

Lesson 5

Methods of Research

Place Studies

A place study is one of the most foundational methods of Bible research.

I. Definition

A place study is research into a place's geographical and historical significance, including its possible prophetic and symbolic significance. The various elements to be researched include but are not limited to:

- Land forms - mountains; valleys; plains; etc.
- Bodies of water – seas; lakes; rivers, etc.
- Types of vegetation – forest; grasslands; desert; etc.
- Population groups – nations; provinces; cities; etc.

II. Importance

The primary focus of scripture is the fulfilment of God's heavenly purpose on earth and as such, depicts God's involvement in human history. This history revolves around people and places, and people and places are inextricably woven into the tapestry of the scriptures. People and places are often the focus of biblical prophecy and can often have significance in poetry and doctrine.

III. Method

The method outlined below is a guideline that can be adapted depending on the goal of the study and the place being studied.

- A. List the name of the place and its meaning. Be careful to identify all the names for the same place. Do not confuse two places with the same name.
- B. Locate the place on a map. Note all the relevant details, e.g. is it a city, mountain, nation, where is it, and so on.
- C. Using a concordance, research how many times it is referred to in scripture.
- D. Using your various research tools, compile information in the following areas of potential significance:
 - a. Geographical –
 - b. Historical –
 - c. Symbolic –

- d. Prophetic –
- e. Spiritual –

Use the format provided in the homework example.

IV. Homework Example

Do a place study on Bethlehem in the Old Testament using Genesis 35:19 as a foundation text. Complete the steps as listed below.

A. Scripture information

Complete a table like the one below with the relevant information:

Scripture	Brief verse Quote and Important Details	Insights

B. List the names for Bethlehem and their meanings.

C. Draw a simple mini-map and fill it in on the map.

D. How many times is it referred to in scripture?

E. Geographical significance

1. Size?
2. Near or in what other significant place (country, mountain range, etc.)?
3. Natural characteristics of the region:
 - a. Climate
 - i. Temperature range
 - ii. Annual rainfall
 - iii. Other information (droughts wind storms, etc.)

- i. Altitude
- ii. Vegetation
- iii. Terrain (hilly, rocky, etc.)
- iv. Resources (crops, grazing, etc.)

F. Historical significance

Trace the role this place played in history including people, events, etc. Also include significant scriptural statements about this place. Endeavour to make important notes in this section which include the following if possible:

- 1. Political (time period)
- 2. Cultural
 - a. Language
 - b. Religion
 - c. Morality
 - d. Level of civilisation
 - e. Type of people

G. Symbolic significance

What was this place symbolic or representative of?

What did it represent before God? Before the people?

H. Prophetic significance

List any prophetic statements about the place, fulfilment, and whether they have been, or have yet to be fulfilled.

I. Spiritual significance

What spiritual and practical lessons can be learned from a study of this place and applied to our times, to believers and to churches today?

IV. Homework Example

Do a place study on Bethlehem in the Old Testament using Genesis 35:19 as a foundation text.

“And Rachel^{H7354} died,^{H4191} and was buried^{H6912} in the way^{H1870} to Ephrath,^{H672} which^{H1931} is Bethlehem.^{H1035}”

(Gen 35:19 KJV)

“So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).”

(Gen 35:19NLT)

Complete the steps as listed.

Much of the information has been filled in for you. Using the various aids at your disposal, complete the homework. Fill in the missing information. Note down anything else that is of interest that you discover in your research.

J. Scripture information

Complete a table like the one below with the relevant information:

Scripture	Brief verse Quote and Important Details	Insights
Gen 35:19	Rachel died and was buried on the way to Bethlehem	
Gen 48:7	"Long ago, as I was returning from Paddan-aram, Rachel died in the land of Canaan. We were still on the way, some distance from Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). So with great sorrow I buried her there beside the road to Ephrath."	
Jdg 12:8	After Jephthah died, Ibzan from Bethlehem judged Israel.	
Jdg 12:10	When he died, he was buried at Bethlehem.	
Rth 1:19	So the two of them continued on their journey. When they came to Bethlehem, the entire town was excited by their arrival. "Is it really Naomi?" the women asked.	
Rth 1:22	So Naomi returned from Moab, accompanied by her daughter-in-law Ruth, the young Moabite woman. They arrived in Bethlehem in late spring, at the beginning of the barley harvest.	
Rth 2:4	While she was there, Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters. "The LORD be with you!" he said. "The LORD bless you!" the harvesters replied.	
Rth 4:11	Then the elders and all the people standing in the gate replied, "We are witnesses! May the LORD make this woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, from whom all the nation of Israel descended! May you prosper in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem.	
1Sa 16:4	So Samuel did as the LORD instructed. When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town came trembling to meet him. "What's wrong?" they asked. "Do you come in peace?"	
1Sa 17:15	but David went back and forth so he could help his father with the sheep in Bethlehem.	
1Sa 20:6	If your father asks where I am, tell him I asked permission to go home to Bethlehem for an annual family sacrifice.	

