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THE LANGUAGE MILIEU OF FIRST-CENTURY PALESTINE

ITS BEARING ON THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE GOSPEL TRADITION

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PROFESSOR H. E. W. Turner's seventh criterion by which historicity in the gospels is to be judged is that the closer the language is to the style and idiom of Aramaic, the greater the presumption of authenticity.¹ This has been a working principle of gospel criticism for some time. But Cyril Tennant has cautioned that the compilers of the gospel traditions were probably as Aramaic as Jesus and would therefore lapse naturally into its idioms, whether the traditions be authentic or not and whether they were being passed on or created.² That note of caution is needed; nevertheless Aramaisms do create a presumption in favor of earliness and of origin in or near Palestine (that is, in an Aramaic milieu). Therefore, unless one can conceive of wholesale fabrication and radical warping of the gospel tradition, in the very places and at the very time eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry lived, Aramaisms do increase the likelihood of historicity.

The purpose of this article, however, is to argue that the reverse is not true. The absence of Aramaisms (or more broadly, Semitisms) does not militate against authenticity. The opposite to the foregoing statement has also been a working principle of some gospel criticism, but it now stands condemned by archeological discoveries and by close examination of the gospel texts themselves.

The language situation in Palestine during NT times has long been a subject for debate. Thusfar in the present century the Aramaists, led by A. Meyer, G. Caiman, A. J. Wensinck, J. Jeremias, P. Kahle, M. Black, and C. C. Torrey, have been in the ascendancy. Protests in favor of Hebrew have been made by M. H. Segal, J. M. Grintz, and H. Birkeland.³ Proponents of Greek have not been so vocal as A.

¹ *Historicity and the Gospels*, reviewed in *ExpT*, 75 (1963), p. 3.

² *ExpT*, 75 (1963), p. 95.

³ Segal, *A Grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew*, pp. 16 f. (cf. T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus*², pp. 46 ff.); Grintz, *JBL*, 79 (1960), pp. 32–47; Birkeland, *The Language of Jesus* (Oslo, 1954). The debate about the kind of Hebrew that was possibly spoken is irrelevant to the point of this article.

Roberts and T. K. Abbott in the last century,⁴ but have not been lacking.⁵ Special mention should be made of S. Lieberman's notable contribution, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*.⁶ Here he has shown, largely from rabbinical sources, that Hellenism (including the use of Greek) had deeply penetrated all classes of Jews in Palestine.

It is not the purpose of this article to enumerate or evaluate the arguments pro and con.⁷ The present writer would observe, however, that usually the strongest arguments in favor of conflicting views are left largely unrefuted, the weight of discussion being put on evidence favorable to the author's viewpoint.⁸ This has happened for a very good reason: proof now exists that *all three languages* in question — Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek — were commonly used by Jews in first century Palestine. We are not dealing with an either/or, but with a both/and.

A difficulty has been that scholars were forced to infer their views from scattered literary intimations. But now we have archeological data at hand to settle the question. In this respect, NT scholarship must not lag behind archeological discovery — a contention rightly pressed in the field of OT studies by the Albright school.

J. T. Milik notes the presence of Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew on ossuaries dating from NT times.⁹ Excavations by the Franciscans on Mt. Olivet have unearthed ossuaries predating the Jewish war (A.D. 66–73). On seven of these ossuaries the language is Hebrew, on eleven it is Aramaic, and on eleven it is Greek.¹⁰

⁴ Roberts, *Greek the Language of Christ and His Apostles*; Abbott, *Essays on the Original Texts of the Old and New Testaments*, pp. 129–82.

⁵ J. P. Mahaffy, *The Progress of Hellenism in Alexander's Empire*, pp. 128 ff.; A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, pp. 26 ff.; G. A. Smith, in R. O. P. Taylor, *The Groundwork of the Gospels*, pp. 91–95; R. O. P. Taylor, *ibid.*, pp. 5 ff., 96–105; *idem*, *ExpT*, 56 (1944/45), pp. 95–97; T. Nicklin, *Gospel Gleanings*, pp. 290 ff.; A. W. Argyle, *ExpT*, 75 (1964), pp. 113 f. Cf. a well-balanced treatment from the last century by Hug, *Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 326 ff.

