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The issue of Jesus' multilingualism and Mark-within-Judaism

Introduction

The issue of Jesus' multilingualism is a topic of understandable curiosity among a variety of scholars. The quest to uncover the linguistic proficiency of Jesus is almost as studied as the identity of Jesus himself. While certain assertions might be made and defended about Jesus vis-a-vis the available historical data and through comparison with known details about the region and economic classes of the time, a more fruitful investigation might be had into the *portrayal* of Jesus as a multilingual person, particularly by the Gospel of Mark, explicitly in contradistinction to the other Synoptic Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

It is within this linguistic portrayal of Jesus that the nature of Mark's Gospel can be understood *within Judaism*. While the Gospel of Mark is often assumed to be anti-Torah and confrontational with Judaism, this is more a meaning assigned to the text, rather than what the text actually says. The Temple and the Torah's purity regulations¹ were regarded as central pillars of Second Temple Judaism and neither of these is replaced in Mark.² Hillel reads certain parables, such as the Parable of the Vineyard, as evidence of the Markan Jesus' respect for the Temple and its sacrificial system. Jesus' instructions to the leper in 1:40–44 also indicate the author's attitude towards the Temple, in addition to Jesus' interaction with the scribe in 10:18–19.³ The often cited example of Mark 7:1–23 and its treatment of Jewish customs is paralleled in Aristeas 305–306. Crossley sees the statement in this section, "all foods clean" as referring to only Torah-permitted foods and sees this as a halakhic debate about the nature of how impurity is transmitted from the hands through food or liquid.⁴ The same could be said for the Markan Jesus' approach to the Sabbath, where his interlocutors hold to a *stricter* definition of

¹ Ant 12.2.13; Sib. Or. 3:591–94; Jud 12:5–7; etc

² John van Maaren, "The Gospel of Mark within Judaism: Reading the Second Gospel in its Ethnic Landscape." PhD diss., 2019, p. 290-316; Eyal Regev, *The Temple in Early Christianity: Experiencing the Sacred*. (Yale University Press, 2019), p. 126.

³ Vered Hillel, "A Post-Supersessionist Reading of the Temple and Torah in Mark's Gospel: The Parable of the Vineyard", *Religions* 14, no. 4 (2023), p. 487.

⁴ m. Peah 2:23–8; Lev 23:22; c.f. James G. Crossley, "The Date of Mark's Gospel", *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series* 266 (2004), pp. 1-256.

the Sabbath against his lenient views.⁵ All of these readings of Mark points to the possibility of a post-supersessionist reading of the text that situates the author *within* Second Temple Judaism, albeit still opposed to the Pharisaic *party* within the spectrum of Jewish camps of the time.

This article explores the portrayal of Jesus' proficiency in multiple languages from the perspective of the separation between Judaism and Christianity. Edrei and Mendels offer an important reading of the development of rabbinic Judaism and Christianity as the result of a linguistic separation between Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora in the West and Semitic-speaking Jews of Israel and the East. This reading will be explored in further detail in the body of the article but serves as an important interpretive lens through which Mark can be read as presenting Jesus as a figure on par with the Pharisees and scribes. This article proposes that the Aramaic sayings of Jesus of Mark are meant to portray Jesus as a counter-figure to the Pharisaic Torah teacher. The nature of the Pharisees as a group must be fleshed out, consulting Josephus as a source and in understanding their portrayal in Mark. Josephus describes the Pharisees as knowledgeable and accurate in the ancestral customs of the people (Life 190–192; War 2:162), showing camaraderie (War 1:166) and having considerable influence among the people (Ant. 13:288). They are additionally representatives of the Judean temple-state that sought to bring Galileans under Judean understanding of the Torah's commandments and are portrayed as a type of political group in the Gospels.⁶ This stems from the Galilean history separate from Judea since ancient Israel. This region was under separate administration until the Hasmoneans conquered and incorporated it into their regime, including a forced judaization, as with the Idumeans, to bring the ancestral Israelite customs of the Galileans into compliance with Judean practice (Ant. 13:318). Administrative control was ceded to Herod Antipas beginning 4 BCE and was attempted to be reclaimed by Judeans in the war with Rome, beginning in 66 CE, where Pharisees were sent to establish governing councils in Galilee (Life 190–196; War 2:628). The Jesus movement is portrayed as beginning in the Galilean villages and is always in conflict with representatives of Judea, perhaps reflecting this religious history. Horsley sees Mark was originating in the Galilee or Syria around this time. Their function in the Gospels is found within the various controversy stories that almost always revolve around a religious dispute that could be attributed to the religious differences among them.⁷

The differing religious and political contexts are likely reflected in the differing linguistic contexts of the Galilee and Judea. In turn, these underlying conflicts can be felt in the Gospel text itself. However, I do not propose to link any of the conflicts in Mark to the historical Jesus, but, rather, to explore the portrayal of Jesus as a reflection of the religio-political

⁵ CD 10:22-23; Jub 2:29ff; Philo, Moses 2:22; y. Shab. 7:2; c.f. Michael J. Kok, *The Gospel on the Margins: The Reception of Mark in the Second Century*. (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2015).

⁶ Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian society: a sociological approach*. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), pp. 145-157.

⁷ Richard A. Horsley, *The Pharisees and the Temple-state of Judea*, (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2022).

situation of Mark itself in the post-war environment as an intra-sectarian Jewish document, perhaps reflecting the diverging Galilean and Judean forms of Second Temple religious practice.

Languages in Greco-Roman Palestine

In order to understand the sociolinguistic values of the languages that Jesus speaks in Mark, the linguistic profile of Greco-Roman Palestine must be examined within the broader Hellenistic context. Three languages compete in the scholarly mind for the status as the main vernacular of Jews in Palestine, including: Aramaic, Greek, and Hebrew. Additionally, the role of each language in that culture might also be considered.

Aramaic is often thought to have been the vernacular, perhaps not in a literary form but as a spoken vernacular,⁸ as archeological finds seem to suggest.⁹ However, literary remains in Aramaic are less frequent than in Hebrew at Qumran, yet they do exist. Ossuary inscriptions also appear in Aramaic.¹⁰ Those who consider Hebrew as the vernacular are fewer but look to rabbinic Hebrew as an example of a possible Hebrew vernacular of the time.¹¹ However, some point to rabbinic Hebrew as an example of a somewhat artificial language, lacking the character of a vernacular and perhaps revived as Christians and Jews separated linguistically.¹² In contrast, Greek was spoken in the area, given that it was the language of prestige in Hellenistic society. Additionally, Greek was the native language of some in the area. Some have suggested that Aramaic had begun to recede in popularity at the time of Jesus and was reserved for private, intimate spaces, such as among friends, family and in prayer.¹³

A certain degree of bilingualism was probably common in Palestine among Jews, speaking likely Aramaic and Greek, if involved in commerce or administration. However, there would have been a certain continuum of bilingualism vis-a-vis Jewish proficiency in Greek *within Palestine*.¹⁴ Being the *lingua franca* of the Greco-Roman world, it held considerable cultural importance, being the *prestige language* of that society, dominating the educational, political and economic domains¹⁵ and used by cultural and economic elites.¹⁶ Many coins have been found

⁸ Birkeland Birkeland, *The Language of Jesus*. (Oslo: Jacob Dybward, 1954), p. 11, 39

⁹ Aaron Tresham, "The Languages spoken by Jesus", *Master's Seminary Journal* 20, no. 1 (2009), pp. 71-94.

¹⁰ Eric M. Meyers and James F. Strange, *Archaeology, the rabbis, & early Christianity*. (Abingdon, 1981), pp. 75-77.

¹¹ Moses Hirsch Segal, 'Mishnaic Hebrew and its Relation to Biblical Hebrew and to Aramaic', *Jewish Quarterly Review* 20 (1908), pp. 1-191.

¹² Catherine Heszer, "Jewish Literacy and Languages in First-Century Roman Palestine" in Craig Morrison (ed.), *The Languages of Palestine at the Time of Jesus*. *Biblica et Orientalia* 89:1 (2020), p. 58-77; S. Schwartz, "Language, Power and Identity in Ancient Palestine", *Past and Present* 148 (1995), p. 14.

