
HOOFDARTIKELEN

The First Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*

The makers of dictionaries of Rabbinical literature are traditionally scholars who devote considerable parts of their lives to preparing their contribution towards making this vast and complex literature more manageable for others. Back in the seventeenth century, the Christian Hebraist Johann Buxtorf Jr. proudly wrote on the title-page of his father's lexicon of rabbinical literature that he and his father had worked on it for thirty years when it finally appeared in 1639¹⁾, and some decades later the Sephardic lexicographer David Cohen de Lara outdid him by stating below the title of his lexicon *Keter Kehunna* that it had taken him forty years to complete²⁾. Seen in this light, the ten-year period which Michael Sokoloff according to the preface spent on preparing his new *Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic* seems not excessive, but it still represents the investment of the energy of a highly capable scholar during a considerable part of his active life, and the scholarly world has every reason to be grateful for it.

The problem of Galilean Aramaic

The problems with the grammar and lexicography of Jewish Palestinian or Galilean Aramaic have been pointed out repeatedly by the late E.Y. Kutscher, who published a classical collection of grammatical essays on this dialect³⁾. In the Middle Ages the rabbinic traditions of Palestine to a degree sank into oblivion, in contrast with those of Babylonia, which in the course of time gained almost canonical significance. This situation is reflected by the neglect which the Palestinian texts suffered at the hands of copyists, who seem to have attached far greater importance to texts in Babylonian (or Targumic, or Biblical) Aramaic. The result has been a great influx of lexical and grammatical material from other Aramaic dialects into texts which had once been in pure Palestinian Aramaic.

The central problem resulting from this situation is that most texts in Galilean Aramaic are of a mixed nature, and can only be reduced to their original linguistic form through a number of editorial decisions, many of which will not be agreed upon by all, so that the linguistic reality of Galilean Aramaic cannot be reached in this way. The only linguistically pure texts are those which have been written during or shortly after the period when Galilean Aramaic still was a spoken language. Of such texts we have a number of inscriptions and papyri, as well as fragmentary texts from the Cairo Geniza of various midrashim, the Palestinian Talmud and the Palestinian Targum. One of the more important sources for this dialect, however, has not

been published, though use has been made of it for compiling this dictionary. If all or a majority of the Aramaic *piyuṭim* (religious hymns) from the late Byzantine period in Palestine, which the author is to publish together with Y. Yahalom, conform to what I have up till now seen of it, they are going to be the prime source for correct linguistic usage in this period, and may well lead to a new view of the linguistic nature of the other texts. Galilean Aramaic, in sum, confronts the lexicographer with many and variegated problems and he is placed before the unenviable task of attaining clarity about correct usage for himself first, and convey his ideas about it to the reader afterwards. There is bound to be some disagreement, of course, about the many decisions which he has to take with regard to including or excluding certain words or texts.

During the last few decades, many scholars (including myself) filled large filing cabinets with lexical collections of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic texts. These can now all be safely used as scrap cardboard, as there will be little use for them from now on. Before putting these faithful servants to more humble occupations, however, I will loaf through them once more to see whether some may still be useful as complements to the new dictionary. Before doing that I will first give a few more general observations, first about this dictionary and then about the problems facing the maker of such a dictionary in general.

General remarks on the dictionary

I did not perform any systematic checks on the completeness of the dictionary, though during my and my students' perusal of it I did not come across the absence of any obviously important words or passages. I would have liked, however, to have been informed when a certain word indeed appears only this one time, in the passage which is quoted in the dictionary. I have the idea that if there is more than one attestation, these are always given, up to a certain number of course, but I did not find any statement about this.

The words have apparently been listed under their most common form, which is in itself a sound procedure, but led to unexpected results such as *sgy(n)*, "very, much, many", being listed under *sgy* when an adjective, while the adverb is found under *sgyn*. In GA as in many other Aramaic dialects, conjunctions can easily be formed through a combination of a preposition and the relative pronoun *d^e*. Sokoloff is undoubtedly right when listing these two categories separately, but leaving out the word *d^e* in the lemma for the conjunction is bound to cause confusion. I was at first misled through the dictionary's listing the few cases of original *śin* which have not been written with *samekh* instead of the sign for *śin/shin* after the *shin*, instead of before it, as is common in other dictionaries. The fact that it gives words which sometimes retain initial *śin* after the letter *shin* in the dictionary leads to a certain redundancy and may confuse the person who is not aware of the fact that this is a purely orthographical feature, *śin* being pronounced exactly the same as *samekh*.

