

MATTHEW 5.39 AND 26.67: SLAPPING ANOTHER'S CHEEK IN
ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN CULTURE

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In this essay I wish to examine the significance of slapping the cheek of another person in the ancient Mediterranean world. I intend to show (thesis one) that the contention made occasionally in modern scholarship that *backhanded* slaps were particularly humiliating in Greco-Roman (pagan) culture is badly supported by the material in Greek and Latin texts. Some Jewish readers (and hearers), given the texts to be discussed below, would probably have understood the emphasis on striking another's right cheek in Mt. 5.39 better than formerly pagan readers (and hearers). More important are the results the study provides for the depiction of the Passion of Jesus in Matthew, where some individuals slap Jesus (Mt. 26.67) after hearing the determination that he is worthy of death.¹ Both Jewish and formerly pagan readers and hearers of Matthew's Gospel would have been aware of the usual significance of being slapped in the face: humiliation. In some texts, both Jewish and pagan, this is particularly true when one is slapped by social inferiors or by individuals who used to revere a person of good reputation who ends his or her life enduring such indignities (thesis two). There are always exceptions, and Hos. 11.4 LXX is an example, in which God's relation to Israel is compared to an individual who slaps another (probably a child) on the cheeks. The text refers to God's love for Israel using the expression: 'the bonds of my love' (ἐν δεσμοῖς ἀγαπήσεώς μου).

Walter Wink has argued, for example, that 'The backhand slap was the normal way of admonishing inferiors'—but includes no Greco-Roman evidence. He adds: 'Masters backhanded slaves; husbands, wives; parents,

1. One can easily apply the results with regard to Mt. 26.67 (par. Mk 14.65 [servants of the Sanhedrin]) to Jn 18.22 and 19.3 (a servant of the Sanhedrin and Roman soldiers slapping Jesus, respectively), assuming that slapping and not beating with clubs/rods is the intention of those texts—an issue to be discussed below.

children; men, women; Romans, Jews'.² Charles Talbert hypothesizes, 'this back handed slap was a way of humiliating a person'.³ Below I will consider backhanded slaps first in Jewish texts and then examine whether any evidence exists for their use in Greco-Roman (non-Jewish) material. I will use several texts from ancient Christian and pagan interpreters of Mt. 5.39 to show that they were probably unaware that backhanded (or left-handed) slaps were grossly insulting. The review of the evidence will also illustrate the numerous contexts in which people in the ancient world slapped others and the significance of the slaps themselves. The material will consequently illuminate the slaps Jesus suffered during his Passion according to Matthew.⁴

The Text of Matthew 5.39

Some remarks on the text of Mt. 5.39 are necessary, because the textual variant in question may indicate that certain scribes no longer appreciated the significance of slaps on the right cheek. Manuscripts D, k (Codex Bobbiensis, an Old Latin witness), sy^{s,c}, and Ephraem in his commentary on the *Diatessaron* all omit δεξιάν.⁵ Ephraem's text is probably the

2. W. Wink, *Jesus and Non-violence: A Third Way* (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress Press, 2003), p. 15 (he does refer to *m. B. Qam.* 8.6). The thesis has appeared frequently (e.g. R.H. Worth, *The Sermon on the Mount: Its Old Testament Roots* [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997], p. 245; L. Desroches, *Allow the Waters: Anger, Fear, Power, Work, Sexuality, Community—and the Spirituality and Practice of Nonviolence* [Ottawa: Dunamis, 1996], p. 35; and J. Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Saving Christianity from Empire* [New York: Continuum, 2005], p. 147).

3. C. Talbert, *Matthew* (Paideia Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), p. 86.

4. This statement applies also to the portrayals of his Passion in Mark and John.

5. D: *Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis: Quattuor evangelia et Actus apostolorum complectens Graece et Latine* [2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1899], fol. 14b. k: A. Jülicher, W. Matzkow and K. Aland (eds.), *Itala. Das Neue Testament in altlateinischer Überlieferung. I. Matthäusevangelium* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2nd edn, 1972), p. 26. Ephraem: L. Leloir (ed.), *Commentary on the Diatessaron* 6.14 (Saint Ephrem, *Commentaire de l'Evangile concordant: Texte Syriaque [Manuscrit Chester Beatty 70] folios additionnels* [trans. L. Leloir; Leuven: Peeters, 1990], p. 68). sy^s: A. Smith Lewis (ed.), *The Old Syriac Gospels or Evangelion da-Mepharreshê* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1910), p. 12 (Syriac). sy^c: F.C. Burkitt (ed.), *Evangelion de-Mepharreshe: The Curetonian Version of the Four Gospels with the Readings of the Sinai Palimpsest and the Early Syriac Patristic Evidence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), p. 26.

earliest Syriac witness to the New Testament.⁶ He (or perhaps Tatian) has likely conflated Mt. 5.39 with Lk. 6.29. He seems to be the source for the tradition in sy^{s,c}:

D: ὅστις σε ῥαπείσει ἐπὶ τὴν σιαγὼνα σου (whoever will slap you on your cheek)

k: *set qui expalmaverit in maxillam tuam* (but whoever will slap you on your cheek)

Ephraem: (who strikes you on your cheek) *dmhk ʿl pkk*

sy^{s,c}: (who strikes you on your cheek) *mn dmh' lk ʿl pkk*

The Greek manuscripts Augustine knew had δεξιάν, and ‘more credence should be given them’, although he was aware of many Latin manuscripts that lacked *dextram* (*sic enim in exemplaribus graecis, quibus maior fides habenda est, inuenitur. nam multa latina maxillam tantum habent, non etiam dextram*).⁷ NA²⁸ has no doubts about the inclusion of δεξιάν in the text. The omission can be probably explained by the scribes’ harmonization of the text with Lk. 6.29.

The probable harmonization with Luke is independent of the question of whether or not Matthew added the word to the original saying of Jesus. W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison argue, based on its absence from Luke (who was fond of the word and would not have omitted it), that Matthew ‘presumably’ added δεξιάν.⁸ The question is not settled. John S. Kloppenborg notes that it is difficult to prove Matthew added it.⁹

6. Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 192-93.

7. Augustine, *Serm. Dom.* 1.58. C. Tischendorf (*Novum Testamentum Graece ...editio octava critica maior* [3 vols.; Leipzig: Giesecke 1869–94], I, p. 21 apparatus) refers to other witnesses that omit δεξιάν, including J.R. Wetstenius (ed.), *Origenis dialogus contra Marcionitas* (Basel: Bertschius, 1674), p. 24 (there is no specific mention of Matthew, however, so it may be a reference to Luke), Manicheans in Augustine, *Adim.* 8; Faustus in Augustine, *Faust.* 19.25; [John Chrysostom], *Op. Imp. Hom. Matt.* 33 (PG 56, 809); and Ambrose (*Ob. Val.* 6, *Spir.* 2.prol.12, etc.). Tischendorf lists ar^p as lacking ‘right’ (it is unclear to which manuscripts he refers).

8. W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (ICC; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988–97), I, p. 543.

9. J.S. Kloppenborg, ‘The Use of the Synoptics or Q in *Did.* 1:3b–2:1’, in

Didache 1.4 retains the reference to one's 'right cheek', and Kloppenborg concludes, after a precise discussion of the traditions in Matthew, Luke and the *Didache*, 'Thus we might imagine that the *Didache* here used not Matthew but Q (or Q^{Mt}), but was also aware of distinctively Lukan transformations of Q'.¹⁰ Gustav Stählin affirms that Luke simplifies Mt. 5.39 by dropping 'right', 'because for him and his readers a blow with the back of the right hand (or with the left hand) was not particularly insulting'.¹¹

The omission may also be related to one of the theses of this article: the scribes no longer appreciated the importance of a backhanded slap due to their unfamiliarity with its significance in some Jewish texts. Consequently, any emphasis on the right cheek may have been meaningless to them.

