

Jesus the Poet

One quality of the creative character of Jesus that is not always fully appreciated by writers and scholars is his poetic genius. We might get some appreciation of this side of his personality if we were to stop and think how immersed he was in the language, culture and thought patterns of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is also worth bearing in mind that over 50% of the Hebrew Bible is poetic in nature, which testifies to the fact that the medium of poetry is best suited to expressing the concepts and experience of the transcendent.

Our problem, however, is that there is no original text, whether in poetic form or prose, of the words of Jesus. Being an Israelite and raised in Galilee his native language was Aramaic, more particularly, a Galilean dialect of Western Aramaic. The Arameans were a confederacy of tribes, known as Kaldu or Chaldeans, that emerged from the Syrian desert and occupied Aram (11th century BC) a large area in northern Syria. In time they spread east to Babylonia and by the 9th century BC had occupied most of Iraq. Aramaic became the lingua franca of the Middle East by the 600s BC.

The Jewish exiles in Babylon began speaking Aramaic and brought it back to Israel with them in 539 BC. Portions of the biblical books of Ezra and Daniel are in Aramaic as are the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds. Aramaic was the language of the common folk in the Palestine of Jesus' day, while Hebrew was the language of government and the upper classes.

In general, we are familiar enough with the obvious metaphorical expressions that Jesus used, but we are mostly unaware of the poetic nature of his aphorisms, his pithy wise sayings. To further complicate matters, we have been dealt an awkward hand by translations of biblical texts that fail to accurately convey the subtle cultural and linguistic nuances of the original. And to add another layer of difficulty, we have inherited a tradition of reading Scripture literally, which, in a real sense is an imposition designed to reinforce doctrinal orthodoxy and guard against unchecked interpretations. The result is, we do not know how biblical writers operated and we do not appreciate how they made linguistic and mystical connections as they wrote.

Below are some examples of the poetry of Jesus. My English represents a translated reconstruction of Jesus' words using the Syriac Aramaic of the Peshitta (= 'common' version) and the Greek of Mark's gospel. The Peshitta is written in an Aramaic dialect that is closely related to the language spoken in Palestine at the time of Jesus. So, while these verses in Syriac may not be identical to the actual words of Jesus they get as close as possible to the grammatical constructions, vocabulary, rhythm and thought patterns of a Galilean Aramaic speaker. Most (all?) English translations fail to capture this poetic rhythm and tone.

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| <p>A The well do not need a physician
But those who suffer disease.
I came not to call the righteous,
But sinners. Mark 2:17</p> | <p>B Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?
Behold my mother and behold my brothers.
For who does the will of Allaha
Is my brother and my sister and my mother.
Mark 3:33,35</p> |
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Note how 'sinners' stands out in stark emphasis in **A**.

I have left the Aramaic 'Allaha' (God) in **B** to imitate the original rhythm. In **B**, Aramaic repeats 'behold' for balanced rhythm. Aramaic also repeats 'my' throughout **B** to highlight relationship and maintain rhythm. Family relationship is the focus in line 1. Relationship through discipleship is the focus in lines 2-4.

The point: ***connection to Jesus through commitment is far greater than connection to him by accident of birth.***

- C** Why is a lamp put under a basket,
Or under a bed,
Should it not be placed on a lampstand?
For there is nothing hidden that won't be revealed
And nothing in secret that won't be laid bare. Mark 4:21-22

The rhetorical question in **C** underscores the futility of trying to hide the light of truth. The truth of Jesus' messiahship will be revealed to all sooner or later. Light is meant to shine out; it cannot remain a secret