

Introduction

EARLY IN MY ACADEMIC studies I assumed that the dominant language in first-century CE Palestine was Aramaic and that Jesus and his disciples, therefore, taught and spoke in Aramaic. The problem I encountered in accepting the dominance of Aramaic related to my understanding of the relationship between the GNT and the teachings of Jesus. Did the gospel accounts represent accurately what Jesus taught, or were they misrepresentations of the historical Jesus? Was the Jesus of history different from the Christ of Scripture?¹

Additionally, based upon the primacy of Aramaic, would not the legitimacy of Christianity be linked to the Aramaic sources underlying the GNT? G. R. Selby accurately describes the dilemma of many Christians who are confused about the nature of the NT: “Not only is there uncertainty about the validity of late twentieth-century life of what these documents say, but also, the historical accuracy of that which is contained within the pages of the Gospels is often challenged.”²

I began to view the Aramaic Hypothesis³ as an inadequate solution for many of my questions: (1) If Aramaic was the dominant language in first-century CE Palestine (and throughout the Roman Empire), why were all the NT documents written in Greek? (2) If Aramaic was the dominant

1. Schweitzer provides a review of the initial development of the idea of the quest for the historical Jesus, stating that “modern historical theology, therefore, with its three-quarters skepticism, is left at last with only a torn and tattered Gospel of Mark in its hands . . . It is evident, therefore, that this professedly historical Jesus is not a purely historical figure, but one which has been artificially transplanted into history” (*Quest*, 307). For a summary of the current thinking regarding the quest for the historical Jesus, see Brown, “Historical Jesus,” 326–41. Evans provides a helpful bibliography of works related to studies regarding the historicity of Jesus in *Life of Jesus*.

2. Selby, *Jesus*, 2.

3. The designation “Aramaic Hypothesis” has become a technical term often connected to studies relating to the historical Jesus and to studies relating to Gospel/NT origins.

language, why was Greek the common language (*koinē*) of the period? (3) If Aramaic was the dominant language, why was Greek so prevalent in the literature, the architecture, and the culture of both Galilee and Judea in the first century CE? (4) If Aramaic was the source behind the Gospels (and the NT), why do the documents of the GNT show signs of being original compositions rather than translations? (5) If Aramaic was the dominant language, why would the Jews be bilingual (some even trilingual)? (6) If Aramaic was the dominant language, why were many cities (e.g., Ptolemais and Scythopolis) and regions (e.g., Decapolis and Idumea) called by Greek names? (7) If Aramaic was the dominant language, why did many Jews adopt Greek names (e.g., Andrew, Philip, Nicodemus, and Theophilus)? (8) If Aramaic was the dominant language, why were Greek customs and practices adopted by the culture (e.g., measurements, pottery, and Greek loanwords)? (9) If Aramaic was the dominant language, why would Jews inscribe words in Greek on ossuaries?

These questions led me to consider the validity of Aramaic's dominance as a language in the first century CE. Stanley Porter makes a very important point about the presuppositions of the Aramaic hypothesis:

[I]t seems to me that the evidence regarding what is known about the use of Greek in ancient Palestine, including the cosmopolitan Hellenistic character of lower Galilee, the epigraphic and literary evidence, including coins, papyri, literary writers, inscriptions and funerary texts, but most of all several significant contexts in the Gospels, all points in one direction: whereas it is not always known how much and on which occasions Jesus spoke Greek, it is virtually certain that he used Greek at various times in his itinerant ministry . . . This says nothing about the overall linguistic competence of Jesus, nor do we know the frequency with which he used the languages at his disposal. But this conclusion at least opens up the possibility of further exploration of this topic, since it must be recognized that this conclusion has a solid foundation and cannot be ruled out on the basis of presupposition alone.⁴

In the study that follows, I will explore further the possibility that Greek was more widely used in both written and oral form by Jesus, his disciples, and the Jews who inhabited first-century CE Palestine. My thesis is that within the region of Galilee in Roman Palestine in the first century CE, Greek became the *dominant* language spoken among Jews and Gentiles.

4. Porter, "Did Jesus Ever Teach in Greek?" 199–235.

Many scholars have argued since the late nineteenth century that the written sources behind the Gospels were Aramaic and that there might have been Aramaic originals of the Gospels themselves.⁵ Nigel Turner, however, suggested that though Aramaic might lie behind the Gospels, it is more likely that they were composed in Greek, mimicking in many ways a Semitic syntax and style.⁶

Since the quality of New Testament Greek is decidedly Semitic in varying degrees, there may well have been a spoken language in common use among these trilingual Jews which would render superfluous the hypothesis of source-translation as an explanation of certain phenomena in New Testament Greek.⁷

Therefore, what we may have in the NT is a *Palestinian* Greek containing Aramaic words and Semitic expressions as were spoken by both Jesus and his disciples. The methodology of research, therefore, will be to examine the archaeological, literary, and biblical evidence that pertains to the languages spoken in Roman Palestine during the first century CE. Such predominance leads to the conclusion that the composition of the GNT writings generally and the Gospel of Matthew specifically were not dependent upon written Aramaic originals. The motivation behind the study was precipitated by an observation made by Joseph A. Fitzmyer:

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 Aramaic. To my way of thinking, the defense of this thesis must reckon with the growing mass of evidence that both Greek and Hebrew were being used as well. I would, however, hesitate to say with M. Smith that “at least as much Greek as Aramaic was spoken in Palestine.” In any case, the evidence for the use of Aramaic has also been growing in recent years.⁸

The “growing mass of evidence” has now become a convincing witness to the wide use of Greek in Palestine even among the members of the inner circle of disciples who followed Jesus.

This study will focus upon three significant areas. First, the primary geographical area that will be investigated is the land of Palestine, which is defined as that area of land located between the Mediterranean Sea and the

5. Wise, “Languages of Palestine,” 443.

6. Turner, *Style*, 5–10.

7. *Ibid.*, 7.

8. Fitzmyer, “Languages of Palestine,” 501–31.

Arabian Desert and between Sinai and the mountains of Lebanon, within the southern portion of the Temperate Zone situated at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, located at the southwestern end of the Fertile Crescent, and comprising an area including Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine or Israel.⁹ Second, the primary focus of the study will be limited to the first century CE, specifically to the lives of Jesus and his closest disciples, namely the apostles and half brothers of Jesus. Third, the primary intent of this study is not exhaustive but only representative in regard to the evidence that is currently available. Emerging issues of minor relevance will be noted in footnotes that reference sources for further review and study.

This study could potentially have a monumental impact upon the currently accepted presuppositions in regard to the gospel tradition and NT studies. I will challenge the presumption that the only linguistic historical connection with Jesus and his disciples is through Aramaic. On the contrary, I will show that in many respects the GNT contains the very words that Jesus and his disciples spoke in Greek.¹⁰

9. Lasor, "Palestine," 632–48.

10. Since the introduction of form criticism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many scholars have detached the composition of the NT documents from historical reality. For example, Koester states, "Whatever Jesus said and did has been refracted in various ways like through a prism in the process of being formed into a tradition of the community. The original life situation of a saying or story in the life of Jesus is no longer accessible, because the formation of all traditions is deeply embedded in communal life situations" (*History and Literature*, 62).