

REDISCOVERING IR DAVID





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BY PROFESSOR
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NEW FINDS REVEALED IN AN ANCIENT CITY



Team members on the recently discovered stepped-stone platform.



Excavations in Ir David

The exciting results of archaeological excavations of ancient Yerushalayim have been coming to light steadily since the reunification of the city during the 1967 Six Day War. More recently, the area of Ir David, the City of David, to the south of the *Har Habayis* (Temple Mount), has been yielding amazing discoveries. Some of these were the subject of the Ir David Foundation's 16th annual conference, held in Yerushalayim in early September.

In an era in which the Jewish connection to Yerushalayim and the historical nature of the First and Second Temples have been questioned by Palestinians and others, it's hard to believe that rational people would not be convinced of this connection by the evidence that is being continuously uncovered.

The most recent discovery is a stepped-stone platform, the function of which is not yet determined and may never be known. But an understanding of the context in which it was discovered will explain why this find is so important.

The excavations, conducted by the Israel Antiquities Authority with the support of the Ir David Foundation, have already uncovered a public street built by King Herod (Hordos Hamelech, ruled 38-4 BCE). Adjacent to this street was the recently discovered stepped-stone platform.

According to Josephus, Herod was the son of an Idumean (Edomite) named Antipater, who had been forcibly converted to Judaism by Yochanan Kohen Gadol (John Hyrcanus), the Maccabean descendant who ruled over the Jews from 134 to 104 BCE. Herod's mother was an Arab princess. He was therefore not halachically Jewish, but the Romans appointed him as a client king over Judea.

The street in question led from the Siloam Pool (*Mei Hashiloach*), south of the City of David, up to the Triple Gate, the entrance to the *Beis Hamikdash* in the southern wall. It also led to Robinson's arch, the remnant of a monumental staircase that led into the *Beis Hamikdash* from the southeast corner of the *Har Habayis*. This pavement continued along the outside of the *Har Habayis* on the western side, crossing what is today the area of the Kotel Hamaaravi, and continued along the side



of the outer wall. When touring the Western Wall tunnels further north, one walks along that very same pavement. At the Ir David conference, it was explained that a parallel main street from the Byzantine period (fourth to seventh centuries CE) has also been excavated.

The *Tanach* tells us of the building of the Shiloach tunnel by Chizkiyahu Hamel-ech when he faced the impending attack of the Assyrians in 701 BCE (*Melachim II* 20:20, *Divrei Hayamim II* 32:2-4, 30; cf. *Yeshayahu* 22:9-11). The same water source was also known as Gichon (*Melachim I* 1:33). Some scholars have argued that parts of the water system should be dated even earlier, to the period of King Yehoash (835-801 BCE).

In that case, Chizkiyahu may have expanded and adapted the water system. The waterworks he constructed were intended to provide a continuous, safe water supply to the city in the face of the Assyrian siege. The Mishnah (*Sukkah* 3:12) tells us that water from this spring was used for the *simchas beis hasho'eivah* in the Second Temple era. The Sages, following Yeshayahu's complaint, did not agree with Chizkiyahu's action (*Pesachim* 4:9), apparently because it showed lack of *emunah*.

The building of this tunnel, which is almost 1,800 feet long, is recorded in an inscription from the eighth century BCE in which we learn that two groups began digging at opposite directions and met in the middle. In the words of the Hebrew Siloam Inscription, now in the Istanbul Archaeology Museum, when they met, "the voice of a man...called to his counterpart, [for] there was a crack in the rock... The stonecutters struck each man toward his counterpart, ax against ax, and water flowed from the source to the pool for 1,200 cubits."

The text also tells us that the tunnel was 150 feet below ground level. Excavation at Ir David has completely uncovered the Spring House, the building and step

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structure that enabled those inside the city walls to descend and draw water that had flowed through the tunnel.

