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Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin: Languages of New Testament Judea

Roger T. Macfarlane

A trilingual inscription placed by Pontius Pilate upon the cross proclaimed "Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews." This *titulus* was able to be read by many of the Jews, John says, not only because of Golgatha's proximity to the city, but also because the text was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Pilate's declaration addressed the multilingual population of Jerusalem, both its residents and also its visitors, who were filling the city during the Passover. Weeks later, on the day of Pentecost, Peter and some Apostles addressed Jews, residents of Jerusalem who had gathered from every nation, and for a moment the polyglot assembly communicated in one language. Miraculously, "every man heard them speak in his own language" (Acts 2:6). It was cause for amazement that these Galileans were able to be understood by Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Judeans, Cappadocians, Pontians, Asians, Phrygians, Pamphylians, Egyptians, Cyrenians, Cretans, Arabians, and proselytes and Jews from Rome (Acts 2:1-13).

Not only the Jerusalem of these anecdotes, but all of Roman Judea in the first century A.D. was a place of tremendous linguistic diversity. Centuries of political and religious change had resulted in the establishment of a culture in which Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin were written, read, and especially spoken by a multilingual group. This included governors and subjects, scholars and laymen, missionaries and proselytes, buyers and sellers, clients and kings. The rock of Masada, having yielded from its rubble Latin, Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew texts, exemplifies the societal internexus of New Testament Palestine.

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Linguistic History of Judea

Latin was the language of Rome and was a relative newcomer to the linguistic hodgepodge in Judea. At the time of Pontius Pilate’s prefecture, Roman presence in Palestine was scarcely a century old. After centuries of Persian and Hellenistic influence, the arrival of Rome made no dramatic impact on the linguistic environment of the area, though the nature of her arrival under the direction of Pompey the Great in 63 B.C. left an indelible political mark. A passage in the Palestinian Talmud states that “four languages have come into the world to be used, Greek for singing, Latin for warfare, Aramaic (sursi) for lamentation, Hebrew (ivri) for speaking.”² This limited view of Latin’s utility reflects an animosity toward Rome’s military occupation of the region. Roman prefects and governors communicated in Latin with their peers on issues of military administration; Latin was also the official language of the Roman troops among the occupying force, as is manifest by scraps of Latin texts littered about Masada after its fall. One noteworthy papyrus, a document pertaining to the pay and kit of a member of the Roman garrison, records the presence of C. Messius C. f. Fabia Berutensis, a legionary soldier.³

As in other eastern provinces of the Roman empire, communication between Romans and the inhabitants of Palestine was conducted, pragmatically, in Greek. The language had enjoyed growing currency in the region for generations, with the result that, by the time of the Roman occupation, Greek was securely fixed as the lingua franca. Introduced formally at the time of Alexander’s conquest of the area—of course there is evidence for very ancient trade between Greece and the Middle East—Greek remained the administrative language of Alexander’s empire long after his early death in 323 B.C.

Classical Greece accommodated many dialects of the Greek language, with both subtle and deep differences existing among the various regions of Greece. The dialect of Attica, as spoken and written in Athens during the fifth century, came to be regarded as the standard of classical Greece. The consolidation of independent city-states into larger political units, coincident with the demise of Athens and the arrival of Macedonian supremacy, forged a new
dialect of Greek that combined and blurred the peculiarities of various constituent dialects into one "common" dialect, the so-called Koïné. Koïné was the language that was exported with Alexander's conquests. Koïné Greek is Hellenistic Greek; the term applies to Greek spoken and written between the rise of Alexander until the advent of Byzantium, around A.D. 550. To be sure, a language spread over myriad peoples throughout nearly a millennium could hardly remain constant. And, indeed, Koïné was by no means static, but its relative stability was remarkable.

Alexander's legacy of Hellenistic culture survived the division of his realm by his successors. The Jews, like other nations in the vast territory of Alexander's conquests, remained under the influence of Greek-speaking dynasts for much of the next three centuries. When Ptolemy I Soter secured himself finally as Alexander's successor in Palestine and Cyprus in 304 B.C., he persisted in the use of Greek as the language of his administration. Under the watch of Ptolemy V Epiphanes, Ptolemaic control of Palestine was yielded in 200 to the Seleucid Antiochus IV, who conspired with pro-Hellenistic elements to convert Jerusalem into a Greek city and actually dedicated the temple there to Olympian Zeus. The ensuing Maccabean revolt produced an attitude of nationalism and allowed the remedy of many recent changes, especially the rededication of the temple to Israel's god in 164. Yet the influence of Greek language in Palestine remained strong, as many Jews had become bilingual.

From the second century before Christ, Jewish literature was both translated into Greek and written originally in Greek. Eupolemus (active between 158 and 150 B.C.) was a Palestinian Jew with a Hellenistic education, whose Greek account of the kings of Judea seems to have harmonized the Hasmonean claims to Jewish cultural sovereignty with Hellenism. Josephus was also of Jewish aristocratic descent, a priest with a Pharisaic education and a political leader before Jerusalem's fall to Rome. When Josephus composed his history of the Jewish War, he wrote one account, no longer extant, in Aramaic for the Jews in Mesopotamia and another account, which survives, in Greek. He comments in the Jewish Antiquities on the tension that existed in his day between conservative Jews who would retain the use of Hebrew and those who
sought to refine their use of Greek: “Our people dislike those who speak Greek well.”

Remarkable in its own right, but also noteworthy here because of its connection to Masada, is the apocryphal Ecclesiasticus or Wisdom of Ben Sira, which was written originally in Hebrew at Jerusalem in about 180 B.C. This book manifested a certain tolerance of Hellenism, provided it could be fitted to Judaism. The author, known as Ben Sira, is identified as a sage named Jesus, son of Eleazar, son of Sira. Ben Sira proposed a way of life that reconciled fidelity to the faith of one’s fathers with the difficulties of contemporary life. Hellenism was acceptable, provided it did not interfere with the functions of Jewish traditions.

Ben Sira’s grandson translated the book into Greek probably about the same time Eupolemus was writing. The Greek version, written for a readership that was not conversant in Hebrew, gave the book’s teachings a wider audience and greater popularity. In his preface, the translator admits the difficulty of translating from Hebrew to Greek—clearly favoring the former, but his effort suggests that his grandfather’s book would be less widely read in Hebrew than in Greek, at least among the Jews of the Diaspora. Fragments of the original Hebrew text of the Wisdom of Ben Sira have come to light in the last century, including a lacunulose scroll found at Masada. Containing portions of chapters 39:27–44:20, the Masada scroll is apparently the oldest surviving Hebrew manuscript of the text.

Languages in First-Century Palestine

The Hellenization of Judea, which continued after the Seleucids under the Hasmoneans and then the Herodians, was reflected in secular and religious affairs. The dispersion of Jews among various cultures decentralized not only their political, but also their cultural unity. In the Diaspora, Greek came to be used as the lingua franca. At Jerusalem also, Israel became more accustomed to Hellenism and increasingly used Greek more commonly. The Passover and other feasts brought to Jerusalem an annual, if temporary, influx of Hellenized Jews. In Jerusalem members of the political and priestly elite sought advantage in the adoption of Hellenistic
culture and the use of Greek. This is reflected in the surprising fact that of all Jewish funerary inscriptions recorded at Jerusalem before A.D. 70, 40 percent are in Greek. It became so common for Jews to use Greek that the invention of a Jewish historiography—providing a readable record not just for Gentiles, but also for Jews who knew little Hebrew—in the Greek language seems natural.

It would appear that members of all socioeconomic levels of the community could use Greek, as suggested by a papyrus letter found at Masada. The letter records the correspondence sent by one Abascantos to a person, perhaps his own brother, named Judah. The contents of the letter could not be more mundane: the discussion pertains to the supply of liquids and lettuces. Yet the document is a valuable cultural artifact, demonstrating the casual and practical use of Greek among the Jews at Masada.

Abascantos’s letter to Judah is indicative of commonplace use of Greek in first century A.D. Palestine. In addition to the numerous funerary inscriptions and the prohibitive inscription on the Jerusalem temple, further evidence is found in a decree on tomb robbery set up at Nazareth, the scroll of the minor prophets and other Greek fragments from Qumran, and numerous books of both secular and religious importance to Jews, Christians, and pagans.

Indeed, one need not look far for evidence that Greek was commonplace in the multilingual society of first-century Palestine. At this crossroads of the Middle East, Greek found common use beside Hebrew and Aramaic. At the time of Masada’s siege, Hebrew and Aramaic each had enjoyed a long history in the region of Judea. Classical Hebrew flourished throughout the history of the Kingdom of Israel, around 1000–587 B.C. During this time, all formal prose was written in classical biblical Hebrew. The nature of the language that was spoken at the time in the Southern Kingdom, however, is uncertain, and with the captivity of Israel the native language of the Jews suffered corruption. The exile of Israel’s educated elite necessitated their learning the language of Babylon, where, by 587, Aramaic had replaced Akkadian as the spoken language. Cyrus made Aramaic the administrative language of the vast Persian empire and thus assisted in the proliferation of that language. It had already been introduced into Palestine in the eighth century (2 Kgs. 17:24).
There is no doubt that Aramaic influenced the grammar and vocabulary of postexilic Hebrew. Aramaic, on the other hand, was not uniformly applied by the various ethnic and cultural groups that received it. Thus, a number of dialectical forms of the language, commonly referred to as middle Aramaic, evolved: Syriac, Mandeans, Samaritan, Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, Galilean Aramaic, and Christian Palestinian Aramaic.

Simultaneously, then, from about the time of the Maccabean revolt until into the third century A.D., the peoples of Palestine co-existed in a state of multilingualism. Native speakers of Hebrew, various dialects of Aramaic, and Koiné Greek lived side by side. It is difficult and somewhat hazardous to draw conclusions about the state of interaction among these various linguistic groups. Horsley observes that

Greek was apparently the official language of Sepphoris under Herod and Antipas as under the Seleucid and Ptolemaic imperial administrations earlier (and in Tiberias, once it was founded). Yet we cannot conclude, on the basis of their supposed contact with Sepphoris, that most Galileans had become accustomed to speaking Greek by the first century C.E.

We can conclude, he observes, that “language usage in Galilee is heavily interrelated with the fundamental social (political-economic-religious) division between the rulers and the ruled, cities and villages, and the historical changes introduced by the rulers based in cities.”

Determining which languages were spoken by Jesus and his Galilean disciples has been the point of considerable debate. Current scholarship tends to support the belief that Jesus may well have spoken at least three languages: Hebrew, Galilean Aramaic, and at least some Greek. Given the pervasive multilingualism of the immediate surroundings, this would seem true. Thus Jesus’ fluency in the first two may be assumed; as evidence for Jesus’ ability to speak Greek, some salient items may be considered. For Jesus and his adoptive father to have waged a successful business among the inhabitants of Nazareth and Galilee, they would probably have needed to be conversant in Greek. Two notable conversations Jesus held with Gentiles—his first gentile convert, the centurion (Matt. 8:5–13; Luke 7:2–10), and the Syro-Phoenician woman
(Mark 7:25–30), whom Mark observes was a *hellenis*, "Greek"—were possibly conducted in Greek. The disciples mistakenly thought at one point that Jesus himself intended to expand his mission to include the Gentiles (John 7:35), who would probably have had to be taught in Greek. Pilate's interrogation of Christ was most likely conducted in the language of Roman administration in the East, Greek. Pilate can be assumed to have spoken Greek. A Roman magistrate's ability to speak Aramaic or Hebrew would have been worthy of comment, but the writers of the Gospel accounts make none, nor do they mention an interpreter's presence in the New Testament accounts of Jesus' conversations with Roman magistrates. Such evidence suggests strongly that Jesus was able to converse in the region's *lingua franca*, Greek.

Written documents recovered in the Judean desert demonstrate further the pervasiveness of multilingualism around the time of Christ. Beside the familiar hoards of Qumran are the Babatha archive and the scattered literary remains from Masada. Babatha was a Jewish woman who secreted away in a cave a bundle of her personal papers. These papyri constitute a time capsule of enormous historical value. The documents, written in Greek, Nabatean, and Aramaic, provide an uncommonly clear view into the life of an individual and into the administration of Roman imperial affairs in Arabia and Palestine between A.D. 94 and 132.

**Languages at Masada**

While the literary rubble of Masada pales in comparison to the Babatha material, the bits and scraps that survive—biblical and apocryphal scrolls, ostraca, documentary papyri, *tituli picti* (inscriptions), graffiti, and amphora stamps—also attest the common use of Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic.

Wine jars from the period of Herod’s residence bear in Latin the name of C. Sentius Saturninus, consul in 19 B.C. and legate of Syria from 9 to 6, whose name was written onto the jars to date their contents. Other similar written fragments—recording the import of Cumean apples, honey, and the renowned fish sauce called *garum βασιλέως*—starkly contrast the extravagance of Herod’s residence with that of the zealots. Hebrew letters are chiseled onto the
Fragments of the book of Leviticus. The scroll was apparently mutilated intentionally.
cylinders that made up the columns of the Herodian living quarters, suggesting that the laborers for that complex were Jewish.

