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James R. Linville, Letting the “Bi-word” “Rule” in Joel 2:17
Letting the “Bi-word” “Rule” in Joel 2:17

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I Introduction

Joel 2:17 contains a prayer recommended to the priests as a liturgical response to a massive crisis: אֲנָ֡הלֵנִ֣י נְחַלְתּ֗ךְ לִהְרֹפֵׁ֜א לְמֵשָׁלֵ֣מִי נָרִ֗ים. Scholars disagree as to which Hebrew root is represented by term מֵשָׁל in the verse.¹ The KJV reads: “Give not thine heritage to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them” and has considerable modern support in identifying מֵשָׁל II, “to rule”.² Alternatively, מֵשָׁל I is often proposed. NRSV recognizes a noun, “byword”: “Do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations”, and some commentators follow suit.³ Others, however, find an infinitive, as vocalized in the MT (לֶמֶשַׁל): “to tell proverbs” or, “to mock” as in Crenshaw’s “Do not surrender your property to reproach, nations mocking them”.⁴ Some interpreters recognize the potential for a double entendre between the two roots but defend one or another as most plausible.⁵ Garrett says that only “to rule” is possible but adds that Joel permitted a paronomasia with the homonym “byword”, given the presence of “reproach”.⁶ Sweeney is less hesitant about a possible word-play, but he does not develop his thought much in this regard.⁷

A close examination of the various arguments reveals that, while some of the root I proposals are unlikely, “byword among the nations” remains very plausible. On the other hand, the simple grammar of “to rule” is persuasive while the contextual arguments often raised against it are not particularly weighty. The solution is to recognize a deliberate ambiguity here. A lengthy examination of the situation is instructive beyond merely cataloguing another example of biblical polysemy. First, it shows the need for careful analysis of difficult terms in their immediate literary context. Secondly, it shows that Joel 2:17 employs a somewhat irregular figure of speech found in a number of other biblical passages. Third, the contextual associations of the other “humiliation formulae”, as I
label them, not only supports polysemy in Joel 2:17, but also suggests that perhaps the larger context of Joel is itself ambiguous regarding the circumstances of Judah’s depicted plight. The exact nature of the polysemy in Joel 2:17 is, however, indeterminate. There may be a simple double entendre. Alternatively, מָלַשׁ may function as a “pivot” word, one meaning corresponding to the preceding text, the other to the following words. As I will describe in closing, this creative use of language plays into other aspects of the book’s complex imagery.

II The case for מָלַשׁ II: “To Rule over them”

The vocalization of מָלַשׁ implies an infinitive construct linked to a preposition and pronoun combination. There are some fifty cases in the Hebrew Bible in which מָלַשׁ and an adversative ב construction indicates “rule over x”. In the debated expression in Joel 2:17 the final word, “nations”, can easily serve as identifying the “ruler”. There are no clear biblical instances of מָלַשׁ I and an adversative ב (“to tell a proverb about x”) and this is convincing evidence to many scholars that Joel should read “to rule”. On the other hand, many scholars regard the military imagery in Joel 1:4-2:11 as metaphors of natural disasters. They therefore think “to rule” is out of place contextually as there is no obvious mention of foreign armies threatening the land and people in Joel 1-2. Crenshaw also points out that 2:19, 27 speak of “reproach” and “shame” but not military subjugation. This is countered with arguments that at least some of Joel 1:4-2:11 refers to a human or semi-divine army assaulting Judah. References to drought, fire and locusts may then be seen as metaphorical descriptions of these forces. Both sides appeal to Joel’s use of traditional and generic forms of speech. The situation is further complicated by some diachronic analyses which hold the latter half of the book to be secondary. It can be objected, however, that since foreign domination is recalled and vengeance promised in Joel 4:2-14 it is not unthinkable that 2:17 was included or at least edited to anticipate the current ending of the book. In sum, positive arguments for “to rule” carry considerable weight, but contextual objections against it are not decisive.
III Failure “To Rule” Out Alternatives

Despite the strong case for the “to rule” reading, attempts to defend this reading as the only possible one are far less convincing. The variety of מָשָׁל I root solutions (verb or a noun) is not generally recognized while the preposition ב may be construed as adversative or locative. Even if no other example of that root and an adversative ב appears in the Hebrew Bible, other combinations may remain possible. Critics sometimes also fail to notice the role of the verb מָשָׁל vis-à-vis the proposed מָשָׁל I root, a combination which does find a few other instances in the Hebrew Bible. For instance, Garrett challenges the NIV’s “byword among the nations” claiming that the normal understanding of מָשָׁל is “to rule” which also fits contextually in Joel. Garrett also complains that some scholars are overly-impressed with the collocation of מָשָׁל and מָשָׁל and considers any proposed adversative preposition attached to מָשָׁל I anomalous, citing a few verses in which ב is employed with a different sense, including Ezek. 12:23 and 18:3. In those verses, however, a locative preposition is combined with מָשָׁל I and that is just what NIV offers. Some 19th century scholars claimed that had מָשָׁל been employed to speak of the denigration of Judah by foreigners, any one of a number of verbs, including מָשָׁל, should have been present, but they maintain that such a word is lacking in 2:17. So focused were they on the combination of מָשָׁל and the pointing of מָשָׁל as a verb that they neglected to look at the start of the line: and to question the Masoretic pointing. Ahlström and Bergler hold that if Joel wanted to say that a byword was directed against Judah, the construction employed would have been מָשָׁל + מָשָׁל and not an adversative ב, citing Isa. 14:4 and Mic. 2:4. Micah 2:4 reads “he will lift against you a byword” מָשָׁל מָשָׁל. A comparable construction is also found in Hab. 2:4. The writer of Joel 2:17 could have easily written, “Do not allow the nations to lift reproach and a byword against your possession”, had he meant to refer to the directing of an insulting epithet “against” Judah. Yet, the “byword against” proposal portrays those people becoming a “reproach [and] a byword among [the nations]”. Altogether, מָשָׁל I (noun or verb) and adversative ב are a highly dubious combination.
Yet the “byword among” reading has not been demonstrated to be contrary to normal Hebrew usage.

IV The_mesh_1 Solutions: The Case for the Noun “byword”

In view of the above discussion a nominal form of mesh_1 is far more likely in Joel 2:17 than the infinitive, despite MT’s vocalization. The pointing is a relatively late feature and should not be considered decisive. 20 Jeremiah 24:9 provides the strongest evidence for “byword among”.

a ותרחתת ל злоה לרשע I will make them a terror, an evil [thing] 21
b למלטים הארץ to all the kingdoms of the earth,
c לחרפה ההמלשה המושנה_Page_127 הנקראות טמ י in a reproach and a byword, a taunt and a vilification

d בכל מקום ייבששים them in every place I will banish them.

The same verb as in Joel 2:17 appears in v. 9a, but it clearly governs the two series of prefixed nouns. The second series (v. 9c) has four members, including the two terms from Joel. Here mesh_1 should be understood as “byword”, given that the rest of the terms are related nouns. A locative ב construction is found in v. 9d. Holladay comments how, in this verse, the Judeans become the words of ridicule, rather than just the victims of insults. 22 Oddly, some commentators who defend the “byword among” reading in Joel, such as Barton, only notice the collocation of המושנה and not the other similar features. 23

There is, however, a syntactical problem that remains with this reading: that of the redundant pronoun suffix on the preposition: בם בין. “among them, nations”. Barton does not comment on the difficulty, while others propose emendations. 24 One may, however, be able to meet the challenge. Williams identifies a rare construction he calls “anticipative apposition” in which a pronoun suffix appears before the noun. He provides three examples, albeit with the pronoun attached to verbs, not prepositions. 25
Exod. 2:6
תֹּרַעְתָּהּ אֲתָרַיִלֵל “She saw (him) the child”
Ezek. 10:3
בָּכָּא הָאָרֶץ “When (he) the man entered”
1 Kgs 21:13
יְרֵךְ אָנָּשׁ הַבָּלֶטֶל “The worthless men testified against (him)”

It is possible, therefore, to regard בּ in Joel 2:17 as being in apposition to “nations”.

