

'Aramaic Priority' Theory

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Satan never quits with his attacks against the objective authority of God's Word; it began back in the Garden: "Yea, hath God said?" I recently received the following communication from a correspondent in Asia:

Recently, I came across claims made by this movement called Hebrew Roots. One of their claims was that the NT was not originally written in Greek but in Aramaic and Hebrew. They claimed that since Greek manuscripts were 'translations' hence they could not fully transmit the NT message. Hence, better to use English translations of the Aramaic/Hebrew, i.e. Peshitta.

To begin, Jesus spoke and taught in Hebrew (not Aramaic). When the glorified Jesus appeared to Saul He addressed him in Hebrew (Acts 26:14). When Paul addressed the mob, he did so in Hebrew, which means that that is what the people spoke (Acts 22:2). Even more emphatic, Pilate had Jesus' 'crime' written in Hebrew (John 19:20). If the prevailing language spoken in that area had been Aramaic, Pilate would certainly have used it. When Peter was denying Jesus, his accusers cited his Galilean accent, not a different language. To claim that 'Hebrew' does not mean 'Hebrew' begs the question. Presumably the Holy Spirit was cheerfully capable to write *Aramaisti* if He so wished. Should anyone be offended by my invention of *Aramaisti*, for which we have no extant instance, as yet; how about the *Syristi* in Daniel 2:4 (LXX)? Why did the Holy Spirit not use that term, if that was what He intended to say (Titus 1:2)?

I owe the discussion that follows to Dr. Louis R. Tyler (personal communication).

In Mark 4.4 Jesus, speaking to the multitudes in Galilee, says, και εγενετο. This is that un-Greek, un-Aramaic, un-Mishnaic Hebrew expression that is so common in biblical Hebrew, וַיְהִי, the *waw* consecutive with the imperfect, which is the biblical-Hebrew narrative tense.

Then in Luke 22.15 our Lord, pouring out His heart before the disciples, uses the infinitive absolute construction with a finite verb (translated into Greek), again an idiom which could only be a biblicizing Hebrew in the original: Επιθυμια επεθυμησα. This construction is also in the words of John the Baptist in John 3.29: χαρα χαιρει, as well as in the spoken words of the Jewish leaders in Acts 4.17: απειλη απειλησομεθα.

I suspect that some of what is translated Aramaic may well be a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic. And for sure, the spoken Hebrew of the first century had a generous amount of Aramaic borrowings. . . . Perhaps Jesus, because of meditating day and night on Scripture in Hebrew (like John the Baptist and the Jewish leaders) spoke a biblicizing Hebrew in a time when the commonly spoken language was mishnaic Hebrew.

Now then, anyone listening to Jesus and making notes on the spot would have made them in Hebrew. Matthew doubtless had plenty of notes to look at when he composed his Gospel, in Greek. Luke 1:1 says that there were "many" written accounts circulating in his day, at least some of which would have been in Hebrew, presumably. If Matthew first wrote his Gospel in

Hebrew, it was not inspired, because God did not preserve it—we have not a single copy of such a gospel (the same holds for all the accounts Luke mentions).

If Jesus taught in Hebrew, why then does Mark use Aramaic when repeating something Jesus said? I don't know; I wasn't there. However, since Mark wrote his Gospel for a Roman audience, he may have chosen to use the far more widely known and used cognate. The same reasoning could also apply to other Gospels. However that may be, Mark's use of Aramaic is fatal to the theory that his Gospel was first written in Aramaic. An Aramaic original would not have such insertions, and therefore a faithful translation could not have them. It follows that Mark certainly did not compose his Gospel in Aramaic.

