

‘WE HEAR THEM TELLING IN OUR OWN TONGUES THE MIGHTY WORKS OF GOD’ (ACTS 2:11)

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Abstract

The language map of the early Christians is rarely included in New Testament scholarship. This article argues that the understanding of the spread of Koine Greek needs to be nuanced; that local dialects and languages survived hellenization; and that early Christian communities were largely polyglot. The evidence suggests that prayer and songs, in particular, were often expressed in a vernacular, and that the early gospel traditions were transmitted in vernacular forms in some communities.

It is curious that studies in the cultural world of the early Christians rarely mention the matter of languages, and when it is raised, two aspects dominate: Koine Greek, and the languages of first-century Palestine. Other Greek dialects and local languages receive, at the very best, a passing comment.¹ This might be due, in part, to what Horsley calls ‘our wholesale ignorance about the majority of provincial languages in the Roman world’ (1989, 11). The neglect of the language situation is particularly evident in recent publications. For example, *The Early Christian World* (Esler 2000) gives, at best, a little over one page to the language world of Jews, but it says nothing about native, local languages; *The Biblical World* (Barton 2002) has articles on Hebrew and Aramaic, and Greek, but is quiet on other languages; neither Raymond Brown’s *Introduction* (1997) nor Ehrman’s *The New Testament* (2000) mention the languages. *The Dictionary of the New Testament Background* (Evans & Porter 2000) has no entry under ‘languages’, but refers the reader to the ‘Greek language’ entry which deals largely with Koine.

1 Koester devotes some pages to the topic (1982, 101-113) but makes almost no mention of local vernacular languages.

This article has three objectives: To nuance the use of Koine Greek in the first Christian centuries; to draw attention to the survival of local languages; and to emphasize that a variety of language were spoken in most early Christian communities. The situation in Palestine will be left aside, since it has been thoroughly discussed elsewhere.² The multilingual nature of that region, however, is typical of the linguistic map elsewhere. Nor am I concerned with Egypt and North Africa, or with regions to the west and north of Rome. In most of those regions too, the evidence is clear that indigenous vernaculars were very strong and remained so for centuries into the Common Era. The evidence from Egypt itself is that, despite the large finds of Greek papyri, many Egyptians were illiterate in Greek. As Koester observes,

The native Egyptians did not even learn Greek, although all the official documents had to be written in the Greek language. Egyptian remained the country's spoken vernacular, which was soon to reappear as a literary language in the 'Coptic' documents of the early Christian church (1982, 1.42).

According to Moulton, similar language conditions applied in other parts of the hellenized world as well:

Demotic papyri in abundance survive to show that they (Egyptians) did not forget their native language. All over the east, as far as Alexander's arms penetrated, Greek inscriptions attest to this same condition.³

Brock (1999) has shown that in the eastern Roman Empire, Greek functioned as the language of political power, but major dialects of Aramaic (Nabataean, Palmyrene, Emesan Hatran, and Syriac) were very much alive and well around the beginning of the Common Era. He also demonstrates the strength and durability of Syriac among literate Christians and its complex interrelation with Greek in the first half millennium of the Era.

Along with Syriac texts, Old Latin Christian writings also appeared in the second century; Punic psalms were known to Augustine in North Africa; Gothic Christian literature stemmed from the fourth-century Ulfilas;

2 See, for example, Schwartz (1995).

3 Moulton, in Porter 1991, 82-83.

Armenian and Georgian scripture translations appeared by the fifth century. In fact, in Armenia, not only were the Scriptures translated, but by the fifth century so were some of the church fathers. As Bardy notes,

The speed which the leaders of the Armenian Church displayed in appropriating all the works of the Fathers in their national language, is perhaps without parallel in the history of Christianity (1948, 36).

If language death had occurred, it is impossible to explain this phenomenon. Local language survival can also be traced in regions of Asia, Greece, and Italy. In sum, I wish to emphasize that many of the local languages did not simply roll over and die, swamped by the wave of hellenization. The fact that the New Testament was (probably) first written in Greek often obscures the living and vibrant presence of these languages in Christian communities.

As a reading of Strabo, Diodorus Siculus, Pliny the Elder, and Pausanius will quickly indicate,⁴ in the very early centuries of the Common Era there were hundreds and hundreds of tribal groups. Diodorus Siculus speaks of 'the present existence of every conceivable kind of language' (*παντοίους τε ὑπάρξει χαρακτῆρας διαλέκτων*, 1.8.4); and Pliny, a contemporary of the early Christian movement, writes:

A small matter to tell of but one of measureless extent if pondered on is the number of national languages and dialects and varieties of speech (*tot gentium sermones, tot linguae, tanta loquendi varietas*, (N.H. 7.1.7).

It would seem that the majority of illiterate, oral cultures maintained their identity in spite of the powerful cultural influences around them. In the region of Asia Minor and thereabouts, tribal identity had already survived other powerful cultural influences from Persia and Egypt over the centuries. Of course, not every single tribal grouping had its own language—most, probably, spoke a dialect—and many tribes were associated with other, mostly neighboring, tribes through religious ceremonies or festivals, marriage and trade; and they were held together by a common language.

Christian communities mirrored the language complexities of their society and so consisted of members who spoke many and varied languages. Kaimio's general comments are true also of Christian groups:

4 Translations of all pagan Greek and Latin texts in this article are from editions of the Loeb Classical Library.

We must assume that most language communities of the Roman Empire were diglot or even polyglot and quite a few of their members in one way or another bilingual or multilingual. Even if they were unilingual, they had a certain language choice: for the purposes of communication, they could use the only language they knew, they could refer to an interpreter, or they could choose to say nothing. But for the others, there was a real choice between languages ... (1979, 14).