The Significance of ῥαπίζειν in Matthew 26.67

Because I wish to relate Mt. 5.39 to Jesus' Passion in Matthew it is necessary to discuss briefly the translation of 26.67. ῥαπίζειν can undoubtedly mean 'strike' (with a club, rod, etc.) in pagan authors.¹² In a tradition of Xenophanes (sixth century BCE) the philosopher asserts that when Pythagoras saw a puppy being mistreated, he said, 'stop, do not beat it (παῦσαι μὴδὲ ῥάπιζ'), since it is a soul of a human friend; I knew the soul when I heard it crying out'.¹³ The context indicates striking with an object rather than slapping the puppy. A fragment of Hipponax (sixth century BCE) shows that context was necessary for this rather vague word (i.e. 'strike'): ῥαπίζοντες κράδησι καὶ σκίλλησιν (striking with fig branches and squills).¹⁴

In Mt. 5.39, however, and almost certainly in Jn 18.22, it refers to a slap.¹⁵ When Matthew wants to refer to clubs he does so clearly (Mt. 26.47,

H.W.M. van de Sandt (ed.), *Matthew and the Didache: Two Documents from the same Jewish-Christian Milieu* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2005), p. 124.

10. Kloppenborg, 'Use of the Synoptics', p. 129.

11. G. Stählin, 'τύπτω', *TDNT*, VIII, pp. 260-69 (263). He refers to *t. B. Qam.* 9.31 and *m. B. Qam.* 8.6.

12. Cf. BDAG and LSJ *s.v.*

13. Dionysius Laertius (third century CE), *Vit. phil.* 8.36 = Xenophanes frag. 7.7 (Diels/Kranz).

14. Hipponax, frag. 6 (M.L. West [ed.], *Iambi et Elegi Graeci* [2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971], I, p. 113).

15. M.-J. Lagrange, *Evangelie selon saint Matthieu* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre,

55 par. Mk 14.43, 48 ξύλων). The implication is clear: in 26.67, Matthew probably refers to individuals who beat Jesus with their fists and to others who slapped him. The numerous references below to striking another on the cheek, using the verb *ράπίζειν*, in pagan Greek texts also encourage one to believe that Matthew associated the verb with one primary sense, ‘slap’, although absolute certainty evades scholarship on this point.

Mark’s usage is of some relevance to that of Matthew, since he was one of Matthew’s primary sources. Adela Yarbro Collins compares the ‘slaps or blows’ of Isa. 50.6 to the ‘slaps’ of Mk 14.65 (par. Mt. 26.67).¹⁶ Mark’s *ράπίσμασιν αὐτὸν ἔλαβεν* is semantically and syntactically similar to Hypothesis V.1 (P.Lit.London 179) of Demosthenes’ *Against Meidias*: *Μειδίας...αὐτὸν [i.e. Demosthenes]...ἐν μέσῃ τῇ ὀρχήστρᾳ κονδύλοις ἔλαβεν* (‘Meidias took him with knuckles [punched him] in the middle of the orchestra’).¹⁷ There is a somewhat similar form in Lucian, *ράπίσματα λαμβάνειν βούλει με* (he wants me to receive slaps/blows).¹⁸ The transformation of the Gospel tradition in the *Gospel of Peter* has the Roman soldiers spitting in Jesus’ eyes, slapping his cheeks (*ἄλλοι τὰς σιαγόνας αὐτοῦ ἐράπισαν*), pricking him with a reed, and scourging him.¹⁹

1948), p. 509 (on 26.67) refers to Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* 713c ἐπὶ κόρρης *ράπίζων* and thinks the emphasis is on a strike on the lateral side of Jesus’ face that could have rendered him deaf. E. Klostermann, *Das Matthäusevangelium* (HNT, 4; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 4th edn, 1971), p. 215 (on 26.67) refers to his *Das Markusevangelium* (HNT, 3; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 4th edn, 1950), p. 157 (on 14.65): not ‘sie nahmen ihn unter Backenstreichen in Empfang’ (‘they received him with slaps’), but an expression that is not completely vulgar, but perhaps a Latinism as in Cicero’s phrase *Spartae vero pueri ad aram sic verberibus accipiuntur...* (boys in Sparta are, at the altar, handled to such an extent with blows... [that blood flows], *Tusc.* 2.34); see BDF 198 §3: ‘*ράπίσμασιν αὐτὸν ἔλαβον* Mk 14:65 is completely vulgar (Latinism?); e.g., Cicero, *Tusc.* 2.34’. Cf. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *accipio* §15 ‘To receive, deal with, handle (in a specified manner)’. U. Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; 3 vols.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001–2007), III, p. 448: ‘slap’ (Isa. 50.6), but the verb can mean ‘hit with hand or a stick’ and so can be synonymous with *κολαφίζω*.

16. A. Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), p. 707.

17. Demosthenes, *Mid.*, Oration 21 (see D.M. MacDowell [ed. and trans.], *Against Meidias* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990], p. 430, ll. 1–14). This was noted by F. Blass, ‘Demosthenica aus neuen Papyrus’, *Neue Jahrbücher für Philologie und Pädagogik* 145 (= 38) (1892), pp. 29–43 (33). Cf. BDF 198 §3.

18. Lucian, *Dial. meretr.* 8.1.

19. *Gos. Pet.* 3.9 (T.J. Kraus and T. Nicklas [eds.], *Das Petrus-evangelium und die Petrusapokalypse: Die griechischen Fragmente mit deutscher und englischer*

Jewish Culture

In this section I will discuss some texts from Jewish culture related to slapping another's cheek using a rough chronological thread. My intention is not to create a (non-existent) hard and fast boundary between Hellenism and Judaism, but in this case certain Jewish texts do offer a unique perspective on the issue. The goal is to see whether they illumine the problem of slaps and especially of *backhanded* slaps in particular and so to explore the significance of Mt. 5.39 and Mt. 26.67 for hearers and readers of the Gospel who were from a Jewish background.

The Greek of 1 Esdras was probably composed in the second century BCE.²⁰ The famous story of the three bodyguards in 1 Esdras includes a text in which Zerubbabel affirms that he has seen Darius's concubine Apame take the crown from the king's head, put it on her own, and slap him with her left hand (4.30 καὶ ἀφαιροῦσαν τὸ διάδημα ἀπὸ τῆς κεφαλῆς τοῦ βασιλέως καὶ ἐπιτιθοῦσαν ἑαυτῇ καὶ ἐρράπιζεν τὸν βασιλέα τῇ ἀριστερᾷ).²¹ The king looked at her agape. Presumably this story originally came from an Aramaic or Hebrew context.²² Perhaps it does show that a left-handed slap was more humiliating than a right-handed slap, but the author does not seem to emphasize the point. James F. Davis argues that since she was sitting at the king's right hand (1 Esd. 4.29) the reference is probably to a 'backhanded slap. However, in any case,

Übersetzung [GCS neutestamentliche Apokryphen, 1; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2004], p. 34).

20. H.G.M. Williamson, 'The Problem with 1 Esdras', in J. Barton and D.J. Reimer (eds.), *After the Exile: Essays in Honor of Rex Mason* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), pp. 201-16 (203).

21. E. Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Matthäus* (ed. W. Schmauch; MeyerK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 3rd edn, 1962), p. 138, referred to the text, but Luz, *Matthew*, p. 272, emphasizes Apame's left-handed slap as 'especially insulting' (he thinks, however, that the mention of the right cheek in Matthew was for 'rhetorical reasons', because otherwise 'after you have suffered a greater injustice [= the blow on the right cheek], you should also accept the smaller one'). Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 11.54, who notes the slap in 1 Esdras but not the left hand.

22. Cf. H.G.M. Williamson, '1 Esdras as Rewritten Bible? Was 1 Esdras First?', in L.S. Fried (ed.), *An Investigation into the Priority and Nature of 1 Esdras* (Atlanta: SBL, 2011), pp. 237-50 (241); Z. Talshir, *1 Esdras: From Origin to Translation* (SBLSCS, 47; Atlanta: SBL, 1999), pp. 94-105; and Z. Talshir and D. Talshir, 'The Story of the Three Youths (1 Esdras 3-4): Towards the Question of the Language of its Vorlage', *Textus* 18 (1995), pp. 135-55 (an argument for Aramaic).

it is presented as an act of insult. The response of the king staring at her with his mouth open communicates the astonishment at such an action.²³ Apparently she slapped him on his right cheek. Richard Laqueur believes the story (without Zerubbabel or the praise of truth) was a free-floating narrative and notes a parallel in an Ethiopic text which ends, ‘mourning is strong, and wine overcomes it, wine is strong, and sleep overcomes it. But woman is stronger than all.’²⁴ Whether one can draw the conclusion from 1 Esd. 4.30 that a backhanded slap is particularly humiliating is, however, not at all obvious.

Hosea 11.4 LXX includes a phrase that describes God’s action toward Israel: ‘In the destruction of people [i.e. when people wanted to destroy them], I stretched them out with the bonds of my love, and I will be for them as a person who slaps (someone) on his cheeks’ (ἐν διαφθορᾷ ἀνθρώπων ἐξέτεινα²⁵ αὐτοὺς ἐν δεσμοῖς ἀγαπήσεώς μου καὶ ἔσομαι αὐτοῖς ὡς ῥαπίζων ἄνθρωπος ἐπὶ τὰς σιαγόνas αὐτοῦ). In that case both cheeks are clearly meant, and it likely is an image in which God is compared to one who corrects the errors of another (probably a child if the MT is considered) with slaps on the cheek. In the LXX version of Hosea it is apparent that a slap can be made in love, so that it does not always imply utter humiliation for the one who receives it, although undoubtedly it is a humbling experience for the child on the receiving end. The note in the *Septuaginta Deutsch* is appropriate: ‘Schließlich handelt er wie jemand, der die Fehler seines Kindes mit Gewalt glaubt bestrafen zu müssen’.²⁶ J.D.M. Derrett thinks that Hos. 11.4 is ‘being quoted’ in Mt. 5.39b.²⁷ The

23. J.F. Davis, *Lex talionis in Early Judaism and the Exhortation of Jesus in Matthew 5.38-42* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2005), p. 113. Davis contends (p. 134), based on *m. B. Qam.* 8.6 and 1 Esd. 4.30, that ‘a backhanded slap is seen as more insulting than a frontheaded one’. Cf. his remarks on *t. B. Qam.* 9.31 (pp. 114-15).

24. R. Laqueur, ‘Ephoros’, *Hermes* 11 (1911), pp. 161-206 (168-72).

25. εἴλκυσα (I drew) is a variant reading here (the Lucianic recension, Syriac Hexapla), and several Greek minuscule manuscripts (613, 764) read ἐξείλκυσα. Cf. J. Ziegler (ed.), *Duodecim prophetae* (Septuaginta, 13; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2nd edn, 1967), p. 172 app. crit.

26. W. Kraus and M. Karrer (eds.), *Septuaginta Deutsch: Das griechische Alte Testament in deutschen Übersetzung* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2nd edn, 2010), p. 1174, apparatus. Cf. the comment in Martin Karrer and Wolfgang Kraus (eds.), *Septuaginta Deutsch: Erläuterungen und Kommentare zum griechischen Alten Testament* (2 vols.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2011), II, pp. 2327-28.

27. J.D.M. Derrett, ‘Taking Up the Cross and Turning the Cheek’, in J.D.M. Derrett (ed.), *Studies in the New Testament. V. The Sea-Change of the Old Testament*

translation of Hosea's text into Greek was probably made in the second century BCE in Alexandria.²⁸ A vivid image appears in Isa. 50.6 : 'I gave up my back to scourges and my cheeks to slaps' (τὸν νῶτόν μου δέδωκα εἰς μάστιγας, τὰς δὲ σιαγόνας μου εἰς ῥαπίσματα).²⁹ In neither Hosea nor Isaiah is there any apparent indication that a slap on the right cheek was more humiliating than one on the left. Two other Septuagintal texts mention striking a cheek with a hand: 3 Kgdms 22.24 = 2 Chron. 18.23 (ἐπάταξεν τὸν Μιχαῖαν ἐπὶ τὴν σιαγόνα). These texts describe Zechariah's humiliating strike of Micaiah's cheek. The Greek translation of the books of Kings was made around 200 BCE.³⁰ *Ascension of Isaiah* 2.12 expresses the event in 1 Kings with ἐράπισεν καὶ ὕβρισεν τὸν Μιχαῖαν (he slapped and outraged Micaiah).

Rabbinic Judaism provides a rich resource for interpreting the problem of being slapped in Matthew. Since the famous edition of the New Testament by Johann Jakob Wettstein at least, New Testament scholars have been aware that in some rabbinic texts a backhanded slap was considered particularly blameworthy.³¹ The commentary on the New Testament by Hermann Strack and Paul Billerbeck advanced Wettstein's research.³² The key text is *m. B. Qam.* 8.6: 'If one cuff his fellow, he must pay him a *sela*. R. Yehudah, in the name of R. Jose the Galilean, says, "A *maneh*. If he slapped him, he must pay him two hundred *zuz*; [if he hit him] with the back of his hand [לְאַחַר יָדוֹ] he must pay him four hundred *zuz*.'" ³³ Samuel Greengus has shown that the offense of slapping another person (a 'dignitary tort') was already an element in a number of different Babylonian laws including the Laws of Hammurapi. In the Laws of Hammurapi (§§ 202-205) a social inferior who struck the side of a superior's face was flogged, and a slave who did the same to

in the New (Leiden: Brill, 1989), pp. 41-58 (49).

28. Kraus and Karrer (eds.), *Septuaginta Deutsch Übersetzung*, pp. 1165-66.

29. Lamentations 3.30 LXX only mentions one cheek: 'He will give his cheek to the one who strikes him' (δώσει τῷ παλόντι αὐτὸν σιαγόνα).

30. Kraus and Karrer (eds.), *Septuaginta Deutsch Übersetzung*, pp. 300-301 (with discussion of the *kaige* and Antiochene recensions). They place the translation of Chronicles into Greek around 100 BCE (p. 490).

31. J.J. Wettstein (ed.), *Novum Testamentum Graecum cum variis lectionibus et commentario duobus tomis* (2 vols.; Amsterdam: Dommer, 1751-52), I, p. 309.

