

*Using Old Testament Hebrew in Preaching: A Guide for Students and Pastors*

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# PREFACE

*For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to do [it], and to teach [its] statutes and judgments in Israel.*

—Ezra 7:10

**T**he faculties of many major seminaries still believe it is crucial for pastors to have a firm grasp of the biblical languages, and I wholeheartedly agree. Students, however, continue to ask me, “Why do I have to learn biblical Hebrew?” Some of the more desperate students add, “I hear that most pastors don’t ever use their Greek, let alone their Hebrew, in their preaching after they get out of seminary anyway.” Eugene Peterson explains the dilemma of these students well:

Post-academic life is demanding and decidedly unsympathetic to anything that doesn’t provide quick and obvious returns. We are handed job descriptions in which our wonderful languages don’t even rate a footnote; we acquire families who plunge us into urgencies in which Hebrew radicals provide no shortcuts; we can’t keep up with all the stuff thrown at us in easy English—who has time for hard Greek? It isn’t long before the languages are, as we say, “lost.”<sup>1</sup>

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1. Quoted in David W. Baker and Elaine A. Heath, with Morven R. Baker, *More Light on the Path: Daily Scripture Reading in Hebrew and Greek* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 5.

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In the first year of seminary it is easy to think, somewhat naively, “Of course pastors should know Greek and Hebrew and use the original texts every time they preach or teach.” However, in time, the initial excitement of learning the biblical languages can get smothered by the amount of Greek and Hebrew vocabulary to memorize and the difficulty of understanding apparently inconsistent grammatical rules. I understand this since I, too, experienced the crushing load of studying Greek and Hebrew as a second-year seminary student. But now that I am “on the other side” and have learned enough Greek and Hebrew to understand why the languages are important, I believe a book like this needs to be written. It seems a terrible waste for students to take one, two, or more years of Greek and/or Hebrew only to enter a busy pastorate and never use the languages. However, it is even worse to hear a pastor butcher a text because no time was dedicated to looking at it in the original language.

This book is written for all Bible school and seminary students who have struggled through at least one year of Hebrew grammar and are wondering how they will ever be able to retain it. It is also written for pastors who need some encouragement to refresh and maintain their knowledge of the biblical languages. I hope this book will help you keep up the good fight and use Hebrew to its fullest. Similar books (e.g., David Alan Black, Gordon D. Fee, Walter L. Liefeld) have been written to help busy pastors use their Greek to prepare sermons, but few resources exist for using Hebrew. I am convinced that modern Christians lack a certain richness and depth in their spiritual lives because they are not hearing the Old Testament preached with the same urgency and power as the New Testament is preached. It is too easy to use the Old Testament merely for illustration without uncovering its true depth.

I agree with David Alan Black who says, “The Word of God must be handled accurately—or not handled at all.”<sup>2</sup> My main purpose for this book is to encourage students and pastors to begin using their Hebrew to expound the Old Testament and to bring across the message of a passage both powerfully and accurately. Even though it takes effort and time to understand the grammar and structure of Hebrew

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2. David Alan Black, *Using New Testament Greek in Ministry: A Practical Guide for Students and Pastors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 9.

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(e.g., dagheshes, mappiqs, weak verbs), nevertheless the syntax is fairly simple and the time spent trying to understand the meaning of Hebrew texts pays great dividends.

My prayer is that God will use this book to excite you to the fantastic possibility of preaching from the Old Testament with power and accuracy. Lord willing, congregations all over the United States and abroad will be reintroduced to the Old Testament with relevancy and meaning that produces changed lives.