¹³ Hughson T. Ong, "An Evaluation of the Aramaic and Greek Language Criteria in Historical Jesus Research: A Sociolinguistic Study of Mark 14, 32-65" *fn* 25 (2012), pp. 37-55.

¹⁴ Hughson T. Ong, "The Language of the New Testament from a Sociolinguistic Perspective," *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 12 (2016), pp. 163-190.

¹⁵ Stanley Porter, "Did Jesus ever Teach in Greek?" *Tyndale Bulletin*, 44.2 (1993).

from the first century CE, beginning with the Hasmoneans, until exclusive Greek coinage under the Herodians. A number of papyri have been found in Greek that were written by Jews. Sacred literature such as the Greek versions of Daniel and Esther were composed around this time, including the Septuagint, as well as non-sacred writers, such as Josephus, among many others. Jerusalem was the locus of Hellenized native cities and the process of Hellenization continued throughout the Hasmonean period until Greek had become the administrative language by the first century CE.¹⁷ In the broader Mediterranean world, archaeological remains confirm the importance of Greek, with around 68% of all Jewish inscriptions being in Greek. Jerusalem also housed an equal number of Greek and Semitic inscriptions.¹⁸

Some differences seem to emerge when considering Judea and Galilee. In the south, funerary inscriptions in Jerusalem show 32.5% in Greek, 27.8% in “indistinct Semitic”, 21.8% clearly in Aramaic and 7.7% in Hebrew, with the rest being some bilingual combination or other possibilities. *Indistinct Semitic* here refers to terms that could be read as either Hebrew or Aramaic, due to overlapping lexical similarities. Some have seen this evidence as suggesting that Greek was widely spoken by Jews, at least in Jerusalem.¹⁹ Additionally, the Bar Kokhba letters can be consulted as a form of evidence by analyzing the signatures of the signatories. 25% of these were signed in Hebrew, suggesting that Jerusalem scribes, as members of the cultural elite, were more proficient in Hebrew, perhaps more so than others in society. Some see this as evidence of a Hebrew vernacular in Roman Judea, in contrast to Galilee and the Diaspora, where Hebrew proficiency was lower. In particular, Michael Wise proposes that Hebrew was spoken by a majority of Judeans, resembling Mishnaic Hebrew, with elites proficient in the biblical variety.²⁰ It seems probable that Aramaic was the language of daily writing in Judea, such as for signing legal documents. However, Wise proposes that Judean elites probably lacked a strong proficiency in Greek, given the lack of signatures in Greek. However, there could have been two alternative literacy tracks for elites in Semitic and Hellenic literacies with the benchmark being the ability to read the Hebrew Bible or Greek literature. Of course, Hebrew literature existed in Greek translation and might have been available in Judea in the first century CE as well.

Galilee was quite a bit different from Judea. First, there are relatively few archeological remains from the region, making the task of summarizing its linguistic proficiency more

¹⁶ Lester Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), p. I:158.

¹⁷ M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1981); S. Schwartz, “Language, Power and Identity in Ancient Palestine,” *Past and Present* 148 (1995), pp. 3-47; Smelik, W. Smelik, ‘The Languages of Roman Palestine’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine*, ed. C. Hezser. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010), pp. 122-141.

¹⁸ L.Y. Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel*. (The Israel Antiquities Authority: Jerusalem, 1994), pp. 221-222

¹⁹ Nahman Avigad, *Beth She'arim: Report on the Excavations During 1953-1958. Volume III: Catacombs 12-23* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1971).

²⁰ Michael Owen Wise, *Language and Literacy in Roman Judaea: A Study of the Bar Kokhba Documents* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015).

difficult, albeit not impossible.²¹ There was presumably more influence by Greek culture, as the cities of the Decapolis, Caesarea, Tyre, and Sidon all lay close by, although this point is debated. Some have used this point to suggest that some basic proficiency in Greek was more common in the Galilee.²² With regard to existing archaeological evidence, from around 200 BCE to the first century, there are only twelve pieces of evidence. Nine of these are in Greek, one in Aramaic, and two in indistinct Semitic varieties. From the six pieces attributed to the first century C.E. (including the thirty years after 70 C.E.), only one ostrakon from Jotapata has an unidentified “Semitic” inscription, the rest are in Greek.²³ There is also a noticeable lack of Hebrew in non-literary writing from pre-70 CE Judea, when consulting ossuaries and inscription evidence from the archaeological record. Additionally, knowledge of Greek was useful (and perhaps necessary) for village elites to conduct business with non-Jewish traders.

All of the available data suggests that there might have been a different sort of linguistic proficiency in Galilee and in Judea. In the south, it seems that Hebrew was more frequently the prestige language around Jerusalem. In the north, Greek fulfilled that role. Understanding the role of the competing elite languages will help to understand the context for the original Jesus movement. Aramaic was probably known in both the Galilee and Judea, but it might be more strongly associated with the Galilee.

Rabbinic Linguistic Proficiency in Greek

The relationship between the Rabbis and Greek is somewhat complex. One can contrast the actual linguistic evidence and contrast that with the expressed attitudes of the rabbinic community towards the language and see quite a different picture. The number of Greek loanwords into Hebrew *increased* during the Rabbinic period, although Aramaic was the primary language of rabbinic circles, with the Mishnah being primarily composed in Hebrew and the Gemaras of Palestine and Babylon being composed in a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic. This suggests a prolonged situation of language contact between rabbinic Hebrew and Greek in order for the number of loanwords that exist to be borrowed into Hebrew.

The Mishnah is a multilingual text, even if the majority of the text is composed in Hebrew. There are a number of passages composed in Aramaic.²⁴ There are aphorisms attributed to early sages, such as the Hasmonean Rabbi Yose son of Yoezer, Rabbi Hillel, and Ben Bagbag.

²¹ Mark Chancey, *Greco-Roman Culture and the Galilee of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 122-165.

²² A.W. Argyle, “Greek Among the Jews of Palestine in New Testament Times,” «New Testament Studies» 20, (1973-1974), pp. 87-89, esp. 88.

²³ D. Adan-Bayewitz and M. Aviam, “Jotapata, Josephus, and the Siege of 67: Preliminary Report on the 1992-1994 Season,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 10 (1974), pp. 131-165; E. Eshel and D.R. Edwards, “Language and Writing, Early Roman Galilee”, in *Religion and Society in Roman Palestine: Old Questions, New Approaches*, ed. D.R. Edwards (New York and London: Routledge 2004), p. 53.

²⁴ m. Eduyot 8:4; m. Pirkei Avot 1:13, 2:6, 5:22-23; m. Ketubot 4:7-8; m. Sotah 9:15

The other Aramaic material in the Mishnah are statements made by common people in court, which are obviously not meant to be transcriptions of actual court proceedings, but imagined scenarios and what common people might have said.

Several thousand Greek loanwords are found throughout rabbinic literature in the Mishnah, Talmuds, etc. covering material culture, civil and legal administration, military, architecture, including lexical categories that are easily borrowed, such as adjectives, adverbs, verbs, and nouns. The type and frequency of borrowing suggests a prolonged multilingual contact between languages.²⁵

Yehudah HaNasi called Greek a “beautiful language”²⁶ and the collection baskets in the Temple treasury used the Greek alphabet to organize the contents.²⁷ Later statements indicate the Rabbis’ distancing from Greek, as the Babylonian Talmud proclaimed that there was essentially no good time to learn Greek wisdom.²⁸ Even well within the rabbinic era, the Mishnah shows that even by 200 CE, there was a presumption that a Jew would sign rabbinic legal documents in Greek, presuming a widespread proficiency in and use of that language in Israel.²⁹ There are also provisions for the Torah scroll to be written in Greek.³⁰

However, the Rabbis’ relationship to the Greek language is quite a bit more complex, especially in traditions tied to individuals after 66 CE.³¹ A prohibition is associated with the time of the War of Quietus (116 CE), in which the Rabbis prohibited teaching one’s son Greek. However, the text of the Mishnah uses the Greek word for “war” within the text of the Mishnah itself.

m. Sotah 9:14

In the war³² of Vespasian, they decreed upon the crowns of bridegrooms and upon drums. In the war of Titus, they decreed upon the crowns of brides, and that a person shouldn’t teach his son Greek.

