

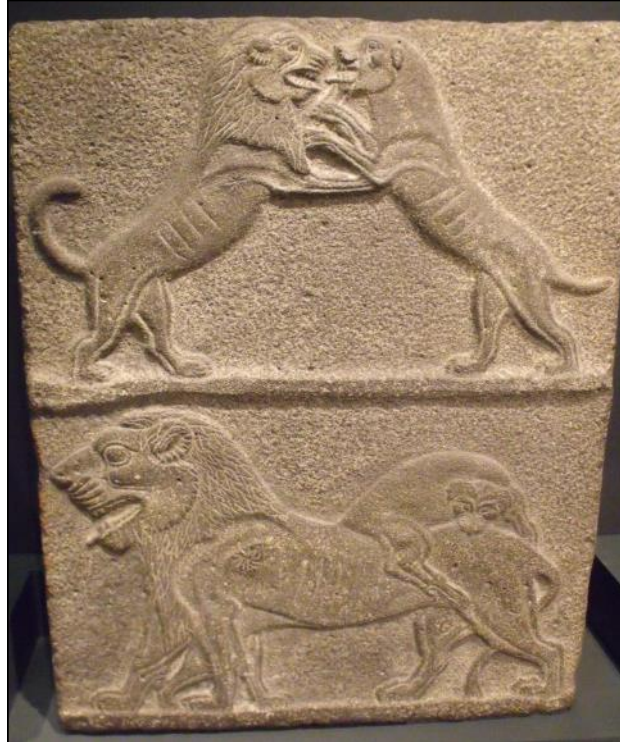
BETH SHEAN

Beth Shean was a city whose name meant “house” or “temple of Shean” (perhaps a reference to an unknown deity). The Old Testament city of Beth Shean is a tel about 260 feet high. It was built on a natural hill, but the height of the tel has grown due to the destruction and rebuilding of the city over the millennia. Archaeologists believe that the site contains eighteen construction levels.



The city was located where the Valley of the Jordan intersects with the Valley of Jezreel. It was two to three miles west of the Jordan River and eighteen miles south of the Sea of Galilee. The fertile soil and abundant water supply attracted early settlers to the area; archaeologists have determined that the site was inhabited as far back as the fourth millennium B.C. As time passed, the area became a junction of highways that connected the empires of the ancient Near East. Trade caravans passed through the area as they traveled between Egypt and Mesopotamia. This traffic contributed to the city’s economic development.

Beth Shean was viewed as a strategic city of great importance, as is evident from Egyptian records. For example, it is listed among the conquests of Thutmose III in the fifteenth century B.C. (*ANET*, 242). The site was utilized as a military base and administrative center by the Egyptians.



A Lion and a Lioness Fighting Together
14th Century B.C.
(Israel Museum, Jerusalem)



Serpentine Cylinder Seal Bearing the Throne Name of Ramses II
from Temple at Beth Shean
13th Century B.C.
(Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem)

The king is portrayed on the right, wearing a war crown and shooting arrows at a target, to which Canaanite prisoners are tied. A Canaanite god stands opposite of him, presenting a sword to the king with his left hand and holding the Egyptian symbol of life in his right. The king's name, framed by a cartouche, is found above the scene.



