

## Why Bethlehem?

Micah 5:1-5

### Introduction

When we consider the Christmas story, as we tend to do only about mid-November until the end of December each year, there are only so many details to think about: the baby Jesus, the manger, Joseph & Mary, the inn so full a stable is the only place available for Jesus to be born, the angels alerting both Mary & Joseph beforehand in Nazareth, the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem with Mary on the verge of giving birth, the angels and the shepherds, the star and the Magi, their gifts, Herod and his psychopathic reaction upon hearing of the birth of the Christ, Simeon & Anna, Zechariah & Elizabeth and John the Baptist's birth, the flight of the holy family to Egypt to escape the murderous Herod, the prophecies of Jesus' birth, and His place of birth, etc. That place of birth is dominant in this story, but in all the lessons, sermons and Bible studies I've personally done related to the Christmas story, I don't recall doing anything specifically on the little town of Bethlehem, until now.

Most of the lessons form in my mind as a small spark, are usually the result of a question or maybe 2 or 3 questions that I am attempting to wrestle with and hopefully come up with the answer to. In this case, the question was, "Why did God choose Bethlehem?" I mean, if Messiah was coming to be born, He had to be born somewhere within the known world at that time in history, but out of all the places – cities, towns, hamlets – why here? Why this sleepy suburb of Jerusalem? Why not in Nazareth in Galilee which was Jesus' hometown after He was born? Nazareth was 75 miles north of Bethlehem, an area that seems to have been known for almost nothing noteworthy at the time of Jesus, until it was known that Jesus the Prophet came from there. ( cf. JN 1:45-52; 7:40-52; MT. 21:10-11 )

The town of Bethlehem has an interesting biblical history, which is pretty easy to research with the use of a concordance as a starting point. It existed as a town by name as early as in Genesis 35:19, when it is mentioned as the place where Jacob buried his beloved Rachel. At that time it was known as Ephrath, & Moses adds "( that is, Bethlehem )" to help the reader get their bearings. The name Bethlehem means "House of Bread", and later on it would be called the "City of David", because David had been born there.

It is mentioned only in passing in Joshua 19:15; is part of the scenes in Judges 12,17 & 19; is the central town in the book of Ruth as Naomi and

Boaz are Bethlehemites, and Ruth becomes a very important one; In I Samuel it becomes the scene as God uses Samuel to locate David and anoint him as the next king of Israel. In II Samuel and I Chronicles, we find a temporary reversal of fortunes for the town as it had become a garrison for the Philistines until David finally defeats them; it is mentioned in Ezra, Nehemiah and Jeremiah; then in the center of a major Messianic prophecy in Micah 5:2 ( which we will look at soon ), it's notoriety is sealed, and then it is mentioned in Matthew, Luke and John in the NT, but not by name anywhere else in the NT.

## In the New Testament

For all that, it remained an obscure little town only 7 miles SW of Jerusalem. Bethlehem's association with the Christmas story is of course, where its fame shines through and will never be forgotten now. It is found in numerous traditional Christmas carols<sup>i</sup>, and even in some more modern carols, but the Bible passages that are most central to it are Micah 5:2, and Matthew chapter 2. Luke and John's contribution in the Gospels are important as well, but more sparing in detail than Matthew. Luke 2:1-7 provides critical context, showing us how a couple from Nazareth 'just so happened' to be in Bethlehem exactly at the time Mary was about to give birth. In Luke, Bethlehem is also the first place the baby Jesus is worshipped as the Son of God: LK 2:8-20 – by shepherds in the middle of the night. Note vv. 10-12, where the angels direct the shepherds as potential worshippers to the “City of David” ( Bethlehem ).

