

# Jesus the Exegete: A study of Mark 12: 26-27

*Rob Sheldon  
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Westminster Theological Seminary*

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## **Dedication**

To my wife Sunmi, who has loved enough to lose her love, twice these 23 years.

*The gates of heaven are lightly locked,/ We do not guard our gain,/ The heaviest hind may easily/  
Come silently and suddenly/ Upon me in a lane.  
And any little maid that walks/ In good thoughts apart,/ May break the guard of the Three Kings/  
And see the dear and dreadful things/ I hid within my heart.  
The meanest man in grey fields gone/ Behind the set of sun,/ Heareth between star and other  
star,/ Through the door the darkness fallen ajar,/ The council, eldest of things that are, /  
The talk of the Three in One.*

G.K. Chesterton, *The Ballad of the White Horse* (1911)

## ***Introduction:***

This paper has two objectives: to understand how the New Testament writers exegeted the Old Testament Scriptures, and to find a model of how the Church is to exegete them today. The first objective appears to be a scholarly one, untainted by theological commitments or religious beliefs, while the second is fraught with significance for ministers and believers, as James Mays reminds us.<sup>1</sup> But we would argue that these two objectives really cannot be addressed separately,<sup>2</sup> for even this first, tame, scholarly objective is tormented with presuppositions tied to our present circumstance. Even as we try to understand how the NT writers exegete, we implicitly use criteria that are themselves the product of exegesis. For example, if we use the Rabbinical *middot* as a guide, we are saying something about the validity of Jewish exegesis, or if we compare to Zoroastrian resurrection myths, we are implying something about the equivalence of the two approaches.

And those assumptions must affect our conclusions, as Van Til reminds us,<sup>3</sup> so that the community of NT scholars has divided into two or three camps: those that view the OT and the NT as infallible truth and must find a justification for NT writer's use of the OT; those who view only the OT as infallible; and those who view neither as infallible. (Marcion's fourth camp is rarely defended today.) Stereotyping these positions, we might call them Evangelical, Jewish Orthodox, and Liberal. As might be expected, Jewish and Liberal views are unsympathetic to the infallibility of NT writers, leaving only the Evangelicals defending the validity of gospel exegesis. Their job is made even more difficult because the gospel writers did not use the evangelical "grammatico-historical" method in their exegesis. This has led some to the strange expedient of demanding that gospel writers be infallible in their conclusions, but erroneous (or equivalently, unrepeatable) in their methods.<sup>4</sup>

We find that deeply disturbing, since Jesus condemns "the leaven of the Pharisees" that attempts to achieve good results with a bad heart. Likewise it is a commonplace in scholarly circles that the

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<sup>1</sup> James Luther Mays "'Is this not why you are wrong?'" Exegetical reflections on Mark 12:18-27" *Interpretation* 32, January 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald Janzen "Resurrection and Hermeneutics: On Exodus 3:6 in Mark 12.26" 43, *JSNT* 23, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Cornelius Van Til *Apologetics* 62, Philipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub Co, 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Longenecker *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 198, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

conclusions are only as valid as the logic used to argue from valid suppositions. To retreat into an irrational fideism neither advances the gospel nor prepares the next generation for the Post-Modern onslaught. Therefore the goal of this paper is to closely examine an example of Jesus' exegesis, contrast the various modern views, attempt to reconcile Evangelical infallibility with 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple milieu, and draw some conclusions for exegesis today.

We have no illusions about the magnitude of the task set before us, for as we already said, our past exegesis affects the presuppositions of our present exegesis. This circular effort is not merely difficult but dangerous both for the uninitiated and the professional, because it is an exercise involving all three of the holy things: God, man and language. That is, one definition of the holy is that it is self-realizing, self-defining, self-observing, self-actualized, *sui generis*, or in shorthand, recursive.<sup>5</sup> (Theologically speaking, only God is *sui generis*, but inasmuch as modernism divorces science from purpose or God, we can say that scientifically, language and man are also recursively defined.) Then exegesis of the words of God (and its hermeneutical principles<sup>6</sup>) bears a triply holy responsibility, interacting with text using text (lexicons, grammars), with man using man (intellect, history), and with God using God (ethics, metaphysics). Accordingly, the pitfalls are not just numerous but deadly, for the text will not survive exegesis that changes the text, any more than man will endure exegesis that changes his self, or than God will tolerate exegesis that changes God.

The danger is real, for James warns us (3:1) that teachers will "incur a stricter judgment", (as Republicans continually rediscover to their shame.) Like Martin Luther upon celebrating his first eucharist, it is with great trepidation that we examine God's holy word for help in this exegetical dilemma. And like Luther, we turn to Christ. For regardless of the liberties taken by the gospel writers, they learned their exegesis from the Christ who rebuked the Sadducees for ignorance of Scripture, giving an object lesson in exegesis. If we would learn from Jesus, we too must sit at his feet, listening to his

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<sup>5</sup>Robert Sheldon "The Holy Part 1" at [http://procrustes.blogtownhall.com/2008/07/01/the\\_holy\\_part\\_1.html](http://procrustes.blogtownhall.com/2008/07/01/the_holy_part_1.html) accessed on 25 Sept 2008.

<sup>6</sup>Louis Berkhof "Principles of Biblical Interpretation," 11-13, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950.

words, straining to learn his lesson. A lesson that happened in Jerusalem, during Passover, when Jesus was being tested by the Pharisees and Sadducees as Mark records for us in 12:26-27.

### **Loop 1: The Purpose**

#### **Wider Context**

This OT quotation, this exegesis of Jesus, is no throwaway line in the gospels, it is not a later insertion or redaction for rhetorical effect<sup>7</sup>, but comes at the pinnacle of Jesus' teaching ministry and bears a tremendous emphasis of placement. This quotation appears in all three synoptic gospels in the same place, between the Triumphal Entry and the Last Supper, in the last five days of his ministry. Over the objections of his disciples, Jesus has returned from Galilee, entered in Jerusalem grand style, and directly confronts the Pharisees and Sadducees. These were both "orthodox Jews", but with differing opinions of what the Law demanded of its followers.<sup>8</sup> However they were united in their opposition to Jesus' ministry.

From a human point of view, Jesus had never been more popular. Three years of ministry<sup>9</sup> had overshadowed that of his relative John, electrified the people, and drawn the attention of the authorities. It seemed obvious that if an uprising were to begin it would have to begin in Jerusalem. If Jesus were to claim the rights of a king he would have to do it there. Just as every successful revolution makes a victorious triumph the centerpiece of its internal saga, so it would appear that this story is at the climax of 'The Jesus Revolution'.

The synoptics and John record the opposition Jesus encountered, making this moment the crucial conflict of his claim to the throne. In a surprising show of unanimity, the Sadducees, Pharisees and the Herodians<sup>10</sup> are looking for an opportunity to arrest him. They can't arrest him publicly, for Jesus is so immensely popular with the crowds, who see his presence in Jerusalem as the culmination of his ministry

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<sup>7</sup> John P. Meier "The Debate on the Resurrection of the Dead: An Incident from the Ministry of the Historical Jesus?" 3, *JSNT* 77, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Robert C. Newman "Breadmaking with Jesus" 2-5, *JETS* 40/1, March 1997.

<sup>9</sup> John's gospel records 3 passovers, this being the last, so that Jesus' ministry is at least 2 full years and probably longer if we accept the testimony of John.

leading directly to coronation, that the crowds would riot.<sup>11</sup> Everything that he has done seems to confirm this trajectory: the king-like entrance into Jerusalem; the confrontational cleansing of the Temple; the challenge to priestly authority; and the veiled threat in the parable about the evil tenants. So at the same time he teaches the crowds, it is the crowds that protect him from arrest, and should he stumble or lose popularity, his arrest would be imminent. Much as Al Qaeda operated in Iraq throughout 2006-7, he must escalate the conflict for the sake of his life, for he is riding the tiger of popular opinion.