The Gemara comments on this Mishnah and predates the prohibition of teaching Greek wisdom to the first century BCE (65 BCE) during the siege of Jerusalem.³³ The Sages interpret the Mishnah’s prohibition as arising from the Hasmonean civil war and the siege of Jerusalem by Hyrcanus. Ultimately, there are extenuating circumstances regarding the study of Greek by the rabbinic circle. For instance, those “close to the government”, like Rabban Gamaliel, were

²⁵ Mark Janse, ‘Greek Loanwords in Hebrew and Aramaic’, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Greek Language and Linguistics*, Vol. 2 (2014), pp. 122-123.

²⁶ b. Sotah 49b

²⁷ m. Shekalim 3:2

²⁸ b. Menahot 99b; cf y. Peah 1:1:21

²⁹ b. Gittin 87a

³⁰ b. Megillah 9a

³¹ b. Megillah 9a; y. Shabbat 1:6, 3c

³² Πόλεμος in Greek

³³ Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.25-28

permitted to study Greek, presumably to facilitate communication with the Gentile authorities who spoke that language.

b. Sotah 49b

[The Mishnah states] that a person should not teach his son Greek.

The Sages taught: When the kings of the Hasmonean kingdom besieged each other, Hyrcanus was outside of [Jerusalem] and Aristobulus was inside. On each and every day, they would throw dinars in a box and [others] would send up daily offerings. A certain elder was there, who was familiar with Greek wisdom. He communicated to [them] by Greek wisdom.

He said to them: As long as they are engaged in the [Temple] service, they will not be delivered into your hands.

On the following day, they lowered dinars in a box and sent up a pig. Once it reached halfway [up] the wall, it inserted its hooves and Eretz Yisrael shuddered four hundred parasangs.

They said at that time: Cursed is the person who raises pigs, and cursed is the person who teaches his son Greek wisdom...

Didn't Rabbi say: "In Eretz Yisrael, why should people speak Syriac? Rather, either the sacred tongue or in Greek.

And Rav Yosef said: In Babylonia, why Aramaic? Rather, in the sacred tongue or Persian.

Greek is discrete and Greek wisdom is discrete. And is Greek wisdom prohibited? But didn't Rav Yehuda say that Shmuel said in the name of Rabban ben Gamliel: What is [the meaning] of that which is written: "My eye affected my soul, due to all the daughters of my city" (Lam 3:51)? There were a thousand children in my father's house. Five hundred learned Torah and the other five hundred learned Greek wisdom, and there only remained of them, me, here, and the son of my father's brother in Asia Minor. The house of Rabban Gamliel is different, as they were close to the monarchy.

The prohibition of learning Greek wisdom is preserved in other places in the rabbinic corpus.³⁴ However, there are also positive feelings expressed towards the Greek language and wisdom.³⁵ These contrary opinions indicate that the effect of the prohibitions was not universally accepted. Even more so, there is indication that Greek was used *liturgically* by some Jews associated with the rabbinic movement.³⁶

³⁴ t. Avodah Zarah 1:20; b. Menahot 99b

³⁵ m. Yadayim 4:6, "The Sadducees say: we complain against you, Pharisees, because you say that the Holy Scriptures defile the hands, but the books of Homer do not defile the hands. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai said: Have we nothing against the Pharisees but this? Behold they say that the bones of a donkey are clean, yet the bones of Yohanan the high priest are unclean. They said to him: according to the affection for them, so is their impurity, so that nobody should make spoons out of the bones of his father or mother. He said to them: so also are the Holy Scriptures according to the affection for them, so is their uncleanness. The books of Homer which are not precious do not defile the hands." c.f. Y Sanhedrin 10:1, 28a; Sotah 49b; M Megillah 1:8; Esther Rabbah 4:12; Genesis Rabbah 16:4, 36:8

³⁶ y. Sotah 7:1, 21b; b. Sotah 49b.

In summary, it seems quite likely that the Rabbis, especially in the earlier part of the first century, learned and spoke Greek. The nervousness of the later Gemaras towards the association of certain Rabbis with the language points in the direction of their knowledge of Greek being likely. All of the individuals associated with knowing Greek would have formed part of at least an intellectual elite, if not an economic elite, which would follow the expectations based on the previously mentioned studies of language use at that time. Additionally, an examination of the literature of the period points to the prevalence of Greek, even in religious literature. While there are certainly examples of Aramaic religious documents being written, at Qumran for example, the majority of novel texts were written in Greek.

The issue of the linguistic proficiency of the Rabbis is of some importance to understand the rift between rabbinic Judaism and Christianity which began in full swing in the second century. Edrei and Mendels present a case that the linguistic divide between the eastern Rabbis and Greek-speaking western Jews of the Diaspora was one of the reasons for the lack of a strong presence of early rabbinic Judaism in Europe. This might have been due to the lack of any translation of rabbinic materials into Greek and Latin and even a reluctance to allow such moves by the rabbinic leaders themselves.³⁷

Nearly the entirety of the rabbinic cast of characters are presented as from either Israel or Babylonia and there are only a few number of rabbinic sages from the west, leading the authors to conclude that the Mishnah was likely not studied in the west.³⁸ One of two sages from the west was Todos ish Romi (or Theodosius) who instituted the practice of eating roasted goat on Passover and was chastised by the sages in Israel.³⁹ One of the only teachings preserved in his name has to do with martyrdom but he is known to have supported Torah scholars.⁴⁰ The other Roman sage, Matya ben Heresh, was sent from Judea to establish a *yeshiva* in Rome⁴¹ and one of his aggadic teachings is found in Pirke Avot.⁴² No rabbinic literature mentions if he was successful in establishing a *yeshiva* in Rome or not.⁴³

The split between the west and the east was linguistic and cultural, with the western Jews speaking Greek and the eastern Jews speaking Aramaic. This linguistic division led to estrangement between the two communities according to Edrei and Mendels, who presume that western Jews did not speak Aramaic or Hebrew and that all of their religious rituals were conducted in Greek. The implication of this linguistic divide is that the Greek-speaking Jews of Rome and surrounding areas did not participate in the religious innovations of the Rabbis,

³⁷ Arye Edrei and Doron Mendels, “Why Did Paul Succeed Where the Rabbis Failed? The Reluctance of the Rabbis to Translate Their Teachings into Greek and Latin and the Split Jewish Diaspora”, *Jesus Research: New Methodologies and Perceptions* (2014), pp. 361-396.

³⁸ Edrei and Mendels, “Why Did Paul Succeed”, p. 365

³⁹ b. Pes. 53a; t. Bez. 2:15

⁴⁰ b. Pes. 53b

⁴¹ b. Sanh. 32b

⁴² m. Av. 4:15

⁴³ Edrei and Mendels, “Why Did Paul Succeed”, p. 366

such as in the establishment of the prayer service or other rabbinic modifications to biblical ritual out of a lack of access because they did not speak the language.⁴⁴

This estrangement most likely resulted from the rabbinic reluctance to translate their work into Greek, which the authors propose as a fear of universalization of their religious traditions. This was due to the Torah becoming a possession of all peoples through its translation into Greek. The Rabbis sought to maintain their unique traditions as the sole possession and inheritance of the Jewish people and this was accomplished through maintaining the text in Hebrew and Aramaic.⁴⁵ This linguistic chasm could have been used by early Christians to spread their message in Greek among western Jewish communities. Edrei and Mendels place this within Paul's lifetime and claim that his success in the west was due to his perception of the linguistic deficiencies among western Diaspora Jews to understand rabbinic innovation and that Diaspora Jews understood him to be a teacher of oral law. Therefore, many western Jews became Christians or Jewish Christians or even maintained biblical observance until much later. From this perspective, the New Testament becomes an even more significant witness to Second Temple Judaism as a member of the corpus of *Jewish literature* from the period, as New Testament literature is an important record of Jewish practice *in Greek*.

Jesus as Teacher in Mark

The growing rift between Christianity and Judaism was only beginning at the time of Mark's writing, presuming the standard dating to the 70s CE. However, following Horsley's analysis, there was a long-felt religious division between the Galileans and Judeans that might have manifested itself in linguistic differences. In this reading of the historical context of Mark, the religious opinions of Jesus reflect those who did not fall into the Pharisaic (proto-rabbinic) scope of influence.

