

The Quotations Bible Study: Series I: The Person of Jesus

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Week 1. Beginnings: the origins of Jesus' earthly life

Prayer: Father, whose power is limitless and whose word is truth, grant this day that we see more deeply into Scripture and thus into Your will, as we ask Your Holy Spirit to open our eyes and instruct our minds and hearts, in Jesus' Name, amen.

The coming of the Messiah was the central event in the life of Israel. Details of His birth are given in a few places in the Old Testament. Not all such passages were necessarily identified as applying to the Messiah at the time. But the Evangelists, particularly Matthew, were eager to teach how Jesus fulfilled prophecies, even those not originally thought to be Messianic, that is, to foretell some feature or event connected with the promised Messiah.

In the excerpts from Matthew, we consider four aspects of Jesus' early life, that is, his birth, birthplace, the flight to Egypt, and the slaughter of the innocents, foretold (as the Evangelist would argue) by four different prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, and Micah.

I. The Birth of Jesus

A. The Prophecy in Isaiah

Focus passage:

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”—Isaiah 7:14

Background: Isaiah 7; 2 Kings 16; 2 Chr. 28

Much of the book of Isaiah consists of the LORD's speech directed to and through the prophet for the king and people of Judah. In the seventh chapter, after giving some directions to Isaiah, the LORD addressed Judah's King Ahaz (whether through Isaiah or not, the account is not clear). The LORD insisted that a sign would be given, even though Ahaz did not dare to ask for one, and the sign was that a virgin shall conceive and bear a son.

[Enrichment: There are plenty of evil characters in the Bible, and much of the history of Israel has a “black-and-white” character. But apart from Satan himself, there are few characters so unremittingly evil and bent as Ahaz. He worshipped heathen, Canaanite gods, even sacrificing his own sons to Moloch by fire (2 Kings 16:3; 2 Chr. 28:3). He plundered the temple to pay for his wars (2 Kings 16:8). He lost battles to the Arameans (Syrians), the Israelites, the Edomites, and the Philistines (2 Chr. 28:17,18). He appealed for help to the Assyrians, who came and took more plunder (2 Chr. 28:20). Even when confronted with God's voice (Isa. 7:10,11), whether through Isaiah or directly, he refused to believe (or, believing, he still refused to obey). His wretched story can be found in 2 Kings 15:38; 16:1-20 and 2 Chr. 27:9; 28:1-27. The passages of Isaiah's prophecy that deal with Ahaz are found in Isaiah 7-9.]

In the incident recorded in Isaiah 7, Isaiah prophesied to Ahaz at the beginning of Ahaz' troubles with Israel. Consider the following questions:

Q1: What did God promise Ahaz in Isa. 7:1-9?

Q2: What did Ahaz have to do in return for safety? (Isa. 7:9)

Q3: Why did Ahaz not want a sign?

Q4: What does “put the LORD to the test” mean? (AV: tempt the LORD) (Deut. 6:16; the word for “test” in Isa. 7:12 is the same word used in Deut. 6:16.)

Q5: How did the LORD take Ahaz' refusal? (Isa. 7:13)

Then came the promise, the sign that the LORD insisted on giving. The sign was a miraculous event: a virgin shall conceive and bear a son.

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Q6: The virgin birth is characterized as a sign. Whom is the sign for? (Hint: the “you” in Isa. 7:13 is plural) What is it a sign of?

Q7: What is promised to happen before the child is old enough to make moral choices? (Isa. 7:16)

The name, “Immanu-el” is transliterated from the Hebrew.

[Note: Scofield says that the “curds and honey” on which the child is to live (Isa. 7:15) is a sign of the simplicity of his upbringing. However, the argument could also be made that it is a sign of the abundance in which the child is to be reared.]

Isa. 7:17-25 then describes a procession of awful events scheduled to occur to Judah. One of the images the prophecy summons seems truly catastrophic: after He promised to *shave* the land, through the king of Assyria, in Isa. 7:22, He depicts a land made affluent through the slaughter or capture and removal of most of its inhabitants. Those left behind might have a cow and two sheep and live in abundance, with everyone eating curds (AV: butter) and honey. In Isa. 7:23-25, the gardens and valuable groves have gone to seed, and much of the land is simply abandoned.

