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SILENT NIGHT?

by Charles E. McCracken

The drama unfolding on the night of Jesus' birth has captured the imagination of Christians through the centuries. The inn with no vacancy, the fields where shepherds watched their flocks and the city of Bethlehem figure prominently in the imagery associated with the nativity.

We're familiar with the spectacular angelic announcement, *For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord* (Lk. 2:11). And, as Christians, we understand the implication of the angel's message. But, how did the shepherds, who first heard the message, understand the announcement?

History

A little over a thousand years earlier, David was king of Israel. The kingdom had been united and Jerusalem established as the capital. Overwhelmed by gratitude for all God had done, David determined to build a temple to house the Ark of the Covenant. Although he was denied that privilege, God consoled David through Nathan the prophet who delivered a message with the terms of what is known as the Davidic Covenant.

Nathan was straightforward. He told

David, *your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever* (2 Sam. 7:16). It is an unconditional or unilateral covenant, and one of four between God and Israel in which God is the sole guarantor responsible for the fulfillment.

The first provision of God's promise to David was "a house". God was not promising to build David a place to eat, sleep and hang his hat; he already had a palace (2 Sam. 7:1). Instead, God was guaranteeing a dynasty, a royal line of descent or posterity that would continue into perpetuity. God explicitly declared, *I have made a covenant with My chosen, I have sworn to My servant David: your seed I will establish forever, and build up your throne to all generations* (Ps. 89:3-4).¹

Second, in addition to an eternal dynasty, God promised David an everlasting kingdom. Although not functioning at all times or in every period of subsequent history, the Davidic kingdom continues to be viable. Through the millennia of Gentile domination, the kingdom could have been restored at any time.

Third, God promised David a throne, which like his posterity and kingdom,

would be established forever (2 Sam. 7:16). Just as David's kingdom has continued to have viability throughout history, so the Davidic right to rule persists from David's time into the future. Despite periods when others have usurped the rule over Israel, God guarantees that the kingdom and the throne rightfully belong to David forever.

The shepherds watching the sheep on the hills around Bethlehem were part of the Levitical priesthood entrusted with the care of temple flocks.² They were versed in the Hebrew Scriptures and certainly familiar with Israel's history including God's covenant with David.

Prophecy

The shepherd's knowledge of Scripture undoubtedly included the prophecies concerning the Messiah. A key Messianic prophecy given by Isaiah was delivered to Judah during the rule of King Ahaz. It was a dark period of history when Israel to the north had created an alliance with Syria against Judah. In their strategy to destabilize Judah, Pekah, king of Israel, and Rezin, king of Syria, plotted to kill Ahaz and replace him with a Syrian puppet king named Tabeal, thus threatening the Davidic line.³

Isaiah assured Ahaz that the alliance would ultimately fail and pressed him to request a sign that would authenticate the prophecy (Is. 7:10-12, 16). Ahaz did not trust God and in point of fact, had already

determined to appeal to Assyria for help. Assuming a pseudo-pious tone to camouflage his disobedience and claiming he would not test God, Ahaz refused to ask for a sign.

In spite of the king's refusal, Isaiah gave the sign—not to unbelieving Ahaz—but to the house of David:

Hear now, O house of David . . . Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel (Is. 7:13-14).

While a time frame confirming resolution of the current threat to unbelieving Ahaz was embedded in the prophecy, the sign had even greater significance for the future.⁴

The prophecy tied fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant to the promised Messiah assuring the house of David and all Israel that the Davidic dynasty, kingdom and throne were secure and unaffected by the present circumstances.

The sign was clear. It was the indisputable test—the virgin conceiving and bearing a Son—to verify the identity of the promised Messiah. The use of the



Stone Manger, Tekoa, south of Bethlehem

definite article identifies a specific virgin referring to the promise of Messiah through the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15).⁵ The sign put Israel on high-alert for the coming of the Messiah who would be born of a virgin as Isaiah predicted.

Shortly after giving this sign,

Isaiah gives a more comprehensive description of this same child as the Messianic fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant,

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name shall be called Wonderful,



Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The

zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this (Is. 9:6-7).

Messiah, a descendant of David and ruling from David's throne, will bring peace to the world not only during the Messianic Kingdom, but continuing into eternity, as Isaiah boldly articulates. Referencing Messiah as Mighty God and



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...in you all families of the earth shall be blessed. Gen. 12:3

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- ★ Israeli designer, **Lilach Steiner**, created a prototype of a shoe for diabetics that increases circulation by using a person's body weight to massage the feet. Her **Flow shoe** has a trendy esthetic boosting appeal to the fashion conscious, but isn't in production. . .yet! <<http://nocamels.com/2013/08/flow-the-israeli-shoe-designed-for-diabetics/>>



Everlasting Father specifically underscores Messiah's deity. These names can refer to no one but God. The certainty of Messiah's advent has its basis in the Davidic Covenant, a unilateral covenant requiring the "zeal of the Lord" to bring it to pass.



