

What is the importance of Bethlehem in the Bible?

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Bethlehem-in-the-Bible.html>

Bethlehem's central importance in the Bible comes from its relationship to Jesus Christ. The prophet Micah foretold that Israel's Messiah would be born in Bethlehem: "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" (Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:4-6). Both Matthew and Luke report that Jesus was born in the humble village of Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1-12; Luke 2:4-20).

Bethlehem is also known as the City of David. The city was David's family home (1 Samuel 16:1; 17:12) and the place where he was anointed king (1 Samuel 16:4-13). The city is sometimes called Bethlehem of Judah or Bethlehem Ephrath (Genesis 35:19) to set it apart from the Bethlehem of Zebulun (Joshua 19:15).

The name Bethlehem means "House of Bread," probably suggesting a broader context of "food" because of its nearness to bountiful fields within the Judean desert. The town of Bethlehem is situated about five miles southwest of Jerusalem in the hill country of Judah, about 2,500 feet above sea level. The climate is mild, and rainfall is plentiful. Fertile fields, orchards, and vineyards surround the city. Located on a rocky spur just off the main route to Hebron and Egypt, the city has welcomed a fusion of cultures and peoples since its origin.

Bethlehem is first mentioned in the Bible as the town nearest to where Jacob's wife Rachel died and was buried (Genesis 35:19; 48:7); at that time, it was a Canaanite settlement.

Bethlehem was the home of a young Levite who served as an idolatrous priest for a man named Micah in Ephraim (Judges 17:7-13). It was also the hometown of a concubine whose murder brought on the massacre of the people of Gibeah (Judges 19-20).

Naomi, her husband, and their two sons lived in Bethlehem before traveling to Moab during a famine (Ruth 1:1). It was to Bethlehem that Naomi returned after the deaths of her husband and sons, along with her daughter-in-law Ruth (Ruth 1:16-19, 22). To the east of Bethlehem lies the valley where Ruth gleaned in the fields of Boaz (Ruth 2:4). Boaz and Ruth were married in Bethlehem, where they also had their son, Obed, who was the grandfather of King David (Ruth 4:13, 17).

Caleb's family settled in Bethlehem, and his grandson Salma became known as "the father of Bethlehem" (1 Chronicles 2:51). Bethlehem was the hometown of two of David's mighty men: Elhanan, son of Dodo; and Asahel (2 Samuel 2:32; 23:24; 1 Chronicles 11:26). While David was camped at the cave of Adullam, three of his war heroes risked their lives by breaking through a Philistine garrison that occupied Bethlehem to bring David water to drink from the well at the city's gate (2 Samuel 23:13-17).

As the City of David, Bethlehem became a symbol of the king's dynasty. Under Solomon and later Rehoboam, Bethlehem expanded in importance as a strategic fortress. Much later, after the murder of Gedaliah in the days of Babylonian occupation, some Jewish refugees stayed near Bethlehem on their way to Egypt (Jeremiah 41:17). Later, more than a hundred people from Bethlehem were among those who returned to their homeland from exile in Babylon (Ezra 2:21; Nehemiah 7:26).

Bethlehem, while diminished in importance to a humble village in New Testament times, remains distinguished above all other biblical cities as the place where our Savior Jesus Christ was born. When the time came for Mary to give birth, Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus decreed that a census be taken. The law required every citizen to return to his or her hometown to register. Joseph went with Mary to Bethlehem "because he belonged to the house and line of David" (Luke 2:4). In Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to Jesus. "She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them" (Luke 2:7).

In another fulfillment of prophecy (Jeremiah 31:15), King Herod, who was plotting to kill the newborn king, ordered the murder of all male babies two years old and younger in and surrounding Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16-18).

Today the Church of the Nativity, built by Constantine the Great around AD 330, still stands in Bethlehem. Tradition states that a cave under the church is the actual spot where Jesus Christ was born. The manger site is marked by a star with the Latin inscription, *Hic De Virgine Maria Jesus Christus Natus Est*, meaning "Here Jesus Christ was born of the virgin Mary."