[Enrichment: This kind of disaster has actually been seen a few times in more modern history (*e.g.*, after the black plague in Europe in the 14th century). The large-scale removal of a population results in prosperity for those who remain. There is as much land available as ever, but a far smaller number of people to own it and benefit from it. There is as much wealth as before, but only half, say, as many people to possess it. Generally speaking, history has no more horrifying story to tell than this, and that is essentially what the LORD was promising Ahaz.]

Ahaz’ unbelief was borne out in his subsequent wickedness, foolishness, and despicable acts of treachery. See the story in 2 Kings 16:5-18 and 2 Chr. 28:5-27. After this, Ahaz is barely mentioned again. But after his death, Ahaz was refused burial in the royal sepulchers, according to 2 Chr. 28:27.

Immanuel is mentioned again in Isaiah 8:8, and there are repeated references to a child in Isaiah 8-11.

[Enrichment: A virgin birth?

Most of us today have never lived in an agrarian culture, and so, a virgin conception and birth is at best a theoretical impossibility. A member of an agrarian society knows it to be impossible through the experience of living with livestock and of depending on animal reproduction to bring the increase necessary to survive. Thus the LORD’s promise is an eye-popping extremity, definitely outside the natural order.

This assumes that the Hebrew word *almah* means “virgin” and not “young woman” as given in the RSV. With your permission, we will assume the former, and let that issue be a fight for another day. The prophecy or sign was spoken to Ahaz, and there may well have been an approximate or partial fulfillment at that time, as Isaiah later seems to address the child as “Immanuel” in Isaiah 8:8. This does not prevent us from noting with Matthew that an unexpected but complete fulfillment is to be seen in the virgin birth of Jesus, even if the source of the prophecy had never before been seen as Messianic.]

B. Matthew’s account

Focus passage:

“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”—Matt. 1:23

Background: Matt. 1

So, who was the child? While the kings were definitely gone, and the people were carried into captivity, doubtless fulfilling many aspects of the prophecy, there is no record of a virgin birth or a child to correspond to the prophecy, in the remainder of the Old Testament.

Commentators have suggested many different explanations for the child and the prophecy of Isa. 7:14-16. But Scripture has also provided an explanation, in the Gospel of Matthew.

Joseph, having discovered that his fiancé was expecting a child not his, was understandably troubled and seeking to do the right thing (Matt. 1:18,19). During his deliberations, an angel appeared to him and explained that the child was conceived by the Holy Ghost, and that Joseph should name the child Jesus (or Yeshua = Joshua, which means, God saves), because He would save His people from their sins.

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At this point, Matthew the Evangelist interjects the explanation that this event satisfies the prophecy of Isa. 7:14. He then quotes the latter half of that verse, asserting that Scripture prophesies the virgin birth of the Messiah. From the context, it is clear that Matt. 1:22,23 are an interjection by the Evangelist and not something uttered by the angel to Joseph.

[Enrichment: C. H. Toy affirms that the quotation in Matthew follows the Septuagint closely, as both the Septuagint and the Gospel make use of a Greek word that unambiguously means “virgin.” The Septuagint for Isa. 7:14 reads, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and thou shalt call his name Emmanuel.” “Emmanuel” in Matthew (which the NIV, but not the AV, turned back into “Immanuel”) is the Greek form of “Immanuel” in Isaiah, and Matthew’s interpretation is exact. Toy further states that the Isaiah prophecy was not necessarily considered to be Messianic in the 1st century.]

In quoting Isa. 7:14, Matthew continues the case for Jesus as the Messiah, foretold in the Old Testament.

Q8: The prophecy in Isa. 7:13,14 is addressed to the “house of David.” Who is the house of David in Matthew’s time?

Q9: What does Matthew establish with the genealogy of Matt. 1:1-17?

Q10: No one ever calls Jesus “Immanuel” in the New Testament. Is this a problem?

