

## The Israelite Tabernacle at Shiloh

Two twentieth-century excavations revealed clear evidence of cultic activity at Shiloh. Advocates for a 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C. exodus and conquest are interested in evidence for a cultic center at Shiloh from Iron Age IA to Iron Age IB; whereas, proponents for a 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C. exodus and conquest seek evidence for the same structure and practice at Shiloh from LB IIB to IA 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 amphictyonic.<sup>1</sup>

In 2017, the Associates for Biblical Research (ABR), under the direction of Scott Stripling, 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. 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 locations, it is important to set forth a brief history of the site and the evidence for cultic activity that has been uncovered.

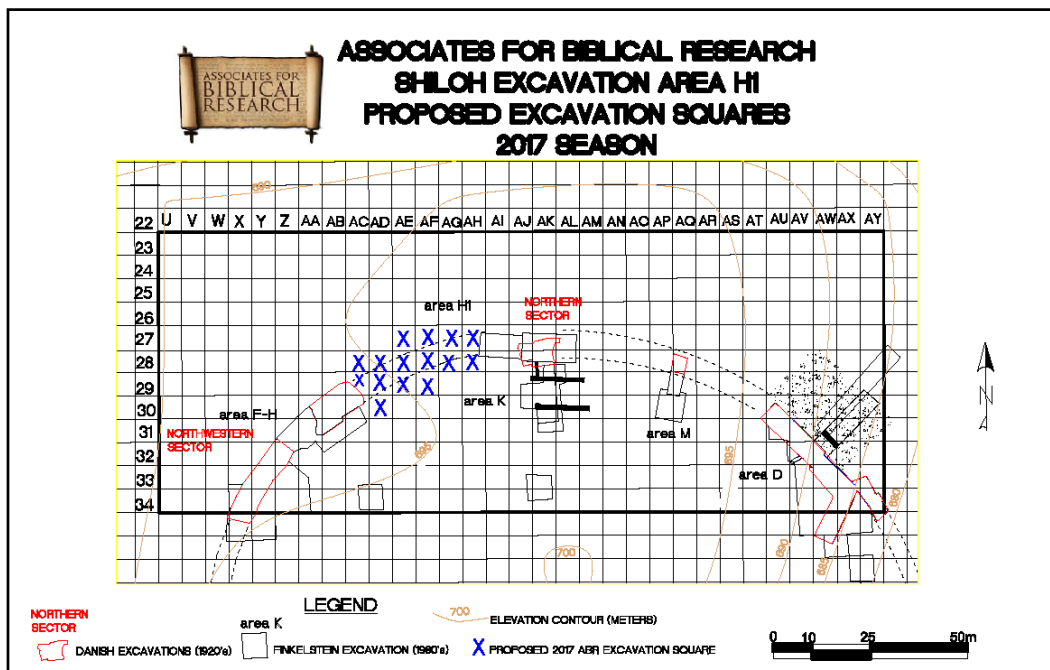


Fig. 1. Grid of the ABR excavation at Shiloh. Courtesy of Jerry Taylor.

## History of Shiloh

The MB II period (c. 1668–1560 B.C.) witnessed the establishment of a village without walls.<sup>2</sup> According to the Hebrew Bible, the Amorites controlled the Shiloh region at the time of the conquest (Num 13:29 [Highlands]; Josh 7:7 [Ai]; 2 Sam 21:2 [Gibeon]), and this likely extended back to MB III (c. 1560–1485 B.C.). During this period they constructed a massive fortification system.<sup>3</sup> The MB III city suffered destruction but was quickly rebuilt, or at least resettled as a cultic center in the Late Bronze Age (c. 1485–1173 B.C.). Pit deposits of bones, cultic vessels, and an abundance of pottery establish this fact. If the early date for the conquest is correct, this faunal deposit is best assigned to an Israelite cleanup of the remnant of the Amorite sacrifices on the summit. A late date for the conquest would require an Amorite attribution for these early remains.

A second and even more devastating destruction, probably at the hands of the Philistines (1 Sam 4), occurred around 1050 B.C., during the IA IB (c. 1075–980 B.C.). IA II (c. 980–587 B.C.) witnessed only a small settlement at Shiloh (1 Kgs 11:29 and 12:15; Jer 41:5). The Early Hellenistic Period (c. 332–167 B.C.) saw the beginning of resettlement at the site after the Babylonian captivity, and this pattern accelerated in the Late Hellenistic (c. 167–63 B.C.) and Early Roman (c. 63 B.C.–A.D. 136) periods. Byzantine era (c. A.D. 325–636) builders expanded the site further, and it continued through the Early Islamic Age (c. A.D. 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 Jerome (*Onomasticon* 156: 28–31; *Eusebius and Jerome* 2012; Freeman-Greenville and Taylor 2003) demonstrated awareness of Shiloh's location as did the cartographer of Madaba in the sixth century (Donner 1992, 47).

