CLARIFYING
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BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

"DO YOU LOVE ME
MORE THAN KITH-AND-KIN?"
JOHN 21:15–17

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XXXIII

"DO YOU LOVE ME
MORE THAN KITH-AND-KIN?"
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INTRODUCTION

John 21:15a

Σίμων Ἰωάννου,¹ ἀγαπᾷς με πλέον τούτων;
λέγει αὐτῷ, Ναὶ κύριε, σὺ οἶδας ὅτι φιλῶ σε.

Simon of John, do you love me more than these?
He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

The Greek text has ἀγαπᾷς "love" as the verb in Jesus' question to Peter and φιλῶ as the verb in Peter's response. The significance of Peter's changing the verb from ἀγαπάω to φιλέω has been thoroughly debated, with a number of commentators convinced that Peter, perhaps from guilt over his threefold denial of Jesus (Matt 26:74–75), would not use the lofty verb ἀγαπάω, but humbled and humiliated could only respond with a contrite φιλέω.

Other commentators have disagreed with any conclusion that φιλέω was a less lofty verb than ἀγαπάω. Bernard (1923: 703) concluded that ἀγαπάω and φιλέω are "practically synonyms" in the Gospel of John, noting that both verbs are used for (1) God's love for man, (2) the Father's love for the Son, (3) Jesus' love for men, (4) the love of people for other people, (5) the love of people for Jesus, and (6) the love of people for God. Consequently, for Bernard "it would be precarious to lay stress on the change of ἀγαπᾷς in vv. 15 and 16 to φιλεῖς in v.17."

Similarly, Brown (1970: 1103) aligned himself with the ancient scholars like Chrysostom and Cyril of Alexandria, with the Reformation scholars like Erasmus and Grotius, and with more modern scholars like Bernard, Moule, Freed, and McKay—against other scholars like Trench, Westcott, Marsh, and Plummer—by denying any clear distinction of meaning in the alternation of ἀγαπάω and φιλέω in 21:15–17. One of his reasons for taking this position was

> In Hebrew and Aramaic there is one basic verb expressing the various types of love, so that all the subtlety of distinction that commentators find in the use of the two verbs in 15–17 scarcely echoes the putative Semitic original. We note that LXX uses both verbs to translate Hebrew ʾāhēb, although *agapan* is twenty times more frequent than *philein*. In the Syriac translation of 15–17 only one verb is used.

Aside from this reference to the "putative Semitic original," the Hebrew or Aramaic which may have been used in the actual conversation between Jesus and Peter received almost no attention in Brown's twenty-two page discussion on John 21:15–23. Actually, Hebrew had a rather rich vocabulary for "love" and "lovers," including the widely used אהב (Deut 6:4), the familial or intimate רעה (Jer 3:1),[2] the romantic דוד (Cant 1:24), and the compassionate רחם (Psa 18:1). More-over, the Aramaic familial חבר and the Syriac ܚܒܪ (ḥĕbar) correspond in part to the semantic range of Hebrew familial רעה.[3]

THE MEANINGS OF אלה AND רעה

Since no Hebrew or Aramaic text of Jesus' conversation with Peter is available, commentators have been reluctant to speculate over the Semitic *Vorlage*, contenting themselves with defining the nuances of ἀγαπάω and φιλέω. However,

the debate could be resolved if the following Hebrew texts were given due consideration. The first significant text is Isa 61:3, which reads in the MT and the Septuagint as follows:

וְקֹרָא לָהֶם אֵילֵי הַצֶּדֶק מַטַּע יְהוָה לְהִתְפָּאֵר

that they might be called *oaks* of righteousness,
the planting of Yahweh that he may be glorified

καὶ κληθήσονται γενεαὶ δικαιοσύνης
φύτευμα κυρίου εἰς δόξαν

and they shall be called *generations* of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord for glory.

