

WHAT DOES HEBREW MEAN?¹

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Abstract

In the New Testament, there are several references to a language called Hebrew which can only mean Aramaic. But who were the 'Hebrews', particularly in relation to 'Israelites' and 'Jews'? We suggest that the failure on the part of non-Aramaic speaking non-Jews led to the incorrect identification of Aramaic as the 'Jewish' language (then known as 'Hebrew') and thus of Jews as 'Hebrews'. Neither the Bible nor (overwhelmingly) the rabbinic literature identify as 'Hebrew' the language now known by that name. But the Jewish Bible does mention Hebrews, who are often identified in modern research as ancient Israelites. More probably however, the designation means inhabitants of the area known since neo-Assyrian times as 'Beyond the River', Trans-Euphrates, Aramaic *'abar nahara*, whence the short name 'Hebrew' or 'Transite'. Very many of these Aramaic speaking and circumcizing 'Hebrews' were assimilated into the Hasmonean kingdom and thus became identified also as 'Judeans/Jews', while both Israelites (Samaritans) and Judeans were equally part of the 'Hebrew' population of Trans-Euphrates. The Bible recognizes the ancestor of this *ethnos* in Abraham, to whose descendants the territory of Trans-Euphrates was promised. When, then, did 'Hebrew' come to be generally adopted as the name for the language of the Bible? This is hard to say, but it may have been as recently as the nineteenth century.

In the New Testament, there are several references to a language called Hebrew. Paul is said (twice in one passage)² to have spoken Hebrew — as did the voice that addressed him on the road to Damascus³ — but the only words that have been preserved in either case are in Greek. We are told by both Luke⁴ and John⁵ that the superscription above the cross was written in Greek, Latin and Hebrew,

¹ This paper is partly based on the ninth annual Semitic Studies lecture, given by D.R.G. Beattie to the Institute of Byzantine Studies, Queen's University, Belfast, in May 2007.

² Acts 21:40; 22:2.

³ Acts 26:14.

⁴ Luke 23:38.

⁵ John 19:20.

but again the content is given only in Greek. Three place-names — Bethesda,⁶ Gabbatha,⁷ Golgotha⁸ — are identified in John's Gospel as being Hebrew but all three have a distinctly Aramaic form. The Hebrew for skull is not *golgotha* but *gulgoleth*; in Aramaic it is *gulgo-ltha*, which is presumably what the gospel cites. Gabbatha, if derived — as seems likely — from גב ביתא, mound of the house (temple), has a genuine Aramaic etymology; the equivalent in Hebrew would be גב הר הבית, but the area is known to this day in Hebrew as הר הבית or Temple Mount. The *beth* of Bethesda could be either Hebrew or Aramaic; whatever the origin of *esda* (most probably *hsd*, mercy) the *a* ending reflects an Aramaic emphatic termination like the other two examples.

Alongside these references are three in which words spoken by Jesus are preserved in Greek transliteration. In two cases, ταλιθα κουμι, 'Get up, girl', the words spoken to Jairus's dead daughter,⁹ and the cry from the cross ελωι ελωι λαμα σαβαχθανει, 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me?'¹⁰ the language is clearly Aramaic; in the third case, εφφαθα, which is said to mean 'Be opened' when addressed to the deaf man with a speech impediment¹¹ some corruption has occurred but restoration to Aramaic can be performed more easily than to Hebrew.

These two sets of data, the form of the place-names said to be Hebrew and the language spoken by Jesus, constitute the evidence for a conclusion already reached in the nineteenth century: that the language called Hebrew in the New Testament is in fact Aramaic. In the nineteenth century, of course, what we now call Aramaic was actually called Syro-Chaldee, and believed to be a mixture of biblical Aramaic, which was then called Chaldee,¹² and the Syriac of the Peshitta. Indeed, it is worth noting that the Greek word ἑβραϊσμός is more likely to have been constructed out of the Aramaic word for Hebrew עברא than from the Hebrew word עברי.

But the word Hebrew is not confined in the New Testament to a language. On the one occasion that it is used by Paul, he describes

⁶ John 5:2.

⁷ John 19:13.

⁸ John 19:17.

⁹ Mark 5:41.

¹⁰ Mark 15:34. Matt. 27:46 has a variant ηλει ηλει λαμα σαβαχθανει.

¹¹ Mark 7:34.

¹² The giving of this name to a language that is called Aramaic (ארמית) in the Bible, just because it is said to have been spoken on one occasion by Chaldeans (Dan. 2:4), must rank as one of the most bizarre achievements of biblical scholarship.

himself as ‘a Hebrew of Hebrews’.¹³ This is a somewhat striking usage, unique in the New Testament. We might rather have expected ‘Jew’, Paul’s usual designation.¹⁴ However, Paul is recorded as directly naming himself a Jew only in Acts 21:39. His own statement ‘I became as a Jew’¹⁵ is less than a self-designation: it might even be a *denial* of one. In 2 Cor. 11:22 Paul again avoids the label ‘Jew’, declaring himself to be ‘a Hebrew, an Israelite, and the seed of Abraham’, while in Rom. 11:1 he is ‘an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, [and] the tribe of Benjamin’ — very similar to the full description in Phil. 3:5, in fact: ‘circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, [and] the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews and a Pharisee’. Are these terms all synonymous, or do they convey different, if overlapping, identities? They seem to express a set of concentric categories, though not in a logical order: seed of Abraham being the largest and Benjamin the smallest, with Israel coming in between. Where do Pharisee and Hebrew stand in relation to this set? The first of these refers, as we know, to membership of a religious party within Israel, but the second is more problematic. It is clearly not the same as Israelite. As already noted, Hebrew in the New Testament mostly designates a language, and we suggest it does so here also, at least in part: it designates a member of a *linguistic* community or population. A Hebrew, we maintain, is a speaker of the language that is called Hebrew in the New Testament, namely Aramaic. The importance of linguistic identity within Judaism is signified in Acts 6:1, which reports the rise of dissension in the developing Christian community between τῶν ἐλληνιστῶν πρὸς τοὺς ἑβραίους or, as modern English translations recognize, between those who spoke Greek and those who spoke the language of the Jews. There is no reason to suppose it has a different meaning in Paul’s words than in any other New Testament passage. He is therefore designating himself to the Philippians as an Aramaic speaker from an Aramaic-speaking family.

From this usage of Hebrew, we suggest, developed what was to become a wide-reaching and long-lasting practice. On the one hand, the name of the language spoken by the Jews (Aramaic) at some point came to designate the (different) language in which the Jewish scriptures were written as well as chronologically later forms of that language. On the other hand, the adjective Hebrew became, in European languages, for non-Jewish speakers of those languages, a

¹³ Phil. 3:5.

¹⁴ Rom. 1:16; 2:9–10, 17, 28–9; 3:1; 10:12; Gal. 2:14; 3:28; Col. 3:11.

¹⁵ 1 Cor. 9:20.

surrogate for Jewish. Essential for these developments is a third-language use (Greek), since only speakers of a third language would not recognize that what we now call Hebrew and Aramaic were distinct and that Hebrew did *not* mean Jewish.

Hence, in the Talmud, in the course of discussing whether sacred writings should be saved from a fire on Sabbath one opinion is given thus: 'If they are written in Egyptian, Median, עברית, Elamite, or Greek, though they may not be read, they may be saved from a fire'.¹⁶ Our interest here lies of course in the word עברית, which we would normally (i.e. elsewhere) understand to mean Hebrew but clearly this cannot be the case here. That what we call the Hebrew scriptures, which are read publicly in the synagogue service, should be saved when necessary from fire needs no discussion. The Soncino Talmud therefore translates עברית here as 'a trans[-Euphratean] Aramaic', which is a double translation. It is called Aramaic to make clear that it is not Hebrew, while the gloss 'trans[-Euphratean]' correctly (in our opinion, as we shall argue) provides the etymology of the word. But the most significant aspect of this note is its testimony that, at the time of the discussion and of its recording neither the language of the Hebrew Bible nor that of the Talmudic discussion was called Hebrew. The former is mentioned a little earlier in the discussion as 'the holy language' (לשון הקדש); what the latter was called we do not at present know.¹⁷

