

# O Little Town of Bethlehem

David H. Roper

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We will interrupt our series of studies in the life of Jacob for a brief look at some passages in the book of Micah appropriate to Christmas. In Micah 5, beginning with verse 2, we read these familiar words:

**"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."**

**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 [stand] 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 [sit]  
Because at that time He will be great  
To the ends of the earth.  
And this One will be our peace [or, simply, "will be peace"].**

The words "He will be great" foreshadow the angel Gabriel's words to Mary when he announced the birth of Jesus: "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give him the throne of His father David." This passage in Micah is what led the Magi, or "Wise Men," to Bethlehem from Jerusalem. The Magi, you know, were not Jews; they were Persians. And they were Zoroastrians. They came to Palestine from Persia because, four hundred years before Jesus was born, an old Babylonian prophet by the name of Balaam prophesied (Numbers 24:17):

**A star shall come forth from Jacob,  
And a scepter shall arise from Israel,  
And shall crush through the forehead of Moab....**

And he continued to foretell the conquest of all the enemies of God's people, The Magi waited until the planets were in correct alignment. It is interesting that Kepler quotes an ancient Chinese journal to the effect that about the time Jesus was born, somewhere between 8 and 2 B.C., there was indeed such an alignment of planets. This was what brought the Magi to Jerusalem.

The star did not lead them to Jesus initially; it led them to Jerusalem, and to Herod -- the wrong place, and the wrong king. You have to beware of the stars. You cannot trust them. They may lead you to the wrong king! When the Magi arrived in Jerusalem, Herod spoke to the scribes and the chief priests, and they referred him to this passage in Micah. It is interesting that the king of the Jews, Herod (who was not a Jew but an Idumaean who nevertheless ruled over the Jews), did not know where Messiah was to be born. So he talked to the scholars, the scribes and chief priests, who directed him to this passage. He in turn told the Magi about it. And it was on the strength of the Word of God that the Magi went to Bethlehem. Although the star went ahead of them, it was the Word that directed them to this little town. There they found Jesus and worshipped him.

I want to sketch something of Micah's background, for it is necessary to understand the circumstances out of which he wrote. Because they are contemporary; they are our circumstances, as well. Micah was an eighth century B.C. prophet, contemporaneous with Isaiah and Hosea and Amos. These men prophesied during a time of deep national trouble and spiritual declension in Israel and Judah. As you know, from the time of Solomon's death on, the nation was divided into two kingdoms. Israel occupied the northern part of Palestine and Judah the southern portion. These two kingdoms were often in conflict. During the time when Micah wrote, the king of the Northern Kingdom, Pekah, son of Remaliah, had made a league with the Syrian king, Rezin, and they had invaded the Southern Kingdom, surrounded Jerusalem, and cast up siege works. The southern king, Ahaz, feared for his life. Then, for some reason not explained in Scripture or in secular history, Pekah and Rezin went back to their own lands, taking with them 120,000 captives, and Jerusalem was spared.

But Ahaz was still panicky, and he appealed to the Assyrian king for help. It was during this time that Isaiah prophesied to Ahaz and told him not to appeal to Assyria but to trust God, and God would deliver him. But Ahaz had more confidence in his own political schemes than in Isaiah's word of trust, and so he appealed to Assyria. The Assyrian army came to his aid, and they did destroy Damascus, and they did do a great deal of damage to the Northern Kingdom, and for a time Judah's defeat was averted. But it was at a terrible cost, because from that time on Jerusalem was subject to Assyria and felt the heavy hand of oppression. This was the time when Isaiah went out and rented a billboard on the freeway between Jerusalem and Nineva, on which he wrote the words, "Maher-shalhash-baz", which mean, in effect, "Easy pickings--come and get them." And the Assyrians did. It was a terrible time nationally and politically for Judah.

Yet things were even worse from a spiritual standpoint. Turn to chapter 7, beginning with verse 2, where Micah says,

**The godly person has perished from the land, And there is no upright person among men.**

**All of them lie in wait for bloodshed;**

**Each of them hunts the other with a net.**

**Concerning evil, both hands do it well.**

**The prince asks, also the judge, for a bribe, And a great man speaks the desire of his soul;**

[That is, he says whatever he wants rather than what is the desire of the people, or, more to the point, what is God's desire for the people.]

