



Izvirni znanstveni članek Original scientific paper (1.01)
Besedilo prejeto Received: 22. 3. 2022; Sprejeto Accepted: 24. 5. 2022
UDK UDC: 81'25=411.16:27
DOI: 10.34291/Edinost/77/01/Chia
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The Problematic Word of מִכְתָּם: A Dialogue Between Biblical Studies and Christian Education

*Problematična beseda מִכְתָּם: dialog med
bibličnimi študijami in krščansko vzgojo*

Abstract: The Hebrew word מִכְתָּם creates a problem because its meaning is controversial. The Hebrew lexicon, BDB (1906) and TWOT lexicon (2003) confirm this difficulty, saying, »the meaning of this word is unknown«. PONS Kompaktwörterbuch Althebräisch (2015) states that this word is untranslated, while other sources translate it as song, prayer, or epigram. Allen P. Ross (2012, 48), a Hebrew scholar, indicates that its meaning is disputed. Ibn Ezra (2009, 112) interprets that this word refers to a very precious Psalm. He compares it with ketem paz or the finest gold in Song of Songs 5:11 because both words are derived from the same root. This perplexity also occurs in the ancient texts as they differ in their translations. This article, therefore, attempts to study and solve this dilemmatic word in ancient texts with a textual criticism and a contextual study as its methodology. At the end, the meaning of מִכְתָּם will be applied into Christian education field.

Keywords: translation, word study, psalms, textual criticism, Christian education

Izvleček: *Hebrejska beseda מִכְתָּם vzbuja vprašanja, ker je njen pomen sporen. Hebrejski leksikon BDB (1906) in leksikon TWOT (2003) potrjujeta to težavo, češ da »pomen te besede ni znan«. PONS Kompaktwörterbuch Althebräisch (2015) navaja, da ta beseda ni prevedena, medtem ko jo drugi viri prevajajo kot pesem, molitev ali epigram. Allen P. Ross (2012, 48), hebrejski učenjak, navaja, da je njen pomen sporen. Ibn Ezra (2009, 112) razlaga, da se ta beseda nanaša na zelo dragocen psalm. Primerja jo s ketem paz ali najfinejšim zlatom v Visoki pesmi 5:11, saj obe besedi izhajata iz istega korena. Nedoslednost se pojavlja tudi v starodavnih besedilih, saj so različno prevedena. Ta članek torej poskuša preučiti in rešiti to sporno besedo iz starodavnih besedil po metodologiji besedilne kritike in študije primera. Na koncu bo pomen besede מִכְתָּם uporabljen na področju krščanske vzgoje.*

Ključne besede: *prevajanje, preučevanje besed, psalmi, kritika besedil, krščanska vzgoja*

Introduction

The Hebrew word **מִקְתָּם** appears only in the book of Psalms and it occurs six times (16:1; 56:1; 57:1; 58:1; 59:1; 60:1). The ancient texts, however, disagree on its meaning. The table below summarizes the inconsistent translations of that word from Greek Septuagint (Rahlfs and Hanhart 1935), Hexapla (Field 1875), Latin Vulgate (Weber and Fischer, 2013), Aramaic Targum (Stec 2004), and Syriac Peshitta (The Leiden Peshitta Edition 2012).

1 Methodology

This research uses a contextual analysis to solve this dilemmatic word. Therefore, the article analyses the word **מִקְתָּם** in the context of Psalms 16:1, 56:1, 57:1, 58:1, 59:1, 60:1. Mickelsen (1972, 99) describes the importance of context to avoid the erroneous of interpretation. Although Wisdom Literature—Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes—sometimes does not provide historical context, it offers a context from the text. Schwartz and Van Hell (2012, 131–135) emphasize that the lexical meaning could be discerned from language cues in the context. Therefore, to find the meaning of the word **מִקְתָּם**, this article examines this word in the context of six psalms. In other words, five possible translations from the ancient texts are investigated in the context of Psalms 16:1, 56:1, 57:1, 58:1, 59:1, 60:1.



