THE LANGUAGE OF JESUS

Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, and the Septuagint:

A Comprehensive Scholarly Assessment

Drawing on Josephus, Philo, the Dead Sea Scrolls, archaeological epigraphy,
and the primary scholarly works of Fitzmyer, Porter, Hengel, Meier, Buth, Chancey, and Young

I. Introduction: The Linguistic World of First-Century Palestine

Few questions in New Testament scholarship carry more direct exegetical consequence than the languages Jesus of Nazareth habitually spoke, taught in, and read. The answer determines which words attributed to him in the Gospels are most likely to preserve authentic tradition, which may be translations or paraphrases, and what relationship he bore to the Greek Septuagint (LXX) that the Gospel writers quote so extensively. The question is not merely philological; it touches the very mechanisms of revelation and the transmission of the Jesus tradition.

First-century Palestine was a **multilingual environment** -- perhaps the most linguistically complex region of the Roman world per capita. The scholarly consensus, developed across the 20th century and substantially refined by the Dead Sea Scrolls discoveries (1947-1956) and by systematic epigraphic surveys, identifies four languages in active use in Roman Judea and Galilee: **Aramaic**, **Hebrew**, **Greek**, and **Latin**. The question is not which languages existed but which Jesus used, and in what contexts, and with what degree of fluency.

II. The Four Languages of Roman Palestine: Evidence and Status

A. Aramaic: The Vernacular of Galilean Jewish Life

The scholarly consensus -- held by Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Matthew Black, John Meier, and the majority of critical NT scholars -- is that **Aramaic was the primary vernacular of Jesus and his disciples**. The evidence is substantial and converges from multiple independent sources.

1. Direct Aramaic Survivals in the Greek Gospels

The most compelling direct evidence is the preservation of Aramaic words and phrases in the Greek Gospel texts themselves, which the Evangelists either translate or transliterate. These Aramaisms function as linguistic fossils -- traces of the underlying Aramaic tradition that survived the translation into Greek:

- *Talitha qum* (ταλιθα κουμ) -- Mark 5:41: 'Little girl, arise.' The Aramaic feminine singular imperative of qum. Mark translates it for Greek readers.
- *Ephphatha* (ἐφφαθα) -- Mark 7:34: from Aramaic *etpattah*, 'be opened.' The Greek text reproduces the Aramaic sound.
- *Abba* (ἀββα) -- Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6: the Aramaic intimate address to the Father. Joachim Jeremias argued this vocative was distinctive to Jesus and unprecedented in Jewish prayer, though subsequent scholarship (James Barr, Mary Rose D'Angelo) has qualified this claim. The retention of the Aramaic word in Greek epistles addressed to Greek congregations is itself evidence of its perceived authenticity.
- *Maranatha* -- 1 Corinthians 16:22; Didache 10:6: Aramaic 'Our Lord, come!' Preserved in a letter to a Greek-speaking Corinthian church as a liturgical formula too venerable to translate.

- *Eloi Eloi lema sabachthani* -- Mark 15:34: the cry from the cross, Aramaic (with possible Galilean dialect features) of Psalm 22:1. Matthew 27:46 has a slightly different form (*Eli Eli*) that may reflect a more Hebraized version. Both are transliterated, not translated, in the Greek text.
- *Cephas* -- John 1:42; Galatians 1:18: the Aramaic *Kepha* ('rock') given to Simon. The name itself is Aramaic, not Greek.
- *Boanerges* -- Mark 3:17: Aramaic *bene regesh* or *bene ra'am*, 'sons of thunder,' the nickname given to James and John.
- *Bartimaeus, Bartholomew, Barabbas, Bar-Jonah*: all Aramaic patronymics using *bar* ('son of'). These are Aramaic formations embedded in the Greek Gospel text without translation.

Joseph Fitzmyer, in his landmark paper 'The Languages of Palestine in the First Century A.D.' (*Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32, 1970) and in his commentary on Luke (Anchor Bible, 1981), assembled the most comprehensive pre-Scrolls case for Aramaic primacy. Fitzmyer classified first-century Aramaic into phases and demonstrated that the Aramaic of the Galilean region in Jesus's time was a living vernacular distinct from the literary Aramaic of Daniel and Ezra.