The MT אֵילֵי (rendered "trees" or "oaks" or "terebinths" in standard translations) became in Greek the plural of γενεά "family, race, generation, clan, offspring" (Liddell and Scott 342; Arndt and Gingrich 153).

The Greek translators were obviously aware of that אלה / איל which was the cognate of Arabic ال (ʾâl/ʾill) and ايلة (ʾîlat) meaning "a man's family, i.e., his relations or kinfolk; or nearer, or nearest, relations by descent from the same father or ancestor; . . . household, followers; those who bear a relation, as members to a head" (Lane 1863: 127–128).[4]

In support of the Greek reading γενεαι "family, generation, one's people, relations" in Isa 61:3 is the parallel in Isa 60:21,

וְעַמֵּךְ כֻּלָּם צַדִּיקִים . . . נֵצֶר מַטָּעוֹ / מַטָּעַי [Q/K]

*your people—all of them—*shall all be righteous . . .
the branch of my/his [Q/K] planting

καὶ ὁ λαός σου πᾶς δίκαιος . . .
φυλάσσων[5] ὁ φύτευμα

all your *people* also shall be all righteous . . .
preserving that which they have planted.

The איל of 61:3 and the עם of 60:21 are interchangeable, although, admittedly, עם was as common as איל was rare.[6]

Although noted in Castell's lexicon (1669: 58, 115, "*populus, asseclae, affines, familia, domestici*") the Arabic cognate اٰل / اٰلَّ (= אֵלָה/אֵיל) has dropped out of subsequent lexicons. Although rarely found in the literature, it probably appears in the name אֱלִיאֵל (Ελιηλ/Αλιηλ) in I Chron 11:46–47, meaning the same as the אֱלִיעָם (Ελιαβ) in II Sam 11:3 and the עַמִּיאֵל (Αμιηλ) in I Chron 3:5—all meaning "God is my kinsman"—which are much like רְעוּאֵל (Ραγουηλ) "God is my kinsman" and אֲבִיָּה and אֲחִיָּה "Yahweh is my brother/father."

In Lam 1: 5, 11, 15, 16, and 19 there are numerous references to the family and community members over whom the personified Jerusalem lamented, including

אֹהֲבֶיהָ	(ἀγαπώντων αὐτήν)	"her lovers"
רֵעֶיהָ	(φιλοῦντες αὐτήν)	"her family members"
עוֹלָלֶיהָ	(νήπια αὐτῆς)	"her little ones"
עַמָּה	(λαὸς αὐτῆς)	"all her people"
אַבִּירַי	(ἰσχυρούς μου)	"my mighty ones"
בַּחוּרַי	(ἐκλεκτούς μου)	"my young men"
מְאַהֲבַי	(ἐραστάς μου)	"my loved ones"
זְקֵנַי	(οἱ πρεσβύτεροί μου)	"my elders"
כֹּהֲנַי	(οἱ Ἱερεῖς μου)	"my priests"
בָּנַי	(υἱοί μου)	"my sons"

In view of this focus on Zion's "kith and kin," (i.e. on *people* rather than *things*) the phrase עַל־אֵלֶּה אֲנִי בוֹכִיָּה in Lam 1:16, commonly translated "for *these things* I weep," would be better translated "for kith-and-kin I weep," with

אֵלֶּה being repointed as אָלָה.[7] In light of this definition, along with the Septuagint's translation of אלה in Isa 61:3 as γενεαί, Hebrew אלה can mean (1) אֵלֶּה "these", (2) אָלָה "to curse," (3) אָלָה "to wail," (4) אֵלָה "terebinth, oak tree" (5) אַלָּה "lance, fork, sign-pole," (6) אֱלוֹהַּ/אֱלָהּ "God," and (7) אֵלֶּה "kith and kin." This last definition is the key for interpreting Jesus' question to Peter, ἀγαπᾷς με πλέον τούτων "do you love me more than these?" (discussed below).

