The Original Language of Thomas

The original language of Thomas began to be debated as soon as the Coptic text was discovered.¹ One of the earliest effects of this discovery was that Coptic became a candidate for the language of Thomas’s composition: this was proposed by Garitte, but soon refuted.² Scholars have occasionally talked about Hebrew underlying particular words or phrases, but none to my knowledge have argued for a Hebrew composition in toto.³ The three serious options, which have been argued for from the beginning and which are still maintained by scholars, are Western Aramaic, Syriac and Greek.


² The criticisms of Haenchen, ‘Literatur zum Thomasevangelium (I)’, 157–160, are particularly effective.

I will not repeat here how the discussion has unfolded, and this section as a whole is an abbreviation of a longer treatment elsewhere. I will confine the discussion here to a survey of the problems attending Semitic theories of *Thomas’s* composition on the one hand, and the positive evidence for a Greek original on the other.

### 5.1 Problems with Semitic Theories of *Thomas’s* Composition

The problems with Semitic theories can be seen at both the general and the particular level. Arguments in favour of Western Aramaic or Syriac are usually based on what is deemed to be a critical mass of Semitisms: so, for example, DeConick prints a double-page table in the Introduction to her commentary, listing 47 sayings out of 114 attesting possible Semitisms; Perrin concludes that a retroversion into Syriac reveals 502 catchwords. If correct, these would be almost incontrovertible evidence.

At the general level, however, there are considerable methodological problems with identifying Semitisms underneath our Greek and Coptic texts of *Thomas*. Many Semitisms of course are insignificant as elements in an argument for a composition in a Semitic language, as they are elements of biblical idiom, or ‘Septuagintalisms’, or Jewish idiom which exists in various different languages. One needs to be sure that the phrase in question is not merely Greek or Coptic idiom, and conversely that the phrase can be Aramaic or Syriac from the period of purported composition: this is especially difficult with Syriac, where we have only a few inscriptions from the first two centuries CE. The most compelling instances of Semitisms are those where we can identify mistranslation (or simply overly wooden translation), or *divergent* translations: i.e. a Semitic original having been translated one way in the Synoptic Gospels and a different way in *Thomas*. Even in these cases, however, detecting such phenomena is extremely difficult. Torrey remarked a century ago that identification of mistranslation is ‘immensely valuable in the rare cases where it is convincing: there is no other internal proof of translation which is so immediately cogent’, but immediately added: ‘But the need of caution is

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6 Perrin, *Thomas and Tatian*.
7 Gathercole, *Composition*, 29–32.