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The Bible was originally written in the ancient languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek over a period of many centuries. Although sometimes referred to as “dead” languages (because they are not commonly spoken in the modern world), all three of these languages are very much alive. Though they’ve changed a lot since biblical times, descendants of these languages are still actively used today in the same parts of the world the events of the Bible happened in. And of course, even the ancient words are alive with the Holy Spirit flowing through them. This article will give a basic explanation of the Bible’s original languages — and why they matter for understanding the Bible today. Of course, a single blog post won’t be enough to actually learn Greek or Hebrew — that would take years of careful study! But learning a little about them can provide invaluable background to the cultures and civilizations God chose to receive his unique revelation. And it can help clarify some of the challenges translators face to make the words of Scripture readable in modern English, without changing — or losing — the depth and nuance of their meaning. Note: This post has been updated and expanded to add clarity, provide additional examples, and other improvements throughout. The Old Testament was written almost entirely in Hebrew, the ancient Middle Eastern language spoken by the Jewish people. A few parts of the Old Testament — namely, Daniel 2:4b–7:28 and Ezra 4:8–6:18 and 7:12–26 — were written in Aramaic. Hebrew was the language spoken by the ancient Israelites, and what most of the Bible (and almost all of the Old Testament) are written in. It’s part of the Semitic family of languages, which also includes Aramaic (see below) and Arabic. These languages are read right-to-left (unlike English, which is left-to-right). They are also unique in that most of their words are based on a triliteral root: three letters (typically consonants) which stay “rooted” while the letters around them shift to change tense, add possessives or plurals, and otherwise modify the word. While this triliteral root makes it easier to quickly recognize related words, it is closely related to another feature of Hebrew (and other Semitic languages) that is not easy: they are not traditionally written with any vowels at all. Because ancient languages also didn’t typically use spaces in writing, this makes reading the Old Testament in its most ancient, original form extremely challenging. MGNRDNGVRTHNGLKTHS (imagine reading everything like this) — backwards — for hundreds of pages (or scrolls)! Aramaic is a descendant of Hebrew that was widely spoken in the Middle East in the centuries leading up to the birth of Jesus. In fact, Aramaic was Jesus’s native language — the one he used to deliver his teachings to his disciples. It is still spoken by a few scattered communities in the Middle East today. Biblical Hebrew stopped being used long before New Testament times as it gradually evolved into Aramaic. Later, as Jews increasingly assimilated into local communities in Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere, both languages faded from common use in favor of local dialects. But Hebrew remained in use liturgically in Jewish communities (most of whom continued to read the Scriptures in their original languages) until it was intentionally revived by European Jews in the late 19th to early 20th centuries. Today it is the national language of Israel and is spoken by over 9 million people worldwide. Ever wonder why Bibles often write “LORD” in small capitals instead of normal uppercase/lowercase? One place where Hebrew’s lack of written vowels plays a truly critical role is in God’s name, which in the Hebrew Bible is written יהוה or YHWH. This name (often called the Tetragrammaton, which just means “four letters”) occurs over 6,000 times in the Old Testament and in every book except Esther, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. But here’s the thing: no one knows how it’s pronounced. In Rabbinic Judaism, after the first Temple was destroyed in 586 BC (2 Kings 25:8-17), it became forbidden to pronounce God’s holy name. When any of those passages were read aloud, the name was replaced with the word Adonai, meaning “the Lord.” After centuries of this practice, when vowels were finally added to Hebrew scrolls in the early Medieval era, the vowels that should be used had long since been forgotten. So in some cases the transcribers simply took the vowels from Adonai and inserted them into YHWH. The result was something like “Yehovah.” Today some Christians use a version of this pronunciation — most commonly Yahweh or Jehovah — to refer to God by name. But it’s still considered forbidden by most Jews. And, because it’s likely that those aren’t actually the correct vowels, many Christians, too, are concerned with the possibility of blaspheming God by addressing him with a name that isn’t his. And that is why nearly all English Bible translations, even today, simply replace YHWH with “the LORD.” The New Testament was written in Greek — specifically, in a dialect called Koine (or common) Greek, to distinguish it from the more complex, sophisticated Greek of ancient Athens and Sparta. Why “common”? And why wasn’t it written in Jesus’s (and his disciples’) own language of Aramaic? After Alexander the Great conquered Judaea around the 330s BC, the region became increasingly influenced by Greek culture and language. By the time of Jesus — when the area was under Roman rule — the entire eastern Mediterranean spoke some form of Greek (in addition to their native tongues). Its widespread use made Greek a convenient choice for anyone trying to communicate or do business across cultures. However, since many of these people spoke it as a second language, it became mixed with many different regional dialects to create a simplified, standardized version of the Greek compared to what was spoken in Greece itself. (This is actually very similar to how American English evolved in the early colonies.) So, when Jesus’ disciples began traveling to spread the Good News of his resurrection, they mostly used Koine Greek to reach the widest population they could — even if it wasn’t the language they used with each other. In some cases, like the Gospel of Mark, the unique writing style shows how the story was originally told in Aramaic, and then written down in Greek as it spread beyond the region of Galilee where Jesus lived and performed his miracles and ministries. One of the telltale signs of this in Mark is the habit of starting nearly every sentence with “and” — a common storytelling technique in Aramaic, but not in Greek. Of course! Greek remained widely spoken in the eastern Roman empire, then the Byzantine empire, for hundreds of years after the New Testament was written. After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453, its use was considerably diminished. But it remains the national language of Greece and is spoken by over 13 million people worldwide. The language has changed considerably since New Testament times, but most Greek speakers are still able to read Koine, much as we might still read Shakespeare or the King James Bible. It may surprise you to learn that none of the Bible was written in Latin — despite Judaea being under Roman rule. Though parts of the Bible started being translated into Latin soon after they appeared in Greek, a complete Latin Bible didn’t exist until the early 400s AD, when Jerome completed