

CHAPTER VIII

Semitisms in the Book of Acts

D. F. Payne

I

Palestine and indeed the whole Levant, has often been acknowledged as the place where East and West meet. Two millennia ago, those who met there were respectively speakers of Aramaic and Greek — unrelated languages, the former Semitic, the latter Indo-European. The New Testament, as a result, presents us with a very interesting phenomenon, in that the writers were nearly all Semites, Aramaic speakers and of Jewish descent, heirs of a long non-Greek culture (not in total isolation from Greek thought, to be sure) who nevertheless all chose to pass on their priceless message in the Greek language.

It is no surprise that their command of Greek varied considerably from one writer to another; it is perhaps somewhat surprising, on the other hand, that they all showed such proficiency in handling Greek as they did. At any rate, the good Greek of James and 1 Peter has often served as one reason for doubting the traditional authorship of both epistles. It is interesting to note that *The Jerusalem Bible* states of 1 Peter that the "Greek is too accurate and unforced for a fisherman from Galilee";¹ yet when discussing the Epistle of James it makes the more appropriate observation that "no accurate estimate... can be made as to how competent first-century Palestinians were in writing Greek!"²

The author of the third gospel and of Acts, however, was no Palestinian, if the traditional authorship is to be accepted; the anti-Marcionite Prologue to the third gospel indicates that the author of both books was Luke, "an Antiochian of Syria, a physician by profession". That he was a Gentile is often deduced from Colossians 4:10-14, where Paul distinguishes him from "men of the circumcision". From these early data it might reasonably be inferred that the writer of Acts lacked both the Hebraic background and the knowledge of the Aramaic language which characterized the great majority of the New Testament writers. One might therefore have expected to find that Luke and Acts stood apart from all the rest of the New Testament documents, by presenting "pure" Greek, free of all trace of Semitism. But this is in fact far from being the case; the Semitisms

[p.135]

of Acts alone have recently necessitated a book of 200 pages for an adequate discussion of them.³

How, then, are the clear evidences of Semitic influence to be explained? An immediate possibility is that Luke was not after all a Gentile, but a Hellenistic Jew; Colossians 4 is not

¹ *The Jerusalem Bible* (London, 1966), New Testament, p. 393.

² *Ibid.*, p. 391.

³ M. Wilcox, *The Semitisms of Acts* (Oxford, 1965).

really the strongest evidence, particularly in view of the fact that the phrase "of the circumcision" is of uncertain meaning.⁴ For the present writer, Colossians 4 most probably does make Luke a Gentile; but in any case, the decision as to the background of the author of Luke-Acts must depend on a thorough examination of those books; Colossians 4:11 cannot be said to settle the issue. Gentile or not, as an Antiochian Luke could well have been bilingual, for Aramaic as well as Greek was spoken in Syrian Antioch and its environs. But then we cannot be sure of the accuracy of the Antiochian tradition, and again we are forced to study the Semitisms themselves.

If there is uncertainty about Luke's own cultural and linguistic background, it is at least clear that much of his subject-matter relates to Palestine and a Jewish milieu. The whole of his gospel, and the first half (and more) of the Book of Acts, are staged against such a Semitic backdrop; and patently his sources (whether oral or written) for three-quarters of his work will have been inevitably to some extent Semitic. But there is no *a priori* reason why later sections of Acts, set in a Gentile environment, should exhibit any Semitic colouring at all.⁵ Hence the general attractiveness of C. C. Torrey's hypothesis that in Acts 1-15 Luke has translated an Aramaic document for his readers.⁶ In fact, many of Torrey's arguments have been virtually overthrown; criticisms of his hypothesis have been many and various, but not least among them is the very fact of the quantity of Semitisms to be found in Acts 16-28, where a theory involving an Aramaic source would have little plausibility.

A thorough linguistic examination of the Book of Acts is, therefore, indispensable for any clear understanding of the author of the book and of the sources he utilized. It also has a bearing on the question of the historicity of Acts. If it could be established, for instance, that the speeches of Acts are of so Semitic a character that they must derive from Aramaic sources, then the probability of Luke's historical reliability would be considerably enhanced.

But if the importance of the question is undeniable, the difficulties inherent in such a study are equally beyond dispute. In the first place, how is a "Semitism" to be defined? The term is usually applied to linguistic

[p.136]

elements (whether words, expressions, idioms, syntax, grammar or style) which are alien to Greek and which owe their origin to either Aramaic or Hebrew. But as C. F. D. Moule has written,

It is not always possible to determine where to draw the line between a clear, alien "Semitism" and a term or idiom which is indeed reminiscent of a characteristically Semitic equivalent but which is none the less good or tolerable Greek, and may, therefore, owe little or nothing to Semitic influence. Sometimes it is only the frequency of its occurrence, and not its actual existence, that a term or phrase owes to the alien influence.

⁴ That the third evangelist was Jewish has been held by A. Schlatter, E. C. Selwyn, B. S. Easton, A. H. McNeile, B. Reicke, W. F. Albright, and E. E. Ellis. [See E. E. Ellis, "Those of the Circumcision" and the Early Christian Mission," in *Studia Evangelica* 5 (TU 102; Berlin, 1968), pp. 390-99 Edd.].

⁵ The scene reverts to Palestine in 15; 21:7 - 27:3, although for the most part Paul's company in the later chapters was non-Jewish.

⁶ C. Torrey, *The Composition and Date of Acts* (Cambridge, Mass., 1916).

