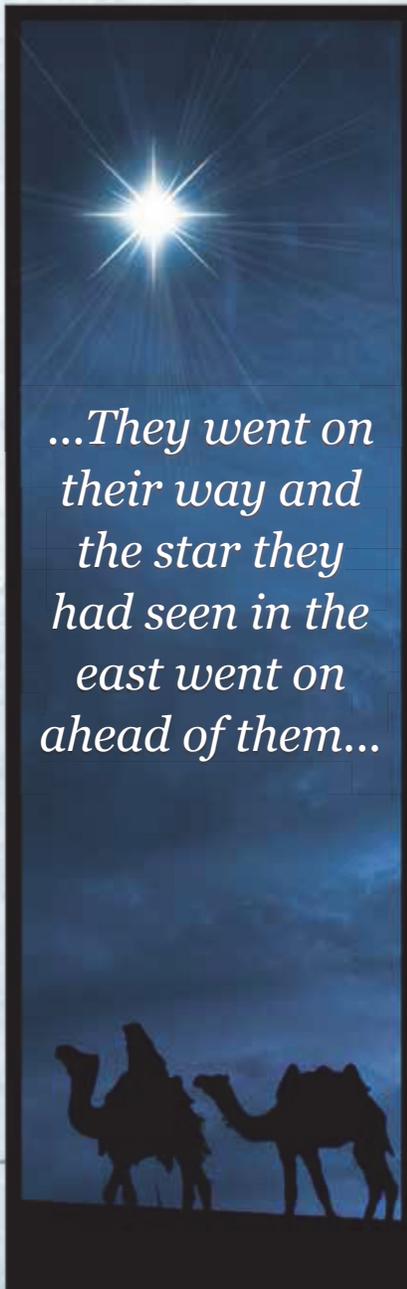


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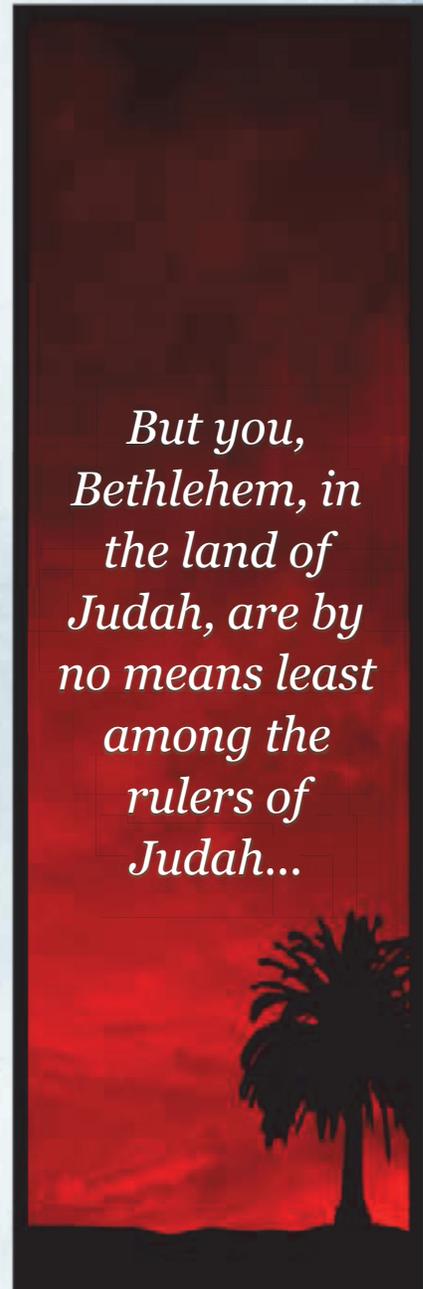
The Star of Bethlehem



...They went on their way and the star they had seen in the east went on ahead of them...



...For out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel...