his Vulgate. The Vulgate caught on quickly and became the exclusive way the Bible was read and transmitted in western Europe for centuries. The first complete translation of the entire Bible into English was Wycliffe’s Bible, released in the late 1300s. (And available to read on Bible Gateway!) John Wycliffe and his followers based their translation on the Vulgate, since the original Hebrew and Greek texts were still unavailable in the West. Because it had to be hand-copied and distributed, it didn’t reach a wide audience, but it was still enough to earn Wycliffe a condemnation for heresy 30 years after his death. After that, it was over 100 years before another comprehensive attempt was made to translate the Bible into English. William Tyndale published his English New Testament in 1526 using the brand-new printing press… and was martyred 10 years later for the effort. The first English Bible to really catch on with the masses was the Geneva Bible of 1560, which was used by the first pilgrims to America. Why “Geneva”? Because the translators were hiding out in Switzerland so they wouldn’t meet Tyndale’s fate back in England. Their Bible proved so popular, however, that King James felt compelled to finally make an “authorized” English version. Released in 1611, it became the King James Version we all know and love today. The world has changed a lot in the thousands of years since the Bible was written. Making its ancient words comprehensible to a modern English reader is an enormous challenge, filled with countless choices about exactly the best way to render any given word or phrase. In addition to the example of the Tetragrammaton above, here’s one more example (among thousands) that translators of the Bible have to contend with: “our daily bread.” This phrase, part of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13, is one of the best-known in the entire Bible, memorized by millions of Christians around the world by the time they can read and write. What could possibly be ambiguous about daily bread? In the original Greek of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:11, the phrase is “Τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν τὸν ἐπιούσιον” (ton arton hēmōn ton epiousion). Here’s how it breaks down: Ton means “the.” Arton means “bread.” Hēmōn means “ours.” Epiousion means… well, no one knows for sure. Outside of the parallel passage in Luke 11:3, the word isn’t found anywhere else in ancient Greek — we’re talking thousands and thousands of documents. So, what did Jesus mean by it? (Or rather, what did he say in Aramaic that became “epiousion” in Greek?) The King James translators (and Tyndale before them) supplied “daily,” based mostly on an early Latin translation of the passage. But there isn’t really any reason to assume that’s what it means. A much more popular theory in the early church (including Jerome and Augustine) was that it meant something like “supersubstantial” — or spiritual — and referred to the bread of the Eucharist. This is still one of the preferred interpretations in the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. Other scholars, both ancient and modern, have suggested “necessary,” while still others have proposed “of tomorrow” (or “for the future”). But regardless of the translation or meaning you prefer, the point is that, in English, you have to pick one. When you read Matthew in its original Greek, however, you can sit much closer to the mystery — just as Christians have been doing for thousands of years — and wonder, what did God mean by that? After all, the words he chose are no accident. Hopefully, this post has given you a better understanding of the languages the Bible was written in: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek — including some of the challenges that go into translating those languages for a modern, English-speaking audience. Of course, taking the time to learn even one of those languages, let alone all three, is far beyond what most of our schedules would allow. Fortunately, there are great resources available to help you understand the original meanings of the Bible, with limited or no linguistic training. Better yet, why not try all three? Sign up today for Bible Gateway Plus and get access to dozens of Bible study resources such as Study Bibles, commentaries, and encyclopedias — including the NIV Reverse Interlinear — all for less than a pack of highlighters. Note: a few chapters of the books Ezra (ch. 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26) and Daniel (ch. 2:4 to 7:28), one verse in Jeremiah (ch. 10:11, and a word in Genesis (ch. 31:47) are written, not in ancient Hebrew, but in Aramaic. Aramaic is about as closely related to Hebrew as Spanish is to Portuguese. However, the differences between Aramaic and Hebrew are not those of dialect, and the two are regarded as two separate languages. How was the KJV translated? Here is how the KJV came about: 54 college professors, preachers, deans and bishops ranging in ages from 27 to 73 were engaged in the project of translating the KJV. To work on their masterpiece, these men were divided into six panels: two at Oxford, two at Cambridge, two at Westminster. Each panel concentrated on one portion of the Bible, and each scholar in the panel was assigned portions to translate. As guides the scholars used a Hebrew Text of the Old Testament, a Greek text for the New. Some Aramaic was used in each. They consulted translations in Chaldean, Latin, Spanish, French, Italian and Dutch. And, of course, they used earlier English Bibles—at least six, including William Tyndale's New Testament, the first to be printed in English. So what language did they use? Every language that was available to them. History of Bible translations The first translation of the English Bible was initiated by John Wycliffe and completed by John Purvey in 1388. The first American edition of the Bible was probably published before 1752. The New Testament was originally written in Greek. This claim is not particularly controversial among biblical scholars, though some have argued that parts of the New Testament were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic. Some popular writers and religious groups, however, have claimed that much or all of the New Testament was originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic. In this article, we will survey the evidence and arguments that lead the vast majority of scholars today to believe that the original language of the New Testament was Greek. The history of spoken and written languages in first-century Palestine In order to identify the original language of the New Testament, it is important to understand the language situation in the first century AD. Before the exile of Judah in the early sixth century BC, Hebrew was the main spoken and written language in ancient Israel and Judah, and most of the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew. Under Persian imperial rule in the sixth through the early fourth centuries BC, Aramaic became the official language of government and most scribal education, and it gradually became the most common spoken language in the region. Hebrew and Aramaic are closely related languages of the so-called “Semitic” branch (of the Afroasiatic family), and they mixed and influenced each other to a large extent during this period. Some portions of the Old Testament were originally written in Aramaic, especially parts of Daniel and Ezra, as were some of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other early Jewish