

Jerusalem Perspective

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A Priest of the Division of Abijah

by Shmuel Safrai

This is the first of a series of articles examining John the Baptist and Jesus in the light of Jewish literature. Prof. Safrai has chosen to deal with Luke's account because he feels that it reflects an earlier version than those found in Matthew and Mark, and because he believes that the religious and social phenomena of the first century A.D. receive a more accurate and detailed description in Luke than in the other Gospels.

There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah; and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.... Once when he [Zechariah] was serving before God while his division was on duty.... (Luke 1:5,8)

During the Second Temple period, the twenty-four priestly divisions (*mishmarot*, *mish-marot*) served in the Temple at Jerusalem in a rotation system. A list

of priestly divisions can be found in I Chronicles 24, which is usually dated by scholars to the fifth century B.C.E. (Before Common Era, B.C. in Christian terminology). There is no mention there, however, of any fixed order of service. Only in post-biblical traditions is it mentioned that the priestly divisions served according to a weekly rotation system.

The priests themselves lived not only in Jerusalem but also in other

settlements in the Land of Israel. When it was "time for the division to go up [to Jerusalem]" (Ta'anit 4:2), the priests left their homes, went up to Jerusalem for a week and afterwards returned to their homes in Judea or Galilee.

Priestly Settlements

The organization of Second Temple priests within a framework of divisions was of great importance for the priests. Even when the focus of Jewish life shifted from Judea to Galilee in the aftermath of the Bar-Kochba Revolt (132-135 C.E., Common Era, A.D. in Christian terminology), priests of the same division continued to live together. The divisions which previously had been located in Judea settled together in villages and towns of Galilee.

The names of the priestly settlements
(Continued on page 2)

Two important Gospel scholars of the early modern

period were Jacob Wetstein and John Lightfoot. Their research highlighted the Hebrew and Greek linguistic influences in the Gospels.

Wetstein published *Novum Testamentum Graecum* in 1752, while Lightfoot published *Horae Hebraicae* even earlier, in 1684. Both works contain material from rabbinic literature illustrating passages of the Gospels. After these books appeared, many scholars became convinced that the synoptic Gospels are versions of a Greek translation of a Semitic story.

Well-Preserved Text

Although Wetstein had an interest in variant texts of the New Testament, it was only much later that scholars began serious attempts to define the earliest Greek text. The Gospels posed particular problems in this regard,

Early Gospel Texts

by Robert L. Lindsey

for ancient copyists tended to confuse the text of one Gospel with that of another. Additionally, at least in Mark's case, a copyist appears to have been unhappy with Mark's wording and decided to correct his text with the deliberate use of phrases from Matthew and Luke.

The definition of the New Testament text was brilliantly achieved in 1882 by two English scholars, B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort. While today a small group of textual critics continues to work on isolated problems, it generally is assumed that the Greek text of the New Testament is the best preserved of any ancient book.

Form & Content

More difficult, and much more critical, is the problem of the relationship of the four Gospels. The synoptic
(Continued on page 4)

A Priest of the Division of Abijah (continued from page 1)

ments in Galilee after 135 C.E. have been preserved. Tannaitic literature (rabbinic works up to 230 C.E.) mentions some of the residences of the priestly divisions in Galilee, while the later *piyyutim* or liturgical poems, although written several hundred years later, preserve the full list of the locations of the twenty-four divisions. In addition, portions of this list have been uncovered in the excavation of ancient synagogues in Israel and the diaspora (for instance, in Yemen).

Nazareth was the home of the eighteenth priestly division, *חַפִּיזֵזִים* (*ha-pi-tsets, Happizzetz*). In 1962, excavators discovered in the ruins of a synagogue at Caesarea a small piece of a list of the twenty-four priestly divisions. This third to fourth-century marble fragment is inscribed with the names of the places where four of the divisions resided, including Nazareth, the residence of Happizzetz. Until that discovery there was no record of Nazareth's existence before the sixth century C.E., other than in the New Testament and later Christian literary sources.

Times of Service

Abijah was the eighth priestly division. The priestly rotation began in the Hebrew month of Nissan (mid-March to mid-April), and therefore the division of Abijah would have served at the end of

Iyyar (mid-April to mid-May) and again at the end of Marheshvan (mid-October to mid-November).

