

Bethel: Where is the House of God?
Defining Sacred Space in the Bible

N. BLAKE HEARSON

Associate Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew,
Book Review Editor, *MJT*,
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

When we think of a sacred place, we often call to mind an architecturally appealing church building, a mountain, or some ancient monument like Stonehenge. We may even think of something along the lines of the land of Israel, since it is often referred to as “the Holy Land.” Yet, modern Christians of the Protestant stripe do not often think of such places as currently sacred, in the sense of somehow being geographically closer to God than any other place on earth. However, the followers of God in the Bible did think of particular places as somehow more closely linked to God than other places. This leaves us with an important question: why don’t we?

Many modern Christians will default to New Testament passages such as Romans 16:5, I Corinthians 11:18, or even John 4:21 when faced with this question. The verses from Romans and I Corinthians are just two of many such passages that indicate that the church is comprised of the fellowship of believers, rather than being identified with any given building or structure. In fact, I Corinthians 11:18 specifically identifies the church as separate from the house it was using as a meeting place. Likewise, the Gospel of John records Jesus as saying that the places of Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim were no longer of primary importance for communicating with God because of the work that Jesus was doing. The idea of a sacred place, one which connected heaven with earth in some special way, was fading away because of Jesus’ ministry.

The very fact that this represented a change of thinking, however, implies that at some earlier point, certain locations did have importance for communication with God. That point of time is, of course, the period of the Old Testament. This, in turn, begs the question, why should the modern follower of Jesus care? If Jesus changed things, why is it important to understand what role sacred places played in

communication with God before Jesus' earthly ministry? The answer is this: the importance lies in appreciating, understanding, and a developing a greater insight into what we have been given in our current relationship with God. Indeed, as I write this, Good Friday and Easter are just around the corner. Most Christians have some sense of appreciation for the rending of the Temple curtain at the time of Jesus' death (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). There is some realization that this tearing of the curtain was symbolic of a greater access to God than was available before the death of Jesus. Yet, this understanding is limited in scope because most believers do not really understand what communication with God was like before the death of the Christ and just how significant sacred places were for the faithful.

This article represents an effort to understand the role sacred places played prior to the work of Jesus and their significance during Jesus' own ministry by examining one sacred place in particular: Bethel.

The Study of Sacred Space in Religion

Before examining the biblical material on Bethel, we must first note that the idea of the sacred intersecting the regular (or profane) world, is one that is present in nearly every religion. Therefore, the academic study of sacred space is widespread and we must give a brief mention of these studies. After all, the broader study of sacred space and communication with God in multiple religions impacts our own ideas whether we recognize it or not.

Many of the foundational studies about sacred space in varying religions take an approach that cuts across historical cultures in order to establish the lowest common denominator with respect to the religious idea.¹ One group of studies on the topic, called The History of Religions School, is of particular importance. This group of scholars understands the differences in religious experience to be largely a product of differences in economy, culture and social organization, or in short, history. In other words, they see a fundamental sameness to all religions with respect to core ideas and beliefs. While studies from this viewpoint

¹ A classic example of this approach is G. Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in Phenomenology* (trans. J. E. Turner; London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1938).

provide crucial insights into the religious psyche of mankind in general, they also bear the weakness of blurring the distinctive ideas of particular religious movements. A few examples will illustrate these strengths and weaknesses.

One of the foundational works for the study of sacred, which must be defined before discussing sacred space, is Rudolph Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*.² In this work Otto was interested in the living God as a terrible power manifested in divine wrath rather than God as an abstract notion. Otto felt that the feeling of terror as a response to the divine preceded any idea of sacredness. In his estimation the sacred (or in his terms, numinous) manifests itself as something *wholly other*—a reality of a wholly different order from the natural. In other words, the sacred, for Rudolph Otto, is that which is beyond man's natural experience.

The weakness of Otto's analysis of the holy lies in his focus on the psychological experience of holiness for man. M. Woudstra notes, "By thus internalizing the holiness-concept Otto is unable to do justice to the pronouncedly sensory and external side which this concept possesses in the Old Testament."³ The sacred then, for Otto, is largely an internal experience that develops over time. The implication is that earlier ideas are primitive and subsequently uninformed while later ideas show more sophistication and therefore are closer to the truth. Otto depends on the Hegelian dialectic and Darwinian evolutionary theory and forces an artificial system on ancient patterns of thought, yielding conclusions that are more revealing of his own context than of the ancient cultures he studies. This evolutionary approach, as seen in the work of Otto, is typical of the History of Religions School and foreign to the Bible.

Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* is a pivotal work that followed and built upon the ideas of R. Otto.⁴ Eliade defines the sacred as that which stands in opposition to the profane. His

² Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (trans. John W. Harvey; London: Oxford University Press, 1958).

³ Marten Woudstra, *The Ark of the Covenant from Conquest to Kingship* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1965), p. 53.

⁴ See the introduction of *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987) in which he explains the influence of R. Otto on his own work.

book is an effort to further define this contrast between sacred and non-sacred and illustrate it with examples from various religions.

The assumption that underlies this opposition between the sacred and profane is that the natural world is profane.⁵ Eliade uses the term *heirophany*⁶ to indicate the sacred breaking into the profane world. This irruption of the sacred (heirophany) into the profane world results in detachment of territory from the surrounding landscape. He offers the narrative of the burning bush in which the bush and its environs are sacred as an example of this.⁷ For Eliade, a sacred space is not chosen by men, it is only sought. When a tree or a stone is worshipped it is not the actual tree or stone that is worshipped, but it is because they are a form of heirophany. The tree or stone has become wholly other while at the same time remaining true to its own nature and participating in the surrounding environment.

While sacred space is not chosen by mankind, according to Eliade, space can be consecrated by man's activities. To organize a place in any given religion is to repeat the paradigmatic creative activity of the gods. Therefore, to settle a place is, in some fashion or another, to consecrate it. The resulting space is viewed as qualitatively different from other space. This idea helps explain our more mundane concepts of distinctions in space such as "home." Our repeated presence and the special associations we have with a place can consecrate it in a limited sense.⁸

⁵ Larry E. Shiner takes issue with this polarization, saying it is overdrawn. He feels there is a middle ground between Eliade's two types of spaces, which he terms "human space" or "lived space". See his article, "Sacred Space, Profane Space, Human Space," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 40/4 (Dec. 1972), pp. 425-36.

⁶ Or "manifestation." It should be noted that for Eliade this is not synonymous with a theophany.

⁷ Exodus 3:5.

⁸ Indeed, this distinction between consecration and sanctification is evident in the widely-held concept of the center or navel of the world. Eliade noted that holy sites and temples, in most religious systems, are believed to be situated in close proximity to the center point of the earth. Eliade gives the example of the term *Dur-an-ki*, which was associated with many Babylonian temples (but goes all the way back to Sumeria) as a support for this. He translates this term as "the link between heaven and earth" and notes that such a "link," is what constitutes the center of the world.

Eliade's perspective is, in many ways, more truly in line with biblical ideas than other perspectives within the History of Religions approach. This, as we will see, is due to its emphasis on sanctity originating apart from any activity on the part of mankind. This also demonstrates that there is a uniqueness to the biblical view of sacred spaces that is not universally shared by other religions.

One more example will suffice to show the differences of opinion among scholars studying sacred space. Jonathan Z. Smith offers an alternate view of sacred space within the history of religion approach. His work, *To Take Place*, is meant to be, in part, a corrective to that of Eliade.⁹ For Smith, a space became a sacred place when one became familiar with it and was oriented to other things from it.¹⁰ Where Eliade emphasized sacred places as revealed, Smith stressed that they were created through human interpretation and the action of ritual. Smith states, "Ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention. It is a process for marking interest. It is this characteristic, as well that explains the role of place as a fundamental component of ritual: place directs attention."¹¹ In other words, sacred places act as a focusing lens for worship rather than some special link between heaven and earth.

Sacred spaces for Smith were the diametric opposite of Eliade's revealed sacred spaces. In Smith's analysis, sacred spaces were invariably situated in a complex cultural context that was replete with political, economic, biological, and numerous other factors of influence.¹² Smith assumes that any attempt to make a place sacred is a way to "take a place" for one's own tribe or culture. In his chapter entitled, "To Replace," Smith cites several examples of how one group makes a site sacred by making it their own. For example, he describes the success of Jerusalem over that

⁹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Interestingly, both Eliade and Smith were professors in the Divinity School at the University of Chicago. Smith speaks of his "history of religion" approach and its relationship to archaeology in a more recent article titled, "Religion Up and Down, Out and In," in *Sacred Time, Sacred Space: Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (ed. Barry M. Gittlen; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002).

¹⁰ Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place*, p. 28ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹² See Jon Pahl, *Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Spaces: Putting God in Place*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003). p. 47.

of Bethel. Where Bethel had archaic sacred institutions associated with it, Jerusalem did not. Therefore, the Temple in Jerusalem, built at the royal prerogative, was guaranteed to bring order for there was nothing to distract from the system.¹³ Space became sacred through the actions of those who claimed it as their own.

