

Jehovah, Yahweh, Jesus or Yeshua? Does it Really Matter?

By Roger Sapp

Have you noticed that Bible colleges and Seminaries encourage or require their students to study two ancient languages; Hebrew and Greek? Ever noticed the multitude of tools to study Greek available in Christian bookstores? Why these particular languages?

There is ongoing study of these two ancient languages because the original manuscripts of the Bible were written in them. Most Christians understand that Hebrew is the primary original language of the Old Testament. However, many believers today are not entirely clear why Greek is the original language of the New Testament.

There are some “Linguistic Zionists” today who seem to be presenting the idea the original language of the New Testament was Hebrew because the original apostles were Jews. Their arguments often undermine faith in the New Testament as we know it today. There is strikingly little evidence that the original New Testament was written in Hebrew. This argument seems reasonable only to those who are ignorant of the actual historical facts of the New Testament era and have not examined all the evidence honestly. With the possible exception of the Book of Matthew there is little evidence that any of the rest of the New Testament was originally in any other language than Greek. Even with the Gospel of Matthew the evidence is not very strong. There is a simple historical reason for the New Testament being originally written in Greek. The original twelve apostles wanted to reach the whole world. They were communicating with people who could not speak or write Hebrew. They used the international common language of that day which was Greek. So when the apostle Paul would write to the Corinthians or the Galatians, he wrote in Greek. When the Gospel of John was written in Ephesus in the late first Century, John wrote in Greek so that the Ephesians and others could understand who Jesus Christ was. Luke, the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, who was a Greek, certainly would have used Greek in these letters addressed to a man who had a Greek name; Theophilus. If the New Testament writers had written in Hebrew or Aramaic, very few outside of Israel could have read it. They were very interested in continuing to minister to and encourage the non-Jewish converts of that day. Therefore they chose the language that most people outside of Israel understood. They chose Greek.

How did Greek become the common language of the First Century? This requires a short recounting of the history of the Jews in the ancient world leading up to the First Century. A good place to start is with Alexander the Great and his amazing interaction with the Jews in the Third Century B.C.

Alexander the Great

Alexander, the Greek son of Macedonian conqueror and king Philip II, lived approximately 350 years before Christ. Alexander conquered the entire known world during his twenties including the land of Palestine, the land that God gave to the Jews. Alexander was a keen student of world history. He knew that all the other world kingdoms before him had experienced similar fates. He knew about Babylon, and the kingdoms of the Medes and the Persians. When the conqueror died, their kingdoms were divided among their rivals and descendents.

Alexander knew that his kingdom would not survive beyond his death for very long if he didn't do something dramatically different than all the conquerors that lived before him. Alexander decided that he would cause his kingdom to endure by encouraging his soldiers, Greeks, to intermarry with the women of the various nations where he conquered and strictly requiring that all commerce, all business, to be done in the Greek language. Additionally Alexander promoted all aspects of Greek culture to those who he had conquered. This succeeded in producing a much more homogeneous culture across national and tribal borders. Over the next hundred years, Common (Koine) Greek became the international language of the ancient world. All the nations and all educated and many uneducated people could speak Greek as a second language. This included the Jews as well.

Some historians have called Alexander the apostle of Hellenism. This, of course, doesn't mean that Alexander was a godly man or a Christian believer. Remember he lived before Christ was born. This simply means that Alexander highly encouraged the public study of the Greek literature, Greek orators, Greek philosophers, Greek arts, Greek sports and of aspects of Greek culture along with the use of the Greek language. This influence strongly reached the entire ancient world and was called the *hellenization of the world*. Alexander's method of uniting the entire world was so effective that one hundred years after Alexander's death, many Jews in Jerusalem and elsewhere in Palestine wore Greek-styled clothing and watched and participated in Greek sports.

Alexander's Dream Recorded by Josephus.

