

# Semitic Idioms in the New Testament, Suggest Peshitta Primacy – Part 1

Compiled and edited by Christopher Lancaster and Paul Younan

An idiom, basically is an expression (though there are many more definitions. e.g. certain words/phrases specific to a language). Something we say to convey a certain thought or feeling, that does not come from the individual meanings of the words. For example, some idioms in English are “a bad egg” (a bad person), “blood is thicker than water” (relatives are closer than friends) and “they are at 6’s and 7’s” (they are confused). Idioms in books convey a meaning that cannot be gleaned from the literal text.

Idioms appear in many books, and the Bible is no exception. Have you ever heard someone say “the Bible doesn’t mean that literally”? They are referring to a possible idiom. Now we have a problem for Greek primacy (the belief that the New Testament was written in Greek). The New Testament is lacking in Greek idioms and is filled with Aramaic idioms! Sometimes the idioms are translated literally, and sometimes, they are translated idiomatically. In fact, many contradictions are caused in the Greek New Testament, by literal translation of the Aramaic idioms. When the original Aramaic New Testament was translated into Greek, the translators should have given explanations of the Aramaic idioms. This would have saved lots of headaches (and in some cases, people’s lives) over alleged contradictions (an understanding of the original Aramaic New Testament, and it’s many idioms, are invaluable in Christian apologetics) in the New Testament.

Have a look for yourself, how the so-called Greek Bible is filled with Aramaic idioms!

## 1. Pick up snakes – Mark 16:18

I chose this as the first example, as it deals with a literal life and death issue.

The KJV says: “They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.”

“They translated many Eastern idioms and metaphors literally, not knowing their true meaning. For instance, ‘You shall handle snakes.’ They did not know that the word ‘snake’ refers to ‘an enemy.’” – Dr. George Mamishisho Lamsa

A better reading for that section of the verse would be “they will handle their enemies”. This mistranslation has even cost the lives of many people. George Went Hensley, a former pastor of the Church of God, formed one such Pentecostal group, who drank poison and exposed themselves to poisonous snakes. He died of snakebite, as have many others.

## 2. Cut it off and pluck it out – Mark 9:43-47

Note: This example is also solves the possible contradiction with 1Corinthians 6:19-20 (What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost *which is* in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s.). One section in the Greek tells you to glorify God with your body, as it is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and another commands self-mutilation!

The KJV says: “And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire:”

“Even today these ancient Christians, Lamsa's people (Assyrians), understand what Jesus meant when he said, "If your hand offends you, cut it off; if your eye offends you, pluck it out; if your foot offends you, cut it off". Jesus meant: "If you have a habit of stealing, stop it". "If you have a habit of envying, stop it". "If you have a habit of trespassing on other's property, stop it". These sayings are understood because these idioms have been in general use throughout the centuries. The idioms arise out of the fact the Aramaic collapses into one word, both mental and physical action, with either or both meanings acceptable.

This explains why no Christian in the East has ever cut off his arm or plucked out his eyes. None of Jesus' disciples and his followers amputated parts of their bodies. They used the mental meaning. In other parts of the world many Christians who misunderstood the Aramaic idiom, have cut off hands, fingers and feet, or inflicted other injuries upon their bodies to follow the misunderstood injunction of Jesus.” – Aramaic Bible Society

### **3. Eyes of your heart – Ephesians 1:18**

This is also an example of a split word, and can be found (with greater detail) in the 2nd split word article of this series.

The NIV says: “I pray also that the eyes of your **heart** may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,”

The KJV says: “The eyes of your **understanding** being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints,”

Now, it just so happens that the Aramaic phrase  is an idiom, and as such, can have a literal translation, and a meaningful translation.

“Many times we have spoken of the Semitic understanding of the heart, that it is the idiomatic organ of understanding and knowledge.

