

THE LANGUAGES SPOKEN BY JESUS

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For decades scholarly consensus has held that Jesus usually spoke the Aramaic language. To evaluate the accuracy of this assumption, one must investigate to learn which language(s) was(were) spoken in Israel during the first century A.D., and whether the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels record the spoken Greek of Jesus or are translations of what He said in Hebrew or Aramaic. Evidence for the use of Aramaic in the areas where Jesus lived and taught is strong, but not necessarily strong enough to exclude His use of other languages. Hebrew was not a dead language after the Babylonian Exile as some have assumed. Documents, inscriptions, and coins have shown the continued use of Hebrew during the time that Jesus was in Israel, particularly in the area of Judea. The fact that the Gospels as well as the rest of the NT were originally written in Greek bolsters the case for a widespread use of Greek in Jesus' time. Specific instances of internal evidence in the NT itself, along with widespread use of the Septuagint, in the NT indicate the trilingual nature of first-century Israel. Indications that are external to the NT also show the use of Greek in Jesus' first-century surroundings. Yet impressive voices question the case for Greek as the language Jesus used. A weighing of the evidence on both sides seems to indicate that Jesus spoke and taught in both Greek and Aramaic, with the degree to which He used each one yet to be clarified by further research on this important subject.

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The hypothesis that Jesus usually spoke Aramaic has dominated scholarly discussion for decades. Joseph Fitzmyer writes, "If asked what was the language commonly spoken in Palestine in the time of Jesus of Nazareth, most people with some acquaintance of that era and area would almost spontaneously answer

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Aramaic.”¹ Just seven years ago Darrell Bock noted, “Most New Testament scholars believe Aramaic was the primary language of Palestine in Jesus’ day.”² Coming from a leading evangelical scholar of the NT, this assessment of the state of current scholarship is surely accurate. If these scholars are correct, then the sayings of Jesus found in the Gospels in Greek are usually translations of original Aramaic sayings (at best). This would make the number of Jesus’ *ipsissima verba* found in the Gospels very small, and it would discredit the independence view of Synoptic Gospel origins (How likely is it that three independent witnesses would make the same translations from Aramaic into Greek?). It also leads many scholars to adopt an exegetical method whereby the “original” Aramaic is sought to elucidate the Greek text.³

Is this scholarly consensus correct? Is it possible that Jesus actually spoke and taught in Greek? Do the Gospels provide the original words spoken by Jesus in Greek (at least occasionally)?

To decide which languages Jesus commonly spoke and which languages He used for teaching, the languages spoken in Israel⁴ in the first century A.D. must be identified. Such a study is necessarily limited and tentative. Available evidence comes from written sources, but spoken and written languages may not coincide. The linguistic milieu was subject to change in the period from 200 B.C. to A.D. 135, but the evidence is spotty and not evenly distributed. Different languages and dialects were spoken by various groups of people, some of which have no written record preserved to the present day.⁵ Since the teaching of Jesus is the focus of this article, the discussion will be limited to Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.⁶

Of course, a distinction may exist between the languages spoken by Jesus

¹Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Languages of Palestine in the First Century AD,” in *The Language of the New Testament: Classic Essays*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 60, ed. Stanley E. Porter, 126-62 (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic, 1991) 147. Other scholars assert simply, “Jesus’ native tongue was Aramaic” (Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* [New York: Macmillan, 1993] 27).

²Darrell L. Bock, review of *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research: Previous Discussion and New Proposals*, by Stanley E. Porter, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159/633 (January 2002):126. A similar point is made in Scot McKnight, review of *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research: Previous Discussion and New Proposals*, by Stanley E. Porter, *Trinity Journal* 23/1 (Spring 2002):124.

³To provide just one example, consider the discussion of Matt 16:18 in D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, 8:1-599 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 367-70. His conclusions may be correct, but his argument involves the Aramaic allegedly underlying Πέτρος and πέτρα (he also discusses the Aramaic behind ἐκκλησία).

⁴In this article the names “Israel” and “Palestine” are used somewhat interchangeably because use of “Palestine” as a name for that part of the world in the first century A.D. is anachronistic.

⁵Michael O. Wise, “Languages of Palestine,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, 434-44 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992) 434.

⁶Some, including Roman officials and soldiers, would have spoken Latin. However, “Latin never gained a strong foothold in Palestine” (Eric M. Meyers and James F. Strange, *Archaeology, the Rabbis, and Early Christianity* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1981] 88).

and the languages usually spoken in Israel, but it is reasonable to assume that Jesus taught in a language his audience understood. In fact, no reason supports the assumption that Jesus always spoke the same language. Evidence shows that many Jews in the first century were at least bilingual. Jesus would have used whatever language best met the needs of the occasion.

Which languages the Lord spoke is not merely an academic concern. This article seeks to answer whether it is likely that the sayings of Jesus recorded in Greek in the Gospels are based on the spoken Greek of Jesus or are the translations of words He spoke in another language. The external evidence may prove it to be likely that Jesus could speak Greek; the internal evidence can reveal if He actually did.

ARAMAIC

The classic presentation of the view that Jesus spoke primarily Aramaic was provided by Gustaf Dalman, who concluded that Jesus knew some Hebrew and Greek but usually used Aramaic.⁷ That Jews spoke Aramaic after the Exile is rarely disputed; even portions of the OT are in Aramaic (see Daniel and Ezra).⁸ Those who see Aramaic as the primary language of Jesus assert that Aramaic dominated Israel even after Greek had become the *lingua franca* of the Greco-Roman world.⁹

Archaeological finds have confirmed the continued use of Aramaic in Israel. Literary documents in Aramaic from the first centuries B.C. and A.D. were found at Qumran. While the documents in Aramaic are in the minority, they show that Aramaic was at least a literary language at the time. Ossuary inscriptions show that Aramaic also continued as a colloquial language in the first century A.D. A contract in Aramaic dated A.D. 56 was found at Murabba'at. Finds at Masada can be dated A.D. 68-73. These include an Aramaic invoice written on an ostrakon, along with an inscription on a storage jar and an inscription of ownership on a vessel.¹⁰

Documents found in the Cave of Letters at Murabba'at show that Aramaic was also in use at the beginning of the second century. These documents include

⁷Gustaf Dalman, *Jesus-Jeshua: Studies in the Gospels*, trans. Paul P. Levertoff (New York: MacMillan, 1929) 1-37, esp. 37. Pinchas Lapide says that Dalman is "so far the most eloquent proponent of Aramaic as Jesus' native tongue" ("Insights from Qumran into the Languages of Jesus," *Revue de Qumran* 8/32 [December 1975]:497).

⁸However, Chaim Rabin writes, "The Aramaic portions of Daniel and Ezra are no evidence that Aramaic had become a Jewish literary language. The book of Daniel describes happenings at the court of the king of Babylon, and the Aramaic portions of Ezra consist largely of official documents to and by functionaries of the Achaemenid Persian empire" ("Hebrew and Aramaic in the First Century," in *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions*, 2 vols., eds. S. Safrai and M. Stern, 2:1007-39, *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976] 2:1013).

⁹Stanley E. Porter, "Jesus and the Use of Greek in Galilee," in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research*, New Testament Tools and Studies 19, eds. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans, 123-54 (Leiden, Neth.: E. J. Brill, 1994) 124.

¹⁰Meyers and Strange, *Archaeology* 75-77.

deeds and letters. For example, one deed for a palm grove dated December 18, 99 is in Aramaic. A marriage contract from the same cache of documents is also in Aramaic.¹¹

To find the original language of Jesus, James Barr suggests translating the Gospels into Hebrew and Aramaic. The one which provides a better understanding of the Greek is more likely to be the original language. He writes, "This kind of evidence is, as evidence, extremely intangible, and yet in a way it forms, for the New Testament scholar, the main ultimate importance of the whole exercise."¹² Barr does not seem to consider the possibility that the Greek itself may be original. Moreover, the whole process is subjective, and the assumption that the Greek cannot be understood without knowing the alleged original betrays a low view of Scripture.

However, it cannot be doubted that Jesus did speak Aramaic.¹³ In fact, the Gospels record several Semitic words uttered by Jesus and his disciples, and many scholars believe most of them are Aramaic.¹⁴ Aramaic was commonly spoken in Israel in the first century, and so Jesus would likely speak Aramaic at times. Thus, the question is whether Jesus spoke any other languages, and more important, Did Jesus ever teach in a language other than Aramaic?¹⁵

HEBREW

Scholars have argued that Hebrew became a dead language after the Exile, so the first-century Jews spoke primarily Aramaic. However, this view has proven to be too simplistic.¹⁶ Scholars used to believe that Jews had created an artificial hybrid of Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic in order to write the Mishna in the second

¹¹Ibid., 77-78.

