Introduction
An Aramaic Approach Thirty Years Later
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The first edition of Matthew Black’s *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* appeared in 1946. The second edition appeared in 1954; the third in 1967; and a German translation appeared in 1982.1 Given the limited amount of Aramaic material available to the wider scholarly community in the 1940s through the 1960s, Black’s study represents the highwater mark in the older dictional and philological analysis and comparison of Aramaic sources with the New Testament Gospels and Acts. His work laid the groundwork for subsequent research.

Black’s work represents a continuation of the investigation of Aramaic and its relevance for understanding Jesus and the Gospels and perhaps for recovering the *verba Jesu*. In this work he was preceded by Gustav Dalman2 and Joachim Jeremias.3 Black’s more cautious method and conclusions served as a corrective to the ultimately unpersuasive claims of C. F. Burney4 and C. C. Torrey,5 who

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1 Each edition grew by some 50 pages. The German edition was translated by Günther Schwarz and entitled Jesu Muttersprache (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1982).
had argued that our Greek Gospels are translations of Aramaic originals.

Black began his work with the assumption that “At the basis of the Greek Gospels . . . there must lie a Palestinian Aramaic tradition, at any rate of the sayings and teaching of Jesus, and this tradition must at one time have been translated from Aramaic into Greek” (p. 16). Taking a “linguistic approach” Black reviewed grammatical features (syntax, grammar, and vocabulary), poetic features (parallelism, alliteration), and various indicators of translation of Aramaic. He hoped to clarify difficult passages and in many cases contribute to the exegetical task. He concluded that the evidence points decidedly to an “Aramaic origin” of the Gospels and Acts. Although, “whether that source was written or oral, it is not possible from the evidence to decide” (p. 271).

**Scholarly Assessment of Black’s Aramaic Approach**

Scholarly response to Black’s work has been mixed, with the sharpest criticism coming from Joseph Fitzmyer. Most express appreciation for the work. Sebastian Brock calls it “something of a classic” that “remains both a very useful and an exciting work.” Even Fitzmyer, who faults the book at many points, begins his review by describing Black’s work as “an invaluable instrument de


7 From Brock’s review, 274, 278.
travail for the study of the Gospels and Acts” and concludes his review with these words: “I certainly learned much from the earlier editions of [An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts]. I shall surely continue to be stimulated by it despite the criticisms which I have expressed against the third edition.” Hendrickson Publisher’s decision to reprint this important work will afford another generation of scholars the opportunity to learn from and be stimulated by it.

The major problem for Black was his reliance on Aramaic that for the most part derived some centuries after the time of the New Testament. Fitzmyer and others have shown that the Aramaic of the Targumim is different at many points from the Aramaic that is attested from the New Testament period. Indeed, the “closest parallels to the sort of Aramaic in which the non-Qumran targums are written are found in the inscriptions from synagogues and tombs of the Byzantine period in Palestine (roughly from the third to the sixth centuries), and often enough in the literary texts of rabbinical literature and classical Syriac.” Fitzmyer adds: “The only reasons that are ever given for the first-century dating of the so-called Palestinian targums are philological, based on the assumption that we can identify their language with the spoken, popular form of first-century Palestinian Aramaic.”

Fitzmyer’s criticism is justified, at least in reference to Black and others at that time. Usage of the non-Qumran Targumim is problematic, particularly for philological and dictional analysis, the very sort of analysis that predominates Black’s work. But at the time of his work, Black believed that these Targumim offered the best, indeed almost the only, material for his comparative work: “The most significant new discovery in recent years in the field of Palestinian

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8 From Fitzmyer’s review, 417–18, 428.
10 Fitzmyer, A Wandering Aramean, 74, 84 nn. 118–19.
11 Fitzmyer, A Wandering Aramean, 74.
Aramaic is Codex Neofiti I to which attention was first drawn by Professor Alejandro Díez Macho . . ." (p. 35).\textsuperscript{12} Black said this, even after the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. With respect to the Scrolls, he says: "In comparison with the extensive Hebrew discoveries, only a small number of Aramaic texts have so far come to light at Qumrân. They consist, for the most part, of small fragments, miscellaneous 'bits and pieces', some containing no more than one word or even just a single letter, and only occasionally extending to several lines of text . . ." (p. 39).

Black’s dismissive assessment of the Aramaic Scrolls reflected the limited accessibility of the materials in the 1950s and 1960s. He would not have said this had he had access to all of the Aramaic material from the region of the Dead Sea. A little over a decade after the appearance of the third edition of An Aramaic Approach Joseph Fitzmyer and Daniel Harrington published a collection of some 150 items, including sixty-four texts from the Dead Sea caves and a great number of inscriptions, many from ossuaries.\textsuperscript{13} As extensive as this collection is, it is not complete; for not all of the Scrolls were available in the late 1970s.

Many of the Aramaic texts in the Fitzmyer-Harrington collection are “bits and pieces,” to be sure, but the Job Targum from cave 11

\textsuperscript{12} Black is referring to A. Díez Macho, Neophyti I: Targum palestinense Ms de la Biblioteca Vaticana (6 vols., Barcelona and Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1968–77). This work did not appear until after the publication of the third edition of Black’s Aramaic Approach.

preserves thirty-eight columns of text, with the Genesis Apocryphon from cave 1 preserving another fifteen columns of text; and these columns are quite broad. The New Jerusalem text from cave 5 (5Q15) adds two more columns, while the Enoch fragments are not insignificant. The much debated 4Q246, which speaks of a figure called the “son of God” and offers several striking parallels to the angelic anunciation (Luke 1:32–35), preserves two columns of text.

This Aramaic material, which dates to the New Testament period and somewhat earlier, must be accorded primary status for all future philological work. It is at this point especially that Black’s work is in urgent need of updating. The recent and ongoing publication of the tools and studies that are discussed below will make this updating possible.

**Recent Relevant Tools and Studies**

Lexical tools have appeared that have aided ongoing research. Michael Sokoloff’s *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic* immediately comes to mind.14 The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon Project that is under way at Hebrew Union College and Jewish Institute of Religion is sure to make important contributions.15 Shirley Lund and Julia Foster have assembled targumic variants within Neofiti I,16 while David Golomb has published a study of the grammar of Neofiti I.17 Some Aramaic concordances are now available.18

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15 All Aramaic material is being concorded and tagged lexically.
18 See E. Brederek, *Konkordanz zum Targum Onkelos* (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1906); J. B. van Zijl, *A Concordance to the Targum of Isaiah* (Society of Biblical Literature Aramaic Studies 3; Missoula: Scholars, 1979); B. Grossfeld, *Concordance of the First Targum to the Book of Esther* (Society of Biblical Literature Aramaic Studies 5; Chico: Scholars, 1984); E. G. Clarke, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch: Text and Concordance* (Hoboken: Ktav, 1984). The Aramaic project of Hebrew Union College will eventually make it possible to complete the task of concording the data. Fitzmyer and Harrington (*A Manual of Palestinian Aramaic Texts, 307–53*) provide a glossary of the Aramaic vocabulary of the texts presented. See also the multi-volume series edited by J. C. de Moor and others, entitled *A Bilingual Concordance to the Targum of the Prophets*, of which 17 volumes to date have appeared (Leiden: Brill, 1995–98), covering Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.
Other useful contributions include John Bowker’s comparison of the interpretive traditions in the Targumim and rabbinitic literature. Although introductory in nature, his study usefully illustrates how the Aramaic tradition forms a part of Jewish exegesis in general. Bruce Chilton has laid the groundwork for the critical sifting that is necessary in order to identify significant stages in the interpretive development of Targumim. His work, moreover, establishes a firmer foundation on which New Testament studies that make use of the Targumim may rest. (Examples of the positive results that may be had from his method will be reviewed below.) A collection of studies edited by Beattie and McNamara, and one in honor of McNamara, enrich the secondary literature in the field. The Michael Glazier Aramaic Bible project, in which English translations of the Targumim, with departures from the Hebrew indicated by italicized font, has had the positive effect of making the relevance of the Targumim more widely known and more readily appreciated, especially by nonspecialists.

Much of the primary material may soon be available in electronic form, complete with grammatical tagging (as is already available for the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint, the Greek New Testament, and, soon, the Dead Sea Scrolls). Rapid and exhaustive verbal and grammatical searches will greatly assist students.


22 In the “canonical order”: M. McNamara, Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis (The Aramaic Bible 1a; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992); M. Maher, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis (The Aramaic Bible 1b; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992); M. McNamara, M. Maher, and R. Hayward, Targum Neofiti 1: Exodus and Pseudo-Jonathan: Leviticus (The Aramaic Bible 2; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1994); M. McNamara, M. Maher, and R. Hayward, Targum Neofiti 1: Leviticus and Pseudo-Jonathan: Leviticus (The Aramaic Bible 3; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1994).
Several critical studies have advanced the study of Aramaic and the Targumim since the appearance of Black’s *Aramaic Approach*: Fitzmyer’s work on Aramaic in the New Testament era is of direct relevance to many of the issues addressed by Black.\(^2\) J. T. Forestell’s index of New Testament passages studied in the light of the Targumim is an invaluable tool, though it needs to be updated.\(^2\) Illustrative studies by Martin McNamara and Roger Le Deaut, among others, have made it quite clear that the Targumim can in many instances shed light on the world of the New Testament and on

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specific passages, even if the language of these Targumim come from a later period.