The following analysis will examine the Aramaic sayings of Jesus in the context of the linguistic division between Christians and Jews, attempting to reach back to the beginning of that shift. It will argue that Mark attempted to portray Jesus as a Semitic-speaking teacher to a Greek-speaking audience. Mark presents Jesus as a teacher *par excellence*. The crowds are "amazed" at his teaching (1:21–22). He teaches his disciples through parables in secret (4:33–34) and travels throughout Galilee teaching in synagogues, by the sea (2:13), in the villages (6:6), to his disciples (9:31), to the priests and scribes (11:18) and in the Temple (14:49). Later Gospel authors seemingly expand upon this presentation of Jesus as a teacher in the mold of rabbinic figures from the era. Luke portrays Jesus as being able to read from the *Haftarah*.⁴⁶ Jesus is portrayed as being well-versed in the Hebrew Bible, enough to quote it verbatim

⁴⁴ Edrei and Mendels, "Why Did Paul Succeed", p. 377

⁴⁵ Edrei and Mendels, "Why Did Paul Succeed", pp. 384–385.

⁴⁶ Lk 4:16–21

throughout the Gospels.⁴⁷ In other cases, it is less clear that Jesus can read. In John, he is questioned, “How does this man know letters since he was never taught?”⁴⁸ However, in the later interpolated passage in John, Jesus is portrayed as able to write, “Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground... And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground”.⁴⁹ Perhaps the interpolated text was added with the subtle purpose of demonstrating Jesus’ erudition through his ability to write, an even more specialized skill than reading in the ancient world.

Other, roughly contemporaneous, sources portray Jesus as a teacher. Josephus describes Jesus as a “wise man” (*sophos anter*), language echoed by some early Christian writers, even though this language is not found in the New Testament, relying on current reconstructions of the *Testimonium Flavianum*.⁵⁰ Josephus uses the same language to talk about Solomon and Daniel,⁵¹ making Jesus congruent with the tradition of Solomon and Daniel, “melding of prophetic, apocalyptic and wisdom insights”.⁵² Josephus’ use of the term *sophist* is particularly important, as it is the same term used for the Jewish Sages in his works, meaning that Jesus was portrayed exactly as the Greek-speaking early Rabbis of the first century by a contemporaneous source.⁵³

The possibility of Jesus’ literacy, even if only of a certain type, would suggest Jesus’ identity as a member of the *cultural elite*, an assertion that has been considered. Focusing only on Mark, we see Jesus identified as something like a contractor.⁵⁴ While there are a few sayings that *might* reflect a lower-class background,⁵⁵ there are a great deal more that reflect an upper class orientation, such as the parable of the landlord who leases his properties to tenants,⁵⁶ the imagery of kings and courts,⁵⁷ Jesus’ interactions with the rich young ruler⁵⁸ or the Jewish cultural elites.⁵⁹ Jesus does not object to being anointed with expensive oil, perhaps suggesting his being accustomed to such luxuries.⁶⁰ Even Jesus’ disciples are portrayed as small business

⁴⁷ C.f. Matt. 4:4, 7, 10; 5:21, 27; 9:13; 15:7-9; 21:16; 27:46; Mark 10:7-8; 12:29-30, 36; Luke 4:18-19; 7:27; 19:46; 23:46, c.f. Willmington, Harold, “Old Testament Passages Quoted by Jesus Christ”, *The Second Person File 71* (2017). https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/second_person/71

⁴⁸ Jn 7:15

⁴⁹ Jn 8:6, 8

⁵⁰ Dave Allen, “Tres estratos redaccionales para el Testimonium Flavianum: Una propuesta”, *Revista Bíblica* 85, no. 1 (2023), pp. 211-232.

⁵¹ Josephus, *Antiquities* 8.2.7

⁵² Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 163

⁵³ David Flusser, *Jesus*, (Magnes Press, 1998), pp. 30-32.

⁵⁴ Mk 6:3

⁵⁵ Mk 2:21

⁵⁶ Mk 12:1-9

⁵⁷ Mk 3:24-25

⁵⁸ Mk 10:17-22

⁵⁹ Mk 12:15-17

⁶⁰ Mk 14:3-9

owners themselves, having hired employees to take over their work when they join Jesus.⁶¹ Jesus is certainly portrayed in the Gospel as being accustomed to good food and drink.⁶² This might imply his status as elite. However, others have disagreed and argued for a lower socioeconomic status for him and his followers.⁶³ Still, others argue for a middle option between “elite” or “poor” for Jesus’ status that would explain his *possible* exposure to Greek.⁶⁴

The Aramaic Sayings of Jesus

Still, there are certain phrases of Jesus preserved in Aramaic, often assumed to be remnants of Jesus’ original words. The narrative function of these sayings, leaving behind any assumptions of veracity, would be to provide evidence that Jesus did know Semitic languages.⁶⁵

Mark’s use of Aramaic in the body of his Greek text reflects the ways in which Hebrew words are transliterated in the Septuagint.⁶⁶ In that translation, many Hebrew words are loaned into Greek and new lexical items are created. However, at the same time, many words are simply transliterated, particularly as they relate to the religious lexicon. However, the use of Aramaic here should not be considered a *Semiticism* because it reflects transliteration of actual Aramaic phrases, rather than any influence upon the Greek itself.⁶⁷

Kuziej explores *why* the Aramaic phrases were included in the Gospel accounts. There are two possibilities. First, presuming the Gospel authors were not native Greek speakers, which is not necessarily a valid assumption, they could be instances where the authors did not have a proper Greek translation for their native lexicon. However, the words in this list of Aramaic sayings are quite quotidian and not overly specialist in any meaningful sense. The other option is that they preserve something of an eyewitness account, as Kuziej reads it. However, this could be a record of a received tradition in Aramaic or an attempt to *appear* more of an

⁶¹ Mk 1:19-20; c.f. George Wesley Buchanan “Jesus and the Upper Class”, *Novum Testamentum* 7, no. 3 (1964), pp. 195-209. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1560312>.

⁶² Matt 11:19; Mk 7:15; c.f. José Faur, *The Gospel According to the Jews* (Moreshet Sepharad: s.l., 2012), p. 113ff.

⁶³ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992); Mark Bilby, *The First Gospel, the Gospel of the Poor: A New Reconstruction of Q and Resolution of the Synoptic Problem based on Marcion's Early Luke* (2020). Accessed online 10.5281/zenodo.3927056.

⁶⁴ Using rabbinic legislation around the lines drawn between those who needed help in the social safety net and those who did not, c.f. B.Z. Rosenfeld and H. Perlmutter, “The Poor as a Stratum of Jewish Society in Roman Palestine 70-250 CE: An Analysis”, *Historia* 60,3 (2011), pp. 273-300; B.W. Longenecker, “Exposing the Economic Middle: A Revised Economy Scale for the Study of Early Urban Christianity”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31,3 (2009), pp. 243-278.

⁶⁵ Neil J McWleny, “Authenticating Criteria and Mark 7: 1-23”, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (1972), pp. 431-460.

⁶⁶ Emanuel Tov, “Loan-words, Homophony and Transliterations in the Septuagint”, *Biblica* 60, no. 2 (1979), pp. 216-236.

⁶⁷ Following a somewhat common understanding of Semiticisms in NT Greek, c.f. Max Wilcox, “Semitic Influence on the New Testament”, *Dictionary of the New Testament Background*. Craig A. Evans, Stanley E. Porter, eds. Downers Grove (2000), pp. 1093-1098.

eyewitness account.⁶⁸ Neither of these options seems overwhelmingly convincing. The latter inches in the right direction but it is not necessary to consider these as eyewitness reports or attribute them to oral tradition. Rather, the author's intentions should be considered, particularly vis-a-vis his religious context and the messages he intended to convey.

