

DISCUSSION: HEBREW OR ARAMAIC?

The short contribution published in our July 1986 issue under the title “Hebrew or Aramaic?” evoked comment from several readers, in particular Dr D. S. Deer, who quoted an impressive number of translations and commentaries in support of translating *Hebraïsti* in the gospels and Acts by “Aramaic”, and in Revelation by “Hebrew”. We are most grateful for these contributions.

Professor H.-P. Rieger of Tübingen responds as follows, partly by referring to his article “Aramäisch II” in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie III*, on Aramaic in the New Testament:

Proof [that the reference in a particular case is to Aramaic rather than Hebrew] would be forthcoming if one could quote an Aramaic derivative for each of the “Hebrew” words, and if one could quote an Aramaic analogy for the acts of “Hebrew” speaking and writing. But that seems impossible. On individual occurrences:

Bethesda (**John 5.2**) seems to be mentioned only in the Copper Roll from Qumran; this is written in *Hebrew*.

Gabbatha (**John 19.13**) probably comes from the Aramaic *gäbb^eta'*, “bowl”; compare Mt 26.23.

Golgotha (**Mt 27.33; Mk 15.22; Jn 19.17**), translated as “Place of a Skull” (cf Lk 23.33) is a corruption of the Aramaic *gulgulta'*, “skull”.

It seems very unlikely that in **Jn 19.20**, “Hebrew” would really mean “Aramaic”. In a *titulus* [an official “notice”, GNB, Jn 19.19], one would expect, alongside Latin and Greek, the name of an officially recognized language, not a “dialect”.

Rabboni (**Mk 10.51; Jn 20.16**) is the Aramaic *räbbûnî*, “my Lord; Lord”. It is translated in Mt 20.33; Lk 18.41 by *kuri*, “Lord”, and in Jn 20.16 by *didaskale*, “teacher”.

Acts 6.1 is not only a linguistic problem; but with reference to the linguistic aspect, it seems clear that the Hellenists worshipped in Greek and the Hebrews in Hebrew.

We do not know what language Paul used in Jerusalem (**Acts 21.40; 22.2**); but in a formal speech, Hebrew would seem more probable than Aramaic.

In **Acts 26.14**, the translation “Aramaic” seems excluded: only Hebrew would be appropriate for a voice from heaven.

Summing up, it seems linguistically certain that in a number of cases, New Testament writers describe as Hebrew, *Hebräïsti*, a form which in fact is Aramaic; but that in other cases, possibly a majority, the language used was probably Hebrew. The New Testament writers thus do not appear concerned to distinguish systematically between Hebrew and Aramaic.

What, then, are the options for the translator today? They appear to be as follows:

1. To use everywhere the generic term “Semitic”. The difficulty is that this is not the name of a language, any more than “Bantu” or “Slavic”. In a dynamic equivalent translation, one would expect each case to be assessed on its merits.

2. To translate *Hebraïsti* everywhere as “Hebrew”. This has the advantage of simplicity, and the greater advantage that it seems to correspond best to the New Testament writers’ perception of the linguistic situation. It has the dis-

advantage of being in some cases incorrect; but is it part of the translator's task to correct statements which would be considered inaccurate by modern standards?

3. To translate *Hebraïsti* as "Aramaic" where we know that the form used is in fact Aramaic, and as "Hebrew" elsewhere. This applies the good dynamic equivalence principle of treating each case on its merits, but raises once again the question of how far the translator should correct the text.

4. Perhaps the solution which makes the best of both worlds is to translate *Hebraïsti* as "Hebrew" in the text, but to add a note to cover those cases which are in fact Aramaic. If this solution is chosen, a glossary note would seem better than a series of footnotes: first, because (as this discussion has shown) it is a general question, raising issues which go beyond any particular text; and second, because the matter is not one which is of primary concern to most readers of the New Testament—any more than it was of primary concern to the New Testament writers themselves.

P.E.

REVIEW ARTICLE

HEBREWS IN THE EIGHTIES

The following notes on books (mainly commentaries) on Hebrews published in the 1980s does not claim to be exhaustive. The comments take into account the usefulness of the book to translators.

1. Morris, Leon: "Hebrews", in F. E. Gaebelin (ed.): **The Expositor's Bible Commentary**, vol. 12, pp. 1–158. (Regency Reference Library). Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan 1981. xvi + 603 pp., no price stated. ISBN 0 310 36540 6.

This work of mellow conservative evangelical scholarship should be high on any translator's list. The word "expositor's" in the general title certainly does not mean that the commentary is a collection of suggestions for preaching. It is chiefly based, as the general editor states in his preface, on the principle "that the primary aim of the exegete is to make clear the meaning of the text at the time and in the circumstances of its writing" (viii). More far-ranging comments, for example on fear (2.15), are exceptional, and refer mainly to the ancient world.

Limitations of space oblige the author to be concise (he has 250–300 words per verse on average), and make for clarity. The commentary is based on NIV, which is printed in full in sections. The introduction concludes that Hebrews was written from Rome to Jewish Christians around AD 66–70. Each section of the commentary, in which the Greek is transliterated, is followed by brief notes, mainly linguistic, in which both the Greek and a transliteration are provided. Morris feels free to disagree with NIV on occasion, and to make positive reference to other translations. For example, he prefers "tent" (citing NEB, JB, TEV) to "tabernacle" (NIV) in 9.2, finds NIV "a trifle free" in 7.8, and "a little difficult to follow" (i.e. wrong) in 9.28, while he commends TEV's "city with permanent foundations" (11.10) as representing what the Greek "probably means". NIV's omissions of connectives such as *gar* are quite often noted. It is to