

DISCOVERING

THE LANGUAGE OF JESUS

HEBREW OR ARAMAIC?

DOUGLAS HAMP

FOREWORD BY BRIAN BRODERSEN

CALVARY CHAPEL PUBLISHING
SANTA ANA, CALIFORNIA

Discovering the Language of Jesus

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Published by Calvary Chapel Publishing (CCP),

a resource ministry of Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa

3800 South Fairview Road

Santa Ana, California 92704

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First printing, 2005

ISBN 1-59751-017-3

Printed in the United States of America.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to my loving wife, Anna, who so graciously encouraged me to write it and allowed me the time necessary. She also served as my in-house proofreader. Without her help I could not have done it. She has been an essential source of inspiration!

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Foreword

Quite a few years ago while reading through the Acts of the Apostles it struck me that Paul was said to have spoken to the mob in the Hebrew language. It struck me because like most other Bible students, I had been taught that Aramaic, not Hebrew, was the language of Jesus and the apostles. After inquiring a bit further into the matter, I was assured that Hebrew really meant Aramaic and that I shouldn't waste my time pursuing an issue that was settled long ago.

So, not having the language skills that would be needed to take my investigation any further, I let it rest, even though I was still unsatisfied with the issue. After all, was it not just as easy for the New Testament writers to say *Aramaic* if that's what they really meant?

Well, many years have past since that incident, and although I never really lost any sleep over the matter, it's still been in the back of my mind. Therefore, I was extremely delighted when Douglas Hamp handed me a manuscript of this book and asked if I'd read over it. He, of course, had no idea of my previous inquiry into the subject.

Having read it now a number of times, I am convinced that the language of Jesus and the apostles was indeed Hebrew rather than Aramaic. That's why we read in Acts that Jesus spoke to Saul of Tarsus in the Hebrew language and that many years later Paul spoke to the Jewish mob in Jerusalem in the Hebrew language. Not that this changes anything in regard to our faith, but it does shed some interesting light on certain words and phrases in the New Testament. It also, as the author points out, gives us confidence that we can trust the accuracy of the Scriptures right down to the very words.

Brian Brodersen

Associate Pastor Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Tim Taylor who read one of the early drafts and gave important feedback on the general readability and who suggested that some tables and charts would be helpful.

Special thanks to Dr. Bill Gallagher who spent many hours with a later rough draft suggesting improvements to my arguments. Moreover, as an expert in Hebrew, he was able to make crucial observations and recommendations that have made this book a much more polished work. I am indebted to his careful eye and constructive criticism.

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Introduction

What was the language that Jesus communicated in as He taught and interacted with the people of Israel? Some say it was Greek since that is the language of the New Testament. Some say Aramaic, picked up by the children of Israel during their seventy year captivity in Babylon, since they suppose that Hebrew was a dead language at the time of Jesus. Finally, the minority view holds that Jesus spoke Hebrew, the language of His people, of Moses, David, and the prophets. Nevertheless, Greek, Aramaic, or Hebrew, couldn't He have spoken all three? While it is entirely possible that He spoke all three, the issue that our discussion will focus on is what language He most often communicated in. After all, the Creator of the Universe would obviously be able to speak whatever language He desired, but, of course, speaking a language is only useful if those around you can understand what you are saying. So our question quickly becomes limited to what language the disciples and followers of Jesus spoke. That is not to say what

they were *capable* of speaking, but rather, what language they spoke in the markets, their homes, and in their inner circles when sharing their thoughts.

Even if we can determine what language Jesus most often communicated in, does it really matter? Yes, it does matter! The language of Jesus is important to our understanding of the Jewish culture and world in which Jesus lived, taught, and interacted. So much of a culture is wrapped up in its language, that it is often difficult to separate the two. Knowing what language Jesus and the Jewish people living in Israel¹ in His day spoke helps us better understand the words, phrases, and teachings that were used in the New Testament.

Perhaps even more significant to why this is important is that the Bible says that He spoke Hebrew! The idea that Jesus spoke only Aramaic and not Hebrew is neither historical nor biblical. The New Testament clearly and unambiguously says that Jesus spoke Hebrew, and that Hebrew was used in His day; it never refers to Aramaic. In spite of this, most biblical scholars have taught that Hebrew was a dead language at the time of Jesus. They claim that when the New Testament says *Hebrew*, it really means *Aramaic*; in other words, they say that the phrase *Hebrew language* really means *Aramaic*. Just as the phrase *American language* means *English*, so they say that the *Hebrew language* in the New Testament actually means *Aramaic*.

Greek, Aramaic, or Hebrew

Perhaps Greek?

We see evidence in the New Testament that Greek was indeed spoken in first century Israel. A number of Greek inscriptions have also been found in the land from this period (a result of the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC). Greek, for centuries, had been the international language of the Ancient Near East, including Israel. Moreover, Josephus reports

that there were signs in the Jerusalem temple "... declaring the law of purity, some in Greek, and some in Roman letters, that 'no foreigner should go within that sanctuary' for that second [court of the] temple was called 'the Sanctuary ...'" (*Wars* 5, 5, 2). Also, one of the languages of the sign on Jesus' cross² was Greek (John 19:20). Thus, there can be no doubt that Greek was used in Jesus' day. In fact, this is an issue which hardly needs to be mentioned. After all, the entire New Testament has come to us in Koine Greek, a dialect of Jesus' day. However, almost all scholars agree that the mother tongue of the Jews in Israel was not Greek. As we will see, the New Testament records various words written in the spoken language and then transliterated and translated into Greek.

Aramaic or Hebrew

So, if not Greek, then we are left with two options: Aramaic or Hebrew. This is truly where opinions differ. Admittedly, nearly all scholars have argued and still maintain the position that the common language of Jesus' day was Aramaic. The theory is so prevalent that it is taught in seminaries as fact that Hebrew was a dead language by the time of Jesus.

Barbara Grimes, in her book, *Language Choice in First Century Christianity*, unambiguously declares, "In the homeland of the Jewish people in the first Century AD, Aramaic was the mother tongue and principal language of most of the people, including virtually all of the women" (Grimes 1987:20-21). Alfred Edersheim, an expert on the life of Jesus, suggests that Hebrew was nothing more than a language used in the temple and synagogues, and the messages had to be translated into Aramaic for the commoners (Edersheim 1993:91). Edersheim and Grimes are not alone; perhaps the majority of scholars have had a mistaken view of Mishnaic Hebrew, the Hebrew of Jesus' day. Probably typical of the prevailing opinion was Abraham Geiger's suggestion, given in 1845, that Mishnaic Hebrew was an artificial creation of rabbis whose native tongue was Aramaic (Buth 1987:25). One of the most frequently cited scholars

is Matthew Black, an expert of Aramaic and proponent of the idea that Hebrew was a dead language in the time of Jesus. He says,

The Aramaic speaking masses ... could no longer understand Hebrew. The use of the term 'Hebrew' to refer to Aramaic is readily explicable, since it described the peculiar dialect of Aramaic which had grown up in Palestine since the days of Nehemiah and which was distinctively Jewish. (Black 1967:48)

This belief became so commonplace that the New International Version (NIV) translation of the Bible followed suit with the assumption by systematically translating the words Ἑβραῖδι, *Hebraidi*, and Ἑβραϊστὶ, *Hebraisti*, (both mean *Hebrew*) as *Aramaic*. For example, in John 5:2 the NIV translates "... near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda ..." instead of the literal translation *Hebrew* (though "or Hebrew" is in the footnotes). Obviously, the rationale for doing so stems from the belief that Aramaic had replaced Hebrew. Is this justifiable when the word is clearly *Hebrew*? When Paul, in Philippians 3:5, describes himself as a "Hebrew of Hebrews," the NIV correctly retains *Hebrew* instead of *Aramaic* or *Aramean*. They translate the same word Ἑβραῖος (*Hebraios* – related to the two variations above) as *Hebrew* in Philippians; why not retain the translation in the other passages which are talking about the language? It is unfortunate that the belief that Aramaic had replaced Hebrew is so strong that Bible translators feel justified in changing the text of the New Testament instead of simply faithfully translating what it says even if it is in contradiction to current scholarship.

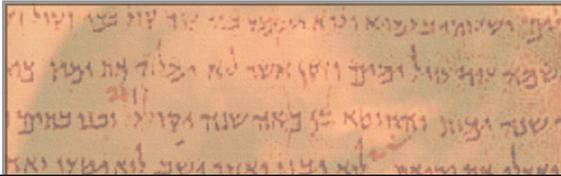
Though the prevalent theory of Aramaic as the mother tongue of Jesus is overwhelming, the view is in need of a revision that more accurately represents the language situation in Jesus' day. Once we begin investigating, we discover that there is a great deal of evidence from the New Testament, as well as a plethora of external evidence showing that Jesus spoke Hebrew (not Aramaic) as His mother tongue and in His daily life and ministry.

This is not to say that Aramaic was not spoken. The amount of

evidence is irrefutable that Aramaic was *one* of the languages of His day. However, the historical and biblical evidence attests to the fact that He was speaking Hebrew. Again, this is important since to say otherwise does not accurately represent Jesus. Also, recognizing His language as Hebrew demonstrates the reliability of the Bible as the Word of God, and provides a continuum of teaching from the Old Testament up to and through the life and ministry of the Messiah.

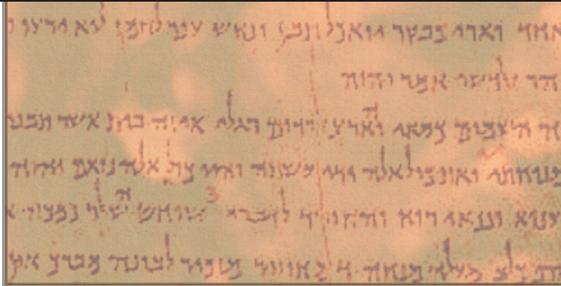
A Road Map

In order to resolve the question of just what Jesus was speaking as His day-to-day language of communication, we will, first of all, look at the historical evidence coupled with the testimony of the New Testament in order to see what ancient authors had to say about the language of the day. After reviewing what history has to tell us, we will then examine, from a linguistic point of view, the actual words of Jesus (plus a few others), as recorded in the New Testament. This is necessary since words and phrases, such as *talitha kumi* have so often been used to “prove” that He really spoke Aramaic. Our linguistic examination will reveal that He was speaking Hebrew, just like the New Testament says.



PART ONE

Historical and Biblical Evidence



A Brief History of Hebrew

The amount of historical evidence that Jesus and the Jewish people living in Israel of His day spoke Hebrew as their mother tongue is extensive. Over the last one hundred years, a better understanding of literary sources such as the Mishna has greatly elucidated the linguistic situation of ancient Israel. Additionally, discoveries such as the Bar-Kochba letters, coins, inscriptions, and the Dead Sea Scrolls have brought to light what some scholars a hundred years ago could not know regarding just how widespread Hebrew was at the time of Jesus. There is, in fact, so much evidence that there is simply not enough space to cover it all since that would require several volumes. Rather, we will look at the most relevant and pertinent information regarding which language Jesus taught in.

The discussion of this chapter will proceed as follows: First, we will trace the development of Hebrew from the time of the patriarchs to the time of Jesus and later. We will see that Hebrew never died out, as is so often claimed, and that when the New Testament writers said *Hebrew*, they really meant *Hebrew* and not *Aramaic*. Our exploration

Table 1. Progression of Hebrew from Ancient to Modern

<i>Dates (approximate)</i>	<i>Progression of Hebrew (stages overlap)</i>	<i>Events or Key Figures</i>
Second millennium BC	Proto Hebrew	Abraham to Moses
Moses to Babylonian captivity (sixth century)	Standard Biblical Hebrew	Moses, David, Isaiah
Sixth century BC	Transition between Standard and Late Biblical Hebrew	Babylonian captivity, Daniel, Aramaic and Persian loan words increase
End of sixth century to fifth century BC	Late Biblical Hebrew	Zechariah, Malachi, Haggai, and Nehemiah
Fifth century BC – 135 AD	Intertestamental and Mishnaic Hebrew	Intertestamental period to Jesus
135 – 200 AD	Waning and demise of Mishnaic Hebrew	Post second Jewish revolt when spoken Hebrew truly died out
Early twentieth century	Modern Hebrew	Eliezer Ben Yehuda and others revived Hebrew

will reveal that while there were some Aramaic speakers in Israel at the time of Jesus, Hebrew was the language of the Jews and Aramaic was the language in which they conducted their dealings with non-Jews. Then we will also consider the testimony of some ancient sources that consistently claim that Jesus spoke and taught in Hebrew, that the disciples spoke Hebrew, and that the Jewish people, as a whole, spoke Hebrew.

Biblical Hebrew

When talking about Hebrew, a brief history of the language is of great aid in understanding what is meant. Just like today, when we talk about English, we are not speaking of the English that was spoken in Chaucer's or Shakespeare's day, or even that of one hundred years ago. While the latter two we can understand, most of us cannot understand the first, due to radical changes in the language, even though it is referred to as English. Most educated English speakers, however, can figure out what Shakespeare is telling us – though there are certain words that may trick us, and unless we dig deeper into what they mean, we may be left with a misunderstanding of what is being said. Consider Romeo and Juliet. In my younger years I thought that Juliet by saying, “wherefore art thou Romeo” was in reality asking where he was! Only later did I discover that “wherefore” is an archaic way of asking the question “why” (which certainly helps to understand what she was asking!)

