

Reevaluating Bethel

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The mound of biblical Bethel in the village of *Bēṭān* is one of the most important Bronze and Iron Age sites in the central hill country¹. Bethel is mentioned repeatedly in the Hebrew Bible, where it retains a singular importance as a cult place – probably the most important sanctuary of the Northern Kingdom. Amos (7:13) describes it as “the king’s sanctuary (. . .) a temple of the kingdom”. Bethel is the focus of the Jacob cycle in Genesis (28:19; 35:13); the location of one of the two golden calves established by Jeroboam I, the founder of the Northern Kingdom (1 Kgs 12:29); and a principal target for Josiah’s cult reform (2 Kgs 23:15–16). It is understandable, therefore, why Bethel has always been in the spotlight of biblical and archaeological research. In fact, the interest in biblical Bethel has even grown in recent years, with a significant number of articles² and three monographs³ devoted to its history.

From the point of view of archaeology, the basis for these discussions has been the report on the excavations carried out at the site by ALBRIGHT in 1934⁴ and by KELSO in 1954, 1957 and 1960⁵. The excavators described a site with an almost full occupational history, starting in the Chalcolithic period, peaking in the Middle Bronze Age and Late Bronze Age II and continuing throughout the Iron Age until sometime in the 6th century B.C.E. The site then declined and reached another peak of activity in the Hellenistic period. Previous studies, including the three monographs mentioned above, concentrated on the biblical material, accepting the interpretation of the archaeological finds as presented by ALBRIGHT and KELSO⁶.

In this article we wish to revisit the archaeology of Bethel and then comment on its biblical associations. We will focus on the period of time between the destruction of the Late Bronze Age settlement and the Hellenistic period. Our investigation is based on the published material⁷, as well as on our study of unpublished material at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and the W.F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research in Jerusalem⁸.

¹ There can be no doubt about the identification of Bethel with *Bēṭān* (RAINEY 2006). The geographical location, the name of the village, the prominence of the site in the Iron Age and the lack of an alternative site in this area make this clear.

² E. g., BLENKINSOPP 2003; ROFÉ 2003; KNAUF 2006; SMITH 2007.

³ KOENEN 2003; GOMES 2006; KÖHLMOOS 2006.

⁴ ALBRIGHT 1934.

⁵ KELSO 1968 with preliminary reports in KELSO 1955; 1958 and 1961.

⁶ DEVER 1971 does not challenge the main outline drawn by the excavators.

⁷ KELSO 1968.

⁸ The study of the finds at the W.F. Albright Institute was carried out by both of us; we wish to thank the Director S. GITIN for making the material available to us. The study of the finds at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary was carried out by one of us (I.F.). We wish to thank RON TAPPY and KAREN BOWDEN COOPER for their help and hospitality.

1. The Archaeology and History of Bethel According to ALBRIGHT and KELSO

1.1. *The Late Bronze Age*

There were two phases to the Late Bronze Age II settlement. The first is characterized by painted and imported sherds, while the second “had much less painted pottery and imported ware”⁹. The quality of construction in the Late Bronze Age settlement – especially in its first phase – is regarded as “the finest masonry in Bethel’s entire history [. . .] the best example of LB work yet found anywhere in Palestine”¹⁰. VINCENT described the (domestic) buildings of the second phase as the finest of this age and area that he has ever seen¹¹.

The early phase was destroyed in an intense fire, which left 25cm thick debris. The devastation was dated to the late 14th or early 13th century B.C.E.¹². The last Late Bronze Age settlement was annihilated by a great conflagration, which left 1–1.5m thick debris¹³. This destruction layer is described as “one of the thickest ash levels yet reported in Palestine”¹⁴. It was dated to 1240–35 B.C.E. and attributed to the invading Israelites¹⁵.

1.2. *The Iron Age I*

The excavators describe four Iron Age I phases. The first three featured architectural remains, while the fourth was represented by pottery only¹⁶. Evidence of burning could be traced at the end of Phases 1 and 2¹⁷. They left 40cm and 70–90cm thick debris respectively¹⁸. The pottery of the first three phases corresponds to that of *Tell Bēt Mirsim* Stratum B1. Forms characteristic of *Tell Bēt Mirsim* Stratum B2 appear in the third phase. The fourth phase, which features more burnished material¹⁹ matches the pottery of *Tell Bēt Mirsim* Stratum B2–3. Following the ALBRIGHT tradition, the Bethel team ended the Iron Age I at ca. 900 B.C.E.; the Iron Age II was dated to 900–586 B.C.E.²⁰. According to the division common today, the fourth phase – the one represented by pottery only – should be labeled Iron Age IIA.

1.3. *The Iron Age II*

The Iron Age II walls in Areas I and II of the 1934 excavations were built in different alignments than the Iron Age I walls, yet sections of the latter were reused in the Iron Age II²¹. Several phases of Iron Age II construction were detected.

⁹ KELSO 1968, 28.

¹⁰ KELSO 1968, 30.

¹¹ Cited in KELSO 1968, 28.

¹² KELSO 1968, 28.30.

¹³ KELSO 1968, 31.

¹⁴ KELSO 1968, 48–49, see pl. 14b.

