

# A HISTORY OF SHILOH

BRYAN E. BEYER

**T**he city of Shiloh played an important role in Israel's history. The city's name probably came from the Hebrew word *shalah* (sha-LA), which means "to be at rest." Shiloh was located 20 miles north and slightly east of Jerusalem. Its position off the main north-south route afforded the traveler a somewhat tranquil atmosphere to rest and worship. Its central location and abundant water supply also made it a good choice for Israel's worship center. The modern village of Seilun lies next to its ruins.

The Israelites first settled the area of Shiloh after the conquest. They set up the tent of meeting there, and Joshua divided the land among the remaining tribes (Josh. 18:1,8-10). The city became part of Ephraim's tribal territory.

Shiloh remained Israel's worship center through most of the period of the judges. During this time, the people often worshiped idols and disregarded God's commandments (Judg. 17:6; 18:31). The Lord responded by sending an oppressor against them. The people then repented, and the Lord raised up a judge to deliver them. But when the judge died, the people soon fell again into idolatry, and the cycle would be repeated (Judg. 2:11-19).

Shiloh hosted an annual festival, perhaps at the time of harvest (Judg. 21:19). This holiday featured much dancing and celebration. One year it provided an opportunity for

**Above:** Remains of a building at Shiloh that is believed to be the oldest remains of an ancient synagogue in all of Israel.

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the men of the tribe of Benjamin to come near and seize the dancing maidens as wives (Judg. 21:21). The bizarre story provides a fitting end to the Book of Judges, which described the tragic consequences the Israelites' suffered for ignoring God's ways (Judg. 21:25).

About 1100 B.C. Eli served as high priest at Shiloh (1 Sam. 1:9). Hophni and Phinehas, Eli's two sons, served with him; but they did not follow the Lord, and they corrupted the sacrificial system (1 Sam. 2:12-17). They also committed sexual immorality and refused to heed Eli's correction (1 Sam. 2:22-25). God warned Eli of the judgment that would come if Eli did not control Hophni and Phinehas (1 Sam. 2:27-36).

Meanwhile, the boy Samuel grew to manhood at Shiloh. His mother had prayed for a son and dedicated him to the Lord (1 Sam. 1:10-11). She brought him to Eli and left him in Eli's care (1:24-28). One night, the Lord revealed Himself to Samuel (1 Sam. 3:1-14). God had prepared him for service, and soon all Israel knew of Samuel's prophetic gift (1 Sam. 3:19-21).

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**Lesson Reference:**  
CUS: Jeremiah 7:1-15



Meanwhile, the Philistines settled along Judah's coastline and became a threat to the nation of Israel. When the Philistines defeated the Israelites in battle, the Israelites determined that the ark of God should be carried into battle with them (1 Sam. 4:3-4). They felt certain the ark would bring them victory over their enemies. Hophni and Phinehas accompanied the ark into battle.

But by doing so, the Israelites were treating the ark as an idol. The ark contained no divine powers within it, as the people soon discovered. The Philistines defeated the Israelites, captured the ark, and killed Hophni and Phinehas (1 Sam. 4:10-11). Shiloh received the news amidst great mourning and lamentation (1 Sam. 4:12-22).

The biblical account does not relate what happened to Shiloh after the Philistines captured the ark. Archaeological evidence indicates the city suffered massive destruction about 1050 B.C.<sup>1</sup> Probably the Philistines moved inland and conquered Shiloh to complete their victory. The people apparently moved the tent of meeting to Nob a few miles from Jerusalem (1 Sam. 21:1-6). It remained there until King Saul destroyed the city. Saul did so because Ahimelech the priest showed kindness to David while David was fleeing from Saul (1 Sam. 22:9-19).

The biblical record indicates that people still lived at Shiloh following its destruction by the Philistines. Jeroboam I (922-901 B.C.), the Northern Kingdom of Israel's first king, sent his wife to Shiloh to inquire of the prophet Ahijah (1 Kings 14:2). And after Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar's armies in 587 B.C., a delegation of Jews came to Jerusalem from Shechem, Shiloh, and other parts of Samaria (Jer. 41:5). Further archaeological finds show people occupied Shiloh into the Byzantine period.<sup>2</sup>

The prophet Jeremiah ministered to the people of Judah during Judah's last 40 years as a nation (627-587 B.C.). The Book of Jeremiah records the prophet's desperate attempts to turn the people back to the Lord. Jeremiah's life illustrates the kind of courage we need to have if we want to follow the Lord whatever the cost. Unfortunately, the people refused to listen and eventually paid the price of exile for their sins.

Jeremiah 7:1-15 presents the account of Jeremiah's message to the people at the temple gate in Jerusalem. The text does not provide a date for the message, but many interpreters have suggested a date of around 609 B.C., based on a comparison of Jeremiah 7 with Jeremiah 26. Jehoiakim (609-597 B.C.) cared little for God's ways and showed great contempt for God's Word (Jer. 36:20-25). The little hope that remained for Judah's repentance and restoration disappeared under Jehoiakim's rule.

Jeremiah called to the people as they entered the temple area to worship. He challenged them to change their ways, because only by doing so could they hope to remain

in the land that they called home (7:3).

Judah's people placed more faith in the temple than in their God (7:4). They thought if they merely recited appropriate liturgies God would bless them. But Jeremiah told them to show the genuineness of their faith by acts of social justice (7:5-7). They could not live in open sin—stealing, murder, adultery, swearing falsely, and idolatry—and at the same time profess allegiance to the Lord (7:8-11).

Jeremiah challenged the people to make a trip to Shiloh (7:12). If they did, they would see the disaster God had brought on the city when its people refused to heed His warnings! The prophet warned his audience that they would soon see the same judgment come to Jerusalem and the temple. The people refused to follow God's written word, and they also would not listen to His prophets. Therefore, they would suffer the same fate as Shiloh and the rest of the Northern Kingdom.

Jeremiah's condemnation of Jerusalem's temple worship sprang from the strong parallels that existed between Shiloh and Jerusalem. Both cities had housed God's sanctuary. Both cities had suffered from poor spiritual leadership (1 Sam. 2:12-17; Jer. 6:13). Both cities had developed systems of worship that became more important than the God they worshipped. Shiloh trusted in the ark's power rather than in the Lord's power (1 Sam. 4:3-4). Jerusalem placed its confidence in the temple (Jer. 7:4). God's judgment revealed the emptiness of Shiloh's misplaced trust, and soon He would reveal the same truth to Jerusalem.

Churches today have many ways to express worship—baptism (Rom. 6:3-4), the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:26-29), singing (Eph. 5:19), and more. God has given these ceremonies to heighten worship experience and make faith more meaningful. But they must never be used as a substitute for genuine faith. God counts these observances as meaningful when they flow from lives that stand in right relationship to Him (1 Cor. 11:27-29).

The citizens of Shiloh learned a hard lesson when God used the Philistines to bring judgment on them. The city's ruins serve as a warning to those who would deem mere worship forms more important than hearts devoted to God. Jerusalem failed to learn from Shiloh's judgment. The Scriptures call God's people today to learn from these two cities and to base their eternal assurance on Christ, not a form of worship (Rom. 15:4).

<sup>1</sup>Larry McGraw, "Shiloh," in *Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 1267; H. G. Andersen, "Shiloh" in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975-76), 402.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Goddard and John Rea, "Shiloh" in *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 1576.

Bryan Beyer is Assistant professor of Bible, Hebrew, and Old Testament, Columbia Bible College and Seminary, Columbia, South Carolina.



Excavated area of tel Shiloh  
(modern Sellun) in Israel

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