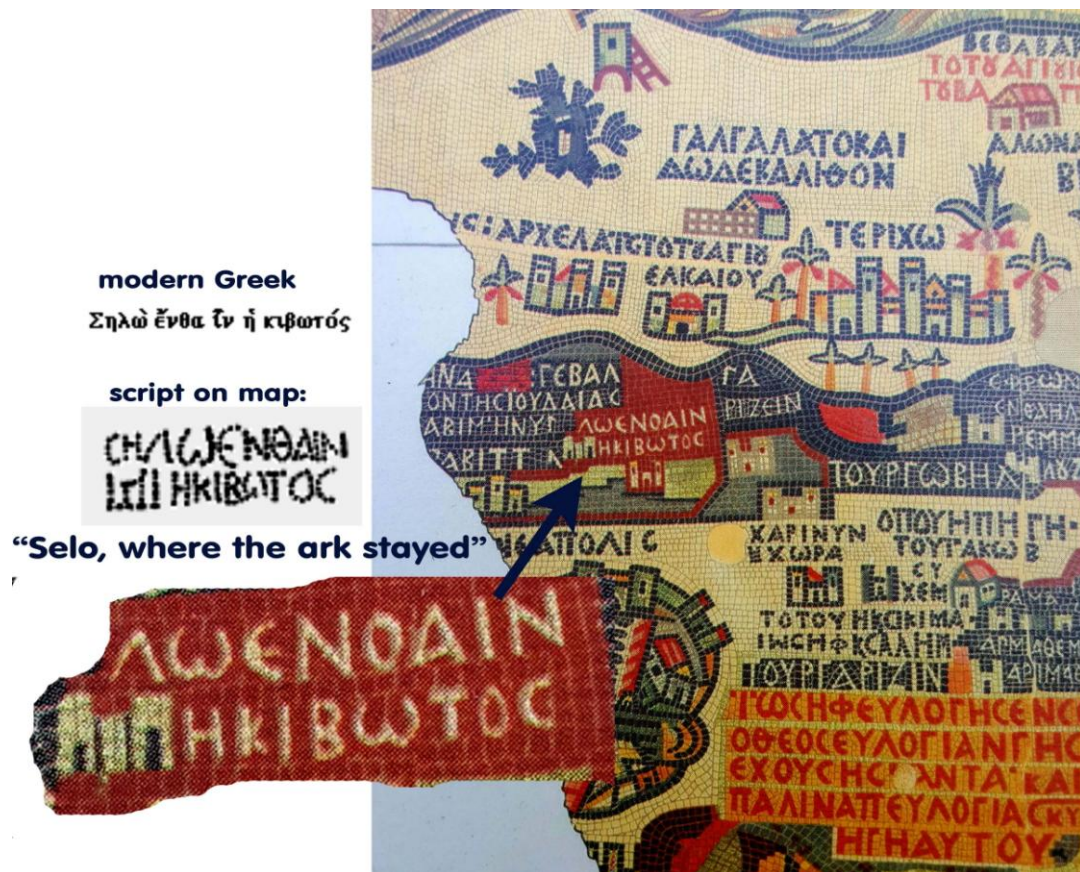


Fig. 2. The Madaba Map Showing Shiloh. Graphic by Steven Rudd.

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 (1838) to correctly identify Khirbet Seilun as Shiloh. Later in the century, Wilson and Guérin documented what they observed at the site in the 1860s and 1870s respectively (Wilson, 1873, 38; Guérin, 1875, 21-23). In the 1880s, Conder and Kitchner did the same in their *Survey of Western Palestine* (1882, 368). In 1922, Danish archaeologist Aage Schmidt executed several soundings, and with the help of Albright correctly identified the basic ceramic sequence at Shiloh (Albright, 1923, 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.<sup>4</sup> The reigns 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 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 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 Hizme, Staff officer of the Civil Administration of Judea and Samaria, further excavations have been conducted on the summit, the aforementioned scarp, and the churches along the southern approach to the site.<sup>5</sup>

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.