Obviously, too, this problem is complicated by the question of how far the generally understood, secular κοινή had unconsciously absorbed and, so to speak, naturalized what were originally alien elements from Semitic populations.⁷

Generally speaking, one would require a reasonable quantity of Semitisms before deciding that a particular passage was clearly influenced by or translated from a Semitic language. All too often, features of New Testament Greek which appeal to one scholar as clear Semitisms tend to be disallowed by the next scholar.⁸

A second difficulty is occasioned by the very vagueness of the term Semitism. In theory, the New Testament documents and manuscripts might have been influenced by classical Hebrew, by contemporary spoken Hebrew, or by several contemporary dialects of Aramaic — Judaeen, Galilean, Antiochian among them. Strictly speaking, therefore, one ought to look for Hebraisms, Aramaisms, and Syriacisms, and then subdivide these categories still further; but in practice relatively few acknowledged Semitisms can be neatly pigeon-holed in such a fashion. The dialects of Aramaic did not differ too radically from one another; and Hebrew, though a different language, is very closely akin to Aramaic. Moreover, our materials for distinguishing distinct Aramaic dialects are still much scantier than we could wish, despite recent discoveries of importance.⁹

A further complication is caused by New Testament textual variations. As is well known, the text of Acts preserved in Codex Bezae (D) is almost an *editio altera* of the book, as compared with the TR or the Westcott and Hort text. Both in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, moreover, the D text exhibits far more Semitisms than can be found in other textual traditions. A good case can be made for viewing many of these additional Semitisms as original; it is rather more likely that in the course of transmission some

[p.137]

alien elements in Greek were removed than that Aramaic-speaking scribes deliberately or unconsciously recast the Greek which they were copying into a more Semitic mould. Even so, some caution must be observed. Wilcox very properly stresses the importance of the "eclectic" method of textual criticism, and adds that "textual criticism and judgment on Semitism must proceed hand in hand".¹⁰ The simple view that the Western text gives us more or less the original text of Acts¹¹ is now even less likely than it was, since E. J. Epp has demonstrated the scope and extent of theological reinterpretations in D.¹² Some of the Semitisms of D may well be secondary; but Epp's most convincing examples are those where there is variation in vocabulary, and it would not be easy to find theological motives for mere

⁷ C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-book of New Testament Greek*² (Cambridge, 1959), p. 171. Moule's chapter on "Semitisms" [pp. 177-91] is a useful introduction to the subject in general.

⁸ See especially M. Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*³ (Oxford, 1967), chapter 1, for examples. Wilcox's recent list of significant Semitisms, for all his cautious treatment, would be reduced by J. A. Emerton (cf. his review of Wilcox in *JSS* 13 [1968], pp. 282-97). For a critical appraisal of Black's work, see J. A. Fitzmyer's review of the 3rd ed. in *CBQ* 30 (1968), pp. 417-28.

⁹ Cf. Black, *op. cit.*, chapter 3.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 185.

¹¹ Cf. A. C. Clark, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford, 1933).

¹² E. J. Epp, *The Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis in Acts* (SNTS monograph 3. Cambridge, 1966).

syntactical and grammatical variations, which in no way affect the general sense of the passages concerned.

In the scrutiny of the Semitisms of Acts, then, difficulties abound on every hand; but the greatest of them all is to assign the source of the individual Semitisms. If source-criticism of documents has been characterized as "guess-work", how much more so the source-criticism of single words and phrases! A wide variety of possibilities has to be taken into account. First, there are "naturalized" Semitisms, that is to say, local Aramaisms which had long since affected the Greek spoken in any bilingual area (such as Antioch). Koine Greek in general shares some features with Semitic languages which would not have been tolerated in classical Greek, and it may safely be assumed that in bilingual areas the local Greek dialect will have had an Aramaic colouring over and above such common features. Secondly, there are "Biblicisms", or Semitisms due ultimately to the influence of the Old Testament. These might take the form of direct quotations from the Scriptures, or of allusions to the Old Testament, or simply of a style and phraseology borrowed from it. Thirdly, we find a certain ecclesiastical vocabulary owing more to the Palestinian and Jewish environment in which the church was born than to the Greek world into which it moved so rapidly. Fourthly, there may be a residue of Semitisms most naturally attributed to sources, written or oral, which were available to Luke. The Semitisms of Acts, accordingly, require to be analysed and distributed between these various categories. The importance of this analysis is evident in the observation that Hebraisms will time and time again belong to the category of Biblicisms, whereas Syriacisms would probably derive either from the "naturalized" Semitisms of the Antioch region or else from documents or living traditions of this same area.

[p.138]

II

Academic study of the Semitisms of Acts (as indeed of the Gospels too) may be said to have proceeded in three phases: observation, conjecture, and analysis. Observation and amassing of appropriate material obviously must be the first step towards a scholarly discussion of the phenomena; and this process still continues. The second stage, that of conjecture, has been traced back by Wilcox as far as 1857, when a particularly interesting variant reading (in Acts 3:14) was discussed by W. W. Harvey in the light of a possible Semitic background.¹³ Harvey's discussion may be termed conjectural in one respect; he guessed at the Semitic (specifically, Syriac) verbs which he thought to underlie the two Greek verbs, ἠρνήσασθε and the variant ἐβαρύνατε. But it was not long before much greater conjectures were being built upon such foundations; in 1893, for example, F. H. Chase utilized this conjecture of Harvey's, among others, to argue for a strong influence by Syriac versions upon D (which reads ἐβαρύνατε).¹⁴

In the case of Torrey in particular, we find a sweeping conjecture (i.e., of a literally-translated document behind Acts 1-15) based largely upon conjectural evidence. The type of Semitism which most appealed to Torrey was what might be termed "hidden" Semitisms; that is to say, instances where the Greek does not immediately strike the reader as owing something to a

¹³ W. W. Harvey, *Sancti Irenaei... adversus Haereses* (Cambridge, 1857), vol. 2, p. 55. Cf. Wilcox, *op. cit.*, pp. 1 f.

¹⁴ F. H. Chase, *The Old Syriac Element in the Text of Codex Bezae* (London, 1893).

Semitic language, but which on investigation suggest that the best explanation of the Greek is nevertheless some Semitic *Vorlage*, either because the Greek does not appear to say what one would expect, or because of textual variants difficult to explain on the basis of corruption or deliberate alteration of the Greek. In a number of cases of this sort, Torrey sought and found (to his own satisfaction, at least) Aramaic words which might have been mistranslated or misread.

Two such "hidden" Semitisms discovered by Torrey in the Gospel of Luke may be mentioned briefly. In Luke 1:39 a strangely vague expression occurs, εἰς πόλιν Ἰούδα, "to a city of Judah". The form Ἰούδα rather than the more usual Ἰουδαία in itself suggests a Semitic source here; and Torrey plausibly conjectured that the Greek πόλις here represented an ambiguous Semitic word, the Hebrew *m^edīnāh* or its Aramaic equivalent, which Luke ought to have translated "province".¹⁵ An example of a misreading rather than a simple mistranslation could be the οἰκοδομεῖτε, "you build", of Luke 11:48 as opposed to υἱοὶ ἐστε, "you are sons", of Matthew 23:31; the Aramaic word for "builders" is *bānîn*, for "sons" *benmn*, and the two words would be indistinguishable in an unvocalized

[p.139]

document.¹⁶ These two examples have Black's strong support; indeed, he describes them as "brilliant" discoveries by Torrey.¹⁷ Similar examples from the Book of Acts tend to be more controversial; one or two are discussed below.

Some of Torrey's alleged mistranslations in Acts may survive criticism, and it must be admitted that no type of Semitism is quite so convincing as an apparent mistranslation; it is perhaps the only convincing evidence of a Semitic source document. But the fact remains that *all* such evidence is conjectural; we do not know what sources Luke used, far less do we know the precise wording of those sources.

The conjectural approach to the whole question reached its high watermark with Torrey. Not only was his methodology questionable, but even more so his attempt to force all the Semitisms he found in Acts into a single category, the pigeon-hole of "Aramaisms" due to a source document. Torrey's critics were from the first able to point out defects in his methods and conclusions, and in doing so they were obliged to be more thoroughly analytical than he.¹⁸ Thus study of the Semitisms of Acts progressed into the analytical stage; the important article of H. F. D. Sparks, "The Semitisms of the Acts,"¹⁹ deserves special mention in this connexion, for its careful and persuasive critique of Torrey's work on the subject. Torrey's alleged "mistranslations" were shown to lack cogency in many cases; he had sadly neglected the influence of the LXX, in Acts 1-15 and indeed the later chapters too; he had paid even less attention to the Semitisms in Acts 16-28; and finally he had failed to account satisfactorily for the "incontestable unity of Acts".²⁰

¹⁵ C. C. Torrey, *HTR* 17 (1924), pp. 83-89.

¹⁶ C. C. Torrey, *Our Translated Gospels* (London, n.d.), pp. 103 f.

¹⁷ Cf. Black, *op. cit.*, pp. 12f.

¹⁸ A notable example (by J. de Zwaan) appears in *BC*, vol. 2, pp. 44-64.

¹⁹ In *JTS* N.S. 1 (1950), pp. 16-28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

All of these criticisms by Sparks were legitimate and remain valid. Nevertheless, he too showed a tendency to look for a single pigeonhole, in his case the "Biblicism". While allowing for some influence on Luke by Aramaic and "Semitic-Greek *patois*" speakers, he opined that "most [Semitisms]... are his own 'septuagintalisms'".²¹ He concluded his article by depicting Luke as an artist and a dramatist, and asked "What more appropriate language... than the language of the Bible could anyone possibly choose as the main medium through which to present the manifestation of the Mystery?"²² Thus with Sparks too the element of conjecture is present, alongside his analytical work.²³

But four years before the publication of Sparks's article, there had already appeared a major, thoroughly analytical, treatment of the whole subject, in Matthew Black's book, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and*

[p.140]

Acts.²⁴ As the title indicates, the author was careful not to isolate Acts from the other relevant New Testament documents, and this feature in itself adds to the weight and validity of his analysis. On the other hand, the work is not too easily used by the student who is interested solely in the: Book of Acts; moreover, as the title again shows, Black's purpose was to examine Aramaism as such, not Semitism in general. Hence the need for and value of the recent book by Max Wilcox, *The Semitisms of Acts*.²⁵

Black felt the need to re-examine the Semitisms of the gospels and Acts in a thorough, scientific and impartial fashion, eschewing pure conjecture as far as possible, and also to remedy the deficiencies of earlier study in two respects, namely linguistic and textual. In the first place, Aramaic words had been confidently placed on the lips of Jesus with very scant regard for the fundamental question, which dialect of Aramaic did Jesus in fact speak? Dalman had not overlooked the importance of this question, to be sure, but he had probably been wrong in the answer he gave to it.²⁶ There is considerably more information on Aramaic dialects available today than there was when Dalman wrote. Black's work is probably most important, therefore, when it relates to the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus; but similar questions must be asked and answered about any postulated Aramaic source documents, for the gospels or Acts. As for the textual question, Black stressed the need to scrutinize all the text-types, and particularly that exemplified in Codex Bezae, rather than to rely exclusively on one text (in practice, usually that of Westcott and Hort); the relevance of this issue to the Book of Acts needs no arguing. In fine, Black's work exhibits a breadth and depth of treatment which are essential to a study of the subject if it is not to lead to facile and mistaken conclusions. He has, moreover, kept his work fully up-to-date, with a carefully revised third edition in 1967.

One important point which emerges from the history of the study of Semitism in Acts is that, for all the detailed work that is obviously requisite, broad perspectives must always be kept in

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²³ He analysed with sonic care three specimen passages, Acts 4:23-31; 7:54-8:1; 9:36-43.

²⁴ First edition 1946. It had its precursors, e.g., W. F. Howard's appendix on "Semitisms in the New Testament" in J. H. Moulton and W. F. Howard, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, 1929). Howard's treatment offers relatively little material relating directly to Acts, however.

²⁵ Oxford, 1965.

²⁶ See discussion in Black, *op. cit.*, pp. 6, 18-28.

view; successive critics of Torrey and his predecessors have constantly opened up fresh perspectives. The work began, of course, by locating and collating possible examples of Semitism to be found in Acts — a task within the powers of any Semitist able to read Greek. But the alleged Semitisms required analysis; and it demands a competent Hellenistic Greek scholar to isolate "Septuagintalisms" and special *koine* usages which are shared with some Semitic language, and a very well equipped Semitist to distinguish dialectal variations within Aramaic. The distribution of the Semitisms was important too.

