

Training Bible Translators in Israel: The Value of Modern Hebrew for Mastering Biblical Hebrew

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I would like to begin this lecture in honor of the Home for Bible Translators and Scholars' twenty years of service by congratulating the many people—some here, some not—who have helped in making this possible, from the founding directors, Miriam and Halvor, to the relevant university staff and translation organization personnel, to all the workers, volunteers, teachers, students, supporters, and friends, past and present, who have played a role in this endeavor over the last two decades. As someone who has personally benefited from the program, I both appreciate its value and have at least some idea of the effort that goes into running it. HBT's directors are wont to cite their own perceived administrative inadequacies as evidence of Divine approbation and care when it comes to the ministry, so I would be remiss if I failed to thank Him who has made his face to shine upon the work. Finally, I wish to express my gratitude at being invited to speak at this celebratory conference, in which it is a delight to participate.

From the title of my talk you already know the thrust of my claim. Most of what remains of my time I shall spend trying to substantiate this. However, it occurred to me after I had already selected my topic and received approval to speak thereon, that I was perhaps assuming common assent to a still more foundational principle when, in fact, such an assumption is unwarranted. You see, I wish to convince you that knowledge of Modern Hebrew is somehow useful and important for the work of Bible Translation, and that the fact that the joint HBT-Hebrew U program we are here to celebrate gives translation personnel the opportunity to study it as part of a more comprehensive translation-oriented curriculum makes this program not just unique, but better than alternative programs. The problem is that, notwithstanding greater emphasis on training in many translation agencies, the view that knowledge of Hebrew—and here I mean Biblical Hebrew—might be necessary or even advisable for Bible translation is not one universally held.

So allow me to start with a few words on behalf of Biblical Hebrew knowledge as a necessary ingredient in sound Bible translation methodology. Among the more common arguments *against* Hebrew training is expediency. We all agree that the Bible is an important book. Members of people groups around the world are, literally, clamoring to have it in their own languages. Given this urgency, can we afford to devote time and resources to Hebrew studies? An answer that is sometimes given—and I speak from experience, because it is an answer that I myself received—is that Hebrew training is unnecessarily time-consuming given the perceived benefits, because there are sufficient 'helps' available—lexicons, concordances, commentaries, tagged databases and search mechanisms, not to mention myriad translations—so that translators need no special proficiency in Hebrew to achieve a good translation.

To this line of argumentation I wish to respond with a few thoughts on the nature of the tools in question. Before saying anything else, I would first like to emphasize

how much I appreciate these tools. Many are products of great learning, wisdom, experience, and insight and contain valuable information. No matter their proficiency with Hebrew, then, translators, exegetes, and consultants ignore them to the detriment of the work. However, it is clear that the tools in question cannot be fully exploited or profitably utilized without at least *some* degree of Hebrew-specific know-how, any more than a musical instrument can be properly played without musical training. Shifting the metaphor somewhat, just as in the case of a power saw, untrained use of Hebrew reference tools can be quite dangerous. It must also be said that there is much in the way of inaccurate and misleading information out there that the untrained eye may have trouble sifting through. By way of example, I remember one student eager to apply what he had learned about the intensive nature of the *pi'el* verbal stem. Armed with the knowledge that אָוֵהב meant 'love', he quite reasonably concluded that מְאֵהב, ostensibly meaning 'love intensely', was the Hebrew behind the Greek of Jesus' third question to Peter "Do you love me?" in John 21.17. Unfortunately, he was as yet unaware of the especially illicit meaning 'lover' expressed—in Biblical as well as Modern Hebrew—by the latter term (though, happily, he did know that Hebrew was alive and well as a spoken language at the turn of the era and that, in addition to Aramaic, Jesus would have used and taught in Hebrew¹).

In a way, translation is far more demanding and constraining than writing a commentary or even a lexicon. In these latter there is always room for hesitation, vacillation, waffling, the proposal of multiple alternatives, even for throwing up one's hands in honest exegetical despair. Translators rarely enjoy the luxury of such wiggle room; a decision must be made, and then that decision—often amounting to little more than a best guess—quite literally becomes canonized. Footnotes reading "Hebrew unclear" or suggesting alternative renderings are, of course, possible, but the modest sincerity therein is lost on most readers.