It is well-known that the literate Greeks divided the world into two groups, Greeks and barbarians.⁵ This division was largely language-based, and mastery of the Greek language was perhaps the most important component in the process of hellenization (Momigliano 1975, 8-9). But there were noticeable limits. As Jones notes,

The culture which the cities fostered, though geographically spread over a wide area, was limited to the urban upper class. The great mass of the population, the proletariat of the towns, and still more the peasants of the country, remained barbarians (1940: vii).

Hellenization was not an inevitable process to which local cultures, including their languages, simply succumbed. In the Maccabean literature, faithful Jews mark their identity by speaking 'the language of their fathers' (2 Macc. 7:8,21; 4 Macc. 12:7; 16:15). While many educated elite Latins were greatly attracted to Greek language, there are also signs of a stubborn refusal to bow to its superiority.⁶ The first century CE Latin writer, Valerius Maximus, himself familiar with Greek, shows his obvious bias towards Latin. He claims that the magistrates of old made it the rule to always reply to Greeks in Latin. And they made the Greeks:

discard their volubility,⁷ which is their greatest asset, and to speak through an interpreter, not only in Rome but in Greece and Asia also, intending no doubt

5 The word 'barbarian' is commonly said to reflect the language of non-Greeks. Strabo observes that barbarian speech is not due to a vocal defect because the same thing happens when they learn to speak Greek; and in fact Greeks do the same when trying to speak other languages (14.2.28).

6 For a detailed study of the relation between Greek and Latin speakers and writers, see Kaimio (1978).

7 Pliny Jr. also complains about the Greeks for mistaking 'volubility for fullness of expression; they all pour out a torrent of long monotonous periods without taking breath' (Ep. 5.20.4).

that the dignity of Latin speech be the more widely venerated throughout all nations ... they held that in all matters whatsoever the Greek cloak should be subordinate to the Roman gown, thinking it unmeet that the weight and authority of empire be sacrificed to the seductive charm of letters (Memorab. 2.2.2).

Koine in the Imperial Period

Wallace writes,

Koine Greek became the lingua Franca of the whole Roman Empire by the first century AD ... Even after Rome became the world power in the first century BC, Greek continued to penetrate distant lands ... Greek continued to be a universal language until at least the end of the first century AD (1996, 17).

While as a general statement this is an accurate picture of affairs, where it is misleading is in its very generality. It leaves open the questions: For whom was Koine the 'common' language? Was it common for them in *all* language contexts—religious, social, political, legal, economic, conversational and others? Or was Koine only one of the available dialects that one could select for use, depending on the speaker's context? And important is the complex question: Since there are so many variants of Koine, just whose Koine is to be considered 'standard'?

New Testament scholarship often gives the impression that Koine dominated the language scene. Greek and Roman scholars tend to be more circumspect and see Koine as a second language for the majority of people. Thomson, for example, says, 'Koine was spoken as a second language. It is uncertain how widely it was known in the countryside, but except in some of the cities it did not replace the native language' (1960, 35).

It has to be seriously considered, then, that many—if not indeed the majority—in early Christian communities spoke or understood Greek *as a second language*. When they heard the Gospels or the letters of Paul being read to them, they heard them either through whatever competency they had in Greek or through a translator. It cannot simply be assumed that Greek was understood by all.

So, the notion that Koine Greek was a 'universal language' needs balance. This is not an easy task, given that there are ample data to support the claims made of that dialect. The Egyptian papyri, the New Testament, other Greek literature, inscriptions and epitaphs, all give the impression that

the Koine dialect of Greek was ‘common’ across cultural borders. More careful scholarship will admit that much of this evidence comes from artifacts of the elite—the educated, literate, and wealthy—rather than of the great majority of the population. As Deissmann, who championed the papyri and ostraca of Egypt as illustrative of the language of the lower-classes, admits:

Of course among the inscriptions and papyri of that time there are very many (a majority in fact of the inscriptions) that do not come from the lower classes, but owe their origin to Caesars, generals, statesmen, municipalities and rich people. But side by side with these texts, particularly in the papyri and ostraca, lies evidence of the middle and lower classes (1965, 9).

Most literates in the Mediterranean world probably could communicate in a dialect of Greek. In some cases, there could well have been a touch of wanting to appear ‘trendy’. As Russell says, ‘In a number of cities the local dialect or language would still be spoken by some, but just as it was fashionable to “dress with the times” and keep up with cultural trends, so it was essential for all educated men, and indeed for any who had even a modicum of interest in culture, to speak the Greek tongue’ (1982, 86).

When a second language is used as a communication code, that language inevitably is spoken and used with the accent, grammatical structures, vocabulary, and most important of all, the constructed worldview of the speaker’s first language. Given that among the elite oratory was held in high regard, the matter of accent and pronunciation is not insignificant. How one *sounded* was important. It might have been something that Paul felt, since his Corinthian audience saw his letters as ‘weighty and strong’, but his speech (λόγος) as ‘something to be disdained’ (2 Cor. 10:10). He might have been less comfortable speaking Greek than he was writing it.

Strabo was aware that language variations and abilities were more than a simple matter of accent. Speaking of barbarian speakers, he astutely observed,

When all who pronounced words thickly were being called barbarians onomatopoeically, it appeared that the pronunciations of all alien races were likewise thick, I mean of those that were not Greek. Those therefore they called barbarians, in the special sense of the term, at first derisively, meaning that they pronounced words thickly or harshly; and then we misused the word as a general ethnic term, thus making a logical distinction between the Greeks and all other races. The fact is, however, that through our long

acquaintance and intercourse with the barbarians this effect was at last seen to be the result, not of a thick pronunciation or any natural defect in the vocal organs, *but of the peculiarities of their several languages* (κατὰ τὰς τῶν διαλεκτῶν ιδιοτήτας) ... (14.2.28; italics mine).

