

THE NEW TESTAMENT WAS ORIGINALLY WRITTEN IN GREEK

It is vital to understand that the New Testament was written in Koiné Greek, which was the common spoken and written language for hundreds of years in Palestine and the Roman Empire before the days of Jesus and His apostles. Greek was the universal language of commerce and trade. This is the language that Jesus, the apostles and early New Testament Church used.

Some erroneously teach that the New Testament was originally written in the Hebrew language and was later translated into Greek. Because they have not studied the history of Palestine, they fail to realize that Hebrew had ceased to be spoken by the Jews many centuries before the New Testament era.

Under the Babylonian and Medo-Persian empires, 640-333 BC, Aramaic exerted the greatest influence. The writings of Daniel, who lived and worked during the time of the Chaldean and Persian Empires, show the extensive influence of Syriac and Chaldee, which were dialects of Aramaic. The Persians ruled Palestine from the time of Daniel and Ezra until its invasion by Alexander the Great in 333 BC. From that time, the influence of Aramaic was overshadowed by the influence of Greek. Samuel G. Green, a renowned Biblical scholar, described this significant change as follows:

“... as a direct result of the conquests of Alexander the Great and his successors, the Greek tongue had been carried into almost all the countries of the civilized world, and had become the medium of commercial intercourse, the language of the courts, and, in fact, **the universal literary tongue** of the provinces afterwards absorbed in the Roman Empire. **The natives of Alexandria and of Jerusalem**, of Ephesus, and even of Rome, **alike adopted it**; everywhere with characteristic modifications, but substantially the same. Hence it had become a necessity to **translate the Old Testament Scriptures into Greek**....This translation, or the Septuagint, naturally became **the basis of all subsequent Jewish Greek literature, and in particular of the New Testament**” (Green, *Handbook to the Grammar of the Greek Testament*, pp. 155-156, emphasis added).

The Influence of Greek in Jewish Literature

As Green stated, the Greek translation of the Old Testament was followed by other Jewish Greek literature. Rabbi B. Z. Wacholder is one of the leading scholars in Jewish Greek literature of the period from Alexander to Christ. Martin Hengel, a Biblical scholar of modern Germany, wrote of Wacholder’s opinions of this era:

“Around the middle of the second century BCE [nearly two hundred years before the New Testament was written] the **Jewish Palestinian priest Eupolemus**, son of John, whom Judas [Maccabaeus] had probably sent to Rome with a delegation in 161 BCE, **composed in Greek a Jewish history** with the title ‘About the Kings of Judah’... B.Z. Wacholder, who analyses this work, goes very thoroughly in the last chapter of his book into **further Jewish-Palestinian literature in Greek** and traces it down to Justus of Tiberias and Josephus. In his view, its origin **lies in the priestly aristocracy**, the leading representatives of which had always also **had a certain degree of Greek education from the second or even third century BCE**” (Hengel, *The “Hellenization” of Judaea in the First Century after Christ*, p. 23, emphasis added).

Greek was the language of Jerusalem in New Testament times—the language not only of the priestly aristocracy but also of business and commerce. Its influence was most noticeable in the city of Jerusalem. Hengel wrote, “The most important centre of

the Greek language in Jewish Palestine was of course the capital, Jerusalem. We again have a good deal of epigraphical evidence [evidence from historical inscriptions] to support this” (*Ibid.*, p. 9).

The importance of Greek in Jewish life is evidenced by the fact that the temple had a fully staffed Greek secretariat. Such offices were vital to the diplomatic, commercial and banking interests of the nation. Hengel believed that “an institution like **the temple must have had a well-staffed Greek secretariat for more than two centuries**” (*Ibid.*, p. 17, emphasis added).

It was not difficult to find Greek-speaking Jews to serve as members of the temple secretariat. Many Levitical and priestly families had contact with Greek-speaking areas outside Palestine, and some families lived in these areas. The most aristocratic of the priestly families—the old Zadokite family of the Oniads—lived in Egypt. The high priests that Herod appointed came from this and other Greek-speaking families. Herod’s selection of these high priests illustrates the active communication and freedom of movement that was taking place between Palestine and other lands:

“There was a constant and lively interchange with all the centres of the Diaspora [the lands where the Jews were dispersed]. Thus Herod first brought the priest Ananel (Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.22, 34, 39ff., 51) from Babylonia and later the priest Simon, son of Boethus, from Alexandria to Jerusalem, both presumably from the old Zadokite family of the Oniads, in order to appoint them high priests. Boethus could have been a descendant of Onias IV of Leontopolis who fled to Egypt in 164 BCE: that would explain the later status of his family in Jerusalem. The successful Simon, son of Boethus, who married a daughter, Mariam, to Herod, succeeded in founding the richest high priestly family after the clan of Annas and at the same time a particular group among the Sadducees, the Boethusians, who were evidently close to the Herodian rulers” (Hengel, *The “Hellenization” of Judaea in the First Century after Christ*, p. 14).

