

Do Micah 5:2 and Matthew 2:5-6 declare the eternal deity of Messiah?
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“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, being little among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”¹

ואתה בית-לְחֶם אֶפְרַתָּה צְעִיר לְהַיּוֹת בְּאֶלְפֵי יְהוּדָה מִמֶּדֶד לִי יֵצֵא לְהַיּוֹת מוֹשֵׁל בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וּמוֹצָאָתוֹ מִקֶּדֶם מִיְמֵי עוֹלָם:

A passage often remembered around Christmas time, a portion of Micah 5:2 is quoted in Matthew 2:5-6 to describe that Israel’s ruler would be born in Bethlehem. Some Christian expositors and laypersons see the “eternal pre-incarnate existence” of the Messiah and therefore Messiah’s deity in the words of Micah 5:2 (in Hebrew, Micah 5:1): “whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”²

However, even a comparison of English translations shows that “eternality” in Micah 5:2 is not so cut-and-dry.

English Translations

Disagreement as to how to understand the last phrase of Micah 5:2 is reflected in the different English translations. Some English translations of Micah 5:2 imply eternity, while others do not. Compare the King James Version (KJV) with the English Standard Version (ESV):

KJV But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, *though* thou be little among the thousands of Judah, *yet* out of thee shall he come forth unto me *that is* to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth *have been from of old, from everlasting*.

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

These two translations show the typical differences in English translations. The KJV “**from everlasting**” may imply eternity. The ESV “**from ancient days**” does not. This paper aims to show that in this case, the ESV is the better reading.

Our investigation has to parts. First, we examine the words under question in Micah 5:2, and then secondly the context of Micah 5:2. An examination of both the words and the context of the passages shows that neither Micah nor Matthew was declaring the “eternal pre-incarnate existence” of Messiah. Rather, the passages refer to the promise of God given to David in *Israel’s historical past*, centuries before Micah lived.

What are the Hebrew Words?

There are three phrases at the end of Micah 5:2 that may, or may not refer to eternity:

1. *motsa-otav* מוֹצָאָתוֹ translated “his origin/s” or “his goings forth”.
2. *miqedem* מִקֶּדֶם translated “from before” or “from old” or “from long ago”.
3. *mimei olam* מִיְמֵי עוֹלָם translated “from eternity” or “from ancient days”.

¹ ESV with one variation, changing “too little to be” of ESV to “being little”.

² E.g., <https://israelmyglory.org/article/the-eternality-and-pre-existence-of-christ/> and [Keil and Delitzsch OT Commentary](#)

A word study shows that these words and phrases in Micah 5:2 (Hebrew 5:1) do **not** refer to eternity past but rather **refer to past times and events in Israel's history**.

Word #2 above (*miqedem*) does not present much difficulty, and most translators and interpreters don't interpret this word as a reference to "eternity" since "from before, from old, from long ago" does not imply eternity. However, we will examine some other occurrences of *miqedem* since the word often occurs with all or part of phrase #3 *mimei olam*.³

We begin our word study by noting that the principle words of phrase #3, "ancient days" יְמֵי עוֹלָם and the principle word of phrase #2, "before" מִקְדָּם, are used by the same prophet Micah two chapters later. In both instances, the words refer to a time in Israel's historical past:

- Micah 7:14 Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance, who dwell alone in a forest in the midst of a garden land; let them graze in Bashan and Gilead **as in the days of old** (יְמֵי עוֹלָם).⁴

Even the KJV, which translated יְמֵי עוֹלָם as "everlasting" in Micah 5:2, translates the same phrase here as "days of old". Israel didn't graze flocks in Gilead and Bashan in eternity past. Rather, the passage refers to a time in Israel's history, as in Moses's days, when God's people first conquered and grazed flocks in Bashan and Gilead (note the next verse, Micah 7:15); or, perhaps during Davidic times, when the kingdom of David extended to Gilead and Bashan. The point is: the idiom יְמֵי עוֹלָם refers to a time in Israel's historical past.

- Micah 7:20 You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from **the days of old** (יְמֵי קְדָם)

Micah used the word *qedem* (in construct with "days of") to refer to patriarchal times.

³ Koehler and Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (HALOT) illustrates the range of meanings for קָדָם and עוֹלָם:

qedem קְדָם: "front, in front, east, before, earlier, in olden days, prehistoric times, primeval time".

olam עוֹלָם: "long time, long duration, perpetual, future time, former times, a long time back, of old, everlasting, eternity, eternal."

