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FROM LUZ TO BETHEL

by CAMERON MACKAY

MR. MACKAY is probably best known to readers of this and other theological periodicals for his studies in the book of Ezekiel. Here he turns to deal with another area of Old Testament history and literature, and draws our attention to some features which must be set against the arguments for the common literary analysis of the early books of the Bible.

IN an epoch which has to face up to novel and disturbing Old Testament stories about the provenance of the early books a tale suggesting that J, E, and P were working in unison, practically hand in glove, may be thought to deserve a hearing. And while in these pages the present writer would not aspire to "tell you Bible stories you never heard before"—an attempt which at this date even modernists may suspect as involving what is either not new or not true—he must protest that, though the tale to be unfolded is in the Bible, yet in the course of an early scriptural education in the best tradition he was never told it, or at least never heard it.

Our initial concern is with a well-known doublet, the two accounts of the naming of Bethel by Jacob on his journeys to and from Padan-Aram. "It is impossible to believe that these came from the same hand." "It cannot be said that, on the second occasion, Jacob merely *revived* the name . . . for the latter passage plainly implies that Jacob then gave the name for the first time."¹ The critics, as too often, are overstating their case: "impossible" and "plainly" are plainly impossible in view of the credence long and still attached to the compatibility of the narratives. Thus a century ago the controversy could leave a scorch-mark in a Hebrew dictionary, for to Gesenius's reference to "various and discrepant traditions of the origin of this city" his offended translator adds, "The inspired account is plain enough, and contains neither discrepancy nor contradiction." Later authorities point out that

¹ Gen. 28: 19; 35: 7, 15. G. A. Smith, *Modern Criticism and Preaching of O.T.* (1901), 38, 47; Colenso, *Pentateuch* (1875), §266 f. Cf. Chapman, *Introd. to Pentateuch* (1911), 42, 102; Driver, *Literature of O.T.* (1920), 9; Rowley, *Growth of O.T.* (1950), 17.

“the second vision in Bethel is connected with the first by the word ‘again’ (Gen. 35: 9),” and that “the name had remained unused (for who had known in that locality and at that earlier time that Jacob had given it the name?), but Jacob now teaches it to his family.”²

According to the prevalent critical theory the first narrative (Gen. 28: 10-22) is the work of J around the ninth century B.C. combined with that of E a century later, the naming of the altar-site El-bethel (35: 7) comes from E, and the bestowal of the name Bethel in 35: 15 from a post-Exilic P. The compiler of Genesis must be allowed sources and editorial powers; mention of the town Bethel in Abraham’s story (12: 8 J; 13: 3 J) indicates a touching-up of the original account: but whoever that compiler was, Moses or P, the crucial question is whether the end-product is reliable. The present intent is to suggest that the reiteration of the name-change, and the insistence on it where Abraham would have said “Luz,” become self-explanatory if when Genesis was compiled the native name was not only still in use but had some prospect of never being obliterated.

Change of place-name needs the heavy hand of authority. An apposite illustration of the job’s toughness occurs in Robinson’s *Biblical Researches in Palestine*, I, sec. ix: “Our friends the Greek priests at Taiyibeh had also recognized the identity of Beitfn and Bethel; and had endeavoured to bring into use the Arabic form *Beitfil* as being nearer to the original; but it had found currency only within the circle of their own influence. From them the missionaries in Jerusalem had heard of the place and had learned the name *Beitfil*.” That was around 1838, but the Arabic name still keeps the “n.” The priests doubtless changed the native name each time it cropped up—conceivably successors are still at it—and Jacob had neither equivalent justification, influence, nor contacts. Hupfeld’s dictum, “According to the laws of universal logic, a name that has been already given cannot be given a second time,”³ is irrelevant to such illogical procedure as a one-man attempt to christen other people’s territory. If Simeon and Levi had treated Luz as Shechem it would have been in order that once more “Jacob called the name of the place Bethel.” As it was, one understood (so far as childhood recollection serves) that the

² Gesenius, *Lexicon*, trans. Tregelles (1859), cxviii; Orr, *Problem of O.T.* (1907), 236, 361; Kevan, *New Bible Comm.* (1953), 100.

³ Quoted in Allis, *Five Books of Moses*, 83. The immediate reference is to “Israel,” but the fuss about Bethel suggests that the rule is thought applicable here.

children of Israel called the city Bethel while its inhabitants in their benighted way went on saying "Luz" till Joshua put a stop to their nonsense.

But at this point the tale seems to need recasting. In the first place, the children of Israel were, according to the best authorities—themselves, including JEP—a stiffnecked and rebellious race, and the first batch were no exception. Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah all earned bad marks, and of the four sons of the handmaids Joseph brought home an evil report. At least two (Simeon and Judah) had Canaanite wives, and the whole ten (Benjamin must be excluded for the present) were a deceitful lot, witness the picture of Jacob stricken by the faked evidence of Joseph's fate while "all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him." The probability that out of the patriarch's hearing they were punctilious about saying "Bethel" to Canaanites is slight.

In the second place, Jacob on his death-bed said, "Luz in the land of Canaan" without corrective (48: 3 P): it looks as if he had been at odds with backsliding grandchildren on the point, and had—we shall not say, abandoned the unequal struggle, but decided to bequeath it to the all-powerful Joseph (to this intriguing question we shall return). Thirdly, Benjamin, to whom Bethel was allotted⁴ (though it was practically on his boundary with Ephraim), does not seem to have impressed on his offspring the name's significance for their succeeding race, for the Benjamites were not protagonists in effecting the change (Judg. 1: 22-26), and must soon, if not at once, have forfeited the town to the prime movers in the affair, the house of Joseph (cf. 1 Chron. 7: 28), who set great store by "Bethel their confidence" (Jer. 48: 13), exalting it as religious headquarters and royal sanctuary of Northern Israel (Amos 7: 13), while Benjamin turned to Jerusalem.

In the fourth place, traces survive of doubt as to whether Jacob had in sooth decreed the renaming of Luz; and it is a nice theological point. It was the sacred "place" he called Bethel—a solitary spot in the open, in all probability the Abrahamic altar-site on the high ground east of Luz, between it and Ai.⁵ Possibly the debate whiled away hours under the stars of Sinai. In what is regarded as an "early fragment" Joseph's boundary "goeth out from Bethel to Luz" (Josh. 16: 2 J), a recognition of separatism, though not necessarily by the Joseph tribes, but more probably

⁴ Josh. 18: 22 P, where "the lists of cities may well be ancient" (Cooke, *Cambridge Bible*, 167 f.).

⁵ Cf. Smythe Palmer, *Jacob at Bethel*, 8 f., who notes "lighted upon" and the threefold emphasis on the "place" in 28: 11.

imposed on their ardour. Less clearly, Benjamin's border as preserved in Josh. 18: 13 P "passes along southward in the direction of Luz, to the shoulder of Luz (the same is Bethel)," as rendered by R.S.V., or word by word "toward Luz to the shoulder (*fem.*) of Luz (*fem.*) southward which (*fem.*) is Bethel"—which reads like a compromise formula sufficiently ambiguous to be used on either side, as indeed it still is.⁶ Jacob's dying declaration could be held either to equate Bethel and Luz, or to authorize Luz as overall name for the district. But topographical nicety could not survive the facts of co-existence: the high place of Luz with its thousand-year-old temple of Baal, recently excavated, could not flourish cheek-by-jowl with the "House of God"; one must oust the other and assert its name with its tradition. In the record of Joshua's conquests Bethel means the city of Luz, though a text used by the Septuagint apparently omitted the decisive occurrences.⁷

It should now be evident both that childhood's version was inadequate and that a key-figure is Joseph. He was about six years old when the family left Padan-Aram (Gen. 30: 25, 43 J; 31: 41 E), seventeen when carried to Egypt (37: 2 P). In the interval Jacob had before reaching Bethel erected, not a tent, but a house at Succoth, and at Shechem had sunk a 75-foot well, while Dinah, near Joseph in years, had reached her teens. At Bethel our hero was thus at an impressionable age, drinking it all in with youthful enthusiasm. He had, like the other children, been told again and again the dream of the heavenly ladder (Bible stories were in short supply in those days), so that when father said, "Let us arise, and go up to Bethel," the proposal was both plain and inviting. There he saw the altar built, attended its ceremonial, heard of the revelation of towering destiny for Israel, and watched his big brothers struggling with a proportionate monolith to replace the original pillow-stone ("he was but a lad," the Talmud says, "too young to associate with his brothers").⁸ In his memories of the land where he never dwelt in manhood Bethel must have been the high-

⁶ Usually taken as Luz equals Bethel, but distinction is found by Maclear, *Cambridge B.*, 143; Skinner, *Genesis*, 378. The intention, in the light of verse 22, could be to allot the city to Benjamin, the altar-site to Ephraim. But Cooke, 168 f., regards "to the shoulder of Luz southward" as a gloss inserted to transfer the city to Ephraim.

