

INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

Worksheet on the language of the gospels

(* especially relevant to Chapter 9)

The ordinary language which people spoke in Galilee in the first century AD was *Aramaic*, so this is the language which Jesus would have spoken. The Gospels were written in Greek which was the common language of the Eastern part of the Roman Empire.

[A]

1. Make a list of the Aramaic words in these verses, together with what they mean;
Mark 5:41, Mark 7:34, *Mark 14:36 Mark 15:34
(*This should be looked up in the Authorized or the New English Bible.)
2. Can you think of any reason why there should be Aramaic words in a Gospel written in Greek?

[B]

1. Perhaps you have tried translating from one language into another and appreciate how difficult it is to give exactly the same meaning. Some passages of the Gospel are in rather clumsy or peculiar Greek, and some passages are difficult to understand. If scholars find that when these passages are translated into Aramaic, they do read well and make sense, what does this suggest?
2. Here is an example: 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us'.
Where do these words occur? The Greek word for 'trespass' is *opheilema* which refers only to a *financial* debt. This does not make much sense in the Lord's Prayer. In Aramaic, however, there is a word *hōbā* which refers to either a financial or a *religious/moral* debt. Why does this suggest that the Lord's Prayer was not first spoken in Greek but in Aramaic?
3. Here is another. Some of the ancient manuscripts for Luke 14:5 have this saying of Jesus:
If one of you has a son or an ox and it falls into a well, will he hesitate to haul it up on the Sabbath day?
This is rather an odd sentence. But what do you notice about the words in Aramaic?
son = bera; ox = ber`a; well = bwra
Aramaic was fond of 'alliteration'. Look up the meaning of that word in the dictionary. Can you think of any reason why this is likely to be a sentence spoken by Jesus, rather than made up by someone else much later on?

[C]

In Aramaic people often said the same thing twice, once in a more negative way, and once in a positive way.

1. Write out the sayings of Jesus recorded in Mark 2:27, 10:27, and 13:31 with the more negative aspect on one line and the positive underneath.
2. Why might Jesus often have spoken like this?