

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

III.

THAT CHRIST SPOKE GREEK.

THE next portion of the New Testament which claims our special consideration is the Epistle to the Hebrews. Taking for granted that the writing is a true epistle, and not a dissertation, and that its original language was Greek, and not Hebrew—both of which points are unanimously agreed upon by modern critics—we have to inquire to what *readers* it was originally addressed. This question has an obvious and important bearing on the controversy respecting the language then prevalent in Palestine.

Now, on looking into the Epistle itself, we seem at once to find satisfactory evidence of the justness of the conclusion naturally suggested by the title (*πρὸς Ἑβραίων*), that it was sent, in the first instance, to the inhabitants of the Holy Land. The familiarity which it presupposes, on the part of its readers, with the temple services, and with the whole enactments of the Levitical economy, as well as the danger which it constantly assumes they were in of attaching an undue importance to the peculiarities of Judaism, harmonize exactly with the belief that the Epistle was originally addressed to Palestine. And this accordingly has, in spite of one great difficulty to be immediately noticed, been the opinion of the vast majority of Biblical scholars. The ancients with one voice acquiesced in this conclusion. Clement of Alexandria, Jerome, Chrysostom, and others, all suppose the Epistle to have been addressed to the Christians of Palestine. And

in our own times, Hug, Tholuck, Bleek, Delitzsch, with many other eminent scholars, are of the same opinion. The whole complexion of the Epistle is generally felt to be such as necessarily suggests that it was at first intended for such readers as Palestine, or more properly Jerusalem, could alone specially produce; and particular allusions, such as that found in Chapter xiii. 12 (*ἔξω τῆς πύλης*), seem to lead naturally to the same conclusion.

But then, this Epistle having been written in *Greek*, how could it have been addressed to the inhabitants of Palestine, or still less, specifically to those of Jerusalem? Was not Aramaic their ordinary language, and could they have understood any other? Or, supposing that Greek was, to some extent, intelligible to them, would any one, who desired to obtain a favourable hearing from them, have addressed them in that language? Surely, their vernacular tongue would have been employed in such a case as that of our Epistle, which must, on many accounts, from its obvious purpose and express declarations, have been peculiarly distasteful to them; and we must therefore conclude that the Hebrews here addressed were not the inhabitants of Palestine, but some other community of Jewish Christians, to be sought for in a different part of the world.

Such is the great difficulty which has weighed with many modern critics, and induced them, in defiance of some very obvious considerations, to look about for some other body of Judaic Christians, to whom the Epistle might be supposed to have been addressed, than the Church in Palestine. The various devices which have been tried to escape the

difficulties require little more than to be stated in order to be condemned. In ancient times most of the Fathers avoided the perplexity which has been felt in modern times by first supposing, and then asserting, that the Epistle was not originally written in Greek, but Hebrew. Finding this hypothesis plainly negated by the phenomena presented in the Epistle itself, recent writers have been reduced to great straits. Moses Stuart finds a sort of refuge in the idea that the Hebrews addressed were those of Cæsarea. He cannot deny that the writing bears evident marks of having been intended for Palestinian Christians; but as Jerusalem, according to the common view, could not have furnished readers capable of understanding it, he has recourse to the political capital of Judæa, as a place in which the Greek tongue may be admitted to have been well understood. Conybeare and Howson, again, argue that "a letter to the Church of Palestine would surely have been written in the language of Palestine;" and think that, while this consideration above all others serves "to negative the hypothesis that this Epistle was addressed to a Church situated in the Holy Land," there are several circumstances connected with it which "point to another Church for which we may more plausibly conceive it to have been intended, namely, that of Alexandria." And Dean Alford expresses himself against the Palestinian designation of the Epistle on various grounds, among which we find the following:—"Not only is our Epistle Greek, but it is such Greek as necessarily presupposes some acquaintance with literature, some practice not merely in the colloquial, but in the schol-

astic Greek of the day. And this surely was as far as possible from being the case with the Churches of Jerusalem and Palestine." He is led therefore, for this among other reasons, to deny that the Hebrews of our Epistle were the inhabitants of the Holy Land; and by a chain of reasoning which few readers, if any, will deem satisfactory, he appears to himself to find them among the Jewish Christians of Rome.

Such are some specimens of the mazes of speculation in which Biblical critics have been involved, by supposing that it was necessary to seek for the readers specially addressed in this Epistle somewhere out of Jerusalem. On the one hand, it is obvious that none but Judaic Christians could have been primarily in the eye of the writer, and that the designation which the Epistle bears on its front, as well as several of the references which it contains, seem to point naturally to the Church of Palestine. But, on the other hand, the Epistle is written in Greek, and that of such a kind as to argue familiarity with that tongue on the part of its readers; and the Old Testament quotations are taken from the Septuagint, even when that version differs materially from the Hebrew. These facts excite no surprise and create no difficulty if the conclusion for which I plead be admitted. On the contrary, they harmonize with it exactly, and readily lend their aid to illustrate and confirm its correctness. But on the common supposition as to the prevailing language of Palestine at the time, the facts which have been mentioned prove exceedingly troublesome; and being felt to be incompatible with the belief that

the inhabitants of Jerusalem could have been intended as the primary recipients of this Epistle, they necessitate a search for the persons specially addressed in some other portion of the world.