¹²James Barr, "Which Language Did Jesus Speak?—Some Remarks of a Semitist," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 53/1 (Autumn 1970):14-15. According to Barr, such a study had not been done, since everyone who did such translation assumed Jesus spoke Aramaic (ibid., 17). However, David Bivin and Roy Blizzard argue that translation into Hebrew reveals the true meaning of many difficult passages in the Gospels (*Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus* [Arcadia, Calif.: Makor Foundation, 1983] 79-91, 119-69).

¹³Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "Did Jesus Speak Greek?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 18/5 (September/October 1992):58.

¹⁴For example, see Dalman, *Jesus-Jeshua* 11-13. Barr notes that some *may* be Hebrew, but he claims none can be only Hebrew and not Aramaic (Barr, "Which Language" 16-17). In this he disagrees with Isaac Rabinowitz, who argues that εφφαθα in Mark 7:34 must be Hebrew and not Aramaic ("ΕΦΦΑΘΑ (Mark VII. 34): Certainly Hebrew, Not Aramaic," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 16/2 [Autumn 1971]:152-55).

¹⁵Discussion of the hypothesis of a Semitic original of Matthew has been omitted (there is some disagreement whether this alleged document was in Hebrew or Aramaic). Even if such a document existed, it would not prove that Jesus always taught in a Semitic language.

¹⁶Wise, "Languages" 435.

century A.D.¹⁷ However, M. H. Segal refuted this view eighty years ago.¹⁸ His argument was not based on external evidence but on an examination of the grammar and vocabulary of Mishnaic Hebrew itself.¹⁹ Far from being an “artificial scholastic jargon,” it was “essentially a popular and colloquial dialect.”²⁰ The alleged dependence on Aramaic cannot withstand scrutiny. In fact, the grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew essentially depends on Biblical Hebrew, not on Aramaic. Those forms which Mishnaic Hebrew shares with Aramaic are usually found in other Semitic languages as well, and Mishnaic Hebrew has some forms that are unknown in Aramaic.²¹ In the same way that grammatical dependence had been exaggerated, Segal found that the alleged lexical dependence of Mishnaic Hebrew on Aramaic had also been exaggerated.²²

Segal’s conclusion must have been radical at the time (and still is today): the language commonly used by educated, native Jews of Judea from 400 B.C. to A.D. 150 was Mishnaic Hebrew. Although they understood Aramaic, they used it only occasionally.²³ However, it is important to note a caveat: “With regard to the language of Jesus, it is admitted that in the Roman period, and perhaps earlier, [Aramaic] was the vernacular of the native Galilean Jews. But even in Galilee,

¹⁷For example, see Dalman, *Jesus-Jeshua* 16.

¹⁸With the publication of *A Grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew* (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford University, 1927). Nevertheless, Rabin could write in 1976 of the view that Mishnaic Hebrew was an artificial hybrid of Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic, “This theory is still held by many scholars and given in handbooks as statement of fact” (“Hebrew and Aramaic” 2:1022). According to Rabin, by 1909 Segal had already “demonstrated in detail that some of the distinct features of mishnaic Hebrew could not be accounted for by interaction of biblical Hebrew and Aramaic” (*ibid.*, 2:1023; Rabin cites M. H. Segal, “Mishnaic Hebrew and Its Relation to Biblical Hebrew and to Aramaic,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, o.s., 20 [1908-9]:647-737). Rabin adds a few arguments of his own to Segal’s grammatical arguments. One of interest is that “the way the Septuagint translates some Hebrew words shows that the translators understood them in mishnaic Hebrew senses rather than biblical ones” (“Hebrew and Aramaic” 2:1023).

¹⁹Segal calls it “Mishnaic Hebrew” to distinguish it from Biblical Hebrew, but he argues that Mishnaic Hebrew existed as a vernacular centuries before the Mishna. In fact, he believes the use of Mishnaic Hebrew overlapped the use of late Biblical Hebrew. However, the Mishna and its associated literature was the only literature remaining from the period, which justified the name (*ibid.*, 1).

²⁰*Ibid.*, 6. Barr notes, “That this is so is no longer questioned by major workers in the field” (“Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek in the Hellenistic Age,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, 2 vols., eds. W. D. Davies and Louis Finkelstein, 2:79-114 [Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University, 1989] 2:83). Later scholars found more Aramaic influence in Mishnaic Hebrew than Segal without negating his conclusion of spoken Hebrew (*ibid.*, 2:87).

²¹Segal, *Grammar* 6-7.

²²*Ibid.*, 7-9.

²³*Ibid.*, 13. Segal believes that the use of Aramaic increased during this period. He sees the decline of Mishnaic Hebrew beginning with the Herodian period. The Herodians probably spoke Aramaic, the Roman occupation brought closer connections between Judea and the Aramaic-speaking Jews of the Eastern Diaspora, and settlement of Aramaic-speaking Jews in Jerusalem spread the use of Aramaic at the expense of Hebrew (*ibid.*, 14-15).

[Mishnaic Hebrew] was understood and spoken, at least by the educated classes.”²⁴ Chaim Rabin adds, “Those who, like Jesus, took part in the synagogues (Mark 1:21) and in the Temple of Jerusalem (Mark 11:17) and disputed on Halakah (Matthew 19:3) no doubt did so in mishnaic Hebrew.”²⁵

Harris Birkeland also argued for the extensive use of Hebrew in first-century Israel. He claimed that the presence of Aramaic terms in the Gospels, far from proving that Jesus usually spoke Aramaic, actually proved that Jesus usually spoke Hebrew.²⁶ According to Birkeland, Jesus’ usual Hebrew was translated into Greek, but the occasional Aramaic was left untranslated, much like a translation of this article today would leave the Latin phrase *ipsissima verba* untranslated.²⁷ Matthew Black writes of Birkeland’s view, “This extreme position has found little if any support among competent authorities.”²⁸

David Bivin and Roy Blizzard claim the original Gospel was written entirely in Hebrew, and the canonical Gospels are merely translations (and not particularly good translations). They assert that many passages can be understood only after they have been translated into Hebrew.²⁹ Weston Fields writes, “The ideas of the book are generally good,” but he admits that many scholars will not find them readily acceptable.³⁰ These authors do not consider the possibility that Jesus Himself used the alleged literal translations into Greek of Hebrew idioms.

Few today would go as far as Bivin and Blizzard,³¹ but external evidence, including documents, inscriptions, and coins, has demonstrated the continued use of Hebrew. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls near Qumran made much literary evidence available. This collection of documents includes texts written in Aramaic, Greek, and Hebrew, with various types of Hebrew predominant.³² For Barr, the Dead

²⁴Ibid., 17.

²⁵Rabin, “Hebrew and Aramaic” 2:1036.

²⁶Harris Birkeland, *The Language of Jesus* (Oslo: Dybwad, 1954) 25.

²⁷Rabinowitz argues that the author of Mark (or one of his sources) must have translated both Aramaic and Hebrew source texts into Greek, since both Aramaic and Hebrew terms are left untranslated (“ΕΦΦΑΘΑ”156). Rabinowitz does not consider the possibility that Greek was usually original, which would also explain this.

²⁸Matthew Black, “Aramaic Studies and the Language of Jesus,” in *The Language of the New Testament* 124. Black does admit that Jesus may have used some Hebrew, since he was a rabbi “well-versed in the Scriptures” (ibid., 125).

²⁹Bivin and Blizzard, *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus* 19-23.

³⁰Weston W. Fields, review of *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, by David Bivin and Roy B. Blizzard, *Grace Theological Journal* 5/2 (Fall 1984):271.

³¹For example, J. A. Emerton admits rabbinical literature probably implies that “Hebrew was used as a vernacular by some Jews in the first two centuries A.D.” (“The Problem of Vernacular Hebrew in the First Century A.D. and the Language of Jesus,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 24/1 [April 1973]:15). However, he concludes that Jesus normally spoke Aramaic and may have spoken Hebrew occasionally (ibid., 21).

³²Wise, “Languages” 435.

Sea Scrolls suggest “the Jewish community, or some part of it, was bilingual, trilingual or even multilingual in yet higher multiples.”³³ Clearly there were people living at Qumran who could read and write Hebrew, but could they also speak it? Segal and others argue that Hebrew was a spoken dialect in Judea, while other scholars continue to maintain that it was merely a second language for scholars, like Latin in Europe during the Middle Ages.³⁴

In addition to the Qumran material, works such as 1 Maccabees, Ecclesiasticus, and much of the apocryphal and pseudepigraphic literature from the time period under consideration are preserved in Hebrew. There is not as much evidence for written Hebrew apart from these literary texts. Archaeological finds include ostraca, papyri, inscriptions, and coins with Hebrew writing from the second century B.C. to the second century A.D.³⁵ One example of a public inscription in Hebrew dates to the first half of the first century A.D. This inscription on the Tomb of James in the Kidron Valley written in square Hebrew letters states: “This is the tomb and memorial of . . .” and lists the names of several priests.³⁶ Presumably such inscriptions were intended to be understood by at least some of those who lived in the area.