Although Zechariah's division finished its service at the end of Iyyar or Marheshvan, we have no way of knowing exactly when this was. The divisions rotated on the Sabbath, but the Sabbath rarely fell exactly at the end of the month. We can never be sure of the exact date when a priestly division began or ended its duty period. Priests of Abijah, for instance, may have ended their spring week of service from the twenty-eighth of Iyyar to the fourth of Sivan.

Like the other divisions, the priests of Abijah served in the Temple for one week twice a year. We cannot be sure whether the events connected with Zechariah mentioned by Luke took place during the week of his division's spring or autumn service. We also do not know how the divisions compensated for the additional month of Adar that was placed into the calendar twice every seven years. Therefore, we have no way of knowing exactly when Zechariah served. For the same reasons, it is impossible to calculate the date of Jesus' birth based on the time of Zechariah's service.

Names & Lineage

Apparently the priestly division of Abijah was named after one of the priests who returned to the Land of Israel with Zerubbabel and Jeshua (Nehemiah 12:4). Another Abijah, mentioned in Nehemiah 10:7, was one of the signatories of the covenant during the time of Nehemiah, a number of generations after Zerubbabel and the first wave of returnees to Israel. This Abijah probably was a descendant of the Abijah after whom the division was named.

Other priests of the Second Temple period were named Zechariah. Rabbinic works mention two such priests from the last generation before the Temple was destroyed: Rabbi Zechariah ben Auvkulos (Lamentations Rabbah 4:3) and Rabbi Zechariah ha-Katzav (Ketubot 2:9).

According to the Gospel of Luke, Zechariah's wife Elizabeth was of the "daughters of Aaron," that is the daughter of a priest. It was common

in that period to refer to people of priestly stock as descendants of Aaron. For example, a first-century inscription found in Jerusalem in 1971 mentions the heroic exploits of a person who introduces himself as: "I Abba son of the priest Eleaz[ar] the son of the great Aaron."

During the Second Temple period it was quite common for a priest to marry a woman from a priestly family, and there are many rabbinic traditions attesting to this. For instance, Rabbi Tarfon states that when he was a boy he stood on the steps outside the sanctuary to participate in the priestly benediction with "Shimshon, his mother's brother" (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:11). This indicates that his uncle Shimshon was also a priest, and that Tarfon's mother therefore was of priestly stock.

In spite of the common maxim that "one should cling to his tribe and family" (*jKetubot 25c*), meaning that one should marry within the same tribe or at least within the extended family, it was permissible for a priest to marry a woman outside the priestly tribe, as well as for a woman of priestly stock to marry a non-priest. The high priest Aaron himself did not marry the daughter of a priest, but rather the daughter of Amminadab of the tribe of Judah (Exodus 6:23; Numbers 1:7).

Luke notes that Elizabeth was related to Mary, the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:36). It is quite possible that Mary also was of priestly descent even though her husband Joseph, who belonged to the tribe of Judah (Luke 2:4), was not a priest. Of course it also is possible that Mary was related to Elizabeth without being the daughter of a priest.

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Jerusalem Perspective

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Hebrew Nuggets

The letter *vav* does yeoman service in the Hebrew language. It is the sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and also the Hebrew word for “hook.” In previous lessons we have seen *vav* as a vowel: a dotted *vav* (וּ), called *ho-LAM*, is pronounced “o” as in the word note, and a *vav* with a dot to its left (וְ), called *shu-RUK*, is pronounced “u” as in flu. Primarily, however, *vav* is a consonant.

As we saw in Lesson Three, Hebrew vowels are not a formal part of the alphabet and were not written until the sixth century A.D. In a text with no vowel signs, one distinguishes between a *vav* which has the “v” sound and a *vav* which is pronounced “o” or “u” solely from the context in which it occurs.

vav also is one of the many Hebrew letters which are words in their own right. Such a word does not stand alone like the English word “a,” but is attached to the word which follows it. *Vav* usually is translated in English as “and,” but as we will see, this is not always accurate.

