

JESUS AND NICODEMUS



John 3:3 "Jesus answered (Nicodemus), 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'"

The Gospels include a large number of conversations between Jesus and a remarkable variety of different people: we have recorded conversations with Galileans, with Samaritans, with Jews, with a couple of Greeks, with Roman officials, with a Syro-Phoenician woman, and with other foreigners. So, the question arises for me, what language or languages did Jesus speak? For we read those various conversations, of course, in our English Bibles, as though everyone was speaking the same language, which of course is very unlikely. Thus, in what

language or languages were those conversations conducted, and how do the various translations affect the recorded exchanges.

The Gospels themselves confirm that Jesus and many of those around him spoke Aramaic, which would be expected. For example, when Jesus healed the deaf man with a speech impediment in Galilee, Mark's Gospel records that Jesus put fingers into his ears, and spat and touched his tongue, and looking up to heaven, Jesus sighed, and said, "*Ephphatha*," (Mk. 7.33-34) which is Aramaic for, "be opened." Or in John's Gospel on Easter Sunday morning, when Mary Magdalene mistakes the risen Jesus for the gardener, and when he calls her by name, she turns and she suddenly exclaims "Rabboni," which is Aramaic for 'Rabbi' (Jn. 20:16). And there are other examples in the Gospels as well of Jesus speaking Aramaic, such as when he cried out from the cross, "Eli, Eli, lama sabach-thani?" (e.g. Mk. 15.34, Mt. 27.46).

Aramaic was a Semitic language, a Syrian dialect which appears as a lingua franca, or the common language, of the Near East from about the 6th century B.C.E. onwards, so much so that Aramaic gradually replaced Hebrew as the language of the Jewish people in the Near East and was itself later supplanted by Arabic in the 7th century C.E. Hebrew was a so-called dead language, except among biblical scholars, until it's revival in the 19th century.

So, we would not be surprised if Jesus spoke Aramaic. Jesus probably told his parables in Aramaic as the tongue of the common people, the language of the uneducated masses, and Jesus probably disputed with his fellow Jews in Aramaic, as Hebrew had been supplanted by then. Which means the Gospel writers would have had to then translate Jesus' Aramaic teachings and dialogues into koine Greek, the language in which all of the New Testament books were written, which our modern translators have now put into English for our convenience, a translation of a translation of a translation. So then, did Jesus speak any other languages beside Aramaic?

It is unlikely, I imagine, that Jesus spoke Latin, which was the official language of the Roman Empire, and the language in which Roman officials would have most likely conducted their business. One wonders how much Aramaic or Greek those Latin-speaking officials in the Holy Land actually spoke or understood, which may help us explain why, for instance, after Jesus has been handed over to the Roman authorities, there is little emphasis in the Gospels anymore on what Jesus had to say. In fact, Jesus rarely speaks after his arrest, he is oftentimes surprisingly silent, and when he does speak; his words are inevitably disregarded or ineffective or misunderstood. It is recorded that Pilate, for example, said to Jesus, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" But Jesus gave

him no answer, not even to a single charge; so that the governor wondered greatly." (e.g., Mt. 27.11-13). Was this exchange just a matter of language, of how much either side understood or didn't understand the language of the other?

Greek, of course, was the common language of the literary class. That's why all the books of the New Testament were written by Jews but in Greek. And every time someone in the New Testament quotes something from the Old Testament, they do so by quoting them not from the Hebrew originals, or even in Aramaic, but from the Septuagint, the famous Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. The discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls confirms the dominance of Greek, even among the most observant Jews in the Holy Land. Josephus, for example, the famous Jewish historian of the first century of the Common Era, wrote his 20 volumes entitled *Antiquities of the Jews* in Greek. Those who could read and write in Jesus' day, would do so in Greek, but alas, only about 10% or less of the population was thought to be literate in Palestine in those days. The Apostles John and Peter, for example, are both specifically declared as illiterate in the Book of Acts (4.13), so could Jesus read and write, I wonder?

We have only one story of Jesus reading, the famous account at the beginning of his ministry as recorded in Luke's Gospel, where Jesus came home to Nazareth, where he had been brought up;

and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was on the sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. . ."

That's a scene we see in almost every movie about Jesus.

Matthew's version of this story, however, doesn't mention Jesus reading, just teaching, and it would have been remarkable if a poor carpenter's son from Nazareth could read, but perhaps he could. Or perhaps he just had some fluency in Greek, that might be expected at that time. We do have several occasions of Jesus quoting stories from the Old Testament but getting some of the details wrong. For example, in Mark's Gospel (2:23-8), where one Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and as his group made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to Jesus, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" And Jesus said to the Pharisees, "Have you never read what (King) David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food, how he entered the house of God when Abiathar was high priest and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and (how) he gave some to his companions?" Then Jesus famously said to the Pharisees, "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath." However, Jesus has

confused the details of this story from First Samuel (21.1-6). It was David alone that took the bread, it was not from hunger, nor was it from the house of God, and finally the priest was Ahimelech, not Abiathar. So, was Jesus just misremembering these stories he had heard read in the synagogue, or was he misremembering what he himself had read from the Scriptures?

And thus, we arrive at today's Gospel story, where if this story is authentic, it would require that this conversation took place in Greek, and thus Jesus must have been able to speak at least some Greek, for language plays a crucial part in this dialogue. In today's Gospel reading, Nicodemus, who is identified as a leader of the Jews, comes to Jesus by night, so as perhaps not to be seen by others. Nicodemus declares that Jesus is clearly a teacher from God to which Jesus responds that no one can see the kingdom of God who is not born from above. The Greek word here modifying 'born' is *anōthen*, and it has several meanings. It can mean "born from above," or "born anew," or "born again," that familiar translation from the King James' Bible. Nicodemus is clearly hearing Jesus' reply in terms of born anew, wondering how can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born? Jesus however clearly appears to mean "born from above," responding "Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you

hear the sound of it, but you do not whence it comes from or whither it goes. So, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus responds to him, "How can these things be?" (And) Jesus answered him, "Are you (a) teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" The confusion in this recorded conversation only works in Greek, where the Greek word *anōthen* has different meanings. It would not work in Aramaic, or even Hebrew. So clearly Jesus had some fluency in Greek, but perhaps not enough to be clear in his meaning here with Nicodemus, just as the conversation with Pilate may have lacked clarity simply because of language differences.

In the end, we all have to realize that the complexity of human languages and stories do not always provide the clarity we want from our religious leaders, although they often think it does. It is a bit like my sermon last week on the Garden of Eden, and the inherent complexities of human life and interaction. Jesus is trying to say to Nicodemus something very important here about the kingdom of God, about the working of a spiritual realm, where like the invisible wind, things happen that we do not know whence they come, nor whither they go. The spiritual realm is a world of mystery, which language struggles to clearly explain, where language can easily get in the way, as it often does. Thus, we do not have the words to adequately describe the mysteries of life and death that Jesus often speaks

about. It is, therefore, difficult, if not dangerous, to ever take any teaching about religion literally. And yet religious people so often do! Amen.