2. The Galilean Dialect: Peter's Accent

The Gospels themselves record that Galilean speakers were identifiable by their accent. In Matthew 26:73, bystanders say of Peter: 'your speech makes you obvious' -- the Greek word is *lalia* (dialect, manner of speaking). This detail is almost certainly historically authentic precisely because it is an embarrassing incidental detail with no theological motive for invention. Galilean Aramaic was distinguishable from Judean Aramaic by specific phonological features -- particularly the collapse of the laryngeals (ayin and aleph) and the gutturals -- features documented in the Babylonian Talmud's mockery of Galilean speakers and in comparative Aramaic linguistics.

3. The Dead Sea Scrolls and Aramaic at Qumran

The Dead Sea Scrolls (discovered 1947-1956 at Khirbet Qumran, ~15 miles from Jerusalem) include texts in all three Semitic languages used in Palestine: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The Aramaic texts include the Genesis Apocryphon, the Targum of Job, and several Enoch fragments. These demonstrate that Aramaic was a vigorous literary and vernacular language in first-century Jewish Palestine, not merely a foreign import. The Qumran community -- contemporaneous with Jesus -- wrote substantial portions of their library in Aramaic.

B. Hebrew: Not Dead, But Stratified

A significant revisionist movement in scholarship, associated particularly with Shmuel Safrai, David Flusser, Randall Buth, and the Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research, argues that **Hebrew was more extensively used as a spoken vernacular in first-century Palestine than the older consensus acknowledged**, and that Jesus may have taught substantially in Hebrew, not only Aramaic.

1. The Dead Sea Scrolls and Mishnaic Hebrew

The scrolls revealed that **Mishnaic Hebrew** -- a form of Hebrew significantly different from Biblical Hebrew -- was a living spoken language in the Second Temple period, not merely a scribal creation. Texts such as the Copper Scroll, the Bar Kokhba letters (132-135 CE, discovered in the Judean Desert), and administrative documents from Masada are written in this vernacular Hebrew. Yigael

Yadin's analysis of the Bar Kokhba letters (*Bar-Kokhba*, 1971) showed that even a military commander a century after Jesus was writing personal correspondence in Hebrew.

Randall Buth (Biblical Language Center) and his colleagues have argued in peer-reviewed work that Mishnaic Hebrew was the everyday language of Judea specifically, while Aramaic was more dominant in Galilee. On this view, the Jerusalem scribal and Pharisaic classes -- with whom Jesus frequently debated -- would have expected Hebrew discourse, and Jesus's engagement with them would have been partly in Hebrew.

2. Synagogue Practice: Hebrew Liturgy

The synagogue liturgy was conducted in Hebrew. The Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4), the Amidah (Eighteen Benedictions), and the Torah readings were in Hebrew. Jesus would have heard, recited, and responded to Hebrew liturgical texts from childhood. Luke 4:16-20 describes Jesus reading from the Isaiah scroll in the Nazareth synagogue -- the synagogue scroll would have been in Hebrew (and at Qumran, the Isaiah scroll is in Hebrew, not Aramaic). Whether Jesus read the Hebrew text directly or an Aramaic Targum is a crux question to which we return below.

3. The Scholarly Debate: Aramaic vs. Hebrew Primacy

The debate between Aramaic primacy (Fitzmyer, Black, Meier) and Hebrew primacy (Flusser, Safrai, Young) has not been resolved and likely cannot be, given the evidence available. The most defensible position, held by most critical scholars, is that **Jesus was bilingual in Aramaic and Hebrew**, with Aramaic as his primary domestic vernacular and Hebrew as his liturgical and scribal language. The two functioned in distinct registers of life: Aramaic for family, commerce, and general discourse; Hebrew for synagogue, scripture study, and learned religious debate.

Scholarly Consensus on Aramaic and Hebrew

Fitzmyer (1970, 1981): Aramaic was the common language of Palestine; Jesus's primary teaching language was Aramaic.

Black (1946, 1967): An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts argues extensively for Aramaic substrata underlying the Greek Gospel tradition.

Meier (A Marginal Jew, Vol. 1, 1991): The languages of Jesus chapter concludes: Aramaic primary, Hebrew known, Greek possible.

Buth and Pierce (2014): 'Hebraisti in Ancient Texts' (in The Language Environment of First Century Judaea, Brill) argues Hebrew was more widespread as a vernacular than Fitzmyer allowed.

Chancey (2002): The Myth of a Gentile Galilee (Cambridge) documents that Galilee was predominantly Jewish and Aramaic-speaking, not Hellenized.

