

Linguistic Fossils and Gospel Reliability



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Summary

The Gospels were originally written in Greek, but they were written about Judea and Galilee where people spoke Hebrew and Aramaic as well as Greek. If the Gospels are reliable records of what happened, and particularly of what was said, one would expect this to be noticeable in the way that the Gospels are written.

When text is translated from one language to another in a fairly literal manner it is often possible to tell the original language from which the translation was made. The relics of the original language that appear in the translation are called “Linguistic Fossils”. One might find words taken over from the original language without translation, constructions from the original language which are used in the translation, poetic forms from the original language or plays on words.

All these are found in the Gospels. The words of Jesus frequently show every sign of having been originally composed in Aramaic or Hebrew, although the narrative that surrounds them shows no such signs. By looking at these details of the text one can tell that Jesus was bilingual in Aramaic and Greek and possibly trilingual with the addition of Hebrew.

This is important in when one considers the history of the Gospels. Had they been partially invented by the Greek-speaking Christians of the late first and early second centuries there would have been no linguistic fossils within them. The fact that the Linguistic fossils exist shows that the Gospels were written during the lifetime of the Apostles and that the accounts originate from the time and place of Jesus’ ministry.

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Introduction

Every book is written in a language, and the detail of this language is a guide to the background against which the book was written. In the case of books of the Bible features of the language in which the book is written can help to show when and where the book was written, and can help to show that the books were written by writers close to their subject material.

The Linguistic Background to the New Testament

The language which had the largest influence in the Roman world, and particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean, was Greek. This was spoken from the Adriatic to Babylonia and from Aswan to the Bosphorus. Even in Rome it would be the language commonly spoken by many educated men. The dialect of Greek used was called Koine Greek. This was spoken by government officials, by merchants and traders and by auxiliary soldiers. It formed a kind of *lingua franca* in the Eastern Empire and was the normal language of everyday public life even in quite small towns.

However, there were also local languages and dialects which covered smaller areas. Acts 2:7-11, for example, lists 15 languages in addition to the implied native language of the Galileans, making 16 in total.

Languages in the New Testament Area



The main *lingua franca* of the whole area was Greek, which was spoken throughout the area because it had been ruled by the successors of Alexander the Great for centuries. However, each area had its own language as well, the main dialects being shown on this map. Hebrew and Aramaic are especially important for the Gospels because they deal almost exclusively with things that happened in the area covered by those languages.

The Languages of Acts 2



Acts 2:7-11 contains a list of all the different pilgrims that had come to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost and who heard the first of the Apostles' public proclamations of the Gospel after the resurrection. This includes a list of the different dialect groups who were involved. All together 13 languages are involved.

For looking at the New Testament, the most important languages are the ones spoken in the area covered by Jesus' ministry. This would be a multi-lingual area at the time of Jesus in which most people spoke two or three languages as a matter of course, rather like the situation in Welsh-speaking Wales in the 20th century.

In Galilee, for example, a good deal of everyday business would be conducted in Greek, particularly commerce or dealings with Government. There were native Greek speakers in the larger towns, and there would be travellers along trade-routes in the area who spoke Greek. However, most of the inhabitants of the area would be more at home in Aramaic. Aramaic was originally the

language of Syria (Aram is the word for Syria in Aramaic or Hebrew). However, Aramaic became the main language of the Babylonian and, later, the Persian empires.

Aramaic is a semitic language, similar in many ways to Hebrew and written using the same alphabet. Galilee had its own dialect which was closer to Hebrew than other versions of the language. Syrian Aramaic is often called Syriac; there are several translations of the New Testament into Aramaic, and particular into Syriac.

The New Testament contains several phrases in Aramaic. These include *Talitha Cumi* and *Ephphatha*, both of which are different from their Greek equivalents.

