

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

A FRAGMENT OF THE ORIGINAL HEBREW
GOSPEL.

“AFTER all that has been written upon the ‘Gospel according to the Hebrews,’ it requires some courage to reopen the discussion of the question; but it seems to be indispensable.” With these words Theodore Zahn begins the chapter on this Gospel in his great work, *The History of the Canon of the New Testament* (vol. ii., 1892, p. 642). Not much more than a dozen short passages from this Gospel, or as many references, have been handed down to us; yet in the work just mentioned more than eighty pages are devoted to it. It is not the intention of the present article to enter into a full discussion of the questions relating to this Gospel. English readers may consult Nicholson’s *The Gospel according to the Hebrews*, or any work dealing with the introduction to the New Testament, especially Westcott’s *Introduction to the Study of the Gospels*. Suffice it to say that this Gospel “according to the Hebrews,” or “as used among the Hebrews”—for this will be the better translation of its title, καθ’ Ἑβραίων, *secundum Hebraeos*—is quoted by the earliest fathers of the Greek Church, by Hegesippus, Clemens Alexandrinus, Origenes, and Eusebius; while others, as Irenæus, Epiphanius, and Theodoret, know of it only by hearsay. Our knowledge of it, however, depends chiefly upon St. Jerome, the famous author of the Latin Bible. At two different periods of his life this ἀνὴρ τρίγλωττος had the opportunity of becoming acquainted with this book. The first time was when for several years (A.D. 374–379) he was leading an ascetic life in the desert of Chalcis (Kinnesrin), a short day’s journey from Berœa (Aleppo), where a Christian Jew, or Jewish Christian, first imbued him with the knowledge of Hebrew. Then he obtained from the Nazaræans—that

is, the Judæo-Christian community of Beroëa-Aleppo—a copy of their Gospel, and as early as that time, if we may believe him, made a transcript of it. Afterwards he again saw a copy of it in the famous library of Cæsarea, which belonged formerly to Origen, the greatest Biblical scholar of Christian antiquity. It may have been about the year 390, and at Bethlehem, that he translated it into Greek and Latin.¹

But no copies of this translation have come down to us; we are restricted to the few quotations of Jerome himself. Only two of these quotations shall be discussed in the present article.

The first relates to Matthew xxvii. 51, where we read, “*And behold, the veil of the Temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom,*” a passage, certainly, about which any reasonable explanation will be welcome. At three different periods of his life Jerome alludes to this passage.

As early as A.D. 381, in a letter to Pope Damasus (Epist. 18, 9), he writes in connection with Is. 6, 4: “*Nonnulli vero . . . superliminare sublatum illo tempore praedicant, quando velum templi scissum est, et universa domus Israel erroris nube confusa.*”

Again, in the year 398, in his commentary on Matthew, when he comes to this chapter, he says: “*In evangelio cuius saepe facimus mentionem*”—thus “*facimus*” in the present tense of the verb, not “*fecimus*,” as is often quoted, according to the best edition of his works: that of Vallarsi—“*superliminare templi infinitae magnitudinis fractum esse atque divisum legimus.*”

Finally, about the year 406 or 407, he writes again in a

¹ “*Porro ipsum hebraicum (sc. evangelium Matthæi) habetur usque hodie in Caesariensi bibliotheca, quam Pamphilus martyr studiosissime confecit. Mihi quoque a Nazaraeis qui in Beroea urbe Syriae hoc volumine utantur describendi facultas fuit. . . . Evangelium quoque quod appellatur secundum Hebraeos et a me nuper in Graecum Latinumque sermonem translatum est, quo et Origenes saepe utitur.*”

letter, ad Hedibiam (Epist. 120, 8) : “ *In evangelio autem, quod hebraicis literis scriptum est, legimus, non ‘velum templi scissum,’ sed ‘superliminare templi mirae magnitudinis corruisse.’* ”

