

## THE HEBREW NEW TESTAMENT MISUNDERSTANDING 2005/2011

In our post-modern society, the veracity and authority of the Holy Scriptures have come under substantial attack and criticism from those *supposedly* inside the realm of Biblical faith. Many of those who claim a belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and believe in His Son, Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ), question whether or not these writings are a Divinely inspired work, or are instead only a collection of texts compiled over the centuries prone to human error. The result of those who question the Creator God, and do not have the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is that they view the Bible as being only a human work, and subject to significant negligence. The view of higher criticism is that the Bible is a product exclusively of people, has been edited by people, and has not been preserved accurately at all.

Some in the Messianic community, whether they realize it or not, have adopted similar views. Whereas in much of the Messianic movement, one finds various extensions of conservative evangelical Christian doctrine and practice, in that the entire Scriptures—both the Tanach and Apostolic Writings (Old and New Testaments)—are viewed as being Divinely inspired, with the foundation of the Bible being the Torah or Law of Moses and the other writings building on that foundation; **in too many sectors the veracity of the Scriptures is being steadily challenged.** The veracity of the Scriptures is challenged by Messianic Believers claiming that the New Testament is perhaps only “mere commentary” on the Torah, and thus may not be considered as authoritative on spiritual matters as the Tanach or Old Testament is. This is because various persons in the broad Messianic movement, including rabbis, pastors, teachers, and an entire score of laypeople, believe that the Apostolic Scriptures were originally written in Hebrew. They believe that the extant Greek New Testament we have is but a translation, and sometimes a bad or faulty translation at that. They tell us that we cannot understand the “true meaning” of the Apostolic Scriptures because they are in Greek.

The claim that the New Testament was originally written in Hebrew is something that must be substantiated by those who believe it with historical references, textual support, and most of all extant manuscripts in Hebrew. These references must be credible, the textual claims must be supported within a relatively conservative framework of exposition, and the manuscripts must be verified as authentic by organizations such as United Bible Societies or the American Bible Society. Thus far, **no one in the Messianic community has been able to prove a written Hebrew origin for the entirety of the New Testament on the basis of these factors.** If those who advocate a written Hebrew New Testament, that predates and is superior to the Greek New Testament, have done anything, it is that they have discredited much of what the

Messianic movement stands for to Christian scholars, theologians, pastors, and informed laypeople who are sincerely interested in their Hebraic Roots, but are not interested in challenging the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. Furthermore, those who are opposed to the Messianic movement, the Hebraic Roots of the faith, and a message of Torah validity—frequently use searching for a supposed Hebrew New Testament as a legitimate claim against us—**because it cannot be supported.**

One Christian writer comments, “One of the subtle attacks on the Christian Faith comes from the notion that the New Testament was not written in Greek, but in ‘Hebrew.’ This may seem benign at first, but it is not. It is an attack on the reliability of the text of your Bible. If the Greek text is unreliable and has been corrupted by Greeks, as is charged by some, there is no longer a standard of truth. The Protestant cry of ‘Sola Scriptura’ is meaningless unless we have a historically stable and reliable text. Once the New Testament itself is discredited, the rope typing your boat to the dock has been severed, and you are bound to be ‘carried about by every wind of doctrine.’”<sup>1</sup>

This quotation well summarizes the beliefs of many Christians who encounter Messianics who advocate that the Apostolic Scriptures were written in Hebrew, and the problem that we have today. Christians see this as a direct assault on their faith, and a direct attack against the inspiration and authority of the Bible. They see this as an attack on the gospel message of salvation, because as of today there are no extant texts of the New Testament written in Hebrew. The concern is that if these Hebrew New Testament manuscripts do not exist, as is believed by some Messianics, then these people will be responsible for leading others away from the Messiah Yeshua—because they advocate that the God of the Universe will only inspire His Divine message in the Hebrew language.

This is a very serious concern that exists for us in the Messianic community, especially those of us who wish this movement to be one that is theologically credible. Part of being theologically credible is being able to make a viable case concerning what you believe regarding the composition of Holy Scripture. As a Messianic teacher, I have seen to it that Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics have been able to defend many areas of our doctrine and unique Messianic lifestyle practice—and we have been able to do so quite adequately and well from the Greek New Testament, coupled with an understanding of ancient history, background data, and employing proper hermeneutics. We have certainly received a substantial amount of inquiry from an array of Christian pastors and informed laypersons, who have had to think about what we have said and defended. They have seen that it is not our intention to rip apart or shred the Greek Apostolic Scriptures, but rather treat the text with integrity, even when providing some alternative interpretations.

As a ministry, we have discovered through careful research, examination of Hebrew and Greek linguistic tools, and an objective view of Biblical history, that there is **no substantial evidence in favor of the Apostolic Scriptures originally being written in Hebrew.** We have discovered that at most, this is an opinion advocated by those who have ideological problems with the Lord inspiring His Word in other languages, and this opinion is then repeated by Messianic laypeople whose ability to adequately interpret or understand the Scriptures is often lacking. These people are often uninformed regarding the transmission of the Scriptures, Greek *or* Hebrew, and are likewise often uninformed regarding the diverse historical settings of the Scriptures, which leads to misinterpretation, if not some gross misinterpretation, on their

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Warner (2000). *Was the New Testament Written in Hebrew?*, April, 2000. *The Last Trumpet*. Retrieved 03 August, 2004, from <[http://www.geocities.com/lasttrumpet\\_2000/](http://www.geocities.com/lasttrumpet_2000/)>.

behalf. They tend to jump to conclusions a bit too quickly, when some further deliberations and cross-examination on important subjects, are necessary.

In this report, we will be examining the Hebrew New Testament misunderstanding. We will be addressing the fact that as students of the Bible, who believe in the final authority of Scripture, we have to be well informed regarding the Hebrew language, the Tanach, the Greek language, the Apostolic Scriptures, ancient Biblical history, textual criticism, and above all consider the theology and spiritual fruit of many of those who claim that the Greek Apostolic Scriptures are uninspired. We must consider the theological credibility of the Messianic movement, and how we can impact those who are in positions of authority in Christendom who are opening up to the restoration message that God is proclaiming in this hour. Most of all, we must understand that God is bigger than all of us, and He is not limited to any single language or culture that we may force upon Him. Rather, His Word is the progressive revelation that He has given to all of His chosen people—men and women throughout the world who have acknowledged Yeshua (Jesus) as Savior—and how they are to function in the world, testifying *to all*, of who He is.

### **A LACK OF OBJECTIVITY IN THE MESSIANIC MOVEMENT**

As it pertains to the subject of the inspiration of the Apostolic Scriptures, and whether or not they were written in Hebrew, there is a strong lack of objectivity among many proponents who claim that they were originally written in Hebrew, and that the Greek New Testament at best is a translation. In approaching any subject such as the inspiration of, and thus the authority of, the writings of the Apostles, we have to be objective and cannot subjugate the facts into our opinions. We have to look at the available evidence that has been delivered down to us through history, textual criticism of the Bible, and theology—drawing logical and reasonable conclusions. Sadly, very few people, if any, have examined this debate from the pro-Hebrew side without some strong subjective bias. It has even gotten so bad that some advocating a Hebrew New Testament that is superior to our Greek text, have accused Christian leaders and teachers as all being anti-Semitic and propagators of replacement theology.

One proponent of a Hebrew New Testament says, “As a young Christian man I was taught that Yahshua haMashiach (‘Jesus the Messiah’) came to do away with the Torah of Moshe (Moses), and that He did away with the Jews and Israel as YHWH’s chosen people. I was told that YHWH’s people are now the Greek-speaking gentiles, and that one of the most telling indications of this was that the ‘New Testament’ was originally inspired in Greek, and not in Hebrew. Yet today we know that this is not true.”<sup>2</sup>

What this individual basically says is that he believes that the Apostolic Scriptures can only be inspired in Hebrew, because his past experience of believing that they were originally inspired in Greek was rooted in replacement theology, and that the Jews are no longer God’s people. But is this claim justified? Perhaps there are some Christians who advocate that the New Testament was written in Greek because of replacement theology. But not all Christians believe in replacement theology. Many Christians do indeed believe that God’s promises to Israel are still in force, and that He will be faithful to them.

In response to these statements, a Christian theologian and translator of the NET Bible, remarks, “Notice that this fellow’s conclusions are reached without evidence (there are no Hebrew manuscripts of New Testament books, only Greek manuscripts). He uses phrases like, ‘I started thinking about it...something didn’t add up’ and ‘I began to wonder...’ and so on,

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<sup>2</sup> Norman Willis (2001). *Was the “New” Testament originally written in Greek, or in Hebrew?*, Hebraic Heritage Global Network. Retrieved 23 February, 2005, from <<http://www.hebrewroots.org/>>.

indicating that all of his theories originated in his own mind...I did not see him quote any respected scholarship.”<sup>3</sup>

This Christian examiner rejects the belief of an originally written Hebrew New Testament not on any basis of replacement theology or anti-Semitism, but on the basis that the individual claiming that the Apostolic Scriptures were written in Hebrew has no legitimate proof to substantiate his opinion. Our ministry has candidly held to the position for quite some time that the issue of the inspiration of the Greek New Testament is one of theological credibility for much of the Messianic movement.<sup>4</sup> Surmising why the individual quoted may be advocating an original Hebrew New Testament, the Christian teacher responds with, “The New Testament gives us many warnings about the Judaisers—those who wish to bring us back under the law, rather than under grace.”<sup>5</sup> This Christian theologian would clearly dismiss the idea that the Torah is still to be followed, especially if this idea is to be found in a theoretical Hebrew New Testament that cannot be proven to exist—even more so if this Hebrew New Testament exists only in a person’s fantasies!<sup>6</sup>

As a Messianic ministry, we obviously do believe that God’s Torah is to be followed as relevant instruction for Believers. But, we make this conclusion on the basis of (1) the final authority of Yeshua’s words which tell us that the Torah will not pass away (Matthew 5:17-19), (2) the fact that the Torah itself tells us that God’s people are to be set-apart and holy by observing His commandments (Deuteronomy 28:9), and (3) that most English translations of the Greek Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament are translated from some theological presupposition that the Law was done away with. I document in my book *The New Testament Validates Torah* quite thoroughly that the Greek source text is not the problem; the problem is often with translation of the Greek into English. Among many examples to be considered, there is no shortage of debate in contemporary examination on Romans 10:4, as to what the word *telos* (τέλος) is to mean. Does it mean “end,” “culmination” (TNIV), or “goal” (Common English Bible)? There are quite a few who would agree that *telos* rendered as “end” as akin to some termination, is a bad translation.<sup>7</sup> Most Messianic teachers, who advocate some original Hebrew New Testament, have not been trained in the Greek language to be able to deliberate on these matters, and join into the conversations present in theological studies.

But beyond Hebrew New Testament opinions that some Messianics have thrown before our Christian brethren, who in turn say that these opinions cannot be substantiated with evidence, is the fact that our Christian brothers and sisters can be treated with malice—if not outright hatred—when it comes to the inspiration of the Greek Apostolic Scriptures. For some in the Messianic community, the fact that the Greek New Testament exists is viewed as a damning affront to Hebrew or anything Hebraic or Jewish. Some have even insinuated that only Jews would, or could, be used by God to preserve the Scriptures, *and only in Hebrew*, and that the Almighty would never transmit Scripture using non-Jews.

No born again Believer, even in mainstream Christianity, is going to say that the Jewish people have not preserved the Hebrew Scriptures, the Tanach or Old Testament, with

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<sup>3</sup> Bible.org (2004). *Are you familiar with Norman Willis’ claim that the NT may have been written in Hebrew instead of Greek?*, NET Bible. Retrieved 26 September, 2004, from <<http://www.bible.org/>>.

<sup>4</sup> Consult the author’s article, “The Quest for Credibility.”

<sup>5</sup> Bible.org, *Are you familiar with Norman Willis’ claim that the NT may have been written in Hebrew instead of Greek?*

<sup>6</sup> Consult the author’s articles “What Does ‘Under the Law’ Really Mean?” and “What Does ‘Under the Law’ Really Mean?—A Further Study,” for an analysis of the clause *hupo nomon* (ὑπὸ νόμου), and where it legitimately appears in the source text of the Apostolic Scriptures. These articles both defend the viewpoint that born again Believers not being “under the Law” pertains to the Torah’s condemnation and penalties upon unrepentant sinners.

<sup>7</sup> Consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website, “Romans 10:4.”

meticulous detail. No one is going to say that they have not done a good job in preserving these Scriptures. Famed textual critic Caspar René Gregory wrote that “If...any one should be inclined...to find fault with the Jews, we must remember that they not only were in the work of ‘canonising’ and of guarding their sacred books in those early times far superior to all other known peoples, but that they at a later date and up to the present have proved themselves to be unsurpassed, unequalled preservers of tradition written and unwritten. The Christian Church owes them in this respect a great debt.”<sup>8</sup> These words, by a Christian theologian, are not anti-Semitic comments in the least.

Do evangelical Christians hate all things “Hebrew,” as is insinuated by many Hebrew New Testament proponents? Because today’s Christians believe that the God of Israel inspired the written good news of His Son in the Greek language, is this belief birthed out of a hatred for Judaism and the Jewish people? Some in the Messianic community would actually say yes. One Messianic Jewish proponent of a Hebrew New Testament comments that his evidence “shows us that ‘Aramaic’ and ‘Greek’ theories were not isolated mistakes or misconceptions, but part of a worldwide, centuries old dejudaization campaign by anti-semites within the Church to make it judenrein, despite the fact that we worship a Jewish God of Israel and the promised Messiah of Israel.”<sup>9</sup> Yet, what is he to do with the fact that a majority of the First Century Jewish population, actually lived in the Diaspora, *and* many of these Jews actually used the Greek language in their daily affairs?

These sorts of thoughts, sadly, summarize a good portion of the Messianic community among those who believe that the Apostolic Scriptures were written in Hebrew. Their case is not rooted in an objective, historical quest to search for the “original Scriptures,” but rather in prejudice toward Christianity—*a reverse sin in response to Christian anti-Semitism*. These types of attitudes, aside from being unacceptable in the Body of Messiah among born again Believers who should be operating in God’s love and compassion, *do not prove anything*.

Evangelical Christians who are born again, even though they may not be Messianic and totally see things the way that we see them regarding God’s Torah, are not all anti-Semitic Hebraicphobes, as may be falsely believed by some. They fully believe that the Hebrew Tanach is the inspired Word of God and that the Jewish people have done an admirable job preserving it. But, they also believe that when Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ) came to Earth to die for the sins of *all humanity*, that when the gospel message was finally written down, it was written down in the language in which the most people could hear it, which in the First Century happened to be Greek. Consider the following quotation from author David L. Thompson in his book *Bible Study That Works*, relating to the transmission of the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures (Old and New Testaments) in Hebrew, Aramaic, and then Greek:

“The earlier Old Testament books were penned in Hebrew. But as Aramaic became the common language of diplomacy and commerce and finally of daily speech in the Eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamian lands (in the period of the exile), biblical books began to appear in Hebrew heavily influenced by Aramaic, with portions actually in Aramaic, the official language of the Persian empire. The books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and Chronicles especially reflect this adaptation of God to the changing language of the people.

“Finally, by the New Testament era, Greek had become the most widely used tongue of the Biblical world. Given God’s demonstrated commitment to communicate his Word in written form intelligible to the next generation at hand, the result was predictable. No matter

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<sup>8</sup> Caspar René Gregory, *The Canon and Text of the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1907), 25.

<sup>9</sup> Julio Dam (2000). *Was the New Covenant Written in Hebrew?*, Bible Writer. Retrieved 16 November, 2004, from <<http://www.biblewriter.com/>>.

that God had inspired ‘holy men of old’ to write in Hebrew and Aramaic—the Word of God would appear in Greek. And not only in Greek, but in *koine*—the ‘common’ Greek of the marketplace, of legal documents, of personal and business correspondence, and even of the world’s graffiti. Why? **So people could read God’s Word in the language of their own day and understand it as readily as any other contemporary documents”** (emphasis mine).<sup>10</sup>

The fact, as Thompson notes, that the gospel message when finally written down was written in Greek, is not rooted in anti-Semitism—but in the fact that God has always had a plan to spread His Word out to as many people as possible. When Messiah Yeshua came and was crucified and resurrected, the time had definitely arrived for the message of salvation to be spread to the whole world, and in being spread to the whole world this message of spiritual restoration and deliverance needed to be communicated in languages other than Hebrew. It just so happens historically that Greek was the dominant language. Daniel B. Wallace notes, “By the first century CE, Greek was the *lingua franca* of the whole Mediterranean region and beyond...the majority of Greek speakers learned it as a second language.”<sup>11</sup> The Apostolic Scriptures being written in Greek reflect this fact, and reflect the ability of God to communicate to the most amount of people as possible as the Apostles went on their missionary journeys throughout the Mediterranean basin. Thankfully, Greek was a standardized language in the Diaspora so the Apostles did not have to learn the many local languages or dialects in their missionary journeys. **To say that the God of Israel cannot communicate His message in languages other than Hebrew is tantamount to saying that He is not interested in the salvation of the nations.** But this is not what the Tanach says.

