

# What you need to know about the Bible from Hebrew

[Extracts from Skip Moen's "30 Days of the Hebrew Worldview"]

It is the commonly accepted scholarly opinion that Jesus spoke Aramaic as his native tongue...In recent times, several highly respected scholars have begun to question this common theory. As they uncovered evidence from the earliest Christian writers, from the Dead Sea scrolls, and from the Greek text of the New Testament, it became clear that Jesus and the contemporary culture of first century Palestine spoke **Mishnaic Hebrew**, not Aramaic, as the birth language. Of course, Palestine was an occupied land for quite some time. It is easy to imagine that most people were multi-lingual and certainly Aramaic, Greek and Latin circulated among the people.

The New Testament Greek text itself hints at this Hebrew origin. There are many, many examples of Hebrew idioms in the Greek gospels; idioms that do not make sense in Greek because they are really Hebrew expressions woodenly translated into Greek. But once the gospels are converted back into Hebrew, the language comes alive and these stiff words take on flow and meaning not found in the Greek.

Furthermore, there are dozens of idioms, illusions and references in the Greek New Testament that *only make sense* from a Hebrew perspective, not an Aramaic one. Many of these references have no equivalent term in Aramaic and can only be understood if the original language was Hebrew. Some of these include the words for frankincense, Woe!, Beelzebub, Satan, cumin, contempt, rebel, bushels, tares, sycamore, and Amen!

Nevertheless, the Aramaic theory has so predominated the history of Christian interpretation that translations like the NIV routinely render the Greek word for "Hebrew" as "Aramaic", a word that does *not* appear in the Greek text.

This is only a sample of the evidence, but it should at least cause us to ask, "If Mishnaic Hebrew was so pervasive in first century Palestine, why has Christian scholarship been predisposed to the Aramaic theory?" That question leads directly to the anti-Semitism of the early church; an effort which deliberately attempted to strip Christianity away from its Jewish roots. It is unfortunate that we are the inheritors of this miss-applied theology. How much we have lost in translation because we as Christians distinguished ourselves from the legacy of Judaism is beyond calculation. We have much to recover if we are going to understand and appreciate the teachings of our Lord.<sup>1</sup>

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You may say, "So what? What's the big deal?" The big deal (and it is a very big deal) is that if Jesus conversed in Hebrew as His native tongue, then it is simply impossible to understand what He taught without knowing the culture and grammar of Hebrew, not Greek or Aramaic. We already know that Jesus used Scripture (the Old Testament) exhaustively. But if He commonly *spoke* Hebrew, then all of His thought forms, expressions and idioms will have to be understood from a *Jewish* perspective. That is a very big deal. It means that Christians are much closer to Jewish thinking than we have commonly believed. It means that Jesus was the greatest *rabbi* who ever lived, and that He taught in the fashion of the rabbis. It means that if we are going to practice what Jesus commanded, we will have to enter into the Jewish worldview in order to understand what those commands really mean. We will have to throw away centuries of segregation between Jewish thought and Christian thought and re-discover the Judaism beneath the soil of Christianity. This will rock our world!

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1 - "Hebrew Gospels and the Mother Tongue of Jesus" (<http://skipmoen.com/subscribe/hebrew/the-hebrew-gospels>)

Concepts of the church, evangelism, discipleship, tithing, prayer, blessing, confession, repentance and many, many more will have to be reconsidered from an Old Testament perspective. When Jesus said that He did not come to abolish the Law, we will see this in a radically new light. God has not changed. The plan is the same as it has always been from before the foundation of the world. Jesus came to open our eyes to what God had already been doing for thousands of years with a nation of Israel. The Christian Bible starts in Genesis, not *Matthew*.<sup>2</sup>



Our contemporary civilization is like a cake. The icing on this cake is the overlay of Judeo-Christian morality, but the cake itself is thoroughly Greek. Our approach to epistemology, justice, economics, community, politics, education and business are derived from Greek philosophy, tempered by Judeo-Christian moral influence. Once the icing on the cake is eaten away (and a lot has been consumed in the last 500 years), what's left is the Greek cake itself. Our task is to examine the real Greek cake underneath.

We need to do this because we must understand the inevitable consequences of sustaining ourselves by eating Greek cake. The God of the Bible is not Greek. The men and women of the Bible are not Greek. Even the books of the New Testament are not Greek. Of course, some of them were written in Greek, but the men who wrote them, and the thought patterns they employed, are thoroughly Hebrew.

The Hebrew worldview is radically different from our contemporary, Greek-based worldview. Once we begin to see just how different it is, we will discover a new hope for our physical and spiritual existence. In fact, this discovery is really not new at all.

One of the reasons that we have such a hard time putting our faith into practice in everyday life is that we have never taken time to understand these differences. We are part of a heritage that reaches back to ancient Greece; hundreds of years before Christ walked the Galilee roads. We are also part of a society that was reshaped by Christian and Roman influences over two millennia. The world of the Greeks was not at all like the world of the Hebrews. The Greeks are the fathers of western thought. The Hebrews are from eastern backgrounds. The Greeks were a culture of city-states, a government of the rule by the people, ethnic diversity and an intellectual history of reason and theory. The Hebrews were a genealogy of tribal descent, a government by God's revealed character, a culture of nomadic wanderers and an intellectual history of practical wisdom and cultic ritual.

We are the product of both of these streams. But we haven't taken time to see how these two great streams affect us. We haven't listened to the difference between the Greek and Hebrew answers to the biggest questions of life. And since we have not realized that there is a very big difference, we have all sorts of problems when we try to practice a belief in God based on the Hebrew culture within a framework of the world based on the Greek culture.

Trying to live on both sides of the chasm caused by the great differences between the answers to these questions is very difficult. This difficulty shows up in stress in Christian living, Biblical interpretation and fellowship with God. It affects how we think about ourselves, how we treat others and how we worship God.

These two cultural streams answer the fundamental questions of life very differently:

- What is Man?
- What is the nature of the universe?
- Who is God?

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2 - "Day 3 - Unravelling Translations" (distributed email)

The Greeks would answer our questions like this:

1. Man is unique in the world because he is the only creature who can exercise reason. It is rational thinking that makes Man who is truly is.
2. Man can know the truth through his rational abilities.
3. The world can be fully understood through rational investigation.
4. Knowledge is power.
5. Societal institutions are extensions of Man's knowledge and abilities.
6. Man is capable of solving the world's problems.
7. Man has no cognitive limits.
8. Self-sufficiency is the attitude needed to accomplish whatever can be imagined.
9. The destiny of Man is to control his world.
10. Man has a spark of the divine within him. Self-fulfilment takes us toward this divine inheritance.
11. All religious paths lead to spiritual enlightenment.

How would the Hebrews answer these questions?

They might say something like this: (pardon me if we use a Greek technique to do this).

1. All creation begins and ends with God.
2. Man is no different than all the rest of creation (he is finite and dependent) but, at the same time, he is created to have a different and special relationship with his Creator. This relationship is a gift from God.
3. Man is completely dependent on God even if he does not acknowledge this dependence.
4. Every aspect of Man's life is under God's sovereignty and control.
5. Man's greatest problem is his choice to rebel against His creator.
6. Man does not have a spark of the divine. He has "fallen" from the original design and is now a disobedient violator of God's perfect harmony.
7. Man cannot solve his most fundamental problem on his own.
8. God will judge Man's deeds according to the standard of absolute holiness.
9. God is the central focus of all creation, not Man.
10. Knowledge, self-reliance and self-sufficiency are seductive foolishness with regard to Man's real problem.
11. God's Truth is power.
12. Wisdom is the application of God's Truth.
13. God is the only Being who can determine what is finally good and true.
14. God expects all men to follow His instructions for living.

This helps us see how completely different these two views of Man really are. Fundamentally, the Hebrew view is that God is the principal player in this universe. Everything revolves around Him, His purposes, His will and His control. The Greek view is that Man is the central player on the world's stage. Man's goals, creations, abilities and decisions are the most important elements in this world. These two approaches are simply not compatible. Their differences are so far apart that no compromise can even be imagined.<sup>3</sup>

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3 - "Day 1 - Welcome to a Renewed World" (distributed email)

The big difference between Greek and Hebrew is the way the languages view reality. Greek views reality as organized bits. It is the language of *analysis*, breaking down each new element into smaller and smaller pieces. When you enter the Greek mindset, you see the world as a sum of parts. In order to understand something, you have to dig down through the surface appearance and discover all the underlying the parts.

But Hebrew doesn't see things this way. Hebrew is a *phenomenal* language. It describes the world *the way it appears* to the observer.

OK, so why does this matter? Well, Paul is a Hebrew. <sup>4</sup>

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4 - "Day 2 - Phenomenal" (distributed email)