

Dr. Jeffrey Hudon, Biblical Archaeology, Session 10, Identifying Biblical Bethel, a Case Study

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This is Dr. Jeffrey Hudon in his teaching on Biblical Archaeology. This is session 10, Identifying Biblical Bethel, A Case Study.

Part of archaeology is site identification, as we've mentioned before.

I want to use the site of Bethel, the famous city in the Old Testament, as a test case that archaeologists use in trying to figure out exactly where an ancient site was. So, let's look at the site of Bethel and some of the arguments surrounding that site. This is again a view of the West Bank and Bethel again is just north of Jerusalem in the plateau that is called the Central Benjamin Plateau, or just north of that.

As we see from scripture, Bethel is the most frequently mentioned place in the Old Testament, with nearly 600 or 669 references. Most scholars place Bethel at a site called Beitin, an Arab village about 10 miles north of Jerusalem. It's a very important site strategically because it's at a major crossroads.

The crossroads are the route of the patriarchs going north and south and a route going out to the coast along the Ayalon Valley. It also has a well-watering spring. In the Old Testament, Abram built an altar in the hills east of Bethel west of Ai and returned to that site after the Egyptian sojourn.

More famously, Jacob camped at Bethel and had his dream of a ladder to heaven with ascending and descending angels. He erected an altar and pillar naming the site Beth El, or house of God. And so, Jacob returns, builds another altar, and erects a pillar.

So, there's clearly early religious cultic activity and memory here in the early period of the patriarchs. Now Bethel slash Luz, two different names, was a royal Canaanite city with a king in Joshua 12:16 that the Israelites apparently captured. Originally assigned to Benjamin, Bethel apparently passed into the control of Ephraim during the period of the judges.

And an important point here is that Bethel served as a sanctuary during the settlement period and had a prophetic guild. So, there was clearly religious activity. It was a religious site.

The name and the history, even at that early period of the judges, it had religious significance. Now, when the kingdoms of Israel and Judah split, Jeroboam, the first

king of Israel, established Bethel as a major religious center for the northern kingdom. And this is around 930 BC.

Now, after that schism, both Israel and Judah fought each other and the border switched back and forth. It was at this time that Abijah and Asa occupied Bethel under Judah during this early period of the monarchy. The prophet Amos spoke his oracles at the Bethel shrine in the 8th century.

Finally, King Josiah's reform included the utter destruction and desecration of Bethel's sanctuary in high places and the slaying of its priests. So, what is the deal with the two names Bethel and Luz? This is, by the way, an early photo of Betin, the Arab village in the 19th century. Luz is described as an almond tree or defined.

And it was renamed Bethel by Jacob. And updates again in names and of sites and cities are not uncommon in the Old Testament. I give a few examples here.

But it also could mean two separate sites. And that's important as well. And you can see the mentioning of Luz in Genesis, Joshua, Judges, and the apocryphal book of Jubilees.

In Joshua 16:2 Luz is mentioned as a border in a border description of Ephraim and Benjamin. So, it seems to indicate that Luz was distinct and separate from Bethel. And we'll look at that later.

Okay, after the death of Solomon, as we know, the new Solomon's son, King Rehoboam, is asked by the tribal elders of the 10 northern tribes to meet at Shechem for a meeting. And, of course, they request or demand that he lowers the burden on them as far as taxation and work for the crown. And he again takes bad advice from his younger advisors and makes that comment, you know, that you think it was tough under my father, it's going to be worse under me.

That is the cause of the final break between the two kingdoms, or the break of Israel into two kingdoms, Judah, the southern two tribes, and then the northern 10 tribes under Israel. It was at that time that Jeroboam, who assumed the kingship of the northern kingdom, recognized that he had a problem because the house of Yahweh, the temple in Jerusalem, remained a unifying religious site for all 12 tribes.

And that remained in Jerusalem, which was in Judah. So, Jeroboam had to create an alternative site to break this connection between Jerusalem and his kingdom. So he developed not one religious site but two, one at Dan in the very far north of the kingdom and one at Bethel, the very southern part of the kingdom.

And Bethel, of course, was an excellent choice because of its religious history, its name, and the fact that it was a cultic center. Because of that, he fashioned two

golden calves, placing one at each site. And these calves were not necessarily worshipped.

