

The Semitic Origin of the Assumption of Moses

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The Semitic Origin of the Assumption of Moses.

No scholar of first rank since Hilgenfeld¹ has maintained that the *Assumption of Moses* was originally written in Greek. His argument against a Semitic original was based on the absence of the pronoun in the accusative after *Deus creavit* in 12 : 4, and the absence of the pronominal suffix after *magistri* in 5 : 5. Charles points out the deficiencies in Hilgenfeld's main argument.²

Although it is now widely recognized that the evidences for a Semitic original are overwhelming, scholarly opinion is divided, one group claiming Hebrew, and the other Aramaic, as the original language of the *Ass. Mos.* Charles reviews the positions of the older scholars: Schmidt-Merx, Colani, Haus-rath and Carrière asserted an Aramaic original, whereas Rosenthal (and Charles) held to the Hebrew. Thompson discusses the issue at some length and finally concludes that the *Ass. Mos.* was written in Aramaic:

... a view that is confirmed by the occurrence of the word *horas* itself, there being no equivalent to this in Hebrew, while there is in Aramaic, Dan. 4 : 19.³

Deane holds that it cannot be determined if it was written in Hebrew.⁴ Burkitt says the original is Semitic, but does not decide for either Hebrew or Aramaic.⁵ Schürer stated only a probable Semitic original, but did not commit himself specifically.

¹ A. Hilgenfeld, *Novum Testamentum extra canonem receptum*, Vol. I (1866), pp. 45-115; *Messias judaeorum* (1869), pp. lxx-lxxiv; 437-468.

² R. H. Charles, *The Assumption of Moses* (1897), p. xxxix.

³ J. E. H. Thompson, *Books Which Influenced Our Lord and His Apostles* (1891), p. 446.

⁴ W. J. Deane, *Pseudepigrapha* (1891), p. 104.

⁵ F. C. Burkitt, *Jewish and Christian Apocalypses. The Schweich Lectures for 1913* (1914), p. 38.

More recent scholars have demonstrated that the question still is not resolved. Those who hold to an Aramaic original are Torrey⁶ and Pfeiffer.⁷ The latter advances no evidences for an Aramaic original but merely lists the *Ass. Mos.* among Palestinian Aramaic writings along with *IV Ezra* and *Apoc. Abrah.* He apparently follows the view of Torrey, namely, that the original language of the book is to be determined from the name Taxo, which, when transliterated into Aramaic, is seen to be a gematria for Mattathias. This is a patently impossible argument.

A modern protagonist for a Hebrew original is Zeitlin⁸, but he apparently embraces *in toto* Charles' position and adds nothing to it. Fairweather also maintains a Hebrew original but offers no evidence in support.⁹ Lattey appears to agree with Charles, but only indirectly.¹⁰ Mowinckel casts his lot with Charles for a Hebrew original, and builds his theory for the identity of Taxo on the basis of an underlying Hebrew word.¹¹ Rowley wrote an extensive survey of the *Ass. Mos.*, and especially Taxo, but he does not discuss the issue of the original language.¹²

A review of the positions taken by scholars since Charles reveals that those who hold to an Aramaic original do so in the face of Charles' researches, and they have adduced no substantial support for an Aramaic original. On the other hand, those who decide for a Hebrew original simply assume Charles' arguments *en bloc*. So the question of the Semitic original, whether Hebrew or Aramaic, must make Charles' labors the point of departure, for he has produced the only serious attempt to investigate this problem. One must either agree or disagree

⁶ C. C. Torrey, *The Apocryphal Literature* (1946), p. 116. See also *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 62 (1943), pp. 1-7.

⁷ R. Pfeiffer, *History of New Testament Times* (1949), p. 61.

⁸ S. Zeitlin, "The Assumption of Moses and the Revolt of Bar Kokba", *Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (July, 1947), p. 2.

⁹ W. Fairweather, *The Background of the Gospels* (1926), p. 239.

¹⁰ C. Lattey, "The Messianic Expectation in 'The Assumption of Moses'", *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Jan., 1942, p. 19.

¹¹ S. Mowinckel, "The Hebrew Equivalent of Taxo in *Ass. Mos.* ix", *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. I (1953), pp. 89-90.

¹² H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic* (1952), pp. 91-95, 134-141.

with Charles, and if one disagrees, his arguments must be more convincing than the evidence Charles sets forth.

