WHAT LANGUAGES DID JESUS SPEAK?

by Troy Manning

The world in which Jesus lived was truly multilingual. The scholarly consensus that Jesus spoke only Aramaic has been displaced by archeological discoveries substantiating the multilingual environment of Palestine in Jesus' time. Understanding multilingual environments, in general, would provide a proper framework in which to understand the issues. As Stanley Porter explains, in terms of diachronic analysis, we can speak of a person's acquisition of languages—first language ("mother tongue") and acquired languages. In terms of synchronic analysis, we can identify a person as being active or productive in one or more languages but only passive or receptive in others. "Active multilingualism involves the ability to understand and to express oneself in a language, whereas passive multilingualism involves being able to understand but not express oneself in a language."[1] In this discussion, we also need to talk about "diglossia" (or triglossia) and "code switching." The former refers to the use of different dialects or languages in different situations, with one form being called the superstrate dialect/language (H) and the other being the substrate dialect/language (L). In Haiti, for example, the H language is French, while the L language is Haitian Creole. A Haitian will do his government business in French, but he tells stories with family and friends in Haitian Creole. In Palestine, the environment included a complex interplay of Standard Biblical Hebrew, Standard Literary Hebrew, dialects of Aramaic, Mishnaic Hebrew, and Greek (see appendix 2). The first two would have been used only for written material, but the latter three would have been heard in various places in Palestine. Jesus would not have been untouched by any of these languages, but would he have spoken all three in his life and ministry?

The complexities involved in answering this question are numerous. First of all, I can mention a personal complexity: lack of sufficient time to read all the scholarly research and archeological studies on this topic.[2] Second, I can note that I do not know Aramaic. Balancing out these hindrances, I can mention that I know Greek and Hebrew, I have studied linguistics and sociolinguistics, and I have some personal experience with multilingual environments.

Now I can mention some complexities regarding this study. First, we cannot obtain a complete understanding of the situation in Palestine, especially in Galilee because of the very limited data. Archeological finds are mostly from Jerusalem and Judea (see Appendix 1 for an overview of the key archeological locations and key documents). Second, most of the

[1] *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research: Previous Discussion and New Proposals* in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 133.

[2] See Porter's book (pp. 129-141) for a helpful survey of key works.

archeological evidence tells us more about the upper class than the lower classes, since the latter did not have sufficient means or education to put their words into writing. Third, this evidence tells us more about the written form of the languages than about the spoken forms, since the evidence is written material. Fourth, the politics and social situation of those early centuries changed rapidly before and after Jesus' time, so any conclusions about the archeological evidence need to take that into account. Fifth, our current linguistic and sociolinguistic understanding of language environments have greatly evolved in recent decades, but ancient descriptions of the language environment of Jesus' time was not able to profit from those developments. Thus, uses of terms like "language" and "dialect" are probably not reflecting the current, more refined understanding of how these terms can be differentiated. And as Ch. Rabin notes, "historical sources rarely mention what language is spoken in a certain place or milieu."[3] The New Testament fits this characterization.

With these complexities in mind, we can proceed from the less controversial to the more controversial: Latin, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek. I will discuss the language's situation first to determine if Jesus could have spoken that language, considering the use of that language in his time, and then I will look at specific instances in which Jesus may have used that language.

Latin

Latin is not very controversial, because it has very little bearing on the question. Though the New Testament shows evidence of the use of Latin, especially in the gospel of Mark, by employing various isolated terms, the language never really penetrated Palestine in any meaningful way. Though it was used for the inscription on the cross of Jesus, it evidently was not common among the people of Palestine. Rome's conquest of Palestine did not lead to an imposition of Latin upon the land, in contrast to the Greek empire's conquest.

Aramaic

When considering the language of Aramaic, one has to begin by distinguishing between various forms of this language. The earliest inscriptions in Aramaic are from the 9th and 8th centuries B.C., but the language gained its dominant role in society under the Persian empire beginning in 539 B.C. This form of the language can be called Imperial Aramaic, and it became the *lingua franca* of the entire region, including Palestine. By Jesus' time, Aramaic developed into a Standard Literary Aramaic (SLA) and various spoken forms, according to Michael Wise. He said that the differences were not significant but required an education in order to read and write in SLA.[4]

[3] "Hebrew and Aramaic in the First Century," *The Jewish People in the First Century*, 1033.

[4] "Languages of Palestine," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 437.

Since Aramaic was the international language from the 6th century B.C. until the 4th century B.C., this language became common for many generations, and it infiltrated every aspect of culture. Wise explains that Aramaic became a dominant part of Jewish culture, with even legal documents being composed in Aramaic.[5] Rabin surveys the history of the 2nd century B.C., noting the shift of the Palestinian population away from Hebrew and toward Aramaic in the decades after the Maccabean revolt. Aristobulus' (104-103) and Hyracanus' (135-104) conquests forced Judaism upon the populations, resulting in an increase in Aramaic speakers. Another increase came from those who lived afar but moved to Judea because of their attraction to the Temple.[6] Gradually, then, Aramaic would naturally have become more common among the Jewish population than Hebrew in Palestine, except for the strict religious adherents.