There was another interesting historical note in Alexander's relationship with the Jews of his time. Josephus, a Jewish historian, who lived at the same time of Christ, records Alexander's first encounter with the Jews. Josephus records that Alexander had a very dramatic divinely inspired dream the night before he marched upon Jerusalem to conquer it. In the dream, Alexander saw the high priest accompanied by two other priests coming out of the gate of Jerusalem and bowing before him. The High Priest asked Alexander to spare the city from destruction. Alexander awaking from this divine dream knew that the Jews were an especially favored divine people and that he should not harm them. Alexander granted the Jews a special status above all other conquered peoples in his

kingdom. He called them "Second Citizens". This meant that the Jews were second only to the Greek's themselves in privilege in Alexander's conquered lands. This was a high status indeed where many conquered peoples were treated as slaves.

The Dispersion of the Jews

Because of this high privilege among the Greeks and because of God's judgment through the military defeats by the Babylonians and the Syrians (recorded by the Old Testament book of 2 Chronicles), the Jews spread far into the world beyond Palestine. While some of the Jews returned to Palestine during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the majority of those scattered in the Gentile nations remained there. The great number of Jews living outside of Palestine during this time and the time of Christ was called the "Diaspora" in Greek meaning "The Dispersion". The New Testament makes reference to this scattering of the Jews in John 7:35 as "the dispersion among the Greeks".

No one knows exactly how many Jews lived outside of Palestine during this period but the numbers were large. For instance, it is known that that more than a million Jews lived in the city of Alexandria, Egypt at the time of Christ. When Joseph and Mary went into Egypt to escape Herod's intention to murder the Christ child, it is likely that they went to live among the Jews living in Egypt. The New Testament records Jews living in Syria, Egypt, Cyprus, and Italy among other places. For instance, Acts 18:2 records a Jewish couple named Aquila and Priscilla who lived in Rome, Italy. We also know that a later Jewish apostle named Apollos was from Egypt. Acts 18:24-26 records that Apollos was an Alexandrian Jew. He was even named by Jewish parents after the Greek god Apollos. This shows the strong influence of Greek culture on the Jews.

To counterbalance this Greek influence, where ten or more Jewish families existed in a community, they often formed a synagogue to worship the God of the Jews and to educate their children not only in Greek culture but also in Jewish culture. These synagogues brought the knowledge of the coming of the Jewish Messiah to the entire world. When the apostle Paul and others preached in these lands, people were already prepared at some level to hear because the Hellenistic Jews living among them had told them about the coming of Messiah. However, they did not often use the Hebrew word Messiah but more often used the Greek word *Christ* to describe the coming *Anointed One* to the Greek speaking cultures around them. Both Christ and Messiah mean *the Anointed One*.

Over a few generations, Jews living in the Dispersion lost their ability to speak, read and write ancient Hebrew which was already becoming a dead language at this time particularly to those who lived far away from Jerusalem, the Temple and its sacred persons and ceremonies. In other words, Jews in the Dispersion

were rapidly losing the ability to read the Hebrew Old Testament. These Jews spoke the languages of the countries that they lived in and they spoke common Greek. The New Testament describes these Jews as *Hellenistic Jews* in Acts 6:1 and Acts 9:27. *Hellenistic* means *influenced by Greek culture*. Many of the early Christians were *Hellenistic Jews* including the apostle Paul who was from Antioch, Syria. The New Testament even records a Jew named *Alexander* in honor of Alexander the Great in Acts 19:33-34. Timothy, the companion of the apostle Paul, was probably a Hellenistic Jew as well. Acts 16:1 tells us that Timothy's mother was a Jew and his father was a Greek.

Ever noticed how much the apostle Paul makes reference to the Greeks and Jews together? He uses the phrase the Greek to compare with the Jew six times in the New Testament. (Romans 1:16, 2:9-10, 10:12, Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11) This reveals just how strongly the Hellenistic influence was when Paul wrote his half of the New Testament.

The Septuagint: The Greek Old Testament

Because of the increasing inability to read Hebrew among the Hellenistic Jews, seventy-two scholars gathered in Alexandria, Egypt and translated the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek in seventy-two days. This happened under the reign of Egyptian King Ptolemy Philadelphus, who favored the Jews, sometime just before 250 B.C. They chose the language of Greek because it had been the everyday common language of the entire world for more than 100 years at that time. The Roman General Pompey did not conquer Judah until 63 BC and this explains why Latin was not used. Latin simply was not a common language at this time. However, the language of Latin became increasingly influential as the Roman Empire endured.

