

Neither a Yod, Nor a Waw (Matt. 5:18)

9-12 minutes

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus announced: “Until heaven and earth pass away, neither a *iota* nor a ‘hook’ will disappear from the Law” (Matt. 5:18). The parallel passage in Luke is a little different: “It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for a ‘hook’ of the Law to fall” (Luke 16:17). In Matthew, the *iota* denotes a letter, and it is natural to look behind the “hook” for the trace of another letter, according to the parallelism suggested by “heaven and earth.” Among the explanations offered,^[1] the simplest is to regard *κεραία* (*keraiā*) as a translation of Hebrew *waw* (ו),^[2] which as a noun means precisely “hook.” Indeed, transcribing *yod* (י) into Greek as *iota* (ι) was easy, since that was its source, but the equivalent of *waw*, which was originally *digamma* (Ϝ), had disappeared from Classical Greek and only remained as a numerical symbol representing the number 6.

I

The standard interpretations of Matthew may be boiled down to two options, both of which emphasize the smallness of the graphic symbols.^[3] According to the first, which is traditional, the “hooks” refer to the small graphic details which in the Aramaic alphabet distinguish similar letters. Origen explained the difference between the Hebrew text and the LXX version of 1 Sam. 21:2 (where אַבִּימֶלֶךְ [“Abimelech”] is transcribed as Ἀχίμελεχ [“Achimelech”]) as resulting from confusion between ב and כ, which are distinguished by a mere *κεραία* (*Selecta in Psalmos*, PG 12:1068.20). The Vulgate translates *κεραία* in Matt. 5:18 as *apex*, and Jerome (*In Zachariam* 12:10), explained a difference between the MT and the LXX (דָּקַר [“pierced”] read דָּקוּ [“danced”] by the LXX translators), as resulting from the same kind of confusion, since these letters, too, only differ by an *apex*. These explanations are not impossible, but they come from Christian writers who force the primary meaning of *κεραία* according to a received interpretation of Matt. 5:18.

According to the second, more recent,^[4] interpretation, the “hooks” refer to the small ornamental lines (תג) that are added to certain letters in the official copies of certain books (i.e., the Pentateuch, Esther, as well as in phylacteries), but these ornaments are a rabbinic custom (cf. b. Men. 29b) apparently linked to the school of Rabbi Akiva, an innovator of the second century who endeavored to interpret Scripture strictly according to the Hebrew letter. The custom of ornamentation, absent in the texts of Qumran, is not attested prior to Rabbi Akiva.

II

The problem of the meaning of *κεραία* is different in Luke 16:17, when this verse is taken in isolation. The appeal to the smallest aspects of the Law in no way requires a reference to a Hebrew letter, nor even to the strictly legal aspects of Scripture; this is evidenced by the constant reference to the LXX in the NT.^[5] The use of *κεραία* to designate “details” is attested in purely Greek contexts: Philo used the word about the alteration of administrative documents by a corrupt official in the expression “syllables and *κεραῖαι*” (*In Flaccum* §131); Dio Chrysostom spoke of *κεραία νόμου* with respect to the legal accuracy of public records (*Orationes* 31:86); Plutarch criticized the sophists who argued in vain about “syllables and *κεραῖαι*” (*Moralia* 1100A), and it is possible that the phrase “syllables and *κεραῖαι*” was a well-known formula. In short, there is no reason to understand Luke’s phrase any differently. Moreover, the theme of the correctness of the written Law is traditional (see Deut. 4:2 and 13:1: “Without adding or subtracting anything from it”).

The question, then, is how the saying evolved into its Matthean and Lukan forms, since the two versions certainly have the same origin. If we hold that Luke’s version is original, we must suppose that Matthew reintroduced a reference to Scripture as such,^[6] adding *iota* to make it explicit, and that, despite some scattered Semitisms, the Sermon was composed in Greek and is based on the LXX.^[7] However, such an explanation is inadequate, since the addition of *iota* does not really contribute anything useful, for the meaning “details” was already clear. It is therefore appropriate to consider the reverse: Matt. 5:17-18, which form a *chiasmus*, constitute a logion on the durability of Scripture.^[8] It suffices to admit that it predates the final composition of the Sermon,^[9] and relates to Hebrew; the existence of an ancient Hebrew Matthew is reported from the 2nd century.^[10] Thus, *κεραία* translates *waw* in Matt. 5:19, but in Luke 16:17 the term takes on a more general sense, detached from Hebrew and appropriate for Greek usage.