[p.141]

Sparks demonstrates, in a scrutiny of three specimen passages from Acts, how Semitisms and typical Lucanisms are interwoven — a serious embarrassment for the literal-translation hypothesis. Here the New Testament expert plays his part. Then Black drew fresh attention to the relevance of New Testament textual criticism; so also has Epp, more recently, if in a rather different way. Wilcox has shown that Old Testament textual criticism is also relevant; and further, he pays some attention to "liturgical and apologetic factors" and brings patristic evidence to bear on the subject. Recent work on the topic has also shown the value of statistical analysis.²⁷

III

The complexity of the whole question may now be shown by some examples. Two cases of alleged mistranslation, first isolated last century, are still allowed by Black to possess "a high degree of plausibility". They appear in Acts 2:47 and 3:14 respectively.²⁸ In the former passage we read that the early church at Jerusalem was held in favour by all the "people" (λαόν); but Codex Bezae reads "world" (κόσμον). The two Greek words are obviously quite dissimilar, but in the Semitic languages the differences are slight, "world" having just one extra letter.²⁹ E. Nestle accordingly maintained long ago that here was one clear trace of a Semitic original lying behind the early part of Acts.³⁰ Torrey agreed and found a further Semitism in the verse (the phrase ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό, to which we shall return later). Black noted that a theological motive might equally explain the D text, which might represent the attempt of a scribe "to magnify the impression made by these early converts on the 'whole world'".³¹ Epp goes further, firmly rejecting the Nestle/Torrey hypothesis; he has shown that many of the peculiar readings of Codex Bezae are attributable to an anti-Judaic motive, and Acts 2:47 is no exception. The word λαός in Acts regularly refers to Israel specifically, and was therefore deliberately eschewed by the anti-Jewish editor and reviser of the text at this point.³²

The other example of which Black concedes the plausibility is far more complex; it is the textual variant of Acts 3:14 to which Harvey first drew attention. Peter accused his hearers in the temple courts of "denying" Jesus in the presence of Pilate, according to most MSS

²⁷ Cf. K. Beyer, *Semitische Syntax im Neuen Testament*,² Bd.1, Teil 1 (Göttingen, 1968); R. A. Martin, "Syntactical Evidence of Aramaic Sources in Acts I-XV," *NTS* 11 (1964-65), pp. 38-59.

²⁸ Black, *op. cit.*, pp. 13 f.

²⁹ In Hebrew, "people" is 'm, "world" 'im. The Aramaic is comparable.

³⁰ B. Nestle, "Some Observations on the Codex Bezae", *Exp.*, series 5, 2 (1895), pp. 235-40.

³¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 13.

³² Epp, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

(ἡρνήσαθε); but Codex Bezae reads "oppressed" (ἐβαρύνετε). Harvey, as we have seen, found the solution in Syriac; he conjectured that the majority reading was

[p.142]

a translation of *k-p-r*, while the Bezan variant rendered *k-b-d*. Nestle argued for Hebrew rather than Syriac.³³ Torrey preferred an Aramaic solution, his conjectural roots being *k-d-b* and *k-b-d* respectively.³⁴ But it is unfortunate for all three hypotheses that the Semitic root *k-b-d* appears to denote irritation rather than oppression.³⁵ Rendel Harris and Ropes inclined to think that the Latin New Testament supplied the clue to the variants;³⁶ if either was right, Semitisms are ruled out here. Epp once again points out that the Bezan text is patently more anti-Judaic than the majority reading, and again views it as a deliberate theological reinterpretation, owing nothing to underlying Semitisms.³⁷ A simpler suggestion is that the D reading is merely a stylistic improvement, which avoids repetition of the Greek word ἡρνήσαθε.³⁸

The other alleged Semitism in Acts 2:47, the phrase ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό, raises quite different questions. There is not the same problem of variant readings; it is simply a question of what the phrase means.³⁹ (It looks as if Codex Bezae reinterpreted it, by appending the phrase ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ. Torrey noted that the Greek phrase ought to mean "together" or "in the same place", and proceeded to emphasize the inappropriateness of such a sense in Acts 2:47. He accordingly seized upon an underlying Aramaic *lahdâ* as the explanation. Etymologically this meant "into one" (hence the Greek rendering), but in contemporary Judaeo-Aramaic in fact meant "greatly". Luke should therefore have said, "The Lord added *greatly* day by day to the saved".⁴⁰ But was Luke, *ex hypothesi*, such an incompetent translator? As W. F. Howard pointed out tersely, "Such a blunder is not likely on the part of one who could give the right rendering in 6:7".⁴¹ Black went on to challenge the Aramaic basis of Torrey's contentions; the Greek phrase would be the equivalent (if Torrey were right) of *kahdâ*, not *lahdâ*.⁴² Equally damaging to Torrey's case is the fact that nowhere else in Acts could the phrase mean "greatly".

The immediate alternative explanation would appear to be that we have here a Septuagintalism; the LXX frequently renders Hebrew *yahad* or *yahdâw* ("together", "with one accord") by ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό. But as has been suggested above, the "Biblicisms" category of Semitisms is as liable to misuse as any other. Thorough examination of New Testament and patristic documents reveals that the Greek phrase regularly means more

[p.143]

³³ In his article, *op. cit.*

³⁴ *Documents of the Primitive Church* (New York and London, 1941), p. 145.

³⁵ Cf. Wilcox, *op. cit.*, pp. 140 f.; Black, *op. cit.*, pp. 13 f.

³⁶ Cf. Wilcox, *op. cit.*, pp. 139 f. for details and references.

³⁷ Epp, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-53.

³⁸ Cf. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts* (NIC; Grand Rapids, 1954), p. 86 n.

³⁹ There are a number of variant readings, but they all seem to be attempts to clarify the sense; cf. Wilcox, *op. cit.*, p. 93 n.

⁴⁰ Torrey, *The Composition and Date of Acts*, pp. 10-14.

