

**RECOVERING THE “INSPIRED TEXT”? AN ASSESSMENT OF THE WORK
OF THE JERUSALEM SCHOOL IN LIGHT OF *UNDERSTANDING THE
DIFFICULT WORDS OF JESUS***

by

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for *MISHKAN 17*

Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus by David Biven and Roy B. Blizzard, Jr. is a unique book.¹ While receiving the approbation of Jewish and Christians scholars,² it has enjoyed much popularity among non-scholarly readers and thus has been a most effective tool in disseminating the basic views of the Jerusalem School. There are several important factors which have contributed to the book’s relatively wide distribution: It is forcefully and concisely written; the authors present an impressive array of scholarly material in a readable and engaging way; the premise of the book is intriguing, viz., that our current Greek Gospels often obscure and distort the *original* Hebrew teaching of Jesus; the promise of the book is inviting: The reader will gain remarkable new insights into the Scriptures! In fact, without these insights, the authors believe that “one can keep reading the Bible until the day he dies, and the Bible will not tell him the meaning of these difficult Hebrew passages [in the New Testament]. They can be understood only when translated back into Hebrew” (21). Moreover, “had the Church been provided with a proper Hebraic understanding of the words of Jesus, *most theological controversies* would never have arisen in the first place” (105, my italics). These are strong claims!

Unfortunately, those readers for whom *Difficult Words* is intended lack the proper tools with which to evaluate the scholarly information presented, and they may not fully realize the implications of Biven and Blizzard’s study: If *Difficult Words* is correct, then we must accept the fact that at present, *we have no inspired New Testament text* -- not even a reasonably well preserved copy! On this point, the authors have made themselves

abundantly clear: “The [Greek] Gospels are rife with mistranslations”; indeed, some passages “have been misinterpreted to such an extent that they are potentially damaging to us spiritually. . . . Many Gospel expressions are not just poor Greek, but actually meaningless Greek” (105 and 37). In light of statements like these, it is no exaggeration to say that if Biven and Blizzard (and the Jerusalem School) are essentially correct in their overall thesis, the Church as a whole could be in serious error on numerous fundamental points of faith and practice. It will be the purpose of this review to examine critically the scholarly underpinnings of *Difficult Words*; in so doing, we will be able to assess whether this book’s impact has been primarily positive or negative, and whether its hermeneutical presuppositions are helpful or potentially dangerous.

The basic premise of *Difficult Words* is expressed in the Introduction: “the original gospel that formed the basis for the Synoptic Gospels was first communicated, not in Greek, but in the *Hebrew* language. . . . Our reasons for writing the book are not only to show that the original gospel was communicated in the *Hebrew* language; but to show that the entire New Testament can only be understood from a *Hebrew* perspective” (19f., 22., my italics). This emphasis on Hebrew is critically important, since the authors are careful to discredit any notion that the teachings of Jesus were originally transmitted in *Aramaic*. For Biven and Blizzard, a *Semitic* understanding of the New Testament is not sufficient, nor is it adequate to refer to its *Jewish* background. It must be Hebrew!³ “The writers [of the NT] are Hebrew, the culture is Hebrew, the religion is Hebrew, the traditions are Hebrew, and the concepts are Hebrew” (22).⁴ Thus the authors criticize “The Assumptions of Liberal Scholarship” (Chapter Two, 25-27), finding fault with the “many Christians [who] still cling to the outmoded Aramaic hypothesis as if their faith depended on it” (33); yet Biven and Blizzard present their own case quite dogmatically: “it can be stated unequivocally that the original *Life of Jesus* was also communicated in Hebrew” (27).⁵ It is *this* “Life of Jesus” -- not simply an alleged Hebrew original of any of the current Synoptic Gospels -- that the authors seek to uncover. (This crucial point,

which greatly colors the hermeneutics of the Jerusalem School, will be treated in greater detail below.)

In Chapter Three, Biven and Blizzard seek to refute the alleged Aramaic or Greek origin of the Synoptic Gospels. They dismiss “The Greek Theory” in short order (36-38), finding fault with the scholars who claim that the Semitisms of the Synoptic Gospels are primarily due to the influence of the Septuagint, rather than to a supposed Semitic undertext which lies behind the Synoptics. It is axiomatic for Biven and Blizzard that the “poor Greek of the Synoptics is found only in literary works that are translations from Semitic originals, such as the Septuagint” (36). Yet the opposite conclusion can just as easily be reached, viz., that it was the Greek of the Septuagint that heavily colored the Greek of the Synoptics.⁶ Moreover, Biven and Blizzard fail to account adequately for the fact that a Semitic author whose second (or third?) language was Greek would likely *write* in a Semitized Greek style, explaining away some of the alleged indicators of “translation Greek.”⁷

Robert Gordis has also raised a “fundamental objection . . . to the widely-held theory that a difficult text *ipso facto* presupposes a translation from another language.” Rather, according to Gordis, when a translator comes across a difficult passage in the original, he “may misread it . . . [he] may tacitly emend the text, read irrelevant matters into it and generally fail to penetrate its meaning. But ultimately he decides upon some view of the passage, which he then expresses in his idiom. His version may be incorrect, but it will be clear and intelligible, far more so than the original, all the difficulties and alternatives of which will have been ignored or obscured in the process. . . . *Other things being equal, it may therefore be maintained that a difficult text may be presumed to be the original rather than a translation.*”⁸ This observation provides a healthy caution to those who are zealous to find a “Hebrew” solution to every alleged difficulty in the Greek Synoptics.

In their rejection of “The Greek Theory,” Biven and Blizzard criticize scholars like Nigel Turner who explain almost every lexical and grammatical Semitism in the New

Testament as being due to the influence of the Septuagint.⁹ This of course represents the exact opposite position to that of Biven and Blizzard, who immediately translate every New Testament Greek word directly back into Hebrew, with no recourse to the Septuagint. Yet this procedure, not infrequent in the Jerusalem School, fails to take advantage of the very repository that would have most colored the thinking of a first century, biblically-oriented Jew translating a religious Hebrew document into Greek. It is true that Robert Lindsey could refer to his “tedious studies of word usage in the Septuagint and investigation of Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew models”¹⁰ when analyzing parallel passages in the Synoptics. Yet this utilization of the Septuagint is nowhere reflected in *Difficult Words*, nor is it generally found in popularizations of the Jerusalem School’s findings.¹¹ Thus, while Biven and Blizzard seek to recapture the first century Jewish/Hebrew background to our (current) Greek Gospels, they fail to adequately exploit one of the most important resources available: the Septuagint!¹²

The arguments of Biven and Blizzard against “The Aramaic Theory” are: 1) the references in the Greek New Testament to “the Hebrew language” do, in fact, mean Hebrew, *not* Aramaic, as rendered in most modern versions; 2) the few Aramaic words found in the Gospels are in keeping with the occasional Aramaic words found in contemporary Hebrew literature; 3) there are far more Hebrew words in the Gospels than Aramaic; 4) many of the alleged Aramaic words are actually Hebrew; 5) many modern scholars recognize that Hebrew, not Aramaic, was the spoken and written language of the Jews in Israel in the time of Jesus.¹³ *None of these arguments, however, is either decisive or entirely correct.*

1) The Greek expressions “Hebrew” (*hebraisti*) and “Hebrew language” (*hebraidi dialekto*) can definitely be used with reference to Aramaic; cf., e.g., John 19:17, where the Aramaic place name *golgotha*’ is identified as “Hebrew” (the Hebrew would have been *gulgolet*),¹⁴ and note that Philo (and probably also Josephus) can use the Greek term *hebraisti* (“Hebrew”) to refer to Aramaic.¹⁵ In fact, when Philo means Hebrew --

including the Hebrew of the Tanakh -- as opposed to Aramaic, he sometimes speaks of it as *chaldaisti*, i.e., Chaldaic! It is clear, therefore, that first century Jewish authors could speak of either Hebrew or Aramaic as “Hebrew” in the sense of “the language of the Hebrews.”¹⁶

2) Biven and Blizzard are correct in noting that Aramaic words may appear in Hebrew documents; however, they fail to observe that in the case of the Gospels, these expressions, like *talitha koum[i]*, indicate that at the very least, on certain occasions *Jesus spoke Aramaic*.¹⁷

3) Biven and Blizzard exaggerate the number of Hebrew words found in the Greek text of the Gospels and down play the number of Aramaic words. Of course, Greek scholars have long recognized the presence of both Hebrew and Aramaic words in the New Testament;¹⁸ no one would argue with this. But what is interesting is that all the words in Biven and Blizzard’s own list of Hebrew lexemes found in the Gospels can be explained just as plausibly as being either Aramaic,¹⁹ borrowings from the Septuagint,²⁰ and/or common Semitic loan words.²¹