Until 1947 scholars assumed that Jesus spoke almost solely in Aramaic during his earthly ministry. The archeological evidence, though minimal, was sufficient to corroborate with the historical overview just described. Until recently, there was essentially no archeological evidence to indicate the use of Hebrew in Palestine. The discoveries at Qumran, however, significantly altered our understanding. They helped us see that Hebrew (specifically, Mishnaic Hebrew) was also in use during Jesus' time. However, they further confirmed the conclusion to which previous evidence had lead us: Aramaic was the primary language of most Jews in Jesus' time.[7] Other archeological evidence included ossuary and sepulchral inscriptions, an Aramaic IOU, a letter on an ostracon, and some legal documents.[8] Wise explains that "the best evidence for contemporary spoken Aramaic dialects comes from two sources: the Aramaic letters of Bar Kokhba, and the words and phrases preserved in the NT."[9]

Concerning the latter, we cannot make too much of isolated Aramaic words used in various places. Assuming based on the evidence just noted, that Aramaic was the language of Palestinian Jews, it would be expected to find "isolated substantives" in a multilingual environment."[10] In other words, it's typical in code-switching. However, three instances of a verbal sentence could be particularly informative about the use of Aramaic. The first instance is probably the most unambiguously Aramaic, with the least number of complications. In Mark

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[5] *Language and Literacy in Roman Judaea*, 35.

[6] Rabin, 1035.

[7] M. Wilcox writes, "The Masada material indicates that many inhabitants of Judea were 'bilingual or even trilingual,' with Aramaic as the main language of the ordinary people." "Semitic Influence on the New Testament," 1094. Samuel Safrai says, "Aramaic was the language of communication between Jews and those non-Jews not connected with the government or living in Geek cities." "Spoken and Literary Languages in the Time of Jesus," 227. James Barr explains that we can no longer consider spoken Hebrew to be dead during the 1st century AD, but yet the evidence is stronger in favor of Aramaic being the language Jesus used. "Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek in the Hellenistic Age," 83.

[8] Fitzmyer, Joseph A. "The Languages of Palestine in the First Century AD," *The Semitic Background of the New Testament*, 39.

[9] "Languages," 438.

[10] Ibid., 442.

5:41, Jesus says to the synagogue official's daughter, Ταλιθα κουμ. According to BDAG, the first word is an Aramaic word meaning "girl" or "little girl," and the second word is a Mesopotamian form of the imperative (BYZ has the more Aramaic κοῦμι). The form is grammatically non-standard since the masculine imperative is used. It could be the standard form of a particular dialect of Aramaic common at that time.[11]

In Mark 7:34 Jesus says to the deaf man, Ἐφφαθά. Scholars debate whether this is distinctly Aramaic or Hebrew. M.G. Abegg, Jr., says it's "more likely Hebrew than Aramaic."[12] In Mark 15:34, Mark gives Jesus' words on the cross in distinctly Aramaic words: Ελωι ελωι λεμα σαβαχθανι. These words in Matthew 27:46 are slightly different and could be partly Hebrew and partly Aramaic.

Another passage is particularly instructive, though the Aramaic words are not given. Luke records that the ascended Jesus spoke to Paul on the road to Damascus "τῇ Ἑβραΐδι διαλέκτῳ" (Acts 26:14). BDAG explains that Ἑβραΐς refers to "the Aramaic spoken at that time in Palestine."[13] In Acts 9:4, Luke gives no indication of what language they were originally given in, but in 26:14, he adds that they were τῇ Ἑβραΐδι διαλέκτῳ.

Though we don't have ample evidence in the New Testament that Jesus spoke in Aramaic, the linguistic environment of the times and the few passages that do refer to the language that Jesus used provide sufficient evidence to conclude that he definitely used Aramaic in his ministry. In fact, it is quite probable that he mostly spoke in Aramaic.

Hebrew

When considering whether Hebrew was a spoken language, we have to distinguish between three different forms of the language: Standard Biblical Hebrew (SBH), Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH), and Mishnaic Hebrew (MH).[14] SBH was the written form of Hebrew for David and Solomon, who wrote during the literary high point of the United Monarchy. The religious scholars would have been able to read SBH in Jesus' time, but they were no longer using it for writing their texts. They instead used LBH.

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[11] Ibid., 442.

[12] Abegg Jr, M. G. "Hebrew Language," *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 462.

[13] This had been the standard understanding of this and related terms until various scholars began challenging it in the late 20th century. Recently, Randall Buth and Chad Pierce argue that the terms unambiguously refer to Aramaic, not Hebrew. "Hebraisti in Ancient Texts: Does Ἑβραϊστί. Ever Mean "Aramaic"?" *The Language Environment of First Century Judaea*, vol 2, edited by Randall Buth and R. Steven Notley (Leiden: Brill, 2014). Their survey of the occurrences of the terms is impressive, but their arguments are not convincing, nor are they substantiated by archeological evidence. Daniel Wallace remains skeptical, because of "the lack of evidence: there is almost no trace of Hebrew inscriptions in Palestine at this time." *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 24.

