RESURGENT SEMITISMS IN THE TESTAMENT THEOLOGY*

ARTHUR H. LEWIS

Bethel College
St. Paul, Minnesota 55112

Silver anniversaries always call for a celebration and a joyful feast such as we have received here tonight. We are united in gratitude and praise to God for His gracious provision during these twenty-five years. Our society has experienced steady growth in members and influence, yet it remains loyal to the goals set down by its charter members, many of whom are here with us in places of honor. The Evangelical Theological Society continues to be a *koinonia* of teachers and students, diversified in theological disciplines, but united by a common love for Christ and by a common commitment to study, to practice, and to proclaim His infallible Word.

This year we salute guests and members who work in areas related to the New Testament. I doubt that the Society has ever welcomed so many specialists from one discipline to a single meeting. It is also appropriate for a representative from the Old Testament field to show a neighborly interest in the flurry of activity that is in progress just over the fence in the department of New Testament.

A natural topic of conversation for teachers of Hebrew and Greek allied disciplines is the importance of semitisms in the New Testament. A new awareness of this subject was impressed upon me last Spring as I began to read through a Hebrew New Testament while on Sabbatical leave in Jerusalem. Speaking as a non-specialist, I intend my remarks to be a report for society members outside the field of New Testament and who may not be aware of the expanding resources from Judaism that are currently affecting our understanding of the text and message of the New Testament. "Resurgent semitisms" is a reminder of their persistent reappearance in the history of New Testament criticism. Let me begin with a brief sketch of the linguistic studies of the semitic features of the text. studies narrowed primarily to the syntactical evidence in the canonical books of the New Testament.

*Presidential Address at the 25th Meeting of ETS, December, 1973.

LINGUISTIC STUDIES

European scholars for centuries had included Aramaisms in their normal investigation of the meaning of the Greek New Testament until Baur and the Tubingen School made a Jewish origin for Paul and the Gospel writers seem untenable. Yet, there were individual scholars and exegetes in Europe who continued to study the semitic background of the Scriptures. Gustaf Dalman was one, as his philological work in the Gospels will reveal.[1]

Here in America there was C. C. Torey's argument for an original Aramaic text behind all four Gospels. C .F. Burney had preceeded him with his defense of an Aramaic Gospel of John. Neither was able to solicit much support for his views.

In England and Scotland, however, the case was different. James H. Moulton was widely applauded for his treatment of "Semitisms in the New Testament" in volume two of his magnum work, *The Grammar of New Testament Greek.*[2] Later, when the third volume was published, further studies of the semitisms were added by Nigel Turner. More recently we have seen the influence of the British scholars H. E. Turner, C. F. Moule, and Matthew Black, all keenly aware of the importance of the semitic background to the New Testament.

German scholarship has produced our most exhaustive work on the language of the New Testament, the *Theologisches Worterbuch zum Neuen Testament,* edited by Kittel and Friedrich. I mention this multi-volumed dictionary because of the salient place given by most articles to the semitic usages of the terms under discussion. A typical article will lead the student through a labyrinth of categories of Classical, koine, and Septuagintal Greek, then on to Old Testament, Intertestamental Hebrew, Dead Sea Scrolls, rabbinic and Mishnaic materials, Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism.

So detailed is the *Worterbuch* that it has been criticized for seeking to prove too much. James Barr, with some justification, asserts that etymology is never a guarantee for the meaning of a term in any particular context; Biblical language in its relation to theology should be examined at the level of the sentence.[3] "Yet, it is not the Worterbuch itself that is at fault," responds David Hill, "but the use made of it; the articles give the student a full range of possibilities from which to choose."[4] Hill's recent book on *Greek Terms with Hebrew Meanings* aptly demonstrates the effectiveness of the word-study method when properly applied.

1. G. Dalman, *The Words of Jesus* (Edinburg: T & T Clark, 1909).
2. James H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek,* Vol. II (Edinburg, 1929). Appendix, p. 412-485. The third volume with its section on Syntax by Nigel Turner was published in 1963.
3. James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1961).
4. David Hill, *Greek Terms with Hebrew Meanings* (Cambridge: University Press, 1967). p. 6.

SEMITIC SOURCES

An exciting array of newly discovered or newly published materials from early Judaism now confronts the New Testament specialist. Their importance was clearly visible at the 1973 meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Chicago. Even a glance at the program would show the frequency of topics dealing with fresh Hellenistic and Palestinian sources.

Our own program for this twenty-fifth meeting also confirms the recent surge of interest in the semitic background of the New Testament. Judging from the topics of the papers scheduled, I predict that you will be hearing more of these Judaic sources and in much greater detail than I can give you. As an overview I want to take note of three groupings of source-materials that challenge our understanding of the New Testament: the Rabbinic, the Targumic, and the Essenic.

The bulk of the Rabbinic records have been available from the early centuries of our era, particularly to those who were competent in Hebrew and Aramaic. Their interpretation in relation to the New Testament, however, has been a battlefield. Albert Schweitzer concluded that Paul's theology followed the Palestinian rabbis of the Pharisaic party, while John's followed the Hellenized Jews of the diaspora. In reply we have such scholars as Liebermann and Goodenough here in America showing that clear-cut distinctions between first century forms of Judaism may not be drawn.[5]

The most helpful discussion of the Rabbinic sources which throw light on the New Testament is, in my opinion, W. D. Davies' *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism.* First published in 1948, this work lays Paul's doctrines side by side with their parallels in the early Judaic sources.

Davies shows how Paul's autobiographical reflections in Romans seven relate to the Rabbinic belief in man's two impulses. The desire to do wrong was given at birth and was called the *yetzer ha ra.* However, the good impulse, the *yetzer ha tov,* only came at the age of thirteen when a boy became a *bar mitzvah,* a "son of the commandment." The Rabbis taught that the Torah would resolve the problem of the evil desire and bring salvation by its precepts. Paul's view of the "flesh" is closely tied to the first impulse to do wrong; he also knew of that early period in his life when he was "alive, apart from the commandment," the *mitzvah.* But, for Paul, the Law became an enemy rather than an ally. "It would not be going too far to claim that Paul is here

5. E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (New York, 1953) and a very similar study by Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York, 1942).
6. W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism,* (New York: Harpers and Row, 1948). p. 25ff. In his discussion of the two impulses Davis asks whether they reside in the heart or the flesh for Paul. He suggests that the evil urge has spread out into the entire body, thus Paul's emphasis on the flesh as sinful.

directly contesting the Rabbinic view that the Law gives deliverance from the tyranny of the evil impulse."[6]

Our Rabbinic resources are generally inclusive of the Mishna, the Tosephta, the Midrashim, and the two great Talmuds. It is imperative that we make full use of those sections that bear on the theology of the New Testament, delineating the doctrines that are distinctively Christian as well as the points in common with Judaism.

The Aramaic Targums were closely related to these great Rabbinic works, but may be treated as a separate corpus of Jewish literature.

The Targums were teaching manuals used in the early synagogues and sometimes categorized as liturgical writings of Judaism. As a source of information for the New Testament, the Targums were discounted by many scholars because of a cloud of doubt over their dating. Since 1930, however, when parts of the Palestinian Targum on the Pentateuch from the Cairo Geniza were identified, respect for their significance has been growing. Many scholars, headed by a group of Aramaists at the Biblical Institute in Rome, now accept a pre-Christian date for the Palestinian Targum, as Martin McNamara points out in his book, *Targum and Testament.*[7]

Codes Neofiti, our only complete manuscript of the Palestinian Targum, shows its common ground with the books of the New Testament in numerous parallel terms and ideas. To cite just one example, let me summarize McNamara's discussion of the opening verses of John's Gospel and the word *logos.* It has been a standard procedure to link John's use of Word for Christ to Hellenistic concepts of deity. However, the Targum for Exodus 12:42 on the theme of creation uses the Aramaic phrase *memra adonai* for "The Word of the Lord:" It reads:

> "The first night, when the Lord was revealed above the earth to create it, the earth was void and empty, and darkness was spread over the face of the abyss. And the Word (*memra*) of the Lord was light, and it shone."

McNamara agrees with his critics that *memra adonai* is one of many circumlocutions for the divine Name and that no distinction between God and The Word was intended. However, this may still prove to have been John's source for the *logos* concept. After all, for John the *logos* is God. Furthermore in verse fourteen, two other frequently used circumlocutions for the divine Name are linked to *memra* in his identification of the incarnate Christ:

> "And the Word (*memra*) was made flesh,
> and placed His dwelling (*shekenah*) among us,
> and we saw His glory (*yeqareh*)."

7. M. McNamara, *Targum and Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972). p. 13.

The Apostle could hardly have found stronger language to reinforce his claim that the Messiah was co-equal with *Yahweh-elohim* in the trinitarian sense. This parallel usage of these three terms, which are commonly substituted for God in the Targums and related Jewish literature, supports the conclusion that John had a semitic, not a Greek, image of the *logos.*

Consider next the most recently discovered source material, the Dead Sea Scrolls. New texts and fragments are still being published and a flood of comparative studies exist to show their relevance to the New Testament. Joseph Fitzmyer's *Essays on the Semitic Background on the New Testament* is one of the latest books of significance to appear. One topic is the common use by both the Qumrans and the early Christians of such self-designations as *koinonia* and "The Way." The two first century communities also shared a common fear of contamination by unbelievers. Paul's warning in II Corinthians 6 has a distinctively Essenic ring to it: "For what partnership has righteousness and iniquity; what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial?" Not only the three-fold contrast, but the use of Belial is typical of the Essene literature, and unused in the Old Testament. The impact of the materials from Qumran may be just beginning. Additional fragments, perhaps entire manuscripts, are likely to be discovered and their bearing on the language and meaning of the New Testament cannot be ignored.

SEMITIC THEMES

In all of these sources from early Judaism certain broad themes may be pointed out. I would like to mention three of them, the first being the Jewish deep-seated feeling for *corporate personality.* The subject first came to mean something to me during an overland trip into Greece and the Near East. My three companions were professors who had completed their doctoral studies in Europe: Earle Ellis, Russell Shedd, and John Stam. Earl's book on *Paul's Understanding of the Old Testament* and Russell Shedd's *Man in Community* had already been published and were well received, particularly by the European scholars. I listened to long discussions on the solidarity principle as it emerges in the salvation doctrines of the New Testament. Today, ten years after that trip, the evidence is stronger than ever that key theological themes in the New Testament are best understood in their relationship to the old semitic, patriarchal sense of family and national unity.

To the Hebrew mind it would not seem strange to say, "As in Adam all die," or "Christ is the vine," or "Jacob is Israel and Esau is Edom." Dr. Shedd writes, "We need not repeat what is self-evident, namely, that the foundational background of these concepts is the Hebrew view of man as more then an individual." Could anything sound more un-american than this?

8. Russell Shedd, *Man in Community* (London: The Epworth Press, 1958), p. 194.

One corollary of corporate personality is the essential oneness of the Body of Christ and the continuity of the true people of God throughout the ages, before and after Christ. Our honored guest, F. F. Bruce will permit me, I trust, to quote from his recently published book, *New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes* on this same subject.

> "When Jesus chose the twelve, their number implied that they represented the faithful remnent of the old Israel who would be also the foundation of the new. Hence, the New Testament people of God, while preserving its continuity with the Old Testament people of God, is at the same time a new creation."[9]

This oneness is supported by the carryover of the old, Hebrew term for the 'congregation' of Israel, *qahal,* as *ecclesia* in the Septuagint and books of the New Testament. Paul and the early Christians saw themselves as the extension of the true people of God, not as a novel community, unique and separate from the saints of the Old Testament.

If we take this principle of corporate personality as Paul applied it to the church, we will not fragmentize redemptive history so as to separate Old Testament sinners from the grace of God or Jewish saints from Gentile citizens in the Kingdom of God.

My second semitic theme for your consideration is the Jewish view of time and history. At the grass-roots level of our churches I believe you will find that most members hold to an essentially hellenistic view of man in time. They take the flight of the soul into the heavens at death as the believer's ultimate release and the disembodied state as his final reward. What is needed is a clear and precise definition of the Greek view in contrast to the Old Testament, or Hebrew view, as George Ladd has accomplished in his opening chapter of *The Pattern of New Testament Truth.*[10] That man's history is moving toward climax, judgment, and the Messianic Age was the thesis of Oscar Cullmann in his outstanding work on *Christ and Time.* On this teaching the New Testament writers demonstrated their non-hellenistic moorings.