4) Although Biven and Blizzard attempt to demonstrate that Jesus’ words on the cross (“My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?”) should be seen as Hebrew, not Aramaic,²² noting that even the Aramaic verb *šabaq* is found in Mishnaic Hebrew, they fail to answer why, if Jesus was quoting the Scriptures in Hebrew, He said *šabaqtani* (reflected also in the Targumic tradition) and not *‘azabtani* (as per the Hebrew text).²³ The authors also deny that Greek words like *sikera*, *Sabbata*, and *Pascha* are Aramaic loanwords, arguing instead that they simply reflect the Greek neuter ending, *not* a transliteration from Aramaic.²⁴ Once again, however, Biven and Blizzard have not correctly stated the facts: While *Sabbata* (from *Sabbaton*) is neuter, it is clear that, e.g., *Pascha* is indeclinable -- i.e., it is *not* neuter -- thereby substantiating the claim for the Aramaic origin of this word.²⁵

5) While scholars in recent decades have made a general correction by recognizing Hebrew as a living language in the time of Jesus, the consensus among most of the world's leading Semitists is still that Aramaic was the primary spoken language of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel in the first century of this era. This is the verdict of recognized scholars like Geza Vermes (Oxford University's expert in the Dead Sea Scrolls and early Judaica),²⁶ Joseph Fitzmyer (an American Catholic professor regarded as an authority in Aramaic and Gospel studies),²⁷ and Klaus Beyer (the learned German author of the most comprehensive modern study [779 pages!] of Aramaic texts and dialects),²⁸ to mention just a few. The only scholarly monograph in the last thirty years devoted primarily to the subject of the spoken language of Jesus, viz., the German work of Gunther Schwarz, "*Und Jesu Sprach,*" categorically argues *for* Aramaic and *against* Hebrew;²⁹ and a recent article by Johannes C. de Moor, a leading Semitic scholar in the Netherlands, claims that only when the words of Jesus are retroverted to Literary Aramaic (i.e., borrowing extensively from early Targumic traditions), does the full force and beauty of the Lord's teachings emerge.³⁰ Chaim Rabin, a noted Israeli Semitist, does believe that "in Jerusalem and Judaea mishnaic Hebrew was still the ruling language [during the time of Jesus], and Aramaic took second place." Yet, he continues, "the situation must have been reversed in areas such as the coastal plain and Galilee."³¹

Biven and Blizzard quote Pinchas E. Lapide in support of their position regarding an original Hebrew Gospel (41f.). However, his fully articulated position largely accords with what has been stated above: "In the days of Jesus the common language of most Palestinian Jews was Aramaic, . . . and [it] was the source of most of the semiticisms in the New Testament. But Hebrew remained the language of worship, of the Bible, and of religious discourse; in a word, it remained the sacred language (*lšwn hqdwš*) well into the period of the early Church. Otherwise it would be impossible to account for the great number of hebraisms in the New Testament . . ."³²

Remarks like this are much more in keeping with the current state of scholarly opinion. Thus James Barr, a sober philologist of international stature, could say concisely: “On the question, in what language the teaching of Jesus was given, an increasing number of scholars in recent years has considered Hebrew as a responsible hypothesis, though the evidence for Aramaic continues to be rather stronger.”³³ More negatively, regarding the question of the language which most probably underlies the Gospels, D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris -- respected evangelical New Testament scholars -- state: “In very recent times, a small number have argued that Hebrew (not Aramaic) underlies the canonical gospels, but this proposal has been rightly dismissed by the overwhelming majority of those who have looked into the matter.”³⁴

Of course, the views expressed by these and other scholars do not constitute proof. Yet they do raise an important question: How decisive can the “pro-Hebrew” arguments presented by Biven and Blizzard possibly be? And, if there is abundant data which supports the Aramaic theory, is it right to disparage and belittle those who hold to it (see *Difficult Words*, 33)?

There is, in fact, much evidence which can be marshalled in favor of “The Aramaic Theory,” as the following divergent examples will illustrate: 1) Acts 1:19 makes reference to the toponym Akeldama, noting that the people of Jerusalem “called that field *in their language* Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.” Of course, it is only in Aramaic that Akeldama (*hakele dama*) means “field of blood.” Thus, in a most casual way, the reader is informed that Aramaic was commonly spoken in Jerusalem.³⁵ 2) Mark 4:12, citing Isa. 6:9, does not follow the Masoretic Text, nor is it in harmony with the Septuagint (or even the citations of Isa. 6:9 elsewhere in the Synoptics); rather, the rendering of Isa. 6:9 in Mark 4:12 agrees closely with the reading preserved in the Aramaic Targum.³⁶ This is only one of many examples where it is Aramaic, Targumic traditions which elucidate the meaning and/or background of specific verses in the Greek New Testament³⁷ (not to mention the contribution to New Testament studies which has been made by the

discovery of Qumran Aramaic).³⁸ 3) The meaning of the Greek verb *eurisko*, “to find,” may occasionally point back to an idiomatic usage (technically, a verbal calque) of Aramaic *'askah*, “to find > to be able.” Thus, Luke 6:7^b, which is literally, “so that they might *find* an accusation against him,” would better be rendered, “so that they might *be able* to accuse him.”³⁹ If accepted, this could be explained only as an Aramaism, not a Hebraism. Unfortunately, the reader of *Difficult Words* would be led to believe that such examples -- which could easily be multiplied -- do not even exist.

The strongest and most useful section of *Difficult Words* is Chapter Five, “Extra-Biblical Evidence for Hebrew” (45-78), where Biven and Blizzard present their case for Hebrew as *the* literary language of first century Jews living in the Land. Yet, because of their polemical tone, they often overstate their case, leaving the reader with erroneous impressions regarding the current scholarly consensus. This is a constant fault of Biven and Blizzard’s book: *Any positive contribution that could have been made to Gospel scholarship is vitiated by the authors' polemics.* For this same reason, *Difficult Words* cannot serve as a reliable guide -- or even helpful resource -- for the untrained pastor, teacher, or layman.

At the beginning of Chapter Five, Biven and Blizzard state: “An impressive amount of extra-biblical evidence points to the use of Hebrew in first-century Israel: the testimony of the church fathers, the Dead Sea Scrolls, coins, and inscriptions from the first centuries B.C.-A.D., the writings of Josephus, and Rabbinic Literature” (45). Once again, however, these broad, sweeping statements need correction. With regard to “the testimony of the church fathers,” it should be noted that virtually all of the fathers cited (Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius, Epiphanius; *Difficult Words*, 46-48) were apparently following the *single testimony* of Papias (60-130 C.E.), bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor, whom Eusebius quoted as writing: “Matthew put down the words of the Lord in the Hebrew language [*hebraidi dialektō*], and others have translated [or, interpreted] them, each as best he could.” With the exception of Jerome, none of the other church fathers seemed to have

any first hand knowledge of Matthew's "original" gospel; they were simply repeating what they had heard.⁴⁰ Moreover, the statement of Papias is open to widely divergent interpretations,⁴¹ and Jerome's own testimony is difficult to evaluate, since he makes reference to either *two* or *three* different gospels, called by various names, which he either saw, translated, or transcribed, and apparently *none* of these gospels is our canonical Matthew!⁴² In addition to this, one of the gospels which he saw was actually written in *Aramaic*, not Hebrew.⁴³

As far as the Dead Sea Scrolls are concerned, the fact that Hebrew documents at Qumran and Wadi Murabba'at far outnumber Aramaic documents does not indicate that most original (Jewish) writing of the day was carried out in Hebrew. This phenomenon could just as well be explained by remembering that the Qumran sectarians saw themselves, *sui generis*, as the rightful heirs of Moses and the Prophets (cf. esp. the Temple Scroll!); hence Hebrew, the sacred tongue, would be their primary literary language.⁴⁴ In spite of this, the Scrolls serve as a remarkable repository of ancient Palestinian *Aramaic*, and they can be used to argue for extensive first century literary output in *either* Hebrew or Aramaic.⁴⁵ As for the inscriptional evidence, recent studies indicate a preponderance of Aramaic over both Hebrew and Greek, especially in Galilee.⁴⁶ With regard to the writings of Josephus, it has been previously noted that they provide no conclusive data.⁴⁷ In fact, as noted immediately above (end of n. 44), when Josephus referred to his "vernacular tongue" in the introduction to his *Jewish War* (I.3), it is almost certain that he meant Aramaic.⁴⁸

