

Jerusalem Perspective

A Monthly Report on Research into the Words of Jesus
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“The Hem of His Garment”

And behold, a woman which was diseased with an issue of blood twelve years came behind him and touched the hem of his garment.

For she said within herself, If I but touch his garment, I shall be whole. — Matthew 9:20-21 (KJV)

The New Testament makes it clear that Jesus, like all observant Jews of the first century, wore ציצית (*tsi-tsi-YOT*). These are the tassels that were attached to the four corners of one's robe as commanded in Numbers 15:37-41 and Deuteronomy 22:12.

Hebrew to Greek

Jesus' observance of this commandment is dramatically illustrated by the story, found in Matthew 9, Mark 5 and Luke 8, of the woman who suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years. She was healed when she came up behind Jesus and touched what the King James Version of the Bible refers to as “hem of his garment.”

If this story originally existed in Hebrew, as the Jerusalem School conjectures, then it seems certain that it was not the hem, but one of the *tsi-tsi-YOT* of Jesus' garment that the woman touched.

The Greek word which the King James translators rendered “hem” is κράσπεδον (*KRAS-pe-don*). This is the same word that is used in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, to translate ציצית (*tsi-TSIT*, the singular of *tsi-tsi-YOT*). It is found three times in Numbers 15:38-39, where the wearing of *tsi-tsi-YOT*

is commanded.

In Hebrew, therefore, the story would have spoken of the woman touching the ציצית טליתו (*tsi-TSIT ta-li-TO*), that is the *tsi-TSIT* (tassel) of his טלית (*ta-LIT*, mantle).

Reminders

Apparently, most human beings need to be reminded of God and the observance of his commandments, and the wearing of *tsi-tsi-YOT* might be compared to tying a string around one's finger.

According to Numbers 15:39, these tassels served as a sign to help the wearers “recall all the commandments of the LORD and observe them so that you do not follow the lustful desires of your heart and eyes.”

Long Fringes

There was no fixed maximum length for the *tsi-tsi-YOT*, as the two major rabbinic schools in the half century before Jesus agreed:

The elders of the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel gathered in the upper chambers of Jonathan ben Bathyra and reached the decision that there is no prescribed length for the *tsi-TSIT*.” (Sifre Numbers 115, to 15:38)

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Hebraic Heritage

The Beginning of the Jerusalem School

The Jerusalem School for the Study of the Synoptic Gospels grew out of a meeting between two scholars in Israel: a Jewish professor at the Hebrew University, and a Christian pastor at the Narkis Street Baptist Congregation in Jerusalem.

Prof. David Flusser, one of the world's leading Jewish authorities on New Testament and early Christianity, met Dr. Robert Lindsey more than twenty years ago. They both were studying the “synoptic” Gospels — Matthew, Mark and Luke — which present parallel accounts of the story of Jesus' life.

Similar Conclusions

When Prof. Flusser and Dr. Lindsey compared notes, they found that their research had led them to many similar conclusions. They particularly shared the conviction that a knowledge of Hebrew and first-century Jewish culture was essential to a full understanding of the life of Jesus.

That meeting of minds and backgrounds was the impetus for the Jerusalem School, which has developed into an association of Jewish and Christian scholars who are studying Jesus' sayings within

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"The Hem of His Garment"

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It seems there were some who, in an attempt to observe this commandment more fully, wore very long *tsi-tsi-YOT*. Shmuel Safrai has noted the wealthy Jerusalem resident mentioned in the Talmud in Gittin 56a, who received his nickname, בן ציצית הכסת (Ben Tsitsit Hakeset), because of his long fringes (*The Jewish People in the First Century*, p. 798). He was remembered with admiration as being so devout that his *tsi-tsi-YOT* literally trailed behind him on the ground.

Naturally, there also were imitators who wished to appear more pious than they were by wearing longer-than-normal *tsi-tsi-YOT*. Jesus condemned those who pretended to be pious by wearing long *tsi-tsi-YOT* (Matthew 23:5).

Two Garments

Like his Mediterranean contemporaries, Jesus wore two garments, a חלוק (ha-LUK, tunic) and a טלית (ta-LIT, mantle), above his undergarments. The lower garment, the tunic, was a lighter robe, usually made of linen. The upper garment, the mantle, which was draped over the tunic, was a heavy garment usually woven from wool.

