

What's In A Name? **Rewriting Scripture** **Rebuilding a Wall** **Regressing to Shadow**

(The Hebraic Roots Movement's assault on the New Testament)

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It has become essential within certain circles for Christian believers to use Hebrew spellings and pronunciations of key terms and names. This includes especially the Hebrew equivalents for English terms like 'God,' 'Jesus,' 'Spirit' and 'Lord.' Some advocates of this ritual not only use Hebrew pronunciations but also write out words using "**Hebrew**" letters. The rationale seems to be that doing is part of a necessary "recovery" process of the original "pure" faith; that perhaps it may result in deeper insight into the mysteries of God or understanding of Jesus Christ.

One name will be used in what follows to illustrate the problem, the name of **Jesus**. In groups where this practice is all the rage the normal pronunciation is *Y^eshua*.

Is *Y^eshua* the "correct" or original pronunciation of the name of Jesus? To state the obvious, we do not possess audio recordings of ancient Israelites speaking Hebrew. As with other ancient languages, pronunciations used today are at best approximations; educated guesses. While the odds are that *Y^eshua* is the proper pronunciation of **a late form of this biblical name**, we cannot be absolutely 100% certain.

Human language is a tool whereby people communicate verbally and visually. As long as a language is in use, it changes. Spellings and pronunciations vary over time and geography, syntax evolves and devolves, vocabularies expand and contract. The Hebrew language is no different. The Old Testament bears witness to changes and variances over time and space to Hebrew (for example, **Judges 12:4-6** where the men of Ephraim were unable to pronounce "Shibboleth," saying instead "Sibboleth"). Specific Hebrew words are spelled differently in various passages in the Hebrew Scriptures. Any insistence on absolute precision in spelling or pronunciation is fraught with difficulties; any doctrinal system or religious practice based on it is a fool's errand.

'Jesus' is the English equivalent of the name 'Joshua.' The name 'Joshua' first appears in **Exodus 17:9**. This man's original name was *Hoshea*, the son of Nun (**Numbers 13:8**), one of the twelve men Moses sent to spy out the land of Canaan. In **Numbers 13:16** Moses changed

his name from *Hoshea* to 'Joshua' ("these were the names of the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land. And Moses called *Hoshea* the son of Nun, Joshua").¹

Hoshea means "salvation," "deliverance" or "help."² When Moses changed the name he prefixed the first syllable of the Hebrew name of God or 'Yahweh' to *Hoshea*, thus the name became *Y^ehoshua* (hence, "Yahweh saves," "salvation of Yahweh," etc.) In written Hebrew the name consists of five consonants and four syllables (יהושע). This form occurs almost two hundred times in the Hebrew Old Testament.

The shorter spelling, *Y^eshua*, is a later development and occurs approximately twenty times in the post-Exilic books of Ezra and Nehemiah (for example, **Nehemiah 8:17**, **Ezra 2:2**). *Y^eshua* is a contraction of the older and presumably more "pristine" form of the name or *Y^ehoshua*. It consists of four rather than five consonants (ישוע) and has been reduced from four to three syllables. Moreover, the order of two letters (*Waw* and *Shin/Sin*) has been reversed. This later shortened spelling possibly reflects Aramaic influences from the post-Exilic period.

If we are to insist on using "pure" Hebrew spellings and pronunciations in order to return to the "pristine" language of Israel, which form are we to use: *Y^eshua* or *Y^ehoshua*? Both spellings are used in the Hebrew Scriptures. ***If this appears to be brouhaha over trivialities, this is the precise point.***

What about written forms of the name? Some proponents of this practice insist on using "Hebrew" letters when writing out Hebrew words, which is not much help to those who cannot read Hebrew. But the square-like letters commonly used for written Hebrew today are, technically speaking, Aramaic not Hebrew.

The language of a nation that interacts with foreign cultures is influenced by them. A native language only remains "pure" to its roots if the people that speak it are kept in total isolation from the rest of the world. For example, languages incorporate "loanwords" from other languages, words taken from another language and naturalized for use in one's native tongue. This occurred throughout the history of Hebrew as with any other language. Biblical Hebrew shows foreign influences from Persian, Greek, Hittite, Phoenician, Moabite, Aramaic, Ammonite and even Sanskrit sources.³

A pivotal event in the history of Israel was the Babylonian Captivity when the kingdom of Judah was overthrown and the top echelons of its society taken into captivity. The language spoken in Mesopotamia was Aramaic. Under the subsequent Persian Empire, Aramaic was the standard language of government, commerce and international relationships. Aramaic continued to dominate the Near East region until the later conquest by Alexander and the rise of the subsequent Greek kingdoms.

