

MISCELLANEOUS  
BIBLICAL STUDIES

CHAPTER NINE

NOTES ON  
JOHN 19:39, 20:15  
AND MATT 3:7

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## IX

### NOTES ON JOHN 19:39, 20:15 AND MATT 3:7

Raymond Brown (1966: cxxix) noted that the presence of Aramaisms or Hebraisms in the Greek text of the Gospels

is not sufficient to prove that a Gospel was first written in one of the two languages; at most it may prove that certain sayings once existed in Aramaic or Hebrew, or that the native language of the evangelist was not Greek.

A case in point are the three accounts in the Gospel of John dealing with Nicodemus (John 3:1–21, 7:37–52, and 19:38–42). There is good reason to conclude that at least the third account was initially written in Hebrew. The primary clues are hidden in Greek variants of John 19:39, which reads as follows in most manuscripts and in the Peshiṭta:

ἦλθεν δὲ καὶ Νικόδημος,  
ὁ ἐλθὼν πρὸς αὐτὸν νυκτὸς τὸ πρῶτον,  
φέρον μίγμα σμύρνης καὶ ἀλόης  
ὡς λίτρας ἑκατόν.

And there came also Nicodemus,  
he who at the first came to him by night,  
bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes,  
about a hundred pounds.

#### Peshiṭta

בָּרְבִּינָא רְבִּינָא בְּרִי רְבִּינָא אֲרִי רְבִּינָא  
בָּרְבִּינָא אֲרִי רְבִּינָא אֲרִי רְבִּינָא  
בָּרְבִּינָא אֲרִי רְבִּינָא אֲרִי רְבִּינָא  
בָּרְבִּינָא אֲרִי רְבִּינָא אֲרִי רְבִּינָא

ואתא אף ניקדמוס הו דאתא הווא  
 מן קדים לות ישוע בלליא  
 ואיתי עמה<sup>1</sup> חונטתא דמורא ודעלוי  
 איך מאא ליטריין:

And there came also Nicodemus,  
 who at first had come to Jesus by night;  
 and he brought with him a mixture<sup>1</sup> of myrrh and aloes,  
 about a hundred pints.<sup>2</sup>

The list of the major textual variants in John 19:39, as cited  
 by Aland (1968: 406–407), is as follows:

- μίγμα p<sup>66vid</sup> N<sup>c</sup> A D<sup>supp</sup> K L X Δ Θ Π 054 f<sup>1</sup> f<sup>13</sup> 28  
 33 565 700 1009 1010 1071 1195 1216 1239 1241 1242<sup>c</sup>  
 1365 1546 1646 2148 Byz Lect it<sup>a, aur, b, c, f, ff<sup>2</sup>, n, q, r<sup>1</sup></sup> vg  
 syr<sup>p, h</sup> cop<sup>sa, bo</sup> arm geo
- ἔλιγμα N\* B W cop<sup>bo<sup>ms</sup></sup>
- σμίγμα Ψ 892 2174 l<sup>47</sup> (a variant of σμῆγμα)
- σμῆγμα 1242\* l<sup>181</sup> syr<sup>pal</sup> (a variant of σμῆγμα)
- *malagmani* it<sup>e</sup> (= μάλαγμα, *malagmam*).<sup>3</sup>

These variants can be translated (in sequence) as: “mixture,”  
 “packet,” “ungent,” “ointment,” and “emollient.”<sup>4</sup>

J. H. Bernard (1928: 653) called attention to the μεῖγμα  
 “mixture” in Sirach 38:7; and for the variants σμίγμα and  
 σμῆγμα he suggested, “Probably the original was CMIΓMA  
 which could easily be corrupted to EΛIΓMA.” Brown (1970:  
 940) acknowledged Bernard’s suggestion but accepted the  
 μίγμα in the majority of manuscripts as original, noting that  
 the ἔλιγμα in Vaticanus and Sinaiticus\* “is the more difficult  
 reading and might well be favored if it were really mean-

ingful.” The fact is that all the Greek variants cited here are contextually meaningful. Thus, there is no reason to conclude that scribal corruptions were involved in producing these Greek variants. Rather the variants reflect differences in the Hebrew *Vorlage* involving (1) סַק / סֶק “sack, bag, package,”<sup>5</sup> (2) סוּף “ointment, ungent”<sup>6</sup> (3) אֶסוּף “flask,”<sup>7</sup> and (4) מִסְךָ “mixture, mix.”<sup>8</sup>