Initially, there were many and various Greek dialects, and the ancients themselves were aware of these dialect differences, as indicated by the existence of verbs such as αἰολίζειν, ἄττικίζειν, δορίζειν, ἰωνίζειν, all of which could be contrasted with ἑλληνίζειν, a term initially limited to those who were 'Hellenes'. While the idea of being 'Greek' and of a 'Greek language' existed in people's minds, the various dialects remained. Quintilian says the Greeks have many dialects (plura ... loquendi genera, Inst. 1.5.29). Carl Darling Buck (1955 [1928]) identified some twenty-two Greek dialects, based largely on the inscriptional evidence.

The language situation was very complex. Murpurgo Davies summarizes,

There is no evidence before the Hellenistic period for a standard language used in Greece for either the purposes of literature or those of communication. There is on the other hand some evidence for a complicated pattern of dialect switching ... and for an extensive passive knowledge of different dialects. The linguistic forms used differ extensively from region to region but the patterns of use and understanding create links between the different dialects and contribute to mark them off as a unit which can be contrasted with non-Greek languages (2002).

Dialects of a language are often indicators of prestige and status. Attic, for example, was regarded as the dialect of the orator, of the 'classy' writer and speaker, and so of the educated and elite. Many dialects were undoubtedly regional and local. While *poleis* might have been deliberately constructed on a Greek model, and a 'common' Greek dialect was part of that structure, the further one moved outside of those structures and into the villages and rural communities, the less 'common' was the Greek and the more were vernaculars used. Given that Christian communities were also to be found in κώμαι and χώραι (compare Matt. 10:11; Acts 8:25; Pliny, Ep. 10.96.9; Justin, Apol. 1.67), this is not an insignificant matter when trying to determine language usage among Christians.

I wish to emphasize for New Testament scholarship that even if Koine became 'the standard language' in the Hellenistic period, dialect switching and dialect register remained, as did also many of the vernacular languages.

To make matters more complex, the Koine dialect itself was not static. It had its roots in Attic, but like all living languages in constant interaction with other languages, it absorbed vocabulary and grammatical features from the environment in which it was used. In fact, according to Moulton, Kretschmer argued that *oral* Koine contained elements from the Boeotian, Ionic and North-West dialects more than it did from Attic. While he probably overstated the case, the influence of the other dialects is noticeable (1904, 313-314). There was fluidity in Koine as it developed and changed, and it certainly did not instantly become the standard or common Greek dialect. It was a long process. And, as Moulton says, ‘In this process naturally those features which were peculiar to a single dialect would have the smallest chance of surviving, and those which most successfully combined the characteristics of many dialects would be surest of a place in the resultant “common speech”’ (1904, 311).

The interaction with and influence of barbarian languages was true for all the Greek dialects, not just the Koine. The more one lives in communication with others, the more one’s language is influenced. The language can be so ‘adulterated’ that a language-elitist like Dionysios of Halicarnassus could complain:

By living among barbarians many others have soon forgotten [ἀπέμαθον] all their Greek heritage, so that they neither speak the Greek language nor observe Greek customs ... Those Achaeans who are settled near the Euxine sea prove my point; for, though originally Eleans, descendants of the most Greek people [ἐκ τοῦ ἑλληνικωτάτου γενομένοι], they are now the most savage of all barbarians (Rom. Ant. 1.89.4).

The various Greek dialects survived the rise of Koine. Valerius Maximus says that when P. Crassus went to Asia Minor (in about 130BCE), ‘he was careful to master the Greek language that divided as it was into five branches he learned each of them thoroughly in all its parts and aspects ... in whatever dialect one of them applied at his tribunal, he gave his ruling in the same’ (Memorab. 8.7). This might suggest that the dialects were not necessarily mutually understandable; it clearly implies that there was not always one dialect that was used in the courts of Asia Minor. It is also noteworthy that ‘the scholia are unanimous in including the Koine among the five dialects’ (Morpurgo Davies 2002, 163). This common listing of Koine as just one of the five dialects of Greek calls into some question the standardization of Greek and the ‘common’ nature of Koine.

While the written, elite form of Greek tended towards standardization, the evidence that the same thing happened with the spoken language is far less certain. Tatian, who was somewhat sensitive to charges of barbarisms in Christian writings, was aware of the living dialect variations within oral Greek and of the influences from barbarian languages:

... the way of speaking among the Dorians is not the same as that of the inhabitants of Attica, nor do the Aeolians speak like the Ionians. And, since such a discrepancy exists where it ought not to be, I am at a loss whom to call a Greek. And, what is strangest of all, you hold in honour expressions not of native growth, and by the intermixture of barbaric words (βαρβαρικαῖς φωναῖς) have made your language (διάλεκτον) a medley (Address to the Greeks I).

At the beginning of the third century, Clement of Alexandria still divided the Greek language into its five dialects, and he too was conscious of the many barbarian languages still in existence:

A dialect is a mode of speech which exhibits a character peculiar to a locality, or a mode of speech which exhibits a character peculiar or common to a race. The Greeks say that among them are five dialects (διαλέκτους)—the Attic, Ionic, Doric, Aeolic, and the fifth the Common; and that the languages of the barbarians (τὰς βαρβάρων φωνάς), which are innumerable, are not called dialects, but tongues (γλώσσας, Strom. 1.21.142).