By the time the Jewish captives returned to their homeland Hebrew was falling into disuse. Aramaic had become the language of the exiles. When Ezra read the Law in Hebrew before Jerusalem his assistants had to interpret it for the audience, indicating that many present no longer understood Hebrew (**Nehemiah 8:5-8**, "and Ezra blessed Yahweh the great God...and Jeshua and Bani and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah and the Levites caused the people to understand the law, the people

remaining in their places. So they read in the book of the law of God distinctly, *and giving the sense caused them to understand the reading.*"⁴

A fundamental change occurred in written Hebrew following the Captivity. Prior to it Hebrew had been written with a script essentially identical to the one used by the Phoenicians and ancient Canaanites, now commonly referred to as the 'paleo-Hebrew' or 'Phoenician' script from which the ancient Hebrew script was borrowed.⁵ This was the same written script used by the (pagan) Moabites and Aramaeans.⁶ The Old Testament itself refers to the language of the Israelites as the "tongue of Canaan" (**Isaiah 19:18**). From around 400 B.C. onwards the Aramaic script was increasingly used in written Hebrew and the Old Testament text was progressively converted to it.

Thus Hebrew has never been free of foreign, "pagan" influences. There is no such thing as a "pristine," "pagan-free" version of the Hebrew language. *Human languages are not in and of themselves "pagan" or non-pagan, good or evil, spiritual or carnal. As a language Hebrew is no more inherently holy than Greek or English is innately pagan.*

The knowledge of Hebrew is a tremendous asset to biblical studies. However, it is not a requirement for right standing with God or to acquire a deeper spiritual life. What matters far more is to understand what God is, Jesus, the message of the kingdom of God and so on. For any individual this is accomplished most effectively using his or her native tongue. There is nothing inherently wrong with saying *Yeshua*, *Elohim* and *adonai*, but this way of thinking can be taken to extremes that begin to smell like superstition, when Hebrew letters and words take on an air of inherent supernatural powers.

Rewriting Scripture

The push to use Hebrew words along with ideological and doctrinal factors has produced voices claiming the New Testament was originally penned in Hebrew. This is a "slippery slope" by which the unwary slip into a far more serious trap.

The insistence on using Hebrew names and terms stands in stark contrast to the Greek New Testament. Not once do the authors of the New Testament use the Hebrew form of 'Jesus.' Without hesitation the New Testament uses the Greek form or *Iésous* more than nine hundred times, the Greek word for "God" or *theos* (1,300+ times) and "Lord" or *kyrios* (700+ times). The Hebrew equivalents for "God" (*elohim*, *el*, *eloah*) and "Lord" (*adonai*) are never used. Similarly, although "messiah" transliterated into Greek letters is found twice in the Gospel of John (**1:41**, **4:25**), its Greek equivalent "Christ" or *Christos* is used approximately 530 times. Furthermore, both John **1:41** and **4:25** translate "messiah" for that gospel's original Greek-speaking audience ("which is, being interpreted, Christ").

The New Testament provides examples of early church leaders speaking Greek such as Paul on Mars Hill where he even quotes a pagan Greek poet (**Acts 17:22-31**, **Acts 21:37**). Acts describes Hellenized Jews in the early church who spoke Greek including Stephen (**Acts 6:1-6**). Though the New Testament provides clear evidence that Jesus spoke Aramaic (**Mark 15:34**),

there are indicators he also spoke at least some Greek (**John 12:20-24**). And how, for that matter, did Jesus communicate with the Syrophoenician woman if he did not understand Greek (**Matthew 15:22, Mark 7:26**)? She is identified as both Canaanite and Greek (*Hellénis*), that is, a Hellenized Gentile.

Thus the New Testament provides no basis for insisting on the strict use of Hebrew forms of names and terms, it evidences no hesitation on the part of the early church to use Greek or other non-Hebraic terms and languages when necessary for the sake of the gospel. If anything, the early church used all the linguistic tools at its disposal to great effect to spread the Gospel. As Paul wrote, “to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain Jews...to them that are without law, as without law...that I might gain them that are without law...I am become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some” (**1 Corinthians 9:20-22**).

What, then, is the evidence for the original language of the New Testament? What follows summarizes the main (but not all) proofs for a Greek original.

