

MISCELLANEOUS
BIBLICAL STUDIES

CHAPTER TWELVE

REDEFINING THE
εἰκὴ, ῥακά, AND μωρέ
IN MATTHEW 5:22

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REDEFINING THE εἰκῆ, ῥακά, AND μωρέ IN MATTHEW 5:22

MATTHEW 5:22

ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ὀργιζόμενος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ [εἰκῆ]* ἔνοχος ἔσται τῇ κρίσει· ὃς δ' ἂν εἴπῃ τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ, Ῥακά, ἔνοχος ἔσται τῷ συνεδρίῳ· ὃς δ' ἂν εἴπῃ, Μωρέ, ἔνοχος ἔσται εἰς τὴν γέενναν τοῦ πυρός.¹

But I say unto you that whoever is angry with his brother [without a cause]* will be in danger of the judgment: and whoever will say to his brother “Raka” shall be in danger of the Sanhedrin: but whoever will say “Fool” will be in danger of the fire of Gehenna.²

The manuscript evidence for the textual variant in Matt 5:22 (marked above with asterisks) as cited by Aland (1968: 13) and Davies and Allison (1988: 512, n. 4) is as follows:

- ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ (“his brother”): B C μ^{67vid} \aleph^* vg eth Gospel of the Nazarenes Ptolemy Justin Irenaeus^{lat1/3} Tertullian^{vid} Origen Eusebius Basil mss^{acc. to Jerome} Augustine Greek mss^{acc to Augustine} Cassian Ps-Athanasius;
- ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ εἰκῆ (“his brother without cause”): \aleph^c D K L W Δ Θ Π f^1 f^{13} 28 33 565 700 892 1010 1071 1079 1195 1216 1230 1241 1242 1365 1546 1646 2148 *Byz Lect* *it*^a, aur, b, c, f, ff¹, g¹ h, k, l, q syr^{c, s, p, h, pal} cop^{sa, bo} goth arm geo

Diatessaron Irenaeus^{gr, lat2/3} Origen Cyprian Eusebius Lucifer
Ps-Justin Chrysostum Cyril.

The English translations which have a word for the variant εἰκῆ—which appears in the *Peshiṭta* and Old Syriac as ܠܘܩܐ (^{ʿiqaʿ}) (Lewis 1910: 11)—include Murdoch’s *Peshiṭta* (“rashly”),³ Lamsa’s *Peshiṭta* (“for no reason”), the Bishops Bible of 1599 (“unadvisedly”), the Geneva Bible of 1595 (“unadvisedly”), and the KJV and NKJ (“without a cause”). The Hebrew translations made by Delitzsch (1877, 1937) and Salkinson (1885) have ִלְיָדָה “for nothing, gratuitously, gratis” for the Greek εἰκῆ.

However, the εἰκῆ is not reflected in the early translations of Wycliffe (1389) and Tyndale (1534), who followed the Vulgate and the shorter Greek text without the εἰκῆ.⁴ Subsequent English translations which followed the shorter text include (in alphabetic order) the ASV, DRA, NAB, NAS, NAU, NET, NIB, NIV, NJB, NLT, NRS, and the RSV. The Shem Tob *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* (Howard 1995: 18–19) lacks any word equivalent to the Greek εἰκῆ, although it reads פחית “inferior” for the Greek ῥακά and שוטה “madman, fool” for the Greek μωρέ.

Aside from citing the texts which have the εἰκῆ, Davies and Allison (1988: 512, n. 4) simply asserted that the εἰκῆ was inserted “after αὐτοῦ, no doubt to allow room for righteous indignation (cf. Eph 4.26 [ὀργίζεσθε καὶ μὴ ἁμαρτάνετε ‘Be angry and sin not’]).” This assertion followed that of Allen (1951: 49) who conjectured,

The word [εἰκῆ] has strong second century attestation, but may perhaps more probably have been added as a limitation of a wide generalisation, than omitted as unnecessary.

Keener (1999: 183, n.70) noted that the εἰκῆ “may, however, represent a legitimate interpretation of Jesus’ more graphic statement, which may have circulated orally in both forms.” By contrast, Albright and Mann (1971: 60–61) made no reference to the variant εἰκῆ and translated 5:22 (with two parenthetical glosses) as,

But I tell you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be in danger of (divine) judgment. Whoever insults his brother will answer to the Sanhedrin, while whoever says ‘Rebel! (against God)’ merits a fiery death.