As apparent from the above, even defining sacred space can be a tricky endeavor. Attempting to define the geography of the sacred by sampling differing religions does show some certain similarities. Yet, the difficulty of settling on one agreed-upon definition illustrates that not all religions are the same. With the risk of being overly general, we can chalk the similarities to what theologians call general revelation. In other words, there are certain basic truths apparent in creation that can be freely recognized by all of humanity. One of these truths is that sacred space is qualitatively different from other places and has an important role in worship. However, special revelation, the Bible, is needed to determine a more exact understanding of sacred places and their function.

Bethel

In order to illustrate biblical ideas about sacred space and compare them to the aforementioned studies, we turn now to the story of how Bethel earned its name and status in Genesis 28:10-22.¹⁴

¹³ See Smith's earlier article, "Earth and Gods," *Journal of Religion* 49 (1969), 103-27, for his analysis on some of the classic themes of the History of Religions school such as, the "enclave," and the "center," and their relationship to Jerusalem.

¹⁴ At one point a majority of scholars believed this passage (28:10-22) was the end result of two separate narratives (termed J and E) having been woven together. (E = Jacob's dream and his promise to tithe and build an altar upon his safe return to Bethel; J = the apparition of Yahweh who reaffirms the promise made to Abraham). For an example of this line of reasoning see G. von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), pp. 282-287. The method of identifying separate texts on the basis of divine name usage is now widely called into question. Van Seters has postulated that the work is primarily that of J, formulated somewhere during the exilic period (see "The Pentateuch" in *The Hebrew Bible Today: An Introduction to Critical Issues*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998). Other scholars such as

Wherever one divides the narrative chronologically, the integrated whole relates some interesting theological ideas. In 28:11 we are told that Jacob came to a place (Heb.: *maqōm*) and camped there simply because the sun had set. The choice of camping place was a matter of need and convenience in the mind of Jacob. However, the author may be giving the reader a hint in his choice of the word *maqōm*. This term, as noted by De Vaux and others, is often used in association with places that are sacred.¹⁵ Therefore, by the repeated use of the word (three times), the narrator may be indicating the sacred nature of the place to the reader even though Jacob has not yet realized it himself. Furthermore, it is curious that the author relates that Jacob uses some of the stones for a head rest. This, too, may be a foreshadowing on the part of the narrator about the nature of the place. De Vaux believes that the Yahweh cult actually ousted a Canaanite cult and took over the location. This is largely based on Jacob's use of "El," the name of the chief deity in the Canaanite pantheon for a time, in the name "Beth-El". There was also a deity known by the name "Bethel." Whatever the case, Sarna is correct

Wenham and Blum point out that without the name criteria, the idea that Genesis 28:10-22 is a composite of shattered texts would not have been taken seriously. See G. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50* (vol. 2, Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1994), pp. 219-222. When looked at in its current form (Masoretic Text), the use of different names plays a theological role as the narrator removes any association of Israel's God with the Canaanite god "El" with the introductory comment, "I am YHWH" (v. 19) (See B. Waltke, *Genesis, A Commentary*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001. p. 393).

¹⁵ See Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997. p. 291). De Vaux understands *maqōm* to mean "a place of worship" and that the author is indicating that Jacob recognized Bethel as such from the very beginning. However, this interpretation does not fit with the level of surprise with which Jacob reacts following his vision. See "Bethel" in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) for more on the use of *maqōm*. N. M. Sarna believes the sanctity of the site came through the vision and therefore Bethel would not have been sacred prior to that vision. He states, ". . . the sanctity of the site is understood as deriving solely from the patriarch's theophanic experience." (*Understanding Genesis*, [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966], p. 192.). However, when taken in the context of the biblical corpus, Abraham's act of worship near Bethel may be seen as an indication that the area had a connection with the gods in general. Jacob's vision confirms that the God of Abraham was indeed present at Bethel.

when he states, "The details of the scriptural narrative reveal a subtle and deliberated rejection of pagan notions even as they employ their idiom."¹⁶

Jacob soon realizes that he has stumbled on a sacred area by virtue of the vision he experiences.¹⁷ The most fascinating aspect of the vision is the connection of the ladder from earth to heaven. It is my contention that this is the essence of what defines a sacred place. It is a particular link between the profane realm of the earth and the heavenly realm of God. To use a modern analogy, a sacred place is a type of phone booth to the divine realm. Similar to a phone booth, calls can both be placed and received at such a location. In our passage Jacob receives an unexpected incoming call that surprises him and opens his eyes to the fact that he has indeed stumbled on a divine phone booth or, more properly stated, a sacred place.¹⁸

¹⁶ Both the use of the word *maqōm* and the inclusion of the detail about the rock may be the narrator's way of alerting the reader to the prior sacred status of the place. The site was close to a Canaanite settlement and therefore may have been the location of Canaanite cultic activity as well.

