

## BETHLEHEM JUDAH

INTRO: Yesterday we commemorated Christmas. In our culture, we commemorate a number of days related to Biblical history, besides Sunday. I will be addressing the subject of Sunday verses the Sabbath, Lord willing, this next Pentecost day. On December 25, along with traditional Christianity, we commemorate the day of the birth of Christ, though there is no proof that this is the correct day. Then January the 6th, which some commemorate as the day of Christ's birth, we commemorate as the visit of the magi to Bethlehem. Both dates have no verification at all.

We also commemorate the day of Christ's death (the Jewish feast of Passover), the day of His resurrection (the Jewish feast of first fruits), Ascension day, the day Christ ascended to heaven, and the birth of the Church (the Jewish feast of Pentecost). That is six special days on which we set work aside and remember certain events. Then to three of these days, we add 2 extra days; Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. We are a little like the Jews, we do not understand why we do certain things, but by tradition, I can tell you one thing, nobody, but nobody will stop us from doing it. It must have a good reason, though we know not what it is. Mainstream evangelicalism keeps Christmas, Easter and resurrection Sunday. They are, as you understand, quite untrained spiritually, in the ways of tradition.

But this morning I want to zero in on, not the specific day of Christ's birth, but His birthplace. We do know where that is, at least in close proximity. We had the privilege of visiting Israel just a few weeks ago. And then, we were invited to the youth Christmas banquet a little while ago. This banquet began with a wonderful meal and closed with a prayer meeting and singing. Our young people are outdoing us, praise the Lord. Mike, our son-in-law, who went with us to Israel shared a devotional that evening and one of the things that stood out in his mind about our trip was our visit to Bethlehem. Now Bethlehem is in the hands of the Palestinian Authority and we only got to see it from a distance. But we were at a good elevation where we stopped to look, and there we saw Bethlehem and the fields of Bethlehem between us and the town itself. I think it left a deep impression on both of us.

## I. BETHLEHEM AND JACOB (1800 BC)

We will look first this morning at Bethlehem and Jacob. We are at about 1800 years BC. So take your Bibles and turn with me to Genesis 35, where we want to take a look at the first reference that mentions this place. Bethlehem is just a few miles south west of Jerusalem. You will remember that Jacob and his father-in-law, Laban, did not get along too well. According to Jacob, his father-in-law had changed his wages 10 times and that was enough. So, one day he left with his wives and his possessions. But, the one major problem with going back home was that his brother Esau, who had vowed to kill Jacob before Jacob's mother sent him away, was still there. Well, you will know the story, how it all worked out and Jacob went back home.

Then in Genesis 35 the Lord called Jacob to go to Bethel. This was a very special place to Jacob. Here Jacob had dreamed one night as he fled from Esau years earlier. Now Bethel is Beit el in Hebrew meaning 'House of God'.

Well, Jacob traveled south of here. You see, Jacob was a shepherd. He was a man who raised sheep. And Israel is a land of contrasts, from very high to very low. And there is a place in Israel that is good for sheep, and that is where Jacob is headed. So after they left Bethel they began traveling south again. Let us read Genesis 35:16-20 (read).

Rachel has died, Jacob's last son has been born. And after this Jacob makes one more move (read 21). So Jacob has moved just beyond Bethlehem and the tower of Eder. Now this name, tower of Eder has a significant meaning as do most if not all Hebrew names. You will remember that Bethlehem is Beit lachem, and means 'House of Bread'. Eder means flock. Migdal is a tower. So this is the tower of the flock. This speaks of sheep, of course.

Now you will remember that it is not many years after this, when Benjamin's older brother Joseph is but a teenager, that his brothers sell him into slavery. This account takes place in Genesis 37. So, before we go on, consider this. In the book of Genesis,

chapters 1-11 take us from creation up to Abraham. That is right around 2000 years! The life of Abraham is then described for us in the next 14 chapters! More chapters are written about Abraham than about the first 2000 years! That brings us to chapter 26, in the early verses of which Abraham dies. So, chapter 26-27 give us the account of the life of Isaac, Abraham's son. Then chapters 28-50 are the story of Jacob, and his son Joseph! So, almost half of the book of Genesis is given to the account of the life of Jacob and Joseph!