Some lingering suspicions about this solution being a little forced could remain, but given the presence of Jer. 24:9 (and other verses, discussed below) the “byword among” reading remains very plausible.

V Against the MásuI verb

If a verb is identified in Joel 2:17, the difficulty with בּ נִרֵב only grows. “Nations” would have to refer to those who “tell proverbs” or “mock”, while the preposition ב needs to be an otherwise unattested adverסive: “against them”. Allen’s argument that an adverסive ב marks the targets of other verbs of denigration (e.g., in 2 Kgs 2:23 and 2 Chr. 30:10) is of very little weight. Rudolph and Marti both offer “über sie spotten” and prefer MásuI on contextual grounds while Crenshaw has a comparable “nations mocking them.” Rudolph simply says that there is no reason why the ב in Joel 2:17 cannot be adverסive. Marti cites Ezek 18:3 for the adverסive preposition but Crenshaw rightly objects that the ב in Ezek 18:3 is locative. All three scholars refer to the collocation of MásuH and MásuH in Jer. 24:9 to further establish a MásuI root in Joel but then ignore the other comparative features of the Jeremiah passage which suggest that the root in Joel should be understood as a noun with a locative preposition.

VI A Humiliation Formula in Jeremiah

Jeremiah 24:9 is one of a number of relevant verses in Jeremiah which employ a loose form of an expression I characterize as a “humiliation formula”. What links these passages together with Joel 2:17 are a number of features:
(a) הלחם, משל, and/or related terms which appear in a series.
(b) These terms are prefixed by the preposition ל.
(c) The terms are objects of a verb which casts the ridiculed party as objects of insults or, metaphorically, as the insult itself.
(d) A locative ב construction identifying where or among whom the humiliation will take place, typically foreign nations.

Not all of these features are present in each case below. In some the word משל itself is not to be found, although הלחם appears frequently. Besides Jer. 24:9, the latter part of Jer. 29:18 is relevant:

וְיִתְחַמֶּר לְכָל מַמלֶכּוֹת הָאָרֶץ לְכָלָם לְשֹׁמֶם וּלַחֲמָם וּלַחֲרִיתָם בְּכֵלָּיָם אָשָׁר רָאִיתִם שֶם

I will make them a terror to every kingdom of the Earth, an execration, an appalling thing, a hissing and a reproach in every nation where I have driven them.

Of our Joel terms only הלחם appears here while the same verb משל is also found. A list of four humiliation terms: לְכָלָם לְשֹׁמֶם וּלַחֲרִיתָם (preceded by similar verbal forms of היה) appears in Jer. 42:18, which are obviously interrelated. The Egypt-bound Judean refugees will become “an execration and an appalling thing and a vilification and reproach.” This verb is not the one employed in Joel 2:17 and Jer. 24:9, but, in context, it carries much the same meaning. Neither is a locative ב expression found, but the place of disgrace is clear from the larger context. In a similar context, Jer. 44:8 features only “vilification” and “reproach” appear with היה while a locative ב phrase, “in every nation of the earth” is found. In these Jeremiah verses “execration”, “hissing”, “vilification” and “reproach” indicate the metaphorical transformation of the Judeans into their enemies’ derisions. Also note how military defeat forms the backdrop to the international disgrace. A similar pattern emerges in Jer. 49:13 in which Bozrah is the victim:

לֹא שֹׁמֶם וּלַחֲרִיתָם וּלַחֲמָם שֹׁדוּת

“An appalling thing, a reproach, a desolation, a vilification Bozrah will become.”

