

AN ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION:

## HIDDEN HEBREW IN THE GOSPELS

by

Dr. Pinchas Lapide

Hebrew can be found in the books of the New Testament on three different levels.

First is the plain linguistic level. Theologumena such as Pesach, Satan and Qorban appear in close proximity to such titles as Rabbi, Abba and Messiah, followed by names and appellations like Israel, Beelzebub, Abaddon, Iscariot, Boanerges, Armageddon, as well as liturgical terms like Hosanna, Hallelujah and the ubiquitous Amen, which in the Gospel of Matthew alone occurs no less than thirty-one times.

Secondly there is the conceptual level. No less Hebraic in their etymon than the above-mentioned Hebraisms are such mainstays of the evangelical vocabulary as the Kingdom of Heaven, the End of Days, Eternal Life, Divine Grace, Saviour, The Covenant, Election, Redemption, to mention only the most important ones.

Last, and not least, there is a third category of Hebraisms and Hebrew word-groups which escape the superficial reader, but come to light upon retroverting into Hebrew those Gospel passages which contain either textual implausibilities or bad Greek bordering on solecism. Some of these tentative re-hebraisations look like the blurred handwriting of palimpsest, an inkling of the lost *Quelle* behind the Gospel text, which not only shed old-new light upon a number of New Testament obscurities but sometimes arouse the eerie impression that *ipsissima verba* are being revealed.

Needless to say, all such linguistic exercises can lay claim to little more than an intriguing theory – though their cumulative weight may well carry some power of conviction. For a few Bible scholars, at any rate, they may bear out Bishop Papias, who around 130 C. E. recorded a tradition according to which Matthew had “compiled the Sayings (of Jesus) in the Hebrew language, and everyone translated these, as well as he could”.<sup>1</sup>

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“... And thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins.” Thus Matthew (1:21) records the words of the angel to

<sup>1</sup> *The History of the Church*, by Eusebius; English edition by G. A. Williamson, London, 1965, pp. 152.

Joseph on the impending birth of a son. Two points stand out in this verse for every Hebraist. The causal link between the name and the subsequent mission of the Nazarene is non-existent in Greek, Latin, English, or for that matter in any other language. Why should he be less efficacious as a Messiah under the name of Abraham, Isaac or Jacob? Only upon retranslating the verse into its putative original does the sense, the rhythm and the alliterative play on words come out: *weqara't shemo Yeshu'a ki yoshi'a et 'ammo*". For *Yeshu'a* means literally "he will save" or "God will save" – an onomastic symbolism no less profound than the name given to Abraham (Gen. 17:5), Sarah (Gen. 17:15), Isaac (Gen. 17:17ff.), Judah (Gen. 29:35), Reuben (Gen. 29:32) and Simon (Gen. 29:33), to mention but half a dozen luminaries from the Hebrew Bible

But there is another point worth analysing. Matthew, anxious throughout his Gospel to furnish proof that O. T. prophecies have found their fulfilment in Jesus, models the angel's words on Isaiah 7:14, which he quotes in full immediately afterwards (Mt. 1:23). This imitation adhering closely to the Hebrew of Isaiah, goes on to say: "*we-qara't shemo (Yeshu'a) ...*". which, following Isaiah, should have read "... (she will bear a son) and she will call his name Jesus". The trouble is that the key-word *we-qara't* (she will call) can be misread in unvocalised Hebrew – and only in Hebrew – as *we-qara'ta*, meaning "you will call", which is the way Matthew decided to put it in Greek. This runs counter not only to O. T. usage, but also to Jewish custom in N. T. times, as borne out by Luke (1:31), according to which it is the mother who gives her newly born son his name.

In the parable of the fig-tree, Mark (13:28-29) reports Jesus as saying: "When her branch is yet tender, and puts forth leaves, ye know that summer is near. So ye in like manner ... know that (it) is nigh, even at the door". In the last half of this sentence the subject is missing, so that there is actually no knowing who or what "is nigh". Luke must have felt this lacuna, which he forthwith filled, loyal to the sense of the parable as he understood it, with the words "the Kingdom of God" (Lk. 21:31). This term, however, is inconceivable in the semitic *Quelle*, since post-biblical Hebrew only knows the circumscription "Kingdom of Heaven". Since Matthew, like Mark, concludes this sentence in identical words (Mt. 24:33) – again without a subject – it might well be that a biblical play on words was mutilated beyond all recognition owing to a typical case of haplography. Jesus, in the footsteps of Amos 8:2, might have said in the first half of parallelism: *ki qarov ha-qayitz* (that the summer is nigh), completing it alliteratively with the words: *ki qarov ha-qetz* (that the end is near). A later copyist, misled by *qayitz*, omitted the complementary *qetz*, adding perhaps, for the sake of wholeness, to the now limping sentence, the final words "at the door".

