

New Testament word study: *prēnēs*: “headlong” or “swelling up”

The unique word *prēnēs* occurs only once in the New Testament, in Acts 1:18, regarding the manner of Judas’ death:

“Now this man [Judas] obtained a field with the reward of his iniquity; and  
falling headlong [*prēnēs*],  
he burst asunder in the midst,  
and all his bowels gushed out.

And it became known to all the dwellers at Jerusalem; insomuch that in their language that field was called *Akeldama*, that is “The field of blood”.

(Acts 1:18-19, ASV; *Rotherham emphasis*).

HOWEVER: in Matthew 27 we read regarding Judas’ death:

“Then Judas, who betrayed Him, when he saw that He was condemned, repented himself, and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, “*I have sinned in that I betrayed innocent blood*”.

But they said: “*What is that to us? see thou to it*”.

And he [Judas] cast down the pieces of silver into the sanctuary, and departed; and he went away and hanged himself”.

(Matthew 27:3-5, ASV; *Rotherham emphasis*).

These two accounts of Judas’ death are obviously contradicting each other – a matter of no little concern and perplexity and doubts to many believing Christians.

[Numerous commentators have given various explanations; the most common is that Acts 1 describes how Judas, having hung himself (Matthew 27) then after a while fell down (e.g. the rope rotting or the knot slipping etc.) and due to decomposition his bowels burst open on impact and his intestines spilled out.

This ‘explanation’ conveniently ignores, that in the Greek it is clear that what happened to Judas all took place at the same time.

We will leave it at that. It does the Word of God little credit to think that our Almighty God would waste HIS words on the matter, if this anodyne explanation was indeed correct.

As always we find – if we *search* the matter in the absolute knowledge that God’s Word is wholly true and precise, and *lay aside* the traditions of men – that the truth of the matter becomes evident].

Let us commence by examining the *literal* Greek in the two accounts:

Acts 1:18:

“This one indeed therefore...and swollen up having become he burst asunder in the middle  
“*Houtos men oun... kai prēnēs genomenos elakēsen mesos*

and were poured out all the bowels of him”  
*kai exechuthē panta ta splagchna autou*”

Matthew 27:5:

“And tossing the pieces of silver...he departed and going away was strangled off”.  
*...anexhōrēsen kai apelthōn apēgxato*”.

Let us observe two important preliminary things:

1. The language in Acts 1:18 is striking, terse and factual, with the Divine Author – in a few carefully chosen words – providing a unique word-picture of a *spectacularly* gruesome and painful death.

That is WHY the Holy Spirit specifically informs us that:

“it **became known** (emphasized) **to ALL** [*pas*: “all without exception”] those dwelling in Jerusalem”  
(Acts 1:19).

In fact: the Holy Spirit even informs us that not *only* did Judas’ manner of death become known to ALL of those dwelling in Jerusalem (i.e. probably around 300,000 people!), but it even became known to ALL of Jerusalem’s inhabitants to such an extent that

“**insomuch** as that field [purchased by Judas] is called in their [the Jerusalem inhabitants’ ] proper tongue, Aceldama [of Aramaic origin] that is to say, “*The Field of Blood*”.  
(Acts 1:19).

[“insomuch”: *hōste* (*hōs* with *te*): “a consecutive conjunction, i.e. expressing consequence or result: “so that, insomuch that, so then, therefore, wherefore” – *Thayer*].

2. The very short description of Judas’ death, here in these two texts, contains four unique words, each occurring only once in *all* of the New Testament.

The first unique word is *prēnēs* which means either “headlong” or “swelling up”.

[*Thayer* has “headlong”, and likewise *Bullinger*: “bending forward, prostrate”.

Similarly *Vine* says (in part - see below) about *prēnēs*: “an adjective denoting “headlong, prone,” is used with the verb *ginomai*, “to become,” in Acts 1:18, of the death of Judas, “falling headlong”.

And this is indeed part of the problem translating “headlong”, because it *demand*s that *ginomai*, which here absolutely means “having become” (*genomenos*: 2<sup>nd</sup> aorist, middle deponent, participle), must – somewhat artificially – be understood to mean “falling”, as indeed most versions have it in some form or another; e.g. from the literal translations:

- “having fallen headfirst” (Analytical);
- “falling headlong” (Young, Rotherham, Green, Godbey);
- “head-foremost having fallen” (Emphatic Diaglott);

The above translations reflect the prevailing view that *prēnēs* derives from the root *pro*: “before”; hence the meaning “bending forward” or “prostrate oneself *before* someone.

Thus *Julia Smith* translates particularly well: “being bent forward”, and *exeGes*es *Companion Bible* has “being headlong”.

HOWEVER: a significant number of authorities (albeit a minority) holds the view that *prēnēs* derives from the root *prē*, as in the word *pimprēmi*.

