

What is the significance of Bethel in the Bible?

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Two towns named Bethel appear in the Bible. The Bethel of lesser significance, a village in the Negev, is mentioned as one of the places where David sent spoils to his friends, the elders of Judah (1 Samuel 30:26-27). Another Bethel, a city of foremost importance in the Bible, was located about 11 miles north of Jerusalem near Ai. A major trading center, Bethel stood at a crossroads, with its north-south road passing through the central hill country from Hebron in the south to Shechem in the north, and its main east-west route leading from Jericho to the Mediterranean Sea. Only Jerusalem is mentioned more frequently than Bethel in the Old Testament.

The Hebrew name Bethel means “house of God” and refers to both the city and the site of a major sanctuary that was established there for the northern kingdom of Israel. Bethel sat at the boundary between the tribes of Ephraim and Benjamin and eventually delineated the border between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Although Bethel was in the dry hill country, several natural springs supplied water in abundance for its residents.

Bethel is first mentioned in the Bible in connection with Abram, who built an altar to God there: “From there [Abram] went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD” (Genesis 12:8). After visiting Egypt, Abraham returned to Bethel and offered a sacrifice to God (Genesis 13:3-4).

Originally named Luz (Genesis 28:19; Judges 1:23), the city was renamed Bethel by Jacob after the patriarch experienced a remarkable dream there. While traveling from Beersheba

to Haran to escape his brother Esau, Jacob stopped for the night in Luz. As he slept, he dreamed of a stairway or ladder that stretched up from earth to heaven. The angels of God were climbing up and down the ladder as God stood at the top (Genesis 28:10-13). The Lord spoke and revealed Himself to Jacob as the God of his fathers. When Jacob awoke, he declared, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:17). Then Jacob set up a sacred pillar, named the place Bethel (verses 18-19), and consecrated the site as a place to worship God (verse 21).

Many years later, Jacob returned to Bethel, built an altar to God there, and called the place El-Bethel, which means "God of Bethel." Bethel remained one of the main worship centers of Israel. The ark of the covenant was kept at Bethel for a time, and the people often went there to seek God during times of trouble (Judges 20:18-28). The Bible says Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, was buried under an oak tree near Bethel (Genesis 35:8), and the better-known Deborah, judge of Israel, held court at a site between Ramah and Bethel (Judges 4:5).

During the time of the divided kingdoms, King Jeroboam of Israel established two temples for the northern kingdom, one at Bethel and the other at Dan. In these temples, he set up golden calves (1 Kings 12:26-33). God often sent prophets to preach at Bethel (1 Kings 13:1-10). Many of these prophets pronounced judgment and condemnation on Bethel as a center of idolatry (Amos 3:14; 5:5-6; Hosea 10:15).

On Elijah's last day of ministry on earth, he and Elisha encountered a company of prophets at Bethel. These prophets confirmed Elijah's soon departure: "Elijah said to Elisha, 'Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel.' But Elisha said, 'As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.' So they went down to Bethel. The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, 'Do you know that the

LORD is going to take your master from you today?' 'Yes, I know,' Elisha replied, 'so be quiet'" (2 Kings 2:2-3). Elisha refused to leave Elijah. He was fiercely committed to assuming the older prophet's mantle and did not want to miss out on the opportunity.

After the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians, Bethel remained a home for priests (2 Kings 17:28-41). In the seventh century BC, the high places of Bethel were destroyed by King Josiah of Judah as part of his religious reforms (2 Kings 23:4, 13-19). Eventually, by the time of Ezra, the city of Bethel had been burned down and reduced to a small village (Ezra 2:28). Bethel is not referred to in the New Testament.