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Hebrew and Aramaic Origin of the New Testament

By James Scott Timm

THE LANGUAGE OF FIRST CENTURY ISRAEL

The Middle East, through all of its political turmoil, has in fact been dominated by a single master from the earliest ages until the present day. The Semitic tongue has been that single master. Aramaic dominated the three great Empires, Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian. It endured until the seventh century, when under the Islamic nation it was displaced by a cognate Semitic language, Arabic. Even today some few Syrians, Assyrians and Chaldeans speak Aramaic as their native tongue, including three villages north of Damascus. The Jewish people, through all of their persecutions, sufferings and wanderings have never lost sight of their Semitic heritage, nor their Semitic tongue. Hebrew, a Semitic tongue closely related to Aramaic, served as their language until the great dispersion when a cognate language, Aramaic, began to replace it. Hebrew, however continued to be used for religious literature, and is today the spoken language in Israel.

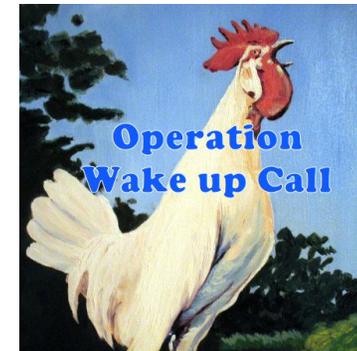
THE BABYLONIAN EXILE

Some scholars have proposed that the Jews lost their Hebrew language, replacing it with Aramaic during the Babylonian captivity. The error of this position becomes obvious. The Jewish people had spent 400 years in captivity in Egypt yet they did not stop speaking Hebrew and begin speaking Egyptian, why should they exchange Hebrew for Aramaic after only seventy years in Babylonian captivity? Upon return from the Babylonian captivity it was realized that a small minority could not speak "the language of Judah" so drastic measures were taken to abolish these marriages and maintain the purity of the Jewish people and language. One final evidence rests in the fact that the post-captivity books (Zech., Hag., Mal., Neh., Ezra, and Ester) are written in Hebrew rather than Aramaic.

HELLENIZATION

Some scholars have also suggested that under the Hellene Empire Jews lost their Semitic language and in their rush to hellenize, began speaking Greek. The books of the Maccabees do record an attempt by Antiochus Epiphanes to forcibly Hellenize the Jewish people. In response, the Jews formed an army led by Judas Maccabee This army defeated the Greeks and eradicated Hellenism. This military victory is still celebrated today as Chanukkah, the feast of the dedication of the Temple a holiday that even Yeshua seems to have observed at the Temple at Jerusalem in the first century . Those who claim that the Jews were Hellenized and began speaking Greek at this time seem to deny the historical fact of the Maccabean success. During the first century, Hebrew remained the language of the Jews living in Judah and to a lesser extent in Galilee. Aramaic

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remained a secondary language and the language of commerce. Jews at this time did not speak Greek, in fact one tradition had it that it was better to feed ones children swine than to teach them the Greek language. It was only with the permission of authorities that a young official could learn Greek, and then, solely for the purpose of political discourse on the National level. The Greek language was completely inaccessible and undesirable to the vast majority of Jews in Israel in the 1st century. Any gauge of Greek language outside of Israel cannot, nor can any evidence hundreds of years removed from the 1st century, alter the fact that the Jews of Israel in the 1st century did not know Greek.

THE TESTIMONY OF JOSEPHUS

The first century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (37-c.100 C.E.) testifies to the fact that Hebrew was the language of first century Jews. Moreover, he testifies that Hebrew, and not Greek, was the language of his place and time. Josephus gives us the only first hand account of the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. According to Josephus, the Romans had to have him translate the call to the Jews to surrender into "their own language". Josephus gives us a point-blank statement regarding the language of his people during his time:

I have also taken a great deal of pains to obtain the learning of the Greeks, and understanding the elements of the Greek language although I have so long accustomed myself to speak our own language, that I cannot pronounce Greek with sufficient exactness: for our nation does not encourage those that learn the languages of many nations.

Thus, Josephus makes it clear that first century Jews could not even speak or understand Greek, but spoke "their own language."

