

“BETHLEHEM”

When I was a boy, growing up in Baltimore, Maryland, the local people despised “hillbillies”. My father worked in the B&O Railroad’s Mount Clare Shops as a machinist for eleven years. Of the hundreds of men who worked there, less than a half dozen knew his first or last name. Everyone else called him “Hillbilly”.

The town where you were born and grew up is very important to people. To people who live in the Northeast, someone from Boston, Massachusetts is regarded as a person of culture. After all there are over 50 colleges in that city. However, people in the South might ridicule the same person and see them as a “damn Yankee.”

Paul’s birthplace was important on the occasions when he was arrested by the Roman authorities. He was born and was a resident of Tarsus. During the various Roman civil wars, Tarsus had the good fortune of siding with the winners each time – Pompey, Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, and Caesar Augustus. When Mark Antony was given the eastern provinces, including Egypt, he made Tarsus his capital and awarded it the status of an independent and tax-free state. Caesar Augustus confirmed that status with a decree. Paul told the centurion: Then the commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" He said, "Yes." The commander answered, "With a large sum I obtained this citizenship." And Paul said, "But I was born a citizen." (Acts 22:27-28 NKJV)

Where you were born and live has a great influence on who you are for the rest of your life. If you listen to the words of country music, you will hear this theme repeated over and over.

1.) Rachel, Naomi, and Ruth

The Biblical history of Bethlehem can be traced back to Jacob's wife Rachel. When Jacob first saw Rachel, it was love at first sight. He worked for seven years for the right to marry her. Then on the wedding night, her father tricked him and substituted her older sister Leah. Jacob then worked another seven years to pay for Rachel. Leah gave Jacob six sons and a daughter before Rachel finally bore him a son, Joseph. When Jacob took his wives, children, flocks, and herds back to where his father lived, Rachel died along the way giving birth to Benjamin. Jacob buried her near Ephrathah which later was called Bethlehem. People still visit her tomb.

During the time of the judges, there was a famine. Elimelech, his wife Naomi and their two sons went to Moab. While there the two sons married Moabite women. Then Elimelech and his two sons died. Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem. One of the Moabite women, Ruth, went with her. It was the time of grain harvesting. Ruth went out to the fields to glean. In the Law when a crop was harvested, whatever fell on the ground had to be left for the poor, the widows, and the wayfarer. Ruth was busily picking up grain from the ground. Boaz was the owner of the field. He asked who she was and found out that she was the widowed daughter-in-law of Naomi. Boaz was close kin to Naomi. He decided to exercise his duty as kinsman-redeemer. He married Ruth. Boaz and Ruth had a son, Obed. Obed had a son Jesse. Jesse had eight sons. The youngest of these was David. In later years Bethlehem would be known as "the city of David." However, three women, Rachel, Naomi, and Ruth brought it to prominence.

2. David

David was born and grew to young manhood in Bethlehem. Two characteristics of Bethlehem influenced David's life. One was shepherding. On the slopes surrounding the town were numerous sheep pens. Also Bethlehem was located on a mountain ridge. The town was at 2550 feet in altitude. Mt. Magazine, the highest mountain in Arkansas at 2755 feet. Jerusalem was a couple hundred feet lower than Bethlehem. Mountain heights are an advantage in time of war.

As a youth David worked as a shepherd. He wrote Psalm 23:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever. (Psalms 23:1-6 NKJV)

It was in Bethlehem that Samuel anointed David to be king while Saul was still king. For several years King Saul pursued David.

As a soldier David often used the hills and mountains to his advantage in battle. He often took refuge in the mountains of Judea.

Once while David was being pursued by Saul, he was homesick for Bethlehem and wished he could just have a cup of water from the well in Bethlehem. Three mighty men from David's forces broke through the Philistine army and brought a cup of water back to David. He was so ashamed of having risked these men's lives that he poured it out as an offering to the Lord.

Three nephews of David from Bethlehem were loyal and mighty men of war – Joab, Abishai, and Asahel.

3. Jesus

The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem was a fulfillment of Micah's prophecy

"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." (Micah 5:2 NKJV)

The reason Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem so close to the time that Mary was due to deliver a baby is given in Luke's Gospel:

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. (Luke 2:1-6 NKJV)

Bethlehem paid a dear price for being Jesus' birthplace. King Herod killed all the boys two years old or less in an attempt to kill Jesus.

Micah's prophecy speaks of Bethlehem as being little. In the census Ezra made of the people who returned from the captivity in Babylon, there were only 123 residents of Bethlehem. Undoubtedly the population had grown somewhat since the return but it was probably still a small town. Micah also says that the One to be Ruler in Israel will come from Bethlehem. Joseph had to return to David's town because he was of the house and lineage of David. Joseph was the rightful king of the Jews. Jesus, as his first born son, inherited the title of king when Joseph died.

Boaz and Ruth were the great-grandparents of David. Like Boaz Jesus is a Redeemer. Ruth was a Gentile. Jesus came for the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles. David was a shepherd, a warrior, and a king. Jesus is our Shepherd, our Mighty Protector, and our King.

