

# The Language Environment of First Century Judaea

*Jerusalem Studies in the Synoptic Gospels*

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# Contents

Introduction: Language Issues Are Important for  
Gospel Studies 1

*Randall Buth*

## Sociolinguistic Issues in a Trilingual Framework 7

1 The Origins of the “Exclusive Aramaic Model” in the Nineteenth  
Century: Methodological Fallacies and Subtle Motives 9

*Guido Baltes*

2 The Use of Hebrew and Aramaic in Epigraphic Sources of the  
New Testament Era 35

*Guido Baltes*

3 *Hebraisti* in Ancient Texts: Does Ἑβραϊστί Ever Mean “Aramaic”? 66

*Randall Buth and Chad Pierce*

4 The Linguistic Ethos of the Galilee in the First Century C.E. 110

*Marc Turnage*

5 Hebrew versus Aramaic as Jesus’ Language: Notes on  
Early Opinions by Syriac Authors 182

*Serge Ruzer*

## Literary Issues in a Trilingual Framework 207

6 Hebrew, Aramaic, and the Differing Phenomena of Targum and  
Translation in the Second Temple Period and Post-Second  
Temple Period 209

*Daniel A. Machiela*

7 Distinguishing Hebrew from Aramaic in Semitized Greek Texts,  
with an Application for the Gospels and Pseudepigrapha 247

*Randall Buth*

<b>8 Non-Septuagintal Hebraisms in the Third Gospel: An Inconvenient Truth</b>	320
<i>R. Steven Notley</i>	
<b>Reading Gospel Texts in a Trilingual Framework</b>	347
<b>9 Hebrew-Only Exegesis: A Philological Approach to Jesus’ Use of the Hebrew Bible</b>	349
<i>R. Steven Notley and Jeffrey P. Garcia</i>	
<b>10 Jesus’ <i>Petros</i>–<i>petra</i> Wordplay (Matthew 16:18): Is It Greek, Aramaic, or Hebrew?</b>	375
<i>David N. Bivin</i>	
<b>11 The Riddle of Jesus’ Cry from the Cross: The Meaning of ηλι ηλι λαμα σαβαχθاني (Matthew 27:46) and the Literary Function of ελωι ελωι λειμα σαβαχθاني (Mark 15:34)</b>	395
<i>Randall Buth</i>	
<b>Index of Ancient Sources</b>	423
<b>Subject Index</b>	448

# The Origins of the “Exclusive Aramaic Model” in the Nineteenth Century: Methodological Fallacies and Subtle Motives

*Guido Baltes*

The hypothesis that the Hebrew language had been fully replaced by Aramaic as a spoken language in the time of Jesus has often been accepted among New Testament scholars without further question. However, few today have any detailed knowledge of how and why this hypothesis came into existence in the nineteenth century and on what grounds it was established. Since the question of language use is considered to be of minor importance, students of the New Testament today readily accept the answers to the question provided to them by textbooks and introductions without doubting their factual correctness. In consequence, unlike in the early period of Aramaic research, the widespread acceptance of the “exclusive Aramaic hypothesis” today is increasingly based on second-hand knowledge: while relatively few scholars continue to investigate the linguistic, archeological and historical evidence pertaining to the language question, most others would confine themselves to the reading of scholarly literature, reiterating the “established results” of earlier generations.

This wide acceptance of established theories leads to a strangely asymmetrical situation where any claim of Aramaic prevalence or even exclusivity is accepted by biblical scholars without hesitation, while the claim of continued use of the Hebrew language, let alone a prevalence of Hebrew as a spoken language, is opposed with vigor, to the point that accusations of “linguistic Zionism” have been brought into the discussion.<sup>1</sup> The burden of proof seems to rest fully on the “Hebrew” side of the discussion, while the “Aramaic” side is based firmly on the grounds of “common knowledge.” A fresh look into the historical origins of the “Aramaic hypothesis” might therefore help to develop

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1 Cf. Michael L. Brown, “Recovering the ‘Inspired Text’? An Assessment of the Work of the Jerusalem School in Light of ‘Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus,’” *Mishkan* 17–18 (1987): 39–64 (64); Seth Schwartz, “Language, Power, and Identity in Ancient Palestine,” *Past & Present* 148 (1995): 3–47; John Poirier, “The Linguistic Situation in Jewish Palestine in the Late Antiquity,” *JGRChJ* 4 (2007): 55–134 n. 6: “On the Zionist impulse behind many of the challenges to the Aramaic ascendancy view, see the comments in Seth Schwartz, ‘Historiography on the Jews in the “Talmudic Period” (70–640 CE),’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies* (ed. Martin Goodman; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 79–114.”

a better understanding of the reasons and causes that led to the establishment of the current status quo and provide a possible way out of an unnecessary stalemate in the question of language use at the time of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

## 1 The Point of Origin: The “Re-discovery” of the Language of Jesus

Modern interest in the Aramaic language did not originate with the study of Jewish sources but was originally sparked by the renewed encounters of Western Christianity with the Syrian Orthodox churches of the East: here, a living dialect of Aramaic continued to be spoken both in liturgy and in daily life. In the year 1555, Johann Albrecht Widmannstadt, a leading Catholic and humanist scholar, published the first printed copy of the New Testament in Syriac. In the title, he described the language as “the Syriac language, the vernacular of Jesus Christ, sanctified through his own divine mouth and called ‘Hebrew’ by John the evangelist.”<sup>3</sup> Three important equations had been made in this very title that would determine scholarly debates in the centuries to come and, in many cases, would be reiterated without further questioning:

1. the equation of the Syriac language with the Aramaic of Jesus’ time;
2. the equation of this “Syro-Aramaic” language with the vernacular of Jesus;
3. the equation of the term “Hebrew” in the Gospels with the Aramaic language.

This identification of the Syriac language with the “language of Jesus” would be picked up and further supported by two other influential works of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, George Amiras’s *Grammatica Syriaca sive Chaldaica*<sup>4</sup> and Brian Waltons *Biblia Sacra Polyglotta*.<sup>5</sup> However, commentators

<sup>2</sup> I have done this in more detail as part of a broader study of the Hebrew background of the Gospel tradition: *Hebräisches Evangelium und synoptische Überlieferung. Untersuchungen zum hebräischen Hintergrund der Evangelien*. WUNT II/312 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011). The present essay sums up some results from the methodological considerations of that study.

<sup>3</sup> Johann Albert Widmannstadt, *Liber Sacrosancti Evangelii de Jesu Christo Domino & Deo-Nostro. characteribus & lingua Syra; Jesu Christo vernacula, Divino ipsius ore consecrata & Joh. Evangelista Hebraica dicta, Scriptoria Prelo diligenter Expressa* (Vienna: Cymbermann, 1555).

<sup>4</sup> Georgius Amira and Enrico Caetani, *Grammatica Syriaca, sive Chaldaica Georgii Michaelis Amirae Edeniensis e libano* (Rome: Luna, 1596).

<sup>5</sup> Brian Walton, *Biblia Sacra Polyglotta* (Graz, 1655).

and biblical scholars of the time would continue to use the terms “Hebrew” and “Syro-chaldaic” interchangeably and without a proper distinction. In fact, “Syro-chaldaic” was considered by many to be a local dialect of the Hebrew language.<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, in his *Tischreden*, mentions the “Hebraisms” of the New Testament and the importance of the “Hebrew language” as a tool to understand the Greek of the New Testament.<sup>7</sup> In his *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen*, he refers to the Hebrew phrase דַּן יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ (Dan 10:19) to explain the Greek phrase χαίρει, κεχαριτωμένη (Luke 1:28), the assumption not being that Luke borrowed the phrase from the Hebrew Bible, but that the angel actually spoke Hebrew with Mary, as Luther explicitly states in his comment.<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, on the other hand, asserts that the “Chaldaic” language had replaced Hebrew after the exile, and adds: “When the evangelist uses the word ‘Hebrew,’ he is referring to the Chaldean or Syriac language,” while at the same time he explains the name Γαββαθα by means of the Hebrew term גַּבְהָה.<sup>9</sup> Richard Simon as well equates both languages when he refers to Papias’ comment about Matthews *logia* as being written “in Hebrew, that is to say, in the language spoken among the Jews of Jerusalem, which was called Hebrew and was (in fact) Chaldee or Syriac.”<sup>10</sup> At the end of the eighteenth century, although the terminology is still somewhat blurred, a common understanding was established that “Chaldaic” or “Syro-Chaldaic” was the language of Jesus and any references to the “Hebrew” language in the early sources must be interpreted to refer to this “Syro-Chaldaic” language. It should be noted, however, that this understanding was established prior to any critical study of historical evidence, let alone Jewish sources from the early centuries. It was, at this point, based solely on the “re-discovery” of the Syriac language and the claim of the Eastern churches that their language was in fact the “language of Jesus.”

