

Concerning the Place of the Messiah's Birth.

by John Gill

The prophecy of Micah 5:2 is fulfilled in Jesus, who was born at Bethlehem, the city of David, and is the eternal God, the Prince of Peace.

Scripture: Psalm 72:17, Isaiah 9:6, Micah 5:2, Habakkuk 1:12, Matthew 2:5-6, Matthew 26:67, Luke 2:1-2, John 7:41-42, John 9:29

Topics: "Prophecy", "Birth of the Messiah"

Description

John Gill emphasizes the prophetic significance of Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah, citing Micah 5:2 to affirm that Jesus fulfills this prophecy. He argues that the expectation of the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem was well-known among the Jews, supported by both scripture and historical context. Gill addresses objections regarding the application of this prophecy to Jesus, clarifying that despite the challenges faced during His life, Jesus is indeed the ruler and peace-bringer foretold. He reconciles differences between the prophecy and its New Testament citation, asserting that these do not undermine the truth of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. Ultimately, Gill presents this prophecy as a vital piece of evidence for recognizing Jesus as the true Messiah.

Transcript

The Prophecies Respecting the Messiah

CHAPTER VI.

Messiah's Birth.

The place of the Messiah's birth comes next to be inquired into, which, by prophecy, has been fully determined, and clearly pointed out to us in Micah 5:2. 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. Now in order to set this prophecy in a clear light, and to make it appear that it concerns the place of the Messiah's birth, for which it is cited in the New Testament. I shall endeavor, 1. To prove, that the Messiah and no other is here intended. 2. That the Jews expected the Messiah to be born at Bethlehem, according to the true intent of this prophecy. 3. That Jesus was born there. 4. Answer the objections made against the application of this prophecy to Jesus, supposing the Messiah intended and, 5. Attempt to reconcile the seeming differences between the text as it here stands, and as it is cited by the evangelist Matthew.

, I shall endeavour to prove, that the Messiah, and no other, is intended in this prophecy, Zerobabel cannot be meant, who is the only person produced, besides the Messiah, to whom the prophecy is thought to belong for he was not born at Bethlehem, but at Babel, as his name declares, nor was he any ruler in Israel, as is said of this person; he was indeed a governor of Judah, and an head of the captivity, but never was a ruler in the land of Israel, or over the tribes which bore that name, much less can it be said of him, that his goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting; for to say, with Grotius that this phrase intends "Zerobabel's taking his origin from an illustrious house of old, and a royal family of five hundred years standing," is intolerable; for however Zerobabel may be considered as seminally in David's loins, as Levi was in Abraham's, so long before his birth; yet his goings forth from thence can never be said to be five hundred years before they were besides, it is a wretched perversion of a phrase, which is peculiar to the eternal God, and belongs to the Messiah, as being such, who appears to be the only person here intended is manifest, 1.

From the context. In verse 1 the person intended is called the judge of Israel, whom Aben Ezra says, is either the Messiah, or Zerobabel; but the character well agrees with the Messiah, to whom it is frequently given (Isa. 2:4; 11:3, 4), and by no means to Zerobabel, who never was a judge of Israel, as has been already observed; nor do we read that he was ever treated in that rude and barbarous manner, as it is here prophesied this person should be, namely, to be smitten with a rod upon the cheek, which was literally fulfilled in the Messiah, Jesus (Matthew 26:67), in whose face some spit; and others buffeted, and others smote him with the palms of their hands, errapisan, smote him with rods, as the word primarily signifies.

Moreover, the characters given of the person mentioned in this verse, agree well with the Messiah; as that he should be a ruler in Israel; for the Messiah is all along in scripture represented as a king, a prince, or governor, and as such the Jews expected him; and of him, he being the eternal God, it may be very well said, that his goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting, a phrase used to express the eternity of God, (Hab. 1:12), and being applied to the Messiah, is by Solomon Jarchi well explained by Psalm 72:17 *before the sun was, his name was Jinnon, which the Jews say is one of the names of the Messiah, and signifies son; and so the words are expressive of his eternal filiation, the phrase well agreeing with this here used.*