¹⁵ KELSO 1968, 47–49.

¹⁶ KELSO 1968, 33–34.

¹⁷ KELSO 1968, 33, see the picture supposedly showing two ash layers in pl. 24b.

¹⁸ KELSO 1968, 33–34.

¹⁹ KELSO 1968, 33–34.

²⁰ KELSO 1968, xiv.

²¹ KELSO 1968, 36.

There is a certain confusion regarding the destruction of the Iron Age II settlement²². In one place the excavator noted that there is “only one catastrophe in the life of the town, when it was captured by the Assyrians”; the site seems to have lain in ruins for some time after this event²³. But then: Bethel “had been spared by Nebuchadnezzar”²⁴, and was destroyed again “at the shift of world power from the Babylonians to the Persians”²⁵. More precisely, “Bethel was destroyed in a great conflagration either at the hands of the Babylonian Nabonidus or shortly afterwards at the hands of the Persians, perhaps in the chaotic period preceding Darius”²⁶. This confusion seems to stem from the excavators’ difficulty to properly date the Iron Age II pottery of Bethel: The preliminary report had stated that in part the pottery from the burned houses is identical with that retrieved from the latest strata of *Tell Bēt Mirsim* and Beth-Shemesh (at that time believed to have been destroyed by the Babylonians), but when the material from the 1934 season was prepared for publication it became clear that the destruction must be dated later than the end of habitation at *Tell Bēt Mirsim*²⁷.

1.4. The Persian and Hellenistic Periods

Clear evidence for a Persian-period occupation was not found at Bethel²⁸, with the exception of a tiny sherd identified by ILLIFF as part of a 5th century B.C.E. Greek lekythos²⁹. The excavators proposed that a Persian-period settlement may have been located under the village of *Bēṭīn*, near the spring in the southern part of the mound³⁰. A prosperous Hellenistic settlement was uncovered at Bethel³¹.

2. Reevaluating the Settlement History of Bethel

The excavators’ interpretation of the Bethel finds is a classic example of Albrightian biblical archaeology of the early-to-mid 20th century. To ALBRIGHT, archaeology did not have an independent role; rather, it was expected to provide supporting evidence for a “history” prewritten according to an uncritical reading of the biblical text. Every mention of Bethel in the biblical record, uncritically dated (*e. g.*, the Patriarchs in the Middle Bronze Age, the Conquest in the late-13th century, etc.), was supposed to be represented at the site. And since Bethel is mentioned in a plethora of biblical sources, which cover the entire biblically narrated sequential history of ancient Israel, the finds were perceived as reflecting a continuous occupation starting in the Middle Bronze Age (the Patriarchal Age according to ALBRIGHT and his followers) and continuing through the Late Bronze Age (the conquest of Canaan), the Iron Age I (the Israelite settlement) and the entire Iron Age II (with special emphasis on the Jeroboam I shrine and Josiah’s reform).

²² Only one picture of an Iron Age II destruction layer was published – KELSO 1968, pl. 28a.

²³ KELSO 1968, 51.

²⁴ KELSO 1968, 51.

²⁵ KELSO 1968, 52.

²⁶ KELSO 1968, 51.

²⁷ KELSO 1968, 37, n. 6.

²⁸ KELSO 1968, 38.

²⁹ KELSO 1968, 80, pl. 37:10.

³⁰ KELSO 1968, 38.

³¹ KELSO 1968, 36.40.52; LAPP 1968.

Below we suggest an inverted method: establishing the archaeological sequence first and only then, and accordingly, dealing with the biblical material.

Unfortunately, the publication of the Bethel results does not allow a thorough discussion of the finds. There are no detailed plans and no detailed section drawings and one cannot connect the drawn (or photographed) finds to their exact provenance³². The pottery vessels of the Late Bronze and Iron Ages were divided by the excavators into four phases – Late Bronze Age, Iron Age I, Iron Age II and “6th century B.C.”. We have assembled the pottery from the different loci and tried to assign them to the published plans in order to examine them as proper assemblages. It turns out that most of the loci are mixed. This is clear even from the definitions of the excavators: Items (rightly) affiliated with the Iron Age were included in loci marked on the plan of the Late Bronze Age remains; and Iron Age II and “6th century B.C.” vessels come from loci marked on the plan of the Iron Age I remains. Furthermore, although the excavators discerned two Late Bronze Age and four Iron Age I phases, most of the loci were not attributed to these phases. It is therefore impossible to restore the pottery vessels (as well as the other finds) to their original context.

