



Shiloh Yields Her Long-Held Secrets

By Scott Stripling

Scott Stripling driving the initial stake for the ABR Shiloh excavation.
Credit: Suzanne Lattimer.

In June 2013 I succeeded Bryant Wood as the Director of the Khirbet el-Maqatir excavations, and in June 2015 I set a plan in motion to bring the excavation to closure and transition to our new excavation at Shiloh. In 2016, we worked in May and December at Khirbet el-Maqatir while laying the groundwork for the new Shiloh excavation. The excitement of our team and the entire ABR family was palpable. After all, we were moving from an obscure and unknown location to the most important site outside of Jerusalem. Normally archaeologists take a break of several years between excavations to work on publications, but I could not imagine shutting down our burgeoning team that ran like a finely tuned machine. And so it was that in June 2016, Leen Ritmeyer, Suzanne Lattimer, and I surveyed Shiloh, and I drove the first excavation stake to designate the area in which I chose to launch our expedition. I had no idea that beneath that initial stake lay evidence that would powerfully confirm the biblical narrative.

In May 2017 we broke ground on Tel Shiloh's northern slope. In my perfect world, I hoped to uncover evidence for three things: the Tabernacle, the sacrificial system, and the gate complex. The Danish (1926, 1929, 1932, and 1963) and Israeli (1981–84) excavations had not, or so it seemed, illuminated these three things. Over the past eight years we have excavated six five-week seasons, missing two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thirty weeks of excavation have brought to light exactly what I had hoped we would find. This article explains these finds and their significance.

The Tabernacle

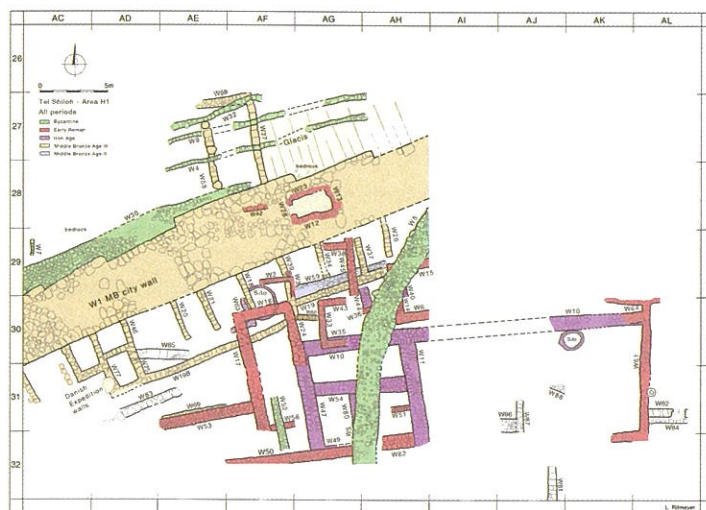
From my reading of 1 Samuel 3 and two passages in the Mishnah, I knew that there was a strong possibility that the Israelites replaced the *Mishkan* (sacred tent) with a permanent

building, but I had no idea if anything remained of the structure or where on the site the builders would have erected it. According to 1 Samuel 3:3, "Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD where the ark of God was" (NASB). The word "temple" here was my first clue that something had changed since Joshua ordered the priests to erect the *Mishkan* at Shiloh (Jos 18:1). First Samuel 3:15 provided my second clue: "So Samuel lay down until morning. Then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD" (NASB). The Hebrew words for "the doors" (*daltowt*) and "house" (*bet*) have a connotation of permanence. The two Mishnaic passages from the second century AD are even clearer. Zebahim 14:6 states that "After they [the Israelites] came to Shiloh the high places were forbidden. There was no roof-beam there, but below was a house of stone and above were hangings, and this was the 'resting place' [of the ark of the covenant]."¹ Seder Olam 8 reads, "Shiloh's sanctuary had stone walls covered by tapestries; Israel worshipped in it for 369 years before its destruction."² Taken together, these four passages suggest that a semipermanent structure or a quasi-Tabernacle / Temple replaced the original *Mishkan* at Shiloh. This new structure had stone walls and a tent for a roof.

