HEBREW-LANGUAGE APPROACHES TO THE GOSPELS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO SYNOPTIC STUDIES

Hebrew-language origins of the synoptic gospel tradition have been discussed by church fathers and scholars from the second century onwards well into modern times. However, with the rise of critical scholarship in the 18th and 19th century, the traditional assumption of a pre-canonical Hebrew gospel tradition has been dismissed gradually from the discourse about gospel origins and the synoptic question. The reasons for this dismissal can briefly be summed up as follows:

1. The rise of the Two-Source-Hypothesis as the most commonly accepted solution to the synoptic problem led to a shift of focus from a possible Hebrew Matthew to the Greek Mark as the oldest written document of the synoptic gospel tradition.

2. The discovery of a growing number of papyri and Greek inscriptions from the New Testament era furthered the understanding of koine Greek and disproved the traditional assumption that the linguistic characteristics of New Testament Greek were owed to translation from Semitic sources.

3. Travels by the Austrian catholic and humanist scholar Johann Widmannstadt to the Christian churches of Syria and the subsequent publication of the Syriac New Testament (peshitta) in 1555 led to a widespread conviction among early bible scholars that Aramaic, not Hebrew, was the lingua vernacula of Jesus.

4. This assumption was strengthened even more by the thesis, put forward by German Jewish Scholar Abraham Geiger in 1845, that Mishnaic Hebrew was an artificial language created by the early rabbis, after Hebrew had been a dead language for centuries.

5. A growing atmosphere of antisemitism and hostility towards Hebrew literature and Jewish culture within German scholarship also led
to a decline of interest in Hebrew and/or Jewish origins of the New Testament literature, while the focus or the early religio-historical school shifted towards the greco-roman culture and language as a milieu of origin for the gospels.

As a result of these, and other, factors, there has been a widespread consensus well into the second half of the past century that the long-held tradition of a pre-canonical Hebrew gospel tradition was a mere myth created by misinformed church fathers and should be abandoned completely. Ongoing attempts to find at least some traits of truth in this tradition have been met by the scholarly community with either ridicule or emphatic rejection.

However, over the past decades, some of the basic convictions that once led to the dismissal of the traditional “Hebrew Gospel” hypothesis have been called into question by new archeological discoveries, changed paradigms in linguistic studies and alternative approaches to the synoptic problem. It therefore seems appropriate today to take a new look at some of the old problems and open up again some of the files that have been closed in order to re-evaluate the evidence. Without doubt, such re-evaluation should not simply be a revival of hypotheses of the past and a repetition of mistakes that have already been dismissed for good reasons. However, it could lead to new, refined and more cautious approaches by avoiding some of the mistakes of the past while at the same time embracing their valuable contributions that might have laid to rest too early by past generations of scholars.¹

In this paper, I will first try to show why I believe, together with others, that there is sufficient reason to re-evaluate the evidence anew in view of recent trends and paradigm shifts in biblical, linguistic and archeological scholarship. Second, I will sum up recent discussions and evidence concerning the use of Hebrew as a spoken and literary language at the time of Jesus. Third, I will suggest that the quest for possible Hebrew origins of the synoptic tradition can serve as a helpful methodological tool for the study of synoptic relationships.

¹ This article is an English summary of the main results of my German book Hebräisches Evangelium und Synoptische Überlieferung: Untersuchungen zum hebräischen Hintergrund der Evangelien (WUNT II/312), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2011. I am grateful for Prof. Kapera’s invitation to present this summary here. For reasons of space, I have limited footnotes and bibliographical references throughout the article. For interaction with primary sources and secondary literature readers may refer to the German original. However, some more recent literature has been added.

I. Changed parameters and new evidence

1. A new openness of the synoptic question

The synoptic question is more open today than it was fifty years ago. The traditional acceptance of the “Two source hypothesis”, or its extended version in the form of Streeter’s “Four document hypothesis” as the only viable answer to the synoptic problem has for long given way to a much broader spectrum of variations and outright alternatives: As a matter of fact, the hypothesis had never existed in a unified and unanimously accepted form from its beginnings: Some assumed a Hebrew or Aramaic “Q”, some did not. Some assumed an “Ur-Markus”, others not. Some proposed a “Proto-Lk”, others not. Already in 1918, an analysis of 17 different reconstructions of “Q” came to the conclusion that no single verse of the Gospel of Matthew was included in all 17 of them.² The raw, non-narrative and (by definition) non-markan sayings collection “A” in Holtzmann’s original hypothesis has next to no resemblance to the “Sayings-Gospel” of the International Q Project which contains not only a continuous narrative running from the Baptist through the Passion tradition, but also overlaps with Mark to a large amount.³ Both, in turn, differ considerably from Matthew Caseys concept of “Q” as a “convenient label” for all sorts of independent sources that were available to the evangelists partly in Aramaic, partly in Greek.⁴

Alongside these differing variations and modifications of the traditional Two-Source hypothesis, some of the main alternative approaches have been worked out more thoroughly over the past decades and therefore gained new momentum in the debate: William Farmers theory of Matthean priority, often dubbed as the “Neo-Griesbach” hypothesis, and also proposed earlier by Basil Butler and Pierson Parker, has been laid out in detail by his followers.⁵ Austin Farrer’s proposal to “dispense with a dual approach and synopticism as a posit”⁶ has been worked out in parallel by the late Hultgren.⁷ Others, such as Kloppenborg,⁸ have emphasized that synopticism as a posit might have led to the dismissal of the traditional “Hebrew Gospel” hypothesis too early by past generations of scholars.

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As a result of these, and other, factors, there has been a widespread consensus well into the second half of the past century that the long-held tradition of a pre-canonical Hebrew gospel tradition was a mere myth created by misinformed church fathers and should be abandoned completely. Ongoing attempts to find at least some traits of truth in this tradition have been met by the scholarly community with either ridicule or emphatic rejection.

However, over the past decades, some of the basic convictions that once led to the dismissal of the traditional “Hebrew Gospel” hypothesis have been called into question by new archeological discoveries, changed paradigms in linguistic studies and alternative approaches to the synoptic problem. It therefore seems appropriate today to take a new look at some of the old problems and open up again some of the files that have been closed in order to re-evaluate the evidence. Without doubt, such re-evaluation should not simply be a revival of hypotheses of the past and a repetition of mistakes that have already been dismissed for good reasons. However, it could lead to new, refined and more cautious approaches by avoiding some of the mistakes of the past while at the same time embracing their valuable contributions that might have been laid to rest too early by past generations of scholars.

In this paper, I will first try to show why I believe, together with others, that there is sufficient reason to re-evaluate the evidence anew in view of recent trends and paradigm shifts in biblical, linguistic and archeological scholarship. Second, I will sum up recent discussions and evidence concerning the use of Hebrew as a spoken and literary language at the time of Jesus. Third, I will suggest that the quest for possible Hebrew origins of the synoptic tradition can serve as a helpful methodological tool for the study of synoptic relationships.

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More complex theories of “multiple layers” and “multiple sources”,
as developed by scholars like Pierre-Emile Boismard and Jean Carmi-
gnac, and, in different variations, more recently by Philippe Rolland
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in a general sense, however at the same time too complex for practical
work on synoptic texts.8 Considerations of the extent and impact of oral
tradition on the several stages of literary development add to the com-
plexity of the issue and have led to even more complex reconstructions
of the early gospel tradition.9

The ever growing diversity of approaches and hypotheses leaves no
doubt that the synoptic question is far from settled. It therefore seems
justified to continue efforts to find new approaches and tools that could
bring to light new aspects of the problem and thereby enrich the discus-
sion of the synoptic problem.

2. A changed perspective on the Jewish setting of the Gospels

Another major shift of paradigms that affects the discussion of syn-
optic research has taken place in the field of “historical Jesus” studies:

One Gospel from Two: Mark’s Use of Matthew and Luke, Harrisburg: Trinity Press In-
Cambridge University Press 1951.


7 Fuchs, A.: Spuren von Deutero markus 1-5 (SNTU.NF 1-5), Münster: LIT 2004-
2007 (cf. esp. Vol. 1 p. 20); Schnelle, U.: Einleitung in das Neue Testament, Göttingen:

Rolland, P.:”A New Look at the Synoptic Question”, EJT 8 (1999) 133-144; Burkett,
D.: Rethinking the Gospel Sources: From Proto-Mark to Mark, New York: T&T Clark
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While the general tendency of 18th and 19th century scholarship was to separate Jesus and the Gospels from contemporary Jewish literature and culture, this tendency has been reversed in the second half of the 20th century: A majority of scholars are now convinced that any seri-
ous study of the historical Jesus must place him firmly in the setting of
Second Temple Palestinian Judaism, and only then ask for differences
and discontinuities. The “criterion of difference”, which tried to find
the most authentic straits of the Gospel tradition in places where the
conflict with Judaism was most obvious,10 has been replaced today by
the “criterion of historical context plausibility”, which assumes high
authenticity especially for those passages that fit into the cultural, re-
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However, for the synoptic question, this important shift of perspec-
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“The original simplicity of the Christian teachers, which had lim-
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teachings, was lost soon after, and people began to follow the spirit
of the Jewish obsession with details, which the Jews did not abandon
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Based on this assumption, it was clear for Eichhorn that Mark, as the
shortest and simplest Gospel, must have been closest to the Urevange-
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10 Käsemann, E.: “Das Problem des historischen Jesus”, ZThK 51 (1954) 125-
153:144.
13 Eichhorn, J. G.: Über die drei ersten Evangelien. Leipzig: Weidmannische Buch-
handlung 1794, 973 (translation mine).
14 ibid., 787.
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More complex theories of “multiple layers” and “multiple sources”, as developed by scholars like Pierre-Emile Boismard and Jean Carmignac, and, in different variations, more recently by Philippe Rolland and Delbert Burkett, have been commented as being historically plausible in a general sense, however at the same time too complex for practical work on synoptic texts.8 Considerations of the extent and impact of oral tradition on the several stages of literary development add to the complexity of the issue and have led to even more complex reconstructions of the early gospel tradition.9

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However, for the synoptic question, this important shift of perspectives bears significant consequences: For many of the fathers of synoptic research, the “jewishness” or “non-jewishness” of synoptic material was an important heuristic factor for the discernment of literary dependencies:12 Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, as an example, described the process of Gospel tradition as follows:

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hypothesis, employed the criterion of difference even more radically: For him, the priority of Mark was demonstrated quite clearly by the fact that he “creates the most vivid picture of the enmity between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees,” while the other Synoptics “copy mechanically” and therefore often weaken this picture. For example, while Jesus sovereignly declares himself Lord over the Sabbath in Mk 2:23-28, the Matthean parallel presents him as “accommodating” to Jewish law and custom, which “deliberately presses him below the greatness of spirit which we find in the historical records.” While Mk 9:11-13, according to Weiß, shows Jesus in clear opposition to the “Jewish messianic saga,” the Matthean parallel suggests that Jesus “was pedantic enough, like the scribes of old and modern times, to adhere to the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament in an outward and literal way.”

Both instances, for Weiß, testify to the priority of Mk over Mt.

Bruno Bauer, who popularized the Two-Source hypothesis shortly after, argues in a very similar vein:

“That it becomes clear that only in Mark’s Gospel […] the collision between the new freedom and the old statutes is steadily progressing and the superiority of this new power is culminating in a final triumph through ever new revelations, and once it is clear that the Gospels of Luke and Matthew show only a dim reflection of this harmony, […] than it should be obvious that the narrative of Luke and Matthew is based on […] the canonical Mark.”

For Bauer, only the Gospel of Mark clearly speaks the “death sentence on the Jewish people”, only here we find the “enmity of the privileged classes” and the “final separation from Judaism” fully worked out. This contrast is regularly “weakened” and “flattened” by the other two Synoptics. The non-jewish character of Mark therefore serves as a criterion of authenticity for Bauer.

