

The Language Environment of First Century Judaea

Jerusalem Studies in the Synoptic Gospels

VOLUME TWO

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The Use of Hebrew and Aramaic in Epigraphic Sources of the New Testament Era

Guido Baltes

The widespread conviction among New Testament scholars that Aramaic, and not Hebrew, should be considered the “Jewish vernacular” of the first century C.E. and therefore the “mother tongue of Jesus,” was shaped in the nineteenth century by prominent scholars like Abraham Geiger and Gustaf Dalman, who were, without doubt, experts in their field. However, the textual evidence they could base their conclusions on was thin at that time: no literature, neither Hebrew nor Aramaic, was extant from the period in question and archaeological research in the land of Israel had only just begun. Geiger had to base his thesis about the artificial character of Mishnaic Hebrew solely on the text of the Mishnah itself.¹ Dalman, in his influential work *Die Worte Jesu* (*The Words of Jesus*), had to build his theses on the lexical Semitisms within the works of Josephus and the New Testament, the Aramaic parts of early rabbinic literature and on the assumption that targum was already an “ancient practice” in the early second century C.E., since no Aramaic texts from the period in question were available to him.² Hence, two prominent Aramaic scholars of our time have described the situation as follows:

The position of Aramaic in our period was long a somewhat ironic one. The central importance of the language was universally recognized, and many scholars . . . supposed it to be the Semitic vernacular of Palestine to the virtual exclusion of Hebrew; yet actual texts in Aramaic from our period have until recently been very scanty.³

1 Abraham Geiger, *Lehr- und Lesebuch zur Sprache der Mischnah. Band 1: Lehrbuch zur Sprache der Mischnah* (Breslau: Leuckart, 1845).

2 Gustaf Dalman, *Die Worte Jesu: mit Berücksichtigung des nachkanonischen jüdischen Schrifttums und der aramäischen Sprache erörtert* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1898). On the history of early Aramaic scholarship, see my other contribution to the present volume. “The Origins of the ‘Exclusive Aramaic Model’ in the Nineteenth Century: Methodological Fallacies and Subtle Motives.”

3 James Barr, “Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek in the Hellenistic Age,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism* (ed. W. D. Davies and Louis Finkelstein; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 79–114 (91).

Between the final redaction of Daniel (ca. 165 B.C.E.), in which roughly six chapters are written in Aramaic, and the first rabbinical writings, *Mēgillat Ta’anit*, dating from the end of the first Christian century, there had never been much evidence of the use of Aramaic in Palestine prior to the discovery of the Qumran scrolls and fragments.⁴

This situation has changed dramatically in the course of the past century. Starting with the discoveries in the Cairo Genizah, and continuing with the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Bar Kokhba letters and other documentary texts from the Judaeen desert, the landscape of Hebrew and Aramaic literature from the Second Temple period has changed dramatically. In addition, ongoing archaeological work has brought to light a vast number of inscriptions, ostraca and other epigraphical material.

While the documents from the Judaeen Desert have been subject to intensive study and scholarly debate not only among archaeologists, linguists and also biblical scholars, the inscriptions and ostraca have largely been neglected by New Testament scholarship. This is probably due to their meager theological content and the lack of any direct links to New Testament literature, with a few exceptions like the “Pontius Pilatus” inscription from Caesarea, a few “qorban” inscriptions, the ossuary of “Alexander, son of Simon, from Cyrene,” or, for those with a more sensational interest, the famous “Jesus ben Joseph” ossuary from Talpiot, together with its companion, the “James Ossuary.”⁵

What has largely gone unnoticed, meanwhile, are the conclusions drawn by archaeologists, epigraphists and palaeographers concerning the language use in the epigraphic material discovered over the past century. Martin Hengel, in an article published in 1996, analyzed in depth the use of Greek in these Jewish inscriptions.⁶ However, he leaves aside the issue of Hebrew versus Aramaic. Leading Israeli epigraphist Joseph Naveh had addressed that question earlier, but only very briefly in a short article published in Hebrew that has probably

4 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Languages of Palestine in the First Century A.D.” (1970), in idem, *A Wandering Aramaean: Collected Aramaic Essays* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 29–56 (39).

5 Although the legal charges of forgery against Oded Golan have been dropped following the court decision of March 2012, the academic debate on the authenticity of the inscription (or parts thereof) remains open.

6 Martin Hengel, “Zum Problem der ‘Hellenisierung’ Judäas im 1. Jahrhundert nach Christus,” in *Judaica et Hellenistica: Kleine Schriften I* (ed. Martin Hengel et al.; WUNT 90; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 1–90. English version: *The ‘Hellenization’ of Judaea in the First Century after Christ* (London: SCM, 1989).

not been noticed by most New Testament scholars. He sums up the conclusions to be drawn from the evidence available at his time as follows:

The Aramaic language gradually replaced Hebrew to become the dominant language [i.e. in the course of the Second Temple period and until 135 C.E.]. The Hebrew language and script was mainly used in matters of national or religious relevance. However, it also continued to be used in daily life. This picture, emerging from the epigraphic evidence, fits well with the picture reflected by the literary sources... Although the Jews began to develop their own specific Aramaic dialect, many also continued to speak Hebrew. Hebrew had the status of a national language: it was the language of literature and religion and the language to express national identity (e.g. on the coins).⁷

Very similar conclusions can be found in most of the major excavation reports from Qumran, Masada, Beth She'arim and Jerusalem. Unfortunately, this insight has still not found its way into the field of New Testament scholarship. As recent as 2004, Klaus Beyer reiterated his claim that Hebrew was not a spoken language in any part of the country at the time of Jesus:

It is therefore improbable that Hebrew continued to be spoken in any remote part of the country until the time of Jesus. Definitely, the scribes have not taken their literary Mishnaic Hebrew [*neuhebräische Schriftsprache*] from there.⁸

Hebrew was nobody's mother tongue from at least 300 B.C.E. until 1880 C.E.⁹

7 Josef Naveh, "Hebrew versus Aramaic in the Epigraphic Finds of the Second Temple—Bar-Kokhba Period," *Leshonenu* 56 (1992): 301–16 (Hebrew with English summary), 301 and 315 (translation mine).

8 Klaus Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer samt den Inschriften aus Palästina, dem Testament Levis aus der Kairoer Genisa, der Fastenrolle und den alten talmudischen Zitaten* (2 vols.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984 and 2004), 1:58: "Deshalb ist es unwahrscheinlich, daß das Hebräische in irgendeinem abgelegenen Gebiet bis zur Zeit Jesu gesprochen wurde. Ausgeschlossen ist aber, daß die Schriftgelehrten sich von dort ihre neuhebräische Schriftsprache geholt hätten..."

9 *Ibid.*, 2:3: "Das Hebräische war von spätestens 300 v.Chr. bis 1880 n.Chr. niemandes Muttersprache."

A similar claim on Aramaic exclusivity has been made by Maurice Casey.¹⁰ Few scholars today would go as far as Beyer and Casey, however. A more “moderate” view, one that allows *some* use of Hebrew in specifically religious contexts or secluded circles, is today probably shared by the majority of New Testament scholars. It has recently been presented by Ingo Kottsieper with explicit reference to the epigraphic evidence:

From all the evidence discussed . . . there can be little doubt that Hebrew was superseded by Aramaic as the commonly spoken language during the Persian era. Nevertheless, Hebrew was still in use in religious circles and in the realm of the temple, not only for traditional texts, but also for new texts and probably also as the lingo of these communities.¹¹

However, the “evidence discussed” by Kottsieper, whose main focus is on the Persian era, is scarce in regards to the first and second centuries C.E.; he mentions the use of Hebrew in the letters of Bar Kokhba, which he explains as “part of the ideology of the rebels” (p. 114). He also adduces the Hebrew ostraca from Masada, which he views as a result of “priestly influence on the groups in Masada” (p. 115). For other Hebrew inscriptions from the first century, Kottsieper argues: “They could either belong to members of priestly or religious circles or show the influence of language politics during the Jewish war” (p. 115). However, does such reasoning, very common also among New Testament scholars, in fact do justice to the sources? The problem with this approach, as with many others of this kind, is that, for reasons of brevity, the authors often give selective evidence without painting the full picture. The reader often gets the impression that the use of Hebrew in the epigraphic sources is the exception, while the use of Aramaic is the rule. However, this impression is based for the most part on the selective character of the evidence provided.

The purpose of the present study is therefore to provide the reader with a comprehensive statistical overview of language use in the epigraphic sources. Since the publication of Naveh’s article, a great number of new inscriptions have been published, including the first two volumes of the long-awaited

10 Maurice Casey, *Aramaic Sources of Mark’s Gospel* (SNTSMS 102; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 79.

11 Ingo Kottsieper, “‘And they did not care to speak Yehudit’: On Linguistic Change in Judah During the Late Persian Era,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Fourth Century B.C.E.* (ed. Oded Lipschitz, Gary N. Knoppers and Rainer Albertz; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 95–124 (118).

“Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae” and the final volumes of the “Discoveries in the Judaean Desert” series, as well as new material from recent excavations. This puts us in a position to present a new and updated overview on the issue, including statistics on the various corpora.

As will be seen, this task is impeded by a number of challenges, ranging from the absence of a complete up-to-date catalogue of epigraphic sources to the coincidental character of the material available and the disputability of language classification and dates of origin in many cases where inscriptions are either too short or too fragmentary to allow a clear verdict. Also, a survey like this must, by default, stay superficial; the purpose is to draw a broad map of language use without getting into the complex details of content and sociolinguistic context.¹² However, references to the sources are given, so that interested readers can look up the evidence themselves and make their own judgments that may, in details, differ from mine. Despite the obstacles, a general picture will emerge from this statistical survey that hopefully will help students of the New Testament and Second Temple Judaism to develop their own view on the complex issue of language use.

