

# WEIGHING THE EVIDENCE FROM ANCIENT SHILOH:

*What Have We Learned from ABR's Five Seasons of Excavations*

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Late in the spring of 2017, I found myself in an unexpected location, surveying the hills of the Judean highlands that stretched out into the distance before me. A buzz of activity was occurring all around the small hill where I stood. More properly, this place should be called a “tell”—a layered mound where different stages of ancient habitation can be seen, often spanning thousands of years. Our team was working here to reveal the secrets of the past. The sounds of archaeological work filled the air—trowels scraping the surface, picks loosening the packed soil of yesteryear, guffas of freshly excavated soil spilling into sifters, and voices of supervisors giving instructions to volunteers like me. My ears picked up the voice of excavation director Scott Stripling giving his expert opinion on the dating of a pottery rim recently uncovered from its ancient resting place. Gary Byers, my square supervisor and a grizzled veteran of many years of excavation,



A “Guffa” (pronounced goof-ah) is a vessel made from tires or rubber, used for transporting dirt, rocks, and debris to the sifter at the dig site. Photo by Bryan Windle.

smiled as he walked in my direction. He then began to advise on the proper way to excavate the pithos rim that had just been uncovered in our square. Perhaps we were coming down on a storage room of pithoi (large storage jars), he speculated. As a



Dr. Stripling and Dr. Byers help at the wet sift. Wet sifting is a relatively new methodology that can help retrieve organic matter and remove thick soil or clay from artifacts. Photo by Brent Hoefling.



volunteer, I was absorbing much archaeological knowledge and gathered that these large storage jars may connect us to the world of the Bible. After all, we were working at a famous location from the Old Testament—the site of Shiloh, the first capital of Israel.



Restored by Leah Tramer, Abigail Leavitt and Tim Lopez, this pithos represents one of many discovered at the site. Photo by Tim Lopez.

The site of Shiloh features prominently in the biblical books of Joshua, Judges, and 1 Samuel. It was here that Joshua settled the Tabernacle and the ark of the covenant, that Hannah prayed, that Samuel first heard the voice of God, and that Eli met his end when news came of the death of his sons and the capture of the ark by the Philistines. The site is located about 20 miles north of Jerusalem and has been known since the early days of exploration and archaeology. Explorer Edward Robinson identified Khirbet Seilun as Shiloh in 1838.

In everyday life at home in eastern Kentucky, I work as a prosecuting attorney. I am confronted daily with conjecture, vacillating opinions, defense attorneys' interpretations of the facts (which may or may not be accurate), and often bald-faced lies. In the quest for justice, the need to see beyond all of that boils down to one factor—what's the evidence? A solid understanding of the evidence then allows for valid interpretation. It came as a surprise that this principle and the skills involved in implementing it also apply to the world of archaeology, especially

Approximately 2,000 pottery sherds are found each excavation day at Shiloh. This Herodian oil lamp nozzle from the time of the New Testament was discovered by a volunteer in Tommy Chamberlin's square during the 2023 excavation season. Photo by Gary Urie.



archaeology related to the world of the Bible. The remains excavated by archaeologists are mute. They require interpretation. Secular archaeologists often claim that archaeological findings have proven that the Bible lacks a historical foundation. Unfortunately, the media and the public often accept these opinions at face value without any investigation into their merits. Such claims stir up the attorney in me that says, "Fine—that's your interpretation, but what's the evidence?" A proper understanding of the evidence must occur before we can come to a fair opinion on whether the interpretation is correct.

Overlooking the archaeological ruins that day in 2017, I wondered what evidence the excavation team would uncover at ancient Shiloh. Now five seasons of excavation work at Shiloh have passed, and ABR has gathered a wealth of information about the history of the site from the Middle Bronze Age through the Islamic era. But what has come to light from the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age I periods, when the Tabernacle was at the site according to the Bible?

Do the archaeological finds from the material culture reflect what is recorded in the biblical text? Is there any evidence of the Old Testament sacrificial system? Is there any evidence that the site was occupied by Israelites? Could there even be evidence of the Tabernacle at Shiloh?

In any archaeological excavation, a primary source of evidence is the pottery recovered. Pottery is the most common discovery at nearly all archaeological sites of the ancient Near East and is of great value to archaeologists, who are trained to "read" the sherds to determine their age. At Shiloh, the team excavates nearly 2,000

pottery sherds daily. These broken pieces of pottery range in date from the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 1700 BC) to the Islamic period. From the Bible, we discern that Joshua settled the Tabernacle and ark of the covenant at Shiloh circa 1399 BC (at the end of the Conquest) and that the site remained in use as the center of Israelite worship until circa 1075 BC. Late Bronze Age II and Iron Age I pottery sherds recovered during ABR's excavation and previous excavations demonstrate that the site was occupied during the time the Bible places the Tabernacle at Shiloh.

