

## Dorcas of Joppa



Acts 9:36 "Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time, she became ill and died."

Just before this story in Acts we are told that "Peter went here and there among all the brothers and sisters, (and) came down also to the saints living in Lydda. There (Peter) found a man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden for eight years, for he was paralyzed. (So) Peter said to him, 'Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals

you; get up and make your bed!’ And immediately he got up. And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord” (Acts 9.32-35). Soon the news of this miracle had apparently reached the nearby city of Joppa as well. About that time Dorcas (or Tabitha) became ill and died. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, ‘Please come to us without delay.’ So, Peter got up and went with them, and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs (where they had laid out and washed Dorcas’ body after she had died). All the widows stood beside (Peter), weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter then put all of (the people) outside, and knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, ‘Tabitha, get up.’ Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Meanwhile, (Peter) stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner” (Acts 9.36-42).

Dorcas or Tabitha lived in the port city of Joppa, which today has been absorbed by Tel Aviv, the ever expanding capital of Israel. Both her Jewish name rendered here as Tabitha, which is Aramaic, and her Greek name, Dorcas, translate from the word for a female 'gazelle'. The equivalent Hebrew name would be Zibiah, a

name carried by the mother of King Joash of Judah at one time (2Kings 12.1, 2Chron 24.1), but the Hebrew name Zibiah is perhaps surprisingly not mentioned here, though both the Greek and Aramaic translations of her name are.

Some scholars suggest that the preference for the use of name as Dorcas in this story was because she was living in a port city, where many seafaring inhabitants and visitors would primarily speak Greek. Dorcas was a common name of the time both among Greeks and Jews. Yet when Peter raises her from the dead, he is recorded as using only her Aramaic name, "Tabitha," which for me raises the question, what language or languages did St. Peter speak? Most of the identifiable conversations of Peter in the New Testament are clearly with Jews in Palestine. Peter's expressed mission in the early church was identified as 'to the circumcised,' again suggesting Jews. And in Matthew's Gospel, outside the High Priest's house when Jesus was being questioned by the Jewish authorities, onlookers "came up and said to Peter, 'Certainly you are also one of (the followers of Jesus), for your accent betrays you'" (Mt. 26.73). Still, we do have the later story in Acts (10.1ff) of Peter going to the house in Caesarea of Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, and so again, what language or languages did Peter speak?

Peter is recorded as speaking Aramaic in today's story, which would not be at all surprising. Aramaic is a Semitic language, a

Syrian dialect, which appears as the tongue of the common people in the Middle East from about the 6th century B.C.E. onwards, until it was replaced by Arabic in the 7<sup>th</sup> century of our Common Era. 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 suddenly exclaims "Rabboni," which is Aramaic for 'Rabbi' in Hebrew (Jn. 20:16). And there are other examples in the Gospels as well of people speaking Aramaic, such as when Jesus memorably cried out from the cross, "Eli, Eli, lama sabach-thani?" (e.g. Mk. 15.34, Mt. 27.46) Aramaic for "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me." Thus, Peter speaking Aramaic in this story today is completely unremarkable.

So then, did Peter speak or understand Greek at all? Greek, of course, was the common language of the literary class in the Middle East at that time. That's why all the books of the New Testament were written by Jews, but they were written 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 from Aramaic translations, but all the Old Testament scriptural references in the New Testament are always direct transcriptions from the Greek Septuagint, the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek made for the famous library at Alexandria in the third century before the birth of Jesus (285-247 BCE). The discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in the 1940s confirms the literary dominance of Greek in the Middle East, at the time of Jesus, even in the Holy Land, even among the most observant Jews, because so many of the Dead Sea scrolls discovered there are in Greek, along with numerous manuscripts of the Septuagint. Josephus, for example, the famous Jewish historian of the first century of the Common Era, wrote his 20 volumes entitled *Antiquities of the Jews*, but nonetheless he wrote them in Greek.