C. Greek: The Language of Empire, Commerce, and Diaspora

Greek was the administrative language of the Roman Empire in the East, the language of commerce throughout the Mediterranean, the language of the Jewish Diaspora, and the language in which the Septuagint -- the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible -- had been produced (third to first century BCE). The question is not whether Greek was present in first-century Palestine -- it demonstrably

was -- but **what degree of functional Greek fluency Jesus possessed** and in what contexts he may have used it.

1. The Epigraphic Evidence: Greek Inscriptions in Palestine

Archaeological surveys of first-century Palestine have recovered substantial quantities of Greek inscriptions. Mark Chancey's comprehensive survey (*Greco-Roman Culture and the Galilee of Jesus*, Cambridge, 2005) analyzed inscriptions from Galilean sites and found that while Greek inscriptions are present, they are heavily concentrated at Sepphoris and Tiberias -- the two administrative centers -- and at burial sites (ossuaries frequently used Greek for names). Village Galilee -- the world of Nazareth, Capernaum, and the villages where Jesus spent most of his ministry -- shows **minimal Greek** in the epigraphic record relative to Aramaic and Hebrew.

The ossuaries (bone boxes) from the Jerusalem area (first century BCE to 70 CE), catalogued by Rahmani (*A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 1994), show a roughly trilingual pattern: approximately 64% of inscriptions are in Aramaic/Hebrew, approximately 36% in Greek, with bilingual inscriptions common among elite Jerusalem families. This reflects the sociolinguistic reality: Greek was the prestige language of the urban Jewish elite, particularly those with Diaspora connections, while Aramaic remained the language of the village majority.

2. Sepphoris: The Greek City Near Nazareth

Sepphoris (Zippori), a Hellenized administrative city, lay approximately four miles from Nazareth. Scholars such as Richard Batey (*Jesus and the Forgotten City*, 1991) argued that Joseph and Jesus, as *tekton* (craftsmen/builders), would have worked in Sepphoris and been regularly exposed to Greek. This argument has been significantly moderated by subsequent scholarship. Chancey's analysis of Sepphoris's first-century remains shows that while Greek was used there, the city was substantially Jewish and Aramaic-speaking in Jesus's time, with full Hellenization coming only after 70 CE. The dramatic theatre at Sepphoris, often cited as evidence of Hellenization, is now dated to the second century CE, not the first.

3. The Dialogue with Pilate

John 18:33-38 records a sustained dialogue between Jesus and Pontius Pilate. Since Pilate was a Roman prefect whose administrative language was Latin and whose second language would have been Greek (not Aramaic), and since no interpreter is mentioned in the Gospel narrative, the dialogue is frequently cited as evidence that Jesus spoke Greek. This argument has force but is not conclusive. The absence of a mentioned interpreter is an argument from silence; interpreters were common and unremarkable in Roman administrative contexts. Nevertheless, the dialogue, if historical, almost certainly occurred in Greek -- the one language both parties could plausibly have shared.

4. The Syrophoenician/Canaanite Woman

Mark 7:24-30 and Matthew 15:21-28 record an encounter with a woman described as 'Syrophoenician' (Mark) or 'Canaanite' (Matthew). This woman was Greek-speaking and non-Jewish. The dialogue between Jesus and her is narrated without an interpreter. If historical, this encounter suggests Jesus could conduct at least a conversational exchange in Greek. Stanley Porter (*The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research*, Sheffield, 2000) cites this passage, along with the Pilate dialogue and the encounter with the Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5-13), as among the strongest indicators of at least functional Greek competence in Jesus.

5. Stanley Porter's Case for Greek Competence

Stanley E. Porter's essay 'Did Jesus Ever Teach in Greek?' (*Tyndale Bulletin* 44, 1993) and his monograph *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research* (2000) constitute the most sustained academic argument for Greek competence in Jesus. Porter argues that: (a) Greek was widely used in Galilee through trade and commerce; (b) a *tekton* would have needed some Greek for commercial transactions; (c) multiple Gospel encounters presuppose Greek communication without an interpreter; (d) certain logion of Jesus show wordplay that only works in Greek, not in plausible Aramaic retro-versions. Porter does not argue Greek was Jesus's primary language but that he was functionally bilingual in Greek and Aramaic.