1) ***Existing Ancient Manuscripts***. All surviving ancient manuscripts of the New Testament or parts thereof are in Greek. This includes virtually complete copies from the fourth and fifth centuries as well as a large collection of ancient papyri, most of which are fragmentary. Some of the papyrus manuscripts date back to the first half of the second century.⁷

2) ***The Ancient Translations***. Because Christianity was a missionary-oriented religion the New Testament was translated into other languages as needed. Among the earliest translations were the Syriac (the Old Syriac, Peshitta, Harclean & Palestinian versions), Latin (both Old Latin and the Vulgate), and Coptic (Sahidic and Bohairic), all translated from a Greek original not Hebrew.⁸

3) ***The Witness of Early Church Authors***. The church fathers of the late first and early second centuries wrote letters in Greek in which they alluded to or quoted passages from the New Testament. This includes *1 Clement* written about 95 A.D. along with the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (110 A.D.), the *Didache*, Barnabas, Polycarp of Smyrna (110-120 A.D.) and the Shepherd of Hermas. In each case New Testament allusions and quotations are from Greek originals.⁹

4) ***The New Testament gives no indication of being a translation***. A document of any length translated from one language into another includes signs or indications that it is a translation. This is especially so with languages as fundamentally different as Greek and Hebrew.¹⁰

5) ***The New Testament's use of the Septuagint***. The majority of verbal allusions and quotations from the Old Testament in the New are from the ancient Greek translation the *Septuagint*, not from the original Hebrew, though some authors use both (*e.g.*, Matthew and Paul). As Kurt and Barbara Aland wrote, “the fact that from the first all the New Testament writings were written in Greek is conclusively demonstrated by their citations from the Old Testament, which are from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, and not from the original Hebrew text. This is true even of the rabbinic scholar Paul.”¹¹

6) *The New Testament itself translates Aramaic/Hebrew terms into Greek.* Several passages from the gospels of Matthew, Mark and John, as well as the book of Acts, transliterate Aramaic or Hebrew terms into Greek characters and then translate them for Greek-speaking audiences.

Mark 15:34, “And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’” (cp. **Matthew 27:46**).

Matthew 1:23, “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called *Emmanuel* (which means, ‘God with us’).”

Mark 5:41, “And taking the child by the hand, He said to her, ‘*Talitha kum!*’, which translated means, ‘Little girl, I say to you, arise!’.”

Mark 15:22, “And they brought him to the place *Golgotha*, which is translated, ‘Place of a Skull’.”

John 1:38, “And Jesus turned and beheld them following, and said to them, ‘What do you seek?’ And they said to Him, ‘*Rabbi,*’ which translated means ‘Teacher,’ where are you staying?’”

Acts 4:36, “And Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called ‘Barnabas’ by the apostles (which translated means, ‘Son of Encouragement’).”

7) *The authors of the New Testament utilized aspects of the Greek language.* The examples of this are too numerous to list. The authors utilized features of Greek syntax and accident according to their individual skill sets. This includes alliteration, wordplays and synonyms, double and even triple negatives, compound words and so on. Many of these features are difficult to explain if the Greek New Testament was translated from a Hebrew original and can be tough to accurately represent in another language like Hebrew, English or German.

8) *New Testament books reflect the skill levels and personalities of each individual author.* Often lost in translation are the varying skill levels with Greek as well as personality traits of each author. This includes in places some very ungrammatical Greek. God used the talents and tools that each possessed or lacked, and despite any human frailties, foibles, etc. The books of the New Testament reflect the varying abilities with Greek, rhetoric and so on, of their respective authors. If a later hand translated these books from Hebrew into Greek it would be difficult to duplicate the individual characteristics of each New Testament author with consistency, and the tendency would be to correct clumsy syntax and grammatical errors.

9) *A Practical Point.* The early church was focused on missionary activities (**Matthew 24: 14, 28:18-20**). By the first century Hebrew had fallen into disuse even among Palestinian Jews. Because of the spread of Hellenism and the Greek language under the earlier Greek kingdoms, the Greek language was spoken throughout the Roman world especially in the eastern half of the Empire. Greek became the *de facto* standard language of commerce. It was so widespread that Roman magistrates commonly published edicts in both Latin and Greek, though Latin was the language of Roman government. While not everyone in the Empire spoke Greek, it was used

more widely than other languages. ***For a new religion committed to spreading its message to peoples of every nation and culture, Greek would be the most practical choice for a medium of communication. HEBREW WOULD BE A MOST IMPRACTICAL OPTION.***

The idea of an original Hebrew New Testament cannot explain the existence of certain New Testament books. For example, the letters of Paul were written to address issues in local assemblies consisting largely of Greek-speaking Gentiles. Why would Paul write in Hebrew or Aramaic to a Gentile church located in a thoroughly Greek city like Corinth or Thessalonica?

What is the evidence for a Hebrew or Aramaic New Testament?