2 The identification of the word מִכְתָּם

2.1 Psalm 16:1

Hebrew Word מִכְתָּם in Psalm 16:1

Source	Text	Translation
Greek Septuagint	στηλογραφία	Inscription
Hexapla (A)	τοῦ ταπεινόφρος καὶ ἀπλου	Lowly in mind and Sincerity
Hexapla (Σ)	(τοῦ) ταπεινόφρος καὶ τοῦ ἀμώμου	Lowly in mind and Blamelessness
Hexapla (Θ)	ὁμοίως τοῖς Ο'	Same with O' (LXX)
Hexapla (E')	μαχθάμ	<i>Maxtham</i>
Hexapla (S')	μαχθάμ	<i>Maxtham</i>
Latin Vulgate	<i>Humilis et Simplicis</i>	Humility and Simpleness (Pureness)
Aramaic Targum	גְּלִיפָא תְּרִיצָא	Upright Inscription
Syriac Peshitta	(No text)	(No translation)
Syro-Hexapla (ω)	גְּלִיפָא תְּרִיצָא	Praise

The table above reveals that the meaning of מִכְתָּם is certainly disputed. There are five translations amongst ancient texts. First, Greek Septuagint, Theodotion or Hexapla (Θ), and Aramaic Targum translate it as »inscription«. HALOT (2001) states that the word מִכְתָּם might have been מִכְתָּב before. The word מִכְתָּב itself is based on the root כתב or 'to write'. The addition of *mem* before כתב changes this verb to a noun or 'writing'. In the context of Psalms, the meaning is inscription. Therefore, LXX, Theodotion and Targum might be influenced by this theory. Holladay lexicon (1971, 195) also supports this translation. *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* indicates that מִכְתָּם is *perhaps* a designation of a specific type of Psalms and that מִכְתָּם *perhaps* refers to a writing on a tablet (Clines 2011, 276). Notice that *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* uses the word 'perhaps' since there this theory hasn't been confirmed yet.

Second, Aquila or Hexapla (A), Symmachus or Hexapla (Σ), and Latin Vulgate communicate the character of David: lowly in mind and his sincerity. There are two major reasons for this translation. The first reason is derived from the context of the Psalms 16:1, 56:1, 57:1, 58:1, 59:1, 60:1. All these Psalms belong to David in the context of his tribulation and sufferings.



Therefore, he pleads before the Lord to rescue him. Seeking God's justice and deliverance is an attitude of humility and sincerity. Secondly, Aquila or Hexapla (A), Symmachus or Hexapla (Σ), and Latin Vulgate see the word מִקְרָתָם as a combination of two words: מוֹד or 'humility' and תָּם or 'perfection or integrity' (BDB 1906, 1070).

Third translation transliterates the word מִקְרָתָם. Hexapla (E') and Hexapla (S') transcribe this Hebrew word. The uncertainty in the meaning seems to produce this transliteration.

The fourth translation is 'praise'. It is attested by Syro-Hexapla (ω). Since the Psalm of praise is a major theme in this book, it is possible that the translation of this unknown word simply followed the theme.

The fifth translation is no translation because Syriac Peshitta ignores the word מִקְרָתָם. It is possible that this omission is due to unknown meaning of מִקְרָתָם.

Investigation

The context of Psalm 16 denotes that the psalmist lives in a difficult time. The psalmist comes before the Lord through prayer for God's protection (16:1-4), praise for God's provision (16:5-8), and trust in God's preservation (Ross 2012, 399-400; Ibn Ezra 2009, 112-119). Longman III also confirms that Psalm 16 starts from the psalmist's lament and ends with his confidence in God's deliverance. The LXX, Theodotion or Hexapla (Θ), and Targum's translation as 'inscription' is possible because of its general translation. The second translation is also possible because this Psalm reveals the psalmist's need to God. The psalmist cries out to God to protect him (16:1). This attitude indicates the humility of the psalmist. The innocence of the psalmist is reflected in verse 2,¹ 4,² 5,³ 7.⁴ Therefore, the translation

