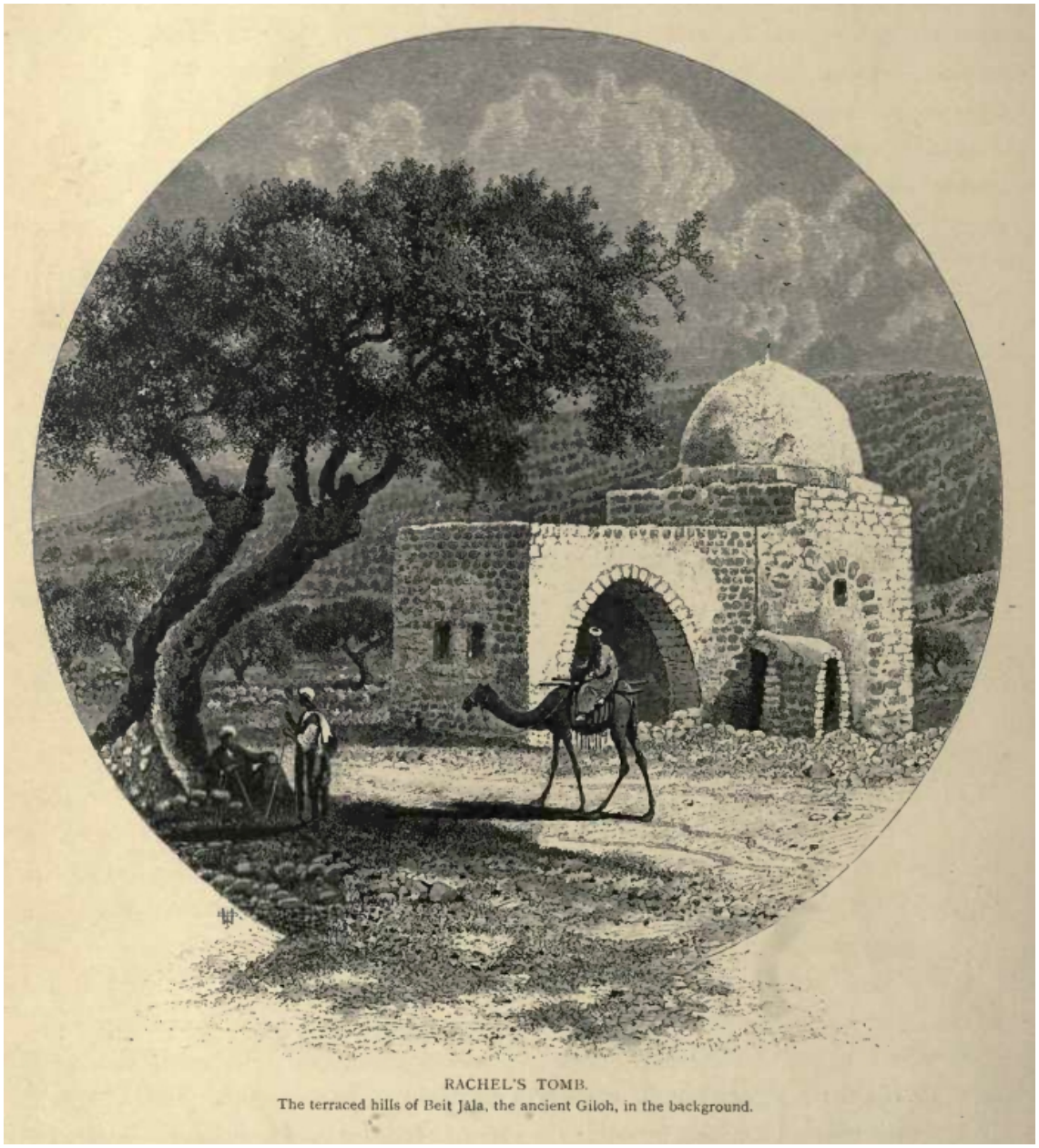

Late 19th century sketch of Rachel's Tomb, on the northern outskirts of Bethlehem and about one mile from the traditional site of Christ's nativity.

The Advent and Christmas seasons represent our annual reminder about the ancient and unassuming little town of Bethlehem. The modern town, on the West Bank and barely five miles south of Jerusalem, has a population of about 25,000 Palestinians, both Muslim and Christian (a century ago, it was almost exclusively Christian). A visitor from Jerusalem recognizes that he is approaching Bethlehem city limits when he reaches the Israeli military checkpoint at Rachel's Tomb, a site holy to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Most references

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.

to Bethlehem in both the Old and New Testaments are few and seemingly marginal to the story of salvation. However, a closer look at the linguistic significance of "Bethlehem" and the ancient history of the town give us a surprising insight into God's eternal plan for mankind's redemption.

Origins and Old Testament

At the time of the patriarchs, Bethlehem was known as Ephrata, a name which apparently referred to multiple locations. Two verses in Genesis (35:19 and 48:7) indicate that Jacob buried his beloved Rachel "on the road" to Ephrata, after her death while giving birth to Benjamin. Several hundred years later, upon the arrival of the Jews into the Promised Land, Bethlehem appears to have been a Canaanite settlement. On what is today the Hill of the Nativity, the Canaanites erected a temple, presumably to their god of fertility, known as Lehem. The temple and the surrounding town would then have been known as *Beyt Lehem* (i.e., temple, or house of Lehem). Written records indicate that, around 1400 B.C., the Egyptian governor for Jerusalem appealed to the pharaoh for aid in retaking *Bit-Laḫmi* in the wake of local disturbances.

