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WERE THE GOSPELS WRITTEN IN GREEK OR ARAMAIC?

WE WISH to enquire if the old and generally accepted view that all four canonical Gospels were written originally in Greek can still be held. That view in recent times has been controverted, especially by M.-J. Lagrange and C. C. Torrey, mainly because of the internal evidence of the Gospels themselves, but partly also because of an ancient church tradition concerning Matthew, which may have some truth in it.

While it is almost universally agreed that the sources of the Gospels, written or oral, must in many cases have been in Aramaic, e.g., the hypothetical source of Matthew and Luke known as "Q" (which T. W. Manson suggests was Aramaic) and the special sources behind the Gospels known as "M" and "L", nevertheless it is also felt that Lagrange and Torrey have not proved their case for the Gospels themselves.

I. ST. MARK

There seems to have been no early tradition in the Church that Mark was a translation, but C. C. Torrey alleges a number of "mistranslations" which, he believes, indicate a Semitic original of which the Greek version is a translation. C. F. Burney, however,¹ shows that the Aramaic colouring of this Gospel is not so striking as that of the Fourth Gospel. "What is needed", he writes, "to substantiate the theory of an Aramaic original for Mark is some cogent evidence of mistranslation, and this has not yet been advanced."²

On the other hand, the reader of Mark's Greek cannot fail to notice his extraordinary fondness for the historic present tense, and to suspect that it translates an Aramaic participle. Other Aramaic tinges are the use of the participle with the verb "to be", as a periphrasis for the past tense, instead of aorist or imperfect, as well as several instances of the un-Greek practice of omitting a connecting word (known grammatically as *asyndeton*). In the realm of grammar, the reader would also notice Mark's fondness for *καί* and for *πάλιν* and for *εὐθύς*, reminding

¹In *The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel* (1922).

²*Op. cit.*, p. 19.

him of the Hebrew *Waw Consecutive*, and the recitative $\delta\tau\iota$, and $\pi\omicron\lambda\lambda\acute{\alpha}$ used adverbially.

So overpowering is this evidence that scholars before the time of Torrey, like Allen and Wellhausen, believed that it indicated actual translation of an originally Aramaic Gospel.

It was not until comparatively recently, when we can read in comfort the copies of the less-educated papyri dating from New Testament times, that we were able to shake ourselves free of the feeling that Mark's Gospel must be a translation. These contemporary documents of the Greek spoken and written by the masses, show plainly that Mark's is by no means an unusual style of Greek, and not so Semitic after all. His use of semi-slang words is sometimes very expressive, as when he renders the Lord's rebuke to the unclean spirit, as, "Put a muzzle upon yourself!" (i. 25). This may not sound unusual to-day because our language has been drenched with such highly metaphorical expressions, but in matter-of-fact Greek the figure strikes the reader with much vividness. The Holy Spirit has here set a seal upon the language of the common people.

In actual fact, Mark's Semitisms are usually due to an over-use of an uncommon Greek idiom (perfectly sound Greek, nevertheless) which happens also to be sound Aramaic.¹ Mark, a Jew, would naturally fall into those Greek idioms which reminded him most of his native Aramaic. These idioms, alleged to be Semitic, are found in the language of the ordinary Greek-speaking man of the day, where the possibility of Semitic influence is negligible. For instance, the Markan $\beta\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\pi\epsilon\tau\epsilon \acute{\alpha}\pi\omicron$ occurs in a papyrus document in a quaint connection. Warning his friend in A.D. 41 against money-lenders, a man writes: $\sigma\upsilon \beta\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\pi\epsilon \sigma\alpha\tau\omicron\nu \acute{\alpha}\pi\omicron \tau\omicron\nu \textit{'}\textit{I}\textit{ou}\textit{d}\textit{a}\textit{i}\textit{a}\textit{i}\textit{on}$. "Surely", as Dr. Moulton humorously observes in bringing this instance forward, "it was no Jew who gave this warning to his friend!" Or again, the word "behold" ($\textit{i}\textit{d}\textit{o}\textit{u}$), of which Mark is so fond, is perfectly good Attic Greek in itself, but Mark and other New Testament writers used it with such facility because they were accustomed to an equivalent in their own Aramaic language. Dr. Moulton reminds us, in his *Prolegomena*, that the Welshman who over-uses the word "Indeed!" is a parallel case with Mark. He uses a perfectly good word of his second language, and yet he uses it because it also happens to be the same as a word in his

¹According to Moulton's *Grammar*.

native Welsh. The double *δύο* ("by twos") is yet another instance (Mark vi. 7).

