

The Major Importance of the “Minor” Agreements

[Robert L. Lindsey \[1917-1995\]](#)

2015Feb20

<https://www.jerusalemerspective.com/13766/>

In this article, Dr. Robert Lindsey discusses the importance of the so-called “minor agreements” of Luke and Matthew against Mark for properly understanding the interrelationship of the Synoptic Gospels. David N. Bivin and Joshua N. Tilton collaborated with Lauren Asperschlager to bring this article, which previously existed only as an unfinished draft, to *Jerusalem Perspective* subscribers.

Revised: 8-April-2015

My research on the [Synoptic Problem](#) was originally stimulated by questions regarding the Hebrew translation of Greek words and idioms in the Gospel of Mark when I attempted to produce a modern Hebrew translation of the New Testament for Christian congregations in Israel. No doubt all Bible translators have the happy experience of finding themselves face to face with the real theological and spiritual problems of their faith as they struggle, often rather desperately, to understand the biblical text. In my own instance, I found myself confronted with the unexpected discovery that a large portion of Mark’s Gospel translated so easily into Hebrew that I began to wonder whether the Gospel of Mark had originally been produced in some Semitic language. The word order was predominantly like that of Hebrew, and many of the special expressions of the Gospel of Mark could easily be explained as resulting from a literal translation of Hebrew idiom. There were also both Aramaic and Hebrew words in Mark’s text that had simply been transliterated into Greek.^[1]

On the other hand, quite a number of the most characteristic words and phrases in the Gospel of Mark, such as τὸ εὐαγγέλιον (*to evangelion*, “the Gospel”), πάλιν (*palin*, “again”), πολλά (*polla*, “much”) and καὶ εὐθύς (*kai evthys*, “and immediately”) have no easy Hebrew equivalent.^[2] It was the difficulty I had in translating such un-Hebraic phrases in Mark’s highly Hebraic text that prompted me to compare Mark’s stories with their parallel versions in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Comparing the texts of Matthew and Luke, I hoped, might yield clues to understanding the “non-Hebraisms” (as I began calling them) in the Gospel of Mark and how best to translate them.

An Un-Hebraic Element in Mark's Version of Jesus' Baptism

I encountered one such translation difficulty near the beginning of the Gospel of Mark. How was one to translate καὶ ἐβαπτίσθη εἰς τὸν Ἰορδάνην ὑπὸ Ἰωάννου (*kai ebaptisthē eis ton Iordanēn hūpo Iōannou*, “and he was baptized into the Jordan by John”) in Mark 1:9? Ancient Hebrew sources use the *pa'al* form, טָבַל (*tāval*), when a person immersed himself^[3] and the *hif'il* form, הִטְבִּיל (*hitbil*), for the immersion of articles, or for bringing a person to baptism.^[4] The *nif'al* form is reserved in modern Hebrew sources for Christian baptism, no doubt due to the passive form of the Greek verb. But can one speak of John the Baptist as having in any sense practiced “Christian” baptism?

This problem led me to study the ancient form of Jewish and Christian baptism. It is often held that Christian baptism is derived from Jewish proselyte baptism. However, there is no formal difference in Jewish rites between proselyte baptism and ordinary immersion. The baptizer officiates and the proselyte, whether man or woman, enters the [mikveh](#) pool naked and completely immerses himself (or herself) in the water.^[5] The earliest picture we have of John's baptism comes from a drawing in a catacomb in Rome, and there a fully dressed John extends his hand from the river bank to Jesus who is coming out of the water naked. The Old Syriac and Peshitta versions of the New Testament treat the passive aorist form of the Greek verb as an indicative, and thus the candidate immerses himself.

Both John's “baptism” and first-century Christian “baptism” had an active and a reflexive sense (i.e., “to immerse someone” and “to immerse oneself”). Thus, when John said, “I baptize you with water,” he meant no more than that he summoned people to his baptism and that they responded by immersing themselves. When, on the other hand, the aorist participle is used in a narrative of someone's baptism, it evidently means that the person immersed himself in the presence of others who either officiated at the baptism or witnessed the act.

When I compared the Matthean and Lukan descriptions of Jesus' baptism to what is recorded in Mark, I discovered that Matthew and Luke agree with each other against Mark not only to drop the phrase εἰς τὸν Ἰορδάνην ὑπὸ Ἰωάννου (“into the Jordan by John”), but they also agree to use a participial form of the aorist of βαπτίζειν (*baptizein*; Matt. 3:16 [βαπτισθείς]; Luke 3:21 [βαπτισθέντος]) against Mark's passive indicative ἐβαπτίσθη (*ebaptisthē*; Mark 1:9). The authors of Matthew and Luke agree against Mark to give us a more Hebraic text.

Mark's Special Use of Λόγος

Another example of an un-Hebraic usage that crops up in Mark's highly Hebraic text is his use of the word λόγος (*logos*, “word”). Mark's first use of λόγος seems, indeed, Hebraic enough. In Mark 1:45 he says that a man healed of leprosy “spread the word” (about his healing). Translated to Hebrew, דָּבָר (*dāvār*) takes on the sense of “thing,” a meaning דָּבָר normally has unless some contextual element clearly shows it to have the meaning of “word” or “thing spoken.” The verse is clear enough so translated, but one wonders exactly what Mark meant, especially when the next use of λόγος in Mark plainly has the

ring of specialized terminology: καὶ ἐλάλει αὐτοῖς τὸν λόγον (“And he spoke the word to them”; Mark 2:2). If we translate this phrase to Hebrew literally, it has such a distinctly odd ring to it that a translator is obliged, especially since this is the first of several such odd uses, to modify the word דָּבָר.

