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MATTHEW 2:6 AND ITS OLD TESTAMENT SOURCES

Homer Heater, Jr.*

Matthew's perspective on the person of Christ, begun in chap. 1 with a genealogy linking the patriarch Abraham and King David to the messianic King,¹ is sharpened even more in chap. 2. Here the court of Herod is challenged by the appearance of the Magi, who inquire as to the birthplace of the king of the Jews. When Herod hears of this request, he is troubled and calls for the chief priests and scribes of the people to give him a private answer to this question. Their answer is contained in Matt 2:6: "And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; for out of you shall come forth a Ruler, who will shepherd My people Israel" (*NASB*).

It is important to note that it is not Matthew who cites the OT here (as in 2:15, 18) but the religious authorities of Judaism. This interpretation of Micah, therefore, should reflect the perspective of the Jewish community in Palestine at that time. The Targum understood Mic 5:2 to be messianic: "The Messiah shall come to me from you to be made a ruler over Israel."²

Moises Silva³ classes Matt 2:6 under the heading "History of Midrash."⁴ He attempts to show in this section that the NT writers so used historical data as to violate modern canons of historicity and that therefore their writings are not "infallible" in the normal sense. Silva's article needs a full response, but my purpose is to respond only to his statement on Matt 2:6: ". . . whether or not we can give persuasive reasons why Matthew seems to alter the text, the fact remains that such use of Scripture is foreign to us—we would certainly not suffer a preacher who quoted the Bible in similar fashion!"⁵ Leaving to others to discuss the use or abuse of the Bible by modern preachers, we should ask whether the Jewish community, quoted with seeming approval by Matthew, was abusing the Bible. My purpose in this article is to show that the scribes are not "quoting" Mic 5:2⁶ but providing what I call "cumulative exegesis" from at least three OT

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¹See W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday) 5.

²See A. Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic* (Brill: Leiden, 1962), 3. 446. See also M. McNamara, *Targum and Testament* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1972) 207.

³M. Silva, "Ned B. Stonehouse and Redaction Criticism. Part I: The Witness of the Synoptic Evangelists to Christ"; "Part II: The Historicity of the Synoptic Tradition," *WTJ* 40 (1977-78) 77-88, 281-303.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 289-298.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 294.

⁶Hebrew 5:1.

passages. Gundry has already briefly noted the dependence of Matt 2:6 on 2 Sam 5:2 as well as Mic 5:2.⁷

The first step in this exegetical process is the famous "Shiloh" passage in Gen 49:10. Here Jacob promises that the scepter will not pass from Judah nor the staff from between his feet until Shiloh come. The LXX has personified the scepter with *archōn* and the staff with *hēgoumenos*. The troublesome *šylw* has been divided into *š-l-w* to provide *ta apokeimena autō*. The key word here is *hēgoumenos*. A ruler is to come from Judah. The Targum becomes more specific by identifying this ruler as the Messiah and that which belongs to him as the kingdom.⁸ Gen 49:10 is therefore to the Targumist a clear prophecy of the coming of the Messiah. He is the one the LXX calls *archōn* and *hēgoumenos*.

The second step is in 2 Sam 5:2, where David of Judah's tribe is probably considered to be in some sense a fulfillment of the prophecy of Gen 49:10. The people quote God as saying that David is a prince (*ngyd*) and that he is to shepherd God's people Israel. The LXX translates *ngyd* with *hēgoumenos*, thereby linking it with Gen 49:10.

The third and final step in the process is in Micah, who prophesied during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah in the last half of the eighth century B.C. (Mic 1:1). He promised both judgment and blessing. In the fifth chapter he gives a striking prophecy. In spite of Bethlehem's insignificance in Judah, she will be honored in bringing forth a ruler (*mwšl*) who is not new on the scene but has been involved throughout eternity. The Targum saw in this prophecy a clear reference to the Messiah, as we have already indicated.⁹ A coming ruler was promised in Gen 49:10. David was such a ruler (*hēgoumenos*), and now David's town has been singled out as the birthplace of the greater David.

The scribes, in replying to Herod about the birthplace of the king of the Jews, bring together the teaching of Gen 49:10, 2 Sam 5:2 and Mic 5:2. From the tribe of Judah will come the *hēgoumenos*. David in some sense is a fulfillment of that, and to him is given the task of "shepherding God's people Israel." Yet David is not the ultimate fulfillment, for some three centuries later Micah is still speaking of a coming one to be born in Bethlehem whose activities have eternal aspects. He is the *archōn* in Micah, the *hēgoumenos* in Gen 49:10; 2 Sam 5:2.¹⁰

The scribes give to Herod the content of these three passages, citing partly from Micah and partly from 2 Samuel.¹¹ They are not quoting, nor are they play-

⁷R. Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel* (Brill: Leiden, 1975) 91-93. See also Albright and Mann, *Matthew* 13.

⁸*d dyyty mšyh' ddylyh hy' mlkw' wlyh yštm'wn 'mmy'.*

⁹*w't byt lhm 'prt kz'yr hwyt' l'tmn'h b'lp'y' dbyt yhwth mnk qdmy ypwq mšyh' lmkwy 'byd šwl'n 'l ysr'l.*

¹⁰A has *hēgoumenos* in Mic 5:2 for *archonta*, but A has a tendency to harmonize with the NT.

¹¹*Poimanei ton laon mou ton Israēl* is from 2 Sam 5:2, not Mic 5:2. The shepherding in Micah is in v 4 and not at all like the citation in Matthew.

ing games with *'l(w)py*.¹² The Greater David, the Messiah, is truly a governor as was David in a lesser sense, and as the Greater Shepherd (John 10) he will shepherd God's people Israel. This is accurate, cumulative exegesis and not an abuse of Scripture.

¹²Silva cites Diez-Macho, who says that the translation of *'lpy* is an example of the midrashic principle whereby interpreters drew inferences from the text by reading different vowels ("Stonehouse" 294). Gundry's explanation is better (*Use* 92), but the personification does not have to be based on a repointing of *'l*p.