

Balaam-Laban as the key to the Old Testament quotations in Matthew 2

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Summary

Matthew chapter 2 appears to pull proof texts out of the Hebrew Scriptures in an almost random way. However, when it is read in the light of the ancient additions to the story of Balaam, the texts form the structure of a sermon based on Balaam's star. Early Jewish sources allude to a story about Balaam who, in the identity of Laban, tried to kill Rachel's children which included a messianic baby. They were protected in Egypt but after the Exodus Balaam attacked again. Matthew's four quotations are each linked to this story, and a first century Jewish reader would have recognised the story behind these links. The underlying message is that Jesus is the Messiah, and that Herod was like Balaam-Laban, the super-enemy of the Jews who tried to destroy the Messiah.

Matthew's four quotations

Matthew chapter 2 leads the reader from the *Magi* who ask after the star, through the flight into Egypt and finishes at the return to Nazareth. It includes four quotations from the "prophets": from Micah 5.2, 4 at v. 6; Hosea 11.1 at v. 15; Jeremiah 31.15 at v. 18; and an allusion from "the prophets" that "he will be called a Nazarene" at v. 23. The correspondence between the contents of this chapter and these texts appears to be flimsy and tendentious, and yet the author seems to think that these are convincing examples of fulfilled prophecy (v.5, 15, 17, 23).

Commentators have largely failed to find any common ground between these texts, and tend to treat them as isolated proof texts, or texts from an early Christian list of testimonies, which have been applied without much regard to their original context. France, followed by Alison, have made good attempts to find a common theme between them by pointing out that they each refer to a geographical location (Bethlehem, Egypt, Ramah and Nazareth), though they have difficulty finding the relevance of 'Ramah'.¹ This explanation does nothing to make these texts more convincing as 'fulfilment' of prophecy because, as France suggests, the deeper meaning of these texts can only be appreciated by someone who has already accepted the conclusion that Jesus is Messiah.

This chapter is therefore either confused or confusing - either the author is writing in a sloppy and unconvincing manner, or we are missing something. In considering which

¹ Dale C Allison, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (3 vols, *The International Critical Commentary*; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988-1997), I: 235, 268f. R.T. France, "The Formula-Quotations of Matthew 2 and the problem of communication", *NTS* 27 (1981) 233-251.

possibility is more likely, we should dismiss two simplistic and condescending possibilities. First, we should not assume that the author is communicating only to those who are already convinced and therefore need only the merest hint to identify Jesus in these prophecies. His primary readership may well have been believers, but they were believers in a mission-orientated church, who mixed with unconvinced people every day. The whole tenure of the birth narratives is apologetic, so we would expect that these “fulfilment” prophecies were meant to be convincing to non-believers. Second, we should dismiss the assumption that ancient readers were gullible and easily convinced while we, in contrast, are more intelligent and logical. Human intelligence has not increased measurably during the last few millennia, and the average Jewish reader was far better read in religious texts than most modern scholars, and they were just as skilled at following complex religious and exegetical reasoning.

We should assume instead that this chapter is confusing for us, partly perhaps because we are unpractised at following their methods of reasoning, but mainly because we are ignorant of something with which first century Jewish readers were very familiar. In other words, the author was assuming some knowledge which any Jewish reader of the time would possess, but which is unfortunately no longer readily available to a modern reader. The problem with this solution is that things which are very well known are often not recorded, but only alluded to, so the missing information may not now be available in an easily accessible form.

A modern example of something which is well known but poorly recorded is the stories regarding Father Christmas. Imagine scholars from a generation which had forgotten the Father Christmas stories, who were trying to piece together 19th C allusions to this person from religious and historical texts, and occasional letters and legal documents (which is roughly the extent of our records from the first century). They would find very it difficult to reconstruct the fable of Father Christmas from the sideways allusions which they might find in these documents. They might find references, for example, in a theology textbook (“Santa Claus is based on Saint Nicholas...”); or in a sermon (“a meal for the poor, unlike the traditional mince pie and cup of milk by the chimney, should be given without any hope of reward”); or in a church talk for children (‘be good or you may get a piece of coal’); or in a letter (“John dressed in a Santa suit for the children’s party”). But they would not find a straight-forward retelling of this story, including the elves, reindeer, milk and mince pie, coal, presents, chimneys and white beard. This story was not passed on in books, because it was told to the very young, so written texts only contained allusions it. The scholars could of course cheat by referring to a children’s book from the 20th C (when parents needed extra help telling stories to their young), but a cautious and serious scholar would try to avoid using literature from a later time period.

We face a similar situation when we try to reconstruct a story which was familiar to all first century Jews, such as the story of Balaam which has many links with the details recorded in Matthew chapter 2. In the intertestamental period, various additions to the Biblical story transformed Balaam into a super-enemy who lived for hundreds of years and who tried to kill the baby ancestor of the messiah.² First, when

² The sources about Balaam in Targums, LXX and early rabbinic literature are conveniently summarised in G. Vermes, "The Story of Balaam." in *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1961) 127-177 and by Louis Ginzberg, *The legends of the Jews* (translated

he was called Laban, he pursued the children of Rachel till they took refuge in Egypt. There Balaam's sons, Jannes and Jambres, advised Pharaoh to kill the children. Later, in the wilderness, Balaam attacked them again and he was finally killed, after prophesying about the star and sceptre of the Messiah. The many examples of embellished rewritings of the Old Testament, such as Pseudo-Philo, Genesis Apocryphon and Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*, suggest that such stories were very popular in the popular Jewish mindset of the first century. This particular series of stories is alluded to in various sources, but they are nowhere told in their entirety, so we have to reconstruct it from various ancient texts.

Problems with 'early' Jewish sources

There are very few sources which might reliably tell us about Jewish preaching and exegesis in Palestine-Syria of the first century. Most of the texts which have survived come from outside the area (such as Philo's works from Alexandria) or from outside mainstream Judaism (such as the documents from Qumran and apocalyptic sects) or from outside the time period (such as Targums and Midrashim). This leaves us with Josephus, who arguably represents mainstream synagogue interpretations, and the LXX, which sometimes preserves clues about the interpretations of the translators.

