Aramaic or Hebrew behind the Greek Gospels?

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1. The Semitic substratum of the Gospels

Jesus' teaching was originally set forth in a Semitic language; the first traditions about him, too, are likely to have been formulated in Hebrew or Aramaic. But the Gospels are written in Greek.

The language situation in Jewish Palestine during the 1st century is complex: at least four different languages were in use, Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin.[1] Latin, however, was used almost exclusively among Roman soldiers. Greek was more widely spoken, both as a vehicular, international language (comparable to English today), and as the native language of Jews from the Diaspora. It is well possible that Jesus, and some of his disciples, knew at least some Greek. But when teaching the masses, discussing the law with the Pharisees, or simply conversing with fellow Jews, Jesus would not have used Greek. Nor would the disciples, or other followers of Jesus, have told their stories about him in Greek. The roots of the gospel tradition, and its early transmission history, go back to a Semitic milieu.

The Semitic origin of the Gospels is well illustrated by the foreign words that are occasionally put upon the lips of Jesus or his followers : *talitha qum*, 'little girl, get up'; *qorban*, 'offering'; *rabbuni*, 'Master'; *eli eli lama sabachtani*, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' These expressions are particularly frequent in Mark.[2] They serve to give some *couleur locale* to the narrative. It is as if Mark wanted to remind his reader : 'I'm telling the story in Greek, but please remember that Jesus was speaking a Semitic language'. Other telltale indications of a Semitic origin are found in the Gospels: sometimes the grammatical construction is unusual in Greek (e.g. 'they rejoiced with great joy', Matt 2:10), or Greek words are used in uncommon ways (e.g. 'if the salt becomes foolish', Matt 5:13). In such instances we meet, so to say, with Hebrew or Aramaic expressions in Greek dress.

What this amounts to is a certain distance between the original formulation of Jesus' words and deeds and the account of these words and deeds in the Gospels. Apart from the passing

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[1] J. A. Fitzmyer, "The Languages of Palestine in the First Century AD", CBQ 32 (1970), 501-531.

[2] See, e.g., H. P. Rüger, "Die lexicalischen Aramaismen im Markusevangelium", in H. Cancik, ed., *Markus-Philologie*, WUNT 33 (Tübingen 1984), 73-84.

of time between the original events and the writing of the Gospels, there is a linguistic factor. Sometime during the history of tradition, the material has been translated, from the Semitic into Greek. Now, translation is never neutral. Translation always results in loss of meaning, and, what is more, addition of new meaning. Many New Testament scholars are little exercised by this. They see it as their task to explain the Greek text of the Gospels as they find it. A minority of scholars, however, Gustav Dalman, for instance, or Joachim Jeremias, to name only two, have been intrigued by the possibility to reach beyond the Greek form of the gospel material back to a more original Semitic formulation.[3] By retranslating, so to say, the Greek into the original Semitic, it should be possible to come closer to what Jesus actually said, and to understand it better.

2. Aramaic or Hebrew?

Since the end of the 19th century, most scholars who have dealt with these questions have set out from the assumption that Jesus and his disciples spoke Aramaic. The two most important arguments for the choice of Aramaic over Hebrew have been, firstly, the fact that the Semitic words contained in the Gospels (*talitha qum*, etc.) are Aramaic and not Hebrew, and, secondly, the idea that Hebrew had died out as a spoken language among the Jews well before the time of Jesus—in day-to-day life, so it was held, the Jews spoke Aramaic, while Hebrew had become a dead language (somewhat like Latin in Europe in the Middle Ages).

The 'Aramaic approach' of the Gospels has had a certain appeal. Many passages in the Gospels have been explained from Aramaic usage, often with success. A somewhat dated, but still very useful, collection of material is Matthew Black's book, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*, originally published in 1946, revised and expanded in 1954 and 1967, and reprinted in 1998. The idea that some of the words of Jesus may have been formulated in Hebrew, not Aramaic, is given little credence in this work. And the same is true in research done after Black, notably in studies by J. Fitzmyer,[4] and up to the most recent work by Maurice Casey.[5]

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[3] E.g., G. Dalman, *Die Worte Jesu* (Leipzi 1898); J. Jeremias, *Abba: Studien zur neutestamentlichen Theologienund Zeitgeschichte* (Göttingen 1966).

