Ancient Names for Hebrew and Aramaic:
A Case for Lexical Revision

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The view expressed in BDAG that *Hebrais* refers not to Hebrew but to 'the Aramaic spoken at that time in Palestine' derives from a century-old argument that because *Hebrais* could mean either Aramaic or Hebrew, and since the average person could not understand Hebrew, *Hebrais* must mean Aramaic. This article challenges the view that *Hebrais(ti)* could mean Aramaic (1) by using an exhaustive list of all instances to show that Aramaic was consistently distinguished from Hebrew, and (2) by explaining the evidence to the contrary: Aramaic-looking words in John, Josephus and Philo that are said to be *Hebraisti*.

Keywords: Hebrew, Aramaic, *Hebrais*, *Hebraisti*

1. Does *Hebrais(ti)* Mean Aramaic?

Despite the etymology and the usual meaning of the cognate adjective Ἑβραῖος 'Hebrew', the standard lexicon of New Testament Greek (BDAG) claims that the phrase τῇ Ἑβραΐδι διαλέκτῳ 'in the Hebrew language' in Acts refers not to Hebrew but to 'the Aramaic spoken at that time in Palestine'.[1] Two of the most prominent English translations agree. Although Acts 21.40–22.2 uses the expression τῇ Ἑβραΐδι διαλέκτῳ to refer to Paul's address to the crowd, the New International Version translates using 'Aramaic':

> ὁ Παῦλος ἑστὼς ἐπὶ τῶν ἀναβαθμῶν κατέσεισεν τῇ χειρὶ τῷ λαῷ. πολλῆς δὲ σιγῆς γενομένης προσεφώνησεν τῇ Ἑβραΐδι διαλέκτῳ λέγων· Ἄνδρες ἀδελφοὶ καὶ πατέρες, ἀκούσατέ μου τῆς πρὸς ὑμᾶς νυνὶ ἀπολογίας. ἀκούσαντες δὲ ὅτι τῇ Ἑβραΐδι διαλέκτῳ προσεφώνει αὐτοῖς μᾶλλον παρέσχον ἡσυχίαν.

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1 F. W. Danker, W. Bauer and W. Arndt, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000³) s.v. Ἑβραΐς.

> Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic, 'Brothers and Fathers, listen now to my defense.' When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic they became very quiet. (NIV)

The NRSV does call the language 'Hebrew' in its translation, but a footnote explains, 'That is, *Aramaic.*'

We should expect there to be sound reasons for interpreting a word contrary to its etymological meaning and its normal usage. After all, Ἑβραΐς is simply a feminine form of the adjective normally meaning 'Hebrew'. It is the masculine form of this word that Paul used when calling himself a 'Hebrew of Hebrews' (Phil 3.5). And Ἑβραϊστί means 'in Hebrew' both etymologically and as used by authors before and after the first century. For example, the prologue to Ben Sira says, 'what was originally expressed in Hebrew (αὐτὰ ἐν ἑαυτοῖς Ἑβραϊστὶ λεγόμενα) does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language' (RSV). When Rev 9.11 says that Abbadon is a 'Hebrew' name, it uses Ἑβραϊστί (ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἑβραϊστὶ Ἀβαδδὼν καὶ ἐν τῇ Ἑλληνικῇ ὄνομα ἔχει Ἀπολλύων). Rev 16.16 uses it to explain that Armageddon is the name of the place 'in Hebrew' (τὸν τόπον τὸν καλούμενον Ἑβραϊστὶ Ἁρμαγεδών).

In this article I first review the reasoning behind rendering Ἑβραΐς/Ἑβραϊστί as '(in) Aramaic', then identify patterns in ancient names for Hebrew and Aramaic, in which I show that Ἑβραΐς/Ἑβραϊστί (henceforth '*Hebrais(ti)*') never refers unambiguously to Aramaic but only refers to the Hebrew language. Because this question of the meaning of *Hebras(ti)* has in past scholarship been combined with questions of the vernacular of Palestine, of language of Jesus and of the original languages of the gospels,[2] I must clarify at the outset that I am *not* arguing that Hebrew was *more commonly* used than Aramaic in Palestine in the first century.[3] I am not arguing that Jesus taught in Hebrew rather than in Aramaic. And I am certainly not arguing that Matthew originally wrote his gospel in Hebrew. Those are indeed fascinating questions, but they must be set aside until after the meaning of *Hebrais(ti)* has been ascertained as closely as possible.[4]

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2 J. Joosten, 'Aramaic or Hebrew behind the Greek Gospels?', *Analecta Bruxellensia* 9 (2004) 88–102.

3 That is the argument of H. Birkeland, *The Language of Jesus* (Oslo: J. Dybwad, 1954).

4 Contrast H. B. Rosén, 'Die Sprachsituation im römischen Palästina', *Die Sprachen im römischen Reich der Kaiserzeit* (Cologne: Rheinland-Verlag, 1980) 225–6, at 225, arguing that *Hebrais(ti)* cannot mean Hebrew because Hebrew was not commonly spoken.

2. The Case for Aramaic

As the bibliography at the end of the BDAG lexical entry indicates, Gustaf Dalman[5] and Theodore Zahn[6] (along with Arnold Meyer[7]) were the scholars who entrenched in biblical scholarship the idea that *Hebrais(ti)* means 'Aramaic'.[8] They made a persuasive argument that Aramaic was the main language used in first-century Palestine. Dalman provided eight reasons for his view: (1) Aramaic targumim were necessary because Hebrew was no longer understood; (2) Semitic words in Greek documents look more Aramaic than Hebrew (for example, *Pharisaioi*); (3) there are two rabbinic references to Aramaic being spoken in the temple,[9] (4) the first-century 'Roll concerning Fasts' is in Aramaic; (5) the Mishnaic formulae for marriage documents are Aramaic; (6) Aramaic script was in use rather than paleo-Hebrew, (7) Mishnaic Hebrew appears to be nothing more than Hebraised Aramaic, and (8) Aramaic was at times called 'Hebrew'.[10] Dalman accounted for this last point by suggesting that because the Hebrew people normally used Aramaic rather than Hebrew, Aramaic could be called the language of the Hebrew people, or the *Hebrew language.*

Dalman's and Zahn's conclusions were reasonable considering the evidence they had to work with at the time. However, their ideas were a product of their times in two ways: (1) they were influenced by nationalistic assumptions that a people has one language; and (2) they did not have the benefit of the last hundred years of research on the targumim,[11] the

5 G. Dalman, *Die Worte Jesu*, vol. I: *Einleitung und wichtige Begriffe* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1898) 5–10. English translation G. Dalman, *The Words of Jesus Considered in the Light of Post-Biblical Jewish Writings and the Aramaic Language*, vol. I: *Introduction and Fundamental Ideas* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902). Also G. Dalman, *Grammatik des jüdisch-palästinischen Aramäisch: Nach den Idiomen des palästinischen Talmud und Midrasch, des Onkelostargum (Cos. Socini 84) und der jerusalemischen Targume zum Pentateuch* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1894); G. Dalman, *Jesus-Jeshua, die drei Sprachen Jesu, Jesus in der Synagoge, auf dem Berge, beim Passahmahl, am Kreuz* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1922); G. Dalman, *Jesus-Jeshua: Studies in the Gospels* (New York: Ktav, 1971).

6 T. Zahn, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, vol. I (Leipzig: Deichert, 1897¹) 18–19. English translation T. Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament* (trans. J. M. Trout, M. W. Jacobus and C. S. Thayer; translated from the 3rd German edn; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909).

7 A. Meyer, *Jesu Muttersprache: Das galiläische Aramaisch in seiner Bedeutung für die Erklärung der Reden Jesu und der Evangelien überhaupt* (Leipzig: Mohr, 1896).

8 G. Baltes, 'The Origins of the "Exclusive Aramaic Model" in the Nineteenth Century: Methodological Fallacies and Subtle Motives', *The Language Environment of First Century Judaea* (Leiden: Brill, 2014) 7–34.

9 *y. Sot.* 24b and *y. Shek.* v.3; vi.5.

10 Dalman, *Words of Jesus*, 1–7.

11 S. D. Fraade, 'Rabbinic Views on the Practice of Targum, and Multilingualism in the Jewish Galilee of the Third–Sixth Centuries', *The Galilee in Late Antiquity* (ed. L. I. Levine; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992) 253–86; A. Tal, 'Is There a Raison

Mishnah[12] and the Dead Sea Scrolls.[13] The origin of the 'Aramaic only' view has recently been exposed in detail by the Eskhults and Guido Baltes.[14] In the last century a few scholars used the new discoveries to challenge the old consensus.[15] Still, the most influential voices in biblical scholarship have adopted the arguments of Dalman and Zahn unrevised even after the discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls. [16]

I do not intend to argue in this paper against Dalman's first seven points, although many of them have also been seriously undermined.[17] It is his final

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d'Être for an Aramaic Targum in a Hebrew-Speaking Society?', *Revue des Études Juives* 160.3 (2001) 357–78.

12 M. H. Segal, 'Mishnaic Hebrew and its Relation to Biblical Hebrew and to Aramaic', *JQR* 20 (1908) 647–737; E. Y. Kutscher, 'Hebrew Language, Mishnaic', *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 16 (1971) 1590–1607; S. E. Fassberg and M. Bar-Asher, *Studies in Mishnaic Hebrew* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1998).

13 J. T. Milik, 'Le rouleau de cuivre provenant de la grotte 3Q (3Q15): commentaire et texte', *Les 'petites grottes' de Qumran: exploration de la falaise, les grottes 2Q,3Q,5Q,6Q,7Q à 10Q, le rouleau de cuivre* (ed. M. Baillet, J. T. Milik and R. de Vaux; Discoveries in the Judaean Desert III; Oxford: Clarendon, 1962) 211–302; E. Qimron, *The Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1986); E. Qimron, 'The Language', *Qumran Cave 4, V: Miqṣat Maʿaśê ha-Torah* (ed. E. Qimron and J. Strugnell; Discoveries in the Judaean Desert 10; Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) 65–108.

14 M. Eskhult and J. Eskhult, 'The Language of Jesus and Related Questions: A Historical Survey', *KUSATU: Kleine Untersuchungen zur Sprache des Alten Testaments und seiner Umwelt, utgiven av Reinhard G. Lehmann och Johannes F. Diehl* 15 (2013) 315–73; Baltes, 'Origins of the "Exclusive Aramaic Model"'.

15 P. Nepper-Christensen, *Das Matthäusevangelium, ein judenchristliches Evangelium?* (Aarhus: Universitetsforlaget, 1958) 101–35; J. M. Grintz, 'Hebrew as the Spoken and Written Language in the Last Days of the Second Temple', *JBL* 79 1 (1960) 32–47; J. A. Emerton, 'Did Jesus Speak Hebrew?', *JTS* 12 (1961) 189–202; J. C. Poirier, 'The Narrative Role of Semitic Languages in the Book of Acts', *Filología Neotestamentaria* 16 (2003) 107–16; S. E. Fassberg, 'Which Semitic Language Did Jesus and Other Contemporary Jews speak?', *SBQ* 74.2 (2012) 263–80; R. Buth and C. Pierce, '*Hebraisti* in Ancient Texts: Does Ἑβραϊστί Ever Mean "Aramaic"?', *The Language Environment of First Century Judaea*, 66–109.

16 J. A. Fitzmyer, 'Presidential Address: The Languages of Palestine in the First Century AD', *CBQ* 32.4 (1970) 501–31; J. A. Emerton, 'The Problem of Vernacular Hebrew in the First Century AD and the Language of Jesus', *JTS* 24.1 (1973) 1–23; J. A. Fitzmyer, 'The Study of the Aramaic Background of the New Testament', *The Semitic Background of the New Testament: Combined Edition of Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament and a Wandering Aramean. Collected Aramaic Essays* (Grand Rapids: Livonia/Eerdmans/Dove Booksellers, 1997) 1–27; A. R. Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000); D. R. G. Beattie and P. R. Davies, 'What Does "Hebrew" Mean?', *JSS* 56.1 (2011) 71–83.

17 Segal, 'Mishnaic Hebrew'; Fraade, 'Rabbinic Views'; S. Schwartz, 'Language, Power and Identity in Ancient Palestine', *Past & Present* 148 (1995) 3–47; K. M. Penner, 'What Language Did Paul speak in Acts 21–22? Ancient Names for Hebrew and Aramaic' (paper

point that I wish to take up: that the language name 'Hebrew' could at times be used for Aramaic.

The standard argument that Ἑβραΐς means Aramaic in Acts depends on two premises: first, *Hebrais(ti)* could refer to either Aramaic or Hebrew, and second, Hebrew was not a spoken language at that time. If these two are true, *Hebrais(ti)* must mean Aramaic rather than Hebrew in Acts 21–2. Logically speaking, only one of the two premises needs to be disproven for the argument to fail. It is the first of these premises that I address in this article. I challenge the view that *Hebrais(ti)* could mean Aramaic at that time by showing that Aramaic was clearly and consistently distinguished from Hebrew, and by accounting for evidence usually adduced to the contrary.

The argument that *Hebrais(ti)* can refer to Aramaic in the first century is based mainly on the evidence that several Aramaic-looking words given in Greek are explicitly called *Hebrais(ti)*. These words are considered Aramaic for three reasons: (1) they are etymologically Aramaic words, or (2) they are words ending in Greek alpha (apparently representing the Aramaic postpositive article), or (3) they are otherwise unknown in Hebrew texts. This body of Aramaic-looking words explicitly called *Hebrais(ti)* consists of four words, all in John's gospel: they are Βηθζαθά (according to Sinaiticus) spelled Βηθεσδά in Alexandrinus or Βηθσαϊδά in Vaticanus or Βελζεθά in Bezae at John 5.2,[18] Γαββαθά in John 19.13,[19] Γολγοθά in John 19.17[20] and Ῥαββουνί[21] in John 20.16. Even if we include words that are said to be 'in the language of the

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presented at the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies Annual Meeting, Halifax, May 2003); S. D. Fraade, 'Language Mix and Multilingualism in Ancient Palestine: Literary and Inscriptional Evidence', *Jewish Studies* 48 (2012) 1–40.

18 The reading בית {א}אשדתין in 3Q15 XI, 12 would favour Bethesda as the toponym (B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994) 178 para. John 5:2), but this reading has been improved since Milik first suggested it, to בית האשוחין\או 'house of waterworks' so that it no longer matches βηθεσδα (R. Ceulemans, 'The Name of the Pool in Joh 5,2: A Text-Critical Note concerning 3Q15', *ZNW* 99 (2007) 112–15. Buth and Pierce suggest Hebrew or Aramaic (בית צידא) ('house of fishing/hunting'; 101) or (בית זית)א) ('house of an olive tree/orchard') or (בית חדסא) ('house of grace') or בית אסטין ('house of the colonnade/portico'), supported by 3Q15 IX, 2 האסטאן (Buth and Pierce, 'Hebraisti', 100–4.)

19 For etymology, Buth and Pierce prefer a Latin loanword *gabata* ('platter') rather than Dalman's original גבתא, revised to גבחתא 'bald spot', or to Hebrew גבה 'eyebrow = ridge' with directive 'he', גבתה (Buth and Pierce, 'Hebraisti', 104–7.)

20 Buth and Pierce note that Golgotha is both Hebrew and Aramaic for 'skull', גלגלת ('Hebraisti', 107).

21 The pronunciation *Rabbouni* reflects the Western vocalisation in Hebrew and Aramaic, as shown by the Cairo Genizah fragments of the Palestinian Targum, and Codex Kaufmann 3.10 (*m. Taʿan.* 3.8). The pronunciation *Ribboni* reflects the Eastern (Babylonian) vocalisation as given in the printed editions of the Targums and Mishnah. Buth and Pierce point to E. Y.

Hebrew people' (and I do not question that the Hebrew people may have spoken more Aramaic than Hebrew), only three more Aramaic-looking words are added to these four: Josephus (*Ant.* 1.33) says that the word σάββατα is κατὰ τὴν Ἑβραίων διάλεκτον 'according to the language of the Hebrews'; about the 'fiftieth day' Josephus (*Ant.* 3.252) says that 'Hebrews call it *Asartha*' (Ἑβραῖοι ἀσαρθὰ καλοῦσι) and Philo (*Decal.* 159) says about Passover, Ἑβραῖοι πατρίῳ γλώττῃ Πάσχα προσαγορεύουσι 'Hebrews call it *Pascha* in the ancestral language' (also in *Spec. Laws* 2.145).

If, as it seems at first glance, several first-century writers could give the name Hebrew to words that are actually Aramaic, it would appear at the very least that the names for the two languages were being used indiscriminately. If this is the case, we should be open to the possibility that when the author of Acts says that Paul spoke in the 'Hebrew' dialect, the language Paul used was actually Aramaic.[22]

3. Testing the Premise that *Hebrais(ti)* Means Aramaic

This fundamental premise behind the lexical entry and the modern translations (namely that Hebrew and Aramaic were not clearly distinguished) is a premise that *can* be tested, by examining the ancient usage of names for Hebrew and Aramaic to see whether they were distinguished or not. It is this question that is the focus of the current article: whether ancient authors consistently distinguished between Hebrew and Aramaic. If it can be demonstrated that Hebrew and Aramaic are consistently distinguished and only Hebrew is certainly called Ἑβραΐς or Ἑβραϊστί, then we can no longer justify translating *Hebrais(ti)* as 'Aramaic'.

To test this premise, I examined all specific references to the Hebrew and Aramaic languages in all extant Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic texts up to the third century. I included adverbs such as Ἑβραϊστί and Συριστί 'Syrian', adjectives such as עברית 'Hebrew', ארמית 'Aramaic', Συριακή 'Syriac', Ἑβραΐς, as well as more general adjectives such as Ἑβραϊκός, Ἑβραῖος, Συριακός 'Syriac' and Χαλδαῖος 'Chaldean', when these were used in conjunction with a word denoting language (such as φωνή, διάλεκτος, γλῶσσα). I purposely discounted references which did not name the language (for example, Josephus' 'ancestral language') but stated only what the Hebrew people *called* something. Such references can be of only secondary value, as circumstantial evidence. If (as the traditional view holds) the Hebrew people spoke Aramaic, either one of the two languages could be the one in view in such statements.

Kutscher, 'Mishnaic Hebrew', *Meḥḳarim be'Ivrit u-ve-'aramit* (ed. Z. Ben-Ḥayyim, A. Dotan and G. B. Sarfatti; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1977) 73–107.

22 This is the position of Beattie and Davies, 'What Does Hebrew Mean?'

Table 1. Attested names for Hebrew and Aramaic, chronologically arranged.

Period	Hebrew	Aramaic
Persian	יְהוּדִית 'Judahite' (2 Kings 18‖Isa 36‖2 Chr 32.18; Neh 13.24) possibly שְׂפַת כְּנַעַן 'lip of Canaan' (Isa 19.18)	אֲרָמִית 'Aramaic' (Elephantine; 2 Kings 18.26‖Isa 36.11; Ezra 4.7; Dan 2.4)
Hellenistic	Ἰουδαϊστί 'in Judean' (LXX 4 Kgdms 18 and parallels) Ἑβραϊστί 'in Hebrew' (Ben Sira)	Συριστί 'in Syrian' (4 Kgdms 18, etc.; Dan 2.4; 2 Esdras 4.7) Συριακῇ 'Syriac' (2 Macc 15.36; Job 42.17b)
Roman	Ἑβραίων γλώττῃ 'tongue of the Hebrews' (Philo, *Sobr.* 46; *Abr.* 57); Χαλδαϊκῇ 'Chaldean' (Philo *Mos.* 2.40) Ἑβραϊστί 'in Hebrew' (Rev 9.11; 16.16; Jos. *Ant.* 10.8; possibly 5/6Ḥev 52) possibly Ἑβραΐδι φωνῇ 'Hebrew speech' (4 Macc 12.7; 16.15) probably לשון הקודש 'the tongue of holiness' (4Q464)	Συριακῇ (*Ep. Arist.* 11.6) Συριστί (Josephus, *Ant.* 10.8)
Patristic / Rabbinic	Ἑβραϊστί / γλώττῃ Ἑβραΐᾳ 'Hebrew tongue', etc. (Origen, *passim*) *Hebraeum* 'Hebrew' (Jerome, *passim*) לשון הקודש 'the tongue of holiness' (*m. Yebam.* 12.6, *m. Sotah* 7.2, etc.) עברי 'Hebrew' (*y. Megillah* 71b)	τῇ Σύρων διαλέκτῳ 'in the language of the Syrians' / Συριακῇ (Origen, *passim*) *Syrum* 'Syrian', *Syriaca* 'Syriac', *Chaldaica* 'Chaldean' (Jerome, *passim*) תרגום 'translation' (*m. Yad.* 4.5) סורסי 'Syrian' (*y. Megillah* 71b)

I found a general consistent distinction made between names for Aramaic and Hebrew. Table 1 summarises these names chronologically.

In what follows, I restrict my discussion to instances that are useful to determine whether *Hebrais(ti)* is (a form of) 'Aramaic' or something different. Statements that mention *Hebrais(ti)* without indicating which language is meant cannot help us. For example, although Papias said Ματθαῖος μὲν οὖν Ἑβραΐδι διαλέκτῳ τὰ λόγια συνετάξατο ('Matthew arranged the sayings in the *Hebrais* dialect', apud Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.16), *Hebrais* here could conceivably refer to either language. Those texts that do consciously contrast the two languages are wide-ranging, including Aristeas, Josephus, 4 Kingdoms,

Origen, Jerome, the Mishnah and the Jerusalem Talmud. A discussion of the usages in chronological order below will show a clear pattern that Aramaic was not called *Hebrais(ti)*.

In the Persian period, the two languages were distinct. The earliest extant reference to Aramaic is found in the Elephantine papyri, where it is called ארמית, the same name used in the transitions to Aramaic in Dan 2.4 and Ezra 4.7 and also in the biblical story told in 2 Kgs 18.26 and its parallel in Isa 36.11.[23] This story explicitly makes a distinction between two ways of speaking: the Arameans are asked not to speak יְהוּדִית, which the citizens of Jerusalem could understand, but rather ארמית, which they could not.[24]

In the Hellenistic period, this distinction remains. In the Greek version of the same story we find the terms Ἰουδαϊστί and Συριστί. Rapsakes is told, Λάλησον δὴ πρὸς τοὺς παῖδάς σου Συριστί, ὅτι ἀκούομεν ἡμεῖς, καὶ οὐ λαλήσεις μεθ' ἡμῶν Ἰουδαϊστί ('Please speak to your servants in Syriac, since we understand it, and you shouldn't speak with us in Judean,' 4 Kgdms 18.26). Συριστί is also the word found in the Greek of Dan 2.4 and 2 Esd 4.7 to translate the Hebrew ארמית. The first attested use of Ἑβραϊστί is by Ben Sira's grandson, referring to the Hebrew language of his grandfather's work and of the Tanakh.[25] The word Χαλδαϊστί is added once to the Greek text of Dan 2.26, to refer to Belteshazzar's name. Aristeas claims the Jewish scriptures are not written in Syriac, although they are commonly thought to be: ... καὶ φωνὴν ἰδίαν ἔχουσιν. Ὑπολαμβάνονται Συριακῇ χρῆσθαι· τὸ δ' οὐκ ἔστιν, ἀλλ' ἕτερος τρόπος (*Ep. Aris.* 11). Josephus kept the two names distinct. When he retold the story from Aristeas, he wrote:

> μὲν γὰρ εἶναι τῇ ἰδιότητι τῶν Συρίων γραμμάτων ἐμφερὴς ὁ χαρακτὴρ αὐτῶν καὶ τὴν φωνὴν ὁμοίαν αὐτοῖς ἀπηχεῖν, ἰδιότροπον δὲ αὐτὴν εἶναι συμβέβηκεν

> though their script seemed to be similar to the peculiar Syrian writing, and their language to sound like the other, it was, as it happened, of a distinct type. (*Antiquities* 12.15; trans. R. Marcus, LCL)

He retold the story from 4 Kgdms 18 as follows:

23 B. Porten and A. Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt: Literature, Accounts, Lists* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989) sec. B2: SUB 3 side 1 l. 2.

24 Although the forms of speech used in various parts of Levant in the Assyrian period is an interesting question, my argument does not depend on whether Hebrew was a distinct language in the eighth century when this story is set. On this question, see E. A. Knauf, 'War "Biblisch-Hebräisch" eine Sprache?', *ZAH* 3 (1990):11–23. My argument is restricted to whether *Hebrais(ti)* ever referred to (a form of) Aramaic.

25 The partially extant Hebrew text of Ben Sira confirms that the original language was Hebrew rather than Aramaic. Note also that the epilogue to Greek Job 42.17b refers to a Συριακῇ 'Syriac' book about Job.

ταῦτα δὲ τὸν Ῥαψάκην *ἑβραϊστὶ* λέγοντα, τῆς γὰρ γλώττης εἶχεν ἐμπείρως, ὁ Ἐλιάκειμος φοβούμενος, μὴ τὸ πλῆθος ἐπακοῦσαν εἰς ταραχὴν ἐμπέσῃ, *συριστὶ* φράζειν ἠξίου.

As Rapsakēs spoke these words in Hebrew, with which language he was familiar, Eliakias was afraid that the people might overhear them and be thrown into consternation, and so asked him to speak in Aramaic. (*Antiquities* 10.8; trans. R. Marcus, LCL)

Josephus changed the Ἰουδαϊστί (or יהודית) of 4 Kingdoms to Ἑβραϊστί, and kept Συριστί for Aramaic. This change from Ἰουδαϊστί to Ἑβραϊστί is significant because it is not what one would expect if Josephus thought Ἑβραϊστί could refer to Aramaic. Josephus consciously chose to call it Ἑβραϊστί, precisely when a contrast between Hebrew and Aramaic was desired. In his mind, Ἑβραϊστί was the most appropriate name for the language he wished to distinguish from Aramaic. Philo is the only one to provide ambiguous evidence; usually he would call the language of the Bible 'Chaldaic'. *Mos.* 2.26 is typical; Philo wrote, 'of old the laws were written in the Chaldaic tongue' (τὸ παλαιὸν ἐγράφησαν οἱ νόμοι γλώσσῃ Χαλδαϊκῇ), as also in *Mos.* 2.31 and 40.

The evidence presented above indicates that the trend up to and including the first century is that Aramaic was normally distinguished from the ancestral language of the Jews. Besides Ἑβραϊστί, that language was also called Canaanite and Judean, and besides אֲרָמִית, Aramaic was called Syrian and Chaldean. The one exception to this trend is Philo, who uses the word Χαλδαϊκῇ to refer to the biblical texts, but even he never uses Ἑβραῖς to refer to Aramaic.

In the centuries immediately following the New Testament, we again have evidence from both Christian and Jewish sources that the two languages were distinguished. In Table 1 I noted just two of the most prominent writers to contrast Hebrew (that is, Ἑβραϊστί or *Hebraeum*) with Aramaic (that is, Συριακῇ, *Syrum* or *Chaldaica*). A typical example can be seen in Origen, *Cels.* 3.6:

... πῶς οὖν τὸ μετὰ τοῦτο οὐχὶ μᾶλλον τῇ Σύρων ἐχρῶντο διαλέκτῳ ἢ τῇ Φοινίκων, ἀλλὰ τὴν ἑβραΐδα ἑτέραν παρ' ἀμφοτέρας συνεστήσαντο;

... how did it happen that after so doing they did not rather adopt the Syrian or Phoenician language, instead of preferring the Hebrew, which is different from both? (trans. F. Crombie, ANF)

The Latin writers are no different. In *Nom. hebr.*, Jerome would typically comment regarding words he considered Aramaic, 'It is Syriac, not Hebrew', as for example, *Abba pater. Syrum est, non Hebraeum* (*Nom. hebr.* 63.20). Augustine, writing from a region where Punic was spoken, noted that *cognatae*

quippe sunt linguae istae et vicinae, Hebraica, Punica, et Syra ('For the Hebrew, Punic and Syriac are cognate and neighbouring languages').[26] When Origen encountered the colophon of the Greek version of Job, with its mention of a 'Syriac' book about Job, he had to appeal to geography to explain how a book of Job, which should be Hebrew, might possibly be called Syriac. He wrote:

Συριακὴν νῦν τὴν Ἑβραίων διάλεκτον καλεῖ, ἐπειδὴ καὶ Συρίαν τὴν Ἰουδαῖαν, καὶ Σύρους οἱ πολλοὶ τοὺς Παλαιστινούς ὀνομάζουσιν

Now it calls the dialect of the Hebrews Syriac, since the masses call Judea Syria and Palestinians Syrians.[27]

Likewise, the rabbis regularly called Hebrew עברי or sometimes לשון הקדש and Aramaic אֲרַמִּי or סורסי or sometimes תרגום. The two were contrasted, never equated or confused. For example, in Midrash Tanchuma Shmini 5, Yehuda Ha-Levi says, 'In Hebrew it is called *yayin*; in Aramaic *ḥemar*' (אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוּדָה הַלֵוִי בְּרַבִּי שָׁלוֹם, בְּלָשׁוֹן עִבְרִי שְׁמוֹ יַיִן, בְּלָשׁוֹן אֲרַמִּי חֲמַר). In the Mishnah Aramaic is called תרגום in *m. Yad.* 4.5 מטמא את הידיים , תרגום שבעזרא ושבדנייאל. ('Targum [= Aramaic] which is in Ezra and which is in Daniel makes the hands unclean'). In the Jerusalem Talmud the languages are explicitly distinguished by their appropriateness for various occasions, and include Latin:

לֹא יהא לשון סורסי קל בעיניך. שבתורה ובנביאים ובכתובים הוא אמר. ... ארבעה לשונות נאין להשתמש בהן העולם. ואילו הן לעז לזמר רומי לקרב סורסי לאיליי עברי לדיבור. ויש אומרים אף אשורי לכתב

Do not let *Syrian* be light in your eyes. For it is spoken in the Torah and in the prophets and in the writings ... Four languages are suitable for the world to use. These are: the foreign language [= Greek] for song; Roman [= Latin] for battle; *Syrian* [= Aramaic] for elegy; *Hebrew* for speech. Some say even Assyrian for script. (*y. Megillah* 71b)

It is not until the fourth century that we find hints that the two languages might both be called 'Hebrew': Epiphanius normally distinguished Hebrew from Syriac,[28] although a few of his explanations are puzzling, notably his mention of a 'deep language' in *Pan.* 26.1.5: 'They give the name Noria to Pyrrha. For since fire is translated *noura* in Hebrew, not according to the deep language, but in

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26 Augustine, *Tract. Ev. Jo.* 15, 27, PL 35.302.

27 Origen, *Homiliae in Job* (J. B. Pitra, *Analecta sacra spicilegio Solesmensi parata*, vol. ɪɪ (Paris: Tusculum, 1884) 390–1); trans. mine.

28 For example, καββᾶ γὰρ ἑρμηνεύεται πορνεία κατὰ τὴν Συριακὴν διάλεκτον, φονοκτονία δὲ κατὰ τὴν Ἑβραϊκήν (*Pan.* 26.2.3)

the Syrian dialect (for fire among Hebrews is called *hesath* according to the deep language)' (*Pan.* 26.1.5).[29] He mentioned parts of the New Testament translated into *Hebrais*, including the Gospel of John (*Pan.* 30.3.8) and Acts and Matthew (*Pan.* 9.9.4), which are not extant, although we do know of Aramaic translations.[30] Also, around 600 CE, Joannes Moschus did call the vernacular of Palestine Ἑβραϊστί (*Prat. spir.* 136). But this evidence of Ἑβραῖς used to refer to Aramaic does not bear much weight since it is so distant from the first century, and even if accurate at its time, would reflect only the reality obtaining centuries after the Bar Kokhba revolt and the changes its aftermath wrought in Palestinian Jewish culture because of the expulsion from Jerusalem and movement of Jews to Galilee.