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- 1 As for the saints who are in the earth, they are the majestic ones in whom is all my delight (NAS).
 - 2 The sorrows of those who have bartered for another *god* will be multiplied; I shall not pour out their libations of blood, nor shall I take their names upon my lips (NAS).
 - 3 The LORD is the portion of my inheritance and my cup; Thou dost support my lot (NAS).
 - 4 I will bless the LORD who has counseled me; Indeed, my mind instructs me in the night (NAS).



of Aquila or Hexapla (A), Symmachus or Hexapla (Σ), and Latin Vulgate could be justified through the context. The transliteration of Hexapla (E') and Hexapla (S') should be abandoned, since it does not communicate the meaning of the word מְכַתֵּם. The translation as 'praise' by Syro-Hexapla (ω) is questionable because praise also consists of Psalm 16:5-8 only. In other words, this fourth translation does not cover the whole message of Psalm 16:1-11. Syriac Peshitta's translation can be put aside since the word מְכַתֵּם is not translated. To sum up, the first translation 'writing' and the second translation 'humility and perfection' are the most possible meanings in Psalm 16.

2.2 Psalm 56:1

Hebrew Word מְכַתֵּם in Psalm 56:1

Source	Text	Translation
Greek Septuagint	στηλογραφίαν	Inscription
Hexapla (A)	ταπεινοῦ καὶ τελείου	Humility and Perfection
Hexapla (Σ)	τοῦ ταπεινόφρος καὶ τοῦ ἀμώμου	Lowly in mind and Blamelessness
Hexapla (Θ)	ὁμοίως τοῖς Ο'	(Missing or Lacunae)
Hexapla (E')	στηλογραφίαν	Inscription
Hexapla (S')	μαχθάμ	<i>Maxtham</i>
Latin Vulgate	<i>Humilis et Simplex</i>	Humility and Simplesness
Aramaic Targum	מְכַד וְשָׁלִים	Humility and Perfection
Syriac Peshitta	(No text)	(No translation)

The table above indicates four different translations. First, Greek Septuagint consistently translates מְכַתֵּם as 'inscription'. Hexapla (E') also follows LXX after its transliteration in Psalm 16:1, while Hexapla (S') faithfully transcribes this disputable word. Aramaic Targum, on the other hand, follows Aquila or Hexapla (A), Symmachus or Hexapla (Σ), and Latin Vulgate to describe the godly character of the psalmist: Humility and Perfection. Syriac Peshitta habitually omits this word and even the whole first verse.

Investigation

The context of Psalm 56 reveals that the psalmist lives in a difficult time. Kirkpatrick discloses that danger is near, and fear is inescapable. However,



the psalmist's faith overcomes the fear (Kirkpatrick 1900, 315). Despite his haughty enemies seek to destroy him, the psalmist prays to God to crush them. The structure of Psalm 56 is equally divided into two halves of seven verse lines. The pivotal colon is constituted by the three words of verse 9a **נְדִי סִפְרָתָה אֶתָּה** and it represents the rhetorical centre of the poem (Lugt 2010, 137). Therefore, the first half of seven verses writes of Psalmist's belief in God's promise (56:1-7) and the second half in His deliverance (56:8-13; Ross 2013, 264). So, the translations 'inscription' and 'humility and perfection' are reasonable, while the transliteration and no-translation do not shed any information to our study (cf. investigation on Psalm 16:1).

2.3 Psalm 57:1

Hebrew Word מִכְתָּם		
Source	Text	Translation
Greek Septuagint	<i>στηλογραφίαν</i>	Inscription
Hexapla (A)	<i>ταπεινοῦ τελείου</i>	Humility and Perfection
Hexapla (Σ)	<i>τοῦ ταπεινόφρος καὶ τοῦ ἀμώμου</i>	Lowly in mind and Blamelessness
Latin Vulgate	<i>Humilem et Simplicem</i>	Humility and Simpleness (Purenness)
Aramaic Targum	מִכִּיד וְשָׁלִים	Humility and Perfection
Syriac Peshitta	(No text)	(No translation)
Syro-Hexapla (ω)	חֲבֵטָה וְעֵלְמָה וְעֵלְמָה וְעֵלְמָה	Low (humble) Thought and without Defect.

