

## STUCK BETWEEN BETHEL AND AI

Genesis 13:3: And he went on his journeys from the south even to Bethel, unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Hai;

Abram is acknowledged as the patriarch of the Jewish people. A man of some wealth, he left his home in modern day Iraq and travelled around looking for the place that God had promised him. He came to a place, which the Bible describes this way:

Genesis 12:8: And he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, having Bethel on the west, and Ai on the east: and there he builded an altar unto the LORD, and called upon the name of the LORD.

He couldn't stay there, though, because the famine was so severe. So he went to Egypt for a time. When he returned, he went right back to the place he had been before the trip to Egypt.

Genesis 13:1-4: And Abram went up out of Egypt, he, and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the south. And Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold. And he went on his journeys from the south even to Bethel, unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai; unto the place of the altar, which he had make there at the first: and there Abram called on the name of the LORD.

At this point it is important to note the significance of the places named in this story. "Beth El" in Hebrew means "House of God." That is why some years later we see in Genesis 28

Genesis 28:17-19: And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven...And he called the name of that place Bethel...

The other place named, Ai, means "ruins" or "destruction." It is always noted in the Hebrew as "hay ai," "the ruins." The word is used whenever something is referred to as being destroyed intentionally or simply left in disrepair.

A house of mud bricks that has been left to weather in the rain will soon find that its walls and foundation are soft and falling over.

I know in my house there is always something that needs repair. On one side of the house there is a rain gutter that has pulled away from the house due to a windstorm a few weeks ago. It is nothing that I did intentionally to cause the damage to the house, it just happens. If I did nothing at all to maintain my house, it would soon fall apart.

Chernobyl was abandoned in 1986 after an accident at the Soviet nuclear power station. Before the accident, Chernobyl was home to about 15,000 people. Today, only a few people remain. Scientists have studied the decline of the city for the past 22 years in order to see how long structures can exist without maintenance. The short story: if human beings were to all be gone tomorrow, the Earth would be just fine. Buildings would collapse, roads would crumble, dams would break, and steel would rust. In short, everything made by humans would deteriorate and disappear in a matter of decades.

So between the House of God and the Place of Destruction is where Abram chose to build his altar to the Lord. He built his altar at the crossroads of his life, not once but twice. He had a decision to make when he travelled from Ur, and he had a decision to make when he travelled from Egypt. In both cases he stops at the place of his decision and he builds an altar to the Lord. Should he go to the House of the Lord, or should he go to the place of destruction? Should he go to Bethel, or Ai?

It is within this context that we see Abram asking his nephew Lot to decide. The Bible says that the flocks of Abram and Lot had grown too numerous. So Abram asks Lot to decide which way he will go.

Genesis 13:9: Separate thyself, I pray thee, from me: if thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left.

Genesis 13:11: Then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan; and Lot journeyed east: and they separated themselves the one from the other.

So Lot chose the well-watered plains East towards Ai. When standing at the crossroads between Bethel and Ai, Lot chose to go towards Ai.

The Bible is quick to point out to us what happened as a result of his choice, however. Because in the plain of Jordan were the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. At first Lot simply places his tent *toward* Sodom, but we soon find him in an official capacity within the city.

**Genesis 19:1: And there came two angels to Sodom at even; and Lot sat in the gate of Sodom**

Now sitting “in the gate” was not a casual affair. The men who sat in the gate of a city were the ones that governed and ruled the city. They decided legal disputes. In modern terms, it is like being on the City Council. I can imagine Lot deciding that a sign was too big, or that a woman should go to jail for shoplifting. By being on the city council, Lot helped shape the tone and the laws of the city.

And the city was evil. So evil that God sent his angels to destroy it. Even today we have a crime, sodomy, named after the city of Sodom. When Lot had the chance to choose between the House of God or the place of Destruction, Lot chose to go towards the place of destruction and would have been destroyed if his uncle Abraham had not intervened on his behalf.

Joshua

A few hundred years later we find a different group of people coming out of Egypt. The Israelites have been in bondage in Egypt for many years. They have wandered in the desert for 40 years under the leadership of Moses. Under their new leader Joshua, however, the time has come to possess the land that was promised to their patriarch Abraham. Their first battle at Jericho went well. They sacked the city and took possession of it with the help of God.

The first thing they do after this victory, however, is to prepare to attack Ai. Just as Abraham found himself at a place of decision between Bethel and Ai, so Joshua finds himself in the same situation when he leaves Egypt.