Some of the literature which was preserved at Qumran and nearby was probably also familiar in mainstream Judaism. In particular, we might assume that historical, ethical or sapiential works were of general interest, such as the Greek version of Ecclesiasticus, Psalms of Solomon, 3rd & 4th Maccabees and Wisdom of Solomon. Some of the apparently sectarian works were probably also widely known outside Qumran and the various apocalyptic sects, because we find copies and translations of them in several locations. These include Jubilees and Enoch and perhaps works such as Pseudo-Philo, Lives of the Prophets, and Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. Even though this literature was probably regarded somewhat like we regard the Arthurian legends – tales with stirring sentiments and moralising conclusions which only the fanatics would read as historic – they are nevertheless a repository of well-known stories. These stories were probably not regarded as 'true' by most Jews, but they would have been valued as quotable illustrations of universal truths and revelations, or simply as popular vehicles to which serious teaching could be attached.

Other sources which were recorded at a later date or outside Palestine-Syria can be useful when they display correlations with this literature. The Midrashim include a vast and varied collection of stories and interpretations which span from the first to fifth centuries CE and sometimes later. These should be treated with caution because even when traditions appear to have an ancient origin, they are likely to have developed greatly in the mean time. Unlike halakhic rabbinic traditions, many of which can now be reliably dated, we do not yet have any way to date this aggadic material.³

from the German manuscript Henrietta Szold; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913-1967), I: 369-376; III: 351-382. However, neither of them highlight the connection between Laban and Balaam.

³ Dating methods for halakhic material are now well established, and the pre-70 CE traditions are now being dated systematically in David Instone-Brewer, *Traditions of the rabbis from the era of the New Testament (TRENT)* (1 vol, 5 vols forthcoming; Grand Rapids, Mich:

The Targums are potentially useful because they are relatively conservative in their preservation of classical synagogue interpretations, though they too should be used with great care. These Aramaic translations adhere closely to the Hebrew text, but they also contain a varying number of interpolations and paraphrases to help the reader understand the text. For the non-Pentateuchal Old Testament we have only the Targum Jonathan (TgJon), but for the Pentateuch we have three full versions and fragments of others. The three are:

- Targum Onkelos (TgOnk) - the traditional rabbinic or Babylonian Targum which is usually very close to the Hebrew text.
- Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (TgPsJon) - initially thought to be part of Targum Jonathan, which has the largest number of interpretive additions.
- Targum Neofiti (TgNf) - discovered in the Vatican last century, which is similar to TgOnk but with some additions like those of TgPsJon in the text and more of them added later in its margin.

There has been a welcome revival of interest in the Targums since the publication of the English translations edited by McNamara,⁴ but the date of the traditions in these targums is still completely uncertain. Written targums existed from the second century BCE, as found at Qumran,⁵ but the rabbinic targums were written much later. Like other rabbinic literature, there was initially a reluctance to record targums in a written form, lest it became confused with “Written Torah”. A story about Gamaliel II (beginning of 2nd C) suggests that he was willing to read a written targum of Job but he then destroyed it by burial to stop others reading it, in contrast to his grandfather in the mid 1st century who buried it without reading it (b.Shab.115a). Even if this story is not historically accurate, it presumably conveys the changing attitudes towards Targums which the editors wished to record.

The Targum versions that we have were probably not written till after 70 CE and they were also greatly re-edited in the second century.⁶ Nevertheless, they often preserve very early interpretations and allusions to stories which were well-known in the first century but which are sometimes entirely missing from rabbinic collections.⁷ This

William B. Eerdmans, 2004). When this project is complete, the results may provide clues by which agadic material can be dated.

⁴ Martin McNamara, ed., *The Aramaic Bible: The Targums* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992-).

⁵ A targum of Job, 11QtargJob, has been found, which may be dated to the 2nd C BCE, which is totally different to the rabbinic targum. However, the small fragment of a targum of Leviticus 16, 4QtargLev, probably from 1st C BCE, is basically similar to Targum Onkelos.

⁶ See the useful discussion of dating the Targum Isaiah by Bruce Chilton in *Aramaic Bible* vol.11, xx-xxxiii. McNamara summarises the attempts to date targums by comparisons with rabbinic halakha, and warns against making firm conclusions from this data (*Aramaic Bible* vol.IA, 41-42).

⁷ McNamara gives the example of the gloss at Gen.3.19 in TgPsJn and TgNf: “But from the dust you are to arise again to give an account and a reckoning of all that you have done.” Apart from Gen.R.20.10 saying that Adam’s “returning” to the dust hints at the resurrection, the nearest parallel to this gloss is found in the *Apocalypse of Moses*, a 4th C Greek translation of a pre-Christian Hebrew document: “And the LORD said to him [Adam], “I told you that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Now I promise to you the resurrection; I shall raise

study will often refer to traditions in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, which are only partially confirmed by more dateable sources such as Josephus and the LXX. Although this is an uncertain way of discovering what was known and thought in the first century, I take comfort from the fact that I rely on the work of two great scholars of the past. This paper pulls together findings in two neglected studies by David Daube and Rene Bloch,⁸ and draws implications from them.

When these findings are applied to Matthew chapter 2, they provide a single theme which places its four OT citations into a sermonic structure which would have been easily recognised in the first century. I will suggest in this study, that some concepts which are found primarily in the Targums should be regarded as intertestamental traditions, because they concur with briefer notices which we find in older sources and because they help to explain this difficult chapter in Matthew. Therefore, by a circular process, these targumic traditions will be shown to be ancient because they concur with older sources and because they cast light on a problematic passage in the New Testament.

Balaam-Laban, the super-enemy of Israel

In targumic traditions, the story of Balaam starts with Laban. It is difficult to know if Laban and Balaam were really regarded as the same individual, or whether Laban was a kind of metaphorical forerunner. We do not know the subtleties of this identification, because we merely have allusions to the fact.