Ezra provides an excellent example of how we should go about our job—to set our hearts to study the law of the Lord so that we can teach it to others (Ezra 7:10). Our job of teaching others God’s Word is vital, for the Word “is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12). May God give us the ability to handle His Word so well that it does its job not only in our hearts, but also in the hearts of our listeners.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ICC	International Critical Commentary. Scribner
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JPSC	JPS Bible Commentary. Jewish Publication Society of America
JPSTC	JPS Torah Commentary. Jewish Publication Society of America
KJV	King James Version, 1611
LXX	Septuagint
NAC	New American Commentary. Broadman and Holman
NASB	New American Standard Bible, 1977
NASBU	New American Standard Bible, 1995
NBC	New Bible Commentary. Eerdmans
NCB	New Century Bible Commentary. Eerdmans
NEB	New English Bible, 1970
NET	Net Bible, 2005
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary. Hendrickson
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Eerdmans
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> . Edited by Willem A. Van Gemeren. 6 vols. Grand Rapids, 1997
NIV	New International Version, 1978
NIVAC	The NIV Application Commentary. Zondervan
NKJV	New King James Version, 1982
NLT	New Living Translation, 1996
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version, 1989
OTL	Old Testament Library. Westminster/John Knox
REB	Revised English Bible, 1989
RSV	Revised Standard Version, 1952
TNIV	Today's New International Version, 2005
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Tyndale
<i>TWOT</i>	<i>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke. Chicago, 1980
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary. Word
WEC	Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary. Moody



# THE BIG QUESTION

HOW WILL KNOWING BIBLICAL HEBREW  
HELP ME IN MY MINISTRY?

*My only hope for the world is in bringing the  
human mind into contact with divine revelation.*

—William Gladstone (1809–1898)

If you are a typical Hebrew student, you have spent almost two hundred hours learning vocabulary, about four hundred hours learning the basics of biblical Hebrew grammar, paid several thousand dollars in tuition, and spent about four hundred dollars on books. All this time and expense has been for one basic purpose: to learn to exegete the Hebrew text accurately in order to preach authoritative, relevant sermons to your congregation. Modern Christians have demonstrated a continuing hunger to know God’s Word by their attendance at Bible conferences, seminars, studies, and by their purchasing of popular books on the Christian life. However, far too many people avoid the Old Testament. They dare not wander too far into the Old Testament for fear of coming across things they do not understand or, even worse, things that appear to contradict the New Testament.

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*Epigraph.* Cited in Edythe Draper, *Draper’s Book of Quotations for the Christian World* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1992), p. 277, #5094.

Sidney Greidanus succinctly states the problem this way: “It is no secret that the Old Testament is like a lost treasure in the church today.”<sup>1</sup> Even well-known accounts from the Old Testament can be confusing:

An old lady waited on [Joseph] Parker [minister of the City Temple in London] in his vestry after a service to thank him for the help she received from his sermons. “You do throw such wonderful light on the Bible, doctor,” she said. “Do you know that until this morning, I had always thought that Sodom and Gomorrah were man and wife?”<sup>2</sup>

There are many good reasons for preaching and teaching from the Old Testament, not the least of which is that it contains at least two-thirds of God’s written revelation. But if we are going to teach our congregations more than just the bare minimum, we need the tools to understand the Old Testament ourselves. Whether you are ready to graduate or have been in the pastorate for a number of years, you may wonder how you can find the time to exegete Old Testament passages in the original language with all the other demands of a busy pastorate. You may also find that, even before the degrees are bestowed and the graduation gowns are hung up, the process of forgetting has already begun. Within two years, much of your Hebrew could be lost. On the other hand, all the time and energy you spent learning Hebrew could be just the beginning of a learning process that will provide depth to your knowledge of Scripture and enrich your preaching.

Everyone knows the danger of taking that last Hebrew class (and it is what Hebrew teachers fear most): it could be the last time you crack open your Hebrew Bible. But why is this? Why do so many students forget their Hebrew almost the moment they leave school? And why are there so few books to help students and pastors develop a realistic and practical plan to keep their Hebrew alive and even growing?

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1. Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 15.

2. Warren W. Wiersbe and Lloyd M. Perry, *Wycliffe Handbook of Preaching and Preachers* (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 213. See also Arthur Porritt, *The Best I Can Remember* (London: Cassell, 1922), 68.



