

## **Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem**

### **Luke 2:1-7**

Intro: A challenge for you tonight. We have just elected a president in the year 2000. Let's move forward a hundred years. Tell me where the president elected will be born in the year 2100. Any predictions? Everyone would immediately recognize the astronomical odds of doing so, for the president of the United States may be from any city in the United States and perhaps even from a city not yet named or that might be renamed.

Let's think about a comparable prediction found in the word of God. In Luke 2 we have the simple record of Jesus' birth in 4-6 BC. And yet God named the place of birth through a prophet hundred's of years in advance. Let's consider tonight that one fact as we look again at evidence for faith. I call this lesson, "Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem".

The remarkable prophecy of Micah 5:2

*"But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity." (Micah 5:2)*

Micah lived and prophesied during the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. A contemporary of Isaiah he predicted the fall of Judah to the Babylonians and the return from captivity. He looked far into the future and saw the coming Jewish Messiah who would bring salvation to Israel.

He said the place of his birth would be Bethlehem. It is mentioned on two occasions in the OT.

It was here that Jacob journeyed with family and where Rebecca died giving birth to Benjamin (Gen. 35).

This little town, meaning "bread house", was the home of Jesse the father of David who was anointed king of Israel (1 Sam. 16:1ff).

The town itself would have been small and not recognized among the clans of Judah. It was not listed among the cities of Judah in the book of Joshua. In the NT it is referred to by the Greek word "kome" meaning a "village."

In this little village Micah announced the Messiah would be born.

And Luke records it without even noting the fulfillment.

Have you considered from the human standpoint how truly astounding the odds are that Joseph and Mary would fulfill this single prophecy?

### **The facts concerning Joseph and Mary, the mother of Jesus.**

We know that both of them were from the Galilean city of Nazareth.

*Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee, called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. (Luke 1:26-27)*

*And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city of Nazareth. (Luke (2:39)*

Bethlehem was located in Judah; Nazareth in Galilee. Nazareth and Bethlehem were approx. 70 miles apart, a significant distance in the ancient world.

Ordinarily women have their children in the town where they live. It would be interesting to know how many women who've had children planned to give birth to them away from home. (cf. Cheryl) Mary would have preferred to be at home as her pregnancy came full term.

To fulfill the prophecy then, Joseph and Mary must be motivated to temporarily relocate to Bethlehem over 70 miles away. There is no evidence that they were aware of or purposely fulfilled the prophecy of Micah.

### **The events that shaped their lives.**

An event must occur that is of sufficient importance to move them from Nazareth to Bethlehem. That event was the census ordered by Augustus Caesar.

*Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. (Luke 2:1-2)*

Most scholars consider it likely that this order was issued by Augustus around 9-8 BC. Archaeological evidence from the period suggests that registration for tax purposes and censuses were taken every 14 years in the empire. In order to be a factor in moving Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem to fulfill Micah's prophecy, Mary's child must be born relatively close to the beginning of one of these 14 year cycles.

Second, this census must require the travel of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem rather than another town. It is interesting that censuses usually do not move people. Instead the counters go where the people are and record them in their own residence. But this census required that people return to their ancestral family's origin.

*And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city. (Luke 2:3)*

An Egyptian papyrus from the Roman period has been found with instructions to a ruler concerning the requirements of the census: "Because of the approaching census it is necessary that all those residing for any cause away from their homes should at once prepare to return to their own governments in order that they may complete the family registration of the enrollment and that the tilled lands may retain those belonging to them".

Notice that this census statement did indeed require people to return to their the place of their ancestral family for registration. Yet this does not guarantee the fulfillment of Micah's prophecy. It would provide occasion for the movement of some people, but what about Joseph?

Third, in order for the prophecy to be fulfilled the father Joseph had to be of the family of David since only the male descendants of David would return to Bethlehem.

*And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David. (Luke 2:4)*

Had Joseph been from any other family in Israel the prophecy would have failed. Yet even this does not guarantee the fulfillment of the prophecy.

Fourth, in order for the prophecy to be fulfilled, Joseph and Mary must go to Bethlehem at the time that Mary's pregnancy was coming to full term and stay long enough to give birth to the child. Since this business required no permanent stay, Joseph and Mary did not go with the intention of staying.

That is evident by the fact that they sought lodging in an inn.

*And it came about that while they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her first-born son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:6-7)*

This tells you that they did not move to Bethlehem to have this child nor did they plan to stay there.

Notice then the remarkable timing. It is not just a matter of getting Joseph and Mary to the right city but also at the right time.

### ***Some observations***

First, all of these conditions had to be met in order for this single prophecy of the Messiah to be fulfilled. The odds that Joseph and Mary should fit every one of them would be astronomical and just as amazing as one being able to predict the birthplace of the president in the year 2100. God could see all these things before they ever happened. Joseph and Mary had to be betrothed to one another and Mary had to conceive at just the right time for all of it to work out in keeping with God's plan.

Second, objectors to the idea of fulfilled prophecy often insist that Jesus deliberately fulfilled the prophecies in order to be seen as the Messiah. Yet, this was a prophecy over which Jesus had no control. In spite of this, He was born in the right city to lay claim to being the Jewish Messiah.

Third, it would hard to resist seeing an intriguing typology in this event. God had made a special promise to David to raise up someone to sit upon his throne who would build God's house. The Jews understood that the Messiah was to come from David's lineage.

*Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, And a branch from his roots will bear fruit. (Isaiah 11:1)*

All throughout the OT period God's prophets spoke of the Messiah under the imagery of David. Consider this passage from Ezekiel:

*"Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd. "And I, the Lord, will be their God, and My servant David will be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken. (Ezekiel 34:23-24)*

Is it mere coincidence that the one who fulfills these prophecies should be born in the same town as David? Was God not trying to show us through the place of Jesus' birth that He was the promised seed of David?

Fourth, look at how God works. What is there about the birth of Jesus that might have been predicted? If men, were fabricating the story would they have thought to have a child conceived in one town and born in another? Would they have chosen some obscure village as the place of birth and the despised city of Nazareth as the place of Jesus' rearing? Would they have had the King and Savior of the world born in a stable? Would they have imagined his first bed to be a feed trough? That his first clothes would have been the first aid bandages that people commonly carried in case of an accident? There is nothing about this story that bears the marks of human invention. The unique features of this story call attention to the God who according to Paul "chooses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and the weak things of the world to shame the strong, and the base things of the world and the despised. . . .that no man should boast before God". Oh, little town of Bethlehem, so country, so small, so obscure, so unimportant. Could the greatest figure in the history of the world come out of you?

***Conclusion: This prophecy alone impressively argues that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God. Have you made that good confession among men?***