John mentions Bethlehem only once, and it is in JN 7:4-42, and it is in the context of “*some of the people*” beginning to ‘connect the dots’ of Jesus's words and miraculous actions to see Him as “*the prophet*” ( cf. Deut. 18:15-19 ), or “the Christ.” Yet, the fact that His known hometown was in Nazareth in Galilee was a bit of a stumbling block for those who knew their Bibles – note vv. 41b-42. This seeming contradiction caused an argument in v. 43. In JN 7:25-31, we see the start of the theological debate that erupts, causing a division by v. 43. The argument of these people, perhaps less biblically informed than their peers, claim that “*no one will know when he [ the Messiah ] will come from*”. Jesus clarifies for them in v. 28 ( note the henna clause – “*So... Jesus proclaimed...*”), v. 29, that He ultimately came from heaven. ( cf. JN 7:14-31 )

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<sup>i</sup> There are 2 genres of these Christmas carols & hymns: ( 1 ) those which mention Bethlehem, and (2) those that only allude to it; some of these are: (1) O Little Town of Bethlehem, Angels We Have Heard on High, We Three Kings, Sing We Now of Christmas, O Come All Ye Faithful, Hark, the Herald, Angels Sing, While Shepherds Watched their Flocks, Once in Royal David's City, The Birthday of a King, How Great Our Joy!, Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne, A Manger in Bethlehem; God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen; I Wonder as I Wander; and (2) Angels from the Realms of Glory, The First Noel, Go Tell it on the Mountain, O Holy Night, What Child is This?, Away in a Manger, All is Well, Silent Night, Coventry Carol...and many more not sung in the past 60 years or so, found only in older Hymn Books.

One comment by the Pharisees in John 8:39-41, intimates without mentioning Bethlehem by name, that they knew where He was born although they also knew that He had arrived in their midst from Nazareth. Their comment about Him being *“born of sexual immorality”* points to the fact that they were aware of what we see as His virgin birth in Bethlehem, but their perception of it was that He was the result of an adulterous union. Yet, here He stood before them, this rube from Nazareth and Bethlehem, taking them to theology school!

When you consider His numerous encounters with the Jewish leaders and the fact that He bested them every time, and when we think of the words of the officers sent to arrest Him in JN 7:44-46... *“No one ever spoke like this man!”* – they should have been much more careful in their *“searching of the Scriptures”* [ JN 5:44-46 ] to discover how ‘this mere man’, this carpenter from Nazareth could have broken the biblical ‘arguments’ they had studied to possess throughout their lives!

Before we get too far afield from our topic, let’s go back to the book of the prophet Micah to look at Micah’s prophecy of the Messiah’s birth at Bethlehem.

## God Chooses Bethlehem

## Micah 5: 1-5

As with all OT prophetic passages, it is extremely important that we understand the context of the prophecy, or we can easily be hopelessly adrift in trying to figure out why the prophecy was given to its first readers, when the fulfilment of that prophecy was not revealed until many years – in this case – hundreds of years later.

We are most familiar with verse 2, which identifies the future birthplace of the Christ, but the context of these 5 verses as a unit is critical to see what I mentioned above – Why give this information to these people at that time?

The historical setting of these verses is a prophecy of Micah against Zedekiah, who had been appointed by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar as a vassal king to rule over Judah in about 589-587 BC. II Kings 25: 1-7 describes his punishment at Nebuchadnezzar’s hand because he had attempted to rebel, so his sons were killed in front of him and his eyes were gouged out.

Zedekiah was not directly in the line of Israel’s kings, and except for Nebuchadnezzar’s actions he never would have ascended to David’s throne. He was actually the uncle of the deposed ( by King Nebuchadnezzar ) Jehoiachin, and his given name was Mattaniah, which was then changed to Zedekiah by Nebuchadnezzar. ( II Kings 24:17ff )

But the important aspect of this series of events, and related to Bethlehem as God's selection of where He would bring His Christ into the world, is that this was the last king to sit on David's throne, and only until he rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar and was blinded and his royal authority cancelled. Ezekiel 12:13 records Zedekiah's death.

In Micah 5:1, what Micah describes is the siege of Jerusalem and the capture and abuse of King Zedekiah. In v. 1, the "*judge of Israel*" is Zedekiah, and "*the rod*" is the instrument used to gouge out his eyes, subsequently also gouging away his position.

