

# WHICH LANGUAGE DID JESUS SPEAK?—SOME REMARKS OF A SEMITIST<sup>1</sup>

By JAMES BARR, M.A., D.D., F.B.A.

PROFESSOR OF SEMITIC LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES IN THE  
UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

ONE of the peculiarities of Christianity is that the words of Jesus have not been preserved in the language in which they were originally spoken. Even from the earliest days there was no great effort—perhaps there was no effort at all—to ensure that his sayings should be kept alive in the original tongue. The tradition of his teaching was carefully cultivated and was set forth in the various versions of the different Gospels, but it was a tradition in translation. Indeed, not only was no great effort made to preserve the sayings in the original language, but—as the title of this lecture implies—it is a matter of some doubt which language the original language was in the first place. There is thus a great contrast with the example of Islam: there is no doubt that the language of the prophet Mohammed was Arabic, or—to put it more precisely—that God sent down his revelation as an Arabic Quran, a document which, just for this reason, has not generally been used in any kind of translation by the Islamic community.

Before going farther, however, we have to go back to our opening remarks and admit that they were already in part an answer to the question before it had been fully formulated. The “original” text of the New Testament is a Greek text, and in saying that the words of Jesus have not been preserved in the original language we have implicitly rejected the possibility that Jesus taught in Greek. If we reject this possibility, however, we are only following the opinion which has been held by the vast majority of competent scholars in the field; and I do not propose to argue the case against Greek in general, but only to note two small qualifications. Firstly, though most scholars have denied that the main teaching of Jesus was given in Greek, many have agreed that he may have known some Greek and used it on certain occasions. The extent to which Greek culture was influential,

<sup>1</sup> A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 11th of February 1970.

and the Greek language used, in the first century both in Jerusalem and in Galilee has been repeatedly pointed out; and recent studies have tended to diminish the gap between a Semitic-speaking Palestinian Jewry and a Greek-speaking Judaism of the diaspora. Some of the disciples came from places of marked Hellenistic culture like Bethsaida, and some of them had Greek names like Philip and Andrew. Linguistically, the Greek evidence shows how far Palestine in Jesus' time was a bilingual or multilingual society. Gustav Dalman, the great authority whose influence—more than that of any other single scholar—has weighed down the balance toward the view that Jesus taught in Aramaic, accepts that Jesus was “conversant with other languages”<sup>1</sup> and goes on to argue that, when his words first came to be formulated in Greek, this was done in a circle which, precisely in its knowledge of the then universal language, was nevertheless in close contact with Jesus himself and his original disciples. Thus, even if we deny that Jesus taught in Greek, we should not minimize the importance of Greek in the earliest stages of the transmission of his teaching and even in the original teaching situation itself. Secondly, we shall simply mention that there continue to be scholars who, contrary to the common opinion, maintain that Greek was the language in which a considerable part of Jesus' teaching was originally given.<sup>2</sup> None of these, however, maintains that Greek was the *main* language used by Jesus in his teaching; their purpose is rather to deny that Greek can be entirely excluded.

We shall therefore leave Greek at this point; and of Latin we shall say nothing at all. Though it certainly was known in Palestine, there has been no serious claim that it was used by Jesus. We come therefore to the opinion that has now long been dominant—and especially so since the work of Dalman—namely that the major indigenous language of Palestinian Jews in Jesus'

<sup>1</sup> G. Dalman, *Jesus-Jeshua* (E. T., London, 1929), pp. 6 f.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., A. W. Argyle in a number of notes in the *Expository Times*, for instance lxvii (1955-6), 92 f., 383; R. H. Gundry in “The Language Milieu of First-century Palestine”, *J.B.L.*, lxxxiii (1964), 404-8. Gundry maintains that Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek may have been used in the tradition about Jesus from the very first stages.

time was Aramaic and that Aramaic was also the language used by Jesus himself in his teaching.

At this point some simple historical and terminological introduction may be found useful. The two languages Aramaic and Hebrew are the best-known representatives of two collateral branches of the Semitic family of languages, and the history of each can be traced through most of the first millennium B.C. Aramaic was the language of the Syrian states like Damascus, Hebrew was the language of the Judaeans and Israelite kingdoms. There are many similarities in structure between the two languages and they also share many vocabulary items. A fairly simple series of sound correspondences suffices to account for a number of differences which on the surface make Aramaic words look different from Hebrew words (e.g. *t* regularly under certain conditions for Hebrew *sh*, so *tekel*, related to the Hebrew weight *shekel* (Dan. v. 26)). There are also, however, areas in which the vocabulary of the two languages is characteristically *not* shared: a good example is the series of verbs meaning "go in a direction", e.g. "go up", "go down", "go in", "go out". Here Aramaic uses most generally quite different roots from those familiar in Hebrew. Thus, in sum, the two languages have both great similarities and some striking divergencies; a person who knows Hebrew should have no great difficulty in learning Aramaic, yet learn it he must, for he will not find that he understands it automatically. Visually, by the time of Jesus the two languages *looked* similar; they used the same script, had more or less the same letters, and moreover they had some history of mutual contact.