literature. With the conquest of Alexander the Great in the late fourth century, Greek gained prominence as the common language of government, trade, and elite culture throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, including Judea and Galilee. By the third century BC at the latest, the Jewish expatriate community in Egypt had largely lost the ability to speak Hebrew and/or Aramaic, and so they translated the books of the Hebrew Bible into their then-native Greek. These translations—collectively called the “Septuagint”—became the main Scriptures used in the Jewish diaspora, the Jewish people living outside of the land of Israel. Many Jewish works from the diaspora, as well as some from Judea, were also written in Greek in this period. Thus, by the time of the first century AD, the language situation in Palestine was very complicated and multilingual. Aramaic appears to have been the most common spoken language, especially among the working classes. Hebrew continued to be used for prayer and to compose religious texts, such as many of the Dead Sea Scrolls. And there is some evidence that Hebrew also continued to be used as a spoken language in some circles. Greek was widely spoken in the area as well, especially by Jews from higher socio-economic classes and those who had reason to interact with their Gentile neighbors. Thus, the language used for any spoken or written interaction depended on who was involved and the purpose of the conversation, and Greek allowed for the widest possible dissemination of written works throughout the Mediterranean world. Manuscript evidence Beyond this general linguistic background, the manuscript evidence is a crucial part of addressing the question of what language the New Testament was written in. Here, the evidence is unequivocal: the New Testament is a corpus of Greek compositions. The Institute for New Testament Textual Research has documented over five thousand Greek manuscripts containing parts (or all) of the New Testament, ranging from the second century AD into the early modern era. This Greek tradition ultimately was and is the source for all known translations of the New Testament into other languages, ancient and modern. This includes ancient translations into Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Ethiopic, Armenian, and Georgian. It also includes, of course, modern translations into countless languages around the world. In sharp contrast, there are no ancient Hebrew manuscripts of the New Testament whatsoever. Some late-antique Jewish polemical works do include Hebrew translations of parts of the New Testament, but the earliest extant Hebrew version of a complete New Testament book is the fourteenth-century version of Matthew included in a polemical work by the Jewish scholar Shem Tov. This Hebrew version likely pre-dated Shem Tov, but it has many elements from Latin and medieval vernacular languages that prove that it is a late translation ultimately derived from the known Greek Matthew, rather than reflecting an original Hebrew version of the book. (The books of the New Testament have also been translated into Hebrew on multiple occasions in modern times, but these are irrelevant for the question of the original language of the New Testament.) The situation with Aramaic is more difficult, since there are ancient copies of the New Testament in different dialects of Aramaic. Even after the first century AD, Aramaic continued to be widely spoken in the Eastern Mediterranean, Mesopotamia, and surrounding areas in a wide variety of local dialects. These dialects cannot exactly be considered “Jesus’ mother tongue,” because they changed considerably over time and varied significantly from place to place. Given the growth of Christianity in the East, it is no surprise that both the Old and New Testaments were translated into these dialects and revised multiple times between the second and the seventh centuries. These versions are usually called the “Syriac,” which is one of the most widely used and well-documented dialects of Aramaic. Another noteworthy translation was made into the Christian Palestinian Aramaic dialect, which has more Palestinian influence than the other versions. While these Aramaic New Testament versions were made already in antiquity, the scholarly consensus is clear that they were translations, mostly from the Greek, into later Aramaic dialects. They were not original Aramaic versions of the New Testament books. The fact that even the earliest Syriac translators had to rely on Greek manuscripts is a good indication that Hebrew or Aramaic copies of the New Testament were unavailable already in the early centuries AD. The manuscript tradition thus strongly indicates a Greek origin for all of the books of the New Testament. Church tradition of Hebrew or Aramaic originals Given the manuscript evidence, why do some argue for Hebrew or Aramaic originals for at least parts of the New Testament? One of the strongest reasons is church tradition. The ancient Christian historian Eusebius cited a Christian writer from the second century named Papias who claimed, “Matthew collected/arranged the sayings [of Jesus] in the Hebrew dialect/manner, and everyone translated/interpreted them as they were able.” This was understood by many early Christian writers to mean that the Gospel of Matthew was originally written in Hebrew and later translated into Greek. Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius, Augustine, Jerome, and others interpreted Papias’s statement this way. But as many modern scholars have pointed out, this brief statement contains many ambiguities that make it difficult to understand and assess its veracity: What does it mean that Matthew “collected/arranged the sayings”? Did he simply write a document collecting sayings of Jesus that was used as a source for composing the complete Gospels? Or does it mean that he wrote in Hebrew the entire Gospel of Matthew as we know it today, including all of the narrative? What does “Hebrew dialect/manner” mean? Some scholars interpret this as meaning simply that Matthew arranged the sayings in a typical Jewish way; and indeed Matthew is often thought to reflect a very Jewish–Christian understanding of the life and words of Jesus. But even if Papias was referring to composition in a Semitic language, it is not entirely clear whether it would refer to Hebrew or to Aramaic. In ancient texts, the word “Hebrew” could also be used to refer to the language we now call Aramaic, with “Hebrew” perhaps better understood as “the language typical of the Hebrews/Palestinian Jews.” And, finally, what does the word “translated/interpreted” mean in this context? In Greek literature it is used to refer to interpretation and exposition, sometimes but not always including translation from one language to another. Thus, while this early tradition undoubtedly merits attention due to its antiquity, it is far from obvious what Papias meant and whether he had accurate information. Indeed, there is no evidence that any early Jewish or Christian writer ever actually had access to a Hebrew or Aramaic original of Matthew, nor does anyone cite from such a hypothetical text. In the fifth century, the famous Christian textual scholar Jerome was sent to the Holy Land and tasked with translating the Old and New Testaments from their original languages into Latin. He came across an Aramaic gospel used by the Jewish–Christian sects of the Nazarenes and Ebionites, which he subsequently translated into Greek. These sects claimed that their gospel—also called