

(This article is helpful background on the various languages of the NT)

The Language Jesus Spoke, by Rick Melnick

At the crucifixion of Jesus, Pilate placed a *titulus* above the cross as an official explanation of Jesus' death. It was written in three languages: Latin, Greek, and Hebrew (or Aramaic) (Jn 19:19–20). Presumably Pilate wanted to communicate to persons of all local dialects. All three languages were common in first-century Palestine. How many of the three would Jesus likely have used?

The earliest texts of the NT are all in koine Greek, the common language of the world at that time. Yet for most of the NT writers, Greek was an acquired language. Jews generally spoke Aramaic, as they had done for centuries, both in Palestine and Persia, though their Scriptures were originally written in Hebrew. In Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire, they spoke Latin, and that was the preferred language of all official communication with Rome. In addition, many people spoke one or more of the various dialects that still prevailed around the Mediterranean world. In Jewish Palestine that would mean Aramaic or Hebrew.

What language did Jesus speak? Perhaps more to the central NT question, did Jesus ever teach in Greek? An affirmative answer may even suggest we do have the exact words of Jesus recorded in the NT, since the writers could have quoted Him verbatim. Even in the remote places of the Roman world, most people knew multiple languages.

The Languages of Palestine

Ostensibly a small and relatively unimportant area like Palestine would be monolingual. Yet its strategic location as the gateway between three continents brought it a disproportionate contact with the world and its languages. At most times multiple languages were spoken.

Hebrew

The classic Jewish language is Hebrew. In the earliest days of Israel's nationhood, it was the national language. As such, it was also the language of most of the OT whose writings spanned 1,500 years. Hebrew has remained the preferred Jewish language and is now the official language of Israel.

Aramaic

Near the end of the OT era the political situation changed drastically. First Assyria, then Babylon captured portions of Palestine and instituted mass deportations to places of other languages. In particular, the Babylonian captivity of 586 BC brought lasting change. The Jews of the Diaspora learned foreign languages in order to survive. Because of the political influence, Aramaic also became the preferred language of Palestine. Thus Aramaic replaced Hebrew as the common language of the Middle East. It remained the popular language until after Jesus' death.

Greek

In 332 BC Alexander the Great conquered the known world. Among his policies, he attempted to teach everyone a common version of Classical Greek, called *koine*. Because Palestine lay in the main route to Egypt, the Greeks occupied Palestine for approximately 150 years. These were years of radical change. The Greeks established the *polis* everywhere they went. Roughly equivalent to a modern city, the *polis* was a place that perpetuated Greek civilization with its philosophy and language. Jerusalem was declared a *polis*, and many Jews acculturated to Greek thought. In Alexandria the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek. Called the Septuagint (LXX), this was the Bible of most Jews as succeeding generations lost their fluency in Hebrew.

Beyond Jerusalem, in Galilee and eastern Palestine, the Greeks built the Decapolis, a region consisting of 10 Greek cities patterned after cities in Greece. These *poloi* influenced most of Palestine, but particularly Galilee, where Jesus was raised. When the Romans conquered Greece, they kept Greek as the language of commerce and society world-wide. Without doubt Greek was frequently spoken in Palestine.

Latin

Rome occupied Palestine from approximately 63 BC. For the most part Rome allowed Greek as the *lingua franca* for pragmatic reasons. The Romans, however, spoke Latin. It was the preferred language of government and literature. Latin did not spread widely until approximately AD 400, when it replaced Greek as the *lingua franca* of the western world.

Few in Palestine spoke Latin. Nevertheless the Roman officials certainly preferred it and probably required it for matters of state. Some of the inscriptions in Palestine and general knowledge of customs of the day suggest that Latin was familiar in Jesus' world.

The Common Languages of Jesus' Day

In the AD first century, Palestine enjoyed much more cultural and linguistic variety than is often assumed. Sacred languages die slowly; national languages transcend cultural changes; and the language of occupying nations is usually resisted. Both the religious and social institutions bear witness to a variety of language options.