Letter and Number

Every letter in the Hebrew alphabet has a numerical value. The twenty-two components of the Hebrew alphabet are not merely letters; they also serve as numerals: א (ʾA-lef) is one, ב (bet) is two ... and ו (vav) is six. Although Arabic numerals, which came into use in the tenth century A.D., are used today in Israel as elsewhere in the world, the ancient system is still very much in evidence.

Hebrew letters can convey numerical information such as the days of the month and of the week. וָאָבֵב (vav be-ʾAV), for example, is the sixth day of the month of Av, the eleventh month in the Hebrew calendar, and יוֹם וָאָבֵב (yom vav) is Friday, although it also is called יוֹם שֵׁשִׁי (yom shi-shi), literally “sixth day.” The exception to this is Saturday, which is never called “seventh day,” but

always שַׁבָּת (sha-BAT).

The levels of primary and secondary school are designated by letter, such as וְשֵׁשֶׁת (ki-TAH vav) which is the sixth grade. Hebrew letters also are used to cite verses

ו — vav Lesson Seventeen

The Hebrew language has a relatively limited vocabulary, but it makes up for this by maintaining a tremendous flexibility. Each Hebrew word can carry a wide range of meaning, and even individual letters often stand for many distinctly different things. Let us look at just one letter — ו (vav). You may be surprised at how many jobs it performs.

and chapters of the Bible. Job 6:6, for example, is וְאֵיבֹב (ʿi-YOV vav, vav). Letters likewise sometimes are used to designate the Ten Commandments on representations of the Tablets of the Torah.

“and...and...and”

Readers of English translations of the Bible have grown accustomed to a style in which sentences are connected by the conjunction “and.” This syntactic feature is common to all Semitic languages, although it seems strange to speakers of languages such as English and Greek which string sentences together with dependent clauses.

For example, an ancient Israelite might have said (in a literal English translation): “And I awoke, and I blessed the LORD, and I dressed, and I ate my breakfast of pita and olives, and I walked to the market and I began my day’s work.” An ancient Greek, however, would have said something like, “When I awoke I blessed the LORD, dressed and ate my breakfast of pita and olives. Then I walked to the market where I began my day’s

work.”

Not just sentences, but often paragraphs, chapters and even books begin with *vav*. Fifteen of the thirty-nine books of the Hebrew Bible begin with this single-letter word. The frequency of *vav* in the Hebrew text is reflected in the King James version of the Bible due to its overly literal translation. “And” appears more than 100 times in the thirty-one verses of the first chapter of Genesis. For example:

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day. (Genesis 1:2-5, KJV)

The Synoptic Gospels

This “*vav...vav...vav*” pattern is one of the hallmarks of Semitic syntax, but seldom appears in Greek. It is surprising, therefore, to find this word pattern in many parts of the Greek New Testament. It is especially prominent in the synoptic Gospels, as can be seen from the following passages:

His father saw him, and was moved with pity, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.... And the father said to his servants, “Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet, and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and make merry.” (Luke 15:20, 22, 23)

This very Semitic pattern of connecting clauses with “and” would seem starkly out of place in any Greek text — Greek simply does not express itself in such a fashion. The fact that the pattern appears so frequently in the Greek texts of Matthew, Mark and Luke is one of many indications that a Hebrew document lies behind the synoptic Gospels. JP

אל תביאנו לידי נסיון

Lead Us Not Into Temptation

by Bradford Young

We have previously noted the Hebrew parallelism in the Lord's Prayer, such as "your will be done" and "your Kingdom come." The petitions "lead us not into temptation" and "deliver us from evil" (Mt. 6:13) also are parallel. The two parts of a Hebrew parallelism are not always synonymous, but the second part usually reinforces the idea of the first part by explaining its implications more fully.

Inclination to Sin

The basic sense of the Hebrew word נְסִיּוֹן (*ni-sa-YON*, temptation) is "test" or "trial." The Mishnah (*Avot* 5:3) speaks of ten tests which Abraham passed. The synoptic Gospels relate the story of three tests that Satan put to Jesus in an attempt to make him stumble (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:1-13; Luke 4:1-13).