Num.22.5: [Balak] sent messengers to **Laban the Aramaean, that is, Balaam** (*for he sought to swallow the people of the house of Israel*), the son of Beor, who *acted foolishly from the greatness of his wisdom. He did not spare Israel, the descendants of the sons of his daughters;* (TgPsJn)⁹

Num.31.8: [Phineas said to Balaam] “Are you not **Laban the Aramean who sought to destroy Jacob our father, and went down to Egypt**, you incited wicked Amalek against them, and now are you sent to curse them? But when you saw that your work did not take effect and the Memra of the Lord did not heed you, you persuaded the evil king Balak to put his daughters at the crossroads of the way to lead them astray, and because of this twenty-four thousand of them fell. Therefore there is no possibility again of sparing your life”. And immediately he drew his sword from its sheath and slew him. (TgPsJn)

It may be argued that the identification of Laban with Balaam was a relatively late idea because Targum Onkelos and Targum Neofiti do not contain these two additions,

you on the last day in the resurrection with every man of your seed.” (Ap.Mos.41.2-3, in J. H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* [2 vols; London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983-1985], II: 293).

⁸ David Daube, “The Earliest Structure of the Gospels” in *New Testament Judaism: Collected Works of David Daube*, 2 vols (ed. Calum Varmichael, Berkeley, Ca: University of California, 2000): 329-341. Renée Bloch, “Ecriture et Tradition dans le Judaïsme, Aperçus sur l’origine du Midrash”, *Cahiers Sioniens* 1 (1954): 9-34

⁹ All quotations from the Targums are taken from McNamara, *Aramaic Bible*, in which the deviations from the Hebrew text are indicated by italics. The words in bold are highlighted for the sake of this paper.

and the other sources which preserve this idea are later rabbinic works.¹⁰ However, it is very common for Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to contain additions which are missing from the other two targums which are far less expanded, so this absence is not necessarily significant. Also, the earliest rabbinic tradition which refers to this idea is already questioning it and revising it, because the rabbis had some misgivings about the implication that Balaam was over 400 years old:

A Tanna taught: Beor, Cushan-rishathaim¹¹ and Laban the Syrian are identical; Beor denotes that he committed bestiality; Cushan-rishathaim that he perpetrated two evils upon Israel: one in the days of Jacob and the other in the days of the Judges. But what was his real name? Laban the Syrian.

Scripture writes, “the son of Beor”; [but also] his son [was] Beor.

R. Johanan said: His father [Beor] was as his son in the matter of prophecy. (b.San.105a, Soncino translation)

The first paragraph is attributed to an anonymous Tanna – i.e. a rabbinic authority who lived before 200 CE. This rabbi appears to be already familiar with the idea that Balaam (the ‘son of Beor’) and Laban are the same individual. However, he has found a way to reduce the long life-span which this implied by saying that actually Laban was identical with Beor, the father of Balaam. A later anonymous comment reduces the lifespan even further by suggesting that Laban was Balaam’s grandfather, because Beor had a son called Beor. Finally R. Johanan bar Nappaha (c. 250-290 CE) completely removed the mystical element from this tradition by saying that Beor (ie Laban) was not his physical father, but only his father in prophesy. By the time of the next generation (c.290-320 CE) R. Hanina is able to agree with an exegesis which said that Balaam lived only 33 years (b.San.106b).¹²

This discussion, which appears to have developed over a time period of two to four generations, shows at each step that the rabbis were moving away from the idea that Laban was identical with Balaam, not towards it. This implies that the straightforward identity of Laban and Balaam, as found in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, was a very old idea, because each of these generations of rabbis are progressively distancing themselves from it.

In Genesis, Laban pursued Jacob because he left suddenly with a large flock which Laban considered to be his property, and because he suspected him of stealing a household god which Rachel, his daughter had indeed stolen and successfully hid from him (Gen.31.22-35). In the Hebrew Bible, it is Jacob who is angry at being treated wrongly while Laban is sad about losing his daughters, and they depart on amicable terms (see Gen.31.36-54). However, in the Targums, Laban remains an

¹⁰ See Ginzberg *Legends* VI 123 n.722

¹¹ See Jud.3.8 – the king whom Israel served for 8 years. The plural form of his name prompted the search for two identities, and the other is found in the days of Jacob, presumably because Israel served him for 2x7 years.

¹² This may be an anti-Christian comment – cf. R. T. Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* (Williams & Norgate: London, 1903): 65f, but contra L. Ginzberg, “Some Observations of the Attitude of the Synagogue towards the Apocalyptic-Eschatological Writings”, *JBL*, 41-42 (1922-23), 115-136: 121 n.18.

enemy of Jacob and continues to pursue him. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and Targum Neofiti both contain this tradition at Genesis 32.2-3 in slightly different language.

Gen.32.2-3: Jacob went on his way, and the angels of the Lord met him. (3) When Jacob saw them he said, “*These are not the camps of Esau that are coming to meet me, and neither are they **the camps of Laban that are pursuing me again**; but they are the camps of the Holy angels who have been sent from before the Lord.*” (TgPsJn)

Gen. 32.2: And Jacob went on his journey and angels from before the Lord overtook him. 3. And Jacob said when he saw them: “*Perhaps they are messengers from **Laban, my mother’s brother, who has returned to pursue after me**; or the hosts of Esau, my brother, who comes to meet me, or hosts of angels from before the Lord come to deliver me from the hands of both of them.*” (TgNf)

This idea is also found in all three Targums for Deuteronomy 26 in words which are clearly related but are too dissimilar to have simple literary dependence on each other.

Dt.26.5: And you shall answer and say before the Lord your God: ‘**Laban the Aramaean sought to destroy our father Jacob from the beginning. But you rescued him from his hand, and he went down to Egypt** and he sojourned there with a few people, and he was blessed. (TgNf)

Dt.26.5: So you shall answer and say before the Lord your God: “Our father Jacob descended to Aram Naharaim at the beginning and (Laban) **sought to destroy him** but the Memra of the Lord saved him from his hands. Afterwards, **he went down to Egypt** and he sojourned there with a small number of people. (TgPsJn)

Dt.26.5: In response, you should then recite before the Lord your God, ‘**Laban the Aramaean sought to destroy my ancestor**, who went down to Egypt and lived there as a small nation’. (TgOnk)

This passage was part of the words recited in the Passover Aggadah, and the version in Targum Onkelos is very similar to some versions of the Aggadah which read: “An Aramean sought to destroy (dby) my father”. This exegesis depends on a minor change of the Hebrew “A wandering (*ober*, רב) ארמאן was my father”, and was probably inspired by a wish to remove this rather disparaging description of Abraham.¹³ This interpretation was already traditional and fixed by Mishnaic times (ie by 200 CE – see m.Pes.10.4) and probably much earlier.¹⁴

¹³ The LXX translation makes a similar attempt by translating “My father forsook (db) y) Aram”.

