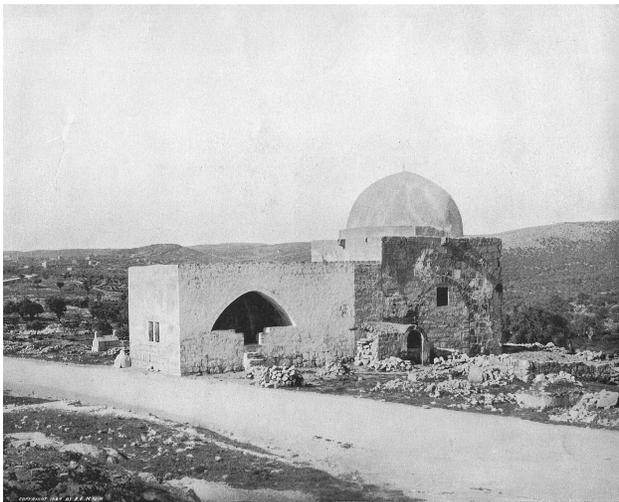


Bethlehem

Many cities and towns are mentioned in God's word. Most are used as points to describe journeys or to define boundaries. Many are used to delineate political or cultural affiliations. Some are used to help define characters, e.g., Saul of Tarsus. Only a handful of places have the distinction of tracing large parts of the history of God's people. Even fewer places provide a sort of mirror, or metaphor, for God's people and His plan. Cities such as Jerusalem immediately spring to mind. One that is often overlooked [except in the instance of the birth of Jesus] is the small city of Bethlehem of Judea.



The tomb of Rachel

Rachel died after giving birth to a son (**Genesis 35:18-19**). This occurred on the approach to Ephrath. “*So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).*” Later in life, Israel will recount this story (**Genesis 48:7**). This is the introduction to Bethlehem—the city so closely linked with the unfolding of God's plan.

The Preservation

The book of Judges again points the reader to Bethlehem. One of the men that God raised to judge his people was from this place. “*Now Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel after him*” (**Judges 12:8**). We know little of him except that he was also buried there. The point to take away from this is the knowledge that there were faithful people in Bethlehem—people who would be responsible for preserving that place.

At this time, there also were people from Bethlehem who were not what they should have been. There was true of a young Levite who decided to leave his assigned place and planned to “*stay wherever I may find a place*” (**Judges 17:9**). He became a priest for hire, serving the idols of Micah. To have more money and prestige, he became priest to the Danites who left their assigned territory and were continually unfaithful to God (**Judges 18:19-21**). There was also a young woman of Bethlehem who became the concubine of another Levite, but “*played the harlot against*

The Promise

God promised Abraham that his descendants would be given a land, the land God showed him. God showed him the land of Canaan (**Genesis 13:17**). God made the same promise to his son, Isaac (**Genesis 26:3**). The promise then was made to Jacob (**Genesis 35:12**). It was also at this time that Jacob was traveling south in the land toward Hebron where Isaac was living (**Genesis 35:27**). It was also during this trip that two other important things happened. First, in conjunction with the promise, God changed Jacob's name to Israel (**Genesis 35:10**). Second, Jacob's beloved

him, and she went away from him to her father's house in Bethlehem in Judah" (**Judges 19:2**). This led to all sorts of turmoil, eventually ending with the near extermination of the entire tribe of Benjamin.

During the days the Judges governed, God frequently raised oppressors to come against Israel. There were frequent famines. It was during one of these times of famine in the area of Bethlehem [very ironic, since "Bethlehem" means "house of bread"] that God introduces someone who also plays a great part in preserving life and furthering God's plan. He introduces a Moabitess named Ruth. Read her story in the book of Ruth. She moves to Bethlehem to serve God and assist her widowed mother-in-law. In the course, of this action she meets and marries a man by the name of Boaz. They have a son, named Obed, who has a son named Jesse, who has a son named David who will be king. More importantly, he is a man after God's heart who becomes a forefather of Jesus (see **Ruth 4** and **1Samuel 16-17**).

The Problem

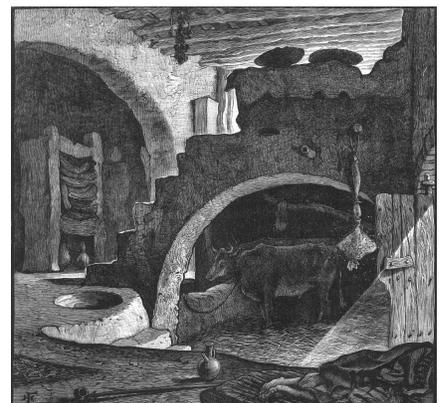
Throughout the days of the Judges and through the reign of King Saul, Israel had a great problem. The problem was of their own making—they continually turned from God. This eventually led to the enemy, the Philistines—overrunning Israel from the Mediterranean coast all the way east to Bethlehem. "*David was then in the stronghold, while the garrison of the Philistines was then in Bethlehem*" (**2Samuel 23:14**). David craved water from his hometown. Three of his mighty men broke through the Philistine garrison to get David water. Instead of drinking it, he offered it to the Lord. The problem of the enemy continued on because of the stubbornness of Israel in refusing God. David, as king, would finally conquer the enemy, but throughout their existence, they continued to turn from God until finally they were taken away into captivity (**2Kings 25:8-11**).

The Persistence

There were faithful people among the population who were persistent in their relationship with God. They were few, but they and a few faithful leaders and prophets understood the need for God. God had promised that a remnant of his people would return to their land from the captivity. Most often, the return of people to Jerusalem is remembered. However, there were faithful who returned to other cities as well. "*Now these are the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away to Babylon, and returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city ... the men of Bethlehem, one hundred twenty-three*" (**Ezra 2:1-21**).

The Prophecy

God, through the prophet Micah, gave great hope: "*But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity*" (**Micah 5:2**). This hope was realized in Jesus (**Matthew 1**; **Luke 2**). King Herod, wishing to kill Jesus, slaughtered many innocent children in and around Bethlehem. This great slaughter is associated with the death of Rachel, who



A Manger in Bethlehem

had wanted children so badly (**Matthew 2:18**). The people of Jesus' day knew well the prophecies of the anointed one to come—the Messiah: *“Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the descendants of David, and from Bethlehem, the village where David was?”* (**John 7:42**).

The Peroration

(the concluding part of a speech, typically intended to inspire enthusiasm in the audience)

Jesus wants all men to know Him. He wanted the Jews of the first century to know Him. He reminded them often of their history and of the law given to them by God. He reminded them often of His love for them. On one such occasion, He reminded them of how their fathers had been fed by God with bread He provided—the manna in the wilderness. God now provides living, true bread. Bread come down from heaven, born in “house of bread”—Bethlehem. *“I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh”* (**John 6:48-51**).

—S Scott Richardson Sr.