

Raca

THE MEANING

BY TERRY L. WILDER

EARLY IN MY Christian experience I vaguely remember calling a friend a “fool” in jest while engaged in horseplay. I was neither angry with him, nor did I dislike him.

I cannot exactly remember whether someone “clobbered” me at that time with Matthew 5:22, or if I later read the verse, pondered its meaning and my words in light of it. In any event, the verse startled me, and from that point on I rarely used the word “fool” ever again for fear of God’s judgment. Had I correctly understood the meaning of Matthew 5:22 with its intriguing term *raca*? To understand what *raca* means, we need to consider the word’s etymology, some non-biblical examples in which the term is used, and the context of Matthew’s Gospel in which it occurs. While examining the Gospel of Matthew, we would do well also to consider the early church fathers’ interpretation of the passage in Matthew.

Etymology

Raca (Greek, *rhaka*) is a term of abuse or contempt derived from the Aramaic word meaning “empty one.”¹ The Greek word’s semantic domain pertains to a “lack of capacity for understanding,” and the term itself denotes “one who is totally lacking in understanding.”² The word may be translated as “fool,” “numbskull,” “airhead,” or something similar. The term is probably parallel

in meaning to the term “moron” (Greek, *moros*) in Matthew 5:22.³ The use of *raca* in Matthew 5:22 occurs without any Greek translation to explain it, which meant that Matthew’s readers would also have probably known some Aramaic. *Raca* was first recognized as Semitic in origin by John

Lightfoot who gave several examples of the word’s usage in the Talmudic and Midrashic literature.⁴ A few non-biblical examples will be examined briefly in the next section.

Non-biblical Examples

The only New Testament use of the Greek term *raca* is in Matthew 5:22.

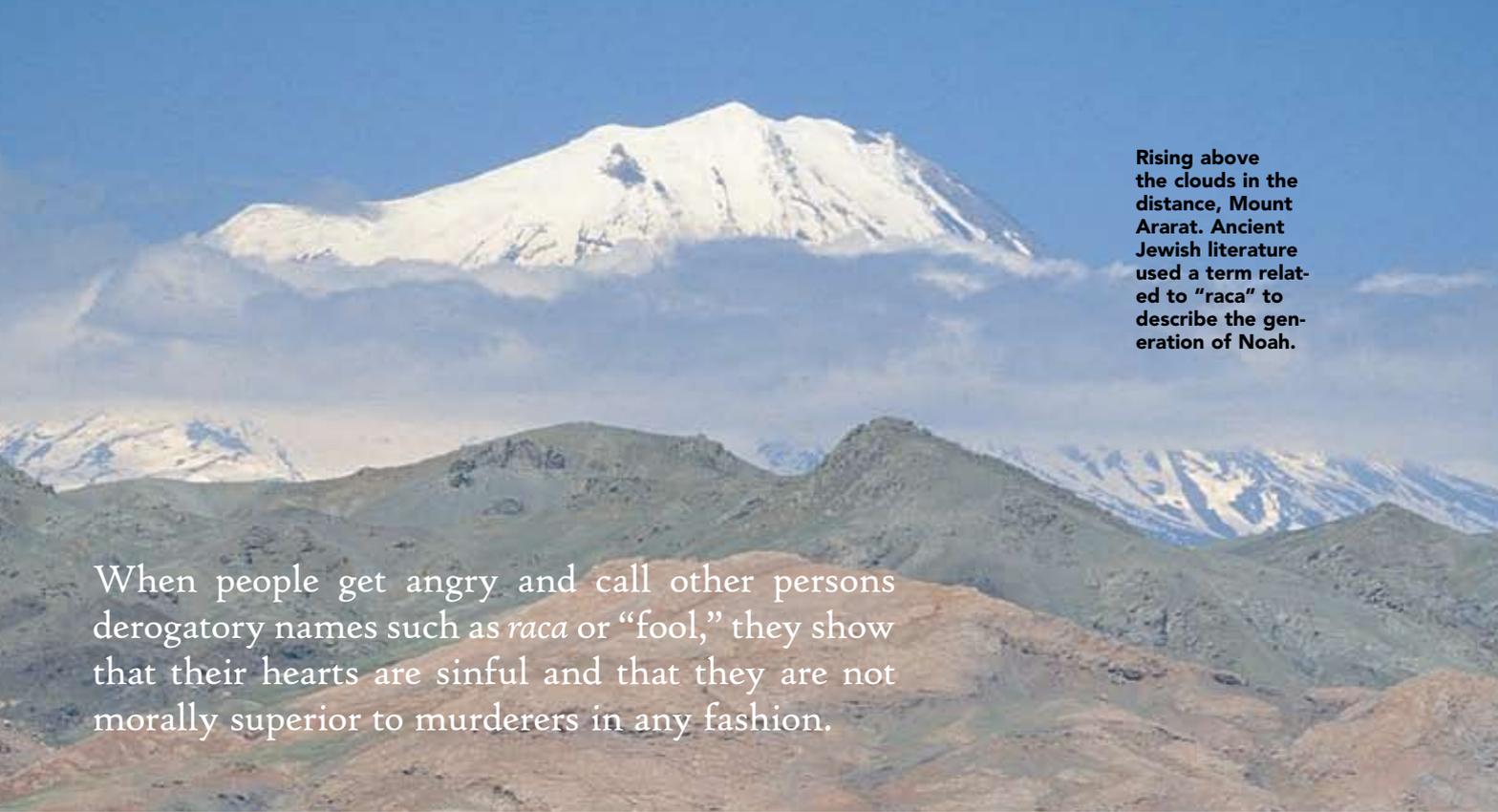
Examining some representative non-biblical examples of the word’s usage, therefore, can help us gain a better understanding of the word. As a term of abuse or contempt, we find