⁴¹ In Moulton and Howard, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, vol. 2, p. 473. The Greek word in Acts 6:7 is σφόδρα.

⁴² *Op. cit.*, p.10.

than merely "together" or "with one accord"; it is almost a technical term, denoting "in church (fellowship)";⁴³ but such a sense does not arise directly from Old Testament or LXX usage. Qumran studies have almost certainly cleared up the difficulty: the Qumran documents often use the Hebrew term *yahad* to denote the (Qumran) community, and the Lucan phrase *προσπιθέναι ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό* seems to be a literal rendering of a Hebrew expression, *h'sp lyhd*.⁴⁴ By whatever route, the Greek phrase owes its origin to a living Hebrew tradition.⁴⁵

IV

Few of Torrey's alleged mistranslations have escaped criticism. The instance he himself felt to be most weighty was 2:47, where, as we have seen, his view has proved untenable. The two instances Black selected as particularly plausible have been rendered more dubious by Epp's researches.⁴⁶ Even so, there may still survive one or two mistranslations. To decide the plausibility or probability of them is a very subjective matter, and different scholars will come to different conclusions. F. F. Bruce, for example, finds two of Torrey's cases persuasive, and allows the possibility of several more.⁴⁷ Wilcox seems to concede the possibility of eighteen instances, though all of them he describes as "weak".⁴⁸ A distinction has to be made between mistranslation of a Semitic document and a debt to Semitic phraseology; the discussion above of *ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό* sufficiently shows this, for while Torrey's view of a mistranslation is untenable, the phrase is nevertheless based on Semitic usage. Wilcox is dubious about the presence of actual mistranslations in Acts, but he is far from denying Semitism altogether. Black, for his part, is inclined to find instances of mistranslation of the ubiquitous Aramaic particle *d^e* at least twice in Acts.⁴⁹

What of the *Biblicisms* category? Wilcox has demonstrated that this has been overpressed in one or two ways. In the first place, the simple fact that a Semitic idiom in the Greek text of Acts can be paralleled, exactly or approximately, from the LXX does not automatically make the usage a *Biblicism*; much depends on the frequency or significance of the LXX parallel. For instance, the over-literal rendering of the Hebrew expression *bāhar b^e* ("to choose") by *ἐκλέγεσθαι ἐν* is rare in the LXX, the correct Greek idiom (*ἐκλέγεσθαι* + accusative) being far more common; for that reason, we ought not to class it as a *Septuagintalism*

[p.144]

when we meet the phrase in Acts is 15:7.⁵⁰ As for *Septuagintal* parallels bearing a different connotation from the Acts usage, exemplified by *ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό*, they are plainly irrelevant. There are also, on the other hand, a number of genuine *Septuagintalisms* in Acts which seem to have been mediated to Luke through church usage. Wilcox instances the phrase *ἐν τῇ*

⁴³ The AV rendering is thus justified, and seems preferable to that of RSV or NEB.

⁴⁴ IQS v. 7. Cf. Black, *op. cit.*, p. 10 n.

⁴⁵ See full discussion of Acts 2:47 in Wilcox, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-100.

⁴⁶ I.e., Acts 2:47 (the *κόσμον-λαόν* variation) and 3:14. Both are discussed *supra*

⁴⁷ Acts 3:16; 4:25. Cf. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*² (London, 1952), *ad loc.*

⁴⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 153 f.

⁴⁹ 1:17; 7:39. Cf. Black, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁵⁰ Cf. Wilcox, *op. cit.*, pp. 62 f.

καρδία (Acts 5:4), a Semitism, but one which is only thrice found in the LXX; the explanation of its use by Luke may well be the importance to the early church of the story of David and the bread of the Presence,⁵¹ a narrative which in the LXX contains this same Greek expression at 1 Reigns 21:13.⁵²

In the second place, the undeniable fact of the use of the LXX made by Luke in Acts must be balanced by other evidence. It is remarkable that of the actual citations from the Old Testament by Luke, a significant number do not seem to be drawn verbatim from the LXX, as one might have expected, if Luke depended so heavily on the LXX. Wilcox has found citations having affinities with the MT or with other textual traditions, as against the LXX. Thus in Acts 7:16 παρὰ τῶν υἱῶν Ἐμμώρ is closer to the MT of Joshua 24:32 than is the παρὰ τῶν Ἀμορραίων of LXX;⁵³ while the ἡγοούμενον of 7:10 is not represented in MT or LXX of Genesis 41:41 ff., but is the equivalent of the *s-r-k-n* of Targum Pseudo-Jonathan.⁵⁴ Even more interesting, if inconclusive, is the case of 15:16 ff., where James is depicted as citing Amos 9:11 f. Sparks makes great play of this passage, emphasizing that it presents the LXX text, which here "not merely diverges from but contradicts the Hebrew in the interests of universalism".⁵⁵ The divergence from the MT is beyond dispute — "the rest of men" is patently not the same thing as "the remnant of Edom" — but contradiction seems too strong a word.⁵⁶ One can also set the LXX against the Targum and the Peshitta. But even so, it may not be without significance that the first few words of the citation in Acts 15:16 are totally different from the LXX:

Acts: μετὰ ταῦτα ἀναστρέψω καὶ ἀνοικοδομήσω τὴν σκηνήν....
LXX: ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ ἀναστήσω τὴν σκηνήν....

If one looks for anything akin to the Acts reading, the nearest text is the partial quotation of Amos 9:11 found twice in the Qumran literature; it begins with the Hebrew *whqymwty*, "and I will raise up", which seems to require a preceding verb.⁵⁷ To this small piece of evidence Wilcox can add only one point: both of the Qumranic citations, like Acts, prefix the words of the prophet with the introductory formula "as it is written."

[p.145]

This point, at first sight insignificant, is well taken. J. A. Fitzmyer has listed no fewer than seventeen introductory formulae used in Acts to prefix old Testament citations, and has found parallels for the great majority of them in the Qumran texts.⁵⁸ It is at least clear that for the first part of this particular citation Acts does not follow the LXX, and that in general it would be a mistake to lean too heavily on the LXX or to neglect the Qumran literature in any linguistic scrutiny of the Book of Acts. One may reasonably expect that the Dead Sea Scrolls will shed more light on the diction of Acts as research progresses. Fitzmyer opines that "the

⁵¹ Sam. 21; cf. Mk. 2:25 f.; Matt. 12:3 f.; Lk. 6:3 f.

