

Biblical Hebrew as a Homeschool Foreign Language



A Foreign Language?

Foreign language study is good for you. It exercises logic and memory, and refines clear thinking and expression even in one's mother tongue. Language embeds history and culture like nothing else. By learning another language, we see the world through other eyes and are surprised at what we had missed: who knew there were five hundred sorts of snow or camels? Foreign language study promises to sharpen our minds, enrich our perspective, deepen our empathy, and meaningfully integrate history and geography.

We know this. And besides, colleges require high school foreign language credits for admission. So, which foreign language to undertake? We homeschoolers whose family situation or calling does not present an obvious answer, and whose high school French fails us, might seek out a tutor, community college course, or computer software. The kid will get into college and be able to say bon jour forever, just like us.

A Classical Language?

Some homeschoolers have rediscovered classical languages. Classical

languages can be practical, rewarding, and efficient for home learning. No one knows how they were really pronounced and we will never have to inquire about bus fares in them, so an instructor with a perfect accent is not necessary. Classical language study emphasizes reading rather than chat, with an emphasis on history, literature, and culture rather than the price of bananas.

Latin or Greek?

If foreign language study opens doors, to which history, literature, and worldview do we want a key? The Greeks and Romans certainly received rave reviews in my school history texts. My church's building pays homage to Greek temples. Pagan Romans wishing to sacrifice to idols would turn expectantly into many of our government offices. But if you nose around the Bible, the artifacts and historic sites of the Roman Empire, or ancient literature, you may not be so favorably impressed. The Romans with whom you will spend much time if you study Latin produced a vile, debauched society and worshipped totalitarian government. In the works of the ancient Greeks, one catches the reek of their humanistic focus on fame and appearance. There is another classical language with a decided difference:

Biblical Hebrew. The history you learn with it is His Story, the literature is God-breathed Scripture, and the worldview is Truth.

There are good reasons to study French, Latin, and Greek (and no one is limiting you to only one foreign language), but with our family's choices open and resources of time and energy limited, with children whose hearts and minds are impressionable, we choose Biblical Hebrew and find it extends wholesome benefit after lasting benefit.

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But are we missing the English vocabulary development offered by learning Latin? Certainly, few English words are formed from Hebrew. However, the average SAT vocabulary scores of Hebrew students are well above average and often above the average scores of those who study Latin-based languages. Obviously, more than Latin roots are at work. Studying Latin no doubt helps with English, but reading Virgil is neither the only or purest path to eloquence. Reading well-written English is the most direct path to a lively vocabulary. Using the dictionary and thesaurus, playing word games, conversing with adults,

composing poetry, memorizing Latin and Greek roots, and translating any foreign language will help.

"Hebrew is the best language of all...no one can really understand Scripture without it."

-Martin Luther

And isn't half the Bible in Greek anyway? In a word, no. The Hebrew Scriptures are about 80% of God's revelation to mankind. Over 90% of the Bible was originally composed in Hebrew. The New Testament authors were all Hebrew speakers. Hebrew thought and language underlie the whole Bible. So much so that Bible scholars David Bivin and Roy Blizzard, Jr. write, "If any additional advances are to be made, especially in better understanding the words of Jesus, the concentration must shift to the study of Hebrew history and culture, and above all, the Hebrew language."¹ Martin Luther said of the Bible that Hebrews drink straight from the pure spring, Greeks from its overflow stream, and Latins from a downstream puddle. He also wrote, "The Hebrew language is the best language of all...no one can really understand Scripture without it."

¹ Bivin, David, and Roy Blizzard, Jr. Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus. Austin, TX: Center for Judaic-Christian Studies, 1984 for more information: www.jcstudies.com

Hebrew: Really?

Perhaps we accept that scholars and pastors do well to study Hebrew, but surmise that translations are adequate for the rest of us. John Wycliffe is my hero, but we no longer have to settle for translations and leave all the fun to the professionals. Hebrew poet Haim Nachman Bialik once said, "Reading the Bible in translation is like kissing your new bride through a veil." It is just plain thrilling to hear God quoted directly, to listen in on the seraphim. Quoting Martin Luther again, "In the Hebrew language we hear God speak...thus study directed toward learning this language might rightly be called a kind of worship." Hebrew is said to be the language with which God created the universe, the words that God taught to Adam, the only language from before the Tower of Babel. These are the words that were spoken aloud from Sinai, that God Himself inscribed on the tablets, that Jesus prayed. Studying Hebrew is like visiting an important historical site: I feel closer to the action; I learn and remember more.

People who have visited Israel often say their Bible has become a vibrant pop-up book of real places and people, rather than a dusty collection of Sunday school flannelgraph stories. Reading in Hebrew has a similar effect. Sometimes, when I call a Bible character by his Hebrew name, in my mind's eye a black-bearded man with broad shoulders and a twinkle in his eye jumps up, ready for action, a brother across the centuries. Before I studied Hebrew, my kinship with other believers felt like it went back to the Reformation, maybe. Now my perceived line of friends and fellows stretches back

to Father Abraham, at least. How great a cloud of witnesses.

"...a black-bearded man with broad shoulders and a twinkle in his eye jumps up, ready for action, a brother across the centuries."

A student of Biblical Hebrew doesn't spend much time memorizing the words for colors, but dives right in to vocabulary that teaches about God. What does it mean to repent? What is glory, and why does God want it? Where is the Kingdom of Heaven? These become everyday lessons in foreign language class when Biblical Hebrew is on the table.

When you can read Hebrew, Scripture is no longer beset with unpronounceable names and awkward sentences. Translation can be clumsy and wordy, but Hebrew is not. Hebrew is concise, pithy, and vigorous. We want the Bible to be adventurous and beautiful in our children's eyes, not remote and murky. Hebrew draws us closer to God's Word.

