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Jesus's Knowledge of Greek.

J.M.Ross.

It is generally agreed,(1) from archaeological and literary evidence, that by the first century of the Christian Era Greek had sufficiently invaded Palestine to become the language of government, trade and law; it was the primary language of the towns and of the upper and middle classes. Even learned Jews read Greek and borrowed Greek terms. To quote from an article by A.W. Argyle,(2) "The fact that so characteristically Jewish an institution as the Sanhedrin derived its name from the Greek word sunedrion is an indication of the deep influence of the Greek language even in the very heart of Palestinian Judaism."

Aramaic continued to be the normal language of the common people and the rural areas. Greek was widely used in Lower Galilee but little known in Upper Galilee. Many people in Galilee must have been bilingual. It would appear that Jesus's public teaching was mostly if not entirely in Aramaic, because so many of his sayings recorded in the Synoptic Gospels imply an Aramaic original,(3) but the fact that bystanders at the crucifixion did not understand the cry Eloi eloi lema sabachthani implies that they did not know Aramaic, or at least that Mark (15:35) and Matthew (27:47) believed this to be the case.

Latin was little used at that time except by the Roman army and in circles directly connected with it.

It is not certain to what extent Hebrew was known or used.(4) It may have been known in and around Jerusalem, but for the purposes of this study it is not necessary to adjudicate on that question. In the synagogues the scriptures were probably read in Hebrew but followed by an Aramaic or Greek targum.

So much is common ground. On this basis it may be confidently asserted that Jesus must have known some Greek. This general position is corroborated by the

following particular pieces of evidence:

(a) Jesus did not come from the lowest stratum of society, though pious Christians have been tempted to assert that he did. He was well read in the scriptures and was brought up as a skilled craftsman.(5) His father and he must have used Greek to negotiate carpentry contracts. According to Mark 2:15 he had a house in Capernaum in which he was able to entertain a sizable company. He was therefore high enough up the social scale to move among people who spoke Greek.

(b) His parable show that he was familiar with the business of trade and government, which was usually transacted in Greek.

(3) Several of his intimate disciples were probably more familiar with Greek than with Aramaic. Andreas, Philippos and Thomas all had Greek names. Simon is a Greek substitute for Sumeon, and one of the Simons had a Greek nickname Petros which according to Mark (3:16) and Luke (6:14) was conferred by Jesus himself, though according to the Fourth Gospel (John 1:43) Jesus gave him the Aramaic name Kephas, and this would have been more appropriate because in Aramaic the word of rock (kepha) would have been identical with the name, whereas in Greek the nickname had to be changed from the feminine petra to the masculine petros. Anyway the fishermen among the disciples must have used Greek to sell their fish and Matthew to collect his taxes. According to the Fourth Gospel (1:45; 12:21) Peter, Andrew and Philip all came from the town of Bethsaida where Greek must have been spoken because it was located in Gentile territory, and it was to the Greek-speaking Philip that certain Greeks applied for permission to see Jesus, and Philip passed on the request jointly with the Greek-speaking Andrew (John 12: 20-22). Therefore it is probable that Jesus conversed with his disciples in Greek as well as in Aramaic.

(d) According to Mark (7:24-37) Jesus was able to talk with people in the Greek-speaking area of Tyre, Sidon and Decapolis. (The description of the Syro-Phoenician woman as Hellenis does not necessarily imply that her language was Greek; it merely means that she was not a Jew.)

(e) The trial of Jesus before Pilate must have been conducted in Greek, and the accounts of it do not suggest that there was an interpreter present, or any linguistic difficulty of communication.

In view of all this we may safely conclude that Jesus had some knowledge of Greek and spoke in that language whenever necessary. From this two particular consequences may be deduced.

The first concerns the petition for bread in the Lord's Prayer. Since Jesus's inner circle of disciples must have been a bilingual community some of whom may have been more familiar with Greek than with Aramaic, it is quite likely that some of his conversations with them were in Greek, and the Lord's Prayer may well have been given to them in Greek as well as in Aramaic. If it had been only in Aramaic, the word Abba would have been preserved, as it was in St Paul's teaching (Gal.4:6; Rom.8:15). This may account for the occurrence, in both versions of the prayer, of the peculiar word epiousios, unknown in contemporary Greek literature or epigraphy, which looks like a nonce-word coined by someone with a limited Greek vocabulary. Much has been written about the meaning of this word. Some scholars adopt Origen's conjecture that the word was derived from epi and ousia and meant "needed for existence", but in Biblical usage ousia means only property or possessions, and even in philosophy it meant substance or reality rather than existence. Others have derived it directly from the verb epienai and interpreted the petition as meaning "Give us this day the bread that comes to it", i.e. that belongs to it; this seems a somewhat artificial interpretation in default of any evidence that the word was actually used in this sense. It is much more likely that the

adjective epiousios was derived from the similar participle epiousa which was in common use, with or without hēmera, to denote the following day (Acts 7:26; 16:11; 20:15; 21:18; 23:11). Various other conjectures have been made, but need not be discussed here in view of Jerome's statement (in his commentary on Matt. 6:11) that in the Aramaic Gospel of the Nazarenes the word used is mahar, i.e. the bread of tomorrow.

Of course the normal word for tomorrow, both in Biblical and in other Greek was aurion, and it may be asked why, if the Lord meant his followers to ask for tomorrow's bread, he did not use that word. In reply, two explanations may be given. (1) Perhaps Jesus did not know the word aurion and had to invent his own substitute. (2) But he may have known aurion and deliberately avoided it because he did not want his followers simply to ask every day for a sufficiency of bread for the following day, but rather to request every day a foretaste of the Messianic banquet, and therefore coined a less specific word meaning the coming bread, the bread of the future.