In any case, Greek speakers did not all shift into Koine. There is clear evidence that North-West Koine Greek persisted into the Common Era in Boeotia, in the Peloponnese, and in Crete; and that the Doric dialect 'showed the greatest resistance to Koine Greek' (Palmer 1980, 190). Pausanias knows that, in his time (ca 170 CE), Doric was used in the Peloponnese (4.27.11; 5.15.12). Pliny knows of contemporary Dorians, Ionians and Aeolians living in Paphlagonia along side of *barbari* (N.H. 6.2.7). And besides the maintenance of regional Greek dialects, there were also elite Greeks advocating Attic, a move that began with Dionysios of Halicarnassus near the turn of the Era and continued through to the third century, as is indicated by Sextus Empiricus, and beyond. Swain notes an intensification of the 'polarization between the language of the educated and the non-educated' (1996, 409). He believes there was an obsession with language 'due to the elite's need to give itself a clearer and more readily definable identity' (1996, 409). The prestige language in oratory and writing was, for some, Attic; but 'it never supplanted the educated Hellenistic

standard in general communication' (1996, 410). On the other hand, there are indications that Attic was not only the domain of the orators and writers longing for some past golden age of language. Aulus Gellus reports an incident when he was dining at Athens and an eight-year old slave boy of Attic birth was ordered to do something. The boy replied 'in Greek and excellent Attic Greek at that' (17. 8. 7). In other words, native Attic Greek speakers were still to be found in Athens in the middle of the second century, and they still taught their children to speak Attic, at least in certain language contexts.

The matter of register deserves further comment. Sextus Empiricus noted that no one speaks in common practice like orators do in the law-courts, because they would be ridiculed if they did. Even orators themselves spoke differently in court than they did with their friends (Ad Math. 2.58). He also argues that the different sorts of speech should preserve their integrity (Ad Math. 1.176). When one speaks with the *philologoi*, a more sophisticated, scholarly language should be used (1.235); but when one is speaking to slaves, appropriate vocabulary should be used. So, for example, instead of using the Greek word ἀρτοφόριον (bread-basket), masters should ask slaves for the πανάριον (from the Latin, *panarium*), 'even if it is barbarian' (1.234). On that principle, I suggest that the Semitisms and Latinisms in Mark could say more about the social class of the audience than they do about the Greek language competency of the author. And can some of the variations that are apparent in the Koine of other New Testament writers also be attributed to language register? A rather delightful example of language register is given by Sozomen. The fourth century bishop Triphyllius had occasion, in his discourse at a synod, to quote the text, 'Take up thy bed and walk,' and he substituted the more-refined word 'couch' (σκήπτους) for the word 'bed' (κράββατον). Another bishop, Spyridon, reacted indignantly, 'Are you greater than he who uttered the word 'bed,' that you are ashamed to use his words?', and walked out (H.E. 1.11.9).

In summary, the status and use of the Greek language, in the first century CE at least, was complex and fluid. Various Greek dialects were maintained, and the gradual rise of Koine did not replace them by simply fusing or merging them all. Nor did Greek of any kind simply overwhelm other languages.

Traditional Languages in the Imperial Period

Clearly, the language terrain of the Greek and Roman world was not smooth. A considerable amount of language-mixing took place as local tribal groups intermingled with other foreign groups as a result of military rewards, recognition for civic patronage, forced settlement, or the placement of slaves and of prisoners of war. Marriages, in particular, led to a mixing of languages or to bilingualism. As Martial and Juvenal testify, the attraction to the bigger cities also saw mixed language populations in places like Rome, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, and Smyrna. In these places, people formed guilds and associations partly on the basis of their common kinship and language. It is plausible to suppose that some Christian communities in these cities were divided into—and even by—various and different language groups.

In Asia Minor, Lydian, Carian and Lycian were the major known local language groups, especially along the western seaboard. They were ancient Anatolian languages which had been influenced by association with Assyrians, Persians, Egyptians and others, through military, political and commercial contact. Greek, however, was the dominant language in the Ionian cities like Priene, Miletus, Ephesus and Colophon. But even there, Ionian Greek itself was spoken in various dialects. Valerius Maximus says that Mithridates (ca 60 BCE) learned the languages of the twenty-two nations in Asia that were under his rule so that he could speak to his subjects without using an interpreter (8.7.16).⁸ Aulus Gellus says it was twenty-five languages (17.17.1). While these authors probably exaggerate and flatter Mithridates' linguistic ability, they reflect with some accuracy the diversity of languages and dialects in Asia Minor.

There are also signs that language-mixing had taken place in some areas of Asia Minor. Carian provides a good case in point. Strabo knows it as a living language and says that it 'has extremely many Greek words mixed up with it' (14.2.28). Nor was the language confined to Asia Minor. Strabo knows that the Caunians (near Rhodes) 'speak the same language as the Carians' (14.2.3), and he notices the mobility of the Carian language-speakers and the impact it had on their use of Greek:

8 Interpreters were commonly used in courts, and especially in the army and in military and political communications.

The Carians roamed throughout the whole of Greece, serving on expeditions for pay. Already, therefore, the barbarous element in their Greek was strong, as a result of their expeditions in Greece; and after this it spread much more, from the time they took up their abode with the Greeks in the islands; and when they were driven thence into Asia, even here they were unable to live apart from the Greeks, I mean when the Ionians and Dorians later crossed over to Asia (14.2.28).

Things do not appear to have changed much in Asia Minor by the turn of the Era. True, Strabo claims that the annexation by the Romans meant that by his time, 'most of the peoples had already lost both their languages and their names' (12.4.6). But he also says that 'Lydians, Carians and Greeks' inhabited the region between Ephesus and Antiocheia in his own time (14.1.38), and that Lydians, Carians and Ionians, 'both Milesians and Mysians', and Aeolians inhabited the region between Magnesia and Tralles (14.1.42).