The phrase עוֹלָם מִיְמֵי *mimei olam* is literally "from days of age". Without the preposition ("from" מ) the idiom is two words 1) the plural noun "days" and, 2) the singular noun "age/eternity". The word *olam* in construct with "days of" or "years of", as will be shown in passages quoted below, restricts *olam* to human historical time: "**days of** long ago, **days of** a previous historical era, **years of** an ancient historical era".

The Greek LXX Old Testament most often translates *olam* with αἰών *aeon*, from which derives the English word eon/aeon, a time period of long duration, but not eternal.

The phrase מִקְדָּם *miqedem* "from before" in Scripture often relates to **space**, meaning "in front of, east" (e.g., Gen. 2:8, Josh. 7:2) because ancient orientation was to the east. In other instances, as in our Micah passage, the phrase relates to **time**, meaning "before" (e.g., Psa. 77:12, Isa. 45:21). In the Bible, past time is not behind but is before or in front (לִפְנֵי) while the future is behind or after (אַחֲרַי).

⁴ The preposition in Micah 5:1(2) is "from, מ" whereas in 7:14 the preposition is "as/like, כ". The different prepositions do not change the meaning of the phrase *y'mei olam* יְמֵי עוֹלָם. Compare the phrases "from yesterday" and "like yesterday". The different prepositions do not change the meaning of the word "yesterday".

More examples of *y'mei olam* and *qedem* referring to Israel's historical past:

- Psalm 44:1 (Hebrew 44:2) O God, we have heard with our ears, our fathers have told us, what deeds you performed in their days, in the **days of old** (יְמֵי קִדְמָה).
- Psalm 77:6 (Hebrew, 77:5) and Psalm 77:12 (Hebrew, 77:11) I consider the **days of old** (יְמֵים מִקְדָּמָה), the **years long ago** (שָׁנוֹת עוֹלָמָיִם)...I will remember the deeds of Yahweh; yes, I will remember your wonders **of old** (מִקְדָּמָה)... You, with your arm redeemed your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph...You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron (cf. Psalm 77:15, 20).
- Isaiah 63:9 In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all **the days of old** (יְמֵי עוֹלָם). See also כִּי־יָמֵי קִדְמָה and עוֹלָמָיִם in Isaiah 51:9-10.
- Isaiah 63:11 Then he remembered the **days of old** (יְמֵי־עוֹלָם), of Moses and his people. Where is he who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of his flock?
- Amos 9:11 In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the **days of old** (יְמֵי עוֹלָם).
- Malachi 3:4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in **the days of old** (יְמֵי עוֹלָם) and as in **former years** (שָׁנִים קִדְמֹנִיּוֹת).
- Nehemiah 12:46 For **long ago in the days** of David and Asaph (בְּיָמֵי דָוִד וְאַסָּף מִקְדָּמָה) there were directors of the singers, and there were songs of praise and thanksgiving to God.

It is clear from these other occurrences in the Bible of the same words that Micah 5:2 uses, *miqedem* מקדם and *y'mei olam* יְמֵי עוֹלָם, do not mean “eternity past” but refer to events and acts of God in Israel's historical past, in days long ago.

***olam* עוֹלָם is limited by “days of” and “years of”**

The word *olam* עוֹלָם “age, eternity” is one of the main reasons for the confusion and supposed “eternality” in the Micah passage. “It (*olam*) can mean eternity, but it often does not when the context puts limits on its meaning.”⁵ In Micah 5:2, *olam* is modified, and therefor limited to human time, by the word *days*.

As an idiom, *olam* עוֹלָם combined with “**days of יְמֵי**” means “**days of long ago, days of a previous historical era, or “years of (שָׁנִים / שְׁנוֹת) an ancient historical era”**. The words “days” and “years” in

⁵ Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 354–55. Cf. note 3 above on lexical possibilities of *olam*.

construct with *olam* עולם restrict the meaning to historical (human) time. That is, to past times (days and years) when God did wonders among the fathers. The time of the patriarchs, or the Exodus from Egypt and conquest are especially thought of as “days/years of long ago” when Yahweh led his people like a shepherd by the hand of Moses, Aaron and Joshua (Psa. 44:2-3). David's days are also specifically recalled (Amos 9:11, “as in the days of old, כַּיְמֵי עוֹלָם”).

The NET Bible translation, a conservative evangelical translation, agrees. The NET note on these two phrases says, “Elsewhere (*in the Bible*) **both phrases** refer to the early periods in the history of the world **or of the nation of Israel**” (NET gives a number of examples like the ones presented above).

When or What are Micah’s “days long ago, days of old”?