Thus, we move to the much more well-known verse 2 of Micah 5, and it is surprisingly addressed to Bethlehem Ephrathah, thus personifying the town. This Bethlehem Ephrathah is the Bethlehem near Jerusalem. John MacArthur comments here,

"Verse 2 is then addressed to the town of Bethlehem. Since no king ever took the throne of David after Zedekiah was deposed, the promise in v. 2 was given to assure the Israelites that their true ruler, the rightful heir to David's throne, would nevertheless come forth. The messianic implications of that prophecy were obvious even in OT times. But like most of the OT's messianic prophecies, Micah 5:2 would have been somewhat mysterious until it was finally fulfilled. Micah gives no clue about when or how Messiah would come, but he was very specific about where the promised ruler would come from."<sup>ii</sup>

( V. 2a ) The theological precision here in this verse is astounding: Micah, inspired by the Holy Spirit, first addresses the town, personifying it, and describing its relative size and location as he does. He addresses "O Bethlehem Ephrathah" to nail down the exact geographical location of this town where Messiah would be born, the "O" being an expression of emotion, alluding to the greatness of the event that God will bring in the future to this town, and with it, outward, to Israel and the world.

It is a little town – in fact – "*too little to be among the clans of Judah*", telling us it is within the territory of Judah<sup>iii</sup>, described in Joshua 15:1-63. Within this description of Joshua, in vv. 20-63 an extensive list of cities in Judah's territory is found, and yet, Bethlehem is not named here. The list names 112 cities, and 12 times the text adds, "and their villages". When the list gets to Jebus ( that is, Jerusalem ), note v. 63. Jerusalem or Jebus is within 7 miles of Bethlehem, but is not even named here. So it was very small. Undoubtedly, this is one reason that Micah's description reads as it does – Bethlehem was tiny, inconsequential and was not on anyone's radar ( except for God's ) as a place where one of the most magnificent events in the history of the world would take place!

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<sup>ii</sup> John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to God*, Crossway, 2018, pp. 69-70

<sup>iii</sup> An important reference as the Messiah was expected to be a descendent of the tribe of Judah, cf. Genesis 49:8-12; Isaiah 11:1; Rev. 5:5, etc.

(V. 2b ) Next, Micah points out why he is addressing this village at all – “*from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel.*” This ‘person to come’s’ kingship ( “*ruler*”) is a definite Messianic clue. He would be the ruler of Israel. Note John 19:33-37 – Here in this interchange with Pilate, the one who would seal Jesus’ earthly fate ( as part of God’s plan – cf. JN 19:10-11 ), Jesus does admit to being a king, but His “*kingdom is not of this world*” He hastily adds, because His people had rejected Him as their King ( cf. JN 1:9-10; 19:14-15 ).

Now, out of Bethlehem came David, but from Micah’s perspective, that was in the past. Remember, his prophecy is in the chronological context of King Zedekiah’s dissolving reign – and he was the last in the line of descendants of David who would occupy his earthly throne.

No, the one who would “*come forth*” from Bethlehem was none other than the greatest son of David – Jesus the Christ. God would thus summon the ‘man’ into the world, entirely of His choice to save His people and He would bring that Saviour into the world via this insignificant hamlet. So this prophecy in its immediate impact to its readers in Jerusalem, is that they are to be reassured with the capture and deposing of their latest king, that God is not incapable of restoring to them new greatness in the form of a new ruler, which also means that the impending immediate misfortune that awaits them as the Babylonians continue to press their violent advantage against their city and nation, will not be permanent. It will end in the victory and glory of a ruler in Israel! All was not lost.

God had not cast aside His promised Davidic Covenant – cf. II Samuel 7:12 - 16 – but the fulfillment of the beginning of it was still hundreds of years away. Leslie Allen comments;

“From a dynasty now diminished in a way reminiscent of its beginnings in Bethlehem’s tiny clan, there will issue a national leader under God, to rule over a people who are heirs of the ancient tribal federation. This royal promise secures with it the destiny of God’s people.”<sup>iv</sup>

In this connection to David’s heritage, I believe we find the major reason that God chose Bethlehem as the birthplace of His Incarnate Son. He is to be the ruler of Israel, and He will take up His rightful place on David’s throne to rule Israel forever! No one will ever unseat Him. Note other biblical references to the Davidic Covenant: Ps. 89:1-4, 19-29, 33-37; Ps. 110:1-7; Zechariah’s prophecy in Luke 1:67-69; 2:8-11; and Gabriel’s prophetic narrative in Luke 1:32-33.