During the last two decades a number of studies dealing with particular subjects in the grammar of Galilean Aramaic have been published. The dictionary, however, hardly refers to these, but bases its grammatical observations on an unpublished 1978 MA thesis (by Y. Peri) which seems highly interesting to me though I have never set eye on it,

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¹⁾ See J. Priejs, *Die Basler hebräischen Drucke (1492-1866)* (Olten & Freiburg i. Br., 1964), p. 365-370: 368.

²⁾ See about this dictionary J. Perles; "David Cohen de Lara's rabbinisches Lexikon *Kheter Khehunna*", *Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 17 (1868), p. 224-232 and 255-264, and P.T. van Rooden & J.W. Wesselius, "Two Early Cases of Publication by Subscription in Holland and Germany: Jacob Abendana's *Mikhlal Yophi* (1661) en David Cohen de Lara's *Keter Kehunna* (1668)", *Quaerendo* 16 (1986), p. 110-130.

³⁾ E.Y. Kutscher, *Studies in Galilean Aramaic*, Ramat-Gan, 1976.

simply because it is not in our library (by the way, neither is Steven Fassberg's 1982 dissertation in the same field [in the meantime a revised edition has appeared], which is never quoted by Sokoloff either). This observation is even true for the field of lexicography. There are very few references to secondary literature, apart from a few standard works of reference such as Löw's *Flora der Juden*⁴), or Sperber's books on navigation, taxation and economics in Talmudic times⁵). Because of this, the reader must still refer to well-known translations such as those in Klein's editions of texts of the Palestinian Targum, or to Le Déaut's and Robert's ambitious French translation of the entire Palestinian Targum for additional information about certain words.

One could doubt the wisdom of excluding geographical names, but including all gentilics, even when these have been derived in the most regular way from those names; I would have liked to see both.

There are two additional complications which render lexicographical work on Galilean Aramaic considerably more arduous than is the case with other Aramaic dialects. One of these is shared with lexicographical work on other parts of rabbinical literature, the other is peculiar to this dialect and springs from the unusual history of its tradition.

A dictionary of rabbinical literature

There are at least two highly complicating factors which confront the maker of a dictionary of any section of rabbinical literature. Firstly this literature is very complex and technical in the exegetical field, and especially when it translates a Bible text it should never be automatically assumed that such a translation is adequate and precise according to our own standards. Indeed, it is often given precisely because rabbinic exegesis wants to modify or change the meaning of the original text, or at least to make it more precise than in the original. A second difficulty is that in this literature there are very many technical terms dealing with Jewish custom and law. These will need some explanation in order to be comprehensible for those who are not so well informed about them: usually the majority of those who use such a dictionary. In both respects the dictionary attempts to meet the users' demands, though some are bound to remain unfulfilled, especially in the first field, of which I will give some examples below.

Of course it is somewhat of a lexicographer's nightmare that especially those texts which seem to offer translational equivalents between the language he is studying and another language should be approached with suspicion; this is, unfortunately, the problem of nearly everyone writing on the Aramaic lexicon from the earliest texts onwards⁶). I will mention some instances where the targumic translation process in my view led the dictionary astray. Such a case is for example to be found in the Targumic translation of the well-known Hebrew expression *l'pī herev*, usually translated into English as: "by the edge of the sword". The fact that *lptgm dhrb* is presented as the translation of *l'pī hereb*

does not authorize us to translate this Aramaic expression in the same way, and assume a meaning "edge" for *ptgm*, as it is quite simply a different translation of the same expression: "by the word of the sword", probably meaning: "mercilessly", or the like. A further example is that the meaning "to curse" is given to the *pa'el* of *z'ṛ* (180), because it is used to translate *zo'amā*, "curse!", in Numbers 23:7 in the Neofiti manuscript. It should be noted, however, that this is merely an alternative rendering of this form, and that there is consequently no reason for another translation of the verb *z'ṛ*.