The Greek translation of the Old Testament that these scholars in Alexandria produced is called *the Septuagint* meaning *The Seventy*. Tradition says that each of these seventy (or seventy-two) scholars translated the Old Testament separately and then they compared the results. They found that each translation was exactly the same and this made them believe that God had supernaturally inspired this translation. Whether or not this is true is not known for certain. Nevertheless, the Hellenistic Jews placed great confidence in this version of the Bible during that time. This translation of the Old Testament was used in the synagogues throughout the Dispersion. Many ancient manuscripts of the Septuagint exist today. Many seminaries and Bible colleges offer courses to study the Septuagint and there are a wide set of tools available today to study the Septuagint.

The Septuagint also became the Early Church's first Bible. It was very popular among the first Gentile Christians. They used it to teach and preach from rather than the Hebrew Old Testament because practically everyone in the ancient world

in the various lands could understand Greek but fewer understood Hebrew. In other words, the apostles preached from a Greek Old Testament to people who could understand Greek. This only makes sense since they wanted to reach the entire world with the Good News about Christ.

Sometimes today's legalists use quotations from the Hebrew Old Testament to make Christian believers doubt the authentic nature of the New Testament. They are making a very serious historical mistake when they do this. The writings of the apostles in the New Testament reflect the use of the Greek Old Testament rather than the Hebrew Old Testament. Many of the Old Testament quotes found in the New Testament are often quotations directly from the Septuagint rather than a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. This reveals that the First Century Church throughout the Roman Empire was using the Greek Septuagint in everyday ministry rather than the Hebrew Old Testament. This makes perfect sense because many of Gentile Christians could read Greek but very few could read Hebrew or Aramaic. Beyond this, the Greek Old Testament was widely available in Gentile lands through the Synagogues but the Hebrew Old Testament was not.

The Manuscript Testimony

There are more than 5,300 known ancient Greek manuscripts of the New Testament existing today. This is amazing testimony to the accuracy of the New Testament. These are ancient copies of the originals or ancient copies of copies. These are, without question, the oldest surviving manuscripts dating back to approximately 125 A.D. There are approximately 19,300 other ancient New Testament manuscripts in various languages such as Latin, Ethiopian, Slavic, Armenian, Syrian and a mixture of other languages. These are generally considered later translations and copies of the translations. There are no ancient Hebrew or Aramaic copies of the New Testament existing today. In other words, beyond the well known historical reasons for the use of Greek, there is a great deal of manuscript testimony to the New Testament being originally written in Greek but absolutely no manuscript testimony to it being originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic. Theories about a Hebrew or Aramaic original are no more than theories because none exist. Thousands of manuscripts and portions of manuscripts in Greek exist to validate that the original documents were most likely in originally in Greek.

The Correct Name Claim

There is a connected claim among some legalists about using the correct name of the Messiah. Some of this is built upon ignorance of the history of the Bible. Here is how some of this logic is formed:

If you were to go to another land, you would still use your ordinary name. You would be offended if people didn't use it. For instance, if your name was "John", you would use "John" even if you were in Spain or France. Therefore, since Yeshua is the proper name of the Messiah, we should use it rather than "Jesus" or any other forms of the name.

No one would debate that *Yeshua* is how the name of the Messiah would have been pronounced in His own language. (However, some legalists may want to argue with how the author of this booklet is spelling *Yeshua* since there are a variety of spellings in English but this document will consistently use this form.) However, this idea, proposed by some Christians today about the importance of using the correct name of *Yeshua* is not found in the New Testament. The idea that the Messiah would be offended in some manner by not properly using his correct name of *Yeshua* is not found in the New Testament either nor is it revealed by history. Bold statements do not make a claim true. In fact, this bold claim is contradicted by the history of the apostles and the New Testament. This is a modern misuse of logic coupled with a modern sense about names to produce a serious legalism. We define *legalism* as taking a practice or belief beyond where God or His Word takes it. Legalism removes freedom, creates fears, distorts our understanding of God. It presents God as judgmental, angry, stern, and picky when Christ has revealed Him as loving, merciful, full of grace and a Father who has declared us of great value to Him as His forgiven children. Legalism focuses our attention on matters that need no attention, creates unwholesome fears and condemnation in us and causes us to neglect the really important matters.

