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A Bimonthly Report on Research into the Synoptic Gospels

Jerusalem Perspective

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Readers' Forum

Being a new Christian, I have had difficulty deciding which Bible to read. I had been strongly advised to read only the King James Version as being the best translation available. Upon discovering, however, that it had been revised in 1881-1885 (Revised Version), and again in 1952 (Revised Standard Version), I settled upon the Revised Standard Version in the belief that anything revised should be better. I also use the New International Version Study Bible which I find very helpful.

However, I have begun suffering doubts about the accuracy of the translations I am reading and have again been in search of what is considered THE most accurate translation. I have even considered taking the original advice given me about the King James Version, but recently discovered that there is a New King James Version available, making a decision still more difficult.

All of these translations and versions make a decision very frustrating. Naturally, I desire to read and understand the Word of God with the greatest accuracy possible.

My question, quite simply, is which English language Bible would you consider and recommend as being the most accurate translation?

From a reader in Taiwan

David Bivin responds:

This is probably the most frequent question that we receive. It is an important question, and it raises a number of complex issues. In this situation, a simple answer is not always the most helpful.

To begin with, in my experience the following English versions usually are the most accurate: For the Hebrew Scriptures: *The Holy Scriptures* (1982, Jewish Publication Society of America); *The Bible: An American Translation* (1935, University of Chicago Press); *New American Bible* (1983, Thomas Nelson). For the New Testament: *New International Version* (1978, Zondervan Bible Publishers); *Modern Language Bible* (1969, Zondervan Bible Publishers); *New English Bible* (1970, published jointly by Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press).

But this list of translations may leave you as confused as you started. All the various translations are helpful, but all of them also leave much to be desired. No translation is ever able to capture 100% of the meaning of the original.

Especially when it comes to the synoptic Gospels, which we believe reflect a Greek

translation from Hebrew, I feel that there is as yet no satisfactory translation. Therefore, the scholars of the Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research are preparing a new translation of the synoptic Gospels which will reflect the Gospels' Hebraic and Jewish background.

To date, probably the most successful attempt to capture the words of Jesus in English is *Jesus* (1973, Simon and Schuster), a synthesis of the four Gospels rendered in a paraphrase by a team of journalists. However, even inspired translating will not overcome a lack of understanding of the Gospels' Hebraic and Jewish background. For instance, the translators of *Jesus* rendered Luke 4:22, "...some were impressed, said complimentary things about him, and remarked about the grace of his speech," whereas the text probably means almost the exact opposite: "But all testified against him being shocked at the shameful words he spoke."

If the Greek synoptic Gospels are descendants of a Hebrew biography of Jesus, then even the greatest translator cannot succeed if he is oblivious to or ignores the original Hebraic idiom. No matter how well a New Testament translator knows Greek, if he is unacquainted with the Hebrew idiom "bad eye" = "stinginess" found in Matthew 6:23, he will not be able to render the passage correctly. If he is unaware that in Hebrew the same word serves for both "city" and "village," then he will use "city" when translating passages which speak of Jesus' birthplace, although Nazareth was just a small Galilean village in the first century. (See "The Jerusalem School," JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE, February 1988.) If he is unaware that in Hebrew there is only one word for both "sea" and "lake," then he will use "sea" instead of the more correct "lake" when translating Gospel passages which refer to the "Sea of Galilee." (See "Hebrew Nuggets," JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE, January 1989.)

In general it is helpful to read and compare as many translations as possible. Often after reading several translations the meaning will become evident, as one translation may clarify which sense of a word or phrase is meant in another translation.

It needs to be added that the quest for a perfect translation of the Bible should not replace one's search and hunger for God. After all, we do not study Scripture as an end in itself, but as a means. Our interest in Scripture springs from a deep desire to know more of God's will and ways. JP

Dr. Ray Pritz deals with this question and gives his list of preferred Bible translations in the following article.



Which Bible Translation?

by Ray Pritz

Which English Bible translation is the best? Which is the most accurate? With the profusion of translations available today, these questions have become common and important among those who use their Bibles regularly.

What is Translation?

To answer these questions, we must first understand the peculiar difficulties involved in the process of translation. When God confused the languages of men at the tower of Babel, he ensured that not only would vocabulary be different but that grammar too would vary widely from language to language. And because people live in different environments and cultures, special ways of describing things develop within each language group.

These are called idioms, and they can be very colorful. For example, where American English-speakers might describe a proud person as having a "big head," in Holland it would be said that he "walks in front of his shoes."