About halfway through your seminary Hebrew classes, you may have started to wonder if the hard work is worth it. By this point you still have only learned enough grammar and vocabulary to translate very rudimentary Hebrew sentences. And then you hear how hard it is to learn those dreaded weak verbs.

It is not an unrealistic goal to be able to maintain your Hebrew after graduation. In fact, you may even have some fun along the way. For instance, using the original language during devotions will not only feed your soul, but it may also uncover gems for future messages. However, it is important to set realistic goals and devise a plan to retain your Hebrew. I have often said that I would rather students get Bs in Hebrew with the intention of using the language for the rest of their lives than to get As but be so exhausted by the end of their coursework that they never want to see a Hebrew text again.

### WHY STUDY HEBREW ANYWAY?

I, like every other teacher of biblical languages, have been asked hundreds of times if studying Hebrew is necessary. Often the question sounds like this: “Aren’t the English translations of the Bible accurate enough and won’t they be sufficient for me to teach from? Why should I make another translation? I will never be able to make as good a translation as those Hebrew experts, anyway.” Most modern Bible translations are indeed accurate and provide a suitable guideline for teaching. However, Dennis Magary notes:

As fine as our contemporary translations are, as carefully as they have been prepared, a translation is still a translation. It is and will always be at least one step removed from the original. An English version, a translation of the Hebrew text in any language, is an interpretation, a commentary reflecting critical and interpretive decisions by a host of scholars. Translators have made numerous decisions regarding the meaning of words, the syntax of clauses, [and] the referent of a pronoun.<sup>3</sup>

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3. Dennis R. Magary, “Keeping Your Hebrew Healthy,” in *Preaching the Old Testament*, ed. Scott M. Gibson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 30.

Translations are sufficient to meet the needs of most people. But for a pastor or teacher of God's Word, they are only the beginning of serious study. The person who is willing to delve into the original languages will be rewarded with depths of meaning to which the average person reading the Bible does not have access. Even just a few examples will highlight the importance of reading an Old Testament passage in the original Hebrew.

Genesis 1:2 says that the earth was "formless and void" (תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ *tōhû wābōhû*), but what does that mean? The text goes on to explain that in the first three days God shaped the earth to correct its formlessness. God used the second set of three days to fill the earth, addressing its emptiness or void. After day six the earth was no longer "formless and void" and God called it "very good." It is interesting that the only other place where the phrase "formless and void" (תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ *tōhû wābōhû*) is used is Jeremiah 4:23 where it refers to the destruction by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. This suggests that Israel's sins had returned the earth to its pre-creation chaotic state. It is easy to miss these connections in English translations.

Another good example is found in the first part of Psalm 2:12, a very difficult verse to interpret. Most English translations render the underlying text as "kiss the Son," a very literal translation in which *son* is a translation of the Aramaic word בַר (*bar*, "son"); rather than the Hebrew word בֵן (*bēn*, "son"), which occurs in verse 7. Noting this subtle shift to Aramaic helps the preacher understand the intended audience of the psalm. By shifting to Aramaic in verse 12, the author of Psalm 2 subtly reminds the readers of the Gentile nations who would have been familiar with the Aramaic trade language, but possibly ignorant of Hebrew. The typical English reader would not even be aware of the change in language.

In addition, members of your congregation will often have questions about differences between modern translations. Congregants may ask which translation is correct, or which translation is better and why. You, as the professional, will need to be able to answer these questions, and you will need to examine the Hebrew or Greek text to know which translation is more accurate. At that point you will have an excellent opportunity to teach members about a new level of Bible study. Or, you will lose this opportunity and will need to direct the would-be learner to someone

else for the answers. In one sense, modern translations are like training wheels—they can provide balance and guidance to someone new to translation. But to get serious about riding a bicycle, the training wheels have to come off eventually. You may not be able to make as good a translation as “those Hebrew experts,” but every translation has to make compromises. Creating your own translation will allow you to discover the crucial issues involved in translating specific passages and to make some decisions for yourself concerning them.