Prior to launching the Shiloh excavation, I studied what the previous excavations had uncovered. I noted that there was a well-built, 1.2-meter-wide (3.9-foot-wide) wall running east-west from Area K under a modern path to Area H, where I planned to focus our initial efforts. The wall disappeared in Area H under about 2.5 m (8.2 ft.) of Byzantine and Early Roman remains. Israel Finkelstein, the director of the Bar-Ilan University (BIU) excavation, tentatively dated it to the Middle Bronze Age. In our first season of excavation (2017), we began to expose this wall (Wall 10) in Area H. Over the next three seasons, we found a perpendicular

wall and three corners to the north of Wall 10. It turned out that Wall 10 formed the southern wall of a monumental building, and the perpendicular wall divided the building on a 2:1 ratio, like the *Mishkan*. We have now reached floor level in several places and have studied the pottery from the strata and foundation trenches with the help of Professor Liora Freud from Tel Aviv University. The structure has complex stratigraphy, but it appears to have been built around 1225–1175 BC, in the Late Bronze Age II / Iron Age I transition. We now have teams excavating the building in Areas H and K. It will take another four seasons to completely excavate and conserve it. Astonishingly, the walls still stand 2.5 m (8.2 ft.) high in some places. Excavation within the building has yielded several important objects with cultic connotations, such as ceramic and faience pomegranates,³ altar horns, and a murex shell. Fourteen storage rooms lie immediately to the north, abutting the city's fortification wall. I estimate the building's dimensions to be 26 × 9 m (85 × 30 ft.). It orients perfectly east-west and has two rooms. The western room is half the size of the eastern room.

Tim Lopez supervises the excavation of the monumental building and plans to write his PhD dissertation on this important structure. Shiloh Assistant Director Abigail (Leavitt) Van Huss is currently writing her PhD dissertation on the Late Bronze Age II / Iron Age I transition in Israel's Central Highlands, so this monumental structure is also relevant to her research. Both Tim and Abigail are students at Ariel University, about ten miles north of Shiloh. I serve on Abigail's doctoral committee.



Site plan for ABR's Shiloh excavation. Credit: Leen Ritmeyer.

The monumental building appears to be the Tabernacle structure described in 1 Samuel and the *Mishnah*, but we must finish our excavation and analysis to be sure. If it is not the Tabernacle, then we have two structures of identical size at the same place and at the same time. This seems most unlikely. About 50 m (164 ft.) due east of the monumental building lies a *favissa* containing the remains of an ancient sacrificial system.

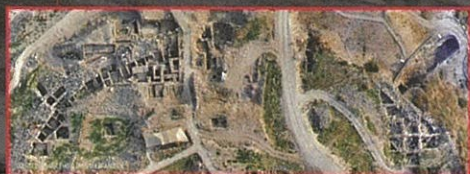
Stripling's re-creation of Shiloh in the Tabernacle period.
Credit: Armstrong Institute of Biblical Archaeology.

BIBLICAL SHILOH

Situated roughly 43 kilometers directly north of Jerusalem, Shiloh was Israel's political and religious capital for about 300 years during the period of the judges. Before it was occupied by the Israelites in the early 14th century B.C.E., Shiloh belonged to the Canaanites and was a center for Canaanite religious worship.

When the Israelites first inhabited Shiloh, they lived in structures constructed by the Canaanites, just as Moses forecast (Deuteronomy 8:10). By the early 11th century, the time period of Hannah, Eli and Samuel—Iron Age I, the period depicted in this illustration—Shiloh was more built-up and well established. Shiloh was Israel's religious center, and this is where the tabernacle was situated and the priesthood operated from. At this time, the tabernacle was probably a semipermanent structure, with a foundation built from stone and its upper features constructed from timber and animal skins.