In the Book of Joshua (19:15), which provides the account of the distribution of the land, Bethlehem was merely one of twelve "cities" assigned to the tribe of Zebulon. The first significant reference to Bethlehem is found in the Book of Ruth, the Moabite girl who would become the great-grandmother of David. In the narrative, Ruth and her Hebrew mother-in-law, Naomi, travel from Moab to Naomi's home in Bethlehem after both women had lost their husbands. There the young Ruth meets and eventually marries the rich and influential Boaz, one of the leading men of the city. Approximately two centuries later, as the home of King David, Bethlehem is mentioned several times in the Books of 1 and 2 Kings (Samuel) and 1 Chronicles (Paralipomenon). The final reference to Bethlehem in the Old Testament comes from the minor prophet Micah in the 7th century B.C., approximately one thousand years after the time of Jacob and Rachel. The prophecy concerns the origin of the Jewish Messiah and reads as follows: "And thou, Bethlehem Ephrata, art a little one among the thousands of Juda: out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that is to be the ruler in Israel: and His going forth is from the beginning, from the days of eternity" (Micah 5:2). This famous prophecy has echoed down through the centuries, in part because of an encounter between Christ and the Pharisees, which we will examine below.

New Testament

Only two of the four Evangelists (Matthew and Luke) even make reference to the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. Matthew, in his narrative of the coming of the Magi from the east, cites

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.

the intriguing conversation between King Herod the Great and the chief priests and teachers of the law. When Herod demands of them where the Messiah will be born, they respond (cf. Matt. 2:4-5) by quoting the 700-year-old prophecy of Micah, indicating Bethlehem of Judea. The Magi, as we know, returned to their homeland without informing Herod of their success in locating and paying homage to the Infant Messiah. Realizing he had been duped, Herod "killed all the men children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the borders thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men" (Matt 2:16). The Church calendar commemorates this tragic event as the Feast of the Holy Innocents, celebrated on December 28.

The Church also notes the prophecy of Jeremiah (31:15) in which Rachel, buried in Bethlehem, weeps for her lost children: "A voice was heard on high of lamentation, of mourning, and weeping, of Rachel weeping for her children, and refusing to be comforted for them, because they are not." Thus Bethlehem, the birthplace of the Messiah, became also the first place to witness the shedding of innocent blood in opposition to the Christ. Incidentally, the reputation of Herod the Great as a butcher has been well documented in other areas. For example, he executed one his wives and several sons. Commenting on Herod's barbaric cruelty, "the emperor Augustus reportedly quipped, 'It is better to be Herod's pig than son' (Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 2:4:11)—the joke being that, since Herod was a Jew, he didn't eat pork and his pig would be safe."

The true significance of Bethlehem is revealed to us some thirty years later, during the public ministry of Christ. Both by His miracles and His powerful words, Jesus had stirred up the people, who were increasingly divided as to whether He was the Messiah. In John 7:40-43, it is recorded that some Jews referred to Jesus as "the prophet indeed" and others called Him "the Christ." On the other hand, "some said: 'Doth the Christ come out of Galilee? Doth not the Scripture say: That Christ cometh of the seed of David, and from Bethlehem the town where David was?' So there arose a dissension among the people because of Him."

Surely, nothing would have been simpler for Jesus to answer these objections than to publicly state that He had, in fact, been born in Bethlehem. He declined to do so, however, for at least two reasons. First, He realized that any claim to a birth in David's city, fulfilling the celebrated prophecy of Micah, would be openly scorned by the Jews without indisputable proof. Indeed, there was no proof that would hold sway in a court of that time, or ours. The divine plan of salvation wanted it that way. More importantly, He wanted to be accepted and followed based on His appeal to human hearts, minds, and souls, not because of a potentially legalistic fulfillment of an ancient text. The Jewish people knew and followed, or rejected and crucified Jesus as a Galilean, not as a son of Bethlehem, which

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.

would not be revealed until much later. God had given a prophetic clue to the Jews about the origin of the Messiah and then deliberately concealed it through the unusual circumstances of Jesus's birth.

The Meaning of "Bethlehem"

The final significance of "Bethlehem" (which is actually two words) is revealed to us in the area of linguistics. We cited above that the original name may have meant "temple" or "home" (beth) of a Canaanite god (lehem). It seems unlikely, however, that the ancient Jews would have retained the name of a town that was knowingly identified with a pagan god. Be that as it may, Bethlehem has long since had another translation – actually two. In Hebrew, it is written as □□□□□ □□□□□ *Bet Lehem*, [bet 'leχem], and translated as "house (or home or abode) of bread." Intriguingly, in Arabic, the term is □□□ □□□ *Bayt Lahm* [beːt.laħm], and translated as "house of meat."

In retrospect, as we consider the birth of Christ in Bethlehem, we refer to it as the "Incarnation" or God's taking on of human flesh, hence the "house of meat." Taken together, the Hebrew and Arabic translations are a juxtaposition of the terms "bread" and "meat," thus making a clear reference to the Eucharist. The mysterious genesis of these meanings, along with the hidden association of Bethlehem with Christ, could have come only from the divine mind. Two thousand years later, we are privileged to appreciate such things and wonder at their beauty.

This article was first published here on December 24, 2017.

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.