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“EVERYONE WILL BE SALTED WITH FIRE” (MARK 9:49)

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The meaning of Mark 9:49 (“everyone will be salted with fire”) has long perplexed interpreters. Although this saying is in a literary context speaking of judgment, many have seen in it a reference to purification. However, since Hebrew was probably the lingual background to the Gospel of Mark, the saying may be easily understood as “everyone [who is sent to hell] will be completely destroyed” (destroyed by fire).

* * *

INTRODUCTION

AMONG the difficult sayings of Jesus, Mark 9:49 is one of the most enigmatic. What could Jesus have meant when he said, “Everyone will be salted with fire”? Stated in a context of judgment in the fire of Geh-Hinnom (the valley of Hinnom outside the southwest walls of Jerusalem), this strange mixture of salt and fire has perplexed Greek scholars for a very long time.

SUGGESTED INTERPRETATIONS

Bratcher and Nida have counted at least 15 different explanations for the verse,¹ and Gould calls it “one of the most difficult to interpret in the New Testament.”² He connects the saying not with the fire of judgment in the preceding context, but with the idea of purification as in the fire of a sacrifice. This is because both fire and salt were used by the Jews in their Temple sacrifices. According to the Mishnah, salt was put into the carcass of the sacrificial animal in order to soak out the blood. After the blood was soaked out, the carcass was fit for

¹Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Mark*, vol. 2 in *Helps for Translators* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1961) 304.

²Ezra P. Gould, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark* (ICC: Edinburgh: Clark, 1896) 180.

consumption or sacrifice: "The priest . . . dried it by rubbing salt on it [the carcass of the sacrificial animal] and cast it on the fire."³

The interpretation that the salt and fire have something to do with purification or with dedication is in general the same one taken by Montefiore, Rawlinson, A. B. Bruce, Alford, Calvin, Meyer, Lange, Lane, Fudge, and F. F. Bruce.⁴ It is evident as well in *TEV*'s translation, "Everyone will be purified by fire as a sacrifice is purified by salt."

Such connection of the verse with sacrifice also appears in its textual variants. Evidently the incomprehensibility of the verse led some scribe to make a marginal note (which later found its way into the text proper) or to make an outright change in the text. Whichever it was, this change involved lifting part of a phrase out of the LXX of Lev 2:13 and adding it to this text. The phrase is: πᾶν δῶρον θυσίας ὑμῶν ἀλί ἀλισθήσεται / 'every one of your sacrificial gifts will be salted with salt'. This connection with Leviticus is seen clearly in the two main forms of the additions to the verse: (1) πᾶσα γὰρ θυσία ἀλί ἀλισθήσεται (D it^{b,c,d,ff²,i}, 'for every sacrifice will be salted with salt') and (2) πᾶς γὰρ πυρὶ ἀλισθήσεται καὶ πᾶσα θυσία ἀλί ἀλισθήσεται (A K Byz al, 'for everyone will be salted with fire, and every sacrifice will be salted with salt'). This last form seems to be a conflation of the shortest version of the verse and the version of intermediate length. Several other versions of the verse, which appear in only one manuscript each, also seem to be the result of scribal attempts to make some kind of sense out of the verse. Three of the four other possibilities mentioned by Metzger have something to do with being "consumed" or "destroyed."⁵

³Philip Blackman, trans., *Order Kodashim*, vol. 5 in *Mishnayoth* (Gateshead: Judaica, 1983) 43.

⁴G. C. Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels*, with a series of additional notes by I. Abrahams (3 vols.; London: Macmillan, 1909) 1, 233; A. E. J. Rawlinson, *St. Mark* (7th ed.; London: Methuen, 1949) 131; A. B. Bruce, "The Synoptic Gospels" in *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (ed. W. Robertson Nicoll; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1897) 1, 407; Henry Alford, *Alford's Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Guardian, reprinted, 1976) 1, 380; John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke*, vol. 1 in *Calvin's Commentaries* (ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprinted, 1975) 176-77; H. A. W. Meyer, *A Critical and Exegetical Hand-book to the Gospels of Mark and Luke* (ed. R. E. Wallis, W. P. Dickson, and M. B. Riddle; New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1884) 120-23; John Peter Lange, *The Gospel According to Mark*, revised with additions by W. G. T. Shedd, vol. 8 in *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, reprinted, 1971) 90-91; William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 349; Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* (Houston: Providential, 1982), 186-87; and F. F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983) 38-39.

