CLARIFYING BAFFLING BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

WHO SHOULD BURY THEIR DEAD?
MATTHEW 8:22b

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INTRODUCTION

Matthew 8:22b

ἄφες τοὺς νεκροὺς θάψαι τοὺς ἑαυτῶν νεκρούς
Leave the dead to bury their dead.[1]

ועזוב המתים לקבור מתיהם [2]
and let the dead bury their dead
(Howard 1995: 35)
and let the next of kin bury their dead
(McDaniel)

The enigmatic phrase "let the dead bury the dead," written without vowels in an Aramaic and Hebrew fashion, would be *lt th dd bry th dd*," which makes the phrase all the more obscure. The English *dd* is very ambiguous because it can mean not only *dead* but also *dad*, *dud* (= a person who 'bombs out' or an unexploded shell), *dude* (= a fop or city-slicker at a ranch), *dodo* (= a bird, or a fogy, or a dullard), *deed* (= a document or an action), as well as the verb *did*. The options available to the interpreter of *lt th dd bry th dd* are many, including: (1) "let the dude bury the deed" or "let the dad bury the dodo ," or "let the dud bury the dude," or "let the dad bury the dead," or "let the dead bury the dead," etc.— all of which could be "spiritualized" as quaint proverbs about the "spiritual dude, dud, and dodo" who is to bury a "dead dad"

or a "doodad" (assuming a dittography of a *d* in the *Vorlage* of this last example).

The difficulties in interpreting המתים לקבור מתיהם is analogous, though the options are fewer. At first glance the Greek and the Hebrew texts above appear to express the same idea. But upon closer examination the Greek and Hebrew texts may well express different ideas, as is reflected in my translation of the Hebrew when compared to that of Howard. The Greek words in Matt 8:22 are as unambiguous as the clause they compose has been inexplicable. On the other hand, two of the four Hebrew words, המתים and מתיהם, are ambiguous. Removal of the definite article, the plural possessive suffix, and the plural endings produces the base מת. Hebrew lexicons now list two meanings for מת: (1) the noun מַת "a male, a man" (related to the Egyptian *mt*, "male, man, written with a hieroglyphic phallus), a cognate of Ugaritic *mt*, Akkadian *mutu*, and Ethiopic ታዊ [*mĕtĕ*] "husband"); and (2) the participle מֵת "a dead (man)," derived from the cognate of Arabic مات (*mâta*), Syriac ܡܝܬ (*mît*), and Aramaic מִית "to die" (BDB 559, 607) and related to the Egyptian *m(w)t* "a dead man" (Gardiner 1966: 443, 568). However, מת may also be derived from the ע″ע stem מתת (like תם and תמם "complete"), a lexeme which was noted in the lexicons of Castell (1669: 2166) and Simon (1793: 956) but has gone unnoticed in more recent lexicons (BDB 607; KBS 653).[3] The definitions of מתת given by Castell and Simon, reviewed below, support the translation of the המתים in Matt 8:22 given above. In turn, this translation of the Hebrew text has significant implications for the interpretation of the Greek text of this verse.

PROPOSED ARAMAIC *VORLAGEN*

Davies and Allison (1991: 57) understated the case when they noted that the seven Greek words in Matt 8:22 and Luke 9:60 are "so scandalous, many scholars have refused to take them at face value." As I have surveyed the literature, including the studies of Klemm (1969–1970) and Kingsbury (1988), it appears that no one has taken the Greek text at face value, including Davies and Allison who professed "that it is prudent to accept the text as it stands," and then concluded that Jesus "simply asserts that the disciple should leave it [the burial] to others." But to interpret νεκρούς as "others" is *not* to accept the text as it stands, but is one more attempt, in the words of Davies and Allison (1991: 57), "to convert a dramatic and memorable imperative into a palatable pedestrian utterance."