[4] Conveniently collected in one volume titled *The Semitic Background of the New Testament* (Livonia MI 1997).

[5] See M. Casey, *An Aramaic Approach to Q*, SNTS.MS 122 (Cambridge 2002) and earlier studies listed there.

And yet, as has been pointed out by a number of scholars,[6] at least the second argument for Aramaic and against Hebrew as the language of Jesus has been voided by recent research. Specialists have known for several decades that Hebrew did not die out as a living language until the 2nd century AD.[7] In the time of Jesus, Hebrew was actively spoken and written, alongside Aramaic, by many Palestinian Jews. The view that Hebrew was, at this period, a dead language, used only in liturgy and in the study of Torah, a language artificially kept alive by the Rabbis, is out-of-date. If the Qumran texts and Rabbinic literature are formulated mostly in Hebrew this is not because the writers wanted to imitate the Bible, but because Hebrew was their native language. It is true that an Aramaic translation, a Targum, of the Torah and of some other books, existed in the 1st century AD. But the original *raison d'être* of the Targum was not to make the Bible accessible to the masses that had forgotten their Hebrew. It is doubtful whether the Targum was at all read in the synagogue during the time of Jesus.[8] Rather, the Aramaic translation was probably used as a tool in the Jewish school: a translation is the shortest possible form of commentary.[9] Biblical Hebrew had indeed become a language that needed to be learned; post-biblical Hebrew dialects, however, were widely spoken. And although the precise relation between Hebrew and Aramaic is not clear, it is certainly correct to state that Jewish Palestine was a bilingual country.

It is credible, then, to submit that Jesus could speak Hebrew as well as Aramaic. He could. But did he? At this point it is well to interrogate once more the Semitic words transmitted by the gospels. Many of them—like *talitha qum* and *lama sabachthani*—are indeed exclusively Aramaic; others however could be Hebrew too: *korban, rabbi, abba*; and some very few words, notably *hosanna* (said by the crowds) and *amen*, are in fact Hebrew and not Aramaic.

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[6] See, e.g., H. Birkeland, *The Language of Jesus* (Oslo 1954); J. M. Grintz, "Hebrew as the spoken and written language in the last days of the Second Temple", *JBL* 79 (1960), 32-47; P. Lapide, "Insights from Qumran into the Languages of Jesus", *Revue de Qumran* 8 (1972-76), p. 483-501.

[7] See, e.g., the summary of J. Barr, "Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek in the Hellenistic Age" in W. D. Davies, L. Finkelstein, eds., *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. II, The Hellenistic Age (Cambridge 1989), 79-114 (in particular p. 82-83).

[8] See Z. Safrai, "The Origins of Reading the Aramaic Targum in Synagogue" , *Immanuel* 24/25 (1990), 187-193.

[9] See A. Tal, "Is There a Raison d'Être for an Aramaic Targum in a Hebrew-Speaking Society?" *REJ* 160 (2001), 357-378. See also the well-informed and even-handed survey in W. Smelik, *The Targum of Judges*, OTS 36 (Leiden 1995), 24-41.

Instead of an exclusively Aramaic approach it may be preferable, therefore, to start out from the idea that Jesus expressed himself in both Aramaic and Hebrew, according to the circumstances. He will have spoken Aramaic with the Syrophoenician woman whose daughter was possessed, a non-Jew (a 'Greek' says Mark, Mark 7:26) who would have had no knowledge of Hebrew. And he will have used Hebrew in his discussion with the Pharisees on the washing of hands (Mark 7:1-25 and par.), for only Hebrew was regularly used at this period in discussions on the Jewish law. If Jesus really said the Aramaic words *lama sabachthani* on the cross—and not the Hebrew *lama (a)zaphthani* as the Codex Bezae and some Old Latin manuscripts have it—Aramaic may have been his mother tongue. In any case, he, as well as his disciples, will have been fluent in both languages.

