

MISCELLANEOUS
BIBLICAL STUDIES

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LUKE'S MISINTERPRETATION
OF THE HEBREW QUOTATION
IN ACTS 26:14

Thomas F. McDaniel, Ph.D.

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LUKE'S MISINTERPRETATION OF THE HEBREW QUOTATION IN ACTS 26:14

In a previous study on the contradiction between Luke 10:27, “Love (ἀγαπήσεις) your neighbor/kin as yourself,”¹ and Luke 14:26, “If any one comes to me and does not hate (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,” I concluded that Luke misunderstood the verb **אִשַׁן/הִשַׁן** in his Hebrew source for Jesus’ statement which appears now in Luke 14:26. Luke read the unvocalized **אִשַׁן/הִשַׁן** as **אִשַׁן/הִשַׁן** “he hates,” but it should have been read as **אִשַׁן/הִשַׁן** “he forsakes.”²

A similar misinterpretation probably occurred in Acts 26:14, where Luke reports that Paul told King Agrippa that Jesus had spoken to him in Hebrew, which included what most scholars recognize as a well known Greek aphorism. The verse which ends with the aphorism reads:

πάντων δὲ καταπεσόντων ἡμῶν εἰς τὴν γῆν,
ἤκουσα φωνὴν λαλοῦσαν πρὸς με
καὶ λέγουσαν τῇ Ἑβραϊδί διαλέκτῳ,
Σαούλ, Σαούλ, τί με διώκεις;
σκληρόν σοι πρὸς κέντρα λακτίζειν.

KJV

And when we were all fallen to the earth,
I heard a voice speaking unto me,
and saying in the Hebrew tongue,
Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?
it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

This last phrase in the Greek text of 26:14 was translated quite literally by Robert Young (1862) as “hard for thee

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against pricks to kick,” whereby he read (a) σκληρόν as a singular nominative neuter adjective, (b) κέντρα as an accusative plural noun, and (c) λακτίζειν as a present active infinitive.

The Hebrew phrase spoken by Jesus and quoted by Paul—which Luke translated as σκληρόν σοι πρὸς κέντρα λακτίζειν, “hard for thee against goads to kick”—was probably קשה לך בעט בפרשים. If so, Luke read the phrase as קשה לך בעט בפרשים, “it is hard for you to kick against goads.” However, what Jesus said may well have been קשה לך בעט בפרשים, “it is hard for you to resist/reject the Pharisees.”

Marcus Jastrow (1903: 180) cited the *Qal* בעט, stem II, to mean not only “to trample, to strike, to kick,” but also “to resist, to reject”; and the *Pi^cel* בעט to mean “to rebel, to kick against, to be contumacious.” Jastrow (1903: 1243) also cited the Aramaic פּרשא “goad,” which appears in the Targum of Judges 3:31 for the מוֹלְמֹד “goad” in the MT.³ The verb פּרש “to sting” appears in Prov 23:32, וּכְצַפְעֹנִי יִשֶׁךְ וּכְנַחַשׁ יִפְרֹשׁ, “it bites like a serpent, and stings like an adder.” One can assume that the noun פּרש “goad” and participle פּרש “stinger” were used in Hebrew as well as in Aramaic and in Syriac (J. Payne Smith, 1903: 466).

After Paul recited before King Agrippa the Hebrew words of Jesus there must have been a written record which had the word פרשים (= פּרוּשִׁים / פּרָשִׁים) “Pharisees,” which Luke read as פּרָשִׁים “goads,” even though Paul had bragged about his being a zealous Pharisee, as in

- Acts 22:3, Ἐγὼ εἶμι . . . παρὰ τοὺς πόδας Γαμαλιήλ πεπαιδευμένος κατὰ ἀκρίβειαν τοῦ πατρῶου νόμου,

ζηλωτῆς ὑπάρχων τοῦ θεοῦ, “I am . . . brought up at the feet of [the famed Pharisee] Gamaliel, educated according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers”;

- Acts 23:6, ἐγὼ Φαρισαῖός εἰμι, υἱὸς Φαρισαίων, “I am a Pharisee and the son of Pharisees”; and
- Acts 26:5, ὅτι κατὰ τὴν ἀκριβεστάτην αἵρεσιν τῆς ἡμετέρας θρησκείας ἔζησα Φαρισαῖος, “I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion.”

The πρὸς κέντρα in the Greek text lacks the definite article. Were its Hebrew *Vorlage* בפרשׂים this בפרשׂים could be read

- as the *indefinite* בַּפְּרָשִׁים “against goads” or as בַּפְּרָשִׁים “against Pharisees,” or
- as the *definite* בַּפְּרָשִׁים “against *the* goads” or as בַּפְּרָשִׁים “against *the* Pharisees.”