1Sa 20:28	Jonathan replied, "David earnestly asked me if he could go to Bethlehem.	
2Sa 2:32	Joab and his men took Asahel's body to Bethlehem and buried him there in his father's tomb. Then they traveled all night and reached Hebron at daybreak.	
2Sa 23:14-16	David was staying in the stronghold at the time, and a Philistine detachment had occupied the town of Bethlehem. David remarked longingly to his men, "Oh, how I would love some of that good water from the well by the gate in Bethlehem." So the Three broke through the Philistine lines, drew some water from the well by the gate in Bethlehem, and brought it back to David. But he refused to drink it. Instead, he poured it out as an offering to the LORD.	
2Sa 23:24	Other members of the Thirty included: Asahel, Joab's brother; Elhanan son of Dodo from Bethlehem	
1Ch 2:51	Salma (the founder of Bethlehem), and Hareph (the founder of Beth-gader).	
1Ch 11:16-18	David was staying in the stronghold at the time, and a Philistine detachment had occupied the town of Bethlehem. David remarked longingly to his men, "Oh, how I would love some of that good water from the well by the gate in Bethlehem." So the Three broke through the Philistine lines, drew some water from the well by the gate in Bethlehem, and brought it back to David. But David refused to drink it. Instead, he poured it out as an offering to the LORD.	
1Ch 11:26	David's mighty warriors also included: Asahel, Joab's brother; Elhanan son of Dodo from Bethlehem	
2Ch 11:6	He built up Bethlehem, Etam, Tekoa,	
Ezr 2:21	The people of Bethlehem, 123.	
Neh 7:26	The people of Bethlehem and Netophah, 188.	
Jer 41:17	They took them all to the village of Geruth-kimham near Bethlehem, where they prepared to leave for Egypt.	
Mic 5:2	But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, One whose origins are from the distant past.	

List the names for Bethlehem and their meanings.

- Ephrath – Fruitfulness or fertile
- Bethlehem – House of bread
- Bethlehem Ephratah (Micah 5:2) -
- Bethlehem Judah (1 Sam 17:12)
- City of Judah (Luke 2:4) -

K. Draw a simple mini-map and fill the location of Bethlehem in on the map.

Map illustrating the location of Bethlehem

L. How many times is it referred to in scripture?**M. Geographical significance****4. Size?**

Micah describes Bethlehem as a small village (Mic. 5:2).

At the time of the birth of Jesus Bethlehem had between 300 and 1000 inhabitants.

5. Near or in what other significant place (country, mountain range, etc.)?

Bethlehem: A town of Palestine, six miles South of Jerusalem, located in the hill country of Judah. The city is not to be confused with another Bethlehem mentioned in the Bible which lay in the territory allocated to Zebulun (Joshua 19:15-16).

6. Natural characteristics of the region:
 - b. Climate
 - iv. Temperature range: 9°C-23°C.
 - v. Annual rainfall: 500-700mm rain per year.
 - vi. Other information (droughts, wind storms, etc.)
 - v. Altitude - 755m above sea level, about 30m higher than Jerusalem.
 - vi. Vegetation – Dry forest
 - vii. Terrain (hilly, rocky, etc.) – In the hill country of Judah
 - viii. Resources (crops, grazing, etc.) – Grazing land

N. Historical significance

Trace the role this place played in history including people, events, etc. Also include significant scriptural statements about this place. Endeavour to make important notes in this section which include the following if possible:

3. Political (time period)
 4. Cultural
 - f. Language
 - g. Religion
 - h. Morality
 - i. Level of civilisation
 - j. Type of people
- First called Ephrath or Ephratah, Gen. 35:16–19
 - Called Bethlehem-judah after the conquest, Judg. 17:7
 - Home of Ruth, Ruth 1:19.
 - Birthplace of David, 1 Sam. 17:12.
 - Birthplace of Christ, Matt. 2:1-2; Luke 2:15–18.

