

Word Study of “Bethel” and Its Significance to Old Testament History (And Its Lessons to be Learned with Regards to Worship Today)

By Joshua Stucki

I. Definition: From Genesis 28:19 – “House of God”

II. There are three (3) distinct places called “Bethel” in Scripture:

1) Bethel, a land area outside of Canaan in Abraham’s day (Genesis 12:8, 13:3).

2) Bethel, previously a city named Luz until Jacob renamed it, in Canaan. Bethel is referred to as both Bethel and Luz throughout the Old Testament, depending on where it is referenced and in what context. See Genesis 28:19, 31:13, 35:6, etc.

3) El Bethel, the specific place in the city of Bethel (Luz) where Jacob built an altar to the Lord. “El Bethel” means “God of Bethel”, referring to where God spoke to Jacob (Genesis 35:7).

III. Other Facts about Bethel:

1) After the time of Jacob but before Moses and Joshua, the city of Bethel became occupied with Canaanites/giants/Nephilim:

a) Joshua 12:16 (also referenced in verse 9) – the city and king of Bethel was conquered by Joshua and the Israelites

b) Joshua 7:2; 8:9, 12, and 17 show Israel conquering the Canaanites who lived around Bethel, before conquering Bethel itself in Joshua 12.

c) Joshua 16:1+2, 18:13+22, and Judges 1:22+23 show the Israelite tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh (sons of Joseph) were given their land inheritance also in the city of Bethel after it was conquered

d) The Biblical record shows that the people groups who inhabited Canaan (and thus Bethel) were Nephilim, or giants:

i) 1 Chronicles 20:4, 6, + 8 (also see verse 1 in the same chapter) – Philistines and others “descended from the giants”

ii) Genesis 6:1-4 tells us the origin of the Nephilim and that they also existed after the flood, and Numbers 13:33 is the witness of Israel attesting to their continuing existence at that time in Canaan.

iii) Numbers 13:33 tells us that the Nephilim were also called giants, or some of the Nephilim were called “the sons of Anak” – also referred to in Deuteronomy 1:28, 2:10, 11, 21, 9:2, Joshua 11:21+22, 14:12, 15, 15:13, 14, 21:11, and Judges 1:20

iv: The Philistines were descendants of the Nephilim as well, also existing in Canaan at the time of Joshua and thereafter even unto King David’s reign: Joshua 11:22, 1 Samuel 7:14, 2 Samuel 21:20+22, 1 Chronicles 18:1, 20:1, 4, 6, 8

v: There are many other references to the Nephilim, or giants, in the Old Testament. Their existence seems to end at the time of King David, when the Philistines were largely conquered, and played a minor role in history before their eventual extinction. It is thought that once the last giant once killed among the Philistines, they lost any significant ability to wage war and gain influence.

2) The Israelite judge Deborah held court in Bethel in Judges chapter 4.

3) The first actual judgment against homosexual sin in a tribe of Israel happened in Bethel against the tribe of Benjamin in Judges chapter 20. It was also in Bethel that the few that remained of Benjamin after the battle that commenced there were spared from extinction. Benjamin was the smallest of all the tribes from this point forward until the tribe as a whole ceased to exist along with Judah in 70AD in the destruction of Jerusalem. Two notable figures descended from Benjamin include King Saul and the Apostle Paul (which may explain his detailed condemnation of homosexuality in Romans 1:24-32).

4) The last judge and the first of the prophets in Israel, Samuel, ministered in Bethel in 1 Samuel chapters 7 and 10.

5) King Saul and King David conducted business in Bethel in 1 Samuel chapters 13 and 30.

6) Bethel became pagan again upon the Kingdom of Israel dividing as of 1 Kings chapter 12 and Jeroboam establishing pagan worship there and at the city of Dan instead of Jerusalem.

6a) Jeroboam, servant of Solomon, ruled the ten northern tribes, otherwise known as “Israel” from this point of Biblical history forward (the two southern tribes –

Benjamin and Judah - or the Southern Kingdom, were known as “Judah” from that forward).

6b) Jeroboam did not want his subjects going down to Jerusalem in Judah to worship, so he setup Bethel and Dan as alternative places to worship.

6c) Altogether, Jeroboam changed the place, time, priesthood, rites and deity to be worshipped:

i) Place: From Jerusalem to Bethel/Dan

ii) Time: From the 7th day to the 8th day of each feast month

iii) Priesthood: From the Levites to Jeroboam’s appointees

iv) Rites: From the rites of the Law of Moses to Jeroboam’s man-made instructions

v) Deity: From the one true God to golden calves

As a side-note, when people want to change the place, time, priesthood, rites, or deity to be worshipped today, this should inform us of a false religion creeping up, instead of the one Christ established.

Examples: many churches today change the object of worship (from God to Mary, for example), or the place of worship (from in spirit and truth from wherever Christians gather to “sanctuaries”), or the frequency of worship (from weekly Lord’s Supper to monthly, quarterly, or none at all), the priesthood (from all believers to a clergy/laity system), or the rites (from the Apostles’ teaching, communion, giving, and prayer to music, performances, staging, etc.).

7) God sent the prophets Elijah and Elisha to try to turn the city of Bethel back to God in 2 Kings chapter 2.

8) In 2 Kings 17, God attempted revival again by bringing in an exiled priest but the people ended up adopting syncretistic beliefs (believing and worshipping the one true God along with other gods and practicing contradictory moral behavior). This would later be reflected in the Gnostic cults of the New Testament, and today of course in modern culture.

9) King Josiah as recorded in 2 Kings chapters 21 through 23 and 2 Chronicles chapters 33 through 35 brought a generation of revival with God's help to Bethel and the surrounding areas. However, unfaithfulness and thus judgment returned after Josiah died.

10) Many prophecies specifically mention Bethel: Jeremiah 48:13, Hosea 10:15 and 12:4, Amos 3:14, 4:4, 5:5+6, 7:10+13, and Zechariah 7:2. Most of these prophecies are warning Bethel (and others) of their impending doom if they do not turn back to God. In 722BC, Bethel, along with all the northern tribes and their lands, were taken captive by Assyria, never to return.

IV: Lessons to be learned from Bethel's existence in history:

1) Even a place whose name means "House of God" does not mean it will be a place where faithfulness reigns; obedience must still be chosen by each generation who lives in any place.

Even in America, founded on Christian principles, does not mean it will be a place where obedience to God is guaranteed, or His protection sustained.

2) Even "giants" (of any kind) can be conquered by God when we are faithful to Him.

3) Homosexuality was and is condemned in Scripture.

4) Bethel was a place where prophets preached and kings worked but its eternal worth was only measured by the faithfulness of the people present in it.

5) When Bethel, the "House of God", became a place of pagan worship, on a pagan calendar, worshiping pagan gods, administered by pagan priests, appointed by a pagan king, it was judged and destroyed. May we also realize that any "house of God" we establish is only that insofar as we remain to the worship of God, on his calendar, as His priests, as instructed by Him alone.

6) Revival may come and go from an area, and then come back again. Each generation is judged on its own; faithfulness is always rewarded, and unfaithfulness is always judged and condemned.

7) Just like Bethel, there will come a day when there are no more chances, and the judgment will be final. May we persevere and be found faithful upon that Great Day!