Isaiah 2:2 attests to the fact that “it will come about that in the last days the mountain of the house of the LORD will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations [*kol-ha’goyim*, כָּל-הַגּוֹיִם] will stream to it.” Isaiah 49:6 states, regarding the mission of the Messiah, “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth [*ad-qetzeih ha’eretz*, עַד-קֵצֵה הָאָרֶץ]” (cf. Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47).

Simply because the good news of Yeshua and the accounts of His early followers are in Greek, does not mean that Christians over the centuries have not valued the study of the Hebrew language and Scriptures. On the contrary, many Christians over the centuries have highly valued and encouraged Hebrew language studies. Author Marvin R. Wilson describes in his book *Our Father Abraham* how many of the early settlers of colonial America valued Hebraic studies:

“Early American educators are [an] influential segment that placed a strong emphasis upon Old Testament and Hebrew studies. These people were strongly connected to the ‘olive root’ and insisted—in keeping with their Puritan heritage—that Hebrew be center stage in the realm of higher education. A study of the beginnings and curricula of many of the Ivy League colleges in the East is a case in point. Hebrew inscriptions, for example, are found on the insignias or seals of such schools as Columbia and Dartmouth.”<sup>12</sup>

The claim that the Apostolic Scriptures were written in Hebrew is rooted in rhetoric that cannot be objectively supported. Contrary to belief in parts of today’s Messianic movement, the transcription of the gospel message in Greek has nothing to do with anti-Semitism or disrespect of the Jewish people. It has everything to do with God’s Divine will that as many people as

<sup>10</sup> David L. Thompson, *Bible Study That Works* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1994), pp 96-97.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 15.

<sup>12</sup> Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 128.

possible in the First Century could hear the good news of His Son and thus come to salvation—including Diaspora Jews! There have been statements made against our Christian brethren by some in the Messianic movement that are unacceptable, and shameful for those who are supposed to be mature followers of the Lord. A balanced perspective reveals that there are many Christians who respect and encourage Hebraic studies, and it is most certainly from such a perspective that we must objectively analyze the facts as to whether or not the New Testament was originally written in Hebrew.

### WHAT IS THE “B’RIT CHADASHAH”?

Before we delve into some analysis of the Holy Scriptures, and the languages in which they were compiled, it is important for us to address the concept of what the “*B’rit Chadashah*” actually is. Anyone who has been in the Messianic movement for any period of time will notice that many terms of Hebraic origin are used by Messianic Believers. Most notably, this is apparent with the widescale usage of Yeshua instead of Jesus for the name of the Messiah, and the preference of using the term Torah instead of Law. This may also extend to some character and place names in the Bible that are of Hebrew origin, such as using Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya’akov (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), Shlomo (Solomon), Miriam (Mary), and names of New Testament characters such as Mattityahu (Matthew) or Yochanan (John).<sup>13</sup>

One term that is not a proper name, which is quite commonplace to hear in the Messianic movement, is *B’rit Chadashah*.<sup>14</sup> It is used innocently by most people in the Messianic community, congregational leaders and laypeople alike, who simply want to sound “Hebrew” in the terms that they use. Indeed, the glossary of the book *Torah Rediscovered*, for its entry under “Brit Hadasha,” it simply states, “Literally, ‘New Covenant.’ For use in this book, it refers to the New Testament.”<sup>15</sup>

In the early days of the Messianic movement, its Jewish pioneers wanted to use many terms that would be inoffensive to Jewish people who would be turned off to traditional Christian evangelism. Using terms like Jesus Christ, the Law of Moses, and even the New Testament might not be received well by a Jewish community that had a long-standing history of hostility with the Christian community. Thankfully, in the past several decades, we have seen increasing amounts of Jewish-Christian dialogue, and many hundreds of years of hostility have been put to rest among many Jews and Christians. The term “*B’rit Chadashah*,” which is so commonplace in today’s Messianic movement, was birthed along with many other terms which are used today as well. However, as it pertains to the subject of the inspiration of the Apostolic Scriptures, in hindsight some of the early Messianic Jews seem to have made a few faux paxs, which we now need to see corrected.

One of the first things anyone who enters into the Messianic movement quickly learns is that there is no real difference between the Old and New Testaments. Technically speaking, what is commonly called the “Old Testament” is the Tanach (תנ"ך), a composite Hebrew term for *Torah* (the Law), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings). Messianic Believers prefer the term Tanach (or Tanakh) rather than using the term “Old Testament,” because the term “Old Testament” often brings with it thoughts of these Scriptures being old and outdated. If

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<sup>13</sup> Even though the Greek texts of the Apostolic Scriptures have the Greek transliterations of *Matthaios* (Ματθαῖος) for *Mattityahu* (מַתִּיתָיָהוּ) and *Iōannēs* (Ἰωάννης) for *Yochanan* (יוֹחָנָן), these, and many other proper names used in the New Testament, are of Hebrew or Aramaic origin. It is no more inappropriate to use these original forms than it is to take a Latin text that uses Ulysses and replace it with the Greek original of Odysseus.

<sup>14</sup> Also transliterated by many as *Brit Hadashah*, *B’rit Hadashah*, *Brit Hadasha*, *Berit Chadashah*, etc.

<sup>15</sup> Ariel and D’vorah Berkowitz, *Torah Rediscovered* (Lakewood, CO: First Fruits of Zion, 1996), 158.

anything, when the term “Old Testament” is used in writing or speaking, it is only done so for the familiarity of others who are unfamiliar with the term Tanach.

In a similar way, there are many people in the Messianic movement who do not prefer to use the term “New Testament,” because it again implies that the “Old Testament” may be old and outdated. But rather than using a neutral term to refer to these writings, many Messianics use the term “*B’rit Chadashah*,” which in Hebrew simply means “New Covenant” or “New Testament,” and the English term “New Testament” is used for those who are unfamiliar with any other term. In actuality, however, the term “*B’rit Chadashah*” does not really solve our problem of getting beyond the belief of many Christians that these Scriptures replace, or are vastly superior to, the Tanach. In fact, it can cause an even new problem that many Messianics are probably not even aware of.

Biblically speaking, it is a misnomer to refer to the Gospels, General Epistles, Pauline Epistles, and other writings as the “*B’rit Chadashah*,” because the prophesied *b’rit chadashah* is not supposed to be any portion of new Scripture, but rather is the promise that the Lord will write His Torah onto the hearts of His people:

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,’ declares the LORD. ‘But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,’ declares the LORD, ‘I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, “Know the LORD,” for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,’ declares the LORD, ‘for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more’” (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

The Biblical promise of the *b’rit chadashah* (בְּרִית הַחֲדָשָׁה) is that our Heavenly Father is going to make a covenant with His people that provides them with a permanent atonement for sin and forgiveness of their transgressions—and as a result of this covenant, His Instruction would be supernaturally transcribed onto their hearts and minds. The author of Hebrews speaks of this new covenant or *diathēkēn kainēn* (διαθήκην καινήν):

“For finding fault with them, He says, ‘BEHOLD, DAYS ARE COMING, SAYS THE LORD, WHEN I WILL EFFECT A NEW COVENANT WITH THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AND WITH THE HOUSE OF JUDAH; NOT LIKE THE COVENANT WHICH I MADE WITH THEIR FATHERS ON THE DAY WHEN I TOOK THEM BY THE HAND TO LEAD THEM OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT; FOR THEY DID NOT CONTINUE IN MY COVENANT, AND I DID NOT CARE FOR THEM, SAYS THE LORD. FOR THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS INTO THEIR MINDS, AND I WILL WRITE THEM ON THEIR HEARTS. AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE” (Hebrews 8:8-10).

The true *b’rit chadashah* is the promise that God will write His Torah or Law onto the hearts of His people. When we talk about the *b’rit chadashah*, this is what we should be referring to, because this is what it is in its correct theological sense.<sup>16</sup>

What we often consider the “New Testament” comprises the Spirit-inspired writings of the First Century Apostles, given by them to testify of the life of Yeshua the Messiah, His teachings and miracles, the acts of the First Century assembly of faith, and specific instructions and admonitions given to the early congregations that were formed in the First Century. These

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<sup>16</sup> For a further discussion, consult the author’s article “What is the New Covenant?”



things do not make up a “new covenant” or *b’rit chadashah*, so to speak. Author Tim Hegg repeats these same thoughts, stating,

“It does no better to call the Apostolic Scriptures the ‘Renewed Covenant’ or ‘*B’rit Chadashah*’ (ברית חדשה), as is so common in Messianic circles. The Apostolic Scriptures do not constitute a covenant in any sense. They are the divinely inspired words of Yeshua and His apostles, giving us the ongoing progressive revelation of God to His people. They are the application of Torah to the people of God in the last days as inaugurated by the coming of Messiah, and they constitute the divine *halachah* for the congregation of Jew and Gentile as envisioned in the blessing of the Abrahamic Covenant. They in no way constitute a ‘new’ or ‘different’ or even ‘renewed’ covenant. They are simply the progressive revelation of the covenants which were given to the Fathers.”<sup>17</sup>

Hegg’s comments in this regard, and his writings which are respected throughout the Messianic community, have influenced many, including myself, to use appropriate neutral terms such as Apostolic Scriptures, Apostolic Writings, Messianic Scriptures, or Messianic Writings, to refer to what most call the “New Testament.”

How does this relate to the subject matter at hand, and the language in which these writings were originally composed?

Many people on the side of believing that the Apostolic Scriptures were originally written in Hebrew will ask the question: “Was the *B’rit Chadashah* originally written in Hebrew?” **This is a manipulative question for unsuspecting audiences.** It is a manipulative question because (1) the true *b’rit chadashah* as stated by Jeremiah 31:31-34 is the promise of a New Covenant given by God to His people, that He will write the Torah onto their hearts, and (2) to call the Apostolic Scriptures the “*B’rit Chadashah*” to an uninformed audience is to presuppose that there is a Hebrew original, thus proving that an examiner is not completely objective. Be cautious of anyone who asks this question, because he or she will rely on an audience being under-informed of Biblical history and of transmission of the Scriptures, to get them to think that the Apostolic Writings were originally written in Hebrew, which as you will see in our analysis, cannot be proven at all.

I do not believe that it was with any malicious intent that the early Messianic Jewish movement wanted to use the term “*B’rit Chadashah*” for the Apostolic Scriptures. They simply wanted a viable, alternative Hebrew term to use instead of “New Testament,” and often did not want to bring the inspiration of the Greek Scriptures into dispute. However, in many circles this is exactly what has happened, and that is why in this analysis, or in any of our ministry materials, you will *not* see us use the term “*B’rit Chadashah*” to refer to the Messianic Scriptures.

### **CAN GOD INSPIRE HIS WORD IN OTHER LANGUAGES?**

One of the severe claims, that is often made against the inspiration of the Greek Apostolic Scriptures, is that our Heavenly Father is simply incapable of inspiring His message in any language but Hebrew. Proponents of a Hebrew New Testament often say that the God of Israel would only inspire the good news of His Son in Hebrew, and thus any Greek text at best is a translation, and at worst is a product of those who hate the Jewish people. But this is not the message of the Bible. Israel was chosen by the Lord to be His special nation who would proclaim who He was as the Creator God to the entire world. Israel would keep God’s Torah or His Law and be blessed by Him, and the nations were to see their being blessed so that they might inquire after Israel’s God. The Psalmist declares, “All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will worship before You. For the

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<sup>17</sup> Tim Hegg, *The Letter Writer* (Littleton, CO: First Fruits of Zion, 2002), 235 fn#503.

kingdom is the LORD's and He rules over the nations" (Psalm 22:27-28). The God of Israel has always had a worldwide agenda of saving humankind—not an agenda that is exclusively limited to Israel. By necessity, going out into the world and testifying of who He is, requires that one speak in languages other than Hebrew.

If we look at the world from God's perspective, it is absolutely true that the Lord chose Israel to be His set-apart people. The people of Ancient Israel spoke Hebrew as their native tongue, and God communicated His message to them in Hebrew. Two-thirds of the entire Bible, the Tanach, was written in Hebrew (with parts in Aramaic), because these Scripture texts were definitely compiled for Ancient Israel as an ethnic nation, and they largely reflect its circumstances in a closed setting. Hebrew is a wonderful, beautiful, intimate language that brought Ancient Israel close to God through prayers, hymns, and songs. However, the God of the Universe is not constrained to any preference or demand of limited mortals who would say that He can only communicate to His people, *of all nations*, in Hebrew. In Genesis 11:7, it is God Himself who confounded the languages of humanity:

"Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another's speech."

Genesis 11:6 explains why God confused the languages of humanity: "Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them." God was concerned about the united front against Him because everyone spoke the same language. He confused everyone and scattered everyone so that humankind could not make a concentrated effort against Him.

Even though Hebrew is the written language of almost two-thirds of our Bible, and God certainly inspired the message of the Tanach in Hebrew, our Heavenly Father as Sovereign Creator is the One who confused the languages, and is thus the Originator of them as well. God created the written language of the Apostolic Scriptures, Greek, every bit as much as He created Hebrew. God created the English language and other modern languages of today, every bit as much as He created Hebrew. Does God have a linguistic preference? Or is God more concerned about the salvation of human beings of all nations? Have some limited mortals—in their personal biases and prejudices—taught that God can only inspire His message in Hebrew?

To say that the God of Creation can only inspire His message in Hebrew can say that God is monolingual and cannot communicate to any group of human beings in other languages. What it does more than anything else is that it reflects on the fallen nature of humanity, and how people often try to make God into what we want Him to be, as opposed to letting God be God and recognizing that He is all-powerful and His might transcends human language and even culture. Can God in His infinite power inspire the good news of salvation in a language other than Hebrew? That is the ideological question that has to be answered by many in the Messianic community today. **There will be those, who, unfortunately, will answer it incorrectly.**

The idea that Hebrew has a place in the economy of God that is superior to all other languages, is often based on Zephaniah 3:9: "For then I will give to the peoples purified lips, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD, to serve Him shoulder to shoulder." The fact that God will give the nations "a pure language" (ATS) or *safah beruah* (שָׁפָה בְּרוּיָה), with which to praise Him, is believed to be Hebrew. A typical Orthodox Jewish interpretation of this passage is reflected in the *ArtScroll Tanach* commentary, as it notes, "They will no longer speak of idols (*Radak*). Alternatively, they will speak Hebrew, the pure and holy tongue (*Ibn Ezra*)."<sup>18</sup> Is this an appropriate conclusion to draw from Zephaniah 3:9?

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<sup>18</sup> Nossou Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *ArtScroll Tanach* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1996), 1398.

It is not uncommon at all for many in today's Messianic movement to perceive of the Hebrew language as being the "holy tongue" or some kind of "pure language." To assume that Zephaniah 3:9 communicates that the peoples will be given an ability to speak the Hebrew language is not an honest assessment of the Book of Zephaniah, as the previous verses tell us exactly what the problem of Ancient Israel has been:

"Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled, the tyrannical city! She heeded no voice, she accepted no instruction. She did not trust in the LORD, she did not draw near to her God. Her princes within her are roaring lions, her judges are wolves at evening; they leave nothing for the morning. Her prophets are reckless, treacherous men; her priests have profaned the sanctuary. They have done violence to the law. The LORD is righteous within her; He will do no injustice. Every morning He brings His justice to light; He does not fail. But the unjust knows no shame. I have cut off nations; their corner towers are in ruins. I have made their streets desolate, with no one passing by; their cities are laid waste, without a man, without an inhabitant. I said, 'Surely you will revere Me, accept instruction.' So her dwelling will not be cut off *according to* all that I have appointed concerning her. But they were eager to corrupt all their deeds" (Zephaniah 3:1-7).

Being given "purified lips" is undoubtedly connected with moving from a state of sinfulness to a state of holiness—from a state of profanity to a state of purity. Zephaniah's prophecy of "I will make the peoples pure of speech" (NJPS) is akin to the Apostle Paul's later instruction, "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a *word* as is good for edification according to the need *of the moment*, so that it will give grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29). The "purified lips" pertains to a *manner of speech* by which the Father's people will be able to serve Him.

While the Hebrew language certainly has great beauty—especially as Messianics use it in traditional prayer and liturgies—it is still a *human language* (and in many cases a primitive language, with limited vocabulary, at that). Perhaps most significantly, Hebrew is an Ancient Near Eastern language with relatives such as Aramaic, Akkadian, and Ugaritic. Yet this is not understood by many within the Messianic community, who assume that Hebrew is a holy language and that every other language is to some degree unholy. Such claims that Hebrew is the so-called "pure tongue" have definitely been used by a few to support errant teachings that advocate that the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament were not written in Greek, the international language of business and commerce in the First Century Mediterranean.