An incident reported for about 700 B.C. seems to make it clear that Aramaic was then still not intelligible to the people of Jerusalem (2 Kings xviii. 26, 28), though there were some Judaeans who, being experienced in negotiation with foreigners, could speak it. But later the Exile brought many more Jews into the Aramaic-speaking culture, and it is well known that the Persian empire widely used Aramaic as the official medium of communication. The Elephantine letters show us a Jewish community in Egypt in the fifth century which conducted its affairs, apparently, only in Aramaic, and wrote even to the

Jewish authorities in Jerusalem in that language. The later books of the Old Testament itself include parts in Aramaic, for instance about half of Daniel (first half of the second century B.C. according to widely-held scholarly opinion). Hebrew, however, continued to be used—how extensively, we shall shortly have to consider—and the great corpus of Jewish legal discussion, coming from the first two centuries A.D. and crystallized about 200 as the Mishnah, is in Hebrew. This Mishnaic Hebrew differs in a number of ways from biblical Hebrew. By and after 200 the rabbinical discussions themselves come to be increasingly in Aramaic. Aramaic continued to be, like Greek, a major common language of the near east, until with the Islamic conquests it came to decline in favour of Arabic.

So much for a very brief orientation, which has carefully left unmentioned almost all the points of difficulty. I shall now try to place the language of Jesus—as understood in the prevailing theory that he spoke Aramaic—in relation to the sketch which has been given, and afterwards will discuss some of the details. According to the Aramaic theory, at least in the more traditional forms of it, before the time of Jesus Hebrew had already ceased to be the general spoken language of Palestinian Jews. Their language was Aramaic, and that was the language used by Jesus in his teaching. The Hebrew of the Mishnah was of course in existence at this time, but it was not a real spoken language; rather, it was an artificial scholarly lingo, used only by Rabbis in their discussions. The Hebrew Bible itself was by this time not understood by the common people, and for this reason its reading was accompanied by an Aramaic translation or Targum, which people could actually understand. In Greek works, like the New Testament or Josephus, when the term *hebraisti* is used, it commonly does not mean “in Hebrew” as we today understand that phrase; rather, it means “in the language (other than Greek) which Jews speak”, or “in the indigenous and non-Greek language of the Jews”, i.e. (according to the view under description) in most cases in Aramaic. The *New English Bible* commonly renders “in the language of the Jews”.

The Aramaic theory of Jesus' language has been very widely held among New Testament scholars, and indeed has come to be

common opinion among the educated laity. In the last one or two decades, however, it has come to be questioned by a number of scholars, some of them not primarily (or not at all) New Testament scholars, who have tried to revive the opinion that Jesus spoke Hebrew. It is not unfair to say that the existence of this contrary school of thought has not as yet received wide publicity. The purpose of this lecture is not to offer any decisive argument but rather simply to make it better known that this diversity of opinion exists and that a Hebrew theory is today once again in the field—if also, we must add, in some widely differing forms.

The person who in modern times reopened the case for Hebrew was the Scandinavian Semitist Harris Birkeland in his book *The Language of Jesus*.<sup>1</sup> It is remarkable that this little book never became well known. It did indeed contain some serious weaknesses in expression and argumentation, and some of its views may have seemed idiosyncratic. Yet Birkeland was well known as a Semitic linguist, and his views rested on earlier studies of the relation between language and religion among both the Jews and the Arabs.<sup>2</sup> His arguments were strong enough to convince at once a noted French Arabist and Semitist, Jean Cantineau.<sup>3</sup> Cantineau in his own work on the Nabataean dialect—a form of Aramaic—had incidentally accepted the usual view that Jesus spoke Aramaic, but in 1955 he wrote to say that he had been forced by Birkeland's arguments to change his opinion, and he is thus perhaps the first convert from the old theory to the new. Since that time a number of studies have appeared, many of them largely reviews and criticisms of Birkeland's view.<sup>4</sup> Though very few have been convinced by

<sup>1</sup> *Avhandlinger utgitt av det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo*. 1954. II: *Historisk-filosofisk Klasse*, no. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Språk og religion hos jøder og arabere* (Oslo, 1949).

<sup>3</sup> *Semitica*, v (1955), 99-101.

<sup>4</sup> Many of these studies are referred to in the footnotes to this lecture. In addition the following may be mentioned: E. Y. Kutscher, "Das zur Zeit Jesu gesprochene Aramäisch", *Z.N.W.*, li (1960), 46-54; M. Black, "Aramaic Studies and the Language of Jesus", *In Memoriam Paul Kahle (B.Z.A.T.W., ciii, Berlin, 1968)*, 17-28; P. Nepper-Christensen, *Das Matthäusevangelium: ein judenchristliches Evangelium* (Aarhus, 1958), ch. iv, "Die sprachlichen Verhältnisse zu Beginn unserer Zeitrechnung", pp. 101-35; Sh. Morag, "Until when

Birkeland in the exact form which his arguments took, and most scholars in the end have continued to hold that Aramaic was the language of Jesus, the tone of the discussion has remarkably changed and among the majority of scholars one sees a willingness to reopen the question and to reconsider the possibility that Jesus used Hebrew at least in part.

