

**CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER**

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>Scripture Memory (Micah 5:2)</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>33</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
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**LATE IN TIME BEHOLD HIM COME**

The *Jesus Seminar*,<sup>1</sup> which traces its origin to a series of meetings that first convened under the leadership of Robert Funk in Berkeley, California, in March of 1985,<sup>2</sup> has captured the imagination of the multi-media in our day. In addition to front-page coverage in our major newspapers, leading magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News*<sup>3</sup> have devoted cover stories to the findings of the Jesus Seminar. Dale Brown’s mega bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* was directly influenced by the findings of the Jesus Seminar. One presupposition (a polite way of saying “bias” or “prejudice”) of this group – and it fairly represents a great deal of contemporary New Testament scholarship – is that the early church is responsible for developing the picture of Jesus that has come down to us over the centuries. The *real* historical Jesus, they confidently inform us, was altogether different from the Jesus that emerges from the pages of the New Testament. The early church ransacked the Old Testament, we are told, to find texts that would prove that Jesus was the promised Messiah. One of the major premises that this type of scholarship operates with is the categorical denial of *predictive prophecy*. The noted German New Testament scholar Rudolph Bultmann declared matter-of-factly that miracles are impossible. All of history, he claimed, occurs within a closed system. Everything happens according to natural law. The supernatural is ruled out *apriori*.<sup>4</sup> But, as S. Lewis Johnson has pointed out, “The early church did not ransack the Scriptures for Old Testament texts to prove Jesus was the Messiah. If they did, then they missed some scintillating ones which are not found in the New Testament at all. A bipartisan reading of the Old Testament reveals that the New Testament is quite restrained in citing Messianic texts. The authors omit many clear ones, such as Genesis 3:15, Numbers 24:17, Isaiah 9:6 and 32:1-7; even some admitted as genuine Messianic texts by the critics, such as Isaiah 11:1-5 and Jeremiah 23:5-6.”<sup>5</sup> The important thing to note is that many Christians seem carelessly indifferent to such things. For them only the *subjective* dimensions of Christianity are of any concern. “Heaven came down and glory filled my soul.” This is a line from a popular hymn – one that many of us have sung over and over again. But what do we mean by that? Are we saying that we have experienced *heaven* in our hearts in a directly subjective way? Do we really mean that *glory* actually filled our soul? The only way we can harmonize the language of this well-known hymn with the Bible is to insist that *heaven* refers to Jesus Christ and the *glory* that floods our souls refers to goodness and sovereign grace and the mercy of God as set forth in the gospel. I am not here this morning to promise you some experience at this time of the year if you will simply follow some religious formula that is akin to climbing Jacob’s Ladder into the presence of God. I want, instead, to direct your attention to Bethlehem and to the Old Testament prophet Micah.

**I. THE DESCRIPTION OF THE PLACE (5:2a)**

Bethlehem was the place of Rachel’s death (Gen. 35:19), the scene of the romance of Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 1:22), and the birthplace of King David (1 Sam. 16:1). Bethlehem means “house of bread.”

- A. ***The Context.*** Micah was an 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. contemporary of Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos. We learn from his little book that the nation had departed from the Word of God. Morality was low (1:7) and the government was corrupt (3:9-11) and had lost its integrity. Looming on the horizon was the threat of Assyria (cf. 2 Kings 19:32-37). At this critical moment in the nation's history, Micah uttered the prophecy of the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem.<sup>6</sup>
- B. ***The Desperate Condition.*** The fifth chapter opens with an address. The city is to undergo a siege, and the King is to be treated in humiliating fashion (cf. Job 16:10; Lam. 3:30).
- C. ***The Divine Design.*** The immediate future looks bleak, but the Prophet directs the nation's attention to a glorious promise. The prophecy concerns *Bethlehem Ephratah*. The future Davidic King will come from this obscure little village.

## II. THE DESCRIPTION OF GOD'S PURPOSE (5:2b)

Old Bishop Hall long ago wrote, "So clearly was Bethlehem designed to this honour by the prophets, that even the priests and the scribes could point Herod unto it, and assured him the King of the Jews could be nowhere else born. Bethlehem, justly, the house of bread, the bread that came down from heaven, is there given to the world; whence should we have the bread of life but from the house of bread? O holy David, was this the well of Bethlehem, whereof thou didst so thirst to drink of old when thou saidst, 'O that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem!' Surely that other water, when it was brought thee by thy worthies, thou pouredst it on the ground, and wouldst not drink of it. This was that living water for which thy soul longed, whereof thou saidst elsewhere, 'As the hart panteth after the water-brooks, so longeth my soul after thee, O God; my soul thirsteth for God, for the living God.'" When the wisemen from the east came to Jerusalem, they inquired about the One "Who has been born King of the Jews" (Matt. 2:2). Note the language "born *King*." Spurgeon once said, "Men are born princes, but they are seldom born kings. I do not think you can find an instance in history where any infant was born king. He was the Prince of Wales, perhaps, and he had to wait a number of years, till his father died, and then they manufactured him into a king by putting a crown on his head; and a sacred chrism, and other silly things; but he was not born a king. I remember no one who was born a king except Jesus; and there is emphatic meaning in that verse that we sing – 'Born Thy people to deliver; Born a child, and yet a king.'"<sup>8</sup>