A casual understanding of Joshua's conquest has the Israelites conquering the Holy Land by laying waste to the cities they would soon occupy. However, the biblical record paints a slightly different picture. It only mentions three sites being



burned by the Israelites—Jericho, Hazor, and Ai. In fact, God promised His people “great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant” (Dt 6:10b–11a). Joshua 18:1 mentions no conflict in the Israelites setting up camp at Shiloh, and archaeology bears that out. Archaeologists have discovered three main destruction layers at Shiloh—in the Middle Bronze Age, near the end of Iron Age I, and in the Early Roman period. None of these are from the time of the Conquest and Joshua. A peaceful integration at Shiloh seems reflected by both the text and archaeology.

That first season in 2017, those of us in Gary Byers’s square excavated along the site’s fortification wall on the north side of the tell. We excavated a storage room that would eventually reveal numerous pithoi. Our storage room was just one of many along

that not to be the case. The storage rooms seem limited to the northern perimeter of the site. Why might they be in this specific location? We’ll look at that later.

During the 2018 excavation season, after explaining the dry-sifting process to a volunteer, field supervisor Tim Lopez examined the sifting screen and made the discovery of his career (at least so far): a nearly intact ceramic pomegranate. It was 43 mm long, 29 mm at its widest point, and perforated at the top so that it could be suspended in some way. Pomegranates were a common symbol in the ancient Near East representing fertility. The pomegranate is also a common symbol in the Bible and was used in the Temple (1



Gary Byers examines the work by volunteers in his square in the first season at Shiloh (2017). Photo by Tommy Chamberlin.



Tim Lopez displays the ceramic pomegranate he discovered while sifting. Photo by Michael C. Luddeni.

the interior of the northern perimeter that contained many of these large vessels. These storage rooms may well be unique to Shiloh among ancient sites in Israel, as normally archaeologists would expect to find private homes built alongside the fortification wall. What purpose might these storage rooms full of pithoi have served? During the period of the Judges, Shiloh served as the capital of Israel. The house of God, with the ark of the covenant, was located there. Israelites would come to Shiloh to bring their tithes, offerings, and sacrifices in worship of their God. Coins wouldn’t come into regular use until many centuries later, so how would one bring tithes and offerings without currency? Offerings were given from commodities—barley, figs, etc. Because of the volume of these goods that would have come into Shiloh, it would have been essential to have somewhere to store them. Excavation of the storage rooms inside the northern perimeter wall has yielded dozens of pithoi from the period of the Judges (the Late Bronze Age II / Iron Age I horizon). Originally it was theorized that these storage rooms followed the entire perimeter of the exterior fortification wall. However, recent excavations have revealed

## “Horizon” Definition

*In archaeological parlance, a “horizon” refers to a general or approximate period. At times, a lack of certainty prevents archaeologists from assigning a vessel or other artifacts to a specific decade or decades. So, for example, instead of stating that the pottery from Shiloh’s favissa dates to ca. 1400 BC, an archaeologist might assign the ceramic assemblage to the Late Bronze Age IB/IIA horizon (ca. 1425–1375 BC).*



Kgs 7:20). After this discovery and a review of previous excavation records, Dr. Stripling concluded that a certain object recovered many decades earlier during the Danish excavation at Shiloh was in fact a similar pomegranate. Because it was broken, its true identity and purpose had been unknown to those excavators. Dr. Stripling dated these two finds to the Iron Age I—the period of the Judges.<sup>1</sup> These discoveries lead the Shiloh staff to ponder Exodus 28:31–35:

“You shall make the robe of the ephod all of blue. . . . On its hem you shall make pomegranates of blue and purple and scarlet yarns, around its hem, with bells of gold between them, a golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, around the hem of the robe. And it shall be on Aaron when he ministers.” (31, 33–35a)

Collectively, these altar horns are evidence of previous religious practice at the site.



An altar horn from Shiloh reused in a Byzantine wall is now on display in a church on the site. Photo by Tommy Chamberlin.

Not far from where I had my first archaeological experience in a Shiloh storage room, my buddy, Jordan McClinton, began excavating in Area D1 in 2022. Area D1 is the location of a *favissa*—a sacred deposit of used materials from worship and



A volunteer at Shiloh dry sifts a guffa of soil to remove the dirt and examine the remains for artifacts. Photo by Bryan Windle.

The highlight of the 2019 excavation season was the recovery of two altar-horn stones, both found in reuse in Early Roman structures. These two stones, each having a naturally shaped protruding “horn” in a corner, meet the requirement for use in the biblical sacrificial system as part of a horned altar, as Exodus 20:25 contains a prohibition against the use of cut stone for the altars of Israelite worship. Additionally, a third altar horn was identified in secondary usage in a Byzantine wall on the south side of Shiloh.