The sole option that remains for us is to examine the pottery typologically, and attempt to determine which periods are represented in the assemblage and in what intensity. One can present two arguments against this treatment of the settlement history of Bethel:

1. At the time of the excavations the mound of Bethel had already been partially covered by the village of *Bēṭīn*, hence only its northwestern sector was investigated. The unexcavated areas might have provided different results. Yet, the area which was available for excavation in the 1930s and 1950s was a significant one, covering ca. 150 × 100m³³. Indeed, in 1927 ALBRIGHT estimated the open area available for excavation as covering one and a half hectares³⁴, which makes up about half the area of the mound. This sector was explored in several relatively large fields³⁵ and tested in a few additional soundings. In many of the excavated areas the dig continued down to bedrock. All in all, the area excavated at Bethel was more significant than the average dig in other biblical mounds; the finds (including stray sherds) should represent the settlement history of the site – at least its broad outlines.
2. The quantity of the published pottery and other finds is relatively limited and hence it is doubtful if they enable a reliable reconstruction of the settlement history of the site. The quantity of finds kept at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and at the W.F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research is also limited in proportion to a major operation such as the one which had been undertaken at Bethel. It is therefore difficult to reach reliable observations regarding minute changes in the occupation of the site in the different phases of the Iron Age I and Iron Age II. But sufficient finds were published (or studied by us in Jerusalem and Pittsburgh) to draw a general outline for the settlement history of Bethel.

³² Also DEVER 1971.

³³ KELSO 1968, pl. 1:120.

³⁴ KELSO 1968, 2.

³⁵ KELSO 1968, pl. 120.

2.1. *The Late Bronze Age*

The finds are shown in KELSO's (1968) pl. 52:6,8–23 (early phase) and pls. 53:1–15; 54:1–14 (later phase). Most vessels were not attributed to a sub-phase and were simply defined as Late Bronze Age.

Some of the 17 potsherds assigned to the early phase (*e. g.*, pl. 52:6,15–16.20) should in fact be dated to the end of the Middle Bronze Age IIB and regarded as stray sherds.

The vessels that were attributed to the later phase are similar to those that were not attributed to either phase. Prominent among them are open bowls with a simple rim³⁶, open carinated bowls³⁷, a thickened rim krater³⁸, and cooking-pots with everted triangular rim³⁹. There are a few potsherds of imported vessels – Mycenaean and Cypriot – including WS II Ware bowls⁴⁰ and BR Ware jugs and juglets⁴¹. Most of these vessels have a long time span. In general terms, this assemblage seems to date to the Late Bronze Age II (to differ from the Late Bronze Age III).

The absolute date of destruction of Late Bronze Age Bethel as given by ALBRIGHT and KELSO⁴² is based on their general interpretation of the early history of ancient Israel, that is, the conquest of Joshua must have taken place before the mention of Israel in the Merenptah Stele, at that time dated between 1235 and 1231 B.C.E.⁴³. Archaeologically speaking, the destruction of Late Bronze Age III Level VI at Lachish is dated to the second half of the 12th century B.C.E.⁴⁴. The end of Late Bronze Age II Bethel should probably be dated to the late 13th or early 12th century B.C.E.

From the published data it is difficult to judge if Bethel was indeed destroyed twice in the course of the Late Bronze Age II. If this were the case, it would provide testimony for unrest in the highlands at that time.

2.2. *The Iron Age I*

Based on the number of finds and the excavators' description of three architectural phases it is reasonable to assume that the Iron Age I settlement was inhabited over a long period of time. Prominent in the Iron Age I assemblage are collared rim storage jars⁴⁵, cooking-pots with everted triangular rims in the Late Bronze Age tradition⁴⁶ and cooking-pots with erect and elongated rims⁴⁷. In addition, there are some S-shaped bowls⁴⁸, several multi-handled

³⁶ KELSO 1968, pls. 53:9,12–14.16–18.26; 54:1–2.12.

³⁷ KELSO 1968, pl. 53:1–7.10–11.27.

³⁸ KELSO 1968, pl. 82:5.

³⁹ KELSO 1968, pls. 53:25,28–30; 54:15–17; 55:1,3–4.

⁴⁰ KELSO 1968, pl. 37:1–9.

⁴¹ KELSO 1968, pl. 38:1–1; additional, unpublished imported sherds were detected in the collection of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

⁴² 1235–1200 and 1240–1235; ALBRIGHT 1935, 18; KELSO 1968, 48 respectively.

⁴³ ALBRIGHT 1935, 17.

⁴⁴ USSISHKIN 2004, 69–70; FINKELSTEIN/PIASETZKY 2007a.

⁴⁵ KELSO 1968, pls. 56; 57:1–5.

⁴⁶ KELSO 1968, pls. 57:12–22; 58:1–18.

⁴⁷ KELSO 1968, pl. 58:19–25.

⁴⁸ KELSO 1968, pls. 59:10; 60:3–4.

kraters⁴⁹ and a few decorated Philistine potsherds⁵⁰. All these, some of which bear Late Bronze Age traditions, have a long time span during the Iron Age I. The Iron Age I pottery of Bethel seems to correspond to the assemblage of Stratum V at Shiloh, located only 15km to the northeast⁵¹.

In other places one of us argued that at nearby *Hirbet et-Tell* (Ai) and *Hirbet Raddāna* the Iron Age I settlement continued to be inhabited until the later phase of the period and possibly in the early stage of the Iron Age IIA, and that both sites were then abandoned⁵². We would therefore suggest two phases of destruction/abandonment in this region:

- a. The first phase took place in the end of Shiloh and Bethel. The violent destruction and abandonment of Shiloh is radiocarbon dated to 1050–1000 B.C.E.⁵³. The excavators of Bethel did not supply evidence for a similar destruction; the site could have been abandoned or could have declined gradually.
- b. The second phase covered the end of *Hirbet et-Tell* and *Hirbet Raddāna* in the mid-to-late 10th century B.C.E.