[14] M.H. Segal's *A Grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew* (1927) clearly shows that MH is distinct from biblical Hebrew. Abegg gives a helpful short list of the differences between biblical Hebrew and MH. "Hebrew Language," 460.

LBH was the written form of Hebrew for the post-exilic prophets like Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and Malachi. This form evidences linguistic influences from Aramaic, which would have started at least beginning at the time of the destruction of Judah in 587 B.C. With Aramaic being the international language of diplomacy since the late-Assyrian period (c. 720 B.C.), both the upper class living in Babylonian and Persian-dominated areas and the lower class remaining back in Palestine would have felt the pressure to assimilate to their linguistic surroundings. Jewish nationalistic fervor and a desire to stay true to God's Law (Neh. 13:24), however, preserved Hebrew from being overtaken by its linguistic environment.

Before discussing the external evidence found in the literary texts in those centuries around Jesus' life, we could note the internal evidence from the language itself showed none of the signs of language "death." Rather than a wholesale borrowing of loan words from other languages, authors using the language coined new words and continued developing the language.[15] In rabbinic literature and in documents found in Qumran, the language was used to describe matters of everyday life.[16] The language also maintained its morphological integrity.[17] LBH was the form of Hebrew used in the "vast majority" of texts discovered in the caves of Qumran.[18] It also appears in the apocryphal and pseudipigraphal texts produced between 200 B.C. and A.D. 135. LBH, however, was apparently only a literary language and would have been known only by the upper class, including the religious elites, both in Jerusalem and in the surrounding Judean villages. The spoken form of Hebrew was MH.

MH receives its name, of course, from the Mishnah, a publication of Jewish oral tradition, redacted around 200 A.D. Clearly, if the Jews were writing in this form by that time, MH began developing in the years before the Mishnah. Evidence of its earlier use, which was unknown prior to the archaeological discoveries of the mid-20th century, comes from the Dead Sea scrolls, the fortress at Masada, and the caves of Wadi Murabba'at and Naḥal Ḥever. As was mentioned above, most of the texts of the Dead Sea scrolls were written in LBH, but some scholars see "MH characteristics" in the *Copper Scroll* and *Miqṣat Ma 'aśey ha-Torah* (or 4QMMT). The latter is dated to the middle of the 2nd century B.C.[19] The uncertainties connected to these texts, however, prevent us from making any firm conclusions about the use of MH in Jesus' time, except that at least some pockets of society were using it. In addition, the Qumran community are not good representatives of the rest of the population. The finds from Masada date to the First Revolt (A.D. 66-74) are not literary texts but instead epigraphic materials (jar labels attached to cultic materials and ostraca), pointing toward a religious use of MH. These materials were likely connected to the Jewish zealots who fled there to escape the Romans. The findings from the caves of Murabba'at and Naḥal Ḥever date to the Second, or Bar

[15] Wise, "Languages," 436.
[16] Thomas, Robert L. and Stanley N. Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels*, 311.
[17] Wise, "Languages," 436.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Abegg. 460.

Kokhba, Revolt (A.D. 132-135), and they include letters in LBH, contracts in MH, and possible a few letters in MH (as well as a majority in Greek, many in Aramaic, and a few in Nabatean). Other documents in Hebrew include deeds, biblical texts, phylacteries, hymns or prayers, bills of divorce, and contracts.[20] In one Greek letter, Bar Kokhba speaks of his desire to write in Hebrew but his lack of success in finding someone to write in that language. Clearly, then, by the 2nd century A.D., they were still speaking MH, but its use in written form was waning.

In addition to these important discoveries, archeologists have also uncovered inscriptions in Jerusalem (two on sepulchers and one on the southwest corner of the Herodian Temple) and coins bearing MH. Hebrew also appears on the coins minted between around 130 B.C. and 40 B.C.

Josephus (A.D. 37-c. 100) writes in *Jewish Antiquities* that the Jews valued the learning of Hebrew (SBH and LBH) for the study of the Jewish Scriptures, and that they looked down upon the study of Greek. However, he speaks of "our native tongue," which is likely a reference to Aramaic, though it could refer to Hebrew (20.11.2 sections 263-4; cf *Jewish War*, Preface 1, sections 3, 6).[21]

Other Jewish writings produced in latter centuries can inform us about the use of MH in the earlier centuries. The Mishnah itself was written mostly in MH,[22] though some parts were in Aramaic. It preserves the Jewish oral teachings of the earlier centuries. The desire to preserve the teaching in MH could indicate the waning of MH by the time the Mishnah was published, and that would be consistent with what we already saw in the Bar Kokhba's letter noted above. This is consistent with what we see in the rest of the Babylonian Talmud, of which the Mishnah was only one part. This Talmud, compiled in the 6th century, and the Jerusalem Talmud, compiled in the 4th century, were written mostly in Aramaic, except for portions of the Gemara. These writings all point to the decline of MH by the 3rd century A.D., but they also suggest that MH was more prevalent in the preceding centuries. However, we cannot be certain how much earlier or how widely it was used.[23]

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[20] Meyers and Strange, 71-72.

