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Can you dig it?

April 01, 2009 ¦ Teresa Dunham

Painstaking hours of digging through rock and sifting sandy debris in the Judean Desert brought Bible history to life for four Liberty University students in December.

The students — Emilee Price, David Sherret, Nathan LeMaster and Katelyn Thurston — traveled to Israel for Liberty University's first-ever study abroad archaeological trip.

Positioned within sight of the cave where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, the students learned about archaeology and put in long days of hands-on labor.

"Working at the Dead Sea was an amazing experience because it brings Jesus' life into the reality of Bible times," said Price, a sophomore studying women's ministry. "God's word really opens up in your mind and in your heart."

Each student traded different roles at the site — sifting, digging, recording discoveries and providing leadership. Additional volunteers from other states and universities shared the work, and 70 degree weather also provided relief throughout the intense days.

As they dug, the group's "Liberty University" sign at the work site drew attention.

"We were digging where the tourists come, so the tourists stopped all the time. It was pretty interesting because they'd [ask], 'Is that Jerry Falwell's school?' I didn't realize that so many people from all over the world knew … of him," said Price, whose father, Dr. Randall Price, executive director of LU's Center for Judaic Studies, organized the trip.

Tourists sometimes watched as the students discovered bits of pottery, coins and animal bones from a Jewish community that thrived 200 years before Jesus' birth, as well as objects spanning Jesus' actual lifetime and the days after His resurrection when the early church began.

"It was pretty exciting at first because we were finding little pieces of pottery. You'd get really excited, and then after a while it seemed quite normal because there's so much of it there," said Sherret, a freshman computer science major.

Dr. Price, an archaeologist and respected scholar who has authored more than 20 books and films on the Bible, believes one of the silver coins students found was a half-shekel — the type Judas would have received for betraying Jesus. Students also found three animal bone deposits on top of a purposefully-buried plank of wood, most likely from a sacred Jewish ritual.

The Dead Sea Scroll fragments were uncovered six decades ago. DNA tests were performed on the animal skins on which the text was written. As the DNA helped match up the skins, researchers were able to piece the scrolls together and read some of the only known copies of Biblical documents that survived from before Christ's time.

Now Price is hoping that DNA from the animal bones his students found could match the DNA of the skins from the scrolls and help determine who hid the documents. If so, the bones could be of more historical value than the coins.

"No one in the last 60 years of research, since the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, has been able to scientifically prove that the people who wrote the scrolls and hid them in the caves were also the people who lived in that community [200 years before Jesus] and hid those … [animal bones]," said Dr. Price. "It's very important research in that respect."

Besides digging, the group did plenty of exploring on the trip, Dec. 7-23. They climbed inside the cave where the Isaiah scrolls were found, swam in the Dead Sea, saw the Shepherds' Fields in Bethlehem, went to the site of King Herod's tomb and explored Jerusalem.

"We went to three places where [people thought] Jesus was born because each church has their own place, and they all argue which is the right place," said Sherret. "I don't know if any of them are. There's just so many of them."

For LeMaster, a senior, the trip was an amazing learning experience. He plans on pursuing a master's degree at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, so the class made him a little more familiar with the area and culture.

"It was good to get my hands dirty and understand what it's really about — archaeology and how that relates to Biblical time periods," he said. "I really enjoy that culture and that mindset of people … I really like the food, and a general impression was very positive. The people were very helpful, very friendly, if you were willing to engage them."

Now the students are back at LU, taking classes and also completing assignments related to their

trip because it is considered a spring course.

Based on the success of this trip,

Dr. Price said he would like to offer trips through the Center for Judaic Studies each spring. Going just before Christmas was difficult for students, he said, but he believes leaving in late May or early June 2010 would encourage more participation.

Next time, he wants to bring 10 to 15 Liberty students along.

The Center for Judaic Studies is located inside the north entrance of the Arthur S. DeMoss Learning Center, just before the Sub Connection. An archaeological display is in the front window, and other interesting pieces are inside for viewing.

For more information about Dr. Price's work, including his hopes of finding Noah's Ark, visit www.worldofthebible.com