the Gospel according to the Hebrews—was the original version of Matthew, written in Hebrew. Though initially intrigued, Jerome appears ultimately not to have been convinced, and he translated his Latin version of Matthew instead from the canonical Greek version. Other church fathers also discussed the contents of the Gospel according to the Hebrews, which is in many respects very far removed from the canonical Greek Matthew received in the orthodox Christian churches. At one point, Jerome cites a supposed saying of Jesus from the Gospel according to the Hebrews that cannot have been from an original Hebrew version, but seems to be dependent upon the Greek version of Matthew. In the Greek Gospel of Matthew, the author quotes John the Baptist saying that Jesus does not need to be baptized, and Jesus saying that it is necessary “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt 3:14–15), pre-empting the theological question of why Jesus would need to undergo John’s baptism of repentance if he was without sin. The Gospel according to the Hebrews cited by Jerome adds a non-canonical saying of Jesus in which he explicitly denies his need for baptism because of his sinlessness. This statement provides a clear safeguard responding to the theological problem first raised in the Greek Matthew, and it is implausible that such an important statement would have been left out in translation if the Gospel according to the Hebrews really had been the Hebrew original of Matthew. Thus, this “Hebrew gospel” can by no means be considered the Semitic original behind our canonical Greek Matthew; it appears to be a separate apocryphal gospel dependent upon Matthew. There is a similar claim that the second-century Christian philosopher and missionary Pantaenus found a Hebrew version of Matthew in India. The local Christians claimed that this was the original Hebrew of Matthew passed on by the apostle Bartholomew, but this is probably no more credible as evidence for a now-lost Hebrew original than the Ebionites’ Gospel according to the Hebrews. The latter example proves that such biased claims cannot be accepted uncritically, and there is no reason to think that Pantaenus was linguistically competent to evaluate the evidence himself. Thus, the evidence from tradition for a Hebrew original remains almost entirely dependent upon the ambiguous claims of Papias and assertions by certain sects about the priority of their own preferred gospels. And this applies only to the book of Matthew, not the other books of the New Testament, for most of which there is no early church tradition of a Semitic original at all. One other church tradition worthy of mention supposes that the letter to the Hebrews was first written by Paul in Hebrew or Aramaic and only later translated into Greek. But the early church’s theories about the origin of the letter to the Hebrews are conflicting and debated. Indeed, Origen, one of the few church fathers who actually knew Hebrew, already argued that the book’s high literary Greek style implies that Hebrews was first written in Greek by a very skilled writer. Language evidence for Hebrew or Aramaic Is there any linguistic evidence for the use of Hebrew or Aramaic in the New Testament? The answer is yes, especially in the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels. Like most Jews of the time in Palestine, Jesus’ first language was undoubtedly Aramaic. Often Jesus’ sayings are still preserved in Aramaic in the Greek New Testament and even modern translations. For example, in Mark 5:41, Jesus tells a little girl, Talitha qum(i), which is Aramaic for, “Little girl, get up!” In Mark 7:34, Jesus commands Ephphatha, “Be opened,” and the deaf man’s ears are opened. In Mark 15:34, Jesus cries out on the cross, Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”—which is an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew of Psalm 22:1. In John 1:42, Jesus calls Simon Cephas, which is the Aramaic word for “rock” and equivalent in meaning to the Greek word Petros (hence “Peter”). Jesus’ Aramaic sayings are not limited to personal interactions with others in stories, but are also evident in his teachings. In Matthew 5:22, Jesus commands his followers not to insult each other with the Aramaic word Raqa “empty-head.” In Matthew 6:24, Jesus says that one cannot love God and Mammon, the Hebrew/Aramaic word for “money/wealth.” The fact that these and other words of Jesus are preserved in Aramaic, even in otherwise Greek New Testament texts, suggests two things. First, they establish that they were indeed probably originally spoken by Jesus in Aramaic. Second, they suggest that the Greek texts of the Gospels are not all translations from a Semitic original. If the entire text of a Gospel had been in Aramaic, why would a translator have preserved these phrases in Aramaic instead of replacing them with their Greek translations like the rest of the text? If the Gospel was originally written in Greek, on the other hand, it makes sense why Aramaic sayings would occasionally be quoted in the original—often accompanied by translations—to provide the reader with a more authentic-feeling access to Jesus’ original words and to increase credibility by demonstrating the author’s ability to bridge the language gap between Jesus and the Gospel’s intended audience. If the entire text of a Gospel had been in Aramaic, why would a translator have preserved these phrases in Aramaic instead of replacing them with their Greek translations like the rest of the text? Additionally, scholars have noted examples of wordplay that suggest that certain sayings were originally delivered in Hebrew or Aramaic. For example, Matthew 1:21 says that Jesus would be so-named, because “he will save his people from their sins.” In Hebrew and Aramaic, “he will save” sounds like and has the same root (yasha’) as Jesus/Yeshua’. This reflects the common Old Testament practice of naming individuals with names that match the circumstances of their birth, but the obvious wordplay cannot come across in Greek. In another more subtle example in Matthew 3:9, John the Baptist says, And do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father,” for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. In both Hebrew and Aramaic, the words for stones (‘abanim/‘abnayya) and children (banim/bnayya, lit. “sons”) look and sound very similar. The meaning of this saying is adequately translated into Greek, but the poetic quality of the likely underlying Semitic wordplay is lost in translation. Because Hebrew and Aramaic were so closely related and intermixed in first-century Palestine, it is often difficult or even impossible to decide on which of the two languages sayings like this were originally produced. In other cases, scholars have noted that differences between the Gospels can be explained by different translations of a Semitic original. For example, in Matthew 23:26, Jesus commands the Pharisees to “cleanse” the inside of the cup and the plate. But in the parallel saying, Luke 11:41 quotes Jesus as saying that they need to “give alms.” This difference is puzzling to explain in Greek, but long ago Julius Wellhausen observed that in Aramaic “cleanse” is dakko and “give alms” is zakko, which not only sound very similar but may also have been spelled the same way in Aramaic. In this case, it is likely that Matthew and Luke differ because of different interpretations of the underlying Aramaic expression. The grammar and language of the Greek New Testament also reflect the influence of Semitic forms in