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can we trust the Greek scriptures? 2002/2011

It is indeed phenomenal that in our day many Jewish people have come to faith in Israel's Messiah, Yeshua. It is also indeed quite phenomenal that many non-Jewish Believers are coming to a revelation of the Hebraic Roots of the faith, are adopting a Torah obedient lifestyle, and are seeing themselves as a part of the community of Israel, in solidarity with the Jewish people. But as with any move of God, there are concerns that exist—concerns that sometimes wrench at the heart and soul of what we should be doing, as opposed to what we should not be doing. We should be proclaiming the gospel message of salvation and discipling others as they grow and mature in their faith, fulfilling Yeshua's Great Commission, and aiming to see the restoration of God's people and the Kingdom to Israel.

Of course, with this restoration comes many things, such as the realization that our Heavenly Father does not have two groups of elect as is commonly supposed, Israel and "the Church," but rather one, the Commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:11-13) or Israel of God (Galatians 6:16). As all Believers, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, are a part of this Kingdom realm of Israel, such a community is called to obey God's Torah, and via their obedience to Him be a light to the entire world (Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 4:5-8).

Many Messianic Believers think that it is important to learn the Hebrew language, the language of the Tanach or Old Testament. This is to be commended and encouraged, as these texts make up the first two-thirds of our Bible that many Christians, sadly, ignore or feel are important only for Bible history. However, there is another portion of the Bible, the Apostolic Scriptures or Messianic Writings, commonly known as the New Testament, which were not written in Hebrew, and should not be cast by the wayside.

Confronting the Challenges in Our Midst

Many you will encounter within the broad Messianic movement say that the New Testament Scriptures were originally written in Hebrew, and that the Greek texts we have today cannot be trusted. This is an opinion that is widely circulated throughout our faith community, but one that has many problems. The foremost of these problems is *where* these "Hebrew New Testament" manuscripts are, if they once existed. Of all of the arguments, though, given in favor of a so-called "Hebrew New Testament," **the most substantial one that must be addressed is the ideological one.** The following individual, quoting Yeshua's words of

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Matthew 5:17-19,¹ essentially says that the God of Israel is incapable of inspiring His words in a language other than Hebrew:

"The amazing thing is that a 'jot' is the smallest Hebrew letter called a Yodh ('iota' in Greek, letter I or Y in English) and the 'tittle' is the smallest Hebrew particle called a Seraph ('keriaia' in Greek, horn or apex in English). Why is this important? Yeshua is saying that the HEBREW character called the Yodh and the HEBREW particle called the Seraph WILL NOT PASS AWAY FROM THE TORAH!!! The Messiah has clearly stated here that the final 'authority' regarding the Torah and the Prophets was to be the Hebrew writings – not translations. The Greek language does not have a character called a Yodh nor a particle called a Seraph! Yeshua is not condemning 'translations', but He is teaching us 'today' that it is the HEBREW, which constitutes the final court of appeal regarding what is right, and what is wrong. Where does that leave the Greek translation called the Septuagint? Where does that leave the Greek translations of the Messianic Writings? **It leaves them 'out' as the final word of authority regarding the truths of Scripture!**" (emphasis mine).²

The last time that I checked, the Creator God of the Universe is all-powerful and is the ultimate originator of *all languages*. I was unaware that the Eternal One was monolingual and that He is only powerful enough to communicate to human beings in Hebrew. The individual quoted above, and indeed many others in the Messianic community, believe that the God of Israel will only communicate to humankind in Hebrew. An attack can be made on anything that is "Greek," and this even includes the Apostolic Scriptures or the New Testament—which contains for us the good news of Yeshua the Messiah, His teachings, and the accounts of His ministry. At the very least, this sort of simplistic teaching discredits the Messianic movement in the minds of many evangelical Christians investigating their Hebraic Roots. In many cases, because the inspiration of the Greek New Testament is readily spoken against, it has led some to deny the faith and convert to Judaism.

The question of whether or not the Greek Scriptures can be trusted is one of ideology. **Is our God powerful enough to inspire His words in a language other than Hebrew or not?**

I have never been against the Hebrew language or the Tanach (Old Testament). I have formally studied Hebrew at both the under-graduate and post-graduate levels, and appreciate the deep richness of the ancient tongue. I enjoy Hebrew music, liturgy, and the ability to converse with others with some modern Hebrew. I encourage people to learn Hebrew to enhance their Bible studies. However, the claims against the Greek New Testament one will often encounter in the Messianic community, are overrated and unwarranted. They often come from those who are misinformed and have never studied the Greek language. They criticize something they have no business criticizing.

