

The Original Language of the New Testament

by David Maas

The Issue

It is often claimed today that the New Testament was originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic, not Greek. As one proponent claims:

□ “The New Testament, or B'rjyt HaHhadashah in Hebrew, was written by Hebrews, for Hebrews and within an Hebraic Culture. While the only New Testament manuscripts known to exist are written in Greek, with the possible exception of the book of Matthew, the evidence suggests that much of it was originally written in Hebrew and afterwards translated into Greek.”

i[1]

Noteworthy is the admission that all the surviving ancient manuscripts of the New Testament were written in Greek, though the statement implies Matthew may be an exception. What is evidence as to the original language of the New Testament? What follows is a summary of the main proofs demonstrating the New Testament was penned in Greek, not Hebrew or Aramaic.

The External Evidence

The evidence for the original language can be divided into External and Internal proofs. “External” refers to manuscript evidence and other witnesses to the original language from outside the text itself. “Internal” refers to evidence for the original language found within the New Testament text.

1) Existing Ancient Manuscripts. All surviving ancient manuscripts of the New Testament or parts thereof, whether complete or fragmentary, were written in Greek. This includes virtually complete Uncial manuscripts from the fourth and fifth centuries such as Codex Vaticanus, Sinaiticus and Alexandrinus, as well as a large array of ancient papyri, most of which are fragmentary. Some of the papyri manuscripts date back to the first half of the second century. ii[2]. In contrast, there are no surviving manuscripts of an original Hebrew or Aramaic New Testament, assuming such ever existed.

2) The Ancient Translations. Because Christianity was a missionary-oriented religion the New Testament was translated into other languages in subsequent centuries. Among the earliest translations were the Syriac (the Old Syriac, Peshitta, Harclean & Palestinian versions), Latin (both Old Latin and the Vulgate), and Coptic (Sahidic and Bohairic). In each case the translation was made from a Greek original, not an Aramaic or Hebrew one. iii[3]

3) The Witness of Early Church Authors. Several church fathers of the late first and early second centuries wrote letters, commentaries and so on in which they allude to or quote passages from the New Testament. This includes 1 Clement written about 95 A.D., which frequently refers to the Epistle to the Hebrews, along with the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, the Didache, Barnabas, Polycarp of Smyrna, Papias of Hierapolis and the Shepherd of Hermas. In each case New Testament allusions and quotations are from Greek originals. iv[4]

No New Testament quotations from a Hebrew or Aramaic original have been preserved in the writings of the early church fathers.

The Internal Evidence

1) New Testament gives no indication of being a translation. A document of any length translated from one language to another, especially with languages as fundamentally different as Greek and Hebrew, will give indications that it is a translation. The books of the New Testament do exhibit the 2 different talents and skill levels in Greek of its various authors. However, they provide no indications of having been translated from another language; in fact, just the opposite. v[5]

2) The New Testament's use of the Septuagint. The majority of verbal allusions and quotations from the Old Testament found in the New Testament are from the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint, not from the original Hebrew, though some authors use both including Matthew and Paul. As Kurt and Barbara Aland wrote, "the fact that from the first all the New Testament writings were written in Greek is conclusively demonstrated by their citations from the Old Testament, which are from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, and not from the original Hebrew text. This is true even of the rabbinic scholar Paul."^{vi}[6] If the New Testament was first penned in Hebrew it would make no sense for its authors to use the Greek Septuagint rather than the Hebrew Old Testament.

3) The New Testament itself translates Aramaic/Hebrew terms into Greek. Several passages from the gospels of Matthew, Mark and John, as well as the book of Acts, transliterate Aramaic or Hebrew terms into Greek characters and then translate them for Greek-speaking audiences. Note the following: Mark 15:34, "And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'" (Matthew 27:46).

Matthew 1:23, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, 'God with us')."

Mark 5:41, "And taking the child by the hand, He said to her, 'Talitha kum!', which translated means, 'Little girl, I say to you, arise!'"

Mark 15:22, "And they brought him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, 'Place of a Skull'."

John 1:38, "And Jesus turned and beheld them following, and said to them, 'What do you seek?' And they said to Him, 'Rabbi,' which translated means 'Teacher,' where are You staying?'"

John 1:41, "He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah,' which means 'Christ'."

Acts 4:36, "And Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called 'Barnabas' by the apostles (which translated means, 'Son of Encouragement')."

4) The authors of the New Testament utilized aspects of the Greek language. The examples of this are too numerous to list. Suffice it to say that the authors of the New Testament utilized features of Greek syntax and accidence according to their individual skill levels. This includes techniques such as alliteration, wordplay, synonyms, double and even triple negatives, compound words (especially by Paul. Hebrew does not lend itself to the formation of compound words except with proper names), etc. The classic example is the wordplay of Jesus in Matthew 16:18, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it." This wordplay in Greek is difficult to reproduce in either English or Hebrew. "Peter" is petros, meaning "stone," and "rock" translates petra or "bedrock, rock, cliff rock." Such examples of Greek wordplays can be multiplied.

