

## The Reliability of the Gospels - 4

# Linguistic Fossils

In previous articles we have seen that the Gospels were written against the background of the Eastern Roman Empire, which developed considerably over the first couple of centuries AD.

One very significant event was the Jewish War of 66–73 AD which reached a climax with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. This allows us to carry out various tests to see whether the Gospels are a reliable record of the time of Jesus. We have already seen that the Gospel descriptions of people, places, events and customs match the picture built up by archaeology. Now we can look at the linguistic basis of the Gospels.

### The Languages of the Gospels

The Gospels were written in Greek, but they show signs of Aramaic and Hebrew language in places. This has led to the strange idea that the Gospels were written in Aramaic, but the reality is that the language structures found in the Gospels indicate that they were written between 30 and 70 AD by people with a good memory of the actual wording of what Jesus said.

In the first century AD, the common language of the Eastern Roman Empire was Greek. There were people who spoke Greek (known as Hellenists or Greeks) throughout the area and most trade was carried on in Greek. However, there is strong evidence of a widespread use of Aramaic in Galilee, and both Aramaic and Hebrew in Judea as well. Many of the inhabitants of Galilee would have been bilingual in

Greek and Aramaic. As Hebrew was used in synagogue services most people in Galilee would have been familiar with Hebrew as well. There would have been an even greater familiarity with Hebrew in Jerusalem, where the temple was.

The early church, however, was mainly a Greek speaking community. The New Testament is written in Greek, and later writings from the Apostolic Fathers were also in Greek. If the Gospels had been invented by the church, or were the result of long creative tradition by the church, then their linguistic background would have been Greek. But the reality is different; there is good evidence that the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels come from an Aramaic background.

### Evidence of Translation

It is sometimes easy to tell that a sentence was originally written in a foreign language. For example, the made-up sentence *“I have, to the horse, over the hedge, some hay thrown”* was originally produced in German and shows evidence of this by its sentence structure. The phrase *“It hit me on the head and I saw thirty-six candles”* originally comes from French because it uses a French idiom – *“to see thirty-six candles”* is equivalent to the English idiom of *“to see stars”*.

Evidence of underlying Hebrew or Aramaic in the Gospels is seen in a number of ways. The most obvious of these is the inclusion in the Gospels of various phrases and sayings in Aramaic. For example, Jesus refers to

Peter as 'Cephas' (the Aramaic word for a stone) in John 1:42, and raises the daughter of Jairus with the words 'Talitha cumi' ('Little girl, arise') in Mark 5:41.

## More Subtle Evidence

- ❖ Jesus often uses parallelism in his sayings, for example: "*Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine*" (Matthew 7:6). Saying something twice in slightly different ways is called parallelism and is typical of Hebrew poetry.
- ❖ Jesus sometimes uses very Hebraic sentence forms, such as "*Let these words sink down into your ears*" (Luke 9:44). This sentence form would never have been used by someone from a more Greek part of the ancient world.
- ❖ The Gospels contain names with Aramaic components, such as Bartimaeus, Bar-Jonah and Barabbas; "Bar" means "son of" in Aramaic.
- ❖ Jesus sometimes makes word-plays which work in Hebrew or Aramaic but not in Greek. For example, he described some of his adversaries as "*blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!*" (Matthew 23:24). The Hebrew word for a camel is *gamla* and the Hebrew for a wine-midge is *qamla*. This saying would be all the more memorable because it uses such similar words.

## All Greek

It is clear that the Gospels were written in Greek. For example, look at some of the words of Jesus from the cross:

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

"Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" is an Aramaic translation of the first words of Psalm 22. It is not credible that this saying would have been invented by the early church. First, the early church would probably have invented the saying in Greek, as they were Greek speakers themselves. Had they decided to put the saying in some other language they would probably have chosen Hebrew, the language in which the Psalm was originally written. The choice of a translation into Aramaic is uncharacteristic for the early church.

However, the fact that the statement is translated into Greek for the benefit of the reader shows that the Gospel was originally written in Greek for use by a Greek-speaking community.

## Reliable Records

These items of evidence which show underlying words in Aramaic are called "Linguistic Fossils". The Gospels contain linguistic fossils which show that some of the words of Jesus were originally delivered in Aramaic. This means that the sayings of Jesus were not invented by the early church, which spoke Greek. What we have is more evidence that the words of Jesus are reported accurately in the Gospels.

For a more detailed look at this subject, please visit the internet site below and follow the links from its homepage:

<http://www.biblethink.org.uk/>

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