C.J. Koster, author of *Come Out of Her, My People*, summarizes these thoughts quite well, by stating,

"[W]e firmly believe and accept the entire message contained in the Greek text of the Messianic Scriptures ('New Testament'), since it is the only complete reliable record we presently have of the time Messiah walked this earth and period immediately following it, the time of the apostles. We firmly believe that the Messianic Scriptures were inspired in Hebrew, at least most of them, but these documents no longer exist. The Greek text can only be a translation of these original Hebrew Messianic Scriptures."<sup>19</sup>

This opinion stated is not supported by any historical evidence as to *where* the original "Hebrew Messianic Scriptures" went. In fact, this same author is forced to say "the original Hebrew Messianic Scriptures...were possibly destroyed in those early days by anti-Jewish gentiles, or else set aside or decayed, for they were probably written on papyrus which is a perishable substance."<sup>20</sup> If this is the extent of his historical evidence, then at least half of his

<sup>19</sup> C.J. Koster, *Come Out of Her, My People* (Northriding, South Africa: Institute for Scripture Research, 1998), pp v-vi.

<sup>20</sup> *The Scriptures*, first edition (Randburg, South Africa: Institute for Scripture Research, 1993), xii.

case has no viable basis, because not only would such texts need to be scholastically proven to have existed, the question of *why God in His infinite wisdom would allow them to be destroyed* likewise must be answered. Basically saying, “We are unfortunately stuck with the Greek,” is not a sufficient answer. Either God can inspire His message in the Greek language, or He cannot!

Some are of the opinion that the Greek language is a pagan language, and thus our Creator is incapable of inspiring the good news of His Son in Greek, basing it on Exodus 23:13:

“Now concerning everything which I have said to you, be on your guard; and do not mention the name of other gods, nor let *them* be heard from your mouth.”

Koster argues, “The Set-apart Spirit, inspiring all Scripture, would most certainly not have transgressed the Law of Yahuweh by ‘inspiring’ the Messianic Scriptures in a language riddled with the names of Greek deities and freely using the names of these deities in the text, no way!”<sup>21</sup>

This value judgment is based on an interpretation of Exodus 23:13 which has several faults. The first is assuming that Exodus 23:13 is a prohibition against simply speaking the names of gods other than the Holy One of Israel. This would mean that in the Torah when God speaks the name Molech (Leviticus 18:21; 20:2, 3, 4, 5), that God Himself has actually broken His own Law. Following this reasoning through to its logical end, because God Himself has violated the Torah, then the Torah cannot be treated as inspired Scripture because there are names of foreign deities in the Hebrew text. Obviously, this is flawed reasoning.

Second, what are we to do about the title *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים), used frequently to refer to Him in the Hebrew Scriptures? *El* (אֵל), the singular form of *Elohim*, “is a very ancient Semitic term. It is also the most widely distributed name among Semitic-speaking peoples for the deity, occurring in some form in every Semitic language, except Ethiopic” (*TWOT*).<sup>22</sup> *Elohim* as a Semitic term is used to refer to YHWH (יהוה), but was also used to refer to pagan gods in pagan societies outside that of Israel. Because of this, do we suddenly throw out the Tanach because He is referred to by a title that the pagans also referred to their deities as? Not at all.

We will certainly not deny the fact that the Greek language has words in it that can also refer to Greek gods. However, when saying that the Greek Apostolic Scriptures cannot be inspired because of this, and not holding the Tanach to the same standard—looking for names of pagan gods in it as well that were used among the cultures of the Ancient Near East contemporary to Israel—reveals a definite bias and a severe lack of faith on the part of our Creator to inspire His Word in other languages. A proper interpretation of Exodus 23:13 relates to how we are not to “invoke the names of other gods” (NIV), meaning praise, worship, or pray to them. If it means that we cannot say the names of other deities, in a factual sense, then God Himself has broken His own Word because even He has said the names of pagan deities.<sup>23</sup>

Biblically speaking, while Hebrew is the written language of the Tanach or Old Testament, it is not given the title of the “holy language” by God Himself. Many go to the extent of not only saying that God would only communicate to humankind in Hebrew, but that He and the angels only speak Hebrew, and in some cases that the Almighty will only answer prayers that are spoken to Him in Hebrew. This is not the example that we see in Scripture. The Apostle Paul describes a person (presumably himself) being taken up into Paradise in a vision, writing the Corinthians that he “heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak” (2

<sup>21</sup> Koster, vi.

<sup>22</sup> Jack B. Scott, “‘ēl,” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:42.

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion on some related issues to this, consult the author’s article, “Sacred Name Concerns.”

Corinthians 12:4). Very clearly, various “unutterable sayings” (YLT) were heard, but this is not identified as supernatural beings communicating in Hebrew, which Paul clearly understood (Acts 26:14). The language of Heaven is far beyond human comprehension.

Some Messianic teachers have overemphasized the value of learning the Hebrew language so much, that in too much of our broad faith community there are only a few people in positions of leadership who know any Greek. I myself can testify to being patronized by various Messianic persons, some of them in congregational leadership, because I have formally studied both Hebrew and Greek at the under-graduate and post-graduate levels. Changing this, so that Messianics have a fair-minded view on the value of Hebrew, Greek, and related subjects, may be somewhat of a challenge for us in the short term as our Biblical Studies improve. There are, sadly, a great number of unjustifiable prejudices that one will encounter.

**It is our firm position as a ministry that the God of Israel, being all-powerful and omniscient, can inspire His message for humanity in whatever language He wants.** Israel, being His chosen nation, does have a unique identity among the nations, but in order to be a light to the whole world, it is necessary and required to speak in other tongues. Sadly, Messianics today who advocate a Hebrew New Testament often fall into the trap of believing that *only Hebrew* is the accepted language of communing with God. But their god is often one who is mono-lingual, only able to speak in a single language, and is sadly not too interested in the salvation of the world which speaks many other tongues.

### **THE TRANSMISSION OF THE HEBREW TANACH (OLD TESTAMENT)**

This is a subject where time and space does not afford us a detailed examination, but it is important that you have some basic background knowledge in the beliefs and opinions regarding the transmission of the Hebrew Tanach. The reason that it is important is because it is widely believed in much of the contemporary Messianic movement that the Hebrew Scriptures have remained perfectly preserved for us, especially with the Torah as Moses was given it at Mount Sinai. It is widely believed that since that time to the present, the Hebrew Tanach has remained perfectly preserved and intact, while in contrast, perhaps, the Greek Scriptures are nothing more than an amalgamation of manuscripts and manuscript fragments that have not been perfectly preserved or agree with one another. Suffice it to say, to believe that the Hebrew Tanach has remained perfectly preserved and intact, while the Greek Scriptures are nothing more than a proverbial mess, is not examining this with a fair scale.

If you have been exposed to textual criticism of the Bible, which involves not only dating manuscripts, but also dating when documents were composed, who their original author or authors were, where the documents were composed, and various literary factors—then you should know that the further we go back in time, **the less and less we know about the composition of a Biblical text.** While it is not uncommon to hear people criticize the Greek Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) in today’s Messianic community, if the truth be known we cannot conclude—at least with accuracy—some things about the composition of the Hebrew Tanach itself. We do not know, for example, who compiled the prophecies of Isaiah or Ezekiel. While we accept these writings as canonical, Isaiah and Ezekiel certainly did not sit down and write out these prophecies in the form of a narrative. We do not know who wrote Judges, although we can probably assume that Israel’s historians wrote it—but who were they? When it comes to the Torah itself, the author of Genesis never identifies himself. While the authorship is attributed to Moses via tradition, Moses does not say that he wrote it.

It is quite important that you know a few things about the composition of the Tanach. First of all, even though the Hebrew Bible has been eloquently preserved by the Jewish scribes or

*soferim* (סופרים)—it is exactly that—they have been preserved in a relatively homogenous and closed environment, whereas the Greek Scriptures have not. Secondly, to assume that the Hebrew Scriptures are without error or variance is simply not true. Emanuel Tov, textual critic at Hebrew University and author of the book *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, writes that “all editions of the Hebrew Bible, which actually are editions of א, go back to different medieval manuscripts of that tradition, or combinations of such manuscripts...there does not exist any one edition which agrees in all of its details with another, except for photographically reproduced editions based on the same electronic (computer encoded) text.”<sup>24</sup> If we cannot understand the fact that the current Hebrew text used in the Jewish community today originates from the Middle Ages, then one is bound to make **some poorly supported assumptions**.

This is not to say that this is a major problem. Tov is keen to note, “It should be remembered that the number of differences between the various editions is very small. Moreover, all of them concern minimal, often minute details of the text, and most affect the meaning of the text in only a very limited way.”<sup>25</sup> In spite of there being some differences in the Hebrew texts of the Scriptures, most of them are minute and do not affect one’s theology in any major ways. The same is actually true of the Greek texts of Scripture as well, as most of the textual variants deal with spelling or grammar, and a scribe wanting to add words like *Christos* or *Kurios* to a text, where only *Iēsous* (Jesus/Yeshua) is used.<sup>26</sup> Where variants do crop up in the Hebrew text of the Tanach, it is necessary for us to consult ancient translations like the Greek Septuagint (LXX), the canonical Scriptures of Hellenistic Jewry, or the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS). While most Jewish Bible versions today only employ the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT) for its English translation, Christian Bibles, on the other hand, do consider the witnesses of the LXX, DSS, Latin Vulgate, and other ancient versions in their English translations.

Many in the Messianic community are unaware of the fact that the Hebrew text used for the Tanach today is largely Medieval in origin. In fact, even fewer are aware of the fact that prior to the Babylonian exile of the Southern Kingdom, the Hebrew alphabet used was nothing like the block script that was used after the exile, and consequently also today. Tov indicates, “Originally, the biblical books were written in the ‘early’ Hebrew script which developed from proto-Canaanite script in the tenth or ninth centuries B.C.E....At some stage during the Second Temple period, a gradual transition occurred from the Hebrew to the Aramaic script, from which a script developed which is exclusive to the Jews and which could thus be called the ‘Jewish script’ (thus many scholars) or the ‘square script’ (according to the form of the letters). However, in many ancient texts (e.g., *b. Sanh.* 21b) it is called the ‘Assyrian script’ due to the fact that its ancestor, the Aramaic script, was in use in the Assyrian Empire. According to Talmudic tradition this script was introduced by Ezra.”<sup>27</sup>

The Talmud attests that during the time of Ezra the Jewish people began using the present Hebrew alphabet that is generally the same that we see used in Biblical documents today:

**“And even though the Torah was not given through [Ezra], the script was changed through him”** (*b.Sanhedrin* 21b-22a).<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> For a brief, yet adequate explanation of how manuscript differences appear in the Greek Apostolic Scriptures, consult Arthur G. Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), pp 137-149.

<sup>27</sup> Tov, 218, 219.

<sup>28</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM.

Sometime during the time of Ezra, the more “final” Hebrew text that was used during the time of Yeshua was compiled. Prior to the Babylonian exile, Hebrew texts were composed in a different script that is commonly referred to as “paleo-Hebrew” or the “Phoenician script” or the “Canaanite script.” After this time, the Assyrian script, also commonly called the “Babylonian script” or “block script,” was used. Ezra and his company of priests and scribes got the final “edit,” if you will, on the authorized Hebrew Scriptures after the exile.

This begs many questions that often go unaddressed in the Messianic community, but frequent discussions among conservative Jewish and Christian theologians with liberal Jewish and Christian theologians. These questions often regard the authorship of the Torah or Pentateuch, and whether or not a single author put it together, or it was composed by multiple authors over many different centuries. To give you an idea about the wide variance of beliefs among theologians, on the extreme Right there are fundamentalist ultra-Orthodox and Chassidic Jews who believe that Moses wrote every single letter, if not every “jot and tittle” of the Torah. On the extreme Left there are liberal Jews and Christians who believe that Moses would have been uneducated and incapable of writing any of the Torah—that is, if Moses even existed. In the middle are conservative examiners who believe that the bulk of the Torah is Mosaic in origin, but that there have been some authoritative edits and redactions made since Mount Sinai. Let us briefly review the two major positions that are adhered to surrounding the Torah’s composition.

There are two points of view which are often espoused relating to the written origins of the Torah. Among fundamentalist Jews and Christians, it is believed that the written Torah that exists, Genesis-Deuteronomy, was entirely written by Moses himself, and has been preserved perfectly since the Ancient Israelites were in the wilderness. The exact opposite of this is that the Torah was compiled after the Babylonian exile, composed of the Yahwist (J), Elohist (E), Deuteronomist (D), and Priestly (P) sources that had their own version of Israel’s religion. This theory, commonly called the JEDP documentary hypothesis, advocates that Moses did not write the Torah, but rather these writings are attributed to Moses and that the Torah as it exists today is entirely a product of the post-Babylonian exile and compiling these sources together. The majority in the Messianic movement believe that Moses wrote the entire Torah, whereas most in liberal Judaism and Christianity believe that Moses did not write it.

For the most part, conservatives believe that Moses wrote or compiled the first five books of Scripture, the Chumash or Pentateuch, himself. There are parenthetical phrases that were likely written at another date. Genesis 14:14 is a glaring example of this, appearing very early in the text, where Abraham pursues Lot’s kidnappers “as far as Dan.” This appears long before the Israelites enter into the Promised Land and ascribed geographical place names to where they settled. Some would say that since Moses was a prophet, he prophesied this into being. But that is doubtful given the fact that this is a place name, not an event, and is in no way given as a predictive prophecy. This was obviously a textual addition added at a later date to clarify for readers where Abraham actually pursued. It does not subtract from the value of the text, nor the event that takes place in pursuing Lot’s captors, though.

Another example is Numbers 12:3, which says, “Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.” In the NASB and NIV, the text actually appears in parenthesis ( ). Truly, if Moses did live as the most humble man on the face of the Earth, at least at the time of writing this, then Moses’ being so humble would have prevented him from ever having written this. This likewise appears to be a textual addition to the Torah at a later date. In a similar vein, the final chapter of Deuteronomy details the death of Moses and how the Lord buried him. This is something that Moses could not have written about in such

detail, but it does not immediately mean that it was written many centuries later, as liberal critics of the Bible often claim. The *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* details,

“Such scholars as R.D. Wilson, Merrill Unger, Douglas Young, R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and R.K. Harrison easily accept that the final chapter of Deuteronomy was likely appended by Joshua or someone else in Moses’ inner circle. This, in fact, supports the view of the continuity of the writing prophets, a theory that each successor prophet writes the last chapter of his predecessor’s book. The addition of a chapter on Moses’ funeral by another prophet is in accordance with the custom of the day in no sense takes away from the belief that Moses was the author of everything up to that final chapter.”<sup>29</sup>

There have been parenthetical additions to the Hebrew text of the Torah since the time of Moses. This does not subtract from the value of the text, all of the events that take place, and certainly not the message of the text. It also does not mean that Moses did not write or oversee the writing of a majority of the Torah, but it is to say that the Torah is not exclusively Mosaic in origin. The following is a summary of the standard conservative theological view regarding the Torah’s composition, as provided by the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (or *ISBE*):

“Very few, if any, modern conservative scholars see the Pentateuch as a composition whose every word, oral and written, came from Moses. Such a position is hardly viable based upon the inner-biblical witnesses (e.g., Genesis, post-Mosaic) or upon ancient Near Eastern concepts of authorship...The pentateuchal issues to a great extent do center upon Moses, but his ‘authorship’ activity must be correctly defined...According to what we know about ancient Near Eastern literary composition, Moses could have written much of the material himself, but just as likely could have dictated much of it to scribes or he could have supervised the compositional process as numerous hands utilized various materials.”<sup>30</sup>

Conservative expositors do not believe that Moses wrote that he was the humblest man on Earth, or about his own death. These were statements added by either someone in his inner circle, perhaps one of the seventy elders, or Joshua who succeeded him.

With all of this understood, conservatives do widely believe that God in His sovereignty directed the Jewish scribes or *soferim* to preserve the Hebrew Scriptures to the best of their ability. But to say that they have preserved it 100% accurately would be to say that human beings cannot make any mistakes. Furthermore, it is notable that one of the significant reasons why we do not see substantial variances among Hebrew texts of the Tanach, versus Greek texts of the Apostolic Scriptures, is because scrolls of Scripture were often considered to be as “living beings” to members of the Jewish community. When Biblical documents and parchments decayed, they were often given a funeral, like any person, and buried. Because of this, older Torah scrolls and Biblical texts in Hebrew are no longer extant. This is sizably different than what would happen in Christian circles, where decaying Biblical texts would simply be deposited in a library or archive and kept for posterity.