Micah had in mind not a nebulous eternity past, but God's ancient promise to David (2 Sam. 7, 1 Chron. 17, Psalm 2) who was from Bethlehem. Micah lived in the middle of the 700s BC. David lived around 1000 BC. The promise to David was made some 250 years before Micah lived, מִקֶּדֶם מֵיְמֵי עוֹלָם “from before, from days long ago”.

Yahweh, the God of Israel, made a promise to David that one of David’s descendants would rule over Israel.⁶ But in Micah’s days things looked grim because the greatest superpower the world had yet seen, Assyria, was demolishing Israel and making its way toward Judah.⁷ Micah trusted that according to Yahweh’s promise made long ago, Yahweh would raise up a king from the Davidic line to yet rule over Israel. Even if centuries had passed, Yahweh would make good on His promise.

Micah’s “from before, from days long ago” may also relate to God’s promises of blessing to Israel through Abraham some 1000 years before Micah lived (Gen. 12:2-3, Psa. 105:8-11). But Micah’s mention of Bethlehem shows that his focus is on the divinely ordained monarchy of David who was of the tribe of Judah and from the town of Bethlehem (1 Sam. 16:1, 13). Israel’s hope was in Yahweh *through* the Yahweh-promised ruler-shepherd descended from David.

2 Chron. 7:18 provides confirmation that Micah had in mind the promise of God to David. Using the same language Micah used, God had reiterated to Solomon that the “ruler in Israel” מוֹשֵׁל בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל would be a descendant of David: “then I will establish your royal throne as I covenanted with your father David, saying, ‘You shall not lack a man *to be* ruler in Israel (מוֹשֵׁל בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל)’” (NAS).⁸

“his origins”

The word translated as “origin/s” or “goings forth” (*motsa’ot*, מוֹצְאוֹתָיו)⁹ is derived from the Hebrew root word *yatsa* יצא “go out”. The form in Micah 5:2 occurs only here in the Bible as feminine noun (and

⁶ Not only over Judah, but over all Israel. 2 Sam. 7, 1 Chron. 17.

⁷ Schlegel, *The Satellite Bible Atlas by William Schlegel*, 91–95. Micah knew that Assyria’s coming was orchestrated by Yahweh as a righteous cleansing action on Israel/Judah (Micah 6:2, 16).

⁸ Micah 5:2 and 2 Chron. 7:18 are the only two places in the Bible where “a ruler in Israel מוֹשֵׁל בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל” occurs.

⁹ Translations vary as to if *motsa’ot*, מוֹצְאוֹתָיו should be translated as a plural or singular. I take the word as an abstract plural meaning “origin”. i.e., “ancestry”(ESV, RSV, et al). The abstract plural is “a more or less intensive focusing of the characteristics inherent in the idea of the stem”(Gesenius’ *Hebrew Grammar.*, pp. 396-7). LXX renders as a feminine plural noun, *exoduses* ἐξοδοί.

only in plural), with one additional possible textual variant in 2 Ki. 10:27 (for “latrine”). The masculine form (*motsa* מוצא) has various meanings including “a place or act of going forth, a word, an exit, an issue, a source, a spring of water, east” (e.g., Deu. 8:3, Hos. 6:3, Isa. 58:11, Ezek. 43:11).¹⁰

All these meanings are all related to the root word *yatsa* יצא, “to go or come out.” Importantly, the word in its verbal form occurs in our verse in the phrase “from you *will come forth* יצא for me”. The ruler designated by Yahweh will “come forth, go out” **from** Bethlehem of the clans of Judah, **for** Yahweh.

One possibility is that the word *motsa ’ot* refers to the ruler’s appearances or what he would do when he goes out. This is why some English translations render the phrase “his goings forth” (KJV, NAS).

But more likely the word *motsa ’ot*, מוצאתיו means, as some English translations (e.g., RSV, NET, NIV etc.), “his origin/s”, relating to the ancestry of the promised ruler. From the same Hebrew root is the word “descendant” צאצא *tse-eh-tsa* (e.g., Job 5:25, Isa. 44:3) and the later Hebrew word for “ancestry” ממוצא. In association with *miqedem* and *mimei olam* “from before, from days of long ago” which relate to Israel’s historical past, the feminine plural form in Micah 5:2 (5:1 Heb.) most likely relates to physical ancestry, especially David’s and/or Abraham’s. The coming ruler’s origin/s, his ancestry, is in the promise of God of a literal, physical descendant to come from the family and dynasty of David.

