

Hebraisms in John:

Many Christian Bible students approach the study of the Bible in a very much back-to-front method by reading the New Testament with a modern Western mindset and failing to appreciate that this Book was written by a number of Jewish authors some 2000 years ago, who thought in a very different way and expressed these thoughts in a language and culturally specific manner which was very different to the way we tend to write and speak today.

I discuss this faulty approach and suggest a better alternative in 'Understanding the Bible 101' - <https://circumcisedheart.info/Understanding%20the%20Bible%20101.pdf>

Their approach involved a significant number of cultural and Hebrew language specific 'idioms' (characteristic modes of expression); idioms that are not common in English usage today.

For example, there is much greater use of figurative (vs literal) language than is common in today's works of literature (especially works of non-fiction).

Add to this expressions that are so strange to the Western and English ear, that the translators have often tried in many different ways to change them to make them more understandable and accessible to modern English readers.

For example the expression '*the eyes of your heart being enlightened*' (Eph 1:18), requires a different appreciation of what the heart represented in Biblical times compared to our modern scientific understanding. I discuss this whole issue in a number of articles on the Hebraic Mindset and www.circumcisedheart.info

There are actually hundreds of these 'Semitic' idioms even just in the Synoptic Gospels alone.

For example, "good eye" meaning "generous" and "bad eye" meaning "stingy" (Mt.6:22-23; Lk. 11:34); "bind" meaning "prohibit" and "loose" meaning "permit" (Mt. 16:19; 18:18), and the use of the word "Heaven" as a euphemism for "God" (Mt. 5:3; 21:25, Lk. 15:18; Jn. 3:27).

Some though, who base a lot of their pet doctrines on the Gospel of John have tried to argue that this Gospel does not make use of Hebraisms (which, if true would mean its author was not Jewish and not part of the original group of disciples of Yeshua – this is turn which bring into serious question the inspiration and whole validity of this Gospel).

So a good question it would seem is to ask specifically what Hebraisms are in John's Gospel? Or alternatively, can we see enough use of Hebraisms in this NT book to convince most that we should indeed approach this book, as well, with a Hebraic mindset?

In answering this question, you may have noticed I have already listed one example of a Hebraism in John. That is, John 3:27 "John answered, "No one can receive anything unless it has been given to him from Heaven."

In fact, the use of the term 'heaven' to represent God is very common in John.

Another interesting example is the use of the positive adjective for the comparative or superlative.

Biblical Hebrew had no special forms or words for the comparative and superlative adjectives such as "bigger," or "biggest". Instead, in this case for example, the positive adjective is used, that is "big."

A good example of the idiom occurs in Mark 9:43: "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is GOOD (Greek 'kalon') for you to enter life crippled than having your two hands to go to hell."

Because our modern Western ear finds this a little off, the translators changed 'good' to 'better'.

Does the Gospel of John reflect this Semitic and Hebraic idiom?

Yes, in John 2:10, "You have kept the best (literally 'good') wine until now.". If we were to read this directly translated as 'You have kept the good wine until now', we might falsely assume that they haven't even been drinking wine up to this point.

Another similar Hebraism is the use of negative verbs to represent a strong positive affirmation. For example in Psalms 84:11 we read "No good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly."

Note the negative of 'NO good thing' (being withheld) actually inferring the opposite idea that the righteous (walk uprightly), will be given ALL good things (from God).

We see this Hebraism used in John 14:18, "I will NOT leave you comfortLESS," meaning, 'I will both protect and give you a most solid comfort'.

Another common Hebraism was to use the term 'father' to represent the originator or inventor of a new thing or approach. For example in Genesis 4:20 we have 'Adar bare Jabal: he was the father of such as dwell in tents, and of such as have cattle.'.

Also, Abraham was known as the 'father of faith' as he was the founder (the first) of the religion of the Hebrews (Hebrew meaning 'to cross over' and originating from the fact the Abraham 'crossed over' the great Euphrates river to heed the call from God).

So is this Hebraism in John?

Yes in John 8:44, "You are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father you will do."