Some scholars argued that the Greek reflects a (mis)translation of an Aramaic *Vorlage* which may have read in part אתא לך בתרי ושבוק מיתייא קברין מיתיהון (Dalman 1935: 153; Jeremias 1971: 132) which corresponds to the Greek; or שְׁבוּק מִיתָיָא לִמְקַבְּרֵי מִיתָיָא "*Laß die Toten den Totengräbern*" ("Leave the dead to the grave diggers") (Schwarz: 1981: 275). Other proposed corrections in translation include the following (in chronological order):

Let the dead past bury its dead.[4]

Laß die Toten ihrem Totengräber
Leave the dead to their 'grave-diggers.'[5]

Let the undecided bury their dead.[6]

Let the young men bury the dead.[7]

Leave it to the men of the town.[8]

The city will bury the dead.[9]

Albright and Mann (1971: 95), assuming a Hebrew *Vorlage*
and recognizing that Hebrew המתים means "the dead" or "the
dying," translated the phrase "let the dying bury the dead."
However, all of these reconstructions have been dismissed by
Davies and Allison (1991: 57), by Kingsbury (1988: 55), and
by Keener (1999: 275). Kingsbury noted, "The Achilles' heel
of this interpretation is, of course, that the reconstructed
Aramaic original is a pure figment of scholarly conjecture."

PARAPHRASTIC INTERPRETATIONS

But the reconstructions of an Aramaic *Vorlage* for Matt
8:22 and Luke 9:60 are not the only figments of scholarly
conjecture evoked by these verses. Many interpreters, unim-
pressed with the Aramaic reconstructions, keep ἄφες τοὺς
νεκροὺς θάψαι τοὺς ἑαυτῶν νεκρούς as the *ipsissma verba*
of Jesus, only to confess that Jesus did not mean literally what
he said. What he said was seemingly a kind of רָז (the Persian
loanword meaning a "secret" or "mystery") which required an
interpretation (פֵּשֶׁר), like the מְנֵא מְנֵא תְּקֵל וּפַרְסִין "50
shekels, 50 shekels, a shekel, and a half shekel" in Dan 5:25.
As a result, some interesting paraphrastic interpretations have
emerged from commentators who, following in Daniel's foot-
steps, have offered their פֵּשֶׁר in order to reveal the intent of
Jesus' command to the disciple.[10]

A survey of some of the paraphrases of what Jesus said or
meant, follows in a list from the shortest to the longest

quotation. Although the Greek text has Jesus using seven words, the interpretations, even with ellipses, range from eight to sixty-two words.

> [Follow me,] That business must look after itself.[11]

> Let the 'spiritually dead' see to such concerns.[12]

> Cut yourself adrift from the past when matters of present interest call for your whole attention.[13]

> Leave the matter of his father's burial to take care of itself.[14]

> Those who are wholly consecrated to God have even more important things to do.[15]

Leave the spiritually dead to bury their own physical dead; that is, Leave the spiritually dead to care for thy aged father till his death and burial; they can do the work.[16]

He [Jesus] is teaching that Christian undertakers are better undertakers than those who are unsaved . . . if we must make a choice between being undertakers or disciples, we must do the latter and leave the former to the unsaved.[17]

"You may attend to that duty if no other will do it, but if you go you must act as one who is not a member of the family, one who is really exempt (cf. Matthew 17, 22–27), remaining, in principle, untainted by their deaths and by their mourning. The "dead" will do their best to bury the dead, but you are not one of them.[18]

These interpretations reflect but another genre of "figments of scholarly conjecture," to borrow Kingsbury's phrase, which tell the reader more about the interpreters than about the text or Jesus's intent.

THE HEBREW מתת

The Hebrew Gospel of Matthew of Shem Tob Ibn Shaprut, dated around 1400 C.E., which contains elements from an older, if not an original, Hebrew gospel tradition,[19] has simply ועזוב המתים לקבור מתיהם. But the Hebrew may not be as simple as it appears at first glance, for המתים . . . מתיהם may well involve paronomasia rather than repetition. As noted in the *Introduction*, מתים can mean "men" or "dead men" or "next of kin." It is this last definition of מת which requires further attention.

Although Castell (1669: 2166) and Simon (1793: 956) referenced מתת, the stem has received scant attention since. Castell noted (1) the Ethiopic cognate ምት/አመትት [*mĕtĕ / ᵓămĕtătĕ*] meaning "*maritus*" (husband), "*sponsus*" (fiancé/bride-groom), "*sponsa*" (fiancée/bride), and (2) the Arabic مت (*matta*) "*miscuit*" (a mixed marriage), "*familiam saturavit*" (an extended household), and "*gradus consanguinitatis, ob quem connubium non potest iniri* (a blood relative whom one cannot marry)."