Porter's arguments have been contested. Fitzmyer and others maintain that commercial Greek in Galilee could have been minimal and formulaic -- enough to negotiate a price, not enough to conduct the philosophical dialogue of John 18. The Johannine discourse style, most critics note, reflects the Johannine community's theological elaboration rather than verbatim transcription of Jesus's words.

III. The Disciples' Greek Names: Hellenization or Translation?

Your question about why Jesus's disciples had Greek names touches a genuinely important historical and cultural phenomenon. The answer is more nuanced than simple Hellenization, and requires careful distinction between **Greek names, transliterated Aramaic/Hebrew names, and bilingual naming practices**

A. The Disciples' Names: A Linguistic Taxonomy

Disciple	Linguistic Analysis
Simon / Peter	Simon is Greek (Siemon) but transliterates Heb./Aram. Shimon (common in Second Temple period). Petros/Kepha: see below.
Andrew (Andreas)	A purely Greek name meaning 'manly.' No Semitic equivalent. From a Greek-speaking Jewish family or given a Greek name for trade use.
Philip (Philippos)	Greek: 'horse-lover.' A Macedonian Greek name. Philip and Andrew are the two disciples with exclusively Greek names approached by Greek-speaking pilgrims in John 12:20-22 -- possibly because they were known to be Greek-accessible.
James (Iakobos)	Greek transliteration of Hebrew Ya'aqov (Jacob). Not a Greek name at all -- it is Jacob in Greek dress.
John (Ioannes)	Greek transliteration of Hebrew Yochanan ('YHWH is gracious'). Not a Greek name.
Matthew / Levi	Matthew = Greek transliteration of Heb. Mattityahu. Levi is Hebrew/Aramaic.
Thomas (Thomas)	Transliteration of Aramaic Toma ('twin'). John 11:16 translates it: Didymos (Greek for 'twin').
Bartholomew	Aramaic bar-Talmai ('son of Talmai/Ptolemy'). The patronymic is Aramaic.
Simon the Zealot	Aramaic/Hebrew Shimon ha-Qanai.

Judas (Ioudas)	Greek transliteration of Hebrew Yehudah (Judah).
Thaddaeus	Possibly Aramaic or Semitic origin -- etymology disputed.
Mary Magdalene	Miriam (Hebrew/Aramaic) from Magdala (Aramaic place name).

B. The Practice of Double-Naming in Second Temple Judaism

The key insight, established by Tal Ilan's comprehensive work *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity* (Mohr Siebeck, 2002-2012, 4 volumes) and by Martin Hengel's *Jews, Greeks and Barbarians* (1980), is that **double naming -- a Semitic name alongside a Greek name -- was extremely common among Second Temple Jews**, particularly those with commercial, administrative, or Diaspora connections. This is not evidence of abandoning Jewish identity but of practical accommodation to a multilingual world.

Acts 13:9 itself illustrates this: 'Saul, who was also called Paul.' Saul (Hebrew Sha'ul) was the Jewish name; Paul (Latin Paulus) was the Roman cognomen used in the wider Greco-Roman world. The same person, two names, for two linguistic-cultural contexts. This practice is documented throughout Josephus (who uses both Greek and Hebrew forms of names), in the Bar Kokhba letters (Hebrew names alongside Greek equivalents), and in ossuaries throughout the Jerusalem region.

C. Simon Renamed Peter / Cephas: A Special Case

The renaming of Simon as *Kepha* (Aramaic) / *Petros* (Greek) -- analyzed in detail in the previous Matthew 16:18 document -- is not an example of Greek-naming but of **Aramaic nickname-giving rendered in Greek translation**. Jesus gave Simon an Aramaic name (Kepha = Rock); the Greek Gospel writers translated this as Petros. This is precisely the pattern of the Thomas / Didymos pairing in John 11:16: Thomas is Aramaic for 'twin,' Didymos is Greek for 'twin.' The Evangelist is explicitly translating Aramaic names into Greek for his Greek-reading audience.

Martin Hengel (*The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 2000) emphasizes that the Greek Gospels are **translations and literary compositions in Greek**, not transcriptions of Jesus's Aramaic or Hebrew words. The naming conventions reflect the linguistic medium of the final text (Greek), not the linguistic medium of Jesus's own speech (Aramaic). Calling disciples by Greek-equivalent names is an act of the Greek-writing Evangelists translating their tradition, not evidence that Jesus called them by Greek names.