⁵Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London and New York: United Bible Societies, 1971) 102-3.

Most modern interpreters of the passage have not advanced much beyond these ancient scribes. In fact one gets the feeling that many commentators are not happy with their own conclusions; yet the absence of a better alternative, coupled with the fact that in the Temple sacrifices salt and fire were found together, has led most interpreters to apply the purificational and dedicatory objectives of the sacrifices to Jesus' statement about the individuals in the passage under consideration. It is as though many of the commentators knew intuitively that the verse cannot say what it seems to say in Greek, for a figure of speech based on these two features among the many elements of a sacrifice hardly seems to fit the immediate context of Mark's narrative, even if Jesus' statement is purely metaphorical. Yet Mark or Mark's source must have felt that it made sense of some kind, even though the sense is not now obvious.

AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION

Perhaps the solution is not to be found in the Greek text. This is one more saying of Jesus which is easily unlocked when it is translated into Hebrew, currently considered by a number of scholars to be the best candidate for the language of Jesus and of the earliest accounts of his life. A couple of questions may be asked to ascertain whether a Hebrew translation helps clarify the meaning of the Greek text.⁶ Does the semantic range for the word "salt" in Hebrew give any clues about what an expression like "salted with fire" (*πυρὶ ἀλισθῆσεται*) might have meant as an idiom in Hebrew? Could it be that a Hebrew expression was translated literally into Greek, not dynamically, and that in the course of time, as those who would recognize the Hebrew idiom behind the statement became fewer and fewer, the original meaning of it became lost?

There is indeed a Hebrew expression which can answer these questions and solve the problem. Mark 9:49 is one of many passages in Mark (some of which have been noted elsewhere by Lindsey)⁷ in which it is possible to translate word for word back into Hebrew and not even change the word order. Lindsey suggests the translation *כֵּל אֵשׁ בְּאֵשׁ יִמְלַח*.⁸ The UBS Modern Hebrew New Testament suggests

⁶Cf. Robert L. Lindsey, "A Modified Two-Document Theory of the Synoptic Dependence and Interdependence," *NovT* 6 (1963) 245-47; idem, *A Hebrew Translation of the Gospel of Mark* (2d ed.; Jerusalem: Dugith, 1973) xxix-xxvi; and David Bivin and Roy B. Blizzard, *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus* (Arcadia, CA: Makor Foundation, 1983). See also Weston W. Fields ("Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus: A Review Article," *GTJ* 5 [1984] 271-88) for a more complete listing of the articles and books supporting Hebrew originals for the Synoptics and those supporting Aramaic originals for the Synoptics.

⁷Lindsey, *A Hebrew Translation of the Gospel of Mark*, xxix-xxvi.

⁸*Ibid.*, 125.

the addition of הן at the beginning of Mark 9:49 to account for the γάρ in Greek.⁹ Delitzsch, following the Byzantine text-type, translates, *כי כל-איש באש ימלח וכל-קרנן במלח ימלח*.¹⁰

Among the several usages of the word מלח, the predominant one is usually translated "to salt." But there is another usage of מלח which Even-Shoshan defines with the term בלה / 'to destroy', and טשטש / 'to erase'.¹¹ Alcalay translates the expression מלח מקום זרע / 'to destroy completely',¹² for which the literal translation is "to sow a place with salt," an action described in Judg 9:45. There Abimelech *destroys* Shechem. One of the actions which was part of the destruction was sowing salt in the city. This is an illustration of the background of what, according to Alcalay, is a figurative expression for complete destruction—to be salted is to be destroyed.

The verb also is found in the passive in Isa 51:6, where Even-Shoshan suggests the glosses בלה, נשחק, and נתפורר¹³ / 'decay, vanish', 'to be pulverized', and 'to disintegrate', and the LXX translates with ἐστρεψώθη / 'negated', 'taken away', 'destroyed'.

Could the translation "to destroy" in place of "to salt" illuminate the meaning of Mark 9:49? The new translation first must be tested in the immediate context. In the preceding verses Mark records Jesus' warnings about offending "these little ones" and Jesus' suggestions that one would be better off to rid himself of offending parts of his body than to be cast into hell, where the fire never goes out and "their worm does not die."¹⁴ It would fit this context perfectly to translate 9:49, "everyone [who is sent to hell] will be *completely destroyed*" (destroyed by fire).

