The Problem of Vernacular Hebrew in the First Century A.D. and the Language of Jesus

There has been much discussion in recent years of the question whether Hebrew was used as a vernacular in Palestine in the first century A.D., and whether Jesus normally spoke Aramaic or Hebrew. In a paper entitled ‘Did Jesus speak Hebrew?’ (J.T.S. n.s. xii (1961), pp. 189–202) I discussed the problem with reference to a theory advanced by H. Birkeland. Since that article was written, relevant texts both in Hebrew and in Aramaic from the Nahal Hever have been published, and various aspects of the problem have been considered by J. Barr, M. Black, J.A. Fitzmyer, R.H. Gundry, E.Y. Kutscher, H. Ott, I. Rabinowitz, and myself, and doubtless by others. Moreover, when I wrote the paper I was unacquainted with some recent discussions of the question such as an article by S. Morag.

The purpose of the present article is twofold. First, I shall discuss, not now the particular theory of Birkeland which I examined in 1961, but the general question of the use of Hebrew as a vernacular at the beginning of the Christian era, and I shall pay special attention to evidence that was not available when my first article was written and to other evidence to which I perhaps failed to do justice. Second, I shall consider the language of Jesus in the light of the conclusions reached in the first part of the paper. It is not my intention to discuss the important but different question of the best way of reconstructing the kind of Aramaic spoken in Palestine in the first century A.D.

The question whether Hebrew was used as a vernacular in Palestine in the time of Jesus is a complicated one, and it is important to have a clear idea of

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1 This paper is based on a public lecture delivered in St. Andrews University on 18 April 1972. A list of books and articles cited by their authors’ names will be found at the end. I am indebted to Professor J. Barr, Professor M. Black, and Mr. A.R. Millard for making available to me copies of articles that were otherwise inaccessible to me in Cambridge. I am also grateful to Professor S. Morag and Dr. E.J.J. Rosenthal for reading a draft of the paper and for making helpful criticisms and suggestions.
the issues involved. Therefore, before the relevant arguments are discussed, four preliminary observations must be made.

In the first place, Mishnaic Hebrew must be regarded as originally a language spoken by ordinary people, even though it may be attested chiefly in a form used by rabbis. It is no longer possible to maintain with such scholars as A. Geiger that Mishnaic Hebrew is an artificial, purely scholarly language. In particular, M.H. Segal advanced strong linguistic arguments in 1908 to demonstrate that the language was a natural development of the Hebrew spoken in Palestine in Old Testament times, and that the development took place among ordinary people who spoke it in everyday life. There are aspects of Segal's understanding of Mishnaic Hebrew that are in need of modification, as Kutscher (1964 and 1967), for instance, has shown. There is also room for differences of opinion on some questions: for example, J. Klausner may or may not be right in his particular theory of the part played in the development of the language by events in the time of the Hasmoneans, and Birkeland may or may not be right in distinguishing more sharply than Segal between the forms of Hebrew used by learned rabbis and by ordinary people. Yet the main thesis argued by Segal has been securely established: Mishnaic Hebrew is essentially a vernacular or, at least, closely related to a vernacular. That leaves open the question how long it continued to be used as a vernacular, and whether it was so used in the first century A.D. Scholars such as Segal and E. Ben Yehuda believe that it was still spoken at the time, and that it continued to be used as a vernacular until late in the second century A.D., and even later; but by then it was struggling for its life against the influence of Aramaic, and eventually, perhaps in the third century, Aramaic won the battle, and Hebrew ceased to be an ordinary, spoken language. Whether the evidence supports their view that Hebrew continued to be spoken as a vernacular well into the Christian era will be discussed below.

Secondly, it is generally agreed that several languages were used in Palestine in the first century A.D.—and a survey of the principal evidence for the use of Latin, Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew has recently been made by J.A. Fitzmyer—but it is disputed how the use of Hebrew was related to the use of Aramaic. Segal and Ben Yehuda argue that the vernacular of most Jews in Judaea was Hebrew, but they do not deny that Aramaic was the vernacular of the majority in Galilee (where, however, Birkeland believes that Hebrew was more widely spoken) and of some Jews in Judaea, or that Jews whose vernacular was Hebrew could also speak Aramaic. Most Jews in Judaea, they maintain, were able to speak both Hebrew and Aramaic, but normally spoke Hebrew. A different view, which is to be found in the writings of scholars such as G. Dalman, is that Hebrew was widely used in Palestine, but not as a vernacular: