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HEBREW OR ARAMAIC?

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There are seven texts in the New Testament which use the Greek word *Hebraïsti,* usually translated "in Hebrew". Five of them are in John's Gospel: 5.2, referring to Bethzatha or Bethsaida; 19.13, referring to Gabbatha or The Pavement; 19.17, to Golgotha, "the place of a skull"; 19.20, to the title on the cross, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews"; and 20.16, to Mary Magdalene's cry "Rabboni!", teacher. The other two texts are in Revelation: 9.11, referring to Abaddon, the angel in charge of the bottomless pit; and 16.16, to Armageddon, the place of battle.

Translators who work only or mainly with GNB and RSV may not realise that there is a problem with this word *Hebraïsti,* since both these translations use "Hebrew" in each case. In fact, however, the word raises three distinct questions:

(1) Which language is it: Hebrew or Aramaic?

(2) Why did these writers apparently call it Hebrew?

(3) How should we translate it?

(1) *Which language is it: Hebrew or Aramaic? Hebrew* is of course the language in which most of the Old Testament was written. In Jesus' time, as still today, it is the language in which the Jewish scriptures were read in public worship. Many people still understood and spoke it, though we do not know how many. Some scholars believe that at least some of Jesus' teaching was originally given in Hebrew; but a greater number of scholars disagree.

Aramaic, however, was by the time of Jesus the language of the people in Palestine (as Israel under Roman occupation was called). Most scholars believe that most if not all Jesus' teaching was first given in Aramaic, though he would certainly have quoted the scriptures in Hebrew. Soon after New Testament times, if not earlier, in Jewish synagogues the scriptures were first read in Hebrew, and then (in Palestine) interpreted in Aramaic, so that everyone could understand. The exceptions were the parts of the Old Testament, mainly in Daniel and Ezra, which were written in Aramaic.

Things had not always been like this. Centuries before, when Jerusalem was besieged by the Assyrians, it was Hebrew which was the language of ordinary Israelites. Aramaic, by contrast, was an internationally used language, spoken by traders, travellers, and educated people (as Greek was in New Testament times[1]).

2 Kings 18 gives a clear picture of the situation. An Assyrian official embrasses the leading citizens of Jerusalem by speaking directly to the ordinary people in Hebrew, calling on them to surrender. "Speak Aramaic to us, sir", plead the Israelite leaders. "We understand it. Don't speak Hebrew; all the people on the wall are listening" (verse 26).

[1] Many Old Testament quotations in the New Testament, especially in the epistles, are taken from the Septuagint, the then current Greek translation of the Old Testamant, and not directly from the Hebrew.

It is clear from this account, as from the New Testament evidence, and from writings in ancient Hebrew and in Aramaic which have survived, that these were two distinct though closely related languages which it was impossible to confuse.

Nevertheless, most scholars believe that, in at least some of the seven New Testament texts, *Hebraïsti* means not "in Hebrew" but "in Aramaic".

The eveidence for this is partly general and partly detailed. The general evidence is simply that in Palestine in New Testament times, Aramaic was much more widely spoken than Hebrew. One would not expect ordinary people, at that time and in that country, to be talking Hebrew to one another in normal conversation.

The detailed evidence is less clear-cut. It is impossible to tell whether some of the seven texts are Hebrew or Aramaic. There would probably be no question if John had only given the Hebrew or Aramaic words which were written on the cross; but unfortunately he gives only the Greek. In John 5.2, even the Greek text is uncertain: "Bethzatha" has replaced "Bethesda" in most modern translations. The name for the "place of a skull" is known in two Aramaic forms, but neither of them is exactly "Golgotha"; no Hebrew form is known either. Armageddon is said to be Hebrew, but it is a symbolic name difficult to identify. Abaddon is certainly Hebrew: it is mentioned in Job 26.6; 28.22; Ps 88.12; Prov 15.11, though as the name of a place, not an angel. No Aramaic form is known. The two clear cases are "Gabbatha", "Rabboni", both of which must be Aramaic.

Generally, therefore, *Hebraïsti* is understood to refer to Aramaic, where the setting is the daily life of Palestine in the time of Jesus. The inscription over the cross, being a kind of official document. may have been written in Hebrew. The mysterious names in Revelation have no place in anyone's daily life, and "Abaddon", at least, is an Old Testament name, so Hebrew is probably the language referred to in Revelation.

(2) if this is so, then *why do these writers apparently call the language "Hebrew"?* It is not as if the two languages could be confused. Distinct names for each of them existed. In the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament), the translator of 2 Kings 18 uses "Syrian" for "Aramaic", and "Judean" for "Hebrew"; yet in fact, neither of these names is used in the New Testament. Were the authors of John's Gospel and Revelation simply careless?