Finds at Masada also provide important evidence. Literary texts in Hebrew include fragments of biblical and apocryphal books, including 26 fragments of Ecclesiasticus, which was previously known only in Greek and medieval Hebrew fragments. Some vessels are marked with the Hebrew names of their owners, and several “tags” were found with Hebrew letters on them (apparently abbreviations; one reads “priest’s tithe” in Hebrew).³⁷

Finds at Murabba’at provide evidence for the use of Hebrew in the early second century A.D. These include letters between commanders of the Bar Kochba revolt (c. 132-35). Some of them are in Aramaic, but others are in Hebrew or Greek. Other documents in Hebrew include deeds, biblical texts, phylacteries, hymns or prayers, bills of divorce, marriage contracts, real estate transactions, and rental contracts.³⁸ These documents come from a later period, a time when Jewish nationalistic fervor was high, but they provide evidence for the continued use of Hebrew in Israel.

It may be concluded that forms of Hebrew were understood by Jews in Jerusalem and the outlying villages in the first century. This evidence applies only to Judea, since similar evidence from Galilee is lacking. Since Galilee had been controlled by Aramaic and Greek-speaking rulers for some time, it seems likely that Hebrew was less well-known there than in Judea. However, the educated classes

³³Barr, “Which Language” 20.

³⁴Meyers and Strange, *Archaeology* 67.

³⁵Wise, “Languages” 436.

³⁶Meyers and Strange, *Archaeology* 69.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 69-70.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 71-72.

would probably have had some knowledge of Hebrew.³⁹

GREEK

The most obvious factor in considering Greek as a language of Jesus is the fact that the NT was written and preserved entirely in Greek. Alexander Roberts wrote over a century ago,

Here we possess, in the volume known as the New Testament, a collection of writings, composed for the most part *by* Jews of Palestine, and primarily intended to some extent *for* Jews of Palestine, and all of them written . . . in the *Greek* language. Now what is the natural inference? Is it not that Greek must have been well known both to the writers and their readers, and that *it* was deemed the most fitting language, at the time, in which for Jews of Palestine both to impart and receive instruction?⁴⁰

Of course, for many scholars the Greek NT is not sufficient evidence to conclude that Greek was commonly spoken in first-century Israel; for such scholars the dominance of Aramaic is often a forgone conclusion. However, archaeological evidence from the last few decades of the twentieth century provides ample confirmation that Greek was used in Israel during the time of Christ. This evidence will be reviewed below. However, the evidence provided by the NT itself will be considered first.

Internal Evidence

Not only the Gospels, but the whole NT is in Greek. Peter and John were recognized as “uneducated and untrained men” (Acts 4:13);⁴¹ certainly they did not have special training in the Greek language beyond that of the middle classes, and yet they were able to write in Greek. James, the brother of Jesus, was most likely a carpenter like his father, certainly not one of the social or political elite, and yet he composed a letter in Greek to other Jews less than two decades after the death of Christ.⁴² Did he learn Greek (and of a quality sufficient to produce such an epistle)

³⁹Wise, “Languages” 437. Rabin asserts, “Late biblical Hebrew must have been widely understood and read in circles close to nascent Christianity, as well as by the early Christians themselves” (“Hebrew and Aramaic” 2:1015). He seems to base this on the fact that the church preserved the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, large parts of which likely existed in late biblical Hebrew, according to Rabin.

⁴⁰Alexander Roberts, *Greek: The Language of Christ and His Apostles* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1888) 82 (emphasis in the original). Hans Betz writes, “The fact is that none of Jesus’ sayings is transmitted in Aramaic. The Gospel writers take it as self-evident that Jesus and his contemporaries spoke and taught in Greek” (“Wellhausen’s Dictum ‘Jesus Was Not a Christian, but a Jew’ in Light of Present Scholarship,” *Studia Theologica* 45 [1991]:90).

⁴¹Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible*, Updated Edition.

⁴²T. K. Abbott states, “Probably the earliest book in the New Testament is the Epistle of James, written in Greek, and showing a considerable mastery of the language” (“To What Extent Was Greek the Language of Galilee in the Time of Christ?” in *Essays Chiefly on the Original Texts of the Old and New*

in those few years, while he was leading the church in Jerusalem, where they allegedly spoke primarily Aramaic?⁴³ Perhaps Peter, James, and John merely produced their works in Aramaic, and faithful (bilingual) secretaries translated them into Greek. However, scholars are agreed that the NT is not written in “translation Greek.” For example, Dalman writes of the Gospels, “He who wishes to re-think the words of Jesus in Aramaic is confronted with a considerable difficulty; these words, as we have them in our Gospels, were not slavishly translated from an Aramaic original, but were moulded into Greek, although into a Greek which has been influenced by the Semitic idiom and occasionally also by the O.T. style.”⁴⁴ Most agree that all of the NT books were originally composed in Greek. Roberts concludes, “If they, humble fishermen of Galilee, understood Greek to such an extent as naturally and easily to write it, that language must have been generally known and used among the people.”⁴⁵

In the Gospels, the authors give no hint that they are translations.⁴⁶ However, there is a problem with this argument. In Acts 9:4 Jesus confronts Saul with the words, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” These words of Jesus are presented in Greek without any hint of translation. However, when Paul is relating these events to Agrippa, he states, “I heard a voice saying to me *in the Hebrew dialect* [τῆ Ἑβραϊδὶ διαλέκτῳ], ‘Saul, Saul why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads’” (26:14, emphasis added). Regardless of whether this refers to Hebrew or Aramaic, it appears that Christ did not address Paul in Greek.⁴⁷ Unless Jesus said the same thing to Paul in both Greek and a Semitic

Testaments [London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1891] 154).

⁴³Roberts notes the suggestion of other scholars that the apostles had the gift of tongues; that is, they were supernaturally endowed with the ability to write in Greek (*Greek*, 84-85). It is doubtful that any scholar would take this suggestion seriously today. This also fails to explain how the readers were supposed to understand what they wrote, unless one assumes that *none* of the NT was intended for those who allegedly spoke Aramaic.

⁴⁴*Jesus-Jeshua* 23. Betz comments, “We now also know that the New Testament sources, even the older ones, are not thoroughgoing translations from the Aramaic. . . . Most of even the oldest layers of the synoptic tradition give the impression that they existed in Greek from the start” (“Wellhausen’s Dictum” 90). He later says, “It would be much more consistent with both the gospel tradition and the multilinguistic culture to assume that Greek versions of Jesus’ sayings existed from the beginning. If at that time Aramaic versions of sayings of Jesus also existed, they have not been preserved” (*ibid.*, 92).

⁴⁵Roberts, *Greek* 91.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 95.

⁴⁷It is commonly assumed that the references to “Hebrew” (Ἑβραϊστί or τῆ Ἑβραϊδὶ διαλέκτῳ) in the NT actually refer to Aramaic, allegedly the usual language of the “Hebrews” (Ἑβραῖοι, see Acts 6:1; 2 Cor 11:22; Phil 3:5). The NIV usually translates the references to a Semitic language by “Aramaic.” Although the NASU usually translates “Hebrew,” it includes the footnote, “i.e., Jewish Aramaic” (see John 5:2; 19:13, 17, 20; 20:16; Acts 21:40; 22:2; 26:14). However, both translations use “Hebrew” in Rev 9:11; 16:16 (and the NASU does not include a footnote), even though the same Greek term is used in John and Revelation. Philip Hughes writes, “Linguistic research is making it increasingly difficult to maintain that by terms like *Hebraisti* (John 19:20; Acts 21:40; 22:2; 26:24) and *Hebraikos* (Luke 23:28) the Aramaic language is unquestionably intended” (“The Languages Spoken by Jesus,” in

language, then this seems to be an instance in which the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus were not recorded. This raises the possibility of similar situations occurring in the Gospels. Nevertheless, other indications show that Jesus used Greek.

