

Introductory

Matthew (17:14-21) and Luke (9:37-43) record this same incident, and the three include information that is sometimes the same and sometimes different. All three synoptic writers place the curing of the young boy just after the Transfiguration. None of these readings are found in the TLH one-year lectionary, nor in the LW three-year lectionary,

Only the Mark account before us this week is to be found anywhere in the LSB three-year lectionary. We also note here that the LSB lectionary skips over chapter eight and the first part of chapter nine in Mark. Some of that material is exclusive to Mark, and some of it, including the Transfiguration, is related to us by the other two synoptic writers.

Matthew says that the boy is “σεληνιάζομαι – acting like a lunatic.” Many of the modern translators have taken upon themselves to practice medicine without a license – or is it doctors practicing exegesis without a license – and called the boy “epileptic.” Matthew begs to differ, stating clearly that “demons” (v.18) were the cause of the σεληνιάζομαι.

We are compelled by the text to talk about a thing – possession by a bad spirit or a demon – that makes people uncomfortable. It’s also something with which they are unfamiliar. Not many people have met a demon-possessed person. Help the reader to understand the concept by clearly explaining what these things are and their place in the world.

If we’re going to scare people – which talk of demons may well do – then we need also to make sure that they know that the Christian have a healthy respect for, but that we should not fear evil or demons. We especially need to make sure that the little ones don’t have nightmares next week because of what the Pastor said in the sermon on Sunday.

One of the things that makes this account so horrifying is the presenting self-destructive behavior of this young man. He throws himself into fire and into water, which are two places that the normal person avoids like the plague. We come to find, however, that the behavior is not the choice of the young man, a plaything for Satan’s entertainment.

On my birthday in 1994, a Saturday morning, I got a phone call from a friend, who told me his wife, dear friend to me and my wife, had committed suicide. And he was a pastor. And she was a Christian. NPH has published a book by Pastor Peter Preus with that title, *And she was a Christian*. It’s a good read, by a man who knows of which he writes.

Pastor Preus talks about Jean and the things that happened that culminated in her taking her own life, and one of the things he mentions is the active participation of demons or evil spirits in her demise. Demons are real, and they are helping Satan, and their goal is the same as they were in this incident today; to cause harm to God's children.

Several summers ago, a man named Tim went out to the barn and hanged himself. And he was a Lutheran, Missouri Synod, lifelong. And he was an Elder in his congregation, and he had a wonderful family and a full life and everything to live for, and the line for visitation was a hundred feet long for several hours, and not everybody made it in.

Perusing the obituaries like we do, it seems like there is an increasing number of people who are not old, but who die "at home, unexpectedly," not surrounded by family. It goes against the very grain of our humanity, and we've been taught all our lives not to put a plastic bag over our heads, not to put ropes around our necks, not to go "into" the water.

I still emphatically and unabashedly discourage people from suicide – especially young people, who are told in other contexts that it's a viable option – and I proclaim that it is among the worst acts that a human being can commit, but I understand that sometimes people, even Christian people, do things that no person in his right mind would do.

The young man in this text – and there appears to be some measure of faith present in the family – and believing Christians in our time may do bad things, even and especially to themselves, not necessarily of their own volition, but due sometimes in whole or in part to things from without, things that come into our very being. That is a very real thing.

Textual Notes

14. According to the translations, an unspecified "they" are observing disciples as they came down from the Mount of Transfiguration, which makes no sense. Except that the apparently preferred variant has "εἶδον – they saw," not "εἶδεν – He saw." KJV and New KJV and too few others correctly have "He (Jesus) saw," which makes perfect sense.

So it is that the disciples preceded Him down that mountain, "Καὶ ἐλθόντες πρὸς τοὺς μαθητὰς εἶδεν ὄχλον πολὺν περὶ αὐτοὺς – and coming to the disciples, He saw great crowds around them." It makes me wonder if people who were not there were aware that something had happened up on that mountain and they wanted to know exactly what.

Recall that only Peter, James, and John had been invited up to the mountain to witness the Transfiguration, so certainly the other nine, who were not invited, wanted to know what exactly had gone on up there. As for the rest, we identify the large "ὄχλον - crowd" with those who are interested in Jesus, maybe even thinking of becoming Christian.