Translation of Names into Other Languages. This "correct name" idea would not have been found in the ancient world. For instance, the New Testament records the translation of names into other languages without apparently any offense in those people using those names. Many people were called by the translations of their names into other language. For instance...

Now in Joppa there was a certain disciple named Tabitha which translated in Greek is called Dorcas... Acts 9:36a

Here *Tabitha's* name is translated into a different but equivalent name Greek name *Dorcas*. There is no indication that there is anything at all wrong with this. Even the apostle Paul had two names, one Hebrew and the other Latin ...both recorded in the Greek New Testament.

But Saul, who was also known as Paul... Acts 13:9a

The apostle was known as Saul among the Jews but as Paul among those in the Dispersion and among those who were Gentiles. In other words, again we see this

logic that if someone used a different name that that person would be offended is contradicted by the New Testament itself. We even see the apostles themselves using other than the proper names for Jewish Christian believers. Here the Book of Acts tells us:

And Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means, Son of Encouragement) Act 4:36

The apostles gave Joseph a different Aramaic name than his birth name. This once again shows the flexibility of the thinking of the New Testament apostles with names. The Lord Jesus Himself is recorded using two names for Peter but the apostle John also gives us the translation of the name given to Cephas into Greek.

He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him, and said, "You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas" which is translated Peter. John 1:42

Simon is the Greek form of the Hebrew/Aramaic name *Shimon*. Cephas is Aramaic for "a stone". Peter is Greek for "a stone". It is noteworthy that the apostle John, one of the Twelve, did not believe anything was wrong with translating this name into another language.

Even the angel of the abyss also has two different names in two different languages...

They have as king over them, the angel of the abyss; his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in the Greek he has the name Apollyon. Revelations 9:11

The "correct name" idea is refuted by the fact that three languages were being used in Israel at the time of Christ. A form of Hebrew (Aramaic), Greek and Latin were all being used. It was not usual for someone to translate something into all thing languages including names. For instance, the inscription on the cross of Christ read in all three languages.

Therefore this inscription many of the Jews read, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and in Greek. John 19:20

In all the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, we find that occasionally one of the other languages is used. For instance, we find that the Greek manuscript of John's Gospel uses the Hebrew word "Messiah" twice. Some Latin words are also used in the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. Therefore, if any of the authors had wished to use the Aramaic *Yeshua* form of the name of Jesus they certainly could have done it. They did not do this throughout Church history and this is powerful testimony that the "correct name" theory is very wrong.

Purposeful Corruption Claim

Additionally, for the "correct name" claim to be right there would have to be very serious corruption of the ancient manuscripts of the New Testament. In other words, the name of *Yeshua* would have had to be purposely eliminated from the original manuscripts and all the thousands of copies. This is an extraordinary claim. The purposeful corrupting of thousands of manuscripts would be an impossible task considering that these copies were spread all over the Roman Empire. There would have been no way even to locate all the copies. This would truly be an extraordinary task. Beyond the impossibility of this task, we must wonder about the motivation behind the task. *What possible purpose would Christian translators and those believers copying the manuscripts have in corrupting the manuscripts?*

Not One Manuscript Uses Yeshua

Since there are more than 24,600 of these existing ancient manuscripts of the New Testament, it would seem certain that there would be some existing evidence of this corruption. However, not a single manuscript uses the *Yeshua* form of the name of Jesus. *Every* ancient manuscript uses a translation of the name of *Yeshua*. For example, every one of the more than 5300 Greek manuscripts uses the Greek form of Jesus *Iesous* consistently. (This is pronounced "ee-ay-sooce" which does sound similar to *Yeshua* and to Jesus). Those Greek manuscripts which contain all the books of the New Testament, called a Codex, each use *Iesous* more than 900 times. Not a single Greek manuscript uses any other form of the name. In other words, in the thousands of uses of the name of *Iesous* in these 5300 Greek ancient manuscripts there is not a single manuscript that has a single use of *Yeshua* or any other version of this name.