Speculations that the word מוצאתיו relates to an ontological “eternal generation” of “God the Son” from God the Father are just that, speculations, with no biblical evidence. These speculations are annulled by the fact that מוצאתיו is limited to human historical time by the two phrases that follow it, “from old, from ancient days”. The coming ruler’s origin/s is connected to the nation of Israel’s historical past. Further, translations that use the word “origin/s” imply that the coming ruler has a beginning, indeed a derived beginning. He is not his own source.

Context, context, context

In addition to misinterpreting the meaning of “from before, from days of long ago, the “eternality” interpretation of Micah 5:2 ignores both the literary and historical context of Micah’s prophecy.

Literary Context

In Micah 5:2 it is Yahweh (the LORD) speaking via the prophet Micah (cf. Micah 4:6). Yahweh says that a ruler will come forth *from Bethlehem* of Judah *for me*. The ruler does not come forth from Yahweh in some ontological sense of “eternal generation”. Rather, the coming forth is from a geographical location (Bethlehem) and by implication from the Davidic dynastic family. As we will see, Jewish leaders in the time of Jesus applied the passage to the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:4-6).

Also, the coming ruler comes from Bethlehem to rule *for Yahweh*. That is, the coming ruler is distinguished from Yahweh. The coming ruler from Bethlehem is not Yahweh himself, but is Yahweh’s designated human vice-regent who, like David, will rule *for* Yahweh.

¹⁰ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, p. 425.

Also, two verses after the famous Bethlehem promise, Micah 5:4 declares that the promised shepherd-ruler will shepherd his flock “in the strength *of* Yahweh, in the majesty of the name of Yahweh *his* God.” Like Moses and David, the coming shepherd-ruler is not God, but has a God, and is empowered by *his* God, Yahweh.

Historical Context

The historical context of the passage is “This (or this one) will be our peace *when the Assyrian comes into our land*, and treads in our palaces...” (Micah 5:5-6). Micah’s words were spoken when the mighty nation of Assyria threatened to conquer both the northern Kingdom of Israel and southern Kingdom of Judah. The Northern Kingdom of Israel would be destroyed by Assyria, but Judah, incredibly, survived.

Micah’s prophecy had a certain fulfillment in the days of a descendant of David, Hezekiah (Isa. 37:15-38). Yahweh was keeping His promise to David by setting David’s descendant Hezekiah on the throne. Micah knew (as did his contemporary, Isaiah) that although Assyria was God’s tool, God would stop mighty Assyria in its tracks (2 Chron. 32:20-22, Isa. 37:35). Judah would survive under the shepherding of King Hezekiah who ruled in the strength of his God, Yahweh. The origins or ancestry מוֹצְאֵתָיִי of the faithful Hezekiah, who became “ruler in Israel” *when the Assyrian comes into our land*, was “from before, from long ago”, in David and the promise of Yahweh to David.

Both the literary and historical context distinguish between Yahweh and Yahweh’s appointed human vice-regent. The shepherd-ruler that Micah foresees has a God and is empowered by Yahweh his God.

Hezekiah can be understood to be a type, sample or paradigm of the great salvation Yahweh has and will yet work through that greater descendant of Abraham and David, Jesus the Messiah. The events and deeds of the fathers are signs for the sons. Jesus’s birth in Bethlehem relates to the “long ago” promise of the “days of old” - the promise Yahweh made to David.

Matthew’s quote

The Gospel of Matthew 2:5-6 quotes a portion of the passage from Micah 5:2. It should first be noted that Matthew did not quote this passage from Micah as a “fulfillment” passage. Matthew simply recorded the words of the Jewish scribes who believed that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem because of the Davidic promise.

Next, neither the Jewish scribes nor Matthew make any reference to the “eternality” of the Messiah. In fact, **the passage quoted in Matthew does not even include the words analyzed above that some Christians claim show the Messiah’s eternality.** Matthew simply recorded the Jewish scribes’ answer to Herod’s question about where Messiah would be born: “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel’” (Matthew 2:5-6).¹¹

There is no declaration from either the Jewish scribes or Matthew of the “eternal pre-incarnate existence” of the Messiah. As mentioned, the words that some interpret in Micah as showing

¹¹ There are differences in Matthew’s quote compared to both the MT and LXX. E.g., in Matthew, Ephrathah is not mentioned, “by no means least” instead of “being small”, “rulers” instead of “thousands/tribes”, and the addition of “my people”. Matthew’s version has no implication whatsoever of the coming ruler having a literal pre-incarnate existence.

