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Rabboni Jesus – Confirmation from the Talmud?

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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 *rabbouni* (רַבּוּנוּנִי) or *rabboni* (רַבּוֹנִי), 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 *hiriq* (as in *ribbono 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 Taʿanit 3.8 records Ḥoni ha-Maʿagal's reference to God as *ribbono shel ʿolam*, both MS Kaufmann and MS Parma vocalize the first word with *pataḥ* (Kaufmann as *rabbuno*; Parma as *rabbono*). Then geniza liturgical fragments of *birkhot ha-shaḥar* (Palestinian rite) turned up with the phrase רבון כל העולמים 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 של עולם; 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 רבוני alone but a later hand added של עולם and extended the *yod* of רבוני (which is grammatically required and graphically obvious) to make it into a *vav*, thus producing רבנו של עולם.

¹ See Ḥ. Yalon in *Leshonenu* 24 (1960) 162; Y. Kutscher, "Leshon ḥazal," in *Sefer Ḥanok Yalon* (Jerusalem, 1963), pp. 268-271 (reprinted in Kutscher, *Mehqarim be-ʿIvrit uve-Aramit*, Jerusalem, 1977, pp. 268-271); Z. Ben-Ḥayyim, *ʿIvrit we-Aramit nusah Shomron* 3.2 (Jerusalem, 1967), pp. 37-38. Targum Neofiti references are in Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period* (Ramat-Gan/Baltimore, 1990, 2003), s.v. רבון. In addition to the references in these articles, note that a Syriac version of the original Greek *Transitus beatae Mariae virginis* has Mary refer to Jesus as "Rabbuli, the messiah" which W. Wright takes as "Rabbuni, the messiah" (W. Wright, trans. and notes, *Contributions to the Apocryphal Literature of the New Testament, collected and edited from Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum*, London, 1865), pp. 19, trans.; 28 text; 60 note. The liturgical fragments: Naftali Wieder, "Ha-ṣura rabbun bi-mqorot ʿIvriim," *Leshonenu* 27-28 (1963-64) 214-217.

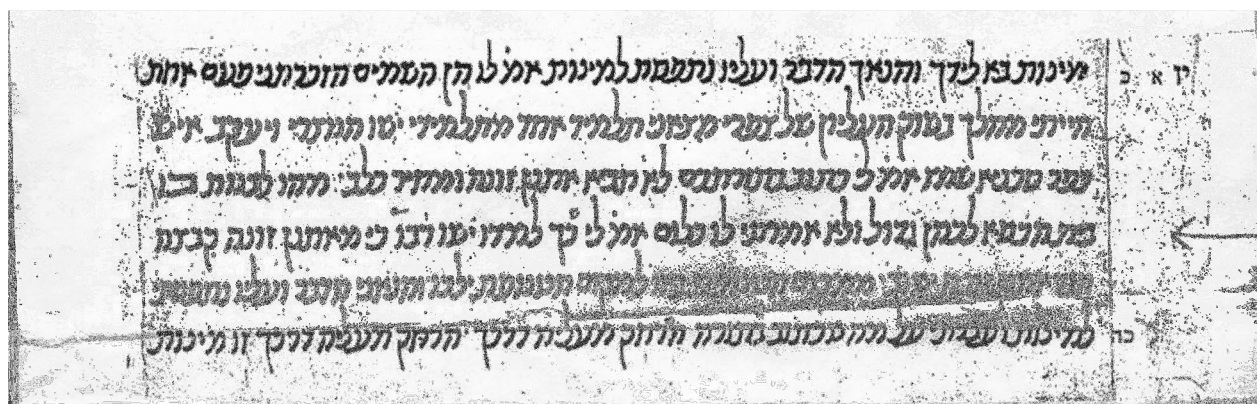
The first person possessive suffix recalls the New Testament reference to Jesus as *rabbouni /rabboni*. In addition to the New Testament, the word with the first person suffix ('my teacher') is commonly found in several of the Aramaic texts mentioned above. In regard to Hebrew texts, besides MSS Kaufmann and Parma, רבוני 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 רבוני, 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 רבוני 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):

פעם אחת הייתי מהלך בשוק העליון של ציפורי ומצאתי אחד {מתלמידי יש"ו הנוצרי} ויעקב איש כפר סכניא שמו אמר לי כתוב בתורתכם {דברים כג} לא תביא אתנן זונה [וגו'] מהו לעשות הימנו בהכ"ס לכ"ג ולא אמרתי לו כלום אמר לי כך לימדני {יש"ו הנוצרי} {מיכה א} [כי] מאתנן זונה קבצה ועד אתנן זונה ישובו ממקום הטנופת באו למקום הטנופת ילכו.