*Bauer*, in particular, refers to the above and that the meaning “swollen, distended”, has been accepted by numerous authorities (cited by *Bauer*), and opines that this “is linguistically possible” (and likewise *Liddell & Scott* holds this “possible”).

*Vine* only says that “some ascribe to the word [*prēnēs*] the meaning “swelling up”. However, these “some” include New Testament Greek authorities such as Nestle, Goodspeed and Moffat!

*pimprēmi* - according to *Bauer* – “is a medical term but by no means confined to this profession, meaning either “to burn with fever”, or “become distended, swell up”.

It occurs only once in all of the New Testament, namely in Acts 28:6 when Paul was bitten by a deadly viper:

“Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen [*pimprēmi*] or fallen down [*katapiptō*] \* dead suddenly”;

\* [*katapiptō* : “to fall down (from *kata*: “down” and “*piptō*”: “to fall”), the very word you would expect to see used in Acts 1:18 *if* indeed the Divine Author intended to convey that Judas died “falling down”.

Do the reader believe for a moment that it is not deliberate, that the Divine Author here places the only occurrence of *pimprēmi* right next to *katapiptō* to cast light on how to understand Acts 1:18?].

*Vine* has this regarding *pimprēmi*: “primarily "to blow, to burn"; later came to denote "to cause to swell," and, in the Middle Voice [*which we have here – see below*] "to become swollen", Act 28:6.

*Vine's Note*: “Some, connecting the word *prēnēs* in Acts 1:18 with *pimprēmi*, give it [i.e. *prēnēs*] the meaning "swelling up".

The word *pimprēmi* is found in the Septuagint (LXX) only in Numbers 5:21, 22, 27 (regarding a swollen belly)].

In context – see below – there is little doubt that the first part of Acts 1:18 should therefore read as indeed translated by Moffat:

“but swelling up [or: “*having become swollen up*”] he burst in two, and all his bowels poured out”].

[And even if assuming that the majority view is correct (i.e. that *prēnēs* derives from the root *pro*), Julia Smith’s Literal Translation is the better one: “being bent forward”, or – giving *genomenos* its full grammatical force: “having become bent forward”].

The second unique word is *lakaō* which means: “to crack, crackle, crash; to burst asunder with a crack, crack open” - *Thayer*.

*Vine* has the meaning as: “primarily: "to crack, or crash"; denotes "to burst asunder with a crack, crack open" (always of making a noise), [and] is used in Acts 1:18”.

[*Bullinger* likewise has: *lakaō*: “to sound (of things which ring when struck); to break with a crash; burst with a noise; break with a load report”.

*Bauer* (citing Acts 1:18): “he burst open in the middle” [in classical Greek used of “iron [which] breaks apart, bursts”].

The third unique word is *splagchnon*, which – according to *Thayer* – is “probably strengthened from *splen* [whence the English "spleen"], meaning the bowels, intestines, (the heart, lungs, liver, etc.)”.

According to *Vine*, the word “is always in the plural [*ta splagchna*] and properly denotes "the physical organs of the intestines," and is once used in this respect, Acts 1:18”.

[*Bullinger*: “the inward parts”; *Bauer*: “inward parts, entrails”; in classical Greek – according to *Liddell & Scott* – “inward parts, especially the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, which in sacrifices were reserved to be eaten by the sacrificers at the beginning of their feast”].

The fourth unique word we find only in Matthew 27:5:

*apagchō*: “to throttle, strangle, in order to put out of the way or kill [off]”; it is *apo* (“from, off”) with *agcho* (“to choke”) akin to the base of *agkalē*, which in turn derives from *agkalēto*: “bend, curve”, the curve or inner angle of the arm, the bent arm, which comes from *agkos* (“a bend, ache”) – *Thayer*;

[hence also *agkalē*: “an arm” (used in the plural in Luke 2:28 about Simon taking the infant Jesus up into his arms).

Vine notes that *enankalizomai* (*en* “in” and a verb akin to *agkalē*): “to take into the arms, to embrace”, is used in Mark 9:36 and 10:16 of the tenderness of Christ towards little children].

Thus: Judas absolutely died by strangulation. However, the Greek carries *no* meaning regarding death by “hanging from a rope”.

This is an ‘interpretative’ translation of *apagchō* arising from the notion that Judas “strangled himself”.

Since

1. self-strangulation is difficult except by means of *hanging* oneself, and
2. it is nearly universally assumed that Judas killed himself,

nearly all versions (since Tyndale) translate that Judas “hanged himself”.

[Some literal translations are more precise – although all, in the tradition of men, assume that Judas committed suicide:

- “he did strangle himself” (Young);
- “he strangled him self” (Julia Smith);
- “strangles himself” (Concordant; exeGes);
- “strangled himself” (Emphatic Diaglott)].