Jesus specifically told them to keep in on the QT, hush hush, and did the people not there hear the audio or at least some sound from up there? They were surely able to see the

large cloud from which the audio emanated. Could they see something glowing up there from down there? Were those the things about which they were arguing with the scribes?

A couple of weeks ago, when we last saw the Scribes, with the Pharisees they had their tails tucked firmly between their legs, embarrassed by the verbal beat-down laid on them by Jesus. The Pharisees had the good sense to stay away, but the Scribes are back, and while Jesus is away being transfigured, these OT scholars are teaching people about God.

Now, the Scribes are specifically placed there, “καὶ γραμματεῖς συνζητοῦντας πρὸς αὐτούς – and the Scribes were discussing with them.” The verb “συνζητέω” occurs ten times in the NT, and it means “to examine together.” It does not normally indicate nasty arguing, like we sometimes see, but anytime you discuss things, that might happen.

The word is also often used in those ten occurrences – like here – when things supernatural are being talked about. We now find out, they were not said to be talking about the Transfiguration. They were talking about a demoniac boy, and the question is going to center around the possibility of his supernatural healing at the hand of Jesus.

15. The crowd sees Jesus coming, καὶ εὐθὺς πᾶς ὁ ὄχλος ἰδόντες αὐτὸν ἐξεθαμβήθησαν, καὶ προστρέχοντες ἠσπάζοντο αὐτόν – and immediately all the crowd, seeing Him, were astonished, and running to Him were greeting Him.” The verb is “ἐκθαμβέομαι,” and it occurs only four times in the NT, all of them in Mark. The first occurrence is here.

In 14:33 it is used to describe the emotional state of Jesus (He had them) when He prays at Gethsemane, and it is used twice in chapter sixteen (vv. 5 and 6) to describe the emotional state of the women when they found the young man dressed in white sitting there in the tomb, and him telling them not to be in that state, because Jesus is risen.

I don’t think the word “amazed,” used by several English translations, quite captures the moment. Those that use the word “overwhelmed” (NIV “overwhelmed with wonder”) and “confused” are closer to the accurate meaning. Myself, I like the idiom “bent out of shape” and the English word “gobsmacked” is good, but not for American hearers.

A quick perusal of the English word “amazed” as it occurs forty times in the writings of Shakespeare, reveals that the word meant those sorts of things – overwhelmed and confused - at the time of the writing of the KJV. In modern usage, the word “amazed” means amazed, and does not carry those connotations of overwhelmed and confused.

In fact, the free Internet dictionary says just that. The second entry under the term “amazed” is “*Obsolete* To bewilder; perplex.” (That means that the word used to mean bewilder or perplex, but that those meanings are obsolete. But you knew that.) So the use of the word “amazed” by the modern translators seems to me another case of LBT.

Lazy Bible Translator is characterized by a willingness to just use the word used four centuries ago, which meaning may have changed, and by a concurrent unwillingness to

look at the four occurrences – and there are *only* four – to determine the meaning of the word and to put that meaning into modern terms that communicate that meaning well.

So just what was it that about the approach of Jesus that caused this confusion in the crowd? Perhaps they knew that Jesus had gone up on the mountain with the three, and they did not expect Him to come back, or at least not so soon and were surprised when He did. Maybe they did hear the sound, see the cloud, catch a glimpse of Glowing Man.

Maybe they thought He was going up there in order to ascend back into heaven, like He talked about, and that they would never see Him again. The word lends credence to the idea that Jesus somehow looked different when He came down from the mount, but it would have had to have been an extremely different, to cause that emotion in them.

Their running is in the present active participial form, and we note that one runs when one wants to get from point a to point b more quickly. The verb “greet” is a common word for one person greeting another. In the imperfect tense, it paints the picture of heartfelt and repeated handshaking, back-slapping, and “good to see you” back and forth.

16. Jesus notes that they have been discussing things, and He gets right down to business, asking those who greet Him, “τί συζητεῖτε πρὸς αὐτούς – what are you discussing with them?” The interrogative pronoun “τί” could also mean “who,” but here “what” is preferred. We recognize the verb “συζητέω” from v. 14, here a present indicative active.

