

DID JESUS SPEAK HEBREW?

by Roy Blizzard Jnr

JESUS SPOKE AND TAUGHT IN HEBREW.

Hebrew was the language of the common person in Judea in Jesus' day.

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) were all based on an original Life Story of Jesus that was written originally in Hebrew and not in Aramaic nor in Greek.

What evidence do we have that establishes unequivocally that Hebrew was the language Jesus spoke and in which he taught?

THE TESTIMONY OF EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS

Early Christian writers who mention the subject are all in unanimous agreement that the original Gospel was written by Matthew in Hebrew.

The earliest of these writers was Papias (Fragment 6), dating from about A.D. 167, who records, "Matthew compiled the sayings of Jesus in the Hebrew tongue, and everyone translated them as well as he could" (Eusebius, "Ecclesiastical History", III,39,1). Irenaeus, one of the earliest of the Church Fathers, confirms Papias' statement a few years later when he writes, "Matthew published a written Gospel for the Hebrews in their own tongue" (Ibid. V,8,2). A Jewish believer named Hegesippus is reported to "draw occasionally on the Gospel of the Hebrews ... and particularly on works in Hebrew" (Ibid. IV,22,4).

However, the most dramatic testimony to the existence of an original Hebrew Gospel is the well-known Jerome, who translated the Scriptures into Latin in Bethlehem circa A.D. 400. In Jerome's extensive writings there are nineteen passages that speak of a "Hebrew Gospel" or a Gospel "according to the Hebrews". On one occasion he speaks of "the Gospel according to the Hebrews" which, he says, "I have recently translated into Greek and Latin" (De vir. ill., II).

On another occasion he writes, "In the Gospel which the Nazoraeans and the Ebionites use, which we have translated recently from Hebrew into Greek, and which is called the authentic text of Matthew by a good many ..." (In Matt., 12,13). His most interesting and telling statement can be found in "Lives of Illustrious Men" in Volume 3 of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, edited by P. Schaff and H. Wace, page 362.

"Matthew, also called Levi, apostle and aforetime publican, composed a gospel of Christ at first published in Judea in Hebrew for the sake of those of the circumcision who believed, but this was afterwards translated into Greek though by what author is uncertain. The Hebrew itself has been preserved until the present day in the library at Caesarea which Pamphilus so diligently gathered.

"I have also had the opportunity of having the volume described to me by the Nazarenes of

Beroea, a city of Syria, who use it. In this it is to be noted that wherever the Evangelist, whether on his own account or in the person of our Lord the Saviour, quotes the testimony of the Old Testament he does not follow the authority of the translators of the Septuagint, but the Hebrew."

Epiphanius (4th century A.D.) described the "Nazoraioi" (Jewish believers), as "painstakingly cultivating the Hebrew language in which they read both the Old Testament and the Gospel according to Matthew" (Panarion I,29,7 and 9). Pantaenus, the teacher of Clement of Alexandria, relates having found the Hebrew Gospel of Matthew as far away as in India (Eusebius, op. cit., V,10,3).

COINS AND INSCRIPTIONS

Although there is a difference of opinion among scholars currently working in the field as to the importance of coins in deciding the language of Israel in the first centuries B.C./A.D., I believe coins and inscriptions are an important tool for determining the principal spoken language of this period. In my view, the evidence of coinage is dramatic. From the fourth century B.C. until the end of the Bar-Cochba Revolt in A.D. 135 - the entire history of Jewish coinage - only one coin is inscribed in Aramaic (Alexander Jannaeus, 103-176 B.C.). All the rest are in Hebrew.

In addition, there is considerable epigraphical evidence from the period to establish Hebrew as the principal spoken language. In excavations in occupation levels from the first centuries B.C./A.D. at the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, not one Aramaic inscription has been found.

However, several exciting and important Hebrew inscriptions have been found (see "Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus" pages. 58-59). At Masada, Herod's fortress on the Dead Sea, the epigraphical evidence is staggering: fragments of 14 scrolls, over 4,000 coins, and more than 700 inscribed pottery fragments. In these, the ratio of Hebrew to Aramaic exceeds nine to one.

Inscriptions on pottery vessels, burial ossuaries, tombs, walls, mosaic floors, and so on, all attest to Hebrew as the spoken and written language of the common people.

Of course, the Dead Sea Scrolls provide for us one of the most dramatic and significant of the epigraphical evidences for Hebrew. The Dead Sea Scrolls include nearly 600 partial manuscripts, both biblical and non-biblical, indicated by some 40,000 fragments. The most telling evidence of the scrolls is found in the sectarian scrolls and the commentaries on the biblical scrolls. In the sectarian scrolls, the ratio of Hebrew to Aramaic is again nine to one, but all of the commentaries are in Hebrew. It is impossible to conclude that a commentary on the Scripture would be written in a language other than the popular language of the people.

EVIDENCE FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT TEXT

The most conclusive evidence for Hebrew as the principal language behind not just the Synoptic Gospels, but the New Testament in its entirety, is the text itself. The New Testament is filled with semitisms: Hebrew vocabulary, Hebrew syntax, Hebrew idioms, Hebrew thought patterns, and Hebrew theology. Moulton and Howard have compiled an impressive 72 page list of Hebrew expressions and idioms found in the New Testament in their "Grammar" (Vol. 2, pgs. 413-485).

Professor David Flusser of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and a member of the Jerusalem School for the Study of the Synoptic Gospels, has emphatically stated: "Of the hundreds of Semitic idioms in the Synoptic Gospels, most can be explained on the basis of Hebrew only, while there are no Semitisms which could only be Aramaic without also being good Hebrew."

Joining Professor Flusser are such notable scholars as Pinchas Lapide (Bar-Ilan University, Tel Aviv), Frank Cross (Harvard University), William Sanford LaSor (Fuller Seminary), Harris Birkland, and J.T. Milik. Even Moshe Bar-Asher, the prominent Aramaic scholar at the Hebrew University, has stated that he believes the Synoptic Gospels go back to an original Hebrew and not Aramaic document.

To the New Testament scholar, fluent in both Hebrew and Greek, it is immediately apparent that the Greek of the Synoptic Gospels, the first fifteen chapters of the Book of Acts, the Book of Hebrews, and the Book of Revelation, as well as vast portions of the remaining portions of the New Testament text, is not Greek at all, but Hebrew in Greek dress. (Editors note: with regard to the Hebraic style of the letter to the Hebrews another scholar comments, "all Greek scholars know that the Greek of Hebrews is the best Greek in the New Testament.")

However, there is an important fact that cannot be over-emphasized. To the scholar fluent in Hebrew, it is additionally apparent that the thought patterns behind the entire New Testament are Hebrew, and not Aramaic nor Greek.

FOR FURTHER READING

"Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus" by David Bivin and Roy Blizzard.

"The Missing Hebrew Gospel" by Pinchas Lapide.