HOWEVER: if we ignore the assumptions and traditions of men and instead *examine* the Scriptures, Judas clearly did not kill himself.

The Greek *apagchō* is here *apēgxato*, i.e. neither in the active, nor in the passive voice, but in the quite rare *middle* voice.

[The middle voice – found in only a few languages (e.g. Greek, Albanian, Bengali, Sanskrit, Swedish and a few others) was quite common in classical Greek, but is used less than a 100 times in all of the New Testament)].

The *voice* of a verb (here: “to strangle”) indicates the role that its grammatical subject (here: “Judas”) plays in relation to *either* (1) the action, *or* (2) state of being, expressed by the verb.

The *middle* voice is used mainly to imply that the subject (1) *benefits*, or (2) *suffers* directly from the action expressed by the verb. Clearly Judas here suffered from the action expressed by the verb. He died from being strangled.

The important point about the verb being in the *middle* voice is that often - BUT NOT ALWAYS - the subject (here: “*Judas*”) also represents the cause of the action expressed by the verb.

Thus *apēgxato* may either be translated: [Judas] “he strangled him self”, OR: [Judas] “he was strangled”.

The all-important context decides the matter: whether Judas *himself* was or was not the cause of him dying by strangulation. Either he committed suicide – or he was killed.

The full context in Scripture *never* lets us down when we examine the Word of God to determine such difficult questions. Thus in 2 Samuel 17 we read that:

“And Ahithophel hath seen that his counsel [regarding his conspiracy against king David] was not done, and he saddleth the ass, and riseth and goeth unto his house, unto his city, and giveth charge unto his household, and strangleth himself [*apēgxato* in the Septuagint – in the same middle voice], and dieth, and he is buried in the burying-place of his father”. (2 Samuel 17:23 – Young).

The context here leaves us in no doubt that it is correct to translate the middle voice as Young does in his Literal Translation. Ahithophel was the *cause* of his own death].

In Acts 28:6 when Paul was bitten by a deadly viper:

“Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen [*pimprēmi*] or fallen down [*katapiptō*] \* dead suddenly”;

Here *pimprēmi* is in the middle \* voice, with the *context* clearly indicating that Paul – as the subject – was *not* the cause of the expected swelling up].

\* [according to *Vine*].

The context of Matthew 27:5 MUST, of course, include also Acts 1:18; *both* passages describe aspects of Judas’ death.

IF we believe, that God’s Word is perfect, true, accurate, precise and “God-breathed”, then the description of Judas’ death must be understood directly, literally and in a manner which accounts scripturally, naturally and logically for all the elements of that description.

[If we do *not* understand thus – then we can of course make the texts say anything we want, incl. e.g. – as some ‘theologians’ do - that Matthew ‘heard one account’ and Luke ‘heard another’ etc. etc.].

Reading the account of Judas’ death like a child (although one would hesitate to actually expose a child to the gruesome details) the Divine Author tells us what they saw, who actually witnessed Judas’ death; and *some* (many or few) indeed witnessed it – otherwise the account thereof would *not* have spread like wildfire throughout Jerusalem, so that it became

“known [emphasized] to ALL the dwellers at Jerusalem” – Acts 1:19).

Seeking to give the four unique Greek words, and the texts as a whole, their accurate and dramatic force in the Greek, here is what they - who saw it - witnessed when Judas died:

*Judas Iscariot was suddenly lifted up as if by giant unseen hands – stretched out.*

*An invisible giant hand - obviously around his throat - began to strangle him.*

*As he choked, the two invisible hands bent his lower and upper body inexorably towards each other – like he was in a massive vice.*

*His spine cracked loudly as it snapped.*

*As he was squeezed even further, the immense pressure exerted pressed all his internal organs ever upwards and outwards so his stomach became grotesquely swollen.*

*Finally, Judas’ abdomen ruptured from the huge pressure from inside, and his soft intestinal tissues and other innards, all burst forth and poured unto the ground.*

He...was strangled off”  
*apēgxato”.*

...and swollen up having become he burst asunder in the middle  
*kai prēnēs genomenos elakēsen mesos*

and were poured out all the bowels of him”  
*kai exechuthē panta ta splagchna autou”*

[Cfr. e.g. Julia Smith’s Literal Translation: “...being bent forward, he brake in pieces in the midst, and all his entrails were poured out”];

Moffat: “...swelling up, he burst in two, and all his bowels poured out”

Rotherham: “...burst asunder in the midst, and forth gushed all his bowels” (likewise Godbey and Green);

“poured out”: *ekcheō* : “to pour out; shed forth” – *Thayer*. Used e.g. in Matthew 9:17 and Mark 2:22 of the old leathern wineskin, which bursts when filled with new wine and the wine spills out, of blood shed (e.g. Matthew 23:35) and of the bowls (or vials) of Divine wrath being poured out (e.g. Revelation 16:1-4)].