Thus the authorities view Jesus as cashing in on his popularity, as making the move that would lead to another Maccabean revolt and bring the retributive wrath of the Romans (as indeed occurred 40 years later). To prevent him from succeeding, to knock him off the tiger, they challenged him to a rabbinical puzzle contest.<sup>12</sup> The topic of taxes was chosen to either force his hand early (opposing the tax and getting arrested by the Romans), or diminish his popularity (supporting an unpopular tax). When this failed, the second strategy was to split the allegiance of his followers by having Jesus either defend a politically incorrect viewpoint (resurrection) or a popularly incorrect viewpoint (materialism).<sup>13</sup> If enough of his followers could be peeled off, he would be vulnerable to arrest. So this passage draws its importance not just from being at the center of the gospel story, but at the climax of his struggle with the religious authorities.<sup>14</sup> Therefore at the pinnacle of his career, at the center of his cultural-political-religious heritage, at the peak of his physical prowess, Jesus was exegiting as his life depended on it.

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<sup>10</sup> The Herodians are historically vague, though with Meier, we concur they are likely to be supporters of Herod Antipas. (John P. Meier, "The Historical Jesus and the Historical Herodians" 743, JBL

<sup>11</sup> J.A. Alexander "Commentary on the Gospel of Mark", xxi, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark: the Greek text with introduction, notes, and indexes*, 480, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981.

<sup>13</sup> Josephus, *Ant. 18:12-17* says "the Sadducees hold that the soul perishes with the body", quoted in John Donahue and Daniel Harrington "The Gospel of Mark", *Sacra Pagina Series vol 2*, The Liturgical Press, 350, Collegeville, Minn. 2002, and compares them with the Epicureans. While Josephus is quite familiar with Hellenistic philosophy, he may be overly harsh with the rival Sadducees (Louis Feldman "Use, Authority and Exegesis of Mikra in the Writings of Josephus", 515, Peabody: Henderson Pub, 2004.) who would have had difficulty harmonizing Epicurus with Moses.

<sup>14</sup> We note in passing that it is common in redaction criticism to excise passages that "fit rather awkwardly into the flow of the argument" as being later insertions. See Francis Muloney "The Gospel of Mark" 238-239, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002, footnotes 122 & 126. This is an example of a specific hermeneutic that circularly interprets Scripture, making use of the method of "subtraction."

## Narrower Context

Just as the wider context of this OT quotation placed it at the apex of his earthly ministry with the crowds, so the narrower context of the quotation placed it at the apex of his rabbinical interpretation of the Law. Once again, this is no throw-away exegesis, but the heart of Jesus' interpretation of Scripture, which can only be seen in contrast to his opponent's exegesis. The quotation of Jesus occurred during a debate started by the Pharisees and Sadducees ostensibly about Mosaic Law but intended to get Jesus in trouble with somebody and soon. Jesus parlayed the explosive question about taxes so effectively that the Pharisees went silent. This gave the Sadducees an opportunity to ask their stumper, which had the added benefit of shaming the more scholarly Pharisees, posing a riddle that was intended to show the inconsistency of the concept of the resurrection with levirate marriage in Mosaic Law. Namely, a woman marries the oldest of 7 brothers, and when he dies, Moses commanded a brother to marry her to bear a son for the dead brother (Deut. 25:5ff). The unfortunate woman is childless, and the brothers prone to early death, so she ends up marrying all seven.<sup>15</sup> So in the hypothetical Resurrection, the Sadducees want to know, who will be the woman's husband?<sup>16</sup>

There are many unwritten rules in this debate, which are implicit in the text. In addition to disagreeing with the Pharisees on the Resurrection, the Sadducees also only accept the five books of Moses, so whatever Jesus answers has to come from the Pentateuch, he was not allowed, for example, to bring in the traditional rabbinic defense of Is 26:19; Ps 16:9-11; Job 19:26; Dan 12:1-2.<sup>17</sup> Jesus deflects the force of their riddle by pointing out that there are alternative solutions to the stumper that still admit the Resurrection; the simplest is to point out that marriage is an earthly institution, so there can be no

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<sup>15</sup>A parallel to apocryphal literature Tobit 3:8, 15; 6:13; 7:11, and possibly 4 Maccabees. (William Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 427, Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns Pub Co. 1974). Bolt argues for a merger of the two stories, though enough differences remain for it to remain an indirect reference. (Peter G. Bolt "What were the Sadducees Reading?" 393-394, *Tyndale Bulletin* 45.2, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Levirate marriage was shunned by the rabbis/Pharisees, who saw it as nearly incestuous, putting so many restrictions on it that the practice was effectively eliminated. Thus the Sadducees, by presenting Jesus with a despised law of Moses, hoped to force him either to dismiss a law of Moses, (validating their claim that the Pharisees are no more righteous than they) or defend an unpopular law in order to hold to a popular claim. (Dale W. Manor "A Brief History of Levirate Marriage as it Relates to the Bible", 140-141, *Restoration Quarterly*, )

<sup>17</sup>Craig Evans *Word Biblical Commentary Vol 34B*, 255-256, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001.

conflict in heaven, which he corroborates with the observation that the other heavenly beings, angels are not (re)married either.<sup>18</sup>

### **Double Trouble**

But Jesus is not content to leave the matter there; he has deflected the question but left the Sadducees still ensconced safely in their skepticism. Since the Sadducees also deny the existence of angel-souls (Acts 23:8),<sup>19</sup> his defense would have mainly satisfied the Pharisees and the crowds. So he turns the tables and says that their skepticism shows they are ignorant of both the Scriptures and the power of God.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps it was understood at that time that the Sadducees' denial of the Resurrection arose from a denial of God's power to raise the dead. Certainly the Sadducees thought they knew the Scriptures, this was one of the implicit rules of such a puzzle debate. So if Jesus could prove the more

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<sup>18</sup> Trick argues that the problem stated by the Sadducees is not resurrection polyandry, because death annuls a marriage anyway, but rather, which of the 7 brothers will be remarried in the Resurrection. This is why Jesus uses the phrase "marry or given in marriage" in his response (Bradley R. Trick, "Death, Covenants, and the Proof of Resurrection in Mark 12:18-27", 241-4, *Novum Testamentum* 49, 2007). Note also Jesus doesn't use a non-materialist dualism to deny resurrection marriage, which would have undermined the immaterial aspects of earthly marriage.

<sup>19</sup> Since only Acts among 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple or 1<sup>st</sup> century accounts accuses the Sadducees of this strange disbelief in angels, which appear notably in the Pentateuch with the iconic dream of Jacob's ladder, many commentators (e.g. Bernard J. Bamberger, "Critical Note: the Sadducees and the belief in angels" 434, *JBL*) think the Sadducees still believe in angels and Acts must be reinterpreted (David Daube "Critical Note: on Acts 23:8 Sadducees and Angels" 493-4, *JBL* 109/3, 1990). Among various reinterpretations of Acts, we prefer the view that takes 23:8 "For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge both." as referring to two items: resurrection-angels, and resurrection-spirits. (The NIV characteristically translates τα ἀμφοτέρω as "them all" so as to avoid the numbering problem.) In this view, the Pharisees recognize two forms of "intermediate state" beings, a monist, bodily "angel-soul", and/or a more tenuous, dualist "spirit-soul", both of which are denied by the Sadducees. (Benedict T. Viviano, "Sadducees, Angels and Resurrection (Acts 23:8-9)", *JBL*). If this be correct, then Jesus contradicts the Sadducees without confirming/denying either monism or dualism, lest they escape his more important point about then resurrection.

<sup>20</sup> Lane says that "the traditional Pharisaical defense of the resurrection found in "TB *Sanhedrin* 90b where Rabbi Gamaliel II deduces it from Num. 11:9 ('in order that you may prolong your days on the land which God has promised to your fathers to give to them') on the ground that they must themselves be beneficiaries of the promise. In a similar manner Rabbi Johanan deduces it from Num 18:28 that Aaron must be alive all the time the law is in effect" (William Lane "The Gospel According to Mark", 431, footnote 40). Neither of these are in themselves compelling, since they require a more spectacular belief (resurrection) to be derived from a more minor legal belief (fairness involving additional beneficiaries to an earthly inheritance). If this was the best the Pharisees could muster, it is not surprising the Sadducees did not find it convincing. Lane then argues that Jesus increased the force of the argument by enlarging the beneficence to include anti-death. While we do not minimize Lane's insight, it remains a circular argument that we do not think the Sadducees would have found compelling.

difficult of the two assertions, their ignorance of Pentateuch, then the second, their ignorance of God's power, would surely follow.<sup>21</sup>

The logic seems associative, but recall that most of Jesus' audience already believed the truth of the Tanakh with its many resurrection stories.<sup>22</sup> They already thought the Sadducees' rejection of the Tanakh was a willful ignorance that led them to deny the Resurrection.<sup>23</sup> So Jesus' challenge was to prove, from the Pentateuch alone, that not only had God the power to raise the dead but that it applied generally to all men, and then he had won the second argument that it was their willful ignorance or unbelief that separated them from Heaven.<sup>24</sup>

### **Willful Unbelief**

And while the Mark 12:27 rebuke "you are quite wrong" does not explicate fully his criticism, it is a recurring theme of Jesus' ministry that skepticism arises not from lack of knowledge, but from willful, and therefore sinful, unbelief. We mention it here because the Sadducees perfectly illustrate the danger of recursive argument, the danger of willfully changing our beliefs, rather than belief changing our wills. Only if we understand this form of faulty interpretation, will we understand how Jesus' arguments cut to the quick of their circular exegesis.

