

The Original Language of Matthew's Gospel - Greek Not Hebrew

by David Maas

The Problem

Certain contemporary sectarian groups have popularized the belief that the Gospel of Matthew was originally penned in Hebrew rather than Greek. The primary evidence cited is a collection of statements from early church fathers attesting that Matthew was composed in Hebrew.

Why it Matters

A rationally minded individual might ask: What does it matter whether Matthew was written in Hebrew or Greek? This is a reasonable question. In a normal situation the simple answer is, it does not matter as long as Matthew's text is accurately represented in a person's native language. However, the same voices that claim Matthew was composed in Hebrew also allege that the Greek version the Church inherited was corrupted in translation from the Hebrew original. This means the version of Matthew used in Bible translations today is unreliable, an inaccurate representation of what Jesus taught and did. Compounding the situation is that there are no existing copies of an original Hebrew version with which to "correct" the Greek Matthew. This is why the issue matters. Additionally, proponents of this viewpoint argue from their assumption of an original Hebrew Matthew that the rest of the New Testament was also composed in Hebrew. As one wrote: "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."

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The "Evidence" for a Hebrew Original

The proof consistently offered in support of a Hebrew original of Matthew is a series of quotations from early and later church leaders. The following are the key ones:

1) Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis writing in the first half of the second century: "Matthew therefore compiled the oracles in a Hebrew dialect, and each one translated as he was able" (quoted by Eusebius in Eccl. History, iii. 39. 16).

2) Irenaeus of Lyon writing around 170 A.D.: "Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome and laying the foundations of the Church" (Against Heresies, iii. I. 1).

3) Origen writing around 210 A.D.: "The first [Gospel] is written according to Matthew, the same that was once a tax collector, but afterwards an apostle of Jesus Christ who having published it for the Jewish believers, wrote it in Hebrew" (quoted by Eusebius in Eccl. History, vi. 25. 4).

4) Pantaenus: "Of these Pantaenus was said to have been one and to have come as far as the Indies. And the report was that he there found his own arrival preceded by some who were acquainted with the Gospel of Matthew, to whom Bartholomew, one of the apostles, had preached and left them the Gospel of Matthew in Hebrew, which was also preserved until this time" (as described by Eusebius in Eccl. History, v. 10. 3).

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5) Church historian Eusebius himself stated (315 A.D.): "Matthew indeed," said he, "produced his gospel written among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul proclaimed the gospel and founded the church at Rome" (Eccl. History, v. 8. 3). The preceding quotations constitute the oldest evidence for a supposed Hebrew original of Matthew. Several later church fathers also referred to a Hebrew original but based their information on the tradition from Papias as preserved by Eusebius in his fourth century work, Ecclesiastical History. The quotations from Papias, Origen and Pantaenus are all mediated via church historian Eusebius. At best they constitute second hand evidence (the original writings from which Eusebius presumably quoted have been lost) and cannot be independently verified.

Irenaeus provides testimony in a text of his that has survived (*Against Heresies*). However, his statement is also dependent on Papias (e.g., the reference to “their own dialect” is clearly derived from Papias’ statement). If Irenaeus had a copy of one of Papias’ writings, it also has not survived. Eusebius’ statement as recorded in *Eccl. History*, v. 8. 3 (item #5 above) is a quotation from Irenaeus and thus not an independent piece of evidence (*Against Heresies*, iii. I. 1 - item #2 above). All statements by later church authors regarding a Hebrew Matthew were dependent on Papias. As one commentator wrote:

- “This tradition, early, unanimous, and explicit, is impressive. But note this: Papias is the key witness. Irenaeus, for example, obviously knows and uses Papias as an authority. No tradition demonstrably independent of Papias exists.”ii[2]

In short, this body of evidence is entirely dependent on the veracity of Papias’ statement from the early second century as preserved in the fourth century work of Eusebius. Papias was a bishop of the city of Hierapolis in what is present day Turkey. He wrote his works in the first half of the second century. He was a disciple of Polycarp of Smyrna and claimed to have heard the Apostle John. Papias reportedly wrote a five-volume commentary called the *Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord*. Unfortunately this work did not survive. Beyond this little is known about him. iii[3]

Later church writers have preserved only a few fragmentary quotations from his works. Those that have survived were all written in Greek.

The all important quotation has not come down from a copy of one of Papias’ written works, but from the pen of later Church historian Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History*, which was written approximately two hundred years after Papias’ death. Eusebius does not provide the original context of Papias’ statement or specify his source. Because no copies of Papias’ writings have survived, and because Eusebius does not account for his source, the quotation cannot be independently verified and there is no way to determine its accuracy. In a modern criminal court this would amount to hearsay evidence. The evidence for a Hebrew original of Matthew consists of references to it by several later church fathers (Papias, Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius, Pantaenus and a few others), all of whom were dependent on the statement by Papias as preserved by Eusebius. Papias’ statement is the source from which the idea of a Hebrew New Testament has been derived. The ambiguity of Papias’ statement raises as many questions as it answers (“Matthew therefore compiled the oracles in a Hebrew dialect, and each one translated as he was able”). The term “Hebrew dialect” can refer either to Hebrew or Aramaic, related but distinct languages. If Aramaic was intended the next question is, which Aramaic dialect was meant, western or eastern? Aramaic is the more probable meaning since it was much more widely spoken among Palestinian Jews than Hebrew (fluency in Hebrew was largely limited to the religiously educated class). iv[4]