Hebrew was the language of the Old Testament and as such it was the language of the synagogue in New Testament times. In Galilee it would be taught in synagogues. The route to a thorough understanding of the Old Testament would involve the study of Hebrew. Although there were translations of the Old Testament into Aramaic (The Targums) and Greek (This translation is called the Septuagint and is often designated LXX), a full understanding would only come by study of the Hebrew manuscripts. Possibly this need to learn Hebrew is what the Jewish authorities refer to in John 7:15

Aramaic Phrases in the Gospels

<i>Raca</i>	- empty head (Matthew 5:22)
<i>Hosanna</i>	- (Matthew 21:9,15)
<i>Corban</i>	- (Matthew 27:6)
<i>Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani</i>	- (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34)
<i>Boanerges</i>	- Sons of thunder (Mark 3:17)
<i>Talitha Cumi</i>	- Maiden arise! (Mark 5:41)
<i>Ephphatha</i>	- Be opened! (Mark 7:34)
<i>Abba</i>	- Dad (Mark 14:36)
<i>Golgotha</i>	- Place of a skull (Mark 15:22)
<i>Messiah</i>	- God's anointed (John 1:41)
<i>Cephas</i>	- stone (John 1:42)
<i>Gabbatha</i>	- Ridge, raised place (John 19:13)
<i>Rabboni</i>	- my master (John 20:16)

The word "*Rabbi*" is used with some frequency in the Gospels.

The existence of these Aramaic words in the Gospels, sometimes with explanations, would be unlikely in a purely Greek culture. They show that the Gospels were written in some language other than Aramaic (of they would have been removed in the translation) and that the Gospels were written in a community which was still in touch with the Aramaic language.

*And the Jews marvelled, saying,
How knoweth this man letters,
having never learned?*

(John 7:15)

It was once thought that the language of the area was entirely Aramaic, with no real use of Hebrew, but recent archaeology has shown that there was a considerable use of Hebrew in Jerusalem. Here the majority of inscriptions are in Hebrew rather than Aramaic and there is even some Hebrew graffiti. The Dead Sea Scrolls also contain a larger number of manuscripts in Hebrew.

Analysis of the Dead Sea Scrolls shows that the main language in use is Hebrew. Even so, some manuscripts are in Aramaic and others are in Greek. There are even a few translations of the Old Testament into Greek, which shows that the use of Greek as a main language had penetrated even into the remote Judean wilderness. The finds in the Nahal Hever (from about 135AD) contained manuscripts in Hebrew and Aramaic in about equal proportions.

A similar analysis of coins in from the period shows that both Greek and Hebrew were used in official contexts.

Linguistic Fossils

The record of Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels is written in Greek, with occasional words of Aramaic. However, there are some tools that can be used to discover whether the words of Jesus were originally in Greek or in some other language such as Hebrew or Aramaic.

When a text is translated from one language to another in a fairly literal way some of the features of the original language remain, fixed into the new text. These are a kind of fossil of the original language, so they could be called “Linguistic Fossils”. The presence of such fossils in a document shows that one is reading a text which has either been translated from a text in a different language or that the work was written by someone who is working in a language which is unfamiliar to him.

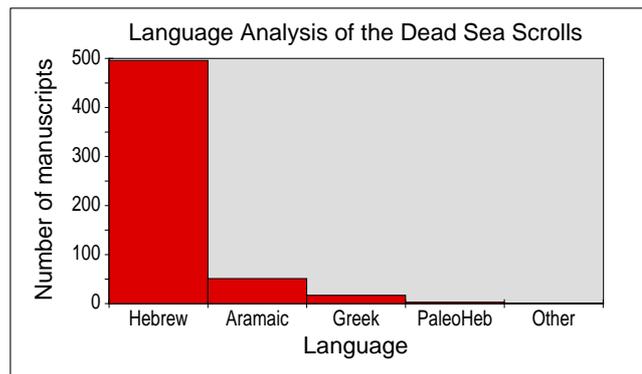
The following are signs that a text has been translated from a different language. Each one is illustrated by an example from a modern language.

Languages in the Dead Sea Scrolls

The Dead Sea Scrolls were buried by members of a minority Jewish community in 68AD as the Roman armies approached. The scrolls were the literature of this group and were written in three languages, Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek. Some of the Hebrew was written in an archaic script known as “Paleo-Hebraic script”. The following table shows the numbers of manuscripts in each category:-

Type	Hebrew	Aramaic	Greek	PaleoHeb	Other
Biblical	183	0	5	11	0
Sectarian	288	6	0	0	0
Commentary	32	0	0	0	0
Apocryphon	60	10	1	0	0
General Jewish	7	4	0	0	0
Other	21	4	1	0	1
Unidentified	88	27	15	3	0
Total	679	51	22	14	1
Total non-bible	496	51	17	3	1

The most useful comparison is from non-biblical literature because the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew. The chart below shows the number of manuscripts in each language.



Clearly Hebrew is the predominant language, not only in Biblical scrolls but also in more ordinary documents. However, Aramaic was clearly read by the community and there were even some Greek texts. The existence of translations of the Old Testament into Greek shows that the language was taken seriously. The owner of the scrolls, of course, was a religious community and one would expect these to give a high priority to documents in Hebrew.

Grammatical Construction

Here something of the original wording is preserved from the original language, producing an awkward construction in the new language. For example, if one were to read the sentence “I have, to the horse, over the fence, some hay thrown”, one would know that this originally came from German. one would suppose that either the original sentence was written in German and translated super-literally into English or that the person who originated the sentence only had a poor grasp of English and thought in German.

Analysis of Coins

Another source of information on languages is the set of inscriptions on coins. The catalogue of types of coin in the Israel museum shows the following:-

Hebrew	Aramaic	Greek	No Inscription
99	1	111	4

This shows that Greek was a strongly used language. One would expect that coins would emphasise the use of Greek as they were mostly used in a commercial context, but even so a predominance of Greek is unexpected.

There is less Aramaic than one might expect; this shows that Aramaic had become a rural and regional language in Judea and Galilee.

Borrowed Words

This form of linguistic fossils is very obvious, the inclusion of words from one language into a paragraph written in another language. The problem here is that sometimes the foreign word becomes a part of the host language. For example words borrowed from Anglo-Saxon have been incorporated into Welsh and these do not indicate that a modern Welsh speaker has met an Anglo-Saxon. Similarly words like *Bistro* have been incorporated into English from French and do not indicate a speaker who has a connection with France.

Plays on Words

People through every word and in every culture have made use of word-play and puns to make their sayings memorable. These will typically only work in the language in which they were written, and do not translate into foreign languages.

For example the old music-hall joke “My Wife’s gone to the West Indies. Jamaica? No, she went of her own accord!” only works in English. Translated into French, German or Classical Greek it would be a complete failure.

Poetic Structures

Another method of making things memorable is to write them as poetry, using rhyme and metre to make them recitable. These forms will often only work in one language, which is an indicator to the

The Limerick - A Poetic Form

There once was a farmer from Leeds
Who swallowed six packets of seeds
It soon came to pass
He was covered in Grass
And couldn’t sit down for the weeds

This poem is a limerick, which is only found in the English language. Not only that but there is a rhyming scheme which also only works in English. A translation of this poem into another language wouldn’t rhyme, and the structure of the poem would be foreign to that language. It would be easy for someone examining the translated poem to tell that it was originally written in English.

language in which they were written. So the couplet “As I was going to Saint Ives / I met a man with seven Wives.” only works in English.

Not only that, but some poetic forms are only found in particular languages. A limerick, for example is a poetic form which appears only in English. Finding such a unique poetic pattern would help one to decide in what language the original was written.

Idioms

A final kind of linguistic fossil is the idiom. Idioms are conventional, but non-literal, ways of expressing ideas which often come over oddly when they are translated

into another language. For example “It was raining cats and dogs” can’t be taken literally and is only used in English. Another example might be “As sick as a parrot”.

Linguistic Fossils in the Gospels

By using the ideas of linguistic fossils one can examine the Gospels and decide the language in which the content was composed. The picture is made more complex by the fact that the Gospels contain narrative from the Gospel writer and speech which comes from people who might not originally have been speaking the same language as the narrator. Not only that, but the same person might use different languages at different times. However, in spite of this there are clear signs which show that the Gospels describe events which took place in a Hebrew or Aramaic linguistic background.

Idiom

An idiom is a non-literal way of expressing some idea. All languages use them: they are usually nonsense when translated into another language. Here are some examples in modern languages:-

English

She went into a flat spin.
The prince received Cinderella’s hand in marriage.
He was as sick as a Parrot.
He is like a bull in a china shop.

French

He saw 36 Candles (He saw stars)
Let’s return to our sheep (Let’s get back to the subject.)
He jumped from the cock to the donkey (He was moving from one subject to another without pattern.)

German

I gave him a wave with a fence post. (I dropped a very broad hint.)

Consecutive Ands

In Western languages such as English or Greek AND is a separate word and it is considered bad style to use it repeatedly as a joining word in a list or to start a sentence with it. However, in Semitic languages like Hebrew or Aramaic, AND is a prefix, a letter added to the beginning of a word to indicate a conjunction. In such languages it is considered good style to use a conjunction in the same sentence many times and to begin a sentence or even a paragraph with a conjunction. The first word of the book of Joshua, for example, begins with a conjunction (although this is rendered “Now” in the Authorised Version).