⁵² Cf. Wilcox, *op. cit.*, pp. 62 f.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27f.

⁵⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁵⁶ Cf. Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 298.

⁵⁷ CD vii. 16; 4QFlo 1.30. Cf. Wilcox, *op. cit.*, p.49.

⁵⁸ Cf. J. A. Fitzmyer, "Jewish Christianity in Acts in the Light of the Qumran Scrolls", in L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn (eds.), *Studies in Luke-Acts* (New York and Nashville, 1966; London, 1968), pp. 233-57.

influence of Qumran literature on Acts is not so marked as it is in other New Testament writings (e.g. John, Paul, Matthew, Hebrews)".⁵⁹ Nevertheless he has drawn attention in his article to three idioms or technical terms common to the Qumran scrolls and to Acts, namely, "the Way" (used absolutely),⁶⁰ "the fellowship",⁶¹ and "the congregation".⁶² If these terms had not precisely identical connotations for the two communities, the Qumran sect and the infant Christian church, nevertheless the usage is similar enough to warrant our viewing the expressions as Semitisms in Acts.

A salutary warning against over-pressing Septuagintal influence on Luke is also to be found in the statistical count of K. Beyer.⁶³ Most of his investigations to date are concerned with conditional constructions, and it may be that further research will produce different results; but he has shown that the syntactical usages so far examined reveal over twice as many typically Semitic constructions in Acts as there are comparable Septuagintal constructions. The third gospel exhibits an even greater preponderance of Semitic constructions — 422 examples as against 23 "Septuagintalisms". In fact, both Luke and Acts have a considerably higher ratio of Semitic as against Hellenistic Greek constructions than any other New Testament book except Matthew (which has the highest proportionate quantity of Semitisms of all).⁶⁴ It is a pity, however, that Beyer's statistics relate to books as a whole, and so make no differentiation between different sections or subsections of Acts.

R. A. Martin has endeavoured to remedy this deficiency in Beyer's statistics by sampling three specific aspects of the syntactical data of Acts 1-15, and weighing one section against another. He concludes that at least thirteen passages are based on Aramaic sources, since they reveal syntactical marks of translation Greek as opposed to those of original

[p.146]

Greek works.⁶⁵ The possibility exists that other passages too owe much to Aramaic sources; but if so, the Semitic elements in them have been more thoroughly eliminated in translation and editing.

V

That there are Semitisms in Acts is in the last resort undeniable, whatever their origins and sources. Wilcox has isolated a number of what he calls "hard-core" Semitisms, that is to say, words and expressions in Acts which cannot be explained on the basis of *koine* Greek or of textual corruption. Luke's indebtedness to the LXX was profound, but it was by no means his only influence. Other Old Testament textual traditions were known to him; Semitic idioms common in the contemporary church (or what Wilcox calls "liturgical and apologetical factors") affected his diction; and there is no good reason to doubt that he had access to

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.253.

⁶⁰ Hebrew *drk*, Greek *ὁδός*.

⁶¹ Hebrew *yhd*, Greek *κοινωνία*.

⁶² Hebrew *hrbym*, Greek *τὸ πλῆθος*.

⁶³ In his *Semitische Syntax im Neuen Testament*.

⁶⁴ See the table in Beyer, *op. cit.*, p. 298.

⁶⁵ *Art. cit.* The passages are: 1:15-26; 2:1-4; 4:5-12, 23-31; 5:17-42; 7:1-53; 9:10-19a, 19b-30, 31-43; 10:26-43; 11:1-18; 12:1-25; 13:16-41.

traditions or documents couched in, or translated from, a Semitic language. The resulting Semitisms can be seen here and there in the vocabulary, word-order, grammar, syntax and idioms of Acts — whatever may be said of mistranslations. However, such Semitic elements in Luke's writing must not be pressed to support conclusions which they will not bear. Sparks emphasizes, after analysis of his specimen passages, that Lucanisms surround the Semitisms. Wilcox too, on the basis of his more full analysis, asserts that his survey shows that "in almost every case the material in which they ["hard-core" Semitisms] are embedded has a strongly Lucan stamp".⁶⁶ This fact is probably fatal to such a theory as Torrey's, although it could perhaps be argued that the presence of Lucanisms merely serves to show that Luke himself translated and recast the hypothetical source document(s).⁶⁷

Of special interest is the question of the distribution of Semitisms in Acts. Torrey's view that they were scattered liberally throughout Acts 1-15 but were so rare as to be negligible in the remaining chapters, was exaggerated in both respects, though it has to be admitted that the preponderance of Semitisms is in the first half of the book. (This fact is not surprising, in view of the subject matter and locale, if Acts has the slightest claim to historical accuracy.) What is now evident is that time and again the Semitisms are to be found in the speeches of Acts. Black, for instance, finds examples of *casus pendens* — confined to the speeches;⁶⁸ some examples of asyndeton in the D text — many of them in the speeches;⁶⁹ two instances

[p.147]

of mistranslation of Aramaic *d^e* — both in speeches;⁷⁰ a few cases of the use of a proleptic pronoun, especially in the D text — mainly in speeches;⁷¹ several examples of the indefinite use of ἄνθρωπος (=τὸς) — nearly always in direct speech;⁷² and two instances of a Semitic prepositional idiom — both in speech.⁷³ Wilcox's investigations have a similar result, and he concludes, "Luke used, or rather seems to have used, some kind of source-material for certain parts at least of the speeches in Acts."⁷⁴ Fitzmyer's list of seventeen introductory formulae are without exception located in direct speech; even if the distribution of this feature is not surprising (since citations of Scripture are more natural in speech than in narrative), one must still ask where they came from. Finally, of R. A. Martin's thirteen subsections of Acts 1-15 which show indebtedness to Semitic source material, eight consist, in their entirety or almost so, of direct speech.