[21] Abegg. 462.

[22] Barr explains that the rabbis of the later first century A.D. would have known Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic, but they never would have written in Greek. Instead, they would have only written in Hebrew "or (depending on place and time) in Aramaic." Eventually, Aramaic would become the dominant language among the rabbis, due in large part to the destruction and dispersion caused by the wars that occurred in those early centuries. "Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek in the Hellenistic Age," *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, 113-114.

[23] Drawing upon later Jewish writings in the Talmud, Shmuel Safrai argues that the Jewish writers of the Second Temple period clearly distinguished between Hebrew and Aramaic, using "*targum*" and "Syraic" for the latter. He contends that MH is "the language of conversation, prayer and the Oral Torah." "Spoken and Literary Languages in the Time of Jesus," *Jesus' Last Week*, 228-229). Barr (p. 112) writes that there was no Greek term that unequivocally meant Aramaic in those days, but Buth explains that there were Greek words that specifically identified Aramaic—*syriake glossa* ("Syrian language") and *syristi* ("in Syrian"). Such words appear in the Septuagint and the *Letter of Aristeas*. "Aramaic Language," *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 66-87. Fitmyer acknowledges these words, but he explains that when "Greek writers of the first century refer to the

The evidence points more in favor of the use of Aramaic than MH. The targums,[24] Aramaic translations and commentaries of the OT, postdate the time of Christ, so they cannot be used as evidence for the use of targums during the time of Christ.[25] But, they may be providing a window into the language used for Jewish oral teachings in that time. Wise explains that the Scriptures would have been read in Hebrew, but that the teaching would have been in Aramaic "to avoid confusion between the words of the text and its interpretation."[26] Another reason would be to be sure that the greatest number of people would understand the teaching, since Aramaic probably had more widespread use among the Jews in Palestine.[27]

There are a few places in the New Testament where a Hebrew word is clearly used. In John 20:16, Mary Magdalene calls Jesus Ραββουνι. Buth says this term "is correctly called Hebrew." In Revelation 9:11, John says that the name of the angel of the abyss is Ἀββαδών, which is a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew אֲבַדּוֹן. In Revelation 16:16, John speaks of the great eschatological battle between satanic forces and God as taking place at Ἁρμαγεδών. Scholars debate the precise origins of this word, but all are apparently agreed that it comes from Hebrew, not Aramaic. Other terms which could be cited here, such as κορβᾶν, Αββα, and ῥακά, could be either Hebrew or Aramaic, so they do not help much.[28]

Rabin asserts that Jesus would have used MH when Jesus "took part in the discussions in the synagogues (Mark 1:21), and in the Temple of Jerusalem (Mark 11:17), and disputed on Halakah (Matt 19:3)."[29] This assertion is based on his conclusions about the prestige of MH among the Jewish religious authorities and in worship contexts. Though it is theoretically possible that Jesus did use MH in these occasions, it's also quite possible he used Aramaic, since he would have wanted the majority of the crowds to understand his words, not just the Jewish religious authorities.

It is clear that the Jewish writers of the New Testament could at least read Hebrew, and it's likely that Jesus could too. In certain passages, the writers deviate from the LXX and instead

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native Semitic language of Palestine, they use ἑβραϊστὶ, ἑβραΐδι διαλέκτος, or ἑβραΐδων." It's still not clear whether the terms refer to Hebrew or Aramaic. "The Languages of Palestine in the First Century AD," 43.

[24] Abegg writes that the Palestinian Targum, *Targum Onkelos*, and *Targum Jonathan* were likely written in the second century A.D., with the latter two possibly written as early as 70 A.D. Barr (p. 91) casts suspicion on the use of targums for evidence, given the difficulty in dating them and the likelihood of revisions to them in the years subsequent to their original writing. "Hebrew Language," 90.

[25] Wise counters those who suggest that Targum Neofiti preserves the oral teachings of the Jews in Jesus' time. However, this targum was not written in Standard Literary Aramaic, which is what the Jews of that time would have used for literary materials. Wise says what is a better possibility is Targum Onkelos, since it is written in SLA. However, the uncertain origins of this targum prevent us from making any certain conclusions. "Languages," 438.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Wise writes, "In terms of geography and social class it would seem that Aramaic was the best-known and most widely used language among the Jews of all classes in Galilee and in Judea also, at least in the larger urban areas" (DJG, p. 439).

[28] Buth, "Aramaic Language," 86.

