

Was the New Testament Written in Hebrew?

Copyright © [Tim Warner](#)

I have been concerned about certain forces within the Hebrew Roots movement and where this is leading. While understanding the Hebrew foundation of Christianity is something all Christians should pursue, there is something sinister going on below the surface. There seems to be an attempt to draw Christians away from the simplicity of the Gospel back under the Old Covenant (Law) into Judaism. Eventually, I believe the result for those who are absorbed into this movement will be forsaking the only begotten Son of God for another "Yeshua" who was just a Jewish sage. The destination seems to be the same as the Jesus Seminar, it is just arrived at via another route. I realize that this is a tough statement. But, after interaction with several who have been involved in this movement for some time, I am convinced it is accurate.

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 tying your boat to the dock has been severed, and you are bound to be "carried about with every wind of doctrine." *"We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away."* [Heb. 2:1].

No ancient Hebrew manuscript of the New Testament has ever been found from the early centuries of Christianity. The oldest are Greek. The oldest papyrus fragment [a portion of the Gospel of John] dates back to the late second century. So the manuscript evidence alone weighs heavily against the concept of Hebrew "originals." The proponents of the Hebrew New Testament claim that internal evidence suggests the original language of the text was "Hebrew." Actually, the "Hebrew" of the Torah was not widely spoken at the time of Christ. It was the language of the Jewish scholars, but not widely spoken by common Jewish folk. It was like the "Latin" of the day. It had long since gone out of common use since the Babylonian captivity. In Israel of the first century, Aramaic [or "Chaldee"] was fairly common, which is similar to Hebrew. But, this was the language picked up during the Babylonian captivity, which found its way into Jewish life. [There are a few parts of the Old Testament written in Aramaic, parts of Jeremiah, Daniel, and Ezra]. So, let's not begin with a false impression that true "Hebrew" of the Torah is even a possible candidate for the original documents of the New Testament. It is not. No one except a few Jewish scholars would have been able to read it. When the New Testament refers to the "Hebrew tongue" it is not referring to pure "Hebrew" of the Torah, but to "the common language of the Jews" ie., the common tongue spoken by Jews, Aramaic or "Chaldee," adopted from the language of the "Chaldeans" [Babylonians].

Proponents of the "Hebrew" New Testament concept claim that the Greek New Testament is unreliable, due to "Hellenization" of the text. "Hellenized" simply means influenced by Greek culture and thought. This theory leads to the conclusion that the Greek New Testament, from which we get our English New Testament, is unreliable, and we are subject to errors of "Hellenism" when we read it. The real message of Jesus was allegedly lost in the "Hellenized" and "embellished" documents we call the four Gospels. My friends, this is NOT of God! It is EXACTLY the tactic of every major cult. They all claim that true Christianity was

lost, and they have been chosen to “recover” the true message of Jesus and the Apostles. It is the same message Islam teaches, that Christians have corrupted the Scriptures over the centuries.

The Hebrew New Testament proponents would have us trust them to fix the faulty Scriptures, by relying on their supposed knowledge of Jewish customs and figures of speech. *In short, we need to sit at the feet of rabbis in order to understand what was written.* But, by editing the text of the New Testament to conform to so-called Jewish thought only leads AWAY from the message preserved by the providence of God. God promised to preserve His Word for every generation [Psalm 12:6,7 Matt. 24:35]. God kept His word! The Traditional Greek text of the New Testament is reliable. Any changing [regardless of motive] of what has been preserved by God is a blatant violation of the commandment found in the last chapter of Revelation. Those who remove words that God has preserved in His Word, will be removed from the “Book of Life,” and those who add to His words, to them God will add the plagues.