The table above reveals three translations. First, Greek Septuagint consistently translates **מִכְתָּם** as »inscription«. Syriac Peshitta also faithfully omits this word. Aquila or Hexapla (A) in Greek, Symmachus or Hexapla (Σ), Aramaic Targum, Syro-Hexapla (ω), and Latin Vulgate describe the character of the psalmist.

Investigation

Scholars believe that Psalms 56 and 57 are twin poems because they communicate the same message (Ross 2013, 280; Lugt 2010, 139). This psalm also has 14 verse lines. The caesura equally separates this psalm into two halves. Verses 6 and 12 function as a refrain to end the major sections and



separate this psalm into two cantos (Lugt 2010, 145). A thematic approach also endorses this division. Weber, for instance, argues on philological and formeritical grounds: a lamentation (57: 2-6) and a thanksgiving (57:7-12) (2001, 295–305). Ross, also, sees that this poem consists of lament and praise. Psalm 57:1-4 records the Psalmist's prayer. 57:6 functions as a link between prayer (1-4) and praise (7-10). The next section, vv. 7-11, reflects the psalmist's trust to God's deliverance. 57:12 serves as a refrain: expressing Psalmist's desire for God to be glorified (Ross 2013, 282). This Psalm has a similar context to Psalm 16 and 56. As a result, the translations 'inscription' and 'humility and perfection' are favourable. In addition, the table of Psalm 57:1 above unfolds that only two translations are consistently used: 'inscription' and 'humility and perfection'.

2.4 Psalm 58:1

Hebrew Word מְבַתֵּם		
Source	Text	Translation
Greek Septuagint	στυλογραφίαν	Inscription
Hexapla (A)	ταπεινοῦ τελείου	Humility and Perfection
Latin Vulgate	<i>Humilem et Simplicem</i>	Humility and Simpleness (Purenness)
Aramaic Targum	מְבַתֵּם וְשָׁלִים	Humility and Perfection
Syriac Peshitta	(No text)	(No translation)
Syro-Hexapla (ⲛ)	ⲙⲃⲏⲏⲟⲩ ⲙⲉⲧⲏⲟⲩ	Humility and Perfection

The table above presents three translations. First, Greek Septuagint consistently translates מְבַתֵּם as 'inscription'. Syriac Peshitta faithfully omits this word. Aquila or Hexapla (A) in Greek, Aramaic Targum, Syro-Hexapla (ⲛ), and Latin Vulgate consistently picture the character of the psalmist.

Investigation

This psalm is concentrically structured. It has 11 verse lines with verse 7 serving as the arithmetic centre: 5+1+5. Verse 7 is the only verse where God is explicitly mentioned and the name of YHWH is communicated. Verse 7 becomes the rhetorical centre of this psalm because the psalter ending the aggression of these unrighteous judges serves as a focal point (Lugt 2010, 152–153). Lund also argues for the centrality of verse 7 by



highlighting its symmetric form in the grammar: a b c – c' b' a' (1933, 310). Verses 4-6 and 8-10 serve as the inner ring that picture the intrinsic wickedness of the judges, and verses 2-3 and 11-12 describe the injustice by those judges (Lugt 2010, 155). The content of Psalm 58 denounces the corrupt judges (vv. 1-5), requests for the Lord's punishment upon unrighteous judges (vv. 6-9), and expresses the psalmist's trust that God will judge rightly (vv. 10-11) (Ross 2013, 296–297). Once again, this Psalm has a parallel content to the previous Psalms that we have presented. Consequently, the translations 'inscription' and 'humility and perfection' are acceptable.

2.5 Psalm 59:1

Hebrew Word מִקְתָּם		
Source	Text	Translation
Greek Septuagint	στηλογραφίαν	Inscription
Hexapla (A)	ταπεινοῦ τελείου	Humility and Perfection
Latin Vulgate	<i>Humilem et Simplicem</i>	Humility and Simpleness (Pureness)
Aramaic Targum	מִכִּיךְ וְשָׁלִים	Humility and Perfection
Syriac Peshitta	(No text)	(No translation)
Syro-Hexapla (Ⲡ)	ⲙⲁⲕⲁⲣⲁ ⲙⲁⲕⲁⲣⲁ	Humility and Perfection

The table above states three translations. First, Greek Septuagint consistently translates מִקְתָּם as 'inscription'. Syriac Peshitta faithfully omits this word. Aquila or Hexapla (A) in Greek, Aramaic Targum, Syro-Hexapla (Ⲡ), and Latin Vulgate consistently picture the character of the psalmist.