If you are (or will be) a preaching pastor with regular opportunity to open God’s Word to your congregation, then you must be better prepared and trained than those in your congregation. You may have doctors, lawyers, dentists, business people, or other trained professionals in your congregation. They have each studied hard to do well in their professions and they will expect no less from you. Any professional should be better prepared than their clients. I don’t need to know much about how my car works to drive it, but my mechanic needs the knowledge and expertise to fix it. In a similar way, a pastor needs to work with the original languages to answer certain questions and to speak accurately on certain issues. How will you be able to correct someone’s erroneous thinking if you cannot be sure what the Greek or Hebrew text says? How will you know if commentaries or Bible study tools are correct? The members of your congregation will want to know what *you* think since they know and trust you; they have never heard of F. F. Bruce or D. A. Carson. These scholars can be your guides, but you will need to guide those in your congregation.

Sometimes students say, “I’ve already learned Greek, so how important is it for me to learn Hebrew too?” This question always strikes me as odd. I would hope knowledge of Greek would impact our understanding of the New Testament and that this would extend to our preaching and teaching. So wouldn’t learning Hebrew be just as valuable for understanding the Old Testament? It is like asking which is more important to learn: how to put together a wedding ceremony or how to conduct a funeral? Both ceremonies are important at different times in people’s lives—both are necessary. In a similar way, learning both Greek and Hebrew provides the foundation for helping other people understand the full counsel of God.

Paul writes to Timothy and assures him that “All Scripture is God breathed and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the person of God may be fully equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). At the point in history in which he wrote, Paul was primarily speaking about the Old Testament.

In past generations it was not unusual to be well trained in both Greek and Hebrew:

Jonathan Edwards, educated at home under his father’s care, had thorough knowledge of Greek, Hebrew, and Latin when he entered Yale before the age of 13 in 1716. Likewise, J. A. Alexander (1838–1860) one of the second generation professors of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, knew the rudiments of Greek, Hebrew, and Latin by his tenth birthday. The founder of Southern Seminary, James Pedigru Boice learned Greek from a Sunday School teacher.<sup>4</sup>

If the original languages are so important for understanding and exegeting Scripture, why have many seminaries and Bible schools dropped the original languages from their curricula?<sup>5</sup> Why aren’t students demanding to be taught the original languages? To neglect the study of the biblical languages is to set our sights far too low. Some pastors today would have a difficult time finding the book of Habakkuk, let alone explaining what it means or why it is important. If pastors cannot perform these functions, imagine how difficult they are for laypeople. So the question remains, how can we retain Greek and Hebrew amid the demands of a busy pastorate?

### PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

Before you throw in the towel and sell all those expensive Hebrew books to some unsuspecting beginning student, let’s consider where you are and what you have gained in

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4. Gregg Strawbridge, “Thoughts on the Importance of Greek in Education and Training,” <http://www.wordmp3.com/gs/greekimportance.htm> (accessed March 25, 2006).

5. H. Richard Niebuhr, Daniel D. Williams, and James M. Gustafson, *The Advancement of Theological Education* (New York: Harper, 1957), 92–93.

the process of Hebrew study. You began this study because you felt that undertaking it was the only way to know adequately what the biblical texts are saying (and that is still true). You believed you had the perseverance and patience to learn another language (or two) and you have either accomplished this goal or are moving closer to it. So what you really need now is a plan to use your learning to exegete properly and prepare sermons. This book is intended to provide the plan or method for you not only to keep using your Hebrew, but to help you become more and more proficient in your use of it.