C. Conclusions

Four conclusions can be drawn from this quotation. See what you think:

Q11: Can Old Testament prophecies take on unexpected significance at the time of their ultimate fulfillment?

Q12: Even if Isa. 7:14 was not considered to be Messianic at the time, Matthew’s audience was sufficiently interested in the fulfillment of prophecy and could be persuaded, under the right circumstances, to believe in Jesus on the grounds that His mission and ministry were foretold. How did Isa. 7:14 qualify for this purpose?

Q13: What does fulfillment of prophecy accomplish for Jesus?

Q14: Matthew’s interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 as applying to Jesus affirms a continuum of God’s authority throughout the entire span of Scripture (including the Gospel). What is the significance virgin birth of Jesus?

What else do you conclude?

II. The Place of Jesus’ Birth

A. The Prophecy of Micah

Focus passage:

“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.”—Micah 5:2

Background: Micah 5:1-5

The prophet Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos. In Micah’s brief (seven chapters) book of prophecy, he records the LORD’s wrath against the people of Israel. In the middle of these terrifying predictions, Micah 5:1-5, he reports the LORD’s plan to raise up a leader from Bethlehem, an ancient dwelling place actually mentioned in Gen. 35:16. He goes on to describe this leader’s campaign for the redemption of Israel.

Some Scriptures about Bethlehem:

- Gen. 35:16,19; 48:7 – where Rachel died
- Ruth 4:11 – mentioned in the story of Ruth & Boaz, ancestors of Jesus
- 1 Sam. 17:12 – where David’s family lived
- Luke 2:4 – hence, the city of David
- 1 Sam. 16:4-13 – where David was found and anointed to be king
- 2 Sam. 23:13-17 – David longs for Bethlehem

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Consider some questions from Micah 5:1-5:

Q15: What will this leader be? Where does he come from? (Micah 5:2)

Q16: What will happen until he comes? (Micah 5:3)

Q17: How is the metaphor of pregnancy and delivery used? Is it a metaphor? (Micah 5:3)

Q18: What will the leader do? (Micah 5:4)

Q19: How will the people live, as a result? (Micah 5:4)

Q20: How will the leader defend the land? (Micah 5:5)

Q21: Given that the entire passage in Micah is clearly Messianic, is it surprising that some in Jesus' time expected a political leader?

B. Matthew's Account

Focus passage:

“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.” —Matt. 2:6

Background: Matt. 2:1-12

Matthew the Evangelist refers to the prophecy in Micah (Matt. 2:6) as part of a narrative on Jesus' early life. The wise men came from the east and questioned Herod (the Great) about the King of the Jews. When Herod inquired with the priests and scribes as to where this king was to be born, they told him what Micah prophesied. The quotation is a paraphrase, matching neither the Hebrew nor the Septuagint Greek. The Septuagint for Micah 5:2 reads, “And thou, Bethlehem, house of Ephratha, art very small to be reckoned among the thousands of Judah, out of thee shall one come forth to me to be ruler of Israel.”

Matthew evidently recorded a verbal report of the incident, perhaps paraphrasing the Micah Scripture somewhat. If so, Matthew understood the significance of the Micah passage to the incident as a whole, for he shows how it immediately results in a disingenuous offer by Herod. Indirectly, this episode led to a great tragedy and sin, and it may be concluded that the passage from Micah is the reason that Herod took the story the wise men told him so seriously.

Consider some questions from text:

Q22: Do the priests and scribes believe the prophecy? (Matt. 2:5,6)

Q23: Does Herod believe the prophecy? (Matt. 2:7)

Q24: What are Herod's instructions? (Matt. 2:8)

Q25: Do the wise men believe Herod's intentions? (Matt. 2:12)

Q26: Does the prophecy and its application support Matthew's case?

Q27: In retrospect, is the passage from Micah about the Messiah?

Q28: How do the predictions about the Messiah match Jesus' actions and life? (Micah 5:3-5)

C. Conclusions

See if three conclusions suggested by these questions can be drawn from this quotation:

Q29: Was the prophecy of Micah believed to be Messianic in Jesus' time?

Q30: How does belief in the prophecy of Micah explain the actions of Herod, the priests, and the scribes?

Q31: Is the prophecy of Micah borne out in the subsequent life, death and resurrection of Jesus?

What else do you infer from this quotation?

III. The Flight to Egypt

A. The Prophecy of Hosea

Focus passage:

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”—Hosea 11:1

Background: Hosea 11:1-6

Hosea was a contemporary of Isaiah, Amos, and the above prophet, Micah. In his more lengthy book, Hosea reported a tirade of prophecy from the LORD against Israel, specifically, the tribe of Ephraim (which, as the leading region of the Northern Kingdom, was frequently used as a euphemism for Israel).

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In more than one place, he mentions what God has done for his people in the past, and it is during one of these allusions to the past, that Hosea records the words (Hosea 11:1), "... out of Egypt I called my son."

At first glance, it would appear that this is not about the Messiah or even a prophecy of the future, but a simple fact referencing the Exodus of God's people ("my son") from Egypt.

Consider some questions about the passage:

Q32: What is the age of Israel at the time of calling? (Hosea 11:1)

Q33: How did God feel towards Israel? (Hosea 11:1)

Q34: Does the passage correspond well to the Exodus story?

Q35: What was Israel's response to the calling? (Hosea 11:2)

Q36: How does God feel specifically about Ephraim? (Hosea 11:3,4)

Q37: What will happen to Israel as a result of their faithlessness? (Hosea 11:5,6)

Hosea's characterization of the LORD's paternal feelings towards Israel are moving and visceral. They certainly present a picture of grief and disappointment, as well as wrath.

B. Matthew's account

Focus passage:

... And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."—Matt. 2:15

Background: Matt. 2:13-15

The Evangelist has made a relatively brief account of what must have been a difficult and involved journey to and through Egypt for the sake of safety from Herod's dreadful orders—to kill all the children under two years' age. The angel advised Joseph to flee with his family in Matt. 2:13, and in Matt. 2:21, they return. The implications of the brief text are, however, enormous.

A journey to Egypt in secret (Matt. 2:14) would have been difficult and expensive, not to mention dangerous and exhausting. In light of the expense, that Joseph and his family had to live two years in Egypt, i.e., until Herod's death, the gifts of the wise men (Matt. 2:11) take on increased significance. They may well have paid for the journey and living expenses, and more besides.

[Enrichment: Nothing is actually known about the holy family's time in Egypt, but there is a substantial tradition. Throughout Egypt, there are even today dozens (perhaps, hundreds) of shrines, basilicas, etc., commemorating the residence of the holy family during part of their journey. As with the "pieces of the True Cross," there are probably too many. But, for all anyone knows, some of them may be authentic traditions dating back to the 1st century.]

The quotation in Matt. 2:15 matches the Hebrew of Hosea 11:1, rather than the Septuagint, which is somewhat different. The Septuagint for Hosea 11:1 reads, "Out of Egypt I called back his children."

Matthew the Evangelist drew a parallel between the Exodus and the return of Jesus from Egypt. What does this suggest? Is Israel a "type," or metaphor, of Christ? Note that the Evangelist asserted that the return of Jesus from Egypt was the fulfillment of what the LORD said through the prophet, not just a historical allusion, or even a striking parallel.

Consider some questions about the passage:

Q38: What is the purpose connected with the flight to Egypt? (Matt. 2:14,15)

Q39: Why is the Evangelist pointing out the fulfillment of prophecy?

Q40: Is "my son" Israel, or Jesus, or both?

C. Conclusions

Four conclusions can be drawn from this quotation:

Q41: Did the prophecy of Hosea take on an entirely different meaning in Matthew's hands than it likely had for Hosea's original readers?

Q42: There is a clue to the possible Messianic interpretation of Hosea 11:1: the reference to "my son." Consider Psalm 2:7, part of a tableau that is clearly Messianic. Who is "my son," according to Acts 4:25,26?

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Q43: What is Matthew's attitude about the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy?

Q44: How does the Evangelist interpret the God's continuing authority and purpose?

Are there other conclusions you would draw?

