

Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem

12-20-2017

1 Micah 5:2

2 *But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet*
3 *out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth*
4 *have been from of old, from everlasting.*

5
6 I have declared from this pulpit for years that the Bible is the story of REAL PEOPLE, in
7 a REAL PLACE, in a REAL TIME. It is not make-believe. It is not fiction. It is the
8 total revealed mind of God to man. The history contained in God's Word is clear and
9 accurate. The people described therein were very real. As someone has wisely
10 observed, the Bible was not written in a "vacuum."

11
12 During this precious time of the year, our minds are drawn to a real place - Bethlehem.
13 To a real time - somewhere around 2-3 B.C. - to a real mother, the Virgin Mary.

14
15 It has been my exquisite pleasure to visit Bethlehem probably 45-50 times over the past
16 decades. Although I have only gone to Israel itself 36 times, I have visited friends and
17 associates there in Bethlehem on even more delightful occasions. One family, in
18 particular, that of Nicola Canavati (Palestinian), remains to this day among my dearest
19 friends. His family has resided in Bethlehem for decades - if not longer.

20
21 From God's Word, and, yes, other sources as well, we learn of the joyful story of the
22 happiest event in all recorded history, the birth of Jesus Christ. As the late journalist Jim
23 Bishop accurately observed, the story needs no gilding. But the more we study this
24 classic event - and the place where it happened, the more precious God's Word becomes
25 to us.

26
27 The town itself of Bethlehem has changed a lot over the centuries. Once a wide spot in
28 the road, it is now a town of about 22 thousand people. Most of them are Palestinian
29 and Muslim by religion (at least 3/4 of them). It is interesting to me, however, that, by
30 law, the mayor of the town has to be a Christian. My friend Elias Freij served that office
31 for 25 years, from 1972-1997. Interestingly enough, his office is on the second floor
32 directly across Manger Square, near the spot where Jesus was born.

33 KEY HISTORICAL FIGURES IN THE STORY OF THE NATIVITY

34
35
36 Luke 2:1-4 *And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar*

1 *Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. [2] (And this taxing was first made when*
2 *Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) [3] And all went to be taxed, every one into his own*
3 *city. [4] And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea,*
4 *unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and*
5 *lineage of David:)*

6
7 The Assassination of Julius Caesar - March 15, 44 B.C.



35 Certainly one of the most prominent and powerful men in all recorded history was Julius
36 Caesar. He was stabbed to death by some sixty senators in a conspiracy led by Gaius
37 Longinus, Junius Brutus, Cassius and others. Caesar was the dictator of the Roman
38 Republic at the time, having recently been declared *dictator perpetuo* (ruler in perpetuity)
39 by the Senate. This declaration made several fear that Caesar wanted to overthrow the
40 Senate in favor of dictatorship. His death led to a thrust for power by three more

1 powerful men:

- 2 ▶ Marc Antony
- 3 ▶ Octavian (who prevailed)
- 4 ▶ Lepidus (who dropped out of the quest quickly)

5
6 After Marc Antony teamed with Egyptian Queen Cleopatra, his power dissipated quickly
7 and Octavian became the really first Caesar of Rome; Julius himself was a dictator, not
8 the Caesar despite his name. Octavian became known as CAESAR AUGUSTUS.

9
10 Wanting to consolidate his new power, and finding the true strength of the Empire, he
11 made a decree that a world-wide census be made and a resulting tax accountability.

12 13 King Herod (the Great)

14
15 How did Julius Caesar gain such power? He had a lot of help. Among his fans was a
16 fellow from Idumea (also known as Edom - descendants from Esau - or Mount Seir. We
17 also know it today as Petra.) The fellow's name was Antipater. He made himself very
18 valuable to Rome. Four year's before Caesar's assassination, he supplied both men and
19 money for Caesar's campaign in which Rome conquered Egypt. Antipater's wife's name
20 was Kypros. She was the daughter of King Aretas of Arabia. They had two sons:
21 Phasael and Herod.

22
23 At age 25, Herod was made governor of Galilee. His rule was brutal. For some years,
24 Galilee had been infested with a band of men calling themselves *patriots*. They lived
25 securely in cluster of well-known caves on the steep sides of Mount Arbel (which
26 overlooks the Sea of Galilee). Herod had iron cages constructed, placed armed soldiers
27 in them, and let them down over the precipice, where they killed and captured the zealots.
28 This brutality earned Herod the applause of Rome but the increased hatred from the Jews.