But in Aramaic there would have been no ambiguity. The *indefinite* “against goads” or “against Pharisees” would have been בפרשׂין, and the *definite* “against *the* goads” or “against *the* Pharisees” would have been בפרשׂיא, with the conspicuous shift from the final ך with the *indefinite* to a final א with the emphatic *definite*. Although most commentators interpret the Greek τῆ Ἑβραϊδι διαλέκτῳ “in the Hebrew dialect” in 26:14 to mean “in the Aramaic dialect,” the absence of a definite article before κέντρα is more easily explained as being due to the ambiguity created when the ה of the Hebrew definite article is elided when a preposition is prefixed to the definite noun.

Before surveying some of the exegetical gymnastics required to explain Luke’s reporting that Paul cited Jesus’ using a Greek aphorism, a comment on the adjective σκληρόν “hard” is in order. Martin Culy (2003: 495) noted that there

was an *implicit* verb used with the predicate adjective σκληρόν. He cited Stanley Porter (1994: 85) who argued that the nominative by itself can be used to form a nominal clause, like the ἄφωνος “is silent” in Acts 8:32. (In 26:14 the infinitive λακτίζειν “to kick” is also subject to an *implicit* verb.) The *implicit* verb would be one in the present tense, not a future tense. If the σκληρόν referred to a future situation one would expect to find σκληρόν ἔσται, the same phrase which appears in Deut 15:18 as the translation of the verb הַשְׁקֵי! “it will be hard,” not the adjective הַשְׁקֵי “(it is) hard.”

Although σκληρόν means “difficult, hard, harsh, unpleasant” (Arndt and Gingrich, 1957: 763; Liddell and Scott, 1966: 1612) the RSV (1952) and the NRS (1989) translated σκληρόν σοι as a verbal phrase “It hurts you,” and similarly the NET (1996) has “You are hurting yourself.” Surprisingly, the NLT (1996, 2004) paraphrased the five Greek words as “It is useless for you to fight against my will,” and Pervo’s paraphrase (2009: 623), “you can’t swim against the flow,” is even more surprising and well off target.

However, it is not surprising that the vulgarism in English slang which uses “prick” for the penis resulted in the termination of translating κέντρα as “pricks,” which had been the customary translation of κέντρα in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—appearing in these well known Bibles:

- Tyndale Bible (1534) “It is harde for the to kicke agaynste the pricke,”
- Bishops Bible (1595) “It is harde for thee to kicke agaynste the prickes,”
- Geneva Bible (1599) It is hard for thee to kicke against prickes,”
- King James Bible (1611) “*it is* hard for thee to kick against the prickes.

Contemporary translations now have the plural “goads” for the plural κέντρα. The Vulgate’s singular *stimulum* “goad” may account for Tyndale’s singular “pricke,” and it definitely accounts for the singular “goad” in the DRA (1899), as well as the singular “goad” in the ERV (1885), the NJB (1985) and the NAB (1986). Other English translations rightly render κέντρα as a plural, but take the liberty to make the indefinite κέντρα into a definite by translating it as “the goads.”

The proverbial phrase “kicking against the goad” is cited by Liddell and Scott (1966: 429, 1025) in their definitions of κέντρον “goad” and λακτίζω “to kick,” including its appearance in Acts 26:14.⁴ The classical Greek texts of the sixth to fifth centuries B.C. in which this proverb appears include:

- Pindar, *Pythian Odes* 2.95:⁵
One must not fight against a god, [89] who raises up some men's fortunes at one time, and at another gives great glory to others. But even this [90] does not comfort the minds of the envious; they pull the line too tight and plant a painful wound in their own heart before they get what they are scheming for. It is best to take the yoke on one's neck and bear it lightly; **kicking against the goad** [95] makes the path treacherous. I hope that I may associate with noble men and please them.
- Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1624:⁶
You speak like that, you who sit at the lower oar when those upon the higher bench control the ship? Old as you are, you shall learn how bitter it is [1620] at your age to be schooled when prudence is the lesson set before you. Bonds and the pangs of hunger are far the best doctors of the spirit when it comes to instructing the old. Do you have eyes and lack understanding? **Do not kick against the goads lest you strike to your own hurt.**
- Euripides, *The Bacchae*, 795:⁷
Pentheus, though you hear my words, you obey not at all. Though I suffer ill at your hands, still I say that it is not right

