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Little James: Μικρός as an Indication of Height or Affection not Comparative Age in Mark 15.40

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Abstract

This article argues that, based on a close reading of the ancient textual, documentary and epigraphic evidence, the expression ὁ μικρός in Mark 15.40 is most likely a nickname regarding this James' particular height or potentially an affectionate indication that he is a child. The expression ὁ μικρός is not an indication of comparative age to another person ('younger'). The evidence from ancient epigraphy and the LXX, initially provided by Adolf Deissmann to support a longstanding reading of ὁ μικρός as 'the younger' in Mark 15.40, proves to be less than reliable.

Keywords: μικρός; James; Mark 15; height; affection; younger

1 Introduction

In the Gospel of Mark, there are four people with the name James. There is James the son of Zebedee (1.19), James son of Alphaeus (3.18), James the brother of Jesus (6.3), and James ὁ μικρός (15.40). While the first three figures are primarily conveyed in relationship to a father or brother, James ὁ μικρός in 15.40 is related to his mother and brother, Mary and Joses, and is given an additional clarifying moniker. Although it is not the focus of this article, a significant amount of attention has been given to whether or not the James in 15.40 is the same brother of Jesus mentioned in 6.3.¹

The concern of this study is the title Mark uses to distinguish James in 15.40, ὁ μικρός. The Greek word μικρός is a flexible term depending on its semantic context, and earlier modern interpreters were unsure how exactly Mark was using it. Ezra Gould argues, 'But whether it designates him [James] as less in stature, or in age, or of less importance, there are no data for determining.'² Josef Ernst echoes this hesitation in his commentary on

¹ There are a few reasons why it is unlikely that James in Mark 15.40 is meant to refer to Jesus' brother, James, mentioned in Mark 6.3. The first is that, as R.T. France argues, it would be strange to identify Mary by her other sons and not with Jesus as he does in Mark 6.3. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 664. Additionally, why would Mark not say that both James and Joses are Jesus' young brothers? Mark 15.40 is clearly meant to distinguish James 'the Little' and his brother Joses from Jesus' brothers and mother in 6.3. Eduard Schweizer, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (NTD; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998) 198. Additionally, as Joel Marcus notes, there is no ancient evidence that Jesus' brother, James, was ever referred to as 'James the Small'. Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AYB; New Haven: Yale University, 2009) 1060. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. Texts and translations from classical Graeco-Roman literature are from the Loeb Classical Library unless otherwise noted.

² Ezra Palmer Gould, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark* (ICC; New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1922) 296.

Mark when he remarks, ‘Der Verfasser der vor-mk Passionserzählung könnte bei dieser Erklärung über nur geringe historische Detailkenntnisse verfügt haben, wogegen allerdings die Kennzeichnung des Jakobus als “der Kleinere” (Alter, Statur, Rang?) spricht.’³ Some recent interpreters like Morna Hooker, although she translates him as ‘James the younger’, says that it ‘could be a reference to his age or his height.’⁴ Whereas interpreters before the twentieth century might not have hesitated to remark that the title ὁ μικρός referred to James’ height as μικρός frequently denoted size and stature, a study by Adolf Deissmann cast doubt on this usage of μικρός. Deissmann argued that μικρός in Mark 15.40 should not be understood as a reference to height (‘short’) but a reference to age (‘younger’). Although Deissmann offered only a few examples, it has become near axiomatic among interpreters and translations (e.g., NRSVue, NRSV, RSV, NIV, ESV, NLT, CSB, HCSB, GNB, LEB, NET, etc.) that Ἰάκωβος ὁ μικρός should be translated as ‘James the younger’.⁵ Nonetheless, in the past century-and-a-half there have been a handful of interpreters who have translated Ἰάκωβος ὁ μικρός as James the Short/Little.⁶ A few German interpreters, like Peter Schegg, Theodor Zahn, and Rudolf Pesch, also tersely argued that μικρός probably refers to height rather than age, and even the standard lexicon BDAG tentatively provides height as an option. No one, as of yet, has made a sustained case for why ὁ μικρός should be read as a reference to height or age in Mark 15.40.⁷

This article argues that, based on a close reading of the ancient textual, documentary and epigraphic evidence, the expression ὁ μικρός in Mark 15.40 is most likely a nickname regarding this James’ particular height, or potentially an affectionate indication that he is a child, but that semantically the expression is not an indication of his comparative age to another person (‘younger’).

³ Josef Ernst, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (Regensburger Neues Testament; Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1981) 475.

⁴ Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (BNTC; London: Continuum, 1991) 379.

