

What did you go out to see? A demon crazed ascetic? Light on Matthew 11:7b from an Aramaic Reconstruction¹

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In Matthew 11:7, Jesus asks the crowd a question concerning John the Baptist: what did you go out into the wilderness to see; a reed shaken by the wind? There is a depth to this question which has remained unexplored. Far from being a poetic image meant to convey something prosaic, this question probably alludes to an actual term of contempt used by the enemies of John. A proposed Aramaic reconstruction reveals not only the pun behind this, but may also allows exegetes a greater glimpse at the way Jesus uses this image to force the crowd to acknowledge him as Messiah.

The story starts in Matthew 11:1-6, when the disciples of John the Baptist come to Jesus with a question from their master, who was at that time in prison. They ask on his behalf: *are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another?* Jesus sends them back to John suggesting that the signs and wonders performed provided the self-evident answer. It isn't that these displays of miraculous power in themselves proved anything. Jesus is claiming that his ministry is the fulfillment of messianic prophecy. The list Jesus gives is an allusion to a conflated version of Isaiah 61:1-2, which seems to have encapsulated the messianic expectations of the time.

¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

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Matthew 11:5-6	Allusion in Isaiah
<i>the blind receive sight,</i>	29:18; 35:5; 42:7, 18; 61:1 (cf., Luke 4:18)
<i>the lame walk,</i>	35:6;
<i>the lepers are cleansed,</i>	
<i>the deaf hear,</i>	29:18; 42:18
<i>the dead are raised,</i>	26:19
<i>and the poor are evangelized</i>	61:1

A similar example amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls can be seen in 4Q521, entitled by its editor, *Une Apocalypse Messianique* [A Messianic Apocalypse] (Puech 1992:475). It is a vision of the messianic future. Consider the list of things the Messiah will do itemized in the following lines from fragment one, column two:

8. מְחַיֵּי אֲסוּרִים פּוֹקֵחַ עֵינַיִם זֶקֶק כַּפּוּסִים [Setting free the prisoners, opening (the eyes of the) blind, raising up the downtrodden]
12. אֲוִי יִרְפָּא חֲלָלִים וּמָתִים יַחֲיֶה עֲנִיִּים יְבַשֵּׁר [Then he will heal the sick and the dead he will cause to live (and to the) poor he will announce the good news]

(Eisenman and Wise 1992:21, translation mine)

The similarities between Matthew 11:5-6 and the lines from 4Q521 above are striking:

Mt 11:5-6	4Q521
<i>the blind receive sight,</i>	<i>setting free the prisoners</i> <i>opening (the eyes of the) blind</i> <i>raising up the downtrodden</i>
<i>the lame walk,</i>	<i>he will heal the sick</i>
<i>the lepers are cleansed,</i>	
<i>the deaf hear,</i>	
<i>the dead are raised,</i>	<i>the dead he will cause to live</i>
<i>the poor evangelized</i>	<i>the poor he will evangelize</i>

In Matthew 11:5, Jesus specifies various things that are healed, where 4Q521 merely says *he will heal the sick* (though opening the eyes of the blind is mentioned in line eight). Both mention the dead being raised and then follow-up with a reference to the poor having the good news preached to them. The likelihood that this is merely coincidence is slim. Rather, both point to a common conflation of messianic prophecies known and accepted by the people of that day to Isaiah 61:1

Jesus' mention of the lepers being cleansed seems, at first glance, to have no allusional counterpart in Isaiah 61. First of all, the cleansing of lepers should not be seen as a case of healing *per se*. In the New Testament lepers are never healed, rather, they are cleansed. The cleansing of lepers is not mentioned as one of the things the Messiah will do in 4Q521 but it does mention the release of those who are bound in accordance with Isaiah 61:1.

