

In What Language Were the Synoptic Gospels Written?

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In this paper I will seek to investigate the claim that the synoptic gospels were originally written in Hebrew. To do so I will first survey the language of the Jews in the first century, and then look at the mention of a Hebrew Gospel by the church fathers.

The discussion of the original language of the synoptic gospels is one that is still a heated debate today, with no end in sight. Scholars still discuss, debate, and argue over this topic, with many schools of thought on the Gospels originally being written in Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic¹. With that in mind, I do not in anyway believe that I will solve the problem that scholars have taken on for years and even centuries. However, I do hope to shed some light on a few points.

Importance of the debate

Some might think that this is a detail that really doesn't matter at all, but the discussion hits on a much bigger issue, and that is the inerrancy of scripture. Since the earliest manuscripts of the synoptic gospels we have today are written in Greek, those that say it was originally writ-

¹ The debate over Hebrew or Aramaic is one that I will not address in this paper. Since they are both Semitic languages and both were used in the first century, I am willing to concede that Hebrew or Aramaic could have been used. For this paper when I say Hebrew, this could just as well be Aramaic.

ten in a different language are essentially making the claim that we don't have the words of the original manuscripts, just a translation of the words from original manuscripts². Michael L.

Brown speaks to this point in a book review he published, and he says,

It has often been demonstrated that once belief in the reliability of the biblical text has been surrendered, within one generation, established tenets of the faith also begin to be surrendered, notwithstanding the disclaimers of those of the first generation. Will a similar scenario be repeated here? Will fundamental beliefs in, e.g., the person and work of Jesus, the teaching of Paul, or the message of John soon be questioned? There is some disquieting evidence which suggests that this scenario is already unfolding.³

Brown's point is well taken, however, proponents of a Hebrew authorship of the synoptic gospels bring up points that are worthy of investigation. First, the writers of the synoptic gospels were Jewish! They spoke Hebrew and/or Aramaic. Why would they write in a foreign language? Second, they were writing to Jews and the Jews spoke Hebrew. Why write in a language they didn't understand? Third, there are early church fathers, six from the second century alone, who give account of a "Hebrew gospel."⁴ It is easy for us to say that the synoptic gospels had to be written in Greek, but is the proof really there?

² Stanley <http://rabbi-stanley.wrytestuff.com/swa413703.htm>

³ Michael L. Brown: *"Recovering the "inspired Text"? An assessment of the work of the Jerusalem school in light of understanding the difficult words of Jesus"* P. 27

⁴ James R. Edwards: *"The Hebrew Gospel & the Development of the Synoptic Tradition"* P. 2

They Were Jews, They Spoke Hebrew.

It is only natural to presume that the Jews of the first century spoke Hebrew and/or Aramaic. In an article by Stanley, he references Josephus in War 5.361 (5.9.2.361) and makes this statement:

"We see that Josephus testifies that the people didn't even understand Greek. He had to translate what the Greek speaking Romans had to say to the Jews in order for them to surrender."⁵

In this part of *War*, Josephus is recounting the taking of the Jerusalem temple, and the surrender of the Jerusalem people. Josephus writes:

so he mixed good counsel with his works for the siege; and being sensible that exhortations are frequently more effectual than arms, he persuaded them to surrender the city, now in a manner already taken, and thereby to save themselves, and sent Josephus to speak to them in their own language; for he imagined they might yield to the persuasion of a countryman of their own.⁶

There is no reference to the Jews not understanding Greek as Stanley claims. Instead the king tells Josephus to go speak to the Jews because he thinks that seeing and hearing another Jew and countryman that speaks their forefather's language⁷ will persuade them to surrender. This passage does, however, let us know that these Jews did in fact speak Hebrew, but were they unable to understand Greek? This is unlikely due to the fact that the primary language spoken in the Roman Empire was Greek, and that the Jews would have most likely been influenced by the culture around them. Shaye Cohen speaks to this issue:

⁵ Stanley: <http://rabbi-stanley.wrytestuff.com/swa413703.htm>

⁶ War 5.361 (5.9.2.361)

⁷ Literally τῆ πατρίῳ γλώσσῃ (ancestral language)

"The essence of Hellenization, of course, is the Greek language. In the diaspora, the triumph of the Greek language was complete. Hebrew was virtually unknown to Egyptian Jewry. Even Philo, certainly the most learned and literate Jew produced by the Jewish community of Alexandria, was no Hebraist,"⁸

Even before the first century we see Greek being a part of Jewish writings. The Septuagint was a translation of the Hebrew bible (exact books are debated),⁹ into Greek, dating between 250-100 BCE. We also know that there were Greek manuscripts found at Qumran:

The fact that copies of the Greek version of some biblical books have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls is significant. Study of the manuscript 4QLXXNum (4Q121, Num 3:30-4:14) from Qumran has even yielded the conclusion that the Jews of Palestine felt themselves both qualified and authorised to improve the style of the Greek version.¹⁰

Cohen has this to say about the Greek texts at Qumran:

According to both Christian and rabbinic legend, a convert to Judaism named Aquila translated the Bible anew into Greek under rabbinic aegis, his goal being a faithful word-for-word translation. Whether there is any truth to this legend is hard to establish, but the important point is that the translation attributed to Aquila is a revision of the Septuagint in the direction of the emerging newly standardized Hebrew text. Qumran fragments show that revisions in this direction were being done already in the first century CE, demonstrating the existence in Judea of a group of Jews who needed a Greek translation of the Bible, but a translation which would be closer to the Hebrew original than that produced by diaspora Jewry.¹¹

Cohen does go on to say:

The Greek language, then, had an enormous impact in Judea in both second

⁸ Shaye J. D. Cohen: *"From Maccabees to the Mishnah"* Second Edition (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006) p.30

⁹ Paul Wagner, *The Journey from Text to Translations* (Baker Academic, 1999) p.109

¹⁰ Julio Treballe Barrera: *"The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible"* (Eerdmans, 1998) p.124

¹¹ Shaye J. D. Cohen: *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* Second Edition P. 31

Temple and rabbinic times. As far as we know, however, Hebrew remained the primary language of literary expression.¹²

From these few quotes we see that Greek had made its way into Jewish culture to some degree. Even if the people that Josephus talks about in *War* 5.361 spoke Hebrew as a primary language, it would not be a stretch at all to think that they would have also spoken Greek. We know that the scribes wrote the Torah in Hebrew, but we also know that some authorities allowed writing a Torah scroll in Greek.¹³

It is apparent that first century Judean Jews spoke Hebrew, but there is evidence that they also spoke Greek. What is not clear is how far out of Judea the Hebrew language was known as a primary tongue. Greek was widely spoken even in Jewish sects, especially outside of the Holy City, and there is evidence that the Jews needed the Tanach in Greek. This leaves us with the question of why would first century Jews use (and or need) a Greek translation of the Torah if they were not speaking Greek as a mother tongue?

The argument that the writers of the synoptic gospels were Jewish and therefore would have written in Hebrew is less than conclusive. I personally take the traditional view of the authorship of the synoptic gospels i.e, that Matthew wrote Matthew, Mark wrote Mark, and that Luke the physician wrote Luke, then the question of their ethnicity arises, especially for Luke. The prevailing perspective among scholars is that Matthew was Jewish. Many believe Luke to be

¹² *ibid.* P. 32

¹³ Mulder and Sysling, eds., *Mikra* (Fortress, 1988), P. 32

a gentile, a theory based largely on Col. 4:10-14 where Paul speaks of Aristarchus, Barnabas, and Jesus (also called Justus), and says of them "these are the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are from the circumcision..." (V. 11). He then goes on to use Luke's name later in verse 14. Many conclude since Luke's name wasn't counted among those of the "circumcision," it means he wasn't Jewish. But this is hardly an air-tight argument. The word circumcision could reference several different groups of people in the context and does not imply for certain he is talking of just "Jews". In verse 10 Barnabas is counted as one of the circumcised, and is also said to be the cousin of Mark. Once again this does not prove bloodline or "Jewishness" one way or the other.

