

LIVING LESSONS FROM THE LAND

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CHAPTER ONE

The Fruitfulness of Bethlehem

The word “Bethlehem” can designate the Judean city which covers the hilltops that are about five miles south of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The word can also identify the broader region that is both in and around the city, including its countryside, farmlands, pastures, and valleys. The words “Bethlehem Ephrathah,” however, refer to a more specific designation of that area which is near but outside the city where there would be one or more threshing floors for grain, a grape press for the making of wine, and an olive press for the production of oil. The Ephrath would also be in or near the grazing lands for livestock (goats, sheep, oxen, and cattle).

In Hebrew, the root word of Ephrathah means *fruitful*. It describes a specific elevation of land based upon its agricultural function. In biblical times, a *fruitful place* or Ephrath was where agricultural products of the Promised Land were processed for their maximum use and benefit.

An Ephrath cannot be located at the top of a hill or mountain. The wind can get so strong up there, it

can blow away the grain along with its chaff as it is winnowed on the threshing floor. Nor will an Ephrath be in the lowest part of a valley because often there is no wind at all. Rather, an Ephrath is established in the “heart” of the hill, not on its “head” and not at its “feet.” This is where you will find the ancient Ephraths in Israel today. One can readily identify an Ephrath by that elevation in the heart of a hill where there are remnants, carved in bedrock and stone, of threshing floors (grain), grape presses (wine), and olive presses (oil).

The difference between “Bethlehem” and “Bethlehem Ephrathah” may seem insignificant, but tracing the latter through Scripture reveals an extraordinary lesson regarding the “Fruit” of God himself, Jesus Christ.

TRACING BETHLEHEM EPHRATHAH

The Bible reveals that, in about 1900 BC, Israel (Jacob) pitched his tent and mourned for Rachel at Bethlehem Ephrathah:

Then they [Israel and Rachel] journeyed from Bethel. When they were still some distance from *Ephrath*, Rachel went into labor, and she had hard labor. And when her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, “Do not fear, for you have another son.” And as

her soul was departing (for she was dying), she called his name Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to *Ephrath* (that is, *Bethlehem*), and Jacob set up a pillar over her tomb. It is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day. Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder (Genesis 35:16-21).

Many years later, in about 1150 BC, Ruth the Moabite lay at the feet of Boaz in the same location:

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of *Bethlehem in Judah* went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were *Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah*. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons.... So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to *Bethlehem* at the beginning of barley harvest (Ruth 1:1-3, 22).

It was also here that, in about 1000 BC, David, the great grandson of Boaz and Ruth (and Jesse's youngest son), tended his father's sheep:

Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David (Ruth 4:21-22).

Now David was the son of *an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah*, named Jesse, who had eight sons. In the days of Saul the man was already old and advanced in years.... David was the youngest. The three eldest followed Saul, but David went back and forth from Saul to feed his father's sheep at *Bethlehem* (1 Samuel 17:12, 14-15).

Bethlehem Ephrathah was where the lad David took care of his father's sheep. From that time on, this land would be considered House of David land. There are many sections of land all over Israel, including parts of Jerusalem, that over the centuries belonged to the House of King David, but Bethlehem Ephrathah was extra special because this small area outside the city of Bethlehem was David's childhood home.

In about 800 BC, the prophet Micah predicted the Messiah King would come. The two passages below are portions of the same oracle given by the prophet. They are in two different chapters in the Bible, but

they are both part of one amazing prophetic utterance.

And the lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation; and the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion from this time forth and forevermore. And you, *O tower of the flock*, hill of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, the former dominion shall come, kingship for the daughter of Jerusalem. [Bethlehem Ephrathah is only 4.5 miles south of Jerusalem; hence, it is called here “the daughter of Jerusalem”] (Micah 4:7-8).

Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the judge of Israel on the cheek. But you, *O Bethlehem Ephrathah*, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days (Micah 5:1-2).

Of special note is, as first seen in the former mentioned Genesis 35 passage, the reference to the close proximity and relationship of Bethlehem Ephrathah and the Tower of the Flock (tower of “Eder”). The Hebrew word *eder* means “flock.” The “tower of Eder,” therefore, means *tower of the flock*,

which is a noteworthy and highly significant landmark for tracing Bethlehem Ephrathah in Scripture. The relationship between the two are established in Scripture all the way back to the time of ancient Israel, and they are essentially synonyms.

