

Neil Douglas-Klotz on The Aramaic Jesus by Tami Simon

What follows is the transcript of a SoundsTrue interview from the podcast Insights at the Edge between host Tami Simon and Neil Douglas-Klotz. You can listen to the audio recording of this call [here](#).

Tami Simon: You're listening to Insights at the Edge. Today my guest is Neil Douglas-Klotz. Neil is a world-renowned scholar in religious studies, spirituality, and psychology. He holds a PhD in religious studies and psychology from the Union Institute and taught these subjects for 10 years at Holy Names College in California. Living now in Edinburgh, Scotland, Neil Douglas-Klotz directs the Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Learning. He's the author of several books including *Prayers of the Cosmos*, *The Hidden Gospel*, *The Genesis Meditations*, and *The Sufi Book of Life*. With Sounds True, Neil has published three audio-learning courses including the new program, *I Am: The Secret Teaching of the Aramaic Jesus*. Neil has also written the Sounds True book, *Blessings of the Cosmos*—which includes a corresponding CD of 20 guided Aramaic body prayers—where he presents a collection of all new translations of Jesus' best-loved benedictions and invocations for peace, healing, and divine connection.

In this episode of Insights at the Edge, Neil and I spoke about how to read a text as a Midrash and appreciate multiple interpretations. We also talked about body prayers and how they relate to how Jesus himself might have prayed. Neil also led us through a body prayer experience in relationship to the "I am" sayings of Jesus. And finally, we talked more about these "I am" sayings and how they were really designed as a communication to Jesus' inner circle at the end of his life. Here's my conversation with the very generous scholar, Neil Douglas-Klotz.

To begin with, Neil, I'm wondering if you can introduce our listeners to the language of Aramaic. Give us a sense of what part of the world this language comes from. Give us an introduction to Aramaic.

Neil Douglas-Klotz: Aramaic really arises from the area that we now call Mesopotamia, which is in the area of present-day Iraq. And you could say that classical Aramaic was the language of the Assyrian Empire. In fact, today some modern Aramaic speakers refer to Aramaic as Assyrian because there are still native speakers of Aramaic today. But as I say, they often identify themselves as Assyrians.

Now the question is how it comes to be associated with Jesus. And that has to do with the fact that if you look at the Bible and you look at world history, the ancient Hebrew peoples were subject to the domination of several empires. One of those was the Babylonian Empire and the other was the Assyrian Empire. Really, in both cases—because they were overlapping in some ways—these dominators spoke this Semitic language that we call Aramaic.

So from about, say, the sixth century before the time of Jesus, the Hebrew peoples had begun to switch over from ancient Hebrew, the Hebrew of the prophets, to this Assyrian/Aramaic language. The reason this happened so quickly—that is, within a hundred years or so—is really because Assyrian or Aramaic and ancient Hebrew are not really that different. They have the same letters in the alphabet. They have the same number of letters. They are identifiably very similar as ancient Semitic languages.

Most scholars now believe that by the time of Jesus, no one was really speaking the ancient Hebrew that would have been spoken, let's say, by Moses or by King David. And everyone was speaking this lingua franca, or common spoken language, of the whole Middle East, which was Aramaic. The only exception to this would have been those who were a small group in the upper classes who were collaborating with the Romans and the Roman domination of areas of the Middle East. And they would have spoke either Latin or perhaps some Greek. But Jesus' audience was all not these upper class collaborating people. These were the common people of their time, most of whom were not the friends of the Romans and who had been taxed and driven off their small holdings by the Romans in any case.

So that's how we come to Aramaic. How is it spoken? How does it sound? Well, you know, if you listen to modern Hebrew today, the Hebrew spoken in the state of Israel, it's a little bit like ancient Hebrew, a little bit like ancient Aramaic. It has some of those "h" and "ch" sounds and things like that. It's also a little bit like modern day Arabic, with which it shares many common root words.

So for instance, as one of the first programs I did for Sounds True was this program on the Aramaic prayer, Jesus' prayer. So the beginning of the prayer sounds something like this: [Prays in Aramaic] That takes us up to the line about heaven becoming earth. So it is very much, you could say, an ancient Middle Eastern language. It's related to old Egyptian. It's related to ancient Hebrew. It's related to Babylonian, Ugaritic, Canaanite, and many of the other ancient Semitic languages.

TS: And is it pretty well-accepted [now] that this is the language that Jesus spoke in? Is this commonly agreed upon?

