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The Question of Aramaic Originals

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wirklicher Schmutz bei dem gemeinsamen Brauch der Gnadenmittel und im gemeinsamen Bekenntnis und Lob des Allerhöchsten erscheine.“⁹⁾ Und wir schließen mit dem bekannten Wort Luthers, das er sagte, als Carlstadt das Tragen von Priesterkleidern ganz verbieten und für sündhaft erklären wollte: „Wir gehen auf der Mittelbahn und sagen, es gilt weder Gebietens noch Verbietens, weder zur Rechten noch zur Linken; wir sind weder papistisch noch carlstädtisch, sondern frei und christlich.“ (XX, 185.)

L. F.

The Question of Aramaic Originals.

Possibly this question requires some explanation. It is by no means a mere academic question, as some are inclined to think, just as little as the claim made for the authenticity of the Vulgate is a mere academic question. If the Greek New Testament, in the form in which it is substantially before us to-day, either as a whole or in any of its books, is a translation, then it is, to that extent, *not authentic*. If that could be proved or would be established, then we should be obliged, in the interest of the full and exact truth, to make that original language our *terminus a quo*, thereafter using the Greek text in the same way as we use any other translation or version of the Bible, the chief value, for exegetical purposes, lying in the genius of each language to express in its own idiom the thought which the Holy Ghost originally set forth in the tongue or language in which He actually had the inspired writers put down His message to men.

In this particular investigation we are concerned with the *gospels*, specifically with those of Luke, John, and Matthew, the arrangement being given in the order of their relative importance in the discussion. Mark's gospel will have to be included, at least in an incidental fashion, chiefly on account of the most recent developments, which caused the inclusion of this book in the number of those for which an Aramaic original is alleged.

Let us emphasize even in these introductory remarks that the question before us is not whether the words of Jesus and of His disciples *as originally spoken* were uttered in the Aramaic tongue. This fact is now universally acknowledged, especially since the investigations by Meyer (*Jesu Muttersprache*) and Dalman (*Jesus-Jeshua*). Nor are we unconscious of the fact that this point plays a fairly important rôle in understanding the arguments in favor of an Aramaic original of the gospels. It is necessary, however, at the very outset, to emphasize that our argument is not concerned with this fact, but with the question whether the gospels as given by inspiration of the Holy Ghost were given to the holy writers *in Greek*

9) Lehre und Wehre, 42, 143.

or in some other tongue, specifically Aramaic (first- and second-century Syriac) or possibly Hebrew.

Let us present the statements and the arguments for the Aramaic (or Hebrew) original first as found in various text-books on Biblical introduction. Here the Gospel according to Matthew looms up very large. The strongest champion of the alleged Hebrew (or Aramaic) original of Matthew is Theo. Zahn (*Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, II, 261 ff.). In the chapter on *Die Ueberlieferung ueber Matthaeus und sein Evangelium* he offers a long discussion of the ancient tradition, and his first conclusion is: "*Es ist unanfechtbar, dass das Hebraeische (oder Aramaeische) die Originalsprache des fraglichen Buches gewesen ist und dass es damals keine griechische Uebersetzung oder Bearbeitung desselben gegeben hat.*" And in keeping with this chief conclusion he states a little farther on: "*Es darf demnach als sehr wahrscheinlich gelten, dass der griechische Matthaeus noch vor dem letzten Ende des 1. Jahrhunderts — in Anbetracht der angefuhrten Zeugnisse koennen wir sagen, eher vor dem Jahre 90 als nach dem Jahre 100 — in der Provinz Asien entstanden ist und von dort aus sich verbreitet hat.*" For some years the position and the learning of Zahn caused his theory to be considered with a good deal of respect both in Germany and in this country. Thus Reu's *Book of Books* (Part II, p. 8) has the statement: "According to the same tradition Matthew did not write his gospel in the Greek language originally, but in the Aramaic, *i. e.*, in the language spoken by the Jews at that time. Our gospel is a translation made about 80—90 A. D. for the benefit of the Greek-speaking congregations." In his *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* F. Barth is much more careful when he states: "*Somit duerfen wir annehmen, dass der Apostel Levi-Matthaeus EINE SCHRIFT in aramaeischer Sprache geschrieben hat.*" (P. 214 f.) Parenthetically — by the way, an interesting factor to Bible students — we may remark that Franz Delitzsch, who in his earlier years believed that Aramaic was the original tongue of Matthew's gospel, later decided in favor of Hebrew. (*The Hebrew New Testament*, 30.)