1 The Material

A comprehensive catalogue of Jewish inscriptions from the land of Israel does not exist. The most recent collection covering the whole land of Israel, the “Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum” (CIJ), dates back more than half a century and does in many respects not meet modern methodological standards.¹³ Work is still in progress on a successor, the “Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae” (CIIP), of which the first two volumes have just recently appeared in print, while nine volumes are projected altogether.¹⁴ The estimated number

12 I have done this in more detail as part of a broader study of the Hebrew background of the Gospel tradition: *Hebräisches Evangelium und synoptische Überlieferung. Untersuchungen zum hebräischen Hintergrund der Evangelientradition* (WUNT 2/312; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

13 Jean Baptiste Frey, *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum. Recueil des Inscriptions Juives qui vont du II^e siècle avant Jésus-Christ au VII^e siècle de Notre Ère. Vol II: Asie—Afrique* (Sussidi allo studio delle antichità cristiane III; Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Christiana, 1952).

14 Hannah M. Cotton, Leah Di Segni, Werner Eck et al., *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae*. Vol. 1, *Jerusalem, Part 1: 1–704* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2010). Part 2: 705–1120 (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2011). Vol. 2: *Caesarea and the Middle Coast: 1121–2160* (Berlin / New York: de Gruyter 2011).

of 10,000 texts in the CIIP, compared to the 533 texts compiled in the CIJ, gives us a vague idea of how drastically the epigraphic landscape has changed in the past 50 years.¹⁵

Until the final completion of the CIIP, we therefore still have to turn to a number of separate catalogues, collections and excavation reports to get a rough idea of language use in the epigraphic material of the period in question. The following material from major excavations and publications has been included in this survey:

(a) The “Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum,” though outdated, still offers the broadest and most diverse collection of inscriptions from across the land of Israel. Among the 535 samples (CIJ 882–1414),¹⁶ three groups stand out as separate corpora: 178 ossuary inscriptions from Jerusalem (CIJ 1210–1387), 169 inscriptions from the Beth She’arim necropolis (CIJ 993–1161), dating from the late second century to the fifth century C.E., and 69 inscriptions from the Joppa necropolis (CIJ 892–960), dating from the late second and third centuries C.E. Of the remaining 117 inscriptions, 48 are without date, and some others are dated only very vaguely.¹⁷

15 It should be noted, however, that the CIIP will also include the non-Jewish material as well as inscriptions from the Arabian peninsula.

16 According to Frey’s numbering, they should be 534 samples. However, some of the inscriptions have been regrouped differently in view of later research. For example, CIJ 1393 a/b are probably two separate inscriptions (now CIIP 347 and 357), while CIJ 1215, 1217 and 1226 are probably part of the same inscription (now CIIP 421). CIJ 1286 is probably a recent forgery; cf. Rachel Hachlili, *Jewish Funerary Customs, Practices and Rites in the Second Temple Period* (JSJSup 94; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 175. Re-evaluations and uncertainties like these lead to slight deviations from exact mathematical numbers throughout this article.

17 For one of the Hebrew inscriptions from the basement of the Al-Aqsa Mosque (CIJ 1399), a possible range of dates from pre-70 C.E. to the Middle Ages (!) is given. Palaeographic dating is not employed throughout the CIJ. Apart from the ossuary inscriptions, a possible dating to the first centuries B.C.E. or C.E. is proposed by Frey for 14 other inscriptions: CIJ 891, 989, 1173, 1388, 1390, 1399, 1400, 1402, 1403, 1404, 1407, 1408, 1412 and 1413. For CIJ 989 and 1403, however, a later date is much more probable, and for CIJ 1399, a late date is next to certain. The latter has therefore been excluded from the statistics for the 1st century inscriptions. For the ossuary inscription CIJ 1389, no date is given by Frey. However, already Clermont-Ganneau, who is adduced by Frey as his source, had proposed a date of 200 C.E. or later. Therefore, it is also excluded from the 1st century inscriptions. CIJ 1300, 1394 and 1395 (CIIP 460, 137 and 138) are not dated by Frey, but a 1st century C.E. provenance is assumed by the editors of CIIP.

(b) Volume 1.1 of the CIIP contains, according to the layout of the series, all inscriptions found in the Jerusalem area that can be dated before 70 C.E. Most of these are ossuary and funerary inscriptions (CIIP 1, 11–608), most others are ostraca and domestic utensils like engraved vessels, pottery stands, stone weights, and so on (CIIP 609–704). CIIP 1–10 are other inscriptions from public areas.¹⁸ Volume 1.2 contains only inscriptions later than 70 C.E. and therefore has been excluded from this survey as a whole. In contrast, Volume 2 has been included, because it contains inscriptions from all eras, collected from Caesarea and the surrounding coastline. However, other than Vol. 1, the majority of the finds in Vol. 2 can not be dated with certainty before or after 70 C.E.¹⁹

(c) Outside of Jerusalem, the excavations at Masada have probably yielded the largest number of inscriptions from the Second Temple period. The final excavation reports list a total of 941 inscriptions: 700 in Hebrew or Aramaic, 2 in Nabatean, 105 in Latin, 101 in Greek, 6 in Latin and Greek (bilingual) and 27 which cannot be clearly identified as being either Greek or Latin. However, the impressive numbers are misleading, since 301 of the 700 inscriptions in Jewish script (Mas 1–301) contain no more than one letter each. Another 139 samples (Mas 302–440) contain names and list of names, much like the ossuary inscriptions from Jerusalem, and are only of limited value for language studies. Most of the Latin material is dated to the time of Herod the Great, some of it also to the period of Roman occupation after 74 C.E. The Greek material originates both from Herodian times (26 B.C.E.–66 C.E.) and from the time of the Jewish revolt (66–73 C.E.). At least one document (Mas 742) and two ostraca

18 Although CIIP 1.1 contains 704 inscriptions, in the overview a total of 707 are listed because some of the CIIP inscriptions combine multiple inscriptions from older corpora and vice versa (cf. n. 16).

19 Out of a total of 1023 inscriptions, about 400 are explicitly dated by the editors. Roughly 100 others are implicitly dated with reference to their context or content (e.g. Christian symbolism). Using these criteria, only 43 inscriptions are dated by the editors to a period of the 1st centuries B.C.E./C.E. If all inscriptions were counted for which such a date is *possible*, while not explicitly or implicitly stated (and in many cases not probable), the number would rise to 570. However, for the purposes of the present study, the decision to include or exclude these in the count for the New Testament era does not make much of a difference, since the vast majority of these 570 are either Greek or Latin: Out of a total of 12 Hebrew/Aramaic and 8 bilingual Greek-Hebrew/Greek-Aramaic inscriptions, none are dated explicitly to a time before 100 C.E., while 11 are too fragmentary to be dated at all (6 Hebrew/Aramaic: CIIP 1431, 1549, 1610, 1677, 1678 and 2078, 5 bilingual Greek-Hebrew/Greek-Aramaic: CIIP 1571, 1602, 1662, 1675 and 2079) and therefore could *theoretically* be from the New Testament era. However, this would not change the results of this study in a significant way.

(Mas 793 and 794) are dated to Byzantine times. The Hebrew and Aramaic material (Mas 1–701 and Mas 1p), however, can safely be dated to a period before the fall of Masada in 73 C.E.²⁰

(d) The excavations at Herodion have yielded a total of 63 inscriptions and ostraca, 28 of which are dated by the excavators to the first or early second century.²¹ Some of these (Herodion 14, 20, 22, 31, 32, and 43), however, contain no text, but only drawings and symbols.

(e) Inscriptions from Beth She'arim that were discovered during the first phase of excavations in 1936–1940 have been included in the CIJ (993–1161). However, further excavations during the years 1953–1958 brought to light more burial caves and inscriptions. The total number of inscriptions, published in the final reports, rose to 290, dating from the late second century to the fifth century.²² In spite of the late date, this collection is particularly interesting because of a relatively large number of Hebrew inscriptions, probably originating from “a circle of scholars and their families who remained fluent in Hebrew at a time when the general populace spoke Aramaic or Greek.”²³

(f) A number of ossuary inscriptions not included in the CIIP due to their provenance from outside Jerusalem, their disputed dating or their recent

20 701 Inscriptions in “Jewish script” (Mas 1–701) have been published by Yigael Yadin and Josef Naveh, “The Aramaic and Hebrew Ostraca and Jar Inscriptions,” in *Masada*. Vol. 1, *The Yigael Yadin Excavations 1963–1965: Final Reports* (ed. Yigael Yadin; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1989), 1–70. Mas 514 and 515 are identified as Nabatean. The Greek and Latin inscriptions have been published by Hannah M. Cotton, Joseph Geiger and David J. Thomas, *Masada II: The Yigael Yadin Excavation 1963–1965 Final Reports. The Latin and Greek Documents* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1989). One additional, unclassified Hebrew or Aramaic fragment is listed by Tov as Mas 1p in *The Texts from the Judaean Desert: Indices and an Introduction to the Discoveries in the Judaean Desert Series* (ed. Emanuel Tov; DJD 39; Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 226 (cf. below). Biblical and Bible-related material from Masada in Hebrew and Aramaic has been published by Shemaryahu Talmon, “Hebrew Fragments from Masada,” in *Masada VI: Yigael Yadin Excavations 1963–1965 Final Reports* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1999), 1–148. However, because of their literary character, these have not been included in the present study.

21 Emmanuele Testa, *Herodion*. Vol. 4, *I graffiti e gli ostraka* (Studium Biblicum Franciscanum: Collectio Maior 20/4; Jerusalem: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, 1972).

22 Benjamin Mazar, *Beth She'arim: Report on the Excavations during 1936–1940*. Vol. 1, *Catacombs 1–4* (Jerusalem: Masada, 1973). Moshe Schwabe and Baruch Lifshitz, *Beth She'arim*. Vol. 2, *The Greek Inscriptions* (Jerusalem: Masada, 1974). Nahman Avigad, *Beth She'arim. Report on the Excavations during 1953–1958*. Vol. 3, *Catacombs 12–23* (Jerusalem: Masada, 1976).