Now, as experience has proved, it is certainly a very difficult thing to find a community of Christians anywhere outside of Palestine to whom the Epistle can, with any preponderating probability, be viewed as having been originally sent. Every Church, almost, which had any connection with Paul and his associates, has been fixed upon by different writers. Various lists of these may be found in the critical works on our Epistle, and are so comprehensive as pretty nearly to exhaust the geographical notices which appear in apostolic history. The following is the list presented by Alford: "Wall believed the Epistle to have been written to the Hebrew Christians of proconsular Asia, Macedonia, and Greece; Sir I. Newton, Bolten, and Bengel, to Jews who had left Jerusalem on account of the war, and were settled in Asia Minor; Credner, to those in Lycaonia; Storr, Mynster, and Rinck, to those in Galatia; Lyra and Ludwig, to those in Spain; Semler and Nösselt, to those in Thessalonica; Böhme, to those in Antioch; Stein, to those in Laodicea; Röth, to those in Antioch; Baumgarten-Crusius, to those at Ephesus and Colosse." It can scarcely be said that any one of these hypotheses possesses much advantage, in point of evidence, over the others. As their variety suggests, they have been adapted more from caprice than on any solid grounds of argument. Nor is it necessary to spend time in proving that the original destination of the Epistle could not have been either

Rome or Alexandria. The totally discrepant pictures given of the Roman and Hebrew Christians¹ sufficiently discredit the one hypothesis; while the fact that the converts in Alexandria were, in every sense of the word, *Hellenists*, is enough to set aside the other.

We rest, therefore, in the ancient opinion that this Epistle was addressed to the Jewish Christians in Palestine. In maintaining this position, I do not of course mean to assert that the Epistle was intended to be confined to any particular Church. Like all the other Epistles, it was meant to have an encyclical character, and to possess an enduring value. But this has no influence on the question now under consideration. That question simply is, Who were its *original* readers? And the answer which, following ancient testimony and internal evidence, I give to that question is, that it was primarily addressed to the Church in Jerusalem. But then we must of course believe that its author wrote in a tongue which he was sure his readers well understood; and thus we are again led by this Epistle to reassert very emphatically the proposition that Greek was then *thoroughly familiar* to all the inhabitants of Palestine.

I now proceed to subject the view for which I contend to a sort of cross-examination. There are several phenomena presented in the New Testament which have been felt perplexing, if not inexplicable, on the opinion which has generally prevailed as to the language usually employed by the Saviour and

¹ Cf. Rom. xv. 14 with Heb. v. 11, 12.

his followers ; and I desire now to employ these both as tests and evidences of the opposite theory, which it has been my endeavour to establish. The decisive proof of the validity of any hypothesis is that it explains *all* the phenomena in question. As Aristotle has remarked, "Everything connected with a subject harmonizes with the truth regarding it ;" ¹ and if we have, in fact, reached the truth respecting the point under discussion, we may justly expect that difficulties otherwise formidable will vanish when set in the light of it, and that, through its means, problems will be easily solved which remain insoluble on any erroneous hypothesis.

There is, then, one great difficulty which has been felt and acknowledged by some of those able and candid scholars who hold that Aramaic was the only language with which natives of Palestine could properly be said to be familiar at the time referred to ; and that is, how to account for the very considerable command of Greek possessed by all the writers of the New Testament, and by some of them more than others. The idea, long prevalent, of ascribing this to a miraculous interposition, is now, as was formerly remarked, universally abandoned. And the question then comes to be how a man like St. James, for example, who never, apparently, left Palestine all his life, should have been able to write such Greek as is found in the Epistle bearing his name. The diction and style of that Epistle are admitted, on all hands, to make a comparatively near approach to the classical models of Greek composition. Expressing the opinion which exists on this point among Biblical

¹ *Nic. Eth.* i. 8.

critics, Dean Alford remarks: "The Greek of our Epistle is peculiar. It is comparatively free from Hebraisms; the words are weighty and expressive; the constructions for the most part those found in the purer Greek." And he adds: "*The Greek style of this Epistle must ever remain, considering the native place and position of its writer, one of those difficulties with which it is impossible for us now to deal satisfactorily.*"

The sentence which I have printed in italics contains a candid admission of the difficulty which the style of this Epistle presents to every one who holds the prevalent views with respect to the relation then subsisting between the Greek and Hebrew languages in Palestine. To all who agree with the eminent writer quoted, that Aramaic was the prevailing language of the country, the problem which is suggested by the Greek diction of this Epistle of James must remain, as he frankly confesses, one of which it is hopeless to attempt the solution.

