

## XIV

### THE ORIGIN OF JESUS' “MESSIANIC SECRET”

Joseph Fitzmyer (1979: 29, 30, 45) writing about “The Languages of Palestine in the First Century A.D.” noted that Hebrew did not wholly disappear from Palestine, either when Aramaic had become the more common language or when Palestinian Jews gradually began to use Greek. . . . There were areas or pockets in Palestine, and perhaps even strata of society, where Hebrew continued as a spoken language too. . . . Since, however, the majority of sectarian literature was composed in Hebrew, this seems to mean that it was being spoken.<sup>1</sup>

In response to Birkeland’s assertion (1954: 16) that Hebrew was the language of Jesus because it remained the language of the common people, Fitzmyer stated, “That Hebrew was being used in first-century Palestine is beyond doubt, as we have been saying; but this fact is scarcely sufficient evidence for maintaining that Jesus therefore made use of it. We would have to look for further indications of this fact.”<sup>2</sup>

This study on “The Origin of Jesus’ ‘Messianic Secret’” provides some of the “further indications” which Fitzmyer wanted to see. When relevant texts from the Gospels are translated back into Hebrew, ambiguities appear as to whether a ש should be read as a שׁ or a שׂ, or whether a אָל should be read as אֵל “not” or אִל “indeed,” or if פֶּן equals פֶּן “lest” or פֶּן “would that.” It will be shown that the ‘Messianic Secret,’ no doubt, stemmed from mis-readings of consonantal Hebrew texts, coupled with consistent mistranslations into Greek of several words in Jesus’ Hebrew vocabulary—one of which never made it into any standard Hebrew-English lexicon until the publication of *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (1993–1998). As Grintz (1960: 32–47) argued that Hebrew was the language of the first edition of Josephus’ *Bellum Judaicum*

and the original language of the *Gospel according Matthew*, the arguments which follows support Grintz's conclusion about the *Gospel of Matthew*, as well as Birkeland's assertion (1954: 16) that Hebrew was the language of Jesus.

### THE EMPHATIC *LAMED*

As early as 1894, when Paul Haupt made the following statement, the emphatic *lamed* was recognized as occurring in biblical Hebrew,

A comprehensive study of the use of the ל *praefixum* in the Old Testament will no doubt reveal a considerable number of cases where the ל is not the preposition but the emphatic particle ל = Arabic *la* and Assyrian *lû* 'verily' . . . .<sup>3</sup>

Since this statement was made the emphatic *lamed* has been detected in most Northwest Semitic dialects<sup>4</sup> and a host of scholars have added to Haupt's original list of the particle's appearance in Hebrew.<sup>5</sup>

Although the Arabic cognate ل (*la*) "indeed" appeared in E. W. Lane's *Arabic-English Lexicon* (1893: 3006),<sup>6</sup> the emphatic ל/לָ/לָהּ/לָהֶּם "indeed" were not cited in the widely used lexicons of Brown, Driver, and Briggs (BDB, 1906) and Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm (KBS, 1969-1990). The Aramaic cognate of the emphatic ל/לָ/לָהּ/לָהֶּם does not appear in Jastrow's *Dictionary of the Targumin and Talmud* (1903) nor in Payne Smith's *Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (1903). However, David Clines and his fellow lexicographers wisely included the emphatic ל/לָ in *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, which was published in five volumes in 1993-1998.<sup>7</sup>

The unpointed emphatic ל/לָ "verily" is a homograph of the preposition ל "to" and the negative particle לָ "not." In speech there would have been no ambiguity between לָ

“verily, indeed” and לֹא “no, not.” But once the particles were written without vowels there was instant ambiguity. As a consequence, the emphatics לְ/לֹא/לְמָה dropped out of usage in post-Biblical Hebrew and disappeared from the memory of the scribes who vocalized and standardized the text of the Hebrew Bible. From the Septuagint translations of the 3rd–1st centuries B.C. until the 20th century A.D. every emphatic לְ/לֹא/לְמָה in the Hebrew text was vocalized and interpreted as the preposition לְ, or as the negative particle לֹא, or as the interrogative לְמָה “why?” But, as will become evident in this study, the emphatics לְ/לֹא/לְמָה appeared also in Shem Tob’s *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*—although they were not recognized as such in George Howard’s translation—and were spoken by Jesus and understood by his hearers.<sup>8</sup>

Twenty-seven occurrences of the emphatic לְ and לֹא are cited in *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. Over the years I have identified the emphatics לְ/לֹא/לְמָה in twenty-one more verses in the Hebrew scriptures and in six verses in Shem Tob’s *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*.<sup>9</sup> These twenty seven occurrences are cited in the following list—with an endnote for each directing one to the publication where the new translation was first proposed. The emphatics לְ/לֹא/לְמָה in these verses are cited as found in the MT with a traditional translation—which read the לְ/לֹא/לְמָה as a preposition, a negative particle, and an interrogative—followed then by the new translation with the emphatic element cited in italics.

GENESIS 18:13

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָהָם לְמָה זֶה צָחֻקָה שָׂרָה

Yahweh said to Abraham, “Why this? Sarah laughed.”

Yahweh said to Abraham, “*Indeed* this (happened).

Sarah had (her) period.”<sup>10</sup>

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GENESIS 39:6

וְלֹא־יָדַע אִתּוֹ מֵאוֹמָה

And he knew not with him anything.

And he would *indeed* entrust to him anything.<sup>11</sup>

EXODUS 6:3

וְשְׁמִי יְהוָה לֹא נִוְדַעְתִּי לָהֶם

By my name Yahweh I did not make myself known.