2.3. The Iron Age IIA

In the vicinity of Bethel, the Iron Age IIA is best known from the City of David Strata 14–13⁵⁴, the site of *Hirbet ed-Dawwāra*⁵⁵ and tomb-groups at Gibeon and *Tell en-Naṣbe*⁵⁶. Most types common at these sites are rare or absent at Bethel. Only a few sherds/vessels which can be affiliated with the Iron Age IIA appear in the Bethel report, most of them included in the Iron Age I plates:

- sherd of a red-slipped, hand-burnished bowl⁵⁷,
- sherd of a hand-burnished bowl⁵⁸,
- hand-burnished small bowl⁵⁹,
- red-slipped, hand-burnished bowl⁶⁰,
- hand-burnished krater⁶¹,

⁴⁹ KELSO 1968, pls. 59:15; 84:1.

⁵⁰ KELSO 1968, pls. 38:12–14; 59:9; 60:12. The bowl (pl. 60:12) was reconstructed from a base and a rim shown in the same plate (pl. 60:14 and 60:10 respectively, see KELSO 1968, 103).

⁵¹ BUNIMOVITZ/FINKELSTEIN 1993.

⁵² E. g., FINKELSTEIN 2007. The unstratified pottery which belongs to the fourth “Iron Age I” phase at Bethel, including some slipped and burnished material (KELSO 1968, 34), could have been taken as indicating a similar situation, *i. e.*, that Iron Age I Bethel continued to be inhabited in the early phase of the Iron Age IIA. Yet, the diagnostic Iron Age IIA pottery items seem to date to a later phase of that period (below).

⁵³ FINKELSTEIN/PIASETZKY 2006.

⁵⁴ CAHILL 2003.

⁵⁵ FINKELSTEIN 1990.

⁵⁶ DAJANI 1953; MCCOWN 1947, pl. 35 respectively.

⁵⁷ KELSO 1968, pl. 59:18. Information about surface treatment (slip and burnish) is taken from the Catalogue of Pottery Plates, from the description in the text, and, if available, from reviewing the actual vessels in Pittsburgh and Jerusalem.

⁵⁸ KELSO 1968, pl. 60:17.

⁵⁹ KELSO 1968, pl. 73:4.

⁶⁰ KELSO 1968, pl. 73:6.

⁶¹ KELSO 1968, pl. 78:6.

- cooking-pot rim⁶²,
- three black juglets⁶³,
- decorated amphoriskos⁶⁴,
- several small hand-burnished sherds shown in the photograph plates⁶⁵.

To this one should add several unpublished Iron Age IIA items: a few additional black-juglets and several red-slipped/burnished sherds kept at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and, possibly, a red-slipped juglet⁶⁶, kept at the Albright Institute. The scarab in KELSO 1968, pl. 119c:63 may also belong to this period⁶⁷.

Most of these pottery items are known from both the early and late phases of the Iron Age IIA. Yet, there are no diagnostic *Early* Iron Age IIA items here, while at least two of the items in the list above⁶⁸ seem to date to the Late Iron Age IIA⁶⁹. On the basis of this limited number of vessels we can only say that there is evidence for some activity at Bethel in the later phase of the Iron Age IIA, in the 9th century B.C.E. (mid-to-late 9th century according to FINKELSTEIN). In any event, the Iron Age IIA settlement must have been small and probably sparsely built⁷⁰. One could argue that the Iron Age IIA settlement was restricted to the sector of the mound under the village of *Bētīn*, which has not been excavated. But as we are dealing with a relatively small site, which was intensively excavated in large areas, had there been a prosperous Iron Age IIA settlement at Bethel, more pottery representing this period should have been found as stray sherds in the Iron Age IIB and later strata in the excavated part of the mound.

2.4. The Iron Age IIB–C

The excavators presented the pottery under two categories:

1. Iron Age II, which they compared mainly to *Tell Bēt Mirsim* Stratum A.
2. The 6th century B.C.E., identified as such because it seemed later than the pottery of *Tell Bēt Mirsim* Stratum A, at that time believed to have been destroyed in 597 B.C.E.⁷¹.

A close examination of the pottery plates and the material kept at Pittsburgh and Jerusalem reveals a clear resemblance between the pottery of these two phases and indicates that both should be dated to the 8th century, parallel to the time of Lachish Level III, *Tell es-Seba*^c

⁶² KELSO 1968, pl. 61:9.

⁶³ KELSO 1968, pl. 61:12–14.

⁶⁴ KELSO 1968, pl. 74:4.

⁶⁵ KELSO 1968, pl. 40:28–29.32.

⁶⁶ KELSO 1968, pl. 59:1.

⁶⁷ BARUCH BRANDL, personal communication. The seal in KELSO 1968, pl. 44:5 dates to the Iron Age I or Iron Age IIA (KEEL/UEHLINGER 1998, 127.142.148). The south Arabian clay stamp in KELSO 1968, pl. 118, dated there to the 9th century B.C.E. and described as having been found in mixed debris outside the west wall of the city (KELSO 1968, 89; 1970; VAN BEEK/JAMME 1958; 1970) was most probably brought to the site in modern times (YADIN 1969; CLEVELAND 1973) and therefore is not discussed in this article.