When we look at the audience to whom the authors of the synoptic gospels wrote, we run into the same problem. Yeshua tells his disciples to "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations..." (Matt. 28:19). And Luke addresses (we might even say dedicates) his book to Theophilus, a Greek name meaning "loving god" or perhaps "loved by God,"¹⁴ but besides this we are left to debate this issue. Even if the authors of these gospels were writing to a mainly Jewish audience, (a point I'm still not willing to concede), the point still stands that the Hebrew language was not necessarily the language in which they would have been chosen to write. Whether the writers of the synoptic gospels were Jewish, or those being written to had Hebrew lineage, is really not the major issue in this study. The fact that Greek was such a major part of Jewish

¹⁴ BDAG, "Theophilus"

living in the first century is more the issue that should be addressed. And it seems fair to say that the Jews of the first century, even those in Judea, understood Greek or even spoke it fluently.

The Synoptic Problem

The synoptic problem alone has had a plethora of books and work written on it throughout the centuries and is a topic too large for the scope of this paper. Rather what follows is a basic outline of the theory, in order to show why most scholars hold to the priority of Mark.

The "synoptic problem" is the term used to describe the relationship between Matthew, Mark and Luke.

In reading the four Gospels it is apparent that three of them resemble one another and one does not. A brief time spent in any synopsis of the Gospels will indicate that Matthew, Mark and Luke share a number of striking similarities. The "Synoptic Problem" is the name that has been given to the problem of why the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke look so much alike. Why are they so similar in content, in wording and in the order of events found within them?¹⁵

One of the big issues is to decide who wrote the gospel first. Due to writings from the church fathers, the majority of scholars prior to 1790 believed that the gospels were written in the order we see them in our Bible today.¹⁶ That theory started to change because of J.J. Griesbach who, in 1783, took a theory from H. Owen hypothesizing that Matthew was written first, then Luke and

¹⁵ R. H. Stein, "Synoptic Problem", in *ISP Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (IVP, 1992).

¹⁶ we will discuss the church fathers below

finally Mark. This hypothesis has come to be known as the "Griesbach theory".¹⁷ Later, from around 1870 until 1970, the priority of Mark started to become the favored view. Wagner has this to say:

It was argued that Mark was written first and that both Matthew and Luke independently used this Gospel to compose their own. Since about 1970 the Synoptic Problem has increasingly become an open question, but Markan priority is still supported by the majority of Synoptic scholars (e.g., D. R. Catchpole [1993]; G. N. Stanton [1992]; S. McKnight [1988]; C. M. Tuckett [1984], J. A. Fitzmyer [1981]).¹⁸

There are a number of reasons why Markan priority is held higher than any other priority. Although R.H. Stein doesn't give a concise list, he goes through each reason and explains its importance. Primary among his list are:

- 1) Mark is the shortest gospel, 2) Mark has the poorest Greek, 3) Mark is frequently redundant,
- 4) Mark has harder readings, and 5) the lack of Matthew-Luke verbal agreements against Mark.

While there are proponents of Matthean or even Lukan priority, this short list provides the essential reasons for the majority of scholars to hold a Markan priority.

I will now address "Q", and will address Matthew priority below.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Paul Wagner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations* P. 64-65

"Q"

Those who hold to a Markan priority almost always¹⁹ hold to the "Two-Document Hypothesis."

This theory concludes that Matthew and Luke used Mark and a second document which we no longer have. Scholars have named it Quelle which means "Source," know as "Q" by scholars.