NDK: Yes. And there is a "but" to that. Scholars generally, I would say, 99 percent agree that Jesus spoke Aramaic and that all of his listeners were Aramaic. However, Western biblical scholarship has gone down the root of looking at which are the oldest texts, which are the oldest, shall we say, transcriptions or renditions of Jesus' words. And there they differ from Eastern, that is Aramaic scholars and Aramaic Church scholars, as to which are the actual, oldest written versions.

Now, as we know from looking at "prophetic figures" around the world, in different world spiritualities, the distance between the prophet or the messenger speaking something and it being written down is not a simple path. It's subject to changes, alterations—depends on what we think of ancient people's memories, which seem to have been actually very good. But still, different things can be written down for different purposes, and we find that in the ancient world in general.

The Buddhist sayings are transcribed in Pali and then re-transcribed into Sanskrit or other languages, for instance. And some sayings are dated as being more historically closer to the Buddha than others, certainly. The same is true, really, with the study of Christianity. So while everyone agrees that Jesus spoke Aramaic, scholars don't agree about what the

earliest texts are.

I've essentially tried to get around this problem in my work by saying that we agree that Jesus spoke Aramaic, so let's look at the sayings that are attributed to him both in the Gospels—that is, the Gospels in the Canonical Bible, as well as those Gospels that are outside the Canonical Bible, which are sometimes called the Gnostic Gospels. Let's look at them, in an Aramaic version if we have it, let's look at them in an Aramaic view and see if this elucidates it, this illuminates something about Jesus' spirituality, about his way of prayer or way of practice. That really has been my main interest, rather than tracking down which is the most ancient text, because no one really knows that. That's really still subject to theories, Biblical scholarships theories, and people are unearthing new theories about the oral transmission every day, really.

TS: So Neal, are you working with original prayers and writings in Aramaic, or are you translating what you're finding into Aramaic and then interpreting it in a new way?

NDK: No, I'm working with an Aramaic text, which Aramaic Christians still use today, which is called Peshitta. And Peshitta is a rendering of the Gospels sayings of Jesus into an Aramaic that is slightly later than the one he would have spoken, but all of the key words really remain the same. So for my purposes, for the purposes of translation or interpretation of his prayer or his sayings, the fact that the pronunciation would have been slightly different isn't that much of a factor. If he said a certain saying, he had to use particular words. He didn't have a choice. And so we can limit our variables in that regard.

But I use what Aramaic Christians of all the different groups or the different denominations use, and [what] they consider to be their Bible and the most ancient and authentic. Whether it is the oldest or not, well, the jury is still out on that but it's certainly the most Semitic, the most Aramaic, it's the closest to what his expression would have been. So I don't have to reinvent or backward translate something.

TS: Right. And what have been some of the most significant discoveries you've made of how the original Aramaic helps us understand potentially what Jesus was really trying to say versus how people in contemporary situations might be interpreting those same verses? What are some of the observations you've made that you think are the most important?

NDK: It's hard to know where to start. There are large things that I've discovered that are very important and which I wrote about in my second book, Hidden Gospel. For instance, that really the meaning of the word "good" in Aramaic really means "ripe." That is, r-i-p-e, meaning "at the right time, at the right place." It's essentially a planting image and one that is drawn from nature.

Conversely, you could say, the word for "evil" as it's translated as evil in the Gospels, really means unripe. It's the Aramaic bisha where as "ripe" is the Aramaic tuve, which is similar to the modern-day Hebrew, Tove. Just knowing that makes a huge difference when you look at works that have come to "theological" implications of, "Well, this is good belief and this is bad belief." Or, "This is categorically, as Jesus says in the Gospels: a good tree bears good fruit. An evil tree bears evil fruit." Well, I mean, he's really saying that "a ripe tree bears ripe fruit and an unripe tree bears unripe fruit."

So look at nature if you want to know how to live life, how to come back into tune with what he would call "sacred unity." If you want to live life in a right way, in a ripe way, look at nature around you, it will guide you. So there are several things that I would consider to

be keys that have to do with Aramaic words themselves.

Then there are several things which ended up really making a huge difference the more that I looked at them. And this has to do with small things, like prepositions. Jesus primarily talks about not believing in him. He doesn't say, "Believe in me." He says, "Believe like me. Believe as I do." It's just a matter of translating the prepositions differently. You know, when [the Bible] went into a Greek version, which is what the Western churches ended up using, they chose to translate "believe like me" into "believe in me." And that makes a huge amount of difference. So there are small things that I found also made a great deal of difference, that some of the later interpretations of the words of Jesus—and then their formulations as theology and as different sorts of theological organizations, churches and so forth.

