Seek Yahweh:
A Hebrew Gospel of Matthew
by Rev. John Cortright

No early Hebrew translations of the New Testament are known. If such manuscripts did exist, we would have tremendous enlightenment regarding the name of God in New Testament times. Although no such manuscripts exist, writings of early church fathers indicate that the Gospel of Matthew was originally written in Hebrew.¹

Papias (130 AD)
“Matthew wrote the oracles in the Hebrew language, and every one interpreted them as he was able” (Eusebius, Church History, 3.39.16)

Irenaeus of Lyons (170 AD)
“Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect.” (Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 3.1.1)

Origen (200 AD)
“The first was written by Matthew, who was once a publican, but afterwards an apostle of Jesus Christ, and it was prepared for the converts from Judaism, and published in the Hebrew language.” (Eusebius, Church History, 6.25.4)

Eusebius (315 AD)
“For Matthew, who had at first preached to the Hebrews, when he was about to go to other
peoples, committed his Gospel to writing in his native tongue.” (Eusebius, Church History, 3.24)

Jerome (382 AD)
“Matthew, also called Levi, apostle and afores times publican, composed a Gospel of Christ at first published in Judea in Hebrew for the sake of those of the circumcision who believed, but this was afterwards translated into Greek, though by what author is uncertain. The Hebrew itself has been preserved until the present day in the library at Caesarea.” (Jerome, On Illustrious Men, 3)

No copies of this Hebrew version of Matthew exist. The Greek language “had an enormous impact in Judea in both Second Temple and rabbinic times. As far as we know, however, Hebrew remained the primary language of literary expression. The Qumran scrolls demonstrate that Hebrew was the original language of most of the works written in Judea between the period of the Maccabees and the destruction of the temple in 70 CD.”² For years, it had been commonly believed that Hebrew was not spoken in Jesus’ day and that the vernacular of Palestine was Aramaic. However, since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, scholars have reconsidered this supposition as these texts are overwhelmingly Hebrew, not Aramaic. Many other discoveries from Judea in the last 50 years have also confirmed the extensive use of Hebrew in the land of Judea in the early first century.

The New Testament bears witness to this truth as well. Some have thought the following uses of the word
“Hebrew” should be understood as “Aramaic.” However, there is a very good possibility that the Scriptures mean exactly what they say and that the language was indeed Hebrew.

John 20:16
Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

John 19:20
Therefore many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin and in Greek.

Acts 21:40; 22:2
When he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the stairs, motioned to the people with his hand; and when there was a great hush, he spoke to them in the Hebrew dialect, saying,
And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew dialect, they became even more quiet; and he said,

Acts 26:14
And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'
If this is the case, then it seems altogether reasonable to believe that some of the New Testament writings, especially those written to Jews living in Israel, would have been written in Hebrew. Although there are no known early Hebrew New Testament manuscripts, a complete Hebrew Text of Matthew was produced in the fourteenth century by a Jew named Shem-Tob. This copy of Matthew is part of a larger Hebrew writing known as *Even Bohan* or “The Touchstone.” Shem-Tob made this translation, not to support Christianity, but as Jew he wrote this as a polemic, written to refute Christianity. The original document contained many polemical insertions used by Shem-Tob as arguments to support Judaism against the Christian doctrine. What text did Shem-Tob use to make this Hebrew translation? George Howard’s excellent analysis provides strong evidence that this translation did not come from an existing Greek text, but more likely was a translation of an earlier Hebrew manuscript.³

One particular note of interest is in Howard’s appendix on “The Divine Name” and Shem-Tob’s use of the Hebrew letter “ח” (Heth), which is a shortened form of “יהוה” (HaShem or “The Name”). The term “HaShem” is one of the common surrogates spoken by Jews today when reading the name of God. This use of the Hebrew letter “ח” appears 19 times in Shem Tob’s translation – (Mt 1:22, 24; 2:13, 19; 3:3; 4:7, 10; 5:33; 15:8; 21:9, 12, 42; 22:31, 32, 37, 44; 27:9; 28:2, 9). An examination of the majority of these references reveals that this is often a quote from the Old Testament and is clearly a reference to Yahweh. The Greek texts use the word “κυρίος;” the Syriac versions use the word “μύρα;” Latin is “domino;” and in English, it is translated as “Lord.”
However, in three instances there is no corresponding Greek, Syriac, Latin, or English equivalent. “The Name” simply appears in Shem-Tob’s Hebrew version. The three references are as follows:

Matthew 15:8 – “Thus [HaShem] said, because this people...,”
Matthew 22:32 – “[HaShem], am the God of Abraham...,
Matthew 28:9 – “Jesus passed before them saying: May [HaShem] deliver you, then they came near to him, bowed down...”

This begs the question, “Why would Shem-Tob, a Jew of the strictest sense, add a usage of Hashem, representing the sacred Name, to a text where it did not exist in the first place?” Howard states, “The conclusion that seems inescapable is that Shem-Tob found the Divine Name already in his gospel text, having received it from an earlier generation of Jewish tradents. He permitted the Divine Name to remain in the text perhaps because he was unsure himself about what to do with it.”

By the 14th century, Jewish tradition had completely restricted the use of the name of God. Shem-Tob, being a fervent Jew, would not have added “the Name” to a Christian manuscript. He would, however, have been careful not to write the name and instead use the common Jewish surrogate, (HaShem) or in shortened form “יה穏.”

Perhaps one day, more discoveries will be found that would provide insight into the use of Hebrew in New Testament writings. If that were the case, then the name, Yahweh, could be seen in the texts and not the ambiguous title “Lord.” When reading the words of Jesus speaking about his Father in the Hebrew tongue,
we would see him boldly declare God’s name in the Shema, the Jewish statement of faith:

Matthew 22:36-38
Rabbi, tell us which is the greatest commandment in the Torah.
He said to him: Thou shalt love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. This is the first.

(This is a rendering of George Howard’s translation of Shem Tob’s Hebrew Gospel of Matthew, replacing the Hebrew letter “י” with the name of God, Yahweh, –rather than the ambiguous surrogate “Lord” or the Jewish substitute “HaShem.”)


2 Shaye J.D. Cohen, From the Maccabees to the Mishnah (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, Copyright © 2005) Page 32

3 George Howard, Hebrew Gospel of Matthew (Mercer University Press, Macon Georgia, Copyright © 1995), Part Two, Analysis and Commentary, Pg 153-234

4 Ibid., pg 231