The development of Hebrew is, in many ways, similar to that of English. At some point in the second millennium BC, the Hebrew of the patriarchs emerged from the Semitic language family and became a distinct language. This earliest form of Hebrew is referred to as Proto-Hebrew, and the period in which it was spoken lasted approximately through the time of the Judges. We can see traces of this older form of the language in the Song of Moses, Exodus 15, and possibly in the book of Job.³ From there, we can trace Hebrew to its next stage known as Standard Biblical Hebrew (SBH), which includes the majority of the books of the Bible, such as Kings,

Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and many others. It is called *standard* by Biblical Hebrew scholars since this is what we find most of the Old Testament Scriptures written in. Finally, the books written after the return from the Babylonian captivity – Zechariah, Malachi, Haggai, Esther, Nehemiah, Ezra, and Daniel (excluding half of Daniel and Ezra written in Aramaic) were all written in what scholars have called Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH).

While in all of these different eras the language was Hebrew (similar spelling, vocabulary, and grammatical features), there are differences that exist among them. For example, the word “kingdom,” which in SBH is **ממלכה**, *mmlcha*,⁴ becomes **מלכות**, *mlchut*, in LBH. Both are derived from the same root for *king* (and hence *kingdom*), but are clear and consistent variants. Another feature is the addition of pronunciation aids. For example, the spelling of *David*, **דוד**, *dvd*, in SBH changes to **דויד**, *dvid*, in LBH. There are many other examples demonstrating that the Hebrew in the Old Testament was a living language constantly going through changes. Moreover, it never died out, as attested by the fact that the latter postexilic prophets were still writing in Hebrew.

Intertestamental Hebrew

The time between the Old Testament and the New Testament (shortly after the time of Jesus) is commonly known as the intertestamental period. Though none of the works written in Israel at that time were included in the Bible, many books in Hebrew were composed. Perhaps the most significant finding of this period is the Dead Sea Scrolls found in a region called Qumran near the Dead Sea, southeast of Jerusalem. A group known as the Essenes inhabited the site from approximately the third century BC until just prior to the destruction of the temple in 70 AD.

Discovered in the 1940s and '50s, the Dead Sea Scrolls contain more than 800 documents and fragments, most of which were in Hebrew, some in Aramaic, and almost none in Greek (Stone 2000:11). Among the most notable finds in the Qumran region

was the copper scroll written in Mishnaic Hebrew, which gave an inventory of temple treasure and where it had been hidden before the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. Also found in the caves of Qumran were the books of Ben Sira (in Hebrew), Jubilees (in Hebrew), and Testament of Naphtali (in Hebrew), as well as commentaries on books of the Bible. Additionally, a document called the *Community Rule* was found, which was the rulebook for those living in the community (see Safrai 1991b).

Mishnaic Hebrew

An important element in discovering the language of Jesus and of first century Israel is the Mishna, a body of writings in Hebrew, which set forth rabbinical guidelines of how to apply the law to everyday life. The Mishna includes the (oral) teachings of the rabbis up through the second century AD, so it provides crucial confirmation that Hebrew was a spoken language. It is divided into six parts dealing with every topic to which the law could be applied, e.g. contracts, marriage, work related issues, etc. In other words, it employed vocabulary that was current and up-to-date at the time of Jesus (see Segal 1908). The Hebrew vocabulary used in the Mishna is not solely that of the Bible, but neither is it Aramaic. It was the “modern” Hebrew of the day. Many Hebrew words had changed, some had fallen out of use, and others had even taken on a totally different meaning.

Nonetheless, many scholars have insisted that Mishnaic Hebrew was either an invention of the rabbis or even a translation from Aramaic. Dr. Shmuel Safrai, a founding member of the Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research and past professor at the Hebrew University, notes that

most scholars since the beginning of the nineteenth century have concluded that Aramaic was the spoken language of the land of Israel during the Second Temple period. Even when scribes of that period or later attest that they wrote or transmitted traditions in Hebrew, scholars have persisted in claiming that this “Hebrew” was actually some type of Aramaic dialect then

prevalent among the Jews of the land. It has even been claimed that the Hebrew in which the Mishna was written was an artificial language of the *bet midrash*, house of study, which was a translation from Aramaic, or at the very least heavily influenced by Aramaic. (Safrai 1991a)

However, the application of Hebrew to everyday situations strongly suggests that Hebrew was still a living language. Consider by way of example the English word *nice*. Eight hundred years ago it meant “silly and strange.” Words can take on radically new meanings, but we would not say that *nice* is no longer English; it has a different meaning, but it’s not a different language. So, too, the Mishna used much of the vocabulary from the Bible – both Standard and Late Biblical Hebrew – but also coined new phrases to deal with then-current situations, and occasionally even completely integrated vocabulary from Aramaic, Greek, Persian, and other languages.

Furthermore, the possibility of it being a living language is corroborated by other Hebrew documents from roughly the same period, which we will discuss later. To say that Mishnaic Hebrew, the Hebrew of Jesus’ day, was not a living language is truly an argument from silence. All of the sources that we will look at plainly designate Hebrew as a living language. Therefore, in light of this evidence, the burden of proof should lie with those who maintain that Mishnaic Hebrew is an artificial contrivance (Dr. Gallagher personal communication).

Bar Kochba

After the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 AD under the Roman General Titus, the Jewish people continued living in Israel though their numbers were greatly diminished. From 132–135 AD, the Jewish people, under Simon Bar Kochba, rebelled against the dictates of Rome, which had outlawed circumcision. Though they fought passionately, the Romans overwhelmed them, and at the end of the revolt, all Jews were expelled from the city of Jerusalem on penalty of death.

Letters of correspondence between Bar Kochba and his soldiers were discovered in 1951 near the Dead Sea. They are a significant finding since they were written in Hebrew as well as Aramaic and Greek. There are certain colloquialisms found in them, leading to the conclusion that Hebrew was not a dead language, nor was it a language reserved only for the synagogues.

The Hebrew documents clearly were written by an expert scribe, with the script being similar to printed Hebrew used today ... they contain a number of colloquialisms causing some scholars to suggest that contrary to popular assumption, Hebrew at the time was a living and developing language. This is also reflected in the economic and military documents found in the Judean Desert ... The widespread use of Hebrew in the period is confirmed by coins minted during the revolt. All fifty-one different types of coin found from that period have Hebrew inscriptions. (Pileggi 1991)

The Bar Kochba letters are a weighty piece of evidence demonstrating that well after the time of Jesus, the Jewish people in Israel were still speaking Hebrew. After all, if you were leading a revolt against the strongest army of the world, wouldn't you want to give your orders in a language that your subordinates might misunderstand? And, of course, a misunderstanding in war could cost one's life. Thus, finding correspondence in Hebrew clearly confirms that it was a spoken language, not just a language of religious gatherings.

Where Does Aramaic Fit In?

The importance of Aramaic was felt in Judah as early as the late eighth century BC, as is evident from 2 Kings 18:26: “Then Eliakim ... said to the Rabshakeh, ‘Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it; and do not speak to us in Hebrew ...’” Dr. Bill Gallagher (personal communication) lists some reasons for the success of Aramaic against other languages, though the Arameans never had any significant period of conquest.

- The presence of Aram in the midst of the Fertile Crescent as well as the Aramean tribes between Babylonia and Elam in the first half of the first millennium BC.
- The numerous deportations of rebellious Aramean tribes from Babylonia/Elam by Assyria to other parts of their empire, resulting in the spread of the language.
- The spread of the language increasing its importance for traders and other travelers.
- The simplicity of their alphabet compared to cuneiform

used by the Babylonians and the greater diversity of writing surfaces suitable for Aramaic.

By the time Nebuchadnezzar took the Judeans captive and destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC, Aramaic had all but displaced Akkadian as the language of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, becoming the international language (though Akkadian may have still been spoken in Babylonia proper). The Persian Empire then conquered Babylonia and kept Aramaic as their official international language until the fourth century BC when Alexander the Great came through and made Greek the new international language; Aramaic continued to be used by many as either a first or second language. Among the nations where Aramaic had a role were Israel, located on the important trade routes between Babylonia to the north,⁵ and Egypt, and all of Africa to the south, as well as on a route from the Arabian Peninsula for the spice trade. The number of travelers who would not have spoken Hebrew would have been considerable. And since the official court language was Aramaic, marriage contracts and the like were written in Aramaic and not in the married couple's native language (Safrai 1991b).

Transliterated Names and Words in the New Testament

Considering the influence of Aramaic in Israel, we should not be surprised to see some Aramaic names and words in the pages of the New Testament (NT). Though there are a number of Aramaic names in the NT (such as names starting with *Bar*), there are actually more Hebrew names. Moreover, just because foreign names appear in a text, we do not automatically assume that the name's language of origin is the spoken language. Living in California provides us with wonderful examples. Though it seems that every other street has a Spanish name, we don't conclude that Spanish is the language of America. Rather, it demonstrates that sometime during the history of California, Spanish had, and still has, influence in the state.

Ben/Bar

The words *ben* and *bar* are Hebrew and Aramaic respectively, meaning “son.” The demarcation between the two has been thought to be so clear that the ben/bar distinction is often used to decide whether an inscription is Hebrew or Aramaic. However, Ken Penner, at the 2003 Canadian Society of Biblical Studies Annual Meeting, notes that the ben/bar rule may not be as useful as it was once thought.

A clue to the solution may be found in the Bar Kokhba letters ... These letters unavailable to Dalman and Zahn a century ago, are from the early second century CE.⁶ Some are in Aramaic, some in Hebrew, and some in Greek. Especially noteworthy for our purposes is the use of Aramaic names within Hebrew letters, and vice-versa. It is common practice to use the ben/bar distinction to categorize inscriptions as either Hebrew or Aramaic. But it appears (not only from these letters) that names are *not* reliable indicators of language. Names are notoriously resistant to translation. (Penner 2003)

In the letters there are examples of where the Aramaic *bar* is used in Hebrew correspondence and, likewise, Hebrew *ben* is sometimes used in Aramaic correspondence, and both of these occasionally appear in Greek. Thus, just because we find the word *bar* recorded in New Testament names, we need not conclude that the name bearers necessarily spoke Aramaic. Names such as *Bar-abbas*, *Bartholomaios*, *Bar-iesous*, *Bar-iona*, *Bar-nabas*, *Bar-sabas*, *Bar-timaios* have the appearance of Aramaic, but it is impossible to tell which language the bearer of each name spoke.

The use of non-Hebrew names seems to have been rather common since even the (Jewish) disciples *Philip* and *Andrew* have Greek names. Philip, however, was not from Greece or anywhere else outside of Israel, but was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter, according to John 1:44. Andrew, likewise, had a completely Greek name, though his brother had a completely Hebrew name, *Simon*, in honor of one of the twelve patriarchs. Their father had a completely Hebrew name, *Jonah*, after the prophet. It should be kept in mind that Peter seems to have had three names in all, each in a different language: *Shimon* (Hebrew), *Kepha* (probably Aramaic

but the root *keph* is found twice in the Hebrew Bible: Job 30:6 and Jeremiah 4:29), and obviously, *Peter* (Greek) – talk about culturally diverse! Just because Philip and Andrew had Greek names, we don't assume that they were Greek or that Greek was their mother tongue (though they may have spoken it as a second or even third language). Quite possibly what happened was that, like today, the parents knew someone with the name or just simply liked how it sounded. When I spent a few months in the Dominican Republic during college, my host family had a son named Wilmington, and nobody in the family spoke any English!

However, most of the disciples had Hebrew names: *James* is simply the Greek form of the Hebrew *Jacob* (*heel catcher*). The name of his brother *John* reflects the Hebrew name *Yochanan* (*God is gracious*). *Thomas* is the Greek form of the Hebrew *Teom* which means “twin.” *Matthew*, *Judas*, *Alphaeus*, and *Lebbaeus* are, likewise, New Testament names of Hebrew stock, which we either find in the Old Testament or at least have an easily identifiable Hebrew root. Though we do not see any names with the Hebrew word *ben* (son) preceding it, that may simply be because those were translated into Greek. For example, when Jesus speaks to Peter, He says, “Simon son of Jonah” (John 1:42), which, more than likely, was *Simon ben Jonah*. This conclusion is supported by the high number of Hebrew names attested in the New Testament.

Table 2 demonstrates that even though the Aramaic *bar* was a common designation for *son*, most names still come from a Hebrew origin. Moreover, names are actually a poor indicator of the spoken language since even some of the (Jewish) disciples had either exclusively Greek names, or, in the case of Peter, had three names, each in a different language. Thus, the *ben/bar* distinction proves to be unhelpful in determining which language the person spoke, and so the presence of names which have *bar* does not prove that Aramaic had replaced Hebrew by any means.

Table 2. Names in the New Testament

<i>Hebrew names – English equivalent</i>	<i>Transliteration</i>	<i>Hebrew</i>	<i>Greek</i>
John	<i>Yochanan</i>	יוחנן	Ἰωάννης
Simon (Peter)	<i>Shimon</i>	שמעון	Σίμων
Cephas (Aramaic) (Peter)	<i>Kephas</i>	כפא (כף)	Κηφᾶς
Thomas	<i>Tom</i>	תאום	Θωμᾶς
Jacob (James)	<i>Jaakob</i>	יעקב	Ἰάκωβος
Matthew	<i>Matai</i>	מתִּי	Ματθαῖος
Judas	<i>Jebuda</i>	יהודה	Ἰουδᾶς
<i>Greek names – English equivalent</i>			
Peter	<i>Petros</i>		Πέτρος
Philip	<i>Philipos</i>		Φίλιππος
Andrew	<i>Andreas</i>		Ἀνδρέας

Targumim

Another reason for assuming that Jesus spoke Aramaic is the usage of Targumim. *Targum* (Targumim is plural) is the Hebrew word for the Aramaic translations of the Old Testament (OT). For the Jews living outside of Israel, due to their dispersion through the centuries before Jesus, Hebrew did truly become a dead language. They therefore translated the OT into Aramaic, which was the international lingua franca. Furthermore, there was more than just one *Targum*. There were several different ones written at different times in different places such as in Babylon, where Aramaic was definitely spoken, and other places such as Israel (the Palestinian Targum – which was written after Jesus). Unfortunately, a misunderstanding regarding the question of Hebrew or Aramaic has arisen from the use of Targumim. The error is assuming that since the Old Testament was translated into Aramaic, Jesus and the Jews in Israel of His day did not know Hebrew.

