THE CONFUSION OF HEBREW WITH ARAMAIC

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John 19:17

καὶ βαστάζων ἑαυτῷ τὸν σταυρὸν
ἐξῆλθεν εἰς τὸν λεγόμενον Κρανίου Τόπον,
ὃ λέγεται Ἑβραϊστὶ Γολγοθα.

And he, bearing his cross,
went out to a place called the Place of a Skull,
which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha.

The name "Golgotha" is not a Hebrew name, but an Aramaic name. The Hebrew word for the "skull" is גֻּלְגֹּלֶת/גּוּלְגֹּלֶת *gulgolet*/*gûlgôlet*, ending with a consonant. The *tha* ending of "Golgotha" marks the word as the Aramaic גּוּלְגַּלְתָּא *gûlgaltâ* "skull" (Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli, . . .* [New York: Putnam, 1903], 221). The two words are cognates, with the *tha* ending being the suffix in Aramaic for the "emphatic state," which corresponds to the Hebrew prefixed definite article *ha* (הַ·) and the English definite article. The definition of the Aramaic "Golgotha" was given as "cranium" in Matt 27:33 (Καὶ ἐλθόντες εἰς τόπον λεγόμενον Γολγοθᾶ, ὅ ἐστιν Κρανίου Τόπος λεγόμενος) and as *calvaria* "skull" in the Vulgate (*et venerunt in locum qui dicitur Golgotha quod est Calvariae locus*). The *Shem Tob Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* has only a transliteration of the Vulgate, ובאו למקים נקרא גולגוטא, הוא הר קאלווארי "they came to a place called Golgoṭaᵓ which is Mount Qalvary"—which is of no etymological significance.

John 19:13

ἤγαγεν ἔξω τὸν Ἰησοῦν καὶ ἐκάθισεν ἐπὶ βήματος
εἰς τόπον λεγόμενον Λιθόστρωτον,
Ἑβραϊστὶ δὲ Γαββαθα.

he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench
at a place called The Stone Pavement,
or in Hebrew Gabbatha.

Like "Golgatha," the name "Gabbatha," meaning "the pavement," is not Hebrew but Aramaic. It may be related to the Hebrew נַּבַּחַת (*gabbaḥa*t) "bald, an open space, a court," but the *tha* ending of "Gabbatha" marks it unequivocally as Aramaic (Jastrow, 1903: 215).

Acts 21:40–22:2

And when he had given him leave, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people; and when there was a great hush, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language (τῇ Ἑβραΐδι διαλέκτῳ), saying: 'Brethren and fathers, hear the defense which I now make before you.' And when they heard that he addressed them in the Hebrew language (τῇ Ἑβραΐδι διαλέκτῳ), they were the more quiet. (RSV)

The NIV, NIB, and NLT translated the Ἑβραΐδι "Hebrew" as "Aramaic" or as "their own language" (NLT in 22:2), in agreement with the citation in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* by William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p.212, which reads: "*the Hebr. language* Ac 21:40; 22:2; 26:14; Papias 2:16, i.e., the Aramaic spoken in that time in Palestine."

But there have been significant changes in biblical scholarship since 1952, when the Arndt and Gingrich lexicon was published. George Howard (*The Gospel of Matthew according to a Primitive Hebrew Text* [Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987]) spoke to the shift away from a four-hundred years old tradition of interpreting τῇ Ἑβραΐδι διαλέκτῳ as "Aramaic." He noted,

> Since the time of Widmanstadt [1555], it has become commonplace to suppose that by "Hebrew" Papias meant "Aramaic." This supposition was due primarily to the belief that Hebrew in the days of Jesus was no longer in use in Palestine, but had been replaced by Aramaic. The subsequent discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, many of which are Hebrew compositions, as well as other Hebrew documents from Palestine from the general time period of Jesus, now show Hebrew to have been alive and well in the first century. There is, therefore, no reason to assume a priori that Papias meant Aramaic. (pp. 155–156)

According to Acts 21:40, Paul was gifted with non-verbal skills, for "Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great silence, he spoke to them." He was able to bring a crowd to silence without saying a word. Moreover, Paul and his audience appear to have been at least bilingual. The noise made by the crowd before he silenced them was most likely from the crowd's shouting in the vernacular Aramaic. But, according to Acts 22:2, "when they [the Jews] heard that he [Paul] addressed them in the Hebrew language they became even more quiet." Both Paul and his audience could communicate in the language of *Torah* and *Tanak*. It was the sacred language which

evoked instantaneous reverence manifest by polite silence. But even speaking in Hebrew had its limits, for when Paul announced that he would be sharing his Jewish-Christian faith with Gentiles, the crowd again went wild and wanted to kill him (Acts 22:21–22).

Recognition that Paul spoke to the crowd in Hebrew suggests that Jesus also must have spoken to crowds in Hebrew as well as in Aramaic. What he said in Hebrew or in Aramaic was written down in either Hebrew or Aramaic. Consequently, when the clearly articulated teachings of Jesus were heard, there was no ambiguity in his spoken words. But once his sayings were written down in either language, ambiguities were instantaneously created by the scribe who used no vowels and did not always use a space between words. Unintentional ambiguities led to subsequent mistranslations which were more serious than simply misidentifying an Aramaic word like "Golgotha" as a Hebrew word.