3. What does it matter?

A question that may arise at this point is: what does it matter which language Jesus spoke? What counts is what he said! This is true. And I do not claim that Jesus said something entirely different from what he is generally thought to have said. At the same time, one should admit that the language in which something is formulated is not totally indifferent. Some thoughts sound great in one language and mediocre in another one. Some famous sayings are hard to translate. Language and culture are intimately linked. Two examples may illustrate. When Jesus calls Herod Antipas a 'fox' (Luke 13:32), most modern European readers will automatically think this means he considered Herod to be particularly crafty or clever: 'Go tell that *fox*: Behold I cast out demons...' The same association would naturally have occurred to a Greek reader in the 1st century. In Greek literature, the fox is proverbially a crafty animal. In Jewish literature, however, both Hebrew and Aramaic, the fox most often has another connotation, namely that of being second rate.[10] 'There are lions before you, and you ask foxes' (JT Shev 39a) means: there are first-rate scholars present in this room, so why do you ask me, a mere student? The term is often derogatory: 'We thought he was a lion, but he is a mere fox' (BavaKama 117a). This is clearly the meaning intended by Jesus: When people tell him Herod seeks to kill him he responds: 'Go tell that *nonentity*, that *man of straw*: Behold I cast out demons...' Since in Greek, 'fox' means something else than in Hebrew or Aramaic, a different meaning emerges according to the

[10] See R. Buth, "That Small-Fry Herod Antipas, Or When A Fox Is Not A Fox", *Jerusalem Perspective* (published on the internet: www.jerusalemperspective.com).

linguistic and cultural background we attribute to the saying of Jesus. If we are interested to know what Jesus really said, the Hebrew-Aramaic meaning is the only correct one in this case.

A welcome aid for establishing the Hebrew-Aramaic meaning of words or expressions as they occur in Jewish texts is the commentary of H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (1926). In their comment on Luke 13:32, these scholars bring a number of quotations from Rabbinic literature clearly showing that 'fox' here means 'a second rate person'.

Now Greek is much more different from Hebrew and Aramaic than Hebrew is from Aramaic. The two Semitic languages are in fact closely related, sharing a large part of their vocabulary and grammar. Yet Hebrew is not Aramaic. Occasionally an expression may take on different meanings depending on the linguistic background that is assigned to it. A nice example is provided by a phrase in the Lord's Prayer. As most of you will know, there is a controversy on how the last request in the Lord's Prayer is to be rendered: 'deliver us from evil', or 'deliver us from the evil one' (Matt 6,13). The Greek, *apo tou ponerou*, is ambiguous: *tou ponerou* could be neuter, meaning 'evil', or masculine, meaning 'the evil one, i.e. the devil'. Both usages are found in the Greek gospels themselves (e.g. Luke 6:45 and Matt 13:19). In order to solve the problem, many exegetes have therefore looked to Semitic texts for a solution. What does 'the bad' mean in Hebrew or Aramaic, 'the bad one, i.e. the Devil'? or 'something bad, i.e. evil'? Strack-Billerbeck inform us that in Jewish literature the Devil is never called simply 'the bad one'; at the same time, 'the bad' (*hara'*) is a common expression for 'evil'. This would mean that, if the Lord's Prayer was really said by Jesus himself in Hebrew or Aramaic, he meant 'deliver us from evil' as the Lord's Prayer is said in English and French (and not '*verlos ons van den Boze* [from the evil one]' as it is prayed it in Dutch). However, Strack-Billerbeck's indications are incomplete on this point. While in Hebrew the expression *hara'*, 'the bad', never refers to evil persons or spirits, in Aramaic the equivalent expression *bisha*, 'the bad', is used of both humans and Satan. In very early Syriac traditions—Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic—it is actually common to call the Devil 'the bad one' (*bisha*); thus the verse 'the fire prepared for Satan and his angels' (Matt 25:41) is rendered in an early Syriac version 'the fire prepared for the evil one and his angels'.[11] From the