TS: I'd love to know more about some of the big and small things that you've discovered, because this is really interesting to me. So maybe you could tell me some of the other key words and how [the translation] changes our understanding of what Jesus might have been trying to communicate.

NDK: Well, one of the bigger picture items—which also comes into the translation of particular words—is just that we need to look at Aramaic and actually any ancient Semitic language. We need to let go of this division of reality into mind, body, soul, and spirit. This really comes to us from platonic Greek philosophy. And this division into heaven and earth—you could say transcendent imminent: mind, body, soul, spirit. All of these divisions don't apply in ancient Semitic languages. They had an entirely different world view or way of looking at the psychology of the self and its relationship to nature, its relationship to the universe.

So when we bring this into individual words—for instance, the word that Jesus uses that is often translated as "spirit" really means "breath." Spirit is sometimes seen in some theologies as something that is not of this world. That is, you could say, not having anything to do with nature or with what is sometimes considered to be a fallen reality. Whereas, Jesus couldn't have thought that way and neither could have the ancient Hebrew or ancient Jewish prophets because they believe that, according to Genesis, if we read Genesis literally, the holy one sort of creates the whole universe, breathes into it. So it's all part of what Matt Fox calls the "original blessing."

"Breath, my breath, the breath that we share, that we're sharing in this interview over these many miles, connects with the breath or the breathing, the wind, the air that is all over the planet, and this itself returns to a larger breath." This would be their way of telling the story. And this larger breath, this breath of the whole universe, this breath that the Holy One is breathing, they would call this the "holy breath" or [speaks Aramaic]. And this was later translated, as you probably realize, as "holy spirit." Which, again, brings up the image of something disembodied, something not of this world, disconnected.

So this is a big-picture image that percolates down through many, many Aramaic words and their literal translation, which simply was, as I sometimes say, strained out through Greek philosophy, strained out through Greek language into a way of looking that Jesus and the ancient prophets could never have imagined. They couldn't have even imagined some of the concepts that later came into Western theology.

TS: You know, I notice as we're talking, Neil, that I have this awareness that people can be very attached and convinced of their interpretation of Jesus' words, and that it's very easy to offend people—not intentionally, but just by offering an alternative view. And I'm

curious how you work with this in your teaching and writing?

NDK: Yes, that's a good question, Tami. Since I've been working with this for over 30 years now, what I tell people is, "If you like the translation of the Aramaic prayer, of the Lord's Prayer that you have, the Our Father in the King James Version, stay with it. If that means something. If that's something for your heart, stay with that because it has meaning for you, it has resonance for you." All I'm trying to show is that there are deeper additional meanings to some of these more limited translations. And that has resonated with people.

The beauty that we find, for instance, in the King James Version, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes and certain sayings of the Gospel of John—all of this is still there, it's just that the spirituality that Jesus was pointing his listeners towards, and we might say pointing us towards as well, was something broader. It doesn't eliminate necessarily any of the literal translations that were done in the past. But what it does do is perhaps broaden and deepen a person's spiritual experience. And with that approach, I've had very good success in speaking to many mainstream groups, as I say, over the last 30 years.

People of many many different denominations have benefited [from that approach.] And some of the even mainstream denominations: one of the Methodist branches even put some of my work in their handbook for ministers. They felt it was helpful for their ministers to also look at other views to deepen their spirituality around Jesus' prayer, rather than having [them] just saying it as sort of words that trip off the tongue, and they aren't really conscious or present with what they are saying.

You know, it's possible consciously or unconsciously to offend people. Some people become outraged, not necessarily because of that, but they wonder why no one told them some of these things all those many years ago, when they felt [they were] not treated very well by the institutional church. So many of the people that end up in my seminars are those who do feel that they connect to Jesus, they may even identify themselves as Christians. Many do. But they may feel that the institutional church in some of its forms has not treated them with respect, has not treated their own spirituality with a sense of respect.

TS: Well, I'm grateful for your very open and embracing view of helping people find what works for them, what is a gateway for them. I'm curious, though, do you think it's possible for you or anybody in their work, no matter how close you try to stay to the original language, to really know what Jesus meant? I mean, could you really know? Could anybody really know?

NDK: Well, I think no, you can't really. But this is, what I would say, the beauty of the approach that I have used, which I didn't really evolve because it's common in looking at the Semitic language teachings of various prophets. It's common among the Sufis today, it's common among the Jewish mystics, that when you look at the words of a prophet or a mystic or a teacher in the Semitic languages, the language itself allows you to look at it in a number of different ways, from a number of different viewpoints, a number of different levels.