⁶⁸ The bowl in KELSO 1968, pl. 59:18 and the decorated amphoriskos in KELSO 1968, pl. 74:4.

⁶⁹ For these two phases see HERZOG/SINGER-AVITZ 2004.

⁷⁰ The absence of prominent Iron Age IIA types, such as Black on Red decorated juglets and bowls may be noteworthy when one tries to evaluate the quality of the Iron Age IIA material from Bethel.

⁷¹ KELSO 1968, 66.

Strata III–II, Arad Strata X–VIII and *Tell Bēt Mirsim* Stratum A⁷². Prominent among the vessels of this period are the folded rim bowls, most of them wheel-burnished⁷³. Other noteworthy vessels are bowls with everted sloping rim⁷⁴, open shallow bowls⁷⁵, folded rim kraters with two or four handles⁷⁶, thickened rim cooking-pots⁷⁷, small black juglets⁷⁸, dipper juglets⁷⁹, *lmlk* type storage jar⁸⁰, ridged neck storage jars⁸¹, cylindrical holemouth jars⁸², a pithos with inward-sloping rim⁸³ and a lamp with a low disc base⁸⁴.

Bethel belonged to the Northern Kingdom. It is therefore surprising that in addition to pottery types known from 8th century B.C.E. northern sites the pottery repertoire of the site includes a considerable number of vessels which depict Judahite characteristics. The Iron Age IIB assemblage includes folded rim bowls⁸⁵, folded rim kraters⁸⁶, a storage jar of the *lmlk* type⁸⁷, a storage jar with carinated shoulder⁸⁸, cylindrical holemouth jars⁸⁹, a pithos with inward-sloping rim⁹⁰ and a lamp with a low disc base⁹¹.

A. MAZAR encountered a similar phenomenon at *Hirbet el-Merḡame*, a site located 12 km to the northeast of Bethel: “On the one hand, it [the *Hirbet el-Merḡame* pottery] differs from the finds at Hazor, Megiddo and Samaria, as well as from those of Jerusalem and its environs; on the other hand, it shows an interesting mix of influences from both these regions”⁹². MAZAR concluded that the *Hirbet el-Merḡame* assemblage

“is typical of the southern part of the kingdom of Israel: it exhibits strong influence of the ceramic traditions of Judah on the one hand, and of those of the northern kingdom of Israel on the other. Such a mixture of influences is unparalleled at any other site, with the possible exception of Gezer”⁹³.

The Iron Age IIB pottery of Bethel fits this description.

Many Iron Age IIB pottery forms continued into the Iron Age IIC, hence an attempt to verify the nature of Bethel in this phase of the Iron Age must concentrate on the diagnostic

⁷² DEVER (1971, 468) ascribed this pottery to the 8th and 7th centuries B.C.E. For the change in the dating of Stratum A at *Tell Bēt Mirsim* see, e.g., AHARONI 1973, 6.

⁷³ E.g., KELSO 1968, pls. 62:5–7.10.12–17; 63:20–22.24; 79:5; 80:4.6.

⁷⁴ KELSO 1968, pls. 63:1–2.9–13; 64:3–5.9.

⁷⁵ KELSO 1968, pls. 63:15; 74:1; 80:2.

⁷⁶ KELSO 1968, pls. 62:1–4.18–20; 64:1–2; 80:8.

⁷⁷ KELSO 1968, pl. 65:1–3.

⁷⁸ KELSO 1968, pl. 65:9–12.

⁷⁹ KELSO 1968, pl. 65:14–18.

⁸⁰ KELSO 1968, pl. 80:10.

⁸¹ KELSO 1968, pls. 66:14–15; 67:11–19.

⁸² KELSO 1968, pl. 66:3–6.9–12.

⁸³ KELSO 1968, pl. 67:9.

⁸⁴ KELSO 1968, pl. 65:21.

⁸⁵ KELSO 1968, pls. 62:5–7.10.12–17; 63:20–22.24; 79:5; 80:4.6.

⁸⁶ KELSO 1968, pls. 62:1–4.18–20; 64:1–21; 80:8.

⁸⁷ KELSO 1968, pl. 80:10; for a *lmlk* handle found at the site see ESHEL 1989.

⁸⁸ KELSO 1968, pl. 66:13.

⁸⁹ KELSO 1968, pl. 66:3–6.9–12.

⁹⁰ KELSO 1968, pl. 67:9.

⁹¹ KELSO 1968, pl. 65:21.

⁹² MAZAR 1995, 114.

⁹³ MAZAR 1995, 117.

late 7th/early 6th century forms of the Lachish II assemblage. Only a few such vessels (mainly potsherds) can be found in the Bethel report ⁹⁴:

- the rim of a heavy bowl ⁹⁵,
- the rim of a cooking-pot ⁹⁶,
- a large decanter ⁹⁷,
- a small decanter ⁹⁸,
- two dipper juglets ⁹⁹,
- a decorated “Assyrian” bottle ¹⁰⁰,
- an alabastron ¹⁰¹,
- an upper part of a holemouth storage jar, decorated on its shoulder with horizontal incisions bordering rows of circular protuberances ¹⁰².