There are a few things that should be kept in mind when considering the role of the Targumim. They were more than simple translations – they were also commentaries on the Scriptures. And, more importantly, “the language of the Palestinian Targumim is several centuries later than the first century. They cannot be used as examples of first century Aramaic” (Buth 1987:30–31). Thus, for many people, the Aramaic of the Palestinian Targum would have been their first language, but not at the time of Jesus. Aramaic did not truly become the first language of Jews in Israel until after 200 AD!⁷ (Buth 1987:31). So, though the Targumim are helpful sources, they are in no way indicative of the language of Jesus’ day and should not be used to argue that the Jews in His day didn’t know Hebrew. Indeed Smith’s Bible Dictionary substantiates that “the earliest Targum, which is that of Onkelos on the Pentateuch, began to be committed to writing about the second century of the Christian era; though it did not assume its present shape till the end of the third or the beginning of the fourth century” (Smith 1884: Targum entry).

The New Testament Evidence

Another important resource in our quest is the New Testament. Paul himself gives personal testimony regarding the language of Jesus while on his way to Damascus. He says, “I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’” (Act 26:14). The words translated as *Hebrew* are the Greek words Ἑβραϊδὶ διαλέκτῳ – *Hebraidi dialecto*, which literally translated mean “in the Hebrew language.” Though this would seem clear enough to make it a shut case, there is still felt a need to explain this away – again the presupposition being that “we know that they spoke Aramaic.” This thinking is reflected in some translations such as the NIV and New Living Translation Bibles where the word is translated as *Aramaic* as mentioned earlier.

If this were the only example of the word *Hebrew* in the NT, then our claim regarding which language Jesus spoke would have less weight. However, previously in Acts, when Paul is in front of his accusers in the temple, he takes advantage of a chance to proclaim the gospel to his fellow countrymen whom he was eager to win to Christ. “So when he had given him permission, Paul stood on the stairs and

motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great silence, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language ..." (Acts 21:40). Again, the word *Hebrew* is the Greek word Ἑβραϊδί - *Hebraidi*. The sign on the cross of Jesus was written in three languages, Hebrew (Ἑβραϊστί - *Hebraisti*), the language of the land; Latin, the language of Rome and her officials; and Greek, the international trade language (like English today).

Interestingly, the current situation in Israel closely parallels the situation back then. Today, Hebrew, the official language of the land, is spoken by nearly everyone. It is followed by the trade language English. A businessman is greatly impaired if he doesn't have at least a fair command of English - even if he misses some words or grammar here and there. And lastly, Arabic is spoken by about one-fifth of the population. If someone really wants to get a message out to as many people as possible, he or she would do well to write it not only in Hebrew, the national language, but in English and Arabic as well. And with the huge influx of Russian immigrants, writing it in Russian also would be a good idea! And so, by putting the sign on Jesus' cross in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, Pilate was sure to communicate the message to as many people as possible. Just because it wasn't in Aramaic doesn't mean that no one was speaking Aramaic. It would seem that Aramaic was not considered important enough or perhaps there wasn't large enough of a population group in the area to warrant it being written in Aramaic as well.

A common explanation regarding why Jesus spoke to Paul, and Paul to his listeners in Hebrew is because it was so much out of the ordinary. However, a bit of investigation and logic will demonstrate otherwise. First of all, why would Jesus speak to Paul, and Paul to his audience in a dead language? When making an important declaration, the mother tongue is always the best choice, since there is much less chance of being misunderstood. This is especially true of Paul trying to persuade the crowd in the temple not only to accept Jesus, but also to save his life! The fact that Luke in Acts

says that Paul spoke Hebrew does not indicate that that was out of the ordinary. It must be kept in mind that Luke was writing in Greek. Since Paul's letters to the churches were written in Greek, it would be important for Luke to tell his audience that here Paul used Hebrew, the language of the Jews in Israel rather than Greek, the language in which he communicated with the Gentiles. The context in no way suggests that Paul was speaking Hebrew *rather than* Aramaic.

Secondly, of the places in the NT where it says *in the Hebrew*, most are place names. For example John, in 19:13, gives the translated name (*the Pavement*) and then tells the readers what the actual original language name was (*Gabbatha*). There is nothing abnormal or out of the ordinary in doing this since John was writing to Greek speakers who probably had no idea of what *Gabbatha* meant. If I told you that the Orthodox Jews go to *HaKotel* to pray, you probably wouldn't understand. However, if I say, they go to the *Western Wall*, which in Hebrew is *HaKotel*, you would understand what I am referring to and would learn a Hebrew word in the process.

Is Hebrew Really Aramaic?

So, in spite of all the evidence that Hebrew was spoken, why do most scholars and certain Bible translators assume that *Hebrew* really means *Aramaic*? The word for *Aramaic* in Greek is Συριστί, *Syristi*, which, however, never appears in the New Testament, though it does appear a few times in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament). Since there was a way for the writers of the NT to express *Aramaic* if they had wanted to, why didn't they if *Hebrew* really means *Aramaic*? The common assumption is that since Hebrew was a dead language, the NT authors actually meant *Aramaic* when mentioning *the Hebrew language*. They did this since, supposedly, *Aramaic* was the language of the Hebrews.

So *the Hebrew language*, according to this view, is very much like how *the American language* actually means *English* or that speaking *Austrian*, of course, means speaking *German*. Matthew Black, suggests “the use of the term ‘Hebrew’ to refer to *Aramaic* is readily explicable, since it described the peculiar dialect of *Aramaic* which had grown up in Palestine since the days of Nehemiah ... ” (Black 1967:48). Likewise, Ken Penner points out the view of previous scholars:

The view is articulated best by Gustav Dalman and Theodore Zahn a century ago. [...] Hebrew was *not* a spoken language in the first century, or it was at least greatly overpowered by Aramaic. [...] This line of reasoning holds that because the Hebrew people normally used Aramaic rather than Hebrew, Aramaic could be called the language of the Hebrew people, and therefore the *Hebrew language*. (Penner 2003)

Their thinking goes something like this: After King Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem and carried away its residents, Hebrew eventually died out and was replaced by Aramaic. Therefore, the Jews who returned from Babylon no longer spoke Hebrew; their new mother tongue was Aramaic (the new “Hebrew” language), as attested supposedly by the use of Aramaic in the books of Daniel and Ezra. However, the usage of Aramaic in these books is easily explained: Aramaic speakers in Babylonia are being quoted, written to, or included in the narrative. Hebrew never did die out, however. If it had, then why did the latter prophets (after 530 BC) write in Hebrew? Why didn’t Zechariah, Malachi, Haggai, Esther, Nehemiah, (and all chapters of) Ezra and Daniel write in the language of the common people, which they would have understood? If they were writing in a language that was not the mother tongue of the majority of the people, then we can conclude that God was not interested in communicating with His people (See Buth 1987:28). But they did write in Hebrew for the masses and we know that those books are post-exilic, which means that Hebrew was still a spoken language. Let’s now look more closely at the books of Nehemiah and Ezra to see if they support the claim that the Jews lost Hebrew as their mother tongue.

Nehemiah and Ezra

One of the most commonly cited passages used to supposedly prove that the returning captives spoke Aramaic is Nehemiah 8:8. “So they read distinctly (*meforash*, מפרש) from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading.” The pro-Aramaic camp sees in this verse proof that the

Hebrew Scriptures needed to be translated for the solely Aramaic speaking people, which is reflected in some versions of the Bible (*The Message* and the *New American Standard Bible*). “They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading” (NASB). But does this verse really say that they translated from one language to another?

The first few words of this verse in Hebrew are straightforward – *They read in the book of the law of God* (translation mine). The disagreement occurs when we come to the word *מפרש*, *mefarash*, which comes from the Hebrew root *פרש*, *parash*, meaning to *distinguish, separate, make clear*. The idea that this means to *translate* is simply not supported by the Hebrew text. In Leviticus 24:12 we encounter this same Hebrew root with the meaning to *make clear*: “Then they put him in custody, that the mind of the LORD might be shown (*parash*) to them.” We then later find it in Numbers 15:34 with the same meaning. “They put him under guard, because it had not been explained (*parash*) what should be done to him.” There is no indication whatsoever of translating from one language to another. Finally, we see this in another place that has caused some to conclude that it must mean *translate*. Ezra 4:18 records that Aramaic speaking King Artaxerxes received the letter sent to him and then he replies. This verse, of course, is in Aramaic since it is the correspondence between the king and Rehum and Shimshai as discussed below. It says, “The letter which you sent to us has been clearly (*mefarash*) read before me.” The word *clearly* is the Aramaic word *mefarash* – a cognate of the Hebrew word *mefarash*.

How should this word be understood here? Should it be *translated* or is it *clearly* or *distinctly*? Fortunately, the context will only support one of the two options, thereby making it clear for us which one it should be. We need to recall that the letter written by Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe, two leaders of the inhabitants who were against the returning Jews, to the king was translated into Aramaic (“In the days of Artaxerxes also, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabel, and the rest of their companions wrote to Artaxerxes king

of Persia; and the letter was written in Aramaic script, translated [*meturgam*] into the Aramaic language ..." Ezra 4:7). This letter was put in Aramaic and then sent to the king, which is why from Ezra 4:8 onward the entire text switches from Hebrew to Aramaic. So, if the letter sent to the king was in Aramaic, then why would there be a need for another translation if the word *mefarash/meforash* actually means *to translate*? Would the king's scribe translate it into any other language besides Aramaic, which was the official court language? The obvious answer is no. There was no need to translate the letter into Aramaic since it was already written in Aramaic! We are left with only one option of the meaning of *meforash*; it is *clearly, distinctly*. So, Ezra 4:18 does not mean *translate* but *clearly, distinctly*. That is, the letter was read carefully, and apparently the king must have really paid attention and not have been sleeping or daydreaming! And so the meaning in Nehemiah 8:8 also means *clearly, distinctly*, and not *translate*.

In addition to examining the meaning of the Hebrew word *meforash*, there are several other contextual factors which serve to clarify that Nehemiah 8:8 is not referring to *translating*. It must not be overlooked that the entire book of Nehemiah was written in Hebrew! If it had been written in Aramaic, then the argument of translation might hold some weight. The book of Nehemiah was written at, or a bit after, the time of this event, thus showing that Hebrew was the common language. Yes, but isn't Ezra written in Aramaic and doesn't that therefore prove that the Jews spoke Aramaic? Again, there is little doubt that the returning Jews *knew* Aramaic. The real question, however, is whether Aramaic replaced Hebrew as the mother tongue of the Jewish people.

It is true that three and one half chapters of Ezra are written in Aramaic. However, what is crucial to a proper understanding is what was written in those three and a half chapters. The book of Ezra, like every other book in the Hebrew Bible, begins in Hebrew. Only in the middle of chapter four does the book switch from Hebrew to Aramaic. The reason is all too obvious. Beginning in

4:8, the antagonists to the Jews who were trying to rebuild the walls write a letter to the King Artaxerxes in Persia. Ezra 4:7 describes the letter: “In the days of Artaxerxes also, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabel, and the rest of their companions wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the letter was written in Aramaic script, and *translated into the Aramaic language*” (emphasis mine). Notice that they needed to write the letter in a language other than that of the land! We are told specifically that they translated it into Aramaic. And then in 4:11, we read, “This is a copy of the letter that they sent him,” which tells us explicitly that what follows is a copy of the very letter that they sent in the king’s language (Aramaic) and not in their language (Hebrew). The word for *translate* is not *meforash* but **מתרגם**, *meturgam*.

The following three chapters follow a similar course. The bulk of chapter five is a letter from Tattenai to Darius, most of chapter six is Darius’ response, and then most of chapter seven is the letter of Artaxerxes to Ezra. Thus to suggest that the fact that these chapters are in Aramaic somehow proves that the returning exiles didn’t speak Hebrew does not follow the context of the passages. Very clearly we are told that in the chapters mentioned, what we have are copies of the actual letters of correspondence between the Persian Empire, which spoke Aramaic, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Thus the proper understanding of Nehemiah 8:8 in no way suggests that they needed to translate the Scriptures into the Jews’ “new” language (Aramaic), but rather they gave an understanding of the Scriptures to the nation that had not embraced them for the previous seventy plus years. It is no different than how we read the Bible and then back up to expound and explain what those words mean and how they apply to our lives. Nor can we conclude from Nehemiah or Ezra that Aramaic could be considered Hebrew. Hebrew remained Hebrew, and Aramaic, as we have seen, was referred to as Aramaic. Therefore, we conclude that Hebrew never did die out.

Semitic Words in the New Testament

In all fairness to Black and many other scholars like him, it should be noted that their position is not based solely on the assumption that Hebrew died out beginning with Ezra and Nehemiah. There are several words in the NT which indeed are Aramaic. For example, *maranatha* (which is actually two words: *mare* and *ata* meaning “Lord come!”) in I Corinthians 16:22 where Paul is writing to his non-Israelite, non-Hebrew-speaking audience (though even *ata* is used in the Hebrew Old Testament at least twenty times).

