

JESUS: BORN IN HUMILITY

Series: The Messianic Prophecies Of Jesus

by Ron Ritchie

During my teen years I lived and worked on the farm section of a Pennsylvania orphanage. We usually worked in teams of four or five boys, and we did all the chores that were necessary on a dairy farm that provided milk, butter, cheese, meat, and grain for a few hundred children and staff. Farm work was fun in the spring, summer, and fall, but it was very difficult in the Pennsylvania winters. So our resident farmer would move teams of boys around the orphanage so that from time to time each team would end up on those cold winter days in our nice warm bakery. That experience left a marked impression on my life. I remember Saturdays in particular, when we baked long, dark brown loaves of bread for the week and Pennsylvania Dutch and raisin cakes. By noon the smell of the freshly baked bread and cakes would begin to spread throughout the orphanage, and kids and adults would just kind of drop by hoping for a handout. By two o'clock or so we had the week's bread all placed on large trays, and then we would put the topping on the Dutch and raisin cakes that would be served as a special treat on Sunday mornings. Finally we would make several trips through the cold winter winds for about fifty yards with our trays loaded with those fresh loaves of bread and cakes, to the warm main kitchen run by Miss Louise. There we would put all the loaves of bread and cakes on their special shelves.

After that chore was done, we would always look at Miss Louise, who had a mother's heart and a twinkle in her eye. We knew that she would take one of the large fresh loaves of brown bread; cut it into thick slices; and place them all in front of some freshly made butter, jelly, and honey. She would point to the tea kettle and say with a thick German accent, "Boys, let's have a snack!" The bread was so good that we would eat the whole loaf. I left that home after about eight years, but each time my wife and I would return for a visit I would go back to the main kitchen, and Miss Louise with that same twinkle in her eye would hand us a fresh loaf of brown bread to take home.

Ours was a humble bakery, but it was able to produce much good bread for the hungry people in that small community so that they could continue to live wholesome lives. And in a spiritual sense God also offered the hungry world good bread out of his humble bakery, Bethlehem, "the House of Bread," so very long ago yet with current application to everyone who will receive it. Jesus said one day during his earthly ministry, "I am the bread of life....This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is My flesh" (John 6:48-51). Jesus was saying that in him was, and is, everything necessary for physical, emotional, and spiritual life.

During this Christmas season we have been looking at some of the prophetic scriptures leading up to the birth of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Today we will look at an Old Testament passage written by the prophet Micah, who lived in Judah and was called upon to prophecy about Bethlehem, the very town where the Messiah would be born, seven hundred years before that event occurred.

The Messiah Would Be Born in Bethlehem

Micah 5:1-5

Now muster yourselves in troops, daughter of troops;
They have laid siege against us;
With a rod they will smite the judge of Israel on the cheek.
"But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathath,
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."

Therefore, He will give them up until the time
When she who is in labor has borne a child.
Then the remainder of His brethren
Will return to the sons of Israel.
And He will arise and shepherd His flock
In the strength of the LORD,
In the majesty of the name of the LORD His God.

And they will remain,
Because at that time He will be great
To the ends of the earth.
And this One will be our peace.

Micah's name meant "Who is like Yahweh?" He wrote this book in about 700 BC. He was called of God to prophecy to Israel and Judah over a period of some fifty years along with Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos. Micah had a heart of courage, conviction, and rare personal faith. He wrote about himself in these words (3:8):

"But as for me, I am filled with power,
with the Spirit of the LORD,
and with justice and might,
to declare to Jacob his transgression,
to Israel his sin."

His message can be summed up as follows (6:8):

"He has told you, O man, what is good;
And what does the LORD require of you
But to do justice, to love kindness,
And to walk humbly with your God?"

The Lord had given this prophet a heart and a message to lead the people of God back into a personal relationship with him, and to then, by God's power, bring about social righteousness toward the poverty-stricken masses. Blessings would come upon those who repented of their sins, wrath upon those who disobeyed. Using broad brush-strokes, Micah prophesied (1) the fall of Israel by the mighty hand of Assyria that occurred in 721 BC, (2) the invasion of Judah by Assyria in 701 BC, and (3) the captivity of Judah by the mighty hand of Babylon that occurred in 586 BC (See Micah 4:9-10).

The prophecy of 5:1 had immediate application to Micah's then present situation. Let's look at it briefly:

"Now muster yourselves in troops, daughter of troops;
They have laid siege against us;
With a rod they will smite the judge [king] of Israel on the cheek."

Micah seems personally involved in this prophecy; he refers to the present in the word "now" and includes himself among the population in the word "us." The context seems to be sometime after Assyria defeated Samaria and took the northern tribes into exile in 721 BC. The fulfillment of this prophecy was probably when Sennacherib, King of Assyria, invaded Judah, set up a siege against Jerusalem, and began to insult King Hezekiah in 701 BC. (See 2 Kings 18-19; he is reported to have said in his journals that he had Hezekiah trapped "like a bird in a cage." See also *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* by D. J. Wiseman.) Hezekiah was a godly king and trusted God to deliver him and Judah from Assyria. Based on that trust, God sent an angel of death among the Assyrian army (some 185,000 men), "...and when men arose early in the morning, behold, all of these were dead." Sennacherib went home in disgrace only to be killed by his sons when he

went into the temple of his god to pray (see 2 Kings 19:35-37; Isaiah 37:36-38).

