

RECONSTRUCTING THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TABERNACLE OF SHILOH

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THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TABERNACLE OF SHILOH

Nearly a third of the Book of Exodus deals with the Tabernacle of the wilderness. That portable temple served the newly formed Jewish nation during the forty-year span between the Exodus from Egypt and their entry into the Land of Israel. What became of that Tabernacle once Joshua led the Israelites across the Jordan River?

The Book of Joshua implies that the Tabernacle was first set up in Gilgal during the conquest and division of the Land (Josh. 4:19 and 5:10). That same book explicitly records that the Tabernacle was later erected in Shiloh: *The entire congregation of the children of Israel assembled at Shiloh, and they set up the tent of meeting there . . .* (Josh. 18:1).

Centuries later, when trying to awaken his fellow Jews from their unjustified feeling of security, the prophet Jeremiah warned Israel that unless they repented, their magnificent Temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed by their enemies. In the course of his stern admonitions, Jeremiah emphasized that the Temple faced the same fate that had befallen the Tabernacle of Shiloh years earlier: *For go to My place at Shiloh, where I first caused My Name to dwell, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of My people Israel* (Jer. 7:12). *I shall do to the House which bears My Name, in which you trust, and to the place which I gave you and your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh* (Jer. 7:14).¹

Maimonides offers some clarity regarding the history of the Tabernacle. Basing himself on the Mishnah (*Zevahim* 14:6) and Talmud (TB *Zevahim* 118), Maimonides writes: “Once they entered the Land [of Israel], they established the Tabernacle in Gilgal [where it stood] for the 14 years that they conquered and divided the land. From there they went to Shiloh, where a stone house was built, and it was covered with the Tabernacle’s curtains – as opposed to a solid roof. For 369 years the sanctuary stood in Shiloh. On the death of Eli it was destroyed, whereupon they came and built a sanctuary at

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Nob. On the death of Samuel it was destroyed, whereupon they came and built a sanctuary at Gibeon. From Gibeon they came to the Temple in Jerusalem. The length of time [of the Tabernacle] in Nob and Gibeon was 57 years.”²

Thus, Jewish tradition maintains that after serving as the spiritual center of Israel for 369 years, the Tabernacle of Shiloh was destroyed. Surprisingly, nowhere in the Book of Samuel does the text offer an account of this event. In I Samuel, chapter 4, we learn of the defeat of Israel’s forces at the hands of the Philistines, who also temporarily held on to the Ark of the Covenant. Nowhere in that chapter, however, is mention made of the victorious Philistines proceeding to destroy the Tabernacle of Shiloh.

Nonetheless, it is clear from Jeremiah’s warnings of the Temple’s impending destruction that the Tabernacle of Shiloh had also met a violent end.³ Moreover, several statements in the Talmud⁴ and many later sources⁵ indicate that, according to Jewish tradition, the Tabernacle of Shiloh was in fact destroyed by Philistine warriors.

THREE PROBLEMS

As shown above, Jewish tradition maintains that after the Tabernacle of Shiloh was destroyed, it was soon reestablished in Nob. This raises several problems:

A) The building of the original Tabernacle involved a huge national effort. As recorded in great detail in the Book of Exodus, this project took a good deal of time and required a massive campaign to raise the funds and materials needed for the Tabernacle’s assembly. If the Philistines did in fact destroy the Tabernacle of Shiloh, logic would dictate that another campaign – along the lines of the one in the Book of Exodus – should have been necessary in order to rebuild the Tabernacle in Nob. Yet we find no mention of an emergency campaign to rebuild the Tabernacle following the Philistines’ sack of Shiloh. From all accounts, though, it seems as if the Tabernacle was quickly rebuilt in Nob following its destruction in Shiloh.⁶

B) In I Kings, an incredible amount of information is given about the Temple built by King Solomon. In the course of listing and describing all of the vessels specially crafted for the Temple, we read of multiple candelabra (*menorot*) placed in its sanctuary (I Kgs. 7:49). According to TB *Menahot*

