

THAT CHRIST SPOKE GREEK.

It has been the almost universal opinion of Biblical scholars that our Lord Jesus Christ spoke a kind of Hebrew *patois*, which is variously denominated Aramaic or Syro-Chaldaic. On that hypothesis, nearly all the words which He really uttered have been lost for ever. The few scattered expressions, like *Raca*, *Cephas*, and *Ephphatha*, to be found in the Gospels, are the only relics of the language which did, in truth, proceed out of his mouth. The whole of the Greek is a translation. We have nothing more than a few brief sentences which the Son of God positively uttered when He dwelt with men upon the earth.

The thesis which I venture to maintain on this the most interesting of all literary questions is the exact converse of that usually held. While it is generally said that Christ, for the most part, spoke in Aramaic, and only on some rare occasions in Greek, my contention is that He almost always made use of Greek in his public discourses, and only now and then, for special reasons, had recourse to the vernacular Hebrew. In this point of view, we still possess in the existing Greek Gospels—so far as the language is concerned, and so far as strict accuracy in reporting has been observed—the *ipsissima verba* which proceeded out of our Saviour's mouth.

I have said that the controversy as to the language really made use of by Christ involves the most interesting of all literary questions. And probably every one will admit this. It is related of the illustrious Christian philosopher Boyle, that towards the end of his days he sought to master Syriac, with the view of thus coming as near as possible to the actual language which it was supposed our Lord employed. I have in my own possession a letter from the late eminent Isaac Taylor, in which he states that, after considering my argument and being convinced by it, he felt, on reading the Greek Gospels, a sense of nearness to Christ which he had never possessed while these Gospels were regarded as a translation. And in one of many kind letters which the late Lord Lytton wrote to me on the subject, he says : " To my mind, our reverence for the Gospels, and even the respect with which a Deist of fine understanding would view them, are increased by all that tends to render it probable that we are not reading that paraphrase which words rendered into another language from that in which they were spoken could scarcely fail to be, but viewing the Mind that spoke in the language it employed."

It is now fifteen years since my views on the Language of Christ were presented to the world. That is truly, as Tacitus remarks, "*grande mortalis ævi spatium*;" but it could not reasonably be regarded as long enough to secure acceptance for views (even supposing them correct) so entirely opposed to prevailing opinions as those which I ventured to present. I am, therefore, not surprised that the old conceptions on the subject referred to still hold the ground. We

find the most recent writers on questions connected with the Gospels proceeding, without a word, on the assumption that Hebrew, in the form of Aramaic, was the language constantly employed by Christ. As I still firmly maintain the contrary, and have no doubt of the ultimate acceptance of truth on this as on all other questions, I gladly avail myself of an invitation to give an outline of my argument in the pages of *THE EXPOSITOR*, leaving it to any who may become interested in the question to seek a further acquaintance with all its bearings in the work to which allusion has already been made.¹

The position which I endeavour to make good is this. I believe that the Jews of our Saviour's time were bilingual, their old ancestral tongue still surviving among them in a corrupted form, and being, for the most part, employed in familiar domestic intercourse, while the Greek existed side by side with it, and was usually made use of for all public and literary purposes. Many analogous cases will at once occur to the reader. It may be sufficient to refer to Wales, or the Highlands of Scotland, in numerous districts of which both the Celtic and English tongues are in constant use, the one being the language of homely private life, and the other being made use of as the language of literature, and on almost all public occasions.

Every one acquainted with the facts of the case will grant how wide-spread the Greek language had become before the commencement of our era. It was

¹ "Discussions on the Gospels, in two parts. Part I. On the Language employed by our Lord and his disciples. Part II. On the Original Language of St. Matthew's Gospel, and on the Origin and Authenticity of the Gospels." Macmillan and Co.

in truth the common medium of intercourse throughout the whole civilized world. Cicero, bringing out this point by contrast to his native tongue, declares in well-known words, "Græca leguntur in omnibus fere gentibus, Latina suis finibus, exiguis sane, continentur."¹ This statement, if true in the great orator's day, became far more emphatically so some generations afterwards. The knowledge and use of the Greek language continued to spread with great rapidity during the century which followed the death of Cicero, and it retained its supremacy for several ages as the language of the Christian Church. Let me refer only to the following facts. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans and Galatians in Greek; Latin writers both in prose and verse² testify to the constant use which was made of Greek in the Imperial City at the date at which they write; while towards the end of the second century Irenæus wrote from Lyons in Greek, on a theme interesting to, and intended to be considered by, the whole Christian world.