There is a further problem with the aforementioned tools, namely, that on nearly all of the really sticky and interesting problems they are far from unanimous in their proposed solutions, and, it must be admitted, there are an awful lot of these sticky and interesting problems in the Hebrew Bible. A reckoning of one per page would surely be a gross underestimation of their frequency. What are translators, exegetes, or consultants with little or no Hebrew training to do when confronted with translations and commentaries that diverge, often substantially, in their understanding of a given verse? How are they to select among the various alternatives? As any translator can tell you, this becomes particularly relevant and uncomfortable when they face the polite but unrelenting probing of the questions of a translation consultant in regard to the rendering of known problem passages.

¹ See, recently, Joosten and Kister 2012; Fassberg 2012; Gross 2014; and the collection of articles in Buth and Notley 2014.

One of the least satisfying answers one can give responding to the request “Please tell me what led you to translate like this here” is “Well, this is how the NIV (or RSV, or KJV) does it.” Translation project teams need at least one person with Hebrew proficiency, if for no other reason than to make informed choices between competing alternatives in the case of problem passages. If this is not the translator, then it should be the exegete; and if not the exegete, then it must be the consultant. But it seems obvious that the more remote the knowledge of Hebrew from the actual process of translation, the less influence it will have on the final product.

Now, for some readers of Scripture—particularly those of us whose peoples have long enjoyed the Bible in their own language—the idea that new translations should be made from old ones may sound, for lack of a better description, good enough. I submit, however, that such an attitude may betray a degree of cultural and intellectual superiority. I need not defend the general mission of Bible translation against accusations of colonialism or imperialism, since, especially in the case of the Old Testament, it is very much the relevant local communities that are both calling for and spearheading translation activity. But there *is* a sort of conceit whereby we speakers of major languages expect speakers of minority languages—whether in the Americas, Asia, Africa, or Oceania—to accept the fruit of a translation approach that we would not ourselves consider adequate or reliable. For who of us would trust a translation of God’s Word done without ample recourse to texts in the original language by translators and exegetes trained to read them and capable of making informed choices with the help of the available reference materials? Perhaps most importantly, many of the indigenous translation teams whom we serve are convinced of the value of Hebrew training and are willing to invest the time and energy to get it.

But the informed treatment of problem passages is not the only potential benefit of Hebrew knowledge for Bible translation teams. Thanks to the relative cultural proximity to ancient Israelite society of some non-western people groups, many Biblical Hebrew concepts, among them what are typically described as ‘key concepts’, are more directly translatable from Hebrew, the intermediacy of western languages only creating an unhelpful layer of opacity. Reinier de Blois (2013: 846) gives the following example, which deals with what is arguably one of the more central lexemes and concepts in the Hebrew Bible:

A good example is the word דָּבָר הֶעֱשֶׂה. This concept is so deeply ingrained in many non-western cultures that it hardly requires explanation. In the first place it presupposes a relationship. There can be no דָּבָר הֶעֱשֶׂה without some kind of a relationship, such as marriage, friendship, kinship, or a covenant. Secondly, דָּבָר הֶעֱשֶׂה usually implies mutual obligation. In the past, however, many a Bible translator has based his/her work on an English equivalent, such as

‘(loving)kindness’, which implies neither the relationship nor the obligation. The result has often been unacceptable.

In this and similar cases, the medium of western translations only hinders the realization of a clear, accurate, natural, and acceptable result. For this reason, we note happily with de Blois (ibid.)

During the last decade, however, the world of Bible translation has become more and more convinced that a good-quality translation of the Hebrew Bible cannot be achieved without at least a basic knowledge of Biblical Hebrew and that it is worthwhile to invest a few extra years in training the translators, so that they have more in-depth knowledge of the language and culture of the ancient Israelites. The emergence of cognitive linguistics has also greatly contributed to this insight. According to this approach..., language is first and foremost a product of the human mind. Humans see the world in and around them and conceptualize what they see. All things—relations, patterns, similarities, and dissimilarities—that are perceived by the human mind constitute a complicated network. Language reflects this network. Cognitive linguists believe that through the study of everyday language it is possible to gain insight into the system of experiences, beliefs, and practices underlying it. If we apply this to Bible translation, it means that the translator can understand the concepts that made up the world of the ancient Israelites only on the basis of a thorough study of Biblical Hebrew.