Undoubtedly the Hebrew expression literally translated in Mark's Greek source would have been understood figuratively by its first readers; but once the Gospel left the world of Palestinian Judaism and its Hebrew constituency, the meaning of the phrase was eventually forgotten and has remained ambiguous to most, though not all, interpreters throughout the Christian era.¹⁵

⁹החדשה (Jerusalem: הקודש, 1979).

¹⁰החדשה נעהים מלשגן יין ללשון עפריח, פראוף דעלטש (London: Trinitarian Bible Society, 1968).

¹¹Avraham Even-Shoshan, *המלון החדש* (Jerusalem: Kiryath Sefer, 1983 [Hebrew]) 697.

¹²Reuben Alcalay, *The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary* (Jerusalem: Masada, 1981) col. 1345.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴A hyperbole quoted from Isa 66:24, which evidently refers to an inexhaustible supply of dead bodies upon which worms may feed (and thus not die for lack of food).

¹⁵After this article was completed, H. J. de Jonge (private communication, February 9, 1985) kindly pointed out that several centuries ago two well-known Dutch

CONCLUSION

ἄλιζω, then, is perhaps another example of the way in which the Greek lexicon needs to have its glosses expanded at certain points to take account of the multilingual situation in first century Palestine, a situation also much influenced by the LXX. This Septuagintal influence is already recognized by Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, who say in the introduction to their lexicon that "as for the influence of the LXX, every page of this lexicon shows that it outweighs all other influences on our literature."¹⁶

There are a number of references in BAGD to Greek words whose semantic range was expanded by this multilingual influence. One of these is the word δίκαιος, used by Matthew in the narrative about Joseph, who was a "δίκαιος man" (Matt 1:19). Much better sense is made of the passage if one translates "merciful" for δίκαιος in this context, rather than "righteous," and the translation "merciful" is suggested by BAGD. This accords well with the range of the Hebrew word חַנּוּן, which either lies behind the Greek δίκαιος or influenced it. This is plausible because חַנּוּן has a total semantic range which is broader than that of δίκαιος—a range which includes usages which are best glossed in English by the word "merciful."¹⁷

There are a number of other words in the Greek lexicon which have been glossed too narrowly in English. One must not forget that usage defines meaning, and the meaning of a Greek word in the NT is what is meant to its writer and first readers. If that meaning was influenced by the use of Hebrew/Aramaic side by side with Greek, and by the sometimes rather literalistic rendering of the Hebrew OT into Greek in the LXX, then the most accurate glosses of Greek in any bilingual dictionary (such as our Greek-English lexicons) will be those which take account of these facts. There is yet much progress to be made in this area, and that progress is perhaps furthered yet a little more by understanding that in Mark 9:49 a Hebrew idiom was translated into Greek and is best glossed into English as suggested above.

exegetes proposed this very interpretation. These interpreters provide independent confirmation of the plausibility of the solution to this passage suggested in this article, a solution which de Jonge calls "plausible indeed." See H. Grotius, *Annotationes in Libros Evangeliorum* (Amsterdam: Cornelium Blaeu, 1641) 568–70; and J. Clericus, *Novum Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi* (2d ed.; Frankfurt: Thomas Fritsch, 1714) 243–44.

¹⁶BAGD, xxi.

¹⁷See Alcalay, *The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary*, cols. 2155–56.

Since Aramaic also has the verb מלח, if one prefers to posit Aramaic rather than Hebrew originals for the sources behind the Greek Synoptics, the interpretation suggested here would probably still be valid.¹⁸ Everyone who is cast into hell will not be salted, but will be destroyed.¹⁹

¹⁸Although Marcus Jastrow (*A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Bibli. and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* [Brooklyn: P. Shalom, 1967] 788) does not suggest a gloss like "destroy" for the Aramaic verb, he does list contexts in which salt is considered as much an agent of destruction as it is an agent of preservation. The standard reference books for Aramaic backgrounds do not discuss this passage (cf. Gustaf Dalman, *The Words of Jesus* [Edinburgh: Clark, 1902]; Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* [3d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1967]; and J. A. Fitzmyer, *Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament* [London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1971]).

¹⁹I.e., "punished." This verse does not decide the question recently raised again in Fudge's book (see n. 4 above) concerning everlasting punishment or annihilation of the wicked. If ἀλισθήσεται is a metaphorical term for the more common NT ἀπόλλυμι, it should probably be understood in the general theological sense of "perish" or "be lost" (see LSJ, 207).