Recent study of the language of the Book of Acts, therefore, has done little to undermine the arguments set forth in F. F. Bruce's monograph, *The Speeches in the Acts of the Apostles*,⁷⁵ where considerable emphasis was laid on the Aramaic substratum of the speeches. Summing

⁶⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 177.

⁶⁷ A translator, after all, is bound to utilize his own favourite vocabulary so far as his material permits; and his selection from the documents would be determined by the relevance of their contents to his own themes and purposes.

⁶⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 53 ff.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 99 f.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁷⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 177.

⁷⁵ London, 1944.

up, he wrote, "We need not suppose that the speeches in Acts are verbatim reports.... But I suggest that... the speeches reported by Luke are at least faithful epitomes."⁷⁶ The Lucanisms and Septuagintal diction must of course be taken into account too, but the Semitic substratum is not to be discounted.⁷⁷ The argument that Luke used a Semitic type of Greek where he considered it to be appropriate sounds very reasonable; but the obstinate fact remains that where we are in a position to check his stylistic policy, i.e., where he has utilized and adapted Marcan material, he has tended to eliminate Semitisms (while admittedly leaving many untouched); he has certainly not created many. It is not at all clear why Luke should think "Semitic" Greek appropriate for the speakers in Luke 1 f. and in Acts, but feel otherwise about the words and deeds of Jesus.⁷⁸

Outside the speeches of Acts, some narrative sections appear to contain a greater Semitic element than others, and Wilcox draws attention to the fact that in general they are passages having a close connexion of some sort with Antioch.⁷⁹ So far as the linguistic evidence goes, it thus tends to support the tradition that Luke was an Antiochene, and also the general historical reliability of these sections.

[p.148]

VI

We may be sure that research into the Semitisms of Acts will continue, and that Wilcox's contribution will not close the topic. Without doubt, other scholars will reject some of his Semitisms or add to their number. But it will be interesting to see what new avenues of exploration will yet be opened up. It seems to the present writer that an important need is a quantitative and qualitative analysis of New Testament Semitisms, balancing one writer against another, and also paying close attention to the *total* diction of each individual author. As it is, Dr Wilcox's book cannot provide these wider perspectives. There are of course older works, such as de Zwaan's useful chapter in *The Beginnings of Christianity*, entitled "The use of the Greek language in Acts,"⁸⁰ taken in conjunction with Lowther Clarke's "The use of the Septuagint in Acts";⁸¹ but there is now an urgent need to up-date these treatments. Beyer's *Semitische Syntax im Neuen Testament* represents an important first step in this direction.

It is all too often assumed that outside influences upon an author have only positive effects; but possible negative effects, if fewer in number and more difficult to pin down, may be equally important. Fitzmyer's article draws attention to the relevance of this mode of inquiry to our topic: he suggests that in at least two respects in the book of Acts Luke may have deliberately avoided Semitic, specifically Qumranic, terminology. The "poor" of Jerusalem, so much a matter of concern to Paul, are nowhere in Acts described as πτωχοί — the obvious word for them, one would have thought. More remarkable, the term ἐπίσκοπος appears but once in the whole book; the sole occurrence of it is in 20:28, on Paul's lips, when he

⁷⁶ p. 27.

⁷⁷ As it would appear to be in the article "Concerning the Speeches in Acts" by E. Schweizer in Keck and Martyn, *op. cit.*, pp. 208-16.

⁷⁸ Cf. E. B. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (Century Bible, new ed. London, 1966), p. 3.

⁷⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 178 f.

⁸⁰ *BC* vol. 2, pp. 3-65.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 66-105.

addressed church leaders far from Palestinian soil. Fitzmyer thinks it not irrelevant that the Hebrew equivalents of these nouns, respectively *'bywnym* and *mbqr*, were common technical terms among the Dead Sea sect. Did Luke feel that such terms, even in Greek, might have unfortunate connotations for his readers? Or was it his sources which avoided such terminology? There is clearly room for further inquiry of this sort.

If it could be demonstrated that Luke was indeed sensitive to the possible connotations of words like *πτωχοί* and *ἐπίσκοπος*, then this fact would tend to militate against the view that he knew nothing but Greek.⁸² There is no obvious reason why a writer ignorant of Hebrew and of Palestinian Judaism should avoid such terminology.

While one swallow does not make a summer, nor two missing swallows a winter, this suggestion of Fitzmyer does point us in a new direction,

[p.149]

namely that of semantics. To what extent, we may ask, does the vocabulary of Acts consist of Greek words carrying Semitic overtones? Here is a question scarcely touched on by Black or Wilcox. Their treatment of Semitisms in vocabulary is almost entirely restricted to transliterations of Semitic words (e.g. Ἀκελδαμαχ) and to idioms (e.g. ἐκλέγεσθαι ἐν). The only interesting word, from a semantic point of view, discussed by Wilcox is the *ἰδιώτης* of Acts 4:13; he suggests that this noun has its "rabbinical" rather than its native Greek connotation.⁸³

It is not my purpose here to enter into the debate which was raised by J. Barr in his important book *The Semantics of Biblical Language*,⁸⁴ and to which D. Hill's recent *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings*⁸⁵ made a contribution of no little value. Both writers would agree, at least, that the New Testament documents in general do betray thought-forms and concepts alien to the Greek world, and owing much to the Septuagint. The question whether the distinctive ideas lie chiefly in the vocabulary itself or in the sentence structure and in the actual statements made is not particularly relevant to our present purpose. The latter writer, however, has usefully reminded us that words like "righteousness", "life" and "spirit" tended to be employed in different ways in the Hebraic world and in the Greek one, and that the Greek terms used first in the LXX and subsequently in the New Testament inevitably reflect Hebraic rather than Greek usage. That being so, we may well ask how far Luke's handling of vocabulary reveals a Hellenistic, and how far a Semitic, background. If he were a Gentile and made little use of source material, we might expect to find a much less Semitic cast of thought and expression than if he were a bilingual Jew making great use of Semitic source documents (to talk in terms of extreme positions). Such a study might conceivably show merely that Luke (whoever he was and whatever documents were available to him) was deeply influenced by the language of the LXX, as indeed he was; but different results might reveal themselves. We

⁸² Cf. Moule, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

⁸³ I.e., "an ordinary person" rather than "private person"; cf. Wilcox, *op. cit.*, p. 101. Cf. also Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, p. 102 n. This case may be a special one, however, for the equivalent Semitic word (both Hebrew and Aramaic) is *hdywt*, itself a loan-word from the Greek. In bilingual areas it is scarcely likely that *ἰδιώτης* and *hdywt* would have borne subtly different connotations.

