

Bethlehem City of Bread

On Monday December 4th Dr David Jeremiah did a teaching over TBN searching out the answer to the question, “Why Bethlehem?” Of all the places in the world to choose for the birth of the messiah, why this little town of Bethlehem?

Apparently, God knew from the beginning that that “little town” would be His choice. This was proclaimed over 700 years before Christ’s birth by the Prophet Micah: “But now Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judea, yet out of thee shall come forth unto me one who is to be the ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from ever lasting... He shall be great until the end of the earth.” (Micah 5: 2 – 4.)

The name *Bethlehem* in the Hebrew is literally, “the city of bread,” and *Ephratah* means “fruitfulness.” Micah’s prophecy is the clearest enunciation of the metaphor of bread threaded throughout the Bible. In Genesis alone there are thirty bread references. One of the most memorable is Melchizedek's blessing of Abram for his defeat of the warring kings bent on destroying Israel. (Gen. 14: 18, 19.)

I’ll quote George Herbert’s poetic account from his poem, “Peace.”

There was a prince of old/ at Salem dwelt ... But after death Out of his grave
sprang twelve stalks of wheat/ Which many wondering at did plant and set./ It prospered
strangely, and did soon disperse through all the earth/ Take of this grain/ Which in my
garden grows/ And grows for you./ Make bread of it: And that repose/ and peace which
everywhere you do pursue/ Is only there.”

Herbert's poem reveals an allegory: The twelve stalks of wheat represent the twelve disciples, who after Jesus' death miraculously dispersed the good news of the coming of the Messiah "throughout the earth." They also remind us of the twelve tribes of Israel, all still very much in evidence even in today's news.

But bread is a major symbol of everything Jesus came to deliver, it is a symbol of life itself and is found mentioned throughout countless idioms in every day English. The hippies called money bread, and bread also depicts the situations mankind puts himself through: we hear of eating the bread of idleness, the bread of sorrows, the bread of affliction, the "children's bread," or Adam, working to get bread "by the sweat of his brow." And Satan tempting Jesus after he had fasted 40 days, dared him to "turn these stones into bread."

When Melchizedek blessed Abram, he gave him bread and wine, the two central elements that make up the communion table whereby we commemorate and meditate on the death of our lord.

Here is Paul's account of the words of Jesus himself as he served up the first communion: "On the night he was to be betrayed, the lord took bread, and after he had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'This is my body, broken for you; take and eat in remembrance of me.'

Then in like manner He took the cup and said, 'This cup is the new testament in my blood, shed for the forgiveness and remission of sin. As often as you drink this cup, you do show the lord's death till he comes.'" (I Cor. 11: 23-25.)

Jesus, in another setting clarified the essential meaning of Biblical bread: “I am the bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness and are dead. ... I am the living bread which came down from heaven: If any man eats this bread he shall live forever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” (John 6: 48-51.)

So it is perfectly fitting that God chose Bethlehem, “the city of bread,” as the birth place of his “only begotten son.” That also fulfilled Micah’s prophecy seven centuries earlier.

The second chapter of Acts highlights the effect of that first communion on the disciples, who sold all their possessions and continued daily, “going from house to house to break bread with gladness and singleness of heart.” And that first communion in the upper room saw 3000 people saved. That’s likely what George Herbert meant in the poem “Peace,” cited above, when he writes, “It prospered greatly/ And did soon disperse throughout the earth.”

Anyone reading these amazing accounts, who still harbors unbelief, had better search more deeply. To me they are too miraculous not to be God’s plan for mankind perfectly carried out. Truly, Bethlehem, “the hopes and fears of all the years were met in thee” that first Christmas night, when unto us was born in one of your “dark streets” a savior who is Christ the Lord.

Gene Pinkney 12-12-23 for the Daily News