Somewhat less problematic than these two is the existence of many loanwords from Hebrew, as is natural in a literature from such a linguistically mixed background. A problem for the Semiticist dealing with Galilean Aramaic on the basis of this dictionary alone will be that in a number of instances he will not be in a position to discern that certain lexical isoglosses with Hebrew are marginal, if they cannot simply be said to be non-existent. Of the words *ḥyl*, *ḥryn*, *kdy*, *myth* (see below) and a number of others one can hardly maintain that they belong to the Aramaic lexical heritage. This will make the use of this dictionary problematic for those who study, to mention only one example, the lexical relations between Aramaic and other Semitic languages.

It must be said that there were good reasons for making dictionaries which combine Hebrew and Aramaic parts of rabbinic literature and give extensive commentaries on difficult passages, from the medieval Arukh to M. Jastrow's dictionary from the beginning of this century. One of the problems one avoids in this way is that Hebrew words are often used rather freely in Aramaic contexts, and that it is not always easy to determine which words really entered the Aramaic lexicon and which are merely quoted in it. Thus I would hesitate whether one could classify the word *kdy*, "worthy", as Aramaic, because in Aramaic passages it is always used in contexts which deal with the praying for rain, where this characteristic Hebrew word, which is found in the passages of Tractate Taanith in both Talmudim which deal with this, serves a technical halakhic purpose.

There is an objection to the traditional dictionaries which, though to a far lesser degree, also applies to this dictionary. Very common words, such as the prepositions *b*, *l*, *k* and (somewhat less) *l*, are treated very briefly only, without differentiation among their many meanings and without reference to the idioms which they may be used in. On the whole, however, those very common lexical elements which had been neglected by the older dictionaries have been dealt with very satisfactorily.

A dictionary of a heterogeneous Aramaic dialect

This is the first dictionary of a major Aramaic dialect (only some useful works dealing with more limited corpora having appeared in the meantime) to appear since Drower's and Macuch's *Mandaic Dictionary* (Oxford, 1963). For this reason some mention of comparative Semitic material might have been useful both for beginner and professional, though I can understand the reticence to rely on secondary information concerning this subject. Comparative Semitics will certainly not advance unless scholars take this risk, but it can be argued that the Comparative Aramaic Lexicon, now well under way under the guidance of S.A. Kaufman, will soon fill this lacuna.

One other respect in which something remains to be desired is in the field of the delimitation of dialects and languages.

⁴) I. Löw, *Die Flora der Juden* (Vienna, 1924-1934).

⁵) Daniel Sperber, *Roman Palestine 200-400: Money and Prices* (Ramat-Gan, 1974); id., *A Dictionary of Greek and Latin Legal Terms in Rabbinic Literature* (Ramat-Gan, 1984); id., *Nautica Talmudica* (Ramat-Gan/Leiden, 1986).

⁶) For a discussion of the very same phenomenon in the Tell Fekherye Old Aramaic inscription, see my "Translation Techniques in the Tell Fekherye Inscription" (to appear).

Galilean Aramaic is hardly a uniform language, even without the contamination by other dialects. On the one hand the dialect of the Palestinian Targum has a distinct position, on the other hand the poems, as far as they have been published up till now, exhibit a type of language which deviates significantly from the texts in the Palestinian Talmud and the midrashim as well (because most poems are still unpublished, a complete picture is not yet possible, but the words which are quoted in the dictionary apparently confirm this impression). One can imagine that it is not feasible to give a complete delineation of the semantic fields in the various dialects, but I missed especially some differences which have been noted in the secondary literature. One can hardly blame the author on the one hand for not noting each and every difference between the various dialects which can be distinguished within Galilean Aramaic of this periods, and on the other hand for not pointing out every instance where influence of the language of Targum Onqelos or of Babylonian Aramaic can possibly be detected. I realize the problems which are involved, but still it would have been useful to find some indication to which linguistic layer certain words and expressions belong. Thus, to mention only one well-known example, one could peruse the entire dictionary without ever realizing that the three expressions for “to lift up the eyes” in the dictionary (*zqp / ntl / tlh ʿnyyn*) are in principle characteristic of three different dialects (Onqelos, Palestinian Targum and Midrashim, respectively, with *tlh ʿnyyn* also being used in midrashic expansions of the Palestinian Targum).