In the Lord's Prayer, the word "temptation" seems to be related to man's inclination to sin. To avoid sin, a person must not place himself in a position where he will be put to the test. A tradition preserved in the Talmud is instructive:

One should never put himself to the test [i.e., place himself in a tempting situation]. David the King of Israel did so and he fell. (*San.* 107^a)

Power of Evil

"Deliver us from evil," the second half of the parallelism, goes beyond the idea of trial and introduces

a plea for deliverance from the forces of evil. Jewish prayers from Jesus' time exhibit an awareness of the power of evil which has the potential to overpower an individual.

Prayers appealing to God for deliverance from this power have been found in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

One non-biblical psalm requests:

אל תשלט בי טמא ורוח סמא (al tash-LET bi sa-TAN ve-RU-ah tum-²AH, Do not let Satan or an unclean spirit gain control over me). (11QPs^a Plea, Col. XIX, ln. 15)

This request involves more than merely asking to overcome a sinful desire. One must conquer a powerful and concrete evil force that seeks to influence one's life.

Aware of the potency of sin, the composer of another non-biblical psalm found in the Qumran caves included this appeal:

אל תביאני בקשה מבי ba-ka-SHOT mi-ME-ni, Lead me not into trials too difficult for me). (11QPs^a 155, Col. XXIV, line 10)

The apostle Paul wrote:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your power to resist, but with the temptation will also provide a way out so that you will be able to withstand it. (1 Cor. 10:13)

The author of Psalm 155 recognized his human frailty and asked not to be led into any trial that would be more than he could withstand. Paul realized that only God can deliver from temptation.

150 years, scholars have been trying to determine what these similarities and differences mean, and whether they reflect an even earlier text. The similarities are so exact as to suggest a definite interdependence, but the differences are so great that it seems certain editorial changes were made.

Dr. Robert Lindsey's research is challenging many conclusions of New Testament scholarship. Lindsey and his colleague, Professor David Flusser, have been instrumental in creating a new approach to the study of the synoptic Gospels.

Early Gospel Texts (continued from page 1)

Gospels were always seen to be closely related in form and content. In modern times the three often have been printed in books with parallel columns to make it easier to compare the versions. Such a book is called a synopsis, from a Greek word meaning "seen together."

All of the Gospels have stories, sentences and phrases in common, yet they also differ from one another in large and small ways. For the past

Opposing Evil

Several rabbinic prayers also contain a plea for God's help in standing against the power of evil. The blessing that was to be recited when a person washed his face in the morning began by thanking God for "removing the bands of sleep from my eyes," and continued with a prayer which includes a request for God's aid in resisting temptation:

...May it be pleasing to you, O LORD our God and God of our fathers, to train me to walk in the way of your Torah and to cling to your commandments. Lead me not into sin or transgression and iniquity, or into temptation or disgrace. Do not let the evil inclination gain control over me...but help me cling to the good inclination and good deeds, and bend my inclination to be in submission to you.... (Berachot 60^b)

Another Talmudic prayer to be recited upon rising in the morning is attributed to Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi, the compiler of the Mishnah. Like the Lord's Prayer, it contains an entreaty for deliverance from evil:

May it be pleasing to you, O LORD our God and God of our fathers, to deliver us from the arrogant and from arrogance, from an evil man, from contact with evil, from the evil inclination, from an evil companion, from an evil neighbor and from Satan the Destroyer.... (Berachot 16^b)

Jesus instructed his followers to pray to be delivered from the evil force that can influence a man and bring him under the power of sin.

Surrender to God

"Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil," is closely related to the preceding petitions of the Lord's Prayer concerning God's reign and the execution of his will in heaven and on earth. No wonder the early Christians are reported to have used this prayer at baptism.

The prayer Jesus taught is one of surrender to the divine will. A person who prays the Lord's Prayer seeks God's reign in his life, and has already forgiven those who have wronged him. The plea for deliverance from temptation and protection against the evil one's power forms a natural conclusion to this prayer.

This article is condensed from Dr. Young's The Jewish Background to the Lord's Prayer, published by the Center for Judaic-Christian Studies (\$4.95 ppd.), P.O. Box 293040, Dayton, OH 45429, U.S.A.