

LESSONS FROM BETHLEHEM EPHRATHAH

The Astounding Significance of the Place Where Jesus Was Born

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This paper offers a synopsis of God's purpose and grace as he reveals it over hundreds of years at a specially appointed place called Bethlehem Ephrathah. Here is a quick preview:

- In Jacob's (Israel's) time, we learn from the account of Rachel's death that Bethlehem Ephrathah and *Migdal Eder* (the Tower of the Flock) are closely associated and in the exact same vicinity.
 - Boaz was an Ephrathite from Bethlehem in Judah, where he met and married Ruth the Moabite.
- David, their great-grandson, tended his father's sheep at Bethlehem Ephrathah; hence, from that time forth, the area is known "House of David" land.
- The prophet Micah announced that the Messiah would originate, not only from Bethlehem Ephrathah but even more specifically from the Tower of the Flock.
- The Mishnah, a second-century A.D. written record of centuries-old oral rabbinic tradition, indicates the significance of the Tower of the Flock in the priestly system of administering Temple worship, including the identifying of lambs without blemish for sacrifice.
- When the Magi came to King Herod, inquiring where the King of the Jews was born, the chief priests and scribes turned to Micah's prophecy for their answer.
- To express the great grief following Herod's murderous slaughter of baby boys, Jeremiah's lament is quoted in Matthew, which includes "Rachel weeping for her children," a reference all the way back to the Genesis account of her death and burial at the same place.

What is the difference between Bethlehem and Bethlehem Ephrathah?

The word Bethlehem can designate the Judean city which covers the hilltops that are about five miles south of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The word can also identify the broader region that is both in and around the city, including its countryside, farmlands, pastures, and valleys. Bethlehem Ephrathah, however, is a more specific designation of that area that is near but outside the city where there would be one or more threshing floor for grain, a grape press for the making of wine, and an olive press for the production of oil. The Ephrath would also be in or near the grazing lands for livestock (goats, sheep, oxen, and cattle).

The root word of Ephrathah means *fruitful*. It describes a specific elevation of land based upon its agricultural function. In biblical times, a *fruitful place* or Ephrath was where agricultural products of the promised Land were processed for their maximum use and benefit. These crops had not been available to the children of Israel in the wilderness; therefore, the functions of harvest, dedication, and

preparation were designed to be reverent acts of worship, praise, and renewal in the people's relationships with God. Unfortunately, these blessings also tempted the people to wander from their love of the one true God as their very Source of life.

Again, the agricultural blessings of the Promised Land were represented in three main categories: grain, wine, and oil. In addition, the people enjoyed the blessing of livestock. All of these were dependent upon the "living water" of rain from heaven for their sustenance. Often in the Bible, these blessings of the land are referenced in the context of God's instructions to the people and their responsibilities to remember the lessons they learned in the wilderness. Here is one example:

Deuteronomy 11:13-17

And if you will indeed obey my commandments ... to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, he will give the rain for your land in its season ... that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. And he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full. Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them; then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly off the good land that the Lord is giving you.

An Ephrath cannot be located at the top of a hill or mountain. The wind can get so strong up there, it can blow away the grain along with its chaff as it is winnowed on the threshing floor. Nor will an Ephrath be in the lowest part of a valley because often there is no wind at all. Rather, an Ephrath is established in the "heart" of the hill, not on its "head" and not at its "feet." This is where you will find the ancient Ephraths in Israel today. One can readily identify an Ephrath by that elevation in the heart of a hill where there are remnants, carved in bedrock and stone, of threshing floors (grain), grape presses (wine), and olive presses (oil).

Ephraths were not typically "in the city." Naturally, they were most often "out in the country," close to the harvest and the livestock. Goats and sheep were the most common livestock with perhaps a few oxen and cattle among them.

What does the Bible say about Bethlehem Ephrathah?

(Please read thoroughly each Bible passage below)

Here, about 1900 BC, Israel (Jacob) pitched his tent and mourned for Rachel.

Genesis 35:16-21

Then they [Israel and Rachel] journeyed from Bethel. When they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel went into labor, and she had hard labor. And when her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, "Do not fear, for you have another son." And as her soul was departing (for she was dying), she called his name Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), and Jacob set up a pillar over her tomb. It is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day. Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder.

The Hebrew word for the tower is *Migdal*. The Hebrew word for flock is *eder*. The translation of *Migdal Eder*, therefore, is the *tower of the flock*. This is how these same two words are translated in Micah 4:8, as reviewed below.

It is noteworthy and highly significant that the relationship and close proximity of BethlehemEphrathahand a place called the Tower of the Flock are established in Scripture all the way back to Israel's time.

Here, about 1150 BC, Ruth the Moabite lay at the feet of Boaz.

Ruth 1:1-3 ... 22

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. [2] The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons.... So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Assignment and question for reflection: The book of Ruth is only four chapters long. Read all of it in one sitting as preparation for your visit to Bethlehem Ephrathah. You will be glad that you did! As you read, look for the answer to this question: What is the significance of the threshing floor in the story of Ruth the Moabite and Boaz, an Ephrathite from Bethlehem?

Here, about 1000 BC, David, the great-grandson of Boaz and Ruth and Jesse's youngest son, tended his father's sheep.

Ruth 4:21-22

Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.

1 Samuel 17:12, 14-15

Now David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, named Jesse, who had eight sons. In the days of Saul the man was already old and advanced in years.... David was the youngest. The three eldest followed Saul, but David went back and forth from Saul to feed his father's sheep at Bethlehem.

Bethlehem Ephrathah was where the lad David took care of his father's sheep. From that time on, this land would be considered House of David land. There are MANY sections of land all over Israel, including parts of Jerusalem, that over the centuries belonged to the House of King David. But BethlehemEphrathah was extra special because this small area outside the city of Bethlehem was David's childhood home. See Luke 2:4.

Here, about 800 BC, the prophet Micah predicted the Messiah King would come.

The two passages below are portions of the same oracle given by the prophet Micah. They are in two different chapters in our Bible, but they are parts of one amazing prophetic utterance.

Micah 4:7-8

And the lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation; and the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion from this time forth and forevermore. And you, O tower of the flock, hill of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, the former dominion shall come, kingship for the daughter of Jerusalem. [Bethlehem Ephrathah is only 4.5 miles south of Jerusalem; hence, it is called here "the daughter of Jerusalem."]

Micah 5:1-2

Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops; siege is laid against us; with a rod, they strike the judge of Israel on the cheek. But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days.

As in the Genesis 35 passage, there is a reference again to the close proximity and relationship of Bethlehem Ephrathah and the Tower of the Flock. In fact, in this passage, the two names are synonyms.

Of here, about 1 or 2 BC, the scribes spoke to King Herod, repeating Micah's words.

Matthew 2:1-2, 5-6

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." ... They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'

Herod built a huge palace north and east of the city of Bethlehem on top of a manufactured "mountain" of his own making. Today, this is a major tourist attraction called Herodion. Every day, crowds and their buses are there to tour the palace and even view the place of Herod's tomb. We will stand in the field of Bethlehem Ephrathah and be able to see Herodion clearly from there.

Question: Why did Herod build a mountain first, and then a palace at that location? Answer: He knew Micah's prophecy! If a king-ruler and his troops were going to exert their "dominion," as Micah said, and rise up against him from Bethlehem Ephrathah, then Herod was determined to be the first to know and then put a stop to this insurrection.

But it was not an infantry that came to that field. It was an infant! For this, Herod was completely unprepared and, therefore, filled with rage.

Here in this area, King Herod murdered baby boys, attempting to stop this King.

Matthew 2:16-18

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... Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

Ramah means highland. Today, this highland is called Ramat Rachel. It is the hill directly above the field of Bethlehem Ephrathah.

What else can we know about Bethlehem Ephrathah?

In the Mishnah, the Tower of the Flock located here is mentioned in the instructions concerning acceptable sacrificial

animals

In the Mishnah, Shekalim 7:4, we read these words: "Of the herds, in the space between Jerusalem and the tower of the flock' and on both sides, the males are for burnt-offerings, the female for peace-offerings."

The Mishnah is a monumental work completed 200 years after Christ at Zippori (an amazing place also hope to visit). It was the written record of the rabbinic and priestly oral traditions that had faithfully been passed down by rote memory from generation to generation.

The Mishnah records the significance of the tower of the flock in relationship to acceptable animal sacrifices that were to be brought to the temple in Jerusalem. Today, we know that the tower of the flock developed into a major priestly center, related to the temple sacrificial system— not just the preparation of animal sacrifices but also the production of pure oil [olive press] and wine [grape press] and bread [threshing floor], all necessary as a part of temple worship. You will see this evidence.

Here, for centuries prior to Christ's birth, shepherds who were specially trained by temple priests regularly watched their flocks by night.

Luke 2:8

And in the same region, there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Ponder the following excerpt from chapter VI of The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, written by Alfred Edersheim, a 19th-century Messianic Jewish scholar:

This Migdal Eder was not the watchtower for the ordinary flocks which pastured on the barren sheep ground beyond Bethlehem, but lay close to the town, on the road to Jerusalem. A passage in the Mishnah leads to the conclusion, that the flocks, which pastured there, were destined for Temple-sacrifices and, accordingly, that the shepherds, who watched over them, were not ordinary shepherds. The latter were under the ban of Rabbinism, on account of their necessary isolation from religious ordinances, and their manner of life, which rendered strict legal observance unlikely, if not absolutely impossible. The same Mishnic passage also leads us to infer, that these flocks lay out all the year round since they are spoken of as in the fields thirty days before the Passover - that is, in the month of February, when in Palestine the average rainfall is nearly greatest. Thus, Jewish tradition in some dim manner apprehended the first revelation of the Messiah from that Migdal Eder, where shepherds watched the Temple flocks all the year round. Of the deep symbolic significance of such a coincidence, it is needless to speak.

To read the entire chapter, click this link: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edersheim/lifetimes.vii.vi.html> Here, about 4 BC,

angels announced an amazing sign to some of those specially trained shepherds

Luke 2:12

And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

Look again. What was the sign? "You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

Question: What was so remarkable about finding a baby, wrapped in ... something warm, and lying in a... crib? (This is

how we typically think of it.) Should this scene be considered unusual, astounding, and amazing – so as to explain the shepherds' awe-filled, worshipful response? Why did they immediately understand what they were seeing as an unmistakable miraculous "sign?"

Because these shepherds were accustomed to seeing something else wrapped in swaddling cloths -- newborn lambs! These lambs were to be watched and cared for, according to their training, until the day these goats and sheep were selected for temple sacrifice – if, that is, they qualified as worthy and without blemish.

The sign the shepherds witnessed was that – this time – instead of a lamb, the shepherds saw...a real baby wrapped in the very swaddling cloths normally used for future sacrificial lambs! It was just like the angels had told them!

Luke 2:17-18, 20

And when the shepherds saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.... And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them.

Conclusion

Surely, John the Baptist also knew this story of his cousin's birth. Could this be the reason why he chose the imagery he did when, to his own disciples, he proclaimed Jesus as superior to himself?

John 1:29

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

Today, we know that Jesus is our Passover Lamb whose blood was shed in our place because the cross and the resurrection have already occurred. John, however, called Jesus the Lamb of God before anyone knew he would hang on a cross and die at Passover.

So, what was John the Baptist's understanding of the words he spoke to his disciples? We may have the answer in the context of the Lord's lessons from Bethlehem Ephrathah.

Isaiah 9:6

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. and his name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.