To Dr. Moulton's discussion we may add, in further illustration, that the word *εὐθύς*, of which Mark makes excessive use, is also a perfectly good Greek word, and would never give rise to the suspicion of Semitic influence unless other indications had pointed to it. It has been suggested¹ that the over-use of such a word in Mark goes back to Peter's graphic way of giving the Gospel story by word of mouth in Rome; or that Mark wished by its repeated use to suggest something of the strain of the Lord's ministry. There is thus, if this suggestion holds good, no need to bring in the question of Semitic influence at all—except perhaps in this way: Mark would fall instinctively into using such a phrase because in his native Aramaic it had its own idiomatic counterpart.

In an Appendix on Semitisms in Moulton's *Grammar*² Dr. W. F. Howard expresses agreement with Lagrange that Mark's Greek is translation-Greek, but the point at issue goes further than that. Did Mark do the translating, or was he translated? Dr. Howard's opinion of the evidence is that the undoubted Semitisms in Mark's Greek are to be partly explained by the fact that he is translating here and there an Aramaic catechetical system. Papias seems to indicate that Mark himself was a catechist (*ὀπιηέτης*), so that his Gospel may therefore be based on the teaching which Mark was accustomed to give in Aramaic to young converts.

While it thus seems likely that some of Mark's sources were Aramaic in the first instance and Palestinian in origin, there is not sufficient evidence that he himself wrote in anything but Greek. Even in the matter of possible oral sources in Aramaic, the assumption that our Lord and the Apostles spoke and wrote in Aramaic must not be too easily made. Except in exclusively Jewish circles Greek was probably the regular language of Palestine, even though it were a kind of Jewish Greek.

II. ST. MATTHEW

Zahn, the conservative German scholar, thought that this Gospel was originally written in Aramaic; but Matthew's

¹By C. H. Turner in Gore's *New Commentary*, on Mark i. 10.

²Vol. II. Appendix.

language, unlike Mark's, is nothing like translation-Greek. An ancient translation usually betrays itself to the eye of a linguistic expert in vocabulary or syntax, but Matthew's Greek passes such a test. It is the ordinary Hellenistic. The student finds it easier to render back into Greek than any other New Testament book, for the style is simple and colourless and quite what one would expect. Dr. Howard notes that most of the alleged Aramaisms which Lagrange produces in evidence of an Aramaic original are found in the teaching of Jesus Himself and thus cannot be taken as evidence for the whole Gospel. The nearest Matthew gets to Semitic influence is in the parallelism, so characteristic of Hebrew poetry, found in the teaching of Jesus in this Gospel.¹ This can be accounted for easily enough by supposing that one or more of Matthew's sources were in Aramaic or Hebrew. Perhaps the hypothetical "Q" and "M" were in Aramaic, but hardly the Gospel itself.

To Irenaeus (about A.D. 180) can be traced an ancient church tradition—found also in Origen, Eusebius, and Jerome—that Matthew writes for Hebrews in Hebrew. Cyril of Jerusalem voices the same belief: "Matthew, who wrote the Gospel in the Hebrew tongue". Epiphanius also: "And this Matthew writes the Gospel in Hebrew and preaches, and begins not from the beginning but gives the genealogy from Abraham". We may dismiss this tradition, however. It is doubtless founded partly upon some words of Papias: "Matthew composed the Logia in the Hebrew language". Whatever Papias was referring to, whether one of Matthew's sources or a Book of Testimonies from the Old Testament, it is hardly possible that it was the Gospel of Matthew—unless Papias really did suppose that Matthew's Gospel was written in Hebrew or Aramaic. But it is quite likely that a customs clerk, like the Apostle, wrote down the Lord's "oracular utterances" (Logia) even as they fell from His lips, and that it is such a collection as this that Papias means. Perhaps, too, the tradition of a Hebrew Gospel of Matthew rose partly from the fact of the existence of apocryphal gospels in Jewish-Christian circles which were closely akin to Matthew's. There was, for instance, the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*, written in Aramaic, and clearly based on Matthew, which Jerome does in fact mistakenly identify with Matthew, though it is now known, from recently discovered fragments, that this book had nothing

¹Cp. especially the Parable of the Two Builders, in the Sermon on the Mount.

to do with the Apostle. But Jerome and Papias may not have known this. Hence the tradition.

III. ST. LUKE

There can be no doubt of the pronounced Hebraic flavour of the phraseology of chapters i and ii, after the preface, and perhaps Luke did translate a Semitic original here. More probably the old-world atmosphere, so fitting to the subject matter of these two chapters, is purposely and skilfully produced by Luke in imitation of the Greek of his Bible, the Septuagint. This is the opinion of Dr. W. F. Howard, who finds nothing in these chapters which could not have been composed by one who was steeped in the diction of the Greek version of the Psalms.