Translators speak of a tension that exists between maintaining the **form** of the source language and conveying the **meaning** into the receptor language. It would be possible to translate the phrase he "has a big head" word for word into Dutch, but the Dutch reader might then think the man needs a large size hat. The form of the English would have been maintained perfectly, but the meaning would be lost.

Literal or Accurate?

When people ask which Bible translation is the most accurate, they often mean which is the most literal. The two are not always the same. In the example of the man with a "big

head," the literal translation is only accurate for the Dutch-speaker who has a linguistic interest in the actual English words. For a person who wants to get the meaning of the original, the more accurate translation into Dutch would speak of shoes rather than a head.

Let us look at a couple of examples from the Hebrew of the Bible. A common phrase in the Bible is that a person "found favor in the eyes of" someone. For those of us who have read the Bible most of our lives, this may sound like a reasonable and normal expression. We probably would never use it in a conversation about a non-biblical subject, but when we encounter this expression in our Bibles we feel we basically know what it means. In other words, the usefulness of this idiom is limited to the Bible because it is not English but Hebrew. When the earliest En-

glish Bible translators came to this phrase, they decided to translate it word-for-word, even though such an expression did not exist in English.

In modern English we would say a person "liked" someone. When an English-speaker reads

or hears that sentence, it conveys to him the same sense received by a Hebrew-speaker who hears that a person "found favor in the eyes of" someone. But we have conveyed the meaning of the Hebrew into English with no mention of finding, favor or eyes. Which translation is more literal? Which is more accurate?

Let us take another example. Suppose you overhear these statements: "My son has decided, against my advice, to drop out of school. I will not stand in his way." How do you understand the last sentence? Undoubtedly you understand it to mean something



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"When people ask which Bible translation is the most accurate, they often mean which is the most literal. The two are not always the same."

(continued on page 4)

Which Bible Translation?
(continued from page 3)

like "I will not prevent him." In fact in English that is the only meaning the phrase can carry in this context. Psalm 1:1 includes what appears to be the same idiom: "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners..." (King James Version). This is a fairly literal translation from the Hebrew. (A completely literal translation would read, "Blessed the man who not walked in the counsel of wicked and in the way of sinners not stood.")

In modern English we would express the opening words of the Psalm something like this: "Blessed is the man who does not follow the advice of wicked people, who does not walk the way of sinners...." The second

gious jargon. In the case of the second part of Psalm 1:1, an English-speaker unfamiliar with the Bible might understand not only the King James Version but also the New International Version, Revised Standard Version as well as several other "modern" translations to be saying, "It is just as well to let the

"Don't simply accept my recommendations about translations, but test several translations yourself."

wicked do as they please," which, of course, is almost the opposite of what the Hebrew actually means. In this instance, then, literal is not accurate.

Which is Best?

Which translation is best cannot be answered without determining what the questioner means by "best." If he means best for knowing what original words stand behind the English, then he will want a translation which preserves the form of the source language, even if it is at the expense of the meaning. This will be useful for students of biblical languages or other Bible-related subjects. If, however, the questioner means best for knowing what the original words meant, then he will want a version which translates meaning for meaning, even if it is at the expense of the form of the original language.

Many of us read our Bibles at different times for different purposes. Sometimes we just want to read and let God speak to us in our own personal relationship with him. At such times

it may be a hindrance to stop every couple of words to analyze the etymology of a word. At other times we may want to do an in-depth study of a passage, comparing it with similar passages in the Bible to find the range of meaning the words can have throughout the Bible. This

can be a time consuming process, and stopping to meditate on each verse would keep us from finishing the study.

I would make several suggestions. First of all, it is probably a good idea to

have two Bibles to use for different purposes. For a translation which transmits the form better than the meaning, I would recommend the *New American Standard Bible* or the *King James Version*. For a translation which conveys meaning at the expense of form, I would recommend the *Good News Bible* or the *New Jerusalem Bible*. Translations which have tried to find a middle road between meaning and form are the *New International Version* and the *Revised Standard Version*.

My second suggestion would be not simply to accept my recommendations about translations, but to test several translations yourself. If you have a regular program of reading through the Bible, then read it each time in a different translation.

For those who are interested in reading more on the subject, I would recommend *Bible Translations and How to Choose Between Them* by Alan S. Duthie (1985, The Paternoster Press, 3 Mount Radford Crescent, Exeter, Devon, EX2 4JW, Great Britain). JP



He "walks in front of his shoes."

He "has a big head."

part of the Hebrew sentence is parallel to the first part, that is, the two parts are synonymous. And indeed the Hebrew expression "not stand in his way" means "not do what he does."