One of the significant reasons why we do not see great variance among the Jewish sources of the Tanach is because older texts were removed from circulation. That is why the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 was so significant. And, while there is much continuity between the DSS and MT, there are differences between them as well. **Do not fall into the trap of believing that the Hebrew Tanach has been perfectly preserved.** There are differences among Hebrew texts, and there have been changes to the Torah since the time of Moses. When it comes

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<sup>29</sup> “Pentateuch, Mosaic Authorship of,” in Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 587.

<sup>30</sup> E.E. Carpenter, “Pentateuch,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 3:753.



to the composition of the books of the Hebrew Tanach, there are too many questions that today's Messianic community, at least at present, is unable or unprepared to answer. We will have to answer these questions in the days ahead, and hopefully such examination will make us theologically and spiritually stronger.<sup>31</sup>

### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SEPTUAGINT

One factor that is extremely important in our examination of the Tanach, that is often not given enough consideration in today's Messianic theology, is the usage of the Greek Septuagint. What we call the Septuagint (LXX) today, was authoritative Scripture in the Jewish synagogues in the Greek-speaking Diaspora. According to tradition, its seventy-two Jewish translators translated the Torah into Greek in seventy-two days. The number was later rounded off to seventy, and is often identified in theological works by the Roman numerals LXX for seventy. Shortly thereafter, other books of the Hebrew canon were translated, and complete forms of the text were likely circulating before the time of the Maccabees (Second Century B.C.E.). The Septuagint quickly became the primary Scripture of Hellenistic Judaism, and was widely responsible for presenting Greeks and Romans the message of the God of Israel. It was used for converting new proselytes, and formed the backbone of a Jewish style of Greek speech and composition that was influenced heavily by Hebrew diction.

While the written language of the LXX was Greek, the understandings of the various words and concepts were undeniably Hebraic. When encountering the term *eirēnē* (εἰρήνη) or "peace," for example, this is obviously to be understood as encompassing far more than just its classical meaning of absence of war—but with *shalom* (שָׁלוֹם) in view, involves total peace, harmony, and tranquility between man, God, and nature.<sup>32</sup> The Septuagint is widely acclaimed as being the first true Bible translation, and it clarifies many of the unclear or imprecise words and terms in the Hebrew Bible, given the fact that Greek has a larger vocabulary than Hebrew. The *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* notes, "In the mid-first century C.E., Philo stressed its divine inspiration."<sup>33</sup> Of course, whether or not the Septuagint is truly "inspired" remains debated, but it nevertheless cannot be overlooked as unimportant.

The importance of the Septuagint for Messianic Biblical Studies today has been clouded by much of the anti-Greek rhetoric present in various parts of the Messianic movement. Some are keen to say things along the lines of, "It is better for a Jew to eat pig than speak Greek." While this statement may reflect some Jewish opinions of ancient times, it is sectarian and only reflective of a small part of ancient Jewish opinion. In spite of what some people in the Messianic movement today would like to believe, the majority of the First Century Jewish community was not living in Israel and speaking Hebrew as their first language. Many lived in Greek-speaking lands and still maintained a high degree of Torah observance and Jewishness.

F.F. Bruce writes in his book *New Testament History* that there were major Jewish communities established "from the territories of the 'Parthians and Medes and Elamites' in the east to Rome in the west, with Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, Crete, Arabia, Egypt and Cyrene receiving special mention between these limits."<sup>34</sup> While some of these Jewish communities, notably in the East, had been remnants from the Babylonian Diaspora, many others were birthed out of Jewish merchants moving to these areas for economic opportunities, as well as a

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<sup>31</sup> For a further analysis of the composition of the books of the Tanach or Old Testament, consult the workbook *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

<sup>32</sup> G. Lloyd Carr, "shālôm," in *TWOT*, 2:931.

<sup>33</sup> "Septuagint," in Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 567.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce, *New Testament History*, 135.

drive among some to make proselytes of the nations (cf. Matthew 23:15). The bulk of Diaspora Jewry that we get a glimpse of in the Apostolic Scriptures is Hellenistic Jewry, primarily constrained to the Eastern Mediterranean basin with centers in Northern Egypt, Asia Minor, Corinth, and Rome. In fact, the Roman Jewish community was quite large, as Bruce indicates,

“[T]he Jews had established diplomatic relations [with Rome] in the days of Judas Maccabaeus, the Jewish colony there was greatly augmented after Pompey’s conquest of Judaea in 63 B.C., and by 59 B.C., according to Cicero, it formed an influential element in Roman society. It is estimated that by the beginning of the Christian era the Jews of Rome numbered between 40,000 and 60,000.”<sup>35</sup>

The Jewish position on the Greek language of this period was substantially different than the position of various Messianics today, as it was the principal language of commerce and trade, as many Jews in these lands were merchants. The Mishnah indicates that the sacred Scriptures were authorized to be written in Greek by the Rabbinical authorities:

“There is no difference between sacred scrolls and phylacteries and *mezuzot* except that sacred scrolls may be written in any alphabet [‘language’], while phylacteries and *mezuzot* are written only in square [‘Assyrian’] letters. Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel says, ‘Also: in the case of sacred scrolls: they have been permitted to be written only in Greek’” (m.*Megillah* 1:8).<sup>36</sup>

The further commentary on this, seen in the Talmud reflects this same position:

“Our Rabbis permitted that they be written [only] in Greek [other than in Ashurit]. *And it is taught*: Said R. Judah, even though our rabbis permitted Greek, they permitted [it] only in a Torah scroll and that was because of the episode of King Ptolemy. *As is taught*: An episode about Ptolemy, he gathered 72 elders and cloistered them in seventy-two buildings, and did not tell them why he had gathered them: He entered to [speak with] each and every one and said to them: Write for me the Torah of Moses your master. The Holy One, Blessed Be He, advised each and every one of them” (b.*Megillah* 9b).<sup>37</sup>

This records how the Torah was originally translated into Greek, and how the Jewish religious leaders of the Third-Second Centuries B.C.E. authorized it. Later in the same period, other texts of the Hebrew Bible were translated into Greek. The Jewish philosopher Philo attests that there was a celebration to commemorate the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, and that the translation was done with honorable intentions:

“And there is a very evident proof of this; for if Chaldaens were to learn the Greek language, and if Greeks were to learn Chaldaen, and if each were to meet with those scriptures in both languages, namely, the Chaldaic and the translated version, they would admire and reverence them both as sisters, or rather as one and the same both in their facts and in their language; considering these translators not mere interpreters but hierophants and prophets to whom it had been granted it their honest and guileless minds to go along with the most pure spirit of Moses.

“On which account, even to this very day, there is every year a solemn assembly held and a festival celebrated in the island of Pharos, to which not only the Jews but a great number of persons of other nations sail across, reverencing the place in which the first light of interpretation shone forth, and thanking God for that ancient piece of beneficence which was always young and fresh” (*On the Life of Moses* 2.41).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>36</sup> Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 318.

<sup>37</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

<sup>38</sup> Philo Judeaus: *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C.D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993),

When it was originally produced, the Septuagint was hailed as being a great work, blessed by God Himself. There was a day of great rejoicing and assembly held for its production, as many from the nations would now be able to hear about the God of Israel. Biblical history bears out the fact that the Septuagint was used in the Jewish synagogues of the Diaspora, and it is quoted many, many times by the Apostolic writers, and certainly carried some major authority for them. This is something that is often not considered by some Messianic expositors, a few of whom have concluded that the Apostles sometimes misquote the Hebrew Scriptures. This is largely because they fail to consider the fact that the Apostles often quote from the Greek Septuagint, which is not a literal word-for-word translation of the Hebrew Bible, and includes many distinct interpretations of messianic texts, and other passages or issues, sprinkled throughout.<sup>39</sup>

Many Jewish people in Israel, in the time period of Yeshua and the Apostles, did use Greek to communicate with their neighbors around them. The following is an historical attestation from the Talmud, regarding how Greek philosophy and language were studied by those of the Rabbinical school of Gamaliel, the same school that the Apostle Paul would have attended:

*"Is it so [that one may not teach his children Greek]? And did not Rabbi say, 'In the land of Israel why use Syriac? Let it be either the Holy Language or the Greek language.' And R. Joseph said, 'In Babylonia why use Aramaic? Either use the Holy Language or use the Persian language [Pahlavi].' [But we have to make a distinction, teaching] the Greek language as one thing, and Greek learning as something else. But is Greek learning, for its part, forbidden at all? And did not R. Judah say Samuel said in the name of R. Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel, 'What is the meaning of the following verse of Scripture: "My eye affects my soul, because of all the daughters of my city" (Lam. 3:51)? There were a thousand children in my father's house, five hundred of them studied Torah, and five hundred studied Greek learning. And I am the only one of them who has survived here, and my father's brother's son [survived] in Asia.' The household of Rabban Gamaliel is in a separate category [and may study Greek], for they had a relationship with the government. For it has been taught on Tannaite authority: To cut the hair in front —lo, this is one of the 'ways of the Amorites' [which is forbidden]. Abtilus b. Reuben was permitted to cut his hair in front, because he had a relationship to the government. The household of Rabban Gamaliel did they permit to study Greek learning, because they had a relationship to the government" (b.Sotah 9b).<sup>40</sup>*

Here, we see an historical attestation that the Rabbinical school of Gamaliel not only trained Rabbis in the Tanach Scriptures and proper hermeneutics, but also trained them in Greek language and philosophy. The reason for this was very clearly that these Rabbis often had close dealings with the Roman government and authorities, and it is not improbable to conclude that these Rabbis were also sent out on various teaching missions beyond the Land of Israel. This is the school that Paul attended as a student of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), and is a strong indicator that Paul would have formally learned Greek as a foreign language in school, not just picking it up through interaction on the street. The Jewish position on Greek in the First Century was much different than the position of many Messianic people today. The Jews used Greek as a language of business, commerce, and diplomacy.

Even the viewpoints of various Orthodox Jews today, regarding the Greek language, is much more positive than many of their counterparts in the Messianic community. Rabbi Daniel

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<sup>39</sup> This is examined further in the author's commentary *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic*, which was partially released in 2006 in response to one teacher's claim that the Epistle to the Hebrews misquoted the Tanach, when in fact the Septuagint is what was being quoted.

<sup>40</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

Lapin, in his book *America's Real War*, records a short story about how eager his father was to use the Greek that he learned as a student when traveling to Athens:

"I recall how, when as a young lad I first traveled to Greece with my father, he signed his name on the official entry permit at Athens Airport. The official became irate. It turned out that my dad was so excited to finally put to some practical use the schoolboy Greek he had studied decades earlier that he had signed his name and completed the questionnaire in the language of Homer in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. This meant absolutely nothing to the mid-twentieth-century Athenian we encountered at the airport."<sup>41</sup>

Both Rabbi Lapin and his father were raised in England, and were subjected as young boys to both a traditional Orthodox as well as a classical British education. Receiving a classical education, they would have been exposed to the Greek language (and likely Latin as well) and ancient literary works. For Lapin's father, learning Greek and using it is no different than anyone today who has studied a foreign language such as Spanish, French, or German, and is eager to use a few phrases on a native speaker. The Lapins may be an exception, though, as Twenty-First Century America largely does not train its students in any of the classical works, be they Greek or Jewish, as those interested must often study them at the collegiate level. **Many of the Messianics who largely criticize the Greek language and the Septuagint, have not been exposed to it, and thus cannot reflect an objective point of view when encountering it in theology.**

Some teachers in today's Messianic community are responsible for perpetuating a fiction that the Greek language was not part of the Jewish culture of First Century. *It was*. Greek was just as much a part of First Century Jewish culture in the Mediterranean, as Yiddish was of Central European Jewry in the Middle Ages and up until today. It is absolutely true that the Diaspora Jews did have some distinct differences from Jews living in the Land of Israel, but the same can be said today as Israeli Jews and American Jews and Jews in other countries all have major differences. Jews in English-speaking countries are more apt to use a Tanach in English as their primary Scriptures, just as Jews living in the Mediterranean Diaspora were more likely to use the Septuagint. We have to treat the First Century in a similar way to how we understand Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Jewry.

## **THE TRANSMISSION OF THE GREEK APOSTOLIC SCRIPTURES**

Of all of the documents of antiquity, there is none with such a witness as great as the Greek Apostolic Scriptures. Over 5,000 manuscripts, codices, and manuscript fragments exist of the Greek New Testament (compared to about 600 for the works of Homer). These give an overwhelming testimony to the gospel message and the life of our Messiah Yeshua, and the fact that it was eagerly copied by people being spiritually transformed, and that the message was spread out. The oldest of these texts date from the mid-Second Century. Advocates of an original "Hebrew New Testament" are often not even aware of the overwhelming manuscript evidence in favor of the Apostolic Scriptures being written in Greek. And when it comes to their position of the Apostolic Scriptures being written in Hebrew, **not a single manuscript or manuscript fragment exists from the early centuries of the faith in Hebrew.** Some in the Messianic movement have claimed that God showed them visions that the "Hebrew New Testament" documents will be "discovered" in a cave in Jerusalem or somewhere in Israel, but this is not proof. At the very least it is a mental manifestation of what one wants to believe, although in far too many cases it is self-delusion and sheer fantasy.

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<sup>41</sup> Rabbi Daniel Lapin, *America's Real War* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1999), 120.

Advocates of the Apostolic Scriptures being written in Hebrew will often claim that while there are many texts of the Greek Scriptures, they do not all agree, and there are many scribal errors in them when compared to the Hebrew texts of the Tanach. It is frequently argued that these can only be but translations, accounting for the many variations that exist. This point of view demonstrates a severe lack of information when it comes to the transmission of the Greek Apostolic Scriptures. While Torah scrolls are often copied by a single Jewish scribe or *sofer* copying from another text, the Greek Apostolic Scriptures were copied much differently. First of all, the Apostolic Scriptures were not copied in a closed, relatively homogeneous Jewish community like the Tanach. Some New Testament documents were clearly copied hurriedly, either because the Roman authorities were out to prosecute those who held them, or the members of the faith community wanted to get the message out quickly to others. Secondly, when we do see mass production of the Apostolic Scriptures, we often see the same techniques used that were employed to copy other ancient books, literature, important letters, and news reports. One person would read from a master text, and then several scribes—or perhaps even a room of thirty or more scribes—would write down what was heard. This inevitably led to there being variance in some documents. D.A. Carson describes how most variances in the Greek Apostolic Scriptures came into being:

“Unintentional errors are those in which the scribe had no intention of changing anything. He simply made a mistake. If he was copying a manuscript as a professional scribe, writing down what the reader read out to him and to those working with him, he might hear something incorrectly and therefore make a mistake....After the professional scribes had finished transcribing all the readers had read out, a trained corrector read over what the scribe had written and made corrections. Often, therefore, the reading of the first corrector of a manuscript (often in a different color of ink) is correct. But the corrector might miss some mistakes; and he might even introduce some new ones....Other kinds of unintentional errors are common if the scribe is copying a manuscript by himself; that is, if, instead of listening to a reader, he is using his own eyes to read the parent manuscript. Certain Greek letters in uncial form are readily confused. A very common error is caused by homoeoteleuton, a similar ending of lines or words: a scribe copies what he sees, but when his eyes return to the parent manuscript he accidentally leaves out a bit because his eyes skip down to a place where the same or a similar ending occurs. Alternatively, for an analogous error, he might unthinkingly copy out the same expression or line twice, because his eyes have skipped back up the page. Another common error involves the transposition of words or expressions. Probably this error arises when the scribe retains a whole clause or verse in his memory as he writes it down; and his memory betrays him. It may further betray him by prompting him to substitute a favored synonym for some particular word.”<sup>42</sup>

This, of course, is just a brief description of how many of the variants that exist in the Greek Apostolic Scriptures came into being. You have to put yourself back into ancient times and how the emerging Christian Church of the Second and Third Centuries wanted the gospel message to go forth. The documents copied were copied meticulously, but human error inevitably crept in. Most of the variants we see among these ancient texts are in the form of spelling, words added, or clauses unnecessarily repeated, and errors that would take place by anyone copying by himself, or in a room with others. The ancients did not have computers where they could easily remove letters or words or sentences with the stroke of a few keys. Papyrus or paper was at a premium, and the copyists had to make do with the means at their disposal.

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<sup>42</sup> D.A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1979), pp 21, 22.