The question now is, Had Greek, in any way, attained a footing in Palestine as in the rest of the world? Answers crowd upon us to this question, and these both of an *a priori* and *a posteriori* character. It seems almost impossible for any one to consider the national history of the Jews for a century or two before Christ without concluding that Greek could not have failed to secure a large ascendancy among them. The several dynasties to which they were successively subject, Egyptian, Syrian, and Roman, alike contributed to this result. A new wave

¹ *Pro Arch.* 23.

² Suet. *Tib.* cap. 71; Juv. *Sat.* vi. 180, *et seq.* &c.

of Hellenic influence passed over the land with every fresh change which occurred in its political condition. Nor was this influence much checked under the Maccabean princes. With the temporary independence then enjoyed, there was, no doubt, an attempt made to throw off the taint of Gentilism in every particular. But Hellenic tendencies had become too firmly rooted in the land, and the constant use of the Greek language was found too necessary in all national transactions, to allow of any considerable change taking place during the brief period in which Judæa then existed as an independent kingdom. And soon did the hopeless effort die away. More than half a century before the beginning of our era Pompey the Great appeared in Palestine as an arbiter between the brothers Hyrcanus and Aristobulus, and from that moment Gentile influence revived in greater power than ever. The government speedily passed from the Asmonæan to the Herodian family; Judæa soon became an acknowledged dependency of Rome; and we naturally conclude that, as in other parts of the Empire, so in Palestine, the Roman power would be the pioneer and support of Greek civilization and literature.¹

But now let us look at facts. We have the Apocryphal books of the Old Testament, the writings of Josephus, inscriptions still remaining on ruins in Palestine, numismatic evidence, and, above all, the New Testament itself, from all which sources proof is to be derived in favour of the conclusion for which I contend.

¹ Ewald (*Gesch. des Volk. Is.* iv. 250-520) gives an excellent sketch of the history of the period, shewing the gradual encroachments and ultimate ascendancy of Gentilism.

As to the Apocryphal books, there is good reason to believe that the latest of them was written some time before the commencement of our era, while the others range, at somewhat uncertain dates, from that period up to perhaps the third century before Christ. And it at once strikes us as a suggestive fact connected with these books, that they exist only in *Greek*. One of them, we know, was at first written in Hebrew, but the original was soon replaced by a translation. Another is generally believed to have been composed in Hebrew, but of it, too, all traces of the supposed original have perished. Some of the rest are conjectured by critics to have been partly written in Greek and partly in the ancient tongue of Palestine, but of all, without exception, it holds true that only in their *Greek* form were they generally known among the Jews of our Saviour's day.

Now, in this consideration there seems to be an argument which will weigh much with every unprejudiced mind in the controversy respecting the prevailing language of Palestine at the time of Christ. The Jewish *literature* was then Greek. Writings intended for the people, and commonly current among them, were composed in the Greek language. Of that fact, the most cursory glance at the Apocrypha is sufficient to convince us; and the impression thus made is strengthened by a more particular examination of the several books.

Let me, for instance, refer to a single incident recorded in the Second Book of Maccabees. In the seventh chapter of that book we have a remarkable account of the heroic conduct of a mother and her seven sons when subjected to torture in the presence

of Antiochus Epiphanes. Mention is again and again made in the narrative of the sufferers having made use of their proper ancestral tongue in addressing each other, while, at the same time, it is evident from the intercourse which they held with the king that they also understood and employed Greek. There can be no doubt that both the mother and sons were *bilingues*, speaking between themselves in Hebrew, and addressing Antiochus in Greek. This whole book, it may be remarked, bears unmistakable evidence of the sway then possessed by Hellenic influence in Palestine. No one can read it, in a spirit of candour, without being convinced that, as the writer himself declares (Chap. iv. 13), "a kind of acme of Hellenism" had then been reached in the land; and that, in accordance with this state of things, the people generally had become quite familiar with the Greek language.

. Much might be said on the point at issue in connection with the writings of Josephus. But I shall refer, at present, to only two notable passages. The first occurs in the preface to the "Wars," and may be rendered as follows: "I have devoted myself to the task of translating, for the sake of those who live under the government of the Romans, the narrative which I formerly composed in our national language, and transmitted to the barbarians of the interior." It is now generally agreed that by the "barbarians" here referred to (*τοῖς ἄνω βαρβάροις*) Josephus means the Jews of Babylon, Parthia, Arabia, and those beyond the Euphrates. For the information of these distant members of his nation, he had at first composed his history of the Jewish war

in Hebrew. This history, he tells us, he afterwards translated into Greek "for the sake of those living under the government of the Romans"—manifestly, therefore, though not exclusively, for the use of his brethren in Palestine. The inference as to the language dominant among them is obvious. Nor does the conclusion to be derived from the other passage in the works of Josephus referred to appear to me less decisive. It is to be found in the last chapter of his "Antiquities" (xx. 11, 2). Much erroneous reasoning has, I believe, been founded on this passage. I shall have to refer to it again, when dealing with the objections which have been brought forward against my argument. Meanwhile I remark that it implies, as Cardinal Wiseman in his *Horæ Syriacæ* has observed, that so prevalent was the knowledge of Greek then among the Jews, that the very *slaves* understood it ("Etiam servi linguam Græcam callebant"), and that thus, as Josephus states, on account of the commonness of the accomplishment, it was undervalued by those who aimed at a high reputation.

Proceeding now to a brief notice of existing inscriptions in Palestine, it is well known that almost all those which can be dated about the time of Christ are in Greek. Seetzen long ago collected sixty-nine, all of which, with one exception, were in that language. Burckhardt in his "Travels in Syria" (1823) also gives a great variety of Greek inscriptions. And coming down to our own day, I find Captain Burton in "Unexplored Syria" (ii. 378) making the following remark: "Mr. Tyrwhitt Drake and I, when travelling about the Haurán, copied some one hundred

and thirty-five Greek inscriptions, besides three Palmyrene." The inference as to the ancient linguistic condition of the country is clear and conclusive.

The numismatic evidence plainly points to the same conclusion. There is hardly an exception to the rule that the various coins which circulated in Palestine about the time of Christ bear Greek superscriptions. And it seems impossible to give any adequate explanation of this fact unless we admit, in accordance with what has already been said, that Greek was then the prevailing language of the country.

But we have now to notice by far the most important source of proof in the prosecution of this argument—that which is found in the New Testament itself. I here assume that the several books are a genuine product of the age to which they are generally referred. Of course, some will dispute that position, and to them the reasoning founded on the postulate named will have little weight. In fact, an eminent Biblical scholar said to me in as many words, after reading my work, that he would have felt the argument as to the habitual use of Greek by Christ irresistible, had he believed that the Gospels belonged to the first century of our era. It is only fair then to say that, in what follows, I proceed upon that assumption. The New Testament is regarded as having been written at the time which has been usually assigned it, and by the persons to whom its several portions are ascribed. These positions admit, I believe, of conclusive proof, but are here taken for granted. And, supposing them conceded, I have

now to ask the reader's attention to a general glance at the books of which the New Testament consists.

Turning first to the Epistles, this question at once occurs. How *could* Palestinian Jews, like Peter, James, and John—"unlettered and ignorant men," as they were styled by their countrymen—men certainly possessed of no advantages, either of rank or education, above the respectable labouring classes in Judæa—*have written in Greek*, unless that were the language which men even in the humblest station naturally employed?

