The exchange one year ago between Pope Francis and Prime Minister Netanyahu over the language spoken by Jesus overshadowed any other news of the pope’s visit to Israel. The pope was right, of course, Jesus spoke Aramaic, not Hebrew, although Netanyahu could have offered a better rejoinder than his weak “But he knew Hebrew.” He could have said: “But he prayed in Hebrew.”

Among the proofs that Aramaic was the spoken language of Jesus’ time and place is the evidence of the New Testament, which no doubt informed the pope’s comment. Of the Aramaic words and phrases recorded in this text, perhaps the most cited is the word ῥαββουνί (ῥαββουνι) or ῥαββώνι (ῥαββώνι), which is how Jesus is referred to by the blind man in Mark 10:51 and by Mary Magdalene in John 20:16. The text in John glosses the word by adding: “which means teacher.”

Years ago the spelling of this word caused confusion, since Jewish Aramaic and Hebrew texts traditionally vocalize the first letter with a ḫiriq (as in ῥιββονος shel ʿolam). But then the pataḥ vocalization was discovered in Palestinian Targum fragments from the geniza and in Targum Neofiti, as also in Samaritan Aramaic texts. Some time later it was also found in Hebrew manuscripts. Where the Mishna in Ta’anit 3.8 records Ἰονί ha-Maʿagal’s reference to God as ῥιββονος shel ʿolam, both MS Kaufmann and MS Parma vocalize the first word with pataḥ (Kaufmann as ῥαββουνο; Parma as ῥαββονο). Then geniza liturgical fragments of birkhot ha-shaḥar (Palestinian rite) turned up with the phrase ῥαββουνος ὑμῶν vocalized with a pataḥ under the resh.1

MSS Kaufmann and Parma have another point in common: as opposed to the printed editions of the Mishna, the original text of the manuscripts does not have the words Ἱερᾶν οὐλᾶ; Kaufmann has them added above the line, and Parma in the margin (in both cases as clitics, written as one word). As scholars have noted, this indicates that the original was Ἱερᾶν οὐλᾶ alone but a later hand added ὑμῶν and extended the yod of ῥαββουνο to make it into a vav, thus producing ῥαββουνος ὑμῶν.

The first person possessive suffix recalls the New Testament reference to Jesus as rabbouni/rabboni. In addition to the New Testament, the word with the first person suffix ('my teacher') is commonly found in several of the Aramaic texts mentioned above. In regard to Hebrew texts, besides MSS Kaufmann and Parma, רַבּוֹנִי is commonly found in geniza manuscripts of Hebrew midrashic works. A search of the word on the Friedberg Genizah database (genizah.org) results in 23 hits of רַבּוֹנִי, all but one in Hebrew texts, and that figure does not even take into account cases where the reading is obvious but not certain and the search results did not therefore include it.\(^2\)

An interesting example of רַבּוֹנִי in a Hebrew context is found in a reconstructed text of Bavli, 'Avoda Zara 17a. Here we find the story of R. Eliezer's arrest for heresy. R. Eliezer, who lived in the second half of the first century and the beginning of the second century, explained his heresy to R. Akiva as follows (additions in curly brackets follow the uncensored Munich 95 and Paris 1337 manuscripts):

Translation: I was once walking in the upper market of Sepphoris when I came across one of the disciples of Jesus the Nazarene, Jacob of Kefar Sekhania by name, who said to me: “It is written in your Torah, You shall not bring the hire of a harlot . . . into the house of the Lord your God (Deut. 23:19). May such money be used to build a toilet for the High Priest? I didn’t answer him. He said to me: “Thus Jesus the Nazarene taught me: For of the hire of a harlot has she gathered them and to the hire of a harlot shall they return (Micah 1:7) – They came from a place of filth, let them go to a place of filth.”