Assuming a Hebrew *Vorlage* the following identifications can easily be made:

- μίγμα “mixture” (p<sup>66vid</sup> א<sup>c</sup> A D<sup>supp</sup> K L X Δ Θ Π etc.) translated מִסְךָ,
- ἔλιγμα “packet” (א\* B W cop<sup>bo<sup>ms</sup></sup>) translated סֶק,<sup>9</sup>
- σμίγμα “ointment” (Ψ 892 2174 I<sup>47</sup>) translated סוּף,
- σμηγμα “ointment” (1242\* I<sup>81</sup> syr<sup>pal</sup>) translated סוּף,
- *malagmani* [= *malagam*] “ointment” (it<sup>e</sup>) translated סוּף.

These identifications suggest the following reconstruction of the Hebrew *Vorlage* of this verse:

וְבָא נִקְדִימוֹן אֲשֶׁר לְפָנָיו בָּא אֶל־יֵשׁוּעַ בְּלֵילָה  
 מִבֵּיא אֶסוּף סוּף  
 מִסְךָ מֵר־וֹאֵה לֹת כְּלִיטְרָא  
 מֵאֵהָהָ:<sup>10</sup>

And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night,  
 came bringing a flask<sup>11</sup> of ointment,  
 —a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a liter—  
 moaning/wailing.

The following haplographies (highlighted in red underline) in the phrase מִסְךָ סוּף אֶסוּף “flask ointment mixture”

produced the variants found in the Greek texts noted above:

מִבִּיא אֶסוּד סוּךְ מִסַּךְ “bringing a mixture”

מִבִּיא אֶסוּד סוּךְ מִסַּךְ “bringing a packet”

מִבִּיא אֶסוּד סוּךְ מִסַּךְ “bringing ointment.”

Recognition of another haplography or a defective spelling of the last word of the verse, (מִזְאָדָה) “bemoaning,” which mistakenly became מִזְאָה “one hundred”), clarifies a second crux about the actual volume or weight of the spices Nicodemus brought.

Raymond Brown (1970: 941, 960) noted,

The Roman pound was about twelve ounces, so that this would be the equivalent of about seventy-five of our pounds; but the amount is still extraordinary. . . . This Johannine penchant for extravagant numbers is explained in the other instances [2:6, 21:11] in terms of symbolism, and that may be true here as well.

He suggested that “the large outlay of spices may be meant to suggest that Jesus was given a royal burial, for we know of such outlay on behalf of kings,” as in the case of Herod the Great as told by Josephus<sup>12</sup> and in the case of Rabbi Gamaliel as found in the Talmud, *Tractate Ebel Rabbathi*.<sup>13</sup>

Leon Morris (1971: 825) called attention to II Chron 16: 14, “they laid him [Asa] in the bed which was filled with sweet odors and divers kinds of spices prepared by the perfumers’ art.” He recognized that the lavish amount of myrrh and aloes brought by Nicodemus to the grave site was unusual and if taken literally it suggests that the wealthy Nicodemus was “trying to make some reparation for his failure to do more in Jesus’ life.”

Barnabas Lindars (1972: 592) interpreted the “mixture of myrrh and aloes” to be in a liquid form (as in John 12:3) and

calculated one hundred liters to equal eight gallons, which he noted, “is obviously an exaggeration.”

More recently Craig Keener (2003: 1163) commented on Nicodemus’s “one hundred pounds” of myrrh and aloes:

But the amount of the spices mentioned in 19:39 is extraordinary. The Roman pound was about twelve ounces by modern standards, and hence the figure probably presents about seventy–five pounds; some have proposed that if one takes the amount as a measure of volume equivalent to the biblical *log*, one might find an abundant but hardly impossible amount close to seventy fluid ounces. . . . the lavish amount of spices here, however, are “as befits a king”. . . . Nicodemus honored Jesus lavishly, as had the woman in 12:3; but, if her gift had been worth 300 denarii (12:5), Nicodemus’s was worth 30,000, a gift befitting “a ruler of the Jews” (3:1).