Likewise, there are some other words that have the appearance of Aramaic such as *Sabbatha* and *Pascha*, plus some words spoken by Jesus, all of which will be dealt with in a later chapter. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that these scholars did not simply take God’s Word at face value and accept the word *Hebrew* (Ἑβραϊσ̄ or *Hebrais*) in Scripture as meaning *Hebrew*, especially since we now have enough external sources to validate that where the New Testament writers say something was in Hebrew, it was really Hebrew. It is also unfortunate that some modern translators are following the lead of some scholars and are actually substituting *Aramaic* where it says *Hebrew*. God’s Word is faithful and true and can be trusted in even the most minute of details, even when it is contrary to current scholarship.

The New Testament writers identified certain words and phrases as Hebrew nine times, one of which is when Jesus is speaking to Paul. Rather than trying to make it fit a preconceived idea about what it means, we can simply accept the NT witness and believe that Hebrew really means Hebrew! Let’s look at the testimony of some biblical and non-biblical ancient sources which all say that the Jewish language in Israel at that time was Hebrew.

Septuagint

The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, written

approximately from 280–250 BC, clearly differentiates between the word *Hebrew* (*Hebrais*) and the word *Aramaic* (*Syriak* or *Syristi*). In 2 Kings 18:26, the distinction is made between *Hebrew*, which was the language of the Israelites and *Aramaic*, that of Assyria. “Then Eliakim ... said to the Rabshakeh, ‘Please speak to your servants in Aramaic (Συριοῦ), for we understand it; and do not speak to us in Hebrew (literally *Ιουδαῖτι*, *Youdaiti*, – Judean – the language of Judah)⁸ in the hearing of the people who are on the wall.’” This event occurred in the eighth century BC, over 200 years before the return of the exiled Jews in about 530 BC. This is important to our question since it shows unmistakably that there was a distinction between Hebrew and Aramaic.

Josephus

Josephus, the Jewish historian to whom we are greatly indebted for much of our knowledge of the Second Temple period, writes in the preface to his monumental work, *Antiquities of the Jews*, “Now I have undertaken the present work, as thinking it will appear to all the Greeks worthy of their study; for it will contain all our antiquities, and the constitution of our government, as interpreted out of the Hebrew Scriptures.” Here he states that the *Hebrew Scriptures* will be his primary source material. He distinguishes unmistakably between Hebrew and Aramaic by his commentary of the above text from 2 Kings 18:26, “When Rabshakeh had made this speech in the Hebrew tongue [*Ἑβραῖστῃ*=*hebraisti*], for he was skilful in that language, Eliakim was afraid lest the multitude that heard him should be disturbed; so he desired him to speak in the Syrian tongue [*συριοῦ* = *syristi* – Aramaic]”⁹ (*Antiquities* 10, 1, 2).

Later in the *Wars of the Jews* 5, 9, 2, Josephus states, regarding the Roman leader, “But then Titus ... sent Josephus to speak to them in their own language; for he imagined they might yield to the persuasion of a countryman of their own.” Later in 6, 2, 1, he says in unmistakable terms, “Upon this Josephus stood in such a place where he might be heard, not by John only, but by many

more, and then declared to them what Caesar had given him in charge, and this in the Hebrew language [Ἑβραϊζων – *hebraidzon*].”¹⁰ We see that he uses the same word for Hebrew (Ἑβραῖς – *Hebrais*) referring to their own language as the Hebrew (Ἑβραῖς – *Hebrais*) of the Septuagint. If Josephus had desired to indicate that their own language was Aramaic, why didn’t he do so? He certainly understood the difference between the two as he notes in his commentary on 2 Kings 18:26. From this, we can conclude that Josephus understood the language spoken by the Jews in Jerusalem when he spoke on behalf of Titus in *their* (that is, the Jews’) language, as being the same as the language of the Old Testament, which was Hebrew. It should be pointed out that Josephus wrote his books several years after the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. That means that in 70 AD at the very least, the inhabitants of Jerusalem were speaking a form of Hebrew as their mother tongue – that is, the one that they were most comfortable conversing in. After all, why would Josephus urge them to “give themselves up” in a dead language that was only used in religious settings? Furthermore, Josephus, understanding that the lives of his fellow Jews were at stake, would have used the language easiest to understand so that there would not be any misunderstandings.

The Letter of Aristeas

The Letter of Aristeas, (written in Greek at about 200 BC), which purports that the Torah section of the Septuagint was translated in seventy-two days by seventy Jewish elders, mentions that though it is assumed that they (the Jews) spoke Aramaic, that they, in fact, spoke a different language. The writer says, “Translation is needed [for the Hebrew Scriptures] ... they [Jews] are assumed to use Aramaic [*syriake*], but such is not the case, it is a different [*eteros*] kind [of language]” (Aristeas, section 11. Translation Buth 1987:28). Dr. Buth further explains, “Many Jews in Egypt knew and used Aramaic and many communications from Israel were received and understood in Aramaic. This explains why people were able to

assume that Aramaic was the language of Yehud (as Israel was called at the time). However, the writer of *Aristeas* knew better” (Buth 1987:29). Here, quite plainly, we see from an ancient source that the language of Israel approximately one or two centuries before Jesus, was not Aramaic; and it is not to be understood as a dialect of Aramaic, in this case, by the word *eteros* which means something of a totally different sort. This is not to say that no one in Israel spoke Aramaic; in fact, they did, but not as their primary language of conversation.

What needs to be understood is that there were people other than the Jews living in Israel at the time, and the Jews’ dealings with them were often done in Aramaic. But in their own circles, the Jews spoke in Hebrew. Aramaic was one of a few languages spoken in Israel at the time. Shmuel Safrai points out, “Aramaic was the language of communication between Jews and those non-Jews not connected with the government or living in Greek cities. An ordinary non-Jew mentioned in rabbinic literature is referred to as an Aramean and generally has an Aramaic rather than a Greek name (Tosefta, Pesahim 1:27)” (Safrai 1991a). The “different” language the Letter of Aristeas refers to is Mishnaic Hebrew. They were not able to understand very well the old biblical Hebrew (that is, Standard Biblical Hebrew – the language of David and Isaiah, etc.), but neither did they speak Aramaic. We can also deduce from this letter that the “different” language was not Greek since there would have been no need for a translation; the Septuagint was already in existence.

They did not understand much of the Hebrew of some parts of the Bible very well and so they needed a translation. As mentioned before, Hebrew, as a living language, was a language in change. By the time of 200 to 100 BC, the language had changed significantly enough so that the average reader could no longer understand the Scriptures with ease. A translation would have greatly benefited them, just as many of us prefer the New King James Version to the archaic King James Version, though with enough perseverance, most of us can eventually make it through the older text.

Jerome

Someone who should not be overlooked is Jerome, an ascetic monk who lived in Bethlehem in the fourth century AD, who wrote a series of commentaries on the Bible and numerous letters. He spent a great deal of time learning Hebrew so that he could translate the Bible into Latin from Hebrew versus the (Greek) Septuagint-based version. Jerome makes numerous references to the language of Hebrew throughout his letters to different individuals. In his writings there are nineteen passages that speak of a “Hebrew gospel” or a gospel “according to the Hebrews.” Jerome states in “Lives of Illustrious Men,” 3, in Volume 3 of the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*,

Matthew, also called Levi, apostle and aforesaid publican, composed a gospel of Christ at first published in Judea in Hebrew for the sake of those of the circumcision who believed, but this was afterwards translated into Greek though by what author is uncertain. The Hebrew itself has been preserved until the present day in the library at Caesarea which Pamphilus so diligently gathered. I have also had the opportunity of having the volume described to me by the Nazarenes of Beroea, a city of Syria, who use it. In this it is to be noted that wherever the Evangelist, whether on his own account or in the person of our Lord the Saviour, quotes the testimony of the Old Testament, he does not follow the authority of the translators of the Septuagint, but the Hebrew. (See also Blizzard 1989)

Fragments of Papias

Papias was one of the early church fathers who lived from 70 to 155 AD. The early church historian Eusebius notes that he “had the privilege of association with Polycarp, in the friendship of St. John himself, and of ‘others who had seen the Lord’” (Eusebius 3.39.15). In these fragments of correspondence, an important statement is made concerning the language of Jesus’ disciples – specifically Matthew, though he makes reference to the other disciples as well. He says about Matthew (fragment VI), “Matthew put together the oracles [of the Lord] in the Hebrew language, and each one

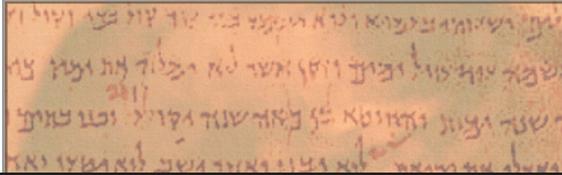
interpreted them as best he could” (Eusebius, III, 39, 1). Thus we witness, from the mouth of a man who lived shortly after the time of Jesus and who was born at the time of the destruction of the temple, that Matthew put together Jesus’ words in Hebrew. This proves that the people for whom Matthew wrote his original book would have spoken Hebrew since people usually don’t write a book in a language that no one can speak, unless they are not concerned with actually communicating his message.¹¹ This fact alone does not prove that Jesus spoke Hebrew, but it does strongly demonstrate that there were Hebrew speakers living in the land even after his day.

This is in complete agreement with the findings of many scholars who suggest that the evidence points to not only the Gospel of Matthew having been written in Hebrew, but also to a general Hebrew thought pattern behind the entire New Testament. Dr. Roy B. Blizzard Jr. points out, “The most conclusive evidence for Hebrew as the principal language behind not just the Synoptic Gospels, but the New Testament in its entirety, is the text itself. The New Testament is literally filled with Semitisms: Hebrew vocabulary, Hebrew syntax, Hebrew idioms, Hebrew thought patterns, and Hebrew theology” (Blizzard 1989:6).

Summary

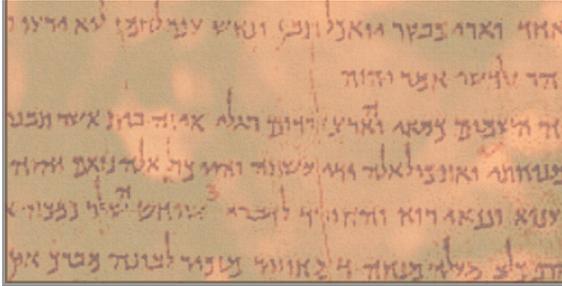
We have seen that the commonly asserted claim that Nehemiah 8:8, portions of Ezra and Daniel point to Aramaic as having replaced Hebrew is not true. The key word *clearly* in Nehemiah indicates that they were giving an explanation of the Scriptures. The Aramaic portions of Ezra and Daniel were written as such due to the correspondence between Jerusalem and the Persian Empire in Ezra and communication or inclusion of Babylonian people in the book of Daniel. Thus, these books cannot be used to support the claim that Aramaic became the language of the Jews. Rather, they are consistent with the fact that Hebrew remained their primary language.

Furthermore, the Septuagint, Josephus, the Letter of Aristeas, Jerome, and the writings of Papias all clearly point to Hebrew as the language of the first century and Jesus. They make a plain distinction between the languages of Hebrew and Aramaic and repeatedly state directly or indirectly that Hebrew was the language of the Jews. In addition to these, there is a plethora of literature written in Hebrew from the first century AD. Shmuel Safrai notes, “Not only was Hebrew the most prevalent spoken language in the land of Israel during the first century, it was also the language in which most literary works were written” (Safrai 1991b). He cites the many Jewish sources which were written in Hebrew at or even after the time of Jesus such as the Haggadah, Halacha, Midrash, etc. His conclusion is that “Hebrew was certainly the main written language in the land of Israel at the time of Jesus among all streams of Judaism and in all literary genres. Although documents apparently were written in Aramaic by Jews in this period, they are insignificant in number when compared with the vast literature written in Hebrew.” Furthermore, since his survey was so complete, he boldly makes the statement that “Hebrew was the dominant spoken and written language in the whole land of Israel in the time of Jesus. It is therefore quite possible that not only did Jesus give His teaching in Hebrew, but that His biography was written in that language as well” (Safrai 1991b).



PART TWO

The Words of Jesus and the Gospels



We have seen, so far, that there is extensive evidence showing that Hebrew was alive and well during the time of Jesus. It was not a dead language as it is so often declared. In fact, it was the primary language of communication for the Jewish people in the land of Israel in Jesus' day. But can we prove that Jesus and His followers spoke Hebrew?

In a sense, it is like living a few hundred years from now in the future and trying to prove that some Swiss people spoke German as their mother tongue. Chances are, it could be done, but since there are Swiss citizens that speak also French and Italian, just knowing that some spoke German does not prove that so and so's native language was German – though it does provide the important language environment. On the other hand, an occasional word here and there in French or Italian would not prove that our imaginary person did not speak German. However, if every time the person's transliterated words were proven to be German, which was then coupled with the fact that the person's historic language was German, we could safely and conclusively prove that he spoke German as his mother tongue.

This is essentially the same scenario we have when considering the question of which language Jesus spoke in His daily life and ministry. Remember, the question is not what He was capable of speaking – He was probably tri-lingual, speaking Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and maybe even Latin. Our focus is on what He used daily with His disciples, the religious leaders and the masses. Since we now know that Hebrew was not a dead language and that it was widespread in Israel at that time, we must demonstrate that Jesus also used it. Therefore, the rest of the book will examine (a) words that the gospel writers at times state are Hebrew, (b) some place names said to be Hebrew, (c) those words of Jesus which have been left in the original language (d) and a few other words that are known to be specifically Hebrew and not Aramaic. There are many clues that, upon close inspection, will reveal just which language they belong to and, consequently, show that Jesus was using Hebrew words and speaking Hebrew sentences in His daily life and ministry.