I have examined the Greek texts of the Apostolic Scriptures and they have only confirmed my beliefs as a conservative Messianic Believer. In them I have found confirmation that the Torah is still to be followed today, that God does not have two groups of elect, that our Heavenly Father is in the process of restoring Israel and welcoming the righteous from the nations into His Kingdom, and most importantly that Yeshua is indeed God made manifest in

¹ "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach *them*, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:17-19, KJV).

² Charlotte Fludd (2003). Cited in *Devarim/Words*, 02 August, 2003. *Sheepfold Gleanings*. Retrieved 28 March, 2004, from <<http://www.mim.net>>.

the flesh and that He is the Messiah. I do not believe that some Hebrew text of the Apostolic Scriptures is needed to prove such claims.

Many people I have encountered in the Messianic community fail to examine the Greek text itself, as opposed to biased English translations, before discrediting it. This is a blatant violation of the Torah, which requires multiple witnesses to be evaluated before something can be established as fact.³ Even more importantly, almost all advocates of a “Hebrew New Testament” have *consistently failed* to give a book-by-book historical analysis of why they believe the Gospels, General Epistles, and Pauline Epistles were all originally written in Hebrew. They have simply said things along the lines of “It was written in Hebrew,” but have failed to substantiate their claim with any hard evidence.

I have received e-mails and letters from many people, throughout my time in Messianic ministry, telling me over the years why I should deny the inspiration of the Greek New Testament. They essentially say things along the lines of “Hebrew is the holy language,” “Why would Yeshua speak Greek?”, and even “Why would Paul write to Hebrews in Greek?” On the surface, some of the arguments can seem rather convincing to the layperson, but many of them come from people who have studied neither language and they are merely repeating the claims of others. They have looked at the Apostolic era through a grid that is largely devoid of any legitimate historical accuracy. And, what of the motives of the people involved?

What are the Hebraic Roots of the faith?

Many have varying opinions in regard to what the “Hebraic Roots” of the faith actually are. What one defines as “Hebraic Roots” can determine how we handle the Apostolic Scriptures. For some, “Hebraic Roots” encompasses the origins of our faith as they relate to the Hebrew Bible, the Tanach or Old Testament, and how all of God’s people need to have a foundation in it to understand the Messianic Scriptures or New Testament. This includes things such as learning about the Biblical festivals and how they relate to the sacrifice of Yeshua and His Second Coming, why we need to understand the Sabbath, and why God gave the Torah to Israel. It also simply includes knowing about the history of Ancient Israel, which many people, *including Messianics*, can be under-informed of in various areas.

This is what I consider my definition of “Hebraic Roots” to be. You must have knowledge about the first two-thirds of Scripture—for without a foundation you cannot have a house—and with it be able to properly understand what the writers of the Apostolic Scriptures communicate to their audiences.

There are, however, others whose definitions of “Hebraic Roots” are somewhat different than my own. Many seek to take the written Greek texts of Scripture and stridently argue that every saying of Yeshua, the Apostles, and others are colloquial Hebraic expressions, and that the Greek can only be a translation, and likely an errant one at that. Thus, it is said that the Greek texts of Scripture are only “second hand.” Many go as far as to say that they “cannot be trusted” and that the Greek must be “retranslated” back to Hebrew. But some of these so-called “Hebraisms” offered by people are not supported by Biblical scholarship, in comparison with Rabbinical Jewish writings and ancient sources, and especially in comparison with other Scripture passages. Claiming that something is an “Hebraic expression” to others who are uninformed, can be a way of manipulating people, and to make what a Biblical text says fit one’s pre-determined agenda. Unfortunately for many people who have denied the significance of the Greek Apostolic Scriptures, some of the same have denied Yeshua as the Messiah. For

³ Cf. Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15; Matthew 18:16; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19; Hebrews 10:28.

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once you deny the veracity of the message, what is really keeping you from denying the Messenger?

There is merit in knowing that there *are* colloquial Hebraic expressions in the Greek texts of Scripture, which no conservative Christian scholar should deny. One example comes from Matthew 16:19, when Yeshua tells the assembly, “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.” This expression strictly deals with *halachah* or Torah application, as the Messiah was giving Peter the authority to “bind” (restrict) or “loosen” (permit) various requirements of the Torah to the congregation of Believers.⁴ But even if the expression were translated from Hebrew to English instead of Greek to English, it would be largely meaningless without historical knowledge of the setting.