Contrary to the prevailing preference of New Testament scholars, translators, and Bible publishers for the shorter Greek texts of Matt 5:22, which lack the adverbial εἰκῆ (as listed above), a challenge to that preference is in order once it is acknowledged

- that Jesus’ statements in Matt 5:21–26 were spoken in Aramaic or Hebrew rather than Greek, and
- that the translator(s) may have misunderstood a word in the Aramaic or Hebrew text of 5:22a, similar to the uncertain meaning of the μωρέ in 5:22b, which became “traitor” in the NJB, “curse” in the NLT, “rebel” in the YLT, and “fool” in most other English translations.

As noted above, Salkinson and Delitzsch translated the Greek εἰκῆ “without a cause” into Hebrew as אֵין טעם “for no reason,” which is equivalent to the Aramaic מִגֵּן “for nothing, undeserved, gratis” (Jastrow, 1903: 729). Had Jesus spoken in Aramaic one can assume that the written record would have had an unambiguous מִגֵּן (מִגֵּן), with the homographs מִגֵּן [= מִגֵּן] “he delivered” and מִגֵּן [= מִגֵּן] “shield” being contextually irrelevant.

However, if Jesus spoke in Hebrew one can readily assume that the Hebrew text behind the Greek εἰκαῖ contained the adverb חנם. The Hebrew חנם, like the Aramaic מנגן, had three possible derivations—but with חנם all three derivations could be contextually relevant. First is the widely attested חנם “for no reason, without a cause” from חָנַן, stem I, “to show favor, to be gracious,” with its Arabic cognate being حن (*ḥanna*) “he was merciful, compassionate, he longed for.” Second is the rare חָנַן, stem II, “to be loathsome,” attested in Job 19:16–17 (along with חָנַן, stem I). This text reads in part: וַחֲתָתִין לִּי . . . וְחָנַנִי לְבָנַי בְּטָנִי, “I entreated him . . . And I am loathsome to my own brothers.”⁵ The standard Hebrew lexicons cite the Arabic حن (*ḥanna*) “it emitted a stench” as the cognate of חָנַן, stem II (BDB 337). (This accounts for the translation of Job 19:17 in the NJB as “My breath is unbearable to my wife, my stench (וְחָנַנִי) to my own brothers.”)

The third derivation of the חנם in the hypothetical Hebrew *Vorlage* of 5:22a is חָנַן, stem III. This would be the cognate of the Arabic حنى (*ḥanaya*) “he uttered foul, abominable, unseemly, or obscene speech,” with the noun حنى / حنأ (*ḥannā / ḥannay*) meaning “foul, abominable, unseemly, or obscene speech” (Lane 1865: 819; Wehr 1979: 305).⁶

This third חנם [= חָנַן] in the *Vorlage* of Matt 5:22 was—understandably but mistakenly—misread as the חנם from stem I; and in the Greek translations it became εἰκαῖ “without cause.” The חָנַן of חָנַן, stem III, is a contextually perfect match for 5:22a. Consequently, simply by repointing the חנם

“without a reason” to חֲנֹם “obscenely” the translations of Delitzsch (כָּל-אִשָּׁר יִקְצֹר עַל-אָחִיו חֲנֹם) and Salkinson (הַמִּתְעַבֵּר בְּאָחִיו חֲנֹם) could be read as “the one / everyone who is *obscenely* angry with his brother.” Once the חֲנֹם is modified to חֲנֹם, either translation could well approximate what Jesus said. There was no ambiguity when he *said* “whoever becomes *obscenely* (חֲנֹם) angry with his brother.” However, once his spoken words were written down, the חֲנֹם (without vowels) was for no apparent reason read as חֲנֹם “for no reason”—even though Jesus immediately identified in 5:22b the words which he considered vile and obscene.⁷

The two obscene words identified by Jesus are ῥακά⁸ and Μωρέ. The former, ῥακά, is simply transliterated as *Raca* or *Raqa* in most English texts, although “Fool” appears in the NJB, “You fool” in the RSV, “idiot” in the NLT, and “You good-for-nothing” in the NAU. The latter, Μωρέ, appears as “Fool” in the KJV, ASV, NIV, NIB, NAS, NAV, NKJ, NAB, as “Rebel!” in the YLT, and as “Traitor” in the NJB.

According to Allen (1951: 49) and many other commentators the ῥακά seems to be equivalent to the Aramaic רִיקָא “empty”—even though it is spelled as ῥακά rather than as ῥηκά—which was evidently a term of contemptuous address.⁹ (Allen compared this ῥακά to the κενέ in James 2:20, ὦ ἄνθρωπε κενέ “O foolish fellow.”) Davies and Allison (1988: 513) agreed with Allen and cited not only the κενέ in James 2:20 but also the κενός in Neh 5:13. They suggested that ῥακά could be translated as “empty-head,” “good for nothing,” or “fool,” and conjectured that,

Matthew's failure to translate the term might suggest an audience familiar with an oriental word of abuse, although it is also

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possible that the evangelist could leave *raka* untranslated because its field of meaning was roughly indicated by the *mōre* in 5:22c.

