

# Bethel

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Beth'-el (Heb. *Beyth-El'*, בֵּית אֱלֹהִים, *house of God* [see below]; Sept. usually Βαιθήλ; Josephus [τὰ] Βήθηλα, or [ἡ] Βηθήλη), the name of one or two towns.

1. A city of central Palestine, memorable as a holy site from early times. Many have inferred (from [Jg 1:23,26](#); [Jos 18:13](#)) that it was the same place originally called Luz (q.v.), but from other passages it appears that they were different, although contiguous (see below). Of the origin of the name Bethel there: are two accounts extant: 1. It was bestowed on the spot by Jacob under the awe inspired by the nocturnal vision of God when on his journey from his father's house at Beersheba to seek his wife in Haran ([Ge 28:19](#)). He took the stone which had served for his pillow and put (נִשַּׁבֵּךְ) it for a pillar, and anointed it with oil; and he "called the name of that place (הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה) Bethel; but the name of 'the' city (הַעִיר) was called Luz at the first." The expression in the last paragraph of this account is curious, and indicates a distinction between the early Canaanite "city" Luz and the "place," as yet a mere undistinguished spot, marked only by the "stone" or the heap (Joseph. τοῖς λίθοις συμφορούμενοις) erected by Jacob to commemorate his vision. 2. But, according to the other account, Bethel received its name on the occasion of a blessing bestowed by God upon Jacob after his return from Padan-aram, at which time also (according to this narrative) the name of Israel was given him. Here again Jacob erects (יִצְבֶּחֶת) a "pillar of stone," which, as before, he anoints with oil ([Ge](#)

[35:14-15](#)). The key of this story would seem to be the fact of God's "speaking" with Jacob. "God went up from him in the place where He 'spake' with him" — "Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He 'spake' with him,"" and "called the name of the place where God spake with him Bethel." Although these two narratives evidently represent distinct events, yet, as would appear to be the case in other instances in the lives of the patriarchs, the latter is but a renewal of the original transaction. It is perhaps worth notice that the prophet Hosea, in the only reference which the Hebrew Scriptures contain to this occurrence, had evidently the second of the two narratives before him, since in a summary of the life of Jacob he introduces it in the order in which it occurs in Genesis, laying full and characteristic stress on the key- word of the story: "He had power over the angel and prevailed; he wept and made supplication unto him; He found him in Bethel, and there He *spake* with us, even Jehovah, God of hosts" ([Ho 12:4-5](#)). Both these accounts agree in omitting any mention of town or buildings at Bethel at that early period, and in drawing a marked distinction between the "city" of Luz and the consecrated "place" in its neighborhood (comp. [Ge 35:7](#)). Even in the ancient chronicles of the conquest the two are still distinguished ([Jos 16:1-2](#)); and the appropriation of the name of Bethel to the city appears not to have been made till yet later, when it was taken by the tribe of Ephraim, after which the name of Luz occurs no more ([Jg 1:22-26](#)). If this view be correct, there is a strict parallel between Bethel and Moriah — which (according to the tradition commonly followed) received its consecration when Abraham offered up Isaac, but did not become the site of an actual sanctuary till the erection of the Temple there by Solomon. *SEE MORIAH.* — The actual stone of Bethel itself is the subject of a Jewish tradition, according to which it was removed to the second Temple, and

served as the pedestal for the ark, where it survived the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, and was resorted to by the Jews in their lamentations (Reland, *Palaest.* p. 638). At a still earlier date, according to [Ge 12:8](#), the i name of Bethel would appear to have existed at this spot even before the arrival of Abram in Canaan: he removed from the oaks of Moreh to "the' mountain on the east of Bethel," with "Bethel on the west and; Hai on the east." Here he built an altar; and hither he returned from Egypt with Lot before their separation ([Ge 13:3-4](#)). In these passages, however, the name seems to be used *proleptically*, with reference to the history of Jacob. After his prosperous return, Bethel became a favorite station with Jacob; here he built an altar, buried Deborah, received the name of Israel (for the second time), and promises of blessing; and here also he accomplished the vow which he had made on his going forth ([Ge 35:1-15](#); comp. [Ge 32:28](#), and [Ge 28:20-22](#)). Although not a town in those early times, at the conquest of the land Bethel (unless this be a different place [see below]) is mentioned as a royal city of the Canaanites ([Jos 12:16](#)). It became a boundary town of Benjamin toward Ephraim ([Jos 18:22](#)), and was actually conquered by the latter tribe from the Canaanites ([Jg 1:22-26](#)). In the troubled times when there was no king in Israel, it a was to Bethel that the people went up in their distress to ask counsel of God ([Jg 20:18,31](#); [Jg 21:2](#); in the A. V. the name is translated "house of God"). At this place, already consecrated in the time of the patriarchs, the ark of the covenant was, apparently for a long while, deposited, *SEE ARK*, and probably the tabernacle also ([Jg 20:26](#); comp. [1Sa 10:3](#)), under the charge of Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, with an altar and proper appliances for the offering of burnt-offerings and peace-offerings ([1Sa 21:4](#)); and the unwonted mention of a regular road or causeway as existing between it