32. Str-B, I, p. 342.

33. P. Blackman (ed.), *Mishnayoth* (trans. P. Blackman; 7 vols.; New York: Judaica, 1963), IV, p. 66. According to Blackman, p. 67 apparatus, a *maneh* = 100 *zuz* = 25 *sela*.

a free person lost an ear.³⁴ He thinks that talion is naturally associated with the slapping of a face, since *m. B. Qam.* 8.6 and the Hammurapi Laws (§§ 202-205) are in sections dealing with ‘serious bodily injuries’. If talion was the ‘ancient literary and legal setting for a discussion of dignitary torts’, then the similarity between the Mishnaic passage and Matthew is explained.³⁵

R. Yehudah ha Nasi (fourth generation Tannaitic teacher who died in 217 CE and who redacted the Mishnah) took his view from R. Jose the Galilean (second generation Tannaitic teacher) concerning the fine for slapping one’s friend.³⁶ One can assume that the Mishnaic teaching may well have its origins in the first century CE or before. The commentator Yom-Tov Lippman Heller (seventeenth century CE) calls such a strike ‘extreme humiliation’ (קלון יותר).³⁷ *t. B. Qam.* 9.31 requires the same payment for a similar transgression: ‘If one has struck another with one’s backhand [באחר ידו], with paper [parchment/papyrus], with a pinax, with untanned hides, or with a roll of documents that are in one’s hands, then one pays 400 *zuz*. Not because it is a blow of pain, but because it is a blow of [public] shame (ביזיון).’³⁸ Greengus interprets this to mean that the fine is not so high because of the pain, but because of the public dishonor.³⁹

The Mishnaic text appears in the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, but the relevant passages in the Gemara do not comment on the ‘backhanded slap’.⁴⁰ Another Mishnaic text (*m. Šab.* 10.3) concerning

34. S. Greengus, ‘Filling Gaps: Laws Found in Babylonia and in the Mishna but Absent in the Hebrew Bible’, *Maarav* 7 (1991), pp. 149-71 (152-55). Cf. Laws of Eshnunna §42.

35. Greengus, ‘Filling Gaps’, pp. 154-55.

36. I take the references to the generations of the Tannaim from H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 73, 76. Blackman, *Mishnayoth*, IV, p. 67 n. 3, argues that R. Yehudah’s view is rejected.

37. C. Albeck (ed.), *Shisha Sidre Mishnah* (Hebrew) (3 vols.; Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1955), II, p. 20 (*m. B. Qam.*).

38. *t. B. Qam.* 9.31 (see S. Lieberman [ed.], *Tosefta* [5 vols.; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1955–73], IV, p. 49 [*Nezikin*]). Cf. *Sifra* Emor 14 to Lev. 24.19-20 for a similar tradition. Cf. the texts in P. Fiebig, *Jesu Bergpredigt: Rabbinische Texte zum Verständnis der Bergpredigt, ins Deutsche übersetzt, in ihren Ursprachen dargeboten und mit Erläuterungen und Lesarten versehen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1924), Teil I, pp. 95-96 (German), Teil II, pp. 44-45 (Hebrew).

39. Greengus, ‘Filling Gaps’, p. 155.

40. *b. B. Qam.* 90a, *y. B. Qam.* 7, 7a (Venice ed.). Cf. P. Schäfer and H.-J. Becker (eds.), *Synopse zum Talmud Yerushalmi. IV. Ordnung Nezikin Ordnung Toharot:*

what renders a person guilty for carrying objects on the Sabbath indicates that the expression ('as with one's back-hand' or 'in an unusual way' (כלאחר ידו)) can refer to an unusual way of doing something (such as picking up an object with one's foot on the Sabbath, not a culpable act). The presence of the teaching about slapping with the back of one's hand in the Mishnaic texts shows that such a slap, which would have resulted in a strike on another's right cheek, was particularly blameworthy for some Tannaitic rabbis.

A late haggadic text (אגדתא דשמעון כיפא) includes an account in which Peter (who is helping the Jews who have been persecuted by the Christians) commands the Christians: 'If a Jew tells a Nozri, "Go a parasang with me", then he should go two parasangs; and if a Jew strikes him on the left cheek (הלחי השמאל), then he should turn his right cheek (הלחי הימין) [to him]'.⁴¹ The reversal of the order is interesting, but the haggadic text reveals no particular concern for the 'extreme humiliation' of a strike on the right cheek. The conclusion seems to be justified that according to some rabbinic sources, a backhanded slap was more blameworthy than a slap with an open palm on the left cheek of another individual. One cannot affirm that every Hebrew- or Aramaic-speaking Jew in the Mediterranean world would have been aware of this fact, but perhaps one may assume that at least some individuals in the audience of Matthew's Gospel knew that a backhanded slap was particularly humiliating. Slapping another also constituted a tort in the eyes of rabbinic Judaism, and that illuminates 5.39 to a certain extent, because it indicates the humiliating nature of the action.

Nidda (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), p. 48 (the only column they print with the 'backhand' expression in *m. B. Qam.* 8.6 is from the Escorial Targum manuscript). On the Bar-Ilan Responsa database the expression above for 'backhand' appears over 170 times in various contexts (online: <http://www.responsa.co.il/home.en-US.aspx>). J. Weismann believes the tradition in *b. B. Qam.* 90a goes back to the time of Jesus ('Zur Erklärung einer Stelle der Bergpredigt', *ZNW* 14 [1913], pp. 175-76).

41. J.D. Eisenstein, *Ozar Midrashim: A Library of Two Hundred Minor Midrashim* (2 vols.; New York: J.D. Eisenstein, 1915), II, p. 557 (recension A). This is from a manuscript of the *Toledoth Yeshu*. Cf. S. Kraus, *Das Leben Jesus nach jüdischen Quellen: Herausgegeben und Erläutert* (Berlin: S. Calvary, 1902), p. 227. See the general treatment by J. Gager, 'Simon Peter, Founder of Christianity or Saviour of Israel?', in P. Schäfer, M. Meerson and Y. Deutsch (eds.), *Toledot Yeshu ('The Life Story of Jesus') Revisited: A Princeton Conference* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), pp. 221-46 (Gager does not discuss the text above). I thank Professor Peter Schäfer for this reference.

Greco-Roman Culture

The situation in Greek and Latin texts is far more ambiguous. Although Hans-Dieter Betz in his monumental commentary on the Sermon on the Mount appeals to Wettstein to establish the thesis that backhanded slaps constituted ‘extreme humiliation in the Greco-Roman’ world, Wettstein himself did not make the claim in his own comments, nor do the texts he includes mention backhanded or left-handed slaps.⁴² At this point one is left with a logical conundrum. If scholars cannot produce ancient texts from Greco-Roman culture (i.e. pagan, not Jewish), then on whom is the burden of proof to show that backhanded (or left-handed) slaps were a form of extreme humiliation? I suggest that the burden of proof is on the commentator who holds the thesis in question. It is difficult to prove the negation of the thesis—namely that neither Greeks nor Romans considered backhanded slaps particularly humiliating. Slaps themselves were humiliating, according to the surviving evidence. The searches in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* I carried out on various words for ‘slap’ and ‘cheek’ and for several words in the Brepols’ Library of Latin Texts—Series A and B have convinced me that evidence for backhanded (and left-handed) slaps in pagan Greek and Roman texts probably does

