1. Introduction

Jesus spoke Aramaic, both when conversing with his disciples, and when teaching crowds of ordinary Jews. His teaching is however transmitted to us in gospels written in Greek. The occasional Aramaic word alone survives, and most of these occur in comments made by him or his disciples rather than in his teaching. For example, ταλιθα κομ (Mark 5:41) correctly represents the Aramaic קום טלייתא, “girl, get up,” so we have two of Jesus’ ipsissima verba. Occasional reports by the church fathers show us that more was once available. For example, at Matt 6:11, Jerome comments on the most difficult word in the Lord’s Prayer:

In Evangelio quod appellatur secundum Hebraeos, pro supersubstantiali pane mahar reperi, quod dicitur crastinum, ut sit sensus: Panem nostrum crastinum, id est futurum, da nobis hodie.

In the Gospel which is called “according to the Hebrews,” for “bread necessary for existence” I found “mahar,” which means “tomorrow’s,” so that the meaning is, “Give us today our bread ‘for tomorrow’” that is, “for the future.”

Here Jerome found a correct tradition that behind the difficult ἐπιούσιον lay the straightforward Aramaic word מחר, which means “to-morrow’s.” This supplies us with one more of the ipsissima verba of Jesus, one used in a fundamental piece of his teaching, and it helps us greatly to interpret this piece of his teaching. It also tells us that there was once a gospel written in Aramaic. Unfortunately, however, all such source material has long since vanished. The nearest we get

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2 For the text, D. Hurst and M. Adriaen, eds., S. Hieronymi Presbyteri Opera. Pars I, 7. Commentariorum in Matheum Libri IV, CCSL 77 (Turnholt: Brepols, 1969). I have followed the reading “mahar,” other readings being due to scribal difficulties over an unfamiliar word.
to Aramaic gospels are the translations of our canonical Greek gospels into Syriac. These do not show significant signs of independent transmission of the teaching of Jesus.

There is no agreement among scholars as to what to do about this. At one end of the spectrum, I have argued that we can reconstruct Aramaic sources of parts of the Gospel of Mark and of what scholars call “Q.” This helps us to locate the teaching of Jesus in its original cultural context. In this way, we can demonstrate that he really did say some of the things attributed to him in our oldest sources, and we can see much more clearly and accurately what he originally meant. From this perspective, the role of Aramaic is central to reconstructing and understanding the teaching of Jesus. At the other end of the spectrum, some scholars have argued that Jesus taught in Greek, and this view has recently been revived by Stanley Porter. From this perspective, Aramaic has no role to play in reconstructing the teaching of Jesus. In practice, the majority of New Testament scholars suppose that Jesus generally taught in Aramaic, but they do not learn it properly, and make little use of it in interpreting his teaching.