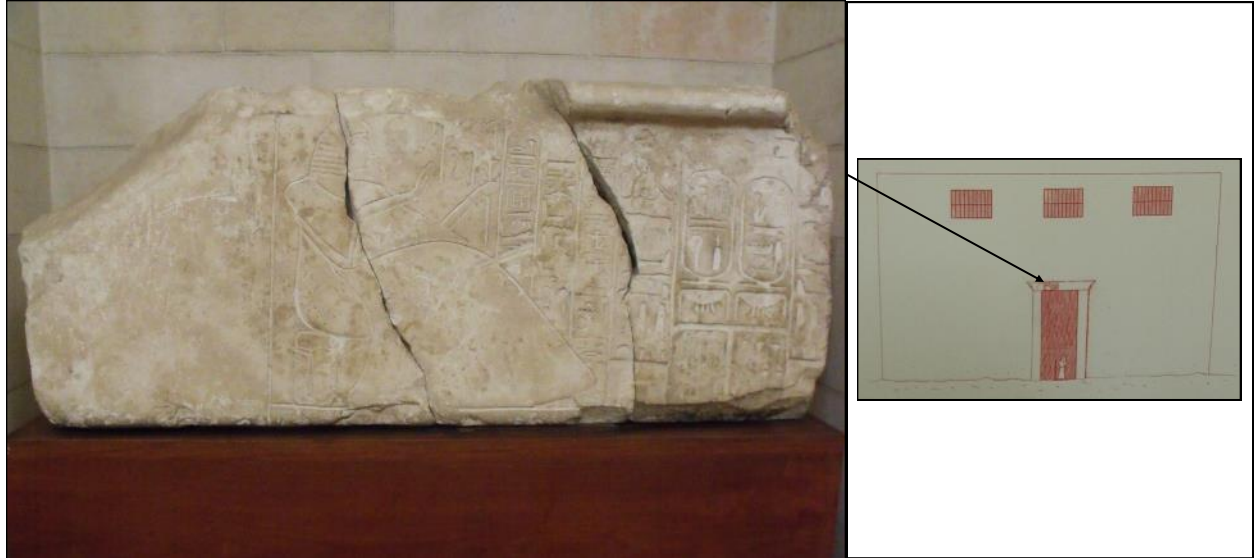
Stela of Seti I
13th Century B.C.
(Rockefeller Museum)

Seti I led a military campaign into Canaan near the beginning of his reign in order to put down a rebellion in the region of Beth Shean. This basalt stela was erected at Beth Shean to commemorate the king's victory. On the upper portion of the stela, the king is presenting incense and a libation to the sun god, Re-Harakhte, who is portrayed as a human with a falcon head crowned with a sun disk.



Statue of Ramses III
12th Century B.C.
(Rockefeller Museum)

This basalt statue of Ramses III from Beth Shean testifies to the continued Egyptian influence in the region before it was dominated by the Philistines. Seated on a throne, Ramses III is wearing a wig crowned with a uraeus (royal cobra). He also has on a beaded necklace, a short kilt, and sandals. His throne name is inscribed on his left shoulder and his birth name is on his right.

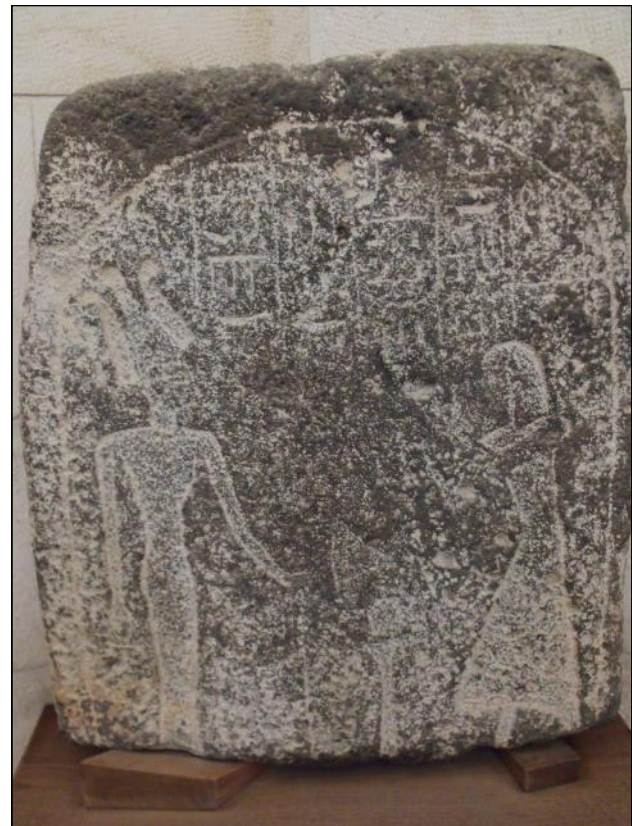
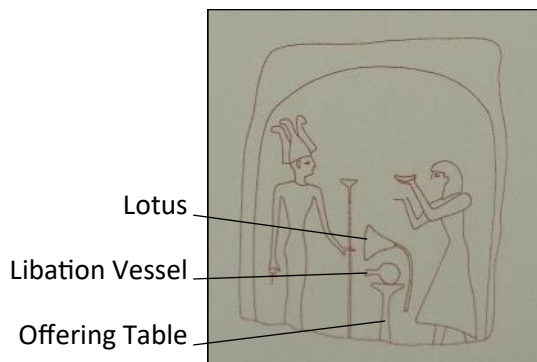