It is noteworthy that Jesus asks the crowds, not the Scribes, what is the topic of conversation, thereby marginalizing the men who are supposed to be the expert teachers, and thereby maximizing His interest in the masses. It’s part of the constant NT tension between God and the Scribes about who is authorized to teach people about God.

17. Having been asked, one of them answers Jesus, “καὶ ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῷ εἷς ἐκ τοῦ ὄχλου Διδάσκαλε – then answered one of the crowd, ‘teacher.’” The man uses the common “Διδάσκαλε - teacher” not “rabbi – honored teacher,” and reports that “ἤνεγκα τὸν υἱόν μου πρὸς σέ, ἔχοντα πνεῦμα ἄλαλον – I brought my son to you, having a spirit mute.

The adjective “άλαλον” is the word “λαλέω – to speak” with the negating “ά” prefix. The literal reading is “a mute spirit,” and it means that the boy has a spirit that is rendering him unable to talk, and more, and that’s a problem. As usual when talking about a physical malady, it’s good to cause pathos in your hearer about that malady.

Ask the hearers if they know anybody who is unable to speak or hear – the second is often the cause of the first. Invite the hearer to imagine life without talking or hearing. Point out some of the things that we commonly do and take for granted, and rhetorically ask how life would change if we could no longer do those things that involve talking.

And when talking about a parent and a child, like here we’re talking about a man and his son, create pathos in your hearer – many of whom *are* parents, all of whom *had* parents –

by talking about the pain and suffering that the inability to talk – or any other physical malady in the child– brings to a parent. Place them into that man’s emotional state.

18. The man then goes on to describe in detail just what happens when his son is beset by the spirit. The phrase “ὅπου ἐάν – whenever, if,” followed shortly with subjunctive verb form, the verb “καταλάβῃ - seizes” tells us that this is an occasional, not a continual, state of being, and the verb itself indicates that the spirit “lays hold of” or “seizes” the boy.

In Word Pictures, Robertson quotes “The word is used by Galen and Hippocrates for fits.” The control that the spirit exercises over the boy when it seizes him appears to be *almost* total, if not absolute. Whenever such seizure should happen, most translations say that “ῥήσσει – it throws him down,” and a lot of them add the redundant “to the ground.”

Firstly, the word “ground – γῆς” does not appear here in the text or in any variant readings. (The word “γῆς” does appear in v. 20). Secondly, the verb is “(ῥήγνυμι) ῥήσω,” and if we look at the other six times that word appears in the NT, and in other literature of the time, it means “to tear” or “to break apart” rather than “to throw down.”

Matthew (7:6) and Aesop (Fable 408H – BAG) both use the word to refer to a swine or a hog. If you followed that now defunct show *American Hoggers* on *A & E*, or tuned in to certain episodes of *Homestead Rescue*, or seen any of the educational programming that teaches us about feral hogs down, then you know how badly hogs can tear things up.

The most common use of the verb in the NT is in the context of how old wineskins will burst or break if you try to put new wine into them. Clearly, the boy is not literally “bursting” or “breaking,” but just as clearly the boy loses control of himself when the spirit takes him over. It sounds like his entire person is being torn apart by the demon.

The term as used here is a metaphor and perhaps an idiom, and it would be like our saying that somebody had a “breakdown” or “he’s falling apart.” The description continues, the man saying that when the spirit comes, the boy “ἀφρίζει – foams,” presumably at the mouth, like a rabid animal. He also “grinds – τρίζω” his teeth.

That word (grind) is a hapax in the NT, and it is a different word from the one that is used when talking about the idiomatic “gnashing of teeth” of hell-bound people who knew better. Finally, the boy is said to be “ξηραίνω – withering away,” a word that in its fifteen NT appearances is almost always in the context of a plant that is slowly dying.

The verbs are all in the present tense.

After the man finishes describing for Jesus the symptoms of his son’s possession, he tells Him that, “καὶ εἶπα τοῖς μαθηταῖς σου ἵνα αὐτὸ ἐκβάλωσιν, καὶ οὐκ ἴσχυσαν – I talked to your disciples, that they might cast it out, but they were not able.” The verb “ἐκβάλωσιν – might cast it out” is an aorist subjunctive, they may or may not be able to pull it off.

