

Did the Messiah Speak Aramaic or Hebrew? (Part 2) by E. A. Knapp

In the first installment of this study we looked at instances where the “Aramaic” (Συριαστικὴ) or “Hebrew” (Εβραϊστικὴ) language was specifically referred to by name in the New Testament. As it turns out there are eight explicit citations of Hebrew and none of Aramaic. For many this is cut and dried. The New Testament authors said Hebrew was being used, so clearly it was. But some are skeptics – myself included – and want a more thorough exploration of the linguistic landscape of the late Second Temple Period. Consequently we will proceed by taking a look at Yeshua’s words on the cross, recorded in the gospels of Matthew and Mark.

Matt. 27:46-49 About the ninth hour Yeshua cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” [Ἠλεὶ Ἠλεὶ λημα σαβαχθανι]—which means, “My G-d, my G-d, why have you forsaken me?” When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He’s calling Elijah.” Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Yeshua to drink. The rest said, “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him.”

Mark 15:34-36 And at the ninth hour Yeshua cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” [Ἐλωὶ Ἐλωὶ λημα σαβαχθανι]—which means, “My G-d, my G-d, why have you forsaken me?” When some of those standing near heard this, they said, “Listen, he’s calling Elijah.” One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Yeshua to drink. “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to take him down,” he said.

This passage is revealing for several reasons, but first notice the English translations, some of which, like the translation above try to “do us a favor” and unwittingly do us a bit of a disservice. In English, Yeshua seems to be presented as speaking the same words, but in the Greek texts Matthew and Mark have very different words written – transliterations of the words Yeshua spoke. (A transliteration is when someone hears or reads something in one language and writes it just as it sounds in another language, like when English speakers write “Moshe” for the Hebrew “משה”). The English transliteration “Eloi Eloi” (Ελωι Ελωι) is an accurate transliteration for Mark’s Greek text, while in Matthew the English transliteration *should* be “Eli Eli” (Ηλει ηλει) since this is what Matthew’s Greek text actually says. This is provocative because Mark’s version is clearly suggesting that Yeshua spoke Aramaic while Matthew’s version is definitely Hebrew.

As previously mentioned, many scholars have assumed that Aramaic was *the* language of Yeshua and that Aramaic must be the fundamental language underlying our gospel texts. In keeping with this assumption many translators trying to harmonize the gospels have made a habit of “correcting” Matthew to match Mark when they translated these words. Since Mark’s version presents Yeshua speaking Aramaic they presume it must be the true version.

If Matthew’s first two words of the quote are Hebrew and Mark’s are Aramaic then the obvious question is what language are the remaining two words, “lama sabachthani” (λεμα σαβαχθανι)? In an interesting coincidence these words are used in *both* Aramaic and Mishnaic Hebrew (the Hebrew used at the time of Yeshua). Thus the remainder of the sentence doesn’t give us a clue which language is being used. So what is actually going on here? Which version is correct and which language did Yeshua speak on the cross?

Before answering I should digress briefly and discuss Mark

and his famous Markan style. According to tradition Mark is said to have recorded the preaching of Peter. Greek linguists will be quick to observe that Mark is shorter than the other gospels and uses rapid, dramatic, almost graphic novel style to draw the reader in and whip him along for the ride. G-d speaks from the heavens at Yeshua's baptism and at the transfiguration, demons shout at Yeshua, the disciples are told they will drink poison and be bitten by snakes and not be harmed. Drama is everywhere.

In keeping with this, scholars have observed that Mark uses a brand of thaumaturgical language – miracle-working language – in several places, for dramatic effect. To phrase it differently, Mark used a technique that is familiar to us from literature of his time. He presented Yeshua as speaking Aramaic when performing miracles because, to the ear of the Greek audience there was a common perception that Aramaic was “mystical.” Mark is hardly the only ancient author to have used this method. Another example of this is in Mark 5:41 where he presents Yeshua saying “Talitha Koum” (Ταλιθα κουμ), “Talitha, get up.” This incident is recorded only in Mark, for whom this technique was unique among the gospel writers. In Mark 7:34 there is a third episode, exclusive to Mark, where Yeshua heals the blind and deaf man by saying “ephphatha” (Εφφαθα, “be opened”) although this example is disputed because some scholars suggest that this word may in fact be Hebrew. A modern descendant of this type of miracle-working language is the word “abracadabra,” whose origin is probably Aramaic, translating to “I create as I speak” and which modern magicians still use when they perform wonders.