Fragment of a Door Lintel with the Name of Ramses III
 12th Century B.C.
 (Rockefeller Museum)

This limestone fragment was found at Beth Shean in an Egyptian administration building referred to as the Governor's Palace. It is inscribed with a dedication to Ramses III, since the building was constructed during his reign. The royal scribe/chief steward of the king has his hands raised in adoration.

Stela of the Goddess Anat
 12th Century B.C.
 (Rockefeller Museum)

The singer Nakht (right) is portrayed as presenting an offering to the Canaanite goddess Anat (left), who was viewed as Baal's consort. Anat is called "lady of heaven, mistress of all gods." This stela demonstrates that the Egyptians in Canaan worshiped Canaanite deities.





Beth Shean, 12th-11th Century B.C.
(Israel Museum)

Ritual Stands Decorated with a Fertility Goddess
and Other Figures



There is no mention of the Israelites defeating Beth Shean in the conquest of Canaan. The city was allotted to the tribe of Manasseh, but they did not drive out the Canaanites living there, who had a fleet of iron chariots (Josh. 17:11, 16; Judg. 1:27).

By the time of Saul, the first king of Israel (1050-1010 B.C.), Beth Shean was controlled by the Philistines. While engaging the Philistines in battle, Saul's sons were killed on Mount Gilboa. After Saul himself was seriously wounded by archers, he fell on his own sword so the enemy would not torture him. Then the Philistines came and decapitated the fallen king. They placed his armor in the temple of the Ashtoreths and fastened his body and the bodies of his sons to the wall of Beth Shean. Valiant men from Jabesh Gilead traveled at night to Beth Shean and removed the bodies of the king and princes from their disgraceful display. They burned them and gave their bones an honorable burial (1 Sam. 31:1-13). Later, David exhumed the remains and took them to the territory of Benjamin to be buried in the tomb of Saul's father Kish (2 Sam. 21:12-14).



Anthropoid Coffin from Beth Shean
12th-11th Century B.C.
(Rockefeller Museum)

Anthropoid coffins were roughly cylindrical, beginning with a domed top and tapering to a flat base. They were adopted from the Egyptians and used by the Philistines, although they did not become common. The one shown here portrays a Philistine feathered headdress. The human features are in the "grotesque style," with exaggerated facial features and tiny arms and hands.

Although the Bible is silent on the matter, Beth Shean was likely conquered by Israel during the time of David, along with other cities like Taanach and Megiddo. During the reign of his son Solomon, Beth Shean was identified with the fifth district in the kingdom (1 Kings 4:12). The rule of the Israelites over Beth Shean lasted nearly three hundred years, and then the city fell to the Assyrians—perhaps in the military campaign of 732 B.C. (2 Kings 15:29).

During the Hellenistic period, the city was rebuilt and named Scythopolis, which means “city of Scythians.” Some think that this name was derived from Scythian cavalry stationed there by Ptolemy II, who ruled both Egypt and Palestine. Instead of a cavalry, Pliny the Elder mentioned a Scythian colony established there (Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 5.74). Scythopolis was later given the additional name Nyssa. In Greek mythology, Nyssa was the nurse of Dionysius, the god of wine (who was worshiped at Scythopolis).

In 107 B.C., the city was conquered by the Hasmonean ruler John Hyrcanus (Josephus *Antiquities* 13.10.3). Later, Alexander Jannaeus forcibly converted the inhabitants of the city to Judaism or killed them if they refused (*Antiquities* 13.15.4). After the Roman Pompey conquered Palestine in 63 B.C., he made Scythopolis a part of the Decapolis (*Antiquities* 14.4.4; Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 5.74). It was the only one of these ten cities that was on the west side of the Jordan. During Jesus’ ministry, people came from the Decapolis to hear his teaching and witness his miracles (Mt. 4:25). In Roman times, the city of Scythopolis was built below Tel Beth Shean on an area of about 320 acres. The city flourished into the Byzantine period. Later, while under Muslim control, it was destroyed by an earthquake (A.D. 749).