⁵ See interpreters such as Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) 774; Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (WBC 34B; Dallas: Word Biblical Incorporated, 2001) 511; James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 485; Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 977; Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, 379; John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (SP; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002) 449; James A. Brooks, *Mark* (NAC 23; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1991) 264; Ernst Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Markus*, 11th ed. (KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1951) 348. Some interpreters do not comment on it at all: Erich Klostermann, *Das Markusevangelium* (Handbuch zum Neuen Testament; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1950) 168.

⁶ Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 1060; Kara Lyons-Pardue, *Gospel Women and the Long Ending of Mark* (LNTS; London: Bloomsbury, 2020) 62; David A. deSilva, *The Jewish Teachers of Jesus, James, and Jude: What Earliest Christianity Learned from the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 33; Raymond E. Brown, et al., *Mary in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978) 71; John Painter, ‘What James Was, His More Famous Brother Was Also’, in *Earliest Christianity Within the Boundaries of Judaism: Essays in Honor of Bruce Chilton* (ed. Alan Avery-Peck, Craig A. Evans, and Jacob Neusner; Leiden: Brill, 2016) 225; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 1224. Swete tentatively suggests that a comparison should be made with a similar expression in Luke 19.3 with Zacchaeus. Henry Barclay Swete, *The Gospel According to St. Mark. The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Indices* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1898) 390.

⁷ Peter Schegg, *Jakobus der Bruder des Herrn* (München: Ernst Stahl, 1883) 56–7; Rudolf Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium. II Teil: Kommentar zu Kap. 8,27–16,20* (HthKNT; Freiburg: Herder, 1977) 506; Theodor Zahn, *Forschungen zur Geschichte des Neutestamentlichen Kanons und der Altkirchlichen Literatur. VI. Teil* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1900) 346. See also, BDAG s.v. ‘μικρός’ 1a says that ‘perhaps’ it is a reference to stature, but then under the entry for Ἰάκωβος it says under 3, ‘ὁ μικρός, James the small or the younger.’

2 Μικρός as a Description of Someone ‘Younger’

The scholar that has been most influential upon subsequent scholarship, who read μικρός as a reference to comparative age and not stature in the expression Ἰάκωβος ὁ μικρός from Mark 15.40, is Adolf Deissmann. If interpreters deal with evidence at all regarding the translation of μικρός, they usually reference his two-page section published in a collection of translated studies in 1901.⁸ There are two primary arguments that Deissmann makes to support a reading of μικρός as a reference to age and not stature in Mark 15.40. First, Deissmann draws on the papyrological work of Dutch Egyptologist Conradus Leemans. Second, he appeals to the use of μικρός in the LXX, particularly 2 Chronicles 22.1. An examination of the evidence for these two arguments, however, shows that they do not support reading ὁ μικρός in Mark 15.40 as ‘the younger’.

Deissmann appeals to a second-century BCE papyrus from Hermonthis in Egypt, for which Leemans provides a transcribed edition, textual notes and brief commentary.⁹ Leemans labels it Papyrus N (P. Leiden Gr. 1 no. N), but it is known today as UPZ 2 181 (P. Survey 62 descr. = Trismegistos 3583; Leiden, National Museum of Antiquities Inv. 414).¹⁰ In column 2 of the papyrus, a man named Nechoutes has negotiated the sale of a particular Asotos:

Col 2, ll. 11–13

ἐπρίατο Νεχούτης μ[ι]κρός Ἀσώτος ὡς (ἔτων) μ μέσος, μελίχρως, τετανός, μακροπρόσωπος, εὐθύριν, ο[ὐ]λή μετώπῳ μέσῳ, χαλκοῦ νομίσματος (ταλάντου) α. προπωληταί.¹¹

Nechoutes the μ[ι]κρός purchased Asotos about 40-year-old; medium (height), honey-coloured skin, firm body, long-faced, straight-nosed, scar over the middle of the forehead. He negotiated a talent of copper-coins.

Based on the physical description of Asotos, it is clear that he is a slave as the details of his body, especially of scars, facial features, and skin colour correspond to descriptions of other slaves in the Zenon papyri (P. Cair. Zen. 59076, Cols i-iv = Trismegistos 731 = oxford-ipap.apis.559 = p.lond.7.1947).¹²

⁸ Adolf Deissmann, *Bible Studies: Contributions Chiefly from Papyri and Inscriptions to the History of the Language, the Literature, and the Religion of Hellenistic Judaism and Primitive Christianity* (trans. Alexander Grieve; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1901) 144–5, originally published as Adolf Deissmann, *Bibelstudien: Beiträge, zumeist aus den Papyri und Inschriften, zur Geschichte der Sprache, des Schrifttums und der Religion des hellenistischen Judentums und des Urchristentums* (Marburg: N.G. Elwert, 1895). For interpreters who cite Deissmann, see Swete, *St. Mark*, 390; Gundry, *Mark*, 977.

