

# 11 The Greek of the New Testament

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## 1 Introduction

The New Testament has come down to us in Greek. But what kind of Greek is it? And why was it written in Greek in the first place? The Fourth Gospel informs us that when Jesus was crucified, Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: “Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews” (John 19.19: Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων). According to John, the sign was written in three languages: ἐβραϊστί, ῥωμαϊστί, ἑλληνιστί (John 19.20). The original meaning of ἐβραϊστί is, of course, “in Hebrew,” but in the New Testament it, like the expression τῇ ἐβραΐδι διαλέκτῳ (Acts 21.40, 22.2, 26.14), usually stands for “in Aramaic,” the home language of the Palestinian Jews and an important *lingua franca* in the Near East. As a matter of fact, Jesus is portrayed in the Gospel tradition as occasionally speaking Aramaic (cf. 3 below).

Ῥωμαϊστί means “in Latin,” the language of the foreign oppressors which never gained a strong foothold in Palestine outside the range of influence of the Roman civil and military administration. This explains the extremely low frequency in the New Testament of Latin loanwords, which are practically confined to the administrative sphere (cf. 2 below). This is no surprise, since Greek was the official language of the Roman presence in the eastern empire, hence the inclusion of a translation of the sign on the cross “in Greek,” ἑλληνιστί. The use of Greek as a *lingua franca* was so widespread that it was a second language for many Palestinian Jews (see also 1v.10) and the first, if not the only, language of the Jews of the western diaspora, as can be gathered from the following passage from the Fourth Gospel: μὴ εἰς τὴν διασπορὰν τῶν Ἑλλήνων μέλλει πορεύεσθαι καὶ διδάσκειν τοὺς Ἕλληνας; “Surely he is not planning to go to the Greek diaspora and teach the Greeks?” (John 7.35). The ethnonym Ἕλλην is probably used here in the sense of Ἑλληνιστής “Greek-speaking Jew” (see also vii. c.1). (Ἕλλην is twice

attested as a variant reading for Ἑλληνιστῆς in Acts 9.29 and 11.20.) This explains why the New Testament, like the Septuagint, had to be written in Greek if it was to reach the western diaspora Jews. This brings us back to the question posed at the beginning of this section: what kind of Greek was the New Testament written in?

Already in antiquity the language of the New Testament was considered to be somewhat peculiar, the language of “fishermen” (Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones* 5.2.17) or “sailors” (Origen, *contra Celsum* 1.62). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the problem of the nature of New Testament Greek crystallized out into two opposite extremes. On the one hand, the “Hebraists” emphasized the influence of the Hebrew Old Testament on the Greek New Testament. On the other, the “purists” believed that the New Testament was written in a pure Greek, uncontaminated with any foreign element. In the nineteenth century, the Hebraist position came to prevail. The Greek of the New Testament was seen as heavily Semitized under the influence not just of Jewish languages (Hebrew and/or Aramaic), but of Jewish thought and Jewish life in general. This led to the idea that the Jewish people at the time of Jesus did not speak and write ordinary Hellenistic Greek, i.e., Koine (see also IV.10), but a special “Semitic” dialect of common Greek, a “Jewish Greek” which was also the language of the New Testament and of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. As a result of the close relationship between the Septuagint and the New Testament, the phrase *Biblical Greek* gained in popularity, even up to the present day, when one still finds an occasional reference to the old metaphor of the “language of the Holy Ghost.”

Around the turn of the century, however, the German pastor Adolf Deissmann demonstrated that the language of the New Testament essentially reflects the vernacular Greek of the Hellenistic world, i.e., the koine. He collected ample evidence to show that New Testament Greek exhibits strong affinities not with the literary works of the time, but with the vulgar language preserved in the papyri, inscriptions, and ostraca. Deissmann’s theory is now commonly accepted, even though it is equally commonly accepted that there are varying degrees of Semitic interference in the Greek of the New Testament. However, the acceptance of Semitic interference has not led to a revival of the Hebraist position. New Testament Greek is no longer seen as illustrative of a particular dialect (“Jewish Greek” or “Biblical Greek”), but rather as belonging to one particular regional variety or substandard of

the Koine, i.e., the Syro-Palestinian Koine (see also IV.9, IV.10). The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to Koine features of New Testament Greek and Semitisms in the New Testament.

