

The languages of Jesus

As well as Aramaic and Greek, Jesus spoke Hebrew, the tongue in which the Old Testament was written, and maybe a smattering of Latin. Sociolinguistic studies suggest some clues as to when and where he used his three main languages / By DAVID CRYSTAL

THE NEW TESTAMENT was written in a language known as Koine Greek. *Koine* (pronounced *koy-nay*) meant “common”, referring to the everyday dialect of Greek spoken as the lingua franca of the Roman empire at that time, and especially throughout the eastern Mediterranean. The adjective distinguishes it from the elite variety of the language spoken in Athens (Attic Greek). Greek then – and now – was a two-level language, with “high” and “low” varieties.

Galilee was a multilingual area, adjoining provinces where other local languages and dialects were spoken, such as Syria in the north, Samaria in the south, and the nearby 10 cities (the Decapolis), where Greek culture predominated. There’s clear evidence in the Bible of bilingualism from that time. In Acts 21:37 we are told explicitly that Peter talked

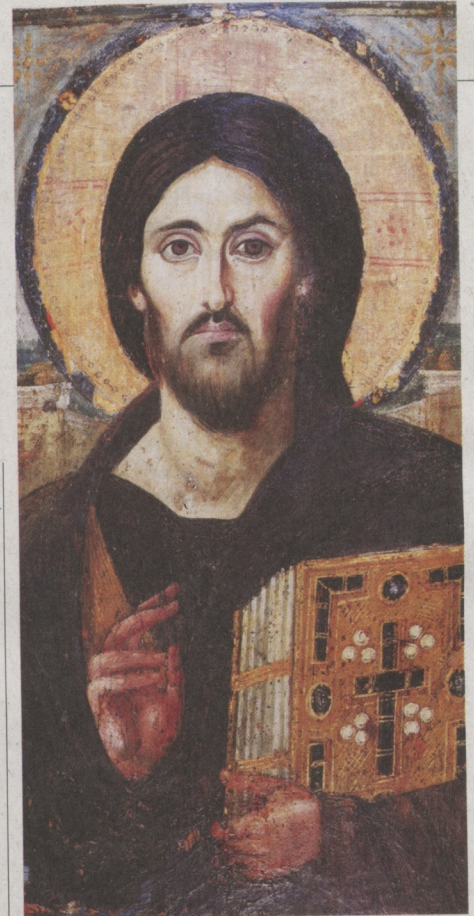
to a Roman tribune in Greek, and then in 21:40 that he addressed the crowd in Hebrew.

Christianity presents an unusual linguistic situation. Religions typically prioritise the home language of their founder, and resist translation, as in the case of Arabic and the Qur’an. But in the early years of Christianity, this didn’t happen. Aramaic was Jesus’ mother tongue, the traditional language used in his part of Palestine, and some three centuries earlier an important language of the Persian empire. It is thought that it still had some status as a lingua franca in the first century, but it was by no means as widespread as Koine Greek, which would have been a natural second language for him, as it was for most. So it was Greek, not Aramaic, that became the language of the Gospels – a sensible choice if they were to be universally understood. It allowed people from widely different cultural backgrounds to access the new message.

The main alternative, Latin, wouldn’t have had such reach or popular appeal, being the language of Roman colonialist power and prestige, and thus uninviting to local people. Of course, when Rome later developed as the centre of the new religion, Latin acquired a fresh role as the Church’s lingua franca, and became the official language of the Bible through the translation of St Jerome.

THE LANGUAGES Jesus would have spoken has been a much-discussed topic in biblical studies. In addition to Aramaic and Greek, he also spoke Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament and the everyday language of the Jewish religious hierarchy. It would thus have been a constant Sabbath companion for him because of its routine use in synagogues, the Temple, and other faith settings in Galilee and Judea (where Jerusalem was located). His competence in that language, from an early age, is evident in Luke’s Gospel – in 2:41 we hear that when he was 12 he spoke to the elders in the Jerusalem Temple, and in 4:17 that he read from the scroll of Isaiah in the Nazareth synagogue. He might also have had a smattering of Latin. When you live in a highly multilingual area, you readily pick up bits of all the languages around you.

