Did Jesus Walk On Water?

Paul Kotschy

11 June 2023

Compiled on December 14, 2024

I DO NOT BELIEVE JESUS performed any incontrovertible miracles. And indeed, for some miracles recorded in the Bible, plausible non-fantastical explanations are available, reflecting possible embellishment by the ancient theologically oriented writers. One such event is Jesus walking on water.

The event of Jesus walking on water near the town of Bethsaida on the Sea of Galilee is recorded in Mark 6:45–52, Matthew 14:22–34 and John 6:15–21. As an itinerant preacher during his ministry years, Jesus would have spent much time in Galilee visiting coastal towns such as Gennesaret, Capernaum and Bethsaida, preaching on the lake's shores. On one such occasion, he had been doing exactly that (Mark 6:34). We know that the location could not have been far from the town of Bethsaida because it was late in the day when Jesus instructed his disciples to "get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida while he dismissed the crowd" (Mark 6:35–45). Capernaum, for example, is about 4 km (2.5 miles) from Bethsaida, and there was a synagogue in Capernaum where Jesus often preached (Mark 5:22, Luke 7:5). Figure 1 on page 2 refers.

What possible natural sequence of events could have transpired after his disciples climbed into their boat and began rowing to Bethsaida, such that the sequence ultimately came to be mythologised and immortalised by later religious scribes as the *Jesus-walking-on-water* miracle? Knowledge of the relative location of Bethsaida during Jesus' time, of the topography near to the disciples' intended destination (Bethsaida), and of the flow characteristics of the Jordan river offer valuable insights.

Two archaeological sites vie for the location of the ancient town of Bethsaida during Middle Classical Antiquity, as shown in Figure 2 on page 3. The first site is el-Araj. It is located close to the present northeastern shoreline of the Sea of Galilee on the western edge of the Beteiha Plain.[1] The second site is at an ancient mound known as et-Tell. The mound is located about 2.5 km (1.5 miles) inland from the present northeastern shoreline, also on the western edge of the Beteiha plain. A panoramic view of the Beteiha Plain is shown in Figure 3 on page 4.

An archaeological excavation called the Bethsaida Excavations Project led by professor Rami Arav has been ongoing at the et-Tell site for about 34 years.[3, 4] Figure 4 on page 4 refers. As part of this project, a geological team from the University of Nebraska at Omaha completed an extensive geomorphic survey of the western part of the Beteiha Plain. The survey area included the land around both the et-Tell mound and the

[1] The Beteiha Plain is also called the Bethsaida Valley.

Figure 1: *Top*—Satellite map of Israel and surrounding regions showing Jordan rift valley with the Sea of Galilee to the north and the Dead Sea to the south.[1] *Bottom*—Satellite map of the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee from Gennesaret on the left to the Beteiha Plain on the right. As an itinerant preacher, Jesus spent much time in this region, visiting towns such as Gennesaret, Capernaum and Bethsaida, giving sermons on the lake's shores. The two leading candidates for the site of the ancient town of Bethsaida are also shown. They are el-Araj (labelled a) and et-Tell (labelled b).

el-Araj site. Fluvial and lacustrine sediment data associated with the Jordan river as it meanders its way across the Beteiha Plain were obtained by sampling at various locations in the plain. Data on sediment grain size, texture, color, the presence of microfossils, gravel, clastics, organic matter, pottery shards, and Roman glass

Figure 2: Close-up satellite map of the Beteiha Plain located on the northeastern edge of the Sea of Galilee. The Jordan river winds its way down the western edge of the plain and empties into the lake. An estuary system at the mouth of the Jordan river is clearly visible. The two candidate sites for the ancient town of Bethsaida are el-Araj (labelled a) and the et-Tell mound (labelled b). Both are on the western edge of the plain close to the river. The et-Tell site is about 2.5 km (1.5 miles) from the lake's present shoreline.

were collected.[7] Subsequent stratigraphic analysis of these sampled data revealed the following:

1. The present day alluvial plain was variously covered with swampy water in antiquity, varying in depth from 0 to 2.4 meters.

