

Translating παραλυτικός in Mark 2:1–12: A Proposal

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The man who is healed by Jesus in Mark 2:1–12 is denoted in the text by the word παραλυτικός, which is usually translated ‘paralytic’. The problem with this translation by transliteration is that it is by no means clear that the man in view was “paralyzed” in any modern sense of the word. A word study of παραλυτικός, along with related words παραλύειν and παράλυσις, in and beyond the NT shows the lack of etiological, diagnostic, and prognostic specificity that characterizes ancient medical language when compared with modern technical medical terminology. This means that in Mark 2, we do not know what was “wrong” with the “paralytic,” other than that he could not walk. The possible causes of his condition are numerous: stroke, head injury, twisted or badly broken legs that did not heal properly, severe arthritis, or even a psychosomatic condition, to name but a few possibilities. All of these conditions and many others could easily result in a situation in which a person “cannot walk.” A good translation of the word in this context, then, ought to be nonspecific and nontechnical by modern standards and ought not to draw attention to the cause of the man’s condition. I, a paraplegic who uses a wheelchair, suggest that the word ‘cripple’ fits the bill but provide alternative translation possibilities for those who cannot countenance the use of this word, which comes across as offensive to many people.

Key Words: paralytic, Mark 2:1–12

Mark 2:1–12 tells a story about the healing of a man who cannot walk. The man is carried by four friends to the roof of a house in which Jesus is “speaking the word” to a crowd so large that they have spilled out the door. The friends dig through the roof and lower the man on his mat through the hole they have just dug. Jesus promptly forgives the man’s sins, thereby setting the stage for a conflict with scribes who happen to be there and who question Jesus’ right or ability to forgive sins: only God, they think, is able to forgive sins. As part of the ensuing argument with the scribes, Jesus tells the man who cannot walk to get up, pick up his mat, and go home. The man, who now *can* walk, complies and leaves the house, to the amazement of all who witnessed the event.

This passage has attracted the attention of commentators, who have used it as an opportunity to discuss a variety of subjects, from the relationship between sin and illness, Jesus’ conflict with Jewish leaders, and

Jesus' first use (in the Gospel of Mark) of the title "Son of Man," to the compound form of the pericope and the first-century house-construction techniques that allowed people to dig through roofs. An issue that has never been discussed adequately in any treatment of the passage, however, is how best to translate the word that serves to label the man who cannot walk, παραλυτικός.

The translation of choice for most English Bibles is, in effect, a transliteration: 'paralytic'. English Bibles that choose this translation include the RSV, NAB, NIV, NASB, and the NJB.¹ Most recent commentators writing in English (for example, Marcus, Guelich, Gundry, Myers, Lane, Taylor, and Nineham, among others)² also opt for the same translation. The decision to translate by transliterating is seen as sufficient because the word *paralytic* is understood as adequately describing what is "wrong" with the man: he "can't walk" because he is "paralyzed." The story, told in Mark and its synoptic parallels, Matt 9:1–8 and Luke 5:17–26, is interested in the man only for this reason. He cannot walk. Jesus changes that situation: the healed man walks away. The translation 'paralytic' seems to do the job quite admirably.

There is, however, a problem with transliterating παραλυτικός and "being done with it." The problem relates to the etymological relationship between the word *paralytic* and the word *paralysis* in English, and the way that the word *paralysis*, in our highly medicalized culture, conjures up images of problems with the central nervous system and Spinal Cord Injury (SCI). SCI, in turn, connotes people in wheelchairs. (Note, for example, that the universal symbol denoting handicapped people is a stick figure person in a wheelchair.) Furthermore, when people picture people in wheelchairs, they think in terms of modern medical diagnostic terms such as paraplegia and/or quadriplegia.³ A recent paraphrase of the NT,

1. The NRSV translates the word 'a paralyzed man', a translation that has its own problems, as we will see below. Older English translations (KJV, DOUAY-RHEIMS, ASV) translate παραλυτικός 'sick of the palsy'. This is actually a better translation than the transliteration favored by most recent translations, since it is more general and less diagnostic than modern medical terminology. This is so because the translation was made before the era of modern medicine.

2. Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 27; New York: Doubleday, 2000); Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26* (WBC 34a; Dallas: Word, 1989); Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988); William L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel according to Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indexes* (London: Macmillan, 1957); D. E. Nineham, *Saint Mark* (Westminster Pelican Commentaries; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978).

3. It is impossible, of course, to know what everyone thinks when he or she encounters the word *paralytic*. It is certainly the case, however, that the translation of παραλυτικός as 'paralytic' does little if anything to head off the association with paraplegia and quadriplegia.