A good test of a Bible translation is how easy it is to understand for people who are not familiar with reli-

The Role of Women in the Temple

by Shmuel Safrai

This is the fifth of a series of articles examining the Lukan account of John the Baptist and Jesus in the light of Jewish literature.

... Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the LORD, as it is written in the LORD's Torah: "Every first-born male is sanctified to the LORD." (Luke 2:22-23)

Luke 2:22-39 describes the "redemption" of Jesus in accordance with Exodus 13:2,13, which commanded that every first-born male Israelite be redeemed because his service belongs to the LORD. Luke also adds that Mary went to Jerusalem to sacrifice the prescribed offerings after giving birth: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons" (Leviticus 12:8).

pid·YON ha·BEN

According to Jewish religious law, it is not necessary to go to Jerusalem in order to redeem a first-born son. The ceremony, פדיון הבן (*pid·YON ha·BEN*, redemption of the son), can be held anywhere and the redemption money is included among those gifts or offerings which are given to priests anyplace in the land of Israel:

Twenty-four priestly gifts were given to Aaron and his sons... ten in the Temple, four in Jerusalem and ten anywhere in the land of Israel... [and among those received by the priests anywhere in the land was] the redemption of the first-born son." (Tosefta Halah 2:7-9)

Likewise, it was not necessary for Mary to go immediately from Nazareth in Galilee to Jerusalem to offer the sacrifice for her purification. It was permitted for a woman to wait until she had given birth a number of times and then go to Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice for all the births at once (Keritot 1:7). A woman who had given birth could not eat the

meat of sacrifices until she had purified herself on the thirty-third day after the birth. However, if a woman was not of a priestly family, she never ate the meat of sacrifices, so she easily could wait to offer the purification sacrifice.

Even if Mary was of priestly descent, the moment she married Joseph (who was not a priest or a Levite, otherwise he would not have performed the *pid·YON ha·BEN* ceremony), she was no longer permitted to eat the meat of sacrifices.

However, devout parents who were especially stringent in their observance of the commandments or who wished to do more than was required used to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice after the birth of their first child and to celebrate "before the LORD" (i.e., in the Temple) the redemption of the first-born (Kiddushin 29b).

In fact, the Bible hints at this practice of redeeming the first-born son in the Temple. Exodus 34:20 states: "Redeem every first-born son. No one is to appear before me empty-handed." This verse explicitly connects the redemption of the first-born with pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem and the bringing of gifts.

demption of the first-born with pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem and the bringing of gifts.

Temple Precincts

When Joseph and Mary brought their baby to the Temple they were blessed by a certain Simeon, a righteous and devout man who "was waiting for the consolation of Israel." Luke also mentions an elderly widow by the name of Anna who was constantly in the Temple and who served God by prayer and fasting.

According to Jewish religious law, wom-

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The Presentation in the Temple

"By the Finger

by R. Steven Notley



Steven Notley, director of Shores Study Tour Program at Christ Church, Jerusalem, is a member of the Jerusalem School. He is a Ph.D. candidate in Comparative Religions at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, concentrating on Jewish history of the Second Temple period and the history of early Christianity.

Jesus' ministry of miracles and deliverance occasionally brought him into conflict with the religious establishment of his day. One of the most intriguing controversies concerned the accusation by a group of Pharisees — termed "Jerusalem scribes" in Mark's Gospel — that Jesus had accomplished the healing of a dumb man with the aid of Beelzebub, the prince of demons (Mt. 12:22-30; Mk. 3:22-27; Lk. 11:14-23).

Minor Agreements

In terms of synoptic relationships it is significant to note a "minor agreement" of Matthew and Luke against Mark in this story. In Matthew and Luke Jesus is accused of casting out demons "by Beelzebub, the prince of demons." Mark, however, records his ac-

cusers' claim as: "He is possessed by Beelzebub, and by the prince of demons he casts out demons."

Mark's variation is a clear example of the literary technique which Dr. Robert Lindsey has termed "Markan pickups." These are dif-

ferences in Mark's account which often can be attributed to words and phrases Mark borrowed from other literary sources (e.g., Luke, Acts, the early Pauline epistles). In

this instance, Prof. David Flusser has suggested that Mark's preservation of the claim that Jesus was "demon possessed" is taken from the accusation laid against John the Baptist found in Matthew 11:18 and Luke 7:33.