The high priests who returned to Jerusalem from Alexandria were Greek-speaking. The city of Alexandria, named for Alexander the Great, was renowned as a center of Greek culture and learning. It was the Jews of Alexandria who in earlier times had translated the Hebrew text into Greek for the Septuagint. When the families of the high priests returned to Jerusalem, they continued to speak Greek. As Hengel wrote, these influential upper-class families were not the only Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem:

“Be this as it may, we can assume that Greek was spoken among the families of these aristocrats who had returned. It will also be the case that **Greek was no less established among the leading families of Jerusalem than in the scriptoria and the bazaars of the city or at the tables of the money changers in the temple forecourt**” (*Ibid.*, p. 14, emphasis added).

In New Testament times, Greek was spoken not only by the elite of Jerusalem but also by those who copied manuscripts in the scriptoria, by the middle-class businessmen who ran the bazaars, and by the bankers who served as money changers in the temple. The monetary exchange that was centered at the temple and all business transactions in Jerusalem required the speaking of Greek. This was the language of business and commerce in every province of the Roman Empire, including Palestine.

Greek Was Spoken in Galilee in New Testament Times

While Jerusalem was the commercial, cultural and banking center of Palestine, the region of Galilee did not fall far behind. Galilee was perfectly positioned at the crossroads of trade entering and exiting Palestine. The entire region was bustling with

commerce, and the language of that trade and commerce was Greek.

Hengel relates that by the time of Christ, the cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias in Galilee had Greek schools of renown. As carpenters, Joseph and Jesus might have worked in Sepphoris, which was only four or five miles from Jesus' home. The Greek-speaking city of Tiberias, center of a thriving fishing industry, was near their home. These two cities of Galilee were both prominent in the Palestine of Jesus' day. As centers of commerce and trade, they depended on merchants and tradesmen who could speak fluent Greek. Their schools ranked among the best.

As Hengel related, the training received in these schools of Galilee was on a par with the great institutions of higher learning in Antioch and Alexandria: "Wacholder believes that the rhetorical training which Justus received in the Tiberias of Herod Antipas and Agrippa II was on a par with the 'cosmopolitan Greek of Antioch or Alexandria,' whereas Jerusalem could not offer Josephus educational possibilities of the same high quality" (Ibid., p. 24).

The historian Josephus, who belonged to one of the leading priestly families of Jerusalem, spoke Greek; but his Greek was far from the quality of the Greek spoken and written by Justus, who had studied Greek at Tiberias. As the following quote relates, the linguistic and rhetorical education of Justus of Tiberias was far superior to that of Josephus of Jerusalem:

"Therefore Josephus stresses at the end of his *Antiquities* that his Jewish education was more perfect than his Greek, and that he still found difficulties in speaking impeccable Greek (*Antt.* 20.262-4)...Presumably he also refers to this deficiency because his rival and opponent Justus of Tiberias had had a better linguistic and rhetorical education....The patriarch Photius of Constantinople (c. 820-886) still praised the stylistic precision and evocative character of Justus' history of the Jewish kings, which extended from Moses to the death of Agrippa II, the last Jewish king" (Ibid., p. 24).

Like Josephus, all members of the priestly families were trained in both Hebrew and Greek. Hebrew continued to be spoken by the priests in the temple and the Scribes in the synagogues for religious events and discussions only. When at home with their families or conducting business in the market, they spoke Greek. The common people, who had long before lost their knowledge of Hebrew, spoke Aramaic in general, but those who dealt in commerce and trade also spoke Greek. According to Hengel, "Judaea, Samaria and Galilee were bilingual (or better, trilingual) areas. While Aramaic was the vernacular of ordinary people, and Hebrew the ... language of religious worship and of scribal discussion, Greek had largely become established as the linguistic medium for trade, commerce and administration" (Ibid., p. 8).

Historical inscriptions attest to the fact that Galilee in the early Christian era was a bilingual society. Hengel states: "In economic terms Galilee was to a large extent dependent on the completely Hellenized Phoenician cities, especially Acco/Ptolemais and Tyre. The great cemetery in Beth-shearim between Nazareth and Haifa, which comes from between the second and fourth centuries CE, contains predominantly Greek inscriptions. Some of those buried there come from the Phoenician metropolises. After the death of R. Jehuda han-Nasi (after 200) the tombs of Beth-shearim took on a more than regional significance, like the Holy City before 70 CE. The marked increase in Greek inscriptions compared to those in Hebrew and Aramaic (218 to 28) is bound up with the further development of the process of Hellenization in the second to the fourth centuries CE ..." (Ibid., pp. 15-16).

Hengel points out the significance of these inscriptions, which supports the earlier findings of Schlatter and contradicts the opinion of the History of Religions school: "In the meantime we also have two bilingual inscriptions from Judaea and Galilee, quite apart from the large number of testimonies to use of the Greek language. Almost ninety years ago Schlatter had a completely correct view of the linguistic situation, a clearer one

than the representatives of the History of Religions school.”

“The constant discovery of new inscriptions confirms this picture of a fundamentally multilingual society. Schlatter already drew attention to this situation in his famous study on ‘The Language and Homeland of the Fourth Evangelist’ (which is in no way taken seriously enough): ‘Here too the inscriptions are the decisive authority for assessing the linguistic question (of a bilingual situation, M.H.)’ ” (Ibid., p. 9).