⁷ Josh. 8: 17 J; 12: 16 RD; 18: 22 P, in each of which Codex Vaticanus omits "Bethel." In 8: 17 "or Bethel" is regarded as "an unintelligent insertion of a late editor" (Holmes, *Peake's Comm.*, 252).

⁸ *Selections from Talmud* (Chandos Classics), trans. Polano, 72, on Shechem episode. There Jacob is given over 18 months at Shechem, over six at Bethel (63, 71).

light, roseate with hope, unalloyed by the regrets which attached to Shechem, the Ephrath district, and Hebron (for the death of Deborah, his grandmother's aged nurse, would hardly have touched him deeply). Round Bethel, rather, gathered his last glad memories of an adored and adoring mother: "they journeyed from Bethel . . . and Rachel died." It was a place-name which spoke of dreams taking shape; afterwards everything went wrong. When later in Egypt he told his own sons of Canaan it must have been on Bethel he preferred to dwell: we can scarcely go wrong in thinking of it as wee Ephraim's favourite bedtime story.

Some twenty-three years on, when Jacob saw Joseph's face again, the Book of Jubilees (second century B.C.) adds to his words of thankfulness, "Yea, true is the vision which I saw at Bethel" (45: 4); and the name as used between the two in the last years must have held something of the unction which "Zion" acquired for future generations. Why then "Luz" when Jacob was a-dying? An errant pen is hardly admissible, when the tendency is to substitute "Bethel" for "Luz," not vice versa. The slip of an aged tongue? That tongue went on to a vaticination which the Epistle to the Hebrews singles out from all the episodes of Jacob's career to attest his good report. The indifference of an abstracted mind? But "Israel" had prepared for Joseph's visit, summoning strength to seat himself on the bed staff in hand,⁹ so that his opening was more likely rehearsed than inadvertent, *ex cathedra* rather than *ex hypothesi*. As the astute vizier, entering with his two sons, saw the little tableau staged by his fabulously astute sire, the thought must have flashed, "Now we are to hear of the marvels of his pilgrimage—Bethel, 'with my staff I passed over this Jordan,' Mahanaim, Penuel, and back to Bethel." The first words must have taken him aback, almost as if the patriarch had used a bad word before his grandsons, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz." Impact of subtle kindred minds can be sensed, with the shock intended, the effect calculated—

Something lost behind the Ranges,
Lost and waiting for you. Go!

Luz, the unspoken message said, is not yet God's house. Jacob could not, or did not care to, give orders on the subject to the vicegerent of the Nile, but he could say, "And now thy two sons are mine. . . . As for me, Rachel died." Benjamin, who had no

⁹ Jacob did not merely sit up in bed, but sat so that his grandsons stood "between his knees" (48: 10b, 12 E). Heb. 11: 21 is authority for the staff.

memories of Bethel, was apparently too much of the lone wolf (49: 27 J) to be entrusted with an affair of family honour.

The descendants of Joseph were never to forget that oblique behest from the verge of the grave, joined as it was to their destiny: their response lives in the record from Judges to Jeroboam and over the Exile.¹⁰ Generations elapsed before the weight of the nursed commission fell on Luz, now, according to archaeology, a flourishing city with exceptionally well-built houses, but then there was "a terrific conflagration, leaving a deposit of as much as a metre and a half of débris," an abiding five feet of holocaust wrought early in the thirteenth century by Israelites,¹¹ specifically, according to Judges, the house of Joseph. From the time the tribes crossed Jordan with Joseph's coffin in their train tension must have surrounded the town's name among both invaders and invaded, for the brief narrative of the capture concentrates on the survival of a pertinacious household to build another Luz in North Syria, so preserving the name until Judges was compiled. In the eighth century the old controversy echoes in Hosea's scornful reluctance to allow Bethel its name (4: 15; 10: 5, 8), "Beth-aven," "House of vanity," summing up Ephraim's exploitation of a trust which culminated in the wheel of destiny coming full circle with fire in the house of Joseph and none to quench it in Bethel (Amos 5: 6; 2 Kings 23: 4, 15).