Prov 18:24 sheds significant light on the difference between ἀγαπάω (when it equals אהב) and φιλέω (when it equals רעה). It reads

[אִ]ישׁ רֵעִים לְהִתְרֹעֵעַ וְיֵשׁ אֹהֵב דָּבֵק מֵאָח[8]

There are kinfolk who proffer special friendship,[9]
but there is a loving one who sticks closer than a brother.

The contrast here between רעע/רע (= רעה to share in "familial love" or "brotherly love") and אהב "the loving one" definitely places the latter as more lofty than the former.

On the other hand, the use of רעה Jud 14:20, וַתְּהִי אֵשֶׁת שִׁמְשׁוֹן לְמֵרֵעֵהוּ אֲשֶׁר רֵעָה לוֹ "Samson's wife was given to his special friend, who had been his best man," also needs to be in focus when interpreting the conversation between Jesus and Peter in John 21:15–17. Of special interest is the denominative *Piᶜel* רֵעָה "to love in a special way," coupled with מֵרֵעַ "friend, best man, confidential friend."[10]

JESUS' DIALOGUE WITH PETER

If Jesus' question to Peter (ἀγαπᾷς με πλέον τούτων; "do you love me more than these?") had been asked in Hebrew it

could have been stated as either התאהבני יותר מאלה or
האתה תאהב אתי יותר מאלה. Either way, the meaning was
more likely to have been, "Do you love kith-and-kin more
than me?" Far from אלה being the indefinite τούτων "these"
(which could have meant anything from Peter's fishing gear
to his fellow fishermen) it was a very definite reference to
Peter's γενεαὶ, his "family, clan, kith-and-kin." The Matthean
(10:37) indicative statement of Jesus,

$$\text{Ὁ φιλῶν πατέρα ἢ μητέρα ὑπὲρ ἐμὲ}$$
$$\text{οὐκ ἔστιν μου ἄξιος,}$$
$$\text{καὶ ὁ φιλῶν υἱὸν ἢ θυγατέρα ὑπὲρ ἐμὲ}$$
$$\text{οὐκ ἔστιν μου ἄξιος}$$

Whoever loves father or mother more than me
is not worthy of me;
and whoever loves son or daughter more than me
is not worthy of me,

became the Johanine (21:15) interrogative "Do you love me
more than kith-and-kin?" The question may have been in anti-
cipation of Peter's ministry with Gentiles. Was he so locked
into his Jewish clan that he would insist that "it is unlawful
for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another
nation?" (Acts 10:28). Or would his love for Jesus permit him
to affirm—as he later did—"I truly understand that God
shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him
and does what is right is acceptable to him!" (Acts 10:34f.)?

Thus, Jesus asked, התאהבני יותר מאלה "Do you love me
more than 'family' or 'clan' or your 'ethnic' identity?" Jesus
asked the question in the spirit of Prov 18:24, for while "there
are kith and kin who proffer friendship," Jesus was asking
about "a loving one (אהב = ἀγαπάω) who sticks closer than
a brother."

If the response of Peter to Jesus was in Hebrew, he probably did *not* say אֲהַב אֹתְךָ—since the Greek became φιλέω rather than ἀγαπάω. Peter's Hebrew was either אֶרְעֶה אֹתְךָ or אֶרְעֶיךָ, with the verb being the intensive *Piᶜel* רָעָה, which was well translated as φιλέω in the Septuagint of Jud 14:20, where ἑνὶ τῶν φίλων αὐτοῦ ὧν ἐφιλίασεν appears for the MT לְמֵרֵעֵהוּ אֲשֶׁר רֵעָה לוֹ "to his special friend, who had been his best man." Peter seemingly opted for an intensive form of a verb which carried the nuance of the special love of a confidant. It was no less lofty than אהב but it was a great deal more specific, reflecting the special relationship established earlier in John 15:15 when Jesus called the disciples φίλους (= רֵעִים) "loving confidants," which Brown (1970: 659) translated, "I have called you my beloved, for I have revealed to you everything I heard from the Father."