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for you to raise arms against a god, [790] but to remain calm. Bromius will not allow you to remove the Bacchae from the joyful mountains. . . . I'd sooner make an offering to that god than in some angry fit *kick at his goad*—a mortal going to battle with a god.⁸

Lothar Schmidt (1966: 666) in his comments on the use of κέντρον in the New Testament concluded,

It thus seems that Christ's warning to Paul not to attempt futile and harmful resistance takes the form of a suitable Greek proverb. *To be quite blunt, Paul or Luke puts a Greek proverb on the lips of Jesus. . . .* There is little point in labouring the minor flaw that a Greek proverb is put on the lips of one who speaks Hebrew or Aramaic. (italics added)

Schmidt rightly challenged the opinion of the scholars who argued that the plural κέντρα “goads”—which was required by the meter in *The Bacchae* but optional for Luke's prose—pointed to a direct quotation from *The Bacchae*.⁹ He surmised,

It might well be, then, that there is at least an allusion to the famous play. But this cannot be proved, since . . . the proverb had passed into the common stock of quotations of the educated Greek.

Because this proverb “does not occur at all in the Jewish sphere,” Schmidt, as noted above, attributed its quotation to Paul or Luke, rather than to Jesus himself.

Johannes Munck (1967: 242) translated, “It hurts you when you kick against the goad,” and stated

. . . the sentence is a very common Greek proverb which means: “from now on it will be difficult for you to kick against the goad,” or in other words: “the call of Christ will from now on constrain you.”

In this interpretation the plural κέντρα “goads” was translated unnecessarily as a singular and the adjective σκληρόν “hard”

became a verb in the future tense (*will be difficult / will constrain*) rather than being in the present tense.

William Neil (1981: 243) was of the opinion that the aphorism “kicking against the goad”

expresses vividly Paul’s growing doubts before his conversion as to the justice of his course of action in persecuting the Nazarenes, his increasing conviction that Stephen may have been right and himself wrong, and his redoubled fury against Christians in an attempt to kill his conscience.

Similar to the way that Schmidt challenged the opinion of the commentators who argued that the proverb was a direct quotation from *The Bacchae*, F. F. Bruce (1988: 466) challenged the scholarly opinions, like those of Lewis, that this proverb addressed the “prickings” of Paul’s uneasy conscience. His interpretation of Acts 28:14 was as follows:

This homely proverb from agricultural life has been thought to suggest that Paul had already begun to suffer from pricks of an uneasy conscience, from a half-conscious conviction that there was more in the disciples’ case than he was willing to admit. But there is no hint . . . he was subject to any such inward conflict. . . . The “goads” against which he was told it was now fruitless for him to kick were not the prickings of a disturbed conscience but the new forces which were now impelling him in the opposite direction to that which he hitherto pursued, the new “necessity” which was henceforth laid upon him (I Cor 9:16, [“. . . Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!]).¹⁰

Following the translations of the RSV, NRS, and NET, which refer to *σκληρόν* as “hurts/hurting,” some commentators have made the aphorism “it is hard to kick against the goads” speak to Saul’s experience of physical pain as a result of his persecution of Christians—despite the fact that Saul was untouched or oblivious to any goading directed at him by Christ or by Christians. As Ajith Fernando (1998: 296) rightly

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noted, “. . . while Saul was hitting the church, Jesus was actually feeling the pain.” Pharisees like Saul actually had an *easy* time hurting others, and it was easy for Saul to goad Christians into prisons and pits for execution by stoning. The goaded Christians (פְּרוֹשִׁים) did not kick at their goaders (פּוֹרְשִׁים). The Pharisees (פְּרוֹשִׁים) had convinced themselves they were on a godly mission to kill infidels—as required in the Torah (Exod 22:20, Deut 13: 1–20, and Deut 18:20) and exemplified by Moses and the Levites (Exod 32:25–29).

A glimpse, in chronological order, at some of the comments from over the past twenty years will suffice to show how varied have been the interpretations the aphorism “hard for thee against pricks to kick.” The first comment to be noted is that of Luke Johnson (1992: 435) who stated,

The idea is that God has been pushing Paul to become a Messianist and he has resisted. The phrase *sklēron soi* should not be read in the sense of “difficult,” however, but as pointing to Paul’s stubbornness in resisting the goad,¹¹ echoing the theme of “hardness” (*sklēros*) in Torah.