But should not the very fact of such a difficulty being felt, on the ground assumed by Alford and others, lead them to doubt whether, in standing where they do, they may not be in error? The hypothesis which they maintain with respect to the knowledge of Greek then possessed by the inhabitants of Palestine is one which must be tested by facts, and it confessedly fails when set face to face with some of them. But surely, if the philosopher of old could say that "there is in *nature* nothing interpolated, or without connection, as in a bad tragedy," we may as confidently affirm that there is nothing in *Scripture* which is really out of harmony with the circumstances.

in which the inspired writings were composed. And when this Epistle of James, on being appealed to in evidence either of the validity or unsoundness of that opinion which is generally held as to the knowledge of Greek then possessed by the natives of Palestine, is found to declare against those who maintain it, ought not that fact of itself to suggest a doubt whether they may not possibly be mistaken? Under the pressure of that difficulty which they acknowledge to be connected with this Epistle, may they not, without offence, be asked to reconsider their position, and to inquire whether there be not another way of looking at the point in question, by which all the facts of the case become easily explicable, and no residuum of unexplained difficulty remains to perplex and baffle the critical student.

That the position maintained in these papers entirely neutralizes every such difficulty, is too obvious to need any lengthened remarks. On the ground which I have assumed, and sought to make good, nothing could be more natural than that even the Palestinian James should write in the style which characterizes his Epistle. He lived in a country where the Greek tongue was constantly employed. On almost all public occasions he used it himself and heard it used by others. In the civil transactions taking place between the Romans as masters and the Jews as subjects, the language of Greece could alone furnish a common medium of intercourse; while in the ecclesiastical courts held under the presidency of the high-priest in Jerusalem, and in the Christian assemblies which met in the same city, with the Apostle himself at their head, we have

seen that the same tongue was habitually employed. In these circumstances, James could not fail to acquire a large acquaintance with that noble language. Continual use may easily be believed to have given him such a command of it as appears in his Epistle; and his very permanency in one settled sphere of labour would afford him an opportunity, which the other apostles did not possess, of becoming acquainted with some of the literary treasures which it contained. It seems, indeed, too plain to be disputed that James had read at least the works of some of the learned Jewish writers of the religio-philosophical school of Alexandria; and he could not have been familiar with the almost classical writings of Philo, without contracting some of that purity and polish by which they are so remarkably distinguished, and which are, in fact, so apparent in his own very elegant Epistle.¹

I next observe that the very *existence* of what is known as the Hellenistic dialect of Greek seems to point to, and certainly fits in exactly with, the conclusion which is here sought to be established. A somewhat futile disputation was formerly carried on among scholars respecting the Greek of the New Testament. As the controversy was conducted between two such illustrious scholars as Salmasius and Heinsius, it may now be clearly seen to have been a mere strife about words. No one can read the Greek New Testament without perceiving that it is written in a peculiar kind of Greek. He may, indeed, refuse to allow that it ought to be styled

¹ Credner, a most competent authority remarks, "In der That zeigt unser Brief des Jacobus vielfache Berührung mit den Schriften Philos."—*Einl.* sec. 219.

a *dialect* in the same sense in which that term is applied to those varieties of language which were employed in different parts of Greece and her dependencies; but that it had its own characteristics, as much as any of the recognized dialects of classical Greek, is evident from the slightest inspection of the Gospels and Epistles. Not more manifestly does Herodotus differ from Xenophon or Theocritus from Sophocles, than St. Matthew or St. Peter differs from all. Now, how did this peculiar dialect arise? and how did it come to be so largely used, that we have many more writings extant in it than we possess in some of the classical dialects of the Greek language? Allow the common view as to the prevailing language of Palestine at the time of Christ to stand, and these questions appear to admit of no answer. Aramaic, it is said, was *the* language of the country, and Greek was but little used or understood. How then, I ask, did the dialect employed by the human authors of the New Testament arise? and how did it reach that maturity which manifestly appears in their use of it? Could the employment of Greek by a few scholars, accustomed for the most part to write in Hebrew, have led to its existence and cultivation? It is not thus that dialects are usually formed. They spring up, not in the libraries of the few, but in the homes of the many—not from the practice of learned and elaborate writers, but from the rough and ready utterances of those who meet at church or market, and are there accustomed to address each other in language which is naturally tinged by national characteristics and habits. No sort of *saltus* could possibly have been made by Jews

addicted to the almost exclusive employment of the Hebrew language, to the use of such Greek as appears in the New Testament. The very fact, therefore, that the inspired writings exhibit such a formed and distinct species of diction seems of itself necessarily to presuppose the general and long-continued use of the Greek language among the people.