Whereas the Greek ἑκατόν must mean “one hundred,” the Hebrew מאה can be the noun “one hundred” or the *Pi<sup>c</sup>el* participle מֵאֵהָ/מֵאֵהָ from the root אָהָה, a denominative verb from the interjection אָהָה “Alas” and a by-form of אָהָה, the denominative verb from אָוִי “Woe!”<sup>14</sup> Both אָהָה and אָוִי have Arabic cognates. Lane (1863: 120) cited أھ (°ahha) and أھھ (°ahhaha) “he expressed pain or grief or sorrow, or he lamented, or complained, or moaned as one broken in spirit by grief or by mourning, and said آھ (°āhi) or هآھ (hāh).”<sup>15</sup>

Had the participle “bemoaning” in the Hebrew *Vorlage* been the *Qal* אָהָה, rather than the *Pi<sup>c</sup>el* מֵאֵהָ, there would have been no confusion with מֵאֵהָ “one hundred.” But this מֵאֵהָ which followed the noun לִיטְרָא “liter” was understandably—though mistakenly—misread as a number. The simple loss of a ה increased “a liter” into “a hundred liters.”

The fact that Nicodemus came to the grave *bewailing loudly* disappeared in the Greek texts. In Greek the focus shifted to Nicodemus's wealth which permitted him to contribute so extravagantly and implied that servants carried the 75-100 pound container of myrrh and aloes—not Nicodemus himself with a more modest gift of a liter of perfumed unguent.

If the Hebrew *Vorlage* presented here approximates what was original, the אֶסוּדָּה “flask”<sup>6</sup> is especially noteworthy. It appears only in II Kings 4:2–7, when Elisha asked the prophet's widow who was being threatened by a creditor what she had of worth in her house, she replied, אֵין לִּשְׂפַחְתִּיָּהוּ כֹּל בְּבַיִת כִּי אִם-אֶסוּדָּה שָׁמֶן “Your maidservant has nothing in the house except a jar of oil.” Miraculously, thanks to Elisha, many vessels were filled from that single אֶסוּדָּה שָׁמֶן “pot of oil,” and when all the oil was sold the income was sufficient to pay off the widow's creditor. The אֶסוּדָּה, in and of itself, spoke of the miraculous. Moreover, this אֶסוּדָּה triggers one's recalling other miracles of Elisha and Elijah—including Elijah's raising the dead (I Kings 17:17–24) and his assumption into heaven in a whirlwind (II Kings 2:1–15).

These intimations in John 19:39 (that death is *not* final and that heaven *is* open for occupancy) appear only in this hypothetical Hebrew *Vorlage*. There are no such hints here in the Greek text itself. The variants in the Greek of John 19:39 cannot be accounted for fully by assuming that scribes confused reading/ writing the syllables μί, ἔλι, σμί, and σμη when prefixed to the syllable μα. Haplography in the consonant cluster אֶסוּדָּה מֶסַךְ, as demonstrated, seems much more likely. Just as the אֶסוּדָּה שָׁמֶן “flask of oil” paid off richly for

the widow (I Kings 17), the **סִנְדוֹן סוּךְ סַמָּךְ** (as reconstructed) “a flask of ointment, a mixture of . . .” pays off nicely in ascertaining what Nicodemus actually brought to the grave. Moreover, the **מֵאָה** “one hundred,” when read as **מֵאָהָה** “bewailing,” pays off well in ascertaining the actual depth of Nicodemus’s grief after the death of Jesus.

