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The Vernacular of Palestine in the Time of our Lord, and the Remains of it in St. Mark.

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IN several places of the New Testament Semitic words are found, some of which are proper names of persons and places, while others, like *Corban* (Mark vii. 11), are terms in familiar use; and others, again, like *Talitha cumi* (Mark v. 41), are pregnant sayings, or, like *Maran atha* (1 Cor. xvi. 22), are semi-proverbial expressions. The great interest to us of these terms and sentences lies in *this*—that they are (if anything be in the New Testament) sounds actually uttered by the sacred speakers. Most of them are ascribed to the Saviour Himself; and while it may legitimately be held that the inspired evangelists have often recorded the substance rather than the *verba ipsissima* of the Master's teaching, it is hardly open to doubt that He said "Ephphatha" to the deaf man, or that He uttered the awful cry from the Cross in the very words which are put into His mouth.

The occurrence of Semitic *proper names* in the Greek Testament has no more weight in determining what was the vernacular of the apostles and evangelists, than the presence of non-Saxon proper names would have in an inquiry about the vernacular of England in the nineteenth century. Although a certain town was called by the Semitic name Καπερναούμ [כפר נחום] (K'phar Nachum), *Nahum's Town*, the name does not prove that all the inhabitants were men of Semitic speech. A patronymic like Βαρθολομαῖος [בן תלמי = *Talmay's son*] might be borne by one whose family had for generations used Greek; just as Price [*Ap Rice*] or Jones [*John's son*] are often the names of men whose ancestors long ago severed connection with Wales and Welsh. In this respect mere names prove nothing. Further, it has been thought that even the non-Greek *words and sayings* attributed to speakers in the sacred writings are not evidence of their ordinary language, but occur, perchance, as playful expressions, perchance as solemn utterances, spoken for effect in the obsolete ancestral tongue. This view is held in deference to an opinion that Greek had so completely taken possession of the countries which had been subjected to the conquests of Alexander the Great, that it had altogether ejected the national dialects. In Palestine, therefore, it is supposed that all classes used Greek (debased and corrupted, no doubt) as a vernacular, while the knowledge of Hebrew was the possession of the few, or at most, that its use was confined to the synagogue and the schools.

In Acts i. 19 we are informed on good authority that the Semitic name lately given to a certain field was in the *ἴδιος διάλεκτος* of Jerusalem. Certainly the *onus probandi* lies on those who declare that the Jews of Palestine had adopted the alien speech of Greece as their own. It is improbable *à priori*; for the Jews were not traders, to whom the language of the Mediterranean littoral would be an advantage. It is inconsistent with the admitted distinction between the *Jews*, or Hebræi of Palestine (Acts vi. 1), and the *Hellenists*, who used the Septuagint version. It is opposed to the universal judgment of writers in different parts of the ancient Church. It is contradicted by the indirect evidence of facts of the Gospel story. Peter was recognised as a Galilean by his accent. There is evidence that the inhabitants of Northern Palestine pronounced their Semitic letters somewhat barbarously, but it is not known that a Galilean and a Jerusalemite would accent Greek differently. The threefold inscription on the Cross is inexplicable, if those who could not understand the official Latin could read the Hellenistic version without requiring a Hebrew interpretation. Again, the words of Josephus in *Antiq.* xx. 11 afford the clearest evidence that not Greek, but some form of *Hebrew*, was the language of the educated Jews; much less, therefore, is it likely that Greek was the language of the peasants and fishermen of Galilee, amongst whom our Lord dwelt and laboured, and from whom He chose His apostles. It must therefore be assumed, in spite of the warm advocacy of an opposite opinion, that the vernacular of Palestine was *Semitic* during the last century of the national existence.

As to the particular dialect of that vernacular, various opinions have been held. It is a widespread tradition in the Syriac Church that it corresponded with the idiom of their own national version of the Scriptures; but this is inconsistent with the few remains which are extant in the New Testament writings. It has often been tacitly assumed that the Jews changed the *Hebrew*, which they undoubtedly spoke before the captivity, for *Chaldee*, which they learned in Babylon. The Chaldee Targums are appealed to in proof of this; but a similar argument would compel the conclusion that all Jews spoke Greek, because there is a *Septuagint* extant. Besides, a large population never left the Holy Land. Again, the influence of the court of Babylon was not permanent, and under the Maccabean ascendancy a variety of

circumstances tended towards a great revival of Hebrew customs, Hebrew worship, Hebrew culture and speech. The prevalence of Hebrew after the Captivity is demanded by the position assumed by radical critics, that the greater part of the Old Testament was composed, and certainly the whole revised, in the Maccabean days; while all will admit that the post-exilic prophets addressed their contemporaries in Hebrew and not in Aramaic.