**Improved Criteria**

The problem that has plagued appeals to the Targumim for interpretation of New Testament writings has been the absence of carefully constructed criteria. Bruce Chilton’s articulation of dictional coherence and thematic coherence commends itself and goes a long way in providing the criteria necessary for such comparative work, if it is to be judged critically compelling.²⁵

Chilton looks for evidence of dictional and thematic coherence between the Targumim and the sayings of Jesus.²⁶ By “dictional coherence” Chilton has in mind instances of verbal agreement. For instance, does Jesus’ wording agree with the wording of the Targumim (in contrast to the wording of the Hebrew or the Greek)? By “thematic coherence” Chilton is thinking of instances where Jesus’ understanding of a given passage of Scripture apparently agrees with the interpretive paraphrase found in the Targumim. Both types of coherence between the sayings of Jesus and targumic tradition have been identified. The cumulative effect supports the validity of the method.

The thematic element might be subdivided into thematic and exegetical, as I have tried to show elsewhere.²⁷ By “exegetical coherence” I have in mind points of agreement between Jesus’ or the evangelist’s understanding of a passage and the way it is understood by the meturgeman—the Aramaic translator/interpreter. The agreement lies not so much in theme but in a particular point of interpre-

²⁵B. Chilton, A Galilean Rabbi and His Bible: Jesus’ Use of the Interpreted Scripture of His Time (Good News Studies 8; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984) esp. 57–147. Although not with precision seen in Chilton’s study, these criteria are adumbrated in the older studies of McNamara and Le Deaut.

²⁶Chilton (A Galilean Rabbi, 89–90) comments that “the citations of the Targum to Isaiah in the New Testament record of Jesus’ words make better sense as traditional elements in the dominical sayings than as redactional innovations.”

A few examples of these three types of coherence should make these criteria clear.

**Dictional Coherence.** Chilton’s approach to dictional coherence resembles Black’s linguistic approach, but it is more carefully controlled. The paraphrase of Isa 6:9–10, concluding with “and it be forgiven them” (Mark 4:12), coheres with the wording of Tg. Isa. 6:10.28 Only the Targum—not the LXX or the Hebrew—reads “forgive,” as Black rightly observed (pp. 211–16).29

Chilton identifies Matt 26:52 as another example of dictional coherence, this time with Tg. Isa. 50:11, which has introduced the very language distinctive of Jesus’ saying.30 Jesus’ allusion to Isa 66:24, which serves to describe “Gehenna” (Mark 9:47–48), in all probability is another example of dictional coherence with the Isaiah Targum, which has introduced this word into the verse in question.31 A final example is seen in Tg. Ps.-J. Lev 22:28, which adds the following to the passage: “My people, children of Israel, as our Father is merciful in heaven, so shall you be merciful on earth.” Chilton and others are correct to suggest that this interpretive expansion is in some way reflected in Jesus’ utterance preserved in Q: “Be merciful, even as your Father [in heaven] is merciful” (Luke 6:36 = Matt 5:48).32

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29Moreover, when the Targum inserts the relative “who” into Isa 6:9 (“speak to this people who hear indeed . . .”), thus implying that the prophetic word of judgment is to be directed only against the obdurate (i.e. those who refuse to listen and observe), the dominical saying’s distinction between insiders and outsiders (cf. Mark 4:11) may offer an instance of thematic coherence as well. Evans, *To See and Not Perceive*, 105.


The Johannine Gospel yields several suggestive examples. One immediately thinks of the coherence between the opening words, “In the beginning was the Word [logos], and the Word was with God . . . all things came into being through it” (1:1, 3), and those of Tg. Neof. Gen 1:1, “From the beginning with wisdom the Word [memra] created and perfected the heavens and the earth.” Or again, when the evangelist declares that Isaiah spoke “because he saw (the Lord’s) glory” (12:41), we have coherence with Isa 6:1 in the Targum (“I saw the glory of the Lord”), not with the Greek or the Hebrew (“I saw the Lord”).

Thematic Coherence. Chilton also offers an important example of thematic coherence between the Isaiah Targum and Jesus’ Parable of the Tenant Farmers (Mark 12:1–9). Whereas the Hebrew and LXX versions of Isa 5:1–7 direct a general word of judgment against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem, the Isaiah Targum gives the passage a narrower and distinctively cultic cast. Among other things, the Targum introduces “sanctuary” and “altar” (evidently in place of “tower” and “wine vat,” respectively; cf. t. Me’ila 1:16; t. Sukka 3:15); these are what specifically will be destroyed. Because Jesus’ parable, which is based on Isa 5:1–7, is directed against the temple establishment and not against the general populace, the “possibility does seem strong,” to quote Chilton, that it “reflects the specifically cultic context of Isaiah 5:1–7 in the Targum.”


Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom and his predilection for the language and imagery of Second Isaiah once again suggest thematic coherence with the Aramaic tradition. Jesus’ use of the word “gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον) is drawn from this prophetic book (e.g. Isa 40:9; 41:10).  