The difference, between the preservation of the Greek Apostolic Scriptures and the Hebrew Tanach, is that the Christian Church today is readily honest about the fact that there are some manuscript differences that exist, whereas many (but certainly not all) in the (Orthodox) Jewish Synagogue believe that the Hebrew Scriptures have been “preserved perfectly” (and this errant idea has subsequently passed into much of the [fundamentalist] Messianic community). Monasteries, depositories, and libraries all throughout the Christian world have ancient manuscripts and manuscript fragments from the early centuries of the faith, that are employed in determining what the original reading of a text was. The modern-day study of textual criticism came about largely because of renewed contact with the lands of the Bible and antiquity via European imperialism. The same techniques that take manuscripts and manuscript fragments of Homer, Plato, or Aristotle—of which we have considerably fewer, and much greater textual variance exists within—are used in examining Biblical documents and their counterparts, in scientifically determining what the original reading of something was.

Critical editions of the Greek New Testament have been in production ever since the King James Bible was translated in 1611.<sup>43</sup> The British scholars B.F. Westcott and F.J.A. Hort helped pioneer textual criticism in the Greek Scriptures in the late Nineteenth Century. Most of our modern English Bible versions (RSV, NASB, NEB, NIV, REB, NRSV, ESV, HCSB, etc.) are translated from a critical Greek text that goes back to a Westcott and Hort edition published in the late 1800s. (In 2005 I had the privilege myself of handling an edition from 1892.) Today, two major editions that exist are the *Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition* (1998), and the *Novum Testamentum Graece, 27th Edition* (1993).<sup>44</sup> The text of these editions is widely identical, but they differ in their explanatory notes, which go into the differences among variants of the Greek Scriptures and other ancient versions. A required companion with either of these two publications is Bruce M. Metzger’s work *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, which explains some of the potential theological reasons why variants among texts exist.

Suffice it to say, almost all of those who advocate an original “Hebrew New Testament” are unacquainted with how and why variants in the Greek Scriptures exist, and the modern discipline of textual criticism. They may fail to even understand the fact that textual criticism of the Hebrew Scriptures likewise exists, and there are critical editions of the Tanach such as the *Biblia Hebraica* (1939) and the updated *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (1977), which are used for most modern English Bible versions, including Jewish ones like the NJPS. Jewish scholars sit on the same committees that critique the reading of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the explanatory notes for these editions indicate where variants exist among Hebrew texts, ancient translations like the Septuagint or Vulgate, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Hebrew Scriptures have not been “preserved perfectly.” There is variance.

Suffice it to say, the study of textual criticism, as an art, is very complicated, and sits beyond the scope of many people. It is, nevertheless, an important area of Biblical study. (Note how many of the issues created by variants among NT documents have to be discussed on a case-by-case basis in examination of the verses themselves.) What is ironic, of course, is that some teachers, by a sensationalistic personality—**or making statements that have absolutely no factual basis to them**—can easily discount the composition of the Apostolic Scriptures in Greek. While it is very true that more differences exist among the Greek Apostolic Scriptures

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<sup>43</sup> Contrary to what some advocates of “King James Onlyism” may claim, the source text for the KJV, the Greek Textus Receptus, was an early product of New Testament textual criticism. Stephanus fully expected to publish future editions of his Greek Bible, based on further manuscript evidence that would come to light. For a further discussion of this issue, consult James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust the Modern Translations?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1995).

<sup>44</sup> The *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th Edition was recently released in Fall 2012.

than the Hebrew Tanach, we also have a wider array of texts from which to survey. Hebrew texts of the Bible that were old or decaying were often buried. Certainly, if we had some of these texts today, we might see a greater variance among Hebrew texts of the Bible. We do, in fact, have a wider variance when we consider the witnesses of the Septuagint and Dead Sea Scrolls.

### THE RAMIFICATIONS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT BEING WRITTEN IN HEBREW

There are some serious historical factors working against advocates of a so-called "Hebrew New Testament" that many either do not take into consideration, choose to ignore, or choose not to report to those hearing their teachings. One of the major misunderstandings circulating, as already discussed, is thinking that all Jews in the First Century lived in the Land of Israel and spoke Hebrew. **This is absolutely not true.** While it is true that many Jews did indeed live in Israel, and spoke either Hebrew or Aramaic as their primary language, the latter being a Semitic relative of Hebrew, we cannot separate the province of Judea from the Roman Empire of which it was a part. Likewise, we cannot forget the fact that many more Jews were living in the Diaspora and were Greek speaking. These Jews are often identified in the Apostolic Scriptures as being "Hellenists" (Grk. sing. *Hellenistēs*, Ἑλληνιστής). F.F. Bruce describes them in greater detail, and how many of them became followers of Yeshua:

"This division between Hebrews and Hellenists was primarily linguistic and cultural, but probably it had theological implications too. The Hebrews were evidently Jews who habitually spoke Aramaic, whose homeland was Palestine (or any other area where Aramaic-speaking Jews lived). The Hellenists, on the other hand, were Jews who spoke Greek...Many of them would belong to the Greek-speaking Diaspora, even if they resided in Palestine for longer or shorter periods; but Palestine had its native Greek-speaking Jews. If we ask when and how so many of these Hellenists were enrolled as disciples of Jesus, we may find the answer in Luke's narrative of the day of Pentecost, according to which Jews of the Diaspora formed a large, if not the main, part of Peter's audience."<sup>45</sup>

**No honest theologian is going to argue against the fact that Yeshua the Messiah spoke Hebrew and Aramaic in His daily affairs.** No honest theologian is going to argue against the fact that He primarily spoke these languages when He gave His teachings recorded in the Gospels. However, we cannot automatically make broad assumptions such as Yeshua *only speaking Hebrew* when addressing individuals, or even groups of people. It simply does not align with history and what we know about First Century Judea. There are instances in the Gospels, such as when He encounters the Roman centurion or the Syro-Phoenician woman, where He would have spoken Greek. Gregory comments to this end:

"It is perfectly true that Jesus and His disciples without doubt commonly spoke Aramaic, an Aramaic that had come down from the North, though I consider it as possibly that He and they also understood and spoke more or less Greek, seeing that the tiny province in which the Jews prevailed was so closely surrounded by and permeated by Greeks. The words of Jesus, therefore, which the Gospels have preserved for us are, aside from a few cases, words that have been translated from the Aramaic into Greek."<sup>46</sup>

These comments, as should be expected, lead many in the Messianic community to conclude that the Greek of the Gospels does not accurately reflect the "true sayings" of Yeshua. But before making hasty judgments, there are several factors that are not often considered. First

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<sup>45</sup> Bruce, *New Testament History*, pp 217-218.

<sup>46</sup> Gregory, 394.

of all, the Gospels were not composed during the ministry of Yeshua. The events were not necessarily “written down” as they occurred. Secondly, the target audiences of the Gospels were largely in the Greek-speaking Diaspora. And third, we have to remember that a thoroughly Jewish style of Greek existed with the production of the Septuagint. The same kind of grammar and sentence construction that we see in the Gospels mirrors much of that of the LXX. Furthermore, to assume that Yeshua *exclusively spoke Hebrew or Aramaic* in His recorded interactions simply is not true. Yeshua certainly did not speak to Pontius Pilate in Hebrew.

One of the major claims that Hebrew New Testament advocates make is that the Apostolic Scriptures, particularly the Gospels, are full of First Century Hebrew idioms.<sup>47</sup> It is claimed that these idioms cannot be accurately translated, and thus they reflect that the Gospels were originally written in Hebrew. **Many Christian scholars agree that there are colloquial expressions or Hebraisms unique to the First Century present in the Gospels.** These include terms like “good eye” or “bad eye” and what they meant to their Jewish audience. However, many Hebrew New Testament advocates will say that these terms and expressions are unknown to the world of Christian scholasticism, and that God has perhaps only revealed these things—the so-called “Truth”—to “them.” This is likewise false. One almost universally recognized Hebraism among theologians appears in Matthew 16:19, where Yeshua speaks about “binding” and “loosing”:

“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.”<sup>48</sup>

This expression actually has its own entry under “Binding and Loosing” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary (ABD)*. Raymond F. Collins states the following, reflecting a strong grasp on the unique Jewish character of this phrase:

“Matthew introduces ‘binding’ and ‘loosing’ in his gospel without further explanation, thereby suggesting that the practice to which these expression refer was known to his community. Since Josephus writes of the Pharisees’ power to loose and bind (*luein kai desmein*; JW 1 § 111), it is likely that the primary interpretive analogue is to be sought within contemporary rabbinic practice. Within Matthew’s community the Scriptures were midrashically interpreted (e.g., Matt 1:22) and appropriate *halakah* was established (e.g., Matt 5:21-48). Thus it is probable that the practice to which the Matthean ‘binding and loosing’ refers is the interpretation of the Scriptures and the determination of an appropriate Christian way of life.”<sup>49</sup>

Of course, in order to properly understand what is written in Matthew’s Gospel as “bind” (Grk. verb *deō*, δέω) and “loose” (Grk. verb *luō*, λύω), one must be familiar with First Century Jewish history. Josephus, specifically referenced here, writes about the reign of Alexandra, a queen who ruled over the Jewish people several generations before Yeshua, and her involvement with the Pharisees:

“Now, Alexandra hearkened to them to an extraordinary degree, as being herself a woman of great piety towards God. But these Pharisees artfully insinuated themselves into her favor little by little, and became themselves the real administrators of the public affairs; they banished

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<sup>47</sup> One work that is quite popular in throughout the Messianic community, which compiles much of this, is David Bivin and Roy Blizzard, Jr., *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus: New Insights From a Hebraic Perspective* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 1994).

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Matthew 18:18.

<sup>49</sup> Raymond F. Collins, “Binding and Loosing,” in David Noel Freedman, ed. et. al., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:744.



and reduced whom they pleased; they bound and loosed [men] at their pleasure" (*Wars of the Jews* V.1.111).<sup>50</sup>

Interestingly enough, William Whiston, translator of this edition of Josephus' works, indicates in a footnote that "Here we have the oldest and most authentic Jewish exposition of binding and loosing, for punishing or absolving men; not for declaring actions lawful or unlawful, as some more modern Jews and Christians vainly pretend,"<sup>51</sup> referencing Matthew 16:19 and 18:18. Whether you agree with his interpretation or not here is unimportant. What is important is that he identifies it as an Hebraism that is used in later works, namely the Gospel of Matthew.

In the Greek text of Matthew, this phrase was obviously written literally as "binding and loosing,"<sup>52</sup> and would have been understood by Matthew's target audience as relating to determining the *halachah* or religious orthopraxy of a community. The only way that this phrase can be possibly understood—that is if one is unfamiliar with the terminology "binding and loosing"—is knowing the history behind it. Translation *into any language* will not really help; engagement with ancient Jewish resources is what is needed.<sup>53</sup>

There are many more widely recognized Hebraisms in the Gospels by Christian scholars today, which are discussed and analyzed in many technical commentaries of Biblical books.<sup>54</sup> However, simply because there are Hebraisms in the Gospels or the Apostolic Scriptures does not prove that the Gospels were originally written in Hebrew. **It proves that the Gospels have a definite Hebraic background, and that one must be familiar with the history of Biblical times in examining the text.**

Yet, readers need to be cautious in noting how some things which may appear to be Hebraisms, may not be. R. Timothy McLay explains, "what might be explained as a *Semitism* in the NT, whether an *Aramaism* or a *Hebraism*, might just as easily be due to the prior influence of the Greek Jewish Scriptures on the style and language of the writer (*Septuagintism*)."<sup>55</sup> He further states, "An appreciation for the ways in which the LXX translators rendered the Hebrew Scriptures into the Greek language is also necessary for our exegesis of the NT because of the NT writers' use of the Scriptures."<sup>56</sup> This only further exemplifies the need for Messianic Bible

<sup>50</sup> Flavius Josephus: *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 551.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 551-552.

<sup>52</sup> The source text of Matthew 16:19 reads with, *kai ho ean dēsēs epi tēs gēs estai dedemenon en tois ouranois, kai ho ean lusēs epi tēs gēs estai lelumenon en tois ouranois* (καὶ ὃ ἐὰν δέσῃς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται δεδεμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, καὶ ὃ ἐὰν λύσῃς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται λελυμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς).

This was rendered in the Delitzsch Hebrew New Testament with, *v'kol-asher te'esor al-ha'erezt asur yi'yeh b'shamayim v'kol-asher ta'tir al-ha'erezt mutar yi'yeh b'shamayim* (עַל-הָאָרֶץ אֲסוּר יִהְיֶה בַשָּׁמַיִם וְכֹל-אֲשֶׁר תִּתִּיר עַל-הָאָרֶץ מוּתָר יִהְיֶה בַשָּׁמַיִם), "and all that you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and all that you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven" (DHE).

<sup>53</sup> While their conclusions on what "binding and loosing" meant for the early Body of Messiah differ, there are a variety of commentators on Matthew who recognize this as some kind of Hebraism contemporary to Second Temple Judaism:

Leon Morris, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp 426-427; Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 14-28*, Vol 33b (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), pp 472-474; Craig S. Keener, *IVP New Testament Commentary Series: Matthew* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), pp 272-273; John Nolland, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp 676-682; R.T. France, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp 625-627.

<sup>54</sup> The **Theological Resources** ([messianicapogetics.net/resources](http://messianicapogetics.net/resources)) section of the Messianic Apologetics website has listed many possible tools for you to use in this regard.

<sup>55</sup> R. Timothy McLay, *The Use of the Septuagint in New Testament Research* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 32.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

teachers and students to be familiar with the Septuagint. What is classified as a colloquial Hebraic expression, might instead be the influence of the Septuagint—a Jewish style of Greek composition—on the Gospels.

David Allan Black adds to this, “it is possible that the New Testament writers incorporated oral or written sources that were translations of Aramaic or Hebrew into Greek that contained Semitisms in proportion to the literalness of the translation. Thus, it would be surprising if speakers whose linguistic background was Semitic did not betray some Semitic influence in their use of Greek.”<sup>57</sup> Of course, the principal Hebrew and Aramaic resources employed by the Apostolic writers were the Tanach Scriptures themselves. Beyond this, it is quite possible that second hand notes, originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic regarding the sayings and teachings of Yeshua, were employed as source documents for the final composition of our canonical Greek Gospels.<sup>58</sup>

### WHAT ABOUT THE ARAMAIC PESHITTA?

One growing trend in some sectors of the Messianic community is not proposing that the Apostolic Scriptures were originally written in Hebrew, but instead Aramaic. Aramaic is a Semitic relative to Hebrew and was a local language of the Land of Israel during the time of Yeshua. It is historically accurate that an Aramaic version of the Apostolic Scriptures was in existence in the early centuries of Christianity. But arguing for an original Aramaic version of the Apostolic Scriptures *is not the same as arguing for an original Hebrew version*. While the Aramaic language is related to Hebrew, it is nevertheless *not Hebrew*. Arguing for an original “Aramaic New Testament”—as far as we are concerned—is totally different than arguing for an original “Hebrew New Testament.” Nevertheless, similar rhetoric is advocated by Aramaic New Testament advocates as it is from Hebrew New Testament advocates. One advocate of an original Aramaic New Testament, revealing a severe lack of objectivity, states,

“I...could not understand how Elohim could reveal half of His Word in the holy tongue of Hebrew and the other half in the language of Greek paganism and the Romans, who burned Jerusalem to the ground.”<sup>59</sup>

What is ironic about this statement is the fact that while Greek is assumed to be the pagan language of those who destroyed Jerusalem and the Second Temple, Aramaic was used by the pagan Assyrians who carried away many exiles from the Northern Kingdom, *and* the pagan Babylonians who destroyed Jerusalem and the First Temple. Aramaic was “an international language of diplomacy in the latter days of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and the dispersal of Aramaic-speaking peoples from Egypt to Lower Mesopotamia as a result of the Assyrian policies of deportation” (*ABD*).<sup>60</sup> To somehow assume that the Greek language is “totally pagan” and that Aramaic is “just as pure as Hebrew” is totally confounded. **Aramaic was used by pagans every bit as much as Greek.** Again, the question always comes down to ideology and whether or not the God of Israel is capable of inspiring His Word in other languages. I believe God is capable of inspiring His Word in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

Parts of the Tanach were written in Aramaic, including sections of Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and 1&2 Chronicles. As *ABD* notes, “Late biblical Hebrew and rabbinic Hebrew were heavily

<sup>57</sup> David Allan Black, *It's Still Greek to Me* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 151.

<sup>58</sup> For a further discussion of this issue, consult M. Wilcox, “Semitic Influence on the New Testament,” in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), pp 1093-1098.

<sup>59</sup> Andrew Gabriel Roth, *Ruach Qadim: Aramaic Origins of the New Testament* (Malta: Tushiyah Press, 2005), 20.

