

Jerusalem Perspective

A Monthly Report on Research into the Words of Jesus
Number Six

March 1988

Preview: The Jerusalem Synoptic Commentary

The most frequent request we get from readers is for the new English translation of the reconstructed Hebrew Life of Jesus which is being prepared by the scholars of the Jerusalem School for the Study of the Synoptic Gospels. The Jerusalem School believes that a Hebrew biography of Jesus — a lost document from the Second Temple period — underlies the synoptic Gospels. In this and future articles we will present excerpts from the Jerusalem School's new translation of the reconstructed Hebrew Life of Jesus.

We begin with an examination of Matthew 5:17.

Four Translations in One

Each passage in the *Jerusalem Synoptic Commentary* will be presented in Greek accompanied by a literal English translation, and in Hebrew reconstruction accompanied by three English translations. In this way, the commentary will more fully convey the meaning of the Gospel texts.

• Greek:

Μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι ἦλθον καταλῦσαι τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφῆτας· οὐκ ἦλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι.

• Literal Translation of the Greek:

"Do not think that I came to destroy the law or

the prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fill/fulfill."

• Hebrew Reconstruction:

אל תחשבו שבאתי לבטל את התורה והנביאים. לא באתי לבטל אלא לקיים.

• Literal Translation of the Hebrew

Reconstruction:

"Do not think that I have come to cancel the Torah [the five books of Moses] and the Prophets [the second section of the Hebrew canon]. I have not come to cancel but to sustain."

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Jesus and the Oral Torah Tithing

Tithing is a biblical commandment set forth in Leviticus 27:30-33, Deuteronomy 14:22-29 and Deuteronomy 26:12-14. Most Christians would probably agree

that Jesus observed this commandment since the New Testament clearly states, "having been born under the Torah, he committed no sin" (Gal. 4:4; I Pet. 2:22; Heb. 4:15). However, the question we are asking in this series is, did Jesus observe the commandments as they were interpreted in the Oral Torah?

The Gospels give the general impression that Jesus dutifully adhered to the practices of observant Jews of his day, and that his attitude toward these practices was guided by the interpretations of the

rabbis as expressed in the Oral Torah. There is no specific reference in the New Testament to Jesus' tithing. Yet Jesus did make a statement which indirectly witnesses to his observance of this commandment.

Light and Heavy Commandments

It is sometimes suggested that Jesus criticized the Pharisees for being so pedantic as to tithe even the spices and herbs in their gardens (Matthew 23:23).

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Oral Torah — Tithing

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Tractate Ma'asrot 1:1 in the Mishnah confirms that the Pharisees did in fact tithe on "everything that is used for food, that is looked after and that grows from the soil." The Pharisees extended the biblical commandment — to tithe on grain, wine and olive oil — to include other cultivated crops used as food such as figs, grapes, pomegranates, walnuts, cucumbers and garden herbs.

However, Jesus did not pronounce woe upon the scribes and Pharisees for tithing mint, dill and cummin, but rather for keeping only such "light" or less serious commandments while failing to keep the "heavy" commandments. To infer from this statement that Jesus was against tithing is an error resulting from not carefully reading the text. This is similar to the misunderstanding that money is the root of all evil, whereas the New Testament actually states that "the love of money is the root of all evil" (I Timothy 6:10).

Furthermore, it obviously would be wrong to conclude that all Pharisees, or even a majority of them, were not keeping the "heavy" commandments such as

"Do not murder" and "Do not commit adultery." Jesus, like most teachers, often used general statements for didactic purposes, just as someone might say, "We Americans are materialistic." It would be a mistake to conclude from this generalization that all Americans without exception are materialistic.

Internal Criticism

Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees was "inhouse," constructive criticism. There was hypocrisy among the Pharisees — it was not unique to them — and in their own writings they were just as critical of this hypocrisy as was Jesus.

Jesus apparently felt that it was important to correct this error because the future of Israel lay with them, rather than with, for instance, the Sadducees. He endorsed the Pharisees' doctrine, stating in Matthew 23:3, "Do and observe what they [the scribes and Pharisees] command you."

What is frequently overlooked is that after Jesus criticized the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, he went on to say that the "lighter" commandments, such as tithing even on the herbs grown in one's home garden as commanded in the Oral Torah, are "necessary to do." This statement leaves no doubt how Jesus felt about tithing, and more importantly how he felt about the observance of the commandments as they were interpreted by the rabbis.

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector recorded in Luke 18:9-14 should also be noted. Here, too, Jesus was not being critical of this Pharisee for tithing on "everything I get," but rather for his self-righteous attitude.

Almsgiving

Like tithing, almsgiving — giving to the poor — is a biblical commandment (Deuteronomy 15:8;

Leviticus 25:35). Since it is related to tithing, we add here a few comments about almsgiving even though there is no specific New Testament example of Jesus actually giving alms.

