

Ezra 2:28

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

The men of Beth-el and Ai, two hundred twenty and three.

Analysis

The men of Beth-el and Ai, two hundred twenty and three. Bethel (בֵּית־אֵל, Bet-El, 'house of God') and Ai (עֵין, Ha-Ay, 'the ruin') carry profound theological significance. Bethel was where Jacob encountered God, receiving covenant promises and naming the place 'house of God' (Genesis 28:10-22). Ai was Israel's humiliating defeat after Achan's sin, teaching that covenant unfaithfulness brings disaster (Joshua 7).

Bethel's later history complicates its legacy. Jeroboam I established a golden calf shrine there (1 Kings 12:28-29), making it a center of apostasy. The prophets condemned Bethel's false worship (Amos 5:5, Hosea 10:15). Yet 223 men from these towns returned, suggesting either the population maintained faithfulness despite the shrine, or post-exilic renewal purged the apostasy. Their return to 'house of God' and 'the ruin' symbolizes restoration after judgment.

Theologically, linking Bethel and Ai in one count juxtaposes divine encounter with human failure. Bethel represents God's gracious revelation; Ai represents sin's consequences. Together they summarize Israel's history—divine promise mixed with human unfaithfulness, yet God's purposes prevailing. The returnees embodied hope that grace outlasts judgment, that 'house of God' endures despite 'the ruin.'

Historical Context

Bethel lay approximately twelve miles north of Jerusalem, strategically positioned on the central watershed route. Archaeological excavations at Beitin (likely ancient

Bethel) reveal extensive Iron Age occupation followed by destruction—probably during the Babylonian conquest. The site shows Persian-period resettlement, confirming the return described here. Ai (et-Tell) lies east of Bethel. Its name means 'the ruin,' possibly because it was already abandoned when Israel invaded. The 223 returnees re-established presence in territory that had been both sacred (Jacob's altar) and profaned (Jeroboam's calf). Their return symbolized reclaiming sacred space from idolatrous corruption, purifying 'house of God' for true worship.

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How does Bethel's mixed legacy—both sacred and profaned—illustrate the tension between God's faithfulness and human unfaithfulness?
2. What does the juxtaposition of 'house of God' (Bethel) with 'the ruin' (Ai) teach about restoration after judgment?
3. How can churches reclaim heritage sites or traditions corrupted by false teaching while honoring legitimate spiritual history?

Interlinear Text

וְשָׁלַשָּׁה: עֶשֶׂר יָמִינָה אֶתְנֶשׁ בֵּית אֶלְעָם וְבֵית אֶלְעָם
H376 H0 of Bethel and Ai two hundred twenty and three
H1008 H5857 H3967 H6242 H7969

Additional Cross-References

Genesis 12:8 (Parallel theme): And he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Beth-el, and pitched his tent, having Beth-el on the west, and Hai on the east: and there he builded an altar unto the LORD, and called upon the name of the LORD.