So we can find meaning in these words then, [and] different sorts of meanings when we return to them with different life experiences. And I think that's the richness of it, that there doesn't have to be fixed as one particular translation, or one particular meaning. It doesn't have to be the be-all and end-all or the only meaning. So that's what I've

attempted to really do in my work—for instance, in my very first book, *Prayers of the Cosmos*, [I translated] each line of the Lord's Prayer, of Jesus' prayer, five or six different ways.

So these are possibilities. No one translation is the definitive translation. But there's a richness. There's a breadth there. There's a depth there in which people can hear what they need to hear and still connect, you could say, through breath, through spirit to the person who said the words.

TS: I love that. So you're offering different forms of translation and saying, "see which one speaks to you"?

NDK: Yes. In the Jewish tradition, especially in the Kabbalistic traditions, this is called Midrash. You take a translation, [and] rather than do a so-called a literal translation, you do maybe five or six different literal translations, because the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic [each] allows for different literal translations of the same word. And so they would say that you could [then] look at these sayings, you can look at the wisdom in different ways from our everyday reality: "How does the saying relate to me in my relationships?" Or you could say, "my work life," "my inner spiritual life," "my psychological life," "my relationship to nature."

All of these are what you could call different arenas [in which] we act and feel, and which we are in life. And the ancient Semitic languages seemed to revel in this almost paradoxical way of looking at life. Life was both heaven and earth. It was both a connected "shimmering wave," which would be one way of translating "heaven." And it was also an individual particle; it was an individual essence that each of us came into life to offer and to blossom like a seed blossoms.

So there's individuality. There's diversity. But there's also unity. And this is the way the Hebrew Bible begins. If it begins in paradox, it certainly not going to go anywhere else from there. And so I think the main difficulty is when people try to boil things down to an "only translation" or an "only correct belief" in any religious or spiritual tradition, this is where things tend to get a bit volatile.

TS: That's very helpful. I'm curious, in that spirit, how do you look and hear through Aramaic ears, if you will, the miracles of Jesus that are recounted in the Bible?

NDK: That's a good question. I've looked at these. I come back to the great Christian writer, C.S. Lewis, who many people know for his Narnia books, but he also wrote some wonderful reflections on Christian spirituality. Particularly he wrote a book on miracles, which I think is very perceptive. He points out that ancient peoples in many different cultures, because they looked at reality in a different way, they were more open to the unexpected. They were more open to what we tend to call "the miraculous" or "the supernatural" because they didn't necessarily see it as outside the realm of possibility.

This is really true with the ancient Semitic peoples as well, because they felt that the holy one, you could say "God" or "Sacred Unity," was infused in all dimensions of reality, including nature. Again, original sin is a later idea developed by a Christian theologian. It wasn't an idea that Jesus or the Hebrew Prophets could have had. But because you could say that the Holy One is infused in all of reality, everything we see, anything is possible at any particular time.

I suppose some scientists would say today that that created a field, that that created a

possibility that unusual things could actually happen. Things [that] we tend to call “statistical anomalies” [today], particularly in the medical profession, where if someone has a spontaneous healing from a particular illness—basically that spontaneous healing is not tracked. It’s just considered as unusual. It’s not subject to what we would call Western science.

Western science deals in what is predictable. Whereas ancient cultures in many parts of the world, they were much more open to the unpredictable. They were much more open to what we would tend to call the supernatural. Although in reality, especially for the ancient Semitic peoples, nothing was really supernatural. Everything was within the realm of the Holy One, of the One being. There was nothing outside of that realm.

TS: Well, so I understand that context, but still, just to ask the question again, do you think then that these miracles are events that actually happened because of that field of acceptance, or do you see them as metaphor?

NDK: That’s my feeling, yes. Now, I don’t see the need to take them as metaphor. I think that the various healings that we find in the Gospels, there’s no reason why these couldn’t have happened exactly the way they are described. Now, do I know that’s the case? No. But you know, I think it’s well within the realm of possibility, especially in terms of what we see today, as I say, that things happen which could be called miracles but are simply not tracked that way.

TS: Now, a very interesting part of your work, Neil, in addition to your scholarship around the language of Aramaic, is your introduction of what you call “body prayers.” And I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit about that and how it relates to your teachings on the Aramaic Jesus.

NDK: Well, yes, that really is an essential feature of the way I teach, both in my seminars as well as the way that I present at the various programs that I’ve done for Sounds True. I found that because of the nature of this—and because, really, my work is about spiritual experience and trying to decode, if you will, Jesus’ way of prayer, his meditation and his spirituality—it’s important to give people some sense of how this could have felt. What would it mean? Not just in words, but what would it feel like. And so I’ve used what I’ve sometimes called “body prayers.” I used to call them body prayers but now I just call them meditations in some cases. We don’t really have a good word for this in Aramaic because Aramaic has only one word that means both prayer and what we would currently call meditation. That is silent meditation. So the same word [speaks Aramaic] really means both.

