

About 6 years ago, a woman called my wife asking about Psalm 22. She asked about the word “pierced” in verse 16 and said that she had been told the word actually meant “lion”. Having never been asked that before, I began to look for the answer. At that time, I was unaware of any questions about the text, or the attempts by various Jewish rabbis to discredit the Christian claim that Psalm 22 is a “messianic” prophecy.

After a relatively short period of time, I was able to see where the rabbis were coming from, but also realized that their conclusions were based on false premises. I was able to show the woman what I had learned and after help from other Hebrew Roots teachers, the woman and her husband began to see the fallaciousness of the rabbinical arguments.

In this study, I want to show that the text of Psalm 22, especially verse 16, is indeed a Messianic prophecy. We'll begin by discussing why there is a problem, then look at Jewish arguments against the Christian claim that the psalm pictures the crucifixion to the Messiah. Finally, I'll show that even if the rabbis are correct in regards to verse 16, it doesn't change the significance of the prophecy.

Let's begin by defining the argument.

Why is There a Problem?

Most Messianic believers believe that Jesus was crucified so as to satisfy the requirements of the prophets. There are many statements in the New Testament that support that view. For instance, in his testimony of the Messiah's death, John - the disciple that Yeshua loved, went into much detail to show that the events of Yeshua's death were by design. He concludes his testimony by saying -

^{NKJ} **John 19:35-37** ³⁵ And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe. ³⁶ For these things were done that the Scripture should be fulfilled, "Not *one* of His bones shall be broken." ³⁷ And again another Scripture says, "They shall look on Him whom they pierced."

John, as did the other gospel writers and the disciples, believed that it was important to convey the message that Yeshua died according to the scriptures. Peter - another disciple - just after healing a lame man in the same area of the Temple complex where Yeshua had spoke just a few months earlier¹, spoke to the Jewish crowd that gathered as a result of the miracle. After convicting them of killing “the Prince of life”, he said -

^{NKJ} **Acts 3:17-18** ¹⁷ "Yet now, brethren, I know that you did *it* in ignorance, as *did* also your rulers. ¹⁸ "But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled.

The fact that the Messiah had to fulfill the prophecies - even in regards to the manner of His death - was so important to the apostles that even Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, stated that the record of Yeshua's death is the first thing he taught them -

^{NKJ} **1 Corinthians 15:1** Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, ² by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you -- unless you believed in vain. ³ For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

¹ John 10:22-23

To Paul, the testimony of the events of Yeshua's death was in many ways, a pivotal point in the proof of the gospel message we was sent to proclaim. We, as Messianic believers agree, and thus we compare the various testimonies of Yeshua's death and compare them to the messianic prophecies and see proof that the historical "Jesus" is indeed the Messiah of Israel. Psalm 22 is a leading example of that proof since it contains so many parallels to the disciple's narrative of the crucifixion.

Judaism, on the other hand, believes the messiah will come in the spirit of King David as a conquering king, and thus discount the "suffering servant" passages of prophecy and apply them to Israel as a nation. Thus, when they come to Psalm 22, they see it as King David's personal story as he sees himself being chased like an animal as Saul tries to kill him. In an article entitled "Psalms 22 - "Nailing" an alleged Crucifixion Scenario", the author Uri Yosef writes² -

"There are several Jewish perspectives on this psalm, all of which agree that King David composed it and is the "voice" throughout, and that it is historical, not messianic." . . . "it is David's own personal story, in which he describes his own pain, anguish, and longing during those times when he was a fugitive from his enemies, believing that, at times, God had not heeded his pleas for intervention. He pleads with God to come to his aid since his persecutors are relentlessly pursuing him in their zeal to dispossess him of his kingdom and mantle of royalty. He uses animal motifs of lions, dogs, and bulls/bison, to describe his adversaries, which he also employs on other occasions (e.g., Psalms 17:11,12, 35:17, 59:2-7,15)".

So for those who prescribe to traditional Judaism, Psalm 22 is just the story of one of David's many trials. It is not in any way "messianic". As far as they are concerned, the "Christians" have tampered with this story in order to make it fit the crucifixion narrative. A leading Jewish "anti-missionary" writes in a response to a post on his web site³ -

"To understand the brazen manner in which Christendom tampered with the Jewish scriptures, let's examine the verse that you insist "proves" that Jesus is the messiah."

OK – let's do it! Let's examine the verse to see what it really says.

The verse in question is verse 16 (verse 17 in a Jewish bible). In most "Christian" bibles, the verse reads similar to –

^{KJV} **Psalm 22:16** For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have enclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet.

But in most Jewish bibles it reads like this –

^{TNK} **Psalm 22:17** Dogs surround me; a pack of evil ones closes in on me, like lions they maul my hands and feet.

The difference is that the Christian bibles state that what happened to the hands and feet is that they were *pierced* whereas the Jewish bibles say that they were *being mauled at like lions*. Obviously, the Christian rendition substantiates the crucifixion narrative whereas the Jewish does not.

Christians Tampered with the Text

Let's begin by answering the charge that Christian's tampered with the text. The text that's being referenced is the Septuagint - often referred to as "LXX" or "Seventy"⁴. The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Tnakh (the Old Testament). The Encyclopedia Britannica states that the Septuagint is –

² <http://thejewishhome.org/counter/Psa22.pdf>; pg. 3

³ <http://outreachjudaism.org/crucifixion-psalm/>

⁴ See on our web site - http://www.amiyisrael.org/articles/LXX_vs_MT.htm

“ . . . the earliest extant Greek translation of the Old Testament from the original Hebrew, presumably made for the use of the Jewish community in Egypt when Greek was the lingua franca throughout the region. Analysis of the language has established that the Torah, or Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), was translated near the middle of the 3rd century BC and that the rest of the Old Testament was translated in the 2nd century BC.”

“The name Septuagint (from the Latin septuaginta, “70”) was derived later from the legend that there were 72 translators, 6 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel, who worked in separate cells, translating the whole, and in the end all their versions were identical.”⁵

Though the legend may be somewhat of a stretch, it appears that the Septuagint (LXX) – written more than 150 years before the advent of Yeshau - had gained considerable acceptance among the first century Jewish believers in Yeshua as evidenced by the fact that a majority of the New Testament quotes from the Old Testament “scriptures” were made from the LXX. The LXX was widely used in the Jewish community, even being read in the synagogue. Today, the Septuagint is the oldest translation of the Hebrew scriptures available, predating the Masoretic text by 1000 years. Note that the Encyclopedia Britannica states that all of the Old Testament was translated into Greek by the close of the 2nd century BC, or at least 100 years before the birth of Yeshua.

With that said, we see that the Jewish translators of the LXX render Psalm 22:16 like this –

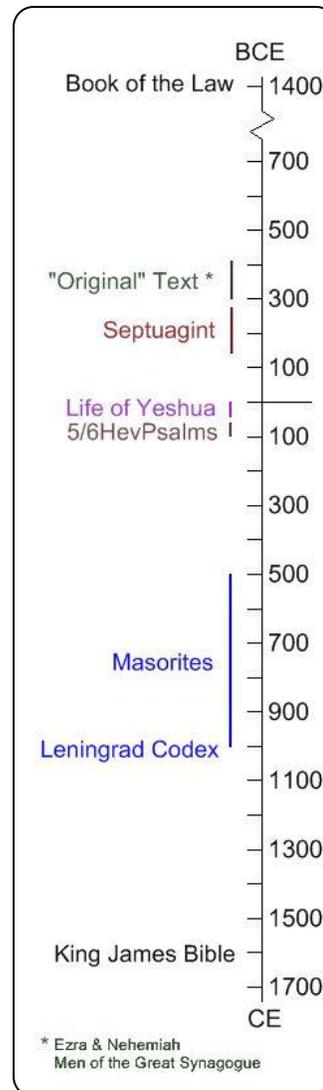
^{LXE} **Psalm 22:16** {021:16} For many dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked doers has beset me round: they pierced my hands and my feet.

The Greek word that was translated as “pierced” is the Greek word ὄρυξαν (oruxan) which means “to dig”. This same word is used to translate “chaphar” (Strong’s 2658) in Gen 26:19 where it says –

^{NKJ} **Genesis 26:19** Also Isaac’s servants dug in the valley, and found a well of running water there.