The Ir David excavations have determined that during the Second Temple era, from the time of Herod on, the street pavement we have been discussing ran along a route similar to that of the water tunnel, all the way up from the Pool of Shiloach to the southwest corner of the *Har Habayis*. In order to compensate for the difference in height, alternating narrow and wide steps were constructed along this path. It is thought that this was the usual route by which pilgrims ascended to the *Beis Hamikdash* on the *shalosh regalim*. The beautiful stepped street was meant to impart a sense of grandeur and the glory of the Temple.

The stepped platform that was recently announced was found along this street of pilgrimage. There is a great deal of speculation about how it might have been used—as a place for making public announcements to those entering the *Beis Hamikdash*, or even as the ancient lost-and-found about which Chazal speak. It is doubtful that anyone will ever know exactly how this platform was used. But its close relationship to the public street leading to the *Beis Hamikdash* indicates some important role.

This area is brimming with archaeological discoveries, so it is not surprising that the excavators at Ir David, who are among Israel's leading archaeologists, have uncovered a monumental tunnel under the street we have been discussing. King Herod began to rebuild the *Beis Hamikdash* in 18 BCE, turning it into one of the architectural won-

ders of the ancient world. In fact, when the revolt against the Romans broke out in 66 CE, workers were still putting finishing touches on the Temple, despite the fact that Herod was long since dead.

In order to build the new structure, Herod greatly enlarged the platform of the *Har Habayis*. Water had previously drained naturally through the Tyropaeon Valley to the west, but its path was blocked by his expansion of the *Har Habayis* toward the west. For this reason, Herod had to dig a drainage tunnel that led all the way from the Temple Mount down

to the area of the Pool of Shiloach. This tunnel was dug right underneath our pilgrimage street.

On a July visit to the Ir David excavations, I had the chance to walk through a large part of this tunnel, and I can testify to the amazing engineering skill that must have been required to support its sides and the street above it. In fact, the historian Josephus states that these tunnels served as hiding places for Jews during the Roman destruction of Yerushalayim in 70 CE. This is confirmed by the discovery of various household goods, such as oil lamps and cooking pots, in the water drainage tunnel. Virtually the entire length of this tunnel has been exposed by the archaeologists working at Ir David.

To fully grasp the enormity of it all, one has to visit the large-scale excavation of an urban area immediately across the street from the offices of the Ir David Foundation, in the Givati parking lot. (Atop the excavation there will eventually be a visitor center for Ir David.) I also had the privilege of touring this excavation in July. This massive urban complex was occupied throughout the Greco-Roman period. From the Second Temple era there is evidence of a large residential palace occupied by some important member of the aristocracy.

After the *churban*, there is evidence that the area was occupied by Romans. In the later Byzantine Christian period, specifically during the brief interlude in which the Persians conquered Yerushalayim (614-629 CE), the area was apparently inhabited by Jews. Among the finds is a beautiful gold plaque with a menorah and other Jewish symbols, what may have been a silver buckle for a Torah scroll, and a cache of 264 gold coins. Scholars have speculated that Jews may have returned to this area after the Persian conquest, hoping that it would usher in an era of widespread Jewish resettlement in Yerushalayim. Unfortunately, the Persians were quickly dislodged by the Byzantine Christians, and the Moslems conquered Eretz Yisrael in 637 CE.

The excavation of this area is ongoing, and we can continue to expect great results from the excavations of Ir David. Phenomenal evidence for Jewish Jerusalem in the First and Second Temple eras has already emerged. Only a few of the important finds have been highlighted here.

Political debate has swirled around these excavations and the planned visitor center, but it has not affected the project. The archaeologists are to be credited with doing their work in a professional, scientific manner. But of course, since the *Har Habayis* did indeed house the First and Second *Batei Mikdash*, and since so much of our history took place in this area of Yerushalayim, we can expect that these excavations, as well as others conducted in Yerushalayim, will continue to yield evidence of a Jewish presence in the city and to enlighten us about the ancient history of the Jewish people. ●

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