other ways. One particularly striking example is how writers sometimes add an extra (redundant) pronoun where it is common in Hebrew and Aramaic, but not considered good Greek. For example, Mark 7:25 in the Greek literally reads “whose her daughter had an unclean spirit,” which is as awkward in the Greek as it is in English. Mark also begins most of his paragraphs with the word “and,” which is very odd for Greek texts but normal in Semitic usage. Other common grammatical structures in the Greek New Testament also seem to have been influenced by Semitic grammar, like: “Answering, Jesus said” (Matt 11:25) means “Jesus answered” “King of kings” (Rev 19:16) means “the highest king” “And it happened when he returned” (Luke 19:15) means “When he returned” “I desired with desire” (Luke 22:15) means “I eagerly desired” These kinds of expressions, even if not totally impossible in native Greek speech and writing, reflect the Semitic background of the writers of the New Testament. They do not indicate that the New Testament books were translated from Hebrew or Aramaic, however. Many of the New Testament authors were bilingual (or potentially even multilingual), so it would be no surprise for one language to interfere with another. And most of these Semitic features in the Greek of the New Testament were well-known to Greek-speaking Jews and God-fearing Gentiles through literal translations in the Septuagint. In a sense, they formed a sort of mixed biblical idiom that shaped how the New Testament writers spoke and wrote religious texts in the Greek language. This is similar to how a modern believer’s prayers or speech about religious topics might be influenced by the King James Version in ways that would sound odd to most modern English speakers (“How Great Thou Art”). Even more to the point, when modern worship leaders cry out “Hallelujah!” “Hosanna!” or “Amen!” it by no means implies that they know Hebrew or Aramaic. When modern worship leaders cry out “Hallelujah!” “Hosanna!” or “Amen!” it by no means implies that they know Hebrew or Aramaic. To summarize, there is much evidence for an underlying Semitic language (especially Aramaic) for parts of the Gospels, particularly in the sayings of Jesus. There is also considerable Semitic influence in the Greek language of many New Testament authors. But there is no linguistic reason to suppose that any of the complete Gospels or other New Testament books were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic in their entirety. Language evidence for Greek Why then do most modern scholars insist that the New Testament was originally written in Greek? We have already discussed how the presence of Semitic influence in the language of the New Testament need not indicate that the Greek texts were translated from Semitic languages. These “Semitisms” were very familiar to readers of Greek translations of the Old Testament and became thoroughly ingrained in their own Greek writing. Furthermore, it is important not to exaggerate these Semitic elements. While they may stand out in sharp contrast to what would have been considered proper classical Greek, the discovery of many thousands of Greek papyri in the past 150 years has radically changed scholars’ understanding of everyday Greek in the first century AD. While earlier scholars sometimes emphasized the uniqueness of Jewish Greek against that of classical authors, scholars can now see how the Greek of the New Testament fits comfortably within the common (or Koine) Greek spoken and written throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. Greek, as the lingua franca of the region, was often used in a simpler form than the classical authors and often reflected the influence of local customs and languages, but still remained recognizably Greek. This is exactly what we see in the Greek writings of the authors of the New Testament and other Jewish works of the period. In short, the books of the New Testament look just like other Greek writings from the period. On the other hand, the books of the New Testament do not look like translations from Hebrew or Aramaic versions of the books. Scholars actually know a lot about what Jewish translation from Hebrew or Aramaic into Greek looked like, because all the Hebrew Scriptures and many other works were translated into Greek before or around the first century AD. For most of these books, we know the text in both the original language and the target language (in this case, Greek) and can compare them word by word for many thousands of words to develop detailed profiles of how the translators worked. These “Septuagint” Greek translations are now a well-developed field of study, covering examples ranging from more to less literal and encompassing the idiosyncrasies of many individual translators. Even in the most free of these ancient translations, the Semitic base texts constrain and influence the translations to a much greater degree than could be supposed based on the Greek texts of the New Testament. The translations regularly mimic the simple sentence structures of their Semitic sources, whereas the New Testament texts tend to have the more complex sentences that are characteristic of Greek literary writing. Translations tend to have a limited range of Greek vocabulary and grammatical particles that conventionally correspond to Semitic words and usage, whereas the New Testament texts frequently have more varied vocabulary and use particles and expressions in ways that have no exact Semitic equivalents. Known translations also generally have a fairly consistent profile of translation technique throughout the entire translated book. In this regard, the greater evidence for Semitic language in the sayings of Jesus than in the surrounding narrative actually reinforces the argument that the entire Gospels could not have been written in Hebrew or Aramaic. If the Gospels had been translated in their entirety from Semitic originals, both the sayings and the narrative would have had a more consistent profile, rather than fluctuating back and forth between Semitic-sounding and proper Greek. Put simply, though the various books of the New Testament differ from each other in terms of style and level of writing, none of them looks like the known Greek translations from Hebrew or Aramaic texts from the period. Another important indication regarding the original language of the New Testament is that the authors often used Greek sources. Many books of the New Testament are filled with Old Testament quotations, and these are almost always cited from the Septuagint translations or revised Greek versions of the Old Testament texts. We cannot easily explain these away as just borrowing from previous biblical translations while translating the whole book, because the larger context sometimes depends on using the Greek text instead of the Hebrew. For instance, in Hebrews 10:5, the author cited Psalm 40:6 in the Greek tradition that has the word “body,” instead of the Hebrew text which reads “ears.” This reading from the Greek is important in the context of Jesus’ body being the perfect sacrifice, which shows that the author must have been composing the text in Greek. Furthermore, scholars have long argued that the similarities in Greek wording between the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are so close and extensive that some of them must have used the Greek text of one or more of the others as a source. The most common explanation is that both Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source, which is particularly