

## *Language and The Historical Jesus*

The limitation of language is also true, of course, of the words of Jesus, who, the New Testament says, taught us to pray “Our Father, who art in Heaven ... .” This is a familiar phrase for Christians. It is a 17th century translation from the Latin, copied over and over by monks for centuries after being translated into Latin from Greek. These words are attributed to Jesus, who spoke in Aramaic, a language still spoken in parts of the Middle East.

Arabic is the popular language of the Arab world today and is the sacred language of the Koran, the scriptures that Muslims believe were revealed to Mohammed, the prophet of Islam. Some believe it is the language of Allah himself. “Allah” is the Arabic word for “Deo” and “God.” The word Jesus used was “Allaha.”

The script for Aramaic and Arabic is radically different from English. Translation is a very difficult task and much can be lost across the centuries and across several languages (as is the case here), especially since translators are biased by a particular theological way of thinking. Translators must make difficult decisions, which is why translations differ.

For instance, whereas in the First century Christian church men and women seem to equally share priestly functions, by the Second century a strong patriarchy had emerged—and only men became priests in the evolving Church. The idea of God-as-Father supported the way the church was being re-structured and would encourage translators to write “Our Father” rather than “Oh Birther” as Neil Douglas-Klotz believes the Aramaic should be translated.

Were we reading the “Our father who art in heaven” phrase translated by Douglas-Klotz directly from the Aramaic, it would read “O Birther, father-mother of the Cosmos.” Now, Douglas-Klotz is also a translator with *his* theological biases! We cannot avoid the fact that all is interpreted! Every word that you read here is being interpreted through your filtering systems—your beliefs—your biases. But suppose Christians were praying “O Birther” rather than “Our Father.” Does this seem different to you? Likewise, does “cosmos” strike you differently than “Heaven”?

Thus, we don’t truly *know* what the words of Jesus were, despite the fact that Christian scholars have been seeking to understand Jesus the man for centuries. Since about 1850 serious scholarship has taken place—especially in Europe and America. One such scholar was Albert Schweitzer, the great organist, theologian and medical doctor, who spent most of his adult life in Africa providing Western medical services to the people. In 1898 as referenced earlier, his work “*The Quest for the Historical Jesus*” burst like a bomb on the European religious scene. For a decade he was forbidden to preach to the African people.

Actually many scholars preceded him in this quest to cut through the traditional theology to find the real Jesus—with his brothers and sisters and mother and father and life as a child and adolescent. These scholars’ recounting would go like this:

He lived.

He wrote nothing.

He died in the year 29.

Stories were told.

Paul (the apostle) wrote letters to Christians 20 to 30 years later.

During this period, it was common to hear stories about extraordinary miracles performed by heroes and heroines that were told and believed across the world, and many religions celebrated

the death and resurrection of a god. Such stories were very familiar in Jesus' time. Christians believed he had survived death but had many differing ideas about how. They felt his presence. Paul said he appeared "in" him, equating this with other stories of Jesus' resurrection. Others said "to" them, that is, he "appeared" to them. However different the stories, the storytellers say they felt a profound difference in their lives.