Few scholars today would follow, or even are aware of, this line of thought that permeates the works of early synoptic research. Arguments from the “Jewish” or “non-Jewish” character of synoptic traditions have disappeared from the discussion, and other textual, linguistic and theological features have moved into the focus today. However, the question may be asked why the results and hypotheses of these early synoptic researches are still accepted unquestionably today, when it is clear that some of the main arguments and assumptions they were based on are dubious, at best, from today’s perspective. As a matter of fact, the weight of evidence has turned around in view of the paradigm shifts within historical Jesus studies described above: If proximity to, or distance from Jewish thought, culture, religion or literature can throw any light on the question of literary dependencies, than the “criterion of historical context plausibility” should be applied as a heuristic criterion: In any given comparison of differing synoptic variants, the line of assumed dependencies should run from the “most Jewish” to the “least Jewish” variant.

Within the scholarly debate on the synoptic question, arguments of this kind have disappeared more or less from the discussion since the beginnings of the 20th century. This development was probably a result of an ongoing compartmentalization of New Testament scholarship, where the “literary-historical” school has focused on linguistic analysis of the canonical Gospels and therefore largely ignored Jewish literature and thought, while the “religio-historical” school has focused on the relations between early Jewish and early Christian literature without asking questions about synoptic relationships. The major scholarly works on the synoptic problem do not engage in depth with the field of Jewish studies or with Jewish literature of the Second Temple period. On the other hand, the major studies on the historical Jesus, whether within the “Jewish reclamation of Jesus” or the so-called “Third Quest”, engage thoroughly with the world and literature of early Judaism, but in most cases pragmatically accept the traditional Two-Source hypothesis as a working model without ever engaging with it any further.

Two notable exceptions to this rule should be mentioned here. One is to be found in the work of the “Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research”, initiated by David Flusser and Robert Lindsey, and inspiring

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16 ibid., 484-485 (translation mine).
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21 This does not exclude the possibility that traditions can be “re-judaized” in a later stage of literary development, e.g. in view of a more Jewish audience or as an “accommodation” to surrounding Jewish culture. However, this should not be the standard assumption as it has been in earlier research.
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The synoptic theories of Flusser, Lindsey and Carmignac have not found much support within the scholarly community. However, even if one does not agree with their specific results: their approach can definitely serve as a model for synoptic research in the future, especially in the light of the shift of perspectives described at the beginning of this section. The criterion of “historical (Jewish) context plausibility”, as suggested by Theissen for the field of historical Jesus studies, has become indispensable for that field. However, it still remains strangely absent from the field of synoptic studies until today. Most contributions to the discussion focus instead on arguments from word frequency, word order, arrangement of material, narrative structures, redactio-historical considerations and linguistic features. While all these methods doubtless have their value, many of them are highly susceptible to circular reasoning, a critique that has been voiced repeatedly from all sides of the discussion by proponents of all synoptic models alike.

The approaches to the synoptic question from interaction with Hebrew literature and the Jewish historical context, however, add evidence from outside to the discussion and therefore can help as a helpful corrective and addendum to the other tools. If researchers on the synoptic questions could agree that, generally speaking, synoptic variants that fit in well with the context of first-century Palestinian Judaism have a higher probability of going back to pre-canonical tradition than those that do not, then an additional heuristic tool would be available to enrich the discussion. Scholars applying this tool might even come to quite different conclusions than Flusser, Lindsey, Carmignac or others. However, what concerns us here is not the results and conclusions, but the methodology.

3. A new openness of the linguistic question

If the Jewish setting of the early synoptic tradition is to be incorporated into the methodology of synoptic research, then the question of the work of other Jewish and Christian scholars in Jerusalem and beyond. Here, the study of the synoptic problem is closely intertwined not only with linguistic study of Hebrew and Aramaic literature, but also with historical study of the wider Jewish context, especially with the world of proto-rabbinic Judaism.23 Though the views of scholars within the school vary in respect to the synoptic hypotheses preferred, Flusser and Lindsey agreed with the observations of earlier synoptic researchers that the Gospels of Luke and Matthew are very often closer connected to Jewish culture and thought, while Mark shows less familiarity. They also observed that, in terms of language, Mark’s Greek style betrays less influence from Hebrew interference than that of Matthew and Luke. Therefore, they reversed the conclusions of the early researchers and suggested a model of synoptic relations in which Luke is the oldest of the canonical gospels and was used by Mark, who in turn was used by Matthew, while all three are also dependent on an earlier narrative source, probably written in the Hebrew language.

In a similar vein, Jean Carmignac suggested an approach to the synoptic question through the lens of Jewish literature, however with a stronger focus on the literature from Qumran, his field of expertise. Unfortunately, his plans to write a “commentary on the New Testament from the texts of Qumran” as well as a major work on his synoptic theory,24 never materialized due to his untimely death in 1986. However, in 1984 he presented a temporary working hypothesis, in which, quite similar to Lindsey’s hypothesis, the Gospel of Luke features as the earliest of the three canonical Gospels and served as a source for the other two, while all three depended on earlier Hebrew documents of proto-markan, deuteromarkan and proto-matthean shape.25 His theories on synoptic relationships, as well as his research on the Hebrew background of the New Testament, is based on the work of earlier French colleagues, most notably Marie-Joseph Lagrange, Léon Vaganay and Marie-Emile Boismard. However, Carmignac went beyond their scope of work in


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25 Carmignac, op. cit., 54-56 and 71-73.

26 An early insight into his working method can be found in his study of the Lord’s prayer: Carmignac, op. cit. (n.8). However, in this study Carmignac deliberately leaves aside synoptic considerations due to the paucity of material (cf. p. 361).
language comes into play: Although we have a good number of Greek Jewish literature from the New Testament era at hand, the closest and most relevant parallels are to be found in the rabbinic literature and the Dead Sea scrolls. Synoptic studies that seek interaction with these corpora of literature therefore will necessarily be cross-lingual: The Greek texts of the Gospel tradition have to be compared with the Hebrew and Aramaic Texts from Rabbinic and Qumran literature. Researchers of the past have therefore frequently employed approaches that use retroversion of Greek texts into Aramaic or Hebrew as a tool for study. The term retroversion is purposefully chosen in more recent study over against the older term reconstruction, because the primary aim is not, as it had been in older studies, to reconstruct a historical “original source” or even the “ipsissima vox” of the historical Jesus: The aim is rather to find a plausible Semitic equivalent for the present Greek text, solely for the purpose of interaction with other Semitic texts of the era.

However, there is a point of disagreement on the question which Semitic language should be chosen for this type of approach: Should it be the spoken vernacular of Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries, because this is where the oral Gospel tradition originated in the first place? Should it rather be the literary language of Jewish texts of the period, because this would be the language that would have been chosen for early written Semitic sources, if they ever existed? Or should it rather be the respective language type of the literature aimed at for comparison (e.g. Palestinian or Babylonian Aramaic for comparison with the respective Targums, Postbiblical Hebrew for comparison with the Dead Sea Scrolls, Mishnaic Hebrew for interaction with Rabbinic literature)?

In either of the two first options, the question of language choice is heavily debated: What exactly was the Jewish vernacular in the land of Israel during the Second Temple period, if there was any unified one? And which language would an early (Jewish-)Christian writer choose if he wanted to put Jesus tradition a written form?

The early fathers of synoptic research, from Lessing (1776) to Holtzmann (1863), did not study the matter intensely, but worked instead with the traditional assumption that the “syro-aramaic” language, known from the Peshitta, was the mother tongue of Jesus and therefore the most probable language for any assumed Semitic sources like the “Hebrew Matthew”, the “logia source” or “Ur-Mark”. The most extensive study of the question, available to them at that time, had been presented by Heinrich Friedrich Pfannkuche in 1798.27 However, Pfannkuches main purpose was to prove that a Semitic language, as opposed to Greek, was the “Jewish national language” at the time of Jesus. He therefore did not engage very thoroughly with linguistic differences between Hebrew and Aramaic, and even less with the question of their respective dialects. Since he worked with the a priori assumption that Hebrew had been a dead language since the time of the Babylonian exile, all evidence for Semitic language use in later times was counted by him as evidence for Aramaic language use: Accordingly, he presented Hebrew coins from the Jewish revolt (which he dated into the Maccabean era) as an example for Aramaic language use. Josephus’ remark (Ant, 20.264) that wise men of his time were able to interpret (ἐρμηνεύοντα) the Holy scriptures was for him a proof for the existence of written Targum. Place names with “Beth, Caphar und En (挪)” are interpreted indiscriminately as evidence for Aramaic language use.28 This monolingual approach, typical for the era of early critical biblical scholarship, was further supported half a century later by Abraham Geiger’s thesis that Mishnaic Hebrew was an artificial language created by the Rabbis of the tannaitic era and therefore Hebrew could not have been a spoken language during the Second Temple period.29 German scholars readily accepted this approach because the idea of a “dead Hebrew language” fitted well with the idea of a dead, or at least dying, Judaism or “late Judaism”, the term coined by Wellhausen around the end of this era.

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28 ibid., 408-409; 420; 441.
30 For reasons of space, full bibliographic information on his well-known Grammar (1894), Textbook (1896) and Lexicon (1897) will not be given here.
31 Dalman, G., The words of Jesus, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1902.
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1. The “high antiquity” of the targum custom.
2. The lexical Aramaisms in Josephus and the New Testament
3. The use of Aramaic in the temple, according to later sources
4. The use of Aramaic in older strata of rabbinical literature
5. The use of Aramaic in legal documents (e.g. Ketubot)
6. The change of script
7. The artificial character of Mishnaic Hebrew
8. The use of אֲבִירָאָה for Aramaic in Josephus and the NT

As will be seen, many of these assumptions are outdated from today’s perspective. This fact is largely due to the discovery of new text corpora and ongoing progress in linguistic research. However, with the data and texts available at Dalman’s time, the conclusion seemed inevitable that only Aramaic could be assumed as a spoken language at the time of Jesus and as a written language for early Semitic Gospel sources. This conclusion was widely received by New Testament scholars, both those that were interested in the “ipsissima vox” of the historical Jesus as well as those who were interested in pre-canonical Gospel sources.

However, a good number of scholars have continued to work with the assumption of Hebrew language as a possible linguistic background of the Gospel tradition. Already in the 19th century, Alfred Resch had put together a meticulous study of canonical and extracanonical Gospel tradition, agrapha and textual variants in order to reconstruct precanonical Hebrew Gospel sources. The assumption of Hebrew sources remained prominent in German and French Catholic scholarship, but also in Scandinavia as well as among the newly emerging Judaic scholarship and Jewish-Christian dialogue in the Land of Israel. Others have assumed hebraizing sources at least for parts of the Lucan special tradition.

While part of the early Catholic preference for Hebrew language was owed to other factors, the main reason for a renewed interest in possible Hebrew (as against Aramaic) origins of the Gospel tradition was the emergence of new evidence and changed parameters in the course of the 20th century. Many of the assumptions of Dalman and other early scholars of Aramaic were called into question by ongoing research and new discoveries, so that today the question of language use at the time of Jesus is far more open to discussion than it was a hundred years ago. Some of the factors that have changed the debate will be mentioned here:

\[\text{a) New textual evidence}\]

At the time of Dalman, little textual evidence for the use of either Aramaic or Hebrew during the Second Temple era was available. As two prominent Aramaic scholars of our time have put it:

“The position of Aramaic in our period was long a somewhat ironic one. The central importance of the language was universally recognized, and many scholars [...] supposed it to be the Semitic vernacular of Palestine to the virtual exclusion of Hebrew; yet actual texts in Aramaic from our period have until recently been very scanty.”

