

# **HOW LANGUAGES INFLUENCED THE WRITINGS OF THE GOSPEL**

Antonio J. Knox

BHU 12112

Synoptic Gospels Bi-103

Professor Jackie Armstrong

Beulah Heights University, October 12, 2017

## 1. Introduction

Christianity was born in Israel. By the end of the first century, it had spread throughout the Roman Empire and was armed with a new book, the New Testament. This collection of inspired scriptures had been added to the Hebrew Scriptures, which Christians called the Old Testament. The new writings were distributed widely in the Greek language. It would appear that the Gospel of Luke was originally written in Greek, but what about the Gospels of Matthew and Mark?<sup>1</sup>

The oldest known manuscripts of Matthew and Mark are in Greek. According to recent scholars, Greek fragments of these two Gospels have been verified as dating from as early as 60s A.D. Some have argued that these Gospels were originally written in Aramaic and later translated into Greek. If that is the case, no extant copies or fragments of the Aramaic text have been found. The only evidence that we have thus far, is that the original text of Matthew and Mark was in Greek. <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Thomas McCall, The Language of the Gospel (Levitt Letter: May 1997)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

## **WHAT LANGUAGE DID JESUS SPEAK?**

Does this mean that Jesus spoke Greek to his disciples and to the crowds he addressed in His Galilean ministry? We have to understand that first century Israelis were tri-lingual, and even perhaps quadri-lingual. The languages spoken in Israel at the time of Christ were Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek and Latin. Most Jewish people spoke the first three. Hebrew was the language of the Old Testament. Aramaic is a different language from biblical Hebrew. They use the same alphabet, but much of the vocabulary and syntax are different.

The Jewish people learned to speak Aramaic in Babylon during the Babylonian Captivity. The Book of Daniel illustrates this transition. The first part of the Book of Daniel was written in Hebrew, but as Daniel began to explain the prophetic dream to

---

King Nebuchadnezzar, he switched to Aramaic. The next several chapters of Daniel deal with the succession of Gentile world powers and were written in Aramaic, and then the final chapters reverted to Hebrew.

When the Jewish people returned to Israel, they carried back with them the language they had learned in Babylon. Hebrew was used in the synagogue when the Scriptures were read, but the language of the streets was Aramaic. This continued through the time of Jesus, and is thought to be the language He most frequently used. One source of confusion is that Aramaic had, by Jesus' day become so identified with the Jewish people that it was commonly referred to as "Hebrew", as it is in the New Testament. Note how the Gospel of John uses the term, "in a place that is called the Pavement, but in the Hebrew, Gabbatha...in a place that is called the place of the skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha."<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the "Hebrew" language described in the New Testament is not biblical Hebrew, but rather Aramaic, the ancient language of Mesopotamia. In a very real sense, the language of Aramaic that

---

<sup>3</sup> John 19:13, 17

Jesus and most people of Israel in His time spoke, as Gentiles, in the Greek language. Examples of Jesus' words in the original Aramaic are found in the recording of Gospels such as when He healed a little girl and he said in Aramaic, "Talitha cumi,"<sup>4</sup> which means, 'Little girl, get up'. A second example occurred when He healed a deaf man, who spoke poorly because he was deaf, He said, "Ephphatha," which is Aramaic, as was the custom for, "Be opened."<sup>5</sup> On the cross, when Jesus cried out to His Father in Heaven, He spoke in the language of His daily life on earth, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"<sup>6</sup> Jesus also spoke and taught occasionally in Hebrew. He often read the Scriptures and taught in the synagogues on the Sabbath. "And he came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day. And he stood up and read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written..."<sup>7</sup>

---

4 Mk 5:41

5 Mk 7:34

6 Mk 15:34

7 Lk 4:16-17

When Jesus read from the scriptures, he read in Hebrew. The Hebraic Jews of Israel generally knew both Aramaic (their daily language) and Hebrew (the language of their faith). Hebrew was their preferred language since it was the language of their Scriptures. Jesus could have taught in either Aramaic or Hebrew and been understood. However, He probably taught in the synagogue in Hebrew.

What, then, was the process used for writing the Gospels of Matthew and Mark? The tradition about Mark is that Mark wrote his Gospel under the guidance and encouragement of the Apostle Peter. After the early years of the Christian movement, Peter apparently worked among the Jewish people of Diaspora, including Babylon, as indicated in his Epistles. There is also the tradition that Peter spent his last years in Rome. In either case, Peter and Mark would have communicated primarily in Greek, rather than in Hebrew or Aramaic, since that was the common language among Diaspora Jews, as well as most Gentiles. Thus, there seems to be no reason why Mark would not have written his Gospel in Greek as he recorded Peter's recollections of the events described.

This leaves the Gospel of Matthew. Of those credited with the writing of the Gospels, Matthew is the only one who was both an eye witness to almost all of the events in Galilee and Jerusalem, and also wrote his Gospel near the beginning of the Christian movement. Matthew is observed as a tax collector, who undoubtedly had important writing skills. It has been discovered that the ancients who were skilled in writing had developed a form of shorthand so that they could take dictation. It is not outside the realm of possibility that Matthew could have written down entire messages, such as the Sermon on the Mount and the Olivet Discourse, just as Jesus delivered them, verbatim, in shorthand. Later, the faithful tax collector could have assembled his notes and written his narrative with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup> Jesus probably delivered most of His messages in Aramaic, and therefore Matthew would have necessarily taken his shorthand dictation in Aramaic. Would he then have written his Gospel in Aramaic? All we know for certain is that, perhaps as early as 66 A.D., the Gospel of Matthew was distributed in the

---

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Carsten Peter Thiede, "Eyewitness to Jesus: Amazing New Manuscript Evidence about the Origin of the Gospels"

Greek language as far as Egypt.<sup>9</sup> If Matthew was still in Israel when he wrote his Gospel, it would seem appropriate that he would have used Israel's common language: Aramaic. In that case, his Gospel would have been translated into Greek quite early, before 66 A.D. It should be noted that Matthew's Gospel has more "Hebraisms" than any of the others. This suggests an earlier Aramaic version, although, no early Aramaic version of Matthew has been found.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is no evidence that the Gospels were written originally in any other language but Greek. If there were versions of Matthew or the other Gospels originally penned in Aramaic (in accordance with the language Christ used), they were very quickly translated into Greek so that they could be utilized throughout the Roman world. Both Greek and Aramaic were essentially Gentile languages, and the Lord was able and willing to convey His teachings, so that the Good News could go forth from His homeland of Israel to "the uttermost parts of the earth."

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid



[ CITATION DrC96 \l 1033 ]

Thiede, D. C. (1996). *Eyewitness to Jesus: Amazing New Manuscript Evidence about the Origin of the Gospels*. DoubleDay.

[ CITATION Tho97 \l 1033 ]

McCall, T. (1997). The Language of the Gospel. *Levitt Letter*.

Thiede, D. C. (1996). *Eyewitness to Jesus: Amazing New Manuscript Evidence about the Origin of the Gospels*. DoubleDay.

[ CITATION Ron05 \l 1033 ]

Jr., R. L. (2005). *The Writings of the Gospels - Which Languages Did Jesus Use?*