I here quote Dr. Tyler again:

This idea of "Aramaic priority" is based on a false premise. The Hebrew language did *not* die immediately after the Babylonian captivity. Malachi and the other post-captivity books written in Hebrew were *not* written in a dead language. Nor is the NT in error when it mentions the Hebrew language nine times. The NIV, not the NT, is in error at this point--the NIV most of the times "corrects" the text to say Aramaic. The Bar-Kokhba letters of AD 132 were written in mishnaic Hebrew, which was not an artificial language created by the rabbis, but was a living language. Aramaic was apparently the language only of a few upper-crust Jews living in the Land of Israel in the first century. This Aramaic thing is just more of the apostasy of these latter days.

It does seem strange that the Holy Spirit would have the post-exilic prophets write Scripture in a 'dead' language. As a linguist (PhD), I myself would say that those who have studied living languages know that such a language simply does not die out in one generation, or even two, the more especially if there are many thousands of speakers. The Hebrew mothers in exile would certainly have conversed with their children in Hebrew. And then there were the Jews that were left behind in the land, who would still be speaking Hebrew. And how about the gang that hauled poor Jeremiah off to Egypt (Jeremiah 45:28)? What possible reason would they have to speak Aramaic?

Consider also Esther 1:22—"Then he sent letters to all the king's provinces, to each province in its own script, and to every people in their own language, that each man should be master in his own house, and speak in the language of his own people." Now then, notice especially the last clause: evidently it was not Persian policy to try to coerce subjugated peoples to use the official language. On the contrary, the use of one's mother tongue appears to have been encouraged. This also militates against the idea that the Jews in exile stopped speaking Hebrew. And then there was the ascendancy of the Jews under Mordecai, to the point that "many of the people of the land became Jews" (Esther 8:17). How could they do that without learning to speak Hebrew?

As I have noted elsewhere, some 50% of the extant Greek MSS of the NT, including Family 35, have colophons stating that Matthew's Gospel, in Greek, was 'published' in 38 AD, Mark in 40, Luke in 45, and John in 62. Of course we have no means of proving that such information is correct. However, the Greek NT scraps found in Qumran cave 7 date to about 50-60 AD. The cave was presumably sealed by 68 (certainly by 70), and the MSS had been brought in

from elsewhere. What possible reason could the Essenes have had to translate an Aramaic, or Hebrew, original into Greek?!

I invite the attention of the reader to the scholarly discussion of those fragments given by Dr. William R. Cooper (*The Authenticity of the New Testament Fragments from Qumran*, 2016). He defends the following identifications: 7Q4 = 1 Timothy 3:16 – 4:3; 7Q5 = Mark 6:52-53; 7Q6.1 = Mark 4:28; 7Q6.2 = Acts 27:38; 7Q7 = Mark 12:17; 7Q8 = James 1:23-24; 7Q9 = Romans 5:11-12; 7Q10 = 2 Peter 1:15; 7Q15 = Mark 6:48; 7Q19 = a possible commentary on Romans (fragments 1, 2 and 3 are not NT; 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17 and 18 are too tiny to identify). The four fragments from Mark were written by four different hands, which raises the interesting question: Why did the Essenes save four copies of the same book? Whatever the answer may be, we have books here from **five** different authors! If they are copies, their exemplars must be even earlier. There simply is not enough time for hypothetical originals in Aramaic.

Clement, bishop of Rome in 96 AD, wrote in Greek, and cited a number of Greek NT passages, and so for Polycarp (a. 115 AD), Justin Martyr (a. 150 AD), Irenaeus (a. 180 AD), etc. A fair share of their writings that have come down to us were written against heretics, and they cited the NT as authoritative. If the originals of the NT books had been written in Hebrew/Aramaic, those fathers would certainly have appealed to them, being their maximum authority (such originals would be less than a century old). However, there is not a single mention of any Aramaic originals, or whatever, which means that there were none. The NT was certainly written in Greek, for reasons that are well known.

As for the Peshitta, it is basically Byzantine in text, not totally, and is missing some canonical books (supplied by the Harklean). It is certainly a better translation than the Latin, but it is only a translation. The fundamental flaw in the Aramaic priority theory is that it is no more than a theory; it has no objective evidence to support it. Of course people can believe whatever they wish, but we have every right to demand evidence.