It is similar to the principle of jurisprudence that ignorance of the law is no excuse. Why? Because we have a legal responsibility to know the law (note the recursion!) In the same way, we have a moral responsibility to know the power of God, to know the Scriptures. Paul expands on this concept in

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<sup>21</sup> Note how Jesus often ties together an immeasurable and measurable principle, so that demonstration of one is proof of the other (Mark 2:9-11).

<sup>22</sup> Certainly by the time of the exile, there was a belief in the resurrection as depicted in Daniel, a belief, which grew throughout the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple period, both in commitment and in detail, as witnessed in the pseudepigraphical books (George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism and Early Christianity* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006) and Targums. (Cf. Henry Sysling "'Tehiyyat Ha-Metim: The Resurrection of the Dead in the Palestinian Targums of the Pentateuch and Parallel Traditions in Classical Rabbinic Literature" *TSAJ* 57; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1996). That is, if the Aramaic translations of the Pentateuch include the resurrection, then the Pharisees are attempting to "read back" into the books Moses, this later theological development, no doubt to deflect the Sadducee's criticism that the resurrection is not to be found in the Torah.

<sup>23</sup> We take the commotion Paul caused in the Sanhedrin (Acts 23:9-10) as evidence that there was bad blood (e.g., willful ignorance) between Pharisees and Sadducees over this issue.

<sup>24</sup> Some commentators think that his was an easy thing to do, since all Jesus had to do was to appeal to the present tense of "I am the God of Abraham". But as Gould (Ezra P Gould, "The Gospel of Mark" *The International Critical*

Rom. 1:18-20, where he argues that God's power is plain to everyone, so that skepticism arises not from passive ignorance, but active suppression of the truth. This is not unique to Paul, but we can find this same sentiment in Job 28:28, Ps 111:10, Pr 1:7, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." We cannot fear something we do not know, so the beginning of wisdom is an appropriate (= wise) response to what we cannot help but observe. This recursion on wisdom was a common theme of the prophets, making Jesus' declaration of ignorance not the condescension of a teacher, but the accusation of a prophet. Only prophets, it seems, demand both the attitude and the action be in alignment.

### **Prophetic Power**

But the claims of a prophet are much greater than that of a teacher. A teacher recites the text and the opinions of others on the text, perhaps a famous teacher will add his gloss to the tradition, but a prophet grasps the authority of the text itself, he adds not gloss but text itself, he is text. For Jesus to "speak with authority" to the Sadducees, then, he must establish his prophetic credentials, but under their peculiar terms of using only the first five books of Moses. And since Moses was the greatest prophet in these books, Jesus must draw his authority from Moses himself. Therefore the manner of Jesus exegesis is as important as the content, for not only must he establish the truth of the Resurrection, but he must also establish his Mosaic authority to appropriate that truth.

### **Recursive Exegesis**

Finally we come to the matter of recursion itself. As our example from jurisprudence demonstrates, one must know the law in order to know that one must know it. Likewise, one must know God (and fear Him) in order to have the wisdom to seek to know God (through the Scriptures), which commands us to know Him. These are closed loops,<sup>25</sup> and it would appear that just as foreigners and travellers are at a disadvantage with regard to local law, so also Gentiles and pagans have no opportunity to obtain wisdom, unless an outside influence were to introduce them to God or the Scriptures or both. Paul's claim is that there is just such an outside influence, and Ps 19:1-4 might be the Scripture Paul

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Commentary, 230, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1896.) comments "But this is a *non sequitur*, since it is a common expression in regard to both dead and living..."

<sup>25</sup>Douglas Hofstadter, "Goedel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid", 15, New York:Vintage Books, 1979.

refers to in Rom 1:18ff. But Jesus has to make this argument without recourse to the Psalms. Why? Because the Sadducees have rejected them already. But on what basis have they rejected them? On the testimony of Moses? Or their desire to deny the Resurrection?

### **Vicious Cycle-Breaking**

The Sadducees would no doubt claim their denial was the testimony of Moses. There are scholarly attempts to reconstruct the Sadducees arguments from reading the rebuttals in the rabbinic literature, suggesting that the Sadducees saw resurrection as a pagan, Persian and/or Greek influence on post-exilic writers, and therefore rejected these contaminated latter writings in preference to Moses.<sup>26</sup> But because exegesis is a circular and recursive task, the conclusion could very well have been the cause. They may have rejected the full Tanakh simply because they rejected the Resurrection. Pious and personal statements notwithstanding, we are not able to know our hearts sufficiently well to ever exclude a base motive.<sup>27</sup> Bahnsen argues that the human mind suppresses the truth, not by making the Aristotelean antinomy of believing both A and not-A (despite PoMo claims to the contrary), but by invoking an intermediary statement B, such that B implies not-A, including as many intermediaries as needed to reduce the cognitive dissonance.<sup>28</sup> The Sadducees undoubtedly employed this process in adducing that they believed Moses, but not the Resurrection, and it remains an ever-present pitfall for us.

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<sup>26</sup> Attributing resurrection to the Greco-Persians was a poorly supported argument of the 19<sup>th</sup> century *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, Bremmer argues, which instead arose in the 2<sup>nd</sup> –1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC Palestine as a result of persecution, and would have been considered a “modern” innovation of the Pharisees. (Jan N. Bremmer *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife: The 1995 Read-Tuckwell Lectures at the University of Bristol*, 47, London: Taylor and Francis Inc, 2001.) If the Sadducees are identified with the Zadokites and the Qumran community, as Groppe suggests, then it would seem that the cause of their separation was over halakhic differences, perhaps a revelation to the Teacher of Righteousness, and quite distant from Greek and Persian influences (Lawrence H. Schiffman, “The New Halakhic Letter (4QMMT) and the Origins of the Dead Sea Sect” 74, *Biblical Archaeologist*, 53.2 June 1990.) A number of Qumran scrolls carry notions of resurrection: “from Sheol and Abaddon you have lifted me up” (1QH xi:19) and “and will make the dead live” (4Q521:12), (Florentino Garcia Martinez *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, 332, 394, Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns 1992.) Levenson, while arguing for a monist versus dualist intermediate state, agrees with the Pharisees that resurrection is inherent in the Torah, and not a later post-exilic construct. (Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life*, New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1990). So while we do not have a good justification of the Sadducee’s rejection of the Resurrection, which may have been irrational as Jesus implies, it wasn’t essential to the counter-argument.

<sup>27</sup> Canon Michael Green argues that Sadducees did not want a Resurrection because they had already obtained power. Quoted in a sermon from internet: <http://www.virtueonline.org/portal/modules/news/article.php?storyid=9133> accessed on 10/5/08.)

<sup>28</sup> Gregory Lyle Bahsen, “A conditional resolution of the apparent paradox of self-deception” 1979, PhD USC.

But if the circularity of exegesis depends on our choice of starting point, how then can we ever obtain certainty? As we will see later, certainty lies outside the rational method, and to a large extent, is a divine Trinitarian revelation beyond our limited intellect. However, we can obtain *uncertainty*, we can tell whether our hermeneutic is flawed by whether the conclusions and premises are balanced. That is, our exegesis must survive irrespective of what motives we assign to it. For in a circular argument, in a recursive hermeneutic, both the premises and the conclusions must be separately justified, they must be able to stand in any order if they are to stand at all. This is an important point so let me say it again. Since a recursive hermeneutic brings us right back to where we started from, for it to be valid, it must not matter where in the argument we begin, whether with the premises or with the conclusions.

