

E-Mail Wisdom...

Take a tour to Israel and there is one town you'll need to think twice about visiting. Jewish tours almost always avoid it, even though it is the birthplace of the greatest ruler in Israel's ancient history—King David. Christians like to tour there, but it is such a hassle that many settle for a "facsimile." You can walk through a reproduction of this town (particularly at this time of year) in many major U.S. cities, from Longview, Washington, to Orlando, Florida. I am talking about that little town of Bethlehem.

Bethlehem is only six miles from the heart of Jerusalem, but since it is in Palestinian territory, to get there from Israel you have to go through a border crossing. If you are part of a tour, you will probably have to get off your bus and board another with a Palestinian tour guide and driver. That is why Jewish groups rarely go there and why many Christian groups decide the hassle isn't worth it.

But the modern political difficulties mask a far greater and more ancient controversy.

The Jewish prophet Micah wrote:

"And you Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, from you shall come forth to me one to be a ruler in Israel and his goings forth are from old, from everlasting" (Micah 5:2, or 5:1 in some versions).

Since Micah was writing several hundred years after the death of King David, it has been accepted that the "ruler in Israel" spoken of would be none other than David's greater son, the promised Messiah.

Targum Jonathan, an ancient Aramaic paraphrase of the Bible says this:

"And you, O Bethlehem Ephrata, you who were too small to be numbered among the thousands of the house of Judah, from you shall come forth before me the Messiah." The 12th century rabbi called Radak (David Kimhi) wrote: "out of thee shall come forth unto me a Judge to be Ruler in Israel, and this is the King Messiah."

The mystery and the controversy intensify when we begin to examine what is actually said about this ruler who is to be born in Bethlehem.

Micah makes an unusual statement when he says: "from you shall come forth to me." This is no ordinary way to talk about someone's birth. Micah is speaking as a prophet on behalf of God—that is who the "me" is. So this ruler is born for God and

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Thot for a day: He who has no Christmas in his heart will never find Christmas under a tree.

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for God's purposes. No wonder all the ancients expected this one to be the Messiah!

Now we arrive at the most controversial—and for some, alarming—part of Micah's prophecy. God begins talking more specifically about the nature of the child, or the "comings forth" of the ruler. In Hebrew the word is *motzaotav*. This is a compound noun meaning more precisely: "the place where he originally left." So here we are surprisingly told there is a place this ruler existed before his birth in Bethlehem. God then tells us that this ruler actually comes from "*kedem*" meaning "of old" and from "*yemei ha Olam*," "from everlasting" or literally "the days of eternity."

Who in the world has origins in eternity? Who could exist before his own birth? There can be only one conclusion: this one to be born in Bethlehem would be of divine origin!

The mystery of Messiah is not just where he would be born, which we know to be Bethlehem, but what his nature is to be, i.e. divine. This is a shocker. As Jews we are taught, "*Shema yisrael adonai elohenu adonai echad*," "Hear O Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And yet here we have a mystery that goes beyond the nature of the Messiah and straight to the nature of the One True God. How can the promised Messiah be divine when the Lord our God is One? We can point to biblical clues regarding the compound unity of God, but we cannot fully understand it; we cannot fully explain it. It is a mystery and a controversy, but it is also true. And that is where faith comes in. God says it. I believe it. That settles it.

Can you live with that tension? Are you willing to believe something that you can't fully understand? Will you agree there are things about the nature of God that are beyond our ability to completely comprehend?

In Bible times, there was no controversy among Jews about where Messiah was to be born. The only controversy was when he was to be born. These mysterious wise men from the east were looking for the Messiah because they had seen signs in the heavens. When they approached King Herod—then the ruler of the Jewish people—to find out where to look for him, Herod had to ask his own wise men. The Jewish scribes and chief priests confidently answered the King's question. "Tell the wise men from the east that Messiah must be born in Bethlehem." And so he was.

But how could a wise man (or woman) possibly answer the question of the Messiah's birthplace were it to be posed today? For many this controversial question has been answered once and for all in the person of Jesus our Messiah. How do you answer?