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The Aramaic Origin of the Pauline Epistles James Trimm

In speaking of Paul's Letter to the Hebrews, the "Church Fathers" write:

Clement of Alexandria (150 - 212 C.E.)

In the work called *Hypotyposes*, to sum up the matter briefly he [Clement of Alexandria] has given us abridged accounts of all the canonical Scriptures,... the Epistle to the Hebrews he asserts was written by Paul, to the Hebrews, in the Hebrew tongue; but that it was carefully translated by Luke, and published among the Greeks.

(Clement of Alexandria; *Hypotyposes*;
referred to by Eusebius in *Eccl. Hist.* 6:14:2)

Eusebius (315 C.E.)

For as Paul had addressed the Hebrews in the language of his country; some say that the evangelist Luke, others that Clement, translated the epistle.

(Eusebius; *Eccl. Hist.* 3:38:2-3)

Jerome (382)

He (Paul) being a Hebrew wrote in Hebrew, that is, his own tongue and most fluently while things which were eloquently written in Hebrew were more eloquently turned into Greek
(*Lives of Illustrious Men*, Book V)

The question is, do these statements only apply to the Book of Hebrews, or did Paul write all of his Letters in Hebrew or Aramaic?

The common wisdom in the West has been that Paul wrote in Greek. By Contrast the tradition in the Church of the East is that Paul wrote his letters in Aramaic. This tradition

is expressed by George Lamsa, an Assyrian writer with a background in the Church of the East:

The Pauline Epistles were letters written by Paul to small Christian congregations in Asia Minor, Greece and Rome. These early Christians were mostly Jews of the Dispersion, men and women of Hebrew origin. Paul on his journeys always spoke in the Jewish synagogues. His first converts were Hebrews. Then came Arameans...

Paul emphasizes Hebrew law and history. He refers to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as our fathers. In his letters and teaching he appeals to the Jewish people to accept Jesus as the promised Messiah. Paul's mission was first to his own people... Paul was educated in Jewish law in Jerusalem. He was a member of the Jewish Council. His native language was western Aramaic but he acquired his education through Hebrew and Chaldean or Palestinian Aramaic... He defended himself when on trial in the Hebrew tongue. Acts 22:2... Very early the Epistles were translated into Greek for the use of converts who spoke Greek. Later they were translated into all tongues.¹

Now many serious scholars have argued a Hebrew or Aramaic Origin for the Four Gospels, Acts, the “Catholic Epistles” and Revelation. These arguments have been men like Charles Cutler Torrey, Charles Fox Burney and Frank Zimmerman. However few Western scholars have argued for a Hebrew or Aramaic origin for Paul’s letters. These men have argued for an Aramaic origin to other portions of Scripture based upon Semitic grammar found in the Greek text. They argue that the comparative lack of Semitisms in the Pauline Letters, points to their Greek composition.

However a lack of Semitisms does not prove that the Pauline Letters were written in Greek. A good case study may be made of Josephus’ “Wars of the Jews”. The book survives today in its Greek form, which is excellent Greek lacking in Semitisms. However we know for certain that Wars of the Jews was originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic, as Josephus himself declares this plainly in his preface:

...I have proposed to myself, for the sake of such as live under the government of the Romans, to translate these books into the Greek tongue, which I formerly composed in the language of our own country, and sent to the Upper Barbarians;...
(Josephus; Wars of the Jews; Preface 1)

Yet there is such a lack of Semitisms that Edger Goodspeed writes:

And attention is then called to the doubt I feel as to the statement of Josephus that he first wrote his Jewish Wars in Aramaic and afterward translated it into Greek. This is quite true. I do have some doubt about it.
(The Possible Aramaic Gospel; Journal of Near Eastern Studies, July, 1943, p. 329)

¹ George M. Lamsa; *The New Testament according to the Eastern Text*; 1940; pp. xi-xii

here are all *benyana* (בניא) and the verb root for “to build” in each case is *b’na* (בנ) which is the verb root for the word “stone” *‘abana* (אבא).

It is important to know that there is a common wordplay in Hebrew between “son(s)” *ben* (sing.) *b’nai* (plural) and “stones”. A classic example is found in Matthew 3:9

And think not to say within yourselves,
We have Abraham to our father:
for I say unto you, that Elohim is able of these *stones*
to raise up *sons* unto Abraham.
(Matt. 3:9)

By using these related words Paul has implied a wordplay between believers as “sons of the House of Elohim” (2:19) and “stones of the Temple” (implied in 2:20-22). The wordplay is very clear in the Aramaic and is clearly original to the document. The use of the Aramaic idioms “sons of the house of” and “House of Eloah” becomes the transition point at which Paul’s argument turns to the subject of an allegorical Temple built out of believers in 2:20-22). The whole point to Paul’s argument is imbedded in an Aramaic word play that is absent in the Greek, that is itself rooted in an Aramaic idiom which is also absent from the Greek. This is very clear evidence that like Josephus’ Wars of the Jews, Paul wrote in Hebrew or Aramaic and his work was then translated into Greek.