We next ask: What is the patristic testimony that has caused all the difficulty? In the final analysis the whole controversy was started by a rather obscure passage in Papias. Since this is of such great importance in our entire discussion, we offer it in its original form, as given in Eusebius (*Church History*, III, 39, 16): *Ματθαῖος μὲν οὖν Ἑβραϊδὶ διαλέκτῳ τὰ λόγια συντάξατο, ἠρμήνευσε δ' αὐτὰ ὡς ἦν δυνατὸς ἱκαστος*, which is to say, in a literal translation: Matthew now, in a Hebrew dialect, compiled the words, but every one translated them (or: interpreted them) as he was able to. It was evidently this statement of Papias which caused Eusebius to form his conclusion concerning the original language of Matthew's gospel, for he practically quotes Papias in V, 8, 2, as does Irenaeus in his *Adversus Haereses*,

II, 1, 1. (Cp. Zahn, *l. c.*, 184. 272.) The view thus established is then found in Origen, later in Chrysostom, and especially in Jerome, who writes, *e. g.*, *Matthaeum evangelium Hebraeis litteris edidisse, quod non poterant legere, nisi hi, qui ex Hebraeis erant*; and again: *Evangelium Christi Hebraeis litteris verbisque composuit; quod quis postea in Graecum transtulerit, non satis certum est*. As to the last, however, as Zahn frankly states, Jerome made the mistake of regarding the Gospel of the Nazarites as the original of Matthew. (*L. c.*, 275.)

But the view concerning a Hebrew or an Aramaic original of Matthew's gospel has persisted, so that it has lately resulted in the publication of two interesting books. The first of these is entitled *An Old Hebrew Text of Matthew's Gospel* and was published by Hugh J. Schonfield in 1927. And the second, entitled *The Four Gospels according to the Eastern Version*, translated from the Aramaic by George M. Lamsa, was issued in 1933. Some of the claims made by Schonfield, in his preface, are: "We have advanced far beyond [!] the meager information possessed by those who prepared the Authorized Version. . . . There is still another eventuality to be taken into consideration: the supposed originals of certain books of the Bible may themselves be translations. . . . We can by no means be sure that some of the earlier narratives of the Bible were not written in ancient Babylonian or Egyptian. When we turn to the New Testament, we find that there are reasons for suspecting a Hebrew or Aramaic original for the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John and for the Apocalypse." These are bold words, and one only wonders why the author did not include Luke in his suppositions. But he continues: "Good results have already been obtained in the case of certain obscure passages in some of the Jewish apocalyptic writings preserved in Greek, whose Hebrew or Aramaic original was suspected, by re-translation into these languages. This has often not only revealed the source of error, but at the same time confirmed [!] the theory of translation. The early Hebrew manuscript of the Gospel of Matthew translated in the present work enables us to apply this test more or less effectively to the Greek text of this gospel, and the results obtained prove to my mind conclusively the existence of an underlying Hebrew original." So Schonfield, like Delitzsch, holds that the original version of Matthew's gospel was Hebrew.

It seems strange that Lamsa is just as emphatic in his contention concerning the Aramaic original of the gospels, an original which he identifies with the ancient Syriac version known for many years as the Peshito. In his *Introduction* to the translation of the four gospels which Lamsa has published he tries to establish the authenticity of the Peshito text as the original or inspired text. He writes, for example: "The original language of the gospels is the native Galilean Aramaic, the vernacular of Northern Palestine, and not the Chaldean

Aramaic which was spoken in Southern Palestine." (P. xix.) "Even so far back as the seventh century B. C., Aramaic was the language of communication for commerce and diplomacy between the nations in Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, and Palestine (cf. 2 Kings 18, 26). The Greeks referred to this language as Syriac, because they confused Syria, which is in the north of Palestine, with Assyria, which is a totally different country between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, east of Syria." (P. xv.) Hence we are to understand that Lamsa holds this Galilean Aramaic, now commonly known as Syriac, to be the tongue in which the inspired writers of the gospels put down the thoughts of the Holy Ghost. The present writer must confess that the distinction is not quite clear from the introductory paragraphs, since on the same page the author remarks that the books of Daniel and the Psalter were written in part in Aramaic, and we certainly cannot *identify* the Aramaic of certain passages in the Old Testament with the language of the Peshito.

