

Ancient Structure Resembling First Temple Found Near Jerusalem

Archaeological findings at Tel Motza near Jerusalem indicate the existence of a temple from the First Temple period that was very similar to Solomon's temple described in the Bible, an unprecedented finding that raises many questions yet to be answered.

Archaeologists from Tel Aviv University, led by Prof. Oded Lipschits and Ph.D. student Shua Kisilevitz, continued to expose a unique temple dating back to the First Temple in Tel Motza, on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

The Iron Age temple complex dating to late 10th-early 9th century B.C., which is the only one of its kind to be found to date in the realm of the kingdoms of Israel and Judea, is in many details similar to the shrine built by King Solomon, which is described in great detail in Kings I.

The researchers say the site contributes greatly to understanding the First Temple period and in the comparison of archaeological findings, here and elsewhere, with the Bible texts.

Rescue excavation by the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) ahead of the construction of a section of road that replaced the exit roundabout on Highway 1 uncovered this important site.

The findings indicate that there was an important economic and administrative center in the valley, with dozens of silos and two large grain storage depots, which included a monumental temple of the North-Syrian type, typical of the Ancient Near East.

The findings include human-shaped figurines, horse figurines, a cult stand decorated with a pair of lions or sphinxes, a stone altar, a stone offering table and a pit filled with ash and animal bones.

In March 2019, following the completion of the construction of the bridge leading to Jerusalem and the removal of the sand fillings that covered the site during the construction process, the archaeologists returned for an academic dig.

Kisilevitz said that they found that the building was at least 21 feet long and discovered that underneath the temple courtyard floor there are remains of another worship building, probably from the 10th century B.C.

Researchers note that the temple complex, with its various layers, represents an unprecedented finding in the archaeology of ritual structures erected at the beginning of the Iron Age.

Therefore, the site contributes greatly to understanding the development of worship in Judea, as well as to understand the process of forming the kingdom of Judah.

The researchers sampled materials from four layers exposed in the section on the eastern side of the temple and sent them for testing using various technologies: OSL, a physical method for dating soil samples; carbon-14 tests for dating organic materials; and micro-archaeology techniques using microscopes, infrared rays and other scientific devices to uncover the hidden sections in the archaeological findings.

Kisilevitz expressed hope that the test results will “help us to pin down the dates of the different layers, find out if the structure had been abandoned for some time and reconstruct the nature of the activities that took place in the courtyard.”

“Because most of the ritual activity was only accessible to the priests, we hope that further excavation in this area will uncover more objects of worship,” she said.

"The findings of the excavation at Tel Motza, past, present and future, are of great importance for understanding the First Temple period, and for comparing the archaeological findings with the Bible," Lipschits concluded.

"The very existence of a temple similar to Solomon's Temple just a few miles from Jerusalem raises many questions, as the biblical text is filled with descriptions of struggles over worship sites outside Jerusalem, and explicitly states that the God of Israel should be worshiped only in the temple of Jerusalem," he said.

"We hope our findings will help us answer a variety of intriguing questions: Who erected the temple at Motza and when? What rituals had taken place in it at different times? What was the relationship between the community around the temple in Motza and the community around the temple in Jerusalem?" Lipschits added.

"Did the priests of the temple of Motza at some point accept the supremacy of the priests and rulers of the temple in Jerusalem, and if so, when did this happen? Did the temple survive the religious reforms of the kings Hezekiah and Josiah, and did it continue to operate until the destruction of the kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians in 586 BCE?" he said.

Tel Aviv University has planned two more excavation seasons in the spring of 2020 and in the spring of 2021, with students and researchers from around the world, and especially from Israel, Germany, the Czech Republic and the U.S.

"We suggest that the Tel Motza temple was the undertaking of a local group, initially representing several extended families or perhaps villages that banded together to pool their resources and maximize production and yield," the researchers write. "The rest remains to be discovered." {eoa}

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