

Did Yeshua Converse with Nicodemus in Greek?

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A nice conversation with Skip Moen has encouraged me to better clarify my reasons for assuming Yeshua spoke Greek with Nicodemus rather than Hebrew. Here's a summary:

1. Jews throughout the Mediterranean had adopted the Greek language, much for their own purposes, in the centuries prior to Yeshua's incarnation. Through the influence of the Greek translation(s) of the Torah, Prophets, Writings, etc... Greek became a natural means of expression for Jews in these regions. Of course, it is clear that Yeshua spoke Aramaic at times too, and most likely Hebrew. (The lion's share of the "Hebrew" words we find transliterated in the Greek New Testament are what scholars today would classify as Aramaic). Numerous "non-canonical" Jewish Greek texts from the 2nd Temple era, including some among the DSS, in addition to epigraphic evidence, support the idea of a fluid, multi-language culture. Even the sign put above Yeshua's head was in three languages. Greek language was neither denigrated nor looked down upon.

2. There is no evidence that the Apostles were involved in "language" one-upmanship, and Acts 2 actually shows the very opposite: God's word is effective in any language! It's not that all these Jews at Shavuot suddenly understood the same language; rather, that they all heard in their native language. "Language ideology" (meaning, "Hebrew is the holy language, others are not!" type of doctrine), if it was present at all in the Jewish world of the 1st century, would have been group-specific at best. It doesn't really even register with the rabbis until after the spread of the Gospel and the LXX traditions among non-Jews. For example, earlier in the talmudic era there is a positive view of the Greek Torah, but ambiguity on whether Greek language and literature (Homer is even mentioned) should be taught. However, later on, the "day the Torah was translated into Greek" was likened to when Israel made the golden calf. Still, the Greek language has forever infiltrated Jewish culture. We use words like "synagogue" and "Sanhedrin" (even "Judaism"! not to mention the hundreds of Greek and Latin words peppering the Mishnah, Talmudim, and midrashim.

3. There is clearly a deliberate ambiguity with Yeshua's choice of *ανωθεν* *anowthen* in John 3. Nicodemus takes it to mean "a second time" (a legitimate meaning), and struggles to understand. But Yeshua clearly means it as "above," and has a bit of fun in the process: "Are you the teacher of Israel and you don't get this?" My assumption is that the Greek language traditions of *ανωθεν* in the Torah and Prophets as referring to the heavens is what Yeshua is alluding to. For me, this is confirmed by the end of the chapter (John 3:31), in the mouth of John the Baptist: "He who comes from above (*ανωθεν*) is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all." Here we see that we are to take *ανωθεν* as "from heaven," *not* as "again" like Nicodemus did. [Why then do evangelists say "You must be *born again*!" As if this is something one can affect for one's self!? The popular "born again" phrase reminds me of Nicodemus' words rather than Yeshua's!]

4. This word play is not possible in Hebrew or Aramaic. There is to my knowledge no Semitic word that enjoys this specific polysemy. That's why reading the Peshitta or other Hebrew NT version of John cannot convey what's going on here in the Greek.

5. We don't have any indication from the text of John that this conversation was in Hebrew or Aramaic. Neither do we have any indication that John's Greek is a translation of an earlier "Semitic" Gospel of John. Five times in the Gospel we are told what something is called "in

Hebrew” (*Bethesda*, *Gabbatha*, *Golgotha*, and *Rabboni* are what we today would call “Jewish Aramaic”), but not here.

So, I see all signs pointing to Yeshua speaking Greek in this case. But why might Yeshua have chosen to speak Greek with Nicodemus? Perhaps to challenge “the teacher of Israel” on the very point of language ideology. Does Nicodemus put “Hebrew” first? Or, is he able to adapt to the needs of much of the flock of Israel, many of whom were raised on Greek Torah traditions, in order to teach the truth of Scripture? Can he adopt the language of his audience and then build a bridge between worlds (a key skill for disciples of Yeshua!), or will he insist that Hebrew is the “holy language” and that others must learn it before they can converse?