In Ephesians 1:18, Paul uses this Semiticism:

 (Ayna d'Lebwatkon - "the eye of your hearts")

[The Alexandrian manuscripts (including Tischendorf, Westcott & Hort and Nestle-Aland) tend to literally retain this Aramaic idiom, while the Byzantine texts give a meaningful translation. – Chris]

This clearly demonstrates that Zorba sometimes understood that Paul was using an Aramaic idiom, and chose to liberally translate the meaning into a more acceptable solution in Greek thought.” – Paul Younan

And this, in a letter, written apparently to Greeks! It seems that it was written to SEMITES, in Greece.

Note: Once again, “Zorba” refers to the people who translated the Aramaic New Testament into Greek. It’s just easier to say “Zorba”.

#### **4. Of the household – Ephesians 2:19**

The KJV says: “Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God;”

“Eph. 2:19 translated literally from the Aramaic reads: Therefore, you are not strangers nor foreigners, but you are sons of the province of the set-apart ones and sons of the House of Eloah.

Here the Peshitta has the Aramaic idiom "sons of the House of Eloah" where the Greek reads "of the household of God."

"sons of the House of..." is a Semitic idiomatic expression meaning "of the household of..."

"House of Eloah" is a Semitic euphemism for the Temple.

Also the Aramaic word for sons "ab-nay" is a wordplay for the the Aramaic word for build in 2:20 "b'na" and the Aramaic word for building "benyana" in 2:20-21 both from the Aramaic root "'abna" (stone). (A similar wordplay appears in the Aramaic of Mt. 3:9.)

Paul transitions from the idea of "sons of the House of Eloah" (heirs) in 2:19 to stones of the House of Eloah (members of the Temple) in 2:20-21.

This transition of thought is deeply steeped in the Aramaic idiom "sons of the house of" the Aramaic euphemism for the Temple (House of Eloah) and the Aramaic wordplay between "sons" and "stones." This transition of thought is clearly dependant on the Aramaic text of Ephesians as found in the Peshitta. It does not work in the Greek text at all. This is not only clear evidence for the Semitic origin of the book, but a great help in following Paul's train of thought as well.” – Dr. James Trimm

#### **5. Bowels of Jesus – Philippians 1:8, 2:1 / Colossians 3:12 / Philemon 7, 12, 20 / 1John 3:17 / 2Corinthians 6:12**

This is also an example of a split word, and can be found (with greater detail) in the 2nd split word article of this series.

This example is not really a split word, more of a “pseudo split word”, as the variant in question (at least to my knowledge) does not occur in the Greek (just about all Greek versions read “bowels”). It does occur though in the English versions. The Byzantine versions tend to say “bowels”, while the Alexandrian versions tend to say “love”. That the variant is caused by differing translations of an Aramaic idiom, is indicative of an Aramaic original, undermining the Greek.

However, this example is quite amazing, as it runs throughout many New Testament books, and is evidence of Aramaic originality to letters sent to Christians in Greek cities! It also is an example of where an idiom is translated literally in some versions, and meaningfully in others. This phenomenon occurs in many verses, but for simplicity, we shall discuss only Philippians 1:8.

The KJV says: “For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the **bowels** of Jesus Christ.”

The NIV says: “God can testify how I long for all of you with the **affection** of Christ Jesus.”

Now, it just so happens that the Aramaic root **ܠܡܝܐ** can be meant literally or as part of an idiom.