Lane (1885: 2687c–2688a) defined the verb مت (*matta*) as "he sought to bring himself near [to another], or to approach [to him], or to gain access [to him], or to advance himself in [his] favour by relationship . . . by affection, or by love." The noun ماية (*mâttat*) meant "anything that is sacred or inviolable . . . which renders one entitled to respect and reverence . . . a thing whereby one seeks to bring himself near." Lane noted بيننا رحم ماية (*baynanâ raḥimun mâttat*) "between us is a near/inviolable relationship." These definitions survive to the present in literary Arabic, where مت (*matta*) means "to

seek to establish a link to someone by marriage, become related by marriage . . . to be most intimately connected with someone," and the noun مَاتَة (*mâttat*) means "close ties, family ties, kinship" (Wehr 1979: 1045).

In Exo 4:24 the MT reads וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָה וַיְבַקֵּשׁ הֲמִיתוֹ which has been translated "Yahweh met him and sought to kill him." In light of the Ethiopic and Arabic cognates of מתת—and simply by changing הֲמִיתוֹ to הֲמִיתוֹ—the text would mean "Yahweh met him and he sought to make inviolable his relationship."[20]

Castell considered the names Amitti (אֲמִתַּי / Αμαθι) and Matthew (מתתיה / Ματθαῖος) to be derived from this stem.[21] If so, מתת was not only in the vocabulary of Zipporah and Moses (Exo 4:24), it accounts for the name מַתַּתָּה (Μαθαθα) in Ezra 10:33, as well as the Levitical name מַתִּתְיָה (Ματτα-θιας, Ματθατ, and Ματταθα). Supporting the derivation of מתתיה from מתת, rather than נתן, are the names Ahijah (אֲחִיָּה) "Yah is my brother/kin" and Reuel (רְעוּאֵל) "kin/friend of God." Hebrew מתת, like its Arabic and Ethiopic cognates, denoted a familial relationship, similar to אח "kin, brother, relative" and רֵעַ "friend, fellow, kin." Thus, while מתתיה can mean "gift of Yah," it can also mean the "family of Yah" or the "relative of Yah," like the affirmation in the name Abijah (אֲבִיָּה) "Yah is my father" and Ahijah (אֲחִיָּה) "Yah is my kinsman."

CONCLUSION

Consequently, the ועזוב המתים לקבור מתיהם in the text of Shem Tob Ibn Shaprut, cited above, has at least four

possible meanings: (1) "let the men bury their dead"; or (2) following Howard, "let the dead bury their dead"; or (3) reading with Albright and Mann, "let the dying bury their dead"; or as I prefer, (4) "let the *relatives*/the *next of kin* bury their dead." While the disciple requesting the delay in following Jesus was a son of the deceased, there is no evidence to insist that he was the only relative or the next of kin.

Once מתת is restored in the lexicons of Biblical Hebrew and identified as the verb used in Exo 4:24, as well as appearing in the names מַתַּתְיָה and מַתִּתְיָה, the Hebrew text of Matt 22:8b can be read as Jesus' providing a realistic alternative for someone who is away from home when a death in the family occurs: "other relatives can handle the burial," or "[in your absence] let the next of kin bury their deceased."

Because Hebrew was and remains a language of discourse for rabbis and their disciples, Jesus could have spoken to his bereaved disciple in Hebrew. If so, he may have used words similar to those which appear in the Shem Tob *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*: עזוב המתים לקבור מתיהם. But the ambiguity in the written text would not have been present in the spoken word since vowels are a requisite for speech. The המתים of the written record stood for הַמַּתִּים "the relatives"—rather than הָמְתִים "the men" or הַמֵּתִים "the dead." The use of הַמַּתִּים from the root מָתַת and מֵתֵיהֶם from the root מות presents a wordplay rather than repetition.

What Jesus said in Hebrew was clear and simple. But once it was written down in Hebrew it became automatically ambiguous since vowels were not recorded along with consonants. Of the four possible ways to read המתים, a Greek translator opted for τοὺς νεκροὺς "the dead," thereby transforming a very practical suggestion of Jesus into an

impossible proverb, which in turn has led to many implausible interpretations.[22]   It is a bit ironic that many who disdain the idea of an Aramaic or Hebrew *Vorlage*—insisting that Jesus meant for his disciples to let the "spiritually dead" bury their loved ones—turn to the clergy for funeral services and burial rites.

NOTES

1. Luke 9:60 contains the same phrase, Αφες τοὺς νεκροὺς θάψαι τοὺς ἑαυτῶν νεκρούς, but the rest of the verse differs considerably, reading σὺ δὲ ἀπελθὼν διάγγελλε τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ "but as for you, *go* and proclaim the kingdom of God," for Matthew's ᾽Ακολούθει μοι "*follow* me."