An Ancient Western Aramaic Version of the “New Testament”

**By
James Scott Trimm**

In 1852 James Murdock wrote:

Besides the manuscripts of the Peshito and Philoxenian versions, Adler found in the Vatican at Rome, one manuscript of the four Gospels, in a translation different from either. It is more servile and inelegant than the Peshito; but is not so servile as the Philoxenian. Its idiom also differs from both; for it is not pure Syriac, but is a species of Chaldee, or Jewish Aramaean: and the characters in which it is written, approximate to the Hebrew. Adler supposed it was made by some Jewish Christian about the fourth century. And as it is written in Jewish Aramaean, and not Syriac, he called it the HIEROSOLYMITAN VERSION. It has never been published, and is not considered of any great value.
(The Syriac New Testament Translated into English from the Peshitto Version;
By James Murdock Appendix II p. 503)

In the centuries since then Adler's fragment as well as many others, have been published. They are still "not considered of any great value" by much of academia and as a result little work has actually been done with this version. A very important field of study has been sitting wide upon for centuries because CPA was "not considered of any great value."

Here we have an Aramaic version of both the Tanak and "New Testament" many copies of which are written in Hebrew letters, while others are written in characters similar to Syriac, and in a dialect closer to "Jewish Aramaean" than Syriac. A version which Adler believed "Adler supposed it was made by some Jewish Christian about the fourth century." Obviously this is a very important Ancient Aramaic version.

What is the origin of this version? In 451 C.E. at the Council of Chalcedon Jacobite Syrians were excommunicated due to their Monophysite doctrine. The center of the Syrian Church was Antioch. While Antioch was a Syrian city, it was also a Greek colony. As a result Antioch had a healthy population of Greeks and Helenist Syrians making it a bilingual community. When the largest portion of the Syrian Church was excommunicated, many of these Helenist Syrians remained loyal to the Greek Catholic Church. These followed the Constantinopolitan Tradition of Eastern Catholicism and the Byzantine Rite and became known as Melekites. Those Melekites who lived in the Judean Desert, the vicinity of Jerusalem, Amman, and the Sinai Peninsula between the 3rd century and the 13th century C.E. used a unique Aramaic version of the Scriptures. This Aramaic Version is generally of the Western Text-Type and has been called by several names: Syro-Palastinian; Palestinian Syriac and Christian Palestinian Aramaic (CPA).

Although the version has been called "Syriac" this is totally inaccurate. This version is not Syriac at all, nor is it even an Eastern dialect of Aramaic. CPA is in a Western dialect much more like that of the targums. The term "Syriac" was attached wrongly to this version because the script in which most copies are written resembles the Estrangelo script with which many Syriac documents are written. Most of this version is lost, only about 20% of it survives.

CPA uses Greek versions of names throughout, for example using יֵסוּס ("Jesus") in place of יֵשׁוּעַ ("Yeshua"). However in Acts 13:6 the name בַּר יֵשׁוּעַ "Bar Yeshua" appears, which may be a clue that an earlier version of CPA may have retained Semitic names.

This Aramaic version seems to have some relationship to the Old Syriac. The first surviving NT verse in CPA is Matthew 1:18.

In fact some relationship does exist. For example in Matthew 1:18 the Old Syriac and CPA are clearly related.

The Old Syriac reads:

ילדה דין דמשיחא הכנא הוא
כד מכירא הות מרים אמה ליוסף עד לא נתקרבו
חד לות חד אשתכחת במנא מן רוחא דקודשא

Now the birth of the Messiah was thus:

While betrothed was Miriam his mother to Yosef before they came near one to another (literally one to one) she was found pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

CPA has:

תלודתה די דמרא יסוס משיחא הכדן הות
כד אתהרסת מרים אימה ליוסף עד לא שתקרבו
חד לות חד אשתכחת נסיבא כרס מן רוחא דקודשא

Now the birth of the Lord Jesus the Messiah was thus:

While betrothed was Miriam his mother to Yosef before they came near one to another (literally one to one) she was found pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

In the Aramaic, with the exception of the alteration of “Messiah” to “the Lord Jesus the Messiah” and the alteration of the dialect these two verses are almost identical including the idiomatic Aramaic phrase **חד לות חד** literally “one to one” to mean “one to another”.

More research will need to be done to determine what, if any part, CPA can play in researching Aramaic textual origins.

We are now making detailed comparisons of CPA with the Old Syriac, Peshitta and other versions. This effort promises to be very fruitful in improving our understanding of Hebrew and Aramaic NT origins.

G'mira: Journal of Hebrew and Aramaic New Testament Studies

Gmira-list is a non-sectarian e-mail discussion group devoted to the academic field of Hebrew and Aramaic New Testament studies. The list is associated with the electronic journal.

G'mira—An Aramaic word meaning “perfect, full-grown, mature”

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