Another difficulty confronting the reader arises from the habit to adduce parallels from Aramaic dialects which do not belong to the Western group from the same period as Galilean Aramaic (Samaritan Aramaic, Christian Palestinian Aramaic) more or less at will, apparently when it was felt that a meaning or an etymology needed further corroboration. I will discuss only the problem of Syriac here. In many cases the absence of certain Syriac parallels in the dictionary will not be felt to be a problem by most users, as the words which Syriac and Galilean Aramaic have in common are often quite ordinary words, which occur in many dialects. In not a few instances, however, mentioning a Syriac parallel would have been really helpful for establishing the etymology or meaning of words in the dictionary. I checked the letter *samekh* (including the *sin*), and found that a comparison with the Syriac dictionaries proves quite useful. Thus the relatively rare *smqry*, “reddish”, is found in Syriac also, from Syriac *sylyn* it would appear rather likely that *sylwn*, “chair”, must be read in that way also (i.e. with *yod* instead of with *waw*), *srgl*, “to trace lines”, has a nice parallel in Syriac *srgd* with the same meaning, and *srswr* is paralleled by Syriac *smsr*. These are hardly very sensational parallels (and most were already known), but they are still quite helpful for the lexicography of GA, and I think that they should have been in the dictionary.

Details

Some corrections to the list of abbreviations on p. 8-18: the correct title of DISO is *Dictionnaire des inscriptions sémitiques de l'ouest*. I missed the entry “GM”, which is apparently used for Michael Klein’s edition of the Geniza manuscripts of the Palestinian Targum.

Sometimes the Hebrew/English software seems to have messed things up somewhat and put words in the wrong

order, e.g. in the entries *zbn* (171r.), *sbs* (365r.), *sdn* (368r.), *swrystwn* (372r.), *snbyryn* (383r.).

I will now proceed to give a number of short notes on entries in the dictionary, in alphabetical order (unless otherwise noted).

ʿhyl – If this word would really mean simply “tent”, as listed in the dictionary, it would be a remarkable loan of a very common word from Hebrew. It is, however, a halakhic term denoting the area rendered impure by a person suffering from a flux or by a dead body, and in the field of halakha borrowing from Hebrew is, of course, far more common. It should be noted that there is a further instance of this word on p. 226r., under *tmy*, where it is also translated as “tent”; I would say that the translation of *mrym ʿhtnn mšr ʿ mʿm ʿh bʿhl ʿ kmyl ʿ*, “Miriam, our sister, is leprous, contaminating in a tent like a dead person”, should rather be: “... causing uncleanness by overshadowing...”.

ʿwryn – “lights” is a disputable translation, as the word merely serves to render one element of the Hebrew word for an oracle, *ʿurim wʿ-ummim*, in *twmyy ʿ wʿwryy ʿ* (as translation of *tmyk wʿwryk* in Deut. 33:8). Of course Hebrew *ʿurim* has indeed been connected with *ʿor*, “light”, but that is not sufficient reason for positing this meaning in Aramaic.

ʿwrwys – Note the sentence which is quoted here from one of the unpublished piyutim, and which would seem to contain the spelling *ʿrq*, “the earth” (for normal *ʿrʿ*); if correct, it would of course be an archaism, probably based on the same spelling in the Aramaic of Jeremiah 10:11.

ʿzyl – This word, translated as “standing” (instead of the expected “going”) because it corresponds to Hebrew *nōzʿlīm* in Exodus 15:8, is again an example of a midrashic rendering which has attained lexical status in the dictionary: there is really nothing against deriving it from the common verb *ʿzl*, “to go”.

ʿngryyh – The translation “seizure of people or goods for public services” is in itself correct, but these public services are, in this case, limited to the long-distance transportation of heavy and bulky goods by the Roman government, as is well known to students of classical languages. It would have been useful to quote Sperber’s (admittedly somewhat dated) article on this subject: D. Sperber, “Angaria in Rabbinic Literature”, *L’Antiquité Classique* 38 (1969), p. 164-168.