“CAL Outline Lexicon: GENERAL rxm

rxm N rxm)

1 passim friend

LS2 724

LS2 v: rAxmA)

rxm#2 N rxm)

1 Syr womb

2 Syr **intestines**

3 Syr genitals

4 Syr mercy > rxmyn

5 Syr **love**

LS2 724

LS2 v: raxmA)

abs. voc: rxem

rxm V

011 passim to love

012 Syr to have pity on

013 Syr to desire

013 JLAGal,JLATg to like s.t.

014 Syr to prefer

041 Syr to be loved

042 Syr to obtain mercy

043 Syr to be moderated

021 JLAGal,JLATg,Syr,JBA w.%(1% to have mercy

022 Syr to strive for mercy

023 JBA to love

024 JBA to give suck

051 JLAGal,Syr to be pitied

031 Syr to have pity

032 Syr to make to love

033 Syr to make beloved

LS2 723” – Andrew Gabriel Roth

“As the heart is viewed as the seat of the intellect, the bowels are viewed as the seat of compassion.” – Paul Younan

## **6. His face was set – Luke 9:53**

The KJV says: “And they did not receive him, because his face was as though he would go to Jerusalem.”

“In Luqa 9:53, we read the Greek with astonishment:

*“...because his face was set toward Jerusalem”*

Face was set toward Jerusalem? What does that mean in Greek?

In Semitic idiom, "to set one's face..." means 'to make up one's mind', and is quite frequent in Semitic thought. Reference the following verses:

Amos 9:4

Jeremiah 3:12

Jeremiah 21:10

Jeremiah 42:15

Jeremiah 44:12

2 Kings 12:17

Daniel 11:17

Ezekiel 6:1

Ezekiel 13:17

Ezekiel 14:8

Ezekiel 15:7

Most importantly, this idiom is present in the commentary portion of Luqa. The idiom is also present in verse 51.”  
– Paul Younan

## **7. Their phylacteries and borders – Matthew 23:5**

The KJV says: “But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments,”

“Has anybody compared the Greek and Peshitta of Matti 23:5?

Zorba:

τα φυλακτηρια αυτων

*"thier phylacteries"*

Peshitta:

ܬܦܝܠܝܢ

*"their tefillin"*

From 2nd Temple period times to this day, 'Tefillin' is the proper (and only) term. The Peshitta text assumes the reader has a good knowledge and vocabulary of Jewish orthodoxy.

Zorba:

τα κρασπεδα των ματιων αυτων

"the borders of their garments"

Peshitta:

ܩܪܫܦܝܢܐ ܕܡܝܬܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ

"the tekhelet of their garments"

'Tekhelet' is the correct Biblical term here, the name for the actual blue strand in the 'tzitzit', or fringes.

Numbers 15:38 (KJV) Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes (Heb. *tzitzit*) in the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a ribband of blue (*tekhelet*)

The Peshitta assumes intimacy with Jewish custom and vocabulary, and is a much more specific a term than the general Greek word meaning 'edge, border, skirt, or hem'.

Is this evidence of Peshitta primacy in Matthew? Are translations ever more specific than the original?" – Rob Vanhoff

## **8. Who shall declare his generation? – Acts 8:33**

The KJV says: "In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth."

“"Who will declare his generation?" is an idiom meaning roughly in English "His line was cut off". In other words, Meshikha has no living relatives or descendants....and that's the context of the passage being quoted in Isaiah.

In Semitic thought, "generation" is inextricably linked with genetic line, offspring. It's not like the English which means only an "age" or "period of time." When Mattai and Luqa recorded the genealogy of Meshikha, it stopped with him. There is no one after him, and no one today is related to him. This is the meaning of the Isaiah's prophecy - "who will speak of his descendants (generations) ?" [Isaiah 53:8 – Chris]. Isaiah teaches us that the Messiah would be "cut off" without any descendents or line of continuation.....no "generations".” – Paul Younan

## **9. Pressed in the spirit – Acts 18:5**

The KJV says: "And when Silas and Timotheus were come from Macedonia, Paul was pressed in the spirit, and testified to the Jews *that Jesus was Christ.*"

Note: Some translators of the Peshitta New Testament, into English, are Dr. George Mamishisho Lamsa, James Murdock and John Wesley Etheridge.

“Our friend Zorba failed to translate a certain phrase in Acts 18:5 idiomatically.