Roberts rightly questions those who cite the occasional appearance of Aramaic words in the Gospels as proof that Jesus usually spoke Aramaic.⁴⁸ The fact that a few Aramaic words show up in the midst of predominantly Greek words would seem to argue the opposite. If Jesus habitually spoke Aramaic, then why would only a few of these words appear in the Gospels while the rest were translated?⁴⁹ In fact, when the Gospel writers provide translations for the Aramaic originals of Jesus, they explicitly note that they are doing so.⁵⁰ On the contrary, if Jesus often spoke in Greek, then it is easy to believe that he would also use Aramaic when appropriate. For example, when speaking to the daughter of Jairus, Jesus says, “Talitha cum” (Mark 5:41). It is understandable that the young daughter of a synagogue official (vv. 22-23) would not be familiar with Greek.⁵¹

Roberts next examines the quotations of the OT found in the NT. These quotations could be Greek translations of the original Hebrew, Greek translations of an Aramaic version, or the Greek of the Septuagint. When one examines the citations

New Dimensions in New Testament Study, eds. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney, 127-43 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974] 134). In fact, Aramaic was called “Syriac” as “Syria” was the Greek name for “Aram” (ibid., 138-39). Birkeland also argues that these references are to Hebrew not Aramaic. He notes that Josephus distinguishes between the language of the “Syrians” (Aramaic) and the “Hebrew” language (*Language of Jesus* 13). Nevertheless, Black still maintains that the terms refer to a peculiar Jewish dialect of Aramaic (“Aramaic Studies” 125). Jehoshua Grintz also argues that Hebrew is actually intended in all these passages, not Aramaic. His argument is based on Matthew, Josephus, and the Talmud. He examines several passages in Matthew “where the Greek text points unmistakably to a Semitic original, and where a clear distinction can be made between Hebrew usage and Aramaic” (“Hebrew as the Spoken and Written Language in the Last Days of the Second Temple,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79/1 [March 1960]:33-34). He concludes, “One can assert that the original language behind the Gospel of Matthew was Hebrew” (ibid., 41). He also concludes that Josephus’ references to a Semitic language all refer to Hebrew (ibid., 42), and he believes references in the Talmud confirm this (ibid., 45-56). Grintz believes Matthew was originally composed in Hebrew, based on evidence from the church fathers (ibid., 33). However, it is not clear that the alleged Hebraisms in Matthew are based on a Hebrew original. Accepting these Hebraisms and assuming for the sake of argument that Jesus spoke Hebrew as His first language and Greek as His second language, would it not be possible for Hebraic expressions to creep into any of His teaching which was originally in Greek?

⁴⁸Roberts, *Greek* 96-101. This argument is also refuted by Abbott, “Greek” 134-45. Wise notes, “Isolated substantives are not necessarily indicative of the language spoken. Aramaic words might appear, for example, in the course of a conversation conducted mainly in Hebrew or *vice versa*; such phenomena are commonly observed in the speech of modern bilinguals” (“Languages” 442).

⁴⁹Emerton suggests that these Aramaic words “had special value for those who told the story—they were words of power used in healing, or words of emotional and dramatic significance or of theological importance like the words from the cross” (“Problem of Vernacular Hebrew” 19). Paul also uses a few Semitic words in his epistles. Note $\alpha\beta\beta\alpha$ (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6) and $\mu\alpha\rho\nu\alpha\ \theta\alpha$ (1 Cor 16:22).

⁵⁰To cite one example: “Jesus looked at him and said, ‘You are Sim on the son of John; you shall be called Cephas [Aramaic] (which is translated Peter [Greek])’” (John 1:42).

⁵¹Roberts, *Greek* 104-6.

of the OT in the NT, he finds that the majority are derived from the Septuagint.⁵² This implies at the very least that the NT authors were familiar with the OT in Greek. But does their use of the Septuagint reflect the language commonly spoken by the authors, or does it represent the language spoken by the original readers? The fact that the NT is in Greek itself implies that it was intended for an audience who also knew the OT in Greek. Thus it would be reasonable to find quotations from the Septuagint in the Epistles and portions of the Gospels.

The situation is slightly different when a Gospel has an OT citation in direct speech. It is conceivable that the Gospel authors used the Septuagint for these OT quotations regardless of what the original speaker used. But if these OT quotations reflect what was spoken, then the language reflected in them should reflect the language commonly spoken. Roberts does not seem concerned with the situation of direct speech in particular, but T. K. Abbott makes this distinction. In fact, he says that Matthew usually follows the Septuagint in direct speech, but his own comments “never agree with the LXX exactly, and their variations sometimes are clear approximations to the Hebrew.”⁵³ Abbott uses this argument to show that Matthew was originally composed in Greek, but it also provides evidence that Jesus Himself used the Septuagint (and thus spoke Greek). If Matthew put the Septuagint on Jesus’ lips, then why did he not use the Septuagint consistently throughout his Gospel? It appears that Matthew faithfully reproduced Jesus’ own citations of the Septuagint.

Robert Gundry, who has studied Matthew extensively, disagrees. He suggests that explicit quotations of the OT in the “Markan tradition” (Gundry, of course, holds to Markan priority) were “assimilated to the Septuagint.” However, Gundry asserts that “allusive quotations” were not so assimilated. These allusions show “affinities with both the Septuagint and the Semitic forms of the OT.”⁵⁴ He states, “This early quotation material exhibits the same threefold language milieu which archaeological evidence should have taught us to expect.”⁵⁵ Thus, even if assimilation of direct quotations has occurred, the Gospels still provide evidence for the use of the Septuagint by Jesus.

According to Abbott, there are similar cases in Acts. At the Jerusalem Council James argues from the Greek version of Amos where it differs from the Hebrew (15:16-18).⁵⁶ Martin Hengel asserts that this Council must have been in

⁵²Ibid., 134. One might also consider the possibility that the Greek of the NT was influenced by the Septuagint, providing further evidence that the Greek version of the OT was in common use. This question continues to be debated. For a brief discussion of the issues involved see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 24-30.

⁵³Abbott, “Greek” 157-58. Abbott notes that OT quotations in direct speech are all by Jesus himself, except for one quotation by Satan during the Temptation (Matt 4:6).

⁵⁴Robert H. Gundry, “The Language Milieu of First-Century Palestine: Its Bearing on the Authenticity of the Gospel Tradition,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83/4 (December 1964):407.

⁵⁵Ibid., 408.

⁵⁶Abbott, “Greek” 161.

Greek (at least “also in Greek”) since the Greek Titus was there.⁵⁷ Stephen also quotes from the Septuagint in his defense before the Sanhedrin (7:2-53). This is not surprising, since he was a Hellenistic Jew, but it may be assumed that his speech was understandable to the council.⁵⁸ Luke’s use of the terms Ἑλληνισταῖ and Ἑβραῖοι in Acts 6:1 may also imply the use of Greek in Jerusalem. C. F. D. Moule argued from the context of Acts that the best way to understand these terms (in Acts) is linguistically. The first refers to “Jews who spoke *only* Greek” and the second to “Jews who, while able to speak Greek, knew a Semitic language also.”⁵⁹ If this interpretation is correct, it provides textual evidence for the use of Greek in Jerusalem.

Stanley Porter notes, “The Greek used by Jesus in Mark’s Gospel at points conforms to a higher register than the Greek of the narrative itself.”⁶⁰ Would Mark have put better words on the Master’s lips on purpose? Or does Mark reflect the actual language of Jesus? This latter possibility seems more consistent with the writing of an inspired Gospel.

Consider also the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew states, “Large crowds followed Him from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan. When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain” (Matt 4:25-5:1). Then Jesus began to teach his disciples. However, many people were listening to the sermon, since at the end Matthew records, “When Jesus had finished these words, *the crowds* were amazed at His teaching” (7:29, emphasis added). Presumably this crowd consisted of people from all the regions mentioned in 4:25, including the Decapolis. Roberts argues that the cities of the Decapolis were primarily Gentile, and the Jews living there were Hellenized. These people probably did not speak Aramaic, so if Jesus wanted such people to understand his sermon, he needed to speak in Greek.⁶¹

A similar situation is found in Luke’s Sermon on the Plain (it is not important to this argument how this relates to the Sermon on the Mount). Luke 6:17-18 says, “Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place; and there was a large crowd of His disciples, and a great throng of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal regions of Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear Him.” Roberts provides evidence that the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon generally spoke Greek, so if the Lord was to be understood by them, he would have spoken in

⁵⁷Martin Hengel, *The ‘Hellenization’ of Judaea in the First Century after Christ* (Philadelphia: Trinity/London: SCM, 1989) 17.

⁵⁸Abbott, “Greek” 161. Abbott also thinks that Zacharias borrowed from the Septuagint in Luke 1:68-79 (ibid.).

⁵⁹C. F. D. Moule, “Once More, Who Were the Hellenists?” *Expository Times* 70/4 (January 1959):100 (emphasis in the original).

⁶⁰Stanley E. Porter, “Did Jesus Ever Teach in Greek?” *Tyndale Bulletin* 44/2 (November 1993):224.

