

Prophecy & the Divine Decree: It Does Not Determine History but Confirms It; Micah Prophesies Messiah's Birth in Bethlehem, Mic 5:2

34. The prophecies of the coming Messiah even nailed down the exact geographic location of His birth. The interesting thing about a biblical prophecy is that it is not a prognostication or a prediction but a definitive statement about what will happen in future history.
35. It was known to God in eternity past how volitional decisions would transpire historically to place Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem at the time of Messiah's birth. But, looking back retrospectively, some allege a divine manipulation of history having primary influence on the timing of the holy family's arrival there. What actually occurred was the omniscience of God knowing the exact geographic location of Mary and Joseph at the time of her delivery: 30° 42' 20" north latitude; 35° 12' 30" east longitude.
36. Prophecy must be understood through the prism of the divine decree:

The *source* of the divine decree is identified as the omniscience of God "comprehending" all things in eternity past. The decree is His eternal and immutable will regarding the future existence of events which will happen in time and regarding the precise order and manner of their occurrence. (p. 297)

The will of God means the *decision* He made in eternity past, from His attribute of sovereignty, which established that certain things would actually come into being while other things would not. (pp. 297-98)

The divine decree is the eternal plan by which God has rendered certain all of the events of the universe, including both angelic and human history. God's decree rendered all things as certain to occur; He decided that they *would* exist. In doing so, He did not interfere with angelic or human free will! In giving us volition, He also decreed that our decisions, whatever they might be, would certainly take place. Being omniscient, He knew ahead of time precisely what we would decide. He not only decreed that those decisions would exist but He also decreed the exact manner, consistent with His character, in which He would handle our decisions. (p. 298)

Picture the decree of God as a giant computer. In eternity past God fed facts from His omniscience into the computer. The facts include every thought you would ever have, every decision you would ever make, every action you would ever take. (p. 300)

No event is directly effected or caused by the decree. The decree merely establishes what will be caused, but the decree itself is not the cause. The cause is your own free will. Your thoughts are in the decree because, in eternity past, God had the wisdom to know *what* you would think and to not omit from His planning the fact that you *would* think it! (p. 304)

Prophecy never determines history.¹ (p. 314)

¹ R. B. Thieme, Jr., "Appendix B: The Doctrine of the Divine Decree," in *The Integrity of God*, 4th ed (Houston: R. B. Thieme, Jr., Bible Ministries, 2005), 297-98, 300, 304, 314.

37. So when we observe the events that led to Mary and Joseph being in Bethlehem at the time of the Lord's birth the reason was a sequence of political events that was *recognized* by the divine decree, not *caused* by it.
38. Let's note the Old Testament prophecy of the virgin birth's location, its fulfillment, and a commentary that illustrates a common conclusion that occurs when one does not recognize the divine decree:

Micah 5:2 - "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah [אֶפְרַתָּה \eph'-ra-thah\]: a district identifying the city of David from other locations of the same name], too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity."

39. Around two years after the birth of Jesus, Persian magi arrived in Jerusalem inquiring about the location where the King of the Jews was born. Hearing of their inquiry Herod called a meeting with the chief priests of the Sanhedrin along with the Jewish scribes to learn from them where Scripture prophesied the site to be. Their response, recorded in Matthew 2:5, was to quote Micah 5:2.
40. Herbert Lockyer comments in his book *All the Messianic Prophecies of the Bible*, that "God's overruling Providence" manipulated the affairs of men so that Mary would be in Jerusalem for the delivery of the Christ Child:

As the time of His birth drew near, Mary was actually living at the wrong place if her Son the Messiah, was to be born in Bethlehem of Judea. But see how the intricacies of God's overruling Providence fulfills His prophetic Word. Sir William Ramsey—the noted British chemist and archaeologist, was well as Bible scholar—in 1923 discovered at Ankara, Turkey, a Roman temple inscription which stated that in the reign of Caesar Augustus there were three great tax collections. The second was ordered *four years* before the birth of Christ; the third, several years after His birth.

The second special tax was the one the proud Jews resented; so they sent a commission to Rome to protest about it. Quirinius, the local governor of Syria, did not have the authority to settle the problem. Further, those were the days of slow communications and slower travel, and as the commission finally failed, the Jews had to submit to the enrollment and taxing. By the time the official tax collectors had worked their way eastward, town by town, and after the time-consuming delays caused by the Jewish protests, exactly enough delay was caused, and all in the natural course of events, so that when the enrollment was put in force in Judea the exact time had come for Mary to give birth to her Child (Luke 2:1-3).

Dr. F. J. Meldau put it this way in his booklet on *Messiah in Both Testaments*:

Neither Mary nor Caesar nor the Roman tax collectors did the *timing*, nor were they in charge of affairs; but the God who rules the world behind the scenes had His hand on the wheel, and He literally “moved the peoples of the world” and timed everything to the very day, so that Mary and Joseph got to Bethlehem in *the nick of time*, that Jesus, the chosen Messiah, might be born in the right place designated by the infallible finger of prophecy.²

41. These commentaries by Lockyer and Meldau assert that God decided the virgin birth would occur in Bethlehem and then manipulated the affairs of men in order to get Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem on time.
42. These two men imply that events of history caught God by surprise and He had to use delaying tactics so that Mary would not reach term until after her arrival in Bethlehem.
43. But, let’s look at it through the prism of the divine decree and review some principles just noted:
 - 1) “God comprehended all things in eternity past.” There is no event in human history that He did not know and consider including the second tax collection under Caesar Augustus, the Jewish protest and subsequent delay of the collection, the slow progress of the collection once begun, and the Senatorial decree that citizens of Judea register in “His own city” (Luke 2:3b).
 - 2) “God has rendered certain all of the events of the universe, including both angelic and human history.” After perceiving the thoughts, decisions, and actions of every person in history (e.g., Augustus, Quirinius, the Jews) He decreed those events would certainly occur.
 - 3) In doing so, God “did not interfere with angelic or human free will.” The issue in the angelic conflict is human volition. God created human beings as free agents and He built His plan around their free decisions in order to accomplish His ultimate objective.
 - 4) “Being omniscient, He knew ahead of time precisely what we would decide. He not only decreed that those decisions would exist but He also decreed the exact manner, consistent with His character, in which He would handle our decisions.” God’s plan is greater than the machinations of the human mind. God does not manipulate human free will but observes it and constructs His plan so that human history moves forward toward the fulfillment of His plan.

² Herbert Lockyer, *All the Messianic Prophecies of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), 63.

- 5) “No event is directly effected or caused by the decree. The decree merely establishes what will be caused, but the decree itself is not the cause. The cause is your own free will.” Thus, the decree causes nothing, it simply records what will happen and guarantees its certain futuration.
- 6) “Prophecy never determines history.” Prophecy is a revelation by the Holy Spirit to a human writer of Scripture concerning a certain future historical event that is declared to be certainly future in the divine decree.