⁶ Lieberman was not the first to gather evidence for the use of Greek from rabbinical literature. See A. Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, I, pp. 29 f.; and also W. L. Knox in the Schweich Lectures delivered the same year that Lieberman's study was published (*Some Hellenistic Elements in Primitive Christianity*, pp. 30 ff.).

⁷ For surveys up to their respective times, see A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, pp. 269 ff.; and W. C. Allen, in *Studies in the Synoptic Problem*, pp. 288 ff.

⁸ A classic example is Dalman's well-known chapter on the three languages in *Jesus-Jeshua*, pp. 1–37. His own discussion of Greek contains evidence that it was used much more than he is willing to admit or attempts to refute.

⁹ *Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judaea*, pp. 130 f.

¹⁰ B. Bagatti and J. T. Milik, *Gli scavi del "Dominus Flevit," La necropoli del periodo romano* (Jerusalem, 1958) — summarized and evaluated by R. de Vaux, *RB*, 66 (1959), pp. 299–301.

Whatever the correct interpretation of the Talpioth ossuaries,¹¹ of significance to the thesis of this article are the use of the Greek alphabet, the Greek form of the name “Jesus,” and the mixture of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek inscriptions on the ossuaries.

N. Avigad notes that on ossuaries in a first-century tomb discovered in 1941 by E. L. Sukenik and himself, eight out of twelve personal names were Greek, most of them never before found in Palestine. Eight of the ossuaries have Greek inscriptions, one inscription is bilingual (Greek and Hebrew), and one is in Hebrew. Even though Avigad’s conjecture that the tomb belonged to a family of the diaspora from Cyrenaica seems probable, we still have evidence of a mixed language milieu — if for no other reason than the influx of the diaspora into Palestine.¹²

Sukenik mentions the presence of Greek as well as Hebrew and Aramaic on many ossuaries in other finds.¹³ Similarly, the ossuaries discovered long ago by Charles Clermont-Ganneau on the Mount of Olives near Bethany bore both Hebrew and Greek inscriptions.¹⁴ One would think that in the presence of death a language of the heart would have been used, a language in which people habitually thought and spoke. Yet all three languages in question appear on the ossuary finds in roughly equal proportions.

Y. Yadin’s recent Dead Sea expedition brought to light fifteen letters dating from the Bar-Kokhba revolt. These letters again employ Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. They show that Bar-Kokhba’s officers understood these languages and suggest the use of these languages among the people of Palestine at large. In a re-excavation later in Yadin’s expedition, a large number of additional documents of other kinds (contracts, receipts, etc.) were found — written yet again in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.¹⁵

It is striking that such finds have been made in Southern Palestine. Scholars have always recognized that Galilean Jews, farther removed from the center of Judaism, closer to gentile areas like the Decapolis,

¹¹ See E. L. Sukenik, *American Journal of Archaeology*, 51 (1947), pp. 351–65; B. Gustafsson, *NTS*, 3 (1956/57), pp. 65–69; D. Fishwick, *NTS*, 10 (1963), pp. 49–61, and other literature cited by Fishwick, p. 51, n. 3.

¹² *Israel Exploration Journal*, 12 (1962), pp. 1–12.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 363 f. See also, S. Klein, *Jüdisch-palaestin. Corpus Inscriptionum* (1920), pp. 8 ff.; Lieberman, *op. cit.*, pp. 30, 37–39; H. J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome*, p. 75 — cited by Fishwick, *op. cit.*, p. 53, n. 1.

¹⁴ C. Clermont-Ganneau, *Palestine Exploration Fund: Quarterly Statement* (London, 1874), pp. 7–10, Fishwick, *op. cit.*, p. 50, cites in addition *Archaeological Researches in Palestine*, 1 (1899), pp. 331 ff., but the present writer has been unable to check that reference.

¹⁵ Y. Yadin, *Biblical Archaeologist*, 24 (1961), pp. 34–50, 86–95. See also a preliminary report by M. Wallenstein, *The Guardian* (Manchester, Saturday, February 4, 1961), p. 6.

and located on the Via Maris trade route, were more hellenized than Judean Jews. Yet the archeological discoveries show that even in the South Greek was commonly used. How much more likely it is, then, that Jesus the Galilean, and the apostles, who were predominantly if not exclusively Galilean, commonly used Greek in addition to the Semitic tongues.¹⁶ If so, much of the gospel tradition may have been originally cast into Greek as well as Aramaic and Hebrew molds.