But the equation ῥηκά = ריקָּי = “empty” = “empty-head” = “Fool” is seriously flawed. It is a no-brainer because in the Hebrew and Aramaic mind-set it was the *heart*, not the *brain*, which was the seat of reason and intelligence. The *mindless* fool was one who “lacked heart” (לִבְּךָ חָסֵר) ¹⁰ and the intelligent, smart person was one with an “understanding heart” (לִבְּךָ נְבוֹן) or a “wise heart” (לִבְּךָ חָכָם). Being a fool had nothing to do with the head, empty or otherwise, or the brain. Hatch and Redpath (1954: 306–307) cited thirty seven texts in which the Hebrew לֵב / לֵבָב “heart” was translated in the Septuagint as διάνοια “mind, intelligence.” This is why in Luke 10:27 and Mark 12:30 the commandment from Deut 6:5 to “love the LORD your God with all your *heart*, and with all your *soul*, and with all your *might*,” was expanded to include ὅλη τῆ διανοίᾳ σου “all of your *mind*.” The διανοία “intelligence” in Luke 10:27 and Mark 12:30 is an explanatory gloss on the Hebrew לֵב “heart,” for in Greek καρδία “heart” was used “especially as the seat of feeling and passion, as rage or anger, . . . of sorrow or joy” (Liddell Scott (1940: 877). Consequently, there must be a better derivation of this ῥηκά than that based upon ריקָּי “empty.”

Philologically, there are five Arabic lexemes which come into focus for clarifying the meaning of the Hebrew / Aramaic ריקָּי / ריקָּא / ריקָּה—none of which support the idea that ריקָּי / ריקָּא “empty” meant “empty-headed,” which could then be paraphrased as “fool.” These Arabic cognates are:

1. ريق/راق (*raʿqa/rayq*) “it poured out, he poured forth,” with the nouns ريق (*riq^{um}*) “strength” and ريق (*riq^{um}*) “saliva,” noting that the phrase “he swallowed his saliva” means “he restrained his anger” (Lane 1867: 1203; BDB 937). This is the basis for Lamsa’s (197: 955) parenthetical gloss in Matt 5:22, “Raca (which means, I spit on you).” This lexeme does not mean “empty,” “empty-head,” or “fool.”
2. روق/راق (*raʿqa/rawq*) “he exceeded in excellence,” and in form 4, أروق (*ʿarwaqa*) “he poured out, he poured forth,” with the noun روق (*rawq^{um}*) “pure or sincere love” and the adjective ريق (*rayyiq^{um}*) “most excellent, goodly, or beautiful” (Lane 1867: 1190–1192). Likewise, this lexeme has nothing to do with being “empty,” “empty-head,” or a “fool.”
3. رقيق (*raqiq*) “weak, abject, mean, paltry contemptible,” with the feminine رقة (*riqqat*) meaning “weakness (of religion), abjectness, meanness, paltriness, contemptibility” (Lane 1867: 1131–1132). This lexeme has nothing to do with being “empty” or “empty-head,” but were it translated as “fool” the translation would be on target.
4. رقيق (*raqiq*) “a slave,” with مرق (*muraqq^{um}*) meaning “made a slave, possessed as a slave, kept as a slave” (Lane 1867: 1131–1132). This lexeme has nothing to do with being “empty” or “empty-head,” but the pejorative “Slave!” might well be on target (see below).
5. ركيك (*rakik*) “low, ignoble, vile, mean, sordid, possessing no manly qualities, weak in his intellect, and in his judgment or opinion” (Lane 1867: 1141). This is a by-form of رقيق

(*raqîq*), number (3) above. There is nothing with this lexeme meaning “empty” or “empty-head,” but its being translated as “fool” would be on target.

Cognates (1) and (2) are obviously contextually irrelevant; but cognates (3) and (5) are most relevant. They permit—if not require—the ῥακά to be translated as a “Vile Fool!”¹¹ Cognate (4) is especially noteworthy in light of the statement in *Kiddushin* 28^a, “He who calls his neighbor a slave (עבד), let him be excommunicated;¹² he who calls him a bastard, let him be punished with forty stripes; if he calls him a malefactor, this is to cost him his life.”¹³ With definitions 3–5 in focus it is reasonable to conclude that ῥακά had three layers of meaning: “vile, fool, slave,” which can be paraphrased in English by the compound pejorative “Vile-Foolish-Slave!”¹⁴