¹⁷ W. Brueggemann notes that the vision turns a "non-place" into a "crucial place" (*Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982], p. 242). This scene "only superficially resembles the incubation ritual that some have suggested as lying behind it." In contrast to the incubation ritual, God here takes the initiative and the revelation requires no activity on the part of Jacob. (Bruce Waltke, *Genesis, A Commentary*, p. 389).

¹⁸ It is interesting to note the differences in translations as to where God is standing in the vision. The Jewish Publication Society translates the preposition/suffix combination *'alayb* as "beside him" (so N. M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, p. 191). The NIV translates it as "above it." The antecedent of the pronoun is unclear. It could refer to the ladder or stairway if the pronoun is translated as "above" or "upon"—both acceptable options. If the pronoun is translated "beside"—also an acceptable option—then Jacob may be the antecedent (See C. Houtman, "What Did Jacob See at Bethel?" *Vetus Testamentum* 27 [1977] p. 348). The latter is also supported by the use of the verb "said" rather than "called" and Jacob's understanding that the "Lord is in this place." See B. Waltke, *Genesis, A Commentary*, p. 391. J. Walton makes a case for the translation "beside" but understands the antecedent to be the staircase (*The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001], p. 571). However, normal spatial relationships may or may not apply to a dream narrative. Either way, the fact that there is a link between this point on the earth and the heavenly realm is clear. Indeed, the point of the stairway is

When Jacob awakens from his dream,¹⁹ his exclamation is telling. He proclaims "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." This statement reveals that Jacob understood certain places to have particular and specific links to the divine.²⁰ It also reveals that there were no distinguishing marks to indicate to Jacob previously that he was in a sacred place.²¹ It was only the revelation from God that indicated to him the holy particularity of the place in which he had chosen to take his respite. At least in this case, the sanctity of Bethel was not dependent on an external marker. The sanctity of the place was completely dependent on the revelation of God. Thus, in the mind of Jacob and the biblical author, the sacredness of the place is determined by the action (here: revelation) of God rather than some identifying marker at the place.

The next statement out of Jacob's mouth is fascinating: "How awesome is this place!"²² Jacob's immediate reaction is in reference to

that "heaven has come to be on earth." (Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, p. 244).

¹⁹ Jacob's experience was truly a dream as he seems to have been passive through the episode and only reacted when he awoke.

²⁰ G. von Rad notes that this statement is concerned with the objective fact of a correct understanding of the place. "'The Lord is in this place,' here has a very definite and exclusive local meaning." (*Genesis: A Commentary*, p. 285).

²¹ Baruch A. Levine notes with regard to this passage that the cult at Bethel is conceived as a human response to the divine presence. He states, "Generally, when sanction is sought for already existing cultic centers, much is made of the fact that the deity manifested his presence at those sites in the distant past." "On the Presence of God in Biblical Religion," *Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough*. Leiden: Brill, 1968. p. 79.

²² Jacob's reaction upon awakening is theologically enlightening. His initial emotion is that of fear or in the terminology of Rudolf Otto, Jacob experienced divine terror. This is a common response when a mortal has an encounter with the divine. There is often a natural terror that comes from an interaction with the numinous. Jacob's experience is no different. (Cf. Gen. 3:10; 18:15; Exo. 3:6; 34:30; Num. 12:8; Deut. 5:5). According to Otto this fear or dread is of a different type than the fear one might experience from a terrestrial danger (*The Idea of the Holy*, pp.12ff). In the ancient Near East, a mortal would normally be afraid when exposed to the radiance of something divine. In the biblical literature, the belief is that exposure to God will result in automatic death. Naturally, there is a fearfulness surrounding a divine encounter and a wonder at surviving such an experience.

the *place*. Not the dream. Not the promise. Not even the fact that he was singled out. But rather the place.²³ In the terminology of R. Otto, Jacob experiences divine terror, but focuses on the location! Clearly, his assumption is that there is something special about the place in order for him to have experienced the revelation of God there. Likewise, there is an implication that Jacob does not believe that such a dream-revelation could take place just anywhere. The occurrence of the dream indicates to him that the place on which he had camped was none other than the house of God!

Jacob elaborates on his assessment that he was at the "house of God" with the adjectival parallel, "and this is the gate of heaven."²⁴ At a basic level, a gate is an access point into an enclosed structure or city, so the gate of heaven would be an access point into the divine realm. If we understand the phrase "and this is the gate of heaven" as a further clarification of the statement "this is none other than the house of God," then we have a greater insight into the nature of a "house of God." As G. von Rad notes, the gate here refers to "that narrow place where according to the ancient world view all intercourse between heaven and earth and the upper divine world took place."²⁵ There is no mention in the text of a building or structure of any kind in the place where Jacob spent the night,²⁶ and if Jacob's reaction to his dream is any indicator, then the

²³ N. M. Sarna notes that while Abraham and Isaac do not express surprise at the divine revelation, the narrative highlights Jacob's astonished reaction. Even if there had been previous cultic activity there Jacob seems to be unaware of it. "The text is most emphatic about Jacob's ignorance of the holiness of the place. In fact, there was nothing there at all, only stones." (*Understanding Genesis*, p. 193).

²⁴ The whole phrase is an adjectival parallel to "the house of God." Bruce Waltke speculates that this may be intended as a counterpoint to the etymology of Babylon as the "gate of heaven" (*Genesis, A Commentary*, p. 392.). However, the etymological origins of Babylon are complex and any polemical considerations would likely be aimed at Canaanite mythology rather than Babylonian mythology.

²⁵ *Genesis: A Commentary*, p. 284.

²⁶ Assuming the site of Bethel is the same as modern Beitin, then Bethel shows occupation in the early Bronze Age. However, for whatever reason, Jacob does not seem to have spent the night in the city. See *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (4 vols. ed., M. Avi-Yonah; London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975).

place was fairly nondescript. Therefore, Jacob's declaration of the site as the house of God cannot be a reference to a structure or existing cult material. For Jacob, the house of God is a gate to heaven. It is an *access point* at which communication with the divine realm can be sent and received. There is no concept of God *dwelling* at the site at this point. In fact, God is located on the heavenly side of things in Jacob's dream. The place is a conduit to the heavenly realm. John Walton describes sacred space as a "portal" between the divine and earthly realms. This is the same idea associated with the ziggurats, although the fact that God is standing next to the ladder in heaven sets this vision apart from the ANE idea that the god descends to the earth.²⁷

The content of Jacob's dream adds further evidence to the idea that Bethel was an access point to God. Jacob sees a *sullam* ("stairway")²⁸ touching the earth, presumably near the point where he was lying. On this stairway angels are ascending and descending. In the biblical, ancient near eastern, and, subsequently, rabbinic world-views, angels or divine beings were often thought of as having a territory over which they watched (see, for example, Daniel 10:13). Thus, the angels in Jacob's dream may be understood as reporting to God and then going back out to their assigned territory. Jacob's wonder at having camped at such a place is understandable!

Perhaps another part of Jacob's amazement after waking from his dream is that there is nothing to mark the site as a divine access point.

²⁷ The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis, p. 571.

²⁸ Translated by various commentators as "ladder, stairway," or "ramp." The image conjured in the modern mind by the word "ladder" doesn't seem aesthetically appropriate here. The angels are coming and going as on a major traffic path. R. de Vaux prefers "stairway" or "ramp" and notes that it has a religious parallel to the ziggurats of Mesopotamia. The ziggurats seem to have had a sanctuary at both the top and bottom of the structure symbolizing a connection between heaven and earth. The sanctuary at the top was either the dwelling place of the god or a resting place, whereas the sanctuary at the bottom was where the god appeared. See *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, pp. 281-2; A. S. Palmer, *Jacob at Bethel: The Vision—The Stone—The Anointing: An Essay in Comparative Religion* (London: David Nutt, 1899), pp 31-38; Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, p. 284. C. Houtman, ("What Did Jacob See in His Dream at Bethel?" *VT* 27 [1977]), posits that Jacob is actually sleeping in the *sullam* and that it represents an area that is neither completely of the earthly realm nor of the heavenly realm.

Indeed, what Jacob does next seems to confirm the lack of significant structure at the site: "Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on its top" (Genesis 28:18). By setting up the stone as a religious "pillar" and anointing it, Jacob provides a marker for the place. This confirms a lack of any significant religious symbol there prior to Jacob's arrival. Interestingly, Jacob calls the stone pillar he had just erected the "house of God." A literal structure is not meant here; instead, the term refers to the cultic object or the site as a whole.²⁹ The fact that Jacob anoints the stone is a customary ritual for cultic objects.³⁰ Wenham believes that this is a show of piety on Jacob's part. However, it is more likely an effort to mark the site as sacred. This would help Jacob find the site again as well as be a marker for others who came that way.³¹ In association with the dedication of the pillar, Jacob renames the place as well.³²

²⁹ While a *maššabah* or "pillar" could have various functions, such as a commemorative stele to an alliance (Gen. 31:45, 51-52; Exo. 24:4; Isa. 19:19-20), or a monument in honor of the dead (Gen. 35:20; 2 Sam. 18:18), it had special significance in relation to the cult. Roland de Vaux states, "As an object of the cult, it recalled a manifestation of a god, and was the sign of the divine presence." *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, p.285

³⁰ See G. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50*, p. 223.