Evidence That Greek Was Spoken by Jesus and the Apostles

In addition to the above evidence, the scholar Samuel G. Green wrote concerning the language spoken by Jesus and the apostles: “It was in the Greek of the Septuagint thus modified that, in all probability, our Lord and His apostles generally spoke. The dialect of Galilee (Matt. xxvi. 73) was not a corrupt Hebrew, but a provincial Greek” (Green, *Handbook to the Grammar of the Greek Testament*, p. 156).

The Gospel accounts verify that Jesus and His disciples, who were Galileans, spoke the Greek dialect of Galilee and not a corrupted Hebrew; hence Jesus’ words to the scribes and Pharisees at the temple: “Therefore, Jesus said to them, ‘If God were your Father, you would love Me, because I proceeded forth and came from God. For I have not come of Myself, but He sent Me. **Why don’t you understand My speech?** Because you cannot *bear* to hear My words’ ” (John 8:42-43, emphasis added).

In recording Jesus’ words, John shows that the scribes and Pharisees had difficulty understanding His Galilean dialect. John’s choice of the Greek word translated “speech” is *λαλια lalia*, which means “dialect.” The Pharisees had a problem with the Greek dialect of Jesus and His apostles throughout their ministries. As further evidence of this, Matthew comments that it was Peter’s Galilean Greek that gave him away during Jesus’ trial:

“Now Peter was sitting outside in the court; and a maid came to him, saying, ‘You also were with Jesus the Galilean.’ But he denied *it* before everyone, saying, ‘I don’t know what you are talking about.’ And after he went out into the porch, another *maid* saw him and said to those there, ‘This man was also with Jesus the Nazarean.’ Then again he denied *it* with an oath, *saying*, ‘I do not know the man.’ After a little *while*, those who were standing by came to Peter and said, ‘Truly, you also are one of them, for even **your speech shows that you are**’ ” (Matt. 26:69-73, emphasis added).

As the Greek in Peter’s epistles testifies, he was speaking and writing a better Greek than those at Jerusalem. The Greek they spoke would be the Greek that would carry the gospel message to the world and would be recorded for all time in the New Testament.

The very names of Jesus’ apostles are Greek: “Among the twelve disciples of Jesus, two, Andrew and Philip, bear purely Greek names, and in the case of two others the original Greek name has been Aramaized. Thaddaeus (*tadda’j*) is probably a short form of Theodotus (or something similar), and Bartholomew (*Bartholomaios = bartalmaj*) derives from (bar) Ptolemaios. The blind beggar Bartimaeus (Bar-Timaios) in Jericho, who becomes a follower of Jesus, can also be mentioned in this connection” (Hengel, *The ‘Hellenization’ of Judaea in the First Century after Christ*, p. 16).

Even the areas that Jesus’ disciples came from bear witness to their speaking Greek: “The information that Simon Peter, Andrew and Philip came from Bethsaida (John 1.44) could perhaps have historical value, since Herod’s son Philip refounded this place soon after his accession as the *polis Julias* (before 2 BCE) in honour of Augustus’ daughter Julia, and it was therefore more markedly ‘Hellenized’ than the surrounding villages....At all events, Simon Peter must have been bilingual, since otherwise he could not have engaged so successfully in missionary work outside Judaea....It is remarkable that Luke does not know of Peter having any problems with language—say in connection

with Cornelius” (Ibid., p. 16).

The Followers of Jesus

As we find in historical records and in Scripture, those who responded to the preaching of the gospel were primarily Greek-speaking people. It is logical, therefore, to conclude that Jesus also spoke to them in Greek.

Scripture attests to the fact that many early converts were Greek speaking: “There are many references to what were in all probability bilingual members of the [early Christian] community from the upper and middle classes: mention should be made of Johanna, the wife of Chuza, the **επιτροπος** of Herod Antipas, i.e., his steward; the tax farmers, like the **αρχιτελωνης** Zacchaeus in Jericho; then men like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. The mysterious Manaen (Menachem) in Antioch, whose mother is perhaps mentioned by Papias, the boyhood friend (**συντροφος**) of Herod Antipas, Mary and her son John Mark, the relations of Barnabas, Silas-Silvanus, Barsabbas Justus, who similarly emerges again in Papias, the prophet Agabus and others may similarly belong to this milieu. Their circle is enlarged by Diaspora Jews resident in Jerusalem like Barnabas from Cyprus and Simon of Cyrene with his sons Alexander and Rufus. Simon’s sons and his mother were perhaps known later in the Christian community in Rome, and Jason of Cyprus, Paul’s host (Acts 21:16), whose mother tongue was already Greek, even if they still understood Aramaic or had relearned it” (Ibid., pp. 17-18).

Early Christians in Jerusalem Spoke Greek

Luke records that some of the earliest members of the church at Jerusalem were Greek-speaking Jews. Hengel’s statement concerning the rapid growth of Christianity in this community follows:

“What was decisive for the subsequent course of primitive Christianity, however, was the amazingly rapid and intensive effect of the new message on the Greek-speaking Hellenists in Jerusalem....Here we have that social stratum in Jerusalem the significance of which ... has so far been neglected. The circle of Christians who came from it cannot have been all that small, otherwise their missionary activity in Jerusalem would not have provoked so much of a stir and caused such offense” (Hengel, *The ‘Hellenization’ of Judaea in the First Century after Christ*, pp. 43-44).