**So they weave it together.**

**The best of them is like a briar,**

**The most upright like a thorn hedge.**

**The day when you post a watchman,**

**Your punishment will come.**

[That is, don't trust anybody you appoint as a watchman -you cannot trust anyone.]

**Do not trust in a neighbor;**

**Do not have confidence in a friend.**

**From her who lies in your bosom [your wife]**

**Guard your lips.**

**For son treats father contemptuously,**

**Daughter rises up against her mother,**

**Daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;**

**A man's enemies are the men of his own household.**

[Jesus quoted this latter portion to the disciples.]

Not only did Judah have difficulty from the outside; internally they were decadent. You could not trust anyone in Judah. Times were hard. There was death in Jerusalem. And in his prophecy Micah addresses a number of messages to various groups. He begins each of these addresses with the word "Hear!"-the command to listen. You find that word in the beginning of chapter one, again in chapter three, and again in chapter six. In chapter one he says, "Listen, O peoples." He addresses the general population of the nation. But no one will listen. So Micah

says, "Your destruction is decreed." It was not long after that that Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom, fell. In chapter three, he addresses himself to the leaders:

**Hear now, heads of Jacob  
And rulers of the house of Israel.  
Is it not for you to know justice?  
You who hate good and love evil,  
Who tear off their skin from them  
And their flesh from their bones,  
And who eat the flesh of my people....**

He describes the strange moral inversion which has taken place: "You love evil and hate good." There is no help from the leaders. Verse 11:

**Her leaders pronounce judgment for a bribe,  
Her priests instruct for a price,  
And her prophets divine for money.**

There is no deliverance for the nation among the people; there is no deliverance among the leaders. So in chapter six Micah goes out and speaks to the mountains. If the people will not listen, the mountains will, and he pronounces judgment on the nation to the mountains. "There is no faithful man," Micah says. There is not a godly man among you; you will not listen." And so he addresses the mountains: "Where will the deliverer come from?"

And that is our situation today. Who is going to save us from Santa Claus? Who will save us from the state of our economy, or, what is worse, from the state of our own souls--torn, divided, frustrated, inhibited. Where is there a savior? Is there one among us? Is there one among our leaders? Is there a godly man anywhere who can deliver? Throughout the book you have this note almost of despair.

But at times there are statements of hope--like lilies on a stagnant pond--a word of hope here and there. These words of hope seem to center around three geographical locations: Zion, Migdal-eder, and Bethlehem. Look at chapter 4. In chapter 4 something happens. In chapter 3 Micah has pronounced judgment on the nation. His final word in chapter 3 is:

**Therefore, on account of you,  
Zion [the temple site] will be plowed as a field,  
Jerusalem will be a heap of ruins,  
And the mountain of the temple will become high places of a forest.**

That occurred in history. When the Chaldeans sacked the city and burned the temple, they plowed it under and it became a forest. But note chapter 4:

**And it will come about in the last days  
That the mountain of the house of the Lord  
Will be established as the chief of the mountains.  
It will be raised above the hills,  
And the peoples will stream to it.  
And many nations will come and say,  
"Come and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord  
And to the house of the God of Jacob,  
That He may teach us about His ways  
And that we may walk in His paths."  
For from Zion will go forth the law [justice]...**

What a radical reversal! In place of injustice, right in the very heart of the nation, from Zion, will go forth justice. This word of hope centers around Zion, Jerusalem, the place where the temple is. Then notice the paragraph which

begins at verse 6. This centers around the location Migdal-eder, in verse 8. In most translations this is rendered "tower of the flock". But it is the name of a place, a geographical location, like Bethlehem or Zion.

**"In that day, "declares the Lord,**  
[the day when the mountain of the house of the Lord is established]  
**"I will assemble the lame,**  
**And gather the outcasts,**

[“Those who are shunned because they are morally defiled” is the meaning of the term used here. That is the kind of people God loves - the lame, the weak, the outcasts.]

