

NOTES

“To save life or to kill?” (Mark 3.4)

The setting of Jesus' words is well known and generally clear. Jesus goes into “the synagogue” (verse 1), presumably the one in Capernaum (2.1), on the Sabbath. People hostile to him are watching. These are probably “the Pharisees” who, already in the previous section (2.24), had challenged Jesus' behaviour on the Sabbath. A man with a shrivelled hand is in the synagogue, and Jesus heals him. But before doing so, he asks those present, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” (3.4, NIV).

The second part of this question is puzzling in two ways. First, a shrivelled hand is not a condition that threatens the life of a person, so Jesus was not about to “save” the man's life. The Pharisees might reasonably have objected that Jesus could have waited until the next day to heal him. Jesus appears to be claiming that anything which does good to a human being is more important than observing the Sabbath. This fits in well with the previous section (2.23-28), where Jesus justified the disciples' picking grain from the field to eat on the Sabbath, and stated: “The Sabbath was made for the good of human beings; they were not made for the Sabbath” (verse 27, GNB). Perhaps the idea is also present that a handicapped person does not enjoy a full life: in modern terms, his “quality of life” is impaired; or as people in some other traditions might say, his “vital force” is weakened. If this is correct, then “to do good” and “to save life” may mean much the same.

But second, “to kill” is clearly stronger than “to do evil”. What does Jesus mean by this talk of killing? Some translations use softer expressions: “to save someone's life or to destroy it” (CEV, GNB, similarly others such as Vulgate, NAB, NLT, SpCL), or even “to save a human being's life or let him die” (FrCL, GeCL, ItCL). Weakest of all is E.H. Peterson's *The Message*, which translates “helping people or leaving them helpless.” “Destroy (life)” would be a good translation of the parallel in Luke 6.9; but Mark says “kill” – why?

Most commentaries which discuss the matter take one of two lines. Some say that “not to heal would be equivalent to killing” (TOB note), which is not very convincing. Others point to Mark 3.6, where plots to kill Jesus begin, and conclude that “the Pharisees ... are doing evil by plotting to bring about Jesus' death” (M. Casey, *The Aramaic Sources of Mark's Gospel*, Cambridge 1989, page 181). It is not impossible that this is part of the meaning, but to make verse 4 mean, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: for me to heal this man, or for you to plan to kill me?” is rather complicated.

Perhaps a simpler explanation of Jesus' language can be found in the Apocrypha, in the story of Israel's resistance to the pagan ruler Antiochus Epiphanes. In 1 Maccabees chapter 2, we read that the Jewish leader Mattathias killed a Jew who was in the act of sacrificing on a

pagan altar, and also killed the officer who was forcing him to sacrifice. A large number of Jews then took to the hills (verse 28).

What followed must have represented a tremendous crisis of conscience for all Jews faithful to their national traditions. At first, when they were attacked on the Sabbath, they refused to defend themselves, either actively by throwing stones (perhaps the only weapons they had), or even passively by barricading the caves in which they had taken shelter (verse 36). About a thousand of them were killed (verse 38).

Under Mattathias's leadership, the Jews then reversed their policy of non-resistance, deciding that they would "fight against anyone who comes to attack us on the sabbath day" (verse 41, NRSV). This policy was put into effect, both against pagan foreigners and against unfaithful Jews (verses 42-48).

It is reasonable to assume that this crisis of faith left deep scars on the consciousness of the Jewish community, which remained even 200 years later at the time of Jesus' public ministry. If so, Jesus' words in Mark 3.4 could have the sense: "If it was right for those national heroes the Maccabees to kill on the Sabbath, how much more is it right for me to heal someone on the Sabbath?"

What does this understanding of the text mean for translators? First, they should translate "kill" literally, with KJV and some modern translations. Second, they should consider adding a note referring to 1 Maccabees 2.15-48, or at least a cross-reference to 1 Maccabees 2.41.

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"Safe and sound" (Judges 8.9)

As is well known, the range of meaning of the Hebrew word *shalom* is quite wide, including the ideas of peace, security, contentment, health, welfare, and prosperity. According to the Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon, the most basic idea of the term is to be "complete" or "sound." While its meaning is commonly given as "peace," in translation other renderings are often more suitable.

One obvious case in point is Judges 8.9. Gideon, who is in hot pursuit of the kings of Midian, asks the people of Penuel to provide food for his soldiers. When the people of Penuel refuse his request, he makes this threat: "When I return *beshalom*, I will break down this tower." It comes as a surprise that a translation as recent as NKJV still translates *beshalom* as "in peace." The literal rendering "in peace" is a poor choice precisely because Gideon is making a threat. Gideon will hardly be bringing peace for those people when he returns.

A rendering more appropriate to the context is given by CEV, which says, "I'll come back **safe and sound** ... but when I do, I'm going to tear