In terms of sheer historical probability, the *Ass. Mos.* is likely to have been written in Hebrew, for this was the language generally reserved for holy writings. The popular speech among first century A.D. Palestinian Jews was probably Aramaic, but it tended to be a colloquial rather than a literary language in this period. Such a statement can only be a broad generalization subject to many exceptions. The entire field of Aramaic studies is enlarging, and modern investigation is expected to shed much light on this area of linguistics. However, it is probable on historical grounds that the *Ass. Mos.*, a quasi-holy writing, was written in Hebrew. But this is at best only a secondary consideration. Of prime significance is the linguistic character of the Latin text.

Charles' work on this question is brilliant, and no scholar since his time has done so thorough an investigation. However, in his enthusiasm to demonstrate the evidences for a Hebrew original he appears to have displayed a certitude which goes beyond the reasonable inferences from the data. He sets down five criteria for a Hebrew original:

1. Hebrew idiomatic phrases survive in the text.
2. Hebrew syntactical idioms probably persist.
3. In some instances it is necessary to translate the presupposed Hebrew, not the Latin text.
4. Often it is solely through retranslation that the source of corruptions in the text may be understood and ultimately removed.
5. Retranslation into Hebrew reveals word-plays.

On the basis of numerous examples advanced, Charles asserts that:

On the above grounds, I hold, therefore, that it is no longer possible to doubt the Semitic original of this book. It may reasonably also be concluded from what precedes, that the original was in Hebrew and not in Aramaic.

A review will be given of some of the more compelling examples brought forth by Charles. They are considered in the order of the criteria he established.

Under the criterion of surviving Hebraistic idiomatic phrases, Charles cites, among others, *Ass. Mos.* 2 : 7, 5 : 2 and 6 : 1. 2 : 7 contains the strange Latin word *circumibo* which is translated "I will protect". Tertullian employed *circumeo*, "go around", but this word is rarely found.¹³ Charles conjectures that Deut. 32 : 10 and Jer. 31 : 22 provide the correct Hebrew word אֲטוֹבֵב. The LXX renders this by κυκλώω in Deut. 32 : 10. Charles states that this word "cannot be explained from the Aramaic". However, in the Targum of Ps. 32 : 10 חֲסֵד יִסְבְּבוּ is translated by טִיבוֹתָא יַחְזִירִינָה. The Aramaic root חזר means "to surround" in the Aphel stem and thus could be rendered by *circumeo*, because the context allows the sense of "protect". Thus Charles' argument permits of exception. Secondly, *Ass. Mos.* 6 : 1 contains two significant Latin constructions which suggest a Hebrew origin : *in sacerdotes summi dei vocabuntur* and *facient facientes*. The first phrase Charles emends to *in summos sacerdotes Dei vocabuntur* on the basis of the LXX reading of I Chron. 23 : 14, which looks back to יִקְרְאוּ עַל שְׂבֵט הַלֵּוִי. This construction is not certain as a Hebraism; it may be an Aramaism in Chronicles. The Niphal is used in the reflexive sense (cf. Isa. 48 : 2), "to call himself". Therefore, the Latin text presupposes a reflexive use of קרא in the Niphal. Charles implies that this construction cannot be paralleled in Aramaic. The second and more transparent Hebraism in this verse is *facient facientes*, which represents the frequent construction עֲשֵׂה יַעֲשֶׂה. Charles expresses astonishment, and rightly, that Schmidt-Merx, Volkmar, Hilgenfeld and Fritzsche attempt to explain away this clear Hebraistic usage. Charles' argument is not significantly weakened by the fact that the Targum at times uses a construction which resembles this emphatic use of the infinitive absolute in Hebrew; e.g., the Targum of Deut. 15 : 4 reads בִּרְכָא יִבְרַכִּינָךְ; Deut. 15 : 5 is קִבְּלָא תִקְבִּיל; and 15 : 8 is מִפְתַּח תִּפְתַּח. The Babylonian origin of the Targum and the tendency toward Hebraicizing are two factors which separate the Targum from the main stream of Palestinian Aramaic. Furthermore, Dalman holds that:

The Hebrew mode of emphasizing the finite verb by adding its infinitive or cognate substantive, though still fre-

¹³ A. Souter, *A Glossary of Later Latin to 600 A.D.* (1949), p. 52.

quent in I Maccabees, is in the Palestinian Aramaic of the Jews—apart from the Targums—quite unknown!¹⁴

These facts tend to support Charles' claim that this construction is a Hebraism, because the exceptions in the Targum clearly reflex Hebrew influence.¹⁵

Ass. Mos. 5 : 5 reads: *qui enim magistri sunt doctores eorum*. Charles agrees with Hilgenfeld's reconstruction into Greek; the context does not suggest any mention of rabbis or teachers in this passage. Rather the context calls for the contrast between the "some" and the "many", not "some" and "teachers". The Hebrew is reconstructed as follows: **והרבים מוריהם**. It is well known that **הרבים** may mean "many" or "the Rabbis". The context calls for the former.