The invisible Yahweh was worshipped that was supposedly riding on these calves. Again, this is a syncretism between the Canaanite religion and the biblical faith. Now, the biblical writers, clearly in the Bible, recognize these shrines as religious counterfeits to the Jerusalem temple.

As typical, the chronicler doesn't even acknowledge their existence. This is the text. So, the king took counsel and made two calves of gold.

And he said to the people, you have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. And he set one up at Bethel and the other he put at Dan.

So, he sacrificed at Bethel to the calves that he made and placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made. He went up to the altar that he had made in Bethel. And on the 15th day of the eighth month, in the month that he had devised from his own heart, he instituted a feast for the people of Israel and went up to the altar to make offerings.

So, this, again, was an alternative temple and worship site right on the border of Judah to prevent people from making pilgrimages to the temple in Jerusalem. So as I mentioned before, this worship of these calves actually was a blending of the worship of the Lord and Canaanite religion. Those who maintain faithfulness to the Lord would supposedly envision an invisible God riding this calf.

Again, with Canaanites, a mixture of Canaanite religious thought or simply worshipping the calf as the Canaanites would do. Now, during the eighth century, there was a change in the geopolitical makeup of these two kingdoms. They were allied together.

And they were both prosperous, and they expanded. Judah to the south and west, Israel to the east and north. And the two of them together fairly, almost recreated or equaled the kingdom of Solomon.

And it was at this time that Amos, the noked from Tekoa in Judah, journeyed up to Bethel and made his oracles. And, of course, that was not popular or accepted there. And you can see Amaziah, the priest, notice the Yahwistic name here, replying to Amos, but never prophesied Bethel again because it is a sanctuary of the king and the temple of the kingdom.

So, you've got this clear indication of the importance of Bethel at this time. Sanctuary of the king, the temple of the kingdom. So where is Bethel? Where is the site of

Bethel? Well, again, most all scholars identify Bethel with the site or the Arab village named Beitin.

And the first ones to do that were these again, these two men, which we've seen before, Edward Robinson and Eli Smith. And they recognize when they traveled past Beitin that it was a corruption, Arabic corruption of the name Bethel. Using ancient sources, even at that time, the Onomasticon of Eusebius, which gave distances between biblical sites, again, published in the fourth century A.D., they recognize that Beitin has to be the site of biblical Bethel.

Moreover, the PEF, the Survey of Western Palestine, also recognized the site of Beitin as Bethel. Again, no, any kind of archaeological activity has yet to take place. And so Conder and Kitchner had their workers survey this area and they recognized, again, the importance that Beitin was clearly the site of Bethel, from name preservation, from toponymic considerations.

Now, later on, a generation later, both a French geographer, Felix Abel and Albright, again, confirmed the site of Beitin as Bethel. And we'll unpack that slightly. In the 1920s, 1930s, Melvin Grove Kyle, who taught in Pittsburgh at the seminary there, began excavating at Beitin.

And, of course, he was looking for that shrine that Jeroboam I created, seeing if he could find any evidence of that. And with Kyle, Albright worked there with him. Later on, after Kyle's death, James Kelso, who took Kyle's chair at Pittsburgh, worked again with Albright in the 1950s and excavated Bethel again.

However, no evidence of that shrine was uncovered. Now, the excavation methodology of this work at Bethel was not good. Poor record keeping, poor stratigraphic control.

But this is how they reinterpreted the history of the site. But again, no evidence of any kind of shrine. More recently, a Japanese-Palestinian expedition has been working at Beitin, but mostly on later remains.

There's a picture of the crew there. Now, with this concern over the lack of any kind of high place found at Beitin, there was another issue forming. And the issue was the site of Ai.

The site of Ai Long was recognized as Et-Tel to the east of Bethel. But a number of scholars questioned that. Questioning the site of Et-Tel as Ai also put the site of Beitin as Bethel under reconsideration.

The person that wrote against that was David Livingstone, who believed that Et-Tel, because it did not contain remains of the period of Joshua, was not the site of Ai.

And so, he looked at a different site called Khirbet Nisa, and that necessitated moving the site of Bethel from Beitin to another site called Al-Bira. And so, he published his ideas in the Westminster Theological Journal and was responded to by Israeli scholar Anson Rainey, who viciously, I don't use that term lightly, but viciously attacked Livingston and argued strongly for Beitin to be the proper site of Bethel.