- 1 Altar horns and pomegranates
- 2 General area of Dr. Stripling's potential location of Tabernacle
- 3 City walls (archaeologists believe the city was 5 acres)
- 4 Favisa and bone deposits
- 5 Storage rooms with collared-rim jars
- 6 Finklestein's proposed tabernacle location
- 7 Charles Wilson's proposed tabernacle location
- 8 City gate
- Prof. Israel Finklestein's excavations
- Danish excavations



The Favissa

A *favissa* is a sacred deposit, often from a sacrificial system. The BIU excavators first identified the Shiloh *favissa* when they were removing a section of the *glacis* on the northeast of the site. They recovered about 3,000 animal bones and bone fragments, 104 restorable vessels (many of which held cultic significance), and a gold pendant. The bones were almost entirely from kosher animals, primarily caprines and bovines, and the BIU team noted that most of the bones derived from the right side of the animals. In Finkelstein's paradigm, no Israelites arrived at Shiloh until the Iron Age I, about 1200 BC. Therefore, he assigned the *favissa* to a Canaanite sacrificial system. He posited that when the Israelites arrived, they wanted to erect the *Mishkan* on the summit of the tell, but there was a huge pile of bones there interspersed with votive remains, so they relocated the pile from the summit to Area D on the northeastern perimeter of the site. Fortunately, the BIU team left one-meter-wide balks (unexcavated areas) on the north and east of their squares in Area D.

Once it became clear to me that the monumental building on the northern slope, not the summit, was the likely location for the Tabernacle structure, I was eager to remove the Area D balks and hopefully find portions of the *favissa* that remained unexcavated. The original *Mishkan* could have, in fact, occupied the summit before the construction of the monumental building. Jordan McClinton, a graduate from The Bible Seminary's (TBS) Master of Arts in Biblical History and Archaeology (as is Abigail), aspired to do his PhD research at Veritas International University (VIU) on the *favissa*, so in 2022 I assigned Jordan as the Area D supervisor. We began removing balks and saw immediate results. Technology has greatly improved since the 1980s, and we have taken full advantage of this revolution. We use a metal detector as we excavate, and we wet-sift every pailful of material that comes out of the ground. We have even performed luminescence testing on soil as we expose it, to get another dating metric. In 2024, we introduced a new system, engineered by Steven Rudd, to extract "heavy fraction" from important loci in our flotation process. This allows us to retrieve many more seeds than we had in the past, as well as tiny bones and beads. This helps us reconstruct life in biblical times.

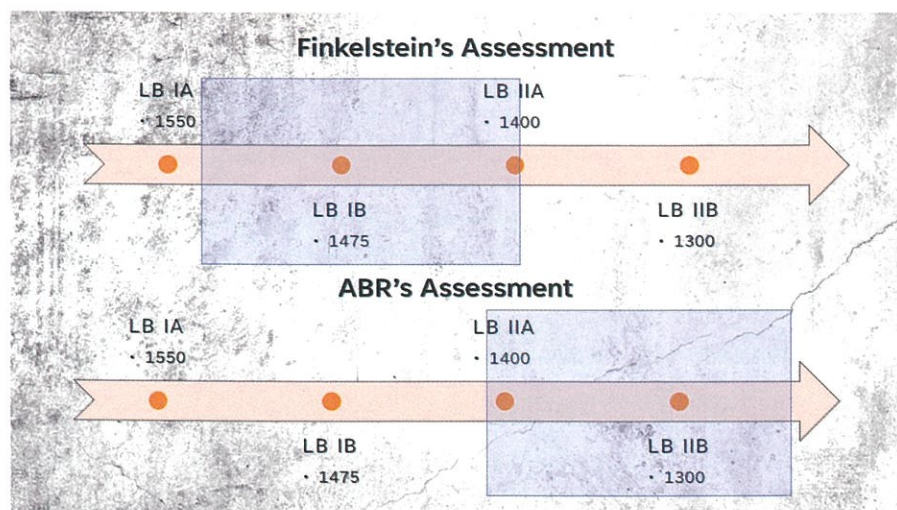


Area D prior to the ABR excavation. Credit: Israel Finkelstein.

I also thought the summit was the most likely spot for the *Mishkan*,⁴ but my date for the Israelites' arrival, about 1400 BC, led me to connect the *favissa* with them, not the Canaanites. However, Finkelstein's dating of the *favissa* to primarily the Late Bronze Age I (ca. 1550–1400 BC) and extending to the first half of the Late Bronze Age IIA (ca. 1400–1300 BC) was too early to match my dating, which derived primarily from internal biblical chronology.