Evidence that the city is very ancient comes from cuneiform clay tablets found at El-Armana in Egypt in 1887 and dated to the 14th Century BC. These tablets are diplomatic letters written by Canaanite kings to the Egyptian Pharaoh. Bethlehem is mentioned amongst this correspondence as belonging to the district of 'Urusalim' (Jerusalem). So we have support from outside the Bible that Bethlehem was a thriving city some 3,500 years ago.

When travelling from Jerusalem to Bethlehem the route passes the venerated shrine of Rachel's Tomb, which is near the village of Beth Jala and then moving on, the road circles the hill on which Bethlehem stands, taking you into the centre of the town. There is very little left of the city from the earliest times, apart from the fields where farmers still graze their flocks as David and later the shepherds did in the time of Christ.

Ruth the Moabitess also had connections with the city of Bethlehem. As a result of the famine in Israel, a family from Bethlehem, Elimelech and his wife Naomi, with their two sons Mahlon and Chilion, had emigrated eastwards across the river Jordan to the land of Moab. The family it seems, integrated well into Moabite society with the two sons marrying Moabite women. But tragedy struck; first the father, Elimelech died and then after about ten years the two sons also died, leaving Naomi and her Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth without support. When Naomi learnt that the famine had ended in her homeland she decided to return to Bethlehem to her family and relatives, where as a widow, under the principles of God's law, she would be cared for. Despite Naomi's advice to Orpah and Ruth to stay in Moab and possibly marry again, Ruth pleaded to be allowed to accompany Naomi back to Bethlehem (Ruth 1:16-18). In this family relationship Ruth had already decided to put her trust in the God of Israel and she chose to stay close to Naomi. A study of this Book of Ruth tells us that when Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem they were befriended by Boaz, a relative of Naomi, a wealthy man who practiced the principles of God's laws. One important outcome of this man's friendship and kindness was that he married Ruth and the happy result of this union was the birth of a son called Obed, who became the grandfather of King David (Matthew 1.5).

From this family line in Bethlehem, the boy David grew up in this area, looking after his father's sheep and we see the development of this youth into 'the man after God's own heart'. It was during the long days and nights in these hills and fields around Bethlehem that this young lad's character developed and where the thoughts and the feelings expressed in those Psalms of David grew and matured in his mind. It was to Bethlehem that Samuel came later, at God's command, to select this little known son of Jesse and then to anoint him as Israel's future king.

When David eventually became king, the Philistines were in control of Bethlehem and he expressed a longing to be able to drink from the well at the gate of the city. On hearing this, three of his mighty warriors risked their lives to bring water from the city for their new king (1 Chronicles 11.16-19). It was not David's intention that these faithful servants should put their lives in jeopardy in this way, but it showed the lengths to which these men were prepared to go in service for David. It was a foretaste of the allegiance that they had for him as they went forward into the battles that followed to establish the kingdom of Israel.

David did not attempt to make Bethlehem his capital city; it had been revealed to him that that God had chosen Jerusalem as the favoured city; 'For the LORD has chosen Zion; He has desired it for his habitation (Psalm 132.13 NKJV).

But great things were spoken about Bethlehem that pointed forward to the birth of Jesus Christ. Some 350 years later the prophet Micah had this to say: 'But you, Bethlehem

Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to me the one to be ruler in Israel' (Micah 5.2 NKJV). The message from this inspired prophet was that God had chosen Bethlehem to be the place where the Saviour of the world, Jesus Christ, would be born.

The Bible student can see the hand of God at work in the history of this favoured city. Even though Mary the Jewish girl chosen to bring the Messiah into the world, had moved away from Bethlehem to Nazareth, the finger of God can be seen operating to fulfil Micah's prophetic words. It was a Roman Emperor who was moved to make it happen; 'And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered' (Luke 2.1 NKJV). This need for a census meant that both Mary and Joseph had to return to Bethlehem, the city of their birth to register. It was there, because there was no room in the inn that Jesus was born in a stable, which was probably a cave beside the inn. The birth of the Son of God in Bethlehem was noted by wise men (magi) from the east who came to Jerusalem asking 'Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him ' (Matthew 2.2 NKJV).

