ST. MARK 14th: AN ARAMAIC MISTRANSLATION?

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The last three words of St. Mk. xiv. 72 have always been impossible to interpret satisfactorily. As the text stands in Westcott and Hort, and with the evidence then available (1881), the more difficult reading of B. καὶ ἐπιθαλῶν ἔκλαιεν, was preferable to the easier Western reading καὶ ἠρέσσατο κλαίειν. The various desperate attempts to render this difficult reading may be seen conveniently summarised in Swete’s commentary on St. Mark.

Since then the valuable Sinaitic Syriac and the Koridethi MS. have been discovered, and both testify to the reading καὶ ἠρέσσατο. We will begin with the Syriac مَعَ لَغُط، translated by Burkitt¹ “he had begun to weep.” Students will recognise immediately the well-known Aramaic idiom,² “he began to do a certain thing” which is simply a fuller way of saying “he did a certain thing.”

Moreover, this reading καὶ ἠρέσσατο, which is found in the texts of Cæsarea, Antioch and the West, is supported by C. the Bohairic and Sahidic,³ which usually support B. Further evidence of the truth of this reading comes from the other synoptics, who divided the idiom and wrote ἔκλαιον.⁴ Most remarkable of all is the reading of the Ethiopic, which is based on the Syriac. The translators knew the idiom, and wrote “wabakya,” “and he wept.” That this is no accident is proved by the fact that

¹ Evangelia da Mepharreshe, ad loc.
³ See the evidence in Legg, “Novum Testamentum Graece,” 1935.
⁴ St. Mt. 26th and St. Lk. 22nd.

273
they have no word corresponding to ἔρχαντο in St. Mk. 15:18, but translate simply “and they greeted him.”

How then did the reading ἐπιβαλὼν arise? It arose from mis-reading ῃ as ῃ, a word which is translated elsewhere in St. Mark as ἀποβαλὼν or ἐπιβαλὼν. That such a confusion is only too likely is obvious when the Palmyrene Inscriptions are perused. These inscriptions range from 9 B.C. to 272 A.D., and the vagaries of ῃ and the occasional diacritical point over the ῃ are well known.

Pictorially, therefore, we may represent the history of the reading as follows:

It is beginning to look as though Burney's statement is near fulfilment.

"What is needed to substantiate the theory of an Aramaic original for Mark is some cogent evidence of mistranslation."

The true reading, therefore, I maintain to be καὶ ἔρχατο κλαίειν: the correct translation “and he wept.”

1 For this information about the Ethiopic I am indebted to the Rev. M. Gregory of the Coptic Church in Abyssinia.
2 St. Mk.10:9.
3 Cooke, "North Semitic Inscriptions", pp. 263.