Eugene Peterson's *Message*, makes this connection explicit by translating παραλυτικός 'paraplegic'.⁴ This way of imagining the situation of the man who cannot walk in Mark 2:1–12 is problematic, however, because whatever the man's condition, he was almost certainly not a paraplegic or a quadriplegic.

He was not a paraplegic or a quadriplegic because throughout most of human history, injuries or conditions that resulted in paraplegia or quadriplegia were always lethal. People who sustained such injuries or were beset with such a condition usually died from the initial trauma, either "external" (falling from a height, being hit by a heavy object, slashed by a sword, pierced by an arrow, falling off a chariot⁵) or "internal" (some sort of pathogen or autoimmune condition). If a person survived the initial trauma, in a world before antibiotics he or she invariably died from infection.⁶ It has only been since the middle of the 20th century (in the wake of World War II and Korea, and especially after Vietnam) that paraplegics and quadriplegics have been able to survive for long periods of time, and only in the last two or three decades that people who have suffered injuries high on their spinal cords have been able to survive at all.⁷ It is highly

4. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993).

5. J. T. Hughes ("Historical Review of Paraplegia before 1918," *Paraplegia* 25 [1987]: 169) notes that "Galen . . . made observations on patients with spinal injuries, notably gladiators falling from chariots, surely the earliest recorded spinal injuries from road accidents." Unfortunately, Hughes provides no references to particular texts among Galen's works.

6. Farred Haj (*Disability in Antiquity* [New York: Philosophical Library, 1970], 94), speaking about the vast numbers of people who died as a result of military engagements in early centuries of Islam, writes: "In view of the limited knowledge prevalent then, many types of wounds which are curable today were fatal, and many today who can be saved from death but remain disabled, did not have that chance several centuries ago." (For Haj, the word "antiquity" in his title refers to the time "during the Arab caliphate from its inception at the death of Mohammad in A.D. 632, to its collapse in Baghdad in A.D. 1258" [p. 13].)

7. Martha Rose, *The Staff of Oedipus: Transforming Disability in Ancient Greece* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 14. Hughes ("Historical Review of Paraplegia before 1918," 171) notes that the "long term treatment and lifetime care of a paraplegic person" was not instituted until after World War II. This is not to say that the ancients were utterly unaware of spinal cord injuries and their effects. Hughes notes the Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus (dated to about 1700 B.C. in Egypt) in which several spinal cord injuries are discussed. The papyrus's comment on one of them (Case 31): "An ailment not to be treated." The Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus was first published in facsimile edition in 1930 by James Henry Breasted (*The Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus: Published in Facsimile and Hieroglyphic Transliteration with Translation and Commentary in Two Volumes* [Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1991]). Hughes also notes that medical writers such as Hippocrates, Herophilus of Chalcedon, Galen, and Aretaeus were aware of the function of the spinal cord and the effects of SCI ("Historical Review," 168–69). Hughes does not provide references to particular texts of these authors, with the exception of a bibliographical entry for a short extract of text from Galen's "On the Affected Parts," published (without specifying the particular passage[s] cited) in the *Annals of Medical History* (Galen, "Experimental Section and Hemisection of the Spinal Cord [Extracted from *De Locis Affectibus*]," *Annals of Medical History* 1 [1917]: 367).

probable, therefore, that the man who could not walk at the beginning of Mark 2 was neither a paraplegic nor a quadriplegic.⁸

What, then, was medically “wrong” with the man? It turns out that it is impossible to know, since the story seems unconcerned with the cause of the man’s inability to walk and since ancient medical terminology denoting disabled people and disabilities does not meet modern standards of technical medical terminology. The Greco-Roman world had no general category or word corresponding to the modern category “the disabled.” Furthermore, “Greek terms for physical impairment are general, and describe outward appearances, or symptoms.”⁹ This is quite different from what we expect of modern medical terminology, which usually points to the etiology of the disease or condition, a range of symptoms, and prognosis for the patient. For instance, technical terms such as “cerebral palsy” or “muscular dystrophy” denote the cause of the condition, symptoms related to the condition, and to some extent the prognosis of the person who has the condition. We will see that the word *παρालυτικός* and related words do not come close to “passing muster” as modern medical technical terms. This is not a criticism of ancient medical terminology; one ought not to expect modern specificity from ancient words in ancient contexts.¹⁰

8. A scenario could, of course, be constructed in which this man might have been a paraplegic or quadriplegic. For instance, the unfortunate man might just have taken a fall off his own roof and broken his neck, and been rushed, at the point of death, to the house where Jesus was teaching. While possible, this sort of scenario seems highly unlikely. Nothing in the story indicates that the man was suffering from an acute condition. And this highly specific scenario is unnecessary to make sense of the story. J. Thompson Rowling (“Paraplegia,” in *Diseases in Antiquity: A Survey of the Diseases, Injuries and Surgery of Early Populations* [ed. Don Brothwell and A. T. Sandison; Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1967], 272–78) believes that paraplegics might have survived for long periods of time in ancient Egypt, calling on paleopathological data, both literary and archaeological, to make his case. The two passages from the Edwin Smith Papyrus he cites, however, appear to deal with patients who died rather quickly after the trauma that induced their paraplegia. (Rowling writes that some of the observations in these two cases could only have been made via postmortem examinations.) The archaeological evidence he presents is, by his own admission, equivocal, since soft tissue such as the spinal cord does not persist in archaeological remains. Soft-tissue involvement, then, must be inferred from scanty bony remains. He does not cite evidence from mummified remains.