4. *Hebrais(ti)* Never Clearly Means Aramaic

There are therefore only a few ancient statements preventing the immediate conclusion that in the first century Aramaic was always clearly distinguished from Hebrew. These are, on the one hand, Philo's assertion that the Bible is written in Chaldean, and on the other hand, the Aramaic-looking words said to be Hebrew by John, Philo and Josephus. Of these three authors, John is the only one who appears to call Aramaic 'Hebrew'. Except for these seven Aramaic-looking words (Βηθζαθά/Βηθεσδά/Βηθσαϊδά/Βελζεθά, Γαββαθα, Γολγοθα, Ραββουνι, σάββατα, ἀσαρθά, Πάσχα) a consistent distinction was made between Hebrew and Aramaic. This fact alone indicates that it was not *normal* for Aramaic to be called 'Hebrew', and that should temper the BDAG lexicon's claim that these passages refer 'to the Aramaic spoken at that time in Palestine'.[31] Yet as Randall Buth and Chad Pierce have now demonstrated, none of even these seven words is certainly Aramaic.[32] All of the anomalies to the otherwise consistent ancient distinction between Hebrew and Aramaic can be accounted for. First, John's Ραββουνι can be considered a Hebrew word

29 τοῦ τῆς Πύρρας ὀνόματος, Νωρίαν ταύτην ὀνομάζοντες. ἐπειδὴ γὰρ νουρα ἐν τῇ Ἑβραΐδι πῦρ οὐ κατὰ τὴν βαθεῖαν γλῶσσαν ἑρμηνεύεται ἀλλὰ Συριακῇ διαλέκτῳ (ἡσὰθ γὰρ τὸ πῦρ παρὰ Ἑβραίοις καλεῖται κατὰ τὴν βαθεῖαν γλῶσσαν). The evidence of Epiphanius is significant because he was probably one of the few Christian authors who knew Aramaic and Hebrew. See J. Wilder, 'Epiphanius as a Hebraist: A Study of the Hebrew Learning of Epiphanius of Salamis' (PhD diss., Toronto: University of St. Michael's College, 2017). Other relevant statements by Epiphanius include his explanation of Jesus' last words on the cross, in which he distinguished Aramaic from Hebrew (*Pan.* 69.19.5). He said that Jesus prophesied in Hebrew from the cross (κατὰ τὴν Ἑβραϊκὴν διάλεκτον 'ἠλί, ἠλί, λημᾶ σαβαχθανί'), but noted that although 'ἠλί, ἠλί' is Hebrew (Ἑβραϊκῇ τῇ λέξει), the rest ('λημᾶ σαβαχθανί') is Aramaic (Συριακῇ διαλέκτῳ).
30 I am indebted to James David Audlin for this observation.
31 Danker, Bauer and Arndt, *A Greek–English Lexicon*, s.v. Ἑβραῖς.
32 Buth and Pierce, '*Hebraisti*', 66–109.

according to Codex Kaufmann of the Mishnah *Ta'an*. 3.8. Second, Josephus and Philo's Πάσχα and σάββατα are taken directly from the Septuagint translation of Hebrew texts, and ἀσαρθά has a final alpha simply to aid pronunciation. Third, John's three place names called Ἑβραϊστί, namely Βηθζαθά, Γαββαθά and Γολγοθά, should not be given much weight given that proper names resist translation. Therefore all the apparently Aramaic words cited could easily have been used in Hebrew speech. Finally, Philo's claim that the Bible is written in Chaldean is insubstantial, since he probably knew neither Hebrew nor Aramaic.

In light of this consistent pattern with no unambiguous counterexamples, the BDAG lexical entries for the words Ἑβραΐς and Ἑβραϊστί need to be revised to remove the assertion (or implication) that these words refer to any form of Aramaic. Rather, Ἑβραΐς, Ἑβραϊστί and other words for the Hebrew language are clearly and consistently distinguished from those for the Aramaic language; any apparent evidence to the contrary suggests at most that Aramaic might possibly be an occasional referent of these words, which as it happens (apart from John's proper names) always denote Hebrew. In consequence, the entry in future editions of Greek lexica should gloss Ἑβραΐς as 'Hebrew', noting not that 'these passages refer to the Aramaic spoken at that time in Palestine', but rather that at most it is possible that the New Testament authors might mean Aramaic. Future translations of the New Testament should also render Ἑβραΐς as 'Hebrew', although it would not be indefensible to reverse the NRSV footnote to read, 'or, possibly, Aramaic'.