What’s unclear is when and where Jesus used his three languages. There are only a few hints in the Gospel, but many sociolinguistic studies provide clues as to how people behave in multilingual settings. For example, they tend to use their mother tongue in domestic situations, when experiencing personal states of emotion, and when engaging



Jesus grew up in a highly multilingual area and is known to have spoken Hebrew as a child

in rapport with others. So when Jesus healed, or had an everyday conversation, it’s likely he would have used Aramaic.

On the other hand, as preaching is a very public kind of activity, with an uncertain knowledge of who might be listening (often several thousand, we are told), he probably switched to Greek for his parables and other major statements. He would surely have spoken Greek in his conversation with Pilate, who would not have known low-level regional Palestinian languages such as Aramaic, and not have been comfortable with Hebrew.

It’s unlikely that a local language such as Aramaic would have been used for writing an authoritative and prestigious text such as Scripture (though some scholars have argued the contrary), which is why the rare instances of Aramaic phrases in Mark’s Gospel are so fascinating, and the subject of many expository papers. Jesus’ mother tongue is seen to break through the Greek on four occasions. Mark seems to be aware that his readers need help with this language, as each is given a gloss:

5:41 *talitha koura* or, in some versions *kouri* (a grammatical gender distinction) is said to the dead daughter of Jairus, glossed as “little girl, get up”;

7:34 *ephthata*, glossed as “be opened”, addresses a deaf person with a speech impediment who Jesus meets on his way from Tyre to the Sea of Galilee;

14.36 *abba*, glossed as “father”, is used in a pleading prayer to God during his agony in the Gethsemane garden;

15.34 *eloi eloi lama sabachthani*, glossed as “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me”, one of the final cries on the cross.

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The last use of Aramaic has elicited a great deal of debate about Mark's motivation for using it here, because the equivalent line in Matthew (27:46) has *eli* for *eloi*, and *lema* for *lama* ("why"), suggesting Hebrew. Why record that language in these particular instances, when there must have been many other times it was used? Perhaps because the first two events were such memorably dramatic moments that those words stayed in local memory. Nothing surely beats a raising from the dead; and the cure of two very noticeable communicative handicaps would have had a huge impact within the local community. As Michael Greed puts it in *Language in the Mission of God* (a collection of essays published by the Summer Institute of Linguistics in 2025) – "Jesus' words have penetrated the impenetrable: death and deafness."

The two other occasions are direct addresses to God the Father – unprecedented appeals – when Jesus was at his lowest ebb: the "agony in the garden", as it is memorialised in the Rosary, and his last words. In such highly emotional states, it would be natural for him to revert to his mother tongue. It's a reaction very familiar to hospice workers who care for dying polyglot speakers, and to psychologists, who talk about regression. Linguistic regression, in this case.

THE ARAMAIC words used on these occasions must have stuck in the memory of those who witnessed them and reported what happened to others, including Mark, who seems to have been particularly sensitive to the linguistic needs of his readers by adding glosses. This thought is supported by the way he also glosses two Aramaic names in his narrative: Bartimaeus as "son of Timaeus" in 10:46, and Boanerges as "sons of thunder" in 3:17. Interpreters and translators are good at providing this sort of assistance, and Mark is described as such (as the interpreter of Peter) by several later writers.

It is the glossing that is so unusual. There are many instances of short expressions from foreign speakers or writers that have stayed in the oral tradition of another language, and appear in its literature, but without translation. An example from English is *Et tu, Brute* ("and you, Brutus") ascribed to Julius Caesar by Shakespeare. The words aren't glossed in the play. Book or film titles can also stay untranslated, such as *Les Misérables*, *Das Kapital* or *La Dolce Vita*. The phenomenon is especially common in languages that have been heavily exposed to global English, where expressions (such as "Catch 22") are found without gloss.

Mark's insertion of a mother-tongue into a lingua franca text, along with his glossing, gives his narrative an effective and memorable linguistic colouring, and makes him stand out among early writers.

David Crystal is a writer, editor, lecturer and broadcaster on language. His latest book is *William Tyndale and the English Language* (Bodleian Library Publishing £25; Tablet price £22.50).