important here, since Matthew is the one Gospel for which there is ancient speculation about a lost Hebrew or Aramaic original. If, as most modern scholars suspect, Matthew used the Greek text of Mark as his main written source and incorporated most of Mark in his Gospel, it makes little sense to think of the present Gospel of Matthew as a translation of a Hebrew or Aramaic gospel. A similar situation can be seen in the relationship between Jude and 2 Peter, one of which used the Greek text of the other as a main source for composing the text. The use of Greek sources by the New Testament authors is thus another strong indication that these works were originally written in Greek, rather than Hebrew or Aramaic. Scholars have also pointed out literary features in some passages that seem to work only in Greek. For example, in John 3 the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus hinges on the ambiguity in the Greek word anothen, which can mean either to be born “from above” or “again.” Jesus seems to be implying that this rebirth needs to be of heavenly origin by the power of the Spirit, a nuance which Nicodemus misses with his response about being born again to an earthly mother. The meaning of this text turns on the nuances of the Greek language it must have been spoken and/or written in, and it is perhaps not coincidental that here Jesus interacts in Jerusalem with a high-status Jewish leader with a Greek name who likely would have been very comfortable speaking Greek. Gospels versus letters To summarize, there is considerable evidence for Semitic languages in the Gospels, primarily in the sayings of Jesus, most of which were likely originally delivered in Aramaic (or sometimes possibly Hebrew). There is also significant Semitic influence in the Greek of the Gospels, but of the type that would be expected for Jewish authors who were bilingual and/or familiar with Greek translations of the Old Testament, rather than indicating that the Gospels themselves were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic. Thus, while Semitic traditions—whether oral or written—undoubtedly lay behind the Gospels, it is very unlikely that any of the four canonical Gospels were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic in anything like their current forms. Only Matthew has support from church tradition for a Hebrew original, but this tradition is ambiguous at best and dubious at worst. Luke and Acts are also sometimes supposed to have been written (at least partially) in Hebrew because of frequent Semitisms, but this is highly unlikely, since most of these were well-known from Greek translations of the Old Testament. Luke’s Gospel and Acts are actually written in a relatively high level of smooth Greek overall, and they are explicitly written for a Greek-speaking Christian with the Greek name Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). Furthermore, like Matthew, Luke clearly used Greek sources, and he positioned himself among the best in the Greek tradition of history writing (cf. Luke 1:1–4). Only Matthew has support from church tradition for a Hebrew original, but this tradition is ambiguous at best and dubious at worst. In short, claims that any of the canonical New Testament Gospels as we know them were originally composed in Hebrew or Aramaic are baseless and contrary to the linguistic evidence of the texts themselves. Any Semitic sources that may have been used by the Gospel writers appear to have been limited in scope and must have been thoroughly reworked in the composition processes of these works. Perhaps a good parallel to this might be the Jewish War by the Jewish historian Josephus. In his prologue to the Greek text, Josephus claims to have written about the war previously in Aramaic for his compatriots, whereas now he has written his book in Greek. Much like the New Testament, however, the Greek book we have today is so thoroughly Greek that it must have differed considerably from any lost Aramaic precursors. Hebrew or Aramaic originals for the rest of the New Testament books are even more implausible than for the Gospels. Though these books also contain Semitisms and sometimes even Hebrew or Aramaic words—for example, Maranatha (“Our Lord, come!”) in Aramaic in 1 Corinthians 16:22; Abaddon (“Destruction”) in Hebrew or Aramaic in Revelation 9:11—their texts are so thoroughly Greek in structure and idiom that there can be no serious doubt about their original language. Furthermore, the epistles were explicitly written to Christian believers in mixed Jew–Gentile congregations outside of Palestine, who could hardly have been expected to understand Hebrew or Aramaic. Many of the individuals mentioned had Greek or Latin names, and Paul’s secretary who helped him write the letter to the Romans had the Latin name Tertius (Rom 16:22). The letter “to the Hebrews”—which some ancient authors supposed was originally written in Hebrew—depends on Greek Old Testament translations and is written at such a high level of literary Greek that no serious linguistic case can be made that it is a translation from a Semitic original. The book may have been written primarily to Greek-speaking Jews (“the Hebrews”), but it was almost certainly not composed in the Hebrew language. Conclusion In light of all of this, it is clear that the scholarly consensus that the New Testament was written in Greek is correct. The Aramaic (and perhaps sometimes Hebrew) words of Jesus and his earliest followers still grace some pages of the New Testament, either explicitly or implicitly. But by no means can they bear the weight of argument necessary to claim that any of the canonical Gospels as we know them today was originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic. Whatever the underlying sources, the language of the canonical Gospels—and even more so the rest of the New Testament—is Greek through and through. This makes perfect sense in historical context, given Jesus’ mission to take the good news to all the nations. Related articles How to Use Greek Lexicons The Big Story of the New Testament Tagged asaramaicgreekhebrewministry cornernew testament In third-century B.C.E. Alexandria, Egypt, one of the last of the pharaonic rulers—Ptolemy Philadelphus II—wanted his Jewish subjects to have access to their own holy books. Because of the far-reaching conquests of Alexander the Great, Greek had become the language of the eastern Mediterranean, and Egypt was no exception. Those who identified themselves as Jewish could no longer read their own Scriptures, and Philadelphus was keen to help. More importantly, he wished to collect a compilation of these writings, in Greek, for Alexandria’s famous library, which boasted a copy of every book in the known world. Calling together seventy of his best scholars, he charged them with a massive undertaking: each one was to work independently, carefully translating Hebrew texts to Greek. And then, according to legend, an extraordinary thing happened. When Ptolemy compared the seventy different translations, he found that each copy was precisely like the next. There could be no explanation other than that God himself directed the translators in their work. This new Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, known as the Septuagint (from the Greek for seventy), was perfect, authoritative, useful, and—above all—divinely inspired. Is this legend true? Some maintain that it is. Many scholars, however, prefer to consider this story not for its factual merit but for what it tells us about the historical moment. For