The old answer to this question—that the Greek of the sacred writers was due to the gift of tongues—is now almost universally abandoned. Every Biblical scholar of reputation agrees with Neander when he says that the apostles, like other people, obtained their knowledge of the language "according to the natural laws of lingual acquirement." But then this conclusion immediately draws after it another. If Peter and James naturally made use of the Greek language, that language must have been known to all classes in the community. And this is a point which I beg to press upon the attention of those who maintain that Hebrew was then chiefly, or almost exclusively, the language of Palestine. How, I ask, in that case, were the apostles able, as they did, to write in Greek? The idea of a miracle having been wrought for this purpose being set aside, there remains no other explanation of the fact in question than that Greek was a language which they habitually employed. But then, as I maintain, this concession implies that it was in common use by the great body of the population. These first

disciples of Jesus were taken from the lower ranks among the people. They had, no doubt, previous to their call to the apostleship, received the elements of an ordinary education; and there can be no question that, during the years of their intercourse with Christ, great additions were made to their intellectual vigour and attainments. But all this will not account for their knowledge of Greek, if it be supposed that Hebrew was the language to which alone they were accustomed from their youth, and which they habitually employed in intercourse with their Divine Master. No one can doubt that they possessed a very considerable command of the Greek language — their writings are sufficient to prove that point. How then, I ask again, did they acquire it? Not by miraculous interposition, as is now generally admitted. It must therefore have been in the natural and ordinary way; and, this being granted, it follows as an irresistible inference, that if they, humble fishermen of Galilee, understood Greek to such an extent as naturally and easily to write it, that language must have been generally known and used among the people.

And now turning to the Gospels, and glancing over their contents, what reason do we find for supposing that they contain merely *translations* of the words which our Lord employed? Is there a single hint to that effect given by any of the writers? Do they not, on the contrary, express themselves exactly as they would have done supposing they had meant to report to us the very language which was made use of by the Saviour? A very strange mode of reasoning, as appears to me, has prevailed with respect

to those occasional Aramaic expressions which are inserted in the Gospels as having been employed by Christ. It has been argued that the occurrence of such terms, now and then, in the reports which have been preserved to us of our Lord's discourses, *proves* that He generally made use of the Syro-Chaldaic language; and that, accordingly, it is in these few instances only that we have examples of the very words which He employed. But such a conclusion rests upon a manifest *petitio principii*: there is not the least foundation furnished for it in the Evangelic narrative. None of the writers ever imply that they are giving the words of Jesus more exactly when they report Hebrew than when they report Greek. On the contrary, the very same mode of expression is made use of by them, whether it be the one language or the other which our Lord is represented as employing; and to say, therefore, that the occurrence here and there of an Aramaic word or phrase proves that He habitually made use of that dialect, is simply to *assume* the point in question, and to mistake for a sound and valid argument what is in reality a fore-gone conclusion.

The fact seems to be, that the occasional occurrence of Aramaic expressions in the Gospels, instead of proving that Christ habitually made use of that dialect, rather tends to prove the contrary. If it be maintained that Syro-Chaldaic was the language which He generally employed, the question at once occurs, why we have a few such words, and a few only, preserved to us as having been used by Him on rare occasions. On the supposition that He spoke usually in Greek, these words, we may see, come in

naturally enough as exceptions to the general rule, just as in the reported discussions of Cicero we often find a few Greek terms introduced ; and, as in our own language, a French or German expression may every now and then occur. But if, on the other hand, it be supposed that Christ really, for the most part, made use of the Aramaic, so that the Greek was the exception, and not the rule, in his discourses, it seems impossible, as experience has shewn, to give any satisfactory, or even tolerable, explanation of the manner in which the few Aramaic words found in the Gospels are introduced.

It may, however, in turn be asked, Can any reason be assigned for the occurrence of these expressions on the hypothesis that our Lord spoke, for the most part, in Greek, and only now and then in Hebrew ? The reply to this question has already been suggested. Let it be remembered that I admit and maintain the simultaneous existence in Palestine, at the date referred to, of both the Aramaic and Greek, the former language being, no doubt, in many respects subordinate to the latter, but still the mother-tongue of most of the native population ; and how natural the supposition that, in such circumstances, our Lord should have sometimes found it proper or expedient to depart from his usual practice, and make use of the debased but still vernacular language of the country.