To the Greek text’s credit, an arguably more important statement as it relates to us, appears in the previous verse where Yeshua tells Peter, “upon this rock I will build My church.” This verse has been interpreted by Roman Catholics as meaning that through the Apostle Peter, Yeshua started an unending line of papal succession. Protestants who are dispensationalists believe it means that He was starting a new assembly of elect.

But is this what Matthew 16:18 says? No. The Greek verb translated “build” in the passage, *oikodomeō* (οἰκοδομέω), could just as well be translated “rebuild” or “strengthen”—and the Greek text alone validates our position as Messianic Believers that God has only one group of elect, as Yeshua was in the process of restoring the *ekklēsia* on Himself.

So what do we do about this? I believe that during Yeshua’s ministry He largely spoke in Hebrew, or in Aramaic, and much of this *verbal* dialogue has been written down for us in Greek, largely word-for-word. But does this in any way “invalidate” the Greek text? Absolutely not. In fact, if anything it should show us that readers need to have a working knowledge in *both* Hebrew and Greek in accessing Scripture. We have to deal with the Biblical text as it exists in its final form *first*, before we can engage in any other kind of speculation.

One way that theologians often build a “bridge” between the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures is through the Septuagint (LXX), or the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible which was produced around three centuries before Yeshua. It is quoted extensively throughout the Greek New Testament, and was considered authoritative Scripture in the Greek-speaking Jewish synagogues of the Diaspora.

In the case of Matthew 16:18, our position of God having only one assembly of elect is vindicated from Jeremiah 33:7: “I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and will rebuild them as they were at first.” In this verse, the Jewish translators of the Septuagint, rendered the Hebrew verb *banah* (בָּנָה) as *oikodomeō*, the same verb used in Matthew 16:18 for “build.” Not only can this validate our claim that Yeshua did not establish a second *ekklēsia* of elect commonly called “the Church,” but it establishes the fact that He came to restore Israel.

Note the slight difference in the translation of Jeremiah 33:7 from Sir L.C.L. Brenton’s 1851 English translation of the Septuagint: “And I will turn the captivity of Juda, and the captivity of Israel, and will **build** them, even as before.” Note that *oikodomeō* is translated here as “build.”⁵

If using the Septuagint as a bridge between the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures demonstrates the fact that the Greek New Testament does in fact support our beliefs—but that we may, at times, need to use the Septuagint to understand the underlying Hebrew meanings behind Greek words—then the importance of having an ability to understand the Greek language is

⁴ Cf. Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 90.

⁵ Matthew 16:18-19 is addressed more fully in the author’s publication *Are Non-Jewish Believers Really a Part of Israel?*

just as important as understanding the Hebrew language. But sadly, as I observed in my past Greek classes, the importance of knowing Greek can be overstated just as understanding Hebrew can be overstated. Many Christians fail to learn Hebrew, and many Messianics fail to learn Greek. **But we are called to set a higher standard and to be more thorough.**

Is Hebrew the “pure language”?

Much of the hostility that one will find toward Biblical period Greek, in parts of the Messianic movement, is how it is not uncommon at all for many to perceive of the Hebrew language as being the “holy tongue” or some kind of “pure language.” This would mean that all other languages are essentially impure, dirty, and unholy. This is based on a misunderstanding of Zephaniah 3:9, where the Prophet says “I will give to the peoples purified lips” or *safar beruah* (שָׂפָה בְּרוּרָה). To assume that this means 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.

The Greek Language Was a Part of the First Century World of the Messiah and Apostles

A second claim that many people use in trying to persuade others to deny the inspiration of the Greek New Testament is, “Why would Yeshua speak Greek?” After all, His ministry was primarily to Jews in the Land of Israel. This reason has its merit, as no Bible reader should deny that the Messiah spoke and knew Hebrew and primarily ministered to Jews. As it is attested in Paul’s experience on the Damascus road, Yeshua spoke to him in Hebrew (Acts 21:40).

But is the claim, that the Messiah did not know any Greek, at all valid? I would ask another question. When Yeshua was before Pontius Pilate, did Pilate speak Hebrew to Him? This is extremely doubtful. Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea, and while he knew Latin, he likely used Greek in his daily affairs as Greek was the primary language of the eastern Roman Empire. Hebrew and Aramaic were the local languages of the province of Judea, but they were not the languages used in commerce or in dealing with the imperial Roman authorities. This is attested by the fact that the transcription above Yeshua’s cross said “Jesus of Nazareth King of

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the Jews” in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin (Luke 23:38; John 19:20). If everyone in the region were speaking Hebrew, then why would this message have to be in three languages?