This book is organized as follows: Chapter 2 helps you determine the best Hebrew tools and discusses how to use them. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the exegetical process to help you determine the meaning of a Hebrew text. Chapter 4 describes the process of moving from exegesis to sermon. Finally, chapter 5 discusses how to make the best use of your time when studying the Hebrew text, as well as offering several practical ways to use your Hebrew. The book provides a plan that can be adjusted to your own schedule and the unique needs of your congregation. It is intended to help you become more efficient in your study time. Wherever possible, I will describe the most useful tools or guidelines and share how I personally allocate my time.

So how do you get started? First, let's look at your motivations and objectives in acquiring Hebrew. Then we will consider the methods that will be the most advantageous for you.

### *Your Motives: Why Did You Learn Hebrew?*

Shepherding God's flock is a high calling (see 1 Tim. 3:1) and comes with great responsibilities. Paul encourages Timothy to "hold fast to the standard of sound words" which he had heard from Paul. Timothy was to "guard through the Holy Spirit" the "good thing" with which he had been entrusted (2 Tim. 1:13-14).

In the next chapter, Paul writes, "The things which you have heard from me through many witnesses, entrust these to faithful people who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2). James offers a similar exhortation and warns, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brothers, knowing that we will receive a stricter judgment" (James 3:1). If we have accepted the call to become teachers of God's Word,



then we also need to realize the awesome responsibility we carry and train to do the job to the best of our abilities. This endeavor will pay rich dividends, but it will come at a cost.

*Your Objectives: How Fluent Would You Like to Be in Hebrew?*

This decision will depend upon many things: (1) how much time and how many resources you have, (2) what goals you have for preaching (do you preach regularly or only occasionally?), and (3) what level of expertise you would like to obtain. While these criteria may help determine what level of proficiency to work toward, don't sell yourself short—these decisions will affect the rest of your life. Aim high, and at the same time be realistic. You can, of course, do further study if circumstances change, but it gets harder to pursue education as you become older. Family commitments, financial constraints, and health issues often accompany the years. David Alan Black recommends following the guidelines used by the Foreign Service Institute of the United States Department of State and the Educational Testing Service to determine your optimal level of proficiency.<sup>6</sup> They are the four R-levels (i.e., “reading levels”) for language:

R-1 (Elementary Proficiency)

In a spoken language, those at the R-1 level of learning know basic phrases and can formulate rudimentary sentences, but easily get lost in conversation with a native speaker who speaks fast or uses more complicated words. In a written language a person can work out rudimentary or simplified sentences such as those used in Hebrew grammars. Such a person may be able to read some of the easier parts of the Hebrew Bible but still depends heavily on Hebrew dictionaries and commentaries. Those at this stage probably also need to follow a literal English translation of the Hebrew text. At this elementary level of proficiency, a person could begin to rate the quality of a commentary. If this is the level of proficiency you would like to attain, then invest in quality Hebrew grammatical aids. This would include a good Hebrew grammar; a Hebrew lexicon (dictionary); a parsing guide (lists specific verb forms and their parsings—stem

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6. David Alan Black, *Using New Testament Greek in Ministry: A Practical Guide for Students and Pastors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 27–28.

[*binyan*], tense, person, gender, number, root, and meaning); basic syntax books; and quality commentaries. A good computer program (e.g., Logos, BibleWorks, Accordance) would be one of your best investments at this level. Spend your time learning basic Hebrew vocabulary (about one hundred thirty of the most frequent words, approximately 68 percent of the Old Testament Hebrew vocabulary) and the basic keys for determining verb forms and the nuances of the various verbs stems (*binyanim*).

R-2 (Limited Working Proficiency)

Those at the R-2 proficiency level can read some of the easier parts of the Hebrew Bible but still need to consult a lexicon regularly for vocabulary. They are able to parse many of the Hebrew strong verb forms and some of the easier weak verb forms. If this is the level of proficiency you would like to attain, you will need a working vocabulary of about three hundred of the most frequent Hebrew words (about 78 percent of the Hebrew vocabulary of the Old Testament), familiarity with the keys for recognizing verb forms, to read more advanced Hebrew grammars, and to spend about one-half hour each day translating from the Hebrew Bible (at least initially—later this could decrease). If you use a computer program, try to parse the verb forms first and then check them. Try to work out the structure and meaning of the passage and then compare various English translations to your own.