This tendency to use the word “And” repeatedly is found in the Gospels.

But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry...
(Luke 15:22,23)

Note the number of appearances of the word “And”. There are far more occurrences here than one would expect in a Greek composition. It seems that this parable was composed in a Semitic language, or that the person who first wrote it was thinking in a Semitic mode, having thought

Summary - Types of Linguistic Fossil

- Grammatical Construction - unusual phrasing for the language of the translation
- Embedded Words - words from the source language taken over untranslated.
- Idiom - Non-literal phrases used to give flavour to the text.
- Poetic Structures - Rhyming schemes and structure in the text.
- Plays on words - puns and word play which only works in one language.

along Semitic lines when devising the story. Luke writes in a very clear literary style in his narrative. He is highly unlikely to have invented a Semitic form. The long list of consecutive “Ands” is one tiny piece of evidence that there is a Semitic voice behind the Gospel records.

Aramaic Fragments

Much more obvious evidence of a semitic background comes in the existence of Aramaic

fragments within the Gospel accounts. In total there are 45 different places where an Aramaic word or phrase is appears in the New Testament, 29 of them in the Gospels. The phrases are sometimes repeated; in total there are only 16 different phrases.

Matthew 27 - Why have you forsaken me?

This passage appears in the parallel record in Mark (Mark 15:34) but not in Luke or John.

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46)

The words "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*" are an Aramaic rendition of the first words of Psalm 22. The original was written in Hebrew, and the word here is "*atsabethani*". The word in Matthew and Mark is "*sabachthani*" which is the Aramaic equivalent. This leads to several points:-

- The obvious conclusion is that Jesus spoke these words in Aramaic. He didn't use Greek, nor did he use the original Hebrew of the Psalm. This shows a semitic origin of the story. If it had been invented by the early Church the words would have been in Greek, or possibly the original Hebrew of the Psalm. It is difficult to imagine a Gentile Christian making up an Aramaic account of Jesus' words.
- The second point notes that Jesus is not making a direct quotation from the Old Testament in its original Hebrew. On the contrary, he is quoting a translation or he is translating it himself. It is interesting to try to work out why he should do this. His audience would have been used to hearing the Psalms in their original language while attending the synagogue, and would have understood the meaning. Presumably Jesus is emphasising that the words apply to his situation at the time of his crucifixion.
- The third point is that the words in Aramaic are accompanied by a translation. This tells us that the Gospel of Matthew was intended for a readership who could understand Greek, but who couldn't understand quite simple Aramaic.

Mark 10 - Bartimaeus

And they came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. (Mark 10:46)

This verse contains the name of a Blind man, or rather his father's name. The man was the son of Timaeus, in Aramaic "*Bar Timaeus*". The word "*Bar*" is the Aramaic word which means "Son of". The Hebrew equivalent would be "*Ben*". Even though Timaeus is a Greek name, Bar-Timaeus is described in Aramaic. This clearly shows an Aramaic linguistic background for the event.

It also shows that the Gospel was not written in Aramaic as there is a need to translate the name for the reader.

"Bar" Names

The following are names with an Aramaic form. These are found in the Gospels. There are no names with Hebrew forms in the Gospels. Someone who did not know the linguistic background of the Gospels would be expected to use "Ben" (Hebrew) names as well as "Bar" (Aramaic) names.

Bar-Timaeus	Bartimaeus	(Mark 10:46)
Bar-Tholemew	Bartholemew	(Matthew 10:3)
Simon Bar-Jonah		(Matthew 16:17)
Bar-Abbas	Barabbas	(Matthew 27:16)
Bar-Sabas	Barsabas	(Acts 1:23)
Bar-Nabas	Barnabas	(Acts 4:36)
Bar-Jesus		(Acts 13:6)

There are several “*Bar*” names in the New Testament, Bar-Jonah, Bar-Tholemew, Bar-Abbas and the like (see box). The existence of these names implies an Aramaic speaking world and the explanation shows that the Gospel was written outside this world.

Loan Words

In addition to untranslated phrases the Gospels contain loan-words which are originally Hebrew or Aramaic but which appear without explanation in the text, even though there might already be a perfectly good Greek equivalent which is not used. These words include *Livonah* (frankincense), *Sikera* (Strong drink), *Kamon* (Cumin), *Bath* (Measure) and *Satan* (Adversary of God’s people).