But if we say that Yeshua probably knew Greek and spoke it occasionally, is this an attempt to deny the Hebraic origins of our faith? **Absolutely not.** It is to say that Yeshua’s ministry operated in First Century Judea, a province in the eastern Roman Empire, of which there were several languages used: Hebrew, Aramaic (a close Semitic relative of Hebrew), Greek, and Latin. This is fully consistent with what modern archaeology and scholarship have confirmed for us. It is just the historical reality of the way things were. And, it is notable that many Jews who lived outside Israel in the Diaspora spoke Greek. **To deny this is to deny legitimate history.** Even more so, two of Yeshua’s own Disciples, Andrew (*Andreas*, Ἀνδρέας) and Phillip (*Philippos*, Φίλιππος), have names of Greek origin. The Gospels of Mark (*Markos*, Μάρκος/מַרְקוֹס) and Luke (*Loukas*, Λουκάς/לֹּוּקָאס), have names of Latin and Greek origin, as well.

An associated third claim against the Greek Scriptures comes in the form of: “Why would Paul write in Greek to Hebrews?” To confront this, all one needs to do is look at where his epistles were sent: Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Philippi, Colossae, Thessalonica, Ephesus, and elsewhere—to mixed Jewish *and* non-Jewish communities of Messiah followers whose members spoke Greek as their primary language, and who used the Septuagint as their primary Bible. Jewish synagogues in the Mediterranean Diaspora were planted not only to serve the local Jews, but also to be present so that the nations might know of the One True God of Israel. The Septuagint was available as a Greek translation of the Tanach, and was helpful in presenting many Greek-speakers with a knowledge of the Lord, preparing them to later hear of Israel’s Messiah. The congregations in the Diaspora that Paul and the other New Testament authors would write to, did not use either Hebrew or Aramaic as their primary language for day-to-day affairs. How else could the good news of eternal life in Yeshua be spread to the nations, unless in languages that they could understand?

To underestimate this is to consign the gospel only to the Jewish people. Although we know that Paul’s practice was to first enter into the local synagogue and witness to his Jewish brethren who knew Hebrew (although possibly not as their first language), those of the nations who did not have faith in the God of Israel did not know this language. The synagogues he would have gone to in the Diaspora would have spoken Greek as their primary language, as the Septuagint translation was used in these synagogues as the primary Scripture. Greek would have certainly been used in largely non-Jewish groups of First Century Believers in the Mediterranean.

Confusion and Stumbling over the Apostolic Scriptures

The arguments against the Greek text of the Apostolic Scriptures, however, may never end for today’s Messianic community. Some claim that original Hebrew texts will one day be discovered. Others say that through some evil conspiracy the Roman Catholic Church destroyed them, and we are “unfortunately” stuck with the Greek. Some deny the authority of these writings because they are in Greek. But will this all stand under intense scrutiny? No, it will not. **No historical and credible book-by-book case for a written original Hebrew New Testament has ever been made by anyone.**

We do know that contemporary translations of the Greek New Testament exist in Aramaic with the Peshitta, but they post-date our oldest Greek texts by approximately 200 years. There also exist ancient translations of the whole of Scripture in Latin, Coptic, and Arabic—which

attests to the fact that the good news of salvation was spread out!⁶ We can certainly use these versions as supplementary tools, but the evidence concerning the New Testament is in favor of an originally written Greek text—but of course this written Greek text has a strong underlying Hebraic understanding, often employing a style of composition consistent with that of the Septuagint.

What of the so-called original Hebrew Gospel of Matthew that has made its way among some Messianic circles? Is it the authentic Matthew as some believe? Can it be trusted? Although some, but not all, Biblical scholars do believe that Matthew was originally written in Hebrew, we must question the current text's origin **because it was used by unbelieving Jews to counter Messianic evangelism**. Does its appearance signal that for over 1,900 years Believers have been using incorrect manuscripts and have been utterly misled? The popular Hebrew Gospel of Matthew bears many signs of it being a translation from a written Greek text. This is most evident by the fact that in the Hebrew Matthew in verse 16:18 Peter calls Yeshua *Kristo* (קריסטו), or "Christ," the Greek word for "Anointed One" (*Christos, Χριστός*). Certainly, evidence like this should make us at least question the claim that Matthew was originally written in Hebrew.⁷

The issue for many people is that they are waiting for original Hebrew New Testament manuscripts to be discovered. In fact, some already believe that they have been discovered. But if they were, then this would be given much more publicity, and the scholastic community would be examining this with much attention given to detail. What does the American Bible Society or United Bible Societies have to say about this? The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was a major discovery, so why should this not be? I fear that such individuals will be waiting a very long time for the discovery of texts that never existed.