Our Lord's mention in Matthew 12 of "This age . . . the age to come" is consistent with the entire New Testament and with the Jewish understanding of linear eschatology. From that brief, Edenic period man emerged into a new, hostile environment, but also into an evil age as well. Christ's coming did not terminate the present age, but only marked its latter days. The age to come is called the *palin-genesia,* the second Creation, by the Master, when "You who have followed me will sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel."[11]

9. F. F. Bruce, *New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes* (Eerdmans, 1968). p. 13.
10. F. Ladd, **The Pattern of New Testament Truth** (Grand Rapids: Eerdman's, 1968) p. 13ff.

The age to come, the *olam ha ba* as the Rabbis knew it, would indeed elevate the natural creation and undo the effects of the curse. Paul marks this coming change in nature for the time of the "revealing of the sons of God" which is parallel to the time of the "redemption of our bodies."[12] These passages among others make the use of Messianic Age, the Jewish term, a more adequate designation for the coming Kingdom of Christ, than the over-taxed "Millennial Age." No one here tonight needs to be reminded that *chilia* is peculiar to one chapter in the Bible and therefore may be classed as a *hapax legomenon.* As such it should be interpreted in harmony with the larger subject of the Messianic Age.

The third and last theme with semitic ties is the place of the Messiah in our Christology. Last Spring I began to read casually through a Hebrew translation of the New Testament.[13] Before long I observed the consistent use of the definite article with the term for Messiah, *hameshiah.* Evidently it was not proper or natural for a Jew to think of Messiah as anything but a title for "The Anointed One," referring to the king. Returning to the Greek text I found that *o christos* was the normal designation in the Gospels, but that Paul, in writing to Gentile believers, allowed the title to become a personal name. I also discovered the personal use of *meshiah* without the article in a few works of later Judaism. However, a strong preference for the full title remains universal among Jews.

It was still a shock to hear myself reading such unfamiliar words as, "in the Messiah," "having a desire to depart and be with the Messiah," "husbands love your wives as the Messiah loved the church," or "the Messiah in you, the hope of glory." One verse just would not translate: "For to me to live is Christ." It had to be re-phrased in Hebrew to read *hameshiah hu hayai,* "The Messiah, He is my life." You may consider this problem to be merely one of semantics, but I found in my own thinking a kind of theological double-talk. When I thought of Christ, the divine, heavenly, and universal aspects of His person came to mind; when I thought of the Messiah there were earthly, political, even Jewish connotations. Such a bifurcation of the Incarnate Son of God is not possible, nor was it likely to have existed in the mind of the Apostle Paul. Whatever his reasons for the shortened form of *christos,* it was not meant to signify anything different than *hameshiah,* the Hebrew title, which could only receive its proper, kingly grandeur from its semitic setting in the Old Testament. Biblical Christology, therefore, will ascribe every facet of our Lord's person and work to the Messiah that belongs to the translated name Christ.

11. Matthew 19:28.
12. Romans 8:19, 23.
13. The New Testament in Hebrew presently being distributed in Israel is a reprint of the original work by F. Delizsch but revised many times and still generally approved by Hebrew speaking students. The British and Foreign Bible Society is presently working with a committee to produce an edition of the New Testament in the latest Israeli vernacular.

CONCLUSION

We started with a review of the linguistic studies on the semitisms of the New Testament, then went on to note the value of the Rabbinic, targumic, and Essenic source-materials. Finally we looked at three great doctrinal themes of the New Testament that have strong, Judaic overtones: the corporateness of the Body of Christ, the Jewish view of history, and the Messiah in Christology.

I want to close with a course of action of a practical nature. As evangelical scholars, responsible for the exposition of the Word of God, we should do the following:

First, because of the kind of new materials challenging us, we should promote the study of all of the Biblical languages, Hebrew and Aramaic along with Greek.

Second, because of the great scope of these materials, we should engage in more inter-disciplinary projects and research, while at the same time sharpening our own linguistic tools.

Third, because of the diversity, not to mention the confusion, of these materials, we should provide accurate interpretation of them for the entire community. This will mean greater effort in communication on three levels: the level of specialists in the field through professional journals and meetings, the level of theological students and pastors through lectures and textbooks, and the level of church leaders through Christian periodicals of wide circulation.