23 Avigad, *Beth She'arim*, 3:131–32.

discovery have also been included in this survey. Among these are a number of ossuaries from the “Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries” (CJO),²⁴ one late inscription from Nazareth, two from a burial cave in Horvat Kishor in the Judean Shephelah,²⁵ one from a private collection²⁶ and two recent finds,²⁷ altogether 31 additional ossuary inscriptions.²⁸

- 24 Levi Yizhaq Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel* (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 1994). Not included in CIIP are Nos. 130 (probably a recent forgery?), 282 (probably from third century C.E.?), 552 and 557 (from El-Jib), 610 (from Ben Shemen), 678, 682 and 865 (from Kibbutz Lahav), 773, 777, 778, 782, 783, 787, 789, 793–796 and 800 (from Jericho), 145 (from Kfar Baruch), 425 (from Qiryat Tiv'on). For the statistical data of language use within the CJO, I am indebted to David Bivin, who kindly provided me with the data he collected and which I have re-checked with the original and with the CIIP (e.g. CIIP 33 and 41 provide inscriptions not seen or not mentioned by Rahmani, CJO 147 resp. CJO 203).
- 25 Boaz Zissu, “The Cave of ‘Yudan Shaul’ at Horbat Kishor, Southern Judean Shephela,” *Atiqot* 46 (2004): 27–35 (Hebrew) and 129* (English summary). The cave contained 16 ossuaries, bearing two inscriptions, one in Greek (“OHO”) and one in Jewish Script (יהודן שאל), probably the name “Yuda(n) Shaul.”
- 26 The inscription בת יהוחנן מריה (“Maria bat Johanan”), published by Ada Yardeni in her *Textbook* (see below) at 1:233 and 2:81, is not to be found in the CIIP, probably due to the unknown provenance.
- 27 The first one has been published by Yuval Baruch and Danit Levi, “The Tomb and Ossuary of Alexa Son of Shalom,” *IEJ* 61 (2011), 96–105. The report presents a two-line inscription in Middle Hebrew, though mentioning a name with an Aramaic patronym: (a) אלכסא אלקסא בר שלום ברת אלכסא (b) ארור שיטלני ממקומי (“Alexa bar Shalom berat Alexa // Cursed is the one who casts me from my place”). The provenance of the second ossuary is not clear, it is possible that it was discovered during an illegal grave robbery in the Elah valley, cf. Boaz Zissu and Goren Yuval, “The Ossuary of Miriam Daughter of Yeshua Son of Caiaphas, Priests [of] Ma’aziah from Beth ‘Imri,” *IEJ* 61 (2011), 96–105. The inscription reads מרים ברת ישוע בר קיפא כהנמ מעזיה מבית אמרי. A connection with the so-called “Caiaphas tomb” in Jerusalem (CIIP 461–465) as well as the historical figure of the High Priest Caiaphas remains to be further investigated, however it is highly probable.
- 28 The comprehensive catalogue of Jewish ossuaries from Galilee compiled by Mordechai Aviam and Danny Syon, “Jewish Ossilegium in Galilee,” in *What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem? Essays on Classical, Jewish, and Early Christian Art and Archaeology in Honor of Gideon Foerster* (ed. Leonard V. Rutgers; Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion 1; Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 151–87, does not yield additional data: it lists 75 ossuaries with three inscriptions, two of them Greek and already included in the CJO (No. 20 = CJO 145 and No. 18 = CJO 425). The third inscribed ossuary mentioned (No. 22) is probably a mistake of the authors: Reference is made to an inscription from Nazareth, originally published by Bellarmino Bagatti, *The Excavations at Nazareth*. Vol. 1, *From the Beginning until the Twelfth Century* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1969), 247–248. However, the inscription was found on a column and has no connection whatsoever to

g) In addition to the ossuary inscriptions, other inscriptions not covered by the corpora mentioned above, include finds from Qiryat Shmuel near Tiberias,²⁹ Khirbet el-Ein³⁰ and Horbat Lavnin³¹ in the southern Judean Shephelah, Horvat Maon in the Hebron hills,³² Jatt,³³ Khirbet Kharuf,³⁴ Moza,³⁵ Karm er-Ras³⁶ and an unpublished Sarcophagus inscription from the north of Jerusalem, announced by the IAA in 2008,³⁷ have been included in this survey, a total of ten inscriptions altogether.

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- the ossuaries also mentioned by Bagatti on p. 247. The inscription reads (in Hebrew) “Soam, Son of Menahem, may his soul find rest.” and already appears in the CIJ as CIJ 988. According to Bagatti (p. 247), it can be dated paleographically to the fourth–sixth century C.E.
- 29 Fanny Vitto, “A Jewish Mausoleum of the Roman Period at Qiryat Shemu’el, Tiberias,” *Atiqot (English Series)* 58 (2007): 7–29. The Greek inscription reads ΣΧΙΩΝ, the meaning of which is unclear.
- 30 Boaz Zissu, “A Burial Cave with a Greek Inscription and Graffiti at Khirbat el-’Ein, Judean Shephelah,” *Atiqot (English Series)* 50 (2005): 27–36. The inscription cannot be deciphered and may be a magical incantation.
- 31 Boaz Zissu, “Horbat Lavnin,” *Hadashot Arkheologiyot—Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 113 (2001): 104 (Hebrew) and 154 (English summary). The inscription contains the Hebrew letters פ״ and the Greek word ΘΕΟΣ, written backwards.
- 32 David Amit and Zvi Ilan, “The Ancient Synagogue at Ma’on in Judah” *Qadmoniot* 23 (1990): 115–25 (Hebrew). The inscription reads ג״וֹר הַפֶּר in Paleo-Hebrew script.
- 33 Marwan Masarwa, “Jatt: Final Report,” *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 116 (2004), published online at <http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il>. One inscription contains the names CAPAC, BEPENIKHC, MAPIMHC and ΙΥΣΤΙΝΟΣ, the other one the name ΑΜΩC.
- 34 Shahar Batz, “Khirbat Kharuf,” *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 116 (2004): published online at <http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il>. The inscriptions mentioned have only decorative character.
- 35 Carsten Peter Thiede and Egon H. E. Lass, “Moza: Final Report,” *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 117 (2005), published online at <http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il>. Undecipherable fragments of an inscription in Hebrew script were found on one ostrakon.
- 36 Alexandre Yardenna, “Karm er-Ras (Areas H,J),” *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 120 (2008), published online at <http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il>. The publishers mention “a marble fragment that had an inscription mentioning the tenth legion—no doubt a relic from the Roman period,” but the actual text is not presented.
- 37 The find was announced in a press release of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Oct. 6, 2008: “Excavations north of Jerusalem reveal sarcophagus fragment inscribed ‘Son of the High Priest.’” Online at: http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/History/Early+History++Archaeology/Excavations_north_Jerusalem_reveal_sarcophagus_fragment_6-Oct-2008.htm?DisplayMode=print (cited March 15, 2009). The fragmentary Hebrew inscription reads בן הכהן הגדול (“son of the high priest”).

(h) The non-literary texts from the Judaean Desert, which had been published in a variety of different places, have meanwhile been systematically collected and listed in the final indices of the DJD series. These include 564 letters, contracts, legal documents, deeds, and other non-literary fragments on ostraca, papyrus and parchment, originating from Wadi Muraba'at (Mur 1–173), Wadi Mishmar (1Mish 1–8), Wadi Se'elim (34Se 1–5), Wadi Ghweir (1–2), Wadi Nar (1–5) and Wadi Sdeir (1–4), Nahal Hever (5/6Hev 1–64, 8Hev 1–7 and XHev/Se 1–169), Jericho (Jer 1–19), Qumran Caves 3, 4 and 6, Khirbet Qumran (KhQ 1–3) and Masada (Mas 1–951). These texts are, for the most part, not inscriptions in the strict sense of the word, however they also form part of the epigraphic evidence from the first and early second centuries. Dividing lines are not easy to draw, for instance, between the “letters on bread supply” from Masada (Mas 557–584) and the letters of Bar Kokhba, or between a receipt for dates written on an ostrakon in the Jewish Quarter (Jewish Quarter 24) and a receipt for a date crop written on papyrus in Jericho (Jer 7). For reasons of clarity and completeness, the non-literary material from the DJD series has therefore been included in this survey; however, the main emphasis will be on the inscriptions and ostraca.³⁸ Within the corpus of non-literary texts from the DJD series, two specific subsets of texts are identified separately in this survey: the so-called Bar-Kokhba letters,³⁹ and the economic documents, for which a detailed study of language use has been offered by Hanan Eshel.⁴⁰

38 For a list of all non-literary texts published in the DJD series; see A. Lange and U. Mittmann-Richert, “Annotated List from the Judaean Desert Classified,” in Tov, ed., *The Texts from the Judaean Desert*, 115–64. For the present study, categories 1.10–1.13, 3–5 and 7 have been included. In addition, the halakic letter 4QMMT has been included. It is listed in the index among the religious texts (category 1.3.5) for reasons of content. However, since it differs from the literary texts both in terms of genre and of language, it is also listed among the letters (category 1.12). The finds from Wadi Daliyeh (category 2) have not been included, since they date to the fourth and fifth centuries B.C.E. The finds from Masada (category 6) have not been included, because this category includes only a selection of finds from Masada. In the present study, the complete statistics for Masada have therefore been extracted from the official excavation reports and not from the DJD index. Language classification of DJD follows the list of Aramaic texts compiled by Emmanuel Tov, “Lists of Specific Groups of Texts from the Judaean Desert,” in Tov, ed., *The Texts from the Judaean Desert*, 221–26.

39 Cf. nn. 73 and 74 below.

40 Hanan Eshel, “On the Use of Hebrew in Economic Documents from the Judaean Desert,” in *Jesus' Last Week* (ed. R. Steven Notley, Marc Turnage and Brian Becker; Jerusalem Studies in the Synoptic Gospels 1; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 245–58.