More important to Biven and Blizzard, however, is the evidence of the rabbinic literature, which is of paramount concern to their case. According to the authors, "The largest and most significant body of written [*sic!*] material from the time of Jesus is known as 'Rabbinic Literature.' Except for isolated words or sentences, it is written entirely in Hebrew. . . . It may come as a surprise to some, but *most* of the difficult passages or problems confronted in New Testament studies could be solved through a

knowledge of Rabbinic Literature. Many of Jesus' sayings have their *parallels* in Rabbinic Literature" (69f., my italics). Yet most of what is commonly known as "rabbinic literature" received its primary shaping in the centuries after Jesus,⁴⁹ and the Mishnah -- composed almost entirely in Hebrew, and representing some of the earliest strata of rabbinic literature⁵⁰ -- does not reflect the general linguistic situation of Palestinian Jews in the first two centuries of this era, since it presents a picture almost diametrically opposed to that which is provided by almost all other contemporary literary and epigraphic sources. In other words, *in no contiguous inscriptions, ossuaries, letters, or other literary productions was Hebrew used to the virtual exclusion of Aramaic or Greek* (as is the case in the Mishnah and early halakhic midrashim).⁵¹

Of course, almost no one today would deny that Hebrew was a living language in Jesus' day, nor would many deny that Jesus Himself knew and used Hebrew. And there is certainly nothing wrong with arguing for either a Hebrew original to our canonical Gospel of Matthew, or an original Hebrew "Life of Jesus" (a central thesis of the authors). Scholars have been debating these and similar issues for decades -- if not centuries.⁵² None of these points is either new or problematic. What is problematic is this: Biven and Blizzard seem to put far more confidence in the veracity and accuracy of the rabbinic texts than they do in the veracity and accuracy of the Greek New Testament. They put more stock in the alleged words of, e.g., a second-century Palestinian rabbi (like Rabbi Akiva), as quoted by a fifth-century Babylonian sage (like Rav Ashi), than they do in the words of a first-century Palestinian rabbi (Jesus!) as quoted by a first-century Palestinian disciple (like Mark). This is not only unscientific;⁵³ it is positively unsound, inevitably leading to a subservience of the message of the New Testament to that of the later rabbis.⁵⁴ Moreover, incredulous leaps of logic are sometimes called for, illustrated by Biven's treatment of Mat. 11:12 (admittedly a difficult passage). He states that the "key to its understanding turns out to be an old rabbinic interpretation (*midrash*) of Micah 2:13 discovered by Professor Flusser," wherein "the 'breach-maker' [of Mic.

2:13] is interpreted as being Elijah, and ‘their king’ as the Messiah, the Branch of the Son of David” (123f.). From this Biven deduces that, although “Jesus does not refer directly to his own role as the shepherd leading the sheep out, *no listener could possibly misunderstand Jesus’ stunning assertion -- I am the LORD*” (125, my italics).

Aside from the fact that it is misleading to say that Flusser “discovered” this “old rabbinic interpretation” -- it is found in Radak’s twelfth century commentary to Micah (as noted by the authors), and was widely discussed over 100 years ago by Christian scholars⁵⁵ -- there is no attempt to *date* this scant and unattributed midrashic comment. For all we know, it could postdate Matthew by 500 years! How then can it possibly be used with any certainty to elucidate the words of Jesus,⁵⁶ especially when the new interpretation that emerges -- viz., an unqualified assertion by Jesus that He is Yahweh -- is so far from the text and foreign to the context? This is hardly an example of careful exegesis.

Biven and Blizzard also give the largely false impression that New Testament scholars have barely begun to utilize the abundant rabbinic data at their disposal. On the contrary, having used rabbinic texts quite freely for well over a century,⁵⁷ New Testament scholars are now becoming aware of the *difficulties* involved in the utilization of this material in the elucidation of the New Testament.⁵⁸ In fact, of the non-controversial, New Testament exegetical examples offered by Biven and Blizzard in Chapters Six, Eight,⁵⁹ and the Appendix, similar interpretations can readily be found in standard New Testament commentaries and scholarly works.⁶⁰

Yet these methodological concerns pale when compared to the fundamental thesis of the authors, as presented in Chapter Seven, “Recovering the Original Hebrew Gospel” (93-103).⁶¹ Following Lindsey, who along with David Flusser is the doyen of the Jerusalem School, Biven and Blizzard posit a novel sequence of gospel transmission:⁶² STEP ONE -- “Within five years of the death and resurrection of Jesus, his words were recorded in Hebrew (tradition states by the Apostle Matthew).”⁶³ This was “a simple and

straightforward Hebrew biography . . . approximately 30-35 chapters in length.” STEP TWO -- “Almost immediately,” so as to meet the need of the Greek-speaking churches outside the Land of Israel, a “slavishly literal” (yet greatly lengthened) translation of the Hebrew *Life of Jesus* was made. STEP THREE -- “Within a few years, very probably at Antioch, the stories, and frequently elements within the stories, found in this Greek translation were separated from one another, and then these fragments were rearranged topically (What remained were fragments that were often divorced from their original and more meaningful contexts.)” STEP FOUR -- “Shortly thereafter, a fluent Greek author, using this topically arranged text, attempted to reconstruct its fragmented elements and stories in order to produce a gospel with some chronological order. . . . In the process of reconstruction, he improved its (Step Three’s) grammatically poor Greek, as well as shortening it considerably” (94-95).

What then were the sources for our canonical gospels? “It was only . . . the ‘topical’ text (Step Three), and the ‘reconstructed’ text (Step Four), that were the sources used by our writer Luke. Mark followed Luke’s work and Matthew utilized Mark’s. . . . However, the texts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke show they did not have access to the original Hebrew *Life of Jesus* (Step One), or to the first Greek translation of the *Life* (Step Two). The Hebrew *Life* was lost . . . “ (95).

The implications of this theory of the Jerusalem School are far reaching in the extreme. In fact, they cause the problems which surround Lindsey’s argument for the priority of Luke,⁶⁴ as well as questions regarding the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek *Urtext* of the gospels, to fade into insignificance. Let it be stated clearly: The theories of gospel transmission presented in *Difficult Words* do not belong to what is commonly called “lower criticism” (i.e., textual criticism), but rather are part of a radical form of “higher criticism.”⁶⁵ They do not simply seek to uncover the literary, oral or editorial history which might underlie the Synoptics. Rather, they posit that the Greek text of the Synoptics is often misleading and incomplete, and it is the alleged Hebrew original that is

most truthful and trustworthy. *These theories, if carried to their logical conclusions, would absolutely undercut the authority of the Greek New Testament, since according to Biven and Blizzard, our canonical (Synoptic) gospels are uninspired reconstructions based on other reconstructions of translations which are themselves reconstructions.*⁶⁶

In light of this, one can only wonder how accurate our Synoptic gospels could possibly be. In what sense could they be an “infallible rule of faith and life”?⁶⁷ It is one thing to point out that behind our current Greek Synoptics there are widely varied source materials.⁶⁸ It is another thing entirely to follow Biven and Blizzard and argue that the *source materials alone* are accurate (and hence, authoritative), and that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are error-filled, often chronologically-incorrect, texts. Although evangelical textual critics hold only to the complete inspiration of the so-called original autographs, they also believe in God’s providential oversight in the process of transmission and canonization. In other words, while there may be some minor errors of textual transmission in our current manuscripts, these manuscripts provide accurate and trustworthy copies of the original “Word.” What scholars of the Jerusalem School imply is that even the original autographs of the Greek Synoptics are faulty!

For example, Brad Young, a professor at Oral Roberts University and one of David Flusser’s top students, argues that Mat. 21:43 is a late redactional insertion which “distorts” the meaning of the preceding parable, contradicting Matthew’s generally positive attitude “toward the Jewish people as well as the law.” Young adds, “Certainly, Paul would not have accepted this radical approach (Rom. 9:4-5).”⁶⁹ Taking this a step further, Flusser, detecting an anti-Jewish bias in the final redaction of Matthew, could state that, “Matthew’s *fabrication* [i.e., the alleged addition of Mat. 8:11f.] is so *subtle* and *clever* that his bias is not obvious . . .”⁷⁰ According to Flusser, Matthew (i.e., the final redactor of that Gospel) was “evidently a Gentile and is the oldest witness of a vulgar approach which caused much harm to the Jews and did not promote a true understanding of the very essence of the Christian message.” In fact, all passages in the Synoptics

“where tension against Jews and Judaism is felt . . . were introduced only at the Greek stage of its development.”⁷¹ It is “practically certain,” argues Flusser, that Matthew, along with these other late, Greek redactors, was part of a “pseudo-Christian group” whose ideology was “only loosely connected with the gist of Christian belief and in many ways contradicts genuine Christian values.”⁷² And what is the source for determining true Christian beliefs and values? The reconstructed Synoptics of the Jerusalem School!