Acts 18:5: ως <5613> ( AND) δε <1161> ( WHEN) κατηλθον <2718> <5627> ( CAME DOWN) απο <575> της <3588> ( FROM) μακεδονιας <3109> ο <3588> ( MACEDONIA) τε <5037> ( BOTH) σιλας <4609> ( SILAS) και <2532> ο <3588> ( AND) τιμοθεος <5095> ( TIMOTHY) συνειχετο <4912> <5712> τω <3588> ( **WAS PRESSED**) πνευματι <4151> ο <3588> ( **IN SPIRIT**) παυλος <3972> ( PAUL) διαμαρτυρομενος <1263> <5740> ( EARNESTLY TESTIFYING) τοις <3588> ( TO THE) ιουδαιοις <2453> ( JEWSTO BE) τον <3588> ( THE) χριστον <5547> ( CHRIST) ιησουν <2424> ( JESUS.)  
(Interlinear Greek NT)

5And when Silas and Timothy had come from Macedonia, Paul **was impeded in discourse**, because the Jews stood up against him, and reviled, as he testified to them that Jesus is the Messiah. (James Murdock)

And when from Makedunia Shilo and Timotheos had come, Paulos **was constrained in his speech**, because the Jihudoyee arose against him and blasphemed, while he testified to them that Jeshu is the Meshiha. (John Wesley Etheridge)

And when Silas and Timotheus came from Macedonia, Paul **felt he was not free to speak**, because the Jews opposed him and blasphemed as he testified that Jesus is the Christ. (George Lamsa)” – Larry Kelsey

The Textus Receptus has “pressed in the spirit”, while Alexandrian texts such as Westcott-Hort and Nestle-Aland, have “pressed in the word”. This is not just a Semitic idiom then, it is also a split word!

## **10. Son of it's hour – Matthew 13:5**

The KJV says: “Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth:”

“Here's another idiom that is strange to the Western mind found in Matti 13:5. This is taken from John Wesley Etheridge's work at peshito.com.

"Another (portion) fell upon the rock, where there was not much soil; and **immediately** † it sprung up, because there was no depth of earth."

† Bar-shoteh, " the son of its hour."” – Larry Kelsey

## **11. High mountain – Matthew 4:8 / Luke 4:5**

The KJV says (Matthew 4:8): “Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them;”

The KJV says (Luke 4:5): “And the devil, taking him up into an high mountain, shewed unto him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time.”

“The term 'high mountain' is used figuratively. It means the high point in human physical aspiration. This temptation was a far greater one than the previous two. This is because the devil, deception, negative thought-

anything contrary to the truth-offered Jesus the greatest rewards known to man in order to beguile him, and thus divert him from his great mission. Satan here offered everything which human imagination can comprehend and embrace. It offered the kingdoms of the world and all their glory and splendor.

Satan took Jesus on a high mountain. This means he took him to the summit of his highest human imagination, and he made all these offers to him, if Jesus would but fall down and worship him. It is interesting to know that the Mount of Temptation is in a wasteland hundreds of feet below sea level. There are no kingdoms or large cities nearby, but small hamlets, sheepfolds and Arab camps. The only town close to it is the humble little town of Jericho.” – Dr. George Mamishisho Lamsa

## **12. To go – John 12:11**

The KJV says: “Because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus.”

“One word that the Greek translators often misunderstood was the Hebrew word  and the Aramaic word  which normally mean "to go" or "to depart" but is used idiomatically in Hebrew and Aramaic to mean that some action goes forward and that something progresses "more and more". The following are several examples from the Tanak. In each of these cases the Hebrew reads  and the Aramaic reads  in both the Peshitta Tanak and the Targums:

And the waters returned from the earth continually...  
Gen. 8:3

And the man waxed great and went forward, and grew...  
Gen. 26:13

And the hand of the children of Israel grew stronger and stronger  
Judges 4:24

the Philistenes went on and increased  
1Sam. 14:19

but David waxed stronger and stronger  
2Sam. 3:1

One case where the Greek translator misunderstood this word and translated to literally is in Jn. 12:11:  
Because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away (!?!?!?!), and believed on Jesus. (KJV)

Certainly Yochanan's intended meaning was: because many of the Judeans, on account of him, were trusting more and more  in Yeshua” – Dr. James Trimm

## **13. Son of peace – Luke 10:6**

The KJV says: “And if the son of peace be there, your peace shall rest upon it: if not, it shall turn to you again.”