There were several figurative expressions for lepers found in ancient Jewish literature (e.g., פְּרִיט [destroyed], חִיָּר [white], סְגִיר [locked up]). It is this last word which is of special interest. Strictly speaking the word סְגִיר was used to refer to those who were locked up, awaiting a priestly ruling as to whether or not they would be declared a leper (in accordance with Leviticus 13:44). The fact that in almost every case such persons were indeed declared leprous allowed this term to be used for lepers in general (e.g., Targ O Num 12:10; Targ Y Ex 4.6; for further references see Jastrow [1903] 1992:955). Thus, perhaps the inclusion of lepers being cleansed is not merely to accentuate the fact that miracles were taking place but that those who are bound have been released (in accordance with Isaiah 61:1).

Having sent John's disciples on their way, Jesus then takes the time to talk to the crowd about John. He asks (Mt 11:7b): *What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed shaken by the wind?* (NIV). Why would Jesus ask if the people had gone out to see a *reed shaken by the wind*? Our instinctive understanding of this rhetorical question is to expect a negative answer and we pass on without thinking about why Jesus would have used this image. We imagine Jesus is merely saying: *You didn't go out to see something ordinary and inconsequential, did you?* Yet, by reconstructing this verse into Aramaic one discovers that the true meaning of Jesus' question has not been clearly understood.

Greek: τί ἐξήλθατε εἰς τὴν ἔρημον θεάσασθαι; κάλαμον
ὑπὸ ἀνέμου σαλευόμενον;

Reconstruction: מָה נִפְקַחִין חֲמַתִּין לְמַדְבָּרָא קוֹלְמוֹס דְּבְרוּחָא מְדַעְעִין

The idioms *go and see*, *go and hear* as well as *come and see* are used in both Hebrew and Aramaic (*Erub* 14^b, *Yoma* 86^b; *yDem* VI, 25^b) to mean *verify* or *prove something*. Thus, Jesus’ admonition to John’s disciples to *go tell John what you hear and see* mean *verify to John what is going on*. By the same token, the use of the terms *go out* and *see* in verse seven suggest that those who went out to the desert to see John were on a fact finding mission not a curiosity excursion. Thus, the question may be paraphrased as, *what did you prove out in the wilderness?* The intention of Jesus is to reinforce that they themselves have established the truth of just who John was—a prophet of God. This was not just to say something nice about John but to provide the foundation for a reminder that John had prophetically identified Jesus as the Messiah (Jn 1:29-34).

This indirect way of teaching was typical of Jesus. He preferred to bring people to their own conclusions. For this reason he used parables in his teaching, ending them with a question which would lead the one answering to give a judgment which could be applied to their own situation. He often answered a question with a question, the answer to which would then lead to the obvious answer for the original question. Compare, for example, the question Jesus asks in Matthew 11:7 with the one he posed to the chief priests and elders in the Temple, in Matthew 21:24. The point in each instance is to bring out a judgment from the ones questioned that John was a true prophet of God. For Jesus it was quite simple. If John is a true prophet and his prophecies come from God, then what he said and confirmed about Jesus must also be accepted. Rather than say that directly Jesus asks the questions:

11:7 *What did you go out into the wilderness to see, a reed shaken by the wind?*

21:24 *Where was John’s baptism from, from heaven or from men?*

In Matthew 21:24 the question puts the religious leaders in a difficult position. They realize that if they answer, *from heaven*, they will be forced to acknowledge that what John said prophetically about Jesus was true.

With this in mind, it must be understood that the comparison of John to *a reed shaken by the wind* is no idle analogy. Jesus is purposefully guiding the crowd to ultimately establish for themselves that he is the Messiah. A reconstruction shows, not only that these words involve a clever pun, but that Jesus seems to be making a reference to a saying likely used by those who wished to dismiss John and his message.

John describes himself, in accordance with Isaiah 40:3, as *the voice of one crying in the wilderness*. This is one of the few things upon which all four Gospels agree (Mt 3:3; Mk 1:3; Lk 3:4; Jn 1:23). These words (an allusion to Is. 40:3) appears in the Hebrew text as: קול קורא במדבר.