raca in both the *Talmud* and *Midrash*. The *Talmud* is a group of ancient (about A.D. 220-500) Rabbinic writings on Jewish law and tradition that holds religious authority for orthodox Jews. The *Midrash* is a set of early (written beginning about A.D. 150) Jewish interpretations or commentaries written by rabbis on biblical texts.

In *Tractate Berakoth* of the *Babylonian Talmud*, Rabbi Hanina used the word while participating in a discussion of bathing for ritual ablution: “Once a man enticed a woman to commit an offence and she said to him: Vagabond [literally, ‘empty one’].”⁵ Similarly, in the *Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah* the term was used in a warning lament voiced to the men of the Noahic flood generation: “Woe, ye foolish ones! [Hebrew, *rqyy*]”



ILLUSTRATION PHOTO: G.B. HOWELL / ATHENS ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (35/187)



Rising above the clouds in the distance, Mount Ararat. Ancient Jewish literature used a term related to “raca” to describe the generation of Noah.

When people get angry and call other persons derogatory names such as *raca* or “fool,” they show that their hearts are sinful and that they are not morally superior to murderers in any fashion.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (25/18/2)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/KEN TOUCHTON (3/19/11)

Left: Gehenna, known also as the Hinnom Valley, is on the southern and western sides of Jerusalem. Used as a place to dispose of refuse and debris, fires constantly burned in the

valley. By the New Testament era, the term “Gehenna” had come to be used to refer to the place of eternal punishment.

Far left: Theater mask with exag-

gerated facial features. As a parody, the mask would have been worn to depict a character known as a “ruler slave.” Dated to 2nd cent. B.C.; found near the Dipylon Gate in Athens.

Raca in the Context of Matthew 5:22

Matthew presented Jesus as the Messiah of Israel, the ever-present divine Son of God, who has all authority to establish His rule and reign. Jesus is truly “God is with us” (1:23) who has all power (28:18) and will never leave or forsake His followers (v. 20). Matthew began his presentation of Christ as the Messiah and Son of God by reviewing the Messiah’s origins and showing that Jesus is indeed the Son of David and the Son of Abraham (1:1-2:23). He highlighted the Messiah’s preparation for ministry, including John the Baptist’s ministry and message and Jesus’ baptism, temptation, and return to Galilee (3:1-4:16). He then reviewed the beginning of Messiah’s ministry, with a summary of Jesus’ message, the calling of the first disciples, and the initial response to Christ’s ministry (4:17-25).

Jesus taught with authority in the Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:29). Calling for a greater righteousness, Christ said that He did not come to abolish the law

To-morrow a flood will come.”⁶ In both references the meaning of *raca* is the same or similar to the moron or empty-headed person mentioned in the earlier section. These are the same thoughts conveyed in Matthew 5:22.

