

New Testament, Written in Hebrew

Do you believe that the New Testament was originally written in Hebrew? It seems that many within today's Messianic movement believe the New Testament was written in Hebrew, but they lack substantial proof for this.

The following entry has been adapted from the author's article, "The Top Ten Urban Myths of Today's Messianic Movement" (appearing in *Confronting Critical Issues*)

There has been a great deal of misinformation circulating throughout the broad Messianic movement that relates to the composition of the Bible, particularly the Apostolic Scriptures or the New Testament. Asserting that the Apostolic Scriptures were written in Hebrew, when no extant documents in Hebrew of these texts exist from the ancient period, has caused the credibility of the Messianic movement as a whole to suffer with evangelical Christianity—even if a congregation or ministry does not espouse this viewpoint. In extreme cases, it has also caused various people to doubt or even deny the Divinity and Messiahship of Yeshua, when no original "Hebrew New Testament" can be found.

Many people who contact our ministry have been exposed to this opinion in some form or another by a Messianic teacher, and/or someone talking loudly in their local congregation or fellowship. Some of these people want to know why our ministry *does not* believe that the New Testament was written in Hebrew, and others want to know where they can find material from a Messianic perspective that upholds the validity of the Scriptures as we have them.

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 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 it was part of. 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 *Hellēnistēs*, Ἑλληνοιστής). F.F. Bruce describes them in greater detail in his book *New Testament History*, 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 [Israel] (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 [Israel] for longer or shorter periods; but [Israel] 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."¹

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. This idea simply does not align with history and what we know about First Century Judea or Galilee. There are instances in the Gospels, such as when He encounters the Roman centurion, the Syro-Phoenician woman, and

¹ F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), pp 217-218.

especially Pontius Pilate, when the Lord would have spoken in Greek. S.E. Porter summarizes the widely encountered position in Biblical Studies regarding the spoken language of the Messiah:

"The vast majority of scholars rightly contend that Jesus' primary and first language was probably Aramaic...Many scholars also entertain the possibility that, at least in a religious context...Jesus may have spoken Hebrew as well....Jesus was also 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 of [Israel] where he may have had contact with Greek speakers."²

Many in the Messianic community, perhaps because much of the dialogue one encounters in the Gospels was originally spoken in Hebrew or Aramaic, conclude that the written 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 of all, the Gospels were not composed during the ministry time of Yeshua. The events were not "written down" as they occurred. Secondly, the target audiences of the Gospels were 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 is simply not historically viable.

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. 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 (also called Semitisms) 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 now revealed these things *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**" (NASU).

This expression actually has its own entry under "Binding and Loosing" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (or *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 refers 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."³

Of course, in order to properly understand what is written in Matthew's Gospel as "bind" (Grk. *deō*, δέω) and "loose" (Grk. *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 and reduced whom they pleased; they bound and loosed [men] at their pleasure" (*Wars of the Jews* 1.111).⁴

² S.E. Porter, "Greek of the New Testament," in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 433.

³ Raymond F. Collins, "Binding and Loosing," in David Noel Freedman, ed. et. al., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:744.

⁴ Flavius Josephus: *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 551.

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,"⁵ referencing Matthew 16:19 and 18:18. More might be in play in terms of what "binding and loosing" meant in an ancient context, beyond how Yeshua applied it. What is important for our purposes here that Whiston 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," and should 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 help too much.

There are many more widely recognized Hebraisms in the Gospels by Christian scholars today, and they are discussed in many technical commentaries of Biblical books. However, simply because there are Hebraisms in the Gospels or the Apostolic Scriptures does not prove that they were written in Hebrew. **It proves that they have an Hebraic background, and that one must be familiar with the history of Biblical times in examining the text.** Likewise, some things that 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*)."⁶ 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."⁷ This only intensifies the need for Messianic Bible teachers and students to be familiar with the Septuagint.

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."⁸ Of course, the principal Hebrew and Aramaic resources employed by the Apostolic writers were the Tanach Scriptures.

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 Chadahsah* 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..."⁹

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 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 these sources was the Hebrew Tanach. Another possible 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.

As a conservative Messianic ministry, Outreach Israel and Messianic Apologetics have had to field the question "Do you believe the New Testament was originally written in Hebrew?" many, many times. Each time we

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 551-552.

⁶ R. Timothy McLay, *The Use of the Septuagint in New Testament Research* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 32.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁸ David Allan Black, *It's Still Greek to Me* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 151.

⁹ Dean and Susan Wheelock, *The Quiet Revival* (Hebrew Roots Press: Lakewood, WI, 2001), 12.

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, 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 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. If you have any questions about the composition of the New Testament, we would urge you to consult our commentary ***A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic***. This is one urban myth that is going to seriously cripple the growth and maturation of the Messianic movement if it is not discarded in the forthcoming future.