

When Are Church Leader's Words Entitled to Claim of Scripture?

(Full text of a lecture by President J. Reuben Clark Jr., delivered Wednesday, July 7, 1954, before the summer session of Seminary and Institute Teachers at the Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.)

Elder Harold B. Lee suggested that I speak about the following subjects:

The King James Version of the Bible; the Value of the Book of Mormon; and When are the Writings or Sermons of Church Leaders Entitled to the Claim of Scripture.

Since the subjects are broad and we have only an hour, I have, with his permission, planned to speak only upon two of them: The King James Version of the Bible, and When are the Writings or Sermons of Church Leaders Entitled to the Claim of Scripture.

Regarding the King James Version of the Bible I shall not say very much. So far as the King James Version as against the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament is concerned, I think it best to leave that matter rest now with my talk at the last Conference. To go into greater detail than was then given would require far more time than one full hour.

The talk was published in the Deseret News, April 10, 1954, and The Improvement Era, June, 1954. Furthermore, the Bookcraft Company obtained approval to issue it in pamphlet form and anyone interested can secure a copy from them. (I may add parenthetically that I have not a penny of financial interest of any sort in that printing project; they did kindly present me with a hundred copies gratis.) But I might today add a few paragraphs about the language in which Jesus spoke and in which the earliest records might have been made.

There seems no doubt but that, at the time of Jesus, the language of Palestine (and the countries adjacent thereto, particularly to the immediate north, east, and south) was Aramaic. It seems clear on the evidence that in his teachings to the people the Lord spoke in Aramaic. There is some suggestion that he may have used Greek, but one scholar (a Christian Jew) says, "A Jewish Messiah Who would urge His claim upon Israel in Greek, seems almost a contradiction in terms." (Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 3rd ed. 28th imp. (New York, Longmans, Green and Co., 1927), Vol. I, pp. 129-30.)

I cannot question that the Christ could have spoken Greek, or any other language, if he had wished.

Another critic says: "Most scholars would admit that the vernacular of Palestine in the time of our Lord was Semitic, and not Greek," but notes that the practice of these scholars does not agree with their theory; "for in all kinds of theological writings, critical as well as devotional, the references to the text of the Gospels constantly assume that the Greek words are those actually uttered by our Lord. But if Greek was not commonly spoken in the Holy Land, it is improbable that he who ministered to the common people would have employed an uncommon tongue. It follows that the Greek words recorded by the Evangelists are not the actual words Christ spoke. . . . But all the evidence tends to the conviction that Christ habitually employed some form of

the vernacular in his discourses, and not the alien language of Greece." (G. H. Williams, "Language of Christ," James Hastings, ed., *Dictionary of the Bible*, Complete in One Volume (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), pp. 530-531.)



PRESIDENT CLARK . . . lectures on scriptures

As to the language in which the first record of Christ's works and teachings was made, we may briefly note the following facts:

As already intimated, it seems clear, and quite naturally so, that the teachings of Christ spread first into the country surrounding Palestine. Christ himself journeyed northward out of Palestine proper into Phoenicia. Indeed, it was here that the Syrophenician woman came to him, asking that he heal her daughter afflicted of an evil spirit. In the conversation which passed between them, the woman, replying to a question put by Jesus—his favorite method of disconcerting those who pressured him—gave the only answer that, so far as I have observed, left Jesus obliged to speak further. For, after a rebuff from the Savior, who told her that it was not meet to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs, she replied: "Yes, Lord: yet the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs." Whereupon Jesus said unto her: "For this saying go thy way; the devil is gone out of thy daughter." (Mark 7:28-29.)

Just before the end of his ministry, Jesus, leaving Palestine proper, journeyed eastward into Perea, just beyond the Jordan.

Saul was on his way to take vengeance on the group of the disciples of Christ in Damascus in Syria, when he had the great vision of his conversion. This was within two years of the crucifixion. The Gospel was spreading through Aramaic areas.

It is difficult to conceive that all this spread of the Gospel from Palestine into adjacent areas was not in the common language of the entire region, the language in which Jesus spoke and taught.

Luke, beginning his Gospel (written somewhere between A.D. 63-68—*The Scofield Reference Bible*, rev. ed., (New York, Oxford University Press, 1917), p. 1070), writes:

"Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us.

"Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word;

"It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus.

"That thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed." (Luke 1:104.)

Kenyon, a modern critical authority, affirms, on the point of the written record of Christ's work and teachings:

"We see first of all a period of some forty years when the narrative of our Lord's life and teaching circulated orally, in the preaching of His disciples, or in written records which have not come down to us; and when St. Paul was writing his letters to various Christian churches which he and his companions had founded." (Sir Frederic Kenyon, *The Story of the Bible* (London, John Murray, 1949) p. 35-36.)

