

Aramaic and Hebrew

The Languages spoken in Judea during the 1st century AD

"Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad", Deuteronomy 6, 4

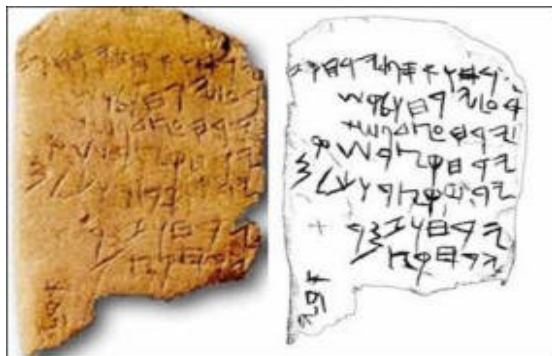
By Camilo Ezagui Menashe, studios of the Jewish roots of Christianity and Pilgrims Guide in Israel.

Hebrew is one of several northwestern Semitic languages such as Phoenician, Moabite and Amonean which all share strong influences of Canaanite. We know that the Old Testament (Torah or Pentateuch) of the Bible was originally written in archaic Hebrew using the characters of the Phoenician Alphabet.



The Torah or Pentateuch of the Bible

In the second book of Kings, chap. 18, 26 and in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah chap. 36, 11 (8th century BCE) there is a clear mention about the difference between Aramaic and the language spoken in Judea at the time of the Sennacherib invasion when the advisers of King Hezekiah in Jerusalem told the emissary of the king of Assyria: "Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it; do not speak to us in [the Judean language](#) within earshot of the people on the ramparts."...



The Gezer Calendar with ancient Hebrew writing



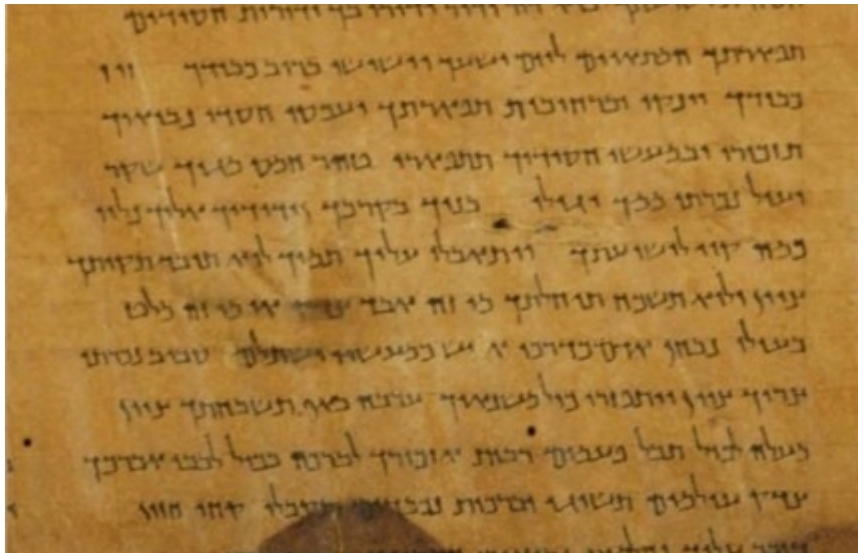
Ancient Hebrew writing of the 10TH century BCE
Khirbet Qeiyafa Ostrakon - Mibtzar Haela

On returning to Judea from the Babylonian Exile (6th century BCE) the "Targumim" in Aramaic were used to teach Torah to the people. The Hebrew alphabet adopted the square characters of the Caldean calligraphy. Five hundred years later things had changed, such that by the 1st century CE, Hebrew had already been spoken for a long time.