Because John was identified so strongly with *the voice of one crying in the wilderness*, Jesus’ question, *what did you go into the wilderness to see?* would cause those hearing to immediately think of this ‘title’. The pun comes from the assonance between the self-designation of John as a קול [voice] and a קולמוס [reed] [The bi-lingual (even tri-lingual) nature of the language situation in first-century Palestine made using Greek loan words quite common. קולמוס, though most often used as a word for *pen*, nevertheless retained its original meaning as *reed* in both the Hebrew and Aramaic of the period.]

The use of the image of a *reed* was employed for other reasons as well. Ephrem, in his commentary on the Diatessaron, indicates that *reed* in this passage is used as a metaphor because it is hollow. He emphasizes that the crowd knew John was not some sort of *hollow reed* (Leloir 1990:128). The hollowness of reeds is a feature unremarked upon in modern commentaries on this verse. Yet, Ephrem may be correct in drawing attention to it. Something hollow is something empty. A hollow person is a hungry person. [An analogy (if one were needed) can be seen in the way the Hebrew word נבויב (literally meaning *hollow*), found in Job 11:12 is homiletically interpreted as *hungry* in *Baba Bathra* 12^b.] John’s ascetic lifestyle of self-deprivation and fasting probably left him thin and gaunt, thus making it easy to caricature him as a kind of *hollow reed*.

It is also not immaterial to this discussion that reeds grow beside rivers. John’s preaching and proclaiming himself to be *a voice crying in the wilderness*, out

by the river Jordan, may have been parodied as the shrill sound made by hollow reeds by the side of a river when the wind blows on them.

The Hebrew word for *wind*, רוּחַ, can also mean *spirit* as well as *demon*. This same is true of Aramaic רִיחָא. The later comment by Jesus, that there were those who said that John had a demon, may be a play on the word רִיחָא/רוּחַ.

The use of מְרַעֵזַע (suggested by both the Christian Palestinian Aramaic and Harklean versions) gives another clue that the reference to *a reed shaken by the wind* may be a pun related to the accusation that John was demon possessed. The verb רָעַע means not only *shake* but *be frightened* as well. The related word מְרַעֵי (Pa‘el participle), meaning *frightening demons*, is used in Targum Yerushalmi at Numbers 6:24:

יְבָרְכִינֶךָ ה' בְּכָל עִסְקֶךָ וַיִּשְׁרָנְךָ מִן לַיְלָא מְרַעֵי וּבְנֵי שִׁדְדֵרֵי וּבְנֵי צַפְרִירֵי וּמְרַעֵי
וּשְׁלֵנִי (Ginsburger 1903:237).

May the LORD bless you in all your affairs and guard you from night demons (i.e., Lilliths) frightening demons and sons of midday-demons, and the sons of morning demons and destroying demons and mischievous night demons.

Another related word, תַּעֲזִיזָה, means *shaking* and is frequently used in rabbinic writings in connection with a demon as a figure of speech for *madness* (Jastrow [1903] 1992:1660). The fact that *shaking* is routinely used to describe behavior caused by demons may suggest that the depiction of John as a *reed shaken by the wind* is a reference to the way that John’s detractors would mock him as some sort of mad-man ranting under the inspiration of demons.

Jesus says as much when he states that there were some who considered John’s fasting to indicate that he was demon possessed. That John was a prophet was not contested by the religious leaders (21:26). So, who would possibly have derided John in this way? It is possible that John had the same enemies as Jesus, but it seems unlikely. At the very least, though the Pharisees and Sadducees had issues with John (Lk 7:30) they would have been afraid to voice them publicly. The second question Jesus asks the crowd may point the way to the answer.

11:8 *But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? Behold, those who wear fine clothes are in king's houses.*

John's direct preaching style certainly brought him into conflict with various groups, but it was Herod and Herodias who felt most threatened by his preaching. Though they also feared the people to some degree (Mt 14:5; cf., Mk 6:20), they were still able to openly confront John. Jesus' parenthetical statement that those who wear fine clothing live in king's houses may be a veiled reference to Herod, who ironically gave such a garment to Jesus (Lk 23:11). Jesus contrasts John, not with a generic picture of kings living in luxury, but with John's arch enemy and his courtiers. Perhaps the contrast is meant to include the difference between King Herod's house in which he lived, and his prison, in which he held John a prisoner.