¹⁴ L. Finkelstein argued that this exegesis originated in the 2nd C BCE – see “The oldest Midrash: Pre-Rabbinic Ideals and Teachings in the Passover Haggadah” (*HTR* 31, 1938, 291-317). Seeligmann thought that the tradition originated at the time of the Syrian Antiochus Epiphanes (early 2nd C BCE) who caused many Jews to flee to Egypt, and he pointed to the LXX of Is.10.24 “that you may see the way to Egypt” as a reference to this – see I. L. Seeligmann, *The Septuagint version of Isaiah: a discussion of its problems, Mededelingen en verhandelingen van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Genootschap ‘Ex Oriente Lus’*, no. 9 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1948): 84-86.

We are not told why Laban wants to pursue Jacob, but Targum Pseudo-Jonathan gives two indications that his target is a child who is the ancestor of the Messiah. First, the targums link the sorrow of Rachel (who is the likely target of Laban's anger because she stole his household gods) with the coming of the messiah:

Gen.35.18-21: As [Rachel's] soul departed—for *death came upon her*—she called his name “Son of my Agony”; but his father called him Benjamin. (19) And Rachel died and was buried **on the way to Ephrath, that is Bethlehem**. ... (21) *Jacob* journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond **the Tower of the Flock, the place from which the King Messiah will reveal himself at the end of days**. (TgPsJn)

Another indication in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan that Laban's grand plan is to kill the child-ancestor of the Messiah, comes in the dream where God tells Jacob to flee to Egypt in order to escape Laban.

Gen.45.27—46.4: When [Jacob's sons] recounted to him all the words that Joseph had spoken with them, and when he saw the carriages that Joseph had sent to take him, the spirit of prophecy which had departed from him when they sold Joseph, returned and rested upon their father Jacob. (28) And Israel said, “*The Lord has done many good things for me; he delivered me from the hands of Esau and from the hands of Laban, and from the hands of the Canaanites who pursued me; and I have seen and expected to see many consolations. But this I did not expect: that my son Joseph was still alive. I will go then, and see him before I die.*” (46.1) Israel set out with all that was his, and came to Beer-sheba, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. (2) *The Lord* spoke to Israel in a prophecy of the night and said, “Jacob! Jacob!” He said, “Here I am.” (3) And he said, “I am God, the God of your father. **Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt because of the slavery which I decreed with Abraham**; for there I will make of you a great nation. (4) *It is I who in my Memra will go down with you to Egypt. I will look upon the misery of your sons, but my Memra will exalt you there; I will also bring your sons up from there.* (TgPsJn)

These two texts point to the common thread which runs through the Balaam-Laban saga – which was the pursuit, not of Jacob, but of his children, and one messianic child in particular – as suggested by the use of “seed” in 46.7.¹⁵

Balaam-Laban in Matthew 2

The first readers of Matthew's Gospel were presumably very familiar with the saga of Balaam-Laban and his pursuit of the child ancestor of the Messiah. The Aramaic targumic version was normally recited in the synagogue after a Hebrew Scripture reading, in order to help the non-scholars understand the day's reading of the Torah. There was probably no need to expand the targumic allusions to the Balaam story, though no doubt preachers would often expatiate upon this popular and lively tale.

¹⁵ A variant reading of TgPsJon.Gen.46.6-7 has "all his sons; he brought his seed and his grandsons", where the MT and other targums have "sons" instead of "seed". The targumist is presumably attempting to remove the redundancy of repeating "sons", by pointing to the messianic "seed" which Jacob also brought with him. For "seed" in a messianic use, cf. 2Sam.7.12; 4QFlor=4Q174.10f; Gal.3.16.

Therefore, when Jews read the quotation of Micah 5 in Matthew, their minds would go directly to this saga, and find the other significant links which are highlighted in Matthew's narrative. Mary, like Rachel, was to give birth in Bethlehem of Ephrath (Mt.2.5-6), and her child would be king of the Jews (Mt.2.2) as Micah prophesied (Mic.5.2) and he would be the Messiah (Mt.2.4) as the targum explained (TgPsJn. Gen.35.21).

The theme of the Messiah in the targum of Rachel's death appears to be prompted by the placenames, Bethlehem of Ephrath and the Tower of the Flock (or 'of Ebal'), both of which are given messianic significance in Micah:

Mic.4.7-8: ... and the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion from now and for ever. (8) And you, **Tower of the Flock**, hill of the daughter of Zion, **to you he will come...**

Mic.5.2-4: And you, **Bethlehem Ephratah**, who are least among the thousands of Judah, **out of you will come** to me one to become **a ruler in Israel**, and his coming is of old, from the days of eternity. (3) Therefore he will give them over till the time **the one giving birth** has given birth **and the rest of his brothers shall return** to the sons of Israel. (4) **And he shall pasture** in the strength of the LORD... [MT Mic.5.1-3]

Matthew conflates verses 2 and 4 of Micah 5, to juxtapose the twin concepts of a ruler being born in Bethlehem and his function as a shepherd. This emphasises the origin of this prophecy in the narrative of Genesis 35.19-21 where Rachel is buried at Bethlehem but Jacob pitches his tent nearby at the Tower of the Flock, to where Micah sees the Messiah coming.

This prophecy in Micah probably prompted the concept that a special child was being born who would return together with his brothers. This inspired the idea in the Targum that Judah had a dream in which he was told to flee to Egypt to escape Laban where his special child ("your son") would be kept safe and that one day God would "bring your son out [of Egypt]".

Matthew records that Joseph, like Judah, had a dream in which God told him to flee to Egypt (Mt.2.13; TgPsJn. Gen.46.2-4), though the child-ancestor of the Messiah who was kept safe in Egypt is now the child-Messiah himself. The messianic reference in the targumic story of Jacob's dream is obvious to someone who expects to find it there ("*I will look upon the misery of your son, I will bring your son up from there.*"- TgPsJn. Gen.46.4), but it is not convincing to the sceptic. Matthew therefore highlighted the inspiration behind this targum, which lay in the strange wording of Hosea 11.1:

"When Israel was a child, I loved him and I called my son out of Egypt".