### **Refuting Sadducees**

Let us apply this principle to the Sadducees argument. (a) If there is no Resurrection, then only the first 5 books of Moses are true. (b) If only the first 5 books of Moses are true, there is no Resurrection. Note that these are non-equivalent statements, (a)  $A \rightarrow B$  is not the same as (b)  $B \rightarrow A$ , but both must be true if the Sadducees circular claim is to be upheld against the criticism that they have a biased, recursive hermeneutic. Jesus' statement that they know not the power of God attacks the first and hidden claim, while his statement that they know not the Scriptures attacks the second and public claim.

But for his logic to succeed in silencing the Sadducees, Jesus has to submit himself to their hermeneutic, he has to humble himself to ignore the rest of Scripture, he has to make his argument from within their hermeneutical system. It is a very VanTillian approach<sup>29</sup> that Jesus must take here, and so his exegesis takes on a great deal more significance, because it establishes some general principles of apologetic hermeneutics, that, for example, Paul widely uses (Acts 13:15ff,17:22ff).

### **Conclusions**

We note that Jesus employs the rhetorical device of "chiasmus" in his reply to the Sadducees, opening with a general condemnation of their hermeneutical approach, moving to the specific problems,

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<sup>29</sup>Cornelius Van Til "Apologetics" 62, Philipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub Co, 1976.

and then ending with a general approbation.<sup>30</sup> While not important to the logic, it nonetheless demonstrates an awareness of how his words were being received, and care to arrange them for maximum rhetorical effect. It places this OT quotation, this exegesis at the center of the argument of this apex of his earthly ministry. So both the narrower and wider context of his reply are united, for if he fails to convince the crowds and they disperse, the Herodians will arrest him on the spot, and if he fails to prove the resurrection, his earthly ministry will end without a cogent explanation (1 Cor 15). So Jesus not only has to present a hermeneutic that rigorously defeats the circular logic of the Sadducees, that works from within their restricted system, and that carries prophetic power, but also one that is acceptable to the public meaning that it follows certain widely known rabbinical conventions for the handling of Scripture and especially, Moses.

### **The Modern Dilemma**

Trick argues that the Christian understanding of Jesus' proof of the resurrection uses one of three validations: grammar, logic or context.<sup>31</sup> In principle, these are the same criteria as the Rabbis, but in practice they are widely different. While Christian commentators have struggled for 20 centuries to understand the resurrection proof given us by Jesus, the Rabbis collected many such proofs over the first 3 centuries. Since these form the background for Jesus' argument, we examine the rabbinic *midrash* first.

### **The 4<sup>th</sup> Century Midrash**

The Tannaitic Rabbis were engaged in a strenuous debate with the Sadducees over the necessity of the resurrection, recording many of their arguments in the Babylonian Talmud. Many "proofs" of the resurrection exist in the Talmud,<sup>32</sup> in *Sanhedrin 91b*,<sup>33</sup> as discussed recently.<sup>34</sup>

In Pes. 68a, for example, R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in Reb Johnathan's name, the righteous are destined to resurrect the dead. He proves this by a *gezera shawa* (Hillel's second rule): Elisha says, 'Lay my staff upon the face of the child'. (2 Kings 4:29). In Zechariah we find the verse, 'There shall yet old men and old women

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<sup>30</sup>David Garland "The NIV Application Commentary" Grand Rapids:Zondervan 470, 1996.

<sup>31</sup> Trick, 244.

<sup>32</sup> "To Live and Live Again", <http://www.sichosinenglish.org/books/to-live-and-live-again/02.htm> accessed 11/07/2008.

<sup>33</sup> "Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin" [http://www.come-and-hear.com/sanhedrin/sanhedrin\\_91.html](http://www.come-and-hear.com/sanhedrin/sanhedrin_91.html) accessed 11/07/2008.

<sup>34</sup> Anthony J. Saldarini "The Uses of Apocalyptic in the Mishna and Tosepta" *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 39, 1977.

sit in the broad places in Jerusalem, every man with his staff in his hand for very age' (Zech. 8:4). Thus, it is argued that because Elisha used his staff to resurrect the dead child, similarly the staff in the men's hands in the Zechariah prophecy is used to resurrect the dead.<sup>35</sup>

Not only do Western theologians find this argument rather unconvincing, but this example is taken from the Writings, and not the Pentateuch, however, it is typical midrash. Cohn-Sherbok goes on to give another rabbinic proof drawn from the Torah this time.

Again, in Ber. 12b, the sages cite Deut. 16:3, 'The day when thou earnest out of the land of Egypt all the days of Thy life'. Following Nahum of Gimzo's method of ... they point out that if the text simply said 'days of Thy life', this would refer to this world. The text, however, uses the particle 'kal' so as to include the Hereafter ... and this illustrates the resurrection of the dead is to take place.<sup>36</sup>

In this situation, Cohn-Sherbok is invoking one of the many "special rules" that rabbinic tradition used to find hidden meanings of the text.<sup>37</sup> Looking for a more standard proof of the Resurrection, Cohn-Sherbok gives three using Hillel's *middot* rules.

In San. 90b, the question is asked, 'How is resurrection derived from the Torah?' Following Hillel's seventh principle. *Davar halamed me-inyano* - the explanation is derived from the context - an appeal is made to Num. 18:28: 'And ye shall give there of the Lord's heave offering to Aaron the priest.' But since Aaron did not enter Palestine, the heave offering could not have been given to him since it was only given in Palestine. Therefore Aaron must have been resurrected there to receive it. Similarly, Rabbi Gamaliel in San. 90b said that resurrection is to be derived from Deut. 11:9, 'And the land which the Lord swore unto your fathers to give to them.' This verse specifically states that the land is to be given personally to the Patriarchs, but they were not alive to receive it. Thus they must have been resurrected.

Using this same *middot* R. Meir said, 'Whence do we know resurrection from the Torah?' From the verse, 'Then shall Moses and the children of Israel sing this song unto the Lord.' (Ex. 15:1). Not 'sang' but 'shall sing' is written here. Since they did not sing a second time in this life, this verse must mean that they will sing after resurrection.

Following Hillel's sixth rule, *Kayotse bo mi-makom aher* - the analogy made from another passage - in Pes. 68a the statement 'I will kill, and I make alive' (Deut. 32:39) is compared with another phrase in the same verse, 'I have wounded and I heal.' Just as wounding and healing obviously refer to the same person, so death and life refer to the same person. This, they contend, refutes those who claim that resurrection is not to be found in the Torah.<sup>38</sup>

How does the Evangelical respond to such argumentation? As the rabbis themselves attest, there are 70 different interpretations for each verse in the Torah, so these are what logicians might call "demonstrations" showing consistency rather than proof. Would they have silenced the Sadducees?<sup>39</sup> It is unlikely, since 30 years later the Pharisees were still arguing with the Sadducees (Acts 23:6-10). The

<sup>35</sup> Rabbi D.M. Cohn-Sherbok, "Jesus' Defense of the Resurrection of the Dead" 64-73, *JSNT* 11, 1981.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Rimon Kasher "The Interpretation of Scripture in Rabbinic Literature", *Mikra* 593, Peabody: Hendrickson 2004.

<sup>38</sup> Cohn-Sherbok, 70-71.

<sup>39</sup> Newman, 5.

problem is that even for the Pharisees, one must already believe in the Resurrection to find it in the Torah; the proofs do not compel belief.

### **The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Grammarians**

Trick categorizes the modern understanding of Jesus' argument into 6 categories using the 3 methods. The first is a rabbinic "grammar" *al tigrei*, in which the letters of the words are rearranged to find new meanings. Trick doesn't find this suggestion very likely, not least because the text is in Greek and not Hebrew. The second category attempts to draw conclusions from the present tense of the verb in Ex 3:6 "I am..." to infer that the patriarchs are still alive. But it too has little to recommend it, even when appealing to the supposedly flexible *midrash*.<sup>40</sup>

### **The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Rationalists**

Trick categorizes the third and fourth views as the logic that a God of the living can't have a relationship to dead people, or at least, Philo would have thought it to be very awkward. However, he finds no scriptural support for the "God of the living" which fatally weakens it, and Philo's awkwardness wasn't likely to impress Sadducees.<sup>41</sup> Not all evangelical commentators see the weakness of this logic, so for example, Swete writes, "In this place God reveals Himself as standing in a real relation to men who were long dead. But the living God cannot be in relation with any who have ceased to exist; therefore the patriarchs were still living in His sight at the time of the Exodus; dead to the visible world, they were alive unto God."<sup>42</sup> His praise for Jesus' intellect notwithstanding, the logic is circular, presupposing the truth of the Resurrection to argue for it, and for that reason it is unlikely that either the Pharisees or the Sadducees would have been convinced with this argument. All these interpretations attempt to find a logic, a meaning that the text itself will not support.

### **The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Post-Moderns**

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<sup>40</sup> Trick, 245.

<sup>41</sup> Trick, 246.

<sup>42</sup> Henry Barclay Swete, "The Gospel According to St Mark", 265, New York:McMillan and Co, 1898, or Moloney, "The Gospel of Mark", 239.

Trick's fifth and sixth categories see the burning bush experience as a covenant. Since it would be inappropriate to let a covenant promise for protection result in death, and because Jesus answered the levirate marriage implying that death annuls the covenant of marriage, it is necessary for the patriarchs to be alive, either through their progeny, or in heaven for the covenant to be eternal.<sup>43</sup> This appears to be a variation on the 19<sup>th</sup> century logic with a creative use of the word "covenant", which doesn't appear in this text.

### **The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Evangelicals**

Gundry argues that Evangelicals fall into three groups: those that use the fact of the Resurrection to argue that the logic for this resurrection must be valid (e.g., 19<sup>th</sup> century); those that argue for some peculiarity of the Greek grammar that removes the logic<sup>44</sup>; and those that say it was an invalid argument.<sup>45</sup> We have noted that the first group is using circular logic, the second group has mostly been contradicted by other grammarians, leaving the third group of somewhat dismissive theologians. Typical of this third group is Gundry,

Modern exegetes would brand the transfer of Exod 3:6 from past to future as highhanded violation of the originally intended meaning. But in first century Palestinian Judaism, as remarked before, an argument's consisting of grammatical historical exegesis would have lacked cogency, just as in another two thousand years different techniques of interpretation (psychological, sociological, economic, rhetorical, and structural posing possibilities that grow out of the present, to say nothing of unpredictable possibilities) may cause grammatical historical exegesis to lose its cogency. What counted then was ingenuity at playing with words by such means as transferring them to new frames of reference where they could be made to say new things, as indeed at the popular level may still count for more than does grammatical historical exegesis.<sup>46</sup>

### **The Jewish Polemic**

Even as the Evangelicals dismiss Jesus' argument as 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple *midrash*, the rabbis object, with Cohn-Sherbok arguing that Jesus did not make a valid argument based on any of the *middot*.

From this examination we can see that the argument put forward by Jesus to defend the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, does not follow the hermeneutical *middot* of the Tannaitic exegetes. This suggests that Jesus' response would not have stood up to the rigorous standards of hermeneutics established by the rabbis. As Professor Doeve remarks, rabbinic exegesis 'is a really systematic exegesis, and certainly not an

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<sup>43</sup> Trick, 249-250.

<sup>44</sup>Robert H. Gundry "Mark: A Commentary on his apology for the cross" 702-3, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub Co 1993.

<sup>45</sup>Gundry "Mark: A Commentary on his apology for the cross" 704-9.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid..

ingenious play upon the text.... To the rabbis the expounding of Scripture is not a game, but a sacred and serious matter.<sup>47</sup>

And while we would differ from the good Rabbi as to the validity of Jesus' argument, we agree that the Evangelical dismissal of *midrash* as an ingenious game is both condescending and inaccurate. But to understand Jesus' argument, we must turn to the text.

**Mk 12:26-27** And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong. (ESV)

Notice how Jesus is quite specific about his quotation, not only identifying it as in the Pentateuch, but also narrowing it down to the Exodus 3 narrative where Moses meets God at the burning bush. Considering how many gospel quotations are indirectly referenced, it is significant that Jesus gives four sequential identifiers, verbal quotation marks, for this passage: "book of Moses", "passage about the bush", "God spoke", "saying". Jesus is making sure that the Sadducees cannot escape the force of his exegesis in an appeal to uninspired speech or paraphrase. He increases its force by attributing the quote directly to God, so that even Moses' intermediary function in transcribing Scripture is removed from the debate.<sup>48</sup> This is the point of Jesus' quadruple reference: to remove all "Protestant" wiggle room that would attribute unwanted sentiment to uninspired gloss.

Jesus begins with the most holy event in the Pentateuch, the calling and ordination of Moses as priest and prophet Exodus 3,<sup>49</sup> who will transmit the sacred words of God to the people, words which include this event. In this self-referential sanctification of the Pentateuch, and without which the Pentateuch would be merely another narrative, Jesus zeroes in on the first (Ex 3:6) or possibly third and fourth self-definition of God (Ex. 3:15,16). The second self-definition (Ex 3:14) is the more profound and recursive even in language, but was given in response to Moses' doubt, rather than a declaration meant for the people. So the definition Jesus used was meant for mass consumption, to distinguish God from all

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<sup>47</sup> Cohn-Sherbok, 71.

<sup>48</sup> Philo considers whether Moses was speaking on his own or for God, but in cases of direct quote, attributes it entirely to God, Yehoshua Amir, "Authority and Interpretation of Scripture in the writings of Philo", 438, in Mikra ed. Martin Jan Mulder, Peabody:Hendrickson Pub, 2004.

other foreign gods by reference to widely known history. This public self-definition was reinforced with the command (3:15) “This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.” In other words, Jesus is referencing a definition of God that is the *sine qua non* of Judaism.

### **Pinning Sadducees**

Why would we assume that Jesus was pinning the Sadducees down, why would we assume that they desired more flexibility than Jesus was allowing? This goes back to Bahnsen, who said that when we have a cognitive dissonance<sup>50</sup>, a problem reconciling faith and action (or observation), we insert intermediate steps between the dissonant pair until the logical distance has sufficiently reduced the mental tension to tolerable levels. So the Sadducees had a cognitive dissonance between their subservience to the Romans and their desire for a Jewish theocracy, which they resolved by subtraction, the removal of offending doctrines or prophecies from the canon.<sup>51</sup> This is not the only solution, for the Qumran community solved it by addition, adding and diluting the offending prophecies to remove their force, nevertheless subtraction appears to be the millennial method of choice for those who live close to the political establishment and its never-ending compromise.<sup>52</sup>

But Moses gave several chapters of curses, Deut 27-28 if they forget even the smallest of the commandments of the Law. This ban on addition and subtraction is summarized at the conclusion of the ceremony on Mt Gerizim with the verse, Deut 29:29, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this Law.” (NASB) Even though the Sadducees knew all these commands, they still managed to subtract from Scripture by applying their restrictive (and circular) hermeneutic. This is no little thing, for it is a small step from limiting Scripture by logic to making logic Scripture. If logic enables cutting-and-pasting with holy things (recursion!), then logic has become holy. And when the self devours the holy, it becomes

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<sup>49</sup> The Rabbis considered this account the “holy of holies”.

<sup>50</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive\\_Dissonance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_Dissonance) (accessed October 3, 2008.)

<sup>51</sup> Newman, 9.

<sup>52</sup> Compare with Marcion’s heresy (Robert Bradshaw 1998, [http://www.earlychurch.org.uk/article\\_marcion.html](http://www.earlychurch.org.uk/article_marcion.html), accessed 24 Sept. 2008) and German liberalism, which removed much of the scriptures from the canon. Nearly all instances of subtraction appear to be attempts to make the Scriptures more (not less) compatible with the culture.

itself wholly devouring. In this self-consuming fire, like Rudolf Bultmann with only 12 words of Scripture,<sup>53</sup> a fragment burning at both ends, Jesus had to act fast. He had to seize what little the Sadducees still had of Scripture to rescue them from the flames.