98b, five new candelabra were placed on either side of the original candelabra of Moses, and five new tables were positioned on either side of the original table crafted in the wilderness.⁷

It makes sense to assume the original candelabra and table of the Tabernacle were housed – and used – in the Tabernacle throughout the years leading up to the construction of Solomon’s Temple. However, if the Philistines did indeed destroy the Tabernacle of Shiloh, how did the original candelabra and table survive to be used in the Temple? Would the Philistines not have plundered the contents of the Tabernacle they had destroyed – just as the Babylonians later plundered the contents of King Solomon’s Temple?

C) TB *Sotah* 9a records the following tradition in the name of Rabbi Hani-na bar Papa: The original Tabernacle of Moses never fell into enemy hands. When the building of King Solomon’s Temple was complete, the Tabernacle of Moses – no longer being needed – was disassembled and stowed away.⁸ Now if the Philistines destroyed the Tabernacle of Shiloh, how can the Talmudic tradition (that the Tabernacle was respectfully stored away) be correct?

PROPOSED RESOLUTION

It seems to me that there is one unique detail in the Tabernacle of Shiloh which holds the key to unlocking the mystery of its destruction, thereby resolving the three problems mentioned above. Maimonides states that the sanctuary walls of the Tabernacle of Shiloh were made of stone. His source for this is a rabbinic tradition recorded in the Mishnah (*Zevahim* 14:6) and explained in TB *Zevahim* 118a. The Talmud notes that the Tabernacle of Shiloh is referred to in I Samuel 1:24 as "the house of God" and in Psalm 78:60 and 67 as "the tent." How could the same structure be designated both a "house" (implying a permanent structure) and a "tent" (implying a temporary structure)? The Talmud reconciles this apparent discrepancy by explaining that the Tabernacle of Shiloh was a semi-permanent structure. While its sanctuary walls were made of stone (in sharp contrast to the gold-plated wooden beams that formed the sanctuary walls of the original Tabernacle),⁹ those walls were not covered by a solid roof. Since the Tabernacle of Shiloh still used the original Tabernacle’s curtains and hides as a roof, its sanctuary was only considered a semi-permanent structure.

Bearing in mind this architectural novelty of the Tabernacle of Shiloh, allow me to propose the following theory:

When the stone-walled Tabernacle of Shiloh was completed, the original gold-plated wooden beams that had served as sanctuary walls for the Tabernacle of the wilderness were no longer needed. As such, those beams were stored away for safekeeping. The Philistines – 369 years later – emerged as the victors from an epic battle against the Israelite forces and captured the Ark.¹⁰ Israelite survivors of that battle hastily returned to Shiloh with the terrible news of their loss. This shocking report caused the death of Eli, the last High Priest of the Tabernacle of Shiloh.¹¹ In addition, those survivors warned Shiloh's inhabitants of the approaching Philistine army.

With a great sense of urgency, all movable components of the Tabernacle of Shiloh – which had remained intact for more than three and a half centuries – were disassembled and evacuated. Thus, before the Philistines reached Shiloh, all components of the original Tabernacle¹² had already been spirited away to safety, and would soon be reassembled in Nob.¹³

By the time the Philistines arrived to sack Shiloh, whatever was left of the Tabernacle for them to destroy was not portable – its stone-walled sanctuary. Like a discarded shell, those stone walls of an empty sanctuary were all that remained of the semi-permanent structure. The Tabernacle of Shiloh that the Philistines destroyed was composed of those stone walls and nothing more.¹⁴