one thing, it reveals anxieties over the issue of words and texts and their relationship to ideas of holiness. Does the Bible “mean” something different in its original language than it does in translation? This story about Ptolemy Philadelphus II suggests the opposite: in whatever language, the Bible is still a holy book because God directs the work of the translators. Most of the Hebrew Bible was written in Hebrew, including all of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. But around 250 Bible verses (of a total of 23,000)—primarily portions of the Book of Daniel (Dan 2:4-7:28) and fifth-century B.C.E. official court documents embedded in Ezra (Ezra 4:8-6:18, Ezra 7:12-26)—are in a related language, Aramaic. At different times in history, Aramaic transformed from an international language that united people living in different parts of the Assyrian Empire, to the dominant language of Jews living in the Babylonian captivity, to the official language of the western half of the Persian Empire (500 B.C.E.). During this time, Hebrew was used less and less frequently until it came to be almost exclusively a religious or sacred language. Still today, Jews study and memorize the Torah in Hebrew while worshiping in the synagogue; Hebrew is the language of the liturgy, and no synagogue is complete without at least one Torah scroll, painstakingly hand copied in Hebrew and kept carefully protected at the front of the congregation. Although Jews may read the writings of the Torah in English as part of the Hebrew Bible or Tanak—it is only in its original Hebrew that the text is particularly sacred. Did Alexandrian Jews of the third century B.C.E. consider their Septuagint sacred even though the Hebrew writings were translated into Greek? We don’t know the answer to this question, but we do know that for centuries, the Septuagint was the predominant form in which Jews read their Scriptures. Even those Jews of ancient Palestine who spoke primarily Aramaic among themselves knew their Scriptures in Greek, not Hebrew. When the apostle Paul quotes Scripture, it is the Septuagint that he cites. But what about the New Testament? It’s written in a form of Greek that most educated people of the first century C.E. used every day, known as Koine (“common”) Greek. It was simpler in its style, syntax, and grammar than classical Greek, and it was probably easier for non-native speakers of Greek to learn. While Jesus and his disciples would have spoken Aramaic (in fact, Jesus speaks Aramaic in certain passages of the New Testament, in words like maranatha and ephaphtha and in his cry “Eloi Eloi…”), the Gospel writers wrote in Koine Greek. This means that our earliest Christian literature has already translated Jesus’ words from Aramaic. Some have wondered if this means that Jesus’ words have been altered in meaning, or even if the meaning of his original words could have been lost. Many Christians counter, however, that the process of translating Scripture from Aramaic to Greek to English (or whatever language) was divinely inspired and guided by God and thus can have no mistake. In its most strict form, this idea is called biblical inerrancy or biblical infallibility, and it is a hallmark of American fundamentalist and Evangelical Protestantism. This view holds that there are no such things as errors because scribes and scholars translated the Bible from its original languages. In essence, this principle has as its basis an idea very similar to the legend of the Septuagint’s translation: whatever language the Bible is in, God guided people to make sure that its sacredness was not lost in translation. Although numerous editions, or versions, of the Bible have been made over the past two millennia, many American fundamentalists and Evangelicals hold only one translation to be authoritative: the King James Version (or KJV; also known as the Authorized Version, or AV). King James I of England commissioned 47 of the finest scholars in the land to translate the Old Testament from Hebrew and Aramaic and the New Testament from Greek. The impetus for the new translation, which was completed in 1611, came from the Church of England’s push to produce not just an English translation but one that conformed to the

example, in Mark 5:41, when Jesus raises a young girl from the dead, he says, "Talitha koum," which is an Aramaic phrase that Mark transliterates into Greek. In other words, the author of the Gospel of Mark sometimes retains Aramaic phrases that were significant in the context of the narrative.Furthermore, these Semitic traces, as Dr. Ehrman notes in his bestseller Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium provide another criterion for establishing the authentic parts that could be traced to the historical Jesus.Early Translations of the Christian Bible: from Old Latin to VulgateThe Latin version of the Christian Bible arose in the heart of the Roman Empire and eventually became the most important translation. It also reflects early Christian steps from the original language of the Bible. To understand the development of this process we need to comprehend basic historical circumstances. When Emperor Constantine (c. 280.-337. C.E.) shifted his capital to Constantinople, the Church in the east remained Greek-speaking. In other words, Christians there continued to read Septuagint and the New Testament in Greek - the original language of the (Christian) Bible. Furthermore, eastern Christianity had a tremendous continuity of language and literature. Consequently, the Greek written and spoken in the 6th century, for instance, was the same Koine Greek in which the New Testament had been originally written. The situation in the Western part of the Roman Empire, however, was different. In the absence of the emperor (since the middle of the 4th century), the bishop of Rome exercised supreme ecclesiastical and increasingly strong political authority.Moreover, as the East remained exclusively Greek, the West became increasingly Latin. The adoption of Latin as the official language of the Bible represented an important aspect of the growing cultural distance between Eastern and Western Christianity. This distance eventually led to a schism in the middle of the 11th century.The Earliest Latin Translations of the Bible The beginning stages of the Latin Bible in the West are obscure. Latin is the ancestral (Indo-European type) language of Rome. Already during the Republic and before Christianity ever emerged, Romans had developed a great literature in Latin (e.g. Cicero's Orations).We can speculate that the earliest Latin translations of the Bible appeared in the 2nd century C.E. However, it's not that clear where it happened. Most scholars believe that North Africa is the best hypothesis. It's an educational guess based on several key observations:Romans had many military colonies and merchants there who used Latin more than Greek.We know that Christianity spread across North Africa fairly quickly. There were, at least, seven Christian communities in the 2nd century C.E.The first documentary evidence of Christian writings in Latin dates to the end of the 2nd century. It's a text known as the Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs - an account of the trial of seven Christian men and five women in Scilla (a town in northwest Africa) who were offered the choice either of recognizing the cult of the emperor or death. Guess what they chose!Probably the most important Latin writer of Christian texts was Tertullian (c. 160.