Investigation

The background of this Psalm also follows the previous Psalms. The psalmist was surrounded by murderers. His prayer is to be delivered from bloodthirsty men. This Psalm is divided into two major sections: 59:1-10 and 59:11-17. Ross (2013, 317–318) argues that each section consists of prayer (59:1-5; 59:11-15), lamentation (59:6-7; 59:14-15), and confidence or promise (59:8-10; 59:14-17). Lugt (2010, 155) argues that this poem is divided into three cantos: verses 2-8 and 9-16, and followed by verses 17-18. The first canto depicts the prayers and the descriptions of trouble (59:2-8). Verse 9 introduces a new canto or a new theme.



Psalmist's hope on God's deliverance is expressed through verses 9-11, while verses 12-14 describe the prayer for the punishment of his adversaries. Verses 15-16 close the second canto and explain the wickedness of his enemies. The last canto (verses 17-18) announces thanksgiving of the psalmist. Based on these divisions and cantos, the translations 'inscription' and 'humility and perfection' fit the context well.

2.6 Psalm 60:1

Hebrew Word מְתָמָּ

Source	Text	Translation
Greek Septuagint	στηλογραφίαν	Inscription
Hexapla (A)	ταπεινοῦ τελείου	Humility and Perfection
Hexapla (Σ)	τοῦ ταπεινόφρος καὶ ἀμώμου	Lowly in mind and Blamelessness
Latin Vulgate	<i>Humilis et Perfecti</i>	Humility and Perfection
Syriac Peshitta	(No text)	(No translation)

The table above presents three translations. First, Greek Septuagint faithfully translates מְתָמָּ as 'inscription'. Syriac Peshitta consistently omits this word. Aquila or Hexapla (A) in Greek, Symmachus or Hexapla (Σ), and Latin Vulgate faithfully depict the character of the psalmist.

Investigation

Ross (2013, 332–336) sees this psalm as a communal lament because the nation has suffered great losses in battle, perhaps in Edom. However, Ross continues that this psalm indicates that God will restore them. Again, there are three available translations: 'inscription', 'humility and perfection', and no translation. As a result, the translations 'inscription' and 'humility and perfection' serve the context well.



2.7 Findings of the Hebrew word מִקְתָּם in Psalms

The Summary of Hebrew Word מִקְתָּם in Psalms

Translation	16:1	56:1	57:1	58:1	59:1	60:1
Inscription	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lowly in mind and Sincerity / Blamelessness	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Maxtham</i>	✓	✓				
(No translation)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Praise	✓					

The table above discloses that there are three major translations that have been used consistently to translate the word מִקְתָּם: inscription, lowly in mind and sincerity (character), and no translation. Peshitta's translation or »no translation« will not be discussed further here since this translation does not shed light on the meaning of מִקְתָּם.

The table below records how many times both 'inscription' and 'lowly in mind and sincerity' are used throughout these six psalms in ancient texts.

Hebrew Word מִקְתָּם

Verse	Inscription	Lowly in Mind and Sincerity
16:1	LXX, Hexapla (Θ), and Aramaic Targum	Aquila or Hexapla (Α), Symmachus or Hexapla (Σ), and Latin Vulgate
56:1	Hexapla (E') and LXX	Aramaic Targum, Aquila or Hexapla (Α), Symmachus or Hexapla (Σ), and Latin Vulgate
57:1	LXX	Aquila or Hexapla (Α), Symmachus or Hexapla (Σ), Aramaic Targum, Syro-Hexapla (Ϟ), and Latin Vulgate
58:1	LXX	Aquila or Hexapla (Α), Aramaic Targum, Syro-Hexapla (Ϟ), and Latin Vulgate
59:1	LXX	Aquila or Hexapla (Α), Aramaic Targum, Syro-Hexapla (Ϟ), and Latin Vulgate
60:1	LXX	Aquila or Hexapla (Α), Symmachus or Hexapla (Σ), and Latin Vulgate



The table above shows that most ancient texts choose the translation of 'lowly in mind and sincerity'. Also, the investigations of these six verses support that translation. In summary, it is reasonable to say that the meaning of מִכְתָּם is 'lowly in mind and sincerity'.