ARCHAEOLOGY

Confirmation of Josephus's claims has been found by Archaeologists. The Bar Kokhba coins are one example. These coins were struck by Jews during the Bar Kokhba revolt (c. 132 C.E.). All of these coins bear only Hebrew inscriptions. Countless other inscriptions found at excavations of the Temple Mount, Masada and various Jewish tombs, have revealed first century Hebrew inscriptions. Even more profound evidence that Hebrew was a living language during the first century may be found in ancient Documents from about that time, which have been discovered in Israel. These include the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Bar Kokhba letters. The Dead Sea Scolls consist of over 40,000 fragments of more than 500 scrolls dating from 250 B.C.E. to 70 C.E.. These Scrolls are primarily in Hebrew and Aramaic. A large number of the "secular scrolls" (those which are not Bible manuscripts) are in Hebrew. The Bar Kokhba letters are letters between Simon Bar Kokhba and his army, written during the Jewish revolt of 132 C.E.. These letters were discovered by Yigdale Yadin in 1961 and are almost all written in Hebrew and Aramaic. Two of the letters are written in

Greek, both were written by men with Greek names to Bar Kokhba. One of the two Greek letters actually apologizes for writing to Bar Kokhba in Greek, saying "the letter is written in Greek, as we have no one who knows Hebrew here." The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bar Kokhba letters not only include first and second century Hebrew documents, but give an even more significant evidence in the dialect of that Hebrew. The dialect of these documents was not the Biblical Hebrew of the Tenach (Old Testament), nor was it the Mishnaic Hebrew of the Mishna (c. 220 C.E.). The Hebrew of these documents is colloquial, it is a fluid living language in a state of flux somewhere in the evolutionary process from Biblical to Mishnaic Hebrew. Moreover, the Hebrew of the Bar Kokhba letters represents Galilean Hebrew (Bar Kokhba was a Galilean) , while the Dead Sea Scrolls give us an example of Judean Hebrew. Comparing the documents shows a living distinction of geographic dialect as well, a sure sign that Hebrew was not a dead language. Final evidence that first century Jews conversed in Hebrew and Aramaic can be found in other documents of the period, and even later. These include: the Roll Concerning Fasts in Aramaic (66-70 C.E.), The Letter of Gamaliel in Aramaic (c. 30 - 110 C.E.), Wars of the Jews by Josephus in Hebrew (c. 75 C.E.), the Mishna in Hebrew (c. 220 C.E.) and the Gemara in Aramaic (c. 500 C.E.)

SCHOLARS ON THE LANGUAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Having thus demonstrated that Hebrew and Aramaic were languages of Jews living in Israel in the first century, we shall now go on to demonstrate that the New Testament was first written in these languages. A number of noted scholars have argued that at least portions of the New Testament were originally penned in a Semitic tongue. This argument has been asserted of the four Gospels, Acts, and Revelation.

The following is just some of what these scholars have written on the topic:

When we turn to the New Testament we find that there are reasons for suspecting a Hebrew or Aramaic original for the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, John and for the apocalypse.

- Hugh J. Schonfield; An Old Hebrew Text of St. Matthew's Gospel; 1927; p. vii

The material of our Four Gospels is all Palestinian, and the language in which it was originally written is Aramaic, then the principle language of the land...

- C. C. Torrey; Our Translated Gospels; 1936 p. ix

The pioneer in this study of Aramaic and Greek relationships was Charles Cutler Torrey (1863-1956),...

His work however fell short of completeness; as a pioneering effort, in the nature of the case, some of his work has to be revised and supplemented. His main contention of translation, however, is undeniably correct. ...

The translation into Greek from Aramaic must have been made from a written record,

including the Fourth Gospel. The language was Eastern Aramaic, as the material itself revealed, most strikingly through a comparison of parallel passages. ...

One group [of scholars], which originated in the nineteenth century and persists to the present day [1979], contends that the Gospels were written in Greek...

Another group of scholars, among them C. C. Torrey ... comes out flatly with the proposition that the Four Gospels... including Acts up to 15:35 are translated directly from Aramaic and from a written Aramaic text....

My own researches have led me to consider Torrey's position valid and convincing that the Gospels as a whole were translated from Aramaic into Greek.