[29] Rabin, 1036.

follow the Hebrew text.[30] In Luke 4:17-18, Jesus most likely read the Hebrew text of Isaiah 61:1, since that was the common practice of the day. But, then when he gave its interpretation (v.21), he could have used Hebrew (MH), Aramaic, or even Greek, since he was in the town of Nazareth.[31]

Since the NT writers do not give clear indication when they are quoting the exact words of Jesus as they were originally given (i.e., in what language), it is impossible to build a clear-cut case for when he definitely spoke Hebrew. Jesus' cry of abandonment on the cross could have been in Hebrew, but it was more likely in Aramaic. In Matthew 27:46, Matthew gives Jesus' words in Hebrew for the first two words and in Aramaic for the last two, though it is possible that all four are in Aramaic: Ηλι ηλι λεμα σαβαχθανι.[32] In Mark 15:34, though, the words are unambiguously Aramaic: Ελωι ελωι λεμα σαβαχθανι.

Greek

Alexander the Great's conquests in the 4th century B.C. brought both Greek language and culture into Palestine. The Ptolemies and then the Seleucids ruled the area, and they conducted their administration in Greek and infiltrated the land with their bureaucrats. The Herods continued this Hellenization under their rule. Thus, the upper class could not help but learn Greek. Even merchants of the lower class would have had to conduct some of their business in Greek. They would have done so even before this period, but now there would have been a greater necessity to use the language of their rulers. Any dealings with the government in Palestine would have had to been in Greek, "as the Zeno papyri of c. 250 B.C. indicate."[33] Various cities became centers of Hellenization: Decapolis, Sepphoris, Scythopolis (formerly Beth-shan), Caesarea Maritima, Caeserea Philippi, Tiberias, and Bethsaida. These cities would have influenced neighboring town, such as Jerusalem, Jericho, and Nazareth.[34]

Though the Jews evidenced mixed attitudes toward Hellenization and the Greek language,[35] they clearly helped Antiochus IV Epiphanes's efforts, "as both 1 Maccabees and Josephus make clear," using Greek as the language to do so.[36] Jewish writings (the book of Jubilees, 1 Esdras, 2 Maccabees, the additions to Esther, and the Greek translation of Ben Sira

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[30] Archer and Chirichigno put these in category C and note that there are 33 quotations in this category. Most are by Paul and Matthew, but even Peter and John have a few instances.

[31] Buth claims Jesus must have taught in Hebrew, since it was "the language used commonly in the first century by the Jewish teachers and miracle workers" (DNTB, 89).

[32] Archer and Chirichigno note that "לְמָה is good Aramaic as well as Hebrew, and occurs several times in *Genesis Apocryphon*." "Summary and Conclusions," *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament*.

[33] Wise, "Languages," 439. See also Abegg, 462, and Buth, "Aramaic Language," 86.

[34] Fitzmyer, 32.

[35] Josephus speaks of his preference to write in his "native tongue" (i.e., Aramaic), but he had to write in Greek because of various circumstances (Ant. 20.263-66). A letter by a lieutenant from the Bar Kohkba Revolt also expresses a similar attitude. Wise, "Languages," 440.

[36] Ibid., 33.

in 117 B.C. by Ben Sira's grandson) as well as Jewish authors (Clement of Alexandria, Eupolemus, Eusebius of Caesarea, Justus of Tiberias, and Flavius Josephus) show how common Greek had become among the upper class.[37] Inscriptions in the Jerusalem temple, a synagogue inscription in Jerusalem,[38] and ossuary inscriptions further substantiate this. Clearly, Greek was the prestige language of the Mediterranean world, so anyone who wanted to advance in society had to know how to speak it, and they would have had increased opportunities for advancement if they could also read and write it.

Evidence for the use of Greek among the lower classes is less numerous. However, there is enough evidence to indicate that Greek did penetrated into those classes. Papyri of "ephemereal business contracts and receipts" and other matters of daily life showed that Greek was the "language of commerce" of the Greco-Roman world.[39] Similar documents were found in the caves at Murabba'at[40] and in Naḥal Ḥever.[41] The inscription over Jesus was written in Greek as well, along with Hebrew (or Aramaic) and Latin (John 19:20). In addition to the epigraphic material, there is also the Jewish practice of taking Greek names, as the New Testament itself gives evidence: Andrew, Philip, and Peter.

The New Testament itself bears witness to how deeply Greek had entered into Jewish circles. First, the New Testament was written in Greek. This points more toward the knowledge of Greek by the authors than it does to the knowledge of Greek among the Jews in Palestine, but it does tell us something about the targeted readers in general. The authors would have naturally written in Greek in order to reach the largest number of people and because Greek was the literary language of the day. What is more significant, though, is that fishermen from Galilee (Peter and John), Jesus' half-brothers from Nazareth (James and Jude), a tax collector from Capernaum (Matthew) would have written in Greek. With the exception of Matthew, these men were from the lower class, but they apparently had access to good education in Greek. They made use of the Septuagint, which is consistent with their desire to reach the largest number of people since they knew the Greek translation of the OT would have been quite familiar. In a few cases, Matthew, Mark, and John veer away from the Hebrew text

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[37] Fitzmyer, 33; Wise, "Languages," 439.