The same is true of Mark 4:14 where it is said, ὁ σπείρων τὸν λόγον σπείρει (“the sower sows the word”). A literal Hebrew translation of Mark’s sentence would mean, “the sower sows the thing,” which is as laconic in Hebrew as in English. Since in Mark 4:15 (2xx), 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20 the same oddity pervades, there is no alternative but to modify the first usage. For this reason, I chose to render τὸν λόγον in Mark 2:2 and 4:14 as דִּבְרֵי הַבְּשׂוּרָה (*dēvar habesōrah*, “the word of the Gospel”).

In contrast to Mark’s special use of the expression “he spoke to them the word (boldly),” I noticed that although Matthew and Luke had parallel material, they were conspicuous in their common failure to include this expression, and this despite the fact that the author of Luke had used the same phrase often in Acts.

It was this non-Hebraic way of using what seemed a Hebrew literalism that led me to notice the greater use of Hebraic idiom in the Gospel of Luke, often opposite these Markan “non-Hebraisms.” For example, in the story of the exorcism of a demon in the synagogue at Capernaum (Mark 1:21-28; Luke 4:31-37), the Hebraic quality of both accounts stares the reader in the face, yet it is Luke’s account that is the most consistently Hebraic. This is especially clear in Luke’s double use of λόγος and its absence in Mark. Where Luke says, ἐν ἐξουσίᾳ ἦν ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ (“his word was with authority”; Luke 4:32), we can translate the Greek word order and idiom literally into Hebrew with perfect results: בִּרְשׁוּת הָיָה דְּבָרוֹ (*birshūt hāyāh dēvārō*). By contrast, Mark’s equivalent ἦν γὰρ διδάσκων αὐτοὺς ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων (“for he was teaching them as authority having”; Mark 1:22) can be put into Hebrew only by resorting to awkward circumlocution.^[6] In Luke 4:36 the expression Τίς ὁ λόγος οὗτος (“What word is this?”) turns beautifully into Hebrew with the meaning, “What is this thing?” It seems certain that the Greek translator of the Hebrew undertext understood דָּבָר in this sentence as though it meant “word,” and therefore wrote λόγος, but it is just as obvious that a word-for-word translation of the Greek into Hebrew has restored an ancient Hebrew text. Mark’s equivalent Τί ἐστιν τοῦτο; διδαχὴ καινὴ (“What is this? A new teaching...”; Mark 1:27), which is almost identical to a phrase in Acts 17:19, is easy enough to translate to Hebrew, but it is clearly secondary to the text in Luke.

From Non-Hebraisms to the Synoptic Problem

It was in wrestling with the strange non-Hebraic and often repetitive phrases of Mark that I was forced to question the scholarly consensus that the authors of Matthew and Luke had independently used the Gospel of Mark as one of their sources. If the authors of Matthew and Luke independently used the Gospel of Mark as one of their sources, how was it that they so often managed to agree against Mark to produce a more Hebraic text? There seemed nothing for me to do but review the classical arguments about synoptic interdependence. I read extensively on the subject, including Streeter’s famous *The Four Gospels*, in which the theory of [Markan Priority](#) is strongly argued.^[7] Streeter’s observation that Matthew and Luke have a common outline when giving stories with parallels to Mark, but do not agree with respect to the order of the stories they share from some other

source (so-called “Q”), certainly supports the conclusion that Matthew and Luke did not use each other’s Gospels. However, against Streeter’s thesis, the verbal agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark strongly suggest that they shared a text parallel to Mark even as they copied Mark’s Gospel.

This conclusion made it possible for me to understand how Matthew and Luke could so often, although in small details, show a preference for this other text parallel to Mark (which I eventually came to refer to as the Anthology) even while mainly using the Gospel of Mark. This was to prove a valuable interim theory and prompted me to check whether the words and phrases Matthew and Luke agree to use against Mark or the phrases in Mark’s text they agreed to omit might suggest how to reconstruct the original Hebrew text. Here are some examples:

1. In Mark 1:5 we read that “all the *χώρα* [*chōra*, ‘country’] of Judea went out” to hear John preach. In Luke 3:3, however, we read that John “went into all the *περίχωρον* [*perichōron*, ‘region’] of the Jordan,” while in Matt. 3:5 we read that “Jerusalem and all Judea and all the *περίχωρος* [*perichōros*, ‘region’] of the Jordan” went out to hear John. Matthew, as so often, has a text that is a combination of the quite disparate wording of Mark and Luke. The *περίχωρος* of the Jordan is the LXX translation of *כְּכַר הַיַּרְדֵּן* (*kikar hayardēn*)—the phrase by which this geographical area is known in the Hebrew Scriptures—in Gen. 13:10, 11 and 2 Chr. 4:17.^[8] The simplest explanation of why Luke and Matthew retain this usage against Mark is that they possess a source other than Mark, or that one of them is using the other. If the second explanation is correct, we would have to choose Matthew as the secondary author because he appears to conflate the texts of Mark and Luke. In either case, both Matthew and Luke show knowledge of a more Hebraic Greek document.

2. At the baptism of Jesus (Matt. 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22) both Matthew and Luke state that the heaven(s) “was/were opened” (Luke 3:21 *[ἀνεῳχθῆναι]*; Matt. 3:16 *[ἠνεῳχθησαν]*). Mark 1:10 says, “the heavens were being split open” (*σχιζομένους τοὺς οὐρανοὺς*). The more natural Hebrew equivalent is found in Ezekiel 1:1, *נִפְתְּחוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם* (“the heavens were opened”; cf. Gen. 7:11 and Isa. 24:18 where the “chimneys” of heaven open up). Behind Matthew and Luke there appears to be a more Hebraic text than what we encounter in Mark’s description of the heavens opening.