⁸⁴ London, 1961.

⁸⁵ SNTS monograph 5. Cambridge, 1967.

noted earlier that the phrase ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό in Acts had more affinity with Qumran vocabulary than with either Hellenistic Greek or LXX usage; similar results might possibly emerge from a thorough semantic investigation of the vocabulary of Luke/Acts.

So far as Acts is concerned, Dr. Hill's study sheds relatively little light on this problem. In any case, soteriological terms (to which Hill's attention is restricted in his monograph) will have been common currency in the early church, in quasi-technical senses, drawn from and based on the LXX; therefore, no early Christian is likely to have used them in a purely

[p.150]

Hellenistic sense.⁸⁶ It is intriguing, nevertheless, that of the terms examined by Hill, ἰλάσκομαι and cognates never occur in Acts, λύπρον and cognates only once, ζῶν (αἰώνιος) rarely, δίκαιος and δικαιοσύνη seldom; and that all of them are found only in direct speech,⁸⁷ and may therefore derive from Luke's sources. By contrast, πνεῦμα is of course ubiquitous in Acts. The rarity of the other terms may mean anything or nothing. The Book of Acts is largely narrative in character, and thus would have little use for abstract and theological terminology except in the speeches; the Spirit, on the other hand, was no abstract, passive Being in Luke's view of the matter!

Modern linguistic science might suggest another method of approach to the vocabulary of the New Testament, namely the study of "semantic fields". This approach has been pioneered for Old Testament Hebrew by T. Donald, in an article where he examined the implications of the various Hebrew words associated with folly in the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament, assessing in particular the overtones of culpability carried by the differing terms.⁸⁸ It is conceivable that comparisons of semantic fields in Hebrew or Aramaic with their counterparts in Greek would throw some light on Luke's use of vocabulary. But a great deal of basic research would need to be done before any effective comparative work became possible.

It is a privilege and an honour for me to have the opportunity of offering this slim tribute to Professor Bruce, who first introduced me to the Greek text of Acts, who first taught me three of the Semitic languages, and whose friendship and guidance I value increasingly with the passing years.

© 1970 The Paternoster Press. Reproduced by kind permission of the publisher.

Converted to PDF by Robert I Bradshaw in May 2005.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

⁸⁶ This applies to other common terms too, such as ἐκκλησία. It is difficult to accept the view of E. M. Blaiklock that in Acts 7:38 ἐκκλησία "bears its Greek connotation" and "views Israel through the eyes of Greek city organization" (*The Acts of the Apostles, TNTC*, London, 1959, *ad loc.*). In the LXX, ἐκκλησία commonly renders Hebrew *qāhāl*, and this is surely the background here. The previous verse cites Dt. 18:15; and Dt. 18:16 immediately goes on to refer to "the day of the assembly" (LXX ἐκκλησία).

⁸⁷ The sole exception is the occurrence of δικαιοσύνη in 24:25; but here too the word is probably so to speak between quotation marks.

⁸⁸ Cf. T. Donald, "The Semantic Field of 'Folly' in Proverbs, Job, Psalms and Ecclesiastes," *VT* 13 (1963), pp. 285-92.

"Anti-Semitism in the 21st century" redirects here. For the documentary film, see *Anti-Semitism in the 21st Century: The Resurgence*.
The first clear examples of anti-Jewish sentiment can be traced back to Alexandria in the 3rd century BCE.[6] Alexandrian Jewry were the largest Jewish community in the world and the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, was produced there. Manetho, an Egyptian priest and historian of that time, wrote scathingly of the Jews and his themes are repeated in the works of Chaeremon, Lysimachus, Poseidonius, Apollonius Molon, and in Apion and Tacitus.[6] Hecateus of Abdera is quoted by Flavius Josephus as having written about the time of Alexander the Great that the Jews "have of In Matthew, as in many books of the New Testament, the idea that Christ followers are persecuted is pervasive. Blessings are pronounced on those who are persecuted for righteousness sake in the Sermon on the Mount; the woes against the Pharisees in Matthew 23 culminate in predictions that they will "kill and crucify, flog in synagogues, and pursue from town to town;" the parable of the banquet in Matthew 22 implies that servants of the king will be killed by. The Fourth Evangelist is still operating within a context of intra-Jewish factional dispute, although the boundaries and definitions themselves are part of that dispute. It is clear beyond doubt that once the Fourth Gospel is removed from that context, and the Anti-Semitism in Western civilisation was unfortunately grounded in religion, in Christianity, and that legitimised it and that gave it an OK, so Constantine's Sword is, I would say, the most authoritative history, by a former Jesuit priest, as to the antecedents, the roots of anti-Semitism in Western society. I would consider that it's the most significant book if you want to understand the essence of why and how it spread. It's a big book. There are a lot of books on Nazism and anti-Semitism in Nazism but I think it's more important to know where it came from, what were its antecedents, and for me Wistrich and Julius and Dawidowicz do that. I would say read all of them. The UK is unfortunately among the places where there are more anti-Semitic acts than in many other places. Global Anti-Semitism Review Act from the 108th congress of the united states. (1) Acts of anti-Semitism in countries throughout the world, including some of the world's strongest democracies, have increased significantly in frequency and scope over the last several years. (2) During the last 3 months of 2003 and the first 3 months of 2004, there were numerous instances of anti-Semitic violence around the world, including the following incidents