

MISCELLANEOUS  
BIBLICAL STUDIES

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LOST LEXEMES CLARIFY  
MARK 1:41 AND JOHN 3:3

Thomas F. McDaniel, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus  
Palmer Theological Seminary  
Wynnewood, Pennsylvania

©

2009

All Rights Reserved

## XV

### LOST LEXEMES CLARIFY MARK 1:41 AND JOHN 3:3–4

As early as 1894, when Paul Haupt made the following statement, the emphatic *lamedh*, a lost lexeme, was initially recognized in biblical Hebrew,

A comprehensive study of the use of the ל *prae*fixum 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>1</sup>

A hundred years later the Hebrew emphatic *lamedh* was finally cited in a standard Hebrew-English lexicon, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, edited by David Clines.<sup>2</sup> As demonstrated in Chapter 14, the Hebrew emphatic ל/א/ל/מזה ל was used by Jesus but was misread as the *negative* particle or an interrogative by those who—past and present—translated his Hebrew into Greek, thereby creating the alleged “Messianic Secret.” Without the recovery of the lost lexeme ל/א/ל/מזה ל, coupled with the recognition that Jesus used Hebrew as well as Aramaic, the enigma of Jesus’ telling only a *few* out of *all* those whom he had healed to keep their healing a secret would remain a mystery.

Semitic cognates provided the clues for the recovery of the forgotten emphatic *lamedh*; and thanks to Arabic cognates other lost Hebrew lexemes have been recovered which clarify what Jesus actually said and what was said about him. Some words in Jesus’ Galilean dialect were forgotten by those who spoke and perpetuated the Judean dialect. Perhaps within the next hundred years the lost Galilean words will find their rightful place in the Hebrew lexicons of tomorrow.

The two lost Hebrew lexemes introduced here are הַמַּל “to be angry” and עָלַל “to do again, to do a second time.” The

former addresses the Greek textual variants which report that Jesus *became angry* with the leper whom he healed (Mark 1:41, but the anger is not mentioned in Matt 8:3 or Luke 5:13). The latter focuses on John 3:3, where Jesus tells Nicodemus that *he must be born again*.

### MARK 1:41

Bart Ehrman, in his *New York Times* best seller entitled *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*,<sup>3</sup> chose the textual variant in Mark 1:41 as his initial example for illustrating how “most English translators have chosen the wrong reading and so presented a translation not of the original text but of the text that scribes created when they altered the original” (2005: 132). In Mark 1:41 fifty-three manuscripts and codices have  $\sigma\pi\lambda\alpha\chi\chi\nu\sigma\theta\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ , “having compassion” to describe Jesus’ response to the leper’s request, “If you will, you can make me clean”. But Ephraem (fourth century), five manuscripts (Codex Bezae from the sixth century [= D], and the Old Latin manuscripts *a*, *d*, *ff*<sup>2</sup>, and *r*<sup>1</sup>), have  $\acute{o}\rho\gamma\iota\sigma\theta\epsilon\iota\varsigma$  “becoming angry” as Jesus’ initial response to the leper’s request (Aland 1968: 123, noting that the Old Latin mss. *b* omits the  $\acute{o}\rho\gamma\iota\sigma\theta\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ ). Ehrman (2005: 133–135) was convinced that  $\acute{o}\rho\gamma\iota\sigma\theta\epsilon\iota\varsigma$  “becoming angry” was the original reading which was changed by unknown scribes long ago to  $\sigma\pi\lambda\alpha\chi\chi\nu\sigma\theta\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ , “having compassion.” His reasoning was as follows:

The question to be asked is this: which is more likely, that a scribe copying this text would change it to say that Jesus became wrathful instead of compassionate, or to say that Jesus became compassionate instead of wrathful? Which reading better explains the existence of the other? When seen from this perspective, the latter is obviously more likely. The

reading that indicates Jesus became angry is the “more difficult” reading and therefore more likely to be “original” . . . What is striking in the stories [of Mark 9] is that Jesus’s evident anger erupts when someone doubts his willingness, ability, or divine authority to heal. Maybe this is what is involved in the story of the leper [in Mark 1] as well. As in the story of Mark 9, someone approaches Jesus gingerly to ask: “If you are *willing* you are able to heal me.” Jesus becomes angry. *Of course* he’s willing, just as he is able and authorized. He heals the man and, still somewhat miffed, rebukes him sharply and throws him out. [¶] There’s a completely different feel to the story, given this way of construing it, a construal based on the text as Mark appears to have written it. Mark, in places, portrays an angry Jesus.