When it comes to interpreting σκληρόν as “hurt,” the comments of Ronald Witherup (1992: 82–83) are noteworthy:

In vv. 9–11 Paul describes his activities as opposing the name of Jesus, shutting up in prison many of the ‘saints’ (αγιών), participating in their condemnation to death, punishing them in synagogues, trying to make them blaspheme, raging in fury against them, and even persecuting them abroad. Thus, by this description the irony of Paul’s situation is even more prominent. He, who now identifies with ‘the saints’, is undergoing the very persecution which he himself had perpetrated prior to the Lord’s call on the road to Damascus. This also helps to explain the expansion of Jesus’ words to Paul in the form of a proverb. The saying, ‘It hurts you to

kick against the goads' (26.14), not only means that Paul cannot escape the power of God calling him to a mission, but that he will also suffer for the sake of that mission.

In the same year John Pohill (1992: 502–503) discounted any idea that Paul's "kicking against the goads" referred to his having a guilty conscience for persecuting Christians. He succinctly stated, "He was fighting the will of God (cf. Acts 5:39) . . . It as a futile, senseless task." A few years later Ben Witherington (1998: 743) also discounted the idea of Paul's having a guilty conscience and simply stated similarly, "It was fruitless for Paul to resist God."

Ajith Fernando (1998: 296, 595) again discounted any idea that Paul's "kicking against the goads" referred to his having a guilty conscience for persecuting Christians. He stated, as noted above, ". . . while Saul was hitting the church, Jesus was actually feeling the pain." and "it is now futile for him to try any longer to work against Christ as it would be for an ox to kick against the plowman's goad."

Joseph Fitzmyer (1998: 758), in agreement with F. F. Bruce, commented:

Though the risen Christ addresses Paul in Aramaic, he quotes a common Greek proverb, which is otherwise not found in Jewish literature. . . . So that from that moment on Paul is being pressed into the service of the risen Christ. It does not express a reflection on Paul's past life or conduct, or indicate a crisis of conscience.

Five years later Beverly Gaventa (2003: 343) noted that "The aphorism ["kicking against the goads"] reveals the crisis: Paul has been acting upon his *own* perception of God's will, all the time resisting God's will." Darell Bock (2007: 716) simply stated, "Saul is kicking against God's discipline and direction." J. Bradley Chance (2007: 489), in a slightly longer statement, concluded,

The implication is that God had other plans for Paul and Paul was only hurting himself to be resisting these by persecuting the very ones whose ranks God fully intended Paul to join. Commentators regularly point out that the expression was proverbial and it always has the meaning of resisting ones destiny or fighting the will of the gods. . . . [Paul] was fighting the will of God. . . It was a futile, senseless task.

Most recently David Peterson (2009: 666) commented,

This is not a reference to Paul's guilty conscience, but a way of speaking about the Lord's prodding him in another direction which he had no choice but to follow—the path of proclaiming this same Jesus he had been attacking.

CONCLUSION

None of the commentators cited in the above paragraphs ventured to speculate about what Jesus actually said to Saul in Hebrew. Most were content to assert that, although the Greek text has τῆ Ἑβραϊδι διαλέκτῳ “in the Hebrew dialect,” Jesus spoke to Saul in Aramaic.¹² Some were convinced that Paul or Luke added the Greek proverb to the words of Jesus to impress their respective audience, rather than Jesus' having used the aphorism in a reprimand or warning to Paul.

An Aramaic text underlying the Greek σκληρόν σοι πρὸς κέντρα λακτίζειν “hard for you against pricks to kick” could have approximated the Peshitta which reads קשא הו לך למבעטו לעוקסא and can only mean “it is hard for you to kick against a crook” (though the English “crook” has two meanings). The Hebrew translations of Isaac Salkinson (1886), קִשָּׂה לְךָ לְהַכּוֹת הַדֶּרְבֵּן אַחֲוֹר,¹³ and Franz Delitzsch (1937), קִשָּׂה לְךָ לְבַעַט בַּדֶּרְבֵּנוֹת,¹⁴ can only mean, respectively, “it is hard for you to strike the goad backwards,” and “it is hard for you to kick against the goads.”

Once the דרבנות / דרבן “goad/goads” is replaced by the synonymous פרש / פרשים, ambiguity is instantaneous for an unpointed פרש (*scriptio defectiva* and *plene*) could be interpreted as פֶּרֶשׁ “excrement,” פֶּרֶשׁ “horse,” פֶּרֶשׂ “horseman,” פֶּרֶשׁ “ploughshare,” פֶּרֶשׂ “goad,” פִּירוּשׁ “commentary,” פֶּרֶשׁ “seceder,” פֶּרֶשׂ “Pharisee”—not to mention the verbs פֶּרֶשׂ “to spread” and פֶּרֶשׂ “to declare.”