Our interest, however, is in another



The Role of Women in the Temple (continued from page 5)

en were allowed in every area of the Temple precincts in which men were. The Mishnah specifies areas within the Temple which non-priests were allowed to enter, but it does not differentiate between men and women:

The Priests' Court is even holier [than the Israelites' Court], for non-priests may not enter therein except when it is necessary for them to lay hands [on the head of their sacrifice], slaughter, or wave [their sacrifice]. (Kelim 1:8)

Although women of priestly lineage did not serve as priests, like men they were obligated to bring sacrifices and offerings of various kinds to the Temple. Women, for instance, brought their offerings of first-fruits to the Temple altar located in the Temple courtyard.

Tosefta Shekalim 2:6 states that "women used to weave the veils of the Temple... and they were paid from monies donated to the Temple." This would agree with the tradition in the Protevangelium of James 10:1 that Mary as a young girl helped weave a veil of the Temple.

Women often were found in the precincts of the Temple where they came to observe the priests at work or to participate in the various services. The Mishnah states that after pre-

paring the morning *tamid* (daily community sacrifices) and before holding the lottery to determine who would offer the incense, the priests gathered in the Chamber of Hewn Stone to recite the Shema and pray together with the people: "They recited three benedictions with the people...." (Tamid 5:1). Both men and women were present for these prayers.

ma^ca·ma·DOT

The Mishnah, in chapter four of tractate Ta'anit, describes in detail the routine of the *תענית* (ma^ca·ma·DOT), the representative delegations of priests, Levites and ordinary Israelites sent from local districts to offer sacrifices in Jerusalem. Following the offering of the morning sacrifice and before the afternoon offering, members of the delegation would assemble for prayer and public reading of the Torah.

Both men and women participated in these gatherings just as women participated in the prayers of the synagogue. It is important to mention, though, that both men and women came to the Temple not only as members of formal delegations, but also whenever they felt the spiritual need to pour out their hearts and feelings to God. JP

of God"

"minor agreement" which occurs in this story. It involves Jesus' response to his accusers as recorded by Matthew and Luke for which there is no parallel in Mark:

But if it is by the finger [Matthew: "Spirit"] of God that I cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you. (Lk. 11:20; Mt. 12:28)

Jesus' reference to the "finger of God" (אֶצְבַּע אֱלֹהִים, *ets-BA^c 'e-lo-HIM*) draws upon an expression which occurs only twice in Hebrew Scriptures — Exodus 8:19 and 31:18.

Semitic Influence

In Greek, the construction ἐν δακτύλῳ θεοῦ (*en dak-TU-loi the-U, by finger of God*)

"But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you."

betrays Semitic influence. Classical Greek requires an article with the noun δακτύλῳ (*dak-TU-loi, finger*) governing the genitive θεοῦ (*the-U, of God*). On page 135 of their *Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, Friedrich Blass and Albert Debrunner note:

In Hebrew the *nomen regens* [governing noun] would appear in the construct or with a suffix and hence would be anarthrous [without an article]. In the NT this Semitic construction makes its influence felt especially where a Semitic original lies behind the Greek (hence "translation-Semitisms"), but occasionally also elsewhere in Semitizing formulae ("Septuagintisms").

Although scholars recognize the numerous Semitisms in Luke's Gospel, explanations vary as to whether Lukan Semitisms are a result of the evangelist's imitation of Septuagintal Greek, or whether the idioms attest to a Semitic undertext. In Exodus 31:18 the expression "finger of God" appears in connection with the inscription of the Torah upon stone tablets. There, as in Luke 11:20, "finger" appears in the instrumental case (אֶצְבַּע אֱלֹהִים, *be-ets-BA^c 'e-lo-HIM, by the fin-*

ger of God). Yet, in the Septuagint's translation of Exodus 31:18 "finger" is not anarthrous, but occurs in good Greek style with the article — τῷ

δακτύλῳ τοῦ θεοῦ (*toī dak-TU-loi tu the-U, literally, "by the finger of the God"*).

If the Semitism of Luke 11:20 is a result of Luke's imitation of the style of the Septuagint, as most scholars claim, then how is it that Luke's idiom is more Hebraic than the Septuagint upon which he supposedly relies? The evidence suggests that this is not a Septuagintism but, in Blass and Debrunner's words, a "translation-Semitism." Luke's text seems to rest upon a literal translation of a Hebrew source.

Rabbinic Commentary

The expression "finger of God" also occurs in a passage from an ancient rabbinic commentary on Exodus which is recited in Jewish homes every year as part of the Passover Haggadah:

Rabbi Yose the Galilean said, "How do we know that the Egyptians were afflicted with ten plagues in Egypt but with fifty at the Red Sea? Of Egypt it is said: 'Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God."' But of the Red Sea it is said: 'And Israel saw the mighty hand....' With how many plagues were they afflicted by the 'finger'? Scripture says with ten. Therefore we may conclude that in Egypt the Egyptians were afflicted with ten plagues but at the Red Sea with fifty." (Mekilta Beshallah 6; to Exodus 14:31)

The first-century sage's attempt to enlarge upon the greatness of the Lord's deliverance of Israel from its slavery in Egypt underscores the importance of this event in the Jewish faith. Those who heard Jesus' reference to the "finger of God" would have recognized the subtle intimation to God's redemptive act.