By making a reference to John's clothing Jesus also drew attention to what John actually wore. Matthew 3:4 mentions that John wore clothing made of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist. This was exactly what the prophet Elijah also wore (2Ki 1:8). The coincidence was probably intentional. Elijah was expected to come in the end times (Mal 4:5). Even before John was born it was prophesied of him that he would minister *in the spirit and power of Elijah* (Lk 1:17). John understood his role as the forerunner of the Messiah and the prophetic voice preparing for the arrival of the kingdom of heaven (Mt 3:2-3). Jesus' proclamation that John should be identified with Elijah (Mt 11:14) would not have seemed surprising, but would be taken as confirmation of what people had already decided based upon what they had seen and heard. [John's denial of being Elijah (Jn 1:21) should not be construed as a contradiction to Jesus' statement that *he is Elijah who was expected to come* (Mt 11:14). The thing which John denies is being Elijah risen from the dead. Moses' prophecy (Dt 18:15) that another prophet would be *raised up* after him was interpreted by some, in the first century, to mean that the Messiah would be a prophet resurrected from the dead. Thus, when Jesus asks (Mt 16:13; Mk 8:27; Lk 9:18), *who do men say that I am?* The disciples answer with the names of dead people: Elijah, Jeremiah, and even John the Baptist. The double meaning of *raise up* became a special preaching point for the early Church (Acts 3:22-26).] The statement, *he who has ears to hear, let him hear*, is, once

again, a deliberate hint that the people themselves are witnesses of Jesus' identity. For, if they accept that John is Elijah—then the one John said he was the forerunner of must also be acknowledged as the Messiah.

It is a good bet that Herod Antipas is the source of the mocking reference to John as *a reed shaken by the wind*. If anyone were to use John's characteristic emphasis on fasting as a basis for the accusation, δαιμόνιον ἔχει [*he has a demon*], it would be Herod. Though the Pharisees did not receive John's ministry (Lk 7:30), fasting would not have been a problem to them. In Matthew 9:14-15, Jesus is asked why his disciples do not fast as do the Pharisees and the disciples of John. Jesus' answer to this question (by giving a question in return) is instructive: *How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is still with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast* (NIV). Though the Sermon on the Mount presupposes that fasting would be part of the lifestyle of believers (Mt 6:16-18), fasting was not a part of the lifestyle of Jesus and his disciples during his earthly ministry. Jesus' emphasis on the arrival of the kingdom was demonstrated by a lack of fasting and in celebration dinners which were symbolic of the messianic banquet to come (Jeremias 1971:116). That this went against religious sensibilities of the time is illustrated by the accusation against Jesus for his eating and drinking (Mt 11:19): *behold a glutton and a drunkard (who is also) a friend of tax collectors and sinners*.

Jesus closes the subject with the words *wisdom is justified by her children*. These words, from Matthew 11:19, really mean that wise people (the sons of wisdom) declare what is really wise or not. The wise will declare that the criticism given against John is just as foolish as that spoken against Jesus. At the same time, those who would consider John to be a true prophet must also declare Jesus to be the Messiah.

The point of this article is to show how our superficial reading of this passage keeps us from seeing how well Jesus makes his point. *What did you prove John to be: a demon crazed reed [kolmos] or was he an anointed voice [kol]?* Admitting that John was a true prophetic voice forces the crowd to a dramatic conclusion. As the implication of John's prophetic calling dawns on them, smiles break out among the people as they see that they can no longer sit on the fence. By appreciating the underlying puns and allusions of this passage

we are able to smile along with those in that crowd and acknowledge that Jesus has forced them, whether they like it or not, to be witnesses to his Messiahship.

Works cited

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