

## AN EVEN CLOSER LOOK AT MATT 2:6 AND ITS OLD TESTAMENT SOURCES

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Biblical interpretation cannot be reduced to universal algorithms. This is fortunate for us since we then have opportunity to look at interesting problems from many different directions. Not too long ago in this *Journal* I had a look at Matt 2:6 and its OT sources,<sup>1</sup> which was itself a second look prompted by the fine article by H. Heater.<sup>2</sup>

In my earlier article I was looking at Matthew's citation of Mic 5:1 (English versions 5:2 and throughout this article) and 2 Sam 5:2 against the four principal versions. I asked two questions: (1) What kinds of divergences do we find? (2) How can we account for these? I concluded that the divergences were significant and could not be accounted for by the extant textual witnesses or by appealing to a non-MT *Vorlage*: "The rather obvious Christological emphasis suggests that Matthew himself is theologizing in this passage."<sup>3</sup>

In this article I want to underscore the point that Matthew is "theologizing" by looking at his primary OT source, Mic 5:1, and asking a different kind of question from the previous. The question regards the wordplay in Mic 5:1 and how it is handled in Matt 2:6.

In Mic 4:14 J. Carreira finds alliteration between *mšwr* and *šm*.<sup>4</sup> More often noticed by commentators is the paronomasia between *šbt* and *špt* where only the middle consonants differ (yet both are labials). 5:1 continues the alliterations. Carreira contends that the dominance of *mēm* and the persistence of *ʾālep/ʿayin* in 5:3 are part of Micah's *Kunstsprache*:

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<sup>1</sup> A. J. Petrotta, "A Closer Look at Matt 2:6 and Its Old Testament Sources," *JETS* 28 (1985) 47-52.

<sup>2</sup> H. Heater, "Matthew 2:6 and Its Old Testament Sources," *JETS* 26 (1983) 395-397. This article was, in turn, a response to an article by M. Silva, "Ned B. Stonehouse and Redaction Criticism. Part Two: The Historicity of the Synoptic Tradition," *WTJ* 40 (1977-78) 281-303.

<sup>3</sup> Petrotta, "Matt 2:6" 51. See also W. D. Davies and D. C. Allen: "The differences [between Mic, LXX, and Matt] are in fact sufficient to tempt one to speak of an 'interpretation' instead of a 'quotation' of Scripture. The text has been freely altered by Matthew in order to make it best serve his ends" (*The Gospel According to Matthew* [Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1988], 1. 242).

<sup>4</sup> J. N. Carreira, "Kunstsprache und Weisheit bei Micha," *BZ* 26 (1982) 65; the *mēm* and sibilants; notice the chiasm or anagrammatical relationship in the wordplay—the inversion of the two letters.

*w<sup>ʿ</sup>th byt-lhm ʔprth*  
*š<sup>c</sup>yr lhywt b<sup>ʔ</sup> lpy yhw<sup>d</sup>h*  
*mmk ly ys<sup>ʔ</sup> lhywt mwšl byšr<sup>ʔ</sup>l*  
*wmwš<sup>ʔ</sup>tyw mqdm mymy<sup>c</sup> wlm*

Is the presence of such combinations, however, any more noteworthy than the dominance of a letter *x* in any given language?<sup>5</sup> What is achieved by the juxtaposition of *mšwr* and *šm*? The same question applies to Carreira's finding a correspondence between *ʔprth* and *b<sup>ʔ</sup>lpy* and between *š<sup>c</sup>yr* and *ys<sup>ʔ</sup>*. Alliteration of sorts exists, but so what? The alliterations hold no structuring significance, display no wit, add nothing to our understanding of words or of the message of the prophet.<sup>6</sup>

More striking and interesting than the alliteration between *š<sup>c</sup>yr* and *ys<sup>ʔ</sup>* is the play between *ys<sup>ʔ</sup>* and *mwš<sup>ʔ</sup>tyw* in the following colon, especially given the unusual form of the second term.<sup>7</sup> The alliteration and etymological play in 5:2 between *ywldh* and *yldh* is along the same line (they are both *figura etymologica*) though this latter play lacks the unusual construction of the previous play.