(i) Some popular textbooks of Aramaic and Hebrew texts offer a selection of inscriptions and materials from the corpora listed above.⁴¹ However, they also contain some material not covered by these corpora, and this has been included in this survey. In addition, the lists of epigraphic and documentary material used for the preparation of recent dictionaries of Aramaic and Hebrew have been included completely.⁴² In sum, these collections add a total of 27 more inscriptions to the survey. It must be noted, however, that the inclusion of the textbooks and dictionaries has a slightly distortive effect on the statistics, since Aramaic texts are much more prominently featured by the selective nature of these collections.⁴³

41 Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Daniel J. Harrington, *A Manual of Palestinian Aramaic Texts: Second Century B.C.–Second Century A.D.* (Biblica et Orientalia 34; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1978); Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte*: included are the texts classified by Beyer as M, V, I, and y; Ada Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic, Hebrew, and Nabatean Documentary Texts from the Judean Desert and Related Material*. Vol. A, *The Documents* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zion Dinur Center for Research in Jewish History, 2000). Joseph Naveh, *On Sherd and Papyrus: Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from the Second Temple, Mishnaic and Talmudic Periods* (Jerusalem: Magnès, 1992 [Hebrew]).

42 *Academy of the Hebrew Language (AHL) Database Project: Materials for the Dictionary* (Jerusalem: Academy for the Hebrew Language, 1988); David J. A. Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (6 vols., Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 1993–2006); Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Judean Aramaic* (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2003). *The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon (CAL)*, available online at <http://cali.cn.huc.edu/>.

43 The fact that New Testament scholarship in the twentieth century has generally been much more interested in the study of the Aramaic rather than the Hebrew language is reflected by the nature of the textbooks available: While Aramaic texts and inscriptions have been diligently collected and published by outstanding scholars in the field (e.g. Fitzmyer/Harrington and Beyer), no comparable work has been done so far for the Hebrew material. Therefore, the textbooks and dictionaries provide us, in addition to the corpora mentioned above, with 18 additional Aramaic texts, but only three additional Hebrew texts, as well as six samples in Jewish script that could be either Aramaic or Hebrew or both. Especially the collection of ten Jewish Aramaic Ostraca of unknown provenance, included by Yardeni, *Textbook*, 1:191–98, many of which would not be identifiable as Aramaic were they not within the collection, blurs the statistics of the “other inscriptions” in the overview significantly. For reasons of comprehensiveness, the details of the remaining 17 inscriptions added from textbooks and dictionaries will be given here: Hasmonean Hyrkania Inscription (MPAT 37, Beyer I 4); storage jar inscribed בלזם / בלזם (“balsam,” MPAT 66, Beyer yXX); jar inscription קרבנ (“qorban,” AHL 385, possibly the same as CIIP 8 / Beyer yJE 32?); two stone inscriptions (Yardeni 1:225/Beyer yXX1 and Yardeni 1:226); ostracon from Aroer, East Jordan (Yardeni 2:212 / Beyer yRO 1); jar inscription from Qumran (Yardeni 1:219); three inscriptions from Ein Farah (Beyer ySW3–4); inscription on jar handle from Jeleme/Galilee (Beyer gJL 1); plate from Jericho (Beyer yJR

Together, all these publications contain a total of 3819 texts: 607 ossuary inscriptions, 605 ostraca, 1731 other inscriptions, 609 documentary texts (among them 41 letters) and 268 other texts and fragments (among them 16 biblical fragments, 8 other literary fragments, as well as unidentifiable or unclassified material from DJD). For 2323 of these texts, a possible origin from a period roughly between 100 B.C.E. and 135 C.E. is suggested in the literature.⁴⁴

2 Criteria of Classification

The three main languages used in the epigraphic material from the land of Israel are Greek, Aramaic and Hebrew.⁴⁵ However, the distinction between the latter two is not always easy. Especially in the case of ossuary inscriptions and ostraca, the limited content often does not allow a further qualification of language. Even where the use of terms like *בן* or *בת*, *בר*, *אשת* or *ברת*, *אתת* or *אתת* seems to point to one or the other language, the evidence is not as conclusive as it seems: in a number of cases, names with a *בר* patronym are used within inscriptions or texts that otherwise have clearly Hebrew vocabulary or grammar.⁴⁶ In contrast, only one example exists for the employment of a *בן*

2a.b); Bar Kokhba weight (Yardeni 1:185); unclassified fragments from Judaeen Desert and Muraba'at (Yardeni 1:57 and 1:187, both possibly also included in DJD 39?); cave inscription from Wadi Garaba (Beyer yWG 1); Hosea Seal (AHL 232); cf. Eleazar Sukenik, "A Stamp of a Jewish Wine-Merchant from the Vicinity of Jerusalem," *Qedem* 1 (1942): 20–23; tomb inscription *בן יני קבר מנשה* ("tomb of Menashe ben Jannai," AHL 424), cf. Benjamin Mazar, "A Hebrew Inscription from 'Illâr," *Bulletin of the Israel Exploration Society* 18 (1954): 154–57.

44 Only the latter have been specified further in the lower part of Table 1, leading to different numbers than those given here, where *all* inscriptions from the corpora listed above, regardless of their date, have been counted.

45 For less frequent languages and language combinations, cf. n. 56 below.

46 Most obviously in the recently discovered Hebrew Inscription mentioning "Alexa", cf. n. 27 above. Shorter inscriptions and texts of similar character are found in Mur 22, 29 and 30; 4Q348; CIIP 244/CIJ 1308 (יהודה הספר. יהודה בר אלעזר הספר); CIIP 534/CJO 871 (יהוסף בר חנניה. יהוחנה. יהוחנה ברת יהוחנן בר תפלוס הכהן הגדול); CIIP 86/CJO 893 (שלוס אנתת בר חנניה בר יהונתן הנזיר); CIIP 70 and 72 (מתיה בר הקוה); CIIP 188 (הספר הקבר). A special case are inscriptions CIJ 994 and 131 from Beth Shearim (הקבר). "This tomb belongs to Rabbi Isaak bar Maqim, peace!"; "הזה שלרבי יצחק בר מקים שלום, אודה בן בר שלום, probably "Oda, son of Bar-Shalom"): here we have a circle of families that deliberately chose to use Hebrew even as late as the second century C.E. However, they still bear "Aramaic" names with *bar*; Masada 667 (אלעזר בר הספר) is classified by the editors as a forgery produced by one of the excavators.

patronym within an Aramaic context.⁴⁷ Some have argued that the use of בר in these Hebrew contexts betrays the real language of the writer, whereas the Hebrew language was artificially chosen due to religious or nationalistic reasons.⁴⁸ Beyer, in his textbook, explains the הכהן הגדול, הספר, הניזיר as “religious titles” and hence classifies the inscriptions using these titles as Aramaic, based on their use of בר and ברת.⁴⁹ While, however, it is certainly true that הכהן הגדול is a religious title, this is much less evident for ניזיר or ספר. Certainly, Beyers argument does not apply to the case of the recent find of the Hebrew “Alexa” inscription from Qiryat Shemuel. Also, the later evidence from Beth She’arim demonstrates that even within a community that deliberately chose to continue the use of Hebrew in the late second century, family names with בר were retained.⁵⁰ In both cases it is obvious that Hebrew was the language chosen for the inscription, while the names mentioned bore בר patronyms. It is therefore more probable, as Rahmani suggests, that בר was used interchangeably with בן in the Hebrew of the period, so that the usual form of the patronym was retained even when a different language was employed.⁵¹ The fact that the word בר could lose its semantic content and become an integral part of the family name is demonstrated by the inscription מרתא בר פפיס (CIIP 505/CJO 256), a female name with a בר patronym.

In the present study, the use of אשת/אתת, ברת/בת, בן/בר, and so on will therefore be used as a “secondary language marker,” distinguished from “primary language markers” such as the use of specific lexical, grammatical or syntactical features of Aramaic or Hebrew language. The inscriptions listed in the paragraph above, which contain *primary markers* of Hebrew and *secondary markers* of Aramaic, will be listed as bilingual (ah), although they are much more likely to be Hebrew, as was shown. The longer texts from the DJD series, which are obviously written in Hebrew, but contain names with בר, will be classified as Hebrew. Greek transliterations of Hebrew or Aramaic words will be classified as Hebrew or Aramaic, not as Greek.⁵² Obviously, in some cases classifications are a matter of individual judgment; for example, יהונתן קדרה (CIIP 51/CJO 222) is interpreted frequently as Aramaic for “Jonatan, the pot (or pot-bellied).” Rahmani, however, suggests that it could also be derived from

47 XHev/Se 8, a bilingual deed written in Hebrew on the outside and Aramaic on the inside, in which the name שמעון בן כוסבה is referred to in the first line of the Aramaic part.

48 Cf. Kottsieper, “And they did not care . . .,” 114; similarly Klaus Beyer, *Texte*, 1:58.

49 Beyer, *Texte*, yJE 28, 29, 30, 39, 44.

50 Cf. n. 46 above.

51 Cf. Rahmani, *Catalogue*, 201.

52 CIJ 992, CJO 552 and Beth She’arim 148 are Hebrew, CIJ 998 and 1121 (both from Beth She’arim) and Beyer, *Texte* I, 353 (yWG 1) are Aramaic in Greek script.