42. H.-D. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 289. Wettstein’s references (*Novum Testamentum*, I, pp. 308-309), in the order they appear, but using the numeration of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (<http://www.tlg.uci.edu/>) are: Phrynichus (second century CE), *Eclogae* §146 (E. Fischer [ed.], *Die Eklogae des Phrynichus* [Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1974], p. 74, ll. 54-56) (‘slap’ [ῥάπισμα] is not good Attic usage...the Athenians say strike on the *korre* [ἐπὶ κόρρης] for striking the cheek [τὴν γνάθον] with the flat of one’s hand); ἐπὶ κόρρης, Thomas Magister (fourteenth century CE) in *Ecloga nominum* (F. Ritschl [ed.], *Thomae Magistri sive Theoduli monachi ecloga vocum Atticarum* [Halle: Orphantropheus, 1832], p. 106, ll. 1-7); ἐπὶ κόρρης, Harpocration (second century CE), (W. Dindorf [ed.], *Harpocration, Lexicon in decem oratores Atticos* [2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1853], I, p. 125, ll. 10-16); ἐπὶ κόρρης, Suda (tenth century CE), in *Lexicon*, epsilon §2400 (A. Adler [ed.], *Suidae lexicon* [Lexicographi Graeci, 1; 4 vols.; Leipzig: Teubner, 1928-35], II, p. 362, ll. 9-12); ἐπὶ κόρρης τύπτοντες, T. Gaisford (ed.), *Etymologicon Magnum* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1848), p. 360, ll. 34-40 (twelfth century CE; cf. J.S. Rusten, ‘etymologica’, *OCD*⁴, pp. 541-42); Lucian (second century CE), *Dial. meretr.* 8.1; Aristaenetus (fifth century CE), *Ep.* 1.4 (O. Mazal [ed.], *Aristaeneti epistularum libri ii* [BiTeu; Stuttgart: Teubner, 1971], p. 11, ll. 10-13); [Longinus] (first century CE), *Subl.* 20.2-3; Demosthenes (fourth century BCE), *Mid.* 72; Libanius (fourth century CE), *Decl.* 5.1.36 (R. Foerster [ed.], *Libanii opera: Declamationes I–XII* [BiTeu, 5; Leipzig: Teubner, 1903-27], p. 324, ll. 18 to p. 325, l. 1), and 2 Cor. 11.20.

not exist.⁴³ It is not an argument from silence, because the databases are fairly exhaustive for pagan literature from the beginnings until late antiquity. They also include much ancient Christian literature.⁴⁴ Although it is not proof, it is striking that commentators in modern times have been unable to produce pagan texts that discuss backhanded strikes to another's cheek.

Several texts will illustrate the context more clearly. The goal here is to be as comprehensive as possible in a reasonably short paper. Demosthenes, in his oration *Against Meidias*, complains of his humiliating treatment by the latter.

For it was not the blow but the indignity that roused the anger. To be struck (τὸ τύπτεσθαι) is not the serious thing for a free person, serious though it is, but to be struck in wanton insolence (τὸ ἐφ' ὕβρει). Many things, Athenians, some of which the victim would find it difficult to put into words, may be done by the striker—by gesture, by look, by tone; when he strikes in wantonness or out of enmity (ὅταν ὡς ὑβρίζων, ὅταν ὡς ἐχθρὸς ὑπάρχων); with the fist (ὅταν κονδύλοις)⁴⁵ or on the cheek (ὅταν ἐπὶ κόρρῃς). These are the things that provoke people and make them beside themselves, if they are unused to insult. No description, Athenians, can bring the outrage (ἡ ὕβρις) as vividly before the hearers as it appears in truth and reality to the victim and to the spectators.⁴⁶

If we can take Demosthenes at his rhetorical word, then free people were not used to being struck on the cheek, but the way in which Meidias administered the blow was particularly humiliating. The humiliation, however, did not consist in a backhanded slap but in the enmity of Meidias reflected in his countenance.⁴⁷ The speech was never delivered.⁴⁸ According to the Passion of Matthew, although Jesus was provoked by

43. Brepols' Library of Latin Texts, Series A and B (<http://www.brepolis.net>).

44. Words searched include *σιαγών*, *κόρρη*, *γνάθος*, *ράπίζειν*, *ὀπισθένειν*, *τύπτειν*, *ταρσός*, *κράτος*, combinations of *τύπτειν* and *κεφαλή*, *maxilla*, *sinistra*, *dextra*, *expalmo*, *caput*, *palma*, *os*, combinations of *verbero caput* and *os verbero*.

45. Cf. the episode in Jesus' Passion when he is struck by the fists of individuals who had examined him in Caiaphas's presence (Mt. 26.67 par. Mk 14.65).

46. Demosthenes, *Mid.* 72. Trans. slightly modified from J.H. Vince *et al.* (eds. and trans.), *Demosthenes with an English Translation* (LCL; 7 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926–49), III, pp. 53–55.

47. Demosthenes, *Mid.* 68 (ὕβριζεν δὲ τοιαῦτα καὶ τύπτειν) earlier described the blow, which Meidias administered to him in their competition for the position of chorus-master.

48. Cf. G.L. Cawkwell, 'Demosthenes (2)', *OCD*⁴, pp. 439–41 (439).

being insulted and struck, he did not respond with any expression of anger.

Socrates confirms Demosthenes's view of slaps on the cheek in his argument against Callicles who refuses to lead a philosophical life.

...but when you go before your judge, the son of Aegina [Aeacus, one of the judges of the dead], and he grips you and drags you up, you will gape and feel dizzy there no less than I do here, and some one perhaps will give you, yes, a degrading slap, and will treat you with every kind of contumely (καί σε ἴσως τυπήσει τις καὶ ἐπὶ κόρρης ἀτίμως καὶ πάντως προπηλακιεῖ).⁴⁹

Again there is no question of a backhanded slap. The blow on one's cheek (or side of one's head) is dishonorable enough. The second verb (προπηλακιεῖ) confirms how degrading such treatment is. A fragment of Plutarch indicates that this view lasted into the Roman era among Greek authors.

For while those in a position of power greatly resent outrageous treatment from inferiors (ἐπὶ ταῖς ἐκ τῶν ἀσθενεστέρων εἰς αὐτοὺς ὕβρεσιν), those whose lives are ordered by virtue meet even outrageous treatment with contempt (ταύτας τὰς ὕβρεις διαπτύουσιν). I am no worse after all, says Socrates, if someone or other slaps my face without justification (ἐπὶ κόρρης πατάξῃ με ἀδίκως).⁵⁰

In this text Plutarch envisions the shock a Greek individual would feel if slapped by a social inferior. That does not prove that every slap was objectionable, but it is probable that the Greek elite were not accustomed to such treatment, and Plutarch emphasizes that such a slap is an act of outrage (*hubris*). Plutarch's (and Plato's) Socrates does, however, envision the possibility that one could slap another with justification.

49. Plato, *Gorg.* 526e-527a. Translation slightly modified from W.R.M. Lamb *et al.* (eds. and trans.), *Plato with an English Translation* (LCL; 12 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914–35), III, p. 531. In 508d Socrates is apparently willing to contemplate that someone could justly slap him (cf. its use in the text of Plutarch below): Οὐ φημι, ὦ Καλλίκλεις, τὸ τύπτεσθαι ἐπὶ κόρρης ἀδίκως αἰσχιστον εἶναι (I deny, Callicles, that to be wrongfully struck on the cheek is the deepest disgrace [Lamb, *Plato*, p. 473, modified]). Aristotle, *Eth. eud.* 1222b believes one can be too gracious and conciliatory, not becoming angry, when slapped (μὴ ὀργίζεσθαι ῥαπιζόμενον). Cf. Lagrange's comment on this text (*Evangile selon Saint Matthieu*, p. 115).

50. Plutarch, frag. 32, from F.H. Sandbach *et al.* (eds. and trans.), *Plutarch: Moralia* (LCL; 15 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927–69), XV, p. 117.