29
30 Julius Caesar promoted Herod to the governorship of the coastal areas of what we know
31 today as Israel and Lebanon. Both Marc Antony and Octavian believed that Herod was
32 the man who could hold Palestine securely for Rome. Therefore, they proclaimed him
33 KING OF THE JEWS. By 37 B.C., Herod had conquered Jerusalem.

34
35 Again and again he was beset with would-be assassins and others who hated him and
36 wanted him dead. You can imagine, then, his anger when "men from the east" came to
37 him declaring they were looking for the "new king:"

38
39 *Matthew 2:1-8 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod*
40 *the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, [2] Saying, Where is*

1 *he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to*
2 *worship him. [3] When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all*
3 *Jerusalem with him. [4] And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the*
4 *people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. [5] And they said*
5 *unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, [6] And thou*
6 *Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee*
7 *shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. [7] Then Herod, when he had*
8 *privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. [8]*
9 *And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child;*
10 *and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him*
11 *also.*

12
13 King Herod had already executed members of his own family, including several wives,
14 whom he suspected were plotting against his throne. So he would have no hesitation to
15 kill some little baby in a backwoods town such as Bethlehem.

16
17 In the 36th year of Herod's reign, and while Augustus was still emperor of Rome, Jesus
18 Christ, the Savior of the world, was born in Bethlehem. Herod got word of it through
19 the wise men who came looking for the child. The Bible teaches they came from "the
20 east," probably Iran (also known in history as Persia).

21
22 That same year Herod lay racked in terrible pain with all sorts of death-causing ailments.
23 He grew rapidly worse and suffered horrible torments. He had a terrible craving to
24 scratch himself, his bowels were ulcerated, and - according to the contemporary historian
25 Josephus - his privates were gangrenous and wormy (*Jewish Antiquities - Josephus - page*
26 *252*). It was almost impossible to be in the same room with him because of the stench
27 coming from his decaying body. On the west side of the Dead Sea were the famed hot
28 springs of Callirrhoe where the dying king attempted to get relief. He then returned to
29 Jericho (where one of his great palaces was located). He assembled scores of men of
30 distinction, Jewish educators, writers, teachers, administrators, and shut them inside the
31 hippodrome. He gave orders that when he died, all of those innocent people would be
32 slaughtered. His thinking? *If these people won't grieve for me....they'll grieve for*
33 *somebody.*

34
35 Just five days before he died in agony, he gave orders to have his own son Antipator (II)
36 executed. He then amended his will quickly to give his eldest son Archelaus succession
37 to the throne upon his own death. (It turned out that Archelaus was such a horrible ruler
38 that Rome threw him out, divided the kingdom into regions, and declared that Israel
39 would no longer be governed by a Rome-appointed king, but rather by a governor
40 (procurator) which is what eventually brought Pontius Pilate to the area.



One of Herod's many palaces - the Herodium (near Bethlehem)

Herod survived his son's execution by five days. He had reigned for 37 years. On the slopes of the Herodium his body was buried - and, not found by archeologists until the last fifteen years or so. Actually, his body was not found at all, only his shattered sarcophagus and the crypt. It is believed that zealots during the Bar Kochba rebellion (132-136 AD) found the corpse and tore it apart because of their intense hatred of their former monarch.

This palace was actually a massive tower, several stories higher than the ruins. To fortify it, Herod had his builders stack up rocks and dirt all round it to make it appear to be a volcano. The actual palace goes deep into the ground, a huge living quarters for the mad king.

I have had the joy of touring this place on a number of occasions and will take you there now by way of video.

SUMMARY

1 Galatians 4:4-7 **But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth**
2 **his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, [5] To redeem them that were**
3 **under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. [6] And because ye**
4 **are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying,**
5 **Abba, Father. [7] Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a**
6 **son, then an heir of God through Christ.**

7
8 Oh what wonders we find in the story of the Incarnation - God becoming a human
9 being! In the fulness of time! What a line! At the precise moment in history,
10 ordained from the beginning of time, Jesus - God, the Son - was born as a babe in
11 Bethelhem.

12
13 It is the story of a real person - JESUS, born in a real place - BETHLEHEM in real
14 time, around 2-3 B.C.

15
16 Oh, come let us adore Him!

17
18