

BETH-EL

CULTURAL INSIGHT

Beth-el is a place in the Holy Land that is very important to the narratives of the matriarchs and patriarchs in Genesis and to the later kingdom of Israel. The name means “house of God.” According to the Hebrew Bible, it was originally named Luz. When Abraham first came into the Holy Land, he camped near Beth-el (Genesis 12:8). His grandson Jacob had his famous dream of angels ascending and descending from the sky happened while sleeping by a pillar at Beth-el (Genesis 28:19). In fact, Jehovah identified Himself to Jacob as “the God of Beth-el” (Genesis 31:13) and commanded him to build an altar there (Genesis 35:1–3).

Beth-el retained its ritual significance throughout the biblical period. When the first king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, built his national shrines as a rival to the temple at Jerusalem, he built one at Dan and one at Beth-el (1 Kings 12:29). Although the authors of the Old Testament rejected Jeroboam’s national shrines in favor of the Jerusalem temple, it is likely Jeroboam built them to continue the worship of Jehovah that had happened at Beth-el, especially as practiced by Jacob.

The association with Jacob means that sometimes the ancient prophets used the symbol, name, or memory of Beth-el as a positive symbol, while its association with Jeroboam’s national shrines meant that sometimes it was presented in a negative light. Thus, when the prophet Amos undertook his mission of preaching repentance from the Southern Kingdom of Judah to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, he preached at the national shrine at Beth-el. The priest there, Amaziah, called Beth-el “the king’s temple.” (The King James Version has “king’s chapel.”) On the other hand, Hosea 12:4 characterizes Beth-el as a place where Israel came to know Jehovah.

Related verses

Abraham 2:20

Genesis 12:8

Genesis 28:19

Genesis 34:1

Genesis 35:15

1 Samuel 7:16

1 Kings 12:29, 33

1 Kings 13:1–4

2 Kings 10:29

2 Kings 17:28

2 Kings 23:15

Jeremiah 48:13

Hosea 12:4

Amos 3:14

Amos 7:10–13

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