By my name Yahweh I did *indeed* make myself known.<sup>12</sup>

NUMBERS 21:15

וְנִשְׁעַן לְגִבּוֹל מוֹאָב

It leans to the border of Moab.

We easily entered the *very* borders of Moab.<sup>13</sup>

JOSHUA 10:13

וְלֹא־אָץ לָבוֹא כִּיּוֹם תָּמִים

It did not hurry to set for about a whole day.

*Indeed* it hasten to set as though it were a whole day.<sup>14</sup>

JOSHUA 24:10

וְלֹא אָבִיתִי לְשָׁמַעַ לְבַלְעָם

I was not willing to listen to Balaam.

I was *indeed* willing to listen to Balaam.<sup>15</sup>

JUDGES 5:11

אִז יֵרְדוּ לְשָׁעָרִים עִם־יְהוָה

Down to the gates marched the people of Yahweh.

When *indeed* the storms would descend from Yahweh.<sup>16</sup>

JUDGES 5:17

וְדָן לָמָּה יָגוּר אֲנִיּוֹת

And Dan, why did he abide with the ships?

Then Dan *indeed* attacked ships.<sup>17</sup>

JUDGES 5:25

(MT) בְּסַפֵּל אֲדִירִים הִקְרִיבָה חֲמֹאָה

(McDaniel) בְּסַף לְאֲדִירִים הִקְרִיבָה חֲמֹאָה

She brought him curds in a lordly bowl.  
In a *truly* magnificent goblet she brought cream.<sup>18</sup>

II CHRONICLES 25:16

חַדְל־לָךְ לָמָּה יִכּוּדָךְ

Stop! Why should you be struck down?  
Stop! You will *surely* be struck down!<sup>19</sup>

PSALM 2:1

לָמָּה רָגְשׁוּ גּוֹיִם

Why do the nations rage?  
*Indeed* the nations rage!<sup>20</sup>

PSALM 22:1

אֱלֹהֵי אֱלֹהֵי לָמָּה עֲזַבְתָּנִי

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
My God, my God, you have *surely* forsaken me!<sup>21</sup>

PSALM 19:4

לְשֶׁמֶשׁ שָׁם־אָהָל בָּהֶם

In them he has set a tent for the sun.  
*Verily* the scorching sun shines in them.<sup>22</sup>

PROVERBS 30:1

נֶאֱמַר הַגִּבּוֹר לְאִיתִיָּאל לְאִיתִיָּאל וְאֶכֶל

The man says to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ucal.  
The oracle of the man: *Surely* there is a God!  
*Surely* there is a God! I will be safeguarded.<sup>23</sup>

SONG OF SOLOMON 1:3

לְרִיחַ שְׁמֹנֶיךָ טוֹבִים

Your anointing oils are fragrant.  
*Truly*, the scent of your perfume is very delightful.<sup>24</sup>

LAMENTATIONS 3:37–38

אֲדַנִּי לֹא צָנָה

מִפִּי עֲלִיוֹן לֹא תֵצֵא הַרְעוֹת וְהַטּוֹב

## THE ORIGIN OF JESUS'

The Lord has not commanded it.  
Out of the mouth of the Most High  
there shall not come forth evil and good.

*Verily* the Lord has ordained it!  
*Verily* from the mouth of the Most High  
there shall come forth evil and good.<sup>25</sup>

LAMENTATIONS 4:3

בַּת־עַמִּי לְאֶכְזָר

The daughter of my people is cruel.  
The daughter of my people is *truly* cruel.<sup>26</sup>

EZEKIEL 20:25

נָתַתִּי לָהֶם חֻקִּים לֹא טוֹבִים  
וּמִשְׁפָּטִים לֹא יָחִיו בָּהֶם

I gave them statutes that were not good,  
and ordinances wherein they should not live.  
I gave them statutes that were *indeed* good,  
and ordinances wherein they could *indeed* live.<sup>27</sup>

EZEKIEL 32:27

וְלֹא יִשְׁכְּבוּ אֶת־גְּבוּרִים נִפְלִים

Nor do they lie beside the fallen heroes.  
They are *indeed* buried with the fallen heroes.<sup>28</sup>

AMOS 7:14

לֹא־נָבִיא אֲנִי וְלֹא בֶן־נְבִיא אֲנִי

I am not a prophet, nor am I the son of a prophet.  
*Indeed* I am a prophet, but not of the corps of prophets.<sup>29</sup>

SHEM TOB HEBREW MATTHEW 10:17

לֹא יִמְסְרוּ אֶתְכֶם בַּקְּהִלּוֹתָם

They will not deliver you up in their congregations.  
They will *surely* deliver you up in their congregations.<sup>30</sup>

SHEM TOB HEBREW MATTHEW 12:16

ויצום לאמר לא יגלוהו (mss G)

ויצום לאמר שלא יגלוהו (mss H)

He commanded them saying  
that they should not reveal him.

He commanded them saying  
they should *indeed* reveal him.”<sup>31</sup>

SHEM TOB HEBREW MATTHEW 18:10

למלאכיהם הם רואים תמיד בני אני שבשמים

Their angels always see the sons of my father in heaven.  
*Verily* their angels are reporting to my father in heaven.<sup>32</sup>

SHEM TOB HEBREW MATTHEW 19:4

הלא קראתם לעושיהם מקדם

Have you not read that he who made them of old . . .  
Have you not read that *indeed* he who made them of old . . .<sup>33</sup>

SHEM TOB HEBREW MATTHEW 19:14

שלא יכנס במלכות שמים אם לא כאלה

One will not enter the kingdom of heaven  
except (he shall be) like these.