In the case of Mk 14.65 (οἱ ὑπηρέται) and Jn 19.3 (εἷς παρεστηκώς τῶν ὑπηρετῶν), it is not entirely clear if the audiences of the Gospels would have viewed the servants of the Sanhedrin as social inferiors to Jesus, but it seems likely that they would have, not only because of the high christological titles but because Jesus was a teacher and not an attendant of some sort.⁵¹ Consequently, Plutarch's text indicates that some Gentiles in the audiences of Mark and John would have been aware of the special outrage of a slap from a social inferior. Both the servants and Jesus were *peregrini* (i.e. non-citizens) and thus of less value than a citizen—at least from the perspective of Roman law (*status civitatis*). The other key distinction (*status libertatis*) in Roman law was between being a slave and being free. Non-slaves were either citizens (*cives Romani*) or *peregrini* like Jesus.⁵² A free *peregrinus* could probably expect not to be slapped by a social inferior.

A passage in Aulus Gellius (around 180 CE) shows how the Roman elite felt about being slapped. One of the original provisions of the Twelve Tables was a piece of tort law in which an individual who renders an injury to another has to pay twenty-five copper coins (*asses*). In a debate between Favorinus the philosopher and the lawyer Sextus Caecilius Africanus (mid second century CE),⁵³ Favorinus (c. 85–155 CE) attacks the provision.

But as for my statement that some laws were excessively lenient, do not you yourself think that law too lax, which reads as follows with regard to the penalty for an injury. 'If anyone has inflicted an injury upon another, let him be fined twenty-five *asses*'? For who will be found so poor that twenty-five *asses* would keep him from inflicting an injury if he desired to? And therefore your friend Labeo also, in the work which he wrote *On the Twelve Tables*, expressing his disapproval of that law, says, 'One Lucius Veratius was an exceedingly wicked man and of cruel brutality (*L. Veratius fuit egregie homo inprobus atque inmani vecordia*). He used to amuse himself by striking free men in the face with his open hand (*Is pro delectamento*

51. John 18.18 distinguishes the servants from slaves. Cf. the useful collection of examples from Roman (and Jewish) culture in BDAG s.v. ὑπηρέτης.

52. Cf. J.-J. Aubert, 'A Double Standard in Roman Criminal Law?', in J.-J. Aubert and A.J.B. Sirks (eds.), *Speculum iuris: Roman Law as a Reflection of Social and Economic Life in Antiquity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), pp. 94-133 (100-103) (on the rights, or lack thereof, of these individuals before Roman law).

53. Cf. M.B. Trapp, 'Favorinus', *OCD*⁴, p. 571, and E. Badian, 'Caecilius Africanus, Sextus', *OCD*⁴, p. 258.

habebat os hominis liberi manus suae palma verberare). A slave followed him with a purse full of *asses*; as often as he had buffeted [*depalmaverat*; “struck with the open hand”] anyone, he ordered twenty-five *asses* to be counted out at once, according to the provision of the Twelve Tables. ‘Therefore,’ he continued, ‘the praetors afterwards decided that the law was obsolete and invalid and declared that they would appoint arbiters to assess damages’.⁵⁴

Gellius’s depiction of Veratius (otherwise unknown) as a person who was remarkably shameless and of brutal temperament (*egregie homo improbus atque inmani vecordia*) and his point that individuals of free status experienced his brutality emphasizes the shocking nature of slaps to the face. Richard A. Bauman comments that ‘the main thrust of his [Africanus’s] reply concerns the fact that the code had made provision for retaliation (*talio*) by the victim of an *iniuria*’.⁵⁵ One can compare the fine for slapping an individual in the face in Roman legal practice with the Mishnaic provisions discussed above. Normally, in Judaism and also apparently in Rome, such an action was a tort. Once Jesus had been condemned by the process before the Sanhedrin (Mt. 26.67), perhaps he lost all such protections normally given individuals in the Jewish community by the Jewish authorities. Such was certainly the case after Pilate’s official trial of Jesus (Jn 19.3).

Pliny, in one of his letters, describes the death of Larcus Macedo, a senator, who had been beaten to death by his slaves while bathing in his home in Formiae. A.N. Sherwin-White notes that he ‘had been a master of exceptional brutality. It was no great surprise when his slaves attacked him in his bath and flung him on to the furnace to finish him off.’⁵⁶ Macedo earlier experienced a chilling sign of his death:

He was in one of the public baths in Rome when a remarkable incident occurred which events have proved to be an omen. One of Macedo’s slaves lightly touched a Roman knight to ask him to let them pass; he turned round and struck not the slave who had touched him, but Macedo himself such a

54. Aulus Gellius, *Noct. att.* 21.1.12-13. Translation from J.C. Rolfe (ed. and trans.), *The Attic Nights of Aulus Gellius* (LCL; 3 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), III, p. 411-12.

55. R.A. Bauman, *Crime and Punishment in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 113 (the ‘dramatic’ date of the debate is around 146). Africanus’s reply defending the principle of *talio* is in Aulus Gellius, *Noct. att.* 21.1.31-35.

56. A.N. Sherwin-White, *Racial Prejudice in Imperial Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 84. The letter ‘reveals the panic of the wealthy slave-owner isolated amid alien hordes’.

violent slap that he nearly knocked him down (*tam graviter palma percussit, ut paene concideret*). So the baths have been the scene successively of insult to Macedo and then of his death (*Ita balineum illi quasi per gradus quosdam primum contumeliae locus, deinde exitii fuit*).⁵⁷

Pliny's emphasis on the insulting (*contumeliae locus*) nature of the slap is important. It is likely that Pliny would have expected the slave to be slapped instead. It seems probable that individuals in the elite of the Greco-Roman world were unused to being slapped.

The examples of this kind of aggression include many forms of social relations. Hyperides (389–322 BCE) describes a scene in which the rhetor Autocles was arguing with Hipponicus over a piece of land. He slapped Hipponicus on the cheek because of the abuse (*καὶ λαιδορίας αὐτοῖς γενομένης ῥαπίζειν τὸν Ἰππώνικον ἐπὶ κόρρης*).⁵⁸ In a tradition of Plutarch, Alcibiades slapped the painter Taureas who was a 'rival choregus' (*Ταυρέαν ἀντιχορηγοῦντα ῥαπίσαι*).⁵⁹ Courtesans were slapped by their jealous lovers, and in one text a friend slapped his friend for refusing to seduce a woman.⁶⁰ In a romance of the second century CE, a mother slaps her daughter for allegedly sleeping with the young man she is in love with.⁶¹ A husband presumed dead slaps the man whom his widow was intending to marry in his place, with a 'blow full of anger' (*ἐμπηδᾷ καὶ ῥαπίζει με κατὰ κόρρης πληγὴν θυμοῦ γέμουσαν*) in the same romance.⁶² An angry sophist, Philagrus, slapped an individual on the cheek for falling asleep during his lecture.⁶³ Slaves could expect to be slapped or

57. Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 3.14.6-7. Trans. slightly modified from B. Radice (ed. and trans.), *Pliny: Letters and Panegyricus* (LCL; 2 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1972), I, p. 215.

58. Hyperides, frag. 97 (in C. Jensen [ed.], *Hyperidis orationes sex* [BiTeu; Leipzig: Teubner, 1917], p. 131, ll. 18-20).

59. Plutarch, *Alc.* 16.5. On this incident and other acts of Alcibiades, cf. M. Beck, 'Anecdote and the Representation of Plutarch's Ethos', in L. van der Stockt (ed.), *Rhetorical Theory and Praxis in Plutarch: Acta of the XIVth International Congress of the International Plutarch Society, Leuven, July 3-6, 1996* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), pp. 15-33 (27). Cf. Libanius's discussion of the episode in *Decl.* 12.2.48 (Foerster, *Libanii opera*, V, p. 561, ll. 13-15).