Let me refer, in illustration, to Mark v. 41, which in English runs thus : " He took the damsel by the hand, and said unto her, *Talitha cumi* ; which is, being interpreted, Damsel, I say unto thee, arise." Now, on the supposition that Greek was our Lord's

usual form of address, I cannot but think that a very good and satisfactory ground may be perceived for the exception which is here particularly noted. The person on whom this miracle was performed was of tender years, and was probably as yet but little acquainted with Greek. At any rate, Greek was to her, as to every native Jew, a language not generally employed in the domestic circle, and it was to Hebrew that her ears from infancy had been accustomed. How beautifully accordant, then, with the character of Him whose heart was tenderness itself, that now, as He bent over the lifeless frame of the maiden, and breathed that life-giving whisper into her ear, it should have been in the loved and familiar accents of her mother-tongue. Although dead and insensible the moment before the words were uttered, yet, ere the sound of them passed away, there was life and sensibility within her. Does not every reader thereby perceive, in the thoughtful tenderness of the act, a most sufficient reason why it was in Hebrew, and not in Greek, that our Lord now addressed her? And do we not also discover a cause why the fact of his having done so should be specially noticed by the Evangelist? Are we not thus furnished with a new and affecting example of our Saviour's graciousness? And do we not feel that St. Mark—the most minutely descriptive of all the Evangelists—deserves our gratitude for having preserved it? Softly and sweetly must the tones of that loving voice, speaking in the language of her childhood, have fallen on the sleeping spirit of the maiden; and by words of tenderness, no less than words of power, was she thus recalled to life and happiness.

In regard to this whole matter, it is obvious that, on the supposition of our Lord having spoken, for the most part, in Greek, we can very easily account for those isolated and occasional Hebrew terms which occur in his discourses. The Aramaic had, as a matter of course, no small influence upon the Greek of the country, and necessarily insinuated many of its idioms and expressions into the co-existing language. Hence the occurrence of such words as *Amen*, *Corban*, *Rabbi*, &c. ; of such designations as *Cephas*, *Boanerges*, &c. ; and of such phrases as *πρόσωπον λαμβάνειν*, *γέεσθαι θανάτου*, &c. But it seems no easy matter, on the hypothesis that our Lord generally made use of Hebrew, to account for the retaining of such words as *Ῥακά* (Matt. v. 22) and *Μαμμωνᾶ* (Luke xvi. 11), while his language is, for the most part, translated. For why, it may well be asked, should an exception be made in favour of these expressions? What right had *they* to stand as they were originally uttered, while the whole context in which they are imbedded was subjected to a process of translation? It certainly does appear to me somewhat difficult to answer these questions on the supposition that our Lord generally made use of Hebrew; whereas, on the theory which I uphold, that the substance of his discourse was Greek, and has thus been reported to us in its original form by the Evangelists, nothing could be more natural, or indeed inevitable, than that such Aramaic words and phrases should from time to time occur and be preserved.

I shall enter upon an examination of special passages afterwards, but meanwhile I venture to main-

tain that, as has been shewn, there is every reason to conclude, from a general survey of the New Testament, that Greek was generally known and used in Palestine at the time of Christ; that *that* accordingly was the language which He usually employed; and that, while He sometimes made use in public of the Aramaic dialect, such an occurrence was quite exceptional to his ordinary practice, and is on that account distinguished by particular notice in the Evangelic history.

A. ROBERTS.

THE GOSPEL IN THE EPISTLES.

I believe that Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; that he descended into hell, and the third day rose again from the dead.

WHEN we begin to institute a comparison between the Gospels and Epistles on the above-quoted articles, we are struck at once with the different way in which the meaning of these sublime events of the Saviour's life was understood before and after the gift of the Holy Ghost. The Evangelists make conspicuous everywhere how little even the chosen Twelve understood concerning the events which were to befall their Master. When Jesus (Luke xviii. 31-34) said plainly to them that, in their approaching visit to Jerusalem, He should be delivered to the Gentiles, be mocked, scourged, and put to death, and the third day should rise again; we are told, "They understood none of these things, and this saying was hid from them, neither knew they the things which were spoken." And if this were so with the plain details of what was about to come to