

Jesus of Bethlehem and the Purpose of Prophecy

Try saying Jesus of Bethlehem out loud. It probably sounds odd to your ear. Why is that? It's because Jesus lived in the city of Nazareth, not Bethlehem where he was born. But he didn't just happen to be born in Bethlehem. God determined Jesus would be born there and told us ahead of time to provide hope and proof of his great power. This is the purpose of prophecy - to show that God is very much in control and does exactly what he says he is going to do.

Around 700 BC, the prophet Micah was preaching a message similar to other prophets of that time: God was angry at his people because they persisted in doing evil and judgment was coming. And although God delayed that judgment for hundreds of years, he eventually put them into bondage and scattered them for 2000 years. However God is merciful, and there is always hope. Micah prophesied about hope, too, when Lord said this:

Micah 5:1 - But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel, whose origins are in the distant past, will come from you on my behalf.

Whose origin is in the distant past? That would be Jesus, who is the Christ from before time. Where will this ruler come from? He will be from Bethlehem.

Bethlehem has always been a minor city and still is today. It lies about a 10 miles south of Jerusalem, and about a hundred miles south of Nazareth, which is where Joseph and pregnant Mary lived. However, it wouldn't have mattered if the city was on the other side of the planet; God said his ruler would be from Bethlehem, so that was that. Daniel says this about God's will:

Daniel 2:21 - God controls the course of world events; he removes kings and sets up other kings.

To put things into historical perspective, Micah lived and prophesied in the time of the kings of Judah: Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Because the Lord's people continued to do evil under the kings of Judah, God rose up another nation to defeat them and put them into bondage, as he had done many times before. This time, God used King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, who conquered Jerusalem along with many other city states.

Over the next few centuries, Babylon was defeated by Cyrus the Great from Persia (present-day Iran). The Persians fell to Alexander the Great from Greece, and upon Alexander's death and the breakup of his empire, control of Jerusalem passed through a succession of rulers until coming under the influence of the Roman Republic in 63 BC. When Julius Caesar was assassinated by Roman Senators in 44 BC, civil war broke up the Roman Republic until Caesar Augustus took control and became the first Emperor of the Roman Empire.

It was Caesar Augustus who implemented a new, more consistent, method of taxation for lands controlled by his Empire. Instead of arbitrary tributes, he set up regular taxation based on population

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census. And this, of course, required Joseph to travel to the location of his ancestors for the census. Joseph was from the lineage of King David, and David was a simple shepherd from Bethlehem:

Luke 2: 4 - And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee.

This was a culmination of prophecy. God declared that his ruler would come from Bethlehem, not Jerusalem or Nazareth. And to accomplish this, along with other promises and prophecies, God exercised his perfect will and power. It was not an accident that empires rose and took his people into bondage. Caesar Augustus did not just happen to inherit the large fortune and powerful name of Julius Caesar. He did not randomly change the Roman tax system. It wasn't by chance that the census occurred while Mary was with child. And, it's not a coincidence that Joseph was of King David's lineage, requiring him to travel to Bethlehem. The God of Heaven orchestrates world events, and yet he also knows each sparrow that falls.

Matthew 10:29 - What is the price of two sparrows—one copper coin? But not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it.

This is what prophecy teaches us. God is great AND he is good. He is in total control of this universe and quite capable of leading the direction of our lives and accomplishing his will. His word is true, and we can believe his promises.

Romans 8:28 - And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.

- *Bill Wilson (This article may be copied freely.)*