Hebrew and mean “Jonatan, the baker.” For CIIP 647 from the City of David, Naveh, in his official excavation report, gives the Hebrew reading חנניה בן קורשא (“Hananiah from Kursi”), while Yardeni in her *Textbook* reads Aramaic סר רבה מן קודשא (“the great/elder from the holiness?”).⁵³ In many cases, it is not easy to decide whether a word should be read as a name or as a lexical item. Thus, however, גרידא (Mas 432), מלתא (Mas 438), צידא (Mas 440), פסולא (Mas 455), קצבא (Mas 512), appearing in name lists, are classified as Aramaic inscriptions by the editors of the CAL (and therefore also in the present study), while they could also be simply personal names. Sometimes, attempts can be made to determine a language from the context in which an inscription was found. Thus, Beyer classifies בני אלעזר (CIIP 378/CIJ 1357) and בני חנן (CIIP 379/CIJ 1360) as Aramaic because other ossuaries in the same tomb were inscribed in Aramaic.⁵⁴ However, such conclusions must remain doubtful in view of other family tombs which contained Hebrew and Aramaic inscriptions side by side, for example, the Kallon family in Katamon (CIIP 366–372/CIJ 1350–1355), the Goliath family in Jericho (CJO 782–803) or the Akeldama tombs (CIIP 288–311). In other cases, such a “group classification” is more obvious: hence, all 28 “Letters of bread supply” from Masada (Mas 557–584) and all 10 “Jewish Aramaic Ostraca” from Yardeni’s collection⁵⁵ are classified as Aramaic, although many of them do not have clear language markers in them (these two rather coincidental cases which slightly distort the statistics therefore should be considered when comparing the data in the overview). In general, language classification will always be a matter of dispute in some cases. However, the purpose of this study is not necessarily to provide the exact classification of all epigraphic material; rather, it is to offer a general idea of language distribution which will not be greatly changed by the relatively small number of disputable classifications. Wherever available (e.g. in the DJD series), language classifications of the editors are followed. For the other material, primary and secondary language markers, as defined above, are used to create the following language categories:

g: Greek

j: “Jewish script” (Aramaic or Hebrew)

l: Latin

o: Other language classifications⁵⁶

53 Yardeni, *Textbook*, 1:211.

54 Beyer, *Texte*, 2:341–42.

55 Yardeni, *Textbook*, 1:191–98.

56 122 texts are written in Latin, mainly from Masada (cf. Cotton, *Masada II*) and the coastal area (CIIP), some also from Wadi Muraba’at (Mur 158–163) and one on an ossuary

For a more detailed evaluation of the “Jewish script” material, the following sub-categories are used:

- a1: primary language markers for Aramaic
- a2: secondary language markers for Aramaic
- h1: primary language markers for Hebrew
- h2: secondary language markers for Hebrew
- n: neutral (“Jewish script,” but non-distinguishable Hebrew or Aramaic)
- ah: bilingual Aramaic and Hebrew (bearing language markers of both)

Bilingual Greek-Semitic inscriptions are marked as follows:

- ga: bilingual Greek and Aramaic (a1 or a2 in the Aramaic part)
- gh: bilingual Greek and Hebrew (h1 or h2 in the Hebrew part)⁵⁷
- gn: bilingual Greek and Jewish Script (n in the Jewish script part)

Using these categories, the statistical data presented in Table 1 has been extracted from the epigraphic material.⁵⁸

(CIIP 40/CJO 202). For reasons of space, 115 inscriptions and texts from smaller language groups have been summed up as “other” in one column in the overview: two bilingual Greek-Latin papyri and four bilingual Greek-Latin “tituli picti” were found at Masada (Mas 748–49 and 924–27), one bilingual Greek-Latin inscription comes from Caesarea (CIIP 1389). Twenty-seven inscriptions from Masada (Mas 915–923 and 928–945), nine inscriptions from Caesarea (CIIP 1744, 1845, 1913, 1922, 1942, 1943, 2041, 2048, 2049) as well as one inscription from Karm er-Ras (cf. n. 36) are not clearly identifiable Greek or Latin (Mas 915–923 and 928–945). Nine inscriptions are written in Palmyrene script (Beth She’arim 12, 17, 18, 83, 86, 94, 101, 132 and CIIP 79/CJO 579), two are bilingual Greek and Palmyrene (Beth She’arim 126 and 130). Twenty texts, all from the Judaean Desert, are written in Nabatean (4Q343, 5/6Hev 1–4, 6, 9, 36, 38, 39, XHev/Se 2–3 and XHev/Se Nab2–6, Mur 71 and Masada 514–515). Five inscriptions are probably Samaritan (CIJ 1168, 1187 and 1188, CIIP 1126 and 1716), two are bilingual Greek and Samaritan (CIJ 1167 and 1186). Two inscriptions are written in Phoenician script (CIIP 2139 and 2152), one in Middle Persian (CIIP 1724). 5 late fragments from the Judaean Desert (Mur 169–173) are written in Arabic. The language of 26 additional inscriptions can not clearly be identified (three ossuaries from Jerusalem: CIIP 383/CIJ1364/CJO 78, CIJ 1347 and 1349; four inscriptions from Beth Shearim: CIJ 1103–1105 and 1120; two fragments from the Dead Sea: Mur 53 and 54; as well as 17 inscriptions from CIIP 2 not specifically listed here for reasons of space.)

57 In only one case (CIIP 411/CIJ 1373), a trilingual inscription has been preserved. However, the Aramaic part was obviously added at a later stage (see discussion below).

58 In the upper part of the table, statistics are given according to each corpus or location separately. For CIIP and CIJ, the total numbers of the corpora are given in lines 1 and 3,

TABLE 1 *Language Distribution in Major Epigraphic Corpora*

Corpora:	Σ	Total												
		g	j	i	o	ga	gn	gh	a1	a2	n	h2	h1	ah
CIJ	535	249	206	—	22	6	37	15	38	33	77	26	25	7
CIJ (ca. 100 B.C.E.–135 C.E.)	202	67	115	—	3	4	9	4	11	21	51	20	8	4
CIIP 1.1 and 2	1730	971	433	241	33	6	33	13	37	90	218	40	34	14
CIIP (ca. 100 B.C.E.–70 C.E.)	726	271	398	11	2	6	25	13	35	86	196	40	27	14
Masada	941	101	700	105	35	—	—	—	48	27	597	12	13	3
Herodion	57	41	15	—	—	—	1	—	2	—	7	—	5	1
Beth She'arim	290	201	52	—	14	1	15	7	3	2	23	4	18	2
Additional ossuary inscriptions	31	11	16	—	—	4	—	—	2	4	7	1	1	1
Additional other inscriptions	37	5	30	—	1	—	1	—	16	1	9	—	4	—
DJD: non-literary texts	564	285	227	6	25	7	13	1	71	2	53	—	98	3
DJD: "Bar Kokhba-letters" only	27	3	24	—	—	—	—	—	9	—	—	—	15	—
DJD: "Econ. Documents" only	87	23	37	—	9	5	13	—	22	—	2	—	12	1
Total	3819	1683	1544	352	115	19	72	27	208	136	925	62	188	25
Total (ca. 100 B.C.E.–135 C.E.)	2323	680	1393	122	60	16	39	14	176	123	870	56	147	21

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Total	Bilingual (Greek-Aramaic and Greek-Hebrew)										"Jewish script" only (Aramaic and/or Hebrew)			
		g	j	1	o	ga	gn	gh	a1	a2	n	h2	h1	ah	
Genres (ca. 100 B.C.E.–135 C.E.): Σ	602	200	349	2	4	9	25	13	25	87	173	35	16	13	
Ossuary inscriptions	565	32	511	22	—	—	—	—	19	16	458	11	7	—	
Other inscriptions	294	99	158	15	21	—	1	—	25	18	87	9	17	2	
Letters	41	4	36	—	1	—	—	—	14	—	—	—	22	—	
Documentary texts	553	164	261	83	25	6	13	1	85	2	134	1	33	6	
Other (incl. unclassified)	269	181	78	—	9	1	—	—	8	—	18	—	52	—	

3 General Observations

From the statistical overview of language use the clear picture emerges of a trilingual society in which Greek, Aramaic and Hebrew are used side by side and even in close interaction with each other. None of the three languages can be said to be dominant. Generally speaking, there is a prevalence of the Semitic languages over Greek (at least in the NT era) and, within the Semitic languages, a prevalence of Aramaic over Hebrew, however not to a significant degree. It cannot be said that a ratio of 25 Aramaic vs. 16 Hebrew ossuary inscriptions, or 19 Aramaic vs. 7 Hebrew inscriptions,⁵⁹ has any statistical relevance for an overall assessment of language use in the first century. Certainly, the claim that Hebrew was fully replaced by Aramaic in the New Testament era cannot be based on such epigraphical evidence.

It should be kept in mind that any conclusion from epigraphic data, especially from inscriptions, as to the language use of the writer must be drawn with caution: in the case of ossuary inscriptions, for example, the language used could be a reflection of the language spoken by (a) the person buried in the ossuary, (b) the person who commissioned the inscription, for example, a family member, (c) the person who decorated the ossuary, (d) the intended

while only the respective subset of these corpora that can be dated with some certainty to the period between 100 B.C.E. and 70/135 C.E. is specified in rows 2 and 4 respectively. The “additional (ossuary) inscriptions” in rows 8 and 9 are collected from the various textbooks, dictionaries and recent finds mentioned in paragraphs (f), (g) and (i) above, cf. nn. 24–37 and 41–42. Row 10 includes all non-literary texts from the DJD series as specified in paragraph (h), cf. n. 38, while row 11 and 12 list the two subsets specified in nn. 39 and 40. Row 13 contains the total number of texts from all the corpora listed. Due to a significant overlap in the different corpora (195 inscriptions from CIJ are included in CIIP, 160 inscriptions from Beth She’arim are included in CIJ, rows 2 and 4 are subsets of row 1 and 3, rows 11 and 12 are subsets of row 10), the totals in row 13 are not equal to the sum of the rows above. For some other smaller numerical inconsistencies within the table, cf. nn. 16 and 18 above. Row 14 confines the totals of row 13 to those inscriptions that can be dated with some certainty to the period specified and is therefore a subset of row 13. Details about dating are given in the descriptions of the separate corpora above. In the second page of the table, the totals of row 14 are further specified by genre. In the last row of the table, “other” genres are summed up, among them 16 fragments of biblical texts (15 in Biblical Hebrew, one in Greek), eight other literary texts from the DJD series (three in Hebrew, five in Greek) and 245 unidentifiable or unclassified texts (mainly from the DJD series, some also from Masada: Mas 1p, 666, 669 and 673). The abbreviations of the different language codes used in the table are explained on pp. 16 and 17 above.

59 Considering the fact that 10 of the 19 come from a rather coincidental inclusion in Yardeni’s *Textbook*; cf. above n. 43.

reader of the inscription or (e) it could simply be the language perceived to be culturally appropriate for the occasion.⁶⁰ As an example, the Aramaic warning formulas against grave robbery (CIIP 460/CIJ 1300, CIIP 359/CIJ 1334, CIIP 375/CIJ 1359) do not necessarily reflect the language of the deceased, his family or the writer; Aramaic was probably chosen in view of possible intruders. The word שלום, frequently added to Greek inscriptions in the Joppa and Beth She'arim necropolis and in Caesarea, was probably a cultural or religious convention and does not necessarily reflect a knowledge of Hebrew or Aramaic on the part of the writer or the deceased, a fact that might be reflected in the repeated misspelling בשולם לעולם and שולם in one inscription (Beth She'arim 5).⁶¹ On the other hand, the use of ברי instead of בני in the Kallon family tomb (CIIP 368/CIJ 1352b, see below) might betray a lack of knowledge of Aramaic (the plural of בר is בני, not ברי.) The parallel use of Greek, Aramaic and Hebrew in the Bar Kokhba letters does not necessarily reflect the language preferences of the writers, but possibly also those of the intended readers. In many of the contracts and economic documents, Aramaic might have been chosen because of its function as a *lingua franca* even beyond the boundaries of Jewish society. On the other hand, Hebrew might have been chosen for the “Halakic Letter” (4QMMT) because of its religious content. Whatever the case, in all these instances the multilingual character of the society and the multiple levels of language interaction and language contact existing in it are reflected.

4 The Character of the Inscriptions

As already mentioned above, the vast majority of inscriptions are found on ossuaries and ostraca, most of which seldom contain little more than a name, in many cases even less (e.g. Mas 1–301). Longer inscriptions appear mainly from the second century onwards. Jonathan Price, in his overview of Jewish epigraphy from the land of Israel,⁶² sees two possible reasons for this

60 Cf. Jonathan J. Price and Haggai Misgav, “Jewish Inscriptions and Their Use,” in *The Literature of the Sages. Second Part, Midrash and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature* (ed. Samuel Safrai, Zeev Safrai, Joshua Schwartz and P. J. Tomson; Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum 2.3b; Assen: Van Gorcum, 2006), 461–83 (468).

61 Beyer, *Texte I*, 58, suggests that the repetition of the same mistake in one inscription might point to the fact that the scribe did not speak Hebrew himself but had learned to write this phrase, however wrongly.

62 Price, *Jewish Inscriptions*, 469–70.

phenomenon: either the Jewish “epigraphic habit,” that is, the custom of producing representative inscriptions, only began in the late second century, at a time when the Roman “epigraphic habit,” strongest in the first and second centuries, had already started to decline, or most Jewish inscriptions from earlier times had been destroyed or lost during the wars and the following period of Roman occupation. The majority of “h1” and “a1” inscriptions from before 135 C.E. therefore consist of names, supplemented with titles, places of origin, nicknames, functions or information on family relations, which contain lexical, grammatical or syntactical language identifiers. Only nine Aramaic inscriptions and four Hebrew inscriptions are somewhat longer examples extant from that period.⁶³ From later periods, we have, for example, the more elaborate Hebrew tomb inscriptions from Beth She’arim and a number of longer Aramaic Synagogue inscriptions. Only the letters and ostraca from the period before 135 C.E., though they are fewer in number, provide us with more content, and they have therefore been subject to more intensive studies for some decades now. The present study, however, does not focus on the content but on the language.

5 Phenomena of Language Contact, Bilingualism and Trilingualism

Of special importance for the study of the language situation are the phenomena of language contact, bilingualism and, in some cases, trilingualism. Here, we can see how the three major languages were not only used within different sectors of society separate from one another, but how multiple languages were used by one person or one group of persons simultaneously. The use of Aramaic בַּר patronyms in Hebrew inscriptions and texts, which is probably a consequence of language contact rather than bilingualism, has already been mentioned above. Other observations of language contact can be made: much has been written on the interference of Aramaic on Middle Hebrew as it appears in the Bar Kokhba letters and other documents from the Judean Desert. However, the interpretations differ: Is the level of Aramaic interference a proof that the writer is not a native speaker of Hebrew (comparable with a native German speaker writing a letter in English and betraying his mother

63 Aramaic (a1): CIIP 460, 602, 605, 620, 623, Beyer ySW3–4; yWG1 and, “highly hypothetical,” Mas 674. Hebrew (h1): the recent Qiryat Shemuel inscription (cf. above), CIIP 10, 137 and 693. CIJ 1399 is very vaguely dated by Frey and probably from a much later period. CIJ 1286, similar in content to CIJ 1285, is probably a modern forgery. Cf. Hachlili, *Jewish Funerary Customs*, 175.

tongue by mixing in German idiom)? Or is it a sign of interference from an international *lingua franca* into the writer's mother tongue (comparable to a native German speaker writing in German and mixing in a number of common Anglicisms)? In any case, the evidence shows that Hebrew and Aramaic were alive and in close contact with one another.

The family tomb of the Kallon family in Katamon (CIIP 366–372/CIJ 1350–1355) is a striking example of multiple language use within one family. The inscriptions read:

- CIIP 366a/CIJ 1350a: יהוסף בר שמעון
 CIIP 366b/CIJ 1350b: ΙΩΣΗΠΙΟΣ ΚΑΛΛΩΝ
 CIIP 367a/CIJ 1351a: יהועזר בר שמעון בר קלון
 CIIP 367b/CIJ 1351b: יהועזר בר שמעון בן קלון
 (the last four words were added later)
 CIIP 368a/CIJ 1352a: מרים יועזר שמעון בני יחזק בן קלון מן בני ישבאב
 CIIP 368b/CIJ 1352b: מרים יועזר ושמעון בני יחזק בר קלון מן ברי ישבאב
 (note: ברי instead of בני!)
 CIIP 369a/CIJ 1353a: שלמציון ברת גמלא
 CIIP 369b/CIJ 1353b: שלמציון אתת יהועזר בר קלון ברת גמלא
 CIIP 370 (not listed by CIJ): יה בר שמעון בר קלון
 CIIP 371a/CIJ 1354a: שמעון בר יועזר בר קלון
 CIIP 371b/CIJ 1354b: שמעון בר יועזר בר קלון
 CIIP 371c/CIJ 1354c: ושמעון בר יועזר
 CIIP 372a/CIJ 1355a: ΣΙΜΩΝΟΣ
 CIIP 372b/CIJ 1355b: ΙΩΣΗΠΙΟΣ Κ[Α]ΛΛΩΝΟΣ
 CIIP 372c/CIJ 1355c: ΣΙΜΩΝΟΣ ΚΑΛΛΩΝΟΣ
 CIIP 372d/CIJ 1355d: ΙΩΣΗΠΙΟΣ ΚΑΛΛΩΝΟΣ

As already stated, it is impossible to know who chose the languages employed here: Was it the deceased themselves, their families or the artisan? Whatever the case, it is obvious that the three languages were used within that family or in their immediate surroundings. In 367b, the secondary addition of *בר שמעון בן קלון* was either a deliberate alteration of 367a or a matter of negligence. On the other hand, the choice of Hebrew *בן* in 368a and Aramaic *בר* in 368b, including the non-Aramaism *ברי*, was obviously deliberate. The *faux pas* in 368b could be an indication that the writer knew Hebrew better than Aramaic. A similar case of a trilingual family is the Goliath family tomb in Jericho (CJO 782–803).

In another case (CIIP 411/CIJ 1373), an inscription that was originally written in Hebrew and Greek (parts a and b) was later extended with an Aramaic addition (part c). Also here, we see that the three languages were employed without hesitation side by side: whoever added the Aramaic line to the inscription

did not bother to use one of the languages already present in the inscription, but made his own language choice:

CIIP 411a/CIJ 1373a: חנין הבשני

CIIP 411b/CIJ 1373b: ANIN ΣΚΥΘΟΠΟΛΕΙΤΗΣ

CIIP 411c/CIJ 1373c: אבא קבר בריה. אבא בר אנין עניה. (יהוסף)

A similar case of later addition is found on two ostraca at Masada (Mas 458 and 460), where the original Hebrew wording לקודש was apparently changed at a later stage into Aramaic by adding the final א. We cannot know the reasons for this “translational addition,” but obviously it was motivated by functional, situational or individual reasons. Theories of language death and language replacement cannot account for such phenomena.

Some bilingual Aramaic–Hebrew inscriptions give the impression that their writers wanted to make a specific point by placing the two versions side by side. Otherwise, it is difficult to imagine why they would repeat exactly the same wording with only one or two letters changed, since any Aramaic speaker would have been able to read and understand the Hebrew line and vice versa. Nevertheless, the inscriptions are given in both versions in full length:

CIIP 237a/CIJ 1255a: יהודה בן תודוס

CIIP 237b/CIJ 1255b: יהודה בר תודוס

CIIP 368a/CIJ 1352a: מרים יועזר שמעון בני יחזק בן קלון מן בני ישבאב (Kallon family)

CIIP 368b/CIJ 1352b: מרים יועזר ושמעון בני יחזק בר קלון מן ברי ישבאב

CIIP 446a: חנניה בר שמעון

CIIP 446b: חנניה בן שמעון

For the following two examples, it is less clear whether the slightly altered repetition of the same word reflects a case of bilingualism:

CIIP 54a/CJO 200a: סמונ בנה הכלה

CIIP 54b/CJO 200b: סמונ בנא הכלה

Storage Jar Inscription (Beyer γXX, MPAT 66): בלזם / בלזמה

Finally, another bilingual Aramaic–Hebrew inscription, from Arnona in the southeastern part of Jerusalem, should be mentioned (CIIP 466). It is similar in content to the Aramaic inscription of Jebel Hallet et-Turi (CIIP 287), but a Hebrew translation is added:

- a) כל אַנשׁ מִתְּהַנֵּא בֵּה קֶרְבַּן (anybody who will benefit/take gain from it—qorban!)
- b) כּל אשׁ קֶרְבַּן (everybody—qorban!)
- c) ק (abbreviation for qorban?)

