

Was the New Testament Composed in Hebrew?

(Evidence from Hebrews 10:5)

15 April 2014

By David R. Maas

218 Main Street, Unit 133

Kirkland, Washington 98033, USA

david.maas@gospeltoallnations.org

bear7755@gmail.com

www.ShadoworSubstance.org

www.GospelToAllNations.org

Overview

[**Hebrews 10:4-6**] – “For it is impossible for blood of bulls and goats to be taking away sins. ⁽⁵⁾ WHEREFORE, COMING INTO THE WORLD, HE SAYS, ‘SACRIFICE AND OFFERING, YOU WILL NOT, BUT A BODY HAVE YOU FITTED FOR ME, ⁽⁶⁾ IN WHOLE-BURNT-OFFERINGS AND SACRIFICES FOR SINS YOU DID NOT DELIGHT’.”

Growing in popularity is the claim that the New Testament was originally penned in Hebrew rather than Greek (or alternatively, in Aramaic). Since Christianity grew out of the ancestral faith of Israel, and since Jesus and the first disciples were Jewish, it is assumed they spoke and wrote in Hebrew.

A major problem with this view is that all surviving ancient manuscripts of the New Testament, whether complete or fragmentary, were written in Greek, not Hebrew or Aramaic. There exists no manuscript evidence whatsoever for a Hebrew or Aramaic original.

Another problem is that the several early translations of the New Testament, such as the Syriac *Peshitta* and Old Latin versions, give evidence of being translations from Greek originals. For example, in the Syriac *Peshitta* “Old Testament quotations are rendered strictly on the basis of their form in the Greek New Testament.”¹ The *Peshitta* included many Greek loanwords and a good number of Greek terms from the New Testament transliterated into the Syriac script rather than translated into Syriac. Similarly, the Old Latin version incorporates numerous Greek terms into its text, including *apostolus*, *baptisma*, *blasphemia*, *diabolus*, *ecclesia* and *episcopus*.² As a result, many such Greek terms found their way into ecclesiastical Latin.

Such external evidence for a Greek original is overwhelming; any external evidence for a Hebrew or Aramaic original is lacking. But far more weighty is the internal evidence provided by factors such as the extensive use of the Greek *Septuagint* for Old Testament quotations, the varying styles and skills in Greek used by individual authors of the New Testament books, theological points made on the basis of specific Greek words that do not have corresponding words in Hebrew (e.g., Paul’s metaphor of the “body” or *sōma* of Christ [**Ephesians 4:4, 4:12**]), and so on.

The quotation from **Psalm 40:6** in **Hebrews 10:4-6** is a particularly relevant example. It not only follows the text of the Greek *Septuagint* version of the Psalm (rather than the Hebrew), the Author of Hebrews makes a key theological point based on the different wording from the *Septuagint* version of the Psalm.

The Variant Reading

The citation from **Psalm 40:6** used in **Hebrews 10:5** reads: “sacrifice and offering, you willed not, but a body you prepared for me.” But the Hebrew text has: “Sacrifice and offering you delighted not in, Ears you dug for me.” The reading in Hebrews follows the Greek text of the *Septuagint*. Note the following comparison:

[**Psalm 40:6b**] – “But a body you prepared for me.”
[Greek LXX Text] – σωμα δε κατηρτισω μοι
[English transliteration] – *sōma de katértisō moi*

[**Hebrews 10:5b**] – “But a body you prepared for me.”
[NT Greek Text] – σωμα δε κατηρτισω μοι
[English transliteration] – *sōma de katértisō moi*

The text of **Hebrews 10:5** is an exact match to that of the *Septuagint* rendering of **Psalm 40:6**. It is impossible to know from this distance precisely why the translator of Psalm 40 rendered the Hebrew for “ears you dug” into a Greek clause meaning, “a body you prepared.”

The Hebrew idiom of “digging an ear” is a metaphorical way of stating that God has caused one to hear and obey Him (e.g., **Isaiah 48:8, 50:5**). He has opened ears to hear and heed the words of the Lord, to obey His laws. This understanding is borne out by **Psalm 40:8**: “I delight to do your will, O my God; Yea, your law (*torah*) is within my heart.”

The theological point of using “body” or *sōma* (σωμα) in the passage is to demonstrate the superior sacrificial value of Christ’s body over those of sacrificial animals, a point the Author could not have derived from the original Hebrew reading (i.e., “ears you dug for me”). While the Hebrew idiom would fit nicely with the idea of Christ’s heedful obedience (“Lo, I am come to do thy will” [verse 9]), it would not facilitate the notion of Christ’s sacrificial body.

The stress in the larger passage is on Christ’s sacrifice, not his obedience to the Law. God did not desire animal sacrifices and offerings but instead prepared a “body” for Jesus. It is “impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins,” therefore when Jesus “came into the world he said, ‘Sacrifice and offering you willed not, but a body you prepared for me.’” When Jesus came “to do your will” he did so by removing the “first” or original rites of animal sacrifices to be replaced by the “second” sacrifice of his own body (verse 9). In this way Jesus “sanctified us through the offering of the body (*sōma*) of Jesus Christ once for all.” Christ’s specific obedience was in offering himself to God as the ultimate sacrifice.

Not only has the Author made a theological point based on the reading of the Greek *Septuagint*, he has transformed the original sense of Psalm 40 “from a declaration of commitment to Torah observance as the better means of pleasing God into an oracle announcing the means by which God’s will for the worshipers will be fulfilled—by the self-sacrifice of Jesus’ body, prepared for him by God for this very purpose.”³

Not only so, but he has turned Psalm 40 into a messianic prophecy, something that could not be done from the Hebrew reading of **Psalm 40:6**. The *Septuagint* reading “opens up the psalm to a Christological interpretation, which would be impossible from the” Hebrew text. “Now Christ becomes the speaker of the psalm and receives a body from God with which to effect the perfect sacrifice, which replaces all the ineffective rituals of the levitical cult.”⁴

Moreover, the key term applied to make the theological point is “body,” specifically the Greek term *sōma* (σωμα). However, biblical Hebrew has no term that corresponds directly to

“body” (*sōma*), and frequently employs “flesh” (*basar*) or “soul” (*nephesh*) where a Greek speaker would use “body.” Neither “flesh” nor “soul” could achieve the theological point or the contrast made between Christ’s and animal sacrifices as effectively as “body.”

In short, the doctrinal points made by the Author of Hebrews cannot be explained from either the original Hebrew text of **Psalm 40:6** or from the Hebrew language itself.

Other Indicators

The Author of Hebrews consistently uses the Greek *Septuagint* when quoting the Old Testament; he never uses its Hebrew text.⁵ Therefore a *Septuagint* reading that deviates from the Hebrew text is often reproduced in Hebrews. For example, in **Hebrews 11:21** after Jacob blessed Joseph’s sons he “bowed in worship on the top of his staff.” While the Author derives no theological significance from this observation, the reading differs from the Hebrew text of **Genesis 47:31** that reads, “Israel bowed himself upon the head of the bed.”

Hebrews 10:4-6 is not the only verse where the Author uses a unique reading from the *Septuagint* to make a theological point. In **Hebrews 1:6** the Author follows the text of the *Septuagint* for **Psalm 97:7** to stress the preeminence of the Son over angels. Both **Hebrews 1:6** and the *Septuagint* read: “let all God’s angels worship him,” but the Hebrew text has: “worship him all you gods.” The latter reading would not have well suited the context and ideological purposes of Hebrews.

The quality of the Greek in Hebrews is superior to any other book in the New Testament, approaching the level of the literary *Koiné* Greek. “The Greek language and style of Hebrews are the best in the New Testament and indicate some degree of Greek education, especially in the art of rhetoric.”⁶ Rhetoric was a cornerstone of Greek education and highly prized in the Greek-speaking world, though far less so among Jews. Moreover, unlike the Greek *Septuagint*, Hebrews shows no signs of being translation Greek. As one commentator noted:

“No writing of antiquity shows fewer traces of being a translation. The Greek is eminently original and eminently polished. It abounds in *paronomasis* (plays on words)...It is full of phrases, and turns of idiom, which could scarcely be rendered in Hebrew at all, or only by the help of cumbrous periphrases. The numerous quotations which it contains are taken not from the Hebrew but from the LXX, and the argument is sometimes built on expressions in which the LXX differs from the original (Heb. 1:6-7; Heb. 2:7; Heb. 10:5).”⁷

The book of Hebrews was written to be heard and includes features intended to enhance its audible effect. “The rhetorical art of Hebrews appears in the careful arrangement of the words, the rhythmical structure of sentences, and the sonorous compounds.”⁸ This epistle was designed to be heard by Greek-speaking audiences.

For example, beginning with the opening paragraph the Author employs alliteration and assonance to catch the ear of his audience, and his use of anaphora in chapter 11 is especially noteworthy. Such features as exist in the Greek version of Hebrews can only be explained if the original composition was in Greek.

Alliteration is the use of the same consonant at the beginning of each stressed syllable in a line of verse. Five times In **Hebrews 1:1** the Author repeats the phoneme or ‘p’ sound at the start of five different words: “many parts and many ways of old God spoke to the fathers in the prophets.” In Greek the text reads (transliterated into English letters): *Polymerōs kai*

Polytropōs Palai ho theos lalēsas tois Patrasin en tois Prophētais. The effect would be difficult if not impossible to reproduce in an English (or Hebrew) translation of the clause.

Assonance is the repetition of similar vowels in the stressed syllables of successive words. An example occurs in the first clause of **Hebrews 1:1**, which employs two like-sounding adverbs. They are placed at the start of the Greek sentence for emphasis. “Many parts and many ways” translates the adverbs *polymerōs kai polytropōs* with the intervening conjunction *kai*. In both adverbs the first and third syllables are of the same or similar sound. The emphasis of the passage is not that “God spoke,” but that He spoke “in part” and “in many ways” in the past, in contrast to the word He speaks in His Son “upon the last of these days.”