**Joshua 7:2-3: And Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is beside Bethaven, on the east of Bethel, and spake unto them, saying, Go up and view the country. And the men went up and viewed Ai. And they returned to Joshua, and said unto him, Let not all the people go up; but let about two or three thousand men go up and smite Ai; and make not all the people to labour thither; for they are but few.**

Joshua is faced with a decision. God has miraculously saved them from Jericho by bringing down the walls of the city. When faced with Ai, however, Joshua makes the fatal mistake of relying on the strength of his own people. "There are only a few people in Ai," said the spies. So Joshua makes the decision to go up against Ai, the place of destruction, without consulting God. He goes up under his own power and the power of a heathen god and is soundly defeated.

When Joshua prays to God, he is told, "Get up off your face. Israel has sinned." When Joshua consults with God and has the blessing of God once again.

Joshua 8:1: And the LORD said unto Joshua, Fear not, neither be thou dismayed: take all the people of war with thee, and arise, go up to Ai: see, I have given into thy hand the king of Ai, and his people, and his city, and his land:

Just like Abraham, Joshua and the rest of the Israelites keep coming back to the place between Bethel and Ai where they must decide whom they will serve. Do they go towards Bethel, the House of God, or do they go towards Ai, the place of Destruction?

Today

So many people, today, live their lives between Bethel and Ai. They have built an altar to God in the middle ground but have not chosen to live in one or the other. One recent poll said that 92% of Americans believe in God. Yet only 40% claim to attend church and only 18.2% actually do. How can this be?

If we take these numbers as accurate, then it would appear that full 76% of Americans have built an altar for themselves in between Bethel and Ai. They do not fully commit to being atheists, but they don't fully commit to serving God either. Instead they try to have a sense of godliness in their lives a type of vague spirituality. You will often find them using phrases like:

- "I believe that all religions lead to God." Do all airplanes go to Atlanta? Many people are going to be surprised when they get off the plane and find themselves in Chicago. In the same way, many followers of other religions are going to find themselves surprised at the end of their life.
- "Jesus was a good person and we should strive to be like him, but he was not God." Really?

The problem with these philosophies is that they try to reconcile things that cannot be reconciled. Zen Buddhism cannot be reconciled with Jesus Christ. Just because Islam and Christianity both derive from Judaism that does not mean that all three are equal.

The Koran says that followers of Islam are under the covenant of Abraham. However they claim that the Old Testament is in error and had to be “corrected” by Mohamed. In fact the Koran devotes more words to Jesus than the Christian New Testament. However their version states that Jesus was the illegitimate child of Mary and a human father. It also states that Jesus went to heaven after his death and was confronted by God who asked him why he claimed to be God. It says that in the “last days,” Jesus will return to earth and tell everyone that while he is Jesus, he is not the Christ. In other words, the Koran states that the second coming of Jesus will be an anti-Christ.

But Jesus clearly claimed to be God. Even the Islamists will agree to that. When he was standing before the Sanhedrin, they said,

Mark 14:61-63: Again the high priest asked him, and said unto him, “Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” And Jesus said, “I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.” Then the high priest rent his clothes, and saith, “What need we any further witnesses?”

The words that Jesus used, “I am,” are more than simply claims. Here Jesus uses the unspeakable name of God, Yahweh. The “I am that I am” that God first spoke to Moses from the burning bush. It was forbidden by the Law for anyone to claim to even use God’s name, let alone claim to be God. (Interestingly, even God could not claim to be God.)

By claiming to be God, Jesus takes away our ability to simply refer to him as a “nice guy” or a “great prophet” or even a “great guy.” No he claims to be God. Therefore we are stripped of any choice but this: do we believe him or not? We can no longer simply build a comfortable altar in between Bethel and Ai. We must choose a side. If he is God, then we are obligated to do what he requires. We cannot tolerate alternative religions or paths because Jesus himself said,

John 14:6: I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

If he is not God, then we must choose to reject everything he said as the ravings of a madman.

I Corinthians 15:14-19: And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.

The cross serves as a symbol of the decision that we must make. Jesus hung on the cross, suspended between earth and the heavens, between Heaven and Hell, between Bethel and Ai, between the House of God and the place of Destruction.

John 12:32-33: And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me. This he said, signifying what death he should die.

Jesus is calling to us today. The days of building an altar in between Bethel and Ai without making a decision are over. The days are drawing to a close and we must choose between belief in Him, and belief in ourselves. Do we commit or pull away?

#### Other Scriptures

I Corinthians 15:50: Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption (Ai) inherit incorruption.

2 Samuel 18:9: And Absalom met the servants of David. And Absalom rode upon a mule, and the mule went under the thick boughs of a great oak, and his head caught hold of the oak, and he was taken up between the heaven and the earth; and the mule that was under him went away.

Joshua 8: 29: And the king of Ai he hanged on a tree until eventide