Similar sherds were found at *Tell el-Hlēfe* ¹⁰³. Kadesh-Barnea Stratum 2 and Aroer Strata II–I produced similar vessels, but the circular decoration is described as thumb-impressed and is not projecting ¹⁰⁴.

A few additional items – two lamps with high-base, three or four rims of cooking-pots with everted rim and a small bowl with elongated, folded rim – are kept at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

It is clear, then, that in the late 7th century B.C.E. Bethel was small and probably sparsely settled. Since we do not know the date of transition from the Lachish III to the Lachish II assemblages within the 7th century B.C.E. ¹⁰⁵, it is difficult to establish exactly when Bethel declined.

The small Iron Age IIC assemblage from Bethel also includes items which show Judahite characteristics: a large decanter ¹⁰⁶, a small decanter ¹⁰⁷, a cooking-pot ¹⁰⁸, lamps with high base and possibly the pillar figurine ¹⁰⁹ and the inscribed weight ¹¹⁰.

⁹⁴ The arrow-head in KELSO 1968, pl. 46:28 is typical of the 7th through 4th century B.C.E. and hence may belong to the Iron Age IIC (BARUCH BRANDL, personal communication).

⁹⁵ Mortarium – KELSO 1968, pl. 63:25.

⁹⁶ KELSO 1968, pl. 65:4.

⁹⁷ KELSO 1968, pl. 79:1.

⁹⁸ KELSO 1968, pl. 78:3.

⁹⁹ KELSO 1968, pl. 78:1–2.

¹⁰⁰ Probably a local imitation – KELSO 1968, pl. 79:4.

¹⁰¹ KELSO 1968, pl. 65:22.

¹⁰² KELSO 1968, 106, pl. 67:8.

¹⁰³ GLUECK 1969, 54, fig. 1:3–4.6.

¹⁰⁴ BERNICK-GREENBERG 2007, 170, pl. 11.80:3–4; BIRAN/COHEN 1981, 265, fig. 16:6.

¹⁰⁵ See, e.g., FINKELSTEIN/NA'AMAN 2004.

¹⁰⁶ KELSO 1968, pl. 79:1.

¹⁰⁷ KELSO 1968, pl. 78:3.

¹⁰⁸ KELSO 1968, pl. 65:4.

¹⁰⁹ KELSO 1968, pl. 46:15.

¹¹⁰ KELSO 1968, pl. 44:6; the latter two may date to the Iron Age IIB.

2.5. *The Neo-Babylonian, Persian and Hellenistic Periods*

The excavators claimed that the site continued to be inhabited without interruption until the mid- or late-6th century B.C.E. Yet, as we have indicated above, most of the pottery assigned to this phase belongs, in fact, to the Iron Age IIB in the 8th century B.C.E.¹¹¹ A Babylonian seal bought from the villagers of *Bēṭin*¹¹² may have originated at another site.

There are a few clues for possible, very weak Persian-period activity at Bethel:

- A sherd described as a 5th century B.C.E. Greek lekythos¹¹³.
- A wedge-shaped sherd kept at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and an additional such sherd kept at the Albright Institute. These sherds probably date to the Babylonian or Babylonian/early Persian period, rather than to the main phase of the Persian period.
- A rim of a mortarium bowl kept at the Albright Institute seems to date to the Persian period, though this type may also belong to the late Iron Age II.

In any event, no unambiguous evidence for a full-fledged Persian-period occupation was found at Bethel – neither pottery nor *Jehud* seal impressions. This fits the description of the excavators, according to which the foundations of the Hellenistic walls penetrated into the Iron Age II remains¹¹⁴. The excavators speculated that a Persian-period settlement may have been located near the spring of *Bēṭin*, under the built-up area of the village¹¹⁵, but had such a settlement existed, it should have left a clear ceramic imprint on the site.

A prosperous Hellenistic settlement was uncovered at Bethel¹¹⁶.

3. Notes on Archaeology and Bethel in the Biblical Text

Archaeology seems to show that the settlement history of Bethel in the Iron Age was *not* continuous, as held by the excavators¹¹⁷. Rather it was characterized by oscillations, with two periods of strong activity in the Iron Age I and the Iron Age IIB, two periods of decline – in the Late Iron Age IIA and in the Iron Age IIC, and two periods of possible abandonment in the Early Iron Age IIA and the Babylonian-Persian periods (Table 1):

¹¹¹ DEVER (1971, 468, citing HOLLADAY), suggested that most of SINCLAIR's "6th century" pottery in fact dates to the 8th and 7th centuries B.C.E. Needless to say, the meager Iron Age IIC pottery discussed above can also cover the period of time immediately after 586 B.C.E.

¹¹² KELSO 1968, 37; STERN 1982, 31.

¹¹³ KELSO 1968, 80, pl. 37:10. We wish to thank Dr. OREN TAL of Tel Aviv University for checking this sherd and confirming its date as suggested decades ago by ILLIFFE.

¹¹⁴ KELSO 1968, 36.