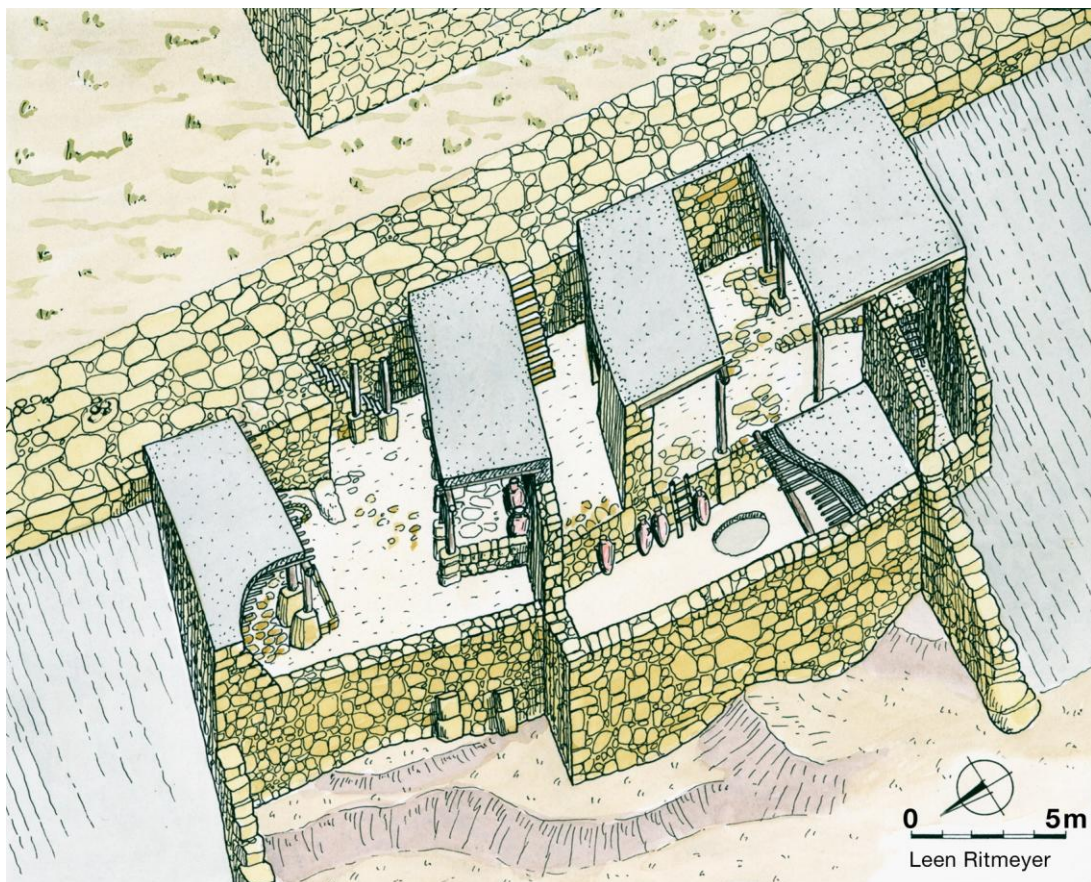


Fig. 3. The Pillared Courtyard Houses in Area C (Stratum 5). Graphic by Leen Ritmeyer.

## **Cultic Activity**

In 1322, Rabbi Ish Tori Hapatchi claimed that there was a domed shrine at Shiloh referred to as the “Dome of the Shekinah” (Kaufman, 1988, 48-49). Nine-hundred years earlier, Jerome claimed to have seen the remains of the sacred altar at Shiloh (Roberts, 1994).<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> Jerome may have documented this very altar. Just 1.5 km west of the tel, Yoel Elitzur identified another four-horned altar in the winter of 2002 at the edge of the Giv’at Har’el settlement (Elitzur, 2003, 30-36). 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 (Exod 20:24-26 and Deut 27:1-8).



Fig. 4. The Altar Found in 2013 in Secondary Use at Shiloh. Photo by Israel Ben-Arie.



Fig. 5. The Altar Near Shiloh identified by Elitzur in 2002. Photo by Yoel Elitzur.

Anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines, along with incense stands from the MB to IA offer further evidence of cultic activity at Shiloh. For example, a

shattered incense stand from Area C, likely dated to IA I, depicts a horse, a lioness, and a deer being overcome by a leopard (Finkelstein, 1993, 27).