Some Biblical scholars think that in this verse Micah was only prophesying the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, when Zedekiah, the last king to sit on the Davidic throne, was taken into Babylonian captivity; and that the next king to sit on the Davidic throne would be the Messiah. Either way we look at these verses, the king of Judah is being humiliated with a rod on the cheek. Micah's contemporary Isaiah spoke of the Assyrian army as a rod (see Isaiah 10:5).

Now in verses 2-5 the prophet looks across the future and sees, as if they were a series of "mountain peaks," important events that will place hope in the hearts of the faithful remnant of Israel.

"But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathath ["Fruitful County"],
Too little to be among the clans of Judah...."

Whereas verse 1 spoke of defeat in Jerusalem, verse 2 speaks of victory in Bethlehem. God had made a promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:12-13: "When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom." Micah now prophesies that sometime in the future this king out of the house of David would have his origin not in the city of Jerusalem but in the humble village of David, Bethlehem. ("Too little" in the Hebrew means lowly, least, weak, or despised; see Psalm 119:141.) Bethlehem was a village outside of Jerusalem so small that among the many clans within the tribe of Judah they were not even thought of as having any significance. As David was the least among his brothers in the eyes of his father, so Bethlehem was the least among the clans.

Micah's prophecy was placed in the minds of the people for some seven hundred years until a then unknown engaged couple from Nazareth arrived in Bethlehem. She was a virgin, yet with child; and he was a carpenter in love with God and with her who was seeking to be obedient to the Roman government, which had required him to register in the town of his lineage---the house of David, Bethlehem.

"From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel."
Micah's contemporary Isaiah said (9:6),

"For a child will be born to us [speaking of his humanity], a son will be given to us [speaking of his deity];
And the government will rest on His shoulders...."

Out of the line of David, out of Bethlehem, and out of the womb of Mary would come One who would do the will of God on this earth and would rule Israel. When the Messiah arrived on earth (the first time), some wise men greatly troubled King Herod when they began asking around Jerusalem, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" (Matthew 2:2). Herod gathered his chief priests and scribes to search out the Scriptures, and they came back and reported, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
Are by no means least among the leaders of Judah;
For out of you shall come forth a Ruler,
Who will shepherd My people Israel."
(Matthew 2:5-6.)

When the Messiah had completed his ministry on earth the first time, he said in one of his last prayers to his heavenly Father before the cross, "I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou hast given Me to do" (John 17:4). But in His second coming the best is yet to come!

"His goings forth are from long ago,
From the days of eternity."

As the Christ Child, the Messiah would be born of a virgin girl in the village of Bethlehem; as the Son of God,

he was from eternity. He is God. He is the Word of God, the voice of God to all who will listen. He was known as "the angel of the Lord" in the Old Testament. He told Moses at the burning bush, "I AM WHO I AM [the self-existing One]" (Exodus 3:14). Jesus told the Pharisees, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am" (John 8:58). And John wrote, "He was in the beginning with God" (John 1:2). But when Deity became human he was known as Jesus, the Lamb of God who would save his people from their sin.

However, in verse 3 Micah sees that before the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, the nation of Judah would have to go into the seventy-year Babylonian captivity because of their sin against God. And in fact God gave up his involvement with his people, the Jews, to not only the Babylonians, but the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans; and they have continued to be dominated by other peoples to the present. But they will come back into full focus in the days to come.

"Therefore, He will give them up until the time
When she who is in labor has borne a child.
This appears to be the prophecy of Mary's giving birth to the Messiah as well as of God's
giving birth to the church through the godly remnant at Pentecost.
Then the remainder of His brethren
Will return to the sons of Israel.

And He will arise and shepherd His flock
In the strength of the LORD,
In the majesty of the name of the LORD His God.
And they will remain,
Because at that time He will be great
To the ends of the earth.
And this one will be our Peace."

As a result of these births the believing remnant began and will continue to call out to Israel and the Gentiles alike to come back to the Great Shepherd and Prince of Peace (Micah 7:14; Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34; John 10:1-30; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Isaiah 9:6; Ephesians 2:14). This is presently going on for Christians (made up of reborn Jews and Gentiles) and will have its final fulfillment (according to Romans 9-11) when Jesus sets up his throne in Jerusalem and begins his reign over the whole earth as Lord of lords and King of kings. The prophet Zechariah, four hundred years before the arrival of the Messiah in Jerusalem, wrote (9:9):

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you;
He is just and endowed with salvation,
Humble and mounted on a donkey...."

The Jewish leaders rejected their King on Palm Sunday so long ago. Yet he will come again to Jerusalem after the great tribulation, and many in Israel will see him and bow their knee to him as their King and Chief Shepherd.