33For further discussion of these and other examples, see Evans, Word and Glory, 114–34.


36Chilton, A Galilean Rabbi, 133–36.
52:7; 61:1). But whereas in the Hebrew the proclamation of the gospel is summed up as “Your God reigns!” (Isa 52:7), in the Aramaic it is summed up as “The kingdom of God is revealed!” This closely approximates the Markan summary: “...proclaiming the gospel... ‘The kingdom of God is at hand!’”

Perhaps another example of thematic coherence is seen in Jesus’ allusion to Hos 6:2 (“After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him”) in his prediction of resurrection following the passion (Mark 8:31 etc.). Whereas Hosea in the Hebrew (and Greek) speaks of national renewal and restoration, in the Aramaic the prophet speaks of being raised up in the day of resurrection: “He will give us life in the days of consolations that will come; on the day of the resurrection of the dead he will raise us up and we shall live before him.”

Exegetical Coherence. When an expert in the Mosaic law answered his own question, “What should I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25), by reciting what commentators often call the “double commandment” (Luke 10:27; cf. Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18), Jesus is said to have replied, “Do this, and you will live” (Luke 10:28). Although this reply may echo Deut 6:24 (“so that we might be kept alive”), most commentators suspect that it alludes to Lev 18:5 (“doing them a man will live”). Fitzmyer cautiously agrees, admitting only that ζησον


39 Cathcart and Gordon, The Targum of the Minor Prophets, 41.


“may allude” to this Old Testament passage. \(^{42}\) I suspect, however, that the whole statement (τούτο ποιεῖ καὶ ζήση) constitutes a conscious paraphrase of יְהִי יְהוָה לִי לְבֵית אֵירוֹסֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

The promise of Lev 18 has nothing to do with eternal life. Neither the Hebrew nor the LXX gives any indication that anything more than life in this world is in view. If the commandments are obeyed, the people of Israel can expect to live. In the Lukan context the question is not “What must I do to live in this world?” but “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus’ answer, “Do this and you will live,” implies that the man will “inherit eternal life.” Why then do we have the allusion to Lev 18:5, which according to the Hebrew and Greek versions speaks only of temporal life?

Jesus’ allusion to Leviticus may have been conditioned by the Aramaic paraphrase as it had come to expression in the synagogue, \(^{43}\) for two of the Pentateuch Targumim extend the idea of life in this world to include life in the world to come. Onqelos reads “he shall live by them in eternal life,” while the later and more embellished Pseudo-Jonathan reads “he shall live by them in eternal life and shall be assigned a portion with the righteous” (cf. Tg. Ezek 20:11, 13, 21). This Aramaic tradition coheres with Tannaitic exegesis: “... shall live”—in the world to come. And should you wish to claim that the reference is to this world, is not the fact that in the end one dies? Lo, how am I to explain, ‘... shall live’? It is with reference to the world to come” (Sipra Lev. §193 [on Lev 18:1–30]). Once again the antiquity of the Aramaic tradition is attested at Qumran, where we hear the words of Lev 18:5: “The desires of His will, ‘which a man should do and so have life in them.’... Those who hold firm to it shall receive everlasting life and all the glory of Adam will be theirs” (Damascus Document 3.15–16, 20). Although the exegesis here is

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not explicit, as it is in targumic and midrashic tradition, it is presupposed, as it also seems to be in Luke 10.

Another example of exegetical coherence between targumic tradition and the Gospels may be seen in Jesus’ pronouncement on the permanence of marriage: “What therefore God has joined together, let no one tear apart” (Mark 10:9). The idea that it is God who joins a man and a woman is not stated in the passages cited from Genesis (cf. Gen 1:27 and 2:24 quoted in Mark 10:6–8), but it is expressed in Tg. Ps.-J. Deut 34:6: “[God] taught us to join grooms and brides because of his having united Eve with Adam” (emphasis added). The Targum’s γυμναζω (“join”) appears to be the equivalent of Mark’s συνεζευγνυμαι.45

Criteria such as these are needed as a supplement to Black’s linguistic and textual approach. Of course, for his approach to be as efficacious as it might be, it will be necessary to treat as primary and to make full use of the Aramaic materials that date to the approximate time of Jesus and the early church. Nonetheless, whatever its shortcomings, An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts will remain the point of departure for study in this field and it will remain as such until someone with the acumen of the late Principal Black replaces it with a full and up-to-date treatment of the phenomena.

Bibliography

Below are works that have appeared since 1965 that treat the Aramaic language and the Gospels and Acts. These studies contribute directly, or in some cases indirectly, to the concerns of An Aramaic Approach, lending greater precision to this field of study and providing more examples that need to be taken into account.


44Clarke, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Deuteronomy, 105.


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