For whereas in ver. 4 b it is said that *some* who are not true priests will defile the altar of God, it is here said that *many* will administer justice corruptly, the "some" and the "many" belonging alike to the Sadducean party, to the Sanhedrin, the chief council of the nation.

Charles then explains **מוריהם**, *doctores eorum*, as a marginal gloss inserted by some Hebrew copyist. Thus the copyist initiated the error by misunderstanding **הרבים**.

Ass. Mos. 12 : 7 contains "an inadmissible text": *temperantius misericordiae ipsius . . . contegerunt mihi*. This corruption is removed by retranslation into the following phrase: **הואיל וקרא אותי חסדו**. *Temperantius* is said to be a translation of **הואיל**; cf. I. Sam. 12 : 22 and II. Kings 6 : 3. Two alternatives then arise: (1) alter **וקרא** into **הקרה**, or (2) insert the preposition **ב** or **מ** before **חסדו**. The tone of the entire book accords with the second alternative; "he was pleased to call me in his compassion (or mercy)". Charles states positively of every reconstruction cited, except that in

¹⁴ G. Dalman, *The Words of Jesus* (1902), p. 34.

¹⁵ Cf. W. B. Stevenson, *Grammar of Palestinian Jewish Aramaic* (1924), p. 9. He points out that the Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan were "somewhat modified by Hebrew originals". See also M. Waxman, *A History of Jewish Literature*, Vol. I (1930), p. 114. "In time, changes in style were introduced to suit the Eastern Aramaic dialect current in Babylon . . ."

5 : 5, that they would be impossible “on the assumption of an Aramaic original”.

One further very plausible removal of a textual corruption by Charles is found in *Ass. Mos.* 1 : 10; cf. also 10 : 15. A problem arises over the presence of the word *promitte* which does not accord well with the context of Moses' charge to Joshua immediately prior to his death. Charles rightly supposes that the author of the *Ass. Mos.* borrowed his phraseology from the parallel passages in the OT: Deut. 31 : 6, 7, 23 and Joshua 1 : 6, 7, 9, 18. The phrase in the *Ass. Mos.* is recast into Hebrew, and the corruption is seen to have come about over the verb **אמר**. The verb in the parallel OT passages is **אמץ**, and thus it was misread by the Greek translator as **אמר**. Furthermore, he understood **אמר** in the rarer sense of “to promise”; cf. I Chron. 27 : 23 for such a usage.

Two phrases occur in the *Ass. Mos.* which have definite parallels in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek writings. The first is found in 1 : 13, 14, 17, and 12 : 4. It is *ab initio orbis terrarum*, and the Greek equivalent is preserved by Gelasius of Cyzicum in his *Comment. Act. Syn. Nic.* 2 : 18: *πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου*. This exact phrase appears in John 17:24, Eph. 1:14, and I Pet. 1 : 20; and it occurs in eight other passages with different prepositions (*ἀπὸ, εἰς*). McNeile states in reference to the words *ἀπὸ κτλ.* in Matt. 25 : 34 that it is “apparently unknown outside the NT”.¹⁶ Then he goes on to cite *Ass. Mos.* 1 : 14 and *IV Ezra* 6 : 1 (*initio terreni orbis*) as tentative parallels. Bernard notes that *Ass. Mos.* contains the same phrase found in John 17 : 24.¹⁷ In reference to these words in Eph. 1 : 4 Billerbeck cites Midrashic sources which contain similar ideas.¹⁸

Further Rabbinic and Aramaic sources for this phrase outside the NT may be found in Buxtorf's lexicon.¹⁹ Concerning the word **בריה** this scholar cites **מבריתו של עולם** — *a creatione Mundi*. In discussing **בריאה** and **בריתא** he states:

¹⁶ A. H. McNeile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1915), in loc.