3 Discussion

3.1 The relationship between the Bible knowledge and Christian education

One of the major goals of education is to pass foundational truths and standards to future generations and to shape them (Warfel 1966, 182). The role of education is more essential than preaching the Gospel and creating laws because it is a foundation for both. In A Psalm 78 Perspective on Education, Cox argues that the success of Christian culture depends on its preparation in accordance with God's expectation which manifested in the Bible (2012, 174-187). He further continues that God's holy nation should educate children in sacred writings (2012, 174-187). Nelson also proved that Biblical knowledge was positively related with morality such as moral reasoning and judgment (Nelson 2009, 41-57). His research discloses that there are significant correlations between reasoning and Bible knowledge ($r = 0.38$), between reason and academic skill ($r = 0.33$), and between academic skill and Bible knowledge ($r = 0.53$). In other words, the more advanced Bible students can be considered as more cognitively sophisticated in an integrated manner. In addition to reasoning and academic skill, the students who know their Bible well show to have more sophisticated moral judgments, especially in the universal ethical orientation (Nelson 2009, 41-57).

Three instances unfold the importance of Scripture based education in shaping the individual. 2 Timothy 1:5 demonstrates that Timothy was taught by his grandmother and mother to study and to live by the word of God. This discipline prepared Timothy to be a minister (Santoso 2013, 142-148). Abraham Lincoln, one of the greatest American presidents, is also an example. He lived in poverty, lost his dad and suffered a lot. However, he received his first education through home-schooling with the Bible as his first book to learn how to read and write (Browne and Simon 1995,



42). Charles Spurgeon, one of the greatest evangelists, studied the Bible carefully and he meditated on God's words days and nights (Fritzius 2005, 12–46).

In short, the basis of education should be the Biblical text although the means could differ. Cox Jr. and Haney (2002, 121–159), for instance, develop Christian character curricula based on the Biblical principles. The result is these curricula support the development of Christian character amongst children, although this research neglects foundational information about character and the distinction between good moral character and a unique Christian character. Dougherty, Glanzer, Robinson, Ratchford, and Schnitker (2021, 1–23) researched that these Biblical principles would be highly effective if supported by peer, adult mentoring, and local congregations (Mayhew et al. 2016, 674–700; Schreiner 2010, 2–10; Park 2000; Löfstedt and Westerlund 2021, 79–98).

3.2 The relationship between מִקְרָתָם and Christian education

The next question regards the relationship between מִקְרָתָם and Christian Education. The discovery of the meaning מִקְרָתָם would encourage the readers in the midst of their difficult times. The meaning of מִקְרָתָם denotes that lamentation, persecution, and danger are an integral part of Christian life. Although they are blameless, תָּם, it does not mean that they would not have enemies or suffer from injustice. However, the meaning of מִקְרָתָם teaches the readers to humble themselves before the Lord to request and to expect his deliverance. The field of psychology of religion also reveals that this prayer and hope would grant the supplicants resilience and more positive attitude to face their tribulation (Chia 2021a, 1–4). The meaning of מִקְרָתָם encourages the readers to remain committed completely to their faith in the middle of injustice (2021b, 1–7).

Conclusion

Although the meaning of מִקְרָתָם is debated, this research reveals that the meaning of this word is 'humility and blameless'. This meaning has its impact on Christian education field since research has shown that a good moral and behaviour cannot be separated from the Biblical text itself.



Therefore, the meaning of מְחַתָּם would encourage the readers and the students to stay faithful in the midst of their tribulation. Although they are blameless, it does not mean that their life would be exempted from injustice in the society. Rather, they might suffer more due to their faith, but they should remain humble and blameless.



Abbreviations

- BDB** Brown, Driver and Briggs 1906
TWOT *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*

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