### **Hooking Them**

After quoting Moses quoting God, Jesus then gives the interpretation. While he doesn't use a scripture verse, he uses a scriptural phrase. It is found 15 times in the Bible, but only once in the Pentateuch, right after the 2nd giving of the Decalogue (Deut 5:26), a definition of God that separates Him from the idols of the nations round about: "the living God". It is a participial phrase found 14 more times in the MT, [Jos 3:10; 1 Sam 17:26, 36; 2 Ki 19:4,16; Ps 42:2, 84:2; Is 37:4,17 Jer 10:10, 23:36; Dan 6:20, 26; Hos 1:10]. And in all these cases, the participle is attributive, modifying God, distinguishing this God from all the idols of the nations around; a "living God," which the prophets tell us, [Is 40:18-20, 46:1-7], is distinct from idols that neither move, nor breathe, nor save. There are additional verses where there is a strong association between "God" and "living" but where the participle is not used as an attributive to God [1 Sam 25:29; Ps 52:5, 56:13; Is 8:19; Ez 32:32].

So we can see that "living God" has both the meaning of not-idol God, but also the meaning of life, action, or breath in contrast to dead. By the rules of the Sadducee riddle game, Jesus cannot appeal to these extra-Mosaic books, he has only the Deut 5:26 passage to work from. Nevertheless, the resonance with the other 15 passages gave public credence to his exegesis that a common attribution of God includes the sense "alive".

It is even more appropriate when we consider the Hellenistic culture in which Jesus and his audience lived, for in Greek mythology, Hades was the god of the dead. So just as God directed the "land of the living", it would have been understood that Hades directed the "land of the dead." Jesus statement would then have the connotation "He is not Hades but Yahweh." This was not a convoluted argument, but

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<sup>53</sup>Bultmann was said to have thought that only Mk 12:17 was a direct quote of Jesus. While the Jesus Seminar followers who succeeded him do not think any of the sayings of Jesus are direct quotes, they do think that 18% of them are authentic. (Lane McGaughy [http://www.westarinstitute.org/Periodicals/4R\\_Articles/sayings.html](http://www.westarinstitute.org/Periodicals/4R_Articles/sayings.html) accessed on 24 Sept 2008)

straight and simple and easily grasped. As if to hammer that home, Jesus gives no more explication of this argument, which one would expect if it were new or complicated or subtle, and merely concludes “you are quite wrong.” The implication is that even a child can grasp the fallacy in their logic, and that they are morally responsible for their ignorance.<sup>54</sup>

So we see that Jesus has managed to avoid losing his public appeal, he has crushed their skepticism, he has not retreated or shown any weakness, and he has avoided all the traps they set for him. But why were his enemies silenced? Why did such disparate groups as the Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees and the Jerusalem crowds all seemingly accept the validity of his argument? What was the apologetic force?

### **Hooking Us**

Which is to say, Jesus’ logic appears specious. Just because He is the God-who-is-alive and calls Himself the God-of-your-fathers does not imply He is the God-of-your-fathers-who-are-alive. Even in English we had to change the verb from “is-alive” to “are-alive” to arrive at the meaning Jesus found. And the grammar is even more confining in Greek and Hebrew than in English, because the participial endings have to agree in gender and number with the noun. So what does the grammar tell us?

We said earlier that hermeneutics was circular, recursive, and likewise our study has made one loop through the passage, addressing the purposes of the encounter, the background of his historical ministry. Now we take a second loop through the passage, looking at how the words Jesus used explain the text. One should not be deceived into thinking that grammar is merely a set of rules that can open the text as a hydraulic press opens nuts, for the grammar is itself derived from the text. Likewise the inspection of first century rules of exegesis may reveal how Jesus silenced the Pharisees, but should bring us back to how the Pharisees adopted the rules in the first place.

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<sup>54</sup> *πλανᾷσθε*. carries a moral sense from LXX Deut 4:19 onwards through the NT use. Henry Barclay Swete, “The Gospel According to St Mark” New York: Macmillan company 266, 1898.

## **Loop 2: The Text**

In our first survey of the pericope, we noted how Jesus constructed a novel exegesis of Deuteronomy to silence the Sadducees, but we did not grasp the force of his central argument, the linchpin of his logic. Then is Gundry right? Is Jesus pulling new meanings out of a hat? Is it true that our difficulty understanding Jesus' logic and the potency of his exegesis merely our cultural conditioning to western modes of thought? Before we escape with that bromide, we might examine Jesus' use of the OT, whether he was quoting the Greek LXX, the Hebrew pre-MT, or the Aramaic Targumim, all of which were in use in the synagogue at the time of Jesus' ministry. Of course, if Jesus spoke in Aramaic, and we have the NT in Greek, we can only speculate on the precise wording of Jesus' quote, but certainly the NT church would have known the LXX comparison.

### **Greek NT and LXX**

Mark 12:26 *περὶ δὲ τῶν νεκρῶν ὅτι ἐγείρονται οὐκ ἀνέγνωτε ἐν τῇ βίβλῳ μωϋσέως ἐπὶ τοῦ βάρτου πῶς εἶπεν αὐτῷ ὁ θεὸς λέγων, ἐγὼ ὁ θεὸς ἀβραὰμ καὶ [ὁ] θεὸς ἰσαὰκ καὶ [ὁ] θεὸς ἰακώβ; 27 οὐκ ἔστιν θεὸς νεκρῶν ἀλλὰ ζώντων· πολὺ πλανᾶσθε.*

LXX Exod. 3:6 *καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ θεὸς τοῦ πατρὸς σου θεὸς Ἀβρααμ καὶ θεὸς Ἰσαακ καὶ θεὸς Ἰακώβ ἀπέστρεψεν δὲ Μωϋσῆς τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ εὐλαβεῖτο γὰρ κατεμβλέψαι ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ*

3:15 *καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεὸς πάλιν πρὸς Μωϋσῆν Οὕτως ἐρεῖς / τοῖς υἱοῖς Ἰσραὴλ Κύριος ὁ θεὸς τῶν πατέρων ὑμῶν, θεὸς Ἀβρααμ / καὶ θεὸς Ἰσαακ καὶ θεὸς Ἰακώβ, ἀπέσταλκέν με πρὸς ὑμᾶς· τοῦτό / μού ἐστιν ὄνομα αἰώνιον καὶ μνημόσυνον γενεῶν γενεαῖς.*

3:16 *ἐλθὼν / οὖν συνάγαγε τὴν γερουσίαν τῶν υἱῶν Ἰσραὴλ καὶ ἐρεῖς πρὸς / αὐτοὺς Κύριος ὁ θεὸς τῶν πατέρων ὑμῶν ὥπταί μοι, θεὸς Ἀβρααμ / καὶ θεὸς Ἰσαακ καὶ θεὸς Ἰακώβ, λέγων Ἐπισκοπῆ ἐπέσκεμμαι / ὑμᾶς καὶ ὅσα συμβέβηκεν ὑμῖν ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ,*

LXX Deut. 5:26 *τίς γὰρ σάρξ ἣτις ἤκουσεν φωνὴν θεοῦ ζώντος λαλοῦντος ἐκ μέσου τοῦ πυρὸς ὡς ἡμεῖς καὶ ζήσεται*

In Mark 12:26 we see Jesus eliding the phrase “the God of your father” from LXX Deut 3:6, (or the plural “the God of your fathers” in 3:15 and 3:16) compressing the quote to “I am the God of Abraam and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” but otherwise identical with LXX. Considering how few NT quotations literally quote the LXX, this is a remarkably faithful rendition. By eliminating the clause that

changes number between 3:6 and 3:15-16, Jesus draws attention to the triple repetition of the patriarchal phrase in Exodus while taking away the distraction of identifying which verse is being quoted. This sets the stage for his next quote, in which number is important.

For the next verse quoted in Mark has a substantial change, a switch in participial number between Mk 12:27 and Deut 5:26. Jesus' construction is "God of the living (ones)," θεὸς ... ζώντων, whereas in LXX we read "the voice of God of the living (one)," φωνήν θεοῦ ζώντος. Jesus has transformed the participle from the singular to the plural, from referring to God to referring to the patriarchs. That is, Jesus can then make the logical argument, that "God of the living ones" demands that the patriarchs be alive at the time of the burning bush some 400 years later. Note also how this differs from the *midrash*, in that a grammatical plural demands, rather than faintly suggests, an explanation.