- 1) ***Existing Ancient Hebrew Manuscripts of the New Testament.*** None.
- 2) ***The Ancient Translations from Hebrew/Aramaic originals into Syriac, Latin, Coptic, etc.*** There are none.
- 3) ***The Witness of Early Church Authors.*** Several later church fathers claimed Matthew was written in Hebrew but all were dependent on the unsubstantiated quotation from Papias of Hierapolis (see below).
- 4) ***A Practical Point.*** In light of Jesus' command to preach the Gospel to all nations, writing or translating the church's core documents into Hebrew would make little sense.

What is noteworthy about claims of a supposed Hebrew original New Testament is the lack of substantive evidence for it. In contrast to the mountain of evidence for a Greek original, there are no surviving ancient Hebrew or Aramaic manuscripts. There are no ancient translations of the New Testament into Syriac, Latin, Gothic, Coptic or other language of the period from an Aramaic or Hebrew original. The idea of a Hebrew original cannot explain why several New Testament authors transliterated Aramaic (or Hebrew) terms into Greek letters and then translated them for a Greek-speaking audience. And the extensive use of the Greek *Septuagint* in the New Testament makes no sense if it was originally written in Hebrew.

The only real "evidence" for a Hebrew original consists of references to a Hebrew version of the gospel of Matthew by several later church fathers (Papias, Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius, and Pantaeus). Each later patristic quotation is dependent on an original statement by Papias of Hierapolis made around 130 A.D., thus he is the original sole source for the notion of a Hebrew version of Matthew ("No tradition demonstrably independent of Papias exists."¹²). According to Eusebius in his history of the Church, Papias wrote, "Matthew therefore compiled the oracles in a Hebrew dialect, and each one translated as he was able" (*Eccl. History, iii. 39. 16*).

Papias was a bishop of Hierapolis in what is present day Turkey. He was a disciple of Polycarp of Smyrna who himself claimed to be a disciple of the Apostle John. Papias wrote a five-volume exposition on the sayings of Jesus. Beyond this little is known about him. ***Copies of Papias' writings were lost in the early centuries of Church History.*** Later church writers preserved only a few fragmentary quotations. The reference of Papias to a Hebrew Matthew is not found in a copy of any of his books, but rather in Church historian Eusebius' *Eccl. History*

History written two hundred years after Papias died. Eusebius did not provide the original context of the quotation or specify his source. Thus, because no copies of Papias' writings have survived and because Eusebius did not explain his source, the accuracy or provenance of the quotation cannot be independently verified. From available data there is no way to determine its accuracy. In a modern criminal court this would amount to hearsay evidence.

There are ambiguities in the statement by Papias. The clause "Hebrew dialect" can refer either to Hebrew or Aramaic. Which was meant cannot be determined with certainty (while closely related, Hebrew and Aramaic are distinct languages). The term "the oracles" normally referred to individual sayings of Jesus, perhaps gathered in a single collection. It is not clear whether this refers to the same document we now know as Matthew or to some other collection of sayings. It is possible Papias mistook one of the spurious Hebrew "gospels" that were making the rounds at the time to be Matthew's gospel. And there is always the possibility that Papias was simply mistaken and there never was a Hebrew version of Matthew.

In summary, *the evidence for Greek as the original language of the New Testament is substantial, extensive, even overwhelming*. In contrast, *the evidence for a Hebrew or Aramaic original is virtually non-existent* and amounts to an ambiguous and uncorroborated quotation from Papias of Hierapolis, which at most hints at the possibility of an Aramaic or Hebrew original of the Gospel of Matthew, *only*.

Does it matter?

Included in claims that the New Testament was originally penned in Hebrew are insinuations that the Greek New Testament contains "corruptions," pagan ideas introduced by the later and largely Gentile church. It then becomes necessary to "correct" said corruptions utilizing the Hebrew original. But there is no Hebrew "original," there is no Hebraic exemplar that can be used to "correct" the Greek New Testament. At best proponents of this can only speculate at what they presume, think or hope the Hebrew "original" said.

This is the real Satanic agenda in this; to undermine Christian confidence in the Greek New Testament as scripture, to leave believers with almost nothing to stand on, ***for if we do not have reliable and accurate copies of what Jesus and the Apostles taught, then we do not have an objective and steadfast source for right Christian conduct and belief.***

Rebuilding a Wall

The church's primary task is gospel proclamation to all nations (**Matthew 28:18-20, Luke 24:47-48, Colossians 3:11**). Just as attempts to "Americanize" Christianity can hinder this, so can attempts to transform it into a Hebraic sect. The more Christianity is particularized with characteristics from specific cultures, nations and ideologies, the more potential barriers are erected to the spread of the gospel. The Universal appeal of the Good News of the Kingdom of God can become transformed in small and large ways by ethnic, linguistic and cultural particulars.

