

The Languages of Palestine

Aramaic emerged as the dominant language throughout the region during the Persian period, resulting in the problem that many of the Palestinian Jews would no longer have direct access to their scriptures, which were written in Hebrew [Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 83]. After a reading in Hebrew, the synagogue service would continue with a translation and commentary in Aramaic [Barnett, *Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity*, 102]. With the arrival of Hellenistic culture, the Greek language became the language of business [Barnett, 50]. This situation lasted throughout Jesus' life: though with the dominance of Rome Latin became the official political language, it was still Greek that dominated the culture of the empire [Barnett, 48, 50]. In Jesus' day, there were even synagogues in Jerusalem that taught in Greek [Barnett, 198].

Jesus Being Trilingual

Aramaic was the language of Jesus' people, and it is likely that Jesus taught the Jews in this language because of Aramaic phrases that appear in the Gospel accounts [Barnett, 47]. Surely Jesus spoke Hebrew, as evidenced by the biblical accounts of his ability to argue scripture with Temple authorities when just a boy and to read scripture in the synagogues as a man. There is reason to assume Jesus spoke at least some Greek [Barnett, 213], considering his extensive ministry in Galilee, the prominence of Hellenistic Jews he would want to reach, and his interaction with some Gentiles. Jesus – being divine – probably knew all languages, even those not yet created. However, even if we assume he had limited access to his omniscience, he would certainly have been equipped to minister in his culture, which required all three languages.

This was an asset for Jesus in his ministry. The only problem would be that his disciples might be expected to have a harder time accurately remembering or recording his teachings if they were in multiple languages. But God always provides. The startling reality is that many of the disciples were tri-lingual as well, including Peter and John [Barnett, 232-233]. Having grown up in the region, they of course knew Aramaic; having studied scripture seriously, they knew at least some Hebrew; having operated a good size business in Galilee, they had to know at least some Greek. Of their knowledge of Greek, we see further evidence in their ability to minister to Gentiles and to quote from the Septuagint.

Gospels in Greek

I would think it was advantageous initially to have the Gospels in Greek, because this would help disseminate their contents throughout the Roman empire. The one big problem in that day would have been that reliance on Greek probably led to reliance on the Septuagint, which some consider to be an inexact translation. However, if we consider the original Gospels to be inerrant, this need not concern us. The greater issue today is in trying to accurately translate the Gospels into English [and other modern languages]. One problem related to translation is deciphering Hellenistic Greek. Another – even when the words are translatable enough – is in accurately conveying the meaning of the text [dynamic equivalence]. A third is that Greek is an incredibly terse language, and – while this can be useful in logical argument – this eliminates some elaboration of argument and some color in historical accounts that the modern reader might find useful.