In the parable of the faithful and the wicked servants, the lord of the latter one "shall cut him asunder and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites" (Mt. 24:51). Quite apart from the unprecedented barbarity of human vivisection, which sounds unbelievable from the mouth of Jesus, the over-mild anticlimax which follows such appalling cruelty makes one wonder whether some Hebraism might not have been corrupted here in translation. A likely candidate is close at hand. If the original said something like: *wayigzor wayiten chelqo im ha-tzevu'im*, the meaning was clear: "and he will decree to appoint his portion with the hypocrites", which sounds like punishment commensurate with the crime – as well as constituting a suitable counterpart to the reward bestowed on the faithful servant (Mt. 24:47). In such a case it is most likely that a scribe committed dittography in doubling the initial *waw* of the second word, adding it as a suffix to the first word with the result that *wayigzeru* was later understood by readers unfamiliar with the genius of Hebrew as "and he shall cut him asunder". Though this tallies with the other meaning of the verb *g-z-r*, it obviously distorts the contextual meaning of the verse.

The coda of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 7:28-29), and the parallel passage in Mk. 1:22: "For he taught them as *one that had authority*, and not as one of the scribes", is probably based on a Hebrew source which said something like: *we-hu limmedam ke-moshel we-lo ka-soferim*. The key-word *ke-moshél*, meaning originally "as a parabolist (or Aggadist)", could easily be mistaken for *ke-moshel* (*defective* spelled?), meaning "as a ruler", i. e. as one having authority. The following arguments speak in favour of this hypothesis. (1) Mt. 7:28 concludes the longest didactic sequence in the Gospel, based upon Jesus's aggadical method of teaching *par excellence*. The salt that lost its savour, a city set on a hill, the fowls of the air, the lilies of the field, the mote in your brother's eye, the grapes of thorns and figs of thistles, the wise man who built his house upon a rock – all these metaphors, similies, allegories, similitudes, as well as the seven classic parables in *Matthew* (which all come under the Hebrew category of *mashal*) prove Jesus to have been a master parabolist – a fact noteworthy enough to merit mentioning at the end of the most extensive parabolic discourse (Mt. 5-7) in the entire New Testament. (2) "The scribes" and "one having authority" are not a genuine contrast, nor were these terms antithetical enough for Jesus's listeners and/or his proto-evangelist to warrant the juxtaposing words "and not as" between them. That the very opposite was rather true is testified to in Mt. 16:21, 20:18, 23:2-3, and 26:5-7. (3) "And he spoke many things to them in parables" (Mt. 13:3); "Why do you speak to them in parables?" (Mt. 13:10); "And without a parable he did not speak to them" (Mt. 13:34). These and other similar passages abundantly prove the truth of Prof. J. Klausner's opinion: "While the Tannaim and their successors, the Amoraim, mainly practised Scripture expo-

sition, and only incidentally used parables, the reverse was the case with Jesus".<sup>2</sup> (4) If we put "parabolist" instead of "one having authority" in Mt. 7:29 (cf. Num. 21:27, Ezek. 16:44 and 18:2), a true and plausible contrast emerges, comparing the halakhic method of the rabbinic "Scribes" with the more down-to-earth aggadic method of Jesus – to the detriment of the former. Rabbi Yeshu'a of Nazareth would apparently have agreed with Rabbi A. J. Heschel, who wrote: "Halakhah deals with details . . . Aggadah inspires".<sup>3</sup> In its traditional reading, Prof. Klausner points out, "the meaning of that verse (Mt. 7:29) is somewhat problematical". In the Hebrew reconstruction of the original text, the problem seems to be solved.