R-3 (Professional Proficiency)

Those at the R-3 level of proficiency can read from most of the Hebrew Bible but still need to consult a lexicon regularly for vocabulary. They are able to parse many of the Hebrew verb forms, both strong and weak, though they may need to look up some of the more difficult forms. If you would like this level of proficiency, then you will need a working vocabulary of about six hundred fifty of the most frequent Hebrew words (over 86 percent of the Old Testament Hebrew vocabulary), proficient knowledge of the keys for recognizing the strong and weak verb forms, to read more advanced Hebrew grammars, and to spend about one hour a day translating the Hebrew Bible (at least initially—later this could decrease). With practice, you will be able to translate fairly quickly with a computer program, though you may still struggle over some of the more difficult verb forms and

sentence structures. It will be helpful at this point to read the full entries for words in the Hebrew lexicons to make sure you understand the full range of meaning. You should frequently check Hebrew grammars and syntax books to understand the meaning of the passage and be able to outline the grammar of Hebrew sentences.

R-4 (Full Proficiency)

Those at the R-4 level of proficiency can read from any part of the Hebrew Bible, but still need to consult a lexicon regularly for certain vocabulary (even at this level, since there are almost eight thousand five hundred vocabulary words, more than sixteen hundred of which are *hapax legomena* [i.e., words that occur only once]). Such learners of Hebrew can parse almost all of the Hebrew verb forms, both strong and weak, though it may still be necessary to look up the most difficult forms. If you would like to obtain this level of proficiency, you will need a working vocabulary of about fifteen hundred words (about 93 percent of the Old Testament Hebrew vocabulary), proficiency in recognizing the strong and weak verb forms, to read more advanced Hebrew grammars, and to spend two hours daily translating from the Hebrew Bible (at least initially—later this could decrease). With practice, you will be able to translate very quickly with a computer program since you already know many of the words, but you may still struggle over some of the most difficult verb forms and some of the Hebrew syntax.

By setting realistic expectations you will be able to plan ahead and work to acquire the necessary skills. Knowing what you are aiming for will help you avoid discouragement and give you a better chance of reaching your goals. An R-1 level proficiency could be achieved with a one-semester course dedicated to providing basic Hebrew grammar and tools. You could advance to an R-2 level of proficiency with a full year of grammar study. The remaining levels take significantly longer to reach. With this in mind, it is better to think of learning Hebrew as a marathon and not a sprint. Some schools offer condensed courses of Hebrew in summer school, but a longer, more steady progression toward the goal will probably suit most people's learning needs much better. Once you reach the R-2 proficiency level, you can build to the higher levels through self-study.



*Your Methods: What Is the Best Way for You to Learn Hebrew?*

All students learn differently. They pursue different goals and varying levels of skill. No single Hebrew course can meet everyone's needs, so each person will have to supplement instruction to some degree. As noted above, there are three crucial elements for learning Hebrew: (1) vocabulary, (2) basic grammar, and (3) practice in translating the original text. Any plan for learning Hebrew must include at least these basic elements. Everyone experiences growth spurts in learning Hebrew, but the key to long-term success in language acquisition is steady, prolonged growth. Simply put, a meager goal of two or three verses a day over time is better than trying to attack large chunks of text and burning out.

Learn How the Language Works

Learning any language becomes drudgery when the instructor emphasizes *quantity* over *understanding*. Teachers guilty of this method may themselves have had ineffective instruction; or perhaps insufficient proficiency limits their ability to explain the language's intricacies. During my first two years of teaching Hebrew, I frequently went to a more experienced colleague to ask questions about how the language worked. It was the best learning experience I could ever have had. It is a running joke in most Hebrew classes that Hebrew is a very consistent language except in all the places where it is inconsistent. However, English can be equally challenging to learn:

English is a crazy language. There is no egg in eggplant, nor ham in hamburger; neither apple nor pine in pineapple. English muffins weren't invented in England or French fries in France. Sweetmeats are candies while sweetbreads, which aren't sweet, are meat. We take English for granted. But if we explore its paradoxes, we find that quicksand can work slowly, boxing rings are square and a guinea pig is neither from Guinea nor is it a pig. . . .

