

# Did the Messiah Speak Aramaic or Hebrew? (Part 1) by E.A. Knapp

What language(s) did the Messiah and other Jews speak during the late Second Temple Period? Most students of the Bible will be quick to volunteer Greek and Aramaic, but is this the whole story? Mel Gibson apparently thought so when he had the script for his Passion film translated into Aramaic, presumably because that was *the* language of the time. There is a small but growing awareness, however, that Hebrew was also a living language during this time. We are going to investigate this claim, but let's begin with a little background about the Aramaic language.

Aramaic is the language of the descendants of Aram, the fifth son of Shem, Noah's eldest son. By the 7-8th century B.C.E. Aramaic was the "imperial language" of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires, and was used by the Persians who succeeded them for ruling their western provinces. During this period it was the predominant language of the Fertile Crescent. References to the use of Aramaic speech can be found in places such as 2 Kings 18:26, Ezra 4:7, Isaiah 36:11 and Daniel 2:4.

*11 Then Eliakim, Shebna and Joah said to the field commander, "Please speak to your servants in **Aramaic**, since we understand it. Don't speak to us in Hebrew in the hearing of the people on the wall."*

*12 But the commander replied, "Was it only to your master and you that my master sent me to say these things, and not to the men sitting on the wall—who, like you, will have to eat their own filth and drink their own urine?"*

*13 Then the commander stood and called out in **Hebrew**, "Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria!"*

*14 This is what the king says: Do not let Hezekiah deceive you. He cannot deliver you!*

**Isaiah 36:11-14**

Several lengthy passages in Ezra and Daniel, some of the “later” books of the Old Testament, were written in Aramaic. Among Jews in the Babylonian exile and during the centuries that followed, both Hebrew and Aramaic were used, though Hebrew seems to have remained predominant among the tribes exiled in 586 B.C.E. when the Temple was destroyed. The Hebrew writings of the exilic and post-exilic prophets during the next few centuries up through Malachi (or Daniel) attest to this. Aramaic also remained in use throughout these centuries and up through the time of Jesus, most especially in Syria and Babylon. (As an interesting aside, Aramaic remains in use as a living language even up to the present day in several remote villages of Syria and Iraq.)

The prevalence of Greek in the centuries leading up to and including the time of Jesus is well documented and universally accepted. Alexander the Great conquered a vast territory in the 330s – 320s B.C.E. and the Greeks made an enormous point of Hellenizing the peoples they conquered, promoting Greek culture and social values. Prominent in this Hellenizing push was the inculcation and spread of the Greek language. Though the Romans conquered much of what had been the Greek Empire, Greek maintained its status as the common language of most of the eastern Mediterranean world.

Most scholars agree Greek and Aramaic were the common spoken languages in Palestine at the time of the Messiah. (Latin proclamations and inscriptions were utilized by the various Roman officials.) While the role of Greek during this period is undisputed and self-evident, the role of Aramaic is a bit murkier. Still more unclear is the rarely discussed role of Hebrew. The roles played by Aramaic and Hebrew are worthy of a closer look. A cursory scan of English New Testament translations provides us with references to “Aramaic” and

“Hebrew” such as the following (NIV, 1985):

**John 5:2** Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in **Aramaic** is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades.

**John 19:13** When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge’s seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in **Aramaic** is Gabbatha).

14 It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week, about the sixth hour. “Here is your king,” Pilate said to the Jews.

15 But they shouted, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!” “Shall I crucify your king?” Pilate asked. “We have no king but Caesar,” the chief priests answered.

16 Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took charge of Jesus.

17 Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in **Aramaic** is called Golgotha).

18 Here they crucified him, and with him two others— one on each side and Jesus in the middle.

19 Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.

20 Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in **Aramaic**, Latin and Greek.

**John 20:16** Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned toward him and cried out in **Aramaic**, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher).

**Acts 21:40-22:3** Having received the commander’s permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them in **Aramaic**: **22:1** “Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense.” 2 When they heard him speak to them in **Aramaic**, they became very quiet. Then Paul said: 3 “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers...”