But is Jesus justified in changing the number? The parallel passages in the LXX [Josh 3:10; 1Ki 17:26,36; 4Ki 19:4,16; Ps 41:3; 83:3; Is 37:4,17; Jeremiah absent; Dan 6:20,26 (2<sup>nd</sup> version); Hos 2:1] always use the singular when modifying God. This is not surprising, since it was customary for LXX translators to have apologetic concerns in mind as they translated, careful to avoid the rampant Greek polytheism,<sup>55</sup> so the participle would agree in gender and number with the masculine singular θεὸς. Of course, Jesus isn't claiming to be quoting Deuteronomy directly, but θεὸς ζώντων would have been jarring for those accustomed to the usual descriptive phrase in the singular.<sup>56</sup>

What of the less attributive uses mentioned earlier? Only [LXX Ps 51:7; 55:14; Is 8:19] use the plural, and in all cases, to refer to undead people rather than God. When the text is ambiguous, referring to both God and a person [1Sam 25:29], then the participle is singular. The highly elliptic clause in Is 8:19 remains elliptic in the LXX and may permit the plural participle to include God, but it would appear strained. Nevertheless, this becomes the sole LXX support for Jesus' use of the plural. So far we have not uncovered the source of Jesus' exegetical liberties. Of course, the original audience was undoubtedly

<sup>55</sup>Emanuel Tov, "The Septuagint" 172 in Mikra, ed. Martin Jan Mulder, Peabody: Hendrickson Pub, 2004.

<sup>56</sup>I had a similar shock in a church service when "her" was substituted for "him" in the liturgy concerning God. The very familiarity of the phrase makes the substitution more shocking.

more familiar with the Targumim and the predecessor of the Masoretic text than the LXX, so we turn next to the Hebrew MT.

### Hebrew MT:

Deut 5:26 אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים 'ēlōhîm chayyîm

We immediately note that the MT has used the plural for God, *elohim*, which takes the plural participle *chayyim*. So Jesus' use of the plural (or Mark's translation into Greek) is (in)appropriately literal. This is not a smooth translation since the strong Mosaic emphasis on "one God" has caused all LXX translators to ignore the plural. Surveying the other 14 Tanakh references, where we give the number of God followed by the number of the participle, we find the 1 Samuel and Jeremiah passages to be plural-plural, the Hezekiah story told in 2 Kings and Isaiah to be plural-singular, and the Joshua, Psalms, Daniel and Hosea passages all singular-singular. Ignoring the Jeremiah passages, it is tempting to view this as a temporal progression, an evolution from the unclear and perhaps polytheism-contaminated terminology of the Pentateuch, to the grammatically mixed terminology of the Hezekiah revival, to the pure monotheism of the exilic period. Which is to say, the LXX and Targumim would then represent the logical conclusion, the final purified form of Jewish religion that was found in the Pentateuch in impure form. Even if the Pharisees and the Sadducees (not to mention Josephus and Philo) would object that the Pentateuch was never contaminated, surely they would not object to our tempting conclusion about refined theology.

But they would be wrong. For in this case, Jesus makes use of that same grammatical peculiarity of the MT to make his point, namely, the plural participle applies not just to the plural God, but to the witnesses, to the patriarchs as well. It almost seems an accident of the Pentateuch, since a generation later in the book of Joshua the singular is used for this same construction. Did it perhaps indicate a rabbinic tradition? If so, it would have shown up in the Aramaic translation that was undoubtedly read in the synagogues in Jesus' day to which we turn next.

### **Aramaic Targum:**

Several Aramaic translations of the Torah exist, the most authoritative being the Babylonian Targum Onkelos. Despite being a “word-for-word” translation, there are nevertheless 1601 deviations from the MT, of which 426 were intended to preserve the “honor of God”, and 10 of those are conversions of the plural “Elohim” to the singular tetragrammaton.<sup>57</sup> Like the LXX then, Deut 5:26 is rendered using the singular rather than the plural, and accordingly, the participle “living” is now “dyy,” masculine singular. Curiously, the Palestinian Targumim Pseudo-Jonathon and Neofiti keep the plural in their translation of this verse, despite holding closely to the Targum Onkelos in other areas.<sup>58</sup>

So we see that Jesus’ turns a small grammatical peculiarity of the Hebrew into a major exegetical point. And not only are the learned Pharisees and Sadducees impressed, but so are the crowds. As we mentioned before, the lack of any extended commentary after this *tour de force* suggests that such exegesis was valid, obvious, accepted, and perhaps imitated. Since Josephus tells us that even the Sadducees had to bend to Pharisaical exegesis, we should look in the rabbinical literature for an explanation of the ground rules Jesus was using.

### **Rabbinical Lit**

Hillel gave 7 principles for rabbinic exegesis, or *middot*, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC Tosefta, later expanded to 13 *middot* in the Sifra.<sup>59</sup> Given the BC precedence of Hillel’s list, this would undoubtedly have been the comparison used to criticize Jesus’ hermeneutic:<sup>60</sup>

1. *Kal wa-homer* An inference from minor to major (or vice versa);
2. *Gezera Shawa* An inference from analogy of expressions;
3. *Binyan Av* Induction from multiple cases in same scripture;
4. *Binyan Av* Induction from two separate scriptures sharing a common feature;
5. *Kelal u-ferat* General principle and enumeration or vice versa (*Perat u-khelal*);
6. *Kayotse bo mi-makom aher* Adducing corollaries by comparison with similar law;
7. *Davar halamed me-inyano* Necessary implications drawn out from the passage.

<sup>57</sup> Israel Drazin, “Targum Onkelos to Deuteronomy”, 19-20, New York: Ktav Pub 1982.

<sup>58</sup> Drazin, “Targum Onkelos to Deuteronomy”, 104.

<sup>59</sup> Rimon Kasher “The Interpretation of Scripture in Rabbinic Literature” 585, in Mikra, Peabody: Hendrickson Pub Inc. 2004.

<sup>60</sup> Kasher, 584.

Cohn-Sherbok's analysis that Jesus uses none of these accepted methods neglects his use of Deut 5:26, and therefore misses the entire thrust of his argument. Evans defends Jesus' exegesis from Cohn-Sherbok's claim by arguing that Jesus was probably using the 3<sup>rd</sup> principle and goes on to give several examples from the rabbinic tradition post-Resurrection.<sup>61</sup> These later examples are interesting, but probably attest to the power of Mark's gospel to affect Rabbinic thought rather than the converse. In any case, the force of Jesus' argument could not have depended on later Rabbinic thought. Nor would it have been as effective in silencing the Sadducees if it had already been proposed and argued. The sheer abruptness of the delivery, and the speechlessness of the Sadducees indicate that it was both compelling and novel. Combining Deut. 5:26 with Ex. 3:6 is, in fact, using aspects of all the *middot*.

(1) The "living ones" applies not just to God, but to the patriarchs, and not just to the patriarchs, but to us. This finds the minor claim (us, patriarchs) subsumed in major (patriarchs, God), a classic example of *Kal wa-homer*.

(2) The elided phrase in Jesus quote, "God of our fathers", which is then elaborated in the naming of the patriarchs, has the same plural genitive construction as the second quote, "God of the living". So Jesus is drawing an analogy concerning the attributions of God, from "Abraham" (or fathers) to "living." Just as the Abraham modifies God, so also living modifies God. The two verses have the same attributive relationship—*Gezera Shawa*.

3) The argument that the eternal life of the patriarchs is transferable to the rest of us was not made from the story of Enoch who also never died, perhaps because Enoch was a special case. But having three patriarchs makes it clear that this is not a special case. They all possess eternal life and like us, are descendants of the patriarchs, therefore all of us share the eternal life—*Binyan Av*.

4) Of course, the three-patriarch formula is repeated multiple times, as is the "living God" phrase, though one would hardly need the repetition to make the point. More pertinently, "God" is the word repeated in Ex 3:6 and Deut 5:26—*Binyan Av*.

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<sup>61</sup> Evans, "Word Bible Commentary Vol 34b", 257.

5) Since Ex 3:6 is an enumeration of the patriarchs, we can generalize to all, a restatement of (3)—*Perat u-khelal*.