Now the kinds of evidence which may be adduced in the discussion of the whole matter would appear to fall into three main categories. Firstly, quotations in the New Testament itself. The Greek New Testament text contains a few words or short sayings of Jesus which are cited in the original language, such as *talitha cum* "maid, arise" (Mark v. 41), *abba* "father (vocative)" (Mark xiv. 36) and *ephphatha* "be opened" (spoken in the healing of a deaf and dumb man, Mark vii. 34). It has been usual to maintain that these sayings are manifestly in Aramaic and that they therefore show that Jesus spoke this language.

Secondly, evidences of the general linguistic situation. If it is true in general that Aramaic was the usual language in Palestine, then it is intrinsically likely that Jesus spoke Aramaic. Now no one denies the importance of Aramaic in Palestine in this period, or indeed the importance of Greek. The question is about the remaining element, if any, of Hebrew. Is it true that Hebrew had died out as a common language? Is it true that when Greek writers, within and without the New Testament, said that an expression was *hebraisti* "in Hebrew", this commonly meant, in our terms, "in Aramaic"? Is it true that Mishnaic Hebrew lacked a base in popular parlance and was a technical and artificial medium of scholarly talk, like medieval and modern ecclesiastical Latin? Such questions about the general linguistic situation in Palestine form the second kind of material with which we must deal.

Thirdly, the evidence of reconstructed originals. This kind of evidence is, as evidence, extremely intangible, and yet in a

was Hebrew spoken?" [in Hebrew], *L'shonenu la'am*, vol. vii-viii, nos. 66-67 (1956), pp. 3-10; references in J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Genesis Apocryphon from Qumran*, p. 20 n., with a recognition that the question deserves to be looked into again. Also J. M. Grintz, "Hebrew as the spoken and written Language in the last days of the Second Temple", *J.B.L.*, lxxix (1960), 32-47.

way it forms, for the New Testament scholar, the main ultimate importance of the whole exercise. Starting from the Greek text of the New Testament, we can try to translate back into a Semitic language, whether Hebrew or Aramaic, subject of course to the limitations of our knowledge of the dialects as spoken precisely at that time. Such hypothetical retranslation may shed light on something that in the Greek text was obscure. A difficulty in the Greek can perhaps be explained if we think of what might have been the Aramaic original, and still more so if that reconstructed original is also something which could easily have been misunderstood by those who translated the traditions into Greek. It is at least possible that such reconstruction may give us a clearer picture of what Jesus may have intended, and this is its direct exegetical importance. Indirectly, however, the procedure may also work as evidence in favour of either Hebrew or Aramaic as the original: if a difficulty will yield to an explanation through reconstruction of the original in terms of one language but not in terms of another, then it forms a kind of indirect evidence that the former was the language used.

Going back now to the first of these kinds of evidence, namely the evidence of Semitic phrases cited in the Greek New Testament text, I do not propose to say much, but I must at least quote this part of Birkeland's argument, for it is one of the great *tours-de-force* of the whole discussion. He admits that the phrases cited are in Aramaic. How then can they form part of an argument that Jesus spoke Hebrew? They were cited in Aramaic, Birkeland argues, precisely because this was not the normal language used by Jesus. When Jesus spoke, as he usually did, in Hebrew, his words were straightforwardly translated into Greek; when they did not translate into Greek this was for the special reason that his words were, exceptionally, in Aramaic.<sup>1</sup> This somewhat unlikely argument has perhaps drawn more criticism than any other part of Birkeland's argument, and not without reason.

But, leaving aside the peculiar explanation offered by

<sup>1</sup> Similarly, French words found in an English translation of Tolstoy would not constitute proof that the original language of the text as a whole was French. But Birkeland goes farther than this analogy when he holds the presence of Aramaic phrases to *prove* that Aramaic was not the original.

Birkeland, there is still room for discussion whether the Semitic forms cited in the Greek New Testament are necessarily always Aramaic. In the case of *ephphatha* "be opened", it is possible to construe this as the Hebrew niphal imperative *hippatah*. Indeed, I. Rabinowitz has argued that it *must* have been this<sup>1</sup>; but a further assessment of the evidence<sup>2</sup> would suggest that his arguments show that the word *could* be Hebrew, not that it *must* be Hebrew. The case of *abba* "father" again is not a clear proof that Aramaic was being spoken. Firstly, it is not certain that this form is of Aramaic origin,<sup>3</sup> and it can possibly be explained as having an ancient Semitic provenance.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, even if the form had been adopted from Aramaic, 'abba was certainly common usage in Mishnaic Hebrew and the citation of it in the New Testament therefore leaves quite open the possibility that the speaker was speaking Hebrew rather than Aramaic. Similarly, the familiar phrase meaning "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?", though probably in Aramaic, does not give a quite simple and clear testimony to Aramaic; for there are differences between various texts and between the Marcan and the Matthaean forms, to which must be added the question of why the hearers understood the sentence to refer to the prophet Elijah, and the question of what Jesus was actually saying

<sup>1</sup> *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, liii (1962), 229-38.

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion by J. A. Emerton in *Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S. xviii (1967), 428-31.

