CLARIFYING MORE BAFFLING BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

"THE MEANING OF EPHRATHAH"

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XXII

THE MEANING OF EPHRATHAH

Micah 5:1 (English 5:2)

tAyh.l ry[ic' ht'r"p,a, ~x,l,-tyBe hT'a;w>
yli ^M.mi hd"Why> ypel.a;B.
laer"f.yIB. lveAm tAyh.li aceyE
`~l'A[ymeymi ~d<Q,mi wyt'ac'AmW

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are 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 the days of
antiquity.

SEPTUAGINT

kai. su, Bhqleem oi=koj tou/ Efraqa ovligostoj ei= tou/
ei=nai evn cilia,sin Iouda evk sou/ moi
evxeleu,setai tou/ ei=nai eivj a;rconta evn tw/| Israhl
kai. ai` e;xodoi auvtou/ avpV avrch/j evx h`merw/n aivw/noj

And you, Bethlehem, house of Ephrathah, are few in number to
be among the thousands of Judah; out of you shall one come
forth to me, to be a ruler of Israel; and his goings forth were
from the beginning, from days of old.[1]

The first step in determining the etymology of the name
Ephrathah (htr"p,a,) and the gentilic *Ephrathite* (ytir"p,a,) is
to recognize the occasional interchange in Hebrew of the t
and the j . The following examples are widely recognized:

- h['T' "to err, to go astray" and h['j' (= a['j', W['j',
y['j',) "to stray, to wander" (BDB 380, 1073; Jastrow 542,
1683)

- @t;x' "to seize, snatch away" and @j;x' "to seize, to rob,

to catch" (BDB 310, 369; Jastrow 450)

- ljq' "to kill," Aramaic ltq, Arabic qª⁽ªⱨ (*qatala*), and Ethiopic Hmz (*qatala*) "to kill" (BDB 881).

The root of htrḃa, can be identified as trp, which has been augmented with a prosthetic a and the feminine suffix h or the locative h (= eiij).[2] This trp was used for the river Euphrates (trP,) and is probably related to the Arabic *?c (*furat*) "sweet," a term applied to water "that subdues thirst by its excessive sweetness" (Lane 6: 2358). But "sweet water"—whether it be a clan name or a place name—does not fit the context of Micah 5:1 or the geography of the Judean hill country. However, with the t/j variable in focus, a very satisfactory derivation of Ephrathah is available once (1) trp is recognized as a variant of jrp and (2) htrḃa, (or trḃa, as in Gen 48:7) are treated as the equivalents of the conjectured variants hjrḃa,and jrḃa,

The *noun* jrP. means "that which is singled out," and the *verb* jrP. means "to specify, to designate" or "to belittle." Related nouns are ~Wj rP, "a small portion" and hjWrP./ hjyrP. "small change, a small coin," which are cognates of the Arabic S?c (*farṭ ᵘⁿ*) "small coin, change" (Jastrow 1219, 1224, 1225; Wehr 827; BDB 827).

Most relevant for Micah 5:2 are the Arabic cognates S?c (*faraṭa*) "he preceded, he was or became first, foremost," S?c (*farṭ ᵘⁿ*) "mastery, ascendency, prevalence, or predominance," and S@"c (*fârṭ ᵘⁿ*) "becoming foremost, getting priority or precedence," as well as ÇU!?c (*furâṭa*) "a small mountain" and

S?c (*furuṭ ᵘⁿ*) "an eminence resembling a mountain" (Lane 2375–2377). Because Bethlehem Ephrathah was situated 2,550 feet above sea level—and was 100 feet higher than Jerusalem—htrþa, / hjrþa, could well reference its size and elevation along a ridge—analogous to the cognates cited here for small portions, small coins, and a small mountain. [3]

Moreover, the conclusion that the trp in htrþa, was a by-form of jrp "small" receives confirmation from the very next word in Micah 5:1, which is ry[ic' "small." [4] Thus, by *definition* and by *description* Bethlehem Ephrathah was such an insignificant village that Micah could state "you are too little to be among the clans of Judah" (NAS) or "too small to be among the rulers[5] of Judah" (NIV, NIB).