It is difficult to know whether these words had generally been assimilated into the Greek of the Eastern Mediterranean or whether they were simply used in the Greek or Galilee and Judea. However, they do place the action of the Gospels in the Eastern Mediterranean when Hebrew and Aramaic were influential.

Word Plays

Finding these takes much more linguistic knowledge than is available to the writer of this article, but nevertheless the following example is well known.

You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! (Matthew 23:24)

In Greek this sentence is fairly unremarkable. However, in Aramaic the word for camel is *gamla* and the word for a midge is *Qamla*. This obvious play on words provides a very clear case that the saying was originally composed in Aramaic.

Idiom

The kind of evidence with the largest number of instances is the appearance of Semitic idioms in the text of the Gospels. There are very many of these, but many modern translations obscure them because they are trying to translate the flow of speech to be consistent with modern English idiomatic usage. The quotations below are therefore from the ASV.

- *She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for it is he that shall save his people from their sins.* (Matthew 1:21)

The standard Greek phraseology would be to say: “You shall call him Jesus” rather than to use the word “name” at this point. The use of the word “name” is characteristically semitic.

- *Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man’s sake.* (Luke 6:22)

The phrase “cast out your name as evil” is completely foreign to any Greek manner of speech, but is pure semitic.

Semitic Idioms in the Gospels

Thou shalt call his name Jesus	(Mt 1:21)
if thine eye is bad	(Matthew 6:22,23)
Let the dead bury their dead	(Matthew 8:22)
their angels always behold the face of God	(Mt 18:10)
Upon an ass and a colt, the foal of an ass.	(Mt 21:5)
The baptism of John - from heaven or of men?	(Matthew 21:25)
I have betrayed the innocent blood	(Matthew 27:4)
an evil eye	(Mark 7:22)
thou shalt call his name “John”	(Luke 1:13)
cast out your name as evil	(Luke 6:22)
the fashion of his countenance was changed	(Lk 9:29)
Let these sayings sink down in your ears	(Luke 9:44)
set his face to go to Jerusalem	(Luke 9:51)
he escaped out of their hand	(John 10:39)

- *Let these words sink into your ears...*
(Luke 9:44)

In his narrative sections in the Gospel and in Acts Luke is shown to have an excellent command of literary Greek. The only reason that he includes a semitism of this kind is that he is employing a philosophy of exact literal translation without interpretation to his source, which is an Aramaic or Hebrew saying.

Poetic Forms

The final evidence comes from the use of poetic forms in the sayings of Jesus. Poetry in Hebrew does not depend to a great degree on rhyme or metre, but instead involves parallelism, the statement of the same idea in two slightly different ways. This, however, is not used much in Greek. There is plenty of evidence of parallelisms in the sayings of Jesus.

Parallelism

Parallelism is a regular feature of Hebrew poetry which also appears in Aramaic. It consists of repeating the same idea twice in different words, preferably keeping the same rhythm for both parts. The Old Testament is full of parallelism. Consider this example in Proverbs:-

*Fret not thyself because of evil men,
neither be thou envious at the wicked;
For there shall be no reward to the evil man;
the lamp of the wicked shall be put out.*

(Proverbs 24:19–20)

Each pair of lines has the same idea in different words.

The New Testament also contains examples of parallelism. For example, consider the following:-

*For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged:
and with the measure which ye measure with,
it shall be measured to you again.* (Matthew 7:2)

There are also many examples of parallelism in the set-piece sayings of Jesus. Probably he was using this to make his sayings more memorable for those who heard him speaking.

- *Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured unto you.* (Matthew 7:1,2)
- *Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast your pearls before the swine,* (Matthew 7:6)
- *Or what man is there of you, who, if his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone; or if he shall ask for a fish, will give him a serpent?* (Matthew 7:9,10)

There are even more complex parallelism schemes in the sayings of Jesus. Luke 1:68-78 contains a complex system called a Chiasmus where the parallelism involves working outward from an inner point, or Matthew 7:7,8 where the parallelism comes in two parallel statements each of which contains its own parallelism.

In general, parallelism is most prominent in set-pieces like the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). These probably represent the regular teaching of Jesus, repeated over and over again in many different places. It would be worthwhile employing poetic forms here to make the teaching more memorable. In off-the-cuff remarks or in parables Jesus doesn't employ poetic forms at all, although other indications imply that Jesus did speak in Hebrew or Aramaic when delivering these sayings.