<sup>3</sup> The basic noun form 'ab "father" is common to Hebrew and Aramaic; the view that *abba* must be Aramaic depends on analysis as an "emphatic state" with ending *-ā*, giving a sense normally like the definite article, i.e. "the father". This mechanism is peculiar to Aramaic. The question however should be asked whether this function of the "emphatic state" makes good sense in the vocative position. In the case of Hebrew, one does not use the definite article in saying "father!" (vocative). These considerations favour a different explanation of the phenomenon (see next note).

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Ch. Rabin, *Ancient West-Arabian* (London, 1951), p. 71: "It is hard to believe that such a homely word should have been taken over from Aramaic (where 'abbā is the status emphaticus). What we have here are the frequent Arabic vocative forms in *-ā* (Wright, ii, 87D), representing most probably the proto-Semitic vocative. The *-ā*, since it often occurs in cases where 'my' is implied, was understood to be equivalent to the suffix of the first singular, and sometimes used without vocative meaning." This passage is already cited by Birkeland, p. 27.

here and how far he was citing Psalm xxii, how exactly, and if so in what text.<sup>1</sup> These complicated details we must here leave aside. Suffice it that we have shown that the Semitic phrases cited in the New Testament are not as clear and final evidence of Aramaic as has commonly been believed. Nevertheless we must at present judge that they support Aramaic as the language of Jesus more than they support Hebrew, for some at least of them, such as *talitha cum*, must be Aramaic, while those that are in some question can still probably be taken as Aramaic; there is none, so far as I can see, that can *only* be Hebrew and cannot possibly be Aramaic.<sup>2</sup>

Before passing to our second kind of evidence we should say a little about our third, because little more will be said about it in this lecture. The evidence of reconstructed originals, as we have seen, could potentially help us to decide between Aramaic and Hebrew. This potentiality has not yet been realized, however, because the more important works which have considered the retranslation of the Greek into a Semitic original have not taken it to be an open question what the language of the original was. They have tended to decide in the first place that the original language was Aramaic and have then proceeded on this basis. The most important modern work, M. Black's *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*, gives a full and careful study of the knowledge that can be derived from hypothetical reconstructions of the original, but hardly at all considers the possibility that this procedure might serve as a criterion for deciding between Aramaic and Hebrew. In order to provide such a criterion, all passages being looked at for hypothetical reconstruction would have to be translated into two possible originals, one Aramaic and one Hebrew, and these then compared. Only to a limited extent has this been attempted,<sup>3</sup> and it lies, needless to say, far beyond the scope of what can be attempted in this lecture.

<sup>1</sup> See the discussions of Birkeland, pp. 25 f., and Emerton, pp. 198 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Unless Rabinowitz should be right in his contention about *ephphatha*, as noted above.

<sup>3</sup> There is something of a special case in the language used at the Last Supper (Black, 3rd edn., pp. 238 f.), of which Dalman himself had held that on this specially solemn occasion Jesus used Hebrew.

We turn therefore to our second kind of evidence, that is to say, evidence about the general linguistic situation in Palestine, and it is here that opinion has been altering most strikingly. There are many today who are not ready to become true revisionists and say that Jesus actually taught in Hebrew, but who are nevertheless willing to reopen the case for the use of Hebrew as a widely spoken language in first-century Palestine. As we have seen, the Aramaic theory which has been prevalent included as one of its main arguments the view that Hebrew had by this time ceased to be spoken as a vernacular and that the Hebrew of the Mishnah was an artificial and scholarly language, even one "concocted" by the Rabbis out of both Hebrew and Aramaic; it was not a spoken language, and in so far as it existed at all it was not genuine Hebrew but a heavily Aramaized Hebrew—so heavily Aramaized that Dalman held its very existence to be a ground for the belief that at this time Aramaic was the only real Semitic language of Palestine.<sup>1</sup> But this opinion was always strongly opposed by some, and in particular by M. H. Segal, who in 1927 published the standard grammar of this kind of Hebrew,<sup>2</sup> and who already in 1908 had deployed his essential arguments (a) that Mishnaic Hebrew was not heavily Aramaized but in fact surprisingly pure Hebrew and (b) that it was in fact a spoken language.<sup>3</sup> "Far from being an artificial scholarly jargon, MH is essentially a popular and colloquial dialect."

This position appears to have been accepted with increasing strength by linguists specializing in post-biblical Hebrew. Thus E. Y. Kutscher, one of the chief experts in the field, writes in a recent article<sup>4</sup> that Segal's arguments "finally solved the problem in an affirmative sense". Kutscher indeed, while completely accepting Segal's position in general, argues that certain aspects of his views have to be modified today. In particular he holds that the original Mishnaic Hebrew was more deeply Aramaized

<sup>1</sup> Dalman, *Jesus-Jeshua*, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> M. H. Segal, *A Grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew* (Oxford, 1927).

<sup>3</sup> "Mišnaic Hebrew and its Relation to Biblical Hebrew and to Aramaic", *Jewish Quarterly Review*, O.S. xx (1908), 648-737.