Christ Himself uses Psalm 110:1 as a theological argument against the Pharisees in Matt. 22:41-46. The Pharisees knew that the long-awaited Messiah would descend from David. It was a *sine qua non* of their

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<sup>iv</sup> Leslie C. Allen, The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah, NICOT – Eerdmans, 1976, reprint, p. 343

Messianic expectations. What they missed or misinterpreted was how a descendent of such a great king as David could be even greater than his ancient ancestor, especially if he came from Nazareth! So Jesus once again schooled the Jewish experts from their own Scriptures. The family connection between David and Jesus was a key element of Messianic promises and hence, at least a major reason if not *the* major reason that God chose Jesus' birthplace as the City of David – Bethlehem!

( V. 2c ) Notice a phrase in Micah 5:2c that can easily be overlooked; two words, “*for me*”. Who is the “*me*” here? It is not Micah, because Micah is speaking God's words, since he is God's prophet. “*Me*” is God Himself. When the One being spoken of in the rest of the verse comes forth, it will be “*for God*”. In Genesis 22:8, Abraham tells Isaac, whom he is about to sacrifice per God's command, when Isaac asks, where is the sacrifice, notice Abraham's words, “*God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.*” For further comparison, see I Samuel 16:1b. “*I have provided for myself a king among his [ Jesse's ] sons.*” This passage refers to the anointing of David by Samuel the prophet, and gives us real insight into how God, in His sovereignty, chooses those who will fulfill His will and purposes. Note vv. 6-7 in this passage. Now see I Samuel 15:26-29, where Samuel, not yet having met David or been shown God's intended kingship for David, identifies David to Saul, through Samuel, as “*a neighbour of yours who is better than you*”. Even earlier in the narrative of I Samuel, in 13:13-14, David is identified as “*The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart.*” David's impact on Israel's history is immense, but Jesus, the greater Son of David's, is inestimably greater. And both were born in Bethlehem, so this is a point of great significance.

Continuing on in Micah 5:2c, the prophet arrests our attention because the One who is coming forth at Bethlehem has pre-existed that coming forth! He will not begin His existence in 1<sup>st</sup> century Bethlehem, because Micah says, “*whose coming forth is of old, from ancient days*”. The NKJV says, “*from everlasting*”. This is at the very least an allusion to, if not an outright declaration of the eternality of the One to come. It is a referral to an existence in eternity past. So we now, as have centuries of believers before we were alive, understand the One who is to come [ for us, who has come ] as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person of the Trinity, the Son of God, Jesus Christ. See John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:13-19; and Hebrews 1:1-3. He is co-Creator, and God in the flesh as of His Bethlehem birth.

The phrase “*whose coming forth*” here is interesting. Although His eternal pre-existence is not in question by most knowledgeable believers, is this all that means? This “coming forth” could ( & I believe, does ) also carry the weight of His pre-incarnate appearances throughout the OT, where He made His existence known to many individuals and sometimes groups, personally, and from Scripture's record, to us as well. There are at least 27 such “Christophanies” in the OT – some very well known ( ie., to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18 ), and to Joshua as he was about to

lead Israel against Jericho ( Joshua 5:13-15 ). Many are lesser known – mostly due to OT avoidance by many Christians. One that does not read as a Christophany, but is identified as one by John – JN 12:41 – is found in Isaiah 6:1-7. The “*Lord high and lifted up*” is none other than Christ, according to the Apostle, John. So this “*going forth*” is meant to convey not only pre-existence, but also a visual realization of His occasional appearances among His people, having left heaven to come down to earth temporarily...before He was born at Bethlehem.