Likewise what is said in the following verses, exactly suits with him, as that until his birth, according to verse 3 the Jews were to be given up to a great deal of sorrow and trouble, which was true of the times between this prophecy and the birth of Jesus; after which, there was to be a coalition of Jews and Gentiles: In verse 4 he is represented as a shepherd feeding his flock, in the strength, and by the authority of his God; on the account of which his name should be great in all the earth, which can be applied to none so well as the Messiah: In verse 5 he is called the peace, that is, the author of peace, which he gives unto his people, whenever their enemies, such as sin, Satan, the world, &c. make any attack upon them; nor need it be thought strange, that these should he represented by the Assyrian who was the then known, common, and avowed enemy of the people of Israel; nor ought this to be concluded to lie against its being a literal prophecy, that though the Assyrians are by name mentioned, yet not they, but other enemies, under their name, may be intended, as a late author would insinuate; for according to himself, in another place, "A literal sense may be signified as well and as obviously by a figurative, as by the most simple or literal expression."

The words may, and I think ought, to be rendered thus, and this man, or person, shall be the peace, O Assyrian, *for he, that is the man, the peace, shall come into our land, that is, shall be made*

flesh and dwelt with us, and so make peace with God for us; and because he shall tread in our palaces in the temple, and in the synagogues and we will raise up, that is by our prayers and entreaties to God for him, or with him, xlxœ for xlxž seven shepherds and eight principal men, that is, a sufficient number of gospel ministers, who shall carry the gospel into the Gentile world, and with the sword of the spirit which is the word of God, do execution there, by pulling down the strong holds of sin and Satan, and subjecting souls to the obedience of Christ.

2. It appealâ€™s from the scope of the place, that the Messiah is here intended, which is to comfort and support the Jews under those severe afflictions that should befall them. In the three last verses of the preceding chapter, they are assured of deliverance out of the hands of the Chaldeans, over whom they should have the ascendant; yet, nevertheless in process of time, either for their evil treatment of their magistrates in common, or rather particularly of the Messiah, the Roman army, called the daughter of troops (v. 1), under the command of Titus Vespasian, should be gathered against them, and lay siege to their city, whereby it would be laid desolate; and the adjacent towns entirely depopulated, and among the rest of Bethlehem. Now for the comfort of the Jews, in the view of these calamities, and particularly the inhabitants of Bethlehem, it is promised, that the Messiah should arise from thence, before those desolating judgments came upon them.

3. It is acknowledged by many Jewish writers, that this prophecy belongs to the Messiah, and was certainly so understood by the Jews in Christâ€™s time, as I shall have occasion to take notice hereafter. For,

, It is manifest enough that the Messiah was expected by the Jews, to be born at Bethlehem, as appears,

1st, From some passages in the New Testament, which show that this was the current opinion of the Jews, in Christâ€™s time. When Herod had the tidings of the king of the Jews being born, brought him by the wise men of the east, which gave him a great deal of trouble and uneasiness, he summoned the chief priests and scribes together, and demanded of them where Christ should be born; to which they reply very readily, without any manner of hesitation, in Bethlehem of Judea (Matthew 2:5, 6); and for strengthening of their assertion, and for the satisfaction of him, cite this very prophecy of Micah, which manifestly shews, what was the then received sense of this prophecy in the Jewish church, as well as where they expected the birth of the Messiah: nay, this was not only the opinion of the more learned among the Jews, who were better versed than others in the knowledge of the law and the prophets, but even of the common people, who concluding from the education and conversation of Christ in Galilee, that he was born there, thought they had got a considerable argument to prove that he was not the Messiah; for say they (John 7:41, 42), Shall Christ come out of Galilee? Hath not the scripture said That Christ cometh of the seed of David, and out of the town of Bethlehem, where David was? Now from whence should they be informed of this? or what scripture could they have in view, but this prophecy of Micah?

