

## IN HIS FOOTSTEPS

### The Towns and Cities of Jesus’ Day

It began in Bethlehem. It was here that God’s salvation was revealed to all people in the person of Jesus Christ. As Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and others peered in at the Baby, they saw humanity and divinity forever joined. At Christmas time He whom the wind and waves obey came to serve the sinner in great meekness.

### Bethlehem

The name *Bethlehem* means “House of Bread.” Sometimes it is also referred to as *Ephratha* or “fruitful” as in *Bethlehem Ephratha* (Mic 5:2). It is located about six miles southwest of Jerusalem. There is evidence that Bethlehem is a very ancient city, having been in existence as early as 3000 BC. It has been occupied over the years by many different peoples.

**Canaanites** - In the earliest days, Bethlehem was inhabited by the Canaanites who had settled in Palestine. The Canaanites built temples at Bethlehem to their false gods.

**Egyptians and Philistines** - Bethlehem is mentioned in some Egyptian letters dating from 1350 BC when the governor of Palestine was an Egyptian. It was an important rest stop for people traveling to Egypt. Shortly after this, the Philistines began to control much of the area in and around Bethlehem.

**Hebrew People** - When God brought His people out of captivity in Egypt, He brought them back to their “promised land.” The traditional date for the Exodus is 1440 BC. Under Joshua, the Israelites began to displace the Canaanites and Philistines. This begins the period in Bethlehem’s history that interests students of the Bible.

**Roman Empire** - As the Roman Empire grew in prestige and power, the Jews were overthrown and placed under Roman rule. By the time Jesus was born, Bethlehem was under the rule of Caesar Augustus who ordered the famous census.

The Roman Empire was extremely corrupt and in 135 AD the Emperor Hadrian profaned the traditional birthplace of Jesus and turned it into a pagan shrine.

In 313 under Emperor Constantine, Christianity was proclaimed the state religion and he ordered that a church be built upon the traditional site of Christ’s birth. Work on such a church was begun in 326. In 384, Jerome (one of the early church fathers) arrived in Bethlehem and it became a center of monasticism. Here in Bethlehem, Jerome worked to produce his Latin translation of the Scriptures (known today as the *Vulgate*).

In 395 the Roman Empire was divided with a capital city at Rome and one at Constantinople and in 527 Justinian became the Emperor in Constantinople. Under Justinian, Bethlehem flourished as a center for religion but soon faced trouble from the Samaritans and the Persians.

**Muslim Rule** - In 614 the Persians invaded Palestine bringing with them the new religion made up by Mohammad (Islam). In 637 the Muslim ruler *Omar* visited Bethlehem. The Christians at Bethlehem were left relatively undisturbed by the Muslims as long as they continued paying their tribute to the caliphs. In 1009, however, Muslim rulers began their persecution of the Christians in earnest, leading to the crusades.

**The Crusades** - During the crusades, Bethlehem remained in relatively Christian control, although it is generally agreed that the crusades against Islam did not represent a wise course of action and ended in dismal failure.

**To the Present Day** - Since the crusades, Bethlehem has been contested by Muslims, Jews, and Christians. The battles rage to this day as all three claim it as holy ground. In 1995 Bethlehem was turned over to the Palestinian Authority in whose hands it remains for the time being.

Bethlehem’s population is now around 22,000 not including several suburbs.

Aerial view of modern Bethlehem )



# Bethlehem and the Bible

## King David

There are several significant Bible events for which Bethlehem is noted. First, it was the home of King David in his youth (1 Sam 16:18). Jesse, David's father, kept flocks near Bethlehem. Bethlehem became known as the "City of David." Apart from Jesus Christ, David was the most important ruler the Jews would ever have. He was a vital link in the genealogy of Jesus and therefore in the history of our salvation.

What do the following Bible passages say about the connection between David and Christ?

Matthew 1:1

Mark 12:35-37

Acts 2:29-36

Revelation 22:16

## Ruth and Boaz

Bethlehem is also noted as the location for the meeting of Boaz and Ruth. Remember that Ruth was originally from Moab to the east. She had followed her mother-in-law Naomi back to Bethlehem, a foreign country to her, in order to worship the God of Israel.

In Bethlehem's fields, Ruth met and married Boaz, a descendant of David, from whom Christ the Savior would be born.

Matthew 1:5



### For Further Study

Read the book of Ruth in preparation for the Christmas season. Keep in mind how God kept His promise to send a "Son of David" as the Savior by bringing Boaz and Ruth together.

## Jesus Christ

Of course the most important thing ever to happen in the history of this little town of Bethlehem was the birth of the Son of God who had been promised from the earliest days in the Garden of Eden. You know so well the familiar verses of Luke 2:1-20. You know about the decree of Augustus, the travels of Mary and Joseph, the stable, the manger, and the shepherds. This is the real story of Bethlehem, the lesson that God kept His promise and sent someone who would live for us and die for us to forgive us our sins and make it possible for us to enjoy eternal life in heaven.



When Mary, Joseph, and the Shepherds looked at the Baby Jesus in Bethlehem, they were looking at more than a human Baby. They were looking also at the Son of God. For remember that Jesus had no human father. Fully human and fully God at the same time was this Christ! That is more than our minds can comprehend. How can God *become* human? It never happened before and it will never happen again, but it *had* to happen that way at Bethlehem in order for us to be saved.

Why did Jesus have to be true man in order to save us?  
(Gal 4:4-5)

Why did Jesus have to be true God in order to save us?  
(Ps 49:7-9)

### For Further Study

What events in Jesus' life revealed Him as true man? What events revealed Him as true God?

Bethlehem holds a special place in the hearts of all Christians. Not because the city itself is worthy of praise, honor, and worship, but because this is the place where God's salvation literally "appeared to all men." Praise God for that!

### Resources

<http://www.holylandnetwork.com/bethlehem/bethlehem.htm>  
[http://www.bethlehem-city.org/The\\_City/history-index.htm](http://www.bethlehem-city.org/The_City/history-index.htm)  
<http://www.bibleplaces.com/bethlehem.htm>  
<http://www.biblepicturegallery.com/Pictures/Bethlehem.htm>  
*The Popular and Critical Bible Encyclopedia* Samuel Fallows, ed.