However, as suggested by the cognates S?c (*faraṭa*/*farṭ*) and S@"c (*fâriṭ*), the by-forms jrp/trp indicated not only the "smallness" of something, but also conveyed ideas of mastery, ascendency, prevalence, and prominence. In Micah 5:1, the prophet capitalized on these disparate nuances of jrp/trp. *Insignificant* Ephrathah would become *prominent*; *small* Ephrathah would become *great*—for a "ruler in Israel" would come from Bethlehem.

For Micah the appointment of a lvAm "ruler" from Ephrathah had been predicted "from of old" (~dQmi), "ages ago" (~lA[ymeymi), when the epithet trþa,/*Ephrath* was first given to the father of Bethlehem (I Chron 4:4). For the prophet Micah, little Bethlehem would fulfill at least two definitions hidden in the epithet *Ephrathah*. Although Bethlehem was but a *minor* village she would soon become *preeminent and foremost* by providing the ruler for the restoration of "the

former dominion of the daughter of Jerusalem" (Micah 4:8).

Micah's expectations about the ruler coming from Bethlehem can be reorganized and summarized as follows:[6]

- from you [Bethlehem] shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel . . . . (MT 5:1b),

- and he[7] shall deliver us from the Assyrian when he comes into our land and treads within our border (MT 5:5b),

- and he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of YHWH, in the majesty of the name of YHWH his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth (MT 5:3).

Once these verses are united it becomes quite clear that Micah's prediction about the Israelite ruler coming from Bethlehem was grounded in history, including

- the remote past when the epithet *Ephrath*(*ah*), with its different levels of meaning, was given to Bethlehem, and

- Micah's own historical moment when Israel was in immediate need of a ruler who could rescue the country from Assyrian aggression and oppression.

The first words of 5:4 (MT), "And this shall be peace," make a fitting close to the prophecy about the coming ruler, as well as an introduction to the prediction about the next appointment of seven shepherds and eight princes who, in a great reversal of power, would rule the land of Assyria with the sword and thereby maintain the peace for Israel. Although this latter prediction in 5:4b–5 (MT) was never fulfilled, according to the Magi and Matthew, the former prediction in 5:1 and 5:3 (MT) was fulfilled with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. The appeal of the Magi to Micah's prophecy (as

quoted in Matt 2:6), requires comment because neither the Magi nor Matthew mentiond *Ephrathah*. And, surprisingly, Micah's assertion that Bethlehem Ephrathah was "(too) little to be among the clans of Judah," was turned into a negative: "you are by no means least among the rulers of Judah."

Matthew 2:6

Kai. su. Bhqleem(gh/Ilouda(
oudamwj elacisth ei=en toij hgemosin VIouda\
ek sou/ gar exeleusetai hgoumenoj(
ostij poimanei/ ton laon mou ton VIsrahlÅ

And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,[8]
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will govern my people Israel.

It is obvious that the Magi were not quoting the Septuagint. Their use of hgoumenoj "princes" for the MT יפלאַ‎ instead of ciliasin "thousands," with the Septuagint, is one example of the independent reading of יפלא as יפולא‎.[9] As in Gen 48:7b, where Ephrathah appears without the final ה (as תרפא‎ instead of the התרפא‎ in 48:7a), the shorter תרפא was probably in the *Vorlage* used by Matthew or the Magi (or by their source). Secondarily, this תרפא became corrupted to תספא "you ceased"[10] and was then translated into Greek with the force of ספא (a particle of negation) as oudamwj "not at all"—similar to the translation in the Septuagint of !ya; as oudeij "in no way."[11] Thus, the Magi's quotation from Micah lacks any mention of התרפא‎ / Ephrathah or the oikoj tou/ Efraqa "house of Ephrathah," found in the Septuagint.[12]

Seemingly, then, a single scribal error in the textual tradition used by the Magi and Matthew—the misreading trpa as tspa—accounts for the two significant variations in the abbreviated quotation of Micah 5:2 (MT) in Matthew 2:26.

