

The City of Bethlehem

1. The Hebrew for Bethlehem is bêyth lechem (בֵּית לֶחֶם) [pronounced *bayth-LEH-khem*], which means *house of bread*. Strong's #1035 BDB #111. It was called Bethlehem Judah or Bethlehem Ephrathah to distinguish it from a city of the same name in Zebulun. We also have two people named *Bethlehem* in I Chron. 2:51 4:4.
2. Almost every historical incident which took place in Bethlehem has Messianic implications, as we will see.
3. Bethlehem was located on the outskirts of Jerusalem (II Chron. 11:5–6), approximately 6 miles southwest of Jerusalem. It is just east of the historic road which runs between Jerusalem and Hebron. Smith's Bible Dictionary: [*Bethlehem*] covers the east and northeast parts of the ridge of a long gray hill of Jura limestone, which stands nearly due east and west, and is about a mile in length. The hill has a deep valley on the north and another on the south. On the top lies the village on a kind of irregular triangle. The population is about 3000 souls, entirely Christians.¹
4. Bethlehem is not well-watered, the nearest spring being 800 yards to the southeast. However, Solomon's aqueduct project, known as Solomon's pools, was apparently utilized for many centuries. Individuals simply tapped into his tunnel, which ran through the hills.
5. The area surrounding Bethlehem is quite fertile, as there are many olive and fig orchards, as well as corn fields and vineyards around Bethlehem.
6. The first mention of Bethlehem is in connection with death (Gen. 35:16, 19 48:7). In Gen. 35:19, Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin and she is buried on the road to Bethlehem. Here we have one of the great foreshadowings of our Lord Jesus Christ. Immediately prior to her death, Rachel named her son Ben-oni (*son of my sorrow*) and Jacob named him Benjamin (*son of the right hand*). The sorrow presents our Lord on the cross, dying in great pain, taking upon Himself the penalty for our sins. *Son of the right hand* foreshadows our Lord's divine nature. Rachel had to die in order for Benjamin to live, just as our Lord had to die for our sins. "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day." (Luke 9:22; see also Luke 17:25 24:7 John 3:14). Paul...reasoned with them from the Scriptures for three Sabbaths, explaining and giving evidence that the Messiah had to suffer and rise again from the dead. "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah!" (Acts 17:2b–3). For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, Who died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him (I Thess. 5:9–10).
7. From Gen. 35:16, 19 48:7, it appears as though Bethlehem was originally known as Ephrath. *Ephrath* may mean *sign, wonder*. Strong's #672 BDB #68. In these early passages, it is first referred to as *Ephrath* and then we have the appendant *that is, Bethlehem*. It is likely that this appendage was added by an editor after Genesis was first written.
8. Bethlehem was not mentioned in the conveyance of property by Joshua to the tribe of Judah. This would indicate that it was sparsely populated, if at all, and was not even considered a village. The *Bethlehem* mentioned in Joshua 19:15 was given to the tribe of Zebulun, which occupied land 80 miles north of Bethlehem-Ephrath.
9. Somewhere between the book of Joshua (circa 1400 B.C.) and Judges 12 (the late 11th century B.C.), Bethlehem was populated and one of the minor judges was born and later buried in Bethlehem (Judges 12:8–10). Given its close proximity to Jerusalem (then occupied by the Jebusites) and its good crop land (with the book of Ruth would attest to), Bethlehem would reasonably become populated during that 200 year period of time.
10. Recall that, in Judges 17, there was a Levite for hire as a priest, who had been living with a family of Judæans in Bethlehem. Micah, a dishonest mother's boy, hired him to be the family priest.
11. There was a second priest who took a mistress from the town of Bethlehem in Judges 19. She left him and returned to her father's home (recall that the portion about her *playing the harlot* is a suspect reading). Although he got her to return with him when he went to her father's home, his overnight stay in Gibeah set of a horrible set of events.
12. Most of the Book of Ruth took place in Bethlehem. Naomi, her mother-in-law, was originally from Bethlehem, and it was to Bethlehem that they both returned. When Ruth marries Boaz, they have a son who is an

¹ William Smith, LL.D., *Smith's Bible Dictionary*; Fleming H. Revell Company, ©1970, p. 83.

ancestor of David. Had Naomi not gone to Moab; had Ruth not come to Bethlehem with Naomi; had Ruth not married Boaz—then the Messiah would not have been born in Bethlehem. There are some books which have been included in the Old Testament canon of Scripture which, to many, would appear to have little or no purpose. The Jew, although they read the book of Ruth once a year, would be hard-pressed to show good reason for this book to be included in their canon of Scripture. However, to the believer, this book is essential. Apart from the events of the book of Ruth, there could be no Messiah born in Bethlehem. The Book of Ruth shows that God laid a foundation for Matt. 2 somewhere between 1200–1350 years in advance. His planning goes back to eternity past. It is passages like these which give us an insight into how far in advance God has planned for all things.

13. As you will recall, we estimated the population of Bethlehem during the book of Ruth to be between 300 and 1000 (Ruth 2:4, exegesis).
14. In I Sam. 16, the judge Samuel comes to Bethlehem to identify the new king and to train him under King Saul. The descendants of Ruth and Boaz had remained in Bethlehem. Jesse, the father of David, trotted out pretty much each of his sons before Samuel as a prospective leader—all but David. David was out tending sheep and, apparently, the runt of the litter. Samuel identified David as the future king, and took him out of Bethlehem to attend Saul.
15. Although David was an attendant to Saul, he continued to see to his father's flock in Bethlehem (I Sam. 17:15).
16. Jonathan tells his father Saul that David had returned to Bethlehem to offer sacrifices with his family. Jonathan did this to determine what Saul's intentions were toward David, which were to kill him. I Sam. 20.
17. The Philistines had made some great inroads during the time of David and they had apparently taken over a portion of Bethlehem, if not all of it (II Sam. 23:14). The well there was famous for its water, and David had asked that water be brought to him from that well, which involved his men going behind enemy lines to get it (II Sam. 23 I Chron. 11:16–19).
18. One of David's great soldiers was also from Bethlehem (II Sam. 23:24 I Chron. 11:26).
19. Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, the son of David, built up Bethlehem as a stronghold and first line of defense for the city of Jerusalem. Because Bethlehem is approximately 2300 feet above sea level, this made it a very formidable area.
20. When the Israelites returned to Israel after being dispersed, 123 men of Bethlehem returned (Ezra 2:21).
21. The prophecy of Micah:
 - a. The city of Bethlehem is mentioned but once in a prophecy: *"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 the ruler in Israel. His appearances are from long ago, from the days of eternity. Therefore, He will give them [up] until the time when she who is in labor has borne a child. Then the remnant of His brother will return to the sons of Israel and He will arise and shepherd in the strength of Jehovah, in the majesty of the name of Jehovah His God. And they will dwell in safety, because at that time, He will be great to the ends of the earth. And this One will be peace [and prosperity]."* (Micah 5:2–5a). Like many prophecies concerning our Lord, the first and second advents are woven seamlessly together.
 - b. We do not fully appreciate what a remarkable prophecy this was, which was made 700 years prior to the coming of the Messiah Jesus. McGee: *During that time the house of David was taken from the throne, the city of Jerusalem was demolished, and the nation was carried away captive to a strange land. In the face of these circumstances, it made the fulfillment of this an unlikelihood.*²
22. Although Mary and Joseph were from Nazareth, they went to Bethlehem in order to register for the census. McGee: *When Cæsar Augustus affixed his seal to a tax bill, calling upon the Roman world for a new assessment to keep its legions marching upon the Roman roads to the far-flung corners of its great empire, little did he realize that he was but a puppet in the hands of an omnipotent God.*³ While Mary and Joseph were registering under the edict of Cæsar in Rome, Christ Jesus was born to Mary in Bethlehem. During this time, Herod reigned as king over Judæa (Matt. 2:1 Luke 2:1–6).
23. There were shepherds who were informed by angels that the Christ Child had been born; they traveled to Bethlehem to worship Him (Luke 2:8–17).
24. Herod gathers the chief priests and scribes together and asks them where the Messiah is to be born. To answer him, they quote Micah 5: *"And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the*

² J. Vernon McGee, *Ruth, the Romance of Redemption*; Thru the Bible Books, ©Pasadena, California, pp. 11–12.

³ J. Vernon McGee, *Ruth, the Romance of Redemption*; Thru the Bible Books, ©Pasadena, California, p. 12.

- leaders of Judah, for out of you will come forth a ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.” (Matt. 2:6 Micah 5:2).
25. Three Magi realized that our Lord was born in Bethlehem. Herod also calls the Magi to himself, and tells them to inform him where in Bethlehem the Messiah is born, so that he can worship Him as well (Matt. 2:8).
 26. Because the Messiah was seen as a great and mighty warrior Who would deliver Israel (which Jesus will do in His second advent), Herod perceived that He would be a threat to Rome and a threat to him, he had all of the children, age two and younger, of Bethlehem, slaughtered, thus fulfilling a prophecy of Jeremiah (Matt. 2:16–18). Mary and Joseph had, at the behest of an angel, taken the Child to Egypt, which also resulted in a fulfillment of prophecy (Matt. 2:13–15).
 27. Although Jesus was born in Bethlehem, he was taken by his parents for approximately two years to Egypt. The family then returned to Nazareth near Galilee, where Mary and Joseph lived, and they raised Jesus there. One of the disputes which later arose of those discussing whether or not Jesus was the Messiah (or, Christ), was where would be come from. Some said he could not be the Messiah, as the Messiah would not come out of Galilee, but be born in Bethlehem (they said this not knowing the full story). John 7:40–43.
 28. Hadrian destroyed Bethlehem in 132 A.D., and we have found no remains of the first three centuries A.D. there. Although today, the well where David’s three mighty men drew water as well as the grave site of Rachel are pointed out, there is no reason to believe that these are the accurate historical locations.
 29. In 325 A.D., Helena *built a church over a series of caves* supposing that this was the birth area of our Lord (Justin Martyr wrote that the scene of the nativity was in a cave in Bethlehem). Justinian I built a larger church there in the mid-sixth century A.D. (it is possible that he simply added onto the original church).⁴ This “Church of the Nativity” still stands, having undergone some modifications during medieval times.⁵
 30. Therefore, in this little area, Bethlehem, we have Ruth gleaning barley in a field belonging to Boaz, who became her kinsman-redeemer, a marvelous revealing of the love and provision of Christ Jesus, Who is the cornerstone for Israel and the Church, just as Boaz became the cornerstone for Ruth and Naomi. This was such a small, sparsely populated area, that it was not even listed as a city by Joshua when the cities were distributed. In this place is where Rachel, the wife of Jacob, was buried, having died while giving birth to Benjamin, son of my right hand, whom she named, Ben-oni, son of my sorrow, foreshadowing the birth as well as the suffering of our Lord. In this same city, David is born and raised, tending the flocks of his father out on the hills. In this same city, a thousand years later, we have the human incarnation of our Lord, as a fulfillment to the prophecy of Micah.

⁴ My sources differ here. According to ZPEB, the first church had been destroyed and Justinian I built a new church on the same site (*The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; ©1976; Vol. 1, p. 540); and, according to another source, Justinian merely added on to what was already there (*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*; James Orr, Editor; ©1956 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; © by Hendrickson Publishers; Vol. I; p. 450).

⁵ Quoted and paraphrased from *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; ©1976; Vol. 1, p. 540.