[38] This inscription has to be dated before A.D. 70. It shows how Greek had penetrated into the very capital of Judaism. Theodotus, the man referred to in the inscription, was "the head of the synagogue" and "belonged to a group of priests in Jerusalem." The inscription strongly implies that the reading and teaching of the Law were done in Greek. Sevenster argues that this synagogue was likely not just for the visiting diaspora Jews, since similar inscriptions were found in other synagogues in Palestine (131-134).

[39] Porter, ""Greek of the New Testament," 428-429.

[40] Fitzymer, 35.

[41] Wise, "Languages." He states, "It is a safe assertion that at the time of Jesus most educated Palestinian Jews of the upper classes knew at least some Greek, especially in Jerusalem and the larger cities such as Tiberias." Wise, 439-440. Fitzmyer says there is evidence that "Palestinian Jews in some areas may have used nothing else but Greek" (35). To balance this statement out, though, we could note Safrai's comment: ""For the most part, though, Greek was not the predominant language heard in the streets or marketplaces of Jerusalem, nor in the other Jewish cities and villages of the land of Israel" (226).

apparently in favor of the LXX rendering.[42] Stephen (Acts 7) and James (Acts 15) show their facility with Greek by quoting from the LXX (unless these just represent Luke's use of the LXX).

Not only did they and the other apostles know how to read Greek, they also spoke it. In John 12:20, Greeks, who presumably spoke Greek on this occasion, came to Philip of Bethsaida, the same town that Peter was from. They would have had to speak Greek in the Hellenized regions into which Jesus took them: Tyre and Sidon (Mat 15:21-28; Mk 7:25-30; Luk 6:17-18), Decapolis (Mk 7:31-37), the region of Gerasa (Mk 5:1-20), and Caesarea Philippi (Mat 16:13-20; Mk 8:27-30; Luk 9:18-21). Of course, their ministry in Galilee would probably have required use of Greek. Though the expression "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Mat 4:5) does not mean that Greek was the only language of that area, it does point to a widely held belief that Galilee was widespread there.[43] The apostles (Act 6:1) had to deal with the differences that arose among Jews in Palestine, some who "habitually spoke Greek only" and "those who also spoke a Semitic language."[44]

Though there is no direct evidence that Jesus spoke in Greek, there is indirect evidence based on our understanding of the linguistic environments in which he ministered and the people to whom he spoke. As noted above, Jesus took the apostles into Greek-speaking regions, so he very likely ministered to certain people in Greek. In the district of Tyre and Sidon, he ministered to a "Gentile, of the Syrophoenician race" (Mk 7:24-30; cf Mat 15:21-28). The term Mark uses (Ἑλληνίς) could refer to her Hellenic culture, which would include language, or just to the fact that she was a Greek polytheist. If the former, her conversation with Jesus may have been in Greek. In Decapolis (Mk 7:31-37) he clearly did not speak Greek to the man with the speech impediment (v. 34), but he may have when interacting with the multitudes from that region (v. 36; cf. Mat 15:30, probably a parallel passage). In John 7:35, the Jews wonder if Jesus was communicating that he would go to the Jews dispersed outside Palestine (possibly Alexandria, Antioch, or Rome) and teach the Greeks, which would likely have required a use of Greek. When dining with the wealthy chief tax collector Zacchaeus in Jericho, he would have definitely had contact with Greek luxury and possibly also the Greek language (Luk 19:1-10).

In light of what was said above about the use of Greek for government matters, Jesus' encounter at Capernaum with the Roman centurion likely included the use of Greek (Mat 8:1, 5-13; Luk 7:1-10). More significantly, when he spoke to Pontius Pilate during the judgment proceedings leading up to the cross, he probably spoke to this Roman official in Greek (Mat 27:2, 11-14; Mk 15:1-5; Luk 23:1-5; Joh 18:28-38).[45]

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[42] Archer and Chirichigno classify 22 passages in the NT in category D, which is when a NT passage adheres to the LXX when it differs from the MT. A few of these passages are in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John.

[43] Fitzmyer, 37.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Porter establishes criteria by which we can actually identify which of Jesus' words were actually in Greek. On this basis, he identifies eight passages. In addition to what was already mentioned, he would add the following: Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman (Joh 4:4-26); Jesus' calling of Levi/Matthew (Mat 9:9; Mk 2:13-14; Luk