- Frank Zimmerman; The Aramaic Origin of the Four Gospels; KTAV; 1979

Thus it was that the writer turned seriously to tackle the question of the original language of the Fourth Gospel; and quickly convincing himself that the theory of an original Aramaic document was no chimera, but a fact mwhich was capable of the fullest verification...

- Charles Fox Burney; The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel; 1922; p. 3

...this [Old Syriac] Gospel of St. Matthew appears at least to be built upon the original Aramaic text which was the work of the Apostle himself.

- William Cureton; Remains of a Very Ancient Recension of the Four Gospels in Syriac; 1858; p. vi)

...the Book of Revelation was written in a Semitic language, and that the Greek translation... is a remarkably close rendering of the original."

- C. C. Torrey; Documents of the Primitive Church 1941; p. 160

We come to the conclusion, therefore that the Apocalypse as a whole is a translation from Hebrew or Aramaic...

- RBY Scott; The Original Language of the Apocalypse 1928; p. 6

The question of the Luke/Acts tradition holds particular interest to us. This is because the common wisdom has been to portray Luke as a Greek speaking, Greek writing Gentile who wrote his account to the Gentiles. The reality of the matter is (whether Luke himself knew Greek or not) that Luke was most certainly written in a Semitic language. As Charles Cutler Torrey states:

In regard to Lk. it remains to be said, that of all the Four Gospels it is the one which gives by far the plainest and most constant evidence of being a translation.

- C.C. Torrey; Our Translated Gospels p. lix

THE TESTIMONY OF THE "CHURCH FATHERS"

All of the "Church Fathers", both East and West, testified to the Semitic origin of at least the Book of Matthew, as the following quotes demonstrate:

Matthew composed the words in the Hebrew dialect, and each translated as he was able.

Papias (150-170 C.E.)

Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect.

Ireneus (170 C.E.)

The first [Gospel] is written according to Matthew, the same that was once a tax collector, but afterwards an emissary of Yeshua the Messiah, who having published it for the Jewish believers, wrote it in Hebrew.

Origen (c. 210 C.E.)

Matthew also, having first proclaimed the Gospel in Hebrew, when on the point of going also to the other nations, committed it to writing in his native tongue, and thus supplied the want of his presence to them by his writings. Pantaenus... penetrated as far as India, where it is reported that he found the Gospel according to Matthew, which had been delivered before his arrival to some who had the knowledge of Messiah, to whom Bartholomew, one of the emissaries, as it is said, had proclaimed, and left them the writing of Matthew in Hebrew letters.

Eusebius (c. 315 C.E.)

They [the Nazarenes] have the Gospel according to Matthew quite complete in Hebrew, for this Gospel is certainly still preserved among them as it was first written, in Hebrew letters.

Epiphanius (370 C.E.)

"Matthew, who is also Levi, and from a tax collector came to be an emissary first of all evangelists composed a Gospel of Messiah in Judea in the Hebrew language and letters, for the benefit of those of the circumcision who had believed, who translated it into Greek is not sufficiently ascertained. Furthermore, the Hebrew itself is preserved to this day in the library at Caesarea, which the martyr Pamphilus so diligently collected. I also was allowed by the Nazarenes who use this volume in the Syrian city of Borea to copy it. In which is to be remarked that, wherever the evangelist... makes use of the testimonies of the Old Scripture, he does not follow the authority of the seventy translators [the Greek Septuagint], but that of the Hebrew."

"Pantaenus found that Bartholomew, one of the twelve emissaries, had there [India] preached the advent of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah according to the Gospel of

Matthew, which was written in Hebrew letters, and which, on returning to Alexandria, he brought with him."

Jerome (382 C.E.)

His [Matthew's] book was in existence in Caesarea of Palestine, and everyone acknowledges that he wrote it with his hands in Hebrew...

Isho'dad (850 C.E.)

Other "church fathers" have testified to the Semitic origin of at least one of Paul's epistles. These "church fathers" claim that Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews was translated into Greek from a Hebrew original, as the following quotes demonstrate:

In the work called Hypotyposes, to sum up the matter briefly he [Clement of Alexandria] has given us abridged accounts of all the canonical Scriptures,... the Epistle to the Hebrews he asserts was written by Paul, to the Hebrews, in the Hebrew tongue; but that it was carefully translated by Luke, and published among the Greeks.

