

Linguistic Situation in Palestine during the NT Times

By Jintae Kim

Associate Professor, Nyack College

Qumran finding shows many interesting aspects of life in the New Testament times. Greek manuscripts, Hebrew manuscripts, and Aramaic manuscripts were all found there. It is worth mentioning that the manual of discipline was written in Hebrew. We may say that all three languages were used in Palestine during the NT times. We may even say that many were tri-lingual in those days. Linguistic situation in Palestine was conditioned by many different social, political, and even theological contexts. The change of ruling hands did affect the linguistic situation on the one hand. However, it brought the opposite effect on the other hand.

1. Hebrew

A. Patriotic Judaists and Temple service

When Luke said Hebraic dialect in NT (Act 6; 22), we may understand it Aramaic. However, as I mentioned above, Hebrew was kept alive and still used by the extreme Judaists such as the Hasidim, Pharisees, and Essenes and also used in sacral service in the temple. For them, everything was related to religious issues. Essenes even restored use of Hebrew in their community.

B. Synagogue

In Synagogues, the Scriptures were read in Hebrew, then an Aramaic 'translation' (interpretation) were given (Targumim).

C. Mishnaic

Segal argues that Mishnaic were a vernacular Hebrew, as evidenced by the Bar Kochba letters and Fitzmeyer says it was never fully supplanted by Aramaic. However, evidence for this is incomplete.

2. Aramaic

A. Lingua franca until 3rd c. B.C.

Imperial Aramaic was the lingua franca of Assyrian empire. Persian empire adopted the language and system of Assyrian empire. While standard literary Aramaic was developed from imperial Aramaic (ref. Genesis Apocryphon), common spoken Aramaic was popular among all the non-Hellenists in Judea.

B. N.T. Aramaisms

We see Aramaisms in the NT. Mark used many Aramaisms conspicuously. Jesus' last word on the cross (Eli Eli lama sabbachdani). Dalitha qum. Maranatha.

C. Patriotic

Hebrew or Aramaic was considered more 'patriotic' (F. F. Bruce). Paul surprised the mobs by speaking in "the Hebrew dialect" (most probably Aramaic) and he did so to win them over and to demonstrate that he was not a Hellenist (Acts 22:3).

3. Greek

A. Alexander and his successors

Alexander encouraged the Greek language and culture. Ptolomies continued the same policy.

Seleucids continued to use Greek in government and even persecuted Hebrew-speakers and their practices later.

B. Koine Greek

A simplification of Attic Greek became widespread (Lohse). Egyptian papyri have shown that Koine was a common, vernacular dialect (Moulton), not some special biblical dialect.

Greek became the language of commerce and government of Greco-Roman world. To speak Greek was good. Otherwise one might be considered a Barbarian.

C. LXX as the Bible for Jesus and apostles

The Septuagint translation encouraged Greek-speaking Jews in Alexandria. Eventually it became the Bible for Christians in the early church fathers.

4. Latin

A. Rome

They did not push Latin but conducted government in Greek in the eastern part of the empire (Wise). They continued to promote unity around Greek language and culture and even adopted some Greek culture and religion for themselves.

Their policy was tolerance insofar as the people obeyed Roman rule.

B. Latinism in the NT

We see Latin words used in the NT. Among the gospel writers, Mark used many Latin words as well as Aramaic words. Scholars argue for Rome as the origin of the gospel based upon Latinism. However, we may not say so conclusively. We may say that Latin might have been used among some people in Palestine in NT times.