In What Language were the Gospels Written?

The consequence of the evidence above is the conclusion that large parts of the Gospels are recording material which was originally composed in Aramaic or possibly Hebrew.

Some have concluded that the Gospels were originally written in Aramaic and that our Greek Gospels are merely translations. However, the evidence is that the Gospels were originally written in Greek:-

- The Gospels contain original Aramaic words within them (e.g. “*Talitha Cumi*” and “*Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani*”); these would not appear in a translation of the entire book into Greek. Not only that but sometimes they are translated into Greek, something that wouldn’t make sense if the original version of the Gospel had been written in Aramaic.
- The Aramaic fossils are only found in the words of Jesus. They don’t appear in the narrative portion of the Gospels, written by the evangelist at the time the Gospel was produced. There is no reason to suppose that these sections were written in anything other than Greek. This being the case, the Gospel itself must have been completed in Greek.
- At least three different translations of the Gospels were made into Aramaic in the two centuries after the resurrection. This would have been pointless if the Gospels already existed as Aramaic originals.

The obvious conclusion here is that the evangelists wrote the Gospel records in Greek, sometimes translating the words of Jesus (and possibly others with whom he was conversing) into Greek.

What Language did Jesus Speak?

It is clear from the above evidence that Jesus sometimes spoke in Aramaic, and possibly also in Hebrew. However, it would be unwise to conclude that he used no other languages. There are a few places in the Gospels where there are word-plays in Greek equivalent to those in Aramaic. For example:-

- They say unto him, He will miserably [Greek *Kakos*] destroy those miserable [*Kakous*] men, (Matthew 21:41)
- Do not think [*me nomisete*] that I have come to abolish the Law [*nomos*] or the Prophets; (Matthew 5:17)
- “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer [*theros*] is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates [*Thurais*]. (Matthew 24:32,33)

The Languages Jesus Spoke

There can be no doubt that Jesus sometimes spoke Aramaic. He is recorded as speaking in Aramaic in the Gospels and Aramaic sayings of Jesus are recorded verbatim. The words of Jesus in Greek often show signs of having been translated from Hebrew or Aramaic.

It is also clear that Jesus sometimes spoke in Greek. There are occasions when he spoke to Pilate, who would not speak Aramaic (though he could have had an interpreter) and there are sometimes plays on words which work only in Greek.

Finally, Jesus read from the Old Testament in Hebrew on at least one occasion (Luke 4:17-19) and provides an original commentary on it. This shows that he knew and understood Hebrew.

In the first of these the authorities are speaking Greek to Jesus, but it is a reasonable inference that Jesus is speaking to them in the same language. The other two references are the words of Jesus and they also contain plays on words in Greek, but not in Hebrew or Aramaic. The inference is that Jesus spoke several languages very well, being either bilingual or trilingual.

Linguistic Fossils and Inspiration

One of the issues that occasionally raises itself is how one can consider the Gospels to be inspired if they only contain a translation of the words of Jesus into Greek from Aramaic and not the original exact words. The answer here is that the translation is an inspired one, with the evangelists writing a translation prompted by God. The existence of linguistic fossils does not prove this assertion, but neither does it suggest that the assertion is untrue.

Conclusion

The existence of linguistic fossils in the Gospels shows that while the Gospels were written in Greek they often report speech of Jesus, and of others, who were speaking in Hebrew or Aramaic but whose words have been translated into Greek. This leads on to certain further conclusions:-

The words reported in the Gospels come from a place and time when Aramaic was a regular feature of human interaction. This ties down the sayings of Jesus to Judea and Galilee before 70AD, when the Hebrew and Aramaic speaking communities of the area were destroyed and replaced by Greek speakers.

From this time onwards the linguistic background of the Church was almost exclusively Greek (there was a Syrian church, but this relied on translations of the Gospels and on Tatian's Diatesseron (a harmony of the four Gospels). Had the Gospels been invented later than 70AD they would have been composed by a Greek speaking church. The creative community would have been a Greek - speaking community which would have been unable to produce much in the way of Semitic fossils in the texts, and there would have been little point in their attempting it.

The linguistic fossils show that the Gospels were written using material from the right place and the right time. The language of the Gospels agrees with the evidence of undesigned coincidences and archaeology in showing that the events described within them come from the time of Jesus and the place where he taught.

They also indicate that the Gospels have not been changed in a significant way since; any such change would tend to destroy the linguistic fossils which remain embedded within the text.