However, once He was born at Bethlehem, He is no longer an occasional visitor but a permanent fixture in Israel for 33 years, in only 3 of which He publicly ministers to His people, and after His death, resurrection and ascension, He now lives to intercede for us, to save us to the uttermost! Once He had arrived, there was no way to ignore the impact of that arrival on earth. Titus 3:4-5 provides a succinct report of the major change when He came to stay, echoing the claim of the angel in Matthew 1:21 to Joseph. He came to save His people from their sins.

So, in Micah 5:2c, “*whose coming forth is of old, from ancient days*” is referring to more than pre-existence. It is a claim to Deity, but not just Deity. This is a fairly clear depiction of a pre-existent, ancient Being who is going to “*come forth*” in Bethlehem, but it is also just as surely a description of an expected human birth! So what we have before us here, when we analyze it in detail and consider the language, is One who will not only be born – a man – but who is also ancient, pre-existing as Deity prior to this Bethlehem birth! There are more than hints that this in fact, was the case in the fulfillment of this prophecy. (1) Matthew 1:18-23; (2) LK 1:26-33,35; (3) LK 1:68-71; (4) LK 2:8-15; and then Peter identifies the grown Jesus in (5) Matt. 16:13-17 as exactly who He is!

The entire testimony of the NT gives evidence of His place of birth and the dual nature of this gift from God – 100% God, and 100% man – known as “the hypostatic union.”

One further NT proof of Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Saviour is provided in Matthew 2:1-18. Note who Herod consulted ‘secretly’ to find out where the Christ was to be born. He asked the chief priests and scribes of the people. Herod was not an Israelite. He was Idumean, an Edomite. Rome had made him a vassal king to ‘rule’ Israel, but he was illegitimate, not a descendent of David, yet out of political expediency, the Romans had placed him in charge. So he needed to ask the true Israelites – the priests and scribes – to tell him the answer to his question, the one the Magi had asked him, expecting him to know ( v. 2 ). Also notice v. 1 – “*Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judah...*”

In Luke 2:1-7, which we have already looked at, we recognize this very familiar aspect of the Christmas story. Because of 2 other politicians, Caesar Augustus and Quirinius, the governor of Syria, and the need for

an immediate census, in order to count and locate the people, and tax them appropriately - Joseph and Mary, citizens of Nazareth, even though she was almost to term in her pregnancy – were forced to travel from Nazareth in the north to Bethlehem in the south ( see v. 4 ). How much simpler for them if they could have stayed in Nazareth for the birth of Jesus rather than travel all those miles ( mostly uphill ) to be registered in Joseph's hometown, Bethlehem, the City of David. Since Messiah was to be a direct descendent of David, we are given Joseph's ( although he was not the biological father of Jesus, he was the adopting father ) pedigree – because he too was *“of the house and lineage of David.”* ( cf. Matt. 1:15-16; Luke 3:23-24 ). It is amazing to see how God's sovereignty knits everything together to bring the prophecies of His prophets to fruition.

### Micah 5:3-5

### The Good Shepherd of God's Flock

Let's now read Micah 5:3-5a. Verse 3 is immediately intriguing as it connects what we know about Bethlehem from our NT perspective to see the mention of *“when she who is in labor has given birth.”* We cannot help but wonder if this part of the prophecy relates to Mary? Although it is tempting to assume that interpretation, it is more likely ( in its context ) a reference to the faithful remnant of Micah 4:10, who, in their captivity would be like a woman in labor as they awaited rescue or redemption. In fact, the second part of v. 3 seems to confirm that interpretation.<sup>v</sup>

But vv 4-5a again refer us back to the coming Messiah, who is referred to as *“One who will shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord.”* Now, here, we can almost immediately call to mind John 10 & Jesus as *“the Good Shepherd”*, one of the titles He used of Himself, and in John 10, in particular contrast to Ezekiel 34 and the 'wicked shepherds'. He will be this in *“the strength of the Lord His God; in the majesty of the Lord His God.”*

Leslie Allen makes a strong connection to the idea of the One to come being Christ as the Shepherd of his people;