Square supervisor, Jordan McClinton, excavates Area D to determine what the bones and other objects reveal about the sacrificial practices that took place at the site. Photo by Gary Urie.



sacrifice. In this case the *favissa* was filled with the bones of animals sacrificed at the site. Dr. Israel Finkelstein was the archaeologist who originally excavated the *favissa* in the 1980s. His work revealed a sacred dump of sacrificial animal bones with a mixture of animals identified. The overwhelming majority of bones were from types of animals used in the Israelite sacrificial system. Interestingly, a higher percentage of the *favissa*'s bones were from the animals' right sides as opposed to the left. Additionally, considering all the bones found at Shiloh site-wide yields interesting information. About 4 percent of the bones in the Middle Bronze Age layer from the Canaanite period were from pigs, but in the strata related to Israelite occupation, that figure dropped to less than 0.5 percent. The Israelite prohibition against pork seems the most reasonable explanation for this difference. The presence of the *favissa* and the totality of the osteological data provide some of the material remains one would expect to find if the biblical text is historical.

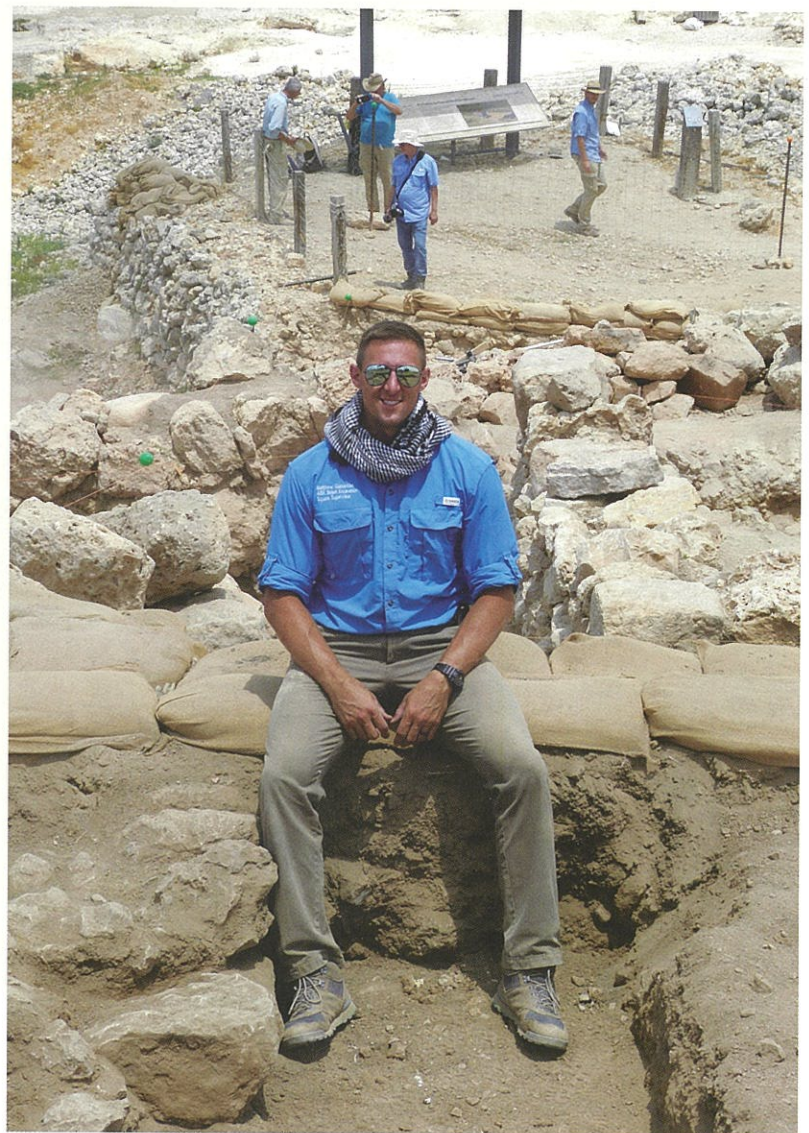
Those excavating the *favissa* have also witnessed some unexpected discoveries. Jordan McClinton and his volunteers have discovered three eight-pointed golden stars from strata dated to the Late Bronze Age. That multiple golden stars were found indicates that their placement in the *favissa* was no accident. While research is yet to be finalized on these artifacts, one possibility is that these ancient gold emblems are stars of Ishtar. But what was the purpose of placing them in this sacred deposit? One theory suggests an Israelite put these expensive gold pieces in the *favissa* as an offering to his God. Another, as already hinted, might suggest that they relate to pagan practices, in which case they would reflect the syncretism of Israelite worship described in the book of Judges.