⁶¹Roberts, *Greek* 147-49.

Greek.⁶² Since people from Judea and Jerusalem were also present, this implies that these also understood Greek. Hence, it is possible that Jesus spoke Greek even when people from Tyre, Sidon, or the Decapolis were not present.

John 12:20-21 tells of some “Greeks” who wanted to see Jesus. They spoke to Philip, presumably in Greek (or had these “Greeks” learned Aramaic?).⁶³ The text notes that Philip was from Bethsaida of Galilee;⁶⁴ it seems that this comment is intended to indicate that Philip was more likely to respond to these Gentiles (Because those from Galilee spoke Greek and the other disciples did not or because those from Galilee had more contact with Greek-speaking Gentiles?). The text does not indicate whether Jesus spoke directly to them, but it seems unreasonable to think that Jesus would completely ignore those who were seeking him. Thus Jesus could have spoken in Greek at this point so that the Greeks might understand.⁶⁵ However, he was in Jerusalem at the time for the upcoming Passover, so if the rest of the crowds understood him, then Greek was also spoken in Jerusalem⁶⁶ (of course, many Jews from outside Jerusalem would also be there for Passover).

Roberts then considers the accounts of Jesus before Pilate, which Roberts believes “bears the clearest and most conclusive testimony” to the common use of Greek.⁶⁷ In these accounts Jesus speaks to Pilate, and Pilate speaks to Jesus, the priests, and the crowds. There is no mention of an interpreter, and many of the exchanges would not lend themselves to the use of an interpreter.⁶⁸ As a Roman, Pilate spoke Latin, but this language was probably not spoken by Jesus, the priests, or the crowd. It also seems unlikely that Pilate had learned Aramaic or Hebrew. Greek would be the natural medium of communication for Pilate to use with the people of Judea.

John 20 records a meeting between Jesus and Mary after the resurrection. In the middle of the conversation John writes, “She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, ‘Rabboni!’ (which means, Teacher)” (v. 16). Whether Ἑβραϊστί refers to Hebrew or Aramaic in this verse is beside the point.⁶⁹ In the midst of a conversation

⁶²Ibid., 149-50.

⁶³Porter notes, “The expression Ἕλληνας here almost certainly refers to Greek-speaking gentiles, whether or not they came from Greece (as they almost assuredly did not), and does not mean Greek-speaking Jews, as the comparative terminology of Acts 6:1 indicates” (“Use of Greek” 150).

⁶⁴Hengel notes that Herod’s son Philip had refounded this city before 2 B.C., so “it was therefore more markedly ‘Hellenized’ than the surrounding villages” (*Hellenization* 16).

⁶⁵Dalman argues, “In John xii.20 it is taken for granted that our Lord did not belong to the Greek-speaking Jews. Greeks who desired to speak to Him in the Temple of Jerusalem, approached His disciple, Philip,” whose Greek name “prove[s] relationship to the Greek cultural circle” (*Jesus-Jeshua* 5).

⁶⁶Roberts, *Greek* 158.

⁶⁷Ibid., 159.

⁶⁸Ibid., 160-64. Porter notes, “Interpreters or translators are specified by other writers during this period (e.g. Josephus)” (“Use of Greek” 149).

⁶⁹It is generally assumed that this term refers to Aramaic (see n. 47 above).

recorded in Greek, John makes a point of noting Mary's use of a Semitic language. It seems safe to conclude that the rest of the conversation actually occurred in Greek.⁷⁰

In John 21:15-17 a conversation takes place between Jesus and Peter, which involves the interplay of three pairs of near-synonymous Greek terms: ἀγαπάω and φιλέω, ποιμαίνω and βόσκω, and οἶδα and γινώσκω. These pairs cannot be reproduced in Aramaic or Hebrew. Similarly, the wordplay between πέτρος and πέτρα in Matthew 16:18 is lost in Aramaic or Hebrew.⁷¹ Should these be explained by the creativity of the Evangelists, or are these the actual words of Jesus?

Porter suggests Mark 7:24-30 records another situation in which Jesus spoke Greek.⁷² Jesus is in the region of Tyre and speaks with a Gentile woman. Mark calls her an Ἑλληνίς and Συροφοινίκισσα. This region had been under Hellenistic influence for some time, and Mark's reference to her as "Greek" emphasizes that she spoke Greek (since she was Syrophenician she was not ethnically Greek).⁷³ There is no mention of an interpreter, so Jesus likely spoke to her in Greek.⁷⁴

Joseph Fitzmyer notes John 7:35: "The Jews said to one another, 'Where does this man [Jesus] intend to go that we will not find Him? He is not intending to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks, is He?'" Presumably Jesus would teach the Greeks in Greek, so these Jews must have thought He could speak Greek.⁷⁵

Porter also notes the NT use of ἐκκλησία. This term is found in the Gospels only in Matthew 16:18; 18:17 in quotations of Jesus. Did those in the early church call themselves an ἐκκλησία because of Jesus' use of the term, or does Matthew's use of the term indicate his redactional tendencies?⁷⁶ If Matthew put the term on Jesus' lips, then why did the early church use that name in the first place? It seems more likely that Jesus used the term than that Matthew introduced an anachronism

⁷⁰Roberts, *Greek* 170-72.

⁷¹Hughes, "Languages" 141. There is a fourth pair in John 21: ἀρνίον and πρόβατον. Hughes does not comment on this pair, perhaps because it is reproducible in Hebrew or Aramaic.

⁷²Porter, "Use of Greek" 149-50.

⁷³However, J. M. Ross states that calling her Greek "does not necessarily imply that her language was Greek; it merely means that she was not a Jew" ("Jesus' Knowledge of Greek," *Irish Biblical Studies* 12 [January 1990]:43).

⁷⁴Porter suggests Matt 8:5-13 = Luke 7:2-10 as another example when Jesus would have spoken Greek ("Use of Greek"). This is the account of Jesus healing the servant of a centurion, who was presumably a Greek-speaker. Some scholars believe that Jesus did not actually speak to the centurion. Luke records that some Jewish elders came and spoke on his behalf, although Matthew has the centurion himself speaking with Jesus. Since this passage is disputed, discussion of it has been left to this note. The present writer thinks both accounts are correct and that Jesus spoke to both the Jewish elders and later the man himself, probably in Greek.

⁷⁵Fitzmyer, "Did Jesus Speak Greek" 61.

⁷⁶Porter, "Did Jesus Ever Teach in Greek" 233. Further research into this issue would be interesting and potentially valuable, but it goes far beyond the scope of this article.

into his Gospel.

A similar argument regarding the use of a single word is made by A. W. Argyle. He cites the use of ὑποκριτής, which appears 17 times in the Synoptics, all on the lips of Jesus. The term is used only twice in the Septuagint (Job 34:30; 36:13), where it translates אָפֵן, “godless.” This does not fit the context in the NT, where the Greek meaning “play actor” makes sense (note Matt 6:2, 5, 16). Since theater was forbidden among the Jews, neither Hebrew nor Aramaic has an equivalent for Jesus to have spoken. According to Argyle, Matthew Black gives an Aramaic equivalent that refers to a liar, which does not fit the context.⁷⁷ Thus Argyle concludes that Jesus spoke Greek on this occasion.⁷⁸

Argyle also notes that the Jewish Sanhedrin got its name from the Greek word συνέδριον. Moreover, Paul quotes from the Greek poet Menander (1 Cor 15:33), indicating that Greek literature was studied in the rabbinic training of the time.⁷⁹ G. H. R. Horsley finds Argyle’s arguments to be weak. Regarding ὑποκριτής, Horsley notes the distinction between loanwords and bilingualism. For example, an English speaker may use a French phrase without knowing French.⁸⁰ This is true, but to be understood the audience must also understand the foreign phrase, so it must be something of a stock phrase. Is ὑποκριτής likely to have been such a word?

Note also the use of ἐπιούσιος in the Lord’s Prayer (Matt 6:11; Luke 11:3).⁸¹ This word is unknown outside of these two verses and Christian writings dependent on them.⁸² Since Matthew and Luke wrote independently, this word must go back to Jesus Himself. This is consistent with the conclusion above that Jesus spoke the entire Sermon on the Mount/Plain in Greek.

Nigel Turner notes that “the characteristically Greek phrase, *men . . . de*, occurs twenty times in [Matthew], and that is an unusual proportion for translation Greek. . . . Every occurrence of *men . . . de* is in the words of Jesus, His disciples, or the Baptist.”⁸³ Similarly, Matthew and Luke have the genitive absolute more

⁷⁷A. W. Argyle, “‘Hypocrites’ and the Aramaic Theory,” *Expository Times* 75/4 (January 1964):114.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 113. See also A. W. Argyle, “Greek among the Jews of Palestine in New Testament Times,” *New Testament Studies* 20/1 (October 1973):89.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 87.