This places Mark within the linguistic divide that could have caused the separation between rabbinic Judaism and proto-orthodox Christianity. However, in this case, Mark intends to semiticize the Jesus narrative in order to bolster the claims of Jesus' authority as a teacher of the law. Perhaps more interesting is the fact that Matthew *removes* Mark's Aramaic sayings of Jesus. The explanation for this editorial change is perplexing. However, viewed from the religio-linguistic separation between rabbinic Judaism and proto-orthodoxy, it makes sense, especially given that Matthew is understood by scholars to post-date the publication of Mark and, therefore, would be further along in the rift between Judaism and Christianity. In this regard, Matthew does not need to present Jesus as a competent Aramaic speaker because that would have begun to be associated with rabbinic Judaism, i.e. the Pharisees.⁶⁹

The following phrases are preserved:

1. *Abba* (Mark 14:36), 'father'
2. *Talitha Kum* [i] (Mark 5:41), 'little girl, rise'
3. *Ephphatha* (Mark 7:34), 'be opened'
4. *Corban* (Mark 7:11), 'sacrifice'
5. *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani* (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34), 'My God, my God, what have you forsaken me?'

Relying on methods⁷⁰ established for analyzing linguistic corpora, we can analyze the presence of Aramaic in the Gospel corpus rather easily in those cases where Jesus is quoted as speaking Aramaic. This contrasts with the numerous lexical borrowings from both Hebrew and Aramaic found in the Gospels, which will not be addressed here. In these cases, we are dealing with *language mixing*⁷¹ with the frame of the text existing in Greek, with the transliterated Aramaic word appearing within the larger frame. The Aramaic used by Jesus is divided between four noun phrases and four verb phrases, with the phrase in Mark 15:34 being the longest, but also a quotation from Psalms 22:1.⁷² In 62.0% of the cases, the Aramaic is preserved by Mark, with 25% occurring in Matthew and, in one case, both Matthew and Mark

⁶⁸ Kenneth Kuziej, "The Aramaic Logic of Jesus in Mark and Matthew", *Consensus* 2, no. 3 (1976), pp. 5.

⁶⁹ Mary Ann Beavis, "The Resurrection of Jephthah's Daughter: Judges 11: 34-40 and Mark 5: 21-24, 35-43", *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (2010), pp. 46-62.

⁷⁰ C.f. J. Lavender, "Polylinguaging and bivalency in the Ecuadorian linguistic landscape: An analysis of public signs in Azogues, Ecuador", *Spanish in Context* (2021); J. Lavender, "English in Ecuador: A look into the linguistic landscape of Azogues", *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* (2019) DOI: 10.1080/01434632.2019.1667362; J Lavender, "Comparing the pragmatic function of code switching in oral conversation and in Twitter in bilingual speech from Valencia, Spain", *Catalan Review*, 31 (2017), pp. 15-39.

⁷¹ M Sebba, S Mahootian, and C Jonsson, (Eds.). *Language Mixing and Code-Switching in Writing: Approaches to Mixed-Language Written Discourse* (1st ed.). Routledge (2012). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203136133>

⁷² אֵלִי אֵלִי לָמָּה עָזַבְתָּנִי (*Eli, eli, lamah azabtani* in Hebrew).

preserve an Aramaic phrase, with variations between the two. Luke preserves no words of Jesus in Aramaic. This makes sense from Edrei and Mendels and Horsley's readings, especially if coupled with various considerations of the dating of Luke as the latest of the Synoptic Gospels around 100 CE. Mark, being the earliest Gospel, would be most inclined to want to situate Jesus *within Judaism*, with diminishing interest in doing so with each iteration of the Synoptic narrative.

1. *Abba* (Mark 14:36), 'father'

In the first example, the word *Abba*, 'father' is found in Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane, where he prays to God, saying, "Ἄββᾶ ὁ Πατήρ,"⁷³ with the superfluous repetition of *abba* and *pater* in Greek. The reference to God as *abba* is found in Paul's letters as well.⁷⁴ The lexical item shows no morphological or phonological adaptation into Greek, suggesting it should be interpreted as a code switch, and as presenting the actual words of Jesus, as understood by Mark. It is an Aramaic-Greek intersentential switch at a clausal vocative boundary. Its use in Paul's letters could be regarded as a *specialized borrowing*, meaning it was only borrowed among Jesus movement followers to imitate his own words. The Peshitta maintains the superfluous repetition in Syriac, with Jesus saying, "ܐܒܒܐ ܐܒܝ" (*abba abi*, 'father, my father'), which is not present in the Old Syriac. In general, the Syriac versions of the Gospel show a pattern with how they deal with the Aramaic phrases in the Greek. The Old Syriac version eliminates the codeswitching, whereas the Peshitta maintains them (in most cases), revealing the conservative character of the Peshitta.⁷⁵ This, perhaps, reflected earlier Jewish practice, as there was rabbinic legislation that permitted praying in any language,⁷⁶ although there was debate around if the angels understood Aramaic or not!

The narrative context for Jesus' utterance of this phrase in the Gospel is found within the scene at Gethsemane. Grassi draws a comparison between this scene and the *Akedah*, the moment in which Abraham is willing to sacrifice his only son to God. Isaac calls out to Abraham, his father, and, as a faithful son, obeys the voice of his father. In the same way, Jesus calls out to God, his father, and obeys the divine will. Grassi sees this as Mark's attempt to draw a narrative comparison between the two accounts and to highlight the father-son relationship between Jesus and God and perhaps the sacrificial nature of Jesus' death.⁷⁷

⁷³ Mk 14:36

⁷⁴ Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15

⁷⁵ Alfredo Delgado Gomez, "The Reception of the Codeswitches of the Syriac Versions in the Gospel of Mark", *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 19 (2022), pp. 25-43.

⁷⁶ b. Sota 33a

⁷⁷ Joseph A. Grassi, "'Abba', Father (Mark 14: 36): Another Approach", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50, no. 3 (1982), pp. 449-458.

Further, the use of *Father* to describe God is found in the Hebrew Bible, which is developed through the redemptive activity of God to Israel in the Exodus, in which Israel is elevated to his son (Ex 4:22). This theme is reiterated in later prophetic discourse (Isa 63:16). God's identity as Father in his role in shaping Israel is also highlighted (Deut 32:6–7; Isa 64:7–8; Mal 2:19).⁷⁸ Josephus sparingly refers to God as Father and his use of the term might be influenced by Roman *pater patriae* ideology.⁷⁹ Additionally, Philo refers to God as Father, perhaps influenced by currents in Greek philosophy.⁸⁰ Early Rabbinic literature includes a number of references to God as the *father in heaven* in the earlier strata of the Mishnah and Tosefta.⁸¹

All of this suggests a reliance on biblical motifs to construct a story of Jesus' last days that portrays his role as one fulfilling Scripture, perhaps relying on the story of the *Akedah*, as a guide for the presentation of this narrative. Additionally, the use of Aramaic might serve to further link Jesus to this tradition and current within Second Temple Judaism.

2. *Talitha Kum* [i] (Mark 5:41), 'little girl, rise'

The second phrase is found in Jesus' healing of the synagogue leader's daughter in Mk 5:41, where Jesus says, “ταλιθα κουμ,” in Codex Sinaiticus or “Ταλιθά, κουμι” in later manuscripts. The Greek translates this phrase as “Little girl, I say to you, get up.” This is translated in the Syriac Peshitta as, “ܬܠܝܬܗ ܟܘܡܝ” and is left untranslated. The Greek variation in *kum* vs. *kumi* reflects the writing of the Aramaic versions but with the feminine imperative form not being pronounced in spoken Syriac, the older Greek manuscript traditions reflect the pronunciation of spoken Syriac. Chilton et al. describe the influence of Aramaic throughout the Gospel as “sporadic” but highlight how here its use is concentrated because of the issues of ritual purity and women, both concerns of sources from the time.⁸²

The synagogue leader had begged Jesus to come and heal his daughter before that encounter and Jesus accompanied him, but a crowd formed around him. A woman with a hemorrhage approaches Jesus and touches his cloak, seeking healing. Jesus addresses the crowd and the woman with the hemorrhage in unmarked speech (which can be presumed to be Greek). However, when turning to the *young girl*, he switches to Aramaic. The little girl

⁷⁸ See for a helpful summary: Svetlana Knobnya, “God the Father in the Old Testament”, *European Journal of Theology* 20, no. 2 (2011).