9. Rose, *The Staff of Oedipus*, 11. The discussion in the remainder of this paragraph is drawn from the same page. The claim that there was no ancient category like “the disabled” in modern times is one of the main burdens of Rose’s study and is buttressed by extensive discussion of primary texts throughout. She is particularly concerned that modern readers coming at ancient texts with the modern category “the disabled” misread those texts by imposing this modern category on the ancient material. The fact that the ancients did not have a category for “the disabled” does not mean that there were no people who were, by modern standards, “disabled.” Rose discusses at length the prevalence of disabling conditions in the ancient world in ch. 1, “The Landscape of Disability,” 9–28.

10. Medical anthropologists would note that every culture has a conceptual “health care system” by which people in that culture live with and make sense of sickness, disability, death, and the like. The terminology that is used in one health care system may not be appropriate for or fit into another health care system. In the modern West, the health care system is highly scientific and medicalized. The health care system in the 1st-century Mediterranean world was, by comparison, neither. Consequently, terminology that “worked” in the first century

The adjective *παραλυτικός*, often used substantively, is a rare word, appearing for the first time in Greek literature only in the 1st century C.E.¹¹ These first century uses are to be found in the NT (10 times, with an 11th in a variant reading¹²) along with the medical writer Dioscorides.¹³ A look at these uses, along with the uses of some related words, will show the lack of etiological, diagnostic, and prognostic specificity that characterizes ancient medical language when compared with modern medical technical terminology.

Of the 10 NT uses, 8 are found in Mark 2:1–12 (in vv. 2:3, 4, 5, 9, and 10) and its Matthean parallel, 9:1–8 (in vv. 9:2 [2 times] and 6). All that can be inferred from the vocabulary used is that the man in view cannot walk. Nothing in the story implies a particular cause for his inability to walk. In other words, the label is entirely descriptive of a particular lack, the ability to walk. It is neither etiological (what was the cause of his not being able to walk?) nor prognostic (what will happen to him over time?). Nor does it specify a range of associated symptoms. The other 2 NT uses are similarly vague as far as the causes of the person's infirmity are concerned. Matthew 4:24 lumps *παραλυτικοί* in with people who suffer from "various diseases" such as demon possession and epilepsy (*σεληνιαζόμενος*), and whom Jesus heals. In Matt 8:6, a centurion's servant is said to be 'paralyzed' and 'in terrible distress' (*ὁ παῖς μου βέβληται ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ παραλυτικός, δεινῶς βασανιζόμενος*). But the specifics of the servant's condition recede quickly into the background as the faith of the centurion, exceeding even that of those in Israel, is pushed to the fore. At the close of the pericope, Jesus accedes to the centurion's request for the healing of the servant, and the servant is healed at a distance. No evidence of the healing (such as taking up a pallet and walking) is articulated so as to give us any insight into the plight of the formerly ill servant. In the Lukan parallel to this story (7:1–10), the servant is not even described with the word *παραλυτικός* or

does not "work" in the same way in the 21st-century West. This is what I mean by saying ancient terminology like *παραλυτικός* does not "pass muster" as modern medical terminology. For recent discussions of the concept of health care systems in medical anthropology, see the following works and the literature cited therein: Hector Avalos, *Health Care and the Rise of Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), especially ch. 1, "Health Care as a System," 19–30; John J. Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament: Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), especially chs. 1–3 ("Basic Perspectives: Healing and Curing"; "Medical Anthropology: Sickness and Disease"; and "Selecting an Appropriate Model: Leprosy—A Test Case"), 1–54.

11. Uses of the word were identified through a search in the *TLG* database.

12. The variant reading is found in John 5:3, where D reads *παραλυτικῶν* instead of *ξηρῶν*. The majority of Old Latin witnesses also presuppose this reading.