¹¹⁵ KELSO 1968, 38.

¹¹⁶ KELSO 1968, 36.40.52; LAPP 1968; for the pottery see, for instance, KELSO 1968, pls. 68–69.

¹¹⁷ This contradicts statements such as "A careful reading through the redactional layers of the books of Kings reveals a chronological thread spanning the centuries from the time of the schism to the post-exilic period (ca. 920–520) [...] throughout which Bethel remained at the heart of Israelite national, religious and political identity" (GOMES 2006, 59).

Period	Date (B.C.E.)	Nature of activity
Late Bronze Age II	13 th century	Strong activity
Late Bronze Age III	12 th century	Not clear
Early and middle Iron Age I	Late 12 th to late 11 th century	Strong activity
Late Iron Age I	Late 11 th to late 10 th century	Gap?
Early Iron Age IIA	Late 10 th and early 9 th century*	Gap?
Late Iron Age IIA	Middle to second half of 9 th century* ¹¹⁸	Weak activity
Iron Age IIB	8 th century and possibly first decades of the 7 th century	Strong activity
Iron Age IIC	Late 7 th and early 6 th century	Weak activity
Babylonian and Persian period ¹¹⁹	6 th to late 4 th century	Gap? Very weak activity?
Hellenistic period	Mainly from 2 nd century	Strong activity

Table 1. Proposed settlement history of Bethel from the Late Bronze Age II to the Hellenistic period.

The biblical reference to the importance of Shiloh in pre-monarchic times must preserve genuine memories of its prosperity in the Iron Age I, as Shiloh was not inhabited, or very sparsely settled, in the Iron Age II¹²⁰. Whether references to Bethel in Judges or 1 Samuel (put in writing centuries later) may preserve a similar memory is impossible to say.

The story in 1 Kgs 12:29 presents a problem. Jeroboam I ruled in the late 10th century – in the transition period from the late Iron Age I to the Early Iron Age IIA, or the early days of the Iron Age IIA. Thus far Bethel has produced no clear indication that it was inhabited at that time. Dating the relatively small number of Iron Age IIA vessels/sherds found at the site to a later phase of the period, in the 9th century B.C.E., would leave this biblical tradition with no remains on the ground¹²¹. Were the site inhabited at the time, it was no more than a small, very meager settlement¹²². The sparse late Iron Age IIA settlement may provide the reality

¹¹⁸ According to SINGER-AVITZ the Early Iron Age IIA dates to the second half of the 10th century while the Late Iron Age IIA dates to the 9th century (HERZOG/SINGER-AVITZ 2004).

¹¹⁹ Possibly also the Early Hellenistic period, in the 3rd century B.C.E.

¹²⁰ FINKELSTEIN 2005.

¹²¹ According to ARIE (2008) Dan, which is mentioned in 1 Kgs 12:29 together with Bethel, was not inhabited, or was sparsely settled in the Iron Age IIA. ARIE has suggested that the tradition about the activity of Jeroboam I at Dan reflects the prosperity of the site in the Iron Age IIB. It is difficult to apply this argument to our case for two reasons: First, Bethel's cult place is prominent in the biblical text, with a strong tradition which goes back to the founder of the Northern Kingdom. Second, Bethel was close to Jerusalem and its history probably known better than that of faraway Dan. For the possibility that 1 Kgs 12:29 is a non-historical construct representing the Deuteronomistic religious concerns see HOFFMANN 1980, 59–73. For the possible late nature of the story about the bull-cult at Dan and Bethel see PAKKALA 2008 (but see below regarding the status of Bethel in the 6th and 5th centuries B.C.E.).

¹²² The idea that the Bethel sanctuary was located outside of the town, to the east (recently BLENKINSOPP 2003) is baseless in view of the intensive archaeological surveys which did not reveal the slightest clue for an Iron Age II site, let alone cult site, in this area (FINKELSTEIN/BUNIMOVITZ/LEDERMAN (ed.) 1997).

behind the reference to Bethel in the northern prophetic cycle (2 Kgs 2:2–3.23), which seems to include genuine historical memories¹²³.

The second period of prosperity at Bethel dates to the Iron Age IIB. Proposing a date for its inception involves discussion of pottery assemblages and ¹⁴C results. It is clear today that in both Israel and Judah the Iron Age IIA pottery assemblages continued until the end of the 9th century B.C.E., if not somewhat later. The lower Iron Age IIA destruction layer at *Tell el-Hamme* and the destruction of Hazor IX in the north provided radiocarbon results *ca.* 820–800 B.C.E., and the destruction of *Tell es-Sāfi* IV in the south gave somewhat similar results – *ca.* 830–800 B.C.E.¹²⁴. The upper Iron Age IIA destruction layer at *Tell el-Hamme* in the Beth-Shean Valley supplied ¹⁴C results in the very early 8th century B.C.E.¹²⁵. In the south, the sequence of Iron Age IIB strata at Arad (X–VIII) seems to attest to a meaningful time span, which probably started no later than the middle of the 8th century and possibly before. In the north, the Iron Age IIB assemblages characterize strata dating to the first half of the 8th century, such as Hazor VI (possibly also Hazor VIII and VII for the early days of this phase) and Megiddo IVA. The beginning of prosperity at Bethel should therefore be dated post 800 B.C.E. The strong presence of Bethel in the biblical text (including “Beth-Aven” in the prophecies of Amos and Hosea) reflects its importance in the 8th century B.C.E., before the fall of the North.