The problem becomes especially acute when we impose laws, regulations and requirements from the Mosaic Law. Often we do so not fully understanding the real ramifications of placing ourselves under the Law.

The Law is not simply the Ten Commandments or a set of moral absolutes. It entails much more. Yahweh gave the Law specifically to the nation of Israel, not to any other. It was much more than a statement of theological principles or moral codes to regulate individual behavior. In the classic summary statement of God's covenant with Israel we read:

Exodus 19:1-6, "...Now, therefore, if you will indeed hearken to my voice and *keep my covenant*, then shall *ye* be mine as *a treasure beyond all the peoples* for mine is all the earth. But you shall be mine as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak unto the sons of Israel."

God designated Israel as His chosen people above all other nations. The Law was *a covenant* between Yahweh and *the entire nation of Israel*. Israel's observance of it was vital to the continuing possession of the Promised Land. The Law included moral codes but was also a national contract, so to speak, between Yahweh and Israel. The Law included a sacrificial system, dietary restrictions, inheritance regulations, civil regulations, penal codes and so on.

One purpose of the Law or Torah was to keep Israel separate from the surrounding pagan nations. For example, the dietary restrictions regarding "clean" and "unclean" meats were designed to keep Israel distinct from its pagan neighbors and maintain its ritual purity. The Levitical food laws had nothing to do with health and hygiene. As Leviticus makes clear:

Leviticus 20:24-26, "You shall inherit their land and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am Yahweh your God *who has separated you from the nations. You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean beast and the unclean, and between the unclean bird and the clean*; you shall not make yourselves abominable by beast or by bird or by anything with which the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to me; for I, Yahweh, am holy and *have separated you from the nations that you should be mine.*"

The faith of Israel was not closed to all but ethnic Israelites. The Law did provide the means whereby a Gentile could join Israel. This included circumcision (in the case of males) and taking on all the obligations of the Law. In effect the Gentile "convert" became a member of national Israel.

The Law is a comprehensive set of principles, rules and regulations governing the national life of Israel. It is not a "pick and choose" menu but an "all or nothing proposition." When one takes on the Law or the Torah one is obligated to keep the whole thing, as the Law itself stipulates (**Deuteronomy 27:26**), a point Paul argued to great effect in his letter to the Galatians (**Galatians 3:10, 5:3-4**, "I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that *he is bound to keep the whole law*. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified on the basis of the law; you have fallen away from grace"). One cannot choose to keep the Sabbath but reject

circumcision, or observe feast days and not keep kosher. ***There is no “options” selection on the Torah menu.***

Taking on the whole Law includes those aspects that keep Israel separate from Gentiles. Originally the church consisted of only Jewish believers. Only in Acts chapter 10 is the Gospel first opened to Gentiles. By means of a vision Peter was directed to visit the home of Cornelius in Caesarea, a Roman centurion described as “***devout and fearing God...doing many alms to the people and supplicating God continually.***” Though he was a Gentile he had attached himself to the synagogue, worshipped Yahweh and loved Israel. Yet he was still uncircumcised, not yet a Jewish proselyte. He remained an “uncircumcised” Gentile despite his well-attested devoutness.

At the end of his vision Peter was admonished, “what things ***God has cleansed be not thou making common***” (Acts 10:9-16). Prior to this it was inappropriate for Peter to have table fellowship with an uncircumcised Gentile. Doing so could render him ritually impure, even with a devout one like Cornelius. Peter’s first words to Cornelius were, “***You well know how it is unlawful for a Jew to be joining himself or coming in to one of another race.***” Despite an uncircumcised Gentile’s righteousness and even excellent reputation among Jews, he was technically outside the covenant, an uncircumcised Gentile.

Peter continued, “yet to me God has pointed out that I should be calling no man common or unclean...of a truth I find that God is no respecter of persons but ***in every nation he that fears him and works righteousness is acceptable to him***” (verse 35). The Holy Spirit then fell on the Gentiles “who heard the word,” causing those Jews who had come with Peter, they “of the circumcision,” to be “amazed ***that upon the Gentiles*** also the free-gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out.” They were amazed because God gave the very same gift of the Spirit ***to uncircumcised Gentiles***. Only now did Peter fully realize that people from every nation are acceptable to God if they fear him and live righteously, whether they are members of Israel or not. ***The underlying issue was the acceptability of Gentiles AS GENTILES into God’s One Covenant People.***

Some Jewish believers found fault with Peter’s actions because “he went in to men ***uncircumcised and ate with them***” (Acts 11:2-3). They did not criticize Peter for fraternizing with gross sinners but simply ***for eating with uncircumcised Gentiles***. If, for example, we feel it necessary to adhere to Jewish dietary restrictions, there will be many times when we are unable to share a table with potential converts or other believers who do not keep kosher, thus hindering the Gospel and dividing the Body of Christ.

In Galatians Paul recounted a previous confrontation in Antioch, another conflict over table fellowship. Paul described how “false brethren slinked in to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 2:4-5). Certain Jewish believers in Jesus infiltrated the church with disruptive doctrines, including claims that it was inappropriate for Jewish believers to share meals with Gentile Christians. This would have prevented joint participation in communal meals ***including the Lord’s Supper***, effectively dividing the local congregation. The pressure brought to bear was so great that even Peter were caught up in it (Galatians 2:11-13).

Paul confronted Peter, “If you, being a Jew, are living like Gentiles and not like Jews, ***how are you compelling the Gentiles to Judaize?***” The heart of the conflict was not the 16th century

Reformation battle over “unmerited grace” versus good works and human effort, but *the status of Jewish versus non-Jewish believers, between circumcised Jews and uncircumcised Gentiles*. Did Gentile believers in Jesus need to adopt Jewish lifestyles and customs including circumcision, Sabbath keeping and dietary restrictions, or were they acceptable AS uncircumcised Gentiles?

The key phrase in **verse 14** is: “*compelling Gentiles to Judaize*.” The Greek verb is a strong one and means just that: “to compel, to force” (*anangkazō*). The infinitive translated “to Judaize” (*Ioudaizo*) occurs only here in the New Testament. It is from a Greek word meaning *to live like a Jew, to adopt a Jewish lifestyle*. Herein is the crux of the problem: some at Antioch (and later in Galatia) were “compelling” Gentile believers to conform to Jewish customs and practices, at least to certain ones. The act of refusing to eat with Gentile believers insinuated there was something defective in their faith, that on some level they were not yet full-fledged members of God's covenant people, that in their uncircumcised state they were “second class citizens” of God's kingdom. The Judaizers saw Gentile faith as incomplete without the regulations and practices of the Torah.

This sort of controversy comes as no surprise. The first disciples were all Jews. Initially the new “way” was open only to Jews and proselytes to Judaism. The early church did not view itself as a new religion distinct from the faith of Israel, but rather as the fulfillment of their ancestral faith. Jesus was the promised Messiah of Israel. Once the faith was open to Gentiles, sooner or later the question would arise: *what is the basis on which Gentile believers are acceptable as members of God's covenant people?* Paul's unequivocal answer was: *through the faith of Jesus Christ, not on the basis of the deeds of the Law (Galatians 2:16)*.

In Ephesians chapter 2 Paul reminded his largely Gentile audience how God saved them from their former sinful life through his grace (**verses 4-9**), They must never forget that “at one time you, the Gentiles in flesh, who are called ‘uncircumcision’ by the so-called circumcision in flesh made-by-hand,” though once “separate from Christ and alienated from the citizenship of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise,” had no hope “and were godless in the world.” Yet God in His infinite mercy made them “nigh by the blood of Christ” and made both Jewish and Gentile believers one, “*having dismantled the middle wall of partition*.”

Paul's reference to a dividing wall likely alludes to the fence in the Jerusalem Temple complex that separated Gentile (the “court of the Gentiles”) from Jewish worshippers; a barrier that excluded Gentiles from the inner courts. If a Gentile violated this barrier he could be instantly put to death.¹³ But God always had the Gentiles in view even when He made His covenant with Abraham (“in you shall all the nations be blessed”). From the beginning His purpose was to “create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might fully reconcile them both in one body through means of the cross, slaying the enmity thereby” (**Ephesians 2:15-16**).

The unity of Jewish and Gentile believers was of prime importance to the Apostle Paul, the “Apostle to the Gentiles.” Again in Galatians he wrote, “for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according

to promise” (3:26-29). Likewise in Colossians, “having put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him -- in which there is no Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all and in all” (3:10-11).

If we attempt to rebuild what was taken down in the cross, we must understand the potential consequences. Among other things this includes rebuilding the Middle Wall of Partition that once divided Jews and Gentiles.

Regressing to Shadow

Some proponents of Hebraic forms of Christianity charge critics with engaging in “Replacement Theology.” This stems partly from a failure to understand what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ.

