbis? Were rabbis as we know them from the texts even distinguishable in this region during the Hellenistic and Roman period when Bethsaida flourished, or is this terminology anachronistic?

These became issues not only for the researchers but also questions posed to students, who every year are asked to choose a topic for a research paper. They can choose almost anything and throughout the years we have had standard research papers on individual finds, thematic papers on the larger social and religious issues, as well as photo essays, movies, audiotapes, and even poetry and songs evoked by the experience. One research question that has been the subject both of scholarly and student papers has to do with the obvious absence of standard Jewish institutions such as a synagogue (a singular and significant “Jewish building” for worship and study) and a mikveh (a uniquely Jewish bath and building complex used to fulfill ritual purity statutes in biblical and rabbinic texts) at a “Jewish” city such as Bethsaida. While I generally tell students that “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence,” the absence of a synagogue structure and a mikveh at the site raises the pedagogical question of defining “Jewish” in the period of Bethsaida’s existence. I sometimes call the search for Jewish institutions such as synagogues and mikvehs an “edifice complex,” but it is an issue that students readily understand and which therefore presents an opportunity to teach. The existence of a synagogue or a mikveh site has become one “litmus test” for the Jewishness of a site; however, our students quickly discover through lectures and conversations with staff that the whole concept and terminology of standard categories such as “the synagogue” and “the mikveh” are not as standard as they thought. Therefore the lack of a synagogue or “Jewish” building on the site should not rule out the possibility that Jews lived there. In fact, all indications are that

Bethsaida may have ceased to be active when formal synagogue structures came into fashion in the third and fourth century CE in the Golan. [For more on the synagogue and mikveh problems, see D. Urman, "The House of Assembly and the House of Study: Are They One and the Same?" *Journal of Jewish Studies* 44.2 (1993); and Jacob Neusner, *The Judaic Law of Baptism* (University of South Florida, 1995).]

The development of the mikveh was an attempt to create a rather specific ritual for on-going, non-Temple-oriented Judaism and it succeeded. When we are at Bethsaida, I will often take students to other sites nearby with mikveh structures and ask them to measure and understand their construction; I then ask them why they think we haven't discovered one. In the past, some students have responded, "Perhaps because we have only excavated 10 percent of the site in fifteen years, and the mikveh is located elsewhere on the site." Other students made the argument: "...perhaps they just bathed in the nearby Jordan River, and that sufficed for ritual and non-ritual purposes." In fact, that would have sufficed according to rabbinic texts. This type of learning and discovery is impossible to achieve in the classroom, but it is the basic stuff of the academic study of religion. I could never really teach all of this in a classroom, and it is for this reason alone that I advocate taking students but into the field for this experience.

Smaller artifacts can help us determine ethnicity as well. Hebrew inscriptional information (we have some at Bethsaida but very little) is also important for the determination of "Jewishness," but again, may not be decisive in a location so far from Jerusalem. No obviously Jewish symbols such as menorahs, Temple images, or biblical scenes have been discovered at the excavations at Bethsaida but again only 10 percent of the site has been uncovered. We have identified other types of what has been called "Jewish" Hellenistic and early Roman Jewish art that have taught us about the relationship between text and material culture. A few different geometric ornaments — identified at other very clearly defined Jewish cities as "Jewish" symbols of the Second Temple period — have been found at Bethsaida on lintels and massive stone pieces scattered around the site and on pottery. They include the rosette, the inhabited double meander, and the five- or six-pointed star. An understanding of Jewish art in this period, its place in religious worship, and its relationship to literary prohibitions against pagan art allows us to teach about a key issue of Judaism's religious system. Similarly, a uniquely decorated stone stele at a city gate religious cult location from the Iron Age level at Bethsaida stands next to an undecorated stele. While this city gate conjures up all types of biblical citations, it is the total context of material culture that teaches our students about the relationship between the Bible and our archaeology: researchers have tried to connect the decorated stone to non-Israelite influences in a mixed Iron Age settlement at the site, while the lack of symbols on the undecorated stone is seen as evidence of an Israelite population.

The most ubiquitous find at any archaeological site is pottery: cooking pots, storage pots,

vessels for grinding, oil lamps, etc. At a site such as Bethsaida, pottery finds usually are not intact and require restoration but they are uncovered every day in every locus. They are the “nuts and bolts” of our material culture study, actually providing us with a window into the lives of the people that lived at a site. This is the most important lesson that we teach in different ways every day, from the moment that students begin working in the field loci to the lectures in the evening. From the washing of the pottery find, the recording of each shard in the daily log, the designation of the find and its elevation on the site on the map grid, and the marking of location numbers of each shard in the lab, to the photographing and drawing of the piece, it is a full learning environment that involves many different skill sets that bring a student into encounters with multiple disciplines and faculty. At our afternoon “pottery readings,” we teach students how to “read” a piece of pottery like a text and how to distinguish every aspect of pottery production from elements used in the preparations of the clay to style changes and useall crucial for dating a site since pottery types are so particular to time and place.

Limestone vessels and pottery become a major teaching opportunity, and the lessons go way beyond the standard archaeology classroom. Pottery seemed to us to be the place to actually engage the students in the larger questions of ethnicity and religion. Since purity laws are an important defining mark of a Jewish life, the discovery of white limestone vessel pieces and pottery types made from the clay and style of a rabbinic center of pottery in Galilee become enormously important. According to biblical and, especially, rabbinic texts, stone vessels are unlike pottery vessels in that they do not contract ritual impurity; therefore, basalt vessels and limestone vessels are seen as “Jewish.” Limestone vessels are particularly meaningful in this context; they are not easy to make and are impractical, breaking easily, so limestone ware “special” pieces at Bethsaida suggest a Jewish presence that cared about such matters. Daily ware pottery may also raise ritual purity issues. Our daily ware pottery finds suggest that a good proportion of these vessels were made at a well-known Galilean rabbinic site called Kefar Hanaya. If this is so, it would also suggest a Jewish rabbinic presence. We spend time in evening lectures discussing rabbinic texts and purity laws in the hopes that we can train students not only to “look” for subtle differences in pottery but to “see” the possibilities that even a minor discovery makes to scholarship. I often worry whether all of this work in the details of discovery makes students unable to see the larger perspective of “Ancient Judaism” in the midst of all of the details of pottery, architecture, coins, glass and metal studies, etc. I have not found this to be the case. In fact, I find that students can appreciate the larger questions even more by understanding how the collection process for data really does work. All of these experiences make field studies a unique learning environment.

In the past few years, planning for these expeditions has become more difficult as political and social conditions in the Middle East and Israel have become more complex. I have found that these complexities also provide important teaching and learning opportunities both before and after the expedition to the field is completed. One of the most significant additions I have made to the student assignments in field studies in archaeology has been the daily journal. Originally it was intended to mimic the site log and included excavation information, pottery readings, lab

experiences, and lectures. Students are now told to record not only the scientific findings of every day at the site but also the experiences and learning opportunities that occur outside of the excavations. The moments of insight recorded in the student journals have convinced me that despite the complexities that field studies present, they are worth the effort that both students and faculty expend to make them successful.