Transliteration

An important term that should be defined before continuing is *transliteration*, which means to write a word from one language to another without translating it. For example, when we write *hallelujah*, we are transliterating the Hebrew words יהללו יה into English spelling. The translation is *praise the LORD*. The New Testament was written in Greek, though some words are simply transliterated from Hebrew (or supposedly Aramaic) into Greek letters. For example, *hallelujah* written in the New Testament is ἀλληλούϊα (*alleluia*). Every language has limitations in reproducing the sounds of other languages. There are certain sounds Spanish has that English cannot reproduce, so too Hebrew has letters that Greek cannot reproduce, and vice versa. We will see that the issue of transliteration is an important key in determining which language Jesus spoke.

Words Stated to be Hebrew by The New Testament Writers

The words *Sabbatha*, *Pascha*, *Bethesda*, *Gabbatha*, and *Golgotha* are cited to support the claim of Aramaic being the language of Jesus and of first century Israel. Their common feature is their ending with the Greek letter *alpha*, which is the transliteration of presumably Aramaic words. The *alpha* would supposedly depict an underlying \aleph (*Aleph*) at the end of these words, which suggests Aramaic, since that was the way to express the definite article *the* in Aramaic, whereas Hebrew would place the letter ה (*he*) at the beginning of a word. Again, the issue of transliteration is paramount in our discussion. In other words, the Hebrew or Aramaic words we see written in the Greek New Testament are only the closest approximation that the constraints of the Greek language permit, just as there are certain foreign words that can not be reproduced when writing in English. So, though it looks like an underlying *aleph*, we cannot be sure, since we only have it written in Greek letters.

Sabbatha and Pascha

The Hebrew words *Shabbath* and *Pesach* are consistently transliterated in the Septuagint as *σάββατα*, *Sabbatha*, and *πάσχα*, *Pascha*, so we should not be surprised to see identical spellings in the New Testament. Ken Penner discusses the presence of the *alpha* at the end of the words. “Blass-Debrunner-Funk’s Greek grammar explains that *alpha* endings can be added to Semitic loanwords to help Greek pronunciation, as it does for the form *sabbata*. Greek abhors words ending in a stop consonant such as *tau*. *Alpha* was a natural sound to add, to keep the word from ending with a consonant” (Penner 2003). We may conclude that either the New Testament writers were aware of the Septuagint’s spelling, or they simply knew that was how one transliterated these words. However, we cannot conclude that the translators of the Septuagint were translating from an Aramaic source since most if not all of the Targumim were translated later. Furthermore, the words *Shabbath* and *Pesach* are originally Hebrew or Israelite words. They originated at the beginning of the Israelite nation at Mount Sinai with the giving of the law and perhaps even before. And so, when we see these words in the Septuagint with the letter *alpha* at the end, the only explanation is that it is due to transliteration.

The *alpha* at the end of *Bethesda* (John 5:2), *Gabbatha* (John 19:13), and *Golgotha* (John 19:17) is due to the same issue of transliteration. Quite contrary to the assertion that they are Aramaic, we find that these words are of solid Hebrew stock with the letter *a* at the end as a product of transliteration. As just noted, an *a*, or *alpha*, at the end of Aramaic words indicates the word *the*. Since the three verses give the translation as well as the transliteration of the words, we should see the definite article *the* in Greek translation if, as is asserted, the words are Aramaic. In other words, if the words *Bethesda*, *Gabbatha*, and *Golgotha* are Aramaic and the letter *a*, or *alpha*, is the Aramaic *the*, then we should see the equivalent definite article in Greek. However, as we will see, none of these words are definite.

Bethesda

“Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda,¹² having five porches.” (John 5:2) This is a compound word (just like Bethlehem means *house of bread*) and is completely Hebrew. Bethesda means *house of mercy* and comes from *Beth* meaning *house* and *chesed* meaning *mercy*. Since Greek had no way to transliterate the “ch” sound like “Bach,” they simply were forced to leave it out. It’s almost as if John wanted to preempt this whole debate by telling us that the word is Hebrew.

Gabbatha

“So Pilate, having heard this word, brought Jesus outside and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called Pavement, but in Hebrew Gabbatha” (John 19:13 Analytical Literal Translation). According to Thayer’s Greek Dictionary, Gabbatha means “elevated or a platform.” The same root word גַּבְתָּה, *gabath*,¹³ is found in the Hebrew Bible ninety-four times (Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament *in situ*) with the general meaning of “high” or “exalted.”

The Greek translation of *pavement* is *lithostrotos*, λιθόστρωτος, which literally means “paved with blocks of stone.” Fausset’s Bible Dictionary states “Pilate’s ‘judgment seat’ (*bema*) was on it [the pavement], whereon he sentenced our Lord to crucifixion. Gabbatha is related to *gibeah*, a bore round hill, implying height and roundness; a rounded elevation with tessellated mosaic.” Thus, because the *beema* or elevated platform (*Gabbatha*) was located on the pavement (*lithostrotos*), we see the relationship between them. There is little doubt that this word is Hebrew and need not necessarily be interpreted as Aramaic. Incidentally, the literal wording of the Greek text does not have the word *the*. Without it, claiming the *alpha* in *Gabbatha* to be Aramaic is a questionable argument – especially since John already says that it is Hebrew!

Golgotha

“And carrying His cross, He went out to a place being called Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew Golgotha” (John 19:17 ALT). Golgotha is another Hebrew word which has simply been transliterated into Greek. The actual Hebrew word is **גִּלְגֹּלֶת**, *gulgolet*, the basic meaning being “something round or rolling” and then by implication, “head or skull.” This word is found throughout the pages of the Hebrew Old Testament (the second “L”, or Hebrew letter *lamed*, was simply assimilated in the Greek transliteration, which is a very common occurrence in languages). How do we know that it’s Hebrew and not Aramaic? Couldn’t it just as well be Aramaic, and so we should flip a coin? Well, actually no. There are two good reasons to conclude that it is indeed Hebrew and not Aramaic. First of all, John clearly tells us in 19:17 that the word is Hebrew. And secondly, the text clearly says “Place of a Skull.” If the *alpha* at the end of *Golgotha* were the definite article of Aramaic, then John should have written in Greek – “place of the skull.” But since he already said that the word is Hebrew, then he accurately gives the translation, “place of a skull” (**κρανίου**, *craniou*; *of a skull*, **τόπον**, *topon*, *place*).

The five words we just looked at are all known to be Hebrew. *Sabbatha* and *Pascha* are very ancient Hebrew words from the books of Moses and are as Hebrew as can be. The Greek letter *alpha* at the end is the consistent transliteration in the pages of the Septuagint. Either the New Testament writers were aware of this or they simply knew that that is how one transliterates those words. The other three are declared to be Hebrew by John, and by digging for clues, they were all shown to be Hebrew-based on the root and form. The *alpha* at the end of the words, often used to point to their Aramaic origin, is the same phenomenon that we see in *Sabbatha* and *Pascha*. And since the Greek does not use the definite article when speaking of these places, we conclude that the *alpha* is not pointing to Aramaic, but is an issue of transliteration from Hebrew to Greek.

Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachtani

Mark 15:34 records some of the last words of Jesus as He was on the cross. They have been used to support the claim that Jesus spoke Aramaic and not Hebrew. “And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*’ which is translated, ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’” These words closely parallel the words in Psalm 22:1 in both the original Hebrew and in the Aramaic Targumim, though His words, as recorded in Mark 15:34 match neither exactly. Many scholars have glossed over this utterance as Aramaic without even really taking the time to see if it indeed is.

Table 3 (following page) lists Jesus’ phrase according to Mark and Matthew and then gives the text from Psalm 22:1 in the Hebrew original, the Targum (Aramaic), and then the Christian Syriac version (Syriac and Aramaic are basically the same). Notice that none of the aforementioned texts is exactly the same. Matthew’s version is exactly the same for the first three words: *Eli, Eli, lama* but then differs with *sabachthani*. The Targum of Ps 22:1 has *shabachtani*

Table 3. Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachtani

Mark 15:34	Ἐλωϊ, Ἐλωϊ λαμὰ σαβαχθάνι	Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani
Matthew 27:46	ἦλι ἦλι, λαμὰ σαβαχθάνι	Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani
Psalms 22:1 Hebrew (original)	אלי אלי למה עזבתני	Eli, Eli, lama azavtani
Psalms 22:1 Aramaic (Targum Psalms)	אלי אלהי מטול מה שבקתני	Eli, Elahi, metul ma shabaktani
Syriac (Aramaic) Mark 15:34	אֵלֵי, אֵלֵי, לַמָּא סַבַּחְתָּנִי	Elahi, Elahi, lamna shabaktani
Syriac (Aramaic) Matthew 27:46	אֵלֵי, אֵלֵי, לַמָּא סַבַּחְתָּנִי	Eli, Eli, lamna shabaktani
Hebrew God	אל / אלוה / אלהים	Elohim / Eloah / El
Aramaic God	אל / אלה	Elah / El
Hebrew/Aramaic My God	אלי	Eli
Hebrew (only) My God	אלהי	Elohai
Aramaic (only) My God	אלהי	Elahi
Septuagint Judges 5:5 My God	Ελωι	Eloi

like in Mark and Matthew but then differs on the following: *Eli, Elahi*, instead of *Eli, Eli*, and *metul ma* instead of *lama*. While these are similar in meaning, it must be conceded that they are significantly different to merit investigation. The Syriac version is the closest, but again, it is not an exact match since *lama* is written *lamna*. It must not be overlooked, however, that the Syriac version was written as a translation to the New Testament and thus cannot be used conclusively to prove one way or the other the exact words of Jesus. The rest of the table lists the different ways of saying *God* in Hebrew and Aramaic (Syriac).

Eloi

We have some interesting evidence in the New Testament, given that the original words of Jesus have been recorded by two of His disciples – Matthew and Mark (according to early church tradition, Mark received his gospel from the testimony of Peter). It is interesting to note that Matthew’s version is slightly different from Mark’s. Matthew records, in 27:46, that Jesus said *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?* (resembling Psalm 22:1 in Hebrew *Eli, Eli, lama azavtani*), while Mark’s account says *Eloi, Eloi*. I believe that we can safely assume that Jesus did not say it one way for Matthew and another for the writer of Mark while on the cross. Matthew’s version – *Eli, Eli*, is what we would expect in Hebrew or even in Aramaic. *Eloi*, however, is a mystery. Which way He said it has to do with the issue of transliteration and will be answered in the course of our search.

We know what *Eloi* means, due to the convenient translation in the text, that is *My God*. The question, of course, is whether it is Hebrew or Aramaic. The truth is, as such, it is neither Hebrew nor Aramaic. While it is close to the Hebrew form of אֱלֹהִים, *Elohim*, it falls short. Its form is not found even once in the Hebrew Bible and since *Elohim* is such a common word, not finding it there forces us to conclude that it is not Hebrew. However, it is not Aramaic either. If *Eloi* were Aramaic, as is assumed, then why don’t we see at least one example of its use in the OT since in both Daniel 4:5, and 6:22,

which were plainly written in Aramaic, the words “My God” are not *Eloi*, but אלהי, *Elahi*. The form spoken by Jesus as recorded in Mark is conspicuously absent! Furthermore, the Targumim translate *My God* as *Elahi* just as the Aramaic does from the time of Daniel. Targum Psalm 22:1, has אֱלֹהֵי אֱלִי, *Eli, Elahi*, (Targum Psalms). Moreover, the Syriac (Aramaic) version of the New Testament (written about 200 AD) actually translates the Greek text of Mark 15:34 (*My God*) ὁ Θεός μου (*ho Theos mou*) as *Elahi* and not *Eloi*! Apparently the Aramaic speakers didn’t consider it to be Aramaic either since they wrote *Elahi*. Considering that this text was written after the time of Jesus just further serves to demonstrate that *Eloi* is not Aramaic.

If *Eloi* is neither Hebrew nor Aramaic, then what is it? There are three ways to say *God* in Hebrew: אלהים, *Elohim*, (2605 times) only in Hebrew, used most often to refer to the God of Israel; אל, *El*, (242 times) both Hebrew and Aramaic, more often used of foreign gods, though, nevertheless, used in reference to the true God of Israel; and אלוה, *Eloah*, (56 times) used only in Hebrew texts (primarily in Job). All of them have a general meaning of *mighty one* – really just a title, which can theoretically, be applied to any one who “is mighty.”¹⁴ *Elohim*, unlike *El* and *Eloah*, is the plural form meaning *gods*. Whenever used of the one true God of Israel, however, the verb related to it is always singular.¹⁵ To say *My God* with *El* simply requires that one add the letter *yud* to the end of the word. Thus, *El* becomes *Eli*. To add *my* to plural masculine nouns like *Elohim*, however, basically requires adding the vowel *a* and dropping the *mem* (*mem* makes a masculine noun plural). *Elohim*, therefore, becomes *Elohai*. To make the first person possessive of *Eloah* is similar, though, unfortunately, the first person singular *my* is not found in the pages of the Bible. There is, however, one passage in Habbakuk 1:11 which does have the possessive pronoun suffix *his*, אלוהו, – *Eloho*. Thus, according to the conventions of Hebrew grammar, the way to say *My God* would be *Elohi* (Gallagher, personal correspondence). Aramaic has two ways to say *God*: *El*, which is exactly the same as the Hebrew counterpart, and the other way is אלה, *Elah*. To say *My God* is *Eli*, and *Elahi* similar to the Hebrew forms.

