

# BETHEL

Bethel is a prominent location in the Bible. Abraham encamped between Bethel and Ai because of its pastureland, and he built his first altar to the Lord there in the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:8). At one time the city was known as Luz, likely due to the almond trees nearby. It received the name Bethel, which means “house of God,” because it was the place where Jacob had his dream of the stairway to heaven (Gen. 28:10-22). At a later time, Jacob built an altar there as his grandfather Abraham had done (Gen. 35:1-7).

When the Israelites conquered the Promised Land under Joshua, they followed a three-prong strategy: (1) the central wedge, (2) the southern campaign, and (3) the northern campaign. Bethel, along with Jericho and Ai, was along the route of the central wedge. It is mentioned in the battle of Ai (Josh. 8:17). Bethel was on the border between the allotments given to Benjamin and Ephraim (Josh. 16:1-2; 18:13). The city was actually taken by “the house of Joseph,” which refers to Ephraim and Manasseh (Judg. 1:22-26). During the Judges period, the ark of the covenant was temporarily brought there from Shiloh (Judg. 20:26-28). Deborah held court between Bethel and Ramah (Judg. 4:5), and Samuel’s judging circuit included Bethel along with Gilgal and Mizpah (1 Sam. 7:16).

After the kingdom of Israel divided, Jeroboam set up a golden calf at Bethel as well as at Dan. These cities were respectively at the southern and northern extremities of the northern kingdom of Israel. Jeroboam set up these idols to prevent his people from returning to the Jerusalem temple in Judah to worship the Lord (1 Kings 12:28-33). Because of the idolatry at Bethel, the prophets often railed against that city (Jer. 48:13; Hos. 10:15; Amos 3:14; 4:4; 5:5-6; 7:10-17). In the period of Judah alone, Josiah, the king of Judah, eventually demolished the high place at Bethel (2 Kings 23:15). After the Babylonian exile, the city was re-established by the Jewish people (Ezra 2:28; Neh. 7:32; 11:31).

The exact location of ancient Bethel is uncertain. According to Eusebius’ *Onomasticon*, it was located at the twelfth Roman milestone north of Jerusalem. Since the exploration of Palestine by Edward Robinson in the 1830s, scholars have generally identified Bethel with Beitin. Although some excavations have taken place there, no inscription has yet proven that this identification is correct. Further, no indisputable remnants of the high place established by Jeroboam have been found, as they have been at Dan (see the high place in the *Dan* section). Local tradition does point to a rectangular area with a stone wall as the high place of Jeroboam near Beitin. Also, a Muslim shrine known as Maqam Sheikh Abdallah marks the traditional site of Jacob’s dream. However, the accuracy of these sites has not been confirmed.

In more modern times, David Livingston has argued from Eusebius' statement and Roman milestones that Bethel should be identified with el Bireh (southwest of Beitin). The topography of that city would have been a more strategic point for preventing Israelite pilgrims from traveling to Jerusalem. El Bireh is an occupied city located in the West Bank, which makes the prospect of excavation very difficult.