

Can We Trust the Greek Scriptures?

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It is indeed phenomenal that many Believers are coming to the revelation of the Hebraic Roots of our faith, are adopting a Torah obedient lifestyle, and are seeing themselves as a part of Israel. 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 preaching the gospel message and discipling others as they grow and mature in their faith, fulfilling Yeshua's Great Commission and aiming to see the restoration of all 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. As all Believers are a part of Israel, Israel is called to diligently follow the Torah, and thus be a light to the entire world (Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 4:5-8).

Many Believers who are seeing the eternal validity of the Torah believe 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 Scriptures 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 is not written in Hebrew, and should not be cast by the wayside.

Some people 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 the Messianic movement, 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 given in favor of a "Hebrew New Testament," **the most substantial one that must be addressed is the ideological one.** The following individual, quoting Yeshua's words of Matthew 5:17-19, 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).¹

The last time that I checked, the Creator God of the Universe is all-powerful and is the originator of *all languages*. I was unaware that He 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 in Hebrew to mankind. An attack can be made on anything that is "Greek," especially the Apostolic Scriptures or the New Testament. At the very least, this 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?**

¹ Charlotte Fludd (2003). Cited in *Devarim/Words*, 02 August, 2003. *Sheepfold Gleanings*. Retrieved 28 March, 2004, from <<http://www.mim.net>>.

I have never been against the Hebrew language or the Tanach (Old Testament). I have formally studied Hebrew and appreciate the deep richness of the ancient tongue. I enjoy Hebrew music, liturgy, and the ability to converse with others in Hebrew. I encourage people to learn Hebrew to enhance their Biblical studies. However, the claims against the Greek New Testament are overrated and unwarranted, often 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 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 Father is restoring the whole House of Israel, and most importantly that Yeshua is indeed God made manifest in the flesh and that He is the Messiah. I do not believe that a Hebrew text of the Apostolic Scriptures is needed to prove such claims. Many people I have encountered 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 before something can be established as fact. 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 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 evidence.

I have received e-mails and letters from many people telling me over the years why I should deny the inspiration of the Greek New Testament. They essentially go 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. And what of the motives of the people involved?

To begin, many have varying opinions in regard to what the "Hebraic Roots" of the faith 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 we as Believers having 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*, are often sadly ignorant of. 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 properly understand what the writers of the Apostolic Scriptures are communicating 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" are not supported by Biblical scholarship, in comparison with Rabbinical Jewish writings, and especially in comparison with other Scriptures. Claiming that something is an "Hebraic expression" to others who are uninformed can be a way of manipulating people. Unfortunately, I fear that some of the same will deny Yeshua as Messiah. For once you deny the veracity of the message, what is 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. But even if the expression were translated from Hebrew to English instead of Greek to English, it would be meaningless without historical knowledge of the setting.

To the Greek text’s credit, an arguably more important verse as it relates to us appears in the previous verse where Yeshua supposedly 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 when Yeshua was on the Earth He spoke in Hebrew, or in Aramaic, and much of this *verbal* dialogue has been written down for us in Greek, word-for-word. But does this in any way “invalidate” the Greek text? Absolutely not. In fact, if anything it should show us that we need to have a working knowledge in *both* Hebrew and Greek. 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.

Those of us who have studied these languages need to be able to build a “bridge” between the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures. One way that theologians do this 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 Rabbis who translated 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 the Two Houses of 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.”

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 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 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.**

One of the first claims people will make against the veracity of the Greek Scriptures is saying that Hebrew is the “pure language,” and therefore claim that the God of Israel would never inspire Scripture in Greek. This is primarily based on Zephaniah 3:9: “For then I will give to the peoples purified lips [Heb. *safah beruah*, שִׁפְהָ בְרוּרָה], that all of them may call on the name of the LORD, to serve Him shoulder to shoulder.”