In the book of Acts, Luke gives us insight into this early community of Greek-speaking Jews from which the first evangelists were chosen and from which the gospel spread to all Judea. Luke wrote: “Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a complaint by the Greeks [*KJV* ‘Grecians’ refers to Greek-speaking Jews] against the Hebrews [Jews whose native tongue was Aramaic], because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. And after calling the multitude of disciples to *them*, the twelve said, ‘It is not proper *for* us to leave the Word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, brethren, search out from among yourselves seven men of good repute, full of *the* Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the Word.’ And this declaration was pleasing to all the multitude; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and *the* Holy Spirit; and Philip; and Prochorus; and Nicanor; and Timon; and Parmenas; and Nicolas, *who was* a proselyte of Antioch. *And* they set them before the apostles; and after praying, they laid *their* hands on them. And the Word of God spread, and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem was multiplied exceedingly, and a great multitude of the priests were obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:1-7).

All seven of those chosen in Luke’s account bear Greek names. These Hellenized Jews spoke Greek as their native language as attested to by Hengel, who gives us

linguistic evidence: “In contrast to the use of ‘Hellenizing’ and ‘Hellenism’ stamped by culture and intellectual history which is customary among theologians, and which ultimately goes back to Droysen, in antiquity the verb *ελληνίζειν* and the rare noun *Ελληνισμος* referred almost exclusively to language. Only rarely did these words have a comprehensive meaning relating to culture and civilization—with one significant exception to which we shall have to return—and there is evidence of this only in the post-Christian period. In Christian literature from the third-fourth century CE the term *Ελλην* and the other terms associated with it then generally came to mean ‘pagan.’ Before that, both terms primarily and in the first instance denoted an impeccable command of the Greek language. This also gives us a fairly clear criterion for distinction in this investigation: *‘Hellenistic’ Jews and Jewish Christians are (in the real, original meaning of the word) those whose mother tongue was Greek*, in contrast to the Jews in Palestine and in the Babylonian Diaspora who originally spoke Aramaic. It is in this way, in terms of mother tongue, that Luke understands the distinction between *Ελληνισταί* and *Εβραίοι* in Acts 6.1 (cf. 9.29). The mother- (or main) language of the *Ελληνισταί* is Greek and that of the *Εβραίοι* Aramaic. However, we meet these two groups in Jerusalem itself, in the Jewish metropolis of the Holy Land—and that goes against the usual dividing line. It is too easily forgotten that in the time of Jesus, Greek had already been established as a language for more than three hundred years and already had a long and varied history behind it. As early as the third century [BC] in different parts of Palestine, we have a whole series of testimonies to Greek as a language, and they are slowly but steadily continuing to increase in number. The Greek language had already long been accepted not only in the former Philistine or Phoenician areas on the coast and (in the third century BCE) in the ‘Graeco-Macedonian’ cities in the interior, but also (though not so intensively) in areas settled by Jews and Samaritans” (Hengel, *The ‘Hellenization’ of Judaea in the First Century after Christ*, pp. 7-8).

Hengel believes that because Greek was spoken almost exclusively among this group of Hellenist Jews in Jerusalem, Jesus and His apostles must have evangelized them in Greek:

“During the lifetime of Jesus, the message of Jesus also reached Diaspora Jews in Jerusalem who almost only spoke Greek or spoke it exclusively; it was from among them that that group of Hellenists was recruited which separated because of its worship in Greek and as a special group in the community became significant in Jerusalem with such amazing rapidity. John 12.20f. could be a later reflection of this transition. Perhaps John 4.38 is a reference to their mission in Samaria (Acts 8.4ff.). At all events it is probable that the rendering of parts of the Jesus tradition into Greek and the development of a distinctive theological terminology with terms like: *αποστολος, ευαγγελιον, εκκλησια, χαρις, χαρισμα, ο υιος του ανθρωπου*, etc., must have begun very early, possibly as an immediate consequence of the activity of Jesus, which also attracted Diaspora Jews, in Jerusalem, and not, say, decades later outside Palestine in Antioch or elsewhere. In other words, **the roots of the ‘Jewish-Christian/Hellenistic’ or more precisely Greek-speaking Jewish Christian community in which the message of Jesus was formulated in Greek for the first time clearly extend back to the very earliest community in Jerusalem**, and accordingly the first linguistic development of its kerygma [preaching of the gospel] and its Christology [the study of Christ] must have already taken place there” (Ibid., p. 18, emphasis added).

The seven who were chosen to represent the Hellenist Jews in the Jerusalem church became evangelists who preached to Hellenist Jews in other parts of Judea. Hengel describes the Greek-speaking cities in which these men evangelized: “However, the significance of language was not just limited to Jerusalem. Thus a substantial Jewish population lived in the Hellenized cities of the coastal plain from Gaza to Dor or Ptolemais-Acco: in Caesarea they made up almost half the population, and in Jamnia

certainly and Ashdod probably they outnumbered the Hellenized Gentile population. Philip, who came from the group around Stephen, may have preached primarily in Greek in the coastal plain and particularly in Caesarea. That Greek was the principal language in these cities is again confirmed by Jewish epitaphs and synagogue inscriptions” (Ibid., p. 14).