⁹ C. Leemans, *Papyri Graeci Musei Antiquarii Publici Lugduni-Batavi. Tomus I.* (Leiden: H.W. Hazenberg, 1843) 68–9.

¹⁰ For further information see <https://papyri.info/ddbdp/upz;2;181>.

¹¹ Transcription from the Duke Databank of Documentary Papyri: <https://papyri.info/ddbdp/upz;2;181>.

¹² Col i: Αἴμος ὡς (ἔτους) ι μελαγχρῆς κλαστόθριξ μελανόφθαλμος σιαγόνες μείζους καὶ φακοὶ ἐπὶ σιαγόνι δεξιᾷ ἀπεριτμητός (‘Haimos, about 10, dark skin, curly hair, black eyes, rather big jaws, with moles on the right jaw, uncircumcised’). Col ii: Ἀτικός ὡς (ἔτους) η μελίχρως κλαστόθριξ ὑπόσμιος ἤσυχῃ μελανόφθαλμος οὐλή ὑπ’ ὀφθαλμὸν δεξιὸν ἀπεριτμητός (‘Attikos, about 8, light skin, curly hair, nose somewhat flat, black eyes, scar below the right eye, uncircumcised’). Col iii: Ἀυδομος ὡς (ἔτους) ι μελανόφθαλμος 10κλαστόθριξ ἔσσιμος πρόστομος οὐλή παρ’ ὀφρῶν δεξιᾷ περιτετημένος (‘Audomos, about 10, black eyes, curly hair, nose flat, protruding lips, scar near the right eyebrow, circumcised’). Col iv: Ὀκαίμος ὡς (ἔτους) ζ τρογγυλοπρόσωπος ἔσσιμος γλαυκὸς πυρράκης τετανός οὐλή ἐμ μετώπῳ ὑπὲρ ὀφρῶν δεξιᾷ περιτετημένος (‘Okaimos, about 7, round face, noes flat, grey eyes, fiery complexion, long straight hair, scar on forehead above the right eyebrow, circumcised’). Text is from the Duke Databank of Documentary Papyri: <https://papyri.info/ddbdp/p.cair.zen;1;59076>. Translations are from Mladen Popović, *Reading the Human Body: Physiognomics and Astrology in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Hellenistic-Early Roman Period Judaism*, (STDJ 67; Leiden: Brill, 2007) 279.

Quoting Leemans directly, Deissmann argues that μικρός cannot describe Nechoutes as being 'short' since, in a few words, he is described as μέσος, 'medium' (of stature). In his commentary, Leemans triangulates the Nechoutes mentioned here with another papyrus (Pap. Taur. I. Col. 5 l.11), where both Nechoutes and Asotos are mentioned, along with another person named Nechoutes.¹³ He argues that the two are brothers and that the author uses μικρός in UPZ 2 181 to distinguish from this 'other' (ἄλλος) Nechoutes, that the Nechoutes of UPZ 2 181 is Nechoutes 'the younger'.¹⁴

There are two significant problems with Leeman's argument (and subsequently Deissmann's reliance on him). The first is that in Pap. Taur. I., the author does distinguish the two Nechoutes from one another, but not by using μικρός but rather ἄλλος; if age was of relevance, then we would expect μικρός to be mentioned or perhaps a distinguishing epithet like πρεσβύτερος. More importantly, however, in UPZ 2 181, the term μέσος is not used with reference to Nechoutes but to the slave he has purchased, Asotos. It is the first in a long list of physical descriptions of his body. Therefore, μέσος does not clarify the description of Nechoutes as μικρός. Instead, it makes coherent the use of μικρός in relation to Nechoutes, that just as the slave's physical appearance is marked, so also the owner's nickname ('short') is used to distinguish the short-statured master from his moderately sized slave. In other words, μικρός in UPZ 2 181 does not refer to age but to height.

The other primary evidence Deissmann uses to argue μικρός can refer to comparative age is an appeal to the use of μικρός in LXX 2 Chronicles 22.1. There, Ahaziah of Israel (the LXX refers to him as Ochozias) is described as being Ahab's υἱόν...τὸν μικρόν, his 'little son'. The question is whether this is referring to his size or his age. There are some contextual features that indicate μικρός refers at least to his age as the same verse mentions the slaying of his elder brothers (πάντας τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους ἀπέκτεινεν τὸ ληστήριον τὸ ἐπελθὼν ἐπ' αὐτούς). This is confirmed by the description in the previous chapter of Ahaziah as Ahab's 'youngest son' (ὁ μικρότατος τῶν υἱῶν αὐτοῦ, 2 Chr 21.17). The superlative form of μικρός clearly describes Ahaziah's age relative to his brothers. This seems to be a clearer use of μικρός to describe age as Jacob's son Benjamin is also described as a μικρότατος in Gen 42.32. The reference to Ahaziah in 2 Chr 22.1 with μικρός recalls the previous superlative use of μικρότατος in 2 Chr 21.17. These combined contextual features reveal how μικρός is being used in this particular context of Ahaziah losing his brothers. But in the absence of such features in Mark 15.40, μικρός as a reference to age cannot be assumed. There is no indication in the text that James, James' brother, is older than him. Furthermore, no other James in Mark is given the title πρεσβύτερος to distinguish them from Ἰάκωβος ὁ μικρός.