The rest of Luke's Gospel shows very little sign of a Semitic original. The exceptions are some of the utterances of our Lord, where an Aramaic document may be detected behind the Greek,¹ and suggest that Luke's source for this was either in Aramaic or was itself a translation therefrom. The general Semitic tone of the Gospel, in which the LXX is freely quoted and is allowed to colour its phraseology, is not so much due to translation as to Luke's feeling that a "Biblical" style was more fitting for a narration of Jesus's words and deeds than the somewhat artificial Greek of the educated man of the day. Probably when Luke wrote, the words and deeds of Jesus, and the records of them, were already being regarded as equally inspired and sacred with the Old Testament. So reverence alone might have compelled Luke to write in a somewhat Hebraic style.

IV. ST. JOHN

Just as a reading of Mark leaves us with the impression of a translated document, so does a reading of the Fourth Gospel, though for different reasons. It is the simple structure of the sentences and the lovely haunting cadences which strike us here, and remind us so convincingly of Hebrew thought and syntax. C. F. Burney² believes this Gospel to be a literal translation of an Aramaic original; thus only, he feels, can the many un-Greek idioms be explained. In *The Poetry of Our Lord* this expert

¹E.g., the word *διχοτομησαι* in Matt. xxiv. 54 and Luke xii. 46 ("to cut in pieces") makes poor sense as it stands, and must be due, suggests Torrey, to misunderstanding on the part of Matthew or Luke or their source or their translators (if they wrote in Aramaic) of some Aramaic phrase. The Aramaic *pēsag* has been suggested.

²In *The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel* (1922).

Semitic and Greek scholar (rare combination!) suggests that much of the teaching of our Lord in John's Gospel falls naturally into Semitic poetry as soon as it is translated into Aramaic. Other scholars, however, feel that with the exception of a few verses the Greek style is too uniform and facile to be a translation.¹

It is to Adolf Deissmann that we are indebted for the most original suggestion about the language of John's Gospel. This well-known and erudite scholar—in accordance with his general thesis on the Greek of the New Testament—denies that the Gospel is a translation. It was originally composed in Greek, and the style is none other than the popular Hellenistic of the day. He points out how even the failure of the author to decline the adjective *πλήρης* is not a Hebraism, as was once thought, but is often found in contemporary Hellenistic Greek. Thus the Greek of John is correct, but very, very simple; the only convincing Semitic tinge would seem to be the priority of the verb in the sentence. Even here, however, Dr. J. H. Moulton agrees with Deissmann, and is not convinced of Aramaic influence. The striking simplicity of the syntax, with its short sentences, lack of subordinate clauses, and the constant repetition of "and", is certainly remarkable, but it will become less so if the student will read some of the Egyptian papyri recently unearthed, and see the same style there. These writings are certainly not translations, nor are they written by persons steeped in Semitic influence. Thus will be brought home to the reader the impressive fact that such a lofty monument of devotion as the Fourth Gospel uses nothing more than the simple expression of everyday speech. Deissmann calls it the "Apostolic popular style",² and has collected examples of this narrative style from Egyptian papyri.

But Deissmann makes the further original suggestion that this had already become a cult-style; its impressive and haunting character would be well suited for use in the sanctuary, and a similar style is in fact found in some fragments belonging to the cult of Isis. One could readily agree that the Johannine short verses would sound very well if chanted in the assembly of the saints, and it may well be that Deissmann is right in suggesting the Gospel according to St. John was originally intended for use in church services. In any case it was written in Greek.

¹E. C. Colwell, for instance, in *The Greek of the Fourth Gospel* (1931), denies that there is any evidence for the least trace of Aramaic influence in St. John's Greek style.

²In *The N.T. in the Light of Recent Research* (1930), the stimulating volume to which this whole passage refers.

Has the subject under discussion any relevance for the Christian believer who is not able to appreciate the significance of linguistic studies?

We believe it has. At least this much can be said. If it were proved that the Gospels were not written in Greek, then the believer is robbed of these Scriptures as they were originally penned, for Aramaic is such an utterly different language from Greek that it would not be possible to reconstruct them in their original form. This would be an untold calamity, and surely not in keeping with God's purposes in giving to man this revelation of Himself by His Word. Man would, it is true, still have a general idea of the contents of the Gospels, but not the life-giving Word itself as it fell from the pens of inspired authors. We would not be able to analyse it so carefully; we would see it "through a glass darkly".

It is hoped that this essay will help to show that we do indeed in all four Gospels see God's Word "face to face".

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