IV. Why Were the Gospels Written in Greek?

The composition of the Gospels in Greek rather than in Aramaic or Hebrew is one of the most consequential and explicable facts of early Christian history. The reasons are historical, sociological, theological, and pragmatic -- and they converge powerfully.

A. The Koine Greek Mediterranean: Language of Universal Reach

Alexander the Great's conquests (334-323 BCE) spread Koine Greek ('common Greek') as the lingua franca of the entire eastern Mediterranean world. By the first century CE, **Koine Greek was the universal written language of educated and commercial life** from Rome to Mesopotamia. It was the language of the Roman Empire's eastern administration, of Jewish Diaspora communities from Alexandria to Antioch to Rome, of philosophy, medicine, history, and public inscription.

The Septuagint (LXX) -- the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures -- had been produced in Alexandria between the third and first centuries BCE and was the **Bible of the Jewish Diaspora** and the primary scriptural text of the emerging Gentile Christian communities. Martin Hengel's monumental *Judaism and Hellenism* (1974) demonstrated that even Palestinian Judaism was far more deeply shaped by Hellenistic culture than had previously been acknowledged. The rigid Hellenism-vs.-Judaism dichotomy of earlier scholarship dissolved under Hengel's analysis: Judaism and Hellenism had been in dynamic interaction for centuries before Jesus.

B. The Audience: Diaspora Jews and Gentile God-Fearers

The early Christian mission moved rapidly beyond Aramaic-speaking Palestinian Jews into the Greek-speaking world. Paul's letters -- the earliest New Testament documents (c. 50-60 CE) -- are written in sophisticated Greek to Greek-speaking communities in Galatia, Corinth, Philippi, and Rome. The Jesus tradition had to be transmitted in the language the audience could read.

Luke's Gospel and Acts explicitly address a Greek-speaking patron ('most excellent Theophilus,' Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). John's Gospel was almost certainly composed in a Diaspora context -- Ephesus is the most commonly proposed location -- for a Greek-reading community. Even Matthew's Gospel, with its strong Jewish-Christian character, is composed in literary Greek and quotes the Septuagint extensively rather than the Hebrew MT.

C. The Septuagint as the Christian Old Testament

The early Church's near-universal adoption of the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew MT as its Old Testament text is a crucial datum. The NT writers -- Paul, the Synoptists, John, the author of Hebrews -- **quote the LXX, not the MT, in the overwhelming majority of their Old Testament citations**. This is documented exhaustively by Dietrich-Alex Koch (*Die Schrift als Zeuge des Evangeliums*, 1986) and by Christopher Stanley (*Paul and the Language of Scripture*, Cambridge, 1992).

This means that the Gospel writers composed their narratives **within a Greek-scriptural interpretive framework**. When Matthew writes 'that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet' and quotes Isaiah 7:14 with the word *parthenos* ('virgin'), he is following the LXX's rendering of the Hebrew *almah* ('young woman') -- a rendering that matters enormously for the Matthean

theology of the virgin birth. The MT would not have supported the same reading as directly. The Greek Gospels were written in Greek because their scriptural DNA was the Greek LXX.

D. The Q Document and Oral Tradition

Scholars who posit a sayings source Q (German *Quelle*, 'source') behind Matthew and Luke debate whether Q was composed in Greek or Aramaic. The dominant view (John Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q*, 1987) holds that Q as we can reconstruct it is a Greek document, consistent with the predominantly Greek-speaking communities of Syria and the Galilee-Decapolis corridor where it likely circulated. Some scholars (Maurice Casey, *Aramaic Sources of Mark's Gospel*, Cambridge, 1998; *An Aramaic Approach to Q*, Cambridge, 2002) have argued for Aramaic originals behind portions of the Synoptic tradition, but these arguments remain contested and the dominant critical consensus is that our Gospel texts in their final form are Greek compositions, whatever Aramaic or Hebrew oral tradition underlies them.

V. Did Jesus Read and Use the Greek Septuagint?

This is the sharpest and most technically demanding question in the cluster, and the answer requires distinguishing between several sub-questions: (a) did Jesus read Greek? (b) did he read the LXX specifically? (c) do the Scripture quotations attributed to him in the Gospels reflect the LXX or the Hebrew MT?