Another piece of indirect evidence is the use of synonyms in certain passages, which only work in Greek since Hebrew and Aramaic do not have similar pairs. In Matthew 16:18, Matthew records Jesus' saying as having a wordplay on two Greek words for "rock": πέτρος and πέτρα. Either Matthew is taking liberties with his recording of the saying under the Spirit's guidance (less likely), or he's quoting the actual words of Jesus (more likely). In John 21 Jesus asks Peter if he loves Jesus, using ἀγαπάω twice (vv. 15-16) but then switching to φιλέω (v. 17). After Peter affirms his love, Jesus gives commands to tend his sheep, but he uses βόσκω first (v. 15), then ποιμαίνω (v. 16), and then back to βόσκω (v. 17). Peter's reply includes two different words for "to know": οἶδα and γινώσκω. Again, either John is taking liberties under the Spirit's guidance to relate what Jesus and Peter said with more variation than the speakers did (less likely), or John is simply recording a conversation that took place in Greek (more likely). If these two passages can truly be interpreted as recording Jesus' conversations with his apostles in Greek, one has to wonder whether there were other such occurrences. These conversations were private ones (i.e., no one other than the apostles), and they took place in predominantly Greek-speaking locations (Caesarea Philippi and near the Sea of Tiberias, respectively). However, there is no apparent reason why Jesus and his apostles had to use Greek in these instances. Thus, it is possible they used Greek in private conversations on other occasions, especially if the nature of the conversation demanded it.[46] And, it is likely that Jesus used Greek for public conversations and sermons as well.

Conclusion

The archeological evidence from Jesus' time and our understanding of the history and politics leading up to the time of Christ clearly point in the direction of a widespread use of Aramaic throughout Palestine. It is natural, then, to assume that Jesus would have spoken it as well. Since he wanted the widest possible hearing in most public settings, he would have probably spoken Aramaic on most occasions. There is no evidence to contradict this conclusion or to argue in favor of a greater use of Hebrew or Greek. Aramaic was likely his first language in which he would have been the most productive. Since it was the L language of Palestine and

5:27-28), Jesus' conversation with the Pharisees and Herodians over the Roman coin of Caesar (Mat 22:16-22; Mk 12:13-17; Luk 20:20-26).

[46] Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3 did not demand the use of Greek, but Jesus' apparent play on the double meaning of ἄνωθεν strongly implies that he used Greek on this occasion. In every other occurrence of this adverb in John's gospel outside this conversation (3:31; 19:11,23), the meaning is clearly "from above." But Nicodemus' response in 3:4 indicates that he clearly understood it as meaning "again." Thus, a word with such a double meaning is quite likely. Aramaic has no adverb with such a double meaning, so the logical conclusion was that Jesus used Greek for at least this statement (and v. 7), and it is not unnatural to think that he may have used it for the entire conversation. The evidence already presented is sufficient to allow that Nicodemus could have known Greek, and maybe he had specific reasons for using it here with Jesus (though we cannot be certain whether Nicodemus started the conversation in Greek or if Jesus changed it to Greek when he started speaking in verse 3).

since he wanted the largest hearing on most occasions, he would have used that for most public situations.

The Hellenization of Palestine and other regions and the importance of Greek in Roman politics and daily commerce lead us to believe that Jesus probably spoke Greek as well. Jesus' family took him to Egypt where they would have had to interact in Greek, and they very likely used it often in Galilee as well. The widespread use of Greek throughout the Mediterranean world led the NT authors to pen their writings in Greek, and their familiarity with the language implies that Jesus would have also been familiar with it. If fishermen from Galilee could write in it only a few decades after Jesus' ascension, they probably knew it when Jesus was still on earth, and they probably conversed with Jesus in it at times. Jesus conversed with Roman officials, who would have mostly used Greek, and he ministered in Greek-speaking areas, so he probably used Greek at times in private conversations and in public settings. The interplay of words in certain discourses of Jesus' make sense only in Greek, and these are probably indications of Jesus' use of the language, rather than the NT writers' use under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It would have been an acquired language for Jesus but one in which he became quite productive. As an H language in Palestine, he would have used it for specific occasions.

Jesus' use of Hebrew is perhaps the most controversial issue in regard to the languages he spoke. Archeological evidence is sufficient to indicate the use of Mishnaic Hebrew by certain persons in certain settings. There is no sociolinguistic requirement that would lead us to say that Jesus spoke MH, though it is quite likely he could read the Hebrew OT. It is possible that he spoke it in his disputes with religious leaders, but it's more likely that he spoke Aramaic on those occasions in order to have a wider hearing by the crowds. If he did speak MH, an H language in Palestine, he would have done so for only very rare situations.

Thus, in conclusion, it seems safe to say that Jesus spoke mostly Aramaic, but also a good bit of Greek. He may have also spoken Hebrew on a few occasions, but it is not definite.

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Appendix 1

Key Archeological Locations[47]

Location	Key Event	Dates	Language	Description
Jerusalem	n/a	n/a	Greek	inscriptions on temple, synagogue, and ossuaries
			MH	coins, temple and synagogue inscriptions
Khirbet el-Kom	n/a	277 B.C.	Greek	ostraca
Masada	First Revolt	A.D. 66-74	MH	jar labels attached to cultic materials, ostraca
			Aramaic	invoice, letter on an ostraca
Wadi Murabba'at	Second Revolt (Bar Kokhba)	A.D. 132-135	LBH	letters
			MH	deeds, biblical texts, phylacteries, hymns or prayers, letters, contracts, receipts, inscriptions
			SLA	contracts, letters, deeds
			Greek	various documents
Naḥal Ḥever	Second Revolt (Bar Kokhba)	A.D. 132-135	Greek	scroll of the Minor Prophets
			Hebrew	portions of Deuteronomy, Numbers, Psalms
Qumran	n/a	n/a	LBH	biblical texts, commentaries
			MH	*Miqṣat Ma ʻaśey ha-Torah* (or 4QMMT), *Copper Scroll*
			SLA	*Genesis Apocryphon*, the *Prayer of Nabonidus*, the *New Jerusalem* text, portions of Enoch literature, a "pseudo-Daniel" cycle, Tobit and the *Testament of Levi*, ossuary and sepulcher inscriptions