Anaphora is the repetition of a word at the beginning of successive clauses for audible effect. Each introduction of a past person of faith in chapter 11 of Hebrews begins with the clause “by faith,” the Greek noun *pistei* (πιστει).

These three features are representative of the rhythmic prose in the Greek found throughout the epistle, a feature difficult to explain if the Greek text is a translation from a Hebrew or Aramaic original.⁹

Similarly, the word order of each Greek sentence has been very carefully chosen with an eye toward audible effect. Since Greek is a highly inflected language, the Greek sentence is not overly dependent on word order and an author can exercise great flexibility in the order in which he or she places words in a sentence. Hebrew, in contrast, is much more dependent on word order to show relations between words in a sentence (*e.g.*, subject, direct object, etc.).

Like the Apostle Paul, the Author makes extensive use of subordinate clauses and sentences, which is facilitated by Greek’s richness in conjunctions, in contrast to Hebrew which has a very limited repertoire of conjunctions.

Hebrews includes a large number of compound words that are not found in other books of the New Testament, several of which were probably coined by the Author himself. This is noteworthy since compound words are largely limited to proper names in biblical Hebrew¹⁰ (*e.g.*, ‘Elijah’ = “Yahweh is God”). A good example is found in **Hebrews 7:3** in the clause “without declared genealogy,” which translates the triple compound *agenealogētos* (α-γενεα-λογητος). In ancient Greek literature *agenealogētos* first occurred in the book of Hebrews and very likely was the creation of its Author. Moreover, the term is important to his comparison of Jesus’ priesthood with that of Melchizedek (neither priestly office was based on genealogical lineage).

Two other of many possible examples of unique compound words in Hebrews are found in **Hebrews 11:31** and **12:3**. In **11:31** “perished together with” translates *sunapollumi* (συν-απολλυμι). “Consider” in **12:3** translates the compound verb *analogizomai* (ανα-λογιζομαι). In all three preceding examples the compound word in the New Testament is found only in the epistle to the Hebrews.

Wordplays based on similar sounding Greek words abound in Hebrews. Note the following five examples, several of which are difficult to duplicate in English because they are based on like-sounding Greek words:

1:1	“many parts and many ways”	<i>polymerōs kai polytropōs</i>
2:8	“put in subjection”	<i>hupetaxas hupokatō</i>
5:14	“good and evil”	<i>kalou kai kakou</i>
7:3	“without father, without mother”	<i>apatōr amētōr</i>
11:27	“seeing him who is unseen”	<i>aoraton hōs orōn</i>

Conclusions

The quotation from **Psalm 40:6** used in Hebrews chapter 10 is clearly from the Greek *Septuagint* and not the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. The Greek reading, “a body you prepared,” differs significantly from the Hebrew reading (“ears you dug”) and cannot be explained from a Hebrew original. This is especially so in light of the use of “body” from the *Septuagint* text, a term integral to the Author’s theological point made in the larger passage.

This usage and the Author’s consistent use of the *Septuagint* for Old Testament quotations provide strong evidence for a Greek original. Proponents of a Hebrew original must explain why the Author of Hebrews would rearrange the text of a Hebrew passage from the Old Testament to conform to the text of the *Septuagint*.

The Author of Hebrews does not just write in Greek, he composes his lines with elegance, artistry and great precision and in excellent Greek. His diction reflects a thoughtful, intelligent and well-educated mind perfectly at home in Greek. His frequent creation of new compound words to make specific theological points is further evidence of his skill and creativity in Greek.

All of this evidences originality and authenticity, not the artificiality of translation language. Even for the most skilled scribe it would be difficult to translate a document of this length from Hebrew into Greek without showing signs of being a translation, especially from languages as fundamentally different as Hebrew and Greek. If the letter to the Hebrews was originally penned in Hebrew, the present Greek form of the document is not a translation but a complete rewrite.

And the Author does not write in the Attic dialect of ancient Athens but in the *Koiné* or “common” Greek dialect spoken throughout much of the eastern half of the Roman Empire in the first century, though certainly with greater skill than the average man of the street. This further attests to the letter’s authenticity and origin as a Greek composition.

Finally, proponents of an original Hebrew New Testament need to provide a rational explanation of why Paul or Peter, for example, would compose a document in Hebrew intended to communicate things to largely Gentile Greek-speaking congregations in places like Corinth and Thessalonica.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Bruce Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 96-97. See also pp. 48-98.

² *Ibid.*, p. 323.

³ David DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 322.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵ Karen Jobes, Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), p. 197; David DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, pp. 32-33.

⁶ Barnabas Lindars, *Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 21.

⁷ J. J. S. PEROWNE, D.D., Editor, *EPISTLE OF PAUL THE APOSTLE TO THE HEBREWS* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1891), *INTRODUCTION* by VEN. F. W. FARRAR, D.D.

⁸ M.R. Vincent, *Vincent’s Word Studies*, from the Introduction to Hebrews.

⁹ A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek N.T.* (Nashville: Broadman Press 1934), p. 132.

¹⁰ *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford, 1910), p. 4.