3. In Mark 1:10 the Spirit is said to come down “into” (*εἰς*, *eis*) Jesus. Both Matthew and Luke, on the other hand, state that “the Holy Spirit” (Luke) or “the Spirit of God” (Matthew) came down “upon” (*ἐπὶ*, *epi*; Matt. 3:16; Luke 3:22) him. Since Isaianic passages like Isa. 11:2; 42:1; and 61:1 all speak of the coming of the Spirit of God “upon” (*עַל*, ‘*al*) the Anointed One, the Matthean and Lukan descriptions are more Hebraic than Mark’s.

4. Mark’s failure to employ more than a few examples of the Hebraic *ἰδοὺ* (*idou*, “behold”) is in striking contrast to the very frequent usage of *ἰδοὺ* in Matthew and Luke. Matthew uses *ἰδοὺ* 62xx, Luke 57xx, but Mark only 7xx. Even more striking is the fact that Mark never uses the narrative phrase *καὶ ἰδοὺ*, which appears often in Matthew and Luke and corresponds to the narrative formula *וְהִנֵּה* (*vehinēh*, “and behold”). Matthew and Luke agree 3xx to use this phrase at precisely the same place in the common narrative where Mark chooses to use another narrative phrase.^[9] Mark has a tendency to write *ἴδε* (*ide*) where *ἰδοὺ* would be normal Hebraic Greek. Mark writes *ἴδε* 9xx,^[10] whereas *ἴδε* is completely absent in Luke, and in Matthew *ἴδε* occurs only 4xx.^[11] We note, moreover, that

Matthew and Luke agree to use ἰδοὺ in the saying “Lo here, lo there,” while Mark has ἴδε in his parallel.^[12] Thus Mark would appear to reject the narrative phrase καὶ ἰδοὺ altogether, and often replaced the saying’s idiomatic ἰδοὺ with ἴδε, and perhaps added ἴδε at other times. When Mark added ἰδοὺ, he was sometimes followed by Matthew, but never by Luke.

5. Where Mark quotes Jesus as saying, Οὐδεὶς ἐπὶ βλήμα...ἐπιράπτει (“No one sews on a patch”; Mark 2:21), Matthew and Luke agree to write οὐδεὶς ἐπὶ βλήμα...ἐπιβάλλει (“No one patches with a patch”; Luke 5:36; cf. Matt. 9:16). This latter usage probably reflects the Hebraic use of a verb with its cognate accusative.^[13] Were it not for Matthew’s agreement with Mark in the modifying ῥάκους ἀγνάφου (“unshrunk cloth”) against Luke, whose ἀπὸ ἱματίου καινοῦ σχίσας (“tearing from a new garment”) seems also to be an added explanation, we would have no difficulty in recognizing a quite typical rabbinically-styled Hebrew saying:

οὐδεὶς ἐπιβάλλει ἐπὶ βλήμα ἀπὸ ἱματίου καινοῦ ἐπὶ ἱμάτιον παλαιόν

No one patches a patch from a new garment on an old garment.

אין טולים מְטַלַת מִבְּגַד חָדָשׁ עַל בְּגָד יָשָׁן

They do not patch a patch from a new garment on an old garment.

In Matthew and Luke we read, “No one patches a patch,” against Mark’s “No one sews a patch.” The Matthean-Lukan form retains the Hebraic-looking verb + cognate accusative, and thus likely preserved the saying in its original Hebraic form against Mark’s secondary version. No exact rabbinic parallel of this saying seems to have been preserved, but it is clearly of the same Hebraic form as the one so nicely preserved in the following verse in each of the Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37): οὐδεὶς βάλλει (Mark-Luke) οἶνον νέον εἰς ἀσκοὺς παλαιοὺς (Matthew-Mark-Luke), which in Hebrew is easily retroverted to:

אין שמים יין חָדָשׁ בְּנִדוֹת יִשְׁנִים

They do not put new wine in old wineskins.

6. In the Beelzebul Controversy (Matt. 12:22-30; Mark 3:20-27; Luke 11:14-23) Matthew and Luke agree to write πᾶσα βασιλεία...ἐρημοῦται (“every kingdom...is destroyed”; Matt. 12:25; Luke 11:17) against a quite different rendering of this saying in Mark. The Matthean-Lukan phrase likely represents a non-Greek Hebraic saying: כָּל מְלָכוֹת נִחְרָבָת (“every kingdom is destroyed”). Here the Hebrew word for “all” means “every” before the singular noun, and the root ב-ר-ח, which is literally connected with “dryness” and therefore is used for the description of a ruin in the desert, takes on a verbal form meaning “brought to dry ruin.”^[15] It is doubtful whether a Greek author would ever have used ἐρημοῦν (*erēmoun*, “to make uninhabitable”) in such a sentence when he had his highly versatile ἀπολλύειν (*apollūein*, “to destroy”) so readily at hand. Moreover, as Professor David Flusser of the Hebrew University has pointed out to me, we have a series of rabbinic parallels which use this form of the verb נִחְרַב to express the destruction of a house, a city, or a synagogue after a division has arisen among the constituents.^[16]

7. Matthew and Luke agree in reporting that Jesus explained his use of parables by stating to his disciples, “To you it is given to know the mysteries [plural] of the

Kingdom...” (Matt. 13:11; Luke 8:10). Mark, on the other hand, has, “To you the mystery [singular] is given of the Kingdom...” (Mark 4:11). We can translate the version of Matthew and Luke into idiomatic Hebrew, word by word, but we cannot do so with Mark’s version, mainly due to the non-Hebraic word order. Moreover, Mark’s use of the singular of the word “mystery” is like the Pauline usage,^[17] but the plural form in Matthew and Luke agrees with the scrolls of Qumran in their frequent references to מְרָזִים (*rāzīm*, “mysteries”), and with the plural ταῦτα (*tavta*, “these things”) found in the Matthean-Lukan version of Jesus’ prayer in which he thanks God that “these things have not been revealed to the wise and understanding, but to babes” (Matt. 11:25; Luke 10:21).