The Bible's next mention of Bethlehem Ephrathah comes around 3 and 2 BC, when the scribes spoke to King Herod, repeating Micah's words:

Now after Jesus was born in *Bethlehem of Judea* in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "*Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?* For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." ... *They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel'*" (Matthew 2:1-2, 5-6).

During the time of this conversation, Herod had built a huge palace north and east of the city of Bethlehem on top of a manufactured “mountain” of his own making. Today, this is a major tourist attraction called Herodion. Every day, crowds and their buses are there to tour the palace and even

view the place of Herod's tomb. It truly is a remarkable site, but a common question concerning the attraction is: "Why did Herod manufacture a mountain in order to build a palace? Weren't there enough mountains available?" A reasonable answer might be: "Because he knew Micah's prophecy!"

If a king-ruler and his infantry were going to exert their "dominion," as Micah had prophesied, and rise up against him from Bethlehem Ephrathah, then Herod was determined to be the first to know and put a stop to this insurrection. However, it was not an *infantry* that came to that field. It was an *infant*! For this, Herod was completely unprepared and, therefore, filled with rage. It was here in this area that King Herod murdered baby boys, attempting to stop the forthcoming King:

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys *in Bethlehem and its vicinity* who were two years old and under... Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in *Ramah*, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more" (Matthew 2:16-18).

In Hebrew, the word *Ramah* means highland. Today, this highland is called Ramat Rachel. It is the hill directly above the fields of Bethlehem Ephrathah, further substantiating the uniqueness of Bethlehem Ephrathah as the place where Jesus was born. To say this another way, the place that means “fruitful” produced the most important “Fruit” that has ever walked this earth.

NOT AN INFANTRY, BUT AN INFANT'S TREE

The Mishnah is a monumental work completed 200 years after Christ at Zippori. It was the written record of the rabbinic and priestly oral traditions that had faithfully been passed down by rote memory from generation to generation. Interestingly, it records the significance of the tower of the flock in relationship to acceptable animal sacrifices that were to be brought to the temple in Jerusalem:

"Of the herds, in the space between Jerusalem and 'the tower of the flock' and on both sides, the males are for burnt-offerings, the female for peace-offerings" (Mishnah, Shekalim 7:4).

This tower of the flock developed into a major priestly center related to the temple sacrificial system, not just for the preparation of animal sacrifices, but also for the production of pure oil [olive press], wine

[grape press], and bread [threshing floor], all necessary as a part of temple worship. While all of these further substantiate the tower of the flock's relationship with Bethlehem Ephrathah, it is the animal sacrifices with which this particular section is concerned.

The Bible tells us that, for centuries prior to Christ's birth, shepherds who were specially trained by temple priests regularly watched their flocks by night:

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night (Luke 2:8).

Alfred Edersheim, a 19th century Messianic Jewish scholar, offers thoughts on these shepherds in writing:

This [Tower of the Flock] was not the watchtower for the ordinary flocks which pastured on the barren sheepground beyond Bethlehem, but lay close to the town, on the road to Jerusalem. A passage in the Mishnah leads to the conclusion, that the flocks, which pastured there, were destined for Temple-sacrifices and, accordingly, that the shepherds, who watched over them, were not ordinary shepherds. The latter were under the ban of Rabbinism, on account of

their necessary isolation from religious ordinances, and their manner of life, which rendered strict legal observance unlikely, if not absolutely impossible. The same Mishnic passage also leads us to infer, that these flocks lay out all the year round, since they are spoken of as in the fields thirty days before the Passover - that is, in the month of February, when in Palestine the average rainfall is nearly greatest. Thus, Jewish tradition in some dim manner apprehended the first revelation of the Messiah from that [Tower of the Flock], where shepherds watched the Temple-flocks all the year round. Of the deep symbolic significance of such a coincidence, it is needless to speak.¹

It was around 4 BC when God's angels announced an amazing sign to some of those specially trained shepherds:

And this will be a *sign* for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger (Luke 2:12).