The only unambiguous uses of μικρός in the LXX that connote age are with the expression ἀπὸ μικροῦ ἕως μεγάλου ('from small to great') when μικρός is paired with μέγας. This expression uses height as a metonym for age, e.g., 'from the youngest to the oldest/smallest to the greatest' (Gen 19.11; 1 Kgdms 5.9; 30.2; 30.19; 4 Kgdms 23.2; 25.26; 2 Chr 34.30; Jdt 13.4; 13.13; 1 Macc 5.45; Isa 22.5, 24; Jer 38.34; 49.1, 8; 51.12; Bar 1.4; cf. Num 22.18; Deut 1.17; 25.13, 14; 1 Kgdms 22.15; 25.36; 3 Kgdms 22.31; 1 Chr 25.8; 2 Chr 18.30; 4 Macc 5.20; Ps 113.21; Job 3.19; Wis 6.7; Sir 5.15; 29.23; Isa 33.4; 33.19).

When μικρός is used on its own, however, to describe a person, it usually refers to height. For example, elsewhere in the LXX, the term μικρός is used to describe children or servants who are small or diminished in height like Jonathan's small servant child

¹³ Leemans, *Papyri Graeci*, 74.

¹⁴ Leemans says, '*Itaque ad aetatem referendum videtur, et additum fortasse ut distingueretur ab altera Nechytye, fratre majore*' (Therefore, it seems to refer to old age, and perhaps an addition added to distinguish him from the other Nechytyes, his older brother).

(παιδάριον μικρόν) in 1 Kgdms 20.35, Mephibosheth's small son (υἱὸς μικρός) Micha in 2 Kgdms 9.12, Solomon's self-description as a small child (παιδάριον μικρόν) in 3 Kgdms 3.7, and the description of Ader as a small child (παιδάριον μικρόν) in 3 Kgdms 11.17. In none of these contexts is the comparative age of the child directly in view (e.g., 'younger'), even while (the case of Solomon notwithstanding) being a child necessarily accompanies youth. In Judges 6.15, Gideon describes himself as 'small' among the house of his father: εἰμι μικρὸς ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ τοῦ πατρός μου. But, Meyer argues, rightly, that what is in view here is not stature but that he is physically weak concerning 'warlike aptitude'.¹⁵ This can be seen by the parallelism with the previous clause where he describes his clan as 'weak' in Manasseh. It is important also to note the absence of comparative forms of μικρός; we are not dealing with a comparison in age, but a description of physical prowess (or rather, the lack thereof).

One possible exception to this rule is 1 Kgdms 16.11 where David is described by Jesse as ὁ μικρός. However, just before this Samuel asks Jesse if any 'young men' (i.e. his sons) have been left out (ἐκλελοίπασιν τὰ παιδάρια;) to which Jesse replies that there is still David, ὁ μικρός. Seven brothers are examined by Samuel before David, and we know that the three brothers who are named are the eldest sons of Jesse, Eliab, Abinadab and Shammah (cf. 1 Sam 17.13; 1 Chr 2.13). As Samuel proceeds from the firstborn down in age chronologically, this wider context implies that it is not David's age in view but his size. He is the youngest son (cf. 1 Chr 2.14–15).¹⁶ In the LXX, if youthfulness is directly in view, then the term νέος or νεανίσκος better encapsulates that meaning. For example, in 4 Kgdms 5.2, a 'small young woman' (νεᾶνις μικρά) is captured, and the text distinguishes between stature and age. If Mark's point was to emphasise the relative age of James, it would have made more sense for him to use this language or comparative/superlative forms like those found in the previous examples from the LXX (2 Chr 21.17; Gen 42.32). This is precisely the argument made by Theodor Zahn over a century ago, that if Mark had intended ὁ μικρός to be a nickname to contrast another well-known James, then the author would have used ὁ μικρότερος or ὁ νεώτερος instead.¹⁷

Deissmann's appeals to the papyri and the LXX for uses of μικρός that refer to comparative come up short. Even if both of Deissmann's examples (UPZ 2 181 and 2 Chr 22:1) demonstrated that μικρός could refer to age, it does not follow that the description of Ἰάκωβος as ὁ μικρός must necessarily refer to relative age, given its wide usage as a descriptor of size. This is especially true given the fact that, as we will see in the next section, ὁ μικρός was a widely popularized nickname across the ancient Mediterranean for a person with short stature.