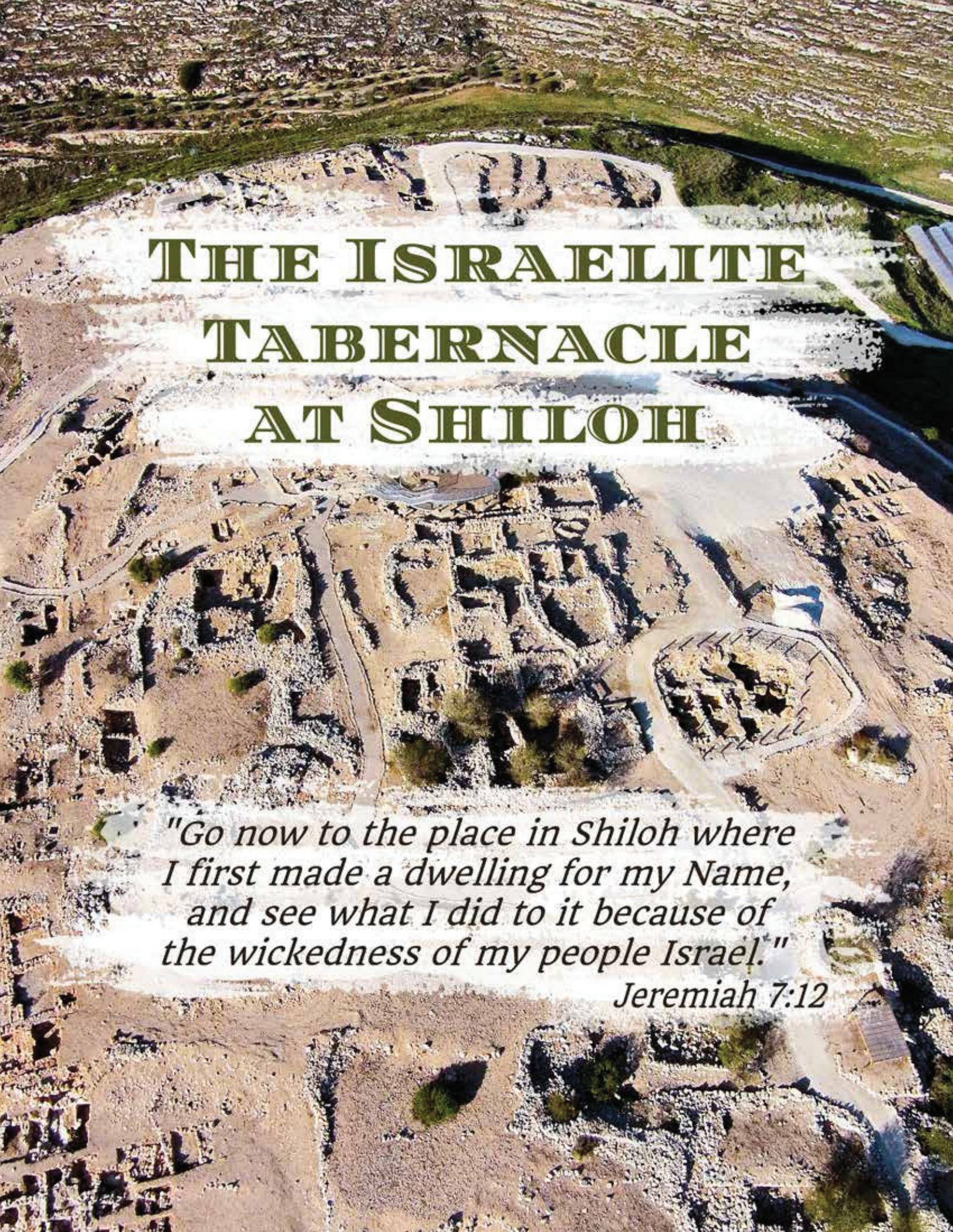
But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah...

Shackled or Anchored?

The Historical Reliability of Past Events, People, and Places in the Bible

The Israelite Tabernacle at Shiloh

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**THE ISRAELITE
TABERNACLE
AT SHILOH**

*"Go now to the place in Shiloh where
I first made a dwelling for my Name,
and see what I did to it because of
the wickedness of my people Israel."*

Jeremiah 7:12

By Scott Stripling

Two 20th-century excavations revealed clear evidence of cultic activity at Shiloh. Advocates for a 13th-century BC Exodus and Conquest are interested in evidence for an Israelite cultic center at Shiloh from Iron Age IA to Iron Age IB; whereas proponents for a 15th-century BC Exodus and Conquest seek evidence at Shiloh from LB IIB to Iron Age IB. According to Joshua 18:1, the tabernacle was erected at Shiloh, in the tribal territory of Ephraim, immediately following the Conquest. While the tabernacle served social and political purposes, its primary purpose was as a religious cult center.¹

In 2017, the Associates for Biblical Research (ABR), under my direction, will open a new excavation on the north side of the site (Field H1) that portends insight into the critical issue of the location of the famed cultic shrine.² Four possible options exist at Shiloh for the placement of the Israelite tabernacle. Although three of these have been previously posited, here I will introduce a fourth possibility. Before discussing these proposed *temenos* (sacred precinct) locations, it is important to set forth a brief history of the site and the evidence for cultic activity that has been uncovered.

