

*The Biblical Heritage Center*  
**Letting Our Bible Tell Its Own Stories**

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## **Jesus Teaches About the Dangers of Anger**

By Jim Myers

The Gospels contain many clues that Jesus was a Jew who taught in Hebrew and that he taught other Jews living in Galilee and Judea in the Late Second Temple Period. The more we can learn about his language and culture the more accurately we will be able to understand what his words meant. Today I am going to discuss a lesson that Jesus taught to his followers on the side of mountain about 30 CE. It is found in Matthew 5:22. This single verse contains several important cultural and linguistic clues that, when understood; allow us to have a much deeper understanding of a message that was very important to him. Below is our reconstruction of this verse.

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be **subjected to judgment.**'

But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother will be **subjected to the Bet Din.**

Again, anyone who says to a brother, '**RAQA,**' is **answerable to the Sanhedrin.**

And anyone who says, 'You **fool!**' will be **in danger of the fire of GEHINNOM.**<sup>1</sup>

His first clue, "subjected to judgment," turned the audience's attention to the Jewish court system which they all knew. The lowest court was called the "**Bet Din,**" which literally means "House of Judgment" and it had **three judges.** This type of court was found in villages throughout Judea and Galilee, and handled **non-capital cases** that covered a wide range of offenses.<sup>2</sup>

A higher court was called the **Sanhedrin** and there were two levels of this court. The **Lesser Sanhedrin** had **23 judges** and could try **capital cases.**<sup>3</sup> The **Greater Sanhedrin** had **71 judges** and tried cases that involved a **tribe,** a **false prophet,** a **high-priest,** or the **nation.**<sup>4</sup>

There was, however, a court higher than the Greater Sanhedrin and **it had only one judge – God**. It will meet on the **Great Day of Judgment** when **God will judge all mankind**.<sup>5</sup> It has the power to **sentence a person to GEHINNOM**, which was understood in several ways. Some viewed it to be a bit like the Christian Hell with fire and brimstone. *It was understood to be the place where the utterly wicked that are alive or have ever lived will be punished.*<sup>6</sup>

Now let's use this information to reveal what Jesus taught that day. Imagine that you are sitting on the side of the mountain that day, when Jesus suddenly said, **"Anyone who is angry with a brother will be tried by a three judge Bet Din!"** Do you think that caught their attention? *There is no doubt that everyone that heard him had been angry with a brother at one time or another. Did Jesus really mean that everyone that had been angry with his brother should be charged with a crime and taken to a Bet Din?* He did not mean for this to be taken literally. It was how he introduced the subject of this lesson and grabbed the attention of his followers at the same time.

*The audience knows that this lesson will be about how anger can lead to the very serious crime of murder. Jesus is going to teach them how they can prevent this from happening.* The first step to prevent anger from leading to the more serious crime of murder was revealed when Jesus taught -- "Anyone who says to a brother, **'RAQA,'** is **answerable to the Sanhedrin**." This is clearly more serious than just being angry, because it is to be tried by a higher court. Please pay close attention to what makes it a more serious crime. It is by one word being spoken by the angry person -- **RAQA**. What does it mean in English? *The answer is nothing.* We know our English translations came from Greek manuscripts, so what does it mean in Greek? *The answer is also nothing.* **RAQA** is a transliteration of the Hebrew word רָקָא; not a translation. We know how it sounds, but not what it means. The story below will help us understand it.

*"Our Rabbis have taught: A man should always be gentle as the reed and never unyielding as the cedar. Once R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon was coming from Migdal Gedor, from the house of his teacher, and he was riding leisurely on his ass by the riverside and was feeling happy and elated because he had studied much Torah [20b]. There chanced to meet him an exceedingly ugly man who greeted him, 'Peace be upon you, Sir.' He, however, did not return his salutation but instead said to him, '**RAQA** (you useless and empty thing), how ugly you are. Are all your fellow citizens as ugly as you are?' The man replied: 'I do not know, but go and tell the craftsman who made me, "How ugly is the vessel which you have made.'*

*When R. Eleazar realized that he had done wrong he dismounted from the ass and prostrated himself before the man and said to him, 'I*

*submit myself to you, forgive me.' The man replied: 'I will not forgive you until you go to the craftsman who made me and say to him, 'How ugly is the vessel which you have made'.'*