One of the things Anne Marie and I love to do when we go to France is find a place to live in a small village, then get up early in the morning, go down to the local bakery, and purchase some fresh baguettes. Then we find an outdoor cafe and order some café au lait, and while we eat our baguettes we watch the life of the village. The smell of fresh bread is everywhere. It's fun to watch the older men come into the village with their shopping bags empty, and half an hour later walk home with all their fresh meat, fruit, and a couple of baguettes---one under their arm and another in the process of being consumed, thus satisfying a basic physical need. When Jesus came to this earth he spoke of humble and everyday things so that all who heard him would be able to relate to him and his message of salvation. That is why he said, "I am the bread of life."

Now let's turn to Luke 2:1-7, and we will see that some seven hundred years after Micah's prophecy, the Messiah was born in an amazing event in Bethlehem.

The Messiah Was Born in Bethlehem

Luke 2:1-7

Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited world [the Roman Empire]...And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city. 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, in order to register, along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. 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.

Last week we saw how God sent the angel Gabriel to a godly senior citizen and priest, Zacharias, and told him that his godly barren wife Elizabeth would have a son to be named John, who would become the fulfillment of Malachi 3:2; 4:5-6 as the forerunner of the long-awaited Messiah (Luke 1:1-17). Then six months later God sent Gabriel to a godly young engaged virgin woman named Mary and told her she would conceive and bear a son, saying, "and you shall name Him Jesus." Thus began the mystery of the Incarnation, God in the flesh. In Luke 1:39-55 we saw that Mary, pregnant with the Son of God, visited her cousin Elizabeth, who was in her sixth month of pregnancy. Elizabeth blessed Mary, and then Mary broke out in a new song of praise to God Almighty.

Mary went back to Nazareth and told Joseph all that the Lord was doing with her. As a result of their spiritual encounter with Gabriel, Joseph was willing to marry Mary, so they settled down in Nazareth to await the birth of Immanuel. Within the ninth month the couple as well as all who lived in Nazareth were informed by the local Roman officer in the garrison that Caesar Augustus had sent out a decree that a census should be taken of his empire in order for proper taxation to take place. So Joseph and Mary, who was now great with child, began the journey of some ninety miles south to their home town. I love the way God used the Roman government to help fulfill a seven-hundred-year-old prophecy in which his Son was to be born in the humble village of Bethlehem!

As we have seen, Bethlehem means "the House of Bread," and so it was a fitting place for "the Bread of Life" to be born. It was a small village some 2,550 feet above sea level and five miles west of Jerusalem. There Boaz and Ruth, the great-grandparents of David had lived. And there in time David had been born and raised, and had tended his father Jesse's sheep before he was anointed by the priest Samuel to be the king of Israel (1 Samuel 16:1). Christ's birth in Bethlehem was an indication of his Davidic-messianic ministry.

When Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, they found that rooms were hard to come by, since so many other people from the house of David had arrived before them. To add a little more pressure to the situation, Mary was aware that she was about to give birth. So Joseph found a room that was built along a rock ledge with a large cave cut into the side of the hill, used for the travelers' animals. He made a warm place with some new straw. "And she gave birth to her first-born son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger...." The Son of God came into this world under the most humble of circumstances.

Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, wrote a free-flowing translation of Philippians 2:6-8 which reads, "When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death---and the worst kind of death at that: a crucifixion."

The apostle John would write, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14). He was the Son of God, the Savior of the world, the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Eternal Father, the Prince of Peace, the King of kings and Lord of lords, Immanuel, the only hope for man to ever be set free from Satan and the bondage of sin. And yet he was willing to be born in a rented cave in Bethlehem. Paul would write some sixty years after his humble birth, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet

for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

The Birth of the Savior Was Announced

Luke 2: 8-14

And in the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields, and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. And the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger." And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

Let me share this poem by the late Joe Bayly with you:

Praise God for Christmas. Praise Him for the incarnation for Word made Flesh.
I will not sing of shepherds watching flocks on frosty night or angel choristers.
I will not sing of stable bare in Bethlehem or lowing oxen wise men,
trailing distant star with gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Tonight I will sing praise to the Father who stood on heaven's threshold
and said farewell to His Son as He stepped across the stars
to Bethlehem and Jerusalem.
And I will sing praise to the infinite eternal Son
who became most finite a Baby who would one day be executed for my crimes.

Praise Him in the heavens,
Praise Him in the stable,
Praise Him in my heart.

God the Father made his plans and then announced through his prophets not only that a virgin would be found with child (Isaiah 7:14), the son promised in Isaiah 9:6, but that seven hundred years before his Son's birth he had arranged the very town where he would be born:

"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."

Bethlehem became the symbol of God's love toward humanity; the bakery, if we could be so bold, from which the aroma of life itself wafted out to the shepherds, the wise men, and all of humanity as they heard Jesus offer them the words of salvation: "I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever...."

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