The second obscene word pinpointed by Jesus in Matt 5:22 is Μωρέ, which, as noted, appears as “Fool” in most English translation, but as “Traitor” in the NJB and as “Rebel!” in the YLT. Μωρέ could be a transliteration of מורה or מורא, which could be read as מורה “authority,” מורה “teacher,” or מורא “reverence.” But these do not fit the context of obscene anger. Bertram (1968: 840) suggested that Μωρέ “may be regarded as the rendering of a Heb-Aram term from the stem מרר (מורה) [sic] מרה or מרא, to be bitter, recalcitrant.” He called attention to Psalm 78:8, דור סורר ומרה, “a stubborn and rebellious generation.” Allen (1951: 48) noted that Μωρέ “has quite unnecessarily been identified with the Hebrew מורה, Nu 20¹⁰ [“Please listen, O rebels”].”¹⁵ Nevertheless, Albright and Mann (1971: 60–61) opted for “Rebel!”

Allen suggested that Μωρέ, a vocative of μωρός “fool,” may be a translation of ῥακά, and this idea is duly noted by

proscription list, or did Μωρέ and ῥακά only make up the list? How is one to account for the fact that μωρός “fool,” which appears twenty-six times in Sirach, still appears nine times in I Corinthians, and in Matt 7:26; 25:2, 3, 8, 17; plus II Tim 2:23; Titus 3:9; and Eph 5:4? Did the proscription involve only the *vocative* when an argument became personal, whereas, if the μωρός was applied to oneself or to others in general, it was not considered an obscene pejorative?

Similar questions were raised and answered by Davies and Allison (1988:515), which I present in the following lengthy quotation (with the bullets added by this writer).

Because there is an ascending order of punishments in 5:22—local court, sanhedrin, Gehenna—one expects a corresponding ascent in the severity of the crimes listed. It does not attain. Anger, rebuking a fellow with *raka*, and insulting another by calling him *more* [Μωρέ]—one is not more obviously heinous than the others. The difficulty thus created has been solved in several ways—

- by arguing that *more* [Μωρέ] is more odious than *raka* [ῥακά] and that the uttering of either is worse than anger (cf. Augustine, *De serm. mont.* 1.9.24, and Schweitzer, *Matthew*, p. 119);
- or that by claiming κρίσις, συνέδριον, and γέεννα are functionally similar, each being three different ways of referring to the death penalty (J. Jeremias, TWNT 6, p. 975);¹⁸
- or by emending or rearranging the text;
- or by seeing 22a as a general statement which is then illustrated by two concrete examples (so Luz I, p. 253);
- or by inferring that the incongruity is intentional and serves as an ironic commentary on a parody of scribal exegesis: as all wrongs against one’s neighbour are equally wrong, it is foolish to make casuistic distinctions with regard to degrees of punishment.

We [Davies and Allison] should like to add another possibility. As spoken by Jesus, the saying consisted only of 5:21–2b and affirmed, in hyperbolic fashion, that anger and insulting words were deserving of punishment as murder; and, originally, the Aramaic or Hebrew words behind κρίσις and συνέδριον were roughly synonymous or of similar import, both referring to judicial trials. Problems arose only when Matthew, in order to clarify *raka* [Ῥακά] and to create a triad, tacked on the final clause. His choice of *more* [Μωρέ] created no difficulty; but ‘into the Gehenna of fire’ (cf. 18.9 diff Mk 9.47), which he no doubt felt justified in adding to underline the severity of the named offences, created the possibility of apprehending an ascending order of punishments.

None of these speculations cited and offered by Davies and Allison are convincing. Better answers to the questions raised above are available once the focus of attention shifts to this one sentence above from Davies and Allison: “*the Aramaic or Hebrew words behind κρίσις and συνέδριον were roughly synonymous or of similar import, both referring to judicial trials* (italics added). However, Davies and Allison did not speculate as to what were the Aramaic or Hebrew words behind κρίσις and συνέδριον. But this is the direction in which the speculation must go.

Speculation about the Hebrew *Vorlage* of Ῥακά was very productive once the lexemes רַקַּה and רַקַּה came into focus and produced the layered pejorative “*Vile! / Fool! / Slave!*” Speculation about the Hebrew *Vorlage* of Μωρέ will prove to be equally rewarding.

As noted above, the Hebrew words for “fool” include אוֹיִל, כְּסִיל, סָכַל, and נָבֵל. Of these four only נָבֵל is ambiguous. The consonantal נָבֵל has four different meanings: (a) נָבֵל

“skin-bottle, jar, pitcher”; (b) נְבֵל “a musical instrument”; (c) נְבֵל “be foolish,” נְבֵל “a fool”; and (d) נְבֵל “to wither, to die,” with the noun נְבֵלָה “carcass, corpse.”¹⁹ The Arabic cognate of this נבל is نبل (*nabala*) which, in forms 5 and 8, also means “to die” (BDB 614–615).