I have limited these illustrations to the first four chapters of the Gospel of Mark, that is, to about one fourth of the common story of our Synoptic Gospels. Many other illustrations could be given from the later portions of Mark’s Gospel. However, the examples I have given here are sufficient to establish my argument that the so-called [minor agreements](#) of Matthew and Luke against Mark reflect their common dependence on a source that was earlier than Mark and gives every indication of having been translated from a written Hebrew document or documents.

A Written Hebrew Source Behind the Synoptic Gospels?

There are, of course, many other reasons for believing that the first Gospel story appeared in Hebrew, not least of which is the statement of Papias that “Matthew first wrote the *logia* of the Lord in Hebrew and everyone interpreted these as best he could” (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.16). For well over two hundred years scholars have supposed that “Hebrew” here means “Aramaic,” but the discovery that the principal language of the first-century sect of Qumran was Hebrew has made that contention improbable. Hebrew was the preferred tongue of the Jews in the land of Israel in the days of Jesus, and there is no reason why it should not have been the main language of Jesus’ teaching and conversation. However, it is the internal evidence of the Synoptic Gospels themselves that provides the decisive evidence.

It is remarkable how much one can learn from studying Hebrew and Greek concordances of the Jewish Scriptures, the use of Moulton and Geden’s *Concordance of the Greek Testament*,^[18] and from translating to Hebrew the parallel passages of Huck’s *Synopsis of the First Three Gospels*.^[19] One of the methods I found most instructive was to trace a given Greek word by studying its every appearance in concordance and synopsis. I began to notice that not only were many of the Greek words used with Hebraic ranges of meaning, but that the Hebraic usages of these Greek words were, for the most part, confined to the Synoptic Gospels, the first half of Acts, and the book of Revelation.

The verb ἑστάναι (*hestanai*, “be standing,” “stop”) is a case in point. This word occurs with high frequency in the Synoptic Gospels, the first half of the book of Acts, and the book of Revelation. Of even greater importance, however, is the manner in which the word is used. In the Gospel of John and in the last half of Acts we have the typical Greek meanings of ἑστάναι: “rise up,” “stand,” or “remain standing.” Hebraic meanings of this word are largely absent.

Very different is the use of ἑστάναι in the Synoptic Gospels and the first half of Acts. There ἑστάναι shows meanings within the semantic range of the Hebrew verb עָמַד

(*āmad*). These include the more literal meanings of “to get on one’s feet” or “to stand,” but also the meanings “to come to a stop,” “to be at a certain place,” “to wait,” “to last,” and others.^[20] Some of these usages are common to the English word “stand,” but in English one cannot use “stand” as an equivalent of “come to a halt” and it is questionable whether this sense was a normal Greek meaning of ἐστάναι. In Luke 7:14 and 18:40 the verb ἐστάναι is used in the sense “come to a halt,” and this usage is duplicated in the parallels of Matthew and Mark. Luke 8:44 speaks of the “halting (of a flow of blood)” in this same manner, and although at least one parallel has been found in Greek literature,^[21] this usage is much more typical of the Hebrew verb *תָּמַד*.

The meaning of “being at a certain place” or “being before someone,” which is a common use of *תָּמַד* (“to stand”) in the Hebrew Bible, may arise from the weakness of the verb “to be” in Hebrew. Many languages, including Greek, find the copula capable of bearing statements of location, but Hebrew idiom demands a stronger verb. Thus, in Luke 5:1 Greek and English usage might have preferred “and he was at the lake,” but instead we find “and he stood beside the lake.” Luke 9:27 and its parallels in Matt. 16:28 and Mark 9:1 speak of “some of those who are standing here,” but the meaning is only “some of those who are with us.” Similar are the usages at Luke 17:12, ἔστησαν πόρρωθεν (“stood outside”); Luke 18:13, μακρόθεν ἐστὼς (“standing at a distance”); Luke 8:20, ἐστήκασιν ἔξω (“stood without”); and the numerous expressions of “standing before” someone (cf. Matt. 27:11; Luke 21:36; Acts 10:30).^[22]

The development of the meaning “to wait” or “to last” for *תָּמַד* grew, no doubt, out of the idea that the verb could be used for a continuing state of being. In any case, ἐστάναι is often used in the Synoptic Gospels in this sense. When each of the Synoptic Gospels speaks of Jesus asking whether Satan’s “kingdom” can “stand” (Matt. 12:26; Mark 3:26; Luke 11:18) we have a Hebraic usage.

It is the meaning “to be around” or “to be near” that sometimes makes *תָּמַד* (and thus, apparently, ἐστάναι in the Synoptic Gospels) the equivalent of the Greek verb μένειν (*menein*). The verb μένειν is relatively rare in the Synoptic Gospels (3xx in Matthew; 2xx in Mark; 6xx in Luke), the first half of Acts (2xx) and Revelation (1x). In glaring contrast with this scarcity, μένειν occurs in John’s Gospel 34xx, 11xx in the second half of Acts, and with high frequency in the Epistles (e.g., 24xx in 1 John).

Hebrew has no direct equivalent for μένειν; the closest equivalent is *יָשַׁב*, which literally means “to sit,” and the next nearest equivalent is *תָּמַד*, when used in the sense we have been discussing above. The Septuagint’s translators hesitated to employ μένειν for *יָשַׁב* or *תָּמַד* due to their literalistic translation habits. Instead, they preferred to make the more literal equivalent bear the Hebrew range of meanings. This same pattern of literal translation appears in the sections of the New Testament that have long been suspected of having had a written Hebrew *vorlage*. In other words, we have in the use of the verbs ἐστάναι and καθῆσθαι (*kathēsthai*, “to sit”), in the Synoptic Gospels especially, a Hebrew range of meanings that includes the meaning “remaining, staying, lasting.” For this idea a Greek author would hardly choose ἐστάναι, or one of the verbs that means literally “to sit.” Such evidence points to the dependence of certain New Testament books on written Hebrew sources.