Herod the Great was the ruler of Judaea appointed by Rome at this time and he saw in this event of the birth of Jesus, a rival to his throne. When his enquiries placed the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, he sent his soldiers to 'put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under' (Matthew 2.16 NKJV). The murderous intent of King Herod towards Jesus was thwarted by the fact that Joseph was warned to leave Bethlehem and travel to Egypt, where the family stayed until Herod died. This slaughter in Bethlehem has gone down in history as the 'Massacre of the Innocents', but it was also the fulfilment of a prophecy through Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they were no more' (Matthew 2.18 NKJV).

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem can be visited today and is supposed to cover the place where Christ was born. A silver star fixed to the floor marks the spot, but some doubt its authenticity. It is known that the Emperor Constantine built a church there in the fourth century AD. It is also claimed that Constantine knew of the place because earlier the Emperor Hadrian (AD 76-138) had set about destroying the buildings venerated by Christians and that over the stable at Bethlehem he replaced a church there with a temple to Adonis. Constantine pulled down this pagan building and replaced it with a church. How much of the building remains after the centuries of battles that have been fought over the land of Israel, we do not know.

We do know that the church on the site today is shared by several sects of 'Christians' and that demonstrates vividly to us the divided state of Christianity. Those who have managed

to visit the place can be upset by the atmosphere inside the church, which one writer has described as 'more like an Oriental bazaar than a holy site.'

But it was outside the city in those peaceful fields surrounding Bethlehem, that the angels appeared to those shepherds 'praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will towards men' [Luke 2.13,14 NKJV]. It is there that we can contemplate the great events that have taken place in this favoured Biblical city.

History shows us that 'peace' and 'good will' have not been at the forefront of the thinking and behaviour of mankind since the birth of Jesus. But we can be comforted by the fact that Jesus is coming again to make those angelic words a reality on this earth. The message given to Mary the humble girl from Bethlehem was very clear:

'...you will...bring forth a Son, and shall call his name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end' (Luke 1.31-33 NKJV).

O. Symbolic significance

What was this place symbolic or representative of?

What did it represent before God? Before the people?

P. Prophetic significance

List any prophetic statements about the place, fulfilment, and whether they have been, or have yet to be fulfilled.

Q. Spiritual significance

What spiritual and practical lessons can be learned from a study of this place and applied to our times, to believers and to churches today?

Homework Assignment

Do a place study on Ephesus in the New Testament using Acts 18:19 as a foundation text. Use the format outlined above to do this.

Appendix 1

Bethlehem and Her Children

(<http://www.gospelweb.net/Books/bethlehemandherchildren1.htm>)

Author Unknown

This city is pleasantly situated in the land of Judea, and lies, like many other places mentioned in Scripture, upon the top of a hill. It is only six miles south of Jerusalem, and as one travels towards it from that city, it suddenly bursts upon his view, stretching itself on from east to west with enchanting loveliness. The traveller passes through a deep valley, and then winding his way up the road, approaches the gates of the city, near which of old was the famous well of water of which David drank in his youth, and for which he afterwards longed in time of war. 2 Sam. 23:15.

Bethlehem has been visited by many modern travellers, and they all unite in describing the first view of it as very imposing. From its higher points the eye takes in at one view "the mountains that are round about Jerusalem," the deep and luxuriant valleys nearer at hand, and the far distant mountains that lie in the land of Moab. Everything around it is beautiful.

Considering that Bethlehem has stood for nearly four thousand years, and been the home or tarrying place of many of whom we read in Scripture, we cannot fail to be interested in tracing the history of some distinguished characters and events most intimately associated with it.

The first mention we find made of Bethlehem is in Genesis 35:19, and that record presents to our view a scene of sadness and mourning. It was the death and burial of Rachel, the wife of Jacob the patriarch.

Twenty-seven years previous to this time, Jacob had passed through Bethlehem on a journey. How many changes had since occurred? He had previously resided with his father Isaac at Beersheba, in the southern part of Canaan; but his father and mother, that he might avoid the wrath of his exasperated brother Esau, and be prevented from marrying a heathen wife, sent him away from home on a journey of over six hundred miles, to their pious kindred in Haran.

With only his staff and a small bundle of provision for the way, Jacob walks on in a northerly direction, through an inhospitable region, alone and unprotected. Hebron lies on the route, and we may naturally suppose that his footsteps would turn towards the cave of Machpelah, which lay in its suburbs. There slept in unbroken rest Abraham and Sarah, Jacob's grandparents, of whom he had heard so much; and he undoubtedly stood before their graves in deep communings; for unto them and their children were "the promises."