Limiting the words of Jesus and the Apostles to a Jewish culture and to Jewish thought is to limit the Son of God to human ideologies! It is to make Jesus out to be just another “radical rabbi.” The message of the New Testament transcends the Jewish and Greek cultures! Sure the writers of the New Testament were Jewish. But they used language and explanations understood by common folk, in the common language of the Roman Empire, Greek. Sure, there are uniquely “Jewish” expressions and ideas found in the words of Jesus. After all, He was Jewish, speaking to those of the Jewish culture. But, Aramaic was not the only language spoken in Israel. The common language of commerce was Greek, as it was all over the eastern Roman Empire. Jews spoke Greek in their daily trade. Being bilingual was very common all over the Roman Empire. And this is particularly true of the Jews.

The New Testament writers adapted the Gospel message to the thinking of the ones they were addressing! This is seen clearly by comparing two passages from Acts where Paul addressed two different groups from two different cultures.

First, when Paul was arrested at the Temple, because of false charges from a mob of Jews hurling accusations, he was immediately brought before the Roman guard.

Acts 21:36-22:3

³⁶for the multitude of the people kept following them, shouting, “Away with him!” ³⁷As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the commander, “May I say something to you?” And he *said, “Do you know Greek? ³⁸Then you are not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?” ³⁹But Paul said, “I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city; and I beg you, allow me to speak to the people.” ⁴⁰When he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the stairs, motioned to the people with his hand; and when there ¹was a great hush, he spoke to them in the Hebrew dialect, saying, “Brethren and fathers, hear my defense which I now *offer* to you.” ²And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew dialect, they became even more quiet; and he *said, ³“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today. (NASB)

Here we have recorded that Paul addressed the Jews on the Temple Mount in Aramaic. Why? Because He was being accused of bringing a Gentile into the Temple. He wanted to make an impression that He was indeed a Jew, as he clearly stated in his opening statement. He proceeded to give a long discourse in the language of the Jews.

Now, compare this to Acts 17.

Acts 17:22-24,28-29

²²So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. ²³For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; ²⁸for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' ²⁹Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. (NASB)

Here, Paul addressed the men of Athens in their native tongue, Greek. He also quoted two excerpts from a Greek philosopher in support of His preaching! Now, talk about "Hellenism!" It is easy to see that Paul adapted the message of the Gospel to the language and culture of his hearers.

Based on these two quotes, what can we conclude about the language in which Acts was written? Acts contains no statement that Paul addressed the men of Athens in Greek, yet we know they spoke Greek. In Acts 21, when Paul addressed the Jews on the Temple Mount, a point is made by Luke of the fact that he spoke Aramaic. The logical conclusion is that Luke recorded Acts in Greek, and noted where he had to translate from Aramaic to Greek himself.

That Acts was originally written in Greek is further supported by the fact that it was addressed to a Greek man. Luke commented that his "former treatise," ie. the Gospel of Luke, was also written to this same Greek man, Theophilus.

Acts 1:1-2

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, ²until the day when He was taken up to *heaven*, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. (NASB)

We can conclude from this that both Luke and Acts were originally written in Greek.

Mark and John were both written to Greek speaking Gentiles. Mark makes it a point to explain some of the Jewish customs to His Greek speaking audience. This would have been gratuitous had they been Jewish. Note:

Mark 7:2-4

²and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. ³(For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, *thus* observing the traditions of the elders; ⁴and *when they come* from the market place,

they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.) (NASB)

Mark was a companion of Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey to the Gentiles. His Gospel was most likely recorded for the benefit and use of Paul and the Gentile churches founded by Paul. So, his explanation of the Jewish customs was considered necessary so that the Gentiles would understand why the Pharisees were so upset with Jesus. Mark was definitely not written to those who were well acquainted with Jewish customs.

The Gospel of John shows thoroughly Roman thinking by the Apostle himself. The Gospel of John was written much later than the others, after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70. During this time John had taken over the leadership of the churches of Asia Minor that Paul had founded, after Paul's martyrdom at Rome. This is a fact of Church history, and it is also apparent in Revelation, where John was instructed by Jesus to send the seven letters to the local Gentile Greek-speaking churches of Asia Minor.