¹⁷ J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (1949, Reprint), Vol. II, p. 580.

¹⁸ H. Strack & P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, Vol. 3 (1926), pp. 579-580.

¹⁹ J. Buxtorf, *Lexicon Chaldaicum, Talmudicum, et Rabbinicum* (1640), col. 350.

Creatura: ובריא לקבל אפהא אולא Ez. 1, 6. et creatura quaeque coram facie sua ambulabat, ibid. v. 12. והא ברית גובי et ecce creatura locustarum, Amos 7, 1. Item *Creatio*: ושרוי ברית עלמא et principium creationis mundi, Ps. 50, 2. Plur. ברין ארבע quatuor creaturae, Ez. 1, 5. ודמות בריתא et similitudo creaturarum, v. 13.

Thus it is clear that this phrase in the *Ass. Mos.* has significant Rabbinic parallels, and ושרוי ברית עלמא is certainly Aramaic.

Another phrase in the *Ass. Mos.* which suggests an Aramaic background is found in 1 : 11, "the Lord of the world", *Dominus orbis terrarum*. Charles says nothing about this phrase. It has a somewhat unusual combination of words, not found in the Scripture in this form. However, an Aramaic equivalent has to be seen in the words מרי עלמא. Cantineau notes this in his lexicon as "le maître de l'univers".²⁰ Lidzbarski cites למרא עלמא טבא ורחמנא as "dem Herrn des Alls, dem Guten und Barmherzigen", a phrase from the inscription of Palmyra.²¹ Ginzberg cites this phrase "Lord of the world" from the Rabbinic accounts of Moses' death as contained in *DR.* 11. 9, *Petirat Mosheh* 125 and 2 *Petirat Mosheh* 379.²²

These Aramaic equivalents to expressions in the *Ass. Mos.* are not advanced as an attempt to demonstrate that the original language was Aramaic, but rather to show that Aramaic parallels do exist and were current in the writings of Judaism. Whether the original language of the *Ass. Mos.* was Hebrew or Aramaic, it is reasonable to assume that current Aramaisms could have found their way into the text.

It might be argued that the best case for a Hebrew original rests on the frequent use of OT phrases in the text. A rapid reading of the *Ass. Mos.* reveals many familiar OT expressions: tabernacle of the testimony, 1 : 7; oath and the covenant, *passim*; house of the Lord, 2 : 9; whoring after strange gods, 5 : 3, etc. But this cannot be even a supporting argument be-

²⁰ J. Cantineau, *Le Nabatéen*, Vol. II (1932), p. 118.

²¹ M. Lidzbarski, *Ephemeris für semitische Epigraphik*, Vol. II (1908), p. 298. Cf. also J. G. Février, *La religion des Palmyréniens* (1931), p. 111.

²² L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Vol. III (1938), p. 450, and Vol. VI, p. 152.

cause many of these phases had passed over into Aramaic from the Hebrew.

The difficulty which attends an investigation into the original language is profound. It is clear that the Greek translator of the *Ass. Mos.* frequently misunderstood and thus improperly rendered the text, e.g., 10 : 10. Only fragments of this Greek version are extant. But the greatest difficulty is that the Greek translation was rendered into Latin by an individual who was obviously clumsy in his use of Latin, and deficient in his knowledge of Greek. Repeatedly he obscured the sense of the text and often produced a meaningless phrase. If the Greek and Latin translators had been skilled linguists, the problem of determining the original language, though simplified, would have been difficult. But the attempt to demonstrate conclusively, as Charles feels he has done, that the *Ass. Mos.* was written in Hebrew is to fail to appreciate the hazards involved. To argue a case on the grounds of word order of the Latin is manifestly impossible, for the word order could have been altered considerably through two translations. As to alleged Hebrew idiomatic phrases in the text, even Charles admits that "it is true that the majority of these could be paralleled by Aramaic expressions . . ."

In view of these facts it appears that Charles is too certain of his position when he declares that the original was in Hebrew. While admitting that his restorations are very clever, and in some instances quite compelling, it is evident that the data for certainty are insufficient. Where there is such paucity of sound evidence, statements about the original must be made cautiously and only tentatively. It is far more judicious to affirm that the original language of the *Ass. Mos.* was *probably Hebrew*, but final conclusions must await further evidence, such as the finding of a substantial portion of the text in Greek, or an older and more reliable Latin text.

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