Before considering the usage of the Hebrew Bible, we might consider the Mishnah. Here we again find references to biblical Hebrew as 'the holy language';¹⁸ these occur in relation to certain rituals that must be performed in 'the holy language', the reasoning being that, because the biblical text says 'you/he/she/they shall say ...' only the actual words used there are appropriate. Elsewhere in the Mishnah, Hebrew and Greek are also mentioned as languages, in terms not unlike New Testament usage, in relation to bills of divorce.¹⁹ Since a major point of concern in these cases seems to be the direction of writing, and since in any case the contrast with Greek indicates that it is the alphabet used that is important, עברית may as easily be Aramaic as Hebrew. At this stage of our enquiry it is impossible to decide which is the more probable, although as we are dealing with mun-

¹⁶ b.Shabb.115a.

¹⁷ The Jewish writer of 2 Maccabees calls Aramaic 'Syriac' — the language spoken by the inhabitants of what Greeks knew as 'Syria' (2 Macc. 15:36), but this hardly tells us what Aramaic-speaking Jews called it.

¹⁸ m.Yeb. 12:6, m.Sot. 7:2, 3, 4; 8:1; 9:1.

¹⁹ M.Gittin 9:6, 8.

dane usage Aramaic is more likely. There is, nevertheless, one single passage in which עברית must mean (biblical) Hebrew. According to m.Yadaim 4:5, 'The *targum* that is in Ezra and Daniel renders the hands unclean. If [this text] is written in Hebrew or Hebrew written in *targum*, or in Hebrew, it does not render the hands unclean'. The contrast initially made in this passage between 'targum' (Aramaic) and 'ivrit' must indicate that the latter means Hebrew. But the distinction is made between Hebrew and *targum* (Aramaic) as *both* languages *and* scripts. Hence a copy of Ezra or Daniel in which *either* the Aramaic *or* the Hebrew portion is written in the Hebrew (i.e. palaeo-Hebrew) script does not defile the hands; both must use the Aramaic, or Assyrian (אשורית)²⁰ or square characters. A similar prescription is laid down in relation to the scroll of Esther in m. Megillah. However, in m.Meg. 2:1 no language, not even לשון הקדש, is specified for the scroll. It would almost appear here that אשורית (Assyrian) is the name of the appropriate *language*.²¹

The most important element in the Mishnaic passage is the use of עברית in reference to scripture, even if only once. But this is found in a document dated well over a century later than the writings of Paul and the gospels. It is perhaps also significant that the word *targum*, which properly means translation, should be used in this passage to mean Aramaic whereas it is the word ארמית that appears in the text of Daniel and Ezra at the beginning of the Aramaic sections. This Mishnaic usage might provide a clue to the time at which Hebrew emerged as a name for the 'holy language'.

We can turn now to the Hebrew Bible, where the word Hebrew occurs in 32 places. The most important observation is that it never refers to a language. In the well-known passage in 2 Kings 18 (paralleled in Isaiah 36), where King Hezekiah's officials request the emissaries of the King of Assyria to speak to them in Aramaic rather than Hebrew, the word translated Hebrew is יהודית, 'Judaean'. A second observation is that almost all of the occurrences fall into one or other of two groups. The smaller group (five occurrences) deals with the

²⁰ Perhaps the name Assyrian reflects its introduction to the west by the Assyrians along with the Aramaic language.

²¹ The Gemara, in commenting on m.Megillah 2:1, expands the statement 'if he read it ...in any other language, he has not fulfilled his obligation' by using the same list of five languages as is found in b.Shabbath but in a slightly different order into 'if he read it in Coptic, Hebrew, Elamite, Median, or Greek, he has not fulfilled his obligation'; while the rule 'it may be read in a foreign tongue to them that speak a foreign tongue' is expanded into 'Coptic to Copts, Hebrew to Hebrews, Elamite to Elamites, or Greek to Greeks', the dropping of 'Median to Medes' being presumably accidental. (b.Meg. 18a)

