

Study Guide for The Micah and Matthew Controversy

By Dr. Cynthia and Luke, December 2021

The Micah and Matthew Controversy is important in the context of Muslim evangelism because when attacking Christian beliefs, more and more Muslims are quoting Jewish apologists.

In this video and study guide, Dr. Cynthia and Luke Price discuss the controversy, and explain why the Christian interpretation is correct.

Traditionally, Christians consider the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem to be a fulfillment of the messianic prophecy in Micah chapter 5 verse 2. Because this association is so strong, to deny that Jesus is the prophesied Messiah, Jewish apologists not only deny the association, but accuse Matthew of corruption and even treachery.

Micah 5:2 says:

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

Luke points out that the straightforward reading of the passage sounds like a special ruler will be born in Bethlehem. However, Jewish apologists claim that even though David is not mentioned, since David was born in Bethlehem the passage is indirectly referring to him. It means only that the Messiah will be a descendant of David. This downplays the significance of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, and opens the way for them to claim that any future leader is the Messiah, regardless of where he is born.

Luke points out that if the Jews are correct that the Messiah only descends from David, and need not be born in Bethlehem, that fits with Jesus too: one of his titles is “Son of David.” So Christians are OK with either interpretation, although we believe and prefer that Bethlehem is the designated birthplace.

Luke tells us that in the picturesque wording of the Hebrew, the origin of the Messiah is depicted as if a spring from the ancient times is flowing into the Messiah (from the word *Mowtsah*).

The expression, “from ancient times” would seem indicate very far in the past. David was only 300 years before Micah, so he does not seem as likely a candidate for the origin of the Messiah as “the Ancient of Days,” as God himself is referred to in the Bible, such as in Daniel chapter 7.

Matthew chapter 2, verses 1-6 explain how the Micah prophecy is fulfilled:

“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the One who has been born King of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.”

When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.

“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,
for out of you will come a ruler
who will be the shepherd of My people Israel.’”

Here is Micah 5:4:

“He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.”

If you compare the Micah passage to the Matthew quotation, you will see that they are not identical. The quotation combines verses 2 and 4 together, skipping over the end of verse 2 and all of verse 3. Why is that? The accusers ascribe sinister motives to it; that Matthew tries to “rewrite” the Bible and take out parts he does not like.

Dr. Cynthia has an easy explanation. She is a writer and speaker. Often for the sake of clarity and brevity she will shorten someone’s quotation, or a story. Certainly you will have seen that or done it yourself when relating something that happened.

In this case, the portion quoted is what directly answers the question of the wise men: where was the Messiah to be born? The quote mentions the location, and the function of the Messiah, in verse 4. It does not, nor does it need to quote the entire passage. Matthew includes the portion of the passage that was most pertinent to the Wise Men.

Dr. C says that from the passage there is no reason to assume that the entire passage was not read to Herod and the Wise Men. Matthew was not under any obligation to quote it all.

The second important point is that at the time, the chief priests and scribes had no problem with accepting that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Their traditional interpretation fits with the Christian understanding. Most of the early Christian believers were Jews. We are told in the book of Acts that many priests became Christians. The fulfillment of this passage could have been part of it.

Much later, unwilling to accept Jesus as the Messiah, some Jews deny that Bethlehem was to be the Messiah’s birthplace.

The third point on Matthew is a defense against the accusation that Matthew intentionally cut out the words that say, “*whose origins are from of old, from ancient times,*” because they did not fit with Jesus.

On the contrary, we strongly feel that this had nothing to do with the quote. Matthew does present Jesus as God, and this phrase supports that. However, the point in chapter 2 is to answer the question of where the Messiah was to be born. Matthew might not have wanted to divert the topic to Jesus being God at that point.

Another reason for Matthew’s condensing the verses is that he could be quoting something 5th hand. The quote was passed from: the scroll, to the priests and scribes, to Herod, to the Wise Men, to Mary and Joseph, and then to Matthew.

There are two **other accusations** against Matthew chapter 2 that we did not discuss, but which are good to know about and be prepared to defend:

1. **Not Born in Bethlehem:**

This claim is that there is no record outside of the Bible that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, so it did not happen. They say that Matthew simply invented Jesus' birth there in order to have a fulfilled prophecy.

This accusation is called "an argument from silence," meaning to records speaking to it. But we must remember that "an absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." Bethlehem is mentioned in two independent sources, Matthew and Luke. Bethlehem fits with the prophecy of the Messiah's birthplace.

The gospels tell us that Jesus himself is the one who told his disciples which prophecies he fulfilled. Matthew was his disciple. This interpretation would have come to Matthew from Jesus. (*Luke 24:27*)

2. **Written to Insult the Jews:**

We were surprised to hear a Jewish apologist claims that the entire story about Wise Men coming from the east was included by Matthew to insult the Jews. They say that he maliciously included it to show that the rest of the world recognized Jesus as the Messiah, but not the Jews.

This interpretation of the passage never occurred to us, or any other Christian we know of. It is unjustifiably reading an unkind motive to not only smear Matthew, but to keep people from taking the passage seriously.

But in fact, it is incredibly easy to disprove that Matthew is claiming that Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah.

Around the time of Jesus' birth, Jews already accepted him as the Messiah. For example, we find in Luke chapter 2:

- the shepherds who adored Jesus in the stable
- and Anna and Simeon, temple workers at his dedication

And in Matthew's very next chapter, chapter 3, he has the Jewish prophet John the Baptist (Yahia in Islam), proclaiming that the grown Jesus is the Messiah.

In summary, we hope that this discussion will not only bring you into deeper understanding of these two passages, but also enable you to defend them, and possibly inspire in you an even greater sense of wonder into the miracles surrounding Jesus Messiah's birth.

Bible References:

Micah 5:2,4

Matthew 2,3

Daniel 7:13

Luke 2:1-38 & 24:27

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Read Micah 5:2 in your Bible. To whom does it sound to you that the passage refers?
2. How are Micah 5:2 and Matthew chapter 2 traditionally related?
3. What is the Christian interpretation of these two passages?
4. How do Jewish apologists try to deny that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem?
5. How did the chief priests and the scribes at the time of Jesus' birth interpret the Bethlehem prophecy?
6. Do you find it acceptable that Matthew shortens the Micah passage, putting verses 2 and 4 together?
 - Why might Matthew have done that?
 - What common practice does Dr. C say Matthew could be doing?
 - Have you ever done anything like that?
7. What qualities does Micah 5:2,4 claim that the Messiah will have?
8. How did Jesus' disciples know which prophecies referred to him?
9. What unkind and untrue things do some Jewish apologists say about Matthew?
10. It is good when we have outside documentation for something that the Bible claims, like the way the Cyrus Cylinder confirms that King Cyrus let Jews return to Jerusalem and worship their God.
 - What about passages that do not have outside historical documentation. Is it needed to be sure that something that the Bible says happened?
11. EXTRA CREDIT: Dr. C uses the debate term "genetic fallacy" to describe doubting the truth of someone's point because it supports what they believe. This is a helpful thing to know about and look for in apologetics. We can't assume someone is wrong simply because they believe it; but sometimes a person's motivation can help us understand why they would make unsupported claims.
 - What does Dr. C say about Jewish apologists now wanting the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem that might be "genetic fallacy?"
 - How do the Jewish apologists accusations against Matthew fit with a genetic fallacy against him?