It is evident that Paul, whom God selected to preach to the Gentiles, also spoke Greek. Luke recorded that shortly after Saul’s conversion, he became involved in a dispute with the Greek-speaking Jews of Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-31). In his epistle to the Philippians, Paul described himself as a “Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil. 3:5). Paul had been trained at the feet of Gamaliel, the leading rabbi of that period in Jewish history, and Paul was fully capable of speaking Hebrew to the Pharisaic Jews of Jerusalem (Acts 21:40). However, Paul did not customarily speak Hebrew. He was equally knowledgeable in the Greek language, as the same passage in the book of Acts shows (Acts 21:37-39). Paul could not have preached throughout Asia without this ability to speak Greek. Thus the records of the New Testament demonstrate that the preaching of the gospel was carried out almost exclusively in Greek.

The Gospel Was Recorded in Greek

The books of the New Testament were written between 26 and 96 AD, a period of almost seventy years. As internal evidence reveals, Jesus’ disciples recorded His message and began to circulate these writings throughout Palestine and the Empire at a very early date. These documents were later collected into the Gospel accounts—Matthew’s account may have appeared as early as 35 AD; Mark wrote his account shortly after, in 42 AD, and Luke wrote his account around 59 AD. The Gospel of John also was written about 42 AD.

In 50 AD Paul wrote the first of his epistles that would appear in Scripture. The rest of Paul’s epistles were written between 51 and 67 AD. The epistle of James was written around 40-41 AD. The epistles of Peter were written between 63 and 66 AD. Jude was written sometime around 67 AD. The letters of I, II and III John were written about 63-64 AD. The book of Hebrews was written from Rome about 61 AD. Thus the basic canon of the New Testament was completed by the time the Jewish Wars began—that is, about 66 AD. The book of Revelation, the final book of the New Testament, was written by the aged apostle John about 95-96 AD.

The early New Testament text was copied and preserved by the brethren in Asia Minor. It was this text that was generally adopted by Christians in the 4th century as the text of the New Testament. From that time forward, it has been known as the Byzantine text. The Byzantine text, of which the King James Version is a translation, is the most authoritative Greek text of the New Testament. Its role as the leading Greek text dates back to the beginning of the Byzantine period, for which the text is named: “The Byzantine text is found in the vast majority of the Greek New Testament manuscripts. It is called *Byzantine* because it was the Greek New Testament text in general use throughout the greater part of the Byzantine Period (312-1453). For many centuries before the Protestant Reformation this Byzantine text was the text of the entire Greek Church, and for more than three centuries after the Reformation it was the text of the entire Protestant Church. Even today it is the text which most Protestants know best, since the King James Version and other early Protestant translations were made from it” (Hills, *The King James Version Defended*, p. 40).

As Hills explains, the authenticity of the Byzantine text is supported by a history dating back to the apostolic era: “This general trend in the Greek Church toward the Byzantine (true) text first evidenced itself in Antioch and Asia Minor....It is reasonable to suppose, therefore, that this text had been preserved in these regions from apostolic times.

Before the middle of the fourth century its circulation in this area was probably confined to the humbler believers, the more scholarly Christians (the leaders) being inclined toward the text of Alexandria, that great center of Christian scholarship, or toward the Western text, which was in vogue at Rome. But after the triumph of orthodoxy in Antioch and Asia Minor during the latter half of the fourth century, this popular text came more and more into its own. Orthodox scholars, such as Diodorus and Chrysostom, came more and more to appreciate its orthodox character and to adopt it. Soon its victory was complete, and it became the New Testament text of the whole Greek Church, of the Protestant Reformation, and of our familiar King James Version” (Ibid., p. 56).

Descriptions of the Original Manuscripts of the New Testament

Some claim that the New Testament was originally written in Hebrew and then translated into Greek. However, the records of early church history do not support this assertion. Tatian, Papias, Tertullian and Irenaeus, to name but a few writers of the early church, describe the original writings and quote from them. Yet not a single quote is taken from a Hebrew text—all are taken from Greek texts. Although Papias asserts that Matthew compiled his early reports in Hebrew, no evidence is given.

Early translations of the New Testament are all based on Greek texts. *The Harmony of Tatian*, translated in 170 AD, is based on a Greek original, as is *The Muratorian Canon*. The Old Latin version translated in 180 AD is based on a Greek original. Early Gothic, Egyptian, Ethiopian, Armenian and Palestinian versions are all based on Greek originals. Even the Aramaic versions of the New Testament are translations from the Greek (see *The Books and the Parchments*, by F. F. Bruce, p. 189). No evidence of a Hebrew original has been found in all the centuries that have followed the writing of the New Testament.