The Epistle to the Hebrews was probably sent to a congregation of mostly Jewish believers in Jesus located in or near the City of Rome (**Hebrews 13:24-25**). This group had experienced persecution in the past (**10:32-34**) and was now facing the likelihood of renewed persecution (**2:15, 12:4**). Consequently, some members began to withdraw from the assembly and were contemplating returning to the synagogue (**10:25**). Returning to Judaism would be a way to escape persecution. Unlike Christianity, Judaism had legal standing in the Roman Empire. The government exempted Jews from certain requirements imposed on others, including participation in the imperial cult.

In its early years Christianity was perceived by Rome to be a Jewish sect. However, beginning perhaps in the middle of the 60s A.D. Rome began to understand Christianity to be a new and distinct religion and it lost any legal protections. Undoubtedly following the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., the divide between church and synagogue became much more pronounced. The church increasingly found itself on Rome’s radar screen.

The concern of the Author of Hebrews was not theological but pastoral. His purpose was to prevent members of this church from leaving the faith and he therefore strongly urged them to faithfulness (**2:1-3; 3:6; 12-14; 4:1, 11-13; 6:1-12; 10:26-31, 35-39; 12:3-17; 13:9**), to not return to their former Judaism. “Accordingly, the author sets forth the incomparable superiority, together with the utter finality and definitive nature, of God’s work in Jesus Christ. Christianity rightly understood is thus absolute in character and universal in scope. It is indeed nothing less than the fruition of God’s intended purposes from the beginning and therefore the fulfillment of what ‘God spoke...through the prophets at many times and in various ways’ (**1:1**). The inescapable conclusion is that a turning away from Christianity to any other way—regardless of how excellent in itself—is altogether ruled out. The answer to any such tendency is to be found in an understanding of the true significance of Jesus Christ and his work.”¹⁴

Hebrews opens with a paragraph that sets the tone of the Letter (**1:1-4**). The passage begins, “in many parts and many ways long ago God spoke to the fathers in the prophets; upon these last of days he spoke to us in a Son.” God did speak in the past but only partially, here a little, there

a little. But now He is speaking with finality in His Son. God's past word was true but promissory and incomplete. It prepared the way for His ultimate revelation in the Son. In this thematic passage the Author introduces angels and begins the first of a series of comparisons whereby he contrasts what God has done in the past with what He is now doing in the Son. Thus the Son "became superior to the angels by as much as going beyond them, he inherited a more excellent name." The purpose in **verses 5-14** is not to digress into a discussion about the nature of Christ or angels, but to demonstrate the Son's superiority over angels.

The comparison of chapter 1 leads into the first exhortation of the Letter in **Hebrews 2:1-4**: "if the word spoken through angels became firm and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we escape if we neglect" the superior word spoken in the Son? Here he refers to a Jewish tradition that the Law or Torah was mediated to Moses by angels. The purpose is not to disparage angels or the Law, but to point out the far more serious danger of ignoring the vastly superior revelation in the Son. He is arguing from the lesser to the greater. Angels are God's ministers and glorious in their own right. The Law was given by God and is just and excellent. Yet the word spoken through the Son is vastly superior to the one given through angels, as excellent as it was in its time. Rejecting the superior revelation will result in far greater punishment than disobedience to the Law.

The Author goes on to compare the Son to Moses (**Hebrews 3:1-6**), the Son to Aaron (**5:1-10**), the Son's Melchizedek priesthood to the Levitical priesthood (**7:1-25**), the Son's sacrifice to the repeated sacrifices of the Tabernacle (**7:27, 9:26**), and the Old Covenant to the New (**8:4-10:18**). In each case he does not disparage the Old but demonstrates the clear superiority of what God has done in the New, in the Son.

A dire warning against forsaking the Son follows each contrast. Thus the comparison with angels ends with the warning to not "drift away" from the word spoken in the Son (**2:1-4**). The comparison to Moses is followed by a warning against being hardened through the deceitfulness of sin and unbelief (**3:1-4:16**). The initial description of the Son's superior priesthood is followed by a most dire warning against "falling away," thereby going beyond the pale by once again publicly crucifying the Son and holding him up for public ridicule (**6:1-8**). The more detailed exposition about the Son's priesthood, his superior sacrifice and the New Covenant instituted by him, are followed by a fourth warning against the dreadful fate that awaits those who desert the superior faith found in the Son (**10:25-31** – "anyone having set aside a law of Moses...dies. Of how much sorer punishment do you suppose he shall be accounted worthy, who has trampled underfoot the Son of God and esteemed the blood of the covenant a profane thing...?").