NOTES

1. The ~lA[and ~dq, in the phrase ~lA[ymymi ~dQmi do not indicated any kind of pre-existence. Compare Amos 9:11,

~lA[ymyKi hytynbW

and I will build it (the booth of David)
as in the days of old

and Malachi 3:4,

~l:VWryW hdWhy> txnmi hwhyl; hbr{W>
`tAYnmdaq; ~ynVkW ~lA[ymyKi

kai. aresei tw/ kuriw| qusia Iouda kai.
Ierousalhm kaqwj ai`
hmerai tou/ aiwhoj
kai. kaqwj ta. eth ta. emprosqen

And the sacrifice of Judah and Jerusalem
shall be pleasing to the Lord,
according to the former days,
and according to the former years.

2. The names htrba, trba, and ytrba, are cited in BDB (68) under the root rpa, stem II, without definition.

3. The jrP in Amos 6:5, used with reference to ecstatic singing or playing a musical instrument, would be the cognate of Arabic فرط (faraṭa) "to speak (thoughtlessly) or act hastily" (Lane 6: 2375).

4. Note that רְעִצ' also has the by-form רְעִז "small."

5. Reading perhaps בְּאַלְפֵי>יְהוּדָה. for the MT בְּאַלְפֵי>יְהוּדָה. and the Septuagint's en ciliasin Iouda "among the thousands of Judah."

6. Micah 5:2 (MT) is a misplaced verse which interrupts the natural transition from 5:1 (MT) and 5:3 (MT). It reads as follows:

> Therefore *He* (YHWH) shall give *them* (" the heads of the house of Jacob and the rulers of the house of Israel" [MT 3:8]) up until the time when *she* (the "daughter of Zion" [4:10]) who is in travail has brought forth; then the rest of *his* (Jacob's) brethren shall return to the people of Israel.

This verse, when moved to follow 3:12, provides a second "therefore" clause corresponding to the "therefore" at the beginning of 3:12. The two verses when so united speak of the impending fall of Jerusalem and exile in Babylon (alluded to also in 4:10).

7. The RSV and the NRS make the verb plural as though its antecedent were the "seven shepherds and eight princes of men who shall rule the land of Assyria with the sword," mentioned in 5:6a. The NAB opted for "we will be delivered." But the versions follow the singular in the Hebrew text, as do most English translations. Elliger proposed in BHS to emend וְהִצִּיל> to וְהִצִּילָנוּ "he will deliver us," and this has been followed by many translators.

8. The MT ... רְעִצ' הֶתְרָפָה, מִלֶּ֫ךְ-תְּבֵהֶהתָּאוֹ> was expanded in the Shem Tob Hebrew Gospel of Matthew to read (with additional words underlined):

htrpa <u>hdwhy</u> ~xl tyb htaw
...ry[c <u>hta !h hdwhy #ra</u>.

Six of the nine Shem Tob manuscripts (ABDEFG) read the negative !ya (= oudamwj) instead of interjection !h (= idou).

9. See above, note 5.

10. For the confusion of the ר with מ and the מ with ס, see Friedrich Delitzsch, *Die Lese- und Schreibfehler im Alten Testament* (Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter), 1920: 119–120 (§131).

11. The #ra'-yspa; in 5:3b (MT) may have influenced the reading of trpa as tspa in 5:1 (MT) in the *Vorlage* reflected in Matt 5:26. The use of S@"ds (*mafâriṭu*) in Arabic for "the *extremities* of a country" (Lane 6: 2378), like the #ra'-yspa; "ends of the earth," provides another possible explanation of how the stem jrp (and its by-form trp) took on *negative* as well as *locative* connotations like the root Spa. Were this the case, there would be no need to appeal to a scribal error of misreading trpa as tspa.

12. Note John 7:42,

<div align="center">
ouc h` grafh. eipen oti
ek tou/ spermatoj Dauid kai. apo. Bhqleem
thj kwmhj opou hn Dauid ercetai o` Cristoj\
</div>

<div align="center">
Does not scripture say that
from the seed of David and from Bethlehem,
the village where David lived, the Christ will come ?
</div>