IV. The Slaughter of the Innocents

A. The Prophecy of Jeremiah

Focus passage:

“This is what the LORD says: ‘A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more.’”—Jer. 31:15

Background: Jer. 31:1-17

Jeremiah was a late contemporary of Isaiah, who predicted and lived to see the Babylonian Captivity. His story is complex and many-faceted. The quoted passage comes early in the Captivity portion of his prophecies. Consider some questions on the passage:

Q45: What was Jeremiah describing in the preceding passage? (Jer. 31:1-14)

Q46: Who is speaking? (Jer. 31:15)

Q47: Who was Rachel? (Gen. 29-33, and Gen. 35:16-20)

Q48: Whom does Rachel stand for? (Jer. 31:15)

Q49: What has happened to the children? (Jer. 31:15)

Q50: What is the LORD's counsel to Rachel? (Jer. 31:16)

Q51: Is the LORD's counsel encouraging? What is to follow? (Jer. 31:16,17)

Once again, the passage is not obviously Messianic, as it seems to address directly the conditions surrounding the Captivity and return.

B. Matthew's account

Focus passage:

Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”—Matt. 2:17,18

Background: Matt.2:16-23

In Matt. 2:18, Matthew the Evangelist makes the fulfillment of prophecy from the passage from Jeremiah the centerpiece of his interpretation of the slaughter of the innocents. Israel (what was left of it) was again in a kind of captivity, occupied and controlled by the Romans. The killing of all male children under two years' age by the despot Herod was an atrocity of enormous proportions. Thus, it is not surprising that one might think of the parallels to the passage in Jeremiah. But Matthew goes further, asserting in Matt. 2:17,18 that Jeremiah 31:15 was prophetic and that the slaughter of the innocents was the fulfillment of that prophecy.

Consider some questions on the passage:

Q52: What caused Herod's wrath? (Matt. 2:12,16)

Q53: What was Herod trying to accomplish? (Matt. 2:13)

Q54: What was the Lord's response? (Matt. 2:13-15)

Q55: What is the Lord's attitude towards earthly rulers and their plots? (Ps. 2:4)

Q56: How was the situation resolved? (Matt. 2:18)

There is no extant record, apart from Matthew, of the order of Herod or of its execution. But such atrocities were not uncommon in the Roman era. All threats to authority were dealt with harshly.

C. Conclusions

Once again, Matthew has taken a verse from a prophet, seemingly directed entirely towards a contemporary situation, and applied it in an unexpected way to the life of Jesus. What is the lesson of this?

IV. General Conclusions

The four passages in which Matthew quotes the prophets Isaiah, Micah, Hosea, and Jeremiah, frame the story of the early life of Jesus for the purpose of establishing Jesus' claim to the kingship of Israel. In doing this, Matthew explains who Jesus is, probably to people who were already committed to understanding Scripture in a Messianic way.

Q57: One of the prophecies is clearly Messianic in the original context, one is possibly so, and the other two are not obviously Messianic at all. What does this say about the Evangelist's interpretive rule?

Matthew's selections from the Old Testament reveal a point of view that turns the Scripture inside out, in a sense. Because there is a parallel between the calling of Israel and Jesus, the prophetic passages prefigure Christ, whether they did so in the original hearers' ears or not. Thus, Matthew sees the story of Jesus as the continuation of the story of grace and God's providential guidance throughout the Old Testament.

The Evangelist's worldview is that God is sovereign, and that whatever He does, there are patterns, signs, and signposts, indicators of the way God works. His fingerprints are all over His creation and plan for salvation, which was planted in Genesis and bore fruit in the Gospels.

Matthew revealed the mind of God as He has unfolded His plan for salvation, telling us things about that plan that we would never have known otherwise.

What other conclusions can you draw?

Can we pray this **prayer** together?

Father, we thank You and praise You for Your exercise of sovereign will over history, writing the life and work of Your Son into the life and history of Your people, Israel. Lord, we ask you to increase our faith and strengthen our confidence in your providence, so vividly demonstrated in these passages from your Word, in Jesus' Name, amen.