The Law, the Old Revelation, was incomplete and not without shortcomings. The fact that a new priesthood of a different order was necessary indicated the need for a change of law (**7:11-12** – "for the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law"). There is a setting aside of the former commandment because of "its weakness and unprofitableness, for the Law was unable to perfect anyone" (**7:18**). Jesus became the "guarantee of a better covenant" (**7:22**); he is mediator of a "better covenant legislated on better promises" (**8:6-7**). If the first covenant had been complete or "faultless" there would have been no need for a second (**8:7**).

The Old Covenant with its system of sacrifices and offerings was ordained by God and the priests who served in the Tabernacle did render divine service, but only as “glimpse and shadow of the heavenly realities” (8:5, 9:9-10), “copies” or “patterns” of the heavenly and real things (9:23). In contrast, Jesus did not enter into the copy or the pattern, but into the very presence of God in heaven (9:24). “For the law having a shadow of the good things to come, not the very image of the things, can never with the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near” (10:1).

In the case of this congregation the temptation was not to revert to a grossly sinful or pagan life, but instead to regress to the synagogue, to re-embrace the “shadow” of the Heavenly Reality revealed in Jesus. But this would amount to rejection of God’s appointed high priest and open way of salvation, *a retreat to the Old Regime already made obsolete by the New and vastly superior covenant established by the Son.*

The underlying theme is one found throughout the New Testament; that of *fulfillment*. What the New Testament teaches is not “Replacement Theology” but “Fulfillment Theology.” The Old has been superseded by the New. The Old was partial, consisting of shadows and types. The substance is found in the New. It is in Christ, not the Torah, that “all the promises of God are Yea! and in him Amen!” (2 Corinthians 1:20). *Jesus is the interpretive key that unlocks the Hebrew scriptures, not vice versa.* God defeated Sin, Satan and Death not on the altar of the Jerusalem Temple, but on the Cross, outside the Temple, outside Jerusalem.

As Paul wrote, we are “filled full in him who is the head of all principality and authority, in whom we have also been circumcised with a circumcision not made by hand...having been buried together with him in our baptism, we also have been raised together through our faith in the energizing of God, who raised him from among the dead.” Though we were “dead in our offences and by the uncircumcision of our flesh, he has brought us to life together with him, having in grace forgiven us all our offences, having blotted out the handwriting against us by the decrees...and having taken away the same nailing it up to the cross...Let no one, therefore, be disqualifying you in eating and in drinking, or in respect of feast, or new moon, or Sabbath, *which are a shadow of the things to come, whereas the substance is of the Christ*” (Colossians 2:9-17).

There is nothing inherently wrong with using Hebrew names, worshipping on Saturday, being circumcised or keeping a kosher diet. Such things are matters of indifference to our standing before God. One does not sin by refusing to eat pork or to work on the Sabbath. Where a line is crossed is when we begin to teach or believe that such things are still necessary to be a full member of God’s covenant community, when we compel others to adopt Jewish customs and lifestyles, when we find it necessary to make the vastly greater revelation found in Jesus Christ conform to the partial revelations of the past, when reverting to the shadow becomes necessary for the completion of Christian faith, *when Christ crucified is demoted as the All-Sufficient head of the Church and instead Torah exalted as God’s final word.*

If the fulfillment of God’s plan; *if its substance has now arrived in the person of Jesus Christ, why return and embrace the shadow.* In the final analysis doing so is not fuller revelation or walking in greater light, but regression to that which was always partial, fragmentary, and promissory and not without fault.

ENDNOTES:

¹ *Hoshea* in Hebrew is the same name as that of the prophet *Hosea* (SEE Hosea 1:1).

² Francis Brown, *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew & English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), p. 448; *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1939), vol. III, p. 1431; Johann Keil, Franz Delitzsch, *Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the O.T.*, notes on Numbers 13:1-17.

³ Angel Saenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 75, 115.

⁴ F.F. Bruce, *Israel & the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 108-109, 118.

⁵ F.F. Bruce, *Israel & the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 118-119.

⁶ Menahem Mansoor, *Biblical Hebrew Step-by-Step* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997), pp. 23-24.

⁷ Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 36-66; Philip Wesley Comfort, *Early Manuscripts & Modern Translations of the N.T.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1990).

⁸ Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, pp. 67-81; Bruce Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1977); Kurt Aland & Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 185-221.

⁹ Bruce Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 39-67.

¹⁰ Kurt Aland & Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, p. 52; A.T. Robertson, *Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Nashville: Broadview Press, 1934), pp. 76-139.

¹¹ Kurt Aland & Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, p. 52.

¹² Floyd Filson, *Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1971), p. 16.

¹³ F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 435-436.

¹⁴ Donald Hagner, *Hebrews* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), pp. 11-12.