And most scholars, nearly all scholars sided with Rainey that Beitin has to be biblical Bethel. Now, while excavations at Beitin did not uncover any kind of shrine or altar, remember there were two shrines that Jeroboam built, one at Dan and one at Bethel. Excavations at Dan starting in 1967 or 66 rather under Biran, Avraham Biran, Israeli excavations, did uncover a beautifully ruined, in ruins but beautifully preserved shrine and high place that clearly was the one that is described in the Bible as built by Jeroboam.

And here's an artist's reconstruction, I mean Rittmeier's reconstruction of what that would have looked like. Now we assume the Bethel structure was similar to this, the altar and the sanctuary and the houses for the priests along the side. But the one at Bethel was again the royal sanctuary and the main temple, so this would have been, the one at Bethel would have been more elaborate and larger, almost for certain, than the one at Dan.

The one at Dan that we see here was probably much more modest in size and luster. Now we come at this point to a very well-known Israeli geographer and guide, Zev Vilnay, you see his dates there, and he wrote a series of guidebooks and tourist books on exploring Israel and Palestine for many years and loved to take students and tourists and Israelis and foreigners out on excursions just exploring the land. And it was him that went to and studied the area around Bethel or Beth-een and he saw that there was a site just adjacent to Bethel or Beitin called Jebel Aratas and it had features that he thought might have been related to Jeroboam's shrine and altar that was built in the late 10th century.

And Vilnay suggested that, not any archaeologist, but just this one person. And this is Jebel Aratas and possibly the area of the high place on top of that mountain. It's only one mile north of Beitin and it seems to have features that might suggest this was the actual site not only of the shrine and the high place, but also perhaps where Jacob originally dreamt the dreams and built his high place or altar to the Lord.

It's a beautiful view from there. You can see the Jordan Valley, the coastline of the Mediterranean, and it's a very ideal spot for something like a shrine to be built. And here's some pictures.

Again, this has not been excavated yet, but you can see some of the remains on top of this summit. The fact that a lot of Jewish New Testament tombs have been discovered along the periphery of this mountain suggests that it has some sort of

religious significance or nature as well. So even Jews who lived at the time of Christ might have recognized that this actually was the high place and religious site of Bethel related to Jacob as well as Jeroboam.

Some views on the top of the mountain and you can see this tumble of rubble here and it is believed that that perhaps is the remains of the shrine in the high place built by Jeroboam and perhaps expanded and embellished by later kings of Israel. Okay, to sum this up, you've got two sites here. You've got Betin, which was the ancient town of Bethel, and then Jebel Aratis, the mountain of Aratis just to the north.

Could this be the site of Luz? And that's clearly a possibility here. Religious significance: we list some information there that seems to indicate Jebel Aratis was a religious site. We've got a crusader castle, a Muslim shrine, Jewish rock-cut tombs from the New Testament, and an oak tree again, which has religious significance.

So, it seems to be pointing to maybe something important of religious significance that happened there in antiquity. The elevation is high, with commanding views. So, if this is the site of Luz, that seems to indicate perhaps a good place for such a site as well.

Now, the identity. Sites of Bethel and Luz are indistinguishable in Genesis and Joshua but appear to be two distinct sites in another text in Joshua. And the one clear indication of that is Joshua 16:2 which describes a southern boundary between Ephraim and Manasseh going out from Bethel to Luz.

So, Vayatzah Mibet El Luzah and you notice the final word Luzah is Luz with an H at the end or a hey. That is a directional hey in the direction of Luz. If that is how we read that, that clearly indicates two sites.

So, Luz could be Jebel Aratis or the high place of Bethel, somewhat like the high place of Gibeon to Gibeon the city. The remains on Aratis show that the area was roughly 200 by 100 meters. So that is very large and certainly enough area for a very elaborate shrine and high place.

So, this is kind of a good site to look at and to see the arguments that have gone on throughout modern scholarly history on whether this site was Bethel or not. And the danger here is to try to fit the evidence to what you think fits the biblical narrative. And Betin, from every possible reason, should be biblical Bethel.

There's no reason not to accept that. And then Luz could be the high place of Bethel or the religious site of Bethel located slightly to the north. Thank you.

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