Professor Sara Lipkin, a specialist in Hebrew, in her study: "The Hebrew, story in chapters" (1992) tells us that the archaic Hebrew of the Mikrá, spoken in the time of King Solomon as it appears in the Pentateuch, Chronicles and Prophets, was replaced about 300 years BCE by a spoken Hebrew using words, idioms, pronunciation and expressions somewhat different known as "Lashon Chazal" or the Language of the Sages. This Hebrew was spoken in Judea until 200 CE. Professor Sara Lipkin remarks that during that period Aramaic was an international language that was spoken and written from India to Kush (Sudan). At this time, Sara Lipkin concludes, Jews spoke three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. There were those who spoke the three and others who spoke only one of them".

Professor David Flusser of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem concludes that: "After the discovery of the Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew among the Dead Sea Scrolls and the discovery of the Bar Kochba letters and in light of further study of the language of the Jewish Sages, it is accepted that most part of the people spoke good Hebrew". Professor M. H. Segal, an authority on Mishnaic Hebrew, thinks the same.

It should be noted that among the Dead Sea Scrolls all texts of self expression such as hymns, commentaries on Scripture, correspondence, the community rule, the apocalyptic prophecy as well as Peshier Habakuk, among others, were written in what scholar John Meier called a "post-biblical Hebrew" that was in use during the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE.



Dead Sea Scrolls
Hymn in Hebrew dedicated to Jerusalem

The Book of Ben Sira **in Hebrew** was written between 190 and 180 BCE at the time of the suffocating occupation of Judea by the Greeks. With this text, teachers and elders taught Mosaic wisdom and virtue to the young. It was translated into Greek by the grandson of Ben Sira who says in the introduction: "Because things originally expressed in Hebrew do not have the same strength when translated into another language." This book is considered a canonical text in the Catholic Bible (Ecclesiastes).



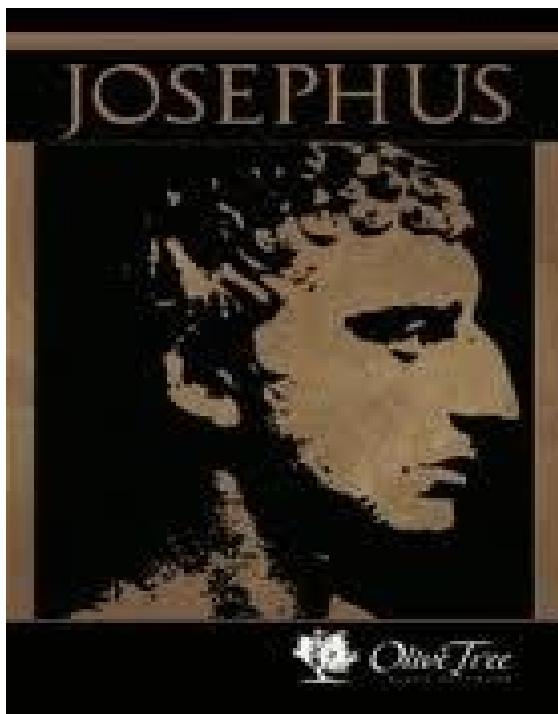
Excerpts from the book of Ben Sira in Hebrew
found at Masada – 1st century CE

During the reign of the kings of the Hasmonean dynasty (141 to 63 BCE) currencies, with few exceptions, were minted with inscriptions in Greek and **Hebrew**.



Coins of King Alexander Jannaeus - 103 to 76 BCE

The Jewish historian Yosef Ben Matityahu (37-100 CE) or Flavius Josephus in his book "The War of the Jews against the Romans" (Volume 6, chap. 2) relates how General Tito sent him to the walls to negotiate a surrender with the people besieged in Jerusalem in the year 70 CE. In some doctrinal biased translations it appears that he did so in the "language of their ancestors" which according to scholars of the Church is Aramaic (like John Meier in his book "A Marginal Jew"). Josephus wrote literally that [he spoke to the people in Hebrew](#) and thus appears in [the 1824 English translation of William Whiston](#) in "The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus" (see below) and in the 1923 Hebrew translation of Dr. Yaacob Naftali Simjoni, further confirmed by the English historian Desmond Seward in his book "Jerusalem's Traitor", 2009. Josephus who wrote his works in Koine makes a clear distinction between Hebrew and Aramaic which he calls ["Συριστί = Siristi or Syriac"](#).