This interpretation of epiousios, which scholars are increasingly accepting, brings the petition for bread into line with the rest of the Lord's Prayer. It belongs with Jesus' characteristic contrast between the heavenly realm in which God is everything and the imperfect world of time and space in which God is in process of making the heavenly actual upon earth. Just as we are to pray that God's Name may be hallowed upon earth and his Kingdom, which had drawn near to earth in the person and deeds of the Christ, may keep breaking through into this world until the great day when it is fully established here, so the bread which the Messiah's people will eat when the Kingdom fully comes, may be available to them here and now. Just as the heavenly Kingdom as God's demand keeps on bursting into the world to make it divine, so does the heavenly feast as God's gift.

Although the true meaning of the word epiousios was

soon lost to the Church, the word will have been preserved in the Dominical prayer because it was known to have been used by the Lord himself and therefore not to be paraphrased by some more ordinary Greek word. Had the prayer been given only in Aramaic it is likely that the Greek version would have used a more familiar and intelligible word in the petition for bread.

The second consequence of Jesus' knowledge of Greek concerns his use of the expression "the Son of Man". Jesus must have described himself by this title because it is difficult otherwise to understand how the Church came to attribute to him so obscure an expression which is almost if not entirely(6) unknown in the New Testament outside Jesus's own words recorded in the Gospels. But if so, whatever Aramaic expression he used in his public teaching (which we can only guess at), it is likely that he used the Greek expression ho huios tou anthrōpou when talking with his disciples, or at least approved the expression as a correct translation of the Aramaic. But if this is so, the invariable use of the definite article ho, in contradistinction to all Old Testament usage, shows that the phrase cannot have meant, as has recently been argued by some British scholars(7) "someone" or "a certain person" or "this person", for which other Greek expressions were ready to had, such as tis or anthrōpos tis or houtos or ho anthrōpos houtos. It looks as if the expression, which was not in current use, was deliberately chosen by Jesus because of its enigmatic character, to avoid making an explicit identification with the Messiah, which would have been misunderstood as a claim to be a political leader, a claim which would have caused him to fall foul of the Roman authorities before the time was ripe. The Greek seems intended to mean something like "the personage", "the individual", "the representative human being", and it seems likely that this was the force of the Aramaic equivalent, whatever that may have been.

We have here a divergence between two traditions in the early Church. On the one hand all four gospels firmly maintain a tradition that Jesus described himself

in various contexts, sometimes as ho huios tou anthrō pou as the rejected wanderer on earth, sometimes as the future glorified conqueror in heaven. Even the Fourth Gospel, which rarely records Jesus's ipsissima verba, is careful to include this characteristic expression at appropriate points in his pronouncements. Some of the Son-of-Man sayings in the other Gospels may not be authentic but may have included this title because it was known to have been used by the Master. On the other hand, apart from the tradition of how the Lord himself had described himself, the church had no use for the expression, either when addressing Jews, who would better understand Messiah, or Gentiles, who would better understand Lord or Son of God. Even for use within the Church, Christians probably found the expression too obscure for common use; it was not included in any credal statement or liturgical formula. It was also perhaps avoided because it appeared to overemphasize Jesus's humanity. The important thing in the early days of the Church was to acknowledge and proclaim Jesus as Lord, Son of God, even as an incarnation of God himself. But the writers of the Gospels could not abandon the title because, whatever it meant, it was known to have been used by the Lord himself, perhaps in the Greek form ho huios tou anthrōpou.

Thus the fact that Jesus knew some Greek may afford an explanation of why the records carefully preserved two obscure expressions --- epiousion and ho huios tou anthrōpou: they were known to have come in Greek from the lips of the Lord Jesus himself.

J. M. Ross

NOTES

1. This is the consensus of Saul Liebermann, Greek in Jewish Palestine (Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1942), pp. 1-38, 144ff., and Hellenism in Jewish Palestine (ibid. 1950) p. 205; Joseph Fitzmyer "The Language of Palestine in the First Century A.D." in Catholic Biblical Quarterly 32

- (1970) 501-31; James Barr "Which Language did Jesus speak?" in Bulletin of the John Rylands Library 53 (1970) 9-29; A.W.Argyle "Greek among the Jews of Palestine in New Testament Times" in New Testament Studies 20 (1973) 87-89; Martin Hengel Judaism and Hellenism (tr. John Bowden, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1974) vol. i. pp. 58-64; 103-5; Eric M. Meyers and James F. Strange Archaeology, the Rabbis and Early Christianity (SCM Press 1981).
2. Op.cit. p.87
 3. The question whether Jesus actually taught in Greek is argued pro and con by Ray Selby and Barnabas Lindars in Theology 86 (1963) 185-93 and 363-65.
 4. See Barr, op.cit.; J.A.Emerton "The Problem of Vernacular Hebrew in the First Century and the Language of Jesus" in Journal of Theological Studies 24 (1973) 1-23; Klaus Beyer, The Aramaic Language (tr. J.F.Healey, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1986, Göttingen) pp. 40-43.
 5. According to the better attested reading in Mark 6:3 Jesus was himself a carpenter as well as his father; a few early manuscripts and versions altered "carpenter" to "carpenter's son", as also did Matthew, doubtless in order to avoid attributing a manual trade to the Son of God.
 6. The more probable reading in Acts 6:56 is theou, which an early copyist altered to anthrōpou to avoid the occurrence of theou twice in the same sentence.
 7. Principally G.Vermees in an appendix to M.Black An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels (3rd edition 1967) and pp. 160-166 of his Jesus the Jew (1973); M.Casey in chapter 9 of Son of Man (SPCK 1979); and B. Lindars in Jesus Son of Man (SPCK 1983).