

CLARIFYING
BAFFLING
BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

WHO SHOULD BURY THEIR
DEAD?
MATTHEW 8:22b

Thomas F. McDaniel, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus
Palmer Theological Seminary
Wynnewood, Pennsylvania

©

2007

All Rights Reserved

XXIX

WHO SHOULD BURY THEIR DEAD?

MATTHEW 8:22b

INTRODUCTION

Matthew 8:22b

ἄφες τοὺς νεκροὺς θάψαι τοὺς ἑαυτῶν νεκροὺς

*Leave the dead to bury their dead.*¹

ועזוב המתים לקבור מתייהם²

and let the dead bury their dead

(Howard 1995: 35)

and let the next of kin bury their dead

(McDaniel)

The enigmatic phrase “let the dead bury the dead,” written without vowels in an Aramaic and Hebrew fashion, would be *lt th dd bry th dd*,” which makes the phrase all the more obscure. The English *dd* is very ambiguous because it can mean not only *dead* but also *dad*, *dud* (= a person who ‘bombs out’ or an unexploded shell), *dude* (= a fop or city-slicker at a ranch), *dodo* (= a bird, or a fogy, or a dullard), *deed* (= a document or an action), as well as the verb *did*. The options available to the interpreter of *lt th dd bry th dd* are many, including: (1) “let the dude bury the deed” or “let the dad bury the dodo,” or “let the dud bury the dude,” or “let the dad bury the dead,” or “let the dead bury the dead,” etc.—all of which could be “spiritualized” as quaint proverbs about the “spiritual dude, dud, and dodo” who is to bury a “dead dad”

or a “doodad” (assuming a dittography of a *d* in the *Vorlage* of this last example).

The difficulties in interpreting **הַמְתִּים לְקַבֹּר מֵתֵיהֶם** is analogous, though the options are fewer. At first glance the Greek and the Hebrew texts above appear to express the same idea. But upon closer examination the Greek and Hebrew texts may well express different ideas, as is reflected in my translation of the Hebrew when compared to that of Howard. The Greek words in Matt 8:22 are as unambiguous as the clause they compose has been inexplicable. On the other hand, two of the four Hebrew words, **הַמְתִּים** and **מֵתֵיהֶם**, are ambiguous. Removal of the definite article, the plural possessive suffix, and the plural endings produces the base **מֵת**. Hebrew lexicons now list two meanings for **מֵת**: (1) the noun **מֵת** “a male, a man” (related to the Egyptian *mt*, “male, man, written with a hieroglyphic phallus), a cognate of Ugaritic *mt*, Akkadian *mutu*, and Ethiopic **ጠጥ** [*mētē*] “husband”); and (2) the participle **מֵת** “a dead (man),” derived from the cognate of Arabic **مَات** (*mâta*), Syriac **ܡܝܬ** (*mîṭ*), and Aramaic **מֵיַת** “to die” (BDB 559, 607) and related to the Egyptian *m(w)t* “a dead man” (Gardiner 1966: 443, 568). However, **מֵת** may also be derived from the **ע“ע** stem **מָתַת** (like **תָּם** and **תָּמַם** “complete”), a lexeme which was noted in the lexicons of Castell (1669: 2166) and Simon (1793: 956) but has gone unnoticed in more recent lexicons (BDB 607; KBS 653).³ The definitions of **מָתַת** given by Castell and Simon, reviewed below, support the translation of the **הַמְתִּים** in Matt 8:22 given above. In turn, this translation of the Hebrew text has significant implications for the interpretation of the Greek text of this verse.

PROPOSED ARAMAIC *VORLAGEN*

Davies and Allison (1991: 57) understated the case when they noted that the seven Greek words in Matt 8:22 and Luke 9:60 are “so scandalous, many scholars have refused to take them at face value.” As I have surveyed the literature, including the studies of Klemm (1969–1970) and Kingsbury (1988), it appears that no one has taken the Greek text at face value, including Davies and Allison who professed “that it is prudent to accept the text as it stands,” and then concluded that Jesus “simply asserts that the disciple should leave it [the burial] to others.” But to interpret νεκρούς as “others” is *not* to accept the text as it stands, but is one more attempt, in the words of Davies and Allison (1991: 57), “to convert a dramatic and memorable imperative into a palatable pedestrian utterance.”