“Between the final redaction of Daniel (ca. 165 B.C.), in which roughly six chapters are written in Aramaic, and the first rabbinical writings, Megillat Ta’anit, dating from the end of the first Christian century, there had never been much evidence of the use of Aramaic

\[\text{32 "...represented already in the second century after Christ as very ancient".}\]
\[\text{33 e.g. mSheq 5:3 and 6:5, ySot 24b.}\]
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\[\text{38 Notably Harald Sahlin and Harris Birkeland, cf. ibid, 53-59.}\]
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\[\text{40 Harald Sahlin, Adolf Schlatter, Eduard Schweizer, Raymond Martin, Stephen Farriss, Rainer Riesner and James R. Edwards. Cf. ibid. 64-68.}\]
\[\text{41 Some of these include: a) a stronger emphasis on traditio-historical interaction with Old Testament texts rather than contemporary Jewish literature; b) a more confident reception of the patristic traditions about a “Hebrew Gospel”; c) the “anti-modernist” course of the papal see which prevented Catholic scholars from fully embracing the conclusions of (mainly) protestant critical scholarship of the time, including hypotheses of Aramaic sources that had been prevalent in early synoptic research.}\]
\[\text{42 For a recent in-depth study of many of the issues discussed here, cf. Buth/Notley (n.23).}\]
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in Palestine prior to the discovery of the Qumran scrolls and fragments.44

This situation changed dramatically in the course of the 20th century: Ancient copies of *Ben Sira* and the *Damascus Document*, though dating to later centuries, were the first tangible evidence of Semitic literature from the post-biblical era. However, both were composed in Hebrew, not Aramaic. The finds from Qumran, and later from other locations in the Judean Desert, then fully revolutionized our picture of Jewish literature and culture of the Second Temple era. In terms of language use, these finds enhanced our understanding of the development of Hebrew as well as Aramaic. They also bridged the gap that existed between late biblical Hebrew/Aramaic and early Rabbinic Hebrew/Aramaic literature, although they also make it clear that no simple line of linear development can be drawn.

However, in summary, it can be said with confidence that at the turn of the 21st century it is no longer a matter of debate that Hebrew and Aramaic both were used as a language of religious literature well into the end of the Second Temple era. As a matter of fact, the vast majority of extant literature from that era, according to one recent estimate around 80 Percent,45 was written in Hebrew, not in Aramaic. Any hypothesis of pre-canonical Gospel sources therefore should include considerations about a possible Hebrew language form of these sources.

In addition to the new literary finds, also the amount of epigraphical and other non-literary material has multiplied in the course of the past century: While the “Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum” (CIJ), published 1952, listed a total of 533 Jewish Inscriptions from the area of Palestine, its successor, the “Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeeae et Palaestinae” (CIIP) projects a total of 10,000 inscriptions.46 Unfortunately, the CIIP still remains unfinished, so currently there is no comprehensive catalogue of epigraphical finds from the land of Israel. However, data can be collected from a number of separate publications, catalogues, excavation reports, textbooks and dictionaries to form a reasonably comprehensive picture of language use in non-literary texts: An examination of about 2300 extant inscriptions and documents, dating from around 100 B.C.E to 135 C.E., has brought the following results:47

Around 1400 (60%) of these texts were written in Jewish script (i.e. either Hebrew or Aramaic), while 680 (30%) were written in Greek. Of the 1400 Semitic samples, the majority (870) were too short to be identified as Hebrew or Aramaic, many of them bearing only a name or indiscernible letter combinations. Of the remaining 530, another 179 have no identifiable Hebrew or Aramaic features apart from the use of א or ד/ר/פ in the patronym.48 This feature, however, is not very reliable for identification of language use: The use of א in names had become so conventional that it frequently appears in Hebrew literary and non-literary contexts. It therefore does not reveal reliable information about the language of the inscription, its maker or the person carrying the name. Only 323 of the 2300 inscriptions and non-literary documents in “Jewish script” therefore have reasonable clear grammatical or lexical features to identify them as Hebrew or Aramaic: 176 of these are written in Aramaic, 147 in Hebrew.49

One last piece of textual evidence is the Jewish coinage during the Second Temple period. Here, the weight of evidence is quite clearly on the Hebrew side: All Jewish coins of this period were inscribed in Hebrew and written in Paleo-Hebrew script, except for one series minted by Alexander Jannai in 78 B.C.E., which bore an Aramaic inscription in square script.50

In sum, the textual basis for the debate on language use in Jewish Palestine has broadened considerably over the past century. Many assumptions of early scholarship concerning the exclusive use of Aramaic


45 Poirier, J. C.: “The Linguistic Situation in Jewish Palestine in Late Antiquity”, *Journal of Graeco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 4 (2007) 55-134:59. The figure, according to Poirier, is based on an estimate that excludes the biblical texts.

46 Hannah M. Cotton, Leah Di Segni, Werner Eck et al., *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palestinae*. (Berlin/New York, de Gruyter, 2010-2014). Volumes 1-3 have been published to date. The introduction to Volume 1.1 (p. v-xii) gives an updated overview of the layout and scope of the whole project. Even if it is taken into account that the CIIP includes Jewish as well as Non-Jewish inscriptions, as well as a wider geographical area (including the Arab peninsula), the difference in numbers shows the enormous progress in epigraphical research over the past decades.


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have been challenged by the new material. On the other hand, the classification of Hebrew as a “dead language” can no longer be upheld against the evidence from literary, epigraphical and documentary sources:

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<th>Category</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literary texts</td>
<td>20% Aramaic, 80% Hebrew</td>
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<td>Ossuary inscriptions</td>
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<tr>
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Although statistics can never reflect the complexity of historical realities, they still can help develop a more balanced view of the language situation. While Hebrew seems to have been the dominant language for religious literature and matters of national identity (coins, military letters), Aramaic seems to have been more prevalent in administrative, financial and judicial contexts (supply lists, legal documents, bills, deeds etc.), however none to the exclusion of the other. Traditional assumptions about geographical or social distribution of languages are not reflected in the epigraphical data.

b) The date and function of the targumic custom

In his 1898 summary, Dalman listed the “ancient custom” of targum

51 The often assumed preference for Aramaic in Galilee or for Hebrew in Judea cannot be based on the archeological evidence, since 322 out of 323 relevant samples (i.e. those that can be classified as being Hebrew or Aramaic on grammatical or lexical grounds) were found in Judea. The only exception is an Aramaic Jar inscription from Jelme. All other Aramaic (and Hebrew) inscriptions from Galilee date to a period after 135 C.E. If place names within inscriptions are taken into consideration, the picture becomes even more complex. Those that mention place names from the north of the country are written in Hebrew without exception. Four mention “Gileadeans”, three “Bet-Sheanites” and one possibly a “Gadarene”. On the other hand, the only southern place name (“Bet Amon”) appears in an Aramaic inscription. Therefore, the place names in fact contradict the traditional assumption. For details cf. Baltes, op. cit. (n.47), 63.

52 The popular assumption that Hebrew was the language of the “learned”, while Aramaic was the language of the “masses” cannot be verified from the epigraphic data, since we do not know enough about the social reality of those who stand behind the inscriptions and documents. However, since most of the epigraphic material comes from upper social strata, we can conclude that both languages were used here.

as prime evidence for his assumption that Aramaic had replaced Hebrew as the Jewish vernacular. Pfannkuche, in his earlier study, had dated the written Targums as early as the time of Philo. Dalman was more cautious with regard to written Targums, however he assumed that oral targum was already a regular part of synagogal life at the time of Jesus, “because visitors of the synagogue would not have understood the Hebrew text”. He nevertheless used the language of Targum Ounklo as a model for the spoken language at the time of Jesus.

Ongoing targumic and Aramaic studies of the 20th century, however, have shed a different light on all of these assumptions: The written Targumim today are dated to the third century or later. The origins of oral targum are still being debated, however it is generally assumed that the custom originated after the end of the Bar Kochba revolt. In addition, the function of targum is being viewed differently today: While early researchers assumed that the main purpose of targum was translation, today the function of exegetical expansion is seen as the main focus of the custom. Therefore, the custom of targum, if it existed already in the New Testament era, can no longer serve as an indicator of Hebrew language competence in the Second Temple period.

c) Lexical Semitisms in the New Testament

“Lexical Aramaisms” are listed by Dalman as evidence for the exclusive use of Aramaic as Jewish vernacular at the time of Jesus, and his assessment was repeated by many scholars afterwards. However, many of the various lists of lexical Semitisms suffered from a one-sided analysis of the material: many of them listed any Semitism as an Aramaism, sim-

54 Dalman, op. cit. (n.31), 1-2.
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Although statistics can never reflect the complexity of historical realities, they still can help develop a more balanced view of the language situation. While Hebrew seems to have been the dominant language for religious literature and matters of national identity (coins, military letters), Aramaic seems to have been more prevalent in administrative, financial and judicial contexts (supply lists, legal documents, bills, deeds etc.), however none to the exclusion of the other. Traditional assumptions about geographical or social distribution of languages are not reflected in the epigraphical data.

b) The date and function of the targumic custom

In his 1898 summary, Dalman listed the "ancient custom" of targum as prime evidence for his assumption that Aramaic had replaced Hebrew as the Jewish vernacular. Pfannkuche, in his earlier study, had dated the written Targums as early as the time of Philo.53 Dalman was more cautious with regard to written Targums, however he assumed that oral targum was already a regular part of synagogal life at the time of Jesus, "because visitors of the synagogue would not have understood the Hebrew text".54 He nevertheless used the language of Targum Onkelos as a model for the spoken language at the time of Jesus.

Ongoing targumic and Aramaic studies of the 20th century, however, have shed a different light on all of these assumptions: 55 The written Targumim today are dated to the third century or later. The origins of oral targum are still being debated, however it is generally assumed that the custom originated after the end of the Bar Kochba revolt. In addition, the function of targum is being viewed differently today: While early researchers assumed that the main purpose of targum was translation, today the function of exegetical expansion is seen as the main focus of the custom. Therefore, the custom of targum, if it existed already in the New Testament era, can no longer serve as an indicator of Hebrew language competence in the Second Temple period.

c) Lexical Semitisms in the New Testament

"Lexical Aramaisms" are listed by Dalman as evidence for the exclusive use of Aramaic as Jewish vernacular at the time of Jesus, and his assessment was repeated by many scholars afterwards. However, many of the various lists of lexical Semitisms suffered from a one-sided analysis of the material: many of them listed any Semitism as an Aramaism, sim-
ply based on the assessment of Hebrew as a dead language.56 No serious effort was made to ask whether a specific lexical Semitism could also be derived from the Hebrew language, or if such a derivation could even be more probable. Today, with much better and more specific lexica available for either of the two languages, this task needs to be re-addressed: "...the way in which claims are sometimes made for the Aramaic substratum of the sayings of Jesus, when the evidence is merely 'Semitic' in general, or worse, still, derived from some other Semitic language, e.g. Hebrew, should no longer be countenanced."57

"...many Semitisms can be classified as Aramaisms, only if Aramaic is the basic, if not the sole, Semitic influence upon a given writer or speaker. But this is precisely what can no longer be assumed."58

My own preliminary re-evaluation of the lexical Semitisms contained in the Gospel tradition, based on an even comparison with the most recent lexica of both Hebrew and Aramaic, yields the following results:59 The only lexical Semitism that can only be Aramaic is the word ταλαθά in the phrase ταλαθά κοιμ, which renders the whole phrase as Aramaic. For the exclamation ερράθα, a derivation from Hebrew is more plausible than one from Aramaic. For the quote from Psalm 22 on the cross, the case is complicated, because the phrase is rendered differently in different synoptic and textual variants, some of which relate to Aramaic and some to Hebrew.60 Semitic equivalents for the words μινή, ώσοννα, ἀλληλουία, βεβλεβούλι, μάνια, σάκκος, and βατός can be found in biblical Hebrew, but not in Judean Aramaic. Some appear in later Aramaic literature, but there they apparently still function as Hebrew loanwords.

56 Cf. Schwarz, G.: 'Und Jesus sprach': Untersuchungen zur aramäischen Urgestalt der Worte Jesu (BWANT 118), Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1985. Schwarz lists 30 lexical Aramaisms and 2 lexical Hebrewisms, however he includes words like ἄξι as in his list of Aramaic-only words.


κόρος and γέννα can be derived from both languages, but their equivalents are much more common in Hebrew than in Aramaic. σάββατον is a special case: It has equivalents in Hebrew as well as in Aramaic, however even in Aramaic contexts, the term remains a Hebrew loanword, since the root remains Hebrew נַעַשׁ, while the Aramaic verb for “rest” is נ.61 For the words πρόβατι, ῥαββουνί, μεσσίας, αββά, μαμώνι, πάσχα, σαβανά, κοριθά, βύσσος, μνά, σάντον, equivalents can be found in Hebrew as well as Aramaic language. For the word ράκα, an equivalent can be found in biblical Hebrew, however it is not yet used in a derogatory sense as in Mt 5:22. The derogatory use can however be found in later Aramaic and Hebrew literature.