2dly, This appears to be the sense of their ancient Targums; thus upon the text in Genesis 35:21, where it is said that Israel journeyed and spread his tent beyond the tower of Edar; which, by comparing with verse 19, appears to be a place near Bethlehem; the Targum of Jonathan adds, "the place from whence the Messiah shall be revealed in the last days," and mention being made in Micah 4:8 of this Migdal Edar, or tower of Edar, the Targumist takes occasion to speak of the Messiah and applies it to him. Nay,

3dly, Later Jews have asserted, that the Messiah was born at Bethlehem, before the destruction of that place, but not yet revealed, being hid, because of their sins and transgressions; which, though a Talmudic

story, is a plain indication of the conviction of their minds, as to the intent of this prophecy, and of the universal and constant expectation of their forefathers grounded upon it. There are indeed some objections advanced by the author of The Scheme of Literal Prophecy, &c. against this general expectation of the Jews, concerning the place of the Messiah's birth.

1. He objects, "That, since Jesus's time, it has been deemed among the Jews a matter of no consequence, where the Messiah was born, since they have set up many Messiahs, who they knew were not born at Bethlehem," which need not at all be wondered at in them, who have rejected the true Messiah, since whose times this town of Bethlehem has been wholly destroyed; and therefore despairing of meeting with this character of a Messiah, in any person, have hid it aside, as they have done many others; such as his being born before the departure of the scepter from Judah, and during the second temple, and that he should be of the tribe of Judah, &c. though, when pressed with those instances, are obliged to recur to the aforementioned Talmudic fiction, of his being there and then born but hid for the sins of the people, which is a manifest indication of the wretched puzzle and confusion they are thrown into.

2. He objects, that "the Jews, in Jesus's time, made it a part of the character of the Messiah not to know whence he was" (John 9:29), to which may be replied, that the meaning is, not that they knew not the place of his birth, for the contrary is evident from the ready reply of the chief priests to Herod, and the way of reasoning the common people made use of from the prophecy of Micah, to confront the Messiahship of Jesus, as has been already observed: And, by the way, what service this instance of the Jews arguing against Jesus, that Bethlehem, and not Galilee, was to be the place of the Messiah's birth, can be of to our author, I cannot see, which is in another place produced by him, seeing it directly militates against his notion. But to proceed; neither can the meaning of this phrase be that they did not know who were his remote ancestors, for they knew that he should be the son of David; but the meaning is, that they should not know who was his father, seeing he was to be born of a virgin, and his descent and original to be from above. Besides, this author ought to have confuted the sense given of this phrase in John 7:26, 27 by Bishop Chandler, who has very well supported it, before he had made this an objection against the place of the Messiah's birth being pointed out by prophecy, and its being made known unto, and expected by the ancient Jews.

3. He objects, that there are some " Jews who deny the truth of Herod's sending for to know of the chief priest where the Messiah was to be born; and say, that Jesus was not born in Herod's time, but in Cyrenius's time, eleven years after the death of Herod;" who these Jews are he does not say, unless he means the evangelist Luke, whom he cites, whose words are in chapter 2:1 and 2. And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed (and this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) Now this author supposes, that this tax, or enrolment, is to be understood of that which was made by Cyrenius when Governor of Syria, when Judea was annexed to it as a province, which was ten or eleven years after the death of Herod, and from thence would conclude, that Jesus was not born in the days of Herod, but about eleven years after his death which will appear to be a mistake, for this tax here mentioned, was not made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria, but rather when Sentius Saturnius was, as Tertullian says, and is here very manifestly distinguished from that made when Cyrenius was president; for the words may be read either thus, and this tax, or enrolment, was made before Cyrenius was governor of Syria, prwth being used for vrotepa, of which many instances are given by learned men, who also approve of this reading of the words and this solution of the difficulty, or else the words (Auth h apotpajh vrwth egeneto hgemoneuontoV thV SuriaV

Kurhnia) may be read thus, this was the first tax, assessment, or enrolment, of Cyrenius the governor of Syria. Many instances of a parallel construction with this have been given by a late writer; so that the meaning is, that this tax which was made at the birth of Jesus, was the first that Cyrenius was concerned in, and is manifestly distinguished from that which was made during his being governor of Syria, when Archelaus was banished from Judea, ten or eleven years after Herod's death which Josephus gives an account of, and Luke refers to in Acts 5:37. Moreover the words do not suppose that Cyrenius was governor of Syria when this first tax was made, for he then acted only as Cæsar's procurator, but that he had been so before Luke wrote this history; and this being a title of honor, and what might perhaps distinguish him from others of the same name, he gives it to him.