If we combine this information with the fact that the culture behind the Hebrew Bible often has much in common with many non-western cultures, we can safely assume that teaching Biblical Hebrew to non-western Bible translators is a worthy investment.

I might also add that, on the basis of this logic, it is not just conceivable, but imminently likely that modern non-western translations may more accurately, more clearly, and more naturally express biblical meaning than their western counterparts, and that western bible scholars may have a great deal to learn from non-western readers.

Up to now I have probably been preaching to the choir. Now I will move on to my main topic, which may very well prove a harder sell. My contention is quite simply that Modern Hebrew acquisition is highly beneficial for Bible translators, exegetes, and consultants... so highly beneficial that *ulpan* might even be more profitable a class than a course devoted either to Biblical Hebrew or to translation. Now, I often find people—whether Biblical Hebrew professors or Bible translation personnel—suspicious of Modern Hebrew and more than a little skeptical of its relevance to Biblical Hebrew. So despite the fact that, in my experience as both language-learner and teacher, I have found that the benefits of Modern Hebrew for the student of Classical Hebrew *more* than offset any potential detriments—many of which are

imaginary or, at least, not as momentous as they may seem—let me make explicit at this juncture a few points in order to forestall potential misunderstandings:

1. For all the common ground between Biblical and Modern Hebrew, all their shared lexical and grammatical material, *there are significant differences between the two that must be learned*. As such,
2. Modern Hebrew knowledge is *not* sufficient to make a person a good reader of Biblical Hebrew, much less a competent analyst thereof; and finally,
3. Neither fluency in Modern Hebrew nor expertise in Biblical Hebrew are sufficient to make a person a qualified Bible translator.

Some of the benefits of Modern Hebrew study for Bible translators and other learners of Classical Hebrew are more conspicuous than others. A prime motivation for many *research* students is admission into the world of Israeli scholarship. For Bible translators this is usually less of an attraction, since such access is frequently something of a luxury, limited in the places where they work (though more is available on-line than ever before). Also significant, though underused, is pre-modern material—for example, medieval commentary—which avails the student of a wealth of interpretive discussions that often anticipate those found in modern critical literature.

From another perspective, because Israeli Hebrew represents a vibrant medium of communication, learning it encourages Biblical Hebrew students to view *their* object of study, i.e., Biblical Hebrew, as an authentic linguistic system, rather than as a mere string of encoded units to be deciphered on the basis of etymology and Semitic cognates and analyzed in translation. To paraphrase one scholar here present, a number of forced and unconvincing explanations of the Biblical Hebrew verbal system could have been avoided had the respective proponents attempted to generate communicative Hebrew on the basis of the theories proposed.

To my mind, however, all these incentives, though alluring, are quite secondary. The single greatest benefit for the biblical student, including the Bible translator, in learning contemporary Hebrew is the sheer quantity of classical linguistic material that can be internalized through acquisition of the modern tongue. The great similarities in orthography, morphology, morpho-syntax, and lexicon, as well as the significant overlap in syntax, mean that a high percentage of Modern Hebrew forms, words, and grammar—including many of the most basic elements of the language—echo and reinforce their biblical counterparts. Furthermore, as a living medium of communication, Modern Hebrew can be taught and learned using effective second language acquisition strategies far more readily than Biblical Hebrew, in which classes proven language learning methodologies are either ignored or must be simulated. Restated plainly: learning Modern Hebrew, because it involves the acquisition of a living means of communication that is the most recent rendition of an ancient language, provides for true internalization and fluency in countless

linguistic features common to all historical phases of the language, including Biblical Hebrew, in ways that cannot be achieved in classes devoted to Biblical Hebrew.

I expect little controversy regarding the argument that Hebrew knowledge benefits a Bible translator. Likewise, that fluency is easier to achieve in Modern than in Biblical Hebrew seems obvious. I think the most significant doubts concern the amount of similarity and difference between Modern and Biblical Hebrew, and, more generally, how Modern Hebrew study helps a reader of Biblical Hebrew. With this in mind, I will now briefly describe the usefulness of Modern Hebrew from the perspective of the various linguistic or semi-linguistic domains of Biblical Hebrew.