6 E.g. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, “Neue Hypothese über die Evangelisten als bloß menschliche Geschichtsschreiber betrachtet” (1778), in idem, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessings Theologischer Nachlass* (Berlin: Voß, 1784), 45–72 (55). Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament. Erster Band* (Johann Gottfried Eichhorns Kritische Schriften 5; Leipzig: Weidmannische Buchhandlung, 1804), 12.

7 Martin Luther, *Tischreden*, WA Tr 1, 525.

8 Martin Luther, *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen*, WA 30.2, 638–39.

9 John Calvin, *Comm. in Joh.* 1.42; 19.13 and 19.17 (*JCO* 47, 31 and 413) and *Comm. in Mk* 7.34 (*JCO* 45, 462): “Wenn der Evangelist sagt, der Name Gabbata sei hebräisch, dann meint er damit die chaldäische oder syrische Sprache.”

10 Richard Simon, *Histoire critique du texte du Nouveau Testament* (Rotterdam: Reinier Leers, 1689), 47–48: “... en Ebreu, c’est-à-dire, dans la langue que parloient alors les Juifs de Jerusalem, qu’on appelloit Ebraïque & qui étoit Caldaïque ou Syriaque.”

## 2 Heinrich Friedrich Pfannkuche and the “Palestinian National Language”

The first critical study dedicated to the use of the Aramaic language in the time of Jesus, and the only one for another 100 years, was presented in 1798 by Heinrich Friedrich Pfannkuche.<sup>11</sup> The focus of his work, however, was not a critical distinction of Hebrew and Aramaic, but a distinction of Greek and Aramaic, based on the common assumption that Hebrew had ceased to exist as a living language since the days of the Babylonian exile. The main thrust of Pfannkuche’s argument was aimed towards the hypothesis put forth in 1767 by Domenico Diodati, who had claimed that Jesus and his followers spoke Greek as their mother tongue.<sup>12</sup> A refutation of Diodati’s hypothesis had already been published by Giovanni Bernardo de Rossi in 1772<sup>13</sup> Pfannkuche, however, felt that this had not received the attention it deserved, and so he decided to reiterate the main arguments of de Rossi in an article published in German. Pfannkuche presents his arguments in order to prove the existence of a “Palestinian national language” (*palästinische Landessprache*), which he identifies exclusively as Aramaic. According to his view, Greek was used merely as a “language of fashion,” spoken by some representatives of the upper class, comparable to the French language used in European aristocratic circles of his own times (p. 404), while Hebrew had been completely out of use since the return from exile.

However, in his attempt to refute the idea of Greek being the mother tongue of Jesus, Pfannkuche severely blurs the borders between Hebrew and Aramaic: he adduces place names with בית, כפר and עין as unambiguous evidence for the use of Aramaic (p. 420). Pfannkuche also cites Hebrew coin inscriptions

שנת א' לגאולת ישראל  
שקל ישראל  
שמעון נשיא ישראל  
שנת א' לחרות ישראל

which he dates to the Hasmonean period (while they are today known to be from the time of the Jewish revolts), and comments:

11 Heinrich Friedrich Pfannkuche, “Über die palästinische Landessprache in dem Zeitalter Christi und der Apostel. Ein Versuch, zum Theil nach de Rossi entworfen,” in *Allgemeine Bibliothek der biblischen Literatur. Achter Band, Drittes Stück* (ed. Johann Gottfried Eichhorn; Leipzig: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1798), 365–480.

12 Domenico Diodati, *De Christo Graece loquente exercitatio, qua ostenditur, Graecam sive Hellenisticam linguam: cum Judaeis omnibus tum ipsi adeo Christo Domino et Apostolis nativam et vernaculam fuisse* (Naples: Raymundus, 1767).

13 Giovanni Bernardo de Rossi, *Della lingua propria di Cristo e degli ebrei nazionali della Palestina da' tempi de' Maccabei* (Parma: Stamperia Reale, 1772).

These coins therefore prove that the Aramaic language was dominant as the national language of Palestine in the time of the Maccabees, while the ancient Hebrew language must still have been known, because the producers of these coins could not have dared to use for their coins a language which was then totally unknown in Palestine without risking to be exposed as *falsarii* (forgers) immediately.<sup>14</sup>

Pfannkuche quotes Origen’s comment about a Hebrew original of the first book of Maccabees (Origen, *Comm. in Psalm 1*, and Eusebius, *H.E.* VI.25.2) as proof that this book was written in Aramaic, based on the common assumption that the church fathers “must have meant “Aramaic” when they said “Hebrew” (p. 411).<sup>15</sup> He interprets a reference to the *πατριῶ φωνῆ* in 2 Macc 12:37 as evidence for “the general use of the Aramaic dialect among the people” (p. 407). He refers to “the few literary works written by native Palestinians in the first centuries,” which he claims had been “written for the most part in Aramaic, sometimes also in Hebrew,” giving as examples the Gospel of Matthew, the original version of Josephus’ *Jewish War*, as well as *Yerushalmi*, *Mekhilta*, *Pesiqta*, *Sifra* and *Sifre* (pp. 432–33). Any reference in the works of Josephus to the *πατριῶ γλώσση* (e.g. Josephus, *War* 1.3) is interpreted by Pfannkuche as evidence for Aramaic language use, and even where Josephus explicitly mentions the ability of many Jewish people to read and understand the Hebrew scriptures (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.264), Pfannkuche adds: “. . . in the Hebrew original with the help of the Targumim available in their national language.”<sup>16</sup> His argumentation therefore is a classical case of *petitio principii*: because it is assumed that Aramaic was the only Semitic language still in use by the Jewish people, all evidence that points to Hebrew must be interpreted as evidence for Aramaic.

Following this line of argumentation Pfannkuche laid the foundation for a methodological weakness to be found in almost every subsequent study of the

14 Pfannkuche, “Über die palästinische Landessprache,” 408–9: “. . . so dienen doch diese Münzen auf allen Fall zum Beweise, dass die aramäische Sprache als Landessprache in Palästina zu den Zeiten der Makkabäer geherrscht haben und die althebräische noch immer bekannt gewesen sein muss, da die Verfertiger dieser Münzen, ohne augenblicklich als Falsarii entlarvt zu werden, sich die Freiheit nicht nehmen durften, eine damals in Palästina ganz unbekannte Sprache auf Münzen . . . zu gebrauchen.”

15 Origen uses the term *καθ’ Ἑβραίου* to denote the language and then cites the *Hebrew* titles of all the biblical books, adding the cryptic transliteration *Σαρβηθσαβαναελ* for the original title of the book of Maccabees. Since all other titles are quoted in Hebrew, it can be assumed that this also is a Hebrew title.

16 *Ibid.*, 441: “. . . nach dem hebräischen Urtexte mit Zuziehung . . . der in der Landessprache vorhandenen Targumim.”

language situation, a weakness that would still be admitted by Joseph Fitzmyer more than 150 years later:

... 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.<sup>17</sup>

But from where did this assumption of the death of the Hebrew language originate in the first place? Pfannkuche gives three reasons. First, he sees an inherent connection between language and nationhood and therefore concludes that the Jewish people lost their national language together with their independence as a nation in 586 B.C.E. (pp. 406 and 379). Secondly, he interprets Neh 8:8 as early evidence for the practice of targum and therefore assumes the existence of written Targumim as early as the Hasmonean era (pp. 420 and 422). Thirdly, he claims that all literature written for Palestine in the post-biblical period was written in the *Landessprache* (national language), this being of course the Aramaic language. To prove this, Pfannkuche refers to conjectured Aramaic originals of Ben Sira, 1st Maccabees (cf. above), as well as Tobit and Judith. Obviously the third argument suffers from the same argumentative circle already mentioned above. It is noteworthy that on close examination not a single piece of literature in Aramaic from the period in question was available to Pfannkuche at his time. However, the hypothesis of Aramaic exclusivity was already well established at this point and no further discussion seemed necessary. This was to remain the *status quo* for another 100 years, that is, all the way through the period that was to prove to be the formative phase of modern critical New Testament scholarship.

### 3 Paradigm Shifts and Unshiftable Paradigms at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century

The next steps in Aramaic studies would be taken almost simultaneously by three German scholars: Arnold Meyer, Theodor Zahn and Gustaf Dalman. Dalman had laid the important groundwork by compiling his "Grammar of

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17 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Study of the Aramaic Background of the New Testament" (1975), in idem, *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 1–27 (5).