From the 1824 Translation of William Whiston:

§ 1. AND now Titus gave order to his soldiers that were with him to dig up the foundations of the tower of Antonia, and make him a ready passage for his army to come up; whilst he himself had Josephus brought to him (for he had been informed that on that very day, which was the seventeenth* day of Panemus[Tamuz,] the sacrifice called the daily sacrifice had failed, and had not been offered to God, for want of men to offer it, and that the people were grievously troubled at it,) and commanded him to say the same things to John that he had said before, that, "if he had any malicious inclination for fighting, he might come out with as many of his men as he pleased, in order to fight without the danger of destroying either his city or temple; but that he desired he would not defile the temple, nor thereby offend against God: that he might, if he pleased, offer the sacrifices which were now discontinued, by any of the Jews whom he should pitch upon." Upon this Josephus stood in such a place where he might be heard, not by John only, but by many more, and then declared to them what Cæsar had given him in charge, and this in the Hebrew language.† So he earnestly prayed them, "To spare their own city, and to prevent that fire which was just ready to seize upon the temple, and to offer their usual sacrifices to God therein." At these words of his

The Jewish rebels who defended the fortress of Masada were defeated by Roman legions in the year 73 CE. Among the archaeological finds were fragments of pottery with some fighters names written in Hebrew. Among the names listed was the name of the commander ELEAZAR BEN YAIR mentioned by Jewish historian Flavius Josephus in his account of the fall of Masada in his book "The Jewish War against the Romans".



Masada Ostraca, 1989 Archeological Report

The Letters of Simon Bar Kochba or Bar Kosiba (see translation below) found in the Judean Desert and exposed in the Archeological Museum in Jerusalem-Israel were written in every day Hebrew during the second revolt of the monotheistic Judea against pagan Rome between 132 and 135 CE. Those letters have shown that 100 years after Jesus Crucifixion, Hebrew was still spoken in Judea. However, a generation or more later, following the overwhelming defeat of Judea, the Jews of Galilee gradually came to speak more Aramaic and Hebrew ceased to be a spoken language about the year 200 CE.

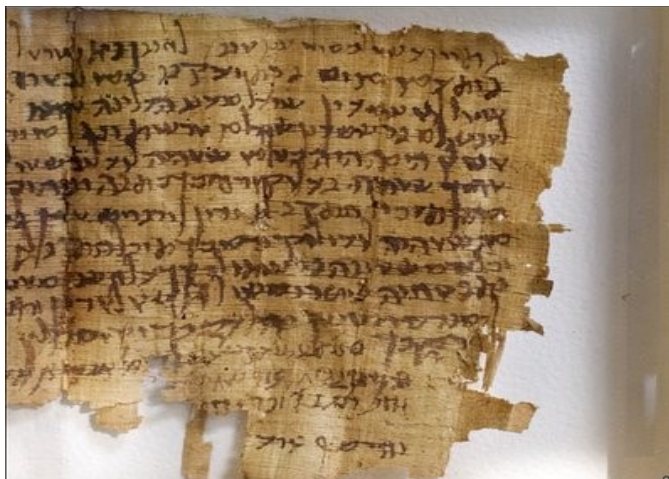


One Letter of Bar Kochba

Incidentally, it was after the year 135 CE when the roman emperor Hadrian renamed Judea as "Syria Palaestina". That's why the name Palaestina does not appears in the Gospels.



Vespasian roman coin of the year 71 CE with the inscription JUDEA CAPTA



Document in Hebrew dated 2nd century CE:
"Year four of the destruction of the House of Israel".