VII Other Humiliation Formulae

Solomon’s vision of Yahweh in 1 Kgs 9:7 has all the features of a humiliation formula. Impious Israelites will become a “byword and a taunt among all the peoples”:
והיה ירהם למלשך ולשניך בבל היפלום.

You will become an appalling thing, a byword, and a taunt
Among all the peoples to whom Yahweh will drive you.

Here foreign domination and ridicule are to be the fate of a disobedient Israel. Exile and defeat are again envisioned in vv. 41, 43-44. On the other hand, Deuteronomy 28 also has numerous references to natural disasters as punishment. Verses 23-24 speak of nature turning against the Israelites. Verse 38 has locust infestations: אדבר (cf. Joel 1:4, 2:25), while different insects appear in v. 42. On the whole, this chapter’s conflation of famine, infestation and domination suggests that in Joel 1:2-2:11 a similar mix of catastrophe may be in view. Moreover, a number of other biblical passages, including Ezek. 14:8, add to the list of reference to someone becoming a byword or an insult. Of that Ezekiel verse, Polk finds that למלשך, governed by the verb שם “to place or set”, refers to the people as “not the thing signified but the signifier itself. They have themselves been made a sort of speech-act, a metaphor, a parable”. A similar sense of transformation should be seen in Joel 2:17.

VIII Two Double Readings

It appears that Joel 2:17 is closely related to a number of other biblical passages which denote metaphorical transformation of a party into its enemies’ words of insult. Even so, in a number of cases this loose formula is used in a context in which foreign domination is either explicitly stated or implied. The “to rule” reading, therefore, should not be discounted especially as it has absolutely no linguistic anomalies and foreshadows the closing of the book. Since both readings can be defended, it is best to regard Joel 2:17 as embracing a double reading, or better, two of them simultaneously. The first route to polysemy is to find a simple double entendre:
Do not make your possession a reproach, a byword among [them] nations.
… a reproach, to nations ruling over them.

On formal grounds readers should expect that they have encountered a humiliation formula complete with its series of nouns and a locative clause, however oddly constructed. Yet, the contexts evoked by the other attestations and the somewhat anomalous grammar suggest an alternative reading as an abridged humiliation reference and a comment on the foreign domination of Judah, anticipating, as it does, the closing of the book.32

On the other hand, one can see מָשָׁל as a “pivot” in 2:17, shifting from “byword” to “to rule”. In this sense, one might understand the line as technically requiring מָשָׁל to be written twice, instead of just once. Given considerations of word order, it is hard to reproduce in English.

Do not allow your possession to be a reproach,
[and] a byword / to rule
over them, [the nations]

Pivot patterns have been recognized in a number of other biblical and ancient near eastern texts.33 If one is identified here, the full association between this verse and the so-called humiliation formula is lost, since בִּבְּנֵי נִוֵׁית is not the expected “among the nations”. The pivot on מָשָׁל, however, solves the grammatical problem of בִּבְּנֵי נִוֵׁית, since those words do not need to be reconciled with “byword” at all. They need only relate to מָשָׁל II “to rule” and this they can do without difficulty. Even if the latter proposal is accepted, it does not prevent the fuller humiliation formula to be evoked by the text following מָשָׁל. In reality, I do not see the value in choosing between the two proposed word-plays. The first combines the structure of the humiliation formula and clear grammar in the complimentary second meaning. The “pivot” has no grammatical difficulties and employs a recognized literary device. Perhaps it is best to posit that the writer was building on the two מָשָׁל roots, but was not exploiting them in only one particular fashion.34
IX The Significance of Joel’s Ambiguity