Can We Trust the Greek Scriptures?

What does the attack on the Greek Scriptures do to those who have gone before us in the faith? What of those men and women of God who were martyred at the hands of the Roman Empire because they possessed a copy of a Greek text that spoke of the Jewish Messiah as *Iēsous Christos*? What of those who were hunted down by the Roman Catholic Church during the Reformation, because they dared to possess copies of these same texts, to translate into their native tongues in which the Word was suppressed? Such attacks against the Greek Apostolic Scriptures by Messianics today, seem to imply that their actions were in vain, and they would have been better off not concerning themselves with the New Testament.

What of the actions of those who readily deny the inspiration of the Greek texts of Scripture? Many of them are not unlike those who compose the "Jesus Seminar," who want to say that the Bible is a collection of oral stories and exaggerated myths, and tell us that the virgin birth and the resurrection are all fabricated and inaccurate, and that no texts of Scripture—Greek *or* Hebrew—can really be trusted.

Once you deny the veracity of the Greek Scriptures using the kind of reasoning presented by a few, what is really stopping you from denying the reliability of the Tanach or the Hebrew Scriptures? The oldest complete copy of the Hebrew Bible that currently exists comes from the Middle Ages, whereas, the older copies of the Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate date from the Fourth Century C.E. But is this to say that we should not believe in the inspiration of the

⁶ Cf. Bruce M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation: Ancient and English Versions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), pp 25-51.

⁷ This is further addressed in the article "Is the Hebrew Matthew an Authentic Document?", appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper* (forthcoming).

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Hebrew Scriptures? Certainly not. But it does mean that we have a responsibility to examine these older texts to confirm that what the Hebrew Tanach is saying is truly accurate, especially in regard to the Hebrew vowel markings which were a Medieval addition to the text.

Why do I believe that the Greek New Testament is the inspired Word of God? Obviously, I believe that the power of the God of Israel transcends all languages, cultures, and creeds. If the Lord wanted the message of His Son in Greek, then He is fully capable of providing it as such. My God is all powerful and I refuse to put Him in a box. But it is not just this. Having studied the Greek language, I know that it will confirm for us what we Messianics believe. I know that the Greek text is our friend, and that it upholds the validity of the Torah⁸ and the message of what God is doing in this hour via the Messianic movement. I know that we must use the Greek Scriptures if we are to be taken seriously by evangelical Christianity and the academic world, rather than being discredited because we believe they are thoroughly inauthentic.

I do not deny the clear Hebraic connection that the Messianic Scriptures have. If you do not have knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures to understand the Greek Scriptures, you will run into serious misinterpretations. But likewise, if you do not have an understanding of the Apostolic Scriptures, your interpretation of the Tanach or Old Testament will be skewed. Yeshua properly interpreted the Torah for us (Matthew 5:16-18), and all things must be interpreted through what He says, as He is the Word of God made manifest in the flesh.

Above all, we must be very thankful for what we have. We must understand that the Apostolic Scriptures being written in Greek is not something to be looked down upon, although we certainly need to understand the proper Hebraic historical background behind them. This can be accomplished through study of ancient contemporary literature, First Century history, and use of the Greek Septuagint as a “bridge” with the Hebrew Tanach. The Greek texts must be embraced as the inspired Word of God, for they contain the keys to our salvation, and they record the perfect life of our Redeemer. They are the oldest recorded testimony to the existence of Yeshua of Nazareth.

The Apostle Paul writes, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16). As it was said of Yeshua, “Where does this man intend to go that we will not find Him? He is not intending to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks, is He?” (John 7:35). The Greeks were some of the first people who wholeheartedly received the good news that the Savior had arrived!

Truly, I have been blessed by having the ability to study and understand both Hebrew and Greek. I encourage each and every one of you: if you have the opportunity to study either language, or at least audit a class at a local college, *do it*. At the same time, let none of us be so caught up in embracing our Hebraic heritage, that we cannot see the big picture: **the redemption of all of humanity and those of all languages**. The good news of salvation cannot be consigned to a single language, be it Hebrew or Greek *or even English*.

My God is powerful enough to communicate in whatever language He wants to. Is yours?

⁸ Consult the author’s book *The New Testament Validates Torah*, and the various volumes of the *Practical Messianic* commentary series.