*Indeed* one will enter the kingdom of heaven  
if one (is) *indeed* like these.<sup>34</sup>

SHEM TOB HEBREW MATTHEW 19:22

הלך זעף לפי שלא היה לו קרקעות רבות

He went away angry because he did not have much property.  
He went away angry because he *indeed* had much property.<sup>35</sup>

SHEM TOB HEBREW MATTHEW 27:46

אלי אלי למה עזבתני

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
My God! my God! *Oh how* you made me suffer!<sup>36</sup>

**THE EMPHATIC LAMED  
NEGATES THE MESSIANIC SECRET**

As noted above, in speech לֹ and לָ would never be easily confused. But once written לֹ was always read as a negative, the ל was always read as a preposition, and the למה was always read as an interrogative.<sup>37</sup> This ambiguity of the consonantal לֹ—which according to Howard’s translation of Matt 19:22 in Shem Tob’s *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* turned the *very rich* (πλούσιος σφόδρα) young ruler of Luke 18: 18–25 into a man *without much* property—contributed no doubt to the inconsistencies in what Jesus said to those whom he healed. According to the Greek texts he commanded some to keep their healing a secret—a command which was immediately disobeyed—whereas others who were healed received no such strict instruction. Indeed, Jesus’ “messianic secret” may well be the by-product of a misreading of all of the לֹ’s in the Hebrew *Vorlagen* of Jesus’ sayings as “not” rather than reading some of them as לָ “verily/indeed.” Thus, a survey of the core texts contributing to the claim that Jesus called for his messianic ministry to be kept a secret is in order.

The first text tells of the healing of a leper, found in Matt 8:1–4, Mark 1:40–44, and Luke 5:12–15. The Greek text of Matt 8:4 has the phrase Ὁρα μηδενι εἰπης<sup>38</sup> “Behold, you may tell no one,” which can be translated back into Hebrew as ראה לא תגד לאיש. If this approximates what Jesus said, the translator read this as ראה לא תגד לאיש “See! You must not tell anyone.” But what Jesus probably said was ראה לא תגד לאיש “See! *Indeed* you must tell everyone!”<sup>39</sup>

The synoptic account in Mark 1:44 has a double negative, reading Ὁρα μηδενι μηδεν εἰπης, “Behold you may say nothing to no one.” This can be translated back into Hebrew as ראה לא תגד לאיש הרבר. If so, this was read by Mark

as **רְאֵה לֹא תִגְדַּל לְאִישׁ הַדְּבָר** “See! You may not tell anyone a thing!” But Jesus probably said **רְאֵה לֹא תִגְדַּל לְאִישׁ הַדְּבָר** “See! *Indeed* you must tell everyone the matter!” The command in the synoptic account in Luke 5:14 has only two words, μηδενι ειπεν (meaning literally “to no one to tell”), which can be translated back into Hebrew as **לֹא תִגְדַּל לְאִישׁ**. Luke obviously read this as **לֹא תִגְדַּל לְאִישׁ** “Tell not to anyone,” whereas Jesus probably said **לֹא תִגְדַּל לְאִישׁ** “*Indeed*, you must tell everyone.”

The story in Matt 9:27–31 of the healing of the two blind men ends with Jesus commanding the men, Ὁρατε μηδεις γινωσκατω “See, to no one be it known.” But in the similar story in Matt 20:29–34 of Jesus healing two blind men, and in the story in Mark 10:46–52 and Luke 18:35–43 of blind Bartimaeus’ being healed, Jesus does not command those healed to tell no one. This inconsistency can, no doubt, be credited to the ambiguity of the particle **לֹא**. Jesus probably said **רְאוּ לֹא יִדְעֵ לְאִישׁ**, which when properly interpreted would have been vocalized as **רְאוּ לֹא יִדְעֵ לְאִישׁ** “See! *Indeed*, let it be known to everyone.” But the command was misread as **רְאוּ לֹא יִדְעֵ לְאִישׁ** “See! Let it not be known to anyone.”

According to Matt 12:9–14, the man with the withered hand whom Jesus healed on a Sabbath day was *not* commanded to tell no one. But the “many” whom Jesus healed after this (Matt 12:15) were told, μη φανερον αυτον ποιησωσω “they should not make him known.” In the synoptic account in Mark 3:7–12, the unclean spirits were ordered not to cry out and announce “You are the Son of God.” But there was no such silence required by those who had been healed.

Again, the differences may be due to the ambiguity of the particle **לֹא**. The phrase μη φανερον αυτον ποιησωσω, “they must not make him known,” in Matt 12:15 could well be

a translation of the phrase **לֹא יַגְלוּ אֹתוֹ** if it was read as **לֹא יִגְלוּ אֹתוֹ**. But what was said was probably **לֹא יִגְלוּ אֹתוֹ**, “*Indeed they should make him known!*” Otherwise it is very difficult to reconcile Matthew’s quotation of Isaiah 42:1–4, which announced that God’s Servant will proclaim justice to the Gentiles, if the Servant himself actually forbade everybody from making him known to the Gentiles.

According to Mark 1:34 Jesus did not allow the outcast demons to speak” (οὐκ ἤφιεν λαλεῖν τὰ δαιμόνια); and according to Mark 3:12 the unclean spirits who proclaimed “You are the Son of God!” were “strictly ordered not to make him known” (μὴ αὐτὸν φανερὸν ποιήσωσιν). These prohibitions are quite understandable in light of the Pharisees’ charge that “it is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons” (Matt 12:24). Pro-Jesus testimonials by demons or demoniacs would only have added fuel to the fire of the Pharisees. Jesus’ silencing the demons had nothing to do with trying to maintain an alleged “messianic secret.”

The closing verses in the Greek synoptic accounts of the healing of Jarius’ daughter differ with reference to (a) the healing being kept a secret, or (b) its being widely publicized. The account in Matt 9:18–26, ends as follows:

**וַתֵּצֵא שְׂמוּעָהּ בְּכָל הָאֶרֶץ הַהִיא**

καὶ ἐξῆλθεν ἡ φήμη αὕτη εἰς ὅλην τὴν γῆν ἐκείνην

And the report of this went through all that land.

By contrast the account in Mark 5:21–43 ends this way:

καὶ διεστείλατο αὐτοῖς πολλὰ

ἵνα μηδεὶς γνοῖ τοῦτο

But he commanded them strictly  
that no one should know it.

The account in Luke 8:40–56 ends with a similar prohibition:

ὁ δὲ παρήγγειλεν αὐτοῖς μηδενὶ εἰπεῖν τὸ γεγονός

But he ordered them to tell  
no one what had happened.

The prohibitions in Mark 5:43 and Luke 8:56 could well go back to a Hebrew text which read וַיִּצַו אוֹתָם זֶהִיר לֹא יוֹדַע and was interpreted to mean וַיִּצַו אוֹתָם זֶהִיר לֹא יוֹדַע הַדְּבָר לְאִישׁ “But he commanded them strictly: the matter must not be made known to anyone.” But the text should have been read and interpreted as

וַיִּצַו אוֹתָם זֶהִיר לֹא יוֹדַע הַדְּבָר לְאִישׁ

And he commanded them strictly:

“*Verily!* Let the matter be known to everybody!”

The account in Matt 9:26, “And the report of this went through all that land,” indicates just how obedient Jarius and his wife were in obeying Jesus’ command *to publicize the healing of their daughter*. This interpretation removes the inconsistency in the Greek texts of Jesus’ commanding Jarius and his wife to tell no one about their daughter’s being healed, but the woman who was healed just moments earlier of her hemorrhaging and the large crowd that witnessed her being healed were free to tell what happened to anyone and everyone. If Jesus had wanted to keep his messianic ministry a secret he surely would have required a vow of silence from everyone. Instead of attracting crowds he could have withdrawn into the privacy he enjoyed between the ages of twelve to thirty.

The account in Mark 7:32–37 of the healing of the man who was deaf and dumb ends with this prohibition:

καὶ διεστείλατο αὐτοῖς ἵνα μηδενὶ λέγωσιν

Then he ordered them that they should tell no one.

The *Vorlage* was probably וַיִּצַו אוֹתָם שֶׁלֹא יִגִּידוּ לְאִישׁ, in which case the *שֶׁלֹא* was misread as שֶׁלֹא “that not,” rather than being read as intended as שֶׁלֹא “that *indeed*.” Once this change is recognized, verse 7:36a (“he ordered them that they

should *indeed* tell everyone”) and verse 7:36b (“and the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it”) are in complete harmony. There was no disobedience by those who “were astounded beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done all things well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak’” (7:37).

In the account of this healing in Matt 15:29–31 there is no hint of any secrecy to be maintained or any disobedience to be tolerated. The crowds testified to what they saw and praised God:

And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the dumb, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, So the crowd marveled as they saw the mute speaking, the crippled restored, and the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel. (15:30–31)

After Jesus healed the deaf and dumb man in Decapolis (Mark 7:32–37), which was well publicized, he went on to Bethsaida where he healed a blind man (Mark 8:22–26). In the Greek text<sup>40</sup> this healing story ends with a compound command:

μηδὲ εἰς τὴν κώμην εἰσέλθης  
καὶ μηδενὶ εἴπησ εἰς τὴν κώμην  
Do not go into the village;  
and do not tell anyone in the village.

The Hebrew *Vorlage* behind these commands was probably

לֹא תִבֵּא בְכַפֵּר וְלֹא תִגִּיד לְאִישׁ בְּכַפֵּר

which was read and interpreted by Mark as if Jesus said

לֹא תִבֵּא בְכַפֵּר וְלֹא תִגִּיד לְאִישׁ בְּכַפֵּר.

But what Jesus meant required the text to be interpreted as

לֹא תִבֵּא בְכַפֵּר וְלֹא תִגִּיד לְאִישׁ בְּכַפֵּר

*Indeed*, you must go into the village;  
and you must *indeed* tell everyone in the village.

The account in John 9:1–43, telling of Jesus' healing near

the pool of Siloam the man who was blind from birth, contains no hint that the healing was to be kept a secret. Quite the contrary, the healing occurred at the public pool without Jesus’ being present. But the man announced to all that Jesus was his healer (9:11). Shortly thereafter, when Jesus again met the healed man after the man’s being challenged by the Pharisees because his healing occurred on the Sabbath, Jesus announced to the healed man—within earshot of some Pharisees—that he was “the Son of Man” (τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου).<sup>41</sup> This led the healed man to worship Jesus publicly before those Pharisees. For John Jesus’ healing ministry was not subject to any “messianic secret.”

But the Greek synoptic accounts which tell of Peter’s declaring “You are the Christ” end with a clear call for secrecy:

- Matt 16:20, μηδενὶ εἴπωσιν ὅτι αὐτός ἐστιν ὁ χριστός “they should tell no one that he was the Christ”;
- Mark 8:30, μηδενὶ λέγωσιν περὶ αὐτοῦ “to no one may they tell about him”;
- Luke 9:21, παρήγγειλεν μηδενὶ λέγειν τοῦτο “he commanded they should tell this to no man.”