⁷⁹ Mladen Popovic, “God the Father in Flavius Josephus”, in *The Divine Father* (Brill, 2014), pp. 181-197.

⁸⁰ Scott D. Mackie, “Seeing God in Philo of Alexandria: The Logos, the Powers, or the Existent One?”, *Studia Philonica Annual* 21 (2009), pp. 25-47.

⁸¹ Cf. m. Ber. 5:1; m. Kil. 9:8; m. Yom. 8:9; m. Ros.Has. 3:8; m. Sot. 9:15; t. Peah 4:20; t. Dem. 2:7; t. Chag. 2:1; t. Chul. 2:6, etc.

⁸² Bruce D. Chilton, Alan J. Avery-Peck, Darrell Bock, Craig A. Evans, Daniel M. Gurtner, Jacob Neusner, Lawrence H. Schiffman, and Daniel Oden, *A comparative handbook to the gospels of Matthew and Luke: comparisons with pseudepigrapha, the Qumran scrolls, and Rabbinic literature*, vol. 2, (Boston-Leiden: Brill, 2021), p. 202–203.

would have lacked any formal education and knowledge of Greek, unlike the synagogue leader, for example, who *could* have had knowledge of Greek.

Kubiś presents a symbolic analysis of the characters in Mark 5:21–43 as both representatives of Israel. Both are representatives of different aspects of Israel's society, which is read as showing the religious marginalization of certain people to show how Israel needed the Messiah to right the wrongs of the religious establishment of the time.⁸³ Wolmarans reads the raising of Jairus' daughter as a representation of Jesus' power, the role of faith in Israel's salvation, the exhortation of believers to care for each other and to attack the levitical purity laws as inapplicable in the Christian assembly.⁸⁴ From a narrative perspective, the story shows elements of comedy and amusement at the ambiguous elements in the story. Jesus reportedly heals the hemorrhaging woman but it is implied that she might have healed herself by touching Jesus' *talit*. Additionally, the elements surrounding the raising of Jairus' daughter are also ambiguous because it is not clear that the girl had died and Jesus might have only woken her.⁸⁵

The passage has been linked to Judges 11:34–40 and the story of Jephthah's daughter. Both stories share a focus on a father and daughter whose death is imminent and who dies. The men in the stories are leaders of Israel and the texts show similarities in vocabulary and the ordering of the plot. The purpose of the story in Mark's narrative is to show that Jesus has the unique power to bring back the dead to life and foreshadows his own resurrection.⁸⁶ The lexical similarities are between the LXX version of the narrative and Mark. However, Beavis's analysis did not consider any possible overlap between the Aramaic in Mark and the Hebrew Masoretic text. The Aramaic text reads, "*Talitha kumi*," as we have seen. The Masoretic text reads, "*bitti, hakber'a bikbra'etini*" (Jdg 11:35, 'my daughter, down, you have brought me down').⁸⁷

Viewing the use of language here from a discourse analysis perspective, it seems that this use of Aramaic is to highlight Jesus' identification with the lowly in society, who would have been monolingual in Aramaic. The young girl here is a stand-in for the members of society who were not of any particular socio-economic or cultural importance and shows that Jesus identifies with these followers as much as any elite members of Christian assemblies.

⁸³ Adam Kubis, "The Hemorrhaging Woman and Jairus' Daughter as Representatives of Israel. An Attempt at the Symbolic Reading of Mark 5: 21-43", *The Biblical Annals* 10, no. 67/3 (2020), pp. 355-387; J Mateos, F Camacho, I Vangelo di Marco, *Analisi linguistica e commento esegetico*, «Lettura del Nuovo Testamento» 1, (Assisi: Cittadella, 1997).

⁸⁴ J. L. P. Wolmarans, "Transitioning from childhood to maturity: a rereading of the resurrection of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5: 21-43)", *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 92, no. 1 (2010), pp. 275-285.

⁸⁵ Stephen B. Hatton, "Comic ambiguity in the Markan healing intercalation (Mark 5: 21-43)", *Neotestamentica* 49, no. 1 (2015), pp. 91-123.

⁸⁶ Mary Ann Beavis, "The Resurrection of Jephthah's Daughter: Judges 11: 34-40 and Mark 5: 21-24, 35-43", *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (2010), pp. 46-62.

⁸⁷ Original translation.

3. *Ephphatha* (Mark 7:34), ‘be opened’

The following lexical item, *Ethphateh* or *ephphatha* in Greek, occurs in the region of the Decapolis, as a deaf and mut man is brought to Jesus who begs for healing, some have even noted an apocalyptic undertone to this seemingly benign healing phrase.⁸⁸ This region was populated with Jews, Nabateans and Arameans, but was thoroughly Hellenized, and it was quite likely that Greek was the common language of that area. The Syriac Peshitta records Jesus saying, “ܐܦܦܬܗ” but the Greek has, “Εφφαθα”, which has resulted in scholarly speculation about the reason for the significant departure from Aramaic grammar in the Greek. The Syriac is likely closer to what Jesus would have said. An important factor not to mention is that the man who is being healed is of a lower social status and would have had no reason to be proficient in Greek. There has been considerable debate surrounding the precise linguistic form of *ephphatha* and if it is meant to be a representation of Hebrew or Aramaic, given that the Greek transcription in Mark does not match neatly either Hebrew or Aramaic verbal forms. The precise linguistic formulation is not of great concern to this study, other than to note that Mark clearly intends to portray Jesus as proficient in a Semitic language.⁸⁹

The use of Semitic varieties when describing Jesus’ healing ministry might also serve a function of competing with proto-rabbinic charismatic healers, such as Honi the Circle-Drawer and Hanina ben Dosa. Crossan would describe these wonder workers as “operat[ing] with certain and secure divine authority not mediated through or dependent on the normal forms, rituals, and institutions through which that divine power usually operate[d].”⁹⁰ There might have been a distinct Galilean tradition, linked to the Elijah-Elisha connection in the prophetic stories, especially since Hanina imitates the Elijah posture and controls the rain like Elijah.⁹¹ Crossan postulates that these magicians represented the lower classes against the Temple elite and were likely far more common than just the few, isolated examples that remain. It is possible that stories about these figures circulated in the late first century and Mark’s use of Aramaic served the purpose of linking Jesus to these (presumably) popular figures.

4. *Corban* (Mark 7:11), ‘sacrifice’

In Mk 7:11, there is an Aramaic lone insertion in a full Greek sentence, in which Jesus is engaged in polemical discussion with the Pharisees and is mimicking their arguments and

⁸⁸ David Lincicum, “Εφφαθα (Mark 7, 34): An Apocalyptic Trope?”, *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 91, no. 4 (2015), pp. 649-653.

⁸⁹ John Adney Emerton, “Maranatha and Ephphatha”, *The Journal of Theological Studies* (1967), pp. 427-431.

⁹⁰ John Dominic Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*, (s.l.: A&C Black, 1999), p. 157.

⁹¹ b. Berakhot 34b; b. Ta’anit 24b

mentions “**ܩܘܪܒܢܐ**” (*qurban*).⁹² The usage reflects how this term was used in other Second Temple Judaism. The Syriac translations use *qurban* explicitly in cases where the Greek text does not.⁹³ The context here is markedly different in that Jesus is mimicking what the Pharisees say in their disputes with him but Jesus is not directly addressing a single person but the Pharisees and scribes as a crowd. The exchange should be read as a form of oath-taking perhaps shared with later rabbinic tradition (c.f. m. Shev. 5:2). Available data suggests that oath formulae were taken seriously at the time and the implication of a bad vow was a serious offense.⁹⁴ The use of *Corban* here introduces a relationship-severing formula in that he is claiming to no longer be able to help his parents in any way, which transgresses a biblical commandment per Jesus.⁹⁵

The exchange occurs within a broader critique of the Pharisees. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus' teaching is contrasted with the Pharisees and his teaching is characterized as having authority, whereas the teaching of the Pharisees lacks such authority.⁹⁶ In this section, Mark criticizes the *paradosis* of the Pharisees. This term is found throughout literature of the time and interpreted by Baumgarten as a technical term referring to the Pharisaic regulations observed but not found in the Mosaic legislation.⁹⁷ Other sects of the time rejected Pharisaic *paradosis* because it was not written (Ant. 13.10.6) or criticized the Pharisees for following the desires of their hearts and not God (1QH 4:14–15). Nicolaus of Damascus criticized the Pharisees for *pretending* to follow the laws of God (c.f. Ant. 17.2.2).⁹⁸

Chapter 7 includes two halakhic arguments against the legal positions of the Pharisees vis-à-vis the position of the Jesus movement. The first section (vv. 1–8) concerns a matter of how to interpret the purity regulations in the Hebrew Bible (c.f. Lev 1:9, 15:27; Deut 23:11). The debate around the washing of the hands connects to the Pharisaic *paradosis* mentioned above. The presence of *miqwa'ot* at Qumran suggests that immersions were performed for ritual purity purposes and perhaps for handwashing purposes as well. Additionally, the ritual of handwashing is explicitly mentioned by the *Letter of Aristeas* 305.