English was invented by people, not computers, and it reflects the creativity of the human race (which, of course, isn't a race at all). That is

why, when the stars are out, they are visible, but when the lights are out, they are invisible.<sup>7</sup>

If you are still in a position to choose, I challenge you to study under the best teachers—those who really understand the language and not those who just let you slide through with an A. Ask the tough questions like, “Why does the language work this way?” and “How will this knowledge help me feed my future congregation?” If you do not understand aspects of Hebrew, ask to have “language labs” with your professor. Use this extra time to carefully go over what you are missing or do not understand.<sup>8</sup>

Learning Hebrew is not easy, but be willing to push yourself. We live in a culture that readily accepts mediocrity and relativism. If truth is relative, then there would be little point in working hard to determine what the Bible says, much less compounding our frustration by learning Hebrew. But truth is not relative and the Bible helps us to know what really is true. This generation of pastors needs to be better prepared than any previous one so that people can know the truth by which God illumines us.

To pursue this role, you should take adequate time to learn the biblical languages. While in school, it would be helpful to arrange your schedule so that you do not have your hardest classes in a semester when you are taking Hebrew or Greek. If this means extending your seminary training, then by all means do it. Speed is not as important as being prepared.

Make It Practical

In 1981, Walter Kaiser pointed out a significant deficiency in seminary education:

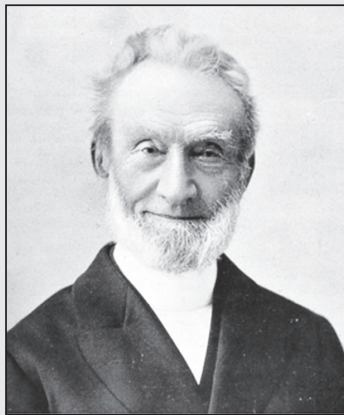
I have been aware for some time now of a gap that has existed in academic preparation for the ministry. It is the gap that exists between the study of

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7. Richard Lederer, “English Is a Crazy Language: An Excerpt from the Introduction,” [http://web.mit.edu/wchuang/www/humor/college/English\\_is\\_Crazy.html](http://web.mit.edu/wchuang/www/humor/college/English_is_Crazy.html) (accessed May 18, 2006).

8. For a helpful book on understanding the workings of biblical languages, see Peter James Silzer and Thomas John Finley, *How Biblical Languages Work: A Student's Guide to Learning Greek and Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004).

the biblical text (most frequently in the original languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) and the actual delivery of messages to God's people. Very few centers of biblical and homiletical training have ever taken the time or effort to show the student how one moves from analyzing the text over to constructing a sermon that accurately reflects that same analysis and is directly dependent upon it.<sup>9</sup>



George Müller, after having read the Bible through one hundred times with increasing delight, made this statement: "I look upon it as a lost day when I have not had a good time over the Word of God. Friends often say, 'I have so much to do, so many people to see, I cannot find time for Scripture study.' Perhaps there are not many who have

more to do than I. For more than half a century I have never known one day when I had not more business than I could get through. For 4 years I have had annually about 30,000 letters, and most of these have passed through my own hands.

"Then, as pastor of a church with 1,200 believers, great has been my care. Besides, I have had charge of five immense orphanages; also, at my publishing depot, the printing and circulating of millions of tracts, books, and Bibles; but I have always made it a rule never to begin work until I have had a good season with God and His Word. The blessing I have received has been wonderful."<sup>10</sup>

9. Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 8.