But let me remind us now of how Joseph was sold into slavery, and how he ultimately became the second in command over all of Egypt. And in the series of messages Pastor Boehlig did just recently, you heard again of how ultimately Joseph's brothers and his own father came to bow before him. And then, the Pharaoh of Egypt invited Jacob to come live in Egypt during the time of the famine.

I want to remind us of one thing here. Jacob family were shepherds. Now let us read Genesis 46:31-47:6. Scholars are not agreed why shepherds were an abomination to the Egyptians but let me read from the commentator, Matthew Poole: "Because of the fresh remembrance of the horrid cruelties lately committed there by the Phoenician shepherds, who, as some very ancient writers affirm, were seated in Egypt in great numbers, and had arrived to great power, and waged a cruel war with other Egyptians, wherein they wasted divers cities, and burned their temples, and barbarously murdered a multitude of people. And therefore it is no wonder if the calling of shepherds was grown out of use and credit among them. True it is, the Egyptians had some sheep, and other cattle, #Ge 47:6,17 Ex 8:26 9:3, which they kept for delight or profit by their milk, wool, &c., or for sale to others, but they did not use them, as other shepherds generally did, kill and eat them. And it is probable that they committed even the keeping of their sheep and cattle to those strangers which were dispersed among them, and looked upon the employment as too vile and mean for any Egyptian. And though Pharaoh offered it to Joseph's brethren as a favour to be rulers over his cattle, #Ge 47:6, that might proceed only from hence, because he saw them firmly resolved

upon that course of life, and therefore could not bestow any higher preferment upon them."

Well, you know how that Israel stayed in Egypt for over 400 years. And when they came out, it was because of the tenth plague, the slaying of all of Egypt's firstborn. So let us read Exodus 12:1-14 (read). You see, sheep are a very important animal to Israel.

## II. BETHLEHEM AND RUTH (1300 BC)

Well, many years went by, and there was a family in Bethlehem, during the time of the Judges. It is about 1300 BC. And, because a famine struck their land, they moved to the land of Moab which is on the East side of the Dead Sea. There the husband died. They had two sons, who eventually married Moabite women. Then the two sons died. Tell me what book of the Bible we are talking about? So, let us read Ruth 1:1-5.

Well, the widow decided to move back to Israel and encouraged her daughters-in-law to stay with their own people and marry and have a good life there. But you will remember how Ruth said, "Entreat me not to turn back from following you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God shall be my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. The LORD do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me."

Well, I'll tell you what I think. I think she had found the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords through her mother-in-law. She recognized the God of Israel that her mother-in-law knew and she would not leave. She had learned what real faith was. And so they went back to Bethlehem. Now you remember what the name 'Bethlehem' means. It was not only a place of sheep, and grapes, it was also a place of grain.

And so, there, in the grain fields of a relative of her mother-in-laws she fell in love with the land-lord and he with her. It was a very happy marriage, and through their marriage, God continued a lineage

that was very special to Him indeed. Let us read Matthew 1:1-5.

### III. BETHLEHEM AND DAVID

Well, the story of Ruth took place during the time of the Judges of Israel, for as yet there had been no king. Then Israel cried to God for a king. They wanted to be like the nations around them who had kings. Well, God told them what kings do to their people, but they knew better than God and begged until God gave them a king. His name was Saul. He was a big handsome man of the tribe of Benjamin. You see, the time for a king was premature, and the tribe for kings was wrong. Saul was the reluctant king, but he did become king. He started out well, but once he had tasted power he wanted to remain king, and he wanted his kingship to go to his own son Jonathan. That became the downfall of Saul and he began to fail God.

And so, some time before his kingship came to an end, we come to 1 Samuel 16:1 (read). Well, Samuel went to Bethlehem, to the home of Jesse, grandson of Boaz and Ruth. And this grandson is still in Bethlehem, where his grandparents had lived. So, let us read now verses 2-10. Jesse had eight sons, but he never thought God would choose the youngest one. But this youngest son had learned some very important lessons in leading people, the same lessons Moses had learned from sheep many years earlier. So let us read now verse 11-13 (read). So David became king. The time now is about 1000 years before Christ.