LESSON REFERENCE

ETB: Matthew 5:21-22

but to fulfill it (vv. 17-20). He did so by teaching its correct meaning, by obeying it perfectly, and by providing a way of salvation that meets all of the law's demands. Jesus illustrated this greater righteousness in relationships to others with six antithetical statements on: murder (vv. 21-26), adultery (vv. 27-30), divorce (vv. 31-32), oaths (vv. 33-37), retaliation (vv. 38-42), and loving one's enemies (vv. 43-48). In each of these antitheses Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said...But I tell you." He authoritatively overturned their erroneous traditional understanding of the Old Testament law, replacing their traditions with the law's true meaning and elevating their understanding of the law with correct teaching.

Using one of these antithetical statements, Jesus related anger to murder (vv. 21-22). He taught that the demands of the Old Testament law that prohibits murder (Ex. 20:13) are not satisfied just because someone sheds no blood. The law instead points also to derogatory anger, a more deep-seated problem. Jesus taught that the judgment set aside for murderers is also reserved for those who are spitefully angry. Christ indicated murder is unquestionably wrong, but the anger that provokes such an act is also wrong. When people get angry and call other persons derogatory names such as *raca* or "fool," they show that their hearts are sinful and that they are not morally superior to murderers in any fashion. Jesus taught that those who engage in such practices and attitudes are in danger of judgment, the Sanhedrin, and hellfire. The Sanhedrin was the highest official Jewish court in the land, comparable to the U.S. Supreme Court. Rome permitted the Jews to handle their own cases unless they encroached upon the rule of Rome. "Hellfire" (v. 22) is a translation of the Greek for "Gehenna fire." Gehenna referred to the valley of Hinnom, a place south of Jerusalem where the city burned its refuse. Since the fires burned constantly, the valley came to be associated with the fires of hell. "Jewish apocalyptic writers began to call the Valley of Hinnom the entrance to hell, later hell itself (4 *Ezra* 7:36)."⁷

In Matthew 5:23-26, Jesus further taught that such wrongful practices like murder and vilifying people should not be ignored but should be settled and made right. Brothers who are at odds with one another must be reconciled (vv. 23-24). Gifts presented at the altar mean nothing to God without reconciliation. A settlement should be reached quickly before judgment begins (vv. 25-26).

Interpretations of the Early Church Fathers

A representative example from the writings of a group of the early church fathers, called the "ante-Nicene Fathers" (pre-A.D. 325) shows that their understanding of *raca* and Matthew 5:22 was consistent with the understanding of the first century. In

a treatise on the subject of patience as both antecedent and subsequent to faith, Tertullian (one of the early church fathers, ca. A.D. 145-220) maintained that before Jesus came to the earth impatience took advantage of the opportunities that the law gave. Now that Christ has come, however, He "has united the grace of faith with patience" so that

it is no longer lawful to assail even with *word*, nor to say "fool" even, without "danger of the judgment." Anger has been prohibited, our spirits retained, the petulance of the hand checked, the poison of the tongue extracted.⁸

Tertullian knew that Jesus not only prohibited murder, but He also warned against unjustified anger toward others. Judgment loomed for anyone who was spitefully angry with another person.

Application

Jesus certainly prohibited murder and He forbade vilifying anger—but He did not forbid all anger. Even Christ got angry (see Matt. 21:12-13; John 2:13-16), and called some religious hypocrites "fools" (Greek, *moroi*; Matt. 23:17) on at least one occasion. We can only conclude that some anger is indeed justified—anger against sinful acts and injustice. But even justifiable anger, if we are not careful, can lose its focus and instead wrongly center on individuals. Personal animosity towards others is never justifiable. Jesus is our example *par excellence* when people treat us badly. When reviled and treated wrongly, Jesus did not return in kind; instead, He forgave (Luke 23:34; 1 Peter 2:23).

So was I wrong when I called my friend a "fool" while engaged in horseplay? Not necessarily. Sure, it was a childish and unwise thing to do, but it was not the type of thing that Jesus really had in mind. But if I had called my friend some disparaging names out of anger, that would have been a totally different story. **B**

1. "ῥακά" in Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2nd ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 733.

2. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 1: 385, 388.

3. See Max Wilcox, "Raca" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. in chief David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:605. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Berakoth: Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud*, ed. Maurice Simon (London: Soncino Press, 1980), 22b.

6. *Midrash Rabbah: Ecclesiastes*, trans. A. Cohen, 3rd ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1983), 9:15; Wilcox, 605.

7. Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew* in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, gen. ed. Clinton E. Arnold, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 39.

8. Tertullian, *Of Patience* in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 3:711.

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