

**A FAST Biblical Portrait: Bethel**  
*A Vision, a Place, and,*  
*Ultimately, a Personal Connection*

John Kain, 2010

*The word Bethel is used today in the names of many ministries and Christian institutions of higher learning because of its rich meaning: also written Beth-El, it generally means “house of God.”*

The key reference to a place named Bethel is found in Genesis 28, when Jacob fell asleep on a stone and dreamed of a ladder stretching between heaven and earth with angels ascending and descending and God standing at the top. When Jacob awoke, he anointed the stone and named the place Bethel.

The name *House of God* and the term *gate of heaven* also allude to the Holy Temple that came to be built on or near the location of Jacob’s revelation. That location—believed to be at the Temple Mount in the old city of Jerusalem—was the site for two temples. The first was built by King Solomon over seven years during the tenth century B.C. It replaced the tabernacle of Moses as the central geographic focus of the Jewish faith. This temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

Construction of the second temple on this site began in 535 B.C. and was completed twenty years later. According to the book of Ezra, this rebuilding was authorized by Cyrus and ratified by Darius. Five centuries later, in about 20 B.C., this temple was renovated by Herod the Great. It was subsequently destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. Only portions of the outer walls still stand.

The significance of the temple is that it marked a place of spiritual connection between heaven and earth. The temple was regarded and respected as a place of contact with God—a house of prayer, a place of safe retreat, and a holy place worthy of the utmost honor.

Within your temple, O God,  
we meditate on your unfailing love.  
— Psalm 48:9

Jesus chose the temple as the site of his most public demonstration of his divine mission: he cleansed the temple of the carnival atmosphere and the economic as well as religious corruption that disrupted worship in this holy place. He knew that this public stand would lead, ultimately, to his death.

He overturned the tables of the money changers  
and the benches of those selling doves,  
and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts.  
And as he taught them, he said, **“Is it not written:  
‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’?  
But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”**  
— Mark 11:15-17

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, access to God was no longer focused on a geographic place. In effect, Jesus had changed the place of contact with God from Jerusalem to the heart of anyone who sincerely enters into a new life of faith in him. As God’s one and only Son, who willingly died on our behalf, Jesus brought us into a whole new relationship with God: Jesus is *bethel*, the house of God, the gate of heaven.

He then added,  
“I tell you the truth,  
**you shall see heaven open,  
and the angels of God  
ascending and descending  
on the Son of Man.”**  
— John 1:51

Godly men are no longer called to visit a specific geographic place in order to seek the presence of God. Worship is a matter of the spirit, not of geography.