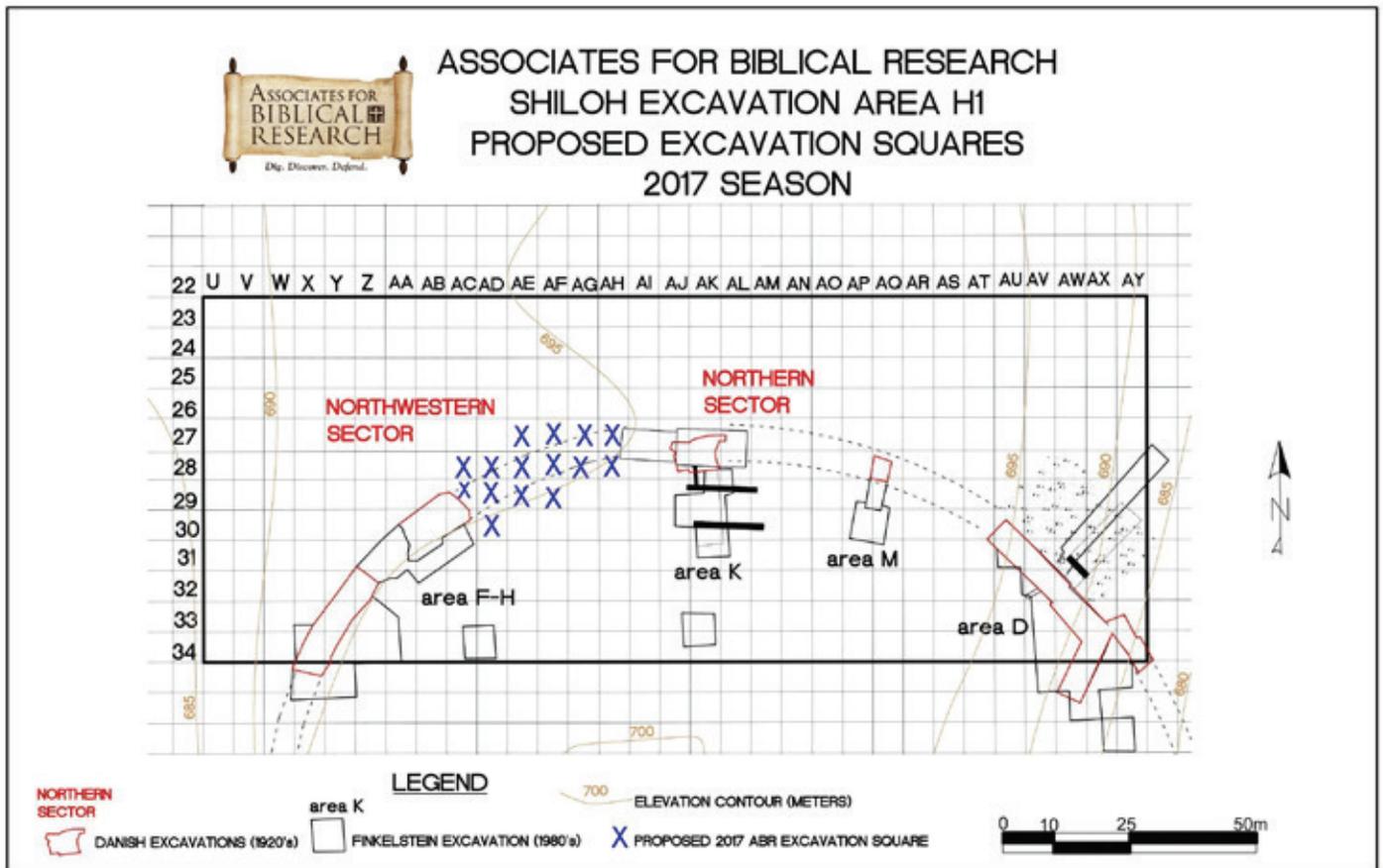
History of Shiloh

The MB II period (ca. 1668–1560 BC) witnessed the establishment of a village without walls.³ According to the Hebrew Bible, the Amorites controlled the Shiloh region at the

time of the Conquest (Nm 13:29 [highlands]; Jos 7:7 [Ai]; 2 Sm 21:2 [Gibeon]), and this likely extended back to MB III (ca. 1560–1485 BC). During this period they constructed a massive fortification system that enclosed 17 *dunams* (4.25 acres).⁴ The MB III city suffered destruction but was quickly rebuilt, or at least resettled as a cultic center in the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1485–1173 BC). Pit deposits of bones, cultic vessels, and an abundance of pottery establish this fact. Finkelstein assigned this faunal deposit to an Israelite cleanup of the remnants of the Amorite sacrifices on the summit. Further excavation and analysis, however, may point to the bones as evidence of the Israelite sacrificial system.

A second and even more devastating destruction, probably at the hands of the Philistines (1 Sm 4), occurred around 1050 BC, during the Iron Age IB (ca. 1075–980 BC). Iron Age II (ca. 980–587 BC) witnessed only a small settlement at Shiloh (1 Kgs 11:29 and 12:15; Jer 41:5). The Early Hellenistic Period (ca. 332–167 BC) saw the beginning of resettlement at the site after the Babylonian captivity, and this pattern accelerated in the Late Hellenistic (ca. 167–63 BC) and Early Roman (ca. 63 BC–AD 136) periods. Byzantine era (ca. AD 325–636) builders expanded the site further, and it continued through the Early Islamic Age (ca. AD 636–1099) and on into the Middle Ages, when apparently the Black Death or some other pestilence finally brought an end to life at ancient Shiloh.

In the fourth century, Eusebius and Jerome⁵ demonstrated awareness of Shiloh's location, as did the cartographer of Madaba in the sixth century.⁶