⁸⁰G. H. R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, vol. 5, *Linguistic Essays* (Australia: Macquarie University, 1989) 21.

⁸¹Suggested by Ross, “Jesus’ Knowledge of Greek” 43-45. The preservation of this unusual term is understandable if the early church knew that Jesus Himself had uttered it in Greek (*ibid.*, 46).

⁸²The word might occur in one Greek papyrus. Unfortunately, this papyrus has gone missing, and the published versions all depend on the transcription of one who is known to have made transcriptional errors (Bruce M. Metzger, “How Many Times Does ‘Epiusios’ Occur Outside the Lord’s Prayer?” *Expository Times* 69/2 [November 1957]:53).

⁸³Nigel Turner, “The Language of Jesus and His Disciples,” in *The Language of the New Testament* 177.

frequently than the Septuagint.⁸⁴ These facts argue against a Semitic original for this material, for in that case the translations provided by Matthew and Luke were very free. This is not consistent with the reverence a Christian translator would have had for the sayings of Christ. The Septuagint offers a parallel: “As reverence for the sacred books increased, so did the degree of literalness in the translation.”⁸⁵ Turner also notes Jesus’ use of the phrase “an honest and good heart” in Luke 8:15, which reflects the traditional Greek phrase for a gentleman. However, it has no parallel in Hebrew or Aramaic. The alliteration also argues for a Greek original (ἐν καρδίᾳ καλῇ καὶ ἀγαθῇ).⁸⁶ Similarly, κακοὺς κακῶς (Matt 21:41), λιμοὶ καὶ λοιμοί (Luke 21:11, Jesus speaking), and the wordplay αἶρει . . . καθαίρει (John 15:2, Jesus speaking) support the claim of Greek originals.⁸⁷

This testimony from the Gospels is not surprising. Jesus’ family fled to Egypt shortly after His birth, where Greek was used. Jesus spent most of his life in Galilee, where many Greek-speaking Gentiles lived. Gerard Mussies notes that Jesus “grew up in surroundings where Greek was the second language of many people if not a majority of the population.”⁸⁸ Thus, Jesus must have spoken Greek. The passages above indicate that He also used Greek in His ministry.⁸⁹

External Evidence

Now consider the external evidence for the use of Greek in Israel. Greek had been making inroads long before the first century A.D., and even before the conquests of Alexander the Great. According to Mussies, Greek individuals had been in Israel as early as the eighth century B.C.⁹⁰ Greek pottery from the sixth century B.C. has been found in coastal sites in Israel. Greek coins are known in Israel before the fourth century B.C. Ostraca from the early third century B.C. were found at Khirbet el-Kôm. These eight ostraca include six in Aramaic, one in Aramaic and Greek, and one in Greek. The bilingual one is dated July 25, 277 B.C. The text refers to a loan from a certain moneylender (the word for moneylender in the Aramaic text is actually a Greek loanword). This moneylender had clients with Nabataean, Aramaean, Jewish, Greek, Arab, and Egyptian names. A businessman with such diverse clientele apparently used Aramaic and Greek (as inelegant as it may be) for business

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Ibid., 178.

⁸⁶Ibid., 182.

⁸⁷Ibid., 182-83.

⁸⁸Gerard Mussies, “Greek as the Vehicle of Early Christianity,” *New Testament Studies* 29/3 (July 1983):359.

⁸⁹Roberts, *Greek* 172-73.

⁹⁰Mussies, “Greek” 357.

purposes.⁹¹

Public inscriptions also testify to the use of Greek before the time of Christ. An inscription honoring Ptolemy IV was erected in Joppa in 217 B.C. The remains of several Seleucid inscriptions in Greek from the second century B.C. have been found in various locations in Israel. In addition to these political inscriptions, religious inscriptions in Greek have been found dating to the second and first centuries B.C.⁹²

Even Dalman, the proponent of Aramaic, admitted that Greek was the common language in the coastal cities and had “obtained a footing also in Palestine.”⁹³ Summarizing the available evidence, Abbott wrote in 1891:

Taking roughly the period from B.C. 170, and ending A.D. 160 or 150, we find at the beginning Greek was making its way; we find at the end that it had superseded Aramaic, and in the middle of the period we find Galileans speaking and writing Greek, and speeches in Greek made to the authorities in Jerusalem. The inevitable inference is that the language was steadily making its way all the time, the middle period being one in which both languages were used, more or less.⁹⁴

The evidence made available since Abbott’s time has only served to strengthen this view. Writing in 1968, J. N. Sevenster has an extended discussion of archaeological finds in Israel relating to the question of language.⁹⁵ He cites evidence for the use of Greek in the centuries before Christ, as well as evidence for the use of Greek in the second and third centuries after Christ in various parts of Israel. Also, an interesting inscription from Galilee has been found, dated in the first half of the first century A.D., based on the form of the letters. This inscription is in Greek, and it pronounces a death sentence on anyone who desecrates tombs. Presumably the inhabitants of this region were expected to understand this Greek inscription.⁹⁶

Sevenster also discusses Greek synagogue inscriptions. While many of these date to later centuries, the oldest comes from the first century A.D. It was found in Jerusalem and probably dates before A.D. 70. It refers to a man named Theodotos (a

⁹¹Meyers and Strange, *Archaeology* 78-79.

⁹²Ibid., 79-81. Barr asserts, “From the third century B.C.E. on, apart from the inscriptions on tombs and ossuaries and in synagogues, inscriptions in Palestine are almost entirely in Greek” (“Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek” 2:102).

⁹³Dalman, *Jesus-Jeshua* 1-2. Dalman states that Jesus “could not have lived in isolation from the influence of Greek” (ibid., 4).

⁹⁴Abbott, “Greek” 177.

⁹⁵J. N. Sevenster, *Do You Know Greek? How Much Greek Could the First Jewish Christians Have Known?* Supplements to Novum Testamentum 19, trans. J. de Bruin (Leiden, Neth.: E. J. Brill, 1968) 96-175.

⁹⁶Ibid., 117-21. David Lewis suggests caution. What the government thought was readable and what actually was may not have been the same. Nevertheless, he agrees that there is sufficient evidence for the widespread use of Greek in the first century in Jerusalem and Hellenistic towns. (Review of *Do You Know Greek? How Much Greek Could the First Jewish Christians Have Known?*, by J. N. Sevenster, *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 20/2 [October 1969]:587-88).

Greek name), who was head of the synagogue and a priest. This provides testimony to the use of Greek in certain Jewish circles in Jerusalem before A.D. 70.⁹⁷

Similar testimony is provided by the large number of ossuaries discovered in and around Jerusalem. Many scholars date these to the first century before A.D. 70. There are inscriptions on the ossuaries in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and combinations thereof. While some of these may belong to Diaspora Jews who were buried in Jerusalem, it is unlikely that all of them can be explained this way. Thus, evidence for a variety of languages commonly spoken in Jerusalem at the time of Christ has surfaced.⁹⁸ Speaking of funerary inscriptions, Porter notes, "Greek was apparently that dominant, that in the majority of instances it took precedence over the Jewish sacred language, even at a moment of highly personal and religious significance."⁹⁹

Since Sevenster wrote, additional examples of the use of Greek in Israel have been found. Porter reviews the evidence provided by coins, papyri, literary texts, and inscriptions.¹⁰⁰ This evidence supports the use of Greek in the centuries before and after Christ. One example is an inscription, probably from the time of Herod the Great, which honors a man who paid for a stone pavement for the Temple precincts. Although this man was from Rhodes, one would expect that those honoring him would want the local population to understand the inscription.¹⁰¹

In addition to this physical evidence is the commonly accepted view that Greek was the *lingua franca* of the Greco-Roman world.¹⁰² James Voelz claims, "Greek was alive and well in Israel in the first century of the Christian era (and many years before). For Greek had supplanted Aramaic as the *lingua franca* of the eastern Mediterranean."¹⁰³ Porter makes a noteworthy observation worth quoting in full:

I find it interesting, if not a bit perplexing, that virtually all biblical scholars will accept that the Jews adopted Aramaic, the *lingua franca* of the Persian empire, as their first language, with many if not most Jews of the eastern Mediterranean speaking it in the

⁹⁷Sevenster, *Do You Know Greek* 131-33.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 143-49.

⁹⁹Porter, "Did Jesus Ever Teach in Greek" 222.