Arguments for the Aramaic or Hebrew character of the words in question are often made from morphological rather than lexical observations: Thus, the word ending -α is frequently interpreted as an Aramaic status emphaticus. However, the transliterations of the LXX show that the final -α was frequently used in transliterations of Hebrew terms, even where it has no equivalent in the Hebrew morphology. It is therefore no conclusive evidence for either Aramaic or Hebrew language. In sum, the lexical Semitisms of the New Testament do not support the claim that Aramaic was more common than Hebrew as a spoken or written language a: the time of Jesus. To the contrary, they more frequently have their origin in the Hebrew than in the Aramaic language.

d) Evidence of language use from rabbinical literature

Items 3-5 in Dalman’s list all refer to the use of Aramaic in rabbinical liturgy: Aramaic language is used in historical references to temple literature, in early strata of rabbinical literature (e.g. Megillat Taanit) and in legal documents (e.g. ketubot). This, in itself, is evidence for the use of Aramaic in New Testament times. However, it does not exclude the use of Hebrew in other spheres of life. Obviously, other early strata of rabbinic literature have been transmitted in Hebrew.62 In fact, the Aramaic parts within the early strata of rabbinic literature are the exception to the rule. And, what is more, they do not represent the kind of genres that are relevant for the gospel tradition. When we turn instead to the genres.


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of rabbinic parables and halakhic discussion, which feature much more prominently in the gospel tradition, both are transmitted in Hebrew language, even within Aramaic literary contexts, in the case of parables this even exclusively so.\textsuperscript{63} As was already seen from the epigraphic evidence, language use seems to have been a matter of situative choice rather than mere capability: Aramaic seems to have been more appropriate in some contexts and for some genres, while Hebrew was for others.

We even find, in rabbinic literature, examples of deliberate code-switching between the two languages: Thus, the sage Shimon ben Shetah is depicted as switching from Aramaic to Hebrew in the middle of conversations (bBer 19a and 48a), in both cases at a point when the topic changed towards halakhic issues. Other examples of code-switching involve situations where Sages switch to Hebrew because they address a different person in the midst of conversation: In all these, the persons are local and less educated people (bNed 66b, bMeg 18b and bRHS 26b). Even if these traditions do not necessarily reflect historical events, they still are evidence for a familiarity with phenomena of deliberate code-switching between Aramaic and Hebrew. A later dictum of Joseph of Beth Guvrin (3rd c. C.E.) reflects a language diversity in the land of Israel that is defined by function and genre rather than geographical preference or educational status.\textsuperscript{64} And the fierce opposition in a saying ascribed to Juda Ha-Nasi against the use of Aramaic in the Land of Israel (bSot 49b und bBQ 82b–83a) might well reflect a situation at the end of the 2nd century C.E., in which Hebrew was still in use as a living language among the sages, while Aramaic had become more and more predominant. In sum, the early strata of rabbinic literature do not reflect a monolingual Aramaic environment for the late Second Temple period in Israel.

d) The artificial character of Mishnaic Hebrew

Item no. 6 in Dalman's list, the claim of an artificial character of Mishnaic Hebrew, was based on an earlier thesis of Abraham Geiger (1845) who stood at the forefront of the German Jewish Reform movement. Geiger attempted to prove that Hebrew was never used as a liturgical language in early Judaism and therefore should also not be used in modern Judaism. The presumed use of an Aramaic "vernacular" in the synagogues of the Second Temple period for him was a useful analogy for his campaign to introduce the German vernacular into the synagogues of his own time. However, his hypothesis has not stood the test of time. As early as 1908, and then later in his Grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew (1927), Moshe Segal concluded from some of the distinctive features of Mishnaic Hebrew that a spoken dialect must have been the basis of the formation of this specific form of literary Hebrew.\textsuperscript{65} The later discoveries of the Bar Kochba letters, the Copper Scroll (3Q15) and the Halakhic letter 4QMMT have verified his hypothesis. Today, it can safely be said that the existence of a spoken, proto-mishnaic dialect of Hebrew, commonly called "Middle Hebrew", is a commun opinio in the world of Hebrew linguistic scholarship.\textsuperscript{66}.

\textbf{\textit{b}) Terms for “Hebrew” and “Aramaic” in Greek Jewish Literature}

Item no. 7 in Dalman's list is the assumption still widely held in scholarship today that ancient Greek authors, including the New Testament writers, did not distinguish between Aramaic and Hebrew when they used the terms ‘Eβραϊκός, ‘Ελληνικός, or ‘Ελληνική. This assumption has become so common that it found its way into the standard definition of the term Ἠπεραίκης in the BDAG lexicon, and even some modern bible translations translate the term with “Aramaic” in places like Acts 21:40; 26:14 or Joh 19:17. However, these claims have mostly been based on the a priori assumption that Hebrew was not in use at this time and therefore the term Ἠπεραίκης must mean Aramaic in these contexts as well as in Philo and Josephus. A close examination of all relevant Greek literature of the period shows that the term Ἠπεραίκης, Ἠπεραϊκτί and Ἠπεραϊκὴ are never used anywhere to denote Aramaic language,\textsuperscript{67} and that other

\textsuperscript{63} E.g. the Hebrew parables employed in the midst of an Aramaic discussion in bTa'an 5b; bBQ 60b.

\textsuperscript{64} ySot 7,2/3 (21c). ed. Schäfer/Becker III:120


\textsuperscript{67} Two passages are often being quoted here (Ant 1:33 and 3:252). However, in both cases the transcriptions in question are not unambiguously Aramaic, cf. Buth/Pierce, op.
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terms like סורתי, סורא or חלדיאתי were used consistently by ancient authors to distinguish Hebrew from Aramaic language.68 The same can be shown for the terminology of the early church fathers, especially the much-debated quote of Bishop Papias.69

2) Non-lexical Hebraisms and Aramaisms

In addition to the lexical Semitisms listed above, also non-lexical Semitisms need to be taken in consideration when evaluating the Semitic language background of ancient Greek texts. Already Dalman, in his study of the words of Jesus, had compiled a list of 15 typical Semitic idioms found in the Gospel tradition. Two of these he described as exclusively Aramaic, while six were identified as exclusively Hebrew. However, Dalman concluded that only the two Aramaic idioms were "true Semitisms", while the Hebrew idioms should be regarded as "artificial" Hebraisms introduced by the Greek authors as a stylistic echo of biblical texts.70 Klaus Beyer, in his extensive study of the Semitic syntax of the New Testament, has more carefully separated syntactical Aramaisms from Hebraisms.71 Other authors, like Raymond Martin and more recently Randall Buth, have suggested methodologies to discern Aramaic from Hebrew in Semitized Greek sources.72 It can be shown that distinguishable linguistic features point to the fact that some extant works of ancient Greek literature more probably go back to Aramaic sources or traditions, while others more probably are based on translations from Hebrew. Based on these criteria, a Hebrew language background is more probable for the Gospels than an Aramaic one.

This observation is to be supplemented by the fact that for some specific idioms and wordplays in the Gospel tradition a Hebrew language background is much more plausible than an Aramaic one: The phrases βασιλεία τῶν ὑπέρων and αὐξήσεως are not attested in Aramaic literature, but common in Hebrew. To be more specific, they only became common in Post-Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew. The same is true for the periphrastic construction, which is rare in Biblical Hebrew, Classical Greek and Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, but very frequent in Mishnaic Hebrew. The specific semantic nuances of the terms παραβολή (hebr. הדרח) as "story parable" and δικαιοσύνη (hebr. רוח) as "almsgiving", both found in the Gospels, are attested neither in Biblical Hebrew nor in Aramaic, but again are frequent in Rabbinic Hebrew. Wordplays based on the names of Ḥineq (Mt 1,21) and Πίπρος (Mt 16:18) only work in Hebrew,73 as well as a possible wordplay on the terms "sons" and "stones" behind Mt 3:9/Lk 3:8 and Mt 21:38-43.74 Grintz,75 Edwards76 and Notley77 have compiled more extended lists of similar idiomatic Hebraisms.

In conclusion, it can be said that the evidence adduced at the beginning of the 20th century to support a monolingual, Aramaic-only model of sociolinguistic realities in the Land of Israel at the time of Jesus has been reversed by more recent scholarship in the fields of archeological, historical, philological and linguistic study. There can be no doubt today that the Hebrew language was used as a spoken and literary language alongside Aramaic and Greek. In fact, much of the evidence discussed here makes a Hebrew language background for the Gospel tradition more probable than an Aramaic one, taking into consideration the special genre of the gospels, their content, their linguistic style as well as

67 Dalman, op. cit. (n. 31), 36-38.
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Idiomatic evidence. However, this assumption would have to be tested on the basis of a thorough analysis of the synoptic texts themselves.

II. A proposed methodology for synoptic comparison

Based on linguistic observations, but also on the patristic tradition of an early pre-canonical "Hebrew Gospel", several scholars have in the past applied retroversion into Hebrew or Aramaic as a tool for synoptic studies. Resch, Sahlin and Carmignac have envisaged such retroversions for the entire Gospel tradition, however their work remained fragmentary. Flusser, Lowe and Casey have instead concentrated on in-depth-studies for selected pericopes to demonstrate the heuristic value of retroversion for synoptic studies. Casey has suggested a "standard procedure for reconstruction of Aramaic sources from the witness of our Greek Gospels", which in its essentials can also be applied to the work with Hebrew language and literature.

However, in contrast to the work of Casey and much of the older studies on the Semitic background of the Gospels, the focus of my own approach would not be on the attempt to reconstruct older sources that lie behind our canonical Gospels, or even to find the ipsissima vox of Jesus at the core of synoptic sayings. The history of scholarship in this field has shown that this attempt is loaded with dangers and pitfalls, and much of it has to be based on conjectures and emendations of the text: Scholars of the past have often focused too much on supposed reading or writing errors, abnormalities, mistranslations, translational variants or reconstructed poetic forms for single words or phrases within the gospel tradition. They have also often focused on lexical and syntactical Semitisms, because their aim very often was to provide conclusive evidence or proof for the existence of Semitic sources. This, however, is not the aim of the approach suggested here. Verbatim reconstructions of presumed Semitic sources can never be more than mere conjecture. And they can never prove the historical existence of such sources either.

The approach suggested here, therefore, takes a different road: The focus of interest is not on the wording of a supposed Semitic source, but on synoptic comparison of canonical Greek texts. Retroversion into Hebrew serves only as a linguistic tool to facilitate interaction with Hebrew literature and sources from the same period. Based on the assumption that most of the synoptic material originated in a Semitic language context, such an interaction seems plausible even if written Semitic sources never existed. Synoptic research has always been confronted with questions of "who came first?" and "who is dependent on whom?". If it can be demonstrated that one synoptic variant is more closely related to idiomatic expressions, patterns of thought or wording found in Hebrew literature than the other, this observation might serve as a helpful additional evidence to answer these kind of questions.

Obviously, it is also possible that a phrase or expression becomes "more Hebraic" or more "Jewish" also in later stages of literary development. However, in most cases the line of development would be from a "more Hebraic" to a "less Hebraic" style.

Historical Jesus research has for a long time adopted the "criterion of historical plausibility (in a Jewish context)" as a tool to evaluate the historical credibility of a given tradition. In a similar vein, comparison with Hebrew literature could facilitate a "criterion of linguistic plausibility (in a Hebrew language context)" and a "criterion of literary plausibility (in the context of Jewish literature)". Both criteria could then help to make judgements about the originality of specific synoptic variants and about possible lines of literary or oral dependency between these variants.

Retroversion into Hebrew, therefore, does not serve to reconstruct the original wording of a Semitic source. Rather, it serves as a heuristic tool to evaluate Greek texts, to distinguish between traditional and redactional elements within a given canonical text and to reconstruct Greek sources or 'Vorlagen' that might lie behind our canonical texts. Proximity to Hebrew language and Jewish patterns of thought serves as a criterion for authenticity and originality of a given Greek text or variant, when compared to others.

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Based on linguistic observations, but also on the patristic tradition of an early pre-canonical "Hebrew Gospel", several scholars have in the past applied retroversion into Hebrew or Aramaic as a tool for synoptic studies. Resch, Sahlin and Carmignac have envisaged such retroversions for the entire Gospel tradition, however their work remained fragmentary. Flusser, Lowe and Casey have instead concentrated on in-depth-studies for selected pericopes to demonstrate the heuristic value of retroversion for synoptic studies. Casey has suggested a "standard procedure for reconstruction of Aramaic sources from the witness of our Greek Gospels", which in its essentials can also be applied to the work with Hebrew language and literature.