<sup>4</sup> "Mišnisches Hebräisch", *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*, xxviii (1964), 35-48; quotation from p. 36.

than is suggested by the common printed editions of the Mishnah, because later scribes tended to "improve" the diction, assimilating it to a standard of Hebrew in which biblical usage weighed more heavily. This seems, however, not to be a return to the old view that Mishnaic Hebrew was an Aramaized jargon, since the phenomena in question are different ones; and, as we have seen, Kutscher shows total general agreement with Segal. But if Segal's arguments were "final", we must say that it has taken a long time for the realization of their finality to penetrate.

In general, then, Semitists, and specialists who work on Mishnaic Hebrew, appear today to be agreed, in spite of certain modifications, with the opinion of Segal that this dialect was an actual spoken language. It is doubtful whether among experts actively engaged on the study of this stage of Hebrew there is any support for the older view that it was a purely artificial language without a base in colloquial usage. This being so, the mere fact of the existence of Mishnaic Hebrew comes to be a major element within the evidence for the linguistic situation of first-century Palestine.

It has commonly been replied that, though Mishnaic Hebrew was clearly in use at the time, it was still not a "vernacular". But this only raises the question what kind of evidence could ever prove that any kind of Hebrew was a vernacular. Since no one was there to take tape recordings of speech in the markets or in the houses, almost all of the conceivable evidence is susceptible to rejection on the grounds that it does not refer to the vernacular. If Hebrew is found in a book, that is literary and therefore not vernacular; if it is on a coin, that is official; if it is in a legal document, that is special legal language; if it is on a tombstone, that is monumental, and so on. These arguments load the question too unfairly against the recognition of Hebrew. The fundamental argument for the vernacular character of Mishnaic Hebrew comes from the analysis of the language itself—the range of its vocabulary,<sup>1</sup> the character of its expression, its style, and the fact of its very considerable difference from biblical Hebrew.

What has actually changed the climate of opinion, however, is

<sup>1</sup> See my own brief remarks on this in my *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1968), p. 41 and pp. 38-43 generally.

not so much the work of scholars on Mishnaic Hebrew, but rather the material of the Dead Sea Scrolls. These include both Hebrew and Aramaic material, but the quantitative predominance seems to lie with the Hebrew (even excluding actual biblical texts and counting only the fresh and original compositions). Moreover, several further points emerged about this Hebrew. Firstly, Hebrew of a kind akin to biblical Hebrew was still in use for religious documents. Secondly, Hebrew was still also in use for secular documents such as letters and contracts, and sometimes documents of very similar content are found in Hebrew, in Aramaic and in Greek. Thirdly, some documents show linguistic characteristics very much akin to those of Mishnaic Hebrew. In general the Dead Sea Scroll evidence seems to have done for Mishnaic Hebrew what the scholarship of those working directly on that language did not succeed in accomplishing, namely it convinced many that Hebrew was still alive as a language in some kind of general use in the time of Jesus. Thus Milik, one of those who worked on the definitive edition of the documents, wrote (published in 1960) :

The thesis of scholars like Segal, ben-Jehuda and Klausner, according to whom Mishnaic Hebrew was a language spoken by the population of Judaea during the Persian and Greco-Roman periods, is no longer a hypothesis ; it is an established fact. Several *legal* documents from Murabbaat are in Mishnaic Hebrew ; but they are less numerous than those in Aramaic. But Mishnaic Hebrew is the sole language of *correspondence*.<sup>1</sup>

Other similar statements could be quoted. The Dead Sea material has come not only to convince many scholars that Mishnaic Hebrew was a live means of general communication but also to suggest that the Jewish community, or some part of it, was bilingual, trilingual or even multilingual in yet higher multiples. Rabin (admittedly writing directly of the Persian period) maintains that<sup>2</sup> :

The Jewish community of the Persian period was thus, it appears, trilingual, using Aramaic for purposes of outside communication and for limited literary genres for internal consumption ; biblical Hebrew for normal literary composition ; and in all probability an older form of Mishnaic Hebrew as a purely spoken vernacular.

<sup>1</sup> *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* (Oxford), ii. 70.

<sup>2</sup> *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, iv (1958), 152.

In the same article Rabin argues that “ The very fact that the Scrolls are couched in BH [biblical Hebrew] is evidence for the colloquial character of MH [Mishnaic Hebrew] ”.<sup>1</sup> The idea that Mishnaic Hebrew was an artificial jargon had rested on the supposition that those who used it wanted to write in biblical Hebrew but were unable to do so ; it is now clear that they could write “ a correct and at times even elegant BH ”. The ability to use biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew existed simultaneously.

Similarly M. H. Goshen-Gottstein writes of “ the *quasi-trilingual* situation in which QS [the Qumran Scrolls] were composed ”.<sup>2</sup> The three involved are Aramaic and the two kinds or stages of Hebrew.

To sum up this point, then, studies in Mishnaic Hebrew, combined with the evidence of the Dead Sea Scrolls, have made it probable that in the time of Jesus Hebrew was far from dead, and thereby have weakened one of the main traditional arguments in favour of the theory that he spoke Aramaic. At its simplest, that argument was that Jesus spoke Aramaic because there was nothing else for him to speak—unless he spoke Greek. We now see that there was after all something else that he might have spoken. This, however, while it shows that he *might* have spoken Hebrew, does not show that he *did* speak Hebrew. What are New Testament scholars likely to say?