These are areas of early Christian communities, and it can be validly assumed that the language mix was present among them too. Where local languages appear to have survived most strongly is in Phrygia (a strong Christian region in later centuries) and in areas to the north-west around the Black Sea and in the north of Greece itself. In these regions, the language terrain again is difficult to map. Tribal groups had moved in and out of these regions for centuries. Typical, in this region, was the resettlement practice, as noted by Diodorus of Sicily: 'many conquered peoples were removed to other homes, and two of these became very great colonies: the one was composed of Assyrians and was removed to the land between Paphlagonia and Pontus, and the other was drawn from Media and planted along the Tanais' (2.43). The resettled peoples brought their languages with them. In these areas, the number of languages known to the Romans and Greeks is staggering, even if the figures are exaggerations. Strabo knows the area as belonging to the *Caucasii*, of which, he says, there are seventy tribes all speaking different languages (11.4.6).

In Cybira in the Lycian region, Lydian, Solymian, Pisidian and Greek were all spoken (Ramsay 1895-97, 265). The Phrygian tongue, which has survived mainly in epitaphs, remained in use until the fifth or sixth century CE.⁹ Socrates (H.E. 5.23) tells of an early fourth century bishop who preached in Gothic and Phrygian: 'Selenas, bishop of the Goths ... [was] a

9 See Anderson (1899)

man of mixed descent; he was a Goth by his father's side, but by his mother's a Phrygian, by which means he taught in the church with great readiness in both these languages'. Obviously, then, Phrygian and Gothic were both living languages in some churches of the fourth century.

Strabo knows of various languages in use among the Cappodocians (12.1.1), and of the Galatian tribes having a common language (12.5.1). These regions later had large Christian populations. He was also aware that the Bithynians further north had close links with the Thracians and Mysians (12.3.3; 12.4.8). Mysian was originally an ancient western Anatolian language that survived well into the Common Era and was spoken in a number of regions, especially on the north eastern coast of Asia Minor. It later merged with both the Thracian and Dacian languages.

The Celts settled in Galatia around 300 BCE from the west and north-west. There were three major and distinct tribal groupings in the area. According to Strabo, the Galatians all spoke the same language (4.1.1). He says they were still speaking Celtic in his time (although they were also very familiar with Greek). Jerome wrote in the fourth century that the Galatians of Ancyra and the Treveri of Treves spoke the same language (Preface to Comment. in Epist. ad Gal. ii).

The Thracians were a very populous people, inhabiting the region largely in northern Greece, around the Black Sea and northern parts of Asia Minor. Strabo is aware that their language was alive and well in Mysia, Scythia and among the Getae and the Daci (7.3.10; 7.3.13). Sextus Empiricus knew that Thracian was still being spoken in his day (Ad Math. 1.218). It was a language closely related to the Phrygian language group, and was one of the languages spoken in Thessalonika. It was still a living language, especially among the Bessi, in the fourth century CE (Iordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths* 12.75). It was into that region that Ovid was exiled in the first decades of the Common Era. In his opinion, Greek had been so barbarized there as to make it sound like a foreign language. It is yet another example of language mixing. Ovid also worried that his Latin had become mingled with 'the language of the Pontus' (Tristia 3.14.43-52). He complains that 'the barbarian tongue knows not a Latin voice, and Greek is mastered by the sound of Getic' (nesciaque est uocis quod barbara lingua Latinae, Graecaque quod Getico uicta loquela sono est, 5.2.67-68). Though the region was 'a mixture of Greeks and Getae', the latter were dominant (5.7.11-12); 'a few retain traces of the Greek tongue, but even this is rendered barbarous by a Getic twang (in paucis remanent Graecae uestigia linguae, haec quoque iam

Getico barbara facta sono). There is not a single man among these people who perchance might express in Latin any common words whatsoever' (5.7.51-56).

In the region of Italy, along its south-eastern coast, for example, the Messapians, Apali, Daunii and Peucetii all maintained their language into the Common Era (Strabo 6.3.6; 6.3.11). More important, from the perspective of constructing early Christian communities, is the language context in Rome. Late in the first century CE, there were people from many parts of the empire who brought their languages with them, as Martial observes,

What race is so distant from us, what race is so barbarous, O Caesar, that from it no spectator is present in your city! The cultivator of Rhodope is here ... The Scythian ... is here; he, too, who quaffs the waters of the Nile nearest their springing ... The Arabian ... the Sabaeans ... the Cilicians ... the Sicambrians ... the frizzled Ethiopians. Yet though their speech is all so different, they all speak together hailing you, O Emperor, as the true father of your country (Epigrams, 10.3)

Juvenal disliked the influence of Greek in Rome, but he also detested other eastern influences and their languages:

I cannot, citizens, stomach
A Greek-struck Rome. Yet what fraction of these sweepings
Derives, in fact, from Greece? For years now Syria
Orontes has poured its sewerage into our native Tiber –
Its lingo and manners ... (Sat. 3.51-55).

A melting-pot of languages in Rome is also implied by Suetonius, who says that emperors like Julius Caesar presented 'stage-plays in every ward all over the city, performed too by actors of all languages' (Julius 39). Obviously, then, not everyone in Rome understood Greek, as Philostratus makes clear:

When he [Favorinus] delivered discourses in Rome, the interest in them was universal, so much so that even those in his audience who did not understand the Greek language shared in the pleasure that he gave; for he fascinated even them by the tones of his voice, by his expressive glance and the rhythm of his speech (Vit. Soph. 491).

If the Christians in Rome addressed by Paul mirrored the mixed language groups of wider Rome, then one might assume that Paul, who felt an obligation to Greeks and barbarians there (Rom. 1:14), needed someone to translate his Greek for the benefit of 'the barbarians' in the audience.