Jewish Palestinian Aramaic,”<sup>18</sup> which would be followed by a textbook and a dictionary not much later.<sup>19</sup> These works marked a watershed in Aramaic studies, since for the first time a clear distinction was made between the Jewish Palestinian dialect and the later Christian Palestinian or Syriac dialects, dialects that had to this point been used as a reference point to determine the “language of Jesus.” It is still unsatisfactory, from today’s point of view, that Dalman chose the Aramaic of *Onkelos* as his paradigm for the language of Jesus. However, little other material was available to him, since neither the Cairo Genizah nor Targum *Neofiti* nor the Dead Sea Scrolls had been discovered at that time.

The first attempt to apply Dalman’s new paradigms to the words of Jesus was then made by Arnold Meyer, who also relied on the earlier works of de Rossi and Pfannkuche.<sup>20</sup> Like his predecessors, Meyer did not further investigate the assumption of an early death of the Hebrew language; instead, he reiterated the claim that Hebrew was not a spoken language, though it was possibly still in use as a “holy ecclesiastical [*sic*] and possibly also literary language”<sup>21</sup> among the learned scribes, in personal prayer and in the temple liturgy, comparable to the use of Latin among the scholars of his own time.<sup>22</sup> Meyer sums up his claims as follows:

Thus, the knowledge of Hebrew among the common people, unless they were learned scribes . . . was limited to the memorization of a few phrases, prayers and psalms. The rest of his private, public and religious communication would have been in Aramaic.<sup>23</sup>

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18 Gustaf Dalman, *Grammatik des jüdisch-palästinischen Aramäisch nach den Idiomen des palästinischen Talmud und Midrasch, des Onkelostargum (cod. Sorini 84) und der jerusalemischen Targume zum Pentateuch* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1894).

19 Gustaf Dalman, *Aramäische Dialektproben: Lesestücke zur Grammatik des jüdisch-palästinischen Aramäisch zumeist nach Handschriften des Britischen Museums* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1896); Gustaf Dalman and G. H. Händler, *Aramäisch-neuhebräisches Handwörterbuch zu Targum, Talmud und Midrasch. mit Vokalisation der Targumischen Wörter nach südarabischen Handschriften und besonderer Bezeichnung des Wortschatzes des Onkelostargum* (Frankfurt a.M.: Kaufmann, 1897).

20 Arnold Meyer, *Jesu Muttersprache. Das galiläische Aramäisch in seiner Bedeutung für die Erklärung der Reden Jesu* (Freiburg i.Br. / Leipzig: Mohr, 1896), 23–25.

21 *Ibid.*, 42: “. . . heilige Kirchen- eventuell auch Schriftsprache.”

22 *Ibid.*, 74.

23 “Hiernach beschränkte sich die Kenntnis des Hebräischen beim gemeinen Mann, soweit er nicht schriftgelehrt war (. . .), auf das gedächtnishafte Festhalten einiger Sprüche, Gebete und Psalmen: im Übrigen vollzog sich sein häuslicher, bürgerlicher, rechtlicher und religiöser Verkehr in aramäischer Sprache.” *Ibid.* 46–47.

While Meyer focused mainly on the spoken language of Jesus, Theodor Zahn, in his “Introduction to the New Testament,” published in the same year, applied the language question to the field of Gospel transmission and possible literary sources of the New Testament. Citing the results of Pfannkuche, Dalman and Meyer, he reiterated that the mother tongue of Jesus, and therefore the original language of Gospel transmission (*Ursprache des Evangeliums*), was “not Hebrew, not even a mixture of Hebrew and another language, but . . . Aramaic.”<sup>24</sup> Zahn adduced an abundance of evidence for the use of Aramaic from contemporary sources (lexical Aramaisms in the New Testament, Josephus and Philo, as well as historical records of language use from Greek sources and rabbinic literature). However, he fails to argue why the obvious use of Aramaic at the time, which is indeed undisputed, would necessarily imply the exclusion of the Hebrew language. In his list of lexical Aramaisms (pp. 9–15) a tendency is visible to include terms that could be derived from Aramaic as well as from Hebrew (ῥαββί, ῥαββουνί, αββα, πάσχα, σάββατα, σατανᾶς) and even some examples for which a Hebrew etymology is more probable than an Aramaic one (εφφαθα, ἀμήν, βεελζεβούλ, μαμωνᾶ, γέεννα).<sup>25</sup>

Dalman, building in turn on the works of Zahn and Meyer, opened his own opus magnum on the language of Jesus with a programmatic statement in which he argued that the exclusive use of Aramaic was no longer a disputable issue in his day, but could be considered an established result of critical scholarship:

24 Theodor Zahn, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament. Erster Band* (Sammlung Theologischer Lehrbücher 1; Leipzig: Georg Böhme, 1896), 2 and 8.

25 An in-depth study of the lexical Semitisms, using updated Aramaic and Hebrew lexica and an open trilingual language paradigm, is beyond the scope of this study. It can be shown, however, that in many cases the evidence is less conclusive than generally assumed (cf. Fitzmyer’s comment about Aramaisms, Hebraisms and Semitisms above). Also, the frequent use of the final -a in Greek transliterations as evidence for an Aramaic *status emphaticus* is a non sequitur: it is obvious from the practice of transliteration in the LXX that the final -a is a common Grecism rather than an Aramaism, cf. Gen 4:18; 10:15, 19, 27; 11:25; 13:10; 48:22; Exod 12:37; Num 34: 11.24.26 et al. The Greek forms σάββατα and πάσχα regularly transliterate Hebrew (not Aramaic) שבת and פסח in the LXX. Of course, the choice of the forms could have been enhanced by local Greek–Aramaic interface in Egypt during the third–second centuries B.C.E. (note the Aramaic vowels in πάσχα and σίκερα “beer”). And once in use in Greek they may stay in use and become precedents for later choices and authors. But even so, they remain transliterations of a Hebrew original, and the same might therefore be assumed for transliterations in the New Testament, Josephus and Philo.

As the proof has been offered with comparative frequency of late [reference to Meyer and Zahn] that the ‘Hebraists’, i.e. the ‘Hebrew’-speaking Jews of Palestine . . . did not in reality speak Hebrew but Aramaic, it seems superfluous to raise a fresh discussion in all the details of this question.<sup>26</sup>

However, he nevertheless goes on to summarize the main arguments for his “exclusive Aramaic” view as follows:

1. The “high antiquity” of the targum custom, “represented already in the second century after Christ as very ancient.”
2. The lexical Aramaisms in Josephus and the New Testament.
3. The use of Aramaic in the temple (e.g. *m. Sheq.* 5.3 and 6.5; *y. Sot.* 24b).
4. The use of Aramaic in older strata of rabbinic literature (e.g. *Megillat Ta’anit*).
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 the term “Hebrew” for Aramaic in Josephus and the New Testament.

From today’s perspective, some of these arguments have obviously not passed the test of time: the early date of the Targumim, though less extreme than in Pfannkuch’s view, can no longer be sustained in view of recent targumic studies. It is widely agreed today that the Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan, used by Dalman as a reference for the language of Jesus, date to a later period. Even the date of the Palestinian Targums remains an issue of dispute. According to Ze’ev Safrai, the practice of targum in the synagogue developed not earlier than in the later part of the second century, while the literary fixture took place even later.<sup>27</sup> Yet, even if an earlier date is assumed, it need not follow

26 Gustaf Dalman, *Die Worte Jesu: mit Berücksichtigung des nachkanonischen jüdischen Schrifttums und der aramäischen Sprache erörtert* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1898), 1: “Nachdem in neuerer Zeit öfters der Beweis dafür geführt worden ist, dass die . . . ‘hebräisch’ sprechenden Juden Palästina’s . . . in Wirklichkeit nicht hebräisch, sondern aramäisch sprachen, erscheint es überflüssig, alle hierher gehörenden Einzelheiten aufs neue zu erörtern.” Translations taken from the English edition (*The Words of Jesus* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902], 1).