## 2 Koine characteristics of New Testament Greek

For matters of phonology and inflectional morphology, the reader is referred to the preceding chapters on Koine in general and on Syro-Palestinian Koine in particular (IV.6–IV.9). The best New Testament manuscripts postdate the original sources by several centuries and therefore cannot be used as direct evidence for phonological and (to a lesser degree) morphological developments in the Syro-Palestinian Koine of the first century. A number of these developments, particularly itacism and the leveling of vowel quantities, are relevant to the morpho-syntax, e.g., λύσει (future indicative) vs. λύση (aorist subjunctive), or λύομεν (present indicative) vs. λύωμεν (present subjunctive). Some (morpho)syntactic phenomena characteristic of the Koine are (see also IV.8): the expansion of the indicative at the expense of the subjunctive, the increased use of ἵνα with the subjunctive at the expense of infinitive clauses, the gradual decline of the optative and of the middle voice (especially in the formation of the future, e.g., ἀκούσω “I will hear,” ἁμαρτήσω “I will sin,” γελάσω “I will laugh,” κλάύσω “I will cry,” ῥεύσω “I will flow”), the incipient decline of the present tense in moods other than the indicative (especially the imperative), the expansion of articular infinitives to express cause, time, or purpose, the expansion of the accusative case, the rise of improper prepositions (e.g., ἔμπροσθεν “in front of,” ἐνώπιον “before,” ὀπίσθεν “behind”), and the generalized use of the negative particle οὐ “not” with the indicative vs. μή with other moods.

The correspondences between the vocabulary of the New Testament and that of the surrounding Koine are many. In the realm of derivational morphology, the following formations are extremely productive: verbs in -ίζω (e.g., γαμίζω “to give in marriage,” εὐνουχίζω “to make an eunuch of,” κολαφίζω “to beat,” σκανδαλίζω “to cause to fall, i.e., sin,” φυλακίζω “imprison”), -άζω (e.g., ἀγιάζω “to sanctify,” μονάζω “to separate oneself,” μυωπάζω “to be short-sighted,” πυροράζω “to be (fiery) red,” στυγνάζω “to be shocked”), -έω (e.g., ἀθετέω “to declare invalid,” αὐθεντέω “to have authority,” βαπτολογέω “to babble,” γρηγορέω “to be awake,” λιθοβολέω “to throw stones at”), -όω (e.g., δεκατόω “to collect,” δολιόω “to deceive,” δυναμιόω “to strengthen,” ἱκανόω “to make sufficient,” κραταιόω “to strengthen”) -εύω (e.g.,

αἰχμαλωτεύω “to capture,” ἀποδεκατεύω “to tithe,” θριαμβεύω “to lead in triumph,” ἱερατεύω “to hold the office of a priest,” στρατεύομαι “to serve in the army”), nouns in -ιον/-ίον, especially diminutives (e.g., ζιζάνιον “darnel,” ὀψώνιον “pay,” τεκνίον “(little) child,” ψωμίον “piece of bread,” ὠτίον “ear”), -μός (e.g., ἀγνισμός “purification,” βαπτισμός “washing,” ἔνταφιασμός “burial,” ἱματισμός “clothing,” καθαρισμός “purification”), -μα (e.g., ἀνάθεμα “devoted to the divinity” > “accursed,” βδέλυγμα “abomination,” γέννημα “product,” δόμα “gift,” θέλημα “will”), -τής (e.g., βαπτιστής “baptist,” ἑλληνιστής “Hellenist, Greek-speaking Jew,” εὐαγγελιστής “evangelist,” καθηγητής “teacher,” μεριστής “divider”), -σις (e.g., ἀγαλλίασις “exultation,” ἀποκάλυψις “revelation,” λύτρωσις “redemption,” μόρφωσις “embodiment,” νέκρωσις “putting to death”), and -ισσα (e.g., βασίλισσα “queen,” Συροφοινίκισσα “Syrophenician woman”).