Once lexemes (c) and (d) are in focus the Hebrew *Vorlage* of Matt 5:22b could well approximate these translations:

וְאִם נָבֵל יִקְרָא לּוֹ יִפְלֵ לְאִשׁ גֵּיהֵנָם: (Salkinson)

אֲשֶׁר נָבֵל יִקְרָא לּוֹ הוּא מְחַיֵּב לְאִשׁ גֵּיהֵנָם: (Delitzsch).

The vocalization of the נבל in both translations has intentionally been omitted. To approximate more closely what Jesus said, should this נבל be vocalized as the *vocative* נְבֵל (= Μωρέ) “Fool!” or as the intensive *imperative* נְבֵל (= Ἀποθνήσκει) “Die! / Drop Dead!”²⁰ One can further speculate that a Greek μωρέ “death!” was changed to μωρέ “fool,” on the assumption that this נבל was a synonym of the רַקָּה / רַכָּה / ῥακά “Vile Fool.” But the introductory component of Jesus’ statement in 5:21 alludes to Exod 20:13 and Deut 5:17, “. . . whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.” Jesus’ *halakah* in Matt 5:22 expands the law to include any brother who becomes angry enough to use vitriolic pejoratives so as to humiliate or “verbally assassinate” his kinsman.²¹

Thus, the last phrase in Matt 5:22 needs to be translated as “whoever says ‘Die! / Drop Dead!’ will be in danger of the fire of Gehenna.” This was indeed a more offensive pejorative than calling someone a “Vile-Fool-Slave”—for which the Sanhedrin²² might well apply the penalty of “forty stripes” as stipulated in Deut 25:1–3.²³ To tell a brother to ‘Drop Dead!’

would be an expression of hate, and as spelled out in I John 3:15, “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”²⁴

Anyone uttering the imperative נָבֵל ‘*Drop Dead!*’ was himself a נָבֵל “fool,” for in so speaking he would open the gates to Gehenna—not for his brother but for himself.

Bertram (1967: 841) and France (2007: 199) called attention to *Meṣia* 58b which indicates how seriously evil epithets were taken in Jewish tradition.²⁵ Here is an abbreviated text of *Meṣia* 55b:

Our Rabbis taught: Ye shall not therefore wrong one another [Lev 25:17]. Scripture refers to verbal wrongs Then to what can I refer, ye shall not therefore wrong each other? To verbal wrongs. E.g., If a man is a penitent, one must not say to him, ‘Remember your former deeds.’ If he is the son of proselytes he must not be taunted with, ‘Remember the deeds of your ancestors.’ If he is a proselyte and comes to study the Torah, one must not say to him, ‘Shall the mouth that ate unclean and forbidden food, abominable and creeping things, come to study the Torah which was uttered by the mouth of Omnipotence!’ If he is visited by suffering, afflicted with disease, or has buried his children, one must not speak to him as his companions spoke to Job

Abaye asked R. Dimi: What do people [most] carefully avoid in the West [sc. Palestine]? — He replied: putting others to shame. For R. Hanina said: All descend into Gehenna, excepting three. ‘All’ — can you really think so! But say thus: All who descend into Gehenna [subsequently] reascend, excepting three, who descend but do not reascend, viz., He who commits adultery with a married woman, publicly shames his neighbour, or fastens an evil epithet [nickname] upon his neighbour. ‘Fastens an epithet’ — but that is putting to shame! — [It means], Even when he is accustomed to the name.

The ῥακά “*Vile/Fool/Slave!*” would certainly qualify as an “evil epithet,” and saying נָבֵל “*Die! / Drop Dead!*” to a brother would surely cause public shame for the person so addressed.

CONCLUSION

Wernberg-Møller (1956–57: 72)⁶ wisely argued that the εἰκῆ in Matt 5:22a was original and that the Greek translator followed his Semitic *Vorlage* word by word. But he was wrong in assuming that the εἰκῆ “went back to some Aramaic phrase (the equivalent of לֹא בַמִּשְׁפָּט in Classical Hebrew).” The case has been made in this study for a Hebrew *Vorlage* which was misunderstood because of the ambiguities involved when reading a consoantal Hebrew text.

It has been argued that εἰκῆ “without cause” was in the original Greek translation for the הַנֶּחֱמָה that was in the original Hebrew *Vorlage*. This הַנֶּחֱמָה should have been read as הַנֶּחֱמָה “obscenely,” an adverb derived from הַנְּחָה “foul, obscene speech,” rather than being read as הַנֶּחֱמָה “without cause.”