The description of Judas' gruesome, agonizingly painful death bespeaks of a malicious intent by the killer to inflict maximum and excruciating pain.

So who *was* the killer?

Answer: Satan!

“THEN **entered** Satan **into** Judas surnamed Iscariot (Luke 22:3).

And again later at the Last Supper: “And after the sop Satan **entered into** him [Judas]” (John 13:27).

Twice Satan “*entered into*” Judas.

This is *not* figurative language or ‘fine Eastern poetry’ – but reflects the deadly reality that evil spirits *can* enter into a human being and take both physical and mental control.

Scripture provides ample evidence that an evil spirit *can* physically manipulate the human body.

Thus e.g. Luke 9: 42:

“...the demon slammed [*rhēgnymi*] him [the boy] to the ground and threw him into a convulsion [*sysparassō*]”.

(NASB; the KJV has: “threw him down, and tare him”; NLT provides the sense that: “the demon knocked him to the ground and threw him into a violent convulsion”);

[*rhēgnymi*: “to tear, rend, break,” is used of the action of a demon upon a human victim, Mark 9:18; “dasheth...down” (RV); Luke 9:42: “dashed...down” (RV); the KJV: “threw...down”) – *Vine*.

*sysparassō*: “to convulse completely” – *Thayer*; “to tear violently” (*sun*: “with” as an intensive, and *sparassō*): “convulse completely” – *Vine*.

According to *Thayer*, *sparassō* is “a strengthened form of prolongation from *spairō* (“to grasp”, apparently strengthened from *spaō* through the idea of spasmodic contraction) “to convulse, tear”.

Mark 9:17-22:

“And one of the multitude answered and said,

*“Master, I have brought unto Thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit;*

*And wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him [rhēgnymū]: and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away: and I spake to Thy disciples that they should cast him out; and they could not”.*

He answereth him, and saith, “O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him unto Me”.

And they brought him unto Him: and **when he saw Him**, straightway the spirit tare [sysparassō] him; and he fell on the ground, and wallowed \* foaming.

And He asked his father, “How long is it ago since this came unto him?”

And he said,

“Of a child. And ofttimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him: but if Thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us”.

(Mark 9: 17-22, ASV; Rotherham emphasis).

\* [“wallowed”: kuliō; here either in the passive or in the *middle* voice (as *Vine* has it), because – in context – the boy is clearly *not* the cause of the wallowing; the evil spirit is.

Note also the interesting Divine comment, which is heavily emphasized in the Greek:

“**when he** [namely the evil spirit – as is clear in the Greek] **saw HIM** [namely the Lord Jesus Christ] the spirit tare [sysparassō] him [namely the boy]”.

Only Almighty GOD could know this fact].

Dr. John Lightfoot (1601-1675), in his “Works; vol. VIII” (p.366-367) has a similar – though differing in some details - take on Judas’ death:

*“The Devil, immediately after Judas had cast back his money into the Temple, caught him up in the air, strangled him, threw him headlong and dashed him in pieces on the ground...That this was known to all the dwellers at Jerusalem, argues that this was no common and ordinary event, and must be something more than hanging himself...”*].

The Divine Author does not inform us, whether Satan did enter into Judas a third time, or stayed within Judas until our Lord died, or whether Satan killed Judas without entering into and possessing Judas’ body.

[Considering e.g. Luke 9:42 and Mark 9:17-22 above, our own view is that Satan likely did enter into Judas for the express purpose of killing him].

However, we may – in our own view – infer that the manner of the killing of Judas indicates both a malicious intent to inflict maximum and excruciating pain and therefore is likely *also* indicative of Satan being in a towering rage.

If this be so, what would have occasioned such a rage?

We believe that this would have brought Satan into an uncontrollable rage:

“Then Judas, who betrayed Him, when he saw that He was condemned, repented himself, and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying,

*“I have sinned in that I betrayed innocent blood”.*  
(Matthew 27:3-5, ASV; *Rotherham emphasis*).

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[NOTE TO OUR READERS: Word study no. 11 will - in God’s will - appear around mid-September due to travel and other matters in August.

The next sections of our 3 monthly series: “Golgatha”, “The Secret” and the Danish translation “The Secret-Hemmeligheden” have necessarily been deferred for 1 month, and will appear mid/end August, in God’s will.

IN THE MEANTIME: We are pleased to inform the reader that Dr Bullinger’s “*The Giver and His Gifts or The Holy Spirit and His Work*” is now freely available as a PDF download from the “Treasures” section at [www.Bibletreasures.co.uk](http://www.Bibletreasures.co.uk)].

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