, Having proved that the Messiah was to be born at Bethlehem, and that this was the expectation of the ancient Jews, proceed to prove, that Jesus was born there; though it was very improbable it should ever have been so; for his mother dwelt at Nazareth, where he was conceived, and where it was most likely he would have been born; but an all-wise providence, in order to bring about the completion of an ancient prophecy, and to fix upon him one of the true characters of the Messiah, orders it otherwise, putting it into the heart of Augustus Cæsar, the Roman Emperor, to make a taxation, or enrolment of the subjects and tributaries of his empire, which obliged Joseph and Mary to go from Nazareth to Bethlehem, in order to be taxed with those of their own lineage and family, where Mary was delivered of the child of Jesus; whither, in all probability, she had not come, being so near the time of her delivery, had she not been obliged to it by this decree; which decree appears the more remarkable, because there does not seem to be any real necessity for it; nor is it certain that it went through the empire, but seems designed to bring about this event: and it will appear still more remarkable, when it is observed, that Augustus had decreed such an enrolment at Tarracon in Spain, twenty-seven years before the birth of Christ, but was diverted from it by some disturbances in the empire; so that it was deferred to this time; now had this enrolment been made then, in all likelihood it had not been done now, and Joseph and Mary would not have had occasion to come to Bethlehem; but thus it must be, and thus were things ordered by an infinite and all-wise providence to effect it; nor do the Jews themselves deny that Jesus was born there; nay, acknowledge it, in a vile and blasphemous book of theirs, designed to cast all the odium and reproach upon the name of Jesus, that they could possibly heap together. But, , There are some objections made against this prophecy of Micah's being applied to Jesus, though the Messiah be allowed to be here intended. Which are as follow:

1. It is objected, that Jesus did not rule over Israel but they over him, seeing they so far prevailed against him, as to put him to death; and therefore cannot be the person intended, because he was to be a ruler in Israel. To which may be replied, it is true, that, by the divine permission, the Jews compassed their design in taking away his life yet God has exalted him, with his own right hand, to be a Prince and a Savior and whom they crucified he has made both Lord and Christ; whose kingly power has appeared in the destruction of that nation and people, whom he has ruled ever since with a rod of iron; and now rules over the true Israel of God, by his word and Spirit; having carried the gospel into the Gentile world, where it has been propagated and maintained, notwithstanding all the art, policy, and power of man.

2. It is further urged, that this person in verse 5 is said to be the peace, that is, the author of peace; and that the times of the Messiah are always represented as peaceable times, which, it is asserted, is inapplicable to the times of Jesus. But it ought to be observed, that the peace which the Messiah was to effect, and was expected in his days, is a spiritual, and not a temporal peace; and such a peace as this was proclaimed by the angels at the birth of Jesus, procured by his blood, and is bestowed on his people,

who, in the mid of all their sorrows, afflictions, and persecutions, enjoy a peace which passeth all understanding. Though,

3. On the other hand, it is objected, by the author of *The Scheme of Literal Prophecy*, &c. that the fifth and sixth verses of this prophecy, which represent this person as appearing in an hostile manner against the enemies of Israel, "are so plain, as not to need the least comment, to show them to be inapplicable to the peaceable times, and to the person of Jesus," though they, in a very beautiful manner, represent him as the prince of peace, obtaining a glorious victory over all his and his people's enemies, thereby saving them out of their hands, and of his mighty conquests, through the preaching of the gospel in the Gentile world; whereby his people were delivered from their ignorance, infidelity, idolatry, and superstition, as well as from the wretched slavery of their lusts and corruptions. But,

, I proceed to reconcile some seeming differences between this prophecy, as it stands in Micah, and as it is cited by the evangelist Matthew (Matthew 2:6), the most material of which are as follow:

1. The first seeming difference, is in the name of the place; for what Micah calls Bethlehem-Ephrathah, is called by Matthew, Bethlehem in the land of Judah. The reason whereof seems to be this, there were two Bethlehems, one in the tribe of Zabulon (Joshua 19:13), and the other in the tribe of Judah, which is sometimes called Betldehem-Judah (Judges 17:7), and sometimes Bethlehem-Ephrathah; for that Bethlehem-Ephrathah was in the tribe of Judah is manifest enough from the Septuagint version of Job 15:60 (?), as well as from Ruth 1:2. Now in order to give a plain answer to Herod's demand, where the Messiah was to be born, it was proper to distinguish this Bethlehem in the tribe of Judah, from that in the tribe of Zabulon; so that he might not be at a loss about the place of his birth; and this distinction was the more needful, seeing the Messiah was to spring from the tribe of Judah. But,

2. And what is attended with a greater difficulty, is another seeming difference, as to what is predicated concerning this place the text in the prophet says, that it was little among the thousands of Judah; but, as cited by Matthew, it is said to be not the least, though this difference does not appear so very considerable, as it is represented by some expositors; for though this place was little among the thousands of Judah, yet it might not be the least; it is true, the difference between the Septuagint version of the text, and the citation in Matthew, is considerably greater, for according to the former, this place was oligisiĩ, the least, the very least; but according to the latter oudamwĩ, elacisth, by no means the least. But we are not now immediately concerned for the reconciliation of the citation to the Septuagint version, but to the Hebrew text, which may be either rendered by way of interrogation thus, art thou the least? &c. and the answer be according to Matthew, No, thou art not the least, &c. or else the word x"x'x" may be understood, and so be rendered thus, it is a small thing to be among the thousands of Judah, for out of thee, &c. that is, a greater honor shall be conferred on thee; the Messiah shall spring from thee. Again, Bethlehem might be little, and not little, or the least, in different respects, and at different times; it might be little, mean, and contemptible, as to worldly splendor, riches, number of inhabitants, pompous buildings, &c. and yet not be little or mean when considered as the place of the birth of many great persons, such as Boaz, Jesse, David, &c. and especially the king Messiah; it might be little in Micah's time, and yet not little in Matthew's time; especially seeing it had then received a considerable additional honor by Christ's being born there.

Besides, Dr. Pocock has proved, that the Hebrew word x"x'x" signifies both little and great, or of great note and esteem, which he has confirmed from the authorities of R. Tanchuma, Eben Jannahius, the Chaldee paraphrast on Jeremiah 48:4. and from the Arabic, Syriac, and Septuagint versions of Zechariah

13:7, and it is very easy for anyone, who is ever so little acquainted with the Hebrew language, to observe that many words are used therein in a contrary signification. I need not give instances, the learned author now mentioned has furnished us with many.

3. There are some other lesser differences which admit of a more easy reconciliation; as what Micah calls thousands, in Matthew, are called princes. The tribes of Israel were divided into thousands, and every thousand had its prince or ruler; so that though here is a difference in words, yet none in sense; it is true what Micah calls a ruler in Israel, Matthew expresses by a governor that shall rule or feed my people Israel, but here is no repugnancy and whereas the pronoun *ἐγώ* to me is omitted by Matthew, the reason is, because the words are only historically recited by him, God himself speaking in his own person in the prophecy. Thus have I endeavoured to reconcile the seeming differences between Micah and Matthew; though had they been such as would not have admitted of a reconciliation, the evangelist could not have been justly charged with a perversion, or misquotation, of the prophet's words, seeing it is not his own version, but that of the chief priests and scribes, which he gives us, and therefore had it been never so faulty, they, and not he, must have been chargeable with it; for he would have acted the part of a faithful historian, in transmitting it to us in their own words. From the whole, it appears, that Micah 5:2 is a literal prophecy of the place of the Messiah's birth; that it was pertinently and faithfully produced for that purpose in Matthew 2:6 and that Jesus was born at Bethlehem, according to the true purport of this prophecy though we do not produce this singly, as an argument to prove him to be the true Messiah, for we know as well as the Jew, who objects to us, that there were hundreds and thousands born at Bethlehem, who could not be all Messiahs nor did they make any pretensions to it; yet this being a characteristic of the Messiah, as fixed in the Old Testament, and fully agreeing with Jesus, may, with other evidences, be urged as a corroborating one of his being the true Messiah.

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