They “ἴσχυσαν – were unable,” or “were not strong enough.” That’s his perception of *why* the disciples of Jesus were unable to do what he asked. Jesus then says what He says in the next verse to the man, and later on (v. 28), in private, the disciples ask Him the same question, and He tells them what He tells them; it’s not that hard or complicated.

We note here that in chapter six, Jesus had seemingly given these men the kind of power that would be needed to cast out this wicked spirit. In 6:13, He had given them power over “demons – δαιμόνια.” The thing being dealt with here is called “πνεῦμα ἀλαλον – spirit not speaking” (v. 17), and later on (v. 24), it is called “τῷ πνεύματι τῷ ἀκαθάρτῳ.” The word “demon” is not used in this pericope, which causes us to ask if the boy was possessed by a demon. The secondary question is whether the power given in chapter six is in play here. We do have several different words or phrases that describe various demonic aspects. The disciples have indeed been given power to deal with this situation.

19. The response of Jesus to the complaint of the man is to speak in general terms, “Ὡ γένεα ἄπιστος – o unbelieving generation,” and to rhetorically lament “, ἕως πότε πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἔσομαι; ἕως πότε ἀνέξομαι ὑμῶν – until when will I be with you, until when will I bear with you?” The second person verbs are both “ὑμᾶς – you,” plural, to them all.

The verb itself, “ἀνέχομαι – to bear” bespeaks to one whose patience is tried in the extreme. His comments are directed at the man, but in such a way that the others know that they are no different from him when it comes to unbelief. Later (v. 24), the man will claim that he does, in fact, believe. Now Jesus commands the boy be brought to Him.

20. They complied with the command of Jesus, and “καὶ ἤνεγκαν αὐτὸν πρὸς αὐτόν – they brought him to Him,” and that got a rise out of the demon, “καὶ ἰδὼν αὐτόν τὸ πνεῦμα εὐθὺς συνεσπάραξεν αὐτόν, καὶ πεσὼν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἐκυλίετο ἀφρίζων – and seeing Him, the spirit immediately violently convulsed him, and he fell onto the ground.”

The verb “σπαράσσω – to convulse” occurs three times in the NT, all three in connection with demon possession. The occurrences of that word with the intensifying prefix “συσσ” are found only two times in the NT, here and in Luke’s account of this same incident. This has the earmarks of a child’s tantrum, but much more severe and over the top.

He fell on the ground and “is being rolled.” The verb “κυλίω - rolled” is a hapax in the NT, and the verb form is passive imperfect. The imperfect tense means that the rolling was a continual, ongoing act, and the passive mood indicates that the boy was the passive recipient of the rolling. The “spirit” was making him roll, and he couldn’t help himself.

As per his father’s description of the presenting symptoms in v. 18, the boy is now said also to be “ἀφρίζων – foaming.” We note that those are the only two occurrences of *that* verb in the NT. It is not a common thing for humans to be foaming at the mouth, and you add it all together and there is a lot of unusual stuff going on here with this boy.

21. Jesus sounds a lot like a doctor as He asks the father of the boy how long this has been going on, “τοῦτο γέγονεν αὐτῷ - this been with him?” The malady is framed almost

as if it were a constant companion of the boy, and the father confirms as much by answering quite a while, “Ἐκ παιδιόθεν – from childhood,” yet another hapax in the NT.

Contrary to common thinking, nobody is born possessed by a demon, which is a different thing from original sin, but related to it. Nature abhors a vacuum, and the boy must have been without the Holy Spirit, and when that’s the case, an evil spirit can fill that vacuum. Conversely, assure your Christian hearers that this sort of thing cannot happen to them.

22. The father continues, saying that “πολλάκις καὶ εἰς πῦρ αὐτὸν ἔβαλεν καὶ εἰς ὕδατα ἵνα ἀπολέσῃ αὐτόν – often into the fire and into the water it casts him, in order to destroy him.” He continues to picture this spirit as the active participant and his son as the passive recipient, and there is a purpose to it; the demon wants to destroy (kill) the boy.