Internal Evidence in the New Testament

If the New Testament was originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic, there would have been no need for the apostles to interpret the meaning of Hebrew and Aramaic words for their readers. However, the Gospel accounts contain many such interpretations. Consider the following passage in the Gospel of John:

“On the next day, John [the Baptist] was again standing *there*, and two of his disciples *with him*. And as he gazed upon Jesus walking, he said, ‘Behold the Lamb of God!’ And the two disciples heard him say *this*, and they followed Jesus. Now when Jesus turned and saw them following, He said to them, ‘What are you seeking?’ And they said to Him, ‘**Rabbi**, [Greek **Ραββι** *Rabbi*, meaning “my teacher”]’ (which is to say, being interpreted, Teacher [Greek **Διδασκαλε** *didaskale*]), ‘where do You dwell?’ He said to them, ‘Come and see.’ They went and saw where He was dwelling, and remained with Him that day. Now it was about *the* tenth hour. Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, was one of the two who heard *this* from John and followed Him. First, he found his own brother Simon and said to him, ‘We have found the **Messiah**, [Greek **Μεσσιαν** *Messiah* meaning “the Anointed”] (which is, being interpreted, ‘**the Christ**’) [Greek **ο χριστος** *Christos*]. And he led him to Jesus. And when He saw him, Jesus said, ‘You are Simon the son of Jona. You shall be called **Cephas**’ [Greek **Κηφας** *Cephas*], (which is, *being* interpreted, ‘a **stone**’ [Greek **Πετρος** *Petros*])” (John 1:35-42).

The words “Rabbi” and “Messiah” are Hebrew. The word “Cephas” is Aramaic. If John had written his Gospel in Hebrew or Aramaic, these words would not have required translation for Greek-speaking readers.

“Rabbi” is a transliteration of the Greek **Ραββι**, which is a transliteration of the Hebrew **רַבִּי** and literally means “Lord” or “Master.” The Greek **Διδασκαλε** *didaskale* is a paraphrase of the Greek **Ραββι**. John interprets this term for the sake of his Greek readers who were not familiar with the Hebrew Rabbi, and therefore would not have understood the Greek transliteration **Ραββι**.

“Messiah” is a transliteration of the Greek **Μεσσιαν** *Messian* which is a Hellenized transliteration of the Hebrew **מָשִׁיחַ** *Meshiach*. The Hellenized Jews, to whom John was writing, were not acquainted with this Hebrew term. Thus John translated it into the Greek word *Christos*, which means “the Anointed One.” If John had written in Hebrew to a Hebrew-speaking people, it would make no sense to translate into Greek.

“Cephas” is an Aramaic word meaning “little stone” or “pebble.” John felt it necessary to translate this word for the Hellenized Jews, who were no more familiar with Aramaic than with Hebrew.

Other examples of the translation of Hebrew terms can be found in John’s Gospel: “Now *as Jesus was passing by*, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither did this man sin, nor his parents; rather, *this blindness came* so that the works of God might be manifested in him. I must work the works of Him Who sent Me while it is still day. When *the night comes*, no one is able to work. As long as I am in the world, I am *the light of the world*.’ After saying these things, He spat on *the ground*, and made clay of the spittle, and applied the clay to the eyes of the blind man. And He said to him, ‘Go *and wash in the pool of Siloam*’ (which is, by interpretation, “Sent”). Then he went and washed, and came *from there seeing*” (John 9:1-7).

The name “Siloam” is a transliteration of the Greek **Σιλωαμ**, which is a transliteration of the Hebrew **הַשִּׁלּוֹחַ**. Again, it is evident that the apostle John was writing to a Greek-speaking audience that did not understand the meaning of this Hebrew term.

Evidence in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke

Evidence found in Matthew 11 shows that Matthew not only wrote in Greek but wrote at the time of Jesus’ ministry from 26 to 30 AD. The events that are recorded in Mathew 11 are also recounted in Luke. These accounts add to the evidence that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke were written early in the first century, and they were written in Greek: “And as they were leaving, Jesus said to the multitudes concerning John, ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken *by the wind*? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Behold, those who wear soft *clothing* are in kings’ houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and *one* more excellent than a prophet. For this is *he* of whom it is written, “Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who shall prepare Your way before You.” Truly I say to you, there has not arisen among *those* born of women *anyone* greater than John the Baptist. But the one who *is* least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. For from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven is taken with a *great* struggle, and *the zealous ones* lay hold on it. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive *it*, he is Elijah who was to come. The one who has ears to hear, let him hear. But to what shall I compare this generation? It is exactly like little children sitting in *the* markets and calling to their companions, and saying, “We have piped to you, and you did not dance; we have mourned to you, and you did not wail.” For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Behold, a man who is a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is justified by her children” (Matt. 11:7-19).

Hengel points out the profound importance of this passage in dating the Gospel of Matthew: “With exemplary method Gerd Theissen has been able to interpret Matthew 11.7f/Luke 7.25f. as specific polemic against Antipas and as support for the circle of John the Baptist by using coins minted at the foundation of Tiberias and the reed depicted on them. From his interpretation of this logion in terms of contemporary history it becomes clear how in all probability we can identify an authentic saying of Jesus here. As Antipas was banished to Gaul as early as 38 CE, this saying with its unique parallelism between a ‘reed moved by the wind’ and ‘a man in soft raiment’, ‘gorgeously apparelled and living in luxury in kings’ courts’, certainly cannot be a late ‘community construction’. **It would only be comprehensible to the immediate contemporaries of Jesus and John the Baptist**, but nevertheless has been handed down relatively unchanged. The derogatory designation of Antipas as an ever-adaptable ‘reed’ also matches the title ‘fox’ given to him in Luke 13.32” (Hengel, *The ‘Hellenization’ of Judaea in the First Century after Christ*, pp. 42-43).