But which language Papias meant, Hebrew or Aramaic, cannot be determined with certainty. 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 referred to the same document we now know as Matthew, to a collection of individual sayings or to something else 3entirely.v[5] It is possible that Papias mistook one of the spurious Hebrew “gospels” for the Gospel of Matthew that were in circulation at the time (e.g., the gospels of the Ebionites, the Nazoraeans, According to the Hebrewsvi[6]). It is quite possible that Papias was simply mistaken or misinformed, that there never was a Hebrew or Aramaic version of Matthew.

All the preceding means that the evidence for a Hebrew original of the Gospel of Matthew is essentially 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. To take this at face value as convincing proof that Matthew was originally composed in Hebrew is a highly dubious course.

The External Evidence

The evidence for the original language of a document is divided between “external” and “internal” proofs. “External” refers to ancient manuscripts and other witnesses from outside the text of the document. “Internal” evidences are those facts and indicators derived from the text itself, in this case the Gospel of Matthew.

1) Ancient Manuscripts. All surviving ancient manuscripts of Matthew or parts of it are in Greek. This includes complete copies of the gospel from the major Uncial manuscripts of the third, fourth and fifth

centuries including Codex Vaticanus, Sinaiticus and Alexandrinus. Additionally, portions of the Greek text of Matthew are well attested by an array of ancient papyrus manuscripts (most of which are fragmentary). Several of these date back to the first half of the second century. vii[7]

This evidence includes p1 (third century), p21 (fourth century), p25 (fourth century), p35 (fourth century), p37 (third century), p45 (third century), p62 (fourth century), p64/67 (100-200 A.D.), p70 (third century), p71 (fourth century), p77 (second century), p86 (fourth century).

In contrast, there are no surviving manuscripts of an original Hebrew or Aramaic version of Matthew's Gospel, assuming it ever existed.

2) The Ancient Translations. Because Christianity was a missionary-oriented religion the New Testament was translated relatively quickly into other languages, including Matthew. Among the earliest translations were the Syriac (the Old Syriac, Peshitta, Harclean & Palestinian versions), Latin (Old Latin and the Vulgate) and Coptic (Sahidic and Bohairic). In each case the translation of Matthew was made from Greek originals, not Aramaic or Hebrew sources. viii[8]

3) The Witness of Early Church Authors. Several church fathers of the late first and early second centuries wrote letters in which they alluded to or quoted passages from Matthew. This includes 1 Clement written around 95 A.D. (e.g., Matthew 6:12-15 quoted in 1 Clement XIII), the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (approximately 110 A.D. - e.g., Matthew 5:4 in Ignatius to the Ephesians chapter X), and Polycarp of Smyrna's letter to the Philippians (110 A.D. - e.g., Matthew 7:1 in Chapter II). Writing in the middle of the second century in Chapter XV of his First Apology Justin Martyr quoted or alluded to Matthew 5:28, 5:29, 5:32, 5:44, 5:46, 6:19, 6:20, 9:13, 16:26 and 19:12. In the Preface to his Against Heresies Irenaeus writing around 170 A.D. alluded to Matthew 7:15 and quoted Matthew 10:26.

The preceding are just a few the many examples that can be cited from the early church fathers. In each case the author wrote in Greek and all his New Testament allusions and quotations were from Greek originals. ix[9]

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

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The Internal Evidence

The "internal" evidence amounts to facts, observations and indicators found in the text of Matthew itself.

1) Matthew gives no indication of being a translation. A document of any length translated from one language to another, especially utilizing languages as fundamentally different as Greek and Hebrew, gives indications of being a translation. The Greek version of Matthew gives no substantial signs of being a translation from Hebrew or any other language; in fact, just the opposite. x[10]

2) Matthew's Use of Material from Mark: Matthew includes a great deal of the same materials as the Gospel of Mark (Matthew reproduces approximately 90% of Mark's text xi[11]). In many instances there is great correspondence between the Greek texts of passages found in both Matthew and Mark (e.g., Matthew 9:6 - Mark 2:10, "but that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins"). However, Matthew often edited out unnecessary words from Mark's text and improved Mark's Greek syntax. xii[12]

Those who argue that Matthew was later translated from Hebrew into Greek "must also argue that the translator had Mark before him and that he simultaneously redacted Mark's Greek as he translated the putative Aramaic Matthew. Though not impossible, this solution remains improbable." xiii[13]