law of the Hebrew slave. A Hebrew slave must be released after six years' service, according to Exod. 21:2; when read alongside Lev. 25:39, ('If your brother becomes impoverished and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave'), it becomes apparent that Hebrew is not the same as Israelite. In the larger group of occurrences (twenty-five in all) Hebrew is a term used either by foreigners to designate Israelites or Judaeans, or by Israelites and Judeans when speaking to foreigners about themselves. This group may be further subdivided into an Egyptian and a Philistine context. The former embraces the Joseph stories and the early chapters of Exodus, and it might be argued that there is a certain logic in having the Egyptians know the first generation of Israelites by another name. In the Philistine context of the battles recorded in 1 Samuel during the reign of Saul it might in a similar way be argued that the Philistines use the term Hebrew to withhold recognition of Saul's kingdom. But another explanation is also possible, that in both sets Hebrew is distinguishable from Israelite. In one passage this distinction is absolutely clear, even though a minor adjustment in the division of words is involved: 'The Hebrews who had formerly been with the Philistines, and had gone up to the camp with them, turned around to be with Israel who were with Saul and Jonathan'.²² A little earlier,²³ in another passage that is also narrative and not speech, it is recorded that Hebrews crossed the Jordan at/from/to (there is no preposition in the Hebrew text) the land of Gad and Gilead, and it has been suggested by Gottwald²⁴ that this is a reference to *habiru* joining in the battle.

In our view the connection between *habiru* and Hebrew, invoked by Gottwald (and several other scholars) is erroneous. The Akkadian word *habiru* or *'apiru* describes a group or class of people who appear at various times throughout the second millennium BCE and in various parts of the Fertile Crescent and Mesopotamia. In times of war they would apparently hire themselves as mercenaries; in more peaceful times they would attach themselves to wealthy patrons or even enter into voluntary slavery or service. The term was first encountered in the Amarna letters (fourteenth century BCE). Until recently it was maintained by many scholars that these should be equated with the biblical Hebrews, but this view has recently lost support. One reason is that the Egyptian and the Ugaritic texts both favour the form *'apiru* rather than *habiru*, though the spelling is not decisive. Another reason

²² 1 Sam. 14:21.

²³ 1 Sam. 13:7.

²⁴ Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, N.Y. 1979), 423.

is that there is no mention of *ḥabirul'apiru* after about 1000 BCE, and if somehow the term persisted in Israel or Judah, it is unclear to what kind of people it was then taken to refer—and even more uncertain why it should have been used of Israelites (and Judaeans?). The suggestion that historically the Israelites originated as *ḥabiru* has become more unlikely in recent reappraisals of Israelite origins, which trace the core population of Israel to highland farming villages.²⁵

Two further biblical examples of the use of Hebrew require particular attention: Jonah and Abraham. Jonah identifies himself to the sailors by saying 'I am a Hebrew' (Jon. 1:9), while on just one occasion Abraham is described as 'Abram the Hebrew' (Gen. 14:13). Here it very obviously cannot be understood, even by the biblical author, as a synonym for Israelite (by contrast, Abraham could be called a Jew when the term has acquired a religious rather than an ethnic designation). We suggest, then, that throughout the period in which the biblical texts were written, Hebrew had a meaning that included Israelite but was not synonymous with it. Although Jonah's self-description is addressed to foreigners, it is unclear in this context why he would have used it if he meant simply Israelite, which the sailors would presumably have understood. It is perhaps worth considering that the term was used at a certain period to designate a community or population that included both Israelites and Judaeans, who to outsiders did not form a single identifiable people,²⁶ a term that Israelites or Jews could apply to themselves, but also apply to others. How might this population have been identified or characterized? The most obvious answer is the one we have already proposed for the apostle Paul: it refers to the community of native Aramaic speakers. We have seen that among Jews of the first century CE, Aramaic and Greek-speaking Jews differed in more than purely linguistic preferences, such that it is reasonable to consider the distinction as social or cultural. Can it be argued that Aramaic speakers in general were also identifiable as a social or cultural group? Obviously, we are considering the period after the demise of the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah, whose populations did not speak Aramaic as their first language. Our argument entails that the use of the term Hebrew in the biblical texts discussed above reflects Second Temple period usage.