### Four Possible Locations

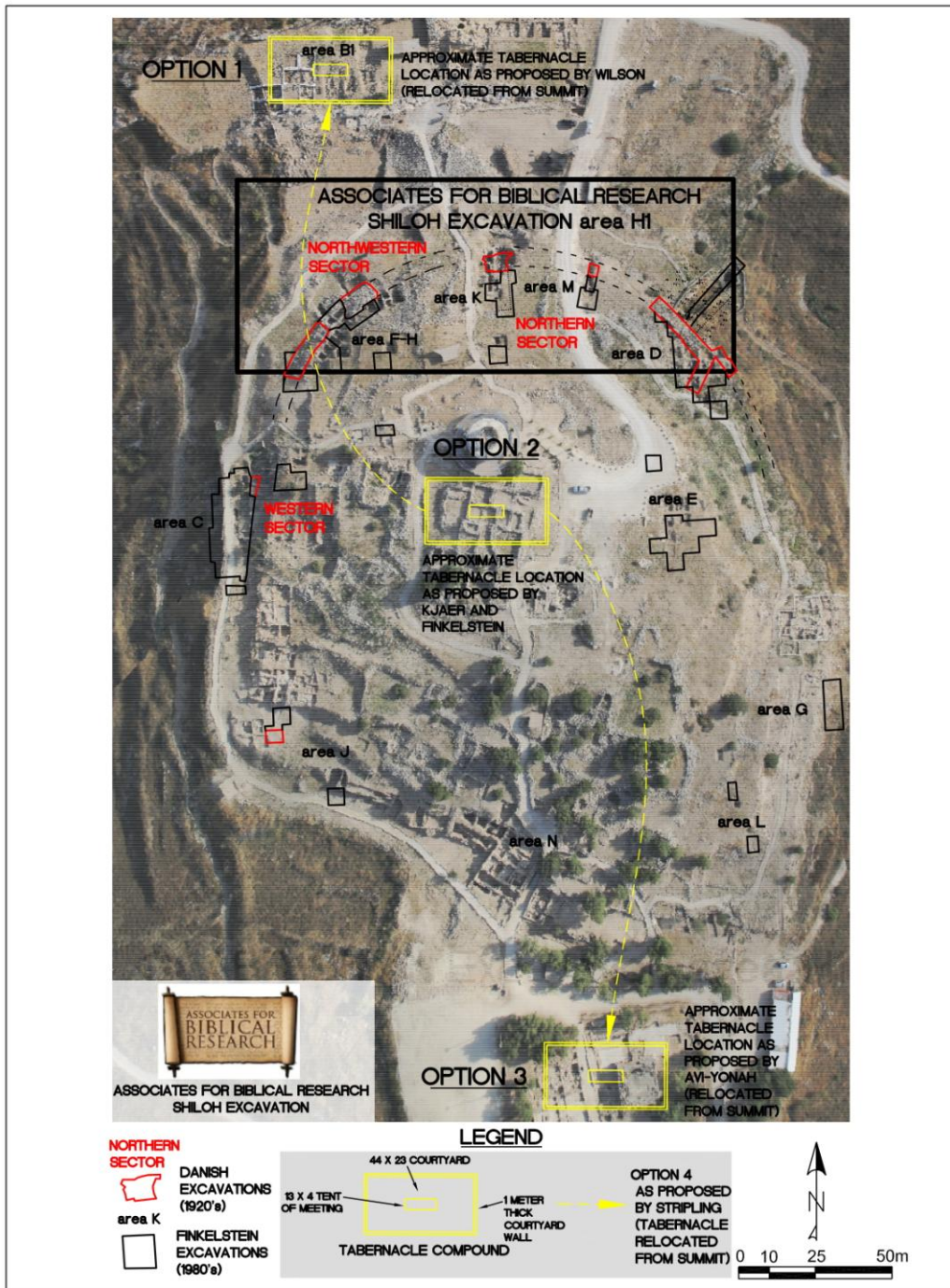


Fig. 6. Possible Locations for the Tabernacle at Shiloh. Photo by Barry Kramer and graphics by Jerry Taylor.

## Option One

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 146 m. north of the tel (Wilson, 1873, 38). Conder and Kitchner (1881–1883) 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. I can attest to Wilson's meticulous measurements. He sketched the church at Khirbet el-Maqatir 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 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 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. (Finkelstein, 1986, 41)

Yeivin, however, only excavated a small area of the platform, and recent excavations have, in fact, yielded likely Iron I remains; therefore, Finkelstein appears to have erred in his premature dismissal (Ben-Arie, 2014, 113-30).<sup>8</sup>

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 followed the same orientation.

The defensibility of the platform, due to the steep slopes on all but the south, 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 Sam 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.