A Hebraic Usage of Wisdom in Matthew and Luke

Often the Hebrew meaning of a Greek word in the Synoptic Gospels sheds light on the proper interpretation of a passage. For example, there is a fascinating passage in which Jesus upbraids his generation by saying:

To what shall I compare this generation? It is like little children calling to each other in the marketplace and saying:

“We piped to you and you did not dance,
We wailed like mourners and you did not weep.”

For John came neither eating nor drinking and they said, “He has a demon.”
The Son of Man came, however, and he both ate and drank, and they said,
“Here is a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners.”
Wisdom is justified by her sons. (Matt. 11:16-19; Luke 7:31-35)

Almost all modern versions show that their translators have supposed that “wisdom” is a positive virtue in this passage. The New English Bible and Good News For Modern Man even insert “God” and read “God’s wisdom.” They obviously intend for the reader to suppose that Jesus is claiming that he and John the Baptist represent by their actions the true wisdom of God in contrast to that of the people of their generation.

This interpretation of the saying goes back at least as far as John Chrysostom. Apparently, all modern commentaries adopt the same view. However, today’s Hebrew speakers would not make such an interpretation on hearing this passage read in a literal Hebrew translation of the original. One reason apparently lies in the use of חֵכְמָה (*hōchmāh*, “wisdom”), which is the undoubted Hebrew equivalent of the Greek σοφία (*sofia*, “wisdom”). The English and Greek equivalents of חֵכְמָה apparently leave no room at all for the concept of “questionable” or “doubtful” wisdom. If, in English, we say that a man is wise, we have used a term which can under no circumstance be interpreted as having a negative meaning. No one will say that a wise man is both wise and insane, or is both wise and evil. But in Hebrew a man may be insane or devilish or immoral and still be חָכָם (*hāchām*, “wise”). For this reason, the noun חֵכְמָה is more often “cleverness,” “skill” or “shrewdness” than “wisdom.”^[23]

It is the sense of cleverness in the word חֵכְמָה that makes it possible to speak of man having a “wisdom” which is worthless in danger (cf. Ps. 107:27). Ezekiel describes the men of Tyre as “wiser than Daniel” so that “no secret is hidden from” them. It is this wisdom, a “wisdom in trade” (Ezek. 28:3, 4, 5; RSV), which has gotten them wealth. Yet their חֵכְמָה will not save them from the invading hordes promised by God (Ezek. 28:7). If חֵכְמָה is translated as “wisdom” in this context, then readers of the English translation must suppose that its use is satirical. Not so in Hebrew: חֵכְמָה is not the perfect virtue. It is simply high intelligence or practical ability to get a job done. When in Hebrew we talk of a person’s חֵכְמָה, we may only mean that the person has bright ideas.^[24]

The moment we understand σοφία in Matt. 11:19 as the translation of חֵכְמָה, we realize that the use of the word “wisdom” to translate σοφία is a mistake. Jesus was speaking of the capricious opinions of his generation: John fasts and they say he is demon-possessed; Jesus eats with one and all, including “sinners,” and he is labeled a prodigal son. The meaning of Jesus’ saying is that “wisdom” is to be judged by the way its

proponents speak and behave. The modern equivalent of Jesus' saying might be, "If you want to see how bright a person is, take a look at the way he or she speaks."

The confusion over the meaning of Jesus' saying is the result of the tendency of translators to translate from one language to another in as literal a manner as possible, and it is this tendency that causes them so often to allow unknown or unusual meanings to creep into their translations. It was quite natural for a first-century Greek translator to write σοφία when חָכְמָה appeared in the Hebrew text. When the translator did so in the above example, however, he gave σοφία a meaning that was so unusual to the Greek reader that misunderstanding was unavoidable. Thus began a long history of misinterpretation of σοφία in Jesus' saying, which passed over into countless secondary translations, eventually finding its way into the best popular English versions of today.

A Hebraic Usage of Πόλις in the Synoptic Gospels

Another Greek word with a Hebrew meaning in the Synoptic Gospels is πόλις (*polis*, "city"). In Acts, Luke uses πόλις in its usual Greek sense of "city," but in his Gospel Luke uses πόλις to refer to villages, in exactly the same way as עִיר (*ir*, "city," "town," "village") is used in Hebrew.^[25] The same is true in Mark and Matthew. The great majority of the uses of πόλις in the Synoptic Gospels appear to represent translation Greek that has behind it a written Hebrew *vorlage*.

In the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel πόλις is used of Nazareth, Bethlehem and "a village of Judea." The same usage continues (5xx) until Luke's first employment of κώμη (*kōmē*, "village"), which occurs in one of the early Lukan summaries (Luke 5:17). Mark does not begin to use κώμη until his sixth chapter. Matthew avoided using κώμη in all but four instances (Matt. 9:35; 10:11; 14:15; 21:2). One of these is in a saying of Jesus that appears in Luke as "into whatever πόλις you enter" (Luke 10:8, 10), but in Matthew as "into whatever πόλις or κώμη you enter" (Matt. 10:11). Almost certainly Luke preserves the original form of the saying. Most examples of κώμη in the Synoptic Gospels were probably introduced into the text by the synoptic writers themselves, who likely found the Hebraic usage of πόλις a little annoying.

One of the words that apparently replaced πόλις in at least one synoptic context is πατρίς (*patris*), a term used to refer to a person's birth-city that has no known ancient Hebrew equivalent. Luke quotes Jesus as saying that the people of Nazareth would doubtless ask him, "What we have heard was done in Capernaum do also here ἐν τῇ πατρίδι σου [in your hometown]" (Luke 4:23). To this Jesus responded by quoting the proverb, "No prophet is acceptable ἐν τῇ πατρίδι αὐτοῦ [in his hometown]" (Luke 4:24). Happily, what is undoubtedly the Hebrew original of this proverb is preserved in a medieval Hebrew document.^[26] The proverb is אֵין נָבִיא בְּעִירוֹ (*ēn nāvi' b'e'irō*), which we can translate literally as, "There is no prophet in his town." However, as an English speaker would immediately detect, such a translation is poor English. We would be much closer to the intended meaning if we rendered the proverb, "In his own town no man is a prophet," or, "In his own town no prophet can get a hearing."