<sup>60</sup> Stephen A. Kaufman, “Languages (Aramaic),” in *ABD*, 4:173.

influenced by Aramaic in both grammar and vocabulary.”<sup>61</sup> Aramaic or a hybrid Hebrew-Aramaic was spoken in much of First Century Galilee. Many people in the province of Syria also spoke Aramaic or Syriac as their primary language, and were evangelized and received the gospel in great numbers. The *History of the World Christian Movement* indicates that “Syriac became the language of choice among Christians in eastern Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, and eventually India, Mongolia, and China. Late in the first or early in the second century, a Syriac version of Old Testament texts began to appear in the form of a rough translation or paraphrase known as the Peshitta.”<sup>62</sup> Later, the complete version of the Aramaic Bible, including (most of) the Apostolic Scriptures, began being known by this name. A fair-minded approach to the Aramaic New Testament is seen in the opening preface to *The New Covenant Aramaic Peshitta Text* published by the Bible Society in Israel:

“In the Mediterranean regions of the Roman Empire, the New Covenant writings of the Gospel, Acts, Epistles and Revelation were handed down in Greek, lingua franca of the West. In the Holy Land, Syria, Mesopotamia, and other countries of the Parthian Empire, these writings were circulated in Aramaic, lingua franca of the East. The apostles and disciples obeyed the command to proclaim the tidings of the kingdom of God. This they did in the Holy Land and the diaspora communities through the empires of Rome in the West, and of Parthia in the East. For this goal they had at their disposal the two international languages of their times, Greek and Aramaic, through which they reached their people, Jews and Israelites, and the nations in those two realms (Matthew 10:6; 28:19; Acts 2.9-11).”<sup>63</sup>

This preface goes on to explain how “In the Greek text of the new Testament one finds Aramaic locutions in disguise, in addition to several words and phrases in Greek transcription, such as ‘talitha qumi [טְלִיחָא קוּמִי, Mark 5:41]’, ‘lema shevaqtani [לְמָנָא שְׁבַקְתָּנִי, Mark 15:34]’, ‘mamona [מַמּוֹנָא]’ and others, indicating that Yeshua spoke in Aramaic, and no doubt used Hebrew in conversations with scribes and other religious leaders, in addition to the synagogue use of Hebrew.”<sup>64</sup> It is fair and proper to emphasize that being able to work with some degree of Biblical Aramaic is necessary for those in Biblical Studies.

No one can deny that the Aramaic Peshitta New Testament has significant value among the early translations of the Apostolic Scriptures. That the Aramaic Peshitta New Testament was used to help spread the good news of Yeshua the Messiah, to many in the East, should be something looked at with great thankfulness. The issue, of course, is how some have thought that the Aramaic Peshitta New Testament is original, and that the Greek New Testament is not original. The intended audiences of the Epistles of the Apostolic Scriptures, at least, were all directed Westward—notably *disallowing* for them to have been written in Aramaic.

It is quite commonplace to see proponents, of an original Aramaic New Testament, claim that there are various Aramaic expressions in the Gospels, which have been mistranslated into the Greek New Testament. Perhaps the most common one is how within the three Synoptics, one sees Yeshua issue the remark, “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24, NASU; cf. Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25). On the surface to some readers, this does not make any sense. Why would a camel pass through the eye of a needle? One explanation offered in history has been to suggest that there was a small passageway in Jerusalem, called the Eye of the Needle, and it would have been

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, Vol. 1 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 57.

<sup>63</sup> *The New Covenant Aramaic Peshitta Text with Hebrew Translation* (Jerusalem: Bible Society in Israel, 1986), i.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., ii.

most difficult for a beast of burden like a camel to pass through. This has been largely rejected by modern scholars as a tall tale.<sup>65</sup>

The explanation for “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle,” as offered by many proponents of an Aramaic New Testament, is to suggest that the Aramaic term *gamla* (ܓܡܠܐ) or “camel,” can also mean “rope.” Hence, a better reading for Yeshua’s word should be “It is easier for a large rope to enter through the eye of a needle” (Mark 10:25, HRV). On the surface, this would seem to make sense, as a rope is kind of like a hopelessly large piece of thread, and perhaps the Aramaic New Testament advocates have made a point. It would seemingly make sense that *gamla*, meaning either rope or camel, was mistranslated as *kamēlos* (κάμηλος) into the Greek.<sup>66</sup>

We should have reason to pause, though, and consider some of the observations made by R.T. France in his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, in the *NIGTC* series. He indicates something rather important that need not be overlooked:

“The grotesque idea of a camel going through the eye of a needle is a proverbial way stating the impossible: a rabbinic saying (*b. Ber.* 55b; cf. also *b. B. Meş.* 38b; *b. ‘Erub.* 53a) uses an elephant going through the eye of a needle (along with a date palm made of gold) as an image of the impossible.”<sup>67</sup>

France references some places in the Talmud, where Rabbinical voices have apparently used the analogy of an elephant passing through an eye of a needle:

- “Said R. Samuel bar Nahmani said R. Jonathan, ‘What a man is shown [in a dream] is only his own fantasy [Simon: what is suggested by his own thoughts]. For it is said, “As for you, O King, your thoughts come into your mind upon your bed” (*Dan.* 2:29). *If you prefer, I offer proof from the following verse: “That you may know the thoughts of your heart”* (*Dan.* 2:30).’ *Said Raba, ‘You may know that that is so, for people are not shown in dreams [such impossibilities as] either a golden palm tree or an elephant going through the eye of a needle’*” (*b. Berachot* 55b).<sup>68</sup>
- “*He said to him, ‘Perhaps you come from Pumbedita, where they can pass an elephant through the eye of a needle...’*” (*b. Bava Metzia* 38a).<sup>69</sup>

It is not difficult for one to figure out how an elephant is a much larger beast of burden—conservatively three to four times—larger than a camel. Yet, the Jewish literature cited here indicates that various Rabbis are said to speak in terms of an elephant passing through the eye of a needle!<sup>70</sup> *A large beast of burden passing through a portal of only one or two millimeters wide! As*

<sup>65</sup> Cf. James R. Edwards, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 314.

<sup>66</sup> James Scott Trimm, trans., *The Hebraic-Roots Version Scriptures* (Northridge, South Africa: Institute for Scripture Research, 2006), 1259.

<sup>67</sup> R.T. France, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 405.

<sup>68</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Other commentators who have noted the connection between the camel and elephant referenced in Rabbinic literature, include **Matthew 19:24**: Hagner, 561; France, *Matthew*, pp 737-738; Nolland, 795. **Mark 10:24**: C.E.B. Cranfield, *Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 332; William L. Lane, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp 369-370 fn#52; Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 284. **Luke 18:25**: I. Howard Marshall, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 687; Craig A. Evans, *New International Biblical Commentary: Luke* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 276; Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke 9:51-24:53* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 1486; Joel B. Green, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 657 fn#152.

How and why advocates of an Aramaic New Testament in today’s Messianic community, who often claim to be familiar with ancient Rabbinical literature like the Talmud—actually missed some of this—is hard to tell.

impossible as we might think it is, to hear Yeshua speak in terms of a camel passing through the eye of a needle, how much more impossible would it be for an elephant to do this? We do not need to disregard the primacy of the Greek New Testament, on account of the Aramaic Peshitta New Testament, because of this sort of example. Statements like “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24, NASU; cf. Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25), can be regarded as authentic to the Jewish world of Yeshua.

While many people who spoke Aramaic or Syriac as their primary language did come to faith in Yeshua, too much can be made by Aramaic New Testament advocates by thinking that the Syrian Christians were somehow “Jewish,” and especially “Torah observant.” We need to understand that “Culturally the Christians appear to have shared much with their Jewish neighbors, but theologically they sought to distinguish themselves.”<sup>71</sup> There were many ethnic similarities between the Syrian Christians and the Jews, **but that is where it ends.** The Syrian Orthodox Church is much more identical in many ways to the Greek Orthodox Church, including the veneration of icons and the Virgin Mary. In November 2004 I had the opportunity to visit what was believed to be the home of John Mark in Jerusalem. This “home” was little more than a concrete basement, but built on top of it was a Syrian Orthodox Church. The nun guiding us through the tour talked about “Aramaic the language of Jesus...and the great virgin who heals cancer” *all in the same sentence.* In this church was an icon of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus that is believed—by that Church—to have been painted by Luke the Evangelist. Do not make the mistake of believing that this is a “Jewish style of church.” Simply because they use an Aramaic New Testament does not make them Torah observant, Messianic, or possibly even that close to Judaism in some of their customs and style of worship.

On the contrary to what many advocates of an original Aramaic New Testament may try to advocate, or what new adherents in their theories may believe, the Aramaic Peshitta is well known to textual critics of the Bible. Preceding the Peshitta New Testament was the production of a work called the *Diatessaron*, produced by Tatian, a student of Justin Martyr. This work was a harmony of the four Gospels produced in Aramaic. As it is described in *History of the World Christian Movement*,

“Tatian’s most lasting contribution to the Christian movement came not through his school...but in the form of this harmony of the gospels in Syriac....Known as the *Diatessaron* (Greek for ‘From Four’), it was for at least two hundred years the preferred edition for many Syrian churches and theologians. Tatian’s project sought to present the message of Jesus in Syriac, not Greek, to its readers.”<sup>72</sup>

If the *Diatessaron* had to be produced to present Aramaic speakers with the gospel message, it indicates that there was no previous New Testament Scripture in Aramaic, discounting a written Aramaic origin for the Apostolic Writings. In fact, there is ample evidence that indicates the *Diatessaron* was originally a Greek work, later translated into Syriac. Bruce M. Metzger states in his book *The Early Versions of the New Testament*, “In support of a Greek origin is (a) its Greek title, by which it was known even in Syriac; (b) the silence of Eusebius, who, though mentioning the *Diatessaron*, says nothing of its composition in Syriac; and (c) the circumstance of the very considerable influence that it exerted on the text of the Gospels of the West.”<sup>73</sup>

The Peshitta New Testament actually dates from the Fourth to Fifth Centuries C.E. All major textual scholars today recognize the Peshitta as a translation from the Greek Apostolic

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<sup>71</sup> Irvin and Sunquist, 64.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>73</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 32.

Scriptures. While the Peshitta is an important translation to be surely consulted, there are too many time-sensitive additions to the text that are not borne out in older versions of the Greek Apostolic Scriptures. Metzger indicates, “toward the close of the fourth or at the beginning of the fifth century, a version of twenty-two books of the New Testament was available in a translation which came to be called at a later date the Peshitta Syriac version.”<sup>74</sup> He goes on to record that “In its official form it includes twenty-two books of the New Testament, the four minor Catholic [meaning, universal] Epistles (2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude) and the Apocalypse being absent.”<sup>75</sup> **Any acceptance of the Peshitta New Testament as being primary to the Greek Apostolic Scriptures, discounts these texts as being inspired Scripture.**<sup>76</sup> Are we prepared to rip out 2 Peter, 2&3 John, Jude, and Revelation from our Bibles? We should be prepared to consider this, if the Peshitta New Testament is primary to the Greek Apostolic Scriptures.<sup>77</sup>

Advocates of Aramaic New Testament primacy have arguments that are widely discounted among those of the academic community, and that do not historically align like the Hebrew New Testament arguments. Many will defend their position on the basis of various Aramaisms, but like Hebraisms these must be considered on a case-by-case basis, and have strong parallel support in contemporary literature and scholastic opinion. Of course, it is very important to understand that the Peshitta is consulted by many scholars of the Bible, as it is one of the earliest New Testament translations. If anyone consults a critical commentary on the Scriptures, the Peshitta is likely to be referred to, and it is employed frequently in textual criticism. But it is not the only text employed in textual criticism, nor it is treated as being superior to the Greek Apostolic Scriptures.

### **THE REQUIRED BOOK-BY-BOOK ANALYSIS**

In examining the origin of the Apostolic Scriptures, there are many factors that have to be taken into consideration that are often *never discussed* by proponents of an original “Hebrew New Testament.” Can we prove on a book-by-book basis that the whole of the Apostolic Scriptures were written in Hebrew? While there may be a substantial amount of rhetoric that brazenly assumes “The *B’rit Chadashah* was written in Hebrew!” floating around the Messianic community, is it borne out in the historical record? One advocate of an original “Hebrew New Testament” confidently states,

“Many Biblical scholars now agree that many of the New Testament books were originally written in Hebrew and later translated into Greek. This means that our English copies of the New Testament are really translations of translations...”<sup>78</sup>

Of course, any critical thinker has to ask: *What books?* and *Which scholars?* This advocate of an original “Hebrew New Testament” provides no such evidence, and has likely not done any book-by-book analysis of the Apostolic Scriptures to see if such an assessment is truly valid. On the contrary to what anyone advocating a Hebrew New Testament might believe, the majority

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. *The New Covenant Aramaic Peshitta Text with Hebrew Translation*, pp iii-iv.

<sup>77</sup> Consult the author’s commentary *Acts 15 for the Practical Messianic*, for an analysis of the different textual variants of this important verse. The elongated reading of Acts 15:24, “Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, ‘You must be circumcised and keep the law’—to whom we gave no such commandment” (NKJV), appears in both the Greek Textus Receptus and Aramaic Peshitta.

This reading is notably lacking from the critical edition Greek New Testament used for most modern Bible versions: “Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with *their* words, unsettling your souls” (NASU).

<sup>78</sup> Dean and Susan Wheelock, *The Quiet Revival* (Hebrew Roots Press: Lakewood, WI, 2001), 12.

of the scholastic community—especially those involved in Jewish New Testament studies—does not believe that the Apostolic Scriptures were written in Hebrew. At the very most, what is advocated is that the Apostolic writers incorporated Hebrew and Aramaic sources into their Greek compositions. The foremost of any written sources was the Hebrew Tanach. Another possible written source was Q, an abbreviation for the German word *Quelle* or “source.” This is a theoretical Hebrew or Aramaic document that was believed to have existed and had a basic compilation of some of the original sayings of Yeshua the Messiah, and/or notes of what went on during His ministry with the Disciples. Beyond this, it is agreed that much of the dialogue present in the Gospels was orally communicated in Hebrew or Aramaic, but was later transcribed in Greek.

As a conservative Messianic ministry, Outreach Israel has had to field the question “Do you believe the New Testament was originally written in Hebrew?” many, many times. Each time we have been asked this question we have answered a resounding: “No!” The principal reason we believe this has not necessarily been because *we believe that God can inspire His Word in languages other than Hebrew*—even though that is an important reason—but because it is not historically valid. **We primarily believe this because we have examined the composition data of each book of the Apostolic Scriptures to determine whether or not an individual text could have been written in Hebrew.** Every time we have examined a text, a written Greek origin seems inevitable. This is not to say that Hebrew sources or Hebraic understandings are not employed in a text—nor to say that understanding Hebrew and/or Aramaic is unimportant—but the *written language* of a text cannot be Hebrew.

There are four critical factors that must be considered when examining the origin of the Apostolic Scriptures, to determine in what language a text was originally composed:

- **Date:** When was the text written?
- **Author:** Who was the author of the text?
- **Author’s location:** Where was the author when composing the text?
- **Audience and audience’s location:** Who was the target or recipient audience of a text? Where were they geographically located?

We have never been able to find anyone in the Messianic movement advocating an original “Hebrew New Testament,” who examines texts of the Apostolic Scriptures on these ever-critical, historical factors. The reason we have likely never seen this is that these factors will prove time and time again that the written language of the Apostolic Scriptures was Greek.

The following information has been reproduced from my workbook *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic*. You will need to access each of its entries for further analysis of the composition of each text of the New Testament. Yet, I can say that I am not afraid of where the issues of date, author, author’s location, and audience and audience’s location lead us: **a written Greek origin for the Apostolic Scriptures.** (Unlike the workbook, which uses a different order for the texts referenced, the information has been produced here in the standard canonical order.)

