

Micah 5:2-5a¹

2 But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah,² from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.³ 3 Therefore, he shall give them up until the time

¹ “The name Micah, meaning ‘who is like the Lord,’ is not a question but an exclamation underscoring the incomparability of the God of Israel. With Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, Micah was one of the four eighth century B.C. prophets. A younger contemporary of the aristocrat Isaiah, Micah was a member of the laboring class who came from the rural area of Moresheth-gath, a small village situated about twenty-five miles southwest of Jerusalem (Philip J. King, From the introduction to the book of Micah in the *Harper Collins Study Bible*, 1379).” What we know of Micah and Micah’s situation is that he was a young prophet living in the southern kingdom of Judah who had witnessed the tyranny of the Assyrians and the stupidity of the Jerusalem leadership. Micah was a prophet during the reign of several prominent Kings, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. While many prophets from the Southern Kingdom resisted the call to speak against Jerusalem, Micah was different. A large part of his message surrounds the ethical violations of Israel and Judah, and Micah goes so far as condemning Jerusalem in 3.9-12. Despite the doom and gloom present at within the opening sections of this book, Micah also espouses a genuine hope that God’s forgiveness and compassion will be known by the people. He looks forward to a time when God will raise up a true leader who will bring peace and prosperity back to the land.

² Bethlehem, meaning “house of bread” in Hebrew, was a small town located six miles south-southwest of Jerusalem. Unlike Nazareth, which was little known, Bethlehem held a significant place within the memory of Israel. As G.W. Van Beek notes, “The first historical mention of Bethlehem is found in one of the Amarna letters of the early fourteenth century B.C. in which ‘Abdu-Heba, prince of Jerusalem, complains that Bit-Lahmi has gone over to the ‘Apiru (Van Beek, “Bethlehem” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 395).” It is believed by many scholars that the ‘Apiru, also known as the Habiru, are some of the earliest ancestors to the Hebrew peoples we meet within the Old Testament in Exodus. This word does not refer to a specific group of people but is used to designate those of a specific Semitic origin. It is more than likely that Abraham would have been referred to as a member of the ‘Apiru when he traveled to Egypt. What the above quotation tells us is that Bethlehem was a location that has been a part of Hebraic culture for a significant period of time. It rose to prominent significance first as the location of much of the Book of Ruth, and finally found fame as the home of Jesse, the father of David.

Prior to David’s anointing by Samuel, Bethlehem was known, but not well-known. After David left Bethlehem, choosing Jerusalem for the capital of Israel, the town fell by the wayside. It does not come back into the mainstream of biblical thought until this passage in Micah. So what are we to make of the word Ephrathah as it is attached to Bethlehem? What is the significance of this word? Many scholars believe that its presence in Micah serves a dual purpose. First, “Bethlehem Ephrathah” distinguishes this town from a village named Bethlehem in Zebulun. Second, Ephrathah might also refer to a specific family clan or area surrounding Bethlehem that provided more definition for this prophecy. Evidence for this is found in the second half of this verse where the prophet refers to Bethlehem, not as a small village, but a little clan of Judah.

³ Up to this point in Micah, the prophet has been heavily criticizing the Israelite people and specifically their rulers. The kings have not been faithful shepherds of the people nor have they acted in ways that are in accordance with their calling. Moreover, the people have been led astray as well. Micah has spent time speaking of the exile of the people as their punishment, yet in this passage his focus shifts. No longer is he condemning the people for their obstinacy and sin; rather Micah proclaims a word of promise to them – a promise that is found in a faithful messiah.

Micah proclaims that from within this small clan, the least likeliest of places, God will raise up one who is to rule Israel. But this is not going to be an average ruler that Israel has seen before. This ruler’s origins will be from of old. What does Micah mean by this? Micah may be trying to convey two things at the same time. “First, the origin of the coming ruler is mysterious and beyond human comprehension, because he comes from

when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel.⁴ 4 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.⁵ And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth;⁶ 5 and he shall be the one of peace.⁷

God. Second, his appearance was planned long ago in the purpose and providence of God. He is not a sudden, spontaneous answer on God's part to Israel's need for rescue. Rather, his rule has been destined from the first in God's plan for his world (Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Minor prophets I* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1996), 339)."

⁴ When reading this verse, some might wonder who the woman is that Micah is speaking about? Is he talking about a woman in labor who will bring forth the messiah, or is there something else going on here? For Micah's purposes, the woman in labor is the nation of Israel. Similar to his words in 4:9-10, Micah is building on a series of images that help to emphasize what God is doing in the midst of his people. Notice that Micah insists that the Lord is giving the people up for a time. In response to their sinful disobedience, the Lord is giving the people up into the hands of their enemies. This giving up can be seen in the exile of the people as they are taken to Babylon. This time of preparation for exile and the impending captivity is viewed through the symbolic lens of a woman in labor: when the time has come for the labor pains to cease, the people will go to Babylon only to be returned to Israel in due time. According to God's promise, there will come a point in time when "the captured inhabitants of Jerusalem burst forth from the city, like a child bursting forth from the womb, to be gathered into groups for the trek to Babylonia. After the tribulation of the exile, the remnant of the people will be returned to Judah, verse 3c-d, to be ruled over by God's future Davidic king or Messiah (Achtemeier, 340)."

⁵ As mentioned earlier, the rule of this future messiah will not be like the kings of old. This future rule will resemble the images of the king/messiah set out in the royal psalms (2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, 132, 144). These psalms do not speak of a specific person; rather, they are concerned with the nature of the messianic office. According to Micah, this future king, chosen and called forth by God will stand in the midst of God's people. That is to say, the messiah's reign will endure and he will shepherd the people of God.

Micah uses the image of shepherd without actually using the word. The references to feeding his flock suggest as much. Kings were often referred to as the shepherds of their people, yet in Israel, the kings often fell short in this task. Micah bears witness to the messiah king who will be raised up by God, who will shepherd his people in the strength of the Lord rather than his own strength. What sets this king/messiah apart from the kings of old, even David, is that he will succeed where others have failed. How can we make this assumption? Because the king that God will raise up will be the representative of the Lord God Almighty; he will rule from out of the majesty of God.

⁶ As the shepherd who rules over the people through the strength of the Lord, the messiah king will provide the care that his people most desperately need. "Under his rule, the people will dwell in security because the rulers' dominion will extend to the ends of the earth (James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press: 1988), 187)."

⁷ When Micah calls the messiah/king "the one of peace" he is not merely stating that this king will bring an end to war and violent conflicts. *Shalom*, the Hebrew word for peace, has a much larger meaning than the cessation of hostilities between two warring parties. That is certainly a part of it, but the meaning plunges much deeper. The peace that Micah refers to is a sense of wholeness and completeness. The messiah/king, acting as the Lord's representative – acting as one who comes in the name of the Lord – he will bring with him the wholeness and completeness that only God can give. This includes salvation and deliverance from enemies, reconciliation with God, and the deeper healing within the human person. Relationships will be rectified through this peace, the glory of the Lord will be known, and good news that God is with his people will never be doubted.