**Even those whom I have afflicted.**  
**I will make the lame a remnant,**  
**And the outcasts a strong nation,**  
**And the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion From now on and forever.**  
**And as for you, tower of the flock** [or, "Migdal-eder"],  
**Hill of the daughter of Zion,**  
**To you it will come**

Migdal-eder was a small plain located just to the southwest of Jerusalem, between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Bethlehem was about six miles away. And just a couple of miles from Jerusalem, out in the fields, there was an ancient tower which had been built as a watchtower so that shepherds could be on the alert for marauders and thieves who might steal from the flock. It was called "Migdal-eder", "the tower of the flock". It was probably named by Jacob. It was at Migdal-eder that Reuben, Jacob's first-born, committed incest. That was something Jacob could not forget. It haunted him to the end of his days. When he pronounced his blessings on his sons, he said of Reuben, "You're like water -uncontrollable. You've lost your preeminence because you went up to my couch." He still can hardly believe it! And it is as though he turns to his other sons and says, "He went up to my couch." That was a disaster in Jacob's life, and it happened at Migdal-eder.

And yet, on the strength of this prophecy in Micah, the ancient rabbis, before Jesus' time, predicted that it would be at Migdal-eder that the announcement would be made that Messiah had come. This was part of the expectancy of Israel. And it was at Migdal-eder that the shepherds were gathered that first Christmas night, when the angel of the Lord announced the coming of Jesus. There were shepherds, shepherding their flocks by night, and the angel of the Lord appeared and said, "I have good news for you. Today in Bethlehem there is for you born a savior, the Messiah." They left their flocks and walked the three or four miles down to Bethlehem, and there they worshipped Jesus. Is that not like the Lord, to take a place like that, which had such terrible memories, and make it the very place where the promise of the ages is announced?

The third place which gives hope is this passage in chapter 5--Bethlehem:

**"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."**

Who would expect that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem? He was the son of David-that was the expectation of the prophets and rabbis. Jerusalem was the royal city; Messiah "should" have been born in Jerusalem. That is normally what you would expect. But this passage indicates, eight hundred years before the time, that David's family would somehow lose its authority and would no longer be on the throne. Herod was on the throne. He was not a Jew but an Edomite, an Idumaeen. David's dynasty temporarily had been set aside. And so it was in Bethlehem, the city where David was born, the city which had such rich associations in Israel but yet was so insignificant, that Jesus was born. Bethlehem is connected with such names as Naomi and Ruth, Obed, Boaz, Jesse, and finally, David. It is known by everyone. You can hardly go anyplace in the world and find people who do not know of Bethlehem. Yet its significance is derived not from its size as a town, but from the fact that Jesus was born there.

Micah says Bethlehem is "small among the thousands" literally. Some translations say "clans", but it was the practice in Israel to divide the nation into thousands by population. Some towns, like Bethlehem, were too small to have a thousand, so they were lumped together with other towns. In Scripture we are given some statistics. When the Israelites come back from the Babylonian exile, there were only two hundred people living in Bethlehem—a tiny, insignificant little place which, from ancient times, had been used merely as a garrison—a place to quarter troops. The ravine which ran between Bethlehem and Jerusalem was a natural place for an army to attack. So whoever occupied Jerusalem would garrison troops there. But the town itself was very small and insignificant. Its significance is that Jesus was born there.

It is one of those odd facts of history that, just a little to the southeast of Bethlehem there is a large hill with a flat top which was artificially heightened. It was the location of Herod's summer palace. Forty years before Jesus was born, Herod defeated one of the Ptolemaic leaders, Antigonus. He called himself "Herod the Great", and he wanted everyone to remember that he was great. So in memory of this event he built a summer castle, actually a whole complex of palaces, and named it after himself--Herodium. It was beautiful, but it is gone today except for a few ruins. When Herod died he was buried there. No one ever visits his tomb today except for a few archeologists. He called himself "great," but he was anything but great. He has long since been forgotten. Jesus never called himself great, but he is called great. He will never be forgotten. And the place of his birth will never be forgotten. Millions of people stream there, to visit the place where Jesus of Nazareth was born—the one whom Herod tried to destroy. Herod was responsible for the Slaughter of the Innocents. He has been forgotten; Jesus will always be remembered.