The wording of this prophesy suggests (to the keen eye of a Jewish interpreter) that there is a distinction between the child Israel whom God loves, and the son whom he calls out of Egypt, because if they were the same Hosea would say: "I loved him and I called him out of Egypt". The targumist replicates this strange ambiguity when he says that God told Jacob he would "look upon the misery of your son", and would "bring your son up from [Egypt]". Jacob had twelve sons, and if any individual could bear the title of the "son" whom God brought out of Egypt, it would be Jacob himself. And yet God tells Jacob that he would bring "your son" out of Egypt, which implied that this "son" was someone other than the nation which Jacob embodied. In Hosea,

the identity of this infant is the young nation, but in the mind of the targumist, there is another child – the Messiah or his ancestor.

The child Messiah predicted by the sons of Balaam

The saga of Balaam-Laban continued while Jacob's family hid in Egypt because the sons of Balaam were magicians at the court of Pharaoh. According to widespread traditions in 1st C extra-biblical literature, Pharaoh's magicians were called Jannes and Jambres,¹⁶ whom some thought were the forefathers of the Magi.¹⁷ But the secret of their 'true' identity as the sons of Balaam was only alluded to in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan:

Num.22.22: And he [**Balaam**] was riding on his *ass* **and his two lads, Jannes and Jam(b)res.**

This identity is not mentioned in any other targum, but it is found in a different context in the later rabbinic work, *The Chronicles of Moses*:

And after they [Moses and Aaron] left, Pharaoh sent and called to Balaam the magician and Jannes and Jambaris [sic] his sons the sorcerers.

(*Chronicles of Moses* cited in *Yalqut Shimoni* 173)

The *Chronicles of Moses* is of uncertain date, but it was known by rabbinic authorities in the late 11th C, when it was cited in the *Arukh* dictionary which was completed in 1101.¹⁸ Although it contains many traditions which are similar to Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, it is likely that these came from an entirely different source because this targum was virtually unknown outside Palestine till after the 11th C.¹⁹

Jannes and Jambres became part of the Balaam-Laban saga when they persuaded Pharaoh to kill the children of the Israelites, and they thereby continued the attempt by Laban to kill the special "son" of Jacob. In the Hebrew text, Pharaoh decided to kill the male Israelite children as a means of population control (Ex.1.9f) but Targum Pseudo-Jonathan added that he this policy was inspired by a dream which explains why he only targeted the male babies:

Exod.1.15: *And Pharaoh said (that while) he slept, he saw in his dream that all the land of Egypt was placed on one balance of a weighing-scales, and a*

¹⁶ See Damascus Document 5:17-19 ("In days gone by, Moses and Aaron arose by the hand of the Prince of Lights [that is, the Good Spirit], but Belial [Satan] in his cunning raised up Yohana [Jannes] and his brother when Israel was saved for the first time."), and the reference to them in 2 Tim.3.8. The apocryphal book "Jannes and Jambres" which has survived in a very fragmentary form is difficult to date, but it may have existed in the 1st C CE.

¹⁷ Pliny, *Hist.Nat.*30.11: "there is also another group of Magi who derive from Moses and Jannes and Jambres and the Jews". Philo calls Balaam a *magos* at *Life Moses* I 276, which is also his term for the magicians of Pharaoh (*Life Moses* I 92).

¹⁸ Bloch, "Ecriture et Tradition", fn 33. The 'Arukh is the great Talmudical dictionary composed by Nathan ben Jehiel of Rome.

¹⁹ R. Hai Gaon (c. 1038 CE) said: "We do not know who composed the Targum Yerushalmi; in fact we do not even know the Targum itself and we have heard speak of it but little." – cited in McNamara, *Aramaic Bible* 1A, 1-2.

*lamb, the young (of a ewe), on the other balance of the weighing-scales; and the balance of the weighing-scales on which the lamb (was placed) weighed down. Immediately he sent and summoned all the magicians of Egypt and told them his dream. Immediately **Jannes and Jambres**, the chief magicians, opened their mouths and said to Pharaoh: “A son is to be born in the assembly of Israel, through whom all the land of Egypt is destined to be destroyed.” Therefore Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, took counsel and said to the Jewish midwives ...” (TgPsJn)*

Jannes and Jambres warned Pharaoh about the special baby boy through whom Egypt would be destroyed. In Josephus’ version, which is characteristically less miraculous, there is a clearer reference to Moses:

One of those sacred scribes, who are very sagacious in foretelling future events truly, told the king, that about this time there would a child be born to the Israelites, who, if he were reared, would bring the Egyptian domination low, and would raise the Israelites; that he would excel all men in virtue, and obtain a glory that would be remembered through all ages. Which thing was so feared by the king, that, according to this man’s opinion, he commanded that they should cast every male child, which was born to the Israelites, into the river, and destroy it. (Jos. Ant. II 9.2, 205)

Josephus’ account appears to be a version of the targumic story which is sanitised so that there is no offence to Egyptian fortune tellers and a minimum of messianic fervour, but he is unable to completely remove the elements concerning a messianic triumph over the enemies of the Jews. Josephus’ account suggests that these stories alluded to in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan already had a wide circulation and acceptance in mainstream first century Judaism.

The story probably originated in order to explain the strange fact that Pharaoh killed all the male children supposedly in order to cut down the number of Israelites (Ex.1.9-10). It would have been far more effective to kill all the female children and let the males grow up as slaves. This story delves behind the Biblical text and finds the 'real' reason why only the males were killed — because there was a secret prophecy from the Magi about a certain male leader.

The prophecy that through this child “all the land of Egypt is destined to be destroyed” (Tg.PsJn - or, as in Josephus, that Egyptian domination would be brought low) clearly goes far beyond what Moses accomplished, who merely succeeded in helping his people escape. The origin of this idea about destruction was probably the prophecy of Isaiah 11, that the messiah would “utterly destroy the tongue of the Egyptian sea” at the final Exodus, just as at the first (Is.11.15-16), because this chapter was often linked with the prophecy of Balaam (as we will see shortly).