“eternality” do not appear in Matthew. Instead, Matthew, like Luke 2:4, associates the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem with the promise of God that Messiah would be a descendant of David. The ruler comes *from* Bethlehem, *not ontologically from* God. Like David, the greater Son of David is differentiated from God but would rule and shepherd God’s people, Israel.

Not a New Testament Exercise

Finally, it should be emphasized that neither Jesus nor any apostle or author of the New Testament went back into the Old Testament (Tanach) to find proofs or hints that Jesus is literally God. Such efforts are totally foreign to the New Testament. Finding proofs of Jesus’ deity or “eternal pre-incarnate existence” in the Old Testament is not a New Testament exercise (nor an Old Testament exercise!). Finding hints or proofs of Jesus’ deity in a passage like Micah 5:2 is an activity of men beginning in the centuries *after* the New Testament was written.

Although beyond the scope of this presentation, early appeals to Micah 5:2 as evidence of Jesus’ literal pre-incarnate or eternal existence might be tracked down. Church fathers like Justin Martyr¹², Tertullian¹³, Origen¹⁴ and Eusebius¹⁵ refer to the passage, but in the main only to describe that the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem. Perhaps they did not so quickly find “eternality” in the Greek LXX ἐξοδοι (exoduses) and ἡμερῶν αἰῶνος (days of an age).¹⁶

In any event, Jesus and the Apostles never appealed to the Old Testament to show Messiah’s eternal deity. Rather, Jesus and the apostles appealed to the Old Testament to show the suffering, death, resurrection and exaltation to the right hand of God, of the man descended from David, Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah (Luke 24:26-27, 44-46; Acts 2:22-36, 3:18, 10:30, 17:2, 31, etc.).

Christians who appeal to a passage in the Old Testament to “prove” the deity of Christ do well to ask themselves this question. “Neither Jesus nor any apostle or author of a New Testament book ever went to an Old Testament passage to prove the deity of Jesus. Why am I?”

Summary

In summary, the “eternal pre-incarnate existence” and “deity of Christ” claims from Micah 5:2 are based on presuppositions that force a wrong understanding of Hebrew words into the passage. The words and phrases (*miqedem* מִקְדָּם, *mimei olam* מִימֵי עוֹלָם and *motsa’otav* מוֹצְאֹתָיו do not convey “eternal pre-incarnate existence” but refer to events in Israel’s historical past. The Hebrew word *olam* (age, perpetual, everlasting) modified by “days of” confines *olam* to human historical ages, usually related to Israel’s past history. Specifically, Micah 5:2 refers to the promise God made to David long ago, centuries before Micah’s day.

¹² *Dialogue with Trypho*, LXXVIII (notes 10-13 all from Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*)

¹³ *Apologetic*, XIII

¹⁴ *Against Celsius*, LI

¹⁵ *Church History*, Book 1: V and VIII

¹⁶ The Latin Vulgate suggests eternality: “and his going forth is from the beginning, from the days of eternity.” Jerome (*Letters to Eustochium*, 10) references the passage and then says, “For in thee was born the prince begotten before Lucifer, whose birth from the Father is before all time”.

The “eternality” interpretation ignores the literary and historical context of the passage which speaks of a descendant of David *from* Bethlehem who was to rule *for* Yahweh by the strength of Yahweh *his* God when the Assyrians came into the land.

The “eternality” interpretation misses the meaning of the passage. Micah expressed trust in God’s promise of peace and salvation through a king who would descend from David. There was a remarkable, observable fulfillment of that promised victorious peace in David’s descendant Hezekiah (Isaiah 37:15-38) who ruled Judah when Assyria came into the land. The faith of Hezekiah and divine intervention in Hezekiah’s days gives confidence that Yahweh our God fulfills His promise to Israel through the Davidic king.

The ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise to David is in Jesus. In a similar yet greater fashion than in the days of David or Hezekiah, Jesus the descendant of David, born in Bethlehem, is appointed by God to shepherd and rule God’s people for God in the strength of his God Yahweh, and in the majesty of the name of Yahweh his God. God has made Jesus of Nazareth both Lord and Messiah (Acts 2:36).

The Gospel of Matthew mentions nothing about the pre-existence of Jesus in quoting Micah’s passage. The words from Micah that some Christians claim show eternal deity of Messiah are not quoted at all in the Matthew passage.

Neither Jesus nor any New Testament author ever appealed to the Old Testament to reveal the pre-incarnate existence or deity of Messiah. Jesus and the New Testament authors did appeal to the Old Testament to show the suffering, death and subsequent glory of Messiah.

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