10. Sermon Illustrations, [http://www.Sermonillustrations.com/a-z/b/bible\\_study\\_of.htm](http://www.Sermonillustrations.com/a-z/b/bible_study_of.htm) (accessed August 22, 2006).

Kaiser then goes on to describe the critical gap “between the steps generally outlined in most seminary or biblical training classes in exegesis and the hard realities most pastors face every week as they prepare their sermons.”<sup>11</sup> There is a big difference between an Old Testament research paper and an Old Testament sermon. Since the time Dr. Kaiser wrote these words, several books have appeared to address this issue. Unfortunately, two questions continue to slip through the cracks: (1) Why should pastors use Hebrew to develop their sermons? and (2) What is a reasonable method for busy pastors to use to prepare their sermons from the original languages? We have already addressed the first question, and we will address the second later in this book.

There is one additional area that is often overlooked in lessons on grammar and homiletics. After parsing, translating, and digging for the meaning of a passage, you are ready to reflect upon how it can feed your soul. How do you apply the new truths that you have learned? For example, what does it mean in Psalm 23:3 that “He restores my soul”? How does this work? The Hebrew root שׁוּב (*šûb* “to return”) apparently speaks in this context of a person’s return to a state of quietness after a period of turmoil. In other words, God is the one who can restore quietness and peace to our inner beings after a time of great upheaval or turmoil. He is the calm after the storm. Other psalms refer to God as a “rock” or “shelter” in the midst of the storm, which suggests that he is our protection when things around us are treacherous. Psalm 23 goes on to say that “He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” The word *paths* brings to mind the constant weight of a wagon going over the same roads time and time again so that a path is worn in the ground. God leads us in the firm and straight paths of righteousness for the sake of his name. Since God’s honor is at stake, He will always lead us in those well-worn paths of truth because that is his character. He wants us to reflect his character.

The Hebrew Bible can be a source of spiritual renewal and it is important to see it in this light. As you learn new Hebrew words or translate new passages, think about their ramifications for your spiritual growth. This is one of the primary ways you can use Hebrew to feed yourself and your congregation. As the Word of God feeds you through your

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11. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, 18.

study of the Hebrew text, use those insights to reach new depths in your preaching.

### CONCLUSION

The goal of this chapter is to help you develop and maintain excitement about using biblical Hebrew to unlock and delve into the richness of the Old Testament. Martin Luther urged us to “zealously hold to the [biblical] languages,” because they are “the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit is contained.”<sup>12</sup> Learning Hebrew need not be a sterile experience of only memorizing vocabulary words and verb forms. Instead it can be a means for you to nourish your spiritual life and share the insights with others.

### THINGS TO CONSIDER

Be sure to think through the following questions about your ministry before you go to the next chapter:

1. Do I have a strong desire to expound God’s Word in order to lead people into a deeper understanding of Scripture?
2. What level of fluency in biblical Hebrew do I want to work toward?
3. Do I have the time, energy, and resources to learn biblical Hebrew at that level?
4. Am I willing to use the Hebrew Bible to help nourish my own spiritual life? If you answered no to this question, then prayerfully consider what better way there could be to understand the Old Testament than to read God’s Word in the original languages. Is there any better gift that you could give to your congregation?

### FURTHER READING

Carson, D. A. *For the Love of God: A Daily Companion for Discovering the Riches of God’s Word*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006.

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12. “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1962), 45:359–60.

- Craddock, Fred B. *Preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1985.  
See especially pages 13–65.
- Gibson, Scott M. “Challenges to Preaching the Old Testament.”  
In *Preaching the Old Testament*, edited by Scott M. Gibson, 21–27. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006.
- Kaiser, Walter C. *Towards an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981.
- Magary, Dennis R. “Keeping Your Hebrew Healthy.” In *Preaching the Old Testament*, edited by Scott M. Gibson, 29–55. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006.
- Piper, John. *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002. See especially pages 81–88.
- Spurgeon, Charles H. *Lectures to My Students*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954. See especially pages 7–52.