One might wonder what was so remarkable about finding a baby wrapped in a cloth and lying in a crib?

¹ Selection taken from chapter VI of *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. To read the entire chapter, click this link:
<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edersheim/lifetimes.vii.vi.html>

Can this really be considered a “sign?” The remarkable reality is that these shepherds were accustomed to seeing something else wrapped in swaddling cloths—newborn lambs! These lambs were to be watched and cared for until the day they were selected for temple sacrifice (if they qualified as worthy and without blemish). Therefore, the sign the shepherds witnessed was that, instead of a lamb, a real baby was wrapped in the very swaddling cloths normally used for future sacrificial lambs! It was just like the angels had told them!

And when the shepherds saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.... And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them (Luke 2:17-18, 20).

If the shepherds knew, then surely John the Baptist also knew this story of this baby’s—his cousin’s—birth. Could this be the reason why he chose the imagery he did when, to his own disciples, he proclaimed Jesus as superior to himself?

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the *Lamb* of God,

who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29)

Today, we know that Jesus is our Passover Lamb whose blood was shed in our place because the cross and the resurrection have already occurred. Where Herod looked for an infantry, we look to the infant who grew up to die on a tree.

“The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree” (Acts 5:30).

CHAPTER TWO

Your Wilderness is Not a Desert

I t was by far the most heartbreaking set of circumstances in my fifty-seven years of life. The emotional ache in me was so profound, I felt it like a flu. I was so confused, I did not only fail to understand *what* had happened, but also *why* it happened. I was powerless. No remedy in sight. How long would this last? No way to know. Every hour was “survival mode” as I gingerly walked one methodical step at a time through the blackest of night.

While the experience was indeed heartbreaking, it was also heart mending. God’s presence was real and powerful. His nearness, life itself. Nothing else mattered. In those days, it was easier than usual to turn away from worldly pleasures and comforts. They held no interest for me. They were meaningless and irrelevant. All I had was God and, oh, how my soul knew it! He alone was my strength and joy. I hung on to His every Word. My mouth spoke a lot less. My ears listened a lot more. Every time I opened the Bible, it spoke directly to my need. I gained deeper insights and understandings on a daily, sometimes

hourly basis. I truly experienced Almighty God as a lamp to my feet and light to my path.

These two descriptions together—darkness and light at the same time—represent my best attempt to encapsulate what my life was like and how it felt in the fall of 2010. The people closest to us know the story. If I tried to tell it all here, this chapter would be way too long.

You do not need to know the details of my crisis to get the point of this chapter. In fact, many of you reading these words already feel a strong personal connection with what I have said so far, even though you know nothing about what I went through. The reason is that, like me, you have also been granted by God the bittersweet blessing of clinging to Him alone as your All-in-All on a journey you did not want or choose—a trek through the perilous yet holy ground called *wilderness*: an excruciating, complex, custom-made set of personal tribulations that Father-God has sovereignly allowed in your life for purposes you will only fully know in heaven. For the rest of you who have not yet been forced to navigate through such an overwhelming, all-consuming series of trials, take heart. It is highly likely that your turn will come. If and when it does, remember the paradox! Never forget that your lowest point can also be your highest. Your greatest pain can yield your purest joy.

Wilderness (in the figurative sense – we are still illustrating) is like a real-life mixture of the good with the bad as depicted in Charles Dickens' famous opening lines in *A Tale of Two Cities*:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

Paradoxes like this regularly occur in the Bible, but I suggest that the order is usually reversed. Think of how often in Scripture we see God intervening in *the worst of times* to convert them into the best, marked by His glory and grace! Think about Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Elijah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Esther, and Nehemiah (to name only a few). We also see the same pattern in the life of Jesus—God gloriously turning the darkest day of the cross into the brightest day of the resurrection. Then think of the disciples, Saul of Tarsus, and the early church.

God has not changed! He still takes our *worst of times* and turns them into His *best* for His glory when we seek Him with all our hearts. In my hour of despair, it felt as if everything I knew or even thought I knew about God had been cast into a fiery, white-hot furnace. Whatever was true would be proven like gold. Whatever was false would be revealed for what it was—ashes and illusion. My wife and I learned to pray, *Lord, we know not what to do, but our eyes are on You* (2 Chron. 20:12). The *wilderness* we were in looked at the world like a *desert* we could not survive, but when we turned our eyes away from the situation and towards the *LORD*, He became the story, not us or our circumstances. Our *desert* was actually His *pasture land*. We learned to declare with even greater awareness and affectionate worship, *The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want* (Ps 23:1).

The day came when the pain of 2010 passed. Hallelujah! I do not miss that trauma one bit! Ah, but I do miss that amazing, indescribable intimacy—the near, precious presence of the Lord whom I so desperately needed, even to make it from moment to moment. I understood more than ever why Moses, after all he had experienced in that *wild pasture land*, pleaded with his Shepherd, *If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here* (Ex. 33:15).

God's word has proven true! Today, He still commands, *Do not forget how I led you through the great and terrifying wilderness! Remember the Lord your God.* (Read these words in their full context in Deut. 8:6-18.)

THE POWER OF THE WORD

Hebrew words used in the Bible that describe forms of wilderness are *arabah*, which comes from the root word for *arid*; *horbah*, whose root means *to lay waste*; and *jeshimon*, from a root that means *to be desolate*. But the primary word, richest with insight because of its root, and more all-encompassing of God's purpose for allowing *wilderness* in our lives, is *midbar*.

As with many Hebrew words, much of the meaning and nuance of *midbar* is lost in translation. When it is translated *desert* (and it often is) we might envision something like the Sahara, but that is not an accurate mental image. Sometimes *midbar* is translated *uninhabited land*, but the way in which it is *uninhabited* is important to know. For instance, it does not mean *no one lives there*.

The root word of *midbar* is *dbr*. Yes, those three letters make a complete word. Hebrew has no vowels. Can you see the root *dbr* in *midbar*? Its primary meaning is “the act of speaking!” That's

right. *The speaking of words* is the root meaning of *midbar*, which is translated *wilderness*. The word literally means, *the place of the speaking!* Ponder that fact in light of this familiar passage: *A voice is calling, “Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.”* (Isa. 40:3)

Wilderness experiences, whether literal or figurative, have a way of silencing all competing voices and making us desperate to hear God's. It is God's life-giving training camp. With this in mind, now slowly re-read the following familiar words:

And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Deut. 8:2-3)

Wilderness heightens our desperation to hear and then devour every single life-giving word that God speaks.

KEY ASPECTS OF ISRAEL'S MIDBAR

Holy Pasture Land

Israel's *midbar* is not dead but very much alive. It may appear to be dry and barren, but look closer. It is teeming with life. It is not the place one would choose to settle down, plant, and grow crops, but it is a place to graze goats and sheep. The land is suitable for shepherds, not farmers. Water is scarce but accessible from underground springs and cisterns, both of which depend upon the "living water" that comes from heaven—rain. The inhabitants of the *midbar* cannot afford to take water and life for granted, like they might if they lived near a river. They are absolutely dependent upon God to bring the rain. Despite its appearance, the *midbar* is not an utterly deserted and desolate place. It is pasture land, where one's trust in the Lord is put to the test and where His faithfulness to provide is proven.

My friend Moshe, an Israeli tour guide, says that *midbar* is more than a mere "pasture land," but "God's *holy* pasture land." This has solid basis, not only because of the way God uses wilderness to separate his people unto Himself and focus them on His word (*holy* means *separated*), but also because the word *holy* is yet another derivative of *dbr*, the

root of *midbar*. For instance, one of the words that comes out of *dbr* is *debir*. Here is a summary of the meaning of *debir*, taken from Abarim Publications (www.abarim-publications.com). Note how the word came to be used and how it relates back to the primary meaning of *dbr* (*dabar*), which means *to speak*:

Debir, meaning hindmost chamber..., inner sanctuary..., oracle. This word ... is reserved as an alternative name of the Holy of Holies in Solomon's temple and, because of the connection to *dabar*, was translated 'oracle' by the King James and others. Younger translations tend to ... seek meaning in the location of the Holy of Holies; in the back. Most notably is its usage in Psalm 28:2, "...onto the *debir* of your holiness."²

So, when my friend Moshe announces "Midbar! God's holy pasture land!" I know that his description is right on! It properly captures the complex meaning and significance of the Hebrew word.

