

The City of Beth-shemesh in Judah

Preface: Beth-shemesh, which means, *City of the Sun*, is located in the lowlands of Judah, on the border of Judah and Dan, very near the territory of the Philistines.

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1. In the Hebrew, this is Bêyth shemesh (בַּיִת שֶׁמֶשׁ) [pronounced *bayth SHEM-esh*], which is appropriately transliterated *Beth-shemesh*. Bêyth is the word for *house* in the Hebrew and *shemesh* means *sun*, giving us *The House of the Sun*. Strong's #1053 BDB #112.
2. We have two other cities which are suggested as cities that are equivalent to Beth-shemesh:
 - a. Ir-shemesh, which means *city of the sun*. This is mentioned in Joshua 19:41 near Zorah, which is very near Beth-shemesh. If you will recall, there was some fluidity with respect to the bordering cities of Judah, as there was some evening out of the territory of Palestine. It is possible that Ir-shemesh was the twin city of Beth-shemesh, and that, originally, there were Danites and Judahites which occupied that city or cities.
 - b. Har-heres (or *Mount Heres*), which means *mount of the sun*. We find this city in Judges 1:35 mentioned in connection with Dan. It was one of the places where the Amorites continued to live. Sun worshiping was common in the Palestine area, even after the Jews took control of the land. Therefore, having more than one city with a name dedicated to the sun is reasonable to expect. The fact that this is *Mount Heres* makes this very unlikely to be equivalent to *Beth-shemesh*, because Beth-shemesh was in a valley. This city is likely in close proximity with Beth-shemesh and it is more likely equivalent to Ir-shemesh, mentioned above.
 - c. We have no way of knowing for certain if we are speaking of one, two or three cities here; and, if we have two cities here, it is not clear which two would be identical. If I was a betting man, I would consider Ir-shemesh and Mount Heres to be the same city, and located very near Beth-shemesh at a much higher elevation in the territory of Dan.
3. Location: Beth-shemesh is located in the lowlands of Judah (because we have the words *went down* in association with Beth-shemesh in Joshua 15:10), in the northwestern portion of that territory, 15 miles west of Jerusalem. It was a city on the border of Dan and Judah, which later became a bordering city for Judah and Philistia (1Sam. 6 2Chron. 28:20–23). When the Israeli kingdom was divided, Beth-shemesh would be a bordering city for Israel and Judah (2Kings 14:11–14 2Chron. 25:20–23). This would be along a common route from the hill country to the coastal plain.

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4. Beth-shemesh in Scripture:
 - a. Beth-shemesh is one of the bordering cities of Judah (Joshua 15:10). It stood between the borders of Dan and Judah. Since the Philistines had more or less overrun the territory of Dan (see Judges 18), this became a city which bordered Judah and Philistia.
 - b. Beth-shemesh was one of the cities given over to the Levites; specifically to the Kohathites (Joshua 21:9, 16 1Chron. 6:54, 59).

- c. There was apparently a road of sorts which went through Philistia and Judah, along which road was the city of Beth-shemesh and probably Ekron. Ekron was also originally on the border between Judah and Dan. It was likely that the religious types of Philistia realized that Beth-shemesh was a city of Kohathites (a branch of the Levites), who were closely tied to the priesthood of Israel. Therefore, delivering the Ark of God to this particular city would make the most sense. Beth-shemesh was along a main thoroughfare, it was near the border between the two countries and it was occupied by those tied to the priesthood of Israel; therefore, the most logical city to send the Ark toward. Recall that there was no actual navigation or guidance provided for the cows or the cart. It was essentially aimed in that direction. From Ekron to Beth-shemesh, we are dealing with a distance of 15–20 miles. 1Sam. 6:9–12
 - d. The cows actually got the Ark to Beth-shemesh, and the Israelites recognized immediately what it was. They offered up the cows to God, using the wood from the cart for the fire (1Sam. 6:13–15).
 - e. When the Philistine lords saw that the Ark went directly to Beth-shemesh, they returned to Ekron that same day. 1Sam. 6:16
 - f. Several of the Beth-shemites were executed by God, as they did not revere the Ark, and peered into it out of curiosity. 1Sam. 6:19
 - g. The Beth-shemites became as afraid of the Ark as were the Ekronites, and they sent messengers to Kiriath-jearim¹ asking them to come and take the Ark. There is some humor in the fact that this Levitical city called upon a city which was not occupied by Levitical families in order to look after the Ark of God (until it would be determined what would be done with It). 1Sam. 6:20–21
 - h. Beth-shemesh is not mentioned for a long time. Saul had not come upon the scene as of 1Sam. 6; he would have a 40 year reign, as would David who followed him. Beth-shemesh is finally mentioned in connection with Solomon (so we are talking about 100 years later). An official in Beth-shemesh had to financially back Solomon for one month out of the year. 1Kings 4:9
 - i. Beth-shemesh is again not mentioned for a long time. Amaziah, the ninth king after Solomon in the split kingdom of Judah, faced Jehoash, his counterpart over Israel, in Beth-shemesh (which was a part of Judah at the time). Amaziah was soundly defeated. This would have been during the late 8th century B.C. 2Kings 14:11–14 2Chron. 25:20–23
 - j. During the time that Ahaz was king over Judah (circa 732–716 B.C.), the Philistines invaded Judah and took several cities from her, including Beth-shemesh. 2Chron. 28:16–19. Ahaz appealed to Tiglath-Pileser III, the famous Assyrian king (circa 745–727 B.C.) (2Chron. 28:20–21). Judah became a vassal of the Assyrians because of this.²
 - k. Rainey supposes that Beth-shemesh back under Judæan control under King Josiah and possibly King Hezekiah,³ although there are no more Biblical references to Beth-shemesh.
5. Archeological discoveries⁴:
- a. Excavations of this area began in 1911–1912 and then were continued in 1928–1932.