Writings of the Church Fathers

Beyond this, there are approximately 60,000 existing ancient writings of the Church fathers, the disciples of the disciples, dating from the Second Century on. The Church fathers do not reveal this "correct name" theory either. They consistently used the translated names of *Yeshua* as well. Not one of these Church fathers makes this argument about the "correct name". They are totally consistent with the writers of the Greek New Testament. No one among the apostolic leadership of the early Church even conceived of this "correct name" theory. The reason is clear. The "correct name" theory is not correct. It is a modern heresy and a legalism.

Textual Variance

This absolute consistency of the apostolic writers of the New Testament is even more significant when the phenomenon of *textual variance* is considered. Some of the Greek manuscripts do vary slightly from each other. This occurred as the manuscripts were being copied and circulated. A few accidental errors were

introduced and repeatedly copied. Most of these errors are easy to reconcile since they concern the spelling of proper names of people and places. There are short passages and verses that vary also. Only about one-half of one percent of the New Testament varies in this manner. Because this variance exists, any attempt to later change the name of *Yeshua* to *Iesous* or vice-versa would have been revealed in variance between manuscripts. There is no such variance in the name of *Iesous* in the Greek New Testament. Nor is there variance in the manuscripts from other languages. In other words, the First Century Christians knew nothing of the claim that is being presented today. They knew nothing of the idea that Christ might be offended if His Hebrew/Aramaic name were not being pronounced correctly or a translated name was being used.

No Corrections Either

If this claim had existed in ancient times, there would be testimony to it also in finding ancient texts where someone would have "corrected" the problem. There would be ancient texts that would have *Yeshua* in the text. None of these exist. This is solid proof that this claim is strictly a modern claim and that the apostles would have not have known about it. The ancient world's Christians and the apostles themselves freely translated the name of *Yeshua* into many other languages. They clearly were not concerned about this manner as are some legalists are today.

Grace, the Most Important Contradiction

Finally and perhaps most importantly, the "correct name" claim is also contradicted by the consistent gracious behavior of God Himself. Despite the fact that many ordinary Christian people historically have not often known the precise name of God as *YHWH* and the Messiah as *Yeshua*, still God saves, heals, delivers them and answers their prayers when they pray in the many translated names of *Yeshua*. God has been doing this consistently for approximately 2000 years. Obviously, those that make the "Correct name" claim are going much farther than God Himself does in this matter. Certainly, this is the definition of legalism.

God would surely correct and rebuke His followers for using the wrong name if this was so important to Him and yet only a very small minority of legalistic Christians believes that this is essential. In the past two thousand years there have been great revivals and movements of Christianity touching millions of souls and yet none of those movement or the great leaders of these movements ever thought these things were important. These revivals occurred among those people using the name of Jesus in their own languages. There never has been a revival in the history of the world that thought that the "correct name" was necessary to please God. In fact, those today that are captured by this false idea are seriously marginalizing themselves. They often have difficulty being in

fellowship with other Christians. They are often perceived as being odd and difficult to communicate with because of commitment to legalistic language about God. At the same time, this legalism makes them think that they have a superior revelation and can make them arrogant as they deal with Christians not embracing the same legalisms.

Yahweh or Jehovah?

What about using *Yahweh* rather than *Jehovah*? This information about the Old Testament name of God is hardly new information even though it is presented as a kind of "secret knowledge" by some writers and teachers today. Any seminarian or Bible college student of the past century would understand this. But most Bible college students would also know something else that is not generally presented. They know that we are simply guessing at how this name is pronounced. Ancient Hebrew has no vowels at all. It only has consonants. The four Hebrew characters on the cover of this booklet, read right to left, is how this name appears in the ancient manuscripts without any indication of vowels.

The vowels, called *pointing*, were added much later after Hebrew was an unspoken, dead language. They are the small marks beneath and between the Hebrew letters. On the cover of the printed booklet, they look like a capital T and a colon. It is important to remember that they were added much later after ancient Hebrew became a dead, unspoken language.