The demon has already killed the boy spiritually, and now it wants to destroy his physical body as well. The reason why you cast somebody into fire is that fire is a means to kill him, and you cast him into water in order to kill by drowning. How horrible it must have been to be cast into fire and water and for the father to watch it being done to his son.

The man continues, “ἀλλ’ εἴ τι δύνῃ, βοήθησον ἡμῖν σπλαγχνισθεὶς ἐφ’ ἡμᾶς – but if you are able to anything, help us, having had compassion.” Having compassion is a very human Christian emotion from the fully human Jesus – on us. The man seems to know about Jesus, and about His compassion, and now he wants some of that for his son.

23. Jesus now speaks in conditional terms, “Εἰ δύνῃ, πάντα δυνατὰ τῷ πιστεύοντι – If you should be able, all things are possible.” The word “if” is the first conditional, δύνῃ is in the subjunctive mood, and the adjective δυνατός is a cognate of that verb. Finally, a third conditional, saying that this is the case for “πιστεύοντι – the one who is believing,”

According to Jesus, the problem with the inability of the disciples to solve the problem and cleanse the boy of the troubling spirit, is lack of faith. He does not say on whose part the faith was lacking, but this man seems to believe, as he is about to state, and Jesus is going to get there in a little while and further explain the faith deficiency. Wait for it.

24. Then “εὐθὺς κρᾶζας ὁ πατὴρ τοῦ παιδίου ἔλεγεν Πιστεύω· βοήθει μου τῇ ἀπιστίᾳ - the father of the child immediately cried out, saying, ‘I believe, help my unbelief.’” The verb “βοήθει - help” is the present imperative form of βοηθέω, a word used eight times in the NT, each time when somebody is in dire straits and most has a felt need for God.

The claim to have faith, and at the same time to ask God to rescue from the lack of faith is a situation with which all Christians are familiar. Been there, done that. That the man is a believer is self-evident from his words and actions. He has faith, but if faith is what is needed to get rid of that bad spirit, then go ahead and rescue me from my unbelief.

25. The visual of the boy being thrown to the ground, et al, and the exchange of words between Jesus and his father – and the conversation seems to be at least passionate, if not

heated – has drawn a crowd. Mark says that “ἐπισυντρέχει ὄχλος – a crowd runs together.” The verb is a hapax in the NT, is “not used by secular writers” (biblos.com).

Here it seems to mean that people were joining other people who were already there. This is the sort of things that happens when a fight breaks out in a bar, according to the movies and television show that depict bar fights. It’s what Chicagoans call a “gaper’s block,” the bottleneck caused when cars slow down during rush hour. It’s what the hoi polloi do.

He told them not to tell anybody what happened on the Mountain, but It was seeing this running of people to the scene of this incident that triggered Jesus to act, “ἐπετίμησεν τῷ πνεύματι τῷ ἀκαθάρτῳ λέγων αὐτῷ Τὸ ἄλαλον καὶ κωφὸν πνεῦμα, ἐγὼ ἐπιτάσσω σοι,– and He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying ‘mute and deaf spirit, I command you,’”

The command is “ἔξελθε ἐξ αὐτοῦ καὶ μηκέτι εἰσέλθῃς εἰς αὐτόν – to come out of him, and you should never enter into him.” We note here that “unclean spirit” and “mute and deaf spirit” stand in apposition to one another; they are the same spirit, it’s a bad spirit, an evil spirit, often in the Bible those kinds of spirits are called “demon,” and it is.

26. The macabre scene continues, as the spirit, “καὶ κράζας καὶ πολλὰ σπαράζας ἐξῆλθεν· καὶ ἐγένετο ὥσει νεκρὸς, ὥστε τοὺς πολλοὺς λέγειν ὅτι ἀπέθανεν – crying out, and convulsing him many times, it came out, and he became like a dead man, so that many said he was dead.” The first two verbs (crying, convulsing) are aorist participles.

The spirit did not leave willingly, but when confronted with the authority of Jesus, it had no choice. All it took was the word and command of Jesus, as we see happening all the time, and it was so. Imagine the bystanders gazing upon that still and now-peaceful body, looking at one another or nobody in particular and playing the part of the coroner.