⁹² The Curetonian Old Syriac has **ܩܘܪܒܢܐ** without the first person possessive suffix.

⁹³ With variation between Old Syriac and the Peshitta in Matt 2:11; 5:23–24; 15:5. The Old Syriac does not have the possessive form, whereas the Peshitta does.

⁹⁴ George Wesley Buchanan, “Some Vow and Oath Formulas in the New Testament”, *Harvard Theological Review* 58, no. 3 (1965), pp. 319–326.

⁹⁵ Aecio E. Cairus, “The Heartless Corban Vow (Mark 7: 11)”, *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 4, no. 1 (2001), pp. 3–7.

⁹⁶ Richard J. Dillon, “‘As One Having Authority’ (Mark 1: 22): The Controversial Distinction of Jesus’ Teaching”, *The Catholic Biblical quarterly* 57, no. 1 (1995), pp. 92–113; Judith König, “Exousia and Conflict in the Gospel of Mark”, *Religions* 14, no. 10 (2023), pp. 1318. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14101318>.

⁹⁷ Albert I. Baumgarten, “The Pharisaic Paradosis”, *Harvard Theological Review* 80, no. 1 (1987), pp. 63–78.

⁹⁸ For the connection of Nicolaus to Josephus see D. Schwartz, “Josephus and Nicolaus on the Pharisees”, *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 14 (1983), pp. 157–171.

Furstenberg's reading of this account provides the best framework for understanding the legal dispute behind this passage.⁹⁹ Jesus is portrayed as disputing the nature of ritual impurity and how it affected people and the body. Rabbinic laws pertaining to handwashing are tied to ritual impurity and serve as a full system to describe how impurities enter the body through contaminated food and liquids. Furstenberg proposes that Jesus' words were meant to oppose the Pharisaic ideal of eating in a state of ritual purity, seen as a non-biblical innovation, and that these norms reflect Greco-Roman practice and not priestly purity laws. According to this reading, Jesus would say that contaminated food does not render the person ritually impure.¹⁰⁰ This reading seems to follow biblical law which does not propose that contaminated food defiles the body, which contrasts with Mishnaic law, which does view contamination as resulting in ritual impurity. Furstenberg renders the passage as the following, "Contrary to your halakhah, which is unknown in the bible, the body is not defiled by eating contaminated food. Rather, it is defiled by what comes out of it".¹⁰¹ In contrast, tannaitic material describes hands as possible of second-degree ritual impurity (m.Yad. 2:1; m. Tah. 1:7). This can make liquids into first-degree impure objects that leads to any object touching liquid receiving the impure status (m Par. 8:7). Jesus' response in vv. 18ff is to say that the reason that his disciples do not wash their hands before eating is that there is no reason to do so according to his understanding of the purity laws in contrast to that of the Pharisees. Jesus denies the possibility of contamination through ingestion. In other words, Jesus is specifically attacking the idea that foods can transfer contamination to other objects as contrary to the message of the levitical purity system. Other scholars have highlighted the problems with reading this pericope in Mark as evidence that Jesus opposed the dietary restrictions or even the ritual purity laws.¹⁰² However, food itself was only *latently* impure, in the sense that impurity was not transferable through physical contact, only through death. Whereas Thiessen sees Jesus as fulfilling an apocalyptic vision of removing the sources of impurity, Furstenberg's approach makes more sense of what the historical Jesus might have actually meant, with the caveat that it is quite likely that the Gospel writers subscribed to something close to what Thiessen proposes.

Following this reading, Mark is making a series of complex halakhic arguments through the mouth of Jesus, showing his sophistication and understanding of Pharisaic law and custom, as opposed to the nascent ideas of the Jesus movement. The use of Aramaic here serves to elevate Jesus to the level of halakhic master and *rabbi* in order to be able to debate the legal conclusions of the scribes and Pharisees.

⁹⁹ Yair Furstenberg, "Defilement penetrating the body: a new understanding of contamination in Mark 7.15", *New Testament Studies* 54, no. 2 (2008), pp. 176-200.

¹⁰⁰ M. Kister, 'Law, Morality and Rhetoric in Some Sayings of Jesus', «Studies in Ancient Midrash» (ed. J. Kugel; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 2001), pp. 145-154.

¹⁰¹ Yair Furstenberg, "Defilement penetrating the body: a new understanding of contamination in Mark 7.15", *New Testament Studies* 54, no. 2 (2008), pp. 176-200.

¹⁰² Matthew Thiessen *Jesus and the forces of death: the gospels' portrayal of ritual impurity within first-century Judaism*, (s.l.: Baker Academic, 2020), pp. 354ff.

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34)
'My God, my God, what have you forsaken me?'

Perhaps most famous of Jesus' sayings in Aramaic is his cry on the cross, found in Mark and Matthew, with slight variation. In Mk 15:34, Jesus says, "Ἐλωί ἔλωί λεμα σαβαχθανεί," whereas in Mt 27:46 he says, "ἡλι ἡλι λεμα σαβαχθανεί". The Peshitta treats this in an interesting manner in Mk by presenting two versions of the phrase with the first being, "ܐܠܘܝܐ ܐܠܘܝܐ ܠܡܐ ܣܒܚܚܬܢܝ" followed by an explanation with, "ܐܠܘܝܐ ܠܡܐ ܣܒܚܚܬܢܝ". The Old Syriac Palimpsest agrees with the latter clause of the Peshitta. The Matthean version in Syriac does not present two versions of the phrase but only has, "ܐܠܘܝܐ ܐܠܘܝܐ ܠܡܐ ܣܒܚܚܬܢܝ" with the Old Syriac palimpsest adding the first person possessive suffix to *il*. There is a slight difference between Codex Sinaiticus and Vaticanus with regard to the word *nby* with CS having *lema* reflecting Aramaic and CV with *lama* reflecting Hebrew.¹⁰³ Casey describes some of the historical development with regard to how the linguistic structure of this saying was attributed to either Hebrew or Aramaic sources.¹⁰⁴ Casey himself strongly sides with an Aramaic source behind Jesus' utterance here, reiterating the commonality of the Markan forms in the Greek and later Peshitta. He also highlights that this is a *prayer* to God, like the discussion of *Abba* above, which Casey infers to mean that Aramaic was Jesus' first language, given the record of him crying out at this moment of anguish in that language. This is beyond the scope of our analysis here, but Casey's comments vis-a-vis the Aramaic sources of this material is noted.

This is, of course, a quotation of Ps. 22:2 (Ps 21:2 LXX), which in Hebrew reads, "אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהִים לָמָּה עֲזַבְתָּנִי" with the Targumic reading of, "אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהִים מַה מְטוּל מִה שְׁבַקְתָּנִי".¹⁰⁵ The lexical variation in Hebrew and Aramaic is between *azavtani* vs. *shevaktan(i)* ('abandon' vs. 'leave'). The Greek mirrors the Aramaic version of the word. The Peshitta duplication has the second version of the phrase mirroring Mark's version, but this might be an attempt to make the Peshitta text more closely align with the Greek, but it seems to give weight to the form *il*. For a slight comparison, the Septuagint reads, "ὁ Θεός, ὁ Θεός μου, πρόσχες μοι· ἵνα τί ἐγκατέλιπές με". The divergence between the LXX and Masoretic text are not profound but are noticeable. The LXX includes the phrase, πρόσχες μοι, *pay attention to me*, not found in the Hebrew or Targum. Mark has subtly edited the Septuagint in this instance, a practice found throughout this chapter. Earlier, he uses the same psalm, among others, to construct the narrative about Jesus' death and to portray him as a "suffering righteous one", a concept derived from both the Hebrew Bible, but particularly the Wisdom of Solomon, where this righteous person is

¹⁰³ Bruce Metzger, *A textual commentary on the Greek New Testament*, vol. 31975, (London: United Bible Societies, 1971); cf. V. Taylor, "Additional Notes" in *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1966), pp. 617-671.

