

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

Micah 5:2, NRSV, updated edition.

*² But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.*

Christmas Eve: *Must we believe in Bethlehem Ephrathah?*

There are numerous references to the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, in the New Testament. Since the very first followers of Christ were Jews who simply accepted Jesus as the Messiah, and most of the authors of the New Testament were Jews, and the Gospel of Matthew specifically was aimed at convincing Jews to become Christians, it makes sense that the New Testament authors would have worked hard to show that Jesus is indeed the Messiah promised by the ancient Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Zechariah, and Malachi. Also, the New Testament didn't exist yet, and so the earliest evangelists like Paul and Peter, when they sought to convert Gentiles, used the Hebrew Scriptures as their source of the Word of God; thus, the ancient prediction of a Messiah became important to non-Jews, as well. One of the most famous Old Testament quotes that predicts

a savior is in the Book of Micah. Remember that the Prophets were intermediaries between God and the Chosen People. The Prophets conveyed the anger and hopes of God to his people and conveyed the worries and prayers of the Israelites to God. Micah was from a village called Moresheth, a forested, hilly area southwest of Jerusalem, where they grew olives and figs; there were also vineyards. We are not sure what Micah did before he traveled to Jerusalem to serve as a Prophet: he may have been a farmer or a tradesman. He felt a bond with the common people of southern Israel, the area called Judah, which included Jerusalem. He was humble, with no official role, such as being a priest.

But before we look at this passage from Micah, I met a young man who was visiting his grandmother at the hospital; she was unconscious and on a ventilator. The young man, we'll call him Franklin, said that his grandmother had taken care of him much of the time while he was growing because his father had to travel on business and his mother had a disabling condition. He told me about how happy he was when he and his grandma went to church every Sunday. It was the special thing that only the two of them did, and as he grew into an older kid, he treasured that time with her. He said that he always knew that his grandmother would probably die while he was still somewhat young, but he had hoped for another ten years. He asked me to pray for her, but not for healing, because she was on

her way to God. I took both their hands; I prayed for a joyous journey through the eternal Kingdom of God. Then Franklin sheepishly asked me if I thought that Jesus was real or if the New Testament was what so many people said it was: a fictionalized story about a spiritual leader who later was considered a Messiah.

Our quote is famous because it seems to match specific facts from the story of Jesus in the New Testament. As some background, the Book of Micah is ancient. At the time of Micah's time as a Prophet, Israel was apparently under attack by the Assyrian Empire. The Babylonians would later conquer the Assyrians and destroy Jerusalem, including the First Temple. Micah predicts that a Messiah, an anointed one sent by God, will save Israel. This will be a king from the line of David – and he will be born in Bethlehem. The Messiah will have divine power. But until the savior comes, Israel will suffer a terrible time of tribulation. Here is the passage, the first five verses of Chapter 5 of the Book of Micah:

*5 Now you are walled around with a wall;
siege is laid against us;
with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel
upon the cheek.*

*² But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah (ef-ruh-thuh),
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.*

³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time

*when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.*

*⁴And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth,
⁵and he shall be the one of peace.*

This starts out by saying that Israel is under siege, and scholars believe, historically, it was the Assyrians laying siege to Jerusalem. Micah says that a smaller town, in a lesser-known area of Judah, will send forth one who will rule, and whose origin will be from the most ancient of times. Indeed, who could come from more “*ancient days*”, as our passage says, than someone who has always existed, the Son of God? This ruler, this king will be born in *Bethlehem of Ephrathah* (*ef-ruh-thuh*). This refers to one of two villages called Bethlehem that existed in Israel. Specifically, this is the Bethlehem in Judah; *Ephrathah* (*ef-ruh-thuh*) means “fruitful” and is apparently an ancient name for the area. Bethlehem means “house of bread”, and it was named this because it was historically a critical area for growing grain for Israel. Notice that Jesus would later call himself the “Bread of Life” in the Gospel of John. The passage from Micah says that God will abandon Israel until the birth of the Messiah, and then the remnant of his people will be restored. The Messiah will protect his flock with “*the strength of God*”. He

will rule over all the Earth. Under this king, we shall “*live secure*”. This Messiah will also usher in an era of “*peace*”. This last part is taken by Christians to be a prediction, not of a peaceful time in Israel or on the Earth as we know it, but at the end of time when Jesus comes again.

This passage impacted the writing of the New Testament. Here is a reference to Micah from the Gospel of Matthew. Chapter 2 begins with this:

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.” 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet.

When King Herod, who wants to get rid of Jesus, hears that the “*King of the Jews*” has been born, some of the most knowledgeable leaders of the Temple remember the words written by Micah 700 years before, and declare to Herod that it will be in the village of Bethlehem, the one that is in Judea.

There has been a huge debate about this seeming prophesy of the birth of Jesus. Did the writers of the Gospels, the Book of Acts, and various letters in the New Testament carefully craft a story that would make Jesus’ life mesh with the Messianic predictions of the Hebrew Scriptures? Even the idea of Jesus being born in Bethlehem, when he lived in Nazareth, strikes many scholars as dubious. In

Luke, we're told that Caesar Augustus ordered a census, and that people had to go to the hometown of their ancestors; thus, Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem, the home of the family of King David. But historians have failed completely at finding any census that happened at that time. And the Romans did not require people to travel to their ancestral hometowns for censuses. Did Luke make this all up so that Jesus would appear to have been born in the town that Micah prophesized?

After Franklin asked me if I thought the story of Jesus was fictionalized, I said that taking the Bible literally is a modern phenomenon that wasn't fully accepted until the 1800s. We must read the New Testament as if we were the early Christians for whom it was initially written. It is a spiritual story that describes Jesus being born a human so that he could tell us that the God of the Jews is our God, too, and that under the New Covenant, we live by faith, we put our full trust in God, and we are determined to live by the values that Jesus taught: kindness, generosity, and forgiveness. That is what we celebrate on Christmas: the birth of the Messiah who taught us how God wants humans to live, now and for eternity.

Franklin's grandmother died peacefully, and from what he told me about her, she certainly walked in the footsteps of her Messiah, Jesus. That is what matters. And she did something beautiful: she passed the gift of faith on to Franklin.