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Kenneth Kuziej

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THE ARAMAIC LOGIA OF JESUS

IN MARK AND MATTHEW

Kenneth Kuziej

The language that Jesus spoke was not Hebrew, but a dialect of Hebrew called Aramaic. Aramaic was the language of the common people of Jesus' time, a folk language, while Hebrew was the official religious and scholarly language of the Holy Land.

Aram is Hebrew for "highland" and this referred to the country in Northeast Palestine called Syria by the Greeks. The Aramaic language had a western and an eastern dialect (Syriac and Chaldee). After the Babylonian captivity ended (538 B.C.) pure Hebrew gave way slowly to Aramaic, until, by the time Jesus was born, Aramaic was spoken throughout Galilee, Samaria and Judea.

As he grew up in the Northern province of Galilee, Jesus very naturally spoke Aramaic. Some of his exact words in this language were recorded by the Gospel-writers. Exactly why they did this is unknown, because almost everywhere else in the Gospels they record his words translated into Greek (which was the universal language of the Eastern Roman Empire). As they wrote out the story of Jesus together with his teachings, in Greek, a precious few of the words and phrases of Jesus, just as they fell from his lips were preserved. These words are: *Mammon* (Matthew 6:24), *Raka* (Matthew 5:22), *Abba* (Mark 14:36), *Talitha Kumi* (Mark 5:41), *Ephphatha* (Mark 7:34), *Corban* (Mark 7:12) and *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani* (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34).

One possible explanation why these words were kept in their original Aramaic might have been to attempt to express a meaning the authors couldn't express in Greek. In the same way we can detect the original language of a person new to English, scholars who read the Gospels in their original Greek can detect their authors' Aramaic accents. They term Greek phrases written with Aramaic style

“semiticisms”. Mark’s Greek is rough, strongly Aramaic, and not surprisingly, full of grammatical errors. At the same time, however, it is language which is lively and appealing, like that of an enthusiastic young immigrant. Matthew’s Greek is smoother than Mark’s, more correct, but still unmistakably having an Aramaic flavour, somewhat like the speech of an immigrant who has mastered his new language, but speaks it with an accent. Luke, who was a physician of Troas in the Western extremity of Asia Minor, wrote with mixed language. When writing material which is exclusive to his Gospel, Luke’s Greek is excellent. But when it is apparent that a written source was being used, Luke’s Greek becomes imperfect.¹ Luke’s Gospel preserves no Aramaic words of Jesus. Neither does the Gospel of John, which, though accented with Aramaic, has such a simple vocabulary it almost seems as if this evangelist chooses not to make his work hard to understand for readers who understood no Aramaic.

The question is why did Matthew’s and Mark’s Gospels preserve those Aramaic words and phrases of Jesus? It’s only a guess, but perhaps, like many people who are new to a language, when stumped, fall back on their native words. This almost could be the explanation for the word *Mammon* (loosely translated “money” but meaning all material things) and *Raka* (which is an obscure term of abuse loosely translated “you fool”).

But there is clearly a more important reason in the use of the Aramaic in some of the other instances. In *Talitha Kumi*, there is no reason to keep the Aramaic for it means simply, “little girl, I tell you to get up”. This is a simple phrase in Greek and Mark’s Gospel translates it into Greek immediately after the Aramaic words. The reason it is preserved in Mark’s Gospel was probably because it records Jesus’ words at the climax of one of his most shocking acts -- the raising to life of a dead child. There is a great deal of eyewitness detail in Mark’s account of this miracle: the girl’s age (12), Jesus telling her parents to give her something to eat and his strict (and disturbing) command that they tell no one of what he had done. An eyewitness (either Mark or Peter who might have dictated the Gospel) would also remember Jesus’ exact words and feel a strong urge to record them. No other Gospel writer records the Aramaic phrase *Talitha Kumi*.

Another Aramaic word Mark records is *Abba* (14:36). This term was translated as “Father” by most Gospel writers. But there is more behind it than simply “Father”² The proper term for “father” was *ab*. *Abba* is the familiar form -- it is equivalent to “Daddy”, or “Papa”. Thus when Jesus prayed, he addressed God not as the more formal “Father”, but actually the very familiar, “Papa”! The implications of this stagger the theological mind! The close familiarity between Jesus and God the Father verifies the ancient Christian teaching of Christ’s equality with God the Father in the Holy Trinity. The use of *Abba* also shows the strong, warm, heartfelt love Jesus devoted to God the Father.

Finally, there is the pathetic phrase *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani* found in Mark 15:34 and Matthew 27:46. This has been translated “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” These are the only words of Jesus from the cross that are

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1. Modern Biblical scholarship assumes the Gospel of Mark was used to write Luke, as well as a theoretical collection of Jesus’ sayings — the “Q” Document.
 2. Of the use of this word, William Barclay writes in his commentary: “It must have been often on Jesus’ lips, and the sound of it was so sacred that men kept it in the original tongue.”

recorded in either Matthew or Mark and they are preserved in Aramaic. Again, the fact that these words were recorded in the language of Jesus implies that the Gospel writers were witnesses and had been deeply moved by what they saw and heard. Rather than emphasizing the physical pain Jesus suffered as he slowly died in agony, these words drive home the much more severe spiritual agony Jesus suffered. Here was the man called God *Abba* who now was suffering so deeply that he felt his *Abba* had rejected him. But there is much more to these Aramaic words. They are the first verse of Psalm 22. The fact that Jesus cried *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani* is undeniable because of the Aramaic remembered and recorded. Put this together with the fact that these are the first words of Psalm 22 and it can be concluded that Jesus was not only suffering for all of mankind, but that *he knew* he was suffering for all of mankind. He knew he was fulfilling the prophecy of the psalmist in the most minute detail. All who see me mock at me, they make mouths at me, they wag their head; "He committed his cause to the Lord; let him deliver him, let him rescue him." (Psalm 22:7-8) My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaves to my jaws; thou dost lay me in the dust of death. (Psalm 22:15) . . . They have pierced my hands and feet -- I can count all my bones -- they stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them, and for my raiment they cast lots. (Psalm 22:16-18)

And Jesus *knew* he'd be finally victorious over death, for the Psalm concludes: Yea, to him shall all the proud of the earth bow down . . . Posterity shall serve him; men shall tell of the Lord to the coming generation, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, that he has wrought it.

Why was Aramaic used by Matthew and Mark? Because the use of some of the words that Jesus himself used was one of the ways these Gospel-writers verified the events they reported and attested to the authenticity of these events to people even of our generation.