3 Μικρός as a Nickname for Height and Affection

It is not news to New Testament scholars that the authors of the Gospels (or the traditions behind them) attribute nicknames to key disciples and figures in their accounts. In the Gospel of Mark, for example, we have at least five disciples with nicknames, including the James of Mark 15.40.¹⁸ Ἰάκωβος ὁ μικρός is also clearly a nickname, and while

¹⁵ Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospels of Mark and Luke* (ed. William P. Dickson; trans. Robert Ernest Wallis; Edinburgh: T&T Clarck, 1883) 236.

¹⁶ This is confirmed by a reception of this story in Psalm 151. In verse 1, the author writes speaking in the voice of David, 'I was small among my brothers and the youngest in the house of my father' (Μικρὸς ἦμην ἐν τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς μου καὶ νεώτερος ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ τοῦ πατρός μου). Here the psalmist distinguishes between μικρός as physical stature and νέος as age in relation to brothers.

¹⁷ Zahn, *Forschungen*, 346.

¹⁸ Simon 'The Rock' (Σίμων Πέτρος, Mark 3.16), James and John, the sons of Zebedee, otherwise known as 'Sons of Thunder' (Βοανηργές, Mark 3.17), Simon 'The Zealot' (Σίμωνα τὸν Καναναῖον, Mark 3.18), and as

scholarship has recognised this in the context of the Gospel of Mark, it has not yet been recognised that ὁ μικρός was a common nickname in ancient Greek sources.

The only scholar, to my knowledge, who has understood ὁ μικρός as a perceivable nickname is Richard Bauckham. In a short footnote twenty years ago, Bauckham appealed not to Graeco-Roman literature, but to late antique Jewish epigraphic evidence. He cites five ancient epigraphic examples:

For the Palestinian Jewish Parallels to this designation, see CIJ nos. 1038 (Joseph the little: Ἰωσήφ [...] μικρός), 1039 (Judah the little: יהודה הקטן), as well as Rabbi Samuel the Small (שמ׳׳ל הקטן) and Honi the Small (הוני הקטן), grandson of Honi the Circle-drawer. Cf. also L. Y. Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel* (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority/Israel Academic of Sciences and Humanities, 1994) 172, no. 421: A Jerusalem ossuary inscribed גאיס גניס, “Gaius the small,” where גניס derives from the Greek νᾶνος, “dwarf.”¹⁹

Bauckham’s evidence seems to clearly demonstrate that individuals in ancient Jewish communities were given nicknames related to their height, not necessarily their age in relation to others (‘younger’). There are a few minor issues that arise. The first is that the inscriptional evidence that Bauckham draws on is quite late in relation to the first century. CIIP 6962 and 6974 (= CIJ II 1038 (BS ii 28) and CIJ II 1039 (BS ii 29)) come from the Beth She‘arim necropolis, specifically in Hall G of Catacomb I, which dates to the third to fourth centuries CE.²⁰

CIIP 6962

ΣΑΛΟΜ
ΙΩΣΗ Ο Μ
ΜΙΚΚ
ΟΣ
שׁלום

Peace
Ioseph²² the <m>
Litt-
le

CIIP 6974

שׁלום
ΙΟΥΔΑΣ
ΘΑΡΣΕΙ
ΦΙΛΤΑΤΕ
vacat
יהודה
הקטן²¹

Peace
Ioudas
Do not be afraid
Beloved
Judah the Little

Given that this is a family tomb with children, it is possible that the references to the Ioseph and Ioudas as ‘small’ may refer to them being children. It is true that children are young, and they are little, but such language is not comparing their age relative to the age

recently argued by Elizabeth Schrader and Joan Taylor, Mary ‘The Tower’ (Μαρία ἡ Μαγδαληνή, Mark 15.40, 47; 16.1, 9).

¹⁹ Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 210, n.35.

²⁰ *Beth She‘arim. Volume II: The Greek Inscriptions* (ed. Moshe Schwabe and Baruch Lifshitz; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1974) 14–15.

²¹ Transcriptions from *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palestinae. Volume V: Galilaea and Northern Regions. Part 2: 6925–7817* (eds. Walter Ameling et. al.; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023) 1081, 1091. Cf. Schwabe and Lifshitz, *Beth She‘arim*, 19.