Very probably, the authors of the Synoptic Gospels tried to avoid such problems. To write in Greek οὐκ ἔστιν προφήτης ἐν τῇ πόλει αὐτοῦ, which is the literal equivalent of אֵין נָבִיא בְּעִירוֹ, poses the problem of non-Greek syntax for the Greek reader. Luke appears to have

strengthened ἐν τῇ πόλει αὐτοῦ to ἐν τῇ πατρίδι αὐτοῦ, just as in English we have to strengthen “in his town” to “in his own town.” In this modification, Luke was followed partially by each of the other two Synoptists. Luke added the word δεκτός (*dektos*, “acceptable”; Luke 4:24) to his version, while Mark and Matthew added the word ἄτιμος (*atimos*, “without honor”; Matt. 13:57; Mark 6:4) to theirs. We thus get expanded versions of this proverb, which would make its restoration to Hebrew extremely difficult were it not for the fortunate appearance of the saying’s Hebrew original in the medieval source.

The tendency of the synoptic writers to expand their text in an attempt to clarify their source(s) compels me to point out that the shortest expansion of this saying is that of Luke, the next shortest that of Matthew, and the longest of all that of Mark. While Luke reads, “I say to you that no prophet is acceptable in his birth-city,” Matthew reads, “No prophet is without honor except in his birth-city and in his house,” and Mark reads, “No prophet is without honor except in his birth-city and among his relatives and in his house.” We get more than a hint here of the character of each writer and of the probable pattern of interdependence existing between the Synoptic Gospels.

Hebraic Texts and Synoptic Interdependence

Observations such as those I have described above have caused me to propose a modified version of the dominant scholarly view of the interrelationships of the Synoptic Gospels to one another, to their extra-canonical sources, and to the earliest form of Christian tradition.^[27] I have observed that, in general, Matthew’s Gospel reflects Mark’s editorial activity, but the Gospel of Luke does not. To the contrary, we are often able to trace the secondary words and phrases in Mark to the non-Markan portions of Luke’s Gospel, the book of Acts, the Pauline Epistles and the Epistle of James.^[28] Of course, if we can trace Mark’s replacements to Luke, it is obvious that the author of Mark depended on the Gospel of Luke when composing his own Gospel. I have, therefore, concluded that the order of synoptic interdependence runs from Luke to Mark to Matthew. Mark is not the earliest of the Synoptic Gospels, but rather occupies the middle position between Luke and Matthew. Luke dealt directly and exclusively with the pre-synoptic source (or sources). Mark was mainly interested in rewriting Luke, but, apparently, he also had access to at least one of the sources Luke used. Matthew, too, relied on the pre-synoptic source used by Luke, but Matthew’s text has been thoroughly influenced by the wording of the Gospel of Mark. Only where Matthew copied stories from the pre-synoptic source that were omitted by Mark did Matthew escape the influence of Mark’s editorial activity.

When Luke’s position as the earliest of the three Synoptic Gospels is recognized, the Hebraic character of almost every verse in Luke comes as no surprise. This realization is of the greatest moment, for, in view of the presence of Lukan parallels to all but about fifteen of the Markan [pericopae](#), we clearly have in Luke the earlier form of the majority of the common synoptic stories. It is therefore unimportant that the Markan account has been so radically edited, or that Matthew has accepted so much of Mark’s secondary editing. We have in Luke remarkably authentic and highly Hebraic materials that are uninfluenced by the rewriting we see in Mark.

If we now add the significant fact that when Matthew is not giving material parallel to Mark his materials show the same Hebraic quality we see in Luke, we arrive at the conclusion that in at least half of Matthew’s material, and in what is essentially all of Luke,

we have the near-perfect retention of the pre-synoptic sources. In other words, apart from some fifteen stories attested only by Mark and Matthew (and which show Matthew's dependence on Mark), we have highly original material in more than ninety percent of our synoptic pericopae.

Because of the Hebraic character of the Synoptic Gospels, especially of Luke and the non-Markan portions of Matthew, it is no longer possible to maintain that the Synoptic Gospels descended from scattered fragments of oral teaching units created by the late first-century, Greek-speaking Church. Materials that developed orally in a Greek-speaking context could not have passed into a written Greek text with such highly Hebraic word order, syntax, idiom and content that it is often possible to translate the Greek text word by word into Hebrew. The only plausible explanation for the present form of the synoptic pericopae is that they are based on Greek materials that show unmistakable signs of having been translated in a highly literal fashion from a written Hebrew source.^[29]

Conclusion

We have seen that when the minor agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark are studied from the standpoint of their Hebraic usage, we often discover that the Markan equivalents to these minor agreements are less original. The agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark indicate their knowledge of a text that is parallel to Mark, but nearer the literal translation of a Hebrew *vorlage*. The author of Mark's Gospel edited the earlier text.

- The pre-synoptic source spoke of the region of the Jordan. Mark replaced it with "country of Judea."
- The earlier text spoke of the heavens "opening," using a word that suggests the customary Hebrew verb פָּתַח. Mark chose another word that suggests that the heavens "split."^[30]
- The pre-synoptic source stated that the Holy Spirit came down "upon" Jesus. Mark suggests that it came down "into" Jesus.
- The pre-synoptic source included many instances of καὶ ἰδοὺ. Mark dropped these completely. Some of the instances of ἰδοὺ without καὶ he retained, others he changed to ἴδε.
- The pre-synoptic source retained a beautiful Hebraic proverb, which in its Hebrew form means, "No one patches an old garment with a new patch." Mark expanded and explained the proverb by adding the expression "unshrunk cloth."
- The pre-synoptic source used the Hebraic "brought to dry ruin" in the proverb Jesus gave in defense of his exorcism. Mark dropped this Hebraic usage.
- The pre-synoptic source used the plural "mysteries." Mark borrowed the Pauline singular "mystery" as a replacement.