Their father must have coached Ephraim and Manasseh in every word of that momentous interview, and they in turn could recount it to children's children as what they had seen with their eyes and heard with their ears. But would Joseph have been content with oral instruction? There were family records in his keeping, or, if not, there were scribes in Egypt. One can imagine an imperious potentate driving off amid shouts of "Bow the knee!" to issue orders which would guard against posterity associating Abraham with Luz rather than Bethel. His immediate reaction could have been that the name of Luz must be wiped out; and that was the propensity his descendants, more visibly than other tribes, inherited. At least, without undue stretch of imagination he can be seen ensuring that his own memorabilia were properly

¹⁰ Bethel an early religious centre, Judg. 20: 18, 26; 21: 2 (LXX, R.V., R.S.V.); 1 Sam. 7: 16; 10: 3. Jeroboam an Ephraimite, 1 Kings 11: 26 (R.V., R.S.V.), 28. Resident priest after deportation of 10 tribes, 2 Kings 17: 28. Zechariah settles a point for the cultus of Bethel, Zech. 7 (LXX, R.V., R.S.V.).

¹¹ Kathleen M. Kenyon, *Archaeology in the Holy Land* (1960), 212, 306 f., citing Albright.

documented, even with Luz and Bethel equated (35: 6 E or P?); and if he added that a third time Jacob named Bethel it was because he recalled so vividly that solemn repetition evoked by Israel's communion with heaven. His father's intention, so congenial to the son's memories and hopes (50: 24 f. E), had to cross a gulf of time "and a threefold cord is not quickly broken." Moses, when/if he edited Genesis, must, conscious of the great walled city over whose name extremists and gradualists contended, have appreciated the need of retaining every detail that threw light on the ancestral attitude.

Is our reconstructed story not new or not true? If the former, it deserves to be better known at mother's knee, if only as warning of how children can go wrong, whether by not attending to what father says, or by banking too much upon family tradition: "Children, obey your parents," yet in years of discretion, "Let your moderation be known unto all men." The alternative cannot be so readily accepted. However it came to be written, the story is there, and through Genesis to Joshua and Judges rings true, moving to finale through normal complications suggesting consecutive record by conscientious hands. On the dominant documentary theory it looks as if JEP's talent for plot-composition were due to a paranormal retroactive wave of inspiration, for there the serial begins at the end, with the fragment in Judges extracted from a previous, perhaps contemporary, record of the conquest used by J, and ends as the plot thickens, with Israel saying "Luz" to his heirs, and "To be continued" implied by P in the fifth century. There is inherent improbability in the *clou* of the tale having to wait for record until Bethel's heyday was over. Perhaps if the higher critics had heard the full story in youth they would have been more conservative in their findings (after all, P was once considered the earliest source, until it was deemed necessary to swivel it round Ezek. 40-48); and perhaps the tale may still serve as encouragement to criticize the critics.

POSTSCRIPT

The story of Bethel, gate of heaven, must always leave a sense of incompleteness—the beginning so auspicious, the sequel so inglorious: "Bethel shall come to nought" (Amos 5: 5). The prophets seem to leave it at that, and the New Testament ignores the place. Yet, as Jeremiah says in the great chapter which speaks of Rachel weeping for her children, of divine mercy for Ephraim, and the new covenant, "there is hope in thine end. . . . Set thine heart toward the highway, the way which thou wentest. . . . Turn again to these thy cities" (31: 17, 21). Hosea, too, seems to see

in Jacob's return from exile and his traverse of the land an omen for the future: "He had power over the angel . . . he found him at Bethel, and there he spake with us. . . . Therefore turn thou to thy God" (12: 4-6, cf. 12). Ezekiel in the fifty-mile-square tabernacle which has its sanctuary with throne of heaven in the district of Shechem, Salem, and Jacob's Well, its city gathered round Bethlehem and Rachel's tomb, makes Bethel centre of the intermediate Levites' or holy portion,¹² so that worshippers going from "profane" city to the most holy territory would approach the quondam Luz and Beth-aven as house of God and gate of heaven, meeting-ground of two spheres. However these things be interpreted, it is highly improbable that, when the mountains of Israel return to their allegiance, Bethel should not share in the promises that "they shall build the waste cities" (Amos 9: 14 f.); "I will settle you after your old estates, and will do better unto you than at your beginnings" (Ezek. 36: 11).

Glasgow.

¹² *Princeton Theol. Review*, July, 1922, 415 f.; Jan. 1924, map 29, and "Jacob's Journey," 40-44.