60. See Lucian, *Dial. meretr.* 8.1. After slapping him, Hippias calls his friend a boor and unschooled in the ways of Aphrodite because of his refusal to attempt the seduction of an attractive woman (*ἀφυῆς εἶ, νῆ τὸν Ἀπόλλωνα, καὶ ὅλος ἀπαίδευτος Ἀφροδίτης*) in Aristaenetus, *Ep.* 1.4.

61. Achilles Tatius, *Leuc. Clit.* 2.24.1.

62. Achilles Tatius, *Leuc. Clit.* 5.23.5.

63. Philostratus (second to third century CE), *Vit. soph.* 2.6 (see G. Olearius

struck. Libanius, in a declamation, has Achilles say that Peleus never commanded him to count himself among the slaves, to honor those who insult him or not to respond angrily if someone strikes him on the cheek (μετὰ τῶν ἀνδραπόδων ἀριθμοῦ, προσκύνει τοὺς ὑβρίζοντας, καὶ ἐπὶ κόρρης σε πατάξῃ τις, μὴ χαλέπαινε).⁶⁴ All these texts can be compared with Jesus' response to being slapped during his Passion. Rather than reacting with anger, he is silent.

Two texts in Cassius Dio bear some analogous resemblance to the New Testament and its depiction of the Passion of Christ. In the first, Sejanus suffers an extreme reversal of fortune as he is led to his death (31 CE):

For the person whom at dawn they had escorted to the senate-hall as a superior being (ὡς καὶ κρείττω σφῶν ὄντα), they were now dragging to prison as if no better than the worst (τοῦτον τότε ἐς τὸ οἶκημα ὡς μηδενὸς βελτίω κατέσυρον); on him whom they had previously thought worthy of many crowns, they now laid bonds; him whom they were wont to protect as a master, they now guarded like a runaway slave, uncovering his head when he would fain cover it; him whom they had adorned with the purple-bordered toga, they struck on the cheek (ἐπὶ κόρρης ἔπαιον); and him whom they were wont to adore and worship with sacrifices as a god, they were now leading to execution (ὄν <τε> προσεκύνουν ᾧ τε ὡς θεῷ ἔθουον, τοῦτον θανατώσοντες ἤγον).⁶⁵

Sejanus receives the treatment of a fugitive slave. Cassius Dio may imply that the slaps Sejanus experienced were a normal part of the

[ed.], *Philostratorum quae supersunt omina* [Leipzig: T. Fritsch, 1709], p. 578). Cf. Philostratus and Eunapius (W.C. Wright [ed. and trans.], *The Lives of the Sophists* [LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922], p. 206).

64. Libanius (fourth century CE), *Decl.* 5.36 (Foerster, *Libanii opera*, V, 324.18–325.1). Cf. further Plutarch, *Mor.* 4.267d (= *Aetia Romana et Graeca*; a slave slapped in a temple ceremony); Lucian, *Men.* 17 (kings being abused and slapped on the cheek like the most dishonorable of slaves [ὑβριζομένους καὶ κατὰ κόρρης παιομένους ὥσπερ τῶν ἀνδραπόδων τὰ ἀτιμότατα]); Lucian, *Prom.* 10 (slapping a slave who tastes leftover food); Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 7.23 (the wealthy man is like one who slaps individuals that are 'slaves' to the wealthy [μόνον οὐκ ἐπὶ κόρρης παῖει δουλουμένους τοῖς χρήμασιν]); and Alciphron (second to third century CE), *Ep.* 3.7.4 (Smikrines slaps Charikles and leads him around like the least of slaves [ὡς ἔσχατον ἀνδραπόδων]). In Achilles Tatius, *Leuc. Clit.* 6.20.1, Leukippe spurns an attempted rapist (Thersandros) who then slaps her on the cheek and calls her a miserable slave (ᾧ κακόδαιμον ἀνδράποδον).

65. Cassius Dio 58.11.1–2. Trans. slightly modified from E. Cary (ed. and trans.), *Cassius Dio: Roman History* (LCL; 9 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914–27), VII, p. 215.

treatment of such a slave. In any case, Sejanus's fate is an example of utter humiliation for a member of the Roman elite. Vitellius undergoes similar humiliation on the way to his own execution (20 December 69):

...along the Sacred Way they dragged the emperor who had often paraded past in his chair of state, and they conducted the Augustus to the Forum, where he had often addressed the people. Some slapped him, some plucked at his beard; all mocked him, all insulted him (καὶ οἱ μὲν ἐρράπιζον αὐτόν, οἱ δὲ τοῦ γενείου ἔτιλλον· πάντες δὲ ἔσκωπτον καὶ πάντες ὕβριζον), making comments especially upon his riotous living, since he had a protuberant belly.⁶⁶

The former emperor is slapped, a form of insult that apparently was an unimaginable experience for one who had enjoyed his position. Cassius Dio uses the oppositions in his text (emperor/insulted person) to make his point clear. These results are important for establishing the nature of slaps on one's cheek. Both episodes from Cassius Dio depict powerful men who ended up being slapped and utterly humiliated by degrading treatment. The analogy with the Passion of Jesus (Mt. 26.26) is fairly obvious. Jesus went from a triumphal entry (Mt. 21.1-10) to humiliation by being slapped, beaten with fists, scourged, and then crucified.

According to my survey of the material, there is no indication that backhanded slaps were viewed as any worse in Greco-Roman culture than the other variety, although backhanded or left-handed slaps were probably rare. It was the slaps themselves that were humiliating and in some cases extremely humiliating when a person in a superior social position was slapped by an inferior or when individuals such as Sejanus and Vitellius, who had formerly been quite powerful, were subjected to slaps. The material offers illustrative clarification for both Mt. 5.39 and Mt. 26.67.⁶⁷

Ancient Interpretation

Augustine provides evidence for the rarity of left-handed slaps in one of his letters (to Marcellinus):

if someone, it is said, shall strike you on the right cheek, offer to him/her also the left. But the left cheek is struck to a greater extent, because the blow of the one who strikes is easier from the right hand. But the saying is usually

66. Cassius Dio 65.20.3. Trans. slightly modified from Cary, *Cassius Dio: Roman History*, VIII, p. 255.

67. The same is the case for the slaps in Mk 14.65, Jn 18.22 and Jn 19.3.

interpreted as if it were said, if someone has attacked you with regard to your better possessions, offer them your lesser possessions, lest being more concerned for revenge than patience, you should regard with contempt eternal things in favor of the temporal, when rather temporal things instead of eternal are to be regarded with contempt, as is the left in comparison with the right.

*si quis te, inquit, percusserit in maxillam dexteram, praebe illi et sinistram. magis autem sinistra percutitur, quod a dextera ferientis facilius ictus est. sed sic intellegi solet, ac si dictum esset: si quis in te meliora fuerit persecutus, et inferiora ei praebe ne uindictae potius quam patientiae studens contemnas aeterna pro temporalibus, cum potius temporalia pro aeternis contemnenda sint, tamquam sinistra pro dextris.*⁶⁸

Augustine's position indicates several things. First, he does not affirm that backhanded strokes were especially blameworthy in the culture of his time, but they (or rather the left-handed variety) were quite unusual.⁶⁹ Secondly, the right side was viewed as more valuable than the left.⁷⁰ Augustine's emphasis on patience rather than revenge coheres well with Matthew's picture of Jesus' Passion (Mt. 26.67).

