

Judges 1:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And the house of Joseph sent to descry Beth-el. (Now the name of the city before was Luz.)

Analysis

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Sending spies to 'descry' (vayatiru, וַיַּתֵּר from tur, תַּור, 'to spy out, explore') follows Joshua's practice at Jericho (Joshua 2:1) and Ai (Joshua 7:2). Intelligence gathering demonstrated wisdom—understanding enemy positions, defenses, and vulnerabilities before attack. However, contrast with Jericho proves instructive: Rahab aided Israel's spies from faith in Yahweh (Joshua 2:8-13), while Beth-el's informant (v. 24-25) acted from self-interest without covenant commitment.

The parenthetical note '(Now the name of the city before was Luz)' (veshem-ha'ir lefanim Luz, וְשֵׁם-הָעִיר לְפָנִים לֹא) connects to Genesis 28:19, where Jacob renamed Luz to Beth-el after his vision. The name Luz (luz, לֹא) possibly means 'almond tree' or derives from a root meaning 'to turn aside.' Canaanites apparently continued using the old name while Israelites used Jacob's designation. This dual naming reflects cultural-religious differences—Canaanites maintained pre-Israelite identity while Israelites emphasized covenantal naming.

Name changes in Scripture signify transformation and new identity. Abram became Abraham ('father of multitudes'), Jacob became Israel ('one who strives with God'), Simon became Peter ('rock'). Beth-el ('house of God') proclaimed divine presence and covenant relationship. Yet names alone don't guarantee reality—despite its name, Beth-el required reconquest and later became idolatry center.

Similarly, Christian identity involves more than labels—genuine transformation requires Spirit-wrought regeneration (2 Corinthians 5:17), not merely adopting Christian terminology while maintaining unregenerate patterns.

Historical Context

Luz/Beth-el's dual naming reflects common ancient Near Eastern practice where conquerors renamed cities while indigenous populations maintained original names. This occurred throughout history—Babylon/Babel, Ebla/Tell Mardikh, Jericho/Tell es-Sultan—with different groups using different names based on cultural-linguistic identity. Biblical texts generally prefer Israelite names while occasionally noting Canaanite originals (as here), demonstrating the texts' historical awareness and accuracy.

Reconnaissance before battle was standard military practice. Egyptian, Assyrian, and Hittite records describe intelligence gathering before campaigns. The Mari letters (18th century BCE) reference spies and scouts. Moses sent twelve spies into Canaan (Numbers 13), Joshua sent spies to Jericho (Joshua 2) and Ai (Joshua 7), and here Joseph's house follows this pattern. Effective intelligence could identify weaknesses (water sources, gates, guard rotations) enabling strategic advantage.

Beth-el's conquest represents the central highlands' strategic importance. Control of sites like Beth-el, Shiloh, and Shechem secured the north-south spine of Canaan's hill country. These highlands, though rugged and less agriculturally productive than valleys, provided defensible positions where Israelite infantry could operate effectively. The Canaanites' chariot forces, effective on plains, struggled in mountainous terrain, giving Israel tactical advantage despite technological inferiority.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. What does the contrast between Rahab (who helped from faith) and Beth-el's informant (who helped from self-interest) teach about motives in serving God?
2. How does the need to reconquer 'house of God' warn against presuming sacred labels guarantee spiritual reality?
3. What areas of your life bear 'Christian' labels but require genuine transformational conquest to match the name?

Interlinear Text

וַיַּרְא	בֵּית	יְהוָה	אֶל	בְּבֵית	יְהוָה	וְשָׁם	בָּעֵיר
sent to descry	And the house	of Joseph		H0	Bethel	Now the name	of the city
H8446	H1004	H3130		H1008		H8034	H5892
לֹא: לֹא:							
before	was Luz						
H6440	H3870						

Additional Cross-References

Genesis 28:19 (Parallel theme): And he called the name of that place Beth-el: but the name of that city was called Luz at the first.

Genesis 48:3 (Parallel theme): And Jacob said unto Joseph, God Almighty appeared unto me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and blessed me,

Genesis 35:6 (Parallel theme): So Jacob came to Luz, which is in the land of Canaan, that is, Beth-el, he and all the people that were with him.