Professor David Flusser said in his book "Judaism and the roots of Christianity" that the Parables (Mashal in Hebrew) of Rabbinic literature were recounted to the people by the rabbi-teachers **only in Hebrew** at all

times. And Jesus' parables were no exception. Dr. Brad Young specialist in this subject agrees with Professor Flusser's assertions. Professor David Flusser also alludes the text of Acts of Apostles 21, 37 to 40 as evidence of the use of Hebrew among Jews which reads how Paul addresses the people "in the Hebrew language" when he was arrested by the Romans on the steps of the Antonia Fortress of Jerusalem. Paul said, "I am a Jew and a citizen of the well-known city of Tarsus in Cilicia. Please give me permission to speak to the people. The man gave his consent and Paul, standing at the top of the steps, raised his hand to the people for silence. A profound silence followed, and he started speaking to them in Hebrew... My brothers, my fathers, listen to what I have to say to you in my defence. When they realised he was speaking in Hebrew, the silence was even greater than before." (Bible of Jerusalem).

And again in Acts 26, 14 when Jesus appears to Paul (Saul) on the road to Damascus, Paul said: "We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Hebrew, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you, kicking against the goad" ... (Bible of Jerusalem).

Some 'old school' scholars claim that Hebrew was spoken only among the Sages but both Paul and Josephus spoke in Hebrew to the people. The Koine was a modality of greek commonly used throughout the Roman Empire and was the language in which the Gospel spread. Aramaic in Koine is defined as Συριστί [συριστί](#) (Siristi = in Syrian language) and in Greek is Αραμαϊκός - Αραμαίοι. The original text of the Acts of the Apostles in Koine says Ebraisti: [Εβραϊστί](#) = in the Hebrew language.

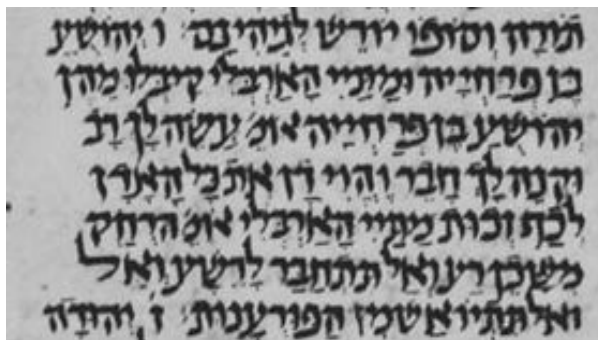
Harmodius. Ἑρμόδιος, ὁ.	Hera. Ἥρα, ἡ. Temple of Hera : Ἡραῖον, τό.
Harmonia. Ἀρμονία, ἡ, or say, daughter of Aphrodite, or daughter of Ares.	Heraclea. Ἡράκλεια, ἡ. People of Heraclea: Ἡρακλεῶται, οἱ. Territory of Heraclea : Ἡρακλεῶτις, -ιδος, ἡ.
Harpagus. Ἀρπᾶγος, ὁ.	Heracleidae. See under Heracles.
Harpies. Ἀρπυιαί, αἱ.	Heracleides. Ἡρακλείδης, -ου, ὁ.
Hasdrubal. Ἀσδρούβας, -α, ὁ.	Heracles. Ἡρακλῆς, ὁ, V. also Ἡρακλῆς, ὁ, voc. Ἡρακλεῖς, V. also Ἡρακλέες, gen. Ἡρακλέους, V. also Ἡρακλῆος (Eur., <i>Herac.</i> 541), or say, son of Alcmena. Of Heracles, adj.: Ἡράκλειος. Descendants of Heracles (Heracleidae): Ἡρακλεῖδαι, οἱ. Temple of Heracles: Ἡρακλεῖον, τό. Pillars of Heracles: Ἡρακλεῖαι στῆλαι, αἱ.
Hebe. Ἥβη, ἡ, or say, daughter of Hera.	Heraclitus. Ἡρακλείτης, ὁ. Of Heraclitus, adj.: Ἡρακλείτειος.
Hebrew, adj. Ἑβραῖος. In the Hebrew language, adv.: Ἑβραϊστί.	Heraea. Ἡραία, ἡ. Men of Heraea :
Hebrus (River). Ἑβρος, ὁ.	
Hecataeus. Ἑκαταῖος, ὁ.	
Hecate. Ἑκάτη, ἡ. Temple of Hecate: Ἑκατέϊον, τό.	
Hector. Ἑκτωρ, -ορος, ὁ, or say, son of Priam. Of Hector, adj.: Ἑκτόρειος (Eur., <i>Rhes.</i> 762).	
Hecuba. Ἑκάβη, ἡ, or say, daughter of Cisseus.	

