

Biblical Research & Education Resources

Blaine Robison, M.A., M.R.E.

[Home](#) • [Bible Insights](#) - [Tanakh](#) • [Bible Insights](#) - [Besekh](#) • [Critical Concerns](#)
[Discipleship](#) • [Marriage/Family](#)

Revelation: A Hebrew Book

Published 28 October 2008; Revised 20 April 2015

[Home](#)



Sources: Numbers in brackets link to notes at the end of the article.

Terminology: In order to emphasize the Jewish nature of the apostolic writings and message I use the terms **Yeshua** (Jesus), **Messiah** (Christ), **Tanakh** (Old Testament), and **Besekh** (New Testament).

Few Christians when reading Revelation (or any other book of the New Testament) stop to consider that the “New Testament is a Jewish book, written by Jews,^[1] largely about Jews, and meant for both Jews and Gentiles.”^[2] The religion, traditions and concepts of the New Testament are thoroughly Hebrew.^[3] The Jewishness of the apostolic writings is certainly evident in the cultural setting of the historical events and characters, but the Hebrew identity is especially manifest in both their terminology and the commonality of content with the *Tanakh* (Old Testament). Moreover, the incarnate Word, the Lord Yeshua, in the flesh was and is a Jew and would have naturally spoken to His disciples in their native language, traditions and Scriptures. Indeed, as one Messianic Rabbi pointed out, Hebrew is the only language in Scripture that God used to speak audibly. For more on this subject see my article [The Jewish New Testament](#).

Many Christian commentators assume that the language behind the Greek words on the lips of Yeshua and the apostles to be Aramaic instead of Hebrew, based on the incidence of a few Aramaic words in the Greek New Testament text.^[4] The field of literary criticism generally assumes that Hebrew was essentially unused outside of rabbinic circles.^[5] However, Jewish scholars have presented strong arguments for the vitality and preeminence of the Hebrew language in first century Jewish life, as well as religious writings and discourse.^[6] David Stern quotes Professor David Flusser, Orthodox Jewish scholar in Jerusalem,

“The spoken languages of that period [first century] were Hebrew, Aramaic, and to an extent Greek. ... It is possible that Jesus did, from time to time, make use of the Aramaic language. But during that period Hebrew was both the daily language and the language of study. The Gospel of Mark contains a few Aramaic words, and this is what has misled scholars. ... There is thus no ground for assuming that Jesus did not speak Hebrew; and when we are told (Acts 21:40) that Paul spoke Hebrew, we should take this piece of information at face value.”^[7]

There are a variety of ways in which Hebrew may be seen as the foundation to the Greek text of Revelation and these are noted throughout this commentary.^[8] First, there are many Hebrew words that are transliterated into Greek. Transliteration is the attempt to reproduce the sound of a word with the substitution of letters of the target language for the letters of the source language without interpreting the meaning. Examples of transliteration from Hebrew to Greek in Revelation include the words “amen,” “Armageddon,” “Hebrew,” “Jerusalem,” “Jew,” “Satan,” “woe” and the names of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The second evidence of the Hebrew language is the presence of idiomatic words and phrases, which scholars call Hebraisms. An idiom is simply an expression peculiar to a particular language. For example, the phrase “the small and the great,” which occurs four times in Revelation (11:18; 13:16; 19:5, 18), actually refers to the young and the old rather than social or economic status. The titles of our Lord reflect the variety of expressions that packaged Jewish theology about God (1:4, 8; 4:8f; 15:3; 16:5; 21:6). Many of the idioms that Yeshua used and are recorded in the Gospels can only be properly understood when interpreted in their Hebrew context.^[9] Because of the presence of Hebrew idiomatic expressions, some commentators have erroneously concluded a dependence on rabbinic Judaism as if Yeshua and the apostles simply plagiarized rabbinic teachings without giving them credit. It is more likely that the similarities represent drawing on a common pool of ideas.^[10] Idiomatic language in Revelation is discussed in the commentary and the footnotes.