Unfortunately, we have none of the Hebrew texts from which the Septuagint was translated. Thus, until recently, no one was certain what Hebrew word was translated “pierced” by the Jewish priests who made the translations.

The rabbis reject the LXX wording of Psalm 22:16, claiming that by the first century, the LXX contained only the five books of Moses, and that the rest of the Septuagint was translated later and with a “Christian” bias. This notion has been found to be incorrect with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls as well as Greek language scrolls from Nahal Hever, an area approximately 25 miles south of Qumran⁶. These scrolls were discovered in the mid 1950’s and contain what appear to be revisions to the LXX



⁵ <http://www.britannica.com/topic/Septuagint>
⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cave_of_Letters

translation of the Minor Prophets⁷. This shows that most, if not all of the Hebrew Bible at that time had indeed been translated into Greek.

In addition, the Dead Sea Scrolls contain copies of the book of Psalms (in Hebrew) that contain 151 chapters – just as it does in the LXX⁸ whereas the Masoretic text (the foundation for most Jewish bibles) contains only 150 chapters. Thus, the evidence reveals that the LXX, including the book of Psalms, was in existence before the first century CE . . . in other words, before the advent of Yeshua. This puts to rest the Jewish notion that the LXX adapted the Christian understanding of the Psalm 22 or that the Christians had tampered with the text.

The Original Text Says . . .

One of the leading modern day Jewish “anti-missionaries”⁹ is Rabbi Tovia Singer. He is the founder and leader of “Outreach Judaism” which according to their web site

“. . . is an international organization that responds directly to the issues raised by missionaries and cults, by exploring Judaism in contradistinction to fundamentalist Christianity.¹⁰

On his site, he says –

“To understand how Christian translators rewrote the words of King David, let’s examine the original Hebrew words of this verse with a proper translation.”

Notice that he says that the “Christian translators rewrote the words of King David” - a charge that we’ve already addressed.

Rabbi Singer continues with a table showing the difference between the “correct” translation and the “King James Version” of the Hebrew text as it’s found in most Jewish Bibles. He then says -

“Notice that the English translation from the **original** Hebrew does not contain the word “pierced.”

The King James version deliberately mistranslated the Hebrew word kaari (כָּאָרַי) as “pierced.”¹¹

In the above statement, I’ve emphasized the word “original” because herein lies the crux of the problem - there are no copies of the “original” Hebrew! Rabbi Singer was incorrect when he said that the “original” says such and such because there is no way to know what the original says. Up until about 40 years ago, the closest thing we had to “original” Hebrew was one of the many renditions of the Masoretic text, so let’s take a moment and discuss the Masoretic text.

The Masoretic text is what Judaism considers the “original” text of the Old Testament. The Encyclopedia Britannica (online edition) says this –

Masoretic text, (from Hebrew masoreth, “tradition”), traditional Hebrew text of the Jewish Bible, meticulously assembled and codified, and supplied with diacritical marks to enable correct pronunciation. This monumental work was begun around the 6th century ad and completed in the 10th by scholars at Talmudic academies in Babylonia and Palestine, in an effort to reproduce, as far as possible, the original text of the Hebrew Old Testament. Their intention was not to interpret the meaning of the Scriptures but to transmit to future generations the authentic Word of God. To this end they gathered manuscripts and whatever oral traditions were available to them.¹²

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_Minor_Prophets_Scroll_from_Nahal_Hever

⁸ <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/psalm-151-and-the-dead-sea-scrolls.aspx>

⁹ An anti-missionary is one who opposes the work of “missionaries” who try to convert Jews to Christianity

¹⁰ <https://outreachjudaism.org/about-us/>

¹¹ <http://outreachjudaism.org/crucifixion-psalm/>

¹² <http://www.britannica.com/topic/Masoretic-text>

From this we learn that:

- The work of the masorites started about 500 CE and ended about 1000 CE
- They used a number of different manuscripts in order to codify the text
- Their “oral traditions” played a part in the codification of the final text

Through the ages, there have been countless studies into how we got our Bible, especially how we came up with the “Old Testament” text. The Tnakh records that the “Book of the Law” had been kept in the Temple up until the time of King Josiah¹³, but after that we’re not sure what happened to all the various texts that we now consider “scripture”. If indeed they continued to be kept in the Temple, that came to an end when the first Temple was destroyed. According to tradition, it was during the Babylonian captivity that the “Men of the Great Assembly” gathered up various manuscripts, including those of the current prophets - Daniel, Malachi, and others, and they became the Tnakh. It’s assumed that copies of these manuscripts were the source from which the translators of the Septuagint did their work. What later became of the various copies of the Hebrew manuscripts is unknown.