In the same section of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus criticized the hypocrites who fasted or prayed "to be seen by men," he also criticized those who made a public display of giving to the poor (Matthew 6:2). One must be careful not to view Jesus' criticism of the exaggerated observance of almsgiving as a general condemnation of this biblical practice.

Jesus commanded his disciples to do their praying, fasting and giving to the poor "in secret." Based on rabbinical literature, most rabbis of Jesus' day would just as strongly have condemned ostentatious giving to the poor. According to Baba Batra 9b, for instance, "Greater than our master Moses is he who gives to the poor in secret."

Secret Chamber

In the time of Jesus there was a "Secret Chamber" in the Temple (Shekalim 5:6). The pious could anonymously leave money there, and the poor from well-to-do families were given money from this source secretly, avoiding embarrassment to them. Tosefta Shekalim 2:16 mentions that there was a similar "Secret Chamber" in every town in Israel.

Jesus must have been a generous giver himself, since he taught that one should "lay up treasures in Heaven" and that if one's "eye is bad [a Hebrew idiom meaning to be stingy] his whole body is full of darkness." (Matthew 6:20-23)

"When you give alms..." said Jesus, not *If* you give alms (Matthew 6:2). Jesus assumed that his disciples were almsgivers, and one may confidently assume that Jesus was as well, even without a specific New Testament example of his actually giving alms.

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JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE is an independent report published monthly by David Bivin, director of the Jerusalem School for the Study of the Synoptic Gospels. Unsigned articles are attributable to the publisher. Subscription prices (including airmail postage): one year, US\$36; two years, US\$60; three years, US\$75. Gift subscriptions: US\$30 for first, US\$25 for each additional. Back issues are available at US\$3 per issue. Copyright, 1988, by David Bivin. Printed in Israel.

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Hebrew Nuggets

The two letters which comprise the word *abba*, א·lef and bet, happen to be the first two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In Hebrew, the word for “alphabet” is *alef-bet*, which comes from coupling the names of these two letters.

The English word “alphabet” is derived from the names of the first two letters of the Greek alphabet, *alpha* and *beta*. Although Greek, the names of these letters sound like Hebrew. That is because the Greeks learned to write from the Phoenicians, who spoke a Semitic language very similar to Hebrew. The Greeks borrowed the Phoenician alphabet — its symbols and the names for its symbols — to write the sounds of the Greek language.

A Silent Letter

The first letter of אבא is the א (א·lef). In ancient times א·lef was a “glottal stop” such as one hears in a New York City pronunciation of “bottle.” In modern Hebrew, א·lef is silent, like the “h” in hour.

The system of transliteration used in JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE indicates the א·lef with the symbol generally used by linguists: ʾ, an elevated half-circle open to the left.

Unlike the first letter of the English alphabet, the א·lef is not a vowel but a consonant. By the way, in the transliteration א·lef, we use capital “A” only to indicate the accented syllable, not because there are capital letters in Hebrew.

Under the first letter in אבא is a pa·TAH, the vowel symbol we learned in Lesson Four. Remember that the pa·TAH is pronounced as

the “a” in “father.” When we put the א and the pa·TAH together, as here in the first syllable of א·BAʾ, we get א (ʾa).

ceive payment of a debt owed to their father’s estate unless they took the oath, “We swear that אבא (א·BAʾ) did not direct us in his will, nor did אבא (א·BAʾ) tell us [before he died], nor have we found instructions in the

papers of אבא (א·BAʾ), that this promissory note has been paid” (Shevuot 7:7).

The Talmud, in Ta’anit 24a, relates the story of a miracle performed by the son of Rabbi Yose of Yokeret. When Rabbi Yose was delayed and failed to return home before nightfall, his field workers complained to the son that they were hungry. Rabbi Yose’s son turned to the fig tree under which the workers were sitting and said: תאנה תאנה הוציא פירותך ויאכלו פועלי אבא (“Fig tree, fig tree, bring forth your fruit so that the laborers of *abba* can eat.”). And the tree produced fruit and they ate.

Fire and Despair

Having learned the א, we now can read another Hebrew word: אֵשׁ (ʾesh, fire). This is a frequently used word in the Hebrew Scriptures, appearing 375 times. It’s Greek counterpart, πῦρ (*pir*), is found in some of Jesus’ most famous sayings. If Jesus taught in Hebrew, he may have used אֵשׁ in at least six of his sayings.

We also can now read אֵשׁוּשׁ (ye·USH), which means despair or despondency. Not found in the Bible, this word appeared in Hebrew for the first time in rabbinic literature.

In Lesson Seven we will learn the next letter of the word אבא.

Lesson Six:

א — א·lef

A knowledge of Hebrew is central to understanding the Hebraic background of Jesus’ life and teaching. Previous installments of “Hebrew Nuggets” presented the three letters and three vowel symbols that form the name ישוע (ye·SHU·aʿ).

In Lessons Six, Seven and Eight we will learn the two new letters and one new vowel symbol found in the word abba.

