

Semitic Origins?

“Why Emphasize Hebrew”

Pancho grew up on the outskirts of Mexico City the biggest city in all the world. He was a poor peasant boy who lived with his mother Maria and his father Cisco. From about the age of six years old, Pancho took care of the burrow for his father and milked their milk goat. His father road his burrow into Mexico city once a week to sell their extra eggs and some other produce the he had grown. But there were too many things that they needed to improve around the farm and had no money to do so. When Pancho became 14 his father decided to send him to the United States to work in the vineyards, hopefully enabling them to get that extra money they needed to repair their dilapidated homestead.

Once in America Pancho got in with a group of migrant workers from Mexico who went from vineyard to vineyard in the Napa Valley preparing the vines and later harvesting the vines for the wine industry there. While the pay was not great by American standards, he was doing very well by his standards and was able to send money back to Papa in Mexico.

Since there were one or two workers who spoke some English in the group, the migrant workers just stuck together and the English speakers acted as foremen, taking orders from the Americans and translating to their people. Pancho learned a little English, but could not carry on a conversation with the others. He continued to do this work for many years going home to Mexico in the off season, but returning to California for work in the vineyards each spring. His English got some better and he even became one of those who would act as the foreman, yet, all the spare time he spent with his people, he spoke Spanish. The trade language may have been English, but if he really wanted to have a meaningful conversation it must be in his native tongue. He could not get too deep in conversation using a language in which he did not think. He kept separate from the English except for receiving orders concerning the vineyard work.

Many of our ancestors came to America from lands that spoke languages other than English. Most have assimilated into the language and culture of America. This makes us assume that all immigrants learned English prior to this last wave of immigrants. If we review our acquaintances we probably know many people of Spanish descent that speak English and some know absolutely no Spanish. This could make us form false conclusions about history. Pancho does not assimilate in the above story. He was coming to America to make his family's life better in Mexico. However, many come to America to make their life here. Those are more likely to adopt the language and culture of the land.

The Houtz family immigrated to the United States from Germany in the late 1700s. My father took me to visit his cousin in Pennsylvania in the late 1960s. My father's cousin, Harry Houtz, was an English professor at one of the area universities. My father had corresponded with him for years by mail from his home state of Nebraska. Imagine his surprise when he met Harry in person and discovered he could hardly speak English. The letters were written in perfect English, the speech was heavily masked with a German accent. Furthermore, when he got enthusiastic or excited, English went by the way side. Fortunately my father

knew a little German because Harry was getting a bit older and a good 50% of everything he said came out German. We were almost 200 years from the time our family first hit the American shores and the part of our family that remained in a predominately German area still spoke German in the family setting. The remainder of our family who moved into areas less populated with German speakers began to use English as the primary language since they needed to communicate with the people of their community.

The natural tendency is to associate with your people. Language is a very decisive factor. Even when a foreign paper is translated into our language, specific nuances are lost. A Spanish person has certain phrases and idioms in his language that really communicate to his way of life. Those specific phrases and idioms will not communicate to an English speaking person. The American Anglophone does not have the same life style or word associations as the Spanish speaking Mexican. All people communicate and feel better accepted by others of their own culture and language.

The story about Pancho and the way he associated with the English culture is probably not much different from that of Yehoshua (Yeshua or Jesus)¹ and His disciples. Yehoshua grew up in the Galilee, a region in northern Israel which spoke Aramaic. His disciples came from the same region. They were all common people like fisherman and shepherds. They had little need to become fluent in Greek. Yehoshua and His disciples did need to know another language – Hebrew. It was their religious language and the language of their family in Judea.

Yehoshua's cousin Yochanan (John the Baptist) was a priest. It was necessary for him to speak Hebrew because he would be ministering in the temple. So Yehoshua's religious and family culture demanded that He know at least two languages quite well, Aramaic, His native tongue and Hebrew the holy tongue. Possibly in some minor way he needed to know some Greek because of the ruling nation. However, his surrounding culture would not immerse him in the Greek language therefore it would be a foreign tongue to Him. When learning a language of minimal use, a person thinks in His native language, but translates those words into the foreign language. Usually one word at a time.

History gives us several tidbits of information that substantiates the language of Hebrew should be considered when studying the Bible. Yes, this even includes the New Testament. Eusebius, an early church historian wrote a book in the first two decades of the fourth century called "Ecclesiastical History," i.e. Church History. In that book he has researched several questions that were being asked at that time and quoted many documents in an attempt to answer those questions. It had been about 250 years since Yehoshua walked on the earth and many things once common knowledge had fallen from their memory. Eusebius attempted to compile documents written by the Pre-Nicean Church fathers to re-educate the masses on the evidences for what was taught of that day. I will quote a few of the documents that he records to substantiate the necessity for considering Hebrew when studying the New Testament.

¹ Yehoshua is the Hebrew name of Jesus, Yeshua is Aramaic which by the first century had become a shorten Hebrew version for Yehoshua. Jesus is an English transliteration of Yeshua derived through Greek, Latin and German. The Hebrew version, Yehoshua, is used in this article to emphasize the Hebraic origin to the New Testament.

Eusebius quoted Origen's list of Inspired books where Origen mentioned the following concerning the gospels.