Matthew’s and Luke’s use of terms known to the Greek-speaking community of Jesus’ day contradicts the claim that their Gospels were not written until later generations and verifies that they wrote in Greek to an audience that understood Greek. From the beginning of Mathew’s Gospel, it is evident that he was not writing to a Hebrew-speaking people. The following passage from Matthew illustrates this: “And the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: Now His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph; *but* before they came together, she was found to be with child of *the* Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous *man*, and not willing to expose her publicly, was planning to divorce her secretly. But as he pondered these things, behold, an angel of *the* Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary to *be* your wife, because that which has been begotten in her is of *the* Holy Spirit. And she shall give birth to a son, and you shall call His name Jesus; for He shall save His people from their sins.’ Now all this came to pass, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, ‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall give birth to a son, and they shall call His name “Emmanuel”’; which is, being interpreted, ‘God with us’ ” (Matt. 1:18-23).

The name “Emmanuel” is a transliteration of the Greek **Εμμανουηλ**, which is a transliteration of the Hebrew **עִמָּנוּאֵל**. The fact that Matthew had to interpret the meaning of this Hebrew name illustrates that he was writing in Greek to a Greek-speaking audience. Further evidence that Matthew wrote in Greek to a people who spoke Greek, and not in Hebrew, is furnished by two grammatical structures unique to the Greek: the articular infinitive and the genitive absolute. Neither of these grammatical structures has a comparable structure in Hebrew.

The Articular Infinitive in the Gospel of Matthew

Matthew’s use of the articular infinitive offers absolute evidence that his Gospel was written in Greek. In English, the word “to” is always used with the infinitive form of the verb, as in “to be,” “to come,” and “to speak.” The Greek infinitive is similar to the English infinitive unless it is preceded by the definite article “the.” When the definite article “the” is used, the infinitive is known as an **articular infinitive**. In New Testament Greek, when the articular infinitive is combined with a preposition, it limits the infinitive to a specific time period. Dana and Mantey stated the following: “Nothing distinguishes the noun force of the infinitive more than its use with the [definite] article....**This item is one of the proofs of the general good quality of New Testament Greek**” (*A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, p. 211).

Matthew’s precise and well written Greek is illustrated by his use of the articular infinitive with the Greek preposition *en*: “Now in that same day, Jesus departed from the

house and sat down by the sea. And so great a multitude gathered around Him that He went into a ship and sat down, and all the multitude stood on the shore. And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, ‘Behold, the sower went out to sow. And **as he was sowing**, some *of the seed* fell by the way; and the birds came and devoured them. And some fell upon the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up **because the soil was not deep enough**; but after *the* sun rose, they were scorched; and because they did not have roots, they dried up. And some *of the seed* fell among the thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. And some fell upon the good ground, and yielded fruit—some a hundredfold, and some sixtyfold, and some thirtyfold. The one who has ears to hear, let him hear.’ And His disciples came to Him and asked, ‘Why do You speak to them in parables?’ And He answered *and* said to them, ‘Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has *understanding*, to him more shall be given, and he shall have an abundance; but whoever does not have *understanding*, even what he has shall be taken away from him. For this *reason* I speak to them in parables, because seeing, they see not; and hearing, they hear not; neither do they understand’ ” (Matt. 13:1-13).

The phrase “**as he was sowing**” contains an articular infinitive. This expression in the Greek is **καὶ ἐν τῷ σπείρειν**. When the articular infinitive is used with the preposition **ἐν** *en*, the definite article is dative, which means that the time at which something occurs is being expressed. Thus George Ricker Berry in his Greek Interlinear translates it “And *as* he sowed.”

Another illustration of the precision and high level of Matthew’s Greek is found in the very next verse, Matthew 13:5. Matthew now uses the articular infinitive with the preposition **δια**, however. Verse 5 reads, “and immediately they sprang up **because the soil was not deep enough**; but after *the* sun rose, they were scorched; and because they did not have roots, they dried up.”

The expression “**because the soil was not deep enough**” also contains an articular infinitive. The Greek is **διὰ τὸ μὴ εἶναι βάθος γῆς** which begins with **διὰ** *dia*. When an infinitive is used with the preposition **διὰ** *dia*, the definite article is accusative with cause; i.e., “for” or “because of.” Thus Berry translates this phrase “**because of not having depth of earth.**”

More examples of Matthew’s use of the articular infinitive could be given. These examples, however, are sufficient to demonstrate his mastery of literary Greek. His usage of the articular infinitive illustrates the fact that Matthew not only grew up speaking Greek but that he also had formal training in Greek rhetoric.