“It is via Micah 5 that the royal road leads to the concept of Christ as Shepherd of his people. The linking of Micah 5:2 in the Matthean citation with 2 Samuel 5:2 in the final part, “a leader who will shepherd my people Israel”, merely adapts an expression of pastoral imagery which already exists in Micah 5:4. Here is an important forward-looking manifestation of the royal complex of ideas upon which the NT literature build so much. It is “our Lord Jesus” who is “the great shepherd of the sheep”, the “shepherd and guardian of our souls,”, the “chief shepherd” of the human flock served by its leaders as under-shepherds, “their shepherd” who will “lead them to springs of living water” – a striking application of the divine imagery of Psalms 23:1,2 and Isaiah 49:10 to Christ – and above all “the good shepherd” who

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<sup>v</sup> Homer Hailey, A Commentary on the Minor Prophets, Baker, 1972, p. 209



“lays down his life for the sheep,” who must fetch “other sheep that are not of this [ Jewish ] fold.”<sup>vi</sup>

This imagery also builds on what David’s role was before Samuel anointed him as king. He was a shepherd ( cf. I Samuel 16:10-13 )

### Why Bethlehem?

So then, why Bethlehem? We’ve established the veracity of the prophecy through context, and the NT evidence for its fulfillment – admittedly, not comprehensively – but with enough citations and passages to realize that Bethlehem was the predicted and actual place of Jesus’ birth. When added to the other prophecies which focus on His birth, His Person, in the prophecies of Isaiah and others – of His virgin birth, who He would be and the Holy Spirit’s empowerment of Him during His incarnate life, we must stand amazed at this One we joyfully worship, perhaps more intensely during the Christmas season.

But as to “Why Bethlehem?” here is what we have uncovered:

1. ) The main reason that has surfaced during our brief investigation is His birth at Bethlehem immediately connects Him to David, His great ancestor. The royalty aspect of His Davidic connection / relationship is paramount since David also was born in Bethlehem hundreds of years prior to Christ’s birth there. Jesus’ birth, under incredible circumstances regarding Mary & Joseph, from Nazareth, takes place with Joseph and Mary being descendants of David as well, is frankly, astounding. Jesus would be a “ruler of Israel” as David was, and according to the Davidic Covenant promises, He would rule from David’s throne forever.
2. ) As we examined the last few verses of the passage in Micah 5, we also arrived at the conceptual prophecy that Jesus would also be a shepherd of God’s people, as David was a shepherd in Bethlehem – or at least nearby it.
3. ) We have to add, about Jesus as the ruler, - since He was to be a Prophet, Priest and King – why did the birth not take place in the obvious choice for a ruler of Israel – Jerusalem? We saw what occurred with Herod in Matthew 2. This birth happened under his nose, 7 miles away. Only the visit of the Magi gave him a clue about the whereabouts of this King just born weeks before the magi arrived. God’s sovereignty overruled Herod’s authority and the Magi, Jesus, Joseph and Mary were warned by God and escaped to Egypt, and only returned when this Herod had died, and yet the family dwelt in Nazareth, far from the sons of Herod. Had Jesus been born in Jerusalem, Herod would have acted much more quickly to try to dispose of this One who would be a usurper of his

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<sup>vi</sup> Leslie Allen, OP CIT p. 351

throne. He would have been aware of this almost instantly, had Jesus been born in Jerusalem.

4. ) We traced the history of Bethlehem back to Genesis and the burial of Rachel, and saw it come up a number of times in Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I & II Samuel, I & II Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, and of course, Micah. For a small, inconsequential hamlet ( at least until Christ came from there ), it certainly gets a lot of OT attention, admittedly most of it minor attention.
5. ) To fulfill this prophecy – connects the dots back to the OT and confirms God’s purpose and intentions. Combine this with the other prophecies of Messiah’s birth: Genesis 3:15; Isaiah 7:14; 9:6-7; 11:1-5; and the Davidic Covenant could also be included – II Samuel 7:12-14 – and we have a picture of the coming Messiah that almost flawlessly displays Him in real life, long before He ever arrived in Bethlehem, and 30 years later began a ministry that lasts for eternity!

To wrap this up, I thought we should read Luke 2:8-14.

<sup>8</sup>And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. <sup>10</sup>And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. <sup>11</sup>For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup>And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup>“Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

4,749 words and Scripture