In view of the vast territory over which the Koine was used, it is no surprise that numerous foreign words were borrowed, many of which had already been incorporated before the New Testament period, e.g., βύσσος “fine linen,” γάζα “treasury,” κράββατος “bed,” νάρδος “nard,” σάκκος “sack.” In the administrative sphere, a relatively small number of Latin words were borrowed (e.g., δηνάριον “denarius,” Καῖσαρ “Caesar,” κεντυρίων “Centurio,” λεγιών “legion,” πραιτώριον “praetorium”). But the Koine vocabulary was also enriched by giving new meanings to, or by extending the meaning of, old words, e.g., ἀδελφός (“brother” > “member of a religious community”), ἄριστον (“breakfast” > “meal in general”), βίος (“life” > “way of life”), δῶμα (“house” > “roof”), ἐπαγγελία (“announcement” > “promise”), λαλέω (“chatter” > “say”), μνημεῖον (“memorial” > “grave”), ὀψάριον (“tidbit” > “fish”), παιδεύω (“educate” > “chastise”), σταυρώω (“fence with stakes” > “crucify”), φθάνω (“anticipate” > “arrive”).

### 3 Semitisms in the New Testament

The text of the New Testament contains some instances of transcribed Aramaic words and phrases uttered by Jesus, followed by a Greek translation: ταλιθα κουμ, ὃ ἐστὶν μεθερμηνευόμενον· τὸ κοράσιον . . . ἔγειρε “*talitha koum*, which means: little girl . . . get up!” (Mark 5.41), εφφαθα, ὃ ἐστὶν διανοίχθητι “*ephphatha*, which means: be opened” (Mark 7.34), αββα ὁ πατήρ “*Abba*, Father” (Mark 14.36), and ελωι ελωι λεμα σαβαχθανι ὃ ἐστὶν μεθερμηνευόμενον· ὁ θεός μου ὁ θεός μου εἰς τί ἐγκατέλιπές με “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*”, which means: my God,

my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15.34 ≈ Matthew 27.46). It is therefore very likely that the so-called *κυριακὰ λόγια* were originally uttered in Aramaic. Matthew is said to have recorded these “sayings of the Lord” in Aramaic (Ἐβραϊδὶ διαλέκτῳ), and they were subsequently translated into Greek (Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.39.15). In some cases, it is suspected that Hebrew and/or Aramaic words and phrases are mistranslated, for instance the use of πόλις “city” instead of χώρα “land” in εἰς πόλιν Ἰουδα “into a city of Judah” (Luke 1.39), probably a mistranslation of Aramaic *mdyn*/Hebrew *mdynh*, which is ambiguous between “city” and “province” (cf. Acts 26.20, ἡ χώρα τῆς Ἰουδαίας “the province of Judaea”) or the use of ὅτι “that” instead of ᾧ “to him” in τίς ἄρα οὗτός ἐστιν ὅτι καὶ ὁ ἄνεμος καὶ ἡ θάλασσα ὑπακούει αὐτῷ “who is this man, whom even the wind and the waves obey” (Mark 4.41), where ὅτι reflects the Aramaic *d(y)* which can be translated either as a relative pronoun or as a subordinating conjunction in Greek.

It is no surprise, then, that there is, in varying degrees, Semitic interference in the Greek of the New Testament. But Aramaic is not the only candidate. The last quotation, citing Jesus’ cry from the cross, constitutes the Aramaic version of Psalm 22.2 (*ʾlhy ʾlhy lmʾ šbqtny*). The Hebrew version (*ʾly ʾly lmh ʾzbtny*) is preserved in *Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis*: ηλει ηλει λαμα ζαφθανει (Mark 15.34D = Matthew 27.46D, “*Eli, Eli, lama zaphthani?*”). This reading not only corresponds with the biblical Hebrew text, but it could also reflect the Mishnaic Hebrew version of Psalm 22.2. Mishnaic Hebrew is the language in which the texts of the Tannaim and of the Amoraim of Palestine and Babylon were written in AD 70–500. There is evidence that Mishnaic Hebrew was still used in first-century Palestine, but it is a matter of debate whether it was actually a vernacular or an artificially revived language. However this may be, it will be clear that there are at least two candidates for Semitic interference in the New Testament: first-century Palestinian Aramaic, Biblical Hebrew, and possibly first-century Mishnaic Hebrew. To complicate matters even further, Semitisms may be due to (conscious or unconscious) imitation of the translation Greek of the Septuagint, which probably outweighs all the other influences on the New Testament.