27 Ze’ev Safrai, “The Origins of Reading the Aramaic Targum in Synagogue,” in *The New Testament and Christian-Jewish Dialogue* (ed. Malcolm Lowe; Immanuel 24–25; Jerusalem: Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Israel, 1990), 187–93. An

that this would have any bearing on the question of Hebrew language use. Much more important than the actual date is the function of Targum. Dalman assumed that the only *raison d'être* for a targumic practice was the necessity of translation because no one understood Hebrew. However, more recent studies into the character and function of the targum suggest that commentary was as important as translation as a functional aspect of targum, especially in the "Palestinian" type. The existence of targum therefore does not necessarily imply a lack of Hebrew language competence, but the desire to expound the meanings of the Hebrew text without having to alter or expand it. Even in the unlikely case of an early date for the practice of targum, Dalman's first argument has lost its exclusive thrust.<sup>28</sup>

The hypothesis of the artificial character of Mishnaic Hebrew, originally put forward by Abraham Geiger,<sup>29</sup> and picked up by Dalman in his argument no. 7, has also been rendered futile by a century of ongoing linguistic research into the development of Mishnaic Hebrew which does not need to be repeated here.<sup>30</sup> The change of script, on the other hand, might in fact reflect a long-term

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updated overview on the issue is now available in Ze'ev Safrai, "The Targums as Part of Rabbinic Literature," in *The Literature of the Sages. Second Part: Midrash and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature* (ed. Samuel Safrai, Zeev Safrai, Joshua Schwartz and P. J. Tomson; Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum 2.3b; Assen: Van Gorcum, 2006), 243–78. Concerning the date of literary fixation, cf. Stephen A. Kaufman, "Dating the Language of the Palestinian Targums and their Use in the Study of First Century CE Texts," in *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in their Historical Context* (ed. D. R. G. Beattie and M. J. McNamara; JSOTSup 166; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 118–41.

28 The literal character of Aramaic Job from Qumran does not change the evaluation of Dalman's point because its spelling shows it to be an Eastern import. Cf. Takamitsu Muraoka, "The Aramaic of the Old Targum of Job from Qumran Cave XI," *JJS* 25 (1974): 425–43; Randall Buth, "Aramaic Targumim: Qumran," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 91–93. An Aramaic Job was apparently used all over the Middle East during the later Second Temple period. An Aramaic Job document is also mentioned in Egypt in the Old Greek to Job 42:17. It should also be noted that the only reference to the pre-70 C.E. existence of a written targum in the rabbinic literature also mentions a targum to Job (*b. Shab.* 115a; *y. Shab.* 16.1/3 (15c); *t. Shab.* 13.2; *Sof.* 5.16 and 15.2). It therefore seems that this book is indeed a special case that does not allow generalizations.

29 Abraham Geiger, *Lehr- und Lesebuch zur Sprache der Mischnah* (2 vols., Breslau: Leuckart, 1845).

30 Moshe Bar-Asher, "The Study of Mishnaic Hebrew Grammar based on Written Sources: Achievements, Problems, and Tasks," in *Studies in Mishnaic Hebrew* (ed. Moshe Bar-Asher; Scripta Hierosolymitana 37; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1998), 9–42; Moshe Bar-Asher, "Mishnaic

language shift, though it is obvious from the archaeological evidence discovered in the course of the twentieth century that “square script” was used for Hebrew literature, documents and inscriptions well into the second century C.E. In fact, of all the evidence in square script available today, the overwhelming majority is written in Hebrew and not in Aramaic. Unfortunately, this evidence was still unknown to Dalman.

Of the remaining arguments, nos. 3, 4 and 5 have no claim to exclusivity: the use of Aramaic in early parts of rabbinic literature proves hardly more than the undisputed fact that Aramaic was in reality one of the languages spoken and written in the time of Jesus. However, it cannot prove that Hebrew was not used as well at that same period. The issues of lexical Aramaisms (which, as Fitzmyer commented, in many cases are simply Semitisms or even Hebraisms) and the use of the term “Hebrew” in the Greek literature remains disputed.<sup>31</sup>

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Hebrew: An Introductory Survey,” in Safrai, Schwartz and Tomson, eds., *The Literature of the Sages. Second Part: Midrash and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature*, 567–96.

- 31 On the former, cf. the remarks made above about lexical Semitisms. On the latter, see the article on Ἑβραϊστί in this volume. It can be shown that Josephus never applies the term “Hebrew” to the Aramaic language but distinguishes carefully between “Hebrew” and “Syriac.” Scholars since the time of Pfannkuche have appealed to Josephus’ employment of the term “Hebrew” for Greek ἑβραϊστικά (*Ant.* 1.33), and ἄσραρθά (3.252) as proof that he confuses the terminology. However, a closer look at the matter reveals that this argument is flawed in multiple respects. Generally, the reference to a final “a” as an identifier of Aramaic language is a non sequitur in view of the common LXX transliteration of Hebrew (!) terms, as was already shown above. More specifically, in the case of ἑβραϊστικά, Josephus is not referring to the term as such, but to its etymological provenance: “. . . which word denotes rest in the language of the Hebrews.” Obviously, this statement must here exclusively refer to the Hebrew language, since the Aramaic word for “rest” is not שבת but נון. Thirdly, even if it was assumed that Josephus had here Aramaic terms in view (while referring to their Hebrew etymology), it needs to be noted that, technically speaking, he does not label these terms as “Hebrew” or even “in the Hebrew language,” but, in one case as derived from a word “in the language of the Hebrews,” in the other case as being in use “among the Hebrews.” This choice of words differs significantly from his terminology in other places, where the reference is undoubtedly to Hebrew terms, not people (Ἑβραϊστί in *Ant.* 10.8 and 11.159; Ἑβραϊστικός in *Ant.* 1.5; 9.208; 12.36, 48; 18.345). In the two passages cited above, however, Josephus does not refer to the *language* of the terms as such, but to the *group of people* that uses the terms. Obviously, since both terms are specifically Jewish in content, Josephus could not have employed the term “Syriac people” or “Syrians” here, even if he did have the Aramaic usage of the terms in mind. Thus, even if the terms here are assumed to be Aramaic, Josephus would be saying nothing more than that *Hebrew* people sometimes used *Aramaic* names for their feasts (which were, in turn, derived from *Hebrew* roots), a fact that is obviously undisputed. The two passages

Dalman's case for the exclusivity of the Aramaic language, strong as it was at his time, has therefore been weakened severely by ongoing historical, archaeological, philological and linguistic research over the past century. Today, many of his presumptions would no longer be supported even by those who still adhere to the exclusive Aramaic hypothesis. However, the conclusions he drew from these presumptions seem to be used without adjustment in much academic discussion despite the accumulating, contradictory evidence.

#### 4 Subtle Motives in the Genesis of the "Aramaic Hypothesis"

Looking at the history and development of the "Aramaic hypothesis," one cannot help but wonder why the idea of an exclusive use of the Aramaic language gained such a strong momentum in German and international scholarship when in fact it was based on such thin evidence. Other factors must have contributed to the widespread acceptance of the hypothesis. Indeed, some such factors can be found in the works of early Aramaic scholarship that point to the existence of a common *Tendenz* towards a theory of exclusive use of Aramaic to the expense of Hebrew:

##### a *The Unity of Language and Nation*

At the end of the eighteenth century, the growing movement of early romantic idealism, paired with the rise of nationalisms of various kinds, impacted

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in question, therefore, do not corroborate the claim that Josephus confuses the language terminology. Other than these two, no examples for an assumed "blurred terminology" can be found in Josephus. A third passage that is often quoted in this context is *Ant.* 3.151, where Josephus refers to the priestly garments as *χαρανάβιας*. However, there he does not say anything about the language of that term, and a derivation from both languages is in fact possible. To sum up: wherever Josephus uses the designation "Hebrew" or "Hebrew language" to denote a Semitic term (cf. the list of passages above), the term referred to is clearly Hebrew, not Aramaic. In other places, he might also refer to Aramaic terms (e.g. *ἐμίαν* in *Ant.* 3.156); however, he never calls them "Hebrew" or refers to them as being "in the Hebrew language." In Philo, the terminology is equally precise: different from Josephus, he always uses the term "Chaldaic" for Biblical Hebrew, not for Aramaic. In no instance does he use "Hebrew" to denote an Aramaic term or phrase. In the three disputed passages in John (John 5:2; 19:13, 17), the argument for an Aramaic derivation again rests solely on the final -a, since, etymologically, all three place names can be derived from Aramaic as well as from Hebrew. And as names, they could legitimately be called Hebrew by the Gospel writer in any case. On the doubtful use of the final -a as a language identifier, cf., however, the remarks above about lexical Semitisms.

the European societies. Along with these, the quest for a unity of nation and language was pursued, also reflected in the linguistic concepts of the time. This romantic ideal of unity of language, spirit and nation was put into words by Wilhelm von Humboldt, a leading pioneer in the philosophy of languages, in 1836:

The mental individuality of a people and the shape of its language are so intimately fused with one another that if one were given, the other would have to be completely derivable from it. For intellectuality and language allow and further only forms that are mutually congenial to one another. Language is, as it were, the outer appearance of the spirit of a people; the language is their spirit and the spirit their language; we can never think of them sufficiently as identical.<sup>32</sup>

It is this idea of unity of nationhood and language that is fundamental for Pfannkuche’s approach: the existence of the Hebrew language for him is tied unsoluably to the national independence of the Jewish nation.<sup>33</sup> Symptoms of language transition and language death are therefore an integral part of the political struggles of the Jewish nation. Pfannkuche uses graphic terms like “*linguistic revolution*” (“Sprachrevolution”), “*violent deprivation of national language*” (“Entreißen der Nationalsprache”) and “*extinction of the popular language*” (“Vertilgen der Volkssprache”), and he speaks of “*purity*” (“Reinigkeit”) and “*barbarisms*” (“Barbarismen”) in language issues.<sup>34</sup> The atmosphere of revolution and national aspirations that shaped Europe at the turn of the

32 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluß auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts* (Bonn: Dümmler, 1836), 37: “Die Geistes-eigentümlichkeit und die Sprachgestaltung eines Volkes stehen in solcher Innigkeit der Verschmelzung ineinander, daß, wenn die eine gegeben wäre, die andere müßte vollständig aus ihr abgeleitet werden können. Denn die Intellektualität und die Sprache gestatten nur einander gegenseitig zusagende Formen. Die Sprache ist gleichsam die äußerliche Erscheinung des Geistes der Völker; ihre Sprache ist ihr Geist, und ihr Geist ist ihre Sprache, man kann beide nie identisch genug sehen.” English translation in idem, *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and Its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species* (ed. Michael Losonsky; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 46.

33 Pfannkuche, “Über die palästinische Landessprache,” 379 and 406: “Denn Behauptung der Nationalexistenz hält allemal mit der Behauptung der Nationalsprache gleichen Schritt” (“The conservation of national existence is always keeping pace with the conservation of national language”).

34 *Ibid.*, 381, 414, 393 and 389.

nineteenth century is obviously reflected here. The death of the Hebrew language after the exile is therefore, in the eyes of Pfannkuche, in a way ushering in the death of the Jewish people as a nation and the death of Judaism as a particular religion. Aramaic, on the other hand, is presented as the old (and new) universal and transnational language, the Semitic “Ur-language that united the inhabitants of Cappadocia and Pontus, the Assyrians, Babylonians, Arameans, Hebrews, Phoenicians and Arabs into one great nation.”<sup>35</sup> For Pfannkuche, Hebrew is the language of Jewish particularism, Aramaic the language of universalism. It is therefore of deep theological relevance that Jesus and the early Church used the *Aramaic* and not the *Hebrew* language.

The same motif of Hebrew as the language of Jewish national particularism was later picked up by Abraham Geiger, though to a very different effect: He used it to advance his cause for the use of German as a liturgical language of the synagogues of his own time. Building on his earlier hypothesis of the artificial character of Mishnaic Hebrew, he argued in a subsequent work that the time had come for German Jewry to break free from the narrow confinements of the ‘artificial’ Hebrew language and turn to the ‘vernacular’ German language instead. In a résumé about language use in ancient and modern times, he called for the replacement of Hebrew by the German national language and argued:

Generally speaking, the Jewish liturgy [from 70 C.E. until modern times] had to remain in Hebrew. It was a national institution, saved from the past for a future that was to restore the past completely . . . However, we are very thankful today, that we have overcome this romanticism of pain . . . We have woken up from the dreamworld of our national past and future into the present time. Religion is breaking free from the chains that were imposed on it by this dreamworld, and the national disguise of the liturgy becomes meaningless, even a disturbance. It has to disappear, otherwise it will do harm to the newly awakened awareness. With all due respect for our past . . . we must not keep the national disguise in which it was clothed, had to be clothed. It is our religious duty to remove it and present our religion, stripped of all national barriers that used to constrict it, as a truth embracing the world as a whole.<sup>36</sup>

35 Ibid., 381–82: “... Ursprache, welche... die Bewohner von Kappadocien und Pontus, die Assyrer, Babylonier, Aramäer, Hebräer, Phönizier und Araber zu einem großen Volk vereinigte.”

36 Abraham Geiger, *Unser Gottesdienst: Eine Frage, die dringend Lösung verlangt* (Breslau: Schlettersche Buchhandlung, 1868), 6: “Allein im Ganzen und Großen mußte derselbe [jüdische Gottesdienst] ein hebräischer bleiben. Er war eine nationale Institution,

Hence, the use of Hebrew, for Abraham Geiger, was a symbol of national particularism and religious traditionalism, whereas the abolition of Hebrew, for him, symbolized the spiritual renewal of the Jewish people into a religion of universal relevance. However, while this was a notion that Geiger shared with Pfannkuche and other Christian scholars of his time, for him this renewal would be implemented in the Jewish Reform movement, not in the final supersession of Judaism by Christianity as claimed by many of his Christian contemporaries.

The motif of the unity of language and nation also resonated well with the concept of “late Judaism” (*Spätjudentum*), developed by Julius Wellhausen and other scholars towards the end of the nineteenth century. The term “late Judaism,” introduced by Wellhausen, suggested that Judaism as such was nothing but a temporary deviation from the original religion of Abraham and the early prophets, a deviation coming to a natural end with the Babylonian exile, while the post-exilic phenomenon of “late Judaism” was somewhat of an anachronism to be finally overcome by Jesus Christ, who restored the old religion of Israel.<sup>37</sup> For Wellhausen, the character of Judaism as a dead religion was reflected in the creation of the written canon of the Hebrew Bible:

Once we understand that the canon separates Judaism from ancient Israel, then we also understand that the written Tora separates Judaism from ancient Israel. The water that flowed freely in the past was now confined to cisterns.<sup>38</sup>

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gerettet aus der Vergangenheit für eine Zukunft, die dieselbe vollkommen wieder herstellen sollte... Allein wir sind unsererseits mit hohem Danke erfüllt, daß wir diese Romantik des Schmerzes überwunden haben... Wir sind aus dem Traumleben einer nationalen Vergangenheit und Zukunft in die wahre Gegenwart eingetreten, die Religion löst sich von den Fesseln ab, mit denen jenes Traumleben sie umschlungen hatte; auch die nationale Hülle des Gottesdienstes wird bedeutungslos, ja störend, sie muß sinken, wenn sie nicht die neu erstarkende Gesinnung trüben soll. Bei aller Ehrerbietung für unsere Vergangenheit... dürfen wir nicht das nationale Gewand erhalten, in welchem sie aufgetreten, auftreten mußte; es ist unsere religiöse Pflicht, dasselbe abzustreifen, unsere Religion entkleidet der beengenden nationalen Schranken in ihrer weltumfassenden Wahrheit zur Erscheinung zu bringen.”

37 Cf. Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (6th ed., Berlin: Reimer, 1905), especially 399–402 and 420–24, and idem, *Einleitung in die drei ersten Evangelien* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1905), 104–15.

38 Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 409: “Erkennt man an, daß der Kanon das Judentum vom alten Israel scheidet, so erkennt man auch an, daß die schriftliche Thora das Judentum vom alten Israel scheidet. Das Wasser, das in der Vergangenheit gequollen war, faßten die Epigonen in Zisternen.”

The death of the Hebrew language after the exile therefore could be interpreted within this framework as a natural reflection of the impending “death” of Judaism and its replacement by the new, old religion of Jesus and the prophets. In assuming Aramaic sources for the Gospel of Mark as well as for the *Logienquelle* Q, Wellhausen therefore seeks to separate the Gospels from the biblical canon as well as from Jewish literature in general, even to the point of preferring Christian Aramaic over Jewish Aramaic sources as a reference point. He considered the latter to be “specifically rabbinic” in character and therefore different from the language of the Galilean people. It would be wrong, he comments, to presume that the “pedants” had already shaped the language of the people at the time of Jesus:

The Rabbis rose to be the autocrats only after the destruction of Jerusalem, when the people had shrunk to a sect.<sup>39</sup>

Gustaf Dalman, in turn, disagreed with Wellhausen on the use of Jewish Aramaic as a reference point. However, he nonetheless shared the idea that the use of Aramaic had a theological implication, reflecting the downfall of Judaism and divine judgment of the Jewish people. When he was asked to continue the legacy of Franz Delitzsch, who had worked on his famous Hebrew translation of the New Testament for much of his lifetime, Dalman took up the task with some hesitation, chiefly because he did not share Delitzsch’s conviction that Hebrew could in fact have been used by Jesus or the authors of the New Testament.<sup>40</sup> Commenting on the language question, he argued:

It is no coincidence, but a consequence of the judgment conjured up by Israel upon herself, that the word of the fulfilled New Covenant did not return to her as a Hebrew original, but as a translation from the Greek. May this new offer of salvation in the Hebrew tongue, in which Christ comes once again . . . to his people, not again be a cause of judgement to them, but a cause of salvation!<sup>41</sup>

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39 Wellhausen, *Einleitung*, 41: “Die Rabbinen sind erst nach der Zerstörung Jerusalems Alleinherrscher geworden, als das Volk zu einer Sekte zusammengeschrumpft war.” Cf. also pp. 38–40.