The "Evidence" for a Hebrew or Aramaic Original

The most noteworthy observation regarding a proposed Hebrew or Aramaic original is the lack of evidence. In contrast to the evidence for a Greek original, there are no surviving ancient Hebrew or Aramaic manuscripts, assuming they ever existed. There are no ancient translations of the New Testament into Syriac, Latin, Gothic, Coptic or other language of the period made from an Aramaic or Hebrew original. None of the patristic fathers or other early church writers has preserved New Testament scriptural quotations from an Aramaic or Hebrew text. The text of the Greek New Testament provides few if any indications of having been translated from a Semitic text. If anything it smacks of having been an original Greek composition. The idea of an Aramaic or Hebrew original cannot explain why several New Testament authors transliterate Aramaic (or Hebrew) terms into Greek letters and then translate them for a Greek-speaking audience.

The only real "evidence" for a Hebrew original New Testament consists of references to a Hebrew version of the Gospel of Matthew by several later church fathers (Papias, Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius, and Pantaenus). All of the later patristic quotes are dependent on a statement made by Papias of Hierapolis around 130 A.D., thus his statement is the source of the idea of a Hebrew New Testament ("No tradition demonstrably independent of Papias exists."^{vii}[7]). According to Eusebius in his Church History Papias wrote, "Matthew therefore compiled the oracles in a Hebrew dialect, and each one translated as he was

able” (Eccl. History, iii. 39. 16). Papias was a bishop of Hierapolis in what is present day Turkey. He was a disciple of Polycarp of Smyrna who claimed to have heard the Apostle John. He wrote a five-volume exposition on the sayings of Jesus. Beyond this little is known about him. Copies of Papias’ writings were lost in the early centuries of Church History. Later church writers have preserved only a few fragmentary quotations from them. The preceding quotation is not from a copy of one of Papias’ books or letters, but one provided by Church historian Eusebius in his Ecclesiastical History written approximately two hundred years after Papias died. Eusebius does not provide the original context of the statement nor does he specify his source for it. Thus, because no copies of Papias’ writings have survived and because Eusebius does not account for his source, the quotation cannot be independently verified. From the available data there is no way to determine the quotation’s accuracy. In a modern criminal court this would amount to hearsay evidence. Further, there are ambiguities in Papias’ quotation. The clause “Hebrew dialect” can refer either to Hebrew or Aramaic and which is meant cannot be determined with certainty (while closely related, Hebrew and Aramaic are distinct languages). The term, “the oracles” of Jesus, was normally used to refer to individual sayings of Jesus, perhaps gathered together in a single collection. It is not clear whether this clause refers to the same document we now know as the Gospel of Matthew or to something else. It is possible Papias mistook one of the spurious Hebrew “gospels” that were making the rounds at the time for the Gospel of Matthew. And there is always the possibility that Papias was simply mistaken on the whole subject and that there never was a Hebrew (or Aramaic) version of Matthew. This means that the evidence for a Hebrew original of the Gospel of Matthew is entirely dependent on the veracity of Papias’ ambiguous statement, a quotation mediated by Eusebius two hundred years after the fact that cannot be independently verified. Even if Papias’ statement is accurate and correct, at best it is only evidence for a Hebrew original of the Gospel of Matthew, not the rest of the New Testament.

A Practical Point

The early church was focused on missionary activities (Matthew 28:18-20). By the first century Hebrew as an everyday spoken language had fallen into disuse even among Palestinian Jews. By the time of Jesus most Jews lived outside Palestine and spoke other languages such as Greek as their first language. Hebrew was largely limited to the religiously educated classes of the Jews including priests, rabbis and scribes.

Because of the spread of Hellenism under the earlier Greek kingdoms, as well as the organizing activities of the Roman Empire, Greek was spoken throughout the Roman world especially in the eastern regions of the Empire. Greek had become the de facto standard language of commerce in much of the Empire and beyond. In the eastern portion of the Empire it became common practice for local Roman authorities to publish edicts in both Latin and Greek (Latin being the official language of the Roman government and Greek the common language of the citizenry). While not everyone in the Empire spoke Greek, Greek was used more widely than other languages. For a new religion committed to spreading its message to peoples of every nation and culture, Greek would be the most practical choice for a medium of communication. Hebrew would be a most impractical choice. The notion of an Aramaic or Hebrew original New Testament cannot explain the existence of certain New Testament books. For example, the letters of Paul were written to address issues in local assemblies consisting largely of Greek-speaking Gentiles. Why would Paul write in Hebrew to a Gentile church located in a thoroughly Greek city like Corinth or Thessalonica?

In summary, the evidence for Greek as the original language of the New Testament is substantial, extensive, even overwhelming. In contrast, the evidence for a Hebrew or Aramaic original is virtually non-existent and amounts to an ambiguous and uncorroborated quotation from Papias of Hierapolis, which at most hints at an Aramaic or Hebrew original of the Gospel of Matthew.

ENDNOTES:

i[1] Jeff A. Benner, Introduction to the Hebrew New Testament, (http://www.ancienthebrew.org/2_newtestament.html).

ii[2] Bruce Metzger, The Text of the New Testament (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 36-66; Philip Wesley Comfort, Early Manuscripts & Modern Translations of the N.T. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1990).

iii[3]Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, pp. 67-81; Bruce Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1977); Kurt Aland & Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 185-221.

iv[4]Bruce Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 39-67.

v[5]Kurt Aland & Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, p. 52; A.T. Robertson, *Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Nashville: Broadview Press, 1934), pp. 76-139.

vi[6]Kurt Aland & Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, p. 52.

vii[7]Floyd Filson, *Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1971), p. 16.

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