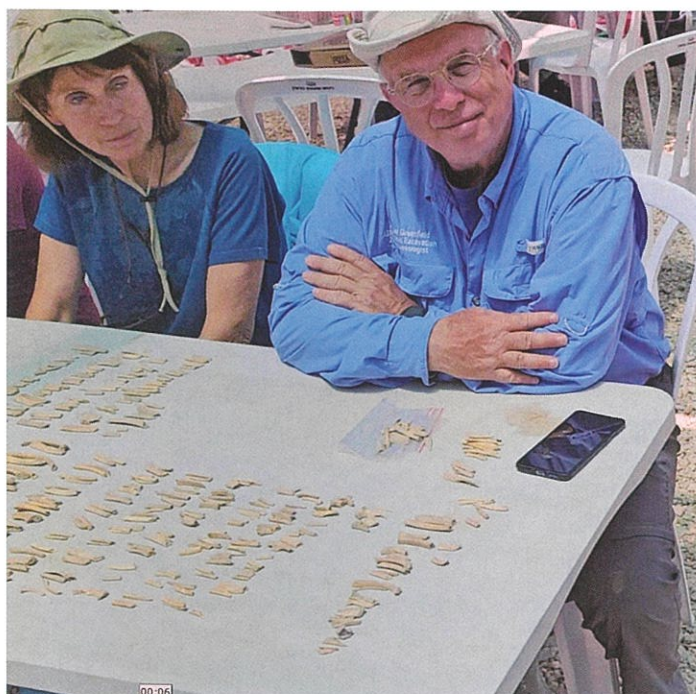


Jordan McClinton excavating in Area D. Credit: Bryan Windle.



In the last three seasons, with our advanced methodology and technology, we have recovered thousands more bones and ceramic vessels from the *favissa*, with many of the vessels being restorable. In 2023 we added Haskel Greenfield, a renowned zooarchaeologist from the University of Manitoba, to our team. Dr. Greenfield is working closely with Jordan and analyzing each bone to determine sex, age, pathology, and side (right or left). The radiocarbon dates of the bones and other material from the *favissa* coincide with the Tabernacle period at Shiloh. Our analysis of the dating of the BIU and ABR pottery suggests that the *favissa* dates to the Late Bronze Age II (ca. 1400–1200 BC) and the Iron Age I (ca. 1200–1075 BC).

Graphic showing Finkelstein's and ABR's dates for the *favissa*. Credit: Jordan McClinton.



Zooarchaeologist Haskel Greenfield analyzing bones from the *favissa*.
Credit: Steven Rudd.

In addition to the bones and pottery, our excavations have yielded six small gold objects, such as star-shaped pendants. Jordan McClinton, Frankie Snyder, and Clayton Van Huss are publishing several of these in *Judea and Samaria Research Studies (JSRS)*. The most striking gold object is a pendant with an engraving depicting a human face. Including the one gold pendant from the BIU expedition, we now have seven gold items from the *favissa*, which I interpret as Tabernacle offerings. The coming seasons may yield even more.



Gold star from the Shiloh *favissa*. Credit: Gary Urie.

The Gate Complex

Just north of the storage rooms that border the monumental building, we are excavating an ancient gate complex, consisting of an inner gate and an outer gate. Amorites first built the gate in the Middle Bronze Age III (ca. 1600 BC), and it remained in use at least until ca. 1075 BC (in the Iron Age IB), when the Philistines apparently destroyed Shiloh—according to our stratigraphic analysis. Joshua ben Nun probably walked through this gate. If so, he would have walked on the in situ paving stones we excavated in 2024 that were just above bedrock. In the stratum above the pavement, excavation yielded about 100 dislodged pavers, many of which had geometric shapes. Based on this, I expect that we will find more in situ geometric pavement in the coming seasons.



Pavement in Shiloh's outer-gate chamber. Credit: Mark Hassler.

