

What is the importance of Gilgal in the Bible?

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There are at least two locations named Gilgal in the Bible. There was a Gilgal just west of the Jordan River near Jericho (Joshua 5:9, 13) and one nearer Bethel (2 Kings 2:1-2). Some scholars believe there was a third place named Gilgal near Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal (Deuteronomy 11:29-30). The meaning of the name Gilgal is “rolling.”

Gilgal is not mentioned in the New Testament, but the Old Testament depicts it as follows:

Gilgal was a place of memorial. Gilgal is significant in the Bible as serving as a place of memorial for the Israelites, to remind them of what God had done. After miraculously crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land, the Israelites set up twelve stones taken from the river, representing the twelve tribes, to serve as a reminder to the children of Israel (Joshua 4:19-20). The stones at Gilgal would remind the Israelites and their descendants of the power of God and how He had dried up the Jordan River so they could walk through it, just as He had done to the Red Sea (Joshua 4:21-24). The stones at Gilgal would serve a teaching purpose to the younger generation, so that they too could remember what the Lord had done for them (Joshua 4:21-22).

Gilgal was a place of consecration and change. It was at Gilgal that the Israelites were circumcised and celebrated their first Passover in the Promised Land (Joshua 5:7-8, 10). The children of those who had wandered in the desert had not yet been circumcised, and it was time for them to take the sign of the covenant and be set apart as God’s people. This time of circumcision is what gave Gilgal its name, for the Lord said He had “rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you” (Joshua 5:9). The “reproach” was the Israelites’

uncircumcised condition; the “rolling away” of that reproach set them apart, once and for all, from the Egyptian people and way of life. After the Israelites celebrated the Passover and began to eat the produce of their new land, the manna that the Lord had provided the Israelites during their years of wandering stopped. This also happened while they were camped at Gilgal (Joshua 5:11-12).

A place of worship. Years later, Gilgal was still a place of worship to offer sacrifices to the Lord, and it was the place where Saul was publicly crowned the first king of Israel (1 Samuel 10:8; 11:15). Unfortunately, as the Israelites slipped into idolatry, Gilgal became connected with the worship of false gods (Hosea 4:15; Amos 4:4).

A place of judgment. It was at Gilgal that Samuel rebuked Saul and prophesied of his loss of the kingdom (1 Samuel 13:13-14). Saul had been instructed to stay at Gilgal and wait for Samuel before offering sacrifices to the Lord there (1 Samuel 10:8; 13:8). Rather than obey, Saul took the matter in his own hands and sacrificed to the Lord at Gilgal (1 Samuel 13:9-12). When Samuel arrived, he announced judgment on Saul for his disobedience, stating that Saul’s kingdom and position would not endure (1 Samuel 13:14).

A place of prophets. Gilgal was one of three cities where Samuel regularly held court as the judge of Israel (1 Samuel 7:16). It seems that Elijah and Elisha spent some time at a place called Gilgal before Elijah’s departure to heaven (2 Kings 2:1-2). This is most likely not the same Gilgal as where Joshua had camped; rather, it is a place nearer Bethel in central Canaan. Sometime after Elijah was gone, Elisha returned to Gilgal where many other prophets resided (2 Kings 4:38). There, he found that Gilgal was in the midst of a famine and so made sure the prophets were fed. He also miraculously fed

around a hundred other residents (2 Kings 4:38-44).

Gilgal was a significant place in that it reminded the Israelites of their heritage, served as a place of worship, and was visited by kings and prophets.