This later Hebrew of the last of the prophets and their contemporaries formed the basis of the subsequent vernacular of Palestine. In Galilee it was specially exposed to deteriorating influences, and at last was perhaps little different from the Aramaic of neighbouring districts. In Jerusalem it was cultivated with a view to greater purity. The popular speech has been described¹ as a jargon of Hebrew words, Aramaic forms, Latin and Greek terms; and while this may be overstated, there can be no doubt that the vernacular was much corrupted, and, indeed, that several Semitic dialects prevailed, corresponding with the mixture of races in the population. It is perhaps hopeless now to attempt to recover their respective idioms. As a general term to connote their origin, inter-relation, and common features, *Aramaised Hebrew* would not be unsuitable. The root was the ancestral speech; but some of the branches were so much affected by their surroundings that they had almost lost their connection with the parent stem.

In the vernacular fragments preserved by St. Mark, the following points may be noticed:—

1. The prefix *bar*. It is true that this is an Aramaic word for *son*; but since it occurs in *Proverbs* (xxx. 2), a work which, even on the most extravagant view of its compilation, is *Hebrew*, and not *Chaldee*, no inference as to the Palestinian dialect can fairly be drawn from its use.

2. *Boaverγés*. *Boane* appears to be a corruption, perhaps north country pronunciation, of the *Hebrew* and *Aramaic* *b'ney*. The latter part of the epithet represents either רֵגֶשׁ (regesh), or רָעַשׁ (ra'ash), for the middle guttural *y* might be represented by *γ*. Both words are *Hebrew*—the former meaning a *crowd*, the latter the *noise of a crowd*, and once (*Ezek.* iii. 12, 13) apparently *thunder*; but either would easily pass into the *βροντή* of the evangelist.

3. *Ταλιθά κοῦμι*. The second word is the imperative קוּמִי (qumi), *arise!* either *Hebrew* or *Aramaic*, the form being common to both. The first represents תַּלְיָה, an *Aramaic* form, *talyâ*, a *boy*, תְּלִיחָה, a *girl*.

4. *Κορβάν* is a transliteration of קֶרְבָּן, which

¹ Immanuel Deutsch's *Literary Remains*, the Talmud, p. 42.

occurs several times in *Leviticus* and *Numbers* for an *offering*.

5. Ἐφθαθά represents the *Hebrew* הִפְתַּח (hippathach), the aspiration at the beginning being lost, and the final guttural resolved into a vowel sound, which constantly occurred — e.g. קִיץ (yitschak) becomes Ἰσαάκ, *Isaac*. The *Aramaic* for *Be opened!* transliterated into *Greek* would be ἐθφαθθα, or perhaps ἐθπαττα or ἐθπεθα; the initial syllable being *eth*, not *hip*, or *ep*, or *ef*.

6. Ῥαββί and Ῥαββονί are transliterations of the *Hebrew* (and *Aramaic*) רַבִּי, and the *Aramaic* רַבּוּנִי, respectively, the first vowel, *i*, of the latter being corrupted to *a*.

7. Πάσχα. The term is used in an *Aramaic*, and perhaps popular form, for the *Hebrew* is פֶּסַח, *pesach*.

8. Similarly Σατανᾶς represents the *Aramaic* שַׂטָּן.

9. And Ἀββί is the *Aramaic* אֲבָי.

10. Ἐλωὶ Ἐλωὶ λεμὰ σαβαχθαυεί. The last word is from the *Aramaic* verb שָׁבַע (sh'vaq), *forsake*. λεμδ (of which there are other forms in the MSS.) may be either *Hebrew* לָמוּ or *Aramaic* לָמוּ. Ἐλωὶ represents the *Aramaic* אֱלֹהֵי (Ēlāhi), but, by a Galilean pronunciation, Ēlauhi; and, as distinguished from the form in *St. Matthew*, expresses the very word employed by our Lord.

In Nos. (2), (10), we have evidence tending to the proof that the *Peshitto* is a translation of the *Greek*, and not an original *Aramaic* record; for at *Mark* iii. 17 it reads, "He surnamed them *B'ney Regesh*, that is, *B'ney Ra'mo*"—*ra'am* in *Syriac* (and *Hebrew*) meaning *thunder*. Again, at xv. 35 the 'μεθερμηνευόμενον' was evidently before the *Syrian*, for his *Peshitto* has, "Il, Il, l'mono sh'vaqthoni; that is, *Alohi, Alohi l'mono sh'vaqthoni*." There seems to be here a reminiscence of *St. Matthew*, and perhaps a different reading from our current *Greek*; but that a *Greek* archetype underlies the text in both passages is indisputable.

To sum up. The vernacular of Palestine, which was employed by our Lord, was neither *Chaldee* nor *Syriac*, although adulterated by these dialects. Some fragments are preserved, especially by *St. Mark*, and the use made of them by the *Syriac* translator shows that he prepared his *Peshitto* by a version from the *Greek*, and not from independent traditions.

The subject may be studied further in *The Dialects spoken in Palestine in the time of Christ* (Neubauer); *Studia Biblica*, 1885; *Greek the Language of Christ and His Apostles* (Roberts), 1888.