A year later, in his *Studies in th Textual Criticism of the New Testament*<sup>4</sup> (2006: 95, 120–141, 330) Ehrman suggested that the scribes may well have changed Jesus’ ὀργισθεῖς “becoming angry” to σπλαγχνισθεῖς “having compassion” due to a fear “that the pagan opponents of Christianity like Celsus, who were known to be pursuing the Gospels for incriminating evidence against the divine founder of the faith, might find here ammunition for their charges.”

Ehrman noted that Jesus did not know Greek or Latin but spoke in Aramaic, with “the probability that he was able to read Hebrew.”<sup>5</sup> That being the case, Jesus’ being “misquoted” probably occurred when his statements were first translated from Aramaic—and I would insist from Hebrew also—into Greek. The misquotations would be the gifts of early translators, not later scribes or copyists. But Ehrman, with few exceptions, refrained from speculating about the early oral traditions and written texts of what Jesus said. The lost Aramaic/Hebrew texts of Jesus’ sayings would have had an abundance of ambiguous homographs because all of Jesus’

words would have been written without vowels, and possibly there were no spaces between the words.

As noted, fifty-three Greek manuscripts of Mark 1:41 read  
καὶ σπλαγχνισθεὶς ἐκτείννας τὴν χεῖρα αὐτοῦ ἤψατο  
καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ, Θέλω, καθαρῶσθαι

which can be translated back into Hebrew to read

ויחמל וישלח ידו נגע בו ואמר רוצה אני טהר.

If the first word, ויחמל, is read as the *Qal* imperfect וַיִּחְמַל the Greek text and this Hebrew text are correctly translated as

*“And moved with compassion,  
He stretched out His hand, and touched him,  
and said to him, ‘I am willing; be cleansed!’”*

Moreover, the ὀργισθεὶς “being angry”—found in codex D, in four Old Latin manuscripts, and in Ephraem—is also a *perfectly correct* translation of the Hebrew text as reconstructed here once the initial ויחמל is read as וַיִּחְמַל, a *Niph<sup>c</sup>al* imperfect. The Hebrew חמל is a homograph of two different verbs. There is חמל, stem I, “to have compassion,” which appears in Jer 21:7, לֹא-יָחֹס עֲלֵיהֶם וְלֹא יַחְמֵל וְלֹא יִרְחַם, “he shall not spare them, neither have compassion, nor have mercy.”<sup>6</sup> This חמל is the cognate of the Arabic حمل (*ḥama-la*) “to accept responsibility, to accept the trust” (Lane 1865: 647; BDB 328). But there was also חמל, stem II, “to be angry,” the cognate of Arabic حمل (*ḥamala*), stem II, which in forms 1 and 8 means “he became angry” (Lane 1865: 647; Hava 1915: 144).<sup>7</sup> In speech the *Qal* וַיִּחְמַל “he had compassion” could not be confused with the *Niph<sup>c</sup>al* וַיִּחְמַל “he became angry.” But the ambiguous consonantal ויחמל could mean either, which is probably why, in the parallel texts in

Matt 8:3 and Luke 5:13, there is no mention of either anger or compassion. This ambiguity about the meaning of **לַחַמַּל** in the Hebrew source used by Matthew and Luke caused them simply to ignore the word—another example of “when in doubt leave it out.”

Working strictly with the Greek textual variants, Ehrman (2006: 126, 313) concluded, “Thus it is hard to understand why Matthew and Luke would have removed *σπλαγχνισθεῖς* from the account of Jesus healing the leper but easy to see why they might have removed *ὀργισθεῖς*.”

Writing in reference to the Gospel of John, Ehrman (2005: 61) conjectured,

John no doubt had sources for his account—possibly a source that narrated Jesus’ signs, for example, and a source that describes his discourses . . . It is possible, though,” that John actually produced several different versions of his Gospel.

The same would hold true for Mark. In one version Mark translated the **לַחַמַּל** as *καὶ ὀργισθεῖς* “being angry” and in another version he opted for *καὶ σπλαγχνισθεῖς* “and moved with compassion.” Either way he honestly translated what he saw at a particular moment, but there is no way of telling which version came first.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, there is no need to speculate as did Ehrman (2006: 138, 141) that,

Mark described Jesus as angry, and, at least in this instance, *scribes took offense*. This comes as no surprise: apart from a fuller understanding of Mark’s portrayal, Jesus’ anger is difficult to understand. . . . Jesus’ anger in this instance did not seem to fit, and *so the text was altered*. It had been changed previously by the prescribal copyists, Matthew and Luke, who omitted his anger; and *it was changed by the scribes themselves*, who transformed his anger into compas-

sion. . . . My point is that Christian scribes who wanted to defend Jesus’s character against the assaults of hostile pagan critics may have had real-life motivations *for changing the texts of the Gospels* in places where Jesus did not appear . . . to be portrayed as one who merited the appellation “Son of God.”<sup>9</sup> (McDaniel’s italics)