A personal illustration may suggest the way their minds could have worked. The writer of this note is an Englishman living in Scotland. When he is in Scotland, he is careful not to say "English" when he means "British"; he is constantly aware that they are two different countries. But when he travels abroad, for example in France, the contrast most strongly in his mind is the one between the countries where French and English are spoken. When he is in France, he even sometimes catches himself saying "in England" when he means "in Britain".

The parallel must not be pressed too far. But it may be that the writers of John's Gospel and Revelation were concerned with the contrast between Greek, the language in which they were writing, and a Semitic language of which they were quoting only a few words. They may have been less concerned with distinctions between two closely related Semitic languages, and therefore used

the name of the better known language, Hebrew. This is particularly likely since they were probably writing in countries where Aramaic was not generally spoken.

(3) This still does not answer the most pressing question for the modern translator: *How do I translate it?* A look at modern translations shows a variety of solutions.

As already mentioned, GNB translates "in Hebrew", simply and for once literally. This solution can be defended on the grounds that GNB is a common language translation, and "Hebrew", unlike "Aramaic", is part of common English. RSV chooses the same translation, understandably in a generally literal translation. NEB "sits on the fence", perhaps partly because scholars are divided about how much Hebrew was spoken in Palestine in Jesus' time: in four places (including John 20.16, which must be Aramaic), NEB has "Hebrew", but in John 5.2; 19.13,17 it has "the language of the Jews". NIV translates "Aramaic" in John and "Hebrew" in Revelation, and so does the Dutch common language translation. GNB translates literally "in Hebrew".

The solutions of the French and German common language translations (FrCL and GeGL) are rather more helpful. As common language translations, they put "Hebrew" in the text, like GNB, but they add notes which let the reader know that this is not the whole story. On "Gabbatha", FrCL's footnote reads "an Aramaic word for a raised place"; there is a similar footnote on "Golgotha". GeCL has a different solution. For every text *except* John 17.20 (the title on the cross), there is an asterisk (*) referring to a glossary note which surprisingly refers *only* to John 17.20. Otherwise, the GeCL note is quite helpful: "Perhaps the inscription over the cross was really in Hebrew, but Aramaic served as the common language in the time of Jesus." There are separate notes on "Aramaeans", and also on Armageddon", explaining it as coming from the Hebrew "har-mo-(g)ed", meaning "mountain of assembly". The Greek common language translation (GkCL) generally follows GeCL, but its glossary note is not linked with the texts in Revelation, and does not make an exception for the inscription over the cross. (Incidentally, GkCL's note on Armageddon gives a different meaning for the Hebrew: "hill of Megiddo").

The basic difficulty with all these notes is that they leave the reader to solve the problem with which we began: Why does John, at least, say Hebrew if he means Aramaic? Or the reader might put the same question in other words: Why does the text of my translation say Hebrew, and the note Aramaic?

The solution to the translator's problem depends to some extent on whether the publication towards which he is working is to be a New Testament or a whole Bible; whether the translation is in common or literary language; and on whether it has footnotes, a glossary, both, or neither. But the problem itself underlines the need for adequate reader's helps. If these are not provided, many readers will be left unnecessarily puzzled, about matters which do not directly concern the heart of the Bible's message, and which would have been no problem for the original readers. In the end, there seems no substitute for sharing openly with the reader all the *relevant* information he *needs* (the emphasised words are important!)

In the light of the evidence discussed so far, we would suggest a three-part solution:

(a) a *text* which has "in Hebrew" everywhere. There are two reasons for this: first, because Hebrew is a more commonly known language than Aramaic, and therefore more suitable for a common language translation; and secondly, because that is what the writers say. *Hebraïsti* may *refer* to Aramaic, but it does not and cannot *mean* "Aramaic".

(b) a *footnote,* at least on John 19.13 (Gabbatha) and 20.16 (Rabboni), which must be Aramaic, reading:

> *in Hebrew.* In fact, in Aramaic, a closely related language generally used in Israel in New Testament times.

(c) a *glossary note*, to which all seven occurrances of *Hebraïsti* should refer, reading:

> *Hebrew* was the language of the people of Israel for most of the Old Testament period; it was the language of worship in Israel in New Testament times, as it is for Jews today. A closely related language, Aramaic, was used in trade and international communication in Old Testament times, and parts of Daniel and Ezra are written in Aramaic. See also 2 Kings 18, especially verses 26-28. By New Testament times, Aramaic had become the language of the people of Israel. In John's Gospel, where "Hebrew" is mentioned, Aramaic is sometimes intended (see especially John 19.13; 20.16).

This note could be shortened, especially for a separate publication of the New Testament.

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