13. There is one other 1st-century use of the word of which I am aware. G. H. R. Horsley (*New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* [North Ryde, N.S.W., Australia: Macquarie University Press, 1983], 3:78–79, no. 55) notes the use of the word *παραλυτικός* in *PMon.Gr.* inv. 123, a partially mutilated text of unknown provenance but dated to the 1st century A.D. Lines 16–17 of the document "appear to refer to those suffering from epilepsy and paralysis." The partially reconstructed Greek text reads: . . . παθὼν οἷον ἐπιληπτικ[ῶν] | [—παρ]αλυτικῶν καὶ τῶν περὶ τὰ | κτλ.

any other 'paralysis' word, but instead is described as being 'very ill and about to die' (κακῶς ἔχων ἤμελεν τελευτᾶν). Perhaps Luke recognized that whether or not the man was a παραλυτικός was of no consequence for the story.¹⁴

The Lukan parallel to the healing of the "paralytic" in Mark 2 (Luke 5:17–26) denotes the man using a perfect passive participial form of a verb etymologically related to the adjective παραλυτικός: παραλύειν.¹⁵ The verb παραλύειν is used five times in the NT (Luke 5:18, 24; Acts 8:7; 9:33; and Heb 12:12), always as a perfect passive participle. The first four uses are substantive uses that denote people who cannot walk until they are healed (by Jesus, Philip, and Peter, respectively). In the Hebrews passage, one of the hortatory passages in that book, it modifies the accusative plural noun γόνατα. The NRSV translates the verse 'Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees' (. . . καὶ τὰ παραλελυμένα γόνατα ἀνορθώσατε). The uses of the word παραλύω, then, like those of its cousin παραλυτικός, lack the medical specificity we have come to expect from medical technical terminology.

The 1st-century A.D. medical writer Dioscorides is no more helpful in providing medical specificity about the condition of παραλυτικοί. The word παραλυτικός is used several times in his *De Materia Medica*, a work of reference recognized as the authority in pharmacological matters for over fifteen centuries. The only full English translation of *De Materia Medica* was prepared in the 17th century by John Goodyer.¹⁶ In the book, Dioscorides discusses a variety of medicinal uses for which plants and plant products can be employed, along with the sorts of symptoms they can be used to treat. The term παραλυτικός is used exclusively in lists of specific illnesses that may be treated with particular herbal concoctions. Παραλυτικός appears in these lists alongside conditions such as epilepsy, headache, fever, convulsions, coughs, clogged lungs, colic, and menstrual periods. The conditions themselves are neither discussed nor described; the only point is that they may all be treated with a variety of herbal remedies.

To give but one example, *De Materia Medica* 1:16 describes the uses to which the plant *Kostos* may be put. The Greek text reads in part: σύγχισμα τε ῥιγοῦσι μετ' ἐλαίου πρὸ τῆς ἐπισημασίας καὶ παραλυτικοῖς. Good-

14. With the majority of scholars, I think Markan priority is important in making the best sense of Synoptic relationships.

15. The inflected verb forms in the Luke passage are παραλελυμένος (5:18) and παραλελυμένῳ (5:24).

16. Goodyer prepared a Greek/English interlinear manuscript that ran to 4,540 quarto pages. It was not published, and the manuscript languished unnoticed for several centuries at Magdalene College, Oxford. Goodyer's work was finally edited and published in 1934 by Robert T. Gunther under the title, *The Greek Herbal of Dioscorides: Illustrated by a Byzantine A.D. 512, Englished by John Goodyer A.D. 1655, Edited and First Printed A.D. 1933 (sic)*. This is the only English translation available. The Greek edition I used is that of Max Wellmann, ed., *Pedanii Dioscuridis Anazarbei: De Materia Medica Libri Quinque* (Berolini: Apud Weidmannos, 1958). The numbering of passages in Gunther's edition of Goodyer and Wellmann's Greek text does not coincide precisely. I will note the differing citations when I refer to the passages below.

yer's translation of this passage (numbered by him 1:15) is as follows: "an ointment thereof, with oyle, helps such as haue ye Rigor of an ague, before ye coming of ye fitt, as likewise the paralyticall."¹⁷ The word παραλυτικός indicates that something is not right with the person so described, but the precise nature of the condition of παραλυτικοί is not clarified. This medically nonspecific use of the word παραλυτικός is similar to all other uses of the word in *De Materia Medica*.

There is, of course, other vocabulary that can be used to denote conditions roughly in the neighborhood of παραλυτικός. Louw and Nida, for instance, list words such as παραλύειν, ξηραίνειν, ξηρός, χωλός, and κυλλός as being in the same semantic domain as παραλυτικός.¹⁸ A brief glance at the use of the first of these, παραλύειν, along with the related word παραλύσις in some ancient texts makes clear that these words communicate no more specific medical information than does παραλυτικός.¹⁹

According to Liddel and Scott, the word παραλύειν has a range of meaning with four major stops on it: to loose from the side; to unyoke; to loose beside; and finally "to disable, enfeeble."²⁰ The noun παραλύσις has two major stops on its range: "a loosening by the side or secretly"; and "a disabling of the nerves on one side, palsy, paralysis."²¹ It is the final meaning in each of these two ranges that is most interesting in this context. In literature outside the NT and medical writings, "paralysis" is referred to

