

Move the Prison, Save the Church, Israeli Archaeologists Say

By Julie Stahl

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Megiddo, Israel (CNSNews.com) - Israeli archaeologists are urging the Israeli government to move a maximum security prison to preserve the remains of what is thought to be Israel's oldest church. The remains were discovered about three weeks ago on prison grounds.

About 20 archaeologists and preservationists met Tuesday at Megiddo Prison in northern Israel to discuss the exciting find -- a mosaic floor and the foundation of an ancient building. The ruins could provide important clues about the development of early Christianity, experts said.

The remains were discovered inside the prison's barbed-wire topped security wall.

Journalists visiting the site on Tuesday were warned not to stray from the group since the prison compound, built by the British in 1942, now houses more than 1,000 Palestinian security prisoners, as well as a small number of other prisoners who are allowed to work on the grounds.

Dr. Uzi Bahari, deputy director of archaeology at the Israel Antiquities Authority, said experts agree that the archaeological find is "very unique" and probably dates back to the late 3rd or early 4th century.

"We decided to continue the excavation and enlarge [the area] all around," Bahari said in a telephone interview.

On Wednesday, the Israel Prison Service planned to fence off a small area around the mosaic and continue its construction project, but those plans have been put on hold.

Archaeologists want to have the prison moved, something that would take years and cost millions, Bahari said.

To protect the recently discovered Christian ruins, they want to enlarge nearby Megiddo Park, which contains other ancient sites.

Both the park and the prison are in the Jezreel Valley, near Nazareth, Mt. Tabor and Mt. Carmel. It is also the place where some Biblical scholars believe that Armageddon -- the last war between good and evil -- will be fought.

The Israel Prison Service has been working to overhaul its prisons during the last few years. At Megiddo, the renovations were taking place one wing at a time. As each old cellblock was destroyed, the Israel Antiquities Authority came in to excavate before the new wing was built, said IPS deputy spokesperson Orit Stelser.

"This was the last wing. All the other wings [were] destroyed" and replaced with new facilities, Stelser said.

"If this event [site] here is so important, maybe this place will [become] a tourist site; we still don't know," Stelser said. "It won't be inside the prison. It might be taken outside the walls or the prison [could] be taken to another place."

The mosaic

Prisoners and archaeologists were working side-by-side on Tuesday, gently cleaning the two mosaics as prison guards stood nearby. The rough outline of the original building was visible under the large plastic tent erected above it.

What makes the find interesting is not just that it is ancient and possibly the oldest church found in Israel, but that it clearly shows there was public Christian worship here at a time when Christianity was still outlawed in the Roman Empire and when Christians were being persecuted, said archaeologist Najar Arfan, who is working at the dig.

Christians were persecuted in the Roman Empire until Emperor Constantine legalized the religion in 324. But the archaeologists believe this building was used publicly for some kind of Christian activity before that date.

IAA archaeologist Yotam Tepper, director of the excavation at the prison site, said the three Greek inscriptions on the two mosaics indicate that the building -- about 29 feet long by 20 feet wide -- was a public and not a private building.

Although it is clearly a Christian building, it is not clear yet if it was used as a church, Tepper told reporters. He also said it is not clear what Christians were living in the area.

The first inscription found on the first mosaic, which contains the Christian fish symbol, says that Gaianos the centurion (Roman military officer) paid for the mosaic himself and Brutius was the artisan.

The second mosaic, which is a simple flower pattern, contains two inscriptions. One of them is an exhortation to remember four women named as Frimilia, Kiriaka, Dorothea, and Karasta.

The second reads: "The God-loving Akaptos [another woman] has offered this table to the God Jesus Christ as a memorial."

Archaeologists do not know if the "table" refers to a table or an altar but none has been found, they said.

This is one of the first references to Jesus Christ in a mosaic, said Tepper.

Independent archaeologist Stephen Pfann, who was visiting the site on Tuesday, said there were two things that struck him about the mosaics.

First, they include a memorial to four women, at a time when women were not usually mentioned in such a way. And second, a centurion of the Roman Empire, which was opposed to Christianity, had funded a Christian mosaic.

Rehabilitation

The Israeli Prison System said the experience of helping to excavate the site had gone a long way toward rehabilitating some of the prisoners.

More than 60 prisoners (none of them Palestinian security prisoners) worked on the excavations and a few of them were so happy with the work, they have asked for jobs with the Israel Antiquities Authority, when they complete their prison sentence, said IPS spokeswoman Stelser.

"If this is not rehabilitation, you tell me what is," Stelser said.

Archaeologist Najar Arfan said there were challenges as well, since the prisoners didn't know what archaeology was before they discovered the ruins.

"In the beginning we had a conflict with them...In the beginning they thought they were coming just to take the sand out and that's it," Arfan said. The prisoners had to be taught to look for pottery and coins and to only dig about two inches deep at a time.

"In the beginning we broke many things," Arfan said.

But he said he did see a change in the prisoners' attitudes over the months of the excavation.

Razilu Ramil, 23, now at the end of a two-year sentence, said he became much more interested in his work when the mosaic started to emerge.

Another prisoner, who gave his name only as Yoram, was holding some of the tiny square tiles from one of the mosaics. "There was a team that was working here and they found these little stones," said Yoram. "[Then] we went down and found this inscription three weeks or a month ago. We started to work carefully and this is what came out."

Yoram, who saw himself on television at the dig, said that working there had prompted him to think about people and religions and the conflicts between them through the ages.

He said doesn't know if he would continue in archaeology when he is released from prison in two weeks but he has received a recommendation from the archaeologists.

"There is something more than physical rehabilitation. There is rehabilitation of the soul...to start to think in a different way. Because you're not being rehabilitated like someone who is working in a plastic factory. You are being rehabilitated when you see history...you can think about [things]," Yoram said.