We need not discuss every word of these references. According to the principle *variatio delectat*, Jerome is rather free in his expressions: *sublatum, fractum atque divisum, corruere, infinita, mira magnitudo*. Neither must we assume that when he says: “ *In evangelio legimus, non ‘velum scissum,’ sed,* ” the former reading was directly refuted in the Gospel. We are only concerned with the veil, and its alternative, the *superliminare*. Our Gospel of Matthew is Greek, and has *καταπέτασμα*, but the general tradition is, that Matthew wrote originally in Hebrew; Jerome says of his Gospel that it was Hebrew and had *superliminare*. Strange to say, no scholar as yet, as far as I know, seems to have asked earnestly enough what may have been the exact Hebrew word which Jerome read there. Else he would have long ago arrived at the solution of the riddle: that *καταπέτασμα*, veil, of our present Matthew is *the translation of the very same Hebrew word which by Jerome is rendered “superliminare,” only influenced by a little misreading*. The Greek *καταπέτασμα* corresponds, as every Hebrew scholar will know by heart, and a glance at any concordance proves, to a very common Hebrew word: פרכת, prkt (pronounced *paroket*); *superliminare*, again, stands for a rather rare word, spelt with the very same letters, but in a little different order: כפתר, kptr (pronounced *kaftor*). This Hebrew word stands in the Old Testament: Amos ix. 1; Zephaniah ii. 14. By a very happy accident—which may serve to convince every one how easily such transpositions of letters occur, especially where *liquidæ* are concerned—the Septuagint, the old Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, has read at the very passage (Amos ix. 1) a third possible grouping of these letters; for it has “ *ἰλαστήριον*, id

est כפרת, *kprt* = *kapporet*." Can there be any longer the least doubt? Καταπέτασμα is translation of a misread כפרת, *superliminare*.

The very first principle of textual criticism is: *Proclivi scriptioni praeat ardua*. That reading is believed to be true from which the change into the other is more easy; the rarer word is likely to change into the one more in use. The latter is in this case no doubt *prkt*, פרכת, *veil*, instead of *kptr*, כפתר. Ask any student of divinity what is the Hebrew expression for the veil of the Temple and the Tabernacle, and he will say "*paroket*." Ask him what is ἱλαστήριον in Hebrew, and he knows: *kapporet*. Ask what is *superliminare*, and few, if any, will without resort to the dictionary or concordance be certain about כפתר, *kaftor*.

But what is most natural from the principle of textual criticism is supported in this instance by the context. "The earth did quake," says the very same verse. What are we to expect? that "a veil is rent"? No, that a lintel of a large door be broken, or that something like an ornament of it, a chapiter, tumble down, or whatever may be the exact meaning of *sublatum, divisum et fractum, corruere*, and of *superliminare* and its Hebrew original *kaftor*.¹ It is really strange that an author writing as lately as 1889, and comparing these two versions said of the relation in the Hebrew Gospel, "It shows a decidedly apocryphal predilection for the miraculous in the crassest sense (*das Wunderbare im grassesten Sinn*). Instead of the tearing of a thin (!) veil, this unsound craving for legends demands the thundering (!) bursting of a massive lintel *infinitae magnitudinis*."² The very opposite is true, and even in our present Greek

¹ This is a philological and archæological question for itself, not to be treated here at length. It must suffice to say, that the etymology seems to show *kaftor* to be a pear-like ornament, some sort of chapiter, as the English Bible (R.V.) renders it in both places of the Old Testament, and that the Latin of Jerome gives freedom to think of *superliminare* with or without the definite article.

² Resch, *Agrapha*, p. 341.

text there are little traces left testifying for the Hebrew original. If the veil were rent from the bottom to the top it would have had the same effect; but if something falls down—*corruit*—it cannot be otherwise than from above downwards. Again, our present Greek manuscripts have for the most part that the veil was rent *in twain*, *εἰς δύο* or *εἰς δύο μέρη* (Matt. xxvii. 51), or *μέσον* (*in the midst*) (Luke xxiii. 45). But if you refer to the critical apparatus of Tischendorf or any large edition of the Greek Testament, you will find that these intensive expressions are not quoted in Matthew, for instance, by Origen and Eusebius, in Luke by the most famous Codex Bezae, and are, probably, later additions. As to my judgment, there can be not the least doubt. Jerome has preserved to us in this passage *the true reading of the original Hebrew Gospel*, which clears away a very great difficulty.

