

The Bethlehem Definition

“But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that is to be ruler in Israel; Whose goings forth have been of old, from everlasting” (Micah 5:2).

What is the most important book in your house? It may be a first aid book, a book describing the treatment of physical injuries. Some women might say that a cookbook, a book of recipes, is a priority. Others would find a how-to book, a book for home improvement, to be a constant necessity. Well, from my perspective, the Bible, the precious Word of God, is the most important book. After that, I would need a dictionary, a word book of some sort.

I'm sure some of my high school teachers would never have believed that a dictionary and a thesaurus would become important volumes in my life. Certainly, they never would have imagined me perusing the meanings and the usage of Hebrew and Greek terms. In preaching and teaching the Bible, book by book, chapter by chapter and verse by verse, however, the study of words and their meanings are vitally significant.

The prophet Micah had similar sermons for both the Northern Kingdom (Israel), and the Southern Kingdom (Judah). But mingled in his message of God's displeasure and their future captivities are several Messianic prophecies. The celebrated prophecy before us, celebrated because of the specific prediction regarding Christ's incarnation and the place of His birth, affords us three names which have significant meanings.

The definition of the name “Bethlehem” points us to the fullness of God! Numbered among all the names that begin with the prefix “Beth,” which means “house,” Bethlehem is defined, “house of bread.” Certainly, this was a good name given to “the bread basket,” or “the harvest capitol” of Israel in Bible times. But being the birthplace of Christ, “the Bread of Life” (John 6:35), the name of this city wonderfully points us to the fullness of God's provision.

The definition of the name “Ephratah” points us to the fruitfulness of God! In fact, while the name was used interchangeably with Bethlehem, the term signifies “a place of fruitfulness.” The fact that the shepherds were “keeping watch over their flocks by night” (Luke 2:8) in this area indicates it provided favorable pastures. Of course, the Christ of Bethlehem came not just to provide a place of fruitfulness, but to be the food and pasture for His sheep.

The definition of the name “Judah” points us to the faithfulness of God! Looking at the name “Judah,” which denotes “praise,” alongside of “Bethlehem,” meaning “house of bread,” and “Ephratah,” signifying “a place of fruitfulness,” we are met with “a house of bread, fruitfulness and praise.” While God's faithfulness was seen in this place of abundance, it is really set forth in the Person of the Lord Jesus, Who came to save, bless and work through His people.