Thus in either Hebrew or Aramaic, we should see one of four forms: *Elohai* or *Elohi* (only Hebrew), *Eli* (both Hebrew and Aramaic), or *Elahi* (only Aramaic). There are no other possibilities and *Eloi* is simply not one of the options. In order to discover which language Jesus spoke, we will limit our discussion to Mark's *Eloi* since *Eli* could be either Hebrew or Aramaic. We will essentially address two questions:

1. What happened to the letter *he* in the middle of the word (equivalent to the letter *h*)?
2. Are there any occurrences of *Eloi* in the Septuagint?

Without *Eli* we have limited our focus to three candidates for the mysterious *Eloi*: the two Hebrew words *Elohai*, *Elohi*, and the Aramaic *Elahi*. We don't have the actual Hebrew or Aramaic word written in the Hebrew/Aramaic¹⁶ script but the Greek transliteration, which can sometimes be tricky. Some languages don't have the rough breathing sound that the letter *h* makes. English, for example, can make the sound at the beginning and middle of words but not at the end (this seems normal to us; however, Hebrew can do all three!). Greek is able to produce the *h* sound at the beginning of words, but not in the middle or end.¹⁷ So, how would one transliterate any of the three from either Hebrew or Aramaic to Greek? There is, in fact, no way to transliterate the words other than by transliterating them without the rough breathing sound, which would yield three different options: *Eloai*, *Eloi*, and *Elai*.

To prove the theory, we will select words which we know have the letter ה (letter *h*) in the middle and then compare them to the Greek transliterations (in the Septuagint) where, if the theory is correct, there should be the absence of a rough breathing mark (like the letter *h*). For example, *Abraham* in the Septuagint is Αβραάμ (*Abraam*).

Notice from Table 4 on following page, that the Hebrew words lose the *h* in the Greek (and English transliteration). As expected, the Greek version cannot reproduce the *h*, and so it was left out in the

Table 4 Loss of the ה (h) Sound in Greek

<i>Verse</i>	<i>Hebrew Bible</i>	<i>Transliteration of Hebrew</i>	<i>Septuagint</i>	<i>Transliteration of Greek</i>
Genesis 17:5	אברהם	Abraham	Αβραάμ	Abraam
Exodus 4:14	אהרן	Aharon	Ἀαρών	Aaron
Judges 3:15	אהוד	Ehud	Αωδ	Aod
I Sam 1:1	אליהוא	Elihu	Ηλιου	Eliu
II Sam 8:16	יהושפט	Jehoshaphat	Ιωσαφατ	Josaphat
I Kings 16:1	יהוא	Jehu	Ιου	You
II Kings 23:34	יהויקים	Jehoiakim	Ιωακιμ	Yoakim

transliteration. Therefore, the word *Eloi* is not necessarily Aramaic simply based on the lack of the letter *H*. However it is too early to conclude that it is Hebrew. Clearly, the Hebrew letter *he* or *h* was lost due to transliteration, but was the original Hebrew or Aramaic? The loss of the letter *he* in the Greek transliteration leaves us with the following three possibilities: *Eloai*, *Eloi*, and *Elai*.

Clearly, *Eloi* fits perfectly what Mark recorded and fortunately we have an example of this in the Septuagint. Judges 5:5, “The mountains gushed before the LORD, this Sinai before the LORD God of Israel” κυρίου Ελωι, τούτο Σινα από προσώπου κυρίου θεοῦ Ἰσραηλ (*kurion Eloi touto Sina apo prosopou kurion theou Israel*). Notice that they translated the word LORD (YHWH in Hebrew) into Greek as *kurion* (Lord) and then added the word *Eloi* (My God), which is not in the Hebrew text. There are two things that must not be missed here. First of all, the mysterious word in Mark is attested in the Septuagint with exactly the same spelling. Secondly, the Septuagint was translated into Greek from Hebrew and not Aramaic. Thus, when looking at Mark 15:34 we have solid evidence of how *Elohi* was transliterated from Hebrew (not Aramaic!) into Greek. If Mark had been transliterating from Aramaic, he would probably not have written *Eloi*, Ἐλωί,¹⁸ with the letter omega (ω) since the Aramaic is distinctly *Elahi* and would have better transliterated it as Ἐλαί with the letter *alpha*.

In summary, we see that there is no way to actually write the Hebrew *Elohai*, *Elohi*, or the Aramaic *Elahi* except by dropping the letter *he*. Of the three, *Elohi* fits perfectly and is attested once in the Septuagint – Ἐλωί, *Eloi*, – the exact same spelling and meaning as what is in Mark 15:34. Furthermore, if Mark had been transliterating Aramaic, it most likely would have appeared as *Elai*, and not *Eloi*. Our findings may explain the difference between Matthew and Mark since Matthew records *Eli*, *Eli*, – which has the same meaning but does not present any problems of transliteration. Perhaps knowing this, we might conclude that Matthew simply wrote *Eli*, *Eli*, and not *Eloi*, knowing that Greek letters could not reproduce the word *Elohi*

and since *Eli, Eli*, is how the Hebrew text of Psalm 22:1 reads. And it would seem that Mark opted to write the specific literal words, even though they could not be written exactly in Greek.

Lama

Lama, למה, meaning *why*, is an extremely common word and is used least 145 times in the Hebrew OT in almost every book. It is seen in every phase in Hebrew – from proto Hebrew to Standard Biblical Hebrew to Late Biblical Hebrew and numerous times in the Mishnah. So, we should not be surprised to see it here in Jesus’ day as well. The root letters *lamed*, *mem*, and *he* are also found in Aramaic, though it should be noted that the vocalization (the vowels) are slightly different than what is recorded in Mark 15:34. The Aramaic word is *lema*.¹⁹ It is possible that Mark was transliterating the Aramaic *lema* as λαμα (*lama*) – although we cannot be dogmatic about the issue, he could have more accurately written it with the Greek letter *epsilon* (λεμα) if that were the case.²⁰ However, as the historical sources indicate, it would seem that Mark was simply writing in Hebrew. Moreover, the word *lama* does not appear in the (Aramaic) Targum of Psalm 22:1. Even though *lema* exists in Aramaic, the translators of this Targum used two words *metul ma*, also meaning *why*. Thus, not only does the Hebrew *lama* fit better than the Aramaic *lema* but even the Targum doesn’t use the word. Only the Hebrew text has the word that Jesus used while enduring our sins on the cross.

Shabachtani

Shabachtani,²¹ שבקתני, appears to be a word of Aramaic origin. It means *to leave*, *leave alone*, *entrust*, *bequeath*, *divorce*, *permit*, *forgive*, *abandon*, and *forsake*. It is used a total of five times in the Old Testament, all of which are found in the Aramaic portions of Daniel and Ezra. However, given that there was a limited amount of Aramaic influence exerted on the Hebrew language after the return from the Babylonian captivity, we later see the root *shabak*,²² שבק,

attested in Jewish writings such as the Jerusalem Talmud, which is where the Mishna is found.

Of the seven occurrences of *shabak* in the Mishnah, four are clearly couched in Hebrew prose. A passage from the Jerusalem Talmud (31:5:1), is an especially good example of the words surrounding *shabak*. The text contains certain grammatical structures and vocabulary which occur only in Hebrew and not Aramaic. A few examples are the use of the letter ה, *he*, found at the beginning of words, which means *the*; Aramaic has א – *aleph* at the end of words. Also the word ש, *shay*, *that*, (used only Hebrew) versus די, *di*²³ (used only in Aramaic). Thus the word *shabak*, which Jesus spoke on the cross, we find situated in the midst of Mishnaic Hebrew words and grammar, and therefore, we can safely conclude that while this was originally a loan word from Aramaic, by Jesus' day, it had become commonplace in the Hebrew language. We should actually expect there to be some loan words in the language.

Imagine being, for example, in France and hearing someone say that he intends to do “le jogging.” You should not conclude that he is actually speaking English! Likewise, consider the dramatic influence French had on English – we use words such as *pork* and *beef*, not knowing that these words are not originally English. This does not lead us to the conclusion that Americans are speaking French, though it *does* imply that there was some French influence upon the English language. In fact, *pork* and *beef* have become so common that we are often surprised to learn that they are French. Nevertheless, though *pork* and *beef* are clearly French, the way they are spelled (vs. *porc* and *boeuf*) shows that they have been completely assimilated into the English language.²⁴ And so it is with *Shabaktani* – the word seems to have come originally from Aramaic, but was completely assimilated into (Mishnaic) Hebrew as attested by its usage in the writings of the Mishnah, which, as pointed out already, was the final stage of ancient Hebrew before its demise around 200 AD.²⁵ Also, the ending of the word “ta+ni” is exactly what we would expect in Biblical Hebrew²⁶ viz. *shabakta*=you forsook +*ni*=me.

Hebrew Words Spoken by Jesus in the Galilee

It is especially noteworthy that not only did Jesus speak Hebrew in Jerusalem, the capital of the Jewish nation, but also in the area of the Sea of Galilee. Some scholars maintain that though the Jews may have spoken Hebrew in Jerusalem, that certainly was not the case in the Galilee. Dr. Safrai summarizes the claim: “There is an oft-repeated claim in scholarly literature that a high percentage of the Galilean population was religiously uneducated, and that the people consequently knew and used less Hebrew. Literary sources, however, provide no indication that this claim is correct” (Safrai 1991b). Again, if Jesus was using Hebrew words to communicate, that (obviously) means that those He was speaking to spoke Hebrew as well. One passage that the pro-Aramaic camp will turn to is in the Babylonian Talmud suggesting that the Jews in the Galilee did not retain their knowledge of Hebrew.

R. Jehudah said in the name of Rabh: The **children of Judæa** who paid strict attention to the words of their masters and propounded many questions

retained all they learned. **The Galileans, however, who did not pay strict attention to the language of their masters, and did not question them, did not retain anything.** The Judæans learned from one master, hence they remembered what they learned; but the Galileans had many teachers and in consequence they did not retain anything.

Rabhina said: The Judæans taught every tract they had themselves mastered to others; hence they retained their knowledge; because teaching others improves one's own learning; the Galileans, however, did not do this and in consequence their knowledge forsook them. (Babylonian Talmud, Erubin Chpt 5 Emphasis mine)

Some scholars have concluded that this indicates that Galileans were speaking Aramaic since they *did not pay strict attention to the language of their masters*. However, the text says nothing about whether it was Hebrew or Aramaic. Simply because the Babylonian Talmud was written in Aramaic – after the time of Jesus – does not lead us to the conclusion that the Galileans were speaking Aramaic. It may possibly indicate that they had a different dialect, just as American English is different in the North and South, though it is still the same language. Dr. Safrai explains,

While this saying is sometimes considered to be evidence for the dominance of Aramaic over Hebrew in the Galilee because some of the examples discussed are in Aramaic, it actually only refers to the Judeans' feeling that Galileans mispronounced the guttural letters *het* and *'ayin* and dropped the weak letters *'alef* and *hey*. This in no way reflects on the cultural status of Galilee, nor does it show that the use of Hebrew was less common there than in Judea or Jerusalem. (Safrai: 1991a)

Though we cannot step back in time to listen to what people were speaking in the Galilee region, we can observe the transliterated words recorded in the Gospels that Jesus spoke to people in that area. The following verses, therefore, were selected because they contain transliterated words of Jesus spoken in the Galilee area. Our goal is to analyze words that have commonly been classified as Aramaic, which, upon greater inspection, are shown to be either equally or exclusively Hebrew. Furthermore, the words below are found in the pages of the Mishna, which was written in Hebrew at or around the time of Jesus.

- *Talitha Kumi*, Mark 5:41
- *Ephphatha*, Mark 7:34
- *Mammon*, Matthew 6:24 and Luke 16:9, 11, 13
- *Korban*, Mark 7:11
- *Raca*, Matthew 5:22

Talitha Kumi

Mark 5:41, “Then He took the child by the hand, and said to her, ‘Talitha, kumi’²⁷ [ταλιθά κοῦμι], which is translated, ‘Little girl, I say to you, arise.’”

We find the word טלה, *taleh*, used in Standard Biblical Hebrew in 1 Samuel 7:9, Isaiah 40:11 (here it is *telah*, a variant of the same word), and Isaiah 65:25 referring to a lamb. While this word was not the most common way of saying *lamb* in the Bible, by the time of Jesus the word *taleh* had become quite common and is attested at least one hundred times in the works of the Mishna, Tosephta, and Jerusalem Talmud, which, of course, are in Hebrew. The form *tali* (טלי) is also attested as meaning either a (male) *lamb* or *little boy*. *Talitha* (טלית), the feminine counterpart, is also found a total of 299 times in the same texts with the same meanings of *lamb* or *girl* – exactly what Jesus said!

There were some other ways to speak to address a young girl, such as *yalda* (girl), *naarah* (young woman, teenager), and *ktona* (little girl), which are equally attested in first century Hebrew sources. Jesus seemingly chose to address her in the more tender and affectionate way – that is, *little lamb*. This is not surprising, considering the importance Jesus placed on children and being childlike to enter the kingdom. Coupled with a culture as closely connected to agriculture and raising of livestock as they were, the nickname or term of endearment is well received, very much like we today call our kids and spouses *sweetie pie*, *honey*, *sugar*,

indicative of the culture of sweets of most Americans.