What then can be made of the exhortation of Biven and Blizzard, urging that “no effort should be spared in correcting every mistranslation and in clarifying every misinterpretation of *the inspired text*” (117, my italics)?⁷³ Which “inspired text” are they referring to? Is it the alleged original “Life of Jesus” (a text which exists with certainty only in the minds of those who are attempting to reconstruct it)? Or is it our Greek New Testament which is the “inspired text”? If so, how can it be rife with mistranslations and misinterpretations? Biven and Blizzard -- along with “evangelical” scholars of a similar ilk -- owe it to their constituency to clarify where they stand on these critical issues.⁷⁴ Are our Greek Synoptics authoritative and trustworthy or not?⁷⁵

According to Lindsey’s reconstruction, the Greek Synoptics are *not* primarily based on eye-witness testimonies or first-hand records; with rare exception, they do *not* have access to the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus (in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek); and the Gospel of Mark -- generally considered by New Testament scholars to be the earliest of the Synoptics -- is actually *five steps* removed from the original Hebrew “Life of Jesus” (97). Yet Biven and Blizzard note that when Lindsey began his translation of Mark into modern Hebrew, he was surprised to discover “that the Greek word order and idiom [of Mark] was more like Hebrew than literary Greek” (93f.).⁷⁶ In fact, the authors confidently assert that, “Often whole sentences, even whole passages, of our Gospels translate *word for word* right back into the *original Hebrew*” (83, my italics). What an amazing claim!⁷⁷

Almost 100 years ago, the Jewish Semitic scholar D. S. Margoliouth attempted to translate the Greek text of Ecclesiasticus (Ben Sira) back into Hebrew. He knew for a fact from the prologue to Ben Sira that it had been translated into Greek directly from a Hebrew original, and he had at his disposal not only the Greek text, but Syriac and Latin translations as well. Yet when sizable portions of a Hebrew Ben Sira were discovered in the Cairo Geniza, it was found that he *did not correctly translate even one single verse!*⁷⁸

Back-translation (called “*Rückübersetzung*” in German) is extremely touchy business, even when we are dealing with sources that are only *one step* removed from the original.⁷⁹ But to postulate that accurate *Rückübersetzung* can be carried out from sources *four* or *five* steps removed from the alleged original is almost unthinkable.⁸⁰ And it is entirely out of the question to suggest that wholesale *reconstruction* -- not just retranslation -- of an alleged original text (here, the “Life of Jesus”) can be carried out from such a distance.⁸¹ Such an effort can only be viewed as *pure conjecture*. To reconstruct the original Hebrew or Aramaic text of even the Lord’s Prayer -- based on the extant witness of Matthew and Luke -- is fraught with difficulty.⁸² To attempt to reconstruct the *entire* (alleged) *original Hebrew Gospel* -- without access to even the supposed primary Greek sources -- is nothing more than a counsel of despair.

Biven and Blizzard supply an example of Lindsey’s alleged original “Life of Jesus” (98-101 -- “The Mary and Martha Story Reconstructed”). Yet it not only involves a totally theoretical rearranging of texts that goes far beyond a Synoptic harmony; it asserts that without this rearrangement, we would not even know what Jesus often meant.⁸³ I fail to see how the Jerusalem School can claim that the results of its research “are confirming the authenticity of the Gospel texts.”⁸⁴ Rather, its research seems to lead to a very different conclusion than that expressed many years ago by the great Aramaic scholar, Gustaf Dalman. Based on the very probable fact that Jesus and His disciples were quite familiar with Greek, Dalman asserted that “we gain the confident certainty that the Gospels present an essentially faithful reproduction of the genuine thoughts of Jesus.

There is no necessity for conjecture concerning their original form, possessing, as we do, in the Greek text a sound bridge over the gap between us and it.”⁸⁵ Readers of *Difficult Words* would be left with a quite different impression, viz., that the current Greek text is anything but a “sound bridge” to the original words of the Lord.

It is impossible to interact here with all the examples of supposed mistranslations and misinterpretations offered by Biven and Blizzard. Let it simply be reiterated that Chapter Eight, “Theological Error Due to Mistranslation,” was removed in its entirety from the Spanish version of *Difficult Words*, and that almost all of the novel interpretations proposed by Biven and Blizzard are based on either: 1) faulty treatment of the Greek;⁸⁶ 2) exaggeration of the alleged difficulty of the extant Greek text;⁸⁷ 3) problems arising because of King James English;⁸⁸ 4) overly simplistic usage of rabbinic texts;⁸⁹ or 5) failure to reckon with other, more satisfactory interpretations to the text.⁹⁰

This is not to say that no positive contributions have been made by the authors, nor is it to deny their scholarly credentials nor their evident zeal for their task. And it is to be hoped that, in spite of Biven and Blizzard’s polemical style, some of their arguments would help the educated readership to look into the question of the possible Hebrew substratum of the Synoptics. But one cannot overlook the massive flaws of the book (and with it, some of the weaknesses inherent in the approach of the Jerusalem School):

1) Any serious study of the Semitic background to the Greek New Testament *must* take into account the pervasive influence of the Septuagint, both syntactically as well as lexicographically.⁹¹ This the authors have not done. They have also grossly exaggerated the translation technique of the Septuagint, claiming that Greek translators “in those days” would always use the same Greek word to translate a given Hebrew word, even when contextually inappropriate.⁹² 2) The failure of Biven and Blizzard to incorporate the rich results of Aramaic studies for the elucidation of New Testament texts seriously mars their approach. This is part of what I term “linguistic Zionism.” 3) The confidence with which whole verses -- not to mention entire texts -- are retroverted into Hebrew is

unacceptable.⁹³ 4) In keeping with this, the cavalier method with which the Greek New Testament is handled is to be deplored.⁹⁴ 5) The authors' simplistic usage of rabbinic parallels must be rejected as unscientific, since it fails to account for the varieties of Judaism which existed in the time of Jesus,⁹⁵ nor does it take seriously the difficult nature of determining the date, accuracy, and provenance of any given rabbinic saying.⁹⁶ 6) The overall thesis of Biven and Blizzard, viz., that *the* authoritative record of the life of Jesus is to be found in a (presently) non-existent Hebrew text which must be reconstructed from relatively distant sources threatens to undermine the authority of the Greek New Testament.⁹⁷

For all these reasons, *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus* is to be most seriously discommended. To the extent that it accurately represents the hermeneutical approach and overall methodology of the Jerusalem School, the constructive nature of the School's work must also be questioned. In fact, a word of warning is in order: It has often been demonstrated that once belief in the reliability of the biblical text has been surrendered, within one generation, established tenets of the faith also begin to be surrendered, notwithstanding the disclaimers of those of the first generation.⁹⁸ Will a similar scenario be repeated here? Will fundamental beliefs in, e.g., the person and work of Jesus, the teaching of Paul, or the message of John soon be questioned? There is some disquieting evidence which suggests that this scenario is already unfolding. It is hoped that evangelicals interested in the work of the Jerusalem School would be wise -- and beware.⁹⁹

¹ It was first published in 1983 by the Makor Foundation (Arcadia, CA), and was still in print at the time of this writing.

² Robert Lindsey wrote the book's foreword, and the back cover carries positive comments from Marvin R. Wilson (Gordon College), David Flusser and Amihai Mazar (Hebrew University), William Sanford La Sor (Fuller Theological Seminary), and W. T. Purkiser (Point Loma College). It was favorably received in a well documented review article by Weston W. Fields, "Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus," *Grace Theological Journal* 5.2 (1984), 271-288.

³ Biven and Blizzard echo the claim of David Flusser, that "there are hundreds of Semitisms (Semitic idioms) in the Synoptic Gospels which could only be Hebrew, but there are no Semitisms which could only be Aramaic without also being good Hebrew" (40). This runs contrary to the general scholarly consensus.

⁴ I call this peculiar emphasis that pervades the book "linguistic Zionism." Wouldn't it have been more natural for the authors to use the word "Jewish" in the sentence quoted above? Why the tremendous stress on *Hebrew*?

⁵ In contrast to the authors' dogmatism on the question of the alleged original, *written* Hebrew Gospel, they are more moderate regarding the *spoken language* of Jesus, stating that "Hebrew was also, *very likely*, the spoken language of Jesus" (27, my italics).

⁶ Cf. the representative conclusions of Elliot C. Maloney, *Semitic Interference in Marcan Syntax* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), who notes that Mark's gospel evidences a large number of Hebraisms and Aramaisms, as well as Semitic features to be traced to the influence of the Septuagint, noting that "syntactical Semitic interference [from either Hebrew, Aramaic, or the Septuagint] permeates every page of the gospel" (245). See also below, n. 12.

