

Oh Little Town of Bethlehem

Matthew 2:1-9; Micah 5:2

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PATH //

connect groups

The Episcopal preacher Phillips Brooks gave the world the Christmas hymn “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” He was visiting the Holy Land, on the road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem on Christmas Eve, when inspiration struck. Bethlehem was where King David was born and where his descendant Jesus Christ would be born. Because of Micah’s prediction made 700 years before Jesus’ birth, four details were anticipated:

I. The *Place* of Messiah

II. The *Person* of Messiah

III. The *Purpose* of Messiah

IV. The *Preexistence* of Messiah

POINTS

The *Place* of Messiah:

- The original wise men were probably Zoroastrians, monotheists from the East (likely northeastern Iran).
- The Magi were most likely sent as a religious-political convoy to Bethlehem to inquire about the star, knowing the ancient texts found in Micah 5:2 and the prophecies of Daniel.
- In ancient Israel, there were two Bethlehems: one in Judah (south) and one northwest of Nazareth (north).
- What are the odds of Jesus being born in Bethlehem? To find the prophetic specificity of the place: the average population of the earth from the time of Micah to the present divided by the average population of Bethlehem during the same period = $2,000,000,000/7,150$, or one chance in 2.8×10^5 .
- Micah gave the prophecy 700 years before Jesus was born. Some doubt Micah 5:2 is an actual prophecy. Yet there was adequate time between the recording of the prophecies in the Old Testament and the recorded New Testament fulfillment (400 years). The New Testament accounts of Jesus were also accepted as fulfilled prophecy by Jews close to those events.
- **Probe:** Nothing happens that is not anticipated by a sovereign God. Discuss the interrelationship between God’s foreknowledge (knowing something in advance) and His active participation (through miracles, fulfilled prophecy, etc.).

The *Person* of Messiah:

- The Jews had been expecting the Messiah for centuries. Some thought he’d be political—a conquering king. Others thought he’d be a prophet or a

priest. All three offices—prophet, priest, and king—are found in Jesus.

- *Anointed* is the Greek translation of *meshiach*, the Messiah. The root of the word means *to smear*. In ancient times, kings were anointed with oil. It carries the idea of being a chosen one.
- There is one coming deliverer, who has been anointed above others (see Psalm 45:7).
- In Luke 4:18, Jesus referenced His anointing with a recitation of Isaiah 61. Woven throughout all the Old Testament prophecies are precise predictions concerning the Messiah. They are also found in various Jewish texts (the Talmud, Mishnah, etc.). Many didn’t see the full nature of the Messiah, but through prophetic foreshortening (a single prophecy linking events that happen at separate times), the Messiah was being revealed in and through Jesus.
- **Probe:** Discuss how Jesus holds the *munus triplex*: prophet (see Luke 13:33), priest (see Hebrews 6:20), and king (see Revelation 1:5). How did Jesus fulfill all the offices, expanding our understanding of the Messiah’s rule and reign?

The *Purpose* of Messiah:

- The Magi asked a loaded question when they inquired about the “King of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2).
- This was taken as a direct challenge to Caesar Augustus’ rule and authority. Ancient writers such as Virgil depicted Augustus as a savior and king. The Roman Senate nominated Augustus and called him “King of the World.”
- Likewise, Herod was called “King of the Jews.” The Magi’s phrase *troubled* (agitated, perturbed) Herod. He felt threatened.

- Herod was paranoid; he married ten wives and killed his first and second sons because they threatened his reign.
- Unlike Caesar, Christ will rule as righteous and shepherd His people.
- His first coming was as Savior; His second will be sovereign judge.
- **Probe:** Discuss the differences between Jesus’ two comings. See Luke 2 (His birth) and Revelation 19-20 (Jesus’ coming at the end of the tribulation).

The *Preexistence* of Messiah:

- The scribes didn’t quote the entire verse in Micah 2. They left out some of the text, particularly the word *everlasting*, a reference to the Messiah’s eternal nature.
- Most ancient Jews expected that the Messiah would preexist before His coming and would rule over the world. In the *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Alfred Edersheim wrote:
Even in strictly Rabbinic documents, the premundane [existing before creation], if not the eternal existence of the Messiah appears as matter of common belief. Such is the view expressed in the Targum on Isaiah 9:6 and in that on Micah 5:2. But, the Midrash on Proverbs 8:9 expressly mentions the Messiah among the seven things created before the world.... The name of the Messiah is said to have been created before the world.
- Jesus was the fulfillment of this. He was the only person who lived before He was born (see John 1:1; John 1:15; Revelation 1:8; Colossians 1:17).
- **Probe:** As the second person of the Trinity, Jesus is both divine and human. Why is it important to keep the two in balance when discussing Christ’s nature and work in the world?

PRACTICE

Connect Up: Jesus said when you see Him, you see the Father (see John 14:9). Jesus is both man and God, and though we can’t completely comprehend this truth, we can apprehend what the Bible declares. How do Christ’s two natures give us insight into the nature and love of God?

Connect In: The body of Christ is the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. Discuss ways we can proclaim both Christ’s humanity (in service to others) and His divinity (His salvation, love, second coming, etc.).

Connect Out: How can you use Christ’s specific prophetic fulfillments to share with Jews? Share two points you found fitting.