17. Other passages in which the word παραλυτικός is used in *De Materia Medica* are 3:78 (Goodyer 3:92); 4:176 (Goodyer 4:178); 4:183 (Goodyer 4:185); and 5:18 (Goodyer 5:26). As another example of the use of the word παραλυτικός, the Greek text of 3:78 and its English translation read in part as follows: ἀρμόζει δὲ σὺν ὄξει καὶ ῥοδίῳ καταχρίομενος, ληθαργικοίς, φρενιτικοίς, σκοτοματικοίς, ἐπιληπτικοίς, κεφαλαγοῦσι χρονίως, παραλυτικοίς, ἰσχυαδικοίς, σπομμένοις καὶ καθόλου τοῖς περὶ νεῦρα πάθει συγχερίομενος μετ' ἐλαίου καὶ ὄξους ('It is good being anointed on with Acetum and Rosaceum for ye Lethargicall, Phreneticall, vertiginous, epilepticall, for ye long troubled with headaches, ye paralyticall, Ischiaticall, for ye convulsed, & in general for ye griefs about the sinews being anointed on with oil & acetum').

18. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., "Sickness, Disease, Weakness (23:142–23:184)," in *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 270–74.

19. Rose (*The Staff of Oedipus*, 12–14) discusses a number of other terms (for example, πηρός ['maimed'], αἰσχροός ['ugly'], ἀσθένεια ['weakness'], ἀτέλεια ['incompleteness; imperfection'], κολοβός ['maimed; mutilated'], χωλός ['lame'], and ἀδύνατος ['unable']) used to denote physical impairment. She argues that these terms did not connote etiology or prognosis in the minds of early hearers or readers. While they probably connoted mental images of people so described, those images were by no means uniform (for example, to be "lame" looks different in different contexts). Many of these terms were "interchangeable, taking on meaning only in . . . individual contexts." None of the terms is used exclusively of human impairment. All of them are extremely broad.

20. Henry George Liddel and Robert Scott, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940), "παραλύω," 1317.

21. *Ibid.* It is interesting to note that major lexical and word study sources either do not mention the word παραλυτικός or give it only the most meager of treatments. Παραλυτικός is not mentioned in *TDNT*, nor is it mentioned in Ceslas Spicq, *Notes de Lexicographie Néo-Testamentaire* (2 vols.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1978). It gets only the briefest of mentions in Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 2:415, in an article on the word χωλός ('lame').

in a manner as medically vague as the NT references noted above. Athenaeus, for example, in a little saying about drinking wine in *Deipnosophiste* (2.36) notes that if wine is drunk mixed half and half with water, the result is ‘madness’ (μανίαν); but if drunk unmixed, the result is ‘bodily collapse’ or, more literally, ‘paralysis of the body’ (παράλυσιν τῶν σωματικῶν).²² The image is clearly drawn of a person so drunk he cannot control the movement of his body. Other examples of the use of the word παράλυσις include those that denote the stupor that attends drunkenness (Diodorus Siculus, *History* 4.3),²³ the lack of ability to move the mouth and legs that accompanies the drinking of certain waters in Arabia (Strabo, *Geogr.* 16.4.24),²⁴ and the “helplessness” or “paralysis of the soul” that results from the receipt of very bad news (Polybius, *History* 30.32).²⁵ The gist of the use of the language of paralysis in nonmedical writers is, not surprisingly, related to a lack of proper function of the human skeletomuscular system or a metaphorical extension thereof. The language is not used in a manner that by modern standards conveys medical information.

Medical writers, although they introduce medical specifics absent from nonmedical writers, tend to use the language of paralysis in a similar, nontechnical way. The 2nd-century medical writer Aretaeus, for instance, lumps “paralysis” together with “apoplexy, paraplegia, [and] paresis,” noting that they “are all of the same kind, and denote a defect of motion or of sense, or of both, sometimes of the mind, and at other times of the other senses.”²⁶ The medical writer Soranus writes about difficulties at-

22. ἐν ταῖς συνουσίαις τε ταῖς καθ’ ἡμέραν τοῖς μὲν μέτριον πίνουσι καὶ κεκραμένον εὐθυμίαν· ἐὰν δ’ ὑπερβάλῃς, ὕβριν ἐὰν δ’ ἴσον ἴσῳ προσφέρῃ, μανίαν ποιεῖ· ἐὰν δ’ ἄκρατον, παράλυσιν τῶν σωματικῶν (‘In daily intercourse, to those who mix and drink it moderately, it gives good cheer; but if you overstep the bounds, it brings violence. Mix it half and half, and you get madness; unmixed, bodily collapse’ [Gulick, LCL]).