6) The Sadducees might counter-argue that God gave the 3-patriarch formula only for Moses, and never intended it to be used today, thereby permitting the patriarchs to expire between Moses' day and ours. However, there is another command in close proximity (3:15b) "This is my name forever, and this is my memorial-name to all generations." (NASB) Thus combining Jesus argument for living patriarchs with this nearby command, clinches the case that the patriarchs remain alive today—*Kayotse bo mi-makom aher*.

7) The context for both verses Jesus used are significant. In Exod 3:15, the self-definition that He demands be a permanent name would almost require the permanence of the patriarchs. (Which is the argument made by many of the Evangelical commentators as well as Post-Modern ones.<sup>62</sup>) But in addition, the Deuteronomy quote comes at the end of the Decalogue and is unintentionally ironic. The Israelites say to Moses (5:25-26), "if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer, then we will die. For who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived?" And the answers to their rhetorical question are: Abraham, who in a vision of God heard and saw God as a flaming fire (Gen 15); Isaac, who lay as a burnt offering sacrifice when God called out "Abraham!" (Gen 22); and Jacob, who wrestled with an angel that touched his hip with the burning pain of dislocation, and renamed him Israel (Gen 32). And they are all now revealed to be still alive. The context may not have been determinative in Jesus argument, but there is no doubt that these passages are central to all of Jewish identity.

In other words, Jesus didn't stretch rabbinic exegesis, but used nearly every principle, making not just a compelling conclusion but prophetic condemnation. Such was the force of his delivery that we see a complete psychological change come over his audience, causing a rich young ruler to pour out the burning question of his heart concerning Torah—what commandment is the paradigm, the exemplar, the explanation controlling all other halakhah? For Jesus was doing much more than impressing Rabbis with

his method, even more than prophetically condemning the subtractive Sadducees, Jesus was proclaiming himself the Messiah,<sup>63</sup> the expert in the law, heir to the throne of David, and herald of the Kingdom of God. His hermeneutic was about his authority to interpret Torah, and the Torah was about him.

This brings us to the last loop around this passage, what does Jesus' exegesis tell us about hermeneutics? What does it tell us about himself? What does it tell us about us?

### **Loop 3: The Person**

We begin by describing where we stand in the continuum of hermeneutics. A Reformed perspective was enunciated by Berkhof in 1950:

In this study on Hermeneutics, we deem it necessary to include ... (1) A brief outline of the history... (2) A description of ... the principles that are to be applied in its interpretation, (3) An indication of the ... requirements that are essential in an interpreter of the Bible. (4) A discussion of the threefold interpretation of the Bible, namely, (a) *the Grammatical*, including the logical interpretation; (b) *the Historical*, including also the psychological interpretation; and (c) *the Theological* interpretation.<sup>64</sup>

Berkhof then traces the history of interpreting scripture, commenting on those that were helpful and unhelpful. He had little good to say about allegorical or Alexandrian approaches but approved of grammatical-historical or Antiochian approaches. Characteristic was this note:

J. A. Turretin opposed the arbitrary procedure of Coccejus and his followers. Averse to the imaginary senses discovered by this school, he insisted on it that the Bible should be interpreted without any dogmatic prepossessions, and with the aid of logic and analysis. He exercised a profound and beneficial influence.<sup>65</sup>

That is to say, he emphasizes logic and downplays the third point of his threefold approach, limiting the Theological interpretation to be support for predetermined doctrines, including as minor contributors with special methods: typology, prophecy, and psalms. Regarding the NT use of OT scriptures, he argues that they do not teach us a rule, but are to be taken as mere illustrations rather than as lessons in method.

Where then does Berkhof get his rules? Clearly not from Scripture itself, but either from the traditions of the Antiochian school, or from the learning and rationalism of the Enlightenment. Inasmuch

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<sup>62</sup> J. Gerald Janzen "Resurrection and Hermeneutics: On Exodus 3:6 in Mark 12:26" *JSNT* 23, 1985.

<sup>63</sup> "The messiah is a God fearing, pious Jew, who is both a great Torah scholar and a great leader as well. He is a direct descendent of King David, and will be anointed as the new Jewish King." Quoted on AISH [http://www.aish.com/literacy/concepts/The\\_Messiah.asp](http://www.aish.com/literacy/concepts/The_Messiah.asp) accessed on Oct 2, 2008.

<sup>64</sup> Berkhof, *Principles*, 13.

<sup>65</sup> Berkhof, "Principles" 30.

as Berkhof clings to the orthodoxy of tradition, his Theological Method remains sound, but by not letting his Hermeneutics interact with his theology, by not allowing his logic to be derived from theology, he denies any benefit from the method to the Method. As a consequence, his tools must dull and rust with age, incapable of being renewed with the new discoveries and philosophies of the times. Taking this as warning, and remembering Van Til's comment that all reasoning is circular, how then can we learn from Jesus' example?

The first thing we notice is how Jesus ignored all the translations. He even ignored the majority testimony of the Hebrew, restricting himself to the minority testimony of Deuteronomy, 1 Samuel and Jeremiah. Of course, the Sadducee rules required he use the single referent in Deuteronomy, but he showed no hesitation using the minority variant with the plural participle. Clearly he trusted the Hebrew implicitly, and the Torah explicitly. Why?

From this study, it would appear that Jesus, like the Rabbis, believed that every syllable, every yod of the Hebrew was inspired by God and was there for a reason. Therefore variants are not errors creeping into the text, but markers that God had a special meaning attached to them. This goes beyond the grammatical-historical method, which assumes that the truth of a passage lies in the meaning of the original speaker, or the understanding of the first audience. Rather, Jesus and the Rabbis held that the meaning lies in the text itself, which comes from the mind of God. While we Reformed today might say original languages are important, no church will disqualify a candidate if he only reads from an English translation, for we believe that a translation captures all that is necessary for salvation. Yet this view is a remarkably recent mutation from Jesus' original view.

That is, all the great religions of the East—Jewish, Greek Orthodox, Islam—insist that one learn the original language to study the Scripture. Just as the Rabbis insisted that the Torah be read in Hebrew, so also Islam has no authorized translation of the Quran. With regard to the Greek text of the NT, the great schism of East from West was precipitated by the unauthorized insertion of the *filioque* clause into the Latin version of the Nicene Creed. Vladimir Lossky, an Orthodox theologian and apologist to the Catholics, writes,

By the dogma of the *Filioque*, the God of the philosophers and savants is introduced into the heart of the Living God, taking the place of the *Deus absconditus, qui posuit tenebras latibulum suum*. The unknowable essence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit receives positive qualifications....When we speak of the Trinity in itself, we are confessing, in our poor and always defective human language, the mode of existence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...<sup>66</sup>

So Lossky blames the Latin church of eisegesis, reading back into theology foreign philosophy, which was imported surreptitiously by the words. The heresy, Lossky implies, comes from a Latin church unfamiliar with the nuanced Greek of the church fathers. Generalizing from these examples, we might paraphrase Lossky that the epistemological error of the West is to found the Truth in the meaning, rather than in the text itself, an error arising from the Latin church's use of the Bible in translation. To avoid this error, the Rabbis forbade the Targum to be publically read, only recited alongside the Torah, lest it acquire the prestige of the Torah.

In the introduction we said that those things that reference themselves are holy, and that God, Man and language are a holy trinity, they have the characteristics of persons. Just as we cannot own God anymore than we own our friends, we cannot own the Word or the Truth. Rather we cherish it, dialogue with it, befriend it. We respect it, admire it, and imitate it. This is the way the Rabbis viewed Torah. This explains the geniza, the kissing of the scrolls, the veneration for the Bible evident even among Protestants of an earlier generation. This explains why the best interpreter of the Word is the Word, just as the best explanation for a spouse's behavior is the spouse.

If we do not believe that reasoning is circular, if we do not believe that the Word is holy, we have adopted the static hermeneutic of the Sadducees, the sanctified rationality that destroys personality. Certainly the German heirs of the Enlightenment were guilty of such linear logic and like the Sadducees, were themselves convicted by Christ because the Truth is not found in logic or in propositions, the Truth is a person. Therefore the hermeneutic Jesus teaches in this passage is more than the middot of Hillel, but the personal word, the Word became flesh, the Word that was with God, for the Word was God.

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<sup>66</sup>Vladimir Lossky "The Image and Likeness of God" 88-89, Crestwood: St Vladimirs Sem Press, 1974.

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