Religion

Classical Jewish faith intertwined with Hebrew. As noted, it was the language of the OT writers because it was the language of national Israel. Frequently other languages vied for acceptance in Palestine primarily through the worship of foreign or Canaanite deities, but they were never accepted since they represented idolatrous institutions. In the first- or second-centuries BC, the rabbis began the process of oral interpretation that became the Mishnah. By far the majority of the tractates of the Mishnah were in Hebrew, although it was somewhat different from biblical Hebrew.

Other indications of Hebrew include the Dead Sea Scrolls (and other such writings), from approximately 200 BC, and the letters of Bar Kochba, approximately AD 130. The Dead Sea Scrolls intentionally attempted to recapture the glory days of Israel, including its language. The letters of Bar Kochba reflect the same intent with a religious and political rebellion after the fall of Jerusalem. While some of Bar Kochba's letters are in Greek out of necessity in communicating with the masses, clearly some Jews could still speak Hebrew. Surprisingly, there are few inscriptions from the period in Hebrew.

Religious language broadened to incorporate Aramaic and Greek in the centuries immediately preceding the birth of Jesus. Because of the Dispersion (586 BC), both Aramaic and Greek became the vernacular.

When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in the second-century BC, Greek became increasingly the language of the synagogues. Apparently many Hellenistic Jews found their way back to Jerusalem (Ac 6:1). The Greek translation became the standard Bible of Greek speaking Jews and Christians. Other religious literature was produced in Greek. This includes many of the OT Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, Philo's writings, Jewish Apocalyptic writings, and some of Josephus's works.

Aramaic naturally assumed prominence through political movements. Some of the OT shows Aramaic influence. Portions of Daniel were written in Aramaic, and there are traces of Aramaic influence (Aramaisms) in the Pentateuch, Chronicles, and the Prophets.

Early on, the synagogue services were in Aramaic. Although the biblical texts were always read in Hebrew, Aramaic paraphrases accompanied the readings. These eventually became the Talmuds.

Thus the religious language of the first century demonstrated variety. Spiritual truth had to be communicated in the vernacular.

Society

Palestinian society was also multi-cultural and multi-lingual. For the most part, Aramaic replaced Hebrew. Inasmuch as the political systems often correlated with the religious systems, Hebrew was maintained in some matters of Jewish politics. In the first century, however, many Jews were unable to communicate in Hebrew. Increasingly, Aramaic gained prominence.

Recent archaeological sites reveal a well-developed Roman structure around lower Galilee in particular. The combination of the Greco-Roman cities, extensive commercial interests, military presence, and strategic location of Palestine, made it imperative to speak Greek. This evidence suggests that most Galileans could speak Greek, learning it quite early. The major Roman city of Sepphoris was only four air miles from Nazareth, and Capernaum was the commercial center of northern Palestine. Without doubt, Greek permeated the entire areas of Jesus' boyhood and primary ministry. This is evidenced by coins with Greek inscriptions, some minted by Herod the Great, the king at Jesus' birth.

Latin was the official language of the occupying nation. No doubt Roman officials preferred it—the language of Rome and Italy. There is some evidence that judicial verdicts had to be communicated officially with a sensitivity to Latin. Practically, however, Rome was content to use the linguistic infrastructure established by Greece, keeping Greek as the *lingua franca*.

Language Evidences from the Gospels

Ultimately knowledge of the language Jesus spoke must be reflected in the Gospels. This is at once the most compelling and most elusive evidence. Knowing with certainty involves extensive linguistic criteria to distinguish between the original words of Jesus and those of the interpreters. Nevertheless, the evidence is significant.

The primary text suggesting Jesus spoke Hebrew is Luke 4:16–19. There Jesus read from the Isaiah scroll in the synagogue. No doubt the scroll was written in Hebrew, indicating Jesus' ability to read, if not speak, the classic religious language.