A. The Scripture Quotations Attributed to Jesus: LXX or MT?

The most direct evidence comes from the Old Testament quotations placed in Jesus's mouth in the Gospels, and whether they match the LXX, the MT, or neither. The analysis has been conducted rigorously by several scholars:

1. The Synoptic Evidence

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus's scripture citations generally reflect the LXX -- but this is complicated by the fact that the Gospel writers themselves may have **conformed Jesus's quotations to the LXX** in the process of composition. Distinguishing between what Jesus quoted and what the Evangelists substituted is a source-critical problem of the first order. Robert Gundry (*The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel*, 1967) demonstrated that Matthew's formula quotations (the explicit 'fulfilment' citations) show LXX influence, while quotations attributed to Jesus in discourse sometimes follow a different text -- suggesting the discourse tradition may preserve more original forms.

2. The Mark 12:29-30 Shema Quotation

When a scribe asks Jesus about the greatest commandment (Mark 12:28-31), Jesus quotes the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4-5. Crucially, Mark 12:29 begins with *"Shema Israel, Kyrios ho theos hemon, Kyrios heis estin"* -- which closely follows the LXX of Deuteronomy 6:4 rather than representing an independent translation from the Hebrew. This could mean Jesus quoted the LXX; it could mean Mark conformed the quotation to the LXX his readers knew. The Matthean parallel (22:37-38) omits the Shema opening entirely, which may preserve an older form of the tradition without it.

3. The Nazareth Synagogue Reading: Luke 4:18-19

Luke 4:18-19 records Jesus reading from Isaiah 61:1-2 in the Nazareth synagogue. The text Luke provides **matches the LXX of Isaiah 61 more closely than the MT**, including the phrase 'to proclaim recovery of sight to the blind,' which is in the LXX but not the MT of Isaiah 61:1. This is one of the strongest pieces of evidence that the tradition as it reached Luke was mediated through the LXX. Whether Jesus himself read the Hebrew Isaiah scroll and the LXX rendering is a Lukan interpretive addition, or whether he read from a Greek scroll, or whether there is a free translation involved, cannot be determined with certainty. However, the synagogue scroll at Nazareth would almost certainly have been in Hebrew; the LXX coloring in Luke's account likely reflects Luke's own compositional practice of citing the LXX.

B. The Scholarly Assessment: What Jesus Most Likely Used

The weight of evidence from New Testament scholarship points to the following hierarchy of probability for Jesus's scriptural engagement:

- **Primary: Hebrew liturgical texts.** Jesus heard, memorized, and recited Hebrew Scripture in its Hebrew form in synagogue from childhood. The Shema, the Psalms, the Torah readings were in Hebrew. His deep familiarity with Hebrew Scripture is uncontested.
- **Secondary: Aramaic Targums.** The Aramaic paraphrases of the Hebrew Scriptures (Targums) were used in synagogue contexts alongside the Hebrew readings to make the text accessible to Aramaic speakers. The Targum of Jonathan (Prophets) and the Palestinian Targum of the Pentateuch (in various recensions) were in circulation. Jesus would have heard Scripture interpreted through Targum.
- **Tertiary: The Greek LXX -- possible but not primary.** The evidence that Jesus directly read the LXX is indirect and inferential. The LXX was the Bible of the Diaspora, not of Palestinian village life. There is no positive evidence that Greek scrolls were standard in Galilean village synagogues. The Qumran community, which was far more scripturally intensive than a typical village synagogue, had Greek texts (seven Greek biblical manuscripts among the Dead Sea Scrolls) but overwhelmingly used Hebrew and Aramaic texts.

Martin Hengel's Position: The Decisive Scholarly Statement

Martin Hengel, in *The Septuagint as Christian Scripture* (T&T Clark, 2002) and in *Judaism and Hellenism* (1974), argues that the LXX was the Bible of Hellenistic Judaism broadly and that Palestinian Jews -- especially those in contact with the Diaspora or with Greek-speaking urban centers -- would have known the LXX. Hengel does not claim Jesus personally read the LXX; he claims the environment was permeable enough that LXX readings could have reached Jesus through Greek-speaking synagogues, Diaspora Jews visiting Jerusalem for feasts, and the general cultural osmosis of Hellenistic Judaism. This is a 'possible but not demonstrable' position.

Hengel's larger argument is that the sharp dichotomy between 'Palestinian Judaism' (Hebrew/Aramaic, anti-Hellenistic) and 'Diaspora Judaism' (Greek, Hellenized) is unsustainable. Palestine was deeply embedded in the Hellenistic world. This does not prove Jesus read Greek; it establishes the cultural context in which Greek literacy was possible for a Jewish teacher in first-century Galilee.