Obviously, the Aramaic part of this inscription has been written carefully and with intent, while the Hebrew part is strangely casual, probably an abbreviated translation of the Aramaic original. This corresponds to the observation made about many of the bilingual Greek–Aramaic and Greek–Hebrew inscriptions, where the Greek part is mostly written carefully while the Aramaic and Hebrew parts often give a rough and sometimes casual translation, probably summarizing the content for unlearned readers. If this analogy is correct, then the inscription from Arnona is rare evidence for a situation in which Aramaic was believed by the writer to be the language of the learned and the language appropriate for a solemn inscription with religious overtones, while Hebrew was perceived by him to be the language of the unlearned for whom translation needs to be offered. This evidence would then run contrary to the frequent presumption that Hebrew was the language of the learned, whereas Aramaic was the language of the unlearned.

Though the concept seems anachronistic, some ancient form of “political correctness” could be assumed behind all these examples of bilingual inscriptions, reflecting not only Hebrew–Aramaic bilingualism on the side of the writer but probably a Hebrew–Aramaic diglossia within the society producing such inscriptions.⁶⁴

6 The Evidence of Coin Inscriptions

Coin inscriptions have been excluded from the present survey, since they are of a different nature, and the large number of finds would obviously distort the statistics. However, the coins add another important aspect to the landscape of language use which can be summed up briefly: all Jewish coin inscriptions, from the Hasmonean period to the Bar Kokhba revolt, are written in Hebrew language and Paleo-Hebrew script, with one exception only—one particular series of coins, minted by Alexander Jannaeus (78 B.C.E.), bore an Aramaic inscription in square script. This coin, however, can hardly be evidence for a

64 This terminology of Hebrew//Aramaic diglossia would be employed in addition to a high Hebrew//low Hebrew diglossia that existed at the time. See below on definitions of diglossia.

general change of language use during that period, because Jannaeus at other times also issued Hebrew coins. It is therefore more probably that Jannaeus had political reasons for his decision to mint an Aramaic coin at one point in his reign.⁶⁵

7 Conclusions

In 1959 Charles A. Ferguson introduced the sociolinguistic term “diglossia” to describe societies in which more than one language form is prevalent, labeling as “high variety” (H) the language register that is used in literature, newspapers, churches and politics, and as “low variety” (L) the language spoken in personal communication and daily matters.⁶⁶ Joshua Fishman later expanded this concept to differentiate between four possible scenarios:

Sector 1: Diglossia with bilingualism (e.g. Switzerland, Ireland, Arabic-speaking countries, Africa)	Sector 2: Bilingualism without diglossia (e.g. USA, Germany)
Sector 3: Diglossia without bilingualism (e.g. Czarist Russia, Canada)	Sector 4: No diglossia, no bilingualism (i.e. monolingual communities in contact)

65 Cf. Naveh, *On Sherd and Papyrus*, 23.

66 Charles A. Ferguson, “Diglossia,” *Word* 15 (1959): 325–40. Diglossia needs to be distinguished from bilingualism. Bilingualism commonly refers to the ability of an individual to use more than one language. Diglossia, on the other hand, primarily refers to a community that uses two dialects or “registers” of the same language. As classic examples of diglossia there is standard “written” Arabic against various spoken Arabic dialects, and “written” German against spoken varieties like Swiss-German. This definition of diglossia can be expanded to include situations where two distinct languages are in a di-glossic relationship.

More importantly for New Testament studies, Hebrew itself existed in two registers by the end of the Second Temple period. The present study does not distinguish the registers because the differences are mostly invisible at the level of short inscriptions and graffiti. (Cf., however, the Qiryat Shemuel discovery mentioned above: ארור שיטלני ממקומי “Cursed is the one who casts me from my place.”) Any theory of “Aramaic exclusivity” must explain how and why Mishnaic Hebrew developed as an apparent low register of a diglossia.

Leaving aside the Greek language for a moment, and focusing only on the relationship of Hebrew and Aramaic, the following observation can be made: traditionally, New Testament scholarship has sought to place the Jewish society of Jesus' times in sector 4: starting with the influential work of Heinrich Friedrich Pfannkuche,⁶⁷ continuing with the works of Arnold Meyer and Gustav Dalman,⁶⁸ scholars have sought to identify the (one) mother-tongue of Jesus or the (one) Jewish vernacular.⁶⁹ Few scholars today would hold such an opinion, but the verdict of these "sages" remains influential to this day.⁷⁰ Linguists, archeologists, and most biblical scholars have changed their views and readily accept the fact that Hebrew as well as Aramaic were spoken and written in the time of Jesus. The present volume is a reflection of this important paradigm shift. It was especially the wealth of new epigraphic material, foremost the manuscripts from Qumran and the documents from the Judaean desert, that caused scholars such as Matthew Black and John A. Emerton to change their opinion in view of the new evidence available.⁷¹

Having said that, there still remains a common conviction that Hebrew was used only in specific geographical areas (e.g. Judaea) or specific groups of society (the priests, the Pharisees, the Essenes, the learned, the religious). To speak in Fishman's terms, this would now place the Jewish society in Sector 3: certain "pockets" of society (Fitzmyer) would speak and write Hebrew, while others (presumably the vast majority) would speak and write Aramaic. However, in view of the epigraphic evidence, even this assumption cannot be reconciled with the data. What emerges clearly from the epigraphical evidence is a picture of a society that fits Fishman's Sector 1: Aramaic and Hebrew are used

67 Heinrich Friedrich Pfannkuche, "Über die palästinische Landessprache in dem Zeitalter Christi und der Apostel. Ein Versuch, zum Theil nach de Rossi entworfen," in *Allgemeine Bibliothek der biblischen Literatur. Achter Band, Drittes Stück* (ed. Johann Gottfried Eichhorn; Leipzig: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1798), 365–480.

68 Arnold Meyer, *Jesu Muttersprache. Das galiläische Aramäisch in seiner Bedeutung für die Erklärung der Reden Jesu* (Freiburg i.Br. / Leipzig: Mohr, 1896). Gustav Dalman, *Die Worte Jesu: mit Berücksichtigung des nachkanonischen jüdischen Schrifttums und der aramäischen Sprache erörtert* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1898).

69 Cf. my essay on the origins of the Aramaic hypothesis in the nineteenth century in the present volume.

70 Cf. the statements of Fitzmyer, Beyer, Casey and Kottsieper in the introductory paragraph.

71 Cf. the verdict of Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (3d ed., Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 48–49. Also compare the view of John A. Emerton, "Did Jesus Speak Hebrew?," *Journal of Theological Studies* ns 12 (1961): 193–94 and 201–2, with his view stated later in John A. Emerton, "The Problem of Vernacular Hebrew in the First Century A.D. and the Language of Jesus," *Journal of Theological Studies* ns 24 (1973): 19–20.

side by side in all spheres of society and in many cases both languages are even used within a family or by one and the same person (i.e. diglossia with bilingualism).⁷² No significant preference for Hebrew or Aramaic can be identified in any specific geographical area, nor can any significant distinction be made for any specific group of society or social function: Hebrew as well as Aramaic is used on ossuaries, in tombs, on ostraca, in letters, legal and economic documents.

What can be said, though, is that, in general, Aramaic is used slightly more frequently than Hebrew in the epigraphic sources. However, the margins of difference are small and allow no general conclusion about language dominance. In the case of letters and coins, for example, the case is reversed. Only in the case of documentary texts from the Judaean Desert is there a clearer prevalence of Aramaic. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that the material catalogued here is too coincidental and the margins of difference too small that the scale could not be tipped by any new archeological discovery in the future.

The discovery of the so-called Bar Kokhba letters is a vivid example of how the coincidental character of finds can easily lead to premature conclusions which might then be challenged by any subsequent discovery of additional material. In 1960 Joseph Tadeusz Milik published eleven letters from the Bar Kokhba revolt, all of which were written in Mishnaic Hebrew. He concluded that these finds proved “beyond reasonable doubt that Mishnaic Hebrew was the normal language of the Judean population in the Roman period.”⁷³ Yet, in the very next year, 16 more “Bar Kokhba-letters,” dating a little earlier than those published by Milik, were discovered by Yigael Yadin in the so-called Cave of Letters.⁷⁴ Of these, nine were written in Aramaic, four in Hebrew and two

72 There is an additional, prototypical diglossia within Hebrew itself consisting of high register and low register dialects, which would appear to fit Fishman’s Sector 1.

73 Joseph Tadeusz Milik, *Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judaea* (SBT 26; London: SCM, 1959), 130, 131. In addition to the letters, Milik adduced also the Copper Scroll from Qumran as evidence for the use of Mishnaic Hebrew. The letters were later published as “Textes Hébreux et Araméens,” in *Les Grottes de Muraba’at* (ed. Joseph Tadeusz, Pierre Benoit and Roland de Vaux; DJD 2; Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), 67–205, and subsequently labeled “Mur 42–52” in the DJD series.