However, in contrast to the work of Casey and much of the older studies on the Semitic background of the Gospels, the focus of my own approach would not be on the attempt to reconstruct older sources that lie behind our canonical Gospels, or even to find the ipssissima vox of Jesus at the core of synoptic sayings. The history of scholarship in this field has shown that this attempt is loaded with dangers and pitfalls, and much of it has to be based on conjectures and emendations of the text: Scholars of the past have often focused too much on supposed reading or writing errors, abnormalities, mistranslations, translational variants or reconstructed poetic forms for single words or phrases within the gospel tradition. They have also often focused on lexical and syntactical Semitisms, because their aim very often was to provide conclusive evidence or proof for the existence of Semitic sources. This, however, is not the aim of the approach suggested here. Verbatim reconstructions of presumed Semitic sources can never be more than mere conjecture. And they can never prove the historical existence of such sources either.

The approach suggested here, therefore, takes a different road: The focus of interest is not on the wording of a supposed Semitic source, but on synoptic comparison of canonical Greek texts. Retroversion into Hebrew serves only as a linguistic tool to facilitate interaction with Hebrew literature and sources from the same period. Based on the assumption that most of the synoptic material originated in a Semitic language context, such an interaction seems plausible even if written Semitic sources never existed. Synoptic research has always been confronted with questions of "who came first?" and "who is dependent on whom?". If it can be demonstrated that one synoptic variant is more closely related to idiomatic expressions, patterns of thought or wording found in Hebrew literature than the other, this observation might serve as a helpful additional evidence to answer these kind of questions.

Obviously, it is also possible that a phrase or expression becomes "more Hebraic" or more "Jewish" also in later stages of literary development. However, in most cases the line of development would be from a "more Hebraic" to a "less Hebraic" style.

Historical Jesus research has for a long time adopted the "criterion of historical plausibility (in a Jewish context)" as a tool to evaluate the historical credibility of a given tradition. In a similar vein, comparison with Hebrew literature could facilitate a "criterion of linguistic plausibility (in a Hebrew language context)" and a "criterion of literary plausibility (in the context of Jewish literature)". Both criteria could then help to make judgements about the originality of specific synoptic variants and about possible lines of literary or oral dependency between these variants.

Retroversion into Hebrew, therefore, does not serve to reconstruct the original wording of a Semitic source. Rather, it serves as a heuristic tool to evaluate Greek texts, to distinguish between traditional and redactional elements within a given canonical text and to reconstruct Greek sources or 'Vorlagen' that might lie behind our canonical texts. Proximity to Hebrew language and Jewish patterns of thought serves as a criterion for authenticity and originality of a given Greek text or variant, when compared to others.

82 However, as such, they may still be helpful for further study, e.g. comparison with Hebrew literature or study of idioms and realia.
III. Examples

In the main part of my study, I have attempted to apply this approach to four different synoptic texts. I have chosen my examples from different strata of synoptic material: Two texts from the “triple tradition” that are traditionally ascribed to a “Mark-Q overlap”, one from Matthean “Sondergut” and one from the Passion narrative. The limits of space do not allow a full presentation of the results here, or even a thorough interaction with the primary texts. What is more, one of the main features of the approach suggested here is that it always attempts a full line-by-line retroversion of coherent synoptic pericopes, in order to avoid the concentration on linguistic particularities or oddities that has been so prevalent in older research. Only a full reconstruction of supposed pre-canonical Sources, alongside a full retroversion of these sources into a historically plausible Hebrew equivalent, avoids the danger of jumping to premature conclusions based on isolated phenomena. However, in this summary it will not be possible to adhere to this principle for obvious reasons. I can only point to a few, isolated observations and results of my studies here. However, it is important to keep in mind that exactly this is a danger that needs to be addressed and avoided in any serious involvement with the approach suggested here.

1. The ministry of John the Baptist (Mt 3,1-6 parr)

Traditionally, this pericope has been explained as a “Mark/Q overlap” in the commentaries. However, on a closer look, this explanation does not work and a more complex explanation is needed.

a) The main crux is the very unusual translation of the Hebrew phrase רִרְתַּבְרַת (Mal 3:1) with ἐς κατασκευάσας τὴν δόννου in Mk 1:2 as well as in the synoptic parallels in Mt 11:10 and Lk 7:27, a classic “Q” passage. A close examination of the two passages reveals that Mk 1:2parr is a very complex intertextual composition that weaves together several biblical verses (Mal 3:1, Ex 23:20) and motives (first exodus and new exodus, first creation and new creation, the angel of JHWH and JHWH himself). Especially the unusual Greek verb κατασκευάσας, which has no basis either in the Masoretic text or in the different LXX renditions, purposefully binds together passages ofDt-Isaiah (Isa 40:19;28:43:7-45:7-9) and the creation narrative (Gen 1:2) with the quotes from Malachi and Exodus. This construction only works on a Greek language level and cannot be explained as an independent redactional feature in Mark and Q. It can also not be explained as the work of a Deuteromarkan redactor. Therefore, either Mark knew the Q passage, or vice versa, or both passages were based on a common, pre-synoptic Greek source.

b) Additional minor and major agreements between Mt and Lk, in wording and in content, support this conclusion. These do not only include verbal agreements within the “triple tradition” passage (e.g. πᾶσα ἡ περίπτορος τοῦ Ἰορ犒γου Mt 3:5 cf. Lk 3:3), but also verbal agreements within the “double tradition” passage (e.g. ἐμμηνοῦσθεν οὐ, Lk 7:27par.), and finally also overlaps in content (an allusion to the baptism’s clothing in Lk 7:25par., to his role as a “prophet” in the same verse and to his diet in Lk 7:33par. All three motives are also present in Mk 1:6). It seems, therefore, that Mk knew a tradition that contained not only the citation from Mal 3:1/Ex23:20, but the whole “Q” passage behind Mt 11:2-21/Lk 7:24-35; 16:16.

c) The assumption of a common pre-synoptic source is also supported by the fact that parallels to this narrative exist not only in the Gospel of John (1:6:28; 3:22-26), but also in the apocryphal Gospel of the “Ebionites” (Etion 1,2 and 4), which was explicitly called the “Hebrew Gospel” by Epiphanius.

d) The narrative core, common to the synoptic and non-synoptic parallels, is found in Mk 1:4-5. A retroversion of the different variants into possible Hebrew equivalents shows that the Markan Version (ἐγένετο Ἰορᾶς βαπτιστικος...) is probably the one that is closest to common forms of Hebrew narrative introductions, using the “periphrastic construction” (τί + name + participle), while Mt has a more complex verbal construction (παραγενομένου) and a titular ὁ βαπτιστικός instead of the simple participle βαπτιστικός. Lk, in turn, seems to be a creative reworking of the narrative in reflection of biblical stories of prophetic vocation.

83 Fuchs, A.: „Die Überschneidungen von Mk und „Q“ nach B.H.Streeter und E.P.Sanders und ihre wahre Bedeutung (Mk 1,1-8 par.),“ in: Wort in der Zeit: Neutestamentliche Studien. Festgabe für Karl Heinrich Rengstorf zum 75. Geburtstag, ed. Haueck, W. / Bachmann, M., Leiden: Brill 1980, 28-81:61. However, Fuchs leaves unmentioned the fact that the citation is not simply omitted by Mt and Lk, but appears in both gospels in a later, however identical context, presumably a „Q“ passage. A deuteromarkan explanation therefore must assume that the whole „Q“ passage in Mt 11/Lk 7 was also part of the Deuteromarkan Gospel. However, if this line is followed, the shape of Deuteromark would in the end include all Markan and all Q material. It would then no longer be a „Deutero-Mk“, but rather a traditional „Proto-Mt“.
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b) Additional minor and major agreements between Mt and Lk, in wording and in content, support this conclusion. These do not only include verbal agreements within the “triple tradition” passage (e.g. πάνω η ἡμέρα τοῦ Ιορδάνου Mt 3:5 cf. Lk 3:3), but also verbal agreements within the “double tradition” passage (e.g. ἐμπροσθόν οὗ Lk 7:27par.), and finally also overlaps in content (an allusion to the baptist’s clothing in Lk 7:25par, to his role as a “prophet” in the same verse and to his diet in Lk 7:33par. All three motives are also present in Mk 1:6). It seems, therefore, that Mk knew a tradition that contained not only the citation from Mal 3:1/Ex23:20, but the whole “Q” passage behind Mt 11:2-21/Lk 7:24-35; 16:16.

c) The assumption of a common pre-synoptic source is also supported by the fact that parallels to this narrative exist not only in the Gospel of John (1:6:28; 3:22-26), but also in the apocryphal Gospel of the “Ebionites” (Ebon 1,2 and 4), which was explicitly called the “Hebrew Gospel” by Epiphanius.

d) The narrative core, common to the synoptic and non-synoptic parallels, is found in Mk 1:4-5. A retroversion of the different variants into possible Hebrew equivalents shows that the Markan Version (ἐγένετο Ἰοάννης βαπτίζον...) is probably the one that is closest to common forms of Hebrew narrative introductions, using the “periphrastic construction” (τις + name + participle), while Mt has a more complex verbal construction (παραγένεναι) and a titular διὰ βαπτιστικής instead of the simple participle βαπτίζον. Lk, in turn, seems to be a creative reworking of the narrative in reflection of biblical stories of prophetic vocation.

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e) Two other elements that seem to have been part of the common pre-synoptic narrative are some kind of temporal clause in the introduction (“in those days”, “in the days of...”) and the quote from Isa 40.

f) The citation formulae used by Mt 3:3 (οὗτος γὰρ ἔστιν ὁ θησείς ἡμᾶς Ἡσαίου τοῦ προφήτου) and Lk 3:4 (ὡς γέγραπται ἐν βιβλίῳ λόγους Ἡσαίου τοῦ προφήτου) both reflect Hebrew citation formulae. Luke’s formula renders ἐν βιβλίῳ λόγους, frequent in the Dead Sea Scrolls and often used in the New Testament. Matthew’s formula stands closer to the Rabbinic formula ἐν βιβλίῳ λόγους, however similar forms are also attested in Qumran. Mark’s version (καθὼς γέγραπται ἐν τῷ Ησαίῳ τοῦ προφήτη) uses the name of a prophet as a synonym for a book, has no analogy in Hebrew literature.