Returning to our discussion of Yeshua's words on the cross, what did Yeshua really say? Matthew's and Mark's transliterated words “My G-d my G-d, why have you forsaken me” *mean* the same thing, but Matthew's transliteration presents Yeshua speaking Hebrew, while Mark's clearly reflects Aramaic speech. So which was it originally? Many

scholars, in addressing this issue, have observed that Matthew's gospel has a strongly Hebraic style. Matthew endeavors to make his book as much like an Old Testament/Tanach book as possible. They have suggested that Matthew changed "Eloi" ("my G-d") to "Eli" in order to make it Hebrew, and in order to make it match with Psalm 22:1 which Yeshua is quoting. This interesting suggestion runs into two problems.

First, the second half of the sentence "lama sabachthani" (why have you forsaken me), which Matthew and Mark agree on, has a different word from the one which appears in Psalm 22. Where the Psalm has "azavthani" the gospels record Yeshua saying "sabachthani," which is a word used in both Aramaic and in Mishnaic Hebrew. Logically Matthew wouldn't have changed "Eloi" to "Eli" to make it match the words of Psalm 22 and then *not* change "sabachthani" to "azavthani" as well, in order to make the quotation of the Psalm match precisely. It is almost completely unrecognized and unappreciated that Yeshua's use of "sabachthani" in place of "azavthani" is actually a well known rabbinic technique. Rabbis used this technique of replacing a word with a synonym to point the discerning reader to a midrash (rabbinic interpretation/teaching) about another related verse. This is a topic for another time.

Secondly, "Eloi," "my G-d," is easily recognized as Aramaic because of its last two letters, the suffix, which is an Aramaic form meaning "my." The root of the word "Eloi" is "El," meaning "G-d" in Hebrew. The word "El" does not occur in Aramaic except on at least one "magic bowl" like the ones to the right found by archeologists. These were bowls which had "magical" incantations on them.

These two problems argue against the suggestion that Matthew changed his text to Hebrew. Likewise these facts, coupled with our knowledge of Markan style and thaumaturgical (miracle working) language, suggest that Mark in fact

presented Yeshua as speaking in Aramaic for his own stylistic purposes. He did so rather than recording what Yeshua literally said verbatim as Matthew did. It should be noted that Mark did not, however, change the meaning or import of Yeshua's words in any way. This conclusion runs counter to the assumption of many past scholars, so we would do well to strengthen our case.

In order to strengthen our case we must turn to the verses which follow Yeshua's cry from the cross, bringing us to our strongest evidence, which is surprisingly obvious. In both Matthew and Mark's versions some of the bystanders suggest that Yeshua is calling out to Elijah, whose name in Hebrew is "Eliya" (or "Eliyahu"). The conventional nickname or shortened form of Elijah is "Eli," which means "my G-d," and is precisely what Matthew has in this passage. In contrast, Mark's "Eloi" with a long "o" sound (as the Greek of Mark clearly indicates by writing it with an omega, not a shorter omicron*) is distinctly different in sound from "Eli," the name of Elijah. This difference in sound is even more distinct in the original languages. Thus the original version of what Yeshua said is Matthew's "Eli," which *must* have been spoken in Hebrew in order for the bystanders to mistakenly think he was calling out to Elijah.

In the next installment of this study we will continue exploring these Semitic linguistic phenomena in the New Testament, as well as looking at other literature from the late Second Temple Period that can help us gain a more thorough understanding of the linguistic world of first century Palestine. Until then you may find it thought provoking to revisit the scene of the Messiah's crucifixion knowing that the words He spoke at one of the most pivotal moments in history were clearly spoken *in Hebrew*. It is merely icing on the cake to return to John 19:20, which we briefly glanced at in the previous article, and note that

the sign Pilate hung over the cross was written in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew...and, interestingly enough, *not* in Aramaic.

*Omega and omicron seem to have been pronounced almost identically in the 1st century, but the distinction is still a meaningful one.

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