Matt 16:20 in Shem Tob’s *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* reads

אז צוה לתלמידיו לבל יאמרו שהוא משיח

which Howard translated as “Then he commanded his disciples not to say that he is the Messiah.” But the לבל יאמרו, meaning literally “to not they should say,” is awkward. One expects an infinitive after the adverb בל “not,” rather than a verb in the imperfect. Idiomatic Hebrew appears once this לבל is emended to לכל, which changes the meaning completely:

אז צוה לתלמידיו לכל יאמרו שהוא משיח

“then he commanded his disciples (that)  
to all they should tell that he is Messiah.”

In John 11:27 Martha made her confession of faith (before her brother Lazarus was raised from the dead) saying,

Ναὶ κύριε, ἐγὼ πεπίστευκα ὅτι σὺ εἶ ὁ Χριστὸς  
ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἐρχόμενος.

“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ,  
the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Jesus was satisfied upon hearing Martha’s confession of faith and proceeded to prove *publicly* that he was the resurrection and the life: “he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.” Martha was *not* admonished to keep her confession of faith a secret.<sup>42</sup>

The change of the כּ to a כ in the Shem Tob text of Matt 16:20, whereby Jesus ordered the disciples *to tell all that he is the Messiah*, brings uniformity to Jesus’ response to Peter’s affirmation, “You are the Christ!” and to Martha’s affirmation, “You are the Christ!” The uniform response can be expanded to include Mark 8:30 once it is recognized that the Greek μηδενὶ λέγωσιν περὶ αὐτοῦ, “to no one may they tell about him,” reflects a misreading of לא יגידו עליו in the Hebrew *Vorlage* as לא יגידו עליו “and he commanded them not to tell about him,” which should have been read as לא יגידו עליו “and he commanded them to *indeed* tell about him.” Similarly, Jesus’ uniform response can be expanded to include Luke 9:21 once it is recognized that the Greek παρήγγειλεν μηδενὶ λέγειν τοῦτο “he commanded they should tell this to no man” reflects a misreading of לא יגידו הדבר לאיש in the Hebrew *Vorlage* as לא יגידו הדבר לאיש, which should have been read as לא יגידו הדבר לאיש, “he commanded they should *indeed* tell the matter to everyone.”

AN ARAMAIC PARTICLE AND ARABIC COGNATE  
NEGATE THE MESSIANIC SECRET

Jesus’ warnings in Matt 8:4, השמרו לך פן תגיד לאדם, “Beware lest you tell a man,” and in 9:30 השמרו פן יודע הרבר, “Beware lest the matter be made known,” may also have been misread and mistranslated.. The פן was read by the Greek translators and by George Howard as the conjunction פן “lest.” But it can also be read as the defectively spelled particle פון “would that,” which introduces a subjunctive, as in Targum Onkelos Num 11:29, פון דיהון קל עמיה דיי, נביין “*Would that* all of the people of the Lord were prophets” (Jastrow 1903: 1143).<sup>43</sup> Recognizing this Aramaism in Jesus’ Hebrew speech helps to negate the idea that he was trying to maintain a “messianic secret”—but this Aramaism does not negate the conclusion that Jesus spoke in Hebrew.

A second misreading in these verses involves the ambiguous ש, which could be either the ש (sh/š) or the ש (s). The imperative השמר in Matt 8:4 and 9:30 can be read as either השמר “Be on guard!” or as השמר “Strive vigorously!” The stem שמר is the cognate of the Arabic شمر (*šamara*) which Lane (1872: 1595–1596) defined as follows:<sup>44</sup>

- שמר (*šamara*) “*he strove, or labored, exerted himself vigorously or his power or ability, employed himself vigorously or laboriously or with energy or took extraordinary pains and was quick in [the affair or the religious service]”;*
- the noun שמר (*šimr<sup>un</sup>*) “*one who acts with a penetrative energy, or who is sharp, vigorous, or effective”;*
- the noun שמרי (*šammariy<sup>un</sup>*) “*a man penetrating, or acting with a penetrative energy, or sharp, vigorous, and effective,*

in the performing of affairs, and expert, or experienced”;

- the noun שמיר (*šimir*<sup>m</sup>) “one who strives, labors, or exerts himself; who employs himself vigorously, or laboriously, or with energy in the performance of affairs.” (Lane’s italics)

Thus, the הַשְׁמִירוֹ פֶּן יִדְעַ הַדְּבָר in Matt 9:30 can be translated as “Strive vigorously! Would that the matter become known.” Thus, in *obedience* to this command, Matt 9:31 states, “As for them, they went out and made him known in all that land.” The same command and response fits the narrative about the leper who was healed (Matt 8:2–4, Mark 1:40–45, and Luke 5:12–16). In *obedience* to the command, הַשְׁמִיר הַלְּאָדָם [לְךָ] פֶּן תִּגִּיד, “Strive vigorously! Would that you declare to the people,” the leper “went out and began to talk freely about it” (Mark 1:45), and “so much the more the report went abroad concerning Him” (Luke 5:15).