[11] See I. Ortiz de Urbina, *Vetus evangelium Syrorum et exinde excerptum Diatessaron* Tatiani, Biblia Polyglotta Matritensia VI (Madrid 1967); the textual variant turns up in both Aphrahat and the Liber Graduum, thus showing that it really does represent an old form of the text. See also the Peshitta version of Acts 10:38.

textual material at our disposal, it appears therefore that if the Lord's Prayer was originally formulated in Hebrew, Jesus would have meant 'deliver us from evil'; but if it was formulated in Aramaic, he would have meant 'deliver us from the evil one'. It is hard to decide between these two.

4. The good eye and the bad eye

As was stated before, the approach of the Greek gospels through Aramaic has attracted much attention. The illumination of gospel passages through recourse to Hebrew has been much less practised. Nonetheless, there are passages where the key to a correct understanding of the Greek text of the gospel is provided by Hebrew, not Aramaic. One such passage will be studied here, the small pericope on the eye as the lamp of the body in Matt 6:22-23 (with a parallel in Luke 11:34-36).

Matt 6:22-23

Ὁ λύχνος τοῦ σώματός ἐστιν ὁ ὀφθαλμός. ἐὰν οὖν ᾖ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου απλοῦς, ὅλον τὸ σῶμά σου φωτεινὸν ἔσται· ἐὰν δὲ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου πονηρὸς ᾖ, ὅλον τὸ σῶμά σου σκοτεινὸν ἔσται. εἰ οὖν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἐν σοὶ σκότος ἐστίν, τὸ σκότος πόσον.

KJV The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!

These verses are hard to understand: what does Jesus mean when he says the eye is the lamp of the body? What is the 'single' (or 'simple', *haplous*) eye? And the evil eye? What is the theme of the passage?

An important clue to the meaning of this saying of Jesus is given when one realizes that the 'evil eye', in Hebrew texts, is a proverbial expression meaning 'avarice, stinginess'. Its earliest attestations are found in the Old Testament:

> Dt 15:9 Beware, don't refuse the poor man a loan because the year of debt cancellation is close. Do net let your eye be evil (i.e. don't be stingy)... you must lend him what he needs.

Prov 23:6-7 Do not eat the bread of a man whose eye is evil (i.e. do not eat the bread of a man who is stingy)... for he is like one who is inwardly reckoning.

The contrary of the 'evil eye', the 'good eye', meaning 'generosity', is also attested in the OT:

Prov 22:9 He who has a good eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor.

Both expressions occur several times in the apocryphal books, notably in the Book of Ben Sira of which the Hebrew text has partly been preserved, e.g.:

Sir 14:10 A miser begrudges bread (literally: the eye of one who has an evil eye swoops on bread), and it is lacking at his table.

Sir 32:12 Give to God as he has given to you, with a good eye (i.e. generously) and according to what you can afford.

And the same figure is used often in Rabbinic literature, e.g.:

Avoth 5:13 There are four approaches to almsgiving:

'let me give but let others not give': his eye is evil (he is stingy) with regard to others;

'let others give, but not I': his eye is evil with regard to himself;

'let me give and others too': the pious (*hasid*)

'neither I nor others shall give': the wicked.

Interestingly, the expression is used in at least one other passage of the gospel, in the parable of the labourers of the eleventh hour:

Matt 20:14-15 I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or is your eye evil because I am good (i.e. are you stingy in my place, cf. Avoth 5:13 quoted above)?