Talitha does appear in Aramaic texts, and so we cannot say that it was not and could not have been Aramaic. What we should see, however, is that a word that has been used for the pro-Aramaic position turns out to be Hebrew as well. Jerome plainly says that it was Hebrew and never even suggests that it may have been Aramaic. Apparently, Jerome just “understood” that Jesus spoke Hebrew, as he says: “We read in Mark of the Lord saying *Talitha kumi* and it is immediately added ‘which is interpreted, Damsel, I say unto thee, arise.’ ... the Hebrew is ... ‘Damsel arise’” (Jerome LVII.7). Note also that *Hebrew* is the same word he uses elsewhere to describe the language of the Old Testament. Of course, he is not suggesting that no developments in the language took place, but simply that both *talitha* and *kumi* are Hebrew.

The word קומי, *kumi*, is simpler than *talitha*. It is a very common Hebrew word, which almost doesn’t need explanation. *Kumi* is the standard Hebrew feminine imperative (command) for “rise, get up.” The actual form of the word *kumi* is used sixteen times while the root קום, *kum*, is used numerous times throughout the pages of the Old Testament. There is no doubt that this word is Hebrew. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this word also is common to both Hebrew and Aramaic. Considering that Jerome testifies that it is Hebrew and that Hebrew never died out as a spoken language until well after the time of Jesus, however, we are better to conclude that the phrase *talitha kumi* is Hebrew and not Aramaic.

Ephphatha

Mark 7:34 records the words of Jesus saying in the original language: “Then, looking up to heaven, He sighed, and said to him, ‘Ephphatha,’ that is, ‘Be opened.’”

ἐφφαθά, *ephphatha*, is another word that has served as “proof” of Aramaic replacing Hebrew. A careful study of the word proves just

the opposite, however. We need to begin by analyzing the word to establish what are its basic elements. Since most Semitic words consist of three root letters – only consonants (vowels being added depending on the particular conjugation of the word), we know to isolate the three root letters in Jesus' word. It would seem that this could pose a problem since there are no roots consisting of the letters *ph ph* and *th*. We must keep at the front of our minds the differences in transliterations between one language and another. We do not find this exact formation either in Hebrew or Aramaic, but again, this is due to transliterating from one language to another, which will cause certain slight changes in form. There are sounds in Hebrew that do not exist in English. For example, the word *Pesach* has been transliterated, not translated (the translation is *pass over*), so that we have the approximation of the Hebrew word, but written in English or Latin letters. Unfortunately, we, in English, have no way of accurately representing the sound of the final letter of *Pesach*, the *chet*. Although we transliterate it with the letters *ch*, it is not a *ch* as in *cheese* it is more like the *ch* in *Bach*.

When we come to the word ἔφφαθά, *ephphatha*, we must try to reconstruct the way that it would have appeared in either Hebrew or Aramaic, and we must keep in mind the limitations of the Greek alphabet to accurately represent the Hebrew or Aramaic sounds. Fortunately, we know the exact meaning of the word, which makes our job much easier. *Be opened* tells us what to look for. The most common way to say *open* in both Hebrew and Aramaic is פתח, *pathach*. While we see a glimmering of these letters in *ephphatha*, it is still not a precise match. How can we get the letters φ *phi* φ *phi* θ *thetha* from פ *pe*, ת *tav*, and ח *chet*?

Actually, it is much easier than it might appear. The Hebrew/ Aramaic letter *pe* is equivalent both to the English letter *p* and to the letter *f*. It will change its sound in verbs depending on which verbal paradigm (binyan) it is in and where it appears in the word. Next, we move on to the form of the word. In this case, we identify it as a passive command similar to how we might say, *be seated*. A

characteristic of Semitic languages is that verbs are formed not only based on tense, but on gender as well. Thus, if I were speaking to someone, I would need to address the person using one verb form for a man and another for a woman.

In Mark 7:34, Jesus is speaking to a man, though we could argue that He is, in a sense, speaking to the person's tongue and/or ears, which we will see later. The verb is masculine and will help unlock this puzzling word. To form such a word in Hebrew, the *niphal*²⁸ (or passive) verb class is used – in this case it would be *hippateach*. Strictly speaking, this is the way to form a passive command in the *niphal*. Interestingly, however, this verb form is not even once attested in the Hebrew Old Testament. There are four verses in which the passive command is expressed. Yet in all verses, the command is expressed in the imperfect tense (relatively similar to the English future tense in some cases).²⁹ Job 12:14, Job 32:19, Ezekiel 24:27, and Ezekiel 46:1 are the only verses with the form **יפתח**. Three of the four have the vocalization *yippateach* and the fourth has *yippatach*. What is important to note is the small dot inside the second letter. That dot or *dagesh*, as it is called, indicates that the letter, which could stand for either *p* or *f*, is *p* in this case. The first letter *yud* belongs to the gender and imperfect tense of the verb, but the second letter, *pe* is the first letter of the root. This doubling is exactly what we see in *ephphatha* – transliterated as two *ph*'s. So that takes care of one of the root letters. But what about the other two? It looks like there is only one. The Greek letter θ , *theta*, actually represents two of our root letters. As confirmation of this, the Syriac New Testament, mentioned earlier, transliterated the word *ephphatha* into the Aramaic of the second century AD. They transliterated the word with the letters *pe-tav-chet* proving that the *theta* was derived from the letters *tav* and *chet*.

How can we know that it is not Aramaic, though? The Aramaic rendering of *be opened* in the Aramaic translations of Mark 7:34 and in the Targumim all have *yitfatach*. While it is possible that this could have been transliterated into Greek and the *tav* was simply

lost through assimilation, it would be highly unlikely. There is, however, a more plausible explanation. The Hebrew rendering fits better since, as already mentioned, it accounts for the doubling of the first root letter. Secondly, there are three instances of Hebrew words being transliterated into Greek where the double *pe* (like *P* as in *Peter*) sound in Hebrew is changed into the double Greek *phi* (like *F* as in *Frank*). The words, found in 1 Chronicles 2:30, 1 Chronicles 24:13, and Jeremiah 52:19 were each transliterated from the Hebrew. The Hebrew forms words contain a *pe* with a dagesh (making it plosive and doubled). For example, אַפַּיִם, *Appaim*, which is rendered in Greek as Αφφαιμ, *Affaim*. Consider also 1 Chronicles 24:13, חַפָּה, *Chuppa* – Οχχοφφα – *Ochoffa*. Just to make sure that the change from the “p” to an “f” sound was not a coincidence, I checked to see if there are any occurrences of a doubling of the letter *Pi* in Greek from a Hebrew word, and none were found. This illustrates quite conclusively that the double *Phi* in *Ephphatha* is not a transliteration of Aramaic, but is exclusively Hebrew, and that Jesus was not speaking Aramaic in this instance but, as expected, was speaking the language of the Jewish people: Hebrew.

Mammon

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

(Matthew 6:24 see also Luke 16:9, 11, 13)

The word *mammon*³⁰ has long been assumed to be Aramaic. In fact, every Greek lexicon I checked said unambiguously that it is of Aramaic origin.³¹ Many lexicons simply relegate the word to Aramaic *a priori* based on the fact that it is not Greek. The word, in fact, comes from an old Hebrew root הַמּוֹן, *hamon*, meaning a number of different things, making it somewhat difficult to translate. But essentially, it means *many, a lot*. Among the meanings³² are *riches* and *abundance*. It might seem somewhat of a stretch to say that *hamon* could become *mammon*. However, in light of the fact that it

was quite common for the letter *mem* to be added to the front of words to make them into other classes of words, it is not a stretch at all. Consider the following examples:

- *targum* (*translation*), becomes *translator* by adding the letter *mem* to the front of the word – *meturgeman*
- *melech* (*king*), becomes *kingdom* by adding a *mem* to the beginning – *mamlacha*,
- *zamar* (*to sing*) becomes *melody*, *psalm* – *mizmor*
- *yesha* (*salvation*) – (from which comes the name *Yeshua* – *Jesus*) becomes *savior* with the *mem* – *moshia*
- *hamon* (*a lot*) becomes (*money*) *mammon*

Equally important is the fact that the word *mammon* is actually attested outside of the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament. We find it nine times in the Mishna. The passages in which *mammon* is found are in Hebrew (not Aramaic!) and are in reference to money and terms of payment. One says, “If they give you a lot of money [*mammon*], you will enter ...” Seder Nizikin 3:4.³³ Another says that if certain services are not performed, then a fine of money [*mammon*] will be paid (Seder Nizikin 4:8).³⁴ And lastly, Seder Nashim Ktuvot 3:2 says in unambiguous terms that if so and so undertakes or commits to do something and then doesn’t pay, then he will be fined as it says in Exodus 21:22:

- (Mishna Nashim Ktuvot 3:2) –
 וכל המתחייב בנפשו – אינו משלם ממון, שנאמר "ולא
 וכיינצו אנשים ונגפו אשה הרה ויצאו ילדיה ולא יהיה
 אסון עניש יענש כאשר ישית עליו בעל האשה ונתן בפללים
 ... יהיה, אסון – ענוש יענש (שמות כא, כב) *Vkol hamitchayev
 benafsho – eino meshalem mammon, sheneamar velo yihye, ason
 – yenosh yeanash (shmot 21:22).*
- (Hebrew Bible, Exodus 21:22)

... he shall surely be punished accordingly as the woman's husband imposes on him; and he shall pay as the judges determine.

There are two things in this text that prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that *mammon* is a Hebrew word for money. First of all, the Hebrew word *pay* (*meshalem*) appears before *mammon* (money). Secondly, is the reference given to Exodus 21:22b which says, "yet no harm follows, he shall surely be punished accordingly as the woman's husband imposes on him; and he shall pay (*natan*, literally *give*) as the judges determine." We see that the Mishnaic text actually uses some of the same words but updates *pay* (*natan* in Exodus 21:22b) with the up-to-date term *pay money* (*meshalem mammon*). Since they use it in conjunction with that verse, which we know means *pay* and then update it with *meshalem mammon*, which, by the way, are in a 100 percent Hebrew context, we can definitively conclude that *mammon* was Hebrew. While we cannot say that this was not an Aramaic word, it is worth noting that Targum Onkelos translates the word in the Exodus passage, which is related to the above Mishnaic passage, as *natan* – *give*. Moreover in places where the Hebrew Bible writes *money* as *keseq* (literally *silver*), Targum Onkelos follows suite with כֶּסֶף, *kaspa*. If *mammon* were such a common Aramaic word, then why is it not used in this of all verses when the Mishna does use it?

Korban

But you say, "If a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban'" (that is, a gift to God).

Mark 7:11

Korban (or *Corban*), קֶרְבָּן, is a very common word in the Hebrew Old Testament. It is found a total of 29 times: 28 in Leviticus and Numbers and once in Nehemiah. While both Hebrew and Aramaic share this root, it is found 49 times in the Mishnah (in Hebrew, of course), many with a similar context to Mark 7:11 authenticating its

use in the New Testament. Since we have seen it used in Mishnaic Hebrew, the Hebrew of Jesus' day, we can conclude that it was used in Hebrew speech here as well. Again, Jesus words demonstrate that He was using Hebrew words common in His day.

Raca

And whoever says to his brother, "Raca!" shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, "You fool!" shall be in danger of hell fire.

(Matthew 5:22)

Raca comes from an old Hebrew root קר, *rek*, meaning *empty*, *vain*, *worthless*, and *unsuccessful*. In our speech it might be equivalent to calling someone a good-for-nothing or loser, by saying "you're worthless!" The *a* at the end can be explained in two ways. The first is that it merely is the result of transliteration from one language to another as we saw earlier in words such as *Sabbatha* and *Pascha*. The other option is that the *a*, or *aleph* as it would have been in Hebrew, is the (vocative) way of addressing someone. For example, when I call someone by name, I am using the vocative which can take different endings. Though the word exists in Aramaic as well, considering that it is known to be a very old word in Hebrew, there is no reason to doubt that it is Hebrew.

Other Hebrew Words in the New Testament

There are a few more words that we need to look at. These are words that are not specifically said to be Hebrew, like those in the book of John, but are important since they confirm that Jesus and those around Him were using Hebrew rather than Aramaic words. The following words can be found in the Mishna, which was written in Hebrew.

Abba

And He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You."

Mark 14:36a

The root אב, *ab*, is found in such names as Abraham and Abimelech. *Ab* is a very old Hebrew word meaning, simply, *father*. *Abba* is a word that many people recognize from the New Testament in that it was used by Jesus and also by Paul in his letters to the Romans (8:15) and to the Galatians (4:6). In Jesus' day we find that the word changed a bit from how it was used in the Old Testament, in that

the letter *aleph* was added to make it the vocative form. That is to say, it becomes a form of address rather than just a description of a person. For example, rather than saying *father* to refer to Him, one would use *abba* when speaking to Him just as today we can talk about our dads or say “Dad” instead of his actual name. Dr. Randall Buth points out that the word was Hebrew and later was *reinterpreted* (or apparently misunderstood) as Aramaic. “It [*abba*] seems to me to have developed as a special vocative and then was reinterpreted within Aramaic as the article ‘the’” (Buth 2000). While it is found in Aramaic sources, it is also found in many passages of the Mishna. In fact, it is found thirty-eight times in the Mishnah. Evidently, the word had become commonplace and even if *abba* had originally come from Aramaic, by the time of Jesus, it was completely assimilated into Hebrew, and Jesus’ use of it is in complete harmony with the Hebrew of His day.

Hosanna

Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD! Hosanna in the highest!”

(Matthew 21:9)

Though this word was not spoken by Jesus, it was said about Him, which is why it is important for us to look at it. The word is actually made up of two words: *yasha*, *deliver* (from which *Yeshua* – Jesus’ name comes) put in the causative form *save*, and the word *na* which is an entreaty – *oh please, may you do something*. Thus the crowds were saying *Hosha-na*, *oh may You please save*, words fitting for the Savior of the world about to give Himself as a ransom for all men. It has been suggested that this is Aramaic as well. However, given the fact that the two words just described are so widely attested in the Old Testament, the suggestion is a moot point. Aramaic speakers may have used it, but it is clearly of Hebrew origin, and, again, the burden of proof is on those who claim that it is Aramaic.