Several texts involve Aramaic. Most come from the Gospel of Mark, written to Romans. Mark intended to interpret for a Latin speaking community. He preserved and interpreted the following Aramaic sayings: Mark 5:41, “*Talitha koum*”; Mark 14:36, “*Abba*”; and Mark 15:34, “*Eloi, Eloi, lemá sabachtháni*.” Mark chose to leave these in the original and translated them into Greek for his readers.

The case for Jesus speaking Greek rests on logical assumptions. Since all the extant copies of the Gospels are in Greek, it would be difficult to determine when the authors were translating instead of quoting Jesus. The assumptions arise from the situations reflected in the Gospels where it is most likely that Jesus interacted in Greek.

Jesus spoke with many Greek-speaking persons. The most extensive, and official, is in the trial before Pilate (Mk 15:2–5; Mt 27:11–14; Lk 23:2–5; Jn 18:29–38). Two aspects of the account suggest a Greek dialogue. First, it is unlikely that a politician in a short-term appointment would learn the local language. Pilate probably did not learn Aramaic. Second, the discourses between Jesus and Pilate, and Pilate and the crowd, are reported in a way that suggests no translator was present. It seems most natural to assume that Jesus and the crowds could speak Greek with Pilate.

Other encounters with Greek speakers support this hypothesis. Jesus spoke with the Syrophoenician woman, recorded in Mark 7:25–30. Mark seems intent on clarifying that she was a Greek-speaking woman. Another case is John 12:20–28, where the Greeks sought Philip as an intermediary to bring them to Jesus. Additionally, Jesus met with a Roman centurion in Capernaum (Mt 8:5–13; Lk 7:2–10), and a similar encounter occurred in John 4:46–53. Doubtless these persons spoke Greek. If so, Jesus would have had to speak with them in their language.

The confession of Peter also supports Jesus' ability to speak in Greek (Mt 16:13–20, especially; Mk 8:27–30; Lk 9:18–21). Primarily, Jesus' play on words with Peter's name makes more sense in Greek than in Aramaic. The contrast between *petros*, the stone, and *petra*, the cliff, is clear in Greek but loses its dynamic in Aramaic.

Conclusions

Two questions guided this discussion. What language did Jesus speak? What was the preferred language in which Jesus taught? The discussion illuminates the situation of both Jesus and His environment.

Regarding Jesus' language, several summary statements may be made. Jesus was, doubtless, multi-lingual. He could move among at least three languages with some

comfort. First, growing up He would have had significant exposure to Greek both from the non-Jews in Palestine and from the Jews who had to speak Greek to engage in the international aspects of life in Palestine. Second, His deep spiritual interests growing up in a synagogue would likely have led Him to a deep appreciation of Hebrew. After all, He could engage in deep spiritual discussions at an early age with learned rabbis (Lk 2:46–47). Third, His daily life in an Aramaic speaking community doubtless facilitated ability in the common language.

Some conclusions may be made regarding Jesus' teaching. First, it seems quite unlikely that Jesus would have, or could have, drawn the large crowds of interested listeners if He had spoken in a second language. Further, Greek was the language of the occupying nation, always hated because their presence implied the triumph of heathen nations over God's people. Aramaic was the language of the heart. Second, the earliest account of the origins of the Gospels state that Matthew wrote first in Hebrew, or possibly Aramaic (Papias, AD 112). That the Gospel accounts were first in Hebrew or Aramaic finds some support from scholars who have translated the Greek texts into Aramaic, discovering an Aramaic rhythm and style to most of the accounts. Third, the varieties of wording in the parallel accounts of the Synoptic Gospels suggest that the three are translations/interpretations of Jesus' words.

At the present state of evidence, strong conclusions are impossible. The best conclusion is that Jesus ministered in the language of the heart. For most that was Aramaic; for others that was Greek. At the same time, Jesus was capable of speaking multiple languages—the languages prevalent in first-century Palestine. It may be that some of the words of Scripture are actual quotations from Jesus in Greek. Most likely, however, by far the majority of the Gospels are interpretations into Greek.