The force of the Peter's choice of רָעָה would match its use in Psa 37:3–4, וּרְעֵה אֱמוּנָה וְהִתְעַנַּג עַל־יְהוָה "cherish faithfulness and take exquisite delight in Yahweh." Both imperatives, רְעֵה and the הִתְעַנַּג, convey the idea of "exquisite love," which is unambiguous considering the ענג in Cant 7:7, אַהֲבָה בַּתַּעֲנוּגִים "O Love, daughter of delights."[11] When limiting the inquiry about Peter's choice of verbs to the nuances of Greek φιλέω, the intensive force of Peter's affirmation in Hebrew—"I cherish you!"—and its nuance of the love of a confidant or best man never comes into focus.[12]

Jesus took advantage of Peter's use of רֵעָה instead of אָהַב as an opportunity for some didactic paronomasia with

(1) רֵעָה "*to love* as a confidant or best man / friend,"
(2) רָעָה meaning literally "*to pasture*, to tend, to feed, and
(3) רָעָה used as a metaphor meaning "*to pastor*, to lead."

While the oral tradition could easily distinguish between רְעֵה "feed!" and רְעֵה "love!" the written tradition did not. With these texts, definitions, and nuances in focus, the conversation between Jesus and Peter can be reconstructed (with uninflected stems in parentheses) as follows:

> "Simon of John, do you *love* (אָהַב) me
> more than *kith-and-kin* (אֵלֶּה)?"
> [Peter] said to him,
> "Yes, Lord, you know that I *cherish*[13] (רְעֵה) you."
> Jesus said to him, "Feed (רָעָה) my lambs!"[14]
> A second time he said to him,
> "Simon of John, do you *love* (אָהַב) me?"
> [Peter] said to him,
> "Yes, Lord; you know that I *cherish* (רְעֵה) you."
> Jesus said to him, "*Lead* (רָעָה) my sheep!"[15]
> He said to him the third time,
> "Simon of John, do you *cherish* (רְעֵה) me?"
> Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time,
> "Do you *cherish* (רְעֵה) me?"
> And he said to him,
> "Lord, you know everything;
> you know that I *cherish* (רְעֵה) you."
> Jesus said to him, "*cherish* (רְעֵה) my lambs!"[16]

CONCLUSION

As reconstructed—by reading רְעֵה "Cherish!" rather than רְעֵה "Lead!"—the climax of Jesus' dialogue with Peter was a command for the new shepherd to *love*, not just to *lead*. The command resonates well with Matt 25:40, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least (ἐλαχίστων = צְעִירִים)[13]

of these my brethren, you did it to me." Peter's profound love for Jesus was to be extended to Jesus' flock. Therefore, Brown's statement (1970: 1115), "The love demanded from Peter is for Jesus and *not explicitly for the flock . . .*" (italics mine), requires reconsideration in light of this reconstruction and in light of I John 4:21, ὁ ἀγαπῶν τὸν θεὸν ἀγαπᾷ καὶ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ "he who loves God must love his brother also"—the force of which would remain the same were the noun θεὸν replaced by the name Ἰησοῦν.

In the language of John 10:14–15 and I Pet 5:4, Jesus as the Good Shepherd (ὁ ποιμὴν ὁ καλὸς) and the Head Shepherd (ἀρχιποίμενος) had laid down his life for the sheep—having practiced what he preached: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends (φίλων αὐτοῦ). In what appears to be an ascending order of importance the Good Shepherd instructed the new shepherd

- **TO FEED THE SHEEP** (21:15), with Matt 25:31–46 providing the commentary for Peter's taking this command literally: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink . . . ."

- **TO LEAD THE FLOCK** (21:16), with I Peter 5:2 providing a commentary: "Tend the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly."

- **TO LOVE THE LAMBS** (21:17), with John 13:34–35 providing the commentary: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another."