Dating the end of Bethel’s Iron Age IIB prosperity depends on another broad issue – the date of transition from the Iron Age IIB to the Iron Age IIC assemblages in the south (that is, the transition from the Lachish III to the Lachish II pottery). With no destruction layers in the first half of the 7th century B.C.E. it is difficult to fix this date accurately, but it is reasonable to assume that the Lachish III assemblage did not terminate immediately after the Sennacherib campaign of destruction in 701 B.C.E.¹²⁶. In other words, the Iron Age IIB pottery probably continued into the first decades of the 7th century and was then gradually replaced by the Lachish II pottery repertoire. Whether the Iron Age IIB settlement at Bethel ended with destruction is difficult to establish. The excavators referred to one, but unlike their description of destructions in the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age I, they do not provide any detail. All one can say is that Bethel declined in the late 8th century or sometime during the first decades of the 7th century B.C.E., certainly before its last phase. Whether this was a result of the Assyrian take-over or of a later event is impossible to say. 2 Kgs 17:28 and Papyrus Amherst 63, which mentions deportees brought by the Assyrians, who were probably settled at Bethel¹²⁷, also testify to a post-720 B.C.E. activity at the site.

Scholars have suggested that the Bethel temple served as the “repository” and place of composition of northern biblical traditions such as the Exodus story, the Jacob cycle and the Book of Saviors in Judges¹²⁸. In view of the weak activity in the late 7th/early 6th centuries and the lack of evidence for meaningful activity in the 6th century and the Persian period, one is inclined to associate the proposed scribal activity at Bethel with its period of prosperity in the Iron Age IIB. Archaeology cannot help in deciding whether this happened before or after the destruction of the Northern Kingdom¹²⁹. Historical considerations may favor the former possibility.

¹²³ NA’AMAN 1997.

¹²⁴ SHARON/GILBOA/JULL/BOARETTO 2007; FINKELSTEIN/PIASETZKY 2007b.

¹²⁵ SHARON/GILBOA/JULL/BOARETTO 2007; FINKELSTEIN/PIASETZKY 2007b.

¹²⁶ FINKELSTEIN/NA’AMAN 2004.

¹²⁷ STEINER 1991.

¹²⁸ E. g., KNAUF 2006, 319–322; for the Book of Saviors see RICHTER 1963.

¹²⁹ For the latter possibility see KNAUF 2002.

Bethel is mentioned in the list of towns of Benjamin (Josh 18:22), which dates to the late 7th century¹³⁰, and appears prominently in the description of King Josiah's cult reform (2 Kgs 23:15). Josiah reigned between 639 and 609 and his actions at Bethel could not have been carried out before the Assyrian retreat in the 620s B.C.E.¹³¹. The late 7th century B.C.E. in Judah is already characterized by the Lachish II assemblage. One could argue that the decline of Bethel was the result of Josiah's actions, but the archaeological evidence makes it difficult to accept this interpretation. It is more reasonable to assume that in Josiah's time Bethel was already in decline. In other words, it seems that Josiah did not act in a prosperous city.

Evidence for activity at Bethel in the Babylonian, Persian and early Hellenistic period is very meager, if it exists at all¹³². This calls for a few comments. First, the idea that Bethel served as a prominent cult place in the Babylonian period¹³³ is contradicted by the archaeological evidence. Second, the mention of Bethel in Zech 7:2 may refer to a personal name¹³⁴. Third, significant scribal activity at Bethel in this time span is not a viable option. Bethel appears in the list of returnees in Ezra 2:28 and Neh 7:32. It is not the only place mentioned in the list which was not inhabited, or was very sparsely occupied in the Persian period. It seems, therefore, that the reality behind the list should be sought in the late-Hellenistic period¹³⁵.

4. Summary

A reevaluation of the archaeology of Bethel indicates that the site prospered in the Iron Age I, Iron Age IIB and the late Hellenistic period, that it was weakly settled in the Late Iron Age IIA and the Iron Age IIC, and that it was probably uninhabited or almost deserted in the Babylonian and Persian periods (possibly also in the Early Iron Age IIA). Biblical references to Bethel should be read accordingly. The only possible period for the supposed strong scribal activity at Bethel is the Iron Age IIB, in the 8th century B.C.E., probably before the fall of the Northern Kingdom.

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¹³⁰ ALT 1925; NA'AMAN 1991.

¹³¹ For this date see NA'AMAN 1991.

¹³² As mentioned above, the meager Iron Age IIC material may theoretically represent the first decades of the 6th century as well.

¹³³ E. g., PAKKALA 2002; BLENKINSOPP 2003; GUILLAUME 2004; KNAUF 2006; GOMES 2006.

¹³⁴ E. g., ACKROYD 1968, 207; *contra* MEYERS/MEYERS 1987, 382–383.

¹³⁵ FINKELSTEIN 2008.

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