The examples could be multiplied, especially from Rabbinic writings. But the passages quoted suffice to show that, in Hebrew diction, 'to have a bad eye' means: 'to be stingy', 'to begrudge others the benefit of one's material riches'. In contrast, 'to have a good eye' means 'to be ready to share one's material riches with others', 'to be generous'; we might paraphrase the expression as 'to look benevolently upon someone, to give with a smile'.

In light of these meanings, we may suppose that, if Jesus was speaking Hebrew on this occasion, our passage in Matt 6:22-23, too, addresses the theme of generosity and avarice: will you share your material riches with your neighbour, or not?

Two elements confirm that this really is the theme of the passage. First, the context in the Gospel of Matthew favours this interpretation.

• The passage immediately preceding the teaching on the eye as the lamp of the body is Matt 6:19-21 — 'Do not store up treasures on earth… but store up treasures in heaven…, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also'. These verses certainly speak about how to deal with one's material belongings. A good case could be made for saying that the 'treasure in heaven' is a figure for alms and charity. A close parallel is Sir 29:12 'Store up almsgiving in your treasury, and it will rescue you from every disaster'.[12]

• The pericope immediately following our passage is Matt 6:24, the saying about the two masters: 'No one can serve two masters… You cannot serve God and money (*mamon*)'. Again, the theme is that of dealing with earthly belongings. It is logical, then, to suppose that the verses 22-23, too, address this subject. In the Gospel of Luke, the passage occurs in a different context. Yet it should be noted that Luke 12:41 speaks about almsgiving.

Second, the motif of charitable giving is suggested by the expression 'if your eye is single/simple'. The literal meaning of the Greek word *haplous* is indeed 'simple' and consequently 'sincere' or 'guileless'. In Hellenistic Greek, however, and quite often in the New Testament itself, the words *haplous/haplotes/haploos* are used in the sense 'generous/generosity/generously', e.g.:

> 2 Cor 9:11 You will be enriched in every way for your great 'simplicity' (i.e. your generosity in the collection I am organizing for the church in Jerusalem).

[12] See also Tobit 4:8-9 and Psalms of Solomon 9:5 (all these verses may be echoes of Prov 10:2); see also Targum Onkelos to Dt 32:34.

This seems to be the meaning intended in Matt 6:22. In a Hebrew text, we would expect an opposition between the 'evil eye (i.e. avarice)' and the 'good eye (i.e. generosity)'. In the Greek, instead of the good eye, we find the simple/generous eye. One may submit that the Hebrew form of the saying did indeed state: 'if your eye be good'. The alteration to 'if your eye be *generous*' appears to be due to the translator: realizing that the Hebrew expression was difficult to understand for a Greek reader, he partially decoded the figure of speech.

Indeed, the 'good eye' and the 'evil eye' are figures of speech. As such they have a double meaning: an obvious meaning, which is to be disregarded, and a figurative one, which is actually intended. More precisely, although the obvious meaning is merely the carrier for the intended meaning, it does not disappear entirely. We may imagine that the expression 'a good eye' evoked, for a Hebrew speaker, a smiling face as well as a generous character.

On this double meaning Jesus will base his teaching:

— The lamp of the body is the eye.

This is true on the physical level: physical light comes into the human being through his eye. At the same time, the physical reality is an image of something deeper. An interesting parallel to our verse is found in Ben Sira:

> Sir 3:25 באין אישון יחסר אור ובאין דעת תחסר חכמה 'Without pupil there is no light, and without knowledge there is no wisdom.'

As light comes into man through the eye, so wisdom comes in through the intelligence. In Jesus' saying, however, the eye does not stand for wisdom, but for something else, namely generosity.

— If your eye is single ('good'), if you are generous, your whole body shall be full of light.

But if your eye is evil, if you are avaricious, your whole body shall be full of darkness.

