The question of this note is not, “Can one translate the Greek of Mark back into Aramaic?” Anyone well trained in Greek and Aramaic who has access to an edition of the Old Syriac Gospels (esp. Syrus Sinaiticus) can perform the work with some ease. The key question is also not, “Can one clarify obvious problems in the New Testament Greek by retroversion into an alleged Aramaic source?” This question has too often characterized, and marred, the search for sources behind the canonical gospels.

It should be readily apparent that misleading methodologies have been used to create a gospel text more appealing to Victorians or twentieth-century believers. Such re-translations often mirror modern authors, who may confuse their great skills in moving back and forth from Greek to Semitics with the search for a discernible source. For example, to demonstrate that it is possible to translate the Greek of a gospel back into Hebrew or Aramaic reflects partially on the Semitic character of New Testament Greek, but it more often displays the philological sophistication of the modern researcher.

The question is thus, “Can one recover Aramaic sources behind Mark’s Gospel?” This question places research on a firm scientific foundation. Several criteria must be met to insure reliable results. First, a passage in the Gospels must be isolated and chosen in which it is clear that some interference hindered the translator when translating from Aramaic to Greek. This choice needs to be guided by the study of interference in translating. Here one is assisted by the research collected and published by H. Schmidt in Interferenz in der Translation (Übersetzungswissenschaftliche Beiträge 12; Leipzig, 1989).

Second, one needs to be guided by the study of the techniques used in antiquity to translate the documents in the Hebrew Bible into the Greek of the Septuagint (see especially the publications by J. Barr and E. Tov) and the Syriac of the Peshitta (see notably the publications by S.P. Brock). The use of the Septuagint as a guide is...
potentially misleading, since it represents numerous geographical areas and is hundreds of years prior to the Evangelists. The use of the Peshîta is problematic, since it is almost always much later than the Evangelists and does not represent pre-70 Jewish Palestine. When attempts at retroversion are aided by lexicography and philology obtained from the later Targumim, one must limit such use and be certain that later forms and linguistic features did not contaminate the process. Careful and judicious use of Neo/ta is essential; and one needs to position oneself between Díez Macho (who perceives this targum to be a relatively reliable record of early oral traditions that help us understand the idiom of Jesus’ Aramaic) and Fitzmyer (who rejects this view).

Third, one must focus on the Aramaic that was, or would be, available to a Galilean Jew like Jesus. Thus, one must depend almost exclusively on the Qumran Aramaic texts; they antedate Jesus, are from ancient Palestine, and represent the issues and concerns of his culture.

Fourth, one should observe that the Greek culture and milieu of a gospel is often paradigmatically different from the prior Jewish culture of the source. It is especially important at this point to make certain the research and attempt at retroversion is informed by what is now known about pre-70 halakhic disputes and preoccupations with purity (e.g., miqva’ot and stone vessels), competing scriptural interpretations of customs (especially the observance of Sabbath), ritual (especially the celebration of Passover), calendar, and diet that shaped Jesus’ Judaism within Second Temple Judaism. One needs to allow also for the bilingualism of Jesus and the Evangelists; that is, they knew Aramaic and Greek—but either one or the other was dominant and thus interference occurred (see the book on bilingualism by C. Hoffmann and the work by P. Appel and P. Muysken). It is essential also to study the Greek and Aramaic inscriptions that are Palestinian and clearly predate 70 C.E., when the culture of Palestine changed markedly, at least in most of Galilee and all of Jerusalem. The archaeological discoveries and sensitivities obtained from examining pre-70 strata in Galilean sites, at Qumran, Herodian Jericho, and Jerusalem are like a rich mine for enriching the task of isolating and approximating a source behind a gospel.

Fifth, one should move away from working on an isolated word; a source is not one word. A long sentence or self-contained passage needs to be found beneath the Greek, and some clarity should arise