



BETHLEHEM

*Its Significance
Up to the Time of
Jesus' Birth*

BY BRYAN E. BEYER

BETHLEHEM IS WELL KNOWN AS THE SITE OF Jesus' birth; the town's name literally means "house of bread." Luke's Gospel records how Joseph and Mary, Jesus' earthly parents, traveled to Bethlehem to participate in a census Emperor Augustus had ordered (Luke 2:1-2). W. F. Albright estimates the population to have been about 300 in the first century, which means Bethlehem was essentially a village at the time of Jesus' birth.¹ While there, Mary gave birth to Jesus, in fulfillment of the prophet Micah's words (Mic. 5:2). That night, angels announced the news to shepherds, who hurried to Bethlehem to see the newborn Messiah (Luke 2:8-20).

Bethlehem played an important role in the ancient world despite its relatively small size. This article highlights Bethlehem's location and geography, its resources, its Old Testament occurrences, and its legacy in God's redemptive purpose.

BETHLEHEM'S LOCATION AND GEOGRAPHY

The first mention of Bethlehem outside the Bible occurs about 1300 BC in a text from El-Amarna, a city in Egypt. In the letter, the ruler of Jerusalem notified Egypt's pharaoh that Bethlehem had fallen into enemy hands.² The text comes from the period of the judges (1350–1050 BC), when various peoples were contending for power in Canaan.

Bethlehem lay approximately five miles southwest of Jerusalem in the Judean hill country, along the major north-south highway that connected Shechem in the central region of Israel with Bethel, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Hebron to the south.³ Scholars sometimes refer to the Shechem-Hebron road as the Way of the Patriarchs

because Abraham and Jacob traveled it. Abraham journeyed south from Shechem to Hebron on his way even farther south to Beersheba (Gen. 12:6-8; 13:3-4,18). Jacob passed through the region of Bethlehem as he journeyed north from Beersheba toward Bethel, fleeing his brother Esau (28:10-19). Twenty years later, Jacob returned to the region, where he faced tragedy; his wife Rachel died in childbirth and was buried near Bethlehem (35:16-20).

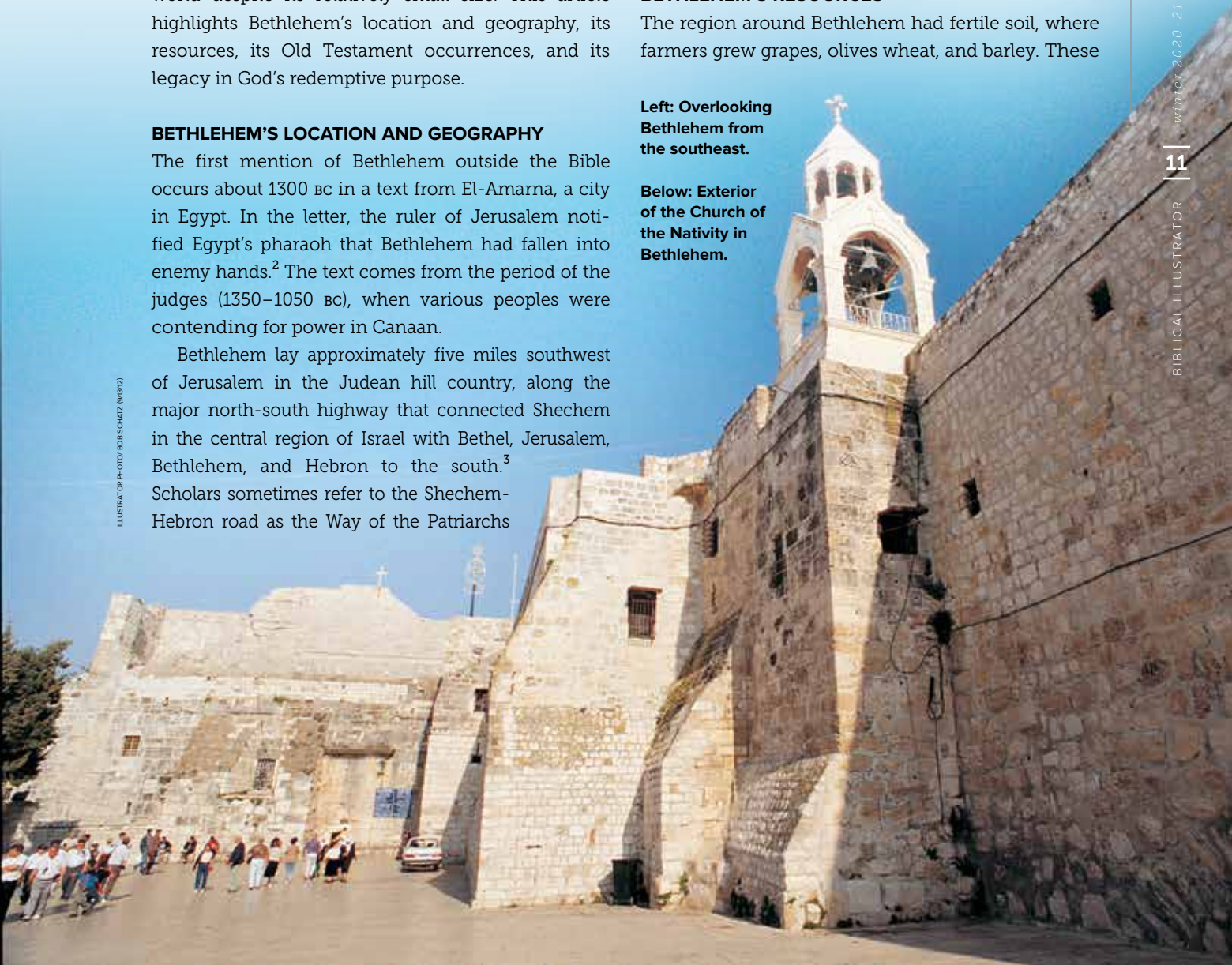
Bethlehem's location in the hill country, in the territory allotted to the tribe of Judah, meant it was not along the International Coastal Highway, which extended from the border of Egypt in the south to Damascus in the north. Travelers from Egypt to Syria, Asia Minor, or Mesopotamia normally would remain along the coast, following the easier route.

BETHLEHEM'S RESOURCES

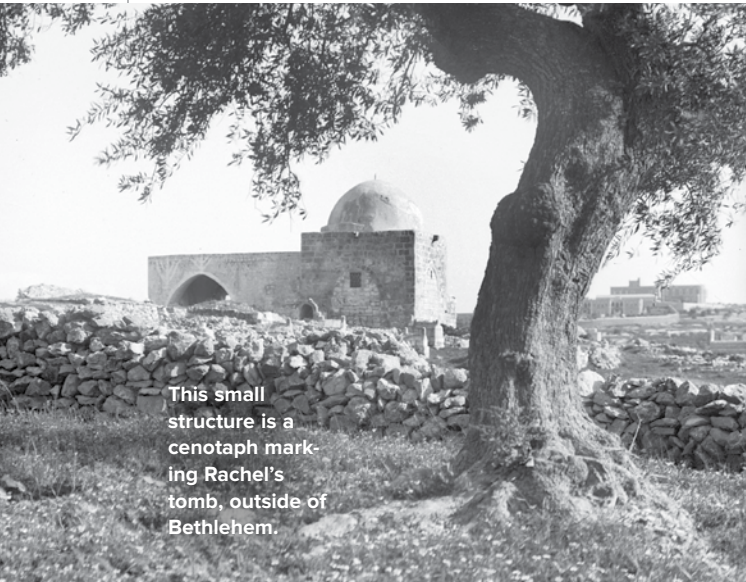
The region around Bethlehem had fertile soil, where farmers grew grapes, olives wheat, and barley. These

Left: Overlooking Bethlehem from the southeast.

Below: Exterior of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BOB SCHATZ (BYEIZI)



This small structure is a cenotaph marking Rachel's tomb, outside of Bethlehem.