and the great town of Shechem is doubtless an indication that it was already in much repute. It was also one of the places at which Samuel held in rotation his court of justice ([1Sa 7:16](#)). After the separation of the kingdoms Bethel was included in that of Israel, which seems to show that although originally, in the formal distribution, assigned to Benjamin, it had been actually possessed by Ephraim in right of conquest from the Canaanites, a fact that may have been held by that somewhat unscrupulous tribe as determining their right of possession to a place of importance close on their own frontier. Jeroboam made it the southern seat (Dan being the northern) of the worship of the golden calves; and it seems to have been the chief seat of that worship ([1Ki 12:28-33](#); [1Ki 13:1](#)). The choice of Bethel was probably determined by the consideration that the spot was already sacred in the estimation of the Israelites, not only from patriarchal consecration, but from the more recent presence of the ark; which might seem to point it out as a proper seat for an establishment designed to rival that of Jerusalem. This appropriation, however, completely desecrated Bethel in the estimation of the orthodox Jews; and the prophets name it with abhorrence and contempt — even applying to it, by a sort of *jeu de mot*, the name of BETH-AVEN (*house of idols*) instead of Beth-el (*house of God*) ([Am 5:5](#); [Ho 4:15](#); [Ho 5:8](#); [Ho 10:5,8](#)). The town was taken from Jeroboam by Abijah, king of Judah ([2Ch 13:19](#)); but it again reverted to Israel ([2Ki 10:28](#)), being probably recovered by Baasha ([2Ch 16:1](#)). It then remains unmentioned for a long period. The worship of Baal, introduced by the Phoenician queen of Ahab ([1Ki 16:31](#)), had probably alienated public favor from the simple erections of Jeroboam to more gorgeous shrines ([2Ki 10:21-22](#)). Samaria had been built ([1Ki 16:24](#)), and Jezreel, and these things must have all tended to draw public notice to the more northern part of the kingdom. It was

during this period that Elijah visited Bethel, and that we hear of "sons of the prophets" as resident there ([2Ki 2:2-3](#)), two facts apparently incompatible with the active existence of the calf-worship. The mention of the bears so close to the town (in, 23, 25) looks, too, as if the neighborhood were not much frequented at that time. But after his destruction of the Baal worship throughout the country, Jehu appears to have returned to the simpler and more national religion of the calves, and Bethel comes once more into view ([2Ki 10:29](#)).

Under the descendants of this king the place and the worship must have greatly flourished, for by the time of Jeroboam II, the great-grandson of Jehu, the rude village was again a royal residence with a "king's house" ([Am 7:13](#)); there were palaces both for "winter" and "summer," "great houses" and "houses of ivory" ([Am 3:15](#)), and a very high degree of luxury in dress, furniture, and living ([Am 6:4-6](#)). The one original altar was now accompanied by several others ([Am 3:14](#); [Am 2:8](#)); and the simple "incense" of its founder had developed into the "burnt-offerings" and "meat-offerings" of "solemn assemblies," with the fragrant "peace- offerings" of "fat beasts" ([Am 5:21-22](#)).

⇒Bible concordance for BETH-EL.

Bethel was the scene of the paradoxical tragedy of the prophet from Judah, who denounced the divine vengeance against Jeroboam's altar, and was afterward slain by a lion for disobeying the Lord's injunctions, being seduced by the false representations of another prophet residing there, by whom his remains were interred, and thus both were eventually preserved from profanation ([1Ki 13](#); [2Ki 23:16-18](#)). Josephus gives the name of the prophet from Judah as *Jadon*, and adds an extended account of the character of the old Bethelite prophet (*Ant.* 8, 9), which he paints in the darkest hues (see Kitto's *Daily Bible Illust.*; Patrick's and Clarke's

*Comment., in loc.)* The lion probably issued from the grove adjoining Bethel (comp. [2Ki 2:23-24](#)). (See Keil, *Com. on Joshua* p. 180- 182; Stiebritz, *De propheta a leone necato*, Hal. 1733).