Some scholars argued that the Greek reflects a (mis)translation of an Aramaic *Vorlage* which may have read in part מִתְיָאֵא לְךָ בְתָרֵי וְשִׁבּוּק מִתְיָאֵא קִבְרִין מִתְיָהוֹן (Dalman 1935: 153; Jeremias 1971: 132) which corresponds to the Greek; or שְׁבִיבּוּק מִתְיָאֵא לְמִקְבְּרֵי מִתְיָאֵא “*Laß die Toten den Toten gräbern*” (“Leave the dead to the grave diggers”) (Schwarz: 1981: 275). Other proposed corrections in translation include the following (in chronological order):

Let the dead past bury its dead.⁴

Laß die Toten ihrem Totengräber
Leave the dead to their ‘grave-diggers.’⁵

Let the undecided bury their dead.⁶

Let the young men bury the dead.⁷

Leave it to the men of the town.⁸

The city will bury the dead.⁹

Albright and Mann (1971: 95), assuming a Hebrew *Vorlage* and recognizing that Hebrew **הַמֵּתִים** means “the dead” or “the dying,” translated the phrase “let the dying bury the dead.” However, all of these reconstructions have been dismissed by Davies and Allison (1991: 57), by Kingsbury (1988: 55), and by Keener (1999: 275). Kingsbury noted, “The Achilles’ heel of this interpretation is, of course, that the reconstructed Aramaic original is a pure figment of scholarly conjecture.”

PARAPHRASTIC INTERPRETATIONS

But the reconstructions of an Aramaic *Vorlage* for Matt 8:22 and Luke 9:60 are not the only figments of scholarly conjecture evoked by these verses. Many interpreters, unimpressed with the Aramaic reconstructions, keep ἄφες τοὺς νεκροὺς θάψαι τοὺς ἑαυτῶν νεκρούς as the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus, only to confess that Jesus did not mean literally what he said. What he said was seemingly a kind of **רֵז** (the Persian loanword meaning a “secret” or “mystery”) which required an interpretation (**פְּשָׁר**), like the **מִנָּה מִנָּה תִּקֵּל וּפְרָסִין** “50 shekels, 50 shekels, a shekel, and a half shekel” in Dan 5:25. As a result, some interesting paraphrastic interpretations have emerged from commentators who, following in Daniel’s footsteps, have offered their **פְּשָׁר** in order to reveal the intent of Jesus’ command to the disciple.¹⁰

A survey of some of the paraphrases of what Jesus said or meant, follows in a list from the shortest to the longest

quotation. Although the Greek text has Jesus using seven words, the interpretations, even with ellipses, range from eight to sixty-two words.

[Follow me,] That business must look after itself.¹¹

Let the 'spiritually dead' see to such concerns.¹²

Cut yourself adrift from the past when matters of present interest call for your whole attention.¹³

Leave the matter of his father's burial to take care of itself.¹⁴

Those who are wholly consecrated to God have even more important things to do.¹⁵

Leave the spiritually dead to bury their own physical dead; that is, Leave the spiritually dead to care for thy aged father till his death and burial; they can do the work.¹⁶

He [Jesus] is teaching that Christian undertakers are better undertakers than those who are unsaved . . . if we must make a choice between being undertakers or disciples, we must do the latter and leave the former to the unsaved.¹⁷

"You may attend to that duty if no other will do it, but if you go you must act as one who is not a member of the family, one who is really exempt (cf. Matthew 17, 22–27), remaining, in principle, untainted by their deaths and by their mourning. The "dead" will do their best to bury the dead, but you are not one of them.¹⁸

These interpretations reflect but another genre of "figments of scholarly conjecture," to borrow Kingsbury's phrase, which tell the reader more about the interpreters than about the text or Jesus's intent.

THE HEBREW מַתָּה

The Hebrew Gospel of Matthew of Shem Tob Ibn Shaprut, dated around 1400 C.E., which contains elements from an older, if not an original, Hebrew gospel tradition,¹⁹ has simply ועזוב המתים לקבור מתיהם. But the Hebrew may not be as simple as it appears at first glance, for המתים . . . מתיהם may well involve paronomasia rather than repetition. As noted in the *Introduction*, מתים can mean “men” or “dead men” or “next of kin.” It is this last definition of מת which requires further attention.

Although Castell (1669: 2166) and Simon (1793: 956) referenced מַתָּה, the stem has received scant attention since. Castell noted (1) the Ethiopic cognate ጠጥ/አጠጥ [mētē / ʾāmētā tē] meaning “maritus” (husband), “sponsus” (fiancé/bride-groom), “sponsa” (fiancée/bride), and (2) the Arabic مت (*matta*) “miscuit” (a mixed marriage), “familiam saturavit” (an extended household), and “gradus consanguinitatis, ob quem connubium non potest iniri (a blood relative whom one cannot marry).”