2. An inlet, bay or estuary existed at or near et-Tell in antiquity, not unlike the estuary shown in Figure 5 on page 5. Recall that et-Tell is situated inland from the present shoreline whilst still being in the Beteiha Plain river delta.

3. This change to the shoreline and water level of the Sea of Galilee confirmed earlier reports by Shroder,[8, 9, 10, 11] Kraft,[12] and Ben-Arieh.[13]

4. Strong seasonal flash flooding of the Jordan river occurred. And the recession of the shoreline to

Figure 3: A panoramic view overlooking the Beteiha Plain, facing southeast.[2]

Figure 4: Two aerial views of the ancient et-Tell mound located near to the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. The et-Tell mound is the most likely location for the ancient town of Bethsaida.[5, 6] There is sedimentologic and paleogeomorphic evidence that the lake's shoreline was higher in antiquity than it is today, and was therefore more inland. The same evidence indicates that quiet waters existed in antiquity in several locations in the western Beteiha Plain and in the region of et-Tell in particular. These quiet waters would have formed an inlet or estuary near et-Tell not unlike the present-day estuary system near el-Araj.[7]

its present location was likely caused by sedimentation due to this flooding, together with known intermittent tectonic activity in the Jordan Rift Valley.

Quoting from the "Conclusion" section of Baker's thesis:[7]

> "The results have shown that areas of quiet and deep (1 to 2 meters) water did indeed exist in antiquity in the area of the western Beteiha Plain in several locations. […] The presence of pottery shards and glass in the sediments at depths ranging from a few centimeters to 4 to 5 meters close to et-Tell show clearly that an inlet or bay existed deep into the Beteiha Plain in antiquity."

Therefore, knowing: 1. that the disciples were not far from Bethsaida when they initially climbed into their boat and began rowing, 2. the topography of the Beteiha Plain in antiquity, 3. that there was an inlet or estuary system near Bethsaida in antiquity, 4. that the Jordan river undergoes flash flooding from time to time, and 5. that the disciples were indeed trying to make their way to Bethsaida by boat, we are able to reconstruct the following plausible sequence of events:

1. The disciples' boat was either approaching the estuary waters at Bethsaida or it was already there but not yet anchored.

Figure 5: South facing aerial view of the Jordan river as it meanders through the Beteiha Plain close to the river's mouth. The ancient el-Araj site is situated on the bank of the river's oxbow. A series of sandbars forming an estuary system are visible behind el-Araj. During a flood, many of the sandbars would become submerged in shallow waters, forming new sandbanks. Jesus could have been walking on one or more of these sandbanks, creating an appearance of walking on the water's surface. The photograph was taken in July 2021.[14]

2. A seasonal flood occurred.
3. The disciples' boat became engulfed in the rising and rapidly flowing waters.
4. Jesus spotted them from the shore.
5. Realising their difficulty, walking in shallower waters from sandbank to sandbar to sandbank, he approached their boat.
6. But from the disciples' perspective, Jesus appeared to be walking on water.
7. Jesus called out to them to jump out of the boat because the waters were shallow where he was standing. But they were afraid to do so.
8. In sheer frustration, Jesus might also have been shouting at the waters, just like I am inclined to shout at a strong headwind whilst on my bicycle.
9. Inevitably, the turgid waters calmed and subsided, exactly as do the waters from all flash floods.

Which sequence of events is more plausible? The above natural sequence which requires no fantastical miracle? Or the one in which Jesus was quite literally walking on the surface of water, magically displaying temporary weightlessness in defiance of gravity, and summoning supernatural command over the flow dynamics and mass conservation of water, as depicted in Figure 6?