ʿrgynt – This is indeed a type of demon, but a highly specialised one: a bath-demon of the type which occurs in many sources from Late Antiquity.

byy – This word for “house” is correctly classified under this lemma, but I wonder whether a cross-reference under *byt* would not have been helpful for Semitists.

br mʿrbh – The translation “inhabitant of Eretz Israel” is too precise, if only because not every Semitist will be able to make the jump from “Westerner” to “inhabitant of Syria/Palestine” at once by himself.

br šnyyn – Especially because this dictionary will also be used by those dealing with midrashic passages, which sometimes involve reckoning of ages, it would have been useful to add that a “son of 17 years”, to mention only one arbitrary example, may well be only 16 years of age according to modern reckoning. See the article by G. Haneman, “On the Meaning of the Phrase *ben kakh wekhkakh shanim*”, in: G.B. Sarfatti e.a., ed., *Studies in Hebrew and Semitic Languages Dedicated to the Memory of Prof. Eduard Yechezkel Kutscher* (Ramat-Gan 1980) 103-109 [Hebr.].

hʿlk – The idiomatic English translation is, of course: “here you are!”.

hzwwn – An evident printing error for *hzw*.

hzn – It would have been useful for the more or less casual user of texts in Galilean Aramaic to define briefly the tasks of officials such as the one who is known both as *hazzān* and as *š'liah šibbur*; in both cases I missed the basic function “cantor”, the first being translated as “sexton”, the second as “delegate of the congregation”.

imy – There is only one instance mentioned in the dictionary of this verb with the meaning “to make unclean” (pa.), the normal verb which is used with this meaning being *s'b* in Palestinian Aramaic; the only common derivation of the root *im* in GA is to be found in the idiom *im' nps*, “corpse”. I strongly suspect that the verbal form discussed here is an Onqelos form which has intruded into the Fragmentary Targum at this place (Num. 12:12, MS V). See under *hyl* above for the translation of the quotation.

yšt yd – This is the normal Onqelos expression for “to stretch out the hand”. If it appears only once in GA, in Palestinian Talmud AZ 44a, and if the normal translation of this expression is *pšt yd* (453), the first form is highly suspect. There may be good reasons to maintain it in the dictionary, but I think these should be given in that case.

kdy – It is unexpected to find this word listed as Aramaic here, while it is (correctly) noted to be a Hebrew word on p. 262 l., à propos of the supposed Aramaic calque *kmyst*.

kwkbt' – One wonders why we find two separate explanations here, as “morning star” and as “evening star”, for the planet Venus, which, as the rabbis were well aware, serves as either of the two.

mtwl – One of the surest signs that a text is not in pure Galilean Aramaic is, as many scholars have noted, the occurrence of the word *maṭṭul*, “because”. As nearly all the occurrences have been rightly excluded from the dictionary, one can only be surprised to see one isolated instance (from the glosses in the Neofiti manuscript, a provenance which is automatically suspect in linguistic matters), without any commentary as to the reason of its presence.

myth – I wonder how this evidently Hebrew word in the expression *tšmys hmyth* (identified as such on p. 593r. s.v. *tšmys d'rs*) found its way into this dictionary.

mlgw – I missed the interesting form *mlgwl*, “from the inside”, in Wayyiqra Rabba 11,6 in M. Margulies, *Midrash Wayyiqra Rabba*, vol. 5 (Jerusalem 1927) 27. One could assume an error, of course, but it seems more likely that this form should be compared with Ma'lula *elgul*, “inside” (adv.), or *lelgul*, “into” (prep.).

sgy nwhryh – It would not have been superfluous to point out that *sgy nwhryh*, “blind person”, is really a euphemism, the literal meaning being “much of light”. Such details are not at once apparent to the unsuspecting user of the dictionary.

sgy – I suppose that the forms of this verb which are noted as *itp^eal* are really *itpa^aal*, as they are used in all cases in the well-known idiomatic combination of *p^eal* and *itpa^aal* (or passive part. of *pa^el*) to express the highest degree of the act which is expressed by the verb. Thus Hebrew *wyprw wyrbw*, “and grew and multiplied” (Gen. 47:27) can be translated in TNGI ad loc. by *wsgwn w'stgwn*, “and they became exceedingly numerous”.