Learning a foreign language usually includes some study of geography and culture. Bibles come with maps because the geography of Israel opens up so much meaning. Studying Hebrew, you will find yourself in a refreshing culture for homeschoolers: among family-oriented, education-minded, God-centered traditions. Prayers, songs, and

celebrations can enrich your family life and worship. Myths and barriers promoted by Christendom's centuries of violent anti-Semitism can be dispelled.

Some shy away from classical languages fearing it is a waste of effort to study a "dead" tongue. The good news (if you will pardon the pun) is that Hebrew is a resurrected language. (Isn't that just like God?) If you want a modern language as well as Bible learning, Israeli Hebrew would be an easy next step. Arabic is gaining in popularity on college campuses, and from Hebrew to Arabic is a stepping stone, not a chasm.

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One of the things I like best about Biblical Hebrew is its lifelong usefulness. Homeschoolers tend to emphasize education for life and service. For instance, we may choose to learn a common, solo instrument that can accompany singing, like a piano or guitar, rather than say, a cornet, which is not so likely to come in handy at home and church. And we know that even if a child does not keep up piano practice forever, he can gain an appreciation for and ability to read music that will last.

Studying Hebrew is like that. It can be easily and profitably kept up throughout life for enjoyment and ministry, but even if fluency fades, there will be lasting rewards: understanding of theological concepts, knowledgeable appreciation of translation issues, ability to use excellent commentaries and Bible study tools, fearless pronunciation, connection to and love for Scripture. In his seventies, my grandfather's only remnant of high school Spanish was "Recite the sentence for today." My pastor, in his seventies, no longer reads Hebrew flawlessly, but says he has "enough to know when someone is trying to fool [him]." Not bad.

An Opportunity

The American colonists studied Hebrew for eternal lifelong use. William Bradford, the governor of Plymouth Colony, learned Hebrew to be ready for Heaven. His gravestone in Plymouth is inscribed in Hebrew: "The LORD still lives." Cotton Mather urged a little less tobacco and a little more Hebrew study. An early president of Yale declared Hebrew "essential to a gentleman's education." It was an obligatory course at Harvard, and the seals of Yale, Columbia, and Dartmouth still bear Hebrew inscriptions. Jonathan Edwards was fluent in Hebrew by the time he was thirteen.

With religious freedom, enthusiasm for Biblical languages ran high. Is it any wonder? For centuries it was a crime for Christians to own a Bible. In Christendom. Can you imagine? In fifteenth century Christian England our homeschooling forebears were executed for teaching their children the Ten Commandments and Lord's Prayer in

English. Generations of Christians lived and died without ever hearing Scripture in a language they knew.

But when the Greeks fleeing the Muslims, and the Jews driven from Spain showed up in Western Europe with the Bible in its original languages, the effect was electric. The Reformation was sparked by Christians learning the Biblical languages.

The highest hurdles are crossed by the time you finish this primer.

But even then, do you realize how hard it was to gain access to our Scriptures? A devout sixteen year old autodidact with time on his hands as he tended sheep on Scottish hills read the New Testament in Greek. He was arraigned on charges of witchcraft, accused of having learned by black magic.

We enjoy unprecedented religious and educational freedom and resources. It has not always been this way, and it may not last. Christian leaders let hundreds of years go by without educating the laity. This was not the inevitable result of medieval poverty or lack of the printing press. That entire time illiteracy among Jewish males older than five was practically nil. They read and studied the Bible in Hebrew. The congregation provided for the education of every boy.

Christianity still has some catching up to do, and God has provided us with an opportunity. Nobody is keeping the Scripture in all its richness away from us. Let's embrace it, however we can, for our children, and see what revival God has in mind this time.

Enter: this Series

Since mostly Jews and seminarians have been learning Biblical Hebrew lately, available texts generally expect you either to be immersed in Jewish tradition, or to have graduate level study skills and a professor of ancient Near Eastern linguistics to hand. The goal of this series is to make Biblical Hebrew a viable and richly rewarding option for a homeschool foreign language course. The highest hurdles are crossed by the time you finish this primer: believing it is possible and mastering a new alphabet.

In these books, we will emphasize Biblical Hebrew as a tool for lifelong Bible study, worship, service, and joy. By completion of this series a student should be able to read from A Reader's Hebrew Bible, a Bible edition that provides same-page basic definitions of words that appear less than 100 times in Scripture. The path to that point will include Biblical culture, geography, history, and worldview. A student will be additionally equipped to use Bible reference tools, understand translation issues, study Biblical words in depth, and enjoy the language with fluent reading and singing.

Biblical Hebrew: A Homeschool Primer teaches how to read and write Hebrew with a gentle introduction to grammar and vocabulary. With reverence

for God, creative exercises, and a dash of fun, it is the foundational student text and workbook. **Biblical Hebrew: Annotations and Answers** accompanies it to provide answers, details, suggestions for use and supplemental resources, and an audio CD of traditional Hebrew songs. The optional **Biblical Hebrew: Show and Tell** DVD offers stories from history and tradition with photos of places and wildlife of Israel, Biblical sites, art and artifacts; pronunciation of each lesson;

and audiovisual flashcard review. The **Jonah Copybook** follows **Biblical Hebrew** with the full text of the book of Jonah, a word-for-word translation, and copywork space for developing fluency and gaining a foothold in grammar, syntax, idiom, and translation. Subsequent Biblical Hebrew volumes will take a student through high school foreign language credits to reading the Bible in Hebrew.

שלום



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