- **TO GIVE HIS LIFE FOR THE FLOCK** (21:18), with I John 3:16 providing a commentary: "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for one another."

- **TO FOLLOW HIM** (21:19, 22), with Luke 9:23 being the commentary for this command: "and he said to all, 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.'"

Only by retroverting the Βόσκε of 21:17 to רעה and interpreting it as רְעָה "Love!" or "Cherish!" do the indicative statements about Peter's later laying down his life follow naturally from this command to "love/cherish the lambs."

The *Vorlage* of the command in 21:19, 22, ᾿Ακολούθει μοι "Follow me!" may have used the language of Ruth 1:14, "Ruth followed (ἠκολούθησεν) her," where the ἀκολουθέω translated דָּבַק "to follow closely, to cleave/cling to." If Jesus said דְּבַק בִּי "stay close to me" or "stay devoted to me" it would have echoed (1) the command in Deut 22:11; 30:20; and Jos 22:5 "to *love* Yahweh your God . . . and to *follow* him *closely*" (לְאַהֲבָה אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ . . . וּלְדָבְקָה־בוֹ), as well as (2) Prov 18:24, noted above.[17]

In John 10:16 Jesus had declared, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." The command to "Follow me!" was the Jesus' invitation for Peter to lovingly embrace the sheep who were not of the household of Israel or of the tribe of Judah.

The dialogue ended with Jesus' permitting the "Beloved Disciple" to remain [with his own Jewish people], whereas Peter, the "Loving Disciple," was to move on to shepherd the larger flock of Jews and Gentiles. With this goal in mind, Jesus had initiated the dialogue with the question, "Simon of John, do you love me more than kith-and-kin?" In the ninety second dialogue recorded in John 21:15–22, the reader is given no indication that Peter directly addressed in word the מֵאֵלֶּה "more than kith-and-kin" part of Jesus' question. But

what was missing in his words became apparent in his deeds. Even Paul—while asserting "I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised" (Gal 2:7)—recognized that Peter's love for Jesus had freed him to "live like a Gentile and not like a Jew" (Gal 2:14). Thus, it is not surprising to read in the apocryphal *Acts of Peter* (31–41) of Peter's living in Rome where, according to tradition, he loved his flock of Gentiles and Jews enough to die on a cross as did his Lord.

NOTES

1. In John 1:42 the text reads Σίμων ὁ υἱὸς ᾽ιωάννου "Simon the son of John." The omission of ὁ υἱὸς here seems to emphasize the ᾽ιωάννου, perhaps being Jesus' way of reminding Simon that Yahweh is indeed gracious and forgiving, as this name affirms, so that nothing more needed to be said about Peter's earlier denials.

2. Whereas the Vulgate has *amatoribus* "lovers," which is followed by most English translations, the Septuagint rendered it ποιμέσιν "shepherds." Compare Hos 12:1 where the MT אֶפְרַיִם רֹעֶה רוּחַ became *Ephraim pascit ventum* "Ephraim *feeds* on wind" in the Vulgate, but Εφραιμ πονηρὸν πνεῦμα "Ephraim is an *evil* spirit" in the Septuagint. Wolff (1974:201) translated it as "Ephraim *befriends* the wind"; and Young (YLT) has "Ephraim is *enjoying* wind"—based on the Aramaic רעא/רעי "to take delight in" (see Jastrow 1486). For another example, dealing with the ambiguity of רע, rather than רעה, see the Addendum following note 14.

3. In the Septuagint ἀγαπάω, ἀγάπη, and ἀγαπητός translated not only אהב but also ידד, יחד, יקר, רחם, שׁעע and twelve other stems; φιλέω, φιλία, and φίλος translated רע, דוד, אהב, and four other stems (Hatch and Redpath 1954: 5; 1430). The statement by Bernard (1923: 704) that

ἀγαπάω and φιλέω are indifferently used in the LXX to translate the Hebr. אָהֵב; this Hebrew root being nearly always behind ἀγαπαν and always behind φιλέω except when φιλέω means 'to kiss,' when it represents נָשַׁק

failed to mention that φιλία and φίλος frequently translated רֵעַ. It would not be surprising if φιλέω had been used also to translate רָעָה "to cherish, to associate with" or the *Pi*ᶜ*el* denominative רֵעָה "to love in a special way" (BDB 945–946). The synonyms רעה and אהב appear in Psa 38:11, אהבי ורעי . . . קרובי "my loved ones and my kinfolk . . . and my relatives."