It can be argued, however, that the Aramaic-speaking Hebrews came to be regarded, and to regard themselves, as defined by more

²⁵ Israel Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (Jerusalem 1988).

²⁶ For the argument that the term 'Israel' developed after 586 BCE as a religious designation for the Judaeans and Samaritan 'children of Jacob' who worshipped the 'god of Jacob', see P.R. Davies, *The Origins of Biblical Israel* (London 2007).

than language alone. One striking indication of this in the Bible is the figure of Eber, a grandson of Shem, in Genesis 10 and 11. Unfortunately, the information given about him is confusing. In the 'Table of Nations' in ch. 10 he and his descendants should represent ethnic or social groups with a designated area of settlement. But only one of his sons, Joktan, is assigned further descendants or territories and these appear to lie in the region of the Arabian peninsula. Nevertheless, according to v. 21 Shem is the 'father of all the descendants of Eber', a statement that has the effect of equating 'Eberites' with all those descended from Shem, and these descendants are given as the inhabitants of the eastern part of the Fertile Crescent from Elam to Aram. Equally strangely, in ch. 11 Joktan is omitted entirely, while the other son, Peleg, is now furnished with a line of descent that leads to Abram (vv. 16–26). It is possible (if a solution is necessary) to reconcile the conflicting information in the two chapters by assuming that the 'children of Eber' were divided into two branches, one inhabiting Arabia, and the other the Fertile Crescent. The two groups together would in fact coincide quite closely with the modern definition of 'Semitic', endorsing the statement in 10:21 that Shem was in fact the father of 'all the descendants of Eber'.

The curiosity of the line of descent from Eber to Abram is that while the genealogy comprises peoples to the *east* of the Euphrates, the immediate family of Abram, and the land that is assigned to him, belong to the *west* of the river. The verb עבר means (among other things) 'cross' and 'eber' can be used prepositionally to mean the region beyond or on the far side of something, usually a river. Thus in Deut. 1:1 'These are the words which Moses spoke בעבר הירדן', while in Jos. 24:2–3 we read 'Your ancestors lived long ago בעבר הנהר ... and I took Abraham from עבר הנהר'. 'The river' in this second passage is almost certainly the Euphrates, and in Genesis Abraham does indeed cross the River from east to west. But the term 'eber hanahar' is also the official designation (Akkadian *eber-nari*, Aramaic 'abar nahara') for a clearly-defined territory, identified first under the Assyrians, presumably followed by the Neo-Babylonians, and then made into a political unit (if it was not already such), a satrapy (initially joined with Babylon, later separated) under the Achaemenids. 'Across the River' was the home of the speakers of Aramaic, the language also adopted by the Assyrians in the western part of their empire and used also by their imperial successors. The vital connection between the name 'Across the River' and the Aramaic language of its inhabitants provides the key to the ancient use of the term Hebrew to designate Aramaic.

The connection between *'eber ha-nahar* and Hebrew is not *explicitly* made in the Hebrew Bible. But it seems to be acknowledged in various subtle ways. We find references to ancestors living 'beyond the river' and crossing rivers in their movement towards self-determination: first the 'sea of reeds' and then the Jordan. The phrase **וְעִבְרִים עָבְרוּ** in 1 Sam. 13:7 looks more than a wordplay, but is rather an attempt to explain the one by the other, as though to say 'Hebrews (are so called because) they crossed the Jordan'. It does not follow that Hebrews and Israel are synonymous here, only that Hebrew is a term that can be applied to Israelites — though the aim is perhaps to supply an indigenous aetiology, to claim the word as originating with Israel itself. The more complicated relationship between Hebrews and Israel emerges when Jonah calls himself a Hebrew. This self-designation is, in our view, evidence that at the time of Jonah's writing an **עִבְרָאִי** (the word will have been coined in Aramaic), is a resident of the place called for short **עִבְרָא** (the emphatic form being used as is normal in western Aramaic when a noun stands alone). Although in the book Jonah speaks not Aramaic but what we call Hebrew, the situation envisaged in the story presupposes that he uses a *lingua franca* such as Aramaic (as he perhaps would in Nineveh too). Whether officially introduced by Persian administrators or developed as a convenient shorthand by the residents, the term **עִבְרָאִי** (in Hebrew **עִבְרִי**) would not have been coterminous with Jew or Israelite but would have applied to the population of the whole satrapy.