Regarding the times at which the various New Testament books were written, Kenyon (apparently principally relied upon by the Revisers of the Revised Standard Version) comments:

"Since the publication of Harnack's *Chronologie der altchristlichen Litteratur* in 1897 it has been generally admitted that, with very few exceptions, the traditional dates of the New Testament books may be accepted as approximately correct. The doctrines of the school of Baur, which regarded the earliest Christian books as a tissue of falsifications of the second century, have been exploded. 'That time,' says Harnack, 'is over. It was an episode, during which science learned much, and after which it must forget much.' Recent discoveries have only confirmed this conclusion." (Sir Frederic Kenyon,

Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts, 4th ed., rev. (London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1948), p. 98, n. 1.)

Under this thesis, the Synoptic Gospels were written about the years 65 to 75, Mark being the earliest; Acts belongs to the same period; Revelation about 95; and John late in the century. (The Story, p. 36.)

Luke was written at the end of Kenyon's "forty years," when (as Kenyon says) "the Lord's life and teaching circulated orally, in the preaching of His disciples, or in written records which have not come down to us." (The Story, p. 36.)

Luke expressly says: "Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us. . . ."

Critics say, as already noted, that these records have totally disappeared. We do not know the language in which they were written. But since Jesus and his disciples are conceded to have spoken in Aramaic; since in large part this would be the language of the common people of the whole Palestinian-Syrian-Mesopotamian region; since the works and teachings of the Savior would first pass out among the common people of the region (inevitably it would seem from geographical propinquity); since, as also seems inevitable in the situation, not alone would the word pass by word of mouth out from Palestine to the surrounding areas, but by a written record as well; since all admit, seemingly, that the Greek text we now have contains many passages that are recognized as translations of Aramaic expressions—may we not, indeed must we not, conclude that the earliest records of the works and teachings of Jesus, probably the ones to which Luke refers, were made in Aramaic, and this being true, the Greek texts of the Gospels are really (in all likelihood indeed in major part) founded upon and are translations of Aramaic records?

Some scholars point out that Papias (who was martyred about 163), "as usually understood" shows they were first written down in Aramaic. (Putnam's *Handbook of Universal History*, New York and London, The Knickerbocker Press,

1914; James Hope Moulton "Language of the NT," HDB (Single Vol., p. 530a).)

The Revisers who produced the recently issued Revised Standard Version, state they were divided on this point of the language of the original records, though they refrain from discussing it. They say:

"Since the gospel was first proclaimed in Aramaic, it is not surprising that the recorded words of Jesus and the apostles retain even in translation much that is characteristic of the original Semitic sentence structure and idiom. Whether there was any direct translation of written Aramaic sources, in addition to the preservation of Semitic ways of speaking through tradition and oral translation, is a question on which the members of our Committee do not agree. It is also, however, a question which was never debated in the Committee, because the basic assumption that our responsibility was to translate the Greek text made such considerations irrelevant." (Millar Burrows, "The Semitic Background of the New Testament," An Introduction to the Revised Standard Version (The International Council of Religious Education, 1946) pp. 27-28.)

One authority calls attention to the possibility that John the Apostle used an Aramaic text in his work. (Edward Miller, *A Guide to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, (London, George Bell and Sons, 1886) p. 75.)

The Extreme Textualists vigorously protest against an original Aramaic text, and contend that those originals—the Sacred Autographs, as they call them—were in Greek. They declare their prime purpose to be the discovery and establishment of this original Greek text. The great scholars Westcott and Hort (whose influence controlled the British and American Revisions of the 1880's and 1901, an influence that still is dominant in Extreme Textualist circles) built up a theory to destroy the value of the early Aramaic versions, a theory that the modern critic Kenyon (following the appraisals of earlier critics hostile to the theory) characterizes as myth. (Clarence T. Craig, "The King James and the American Standard Versions," An Introduction, p. 16; Kenyon, *Our Bible*, p. 115.)

Whether an Aramaic text, if one existed, will ever be discovered is a matter of considerable doubt, because those early records were all written on papyrus which perishes with time, have in very dry climates such as Egypt, where such records have been found dating back as far as the second and third centuries (the Chester Beatty papyri and others). Recently, as I recall, a very old papyrus record was found in southern Palestine.

I have gone through all this to show, first, that so far as the New Testament goes we do not have any (barring a few words) of the actual words of the Savior. If the original record was in Aramaic, of which our Greek text is in all or part a translation, then all we have in our English Bible is a translation of a translation. If the original record was in Greek, then we have a simple translation, for it seems clear Jesus did not teach in Greek.

As I have already stated, the prime purpose of the higher critics is to establish the original Greek text. They are not too concerned with what the Savior actually taught. Perhaps this is best. Dr. Hort made some attempt to determine what the Savior actually said by what he called "conjectural emendation." In fact he was guessing as to what the Savior said or meant, sometimes irrespective of any known text or other evidence, by processes which his critic laughed out of court by



COLLECT OFFICER'S PICTURES

A project to collect pictures of past presidents of the Spring City Ward Relief Society is under way by its present officers. Mrs. Lorna Jensen, present president of the ward Relief Society, is shown here with some of the pictures collected to date. The pictures will be made into a large print which will be hung in the Relief Society Room. Small reprints also will be made. Aiding Mrs. Jensen are Mrs. Ethel Sorensen, Mrs. Leona State and Mrs. Etha Hansen, Relief Society officers.