While disagreeing with Davies and Allison that the best solution for understanding the meaning of ῥακά is the equation “*Empty = Empty-head = Fool,*” they were on target with their suggestion that “Matthew’s failure to translate the term [ῥακά] might suggest an audience familiar with an oriental word of abuse.” That Jewish audience, no doubt, understood the layered meaning of this Hebrew ῥακά / Ραχά (“*Vile / Fool / Slave!*”) which is why the רַכָּה / רַכָּה in the Hebrew *Vorlage* was transliterated rather than translated. What Greek word was there that could match the layered meanings of “*Vile/Fool/Slave!*”?

It has also been shown that the μωρέ “moron/fool” in Matt 5:22b is a translation of an ambiguous נבל in the Hebrew *Vorlage*. Jesus, using an intensive imperative, spoke of the abusive expression נבל “Drop Dead! / Die!” But the consonantal נבל was mistakenly read as נבל “fool.”

Once the חנם, רקה, and נבל in the *Vorlage* became in Greek εἰκῆ, ῥακά, and μωρέ Jesus’ statement was given a new meaning. As interpreted in this study Jesus no doubt said,

Whoever is *obscenely* angry with his brother
shall be in danger of the court:
and he who says to his brother “*Vile Fool Slave!*”
shall be in danger of the Sanhedrin:
and he who says “*Drop Dead!*”
will be in danger of the fire of Gehenna.

Though not prurient, רקה and נבל were definitely obscene expressions.

Although Black (1988: 7) accepted the εἰκῆ as original, with no hint of there being a mistranslation, he rightly noted:

There is anger that is both legitimate and justified. Jesus himself looked on the hypocritical Pharisees “with anger” (μετ’ ὀργῆς, Mark 3:5). This anger, or indignation against sin, is not what Jesus speaks of here. What he condemns is anger without cause, anger that erupts where no offense has been given . . . it is a feeling which would lead one to commit murder if it were fully acted out.

Following the *halakah* of Jesus, when anger is legitimate and justified it must also be civil—free from profanities and obscene expressions like “*Vile/Fool/Slave!*” and free from the violence insinuated in the death threat, “*Drop Dead!*” Otherwise, the gates to Gehenna will open and the stench (חַנְנָה) of the obscene (חַנְנָה) offender will fill the air.

Noland (2005: 230) stated, “interpreters have struggled to find some ascending sequence in being angry, saying ‘Raka’, and saying ‘Fool’. But such efforts are probably misplaced.” This echoes the earlier sentiments of Hendrickson (1973: 298) who cited four objections for finding in Matt 5:22 three gradations of offenses (anger, saying “Raka!” or “Fool!”) and three gradations of punishments (danger of the judgment, danger of the Sanhedrin, and danger of a fiery Gehenna).

But if my reconstruction of the Hebrew *Vorlage* and its interpretation are on target there is (1) a therapeutic *anger* and (2) a pathological *obscene anger*. The first imperative in Eph 4:26 “Be angry!” involves therapeutic *anger*; and the second imperative “do not sin!” involves the pathological *obscene anger* that manifests itself in (a) vitriolic speech “*Vile/Fool/Slave*” (רַקָּרְ / ‘Ρακά) and in (b) explicit death threats, “*Drop Dead!*”). Jesus’ anger in Mark 3:5 (μετ’ ὀργῆς) and in 10:14 (ἡγανάκτησεν) was a therapeutic *anger* revealing his passion for the eternal salvation of friend and foe. But the hateful obscene anger of his adversaries was pathological, revealing their desire for his damnation and death: “*Die! Drop Dead!* then finally, *Crucify him!*”

France (2007: 199) duly noted the statement of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (circa. A.D. 100): “One who hates his neighbor is among those who shed blood” (*Der Er. Rab*, 576 [11:13]). Had Jesus’ enemies been content with simply shouting at him רַקָּרְ / ‘Ρακά, “*Vile/Fool/Slave*,” he may well have responded with an Aramaic or Hebrew saying comparable to “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but nasty words will never hurt me.” But when they said נָבַל “*Die! / Drop Dead*” he knew his days were numbered and his execution would amount to legalized murder, with his murders doomed to Gehenna along with his accusers.

Obscene words may not always hurt those to whom they are addressed, *but the speaker will pay*—sooner (with the lashes ordered by a Sanhedrin) or later (with the stench and fires on the dung heaps of γέενναν “Gehenna.” Most English translations render γέενναν in 5:22 as “hell,” but the simple transliteration, “Gehenna,” in the NAB is the most accurate. The Valley of Hinnom (גֵּי הַנֶּחֱמִים = Gehenna) was accessible through Jerusalem’s Dung Gate (שַׁעַר הַאֲשָׁפֶת) and became the municipal dump for corpses, carcasses, excrement, and garbage. There the maggots thrived on the rotting entrails and the partially cremated remains of those who were not wealthy enough or honorable enough to be buried. The spontaneous combustion of the methane gas generated by the offal and dung produced endless fires and hot spots ready to reignite. Criminals executed by stoning were more likely to be cremated in the גֵּי הַנֶּחֱמִים / Gehenna than to be buried in the tombs of their fathers. Verbal assassins who in anger order someone to “Drop Dead” are en route to this Gehenna along with the actual assassins who carry out the murders.

