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1

“O Little Town of Bethlehem”

Few small towns are as well known around the world as one that sits on a hillside about five miles south of Jerusalem. If it were not for the fact that Bethlehem is the birthplace of Jesus, it would today be a place of little prominence. Yet even before Jesus' time, Bethlehem held an important place in the history of Israel, because it was the home of King David's family. The book of Ruth, which tells the story of how a Gentile girl became David's great-grandmother, is set mainly in Bethlehem.

Its associations with David are numerous. It was his home,¹ and the place where Samuel anointed him to be king.² A Philistine garrison was stationed there.³ It was the home of Elkhanan⁴ and the burial place of Asahel.⁵ King Rehoboam fortified Bethlehem in the late tenth century;⁶ Jeremiah, Ezra, and Nehemiah all mention it in their

1. 1 Samuel 17:12, 15; 20:6, 28.

2. 1 Samuel 16:1-13.

3. 2 Samuel 23:14-16.

4. 2 Samuel 23:24.

5. 2 Samuel 2:32.

6. 2 Chronicles 11:6.

records.⁷ But the most unusual mention of it is found in the book of the prophet Micah, who hails it as the birthplace of the Messiah:

But thou, Beth-lehem Ephrathah,* which art little to be among the thousands of Judah, out of thee shall one come forth unto Me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth are from of old, from ancient days [Micah 5:1].

Like all the prophets, Micah knew that the Messiah would be a descendant of David. It is not surprising that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, David's city. But what *is* surprising is that Micah declares that the Messiah existed *before* his birth in Bethlehem. The Targum* Jonathan, an Aramaic paraphrase of the Scriptures dating from approximately the second century C.E., renders the passage, "he whose name was mentioned from before, from the days of creation." Raphael Patai, formerly professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, remarks, "The concept of the preexistence of the Messiah accords with the general Talmudic view which holds that 'The Holy One, blessed be He, prepares the remedy before the wound.'"⁸

So a primary qualification for the Messiah was that He had to be born in Bethlehem. Jesus seems to fit the bill nicely. The writers of the New Testament record the birth of Jesus as taking place in Bethlehem in a rather unusual manner.

Matthew explains that "wise men" (really a class of religious officials from Babylonia or another Eastern country) came to Jerusalem from the East with the curious announcement that they had seen a star in the heavens that

7. Jeremiah 41:17; Ezra 2:21; Nehemiah 7:26.

8. Raphael Patai, *The Messiah Texts* (New York: Avon, 1979), pp. 16-17.

signified the birth of the king of the Jews. Herod was rather troubled and inquired of the chief priests and scribes—those who knew the Scriptures—where the Messiah was to be born. Promptly and unhesitatingly they replied, “In Bethlehem of Judea,” and cited Micah’s prophecy to back up their assertion. Panic-stricken, in a frenzy of carnage, Herod undertook the slaughter of every male child in Bethlehem under the age of two, in an attempt to kill the rightful heir to the throne. But Jesus’ family, learning of the plot, hurried to Egypt and took sanctuary until the danger was past (see Matthew 2:1-18). That may sound like a good plot for a melodrama, but it is history.

There is more. Have you ever noticed that Jesus is called “Jesus of Nazareth” and not “Jesus of Bethlehem”? Nazareth is a northern city in the Galilean area of Israel. Bethlehem, on the other hand, is down in the south. The parents of Jesus lived in Nazareth, but the Romans, who were the de-facto rulers over Israel, decided that the time had come to take a census and that everyone had to return to his place of family origins to be counted. Since Joseph was of the house and lineage of David, he and his pregnant wife Mary had to travel from their residence in Nazareth down to Bethlehem, the home of David. Interestingly, a petition for tax relief from the Jews to Caesar Augustus* delayed the census for a period of time, so that Mary came full term while they were still in Bethlehem.

If anyone might have suspected that the family of Jesus had somehow arranged to have Jesus born in Bethlehem and so fulfill the prophecy about the Messiah’s birthplace, this account should make it clear that far from being prearranged, the circumstances were totally out of their hands. However, there is still another part of Micah’s prophecy

that the New Testament touches on elsewhere as well: the statement that the Messiah was to be preexistent. Matthew's gospel reports this conversation with the Pharisees:

Jesus asked them a question, saying, "What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?" They said to Him, "The son of David." He said to them, "Then how does David, in the Spirit call him 'Lord,' saying, 'THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD, "SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I PUT THINE ENEMIES BENEATH THY FEET" '? If David then calls Him 'Lord,' how is He his son?" [Matthew 22:41-45, quoting Psalm 110].

In other words, the Messiah is a descendant of David, and yet somehow David's Lord, or ruler! Jesus made a declaration similar to this when he told the Pharisees that "before Abraham was born, I am" (John 8:58). Considering that Abraham lived almost two thousand years before Jesus, that's claiming quite a bit! Normally, anyone who talked like that would be considered a lunatic and simply written off as mad. But when they heard Jesus say those things, nobody called him crazy, laughed, or ignored him as we today might treat a babbling derelict in Times Square. Instead, Matthew reports that when asked about David's son, the Pharisees gave no answer to his question—only taunts. Could it be that, knowing what Micah 5:1 and Psalm 110 had to say, they had no answer?