Later, around 200 CE, Sextus Empiricus, who lived in Alexandria and in Athens, was well aware that not everyone understood Greek: 'All men do not understand the speech of all—Greeks that of barbarians and barbarians that of Greeks, or Greeks that of Greeks or barbarians that of barbarians' (Ad Math. 1.37). Even dialectal differences were numerous: 'Both the Dorian and the Attic dialects are numerous' (1.89) with variations in pitch and tone. Sextus says in his day there were basically 'two kinds of Hellenism' (ἦδη δὲ τοῦ ἑλληνισμοῦ δύο εἰσὶ διαφοραί), 'one stands apart from our common usage and seems to proceed in accordance with grammatical analogy; the other conforms to the common usage of each of the Greeks and is derived from framing words and from observation in ordinary converse' (1.176). He is referring to the Attic and Koine dialects of Greek, and he clearly believes the latter to be 'good Greek', mainly arguing along today's common line that usage is what matters.

The survival of vernacular languages understandably is to be found commonly in religious rituals and practices. Quintilian refers to the 'language of the Salian hymns now scarcely understood by its own priests'. This is because 'religion forbids us to alter the words of these hymns and we must treat them as sacred things' (Instit. 1.6.40-41). This also could be the case with the Greek-speaking Christians, who preserved some Hebrew/Aramaic in their worship. It certainly was the case with many others. The Eleans sang traditional hymns in Doric (Pausanias 5.15.12). Near Coroneia in Boeotia, a woman daily offered a ritual prayer for Iodama 'in the Boeotian dialect' (Pausanias 9.34.2). Diodorus Siculus notes that on Samothrace an ancient language had once been used 'of which many words are preserved to this day in the ritual of their sacrifices' (5.47.3). Cumont refers to Phrygian rituals performed 'in a foreign language' in the confines of the Palatine in Rome (1911, 53). Harnack notes that in Lydia, in the temples of Anahita, the priests sang 'hymns which were barbaric and quite unintelligible to Greeks' (1908, 314).

And among the Greeks, there is some evidence that the vocabulary—and even larger parts of the language—of a ritual foreign in origin was incorporated into the language of its new cultural context. For example, according to Strabo, Thracian ritual and music was heavily influenced by its

Asiatic contact, and some of the musical instruments used in Dionysian rituals were still called by their 'barbarian names, nabras, sambycê, barbitos, magadis and several others' (10.3.17). He also notes that some Athenians in the time of Demosthenes used the language of the Phrygians in a Phrygian ritual: 'êvoe saboe', and 'hyês attês, attês hyês'. It appears that Strabo himself knows this language because he adds, 'for these words are in the ritual of Sabazius and the Mother' (10.3.18). Pausanias also knows from personal experience some Lydians in Hierocaesarea and Hypaepa who use a *magos*, who 'sings to some god or other an invocation in a foreign tongue unintelligible to Greeks, reciting the invocation from a book' (5.27.6). The language might well have been either Lydian or Persian.

Clearly, the language map was complex, fluid and dense. It is a very reasonable assumption that Christian communities reflected that complexity.

Language Evidencee from the New Testament

The New Testament itself reveals glimpses of the language environment of its writers and audiences. Of course, it was written in Koine Greek, albeit with differences in style and 'correctness'. Obviously, the New Testament authors assumed either that their audiences could understand Greek or that someone would translate for those who could not. It needs also to be said that the language choice the writers had was very limited indeed. In a culture where honor and reputation and status were high in one's aspirations, the ability to communicate in written Greek gave prestige, status, and importantly, authority to the very text being heard and to its author. The New Testament authors were probably aware of this factor when they wrote in Greek to their mainly illiterate audiences. The use of the prestige language bolstered their authority.

There is an occasional hint that some Christian communities did have some non-Greek speakers. As mentioned, Paul's use of the phrase 'both to Greeks and to barbarians' (Rom. 1:14) might reflect the standard two-fold division of peoples, a division largely made along language lines. Paul, then, felt that he had an obligation to Greek speakers and to non-Greek speakers in Rome. And in Col. 3:11, the writer implies that among his Christian audience there are 'Greek and Jew ... barbarian, Scythian'. 'Barbarians' indicates those in the community who, at best, spoke Greek only poorly, if at all; 'Scythians' was a general term used by the Greeks as a single designation for many and various peoples who came from the north around

the Black Sea (see Strabo 1.2.27; Pliny N.H. 4.12.81). In Colossians, the term probably refers to any non-Jewish and non-Greek language speakers in Asia Minor and its eastern and northern surrounds.

Further, there is evidence that some Christians prayed in the vernacular. John Chrysostom even thought that tongue-speaking meant speaking in another known language, such as Thracian, Scythian, Latin, and Persian—an indication he knew Christians who prayed in those languages.¹⁰ Clement of Alexandria says, 'men confess that prayers uttered in a barbarian tongue are more powerful' (Strom. 1.21). The language of the heart comes out in religious expression.

The Pentecost narrative in Acts 2 suggests that Jews in the places mentioned spoke native languages. It might be noted that many of the regions listed were on the fringes of the hellenized world and so were less likely to have been influenced by Greek and Latin. It is quite possible that Luke was aware that there were Christians in these areas by his time and that they had 'heard in [their] own tongues the mighty works of God' (Acts 2:11). There is also the well-known narrative in Acts, where the locals of Lystra are said to cry out in their own Lycaonian language (Λυκαονιστί Acts 14:11). Finally, the 'barbarians' of Malta (Acts 28:2) presumably did not speak Greek as their first language. Archaeological evidence suggests they spoke some form of Punic.¹¹

Languages in Worship

Presumably, the Christian communities of the first century predominantly used Greek as their language of worship. That assumption is made on the basis of Jewish practice; on the assumption that Koine Greek was commonly enough understood; on the premise that if there were a multilingual Christian community, a single language is likely to have been adopted to hold them together, and Greek is the most likely language to have served that purpose—in other words, Greek became the 'church language'; and on the basis that all the New Testament writings were written in Greek.