¹⁰⁴ Maurice Casey, *Aramaic sources of Mark's Gospel*, vol. 102, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 6ff.

¹⁰⁵ Bruce D., Chilton, et al., *A comparative handbook to the gospels of Matthew and Luke*, vol. 2, (Boston-Leiden: Brill, 2021), p. 512.

described as shamed and killed but vindicated by God (Wis 2:10–20; 3:1–9; 4:7–20; 5:1–7). Mark also slightly changes the Septuagint’s wording in 15:24 when he quotes Ps 22:19.¹⁰⁶ Mark’s use of the Septuagint here mirrors his use of biblical citations throughout his work, where he uses the Hebrew Bible in a “cryptic, enigmatic, and allusive manner that provokes the reader’s imagination to uncover intertextual connections with those scriptures.”¹⁰⁷ His allusive and enigmatic use of Scripture was possible due to his audience, because he “writes for a particular audience, with particular knowledge and competencies”.¹⁰⁸ In total, Mark contains twenty-seven direct quotations from the Hebrew Bible via the Septuagint.¹⁰⁹

Another issue that could be missed is that Jesus is *misunderstood* by the crowd, who hear him as calling out to *Elijah*. Whitters sees the inclusion of the Aramaic phrase as a means of signaling the purpose of the saying which is to further cement Jesus’ identity as other than being identified with Elijah. This is a role that Mark wishes to cast upon John the Baptist and tie him into the Jesus story. However, Jesus himself must supersede Elijah. However, at the time, there was a fervent expectation for a prophet like Elijah.¹¹⁰ The crowd’s misunderstanding of Jesus’ words is a setup for the resolution by the centurion who proclaims Jesus the son of God.¹¹¹

Linguistic Analysis and Conclusions

The six Aramaic sayings of Jesus in the Gospel are the following:

1. *Abba* (Mark 14:36), ‘father’
2. *Talitha Kum[i]* (Mark 5:41), ‘little girl, rise’
3. *Ephphatha* (Mark 7:34), ‘be opened’
4. *Corban* (Mark 7:11), ‘sacrifice’
5. *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani* (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34), ‘My God, my God, what have you forsaken me?’

The scattered Aramaic phrases attributed to Jesus in the Gospels fall into two types of categories: intersentential code switches and lexical borrowings, if we analyze the narrative context of each occurrence. #1 and 4 are most likely *lexical borrowings* from Aramaic into the

¹⁰⁶ Marijke H. De Lang, “One Cry or Two? Mark’s Composition of Mark 15: 34-37”, *Journal of Biblical Text Research* 45 (2019), pp. 235-253.

¹⁰⁷ Ardel B. Caneday, “Mark’s ‘Provocative Use’ of Scripture in Narration: He Was with the Wild Animals and Angels Ministered to Him”, *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 9, no. 1 (1999), p. 19.

¹⁰⁸ Donald H. Jeul, “A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted”, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), p. 38

¹⁰⁹ Ardel B. Caneday, “Mark’s ‘Provocative Use’ of Scripture in Narration”, pp. 19-36.

¹¹⁰ Cbeaver, *Mark’s Argumentative Jesus: How Jesus Debated His Opponents Using Greek Forms of Argumentation*, (s.l.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018).

¹¹¹ Mark F. Whitters, “Why Did the Bystanders Think Jesus Called upon Elijah before He Died (Mark 15: 34–36)? The Markan Position”, *Harvard Theological Review* 95, no. 1 (2002), pp. 119-124.

Jewish Greek of the author and mapped onto the historical Jesus. That is, they have been morphologically integrated into Greek and serve to reference concepts related to Jewish law or philosophical concepts, such as is the case in the Septuagint. #2, 3, 5, 6 are intersentential switches, meaning that the Aramaic phrase consists of a full verbal phrase. *Who* does Jesus address in Aramaic? The daughter of a synagogue leader and the deaf man in the Galilee around the region of the Decapolis. In the case of his exclamation on the cross, this can be interpreted as Jesus' cry to God. Finally, the cry of "Hosanna!" was made *by the crowds*, not Jesus. In all other cases, Jesus speaks Greek, whether to Jew or Gentile. The two clear examples are cases of Jesus' healing and his use of Aramaic. This suggests that Aramaic was used within the context of healing, perhaps an extension of the diglossic use of Aramaic in prayer. Jesus' knowledge of Aramaic and Greek seems to reflect common social patterns and he would have used Greek as a contact language with outsiders and possibly with his followers, although some suggest he would have spoken Aramaic among his followers, even if textual evidence does not suggest that.¹¹²

All of this presupposes that Mark's use of language can tell us something about the historical Jesus, a fact that remains unsupported. How does Mark portray Jesus as an Aramaic speaker? First, he shows Jesus praying to God in Aramaic, a characterization that fits some interpretations of diglossic patterns of the time.¹¹³ This is the case of #1 and #6 above. In other cases, #2 and 3 above, Jesus addresses members of the lower socioeconomic class, who would have been Aramaic speakers, according to many interpretations of linguistic proficiency of the time. Finally, Jesus' use legal terminology in Aramaic in #4 is in the context of a religious debate with the Pharisees.

The available evidence suggests that Jesus was portrayed as a Jewish sage, like the early Rabbis, and in his literary portrayal, he is presented as one able to speak Greek. The Aramaic phrases found in Mark and elsewhere are used in addressing God and in healing individuals who would have not spoken Greek. This implies Jesus was like other *sophists*, in that he was able to speak Greek. It is quite likely that his mother language was Aramaic and that he used this daily to some degree. Mark does not attempt to portray Jesus as proficient in Hebrew, something that is corrected by the later Gospel of Luke, when he portrays Jesus as reading the scrolls of the Prophets in a synagogue.

¹¹² Hughson T. Ong, "An Evaluation of the Aramaic and Greek Language Criteria in Historical Jesus Research: A Sociolinguistic Study of Mark 14, 32–65", *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 25 (2012), pp. 37-55.

¹¹³ Hughson T. Ong, "An Evaluation of the Aramaic and Greek Language Criteria..", pp. 37-55.

Abstract: The available evidence suggests that Jesus was portrayed as a Jewish sage, like the early Rabbis, and in his literary portrayal, he is presented as one able to speak Greek. The Aramaic phrases found in Mark and elsewhere are used in addressing God and in healing individuals who would have not spoken Greek. This implies Jesus was like other *sophists*, in that he was able to speak Greek. It is quite likely that his mother language was Aramaic and that he used this daily to some degree. Mark does not attempt to portray Jesus as proficient in Hebrew, something that is corrected by the later Gospel of Luke, when he portrays Jesus as reading the scrolls of the Prophets in a synagogue.

Keywords: Mark; Bilingualism; Aramaic; Second Temple; Greek.

Resumen: La evidencia disponible sugiere que Jesús fue retratado como un sabio judío, como los primeros rabinos, y en su retrato literario, se lo presenta como alguien capaz de hablar griego. Las frases arameas que se encuentran en Marcos y otros lugares se utilizan para dirigirse a Dios y curar a personas que no habrían hablado griego. Esto implica que Jesús era como otros sofistas en el sentido de que podía hablar griego. Es muy probable que su lengua materna fuera el arameo y que la utilizara a diario hasta cierto punto. Marcos no intenta retratar a Jesús como un experto en hebreo, algo que se corrige en el evangelio posterior de Lucas, cuando retrata a Jesús leyendo los rollos de los profetas en una sinagoga.

Palabras clave: Marcos; Bilingüismo; Arameo; Segundo Templo; Griego.