Sometimes, the myths we pass down from generation to generation may have little bearing on real events in our histories. Perhaps they begin as entertaining stories which become fantasies believed true. But at other times, our myths derive from accounts of real events whose mundane details become embellished and exaggerated. In the end, it's the story which matters, right?

Figure 6: *Le Christ marchant sur la mer* (Christ walking on the waters) by Charles-Francois Jalabert (1819–1901).[15]

References

[1] Free Bible Images. Satellite Map Showing the Jordan Rift Valley. Retrieved from `https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/blank-satellite-maps/`. Accessed 6 June 2023.

[2] Unknown author. Beteiha plain. Retrieved from `http://www.jerusalemperspective.com/wp-content/uploads/Plain-of-Bethsaida-scaled.jpg`. Accessed 6 June 2023.

[3] Rami Arav et al. Bethsaida Excavations Project. Retrieved from `https://www.unomaha.edu/international-studies-and-programs/bethsaida/`. Accessed 28 April 2021.

[4] Richard Freund. *Digging Through the Bible*, pages 39–41. Number 978-0-7425-4645-5. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., First Paperback 2010 edition, 2009.

[5] Rami Arav et al. Bethsaida Excavations: Twenty Years of Excavating Bethsaida. Retrieved from `https://www.unomaha.edu/international-studies-and-programs/bethsaida/_files/docs/bethsaida-presentation-20-years.pdf`. Accessed 6 June 2023.

[6] Rami Arav. Searching for Bethsaida: The case for Et-Tell. *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 2:40–47, 2020. Retrieved from `https://www.baslibrary.org/biblical-archaeology-review/46/2/4`. Accessed 6 June 2023.

[7] Laura Baker. Sedimentologic and Paleogeomorphologic Character of the Western Beteiha Plain, Israel. Master of Arts (MA), University of Nebraska at Omaha, 2000. Student Work 3393. Retrieved from `https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/studentwork/3393`. Accessed 28 April 2021.

[8] JF Shroder. Deltaic and Lacustrine Sediment Isolation of Early Fishing Settlement, Jordan River and Lake Kinneret. Technical report, SBL International Meeting, Munster, Westphalia, Germany, 1993.

[9] JF Shroder, F John, R Arav, and R Freund. Geomorphology of the Bethsaida archeological site on Lower Golan Heights and Lake Kinneret, Dead Sea—Jordan Rift Zone. *Geological Society of America Abstracts with Programs*, pages A–85, 1993.

[10] JF Shroder and M Inbar. Geologic and geographic background to the bethsaida excavations. In Rami Arav and Richard Freund, editors, *Bethsaida Volume One: A City by the North Shore of the Sea of Galilee*. Thomas Jefferson University Press, Kirksville, Missouri, 1995.

[11] JF Shroder, MP Bishop, RJ Cornwell, and M Inbar. Catastrophic Geomorphic Processes and Bethsaida Archaeology, Israel. In Rami Arav and Richard Freund, editors, *Bethsaida Volume Two: A City by the North Shore of the Sea of Galilee*. Thomas Jefferson University Press, Kirksville, Missouri, 2000.

[12] JC Kraft, U Kayan, and SE Aschenbrenner. Geological Studies of Coastal Change Applied to Archaeological Settings. In G Rapp and JA Gifford, editors, *Archaeological Geology*. Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, 1985.

[13] Y Ben-Arieh. Sea level fluctuations in the Sea of Galilee. *Mada*, 9(6):307–312, 1956.

[14] Reuters. Israel Refills the Sea of Galilee, Supplying Jordan. Retrieved from `https://www.chinadailyhk.com/article/312658`. Accessed 6 June 2023.

[15] Charles-Francois Jalabert. *Le Christ marchant sur la mer* (Christ Walking on the Waters). Retrieved from `https://www.artrenewal.org/artworks/le-christ-marchant-sur-la-mer/charles-francois-jalabert/28713`, 1819–1901. Accessed 29 April 2021.