40 Gustaf Dalman, “Das hebräische Neue Testament von Franz Delitzsch,” *Hebraica* 9 (1893): 226–31 (228).

41 Dalman, *Das hebräische Neue Testament*, 230: “. . . es ist auch nicht Zufall, sondern Folge des von Israel über sich heraufbeschworenen Gerichts, dass das Wort des erfüllten Neuen Bundes nicht als hebräisches Original, sondern als Übersetzung aus dem Griechischen

For Pfannkuche and Geiger, as well as for Wellhausen and Dalman, the transition from Hebrew to Aramaic was much more than just a sociolinguistic phenomenon. Sharing a common ideal of unity of language, nation and spirituality, the downfall of the Hebrew language did also signify the downfall of the Jewish people as a nation. For all of them, the transition into a new language signifies a spiritual renewal that transgresses and dissolves boundaries of national identity.

### **b**      *The Language of the Learned and the Bias for the Unlearned*

Among the reasons why Jesus must have spoken the Aramaic language, Pfannkuche lists the fact that Jesus spoke primarily to the unlearned and the “common people”:

It is an undisputed fact that Jesus, whose sphere of influence was primarily among the common people, who were less “mis-educated” (*verbildet*) than the higher classes and therefore more open for pure moral principles, used the Aramaic language in his discourses.<sup>42</sup>

Pfannkuche does not give an explanation on what grounds he bases this assumption. He mentions the phrase *ἄνθρωποι ἀγράμματοί εἰσιν καὶ ἰδιῶται* (Acts 4:13), however he fails to explain how any conclusions could be drawn from this characterization of two of Jesus disciples as to the general character of Jesus’ audiences. Even a superficial survey of the Gospel narratives definitively shows Jesus in a number of conversations with educated people, perhaps even more frequently than with people specifically described as poor or uneducated. In most cases, however, the Gospels speak about groups, crowds or multitudes of people without further reference to their social or educational status.

Nevertheless, the motif of a bias for the unlearned in the ministry of Jesus frequently reappears in later discussions of language use. While Pfannkuche had used the motif to argue for the use of a Semitic language (in this case, Aramaic) and against the use of Greek, in the later literature it would be used

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nun wieder zu ihm zurückkehrt. Möchte aber diese neue Anbietung des Heils in hebräischer Zunge, durch welche Christus zum zweiten Male . . . unter sein Volk tritt, ihm nicht aufs Neue zum Gericht, sondern zum Heile ausschlagen!”

42 Pfannkuche, “Über die palästinische Landessprache,” 430: “Es ist eine unbestreitbare Thatsache, daß Jesus, dessen Wirkungskreis vorzüglich unter dem gemeinen, weniger, als die höhern Stände verbildeten, und ebendeshalb für reinere moralische Grundsätze empfänglichen Volke war, . . . sich in seinen Lehrvorträgen der aramäischen Sprache bediente.”

to argue for the use of Aramaic as opposed to Hebrew. In the eyes of Arnold Meyer, Hebrew was a language exclusively used by the learned (“nur Sprache der Gebildeten”), while Aramaic was the language of the people (“volkstümliche Sprache”).<sup>43</sup> Jesus, for him, was “not a man of letters, but of living spirit . . . he does not look like a scribe, he was not a theologian but a man of the masses.”<sup>44</sup> In his opinion, the simple teachings of Jesus do not necessitate any first-hand knowledge of the Hebrew Bible or apocalyptic literature; in fact, Jesus himself would probably not have been able to read the Hebrew Bible.

Theodor Zahn builds a case on the term לשון חכמים, interpreting it as qualifying Hebrew as a “language of the learned.”<sup>45</sup> He contrasts this with the rare term לשון הדיוט (*b. Baba Mez.* 104a), which he interprets to denote the language of the unlearned (i.e. Aramaic). However, it is obvious that לשון הדיוט has a different meaning in *Baba Meziyah*, and it is never contrasted with לשון חכמים. Moreover, the term לשון חכמים in rabbinic language does not refer to the educational level of those who speak it, but to the period of time it came into use. The contrast is between לשון חכמים (i.e. Mishnaic Hebrew) and לשון הקודש (i.e. Biblical Hebrew), not between לשון חכמים and לשון הדיוט.

That Wellhausen drew a similar dividing line between Jesus and the rabbis and projected this unto the issue of language use has already been shown above. In a similar way, Dalman echoes the motif of the learned and the unlearned: after having established the claim that Jesus, as a Galilean, would by default have had little contact with the Jewish sages and their teachings,<sup>46</sup>

43 Meyer, *Muttersprache*, 40.

44 Meyer, *Muttersprache*, 56–57: “. . . kein Mensch des Buchstabens, sondern des lebendigen Geistes . . . Jesus sieht nicht aus wie ein Schriftgelehrter, er war kein Theologe, sondern ein Volksmann.”

45 Zahn, *Einleitung*, 17.

46 Dalman, *Worte Jesu*, 8. The claim that Galilee was far removed from Jewish cultural and religious life was already frequent in the time of Dalman and later on led to the preposterous claims of German scholars as to the pagan or even Aryan character of the population of Galilee, including the person of Jesus himself; cf. Walter Grundmann, *Jesus, der Galiläer, und das Judentum. Veröffentlichungen des Instituts zur Erforschung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben* (Leipzig: G. Wigand, 1940). The literary and archaeological evidence, however, points in the opposite direction; cf. Samuel Safrai, “The Jewish Cultural Nature of Galilee in the First Century,” in Lowe, ed., *The New Testament and Christian–Jewish Dialogue*, 147–86, who concludes that “apart from Jerusalem, Galilee was in all respects equal to or excelled all other areas of the Land of Israel where Jews lived” (186). Cf. also Carsten Claußen, Jörg Frey and Mordechai Aviam, *Jesus und die Archäologie Galiläas* (Biblich-theologische Studien 87; Neukirchen–Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2008).

he goes on to claim that Jesus therefore must have used Aramaic to address his followers, if he wanted them to understand:

Of Him, least of all, who desired to preach the gospel to the poor, who stood aloof from the paedagogic methods of the scribes, is it to be expected that He would have furnished His discourse with the superfluous, and to the hearers perplexing, embellishment of the Hebrew form?<sup>47</sup>

Obviously, the widespread motif of an assumed dichotomy between the learned and the unlearned, the Jewish teachers and Jesus, as well as Hebrew and Aramaic in the works of Meyer, Zahn, Dalman and Wellhausen serves a common interest: the desire to draw a clear dividing line between Judaism and Christianity, with an additional emphasis on the freshness and the popularity of the latter, in contrast to a Jewish religion that was perceived to be remote from the people and governed by a minority of traditionalist scholars.

How well this picture can be based on the sources, however is questionable; none of the authors provides any evidence either for the assumption that Jesus was mainly involved with the unlearned, or that the Jewish teachers were particularly distanced from the people. The New Testament, on the other hand, provides us with a picture of Jesus that is very much in interaction with the learned of his day: he is found debating with the scribes in the temple of Jerusalem as a young boy; later on, he is involved in extended discourses with Pharisees and scribes as well as with the Sadducees. In his teachings, he relies extensively on the Hebrew scriptures and seemingly draws from some of the same haggadic and halakic traditions as later rabbinic literature. On the other hand, we have little evidence that the scribes and Pharisees were particularly remote or distanced from the common people. To the contrary, the rabbinic sources testify that many of the rabbis came exactly from the poorer strata of the population, and Josephus states that among all the Jewish groups, it was the Pharisees who had the greatest popularity among the masses (*Ant.* 13.288 and 298).<sup>48</sup>

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47 Dalman, *Worte Jesu*, 9–10: “Von ihm, der das Evangelium den Armen predigen wollte und der Lehrweise der Schriftgelehrten fernstand, ist am wenigsten zu erwarten, dass er seine Rede mit dem überflüssigen und den Hörer verwirrenden Schmuck der hebräischen Form versehen hätte.” Translation quoted from the English edition, *The Words of Jesus*, 11–12.