Clement of Alexandria (150 - 212 C.E.)

For as Paul had addressed the Hebrews in the language of his country; some say that the evangelist Luke, others that Clement, translated the epistle.

Eusebius (315 C.E.)

"He (Paul) being a Hebrew wrote in Hebrew, that is, his own tongue and most fluently while things which were eloquently written in Hebrew were more eloquently turned into Greek.

Jerome (382 C.E.)

It should be noted that these church fathers did not always agree that the other books of the New Testament were written in Hebrew. Epiphanius for example, believed "that only Matthew put the setting forth of the preaching of the Gospel into the New Testament in the Hebrew language and letters." Epiphanius does, however, tell us that the Jewish believers would disagree with him, and point out the existence of Hebrew copies of John and Acts in a "Gaza" or "treasury" [Genizah?] in Tiberias, Israel. Epiphanius believed these versions to be mere "translations" but admitted that the Jewish believers would disagree with him. The truth in this matter is clear, if Greek had replaced Hebrew as the language of Jews as early as the first century, then why would fourth century Jews have any need for Hebrew translations. The very existence of Hebrew manuscripts of these books in fourth century Israel testifies to their originality, not to mention the fact that the Jewish believers regarded them as authentic.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE TALMUDIC RABBIS

In addition to the statements made by the early Christian church fathers, the ancient Jewish Rabbis also hint of a Hebrew original for the Gospels. Both the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds and the Tosefta relate a debate among Rabbinic Jews over the method of destruction of manuscripts of New Testament books. Specifically mentioned is a book called by them as (HEBREW FONT OMITTED) (or "Gospels"). The question which arose was how to handle the destruction of these manuscripts since they contained the actual name of God. It is of course, well known that the Greek New Testament manuscripts do not contain the Name but use the Greek titles "God" and "Lord" as substitutes. This is because the Name is not traditionally translated into other languages, but instead is (unfortunately) translated "Lord", just as we have it in most English Bibles today, and just as we find in our late manuscripts of the Septuagint. The manuscripts these Rabbi's were discussing must have represented the original Hebrew text from which the Greek was translated.

HISTORY OF THE MOVEMENT

That the New Testament, like the Old Testament, was originally written in Hebrew and Aramaic is further verified by the history of the early believers in Yeshua as the Messiah. The first believers in Yeshua were a Jewish sect known as "Nazarenes". Sometime later the first Gentile believers in Yeshua called "Christians" appeared. This first congregation of Gentile Christians formed in Antioch, the capital of Syria, where some of the people spoke Greek and almost all spoke Aramaic, which is also called "Syriac". Then in 70 C.E., there was a mass exodus of the Nazarenes from their center at Jerusalem to Pella. Eventually, they established communities in Beroea, Decapolis and Bashanitis. These Nazarenes used Hebrew Scriptures and in the fourth century Jerome traveled to Borea to copy their Hebrew Matthew. As a result, while at least the book of Matthew was first written in Hebrew, very early on Aramaic and Greek New Testament books were needed.

THE EASTWARD SPREAD

In addition to these factors we must also consider the Eastern spread of Christianity. We have heard much about the so called "Westward spread of Christianity" but little is written of the equally profound Eastward movement. While Paul made missionary journeys from his headquarters in Antioch Syria, into the Western world, most of the emissaries (apostles) traveled eastward. Bartholomew traveled eastward through Assyria into Armenia, then back down through Assyria, Babylon, Parthia (Persia) and down into India where he was flayed alive with knives. Thaddeus taught in Edessa (a city of northern Syria) Assyria and Persia, dying a martyr by arrows either in Persia or at Ararat. Thomas taught in Parthia, Persia and India. He was martyred with a spear at Mt. St. Thomas near Madras in India. To this very day a group of Christians in India are called "St. Thomas Christians. Finally Kefa (Peter) traveled to Babylon and even wrote one of his letters from there. That the emissaries brought Semitic New Testament Scriptures eastward with them is affirmed to us by the Church fathers. Eusebius writes:

Pantaenus... penetrated as far as India, where it is reported that he found the Gospel according to Matthew, which had been delivered before his arrival to some who had the knowledge of Messiah, to whom Bartholomew one of the emissaries, as it is said, had preached, and left them the writing of Matthew in Hebrew letters.