The view that Jesus may have used Hebrew in part of his teaching is itself not a new idea. Dalman himself, though he swept Mishnaic Hebrew aside as a possibility, maintained that Jesus through his Jewish education must have known Hebrew, and by this he means biblical Hebrew.<sup>3</sup> More recently, the great Manchester scholar, T. W. Manson, in this following G. F. Moore, stated that “ Rabbinical Hebrew was a real language, used it may be in a limited circle and for a special purpose, but still used in the full sense of the word ”,<sup>4</sup> and Manson went on to ask the question whether Jesus knew this spoken Hebrew and

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* p. 149 ; cf. also his argument that in the scrolls there are actual references to Mishnaic Hebrew, see *ibid.* p. 146 and his *Qumran Studies* (Oxford, 1957), pp. 67 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, iv (1958), 135.

<sup>3</sup> *Jesus-Jeshua*, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> *The Teaching of Jesus* (2nd edn.), pp. 47, 50.

used it. To both parts of the question he answers in the affirmative. He pointed, among other things, (a) to Jesus' knowledge of the Hebrew Bible—if Jesus knew the Bible well, it is unlikely that he found later Hebrew incomprehensible; (b) to the recognition of Jesus as a teacher, even by learned men themselves: “they recognized him as a competent scholar who could meet them on their own ground”; (c) to his teaching *in the synagogue*. Manson concluded that:

Aramaic was the language which came most naturally to the tongue of Jesus. It is the language of his prayers, the language in which he spoke to ordinary folks who came to him with their troubles, and the language in which he delivered his message to the people and his teaching to the disciples. On the other hand it seems not improbable that in discussion and dispute with the Jewish scholars he may have employed the language, as he certainly used the exegetical methods and terminology, of the Rabbinic schools.

Matthew Black, who has been the leading British scholar to study the Gospels as seen through the original language of Jesus, accepted Manson's account as “not unlikely”.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless his own important study is directed almost entirely<sup>2</sup> towards an Aramaic, and not a Hebrew, linguistic background for the teaching of Jesus, and in later editions of his book, as well as in articles written at about the same time, he seems very reluctant to acknowledge any greater likelihood for the use of Hebrew by Jesus. The third edition of his classic work continues to regard with pained incredulity any suggestion that Hebrew was a fairly general medium of expression and to treat such suggestions as if they were instances of wild extremism (“M. H. Segal has gone so far as to claim . . .”<sup>3</sup>), so extreme that they could scarcely be comprehended (“It would seem from this description of Hebrew in the time of Christ as a ‘free, living language’ and ‘a normal vehicle of expression’ that Dr. Wilcox intends us to understand that Hebrew was in fact a spoken Palestinian language in New Testament times, and not merely a medium of literary expression only or a learned language confined to rabbinical circles”<sup>4</sup>). Black goes on to point out certain extreme and

<sup>1</sup> Black, *An Aramaic Approach* (3rd edn.), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the exception of the story of the Last Supper, above, p. 17, note 3.

<sup>3</sup> *An Aramaic Approach* (3rd edn.), p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* The reference is to M. Wilcox, *The Semitisms of Acts* (Oxford, 1965).

improbable elements in the arguments of Birkeland, and there are indeed such elements; though not all the points at which Black holds Birkeland to be in error are valid, and in any case it is somewhat regrettable that this point should be pressed so hard, when Black's earlier editions had given no real discussion at all to the possibility of Hebrew.<sup>1</sup>

Now it is not my intention in this short lecture to seek a definite answer to the problem which we have been considering, and I want now merely to draw attention to some of the broad issues which are relevant for the continuing discussion.

One of the effects of the recent turn in discussion—and this has already been implied above—is that it has separated two distinct questions. The first was the question whether in the first century Hebrew was still a live option for general communication. The second was the question whether Jesus spoke Hebrew or Aramaic. In the older discussions the two were commonly linked: it was argued that, since Hebrew for practical purposes did not exist, therefore Jesus spoke Aramaic. This argument now falls away and the questions become distinct: one can argue that Hebrew was widely spoken in the first century, but that Jesus himself spoke Aramaic, which was even more widely spoken. Segal himself, who argued so strongly for the real existence of Mishnaic Hebrew as a living language, nevertheless held that Jesus spoke Aramaic, which in the Roman period was “the vernacular of the native Galilean Jews”.<sup>2</sup> More recently, the Spanish scholar Díez Macho, one of our main authorities on early Aramaic, similarly believes that Mishnaic Hebrew was “a popular language, not purely literary or scholarly”; but he also holds that the language of Jesus was Galilean Aramaic, though it is probable that he may sometimes have preached in Mishnaic Hebrew.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Black asserts that “this extreme position [i.e. Birkeland's] has found little if any support among competent authorities”. It is true that the more idiosyncratic elements of Birkeland's argument have been little accepted; but the general movement towards a reconsideration of the matter, and therefore towards a fresh look at the possibility of Hebrew, is in fact very widespread, as the references in this article should show.