In place of בַּקֶּבֶץ, the superior Marx-Abramson manuscript (JTS Rab 15) of 'Avoda Zara reads: .... אָמַר יֵלָךְ לְמַדְּדוּ (יִשָּׁרָה) (מִוָּה א) [כְּ] מַמַּתְתָּן חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה שָׁבְעָה מַמַּתְתָּן חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה חוֹזָה ח...
In the printed edition, as well as MSS Paris and Munich, R. Eliezer recounts the disciple’s comments in direct discourse: “He said to me: ‘It is written in your Torah ....’” and “He said to me: ‘Thus Jesus the Nazarene taught me/us ....’” MS JTS, however, presents the first phrase in direct discourse, but the second in indirect discourse, as indicated by the third person pronominal suffixes in both. Thus, (Thus Jesus his teacher taught him”). Thus, 3

The change to indirect discourse was, no doubt, what caused the scribe to insert the above phrase. But clearly direct discourse is called for as indicated by the preceding direct discourse in MS JTS, and in the lack of a change to indirect discourse in the other witnesses. What would have caused the (confusing) change to indirect discourse in the MS JTS?

The notation mark above the line between the red and and gives a clue. That mark points to a marginal notation. Such notations in this manuscript often refer to another reading of the indicated text. Unfortunately, whatever the scribe wrote in the left margin has been covered by a strip of paper glued to the page to strengthen it and prevent its separation from the codex. But I wouldn’t be surprised if the marginal comment presented the reading of the Mishna Ta’anit. Perhaps an indication that was the original reading is the directly following quote from Micah 1:7, which begins with the word (in the Kaufmann and Parma manuscripts of the Mishna Ta’anit). The anomalous reading of rob in MS JTS may well have derived from an original rob, which became due to the graphic similarity of kaf and nun, and the fact that the verse in Micah began with . Once became rob and other changes were required to conform to the third person suffix of rob and the resulting indirect discourse of the text, and so was changed to rob in and a was inserted to turn the reading into rob. The missing rob in the printed edition may also derive from this confusion.

If this reconstruction is correct, not only do we have another case of the Hebrew word robn with a first person pronominal suffix (robn), but the word is used to refer to Jesus just as it is in the New Testament. So in addition to the blind man and Mary Magdalene, we have another who called Jesus Jacob of Kefar Sekhania, the disciple of Jesus, who taught R. Eliezer an interpretation of a biblical verse.

The Gospel of John glosses the word robn as ‘teacher.’ Shouldn’t the possessive suffix require a translation ‘my teacher,’ just as the Aramaic and Hebrew uses of the word clearly indicate a translation

3 The readings from MSS Paris and Munich are taken from JTS and Evelyn Henkind Talmud Text Databank.
‘my teacher’? Not necessarily. A translation without the possessive would be similar to the term רבי/Rabbi, in which the suffix lost its possessive meaning (‘my’) and the word, as a frozen term, came to mean ‘teacher’ or ‘master.’ Support for this may be found, although from a later period, in Arabic literature. The Qur’an (5:47, 66) preserves the word רבי/ربגניא (rabbānī), which, as the Kisters (father and son) showed, derives from רבני. But the word cannot mean ‘my teacher’ because in the Qur’anic context it appears in the absolute plural: רבנייונא (rabbānīyuna) i.e., ‘teachers.’ In other words, the final vowel in רבני did not function as a pronominal suffix, as the Kisters noted. The word, rather, evolved as a frozen term from an original meaning ‘my teacher’ into the meaning ‘teacher,’ just as John glossed rabbouni as ‘teacher,’ and just as evolved in meaning from ‘my teacher/master’ to ‘teacher/master’ (Rabbi), which, incidentally, is how John elsewhere (1:38) translates rabbi (pοββι). Y. Kutscher explained the word רבני (as in רבניJamיו in Gen. 24:27) the same way, comparing it with the French monsignor. In the final analysis, not only was the pope right that Jesus spoke Aramaic, but the evidence of Jesus’ speech in the New Testament records precisely the pronunciation and meaning of the Aramaic of his time and place.

---

4 Of the 23 instances recorded in the Friedberg database, all but one are petitions to God as רבני, usually made by Moses. One (T-S Misc. 36.198 2v, lines 14 and 16) parallel כְָּּה רבני, ‘my master.’ In Aramaic, e.g., Targum Neofiti translates רבני אברד in Gen. 24:27.