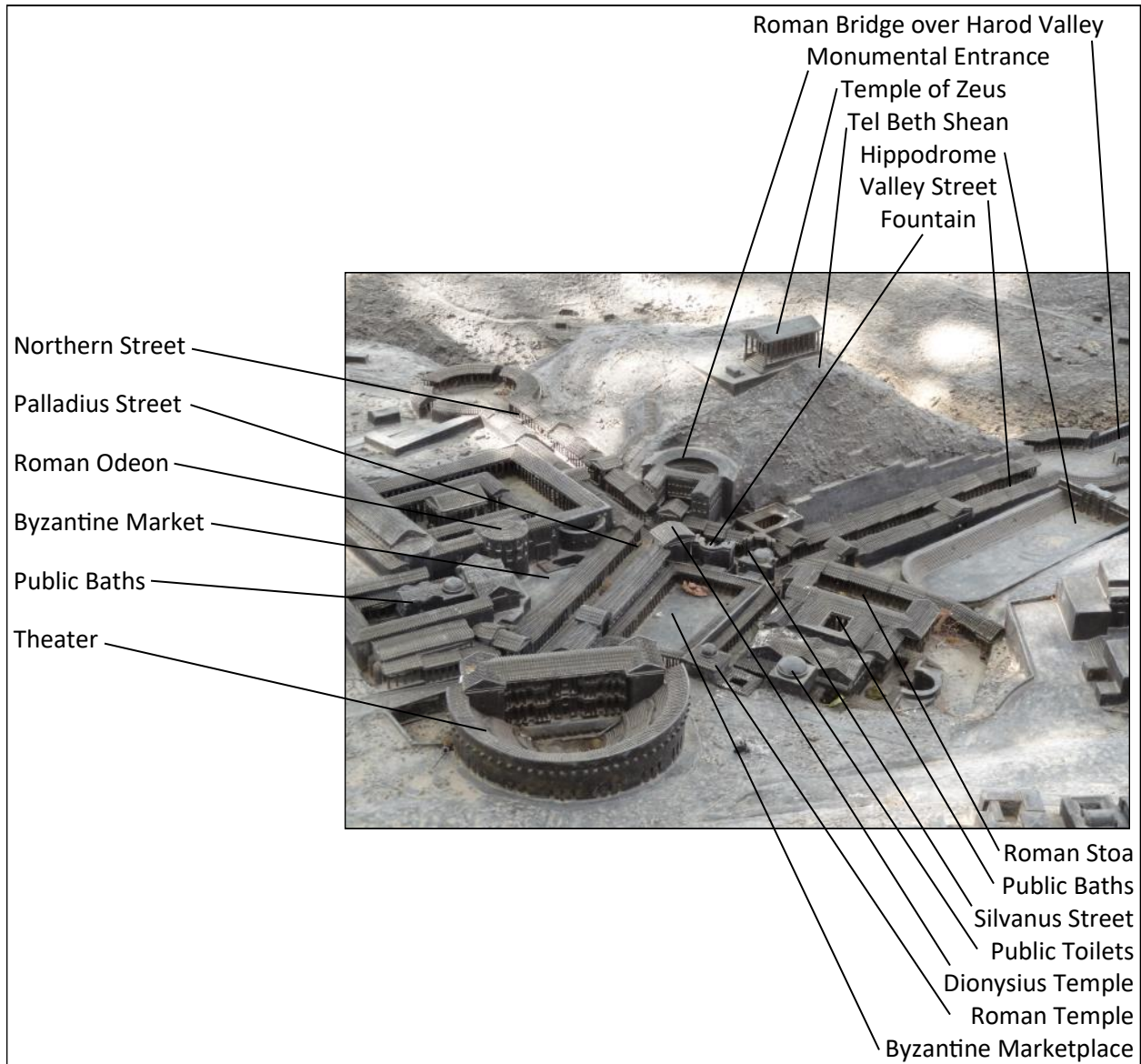
In addition to the Rockefeller Museum and the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, artifacts from Tel Beth Shean can be found at the Beth Shean Museum, the Museum of Regional and Mediterranean Archaeology, and the University of Pennsylvania Museum. Archaeologists from this university were responsible for the initial excavations of the tel.



