

# SCHOLAR'S CORNER

## If Jesus spoke Aramaic as he does in Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, why is the New Testament in Greek and not Aramaic?

The New Testament is in Greek because Aramaic-speaking Christianity (along with any literature it may have produced) died out, while Greek-speaking Christianity (and its literature, which includes the Greek New Testament) survived. Like Buddhism, Christianity basically died out in the land of its birth but thrived elsewhere in translation (not using the language of its founder).

Little of Aramaic-speaking Christianity's literature has survived, none of it in the original Aramaic or Hebrew. There are only a few scattered references in our (Greek) literature from the early centuries of Christianity to Aramaic-speaking Jewish-Christian groups. We do not know for how many centuries they survived, but none of the Christian churches of the Middle

East seem to be descended from them. So the Christians who could read the original text of the Bible and were in cultural continuity with it because they were Jewish died somewhere along the line, leaving only Christians who could not read the Old Testament in Hebrew and were outside the Jewish tradition.

This is the first and most important historical fact about Christianity: it originated in a thoroughly Jewish setting and was entirely Jewish in character, yet early on, it spread to non-Jews and became thoroughly Gentile. The original form of Christianity (Jewish and Aramaic-speaking, Hebrew-reading) eventually died out, while Christianity in Greek translation survived and thrived among non-Jewish peoples.

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Unlike Judaism and Islam, which preserved their Scriptures in their original languages and the ability to read them, Greek-speaking, largely Gentile Christianity worked from its beginnings with translations, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible and Greek translations of the words of Jesus. Like Buddhism, Christianity believed that the message was portable into any language and any culture. In contrast, Muslims believe that the text of the Qur'an is the exact words of God, to the letter, and no translation can ever take the place of the Arabic original and that no translation can communicate all that is encoded in the Divine Words. But Christianity, when

it spread from the Aramaic world to the Greek, made no effort to teach people Hebrew so they could read the Bible in the original language. Christianity was not tied to any verbally inspired text that had to be studied in the original language because of the secret meanings encoded in its every letter. Later in its history, such veneration of the inspired, inerrant biblical text would emerge, but the Early Church's view of inspiration was not troubled by everyone's total inability to read the Bible in the original Hebrew. A Greek translation was sufficient. But Gentile Christianity's being satisfied with a Greek translation is emblematic of how far from its Jewish origin Christianity had gone.

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