"For over a century "Q" has been used to refer to the 230 or so sayings of Yeshua which Matthew and Luke share, but which are not found in Mark."²⁰ Different scholars believe Q to be different things. For example, some believe it was oral tradition of Yeshua's sayings and teachings that his disciples compiled while others believe it was a document that disappeared after being used by Matthew and Luke.²¹ This idea of Q is somewhat difficult to grasp when we first look at it. If Mark was the first to write his gospel, then the evidence does point to some other document being used. As stated above, where would the 230 references come from? This is a core issue in the synoptic problem. Let us look at a statement by Darrel Bock, he writes:

The case of the existence of Q really begins with a negative observation. It is that Matthew and Luke do not depend on each other. Thus, not only does belief that Q existed usually argue that Mark is the first Gospel, but also that Luke did not use or know Matthew. This conclusion about Luke and Matthew requires that two points be treated: (1) the united testimony of the church fathers that Matthew was the first Gospel, and (2) showing why one can believe that Luke did not use

¹⁹ The idea of a Q document in Markan priority is quite common. However, what people might think Q is, or how it was used in this theory is a totally different matter. It should be noted also that not everyone who believes in Mark Priority holds to a Q document.

²⁰ G. N Stanton, "The Theology and Purpose of Q" *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (IVP, 1992)

²¹ Ibid.

Matthew.²²

This is an important statement and one that speaks to the current study. Bock, just prior to this quote, explains that he believes in a Mark priority. After the above quote Bock looks at some quotes from the church fathers that reference a Hebrew Matthew gospel. Bock then gives his answer to the first point.

The testimony of the early church is that Matthew is the first Gospel, but that testimony is clouded by the fact that it is a Hebrew version that is also fairly consistently alluded to in such remarks. Our uncertainty about the existence of this Hebrew version, for which there is little other evidence, makes the evidence less pristine than it might otherwise appear.²³

This statement is interesting. Although I see Bock's point, I would think that since the early church fathers make reference to this document, but not to a Q document, a Matthean Hebrew Gospel would hold at least some weight. We will consider Bock's answer to his second point later, as well as Luke's knowledge of Matthew. For now we will focus on "Q."

The Church Fathers

Many people try to side step the church fathers' statements about the first gospel being written in Hebrew. The fact is that there is reference of some kind of "Hebrew Gospel" from the 2nd century all the way to the 10th century.

²² Darrell Bock, "Questions about Q" in Black and Beck eds. *Rethinking the Synoptic Problem*, (Baker Academic, 2001) p. 43

²³ Ibid. P. 47

The tradition of an original Gospel written in Hebrew is attested by twenty church fathers - Ignatius, Papias, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Pantaenus, Hegesippus, Hippolytus, Origen, Eusebius of Ceasarea, Ephrem of Syria, Didymus of Alexandria, Epiphanius, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Theodoret, Marius Mercator, Philip Sidetes, the Venerable Bede, Nicephorus, and Sedulius Scottus. When references to the Hebrew Gospel by Pope Damasus, the Islamic Hadith, the scholia of sinaiticus, and tractate Shabbat 116 in the Babylonian Talmud are added to this number, the list lengthens to over two dozen different witnesses....

The Hebrew Gospel is therefore identified by name in at least two dozen patristic sources. Each source mentions it at least once, and most mention it several times.

Twelve fathers attribute the Hebrew Gospel to the apostle Matthew, and eleven specify that it was written in Hebrew.²⁴

These are quotes from the third chapter in James Edwards book. In his first two chapters Edwards gives a complete list, break down, and quote of every single reference to the "Hebrew Gospel" that is attributed to the church fathers. His work is precise and in depth. It might be easy to try to explain away one or even several references by church fathers, but over two dozen? And over a period of nine centuries?

Edward's work on this subject is magisterial . He logically shows that there, in fact, was a Hebrew Gospel. He quotes from Origen (185-254 C.E) and states:

Origen's work concentrates overwhelmingly on the Four canonical Gospels, but on occasion he refers (and not disapprovingly) to non-canonical Gospels. Among these are *Gospel of Peter*, the *Protoevangelium of James*, and the *Gospel of the*

²⁴ James Edwards, *The Hebrew Gospel & the Development of the Synoptic Tradition* (Eerdmans, 2009) p.102-103

*Hebrews.*²⁵

In this statement Edwards explains that Origen not only does most of his work on the four gospels, that is, the four gospels we have today, but that he references non-canonical works. Within these non-canonical works he mentions the "Gospel to the Hebrews". Why would Origen speak of the gospel of Matthew (i.e. the canonical gospel that appears as the first book in our Apostolic Scriptures today) as a canonical book, but at the same time compare it with non-canonical works?