So I have tried to offer what I would consider to be the types of prayer, the types of meditations that Jesus would have done, which involves simple chanting, simple inner breathing with certain words, much as it’s done sometimes today in the tradition of Contemplative Prayer or Centering Prayer. The only difference is that I’ve done this from a more Middle Eastern standpoint rather than bringing in a Far Eastern standpoint into it.

The inner intonation of sound is very important in Middle Eastern body prayers in general, or the Middle Eastern way of prayer. It’s much more of a tradition of breath and of sound than it is of sight and of the visual. So body awareness, breathing, sound, intoning, chanting, and of course silence—these are all tools that get us close to, I feel, Jesus’ way of prayer and meditation.

TS: And what gives you the knowing that this is how Jesus might have prayed?

NDK: Well, we find evidence for it both in what he's telling people as well as in various traditions that arise around him. In other words, for him prayer was not simply just saying words or just repeating certain words—prayer was a type of contemplation, a type of inner contemplation that, again, some people would identify today with meditation. Some would call it Centering Prayer or Contemplative Prayer. It's really part in parcel in his words when he says, for instance, "the kingdom/queendom of the One is within you." He's also talking about being "among you."

So [here is] this "within and among," again, this breakdown of the dualism is there in the Aramaic language itself. And again, once we start to retranslate or insert the word "breath" wherever Jesus uses spirit, that gives us a real hint as to his way of prayer or meditation. There are many other things like this. In some of the later Gospels—not in the canonical Gospels, but some of the one that weren't included—there are descriptions of Yeshua/Jesus doing some sort of circle dance with his disciples. In some of the Gospels, for instance in the Gospel of Thomas, there are descriptions of certain types of contemplation or meditation that Jesus was sharing with his disciples.

If we look at all this together, which is what I've really tried to do to make a consistent picture, I think we can get quite close to the type of body prayer or meditation that he was doing. If we look before him, if we look after him, we see that it's really part of a larger picture of what I would call Native Middle Eastern Spirituality.

TS: I'm wondering if you'd be willing to give us an example—actually, take us through a short body prayer that we could do together.

NDK: We could do that. OK. One of the ones I do in the new program, which is based on the Gospel of John, is focused around some of the sayings of Jesus that are usually translated beginning with the words, "I am." For instance, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," "I am the door ..." and so forth. In Aramaic, the word that is later translated as "I am" is really "I-I." Aramaic doesn't have a "being" verb. You can't actually say "I am" in ancient Aramaic, nor can you do it in ancient Hebrew, as far as that goes. So really what Jesus is saying is, "I-I." The connection of the small self, which in Aramaic is called nafsha, is the self that is growing, evolving, learning through life. And the connection between that and the greater self, or what in this way of looking, this story language, so to speak, would be called the only I, the only being, Alaha, or the One, or God, if you like to use that more theological language.

Some of what we're doing in the new program is working with many of these sayings, but we begin with a very simple body prayer, which is simply intoning, breathing gently to ourselves this word in Aramaic, Ina-Ina, which means "I-I." Connecting my own sense of self, the way it is just in this moment, with a sense of awe or sense of unity that is throughout the whole cosmos, and gradually building and strengthening that connection so that there's an easier pathway between the big picture of life and what I have to deal with in my everyday life. So should we try a bit of that?

TS: Yes, let's do it!

NDK: OK, let's do it. If you would place one hand lightly over your heart and feel your breath rise and fall there. And just simply breathing Ina-Ina, the "I-I." Through these words that Yeshua/Jesus spoke, we're connecting to his way of prayer, his way of being. And this is also support. We follow in his footsteps. He's going ahead of us in the caravan of creation. This doesn't exclude a connection with him or through him. But he's also asking

us to dive more deeply into our own inner self and connect that through him to the greater sense of life, of reality, of the Holy One.

Breathe the words first, Ina-Ina. Feeling the breath rise and fall. Hand lightly touching the heart. The heartbeat there as our own inner rhythm as well. And let's intone very softly to ourselves these words, again, using the resonance of the also to bring us into rhythm, into ripeness.

[Intoning] Ina. Ina. Ina. Ina. Ina. Ina. Ina. Ina.