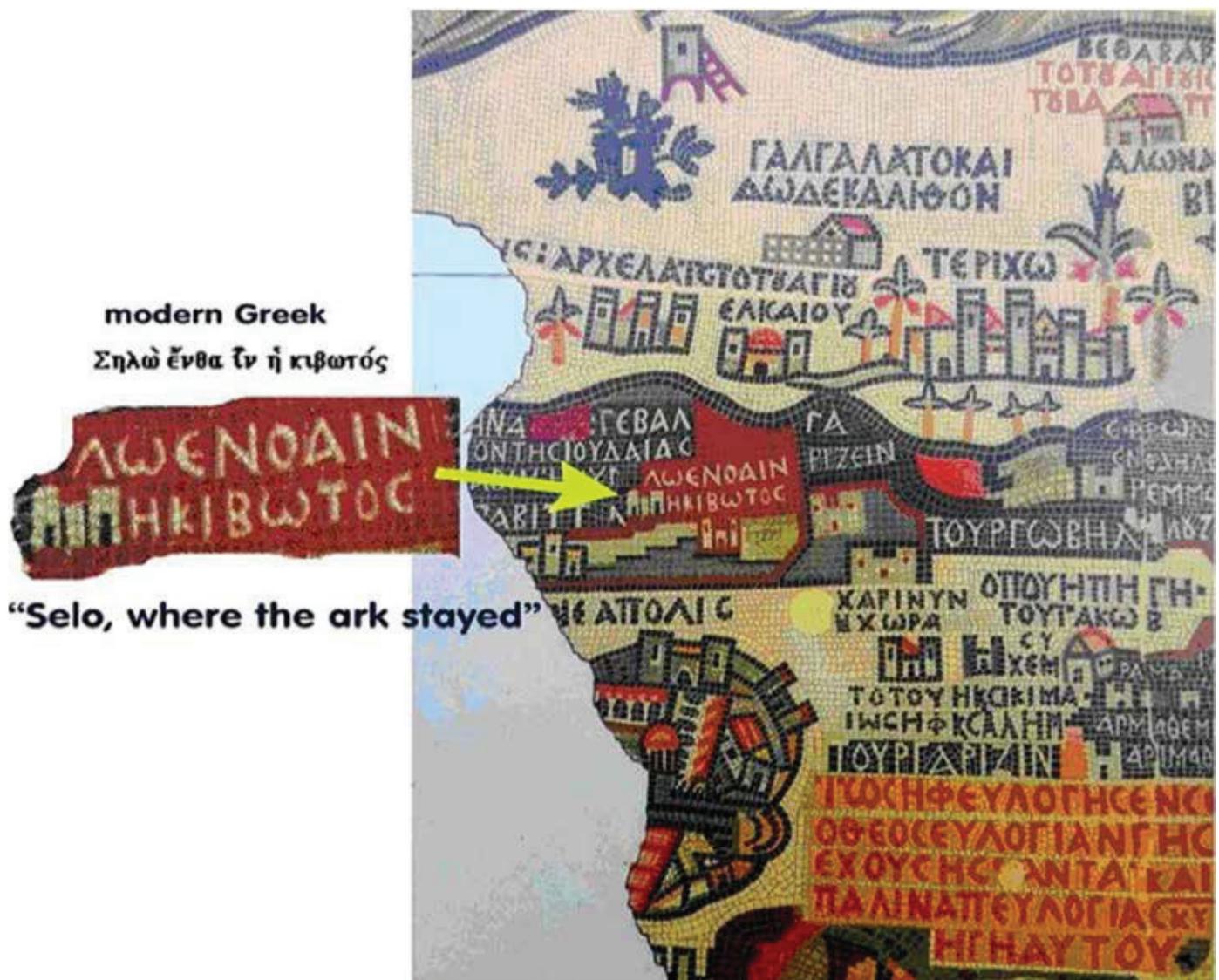


Jerry Taylor and Steven Rudd

Fig. 1. Grid of the ABR excavation at Shiloh.

Apart from the notations of several Byzantine and Medieval writers concerning Shiloh, the great American Orientalist, Edward Robinson, became the first person in modern times

Finkelstein, then of Bar-Ilan University, excavated at Shiloh and published his final report in 1993. Shortly after Finkelstein concluded his work, Ze'ev Yeivin, on behalf of the Israel



Steven Rudd

Fig. 2. The Madaba Map, showing the location of Shiloh.

(1838) to correctly identify Khirbet Seilun as Shiloh.⁷ Later in the century, Wilson and Guérin documented what they observed at the site in the 1860s and 1870s, respectively.⁸ In the 1880s, Conder and Kitchner did the same in their *Survey of Western Palestine*.⁹ In 1922, Danish archaeologist Aage Schmidt executed several soundings, and with the help of Albright correctly identified the basic ceramic sequence at Shiloh.¹⁰ Between 1926 and 1932, a Danish team conducted three seasons of excavation at Shiloh under the capable leadership of Hans Kjaer. Tragically, Kjaer died in the middle of the 1932 season.¹¹ The reins of the excavation were handed to Nelson Glueck, who promptly closed the dig. Three decades later, in 1963, the Danish, under Svend Holm-Nielsen, returned to execute a series of soundings before publishing the long-awaited final excavation report in 1969. From 1981 to 1984, Israeli archaeologist Israel

Antiquities Authority, conducted limited excavations on the scarp just north of the tel, followed by work in a few other areas. In the last decade, under the guidance of Hananya Hizmi, Staff Officer of the Civil Administration of Judea and Samaria, further limited excavations have been conducted on the summit, the aforementioned scarp, and the churches along the southern approach to the site.¹²

Adding to this rich history of archaeological work, the first phase of the ABR excavation will expose and conserve the northern fortification system and all associated structures. The fortification system may have served as a massive retaining wall for the sacred precinct. Based on previous excavations, there will likely be storerooms for the sanctuary and pillared courtyard dwellings (sacerdotal?) from the biblical periods, similar to the Temple Mount platform in Jerusalem.

Cultic Activity

In 1322, Rabbi Eschtori Happarchi claimed that there was a domed shrine at Shiloh referred to as the “Dome of the Shekinah.”¹³ Nine hundred years earlier, Jerome claimed to have seen the remains of the sacred altar at Shiloh.¹⁴ Unfortunately, neither the rabbi nor the author of the Vulgate likely knew the difference between altar and shrine types from various time periods. In any event, they failed to specify where on the site that they had seen the sacred remains.