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Without knowing that the archaic English word *prevent* meant “to precede” (*pre*+*venire*), expositors of Psalm 119:147, “I prevented the dawning of the morning” (KJV) and “I prevented the dawning of the day” (DRA), could misinterpret this verse to mean that the psalmist claimed *to have stopped the sun from rising*. Similarly, without knowing that the archaic Hebrew particle לֹא meant “indeed” (לֹא) as well as “not” (לֹא), exegetes past and present have turned Hebrew emphatic affirmatives into highly problematic negatives—such as (1) Yahweh’s allegedly telling Ezekiel (20:25), “I gave them [the Israelites] statutes that were *not* (לֹא) good and ordinances by which they could not (לֹא) have life,” and (2) Jesus’ telling Jarius “that no one should know this (Mark 5:

43), nevertheless the report of Jesus’s healing of Jarius’s daughter ends up in Holy Scripture! Simply by reading אָל as אָל rather than אָל most verses in the Hebrew *Vorlagen* of the Gospels which call for secrecy can be transformed into a call for publicity. The emphatic אָל may have been more widely used in the Galilean dialect of Hebrew, the dialect of Jesus and Peter (Matt 3:13, Mark 14: 70). Thus, Mark and Luke—as well as the translators of Matthew’s Hebrew Gospel into Greek<sup>45</sup>—were apparently more familiar with the Judean dialect which very rarely used the emphatic אָל. (This would account for the absence of the emphatic אָל in the Mishnaic and Rabbinic dialects which grew out of the Judean dialect.)

The defective spelling of פֿון (=פֿון) “would that” as פֿן (which was misread as פֿן “lest”) in the Hebrew *Vorlage* utilized by the Gospel writers, along with the misreading of a כ as a כ, and a ש as ש rather than ש, contributed to the creation of the alleged “messianic secret.”

The Hebrew texts of Jesus’ sayings, as reconstructed above, called for those healed to give great publicity to their being healed. This interpretation restores a consistency of the healing texts with the accounts in Matt 11:2–6 and Luke 7:18–23, which tell of John the Baptist who having learned of Jesus’ performing “the work of the Christ” (τὰ ἔργα τοῦ Χριστοῦ) sent to inquire, “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” Jesus’ responded, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.” Jesus did not command John the Baptist to keep this report on the “work of the Christ” a secret.

Rather Jesus gave a blessing: και μακάριός ἐστιν ὃς ἐὰν μὴ σκανδαλισθῆ ἐν ἐμοί, “And blessed is he who keeps

from stumbling over Me” (NAS Matt 11:6, Luke 7:23)—which recognizes that many knew of “the work of the Christ.” Keeping it a secret was impossible. Moreover, if the Hebrew *Vorlage* of the blessing was **אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִהְיֶה כֶּשֶׁל בִּי**, it could mean, “*Blessed is he who truly has trust in me!*” The **לֹא** was the emphatic **לֹא**, and the **כֶּשֶׁל** was not **כָּשַׁל** “to stumble,” but **כְּשָׁל** “confidence, trust” a variant spelling of the **כָּסַל** in Psalm 78:7, **וַיִּשְׁיִמוּ בֵּאלֹהִים כָּסָלָם**, “that they might put their trust in God.”<sup>46</sup> Jesus’ Hebrew benediction, which lay behind the Greek benediction in Matt 11:6 and Luke 7:23, was an indirect invitation for John the Baptist to trust him as did the crowds who “were astounded beyond measure” (Mark 7:37).

It was the ambiguities found in un-vocalized Hebrew texts (in the Galilean dialect) which caused some understandable mis-readings to come from those who translated the Hebrew into Greek. While the consonantal Hebrew text called for those healed to publicize Jesus’ healing power, a simple error in vocalization (opting for an *o* vowel rather than a *u* vowel) produced Greek texts with inconsistent prohibitions against publicity. The inconsistency finds no easy explanation when working only with the Greek texts and the Greek language.

However, speculation about the Hebrew wording which lay behind the Greek translations has been quite productive and leads to my conclusion that Jesus had nothing to do with any “Messianic Secret.” This “Messianic Secret” was the gift of translators—including Mark, Luke, and whoever translated Matthew’s Hebrew Gospel.<sup>45</sup> As noted initially, Fitzmyer (1979: 45) thought Jesus spoke in Aramaic and stated, “We would have to look for further indications of this fact [that Jesus made use of Hebrew].” Presented above are the “further indications” Fitzmyer was looking for. The retroversion of

Jesus’ prohibitions into Hebrew produced fourteen verses having an unrecognized emphatic לְ/אֵל/לְמַהֲ. These fourteen emphatics in the Synoptic Gospels can be added to the twenty-seven emphatic אֵל and לְ cited in *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* and to the twenty-one I found over the years and have listed above.<sup>47</sup>

NOTES

1. In response to J. T. Milik’s assertion “that Mishnaic [Hebrew] was the normal language of the Judean population in the Roman period” (1959: 31, 139), Fitzmyer stated,

While it seems apparent that certain pockets, or perhaps strata, of the population in the early Roman period were using Hebrew and that this language became enshrined in the Mishnah in a still more developed form, as of its codification ca. 200, I find it difficult to think of Hebrew as “the normal language of the Judaeen population” in the *whole* Roman period. (1979: 45, Fitzmyer’s italics.)

2. Fitzmyer (1979: 7–8) favored Aramaic as the language most commonly used by Jesus. He provided (page 22, notes 36 and 37) a bibliography of some of the authors debating whether Jesus used primarily Aramaic or Hebrew.

3. “A New Hebrew Particle,” *Johns Hopkins University Circulars* 13, No. 104 (1894) 107–108.