In Acts 26:14, when Jesus addressed the zealous Pharisee Saul, whom he was about to convert and to commission, he made a simple statement of fact: “*It is hard for you to reject the Pharisees.*” It was not an aphorism about kicking goads. The aphorism was created when the ambiguous פרשים was misread by Luke as פֶּרֶשׂ rather than the intended פֶּרֶשׂ. The move from his being a Pharisee to being a Christian required Saul to *reject* his “Pharisee families” (Acts 23:6, οὐδὲς Φαρισαίου) in the same manner in which Jesus required all of his disciples to “*forsake* father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and his own life” (Luke 14:26).¹⁵

This stipulation in Luke 14:26 is the basis for my adding the parenthetical gloss “[*but you must*]” to my translation of Acts 24:16 once the Greek κέντρα “goads” is translated back into Hebrew as פרשים and this פרשים is then read as פֶּרֶשׂ (= פֶּרֶשׂ) “Pharisees.”

“*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*
It is hard for you to reject the Pharisees [but you must].”
 And I [Saul] said, “*Who are you, Lord?*”
 And the Lord said, “*I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.*
But rise and stand upon your feet; for I have appeared to
you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and bear
witness to the things in which you have seen me
and to those in which I will appear to you.”

NOTES

1. The quotation of Lev 19:18 appears also in Matthew 19:19, 22:39, Mark 12:31, Romans 13:9, and James 2:8.
2. Click [HERE](#) to view online the full volume entitled *Clarifying Baffling Biblical Passages*, or click [HERE](#) to view only Chapter 31, “The Misreading which Led to the ‘Hate’ in Luke 14:26–27,” where other possible readings of ישנה / ישנא are recognized.
3. Schmidt (1966: 666) noted four Hebrew / Aramaic terms for a goad or the point of a goad: מַרְדֵּעַ (Jastrow 837), מִסָּא (Jastrow 803), דֵּרְבָן (Jastrow 320), and זִקְתָא (Jastrow 411). But Schmidt overlooked the מִלְמַד in Judges 3:31 and the פִּרְשָׁא in its Targum. The Hebrew *verb* פָּרַשׁ “to pierce, to sting” appears in Prov 23:32, and it is reasonable to assume that the *noun* פִּרְשׁ “goad, stinger” was also used in Hebrew.
4. This proverb is also noted by Arndt and Gingrich (429, 464) and interpreted as a figure of speech for the unreasonable resistance of one who resists the divine call, as in the Greek text of Acts 26:14 (and in the Latin manuscripts *ar, c, h, l, p, ph*, of Acts 9:5, as well as in Georgian, Slavonic, and Ethiopic translations of Acts 9:5).
5. Click [HERE](#) to view online the full text of Pindar’s *Phythian Odes* edited by Steven J. Willett.
6. Click [HERE](#) to view online the full text of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, translated and edited by Herbert Weir Smyth.

7. Click [HERE](#) to view online the full text of Euripides' *Bacchae*, edited by T. A. Buckley.

8. See Lothar Schmidt (1966: 665) for a list of the most important examples of this proverb in early Greek literature.

9. Note that Arndt and Gingrich (1957: 429) called attention to the plural κέντρον in *The Bacchae*, line 795.

10. Note also Bruce's statement (1988: 491),

But the goad kept on pricking his conscience, until at last the truth that Jesus was risen indeed burst forth into full realization and acknowledgment as He appeared to Paul in person and spoke to him by name outside the walls of Damascus.

11. On God's use of a goad, note *Psalms of Solomon* 16:4, "He jabbed me as a horse is goaded to keep it awake; my savior and protector at all times saved me" (Wright 1985: 665). Philo, *On the Decalogue*, 87, spoke of the goading done by one's conscience:

"for the conscience . . . being itself at the same time an accuser and a judge; . . . as a judge it teaches, admonishes, and recommends the accused to change his ways, . . . but if he be not able to do so, then he wages an endless and implacable war against him, never quitting him neither by day, nor by night, but pricking him, and inflicting incurable wounds on him, until he destroys his miserable and accursed life."

Click [HERE](#) and then select Book 26 to view Charles. D. Yonge's complete translation of Philo's *The Decalogue*.

12. Click [HERE](#) to view online a brief article focused of mistakes made when identifying Hebrew and Aramaic words or speech.

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13. Click [HERE](#) to view Salkinson's translation online (PDF page 197).

14. Click [HERE](#) to view Delitzsch's translation online (*Acts* PDF page 57).

15. See the initial paragraph of this chapter and note 1, above.