23. τὸν γὰρ οἶνον ἄκρατον μὲν πινόμενον μανιώδεις διαθέσεις ἀποτελεῖν, τοῦ δ’ ἀπὸ Διὸς ὄμβρου μίγνεντος τὴν μὲν τέρψιν καὶ τὴν ἡδονὴν μένειν, τὸ δὲ τῆς μανίας καὶ παραλύσεως βλάπτον διορθοῦσθαι (‘For the drinking of unmixed wine results in a state of madness, but when it is mixed with the rain from Zeus the delight and pleasure continue, but the ill effect of madness and stupor [παράλυσεως] is avoided’ [Oldfather, LCL]).

24. ἤδη στομακάκκη τε καὶ σκελοτύρβη περαζομένης τῆς στρατιᾶς, ἐπιχωρίας πάθει, τῶν μὲν περὶ τὸ στόμα, τῶν δὲ περὶ τὰ σκέλη παράλυσιν τινα δηλοῦντων ἕκ τε τῶν ὑδρείων καὶ βοτανῶν (‘his army now being sorely tried both with scurvy and with lameness in the leg, which are native ailments, the former disclosing a kind of paralysis round the mouth and the latter round the legs, both being the result of the native water and herbs’ [Jones, LCL]).

25. ταύτης δὲ τῆς ἀποκρίσεως ἐκπεσούσης, οὐ μόνον περὶ τοὺς ἀνακεκλημένους ἐγένετό τις ὀλοσχερῆς ἀθυμία καὶ παράλυσις τῆς ψυχῆς, ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ τοὺς “Ἕλληνας ὡσανεὶ κοινόν τι πένθος, ἅτε κοδοῦσης τῆς ἀποκρίσεως ὀλοσχερῶς ἀφαιρεῖσθαι τὴν ἐλπίδα τῆς ἐλπίδα τῆς σωτηρίας τῶν ἀκληρούντων (‘Upon this answer being issued not only did the Achaeans who had been summoned to Italy fall into a state of utter despondency and helplessness [παράλυσις τῆς ψυχῆς], but all the Greeks in Rome went as it were into mourning, since the answer seemed to deprive the unhappy sufferers of all hope of restoration’ [Paton, LCL]).

26. *Sign. acut.* 2.1.7. ET by John Moffat, *Aretaeus, Consisting of Eight Books of the Causes, Symptoms and Cure of Chronic Diseases* (London: Lugugraphic Press, ca. 1788).

tending the delivery of children and other difficulties women experience should their wombs be “paralyzed.”²⁷

There is a particular usage of the word *παράλυσιν* that merits special attention in this context, since it throws a sharp light on the lack of medical specificity of the vocabulary of “paralysis” in Greek. The passage in which the verb appears is a case study of a woman whom the medical historian and physician Mirko D. Grmek concludes was suffering from chronic tetanus.²⁸ The word, inflected as a perfect passive participle (*παραλελυμένον*) as it is in all its NT uses, appears in the Hippocratic document *Epidemics* 7.8. The Greek text reads in part, ἢ τε φωνὴ ψελλὴ διὰ τὸ παραλυμένον καὶ ἀκίνητον καὶ ἀσθενὲς εἶναι τὸ σῶμα. The LCL translates this sentence: ‘Her speech was unintelligible because her body was paralyzed, immovable and weak’. Grmek, however, thinks it unwise to translate διὰ τὸ παραλελυμένον . . . εἶναι τὸ σῶμα as ‘because her body was paralyzed’, since, as he explains, “the body in such cases of tetanus is immobile but not really paralyzed.” Further, tetanus “is something not situated on the level of the central nervous system. It’s a difficulty in the transmission of the nervous impulse, or a disposition to avoid pain.” In spite of the etymological relationship between the participle *παραλελυμένον* and the English word ‘paralyzed’, then, the Greek cannot mean ‘paralyzed’ in this case. Consequently, Grmek and Robert choose an “untechnical” translation of *παραλελυμένος*: ‘inert’.²⁹

All this means that we do not know what was “wrong” with the “paralytic” in Mark 2, other than that he could not walk. We do not know what caused his condition. The possible causes are numerous: stroke, head

