Chapter Nineteen

The Aramaic of the Talmudic Period

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The Aramaic Vernacular of the Jews

The Hebrew and Aramaic languages are related tongues and resemble one another in many ways. They both belong to the north-western branch of the Semitic Language family. According to the text of the Pentateuch the Hebrews originate in Aram, since Abraham, the ancestor of the Jews, came from there, as did all the Matriarchs. Nevertheless, the Aramaic language was almost

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1 The awareness of this is especially evident in the verse 'And you shall make response before the Lord your God, A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt' (Deut 26:5);
unknown in the Land of Israel during the period of the First Temple. Clear
evidence of this is the story of Rabshakeh, which took place not long before
the end of this period. Rabshakeh was sent by the King of Assyria to Jerusa-
lem, where he spoke to the besieged inhabitants in the language of Judaea,
Yehudit, despite the request of the Judaean princes: ‘Pray, speak to your ser-
vants in the Aramaic language, for we understand it; do not speak to us in the
language of Judah within the hearing of the people who are on the wall’ (2Kgs
18:26). The significance of this is that only the princes spoke Aramaic, as they
came into frequent contact with foreigners, whereas the commoners of Judaea
did not understand that tongue.

The knowledge of Aramaic in the Land of Israel spread ever since the
return of the Babylonian exiles. This development had two causes: first of all,
the Return to Zion was marked by the arrival of a large wave of Babylonian
Jews whose main language seems to have been Aramaic. Secondly, the status
of the Aramaic language was rising and strengthening throughout the entire
region during this period until it became the major language throughout the
East. Even in Babylonia, for instance, Akkadian was on the decline and was
being replaced by Aramaic. This strengthening of the status of Aramaic in the
region took place in the Land of Israel as well, and so the use of Aramaic
spread until it became dominant.

Scholars were first of the opinion that after the return of the Babylonian
exiles, Hebrew no longer served as a spoken language. Their opinion was that
Hebrew retained its status as a holy tongue and was used in prayer and in Tora
study, and for this reason the Mishna and contemporary Tannaic literature was
composed in Hebrew, while in everyday life Aramaic alone was spoken.2
Today this opinion is no longer accepted, everyone agreeing that Hebrew
speech survived in all walks of life at least until the end of the Tannaic period
(beginning of the third century CE).3 Nonetheless, during this period the status
of Aramaic undoubtedly became very strong in comparison with Hebrew. This
can be seen first and foremost in the large number of texts written in Aramaic.
In all the books of the Bible until the destruction of the First Temple, Aramaic
is not to be found except for two words in Genesis (31:47 – uttered by Laban
the Aramean) and in a single verse in Jeremiah (10:11 – aimed at the Gentiles).
During the Second Temple period, the situation underwent a complete change:
lengthy sections in Aramaic appear in the Bible (in Ezra and Daniel) and in the
Judaean Desert Scrolls; many Aramaic sentences can be found in Tannaic
literature, while in the period of the Amoraim most literature was written in
Aramaic. In addition, Aramaic translations of the Bible were compiled during
this period. These translations were read in public when excerpts from the Tora

the historical review recited annually with the bringing to the Temple of the first fruits begins with
mention of the Aramaic origin of the Hebrews.

2 See, e.g., Geiger, Lehr- und Lesebuch, 1f; Rosenthal, Aramaistische Forschung, 106.
3 See, e.g., Kutscher, History, 117f.