Rabbouni

Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned around and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means “Teacher”).

(John 20:16, ISV)

Even though Jesus Himself is never recorded as saying *rabbouni*, it is important to include this word in the discussion. While the clearly Hebrew word *rabbi* is used predominantly in the New Testament, we have only one example in John 20:16 of *rabbouni*, which has been classified as Aramaic. Some translations, such as the NKJV, do not say Hebrew or Aramaic since the Greek manuscript (Textus Receptus), on which these translations are based, does not include the word. The word Ἑβραϊστί, or *Hebrew*, is found in the variant manuscripts of the New Testament, such as the Majority Text. The occurrence of this word in variant manuscripts actually serves as a strong argument in favor of Hebrew (and not Aramaic) as the language of Jesus in that even in the variant manuscripts it says *Hebrew!*

Regarding this word Penner comments,

A century ago, when our access to Mishnaic Hebrew texts was through printed editions, it is true that *Rabbouni* was known only in Aramaic texts. Since then, Kutscher has shown that it could also be Hebrew, and in fact our best manuscript of the Mishna, codex Kaufmann, at Taanit 3:8, has *rabbuni* rather than the *ribbono* of the printed editions, showing that *rabbouni* was considered a perfectly acceptable Hebrew word. (Penner 2003)

Again, thanks to our increased knowledge of Mishnaic Hebrew, we are now able to show that *rabbouni* was a variant used in Jesus' day. And so we are not surprised to see that even at this point Mary refers to the risen Lord in Hebrew, the language of the Jews in Israel at that time.

Conclusion: Jesus Spoke Hebrew as His Primary Language

We set out to discover whether or not the presupposition that Jesus spoke Aramaic and not Hebrew was true. We saw that the New Testament itself tells us that Jesus spoke Hebrew to Paul (Acts 26:14) and, in turn, Paul spoke to a large crowd in the temple in Jerusalem in Hebrew (Acts 22:2). John also says that places in Israel had Hebrew names and that the sign on the cross was written in Hebrew. Nowhere in the New Testament do we see the word *Aramaic* or *Syriac* – that is, except in certain English translations, which assume that Hebrew really meant Aramaic.

We then considered the question of whether Hebrew does, in fact, mean Aramaic as some suggest, and found that the ancient sources examined are all uniform in their distinction between Hebrew and Aramaic. Furthermore, ancient sources such as Josephus say unambiguously that the language of the Jews in Israel at the time of Jesus was Hebrew. This testimony was confirmed by later writers, especially those of the early church who said that Hebrew was the

language of the gospel of Matthew – which fits perfectly with the findings of many scholars who have found Semitic thought patterns (which includes Aramaic) and also specifically Hebrew thought patterns (excluding Aramaic) throughout the New Testament.

Moreover, in order to see if the testimony of the ancient sources was indeed true, we examined the actual words of Jesus and of the Gospels to see if they are Hebrew or if they are Aramaic, as is so often claimed. Not surprisingly, the words which Jesus spoke that had been claimed to be Aramaic, were shown to be Hebrew from either the Bible or Mishnaic Hebrew, thus confirming the testimony of John (5:2, 19:13, 19:17), Mark (5:41, 7:34, 15:34), Paul (Acts 21:40, 26:14), the early church fathers, plus Josephus and others. Many of the features that have made scholars a hundred years ago relegate these words to Aramaic are a byproduct of transliteration. Others such as *mammon*, *korban*, and *abba* are words that are clearly evident in the pages of the Mishna, and thus are Hebrew or even if some were originally Aramaic, they were by Jesus' day completely assimilated into the Hebrew language.

So, what can we walk away with? How does this impact you? First of all, hopefully, this study helped you to see that the New Testament, and of course, the Bible as a whole, is 100 percent trustworthy. We can believe every word that it says and we ought to believe God's Word as it is written even if the scholarship of the day disagrees. Scholars, even well intentioned believers, change their opinions over time. God's Word, however, never changes and whether the question is the language of Jesus or whether we can believe that He rose from the dead, God's Word has been proven trustworthy.

Secondly, it should unmistakably demonstrate the eyewitness accounts of the gospel writers. They wrote down what they saw and heard. Though most of them were uneducated fishermen, they left us a record that is accurate even in the minor details. And most importantly, understanding that Jesus spoke Hebrew provides a continuous tie between the words and thoughts of the Old Testament and those of Jesus and the New Testament. In short,

Jesus came to His people, in their historic language – fulfilling the prophecies of their Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus spoke Hebrew with His disciples, with the crowds, and with the religious leaders of His day. He probably knew Aramaic and Greek and used them in certain social contexts, but His language of communication with the Jewish people, His disciples, and the language in which He taught His parables to the masses was undoubtedly Hebrew, as the New Testament claims.

Appendix

The Sign on the Cross of Jesus: Hidden Acrostic?

It has been suggested that the reason the Jewish leaders were so upset with Pilate regarding the sign on the cross of Jesus was due to the acrostic that the words spelled in Hebrew. That is, the first letter of each word “JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS” (John 19:19) actually spelled *YHWH*, which, if true, would obviously be an affront to the pious leaders of the day.

For the above claim to be true, the Hebrew would have needed to be: *Yeshua Hanotzri W³⁵-melech Hayehudim* (Jesus of Nazareth and King of the Jews). I have capitalized what the transliterated letters would have needed to be to get *YHWH*. The problem is that the letter *Vav* (represented by the *W*) is not reflected in the Greek texts of the Gospels. Hence the above reconstruction is unsound and doubtful and is nothing more than a reconstruction. If we had the Hebrew original, this would be a moot point, but unfortunately, it is not extant.

Below is the complete list of scriptural passages regarding the sign on the cross. If the letters *YHWH* truly did appear on the cross as the reconstruction indicates, then we should clearly see this in the Greek text. The Hebrew affix *W* (*Vav*), which means *and*, corresponds to the Greek word *kai*. For the claim to be true, we should definitely see the word *kai* between the word *Nazareth* and the words *the king*. If we don't see this word, then the theory falls apart.

- John 19:19 “... JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

... Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων

While the text of John is the most promising of the four, the underlying Hebrew would most naturally be rendered as: *Yeshua*

HaNotzri Melech Hayehudim, thus becoming an acrostic *YHMH*, which means absolutely nothing. As a note, we would not see the definite article in front of *melech* (king) in the Hebrew even though it is there in Greek due to the difference in Hebrew grammar. In the Hebrew the definite article on *yehudim* (the *ha*) is adequate to make *melech* definite as well.

It should not be overlooked, however, that in the Bible and Jewish literature, a common way to write *YHWH* was to abbreviate it by just writing η' *YH*. So, perhaps the Jewish leaders were not so much seeing *YHWH* but just *YH*. This theory could work if it were not for their very complaint a few verses later. “Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, Do not write, The King of the Jews, but, He said, I am King of the Jews” (John 19:21). Notice, they didn’t ask Pilate to change the *YH* (*Yeshua HaNotzri*) but specifically asked that the claim of kingship be removed and so the first two letters of the supposed acrostic were in no way an issue.

- Matthew 27:37 “...THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

... οὗτός ἐστιν Ἰησοῦς ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων

Matthew provides little information, yielding a translation of *Ze Yeshua Melech Hayehudim* or *ZYMH*, meaning nothing.

- Luke 23:38 “...THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

... οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων

Luke gives less information than a little less than Matthew: *Ze Melech Hayehudim* or *ZMH*, again meaning nothing.

- Mark 15:26 “...THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

... ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων

And Mark records the most truncated of the four: *Melech Hayehudim* or *MH*, meaning nothing.

Conclusion

In none of the texts above do we see the word *kai*, which, if the acrostic *YHWH* had been written in Hebrew, would have appeared in the Greek. If it appeared in at least one of the texts, then we might conclude that it really was there. However, since we don't see it in any of the texts, which are our *only* records of what was (or was not) on that sign, we must conclude that the acrostic *YHWH* was not on the cross. It is best to be silent where the Bible is silent. Regardless, however, of what it spelled out, the reason that the Jewish leaders were angry was not because the writing somehow spelled out *YHWH*, but because it said He was the king of the Jews, an obvious declaration of messiahship, which they plainly rejected.

Notes

¹ Israel at the time of Jesus refers generally to the areas of Judea, Galilee, and perhaps Samaria as well.

² See Appendix for the discussion of the supposed hidden message on the sign on the cross.

³ The dating of the book of Job is complicated and contested and is not the focus of this book.

⁴ Vowels are not necessarily written in Hebrew.

⁵ Even though Babylonia was to the east geographically, one almost always traveled north first and then in a southeasterly direction due to the enormous desert east of Israel.

⁶ CE – Common Era is used by some scholars in place of AD.

⁷ And even then, Hebrew never completely died out. It lived on in the synagogues.

⁸ Exactly when the language of the Hebrews (Israelites) first became known as *Hebrew* is unknown.

⁹ ταῦτα δὲ τὸν Ῥαψάκην ἑβραϊστὶ λέγοντα, τῆς γὰρ γλώττης εἶχεν ἐμπείρως, ὁ Ἐλιακείμος φοβούμενος, μὴ τὸ πλῆθος ἐπακούσαν εἰς ταραχὴν ἐμπέση, συριστὶ φράζειν ἤξιου

¹⁰ καὶ ὁ Ἰώσηπος, ὡς ἂν εἴη μὴ τῷ Ἰωάννῃ μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς πολλοῖς ἐν ἐπηκόῳ, τὰ τε τοῦ Καίσαρος διήγγελλεν ἑβραϊζῶν

¹¹ This would, of course, apply to those who have translated the Bible into the Star Trek language of Klingon.

¹² Variant readings give *Bethsaida* “house of olives” instead of *Bethesda*.

¹³ Similar to *gabah* is the word **גב**, *gibah*, meaning *hill* or *high place*. Though the latter has the letter *ayin*, there is no doubt that they are related.

¹⁴ Jesus makes reference to this word in John 10:34 of the leaders and judges of Israel.

¹⁵ A beautiful example of the Trinity in the Old Testament (first occurring in Genesis 1:26).

¹⁶ Both Hebrew and Aramaic were written in what was known as Aramaic script, as English is written using Latin letters.

¹⁷ My lovely wife, Anna, pointed this out to me!

¹⁸ Mark includes the breathing marks and accents making it even clearer that it is to be pronounced *Elo-i* demonstrating that the Hebrew letter *he* has been dropped.

¹⁹ The *e* is written with a shewa, which is a very short sound.

²⁰ Some manuscripts do contain the variants $\lambda\epsilon\mu\alpha$, lema; $\lambda\iota\mu\alpha$ lima, – see The Robinson/Pierpont Byzantine Greek New Testament. However, the Textus Receptus and the Vulgate have $\lambda\alpha\mu\mu\alpha$, lamma, or $\lambda\alpha\mu\alpha$, lama, respectively.

²¹ The Aramaic word is actually Shabachtani – Greek does not have the “sh” sound which is why the NT text has transliterated it as Sabachtani.

²² The last root letter is like the letter *k* as in *kite*. Again, this is a matter of transliteration.

²³ The other uses are: זֹאת *zot*, בֵּן *ben*, אֲנִי *ani*, אֵת *et* – these words are specifically Hebrew. The Aramaic counterpart is different enough so that we can conclude that these words are Hebrew and not Aramaic. *Ben* and *bar* (in a later chapter), however, are often interchangeable.

²⁴ Perhaps even more surprising is discovering that the word *sack* is, in fact, a Hebrew word. It is found seventeen times in the Old Testament. It has been so completely assimilated that few people ever give it a second thought. It is indeed English, but was originally (and still is!) Hebrew.

²⁵ Hebrew essentially died as a spoken language, but was still in use in Jewish life up until the establishment of Modern Hebrew.

²⁶ The form, though, is the same in Aramaic.

²⁷ Textus Receptus and the Byzantine Majority Text contain *koumi* while the Alexandrian text reads *koum*.

²⁸ The *niphal* is a passive form. There are other passive forms depending on the particular *binyan* or verb class.

²⁹ My goal is not to go into the finer points of Hebrew grammar since that would sidetrack our discussion. Suffice it to say that the imperfect can act as the future and as a type of command. Interestingly, we see this in use even in Modern Hebrew.

³⁰ The Textus Receptus has the spelling *mamon*, which agrees with Luke in every manuscript. However, for sake of the accepted convention, *mammon* will be used in this book.

³¹ See *in situ* Thayers Greek Lexicon, Strong's Greek and Hebrew Lexicon, Friberg Green Lexicon, UBS Greek Dictionary and Louw-Nida Lexicon.

³² The meaning of *hamon*: cry aloud, mourn, rage, roar, sound; make noise, tumult; be clamorous, disquieted, loud, moved, troubled, in an uproar. Abundance, company, many, multitude, noise, riches, rumbling, sounding, store, tumult. (Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament *hamon* entry).

³³ Seder Nizikin 3:4 (*im notnin lecha mammon harbe, ata niknas*)
אם נותנין לך ממון הרבה, אתה נכנס

³⁴ Seder Nizikin 4:8 (*she-ein chayavin ela al twiat mammon kfiqudin*)
שאינ חייבין אלא על תביעת ממון כפיקדון

³⁵ The letter *vav* before the letter M is pronounced as a long “u”.

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Further reading

For excellent articles on the Hebrew language and thought from the time of Jesus: <http://www.jerusalemerspective.com/>