The eye is the physical eye, by which you see the light of day. But it is also, in view of the expressions 'good eye' and 'evil eye', the source of your generosity toward your neighbour. This is the deeper meaning of the eye as a lamp: if your eye is good, i.e. if you are generous, light will flow in—light stands here for truth, or happiness; but if your eye is bad, if you refuse to share with others your material wealth, then the light—truth, happiness—cannot come in. Again an illuminating parallel can be found in Ben Sira:

Sir 14:9b The evil eye (i.e. avarice) dries up the soul

καὶ ἀδικία πονηρὰ ἀναξηραίνει ψυχήν (*עין רעה תיבש נפש cf Segal, 90)

Underlying Ben Sira's proverb is a different play of words: the eye (*'ayin*) is at the same time a spring (*'ayin*). Therefore if your eye/spring is bad, your soul will lack water and dry up. But the thought is very close to that expressed by Jesus: avarice is bad for you. And the poetic technique is the same in the two cases: the literal meaning of a figurative expression is exploited in order to draw a lesson. A bad spring leads to dryness, a bad eye to darkness.

— If therefore the light that is in you be darkness, how great is that darkness.

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Other aspects of this saying could be explored. It would be interesting to see what different exegetes have written about it, and to contrast the approach through Hebrew with other approaches.[13] But the scope of this study is limited. So I will simply attach a number of concluding remarks that can be made on the basis of what has been stated thus far.

1) The main point with regard to our general discussion is that the figures of speech underlying Matt 6:22-23par, the 'good eye' and the 'evil eye', are Hebrew and not Aramaic (nor, of course, Greek). In Aramaic, the 'evil eye' refers to maleficent magical practices, a meaning that is clearly inapplicable to our pericope. Only Hebrew texts—the Old Testament, Ben Sira, Rabbinic texts written in Hebrew—use the expressions in the way indicated. If Jesus said these words and meant to express something along the lines discussed, he must have spoken Hebrew on this occasion. In light of what I said earlier it should be no surprise to find Jesus teaching in Hebrew. Contemporary Galilean Rabbis did precisely that. But our passage allows us to pass from a general possibility to a specific probability. Jesus may have taught in Hebrew, in Aramaic, or in both. It seems that on at least one occasion he did really teach in Hebrew.

2) Sometime between the oral teaching of Jesus and the final redaction of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the Semitic—in this case specifically Hebrew—saying was translated into Greek. It is rather unlikely that the translation was made by the evangelists themselves. The fact

[13] Notably, it may be contrasted with an approach through Greek exemplified, e.g., by H. D. Betz, "Matt. 6:22-23 and Ancient Greek Theories of Vision" in idem, *Synoptische Studien* (Tübingen 1992).

that the Matthean and Lucan versions of the saying are substantially identical indicates that they both received an existing Greek text from earlier tradition. Whether the translation was at first made orally or in writing is impossible to say. What can be said is that the translator knew very well what he was doing. He appears to have changed the phrase 'if your eye is good' into 'if your eye is simple, i.e. generous', in order to make the Greek intelligible to a reader who had no knowledge of Hebrew.

3) Although we now understand Jesus' words better, we may not like very much what he says. All this insistence on giving alms and sharing from one's material riches smacks perhaps of works-righteousness. Some readers may tend to agree with the philosopher Square in Henry Fielding's novel, *Tom Jones*, who held that the word *charity* in Scripture never means beneficence or generosity: 'The Christian religion was instituted for much nobler purposes than to enforce a lesson which many heathen philosophers had taught us long before, and which, though it might perhaps be called a moral virtue, savoured but little of that sublime, Christian-like disposition, that vast elevation of thought, in purity approaching to angelic perfection, to be attained, expressed, and felt only by grace'. Or if the reader should not share these views, at least it appears they have guided certain commentators of the New Testament.

5. Methodological remarks

For demonstrative purposes I have perhaps been, in some places, a bit more affirmative than is warranted by the facts. I do not want to conceal that the 'Hebrew approach' of the gospels, like the 'Aramaic approach', is beset with obstacles and difficulties of various kinds.