Where does Lamsa suppose the gospels to have originated? Here again he is not nearly as clear as one should like to have him be, for there is little of chronological or logical sequence in his statements. But there is one sentence that is notable, when he writes: "It is important to know that the Eastern version, the first compilation of the New Testament Scriptures, was made in Edessa." (P. xvii.) The only apparent proof which he offers is contained in the statement: "The church in Edessa was founded by Addai or Thaddeus, one of the Twelve, who was sent to that city as a missionary; and St. Thomas, another of the apostles of our Lord, later went through that region." He strongly opposes the view which associates the Peshito with Rabbulas, Bishop of Edessa in 435 A. D., saying that there were many bishops in Edessa and in Persia at large before the days of Rabbulas. All of which may be true enough, but what proof does it offer for the declaration that the gospels (all four of them) were originally written in Aramaic-Syriac? Lamsa alleges that the writers of the gospels were Jews, writing at an early date, but he does not distinguish between the various gospels with their obvious differences as regards references to topography, Jewish customs, etc. But his conclusion at this point is once more: "The evidence therefore is convincing and conclusive for an Aramaic original, and this is none other than the Peshito." (P. xxi.) To which we answer in an emphatic: *Non sequitur*.

But why are we obliged to disagree so emphatically with the contention of Lamsa? Not only on account of the general inadequacy of his argumentation, but also on account of some specific flaws in his logic. He may know enough about the present-day customs in Syria, but he certainly is not well versed in the customs of either the Jews or the Greeks in the days of Christ. He states, for example, that the

Last Supper was eaten by the little company of Jesus "sitting on the floor with their legs folded under them, their hats on their heads, their shoes removed, and a large tray containing two dishes, a few spoons, and a jar of wine in front of them." (P. vi.) But a reference to practically any book on archeology of Bible lands will show that the Greeks had used tables for their meals for centuries, and the Romans certainly did. Moreover, the children of Israel, even before the Exile, used tables, for the word שֻׁלְחָן , while used in some cases of the spread of a meal on the ground or floor, is used in most instances of some kind of table, also for the purpose of serving meals. Cf. Deut. 11, 27; 1 Sam. 20, 29; 1 Kings 13, 20; Prov. 9, 2. The Lord's Supper was clearly not instituted in the home of some poor man, but in the upper room of a house of wealth, and we may well assume, on account of the reference to the sofas and pillows, such as were used in the homes of the well-to-do, that Jesus and His disciples reclined on the customary dining-sofas, surrounding a small circular or rectangular table, such as that pictured by Tucker (*Life in the Roman World of Nero and St. Paul*). As a matter of fact the work of archeologists in recent decades has done more to give us a correct picture of Oriental customs in the days of Christ than any study of the present habits of the natives. It is true that many of their customs have been retained for millenniums, but it is likewise true that many observances of former days, especially those of their conquerors in the periods of the great empires, are no longer in use. To argue from present-day customs of the descendants of the ancient Syrians alone is to present an *ex parte*, and therefore an inadequate, argument.

In the second place, one becomes suspicious of Lamsa's arguments on account of his evident yielding to modernistic influences. Thus he denies the fact of demoniac possession and insists upon translating "insane," his contention being: "We are grateful to science and truth [?] for demonstrating that diseases are due to physical and nervous causes, delusions, and fears and have nothing to do with demons and evil spirits." (P. xiii.) Because of this position, Lamsa also insists that not the demons, but the lunatics attacked the swine in the well-known story, Matt. 8, 31. The words "He breathed on them" in John 20, 22 are simply to signify that Jesus stimulated the courage of His disciples, although his own translation of the last words of the verse reads: "Receive the Holy Spirit." In these and other instances the arguments of the author frequently are a strange conglomeration of misapplied truth and of half-information.