Woodhouse's English-Greek Dictionary

Douglas Hamp is a graduate from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem with an M.A. in the Hebrew Bible and Its World, where he specialized in ancient languages including Biblical Hebrew and Koine Greek. Hamp asks some key questions in his book "Discovering the Language of Jesus" (2005): "So, in spite of all the evidence that Hebrew was spoken,

why do most scholars and certain Bible translators assume that Hebrew really means Aramaic?. The word for Aramaic in Greek is Συριστί, Syristi, which, however, never appears in the New Testament, though it does appear a few times in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament). Since there was a way for the writers of the NT to express Aramaic if they had wanted to, why didn't they if Hebrew really means Aramaic?".

The Mishnah is the compilation codified in Galilee by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi around 200 CE which summarizes the guidelines of the ancestral oral wisdom of the sages (Tannaim) for the correct practice of the commandments of The Torah. It was written in the Hebrew spoken in Judea during the 1st and 2nd centuries CE known as "Mishnaic Hebrew". Józef Tadeusz Milik, Polish Bible scholar and former Catholic priest was part of the team of specialists who deciphered the Dead Sea Scrolls and stated in his book that "[the Mishnaic Hebrew was the language spoken by the inhabitants of Judea](#)" at the end of the period of the Second Temple (Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judaea, 1959).



The Mishnah

In the Gospel of John (Bible of Jerusalem) there is a clear reference to the languages used in Judea referring to the sign placed by Pilate on the Cross (INRI):

+ John 19, 19 says: "Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews. This notice was read by many of the Jews, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the writing was [in Hebrew](#), Latin and Greek."



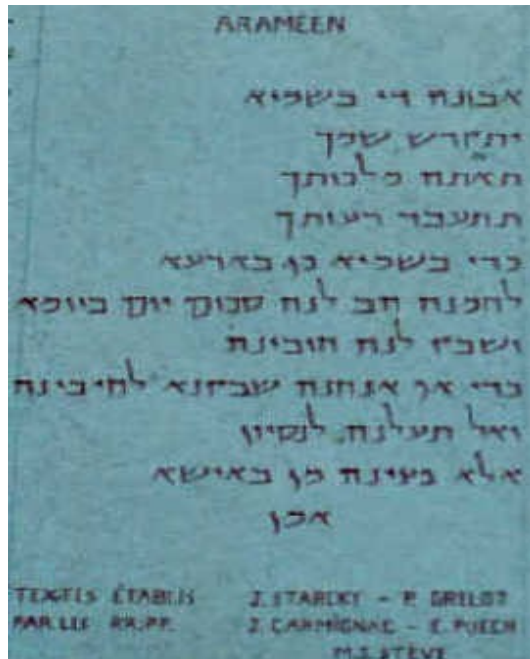
Sign with Hebrew inscription TO THE HOUSE OF TRUMPETS found in the ruins of the Temple of Jerusalem – 1st century CE

Aramaic is an ancestral Semitic language such as the ancient Canaanite and the Ugaritic. It was used as the official language of the royal courts in Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Syria and Judea. All Semitic languages were influenced by each other. Aramaic was spoken in Judea during the Persian occupation since the 6th century BCE. The same happened in the 4th century BCE with the Greek when Judea was under the dominion of Ptolemaic and Seleucid kings of Egypt and Syria respectively. Then Hebrew reappears as a spoken language in Judea especially during the Jewish national renaissance fueled by the Hasmonean kings (Maccabees) in the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE. **To speak Hebrew, the native language, was one way of reaffirming the national identity in Judea to counter the overwhelming influence of Greek culture.**

A foreign language as **Aramaic** that remembered the disastrous Babylonian Exile could not meet that ethnic purpose. It was since then that the Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew was used to teach wisdom and virtue to the young and that book was still in use during the 1st century CE. Both Aramaic and Greek-Koine were used in the 1st century CE to communicate with Jews who did not live in Judea as well as with the foreign gentiles while a good majority of the Judean natives spoke Hebrew.