Sometimes it is argued that Peter clearly spoke and wrote Greek as the two Epistles in the New Testament ascribed to Peter appeared to have been originally written in Greek! But Peter as the actual author of those letters attributed to him is highly questionable, especially as the views represented there are closer to the later works of the New Testament, from a time after Peter's death. Still, those who could read and write in Jesus' day, would most likely do so in Greek, but alas, only about 8% of the population in Palestine was thought to be literate in those days. And there is that very interesting notation in Acts where the

Apostles Peter and John were both specifically identified as "illiterate" (4.13), which would not be particularly surprising then. Thus, it would be quite unlikely, I think, that an illiterate fisherman from Galilee spoke much Greek, if any. Peter, of course, could have dictated his Epistles to a scribe in Aramaic or Hebrew, who then translated them into Greek, but scholars doubt this.

We also need to consider, I believe, whether Peter and those around him could speak or understand any Hebrew? What was the status of the Hebrew language at the time of Jesus? Hebrew, unfortunately, is generally thought to be a so-called 'dead language' at that time, meaning that it was not spoken by ordinary people, and used perhaps only among biblical scholars and synagogue rabbis, like the later Masoretes in the 5<sup>th</sup> century of the Common Era. So, was Hebrew used in the synagogues in the Holy Land at the time of Jesus?

There is some question as to when exactly the Jewish religious class might have moved from Hebrew to Aramaic in worship services. Purists continue to want to assume that religious Jews always read their Scriptures and always conducted their synagogue services in Hebrew, but that seems somewhat unlikely. The story in Luke (4.16) of Jesus reading from the scroll of Isaiah in the local synagogue at Nazareth raises the same question. What

language would they have been using at the local synagogue at that time in Palestine? Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek?

The Friday Adult Bible Study group came upon biblical evidence earlier this spring that Hebrew was becoming less and less familiar, even among faithful Jews, even in Jerusalem, as early as the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (that is, three hundred years before Jesus). To celebrate the rededication of the rebuilt wall of Jerusalem, that is, the completion of the repairs to the walls and doors at the time of Nehemiah, Ezra organized, we are told, a public reading before the people of the Book of the Law of Moses, as good King Josiah had done years before (2Kings 23.1-3). That book, of course, is assumed to have been written in Hebrew, and is thought by many to be an early copy of the Book of Deuteronomy. All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate we are told (8.1). Ezra stood on a raised platform for the reading, so he could be heard, but scattered among the crowd, we are told, were the Levites "who helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. So, they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. (The Levites) gave the sense, so that the people (could) understand the reading" (8.7), suggesting that many of the ordinary Jews in the crowd at the time of Ezra could not understand Hebrew at that time. This is thought by scholars to be the beginning of Aramaic Targums, that is, translations of the

Hebrew Bible or portions of it into the Aramaic language for the benefit of the common people, firstly only orally, and later in writing. The earliest known Targums date from the time after the Babylonian Exile as Aramaic had superseded Hebrew as the spoken language of the Jews even in Palestine. Thus, not surprisingly perhaps (in chapter 13.23) Nehemiah notes that half of the children of the Jewish residents of Jerusalem in the third century before Jesus were 'unable to speak Hebrew.' Thus, it is unlikely, I think, that Hebrew was being used in the synagogues in poor, remote Galilee at the time of Jesus, and it was more likely that Aramaic was being used in the worship services, as the common language of the people of Palestine, the language that St. Peter, of course, choose in raising Dorcas from the dead in today's reading.

Thereafter in the early church, Dorcas of Joppa is celebrated as a saint, who is officially recognized as such by the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Anglican Communion, and some Protestant denominations. According to this reading from the New Testament, Dorcas died in Joppa, at the house of Simon the tanner. And thus that house where she reportedly died and was resurrected by St. Peter can still be visited today in the Jaffa suburbs of Tel Aviv. Presumably Dorcas later died a second time, and according to tradition, she was buried in what are now the gardens of an ancient Orthodox Church in Jaffa, where the tomb



of Dorcas can still be seen today. Dorcas societies, which are worldwide and provide clothing to the poor in her honor, are fittingly named after her. So let us all then remember today and give thanks to God for the life of Dorcas of Joppa.