With a softened and saddened heart he leaves this hallowed spot, and walks on over the hill-tops and through the deep passes of the mountains, gathering perhaps ever and anon the juicy grapes that hung in large clusters from the bending vine, or partaking of the honey that dropped from the rocks by his pathway.

Having journeyed about fourteen miles from the graves of Machpelah, suddenly, on the distant hill-top, Bethlehem bursts upon his sight. But as he was ignorant of the sad events that were to transpire there affecting himself, and of that greater event which was to affect the whole world, he passes through it, and down the valley, and up the hillside, with his feelings undisturbed; and after six more miles the city of Jebus, afterwards Jerusalem, receives the weary traveller.

Melchizedek, the king of Salem, the priest of the most high God, lived here but a short time before, and blessed Jacob's grandfather Abraham: and if this distinguished type of Christ was now dead, yet his history and lineage were without doubt familiar to Jacob, though so little is recorded of them.

The sun was sinking fast towards the Mediterranean sea on the west, when the traveller, perhaps on the second day of his journey, had gone about twelve miles north of Jebus, and cast about for a resting-place through the night. Finding no hospitable roof to offer him a shelter, he took the stones of the place for his pillow, while the ground was his bed, and laid him down to rest. This was the time which he afterwards calls "the day of my distress." But "man's extremity is God's opportunity;" and we find that the angels of the Lord encamped round about him, and ascended and descended upon the ladder which reached from his resting-place to heaven.

Here God talked with him, and renewed the promises which he had before made to Abraham and Isaac, that the land of Canaan should be theirs and their children's for ever. Early the next morning Jacob awoke, and said, "Surely God is in this place, and I knew it not." And he arose, and took the stone, his pillow, and set it up, and poured oil upon it, and called the place Bethel, or "the house of God." And there he vowed to the Lord, and worshipped the God of his fathers.

He then continued his journey, and probably crossed the Jordan soon after; and many days of weary and toilsome travel ensued before he arrived in the vicinity of Haran. This place is situated in the country of Mesopotamia, which lies between the rivers Euphrates and Tigris, and is supposed by many to have contained the garden of Eden, and the first home of some of Noah's descendants after the flood. It was towards the close of the day when Jacob drew near to his journey's end; and seeing men standing by a well watering their sheep, he approached to make some inquiries in regard to the friends he was seeking. They told him

they were from Haran, and were acquainted with the family of Laban, who was the brother of Rebecca, Jacob's mother; and as they were speaking, Rachel, Laban's beautiful daughter, was seen approaching with her father's sheep, coming to the well for water. Jacob seems to have refrained himself while he rolled away the stone from the well and watered Rachel's sheep; but then his pent-up feelings could no longer be controlled: he kissed her, and lifted up his voice and wept, exclaiming, "I am Rebecca's son."

In joyful surprise Rachel left Jacob to care for her sheep, while she hurried back to tell her father of his arrival; and from that time, probably, Jacob dated the love which he ever after felt for Rachel. Laban received him gladly into his family and service, and a month passed away before anything was said of wages. Jacob was but too happy of being under the same roof with Rachel to think of wages; and when Laban finally proposed to remunerate him for his labour, he replied in the fullness of his heart, "I will serve seven years for Rachel." Laban accepted the offer; and those seven years, which might have appeared long to Jacob, "seemed to him but a few days, for the love he had to her." Jacob patiently toiled on fourteen long years for Laban, and received in return his two daughters Leah and Rachel. Six years more he laboured for wages; in which time the Lord greatly blessed him, and increased his substance. Thus twenty years passed by with no intimation from the Lord that he ought sooner to return to the land so long before promised to him and his descendants. But at the expiration of that period, when Jacob was one hundred years old, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, and said, "I am the God of Bethel, where thou anointedst the pillar, and where thou vowedst a vow unto me; now arise, and return unto the land of thy kindred, and I will be with thee."

Fearing that Laban would do him some injury if he were apprised of his design of leaving him and his service, Jacob planned a secret removal, which was carried into effect while Laban went to shear his sheep. Leah and Rachel, dissatisfied with their father's treatment of Jacob, were willing to go; and the large distance over which the numerous flocks of Jacob and of Laban were necessarily separated from each other, favoured a departure unobserved. Three days passed by, after Jacob left; before Laban heard that he had gone.