**Acts 26:14** We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice

*saying to me in **Aramaic**, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads'"*

***Rev 9:11** They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in **Hebrew** is Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollyon.*

***Rev 16:16** Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in **Hebrew** is called Armageddon.*

As mentioned, Greek was the international language of trade and business at the time of Jesus, and the New Testament documents were passed down to us in Greek. In the passages cited above both Aramaic and Hebrew are mentioned, and on the surface it seems that Aramaic is more prevalent than Hebrew.

Upon closer inspection of the ancient Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, however, every supposed reference to "Aramaic" above actually has some form of the word Εβραϊστί which unequivocally means "Hebrew." *Not* Συριστί "Aramaic," which we find in other places in the Bible such as Dan 2:4 (in the Greek OT). In fact, the word Συριστί never appears in the New Testament. The Aramaic language by name simply is not mentioned. This is a case where our translators tried to "help us out" because they were swept along in the wave of conventional wisdom which for many years took for granted that Hebrew couldn't possibly have been a living language at the time of Jesus.

In fairness to the translators, many were probably confused by the New Testament's repeated mentions of "Hebrew" which didn't seem compatible with passages like Jesus' words on the cross ("Eloi Eloi Lama Sabachthani" – "My G-d my G-d, why have you forsaken me?") which are in Aramaic. We will come back to this instance and others like it in the second installment of this series. Undoubtedly adding to the confusion of the translators was the appearance of place names with Aramaic forms such as "Golgotha" which John calls

Εβραϊστί, Hebrew. At first glance this might lead one to think that Εβραϊστί is being loosely used to refer to Aramaic rather than actual Hebrew, even though this assumption is counterintuitive. What is actually going on in the case of place names like “Golgotha” is that these terms have undergone the same absorption into Hebrew that place names like San Diego have in English. As a linguist recently explained, “as names, John has every right to call them Hebrew, just like I can write about the English name San Diego (from Santiago, Sant Yago, aka. Giacomo, James, from Sant Yakobos, from Ya`aqov).”

The simple truth is that the New Testament authors repeatedly and specifically mention people speaking Hebrew because people really were speaking *Hebrew*. Most or all of the New Testament authors cited also knew Aramaic, and they most certainly knew the difference between Hebrew and Aramaic. The least we can do is take them at their word when they say people were using Hebrew. Josephus, a Jewish contemporary of the New Testament authors who also wrote in Greek, uses the words for both “Hebrew” (Εβραϊστί) and “Aramaic” (Συριαστί) in his writings and distinguishes between them with casual precision, so we know that Hebrew and Aramaic were both extant and distinct from one another. It also seems evident that knowledge of “Hebrew” was not something specialized and restricted to the educated elite. Quite to the contrary, Paul, for example, actually goes before a crowd and publicly makes his defense *in Hebrew*! So the New Testament says plainly that Hebrew was being written, read and spoken at the time of the Messiah. Furthermore, many places had either Hebrew names, or Aramaic names which had been absorbed into colloquial Hebrew.

It is worth mentioning that some of the New Testament references to Hebrew are found in what might be characterized as “parenthetical remarks” in the text. Authors use parenthetical remarks to clarify something, in

this case to their Greek-reading audience. This suggests very strongly that the Hebrew names of places were more easily recognized or understood than various Greek names for those same places, at least for a significant portion of the author's audience.

These references are just the tip of the iceberg, shedding light on the linguistic situation in Palestine before the destruction of the Temple, and testifying to the existence of Hebrew as a living language at the time of Jesus. With regard to our English Bibles, it is reassuring to note that in the past two decades many English translations of the passages quoted above have been corrected to read "Hebrew" rather than "Aramaic" where appropriate.

Thus far we have looked primarily at the passages in the New Testament that explicitly mention Hebrew (since as it turned out there was no explicit mention of Aramaic whatsoever). In the next installment we will take a look at some of the instances of actual Hebrew and Aramaic speech being reported by the New Testament writers *without* its explicit identification as Hebrew or Aramaic. Following that we will proceed to the non-Biblical evidence for the relative usages of Hebrew and Aramaic in the late Second Temple Period. In the meantime, ponder this: at Paul's Damascus road encounter he was spoken to by the Lord *in Hebrew*. That implies either Hebrew is G-d's language of choice or else the Lord was using it because it was Paul's mother tongue! Either way, what a fascinating insight into the world of the Bible.

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