To begin with, there is often a question with regard to the history of tradition. The Greek gospels incorporate a variety of materials, not all of which go back to the earliest stages of tradition. Some of the more recent gospel materials may never have existed in a Semitic form, having been formulated in Greek from the start. A well-known example will illustrate the problem. In Matthew 1, a verse from Isaiah is quoted in order to show that the Messiah was expected to be born from a virgin:

> Matt 1:23 Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall name him Emmanuel.

The verse quoted is Isa 7:14 according to the Septuagint version. When we turn to the Hebrew text of the OT we find that it makes no mention of a virgin. The text simply says: 'Behold, a

young woman will conceive...' What this means is that the Christian (whether this was Matthew or someone else) who first interpreted Isa 7:14 as a prophecy of Jesus' birth from a virgin belonged to a Greek-speaking milieu and probably knew little or no Hebrew. Among Palestinian Jews, who read the OT in Hebrew and Aramaic, the link between Isa 7:14 and the virgin birth could hardly have been established.

In Matthew 1:22-23 we are fortunate to have a concrete indication, the use of the Septuagint, showing that these verses go back to the Greek-speaking church and, therefore, to a relatively late stage of the tradition. However, the absence of a specific indication does not always mean that the passage in question goes back to the earliest stage of tradition. Some stories about Jesus and even some words put into his mouth may have been created in Hellenistic circles well after the death and resurrection of Jesus. In such a case, it would be absurd to try and retrace a Semitic background that may never have existed.

Where one can be reasonably sure that a saying or a passage does go back to Jesus it will usually be impossible to tell whether the underlying formulation is Hebrew or Aramaic. As was stated earlier, the two languages are closely related. They also influenced one another a great deal. A word like *rabbi*, 'master, teacher', is originally Aramaic but in Jesus' time it was used in Hebrew as well. Conversely, *shabbat*, 'Sabbath', is a Hebrew word, but Jews used it also in Aramaic. In the relevant period, Hebrew and Aramaic are like two sisters that delight in borrowing one another's clothes. Telling them apart through the medium of a Greek translation is hard. When an extensive document, say an apocryphal book, is translated into Greek and the Semitic original lost, one can often try to determine whether the original was written in Hebrew or Aramaic. But when one is dealing with short sayings there is little hope of success. One would dearly like to know, for instance, whether the Lord's Prayer—a text that can with reasonable certitude be attributed to Jesus—was formulated in Hebrew or Aramaic. But it is hard to decide between the two. Private prayers from this period exist in both languages, and the Greek text could equally well be a translation from the one as from the other.

On top of all this there is a linguistic problem. What kind of Hebrew could Jesus have spoken? Not Biblical Hebrew, of course: the language had evolved during the centuries that separate Jesus from the OT writers. So it must have been some post-biblical dialect. The only Hebrew texts that are really contemporary are the Qumran documents. But Jesus would hardly have expressed himself in Qumran Hebrew, a very peculiar dialect, full of strange forms and

words, the meaning of which may have been known only to the inner circle of sectarians. Probably what Jesus spoke was closer to Rabbinic Hebrew. But the earliest parts of the Talmud and Midrash were put into writing only at the beginning of the 3d century AD, almost 200 years later. It is extremely difficult, therefore, to translate the Greek of the gospels back into Hebrew with any probability of recovering the original wording. Hebrew translations of the gospels, such as that of Frantz Delitzsch, mostly use Biblical Hebrew. The result is charming, but of little scientific value.[14]

How, then, should one proceed if one is interested in discovering the Hebrew basis of certain sayings of Jesus and other gospel passages? The most obvious, and still the most important, window on the Hebrew background of the gospels is the Old Testament. The gospels are full of quotations, allusions, and reminiscences of the Old Testament books. And even where there is no direct link between a gospel passage and the OT, the Hebrew idiom of the latter may illuminate the diction of the former (as in the case of the good and the evil eye). Good concordances exist, and dictionaries, and lists of OT passages alluded to in the New. This is certainly a field where much interesting work can still be done.

