

## Rethinking Mark 3:17: Did Jesus give both *Boanērges* and *Huioi Brontēs* as Apostolic Names?

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Aramaic; *boanērges*; Greek; Hebrew; *huioi brontēs*; NT Semitisms; *sons of thunder*.

Scholars often express perplexity about *boanērges*, and little assurance about its relationship to *huioi brontēs*, *sons of thunder* in Mark 3:17. A widespread assumption seems to consider *boanērges* as the sole apostolic name that Jesus gave James and John, and after years Mark translated it as *huioi brontēs*. But this assumption may not be strongly justified, and if not, then methods to evaluate Mark 3:17 may need modification. This article, then, makes an atypical suggestion that Jesus himself named the brothers both *boanērges*, a Semitic name, as well as *huioi brontēs*, a Greek name, as apostolic appellations for a polyglot milieu. A number of issues are involved, and admittedly, this article has strong and weak points. The aim is to stimulate alternate approaches that may lead to a better grasp of Mark 3:17.

### Recent opinions about Mark 3:17

Among recent comments on Mark 3:17, Robert Guelich voices downright pessimism about *boanērges*: ‘The name itself poses unresolvable problems of derivation and significance.’ For Guelich, *boanērges* fails to follow rules of transliteration or to clearly indicate the underlying Hebrew or Aramaic root, and he adds that *sons of thunder* provides little help for understanding the name since the Semitic word for thunder, *ra ‘am*, does not correspond to the transliteration. Finally, Guelich suggests that *boanērges* is corrupted.<sup>1</sup> Guelich is not alone in this idea. C. E. B. Cranfield likewise suggests *boanērges* is a corrupt transliteration.<sup>2</sup> Equally, Aramaic expert Maurice Casey suggests a flawed transliteration.

Mark has Βοανηργές, ὃ ἐστὶν υἱοὶ βροντῆς (Mark 3:17). Βοανη is evidently an attempt to transliterate the Aramaic בְּנֵי, ‘sons of’. The transliteration of the *shewa* was necessarily problematical. Either *a* or *o* was possible, but both together are ludicrous. It follows that we have before us the work of one of the many bilingual people who are not good at transliteration.<sup>3</sup>

Mark Strauss expresses perplexity, though without suggesting a transliteration flaw:

The etymology of Βοανηργές is unclear, since it does not obviously mean ‘sons of thunder’ in either Aramaic or Hebrew (one would expect the Hebrew *bānê ra ‘am*). Many suggestions have been made (see the summary in Guelich [ . . .]), perhaps the most likely being an unusual (dialectic?) transliteration of the Hebrew *bānê regeš*, meaning ‘sons of commotion/crowd’ (cf. Ps. 2:1). An

<sup>1</sup> Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 34a (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 162.

<sup>2</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary, ed. by C. F. D. Moule (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959, 13th printing 2000, digital form 2005), 131.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Casey, *Aramaic Sources of Mark’s Gospel*, Society for New Testament Studies, Monograph Series 102 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 198.

Arabic word related to *regeš* means ‘thunder’, so this may have been one sense of the word in Mark’s day.<sup>4</sup>

David Garland writes that the origin of *Boanērges* is obscure, that it does not mean anything in Greek, and that probably it is a rough transliteration of Aramaic.<sup>5</sup> Robert Stein says the origin of *Boanērges* is unclear:

‘Boan’ is not an exact transliteration for ‘sons of’ (Heb. בְּנֵי, *bənê*) and ‘erges’ is not very close to רָעַם (*ra‘am*, thunder). It may be best to understand ‘Boanerges’ as a rough transliteration into Greek of ‘sons of thunder’.<sup>6</sup>

William Lane notes the typical word division suggestion, which is *Boανη-ργες*, but he offers no clear definition of *boanērges*.<sup>7</sup> R. T. France comments that *huioi brontēs* may not be tightly correlated to *boanērges* as an etymological explanation:

In the end we have nothing to guide us to the significance of [*boanērges*] other than Mark’s υἱοὶ βροντῆς, which need not be a more exact etymological explanation than many of the ‘etymologies’ offered for names in the OT.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Sebastian Brock comments on Acts 4:36’s Barnabas–*huios paraklēseōs* naming association as ‘loose and unscientific’ and typical of ‘popular etymologies’.<sup>9</sup> But, if one considers the Holy Spirit’s influence of supplying divine wisdom unknown to the world (1 Cor. 2:6–16), then Jesus (Mark 1:10) and the apostles (Acts 2:4, 4:31) may simply have used naming criteria that do not easily yield to scientific analysis.

Alan Culpepper points out two issues in Mark 3:17 to distinguish: (1) the etymology and meaning of *boanērges*, and (2) the meaning of the interpretation *sons of thunder*.<sup>10</sup> This suggests that individual investigation of *boanērges* and *huioi brontēs* might minimize reciprocating influence on the other term, after which harmony should be sought between the terms. This is the method used below.

This article begins by considering Jesus’s fluency in languages, as well as his familiarity with the Hebrew Bible. Following that, the article simply follows the flow of the relevant terms in Mark 3:17 and in the process, considers the Hebrew terms *bōḥānê regeš* (בְּחַנֵּי רָעַם) and *bōḥānê rōgez* (בְּחַנֵּי רָגַז) as solutions for *boanērges*. The meaning of *sons of thunder* is discussed. Finally, Barnabas–*huios paraklēseōs* (Acts

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<sup>4</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. by Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 161.

<sup>5</sup> David E. Garland, *A Theology of Mark’s Gospel: Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God*, Biblical Theology of the New Testament Series, ed. by Andreas J. Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 398.

<sup>6</sup> Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. by Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2008), 172.

<sup>7</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 135, n60.

<sup>8</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 162. Accordance ebook.

<sup>9</sup> Sebastian P. Brock, ΒΑΡΝΑΒΑΣ: ΥΙΟΣ ΠΑΡΑΚΛΗΣΕΩΣ, JTS, 25 (1974), 93–98.

<sup>10</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *John, the son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 39.

4:36) is reviewed since similar questions are involved. We now turn to review Jesus's language ability.

### **Abstract**

Hebrew-to-Greek transliteration hints in Mark 3:17 seem to point to Hebrew, not Aramaic, as the originating language of *boanērges*, and to a suggested original name of *bōḥănê regeš* or *bōḥănê rōgez*. If the well-attested plural *onomata, names*, in Mark 3:17 is taken at face value, then *huioi brontēs* may not be Mark's translation of *boanērges*, but rather it could be Jesus's own original Greek name for James and John. If Jesus named Simon both *Kēphā* and *Petros*, then there is good reason to consider the possibility that he also gave the two brothers a Semitic name, *bōḥănê regeš*, and a simple, striking Greek name, *huioi brontēs*.

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