The ta-LIT was a one-piece rectangular piece of cloth. It was the equivalent of the Roman *pallium* or the Greek *himation* which were rect-

angular, not the Roman *toga* which was semi-circular.

The heavier outer garment was the norm for public occasions. It was considered somewhat immodest to go out in public attired only in the under-robe, even though it extended to just above the ankles. The ha-LUK could be worn alone around the house (unless guests arrived), or when one engaged in physical labor where the over-robe would be too cumbersome.

Everyday Dress

Under the influence of what is today called ta-LIT in Jewish society, some translators have understood that the ta-LIT was a shawl-like covering draped over the upper part of a man's body during prayer. For instance, in Matthew 23:5, the New International Version translates, "They make...the tassels of their prayer shawls long."

This is misleading since, in the time of Jesus, the ta-LIT was part of everyday dress and not a religious article. It is true that out of modesty one would not pray publicly in his ha-LUK, but the ta-LIT was not itself a holy garment.

This clarification of the double robes worn in Jesus' time helps us understand his statement recorded in Matthew 5:40, "If someone wants to sue you for your ha-LUK, let him also have your ta-LIT."

In the privacy of one's home, the ha-LUK could be worn without the ta-LIT, but it was embarrassing to go out in public dressed in it alone. However, if necessary, the ta-LIT could serve as one's only garment. Therefore, the ta-LIT rather than the ha-LUK was indispensable. If someone tries to confiscate your tunic in a dispute, Jesus said, you should for the sake of peace also offer him your mantle.

Did Jesus also wear phylacteries?

That will be the topic of our discussion on the Oral Torah in the next issue of JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE.

Hebraic Heritage

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the context of the language and culture in which Jesus lived.

In addition to Prof. Flusser, the Jerusalem School includes another internationally recognized Jewish scholar from the Hebrew University: Prof. Shmuel Safrai, an authority on the history of the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods. Working with them are a number of scholars trained in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Rabbinics, New Testament and other disciplines related to first-century biblical studies.

The Value of Hebrew

The Jerusalem School's approach to the Gospel texts is a painstakingly careful attempt to examine Jesus' words in their original context. This is a unique cooperative effort which marks possibly the first time in history that Christian scholars, fluent in the Hebrew language and living in Israel, have collaborated with Jewish scholars in New Testament studies.

During the last twenty years, Flusser, Lindsey and their colleagues have become increasingly convinced that the most important key to a full understanding of the words of Jesus is an appreciation of the Hebrew language and culture which underlies all that Jesus said and did. They have gathered considerable evidence which provides exciting insight into the Gospel story, and offers a deepened and revitalized understanding of Jesus.

Better Information

As more people in the Church realize the importance of their Jewish roots, there is an increasing need for more and better information regarding the teachings of the rabbis in general, and of Jesus in particular. The research of the Jewish and Christian scholars in Jerusalem is helping to meet this need.

Recovering Jesus' original sayings and placing them in their proper contexts is an essential part in returning to our Hebraic roots.

Jerusalem Perspective

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The second letter of the Hebrew alphabet is *bet* (ב). When there is a dot in the middle of the letter, as here in the word אבא, it is pronounced like the “b” in “boy.” When there is no dot (ב), it is pronounced as a “v” — in which case it is called *vet*.

Transcription

The Greeks had no “v” sound. Consequently, they transcribed the Hebrew *vet* with one *beta* — the Greek letter which represents the “b” sound. Then, in order to distinguish the *vet* from the *bet*, they transcribed the *bet* using two *betas*. It is doubtful, however, that the *vet* was ever pronounced in ancient Hebrew as a “b.” It seems likely that this spelling was simply a result of the absence in Greek of a letter with a “v” sound.

For this same reason, we find double “b” in the English spellings of Hebrew words which contain a *bet* such as “rabbi,” “Sabbath” and “Abba.” The Greeks were not always consistent, however. For example, one finds in the Septuagint that Deborah (spelled in Hebrew with a *vet*) is spelled with a double *beta*, while Heshbon (spelled in Hebrew with a *bet*) is spelled with a single *beta*.