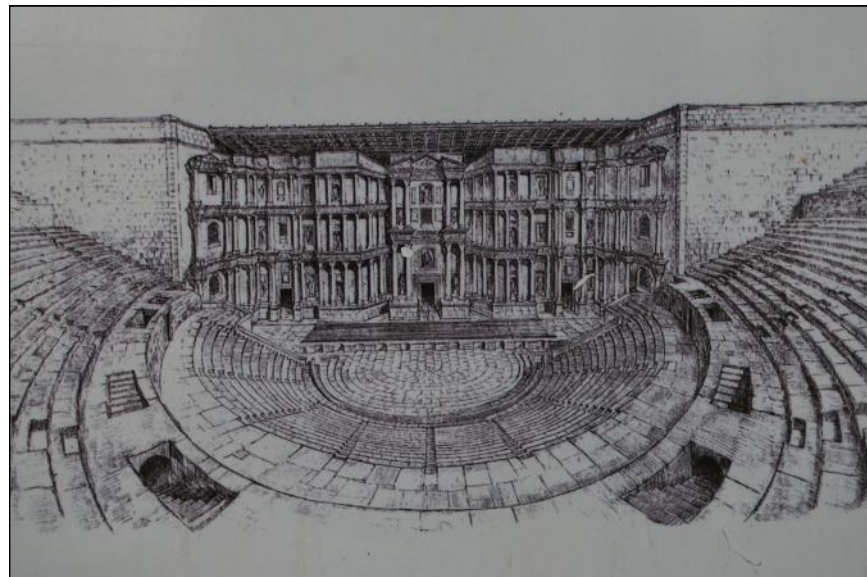
Tel Beth Shean with Scythopolis in the Foreground



Model of Beth Shean (Scythopolis) in the Roman/Byzantine Period



Amphitheater Outer Wall Theater Tel Gate Harod Valley



Artist's Reconstruction of the Roman Theater

The Roman theater is among the most impressive discoveries at Beth Shean. Having accommodated approximately 7,000 spectators, it is considered one of the largest, best preserved, and most elaborate Roman structures in Israel. The theater dates to the first or second century A.D.



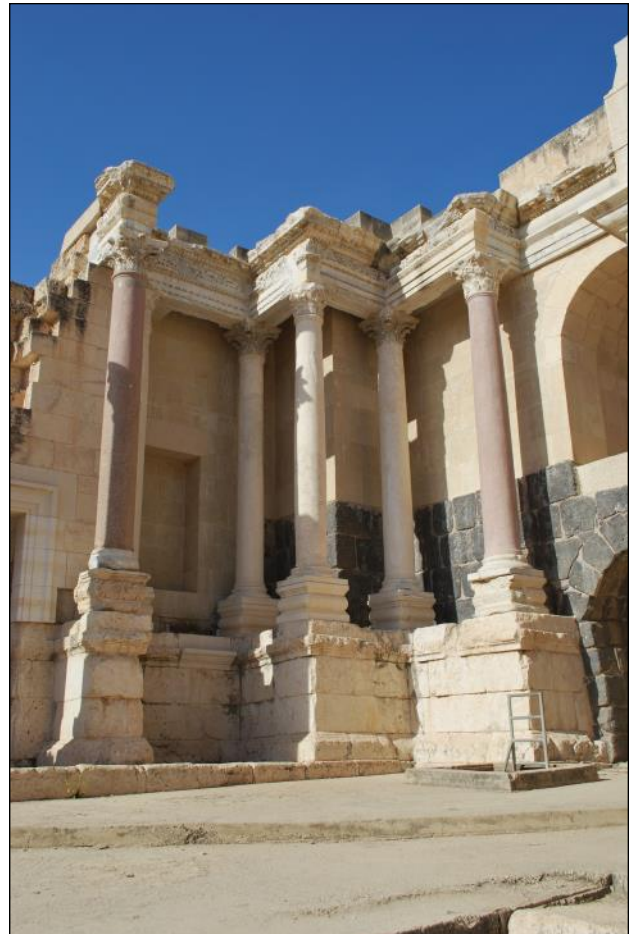
Remaining Lower Level of Theater Seating and Exits



Stage Area of the Theater



Entrances of the Theater





Palladius Street (View from Theater End)



Palladius Street (View from Tel End)

Palladius Street has received its name from a circular mosaic inscription. The peaked stones running down the middle of the street cover the sewage drain. The sidewalks on either side of the street were covered (colonnaded).