shwr shwr – It is rightly remarked that this is a common expression in Targumic Aramaic (= Onqelos and Jonathan to the Prophets); for this reason I do not understand why its one-time occurrence in a juridical document is listed here.

sydwryn – If, as S. seems to suggest, this reading is not correct

(possibly being an error for *snbyryn* = *snwryrn*), it is unnecessary and even hazardous to give this word the meaning “blindness” which the context seems to require.

ssgwn – The meaning, something like “vermilion, sky-blue”, has apparently fallen out here.

srs – I do not understand why this single instance of the verb *srs*, “to act as middleman”, which is rightly connected with the common verb *srsr* here, is not regarded as an error for the latter verb.

srqyy – This word for “Arab” has been discussed at length by A. Díez Macho, “En torno a la datacion del Targum ‘Palestinense’”, *Sefarad* 20 (1960), p. 1-16:1-8.

ywwy – As this word “snake” occurs in one of the many anecdotes which are supposed to demonstrate the Galileans' sloppy pronunciation of laryngeal consonants, I wonder whether this variant of normal *hywwy* should really be considered a separate word. It is quite legitimate and useful, of course, to list this form in the dictionary, but the absence of a note on this state of affairs is bound to lead unsuspecting users astray.

yny – I would say that the form *m'ynh* in *dhbt ntwrh m'ynh krmyn*, “she was a guard watching the vineyards” (SYAP 1:6), can only be derived from the *pa^el* of the verb *yn*, which is attested in Syriac (that is, if the form is correct, of course).

yth – As the normal word for “advice” is *ysh*, a loan-word from Hebrew, in all dialects of Palestinian Aramaic (CPA, Samaritan and Galilean Aramaic), and as the parallels to the occurrences of this word in the Paris manuscript of the Palestinian Targum usually have the word *ysh*, it should seriously be considered whether this is really a Palestinian word, instead of an intruded Onqelos form.

prn – I am afraid that “ketubba” is not a very clear translation of this word for the many readers of the book who do not know that the Hebrew word *ketubba* also has, beside the meaning “marriage contract”, a connotation of: “financial obligations resulting from the marriage contract”, or quite simply: “dowry”.

prsy – In most instances the indicated meaning “to reveal” is too weak; it should rather be translated as: “to denounce”.

rmz – S. gives only the meaning “to motion” for this verb, whereas both the instances which he quotes and the Ma'lula parallel make a meaning “to order, to command” (which derives, of course, from the other meaning) much more likely.

rmy – The verb *rmy*, “to throw”, instead of ordinary GA *tlq*, is on the whole clearly an Onqelos word, but the matter is complicated because it is sometimes used in Galilean Aramaic to render its Hebrew equivalent *rmh*, and one may wonder what meaning was intended in those instances.

r'b – The normal root for “to be hungry” is *kpn* in Aramaic; the one occurrence of the Hebrew root *r'b* in Ruth Rabba 86:64 is consequently highly suspect, also because the supposed noun *r'bn* is doubtful as well (see below).

r'bn – This word for “hunger” is very uncertain, as it is written very indistinctly in the Paris manuscript of the Fragmentary Targum in a place where the parallels have *mkwn*, “with you”.

One of the things which one misses most dearly is an index of Greek words (to a lesser degree also one of Hebrew words), in exchange for which I would have been fully willing to do without the otherwise very useful indexes of the passages from which words have been taken for the text of the dictionary.

Conclusion

A final note about the price of the book. On the one hand one can only be amazed that such a specialized book of over 600 pages would cost just less than 100 dollars, on the other hand this is still too much, in my view, to recommend it as a mandatory purchase to the many undergraduates taking a course of Aramaic midrash texts. I dare say that halving its price would increase its potential market fourfold. These are, however, marketing decisions which the reviewer can only mention in passing.

Much more can be said about this dictionary, many more remarks on matters of detail can be made, numerous interesting questions can be raised. But above all it should be noted that for the first time students of the many fascinating texts in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, whether freshmen or accomplished scholars, find themselves with a tool which they will sometimes disagree with, which they will occasionally wish to be more complete in some respect, but which will support and further their studies immensely.

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J.W. WESSELIUS