Further complicating the search for ancient manuscripts of the Hebrew scriptures is the fact that once a text became old and worn, the Jewish sages would not simply store that copy away, but would instead, give it a respectful burial, making it unavailable for future generations. Therefore, the manuscripts that might be available to the Masorites were all relatively new - possibly being copied from texts that originated after the first century CE - thus opening up the possibility of bias and error. This possibility is mentioned on the Jewish web site “My Jewish Learning Center”¹⁴. Quoting from the book “The Jewish Religion: a Companion”, it says

“A major problem in biblical studies revolves around the accuracy and reliability of the Masoretic Text. It is known that from early Rabbinic times the greatest care was taken by copyists, especially when copying the Pentateuch text, the *Sefer Torah*. There are detailed rules as to how the Sefer Torah is to be copied, with the result that there are no divergences in the text between one Sefer Torah and another in any part of the Jewish world.”

“But, as the ancient versions—the Septuagint, the Targum, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Latin version, the Vulgate, and the texts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls—show, errors may have crept into the text before the Masoretic Text had been established or, rather, the ancient versions may be based on traditions different from that finally recorded in the Masoretic Text”

What this is saying is that there was great care taken when copying the five books of Moses (the *Torah*) and therefore we can assume they are probably correct. But on the other hand, more ancient versions of the Bible (albeit in different languages) reveal that either the texts that were being used had already been corrupted by (Jewish) tradition, or the Masorites themselves corrupted the text to satisfy their traditions.

One final quote along this line is from the book “Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible” by Emanuel Tov¹⁵. In it, he indicates that the Masoretic text could not be considered a replica of the original text. He says –

“It has become clear from the preceding paragraphs that one of the postulates of biblical research is that the text preserved in the various representatives (manuscripts, editions) of what is commonly called the Masoretic Text, does not reflect the “original text” of the biblical books in many details. Even though the concept of an “original text” necessarily remains vague, it will always be legitimate to recognize the differences between the Masoretic Text and earlier or different stages of the biblical text. Moreover, even were we to surmise that MT reflects the

¹³ 2 Kings 22:8

¹⁴ <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-masoretic-text/>

¹⁵ Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible, 2nd Edition; Emanuel Tov; Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN; 1992; ISBN 0-8006-3429-2; pg. 11

"original" form of the Bible, we would still have to decide which Masoretic Text reflects this "original text," since the Masoretic Text is not a uniform textual unit, but is itself represented by many witnesses..."

In other words, there is no single authoritative Masoretic Text, but instead, there are a number of them, and they do not all agree. One is the Codex Leningrad: which is the oldest complete copy of the Hebrew Old Testament dated at 1010 CE. It is the source on which the Hebrew texts of today are based. It resides in the Public Library of Leningrad in Russia. Another version of the MT is found in the Aleppo Codex which while older than the Leningrad Codex, is missing parts of the Old Testament text. In addition to these, there are numerous other copies of the Masoretic text, but again, they do not all agree.

So Rabbi Singer is wrong in stating that the "**original** Hebrew does not contain the word "pierced"", because he simply does not have a copy of the "original Hebrew" to prove it.

So let us review what we've seen so far -

- Christians believe Psalm 22 is a prophecy about Jesus' crucifixion whereas Judaism teaches that it's simply a story about David fleeing from Saul
 - The source of the Christian belief is the Septuagint
- Judaism teaches that the Christians "tampered" with the text to derive the pierced hands and feet reading
- Judaism relies on the Masoretic Text for their belief
 - Claiming it to be the original Hebrew
 - There are no remaining copies of the original Hebrew

This is what we'll be discussing in Part 2 -

- Refuting the Masoretic Text
- Recent evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls
- Other Jewish arguments
- Either way - IT WORKS!

Shalom Alechem