*He [R. Eleazar] walked behind him until he reached his native city. When his fellow citizens came out to meet him greeting him with the words, 'Peace be upon you O Teacher, O Master,' the man asked them, 'Whom are you addressing thus?' They replied, 'The man who is walking behind you.' Thereupon he exclaimed: 'If this man is a teacher, may there not be any more like him in Israel!' The people then asked him: 'Why?' He replied: 'Such and such a thing has he done to me.'*

*They said to him: 'Nevertheless, forgive him, for he is a man greatly learned in the Torah.' The man replied: 'For your sakes I will forgive him, but only on the condition that he does not act in the same manner in the future.' "7*

**RAQA** means "**useless, empty and of no value.**" The point made in this story is that everyone is made in the image of God, therefore, how could a learned man like the famous rabbi call anyone **RAQA**? Jesus is making the same point by teaching his followers to remember that any person we may become angry with is also made in the image of God. *Do not say that the person we are angry with is useless and of no value -- if we do, we should be tried by the Sanhedrin (Supreme Court)!*

Jesus next reveals that there is an even more serious crime that an angry person can commit, and it is also an act of speaking. This time it is calling the person we are angry with, a "fool." Why would calling the person a "**fool**" be so serious that it could cause God to sentence us to **GEHINNOM**? For most English readers, "**fool**" is defined as: "A person lacking in judgment or prudence; a harmlessly deranged person or one lacking in common powers of understanding."<sup>8</sup> But that was not what "**fool**" meant to Jesus or his Jewish audience. He was referring to a well-known Psalm here. His audience recognized the reference to Psalm 14:

**The fool** says in his heart, "**There is no God.**" They are corrupt, their deeds are abominable; there is no one who does good. YAHWEH looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned away, all have become corrupt; **there is no one who does good**, not even one.<sup>9</sup>

Calling a person **RAQA** out of anger *denied that the other person is made "in the image of God."* Calling a person a "**fool**" was to say that *the person had denied the existence of God.* Now let's review what Jesus taught about anger.

- (1) What we say when we become angry can lead to murder – and more.
- (2) The first step from anger toward murder is to say to the person we are angry with is useless and of no value – not the image of God.
- (3) The next step that brings us closer to murder is to say to the person we are angry with denies the existence of God.
- (4) Therefore, when we become angry we must remember to guard what we say. The words we speak could result in a more serious crime than murder and we could be judged by God for it on the Great Day of Judgment.

*Where did Jesus come up with the idea that anger leads to murder? Everyone listening that day knew exactly where he got it. There is no doubt that he intentionally chose an example that every Jew in his audience had heard many times in their synagogues – the story of an angry Cain murdering his brother Abel.*

Then YAHWEH said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? **If you do good**, will you not be accepted? But **if you do not do good**, sin is crouching at your door; it **desires to have you**, but you must rule over it."<sup>10</sup>

Cain became angry with his brother, not because of what Abel did, but because **YAHWEH ignored him and looked only at Able and his gifts**. Jesus' audience understood the connection between what YAHWEH told Cain and Psalm 14. *YAHWEH told Cain that the way he could overcome anger was to do good, which literally meant "acts that were good."* "Good," in that context, meant "acts that protected, preserved, and enhanced the quality of life." Psalm 14 said, ". . . there is no one who does good, not even one." The point was very clear. **If we do what YAHWEH told Cain to do when we become angry, acts of good to the person we are angry with – then we will not say RAQA, "fool" or murder them. We will not be judged by any court for doing acts of good!**

When we recognize and understand the cultural and linguistic clues found in the teachings of Jesus a whole new understanding of his message and mission emerges. His words are as relevant in our world today as they were to his audience nearly 2,000 years ago. I hope you have enjoyed and learned from this lesson. Please share it with others. **BHC**

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:21-22

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/tsa/tsa03.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/tsa/tsa04.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/tsa/tsa05.htm>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/5849-eschatology>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.jewfaq.org/olamhaba.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Taanit 20a-b

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fool>

<sup>9</sup> Psalm 14:1-3

<sup>10</sup> New International Version

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## You can help make a difference!

Should we consider factual cultural, historical and linguistic information when we read the words of our Bible? Or, should each person's understanding of the Bible's words be limited to their cultural experiences and knowledge?

Should the standard that governs biblical knowledge be – "Well that's what it means to me" – "That's the Word of God" - when the biblical text is involved? Or, should do our best to understand the words of our Bible through the eyes of the ancient authors and consider what they meant to them first?

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