¹⁰⁰Porter, "Use of Greek" 137-47. Some of Porter's evidence was known to Sevenster, but some of it was discovered or published later. The interested reader can examine the publications cited in Porter's footnotes.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 129. Barr admits that Greek became the language of government, commerce, and education throughout the East, but he claims it did not advance as far in Israel, because Hebrew and Aramaic literature was so important and connected with the religion ("Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek" 2:101). Nevertheless, he admits, "The cultural movement was overwhelmingly in one direction: orientals learned Greek, but not much was done by native Greek speakers to learn oriental languages or to assimilate oriental culture through their written sources" (*ibid.*, 2:103). He concludes, "In Palestine also Greek made enormous headway, but it is clear that Semitic languages retained a stronghold" (*ibid.*, 2:111).

¹⁰³James W. Voelz, "The Linguistic Milieu of the Early Church," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 56/2-3 (April-July 1992):82.

fourth century BCE. Many of these same scholars, however, will almost categorically reject the idea that the Jews adopted Greek, the *lingua franca* of the Graeco-Roman world, as their language, even though the social, political, cultural and, in particular, linguistic contexts were similar in so many ways, and the evidence is at least as conclusive.¹⁰⁴

Although the evidence indicates that Israel was multilingual, Greek functioned as the “prestige language.” Porter states, “Prestige languages are those languages that dominate political, educational and economic forces at play in a language milieu. In Palestine, the prestige language was Greek, even if Greek was not the first language for a significant number of its speakers.”¹⁰⁵ In such a situation it would be very natural for the inhabitants of Israel to obtain a functional knowledge of Greek. This would be particularly true of Galilee, which was surrounded by Hellenistic culture and acted as a center for trade, with a number of waterways and roads connecting important cities running through Galilee.¹⁰⁶

Jesus grew up in Nazareth. While this was a small village (pop. 1600-2000), it overlooked an important trade route, the Via Maris, which connected Damascus and the Mediterranean. Jesus also spent time in Capernaum, a city of 12,000-15,000, which acted as an entrance to Gaulanitis (Golan Heights) and had the means to support tax collection (Mark 2:14).¹⁰⁷ Fitzmyer notes, “Jesus was not an illiterate peasant and did not come from the lowest stratum of Palestinian society. . . . He would naturally have conducted business in Greek with gentiles in Nazareth and neighboring Sepphoris.”¹⁰⁸ Matthew was a tax collector from Capernaum, so he probably used Greek in the course of his official duties. Many of the other disciples were fishermen, and they most likely used Greek in the business of selling fish.¹⁰⁹

Dissenting Voices

This understanding of the Hellenization and the use of Greek in Israel is not without critics. P. Casey notes that Aramaic documents from before A.D. 70 “show

¹⁰⁴Stanley E. Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research: Previous Discussion and New Proposals*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 191 (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic, 2000) 169.

¹⁰⁵Porter, “Use of Greek” 133.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 135.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 135-36.

¹⁰⁸Fitzmyer, “Did Jesus Speak Greek” 61.

¹⁰⁹Porter, “Use of Greek” 136. One area of external evidence has been omitted: the testimony of Josephus. Sevenster thinks this testimony is important, and yet he admits that care is needed when examining it. Josephus may indicate that the native language of first-century Israel was Semitic, but he does not say how much Greek was spoken. Of course, Josephus is subject to interpretation. Rather than using valuable space to discuss disputed passages of Josephus, this article focuses on the NT and physical evidence. The interested reader can refer to Sevenster, *Do You Know Greek* 61-76, and the brief treatment in Porter, *Criteria of Authenticity* 169-71.

significant interference from Hebrew,” which one would expect after centuries of diglossia among educated Jews. However, he finds “no significant interference from Greek” at this time (although there was later). Casey concludes, “We must infer that, at the time of Jesus, Aramaic was not generally spoken by people who were bilingual with Greek.”¹¹⁰ Casey cites Porter: “There is a possibility if not a likelihood that we have some of the actual words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels,” to which Casey responds, “This is a fundamentalist’s dream, and ultraconservative assumptions are required to carry it through.”¹¹¹ On the contrary, even the Jesus Seminar admits, “It is possible that Jesus was bilingual. Recent archaeological excavations in Galilee indicate that Greek influence was widespread there in the first century of our era. If Jesus could speak Greek, some parts of the oral tradition of sayings and parables preserved in the gospels may actually have originated with him.”¹¹²

Mark Chancey argues that the case for the widespread use of Greek in Galilee is flawed.¹¹³ He notes two main problems: using finds from elsewhere in Israel to make conclusions about Galilee and using artifacts from a range of centuries to draw conclusions about the first century.¹¹⁴ He is critical (rightly it seems) of earlier scholars who used rabbinic materials from later centuries to conclude that Greek was widespread in the first century.¹¹⁵ Discussion of these materials has been omitted from this article.

Chancey then critiques the use of archaeological data by some scholars. He accuses them of using inscriptions and ossuaries from several centuries found all over Israel and assuming that these data allow them to make valid conclusions about Galilee.¹¹⁶ For example, one catalogue of 897 ossuaries from the late first century B.C.

¹¹⁰P. M. Casey, “In Which Language Did Jesus Teach?” *Expository Times* 108/11 (August 1997):326.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, 328. Porter is quoted from “Did Jesus Ever Teach in Greek” 223. For Porter’s response to Casey’s article see *Criteria for Authenticity* 164-80.

¹¹²Funk et al., *Five Gospels* 28.

¹¹³Similar arguments appear in Richard A. Horsley, *Archaeology, History, and Society in Galilee: The Social Context of Jesus and the Rabbis* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity, 1996) especially 154-75 on languages.

¹¹⁴Mark A. Chancey, *Greco-Roman Culture and the Galilee of Jesus*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 134 (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University, 2005) 124. Chancey’s work of well over 200 pages attempts to show that Galilee was not as Hellenized in the first century A.D. as many scholars claim (he seems to accept more Hellenization in Judea). Most of his discussion goes far beyond the scope of this article, but it seems that scholars should address his concerns. In the end, he may have been too pessimistic, but some of his criticism appears valid.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, 125-29.

¹¹⁶The use of inscriptions is made more difficult because the scholar has to track down individual finds in scores of books and journal articles written by different authors in different languages over the course of several decades. This hindrance may be removed in the next few years. Pieter van der Horst writes, “The Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae (CIIP) will be a new corpus of all inscriptions, in all languages, arranged topographically, found in Israel (including the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights) and dating from the 4th century BCE to the 7th century CE. . . . The corpus will include a full

to the third century A.D. included 227 with inscriptions. Approximately one-third of these inscriptions were in Greek, but only one was from Galilee (in a tomb with pottery from the first and second centuries A.D.).¹¹⁷ Later he claims, “The *only* extant inscriptions definitely produced within Galilee during the first part of that century [1st century A.D.], the lifetime of Jesus, are the bronze coins of Herod Antipas and a lead marker weight from Tiberias from 29/30 CE naming its *agoranomos*, Gaius Julius.”¹¹⁸ This evidence is indeed slight, if accurate. The present writer is not in a position to respond to his claims, though the word “definitely” cited above may indicate that some more possibilities exist. However, one should note the sharp bifurcation Chancey makes between Galilee and the rest of Israel. While there were certainly differences (e.g., Peter’s Galilean accent was recognizable in Jerusalem; Matt 26:73), it seems likely that many scholars would disagree with the sharp division Chancey makes.¹¹⁹

Chancey’s argument is largely from silence, but he asserts that there is much more evidence for the use of Greek in neighboring areas, so he doubts that the evidence for Galilee has simply been lost.¹²⁰ He also claims that the number of inscriptions increases during the Roman period in all areas.¹²¹ However, if the relative absence of inscriptions in Galilee (in any language) is expected in the first century, then when a few Greek inscriptions are found this would seem to provide even more evidence for the use of Greek. If the Galileans had only a few inscriptions in the first century, would one not expect those few to be in the common language? So when Greek appears at all, is that not noteworthy? Chancey’s argument seems to be that the presence of more inscriptions itself reflects greater Hellenization, so the relative infrequency of inscriptions in Galilee from the first century argues for less Hellenization in this region. The present writer does not see a necessary connection between the adoption of the Greek language and the adoption of the inscripational habits of Greco-Roman culture. Galileans may well have used the Greek language

re-editing of every text, a drawing or photograph, textual apparatus, English translation, and commentary. The estimate is that there will be between 6000 and 7000 texts in the corpus” (*Japheth in the Tents of Shem: Studies on Jewish Hellenism in Antiquity*, Contributions to Biblical Exegesis & Theology 32 [Leuven: Peeters, 2002] 10). The CIIP is a research project of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. It began in 2001 and is scheduled to end in 2017 according to the university’s website (www.huji.ac.il/cgi-bin/mm/new/data/ihoker/MOP-PROJ_LINK?project_id=000010019, accessed 12/30/08).