Just as the **أه** (*ʿahha*) and **أهه** (*ʿahhaha*) “he expressed pain or grief,” cited above,<sup>15</sup> provides clarity for the interpretation of the **מֵאָהָה** / **מֵאָהָה** in the *Vorlage* of John 19: 39, the Arabic **جان** (*jan*), the cognate of the Hebrew **גַּנֵּן** “gardener,” provides insight into the function of the “gardener” mentioned in John 20:15,

λέγει αὐτῇ Ἰησοῦς,  
 Γύναι, τί κλαίεις; τίνα ζητεῖς;  
 ἐκείνη δοκοῦσα ὅτι ὁ κηπουρός ἐστὶν λέγει αὐτῷ,  
 Κύριε, εἰ σὺ ἐβάστασας αὐτόν,  
 εἰπέ μοι ποῦ ἔθηκας αὐτόν, καὶ γὰρ αὐτὸν ἀρῶ.

Jesus saith unto her,  
 Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou?  
 She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him,  
 Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me  
 where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away.

Lane (1865: 462) included in his definition of **جان** (*jan*) the following: “it / he veiled, concealed, hid, covered, or protected, him; it veiled him, concealed him, or covered him, with its darkness; . . . He concealed it; namely, a dead body; he wrapped it in grave clothing: and he buried it.” This definitely suggests that the Hebrew **גַּנֵּן** “gardener” could in some contexts be better translated as “mortician.”



Moreover, there are also the following derivatives:

- جنن (*janan*) “grave” (= 𐤍𐤍),
- جنن (*janan*) “dead body” (= 𐤍𐤍),
- جنين (*janîn*) “grave clothes” (= 𐤍𐤍𐤏),
- جنين (*janîn*) “buried, placed in the grave” (= 𐤍𐤍𐤏).

These are not related to the words جنة (*jannat*) “garden,” جنان (*jannān*) “gardener,” or جن (*jinn*) “invisible demons,” even though they appear on the same page in the Arabic lexicons (Lane 1865: 463; Wehr 1979: 164).

Whereas the Greek κηπουρός “gardener” took care of the flowers, plants, and trees, the Hebrew 𐤍𐤍 “gardener” may also have handled dead bodies. Thus, Mary Magdalene assumed that the man she saw outside the tomb was the “gardener / mortician” responsible for having removed Jesus’ body.

In support of this appeal to Arabic cognates, haplographies, or dittographies in the Hebrew *Vorlagen* to explain variants in the Greek texts of John 19:39 (or a puzzling piece in John 20:15), an example from the Ethiopic text of Matt 3:7 can be cited as a fitting conclusion to my arguments. In the Ethiopic text of the London Polyglot (1667) of Matt 3:7 it states that the Pharisees and Sadducees came to John’s baptism *secretly* (the Latin *clàm* translates the Ethiopic *ṣamamita*).<sup>16</sup>

The Greek text of Matt 3:7a reads,

Ἴδὼν δὲ πολλοὺς τῶν Φαρισαίων καὶ Σαδδουκαίων  
ἐρχομένους ἐπὶ τὸ βάπτισμα αὐτοῦ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς . . .

But seeing many of the Pharisees and Sadducees  
coming for his baptism, he said to them . . . .

The Hebrew *Vorlage* for this could well have been (minus the vowels),”

וְרֵאָה רַבִּים מִן־הַפְּרוּשִׁים  
 וּמִן־הַצְּדוּקִים בָּאִים לְטַבִּילָתוֹ אָמַר לָהֶם . . . .

If so, the Hebrew text behind the Ethiopic variant must have read טל לטבילתו “*secretly to his baptism*” rather than לטבילתו “*to his baptism.*” Thus, there was a dittography of the initial ל and ט of the לטבילתו (or a haplography in the *Vorlagen* of the majority texts). (This טל “*secrecy*” [BDB 532], was an adverbial accusative, and would not have required a preposition.) The *private* visit of the Pharisee Nicodemus to Jesus at night (John 3:2), provides a striking parallel to this Ethiopic variant which has Pharisees and Sadducees going out to John *secretly* in the daytime. Whereas in Luke 3:7 John *publicly* called the multitude (ὄχλος) “a generation of vipers,” in Matt 3:7, according to the Ethiopic text, only many (πολλοὺς) *Pharisees and Saducees* were *privately* declared to be “a generation of vipers.” Jesus issued this same charge only against the Pharisees (Matt 12:24–34) and against the scribes and the Pharisees (Matt 23:29–33).