One piece of evidence from John indicates that by the time he wrote his Gospel, he had adopted Roman methods of time-keeping. That is, midnight to midnight, rather than sunset to sunset, as was the practice of the Jews. And he wrote his gospel in such a way that Gentiles would understand the hours correctly. Compare the following, where the synoptic Gospels use Jewish reckoning, but John used Roman reckoning.

Matt 27:45

⁴⁵ *Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour.* (KJV)

Here, the crucifixion of Jesus is referred to using Jewish reckoning. The Jews reckoned the days from sunset to sunset [around 6:00PM]. And the daytime hours were counted beginning at sunrise. So, the sixth hour would be around noon, and the ninth hour was 3:00PM. Now, compare John's Gospel.

John 19:14

¹⁴ *Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover; it was about the sixth hour. And he *said to the Jews, "Behold, your King!"* (KJV)

Here, we find Jesus before Pilate at the "sixth hour" prior to the crucifixion. Yet, Matthew has Jesus on the cross at the "sixth hour." The apparent discrepancy is because John used Roman time. Hours were counted from midnight. So, the "sixth hour" was 6:00AM. Three hours later he was crucified at 9:00AM. And at noon the sun turned dark, until 3:00PM.

The question then arises; Why would John, a Jewish Apostle, use Gentile methods of reckoning time? Because he wrote to Gentiles after the destruction of Jerusalem. Since the Jews had been dispersed from Jerusalem, Jewish time-keeping was no longer being practiced on a large scale, even in Israel. And John's Gentile audience might not understand the hours properly had he used Jewish reckoning. This illustrates a couple of important points. The intended audience of most of the New Testament books were Greek-speaking Gentiles, who not only could not possibly understand Aramaic, but did NOT fully understand the Jewish customs. The fact that the New Testament writers took this into consideration, making allowances through explanatory notes or by using time-keeping familiar to the

Greeks, shows that the New Testament was not only written in the language of the Roman Empire, Greek, but was already adapted to Gentile thinking by the original writers. It needs no further tampering by the Hebrew Roots movement!

The Jews spoke Greek, not exclusively Aramaic. Greek was necessary for trade, and because the Roman Empire was governing Israel at the time. In order to interact with the authorities, primarily Greek and even Latin were necessary. The multilingual nature of the Jewish culture at the time of Christ is clearly seen in the inscription hung on the top of the cross.

Luke 23:38

³⁸ And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.
(KJV)

Jews of the Diaspora [Jews who were descendants of those who did not return to the land of Israel after the Babylonian captivity] had settled in little Hebrew communities all over the Roman Empire. Paul encountered them in his travels to many Gentile cities. These Jews spoke Greek in order to participate in commerce, and also spoke the languages unique to the local area. This is illustrated in Acts 2, where Jews of the Diaspora had traveled to Jerusalem for Passover and Pentecost.

Acts 2:5-11

⁵ Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. ⁷ They were amazed and astonished, saying, "Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ And how is it that we each hear *them* in our own language to which we were born? ⁹ Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—we hear them in our *own* tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God." (NASB)

Notice the Jews of the Diaspora were speaking among themselves, obviously in a common language. But what language? Notice they were from many different places, and their native languages were those of the areas in which they lived. Also, notice they EXPECTED the Apostles, who were "Galileans" [from Galilee – north of Judea], to be speaking in the language common to Galilee. Yet, to their surprise, the 120 brethren were speaking "the wonderful works of God" in the native languages of all these men. Now, pay particular attention to the fact that the language of Judea is listed among these languages in contrast to the language of the Galileans! The language of the Judeans was "Aramaic" [or what the New Testament calls "Hebrew."] So, since this crowd was amazed that the Galilean believers were speaking the Hebrew [Aramaic] of Judea [as well as the other languages of Jews of the Diaspora], we must conclude that Aramaic was NOT the normally spoken language of Galilee! Jesus and the Disciples were from Galilee, with the exception of Judas Iscariot, who was from Judea. **This is strong evidence that Jesus and the disciples normally spoke Greek, common to Galilee, rather than Aramaic or Hebrew, which was primarily spoken in Judea.**

That Jesus was bilingual, and spoke both Greek and Aramaic, is indicated by Mark. He made special note of the fact that Jesus uttered some words in Aramaic. These special notations by Mark would indicate that Aramaic was not Jesus' normally spoken language. In other words, Mark records these Aramaic comments of Jesus as unusual.