48 Cf. Malcolm Lowe, “The Critical and the Skeptical Methods in New Testament Research,” *Gregorianum* 81 (2000): 693–721 (726).

c *The Language of the Religious Establishment and the Language of the Lay People*

Similar to the phenomenon observed in the preceding paragraph, however with a different nuance, is the assumed contrast between the religious establishment and the lay people. Here, it is probably the rise of confessionalism in Europe, the fervent opposition of German Protestantism against the Ultra-montanist Roman Catholic movement and the resulting “*Kulturkampf*” between (Protestant) liberalism and (Catholic) traditionalism within German society that has shaped some of the concepts to be addressed here. That such parallels are indeed drawn becomes obvious, when Meyer calls the Hebrew language the “church language” (*Kirchensprache*), or when Wellhausen equals the post-exilic Jewish establishment with the Catholic Church:

Mosaic theocracy, the leftover of a state already perished, . . . is essentially akin to the ancient Catholic church, whose mother she was indeed. It may be aesthetically offensive to speak of the “Jewish church,” however it is not historically untrue.<sup>49</sup>

The use of an analogy between the use of Latin as an ancient Church language as opposed to German as the mother tongue to explain the relationship of Hebrew and Aramaic in the time of Jesus is probably also based on this equation.<sup>50</sup> Dalman even suggests an intentional removal of the use of the Aramaic mother tongue in the Jewish synagogues, promoted by the religious leadership:

49 Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 421: “Die mosaische Theokratie, das Residuum eines untergegangenen Staates, . . . ist ihrem Wesen nach der altkatholischen Kirche nächstverwandt, deren Mutter sie in der Tat gewesen ist. Ästhetisch anstößig mag es sein wenn man von der jüdischen Kirche redet, historisch unrichtig ist es nicht . . .”

50 Meyer, *Muttersprache*, 74. The analogy of the use of Latin in medieval Europe is frequently applied inaccurately and inappropriately in discussions about the roles of Hebrew and Aramaic during the Second Temple period. The two different registers of Hebrew must be included in the analogy in order for it to be explanatory and descriptive. During the Second Temple period Hebrew had developed a “low register” Hebrew in distinction from a high-register literary Hebrew. The true Latin situation in late antiquity and medieval Europe included a classical Latin that is distinguished from spoken vulgar Latin dialects, the predecessors to the Romanic languages. Mishnaic Hebrew during the Second Temple period is none other than the analogical equivalent of “vulgar Latin.” In a diglossic framework, the existence of a low-register Mishnaic Hebrew stands as a primary witness against the “Exclusive Aramaic” model. This is all the more evident after the Qumran discoveries, where it is obvious that a “high” Hebrew could be used when so desired.

The more the scribes obtained unlimited control of the Jewish religious system, so much the more did divine worship adopt the form prescribed by the learned, and specially calculated only for themselves. During the progress of this transition the popular language was gradually extruded from public worship.<sup>51</sup>

Jesus, in the framework of this paradigm, becomes an early prototype of Martin Luther, translating the ancient traditions of his faith from a language no longer understood but imposed on the people by a powerful religious establishment, into the mother tongue of the people, thereby at the same time unleashing a spiritual reformation that freed the faithful believers from the bondages of ecclesiastical traditions and empowered the lay people in their struggle against the corrupted clerical establishment. Obviously, parallels with the struggle of German Protestant liberalism against the dominion of Catholic cultural traditionalism in the nineteenth century were not unintended or without influence in the use of this analogy.

#### d *The Language of the Bible and the Language of Babel*

Still another facet of the socio-political context which gave rise to the “exclusive Aramaic hypothesis” might be found in the rivalry of European nations in the archaeological exploration of the Middle East at the turn of the century.<sup>52</sup> While France and England had for some time been substantially involved in biblical archaeology in the Holy Land, the newly established German nation felt a need to stake her own claims on the fields of archaeology. However, since the majority of biblical lands, including Egypt, had already been at the focus of French, British and American archaeological campaigns, Germany decided to break new grounds in Ashur and Babylonia. In 1898, the *Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft* was founded and one of Germany’s leading Semitists, Friedrich Delitzsch, was invited soon after to lay out a vision for German archaeological endeavors. He did so in a series of lectures presented to an academic audience, including Kaiser Wilhelm II and his wife, Kaiserin Auguste Victoria, in the years 1902–1904. These lectures, titled “Babel und Bibel,” sparked an international

51 Dalman, *Worte Jesu*, 9: “Je mehr die Schriftgelehrten die unumschränkte Leitung des jüdischen Religionswesens in die Hand bekamen, desto mehr hat auch der Gottesdienst die von den Gelehrten geforderte und für sie eigentlich nur berechnete Gestalt angenommen. In diesem Wandlungsprozess wurde allmählich die Volkssprache aus dem Gottesdienste verdrängt.” Translation cited from p. 11 of the English edition.

52 Cf. Bill T. Arnold and David B. Weisberg, “A Centennial Review of Friedrich Delitzsch’s ‘Babel and Bibel’ Lectures,” *JBL* 121 (2002): 441–57.

controversy due to their critical stance on Biblical literature. However, they laid important foundations for a German preoccupation with Babylonian and Assyrian culture in the decades to come. Delitzsch made it clear at the outset of his lectures, that he understood his task in the political framework of his time, referring to a “rivalry among the nations” and “ever-growing, self-sacrificing interest . . . in the excavations in Assyria and Babylonia.”<sup>53</sup>

The main thrust of his argumentation, then, was to prove the superiority of the Assyrian and Babylonian cultures over the biblical culture of Israel: not only were they more ancient, but they were also more advanced in their religious concepts, while the religion of Israel, in the eyes of Delitzsch, was but a dim reflection of the grandeur of her neighbors. These conclusions are then also transferred to the New Testament era as a paradigm by which to understand and interpret the relationship of Jesus to the Judaism of his time. After establishing the partially non-Semitic character of the Babylonian people and describing Ashurbanipal’s wife as “a princess of Aryan blood and blond hair.”<sup>54</sup> Delitzsch concluded that the same was to be assumed for the population of Samaria and Galilee at the time of Jesus:

This assessment of a Babylonian (and therefore not purely Semitic) character of the Samaritan–Galilean mixed population will prove to be, it seems to me, very valuable also for future New Testament scholarship. Many of the conceptions, words and actions of Jesus, the Galilean, urges us instinctively to seek for Babylonian comparisons.<sup>55</sup>

According to this line of argument, the “Good Samaritan” is transformed into a “Good Babylonian” and also the *magi* in Bethlehem are presumably arriving from Babylonia.<sup>56</sup> In a later publication, Delitzsch suggested the total

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53 Friedrich Delitzsch, *Babel und Bibel. Ein Vortrag* (Helsingfors: J. C. Hinrichs, 1902), 3.

54 Delitzsch, *Babel und Bibel*, 19–20.

55 Friedrich Delitzsch, *Babel und Bibel. Dritter (Schluss-)Vortrag* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1905), 11: “Diese Feststellung des babylonischen (und schon deshalb nicht rein semitischen) Charakters des samaritanisch-galiläischen Mischvolkes dürfte sich, wie mir scheint, in Zukunft auch für die neutestamentliche Forschung als der Berücksichtigung wert ausweisen. Gar manches in den Anschauungen, Aussprüchen und Taten Jesu, des Galiläers, drängt unwillkürlich zu babylonischen Vergleichen . . .” For the frequent claim of a non-Jewish character of Galilee, cf. the remarks above.

56 Delitzsch, *Babel und Bibel. Dritter (Schluss-)Vortrag*, 23, 48 and 56–57.

removal of the Hebrew Bible from the Christian canon and its replacement by Schwaner’s “*Germanen-Bibel*.”<sup>57</sup>

Obviously, not all scholars of his time shared the views of Friedrich Delitzsch. Nevertheless, his voice was not a singular phenomenon either. Delitzsch’s lectures on the superiority of the Babylonian over the Hebrew culture and religion found broad support not only in the eyes of the Kaiser, but also among biblical scholars of his time. The general concept of Judaism, and the Hebrew canon, as an inferior deviation of the older Abrahamic religion was close to that of Wellhausen, and the suggestion to remove the Hebrew scriptures from the Christian Bible was advanced in very similar words by Adolf von Harnack.<sup>58</sup> The striking paradigm shift within one generation of scholars—from Franz Delitzsch, who was a leading scholar in Hebraic and Judaic studies, praised by many of his Jewish colleagues at his time, to his son Friedrich, who put much effort into the demonstration of Hebrew inferiority and Babylonian supremacy—might well reflect a general tendency in German scholarship. This, in turn, might have contributed to the rapid advance of the “exclusive Aramaic” paradigm within German scholarship, which offered them a ready tool to move Jesus further away from his Jewish context and closer to a non-semitic, universalist and, at the same time, more ancient and more developed religious framework. The ancient religion of Abraham, the wandering Aramean from Chaldea, was finally restored by Jesus, the Aramaic-speaking wanderer from Galilee, leaving behind the narrow confinements of Mosaic religion and Jewish tradition, enclosed (if not buried) in the biblical canon and the Hebrew language.