### NOTES

1. See J. Payne Smith (1957:132) for חונטתא “a mixture of spices to bury the dead.”
2. “Pint” is Lamsa’s translation (1967: 1079).
3. This phrase in Codex Palatinus, reads “*ferens malagmam murrae et aloen quasi libras centum.*” The *malagmani* was an obvious error for the original *malagmam*. See Liddell Scott (1966: 1076) for the μάλαγμα “emollient.”

4. See Liddell Scott 1132, 533, 1619, 1619, 1076, respectively, for these definitions.

5. See BDB 974; Jastrow 1019, 1620; and Payne Smith 387.

6. A cognate of the Arabic *سك* (*suk*), “a sort of perfume prepared from *رامك* (*ra<sup>2</sup>mak*) or from musk and *رامك* (*ra<sup>2</sup>-mak*),” the *رامك* (*ra<sup>2</sup>mak*) being a Persian loanword for a certain astringent medicine (Lane 1867: 1159; 1872: 1387). Hava (1915: 345) cited *ساک* (*sāk*) “to rub.”

7. See BDB 691–692; Jastrow 963 “to pour oil, to be oiled, to be perfumed.” Montgomery (1951: 370) noted that the *סִנְיָ* in II Kings 4:2 was translated in Codex *Vaticanus* and in Origen’s *Hexapla* as the verb *ἀλείψομαι* “I anoint myself; but in the Lucianic texts it appears as the noun *ἀγγεῖον* “vessel, receptacle, sack.” The initial *ס* of *סִנְיָ* is a prosthetic *ס* (GKC 19<sup>m</sup>), the root being *סִנְיָ*, as noted by Montgomery, who stated, “for the unusual development from the root *סוּךְ*, ‘to anoint,’ cf. *אִזּוּב* (Akk. *zupū*), *אִגּוּז* (Syr. *gūz*) . . . . But it doubtless means an ointment pot.” Montgomery called attention to Honeyman’s study of *סִנְיָ* in *PEQ* 1939, 70.

8. See BDB 587; Jastrow 807, “to mix wine.”

9. The *סך* here is a variant spelling of *סק* “a sack,” like the variants *דקק* / *דכך* “to crush” and *רקק* / *רכך* “to be thin, weak.”

10. In light of the syntax in 2 Sam 24:2,4 שְׁקָלִים חֲמִשִּׁים “fifty shekels,” and Neh 5:15, שְׁקָלִים אַרְבָּעִים “forty shekels,” the retroversion of λίτρας ἑκατόν to לִיטְרִין מֵאָה maintains the Greek word order rather than the anticipated מֵאָה לִיטְרִין.

11. Another option would be to retrovert the μίγμα to בְּחִיטָה “mixture” (Jastrow, 155–156; Payne Smith 41) which was confused with חֲפִיטָה “packet” (Jastrow, 491–492), the cognate of the Arabic cognate حَفْش (*hifš<sup>um</sup>*) “receptacle, vessel, sack” (Hava 132). But this would not account for the variants σμηγμα and σμίγμα “ointment.”

12. Josephus, *Antiquities* VXII: 196ff.:

After this was over, they prepared for his funeral, it being Archelaus' care that the procession to his father's sepulcher should be very sumptuous. Accordingly, he brought out all his ornaments to adorn the pomp of the funeral. The body was carried upon a golden bier, embroidered with very precious stones of great variety, and it was covered over with purple, as well as the body itself; he had a diadem upon his head, and above it a crown of gold: he also had a scepter in his right hand. About the bier were his sons and his numerous relations; next to these was the soldiery, distinguished according to their several countries and denominations; and they were put into the following order: First of all went his guards, then the band of Thracians, and after them the Germans; and next the band of Galatians, every one in their habiliments of war; and behind these marched the whole army in the same manner as they used to go out to war, and as they used to be put in array by their muster-masters and centurions; these were followed by five hundred of his domestics carrying spices.