Matthew’s Use of the Genitive Absolute

The Greek genitive case primarily signifies motion from a person, place or thing. The genitive absolute is a genitive noun that occurs in a subordinate sentence without immediate dependence on any other words; i.e., it occurs absolutely. As Green stated, “The noun, in these cases, is to be translated first, without a preposition, then the participle. In idiomatic English, a conjunction must often be supplied, either temporal (*when*), causal (*since*), or concessive (*although*). It will be observed that the genitive in this construction must refer to some other than the subject of the principal sentence. Equivalent idioms are in English the nominative absolute, in Latin the ablative absolute....The genitive absolute, says Dr. Donaldson, is originally causal, in conformity with the primary notion of the case. Hence arise, by way of analogy, its other uses as denoting accessories of time, manner, or circumstance. The tense of the participle greatly determines the force of the phrase” (*Handbook to the Grammar of the Greek Testament*, pp. 221-222). Green amplified the importance of the participle in genitive absolute constructions. He wrote, “When a participle has a subject of its own in a separate clause,

the construction is the genitive absolute” (Ibid., p. 330).

Three examples of the genitive absolute used by Matthew as translated by Green follow:

- Matt. 1:18 **μνηστευθεισης ... Μαρίας,**
Mary having been betrothed
- Matt. 1:20 **ταυτα δε αυτου ενθυμηθεντος,**
and he having reflected on these things,
i.e., when he reflected
- Matt. 2:1 **του Ιησου γεννηθεντος,**
Jesus having been born,
i.e., when Jesus was born

The first example of a genitive absolute is found in Matthew 1:18. The Greek phrase is **μνηστευθεισης γαρ της μητρος αυτου Μαρίας.** Green translated this genitive absolute beginning with the noun “Mary” (without a preposition), followed immediately by the participial phrase “having been” and then the verb “betrothed”: *“Mary having been betrothed.”*

The genitive absolute in Matthew 1:20 is the Greek phrase **ταυτα δε αυτου ενθυμηθεντος,** which Berry translated literally, “And these things when he had pondered.” Green translated this genitive absolute beginning with the temporal conjunction “when,” followed immediately by the personal pronoun “he,” and then the verb “reflected”: *“when he reflected.”*

The third use of the genitive absolute is found in Matthew 2:1: “Now when **Jesus was born** in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem.” The Greek genitive absolute translated “Jesus was born” is **του Ιησου γεννηθεντος.**

Greek and the Seven Evangelists

Within the text of Acts 6:1-7, it is quite evident that Greek was the mother tongue of the original seven evangelists who spread the gospel far and wide. As Hengel pointed out, their names support this conclusion. The cities in which these men evangelized were Greek-speaking communities. Hengel wrote, “Mention should of course be made here of the ‘Seven’ as the spokesmen of the Hellenist community (Acts 6.5), who all have Greek names, and naturally—above all others as far as his effect on the Christian church and world history is concerned—of Sha'ul/Paul, who studied the Torah in Jerusalem and persecuted the community of Christian ‘Hellenists’ ” (Hengel, *The ‘Hellenization’ of Judaea in the First Century after Christ*, p. 18).

Furthermore, shortly after Saul’s conversion, he became involved in a dispute with the Grecians of Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-31). The word Grecians in this passage does not refer to Gentile Greeks but to Greek-speaking Jews. Here is Scriptural evidence that Paul used the Greek language, not Hebrew.

There is no question that Paul spoke Greek, and all of his epistles were written in Greek. Hebrew was not the language of Palestine during the days of Jesus’ ministry; neither was it the language of the apostles. Therefore, it can be concluded that Jesus and all of the apostles spoke Greek, and the entire New Testament was originally written in Koine Greek. God inspired men to preserve the New Testament in Koine Greek. This text, as noted earlier in this chapter, is commonly known today as the Byzantine Text. This knowledge of *what* language the New Testament was written will lead us into *who*

wrote it in the following chapter.

Later Aramaic and Hebrew Translations of Gospel of Matthew From the Original Greek: According to Johannes Weiss, the late professor of theology at the University of Heidelberg, “Among the Jewish Christians of Beroea in Coele-Syria ... who as a separate community under the earliest name of the Christians (Nazarenes) existed as late as the second half of the third century [late 200s AD], there arose after 150 [AD] a targumistic translation of the Gospel of Matthew in the Aramaic (Syriac) language and in Hebrew characters, the Gospel of the Nazarenes....[It] remained for a century and a half completely concealed from the view of [most] ecclesiastical writers, until in one exemplar it came into the hands of Eusebius of Caesarea and by him was immediately received and used as the original Hebrew Matthew of tradition, long believed lost” (Weiss, *The History of Primitive Christianity*, pp. 669-670, quoting Schmidtke, “Neue Fragmente und Untersuchungen zu den judenchristlichen Evangelien,” *Texte und Untersuchungen*). This revised gospel was mistakenly considered by many to be the original due to Eusebius’ influence. In addition, the Jewish Christians of Transjordan (Ebionites) used an excised Hebrew version of Matthew’s Gospel (with readings from Luke’s Gospel inserted), which “lacked not only a genealogy but an infancy narrative” among other segments (Ibid., pp. 736-737).