So however that comes out for you. Don't worry about how that sounds. Focus more on the feeling. Focus more on the rhythm, the vibration, the breathing. We continue to breathe with that feeling, letting the breath go deeper, deeper. Connecting with our own sense of self as it is growing, evolving, changing, whatever that may be.

In this way of looking, it's never a thing, the self. It's moving, changing. It's evolving every moment. It's not really something we can hold onto. But we connect that momentary sense of our self, our life, our known, our problems, our challenges, with a greater picture and greater reality. With those who have gone before us, who have inspired us, and through them all the way back to the beginning of the caravan. Back to the first beginning, back to the one being or that mysterious something that connects all beings throughout all of life. Aman. Aman. Thank you.

TS: It's interesting that you're calling these teachings and these sayings the "I am" sayings, but at the same time you said that that's not actually the correct translation.

NDK: [Laughs] That's correct. This is bit of a joke, yes. A bit of a paradox. But people know them as the "I am" sayings, so we ended up using that in the title. Really, the new program is retelling most of the story of the Gospel of John. And as I say, in short form, it's really Jesus preparing his disciples for him leaving and trying to point them back to themselves, to dive more deeply into themselves as a source of guidance rather than relying on him because he realizes that he's not going to be around much longer.

So retold in that sense, these "I am" sayings really become him pointing to different pathways, different meditative pathways that they can use after he is gone. But also connecting to him in breath, in vibration. As he says in one of the sayings, really from his way of looking, in his tradition—and it's not really true of all traditions—everyone travels together. No one travels separately. He says, "You connect to me. What you've seen in me is just me reflecting back to you your own divine nature, but you think it's me. But we all travel together. So if it helps you to connect to me after I'm gone, to connect to me in breath and vibration, I will be there for you. That will be there for you, but keep traveling. Keep going further."

And so the teachings evolve, I find, in this very deep way. A way that reviews, that recapitulates, all of his major teachings in the Lord's Prayer and The Beatitudes, but actually, in a more deeper and a more urgent way, we could say.

TS: But going back to this paradox that these are really the "I-I" teachings, but that here you have to call them the "I am" teachings in order to actually communicate. You are writing in English, you're writing in a different language than what was the original Aramaic, so you're dealing with this issue all the time, I imagine?

NDK: Yes, to some extent, you're dealing with glossing certain things. Then after

“glossing” we say, “this is what we’re talking about.” For instance, in the first line of Jesus’ prayer—we’re talking about the line that was translated, “Our father, who art in heaven.” Now let’s look at that in the Aramaic, and what are some of the other, more expanded deeper meanings around that. So you’re always sort of dealing in translation. And the way that I’ve worked around that is to keep opening up the translation rather than to let it be limited to one particular translation, or to say, “OK, this is the definitive translation.” But keep opening it up.

You know, I’ve been gratified to see that as people have used my books, [and as] they’ve used the recorded programs that I’ve done through Sounds True through the years, they have written to me and say, “Here, I’ve done my own Midrash and this is what I’ve gotten from it. Here’s another version or way of looking at it.” And that’s very gratifying for me, because it means that it keeps the words and teachings living rather than let them be set in stone or set in immutable clay.

TS: It also seems that when you made that comment that there is no “being,” very like “am” in Aramaic, it made me think about how the language itself that we speak also shapes our view, our way of being. I wonder what you might have to say about that in relationship to Jesus.

NDK: That’s very much true. Originally when I started this work, Tami, I thought, “Well, it’s just a matter of a few different words.” I mean, they are important different words, as I mentioned. But then I began to say that it is a whole cosmology. It’s a whole way of looking. It’s a different psychology. It’s a different way of looking at time. It’s a completely different way of looking at time.

As I was mentioning in that meditation, the ancient Semites tended to look at time really not as a separate past, present, and future, but more as a, what I sometimes now call, “caravan time.” That is that the past is pulsing ahead of us. The present is here now with us in a community with which we’re traveling. And the future is coming along behind us. So it’s almost exactly the opposite of the way Western philosophy looks at it, which is, “We’re heading toward the future and the past is behind us and it will never affect us again.”

No, they looked at it almost the opposite way. We’re falling in the footsteps of our ancestors, and then as the Native Americans sometimes say, “There are those who come along behind us or after us, and those are our children and our children’s children.” We have to really be careful and pay attention to what we’re leaving for them.

So it’s a whole huge shift, and this idea that there is no “being” verb [in Aramaic] is one of the biggest ones. No one is anything. You could say, “I am not this and not something else.” The whole notion of the self slides away. But the self is something that you can hold onto, or that is an object, or that the soul is something that can be saved or invested or cashed in or any of these ideas. Again, most of these we get from later Greek philosophy, and the ancient Semitic mysticism is much deeper than this. And Jesus participates in this.

So yes, that’s why I’m still doing it, I suppose, after all these years, because I’m still finding things that are new.

TS: Now, this is curious to me what you’re saying about the nature of time. How is the Aramaic different such that time is different?

NDK: It doesn’t have a strict separation between past, present, and future. And by not

having a “being” verb, it doesn’t objectify an object into particular states. If you look at the ancient Hebrew scriptures, if you look at the Bible, what Christians call the Old Testament, you don’t find any really of these types of “being” verbs. You have everything being in motion. You don’t have any verbs that mean “to stand still, to sit still, to be still.” That is, to be motionless. What is usually translated in the Hebrew scripture as “be still and know that I am God,” really is the saying, “Be silent. Listen. Listen and hear.”

So as I say, it’s much more of a vibration sound. These are vibration and sound languages, rather than looking at life from the outer appearances and then objectifying and saying, “Well, it’s this and not that.” You know, things are fluid. Things are in motion. And we don’t generally think about that in terms of the Bible, or in terms of Jesus or Christianity, because as I say, we have strained out through this completely other philosophy where from one standpoint, it’s just becomes very curious.

TS: Now, you were talking about your new program on these “I am” teachings, and in the program you refer to this in some contexts as “secret teachings.” I’m curious, what about them was particularly secret?

NDK: Well, I suppose they aren’t secret anymore. [Laughs]

TS: Well, open secret now.

NDK: I suppose that we use the word “secret.” We went back and forth about this. [These were] secret in the sense that they were teachings really for his close circle. So there were some things that they gave to his inner circle and that he wanted them to know before he left. And it’s not exactly clear if they always understood him either because he had to keep coming back to various themes again and again. But I would say that it’s more of an inner circle teaching rather than what he was expressing outwardly to everyone else.

One often finds that with teachers, as they are about to leave, that they try to leave something, leave some transmission, so to speak. They try to pass that on to a few people—one, two, or maybe half a dozen if he or she is lucky.

TS: And what were some of the central themes of this inner-circle teaching?

NDK: Some of the central themes are first that he wanted really his closer circle, his close disciples, his close students to—as he says in the Gospel of John very clearly (it even says it in the King James [Bible])—he wanted them to do the things that he had done and greater than these. And the way that they would do that is not by idolizing him or putting him on a pedestal, but in trying to look towards where he’s pointing them. Look toward their own connection, Ina-Ina, through him to sacred unity. And there were various ways that he was pointing out that this could be done.

When we connect to our inner self in a deeper way and realize, “OK, it’s changing and moving within this greater caravan of life when we connect to the bigger picture,” that is a doorway that allows us to move more fluidly between different avenues, different aspects of ourselves.

It’s also a sense of guidance or direction, which is the saying that was translated later as “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” In Aramaic, this really looks something like, “If you connect Ina-Ina, this will show you the path. It will show you the sense of right direction”—that is, when you come to a crossroads, that’s the so-called truth. And also it’s

“the life.” But in this case, it means “life energy.” So he says that this connection, this deeper connection through simple presence, eye-to-eye, is the past. It’s the sense of direction. And also it’s the energy to travel.

This just makes perfect sense to me. I mean, this is something that I use every day, actually. Come back to the breath. Come back to presence. And, OK, there’s the path. With breath, with sense of connection, I can decide what I need to do, not to do, and also gives me some life energy to keep traveling.

TS: So I can hear in this, Neil, your excitement and the discovery that you’ve had the experience of discovery in finding some of these original words and sayings and how meaningful they are. I’m curious if you’ve ever come upon some of these original Aramaic and just been like, “Oh my God, I just don’t get this at all. I just don’t get it. It just doesn’t make any sense to me”?

NDK: Well, that’s happened many times, Tami, actually because I started out (this was 30 years ago) just with the prayer. Just with Jesus’ prayer. And I thought, “Well, that’s enough! The rest I can’t deal with.” It’s too complex. But the more that I start to do little bits, little bits, little bits, pieces of the puzzle started to fill in. More and more started to make sense. But there are still some things that I haven’t worked on. And I don’t know if I ever will.

Some people want me to do an entire retranslation of the New Testament, but I’m probably not going to do that. You know, even just getting all of the sayings of Jesus done would be quite a job for one person’s life if you do it in the way that I’ve done it, which is unpacking each thing to look at all the possible, multiple layers or some other ways that people can get into it. As I say, there’s no sense of being definitive. I’m just adding my bit into what people have done before me. Hopefully someone will pick it up after I’m gone as well.