³¹ One purpose of theophanic narratives is to memorialize and establish the legitimacy of cultic activities at specific places. See W. Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, p. 247. Sarna sees the whole point of the narrative as "to dissociate, absolutely and unmistakably, the pagan cult of Bethel from the sanctity the place held in Israelite consciousness." Furthermore, he states, "Jacob is actually reversing accepted religious notions. Normally, a stone was holy and an object of worship because it was thought to be the abode of a *numen*. In this case, however, the stone pillar is simply memorializing the scene of the theophany and is accorded no inherent sanctity" (*Understanding Genesis*, p. 194). E. Martens notes, that the setting up of pillars as memorials to Yahweh (28:18; 35:14) or as stones of witness (Gen. 31:45; cf. Exod. 24:4) is one of the uses of "standing stones" that is considered appropriate in the biblical literature (*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995. 3:135).

³² Jacob was no doubt calling his camp site "Beth-El" and not the city west of the site that carried the name Luz. I am indebted to Dr. Richard Sarason of Hebrew Union College for noting that in Genesis 12:8, the city of Bethel is also west of Abraham's altar. The city of Luz would eventually come to be called Bethel in

The last verses of the story focus on Jacob's vow. The vow serves as a parallel and reinforcement of the promise of God made in the dream. As part of this vow, Jacob indicates that Bethel will be *the* cult site for his worship. Whether he intends to build a more substantial worship structure is unclear. What is clear is that Jacob views Bethel as a significant access point for communication with God.

In Genesis 31:11-13, Jacob relays to Rachel and Leah a dream in which the angel of God tells him to go back to the land of his birth. Verse 13 reads, "I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me; now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth." Two things draw our attention here. First of all, God identifies Himself to Jacob through place association. This is the same God who appeared to Jacob at Bethel. God is identified by His address. God even reminds Jacob of the significant actions he made at the site.

Secondly, there is nothing in the text to indicate that Jacob ascribed any importance to the place where he had the dream he is relaying to his wives. Why? Most likely Jacob considered God to have Bethel as His primary link with the earth, thereby eliminating other sites as sacred. This interpretation makes sense in light of Jacob's dream at Bethel. In that dream, the angels are coming to and going from God on the stairway. Therefore, Jacob may have viewed an angelic messenger as having come from God via Bethel. This is reinforced by the message of the angel who, as the mouthpiece of God,³³ states, "I am the God of Bethel," thereby indicating the spatial priorities.³⁴

Further along in the narrative of Jacob's life (Genesis 35),³⁵ we are told that Jacob is given instructions to relocate, this time to Bethel

association with the sacred site near it. Jacob's camping spot does not seem to be near enough to the city to bring him into contact with others during his stay.

³³ There is a certain ambiguity about the speaker in Jacob's dream who is identified as an angel but states, "I am God." See the section on the burning bush above.

³⁴ My thanks to Dr. Richard Sarason for his helpful comments on this idea.

³⁵ Genesis 35:1-9 and 14-15 are typically attributed to the "E" document whereas 35:9-15 is considered to be "P". In fact, von Rad states that verses 9-13 contain almost everything that the P document has to say about Jacob. His arguments attributing it to the so-called "P" redaction are not convincing (*Genesis: A Commentary*, p. 338). John Van Seters also views 35:9-15 as being a doublet of the supplementary P editor ("The Pentateuch" in *The Hebrew Bible Today*, p. 43).

proper. Jacob is told to live at Bethel and make an altar there. While Jacob had anointed a stone pillar there previously, an altar was required for proper sacrifices. This is the only place where God directs a patriarch to build an altar. Subsequently, on the journey to Bethel, Jacob instructs all those who are with him to purify themselves and they bury their foreign gods.³⁶ Thus, Bethel has now become a permanent sacrificial site, one that will be built and maintained by Jacob himself. Such action increases the status of Bethel in that the sacred nature of the place will be maintained and visible by virtue of both a physical structure and regular cultic activity.³⁷

Bethel maintained its special status for many years after Jacob's initial experience. The book of Judges describes the Israelites returning to Bethel to weep after a devastating loss in the civil war with Benjamin, the Israelites returned to Bethel and wept. Judges 20:26 states, "Then the Israelites and all the people went up and came to Bethel and wept and

The idea that this pericope is a duplication of the narrative of Genesis 28:10-22 which comes from a different source is prevalent. However, as Waltke points out, the contexts are very different and must be taken into consideration. While in Gen. 28 Jacob is fleeing, in chapter 35 Jacob is the recipient of blessing (*Genesis, A Commentary*, p. 470).

