

BETH SHEMESH

Beth Shemesh is located in the lowland of Judah overlooking the Sorek Valley, about 15 airline miles west of Jerusalem. In Old Testament times, Beth Shemesh was a border city between Dan and Judah (Josh. 15:10-11; 19:41) and was one of the 48 Levitical cities (Josh. 21:16). It was an important city that enjoyed much traffic coming east-west as well as north-south. The name Beth Shemesh means “House of the Sun” or “Temple of the Sun,” which probably refers to the inhabitants’ worship of the Canaanite sun goddess named Shemesh. Although the Bible warns against sun worship (Deut. 4:19), the practice was common, even in later times (2 Kings 23:5). Some think that Samson’s name (“Sunny”) was related to the sun goddess in that area, but there are better ways of explaining the name.

The vicinity of Beth Shemesh—the Sorek Valley—is mentioned several times in the Old Testament, especially in the Samson narrative. Just to the north of this valley were the ancient villages of Zorah and Eshtaol, the area where Samson was both born and buried (Judg. 13:24-25; 16:31). Samson’s first love (to whom he was betrothed) lived a few miles west at Timnah in the Sorek Valley (Judg. 14:1-2). His last love, Delilah, lived somewhere in the Sorek Valley, although the town is not identified (Judg. 16:4). Samson traveled through this area often, including the time when he killed a lion with his bare hands and the time when he tied the 300 foxes together by their tails (Judg. 14:5; 15:4-5). Regarding the lion incident, a small stone seal was found at Beth Shemesh in 2012 that featured a man (without a weapon) facing a lion. The artifact dates to the eleventh century B.C.—the time of Samson—and may be based on Samson’s encounter.

The Sorek Valley is the place where the Philistines returned the ark of the covenant, after God had sent a plague on them for taking the sacred chest from Israel. The Philistines placed the ark on a cart, and two cows pulled it to Beth Shemesh (1 Sam. 6:10-12). Later, during the monarchy, Beth Shemesh became an administrative center for one of Solomon’s districts (1 Kings 4:7, 9). This is the location where King Jehoash of Israel fought King Amaziah of Judah in the ninth century B.C.; Jehoash captured Amaziah, and then went to Jerusalem and looted the temple (2 Kings 14:11-14). In the eighth century B.C., the Philistines captured Beth Shemesh (2 Chron. 28:16, 18). However, archaeological evidence suggests that, after Hezekiah became king, he reclaimed the city for Judah; several vessel handles have been found there from this period which bear the stamp “[belonging] to the king” (*lmlk*). Therefore, Beth Shemesh was destroyed in 701 B.C. when Sennacherib attacked the fortified cities of Judah (see 2 Kings 18:13; *ANET*, 288).



Excavations at Beth Shemesh



Many discoveries have been made at Beth Shemesh. One is an underground water reservoir that dates to the tenth century B.C. It was hewn from soft chalk and then plastered all the way to the ceiling. The reservoir had a capacity of 57,600 gallons and was made of two long rooms shaped like a cross (see the drawing in *BAR* [Jan/Feb 1997]: 46). This reservoir was deliberately blocked to prevent resettlement after Sennacherib destroyed the city; some suggest that it was used by the Jews for a while before the Philistines filled it in.



Reservoir Shaft for Drawing Water from the Surface

Entrance to Reservoir

Cross-shaped Reservoir



Archaeologists have also found gates from different periods, including a hidden (“postern”) gate—like the one probably alluded to in Judges 1:24-25. Other artifacts include clay ovens, grindstones, pottery vessels, and potsherds. In 2003, one of the largest iron workshops in the ancient Near East was uncovered. Many iron tools and slag have been found there. The workshop dates to the tenth century B.C. A Byzantine monastery was located on the southeastern side of the tel.



Middle Bronze Age Gate (1750-1550 B.C.)



Half of a Round Clay Oven



Dr. Dale Manor, Field Director at Beth Shemesh, Informs Students About the Excavations

Modern Beth Shemesh was founded in 1950. Now the city has a population of approximately 125,000. There are many conflicts between the different sects of Jews living there; these are generally fueled by the ultra-orthodox. The disputes involve issues such as real-estate, the growth of communities, modesty, and gender segregation.