Jesus responds to his accusers that if God is responsible for the liberation of the dumb man from his bondage to Satan, then God's kingdom has been established in their midst. In this brief New Testament passage we can hear not only the Hebraic words of Jesus — אֶצְבַּע אֱלֹהִים (*be-ets-BA^c 'e-lo-HIM*) — but also his understanding of the redemptive significance of his movement which he chose to call the Kingdom of God. JP



"Luke's text seems to rest upon a literal translation of a Hebrew source."

The Silent *she-VA*²

by David Bivin

We have already introduced the *sin*. We mentioned it in Lesson Three when we learned the *shin* (שׁ), the “sh” sound. The only difference between a *shin* and a *sin* is the

Lesson 21

The second letter in the word יִשְׂרָאֵל (*yis-ra-²EL*, Israel) is שׁ (*sin*). It is the twenty-first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and represents the Hebrew “s” sound. In our system of transliteration, the *sin* is represented by “s.”

placement of a tiny dot. When this dot is at the upper right-hand corner of the letter (שׁ), one knows that it is a *shin* and should be pronounced “sh.”

When the dot is at the upper left-hand corner of the letter (שׁ), one knows that the letter is a *sin* and should be pronounced with an “s” sound. In unpointed Hebrew texts there are no vowel signs or *shin/sin* dots. In that case, one pronounces each שׁ either “sh” or “s” depending on the context in which it appears.

In Lesson Seventeen we pointed out that Hebrew letters also serve as numbers: each of the twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet has a numerical value. א (‘A-lef), for instance, is one, ב (bet) is two, and ו (vav) is six. The numerical value of *shin/sin* is 300.

*she-VA*²

Under the שׁ of יִשְׂרָאֵל (*yis-ra-²EL*) is a *she-VA*², a vowel sign composed of two vertical dots. In Lesson Ten we learned that the *she-VA*² sounds something like the “e” in happening, at other times is as long as the “e” in net, but also can be so short that it is barely audible. Because this vowel is usually barely audible, grammarians often refer to it as a half-vowel. No matter how long or short it is, in JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE we will always transliterate the

*she-VA*² with the letter “e.”

Now we will learn that there is another kind of *she-VA*² which is completely silent. Sometimes, as in the word יִשְׂרָאֵל (*yis-ra-²EL*), a *she-VA*² serves only to mark the end of a syllable. In that case it has no effect on pronunciation and is added simply to fill a gap which would occur in a word under the last letter of a closed syllable.

How does one know whether a *she-VA*² is vocal, or closes a syllable and thus is silent? At your present level of knowledge, you cannot determine this for yourself. Therefore, for now each time you meet a *she-VA*² you will be informed by us whether it is vocal or silent. A silent *she-VA*² will not be represented in our system of transliteration. Consequently it is the only consonant or vowel symbol which will have no indication in our transliterations.

In spite of presently being unable to determine whether a *she-VA*² should be pronounced, there are two simple rules which allow you to decide in most cases whether a *she-VA*² is vocal or silent:

- 1) When two *she-VA*²s occur together, the first is silent while the second is vocal. In other words, a *she-VA*² is vocal (opens a syllable) under a letter which follows a letter with a *she-VA*². Conversely, a *she-VA*² is silent (closes a syllable) under a letter which precedes a letter with a *she-VA*². For an illustration of this rule, see “Jeremiah” in the reading practice below.
- 2) The *she-VA*² is always vocal under the first



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The Inbal dance troupe

letter of a word. For illustrations of this rule, see the final two examples, “Shemiah” and “Sheariah,” in the reading practice below.

Reading Practice

With the introduction of silent *she-VA*², we can now read the following words. Every *she-VA*² you meet in this reading practice will

be a silent *she-VA*² unless otherwise noted.

• עִנְבָּל (‘in-BAL), “clapper (of a bell); uvula.” In mishnaic Hebrew, ‘in-BAL meant the tongue of a bell (Nazir 6:2); today ‘in-BAL also is the word for uvula because of its similarity to the bell clapper. Additionally, Inbal is the name of an internationally-famous Israeli dance troupe which bases its work primarily on Yemenite traditions.

• אַרְבַּעַת (‘ar-BA‘), “four” (feminine).