## III. THE DESCRIPTION OF THE PERSON (5:2c)

The ruler to be born in Bethlehem is one "whose origins are from old, from ancient times." This is how the NIV reads. Regrettably, this is an inadequate translation. Listen to the words of noted OT scholar J. Barton Payne, "Attempts have been made to minimize either the uncreatedness or the eternity of the One whose coming forth is here anticipated; the RSV, for example, reads that from Bethlehem 'shall come forth from me one whose origin [not, coming forth] is from of old, from ancient days [not, from everlasting].' Yet the nouns *mosa*, and *mosa'a* 'coming/going forth,' are never found at any other point in Scripture to signify 'origin,' and their verbal root, in the line just preceding, clearly maintains the standard meaning of 'come forth.'" The point the prophet is making is this, the royal house of David will continue and will be fully established by the Messiah in fulfillment of the covenant promises made to David (cf. Ps. 89). We read in Isaiah 9:6, 7, these words: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this." A child is born, but He is also

the eternal Son who the Father sends. “All their hopes hang on the birth of the royal prince. The brief reference to the confinement of the woman *with child*, obviously the mother of the promised king, evidently alludes to a popular expectation too well known to require amplification. This expectation is doubtless to be related to Isaiah’s mysterious promise of Immanuel’s birth (Isa. 7:14) pronounced over thirty years earlier.”<sup>10</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Bethlehem means *house of bread*, but only on the night of Christ’s birth did this little village attain to the meaning of its name. Then Bethlehem truly became the house of bread, when the Bread of Life came down from heaven and was born of a Virgin in a lowly manger (John 6:35, 512). The Christmas message, as it is often called, has to do with the historical fact of Christ’s birth some two thousand years ago in Bethlehem. This is the Biblical emphasis. “The claims of the disciples are not on the level of psychology, anthropology, morality, sociology, marketing, or even – at least initially – theology. They are historical claims. They do not tell us about experiences that they had, encouraging us to experience the same things: “You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart.” Nor are their claims based on the relevance of the events: “Jesus changed my life and He can change yours, too.” Their testimony, unlike most of the ones we hear in Christian circles, was more like testimony in court than like a pitch for a product or an interview on a talk show. The court was to make its judgment not on the basis of the psychological or moral impact of these experiences, but on the basis of whether the events that the eyewitnesses reported actually took place.”<sup>11</sup> It is significant to note that Isaiah is the first Old Testament prophet cited in the opening book of the New Testament (Matt. 1:23), while Micah is the second (Matt. 2:6). Isaiah foretold *how* Christ was to be born (by virgin birth), while Micah foretold *where* (the place) He was to be born. Was all this merely coincidental or accidental? One astute writer has posed this hypothesis: “Suppose that there were only 50 prophecies in the Old Testament (instead of 333) concerning the first advent of Christ, giving details of the coming Messiah, and all meet in the person of Jesus . . . the probability of chance fulfillment as calculated by mathematicians according to the theory of probabilities is less than one in 1,125,000,000,000,000. Now add only two more elements to these 50 prophecies and fix the time and place at which they must happen, and the *immense improbability that they will take place by chance exceeds all the power of numbers to express* (or the mind of man to grasp). That is enough, one would think, to silence forever all pleas for *chance* as furnishing an unbeliever the least opportunity of escape from the evidence of prophecy.”<sup>12</sup> We celebrate the birth of Him to whom all the prophets witness (Acts 10:43). O Come Let Us Adore Him!

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief overview of the Jesus Seminar (which met in Phoenix in 1993), cf. my inaugural issue of *The Pastor’s Perspective* (Vol. 1, No. 1, March 1994).

<sup>2</sup> To further promote this venture, a journal was launched titled *Forum: Foundation & Facets* in March of 1985. This carried a series of articles that served to introduce the Jesus Seminar to the scholarly community. The agenda of both the seminar and the journal was clearly set forth in the introduction by Robert Funk (Vol. 1, No. 1, March 1985), pp. 7-12.

<sup>3</sup> A television series titled “The Life and Times of Jesus” was co-produced by *U. S. News & World Report* and first aired on the Learning Channel in December of 1993. It was designed to raise questions (doubts, really) as to the accuracy and reliability of the Gospels. This turns out to be the intention of the Jesus Seminar in the first place, and it is my opinion that this is why the media is having a feeding frenzy with the whole thing.

<sup>4</sup> The best critical introduction to this type of scholarship from an Evangelical perspective is Robert B. Strimple, *The Modern Search For the Real Jesus: An Introductory Survey of the Historical Roots of Gospel Criticism* (P&R, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> S. L. Johnson, “The Old Testament Anticipation of the Messiah: Genesis 49:8-12” in *Believers Bible Bulletin* (Believer’s Chapel, No. 3), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> “Isaiah,” wrote G. L. Robinson, “foretold the Messiah’s *Virgin* birth, while Micah foretold His *village* birth.” *The Twelve Minor Prophets* (rpt. Baker, 1955), p. 98. S. Lewis Johnson has made a further observation, “Isaiah is the first prophet cited in our New Testament, while Micah is the second, one speaking of His birth and the other of His place of birth.” Op. cit.

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<sup>7</sup> *Bishop Hall's Contemplation On the Historical Passages of the Old and New Testaments* III (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> *The New Park Street Pulpit* II (rpt. Zondervan, 1995), p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> J. B. Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (Harper & Row, 1973), p. 431. Yet, as he goes on to point out, the Hebrew never signifies "origin." A better translation is that of the Old Revised Version (1881), which reads, "whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting." He comes forth from *eternity*, not from "ancient times" (as in the NIV), an expression that could suggest a specific point in the past. The language clearly speaks of One who is incarnate deity, for only God Himself is from eternity (cf. Matt. 22:41-46).

<sup>10</sup> L. C. Allen, *The New International Commentary: The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (Eerdmans, 1976), p. 345.

<sup>11</sup> M. S. Horton, *Modern Reformation* (Nov./Dec. 1995), p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Olinthus Gregory, as cited by F. J. Meldau, *The Prophets Still Speak: Messiah In Both Testaments* (Christian Victory Pub., 1988), p. 6.