Though in disagreement with Bertram (1967: 842) that ῥακά and μωρέ may be equivalent, there is agreement with his conclusion that “All material arguments against the authenticity of Mt. 5:22 are thus dispelled *at once*” (italics added). I would change Bertram’s “*at once*” to just “*once*,” and complete his sentence this way: “. . . *once* it is recognized that behind the words εἰκῆ, ῥακά, and μωρέ was a Hebrew *Vorlage* with the ambiguous words חַנֵּם, רַקָּה, and נָבֵל.” The interpretations presented above for εἰκῆ, ῥακά, and μωρέ provide examples of how Arabic cognates provide the requisite clues for recovering lost Hebrew words which can clarify enigmas found in the Greek text of the Gospels.

NOTES

1. The Peshitta reads,

אנא דין אמר אנא לכוּן
דכל מן דנרגו על אחוהי איקא
מחויב הו לדינא
וכל דנאמר לאחוהי רקא
מחויב הו לכנושחא
ומן דנאמר ללא
מחויב הו לנהנא דנורא:

See below, note 3, for Murdock’s translation of this verse.

2. Note the statement in the *Manual of Discipline* “One shall not speak to his brother in anger, or in complaint, or with a [stiff] neck, or a callous heart, or a wicked spirit.” See Brownlee 1951: 22.

3. Murdock translated this verse as “But I say to you, That every one who is angry with his brother rashly, is obnoxious to judgment: and every one that saith to his brother, Raka! is obnoxious to the council: and every one that shall say, Fool is obnoxious to hell-fire.” Murdoch’s translation of the **ܡܚܝܒ** (*mēḥaya*³) as “obnoxious” should not be misunderstood as meaning “objectionable, offensive, unpleasant.” In this context *obnoxious* means “to be liable (for punishment), to be censurable.” (Click [HERE](#) to view James P. Murdock’s *The New Testament: Translated from the Syriac Peshito Version*, published in 1852.)

4. Black (1988:2) noted that Jerome, Erasmus, Mill, Bengel, Lachman, Tischendorf, Westcott, Hort, Metzger, and Carson

thought the $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\kappa\eta$ was suprious, with only Whitney, Hodges, Farstand, and Wernberg-Møller finding the $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\kappa\eta$ to be original.

5. Note here the Septuagint which did not recognize נָנַן , stem II, “to be loathsome,” but read the נָנַן and the נָנַן as if both were from נָנַן , stem I. It reads, $\acute{\epsilon}\delta\acute{\epsilon}\epsilon\tau\omicron$. . . προσεκαλούμην δὲ κολακεύων υἱοὺς παλλακίδων μου, “I supplicated . . . I earnestly entreated the sons of my concubines.”

6. On the by-forms נָנַן and נָנַן see GKC 77^e where eight examples of the interchange of ע"ע and ל"ל verbs are cited, including $\text{נָנַן}/\text{נָנַן}$. For the use of the adverbial נָנַן see GKC 100^g.

7. Wernberg-Møller (1956–57: 71–73) argued that the $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\kappa\eta$ was original and

that the Greek translator followed his Semitic *Vorlage* word by word, and that consequently the word [$\epsilon\acute{\iota}\kappa\eta$] is not a later addition, intended to make allowance for ‘just’ anger in certain circumstances.

Wernberg-Møller cited the phrase $\text{וְאִשֶּׁר יָטוּר לְרַעְהוּ אִשֶּׁר לֹא בְמִשְׁפָּט}$ “and the one who bears a grudge against his neighbour without reason” in the *Manual of Discipline*, VII, 8 —noting that the לֹא בְמִשְׁפָּט “without reason” appears also in Jer 17:11 and Ezek 22:29. He cited the Arabic بغير حق (*big'ayri haqqi*) “without right” in the Qur'an (3:20) as a close parallel. However, Wernberg-Møller did not assume that the לֹא בְמִשְׁפָּט was in the Semitic *Vorlage* of 5:22; rather “some Aramaic phrase (the equivalent of לֹא בְמִשְׁפָּט)”

8. The variant ῥακά appears in mss **S*** D W lat Tert Cypr.

9. Jastrow 1903: 1476.

10. See BDB 524 §3, where the חָסֵר לֵב “fool” in Prov 6:32, 7:7, 9:4, 9:16, 10:13, 10:21, 11:12, 12:11, 15:21, 17:18, and 24:30 is noted.

