

What Did Jesus Say to Judas?

Mt 26:50: Ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτῷ· ἑταίρε, ἐφ' ᾧ πάρει;

In their *Commentary on Matthew*, Davies and Allison¹ say that Jesus' question to Judas "can be taken in several different ways", and quote nine different renderings/construals of the three last words of the phrase ἑταίρε, ἐφ' ᾧ πάρει:

1. why are you here?
2. is that [the kiss of v. 49] why you are here?
3. is that [the betrayal] why you are here?
4. do that for which you are here
5. may that for which you are here be done
6. I know for what you are here
7. that [the kiss of v. 49] is why you are here
8. that [the betrayal] is why you are here
9. the thing you are here for! (exclamation)

The above statement is a little unfortunate, because it gives the impression that Jesus' question can justifiably be taken in nine different ways. That they mean just that is shown by their statement that follows the list of renderings: "While we incline to the first option, none of the others can be excluded".

This stance, that a NT text is capable of many alternative meanings, raises an important question. "Can a text legitimately have many different meanings?" Would not this break down communication? There are, no doubt, some nowadays who would like to think of the polyvalence of texts, so that a modern reader can extract the meaning he wishes. However, such personal readings of texts are not the same thing as so-

¹ Davies, W.D., – Allison, D.C., *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (ICC), Edinburgh: T & T Clark, Vol. III, 1997, p. 509.

ber, historical exegesis. Here, we are concerned with the author’s meaning, not the meaning that a reader wishes to find in a text. Surely, the author did not have in his mind nine different meanings, nor did he intend his readers to understand his text in nine different ways. The author must have had just one meaning—even though he may not have been quite successful in giving it unequivocal expression. Thus, to say that “none of the others can be excluded” is to grant them viable and legitimate status. The hitch is to discover the one correct meaning. Having done that, it remains to discard all others. In my commerce with commentaries, I have found that not so infrequently they allow many meanings as valid possibilities as a cover for their indecision. If we cannot understand a text, it is more honest to say so, and leave it open, rather than to present a large number of alternatives and call them equal possibilities.

Now, the stakes have been set rather high. Let us, therefore, look more closely to the text to see what Matthew might have meant by it.

The word ἑταῖρε

Davies and Allison quote Pascal’s opinion that “Jesus disregards the enmity of Judas ... so much so that he calls him friend”. This is a pious statement, but hardly a true picture of the situation. Nor is the idea that by calling him “Friend” Jesus was appealing to his conscience a correct understanding of the text. It needs to be pointed out that ἑταῖρε means ‘companion’, who normally was friendly disposed. But the semantic field of the word is not coextensive with that of φίλος = ‘friend’. Therefore, it is wrong to render Jesus’ words with “Friend ...” —if ‘Friend’ is taken in its ordinary positive sen-

se. A parallel text here is Mt 22:12. Surely, when the king saw the man who lacked a wedding garment and said to him ἑταῖρε, he was not calling him ‘Friend’ in the usual sense of the word, nor was he expressing his friendly sentiments toward him. What the king felt toward the impostor can be read in the next verse: δῆσαντες αὐτοῦ πόδας καὶ χεῖρας ἐκβάλετε αὐτὸν εἰς τὸ σκότος τὸ ἐξώτερον “Bind his hands and feet and throw him into the outer darkness”.

However we may render this term in such a context—‘Friend’, ‘Fellow’, or ‘You over there!’—the word ἑταῖρε does not have friendly overtones. Rather the opposite. The force of the word is similar to the force of Lord Cedric’s words to his disobedient son, Ivanhoe on his return, who, shaking his head in disappointment, says: “You, you ...”—with an aposiopesis. Already this misunderstanding of ἑταῖρε has prejudiced the interpretation of the whole saying of Jesus.