Clearly the Jewish people being condemned here by this apparent quote of Yeshua, were not literally the offspring of the Devil, but were being labeled as such because they were behaving in sinful and unbelieving ways, the origins of which were being laid at the 'feet of the devil', so that the devil was their 'father'.

Another very common Hebraism is to make the 'name' of someone synonymous with that person.

This is very common throughout the Tanakh (OT) , but we can clearly see its use in Acts 1:15 "The number of names together were about an hundred and twenty."

Does John's Gospel make use of this Hebraism?

Yes, a number of times. For example: John 1:12, "As many as received him = (Yeshua), to them gave he power --- even to them that believe on his name."; John 3:18, "He that believes on him = (Yeshua) is not condemned."; and John 20:31, "Believing you might have life through = (in) his name."

Even certain common nouns are clearly Hebrew in origin rather than Greek or even Aramaic.

For example the word 'rabboni' or 'rabboni'. This is a good first century CE Hebrew word --see E. Y. Kutscher (Hebrew and Aramaic Studies [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1977], 268-271).

In John 20:16 we read 'Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!". (NASB) and in the CJB it reads:

"Yeshua said to her, "Miryam!" Turning, she cried out to him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (that is, "Teacher!")."

So hopefully you should now see that there is significant evidence that Hebraisms are plentiful in John's Gospel, and as I have detailed elsewhere, even John's prologue uses very similar language to a number of the more significant Hebrew documents found amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls (dated from around 180 BCE to 30 CE). The list above is far from exhaustive.

One of the most significant Hebraisms that is central to John's Gospel and much of the NT is the use of 'past tense' to speak of future events that have not happened yet!

This really confuses many. I discuss this in some detail in the article 'The Prophetic Perfect Hebraism and its Impact on Preterism' -- see <http://circumcisedheart.info/Prophetic%20Perfect.pdf>

But I suspect that the two most commonly used Hebraisms in John are the use of hyperbole (exaggeration) and the use of figurative language, including metaphors.

Consider John 6:53 "Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you shall not have life within you". Clearly, Yeshua did not expect his disciples to be cannibals and eat his flesh and drink his blood. Such practices were abhorred by religious Jews and the Torah strictly forbids anyone from drinking blood (Lev 17:10-12) (because the 'life' of a creature is in its blood and its 'life' belongs to God alone).

So this statement was definitely figurative, but was also perhaps hyperbole because Yeshua was trying to make the point that he wished the disciples to share the 'life', the intimate relationship he shared with the Father. Yeshua wanted them to so fully embrace his way of living; his obedience to Torah; that they were so close to him; so much in unity with him; that his example and words become their 'bread' (main staple or source) of Truth; or figuratively, as he had just stated that he was their 'bread of life' (John 6:48).

To help confirm the meaning of this figurative language in chapter 6 of John, Yeshua quotes Isaiah 54:13 "All your children will be taught by YHWH; your children will have great peace" to confirm that he sees himself as declaring God's instructions (Torah). So Yeshua exaggerated here to make his point.

But, in John's Gospel there are many of these metaphors: Yeshua called himself 'the bread of life' - John 6:48; 'the light of the world' - John 8:12; 'the door' - John 10:9; 'the true vine' - John 15:1; and he referred to his body as the Temple - John 2:19.

Clearly these are metaphors and not to be taken literally. Yeshua never was an actual door, but rather he offers a means of entry into the Kingdom of God. So when he contrasts himself with the manna (the bread that sustained the Jewish people in the Sinai Desert), he is just further accentuating the metaphor and using hyperbole to bring greater emphasis to his argument.

When you become aware of these metaphors in John, and then re-read this Gospel, you should note that such figurative language and hyperbole is actually used quite frequently.

When the Gospel of John is read with Hebraic eyes, that is with some appreciation of these many Hebraisms, it is most unlikely that any part of it will be seen to be interpreted to support the doctrine of the pre-existence of Yeshua¹

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¹ See my article ['An Introduction to the Pre-existence of the Messiah'](#)