The third evidence of a Hebrew text is that sometimes taking the Greek literally results in a clumsy English translation or a sentence may even fail to make sense. However, the verse makes perfect sense when translated back into Hebrew. For example, in 10:1 an angel is described with feet like pillars. However, feet cannot be “like

pillars,” only legs can. The problem is resolved by recognizing that while Greek has separate words for “feet” and “legs” Hebrew has only one word that can mean both. Apparently, a Greek translator unacquainted with Hebrew nuances translated the Hebrew word as “feet” when the intention was “legs.”

The fourth evidence of a Hebrew text is the use of conjunctions. Joining individual words in a list within a sentence or one clause to another with the conjunction “and” is a frequent characteristic feature of the Hebrew Scriptures, whereas in Greek literature an independent clause will be subordinated to the main clause of the sentence and the use of conjunctions minimized.[11] The conjunction “and” in Hebrew functions generally as a prefix to Hebrew words without using a separate word. To make a Hebrew word part of a connecting sequence, the letter *vav* (v) is added to the noun as its first letter.[12] There are several conjunctions in the Greek language, but *kai*, meaning “and,” also” or “even” is by far the most common in the New Testament[13] and used in the LXX to translate the *vav* character. English normally uses a coordinating conjunction only between the last two elements in a series of three or more, so while the KJV faithfully renders *kai* modern Bible versions leave 80% of the instances of *kai* untranslated to avoid awkwardness. Yet, in the Greek New Testament there is an excessive use of *kai*.[14] an excellent proof of an original Hebrew text.

In addition to the Hebrew linguistic foundation of Revelation, the content of Revelation is decidedly Hebrew in three significant ways. First, as Stern points out, while there are few direct quotations, there are over 500 allusions to the *Tanakh*, principally from Exodus, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah.[15] The overall effect of so many references is to anchor Revelation in the God-inspired words of Israel’s prophets. Of course, except for the prologue (1:1-8), John writes in a straightforward narrative of a personal experience and nowhere does he use the familiar “it is written” (or similar words) to refer to one of the Hebrew prophets as Yeshua and the apostles do in the rest of the New Testament.[16] John declares that his narrative is a revelation directly from his Messiah. The similarities between Revelation and the Hebrew Prophets exist because both were inspired by the same source as “men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pet 1:21) and both reflect God’s grace to warn His people and mankind that the Day of the Lord is coming.

Second, Revelation contains the same elements as the story of the deliverance of Israel from their bondage in Egypt. Dan Juster has summarized the points of commonality between the two books as follows (1) preparation of God’s people, (2) the plagues of God on worldwide Egypt, (3) God’s people protected, (4) Antimesiah, the last days Pharaoh, (5) the exodus rapture, (6) wrath of the Lamb and His armies and (7) entry into the promised Land. [17] Revelation could then be deemed the story of the last Exodus.

Third, Alfred Edersheim (1825-1889) identified many parallels between the narrative and prophetic symbols in Revelation and the architecture, traditions, customs, worship and administration practices associated with the Jerusalem Temple.

“But it is specially remarkable, that the Temple-references with which the Book of Revelation abounds are generally to minutiae, which a writer who had not been as familiar with such details, as only personal contact and engagement with them could have rendered him, would scarcely have even noticed, certainly not employed as part of his imagery. They come in naturally, spontaneously, and so unexpectedly, that the reader is occasionally in danger of overlooking them altogether; and in language such as a professional man would employ, which would come to him from the previous exercise of his calling. Indeed, some of the most striking of these references could not have been understood at all without the professional treatises of the Rabbis on the Temple and its services.”[18]

Specific allusions to the Temple may be found in the following Revelation passages: 1:13; 3:5, 12, 20; 4:8, 11; 5:8-9, 12-13; 6:9-10; 7:2-3, 9-12; 8:1-4; 9:4; 10:7, 11; 11:15; 13:8; 14:1-5; 15:2-4, 6; 16:15; 19:1, 3-4, 6-8; 21:3, 16, 19-20. Edersheim’s observation and explanation of these details are especially valuable to understanding the spiritual lessons of Revelation.