Lane (1885: 2687c–2688a) defined the verb مت (*matta*) as “he sought to bring himself near [to another], or to approach [to him], or to gain access [to him], or to advance himself in [his] favour by relationship . . . by affection, or by love.” The noun مائة (*māttat*) meant “anything that is sacred or inviolable . . . which renders one entitled to respect and reverence . . . a thing whereby one seeks to bring himself near.” Lane noted بيننا رحم مائة (*baynanâ rahimun mâttat*) “between us is a near/inviolable relationship.” These definitions survive to the present in literary Arabic, where مت (*matta*) means “to

seek to establish a link to someone by marriage, become related by marriage . . . to be most intimately connected with someone,” and the noun *ماتة* (*mâtat*) means “close ties, family ties, kinship” (Wehr 1979: 1045).

In Exo 4:24 the MT reads **וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָה וַיִּבְקֶשׂ הַמִּיתוֹ** which has been translated “Yahweh met him and sought to kill him.” In light of the Ethiopic and Arabic cognates of **מתת**—and simply by changing **הַמִּיתוֹ** to **הַמִּיתוֹ**—the text would mean “Yahweh met him and he sought to make inviolable his relationship.”²⁰

Castell considered the names Amitti (**אַמִּיתִי** / *Amathi*) and Matthew (**מתתיה** / *Matthaios*) to be derived from this stem.²¹ If so, **מתת** was not only in the vocabulary of Zipporah and Moses (Exo 4:24), it accounts for the name **מתתיה** (*Matthai*) in Ezra 10:33, as well as the Levitical name **מתתיה** (*Matthai*, *Matthai*, and *Matthai*). Supporting the derivation of **מתתיה** from **מתת**, rather than **נתן**, are the names Ahijah (**אַחִיהָ**) “Yah is my brother/kin” and Reuel (**רְעוּאֵל**) “kin/friend of God.” Hebrew **מתת**, like its Arabic and Ethiopic cognates, denoted a familial relationship, similar to **אח** “kin, brother, relative” and **רע** “friend, fellow, kin.” Thus, while **מתתיה** can mean “gift of Yah,” it can also mean the “family of Yah” or the “relative of Yah,” like the affirmation in the name Abijah (**אַבִּיהָ**) “Yah is my father” and Ahijah (**אַחִיהָ**) “Yah is my kinsman.”

CONCLUSION

Consequently, the **ועזוב המתים לקבור מתיהם** in the text of Shem Tob Ibn Shaprut, cited above, has at least four

possible meanings: (1) “let the men bury their dead”; or (2) following Howard, “let the dead bury their dead”; or (3) reading with Albright and Mann, “let the dying bury their dead”; or as I prefer, (4) “let the *relatives*/the *next of kin* bury their dead.” While the disciple requesting the delay in following Jesus was a son of the deceased, there is no evidence to insist that he was the only relative or the next of kin.

Once **מִתַּת** is restored in the lexicons of Biblical Hebrew and identified as the verb used in Exo 4:24, as well as appearing in the names **מִתַּתָּה** and **מִתַּתִּיהָ**, the Hebrew text of Matt 22:8b can be read as Jesus’ providing a realistic alternative for someone who is away from home when a death in the family occurs: “other relatives can handle the burial,” or “[in your absence] let the next of kin bury their deceased.”

Because Hebrew was and remains a language of discourse for rabbis and their disciples, Jesus could have spoken to his bereaved disciple in Hebrew. If so, he may have used words similar to those which appear in the *Shem Tob Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*: **עֲזֹב הַמֵּתִים לְקַבֵּר מִתִּיהֶם**. But the ambiguity in the written text would not have been present in the spoken word since vowels are a requisite for speech. The **הַמֵּתִים** of the written record stood for **הַמִּתִּים** “the relatives” — rather than **הַמְּתִים** “the men” or **הַמֵּתִים** “the dead.” The use of **הַמִּתִּים** from the root **מִתַּת** and **מִתִּיהֶם** from the root **מִתָּה** presents a wordplay rather than repetition.

What Jesus said in Hebrew was clear and simple. But once it was written down in Hebrew it became automatically ambiguous since vowels were not recorded along with consonants. Of the four possible ways to read **הַמֵּתִים**, a Greek translator opted for **τοὺς νεκροὺς** “the dead,” thereby transforming a very practical suggestion of Jesus into an

impossible proverb, which in turn has led to many implausible interpretations.²² It is a bit ironic that many who disdain the idea of an Aramaic or Hebrew *Vorlage*—insisting that Jesus meant for his disciples to let the “spiritually dead” bury their loved ones—turn to the clergy for funeral services and burial rites.