2. The Hebrew text of Shem Tob Ibn Shaprut; see Howard 1987: 34–35; 1995: 34–35.

3. Not to be confused with the misprint מתה for מתח on 654a. Note Dillman's reference (1955: 183) to the stem מתה.

4. M'Neile 1915: 110. By misreading the infinitive לִמְקְבַּר as the participle לִמְקַבֵּר, it was thought to mean "'Leave the dead *to him that buries* dead bodies,' i.e., Leave your father's body to be buried by anyone who will do it."

5. Perles 1919: 26 and Abrahams 1924: 183, who reconstructed the phrase as שבוק למיתיא מקבר מיחיא.

6. Black 1950: 219–220 reconstructed the Aramaic as ᵓ*ithai bathrai wish*ᵉ*boq m*ᵉ*thinin qabrin mithyanin*, which could have been translated into Greek as ἄφες τοὺς νωθροὺς (?) θάψαι τοὺς (ἑαυτῶν) νεκρούς.

7. Herrmann 1981: 283. This assumes a misreading in the Greek tradition of νεκροὺς "dead men" for νεανίας "young men."

8. Köhler 1987: 91.

9. Basser 1993: 89. See Goldenberg 1996: 64–83 for a critique of Basser's proposal. Gilad Gevaryahu (private communication, 1993) noted (1) the absence of מתא "city, town" in the western Aramaic dialects could simply mean that most documents from the period under review have not survived or are in poor condition, whereas the use of מתא in the eastern dialects suggests more documents survived, not necessarily that מתא was used more than קרתא "town"; (2) contact between the Babylonian and Palestinian Jewish communities was so routine that elements in the respective dialects could have easily have migrated from one community to the other, without showing up in the texts which survived; and (3) in poetry or for paronomasia a word from another dialect may be borrowed.

10. Note also McCane's argument (1990: 31–43) that the disciple wants to participate in a customary second burial service for his father. Important also is Bockmuehl's critique (1998: 553–581) of Hengel's (1981: 3–15) and Sanders's (1987: 252–255) proposal to read this saying as Jesus's rejection of ritualism and his annulment of the fourth commandment. Sanders (1985: 255) concluded

> At least once Jesus is willing to say that following him superceded the requirements of piety and the Torah. This may show that Jesus was prepared, if necessary, to challenge the adequacy of the Mosaic dispensation.

11. Manson 1949: 73.

12. Keener 1999: 275.

13. Allen 1912: 82.

14. Kingsbury 1988: 59.

15. Bockmuehl 1988: 581.

16. Howard 1950: 351.

17. Yeager 1977: 36.

18. Derrett 1985: 226.

19. See Howard 1987 and 1995; and Hewitt 2000.

20. הָמֵת or הָמֵית would be the *Hiphˁîl* infinitive of מתת "to bond (by marriage)," whereas הָמִית or הָמֵת would be the *Hiphˁîl* infinitive of מות "to die." For a more detailed examination of Exo 4: 24–26, see Chapter V.

21. Other lexicographers derive אֲמִתַּי *Amitai* from אָמַן "to confirm, to support" or אֱמֶת "truth," and מַתִּתְיָה(וּ) *Matthew* from מַתָּת "gift" and נָתַן "to give," as if it was just a variation of other names derived from נָתַן, like נְתַנְיָה(וּ) *Netanyah*(*u*) and מַתַּנְיָה(וּ) *Mattanyah*(*u*) (BDB 54, 682).

22. The different translations of רע in the versions provides a good analogy of translation errors in other texts. The נָמוּ רֹעֶיךָ in Nahum 3:18 was rendered in the LXX ἐνύσταξαν οἱ ποιμένες σου "*your shepherds* (= רעה, stem I) *slept*," but the Peshiṭta has ܢܡܘ ܚܒܪܝܟܝ (*nāmw ḥabraiky*) "*your friends* (= רעה, stem II) *slept*." In Micah 4:9 the MT תְּרִיעִי רֵעַ "*you commit evil*" was translated in the Septuagint as ἔγνως κακά "*you have known evil*" (= רעע, stem I, and reading תריעי as תדיעי), and the Peshiṭta has ܥܒܕܬܝ ܒܝܫܬܐ (*ˁābadty bištāˁ*) "*you committed evil*." However, Targum Jonathan has אַתְּ מִתְחַבְרָא לְעַמְמַיָּא "*you made friends* (= רעה, stem II) *with the gentiles*."