Sidewalk with Mosaics Later Covered with Marble Tiles



Byzantine Marketplace
(Semi-Circular Concourse Expanded Shops)



Ancient Shop
Along Palladius Street



Mosaic from the Sidewalk on Palladius Street

“In the time of Palladius son of Porphyrius, the most magnificent governor, the work of the stoa together with the mosaic pavement” (Murphy-O’Connor, 223).



Tyche, the Goddess of Fortune
(Israel Museum)

This original mosaic from the shopping area along Palladius Street features Tyche, the goddess of fortune. She is crowned with the city walls and is holding a cornucopia (horn of plenty), symbolizing abundance for the people.



Northern Street Damaged from an Earthquake (A.D. 749)



Two Views of the Ruins from the Temple of Dionysius (Destroyed by an Earthquake)



Nymphaeum (Decorative Fountain) on Silvanus Street



Propylaeum (Monumental Entrance) at the Base of the Tel
Where Northern, Silvanus, and Palladius Streets Converge



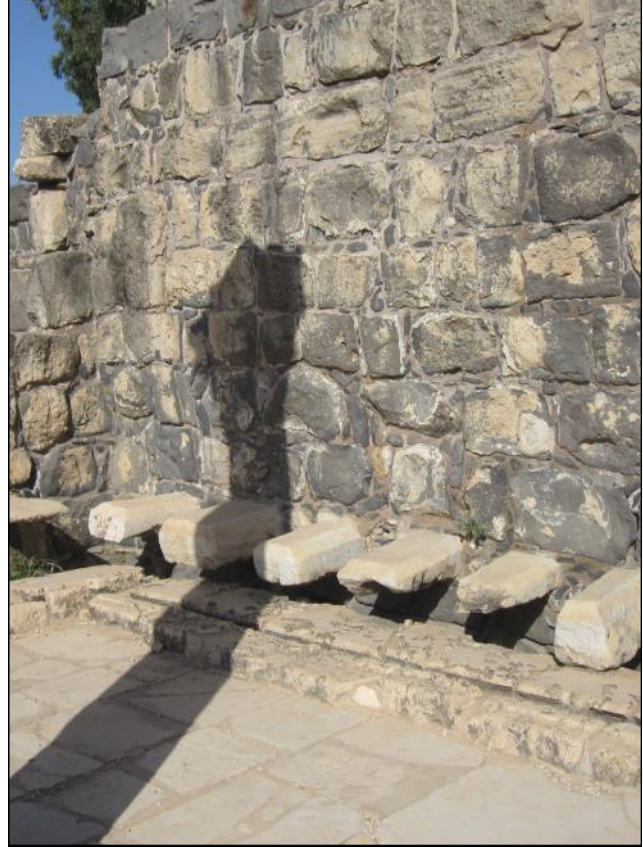
Monumental Structure (Silvanus Street)



Roman Stoa (Silvanus Street)



Building at the End of Silvanus Street



Public Latrine





Amphitheater (2nd Century A.D.)



Byzantine Marketplace



Synagogue Floor from Beth Shean
5th-7th Century A.D.
(Israel Museum)

This mosaic, excavated in a synagogue in northern Beth Shean, features a shrine with two columns that may represent the temple. Within those columns appears a Torah shrine covered by a curtain. This central piece is flanked by two large menorahs. The scene also has shofars (rams' horns) and incense shovels—objects used in temple rituals. These images appear in other synagogue mosaics discovered in Israel from this time period. Some think that this synagogue served a Samaritan community rather than a Jewish one.

Samaritan synagogues have indeed been uncovered in the area of Beth Shean. The most recent one, discovered in 2010, faces Mount Gerizim where the Samaritan temple once stood. This synagogue has a floor mosaic that reads “This is the temple.” The vicinity of Beth Shean became an important Samaritan center in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.