But what about the contention of Lamsa that the Aramaic-Syriac frequently has a better meaning than the Greek and its translations? He offers some interesting and, in part, appealing material. Thus he refers to the fact that the Aramaic word *gamla* is the same word for "camel" and for "a large rope," whence, he insists, Matt. 19, 24 should

read, "It is easier for a rope to go through a needle's eye," forgetting, at the same time, that the Arabs use the proverbial saying of a camel's passing through a needle's eye to this day. He states that the word *kakra* may mean "talent" or "province," depending upon where the mark, or accent, is placed, and he desires to change Luke 19, 13. 17. 24 accordingly; but his reasoning is not very convincing. Particularly strange is this sentence: "Some Aramaic words were not translated into Greek because they were not clearly understood; such words are *rakah*, to spit; *mammon*, wealth; *ethpatak*, be opened." (P. XII.) But *mammon* is originally a Punic word and came into Aramaic (and Hebrew) only by semantic borrowing; and the word *ephphatha* is clearly rendered in Mark 7, 34.

Any student of the New Testament can do more than what Lamsa offers, for we have some passages that differ in the Greek text, though they seem to refer to the same incident. In the account of the admonition given by John the Baptist, Matt. 3, 9, his words are given: "And think not to say within yourselves," the verb being *δὲξτε*. In Luke 3, 8 we have the words: "And begin not to say within yourselves," the verb here being *ἄρξασθε*. In the former instance the Aramaic word would be *tishrun*, in the latter *tesharun*. Or, to take another instance, in Matt. 11, 19 and Luke 7, 35 both the Authorized Version and the translation of Luther have: "Wisdom is justified of her children." But the Greek text of Matthew has *ἀπὸ τῶν ἔργων αὐτῆς*, while that of Luke has *ἀπὸ τῶν τέκνων*.^{*} In the Aramaic we might have *ab'daha*, doers of wisdom, *abdaha*, servants or children of wisdom, and then *obadaha* and *bidataha*, works of wisdom. Yet the difficulty does not overwhelm us. In fact, the answer is easy to one who believes in the inspiration of the New Testament. Whether the text transmitted during the first decades by word of mouth was the one or the other Aramaic word, the Holy Ghost chose to use both versions in the Greek, as the inspired writers were moved to preserve the Lord's words in writing. Similar difficulties are well known to every painstaking Bible student, as in comparing Gen. 47, 31 with Heb. 11, 21. The Holy Ghost, as the true Author of Scripture, certainly has the right to relate events in His own way, especially if a combination of the two apparently differing accounts will make excellent sense or if they are supplementary to each other. Thus Jesus doubtless used similar admonitions frequently, His accent in one instance being placed one way and then again in another. What we have in the Greek documents as penned by the men of God is the record which He wants us to use and to study as the original text.—

* Allen remarks: "If *τέκνων* is original in Matthew, *ἔργων* is due not to an Aramaic original, but to a Greek copyist, who substituted it as easier than *τέκνων*."

The gist of these arguments may also be used with reference to Schonfield, although he does not urge the authenticity of the particular Hebrew text which he translated.