When Israel did leave Egypt and cross the Wilderness, they found Balaam waiting for them, ready to try again to destroy them. He attempted to curse them, but was thwarted, so he advised the king of Moab to cause them to sin with beautiful women, which resulted in the Lord killing 24,000 Israelites (Num.25.1-9; 31.16). When Balaam tried to curse Israel, he was forced to deliver a prophecy which included the doom of the people who hired him:

Num.24.17: ... A star shall come out of Jacob and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall dash the corners of Moab and destroy all the sons of Seth.

This mysterious prophecy of Balaam became the focus of much speculation, both within the Hebrew prophets and later. All three targums give these words a messianic interpretation:

Num.24.17: A king will emanate from Jacob, and the **anointed one** will be consecrated from Israel. (TgOnk)

Num.24.17: A king is to arise from those of the house of Jacob, and a **redeemer and ruler** from those of the house of Israel. (TgNf)

Num.24.17: When the strong King from those of the house of Jacob shall rule and the **Messiah** and the **strong rod** from Israel shall be **anointed**. (TgPsJn)

All three demonstrate an undoubted messianic interpretation, which is also found at Qumran (1QM 11:5-9; CD 7.18-21) and LXX,²⁰ though Targum Pseudo-Jonathan is, predictably, the most effusive and also gives us a clue as to where they gained their certainty about this interpretation – Isaiah 11:

Is.11:1. A shoot will proceed from the stump of Jesse and a branch from his roots will bear fruit (2) And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding... (4) He will judge the poor in righteousness... He will strike the earth with the rod of his breath”.

This apparently unrelated prophecy was regarded as intimately linked with the prophecy of Balaam, and the wording of them both is sometimes intertwined, eg:

And after this there shall arise for you a **Star from Jacob** in peace: And a man shall arise from my posterity like the Sun of righteousness, walking with the sons of men in gentleness and righteousness, and in him will be found no sin. (2) And the heavens will be opened upon him to pour out the spirit as a blessing of the Holy Father. (3) And he will pour the spirit of grace on you. And you shall be sons in truth, and you will walk in his first and final decrees. (4) **This is the Shoot of God** most High; this is the fountain for the life of all humanity. (5) Then he will illumine **the sceptre of my kingdom**, (6) and **from your root will arise the Shoot**, and through it will arise **the rod of righteousness** for the nations, **to judge** and to save all that call on the Lord. (Testament of Judah 24.1-5)

Then the Lord will raise up a new priest, to whom all the words of the Lord will be revealed; and he will **execute a true judgment** upon the earth in the course of time. And **his star will arise** in heaven, as a king, lighting up the light of knowledge as by the sun of the day...(7) And the glory of the Most High shall burst forth upon him. And **the spirit of understanding** and sanctification **shall rest upon him**.²¹ (Testament of Levi 18.3)

²⁰ The messianic interpretation is alluded to by translating “sceptre” as “a man”.

²¹ Translations from Charlesworth. Both are from The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs which is generally considered to be a pre-Christian Jewish work, though it has some Christian interpolations (eg. TLevi.4.1; 14.2; T.Ash.7.3; T.Ben.9.3) and this may also be one (as Dale Allison believes – *Matthew* I: 234.

The child Messiah in Matthew 2

Raymond Brown concludes that the first half of Matthew 2 was deliberately written in such a way as to parallel the Balaam stories. Balaam and his two sons, Jannes and Jambres, who were called ‘*magi*’ by Philo (*Life Moses* I 92), prophesied about the star which pointed to the Messiah, and the child from whom he would rise. As a result of this Pharaoh ordered the death of all baby boys. The Balaam story ends when he “went off to his home” (Num.24.25), just as the Magi “went away to their own country” (Mt.2.12).²² Matthew’s details about Herod are told in very similar terms to Josephus’ version of the story of Pharaoh – he consulted his magicians, expressed fear for his throne, and ordered the death of the baby boys.

But the child who comes out of Egypt in Matthew 2 is not a precursor of the Messiah like Moses (Deut.18.15) or an ancestor of the Messiah, but the Messiah himself. Matthew makes sure that the reader’s thoughts moved from Moses and the first Exodus towards the Messiah and the second eschatological Exodus, by referring to Rachel weeping for her children (Jer.31.15). Jeremiah viewed the death scene of Rachel as a prophetic one – she was weeping not just because of the agony of her difficult labour, but because she could foresee the killing of her children.²³ Matthew’s reference to Rachel keeps the readers thinking about the Balaam-Laban saga, but shifts this to the context of Jeremiah 31 – to the eschatological return of Israel from all corners of the earth (v.8) and not just from Egypt as in the past (v.32), and to a new covenant rather than the old broken one (v.31-34).

Matthew’s account of their return from Egypt appears to be deliberately vague in some details. He says that Joseph decided to return after hearing that Herod the Great had died, but he had misgiving after hearing about the accession of Archelaus,²⁴ which were confirmed by a dream in which God told him to go to Galilee. But he is vague about the stage at which Joseph changed his mind. The most obvious way to write the account would be to say that he changed his mind before they set out, or that when they arrived in Judea they decided instead to continue moving north. However, Matthew’s account appears to suggest that Joseph came to this decision during his journey, before he reached Judea, because “he was afraid to go there”. This makes the reader envisage the family coming out of Egypt, thinking they were safe, and then finding out about the new danger while they were in the wilderness south of Israel. This would explain how they could set out for Judah, but not arrive, because they could skirt round the eastern edge of Judea and travel on towards Galilee. This heightens the parallels of the story with the Balaam-Laban saga: Israel left Egypt thinking they were safe because Laban had died, but when they got to Moab (south east of Judea), they were met by Balaam who (in some mysterious way) was Laban, and who was still trying to kill them.

²² R. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, N.Y., 1977), 190-96.