²² Ἰωσήφ = יוסף according to Tal Ilan and Thomas Ziem, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity. Part III: The Western Diaspora 330-BCE-650 CE* (TSAJ 126; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002) 723.

of others (e.g., ‘younger’) but rather their stage of life as signified by height (childhood). CIIP 6974 presents a further problem with what appears to be a bilingual parallel between the Greek and Hebrew. Schwabe and Lifshitz agree that the Hebrew הקטן corresponds with the Greek address φίλτατε.²³ If this is the case, then הקטן is not a descriptor of height, per se, but a term of endearment and affection.

Although הקטן can simply be translated as ‘the small’, its semantic use in ancient Jewish funerary inscriptions can be more complicated. In the same necropolis but a different catacomb in Beth She‘arim, Catacomb 15, there is a grave inscription for ‘Anina the Little’ (אנינא/הקטן).²⁴ Beth She‘arim was a known place where many of the sages purportedly lived and were buried (in Catacomb 14, there is even the alleged tomb of Judah HaNasi). As Bauckham showed, there were figures in rabbinic Judaism who had the nickname ‘the Small’ (הקטן). One such Tannaitic sage was Shmuel HaKatan (סמואל הקטן, Samuel the Small) mentioned in m. Avot 4.19. But for Talmudic interpreters, הקטן was not necessarily an indicator of height but of humility: y. Sotah 9.13: ‘Why was he called “the Small”? Because he would make his bones small’ (לפי שהוא מקטין עצמו). Indeed, Talmudic traditions acknowledge his humility among the sages (e.g., b. Sanh. 11a; b. Sotah 48b; y. Sandh. 1.2). Thus, the use of הקטן in funerary inscriptions is by no means a clear reference to height. The epithet הקטן could be a reference to height or age or *disposition*.

Notwithstanding the late date of these inscriptions and the semantic ambiguity of corresponding Hebrew nicknames, this evidence is not contradicted wholesale by wider Mediterranean Greek language evidence, but rather bolstered, since Greek sources show that this pattern of nicknaming people based on their short stature occurred well before the fourth-century CE.

In ancient Greek sources, when μικρός without the definite article is attributed to a person, it often describes that person as being short, not young.²⁵ According to Origen, the later early Christian antagonist Celsus calls Jesus ‘little and ugly and undistinguished’ (μικρὸν καὶ δυσειδὲς καὶ ἀγεννὲς, Cels. 6.75). Similarly, Paul in the Acts of Paul and Thecla (Ath 3) describes Paul as being ‘a small man with regard to height’ (ἄνδρα μικρὸν τῷ μεγέθει).²⁶ Zacchaeus in the New Testament, of course, is described as being ‘short in stature’ (τῆ ἡλικίᾳ μικρός) in Luke 19.3.²⁷ Although Heinrich Meyer does not cite Deissmann, he reacts against the interpretation of ὁ μικρός as ‘the younger’ saying that it is based in arbitrariness, and instead appeals to Zacchaeus in Luke 19.3.²⁸ Meyer also draws attention to Homer, Il. 5.801 where Tydeus is described as being ‘short’

²³ Schwabe and Lifshitz, *Beth She‘arim*, 20.

²⁴ N. Avigad, ‘Excavations at Beth She‘arim, 1954: Preliminary Report’, *Israel Exploration Journal* 5, no. 4 (1955) 222.

²⁵ For the most detailed studies on short stature and dwarfism in the ancient Mediterranean see especially Véronique Dasen, *Dwarfs in Ancient Egypt and Greece*, Oxford Monographs on Classical Archaeology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Michael Garmaise, ‘Studies in the Representation of Dwarfs in Hellenistic and Roman Art’, PhD Dissertation (McMaster University, 1996); Alexandra F. Morris, ‘Plato’s Stepchildren: Disability in Ptolemaic Egypt and the Hellenistic World’, PhD Dissertation (Teesside University, 2022); Isaac T. Soon, *A Disabled Apostle: Impairment and Disability in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

²⁶ For the historical plausibility of traditions about Paul’s height see Isaac T. Soon, ‘The Short Apostle: The Stature of Paul in Light of 2 Cor 11:33 and the Acts of Paul and Thecla’, *Early Christianity* 12, no. 2 (2021) 159–78.

²⁷ For studies on Zacchaeus’ stature see Mikeal C. Parsons, ‘“Short in Stature”: Luke’s Physical Description of Zacchaeus’, *NTS* 47 (2001) 50–7; Anna Rebecca Solevåg, ‘Zacchaeus in the Gospel of Luke: Comic Figure, Sinner, and Included “Other”’, *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 14, no. 2 (2020) 225–40. On Jesus as being ‘the short one’ in Luke 19:3 see Isaac T. Soon, ‘The Little Messiah: Jesus as τῆ ἡλικίᾳ μικρός in Luke 19:3’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 142, no. 1 (2023) 151–70.