An Iron Age four-horned altar, found in 2013 in secondary use in a Byzantine wall, attests to an ancient sacrificial practice at Shiloh.¹⁵ Jerome may have documented this very altar.¹⁶ Just 0.9 mi (1.5 km) west of the tel, professor Yoel Elitzur identified another four-horned altar in the winter of 2002 at

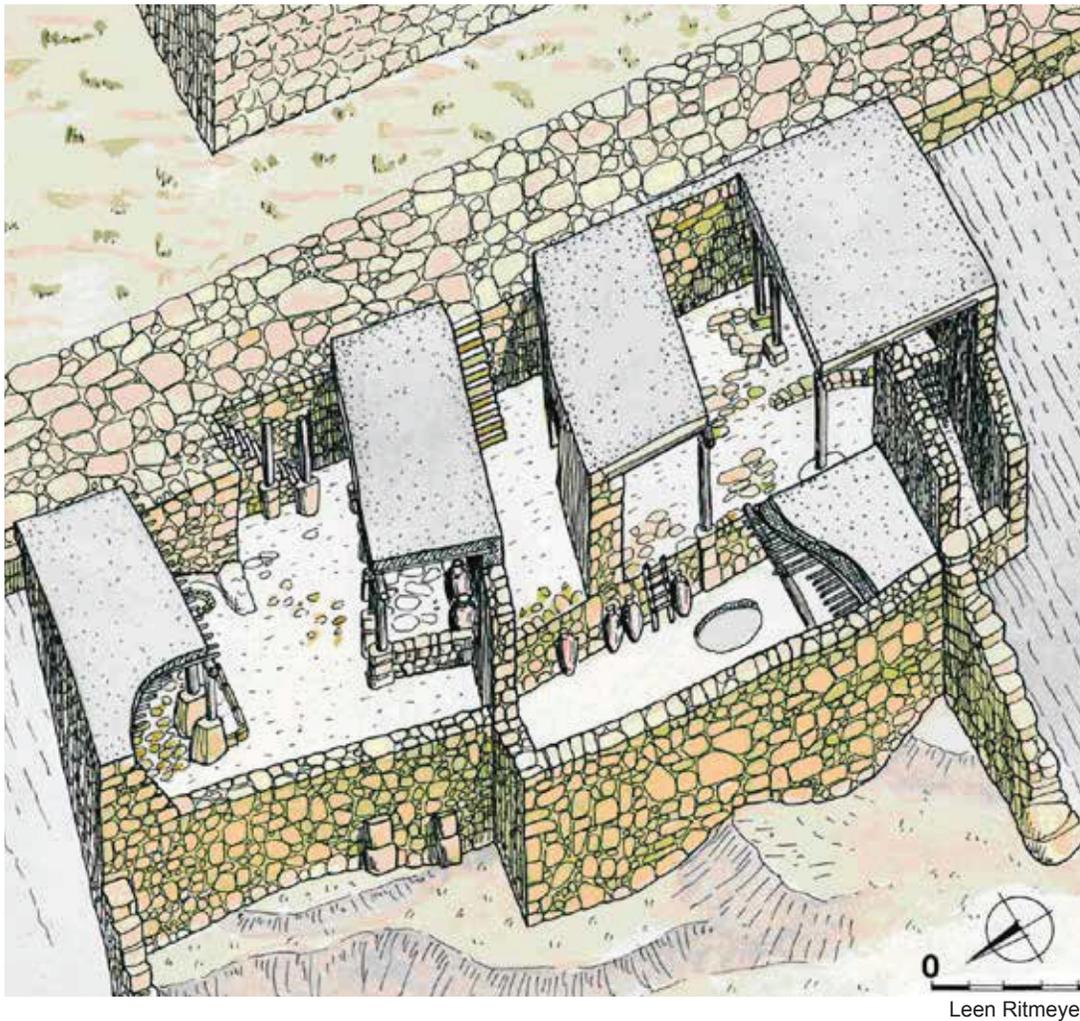
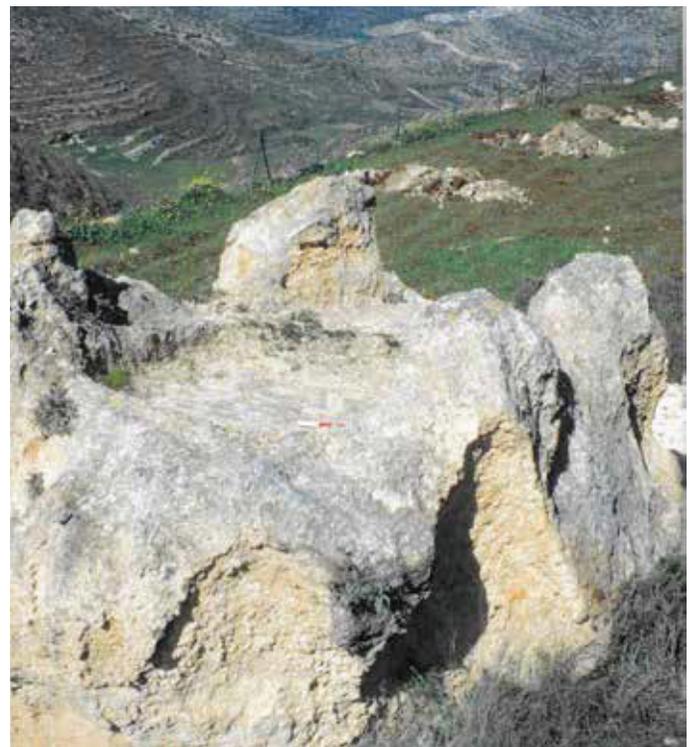


Fig. 3. The pillared courtyard houses in Area C (Stratum 5).