• אַרְבַּעָה (‘ar-ba-‘AH), “four” (masculine).

For the average reader of the English Bible, the most uninspiring portions of the inspired text are its detailed genealogies. However, as one learns Hebrew, such lists of names become more and more interesting, especially as one gains the vocabulary necessary to recognize the elements in Hebrew names. Try reading each of the following biblical names in Hebrew, comparing your pronunciation with the accompanying transliteration.

• מִרְיָם (mir-YAM), “Miriam = Mary.” Miriam was the sister of Moses and Aaron (Numbers 26:59). מִרְיָם was the most common feminine name in the time of Jesus.

• אַבְשָׁלוֹם (‘av-sha-LOM), “Absalom,” the son of David (II Samuel 3:3). We mentioned in Lesson Sixteen that this name is a compound of two words: ‘av (father) and sha-LOM.

• יִשְׁמָעֵאל (yish-ma-‘A‘L), “Ishmael,” the son of Abraham and Hagar (Genesis 16:11).

The following examples each contain two *she-VA*²s:

• יֵרֵמְיָהּ (yir-me-YAH), “Jeremiah,” the prophet from Anathoth (Jeremiah 27:1). Remember that when two *she-VA*²s occur together, the first is silent (closing a syllable), and the second is vocal (opening a syllable).

• יִשְׁמַיְיָהּ (yis-ma-‘YAH), “Ishmaiah,” one of David’s mighty warriors (I Chronicles 12:4). Both *she-VA*²s in this word are silent. The first closes the first syllable, יִשְׁ (yish). The second closes the second syllable, מַיְ (ma‘).

• שְׁמַרְיָהּ (she-mar-YAH), “Shemariah,” a son of Rehoboam (II Chronicles 11:19). The *she-VA*² under the *shin* is vocal because it is under the first letter of the word. The *she-VA*² under the *resh* is silent because it closes the syllable מַר (mar).

• שְׁעָרְיָהּ (she-‘ar-YAH), “Sheariah,” a descendant of Benjamin (I Chronicles 8:38). Like the previous word, its first *she-VA*² is vocal and its second is silent. The *she-VA*² under the *resh* closes the syllable עַר (‘ar). JP

Understanding Parables

by Brad H. Young

With the appearance of Brad Young's Jesus and His Jewish Parables, we begin a special series of articles based on lectures delivered by Dr. Young.

The rabbis taught, “Do not underestimate the value of parables, because by means of parables a person can master the words of Torah” (Song of Songs Rabbah 1:8).

The sages of Jesus’ day employed parables to teach scriptural truths such as the dangers of bad associations and the importance of the proper training of children. For instance:

A parable, to what may the matter be compared? To a king who had a young son. He entrusted him to two nursemaids. One occupied herself with harlotry and the other with witchcraft. The king ordered them to give his son milk but not to teach him their ways. Thus the Holy One, blessed be He, warned Israel concerning the Egyptians and the Canaanites, “Do not learn their ways,” and He also said, “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it” [Prov. 22:6]. (Sifra, Codex Assemani 66, Finkelstein edition, p. 388)

The sages also employed parables to teach about God’s love for people and interpersonal relationships. They used parables to give spiritual advice, to warn and exhort. By means of parables one could even teach about life after death and the Judgment:

To what may this be compared? To a human king who owned a beautiful orchard which contained splendid figs. Now he appointed two watchmen, one lame and the other blind. One day the lame man said to the blind man, “I see beautiful figs in the orchard. Put me on your shoulders so that we can pick and eat them.” So the lame man got on the shoulders of the blind man and they gathered the figs and ate them.

Some time later, the owner of the orchard came and asked them, “Where are those beautiful figs?” The lame man replied, “Do I have feet to walk with?” The blind man replied, “Do I have eyes to see with?” What did the owner do? He placed the lame man upon the blind man and judged them together. So the Holy One, blessed be He, will bring the soul, replace it in the body and judge them together.... (Sanhedrin 91^{a-b})



Dr. Brad H. Young, a founding member of the Jerusalem School, lived and studied in Israel for nine years. He earned his M.A. degree and doctorate at the Hebrew University under the supervision of Prof. David Flusser. Young is now Associate Professor of New Testament Studies in the Graduate School of Theology at Oral Roberts University.

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Jesus' Teaching

One-third of Jesus' teaching is in parable form. If we misunderstand his parables, we misunderstand a significant portion of his teaching.

The parables take the abstract world of spiritual values and enable us to visualize them in concrete terms. For instance, Jesus teaches that the Kingdom of God is of inestimable value. He makes this point with the parables of the Pearl of Great Price and the Treasure Hidden in a Field.