If you have a problem with self-image, if you feel little and insignificant, remember that if Jesus lives in your life he has invested you with significance, because he has been born there. He is the Great One--"He will be great". It is so like the Lord to surprise us in this way. Who would expect Jesus to be born in the little town of Bethlehem? It is so like the Lord to do something that no one ever expected.

Notice how he is described in verse 2. Though he was born in Bethlehem, he did not begin there.

**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 uses the same verb in both of these phrases: "From you One will go forth..." but, "His goings forth are from long ago..." He did not begin in Bethlehem; he had a history before his birth. He is the One revealed in the Old Testament as the Angel of Jehovah, who revealed himself to Abraham, who called himself "Yahweh", who wrestled with Jacob. I have often been amused by the conversation Jesus had with the woman at the well. She said, "Our father Jacob gave us this well. Are you greater than he?" And Jesus must have thought, "Yes, As a matter of fact, I wrestled with him right up that draw, and pinned him!"

He is the One who revealed himself to Joshua. Joshua crossed the Jordan and was viewing the city of Jericho, that great fortress which stood athwart their way into the land. As he was pondering the approach to the city, he saw a man standing with a sword in his hand. It was dark, and he was startled. He said, "Are you for us or against us?" And the man said, "No!" That is, "I'm not here to choose up sides; I'm here to run this operation." It was the Angel of the Lord, who became the Commander-in-Chief of the armies of Israel.

Here is One who had a history before he was born. His going forth, and his goings forth, are from eternity. This takes him out of time. The Jews actually do not have a word for eternity. This was the closest they could come to it. He exists outside of history; he is the eternal One. Jesus said to the Jews, "Abraham saw my day and rejoiced." They said, "Wait a minute! You're not even fifty years old! How could Abraham see your day?" And Jesus said, "Before Abraham was, I am." He did not say, "Before Abraham was, I was." He was not merely claiming preexistence; he was claiming to be eternal.

He is not the great "I was"; he is the great "I am". He is our contemporary. He lived in Micah's day; he lives in our

day. What Micah says in the latter part of verse 4 is translated, "Because at that time He will be great... But the margin notes says "now"--"because now He will be great." He lived in Micah's day, he was great then; he was great when he was born in Bethlehem; he is great today. He is our contemporary. He lives. He is the One who invests us with significance. You are great because he is great.

Earlier in verse 4 Micah says,

**And He will stand and shepherd His flock  
In the strength of the Lord,  
In the majesty of the name of the Lord His God.  
And they will sit....**

This is an interesting play on words. He stands up.. you can sit down, because he acts out of the power of his Father. Jesus said, "As the living Father has sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he that eats me shall live because of me." That is, the same relationship he had to his Father, we have to him. He acted out of the power of his own Father, and we are to act out of his power. He fights for us, and therefore we can sit. He stands; we can rest. We can rely upon him.

The final word in this paragraph, at the beginning of verse 5, is: "This One will be peace." The angel said, "Peace on earth among those with whom he [God] is well pleased." Paul said, "He is our peace, who has broken down the walls that separate us. He is the mighty God, the Prince of Peace. To the Jew, the idea of peace was not merely that war had been brought to an end, but that one was supplied with everything he needed for life--he lacked nothing. That is peace. And that is what Jesus Christ is to us today. He is our tranquility, he is our resource, he is everything we need.

Note that, from verse 5 on in this chapter, Micah is elaborating on the theme of peace. First of all, this peace means liberty. This One will cast the Assyrian army out. You will be free from every force that inhibits you. Had the Jews responded in obedience to Jesus when he came at Bethlehem, then literally, historically, this would have been true. But he came unto his own, and his own did not receive him. And so for a time Israel has been set aside. They will yet come into their own. They will yet have this liberty Micah speaks of. In the meantime, this liberty is yours, in a spiritual sense, when you receive him. "He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But to as many as received him, to them he gave the authority to be sons." Spiritually, you can be a son of God. You can have the same relationship to Messiah that Israel was promised, and the same liberty that she has had, and will have. Jesus said, "If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed." Paul said, "Sin shall not have dominion over you." There is liberty in Christ.

