

# SCHOLAR'S CORNER

## In Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, Jesus and the other Jews speak Aramaic. Did Jesus really speak Aramaic? I thought the New Testament was in Greek.

Yes, Jesus and his disciples, and the early church in Jerusalem, were Aramaic speakers (as were most first-century Palestinian Jews). And, yes, the New Testament is preserved entirely in the Greek language. This means that Jesus' Aramaic words at some point had to have been translated into Greek.

Although Jesus may have been able to speak Greek as a second language, Aramaic was his primary language, the one which he used every day in his ministry to other Palestinian Jews, who were Aramaic speakers.

How do we know that Jesus and the early church in Palestine spoke Aramaic? One indication is the presence of transliterated Aramaic words and phrases in the Greek New Testament:

■ Mark 5:41 He [Jesus] took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!"

■ Mark 7:34 Then looking up to heaven, he [Jesus] sighed and said to him [the blind man], "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened."

■ Mark 10:51 Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for

you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher [Aramaic Rabbouni], let me see again." (Mary Magdalene also calls Jesus "Rabbouni" on Easter Sunday morning in John 20:16.)

■ Mark 14:36 He said, "Abba [Aramaic for Father], Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."

Paul also uses "Abba" in Rom. 8:15 ("When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God") and Gal. 4:6 ("because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!").

■ Mark 15:34 At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" [Aramaic, quoting Ps. 22:2], which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The New Testament also refers to place names in Aramaic:

■ "...carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew [that is,

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Aramaic] is called Golgotha." (John 19:17)

■ "...the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood." (Acts 1:19)

We have one Aramaic phrase from the worship of the early Palestinian church, perhaps

from a worship song: "Maran atha" ("Our Lord has come"), probably better separated as "Marana tha!" ("Our Lord, come!"):

■ 1 Cor. 16:22 Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord. Our Lord, come! [Marana tha!]

The fact that this phrase occurs without explanation or Greek translation suggests that, though Aramaic, it was well known to the Greek-speaking Corinthian congregation and perhaps used in its worship.

Marana tha seems to be an expression directly out of the worship services and piety of the early, Aramaic-speaking Palestinian Church. We may imagine that its use was spread to

Greek-speaking congregations by bilingual Christians from Palestine. It seems to me to be a phrase which was taken over (and sung) by people who otherwise did not use Aramaic. Chances are, the phrase was learned with music and was so well loved that people continued to sing it, even though they didn't understand it grammatically.

Other examples of a word or phrase from a foreign language surviving in Christian liturgical use are (1) "Hosanna" (Aram. Hôsha nâ Save, please! [Hebr. hôshî \*, Ps. 118:25]), (2) "Hallelujah" (and its Greek form, "Alleluia," from Hebr. Halleluyah, "Praise ye the LORD!")—both of which were probably taken over from Jewish use—and (3) "Kyrie eleison" (Grk. for "Lord, have mercy"), a phrase from Greek speaking Christianity which passed into the use of Latin-speaking Christians and from the Latin Mass into the Lutheran and Anglican traditions.

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