-225. C.E.) who was from Carthage (north Africa). The proliferation of many early Latin translations that scholars call "Old Latin" versions is remarkable. They show that the early Christians weren't at all bound by the original language of the Bible.As it turns out, such a proliferation caused the need for a standard Latin translation (Vulgate) done by Jerome. We'll get back to him soon! Although he translated from the Hebrew original, Jerome was subtle in the manner in which he rendered key prophetic texts at certain points. For him, it was crucial to retain the validity of Jesus' prophecy fulfillment. In Isaiah 7:14, for instance, Jerome's Vulgate translates the Hebrew "almah" (young girl) as "virgo" (virgin). Thus, he pushed the Hebrew in the direction of Septuagint to preserve the Christian meaning of the text! Additionally, many Christian authors of Late Antiquity recognized that these "Old Latin" versions suffer from poor quality. They were far from the language the Bible was first written in. An excellent example of this comes from the Old Latin manuscript known as Codex Veronensis.Check out noticeable and important differences in the prologue of John (1:12-13) between the original Greek text and the Codex Veronensis.My translation (based on the original Greek text) My translation (based on the Latin text of Codex VeronensisBut whosoever accepted him (ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτόν), he gave the power to become Children of God, to those who believe (τοῖς πιστεύουσιν) in his name who were begotten not of blood nor of the flesh nor of human will but out of God.He gave them power (dedit eis potestatem) to become Children of God to those who accepted him, who was born (qui natus est), not of blood nor of the flesh nor of the will of man but out of God. Notice the singular (qui natus est) in the Old Latin version. It differs from the original language of the Bible which clearly identifies those (plural) who believe (τοῖς πιστεύουσιν) with those who were begotten. Why did this happen? This shift to the masculine singular in the relative clause makes the antecedent of that clause "the word of God" and, therefore, makes the statement about "being born not of the blood…but of God" a statement about the virgin birth of Jesus. This serves as a compelling example of how scribes, driven by theological motivations, purposefully altered the scriptural text to accentuate their religious doctrines.If you want to know more about the world of early Christian scribes and the way they changed the text of the Bible, join Dr. Ehrman's new course "The Scribal Corruption of Scripture". As a renowned scholar of early Christianity, Bart provides captivating facts behind the story of who changed the Bible and why.Vulgate: An Accomplishment of the Century In response to the concerns about the variegated forms of Old Latin versions, Pope Damasus (c. 304.-384. C.E.) assigned his brilliant secretary Jerome the task of translating the Bible into a standard Latin version that became known as the Vulgate. Again, Christian religious authorities had no problem moving from the original language of the Bible as long as the translation had linguistic and theological merits. Damasus could hardly pick a better person for this job. Jerome was a savant, an amazing scholar well-versed in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin. Furthermore, he was a prolific author who wrote numerous tractates, letters, and commentaries. In simple terms: Jerome was an intellectual superstar! He began with a revision of the Gospels using the original language of the Christian Bible (Greek) in 382 C.E. After that, revisers who worked under Jerome's supervision and guidance translated the rest of the New Testament. Jerome then turned to the Old Testament. But he began translating it into Latin by using Septuagint - a Greek translation. He translated the Psalms in that way thus creating an edition known as Gallican Psalter. However, Jerome soon became convinced that the original language of the Hebrew Bible was superior to the Septuagint. Consequently, he began a new, fresh translation of the Old Testament from the original language. This task occupied him for 15 years. The earliest form of the complete Vulgate we have dates from the 6th century. It's known as the Codex Amiantinus and it originally contained three copies of the Bible commissioned by the Abbot Ceolfrith in England. Jerome's version eventually became the standard Latin version and it lasted throughout the Middle Ages. It partially succeeded because of the ecclesiastical support. But the most important reason was the Vulgate's intrinsic quality both in linguistic and theological dimensions. To put it more bluntly, Jerome was an amazingly skilled translator and theologian. He had a deep insight into the meaning of Greek and Hebrew. Jerome even consulted with the Jewish rabbinic scholars on certain aspects of the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, his mastery of Latin enabled him to render Greek and Hebrew in a vigorous and idiomatic Latin that had genuine literary merit! The best illustration of Jerome's profound linguistic knowledge can be found in the introduction of Genesis: "In the beginning, God created heaven and earth". Jerome recognized the deep meaning of these verses and translated them as: "in principio creavit Deus caelum et terram".By using the phrase "in principio", Jerome brilliantly uncovered the meaning of the original Hebrew. It's not simply at "the start of things" but also as "the basis of everything". God created everything because He is the basis of everything there is. And the phrase "in principio" encapsulates both of these meanings. Have you ever wondered where the boundaries between history and myth lie in the Book of Genesis? Join Bart Ehrman's online course "In the Beginning: History, Legend, or Myth in Genesis?". You might be surprised by what you discover!Jerome's Vulgate became the source of liturgy for Christians during the Middle Ages. It was, the Bible of Western Europe from the 6th to the 16th century; from St. Benedict to Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation.Summing up conclusion The Bible, today translated into over 1200 languages, has a rich and intricate linguistic history. Our quest began with the intriguing question: "What language was the Bible first written in?" We've embarked on a journey that spans millennia, exploring the foundational languages of both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, and the fascinating paths they took.The Hebrew Bible, with its roots stretching back to the second millennium BCE, was primarily composed in the ancient Hebrew language. The original language of the (Christian) Bible was, on the other hand, Koine Greek - a lingua franca of the Roman Empire. Yet, Koine Greek doesn't stand alone; it carries hints of Semitism and Biblical Aramaic, notably within the Synoptic Gospels.In conclusion, the original language of the Bible holds a profound significance in understanding the history and development of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. While it may have started in ancient Hebrew and Koine Greek, the Bible's journey through translations and scribal influences left an indelible mark on the most popular and widely read book in history! TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE of the Historical Jesus!Think you know the Jesus of the Bible? Uncover the historical figure behind the texts! Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. 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