

Language and the early manuscripts (K. Barker)
A Series on How We Got Our Bible: Part 2

Hebrew was the language of the ancient people of Israel. Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew.

Aramaic, a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew, was the second biblical language. It was not used extensively in the Bible. Only about ten chapters in the Old Testament were written in Aramaic. Yet the language influenced the writing of the New Testament and sheds light on our understanding of the Old Testament Hebrew. When the people of Israel returned to Palestine after their exile in Babylon around 500 years before Christ, they brought the Aramaic language with them. Hebrew remained the official language of temple and synagogue worship, and the choice of the educated upper class. However, within three centuries Aramaic was the language of the common people of Palestine. Jesus and his disciples, no doubt, spoke Aramaic in their normal, daily conversations. Several times in his Gospel, Mark quotes the words of Jesus in Aramaic and then translates the meaning for his original readers, most of whom were not from Palestine and did not understand Aramaic.

This mixture of languages presented a particular challenge, first to the Jews and later to the expanding Christian church. As we have seen, by the time of Jesus, many Jews spoke little Hebrew, especially those Jews who had migrated to other parts of the empire. Aramaic was the common language of Jews who lived in Palestine. Jews who lived in other regions of the Mediterranean basically spoke the native languages of those regions.

But virtually everyone in the empire spoke the third biblical language, a form of Greek known as **Koine Greek**. It was the language of commerce and politics. Throughout the Roman Empire merchants, seamen and travelers communicated in this Greek dialect. Anyone who did business on any level throughout the Mediterranean world spoke Koine Greek. An educated Roman might speak Latin at home or with friends, but he spoke Koine Greek in the marketplace. A Palestinian Jew might use Aramaic in private conversation, but in public he spoke Koine Greek. This is similar to the practice in some parts of the United States in our own time. Many families speak English in public but return to a more familiar, native language like Spanish when at home. So Greek provided a linguistic common denominator.

For this reason around 280 BC work began in the ancient Egyptian city of Alexandria on a new translation of the Scriptures. The result was the **Septuagint**, a translation of the Old Testament into Koine Greek. Though Jews continued to revere the Scriptures in their original Hebrew, by the time of Jesus and his disciples the Greek Septuagint was the Bible of popular choice. It became the Bible of Jews all around the empire.

Since most of the first Christians were Jews, the Septuagint became their Bible of choice too. Many of the Old Testament quotations that appear in the New Testament are actually quotations from the Septuagint. And because the Gospels and letters, which make up the New Testament, were circulated among the churches around the Roman Empire, they were also written in Koine Greek.

Due to the spread of Christianity during the four centuries after Christ, the Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments were translated into such ethnic languages as Syriac, Old Latin, Coptic, Ethiopic, Gothic, Georgian and Armenian. Some of these translations were made by people who had more missionary zeal than linguistic skill. As a result, some were of poor quality.

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Another language, Latin, was yet to play an important role in the spread of the Christian message. No part of the Bible was written in Latin. However, Latin was the language of educated Romans. As Christianity spread from the working and merchant classes to the upper levels of Roman society, the church saw the need for a translation of the Bible in Latin. Between the years 390 and 450 AD, a priest named Jerome, also known as Eusebius Hieronymus, produced a translation of the entire Scriptures in Latin. A dedicated and careful scholar, Jerome set out to revise and correct previous inferior translations. And, to a very large degree, he succeeded. He seems to have had a good Hebrew manuscript from which he translated all of the Old Testament except the Psalms. His translation of the Psalms is actually a revision of an earlier, Old Latin translation of the Septuagint. In other words, it was a revision of one translation made from another translation. For the Gospels, Jerome again revised the Old Latin, but this time he based his revision on the original Greek. The remainder of his New Testament was a somewhat hasty revision of the Old Latin.

Jerome's translation was not perfect. No translation is. Still, his work set a high standard of quality and preserved the integrity of the Scriptures from well meaning but careless or poorly qualified translators. Later known as the **Latin Vulgate**, it was the standard for all Christians in Western Europe until the Protestant Reformation.