Too the contrary, the differences in the manuscripts in this case go back to the author, not to scribes or copyists. It is analogous to my changing my mind about the meaning of the phrase **וְיָרַד שְׂרִיד לְאֲדִירִים** in Judges 5:13. In the LXX this became τότε κατέβη κατάλειμμα τοῖς ἰσχυροῖς, “then went down the remnant to the strong.” But I first translated the Hebrew phrase as “when the truly noble ones went down to assist” (1983: 130, 200–202). Then I changed my mind and translated it as “when the *caravan-leader* went forth against the nobles” (2003: 161–164). Both translations are in circulation. When it came to the ambiguous **וַיְהִי** in Mark’s Hebrew source, Mark simply changed his mind without appreciating the problem he was creating for his readers once two versions of his work were copied and in circulation.

### JOHN 3:3

Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μή τις γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν,  
οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ.

Verily, verily, I say unto you,  
except one be born from above,  
he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Friedrich Büchsel (1964: 378)<sup>10</sup> listed four different meanings of the Greek ἄνωθεν: (a) “from above,” as in the Septuagint of Job 3:4 and James 1:17, 3:15, 3:17; (b) “from an earlier period,” as in Acts 26:5; (c) “from the first,” as in Luke

1:2; and “anew, a second time,” as in Gal 4:9. For Büchsel recourse to an underlying Hebrew suggested definition (a) because מְלִמְעָלָה has this meaning. For him the suggestion that both (a) and (d) were meant “is both superfluous and unprovable”—thereby disagreeing with C.K. Barrett (1955: 171), who noted that the ἄνωθεν “is capable of two meanings and here [in John 3:3] it probably means both.”

Raymond Brown (1966: 130) noted in his commentary on John that

The Gr. *anōthen* means both “again” and “from above” and the double meaning is used here as part of a technique of misunderstanding. Although in vs. 4 Nicodemus takes Jesus to have meant “again,” Jesus’ primary meaning in vs. 3 was “from above.” This is indicated from the parallel in iii 31, as well as from the two other Johannine uses of *anōthen* (xix 11, 23). *Such a misunderstanding is possible only in Greek; we know of no Hebrew or Aramaic word of similar meaning which would have had this spatial and temporal ambiguity.* Once again, it is not impossible that the second meaning “again” is intended by John on a secondary, sacramental level. (McDaniel’s italics)

Thus, for Brown, the author of the Gospel must receive credit for using the *double entendre*, ἄνωθεν, not Jesus.

According to Ehrman,<sup>11</sup> also, Jesus probably did not say what is recorded on John 3:3 as his initial answer to Nicodemus. In response to a question addressed to him in a discussion period following a lecture at Stanford University, in 2007, Ehrman stated,

There are sayings which cannot be retroverted back into Aramaic—which means Jesus probably didn’t say them . . . The word ἄνωθεν is interesting because it actually has two meanings. It can actually mean “from above” or it can mean

“a second time” . . . You cannot reproduce this *double entendre* in Aramaic (nor in Hebrew).

Since Jesus did not speak in Greek credit for the use of the *double entendre* ἄνωθεν—in agreement with Brown—must be given to John rather than to Jesus.

However, in disagreement with Brown, Ehrman, and a number of their colleagues, the Greek phrase ἐὰν μή τις γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν, in John 3:3, can be translated back into Hebrew with an ambiguity which approximates that of a *double entendre*. The second lost Hebrew word introduced on the first page of this chapter is עָלַל, stem IV, “to do again, to do a second time,”<sup>12</sup> and its by-form עָלָה, stem II.<sup>13</sup> The Arabic cognate of עָלַל, stem IV, is *عَل* (*‘alla*) “a second time” (Lane 1874: 2123).<sup>14</sup>

One of the noun formations for ע"ע lexemes (i.e., stems in which the second and third letters are the same, like עָלַל) comes with a prefixed מ and an affixed ה, with a doubling of the stem’s middle letter and the loss of the stem’s third letter. A good example is the מִשְׁכָּוָה “desolation” in Ezek 6:14, which appears along with שְׂמִימָה “waste.” Both are from the same stem, שָׁמַם “to be desolate” (BDB 1030–1031). When the ע"ע stem עָלַל appears in the same noun formation as מִשְׁכָּוָה “devastation” it would become מִעָלָה and would mean “a second time” and could be used adverbially. Without vowels this “adverb” would appear in a text as מַעְלָה, which is a homograph of the adverb מִעָלָה “above.” In this case the ambiguity was not in Nicodemus’ misreading of מַעְלָה, but it was a problem with his hearing correctly what Jesus said—was it מִעָלָה “above” or מַעְלָה “again?”

George Lamsa (1967: 1054), commenting on the translation of the  $\alpha\nu\omega\theta\epsilon\nu$  in the Peshiṭta as  $\text{ܡܢ ܕܝܪܝܫ}$  (*men dēriš*), stated, “Born again in Northern Aramaic means to change one’s thoughts and habits. Nicodemus spoke Southern Aramaic and hence did not understand Jesus.” I doubt, however, that the problem was caused by different Aramaic dialects. The similarity in sound of  $\text{ܡܢ ܥܠܐ}$  (*mē<sup>c</sup>allâ*) “again” and  $\text{ܡܢ ܥܠܐ}$  (*ma<sup>c</sup>alâ*) “above” was close enough for anyone to mishear. The real dialect problem was apparently in Hebrew with the word  $\text{עָלַל}$  “to do a second time,” which was used by Jesus in his Galilean dialect.” It did not survive, however, in the Judean dialect which developed into Rabbinic Hebrew.

Consequently,  $\text{עָלַל}$  “to do again,” became a lost lexeme. But the word has been recovered thanks to cognates.  $\text{ܡܢ ܥܠܐ}$  has two meanings because it comes from two different stems. There is not a *double entendre* here. But the unvocalized  $\text{ܡܢ ܥܠܐ}$ —without the benefit of cognates—could easily be mistaken for a *double entendre*: “above” and “again.”

The  $\text{ܡܢ ܥܠܐ}$  used by Jesus was undoubtedly  $\text{ܡܢ ܥܠܐ}$  “above.” Nicodemus simply misunderstood this one word of Jesus. Subsequently, so also have the exegetes who interpreted the  $\alpha\nu\omega\theta\epsilon\nu$  in John 3:3 as John’s editorial addition to the story or translated the  $\alpha\nu\omega\theta\epsilon\nu$  into Hebrew as  $\text{ܡܢ ܡܢ ܥܠܐ}$  “from above” rather than  $\text{ܡܢ ܥܠܐ}$  “above,” which only coincidentally is a homograph of  $\text{ܡܢ ܥܠܐ}$  “again.”<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

1. “A New Hebrew Particle,” *Johns Hopkins University Circulars* 13, No. 104 (1894) 107–108.
2. Clines, David J. A. Editor. 1993–1998. *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. 5 Volumes. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. Click [HERE](#) to view the citation of the emphatic *lamedh* on page 495.
3. New York: Harper Collins, 2005.
4. Boston: Brill, 2006.
5. On April 25, 2007, Bart Ehrman was the guest lecturer at Stanford University for the Heyns Lecture Series. This lecture is available online: <http://video.google.com/videoplay/?docid=397006836098752165> [[click HERE](#)]. The question and answer period which followed the lecture is online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TffAToyojg&feature=related> [[click HERE](#)].
6. See also Gen 19:16, Exo 2:6, I Sam 23:21, and Isa 63:9.
7. Click [HERE](#) to view Lane, page 647b “anger” and [HERE](#) to view Lane, page 648c “anger.”
8. The harsh words of Jesus appearing in the Greek text of Mark 1:43–44 led Ehrman to comment (2005: 136),  
 They are harsh terms used elsewhere in Mark always in contexts of violent conflict and aggression (e.g., when Jesus casts out demons). It is difficult to see why Jesus would harshly upbraid this person and cast him out if he feels compassion for him; but if he is angry, perhaps it makes better sense.

But in Chapter 14, pp. 233–234, it was argued that the harsh words were due to mistranslations of Hebrew words. Note also pp. 113–117 in Volume IV, *Clarifying New Testament Aramaic Words and Names and the Shem Tob Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*, available on line by clicking [HERE](#).

9. See also Ehrman 2005: 200–2001.

10. Büchsel, Friedrich. 1964. ἄνωθεν. In *TDNT*, I: 378.

11. See above, note 5.

12. עָלַל, stem I, means “to act severely, wantonly” with a by-form עָוַל “to act wrongfully”; stem II means “to act or play the child,” with a by-form עוּל “to give suck”; and stem III means “to insert, to thrust in.”

13. The by-forms are comparable to כָּלַה “to complete” and כָּלַל “to complete” (BDB 477, 480).

14. Click [HERE](#) to view Lane, page 2123a “second time.”

Click [HERE](#) to view Lane, page 2123b “second time.”

Click [HERE](#) to view Lane, page 2124a “second draught.”

Click [HERE](#) to view Lane, page 2124c “second drink.”

15. Jastrow (1903: 817) translated לְמַעְלָה as “on high, in heaven,” which parallels the use of عَلِيَيْنَ (*‘illayyîna*) in the *Qurʾan* (*Sura* 83:18–19), which is a place in the Seventh Heaven to which ascend the souls of the believers (Lane 1874: 2125).