It seems as if this verse is speaking in *future tense*. The “purified lips” or “pure language” have yet to be given to anyone to worship the Lord. To say that these “purified lips” are the Hebrew language—or *any human language*—is reading messages into the text. The idea that the

“pure language” is Hebrew is not stated anywhere in the Biblical text itself, and it has been forced into the text by those trying to make a point.²

The Apostle Paul “was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak” (2 Corinthians 12:4). If what he heard were the “purified lips,” or perhaps “the Heavenly language,” then it is self-evident that this is a language that no one has heard before and it is neither Hebrew nor Greek, for Paul demonstrated a knowledge in being able to speak in both languages (Acts 21:37).

The 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. This reason has its merit, as no scholar 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 Greek valid? I would ask another question. When Yeshua was before Pontius Pilate, did Pilate speak Hebrew to Him? That 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 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 was a person who lived and 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 that 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*) and Phillip (*Philippos*), have names of Greek origin. The Gospels of Mark (*Markos*) and Luke (*Loukas*) have names not of Hebrew origin, either.

The 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, Ephesus, Phillipi, Colossae, Thessalonica, and elsewhere—to Jewish communities whose members spoke Greek as their primary language and used the Septuagint as their primary Bible. Jewish synagogues in the Diaspora were planted there to present the nations with the message of the One True God, the 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 speak either Hebrew or Aramaic as their primary language.

Knowing the fact that the gospel was now being preached to the heathen who were joining themselves with Jewish Believers, many of whom were possibly made up or included members of the scattered Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim, should reemphasize the need for Paul to have written in Greek. Why? Think about it for a moment. Hosea 1:10 tells us that the Northern Kingdom Israelites were to become *lo ammi* (לֹא-עַמִּי) or “not a people,” and in so becoming they were to lose all traces of their Hebraic identity—including speaking the Hebrew language. So to say that Paul, the author of much of the Apostolic Scriptures, would have written to people who were once “not a people” in a language they did not understand does not make any

² Indeed, the *safah beruah* or “pure speech” (RSV) need not even be a “language,” per se, but rather be a manner or style of speech that brings honor and glory to the Lord, and that can edify His people (cf. Ephesians 4:29).

sense. How else would the good news of eternal life in Yeshua be spread to those scattered in the nations?

To underestimate this is to consign the gospel only to the Jewish people, who retained their Hebraic identity. 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. Even 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.

Believing, or not believing, in the inspiration of the Greek Scriptures may become a litmus test to see if one truly believes in the end-time restoration of all Israel, or is only dabbling in the idea that there were Israelites scattered into the nations who lost all traces of their Hebraic heritage.

The arguments against the Greek text of the Apostolic Scriptures, however, never end. 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**, because the evidence in favor of the Greek New Testament stands. As far as those who deny the canonicity of the New Testament, the majority of these people later prove that they are unworthy of the Messiah, and deny Him.

We do know that contemporary translations of the Greek New Testament exist in Aramaic, 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! We can certainly use these versions as supplementary tools, but we believe 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.

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 "mislead"? I do not believe so, and I will continue to use the Greek text of Matthew, as I believe that the current Hebrew Matthew bears 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." Certainly, this evidence should make us at least question the claim that Matthew was originally written in Hebrew.

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. 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.

And 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 *Iēsous Christos*? What of those who were hunted down by the Roman Catholic Church 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 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 fabricated and inaccurate, and that no texts of Scripture—Greek *or* Hebrew—can 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 Ninth Century C.E., whereas, the older copies of the Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate date from the Fourth Century C.E. But is this to say that I do not believe in the inspiration of the Hebrew Scriptures? Certainly not. But it does mean that we have a responsibility to examine these older texts to confirm that what the Hebrew is saying is truly accurate, especially in regard to the Hebrew vowel markings which were a Ninth Century 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 doing so. 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 Torah and the message of Israel's restoration. 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 only a mere “translation.”

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. That 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 of 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). If we believe that among those Greeks were the scattered seed of Israel, then we must conclude that the New Testament was written in Greek, because the message went out to those who were “NOT A PEOPLE, but now... THE PEOPLE OF GOD” (2 Peter 2:10).

Truly, I have been blessed by having the ability to understand and study both Hebrew and Greek. But let us not be so caught up in embracing our Hebraic heritage that we cannot see the big picture, **which is the redemption of all of mankind 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?

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