The minor agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark indicate that there was an earlier, more Hebraic Greek Gospel. The major importance of the minor agreements is that they provide a window through which we can glimpse the pre-synoptic source. The minor agreements also show us the method by which Mark edited this source.

This article is based on an unfinished draft that David Bivin found among Dr. Lindsey's papers. The draft was probably written in 1972. [David Bivin](#) and [Joshua Tilton](#) worked together to bring this article into publishable form. Bivin and Tilton would like to thank [Pieter Lechner](#) for his technological assistance, and [Lauren Asperschlager](#) for her careful proofreading of the final version of this article.

Notes

- [1] For a list of Hebrew and Aramaic transliterations in the Synoptic Gospels, see Joshua N. Tilton and David N. Bivin, "[LOY Excursus: Greek Transliterations of Hebrew, Aramaic and Hebrew/Aramaic Words in the Synoptic Gospels.](#)"—JP
- [2] On these un-Hebraic words and phrases, see my "[Introduction to A Hebrew Translation of the Gospel of Mark](#)," under the subheading "The Markan Stereotypes."
- [3] For examples of קָבַל in the *pa'al* stem with the meaning "to immerse oneself," cf., e.g., m. Ber. 3:5; m. Shab. 6:1; m. Pes. 8:8; m. Yom. 3:3, 6; 7:3, 4; m. Meg. 2:4; m. Yev. 16:4; m. Ket. 2:10; m. Naz. 9:2; m. Edu. 5:2; m. Men. 12:4; m. Tam. 1:1, 2; m. Neg. 14:2, 3, 8; m. Par. 3:8; 5:1; m. Toh. 5:3, 4.
- [4] For examples of הִטְבִּיל in the *hif'il* stem with the meaning "to immerse an object," cf., e.g., m. Ter. 2:3; m. Shab. 2:7; m. Shek. 8:3, 4, 5; m. Betz. 2:2; m. Hag. 3:1, 2, 8; m. Avod. Zar. 5:12; m. Kel. 19:1; 25:3, 5, 9; m. Neg. 12:5; m. Par. 5:2, 3, 4; m. Toh. 8:9; 10:3.

Note the following example for the distinct uses of ל-ב-ט in the *pa'al* and the *hif'il* stems:

לְמַעַלְהָ מִהֶן מִקְוֹה שֵׁשׁ בּוֹ אַרְבָּעִים סָאָה שְׁבוּ טוֹבְלִין וּמִטְבִּילִין

Better than these is a [mikveh](#) that has 40 seahs, since in it they may immerse [themselves] and immerse [vessels]. (m. Mik. 1:7; Kaufmann)

While there are some exceptions to this pattern, the distinction between the uses of ל-ב-ט in the *pa'al* and the *hif'il* stems is generally maintained.

Examples of a person bringing a proselyte to baptism include:

הָאִישׁ מִטְבִּיל לְאִישׁ וְהָאִשָּׁה מִטְבִּילת לְאִשָּׁה אֲבֵל לֹא אֶת הָאִישׁ

A man gives immersion to a man, and a woman to a woman but not a man. (Gerim 1:8 [60b]; Soncino)

אִם רוֹצָה לְהִתְגַּיֵּר, מִטְבִּילָהּ וּמְשַׁחֲרָהּ וּמוֹתֵר בָּהּ מִיָּד

If she [i.e., an non-Israelite woman captured in battle] wishes to become a proselyte, he [i.e., her captor] gives her immersion and sets her free and he is permitted to marry her directly. (Semahot 7:13; ed. Zlotnick, 17)

In these examples it is understood that the person bringing the proselyte to baptism merely witnesses the immersion. The proselyte immerses him or herself.

[5] For the immersion of a Jewish proselyte, see the following example:

גר שְׁנִיתֵגִייר עֶרֶב פֶּסַחִים בֵּית שְׁמַאי אָמַר טוֹבֵל וְאוֹכֵל אֶת פִּיֶּסְחוֹ לָעֶרֶב

A proselyte who converts on the eve of Passover—the House of Shammai says he immerses himself and eats his [portion of] the Passover lamb in the evening. (m. Edu. 5:2; Kaufmann)

[6] *Lindsey translated Mark 1:22 as כִּי הָיָה מְלַמֵּד כְּאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הָרְשׁוֹת בִּידּוֹ. —JP*

[7] See Burnett Hillman Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (London: Macmillan, 1924).

[8] *The phrase הַיִּרְדֵּן כֶּכֶר is also found in 1 Kgs. 7:46, but the LXX translation in this case is περίοικος rather than περιχώρος (3 Kgdms. 7:33). —JP*

[9] The instances of Matthean-Lukan agreement to write καὶ ἰδοὺ against Mark are: Matt. 8:2 and Luke 5:12 against Mark 1:40; Matt. 9:2 and Luke 5:18 against Mark 2:3; Matt. 17:3 and Luke 9:30 against Mark 9:4. Also note that against Mark 5:22, where καὶ ἰδοὺ is omitted, Matt. 9:18 has ἰδοὺ and Luke 8:41 has καὶ ἰδοὺ.

[10] The nine instances of ἴδε in Mark are: Mark 2:24; 3:34; 11:21; 13:1, 21 (2xx); 15:4, 35; 16:6.

[11] The Matthean instances of ἴδε are: Matt. 25:20, 22, 25; 26:65.