<sup>2</sup> *Grammar*, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> “La Lengua hablada por Jesucristo”, *Oriens Antiquus*, ii (1963), 95-132; see Conclusions on pp. 131 f.

If this newer turn in the discussion is valid, then our knowledge of the general linguistic situation in Palestine (the second kind of evidence distinguished earlier in this lecture) is no longer in itself sufficiently decisive to determine the language used by Jesus. The effect of this may be to throw more weight henceforth on to the first kind of evidence, i.e. the Semitic phrases cited as spoken by Jesus. Though these phrases are sometimes somewhat ambiguous evidence, they nevertheless swing the balance towards Aramaic. But it is likely that the Aramaic view will—at least in the minds of the younger scholars—no longer necessarily be supported by the argument which in earlier times much pre-disposed in its favour, namely the conception that Hebrew no longer existed as a popular language.

Turning to another point, we have seen that in modern study more use has been made of concepts of bilingualism and multilingualism; but not much has yet been done to apply to these dimly-seen outlines of an ancient multilingual Palestine the information and the techniques which modern linguists have developed in studying multilingualism where it can be observed in modern societies. Here again some pioneering work has been done by E. Y. Kutscher, who has used work like that of U. Weinreich<sup>1</sup> and has suggested ways in which the coexistence of Hebrew and Aramaic has led to probable extensions and shifts of meaning in words.<sup>2</sup>

What was the point of the Aramaic Targum in relation to a multilingual society? The fact that the Bible was read along with an Aramaic translation has been widely used as an argument that Hebrew was no longer in use. But this does not follow. For the original production of the Targum, indeed, a very natural reason lay in the situation of a Jewish community in which only Aramaic was known—such a community as that known from Elephantine. But there is a difference between the origin of the Targum and the way in which the Targum was used. We can at least consider the following hypothesis: though the Targum originated in communities in which the knowledge of Hebrew

<sup>1</sup> *Languages in Contact* (New York, 1953).

<sup>2</sup> "Aramaic Calque in Hebrew" (in Hebrew), *Tarbiš*, xxxiii (1963-4), 118-30 (summary in English, pp. ii-iii).

was negligible, it came to be spread by adoption to communities in which both Hebrew and Aramaic were known. It functioned not simply as a straight translation of the Hebrew Bible, but as a paraphrastic interpretation—and it continued to do so long after Aramaic had ceased to be used, and among Jews of western Europe who had no past history of Aramaic speech in their culture at all. To put it another way, we have to distinguish between two things: difficulty in understanding the Old Testament is one thing, and complete ignorance of Hebrew is another. A person who could speak Hebrew in the first century, and even one who could write—or could even speak!“ biblical ” Hebrew, as some of the Qumran people could, could still be in difficulty with the actual biblical text. The text was now holy, and it was not possible to bring it up to date by a rewriting in a more contemporary Hebrew. Hebrew commentaries (the *peshet* type) existed, but not modernizations of the actual text. For those who knew Hebrew, the Aramaic version functioned as a more or less authoritative interpretation, which both elucidated the linguistic obscurities of the original and smoothed out its religious difficulties. Moreover this function was extended beyond what could have been done by a translation into a different language such as Greek or Latin: because of the considerable overlap between Hebrew and Aramaic, and because the Targum was not read alone but with the accompaniment of the Hebrew text itself, this rendering was able to provide hints and plays upon phenomena of the Hebrew, along with explanations of names and clarifications of obscurities. Thus the existence of the Targum is not a particularly strong argument against the co-existence of Hebrew in the Palestinian culture. The situation in areas like Egypt was quite different: here Greek was entirely dominant and Hebrew was almost entirely unknown; and because the Greek language was quite heterogeneous in relation to that of the Hebrew original this kind of interplay between text and translation was impossible, or possible only in a small degree. (The eventual replacement of the LXX translation by that of Aquila can in part be viewed as an attempt to create for Greek also that kind of linguistic commensurability with the original text which the Targum in its different way had always possessed.)

Modern discussions of our question have had a sociological element: we hear of difference between "the upper classes" and "the common people", and it is to be hoped that rather more refined distinctions will in due course be brought into the discussion. It has generally been assumed that, if Jesus was understood by "the common people" and if "the common people heard him gladly" (Mark xii. 38, A.V.), then he must have been speaking the language of the common people. But more subtle distinctions are needed at this point.<sup>1</sup> There are different registers in language, and a person speaking about one subject or in one context chooses a different register from that in which he speaks when talking about another subject or in a different context: the idiom used by one buying a horse or (in the case of Jesus) saying "girl, get up" is not necessarily—not even probably—the same register as that used in a more literary religious discussion or in a legal dispute.

This mention of literary quality is important because even the most ardent foes of the idea that Jesus spoke Hebrew have allowed that Hebrew was used as "a literary language" in his time. But many of the sayings of Jesus have a strongly stylized or literary character about them, a literary quality which puts them in the same category as, let us say, parts of the poetry in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The common people may have not only tolerated but even expected such a "literary" elevation above the stylistic register which the common people normally *used*. Among the Arabs the diversity between colloquial and elevated styles is very pronounced, and no one, however humble, would expect that in a public speech, a university lecture, a religious discussion or even in writing a letter the same register or idiom would be used as is appropriate for buying a horse or giving instructions to the gardener.<sup>2</sup> To put it another way, one has

<sup>1</sup> It is a point to be made against Birkeland that he, although reversing the traditional equation between languages and social classes, still uses a generally coarse conception of "the lower classes", "the upper classes" and so on.