“The Aramaic "Bar Shlama" literally means "son of peace", but idiomatically this is an expression which means "harmony" or "agreement," in other words, the opposite of contention.

But since the Greek literally translates "son of peace", this is evidence that it was translated from an Aramaic original. Zorba rendered the phrase literally because he did not understand its idiomatic meaning.” – Paul Younan

#### **14. Slow of heart and heart burn – Luke 24:25 / Luke 24:32**

Note: This example from Luke 24:32 also fits in another category, that of semi-split words (aka mistranslations). This example in Luke 24:32 is not only an example of an Aramaic idiom, but also of a mistranslation. The example in Luke 24:25, occurs without the mistranslation.

The KJV (Luke 24:25) says: “Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken:”

The KJV (Luke 24:32) says: “And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?”

“Aramaic: **ܠܘܒܐ** (heavy, sluggish). The Greek translator misread this word as : **ܠܘܒܐ** (burn). Our heart heavy - To have a heavy heart is an idiomatic expression in Aramaic. The word “heart” in Aramaic often really means “mind”, to have a heavy heart means to have a sluggish mind. This should not be confused with the English idiom of a “heavy heart” meaning to be sad, or the idiom “burning heart” which means to feel inspired. The talmidim were hearing the Master expound the Scriptures and commenting to each other about how slow of understanding they were compared to Messiah.” – Dr. James Trimm

#### **15. How your breath should depart – Luke 12:11-12**

This amazing example not only showcases another idiom, but also has some clever wordplays.

The KJV says: “And when they bring you unto the synagogues, and *unto* magistrates, and powers, take ye no thought how or what thing ye shall answer, or what ye shall say: For the Holy Ghost shall teach you in the same hour what ye ought to say.”

“In verse 11, Maran Eshoa says:

"La" - not

"Taspun" - do be anxious about

"Aykanna" - how

"Tapqun" - should depart

"Rukha" - breath

"Aw" - or

"Mana" - what

"Tamrun" - you should say

There are 3 really amazing things about his verse:

(1) The Greek translators did not know what to do with the phrase "how your breath should depart", since this is an Aramaic idiom which means "how to compose your speech" (ie, "speak properly")

The Greeks translated this phrase "how (Pos) or what (Tis) you are to speak", which does not make sense in the context, since it is preceded by an "or"....the way the Greek version reads is:

"do not be anxious (Merimnao) about how or what you should say in your defense"

Whereas the Aramaic reads:

"do not be anxious about how to compose your speech or what you should say"

In other words, don't worry about the way you speak or the content of that speech.

(2) There is a triple-wordplay in this verse: "Taspun", "Tapqun" and "Tamrun".

(3) An allusion to the dual-meaning of the word "Rukha".....spirit and breath, and how Maran Eshoa plays on this duality, is noticed in the very next verse (verse 12)

"For the Holy Spirit (Rukha d'Qudsha) will teach you what to say"

In other words.....don't worry about your rukha "breath", the Rukha d'Qudsha (the Holy Spirit) will teach you.

In the Greek, the allusion to "Breath" (verse 11) and "Spirit" (verse 12) is simply.....missing.” – Paul Younan

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Once again, understanding of the New Testament is enhanced and corrected by going back to the original. And people say it doesn't matter what Bible you use! Well if people dying and maiming themselves over misunderstandings of Scripture, does not matter, what does? – Christopher Lancaster