

The Language of Jesus

Dorothy D. Resig, "Where Aramaic Is Spoken," *Biblical Archaeology Review*, January/February 2008, 12–13.

The language that Jesus spoke has been preserved for thousands of years in the mountains of Syria. The streets and shops of a tiny village called Malula (population: 5,000) are some of the last places on earth where you can still hear Aramaic being spoken.

Aramaic, a 3,000-year-old language closely related to Hebrew, was once the main commercial and diplomatic language of the ancient near east. Hebrew had been the dominant language in the ancient Iron Age [12th–6th centuries B.C.] kingdoms of Israel and Judah, but by the time the exiles returned to Judah from the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century B.C., the Jewish people were speaking Aramaic.

As Aramaic became the popular language, few could understand Hebrew anymore. Although Hebrew was the original language of the Scriptures, it was gradually relegated primarily to religious settings. Hellenistic influence also brought Greek into use throughout the region in the fourth and third centuries B.C.

It is likely that Jesus understood both Hebrew and Greek because of his knowledge of scripture and his childhood in a heavily Hellenized area of Galilee.¹ However, he would have primarily spoken a dialect called Palestinian Aramaic in his everyday conversation and teaching.

Aramaic gradually fell out of use as Greek and ultimately Arabic spread throughout the region. Yet the remote location of Malula protected its people and its language from invasion by foreign influences over the centuries.

The people of Malula and the Syrian government are working hard to preserve their unique linguistic heritage. A special school has been set up to help students of all ages learn or refresh Aramaic skills and, now, to write this traditionally oral language. Many of the religious people here take very seriously what they believe is their responsibility to, quite literally, keep the words of Jesus alive.

1. See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "Did Jesus Speak Greek?" **BAR**, September/October 1992.