

Bite Size Bible Study

Christmas Story – 3 Bethlehem #219

By Pastor Lee

This is the third in a series of studies that are part of the Christmas Story.

Bethlehem {Heb. *Beth' al hēm*}

The Biblical village located approximately five miles southwest of Jerusalem just off the major road from Jerusalem to the Negev. The popular understanding is that the name, *beth-lechem*, means "house of bread." Perhaps the first mention of the village occurred before 1300 BCE in the Amarna letters, where the ruler of Jerusalem complained to the Egyptian pharaoh that the people of *Bit-Lahmi* had gone over to the side of the "Apiru", apparently, a people without local citizenship who caused disturbances in Canaanite society.

The same area is often referred to as **EPHRATAH** (*Eph' rd tdh*) or **EPHRATH** (*£' phrdth*) or **EPHRATHAH** (*Eph' rd thah*) where both the place and the personal name mean "fruitful." Ephrathah may have been a clan name associated with several different geographical localities, the most famous of which was Bethlehem. It is part of Judah's tribal territory. Ephrathah was a clan name of a family in Bethlehem whose importance made the clan name a synonym for the city. The textual and geographical connections are not always easy to distinguish. The two names Bethlehem and Ephrathah are apparently identified with each other as a poetic parallelism.

Bethlehem – Ephrathah is the site of many important events in Old Testament history. Many of them are linked to Jesus' lineage.

Most of us know of Bethlehem as the birthplace of Jesus, but did you know that many other important biblical events happened in or around Bethlehem?

Genesis 35:19, Gen 48:7, (all NIV)

Rachel (Jacob's second wife) died and was buried near Bethlehem.

¹⁹ So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). ²⁰ Over her tomb Jacob set up a pillar, and to this day that pillar marks Rachel's tomb.

⁷ As I was returning from Paddan,^[Northwest Mesopotamia] to my sorrow Rachel died in the land of Canaan while we were still on the way, a little distance from Ephrath. So I buried her there beside the road to Ephrath" (that is, Bethlehem).

Judges 12:7-10

King Ibzan was from Bethlehem and buried there.

⁷ Jephthah led Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in a town in Gilead. ⁸ After him, Ibzan of Bethlehem led Israel. ⁹ He had thirty sons and thirty daughters. He gave his daughters away in marriage to those outside his clan,

and for his sons he brought in thirty young women as wives from outside his clan. Ibzan led Israel seven years. ¹⁰ Then Ibzan died and was buried in Bethlehem.

Judges. 17:7-13

Bethlehem appears to be the home of the Levite who became priest to Micah.

⁷ A young Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, who had been living within the clan of Judah, ⁸ left that town in search of some other place to stay. On his way^[a] he came to Micah's house in the hill country of Ephraim. ⁹ Micah asked him, "Where are you from?" "I'm a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah," he said, "and I'm looking for a place to stay." ¹⁰ Then Micah said to him, "Live with me and be my father and priest, and I'll give you ten shekels^[b] of silver a year, your clothes and your food." ¹¹ So the Levite agreed to live with him, and the young man became like one of his sons to him. ¹² Then Micah installed the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in his house. ¹³ And Micah said, "Now I know that the Lord will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest."

The concubine of the Levite of Ephraim was from the village of Bethlehem. Read the full account in Judges 19.

Ruth (1:1-2,19,22; 2:4; 4:11)

Much of the book of Ruth takes place in the region of Bethlehem. This story leads to the events that gave major importance to the village as Davids' home and place of anointing

¹In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So, a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. ² The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

Samuel Anoints David (1Sam. 16:1-13; 17:12,15).

¹The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king."

⁴ Samuel did what the Lord said. When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town trembled when they met him. They asked, "Do you come in peace?"

¹¹ So he asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?"

“There is still the youngest,” Jesse answered. “He is tending the sheep.”

Samuel said, “Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives.”

¹² So he sent for him and had him brought in. He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features. Then the Lord said, “Rise and anoint him; this is the one.”

¹³ So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David. Samuel then went to Ramah.

Ezra 2:1-2, 21.

Bethlehem is mentioned with reference to the 123 families that returned from the Babylonian exile

¹Now these are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken captive to Babylon (they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to their own town, ² in company with Zerubbabel, Joshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah):

*The list of the men of the people of Israel:
²¹ the men of Bethlehem 123 (men)*

Micah 5:1-4

A Promised Ruler From Bethlehem

*¹ Marshal your troops now, city of troops,
for a siege is laid against us.*

*They will strike Israel’s ruler
on the cheek with a rod.*

*² “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.”*

*³ Therefore Israel will be abandoned
until the time when she who is in labor bears a son,
and the rest of his brothers return
to join the Israelites.*

*⁴ He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they will live securely, for then his greatness
will reach to the ends of the earth.*

These are just a few mentions of Bethlehem in the Old Testament. It was a well-known landmark and used as reference to other places in the area.

But it is the relationship of Bethlehem to Jesus that has ensured its place in modern Christian History. Micah 5:2 was understood to indicate that the Messiah, like David,

would be born in Bethlehem. Matthew 2:1-12; Luke 2:4-20; and John 7:42 report that Jesus was indeed born in that humble village.

A field southeast of town has been traditionally identified as the place where the shepherds’ encountered angels.

Micah 5:2 also appears to equate Bethlehem and Ephrath(ah) as the home of the coming Messiah. This, in turn, was based on Bethlehem (1 Sam. 16:1) and Ephrath(ah) (1 Sam. 17:12) as the home of David’s father Jesse and thus of David. In sending the Messiah, God chose to start over at David’s birthplace.

Matthew 2:1, 5, 6, 8, 16,

¹After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem.

⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

*⁶ “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of
Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.”*

⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

¹⁶ When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

Luke 2:4, 15

⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

Bethlehem was, is, and will be, known as the place where Jesus was born, but also for the many instances God used this city as the instrument to remind the people of God of His love for His people. Jews and Gentiles alike can relate and learn from the things that have happened in and around this city.