<sup>2</sup> The parallel has been offered before, e.g. by Rabin, *Scr. Hier.*, p. 151: "If the Scrolls—as is likely—present the actual form of the teaching offered to the *rabbim*, to 'all Sons of Light', then the ordinary, run-of-the-mill sectarian must have understood BH, much as the uneducated Arab of today understands a sermon preached in Literary Arabic."

to allow for the possibility that the "common people" might be able to *understand* levels of discourse which they could not themselves freely *produce*. This is similar to the difference stated by Segert, in a review of the discussion, as that between the active and the passive knowledge of a language.<sup>1</sup> Passive knowledge of an idiom—which we might define as a competence to understand an already limited corpus of text, but not to expand creatively and productively—has long been a noticeable feature in the relation between Hebrew and parts of the Jewish community.

Historically, the relations between the various languages of Palestine seem likely to have developed in a very complicated and non-linear way. One chief criticism against some formulations of the traditional view is that they were too simple and linear: they suggested that after the Babylonian Exile Hebrew died out, and Aramaic took its place. In fact interruptions and reversals of the process may have been many, and the destinies of the two Semitic languages were intertwined in a complicated way. We have seen that at about 700 B.C. Aramaic was still unintelligible to Hebrew speakers; for us, to whom the two languages seem very closely related, this may seem odd. The probable explanation is that Aramaic, however closely related to Hebrew in the eyes of the modern philologist, was still a foreign language, with no base in the Judaeen culture. A foreign language, even if quite similar to one's own, may well be quite unintelligible until it has been specially learned. In particular, the phonetics being different, you cannot "hear what they are saying"—especially when it is a matter of shouting over the walls of a besieged city. But as the number of those who know both Hebrew and Aramaic increases, the experience of identification of what is going on in the other language begins to take effect. The adoption for Hebrew of the Aramaic script assisted the process: the use of the same script for the two main languages used in the Jewish culture made it easier to relate phoneme to phoneme, word to word, meaning to meaning. The peculiar shape of the bilingual society of Palestine was made by the striking similarity of the two languages in certain aspects, and this, combined with the clear differences between them, was the basis for a rudimentary

<sup>1</sup> See *Archiv Orientalní*, xxv (1957), 21-37, especially p. 31.

comparative philology, which ran through Jewish scholarship right through the Middle Ages, especially when Arabic joined the other two to form a triangular series of comparisons.

In the linguistic situation Greek, though very influential, was the odd man out : though there were many borrowings of words from Greek, as a language it lacked the affinities in sound, structure and writing system which enabled Aramaic and the various kinds of Hebrew to be linked together. As we have seen, in writing for Greek speakers it was generally sufficient to say "Hebrew" in order to specify that the language was the indigenous Jewish language, i.e. non-Greek ; in Semitic writings, on the other hand, distinctions were familiar between dialects and languages which were relevant, e.g. between the holy language and general human language. And Greek has another part to play in the history. The rise of Aramaic, and the gradual extrusion of Hebrew by it, was not a smooth line of progress. It is likely that some Jewish communities were completely Aramaized very early and virtually lost contact with Hebrew. But the world conquests of Alexander made Greek, rather than Aramaic, the major language of universal culture, and the rise of Greek may have thus affected the influence of Aramaic. Moreover, religious and national resistance against assimilation to Greek culture, and later to Roman rule, may have been a stimulus to the cultivation of Hebrew.

The final submersion of Mishnaic Hebrew as a spoken language was also related to world politics. During the first two Christian centuries Rabbinic discussions were conducted in Mishnaic Hebrew ; but after 200 they go over very considerably to Aramaic. This fact is an additional reason in favour of the view that Mishnaic Hebrew had its base in a spoken colloquial ; if this had not been so, and if it had been a purely scholarly language, it might well have continued in spite of all changes of vernacular, as indeed did its later successor, the rabbinic Hebrew of the middle ages. It is simpler to suppose that the abandonment of Mishnaic Hebrew resulted from the loss of its colloquial base, and that that loss was a consequence of the immense human destruction of the second great Jewish revolt against the Romans (132-5 A.D.)

These last thoughts have carried us some distance from the language of Jesus himself. I would only repeat in sum the position which I have tried to survey : for the moment it seems likely that his language was Aramaic, or that he spoke more Aramaic than he spoke Hebrew. Thus far a fairly traditional position seems still to remain. But the balance of the evidence has, under the conditions of modern scholarship, altered ; the question of the language spoken by Jesus is now a more open one than one would formerly have believed ; the kind of information at our disposal has considerably changed ; and our general picture of the linguistic history of Palestine, and of the linguistic situation of his time, is now in course of considerable revision.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> To the literature already cited I should add Abba Bendavid, *Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew* (in Hebrew ; 2nd ed., Tel Aviv, 1967), which reached me too late to be referred to in the text of the lecture.