[12] Cf. Mark 13:21; Matt. 24:23; Luke 17:21.

[13] Examples of the Hebraic use of a verb with its cognate accusative include:

- זָבַח (*zāvah*, “to sacrifice”) with זֶבַח (*zevah*, “sacrifice”): cf. Gen. 31:54; 46:1; Exod. 24:5; Lev. 17:5; 22:29; Deut. 18:3; 33:19; Judg. 16:23; 1 Sam. 1:21; 2:13; 6:15; 11:15; 2 Sam. 15:12; 1 Kgs. 8:62; Isa. 57:7; Ps. 107:22; 116:17; Neh. 12:43; 1 Chr. 29:21; 2 Chr. 7:4, 5.
- הִמְלִיךְ (*himlich*, “to cause to reign,” “to make king”) with מֶלֶךְ (*melech*, “king”): cf. 1 Sam. 8:22; 12:1; 2 Kgs. 8:20; Isa. 7:6; 2 Chr. 21:8.
- צִוָּה (*tzivāh*, “to command”) with מִצְוָה (*mitzvāh*, “commandment”): cf. Lev. 27:34; Deut. 31:5; 1 Kgs. 2:43; 13:21; 2 Kgs. 17:34.

For further examples of cognate accusatives in Biblical Hebrew, see W. Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar* (ed. E. Kautzsch; trans. A. E. Cowley; 2d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), §117 *p-r*.

[14] The verb טָלָה (*tālāh*, “to patch”) occurs 10xx in the Mishnah (Kaufmann), and its cognate noun מַטְלֵת (*maṭlēt*, “patch”) occurs 17xx in the Mishnah.

[15] In the Mishnah (Kaufmann) the verb הָרַב (*hārav*, “to be dry,” “to be desolate”) is used in reference to the destruction of a city in m. Ohol. 18:9, and in reference to the Temple’s destruction in m. Maas. Sh. 5:2; m. Suk. 3:12; m. Rosh Hash. 4:1, 3, 4; m. Moed Kat. 3:6; m. Naz. 5:4; m. Sot. 9:12, 15; m. Men. 10:5. The adjectival form הָרֵב (*hārēv*, “destroyed”) is applied to a synagogue in m. Meg. 3:3, and to the Temple in m. Naz. 5:4.

[16] Cf. *Masechot Zeiroth, Masecheth Yirath Het* (ed. Higger, 80).

[17] Cf. Rom. 11:25; 16:25; 1 Cor. 2:1, 7; 15:51.

[18] W. F. Moulton and A. S. Geden, *A Concordance of the Greek Testament According to the Texts of Wescott and Hort, Tischendorf and the English Revisers* (4th ed.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963).

[19] Albert Huck, *Synopsis of the First Three Gospels* (9th ed. rev. by Hans Lietzmann;

English ed. by F. L. Cross; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1959).

- [20] In the book of Revelation we find not only some of these senses, but also the Hebrew usage “to stand a test” (Rev. 6:17).
- [21] See Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 482.
- [22] One may also classify the redundant “stand and pray” (Matt. 6:5; Luke 18:11); “stand and accuse” (Luke 23:10); “stand and look” (Acts 1:11); “stand and speak” (Acts 5:20); and “stand and teach” (Acts 5:25) as similar to this usage.
- [23] For example, King David tells his son Solomon, as he instructs him what to do after David’s death, not to let Joab’s “grey head go down to Sheol in peace.” Solomon is to act according to his חֶכְמָה (1 Kgs. 2:6). Later Solomon had Beniah kill Joab. Were we writing the story of David and Solomon today, we would have David say to Solomon, “Be smart, but do not let Joab get away with it,” or “Use your best wits, but do not let Joab have a happy death.”
- [24] Very frequently in modern Hebrew speech children criticize their fellows who have just suggested some bright explanation by saying, “That’s no חֶכְמָה.” They mean, “There is nothing bright about that.”
- [25] In the oldest books of the Hebrew Bible we sometimes find בַּת (*bat*) and חֶצֶר (*hātzēr*) used for settlements smaller than an עִיר, and in the very latest books of the Hebrew Bible we twice find the use of כֶּפֶר (*kāfār*; Song 7:12; 1 Chr. 27:25) as equivalent to “village.” LXX usually translates these terms with κώμη (*kōmē*, “village”).
- [26] The Hebrew source to which I refer is 489 זבח פסח לאברבנאל נד,ב; דוידזון.
- [27] As early as 1963, I felt there was convincing evidence that Luke is the first of the Synoptic Gospels, that the author of Mark used Luke in writing his own work, and that the author of Matthew employed Mark in writing his Gospel. My reasons for taking this position were summarized in “A Modified Two-Document Theory of the Synoptic Dependence and Interdependence,” *Novum Testamentum* 6.4 (1963): 239-263. *An updated and emended version of Lindsey’s Novum Testamentum article has been published by Jerusalem Perspective as “[A New Two-source Solution to the Synoptic Problem](#).”*—JP In the present article I have given a few additional details illustrating the basic position taken in that article.
- [28] See my “[Introduction to A Hebrew Translation of the Gospel of Mark](#),” under the subheading “Sources of the Markan Pick-ups,” and also my “[Measuring the Disparity Between Matthew, Mark and Luke](#).” For a list of possible Markan pick-ups, see Joshua N. Tilton and David N. Bivin, “[LOY Excursus: Catalog of Markan Stereotypes and Possible Markan Pick-ups](#).”—JP
- [29] Evidently, the synoptic writers did not know the original Hebrew source first hand.
- [30] In my “[Introduction to A Hebrew Translation of the Gospel of Mark](#),” under the subheading “Sources of the Markan Stereotypes: Jesus’ Baptism,” I suggested that the inspiration for this replacement was probably the result of Mark’s memory of Isa. 64:1 (63:19 LXX, MT).