The frequent and creative use of paronomasia in the Hebrew Bible is now very widely recognized, so saying that 2:17 is yet another example is hardly ground-breaking. Yet, this particular case plays into an extremely complex debate that is central to the interpretation of the book as a whole: determining the external circumstances which led to the book’s creation (invasion, locusts and / or drought). Whereas many scholars appeal to their understanding on these matters to determine a single meaning for מַשָּׁל, it is worthwhile to consider the reverse: the ambiguous מַשָּׁל construction suggests that the rest of Joel 1-2’s references to disaster and calamity may be ultimately indeterminate. Formally, one expects in 2:17 a humiliation formula, yet, such formula are often predictions of a fate at the hands of an enemy: something that is avenged at the end of Joel. It is very plausible, therefore, that in the opening chapter and a half of Joel one encounters a complex imagery intended to allow any kind of major crisis to evoke the book’s call for a communal liturgy in response. While this issue cannot be discussed any further here, some additional comments can be made about our mysterious מַשָּׁל.

The polysemy in Joel 2:17 does seem to extend beyond a simple merging of two contextually appropriate meanings. The prophetic voice is advising priests how to pray to alleviate terrible suffering. Here God is the target of a dramatic rhetorical ploy. The closing words of the recommended prayer are, “Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”35 Oddly, there is not even a narrative describing that the priests actually performed the recommended prayer, but God does have compassion for his people in 2:18.36 On the level of the story-world, one may take this text as describing (and hence legitimizing) a pattern of crisis-ritual: what to do to win divine favour when even the sacrificial rites must be abandoned. Yet, on the discursive level of the book as a whole, there is something more that is going on.

As noted above, to make people a “reproach” or a “byword” is to reduce them to someone else’s spoken words. Their own identity is effaced as they become a weapon in an enemy’s verbal arsenal: God’s own “possession” נֶחֱלָה is threatened with becoming a byword. One can find this “byword” anticipated in the question God fears the nations will
ask. God’s possession becomes מָשָׁל which declares the deity’s own absence or impotence. To add injury to insult, with the shift from “byword” to “rule over them”, his “possession” is usurped by the nations. Although insinuating that God’s honour can be threatened in v. 17, the writer eventually preserves the divine inviolability by attributing the deity’s actions to saving the people, and not himself directly, from disgrace.37 God speaks in 2:19, vowing not to allow his people to become the nations’ reproach (נְא + תַּרְפֵּף; Judah’s “shame” מָשֶׁל is overturned in 2: 26, 27). Judah, then, does not become an international laughingstock. Fittingly, the duplicitous term מָשָׁל is not found again in the book: God’s possession never does become the nations “byword”. The foreigners’ מָשָׁל, therefore, ultimately remains unvoiced. God has regained possession over his people and, it must be added, over words: his voice “roars” from Zion (Joel 4:16). It is certainly worth pointing out how the polyvalence of Joel 2:17 revolves around a word that can otherwise be used of the making of “proverbs” of the wise.38 There is no prediction in Joel that Judah will learn wise, pious proverbs although there remains a promise of future interaction with divine speech. But this is the spontaneous inspiration of prophecy, dreams and vision (Joel 3), and that is perhaps even more mysterious.

Notes


Garrett, Hosea, Joel, p. 349, n. 20.


Garrett, Hosea-Joel, p. 349, n. 64, lists Gen. 1:18; 3:16; 4:7; 37:8; 45:26; Deut 15:6; Josh. 12:5; Jud. 8:22-23; 9:2; 14:4; 15:11; 2 Sam. 23:3; 1 Kgs 5:1; Isa. 3:4; 19:4; 63:19; Jer. 22:30; Mic. 5:1; Hab. 1:14; Pss. 19:14; 22:29; 105:21 106:41; Prov. 16:32; Ecc. 9:17; Dan. 11:43. See also Andinach, p. 437; Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, p. 248; Wolff, Joel and Amos, pp. 39, 52. Wolff also notes that the Greek has καταρμησι and the Vulgate has “dominantur”, while Rashi preferred the reading “to mock”.

Crenshaw, Joel: pp. 142-43; Barton, Joel and Obadiah, pp. 82-83; See too, L. C. Allen, The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 77. Cf. 1:6, 2:2-11, invaders/locusts are considered a nation and a mighty people, while comparisons to horses, chariotry and soldiers are also made.