11. On the by-forms רִיָּק and רִקָּק, see GKC 77^b where other examples of the interchange of ע"ע and ע"י stems are noted. This interchange of an ע"ע and an ע"י stem is analogous. On the interchange of ק and כ compare רִכְכֵּךְ / רִקָּק “to crush,” and רִקָּק / רִכְכֵּךְ “to be thin, weak.”

12. On the issue of slavery note especially Exod 21:1–11, Deut 15:12–17, and Lev 25:39–55.

13. Jeremias (1968: 974) called attention to the use of راقٍ (*raqa'*) as a Syriac term for addressing servants, and suggested that the *a* vowels of the Syriac *raqa'* may be the basis for the *a* vowels in ῥακά. He made no mention of the Arabic رقيق (*raqîq*) “slave.”

14. For quotations in which *Raca* appears in the Talmud, see Lightfoot 1859: 109. Click [HERE](#) for an online edition of Lightfoot or [HERE](#) for just his Matthew Commentary.

15. The הַמְרִים of Num 20:10 was interpreted by Jastrow (1903: 749, 842) as (a) “rebellious” (the plural participle of מָרָה “to rebel”), noting that in the *Hiph'îl* of post-biblical

מִרְדָּה meant “to disregard the authority of the Supreme Court” or (b) “fools” (“for in the sea towns they call fools *morim*,” with the מִרְדָּה being the Greek vocative μωρέ of μωρός (= מורוס) “fool”—with the adjective μωρά “foolish” having been transliterated as מורָה / מורָא. For an entirely different interpretation of Num 20:10, see McDaniel, “Moses Said ‘Please! Behold!’ (Exodus 17 & Numbers 20),” available online by clicking [HERE](#).

16. Davies and Allison (1988: 514) rightly noted that μωρός was “a word beloved by Sirach.” It was also well loved by Paul for it appears in I Cor 1:18, 21, 23, 25, 2:14; 3:18, 19; and 4:10.

17. Surprisingly, Lamsa (1967: 955) translated Μωρέ as “effeminate,” with only a footnote citing “Aramaic, *brutish*, *abnormal*.”

18. The words *môrôš* and *mrš* in the middle of page 514 appear to be typographical errors for *môrôš* (= מורוס “fool”) and *mrš* (= מרס). The Hebrew *mrš* (מִרְשׁ) means “to be sick” or “to flow rapidly” (BDB 599; Jastrow 1903: 749, 846).

19. Note the phrase וּכְיֶרֶק דְּשֵׁא יְבוּלוּן in Psalm 37:2, which appears as “like green plants they will soon die away” in the NIV and NIB. Compare Gen 25:18, עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-אֶחָיו, נָפַל, which appears as “he died in the presence of all his brethren” in the KJV, DRA, and NKJ.

20. The *Piel* imperative here would match the Arabic cognate *نَبَلَ* (*nabala*), which means “to die” in forms 5 and 8. The nouns *מִפְּלֵת* “carcass” and *נְבִילָה* “carcass” indicate that *נָפַל* “to fall down in a violent death” (Jud 5:27) and *נָפַל* “to die” were by-forms.

21. For the Mosaic law dealing with anger, killing someone, and then the slayer being sentenced to death, note Deut 19:4–13.

22. Contra Jeremias (1968: 975), who stated that “the three phrases which follow in 5:22a-c do not refer to three different courts, the local, the supreme, and the divine (hell), but are simply three expressions for the death penalty in a kind of crescendo.” Jeremias suggested the following translation of 5:22, which lacks a word for the disputed εἰκῆ.

Any man who is angry with his brother
 deserves to be punished (with death).
 He who says to his brother ‘Thou blockhead!’
 deserves to be condemned (to death) by the supreme court
 He who says: ‘Thou idiot!’
 deserves to suffer (death) in hell.”

23. Deut 25:1–3 reads:

If there is a dispute between men, and they come into court, and the judges decide between them, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty, then if the guilty man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall cause him to lie down and be beaten in his presence with a number of stripes in proportion to his offense. Forty stripes may be given him, but not more; lest, if one should go on to beat him with more stripes than these, your brother be degraded in your sight.

24. For the enigmatic statement of Jesus in Luke 14:26, “If any one comes to me and does not hate (οὐ μισεῖ) his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple ,” see McDaniel “The Misreading which Led to the ‘Hate’ in Luke 14:26–27,” available online by clicking [HERE](#) .

25. Daiche, Salis and H. Freedman. 1937. *Baba Mazia Translated into English with Notes, Glossary, and Indices*. London: Soncino Press. Click [HERE](#) to view the full text of *Baba Mazia*; or click [HERE](#) to view other texts in the Talmud.