

What Jesus *Really* Meant

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Preface

The Bible's New Testament seems to have been written clearly enough for everyone to understand. Not only are the narratives in the four Gospels, for instance, attractive and compelling, but they also treat the life of Christ in such a very basic way that they seem almost devoid of any bothersome complexities. In fact, people often say that even a child can understand them.

However, even these simple stories contain expressions here and there—sometimes almost tucked out of sight—that beg for expansion and explanation. Likewise, the various epistles of the New Testament contain a few words and phrases that are not particularly easy for the casual reader to understand.

For example, why did Jesus call the Syro-Phoenician woman a “dog”? (Mark 7:24–30). What did Jesus mean when He said we’re to love our enemies? (Matthew 5:44). How can He expect us to love them while they’re mistreating us? And doesn’t what the apostle Paul wrote in Philip-
pians 1:23 teach that as soon as Christians die, they go to be with the Lord?

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Questions of this sort—and many more like them—demand clear, fitting answers so we can feel certain that we’re understanding God’s Word and His will for us correctly. These are the kinds of questions I answer in the pages that follow. I hope these short explanatory chapters will increase the understanding of and appreciation for the Scriptures of those who love the Lord and who honor His Word.

As far as reputable scholars can determine, the individual books of the New Testament were originally composed in the *Koinē* dialect of the Greek language. This means that many of our explanations of difficult passages must give due consideration to the Greek word or words that the original author used, so in the explanations that follow, you can expect to see references to Greek words. However, when I use those Greek words, I’ll provide clear translations to make them understandable. I intend this book to make the Bible an easier “tool” for busy pastors and educated lay people to use—a goal it certainly won’t reach if it were just another book of cumbersome and difficult explanations.

In presenting this volume to you, the reader, I would also like to express my heartfelt thanks to Mrs. Jackie Larson—now, Mrs. Jackie Larson Litke!—who helped prepare it for its publication by graciously keying the manuscript into a computer. And I want to add a note of appreciation to Mrs. Cathy Salzman, who made a number of valuable suggestions and corrections that have enhanced the content.

This volume comes accompanied by my heartfelt prayer that it may make a highly useful contribution to those who love their Lord and who earnestly hunger to understand His Word more perfectly.

CHAPTER 1

The Language Jesus Spoke

The question posed in the title of this chapter is an important one because the language Christ spoke affects how we should understand certain passages in the New Testament. Some New Testament statements, in fact, have meaning only if we know the language of the person who spoke or wrote them. So, it may be helpful at the very beginning of this book to consider briefly the language used by those who spoke and wrote in the New Testament period.

Let's begin by noting what is probably obvious to most readers of the Bible—that the various personalities of the New Testament were, with only a few exceptions, members of the Hebrew race. We might assume, then, that every one of them must have spoken and written in the Hebrew language. However, this assumption is wrong. We now know that in Christ's time, Hebrew wasn't anyone's common, day-to-day language.

What language, then, did the New Testament writers use? And why weren't they speaking and writing in Hebrew?

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Many biblical scholars today believe that, originally, Abraham's native tongue was the ancient Mesopotamian language called Sumerian. Ur, Abraham's hometown, was located in the lower Mesopotamian Valley, and the people who lived there spoke Sumerian. Then, when Abraham and his family migrated from Mesopotamia to the southern part of Palestine, they adopted the language of the Canaanites, who were their neighbors. So Abraham's descendants, the Hebrews, spoke a dialect of the ancient Canaanite language. Consequently, when we speak of the "Hebrew" language or read in some commentary about the wording of the "Hebrew" Bible (the Old Testament), we're speaking about a particular Canaanite dialect.

When Israel's prophets and scribes recorded the sacred prophesies, they wrote them down in Hebrew. As you might imagine, the Jewish people have always venerated Hebrew as a holy language, and they have devoutly maintained it to the present day as the language of choice for use in the services of the Jewish synagogues. Without a doubt, then, we can assume that the people of Christ's day used Hebrew in their religious services. However, that doesn't necessarily mean that they spoke Hebrew in their homes.

The Babylonian captivity of the Jews, which began in 605 B.C., had a profound effect upon them, influencing even their attitude toward Hebrew. They continued to treasure their biblical writings, but during their lengthy exile, they learned the language of their conquerors, which was Chaldean, one of the Aramaic dialects of that time. (Nebuchadnezzar and his dynasty were members of the Chaldean branch of the Aramaeans). So, when the Jews returned to Palestine after their long stay in Mesopotamia, they came back as speakers of the language known as Ara-

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maic, and because they adopted this language as their own and used it for several centuries after their return from exile, Christ and His disciples must have known and used it too.

However, the language situation in Palestine during the time of Christ and the centuries immediately following His time on earth appears to have become even more complicated than what I've described so far. Here's why.