It is possible that Jesus who grew up in Galilee of the Gentiles on the border with Lebanon and Syria (Aram) also spoke Aramaic. That was how he could talk to the demoniac in the passage of the herd of pigs on the eastern shore of the Sea (Lake) of Galilee (Aram = land of pagans) Matthew 8 and Mark 5. But Jesus used Hebrew to amaze the elders for his wisdom in the Temple at age 12, or to preach to the people in parables (Mashal), or arguing with the Pharisees, or reading and teaching in the synagogues and in the Temple and also to speak to the Samaritan Woman at the Well of Jacob as St. Paul did shortly after on the stairs of the Antonia Fortress. This is also the opinion of Professor Shmuel Safrai professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Presumably Jesus spoke Hebrew in the peculiar guttural "accent" of Galileans referred to in Matthew 26, 73 when Peter denied Jesus before the cock crows: "I do not know the man. A little later the bystanders came up and said to Peter, surely you too are one of them for even the way you talk (accent) gives you away.". Yemenite Jews spoke Hebrew in the same accent as Peter did for centuries afterwards.

Jesus often went up to the Temple as a child (Luke 2, 41) so he was familiar with those crowded meetings of Jews in Jerusalem who gathered with joy after making the holy pilgrimage not only from the villages and cities of Judea and Galilee, but also many came from Cappadocia, Cilicia, Syria, Cyrenaica, Babylon and Egypt to fulfill the commandment of Deuteronomy 16, 16. During those days of religious holidays Jews spoke Aramaic, Greek or Hebrew according to their occupation and place of origin. To speak with Pilate Jesus could do it in Koine (colloquial Greek) who may have learned in his childhood with the Jewish community of Alexandria when the Flight into Egypt (or in Sephoris-Tzipori the mixed city close to Nazareth), although it is more likely that this was done through a translator into Hebrew at the service of the Roman Prefect to communicate with the native population.



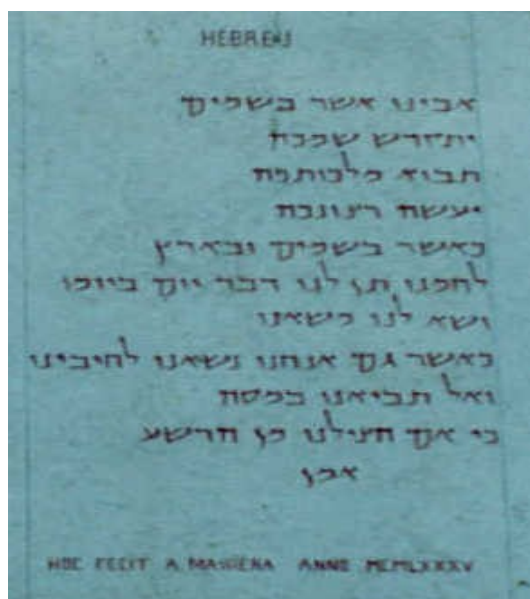
The Lord's Prayer in Aramaic

English has been influenced by Latin, French and German remaining nevertheless an unique language. The same is true for Hebrew. Obviously the Hebrew spoken in the time of Jesus was influenced in the form of words and expressions by Aramaic and Greek alike. Words such as "Abba" (father), "Ima" (mother), "Bar Mitzvah", "Agab", "Agada", "Barnash", "Bar - Bish Mazal" Adraba, Katin, Kushia, the names of the months ... and many other words derived from the Aramaic. So It is not surprising to find Aramainisms in the Gospels. The same happened with the Greek. Words like "Sanhedrin" (Council of Elders), Traklin, Diukan, Hediot, Katedra, Heguemon, Namal and even names like Horcanus, Aristobulus, Agrippa, Ptolemy were used in every day Hebrew during that period (300 BCE to 200 CE).