4. It was a synonym of اهل (*'ahl*) "the people of a house or dwelling, and of a town or village . . . and the family of a man, fellow members of one family or race, and of one religion" (Lane 1863: 121). Lane (127) noted that "By the آل (*'âl*) of the Prophet are meant, accord[ing] to some persons, His followers, whether relations or others: and his relations, whether followers or not . . . ." For this reason "kith-and-kin" [hyphenated at times to correspond to the one word in Hebrew and Arabic] is probably the best English translation. The term appears in the *Qur'an* (*Sura* 3:9, 8:54 and 56) in reference to "the family of Pharaoh" (آل فرعون [*'ala firᶜawnu*]). The word survives in modern literary Arabic for "blood relationship, consanguinity, pact, covenant" (Wehr 1979: 27).

5. Reading נֹצֵר for the MT נֵצֶר.

6. An analogy from English would be the current use of "family" and "kith and kin." A sample check on one internet database came up with 38,000 references to "kith and kin" and 68,000,000 references to "family."

7. On the *qitl* noun formation, see GKC §84ᶜ.

8. Reading יֵשׁ for MT אִישׁ, with the Targum, Syriac and Greek manuscripts (see BHS).

9. The MT *Hithpolel* הִתְרֹעֵעַ is not from רעע "to break" (BDB 950) but is a by-form of רעה "to be a special friend" (BDB 946). For other examples of the interchange of ע"ע, ע"י and ל"ה by-forms see GKC §77ᵇˑᵉ. In light of these by-forms, the ἑταῖρος "friend, companion, comrade" in some Greek manuscripts does not require the emendation of הִתְרֹעֵעַ to הִתְרָעוּת, as suggested in BHS.

10. See BDB 945–946; Jastrow 1475–1476; KBS 3: 1258–1262.

11. Pope (1977: 632) noted, "It could scarcely be termed an emendation to follow Syriac and Aquila in dividing *battaᶜănûgîm*, 'with delights' to *baṯ taᶜănûgîm* , 'daughter of delight(s).'"

12. Note also Evans (1957: 64–71) who argued that φιλέω denoted a higher kind of love.

13. The use of "cherish" rather than "love" is to reflect the *Piᶜel* intensive form and the special quality of the endearing love of רֵעָה.

14. The ἀρνίον may have translated צְעִירִי, with the Arabic cognate صغير (ṣaǵîr) suggesting not only small lambs, but people who are held in low esteem, rank or dignity (Lane 1872: 1691–1692). Note Psa 119:141 צָעִיר אָנֹכִי וְנִבְזֶה "I am small and despised." If the προβάτον of manuscripts C* and D reflect the original Greek of 21:15, the *Vorlage* may have had צֹאנִי, with צֹאן retaining a nuance of its Arabic cognate, ضأن/ضائن (ḍâ'in / ḍâ'n), which was used as an epithet for "a soft man as though he were a ewe or one who ceases not to be goodly in body while a scanty eater" (Lane 1874:1760). The command to Peter to *feed* the *flock* may have influenced the tradition behind manuscripts C* and D.

15. The προβάτον here may well be a translation of צֹאנִי.

16. The προβάτιον here may translate טְלִי, with the טָלֶה retaining the nuance of its Arabic cognate طلى (ṭalîy) meaning not only a

lamb but also "confined, restrained, or withheld" (Lane 1874: 1876). The use of טָלִי here may have facilitated the transition to the restraint mentioned in 21:18, "someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go."