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 קבצה [כי] מאתנן זונה קבצה...., the superior Marx-Abramson manuscript (JTS Rab 15) of 'Avoda Zara reads: with an אמ' לי כך למדו ישו רבו כי מאתנן זונה קבצה inserted ש over the כ of כך, and a notation mark inserted above the line between רבו and כי, as seen below.



² With two exceptions (a *piyyut* and a medieval letter), all are midrashic texts.

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 למדו and רבו ("Thus Jesus *his* teacher taught *him*"). Thus,³

Ed.: אמר לי כתוב בתורתכם / אמר לי כך לימדני [כי]

Paris: אמ' לי כתו' בתורת' / אמ' לי כך למדנו ישו הנוצרי כי

Munich: א' לי כתו' בתורתכ' / א' לי כך למדני ישו הנוצרי כי

JTS: אמ' לי כתוב כתורתכם / אמ' לי [ש]כך למדו ישו רבו כי

The change to indirect discourse was, no doubt, what caused the scribe to insert the ש above כך. But clearly direct discourse is called for as indicated by the preceding direct discourse in אמר לי כתוב in MS JTS, and in the lack of ש in אמר לי כך לימדני/למדנו ישו 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 רבו and כי 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 רבוני, like that found in the Kaufmann and Parma manuscripts of the Mishna Ta'anit. Perhaps an indication that רבוני was the original reading is the directly following quote from Micah 1:7, which begins with the word כי (כי מאתנן זונה קבצה ועד אתנן זונה ישובו). The anomalous reading of רבו in MS JTS may well have derived from an original רבוני, which became כי רבו due to the graphic similarity of *kaf* and *nun*, and the fact that the verse in Micah began with כי. Once רבוני became כי רבו, other changes were required to conform to the third person suffix of רבו and the resulting indirect discourse of the text, and so לימדני was changed to למדו and a ש was inserted to turn כך into שכך. The missing כי 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 רבון with a first person pronominal suffix (רבוני), 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 רבוני – 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 רבוני as 'teacher.' Shouldn't the possessive suffix (רבוני) 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 שאול ליברמן ע"ש = מאגר עדי הנוסח של התלמוד הבבלי and Evelyn Henkind Talmud Text Databank.

‘my teacher’?⁴ 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 Qurʾan (5:47, 66) preserves the word رباني (*rabbānī*), which, as the Kisters (father and son) showed, derives from רבוני.⁵ But the word cannot mean ‘my teacher’ because in the Qurʾanic context it appears in the absolute plural: ربانيون (*rabbānīyuna*) i.e., ‘teachers.’ In other words, the final vowel in רבוני 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 רבי evolved in meaning from ‘my teacher/master’ to ‘teacher/master’ (Rabbi), which, incidentally, is how John elsewhere (1:38) translates *rabbi* (ραββι). Y. Kutscher explained the word רבן (as in רבן גמליאל) the same way, comparing it with the French *monsignor*.⁶ 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 רבוני, usually made by Moses. One (T-S Misc. 36.198 2v, lines 14 and 16) parallel רבוני and מרי, ‘my master.’ In Aramaic, e.g., Targum Neofiti translates אדוני אברהם in Gen. 24:27 as רבוני אברהם.

⁵ M.Y. and Menahem Kister, “Al Yehudei Arav -- he‘arot,” *Tarbiz* 48 (1979), pp. 233-234.

⁶ Y. Kutscher, “Ha-Aramit shel ha-Shomronim,” in his *Mehqarim be-‘Ivrit uve-Aramit*, Jerusalem, 1977, pp. רסב-רסג.