The Expression ἐφ’ ᾧ πάρει

The other three words, are the preposition ἐφ (<ἐπί), the relative pronoun in dative ᾧ (< ὅς) and the second person singular πάρει (< πάρειμι) = ‘to be present’, ‘to be here’. The first two words mean “on which”. This construction can have various functions, depending on its collocation with other words, and thus be rendered variously. Accordingly, in Rm 5:12, ἐφ’ ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον has the sense of ‘on [account of] which’, ‘because’: “because all have sinned”. In Phil 3:12, however, διώκω δὲ εἰ καὶ καταλάβω ἐφ’ ᾧ καὶ κατελήμφθην ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ carries the sense of ‘that for which’: “I follow after, so that I might catch/get/grasp that for which I was caught by Christ Jesus”. In an analogous way, in our present context, the meaning of ἐφ’ ᾧ may be expressed literally by

“on which” > “for which”. Together with *πάρει* it means “for which you are present/you are here”.

Interpretations

Purely contextually, a question such as “Friend, why are you here?/what have you come here for?” would be quite in place in this context. The question would, of course, be rhetorical. Jesus did not expect an answer from Judas. Nor do we need to overinterpret its significance, e.g. that Jesus tried to make Judas think and consider what he had done, etc. etc. This simple question would be enough. It would tell everything. Such a question would be a natural question, since Judas had left earlier that night, had not stayed to the end with Him, had not borne the burden along with the others in Gethsemane. So, why had he suddenly appeared? And why with this retinue of cut-throats? “Judas, why have you come?”

The problem with this construal, as has already been pointed out before², is that the expression *ἐφ’ ᾧ πάρει* does not naturally and unproblematically lend itself to being understood as a question. I have not found any example of this phrase occurring in a question. Davies and Allison defend the possibility of a question here by referring (without citation) to Origenes—whose 61 occurrences of *ἐφ’ ᾧ*, *ἐφ’ ᾧν*, however, contain no question, and to Mt 22:12, which, however, lacks *ἐφ’ ᾧ* and its question hinges on *πῶς*.

The difficulty is with the Greek text. The Greek phrase does not really mean “Friend, why are you here?” nor “Friend, what are you here for?” *Ἐφ’ ᾧ* does not lend itself to the trans-

² E.g. by Alford, H., *The Greek Testament*, Vol. I, *The Four Gospels*, London: Rivingtons 1868.

lation “Why?” and “What for?” This is the decisive objection to this rendering.

Taking the sentence as elliptical, it necessitates presupposing a verb such as ‘to do’ (i.e. “Do that which you came here for”)— a statement.

The trouble with this construal is that we do not have the verb ‘to do’ here. A second, even more serious objection is that an exhortation to Judas to do what he came for is out of place here. There is nothing more that Judas has to do. His task was to point out Jesus with a kiss. Having done that, he had played out his part. Jesus, therefore, could hardly have told him to do what he came for, since he already had done it! Thus, this understanding falls on its own unreasonableness.

Ἐταίρε, ἐφ’ ᾧ πάρει;

The corresponding context in Mark and John contain no address of Jesus to Judas. Luke (22:46) has Jesus address Judas with the words: “Judas, do you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?” The sentiment is quite similar in Matthew. On being kissed, Jesus says to Judas: ἔταίρε, ἐφ’ ᾧ πάρει. “Friend, on which you are here” i.e., “Friend, that which you are here for”. This is a very terse saying, leaving out unnecessary words. The full sentence would have run in some such way: “Friend, leave aside all the trimmings and the spicings and just keep to the purpose of your coming”. It would correspond to the terse demand in English, when one, while stating his purpose, goes round about and is sharply told: “To the point!” Thereby, Jesus shows that he is not interested in Judas’ greetings and kisses, and asks him to keep to his purpose in coming: the betrayal—which has already taken place. Therefore, a dynamic

though free rendering would be: “Jesus said to him: ‘Friend, to the point!’”³

³ The rest of the translation suggestions can be thrown into the dustbin.