### IV. BETHLEHEM AND MICAH (700 BC)

Well, Israel had a king. No more judges! First was Saul. He was no good. Then came David, and he was good. And then came Solomon and he was good and bad. During Solomon's reign, Israel reached its zenith of power. But after Solomon the kingdom of Israel divided in two. The time of the kings lasted about 600 years. But after the kingdom divided, Israel failed God again and again.

And so God began to send prophets to warn Israel. Now you know, the prophets had a two-fold task. One was to foretell, that is to tell of events to come. The

second was to forthtell, and that is to reprove the people. Prophets have a very bad job. I think they are always hated while the live, and usually loved after they die. Usually their life ends premature, and that by those who profess to be God's people.

Well, about the third prophet in line was Jonah. And right after him came four prophets who prophesied during at least part of the same time, and one of those was Micah. He prophesied somewhere around 700 years before Christ. His great concern was regarding the corruption in social justice. Let us get a flavor of his preaching (read 1:1-9). So devastating were the days ahead, that what Micah had to say must have been hard to believe. Look at chapter 3:1-4, then verse 12 (read).

Recently, when we were in Jerusalem, we were very privileged to be able to go to the area of the western wall, or the wailing wall. And there they took us into some excavations to the bottom of the wall and we followed it, deep underneath Jerusalem to a cistern at the end. All the rubble overhead was from the destruction of Jerusalem, as its stones had been leveled and a new city built overtop all the rubble.

But Micah is not done. So let us read 4:1-7. Here Micah looks ahead to the millennium, a time that lies just ahead of us now. Verse three is inscribed on the walls of the United Nations, as this world desperately seeks for peace. But peace will not come until Jesus Christ comes to rule.

But, between the calamities Micah describes, and the future glory, another event must happen and that is the coming of the Messiah, and it is here that Micah 4:8 comes in (read). We saw Migdol Edar in Genesis. Jacob came to live just beyond this place. Migdol Ader is about a kilometer from Bethlehem. Here is the tower of the flock, or Migdal Edar. Now scholars are divided if this speaks of the tower of the flock at Bethlehem or if it speaks of Jerusalem, for some of the wording sounds that way. However, I think it speaks of Bethlehem as chapter 5 seems to verify.

Now, just what is Migdal Eder? Let me quote from the message I did last year where I spoke of this tower: Let us consider now the marvel of the people in verse 18: "And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds." It does not say that the people mocked, it says they marveled. Now let me tell you something about these shepherds. As I understand who the shepherds were that guarded the sheep at Bethlehem, they are very specially trained shepherds. I quote to you from Cooper P. Abrams, 'What are we to make of all of this information from the writings of the rabbis? First, we know that Migdal Eder was the watchtower that guarded the Temple flocks that were being raised to serve as sacrificial animals in the Temple. These were not just any flock and herd. The shepherds who kept them were men who were specifically trained for this royal task. They were educated in what an animal, that was to be sacrificed, had to be and it was their job to make sure that none of the animals were hurt, damaged, or blemished."

Here is an amazing prophecy, I think, to the appearance of the Messiah at this little place called Migdal Ader. "And you, O tower of the flock, to you it shall come." What is 'it'? It is the dominion of Israel. And this dominion required a king, and it is here, I believe, at the tower of the flock that the King is born!

So we go to chapter 5:1 (read). Here is a prophecy to what happened to the last king of Israel, Zedekiah, when Babylon came and took them captive. After this, the dark days for Israel began. Never again did they have a king of their own choosing.

But, the very next verse begins with the word 'but'. Though this darkness was to come upon Israel, there was some light for it says, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."

Now, there is an incredible passage. Bethlehem, whose stature in the land had been shrinking and shrinking, was to be the town to host the birth of the Messiah!

Now let me show you what I think happened as we consider our next point.

#### V. BETHLEHEM AND MARY AND JOSEPH (4BC)

Micah had prophesied, but that was now some 700 years ago. Israel had been under the dominion of Gentile powers now for the duration of that time. And then, suddenly an angel appears to a young woman, a godly young woman by the name of Mary. She is betrothed to be married to a man by the name of Joseph. And the angel tells her she is to conceive by the Holy Spirit and bear a son. This is a phenomenal announcement. However, she does not live in Bethlehem, but in Nazareth, way in the north of Israel. And her fiancé is also from Nazareth. The angel tells her that this child is to be the Son of the Highest, and He is to rule on the throne of David. Mary consents to the message of the angel. It is all so incredible that the Koran says over and over that God has no Son. It is not possible. God has no Son.