During the 2023 excavation, field archaeologist Suzanne Lattimer and her assistant supervisor, Jerry Boyce, recovered a murex shell. What is a murex shell from the Mediterranean coast doing at a high point in the central hill country? Finding a murex shell at a site in Israel is rare. In antiquity, murexes were used to create purple dye for garments (an expensive process). The Torah describes the colors of the high priest's apparel as including purple or a purplish blue (Ex 28). Finding a murex shell at Shiloh could be yet another indicator pointing back to the ancient priestly practice that occurred at Shiloh.

The most intriguing discovery from ABR's five seasons of work at Shiloh is a monumental building still under excavation. As each season progressed, more and more of the structure was revealed. I first encountered this structure in 2019 while working as square supervisor

Matt Glassman's assistant. We had opened a new square and were getting frequent visits by Leen Ritmeyer, our archaeological architect. Dr. Ritmeyer was interested in confirming whether a large wall present in an adjacent square also ran through our square. As the days melted away and the soil of our square was lowered, it became clear that this large wall did indeed continue through our square. By the end of the 2019 season, a picture of this large structure as a whole was becoming clear. Two more seasons in 2022 and 2023 would only further our knowledge of this ancient monumental structure.

With five excavation seasons behind us, we now have a wealth of information about this intriguing structure and the archaeological remains in its vicinity. First, it's a large, monumental structure, and its size suggests public use. Second, it dates to the Iron Age I period (ca. 1200–1000 BC). This is contemporary with the period



Matt Glassman poses for a photo in the area where his team would soon uncover a wall from the monumental building at Shiloh (2019). Photo by Tommy Chamberlin.



of the Judges and the time of Samuel and Eli. Third, the storage rooms inside the fortification wall on the northern perimeter are all located near this building. These rooms full of pithoi for storage were likely in that location to service activities that occurred within or near the monumental building. Fourth, the building is aligned facing eastward (cf. Ex 26:22, 27:13), and its interior space is divided in a 2 to 1 ratio.<sup>2</sup> Fifth, the entrance on the east side is a short 30-second walk away from the *favissa*, the sacrificial animal bone dump. Sixth, the ceramic pomegranate and two of the altar horns were found near this building, and the murex shell was found just inside the building's eastern wall. Seventh, eventually enough of the building was excavated to get an accurate estimate of its dimensions. Dr. Stripling compared those dimensions with the ones given in the biblical text for the Tabernacle, and the two appear to be the same. Considering all these findings, Dr. Stripling now has to contemplate the question, "Have we found the house of God at Shiloh?" Only further excavation will provide the final answer, but the initial evidence is incredibly intriguing.

Weighing the evidence recovered at Shiloh, we see that the record speaks clearly for itself. The artifacts recovered match what one might expect to find based on the biblical description of ancient Shiloh's material culture. A careful examination of the evidence from archaeology consistently demonstrates the Bible as a historically reliable document.

When I began excavating with ABR as a volunteer in 2017, the plan was to live a once-in-a-lifetime experience. However, it seems God had other plans. I have served in every ABR excavation season at Shiloh and now work as a square supervisor. With great passion, I love to share our findings and experiences from Tel Shiloh. On many occasions, I've been asked, "What's your greatest discovery?" My answer was always about excavating the pithos from the storage room in season 1. However, in writing this article, I've realized that's the wrong answer. What's my greatest discovery at Shiloh? The answer is the people.<sup>3</sup> The friendships I've made, the amazing experiences I've shared with other like-minded people, and the sense of family and camaraderie we have while working toward a mutual

greater purpose—all of this is my greatest discovery. I'm thrilled to be a part of this work, and I want to invite you to consider being a part of it as well. If you have ever considered volunteering on an archaeological excavation, I encourage you to come be part of our dig family at Shiloh. Perhaps your discovery will be the next one demonstrating that we're excavating the world of the Bible at Shiloh. \$

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<sup>1</sup>Tim Lopez, Scott Stripling, and David Ben-Shlomo, "A Ceramic Pomegranate from Shiloh," *Judea and Samaria Research Studies* 28, no. 1 (2019): \*40, Table 1, \*41, \*46, \*52–\*53.

<sup>2</sup>This is the ratio between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place, as derived from Exodus 26. See "STUDY 3: The Tabernacle Construction: The Holy & The Most Holy," Bible Students Daily, September 14, 2016, <https://biblestudentsdaily.com/tag/measurements-of-the-tabernacle/>.

<sup>3</sup>I should note that long before I ever put a trowel to the soil of ancient remains, I heard Dr. Gabriel Barkay give this as the answer to the question of his greatest discovery. After several years of being personally involved in archaeology, I now better understand what he meant.



Square supervisor Tommy Chamberlin, and his assistant Amber Caldwell, pose with volunteers during the 2023 excavation season at Shiloh. Photo by Gary Urie.