When the Persian armies under the leadership of Cyrus conquered the Babylonian Empire, the Persian rulers adopted and used Aramaic because so many people throughout the Middle East knew and used this language. But when, under Alexander the Great, the Greeks conquered the Persians, the Greek language rapidly became popular among people everywhere in the Middle East. They used it in everyday speech, and it soon became the language of diplomacy, of commerce, of entertainment, of talk on the street, and of almost every other type of communication outside of the home. Even the Jews in Palestine conducted their business transactions in Greek, and they spoke it in their shops and in their fields.

So, the language situation in Palestine during the time of Christ is probably best described as follows: First, the ancient Hebrew language, a variety of Canaanite, continued to hold a venerated place in the thinking of the Jewish people. It was, after all, the language Moses and the prophets used to record and preserve for later generations the Jewish sacred writings. The priests and the teachers (the rabbis) and the various other specialists in the Jewish religion of that period were expected to learn to read the Hebrew writings. However, even though this language was widely used in the texts and prayers of the Jewish religious

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services, it is highly doubtful that the common people of that day understood much of it. As they became comfortable speaking Aramaic, their ability to understand Hebrew drifted away from them.

Second, the common people of Christ's day probably used Aramaic as their "house" or "home" language—the language they learned from babyhood up and then spoke within their families. It was the language used by the children and the women of the household.

Third, on the streets of the cities, the *Koinē* ("common") dialect of Greek was the language of the day. It was the language of commerce and of men everywhere, though some educated women doubtless knew it too.

During Jesus' ministry, He probably used mostly the Koinē Greek language.

Fourth, Latin, the native language of the Romans, was probably not widely used in Palestine during the first century A.D. Of course, because it was the legal language of the empire, Roman functionaries

had to use it in official communications. But even the Romans appear to have been accustomed to using *Koinē* Greek for most of their communication.

In short, then, it appears that the language most prevalent in Palestine at the time of Christ was *Koinē* Greek, a common dialect of the Greek language.

A few biblical scholars rather firmly reject the idea that Jesus and His disciples spoke Greek, asserting instead that they knew and spoke only Aramaic. But three basic arguments undergird the belief that Jesus must have spoken *Koinē* Greek. First, a group of secular documents has been

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unearthed that provide us with a record of all sorts of relationships and transactions. There are numerous contracts and agreements, ranging from simple wedding summaries to complicated real estate transactions. Some documents deal with the manumission of slaves, and others are lists of shipped goods. There are even all kinds of personal letters, including both messages from young people to their parents and letters between business partners.

For the most part, the messages recorded two or three centuries before Christ were written in Aramaic, but almost without exception, the documents from the first century A.D. and later were written in Greek. They stand as vivid witnesses to the fact that by the time of Christ, communication in Bible lands had very largely shifted from Aramaic to the Koinē dialect of Greek—in fact, that was true not only of the people who lived in Palestine, but also of almost everyone else in the Mediterranean world.

The second evidence that Greek was the language of Christ and His disciples arises from the fact that a number of New Testament sayings have no significant meaning unless they're interpreted as having been originally spoken or composed in Greek. We say things that would be meaningless or, worse, extremely misleading, if taken literally and translated word for word into another language—for instance, “she got it straight from the horse’s mouth.” There are a number of passages like this in the New Testament, passages that can be understood and interpreted correctly only when the interpreter recognizes their Greek origin. In the chapters that follow, we’ll see some interesting examples of this point.

Third, there are a few instances in the Gospel accounts in which Christ’s words are recorded in Aramaic. These are

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significant because they reveal times when our Lord *did* speak in Aramaic. But the point is that these occasions were so unusual and so noteworthy that the Gospel writers felt they should record the exact words that Jesus spoke.

For example, Mark 5:41 tells the story of Jesus' resurrection of a little girl. The Gospel says that when Jesus called her back to life, He uttered the Aramaic words *talitha kourai*, "Little girl, rise up." Mark recounts these Aramaic words as if Jesus' use of them was quite out of the ordinary. Actually, it was indeed noteworthy, because it portrays Jesus' concern for the little girl: when our Lord called her back to life, He used the familiar language of the home, not of the street, shop, and field—language that would be comfortable for the awakened child to hear in such a setting.

These three considerations, then, have led most New Testament scholars to conclude that during the three and a half years of Jesus' ministry, He probably used mostly the Koinē Greek language, though they would also agree that there were a few times when He may well have read from the ancient Hebrew scrolls,¹ and New Testament scholars would further agree that on certain occasions, such as in a moment of extreme mental agony on the cross (Mark 15:34), our Lord also spoke Aramaic.

In the following chapters, we will look at a number of passages that must be interpreted in the light of the original Greek manuscripts. A consideration of the Koinē wording of the ancient texts will clarify many of these challenging passages, making them become more meaningful.

1. Jesus' familiarity with Hebrew disconcerted His adversaries on at least one occasion. Apparently surprised that He could read Hebrew, one of them asked, "How does this Man know letters, having never studied [them]?" (John 7:15, NKJV).