³⁶ It is interesting to note that Jacob calls for ritualistic purity from his whole entourage as he prepares to approach the sacred space of Bethel in order to build an altar (35:2). He firmly believes that God's potent presence is at Bethel. See N. M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, p. 194. In fact, he now calls the place "El-Bethel" (35:7) which, is not the name of the deity, but rather a way of placing emphasis on God who revealed himself there rather than on the place itself (See Waltke, *Genesis, A Commentary*, p. 473). Could burial be symbolic of death of the deities? Acknowledging that they were dead to begin with?

³⁷ According to the biblical accounts, the actual city of Luz/Bethel seems to have remained under Canaanite control until the conquest of the land by the Israelites (specifically the "house of Joseph"). See Joshua 12:16 and Judges 1:22. Jacob and his extended family must have been centered closer to the sacred site. It was not uncommon for a nomadic clan to take up extended residence on the outskirts of a city or town as this was a mutually beneficial relationship for nomad and urbanite in terms of commerce. See Genesis 35:1ff and Glenn M. Schwartz, "Pastoral Nomadism in Ancient Western Asia," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* Jack M. Sasson ed. New York: Scribner and Sons, 1995. pp. 249ff. See also I. J. Gelb, "The Early History of the West Semitic Peoples," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, vol. 15 (1961), pp.27-47.

they sat there before the LORD and fasted that day until evening. And they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD." Two parts of this verse capture our interest. First, the clause that the people "remained before the Lord" in a state of mourning is noteworthy. This reaffirms the concept that the Lord was somehow particularly present at the specific site of Bethel. The Israelites came back to Bethel to weep. They did not stay at the battle site or even just move a safe distance away; they went where they were sure God would hear them. This is not to say that the people thought that God could not hear or see them at other places. The idea that God was aware of the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt would belie such an assumption. Rather, the connection to God at a sacred place like Bethel was a concrete and a certain one, whereas the interaction between God and the people at non-sacred, non-cultic sites would fall under the more general category of God's supporting presence, typified by phrases such as "God was with so-and-so."³⁸

Second, the clause "and they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD" affirms that Bethel had achieved a more formal cultic and institutional nature as an extension of its sacred nature. As noted above, initially Jacob marked the site with a *maṣṣebah* or "pillar" and only much later did he build a formal altar there. While we are not given many details of the sacrificial process here,³⁹ it is safe to assume that the cultic paraphernalia at Bethel must have increased along with the establishment and growth of the nation of Israel.

Common to both the clauses from this verse is the phrase "before the LORD." This phrase indicates that the person or persons are in the presence of the LORD in a manner distinct from the norm.⁴⁰ In other words, the people were certain to have God's full attention by virtue of

³⁸ This is an issue of degree. Sitting "before God" represents a more localized and more intense idea of holiness and connection, whereas God "going with PN" is an extension of God's presence and favor. It is our contention that these distinctions blur and eventually become null as one progresses in time.

³⁹ The text does illustrate the fact that two kinds of formal sacrifices are offered: peace offerings and burnt offerings. This may indicate a formalized cult process in operation at Bethel during this period.

⁴⁰ The phrase can refer to a special dedication or vow wherein the idea is that the person is held accountable by the LORD. See for example, Gen. 27:7; Ex. 16:33; Deut. 6:25; Joshua 6:26; 1 Sam. 11:15, 23:18, 26:19.

being in a sacred place.⁴¹ God's presence was, for lack of a better term, laser-focused at Bethel. Thus, in the period of the Judges, for the Israelites to be at the sacred cult site of Bethel was to be in the special, particular presence of the LORD.

To summarize, the biblical authors associate Bethel with sacred space from the very beginnings of Israelite history.⁴² This sanctity is most clearly expressed in Jacob's dream and subsequent actions there. Ultimately, Bethel continued to be recognized as a sacred site by the tribes of Israel as they sought to understand the will of God in times of trouble. The sacred nature of Bethel seems to derive primarily from two factors. First, God initiated a self-revelation to Jacob at the site. Second, the nature of the revelation depicted God being connected to Bethel by virtue of some type of stairway. Furthermore, it was via that stairway that the messengers of God were proceeding to carry out the divine will. This idea of God's connection to the earth at a particular point is further strengthened by another dream of Jacob in which God identifies himself by association with Bethel.