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57 Friedrich Delitzsch, *Die große Täuschung. Kritische Betrachtungen zu den alttestamentlichen Berichten über Israels Eindringen in Kanaan, die Gottesoffenbarung vom Sinai und die Wirksamkeit der Propheten (Erster Teil)*, Stuttgart/Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1920), 95.

58 Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott. Eine Monographie zur Geschichte der Grundlegung der katholischen Kirche* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1921), 217: “Das Alte Testament im 2. Jahrhundert zu verwerfen war ein Fehler, den die große Kirche mit Recht abgelehnt hat; es im 16. Jahrhundert beizubehalten war ein Schicksal, dem sich die Reformation noch nicht zu entziehen vermochte; es aber seit dem 19. Jahrhundert als kanonische Urkunde im Protestantismus noch zu konservieren ist die Folge einer religiösen und kirchlichen Lähmung” (“To reject the Old Testament in the second century was an error the Church rightly resisted; to maintain it in the sixteenth century was a destiny the Reformation could not escape; but still to preserve it in the nineteenth century as one of the canonical documents of Protestantism is the result of religious and ecclesiastical paralysis”).

## 5 Conclusions

It would be superficial and foolish to say that the rise of the exclusive Aramaic hypothesis was only a result of the different ideological and socio-political tendencies of the eighteenth and nineteenth century sketched out in this article. The purpose of this study was not in any way to discredit the achievements of outstanding scholars like Dalman, Wellhausen, Zahn or even Delitzsch. However, it is obvious that these scholars, as every other in any given period, were children of their time.<sup>59</sup> And it would therefore likewise be foolish to assume that they remained completely untouched by the socio-political circumstances that surrounded them.

It is obvious, from today's perspective, that some of the conclusions of early Aramaic scholarship were based on wrong presumptions and on weak evidence. This is not a fault of these scholars but a natural result of progressing research and new evidence discovered in the twentieth century. We know today that the language of the Syriac Church was never the "language of Jesus." However, it was exactly this idea that shaped the minds of scholars well into the nineteenth century. We know today that written Targums cannot be dated into pre-Christian times. However, for scholars of the nineteenth century they were the main point of reference not only for the identification of the dialects to choose, but for the general assumption that Hebrew was no longer spoken at the time of Jesus. We know today that Geiger's thesis of an artificial character of Mishnaic Hebrew was a misconception. However, this knowledge is the result of a century of linguistic research into the history of the Hebrew language.<sup>60</sup> We have today at our hands a large library of extant literature, doc-

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59 However, even during that period, some scholars were already taking a different road. This is demonstrated by the voluminous work of Alfred Resch, *Aussercanonische Paralleltexzte zu den Evangelien* (TU 10; Leipzig: Hinrichs 1893–1897). Resch was, in his time, an early advocate for a complex trilingual reality in first-century Palestine and assumed that Jesus might have used all three languages depending on situation, location and addresses. However, for the written pre-synoptic Gospel tradition, he assumed a Hebrew language background to be more probable than an Aramaic one. Based on a meticulous study of Agrapha, apocryphal traditions, textual variants and synoptic comparison charts, Resch came to the conclusion that a Hebrew source (of more or less proto-Matthean character) must have laid at the foundation of all three Synoptic Gospels. For an overview of other early approaches to a Hebrew (rather than Aramaic) background of the Gospel tradition, cf. Baltes, op. cit. (cf. n. 2), pp. 44–67.

60 Today, scholarship on the development of Hebrew views Mishnaic Hebrew during the Second Temple more along the lines of a diglossic, register distinction between high

uments and inscriptions from the Second Temple period, on stone, papyrus, sherds and parchment, written for the most part in Hebrew, but to some lesser degree also in Aramaic. The scholars of the nineteenth century had none of these and therefore had to base their assumptions exclusively on conjectures about no-longer-existing (sometimes, from today’s perspective, never-existing) works of literature.

In this study, I have therefore tried to search for possible reasons why bold claims for the exclusive use of the Aramaic language could fall on such fertile ground and why they were so readily accepted in the late nineteenth century, while obviously so little hard evidence was available. The reasons, as suggested here, might be found in the general theological and socio-political and religious framework in which these hypotheses were conceived. Certain connotations of national, cultural, social and religious identity were obviously closely tied to the languages of Aramaic and Hebrew. Indeed, while these might not have been consciously employed by the authors to advance their arguments, most probably they subtly supported presumptions made on other grounds. These connotations include the dichotomies of nationalism vs. universalism, the learned vs. the unlearned, clerics vs. laymen, Babel vs. Bible, and “late Judaism” vs. “early Christianity.” In addition, the romantic ideal of a monolingual society necessitated a choice of one language against the other, leading to the eventual establishment of an exclusive Aramaic model.

Ongoing historical, archaeological, linguistic and philological work in the course of the twentieth century has shown that the models of the nineteenth century were too simple and the historical reality in the land of Israel was more complex than assumed by the scholars of this era. The use of Hebrew and Aramaic in the time of Jesus cannot easily be divided along the dividing lines sketched above. Both languages were used to express nationalist as well as universalist ideas, both languages were used by the learned and the unlearned, by the religious and the non-religious, the establishment and the opposition, within early Judaism as well as early Christianity. The evidence from texts and inscriptions of the period in question, made available through the archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century, reveals an overwhelming use of Hebrew in literary contexts and a more or less even distribution of Hebrew and Aramaic in non-literary contexts.<sup>61</sup> In addition, sociolinguistic research has shown that the romantic ideal of a monolingual society, pursued by scholars

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Hebrew (like most of the Hebrew found at Qumran) and low Hebrew (as is seen in the Bar Kokhba letters, inscriptions and Tannaitic literature).

61 Cf. my other contribution to the present volume on the epigraphic evidence, “The Use of Hebrew and Aramaic in Epigraphic Sources of the New Testament Era.”

of the nineteenth century, is incompatible with empirical realities. To the contrary, bilingualism or even multilingualism should be considered the norm, as André Martinet, a pioneer in the research of language contact and bilingualism, has pointed out in his introduction to Uriel Weinreich's benchmark book on language contact:

There was a time when the progress of research required that each community should be considered linguistically self-contained and homogeneous... By making investigators blind to a large number of actual complexities, [this approach] has enabled scholars, from the founding fathers down to the functionalists and structuralists of today, to abstract a number of problems, to present for them solutions perfectly valid in the frame of the hypothesis... Linguists will always have to revert at times to this pragmatic assumption. But we shall now have to stress the fact that a linguistic community is never homogeneous and hardly ever self-contained... linguistic diversity begins next door, nay, at home, and within one and the same man.<sup>62</sup>

Based on this insight, there is no need, and probably no right, to establish an exclusive Aramaic, or, if such ever existed, an exclusive Hebrew model for the language situation in the land of Israel at the time of Jesus. Since all the evidence points in the direction of a continued use of both languages well into the second century, obviously side by side with Greek, New Testament scholars should move beyond the boundaries set up by the paradigms of early Aramaic scholarship and employ a multidimensional,<sup>63</sup> trilingual model when mapping out the linguistic landscape of the Jewish society in the Second Temple period.

Fortunately, many of the concepts and presuppositions described in this study have already been abandoned. We can only hope that the boldness of the claims based upon them that are still made even today concerning the exclusive use of Aramaic, and the vigor and suspicion that targets those who naturally employ the Hebrew language in their daily work on New Testament texts will likewise be recognized as anachronisms whose time has passed.

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62 André Martinet, "Introduction," to Uriel Weinreich, *Languages in Contact: Findings and Problems* (New York: Linguistic Circle of New York, 1953), vii.

63 Hebrew is attested in two distinct registers, Greek was also attested in registers ranging from Josephus to some of the Greek papyri in the Judean desert, and Aramaic can be distinguished in various dialects.