

Considering the “Νεκρονόμικον”

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The *Necronomicon* is the most potent volume of eldritch writing yet known to modern scholarship. Rare and well-guarded, the only five known copies are kept variously at the British Museum, the Bibliotheque Nationale at Paris, and Universities Harvard, Miskatonic, and Buenos Aires. Although rumours of other copies surface from time to time, no one has yet successfully verified them, although some have lost their lives in the attempt.

The book was written originally in Arabic, by the mad poet of Damascus, Abdul Al’Hazred. Its original title was *Kitab Al Azif*, which is the Arabic term for “the howling of demons.” This term, which is quite provocative and, as initiates might say, highly appropriate, has been called by some scholars nothing more than a nervous description of the sound made at night by swarms of desert crickets which inhabit the sand dunes of the East.

The Arabic edition, however, whether for good or for ill, has been lost to us, and the title by which the book is now called comes from the Greek translation made by Theodorus Philetas circa 950 A.D. The Greek title (transliterated into Roman letters) “*Necronomicon*,” which is by now so familiar, is also, it seems, the object of profound confusion to scholars the world over. While I cannot profess to have the definitive answers to all questions surrounding the meaning of the title, I would like to present an idea or two which may lead the discerning to insight.

The Greek language, as its students will tell you, is replete with subtleties and multiple definitions. Some words have curious and fascinating double-meanings: for instance, ὁ κόσμος means both “universe” and “ornament;” πάσχω means both “suffer” and “experience;” ὁ πόνος means both “pain” and “work.” In addition to its richness of meanings, Greek has many grammatical forms which are very similar to each other. In many cases, due to the contraction or aspiration of certain letters, it can become impossible to tell a participle from its verb, and even, in some instances, a verb from a similar noun. These features of Greek can become a pitfall for even the best translator, and they seem to have ensnared many *Necronomicon* scholars.

Of the gentlemen who have published their conclusions concerning the derivation of the title, not one has differed concerning its first two syllables. They clearly and uncontestably come from the Greek word νέκρoς, meaning “corpse” or “the dead.” But, unfortunately, after this point opinions differ.

According to Mr. Howard P. Lovecraft, the derivation is: νέκρoς, “the dead;” νόμος, “law;” εἶκoν, “image.” Or, “An Image of the Law of the Dead.” This derivation is tempting, but there are difficulties that other scholars have perceived. At best, such a translation could only be considered very liberal, since Mr. Lovecraft seems to have been satisfied with Greek words that sound like they might be words from the title, without regard to grammar.

Mr. Colin Wilson and his associates offer an alternative to this derivation. According to them, the title’s etymology is much simpler, being: νέκρoς, “the dead;” νόμος, “name.” Or, “The Book of Dead Names.” As you can see, νόμος means both “law” and “name.” This derivation, however, is sadly incomplete, as it leaves two syllables (...ικoν) — fully one third of the word — unaccounted for.

There is no such problem in the findings of Mr. George T. Wetzell, whose derivation is based on a study of the title *Astronomica*, an astronomical poem in Latin by Manilius, 1st century A.D. The similarities between *Astronomica* (or *Astronomicon*) and *Necronomicon* yield the following: νέκρoς, “the dead;” νέμω, “to consider;” ικoν, neuter adjectival suffix. Or, “Considering the Dead.” This is by far the best of the three attempts at derivation. It is grammatical, consistent with logic, and perfectly transliteratable when you consider that an alternative form of the verb νέμω, is the verb νομίζω.

My own contribution to the ongoing debate is small, but takes into account a minor fact which I believe none of the aforementioned scholars has considered. *Necronomicon* is supposed to be a **translation** of the original Arabic title, *Kitab Al Azif*. But none of the three derivations explained above—Image of the Law of the Dead, Book of Dead Names, or Considering the Dead—seems to bear much resemblance in meaning to “the howling of demons.”

I would like, therefore, to offer a fourth possible derivation of *Necronomicon*: νέκρoς, “the dead;” νόμος, “song;” ικoν, neuter adjectival suffix. Νόμος is a very versatile Greek word. While it means both “law” and “name,” it also means “song,” and if we take that to be its meaning in this case, the title can be translated as “the song of the dead,” which comes much closer in meaning to “the howling of demons” than anything so far set forth.

Like the book itself, the title alone of the *Necronomicon* is shrouded in mystery. The questions surrounding its true meaning could probably only be answered by Theodorus Philetas or Al’Hazred, both long dead. However, given the fact that the book and the dark spells it contains even exist, I wouldn’t completely rule out the possibility that those answers might one day be had.