The parable is a mini-drama. The scenes of the parable are like the scenes of a play. One must not become so interested in the various de-

tails of the parable that one misses the main message.

Interpretation

A parable is a picture, an allegory, but we must be careful not to over-allegorize. For example, note the way Augustine (354–430 A.D.) interpreted the Parable of the Good Samaritan:

"A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho" — Adam himself is meant. "Jerusalem" is the heavenly city of peace, from whose blessedness Adam fell. "Jericho" means the moon and signifies our mortality because it is born, waxes, wanes and dies. "Thieves" are the devil and his angels. "Who stripped him," namely of his immortality; "and beat him" by persuading him to sin.... The "priest and Levite" who seeing him, passed

by, signify the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament, which could profit nothing for salvation.... The "inn" is the Church, where travelers returning to their heavenly country are refreshed after pilgrimage. The "morrow" is after the resurrection of the Lord.... The "innkeeper" is the Apostle [Paul].... (Quaestiones Evangeliorum II, 19)

Although Augustine's interpretation is ingenious, it hides the message Jesus desired to communicate.

A parable is not the spiritual reality the parable-teller is trying to portray. It is a representation of that reality, a shadow of the substance. One discovers points of contact between the reality and the picture with which it is portrayed, but the picture is not the reality. **JP**

Book Review



Jesus and His Jewish Parables: Rediscovering the Roots of Jesus' Teaching

by Brad H. Young, New York, Paulist Press, 1989. 365 pp. \$12.95.

by David Pileggi

The parables of Jesus have inspired preachers, poets and believers through the ages. At the same time, the parables have often been a source of considerable controversy and confusion. It is ironic that the simple illustrations used by Jesus have proven so difficult for his followers to understand.

This has happened largely because the parables have been so far removed from their original setting, and interpreters of the Bible with little or no knowledge of the Jewish background to the Gospels have struggled to understand Jesus' words. The problem began with the very foundation of the Church. The Church fathers, who freely allegorized the parables, had little contact with the world of Jewish learning. Sadly, their oversight has been compounded by almost every following generation of Christians, often with disastrous consequences.

With the arrival of the Enlightenment, some scholars be-

gan to look at the parables in their Jewish setting. Yet much of this scholarship, such as that of the influential John Lightfoot, is tainted with anti-Jewish prejudice. This ignorance and prejudice concerning the Judaism of Jesus' day continues to be perpetuated today in many Bible colleges and seminaries.

It is against this background that Brad Young has written his *Jesus and His Jewish Parables*. From the outset he argues that the best way to understand what Jesus was teaching in his parables is to try to hear him as he spoke to his people. The author argues that this can best be done by analyzing the parables of Jesus together with those told by other rabbis of his day.

Contrary to popular opinion, Jesus did not invent the parable form. As Young points out, the genre predated his ministry by some time. Jesus' parables were not much different in form and structure than those to be found in the Talmud, and many of the parables in the Gospels and rabbinic literature have similar motifs. For example, both Jesus and the rabbis told stories about such things as the wise and the foolish, unfaithful tenants and laborers in a vineyard.

As the reader delves into *Jesus and His Jewish Parables*, he will naturally begin to ask,

"Who borrowed from whom?" Young seems quite convinced that the parables of Jesus and the rabbis were developed independently. In Young's eyes, their parables are distant cousins, both drawing upon the sources of learning that flourished in the days of the Second Temple.

The author warns that too much should not be read into the similarities between the parables of Jesus and those of the Sages of Israel. While they use similar language, they often emphasize different points. Each parable must be interpreted in its own context. Even so, Young maintains that without a familiarity with rabbinic parallels, it is difficult to get to the heart of the parables in the Gospels.

Young also disputes the traditional Christian notion that Jesus rejected his brethren in the flesh. His study of Jesus' parables shows just how close Jesus was to his own people and to the religious thought of his day.

Jesus and His Jewish Parables serves two other important functions. It gives increased exposure to the ideas concerning the teachings of Jesus that have long been advocated by Prof. David Flusser and Dr. Robert Lindsey. The book also gives an airing to the approach taken by the Jerusalem School concerning the synoptic problem. **JP**

A Personal Perspective

No Longer Hidden

by David Flusser

I am pleased to recommend Brad Young's research into the parables of Jesus, and I am sure that his new book, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables*, will help its readers gain a clearer understanding of Jesus' words and teaching.