But there are signs that other languages were also used in worship. It is well-known that Christians retained some Aramaic loan-words in their

10 *Homilies of St John Chrysostom on the First Epistle of St Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*. Homily XXXV. 4.

11 See Hemer 1989, 152.

vocabulary, words such as *maranatha*, *amen*, *hosanna*, *abba*, and *arrabon*. These loan words were nearly all used in times of prayer and thanksgiving. In fact, it is especially in prayer that languages other than Greek appear to have been used. It is also possible that many Christians initially used Hebrew and Aramaic, especially in the fixed ‘liturgical’ elements of their worship, such as readings and psalms. This might be especially true of those in the more eastern parts of the Roman empire, such as Cappodocia, Cilicia, Phrygia, Galatia, eastern Ionia, where the Persian and other eastern influences had been very strong and where Aramaic had been the *lingua franca*. We might note Josephus’s letter from Antiochos to Zeuxis (209BCE) concerning the forced transfer of two thousand Jewish families to Phrygia and Lydia from Mesopotamia and Babylonia (Ant. 12, 148-53). Presumably, these Jews brought their Hebrew and Aramaic with them, and their contact and communication with Jerusalem would have probably helped to maintain their identity through their language. It is feasible that many Jews in that eastern region of Asia Minor in the first century of the Era still used Aramaic in their synagogues, if not as their first language of communication. Choice of an ancient language like Hebrew might have been encouraged by the idea that such languages are changeless, unlike a contemporary vernacular which changes and in which words can take on different meanings. So, in some areas and at some times, Hebrew remained, even though everyone spoke Aramaic; in others, Greek remained even though most spoke Latin; in others again, Latin remained even though most spoke German or English or some other vernacular.

The Aramaic Targumim are an indication that translation was an acceptable—and probably a common—practice. The Scriptures were read in one language and then translated into the vernacular. The role and function of the *meturgeman* in the rabbinic period indicates too that translation was the norm in the synagogue. Given the acceptability of the practice, and given that in some Christian communities there were some non-Greek speakers, and given the evidence of such a practice in later churches, it is reasonable to assume that it also took place in the very early Christian churches.

Later Centuries

The language picture becomes clearer in later centuries. Christian apologists commonly claim that Christians ‘are not distinguished from the rest of mankind in country, speech or customs’ and ‘live in Greek and barbarian

cities'.¹² The implication is that they spoke the dominant local language. There is also ample evidence that many Christians were uneducated, illiterate, rural, and 'barbarian' in their language; that is, they did not speak Greek, or if they did, they spoke it very poorly. Justin, for instance, says some Christians are 'uneducated and barbarous in speech' (First Apol. 60). Justin also claims, with hyperbole, 'there is not one single race of men, whether barbarians or Greeks, or whatever they may be called, nomads, or vagrants, or herdsmen living in tents, among whom prayers and thanksgiving are not offered through the name of the crucified Jesus' (Dial. Tryph. 117). He infers that such 'prayers and thanksgiving' were offered by both Greek and barbarian language speakers. Justin uses the expression 'prayer and thanksgiving' elsewhere to include invocations and hymns (πομπὰς καὶ ὕμνους, First Apol. 13). Given the nature of prayer, it would not be surprising to find Christians praying and singing hymns in their own vernacular, and Justin suggests that this was the case.

Irenaeus implies that Christians used various languages in the transmission of the tradition when he says, 'although the languages of the world are varied, the meaning of the Christian tradition (ἡ δύναμις τῆς παραδόσεως) is one and the same' (A.H. 1.10.2). He also explicitly speaks of Christians who were both illiterate and barbarian speakers, who did not understand Greek. Importantly, he also implies that other native languages were used orally to preserve the tradition:

To which course many nations of those barbarians who believe in Christ do assent, having salvation written in their hearts by the Spirit, without paper or ink, and, carefully preserving the ancient tradition, believing in one God ... Those who, in the absence of written documents, have believed this faith, are barbarians, so far as regards our language ... If any one were to preach to these men the inventions of the heretics, speaking to them in their own language, they would at once stop their ears ... (A.H. 3. 4.2-4).

It is plausible that in earlier generations of Christians, those who were illiterate—and we would have to assume that they were many—orally 'preserved the ancient tradition' in their own languages. To do that implies, of course, that translation took place in the process. The Hebrew or Greek 'texts' were probably the starting points, but for many the tradition was passed on orally in the local vernacular. For example, in the *Recognitions*,

12 The Address to Diognetus 5:1-5 is a good example.

Clement has heard Barnabas teaching in Rome and was attracted by ‘the word of truth’, and so he requests of Barnabas: ‘Only expound to me the doctrine of that man who you say has appeared, and I will arrange your sayings in my language, and will preach the kingdom...’ (1.11). It is difficult to overestimate the significance of the oral transmission of stories and teachings in the early Christian movement.

Origen also provides evidence for the use of local languages, again in the matter of prayer. Answering Celsus’ charge that Christians seek for divine help by calling upon barbarous names, Origen writes,

Any one will be convinced that this is a false charge ... when he considers that Christians in prayer do not even use the precise names which divine Scripture applies to God; but the Greeks use Greek names, the Romans Latin names, and every one prays and sings praises to God as he best can, *in his mother tongue*. For the Lord of all the languages of the earth hears those who pray to Him in each different tongue, hearing, if I may so say, but one voice, expressing itself in different dialects. For the Most High is not as one of those who select one language, barbarian or Greek, knowing nothing of any other, and caring nothing for those who speak in other tongues (Contra Celsum 8.37).