Two general conclusions about sacred places in the biblical material can be drawn from the above discussion of Bethel. First, of the studies reviewed at the beginning, Eliade's conclusions match best with the picture of Bethel, which attains its sacred status by the revelation of God and not through the decision of mankind. Second, a sacred place is a site at which God is known to be accessible because He has revealed Himself to be present there. Its primary purpose is assured communication with the divine presence. This is an element often missed by many History of Religions studies.

⁴¹ Verse 27 states that the Ark was present at Bethel at that time. Bethel had sacred status independent from that bestowed by the presence of the Ark but the presence of such a holy object no doubt increased the belief and awareness of God's accessibility at Bethel.

⁴² Of course the patriarchal stories centering on places that would become significant cult sites are usually understood to be *heiroi logoi* or foundational myths that justify the site for Israel's cultic use. Yet this should not automatically diminish the possible historical veracity of the stories. They certainly would have been considered true by the authors. For more on the idea of *heiros logos* see Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Worship in Israel: A Cultic History of the Old Testament* (trans., G. Buswell; Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1965).

However limited in its scope, the analogy of a phone booth is helpful here. The space which a phone booth occupies does not limit the location of the one we wish to call. Rather it is a means to get in touch with that person. It is reasonable to assume that, while Jacob and his subsequent progeny did not view God as limited to one site or another in relationship to the earth, they did understand God to have a special presence and accessibility at a sacred site such as Bethel. In fact, Jacob viewed Bethel as THE place to have communication with God. By implication, Jacob did not view God as accessible at any time and in any place. In other words, there were limits on where Jacob felt he could interact with God. These beliefs on Jacob's part were inspired by the self-revelation of God at Bethel. God revealed himself there and made promises that were linked with that place. Therefore, Bethel was vitally important for maintaining a working relationship with God.

Eventually, however, the connection between heaven and earth at Bethel would be lost. The establishment of a calf-idol at Bethel by Jeroboam I was a primary cause for this, and the prophets would condemn the once sacred site.⁴³ The phone line at Bethel was terminated; the phone in the phone booth was no longer in service. With its loss came a real and tangible loss of a point of connection and fellowship with God. For those who sought fellowship with God, the rejection of sacred places by God meant separation from God.

Conclusion

This brings us to the significance of the change brought about by Jesus during His ministry. In John 1:51 we find a strange statement by Jesus to Nathanael, who has just declared his belief in Jesus. The Lord states that Nathanael will see the heavens opened and angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. Without an understanding of Bethel, its significance, and, in particular, the revelation of God to Jacob at Bethel, Jesus' statement makes little sense. However, once the modern

⁴³ See 1 Kings 12:28-29 for the story in which Jeroboam I sets up the golden calves at Bethel and Dan. Jeroboam's action was meant to stop any desire for reunification of the north and south based on the fact that Jerusalem, the primary place of worship, was in the southern kingdom of Judah. See 1 Kings 13:4, 2 Kings 10:29, and 23:19 for examples of the rejection of Bethel as a place where God was accessible.

reader links John 1:51 with Genesis 28:12-13, it becomes clear what Jesus is claiming: Jesus Himself is the stairway, the sacred space, the means by which the believer has communion with God the Father in heaven. A major transition was underway: instead of being linked to a sacred space, connection with God was now through the person of Christ. A transition was taking place. Indeed, place was shifting to person. Unlike Bethel, however, Jesus could not be desecrated by the sin of the people. Through Jesus, the followers of God would never need worry about being cut off from God again.

And this is why it is so important for us as modern believers to understand the Old Testament idea of sacred space. We often take our access to God for granted, in part because we do not truly understand what we have been given.⁴⁴ We do not have to travel to have assured access to God. We do not have to sacrifice an innocent life to interact with Him, nor do we have to worry that we may be cut off from Him. These truths seem so self-evident to us that we hardly think twice about them. But we should. Those who are Christ-followers have an access to God that would cause Jacob to marvel. Because of the work of Jesus, we can worship the Father in spirit and in truth wherever we may find ourselves. This is not a gift to be taken lightly. How marvelous is this Jesus, for he is none other than the Son of God, the gateway to heaven!

⁴⁴ These conclusions are, in many ways, but the beginning. My own work has progressed beyond the scope of the paper presented here and will result in a forthcoming larger work.