“The first is written according to Matthew, the same that was once a publican, but afterwards an apostle of Jesus Christ, who having published it for the Jewish converts, wrote it in the Hebrew.”²

Eusebius also reported quotes from Irenaeus 120AD-202AD, the bishop of Lyons concerning the Gospels which can be found below.

“Matthew, indeed, “said he, “produced his gospel written among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul proclaimed the gospel and founded the church at Rome. (3) After the departure of these, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also transmitted to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. And Luke, the companion of Paul, committed to writing the gospel preached by him, i.e., Paul....”³

It is evident that in the first century it was known that Matthew was written in Hebrew. Some scholars suggest this may be referring to Aramaic since both Hebrew and Aramaic were considered a “dialect of the Hebrews.” My studies bring me to conclude it was Hebrew rather than Aramaic,⁴ but both languages share many words and expressions in common making it less important to determine which it may have been. Greek however, comes from a culture and linguistic base completely different from the Semitic languages and would be very different in usage, culture and word associations. The above quote shows that Peter did not speak Greek or Latin since he needed an interpreter (Mark) to translate for him. This establishes that Peter gave Mark the Gospel in either Hebrew or Aramaic and Mark put Peter's words into Greek. We could also conclude that this same process was needed for the books of first and second Peter. We also find that Luke wrote the gospel preached by Paul. If Paul needed a translator for the Gospel, he may have also needed one for the remaining 13 letters that are claimed to have been written by him.

Whether these books were first written in Hebrew and translated into Greek, or if they were spoken in Hebrew and written down in Greek is irrelevant. The Hebrew thinking that was behind the books would be manifest either way. Like the story about Pancho coming to America, he would still think in Spanish and translate into English. So to understand these books, it is important to understand the basis to Hebrew thinking and the word associations that may come from it.

² *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, translated by C. F. Cruse p 215

³ *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, translated by C. F. Cruse p. 164

⁴ Refer to the article by Frank Houtz, “The Use of Messiah's Name” which can be found on Dry Bones Restoration Company's web site www.drybonesrestorationcompany.com/Frame%20Pages/Messiahs_Name.pdf

I will cite a couple of other quotes from Eusebius to show the Semitic origin to another New Testament book attributed to the Apostle Paul. Ignatius believed that Clement had translated the book of Hebrews. Ignatius died in 110AD and Clement died in 101AD. Eusebius quotes Ignatius:

“It is probable that this was also numbered with the other writings of the apostles, for as Paul had addressed the Hebrews in the language of his country, some say that the evangelist Luke, others that Clement, translated the epistle. (3) This appears more like the truth, since the epistle of Clement and that to the Hebrews preserved the same features of style and phraseology, and the sentiments in both these works were not very different.”⁵

From this we can determine that the book of Hebrews was written in either Aramaic or Hebrew and was translated into Greek by another. The translator can not be determined from the information since Ignatius suggested two possibilities and preferred one over the other. Eusebius also reports on Clement’s teaching concerning the authorship of Hebrews. It may have been that Clement’s comments were triggered from hearing Ignatius’ conclusion.

“The epistle to the Hebrews he (Clement) asserted was written by Paul to the Hebrews in the Hebrew tongue, but it was carefully translated by Luke and published among the Greeks since one finds the same character of style and of phraseology in the epistle as in the acts,”⁶

Clement reveals that the book of Hebrews was written in Hebrew, but was translated by Luke, not himself. This seems rather matter of fact, but since he gives a reason outside of personal knowledge, it leads us to believe he was concluding who translated it by the style of writing rather than a personal knowledge. His first statement concerning the Hebrew language is reporting the facts. It seems clear in this English translation of Eusebius’ that the book was written in Hebrew, not Aramaic. However as stated earlier both languages might have been referred to as the language of the Hebrews, since it depended on the region where a person lived as to which he spoke.

There are other indications that the New Testament is of Semitic origin but this is sufficient to understand one reason we suggest that looking at it with Hebrew glasses is important. A person generally cannot think outside of his native tongue so anything he might write, the native tongue should be considered regardless of the language in which it was written.

Frank Houtz

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⁵ *Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History*, translated by C. F. Cruse p. 103

⁶ *Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History*, translated by C. F. Cruse p. 204

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Dry Bones Restoration Company is a ministry devoted to teaching methods of extracting the Hebraic origin from the New Testament and making strong connections to the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. We teach a course in methods of research and exegesis called “Biblical Research Techniques,” or a less stuffy title, “Bible Detectives.” These seminars are available for congregations and study groups wishing to learn how to make such connections.

Frank Houtz, founder of Dry Bones Restoration Company, is also an author and has written several books including a book on the Sabbath designed to help new Sabbath keepers be equipped with good answers as to why the New Testament did not end Sabbath keeping. Other books and booklets published by Dry Bones Restoration Company and written by Frank Houtz include, “Authority,” “Machanayim-The Two Camps of Israel,” “Episunagoge-A Study on the Assembly,” “Evil Ain’t All Bad,” “A Date With the Lamb,” “Adoption-From an Ancient Perspective,” “A Frank Discussion of God’s Law,” and “Swords of Truth-Conflict Among Brethren Defending the Crown.”

Mary Lynn Houtz is an artist, musician and songwriter who devotes her talent to furthering the Hebraic understanding of the Scriptures. Her CD “Songs for Israel,” put many significant passages to song. Other CDs will soon be available.