Rabbinic Examples

As we mentioned in the previous lesson, *abba* almost totally replaced the biblical *avi* (“my father”) in the sense of “daddy” in rabbinic literature, and was used as it still is today in modern Hebrew.

According to Sanhedrin 4:5 in the Mishnah, when God created mankind, only one man was created so that no one could say: אבא גדול מאבך (“*Abba* was greater than your father”). The idea is that if all men have the same father, no one can make the claim, “My dad was more important than yours.”

Abba also could sometimes mean “our father,” as the following example illustrates. The rabbis ruled that orphans could not re-

Synoptic Commentary

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• Plain English Translation of the Hebrew Reconstruction:

"Do not think that I have come to weaken the Torah and the Prophets. I have not come to weaken them but to strengthen them."

• Dynamic Translation of the Hebrew Reconstruction:

"Do not suppose that I have any intention of undermining Scripture by misinterpreting it. My purpose is to establish and maintain the knowledge and observance of God's Word, not undermine it."

I came/I did not come

ἦλθον / οὐκ ἦλθον
באתי / לא באתי (BA^{ti} / lo BA^{ti})

In this saying of Jesus, the Hebrew באתי (BA^{ti}) apparently was translated with the Greek aorist tense which conveys the simple past. This was standard practice of translators since the time of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Septuagint, some 200 years before the time of Jesus.

If, however, we translate this Greek verb back to Hebrew, we are not bound to translate Jesus' saying using the simple past tense. Hebrew has only one form of the verb in the past tense, and it serves for all the forms of the past found in Greek such as aorist or simple past (I came), perfect (I have come), pluperfect (I had come) and imperfect (I was coming).

The translation "I have come" makes much better sense in this context than "I came." Here Jesus is probably speaking in the perfect tense (I have come) and not of an occurrence in the past (I came).

The Hebrew verb "to come" often is used idiomatically to denote intent or purpose. When Jesus said

"I have come," he probably was not referring to his Incarnation, but rather speaking of intent. The Christian reader who takes the words "I have come" literally, may imagine Jesus leaving his heavenly throne and coming to earth. But it is more likely that Jesus was using "come" idiomatically to mean "my purpose is...."

Destroy the Law

καταλῦσαι τὸν νόμον
לַבְטֵל אֶת הַתּוֹרָה (le·va·TEL ^{et}
ha·to·RAH)

The translators of the King James Version rendered this phrase "destroy the law." However, לַבְטֵל (le·va·TEL, literally "cancel"), the probable Hebrew equivalent of the Greek verb translated "destroy," was used in Jesus' day as a technical term in scholarly debate.

When a sage felt that a colleague had misinterpreted a passage of Scripture, he would say, "You are cancelling the Torah!" In other words, "You are so misinterpreting Scripture that you are negating or cancelling part of it. Needless to say, in most cases his colleague strongly disagreed. What was "cancelling" the Torah for one rabbi was "fulfilling" it for another.

What one encounters in Matthew 5:17 is a rabbinic controversy. Someone had apparently accused Jesus of "cancelling" the Torah. He was being charged with so misinterpreting the Scriptures as to nullify their intent.

Hyperbole

Jesus strongly denied the allegation, using the same technical terminology as the rabbis. In the following verse he used hyperbole to show how strongly he felt about the importance of Torah. Not a *yod*, the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, not even a *kots*, the tiny decorative spur sometimes added to the *yod*, will ever be removed from the Torah, he said.

The meaning of this exaggera-

tion, "not a *yod* and not a *kots* of a *yod*," is, "not the most insignificant thing." What Jesus is suggesting is that one should not consider unimportant even the most seemingly insignificant commandment in the Torah. The full import of this declaration will be made clear in a forthcoming article when we discuss "light" and "heavy" commandments (Matthew 5:19) and Jesus' system of interpreting the Torah.

Just because Jesus spoke hyperbolically about letters and strokes being removed from the Torah, one should not think that he or his disputants believed that the Torah would not endure forever. From English versions of the New Testament one might get the impression that Jesus was being accused of intending to abolish or replace the Torah. However, when Matthew 5:17 is placed in its Hebraic context, one sees that this is simply a typical rabbinic controversy.

Fulfill the Law

πληρῶσαι τὸν νόμον
לְקַיֵּם אֶת הַתּוֹרָה (le·ka·YEM ^{et}
ha·to·RAH)

Some Christian commentators have emphasized the word "fulfill" in verse 17. According to their interpretation, the Law was lacking something which Jesus provided. Rather than being destroyed, they say, the Law reached its zenith in Jesus, the Messiah.

As often, the best solution is to put the Greek back into Hebrew. Once we set this passage in its Hebraic and rabbinic context, it makes better sense.

The probable Hebrew equivalent of the Greek verb translated "fulfill" is לְקַיֵּם (le·ka·YEM). In this period it was usually the antonym for לַבְטֵל (le·va·TEL) and used in the sense of "preserve or sustain." Here, as a rabbinic technical term, it means "to sustain by properly interpreting."