74 Yigael Yadin, “The Newly-Found Bar Kokhba Letters,” *International Communication Gazette* 7 (1961): 158–62; idem, *The Finds from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters* (Judaean Desert Studies 1, Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society 1963); Yigael Yadin, Jonas C. Greenfield, Ada Yardeni and Baruch A. Levine, *The Documents from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters*. Vol. 2, *Hebrew, Aramaic and Nabatean-Aramaic Papyri* (Judaean Desert Studies 3; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2002). These letters were

in Greek. These new finds challenged Milik's view that *only* Hebrew could be considered to be the "normal language" of the population. From the fact that all three languages were used in the earlier documents, while only Hebrew was used in the later ones, Yadin in turn concluded that the use of Hebrew was artificially introduced by a "special decree" of Bar Kokhba in the course of the rebellion for reasons of national identity.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, this view was again challenged by the later publication of more Hebrew documentary texts and letters that could be dated to the first revolt and even to the pre-66 period.⁷⁶ These examples show how quickly the statistical weight for one or the other language can change with the discovery of even a few new texts. Therefore, the most important conclusion to be drawn from the material is that no firm claims should be made about the dominance of one language or another. The evidence clearly points to the direction of a bilingual and of a trilingual society with the close interaction of all three languages: Greek, Aramaic and Hebrew.

Some widespread misconceptions about the use of Hebrew and Aramaic in the time of Jesus should be reconsidered:

First and foremost, the assumption of the death of spoken Hebrew after the Babylonian exile can no longer be upheld in view of the epigraphic evidence. Hebrew was obviously a living language in the first century C.E. and continued to be so well into the second century. It seems from the numerical data that it was used less frequently than Aramaic; however, as has already been said, the material collected here is too coincidental and the margins of difference too small to make any secure claims in that direction. From the character of the Hebrew used and the increasing evidence of language interference especially during the Bar Kokhba revolt, it can nonetheless be concluded that towards the end of the period studied here an influence of Aramaic on Hebrew speakers is becoming more obvious, eventually leading to the nearly complete replacement of Hebrew by Aramaic as a spoken language in the course of the second century C.E. An early sign of such a development might be reflected in the languages used in the economic documents from the Judaean desert that have

first published as p.Yadin 49–64, but later renamed as 5/6Hev 49–64. Two other letters from a different collection, labeled as XHev/Se 30 and 67, were later considered to have come from the same cave. XHev/Se 30 as well as 5/6Hev 49–51 and 61 were written in Hebrew, 5/6Hev 53–58, 60 and 62–63 in Aramaic. 5/6Hev 52 and 59 as well as XHev/Se 67 were written in Greek.

75 Y. Yadin, *Bar-Kokhba* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), 181.

76 The latter are 4Q358, 6Q26, KhQ1, Mur 22, 29 and 30 and probably 4Q345; cf. Hannah Cotton and Ada Yardeni, *Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek Documentary Texts from Nahal Hever and Other Sites* (DJD 27; Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) and Eshel, "On the Use of Hebrew."

been studied in more depth by Hanan Eshel: While Hebrew was employed for documents in the pre-66 period as well as during the two Jewish revolts, no such Hebrew document was found from the period between the two revolts. On the other hand, the number of Aramaic and Greek documents rose significantly during that period. Eshel attributes this to “the spiritual quandary and national crisis brought about in the wake of the destruction of the Second Temple.”⁷⁷

Second, the assumption that Aramaic was more prevalent in Galilee while Hebrew was more prevalent in Judaea cannot be based on epigraphic evidence. It might still be proven true from literary or other historical sources, but the epigraphic evidence in itself does not support such a claim, simply because material of that period from the Galilee is too scarce: of the 175 texts classified as “a1” in this study and dating to pre-135 C.E., only one originates from Galilee.⁷⁸ Of the texts classified as “h1,” none originates from Galilee. The widespread conviction that Aramaic inscriptions are more frequent in Galilee is probably based on the synagogue inscriptions of later centuries, a time for which there is no dispute among scholars that Hebrew had been replaced by Aramaic as a spoken language. However, it should be noted that we also have 18 Hebrew inscriptions from Beth She’arim dating to that later period. An interesting detail should be noted though: among all the places of origin mentioned on ossuary inscriptions, place names from the north of the country are more frequent than others, and in most cases these are, paradoxically as it may seem, given in Hebrew: הגלילי (“the Galilean,” four times: Mas 404, Mur 52, CIIP 693/CIJ 1285) and הבשני (the “Beth-Sheanite,” three times: CIIP 410–412/CIJ 1372–1374), הגדריאן (“The Gadarene”?, Mas 420). On the other hand, the only place name originally from Judaea, apart from Jerusalem, appears in an Aramaic inscription: יהוד בר שבט מין בת אלון (“Yehud son of Shevat from Beth Alon,” possibly referring to Beth Allonim near Hebron, CIIP 43/CJO 293).⁷⁹

Hence, if, and only if, these inscriptions can tell us anything about language use in the places of origin mentioned here, then there is a certain irony in the fact that there is at least some evidence for Hebrew speakers from the Galilee and the Decapolis, while evidence for Aramaic-speakers from these regions is still missing.

77 Eshel, “On the Use of Hebrew,” 258. One might also compare the decline in the public use of German in the Midwestern USA during World War I and following.

78 Beyer gJL 1, a jar inscription from Jeleme. The Aramaic mosaic inscription from Sepphoris (CIJ 989), dated by Frey between the first and fourth century, probably is best dated towards the end of that range.

79 Most other identifiable place names are from the diaspora.

Third, the assumption that Hebrew was exclusively used for religious purposes while Aramaic was used for all other matters, cannot be verified from the epigraphic sources. Indeed, there is a preference for Hebrew in religious contexts: examples are the three inscriptions mentioning הגדול הכהן,⁸⁰ another inscription mentioning שמעון הכהן (CIIP 259/CIJ 1317), the קרבן inscription found near the Temple Mount (AHL 385), the תמד stamp of a wine merchant (AHL 223),⁸¹ the inscription mentioning the התקיעה בית (“the house of the trumpeters”) from the Temple Mount (CIIP 5), the priestly shares from Masada (Mas 441–461) and the halakic letter 4QMMT from Qumran. However, it cannot be argued that the use of Hebrew was obligatory in such religious contexts, since we do have several Aramaic inscriptions mentioning priests (CIIP 434/CIJ 1221, CIIP 25 and 530) and even a high priest (כהנא רבא, Mas 461), three Aramaic קרבן inscriptions,⁸² and possibly an Aramaic reference to the second tithe (Mas 671). The use of Hebrew in religious contexts was therefore obviously still a matter of individual choice and far from being a fixed tradition or convention. On the other hand, we also have a number of Hebrew inscriptions and documents from clearly non-religious contexts: the בני הזיר inscription (CIIP 137/CIJ 1394) is probably a list of wages for workers. Most of the Hebrew ossuary inscriptions (h1 and h2) have no religious content whatsoever. To the contrary, the nickname used in CIIP 565/CJO 821 (מרים אתת העגל), “Maryam, wife of ‘the calf’”, if it is meant in a derogatory sense,⁸³ is a proof that Hebrew could be used in quite unholy ways. Titles like הצייד (“the hunter,” CIIP 693/CIJ 1285), הנהוּתם (“the baker,” Mas 429), ההרש (“the artisan,” CIIP 173), תרפת הנשבה (“the captive physician”?, CIIP 363/CJO 80) or בנה (“builder,” CCIP 54/CJO 200) can hardly be classified as “religious.” The same is probably true for הספר (“the scribe,” CIIP 86/CJO 893), which denotes an administrative occupation and not a religious one.⁸⁴ Also, the places of origin, already mentioned above, are more frequently added in Hebrew than in Aramaic, obviously without any religious or national connotation. Finally, the Hebrew Bar Kokhba letters and documentary texts from the Judaeian Desert make it clear that Hebrew was also used in

80 CIIP 534/CJO 871, CCIP 701 and the recently discovered הגדול הכהן בן sarcophagus inscription from the north of Jerusalem (see above).

81 This inscription might have a religious (respectively halakic) significance if it refers to a special classification of inferior wine frequently mentioned in rabbinic sources, e.g. *m. Hul.* 1.7.

82 CIIP 17/CIJ 1407, CIIP 287 and 466.

83 As suggested by Hachlili, *Jewish Funerary Customs*, 225, who gives also other examples of derogatory nicknames, for example, בן הרצחון (“son of the murderer”), also in Hebrew.

84 *Ibid.*, 215.

military, economic and legal contexts, while the coin inscriptions reflect a use of Hebrew for political or administrative purposes. To conclude: while there is indeed a certain prevalence of Hebrew within contexts of religious or national relevance, and on the other hand, a prevalence of Aramaic in economic and administrative matters, in neither case is this to the total exclusion of the other language.

Fourth, the assumption that Hebrew was used by the learned population, while Aramaic was used by the unlearned, as well as the opposite, cannot be based on the epigraphic evidence either, simply because we do not know enough about the social status of the people behind the inscriptions and documents. Probably most of the inscriptions and documents originate from the middle or upper classes of society, since the lower classes would not have the money or means to produce documents or prestigious inscriptions. Even in the case of casual graffiti, we cannot determine the social status of their authors. Certainly, no sociological pattern of language distribution can be extracted from the evidence.

These conclusions drawn from the epigraphic material of the land of Israel might appear disappointing at first glance since they are predominantly negative in essence: the language distribution within the inscriptions and documents is too evenly divided and too diverse to make any certain claims on geographical, functional or sociological language peculiarities. However, it might be just this non-existence of clear results that is the most important result of this study: too easily New Testament scholars have looked for simple patterns and ready answers to explain the complexity of a reality two thousand years separated from ours. Too quickly, scholars of the past (and present) have made claims about language use that were not based on the material on the ground, but on theological or ideological preconceptions. Too negligently, we have separated ourselves from the fruitful studies of our colleagues in the fields of archaeology, linguistics, and history. Today, however, in a time of increasing interdisciplinary interaction, we find that our judgments should be more careful, our claims more humble and the picture we draw of the past more complex than it has been until now. The epigraphic evidence from the first century presents us with a complex picture of a trilingual society in which Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew not only exist side by side, but exist closely intertwined and in living contact with each another.