[1] Luke is generally considered to have been a Jewish proselyte (David Stern, *Restoring the Jewishness of the Gospel*, 61), but I believe evidence points to Luke being a Hellenistic Jew. See the comment on Luke in [Witnesses of the Good News](#).

[2] David Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, ix.

[3] David Bivin & Roy Blizzard, Jr., *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, 4.

[4] Aramaic words in the New Testament include *talitha cumi* (Mark 5:41), *Ephphata* (Mark 7:34), *rabboni* (John 20:16) and *abba* (Mark 14:36; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). Even the Hebrew writings of the Mishnah and the Dead Sea Scrolls contain Aramaic words (Bivin, 9).

[5] The influence of literary criticism is so strong that even though the Greek specifically says *Hebrais*, meaning “Hebrew,” in John 5:2; 19:17, 20; 20:16; Acts 21:40; 22:2 and 26:14, the NIV translators rendered the Greek word as “Aramaic” in all those seven occurrences. The CEV translates “*Hebrais*” in five out of these seven verses with “Aramaic.” The NLT also uses “Aramaic” three times. The NCV avoided making the choice between “Hebrew” and “Aramaic” by translating *Hebrais* as “Jewish language” in all of the seven verses. Ironically, the NIV translates *Hebrais* as “Hebrew” or “Hebraic” in Acts 6:1; 2 Corinthians 11:22; Philippians 3:5; Revelation 9:11 and 16:16.

[6] Bivin & Blizzard, *op. cit.*, 17-21. Notable Hebrew scholars Moshe Bar-Asher, Harris Birkeland, Frank Cross, David Flusser, Jehoshua Grintz, Pinhas Lapide and Abbe J.T. Milik are cited to substantiate the thesis. While not acknowledged by Bivin, David Stern has likewise made a significant contribution to understanding the Jewish roots of the New Testament with his many publications on similar themes.

[7] David Flusser, *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity* (1989), quoted in Stern, 91.

[8] In the ongoing debate over the best English translation the argument usually resorts to a discussion of the best Greek text and whether the TR, M-Text or the earliest MSS should be given greater weight, since the original autographs no longer exist. Scholars have not adequately considered the thesis that the apostles wrote most, if not all, the New Testament originally in Hebrew and then others translated the circulated works into Greek. The same linguistic evidences for Hebrew can be cited in the rest of the New Testament.

[9] Bivin & Blizzard, *op. cit.*, 2.

[10] Stern, *op. cit.*, 31.

[11] Bivin & Blizzard, *op. cit.*, 50.

[12] John J. Parsons, "The Conjunctive Vav," *Hebrew For Christians: 2005*, http://hebrew4christians.com/Grammar/Unit_Four/Conjunctive_Vav/conjunctive_vav.html.

[13] Dana and Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 249.

[14] *Kai* is uncommonly frequent in the apostolic narratives (in well over 3,200 verses) and in over 1,800 verses in the rest of the New Testament. In Revelation *kai* occurs in 369 out of 384 verses (sixth highest count of New Testament books), occurring in many verses three or more times. *Olive Tree Bible Search Engine* (<http://www.olivetree.com>).

[15] Stern, *op. cit.*, 785.

[16] E.g. Matthew 2:5; 4:4, 6, 7, 10; 21:13; 26:24, 31; Mark 1:2; 7:6; John 6:45; Acts 1:20; 7:42; Romans 1:17; 1 Corinthians 9:9; Galatians 3:10; Hebrews 10:7; 1 Peter 1:16.

[17] Daniel Juster, *Revelation: The Passover Key*, Table of Contents.

[18] Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple-Its Ministry and Services*, 105f.