Let us focus now on those years of linguistics transition from Hebrew to Aramaic in 2nd century Syria Palaestina after the second Jewish Revolt against Rome. It was then that the Syrian Tacianus composed the "Diatessaron" (165-170 CE) which was a Gospel that integrated the others in a single version and without contradictions. This Syrian Gospel was in use in the Aramaic Church that obviously favored aramaic a posteriori as the language spoken by Jesus. On the other hand, the oldest Greek versions of the New Testament are the Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus of the IV century CE that were subject to certain modifications by copyists. It had been nearly 300 years since the Gospels were written. This would explain the apparent contradiction in the text of the first century Gospels that clearly mentions some words as Hebrew words ([Εβραϊστί](#) = Ebraisti) although the II to IV century CE copyists phonetically transcribed them into Aramaic (Akeldama, Rabbuni, Gabatha, Mammon, Sikera, Cephas, Talitha Qum, Ephphatha, Eli Eli Lema sabachthani, Raca, Gethsemani, Golgotha...) backed by the

fact that the Palaestina Jews of their time no more spoke Hebrew but Aramaic. Like in John 19, 17: "And carrying his cross by himself, he went out to the so-called Place of the Skull, which is called in Hebrew *Golgotha*". Or John 19,13: "When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew *Gabbatha*".

According to Professor David Flusser: "There are teachings and sayings of Jesus that can be translated to both Hebrew or Aramaic, but there are some that can only be translated into Hebrew. None can be translated only into Aramaic. Furthermore, the Hebrew origin of the Gospels can be shown translating them into Hebrew ", especially the Gospel of Matthew that was originally written in Hebrew according to eight of the early Fathers of the Church from II to IV century CE. Among them Hierapolis, Papias, Hegesippus, Irineus, Cyril of Jerusalem, Epiphanius, Origen and Jerome. Eusebius in his Ecclesiastical History, VI, XXV, 3-6, quotes early third century AD Origenes who said that **"the first to be written was the Gospel of Matthew ... who composed it in Hebrew and published it for the faithful coming from Judaism"**. Papias according to the same source asserted that: "Matthew recorded Jesus' words in the Hebrew language ...". This was also affirmed by researcher Jean Carignac based on the same sources in "Studies of Jewish history in the Synoptic Gospels," Swedish Theological Institute Annual 7 (1968-69), p. 88.



The Lord's Prayer in Hebrew

In the "Foreword" of the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew reads as follows: "To the very dear brother Jerome the priest, from bishops Chromatius and Heliodorus, health in the Lord ... while ourselves were into these reflections we were informed by two holy personages named Parmenio and Virino that your holiness had discovered a **Hebrew volume, written by the blessed Evangelist Matthew**, and which concerned the birth of the Virgin Mother and the Childhood of the Savior. Here's why, in the name of Jesus Christ, we beg for your goodness and be served to translate that volume **from Hebrew into Latin**, not as much to enhance the virtues of the Christ, but to expose and deny the perfidy of heretics".

During many centuries Christian Church scholars excluded the Hebrew as an every day spoken language in the first century CE Judea and developed his own theory about the exclusive use of Aramaic in their drive to distance Jesus from his cultural and religious context. All this because the term "Hebrew" is immediately associated with "Jew." For example, in the Bible of Jerusalem, the Catholic Church added a note to the text of Mark 7, 11 explaining that the Hebrew word "Korban" used by Jesus and that appears several times in the Torah-Pentateuch, is "an Aramaic word that means offering".



Inscription with the Hebrew word "Korban" from the 1st century CE

Some Christian scholars have called the language spoken then in Judea: "Western Spoken Aramaic" although in Acts of Apostles 6 at the official Catholic Bible of the Spanish Episcopal Conference reads on the Judeo-Christians of the Jerusalem Church: "About this time, when the number of disciples was increasing the Greek-speaking disciples complained against the [Hebrew-speaking](#) disciples because in the daily distribution their own widows were being overlooked.". Acts 6 says [Ἑβραῖοι](#) = in the Hebrew tongue. And not Συριοῖ = Siristi, which is Koine for Syriac or Aramaic.