This theory can resolve the three problems posed earlier: All of the Tabernacle that the Philistines destroyed was the empty stone-walled sanctuary building. Since every other component of the original Tabernacle had been spirited away to safety, the original Tabernacle could quickly be reassembled in Nob. Instead of a stone-walled sanctuary, the Tabernacle of Nob's walls were made from the original structure's gold-plated wooden beams. After lying in storage for 369 years, those beams were put back into service once again in Nob. Thus, the Tabernacle of Nob had the same architectural design – and materials – as the original Tabernacle of the wilderness. With all the components of the original Tabernacle intact, there was no need for an emergency campaign to raise funds and materials to rebuild the Tabernacle.¹⁵ Furthermore, since all the components of the original Tabernacle were saved, it makes perfect sense that the candelabra and table played significant roles years later as part of King Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. All the compo-

nents of the original Tabernacle (except for the candelabra and the table) were stowed away when Solomon's Temple was built.¹⁶

NOTES

This article is dedicated in memory of my father-in-law, Mr. Samuel Feintuch (*Shemuel ben Moshe*), of blessed memory. He loved to study *Nakh*, and I would have greatly enjoyed discussing this topic with him. I thank my father, Mr. U. H. Males, for his valuable editing assistance.

1. See Psalm 78:60-64 for another allusion to the destruction of the Tabernacle of Shiloh.
2. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Beit ha-Behirah* 1:2.
3. See Jeremiah 7:12 and 26:6-9.
4. See, for example, TB *Yoma* 9a, *Megillah* 16b, and *Zevahim* 118b.
5. See, for example, Rashi to Psalm 74:8 and to TB *Zevahim* 102b, s.v. *Bo'u le-Nov ve-Giv'on*.
6. Similarly, we find no mention of such a campaign to quickly rebuild the Tabernacle in Gibeon after the one in Nob was destroyed. This will be additionally considered in footnote 15.
7. TB *Menahot* 98b records a debate as to whether the ten new candelabra and tables were actually used or were there for symbolic purposes only.
8. This tradition is also repeated by Rashi in his commentary to II Chronicles 5:5.
9. See R. Yehiel Mikhel Epstein's *Arukh ha-Shulhan he-Atid, Hilkhot Beit ha-Mikdash* 1:14-16, for an explanation as to why it was permitted to alter the architecture of the Tabernacle when it was established in Shiloh.
10. I Samuel 4.
11. See I Samuel 4:18. As per *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 580:2, Jewish tradition marks 10 Iyyar (once marked by fasting) as the date of these calamitous events..
12. The captured Ark, however, remained in enemy hands for seven months (I Sam. 6:1).
13. See, however, Rashi to TB *Pesahim* 38b, s.v. *Zot Omeret*, who contends that the Tabernacle was never fully reassembled after its destruction in Shiloh. All that was built in Nob was a stone structure. This assertion by Rashi is at odds with the Talmudic tradition found in TB *Sotah* 9a, that the structure of the original Tabernacle was stowed away when King Solomon's Temple was built. This Rashi comment was marked *tzarikh iyyun* ("needs further consideration") by R. Avraham Yitzhak Sorotzkin in his *Sefer Rinat Yitzhak*, I Samuel (2007) p. 70.
14. It should be noted that unlike the Babylonian Talmud, on which Maimonides based himself, the Jerusalem Talmud has a very different understanding of how the Tabernacle of Shiloh was built. According to TJ *Megillah* 1:12, the original gold-plated wooden beams of the Tabernacle were laid on top of a stone wall 10 handbreadths high. Thus, in accordance with the TJ, my theory would need to be slightly adjusted as follows: Before the Philistines arrived to sack Shiloh, the Tabernacle was completely disassembled and spirited away to safety in Nob. All that remained behind was the ten-handbreadth high stone wall which, for more than three and a half centuries, had served as the base for the Tabernacle of Shiloh's sanctuary. The Philistine invaders therefore destroyed only that stone-walled base, while the Tabernacle itself was disassembled and saved. This adjusted theory was suggested in the sources quoted below in footnote 16.
15. Unlike Shiloh, the city of Nob was destroyed by King Saul's troops during his pursuit of David (I. Sam. 22). While the priestly inhabitants of Nob were wrongfully slain for aiding David,