⁷ R. H. Charles claimed that the Greek of the Book of Revelation is "unlike any Greek that was ever penned by mortal man" [*The Revelation of Saint John*, ICC [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920], Vol. 1, xlv]. Yet Revelation is *not* a translation; it is rather an example of a *Semitic* author with an intimate knowledge of the *Hebrew* Scriptures writing in *Greek*; cf. Steven Thompson, *The Apocalypse and Semitic Syntax*, SNTSMS 52 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985); and note G. Mussies, *The Morphology of Koine Greek as used in the Apocalypse of St. John: a Study in Bilingualism*, NT Sup. 27 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971).

⁸ "The Original Language of Qohelet," repr. in his *The Word and the Book. Studies in Biblical Literature and Language* (New York: Ktav, 1976), 233f. He aptly points out that, "One has only to compare a difficult verse in the Hebrew of *Hosea*, *Ezekiel* or *Job* with any English version to see how the manifold difficulties of the Hebrew 'disappear' in the smooth English renderings" (*ibid.*, 234). Several of Gordis' other articles reprinted in *The Word and the Book* are germane to the discussion at hand; see, "The Translation Theory of Qohelet Re-examined," 249-262; "Qohelet -- Hebrew or Aramaic," 263-279; "Was Qohelet a Phoenician?," 280-291; and "Qoheleth and Qumran -- A Study in Style," 292-307.

⁹ Cf. Turner's *Christian Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982). While Turner's Greek scholarship is not disputed, most scholars would not agree with the extent of his dependence on the Septuagint.

¹⁰ Robert Lisle Lindsey, *A Hebrew Translation of the Gospel of Mark* (2nd. ed., Jerusalem: Dugith Publishers, 1973), 50.

¹¹ As represented in, e.g., Roy Blizzard's *Yavo Digest* or the Jerusalem School's *Jerusalem Perspective*.

¹² Cf. also Moises Silva, *Biblical Words and their Meaning. An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 52-73. A careful reading of Silva's chapter, "Semantic Change and the Role of the Septuagint," would bring a needed corrective to the theories discussed in the present article. (It should be noted here that I do not for a moment question the great learning of men like Robert Lindsey or David Flusser; it is with some of their methodology that I differ.)

¹³ This last point is summarily stated in Chapter Four, "Recent Linguistic Research," 38-43.

¹⁴ Cf. also John 5:2, 19:13, and 20:17, all of which are either definitely Aramaic (*Bethzatha* and *Gabbatha*) or probably Aramaic (*rabbouni*); yet John refers to all of them as "Hebrew" (*hebraisti*). The counter-arguments of Fields, "Difficult Words," 274-75, are not persuasive. Note also that *`ibrit* ("Hebrew") in b. Megillah 18a may mean Aramaic; cf. Rashi, *ad loc*; Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midraschic Literature* (repr., New York: Judaica Press, 1975), 1040; Abraham Even-Shoshan, *HaMilon HeHadas* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1986), 3:952. While other interpretations of *`ibrit* in Meg. 18a are possible, it certainly cannot mean "Hebrew" in that context.

¹⁵ See Emil Schurer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.--A.D. 135)*, rev. Eng. vers. by Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, and Matthew Black (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979), 2:22, and 28, n. 118. Biven and Blizzard follow the important study of Jehoshua M. Grintz, "Hebrew as the Spoken and Written Language in the Last Days of the Second Temple," *JBL* 79 (1960), 32-47 (esp. 42-45), and deny that Josephus ever used *hebraisti*, etc., to mean anything but Aramaic. But the arguments of Grintz can be controverted; for a brief discussion, cf. J. A. Emerton, "Did Jesus Speak Hebrew?," *Journal of Theological Studies* N.S., 12 (1961), 193-94 and 201-02.

¹⁶ Cf. John 19:20, where *romaisti* (lit., "Roman") means "Latin" (the language of the Romans).

¹⁷ As to the question of why only certain Semitic words of Jesus have been preserved in our Greek texts, as well as whether these words reflect important Hebrew expressions (possibly *ephphatha*?) transmitted in an original Aramaic (or Greek text), or important Aramaic expressions (e.g., *talitha koum[i]*) transmitted in an original Hebrew (or Greek text), see J. A. Emerton, "Did Jesus Speak Hebrew?," 197-98 (refuting Harris Birkeland, *The Language of Jesus*); *idem.*, "The Problem of Vernacular Hebrew in the First Century A.D. and the Language of Jesus," *JTS* N.S. 24 (1973), 19-20; Isaac Rabinowitz, "'Be Opened' = *ephphatha* (Mark 7 34): Did Jesus Speak Hebrew?," *ZNW* 53 (1962), 237-38.

¹⁸ See already A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek Language in the Light of Historical Research* (4th ed., Nashville: Broadman, 1934), for a list of words in the Greek New Testament considered to be of Hebrew (95-96) and Aramaic (105-06) origin.

¹⁹ This would include *mammonas*, *rabbi*, *Beelzeboub*, *korban(as)*, *satanas*, *raca*, *batos*, *koros*, *Boanerges*, and *more*. (Of course, *more* may simply be Greek; see the standard lexicons and commentaries for discussion.)

²⁰ That is, although originally Hebrew, they were already borrowed into Greek by the time of the Septuagint, and through that medium, made their way into the Greek New Testament. This would include *libanos*, *ouai*, *sukaminos* (listed incorrectly in *Difficult Words*, 33, as occurring in Luke 12:5; the correct reference is Luke 17:6), and *amen*.

²¹ "Common Semitic" refers to words which are common to the various Semitic languages, and thus may have entered Greek (including the Septuagint) through Aramaic just as easily (probably more easily) as through Hebrew. Here would be included *kuminon*, *zizanion*, and *muron*.

²² See *Difficult Words*, 32. Biven and Blizzard present the common argument that Jesus must have said *Eli, Eli*, not *Eloi, Eloi*, since "the people hearing the words thought Jesus was calling Elijah" (*'eliyahu* in Hebrew). But the explanation of Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 54, is sufficient: "Clarity cannot be expected of the cry of a crucified man at the point of death." Moreover, as has often been noted, the presence of Hebrew *'el* in an Aramaic sentence is not exceptional; cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 103, for evidence from Qumran.

²³ Cf. Emerton, "Did Jesus Speak Hebrew?," 199f.

²⁴ The definite article in Aramaic is expressed by the final *a'*; hence scholars have associated these Greek words containing final *a* with Aramaic. Thus, Greek *sikera* is thought to derive from Aramaic *sikra'*, not Hebrew *sekar*.

²⁵ It should be pointed out here that the presence of even dozens of Aramaic loan words in the Greek New Testament would not necessarily demonstrate that the words of Jesus were originally spoken or written in Aramaic. Even Biven and Blizzard would fully accept the pervasive influence of Aramaic on both Hebrew and Semitized Greek. Thus there is no reason for them to make such strenuous attempts to downplay or deny the presence of Aramaic place names, loan words, or the like. I only take the time to refute their claims so as to expose the tenuous nature of some of their statements.

²⁶ ". . . there can be little doubt that Jesus himself spoke Galilean Aramaic" (*Jesus the Jew*, 53f.); cf. also Schurer, Vermes, *et al.*, *History of the Jewish People*, Vol. II, 20-28.

²⁷ "I should maintain that the most commonly used language of Palestine in the first century A.D. was Aramaic, but that many Palestinian Jews, not only those in Hellenistic towns, but farmers and craftsmen of less obviously Hellenized areas used Greek, at least as a second language. . . . But pockets of Palestinian Jews also used Hebrew, even though its use was not widespread" (*Wandering Aramean*, 46); for full discussion, see *ibid.*, "The Study of the Aramaic Background of the New Testament," 1-27, and "The Languages of Palestine in the First Century A.D.," 29-56.

²⁸ Cf. *Die aramaische Texte vom Toten Meer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), 55-58, where Beyer deals with the cessation (!) of Hebrew as a colloquial language by the time of Jesus (55: "Bedenkt man, dass in den grosseren Stadten auch das Griechische gebraucht wurde, so ist es schwierig, eine Gegend zu finden, wo zur Zeit Jesus noch hebraisch gesprochen worden sein konnte.") In my judgment, Beyer has overstated his case; but his densely argued lines of reasoning (pages 56-58 are virtually one extended footnote) deserve careful attention; cf. also *idem*, *Semitische Syntax in Neuen Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962).

²⁹ "Und Jesu sprach." *Untersuchungen zur aramaischen Urgestalt der Worte Jesus* (BWANT 118; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1987²). While many of Schwarz' arguments are not convincing, his book is a mine of useful information.