²⁸ Zahn also connects Mark 15.40 to Luke 19.3, Zahn, *Forschungen*, 346.

(μικρός) and Xenophon, *Cyr.* 8.4.20 where Cyrus says Chrysantas must marry a wife who is ‘short’ (μικρός).

With the definite article, however, ὁ μικρός was used as a recurring nickname in extant sources. Numerous figures in ancient Greek literature are given ὁ μικρός as a moniker. Aristophanes mentions a certain Cleigenes ‘the Short’ (Κλειγένης ὁ μικρός) in his play *Frogs* (*Ran.* 708). Socrates was known for referring to himself as ‘the short one’ (οὗτος ὁ αὐτὸς μικρός εἰμι, *Phaedo* 120e) with the Old Attic form of μικρός. Xenophon calls Aristodemus of Cydathenaeum ‘the one nicknamed “little”’ (τὸν μικρὸν ἐπικαλούμενον, *Mem.* 1.4.2), a description given also by Plato (cf. *Symp.* 137b). Aristotle mentions a certain Amyntas ‘the Little’ (Ἀμύντου τοῦ μικροῦ, *Pol.* 1311b1-19) who was attacked by a certain Derdas because he mocked his stature. Diogenes Laertius (*Lives* 1.4 Pittacus (79)) in his life of Pittacus of Mytilene refers to another person named Pittacus who was addressed as ‘(the) Short’ (ὃς καὶ μικρὸς προσηγορεύθη).

Figures in Greek epigrams are given ὁ μικρός as a satirical nickname to make fun of their height. For example, in epigrams from the first-century author Lucillius preserved in the Greek Anthology, μικρός is appended to names of those with extremely short stature. ‘Little Erotion’ is carried away by a mosquito (τὴν μικρὴν παίζουσαν Ἐρώτιον ἤρπασε κώνωψ, *Anth. pal.* 11.88).²⁹ ‘Little Marcus’ (Μάρκος ὁ μικρός) hangs himself on a fruit pit (*Anth. pal.* 11.90). ‘Little Macron’ strangles a mouse to death in its burrow (τὸν μικρὸν Μάκρωνα, *Anth. pal.* 11.95). In each of these instances, the name of a person is accompanied by the corresponding form of ὁ μικρός as a nickname about stature.

Finally, as with the use of ὁ μικρός (the Doric/Boeotian form of ὁ μικρός) and ἱσπῆ in some late antique Jewish epigraphy, ὁ μικρός is also used in Egyptian papyri to refer to children. In SB 5 7576 (Trismegistos 25302), a first- to second-century CE papyrus from the Elephantine region, a woman named Sennemonis sends a letter to Hatres about acknowledging receipt of bread and mantles. A certain ‘little Ammonis’ is the letter’s ending greeting: ‘The little Ammonis greets you’ (ἀσπάζεταί σε Ἀμμῶνις ὁ μικρός, l. 6).³⁰ It is possible that this is a nickname referring to an adult with short stature, but given the context, it may be an affectionate term for Sennemonis’ child (he shares the same theophoric root as her own, Amon). A similar situation can be found in SB 5 7572 (Trismegistos 27328), a second-century CE papyrus from Philadelphia (Arsinoites). Thermouthas writes to her mother, Valerias, and also acknowledging receipt of some items. She greets various family members and two girls whom she calls ‘little’: ‘the little Nikarous’ (Νικαροῦν τὴν μικράν) and ‘the little Taesis’ (Ταῆσιν τὴν μικράν).³¹ The affectionate language used—that she longs (l. 11, ἐπιθυμο = ἐπιθυμῶ) for members of her mother’s household—suggests a familial context, and it would be superfluous to have two members of a household with the nickname. There is also a third-century CE papyrus letter from Oxyrhynchus sent by Diogenis to her brother Alexander, PSI 9 1080 (Trismegistos 30667 = *Sel. Pap.* I 132), which mentions a boy named ‘little Theon’ (τὸν μικρὸν Θεῶνα).³² We know he is a boy because the papyrus mentions that eight toys have been brought for him. The use of ὁ μικρός in these Egyptian letters shows that it was not just used as a nickname for grown adults but also as an affectionate term for a young child. Children, of course, are short, so there is a natural reason why one would use ὁ μικρός as a term of endearment (cf. *Matt* 18.6, 10, 14).

Turning to Ἰάκωβος ὁ μικρός in *Mark* 15.40, what are the implications for the text of these wider uses of ὁ μικρός in Greek sources? Given the prevalence of using ὁ μικρός as a

²⁹ Text from *The Greek Anthology. Volume IV*, (W.R. Paton, trans; LCL; London: William Heinemann, 1918) 114–17.

³⁰ Text from <https://papyri.info/ddbdp/sb;5;7576/>.