Crenshaw, Joel, pp. 142-43.

Cf. the lament setting identified by Ogden, “Joel 4”, and the theophanic language found by Barton, Joel and Amos, pp. 72-73. A few scholars do not think there is a “real-life” disaster behind the text or think it is irrecoverable: Deist, F. E., “Parallels and Reinterpretation in the Book of Joel: A Theology of the Yom Yahweh” in W. Classen, ed. Text and Context: Old Testament and Semitic Studies for F. C. Fensham (JSOTSup, 48; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), pp. 63-79; R. J. Coggins, Joel and Amos (New Century Bible Commentary; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 29, 42.


As I will describe below, these kinds of oversights are also made by proponents of מָשַל.

Garrett, Hosea-Joel, pp. 348-49, n. 19, referring to Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, p. 248; and Wolff, Joel and Amos, p. 52. Garrett objects that מָשַל as a verb means “to use a proverb” and not “to mock” as Crenshaw, Joel, p. 133, would have it. This is not a fatal objection given the context.


S. Bergler, Joel als Schriftsinterpret (Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des Antiken Judentums, 16; Frankfort am Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1987), p. 86, n. 85. He says מָשַל is possible, too. G. W. Ahlström, Joel and the Temple Cult of Jerusalem (VTSup, 21; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971), pp. 20-21. Ahlström supports מָשַל II by claiming that the so-called covenant term מָשַל in 2:17 implies that Yahweh is the true ruler. This, however, is taking a too narrow approach to the passage.

Cf. the different construction in Ezek. 16:44; 18:2.

Garrett, Hosea-Joel, p. 349 n. 20, offers the hypothetical translation, “Do not let your inheritance become a reproach, a byword against them—nations” which further highlights the dubiousness of the noun and adversative ב combination.

The lack of a conjunction between “reproach” and the proposed “byword” is also not a serious obstacle: cf. Jer. 24:9a, c below.


26 Allen, Hosea, Joel, p. 77, n. 64. His translation is idiosyncratic: “Do not permit your possession to be ridiculed, a swear word bandied about by the nations.” לֶשַׁמְךָ is an infinitive and המָר a “denominative verb” from “byword”. What happens with the proposed adversative בֵּית is not apparent.

27 Ezek. 18:2 has “proverb concerning the land” with בֵּית הָרְמָה, so v. 3’s בֵּית הָרְמָה should be differentiated in meaning. Context strongly suggests a locative sense, and that is supported in the LXX. Cf. Ezek 12:22-23.


29 Jer. 42:18 is in the second person, 44:12 in the third. The conjunction on לֶשַׁמְךָ is not present in the latter verse.

30 Some other relevant verses are Pss. 44:15; 69:12 with מַשָׁל, and Ps. 79:4; Ezek. 5:15; 22:4; Mic. 6:16 with מַשָׁל; Job 17:6.

31 T. Polk, “Paradigms, Parables, and Mēšālím: On Reading the Māšāl in Scripture” CBQ 45 (1983), pp. 564-583 (577)

32 For the difficult grammar as suggestive of attempts to reconcile two alternative readings, I am indebted to E. Ben Zvi (personal communication).


34 One might also find other kinds of word plays on מַשָׁל I / II in Isa. 14:4-5 and 28:14. The latter uses both roots in close proximity while the latter may be a double entendre.

35 Cf. Ps. 79:9-10.
Bewer, “Joel”, pp. 107-10, construed the relevant verbs of 2:15-17 as perfects instead of imperatives, thus producing a narrative of a fast, assembly and prayer of which v. 18 was the logical continuation.


Cf. the Book of Proverbs, המשלים. The full range of meanings for the noun is very wide: see the discussions in TDOT above and in Polk, “Paradigms”, D. W. Suter, “MAŠAL in the Similitudes of Enoch”, *JBL* 100 (1981), pp. 193-212.