Another way I've heard Moshe use *midbar* is: "Bah Meedbarrhh!" (rolling his "r"). No, that is not the Hebrew translation of Ebenezer Scrooge saying,

². Abarim Publications likes to suggest that since in the Holy of Holies the ark was kept, and in the ark the Law, which in turn is intimately related to the Word of God, a better translation of the word *debir* is 'place of the Word.' (<http://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Dabar.html>)

“Bah! Humbug!” *BeMidbar* means *in the wilderness*. Numbers 1:1 begins, “Now the LORD spoke to Moses *in the Wilderness* of Sinai.” (Now you know that one could rightly translate this to read, “The Lord spoke to Moses in *the speaking place* of Sinai.) Guess what the original name is for the book in the Bible we know as Numbers? *BeMidbar!* The name of the book is *In the Wilderness*, taken directly from verse one. When the Greeks translated the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint), they decided to emphasize *Moses numbering the people* instead of *God speaking in the wilderness*; so, they changed the name of the book. That in turn impacted how the book’s name was translated into English, but to this day the real name of the fourth book of the Bible is *BeMidbar*.

So why did the Greek translators shift the emphasis from what God was doing to what Moses was doing? When I consider our western (Greek mindset) mindsets today, I think there might be a lesson here, which is discovered in the question: Do we still value the answer to, “How many people are there?” just a little bit more than, “What is God saying?”

By the way, get out your Hebrew interlinear and note that in Numbers 1:1, the word *spoke* and the word *wilderness* are derived from the same root: *dbr*. Yes indeed. Why does God allow wilderness in our lives? To focus our undistracted attention on what He

wants to say. How precious! His words are life, and He never wastes a single one.

Uninhabited

Uninhabited does not mean *deserted*, as in *no one lives there*. It just means that you will not typically see cities in the *midbar* (an exception would be the *midbar* of Judea, which has several). *Uninhabited* is better understood as *unsettled*. The people who inhabit the *midbar* are nomadic. They travel through the land, grazing their herds, not settling in one location. They cannot be sedentary. They inhabit territory that demands constant movement and activity to maintain life.

This also is instructive. The wilderness experiences we endure in our lives are not forever. They are passages we must travel through. Make no mistake, they are among the most critical and important seasons we will ever know. We are not to forget their lessons, but they usually do come to an end. If they do not resolve in this life, then they will for sure in the great Sabbath rest of heaven. Until then, we are sojourners, pilgrims in the land, just passing through, depending upon God and God alone for life, breath, food, and sustenance.

Take comfort. Fix your focus. Your personal *wilderness* will not last, but its lessons are intended to.

Mouth

Finally, *midbar* is poetically used in the Bible one time as a word picture for *mouth*, the place from which speech comes forth (Song of Solomon 4:3). What a profound symbol of how God uses *wilderness* in the lives of his leaders and people! To borrow one of C. S. Lewis's expressions, one could say that, in God's economy, *wilderness* is a severe *mercy*. The land is indeed severe, but the lessons are full of mercy.

How hard would it be to miss God's words if you were standing in his mouth? Well, *midbar* can mean *mouth*; *wilderness* can be the *instrument of speech* through which God communicates His wonderful words of life.

When Moses finished reciting all these words to all Israel, he said to them “Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day [here in the wilderness], so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you – they are your life. By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess (Deut. 32:45-47).

Do you want to live long in the prosperous land God has given you? Then do whatever it takes to remember and obey the words He spoke to you in the *wilderness.*

ARE YOU LISTENING?

It is my encouragement for every Christian to visit Israel at least once. When lovers of God visit His Land, special things happen. He often speaks through these experiences in significant, unexpected ways. If you do end up going, prepare never to be the same again. You will have begun a journey that will last, not just a few days, but for the rest of your life—a journey of learning and growing in the word of the Lord like never before.

God is working, and He is speaking. Are you listening? Tune your heart now to receive His word and follow.