Israel Ben-Arie and Steven Rudd
Fig. 4. The altar found in 2013 in secondary use at Shiloh.



Yoel Elitzur
Fig. 5. The altar near Shiloh identified by Elitzur in 2002.

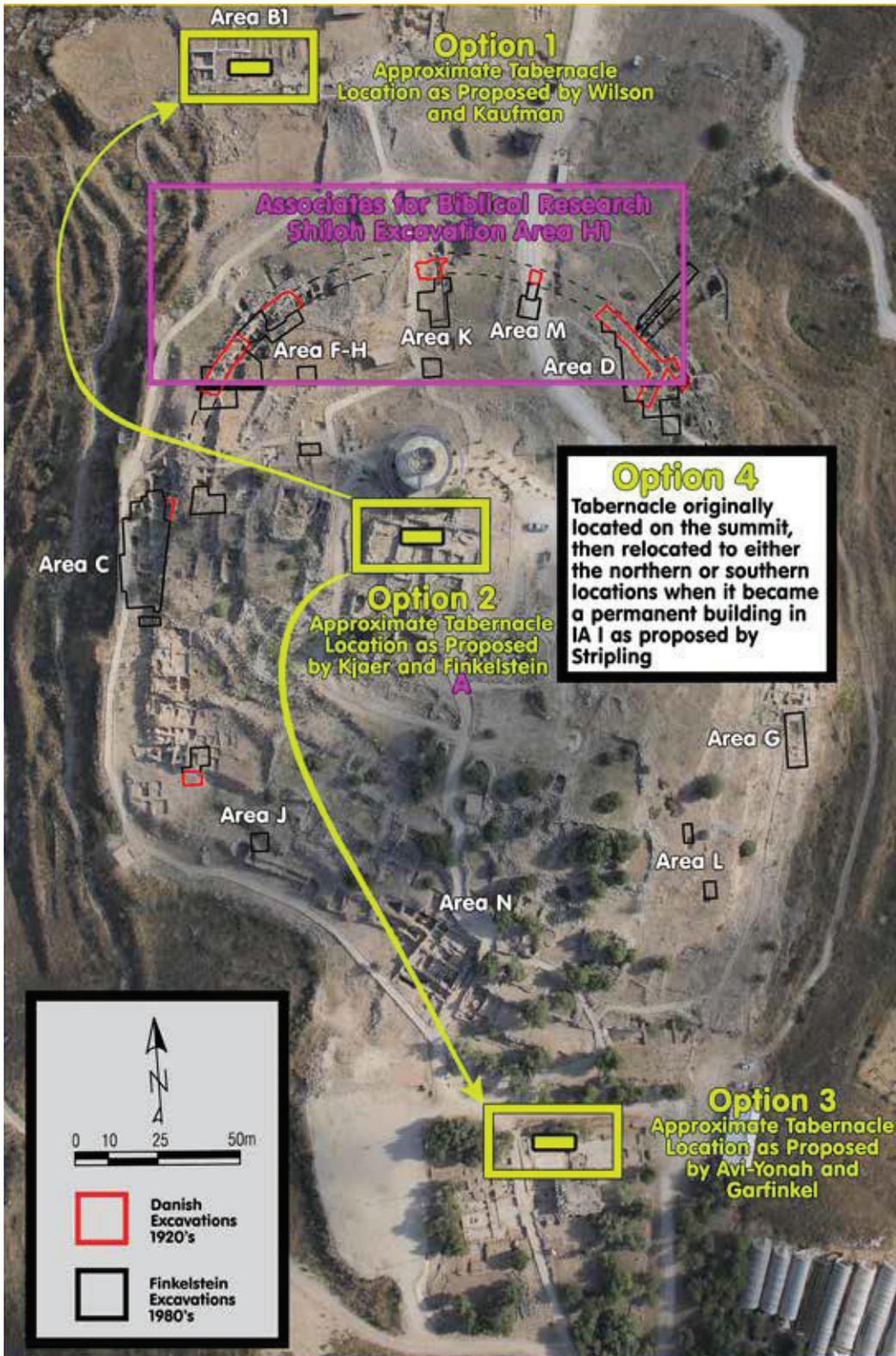


Photo by Barry Kramer, graphics by Jerry Taylor and Steven Rudd

Fig. 6. Possible locations for the tabernacle at Shiloh.

the edge of the Giv'at Har'el settlement.¹⁷ Of the seven such altars found in Iron Age Israel, two were in or very near Shiloh; this is not without significance. None have been found in Judah, where the earthen altar was preferred (Ex 20:24–26 and Dt 27:1–8).

Anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines, along with incense stands and votive bowls from the Middle Bronze to Iron Age offer

the early 1980s. He states the following:

Wilson's proposal still finds some supporters today. However, recent excavations in this area undertaken by Ze'ev Yeivin of the Israel Department of Antiquities turned up no remains whatsoever of the Iron I period.²¹

further evidence of cultic activity at Shiloh. For example, a shattered incense stand from Area C, likely dated to Iron Age I, depicts a horse, a lioness, and a deer being overcome by a leopard.¹⁸

Four Possible Locations

Option One: North Side

In 1866, Major Charles Wilson of the Palestine Exploration Fund surveyed Shiloh, and introduced the idea that the tabernacle was located on a worked bedrock scarp 479 ft (146 m) north of the tel.¹⁹ Conder and Kitchner²⁰ echoed this hypothesis, and it continues to resonate among many researchers. Wilson's reasons were simple but compelling: the dimensions of the platform closely parallel the dimensions of the tabernacle and its enclosure as given in Exodus 26–27. The author can attest to Wilson's meticulous measurements. He sketched the church at Khirbet el-Maqtar in the same year that he surveyed Shiloh. I excavated this church from 2010–2016 and confirmed Wilson's plans, to the inch.

Further, Wilson observed that the platform had been intentionally flattened and squared in antiquity, and he argued that there were no flat areas on the tel proper that could have housed a structure the size of the tabernacle. Although one of the expressed goals of the Danish excavation was to fix the location of the tabernacle, they chose not to excavate Wilson's platform. Finkelstein likewise ignored the northern location in his excavations in

Yeivin, however, only excavated a small area of the platform, and recent excavations have, in fact, yielded likely Iron I remains; therefore, it appears that Finkelstein was premature in his dismissal.²²

Another factor favoring the northern scarp is its east-west alignment, which was a requirement of Exodus 26:22 and Numbers 3:23. The Jerusalem temples maintained this east-west alignment, so it would be reasonable to assume that the tabernacle at Shiloh had the same orientation.

The defensibility of the platform, due to the steep slopes on all but the south side, further bolsters the inductive argument for the northern location. Logically, the Israelites would have taken the safety of their sacred shrine into consideration when choosing its placement.

Finally, a literary argument can be set forth in favor of Wilson's location. In 1 Samuel 4:12–16, the messenger who brings Eli bad news from the Battle of Ebenezer (Izbet Sarteh?), where the Philistines defeated the Israelites, appears to cross through the Shiloh population center before reaching the tabernacle. Although the main gate has not been uncovered, it is generally thought to be on the south, primarily because of the site's topography. If the gate was indeed on the south of the tel and the inhabitants were living on the tel, which has been established, then the straightforward reading of the text leads the reader to the conclusion that the tabernacle sat on the north of the tel. This literary analysis, however, is not without problems. These problems will be addressed below.



Michael Luddeni

Fig. 7. The large structure on the summit.

Option Two: The Summit

A second possible location for the tabernacle is on the summit of the tel, a common spot for a *temenos* in antiquity. This view, favored by Finkelstein and the Danish expedition, is not without support. There are countless parallels of sacrosanct precincts located on the acropolis of sites in the Levant during the Bronze and Iron Ages. Examples can be found at Gibeon,²³ Hazor,²⁴ Megiddo²⁵ and Malhah.²⁶ Jerusalem provides the quintessential example.

The primary objection to the summit hypothesis is that there is not enough flat space for the enclosure. There is, however, no requirement that the area be level, especially for a tent enclosure. The Holy of Holies within the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem certainly was not level, as evidenced by the massive sacred bedrock inside The Dome of the Rock.²⁷ Naturally, some areas on the Shiloh summit are badly eroded and damaged by later building activity. A large structure, however, possibly from the Crusader period, may in fact preserve Bronze and Iron Age remains underneath it. The walls of the structure create perfect boundaries for excavation squares. Perhaps in future seasons the ABR excavation will expand into this area, which Fig. 6 demonstrates is more than adequate for the placement of the tabernacle.

In Area C, west of the tel, both Kjaer and Finkelstein excavated pillared courtyard buildings constructed against the outside of the Bronze Age wall (see Fig. 3). These structures yielded two dozen collared rim jars, the typical Iron I *pithos* type in the highlands. Finkelstein suggests, and I agree, that the Middle Bronze storerooms in Areas F–H served a central shrine.²⁸ I believe that the same is likely true of the Iron Age pillared courtyard buildings in Area C. In Area D, northwest of the tel, Finkelstein uncovered a massive bone deposit and abundant Late Bronze ceramics, including cultic vessels. The faunal remains were from animals that comprised the biblical sacrificial system (sheep, goats, and a smaller amount of cattle). Pig bones comprised 3.5% of the MB II

bones at Shiloh, less than 2% of the Late Bronze assemblage, and less than 1% in Iron Age I.²⁹ The percentage of pig bones reduced by more than 50% once the site moved from Amorite control to Israelite control. The Late Bronze bone deposit likely indicates cultic activity on the summit. Taken together, the pillared courtyard buildings and the bone deposit favor a tabernacle located at the top of the tel. Logically, the storerooms and bone deposit would be in close proximity to the actual sacred precinct, yet Area C (storerooms?) and Area D (bone deposit) are far removed from the other candidate locations.