27. *Gynaeciorium* 4.2. The standard English translation of this work, the one quoted here, is *Soranus’ Gynecology* (trans. Owsei Temkin; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956). The Greek text on which this translation is based is edited by Ioannes Ilberg, *Sorani: Gynaeciorium Libri IV (Corpus Medicorum Graecorum; Lipsiae et Berolini: Teubner, 1927)*. Ilberg uses the so-called “lunate sigma,” *c*, in his Greek text. I have replicated his usage in the text that follows. Ilberg’s Greek text of this passage (followed by Temkin’s translation) reads in part: καὶ παρὰ τὸ voceῖν δὲ τὸ σῶμα τῆς μήτρας δυστοκία γίνεται, οἷον εἰ εἴη ἔκπυρος ἢ φλεγμονὴν ἔχοι ἢ ἔκκυσιν ἢ παράλυσιν ἢ πᾶται ἢ ναρκῆ (‘In addition difficult labor occurs if the body of the uterus is afflicted by disease, e.g., if it is overheated or inflamed, or enfeebled, or paralyzed, or convulsed, or numbed’). The 1st-century medical writer Anonymous Londinensis is in broad agreement with the consensus we have seen developing heretofore, when he reveals (*Latrica* 4.11) that ‘paralysis’ (*παράλυσις*) is so named “from the loss of power to move the sinews” and is defined as a “static” as opposed to a “kinetic” problem along with such conditions as ‘coma’ (*λήθαργος*) and ‘torpor’ (*κάρος*).

28. Mirko D. Grmek, *Diseases in the Ancient Greek World* (trans. Mireille Muellner and Leonard Muellner; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 340–55. Grmek translated this text with the assistance of a professor of Greek literature, Fernand Robert, with whom he held a discussion about translation and diagnostic issues raised by the passage in a dialogue published as a chapter in this book. The Greek text upon which Grmek’s translation is based is that of Emile Littré, *Oeuvres Complètes: Traduction nouvelle avec le texte grec en regard, collationné sur les manuscrits et toutes les éditions; accompagné d’une introduction, de commentaires médicaux, de variants et de notes philologiques* (Amsterdam: Hakert, 1961–62).

29. Grmek, *Diseases in the Ancient Greek World*, 345.

injury, twisted or badly broken legs that did not heal properly, severe arthritis, or even a psychosomatic condition, to name but a few possibilities. All of these conditions and many others could easily result in a situation in which a person “cannot walk.” We cannot diagnose the man’s condition. Given the nature of ancient medical terminology, we cannot, and ought not, expect more specificity from the ancient text.

How, then, shall we translate παραλυτικός in Mark 2? I suggest using the English word ‘cripple’.³⁰ It is a better choice than ‘paralytic’, since the word ‘paralytic’ can connote—and has connoted—people with paraplegia or quadriplegia for many readers, and it is likely that the man was neither. Like most ancient medical terms, *cripple* is nonspecific and nontechnical by modern medical standards, it does not draw attention to the etiology or prognosis of the man’s condition, and it is minimally descriptive. It is worth noting in this context that the recent literary translator of the Gospel of Mark, Reynolds Price, himself a paraplegic and wheelchair user, chooses to translate παραλυτικός ‘cripple’.³¹ In addition, it is interesting that the oldest translation of the Gospels into any form of English, the Lindisfarne Gospels, translates the Latin word *paralyticus* (itself a transliteration of the Greek παραλυτικός) by the word ‘cripple’,³² so to translate with that word is to follow an ancient tradition. Finally, I think a case can

30. I have found only one Greek-English dictionary that glosses παραλυτικός with ‘cripple’: Barclay M. Newman Jr., *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1974), 133. Newman’s full gloss is ‘paralytic, cripple’.

31. Reynolds Price, *Three Gospels* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 89–90.

32. Actually, the Lindisfarne Gospels translation of the Latin *paralyticus* in Mark 2:1–12 is *eorðcryple* or *eorðcrypel* (‘earth cripple’). In the Lukan parallel to Mark 2:1–12 (Luke 5:17–31), where the Greek uses a perfect passive participle of παραλύειν as distinct from παραλυτικός as in Mark, the Latin translation uses the same word used in Mark, *paralyticus*. The first time *paralyticus* is used in the Luke passage (5:18), the Old English gloss in the Lindisfarne Gospels is *eorðcrypel*; the second time it is used (5:24), the Lindisfarne Gospels glosses it with *cryple* (according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, this is the first use of the word in any form of the English language). It seems, therefore, that *eorðcrypel* and *cryple* are synonyms. For the transcribed Latin text and Old English translation of the Lindisfarne Gospels, see George Waring, ed., *The Lindisfarne and Rushworth Gospels, Part II: Now First Printed from the Original Manuscripts in the British Museum and the Bodleian Library* (Publications of the Surtees Society 39; Durham: Andrews, 1861) for the Gospel of Mark; Joseph Stevenson, ed., *The Lindisfarne and Rushworth Gospels, Part I: Now First Printed from the Original Manuscripts in the British Museum and the Bodleian Library* (Publications of the Surtees Society 28; Durham: Andrews, 1854) for the Gospel of Matthew; and George Waring, ed., *The Lindisfarne and Rushworth Gospels, Part III: Now First Printed from the Original Manuscripts in the British Museum and the Bodleian Library* (Publications of the Surtees Society 43; Durham: Andrews, 1863) for the Gospel of Luke. The Lindisfarne Gospels contains the Latin Vulgate text of the canonical Gospels (copied in the 7th/8th centuries) and an Old English interlinear added in the 10th century. For an informative and beautiful book on the history of the Lindisfarne Gospels and its contents, see Michelle P. Brown, *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality and the Scribe* (London: The British Library, 2003). I am grateful to Dr. Justin Clegg, Curator in the Department of Manuscripts at the British Library, for his assistance in ascertaining and understanding the vocabulary used in the Lindisfarne Gospels.

be made that the very bluntness of the word *cripple* can be seen as fitting into Mark's own blunt and abrupt esthetic.³³

It turns out, however, that translating παραλυτικός with the word 'cripple' is off-putting, at least for some. For Americans of a certain age (I count myself among them), public use of the word *cripple* prompts memories of James Watt, President Ronald Reagan's Secretary of the Interior, describing his staff: "I have a black. I have a woman, two Jews and a cripple. And we have talent."³⁴ While I was never a fan of James Watt, I confess to not having been offended by his comments when he made them. Instead, I thought it was humorous that a person occupying such a high position would speak in such an unguarded manner in public. I suspect my response was significantly shaped by the fact that by September 21, 1983, the date on which Mr. Watt made the statement, I myself had been a cripple—or, more precisely, a T-5 paraplegic and wheelchair user—for just over four years. Being a cripple myself had inured me to the unguarded words of silly, if powerful, people.

I am gratified by concern for kind and careful language for people with disabilities. In some quarters such care for appropriate language is derided as "political correctness," but usually, in my experience, such care is a demonstration of good manners and a genuine concern to be respectful to people. This is a sort of care that I appreciate and wish to encourage.

Still, I remain unrepentant about my preference for translating παραλυτικός 'cripple' for the reasons stated three paragraphs above. But for those who remain so uncomfortable with the word that they are unable to countenance its use, I suggest three possible alternatives for translation. First (and least satisfactorily), one could continue to use the transliteration 'paralytic' while keeping in mind (or explaining) that, despite the similarity to the word *paralysis*, the "paralytic's" inability to walk may have had any number of causes that might not be described as "paralysis" in our day. Second, one could follow the lead of BDAG, whose gloss of choice for παραλυτικός is 'lame'.³⁵ The word *lame* does not carry the same sort of

33. The rough (or blunt or "clumsy" or jerky) style of Mark's narrative is widely recognized. For example, one strong argument for Markan priority is that Matthew and Luke routinely smooth over Mark's apparent infelicities of expression. One can recognize the roughness of Mark and at the same time deeply appreciate his literary achievement, as do most recent scholars on the Gospel of Mark. Recent decades have witnessed a growing appreciation for Mark's stylistic and esthetic achievement. Two such studies are David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (2nd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999); and Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

34. I was reminded of James Watt's comments by the editor of this journal, Richard Hess. The wording of Mr. Watt's comments is widely available in the public domain. I found the quotation (by googling "James Watt" and "cripple") in an unsigned article, "James Watt," <http://www.nndb.com/people/010/000023938/> (accessed 16 May 2006).

35. "Παραλυτικός, -ή, -όν," BDAG, 768. Louw and Nida (273, §23:171) gloss παραλυτικός 'lame, paralyzed'.

negative baggage as does *cripple*—*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, for instance, describes the word *cripple* as “sometimes offensive” but includes no such reference with respect to the word *lame*³⁶—and it shares with *cripple* a lack of medical specificity: one can be “lame” due to any number of causes. The use of ‘lame’ as a translation makes it difficult to distinguish παραλυτικός from χωλός, but there is probably substantial overlap in the meaning of these two words.³⁷ Third, many might think it wise to follow (as I have done several times in this article) the direction of Louw and Nida in their discussion of παραλυτικός where, after offering their gloss, they advocate translating the Greek word not with a single English word but with a phrase: “It is often best to speak of a paralytic as ‘one who cannot walk.’”³⁸

36. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (11 ed.; Springfield, MA: Merriam Webster, 2003), 296 (for “cripple”); 697–98 (for “lame”).

37. That the meaning of the two words overlaps is indicated by, among other things, the similarity of the definitions given to them by standard lexica. BDAG, for instance, which glosses παραλυτικός ‘lame’, glosses χωλός ‘lame, crippled’ (“χωλός, ή, όν,” 1093). Louw and Nida gloss παραλυτικός ‘lame, paralyzed’ (see n. 35 above), and χωλός ‘lame, one who is lame’ (273, §23:175).

38. Louw and Nida (273, §23:171).