As to the description of the Baptist’s ministry, some of the parallels have a typical Hebraic “figura ethymologica” (βαπτίζον βάπτισμα, Act 19:4; Ebion 1), which is still visible, however augmented in some Markan manuscripts (βαπτίζον... καὶ κηρύσσειν βάπτισμα), while other manuscripts have dissolved the figure gramatically (βαπτίζον... κηρύσσειν βάπτισμα). Mt and Lk both have a different formula. If it can be assumed that the Hebraic “figura ethymologica” is more original, then Mk has kept the most original version here.

h) The formula βάπτισμα μετανοιας εἰς ἀφοιν ἀμαρτιων, shared by Mk and Lk, is difficult to retrovert into Hebrew, since a construction with הַכְּרִיט הַצְּרֵעַ in a construct state with a noun following always denotes the person or thing that is immersed, but never the purpose or effect of the immersion. 84 The purpose of an immersion, or the action that the immersion prepares for, is not denoted by a construct noun, but by the preposition ὑπά. Therefore, Matthew’s formula βαπτίζω ὑπάτα εἰς μετάνοιαν (cf. Mt 3:11), using instrumental ὑπά and final εἰς, is much closer to Hebrew idiom than the formula used by Mk and Lk.

i) The linguistic style of Mark changes in Mk 1:6. Part of this verse is a verbatim citation from 2 Kg 1:8 (LXX). The other parts are ad hoc descriptions of the clothing and diet of John without significant parallels in biblical texts or other Jewish literature. The syntax of this second part is strikingly non-Semitic, compared to the rest of the passage. Also

Matthew has a non-Semitic word order and syntax here. Apart from Mt 3:4, parallels to this passage are absent from the other versions of the Baptist narrative. 85 Cumulatively, this points to the conclusion that Mk 1:6 was not part of the original narrative.

j) If, however, the initial observation that Mk knew the “Q” material in Mt 11:2-21par remains valid, then Mk 1:6 could be understood as a Markan summary of the material he omitted (clothing and diet of the Baptist, his role as a prophet like Elijah). Apparently, he followed the same procedure with his inclusion of Mt 11:10 par as introduction to his narrative in Mk 1:2. Robert Lindsey coined the term “Markan Pick-Up” for this phenomenon, which can be observed frequently in Mk. A similar “Pick-Up” might be identified in the minor agreement πάσα ἡ παράκλησις τοῦ Ἰωάννου (Mt 3:5 par Lk 3:3), which might be echoed in Mark’s χάρα (Mk 1:5).

k) Mt shows several instances of duplicity: He mentions the Jordan twice (Mt 3:5 and 3:6), he has two references to the clothing of the Baptist (Mt 3:4 and 11:8), as well as two references to his diet (Mt 3:4 and 11:18). All three instances in Mt 3:4-6 are close Mt-Mk parallels without a parallel in Lk. Also, in Mt 3:4 he has a non-Semitic style that resists retroversion into Hebrew more than in the rest of the passage. The transition with narrative τὸρε (Mt 3:5) is a typically Matthean redactional feature, stemming from Aramaic language interference on the side of the redactor, however evidently not from Aramaic sources. 87 Cumulatively, these observations point to the conclusion that Mk 1:6 is a Markan addition to the original pre-synoptic narrative that was in turn copied by the final redactor of Mt, thereby producing doublings between the original “Q” material and the additional “Mk” material.

In conclusion, a reconstructed pre-synoptic source could have had the following shape:

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84 Samples from biblical literature include Gen 37:31; Ex 12:22; Lev 4:6; 17:9-10; 14:6-16:51; Num 19:18; Dtn 33:24; Ruth 2:14. In Qumran only Q274 (=4QTohorotA) 2 i:4-6. In rabbinical literature, מְטַל הַצְּרֵעַ (the dipping of the finger) BZev 13b; מְטַל לֶךֶת מַמָּא (the ablution of a person with corpse impurity), bHag 22b; נִבְּלָה לֶךֶת מַמָּא (the ablution of a young woman) ARN A 8,24 (Becker 104).

85 Ebion 2, which differs in style from the (more Semitic and more independent) traditions in Ebion 1 and 4, is apparently directly dependent on Mt 3:6 here, which becomes obvious from a wordplay (γυρικη/ακρικη) which only works on a Greek language level.

86 The phenomenon refers to minor agreements “in addition”, shared by Mt and Lk but missing in Mk, corresponding to minor agreements “in omission” with a similar content in a different place. Lindsey, working from a hypothesis of Lucan priority, explains this as a redactional style of Mk, who frequently omits material from his sources in one place, only to re-employ it in another place.

87 Duth, op. cit. (n. 72), 253-263 and 296-304.
Matthew has a non-Semitic word order and syntax here. Apart from Mt 3:4, parallels to this passage are absent from the other versions of the Baptist narrative. Cumulatively, this points to the conclusion that Mk 1:6 was not part of the original narrative.

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In conclusion, a reconstructed pre-synoptic source could have had the following shape:
2. The Beelzebul controversy (Mt 12:22—32 parr.)

This pericope, too, has traditionally been explained as a “Mk/Q overlap”. However, the similarities in structure and wording are so close that also here, as in the Baptist narrative, an additional direct dependence between Mk and Q or a common source for both, often described as “ancient” or “Aramaic”, has also been frequently assumed by commentators. Not all the details of the discussion can be repeated here, however some observations will be noted:

a) The original narrative setting of the controversy seems to be reflected best in the Lucan version (Lk 11:14-15a) which contains features typical for Hebrew narrative: A periphrastic construction and an ἐγένετο clause.

b) Within the accusation itself, the double negation in Mt 12:24 reflects Semitic style better than the parallels in Mk and Lk. The instrumental use of ἐν ἐν τῷ Βεελζεβουλ also reflects Hebrew style.

c) The whole argument in this controversy is based on the motif of demonic hierarchies prevalent in Jewish demonology, as testified in Enochic literature as well as in the Dead Sea Scrolls and rabbinic literature. However, the phrase ἐξουσία τῶν δαμασκόν more specifically points to the rabbinic tradition of ונשים, denoting “ruling angels” of nations, individuals or demonic hierarchies. The closest parallels to the phrase are found in later rabbinic sources, however the appearance of the phrase in the Gospels shows that it must be a tradition going back to the Second Temple period. In Jewish literature, the idea of רכוש, ruling over nations and territories, is frequently connected with the motif of the “fall of rulers” and the “binding of the strong”, especially in mid-

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88 The narrative introduction with καὶ ἐγένετο (ἐγένετο δὲ) has frequently been termed as an “artificial Septuagintism” created by Luke as a redactional feature. However, a close look at all instances of the formula shows that there are three different variants of this clause. One of these, using the infinitive after καὶ ἐγένετο, appears in the second part of Acts in places where Lk does not depend on sources. The other two, using finite verbs after καὶ ἐγένετο and closer to Septuagintal style, are employed by Luke in places where he is apparently dependent on sources. They might therefore reflect a Hebrew style of Luke’s sources rather than his own redactional preferences. Cf. Buth, R., op. cit. (n. 72), 263-277 and 296-319.


90 Jub 10:1—7 narrates a story of “binding of demons” which also involves Mastema, the “ruler of the spirits”. TLev 18:12 mentions the binding of Beliar. Similar motifs appear in Jub 48:15-18 and 1thHen 10:12.
The important part of the reconstruction here is the left column. However, the retroversion in the right column serves as a "plausibility check" to demonstrate that the pre-synoptic Greek source is linguistically well grounded in the context of Hebrew literature and might (!) also go back to a Hebrew source, as claimed in this case by Epiphanius. This presumed pre-synoptic source of the Baptist narrative has, at a later stage, been connected with other Baptist material now ascribed to "Q" (Mt 11:2-19 par, Mt 3:7-12 par), which then, in turn, was used by Mt, Mk and Lk. Mk omitted much of the material, however he included the quotation from Mal 3:1/Ex 23:20 in Mk 1:1-2 and the motif of the Baptist's clothing and diet as well as the Elijah-motif in Mk 1:6. On the last redactional stage, the final redactor of Mt included the Markan additions into Mt, thereby creating several doublets. In their canonical shape, Mk has preserved the original wording of the source more closely than the other two in some places. However, Matthew displays the original structure of the narrative more faithfully, once the Markan additions are removed. Lk, together with Mt, has kept much of the original material and some of the original wording, however, he has reworked it more thoroughly, added the synchronism in Lk 3:1-2a, extended the citation in Lk 3:5-6 and reused the material from Mt 3:5-6 in several redactional clauses throughout his Gospel (Lk 3:5;3:21;7:17;7,29-30).

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89 Aramaic נר אנה ספ NAFTA, "ruler of the spirits", War R.1:1 on Lev 4:3 (Mirkin 8:52); אנה ספ NAFTA, "Lord of the spirits", yPea 8:97 (21b) par ySheq 5:6/4 (9ga) ed. Schäfer/Becker I.1—2;96 and II.12—102;יד נפ NAFTA, "king of demons", bPes 110b, BG 68.

90 Jub 10:1-7 narrates a story of "binding of demons" which also involves Mastema, the "ruler of the spirits". TLov 18:12 mentions the binding of Beliar. Similar motifs appear in Jub 48:15-18 and 8thHen 10:12.
The Holy One will not cause a nation to fall unless he has first caused their ruler to fall.

The idea behind these midrashim is that, at the Red Sea, the Egyptian army was protected by the "guardian angel" (דמח) of Egypt, and only after the army had been bound or caused to fall, could the Egyptian army be conquered and the kingdom of God (Ex 15:18) be revealed. The same motif is applied to Nebukaddnezar (based on Dan 4:28). The motif is sometimes connected with the formula that the kingdom of the ר' "can not stand" or "will fall" when God intervenes on behalf of his people.

In other places, it is connected with the motif of the prior "binding" of the ruler. In one late midrash, the binding of Satan and his נֶשֶט is caused by the appearance of the Messiah. One passage in a midrash on Num 34:2 asks the question "How can the land 'fall' before we enter it?". The answer weaves together several motifs that we also find in the Beelzebul pericope: The "Lord of the house", the plundering of the spoil, the binding of the ר' and his subsequent fall, as well as the division of his kingdom:

Should it be that the Lord of the House could not take his belongings from there? What did the Holy One do? He lifted up the ruler of the land, and he bound him and threw him down before them (...). Thus, the land was divided between the twelve tribes.

We have here a cluster of motifs that is repeated in different forms and shapes throughout Jewish literature, and the different elements are closely intertwined. The Beelzebul controversy employs several of these motifs and weaves them together into a consistent picture.

e) In Lk 11:19 par we find another allusion to the Exodus story that fits in neatly with this cluster of motifs, although it is mostly assumed to come from a different source ("Q"): The "finger of God" (Ex 8:15) is a demonstration of God's victory over the rulers and therefore a sign of his kingdom (Ex 15:18). Again, this motif of the "finger of God" is frequently picked up in rabbinic literature. It is an interesting detail that Luke's translation of the Hebrew phrase כְָה הַבַּיִת stays closer to the Hebrew original than the two translations offered in the LXX (Ex 31:18; Dtn 9:10) which he obviously does not build upon.

f) The motif of conflicting kingdoms is applied to the sphere of conflicting schools of teachers in the "Q" tradition behind Mt 12:27 par Lk 11:19. That same connection is made in a rabbinic dictum that is close in wording and content. The collection itself is late, however most commentators assume that the material goes back to early traditions:

A city that is divided will end in devastation. A house that is divided Will end in devastation. Two disciples of sages who quarrel in one town, and also two judges and their sons, when they are divided their end will lead to death.

Commentators have suspected the term πόλις in the Matthean version to be a "hellenistic" addition. However, in view of this rabbinic dictum it is not impossible that it was part of the original saying.

g) The remark about "knowing their thoughts" in Mt 12:25a par is reflecting Hebrew phrases of the Old Testament (notably Job 21:27 and Ps 94:11), however it does not show direct dependence on the LXX translation of these passages. The phrase appears, in different forms, frequently in Mt and Lk, and regularly both agree against Mk in these places, who mostly has a more complex and less Hebraic version of the phrase, or, as in the present text, omits it completely. It has therefore

92 In addition to the texts mentioned above, cf. 4Q386 (=4QPsEzek5) ii 3–4 (Parry 3:335); BerR 77:3 on Gen 32:26 (Theodor/Albeck 2:914).
93 DevR 1:22 and 1:23 on Dtn 2:31 (Mirkin 11:24, Liebermann 29); ShirR 8:19 on Cant 8:14 (ed. Wilna 42a); BerR 56:5 on Gen 22:9 (Theodor/Albeck 2:600).
94 PesR 36:1 §2 (Ulmer 2:830)
95 ShemR 10:7 on Ex 8:12 (Shinan 234; Mirkin 5:136); Migr 85; ShemR 5:14 on Ex 5:1 (Shinan 171; Mirkin 5:98); ShemR 23:9 zu Ex 15:1 (Mirkin 5:265); bSan 67b; bSan 95b; cf. also Philo VitMos 1:113.
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h) The final saying of the pericope, Mt 12:31-32, has been in the focus of Semitic Gospel studies since the beginning, especially in view of the differing synoptic renditions of a presumed Semitic “Son of Man” phrase at the core of the saying.