"If you wish, you can make me clean", the leper reputedly said to Jesus (Mk. 1:40), whereupon, in accordance with an ancient variant reading, Mark goes on to say: "And Jesus, *filled with anger*, put forth his hand and touched him and said to him, 'I will; be thou clean!'" Other manuscripts, however, put the most obvious sentiment, which Jesus evinced in other cases of a cure (cf. Mt. 20:34), to wit, "moved with compassion". Only in Hebrew are these so different sentiments distinguished by one single letter: *be'chemah* means "filled with anger", whilst *be'chemlah* denotes "moved with compassion". In retranslating this pericope of the leper into Hebrew (Mt. 8:1-4, Mk. 1:40-45, Lk. 5:12-16), the impression is gained that we are not dealing here with a cure effected by Jesus but rather with a declaration of purity, pronounced by Jesus after the cure had been brought about by Divine action. The key word, repeated by all three Synoptics, *katharizai* (Hebrew: *taher*), means nothing else in the Book of Leviticus, to which Jesus refers (Mt. 8:4, Mk. 1:44, Lk. 5:14), than "to pronounce clean". The verb is used four times in this sole sense (Lev. 13:6, 13, 17, 23), whereupon the fact is stressed that only God (Lev. 14:3) can effect the cure, whilst the priest is duty-bound thereafter to confirm the cure, to pronounce the ex-leper clean and to offer the purificatory sacrifice. This is in keeping not only with rabbinic practice<sup>4</sup> and the pertinent description given by Flavius Josephus<sup>5</sup> but also with the exact wording of the pericope, which nowhere mentions "healing" or "cure", but merely speaks of "cleansing". This "catharsis", as the Book of Leviticus makes abundantly clear, has only a declaratory character, based upon a previous cure which only God can accomplish.

"It is extraordinary that the Essenes are not named in the New Testament. I know of no fully adequate explanation of this circumstance, Certainly it is not to be attributed to ignorance." In these words Prof. Frank

<sup>2</sup> *Jesus of Nazareth*, New York, 1946, p. 246f.

<sup>3</sup> *God in Search of Man*, p. 336f.

<sup>4</sup> *Lev. Rabbah* 16.

<sup>5</sup> *Contra Apionem* I, 31.

Moore Cross<sup>6</sup> expresses the consensus of Bible scholars on this well-known lacuna. It seems, however, that at least one Essenic pericope is given prominence in the Third Gospel, though under a strange disguise. In the anointment pericope, both Mark (14:3) and Matthew (26:6) speak of the location as “the house of Simon, the leper”, whilst according to Luke (7:36-50) Jesus’s host was “a Pharisee by the name of Simon”. That Jesus and all his disciples should have spent the night in the home of a notorious leper defies all reason and credibility, since the physical and religious “excommunication” of lepers had been decreed and carried out in detail since early biblical times (Lev. 13:45ff.). This was done not so much for sanitary reasons – though numerous rabbis stress the danger of infection – but mainly in order to safeguard the theocratic sanctity of Israel, which was deemed to be in particular danger from the “impurity” of leprosy. The fact that more than ritual impurity is involved is borne out by rabbinic literature, in which leprosy is considered a scourge, decreed by God to chastise a man in punishment for calumny, arrogance, incest, the shedding of innocent blood, etc.<sup>7</sup> Flavius Josephus confirms that the biblical laws of excommunicating lepers were strictly adhered to in the days of Jesus: “Lepers were not permitted to live in any city nor in any village”.<sup>8</sup> Since a leper living within the village of Bethany is therefore as implausible as his playing host to Jesus and his Torah-abiding disciples, who else might this Simon have been? A re-hebraisation suggests that the lost *Quelle* may have spoken of *Shimon ha-tzanu’a*, which could easily be misread (or erroneously copied) as *Shimon ha-tzaru’a*. Whilst the latter signifies “Simon the leper” (cf. Lev. 28:3), the former denotes “Simon the Essene”. Force of habit probably made Luke transform this *hapax legomenon* into a Pharisee, since the third Evangelist speaks in similar terms of two other Pharisees who invited Jesus into their homes (Lk. 11:37, 14:1). Force of habit, a blurred script, or both, made Mark and Matthew fall back on the homeograph “leper” to whom both had previously dedicated an entire pericope (Mk. 1:40-45; Mt. 8:1-4).

*Tzanu’a*, denoting “modest, pious, meek, chaste or humble”, is one of the appellations used by the Talmud<sup>9</sup> for this “third school of philosophy” within Judaism, as Flavius Josephus<sup>10</sup> calls them. According to one theory, their Greek name *Essenoi* was derived from the Hebrew *tzanu’a* (*tzenu’im*), which probably referred to Proverbs 11:2, “When pride comes, then comes shame, but with the humble is wisdom”. To make this theory even more tantalising, we encounter a certain “Rabbi Simon the Essene” in rabbinic

<sup>6</sup> *The Ancient Library of Qumran*, New York, 1961, p. 201.

