

LANGUAGES IN AND FROM THE BIBLE

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As I write this I am preparing the readings for the Festival of Pentecost, which once again this year will be in multiple languages, to symbolize the gift of the Holy Spirit which allowed the message of the Gospel to be understood in the native tongues of all those present. It has made me think a little about languages mentioned in the Bible, and their successors that are with us today.

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, which was the spoken language of the Jewish people in Old Testament times, but ceased to be a commonly spoken language between 200 and 400 of the Common Era. It survived as a literary and liturgical language of the Jews until the late 19th century, when it was revived as the language of the Zionist Movement, largely through the efforts of one man, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858-1922), a lexicographer and newspaper editor from what is now Belarus. He took the vocabulary of the Hebrew Scriptures and newer writings, and added words from Arabic, Aramaic, and Latin. Then he added more words from English, Russian, German, and French. Modern Hebrew became an official language in British-ruled Palestine in 1921, and then in 1948 became an official language of the newly declared State of Israel. Hebrew is the most widely spoken language in Israel today and is still used as a liturgical language of Jews everywhere, even in Reform synagogues such as Temple Beth-El in San Antonio.

While Jesus undoubtedly knew Hebrew, it was not the language he used most often. That was Aramaic, which is also a Semitic language, related to both Hebrew and Arabic. It still survives in isolated communities in Syria and Lebanon today, though its speakers are also fluent in Arabic. It is considered an endangered language that it will probably not survive for many more generations.

The New Testament was written in Greek. Not the Classical Greek of Homer and Aristotle (which is called Attic, because it was spoken in Attica), but the more common (Koiné) dialect which served the Mediterranean world during the time of Jesus. Jesus probably spoke some Greek as well, but not everyone did. In John 12:20-21 we have the story of some Greeks coming to Philip and saying they wished to see Jesus. Why did they go to Philip first? Because (this is just my theory) Philip spoke Greek. Philip is a Greek name, the name of the King of Macedon, who was father of Alexander the Great. I suspect that Philip had a Greek father and a Jewish mother (under Jewish law, this would make him a Jew). These Greeks, whoever they were, probably knew Philip. What happened when he took them to see Jesus? We never get to find out because the story trails off. I always wanted to know.

Modern Greek, which is called Demotic (meaning the people's), is as different from Attic and Koiné as modern Italian is from Latin. However, unlike Hebrew and Latin, the Greek language did not fall into disuse through the centuries. Rather, Demotic simply evolved from Attic and Koiné.

What about Latin? Did Jesus know Latin? We have no evidence of it. Latin was the language of Latium, a region of central Italy which still exists today. In Italian this region is called Lazio, and Rome is its capital. It was not necessarily the most widely spoken language in the Roman Empire (Greek has that distinction), but it was the administrative language. It boasted an extensive body of literature which included Cicero, Horace, Virgil, Ovid, among others. At the fall of the Roman Empire, when the only structure was the Church, Latin continued as the administrative language, as well as the liturgical language of the Western Church. That distinction continued well into the 20th century and is reflected

even in our own 1979 Book of Common Prayer (look at the Psalms).

It is not true that Latin is a dead language, as some assert. Books are still being published in Latin, not only reprints of the classics, but translations of modern works. Some people still speak Latin, though probably not as a first language. And scholars and enthusiasts are continually adding new words to the Latin vocabulary, such as *Tela Totius Terrae* (World Wide Web).

At our service on Pentecost we heard languages that did not exist in the time of the Apostles (such as English), but it's good to realize that the Gospel can be proclaimed in any language that people understand.