3) Matthew's Use of the Old Testament. In his gospel Matthew included verbal allusions to the Old Testament as well as direct quotations. Sometimes he used a version of a passage from the Hebrew Old Testament, other times from the ancient Greek translation or Septuagint (e.g., Matthew 1:23 quotes Isaiah 7:14 from the Septuagint - "behold, a virgin shall be with child..."). Complicating the matter was Matthew's tendency to rely on the Hebrew Old Testament in texts quoted in the narrative portions of his gospel, but then attributing Old Testament quotations made by Jesus that were based on the Septuagint, though not exclusively so in either case (e.g., in Matthew 4:4 Jesus precisely follows the Septuagint text of Deuteronomy 8:3).xiv[14]

This dual use of the Septuagint and Hebrew texts is difficult to explain if Matthew was originally penned in Hebrew and then later translated into Greek. If Matthew first composed his gospel in Hebrew (or Aramaic), why did he not simply use quotations and allusions only from the Hebrew Old Testament? The idea that Matthew writing in Hebrew used both Hebrew and Greek Old Testament sources makes little sense. Alternatively, why did the supposed later translators not convert all Matthew's Old Testament quotations to conform to the Greek text of the Septuagint?

4) Matthew Translated Aramaic/Hebrew Terms into Greek. In several passages Matthew transliterated Aramaic and Hebrew terms into Greek characters, then translated them into Greek for his presumably Greek-speaking audience. Note the following:

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

Matthew 27:33, "And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull)."

Matthew 27:46, "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'"

5) Matthew's Use of Greek. Matthew wrote in reasonably good Greek. xv[15]

"Our Greek Matt. bears convincing signs of having been written in Greek; Greek sources, including our Greek Mk. And one or more other written sources, were used in writing it. Thus internal evidence and source dependence argue that the Papias tradition is misleading or untrustworthy. The Greek Matt. we know is not the direct translation of a Hebrew (Aramaic) original."xvi[16]

As with the other authors of the New Testament, Matthew utilized features of Greek syntax and accidence to the best of his ability. His proficiency with Greek and individual style are clearly seen in his Greek text. This includes his use of techniques like alliteration, wordplay, synonyms, double and even triple negatives (common in Greek), compound words (not common in Hebrew), and so on. The classic example of a wordplay is Matthew 16:18: "I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church." The wordplay in Greek is difficult to reproduce in English and so is rarely accurately represented in English translations. "Peter" translates the Greek petros, that is, "stone," and "rock" translates petra ("bedrock, rock, cliff rock").

In the preceding the most noteworthy observation is the lack of substantive evidence for a proposed Hebrew or Aramaic original of Matthew. In contrast to the evidence for a Greek original, there are no surviving ancient Hebrew or Aramaic manuscripts of Matthew assuming they ever existed. There are no ancient translations of Matthew into Syriac, Latin, Gothic, Coptic or other common languages of the period from a Hebrew original. None of the patristic fathers or other early church writers preserved quotations from an Aramaic or Hebrew original. This gospel's text provides few if any indications of having been translated from a Semitic original and gives clear signs of being an original Greek composition. The idea of an Aramaic or Hebrew original Matthew cannot explain why he found it necessary to transliterate Aramaic or Hebrew terms into Greek letters and then translate them for a Greek-speaking audience.

In Summary

In summary, the evidence for Greek as the original language of Matthew is substantial and extensive, both internal and external. In contrast, the evidence for a Hebrew or Aramaic original of this gospel is weak, amounting to little more than an ambivalent and uncorroborated quotation from Papias of Hierapolis mediated by Eusebius writing some two hundred years after the fact. As for claims that a Hebrew original of Matthew demonstrates that the New Testament as a whole was also originally penned in Hebrew (or Aramaic), this is simply poor logic (hasty generalization). Even if Matthew was written in Hebrew, it proves nothing about the original language of the other books of the New Testament.

Finally, leading textual experts of the New Testament, 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." xvii[17]

ENDNOTES:

- i[1] Jeff A. Benner, Introduction to the Hebrew New Testament, (http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/2_newtestament.html).
- ii[2] Floyd Filson, Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1971), p. 16.
- iii[3] Bruce Metzger, Canon of the New Testament (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 52.
- iv[4] Filson, p. 16.
- v[5] Darrell Bock, Jesus According to Scripture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), p. 29.
- vi[6] Donald Hagner, World Biblical Commentary: Matthw 1-13 (Dallas: Word Books Pub., 1993), p. xlv. Bart Ehrman, The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 51.
- vii[7] 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).
- viii[8] Metzger, 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.
- ix[9] Metzger, Canon of the New Testament, pp. 39-67.
- x[10] Donald Hagner, World Biblical Commentary: Matthw 1-13 (Dallas: Word Books Pub., 1993), p. xlv.
- xi[11] Ibid., p. xlvi.
- xii[12] Ibid., p. xlvi.
- xiii[13] Ibid., p. xlv.
- xiv[14] A.T. Robertson, Grammar of the Greek N.T. in the Light of Historical Research (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), p. 119.
- xv[15] International Bible Encyclopedia (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1939), vol. III, p. 2010.
- xvi[16] Filson, p. 18.
- xvii[17] Kurt Aland & Barbara Aland, The Text of the New Testament, p. 52.