And secondly, verses 7 through 9, there is authority. There is a beautiful picture here--we will be like the dew, and like a lion. In some cases there will be a sense of refreshment; in other cases there will be a fearless power and authority about us. This foreshadows Paul's statement that we will be "a savor of life unto life, and death unto death." We will have impact and influence on people's lives. They cannot depart and remain the same; they will be different.

And finally, there will be purity, verse 10:

**"And it will be in that day," declares the Lord, "That I will cut off your horses from among you And destroy your chariots."**

From time immemorial, Israel had counted on their war machines--their chariots and their horses. And God says, "I will cut them off. You won't need them any longer. You ought to be ashamed, but you are proud of your military might. Now, it's all right to have military might. But the problem is, you're not trusting the Commander-in-Chief. So I'm going to cut this armament off."

**"I will also cut off the cities of your land...."**

The Hebrew word for "city" also means cry of alarm". In ancient times, because people felt unprotected out in the open, they built cities, fortifications, to protect themselves. And when the cry of alarm would go out, they would run into the city. But you know what is happening today. Man has done to his cities what he does to everything else. The cry of distress is inside the city now, and everybody wants out! The Lord says, "I'm going to destroy your cities with which you are polluting not only the land, but one another spiritually..."

**"...And tear down all your fortifications.  
I will cut off sorceries from your hand,  
And you will have fortune tellers no more.  
I will cut off your carved images  
And your sacred pillars from among you,  
So that you will no longer bow down  
To the work of your hands.  
I will root out your Asherim from among you  
And destroy your cities."**

Not only will you have liberty and authority-you will have purity. And that spells peace in your life and mine. It is the One who was born in Bethlehem who is the Prince of Peace.

You will not find that sort of leader in our land today, as good as some of our leaders may be. You will not find that kind of leadership among the general population, as fine as people may be. There is only one Prince of Peace. There is only One who can supply that sort of tranquility, who can be the One that you need-and that is the One who was born in Bethlehem.

Now, what is the proper response to One like this? Look at verse 6 of chapter 6:

**With what shall I come to the Lord  
And bow myself before the God on high?  
Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings,  
With yearling calves?**

What does God want, anyway? How does he want me to respond to him?

Does the Lord take delight in thousands of rams, In ten thousand rivers of oil?

Shall I present my first-born for my rebellious acts, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

At the time Micah wrote these words, Ahaz the king had just sacrificed his first-born infant son, had offered him up to the god Moloch. Is that what God wants?

**He has told you, O man, what is good;  
And what does the Lord require of you....**

This is what God wants. This is acceptable worship. This is the only proper response to the baby born in Bethlehem:

**...But to do justice, to love kindness, And [literally] to submit to walk with your God.**

God does not want your big, ornate temples and tabernacles and churches. He does not want your robes and incense, your stained glass windows, and all the rest. That is not acceptable worship. It can be, but it is not necessarily. What God wants is you and me. This is the only acceptable response. The only worthwhile worship is to say, "Lord, here I am. I want to walk humbly with you." This is what Paul says in Romans 12: "I beseech you

therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is a reasonable act of worship." This is true worship--to say, "Lord, here I am. Here's my life. Do with me as you please" And then, out of that life, to do justice, and to love mercy. This is the only acceptable worship.

The wise men came to Bethlehem because in Balaam's prediction it was stated that the One who was born, the Star who would rise out of Jacob, would smite Israel's enemies on the cheek. The Persians were Gentiles, on the other side of the fence. The Magi came because they wanted to find the King who had that kind of authority. And they got on their knees and worshipped him, offered themselves to him. Wise men are still doing that today.

Father, would you teach us this fact we have learned today-that what you want from us is ourselves, our lives. You want us to submit to walk with you. We thank you that you have come into our life to give us peace, to grant to us what we are looking for, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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