17. The Arabic cognate of דְּבַק includes the ideas of attachment and devotion, as in the expression ما أدبقه (mâ ʾadbaqatu), "How great is his devotedness!" (Lane 1867: 849). The Arabic usage would permit Ἀκολούθει μοι to mean "Stick with me!"

ADDENDUM
Matthew 7:11

The translation of Hebrew רע has been problematic in several texts. For example, MT נָמוּ רֹעֶיךָ in Nahum 3:18 is rendered in the Septuagint ἐνύσταξαν οἱ ποιμένες σου "your shepherds (= רעה, stem I) slept," but the Peshiṭta has ܢܡܘ ܚܒܪܝܟ (nāmw ḥabraiky) "your friends (= רעה, stem II) slept." In Micah 4:9 the MT תָּרִיעִי רֵעַ "you shout a shout" (= רוּעַ) was translated in the Septuagint as ἔγνως κακά "you have known evil" (= ידע and רעע, stem I), and the Peshiṭta has also ܚܒܪܬܐ ܒܝܫܬܐ (ʿābadty bištāʿ) "you committed evil," but the Targum Jonathan has אַתְּ מִתְחַבְרָא לְעַמְמַיָּא "you made friends (= רעה, stem II) with the gentiles." A retroversion of the πονηροί in Matt 7:11 to רעים suggests a similar ambiguity with רעים in the original version of the verse.*

The rhetorical questions in Matt 7:9–11 established the point that parents do not give their children something suggestive of death when they asked for the staples of life. The inference is that "family members" (= Hebrew רֵעִים or Aramaic חַבְרִין) naturally give good gifts to each other. However,

the רעים (= רֵעִים) "family, friends, kinfolk, loved ones" of the original saying was misread as רָעִים "evil ones."

The Aramaic חַבְרָא "family, friends" could not have produced such a misunderstanding, adding support for there being a Hebrew *Vorlage* for this Matthean tradition. Instead of interpreting רעים as πονηροὶ, the early translator should have rendered it as πλησίον, as in Matt 5:43, "you shall love your πλησίον as you love yourself." At one time Matt 7:11 surely carried the meaning, "If you who are *kinfolk* know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more so will your heavenly father give good things to those who ask!"

If ἄρτον was a translation of לחם "bread" in this tradition, then either אֶבֶן "stone" or רֶגֶם "stone" could have been used in a wordplay. In light of Lev 24:14 and 16, ירגמו בו רגום (Septuagint λίθοις λιθοβολείτω αὐτὸν) "stone him with stones," רֶגֶם is more likely to have been in the original saying. Even though אֶבֶן was used with רגם for stoning (Lev 24:23, וירגמו אתו אבן "and they stoned him with stones"), אֶבֶן could have highly desirable connotations, like building stones, writing stones, and gem stones. But רֶגֶם always conveyed a sense of death. Jesus' question seems to have been, "what man of you, if his son ask him for לחם (a staple of life) will give him רגם (an instrument of death)?"

Similarity, the contrast between "fish" (ἰχτηὺν) and "serpent" (ὄφιν) was more than a contrast between what swam in the sea and what crawled on the earth. It was a contrast between an *edible* fish and the *devouring* sea-serpent. In Hebrew תנין was used for the sea-serpent Leviathan (Psa 74:14, 104:26; Job 40:25–41:26 [Eng 41:1–34]). The question was probably, "if the son ask for a fish (דָּג) will the father give him the sea-serpent/Levithan (לִוְיָתָן/תַּנִּין)?" Although

ὄφις was used for a kind of fish (Liddell and Scott, 1279), the preferred Greek word would have been κῆτος, which renders the תַּנִּין in Gen 1:21.

* Gelston (1987: 123–125) listed sixty-six passages in the minor prophets where the "the vocalization presupposed by the Peshiṭta differs from the Masoretic vocalization without affecting the consonantal text."