
FAQ

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Hebrew, Pure Language

J.K. McKee revised 12 August, 2019

I heard a Messianic teacher call Hebrew the “pure language.” Can this at all be substantiated? He used this to discredit the inspiration of the Greek New Testament.

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.” This is based on a misunderstanding of Zephaniah 3:9, where the Prophet says “I will give to the peoples purified lips” (NASU) or *safar berurah* (שָׂפָה בְּרִירָה). 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, NASU).

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, NASU). The “purified lips” pertains to *a manner of speech* by which the Father’s people will be able to serve Him. As the Prophet Zephaniah himself specifies, “The remnant of Israel will do no wrong and tell no lies, nor will a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths; for they will feed and lie down with no one to make them tremble” (Zephaniah 3:13, NASU).

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.

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. The editor himself can testify to being patronized by various Messianic persons, some of them in congregational leadership, because he has

formally studied both Hebrew and Greek at the undergraduate 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, as it concerns some of the language and origin issues of the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures.