

WHY BETHLEHEM

by Dr. Craig Johnson

“But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judea, from you one will go forth for me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth from long ago, from the days for eternity.”

Micah 5:2

Six miles southwest of Jerusalem there was a town in Judea known as Bethlehem, both its names, Bethlehem and Ephrathah spoke of fruitfulness. In all spiritual geography, no soil is more sacred than this. Seven hundred years before the coming of Christ, the prophet Micah marks the cities insignificance, as a city too remote to ever become a place of importance, none could have been more appropriate for the birthplace of the savior of the world. The littleness of Bethlehem contrasts the greatness of the king who would be born there. There are five reasons why I believe Bethlehem was chosen as the birthplace of the Messiah.

Reason #1. The name, Bethlehem

Bethlehem means “the house of bread”. Its fields were populated with rich flocks, its lush valleys clothed with wheat and barley, along with its famous vineyards making Bethlehem’s wine more choice than Jerusalem’s. The fullness of time and the hunger of the world would need a king who was to be for all men the bread of life.

Reason #2. The grave of Rachael

Here Rachael died giving birth to Benjamin. Jacob set up a pillar upon her grave, the cry of Rachael echoes down the sorrows of

Israel. As Babylon exile approached the prophet Jeremiah saw the long road of captives being led northward from Jerusalem past Rachael's grave. Mothers wept as they watched their children carried into exile, never to be seen again. In picturing the mourning of the mothers of Bethlehem at Herod's slaughter of the innocent, it is as though in Bethlehem all the sadness of mankind's predicament had found expression—personal bereavement, delayed hope, bitter disappointment, moral conflict, deserved chastisement, national failure, inhuman cruelty, all are gathered up in years of tears and travail, that heralded the coming of Christ—there in Bethlehem, all “who not be comforted” find at last the consolation of Israel and of the world.

Reason #3. The home of Ruth

Barely three miles away from Bethlehem can be seen the dim outline of the mountains of Moab. The book of Ruth speaks of a Moabitess who found a new faith, a new home, and new happiness in the city of Bethlehem. She marries Boaz and becomes the ancestress of King David and so of the Messiah. In the story of Ruth, Boaz as a “kinsman-redeemer”, exercises an ancient privilege, by redeeming Ruth's life joining her to himself in love, foreshadowing the great “kinsman-redeemer” Jesus Christ who would give his life in order to redeem his bride, that he might provide for her eternal peace and fruitfulness.

Reason #4. The city of David

Neither Rachael nor Ruth can equal the glory of the family of Jesse who produced the shepherd king David. David was born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem's fame of having been the home of Israel's greatest king never deserted the city. In the darkest years, men

looked to Bethlehem to produce another king “a son of David”, both the first David and second David would be born in the same place.

Reason #5. The law of sacrifice

Bethlehem speaks of blood, sorrow, redemption, and royal lineage, but the fifth part of Bethlehem’s story supplies the missing features of Christ’s portrait. Bethlehem had a well beside the gate and the water had a memorable flavor for which King David in distress once thirsted with all his soul.

Some of his men overheard his wish and they broke through a philistine garrison and returned to David with a goblet of water from the well, demonstrating their great love for him. David was deeply moved: too deeply affected to drink this water. “He poured it out to the Lord”, and said, “far be it for me, Oh Lord, that I should do this. Shall I drink the blood of the men that went at risk for their lives?”

This fact spoke of the love that prompts to utmost sacrifice carried even to death and the measureless sacredness in life laid down in love so that only God, himself, is worthy of such devotion. This too would find its fulfillment in Bethlehem. The cup that seemed to David red with the blood of heroic men, bound to him in covenant loyalty, was to be filled again, with the blood of another sacrifice, filling a still stronger covenant between the dying king of the Jews and men he loved unto death.

For these five reasons Bethlehem was chosen; its hallowed name, the grave of Rachael, the home of Ruth, the city of David and the well of sacrifice all conjoin to paint a portrait of

redemptive love. In this holiday season, it is only appropriate to remember again the great redemptive love of God which was His gift of love to the world through Jesus Christ.

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