In reference to Clement of Alexandria (150-215 C.E) Edwards says:

The saying preserved by Clement can scarcely be a compilation from the Gospels, since three -fifths of it is absent from the Gospels. The sayings preserved by Clement certainly derive, just as he attested, from the Hebrew Gospel²⁶

Here Edwards has shown a quote that Clement has given from the "Hebrew Gospel". He explains that the quote gives far to much substance to be from the canonical gospels. And since Clement says that this saying is from the "Hebrew Gospel," it must be just that... from the Hebrew Gospel. This statement shows that quotes given from the "Hebrew Gospel" do not match with our synoptic gospels, but seem to be from a gospel all to itself.

²⁵ Ibid. P. 17

²⁶ Ibid. P. 14

When looking at Eusebius (260-340 C.E.) Edwards writes:

In contrast to burgeoning Gentile Christianity, such Jewish converts - and particularly the Ebionites - either preferred the Hebrew Gospel to the canonical Gospels or used it exclusively. In the canonical debates of the Gentile church, the canonical Gospels were "recognized," whereas the Hebrew Gospel was "disputed," but among the Ebionites the reverse seems to have been the truer.²⁷

In quoting Eusebius, Edwards shows that the Ebionites preferred the Hebrew Gospel as opposed to the canonical gospels. By this time the canon of the Apostolic Scriptures, and more specifically the acceptance of the gospels, had been secured.²⁸ Edwards shows many more examples like these in his first two chapters.

In addition to Edward's work on the Hebrew Gospel, F. F. Bruce writes:

A word may be added about the Gospel according to the Hebrews which, as was mentioned above, Origen listed as one of the books which in his day were disputed by some. This work, which circulated in Transjordan and Egypt among the Jewish-Christian groups called Ebionites, bore some affinity to the canonical Gospel of Matthew. Perhaps it was an independent expansion of an Aramaic document related to our canonical Matthew; it was known to some of the early Christian Fathers in a Greek Version.

Jerome (347-420) identified this 'Gospel according to the Hebrews' with one which he found in Syria, called the the Gospel of the Nazarenes, and which he mistakenly thought at first was the Hebrew (or Aramaic) original of Matthew.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid. P. 18-19

²⁸ Paul Wagner *The Journey from Text to Translations* P. 140-142. There are few that might dispute a canonization by this time, and even fewer who would dispute that the four gospels were excepted as canon, but the majority of scholars would agree with my dating.

²⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1960) pp. 29-30

Conclusion

People who hold to a Matthew priority do so largely on the basis that the church fathers spoke of a Hebrew Gospel. In my opinion the presence of a "Hebrew Gospel" is solid and difficult to renounce, since there are so many references to such a book. I contend that Matthew did in fact write a gospel in Hebrew. And that it was the first account of the life of Yeshua to be put down in ink. I propose that Mark's gospel was the first canonical gospel written, and that it was written in Greek. I also believe that the "Hebrew Gospel" was a document used as a reference, and that the document that many scholars today call "Q" was in fact this Hebrew Gospel. In my opinion the Hebrew Gospel was used by Luke, and referenced by Matthew (for his Greek canonical gospel) as they wrote their accounts of Yeshua's life.

In Luke 1:1-4 he writes

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the things you have been taught.

Luke specifically mentions that "many have undertaken to compile an account," and says that they were "handed down" from those who were "eyewitnesses."

In Darrel Bock's statement mentioned above, he stated that the second problem with "Q" was that Luke would have to have known Matthew. But if Matthew in fact had written in Hebrew, and Luke was using this document, then Luke did indeed know Matthew.

From my own personal findings I am more and more convinced that the synoptic gospels were written in Greek. I do believe that there was a gospel that was not canonized but was used to aid these men in authoring the inspired word of God, and that this gospel was written in Hebrew. I believe that this document was well known among the church fathers and the early Christian church. But I hypothesize that since this document was not received as canon, and the synoptic gospels were, the importance of this book was lost along the way.