<sup>7</sup> cf Arakhin 16a; Tan B 10 (25a); Nu R 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Contra Apionem* I, 31.

<sup>9</sup> b Kiddushin 71a; Baba Kama 69a; Niddah 12a.

<sup>10</sup> Wars II, 8:2.

literature<sup>11</sup> – a sage who lived in or near Jerusalem before the destruction of the Temple and took part in a learned Tannaïtic debate on matters of ritual purity – one of the prime concerns of this abstemious school.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the Greek version of Flavius Josephus<sup>13</sup> knows “a certain Simon, belonging to the Order of the Essenes”, who lived (in his youth) during the final days of the rule of Archelaus, the son of Herod; and one of the Slavonic additions<sup>14</sup> mentions “Simon of Essene extraction, a scribe” as a contemporary of John the Baptist.

Last but not least, there is support within the pericope proper for this hypothesis. As Prof. Frank Moore Cross points out, “There are polemical passages in the New Testament which are most easily explained as directed against the Essenes”.<sup>15</sup> Thus Mt. 5:43-45 takes the community of Qumran to task for their “hatred of enemies”; Mt. 12:28 may argue against Essenic eschatology; and Lk. 14:21-24 seems to pillory the soteriological exclusivism of the *tzenu'im*. In a similar vein, the very anointing of Jesus may be meant to polemicise against the excessive Essenic eschewal of all earthly comforts. “Despising luxury, they would not anoint their bodies with oil”, says the Encyclopedia Judaica of them.<sup>16</sup> “Oil they regard as polluting, and if a man is unintentionally smeared with it, he rubs himself clean, for they think it desirable to keep the skin dry.” Thus reports Flavius Josephus,<sup>17</sup> who spent several years under Essenic tuition, whilst Jesus reproaches his host Simon, “My head with oil thou didst not anoint; but this woman has anointed my feet with ointment” (Lk. 7:46). The fact that most Essenes practised celibacy, and the remainder were chaste to a fault, whilst “a woman” anointed Jesus’s feet, may well have added poignancy to the anti-Essene argument.

Charity is deemed of such paramount importance by the Essenes that it is the only activity in which each one of them may indulge freely. “In general they take no action without orders from their supervisors, but two things are left entirely to them – personal aid and charity; they may of their own accord help any deserving person in need or supply the penniless with food.”<sup>18</sup> This well-known Essenic emphasis on alms-giving and benevolence (to the possible detriment of the veneration of Jesus, as demanded by the Apostolic Church) may likewise have been the target of the four verses in Mark (14:4-7) and Matthew (26:8-11) which describe the (Es-

<sup>11</sup> Tosephta Kelim I, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Wars II, 8:3-6.

<sup>13</sup> Bell. Jud. II, 113.

<sup>14</sup> inserted between II, 110 and 111.

<sup>15</sup> op. cit. p. 201.

<sup>16</sup> Jerusalem, 1971, col. 900.

<sup>17</sup> Wars II, 8:3.

<sup>18</sup> Wars II, 8:6.

senic) reaction of "his disciples" to "this waste" of ointment, which "might have been sold for much, and given to the poor" – whereupon Jesus lauds "the woman" and chides his own disciples: "For ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always" (Mt. 26:11), to which Mark, belabouring the point, adds (14:7): "... the poor ... and whensoever ye will, ye may do them good, but me ye have not always".

Thus, while both Pharisees and Sadducees are roundly condemned (Mt. 3:7f; Mt. 16:6, 11f. *et al*), for reasons which go beyond the scope of this monograph, the Essenes appear only once in the N. T., personified by a friend of Jesus, whereupon two of their tenets are gently chided. No wonder. Their affinities with the Nazarenes by far outweigh their divergencies, a fact which was decisive in making many of them join the early Church.

There is a goodly number of further "hidden Hebraisms" lurking within the web of the Synoptic texture. I intend to publish some of them elsewhere in due course, in the hope that they might add weight, together with those mentioned in the preceding pages, to the hypothesis of a written Hebrew *Verlage*, used by the Synoptic Evangelists.\*

*Dr. Pinchas Lapide is Director of the Government Press Office in Jerusalem, and author of several works in the field of Jewish-Christian relations.*

\* As this article goes to print, Prof. Jakob S. Petuckowski has kindly drawn my attention to the *Markus-Studien* of Rabbi H. P. Chajes (1899), in which a similar theory for *ka-moshel* and other hidden Hebraisms is suggested. I can only express gratification *al ki kala'ti leda'at gedolim*.