With the exception of *šbt* and *špt* and the possibility of *ys<sup>ʔ</sup>* and *mwš<sup>ʔ</sup>tyw*, the alliterations of 4:14 and 5:1 offer little by way of exploiting the ambiguities of language<sup>8</sup> or creating a particularly memorable rhetorical effect. They fall under the category of "pretty paronomasia"<sup>9</sup> and are subordinate to the dominant wordplay of the pericope, *ttgddy bt-gdw*.<sup>10</sup>

Tucked away in these alliterations, however, is a pun that gets overlooked in our efforts to bring perspicuity to the text. *b<sup>ʔ</sup>lpy* is less a play on *ʔprth*, as Carreira contends, and more a play on "ruler" (*mwšl*) in the following colon. *ʔlp* means "thousand" as in a military unit or subdivision of a tribe and is used by extension of the clan itself, as for example in 1 Sam 10:19: "And now present yourselves before the Lord by your tribes (*lšbtykm*) and your clans (*w<sup>ʔ</sup>lpykm*)." It is also used of a district, as for example in 23:23: "I will search him out among all the districts of Judah (*bkl ʔlpy yhw<sup>d</sup>h*)." Furthermore *ʔlp* occurs in rather stylized phraseology, "the heads of the clans of Israel" (*r<sup>ʔ</sup>šy ʔlpy yšr<sup>ʔ</sup>l*; cf. Josh 22:21).

Mic 5:1 personifies "Bethlehem Ephrathah." But Ephrathah is more properly the district in which Bethlehem is situated (cf. e.g. Ruth 1:2),<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Given a class of fifty students, if divided by patronym at "m," the middle letter of the English alphabet, more students will fall into the first group than the second—is this fact significant?

<sup>6</sup> Paronomasia need not do such things but it often will; cf. e.g. W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984) 222–250.

<sup>7</sup> Some consideration must be given to morphology, semantic range, proximity of the words in question, and syntactic position when considering instances of wordplay, especially alliteration.

<sup>8</sup> Biblicalists largely overlook the fact that wordplay, whether paronomasia or pun, is built on the inherent ambiguity of language. Besides Watson, *Poetry* 237, see L. Peeters, "Pour une interprétation du jeu de mots," *Semitics* 2 (1971–72) 127–142.

<sup>9</sup> A phrase used by M. Mahood, *Shakespeare's Wordplay* (London: Methuen, 1957), of a simple soundplay in Shakespeare.

<sup>10</sup> This wordplay is a topic for another day.

<sup>11</sup> We should not overlook, however, the occurrence of "Ephrathah" in 1 Chr 4:4 where it refers to the descendants of Judah: "These are the sons of Hur, the firstborn of Ephrathah, the

and since  $\text{ʔlp}$  follows from this (and even has some sonic affinities) one would do well to translate it as “thousands” or “districts.” The following colon, however, has the phrase “to be ruler of Israel,” which is parallel to “to be among the thousands of Judah.” In Hebrew the phrases are fittingly parallel:

*lhywt bʔlpy yhwdh*  
*lhywt mwšl byšrʔl*

The “ruler” (*mwšl*) draws one back to reconsider the previous line, which suggests a metaphoric reading for “thousands,” especially in light of the personification that begins the colon (“And you, O Bethlehem”).

Is there more to the play than a metaphoric reading over against a literal reading of  $\text{ʔlpy}$ ? I want to suggest that rather than simply a metaphoric reading,  $\text{ʔlpy}$  calls to mind the homonymic  $\text{ʔlwp}$ , “tribal chief,” as in Gen 36:15: “These are the chiefs ( $\text{ʔlwp}$ ) of the sons of Esau.”  $\text{ʔlwp}$  is not present graphically but certainly aurally.<sup>12</sup>

What has all this to do with Matthew? We find in Matthew a quite deliberate transformation of the oracle based on the aural reading rather than the graphic reading.<sup>13</sup> At Matt 2:6 the scribes “quote” Mic 5:1 and render *bʔlpy* as *en tois hēgomosin*, “rulers.”<sup>14</sup> This citation seems deliberate in the light of the drastic departures that we find in the Matthean quotation of Mic 5:1.<sup>15</sup> At every departure from what has come down to us as the MT a Christological point is made by Matthew. What is true generally of the citation is especially true of “rulers.” In using this term here, Matthew is affirming “the superiority of Jesus over his predecessors in the Davidic dynasty” and later uses *hēgemon* to assert Jesus’ superiority over Pilate as well.<sup>16</sup>

Commentators have long noted that the Micah passage appeals to Davidic traditions in citing “Bethlehem Ephrathah.”<sup>17</sup> But Bethlehem Ephrathah has connections with the patriarchs as well as with David. 1 Chr 4:4 cites “Ephrathah” (the father of “Bethlehem”) as the son of

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father of Bethlehem,” a point perhaps not lost on the translator of the LXX who renders the initial words of Mic 5:1 “And you, Bethlehem, of the house (*oikos*) of Ephrathah.”

<sup>12</sup> It is possible, of course, that the text originally read “chiefs” rather than “thousands.” But we have no textual witness for this except Matthew or texts influenced by the Matthean text. Matthew’s rendering is more easily explained on theological than textual grounds.