As far as vocabulary is concerned, the following words have been borrowed from Hebrew and/or Aramaic: ἀλληλουϊα “hallelujah” (*hllwylh*), ἀμήν “amen” (*ʾmn*), βάτος “bath” (*bt*), γέεννα “Gehenna” (*gy(?)hnm*), κόρος “cor” (*kr*), μάννα “manna” (*mn*), πάσχα “Passover”

(*phsh'*), σάββατον “Sabbath” (*sbt*), σατάν and σατανᾶς “Satan” (*štn*), σίκερα “strong drink” (*škr(?)*), ὕσσωπος “hyssop” (*ʒwb*), and ὡσαννά “hosannah” (*hws'n'*). The meaning of many words was modified or extended on the analogy of their Hebrew and/or Aramaic equivalent, sometimes following the Septuagint, sometimes apart from it: ἄγγελος (“messenger” > “angel”), ἀπαρχή (“first-fruits” > “first convert”), ἀποκάλυψις (“revelation” > “divine revelation”), βαπτίζω (“to dip” > “to baptize”), γραμματεὺς (“secretary” > “scribe”), δέησις (“entreaty” > “prayer”), διάβολος (“slanderer” > “devil”), διαθήκη (“will” > “covenant”), δόξα (“opinion” > “splendor”), ἔθνη (“peoples” > “Gentiles”), εἶδωλον (“image” > “idol”), εἰρήνη (“peace” > “salvation”), ἐκκλησία (“assembly” > “congregation,” “church”), ἔξομολογέω (“to confess” > “to praise”), εὐλογέω (“to praise” > “to bless”), κεφαλή (“head” > “chief”), κληρονομία (“inheritance” > “salvation”), λόγος (“word” > [also] “thing”), μάρτυς (“witness” > “martyr”), μετάνοια (“change of mind” > “repentance”), ὀφειλέτης (“debtor” > “sinner”), παρασκευή (“preparation” > “day of preparation”), παρουσία (“presence” > “coming, advent”), πεντηκοστή (“fiftieth [sc. part]” > “fiftieth [sc. day],” “Pentecost”), πνεῦμα (“spirit” > “Holy Spirit”), σὰρξ (“flesh” > “person”), χάρις (“grace” > “divine grace”), χριστός (“anointed” > “Messiah”), etc. Many of these words have acquired a distinctively “Christian” meaning, while others were created or their meaning deepened by Christian authors (see also VII.B.4), e.g. ἀγάπη “love (of God and Christ),” ἀντίχριστος “Antichrist,” ἀπόστολος “apostle,” δαμόνιον “demon,” διάκονος “deacon,” ἐπίσκοπος “bishop,” εὐαγγέλιον “gospel,” κόσμος “earth,” λόγος “Logos,” ξύλον “cross,” παραβολή “parable,” πρεσβύτερος “presbyter,” σκανδαλίζω “to cause to fall,” ψευδάδελφος “false brother,” ψευδαπόστολος “false apostle.”

Apart from the vocabulary, Semitic interference is perhaps most obvious in syntax. A word of caution is in order, however, since constructions have been claimed to be Semitic that are actually possible, although not frequent, in Greek. Among the more debated Semitisms are word order and style. The frequency of initial verb position is often said to be a Semitic feature, but investigation of contemporary and classical authors has shown that initial verb position is not an absolute, but rather a relative phenomenon, depending, among other things, on discourse type and the information status of the verb and the other words in the clause. Another feature often claimed to be Semitic is the frequency of postverbal placement of enclitic pronouns, by analogy with the pronominal suffixes in Hebrew and Aramaic. Research has again

shown that the increasing frequency of postverbal placement in the history of Greek is a natural tendency, which has led to the generalization of the phenomenon in a great number of modern Greek dialects.

