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ἰῶτα ἐν ἧ μίᾳ κεραΐᾳ (Matt. 5:18)

5-6 minutes

ἰῶτα ἐν ἧ μίᾳ κεραΐᾳ οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου

“...not one *iota* nor one *keraiā* will pass away from the law....”^[1]

What the ἰῶτα (*iōta*) means in this passage is unequivocal: it refers to the letter ^[2], or, more precisely, to the word יֹד (*yōd*), which is the name of this letter.^[3]

What κεραΐᾳ (*keraiā*) means, on the other hand, is not as clear. Two explanations have been proposed. First, it may refer to “the decorations that were attached to certain letters (תגיין [*tagiyn*], ‘little crowns’).”^[4] Second, it may denote “the strokes that distinguish the letters כ ה ד from the similar ב ר ה.”^[5]

But a different explanation, it seems to me, is closer to the truth and a bit more obvious: Just as ἰῶτα refers to יֹד, the name of the tenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, so κεραΐᾳ revers to וָ (vā), the name of the sixth letter.^[6] Translated back into Aramaic, the above passage would then read: יֹד קֶרְאִיָּא אִוּן קֶרְאִיָּא.^[7]

But how do we explain the mistaken rendering of וָ with κεραΐᾳ?^[8] Quite simply. The word וָ is ambiguous. It means 1. “hook”, 2. “the letter Vav.”^[9] From this it follows: Whoever translated Matt. 5:18 into Greek made the error of translating the וָ,^[10] instead of merely transcribing it.^[11]



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Notes

[*] This article originally appeared as Günther Schwarz, “ἰῶτα ἐν ἧ μίᾳ κεραΐᾳ (Matthäus 5 18),”

Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 66.3-4 (1975): 268-269.

[1] Select bibliography: G. Dalman, *Jesus-Jeschua* (1922 = 1967), 56-58; W. G. Kümmel, “Jesus und der jüdische Traditionsgedanke,” *ZNW* 33 (1934): 105-130; W. D. Davies, “Matthew 5 17-18,” *Mélanges Bibliques (Festschrift für A. Robert)* (1957), 428-456; A. Descamps, “Essai d’interprétation de Mt 5 17-48, »Formgeschichte« ou »Redaktionsgeschichte«,” *Studia Evangelica* TU 73 (1959), 156-173; E. Schweizer, “Matth. 5 17-20, Anmerkungen zum Gesetzesverständnis des Matthäus,” *Neotestamentica* (1963): 399-406; W. Trilling, *Das wahre Israel* (31964), 167-171; G. Barth, “Das Gesetzesverständnis des Evangelisten Matthäus,” *Überlieferung und Auslegung im M atthäusevangelium* (ed. G. Bornkamm, G. Barth, H. J. Held; 41965), 60-68; G. Strecker, *Der Weg der Gerechtigkeit* (21966), 143f.; H.-Th. Wrege, *Die Überlieferungsgeschichte der Bergpredigt* (1968), 38-40; V. Hasler, *Amen, Redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Einführungsformel der Herrenworte »Wahrlich, ich sage euch«* (1969), 55-57; K. Berger, *Die AmenWorte Jesu* (1970), 73f.; S. Schulz, *Q, Die Spruchquelle der Evangelisten* (1972), 114-116.

[2] This is the general consensus.

[3] This corresponds to the fact that ἰωτα is the name of the Greek letter ι.

[4] W. G. Kümmel (above, n. 1), 127.

[5] E. Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Matthäus* (21958), 109 (with “crown” as an alternative).

[6] So in both cases Matt. 5:18 concerns letters (the second smallest and the smallest letter) of the Hebrew alphabet. According to Dalman, it was not the וי, but the ו that was the smallest letter: “Vav and yod were both represented at that period by a long perpendicular stroke. The yod was distinguished by having a small hook at the top, and was thus really larger than the vav.” Gustaf H. Dalman, *The Words of Jesus Considered in the Light of Post-Biblical Jewish Writings and the Aramaic Language: I. Introduction and Fundamental Ideas* (trans. D. M. Kay [*Die Worte Jesu*, 1898]; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902), 6.

[7] In translation: “not one yod nor one vav.”

[8] Bauer Wb, (51958), 847: »d. Haken, d. Strichlein am Buchstaben« (“Hook,” “Small dashes on a letter”).

[9] G. Dalman, *Aamäisch-neuhebräisches Wörterbuch zu Targum, Talmud und Midrasch* (1938 = 1967), 121.

[10] After all, he reproduced the וי, almost correctly, using the Greek equivalent ἰωτα.

[11] If that is the case, then, contrary to the opinion of others, Matthew’s ἰωτα ἐν ἡ (absent in Luke’s parallel [Luke 16:17]) is to be regarded as original, since וי and ו form a natural pair in reference to the Torah. Both letters stand side by side in parallelism with the pair ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ in the preceding line.

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improved translation? You may
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