Mark 5:41

⁴¹ Taking the child by the hand, He *said to her, "Talitha kum!" (which translated means, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!") (NASB)

Mark 15:34-35

³⁴ At the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "ELOI, ELOI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?" which is translated, "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?" ³⁵ When some of the bystanders heard it, they *began* saying, "Behold, He is calling for Elijah." (NASB)

Some might argue that Jesus always spoke in Aramaic, and the Gospel writers simply translated His words themselves into Greek. But, notice in the above passage, those standing around the cross did not understand these Aramaic words! They thought Jesus was calling Elijah! This is because the majority of Jews spoke Greek.

The late Alfred Edersheim is considered one of the greatest Messianic Jewish scholars of the 19th century. In his book, "The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah," he wrote the following about the languages spoken in Israel during Jesus' ministry.

Pg. 17. "When we turn from the Jewish 'dispersion' in the East to that in the West, we seem to breathe quite a different atmosphere. ... These Jews of the West are known by the term "Hellenists" from ελληνισταιν, to conform to the language and manners of the Greeks." Pg. 22 "Why, this sway extended even into Palistine itself, and was felt in the innermost circle of the most exclusive Rabbinitism. We are not here referring to the fact that the very language spoken in Palestine came to be very largely charged with Greek, and even Latin, words Hebraised, since this is easily accounted for by the new circumstances, and the necessities of intercourse with the dominant or resident foreigners."

There are also cases in the New Testament where Aramaic names are used, but are identified as "Hebrew" [Aramaic]. There would be no reason to make such distinctions had the original documents been written in Aramaic to begin with. If the Greek manuscripts had been translated from Aramaic originals, the translators would NOT have left these words in Aramaic, but would have used Greek equivalents as they do with all other words or names. Here are some examples;

John 5:2

² Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, **which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda**, having five porches. (KJV)

John 19:13

¹³ When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus forth, and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called the Pavement, **but in the Hebrew, Gabbatha**. (KJV)

Acts 26:14

14 And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying **in the Hebrew tongue**, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

(KJV)

Rev 16:16

16 And he gathered them together into a place called **in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon**.

(KJV)

In each of these cases, had the written Word been originally recorded in "Hebrew" [Aramaic], there would have been no reason to add the comment about the Aramaic pronunciation..

Actually, the idea that the entire New Testament was originally written in Hebrew is nearly absurd, because all, except Matthew, Hebrews, and James, were written primarily to Gentiles. And Gentiles did NOT speak Aramaic.

The fact that several uniquely Jewish expressions and figures of speech are used does NOT show that the original documents were written in Aramaic. This phenomenon can easily be explained by the fact that the writers of the New Testament were bilingual, even though they were mostly Jewish men. They conveyed some Jewish thinking in Greek words. Sure, their thinking was mostly influenced by Jewish culture and tradition. That simply means the authors were Jewish themselves. It does NOT say anything about the language in which they wrote, or even the language they usually spoke. In the same way the Apostles could speak the "wonderful works of God" to men from "every nation under heaven," using all of the languages listed, so too did they write New Testament books to Gentiles conveying the necessary concepts in Greek.