⇒See also the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.

After the desolation of the northern kingdom by the King of Assyria, Bethel still remained an abode of priests, who taught the wretched colonists "how to fear Jehovah," "the God of the land" ([2Ki 17:28-29](#)). The buildings remained till all traces of this illegal worship were extirpated by Josiah, king of Judah, who thus fulfilled a prophecy made to Jeroboam 350 years before ([2Ki 13:1-2](#); [2Ki 23:15-18](#)). The place was still in existence after the captivity, and was in the possession of the Benjamites ([Ezr 2:28](#); [Ne 7:32](#)), who returned to their native place while continuing their relations with Nehemiah and the restored worship ([Ne 11:31](#)). In the time of the Maccabees Bethel was fortified by Bacchides for the King of Syria (Joseph. *Antiq.* 13, 1, 13). It is not named in the New Testament, but it still existed and was taken by Vespasian (Josephus, *War*, 4, 9, 9). Bethel is mentioned by Eusebius and Jerome in the *Onomasticon* (s.v. Βαιθιήλ, Bethel) as 12 miles from Jerusalem, on the right hand of the road to Sichem. Bethel and its name were believed to have perished until within these few years; yet it has been ascertained by the Protestant missionaries at Jerusalem that the name and a knowledge of the site still existed among the people of the land. The name was indeed preserved in the form of *Beitin*- the Arabic termination *in* for the Hebrew *el* being not an unusual change. Its identity with Bethel had been recognised by the Oriental Christian priests, who endeavored to bring into use the Arabic form *Beitil*, as being nearer to the original; but it had not found currency beyond the circle of their influence. The situation of Beitin corresponds very exactly

with the intimations afforded by Eusebius and others, the distance from Jerusalem being 3.5 hours. The ruins cover a space of "three or four acres," and consist of "very many foundations and half-standing walls of houses and other buildings." "They lie upon the front of a low hill, between the heads of two hollow wadys, which unite and run off into the main valley es- Suweinit" (Robinson, *Researches*, 2:125, 126). Dr. Clarke, and other travelers since his visit, have remarked on the "stony" nature of the soil at Bethel as perfectly in keeping with the narrative of Jacob's slumber there. When on the spot little doubt can be felt as to the localities of this interesting place. The round mount S.E. of Bethel must be the "mountain" on which Abram built the altar, and on which he and Lot stood when they made their division of the land ([Ge 12:7](#); [Ge 13:10](#)). It is still thickly strewn to its top with stones formed by nature for the building of an "altar" or sanctuary. (See Stanley, *Sinai and Palest.* p. 217-223). The spot is shut in by higher land on every side. The ruins are more considerable than those of a "large village," as the place was in the time of Jerome; and it is therefore likely that, although unnoticed in history, it afterward revived and was enlarged. The ruined churches upon the site and beyond the valley evince that it was a place of importance even down to the Middle Ages. Besides these, there yet remain numerous foundations and half-standing walls of houses and other buildings: on the highest part are the ruins of a square tower, and in the western valley are the remains of one of the largest reservoirs in the country, being 314 feet in length by 217 in breadth. The bottom is now a green grass-plat, having in it two living springs of good water. (See Hackett's *Illustra. of Script.* p. 171-178).

Professor Robinson (*Biblioth. Sac.* 1843, p. 456 sq.) thinks that Bethel may be identical with the *Bether*, not far from

Jerusalem, where the revolt under Barcocheba (q.v.), in the time of Adrian, was finally extinguished (Euseb. *Hist. Ecc.* 4, 6); the *Betarum*, which lay 18 Roman miles from Caesarea toward Lydda (*Itin. Ant.* p. 150), and differently named and located by other ancient notices. This place, he shows, is once called *Bethel* (Jerome, *Comment. in Zec 3:10*); and *Bethel* is once called *Bethar* (Bourdeaux Pilgrim, *Itin. Hieros.* p. 588). *SEE BETHER.*

**2.** A town in the south part of Judah ([1Sa 30:27](#), where the collocation of the name is decisive against its being the well-known *Bethel*; many copies of the Sept. read Βαΐθσούρ, i.e. *Bethzur*). Perhaps the same city is denoted in [Jos 12:16](#); but comp. ch. 8:17. By comparison of the lists of the towns of Judah and Simeon ([Jos 15:30](#); [Jos 19:4](#); [1Ch 5:26,26](#)), the place appears to have borne also the names of **CHESIL** *SEE CHESIL*, **BETHUL** *SEE BETHUL* (q.v.), and *SEE BETHUEL*.