And what of the relationship between Jew and Hebrew? Insofar as 'Jew' means 'Judaean', we conclude that, like Israelites (Samaritans), these too regarded themselves as part of the community of 'Across the River', and the figure of Eber signifies that allegiance, as does his place in the ancestral line of Abraham, who is also described as a Hebrew. Abraham's immediate family, from whom his children and grandchildren took wives, lived in a part of Aram by the Euphrates, while his descendants, to whom the divine promises of land are made, cover most of the rest of 'Across the River' — the main exception being the Philistines, who represent Greek speakers.²⁷ Thus, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Ishmaelites are all members of the Abrahamic line, all Hebrews. The biblical equations between the land belonging to Israel and the region 'Across the River' show on the one hand that the region is being 'Abrahamized' but also that as such it can be

²⁷ See Israel Finkelstein, 'The Philistines in the Bible: A Late-Monarchic Perspective', *JOT* 27 (2002), 131–67.

claimed as part of a 'greater Israel' — a claim reflected in the legendary empire of David and Solomon. Reflected in this claim may be something concretely historical — the spread of the cult of Yahweh during the Second Temple period, beyond the boundaries of Judah and Samaria into the Aramaic-speaking region west of the Euphrates. In the book of Ezra (7:25–6), the royal commission is worded as follows:

And you, Ezra, according to the God-given wisdom you possess, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River who know the laws of your God; and teach those who do not know them. All who will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on them, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of their goods or for imprisonment.

The application of Jewish law to the entire satrapy need not be taken as reflecting fifth-century Achaemenid policy or reality, but it possibly enshrines the perspective of a later period when the story of Ezra was written and the *torah* of Yahweh was defining the religious culture of the region.²⁸ Whenever that date was, the Hasmonean rulers, in particular John Hyrcanus and Alexander Jannaeus, extended Judaeian rule over most of this region. It was probably this political expansion, aided by Hyrcanus's destruction of the Gerizim temple, that secured the name Judaism for the Yahweh cult and relegated the cult of Gerizim to a subordinate status. It thus finally established the equation of Jew with Israelite and, to a less dogmatic extent, with Hebrew also; the areas not included within the Hasmonean kingdom were not Aramaic-speaking.²⁹

In our view, it is likely that the signs of a virulent reaction to mixing with gentiles (such as found in Jubilees) are less probably prompted by a so-called Hellenistic crisis in the 160s BCE, than by the expansion of the Jewish population that accelerated drastically under the Hasmoneans who, despite the origins of their dynasty in a nationalistic uprising, followed many of the conventions of Hellenistic monarchy. On Schwartz's estimate, the Jewish population of Palestine increased by two to five times as a result of this expansion, and

²⁸ On the dubious historicity of Ezra, see P.R. Davies, 'Scenes from the Early History of Judaism', in D.V. Edelman (ed.), *The Triumph of Elohim* (Kampen 1995), 145–82; Lester L. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (London 1998).

²⁹ The conflation of 'Judaism' with the historical territory of 'Israel' (Samaria) is reflected in the book of Judith, whose heroine is an eponymous 'Jew' but probably of the tribe of Manasseh. The history and geography of the story seem to deliberately confuse Judah and Israel.

inevitably diluted the character of the cult.³⁰ But that is another topic. As Mendels has argued, however, the notion of Jewish territoriality became one of the main symbols of Jewish nationalism at the time.³¹