III

Matthew’s allusion to the Hebrew letters is interesting because it is not random. *Yod* and *waw* are semi-consonants, which can also be used as vowels (*mater lectionis*). As such, these two letters can be omitted, which is frequently the case in the MT—and apparently at random. In other words, Jesus in this passage implicitly asked his listeners to read Scripture in its smallest details, to scrutinize it to the letter (cf. John 5:39, 7:52; 1 Peter 1:10-11). These are not puzzles with pre-established solutions, but networks of second meanings, of echoes, perhaps linked to the arithmetic of the scribes.^[11]

Indeed, the context of Matthew shows that Scripture can be approached in various ways. Jesus received the Spirit at John’s baptism, then, after overcoming temptations, he interprets Scripture with an authority the scribes did not possess (Matt. 7:29). They scrutinized the text according to other principles (cf. 1 Cor. 2:10). This, moreover, is the general meaning of midrash: interpretation governed by a point of view. The Damascus Document, attached to the

Essenes, criticizes the דורשי חלקות “those who scrutinize the smooth (i.e., obvious) things” (CD 3:18-14), unlike the דורשי סתומות “those who scrutinize the Law” (CD 6:5).



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Notes

[*] This article originally appeared as Étienne Nodet, “PAS UN YOD, PAS UN WAW (Mt 5,18),” *Revue Biblique* 117.4 (2010): 614-616.

[1] Cf. Arthur J. Dewey, “Quibbling Over Serifs: Observations on Matt 5:18/Luke 16:17,” *Forum: Foundations and Facets* 5.2 (1989): 109-120.

[2] Already suggested by Günter Schwarz, “ἰῶτα ἐν ἡ μίᾳ κεραία (Matthäus 5 18),” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 66.3-4 (1975): 268-269, who provided the references until his time. For an English translation of this article on WholeStones, click [here](#).

[3] This is what modern translations retain, which strive to put an intelligible equivalent in the language. For example, in modern Greek: *Bible Society* ἰῶτα ἢ ὀξεία; in French: *BJ* and *TOB* «pas un i, pas un point sur l’i», *Bayard* «dans tous ses détails, jusqu’à la plus petite lettre»; in English: literal: “one iota or one dot,” dynamic equivalents: *KJV* “one jot or one tittle,” *BJ* “not one dot, not one little stroke”; in German: *Luther* «der kleinste Buchstabe noch ein Tüpfelchen», *BJ* «der kleinste Buchstabe»; in Italian: *BJ-CEI* “un solo iota o un solo trattino”; in Spanish: *BJ* “una i o una tilde”; in Portuguese: *BJ* “um só i, um só vírgula”; in Arabic: *Dar al-Mashriq (BJ-TOB)* «une lettre ou un point»; in Hebrew: *Delitzsch* יוד או קוץ; *Bible Society* יוד או תג.

[4] Edmund F. Sutcliffe, “One Jot or Tittle, Mt. 5,18,” *Biblica* 9 (1928): 458-460.

[5] This is the overall meaning of “the Law and the Prophets.” Cf. Daniel Marguerat, «Pas un iota ne passera de la Loi... (Mt 5,18)» in *La Loi dans l’un et l’autre Testament* (ed. Camille Focant; *Lectio Divina*, 168; Paris: Cerf, 1997), 140-174.

[6] It has been assumed that Jesus advocated a restoration of the true Torah of Moses, which was corrupted thereafter; this is one of the aspects of the doctrine of Peter according to Ps.-Clement, *Homilies* 3.51.23, cf. Georg Strecker, *Das Judenchristentum in den Pseudoklementinen* (TUGAL, 70; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1958), 162-187. This theme is taken up by the Koran, which proposes to restore the monotheism of Abraham, which was necessary because the Bible had been falsified. Cf. Meir Bar-Asher, «La formation du Coran et son autorité» in *L’autorité de l’Écriture* (ed. Jean-Michel Poffet; Paris: Cerf, 2002), 153-174.

Unrelated to the delineation of the canon, rabbinic sources point to discussions of textual criticism (Sifre Deut §356 on the establishment of an eclectic text), and debates on the validity of the Greek translations (reception of the translation of Aquila, y. Meg. 1:11 [71c]). However, in rabbinic sources there is never any question of falsification *per se*; b. Shab. 116a presents a “corrupt philosopher” who apparently quotes Jesus: “I did not come to take away from the law of Moses, but to add to it.”

[7] Cf. Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 182. This view relates to the theme of a rejudaization of the Gospels, cf. François Vouga, *Jésus et la Loi selon la tradition synoptique*, (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1988), 189-301.

[8] For a discussion of the durability of the Law with regard to its legal requirements, cf. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, Fortress, 2007), 218-219.

[9] Whether or not we relate it to the hypothetical source Q. Cf. Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, “Attitudes to the Law in Matthew’s Gospel: A Discussion of Matthew 5:18,” *Biblical Research* 17 (1972): 19-32.

[10] For Papias, see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.16. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.3.7, indicates it as the gospel of the Ebionites.

[11] Cf. François Langlamet, “Arithmétique des scribes et textes consonantiques: Gen 46,1-7 et 1 Sam 17,1-54,” *Revue Biblique* 97 (1990): 379-413.