VI. Did Jesus Speak Greek? The Direct Evidence

A. The Three Key Gospel Episodes

Episode 1: The Pilate Dialogue (John 18:28-38 / Mark 15:1-5). Pontius Pilate spoke Latin and Greek; there is no evidence he knew Aramaic. If the dialogue is historical, it presupposes a common language -- almost certainly Greek. No interpreter is mentioned, though arguments from silence are weak. The historical kernel behind the Johannine elaboration most likely reflects a Greek-language interrogation, suggesting Jesus could respond in Greek under interrogation.

Episode 2: The Syrophoenician/Canaanite Woman (Mark 7:24-30 / Matt. 15:21-28). This woman was a Greek-speaking Gentile from the Phoenician coastal region. The dialogue -- including the sharp exchange about 'children's bread' and 'dogs' -- presupposes a direct verbal exchange. If

historical, this is **the strongest evidence for conversational Greek competence** in Jesus: a sustained, theologically freighted conversation with a non-Aramaic speaker. Stanley Porter (2000) considers this among the most historically authentic Greek-language encounters.

Episode 3: The Roman Centurion (Matthew 8:5-13 / Luke 7:1-10). A Roman centurion (Latin and Greek speaker) conducts a dialogue with Jesus about healing his servant. Again, no interpreter is mentioned. The centurion's famous response ('I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, but only say the word') is theologically precise -- whether this precision reflects Greek literacy on Jesus's part or the Evangelist's literary elaboration is unresolvable.

B. The Scholarly Verdict: A Three-Language Reality

The most defensible synthesis, drawing on Fitzmyer, Meier, Porter, Hengel, Chancey, and Buth, is the following:

Synthesis: The Language Profile of Jesus of Nazareth

Primary language: Galilean Aramaic. This was Jesus's mother tongue, the language of his home, his disciples, his village audiences, and the overwhelming majority of his recorded teaching. The Aramaic substrata in the Synoptic tradition (Aramaisms, Aramaic names, the Aramaic cries from the cross) are the deepest layer of the tradition and most reliably connect to the historical Jesus.

Liturgical/scribal language: Hebrew. Jesus read and engaged Hebrew Scripture in the Hebrew synagogue liturgy. His debates with Pharisees and scribes likely included Hebrew. His deep familiarity with the Torah, Prophets, and Writings in their Hebrew form is evidenced by the accuracy of his scriptural allusions and the Hebrew wordplay detectable in some of his sayings.

Functional second language: Greek. Jesus almost certainly had functional working Greek sufficient for commercial transactions, encounters with Gentiles, and possibly judicial settings. The Pilate dialogue and the Syrophoenician encounter are the strongest evidence. His Greek was likely competent but not his literary or teaching language.

The LXX: Indirect familiarity, not primary text. The evidence does not support Jesus personally reading the Septuagint as his primary scriptural text. The LXX coloring in Gospel citations of Scripture almost certainly reflects the Evangelists' own LXX-based composition rather than Jesus's direct use of the LXX. Jesus's scriptural world was Hebrew and Aramaic Targumic, filtered through the Greek LXX as mediated by the Greek-composing Evangelists.

VII. Scholarly Conclusion: Probability Rankings and Their Implications

A. Language Probability Ranking

Synthesizing the full range of evidence -- epigraphic, papyrological, literary, archaeological, and internal Gospel analysis -- the following probability rankings emerge:

Language / Context	Probability Assessment
Aramaic as primary teaching / domestic language	Near-certain (scholarly consensus >90% confidence)
Hebrew in liturgical and scribal contexts	Highly probable (consensus ~85% confidence)
Hebrew as a spoken vernacular (Judea / Pharisaic discourse)	Probable (significant minority scholarly position, ~60%)
Functional conversational Greek	Probable (~65-70%, Porter, Hengel, Meier)
Greek as a teaching language for Jewish audiences	Unlikely (~15-20%; no positive evidence)
Direct reading and use of the LXX by Jesus himself	Possible but unproven (~25-30%; indirect evidence only)
Latin	Negligible; only a few Latin loanwords in the NT tradition

B. The Greek Names of the Disciples: Conclusion

The Greek names of the disciples are **not evidence that Jesus conducted his ministry in Greek or renamed his disciples in Greek**. They reflect: (1) the common Second Temple Jewish practice of double-naming (Semitic name + Greek equivalent); (2) the Aramaic origin of most 'Greek' disciple names (Thomas = Aramaic Toma; James = Greek transliteration of Hebrew Ya'aqov; John = Greek transliteration of Hebrew Yochanan); (3) the fact that only Andrew and Philip carry purely Greek names -- and these two disciples are notably the ones approached by Greek-speaking pilgrims in John 12, suggesting they were known Greek-accessible contacts; and (4) the Greek-composing Evangelists' practice of rendering Aramaic names in Greek for their audiences.