4. See for AKKADIAN: W. von Sodon, *Grundriss der akkadischen Grammatik* (Rome 1952) §81f, 121c; for AMORITE: Herbert Huffmon, *Amorite Personal Names in the Mari Texts: A Structural and Lexical Study* (Baltimore 1965) 223; Moran, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, 60, 69; William Albright, *JBL* 69 (1950) 389; for ARAMAIC: H. Ingholt,

*Rapport préliminaire sur sept campagnes de fouilles à Hama en Syrie* (1932–1938) (København 1940) 117, n.4; Donner-Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften* (Wiesbaden 1964), II, 211; for PHOENICIAN: Johannes Friedrich, *Phönizisch-punische Grammatik* (AnOr 32; Pome, 1951) § 257<sup>c</sup>; G. A. Cooke, *A Text-Book of Northwest Semitic Inscriptions* (Oxford 1903) 47; for PUNIC: H. Berthier – R. Charlier, *Le Sanctuaire punique d'El Hofra à Constantine* (Paris 1955) 33–34, 139; for UGARITIC: Cyrus Gordon *Ugaritic Textbook* (1965: 76, 425 #1339); Albrecht Goetze, "The Tenses of Ugaritic," *JAOS* 58 (1938) 292.

5. See I. M. Casanowicz, "The Emphatic Particle ֿ in the OT," *JAOS* 16 (1896) CLXVI–CLXXI; Henry P. Smith, "Old Testament Notes," *JBL* 24 (1905) 30; Israel Eitan, "Le particule emphatique 'la' dans la Bible," *Revue des Études Juives Historia Judaica* 74 (1922) 1–16; *idem*, "Hebrew and Semitic Particles," *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 45 (1928) 202; William Albright, "The Old Testament and Canaanite Language and Literature," *CBQ* 7 (1945) 24; Mitchell Dahood, "Canaanite and Phoenician Influence in Qoheleth," *Biblica* 33 (1952) 192–194; F. Nötscher, "Zum emphatischen Lamed," *VT* 3 (1953) 372–380; Dahood, "Two Pauline Quotations from the Old Testament," *CBQ* 17 (1955) 24; *idem*, "Enclitic Mem and Emphatic Lamedh in Psalm 85," *Biblica* 37 (1956) 338–340; *idem*, *Proverbs and Northwest Semitic Philology* (Rome 1963) 19; *idem*, *Psalms I* (Anchor Bible 17A, New York 1966) 143, 158, 188; John Bright, *Jeremiah* (Anchor Bible 21, New York 1965) 333; and H. Neil Richardson, "A Critical Note on Amos 7:14," *JBL* 85 (1966) 89; A. C. M. Blommerde, *Northwest Semitic Grammar and Job*. (BibOr 22, Rome 1969) 31; Thomas McDaniel, "Philological Studies in Lamentations, I and II." *Biblica* 49

(1968) 27–53, 199–220; Dahood, “The Emphatic *Lamedh* in Jer 14:21 and Ezek 34:29,” *CBQ* 37 (1975) 341–342; C. F. Whitley, “Some Remarks on *lû* and *lo*,” *ZAW* 87 (1975) 202–204; and John Huehnergard, “Asseverative *\*la* and Hypothetical *\*lu* and *law*,” *JAOS* 103 (1983) 569–593.

6. Click [HERE](#) to view the citation on Lane, p. 3006, col. B.

7. Clines, David J. A. Editor. 1993–1998. *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. 5 Volumes. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. Click [HERE](#) to view [Clines\\_495\\_lu\\_indeed.pdf](#).

8. On April 25, 2007, Bart Ehrman, author of the *New York Times* best seller *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (Harper Collins, 2005), was the guest lecturer at Stanford University for the Heyns Lecture Series (available online at <http://video.google.com/videoplay/?docid=397006836098752165> [[click here](#)]). The question and answer period which followed the lecture is also online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TffAToyoJg&feature=related> [[click here](#)]). Ehrman stated, “They didn’t speak Hebrew in Jesus’ day; they were reading Hebrew. Jesus could probably read Hebrew, I think, but it wasn’t a spoken language in Palestine in his time.” But this opinion has been challenged (see note 2, above). Many were able to speak Hebrew but were illiterate, unable to read texts which were written without vowels. For a glimpse of the ongoing debate about Hebrew in Jesus day, check out the web page of the Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research [[click HERE](#)] and the Hebraic Roots Movement [[click HERE](#)].

9. Howard, George. 1987. *The Gospel of Matthew according to a Primitive Hebrew Text*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press. Revised and retitled in 1995 as *The Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press). In the

preface to the second edition, Howard stated,

The main thrust of this second edition is to demonstrate that the Hebrew Matthew contained in Shem-Tob's *Evan* (sic) *Bohan* predates the fourteenth century. In my judgment, Shem-Tob the polemist did not prepare this text by translating it from the Latin Vulgate, the ByzantineGreek, or any other known edition of the Gospel of Matthew. He received it from previous generations of Jewish scribes and tradents."

10. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/MBS_11_Sarah_Laugh.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/MBS\\_11\\_Sarah\\_Laugh.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/MBS_11_Sarah_Laugh.pdf). See page 173, which is page 8 in the PDF file.

11. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CMBBP_ONE.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CMBBP\\_ONE.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CMBBP_ONE.pdf). See page 7, which is page 8 in the PDF file.

12. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/MSB_2_Ineffable.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/MSB\\_2\\_Ineffable.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/MSB_2_Ineffable.pdf). See page 72, which is page 2 in the PDF file.

13. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Deborah_Chapter_1.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Deborah\\_Chapter\\_1.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Deborah_Chapter_1.pdf). See page 11, which is page 4 in the PDF file.

14. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CBBP_Chapter_10.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CBBP\\_Chapter\\_10.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CBBP_Chapter_10.pdf). See page 86, which is page 7 in the PDF file.

15. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CMBBP_SIX.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CMBBP\\_SIX.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CMBBP_SIX.pdf). See pages 64–65, which are pages 4–5 in the PDF file.

16. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/6Chapter.pdf) to open <http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/6Chapter.pdf>. See page 156, which is page 52 in the PDF file.

17. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/6Chapter.pdf) to open <http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/6Chapter.pdf>. See page 181, which is page 77 in the PDF file.

18. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/6Chapter.pdf) to open <http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/6Chapter.pdf>. See page 210, which is page 106 in the PDF file.

19. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/6Chapter.pdf) to open <http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/6Chapter.pdf>. See page 182, which is page 78 in the PDF file.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CMBBP_EIGHT.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CMBBP\\_EIGHT.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CMBBP_EIGHT.pdf). See page 114, which is page 6 in the PDF file.

23. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CBBP_Chapter_15.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CBBP\\_Chapter\\_15.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CBBP_Chapter_15.pdf). See page 129, which is page 6 in the PDF file.

24. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CBBP_Chapter_17.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CBBP\\_Chapter\\_17.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CBBP_Chapter_17.pdf). See pages 147–148, which are pages 6–7 in the PDF file.

25. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Biblica1968_199-220.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Biblica1968\\_199-220.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Biblica1968_199-220.pdf). See pages 206–208, which are pages 8–10 in the PDF file.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CMBBP_SIXTEEN.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CMBBP\\_SIXTEEN.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CMBBP_SIXTEEN.pdf). See pages 262–264, which are pages 7–9 in the PDF file.

28. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CMBBP_SIXTEEN.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CMBBP\\_SIXTEEN.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CMBBP_SIXTEEN.pdf). See page 265, which is pages 10 in the PDF file.

29. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CBBP_Chapter_24.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CBBP\\_Chapter\\_24.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CBBP_Chapter_24.pdf). See pages 224–225, which are pages 5–6 in the PDF file.

30. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4_ShemTob+.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4\\_ShemTob+.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4_ShemTob+.pdf). See pages 128–129, which are pages 135–136 in the PDF file.

31. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4_ShemTob+.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4\\_ShemTob+.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4_ShemTob+.pdf). See pages 114–115, which are pages 121–122 in the PDF file. Manuscript Add. 26964 reads לבל יגלוהו ויצום לאמר לבל יגלוהו and mss E and F read לבלתי instead of לבל.

32. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4_ShemTob+.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4\\_ShemTob+.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4_ShemTob+.pdf). See pages 9 and 185, which are pages 16 and 192 in the PDF file.

33. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4_ShemTob+.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4\\_ShemTob+.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4_ShemTob+.pdf). See page 190, which is page 197 in the PDF file.

34. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4_ShemTob+.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4\\_ShemTob+.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4_ShemTob+.pdf). See page 197, which is page 204 in the PDF file.

35. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4_ShemTob+.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4\\_ShemTob+.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4_ShemTob+.pdf). See pages 200–201, which are pages 207–208 in the PDF file.

36. Click [HERE](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4_ShemTob+.pdf) to open [http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4\\_ShemTob+.pdf](http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Volume4_ShemTob+.pdf). See pages 31–41, which are pages 38–48 in the PDF file, noting especially pages 40–41.

37. An analogy would be the English “Woe!” and “Wow!” when transliterated in Hebrew as וו “Woe!” and a וּו “Wow!” The וּו without a vowel is ambiguous.

38. Ὅρα appears in Matt 8:4, Mark 1:41, Heb 8:5, and Rev 19:10 and 22:9.

39. For אִישׁ “everyone,” note Gen 10:5, Exo 12:3, Job 42:11, and I Chron 16:3, אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאִישׁ וְעַד־אִשָּׁה, לְכֹל־לְכֹל, which is gender inclusive.

40. For the textual variants in this verse click [HERE](#) to view p. 155 in *The Greek New Testament*, edited by Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini, Bruce Metzger, and Allen Wikgren (New York: American Bible Society).

41. Click [HERE](#) to view online an in depth study entitled “Adam, Enosh, and ‘The Son of Man,’” which is Chapter 25 in my online Volume III, entitled *Clarifying More Baffling Passages*, for which click [HERE](#).

42. The resurrection of Lazarus was reported to the Pharisees and to the high priest Caiphas. They responded not with a profession of faith but with a desire to to put Jesus to death (John 11:45–53).

43. The MT reads וּמִי יִתֵּן כָּל־עַם יְהוָה נְבִיאִים, which was translated in the Septuagint as καὶ τίς δώσει πάντα τὸν λαὸν κυρίου προφήτας.

44. Note that the sibilants usually shift with Hebrew-Arabic cognates: the שׁ = Arabic ش (š) and the שׂ = Arabic س (s). The Arabic ث (t) appears as a שׁ in Hebrew and as a ת in Aramaic.

45. See Howard (1987/1995: 155–160) for a summary of the debate concerning Papias' statement that "Matthew collected the oracles in the Hebrew language, and each interpreted them as best he could."

46. For the interchange of ס and שׁ, note Ezra 4:5 where סְכָר appears for שְׂכָר "to hire," and Ecc 1:17 where שְׂכָלוֹת appears for סְכָלוֹת "folly."

47. The only Aramaic emphatic ל that I am aware of is the one cited by Donner and Röllig (1964: 211) which appears in the name אֲדֻנְלָרֵם "the Lord is truly elevated," found on a graffiti at Ḥama, in Syria, dated to the 9th–8th century B.C.