But there is more to be said concerning the alleged priority of Aramaic or Aramaic-Syriac texts. As for Matthew's gospel in particular, it clearly appears that the chief considerations of the theory, such as Zahn offers, base practically their entire argument on the passage in Papias quoted above. But a careful examination of the Papias passage shows that the allegation has no basis in fact. This is shown most conclusively by Appel in his *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, p. 159, when he writes: "*Zunaechst ist die Annahme ausgeschlossen, dass UNSER MATTHAEUSEVANGELIUM gemeint sei. Mit τὰ λόγια συντάξατο wird auf die Worte ὡςπερ σύνταξιν τῶν κυριακῶν ποιούμενος λόγων in der vorhergehenden Aussage ueber Markus zurueckverwiesen, und es ist nicht richtig, dass hier durch λόγια der gesamte Inhalt des Evangeliums zusammengefasst wuerde. Dieser ist kurz vorher durch τὰ ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ ἢ λεχθέντα ἢ πραχθέντα wiedergegeben, und es waere schon sonderbar, wenn nun gleich darauf beides, Worte und Werke, durch einen Ausdruck zusammengefasst werden sollte, der nur an EINES der beiden Inhaltsstuecke erinnert. . . . Des weiteren aber ergibt sich, dass die Aussage Vers 16 sich NICHT auf die in unserm Matthaeus-evangelium mitgetheilten REDEN als INTEGRIERENDEN BESTANDTEIL derselben bezieht, sondern auf eine EIGENE SCHRIFT, die nur λόγια enthielt. Schon das συντάξατο fuehrt darauf.*" Regardless of whether a person shares the opinion held by Appel that there was some collection of *Sayings of Jesus* in Aramaic or not, he certainly has proved his point with regard to the untenability of the theory held by Zahn and others on the basis of Papias. But other scholars, independently of Appel, have reached the same conclusions, partly at the suggestion of other factors. Thus Feine writes: "*Unser Matthaeus macht den Eindruck einer original-griechischen Schrift, nicht den einer Uebersetzung aus dem Hebraeischen. Sein Griechisch ist nicht ungewandt, besser als das des Markus.*" (*Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 45.) And in the *Oxford Studies in the Synoptic Problem*, edited by Sanday, we are told: "Of the original language of the first gospel much has been written, but the investigations of the last century of criticism seem to have proved beyond reasonable doubt that the gospel was written in Greek." (P. 293.)

By way of summarizing the arguments and presenting positive evidence excluding an Aramaic original of Matthew we offer the following points: 1. The claims made by Schonfield and Lamsa lack actual proof. 2. None of the Church Fathers who refer to a Hebrew or Aramaic original of Matthew actually saw a copy of the alleged

document, except Jerome, who does not come into consideration until the end of the fourth century and who undoubtedly confused the Gospel of Matthew with the Gospel of the Hebrews or of the Nazarites. 3. Papias, who is really the only early witness, is by no means trustworthy, and even his words can hardly be said to refer to the Gospel of Matthew. 4. The Greek gospel as we now have it bears the stamp of originality, for we clearly have a play on words in 6, 16; 21, 41; 24, 30. 5. The quotations from the Old Testament are given in various forms, some agreeing with the LXX, some being translated exactly according to the Hebrew, and still others offering a free translation, a fact which could not be accounted for if we were to assume the Aramaic or Hebrew to be the original. 6. Hebrew words and phrases are repeatedly translated and explained, chap. 1, 23; 27, 33. 46, which, again, would be excluded in a Hebrew or Aramaic original. 7. The last chapter of the *Didache*, which is placed at the end of the first or the beginning of the second century, is, in effect, a hortatory commentary on the apocalyptic discourse in Matt. 24, using the same Greek text.

But what about the gospels of Mark, of Luke, and of John? Our answer is that in the case of these writings every consideration of internal and external evidence denies Aramaic priority. As for Mark, far from having been written with an Aramaic background, the number of Latinisms alone, as shown by Robertson (*Studies in Mark's Gospel*, 127) favors Rome as the place of writing and Greek as the language; for his conclusion is: "Mark wrote in the vernacular Greek of the period, the *koine*, but was undoubtedly at home in the Aramaic and probably had an acquaintance with the official Latin."—In the case of Luke the circumstances are so clear that even Allen (in Sanday, 292) is constrained to write: "The case of Luke is easiest and may be taken first. It is written in Greek and is largely based on Greek sources."—And as for the Gospel of John, the storm-center of adverse criticism for more than a century, the evidence of the book itself as well as that of the most prominent teachers of the Church from Justin and Irenaeus through the following centuries are sufficient to establish the authenticity of the Greek text as the original. We may say, with Addis (in Sanday, 386): "We have in the gospels to recognize the probability of an Aramaic background, so that the words of the Lord are accessible to us only in a translation," but it was this translation that the Holy Ghost furnished in the words which are now before us in the Greek text of the four gospels.

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