C. Why the Gospels Were Written in Greek: Conclusion

The Gospels were written in Greek because: (1) the early Christian mission moved immediately into the Greek-speaking Diaspora world; (2) Greek was the only language capable of reaching the universal audience Paul and the other missionaries envisioned; (3) the Septuagint was already the scriptural Bible of the Jewish Diaspora and the majority of Gentile God-fearers; (4) the theological and interpretive tradition of the early Church was built on LXX quotation and LXX-based exegesis from the earliest recoverable layer of the tradition; and (5) the literary conventions of the ancient world -- historical writing, biography, letter-writing -- were Greek conventions. To write for the educated Roman-period reader was to write in Greek.

D. The LXX and Jesus: Conclusion

The weight of evidence supports the conclusion that **Jesus himself did not use the LXX as his primary scriptural text**. His scriptural world was Hebrew and Aramaic. The extensive LXX quotation in the Gospels -- particularly in Matthew's formula citations, Luke's rewriting of the synagogue reading, and the Fourth Gospel's scriptural references -- reflects the **Evangelists' own compositional practice**, not Jesus's personal use of a Greek Bible. This is consistent with what we know of the transmission process: an original Aramaic-speaking Jesus tradition, translated and interpreted through Greek-speaking communities, mediated through the LXX as those communities' shared scriptural text, and finally crystallized in the Greek Gospel compositions.

The earliest recoverable words of Jesus -- reconstructed through multiple-attestation, Aramaic retro-version, and the criterion of embarrassment -- are words that translate naturally back into Aramaic and that show the rhythmic, parabolic, aphoristic character of Aramaic oral tradition. They do not show the character of a Greek literary composition. The Greek Gospels are the earliest written form we have; but behind them, the great majority of critical scholars hear the voice of a Galilean teacher speaking Aramaic, citing Hebrew Scripture from memory, and occasionally deploying the Greek of empire when the moment required it.

Primary Sources: Gospel of Mark (NA28 Greek text); Josephus, Jewish War and Jewish Antiquities (Greek); Philo of Alexandria, Opera Omnia; Dead Sea Scrolls (Qumran Cave 1-11, DJD series); Mishnah and Tosefta; Bar Kokhba letters (P.Yadin, 1961); Masada ostraca (Yadin and Naveh, 1989); Rahmani, A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries (1994).

Secondary Sources: Joseph A. Fitzmyer, 'The Languages of Palestine in the First Century A.D.' (CBQ 32, 1970); Matthew Black, An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts (Oxford, 3rd ed., 1967); John P. Meier, A Marginal Jew Vol. 1 (Yale, 1991), ch.8; Martin Hengel, Judaism and Hellenism (Fortress, 1974); Martin Hengel, The Septuagint as Christian Scripture (T&T Clark, 2002); Stanley E. Porter, 'Did Jesus Ever Teach in Greek?' (Tyndale Bulletin 44, 1993); Stanley E. Porter, The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research (Sheffield, 2000); Mark Chancey, The Myth of a Gentile Galilee (Cambridge, 2002); Mark Chancey, Greco-Roman Culture and the Galilee of Jesus (Cambridge, 2005); Randall Buth and R. Steven Notley (eds.), The Language Environment of First Century Judaea (Brill, 2014); Tal Ilan, Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity (Mohr Siebeck, 2002-2012); Maurice Casey, Aramaic Sources of Mark's Gospel (Cambridge, 1998); John Kloppenborg, The Formation of Q (Fortress, 1987); Dietrich-Alex Koch, Die Schrift als Zeuge des Evangeliums (Mohr, 1986); Robert Gundry, The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel (Brill, 1967); David Flusser, Judaism and the Origins of Christianity (Magnes, 1988); Shmuel Safrai and Menahem Stern (eds.), The Jewish People in the First Century (Van Gorcum, 1976); Richard Batey, Jesus and the Forgotten City (Baker, 1991).