²³ Gen.35.17-18 says the midwife tried to comfort her, but she called her boy Son of my Agony (יְנִיבֹד). Jeremiah appears to create a midrash from this when he says she “refused (חָנְףָה) to be comforted for her children who are not (וְנִיבֹד)”. In v.16 the Lord says: “They will come again from the land of the enemy”

²⁴ Archelaus was Herod’s named heir, but Herod Antipas pursued his rival claim which resulted in a few very turbulent years in Judea.

It is tempting to follow Daube's suggestion that Matthew was also making a hidden criticism of the whole Herodian family (including Herod the Great, Archelaus, Herod Antipas who ruled during Jesus' lifetime, and Herod Agrippa I who succeeded him). The hidden criticism is that they were all Idumeans (Edomites), and not real Jews. The country of Idumea became Jewish in the 2nd C BCE,²⁵ though they were often regarded as second-class Jews (cf. m.Sot.7.8). Matthew deliberately highlighted parallels between Balaam-Laban and Herod, who both killed many children of Israel in an attempt to kill the child-messiah. Daube suggests that an unspoken link is found in the well-known words of the Passover Haggadah when it cites Deuteronomy 6.5: "An Aramean sought to destroy my father" (see above). He points out that "Aramean" (ymr) and "Idueam" (ymd) differ only by the tiniest difference between the letters *dalet* and *resh*. This hidden reference would have been noticed by Jewish readers, but not by any Gentiles who happened to read the work.

The Nazarene and his 'sceptre'

The final 'fulfilment prophecy' in Matthew 2 is the most obscure mainly because the source of the text is difficult to identify and partly because the significance seems minor. The only prophecy which speaks about anyone being called anything like a "Nazarene" is in Judges (13:5, 7; 16:17, LXX Naziraiøv) where the angel says that Samson will be a "Nazirite". It is difficult to relate this text to Jesus, whose lifestyle was neither like that of Samson nor an alcohol-abstaining Nazirite (cf. the description of himself at Lk.7.34 which he reports and does not dispute: "a gluttonous man and a drunkard").

This solution became even more difficult after the discovery in 1962 of a synagogue inscription in Caesarea which included the name of Nazareth in Hebrew, spelling it Natzereth (using a *tzade* not a *zayin*). This is the earliest record of the Hebrew spelling of this village, and it confirms the reading found in later rabbinic literature.²⁶ This spelling means that Matthew was calling Jesus a a 'Natziiri' and not a 'Naziri' so this is very unlikely to be a reference to "Nazirite" (which is spelled with a *zayin*).

The term *Natziiri* is well known in rabbinic writings as a name for Jesus and for Christians - Jesus is called *Yeshu Natzeri* (or *Notzeri*, depending how it is vocalised) and his disciples are called *Notzerim*. This designation is found mainly in portions of the Talmud which were considered to be derogatory to Christians and were therefore censored out of the printed editions.²⁷ We do not know why it was considered derogatory, but probably it combined the accusation that it he had no legitimate father

²⁵ Josephus says they were converted by force (Ant.13.9.1) but their support of the Jewish nation makes this questionable. The debate and literature is summarised in Lester L. Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), II: 329-331.

²⁶ See Ray Pritz, "He Shall Be Called a Nazarene" (*Jerusalem Perspective*, online at <http://www.jerusalemerspective.com/Default.aspx?tabid=27&ArticleID=1638>).

²⁷ Jesus is called *Notzri* at b.San 43a, 103a, 107b; b.Sot 47a; b.AZ 16b, 17a and his followers are called *Notzrim* in b.AZ 6a; b.Taan. 27b. Most of these been preserved only in older manuscripts. These censored passages are collected in Hebrew/Aramaic with English translations by R. T. Herford in *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* (Williams & Norgate: London, 1903).

(so that he was named after a place instead of “ben Joseph”) with the fact that he came from a very low-class village. Some ancient versions of the daily prayer, the *Eighteen Benedictions*, contain a curse against the *Notzerim*,²⁸ and early Christians regarded this as a reference to themselves – Justin Martyr said repeatedly that Jews curse Christians in the synagogue and speak disparagingly about them after their prayers (*Dialogue* 16, 93, 95, 96, 123, 133) and Tertullian said that “the Jews call us *Nazareni*” because of Jesus (*Adversus Marcionem* 4.8.1).

Matthew’s readers would presumably be familiar with the name ‘*Yeshu Natzeri*’, and perhaps they were already themselves being called *Natzerim* in some early versions of the curse in the Jewish daily prayer. Matthew wished to relate this name both to the town of Natzereth and to a prophecy “in the prophets” - but which ‘prophets’?

The spelling of Natzeri with a *tzade* makes it likely that the prophesy he was referring to is Isaiah 11.1: “A shoot will come forth from the stem of Jesse, and a branch [*netzer*] from his roots will bear fruit.” Although the word “branch” (*netzer*) occurs in this context only once, there are other similar prophecies which use slightly different vocabulary: Isaiah 53.2, “tender shoot [*yonek*]”; Jeremiah 23.5 & 33.15, “a righteous plant [*tsemach*] for David”; Zechariah 3:8 & 6.12, “my servant, the Branch [*tsemach*]”. These other prophecies might explain why Matthew generalised the source as “the prophets” rather than just Isaiah,²⁹ and his readers would have little difficulty identifying the Isaiah prophesy because it was an important messianic focus in early Jewish traditions (eg 4Q161 pIs^a 3.11-25; Rom.15.12).

This final ‘prophesy’ about Jesus’ title as *Natzeri* brings the readers back to the Balaam’s prophesy of the star in Numbers 24.17, because this became closely linked with the Isaiah 11 prophesy in the intertestamental period (see T.Judah 24.1-5 and T.Levi 18.3 above). Both passages bring the readers back to the beginning of Matthew chapter 2 – Balaam’s prophesy brings them back to the ‘star’ and Isaiah’s equivalent of Balaam’s sceptre (‘rod of his mouth’, Is.11.4) reminds a knowledgeable reader about ‘striking the judge of Israel with a rod on his cheek’ (just before Matthew’s quotation in Mic.5.1).³⁰ As soon as a star was mentioned, Matthew’s readers would

²⁸ The 12th of the Eighteen Benedictions reads, in the Geniza version (which probably represents the earliest form which has been preserved): “For the apostates let there be no hope, and may the kingdom of the arrogant be quickly uprooted in our days; and may *nozterim* and *minim* instantly perish; may they be blotted from the book of the living, and not be written with the righteous. Blessed are you Lord, humbler of the arrogant.” See William Horbury, “The Benediction of the Minim and Early Jewish-Christian Controversy,” *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 33 (1982): 19-61; David Instone-Brewer, “The Eighteen Benedictions and the Minim Before 70 CE” (*Journal of Theological Studies* NS 54 (2003): 25-44.