#### **GOSPEL OF MATTHEW**

**Approximate date:** early-to-mid 70s C.E., possibly into the 80s C.E.

**Time period:** the conception/birth of Yeshua to the ascension of Yeshua

**Author:** Matthew the disciple

**Location of author:** Phoenicia, Transjordan, Alexandria, Syrian Antioch (all debated)

**Target audience and their location:** the Jewish Diaspora, possibly Antioch

## CONFRONTING CRITICAL ISSUES

### **GOSPEL OF MARK**

**Approximate date:** late 50s or early 60s C.E.

**Time period:** the ministry of John the Immerser to the ascension of Yeshua

**Author:** John Mark, secretary of the Apostle Peter

**Location of author:** Rome

**Target audience and their location:** predominantly Roman, later Alexandrian

### **GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**Approximate date:** late 50s to early 60s; or late 70s to early 80s

**Time period:** establishment of a more definitive history of the ministry and teachings of Yeshua

**Author:** Luke the doctor

**Location of author:** Rome or Achaia

**Target audience and their location:** Theophilus, and broad groups of Jews, Greeks, and Romans

### **GOSPEL OF JOHN**

**Approximate date:** mid-to-late 80s C.E.

**Time period:** need to establish a doctrinal Gospel independent of the Synoptics (Mark, Matthew, Luke), focused on the relationship of Yeshua the Son to God the Father, and Yeshua to His Disciples and followers

**Author:** the Apostle John

**Location of author:** Ephesus

**Target audience and their location:** largely non-Jewish Believers in Asia Minor, and eventually throughout the Roman Empire

### **BOOK OF ACTS**

**Approximate date:** after the Gospel of Luke, 60-62 C.E., late 60s C.E., or 70s-80s C.E.

**Time period:** establishment of a more definitive history of the expansion of the gospel in the ancient world

**Author:** Luke the doctor

**Location of author:** Rome

**Target audience and their location:** Theophilus, and broad groups of Jews, Greeks, and Romans

### **EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS**

**Approximate date:** 56-58 C.E.

**Time period:** transition of Paul's ministry work from the Eastern to Western Mediterranean

**Author:** the Apostle Paul with Tertius (secretary)

**Location of author:** Corinth/Achaia or Cenchrea

**Target audience and their location:** Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Rome

### **FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

**Approximate date:** 52-55 C.E.

**Time period:** season of extreme growing pains for the Corinthian congregation, in the midst of idolatry, immorality, and factionalism

**Author:** the Apostle Paul

**Location of author:** Ephesus/Asia Minor

**Target audience and their location:** Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Corinth



**SECOND EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

**Approximate date:** Winter 56 or 57 C.E.

**Time period:** season of extreme growing pains for the Corinthian congregation, in the midst of many challenging Paul's apostolic authority

**Author:** the Apostle Paul

**Location of author:** Macedonia or Ephesus

**Target audience and their location:** Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Corinth

**EPISTLE TO THE GALATIANS**

**Approximate date:** 48-49 C.E. or 50-52 C.E.

**Time period:** season of great confusion among many new non-Jewish Believers, and their integration into the community of faith

**Author:** the Apostle Paul

**Location of author:** Macedonia, Ephesus, or Antioch

**Target audience and their location:** mostly non-Jewish Believers in the province/region of Galatia

**EPISTLE OF EPHESIANS**

**Approximate date:** 60-62 C.E.

**Time period:** season of great expansion of the gospel among those needing encouragement

**Author:** the Apostle Paul

**Location of author:** Rome

**Target audience and their location:** Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Asia Minor, and eventually Ephesus

**EPISTLE TO THE PHILIPPIANS**

**Approximate date:** 61 C.E.

**Time period:** first imprisonment of Paul

**Author:** the Apostle Paul

**Location of author:** Rome (majority view), Ephesus or Caesarea (minority view)

**Target audience and their location:** largely non-Jewish Believers in Philippi

**EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS**

**Approximate date:** 60-62 C.E.

**Time period:** season of extreme error in parts of the Body of Messiah, during the first imprisonment of Paul

**Author:** the Apostle Paul

**Location of author:** Rome

**Target audience and their location:** Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Colossae

**FIRST EPISTLE TO THE THESSALONIANS**

**Approximate date:** 50-52 C.E.

**Time period:** season of severe difficulty for a young assembly of Believers, with misunderstandings about the end-times

**Author:** the Apostle Paul

**Location of author:** Corinth

**Target audience and their location:** Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Thessalonica

**SECOND EPISTLE TO THE THESSALONIANS**

**Approximate date:** 51-52 C.E. (maximum of six months after 1 Thessalonians)

**Time period:** season of severe misunderstanding about the end-times

**Author:** the Apostle Paul

**Location of author:** Corinth

**Target audience and their location:** Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Thessalonica

**FIRST EPISTLE TO TIMOTHY**

**Approximate date:** 63-64 C.E. or 65-67 C.E.

**Time period:** growth of Messianic community with rise of Paul's successors, in the midst of some false teachings and apostasy

**Author:** the Apostle Paul with Luke (secretary)

**Location of author:** traveling to, or in Macedonia

**Target audience and location:** Timothy in Ephesus

**SECOND EPISTLE TO TIMOTHY**

**Approximate date:** 66-67 C.E.

**Time period:** growth of Messianic community with rise of Paul's successors, in the midst of some false teachings and apostasy, as well as rising persecution

**Author:** the Apostle Paul with Luke (secretary)

**Location of author:** Rome

**Target audience and their location:** Timothy in Ephesus

**EPISTLE TO TITUS**

**Approximate date:** 63-65 C.E.

**Time period:** growing pains of new Messiah followers in Mediterranean basin

**Author:** the Apostle Paul with Luke (secretary)

**Location of author:** Macedonia or Nicopolis

**Target audience and their location:** Titus in Crete

**EPISTLE TO PHILEMON**

**Approximate date:** 60-62 C.E.

**Time period:** Paul's first imprisonment in Rome, during an era of runaway slaves

**Author:** the Apostle Paul

**Location of author:** Rome (majority), Ephesus or Caesarea (minority)

**Target audience and location:** Philemon, from Colossae or Lycus Valley

**EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS**

**Approximate date:** 64-70 C.E.

**Time period:** immediately prior to, or during, the Jewish revolt in the Land of Israel

**Author:** unknown, but often favored to be Barnabas or Apollos (and/or Priscilla)

**Location of author:** the Jewish Diaspora, probably Corinth or Italy

**Target audience and their location:** primarily the Jewish Diaspora, probably Rome, Alexandria, Eastern Mediterranean

**EPISTLE OF JAMES**

**Approximate date:** 45-50 C.E.

**Time period:** prior to, or just after, the Jerusalem Council

**Author:** James the Just, brother of Yeshua

**Location of author:** Jerusalem or Judea

**Target audience and their location:** Jewish Believers in the immediate Diaspora: Phoenicia, Cyprus, Antioch

**FIRST EPISTLE OF PETER**

**Approximate date:** 64-67 C.E.

**Time Period:** immediately prior to the Jewish rebellion in Judea, possibly during the persecution by Emperor Nero

**Author:** the Apostle Peter, assisted by Silvanus

**Location of author:** Rome

**Target audience and their location:** Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia (Northwestern Asia Minor)

**SECOND EPISTLE OF PETER**

**Approximate date:** 65 to 68 C.E.

**Time period:** spread of false teaching in the community of faith, and degrees of impatience about the Second Coming

**Author:** the Apostle Peter (possibly with a scribe's assistance, and/or posthumously released)

**Location of author:** Rome

**Target audience and their location:** Jewish and non-Jewish Believers who are soon to face the absence of Peter, the same basic audience as 1 Peter

**FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN**

**Approximate date:** anywhere from 70-90 C.E.

**Time period:** period of transition in the early *ekklēsia* from Apostolic to post-Apostolic, with Believers facing threats from (proto-)Gnostic errors

**Author:** the Apostle John

**Location of author:** Ephesus or Asia Minor

**Target audience and their location:** Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Asia Minor

**SECOND EPISTLE OF JOHN**

**Approximate date:** 70-90 C.E.

**Time period:** period of transition in the early *ekklēsia* from Apostolic to post-Apostolic

**Author:** the Apostle John

**Location of author:** Ephesus or Asia Minor (conservative), Syria (liberal)

**Target audience and their location:** a congregation of Believers (a "lady")

**THIRD EPISTLE OF JOHN**

**Approximate date:** 70-90 C.E.

**Time period:** period of transition in the early *ekklēsia* from Apostolic to post-Apostolic

**Author:** the Apostle John

**Location of author:** Ephesus or Asia Minor (conservative), Syria (liberal)

**Target audience and location:** Gaius, a Believer in Asia Minor

**EPISTLE OF JUDE**

**Approximate date:** 50s or 60s C.E.; or 80s C.E.

**Time period:** intense season of instability and uncertainty

**Author:** Jude, the brother of James and half-brother of Yeshua

**Location of author:** Judea (early composition); Diaspora (later composition)

**Target audience and their location:** Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in the Mediterranean basin

**BOOK OF REVELATION**

**Approximate date:** 50s-70s C.E. or 80s-90 C.E.

**Time period:** deteriorating circumstances for the First Century Believers in the Roman Empire

**Author:** the Apostle John

**Location of author:** the island of Patmos

**Target audience and their location:** the congregations of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea (all in Asia Minor)

**A CREDIBILITY ISSUE**

When we objectively examine the composition data of each text of the Apostolic Scriptures, there is no overwhelming evidence of a written Hebrew origin for it in its entirety. In fact, certain texts that are suggested to have been originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic **have scant evidence at best.**<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, while many in the Messianic movement advocating a “Hebrew New Testament” believe that our theology has been affected by “bad translations,” in actuality our theology is more affected by our lack of having the right background information and resources at our disposal. (Christian scholars are only now *widely* considering the Jewish background of the New Testament, because of failure in the past to have access to Jewish resources—largely coming as a result of the interreligious dialogue of the past century.) This is every bit as true for Messianic teachers who fail to consider the background of the Gospels or Pauline Epistles, and Christian pastors who tend to seldom, if ever, consult the critical commentaries and other tools in their libraries.<sup>80</sup>

The hermeneutic that has been created in significant sectors of the Messianic community is very dangerous. When difficulty arises in interpreting a passage of the Apostolic Scriptures, some are content to say something like, “The original Hebrew would not have said that,” often when criticizing an English translation from the Greek.

First of all, there is no proof that an original “Hebrew New Testament” ever existed. Secondly, before discounting the Greek we have *to actually examine* what the Greek says. And third, in many cases our answer for interpreting a Biblical text is not in the text, but in the historical background of the events. Sadly, these things are often not taken into consideration by Hebrew New Testament advocates.

What is even worse is that almost all of these people have no working knowledge of the Greek language to even have the ability to determine—with accuracy—what the Greek behind our English New Testament translations actually says. As a student in college, I was blessed with the ability to take Hebrew and Greek as electives. I remember being praised by my Messianic peers for studying Hebrew, which I enjoyed immensely, but when I learned Greek, that was another story. I cannot forget all of the negative comments, criticisms, and even some harassment I received for learning Greek. This largely came about because of all the negative “press” the Greek language has unfairly received in the Messianic movement. (When I graduated from Asbury Theological Seminary in 2009—I was actually a recipient of the Zondervan Biblical Languages Award, for Greek, no less!)

Whether we like it or not, the Greek language was an important part of First Century life. Learning the Greek language does not make a person anti-Semitic, as I was accused of being.

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<sup>79</sup> The issues regarding the Gospel of Matthew, which is widely touted to have been written in Hebrew, even among those who accept a written Greek origin for the rest of the Apostolic Scriptures, are addressed in the author’s article “Is the Hebrew Matthew an Authentic Document?”

<sup>80</sup> It is a sad fact, but many Christian pastors seldom do consult the resources in their libraries. My Inductive Bible Study professor in seminary attested several times to our class that he had been to pastors’ offices where the commentary set(s) on the bookshelves were many years old, yet looked like they had never been used.

(Likewise, learning the German language does not make a person anti-Semitic or a Nazi.) I am one of a small selection of Messianic teachers who can say he or she has formally studied both of the Biblical languages, which I say not to elevate myself over others, but to reflect on the fact that **people failing to study Greek—every bit as much as Hebrew—is a serious problem for today's Messianic movement.** This problem will have to be remedied if we ever hope to become more mainstream and be considered theologically credible in the larger world of ideas.

This is compounded by the fact that most “evidence” in favor of an original “Hebrew New Testament” is not evidence. It is often nothing more than opinion. And, when it comes to whether or not something is a *viable and trustworthy opinion*, even that can often not be seen.

In examining this issue, our ministry asked the Institute for Scripture Research, publishers of *The Scriptures* Bible translation, and a strong advocate in favor of a Hebrew New Testament, the following question. We asked them, “On what historical basis do you believe that the Apostolic Scriptures were written in Hebrew?” Their simple answer to us was, “We believe they were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic.” Responding to this, we asked them a further question: “We assume that your organization can be able to document this on a book-by-book basis, taking into account the author of a book, his location, his audience, and the approximate date when a book was written.” This is the data that we have just examined. Notice the ISR’s response: “We prefer not to add too many such comments, as there is no absolute proof of the date when each and every book was written.”

Here is an organization that has taken to publishing a version of the Bible from the premise that the Apostolic Scriptures were written in Hebrew, and they have made (unfortunately) significant inroads into various sectors of the Messianic community. Touting a name like “the Institute for Scripture Research” should require the organization to at least have some opinions about when a Biblical text was written, by whom it was written, and where it was written. But here, you see that they are unwilling to comment on it *in any capacity*. Why? Is it because they are incapable of doing so, and that the name “Institute for Scripture Research” is merely a façade—and there are no Ph.D.’s and Th.D.’s sitting on its board of directors?<sup>81</sup> We may never know if all we can get are ambiguous answers.<sup>82</sup>

If this seemingly “scholastic” and “academic” organization—which produces a Bible translation—cannot answer basic questions about the composition of the Scriptures (the Apostolic Writings and the Tanach), what is to be said about the many other Messianics and rogue individuals out there who promote an original “Hebrew New Testament”? How solid is their evidence? “We [just] believe they were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic” is **not a viable or legitimate answer**. It is an opinion—and if unsubstantiated—is a **poor opinion at that**.

Of course, the biggest question is: **If the Apostolic Scriptures were originally written in Hebrew—where are these texts today?** If they ever existed, why do we not have them? Many will argue that they were burned and discarded in the early centuries of the Christian Church by anti-Semites, but this is not an argument. If they did exist—and we do not believe that they did—then why did God in His infinite wisdom and sovereignty have them destroyed from existence? This is a question that draws a blank stare from almost all Hebrew New Testament

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<sup>81</sup> Please also note the fact that the ISR has no Statement of Faith, and as clearly stated on their website, “The ISR will not respond to doctrinal questions” (<http://www.isr-messianic.org/faqs/faq.shtml>). Unless a companion commentary is in the works for their “*Scriptures*” translation, or at least some ancillary papers written to substantiate their textual positions, we cannot know with any certainty what the theological presuppositions of its translators are—in addition to who they are and what their credentials are.

<sup>82</sup> The ISR *Scriptures* (1993/1998/2009) has been reviewed in the author’s article “English Bible Versions and Today’s Messianic Movement.”

advocates. This is clearly a credibility issue, and demonstrates that the Messianic movement has a substantial amount of maturing to do—both spiritually *and* theologically. Believing in a fictional “Hebrew New Testament” will not help the Messianic movement, and its message of the Hebraic background of Yeshua’s life and the Apostle’s teachings, coupled with the Torah observant lifestyle that God is restoring to His people, grow into the mainstream.

### THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS CAUSED BY HEBREW NEW TESTAMENT ADVOCATES

There are some severe theological, and indeed some spiritual problems that have been caused by many Hebrew New Testament advocates that go beyond promoting a version of the Bible that never existed.

Because many Hebrew New Testament proponents promulgate the “existence” of a text that is superior to, and thus “theologically purer” than our extant Greek Apostolic Scriptures, advocates are literally able to make the Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Revelation say whatever they want—and *then get away with it* among the naïve. While this is especially true when it comes to a few of the so-called Hebraisms that we previously examined, many of which are manufactured Hebraisms among proponents, it is even more true as Hebrew New Testament proponents tend to endorse concepts witnessed in the Jewish mystical tradition, especially from the Kabbalah. In the view of one popular teacher,

“There are many fascinating aspects to this teaching...It is my opinion that there is so much to learn and understand from those things that ARE revealed, that time spent swimming in a sea of mystical emanations is fruitless....The root of this word is *qabal*, which means ‘to receive’, and is taken from the scriptures in Mishlei [Proverbs] 19:20.”<sup>83</sup>

This one proponent does warn about some of the dangers of Kabbalah (but not all), even though he still dabbles with the Kabbalah in emphasizing “the transition from the infinite cause of causes (*eyn sof*) to the finite, tangible universe.” In fact, a great deal of his Hebrew exegesis is not focused around the Hebrew language, grammar, and parts of speech at all, but around so-called letter pictures<sup>84</sup> and numerical values of Hebrew letters. His lack of understanding the Hebrew language—while actually claiming to be an “expert” in it—is revealed in these further comments:

“[I]t might be a wise thing to discern the sometimes subtle difference between the instructions and wisdom of YHVH and the lofty interpretations of man. This would include yours truly as well, for this same word appears in the Brit Chadashah in 1 Corinthians 2:4-5: *And my speech and my preaching were not with ENTICING (qabal) words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power; that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.*”

Here, it is just assumed as fact that the verb *qaval* (קָבַל), which generally means “receive, take” (BDB),<sup>85</sup> was used by Paul when he wrote the Greek-speaking Corinthians—which **included** the Messianic Jews in Corinth. We cannot conclude with definite specificity that when Paul wrote the words “my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom” (1 Corinthians 2:4), what concepts were in his mind. What we know is that the source

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<sup>83</sup> Brad Scott (n.d.). *Kabbalah*, Wildbranch Ministry. Retrieved 02 July, 2010, from <<http://www.wildbranch.org/>>.