Watchtower in the Judean Hills

Geography

The shepherds would also have been aware of the prophecy of Micah that not only pinpointed the location of Messiah's birth in Bethlehem, but confirmed Messiah's connection to the Davidic Covenant,

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting (Micah 5:2).

In the broader context of this prophecy, Micah states,

And you, O tower of the flock [Heb. Migdal Eder], the stronghold of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, even the former dominion shall come, the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem (Micah 4:8).

Although an often overlooked passage, Micah discloses that Messiah, who fulfills the Davidic Covenant (the former dominion), "was to be revealed from Migdal Eder; the tower of the flock".⁶

Interestingly, history documents that Migdal Eder, located on the northern out-

skirts of Bethlehem, was a watchtower built for the protection of temple flocks. On the night of the nativity, the sky burst into blinding light on the fields near Bethlehem, and the angel announced to the shepherds,

Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord [a Deliverer who is the Messiah, the Lord (CJB)]. And this will be the sign to you: you will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger (Lk. 2:10-12).

The angel did not give directions to guide the shepherds to the manger, yet there is no mention of confusion or frantic discussion about where to look for the baby. The record candidly asserts, *they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger (Lk. 2:16)*. The location of the closest manger was likely Migdal Eder at the edge of the fields where they were watching their sheep—the very place Micah prophesied that Messiah would

be revealed. With the city of Bethlehem crawling with people, customary guest-rooms filled to capacity and the delivery close at hand, the Tower of the Flock that Joseph and Mary had passed entering Bethlehem may have been their only hope for shelter and seclusion, and the first place the shepherds would look after receiving the thrilling news.

Implications

The shepherds immediately understood the implications of the angel's message and everything about the newborn baby provided confirmation.

They knew Messiah had to be a descendant of King David in fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant. Mary and Joseph's presence in Bethlehem as a result of the census imposed by Caesar Augustus confirmed His lineage (Lk. 2:4).

The shepherds knew the sign Isaiah had given to identify the promised Messiah. No doubt, Mary and Joseph confirmed the sign by telling the shepherds about Gabriel's announcement nine months earlier. Gabriel (the same angel who had interpreted Daniel's visions and revealed the outline of God's future plan for Israel) had appeared to Mary explaining that even though she was a virgin, she would give birth to the Messiah.

Highlighting the elements of the Davidic Covenant, Gabriel described her Son saying, *He will be great,*

and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of His kingdom there will be no end (Lk. 1:32-33; cf. Dan. 9:24-27).

Expectantly awaiting fulfillment of Micah's prophecy, the shepherds even knew where Messiah would be born. Upon hearing the angel's announcement,

the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us' (Lk. 2:15).

After finding Mary and Joseph and the infant lying in a feeding trough,

They made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds (Lk. 2:17-18).



Bethlehem from the North

The shepherd's actions demonstrate that they understood the significance of the circumstances (v. 17-18). The baby they had just seen was a descendent of King David; He was born of a virgin; He was born in the city of Bethlehem. This was not a night to keep silent—they shared the Good News!

Endnotes:

¹ Even after Jehoram, a later king of Judah, married Ahab's daughter and did, *evil in the eyes of the Lord*, God stood by His promise to David and would not, *destroy the house of David because of the covenant He had made with David* (2 Chron. 21:6-7).

² Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus The Messiah*, (Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.), 131.

³ Charles Lee Feinberg, "The Virgin Birth in the Old Testament and Isaiah", *Bibliotheca Sacra*, (119:475, July 1962). <<https://www.galaxie.com/article/bsac119-475-08>>.

⁴ Although the sign given to the house of David (that a virgin would bear a son) had no specified time frame for its fulfillment, the embedded message to Ahaz did. In contrast to the "house of David", the pronoun "you" in verse 16 specifies Ahaz; and the period of time referenced was definite. Using the interval between the birth of a child and his ability to discern good and evil, Isaiah conveyed to Ahaz that within that same time span, the alliance between Israel and Syria would fail. Significantly, two years later in 732 B.C. both Pekah and Rezin were dead along with the feared alliance.

⁵ The original prophecy was given shortly after man's disobedience in the Garden of Eden.

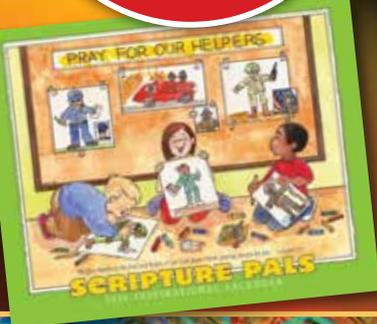
⁶ Edersheim, 131.

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