So they went eight furlongs to Herodium; for there by his own command he was to be buried. And thus did Herod end his life.

Josephus *War* I: 673ff.:

They betook themselves to prepare for the king's funeral; and Archelaus omitted nothing of magnificence therein, but brought out all the royal ornaments to augment the pomp of the deceased. There was a bier all of gold, embroidered with precious stones, and a purple bed of various contexture, with the dead body upon it, covered with purple; and a diadem was put upon his head, and a crown of gold above it, and a sceptre in his right hand; and near to the bier were Herod's sons, and a multitude of his kindred; next to which came his guards, and the regiment of Thracians, the Germans. also and Gauls, all accounted as if they were going to war; but the rest of the army went foremost, armed, and following their captains and officers in a regular manner; after whom five hundred of his domestic servants and freed-men followed, with sweet spices in their hands: and the body was carried two hundred furlongs, to Herodium, where he had given order to be buried. And this shall suffice for the conclusion of the life of Herod.

13. *Tractate Ebel Rabbathi* 8:6

The bodies of kings, and their clothes may be burned, their cattle ham-stringed, without fear that it is after the usages of the Amorites. The ceremony of burning clothes and other things is performed for the corpses of kings only, but not for princes. When Rabban Gamaliel died, **Aquila the proselyte, however, burned in his honor clothes of the value of eight thousand Zuz,** and when he was asked why he did so, he answered: It is written [Jer. 34:5]: "In peace shalt thou die; and as burnings were made for thy father," etc. Was not Rabban Gamaliel more worthy than a hundred kings, for whom we have no use?

The text highlighted in red appears in Brown’s commentary (1970: 960) as “the proselyte Onkelos burned more than eighty pounds of spices.” But in *Abodah Zarah*, 11a, it is stated that burning of clothes was also done for princes, and Aquilas’ deed was used as a support without any explanation. (The 𐤀𐤍 was one fourth of a shekel [Jastrow, 385]).

14. See BDB 13, 17 and GKC 38<sup>c</sup>. Compare the English denominatives “wail/ *bewail*” and “moan/*bemoan*.”

15. Lane (129–130) cited the by-form 𐤀𐤎𐤁𐤀 (ʿawwaha) in form 5, 𐤀𐤎𐤁𐤀 (taʿawwah), meaning “He said 𐤀 (ʿāhi) or 𐤀 (ʿawhi) [i.e. *Ah!* or *Alas!*]; he moaned; or uttered a moan, or moaning, or prolonged voice of complaint.” He also cited under this root about twenty-five variant pronunciations of the Arabic equivalents of “Ah!” and “Alas!” including 𐤀 (ʿahi) and 𐤀𐤁𐤀 (ʿaha). Wehr (1979: 46) also cited the verb 𐤀 (ʿāha) and its by-form 𐤀𐤎𐤁𐤀 (ʿawwaha), in forms II and V meaning “to moan, to sigh.” Hava (1915: 16–17) cited verbs 𐤀 (ʿah), 𐤀 (ʿahha), 𐤀𐤎𐤁𐤀 (ʿawhaʿ), 𐤀𐤎𐤁𐤀 (ʿawwah), 𐤀𐤎𐤁𐤀 (taʿawwah), and 𐤀𐤎𐤁𐤀 (taʿahhah), all meaning “to groan, to sigh,” and the exclamatory particles 𐤀 (ʿāha) “Aha!” 𐤀𐤁𐤀 (ʿāhaʿ) “Alas!” 𐤀𐤎𐤁𐤀 (ʿawwah) “Alas!” and 𐤀𐤎𐤁𐤀 (ʿūhi) “Woe!”

16. This variant was not noted by Allen (1912: 24), nor by Davies and Allison (1988: 301). It was noticed by Adam Clarke (1850: 52) and was called to my attention by my friend and colleague, Dr. Parker Thompson. Also, thanks to Rev. Preston Bush who called my attention to the Arabic جن (*jan*), the cognate of the Hebrew 𐤍𐤁𐤍 “gardener.”