The Six Strata of Occupation

Strata	Discoveries/Occupants/Remains	Time period
Stratum IV	Pottery remains found on bedrock (according to <i>The New Bible Dictionary</i> , this city was settled at the end of the Early Bronze Age, circa 2000 B.C.).	Middle Bronze Age I and Middle Bronze Age IIa

¹ We will cover the city of Kiriath-jearim at the end of 1Sam. 6; suffice to say that this was a nearby city which was on the border of Dan, Benjamin and Judah. Surprisingly enough, it was not a Levitical city.

² Paraphrased from *The New Bible Dictionary*; editor J. D. Douglas; ©Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; p.146.

³ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. a, p. 548.

⁴ Taken from *The New Bible Dictionary*; editor J. D. Douglas; ©Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; p.146. Chart is from *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 1, p. 548, and they credit John Moschus, *Pratum Spirituale*, ch. 170).

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Strata	Discoveries/Occupants/Remains	Time period
Stratum V	“Hyksos” city	Middle Bronze Ages IIb and IIc (18 th –16 th centuries B.C.)
Stratum IV	Two phases of occupation. A small clay tablet was found with an enigmatic inscription in cuneiform script similar to that used in writing the language of the Ugarit. The writing is from right to left, which is an exception to most Ugaritic writings. There is an inscription on a potsherd which represents the <i>proto-Canaanite</i> script. Apparently the second occupation was under Egyptian domination (see point B below).	Late Bronze Age (15 th –14 th and 14 th –13 th centuries B.C.)
Stratum III	Iron Age town with strong Philistine influences	Iron Age (12 th –11 th centuries B.C.)
Stratum IIa	This time period should correspond with the caseate walls being built (see point d below). Discovery of an Israelite administrative center (see 1Kings 4:9, when Solomon set up one of his aides in Beth-shemesh). One of the typical small finds from this stratum (or the next) were numerous royal stamped jar handles, one of which bears the inscription <i>Belonging to Eliakim, the steward of Jehoichin</i> . Apparently Beth-shemesh was attacked and destroyed by the Egyptians soon after the reign of Solomon.	Iron Age 10 th century B.C.
Stratum IIb, c	Unfortified town during Judæan monarchy; levels not carefully distinguished in its excavation.	Iron Age
Stratum I	Byzantine monastery on the southeast corner of the Tell	Iron Age 6 th century A.D.

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- b. The site was settled before 2000 B.C. near the end of the Early Bronze Age and was a fortified Canaanite city in the Middle and Late Bronze Ages, apparently reaching some sort of zenith under Egyptian domination under the pharaohs of Dynasty XIX.⁵ For a parallel time reference, Israel was just beginning to settle into the Land of Promise during the first century of the era of the judges.⁶
- c. Near the end of the Bronze Age, we find a great deal of Philistine pottery, making Israel and Philistia the chief rivals for this particular city (which meshes well with the Biblical record). We know from the pottery that the Philistines had moved this far inland. We know from the references in Judges and 1Samuel that Israel controlled Beth-shemesh during that time period.
- d. It is supposed because of the discovery of caseate walls that David strengthened this city during his rulership over Israel. We have no parallel mention of this in Scripture, however.

⁵ Paraphrased from *The New Bible Dictionary*; editor J. D. Douglas; ©Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; p.146. According to *The World Book Encyclopedia*; ©1983 by World Book, Inc.; Vol. B, p. 99, the XIX dynasty began circa 1300 B.C.

⁶ There seems to be a lot of dispute over dating this particular period of time in Israel.

- e. There is evidence that this city was destroyed in the 10th century. T. C. Mitchell suggests that the Egyptian king Sheshonq destroyed it when he invaded Judah during the rule of Rehoboam's⁷ fifth year (1Kings 14:25–28).⁸ According to World Book Encyclopedia, Sheshonk I was a Libyan who seized the Egyptian throne in 945 B.C.,⁹ making this the right time period. Given the context of Scripture, there is no reason for him to be further identified in Kings other than being the King of Egypt.
- f. Around the time of Tiglath-Pileser's invasion, it is apparent that there was a refinery for olive oil and that there were installations for copper works (which had already existed in the Bronze Age).¹⁰
- g. Nebuchadnezzar finally destroyed a declining Beth-shemesh in the 6th century B.C. Another source places this destruction in 701 B.C.
6. The modern location of Beth-shemesh is no doubt the modern 'Ain Shems.¹¹ 'Ain Shems means *the well of the sun*, which preserves, in part, its ancient origins.
7. There are two (and possibly three) *other* Beth-shemesh's found in Scripture.
- a. The first is found in Naphtali bordering Issachar (Joshua 19:17, 22, 32, 38). There were Canaanites which lived in this Beth-shemesh who were not destroyed (as God had commanded), but pressed into slavery (Judges 1:33).
- b. ZPEB strongly objects to the city of Beth-shemesh in Naphtali being equated with the city of the same name in Issachar.¹² Since this view is not really the subject of this study, I won't pursue this particular topic any further. It appears as though the Beth-shemesh in Issachar might be 25 miles southeast of the one in Naphtali (see Joshua 19:22).
- c. *Beth-shemesh* is also mentioned in Jer. 43:13, but that appears to be more of a translation rather than a transliteration and that the city named should be *Heliopolis*, which is in Egypt. *Heliopolis* means *City of the Sun*.



This is a picture of some recent archeological digging which is being done on Beth-shemesh. The University of Indiana is organizing another dig for the summer of 2002.

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Bibliography

1. *Barnes' Notes; Exodus to Ruth*; F. C. Cook, editor; reprinted 1996 by Baker Books; p. 388.
2. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*; Hendrickson Publishers; ©1996; p. 112.
3. *The Englishman's Hebrew Concordance of the Old Testament*, George Wigram; Hendrickson Publishers, ©1997; First Printing, Appendix p. (9).

⁷ Rehoboam was Solomon's successor after the kingdom of Israel split in two.

⁸ Mitchell wrote the article in *The New Bible Dictionary*; editor J. D. Douglas; ©Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; pp.146–147.

⁹ *The World Book Encyclopedia*; ©1983 by World Book, Inc.; Vol. E, p. 100.

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¹² *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 1, p. 545. I am obliged to point out, however, that ZPEB also equates Beth-shemesh with both Ir-shemesh and Mount Heres (op. cit.).

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4. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*; James Orr, Editor; ©1956 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; © by Hendrickson Publishers; Vol. I; p. 453.
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7. *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*; James Strong, S.T.D., LL.D.; Abingdon Press, New York.
8. *The World Book Encyclopedia*; ©1983 by World Book, Inc.; Vol. B, p. 638–639, Vol. E, pp. 99–100.
9. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 1, p. 545–548; Vol. 5, p. 748.

It is clear, when examining the sources of many the articles above that they have examined more ancient and better sources. However, there are so many hours in a day, so that, in order for me to do what I need to do, I need to stand upon the shoulders of hundreds of great Christian men who have preceded me.

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5. There was apparently a road of sorts which went through Philistia and Judah, along which road was the city of Beth-shemesh and probably Ekron. Ekron was also originally on the border between Judah and Dan. It was likely that the religious types of Philistia realized that Beth-shemesh was a city of Kohathites (a branch of the Levites), who were closely tied to the priesthood of Israel. Therefore, when the Philistines took the Ark of God, and suffered because of that, it seemed logical to deliver the Ark to the nearest godly city, which would be Beth-Shemesh. From Ekron to Beth-shemesh, we are dealing with a distance of 15–20 miles. 1Sam. 6:9–12
6. The Israelites immediately recognized the Ark. They offered up the cows to God, using the wood from the cart for the fire (1Sam. 6:13–15).
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