The Vulgate, the ancient Latin translation of the Bible, usually followed the spellings of the Septuagint. English translations of the Bible, influenced by the Septuagint and the Vulgate, generally followed this convention of transcribing the Hebrew *vet* with “b” and the *bet* with “bb,” even though English has a letter to represent the “v” sound.

Term of Respect

In Jesus’ day, people frequently addressed a sage as רבי (*ra·bi*, my *rav*, i.e., my teacher; my master) or אבא (*ʿa·BAʿ*, the *ʿav*, i.e., my father). Thus, *abba* was a synonym for *rabbi*, and was used, like *rabbi*, as a term of respect.

Hebrew Nuggets

Jesus opposed this usage because both *rav* and *ʿav* were commonly used as names for God. In Jesus’ opinion, they should be reserved for God alone: “Do not let yourselves be addressed *rabbi*, for

Tiv’on (Makhshirin 1:3), Abba Eliezer ben Dalai (Mikvaot 2:10), Abba Saul ben Botnit (Shabbat 24:5) and Abba Yose ben Hanan (Mid-dot 2:6).

Apparently it was not long before this coveted title came into use as a personal name. One such example is mentioned in the New Testament: Barabbas, *bar Abba* (the son of a man named Abba).

Charles Meehan points out in “An Aramaic Inscription from *Hirbet Gemar*” (*Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 96 (1980), 59-66), that another first-century sage had a father named Abba. According to the best Mishnah manuscripts — Kaufmann and Cambridge — the sage’s name was Yehuda ben Abba, literally “Judah son of Abba” (Eduyot 6:1, 8:2).

More Hebrew Words

Having learned the *bet* (ב) and the *vet* (ב), you now can read other important Hebrew words. One is שׁוּב (*shuv*), the masculine, singular, imperative form of the verb “to return.” One commands a male “*shuv!*” (Return!). To a group of males or to a mixed group of males and females, one uses the form שׁוּבוּ (*SHU·vu*, Return!).

Repentance is another concept which is derived from the basic meaning of this verb. The command “Repent!” to a male in Hebrew also is “*shuv!*”, or *SHU·vu* to a group of males or a mixed group of males and females.

Two other Hebrew words you now can read are forms of the verb “to sit” — יֵשֵׁב (*ye·SHEV*) means “he will sit,” and שֵׁב (*shev*), meaning “Sit!”, is the masculine, singular, imperative form of the verb.

We have learned the second letter of the word אבא. In Lesson Eight we will present the next sound of that word.

Lesson Seven:

ב — *bet*

In the last lesson we learned the first letter of the word אבא (ʿa·BAʿ) — the ʿA·lef, a silent letter. Together with the pa·TAḤ — pronounced as the “a” in “father” — it makes up the first syllable, the א (ʿa) of אבא. There is only one more new letter in this word: bet, the first letter of the second syllable. The second syllable, בא (baʿ), begins with bet, the “b” sound of the word ʿa·BAʿ.

there is only one who is your *rav*, and you are all brothers. And do not address anyone on earth as your *ʿav*, for you have only one *ʿav*, your heavenly *ʿav*, and he is in heaven” (Matthew 23:8-9).

There is a beautiful story in the Talmud about Hanan ha-Nehba. It is told that whenever rain was needed, the rabbis used to send school children to him. They would grab the hem of his garment and cry, “Abba, Abba, give us rain.” When this happened Hanan would pray: “Master of the Universe, do it for the sake of these who are unable to distinguish between the father who gives rain and the father who does not” (Ta’anit 23b).

“Abba” as Title

Like “Rabbi,” “Abba” also served as a title. Many sages bore this title, such as the first-century scholars Abba Yose Holikofri of

The Queen of Teman

According to the Greek texts of Matthew 12:42 and Luke 11:31, Jesus used the expression “queen of south.” This is clearly a reference to מלכת שבא (*mal·KAT she·VA*), the Queen of Sheba who paid a visit to King Solomon.

Jesus’ substitute, “queen of south,” raises several questions. First, why didn’t Jesus use “Queen of Sheba” which is found in the Bible, and second, why is there no definite article before south (i.e., queen of *the* south)? More importantly, how can south be an equivalent for “Sheba”?