³¹ Text from <https://papyri.info/hgv/27328>.

³² Text from <https://papyri.info/ddbdp/psi;9;1080>.

nickname for so many individuals in ancient Greek literature, if this James is considered an adult, readers would have understood the epithet to be a reference to his stature—his height—and not his relative age in relation to another person. If, however, one does not presume James is an adult, and that he is a little child, like Ioseph, Iouda, Ammonis, Nikarous, and Taesis mentioned above, then it is also possible that ὁ μικρός in Mark 15.40 is a term of endearment that does not concern comparative age ('younger').

One might argue that the use of ὁ μικρός as a term of endearment for a child suggests comparative age since, in the case of Mark 15.40, James is 'younger' than others, not least presumably the James mentioned in 6.3. However, the relative age of James ὁ μικρός only arises as an implication when 15.40 is put into dialogue with 6.3. It is not something that arises lexically from the semantics of ὁ μικρός and the immediate context of Mark 15.40. Following this logic, and if James is understood to be a child, while it is possible to infer that James is relatively 'younger' than his family around him—Mary and Joses—the semantics of the epithet ὁ μικρός are specifically an affectionate indication of his status as a little human. Following this pattern in ancient Greek sources, then, it is clear that Ἰάκωβος ὁ μικρός should not be translated as 'James the younger' but 'James the Short' or, if there are reasons to understand him as a child, 'Little James'.

It is more probable, in the opinion of this author, that ὁ μικρός is a nickname of affection rather than about height since the purpose of nicknames is to refer to already well-known individuals. Given that no one is known as James 'the short' in early Christianity, except in Mark 15.40, this person was probably not well known, and thus there was no need to give them a recognisable nickname. For this reason, it may be more likely an affective epithet.

With the possibility that James is a child, also comes the possibility that Mark preserves an affectionate title from the gospel tradition itself. It may be potentially a creation from Mark himself but to what end? What kind of historical validity would it bring to his *bios* other than to cause confusion (as it has at least among scholars of traditions about James). It may be more likely that this is something that arises from Mark himself or his sources, potentially even from Peter (if the Petrine origins of the Gospel are to be trusted). In the epigraphic sources, the affectionate use of ὁ μικρός is used by family members, relatives, or close family friends. In the case of Mark 15.40, this may suggest that the author (or at least the implied narrator) has personal knowledge or a personal connection with James' particular family.

Finally, if ὁ μικρός does suggest the James of Mark 15.40 is a child, then this is a clear indication that this is not the same James as Jesus' brother mentioned in Mark 6.3. In other words, if it is a term of affection for a little human, then it cannot be the ecclesial leader James, because James becomes a prominent leader in the early Jesus movement in the subsequent years after his death (Acts 15.13) and by the time of Paul's later ministry was among the elders in Jerusalem (Acts 21.18; cf. Gal 1.19). If he was born after Jesus, then he may have been in his 50s-60s at this time, and it would be hardly accurate to describe him with a term of endearment for children during the time of Jesus' crucifixion. This confirms the previous observations of past scholars that the title is meant to distinguish the James of 15.40 from 6.3. Or rather, more precisely, the title is meant to distinguish Mary, mother of James and Joses in 15.40, from the Mary in 6.3.

4 Conclusion

R.T. France argued that the sobriquet, ὁ μικρός, 'which is not used in the NT, suggests that this one [in Mark 15:40] was generally known in the church'.³³ The error of many previous

³³ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 664.

interpreters, however, has been to limit knowledge of such a nickname to early Christian communities, that it was a unique usage in the ancient world. This article has shown that ὁ μικρός is a common nickname in Greek sources to refer to a person's height and that it was an epithet of endearment to refer to beloved children. Additionally, the evidence provided by Adolf Deissmann to support a longstanding reading of ὁ μικρός as 'the younger' has proven to be less than reliable. The papyrus UPZ 2 181 does not refer to Nechoutes' age but rather his height. Deissmann's (following Leeman's) misinterpretation of μέσος as a feature of Nechoutes' and not Asotos' body disqualifies this evidence. Furthermore, Deissmann's appeal to the use of ὁ μικρός in 2 Chr 22.1 highlights a use of the expression to refer to someone who is the youngest, but which is also embedded in a wider semantic context where Ahaziah's age is explicitly contrasted with the ages of his elder brothers. This situation is different to the one in Mark 15.40. While relative age can be inferred from the use of ὁ μικρός in relation to other siblings, the use of ὁ μικρός in our sources shows that, semantically, it always refers to height, either height as a reference to physical size or height as an affectionate way of referring to a little human. The simplest and most accurate translation for Ἰάκωβος ὁ μικρός in Mark 15.40 is 'James the Short' or 'Little James' and not 'James the younger'.

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