The letters in English are reversed also because Hebrew reads right to left rather than left to right like English. Therefore, no one actually knows today how the *tetragrammaton* YHWH is pronounced since it is all consonants without any vowels. Pronouncing ancient Hebrew words today is simply making educated guesses despite how insistent some legalist may be about the correct way.

Tradition much later assigned the "a" and "e" vowel sounds to come up with "Yahweh". However, this is anything but certain. The vowel sounds were taken arbitrarily from *Adonai* unless YHWH was joined to *Adonai* in the text. When joined with *Adonai* in the text, they assigned the vowels from *Elohim*.

Because of the Jewish practice of not speaking YHWH out loud out of reverence, the actual pronunciation of the name is now completely uncertain except for a few legalists who ignorantly think they know today and will loudly quote Old Testament scripture to prove it. It is telling that the legalist continues to focus on Old Testament texts when all this has been completely fulfilled in Christ. The New Testament tells us that all this revelation in the Law has been a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ. Once we have Christ, we no longer need the schoolmaster. However, the legalist wants us to return to the schoolmaster as if

the schoolmaster were somehow equal to Christ. He wants to debate these Old Testament texts as if they were supremely significant when they are not. The New Testament calls all this information in the Old Testament "shadows" and tells us that the "substance is Christ" Himself.

The "secret knowledge" of legalists always leads back unwise Christian believers back to attempting to practice the Law and to the Old Testament revelation. Legalists want Christian believers blowing ram's horns and blessing each other in the name of Yahweh. They ultimately want believers keeping the Law and will introduce this little-by-little by example if not by direct teaching itself. They will have believers falling from grace and retreating to an obsolete revelation of God as YHWH. They will have Christians ignoring a much higher revelation and the New Covenant revealed in Jesus Christ. Legalists are concerned about the correct form of things rather than the correct spirit of things.

Christ never indicated in any way that saying His name correctly would please God. He never indicated that He would be offended by saying it wrongly. What He did say is that faith in Him would be important. Yet legalists emphasize correctness of form in pronouncing the various names of God.

Legalists emphasize getting every "jot and tittle" correct. Yet it is possible to have every detail correct and have no faith. The apostles emphasized a faithful and merciful high priest, Jesus, who had already fulfilled every "jot and tittle" of the Law. The apostles were not returning to the obsolete, fulfilled Old Covenant of Law revelation of YHWH but were revealing the New Covenant revelation of Father and our sonship revealed in Christ. They strongly resisted those legalists who wanted believers to return to the Old Covenant in any way. The apostle Paul even wrote in Galatians that those legalists who would lead believers back to the Old Testament revelation of God should be accursed.

The most important New Testament revelation of God does not reemphasize YHWH but "Father". The name "Father" is revealed 104 times in the New Testament. This is the revelation that Christ brought that shocked the unbelieving Jews and the revelation that many Jews rejected in favor of the legalistic old revelation. Some believers are in danger of going back to this obsolete way and falling from grace. "Father" is the revelation that Christ was trying to make plain to believers. The apostle Paul often introduces many of his letters with *the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Neither Paul nor the Lord Jesus was trying to reveal God once again as a burning bush on an unapproachable mountain but rather to encourage believers to a higher way in drawing near in faith-love relationship with "Abba Father". Believers need to beware of backsliding to anything less than this. Maranatha!

We highly recommend a scholarly paper for further reading by Dr. Michael L. Brown, a born Jewish, Christian scholar in the Hebrew language, entitled:

Recovering the “Inspired Text”? An Assessment of the Work of the Jerusalem School in Light of *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*.

Dr. Brown examines the premise of the Jerusalem School revealed in the book cited above that “our current Greek Gospels often obscure and distort the original Hebrew teaching of Jesus”. It is excellent reading.

This PDF book by Dr. Roger Sapp was downloaded from the “Pray and Obey” section of www.allnationsmin.org. There are many other files like it available. Additionally, this booklet is available in a printed form on the website or by telephone 1-817-514-0653