Limits of space do not allow a deeper interaction with the passage here. However, due to the traditional focus on Aramaic language, few commentators have noticed the multiple intertextual connections of this passage with Hebrew literature, beginning, again, with the Exodus narrative, continuing into the Psalms and Prophets, and into later rabbinic traditions about blasphemy and unforgiveable sins. At the core of this intertextual complex lies the Hebrew phrase אֵל אֲדֹנָי, used in Ex 12,1.8 for Aaron und Miriam, “speaking against” Moses as the representative of God. In Num 21:5-7 the same phrase is used for the people of Israel, speaking against Moses, and thereby, against God himself. These passages have later become the "typos for Jewish teaching about blasphemy and unforgiveable sins, in different Hebrew and Greek terminology. 98 Rabbincic midrash reflects on the parallelism that Num 21 draws between Moses and God himself. The only two biblical passages that remotely echo an idea of “blasphemy against the Spirit”, virtually absent in other Jewish sources, 100 allude to this Exodus tradition (Isa 63:10; Ps 106:32-33). The ambiguity between the human and the divine, already present in Num 21, also appears in Ps 106:33, since the phrase אֵל אֲדֹנָי could refer to the spirit of Moses or to the Spirit of God.

This ambiguous relation between “speaking against a human figure” and “speaking against God” also lies at the core of Jesus’ controversy in the Beelzebul pericope. And it presents the basis for Jesus’ final saying, addressing this same ambiguity between “speaking against (a) man” and “speaking against the (Holy) Spirit” in respect to Jesus. There is no room here to discuss the “Son of Man” debate in depth. However, the ambiguity of this phrase, ranging from the simple generic meaning “(a) man” to the apocalyptic “Son of Man” figure, might exactly be what was intended in this context. And it might have led to the diversity of synoptic renditions that remains much more ambiguous here than in other places of the synoptic tradition.

Commentators agree that Mark might have preserved a more original form of the saying here, focusing on the generic sense of a Semitic “son of man” phrase. Luke has preserved a version that understood the saying in light of the apocalyptic “Son of Man” tradition. 102 Matthew seems to have conflated both versions.

1) Finally, the distinction between sins against (a) man, which might be forgiven, and sins against God, which can only be removed by divine atonement, is a common distinction in Jewish tradition, preserved in a frequently quoted Hebrew dictum:

Transgressions between Men and God

The whole “Beelzebul” pericope is a literary unit that is deeply rooted in biblical texts, Jewish exegetical traditions and Hebrew terminology. In addition, many of the different motifs employed share an intertextual connectedness with the Exodus tradition. The motif of conflicting kingdoms and the emerging kingdom of God, the motif of the “finger of God”, the motif of the ov of the enemy kingdom who needs to be bound and will fall before his kingdom can be taken. And

99 MekhY יי 7 on Ex 14:31 (Horovitz/Rabin 114); in a list of ten cardinal sins in WaR 17:3 on Lev 14:34 (Margulies 2:394.397), the “speaking against Moses” is used as an illustration for the sin of מָשַּׁל אֵל. The motif also appears in SifBam §103 on Num 12:8 (Horovitz 102); bSan 110a; BamR 19:21 on Num 21:4; BamR 20:23 on Num 25:1 (Mirkin 10:236 and 271); QohR 5:3 on Qoh 5:5 (Wilna 14b). Most of these are midrashim on Num 21.
100 Exceptions are eth. Hen 20:6 (see above) and the Targum on Ps 106:33 (see following note).
101 The Targum on Ps 106:33, however, explicitly explains the phrase as referring to the Spirit of God.

102 One reason for the complexity of the “Son of man” debate might lie in the fact that within a Hebrew discourse, the Aramaic phrase אֵל אֲדֹנָי would have been more easily discernible as a title or intertextual allusion, a discernment that would have been lost when both were translated into Greek. Cf. Buth, R.: “A More Complete Semitic Background for בֵּיתוֹ, ‘Son of Man’”, in: The Function of Scripture in Early Jewish and Christian Tradition (JSNTS 154), ed. Evans, C. A. / Sanders, J. A., Sheffield: JSO1 Press 1998, 176-189.
103 However, he alone has kept a very literal rendition of the phrase אֵל אֲדֹנָי (םיָד בְּיוֹן).
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qoh 5:5 (Wilna 14b)</td>
<td>יומיה וָפֵרוֹיָה כָּמְר</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But those between a man and his neighbour will not be atoned for on the day of atonement until he first has appeased his neighbour.</td>
<td>יא יומיה וָפֵרוֹיָה כָּמְר</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>will be atoned for on the Day of atonement</td>
<td>רָפָא אָז אֱלֹה</td>
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the motif of “speaking against” God and his representative. All these motifs are closely connected in Jewish literature, and therefore form a cluster that cannot easily be taken apart without losing its meaning. This points strongly to the conclusion that the passage, as it now stands in Mt and Lk, is an original literary unit that should not be separated into Markan and “Q” elements.

A closer look at the linguistic features of this pericope, and a tentative retroversion into Hebrew, shows that Mt has probably retained a more original (and often, more Semitic) wording or syntax in Mt 11:24b-25.27.29, while Lk seems to be more original in Lk 11:17-18a.23, whereas Mk repeatedly appears to be less Semitic and secondary in all of these places. Only in Mk 3:28, Mk seems to have preserved a more original wording. Apparently, at this place only, the final redaction of Matthew seems to have been influenced by this Markan version as well as by another version preserved in Luke, thereby creating a doublet of the saying in Mt 12,32 and 33.

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3. The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Mt 18,21—35)

This parable has traditionally been identified as “Matthean Sondergut”. Without doubt, the main core of the parable is unique to Matthew. However, on a closer look, the narrative frame narrative has a parallel in Lk 17:1-4, and the motif of “two debtors” also appears in a Lukan parable (Lk 7:41-42). Also, in Lk 6:34-35, Lk has two noticeable additions to his Matthean parallel, which resemble the terminology of Mt 18:21-35. It might be asked, therefore, if the parable and its frame were possibly part of a source common to Mt and Lk. Lk would then have known the material, however chosen to rephrase and rearrange it for use in three different new contexts. Two additional observations could support this conclusion: First, Mt 17:1-4 betrays knowledge of several other elements of the Matthean “community discourse” (Lk 17:1 par Mt 18:7; Lk 17:2 par Mt 18:6 and Mk 9:42; Lk 17:3 par Mt 18:15). The assumption that both Lk and Mt arranged “Q” and “Markan” material in the same order is less probable than the assumption that Mt reflects an original discourse, partly used also by Lk and Mk. Second, the “repentance clause” in 4b, missing in the Matthean parallel, could be a very concise, but appropriate summary of the parable told by Matthew.

The parable itself has a striking resemblance, in content and wording, with a number of rabbinic parables about kings and their debtors. Limits of space do not allow an in-depth presentation of the similarities. However, a close linguistic analysis, and comparison with rabbinic parables, shows that the Matthean parable, though commonly described as “Matthean Sondergut” or even Matthean redactional creation, is firmly rooted in Hebrew language and highly dependent on a tradition of teaching that we also find in the later rabbinic literature. If we do not want to assume a direct line of dependence, the only explanation is that Matthew and the later rabbinic parables both are rooted in a shared, proto-rabbinic tradition of parabolic teaching on debt and forgiveness. From the many examples, two will be selected here to show the kind of parallels that exist in wording and content:

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<td>מַשָּׁל</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>אֶלֶךָ</td>
<td>אל מחזה</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>בֵּשָׁר רֶד</td>
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\text{מלך} \\
\text{אל יבריע} \\
\text{ויה אל אCompanyId מדרע} \\
\text{תוד לא מקים} \\
\text{אל נטול על כל מעלה} \\
\text{נעשרים על כל מפורח} \\
\text{כפי ונהיה} \\
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\end{array}
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Most of the rabbinic parables apply the debtor/king imagery to the Jewish festivals of Rosh Ha-Shana and Yom Ha-Kippurim: Both festivals are compared with the arrival of a human king (יוּדִי כּוֹנֶן, יִתְנָה יִתְנָה, \textit{Mt} 18:23) who wants to settle accounts (אֲבָל אִלְוָא פָּדוּת, \textit{Mt} 18:23) with a city or with his servants. The two different dates, then, allow for a period of “patience” (אֲבָל אִלְוָא פָּדוּת, \textit{Mt} 11:26), in which the servants can turn the verdict of the king by their appropriate behaviour (prayer, fasting and repentance). The earnestness of repentance, in this context, can be displayed by showing deeds of loving kindness towards others.

Closely connected with this is the rabbinic concept of the two opposing “character traits” of God, the “measure of mercy” (בַּשְׂפָּה יִדּוֹנֵה) and the “measure of justice” (בַּשְׂפָּה יִדּוֹנֵה). In the course of the two festivals, the “measure of mercy” is connected with the first date, while the “measure of justice” is ascribed to the second date. Therefore, the ten days in between the two festivals, are seen as the last chance for repentance, while God is still “merciful”.

In Matthew’s parable, all these motifs are perfectly visible: The king who comes to settle accounts, the two separate appointments with a period in between that gives the servant time to show “deeds of loving kindness”, and eventually leads to the final verdict. A king who shows “unjust” mercy at the first appointment and “merciless” justice at the second appointment. And finally, the idea of reciprocity of human forgiveness and divine forgiveness that we have already found in the rabbinic dictum cited above (p. 45).

In conclusion, the parable could be a perfect example of Jewish teaching about the obligation to forgive in the context of the yearly autumn festivals.\textsuperscript{106} What commentators have missed, though, is any specific "Christian" aspect in the parable: In fact, the story runs contrary to the message of unlimited grace, and the image of the divine king remains ambiguous. Commentators have therefore questioned the authenticity of the parable and ascribed it to a later, Judaean-Christian redactor. However, according to Theissens “criterion of historical plausibility” (\textit{n a Jewish context}) and the “criterion of embarrassment” (\textit{in a later Christian context}), the parable has a high probability of authenticity. The close linguistic ties with Hebrew parables of the same genre add further to that probability.

We therefore have here, in the middle of presumed Matthean “Son
dergut”, a passage that is characterized by a highly Hebraic style, proto-rabbinic imagery and terminology, thoroughly Jewish theology, a probable “Sitz im Leben” in a Jewish festival and a high claim to historical authenticity. We also have evidence that the material was known to the author of Lk.

The common assumption that this passage was added by a late redactor of the Gospel of Matthew should therefore be reconsidered. A more probable assumption would be that the parable, maybe even the whole “community discourse” in Mt 18, was part of an original, hebraizing pre-canonical source used by Mt and Lk alike: While Matthew retained the parable in full, Luke kept only the frame (Lk 17:1-4), echoed the message of the parable in a short additional “repentance clause” (Lk 17:4b), created a new “parable of two debtors” in a new context (Lk 7:41-42)\textsuperscript{107} and reworked some of the “forgiveness/debt” material from the parable into a new, parenetic context (Lk 6:34-35). Mk, if he knew the same source, dropped the whole passage. In a non-Jewish context, the whole idea behind the parable would not have been understood by the readers of either Luke or Mark.

In view of these observations, it would be helpful to examine other Matthean “Son
dergut” with respect to its linguistic and historical “context plausibility”. It might be that some of the material that has been assigned to a Matthean redactor so far, is indeed older material that was also known to Luke and/or Mark, but was omitted by them for whatever reasons possible.

\textsuperscript{106} Though we have only little evidence for the existence of a “Rosh Ha-Shana” festival, with all the later motifs and traditions attached to it, in the time of the Second Temple, some early sources (Jub 12:16-18; 4Q508; LAB 136; Philo Spec.Leg 2:188–192) reflect the origins of these later traditions. The Matthean parable might be another

\textsuperscript{107} The idea that the amount of forgiveness correlates to the amount of love for the king is alien to the rabbinic parable traditions and does not appear in any of the parables as a \textit{nimshal} (application).
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4. Preparations for the Passover Meal (Mt 26,17–20 parr.)