Synonyms for South

Biblical Hebrew has three synonyms for south — תימן (*te·MAN*), נגב (*NE·gev*) and דרום (*da·ROM*).

NE·gev, the dry region in the southern part of the land of Israel, always appears with the article — הנגב (*ha·NE·gev*, the Negev). One would not expect it to be behind the articleless *south* in the Greek expression βασίλισσα νότου (*ba·SI·li·sa NO·tu*, queen of south). The Hebrew word *da·ROM* never appears in the Bible as a place name.

However *te·MAN*, besides functioning as one of the words for south, is the name for a city or district in Edom (cf. Amos 1:12, and Genesis 36:34 which mentions a king of Edom who was from “the land of the Temanites”).

Jesus probably was not referring to the biblical Teman located in Edom, but rather to the classic “south land” of his day. This was the southwestern corner of the Arabian peninsula.

Eastern Orientation

Admittedly, if this is how Jesus used *te·MAN*, it would be the earliest instance of the name Teman for southwest Arabia. However, a similar linguistic development later occurred in Arabic, and today this corner of the Arabian peninsula is called Yemen, from the same

Semitic root (ימן, *y-m-n*) as Teman. *te·MAN* is derived from ימין (*ya·MIN*, right), the right side of a man who is facing east.

The reason south is related to right in Hebrew is because the ancient Hebrew’s orientation was facing the direction of the rising sun. Therefore, the east was before him, the Mediterranean Sea behind him and the south to his right.

Consequently, the Hebrew synonyms for east are related etymologically to the words for “before” or “rising of the sun,” the synonyms for west are related to sea or evening, one of the synonyms for north is the word left, and one of the synonyms for south is from the same root as right.

Kingdom of Sheba

In the first century, the ancient kingdom of Sheba no longer existed and there was some speculation about its identification. Jesus identified Sheba with Teman, and his identification appears accurate since Sheba seems to have been located in that same corner of the Arabian peninsula.

Why didn’t Jesus simply refer to this famous queen as she is referred to in the Bible — “the queen of Sheba”? Probably because, like a typical first-century Jewish sage, Jesus continually interpreted and clarified Scripture. Because the location of the ancient kingdom of Sheba was no longer known, Jesus identified it for his audience. When he mentioned “the queen of Sheba,” he automatically replaced “Sheba” with “Teman.”

The “Construct State”

The Greek version of Jesus’ statement contains no article with the word βασίλισσα (*ba·SI·li·sa*, queen). In Greek, the article normally would not be dropped before the first word in a possessive phrase such as this. However, it often is absent in that location in works which are translations from

Hebrew, such as the Septuagint. That the Greek version is a translation of a Hebrew original may be the best explanation for the absence of the article before “queen.”

There also is no article before νότου (*NO·tu*, of south). In Hebrew it is normal to express possession by linking two nouns in what is called the “construct state.” The first word, the object that is possessed, is tied to the second word, the possessor, without the connecting word “of.”

If the second word is definite, the article is added to indicate that it is definite. If the second word is a proper name, no article is needed since proper names are by definition definite. Just as in English, one does not say “Queen of *the* Sheba,” but “Queen of Sheba.”

Thus, the most likely explanation for the missing definite articles is that behind the phrase “queen of south” is a two-noun Hebrew expression of possession, the second of the nouns being a proper name.

Only in Hebrew

In his article, “Hebrew as the Spoken and Written Language in the Last Days of the Second Temple,” (*Journal of Biblical Literature*, 79 (1960), 32-47), Jerusalem scholar Jehoshua M. Grintz, noted that “neither in Greek nor in Aramaic could the term for ‘south’ be used as an equivalent of Sheba. It is only in Hebrew that the archaic biblical name for south תימן (אֶרֶץ-) acquired in time this specific meaning.... In Jewish Aramaic...this word does not exist at all.”

For those who assume a Semitic (Aramaic or Hebrew) source for the story of Jesus, this example argues for Hebrew. The Greek translator apparently rendered a Hebrew word for south, תימן (*te·MAN*), literally rather than treating it more dynamically as a proper name — Teman.

Our thanks to Aramaic specialist and Jerusalem School scholar Charles Meehan for his help in preparing this article.