But the insight gained for this passage has its consequences for others. *Si haberemus hebraeum Matthaeum; facile expediremus*, said Luther once. Here at least we have a bit of it, but we have one also for another passage of even greater importance.

From the second century there has been a questioning about the meaning of the word *ἐπιούσιος* in the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer: *supersubstantialis, quotidianus, daily, needy, abundant*, and I know not what other translations and explanations have been proposed. At last the question is settled by reference to the Hebrew Gospel. Of course the passage is long known and frequently spoken of, in which Jerome writes on Matthew vi. 11.

“In evangelio, quod appellatur secundum Hebraeos, pro supersubstantiali pane reperi *mahar*, quod dicitur *crastinum* ut sit sensus: *panem nostrum crastinum, id est futurum, da nobis hodie.*”

But up to the present time the opposite views were possi-

ble. Such a good Hebrew scholar as *Delitzsch* declared that *mahar* was quite out of place as a translation of the Greek *ἐπιούσιος*, and considered this very passage as a proof that the Gospel of the Hebrews was dependent from the Greek and did not deserve belief. Other scholars, on the contrary, did take the opposite view; one of the strongest advocates that *ἐπιούσιος* must be our bread for the coming day was *Paul de Lagarde*. *Theodore Zahn*, too, in the work to which we alluded at the commencement of this article, took the same view. His reasoning was quite sound. He said, if anywhere, we must expect that among the Hebrews (Acts vi. 1) the real form of the prayer was propagated which Jesus taught His disciples. Now let us suppose for the moment the *evangelium secundum Hebraeos* was a translation from the Greek. "Is it likely," *Zahn* asks, "that the Hebrew translator left the form of prayer which he was accustomed to, and cared for, and followed the etymological explanation of a very rare Greek word? Impossible! Even Jerome," says *Zahn*, "and Luther left the *quotidianus* and *daily*—the former at all events in Luke xi. 3, the latter at both places, though they knew that *ἐπιούσιος* did not mean daily. Why? because the praxis of prayer in the Occident was too strong for them. The same is the case with the Revised Version. Therefore *crastinum* must be considered to be the true meaning if in the supposed case the Gospel according to the Hebrews be a translation." But from other grounds *Zahn* stated that it was no translation, and that at all events in this passage the originality was on its side. After the light that has fallen on Matthew xxvii. I believe that also for Matthew vi. 11 Jerome's note is a beacon for the true understanding of the Gospel. *Distingue linguas et concordabit Scriptura*. What the Revised Version put in the margin—"Give us this day," or, as we read in Luke, "Give us day by day our bread": "*for the coming day*"—we are now even with

more right entitled to include in our daily prayer. By the same method of going back to the Hebrew original, which must be presupposed to lie at the bottom of our present Greek Gospels, another variation disappears, which has greatly vexed as well the pious as the learned Bible reader. In the history of the Passion it is said by Matthew (xxvii. 34) that they gave Jesus *vinegar* to drink mingled with *gall*, by Mark (xv. 23) *wine* mingled with *myrrh*. Now vinegar may be like wine, or rather wine like vinegar (cf. R.V.), but at all events gall is not myrrh; but in Hebrew gall and myrrh are written by exactly the same letters, varying only in the vowel dots. In the *Evangelium Hierosolymitanum*, which shows a dialect most like to that which Jesus must be supposed to have spoken, the word is in both cases written quite alike, namely *mira*.

Jerome was not in every respect the man we could have wished him to be; but the thanks of all who are interested in an historical understanding of Christendom are due to him that he enabled us fifteen hundred years after his time to recover these bits of the original Gospel.

EBERHARD NESTLE.