TS: You know, Neil, the conversation has been very generous and open and I really appreciate that. But I’m curious, before I let you go here, if you feel that there are any major misunderstandings or misconceptions about Jesus because of bad translation work that you want to be clear—that you get an opportunity here, from your knowledge of Aramaic, to set the record straight?

NDK: You know, because of this different nature of time in Aramaic, the whole notion of a Judgment Day is very problematic. The more I have looked at it, it’s inconceivable to me that Jesus could have imagined a Judgment Day the way that people currently talk about it or that any of the Hebrew Prophets could have imagined it either. I even extend that into Islam because some branches of Islam believe in a certain type of apocalyptic Judgment Day. And Mohammed couldn’t have known anything about it either, again, simply because the language wouldn’t have allowed them to do it.

Their idea of judgment was of discrimination, of decision, in the moment. In connection, as we were working with Ina-Ina, when I connect to the Holy One through whatever prayer or through whatever meditation, then I have the ability to decide what is important in my life at this moment and what is not important. I have to discriminate. I have to discriminate what is ripe and what is unripe. What’s ripe for me now and what’s unripe for me.

And so does our society: our culture has to discriminate and decide, “OK, what we [formerly] thought was good to do as a culture maybe now is no longer ripe.” But it’s not

saying that this is all relative. But this is the actual Judgment Day. The Judgment Day, as many mystics have said, is really here and now. In each moment. Each breath can be a judgment day. So I would say that's, as a parting bit, that is what I would leave you with.

TS: OK, and just two final things. I'm not letting you go quite yet. The first one is: I'm curious, of the teachings of Jesus that you've encountered through your research study and practice, what is currently the hardest one for you to live into?

NDK: Ah. Well, the hardest one for me to live into is, I would say, the difference in lifestyle. When I go on personal retreat, and when I go into nature, then I can really feel much closer to this person Yeshua/Jesus. But you know, I live a life, as many people do, I have a wife and I have work I do. I'm living in the world. I'm not living as a wandering ascetic, although I do travel a lot. So, you know, he had a different mission in life, so to speak. That is, Jesus did. He came. He left very powerful sayings. I believe he left very powerful practices. But then he left, however we believe he may have left. But he left by time he was 30-something. I just pushed passed 60.

So it's a different sort of trajectory of my life path, really, and for that I have to look to other prophets and messengers to see how I can follow in their footsteps in a good way as well as live my own life.

TS: And then, finally, Neil, I wonder if you could leave us with a few phrases, a paragraph of Aramaic, and the translation. Something that is particularly meaningful to you, just as a closing?

NDK: OK. I'll leave you with this. This is from the Gospel of John. And this is one of Jesus' final sayings, at least according to the Gospel of John, to his students, his small group. [Speaks Aramaic]

This is translated beautifully in the King James, "Love one another as I have loved you." And the Aramaic gives us this additional dimension: the aheb—the word for love, in this case, in Aramaic—is like love that grows from a small seed. It grows in the darkness, unknown [at] first, and then slowly blossoms. And this, I feel, is how we have to look at life, at relationship these days. We have to respect, tolerate differences. This is the type of aheb love according to Yeshua. It just begins with mutual respect and then perhaps gradually we can learn to live better with each other and respect these differences more and more.

And this is, I think, the most problematic thing in our culture today. With globalization, we've globalized our differences as well as our similarities, and we know a lot more about other people's differences as well as about their deeper similarities to us in a certain way. So I think this is still a koan—if I can borrow a term from Zen Buddhism—not just for Christians, but anyone who wants to participate in Jesus' spirituality. [Speaks Aramaic]

How can we love our inner self? How can we love our evolving self? How can we love those around us? How can we respect, live together and keep moving together?

TS: Wonderful. I've been speaking with Neil Douglas-Klotz. He's created a new audio learning series with Sounds True called I Am: The Secret Teachings of the Aramaic Jesus. He's also the creator of two other audio learning sets with Sounds True, very complete courses: one on The Healing Breath: Body-Based Meditations on the Aramaic Beatitudes, as well as a program called Original Prayer: Teachings and Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus. Neil Douglas-Klotz has also published with Sounds True a book

called Blessings of the Cosmos, a unique collection of Jesus' benedictions and invocations for peace and healing. Neil, thank you so much for being with us on Insights at the Edge.

NDK: Thank you, Tami.

TS: SoundsTrue.com. Many voices, one journey.

For more inspiration join an Awakin Call with Neil Douglas-Klotz this Saturday, "Breathing Life into Words, Prayers and Scriptures." More details and RSVP info [here](#).