Origen takes a completely different approach than Augustine in a discussion of statements in the Gospels that he thinks cannot be taken literally:

If attending to the Gospel we should seek similar sayings, what can be more absurd than 'Greet no one along the way', which innocent folk think the Savior commanded the apostles; but the right cheek being described as struck is even less convincing because every one who strikes, unless he/she suffers from some kind of defect, strikes the left cheek with the right hand.

εἰ δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον ἐλθόντες τὰ ὅμοια ζητήσῃμεν, τί ἂν εἴη ἀλογώτερον τοῦ· 'μηδένα κατὰ τὴν ὁδὸν ἀσπάσῃσθε', ὅπερ ἐντέλλεσθαι νομίζουσιν οἱ ἀκέραιοι τὸν σωτῆρα τοῖς ἀποστόλοις; ἀλλὰ καὶ 'δεξιὰ σιαγὼν τύπτεσθαι' λεγομένη ἀπιθανωτάτη ἐστὶ, παντὸς τοῦ τύπτοντος, εἰ μὴ ἄρα πεπονθὼς τι παρὰ φύσιν τυγχάνει, τῇ δεξιᾷ χειρὶ τύπτοντος τὴν ἀριστερὰν σιαγόναν.⁷¹

68. Augustine, *Ep.* 138.12 (A. Goldbacher [ed.], *S. Augustini epistulae* [CSEL, 44; Vienna: Tempsky, 1904], p. 137, ll. 8-15).

69. Davies and Allison (*Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, I, p. 543-44) consider the possibility that 'having been hit on the right cheek by the weaker left hand, the disciple offers his left cheek to be hit by the even stronger right hand'.

70. On this, cf. Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 289-90.

71. Origen, *Princ.* 4.3.3. Wettstein, *Novum Testamentum*, I, pp. 308-309, refer to the texts of Augustine and Origen. For a similar usage of *παρὰ φύσιν* referring to

One can conclude from Origen's exegesis that slaps on the right cheek were unusual, but the only clear reason is that people used their right hand and not their left hand. Apparently he does not even consider the possibility of a backhanded strike, and the implication is that such slaps were simply unheard of or very rare in Origen's culture. Origen probably means that not being able to use the palm of one's right hand is not in the natural order of things.⁷² In other words, left-handed slaps are unusual unless one's right hand or arm suffers from a natural defect. Origen then mentions the existence of certain texts in the Bible that he does not believe are historical in a literal sense and certain moral statements that appear absurd or impossible (e.g. Mt. 5.29) in a literal sense;⁷³ however, he notes that there are myriads of texts that can be taken literally (e.g. the existence of Solomon's temple and the Ten Commandments). Many more texts are true in a historical (i.e. literal) sense than texts interwoven among the historical ones that are clearly spiritual (πολλῶ γὰρ πλείονά ἐστι τὰ κατὰ τὴν ἱστορίαν ἀληθεύμενα τῶν προσυφανθέντων γυμνῶν πνευματικῶν).⁷⁴ Consequently, one may affirm that for Origen, Mt. 5.39 has a spiritual meaning. Neither from Augustine nor from Origen can one conclude that backhanded slaps were particularly insulting in Greco-Roman culture.

The Middle Platonist and critic of Christianity, Celsus, offers his own perspective on Lk. 6.29 par. Mt. 5.39.

They have the command not to defend oneself against one who insults them. If one strikes you on the cheek, he says, offer the other also. This is ancient and has been better said before. They have recalled it in a more countrified form.

ἔστιν αὐτοῖς καὶ τοιόνδε παράγγελμα τὸν ὑβρίζοντα μὴ ἀμύνεσθαι· καὶ τύπτει, φησί, τὴν ἑτέραν γνάθον, σὺ δὲ καὶ τὴν ἄλλην πάρεχε. ἀρχαῖον καὶ τοῦτο εὖ μάλα πρόσθεν εἰρημένον, ἀγροικότερον δ' αὐτὸ ἀπεμνημόνευσαν.⁷⁵

some kind of bodily defect, cf. Galen, *De constitutione artis medicae ad Patrophilum* (C.G. Kühn [ed.], *Claudii Galeni opera omnia* [20 vols.; Leipzig: Knobloch, 1821–33], I, p. 228, l. 11): τοὺς παρὰ φύσιν ἔχοντας ἀνθρώπους τὸ σῶμα.

72. Davies and Allison, *Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, I, p. 544, interpret Origen to mean: 'unless one suffers from a defect, one naturally strikes the left cheek with the right hand, so the Saviour's words are incredible on a literal level'.

73. He asks why one could blame only the right eye for lusting after a woman and with good reason cast it away.

74. Origen, *Princ.* 4.3.3–4. The quotation is from 4.3.4.

75. Origen, *Cels.* 7.58 (M. Marcovich [ed.], *Origenes: Contra Celsum libri VIII* [Vigiliae Christianae Sup, 54; Leiden: Brill, 2001], p. 508, ll. 24–27). Cf. J.G. Cook,

Celsus proceeds to compare the text unfavorably to Socrates' teaching in the *Crito*, in which the philosopher argues that one should not return evil for evil.⁷⁶ Celsus is unconcerned with the incongruity of a strike on the right cheek, and if such a slap was particularly humiliating in Greco-Roman culture presumably he would have commented on the fact. Celsus does emphasize the humiliating nature of slaps, however, and that surely is also the intention of Mt. 26.67.

Conclusion

There seems to be no evidence in Greco-Roman (pagan) texts that a backhanded (or left-handed) slap was especially blameworthy. That evidence is confined to certain Jewish texts, in particular to rabbinic texts. The consequences for the interpretation of Mt. 5.39 are clear. 'If anyone slaps you on the right cheek' is a saying best understood by a Jewish audience, some of whom would have probably been aware that such a strike was a gross insult. A Gentile Christian audience, on the other hand, would not have been aware of the extreme humiliation involved in being slapped on the right cheek, and the interpretations of Augustine, Origen and Celsus confirm this view. For Augustine and Origen, slaps on the right cheek are simply unusual. Augustine uses an intriguing exegetical move (the right side is more important than the left) to find a *sensus spiritualis* in the text. With regard to the *sensus literalis*, Origen cannot conceive any kind of slap but one with the right hand to the left cheek and believes that such texts should be interpreted spiritually. Celsus believes Plato said it all better before, and he does not see any incongruity in slaps on both cheeks of a person.

The implications of the material for understanding texts from the Passion of Jesus in the New Testament are also clear (e.g. Mt. 26.67; Jn 19.3). Both Jewish and Gentile hearers or readers of the Gospel, according to the texts surveyed above, would have known that being

The Interpretation of the New Testament in Greco Roman Paganism (STAC, 3; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), pp. 41-42. In *Cels.* 7.18 (Marcovich, *Origenes*, p. 473, l. 16), Celsus includes another version of the saying ('and to a person who strikes once one must submit oneself again to be struck' τῷ δ' ἅπαξ τυπτήσαντι παρέχειν καὶ αὖθις τύπτειν), arguing that it contradicts various laws of Moses that he believes encourage violent behavior.

76. Origen, *Cels.* 7.58 (Marcovich, *Origenes*, 508.29–509.7; 509.8-13), Plato, *Crito* 49bc, de.

slapped on the cheek is a form of insulting and humiliating behavior—a kind of cultural symbol used in numerous social interactions. In certain cases a slap could be given justly or in love, but surely being slapped even then was a humbling experience. It was perhaps most humiliating when a formerly powerful individual (such as an emperor like Vitellius) ended his life by being slapped by the same people who had formerly respected him. Although the same people in Matthew's picture of Jesus who originally praised him (21.1-11) did not end up beating and slapping him (26.67), it is a picture of enduring and intense contrast.