

Who were the Ephrathites?

The Ephrathites were people from Ephrath (or Ephrathah), which the Bible tells us was associated with Bethlehem south of Jerusalem. The word Ephrath in Hebrew means “fruitful,” and Bethlehem means “house of bread.” Most scholars believe that Ephrath and Bethlehem are actually two names for the same place—a view supported by Genesis 35:19 and Ruth 4:11. Most likely, Ephrath was the ancient name for the Canaanite city, and Bethlehem was the Jewish label. Other cities were likewise renamed after the conquest of Canaan, such as Luz (renamed Bethel, Joshua 18:13) and Jebus (renamed Jerusalem, 1 Chronicles 11:4).

Ephrath is mentioned in conjunction with the death of Rachel, a wife of Jacob and the mother of Joseph. While Rachel was pregnant, Jacob and Rachel began to travel from Bethel to Ephrath, or Bethlehem. On the way, Rachel went into labor, and she “had great difficulty” (Genesis 35:16). Then, to Jacob’s lasting sorrow, Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin. Jacob buried her “on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)” (Genesis 35:19; cf. 48:7).

Ephrathites are mentioned twice more in Scripture. The sons of Naomi, Mahlon and Kilion, were “Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah” (Ruth 1:2). After Mahlon and Kilion died in Moab, their mother returned to Bethlehem along with Ruth, Mahlon’s widow (verses 6-22). Thus Ruth the Moabite became an Ephrathite. Another Ephrathite was Jesse, the father of King David, who was “from Bethlehem in Judah” (1 Samuel 17:12). Some translations also list Zuph, an ancestor of Samuel, as an Ephrathite in 1 Samuel 1:1, but other translations have that he was an Ephraimite.

Whenever Ephrathites are mentioned in Scripture, they are associated with the city of

Bethlehem in Judah. The most famous mention of the area of Ephrathah is the prophecy of Micah 5:2: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." The Messiah would be born among the Ephrathites in Bethlehem. Jesus Christ, born in Bethlehem, fulfills this prophecy (see Luke 2:4-7).