But it may be said that the dialect in question was founded upon the Septuagint; and we may, in a certain sense, admit that this was the case. There can be no doubt, I believe, that all the sacred writers were thoroughly familiar with the LXX., and that its style had no little influence on the diction which they themselves employed. But I cannot allow that a mere acquaintance with the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures furnishes any adequate explanation of the point under consideration. If, indeed, it be acknowledged that the Septuagint was in such constant use among the inhabitants of Palestine, as to form in fact the Bible which they habitually read, all is granted for which I contend; and I care not to discuss the question whether this common use of the LXX. implied, on other grounds, the existence of the dialect under consideration, or was itself the means of giving it currency throughout the country. But if it be said that Matthew and John and Paul wrote in the peculiar Greek exemplified in their works, simply because they followed the model presented by the Septuagint, I must deny the sufficiency of the cause assigned. The studied imitation of the style of a work not generally read in the country could never have given rise to the dialect which we find to have so generally prevailed,

even though it were possible to suppose that sufficient motive otherwise existed to lead to such a studied imitation. The influence of the LXX. may have been strongly felt by the New Testament writers, but certainly could not have induced or enabled them to compose their works in the diction which these exhibit, had not that, on other grounds, been the character of the language which they habitually employed.

Besides, it is certain that the Septuagint was universally employed by the Jews of Egypt, yet the Judaic writers of that country were very far from either designedly or unconsciously imitating its style. Philo, as is well known, depended entirely for his knowledge of the ancient Scriptures upon the Greek translation, yet his writings are framed on the classical, not the Hellenistic, model; and the same thing is true of the fragments which have come down to us of other Judæo - Egyptian writers belonging to this period. Palestine alone can be said to be the country in which the dialect exhibited in the New Testament flourished; and the vigorous existence of such a dialect in the days of Christ and his apostles can only reasonably be accounted for on the ground that it was then the prevailing public language of the people.

In what language, I shall now venture to inquire, was the hymn of the Virgin Mary (Luke i. 46-55) originally composed? No doubt some will scarcely have patience for a moment to consider this question, but will at once reply that it was, of course, in Hebrew. Nevertheless, that is not by any means certain: on the contrary, probability strongly inclines

to the other side. It has been noted by some of those who never saw their way to those views which it is my endeavour to establish, that the beautiful song of the mother of our Lord is made up of "entirely Septuagintal expressions."¹ On this ground they have actually felt themselves constrained to believe that Greek and not Hebrew was the tongue which Mary employed, while at the same time they continued to hold that her Divine Son, in the exercise of his public ministry, habitually made use of the Hebrew language! The incongruity of these two statements must, I think, be obvious to the reader. If there is really ground to believe that the Virgin, even in giving utterance in private to those feelings excited within her by the Holy Ghost, made use of Greek, much more must we suppose that this was true of the Saviour in the delivery of his public discourses. Let the *Magnificat* be carefully and candidly examined, and if it is found to bear clear internal evidence of having been originally composed in Greek—as even learned opponents of my views have admitted—then it seems impossible to deny, without utter inconsistency, that Greek was perfectly familiar at the period in question to the inhabitants of Palestine, and would, as a matter of course, be generally made use of by our Lord and his disciples.

I only add that Scripture is consistent to the end with that view of the linguistic condition of Palestine at the time which is here set forth. For, surely, it fits in well with the conclusion we have so often reached, when the exalted Saviour is represented in

¹ Grinfield's "Apology for the Septuagint," p. 185.

the Book of Revelation as making use emblematically of the letters of the Greek alphabet. In three several passages of that book (Chaps. i. 8; xxi. 6; xxii. 13) the expression is used by our Lord,—“I am Alpha and Omega (*A και Ω*), the beginning and the end, the first and the last!” Now there is certainly nothing impossible in the supposition that the corresponding Hebrew form of this figurative description was, in point of fact, made use of by Christ; and that, as Grotius has observed, “*Joannes eam locutionem aptavit ad alphabetum Græcum, quia ipse Græce scribebat.*” But it can hardly be shewn that the analogous Hebrew form of expression was in use among the Jews of our Saviour’s day. It seems also, as Diodati has remarked, to have been the habit of John to insert the Hebrew terms which were, at any time, employed by those to whom he listened in these apocalyptic visions, as well as to give their Greek equivalents (Comp. Chaps. ix. 11 and xvi. 16); and it cannot, at all events, be denied that it is more easy and natural to regard the Greek expressions now referred to as having been actually employed by our Lord; and, as no sufficient reason can be suggested for his having adopted this form of speech, except on the supposition that Greek had been generally employed by Him and his disciples, we find again, in the passages under remark, an additional corroboration of the truth of the proposition already so abundantly confirmed, that He and they did, for the most part, make use of the Greek language.