



Several passages in the canonical Gospels witness to Jesus' emphasis on love as the essential virtue for his disciples¹. Jesus affirms the Old Testament command to love God² and highlights and deepens the command to love one's neighbor³. Even more striking is Jesus' unprecedented command to love him⁴.

The curse and loving Jesus: Confession of the Aramaic Christian Community

In this and following reports of RCEC I intend to share some considerations regarding the Aramaic wording that may have been behind some of these passages. A number of New Testament passages Aramaic or Syriac translations give a remarkably expressive and natural text. This phenomenon may betray an original Aramaic expression, showing that the teaching in the Greek New Testament was not completely produced by Hellenistic Christianity, but, at least in part, goes back to a more primitive Aramaic community of believers in Jesus the Messiah. That brings us one step closer to the Aramaic Jesus.

In this report I will discuss verse 22 of the final chapter of Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians.

¹Mat. 5:43-46 = Luc. 6:27-35; Mat. 6:24 = Luc. 16:13; Mat. 19:19;22:37,38,39; Marc. 12:30,31 = Luc. 10:27; Luc. 7:42,47; Joh. 8:42; 13:34; 14:15,21-24,28; 15:12,17;17:26;21:15-17.

²Mat. 6:24 = Luc. 16:13; Mat. 22:37,38; Marc. 12:30 = Luc. 10:27.

³Mat. 5:43-46 = Luc. 6:27-35; Mat. 19:19; 22:39; Marc. 12:31 = Luc. 10:27; Joh. 13:34; 15:12,17.

⁴Luc. 7:42,47; Joh. 8:42; 14:15,21-24,28; 21:15-17.

In 1 Cor. 16:22 Paul used an Aramaic phrase, μαρναθα,⁵ at the end of an epistle written in Greek. He seems to assume that his readers are familiar with some such expression which circulated in an Aramaic Christian environment. The Aramaic and Syriac show similarity between the two most strongly communicated terms: 'love' (rḥm) and 'curse' (ḥrm). They have the same three root consonants.

εἶ τις οὐ φιλεῖ
man dlā **rāḥēm**
τὸν Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν,
lmāran yišō' mšihā
ἦτω ἀνάθεμα.
nehwē **ḥrem**.
μαρὰν ἀθᾶ.
māran eṭā.

The same can be seen in the Christian Palestinian Aramaic⁶. In transcription, over against the Greek text it represents:

εἶ τις οὐ φιλεῖ
mn dl' **rḥm**
τὸν Κύριον ἦτω ἀνάθεμα
l **mr'** yh' **ḥrm**
μαρὰν ἀθᾶ.
mrn 't'

⁵The Syriac Peshitta as well as the Christian Palestinian Aramaic read μαρναθα as a perfect indicative (μαρναθα = "the Lord has come") rather than as an imperative (μαρναθα = "Come, o Lord"). E.B. Allo in his commentary (E.B. 1935) explains his preference for the imperative: "il nous semble mieux s'accorder avec les souhaits qui suivent; une menace du jugement, aggravant encore l'ἀνάθεμα, nous paraît être moins dans le ton de la lettre." On the contrary, I would say. Taking it as a perfect, confessing that Messiah has come and is claiming the love of his people, makes the powerful rhetoric come out that we know Paul was able to produce.

⁶Christa Müller-Kessler & Michael Sokoloff, ed., *A Corpus of Christian Palestinian Aramaic*, Vol. IIb, Groningen: Styx Publications 1998, p. 87.

The repetition of *mar*, 'Lord', is also interesting, especially in the light of the two very typical 'prophetic confessions' Paul has quoted earlier in 1 Corinthians (12:3):⁷ "Jesus is accursed!" and "Jesus is Lord". In Greek, with the Peshitta version next to it:

ἀνάθεμα Ἰησοῦς
ḥrem hu yišō'
Κύριος Ἰησοῦς
mārya hu yišō'

As in the case of 16:22, we should try to reconstruct the life setting of these confessions.

My suggestion is that Paul thinks of the increasingly difficult situation of Jews who confess Jesus as Messiah: "Jesus is Lord". Hard liners within Judaism insisted that such a confession was incompatible with Jewish belief. Paul knew this very well, as he had been among the most zealous persecutors of Jews who wished to follow Jesus.

In Acts 26: 9-11 we find an account of his actions:

"I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them.

And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities." [ESV]

⁷"Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus is accursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit." [ESV]

Paul was “opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth”. One of his ways to achieve this goal was by forcing Christians to blaspheme (βλασφημεῖν). Paul doesn’t tell exactly what he made them say, but something like “Jesus is accursed!” would certainly qualify. After all it was completely in line with the scriptural dictum “Anyone who is crucified is cursed by God”.⁸ When Paul himself becomes a follower of Jesus, he is confronted with the same desecration of the name of Jesus by unbelieving Jews. It is interesting that the book of Acts tells us that such took place precisely at Corinth:

“Paul ... testified to the Jews that Jesus *is* the Christ. But when they opposed him and blasphemed (βλασφημοῦντων), he shook *his* garments and said to them, ‘Your blood *be* upon your *own* heads; I *am* clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.’ And he departed from there and entered the house of a certain *man* named Justus, one who worshiped God, whose house was next door to the synagogue. Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized.”
[Acts 18:5-8, NKJV]

One can imagine that for Paul as well as for the Corinthian Christians, who had witnessed the blasphemy of the Jewish leaders, the curse on Christ was something very real. Jews among the Corinthian Christians knew that because of their love for Christ they had been

cut off from the synagogue community. But according to Paul’s teaching it is the Jews who reject Jesus that are cut off, not the Christians.⁹ It is noteworthy that the only other passage in which Paul pronounces the anathema (Gal.1:8-9) is in confrontation with Judaizing tendencies.¹⁰

Together the above elements help us to interpret 1 Cor. 16:22. The terms ῥῆμ, ‘to love’ and ἥρμ, ‘curse(d)’, probably functioned within Aramaic debate between Jewish believers in Jesus the Messiah and their non Christian fellow Jews, who believed Messiah was still to come. Both claimed to be the exclusive people of God, denying the other group this status. At the end of an epistle to a church founded in the midst of this type of controversy, Paul stressed that those who refused lovingly to obey Jesus Messiah put themselves under a curse. What follows at the end of the verse is the ultimate reason: the Lord has come, and no other is to be expected.

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⁹This may be what Paul had in mind when he called the Jews who rejected the Gospel the κατατομή (Phil. 3:2).

¹⁰Gal. 1:8-9: “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. (ἀνάθεμα ἔστω) As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.” (ἀνάθεμα ἔστω) [ESV] Cf. also Gal. 3:10-13. Rom. 9:3 is significant too: there Paul assures his readers that he would be willing to be cut off (ἀνάθεμα) if that could save his Jewish kinfolk. In the New Testament the term ἀνάθεμα is consistently used in a context of inner Jewish debate about the Messiah.

⁸Deut. 21:23 LXX, cf. Gal. 3:13.