<sup>13</sup> The “reading” in Matthew need not be conscious, although my use of “deliberate” would suggest such an inference. The reading works equally as well on a subconscious level: From the author’s perspective—Jesus as the “greater ruler”—reading  $\text{ʔlwp}$  for  $\text{ʔlpy}$  is a more “natural” reading.

<sup>14</sup> At Mic 7:5 the LXX translates “confidant” ( $\text{ʔlwp}$ ) as “rulers.” This translation, however, is based on reading the more familiar homograph for the less familiar, something the translator does at other places in the book (cf e.g. *eirenikos*, “peaceful,” for *bšlwm*, “for a bribe/repayment”).

<sup>15</sup> The “scribes” do more than just supply different vowels to this one word; cf. Petrotta, “Matt 2:6”; R. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 29–30.

<sup>16</sup> Gundry, *Matthew* 29.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. e.g. D. Hillers, *Micah* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

“Hur,” who is the son of Judah. It is Judah who receives the blessing that “the scepter shall not depart from [him], nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet” (Gen 49:10). Gen 49:10 is considered a “messianic” passage by some.<sup>18</sup>

The personification of Bethlehem Ephrathah is a point not lost on Matthew, not only in his rendering of “thousands” but also perhaps in a way similar to that of the LXX—that is, as a possible link with the patriarchs.<sup>19</sup> The connection with the patriarchs underscores the messianic status of Jesus, especially in the light of Matthew’s genealogy, which goes through Judah back to Abraham (in contradistinction to Luke’s, which goes back to Adam). A further link with the patriarchs and the royal line is found in Matthew’s rendering “Ephrathah” of the MT of Mic 5:1 as “land of Judah.” Of this rendering Gundry says, “Matthew wants an allusion to Judah, the progenitor of the royal line . . . in order to heighten the stress on Jesus’ kingship.”<sup>20</sup>

The reading of Mic 5:1 that suggests not only monarch (David) but patriarch (Judah) receives support from the enigmatic colon that closes the verse: “His origins are from before, from the days of old.” The medieval Jewish commentators Eliezer of Beaugency and Kimchi seem to be the first to have suggested that these words refer to David and not to “eternity.”<sup>21</sup> Many commentators have followed this interpretation.<sup>22</sup> But the colon is indeterminate at best. Hillers says that there “is a strong flavor of myth here, for ‘of old’ has the suggestion ‘primeval, from the beginning, as an order of creation.’”<sup>23</sup> Hence understanding “Bethlehem Ephrathah” as a subtle reference not only to David but to an earlier time, especially the patriarchal accounts as well, is suggestive. The personification of the initial colon in the light of the indeterminate phrasing of the final colon pushes the reader to look beyond David to the days of yore, to the patriarchs.

These observations support the suggestion that Matthew is not “misquoting” his Hebrew text. Rather, he is picking up on the wordplay of his

<sup>18</sup> Cf. S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen, n.d.), who cites the Talmudic tradition that “Shiloh” is a title of the Messiah. Driver, of course, rejects this interpretation of “Shiloh” but does admit that the passage as a whole seems “to contain a Messianic thought” (p. 386).

<sup>19</sup> See n. 11 above.

<sup>20</sup> Gundry, *Matthew* 29; see also Davies and Allen, *Matthew*, who argue that “Judah” emphasizes the connection with the patriarchs and messianic expectation.

<sup>21</sup> Eliezer glosses the phrase “his origins” by saying, “These are the ancients who emerged from of old, from the seed of Jesse the Bethlehemite, that is David.” Prior to this line of interpretation, many commentators followed the lead of Jerome who interprets these words in the light of John 1:1—that is, to Jesus’ preexistence with the Father.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. L. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 343: “This time can only be the days of David, to which the earlier parts of the verse have been harking.”

<sup>23</sup> Hillers, *Micah* 66. Hillers perhaps overstates his case; cf. Mic 7:20 with its reference to the “days of old” in connection with the patriarchs: “Thou wilt show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as thou hast sworn to our fathers from the days of old (*mymy qdm*)” (RSV).

OT source and bringing a second, latent conceptual association of the word to the forefront in order to heighten the status of Jesus as the greater ruler.<sup>24</sup> “Thousands” (ʿlpy) is a subtle play with “ruler” (mwšl/ʿlwp). The play is set up by both the personification of the initial colon and the further play between yšʿ and mwšʿtyw. It is left to Matthew to exploit this clever pun of Micah.

<sup>24</sup> L. G. Heller (“Toward a General Typology of the Pun,” *Language and Style* 7 [1974] 271-282) suggests that “a single manifesting mark [usually a single word] signals more than one conceptual function” (p. 271).