¹¹⁷Ibid., 130.

¹¹⁸Ibid., 135 (emphasis in the original). He notes several more inscriptions from the second half of the first century (ibid., 135-37).

¹¹⁹Andrew Overman argues against those who assert the “economic or cultural isolation” of upper Galilee. However, his argument seems to be largely based on remains from the third and fourth centuries. His picture of the first century is unclear (“Recent Advances in the Archaeology of the Galilee in the Roman Period,” *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 1 [1993]:42).

¹²⁰Chancey, *Greco-Roman Culture* 150.

¹²¹Ibid., 151.

without becoming thoroughly Hellenized.¹²²

In fact, Chancey questions the use of inscriptions at all. He claims that inscriptions represent only the official language. He rejects the argument that the government would necessarily inscribe in a language that the common people could understand, since most people were illiterate and would not be able to read the inscriptions anyway.¹²³

Chancey also questions the use of the Qumran material. Not only is Qumran far to the south of Galilee, but only three percent of the manuscripts found there are in Greek. Greek writings also make up a minority of material found at Masada. The material from Murabba'at post-dates Jesus by several decades. Chancey notes, "Using these texts to understand the linguistic environment of second-century Judea is complicated enough; using them to understand that of first-century Galilee is almost impossible."¹²⁴

Chancey notes two important factors after the time of Jesus that would have likely increased the use of Greek in Galilee. The first is the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Many Judeans would have fled to Galilee, and Chancey accepts the evidence for the use of Greek in Judea, especially around Jerusalem. The second is the arrival of the Roman legion around A.D. 120. This increase in Roman presence would have elevated the use of Greek.¹²⁵ Chancey believes that the historical development of Galilee rules out the use of second- or third-century data to understand the linguistic situation in first-century Galilee. He believes that Aramaic was the most commonly-spoken language.¹²⁶

Chancey's arguments should be given due weight. However, it must also be noted that he offers no evidence against the use of Greek—his only complaint is that evidence is lacking (and this lack is primarily for Galilee, not Judea).¹²⁷ This makes it clear that one must balance the external and internal evidence. The external evidence at least raises the likelihood that Greek was spoken by some people in Israel

¹²²Chancey writes, "It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the higher number of inscriptions in some cities also reflects a greater receptivity to this aspect of Greco-Roman culture than offered in the Galilean cities" (*ibid.*, 155). But does receptivity to the Greek language correlate with receptivity to other aspects of Greek culture?

¹²³Chancey suggests literacy rates as low as ten percent in the Roman Empire, perhaps higher in the cities (*ibid.*, 143). For this figure he cites William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1989) 22. Chancey claims, "There is little reason to suppose that literacy was more common in Galilee than elsewhere in the Roman world; given that the region was mostly rural, it may have even been less common" (*Greco-Roman Culture* 143). He cites Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001) 496-504. The present writer cannot imagine how one goes about determining literacy rates 2,000 years ago, but this may be an argument worth considering.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*, 132.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 140-41.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*, 165.

¹²⁷The same can be said of R. Horsley, *Archaeology*.

in the first century. This makes the internal evidence for Jesus' use of Greek all the more powerful. Gundry concludes, "Many of the dominical sayings in the present Greek text of the gospels may be closer to the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus than has been supposed. Many may, in fact, be identical with dominical sayings originally spoken in Greek."¹²⁸

CONCLUSION

The evidence available today indicates that Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek were commonly spoken in Israel in the first century A.D.¹²⁹ Gundry made an interesting observation over 40 years ago: "Usually the strongest arguments in favor of conflicting views are left largely unrefuted, the weight of discussion being put on evidence favorable to the author's viewpoint. This has happened for a very good reason: proof now exists that all three languages in question—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—were commonly used by Jews in first century Palestine."¹³⁰ Archaeological evidence since Gundry wrote has only confirmed this reality.

Of course, each individual would speak the different languages at various levels of competency. It seems reasonable to conclude that Jesus could speak Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The language(s) in which He taught would depend not only on His abilities but also on the abilities of His listeners.¹³¹ It is unnecessary to conclude that Jesus taught in Greek only. He may have taught in both Greek and Aramaic (or Hebrew), perhaps even alternating between them when appropriate. It is reasonable to conclude that the Gospel authors chose to record things which were originally spoken in Greek since they were writing in Greek.¹³² Jesus may well have repeated much of the same teaching in Aramaic. It is possible that the Gospels record the translations of Aramaic sayings. If so, they are the inspired translations of what Jesus said, and so they communicate the divinely intended meaning, even if they do

¹²⁸Gundry, "Language Milieu" 408.

¹²⁹Lapide writes, "It seems that *Triglossia* is the most adequate term to describe Jesus' multilingual milieu" ("Insights from Qumran" 498). Voelz concludes, "It is probable that many, if not most, of the inhabitants of the land of Israel [in the first century A.D.] were trilingual" ("Linguistic Milieu" 84). Horst similarly states, "We may tentatively conclude that Roman Palestine was a largely bilingual, or even trilingual, society" (*Jewish Hellenism* 26).

¹³⁰Gundry, "Language Milieu" 405.

¹³¹Fitzmyer states, "Did Jesus himself speak Greek? The answer is almost certainly yes. The more difficult question, however, is whether he taught in Greek" ("Did Jesus Speak Greek" 60). Fitzmyer concludes that Jesus usually used Aramaic for "both conversation and teaching" (*ibid.*). The fact that the Gospels do not agree word-for-word on Jesus' sayings leads Fitzmyer to discount the possibility of original Greek sayings. Commenting on the Lord's Prayer as given by Matt 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4 he writes, "One could naively maintain that he uttered it both ways. But is such a solution, which is always possible, really convincing?" (*ibid.*, 62).

¹³²Fitzmyer believes that if one uses the available evidence to claim that the Gospels have Greek *ipsissima verba* of Jesus, "then the evidence is being pressed beyond legitimate bounds" ("Languages of Palestine" 145). However, Fitzmyer was focused on the external evidence.

not convey every nuance of the original Aramaic.

It is clear that the last fifty years have seen a dramatic increase in interest in this question. This is an encouraging development, and research should continue in this area. The more one understands about first-century Israel, the better equipped he is to apply grammatical-historical exegesis to the text of Scripture. Much work remains to be done. For example, G. H. R. Horsley suggests a number of points from “bilingual theory.”¹³³ First, most bilinguals are not fluent in their second language. It is also important to note the differences between speaking, listening, and writing competencies. Second, bilinguals may prefer their second language over their first language. For example, a native Aramaic-speaker may prefer to speak Greek. Third, it is necessary to distinguish between “primary bilingualism” and “secondary bilingualism.” The former refers to those who are forced to pick up a second language by circumstances; the latter refers to those who have formal language instruction. Fourth, there is a difference between “receptive” and “productive” bilingualism. The first refers to the ability to understand a second language (written or spoken); the second refers the ability to write and speak a second language. In a complex linguistic environment like Israel in the first century A.D., these issues impact the language(s) available for Jesus to use in his teaching.¹³⁴

In a similar vein, Barr notes that “one has to allow for the possibility that the ‘common people’ might be able to *understand* levels of discourse which they could not freely *produce*.”¹³⁵ In fact, they may have *expected* public discourses to be in a higher linguistic register.¹³⁶ In such an environment, a discourse like the Sermon on the Mount, for example, could very well be delivered in Greek (it is doubtful that Barr would go this far), even if Jesus usually spoke Aramaic at home.

One final remark is in order. Even if Jesus spoke only Aramaic (or Hebrew), the inspired text of Scripture is in Greek; hence, it is questionable whether it is ever appropriate to seek the Aramaic “behind” the inspired text to elucidate its meaning. The authors intended the Greek text to be understood by the original readers, who presumably spoke Greek and not Aramaic. Thus, knowledge of Aramaic should not be necessary to understand the meaning the human author intended. Does the divine Author expect modern readers to use Aramaic to get the “real” meaning 2,000 years later? The facts of history and principles of grammar are sufficient to understand the Word of God without speculating about the Aramaic that *might* have been originally spoken by Jesus.

¹³³G. Horsley, *New Documents* 23-25.

¹³⁴Such issues also affect how one evaluates the available archeological and literary evidence as he tries to determine what languages Jesus was likely to have used. For example, G. Horsley believes most scholars focus on productive bilingualism (*ibid.*, 24). Ignoring receptive bilingualism biases the scholar as he examines the evidence.

¹³⁵Barr, “Which Language” 26-27 (emphasis in the original).

¹³⁶*Ibid.*, 26.