The passion narrative is a special field of research for synoptic studies: Many of the traditional working hypotheses have to be abandoned or augmented here to explain the specific characteristics of synoptic relationships in this part of the Gospel tradition. Many suggest some kind of common, pre-synoptic tradition shared by the Synoptics and John. Some suggest an additional, pre-Lukan source. Debates are still on about the question whether Q extends into the Passion narrative. The example that I have chosen as a fourth test case is one of the rather neglected passages. However, some observations invite a closer look:

a) Matthew’s introductory phrase τῇ δὲ πρώτῃ τῶν άζώμων (Mt 26:17) has been the object of intense linguistic and historical study. The chronology of the Passion is a matter of fierce debate, as is the question whether the last meal of Jesus was a passover meal or not. Not all aspects of the question can be addressed here. However, one observation from Hebrew language and literature could help to solve some of the issues in question:

The main crux of the discussion is the fact that “the first day” of the Passover always designates the 15th of Nisan, obviously not the day in view by Matthew. The Mishna has several designations for this day, they all use either וRIORITYת ו主权 or ו主权 (3x). The biblical text prescribes the removal of leaven on this “first day” of the feast (Ex 12:15-16). However, Jewish practice had moved the removal of leaven to the 14th on Nisan, the day “before” passover. Some targumic translations reflect this by giving ambiguous translations such as נברוק קרמאה כלשהי, which might be translated as “the first day” or “the day before”. Some commentators have suspected a similar formula behind Mk 14:12, and a subsequent mistranslation or misreading on behalf of Mark. However, these explanations suffer from the fact that they have to assume mistranslations, misreadings or emendations. Also, the proposed formulae never appear in Jewish literature as designations for the first day of Passover. Another explanation, based on Hebrew language and rabbinic literature, might therefore be more probable:

Matthew’s strange formula might reflect a rabbinic discussion as to the question, which day was designated by the biblical term ו主权 in Ex 14:18. Without doubt, Ex 14:15 and 14:16 designate the “first day of the feast”, i.e. the 15th of Nisan, as the correct day for the removal of leaven. However, Ex 14:18 leaves room for a different reading:

On the First, on the 14th day of the month, on the evening, you will eat unleavened bread

Obviously, the term ו主权 here designates the first month of the year. However, rabbinic discussion later took the opportunity to extract a different meaning from the text and thereby find a scriptural basis for the removal of leaven already on the 14th:

(R. Ishmael b. Elisha says:) We find (in scripture), that the 14. of Nisan is called „the First”

For it is said (in Ex 12:18):

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(R. Nahman b. Isaak says:) „The First” - this means „before”

For it is said (in Job 15:7):

"Were you born before Adam?"

In this discussion, recorded in bPes 5a, the two rabbis debate whether the term יראש服饰 designates the 14th or the 15th of Nisan. If it denotes the 14th, then the removal of leaven on the 14th would be allowed. Similar discussions about the exact meaning of יראש服饰 can be found in other places.108 It seems from these discussions, that some teachers made a clear distinction between the absolute use of יראש服饰 (Ex 12:15) or יראש服饰 (Ex 12:18), denoting the 14th of Nisan according to this tradition, and the fuller formula יראש服饰 (Ex 12:15-16), is never used in rabbinic literature, probably because of its ambiguity and the differences in interpretation.

If we compare the three synoptic variants in Mt 26:17a parr, only Matthew and Luke have a formula that correctly describes the morning of the 14th on Nisan: Matthew uses exact “rabbinic” terminology (corresponding to יראש服饰, while avoiding the more ambiguous יראש服饰), which seems to have been already common in his time. Luke uses a more general formula which rightly describes the day on which the

108 yPes 1,1/1 (27a), ed. Schäfer/Becker II,1–4:122; yPes 1,4/2 (27c), Schäfer/Bekker II,1–4:126.
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Matthew’s strange formula might reflect a rabbinic discussion as to the question, which day was designated by the biblical term חֵרֶשׁ in Ex 14:18. Without doubt, Ex 14:15 and 14:16 designate the “first day of the feast”, i.e. the 15th of Nisan, as the correct day for the removal of leaven. However, Ex 14:18 leaves room for a different reading:

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lambs were slaughtered. Only Mark has a formula that is imprecise in halakhic terms and might betray a lack of knowledge of the halakhic discussions behind the term. Mark seems to have conflated the two different formulas of Mt and Lk into one double formula.

b) This phenomenon of “Markan conflation” can be observed throughout the pericope, as well as throughout the Gospel of Mark: Mark seems to stand between Mt and Lk, drawing from both sides in turn. This points to the conclusion that, in these places, Mt and Lk reflect two different versions of the same text, while both of these versions were known to Mark. The phenomenon has been described frequently by commentators and has led to the identification of two distinct proto-Markan sources, one closer to Lk and one closer to Mt.109

c) In Mt 26:17b, Mt and Lk share the verb προσηλίθησαν/ἐλθεν as a minor agreement,110 and Mt closes with a typical Hebrew formula of speech (λέγοντες). In the following verse, the language of Mt and Lk is more Hebraic than that of Mk, however both differ from each other. Again, it seems that Mark conflated both versions. Mt and Lk seem to have preserved an earlier version, however in two different forms.

d) The narrative about the sending of the two disciples and the man with the water pitcher (Mk 14:13b–14a.15 par) differs from the rest of the passage in several respects: It is missing completely in Mt. It is characterized by a high frequency of hapax legomena and non-Semitic word order. It has, especially in the Markan version, close similarities to the pericope of the entrance to Jerusalem (Mk 11:1-7). These observations, together with general assumptions about Lukan special tradition that can not be unfolded here, lead to the conclusion that this material was inserted by the proto-Lukan author from a special tradition and then taken over by Mark,111 again by way of conflation.

e) The following verses (Mt 26:18b) again have a more Hebraic character: A messenger formula (ὁ διδάσκαλος λέγει) in Mt; the term οἰκοδεσπότης, not unknown in Greek literature, however much more


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IV. Conclusions

Hebrew language and literature can - and should - be employed as a linguistic tool by New Testament scholars in their study of the synoptic problem. Linguistic, philological, archeological and historical studies over the past century have made it sufficiently clear that Hebrew was a living, spoken language in the Land of Israel at the time of Jesus alongside Aramaic and Greek. Hebrew, as well as Aramaic, would have been employed naturally by Jesus in his teachings, in discourses, parables and other sayings. For some genres, like parables and halakhic discourse, Hebrew would even be more probable than Aramaic. Words of Jesus have probably been transmitted in Hebrew language in the early phase of oral transmission. It is possible, however not verifiable, that early written sources existed in Hebrew and/or Aramaic, however the linguistic evidence points more strongly to the former. Early church fathers attest to the existence of such sources and call them “Hebrew”, however none have survived to our knowledge.

While the question of written sources might be left open, the use of Hebrew retroversion for synoptic studies does not depend on the actual existence of such sources. Earlier approaches to the Semitic background of the New Testament have focused on the reconstruction of these sources or even the words of Jesus himself, however all results remained speculation at best. Other approaches have focused on the irrefutable proof of the existence of such sources, however to no avail.

The approach suggested here, and by several other scholars before, focuses therefore on the synoptic comparison of extant Greek sources. It uses, however, retroversion into Hebrew as a tool to test the historical and linguistic plausibility of assumptions about originality and dependencies between synoptic Gospels. The general assumption behind this approach is that a more Hebraic language style and a more Jewish terminology points to the more original synoptic variant. Comparison with Hebrew literature and retroversion into a plausible Hebrew equivalent helps to discern these factors.

In the four examples chosen here, the Gospel of Matthew repeatedly featured as the version that retained a more original version of the text, both in language and in structure. Sometimes, the version of Luke retained more original wording, however a less original structure. The version of Mark frequently appeared to be less original and at times dependent on the versions of Mt and Lk. These observations match with conclusions made by other scholars that have taken a similar approach, based on Semitic languages. While four samples are not enough material to make any reliable conclusions, the results of this study seem to call into question traditional models of Markan priority and invite to further investigate the option of a Proto-Matthean shape of the pre-canonical Gospel tradition.

114 Jan Joosten (RfPhR 92/2012, 523-524), while generally agreeing that this approach might bear fruit for future synoptic research, and also agreeing that Hebrew, not only Aramaic language should be considered as a background for Gospel Studies, has dismissed my Hebrew retroversions as linguistically inadequate. This is a weakness I readily admit. New Testament Scholars who follow the approach suggested here will necessarily need a close collaboration with well-versed Semitists, as well as the help of Judaic scholars for a task that they alone can never sufficiently accomplish. Exactly this argument in view of more than hundred years of progress in archeological and linguistic research and the overwhelming number of new literary and epigraphical evidence discovered since the time of Dalman.

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However, such conclusions about models of synoptic dependencies are not the main focus of this study. The focus is on the approach as such. And even if other scholars, following this approach, will arrive at different conclusions in respect to models of synoptic dependencies, the approach itself will still remain valid. And it hopefully will help to deepen our insights into the synoptic question, broaden our discussion and widen our understanding for the Jewish context of the Gospel tradition.

Guido BALTES
Uniwersytet w Marburgu

PODEJŚCIA HEBRAJSKOJĘZYCZNE DO EWANGELII
I CH WKLAD DO STUDIÓW SYNOPTYCZNYCH

Język i literatura hebrajska mogą i powinny być używane przez badaczy Nowego Testamentu jako narzędzie językoznawcze w studiach nad problemem synoptycznym. Badania językoznawcze, filologiczne, archeologiczne i historyczne w ostatnim stuleciu przekonują, że w czasach Jezusa hebrajski był żywym, mówionym językiem kraju Izraela równolegle z aramejskim i greką. Hebrajski, podobnie jak aramejski, był przez Jezusa używany naturalnie w jego nauczaniu, przemowach, przypowieściach i innych wypowiedziach. W pewnych gatunkach literackich, takich jak przypowieści i wypowiedzi halaicheliczne, hebrajski był nawet bardziej prawdopodobny niż aramejski. Można przyjąć, że słowa Jezusa były przekazywane po hebrajsku we wczesnej fazie słownego przekazu. Jest możliwe, choć to nie do sprawdzenia, że wczesne źródła pisane istniały w hebrajskim i/lub aramejskim, jednakże dowody językowe mocniej wskazują na hebrajski. Wczesni Ojcowie Kościoła poświadczają istnienie takich źródeł i zwą je „hebrajskimi”, jednak, o ile wiadomo, żadne z nich nie zachowało się.

Podczas gdy kwestia źródeł pisanych mogła pozostawać otwartą, używając hebrajskich retrowersji dla studiów synoptycznych nie jest uzależnione od faktycznego istnienia takich źródeł. Wczesniejsze podejścia do semickiego tła Nowego Testamentu skupiały się na rekonstrukcji tych źródeł lub nawet słów samego Jezusa, jednakże wszelkie ich wyniki pozostawały w najlepszym razie spekulacją. Inne badania ograniczały się do nieodpartych dowodów istnienia takich źródeł, jednakże bez powodzenia.

Toteż podejście proponowane tutaj, a także uprzednio przez innych uczo-nych, koncentruje się na synoptycznym porównaniu zachowanych źródeł w języku greckim. Jednakże używa ono retrowersji na hebrajski jako narzędzia weryfikacji historycznego i lingwistycznego prawdopodobieństwa założeń dotyczących oryginalności Ewangelii synoptycznych i zależności między nimi. U źródeł takiego ujmowania leży generalne założenie, że bardziej hebrajski styl i bardziej żydowska terminologia wskazują na bardziej oryginalny wariant synoptyczny. Porównanie z literaturą hebrajską i retrowersją na wiarygodny hebrajski ekwiwalent pomaga wyróżnić te elementy.

W zbitych w artykule czterech fragmentach ewangelii, to Ewangelia św. Mateusza zachowała bliższą oryginału wersję tekstu, zarówno pod względem języka, jak i struktury. Oczywiście cztery przykłady, tj. Mt 3,16 ; 12, 22-32 ; 18, 21-35 i 26,17-20, nie stanowią wystarczającego materiału dla uzyskania niezawodnych konkluzji, jednakże zdają się one kwestionować tradycyjny model priorytetu Ewangelii św. Marka i zachęcają do dalszych badań nad możliwością odtworzenia proto-Mateusowego kształtu pre-kanonicznej tradycji Ewangelii.


[Wg konkluzji autora stresził Z.J.K.]
However, such conclusions about models of synoptic dependencies are not the main focus of this study. The focus is on the approach as such. And even if other scholars, following this approach, will arrive at different conclusions in respect to models of synoptic dependencies, the approach itself will still remain valid. And it hopefully will help to deepen our insights into the synoptic question, broaden our discussion and widen our understanding for the Jewish context of the Gospel tradition.

Guido BALTES
Uniwersytet w Marburgu

PODEJŚCIA HEBRAJSKOJĘZYCZNE DO EWANGELII
I CH WKLAD DO STUDIÓW SYNOPTYCZNYCH

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