Non-Septuagintal Hebraisms in the Third Gospel: An Inconvenient Truth

R. Steven Notley

Almost 70 years ago, working under the assumption of an essentially exclusive Aramaic model, H. F. D. Sparks published a short but influential article, “The Semitisms of St. Luke.”¹ He began by observing that both in number and in character the Semitisms of Mark and Matthew are decidedly different from those of Luke:

If we compare St. Luke with the other Synoptists, we are forced to admit that “subject matter” is very far from being a complete explanation; for not only do certain of the characteristic Semitic expressions, which all three share, occur with greater frequency in St. Luke, but there are in addition a whole host of peculiarly Lukan Semitisms, that is, constructions and phrases, sometimes complete sentences, which, awkward in Greek, are normal and idiomatic in Semitic.²

Even more perplexing for Sparks was the recognition that Matthew and Mark contain Semitisms that can be explained by either Aramaic or Hebrew, while Luke presents Semitisms that can be only Hebrew. Writing prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls³ and other inscriptive evidence that demonstrates

the first-century use of Hebrew, Sparks presumed that if the Evangelist had drawn from a Semitic source, it could only have been Aramaic. Therefore, since “hardly any of St. Luke's Semitisms are demonstrably derivable from Aramaic,” he concluded the only explanation for the Hebraisms in the Third Gospel was the Evangelist's intentional biblicizing style.

Sparks' approach is still representative of the mainstream of New Testament scholars, who have not moved far from either his assumptions or conclusions during the ensuing seven decades. The charge of alleged Lukan Septuagintisms is unhesitatingly repeated in the scholarly literature. This line of reasoning is founded upon two a priori assumptions: first, Aramaic is the only language option available to explain the Semitisms in the Synoptic Gospels; second, Luke's literary sources for his Gospel were primarily Mark and Q, which

4 See, for example, the inscriptive evidence for Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek on ancient Jewish ossuaries; see L. Y. Rahmani, A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries (Jerusalem: IAA, Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994), 13. G. Baltes concludes in a contribution to the present volume (“The Use of Hebrew and Aramaic in Epigraphic Sources of the New Testament Era,” 35–36), “the assumption of the death of spoken Hebrew after the Babylonian exile can no longer be upheld in view of the epigraphic evidence. Hebrew was obviously a living language in the first century c.e. and continued to be so well into the second century.”

5 A Septuagintism is a Hebraism occurring in a Greek text that is found in the Septuagint, while a non-Septuagintal Hebraism is a Hebraism occurring in a Greek text that is not found in the Septuagint.


7 The presumption of Aramaic-only as the Semitic Vorlage of the Gospels is frequently reasoned. For example, R. Gundry rejected the suggestion that the familiar Hebrew word play upon פַּרְק (“summer[fruit = fig]”) and פֶּך (“end,” 2 Sam 16:1–2; Jer 40:10; Isa 16:9; t. Ned. 4.1–2) (Aramaic וְפַרְק, “summer/fruit,” and Aramaic פֶּך, “end,” does not work) might be represented in the logion preserved in the Synoptic Gospels, “Learn the lesson of the fig (συκῆ) . . . you know that the summer (θέρος) is here” (Luke 21:30; cf. Matt 24:32; Mark 13:28). His sole reason was that the wordplay, “is possible only in Hebrew, not in Aramaic . . . much less in Greek.” See R. H Gundry, Mark (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 788. J. S. Kloppenborg likewise dismissed a word play between רַפּא (i.e. מֵחָץ = son) and מַכֶּס (i.e. לִיתֹא = stone) in Mark 12:10 and parallels on the grounds that “this wordplay is impossible in Aramaic, presumably Jesus' language” The Tenants in the Vineyard: Ideology, Economics, and Agrarian Conflict in Jewish Palestine (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 236. M. McNamara (Targum and Testament Revisited: Aramaic Paraphrases of the Hebrew Bible [2d ed; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010], 90–91) describes the general position of scholarship regarding the language environment in the first century and the New Testament: “It is agreed