27. Not so fast. Jesus, “κρατήσας τῆς χειρὸς αὐτοῦ ἤγειρεν αὐτόν, καὶ ἀνέστη – taking him by his hand, raised him, and he arose.” The boy had been on the ground, and now Jesus gives him a hand up, like a football player does for a down teammate. The last word in the sentence (ἀνίστημι), is commonly used for the resurrection of the dead.

Note that even though people thought he was dead, they were wrong. Note also that this healing has a connection to the resurrection of the dead; i.e. in heaven there will be no need for anybody helping anybody up off of, or out of the ground. In heaven all will be restored. All will speak, all will hear, and all infirmities or maladies will be banished.

28. Once again, we see Jesus taking the disciples off to the side for some one-on-twelve. They went to a house, in private, and the disciples were asking Him, “Ὅτι ἡμεῖς οὐκ ἠδυνήθημεν ἐκβαλεῖν αὐτό –Why were we not able to cast it out?” The verb form ἐπηρώτων is in the imperfect tense. They asked, and then there were follow up questions.

They had been given power to cast our demons, and they had done that and been thrilled about it, so what gives? As is the case with all “why” questions, there was not a simple

“yes” or “no” answer, but one that required explanation. The answer, given in the next verse, is to be seen as a summary, which happens all the time with the NT writers.

29. The answer to the inquiry of the disciples as to why they were unable to cast out the spirit is, “Τοῦτο τὸ γένος ἐν οὐδενὶ δύναται ἐξελθεῖν εἰ μὴ ἐν προσευχῇ - Nothing of this kind can come out, except by prayer.” The sentence structure indicates that this thing, the casting out of a spirit like this one, is well nigh impossible in any and every and all cases.

Except for one, the “exception clause” introduced with “εἰ μή,” and now the other shoe drops, with a heavy thud. You are right, this cannot be done, except in this one way. And what is that way? Prayer. And what, fourth grade Lutheran, is prayer? “Prayer,” the fourth-grade Lutheran replies, “is talking to God, maybe asking Him for something.”

Why were the disciples unable to do the thing done almost effortlessly by Jesus? Because they didn’t talk to God, they didn’t ask. They were unable because they didn’t ask, which I think rather conclusively answers the question as to who had the faith problem spoken of earlier. Ask and it shall be given, but if you don’t ask it won’t be.

What did that look like on the ground in this incident? The man brought his son to the nine who did not get invited up onto the mountain and asked them to heal the boy. What they did in response to that request – we don’t know what they did, but we do know what they did not do. They did not pray to God that He would use His power on the boy.

Law/Gospel

Deaf/Hearing – God gives ears to all people, but after the fall some ears are defective. Here Jesus fixes those broken ears, thereby showing His power to fix fallen creation and fallen man. Likewise, the Natural Man knows about God, but knows nothing about God until God unplugs his spiritual ears, so that man can hear, and hearing he may believe.

Spirit/Spirit – The Natural Man does not have the Holy Spirit, and any spirit that he does have is anything but holy. Sometimes an evil spirit enters man. In Holy Baptism, you have been given the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that trumps every other spirit, the Spirit that gives life everlasting.

Sermon Titles

This Boy Has a Problem

You Think You Have Problems?

About Demons

Jesus Confronts Satan

All You Had to Do Was Ask

Hymns

I will often pick a hymn from the *Church Militant* section to be sung early on, and a hymn from the *Church Triumphant* section to be sung later. The congregants are thereby reminded first of sin and the result of sin, and then later of the forgiveness of sin and that result.

A Mighty Fortress is Our God – LSB 657

O Little Flock, Fear Not the Foe – LSB 666

Anything from the *Church Militant* section

Anything from the *Church Triumphant* section

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Resources

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Intervarsity Press, 2002

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William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, University of Chicago Press, 1979

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MGM – W.F. Moulton, A.S. Geden, H.K. Moulton, *A Concordance to the Greek Testament*. T & T Clark LTD., 1978

MM – James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982

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RNK – Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Zondervan, 1976

RSV – Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Zondervan Publishing House, 1965

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WP – A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Baker, 1930

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Internet Classics Library – www.classics.mit.edu

Christian Classics Ethereal Library - www.ccel.org

Project Wittenberg - www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/wittenberg-home.html