Two remarks need to be made, however. The first is that one should try to take into account the way the OT was read and understood in the time of Jesus, and which may be rather different from the way it is understood today. What influenced the teaching of Jesus and the disciples was not so much the Old Testament as the interpretation of the Old Testament in vogue during their time. In order to retrace that interpretation it is important to read and study the Septuagint and the Aramaic Targums as well as exegetical writings from the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

A second remark is that the influence of the Old Testament on the New sometimes takes its source in the Septuagint, the Greek version, and not in the Hebrew text. We have seen an example of this above (Matt 1:23 quoting Isa 7:14). In similar cases, one is not taken back to the

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[14] Exaggerated claims have been made for the "Hebrew Gospel of Matthew" incorporated into Shem-Tob ben Isaac ben Shaprut's work *Even Bohan*, see G. Howard, *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* (Macon GA 1995). The writing is not a direct descendant of the original Hebrew Gospel of Matthew, but a late Medieval translation from Catalan, see J. V. Niclós, "L'évangile en hébreu de Shem Tob Ibn Shaprut", *RB* 106 (1999), 358-407. The many striking readings of this gospel can be partly accounted for by positing a link with the Diatessaronic tradition, see W. L. Petersen, "The *Vorlage* of Shem-Tob's 'Hebrew Matthew'", *NTS* 44 (1998), 490-512.

earliest, Semitic gospel tradition, but to later stages of the tradition in a Hellenistic milieu. The influence of the Septuagint is palpable in all the gospels, but it is particularly striking in Luke. The third gospel has a strong Hebraic flavour, which may owe more to Luke's knowledge of the Septuagint than to the fact that it reflects early source material (reference may be made, for instance, to Luke 1-2).

A second avenue for research is early Rabbinic literature. Much relevant material has been gathered and sorted by Dalman—even though Dalman himself was convinced Jesus spoke only Aramaic—and by Strack-Billerbeck in their commentary. Of course it is preferable that one should have at least some first-hand knowledge of Rabbinic sources.

Two other corpora that have been rather neglected until recently are the Old Testament Apocrypha (notably Ben Sira of which we possess a Hebrew text) and the Qumran Scrolls. These writings are not as easily accessible as the Old Testament and they have not been opened up for New Testament research in the way Strack-Billerbeck did for Rabbinic literature. But they are close in various ways to the teaching of Jesus and certainly merit to be studied in this perspective.

Concretely, the research will usually take its point of departure in literary parallels, where the same thought or the same theological motif is expressed in the gospels and one or more of the Hebrew corpora mentioned. A parallel may help us to translate the Greek of the gospels back into Hebrew. It will show the intellectual and cultural context of Jesus' teaching. In some cases it will help us to establish a contrast between what Jesus says and what, say, a Qumran author writes. Occasionally, the Hebrew parallel will throw light on the Greek idiom used in the gospels. Only rarely will the Hebrew meaning of a gospel passage turn out to be entirely different from its traditional or *prima facie* meaning. But our understanding of the gospel will almost always be deepened.

6. Conclusions

In his course on general linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure has pointed out that the same words may express different thoughts according to the language system applied to them. *I vitelli dei romani sono belli* means: "Go, O Vitellius, to the sound of war of the Roman God" in Latin; but in Italian it means "The calves of the Romans are beautiful".

What I have been trying to argue with regard to the language of the gospels is not quite so radical, but it is similar in a way. Statements have different implications depending on the

language in which they are made. Of course the teaching of Jesus can be expressed in any language. A phrase like ‘Love one another just like I loved you’ (John 13:34) means the same thing in New Testament Greek as it does in English. It is a historical fact, however, that Jesus did not make his statements in Greek, nor in English, but in Aramaic or Hebrew. An inquiry into the more original linguistic form of his words will often help to show the cultural context of his teaching. And sometimes one will realize that a meaning one took for granted is actually false. Some words, when they are translated back into Hebrew become clearer than they were in Greek. That is an appreciable gain, and one that exegetes of the New Testament should welcome.