The hardcore archeological evidence receives confirmation from close examination of the synoptic texts themselves. In what attempted to be an exhaustive survey of the OT quotation material shared by Matthew and the other synoptics, the present writer found that excepting the formal quotations in the Markan tradition and including the large number of allusive OT quotations, the synoptic quotation material exhibits a mixed text form.¹⁷ Apparently the explicit quotations in the Markan tradition became hellenized exactly because they were explicit. They stood out, were recognized, and were assimilated to the Septuagint. The mass of allusive quotations escaped assimilation precisely because they were allusive. Beneath the surface, overlooked, and hard-to-be-changed because they were grammatically tied to nonquotation material, the allusive quotations did not become hellenized. Even within single quotations their mixed text form shows affinities with both the Septuagint (Greek) and the Semitic forms of the OT (original Hebrew, Aramaic targums, and Syriac Peshitta), just like the mixed text form of Matthew's well-known formula citations.¹⁸

We are not dealing with partial hellenization of an originally pure Semitic quotation tradition, because the very point of the quotation sometimes rests on the Septuagint against the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac readings. The mixture appears to be original to the tradition. And since the allusive quotations are worked into the very warp and woof of the synoptic tradition, they belong to its earliest stage so far as

¹⁶ Cf. the Greek names *Andrew* and *Philip* within the circle of the twelve, and Dalman's admission, "Anyone brought up in Bethsaida would not only have understood Greek, but would also have been polished by intercourse with foreigners and have had some Greek culture" (*Sacred Sites and Ways*, p. 165). Philip, Andrew, and Peter came from Bethsaida. John 12:21 takes for granted Philip understood Greek when he was approached by the Greeks who asked to see Jesus.

¹⁷ Robert H. Gundry, "The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel with special emphasis on the Messianic Hope." unpublished doctoral dissertation presented to the University of Manchester, 1961.

¹⁸ The mixed text-form of the many allusive Old Testament quotations kills the school-hypothesis of K. Stendahl by destroying the distinctiveness of the mixed text-form in Matthew's formula-citations, the *sine qua non* of Stendahl's hypothesis (*The School of St. Matthew*, Lund, 1954). With a very few exception, Stendahl pays no attention to the numerous allusive quotations in the synoptics. See further the writer's doctoral dissertation mentioned above.

that can be ascertained by us. It is surely significant, then, that this early quotation material exhibits the same threefold language milieu which archeological data should have taught us to expect. That the trilingual mixture in the synoptic quotations (except formal quotations in the Markan tradition] agrees with the physical evidence for a trilingual situation, in first-century Palestine suggests first-century Palestine as the origin of the gospel tradition, for where else were these three languages used alongside one another?

Just as the Dead Sea scrolls have shown that thought forms once considered extra-Palestinian and hellenistic were in fact current within the Judaism of NT times, so also the evidence just reviewed shows that even the Greek language form was current in NT Palestine. The upshot of both the archeological and the textual evidence is that although Semitisms in the evangelic tradition create a presumption of early date, reflect Palestine origin, and therefore increase the likelihood of authenticity, the absence of Semitisms does not lessen the possibility of authenticity. For those parts of the evangelic tradition which display an absence of Semitisms may have received their very first expression in Greek — in Palestine at an early date.

But even the presence of Semitisms does not necessarily indicate an Aramaic (or Hebrew) substratum. It may only indicate a style of Semitic Greek in which the tradition was first expressed. Anyone who has lived in a bilingual or a trilingual area knows that in such situations the spoken languages interpenetrate one another. And the Septuagintal translation Greek so full of Semitisms must have exerted a powerful influence on the style of Greek spoken by the Jews.

Thus, we can be sure that the tradition about Jesus was expressed from the very first in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. But to assign particular parts of the tradition to one or the other of the language forms is an even more delicate task than has been imagined. At least we cannot naively work on the assumption that everything was originally in Aramaic, that we should seek Aramaic equivalents wherever possible, and that wherever Aramaic equivalents cannot be traced we must reject authenticity. Whether we like it or not, the matter is a great deal more complex. But with the added complications of a trilingual milieu in first-century Palestine, there is the compensation that parts of the gospel tradition which may have sounded too hellenistic to be authentic may be authentic after all, and that many of the dominical sayings in the present Greek text of the gospels may be closer to the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus than has been supposed. Many may, in fact, be identical with dominical sayings originally spoken in Greek.