There is no suggestion that this is an innovation in Christian practice. Origen echoes Justin’s observation that people commonly prayed and sang in their mother tongue. Again, it is reasonable to assume that this was also a common and accepted practice in even earlier generations among Christians who were ‘barbarian’.

In the early fourth century, there are indications that the Christian scriptures had been translated into different languages. Eusebius says,

He [God] gave them [the apostles] moreover, all this excellency and power, that they should compose and complete Books; and ... that they should be received throughout the whole creation, in the languages of both the Greeks and barbarians, and, that in all nations they should be taught, and believed, as containing the written words of God (Theophania 3.28).

He seems to be aware, possibly, of both written and oral translations of the Gospel of John, ‘whose words have, through the Gospel which was delivered by him, also enlightened the souls of men—which has been *translated into all languages*, both of the Greeks and barbarians, and is daily preached in the ears of all nations’ (Theophania 4.7; compare also 4.9).

Chrysostom makes similar claims of John's Gospel,

Are not these things [Greek philosophies] with good cause extinct, and vanished utterly? But not so the words of him [John] who was ignorant and unlettered; for Syrians, and Egyptians, and Indians, and Persians, and Ethiopians, and ten thousand other nations, *translating into their own tongues* the doctrines introduced by him, barbarians though they be, have learned to philosophize (Gospel of John, Homily 2.5).

Theodoret, a fifth century bishop of Cyrrhus, writes similarly, 'Every country that is under the sun is full of these words and the Hebrew tongue is turned not only into the language of the Grecians, but also of the Romans, and Egyptians, and Persians, and Indians, and Armenians, and Scythians, and Sauromatians, and briefly into all the languages that any nation uses' (Therapeut. 5.66). In his Church History, Theodoret writes of fourth century monks at Zeugma, some of whom sang hymns in Greek, others sang them 'in their native tongue' (presumably, Syriac; H.E. 5).

There is also evidence that translators were used in Christian worship in Jerusalem in the fourth century. The pilgrim Egeria, who witnessed the Easter services at Jerusalem about the year 385, makes this interesting observation:

In that province some of the people know both Greek and Syriac, while some know Greek alone and others only Syriac; and because the bishop, although he knows Syriac, yet always speaks Greek, and never Syriac, there is always a priest standing by who, when the bishop speaks Greek, interprets into Syriac, that all may understand what is being taught. And because all the lessons that are read in the church must be read in Greek, he always stands by and interprets them into Syriac, for the people's sake, that they may always be edified. Moreover, the Latins here, who understand neither Syriac nor Greek, in order that they be not disappointed, have (all things) explained to them, for there are other brothers and sisters knowing both Greek and Latin, who translate into Latin for them.¹³

The practice of reading or preaching in one language while another translated was not limited to Jerusalem. Procopius, born in Jerusalem, reared in Syriac, acted as an interpreter for the church in Scythopolis (P.G. XX.1459). And Theodoret, speaking of John Chrysostom, says,

13 Translation from M.L. McClure and C. L. Feltoe (1919).

Appointing presbyters and deacons and readers of the divine oracles who spoke the Scythian tongue, he assigned a church to them, and by their means won many from their error. He used frequently himself to visit it and preach there, using an interpreter who was skilled in both languages, and he got other good speakers to do the same. This was his constant practice in the city ... (H.E. 30)

It would seem that Chrysostom was practicing something that others had done before him, in the synagogues and presumably also in the churches. He himself preached in correct Attic, and the entire worship at Antioch was in Greek. But he also had non-Greek, native Syrian language speakers in his congregations. At Constantinople, the lections were read in Gothic, but Chrysostom ‘preached to them in Greek, while an interpreter repeated his words to them in their own language’ (Robertson 1904, 100). At Antioch, Christians from the rural regions, ‘a people foreign to us in language’, joined in with city Christians for a martyr festival (On Statues, Homily 19.2).

As mentioned earlier, Socrates knew of Selenas, a bishop of the Goths, ‘a man of mixed descent; he was a Goth by his father’s side, but by his mother’s a Phrygian, by which means he taught in the church with great readiness in both these languages’ (H.E. 5.23). This clearly indicates what I believe to have been a common situation. Many Christians lived in multilingual communities and were taught the faith in languages other than the formal, official language of the region or of the church itself. While the evidence is clearer from later centuries, the situation is most likely to have been the same in earlier Christian communities.

Conclusion

The Hellenistic world was a multilingual one; a fact that is too easily ignored in studies of the context of early Christian communities. While much of the very earliest Christian literature was in Greek, it is a questionable assumption that all Christian audiences knew and understood Greek—the evidence suggests that at least some did not, and needed, probably, to have ‘texts’ translated for them. Some, if not many, were illiterate in their vernacular, and used Greek as, at best, a second language, and only in certain social contexts. The oral traditions of the Gospel were communicated in many different languages, probably from the very beginning.

While evidence of vernacular usage in Christian worship practices is stronger from the later centuries, there is nothing in that evidence to suggest that this was an introduced phenomenon. The reasonable inference is that such was the case from the very earliest days of the Christian movement. Certainly, the evidence is strong that in the fourth century, some Christians in the empire heard the gospel and the Christian scriptures in their own languages. They also sang hymns and prayed in those languages. There is also good evidence that in the earlier centuries, local languages were used in prayer and in songs to the praise of God. There is also some evidence that illiterate Christians of the early generations of the movement maintained and passed on the tradition in an oral form in their vernacular. It is highly likely that such communication of the gospel, especially in story form, was common. Finally, there are hints within the New Testament itself that prayers, particularly, were offered also in languages other than Greek, and that Luke was himself aware of Christians in many parts of the empire who had heard in their own local languages 'the mighty works of God'.

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