In a response to Finkelstein's 1986 *BAR* article where he expressed support for the tabernacle being located on the summit, Kaufman cites two literary arguments against the tabernacle being located at the apex of the tel.³⁰ First, he claims that Deuteronomy 12:2–4 disqualifies the summit as an acceptable location. The passage reads:

Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains, on the hills and under every spreading tree, where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places. You must not worship the LORD your God in their way.

In this iconoclastic passage, God commands Israel to destroy the native *bamot*. God admonishes them not to worship in the manner of the people they would dispossess, but importantly, he refers to practice, not location. The next verse reinforces this point: “But you are to seek the place the LORD your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling” (Dt 12:5). High places were not to be automatically chosen because of their elevation, nor were they prohibited based on their height (cf. Is 2:2; Mi 4:1).

Next, Kaufman examines the Jerusalem Talmud (*Megillah*, chap. 1, *Halakhah* 12) in an effort to undermine the summit theory.³¹ These passages refer to separate locations for the city of Shiloh and the tabernacle at Shiloh. Kaufman writes, “Although this text is nearly 1,500 years later than the event, it may well preserve an accurate historical memory that the tabernacle was located apart from the settlement.” Because this text is, in fact, more than 1,500 years removed from the event, it could easily be anachronistic.

Option Three: South Side

Michael Avi-Yonah and Yosi Garfinkel have suggested a third possible location for the tabernacle to the south of the tel.³² The southern approach forms a large, flat plateau that could easily accommodate the sacred tent. The Byzantine builders clearly favored this location, as witnessed by the four churches built on the southern approach. No other area of the site saw ecclesiastical construction, and these Christian inhabitants knew that they were building at biblical Shiloh, as demonstrated by a mosaic inscription in the church excavated in 2006 that reads as follows: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on Seilun [Shiloh] and its inhabitants, Amen.”³³

Gibson, writing in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, expresses qualified support for the southern location:

The area south of the mound, with its ancient road leading to Turmus Aiya, the sanctuaries of Wali Yetim and Wali Sittin, was seen by some scholars to be a much more likely spot for an open-air sanctuary around a tabernacle; a pre-Christian sanctuary can be assumed to have been located in a valley in which there are now a number of Muslim holy places and which, in Byzantine times, contained several churches. Nonetheless, it is quite possible that the sanctuary stood inside the city proper.³⁴

Furthermore, Mizrahi refers to Christian tradition, which identifies the exact location of the tabernacle with one of the Byzantine churches on the site.³⁵

Importantly, Halpern presents a rationale to place the primary gate, or at least a postern gate, on the north of the city.³⁶ If true, this weakens the literary case made earlier for the northern location, since the messenger from the Battle of Ebenezer could have arrived on the north and passed through the city before finally arriving to Eli on the south. Similarly, Richardson argues for a gate on the west.³⁷

Option Four: Multiple Locations

Having considered these three possible locations for the tabernacle, I still see a fourth possibility for its placement. My

“composite view” holds that the tabernacle may have been erected at multiple locations at Shiloh throughout its history there. In this scenario, the original tent structure probably sat at the apex of the mound. With time it was replaced by a more permanent building; hence the mention in 1 Samuel 3:15, that Samuel “opened the doors of the house of the LORD.” The Hebrew word *bayit* is used here for house, and indicates a permanent building. This point is reinforced by the fact that the structure is said to have doors rather than curtains. The Hebrew word *delet*, used here for door, appears 86 times in the Hebrew Bible, and all but once it refers to a door in a permanent structure.

This “tabernacle edifice” was then likely built on the more level areas of the northern scarp or the southern plateau. Concomitant with moving the national shrine from a tent to a house, the Israelite inhabitants of Shiloh built the first public buildings at the site since MB III. The fortifications and storerooms in Areas F–H demonstrate the skill of the early builders. Clearly, Stratum 5 in Area C revealed two pillared courtyard houses from Iron Age I, apparently a forerunner of the Iron Age II so-called “four-room house.”³⁸ Thinking sociologically and anthropologically, perhaps the priests at Shiloh did not want to live in houses while Yahweh dwelled in a tent.

A variation of this fourth theory is that the tabernacle may have been erected at multiple locations at Shiloh. After all, the tabernacle was erected at a variety of locations during the Wilderness and Conquest narratives. Since a tent is highly unlikely to leave an imprint in the archaeological record, it may be impossible to definitively settle the question of its early location, even though there is a strong verisimilitude between the literary descriptions in the Bible and the topography and material remains at Shiloh. However, if a permanent structure was indeed erected as most scholars believe, it likely ceased to be transitory from that time forward.

Conclusion

Strong arguments can be made for several locations for the tabernacle. At this point it is still impossible to establish with certainty the location of the tabernacle at ancient Shiloh. There may have even been multiple locations for Israel’s sacred shrine. The new ABR excavations at Shiloh aim to shed light on this perplexing issue by re-examining previous findings and exposing new features. As more of the Middle Bronze fortification wall is exposed, it may be possible to pinpoint the ancient gates that are important to this discussion. Excavations on the summit would also yield critical data.

Endnotes for this article can be found at www.BibleArchaeology.org. Type “Endnotes” in the search box; next, click the “Bible and Spade Bibliographies and Endnotes” link; then page down to the article.