The written remains left by the Jewish defenders are more compelling. Numerous ostraca and other tags written in both Aramaic and Hebrew bear individual names or single letters and may have been used in a system of rationing or for tithing. Fragmentary scriptural scrolls of biblical, apocryphal, and sectarian texts are of varied importance.24

Other, more mundane scraps of evidence were left by the Roman garrison some time after A.D. 73—documents illuminating the conveyance of hospital supplies, a note regarding the balsam trade, a notice of a soldier’s salary, a graffito that quotes Vergil’s Aeneid, and other odds and ends. In short, the bits and pieces of the literary remains at Masada can help fill out interpretations of Jewish or Roman lifestyles, but none really enlightens single-handedly. As a whole, the multilingual assembly of scraps illuminates a moment when cultures collided in the Judean desert.

Literary remains cannot answer to what degree the population of Masada’s fortress was literate. The biblical scrolls were found near the synagogue, which may mean that the texts were used by men who were trained to read biblical Hebrew and who could convey the import of the texts in worship services. The other documents that survive from the period of the Masada siege do not necessarily require extensive literacy on the part of their users, as most of these texts are brief and are restricted to a single name or phrase or alphabetic character. General literacy was probably no higher in Palestine or at Masada than in Hellenized cities of the Roman empire, some of which seem to have achieved 20–30 percent literacy rates.25 It is impossible to know how completely the documents left behind by Masada’s defenders survived the centuries of weather and plundering until the archaeologists uncovered the remnants in the 1960s. The scroll of Leviticus is assumed to have been mutilated intentionally. And there is no telling how many scrolls were removed intact and are now lost or deposited elsewhere. Still, it is intriguing and informative to consider the rock of Masada as a document of the multilingual culture that existed in first-century Judea.

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NOTES

1 John 19:19–20. Of similar nature is the Herodian-period, bilingual—Greek and Latin—inscription posted on the pillars of the temple, prohibiting Gentiles from entering the sacred precinct. Josephus, Jewish War 5.193–94. Also see the surviving examples of a similar warning in Greek preserved in the Archaeological Museum at Istanbul and in the Rockefeller Museum at Jerusalem. The text of this inscription is reproduced in Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum, vol. 8, no. 169; the inscription is depicted in Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “Did Jesus Speak Greek?” Biblical Archaeology Review 18 (September/October 1992): 61.


5 Josephus, Antiquities 20.264.


8 In 1896 a substantial portion of the Hebrew text was found in the Cairo Genizah, but bits of the text have also been discovered at Qumran (6:20–31; 51:12–20).


10 Peter van der Horst, “Jewish Funerary Inscriptions,” Biblical Archaeology Review 18, no. 5 (1992): 46. The frequency of Greek in all Jewish funerary inscriptions is a remarkable 70 percent.


12 Cotton and Geiger, “Latin and Greek Documents,” 86, further, claim that the fragment is the earliest documentary papyrus from Palestine.

13 For full documentation and limited discussion of each of these items, see Gerard Mussies, “Greek in Palestine and the Diaspora,” in Safrai and Stern, Jewish People in the First Century, 1053.

For Rabin’s belief that Mishnaic Hebrew was the spoken language of Judea, see Rabin, “Hebrew and Aramaic,” 1015. For distinctions among the terms bilingualism, lingua franca, and diglossia, see Rabin, “Hebrew and Aramaic,” 1007–10.


Rabin, “Hebrew and Aramaic,” 1033, wrote that “the language of Jesus has proved to be a problem which has generated much discussion, and can be considered as being still unsolved.” Rabin’s observation remains true twenty years later.

There are numerous Aramaic expressions in the New Testament; Hebrew is read at Luke 4:16–19.


Given the multilingual nature of Palestine, one might as easily assume that these Gentiles spoke Aramaic; the Syro-Phoenician woman must have spoken some Semitic language (for example, Phoenician or Aramaic) as her native tongue, and the centurion might have served as an officer in a Roman legion without being necessarily monolingual.


These scrolls are discussed by David Rolph Seeley, “The Masada Fragments, the Qumran Scrolls, and the New Testament,” in this volume.