## **Option Two**

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 tels in the Levant during the Bronze and Iron Ages. Examples can be found at Dan (Biran, 1974, 25-61), Gibeon (Pritchard, 1993, 511-14), Mt. Ebal (Zertal 1987, 9-30), Hazor (de Vaux, 1997, 285), Megiddo (de Vaux, 1997, 284-285), and Malhah (de Vaux, 1997, 285).

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 (Ritmeyer, 2006, 242-50). 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.



Fig. 7. The Large Structure on the Summit. Photo by Michael Luddeni.

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 MB storerooms in Areas F-H served a central shrine (Finkelstein, 1986, 41). I believe that the same is true of the IA pillared courtyard buildings in Area C. In Area D, northwest of the tel, Finkelstein uncovered a massive bone deposit and abundant LB 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 LB assemblage, and less than 1% in IA I (Finkelstein, 1993, 319). The percentage of pig bones reduced by more than 50% once the site moved from Amorite control to Israelite control. The LB 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 (Kaufman, 1988, 46-52). First, he claims that Deuteronomy 12:2–4 disqualifies the summit as an acceptable location. The passage reads as follows:

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" (Deut 12:5). High places were not to be automatically chosen because of their elevation, nor were they prohibited based on height (cf. Isa 2:2; Mic 4:1).

Next, Kaufman examines the Jerusalem Talmud (*Megillah*, chapter 1, *Halakhah* 12) in an effort to undermine the summit theory (Hersh, 1990). 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**

Michael Avi-Yonah suggested a third possible location for the tabernacle to the south of the tel. 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.”<sup>9</sup>

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. (478)

Furthermore, Mizrachi refers to Christian tradition, which identifies the exact location of the tabernacle with one of the Byzantine churches on the site (2014, 11).

Importantly, Halpern presents a rationale to place the primary gate, or at least a postern gate on the north of the city (1992, 1214). If true, this weakens the literary case made earlier for the northern location since the messenger 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 (1925, 163).

#### **Option Four**

Fig. 8. Possible Movements of the Tabernacle. Photo by Barry Kramer and Graphics by Jerry Taylor.

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 IA I, apparently a forerunner of the IA II so called “four-room house.”<sup>10</sup> 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 MB fortification wall is exposed, it may be possible to pinpoint the ancient gate(s) that is important to this discussion. Excavations on the summit would also yield critical data.

### **Bibliography**

Albright, W.F. "The Danish Excavations at Shiloh." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 9 (Feb 1923).

Anonymous. "Did the Philistines Destroy the Israelite Sanctuary at Shiloh?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 1.2 (March-April 1975).

Ben-Arie, Reut, and Hananya Hizmi. "Tel Shiloh, Excavations in the Northern Area, 2012, 2013." *Judea and Samaria Studies* 23 (2014).

Ben-Arie, Reut. Personal communication on July 14, 2016.

Biran, Abraham. "Tel Dan," *Biblical Archaeologist* 37 (1974).

Buhl, Marie-Louise, and Svend Holm-Nielson. *Shiloh, The Pre-Hellenistic Remains: The Danish Excavations at Tell Sailun, Palestine, in 1926, 1929, 1932 and 1963*. Copenhagen: National Museum of Denmark and Aarhus University Press, (1969).

Chapman, R. L., and J. E. Taylor. "Distances Used by Eusebius and the Identification of Sites." In *The Onomasticon by Eusebius of Caesarea: Palestine in the Fourth Century AD*. G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville and J. E. Taylor, eds. G. S. P. Freedman-Grenville, tran. Pp. 175–78. Jerusalem: Carta (2003).

Conder, C. R., and Kitchner, H. H. *The Survey of Western Palestine Memoirs 2, Sheets VII–XVI, Samaria*. London: Palestine Exploration Fund (1882).

de Vaux, Roland. *Ancient Israel, Its Life and Institutions*, Grand Rapids (1997).

Donner, Herbert. *The Mosaic Map of Madaba. An Introductory Guide*. Palaestina Antiqua 7. Kampen: Kok Pharos (1992).

Driver, Samuel R. "Shiloh." In *A Dictionary of the Bible: Dealing with Its Language, Literature and Contents Including the Biblical Theology*, Eds.

James Hastings and John A. Selbie, 4:499–500. New York, N.Y.: Scribner's Sons (1911).

Elitzur, Yoel, and Doron Nir-Zevi. "A Rock-Hewn Altar Near Shiloh." *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 135.1 (2003).