Here is our question: How is Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, when God has chosen a mother for His Son in Nazareth? Well, let us read Luke 2 (1-7). Incredible this story, is it not? Last year I told you about Christ's birth in Migdol Ader, the place where lambs are birthed. Now maybe you say, "But, just a minute. I thought He was to be born in Bethlehem!"

Well, Micah 4:8 said it should take place at the tower of the flock. That is Migdol Ader. When Herod asked the chief priests and scribes where Christ was to be born, they said He was to be born in Bethlehem because of Micah 5:2. Micah 5:2 does not say He was to be born there, but He was to come out of Bethlehem. From this they concluded He would be born there. Although, for all intents and purposes Migdal Ader could be considered to be Bethlehem.

But what happened, is that though Jesus was born in a barn, as soon as room became available in Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary moved there. No doubt they had relatives there as this was the place they originated, as the census indicates. With that in mind, let us now read Matthew 2:9-11 (read). I want



you to notice particularly the words used here, "And when they had come into the house..." The Magi went to Bethlehem, and they went to a house. Jesus is no longer in the manger, He is in a house. I suppose that Mary and Joseph stayed here at this house a good while.

So, He was born at Migdal Ader and was shortly thereafter taken to Bethlehem. So, He did come out of Bethlehem, just as the Bible prophesied!

## VI. BETHLEHEM AND THE BIBLE TODAY

Today, Bethlehem is in the hands of the Arabs. When we were there just recently, our Jewish guide took us as far as Ramat Rachel. From here we could overlook Bethlehem, and the fields of Boaz but we did not go to Bethlehem because it is in the hands of the Arabs. Arab taxi drivers were more than willing to take us in but besides feeling uncomfortable with that, and paying 300 shekels, we hardly had the time.

Today, the Arabs, the outspoken enemies of Israel say, "Aha! The ancient heights have become our possession!" Turn with me to Ezekiel 36, to see what God has to say to this (read 1 3?-15?).

But there is yet another word from Bethlehem to us today. As it was a very long time from when Micah prophesied that the Messiah would be born there, and yet, come He did, so today it has been a very long time since His coming again was promised; yet just as surely, come He will!

So I ask you, since the Scribes and Pharisees knew where Christ was to come the first time, do you know where He is to come the second time? Well, His second coming, as I understand it, is in two phases. 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 tells us (read).

But after the rapture, He comes down with the Church all the way to earth. Do you know where that is? Turn with me to Zechariah 14 (read 1-2). Now it has been viewed that He will come down to the Mount of Olives and enter Jerusalem through the Eastern Gate. For this reason, the Arabs have filled the Eastern Gate with rock, and it looks like part of the wall. They

closed that gate so that Jesus Christ will not be able to enter there! I do not know that they mind His coming so much as they don't want Him going over the Arab graves placed before that gate.

The Jews, on the other hand, have a cemetery on the opposite side of the valley, going up the Mount of Olives. That is because they want to be resurrected right there when the Messiah comes to the Mount of Olives!

CONCL: Well, Bethlehem, what an important part this little town has played in the history of man and salvation! In the days of Jacob, Bethlehem was already there. That is about 1800 years before Jesus was born there. It is now 2009, so that means it has been in existence now for at least close to 4000 years, and maybe more. Our guide in Israel told us that when you are in Israel, when it comes to space you must think small. When it comes to time, you must think big. All the way across Canada is a good 4000 kilometers. At its very widest point today, Israel is less than 100 kilometers across, although it is several hundred kilometers long. The dominion of Canada was constituted in 1867. That is about 140 years ago. Bethlehem was in existence 4000 years ago!

Now consider this prophecy given about 700 years before it happened, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting."

I want to remind us in closing, that as surely as He came the first time He is coming again. And His exhortation always was this, "Watch and be ready!" Are you ready? And if so, then are you watching? He is coming very soon!