Many other constructions owe their frequency, if not their existence, to Semitic interference. The use of (καί) ἐγένετο “(and) it came to pass” to open a narrative section corresponds to the Hebrew *(w)yhy* “when” (see also IV.10). Often (καί) ἐγένετο is followed by ἐν τῷ with the infinitive to express time corresponding to the Hebrew *b* + infinitive. This construction is characteristic of Luke (see Text [1]) and of Acts, e.g., καί ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ εἶναι αὐτὸν προσευχόμενον κατὰ μόνας συνήσαν αὐτῷ οἱ μαθηταί “and it came to pass when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him” (Luke 9.18); καί ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ εἶναι αὐτὸν ἐν μιᾷ τῶν πόλεων καὶ ἰδοὺ ἀνὴρ πλήρης λέπρας “and it came to pass when he was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy” (Luke 5.12). In the latter example, the use of (καί) ἰδοὺ (lit., “and behold”) to introduce a new topic corresponds to the Hebrew *(w)hnh*, especially when it is used without a finite verb following, e.g., ἔτι αὐτοῦ λαλοῦντος ἰδοὺ νεφέλη φωτεινὴ ἐπεσκίασεν αὐτούς, καὶ ἰδοὺ φωνὴ ἐκ τῆς νεφέλης λέγουσα “while he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said” (Matthew 17.5); καὶ ἰδοὺ γυνὴ πνεῦμα ἔχουσα ἀσθενείας ἔτι δεκαοκτὼ καὶ ἦν συγκύπτουσα καὶ μὴ δυναμένη ἀνακύψαι εἰς τὸ παντελές “and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years, and she was bent over and could not straighten up at all” (Luke 13.11). The use of the so-called periphrastic tenses ἦν συγκύπτουσα καὶ μὴ δυναμένη in the latter example has also been taken to indicate Semitism, e.g., ἦσαν δὲ ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ ἀναβαίνοντες εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα καὶ ἦν προάγων αὐτούς “they were on their way up to Jerusalem, and he was leading the way” (Mark 10.32); καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν μιᾷ τῶν ἡμερῶν καὶ αὐτὸς ἦν διδάσκων, καὶ ἦσαν καθήμενοι Φαρισαῖοι “and one day it came to pass that he was teaching, and Pharisees were sitting there” (Luke 5.17). Another Semitism is the omission of the article in constructions corresponding to the Hebrew “construct state.” In New Testament Greek the article is either omitted or used with both nouns, e.g., ἐκ περισσεύματος καρδίας “from the abundance of the heart” (Luke 6.45) vs. ἐκ τοῦ περισσεύματος τῆς καρδίας “idem” (Matthew 12.34); ἡμέρα κυρίου “the day of the Lord” (I Thessalonians 5.2) vs. ἡ ἡμέρα τοῦ κυρίου “idem” (II Thessalonians 2.2), ὀργὴ θεοῦ “the wrath of God” (Romans 1.18) vs. ἡ ὀργὴ τοῦ θεοῦ “idem” (John 3.36).

## Selected texts

[1] Luke 24.1–8 Nestle and Aland

24.1 Τῇ δὲ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων ὄρθρου βαθέως ἐπὶ τὸ μνήμα ἦλθον φέρουσαι ἅ ἡτοιμάσασαν ἄρώματα. 24.2 εὔρον δὲ τὸν λίθον ἀποκεκλισμένον ἀπὸ τοῦ μνημείου, 24.3 εἰσελθοῦσαι δὲ οὐχ εὔρον τὸ σῶμα τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ. 24.4 καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ ἀπορεῖσθαι αὐτάς περὶ τούτου καὶ ἰδοὺ ἄνδρες δύο ἐπέστησαν αὐταῖς ἐν ἐσθῆτι ἀστραπτούσῃ. 24.5 ἐμφόβων δὲ γενομένων αὐτῶν καὶ κλινουσῶν τὰ πρόσωπα εἰς τὴν γῆν εἶπαν πρὸς αὐτάς· τί ζητεῖτε τὸν ζῶντα μετὰ τῶν νεκρῶν· 24.6 οὐκ ἔστιν ὧδε, ἀλλὰ ἠγέρθη. μνησθητε ὡς ἐλάλησεν ὑμῖν ἔτι ὢν ἐν τῇ Γαλιλαίᾳ 24.7 λέγων τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ὅτι δεῖ παραδοθῆναι εἰς χεῖρας ἀνθρώπων ἀμαρτωλῶν καὶ σταυρωθῆναι καὶ τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ ἀναστῆναι. 24.8 καὶ ἐμνήσθησαν τῶν ῥημάτων αὐτοῦ.

24.1 On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. 24.2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 24.3 but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. 24.4 While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. 24.5 In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them: “Why do you look for the living among the dead? 24.6 He is not here, but he has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 24.7 ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’” 24.8 And they remembered his words. (Authorized Version 1611)