Eusebius and Jerome. *The Bodleian Manuscript of Jerome's Version of the Chronicles of Eusebius*. J. K. Fotheringham, ed. Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon (2012).

Eusebius, Pamphilus. *The Onomasticon of Eusebius Pamphili: Compared with the Version of Jerome and Annotated*. Ed. Noel C. Wolf. Translated by C. Umhau Wolf. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press (1971).

Finkelstein, Israel, Shelomoh Bunimovits, Zvi Lederman, and Baruch Brandl, eds. *Shiloh: The Archaeology of a Biblical Site. Monograph Series of the Institute of Archaeology 10*. Tel Aviv, Israel: Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University (1993).

Finkelstein, Israel. "Shiloh Yields Some, But Not All, of Its Secrets: Location of Tabernacle Still Uncertain." *Biblical Archaeology Review* 12.1 (Jan-Feb 1986).

Gibson, Shimon, and Michael Avi-Yonah. "Shiloh." Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. *Encyclopedia Judaica*. New York, N.Y.: MacMillan, 2006.

Glueck, Nelson. "Palestinian and Syrian Archaeology in 1932." *American Journal of Archaeology* Vol. 37.1 (Jan-Mar 1933).

Goldwurm, Hersh, and Nosson Scherman, eds. *The Talmud*. Schottenstein Edition. 73 vols. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Mesorah, 1990.

Guérin, V. Pp. 21–23 in Vol. 2 Samaria of *The Survey of Western Palestine: Memoirs of the Topography, Orography, Hydrography, and Archaeology*. 3 vols. London, U.K., 1875.

Halpern, Baruch. "Shiloh (Place)." Pp. 1213–1215 in Vol. 5 of *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. Edited by David Noel Freedman. 6 Vols. New York, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1996.

Kaufman, Asher S. "Fixing the Site of the Tabernacle at Shiloh." *Biblical Archaeology Review* 14.6 (Nov-Dec 1988).

Mizrachi, Yonathan, and Anna Veeder. "Tel Shiloh (Khirbet Seilun) Archaeological Settlement in the Political Struggle over Samaria." Ed. Dalia Tessler. *Emek Shaveh* (2014).

Pritchard, J.B. "Gibeon," in Stern, ed., *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, vol. 2, Jerusalem (1993).

Richardson, A. T. "The Site of Shiloh." *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 57 (1925).

Ritmeyer, Leen. *The Quest: Revealing the Temple Mount in Jerusalem* Jerusalem: Carta (2006).

Ritmeyer, Leen. Personal communication on July 17, 2016.

Roberts, Alexander, James Donaldson, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 14 vols. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994.

Wilson, Charles W. "Shiloh." *Palestinian Exploration Fund: Quarterly Statement* 5–6 (1873).

Zertal, Adam. "An Early Iron Age Cultic Site on Mount Ebal: Excavation Seasons 1982–1987—A Preliminary Report," *Tel Aviv* 13–14 (1986–87).

---

<sup>1</sup> Use of this term does not imply support for Martin Noth's views on the emergence of early Israel. Rather, it denotes a confederation of ancient tribes for military conquest or protection and worship of a common deity.

<sup>2</sup> For dates through the Persian Period, I follow Bryant Wood's chronology: "The Archaeological Ages And Old Testament History." Available at [www.maqatir.org](http://www.maqatir.org). For later time periods, I use generally accepted dates.

<sup>3</sup> Construction of the Khirbet el-Maqatir fortification system also occurred in MB III.

<sup>4</sup> The cause of his death remains uncertain. Glueck gives it as exhaustion from the excavation (Glueck, 1933, 66), while others attribute it to dysentery (Anonymous, *BAR*, 3).

<sup>5</sup> Evgeny Aharonovic led the excavation of the churches, and Reut Ben-Arie supervised the work on the summit and the northern scarp.

<sup>6</sup> Jerome's Latin statement reads as follows: "Quid narrem Silo, in qua altare dirutum hodieque monstratur?"

<sup>7</sup> The altar, first identified by Shimon Gibson, has not yet been published.

<sup>8</sup> Personal correspondence with Reut Ben Arie on July 4, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> The church, excavated by Evgeny Aharonovic on behalf of the Staff Officer of the Civil Administration of Judea and Samaria, has not been published.

<sup>10</sup> Personal communication with Leen Ritmeyer on July 17, 2016. Ritmeyer further notes the IA domestic development as beginning with the primitive dwellings at Khirbet el-Maqatir, progressing to the Shiloh houses/storerooms, and culminating with the four-room house in IA II.