There is no question that the way to understanding Jesus leads through his Jewishness. To be a Jew in Jesus' day meant learning not only the Hebrew Bible, but also a wealth of

rabbinic interpretation. Jesus' contemporaries called him "Rabbi" — Teacher — and my experience has shown me that Jesus was a very learned man. His words were sometimes simple as salt (e.g., Mt. 16:26), but even in such cases he alluded to Jewish learning, and he sometimes also spoke as a rabbinical authority (e.g., Mt. 12:11-12).

A knowledge of this Jewish background is vital for a modern reader to understand what Jesus really meant. You do not have to be Jewish to be nourished by Jesus' bread, but to become a New Testament scholar it is essential to acquire a sound knowledge of ancient Judaism. If you want to understand Jesus' parables without becoming a scholar, you have to find a teacher who is an expert in Jewish matters. Dr. Young is such an expert, a scholar whose books reveal new aspects both in Jewish and in New Testament research.

There is no need to fear Jesus' Jewishness. Paul has written with great insight "that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy" (Romans 15:8-9). This statement not only fits the "history of salvation," but also expresses the ties between Jesus' Jewish learning and the Jewish character of the Christian message. This connection is especially valid for the interpretation of the parables in the Gospels.

Parables are typical of rabbinic literature,

and do not exist in any anterior or posterior civilization, not even in the Jewish Scriptures, Dead Sea Scrolls, Apocrypha or Pseudepigrapha. Even the language of the parables seems to be prescribed: from the very beginning of the genre until the last rabbinic parables of the early Middle Ages, the language of the parables is always Hebrew, never Aramaic. It is often overlooked that Jesus' parables

belong to this specific, well-defined literary form which was a creation of Jewish culture, more precisely of the rabbinic Pharisaic movement.

Just as no real parables exist outside of rabbinic literature,

so one does not find parables of Jesus outside of the synoptic Gospels. Without knowing the established themes and motifs of rabbinic parables, it is very difficult to learn what Jesus was teaching us with his Jewish parables.

Jesus and His Jewish Parables is an important step in understanding the rabbinic context within which Jesus presented his parables. Dr. Young's knowledge of the Jewish background of Jesus' parables is astonishing. This, and his gift of analysis and synthesis, created a wonderful book.

"Which of you desiring to build a tower does not first sit down and count the cost...?" (Luke 14:28-30). The moral of this parable could be applied to the study of Jesus' parables: A knowledge of their rabbinic counterpart is necessary before one can begin to study them. There is a strong likelihood that a scholar who does not prepare himself by studying rabbinic parables will be ridiculed in the words of Jesus' parable: "This man began to build and was not able to finish."

Anyone who wants to be a good worker in the field of Jesus' parables should begin by studying Brad Young's *Jesus and His Jewish Parables*. The treasure is no longer hidden! JP

***Jesus and His Jewish Parables* is available at your bookstore, or by writing to:
Paulist Press, 997 Macarthur Boulevard,
Mahwah, NJ 07430, U.S.A.
(\$12.95 plus \$1.50 for postage and handling)**



Prof. David Flusser was born in Vienna in 1917. An internationally distinguished Bible scholar, he is noted for his work on the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Essenes, and first-century Judaism. Flusser studied classical philology at the University of Prague, lectured there from 1947 to 1950, and received a doctorate from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem where he now serves as professor of Early Christianity and Judaism of the Second Temple Period. He was awarded the Israel Prize in 1980 by the State of Israel for his work. His publications include *Jesus and Judaism* and the *Origins of Christianity*.



The Jerusalem School

The Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research (מכון ירושלים לחקר האוונגליזם הסינופטיות) is a team of Jewish and Christian scholars who are studying Jesus' sayings within the context of the language and culture in which he lived.

Their work confirms that Jesus was a rabbi who taught in Hebrew and used uniquely Hebraic teaching methods.

The School's objective is to reconstruct the original biography of Jesus. This is an attempt to recover a lost document from the Second Temple period, a Hebrew scroll which, like so much Jewish literature of the period, has been preserved only in Greek. The Jerusalem School scholars believe that the life story of Jesus lies buried in the Greek texts of the synoptic Gospels and can be successfully recovered.

As a means to its objective, the Jerusalem School is creating a detailed commentary on the synoptic Gospels which will reflect the renewed insight provided by the School's research.

The Jerusalem School was registered in Israel as a nonprofit research institute in 1985.



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Many of JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE's readers are as interested as the scholars of the Jerusalem School in the exploration of Jesus' biography. By becoming a member of the International Synoptic Society, you will be instrumental in helping us all to better understand the words of Jesus. Your membership dues will help expand the horizons of Gospel research, and enable JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE to more fully report on the work of the Jerusalem School.