The political convergence of Jew and Hebrew under the Hasmoneans may therefore have provided a basis for the later use of Hebrew to designate the language of the Jewish scriptures and of Jews themselves. But as we have seen, this usage is not reflected in the New Testament. It remains the case that Hebrew is rarely if ever used in Jewish sources in Hebrew or in Aramaic to designate a Jew: the preferred self-designation was 'Israel'. In the Greek-speaking population, however, the adjective Hebrew continued to be used as a linguistic and geographical one that was not confined to Jews. The process whereby it came to be a synonym of Jew, rather than simply to *include* Jews, became possible when Judaism became the dominant religion of the area. Herod the Great was, after all, both the king of nearly all of 'Across the River' outside the Roman province of Syria, but also the 'King of the Jews'. Nevertheless, Hebrew did not become synonymous with Jew until later and then, as we have argued, through the agency of Greek speakers, predominantly if not exclusively Christian. In the Gospels *Ἰουδαῖοι* can still be used to mean the residents of Jerusalem, amongst whom the disciples from Galilee feel themselves to be strangers. Even Paul, as noted earlier, does not use the word Jew directly to describe himself, but prefers the term Hebrew or Israelite, the latter perhaps because of his Benjaminite affiliation (underscored by his Hebrew name). But this is hardly because he does not see himself as a Judaeon, nor that he is unwilling to acknowledge his parentage. Possibly he is ill at ease with calling himself a Jew in the fully religious sense that it has by now acquired in the diaspora and in the Roman empire generally. The author of Acts, however, has no qualms: he can describe Paul as replying to the Roman tribune thus (Acts 21:40–22:3):

'I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of an important city; please, let me speak to the people.' When he had given him permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the people for silence; and when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying: 'Brothers and fathers, listen to the defence that I now make before you.' When they heard him addressing them in Hebrew,

³⁰ Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society* (Princeton 2001), 19–99, discusses the character of this 'Judaism'. On the population increase, see 41.

³¹ Doron Mendels, *The Rise and Fall of Jewish Nationalism* (New York 1992 [second edition Grand Rapids 1997]), 99.

they became even more quiet. Then he said: 'I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today.'

For this author, 'Jew' or 'Jewish' denoted religious affiliation rather than place of birth or residence, and since Hebrew (Aramaic) was the name of the language spoken in Jerusalem, it was also the language of the Jews. Contrast this with the usage in Jonah, who describes his ethnicity as Hebrew but his religion as the cult of 'Yahweh the god of heaven'. If Jonah is to be identified with the prophet of 2 Kgs 14:25 he was not, of course, a Jew (Judaean) but an Israelite.³² His 'Hebrewness' was not a matter of religion, but of language and geography.

To summarize: we suggest that the word Hebrew originated as an abbreviated name for someone from 'Beyond the River' or 'Trans-Euphrates', a 'Transite' — in Aramaic עבראי. The ethnic and geographical character of this territory developed during the Second Temple period and its Semitic population is reflected in the creation of Abraham as a Hebrew (Gen. 14:13) and his promised land, described in Genesis 15, as the entire satrapy. The spread of the cult of Yahweh, which in the book of Genesis is far from being anything like Judaism, but simply the worship of Yahweh, was given a political expression through the Hasmonean conquests, when Judah began to give its name to that cult. While Semitic speakers were aware that Hebrew and Jewish were not synonymous (rather, they were largely co-extensive), Greek-speakers, and especially Christians for whom Judaism was of especial significance, equated Jews with Hebrews and the Jewish language with Hebrew. At some point subsequently the term Hebrew was adopted by and for the language we now know by that name. Despite the adumbration of this change in the Mishna, the two examples of contrary usage in the Gemara make it exceedingly difficult to determine when this happened. It was only in the nineteenth century CE that Hebrew as equivalent to 'Jew' made its appearance in the Hebrew language, in the works of Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Yehuda Leib Gordon; and in the words of Eliezer ben

³² In Esther 1:1, where Mordechai is described as a member of the tribe of Benjamin but also a Jew, the meaning denotes not his religion but his nationality, Benjamin being one of the tribes comprising the population of the former kingdom of Judah. Likewise, Tobit is from the tribe of Naphtali and a worshipper of Yahweh, but not described as a Jew. Judith 4:1 also refers to 'Israelites living in Judah'. The clues to her tribal affiliation (8:1–3; 16:23–4) suggest she was, despite her name, of the tribe of Manasseh.

WHAT DOES HEBREW MEAN?

Yehuda, when he boxed the ears of young men in Jerusalem while adjuring them, one at a time, עברי דבר עברית ('Hebrew, speak Hebrew!'). All three men were probably using the biblical word in the sense in which they had known it used in Europe.

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