And as Jerome writes:

Pantaenus found that Bartholomew, one of the twelve emissaries, had there [in India] preached the advent of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah according to the Gospel of Matthew, which was written in Hebrew letters...

This entire region of the Near East stretching from Israel through Syria, Assyria, Babylon, Persia (Parthia) and down into India, became known as the "Church of the East." At its high point the Church of the East stretched as far east as China! Today, the Syrian and Assyrian Christians have been split into various groups: Nestorians, Jacobites, Chaldean Roman Catholics, and Maronites. All of whom continue to use an Aramaic New Testament text.

When the Roman Catholic Portuguese invaded India in 1498 they encountered over a hundred churches belonging to the St. Thomas Christians along the coast of Malabar. These St. Thomas Christians, according to tradition, had been there since the first century. They had married clergymen, did not adore images or pray to or through saints, nor did they believe in purgatory. Most importantly they maintained use of the Aramaic New Testament which they claimed had been in use at Antioch.

THE WESTWARD SPREAD

Now while many of the emissaries were spreading the Messianic movement eastward, Paul was taking the movement into the Western world. >From his headquarters at Antioch, the capitol of Syria, Paul conducted several missionary journeys into Europe. At this time there came a need for Greek versions of New Testament books. As time progressed several events occurred which resulted in a great rise of anti-Semitism in the West. This began when the Jews revolted against the Roman Empire in 70 C.E.. A second revolt by Jews in Egypt occurred in 116 C.E.. Things were further complicated by the Bar Kokhba revolt of 132 C.E.. In the Roman Empire anti-Semitism became very popular, and even patriotic. In the West, Gentile Christianity sought to distance itself from Judaism and Jewish customs. The Greek text began to be favored over the Semitic text and many Semitic writings were subsequently destroyed.

By 325 C.E. anti-Semitism and the priority given in the West to the Greek Scriptures had solidified. Constantine invaded Rome, making himself emperor. Constantine proclaimed Christianity to be the Catholic (universal) religion, thus making Christianity the enforced state religion of the Roman

Empire. Before this occurred one could be killed for being a Christian, afterwards one could be killed for not being a "Christian." Constantine, who was an anti-Semite, called the council of Nicea in 325 C.E. to standardize Christianity. Jews were excluded from the meeting. Jewish practices were officially banned and the Greek translations officially replaced the original Semitic Scriptures. Having alienated the Jewish Nazarenes in 325 at the Council of Nicea, subsequent councils alienated the Assyrians and Syrians over Christological debates. The Nestorian Assyrians were alienated in 431 C.E. at the Council of Ephesus while the Jacobite Syrians were alienated in 451 C.E. at the Council of Chalcedon. The division between the Semitic peoples of the Near East, and the Roman Catholic Church grew ever steeper. With the rise of Islam in the Near East the Near Eastern Christians were even further separated from their European counterparts in the West. Relations between the Christian West and the Islamic Near East were non-existent.

As time progressed, in the West the Roman Catholic Church began to suppress the Scriptures in Europe. Those who would try to make the Scriptures available to the common man were often burned alive. Such suppression was impossible in the Near East, where the Scriptures were already in Aramaic, the common language of the people. When the Protestant reformation emerged, claiming the Greek New Testament as the original, it was a time when most Europeans were not even aware that an Aramaic version existed.

In was in this atmosphere, in 1516 that the first printed edition of the Greek New Testament was published in Europe. This edition, published by Erasmus, would become known as the Textus Receptus, and serve as the standard Greek text until the 19th Century. The first edition of this work was based solely on six manuscripts, while later editions used only ten. None of these manuscripts were complete, and only one was even particularly old, dating to the tenth century. Since none of his manuscripts were complete, Erasmus was forced to invent many of his Greek portions of Revelation by translating from the Latin Vulgate into Greek. It was this poor edition which served as the evidence by which the West would embrace the Greek as the original. This edition would later serve as the basis for the King James Version.

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