Another fact that argues against a Hebrew New Testament is the Septuagint [commonly represented by the numerals LXX]. This is a translation of the Old Testament into Greek made by Jews some 200 years before Jesus. It was commonly used and quoted by the New Testament writers. And it was adopted by the early Church as their Old Testament. In fact, this is why many of the quotes of Old Testament passages found in the New Testament do not read exactly word for word from the Hebrew Old Testament. Yet, many are word for word from the Greek Septuagint [LXX]. The different spellings of names in the New Testament like "Esaias" instead of "Isaiah," "Jesus" instead of "Joshua," etc., are from the LXX. It was the Jews, who translated the LXX before Christ, that transliterated these names. By the time of Christ this was how these names were pronounced by Greek speaking Jews. Paul and the other New Testament writers had no problem using these Greek transliterated names. Not once is Jesus referred to as "Yeshua" in the New Testament. We saw earlier that in some cases writers would give Aramaic names of places, and make a comment about the Hebrew [Aramaic] pronunciation. Yet not once is this done with the name of Jesus, God, the names of the OT saints, etc. The common Greek pronunciation is always used. When Paul preached the Gospel, he preached "Iesous Christos" not "Yeshua Messiah."

The idea that the OT Hebrew language was fixed and names remained the same is a myth. The Hebrew language underwent an evolution. The language of Moses and the Torah gave way to changes over time. This can best be illustrated by a comparison of the name of Joshua [which incidentally is exactly the same name as "Jesus"] in the Old Testament from the time of Moses, and the mention of the same name after the Babylonian captivity.

Exod 33:11

¹¹Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend. When ^[a]Moses returned to the camp, his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent. (NASB)

Here the name of Joshua in the Hebrew Text is "Yehowshua" [Strong's #3091]. This is the "Torah" [Old Hebrew] pronunciation. But, at the time of the closing of the OT cannon, after the Babylonian captivity, the name "Joshua" [which is also the name of our Savior] had changed rather dramatically.

Neh 8:17

17 And all the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity made booths, and sat under the booths: for since the days of **Jeshua the son of Nun** unto that day had not the children of Israel done so. And there was very great gladness.
(KJV)

Here the Hebrew text has "Yeshua" [Strong's #3442]. Strangely enough, most Hebrew Roots folks use this post-Babylonian pronunciation of the name of our Lord rather than the Torah pronunciation.

Finally, I would like to propose the main reason for the New Testament being originally written in Greek rather than Hebrew or Aramaic. The Hebrew language is not a very precise language. It does not have all the intricacies of Greek. The Greek language is very precise, making all kinds of distinctions with subtle differences in verb tenses, etc. To translate the Bible accurately from Hebrew to any other languages is extremely difficult. The exact meaning of the text is very often unclear. This is compounded by the fact that the old Hebrew did not even use vowels. In later Hebrew, little marks above and below the consonants gave the vowel sounds. But, the early Old Testament manuscripts did not contain these, and many times the scribes had to guess which word was meant, since without vowels, sometimes completely different words were spelled the same in the text. This problem of the Hebrew text is overcome to some degree by modern translators using the Greek Septuagint translation to find out which Hebrew word was intended.

The Greek language was in place precisely at the right time for the Gospel to be proclaimed to all nations, because translation from Greek is far easier and much more precise. Perhaps that is one reason Paul wrote, "**when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son...**" The circumstances were such that the Gospel could travel along the Roman trade routes, and could be carried in a common tongue all over the known world, using the common language of trade, Greek.

In conclusion, all of the manuscript evidence supports a Greek New Testament. The internal evidence shows a Greek original as well. The uniquely Jewish expressions and figures of speech can easily be explained by bilingual authors who were Jewish, but conveyed their words in the Greek language. The fact that the New Testament makes a point of identifying unique Aramaic names as "Hebrew," and tells us when someone spoke Aramaic, illustrates that the original documents were NOT Aramaic. The fact that the intended audience for the vast majority of the New Testament was Greek-speaking Gentiles, also argues against this theory. The only possible candidates for a Hebrew (Aramaic) original would be Matthew, Hebrews, and James, all of which had a Jewish intended audience. Of these, a few claims of Hebrew originals circulated in the early Church for Matthew and Hebrews. But, none of these claims provide any credible evidence to support them. Nor are there any examples of

manuscripts or fragments of such hypothetical Hebrew originals. The practice of New Testament writers quoting from the Greek LXX is further evidence that the New Testament was given by God in the Greek tongue, the one language that was spoken nearly all over the known world at the time the Gospel was launched from Judea.