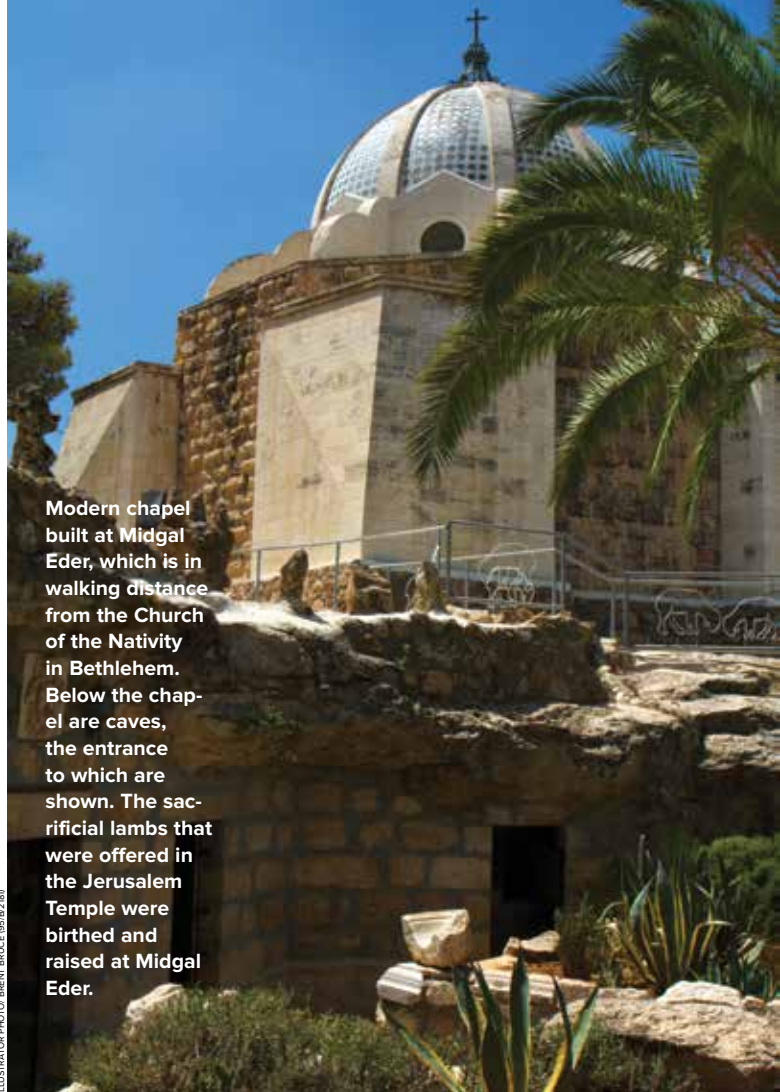
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crops provided food for Bethlehem's citizens and those who lived nearby. Olives also yielded oil, which provided fuel for lamps as well as oil for cooking; people processed grapes into wine. Travelers on the Way of the Patriarchs likely could purchase these items from local merchants. Even today, such crops cover the landscape of that area.⁴

Shepherds also grazed their sheep and goats in the region surrounding Bethlehem. During the season after the harvest, farmers invited shepherds to bring their animals into the fields to consume the stubble that remained. Both shepherds and farmers benefited from this arrangement; the shepherds secured food for their animals, and the farmers obtained stubble-free fields fertilized with sheep and goat manure.⁵

BETHLEHEM'S OLD TESTAMENT OCCURRENCES

The Old Testament mentions Bethlehem approximately forty times. After the Genesis references mentioned above, it appears again in the time of the judges (Judg. 17:7-9; 19:1-2,18). Most significantly during this period, Bethlehem forms the backdrop for the events in the Book of Ruth. The book records how Ruth, a Moabite woman, married into an Israelite family and chose to become part of Israel. She moved to Israel from Moab with her mother-in-law Naomi after their husbands died (Ruth 1:19,22) and settled into the community there. Boaz, a man of influence and godly character, ultimately married Ruth and



Modern chapel built at Midgal Eder, which is in walking distance from the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Below the chapel are caves, the entrance to which are shown. The sacrificial lambs that were offered in the Jerusalem Temple were birthed and raised at Midgal Eder.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRINCE (5632208)

gave her a son, Obed (4:9-17). Obed fathered Jesse, who became the father of David, Israel's great king (v. 22). God's blessing on Ruth's life in Bethlehem reminds us how God can use seemingly ordinary lives for His amazing purposes.

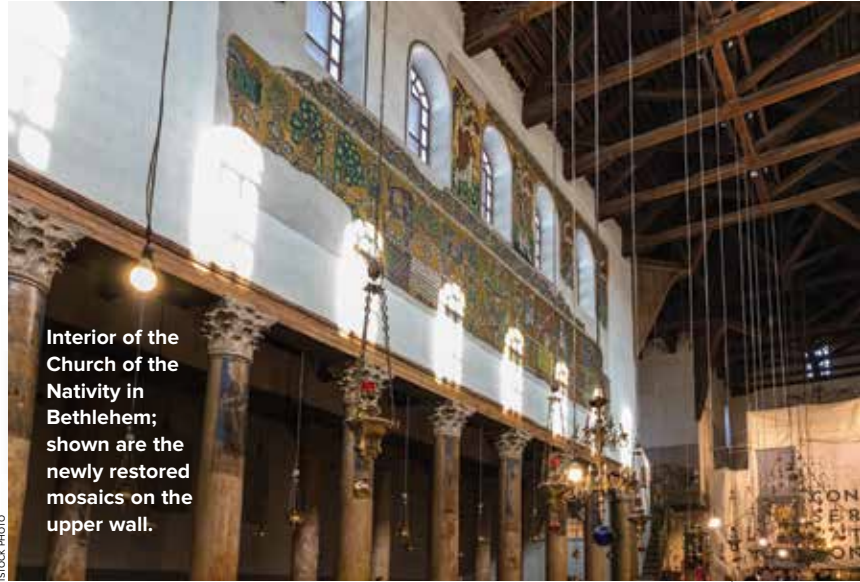
Bethlehem figures largely in the account of David's life. The prophet Samuel came to Bethlehem where David lived with his brothers and their father Jesse; there he anointed David as God's designate to succeed Saul as Israel's king (1 Sam. 16:1-13). During Saul's battle with the Philistines in the Elah Valley, David went back and forth between Bethlehem and the valley to check on his brothers, who were fighting in Saul's army (17:12,15,20). While in the valley, David heard the taunts of Goliath, a Philistine giant, and defeated and killed him, bringing victory for Israel.

After King Solomon's death in 930 BC, Israel divided into two kingdoms (1 Kings 12:1-19). The Northern Kingdom maintained the name Israel, while the Southern Kingdom took the name Judah after its major tribe. Rehoboam, who was Solomon's son and Judah's first king, fortified Bethlehem and other cities of Judah to protect against enemy invasion



Inside the Church of the Nativity; steps leading down to the cave that was, according to tradition, Jesus' birthplace.

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Interior of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem; shown are the newly restored mosaics on the upper wall.

ISTOCK PHOTO

(2 Chron. 11:6). Nonetheless, Shishak, king of Egypt, invaded Judah during Rehoboam's reign, and Judah paid a heavy price (1 Kings 14:25-27).

Bethlehem remained a Judean town until Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah in 586 BC and destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple (2 Kings 25:1-21). When Persia's King Cyrus conquered Babylon and later issued a decree that Jews could return to Judah to rebuild their homeland, almost 50,000 people returned to the region (Ezra 2:64-65). The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah specifically mention citizens of Bethlehem as among that number (Ezra 2:21; Neh. 7:26). That number may have included descendants of the original exiles.

Bethlehem was the focus of an important proclamation from the prophet Micah, who prophesied these words around 750-700 BC: "Bethlehem Ephrathah, you are small among the clans of Judah; one will come from you to be ruler over Israel for me. His origin is from antiquity, from ancient times" (Mic. 5:2, CSB). Micah's announcement must have encouraged God's people, who would have known that King David hailed from there. They believed God one day would send them another king—King Messiah, the Anointed One, who would establish God's kingdom (vv. 4-5). The New Testament affirms the messianic fulfillment of Micah's words. After Jesus' birth, when wise men came from the east seeking to worship Him, King Herod consulted with the chief priests and scribes, asking them where the

Messiah would be born. The Jewish leaders responded, "In Bethlehem of Judea," citing Micah's prophecy (Matt. 2:5-6). Sadly, although all in Jerusalem were troubled by the wise men's visit, no one else apparently made the five-mile trip with them to Bethlehem to see if maybe God's Son had indeed come.

BETHLEHEM'S LEGACY

The Bethlehem of Bible times was significantly smaller than the more expanded city of today. Nevertheless, its mention in the Old Testament reveals its importance during that period; and the New Testament Gospels of Matthew and Luke herald it as a focal point of God's redemptive plan. Bethlehem was a small town in Judea, but it boasts a great legacy—the birthplace of King David, and the birthplace of God's Son, who is the eternal King of kings. ♣

1. W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann, *Matthew*, vol. 26, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 205.
2. George W. Knight and Byron Longino, "Bethlehem," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, rev. ed. (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2015), 196.
3. Denis Baly, *The Geography of the Bible* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 182.
4. For an overview of food preparation and diet in Bible times, see Fred H. Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody, 1953), 43-54.
5. Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible*, ed. D.A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 52.

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