NOTES

1. Luke 9:60 contains the same phrase, Ἀφες τοὺς νεκροὺς θάψαι τοὺς ἑαυτῶν νεκρούς, but the rest of the verse differs considerably, reading σὺ δὲ ἀπελθὼν διάγγελλε τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ “but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God,” for Matthew’s Ἀκολουθεῖ μοι “follow me.”
2. The Hebrew text of Shem Tob Ibn Shaprut; see Howard 1987: 34–35; 1995: 34–35.
3. Not to be confused with the misprint מתה for מתה on 654a. Note Dillman’s reference (1955: 183) to the stem מתה.
4. M’Neile 1915: 110. By misreading the infinitive לְמַקְבֵּר as the participle לְמַקְבֵּר, it was thought to mean “‘Leave the dead to him that buries dead bodies,’ i.e., Leave your father’s body to be buried by anyone who will do it.”
5. Perles 1919: 26 and Abrahams 1924: 183, who reconstructed the phrase as שבוק למיתיא מקבר מיחיא.
6. Black 1950: 219–220 reconstructed the Aramaic as *’ithai bathrai wish^eboq m^ethinin qabrin mithyanin*, which could have been translated into Greek as ἄφες τοὺς νωθροὺς (?) θάψαι τοὺς (ἑαυτῶν) νεκρούς.

7. Herrmann 1981: 283. This assumes a misreading in the Greek tradition of νεκροὺς “dead men” for νεανίας “young men.”
8. Köhler 1987: 91.
9. Bassler 1993: 89. See Goldenberg 1996: 64–83 for a critique of Bassler’s proposal. Gilad Gevaryahu (private communication, 1993) noted (1) the absence of מְהַל “city, town” in the western Aramaic dialects could simply mean that most documents from the period under review have not survived or are in poor condition, whereas the use of מְהַל in the eastern dialects suggests more documents survived, not necessarily that מְהַל was used more than מְהַל “town”; (2) contact between the Babylonian and Palestinian Jewish communities was so routine that elements in the respective dialects could have easily have migrated from one community to the other, without showing up in the texts which survived; and (3) in poetry or for paronomasia a word from another dialect may be borrowed.
10. Note also McCane’s argument (1990: 31–43) that the disciple wants to participate in a customary second burial service for his father. Important also is Bockmuehl’s critique (1998: 553–581) of Hengel’s (1981: 3–15) and Sanders’s (1987: 252–255) proposal to read this saying as Jesus’s rejection of ritualism and his annulment of the fourth commandment. Sanders (1985: 255) concluded

At least once Jesus is willing to say that following him superceded the requirements of piety and the Torah. This may show that Jesus was prepared, if necessary, to challenge the adequacy of the Mosaic dispensation.
11. Manson 1949: 73.
12. Keener 1999: 275.
13. Allen 1912: 82.
14. Kingsbury 1988: 59.

15. Bockmuehl 1988: 581.

16. Howard 1950: 351.

17. Yeager 1977: 36.

18. Derrett 1985: 226.

19. See Howard 1987 and 1995; and Hewitt 2000.

20. הָמִית or הָמִיתָ would be the *Hiph^ʿil* infinitive of מָתַת “to bond (by marriage),” whereas הָמִיתָ or הָמִיתָ would be the *Hiph^ʿil* infinitive of מָוַת “to die.” For a more detailed examination of Exo 4: 24–26, see Chapter V.

21. Other lexicographers derive אַמֵּיתִי *Amitai* from אַמַּן “to confirm, to support” or אַמָּת “truth,” and מַתְּתִיָּה *Matthew* from מַתָּת “gift” and נָתַן “to give,” as if it was just a variation of other names derived from נָתַן , like נִתְּנִיָּה *Netanyah(u)* and מַתְּנִיָּה *Mattanyah(u)* (BDB 54, 682).

22. The different translations of רַע in the versions provides a good analogy of translation errors in other texts. The נָמְוּ רֵעֵיךָ in Nahum 3:18 was rendered in the LXX $\epsilon\nu\beta\sigma\tau\alpha\zeta\alpha\nu\ \omicron\iota\ \rho\omicron\iota\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\epsilon\varsigma\ \sigma\omicron\upsilon$ “*your shepherds* (= רַעָה , stem I) *slept*,” but the Peshiṭta has $\text{נַמְוּ חַבְרַיְכִי}$ (*nāmw ḥabraiky*) “*your friends* (= רַעָה , stem II) *slept*.” In Micah 4:9 the MT תְּרִיעֵי רַע “*you commit evil*” was translated in the Septuagint as $\epsilon\gamma\upsilon\omega\varsigma\ \kappa\alpha\kappa\acute{\alpha}$ “*you have known evil*” (= רַעָע , stem I, and reading תְּרִיעֵי as תְּרִיעֵי), and the Peshiṭta has $\text{חַבְרַתְּ אָבָדְתָּ, חַבְרַתְּ אָבָדְתָּ}$ (*ḥabraty bištā^c*) “*you committed evil*.” However, Targum Jonathan has $\text{יָאֵת מִתְּחַבְרָא לְעַמְּמִיא}$ “*you made friends* (= רַעָה , stem II) *with the gentiles*.”