²⁹ This explanation was already recognised by various Church Fathers, though they also thought that it referred to Jesus’ holy lifestyle as typified in the Nazirite vow – both interpretations are found side-by-side in Chromaticus, *Tractate on Matthew* 7.2; Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew* 1.2.23; Cyril of Alexandria, *Fragment* 16. They are conveniently cited in M. Simonetti, T. C. Oden, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, 1a, *Matthew 1-13* (Illinois: IVP, 2001): 37f.

³⁰ This link makes it likely that Matthew is consciously alluding to this passage in 26.26 and 27.30, where both the Jews and the Romans strike him, both in the context of a scene of judgement.

have started thinking about Balaam's prophecy of the "star which will rise out of Jacob" portending that a deliverer would dash their enemies with his sceptre (Num.24.17), especially as the wording of the LXX is so similar to the Magi's word's "We saw the star when it rose".³¹

The parallels with the stories of Balaam-Laban are not so close as to make us conclude that Matthew is constructing his infancy narratives in order to fit in these stories. Matthew appears to have a set of stories from which he draws out parallels, and the fact that these sometimes appear to be forced suggests that his narrative is determined by the traditions about Jesus rather than the stories about Balaam-Laban.

Conclusion: Matthew 2 is a proem sermon

Balaam's prophecy therefore marks both the beginning and the end of the series of quotations in chapter 2, and Matthew could be sure that Numbers 24.17 was in the mind of any Jewish reader, even though he never alluded to it. As soon as Balaam was introduced in this way, Matthew steered his readers through a series of scriptural citations which remind them of the various stages in the saga of Balaam-Laban. The prophecy about Bethlehem Ephrathah, the site of Rachel's grave, takes them to Rachel, the origin of Laban's anger, and then "call my son out of Egypt" reminds them of the dream when God told Jacob to escape there, even though their baby sons were killed there by the sons of Balaam. The weeping of Rachel when she foresaw the suffering before the final eschatological exodus reminded them that the first Exodus and that the special child whom Balaam-Laban was trying to kill was not merely Moses, but the coming Messiah. The final prompt that the Jews themselves call Jesus the *Natzeri* left the readers with the conclusion that Jesus is that Messiah, the 'branch' of Isaiah 11, who was linked with the 'star' of Numbers 24.17.

Therefore this chapter would have been read as an exposition of a Torah text (Num.24.17) by means of a series of texts from the prophets. The Torah text has not been cited, but the chapter opens with a concept from that text (the star) and ends by leading back to that same text via the linked concepts in Isaiah 11. This structure was very familiar to anyone attending synagogue in the first century and beyond, because it follows the most common sermonic structure of the time – the Proem sermon.

Hundreds of examples of Proem sermons have survived in Midrash Rabbah and other rabbinic literature.³² The first readers of Matthew would have felt as comfortable and familiar with this structure as any Baptist who hears the preacher say "The first of my three points is...", or any Catholic who hears "The Saint we remember on this day

³¹ Mt.2.2: $\tau\omicron\nu\ \alpha\sigma\tau\epsilon\rho\alpha\ \epsilon\theta\eta\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\ \eta\ \gamma\epsilon\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\ \alpha\sigma\tau\epsilon\rho\omicron\varsigma$ cf. LXX Num.24.17: $\alpha\delta\alpha\tau\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\iota\alpha\sigma\tau\rho\nu$. The form of the phrase in Matthew can be translated "in the East", though it is similar to the technical phrase "in it's rising" (with an additional $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ = see Allison ad loc.) and the LXX parallel supports this translation.

³² See the introduction by Isaiah Sonne in Jacob Mann' *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue* (Vol.1, New York: KTAV, 1971; Vol. 2, Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1966). Unfortunately the rabbinic collections which contain these sermons were compiled relatively late, and the individual sermons are almost impossible to date. However it is possible to identify this sermon form in the NT - see John Westerdale Bowker, "Speeches in Acts: a study in proem and *yelammedenu* form" (*New Testament Studies* 14, 96-111) esp. p. 100.

is...”. The fact that the underlying text is never mentioned is entirely normal for this type of sermon. First century Jewish listeners would be able to identify the opening text, and be able to recognise the links to that text, and they would be waiting for the final link to bring them satisfyingly back home to the original text.

Not all of Matthew’s readers would have appreciated his use of these stories. The fact that the Targum writers can assume their readers would know this story suggests that Matthew can do the same, but not everyone had a high regard for them. In particular, we see the rabbis were trying to discredit the idea of the Balaam-Laban identity and probably had a very low view of this popular mythology.³³ More sophisticated readers would think about the contexts of each citation and consider the way in which Matthew found a messianic interpretation in each case, while ignoring the structure based on a popular story as irrelevant. They might have wanted to make a different structure based on Moses, or David, but Matthew chose something different. Gentile readers would not know the Balaam-Laban stories and would probably not realise that there was any need to justify the use of these various texts, except as prophecies of a Jewish Messiah. All readers, at all levels, could understand that Matthew regarded the Old Testament as a signpost to the Messianic credentials of Jesus. As France pointed out, Matthew can be read on many levels.

Therefore the Jewish original readers of Matthew 2, would not have regarded the four citations of Scripture as ‘isolated and disparate proof texts’ (which is how many modern readers regard them) but as the formal structural markers of a careful exposition of Balaam’s prophecy, leading to the conclusion that the baby Jesus is the Messiah, as foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures.

³³ This is perhaps similar to the approbation directed against me when I used quotes from *The Terminator* films to illustrate a Gospel sermon (“Trust me”, “I’ll be back”, and “Judgement Day is inevitable”). Older Christians were uncertain about using illustrations from such a popular and disreputable source, though younger uncommitted listeners thought that the comparison was amusing and memorable.