

Languages of Jesus

The standard answer of what language Jesus spoke would be Aramaic. But there is evidence that Jesus would use other languages as well. Jesus spoke in languages His audience would understand. This was common in Palestine, that most people were at least bilingual.

It has always been assumed that Jesus also spoke Hebrew.

Our Lord grew up in Nazareth, which overlooked a trade route (the *Via Maris*) from Damascus to the Mediterranean. At the same time, Aramaic was the vernacular of the Jews; because of the trade, they had many Greek-speakers coming through and stopping there. Scripture also tells us that Jesus spent time in Capernaum, which supported taxation as one of its industries. Matthew was a tax collector, so he was knowledgeable of Greek. Jesus living in that area would have also known Greek. The question is, how much? Catholic Scripture scholar Fitzmyer writes, "Jesus was not an illiterate peasant and did not come from the lowest stratum of Palestinian society. ... He would have naturally conducted business in Greek with gentiles in Nazareth and neighboring Sepphoris."

Let us see if there is scriptural evidence for Jesus speaking these languages and carrying out ministry in them.

ARAMAIC

This was the common language spoken. In Christ's ministry, the gospels, written in Greek, point to incidents when Jesus ministered in Aramaic, leaving in the original text. For example, in Mark 5:41, in speaking to Jairus' daughter, Jesus says, "*Talitha koum*," which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise!" Since she was young and a synagogue official's daughter, she would probably not know Greek, so our Lord ministers in Aramaic and the gospel writers left in the original text.

HEBREW

From 400 B.C. to 150 A.D., educated and native Jews from Judea spoke and wrote in a dialect of Hebrew called Mishnaic Hebrew. This was the language used in the synagogue and in the reading of the scrolls, which Jesus is seen doing in Luke 4:16-37, which notes that He regularly preached in the Nazareth synagogue and indicated that He also preached in the synagogue in Capernaum.

When Saul is knocked from his horse on the road to Damascus, Jesus asks him in Hebrew, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?"

An interesting aside is that the Dead Sea scrolls are written in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek.

GREEK

Since the Gospels were written in Greek, it was a language known by the first century Christian. James, the brother of our Lord, wrote an Epistle in Greek, and the phraseology shows that it was not a translation. James and Peter were known to be uneducated, yet they ministered in Greek. No doubt then that Jesus ministered in Greek as well.

2. In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew notes that the crowd came from Galilee, the Decapolis, and Jerusalem. At the end of the Sermon, Matthew records that the crowds were amazed at His teaching. The people from Decapolis were predominately Greek-speaking gentiles. The Jews among them were Hellenized, so they did not know Aramaic, only Greek, and Hebrew. If Jesus were to be understood by the crowds, He would have preached in Greek.

3. In the Lucan sermon on the plain, it is noted that in addition to the Jews from Galilee and Jerusalem and the gentiles from the Decapolis, there were people from Tyre and Sidon. These last two would only know Greek. So Jesus would have had to preach in Greek. The Jews present would have also understood Greek. Therefore, it is possible that our Lord only preached in Greek.

4. In John 12, we are told that some Greeks came to see the Teacher, and so He went without a translator.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "the one who is and who was and who is to come, the almighty." is from the book of Revelation. Though not said by Christ in the gospel, this conveys an idea His followers would have understood—A and Ω are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet.



It should be noted that there are scholars who will disagree with any or all of these statements. (My favorite is a Coptic bishop who had Jesus preaching in Persian.)

These points are presented to show that our Lord's ministry reached out to all people in the language that they spoke. He spoke to them in their own language, and they came to faith and expressed it in their own tongue.

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1. When Scripture is cited, it is from the Septuagint.