³⁰ "The Reconstruction of the Aramaic Original of the Lord's Prayer," 397-422, in Willem van der Meer & Johannes C. de Moor, eds., *The Structural Analysis of Biblical and Canaanite Poetry* (JSOT Suppl. Series 74; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988). On 397 de Moor states: "Of course nobody [!] doubts that Jesus will have spoken the Palestinian-Aramaic vernacular in daily life." Rather, de Moor's question has to do with the language Jesus used in his *teaching*: Although "very few people still spoke and understood Hebrew," Jesus could have chosen "Hebrew when he was discoursing upon religious matters," just as "the learned scribes of his time" also did (*ibid.*) De Moor, however, rejects this possibility in favor of Literary Aramaic.

³¹ "Hebrew and Aramaic in the First Century," in S. Safrai and M. Stern, eds., *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum. The Jewish People in the First Century*, Vol. Two (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 1036. Rabin's important chapter, 1007-1039, highlights the difficulties involved in determining the precise extent of *oral* bilingualism in first century Palestine. The linguistic situation posited by him (along with other contemporary scholars), viz., that Jesus would have used Mishnaic Hebrew in synagogical and legal discussions, but that His "home language" in Galilee would have been Aramaic seems plausible. Of course, this does not indicate whether His teachings would have been recorded in either Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek (or all three! On this cf. Robert H. Gundry, "The Language Milieu of First Century Palestine. Its Bearing on the Authenticity of the Gospel Tradition," *JBL* 83 [1964], 404-408.). Rabin's conclusions, however, are colored by the fact that he believes "that the authors and redactors of the Gospels unwittingly described, in the few references to language in their account, conditions of the post-70 period rather than those of the time of the events" (1037), i.e., conditions which, according to Rabin, reflect the ascendancy of Aramaic over against Hebrew.

³² *Hebrew in the Church*, ET Errol F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 1. Cf. also Max Wilcox, "Semitisms in the New Testament," in W. Haase, ed., *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II.25.2 (Berlin: Topelmann, 1984), 978-1029.

³³ "Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek in the Hellenistic Age," in W. D. Davies and Louis Finkelstein, eds., *The Cambridge History of Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), 83. See more fully, *idem*, "Which Language did Jesus speak? -- Some remarks of a Semitist," *BJRL* 53 (1970-71), 9-29. For a summary of scholarship through 1967, cf. also H. Ott, "Um die Muttersprache Jesu Forschungen seit Gustaf Dalman," *NT* 9 (1967), 1-25.

³⁴ *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 68, n. 13. (My colleague, Stephen Homcy, provided me with this reference.) Note also the assessment of the Catholic biblical scholar John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume One: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 266: the "clear presence of an Aramaic substratum in many of Jesus' sayings stands in stark contrast to the relative absence of Hebrew words and constructions (Hebraisms)."

³⁵ The usage of the Aramaic term *Maranatha* by the first believers would indicate that Aramaic was also their common Semitic language; cf. C. C. Torrey, "The Aramaic Period of the Nascent Christian Church," *ZNW* 44 (1952/53), 205-223.

³⁶ Not only is Heb. *rapa'* rendered as "forgive" -- in harmony with Targum Jonathan -- but as Robert Guelich, observes, "The Hebrew and Greek [i.e., Septuagint] text have the verbs in the second person; Mark and the Targum have the third person. And only the Targum has the participial equivalents of *blepontes* [seeing] and *akouontes* [hearing]," *Mark 1-8:26*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1989), 210. Cf. also Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967³), 211-12. This is

one of three instances in Targum Jonathan to Isa. where *rp'* is rendered with *šbq* as opposed to *'sy* (the other vv. being 53:5 and 57:18).

³⁷ For additional examples, see J. T. Forestell, C.S.B., *Targumic Traditions and the New Testament. An Annotated Bibliography with a New Testament Index* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1979), who provides an annotated bibliography of 362 books and articles written from 1930-1978, almost all of which touch on the relationship between Targumic and/or Aramaic research and New Testament studies, as well as a 53 page listing (keyed to the bibliography) of almost 800 New Testament verses which have been studied in the light of various Targumic traditions. For a standard (though flawed) discussion, cf. Black, *Aramaic Approach*; for a different methodology, cf. Bruce Chilton, *Targumic Approaches to the Gospels. Essays in the Mutual Definition of Judaism and Christianity* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986).

³⁸ Cf. Fitzmyer, "The Contribution of Qumran Aramaic to the New Testament," in *Wandering Aramean*, 85-113.

³⁹ Cf. Fitzmyer, *ibid.*, 12f. John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20* (WBC; Waco, TX: Word, 1989), 260, does not agree, arguing instead that the opponents of Jesus were literally on a "fact-finding mission . . . seeking out a basis on which to accuse him."

⁴⁰ Cf. the relevant discussion in A. F. J. Klijn and G. J. Reinink, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish-Christian Sects* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973).

⁴¹ *hebraidi dialektō* has been understood to mean Hebrew, Aramaic, and even heavily Semitized Greek; cf. George Howard, *The Gospel of Matthew according to a Primitive Hebrew Text* (Macon: Mercer Univ. Press, 1987), 155 (with literature); and W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 1* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 8-17, for a summary of recent scholarship; cf. also Carson, Moo, Morris, *Introduction*, 68.

⁴² On Jerome's testimony, see Klijn and Reinink, *Patristic Evidence*, 46-50 (with primary sources and translations, 198-229); and Howard, *Gospel of Matthew*, 158-160; as to the question of whether or not the gospels referred to by Jerome were apocryphal or canonical, see the works cited in Howard's lengthy bibliographical note, *ibid.*, 158-59, n. 10.

⁴³ Cf. Klijn and Reinink, *Patristic Evidence*, 27-28, 48, 50, 68, and note that an Aramaic gospel is also attested by Hegessipus (second century C.E.). This evidence refutes the statement of Biven and Blizzard that, "There exists no early church tradition whatsoever for a primitive Aramaic gospel" (48).

⁴⁴ While the authors of the Synoptics doubtless saw *themselves* as the rightful heirs of Moses and the Prophets, it can be argued that, by and large, their impetus in composing their texts was to disseminate the message of Jesus as widely as possible. Thus, Greek (or, in the first stage, Aramaic) would have been the most likely literary vehicle. This would parallel the literary history of Josephus' *Jewish War*: It was written first in Aramaic, *not* Hebrew (this is almost certain) and then adapted into Greek; cf. A. Schalit, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 10:254-55, cited in Barr, "Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek," 113 (cf. also *ibid.*, 112); and note the similar arguments of P. Nepper-Christensen, cited in Emerton, "Did Jesus Speak Hebrew?", 193.

⁴⁵ Fitzmyer, *Wandering Aramean*, 101f., lists 59 Aramaic fragments and compositions so far identified among the scrolls.

⁴⁶ Cf. John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 380, n. 13 (with reference to Joseph Naveh and Eric Meyers). My colleague, Stephen Homcy, provided me with this reference.

⁴⁷ They simply indicate that "Josephus sometimes refers to Hebrew and that he knows the differences between Hebrew and Aramaic" (Emerton, "Did Jesus Speak Hebrew?", 202; cf. above, nn. 15 and 44).

⁴⁸ Cf. H. St. John Thackeray's note to that effect in the Loeb edition of Josephus, and, more recently, the remark of Gaalya Cornfeld, ed., *Josephus: Jewish War* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 8, n. 3[c]: "The work was written in Aramaic for the benefit of the Jewish communities in Parthia. . . ." Does anyone hold that Josephus would have written in Hebrew for Jews in the Diaspora?

⁴⁹ For an excellent introduction, see H. L. Strack and G. Stemmer, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, ET Markus Bockmuehl (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991). Of course, most of the discussion in both of the Talmuds is carried out in Jewish-Aramaic dialects.

⁵⁰ It should be pointed out that Biven and Blizzard fail to mention that the earliest recorded "rabbinic" document, *Megillat Ta'anit* (first century C.E.?), along with important early prayers, like the Kaddish, were written in Aramaic. In favor of the authors' position, however, is the fact that virtually all rabbinic

parables were delivered in Hebrew, suggesting that Jesus, as a typical Jewish teacher of the day, would have followed suit (see *Difficult Words*, 73ff.). For an in depth study by an American representative of the Jerusalem School, see Brad H. Young, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables. Rediscovering the Roots of Jesus' Teaching* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989).

⁵¹ Cf. above, n. 27. It goes without saying that I am not returning to the (rightly abandoned) view that Mishnaic Hebrew was merely the scholastic language of the sages. I am only stating that the evidence at hand makes it highly doubtful that it was the *primary* language of the Jewish people in first-second century Palestine.

⁵² See the reference to the 1555 work of Johann Albert Widmanstadt, in Jean Carmignac, "Hebrew Translations of the Lord's Prayer: An Historical Survey," in Gary A. Tuttle, ed., *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies. Essays in Honor of William Sanford LaSor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 71, n. 5.

⁵³ Cf. , e.g., Phillip S. Alexander, "Rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament," *ZNW* 74 (1983), 237-246; and Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *JBL* 81 (1962), 1-13.

⁵⁴ The view of David Flusser, viz., that Christianity today "can renew itself out of Judaism and with the help of Judaism. Then it will become a humane religion" is somewhat programmatic. See "The Jewish-Christian Schism," reprinted in his *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 644.

⁵⁵ Cf. Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 303, n. 96.

⁵⁶ According to Biven, the sole author of the Appendix (119-169), Jesus "is not only hinting at Micah 2:13, but also at a well-known [*sic!*] rabbinic interpretation of it" (124).

⁵⁷ Culminating in Billerbeck's massive *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, I-IV (1922-1928); but cf. this remarkable quote from John Lightfoot's *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae* (1658-1674!): ". . . I have . . . concluded without the slightest hesitation that the best method to unravel the meaning of the many obscure passages of the New Testament is through research into the significance of the sayings in question in the ordinary dialect and way of thinking of the Jews . . . And this can be investigated only by means of consulting the authors of the Talmud" (quoted in Vermes, *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 60. The well known comment of Martin Luther (fifteenth century!) on the importance of the study of Hebrew for an adequate understanding of the New Testament is quoted in the front of both Lapidé's *Hebrew in the Church*, as well as in Scwarz' "*Und Jesu Sprach.*"

⁵⁸ It is true that most New Testament scholars have *not* also been competent Semitists; cf. Geza Vermes, *ibid.*, 58-73. Nonetheless, the problem with regard to the rabbinic literature has not so much been its lack of use, but rather its *misuse*; cf. *ibid.*, 74-88, and above, n. 53.

⁵⁹ Dwight Pryor, director of the Center for Judaic-Christian Studies, informed me that Chapter Eight, "Theological Error Due to Mistranslation," was deleted entirely from the Spanish translation.

⁶⁰ E.g., "single/sound/good eye" = "generous" and "not sound/evil eye" = "stingy" (Mat. 6:22-23; see *Difficult Words*, 36-37, and 144-45), has been the subject of lively discussion for decades, and it can be readily adduced from Septuagintal usage (cf. Prov. 22:9) or even from the Greek New Testament itself (cf. Rom. 12:8; 2 Cor. 8:2, 9:11, 13; Jam. 1:5; and Mat. 20:15) without any recourse to rabbinic literature. It should be noted, however, that many scholars who are intimately acquainted with the common arguments set forth by Biven and Blizzard do *not* wholly concur with the renderings "generous/stingy" (cf. recently Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount. A Foundation for Understanding* [Waco, TX: Word, 1982], 329ff.; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1*, 635-641, with bibliography on 665-66).

⁶¹ Even Fields, who was generally impressed with *Difficult Words* (see above, n. 2), could say: "Of all the innovations in the book, this is the one which may be hardest to accept. In fact, the entire chapter would probably have been better left out of the book" ("*Difficult Words*," 284; cf. above, n. 59, regarding Chapter Eight of *Difficult Words*). Fields tellingly adds: "there is still a lingering feeling that what we have is what we have, and that we should leave it as it is."

⁶² Cf. Robert Lisle Lindsey, "A Modified Two-Document Theory of the Synoptic Dependence and Interdependence," *NT* 6 (1963), 239-263; and *idem*, *Hebrew Translation of Mark*, 9-84. In spite of Lindsey's detailed argumentation, his theories have not received much attention from New Testament scholars; cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 1278, who quickly dismissed the work of, *inter alios*, Lindsey and Flusser, stating that it called for "all sorts of questionable analyses of Synoptic relations." C. S. Mann, *Mark*, AB (Garden City, NY:

Doubleday, 1985), 61-63, reviewed Lindsey's views (along with the divergent theory of W. R. Farmer) more fully; yet, while he found their hypotheses to be "persuasive," he concluded that they were both "inconclusive, and . . . attended with considerable difficulty" (63).

⁶³ As to the traditions concerning an early Hebrew gospel of Matthew, see above nn. 40-43 and accompanying text. The recent study of Randall Buth, "'EDAYIN/TOTE -- Anatomy of a Semitism in Jewish Greek,'" *Maarav* 5-6 (Spring, 1990 = *Stanislav Segert Festschrift*), 33-48, is much more nuanced in its approach, although one might question whether the conclusions arrived at go beyond the somewhat limited evidence surveyed. Buth acknowledges David Bivin's "helpful comments" on 33, n. 1.

⁶⁴ See above, n. 62.

⁶⁵ For the differences between lower and higher criticism in the context of New Testament studies, see conveniently Gordon D. Fee, "The Textual Criticism of the New Testament," and Donald Guthrie, "The Historical and Literary Criticism of the New Testament," in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 1, *Introductory Articles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 419-433, and 437-456.

⁶⁶ As stated by Biven and Blizzard: "Our canonical Gospels are based on Greek texts derived from the Greek translation of the original Hebrew story of the life of Jesus" (37).

⁶⁷ These words function almost as a "minimum credal confession" among evangelicals. In a candid and warm telephone conversation with Dr. Brad Young in November of 1991, he informed me that in his view our Greek New Testament is "the inspired rule of faith and life . . . the Word." For a comparison of these oral statements with Young's written work, cf. immediately below.

⁶⁸ Cf. Luke 1:1-4! And is there any study of the Synoptics today that does not deal with "Q"?

⁶⁹ *Jesus and His Jewish Parables*, 292: "Matthew allegorically connected the vineyard to the kingdom of God and thus distorted the message of the parable."

⁷⁰ "Two Anti-Jewish Montages," reprinted in his *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*, 557 (my italics).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 560.

⁷² "Matthew's 'Verus Israel,'" in *ibid.*, 573. Flusser encourages Christian readers who accept his arguments "to renounce these prejudices that belonged to the Matthean redactor." Young noted Flusser's study in his discussion of Mat. 21:43 (*Jesus and His Jewish Parables*, 292).

⁷³ This is from Chapter Eight of *Difficult Words*, for which see above, n. 59, where reference is made to the fact that this chapter was deleted from the Spanish translation of the book.

⁷⁴ In view of the fact that Dr. Blizzard is a popular teacher on Paul Crouch's international Trinity Broadcasting Network, and that David Biven is a regular contributor to the widely read *Ministries Today* magazine, some simple, clarifying, public statements from these authors would be of great value.

⁷⁵ Roy Blizzard's negative views on evangelical concepts of inspiration and the canon (see, e.g., "The Hebrew View of the Bible and Inspiration," *Yavo Digest*, 4/2 [1990], 1ff.) suggest that he might even have a problem with the words "trustworthy" and "authoritative" in reference to the Greek New Testament. Again, his response is welcomed.

⁷⁶ Interestingly enough, J. Grintz, whose 1961 study on "Hebrew as the Spoken and Written Language in the Last Days of the Second Temple" (see above, n. 15) is often utilized by the Jerusalem School, believed that Mark's Gospel "rests on an Aramaic background," and that it was written in Greek (i.e., *not* translated into Greek) "by one versed in Aramaic" (33, n. 3, my italics).

⁷⁷ Even more amazing is the comment of Biven and Blizzard on Luke 12:49-50: "These verses are not English, nor Greek; but pure, undisguised Hebrew" (127). Their own interpretation of this passage, spelled out in considerable detail (126-142), is farfetched, to say the least.

⁷⁸ Cf. Robert Gordis, *The Word and the Book*, 231.

⁷⁹ On the difficulties of recovering the "original" text of Ecclus. -- in spite of the important Hebrew manuscript of Ecclus. found at Masada -- cf. Benjamin S. Wright, *No Small Difference: Sirach's Relationship to its Hebrew Parent Text* (Septuagint and Cognate Studies 26; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989). Wright's book, along with the articles of Gordis (cf. above, n. 8), should be read by all those interested in the theories of the Jerusalem School. Biven and Blizzard's claim that it is "relatively easy to put the Greek [of the Synoptics] back into Hebrew" (143) may be true; but it is not true that it is "relatively easy" to put the Greek back into the *exact original wording* of the alleged Hebrew (or, Aramaic) *Urtext*.

⁸⁰ The problems involved in such an undertaking can be well illustrated by means of the children's game called "telehone" -- but played with the following rules: The first player speaks several sentences in German into the ear of the player to his right; that player then translates the words into Arabic and passes

them on secretly to the next player, who puts the Arabic sentences into a non-chronological, topical order and passes them on. The next player, who knows Arabic very well, improves the grammar of the previous player, shortens the sentences, attempts to put them back in their original order, and then whispers them into your ear. Now it's your turn: Translate these Arabic sentences back into the original German, *word for word*. You will need more than good luck to succeed in this endeavor! And playing this game with *written sources* would not make the task any easier, since the difficulties are created by the *distance* from the original source -- be it oral or written.

⁸¹ The efforts of, *inter alios*, C. C. Torrey, C. F. Burney, and F. Zimmermann to translate the Gospels (including the Gospel of John!) back into Aramaic have not met with much success either, although their primary goal was not *reconstruction*. Their work should not be confused with the writings of George Lamsa, more popular in nature, who claimed that the Peshitta, being the earliest extant Semitic witness to the Gospels, most accurately preserved the idiomatic understanding of the words of Jesus. Lamsa too has gained few scholarly followers.

⁸² Carmignac, "Hebrew Translations of the Lord's Prayer," 18-79, provides 68 different Hebrew versions, dating from the ninth century to 1976; one can also compare the Aramaic reconstructions of the Lord's Prayer by Fitzmyer (*Luke*, 901) and Scwarz ("Und Jesu Sprach," 209-226). R. M. Grant, in expressing skepticism regarding the ability of Aramaic scholars to reconstruct the alleged original wording of parts of the Gospels remarked that, "experts in Aramaic have a tendency to disagree as to what the original was" (*A Historical Introduction to the New Testament* [New York: Harper & Row, 1963], 41). The same can be said of experts in Hebrew!

⁸³ To cite just two examples, it is claimed that the "one thing" Jesus urged upon Martha as being all important was "to seek or desire above all else God's rule and salvation in our lives and in the lives of those around us," as taught in Mat. 6:33 and Luke 12:31, texts supplied in Lindsey's "longer context" (103). Then, in treating Mat. 5:20, the authors retrovert Greek *dikaisune* to Hebrew *sedaqah*, in the sense of "almsgiving." They justify this by noting that, "Mat. 5:20 fits naturally after Matthew 6:1. That must have been its location in the original Hebrew Gospel" (150ff.).

⁸⁴ This is stated in the brochure, "The Jerusalem School for the Study of the Synoptic Gospels." While Flusser wrote that "the historical accuracy of our Synoptic materials is on the whole very much greater than modern scholarship has tended to assert" (Foreword to Lindsey's *Hebrew Translation of Mark*, 7), he freely made reference to "dozens" of dramatizations in (e.g.) Mark "that we cannot make careful history out of" (*ibid.*). It seems, therefore, that his statements must be explained as meaning this: The Synoptics are more accurate than most *liberal* scholars have believed (but less accurate than most *evangelical* scholars have believed)!

⁸⁵ *Jesus-Jeschua: Studies in the Gospels* (ET Paul P. Levertoff; repr. New York: Ktav, 1971), 7. On the pervasive influence of the Greek language and culture on first century Judaea, see Martin Hengel (in collaboration with Christoph Markschies), *The 'Hellenization' of Judaea in the First Century after Christ* (ET John Bowden, Philadelphia: Trinity Press Int., 1989).

⁸⁶ In this category could be listed the treatment of Mat. 5:10 (113-116), where: 1) the authors adduce from the Greek text that believers are to seek persecution; 2) no mention is made of the fact that Greek *dioko* is semantically equivalent to Hebrew *radap* (both can mean either "pursue" or "persecute"); 3) a passive form in Greek is retroverted into an active form in Hebrew ("persecuted for righteousness' sake" becomes "pursue righteousness").

⁸⁷ Cf. the treatments of Mat. 5:20 (150-152); Mat. 5:17-18 (note especially 153-154: "Like so many other verses in our English Gospels it is incomprehensible. Nor are we any better off with the 'original' Greek of this verse. The Greek is just as impenetrable. As usual, the only solution is to put the Greek back into Hebrew."); Luke 9:51 (163-167). Note the strictures of R. M. Grant, *Historical Introduction*, 41, regarding Aramaic reconstructions of the Gospels; as summarized by Fitzmyer (*Wandering Aramean*, 15), Grant "claimed that one had to show that the existing Greek is bad Greek, a feature which might not appear in the work of a 'really good translator,' that the alleged bad Greek could not be accepted as Hellenistic Greek of the time, that the existing Greek did not make sense, and lastly that the passage if retranslated into Aramaic does make sense." Once again, these strictures are equally applicable to Hebrew retroversions.

⁸⁸ Cf. the treatments of Mat. 5:21 (106ff.); Luke 6:22 (156f.); Luke 9:29 (158f.). Fields, "Difficult Words," 285, noted "the use of the King James Version instead of the Greek text" as a flaw in Chapter Eight and the Appendix. Nonetheless, he believed that "almost anyone can find help here with some of the most

inpenetrable sayings of Jesus.” In my judgment, popular studies such as F. F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983) and Robert H. Stein, *Difficult Passages in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), would prove more useful.

⁸⁹ See above, nn. 55 and 56 with accompanying text, on the interpretation of Mat. 11:12 based on an undated midrash to Mic. 2:13.

⁹⁰ Cf. the treatment of Luke 23:31 (120-123) against other interpretations of this verse in the standard commentaries.

⁹¹ Cf. above, nn. 7 and 12.

⁹² See, e.g., *Difficult Words*, 36ff. and 143ff. These statements are untrue of the Septuagint (which was produced by several *different* hands, each with their own style). The reader need only peruse one page of the Hatch-Redpath *Concordance to the Septuagint* (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) in order to see how varied the Greek translators sometimes were. In fact, it was the second century C.E. translation of Aquila, the proselyte of Rabbi Akiva, that distinguished itself *because of its* hyper-literality.

⁹³ On the difficulty of simply determining whether a text had been translated from either Mishnaic Hebrew or Aramaic, see Stanislav Segert, “Zur Verbreitung des Aramaischen in Palastina zur Zeit Jesu,” *Archiv Orientalni* 25 (1957), 21-37; cf. also Klaus Beyer, “Woran erkennt man, dass ein griechischer Text aus dem Hebraischen oder Aramaischen ubersetzt ist?,” in M. Macuch, C. Muller-Kessler, and B. G. Franger, eds., *Studia Semitica necnon Iranica. Rudolpho Macuch Septuagentario ab Amicis et Discipulis Dedicata* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1989), 21-31.

⁹⁴ The authors’ treatment of Mat. 5:10, noted above (n. 86), is typical. They state that, “There are actually four mistranslations in this one verse”; and then claim that the “sudden shift in the pronoun (in verses 11 and 12) . . . is a clear indication that these verses were not originally part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, but a part of another context or story” (114-116).

⁹⁵ For a basic overview, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Westminister, 1987).

⁹⁶ Cf. Strack-Stemberger, *Introduction*, 50-61 (with full bibliography, 50f.); and above, n. 53. The work of Shmuel Safrai, the leading rabbinic scholar associated with the Jerusalem School, has been faulted for an uncritical use of the rabbinic sources; cf. Jacob Neusner’s review of *The Literature of the Sages. First Part: Oral Tora, Halakha, Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud, External Tractates*, ed. S. Safrai (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) in *JBL* 107 (1983), 565-567.

⁹⁷ Even if fragments of a primitive Hebrew gospel were unearthed, they would carry weight only to the extent that they provided an *Urtext* of our canonical Synoptics. Otherwise, if they were filled with non-canonical sayings, they would be similar to the Nag Hammadi Gospels -- i.e., useful for purposes of comparison only -- although, admittedly, of much greater interest and import! On the all important subject of the canon, cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988).

⁹⁸ For a trenchant expression of this position (in the context of strict biblical inerrancy), cf. Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 141-160. Thus the fact that Biven, Blizzard, Young, and others strongly affirm their commitment to Jesus does not vouchsafe the evangelical “orthodoxy” of the next generation of their followers.

⁹⁹ The important sociolinguistic survey of the “Languages of Palestine” by Michael O. Wise, an Aramaic scholar at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (see Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992], 434-444), reached me too late to be incorporated into the main body of discussion. Wise’s relevant -- although not dogmatic -- conclusions are as follows: Jesus spoke an Aramaic dialect, He knew both biblical Hebrew and mishnaic Hebrew (the latter likely being utilized in halakhic discussions), and at least some Greek. If the early believers in Jerusalem wrote about Jesus’ life and ministry in a Semitic language for other Palestinian Jews, they would have written in late biblical, or, mishnaic Hebrew. (This is the theory favored by the Jerusalem School). However, “given the rather widespread knowledge and use of Greek in all levels of Palestinian Jewry, *it may well be that no Semitic sources ever existed.* [This would be diametrically opposed to the view of the Jerusalem School.] The earliest tradition may have been in Greek all along, particularly if such written materials were intended to be read by Gentiles and/or outside of Palestine” (444, my emphasis).