<sup>84</sup> Consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website, “Hebrew, Letter Pictures.”

<sup>85</sup> Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 867.

text of 1 Corinthians 2:4 has *peithois sophias logos* (πειθοῦ[ς] σοφίας [λόγους]), with the adjective *peithos* (πειθός), meaning “*persuasive*” (BDAG),<sup>86</sup> also rendered as “plausible” (NRSV).

Modern Hebrew New Testament translations notably **do not** render *peithos* with the verb *qaval*. The Delitzsch Hebrew New Testament has *l'fatot b'imrei chokmat* (לְפַתוֹת בְּאִמְרֵי חֻכְמָה), and the 1991 UBSHNT has *b'fittuyei milim shel chokmah* (בְּפִתּוּיֵי מִלִּים שֶׁל חֻכְמָה).<sup>87</sup> There are approximately eighty years or more of difference between these two editions, and the former was rendered in a more Biblical style of Hebrew than the latter, which employs modern Hebrew. Regardless of which is consulted, both versions use the verb *patah* (פָּתָה), which in its Biblical context generally means “*be persuaded, persuade*” (BDB),<sup>88</sup> borrowed from Aramaic. It is used in Jeremiah 20:10 in reference to deception:

“For I have heard the whispering of many, ‘Terror on every side! Denounce *him*; yes, let us denounce him!’ All my trusted friends, watching for my fall, say: ‘Perhaps he will be deceived [*patah*], so that we may prevail against him and take our revenge on him.’”

What is ironic, of course, is that this teacher claims that the verb *qaval* would have been used in 1 Corinthians 2:4—when it **does not even appear** in two major, modern Hebrew translations of the Apostolic Scriptures. Of course, we fully believe that Paul wrote in Greek to the Corinthians, but this can only prove that many Hebrew New Testament advocates—in addition to not having any ability to understand or use Biblical Greek—often do not have the acumen in Biblical Hebrew that they think they have. There are many more examples we could give of where this kind of shoddy examination takes place, but the example we have provided is one of the more strident indications of the sub-standard theology that has been created as a result of the fanciful teaching that the Apostolic Scriptures were written in Hebrew.

While it is easy to dismiss the thoughts of those who have cut corners in their Biblical examination, in order to package a few teachings and then “wow” audiences as they travel around on some sort of sideshow roadshow—thoughts that learning the Greek language for Bible study purposes, are not that useful, is seen even in the more well accepted quarters of the Messianic Jewish world. Aaron Eby of First Fruits of Zion, who also served as the main translator of the Vine of David *Delitzsch Hebrew Gospels*, an English publication derived from the Franz Delitzsch Hebrew translation of the Greek New Testament, has stated the following on his personal blog Messianics for Torah:

“[T]he conventional methodology of obsessing over grammatical details and semantic nuances in Greek is misguided. A more fruitful effort is to fit these words back into their place as a part of the tapestry of ancient Jewish literature. In the proper context, the Semitic words and thoughts speak for themselves.”<sup>89</sup>

To be fair to Eby, his attention here is directed mainly at the Gospels and the sayings of Yeshua, and not at the whole of the Apostolic Scriptures. But what are these statements to mean? In claiming “the conventional methodology of obsessing over grammatical details and semantic nuances in Greek is misguided,” someone like Eby has just been caught saying that Greek verb tenses, Greek cases, and Greek prepositional phrases have little bearing and do not matter at all when a reader tries to interpret the canonical, written transcription of Yeshua’s teachings. This viewpoint has passed into the Introduction to the DHE publication with the

<sup>86</sup> Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 791.

<sup>87</sup> תורה נביאים כתובים והברית החדשה (Jerusalem: Bible Society in Israel, 1991), NT p 211.

<sup>88</sup> BDB, 1126.

<sup>89</sup> Aaron Eby (2010). *Excavating the Teachings of Yeshua*, 04 January, 2010. *Messianics for Torah*. Retrieved 22 May, 2010, from <<http://messianicsfortorah.wordpress.com/>>.

conclusion, “The Greek Gospels were written in poor-quality Greek.”<sup>90</sup> These are some very bold statements made by a person who possesses no post-graduate credentials in the Biblical languages of Hebrew or Greek (or for that matter, of any kind of theological studies)—and yet is a translator of a Bible version to be used by thousands of Messianic people. *He has not earned the right to make such imperative remarks.* At worst, we find that the Greek syntax of the Gospels is on par with the Greek syntax of the Septuagint, which is a known translation. Overstatements about the Greek of the Gospels appear to have been purposefully made.<sup>91</sup>

Acting as though a reader does not have to deal with the canonical Greek of the Gospels at all, and he or she simply has to re-translate the text back into a hypothetical Hebrew construction, has set a problematic precedent for Messianic theological studies. Consider what John 1:16 says: “For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace” (NASU).<sup>92</sup> The DHE has the similar sounding, “And from his fullness we all have received kindness upon kindness.”<sup>93</sup> The only major difference appears to be between (χάρις) or “grace,” and *chesed* (חסד) or “kindness.” This does not appear to be that big an issue, right?

John 1:16 is actually a significant place where some theologians have claimed strong support for replacement theology, and in the Torah fully giving complete way to the teachings of Yeshua the Messiah. Difficulty ensues from the perspective one takes concerning the phrase *charin anti charitos* (χάρις ἀντὶ χάριτος), with a selection of interpreters concluding that one revelation of God’s grace has been replaced by a further revelation. While the methodology promoted by those like Eby, and many others in the Messianic community, would suggest that *charin anti charitos* has to be put into a hypothetical Hebrew construction like *chesed al-chesed* (חסד על-חסד) to be properly understood, this cuts a corner by not engaging directly with *charin anti charitos*.

While it is easy, and might be a little convenient for some of today’s Messianics to just disregard the thoughts and perspectives of Christian interpreters who draw conclusions from *charin anti charitos* (χάρις ἀντὶ χάριτος)—this can leave us wide open to unnecessary attack and criticism.

How are readers to correctly view the clause *charin anti charitos* in John 1:16? Common renderings that you will encounter include: “one blessing after another” (NIV), “grace after grace” (HCSB), and “grace on top of grace” (LITV). The *BDAG* entry for the preposition *anti* (ἀντί) notes for us that “χάρις ἂ χάριτος *grace after or upon grace*” is how “God’s favor comes in ever new streams.”<sup>94</sup> *AMG* further describes how *anti* is used “In John 1:16, trans. with ‘for’ in the phrase ‘and grace for grace,’ meaning grace upon grace, most abundant grace, one favor in place of or after another. God’s grace is not given once-and-for-all, but there is a renewal of it that is constant.”<sup>95</sup> There are those who would make the linguistic argument that *anti* does not imply that God’s grace in the Messiah replaces God’s grace in the Mosaic Torah, but rather that God’s grace in the Messiah is a natural continuance of God’s grace first revealed in the Mosaic Torah.

<sup>90</sup> Aaron Eby and Robert Morris, trans., et. al., *The Delitzsch Hebrew Gospels: A Hebrew/English Translation* (Marshfield, MO: Vine of David, 2011), xxix.

<sup>91</sup> The *Delitzsch Hebrew Gospels* has been reviewed in the author’s article “English Bible Versions and Today’s Messianic Movement.”

<sup>92</sup> Grk. NT: *hoti ek tou plērōmatos autou hēmeis pantas elaboumen kai charin anti charitos* (ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ πληρώματος αὐτοῦ ἡμεῖς πάντες ἐλάβομεν καὶ χάρις ἀντὶ χάριτος).

<sup>93</sup> Delitzsch: *u’ m’ melo’ o l’ qachenu kulanu chesed al-chesed* (וּמְמֵלוֹ אוֹ לְקַחְנוּ כֻּלָּנוּ חֶסֶד עַל-חֶסֶד).

<sup>94</sup> *BDAG*, 88.

<sup>95</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993), 190.



The most commonly referenced ancient witness where the preposition *anti* is used in the sense of God's graces being displayed to people in a progressive order, is seen in the First Century Jewish philosopher Philo:

"On this account it is, that God always judiciously limits and brings out with wise moderation his first benefits [*charitas, χάριτας*], stopping them before those who partake of them become wanton through satiety; and then he bestows others in their stead; and again a third class of advantages instead of the second set [*heteras anti' ekeinōn kai tritas anti tōn deuterōn, ἕτερας ἀντ' ἐκείνων καὶ τρίτας ἀντὶ τῶν δευτέρων*]" (*On the Posterity and Exile of Cain* 145).<sup>96</sup>

There is actually a much earlier usage of the preposition *anti* that more closely corresponds to what is seen in John 1:16, *charin anti charitos* (χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος), appearing in the Fifth Century B.C.E. play *Helen* by Euripides (480-406 B.C.E.). In the dialogue King Theokymenos tells the woman Helen, *charis gar anti charitos elthetō* (χάρις γὰρ ἀντὶ χάριτος ἐλθέτω; *Helen* 1234).<sup>97</sup> This has been rendered as "May grace upon grace come to you!" (Clarke),<sup>98</sup> or "since favour is for favour due" (Way).<sup>99</sup> In his commentary on Euripides' *Helen*, William Allan notes how for *charis...anti charitos* (χάρις...ἀντὶ χάριτος), "the repetition emphasizes the reciprocity of favours."<sup>100</sup>

So is the clause *charin anti charitos* "grace in place of grace" or "grace upon/for grace"? Is the grace witnessed in God's Torah now to be replaced and superseded by the grace evidenced in God's Messiah? Bruce does not think that a sharp contrast between such graces is intended in John 1:16. He comments, "In the phrase 'grace upon grace' the preposition is *anti* but no satisfactory sense can be obtained by pressing it to mean 'instead of' here. What the followers of Christ draw from the ocean of divine fullness is grace upon grace—one wave of grace being constantly replaced by a fresh one."<sup>101</sup> Yeshua's word in 2 Corinthians 12:9 should be remembered here: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."

Unfortunately, given the religious culture of much of today's Messianic movement, not enough people who are in positions of leadership or teaching would even think to evaluate what *charin anti charitos* means in any substantial detail, especially if a possible answer for this clause's meaning were to be found within classical Greek sources! **One needs to deal with the Greek source text in its final form, first, before positing hypothetical Hebrew constructions.** And, as far as First Century Judea is concerned, while no Biblical scholar denies the reality of how Yeshua the Messiah spoke Hebrew and Aramaic most frequently, it cannot be overlooked that there were instances when the Messiah would have spoken Greek. S.E. Porter reminds us how,

"Jesus came from an area that had been highly influenced by Hellenism, Nazareth was a small village, but it was on the same trade route as an excellent example of a Greek city in [Judea], Sephthoris, where both Greek and Aramaic were spoken, and near the primarily Gentile Decapolis, Hellenistic cities or villages in the region of Galilee. Jesus was involved in a trade where it is reasonable to assume that he would have had contact with others than his townspeople, possibly including Romans or others who spoke Greek. In the course of his itinerant ministry, Jesus also traveled to various parts...where he may have had contact with

<sup>96</sup> *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 147.

<sup>97</sup> The Greek source text has been accessed via the Perseus Collection <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>>.

<sup>98</sup> E-Sword 8.0.8: Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible. MS Windows 9x. Franklin, TN: Equipping Ministries Foundation, 2008.

<sup>99</sup> Euripides: *Iphigenia at Aulis, Rhesus Hecuba, The Daughters of Troy, Helen*, trans. Arthur S. Way (London: William Heinemann, 1916), 573.

<sup>100</sup> William Allan, ed., *Euripides Helen* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 288.

<sup>101</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 43.

Greek speakers. Several of his disciples, including Andrew, Philip, and even possibly Peter, had Greek names, despite being Jewish."<sup>102</sup>

Of course, there is a bigger spiritual issue at play that must be taken into serious consideration when it comes to advocating that the Apostolic Scriptures were written in Hebrew. Many proponents of a Hebrew New Testament, when they get tired of waiting for the "discovery" of "Hebrew New Testament manuscripts," later deny faith in Messiah Yeshua. This includes many Jewish people who were formerly Believers, who because of Christian prejudice that they failed to deal with and repent of in their "coming to Messiah faith"—meaning that they could never really accept the message of the Greek Apostolic Scriptures—later decide to reject His salvation and return or revert toward Orthodox Judaism. Some are less stringent than denying complete faith in Yeshua, but may be constrained to denying Yeshua's Divinity and treating the Apostolic Scriptures as only being "commentary," but surely not as authoritative as the Hebrew Tanach. But, that may only be a step toward ultimate apostasy at a later date. The following is a quotation from one former proponent of a "Hebrew New Testament," who later fell away from belief in Yeshua:

"As we learned when we researched the origins and the canonization of the 'New Testament,' most, if not all, of the writings...were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic, *not Greek!*...Yes, we have some versions of Matthew in Hebrew, **but we have absolutely no way of knowing how much its current condition was influenced by the Greek and Roman Church!** We don't have the original, and we don't have a documented line of possession we can look at. And what about the other books of the 'New Testament?' Sure, we now have English translations of Aramaic versions of the New Testament books, but do we have any way of knowing how original they are? After all, they have been in the possession of the Syrian Church of the East for almost 2,000 years!...The search for truth led us to believe that we cannot take the New Testament as infallible."<sup>103</sup>

Here, this proponent of a Hebrew New Testament claims that even though for a time he accepted the Aramaic Peshitta as being "okay," he still cannot handle the message of the gospel and the transforming power of Yeshua. For some reason or another, he cries foul play concerning *any version* of the Apostolic Scriptures, probably claiming that it includes myths borrowed from Greco-Roman paganism. Of course, we could easily make the same argument concerning the Hebrew Tanach, and as liberals do, claim that the Hebrew Scriptures copy off of myths from Sumer and Babylon, and we really cannot trust what the Tanach says as fact, either.<sup>104</sup> The standard that this person has held the Church to can also be held to the Synagogue, and the result would be that the entire Bible as we know it is not trustworthy.

**A great many who deny the inspiration of the Greek Apostolic Scriptures later deny faith in Yeshua.** This is a documented fact. Once you deny the message, it is not that much further when you deny the Messenger.

**Much of the fruit of the Hebrew New Testament advocates—who often deliberately undermine the inspiration of the Apostolic Scriptures and the integrity of the gospel message—is people denying Messiah Yeshua.** Yeshua's words to Judas Iscariot probably speak best of these kinds of people: "It would have been better for that one not to have been born" (Matthew 26:24, NRSV; cf. Mark 14:21).

<sup>102</sup> S.E. Porter, "Greek of the New Testament," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 433.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, pp 433-434 include a variety of possible places where Greek was spoken in dialogue between Yeshua and various First Century people.

<sup>104</sup> Yeshayahu Heliliczer (2002). *But Why?*, 04 January, 2002. Retrieved 12 September, 2005, from <<http://www.teshuvah.com/>>.

<sup>105</sup> Consult the author's article "Is the Story of Yeshua Pagan?" for a further discussion of these issues.

**THE IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY’S MESSIANIC MOVEMENT**

The belief that the Apostolic Scriptures were originally written in Hebrew is without historical or textual basis, and has caused some serious problems that will not bode well for the development of the Messianic movement. The ideological claim that God would only inspire the message of His Son in Hebrew—and that He cannot do it in Greek—says that God is monolingual and thus *not all powerful*. This all reflects on the reality that our Messianic faith community has much theological and spiritual maturation ahead of it, if it is indeed to become more mainstream and grow in substantial numbers.

Whether you like it or not, the message of God’s Son was composed in the Greek language **and not in Hebrew**. We must eliminate the misunderstanding that it was written in Hebrew, and indeed some of the other related urban myths floating around that damage the credibility of understanding the *legitimate* Hebraic background of our Messiah Yeshua and the Torah obedient lifestyle that God is restoring to all of His people.

We need leaders and teachers in the Messianic community who have a strong handle on *both* Hebrew and Greek, and who likewise have a strong grasp on Biblical hermeneutics and the historical background behind the Scriptures—and we especially need to be engaging ourselves in detailed Bible studies on specific texts. We need to be producing the commentaries on Biblical books that address the pertinent issues in detail, and go beyond some of the faulty rhetoric that too many are subjected to. We need to demonstrate both spiritual *and* intellectual maturity, and recognize that when we have difficulties with a Biblical text, it not the text that is the problem, but it is us in our examination of the text that needs to be adjusted.

Most important of all, the Messianic community needs to adopt a broader approach in its examination of God’s Word. We need to understand that the Bible is a great gift that God has given to the world, and that it is for every man, woman, and child—of all languages and ethnicities. This is every bit as true for the First Century, as it is today. We need to recognize that our God is interested in the salvation and spiritual transformation of all human beings—*not just those who speak Hebrew*. Even many of the Jewish people of the First Century did not speak Hebrew...