We read about the Shiloh gate in 1 Samuel 4:18 and in one of the Amarna Letters (EA 288—a letter from Abdi-Heba, Jerusalem’s king, to Pharaoh Amenhotep III). These references to the gate are the subject of a chapter that Clyde Billington and I have written for a forthcoming Festschrift honoring the ANE scholar Edwin Yamauchi.⁵

shaped objects inscribed with a pharaoh’s iconography. Gary and I recently published three Shiloh scarabs in *JSRS*.



EA 288, one of the Amarna Letters, tells of two city rulers being murdered in the gate of Silu (= Shiloh). Credit: Johannes Dams.

Previous researchers have assumed that the ancient gate would have been on the southern end of the site since the approach is less steep there. However, I anticipated a gate on the north since Ain Seilun, the site’s water source, lies 1.1 km (0.7 mi.) to the north. If there was another gate on the south, apparently nothing remains of it. Mark Hassler has supervised the squares that comprise the gate area since the inception of the ABR Shiloh excavation. The last few seasons, Gary Urie has also supervised squares in this area. Like Jordan, Gary is a TBS graduate and a current PhD student at VIU. Gary’s research focus is scarabs, small beetle-



Scarab of Thutmose III, Egypt’s most powerful pharaoh, found at Shiloh. Credit: Michael C. Luddeni.

The outer gate measures about 21 × 7 m (69 × 23 ft.). Excavation is ongoing, so we cannot be completely sure at this point. Along with the in-situ pavement, the most outstanding feature of the outer gate is a line of three massive pillars, two of which stand to their original height. These supported roof beams for the outer-gate plaza. A large retaining wall for the *glacis* served as the outer gate’s eastern boundary. A *glacis* is an earthen embankment on a city’s exterior that protects the fortification wall’s foundation.

The inner gate passes through a symmetrical opening in the fortification wall and opens into what appears to be recessed chambers on the east (ca. 2 × 4 m [6.6 × 13.1 ft.]) and west (ca. 5 × 4 m [16.4 × 13.1 ft.]). Within the eastern chamber, on the south, is another recessed chamber (ca. 2 × 2 m [6.6 × 6.6 ft.]), perhaps a place where a city dignitary would sit. Eli’s life may have ended on this very spot. The nexus for passage into the city continues to allude us, but we are hopeful for clarity in the coming seasons. In 2024 we excavated a human cranium in the gate. This is the only human bone we have excavated at Shiloh. This is of particular interest since Eli died in the gate and EA 288 refers to two city rulers of Shiloh who were murdered in the gate by the ‘Apiru. The cranium is undergoing scientific testing.

Conclusion

The ABR Shiloh excavation has brought to light the three things that were on my archaeological “wish list” when I wrote the initial excavation proposal in 2016. Along the way, we have excavated about 250,000 pottery sherds and registered over 3,100 objects.

A figurine (perhaps theomorphic) from Shiloh's Tabernacle period. Kevin Larsen, Frankie Snyder, and Scott Stripling are publishing this figurine in *JRS*. Credit: Kevin Larsen.



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Over the next four seasons I hope to complete the excavation of the monumental building (likely the Tabernacle structure referred to in 1 Samuel 3 and the Mishnah), the *favissa*, and the gate complex. Staff members Abigail Leavitt, Henry Smith, Gary Urie, and Jordan McClinton will also finish their PhDs during this time.⁶ Professor Boyd Seevers has already published several articles on the Romans' first-century assault on Shiloh, and his research will continue as well. As we excavate, we conserve the walls and installations (silos, etc.) that we encounter. *Christianity Today* recently named the Shiloh gate as the number five find in biblical archaeology in 2024,⁷ and the Armstrong Institute of Biblical Archaeology named the *favissa* as the number five find on their prestigious list.⁸ All eyes are on Shiloh. ☞



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Three silver coins found at Shiloh that were used during the Bar Kokhba Revolt. Recently published in Dvir Raviv, Scott Stripling, and Yoav Farhi, “New Findings from the Acrabat Toparchy and the Northern Border of Judea before and after the Great Revolt,” *Jerusalem Journal of Archaeology* 4 (2023): 108–36, <https://doi.org/10.52486/01.00004.5>. Credit: Shahar Cohen.



Schematic drawing of the Shiloh gate complex.
Credit: Photo by Gary Urie; graphics by Scott Stripling.