

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 (אֵי, 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

Related Passages

Study Questions

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Additional Cross-References

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