LBH = Late Biblical Hebrew

MH = Mishnaic Hebrew

SLA = Standard Literary Aramaic

[47] Source: Wise, "Languages"; Fitzmyer; Meyers and Strange

Key Documents[48]

Name	Language	Date	Comment
1 Esdras	Aramaic	200-150 BC	Palestinian Jewish author
Baruch	Hebrew	200-100 BC	
Letter of Jeremy	Aramaic	200-100 BC	
Tobit	Aramaic	190-170 BC	to encourage Pharisaism
Ecclesiasticus (or Sirach)	Hebrew	180 BC	translated by the grandson of Jesus, the son of Sirach
Sybilline Oracles	Greek	160 BC – 400 AD	
Epolemus' writings	Greek	158 BC (circa)	Palestinian Jew
Song of the Three	Aramaic or Hebrew	150 BC	
Susanna	Aramaic or Hebrew	150 BC	
Bel and the Dragon	Aramaic or Hebrew	150 BC	
Judith	Hebrew	150 BC	story of deliverance of Jerusalem by Judith
1 Enoch	Aramaic	150-75 BC	Evidences Pharisaism
Rest of Esther	Greek	125 BC	
Translation of Esther	Greek	114 BC	
Jubilees	Hebrew	125-25 BC	Encourages Pharisaism, includes references to Greek geographic literature
Letter of Aristeas	Greek	100 BC	
1 Maccabees	Hebrew	100-75 BC	history of the Jews
3 Maccabees	Greek	100-25 BC	Stories of Ptolemy IV and his actions against the Jews
Testaments of the 12 Patriarchs	Hebrew	100-25 BC	Predictions for and against the Hasmoneans
4 Maccabees	Greek	100-1 BC	Stoic advice to encourage the Jews
Testament of Job	Aramaic	100-1 BC	Variations on the story of Job
Lives of the Prophets	Hebrew	100-1 BC	Catalog of the prophets

[48] Source: handouts from course "History of NT Times" by Stewart Custer (2002).

Psalms of Solomon	Hebrew	50 BC	From a Pharisaic viewpoint against Sadduceism
2 Maccabees	Greek	50 BC	Palestinian Jewish author
Prayer of Manasseh	Hebrew	50 BC – 50 AD	
Wisdom of Solomon	Greek	40 BC – 40 AD	combines Greek philosophy with devout Pharisaism
2 Enoch	Greek	1 AD	Conveys Hellenistic speculation
Assumption of Moses	Aramaic	6-25 AD	Evidences Pharisaic quietism
Martyrdom of Isaiah	Greek	50 AD	Jewish exposition of 2 Kings 21:16
2 Baruch	Aramaic	65 AD	Jewish prophecies, strongly anti-Christian
Targum Onkelos	Aramaic	35-120 AD	Babylonian translation of the Torah
2 Esdras	Aramaic	100 AD	Mostly Jewish prophecies; Christian additions in 150 and 250 AD
Targum Neofiti	Aramaic	100 AD	Palestinian translation and commentary on the Torah
Books of Adam and Eve	Aramaic	100 AD	Hellenistic Jewish additions to their lives
3 Baruch	Greek	150 AD	Christian prophecies, strongly anti-Jewish
Mishnah	Hebrew (with portions in Aramaic)	200 AD	Jewish oral tradition

Appendix 2: Languages of Judea[49]

Location	Class	Language type	Language name	Purpose
Judean Villages	Upper Classes	High form	SBH	most genres
			SLA, Greek	contracts/receipts
			Spoken Aramaic	letters
			MH dialects	letters, contracts at times of nationalistic fervor
		Low form	MH/Aramaic, Greek	
	Lower Classes	High form	Mostly illiterate	n/a
		Low form	MH/Aramaic	speaking
Jerusalem	Upper Classes	High form	SBH	most genres
			SLA	for a few genres, ossuary inscriptions
			spoken dialects of MH and Aramaic	letters, contracts at certain times
			MH	written halakic discussions, temple record keeping
			Greek	
		Low form	Aramaic, Greek	
	Lower Classes	High form	mostly illiterate	n/a
		Low form	Aramaic, Greek, MH dialects	

LBH = Late Biblical Hebrew

MH = Mishnaic Hebrew

SLA = Standard Literary Aramaic

[49] See Wise, "Languages," for this table, though the presentation is a somewhat modified form.