*(ebraisti/

[Ἑβραῖοι](#)

in the *Hebrew tongue*, NTest.

Liddell and Scott. An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon. Oxford. Clarendon Press. 1889.

The Annenberg CPB/Project provided support for entering this text.

Scholars of the 'Old School' are the same people who refer to 1st century CE Judea with the name "Palaestina" although this name given by Hadrian is only from the 2nd century CE and therefore does not appear in the Gospels. They even go so far as to ignore the archeological evidence (manuscripts and inscriptions) found in the last decades in the Judean Desert. But not all ignore that evidence. The 1st. 1958 edition of the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church curtly stated that speaking Hebrew ceased in the 4th century BCE. Following the archeological findings they corrected their text and the 3rd 1997 edition of the dictionary states that ["the Hebrew continued to be used as written](#)

and spoken language after the classical period and is found in texts from Qumran and in the Mishnah".

The film The Passion of Mel Gibson spoken in Aramaic is a clear example of the stubbornness of certain reactionary Christians factions in denying to this day the cultural Hebrew ties of the Nazarene.

The researchers David Biven and Roy Blizzard have shown in their study "Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus", 1995, p. 53, that "the Hebrew background (in the Gospels) is revealed not only in the structure of sentences but also in many present idioms and literalisms that are specific of the Hebrew language". "The Gospels are plagued by confusion because translators in general were unable to recognize the Hebrew thinking, idioms and sentence structures that are behind the Greek texts" explained Biven and Blizzard. ... "If Church had been provided with a proper understanding of Hebrew in the words of Jesus, most of the theological controversies would never have arisen since the beginning", Biven and Blizzard claimed (p. 67).

The previously spoken Hebrew in Judea became after centuries a sacred language used only to pray in the synagogues of the "Diaspora" as well as to study The Torah. The Jews scattered around the world adopted the language of the land they inhabit. Almost two thousand years after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 CE, the Jews returning to Zion-Israel, spontaneously choose Hebrew as its national language. They could have chosen Aramaic but the call of the "mother tongue" was more powerful.

It is a modern Hebrew who had to be updated and to which new words were added but which is based on the Hebrew spoken by Bar Kochba in 132-135 CE. Israeli Jews today read newspapers, talk and write in the language of their ancestors enriched by everyday use.

Hebrews again speak Hebrew in their Land.



Book written in Modern Israeli Hebrew
by Shai Agnon, 1966 Nobel Prize in Literature

Suggested Readings:

- + [Hebrew Alphabet](#)
 - + ["Which Language Did Jesus Speak - Aramaic or Hebrew?"](#) . By Brian Knowles.
 - + [Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus](#) by David Biven and Roy Blizzard
 - + [The Hebrew language - Wikipedia.](#)
 - + [The Hebrew of Matthew](#)
-



The Letters of Bar Kokhba



One Letter displayed in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem

Image: [Israel Museum, Jerusalem](#)

AHRC ID #:	24
Date of writing:	135 Christian Era
Place of Discovery:	Murabb'at Wadi, near the Dead Sea, Israel
Current Location:	Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel
Language:	Hebrew
Material:	Papyrus
Translation:	From Simon Ben Kosiba to Yeshua Ben Galgula and to the fortress men, peace. I call heaven as a witness against me that unless you destroy every Galilean who are among you, every man, I will place shackles on your feet, as I did with Ben Aflul.
Comments:	This letter written in the 2 nd century AD shows that the Hebrew language was still commonly used for this time. Simeon Ben Kosiba (Shimon Bar Kochba) was the leader of the Second Jewish revolt of 132-135 AD. In this letter appears the colloquial idiom "tashmiym" (last word, third line) instead of "et hashamayim".