Beginning with **orthography**—students familiar with Biblical Hebrew generally see the more-or-less defective spelling and vowel points in the Bible as standard and are reticent, which is to say scared, to move to a writing system in which *matres lectionis* mark only some vowels and in which even this marking is ambiguous. Now, while I have the utmost respect for the Tiberian vowel points when it comes to interpreting the biblical text, there is pedagogical value in reading texts written in more *plene* orthography with minimal or no pointing: namely, that students can be coaxed away from sounding out known words syllable by syllable and toward the useful practice of reading *by word shape according to context*, which is how all fluent readers decode texts. In this way a student goes from *deciphering* to *reading*.

Moving on to **phonology**—pronunciation is the area in which Modern and Biblical Hebrew arguably display the greatest difference. However, since it is also the domain that least affects meaning, little of interest to the Bible translator is lost with the adoption of Israeli pronunciation. It is worth noting, though, that many of the traits of contemporary Israeli pronunciation are hardly recent, but preserve features known to have been characteristic of ancient Hebrew phonological systems.

Regarding **morphology**—it is in the realm of morphemes—especially the endings on nouns and adjectives and the prefixes and suffixes on verbs—that Modern and Biblical Hebrew most resemble one another. Allowing for slight variety in the formation of mainly non-standard forms, the categories of person, number, and gender are all encoded in both stages of Hebrew with the same word components on both substantives and verbs.

The same can be said for **morphosyntax**. With regard to the *binyanim*, Modern Hebrew can be of immense help not only for internalizing the general semantic values of the verbal stems, but for avoiding certain all-too-common semantic overgeneralizations. The same basic group of *binyanim* and associated semantic tendencies characteristic of Biblical Hebrew are also typical of Modern Hebrew. In both, for example, *hif'il* is associated with causative or factitive meanings when there exists a related verb in *qal*, but also—again, as in Biblical Hebrew—can itself have intransitive, inchoative meanings. Significantly, in both strata *hif'il* verbs can also exist independently of related verbs in other *binyanim* and/or can convey

meanings entirely unpredictable on the basis of etymological expectations. Parallel situations—predictable semantics along with isolated forms and unpredictable nuances—also obtain in the case of mostly passive/intransitive *nif'al* and mainly reflexive *hitpa'el*, and of course the internal passives *pu'al* and *hof'al/huf'al*. *Qal* and *pi'el*, conversely, have long defied semantic generalization and this remains so.

Focusing on one aspect of the above, Biblical Hebrew learners can profit from the very clear distinction in Modern Hebrew between inflectional and derivational morphology. In contrast to the pronominal endings on verbal forms, which are automatic, the formation of vocabulary in the various verbal templates, though not entirely without order, is much less predictable than students are sometimes led to believe. For example, a student should view biblical *הִזַּק*, *מִחִזַּק*, and *יִחִזַּק* as conjugations of *pi'el* *לְחִזַּק*, but should certainly not view *pi'el* *הִזַּק* or *hif'il* *הִחִזִּיק* as conjugations of *qal* *חִזַּק*. Users of Modern Hebrew understand these as separate, but related verbs, which is precisely their relationship in Biblical Hebrew, as well.

As for the **lexicon** and **semantics**—obviously, Modern Hebrew has absorbed and introduced many words unknown in Biblical Hebrew. Ancient terms have also developed or been endowed with new meanings. Differences such as these are not to be swept under the rug, but neither should their significance be exaggerated. In the case of a high percentage of the most common vocabulary items there has been little to no semantic change, and even where new meanings have been adopted or evolved, the developments are often, though not always, transparent. So it is in the case of such venerable biblical terms as *מְכֻלָּת*, *מִפְלִצָּת*, *לְהִקָּה*, *בְּקִבּוּק*, and even Aramaic *פְּסִנְתְּרִין*, while the (sometime amusing) shifts in meaning of *מְכֻנָּה*, *שׁוֹבֵב*, *אִישָׁה גְדוּלָּה*, and *עִגָּל מְשׁוּלָּשׁ* serve as useful counterexamples. The identity of borrowed lexemes is also usually straightforward, while semantic shifts often result not in the total displacement of an ancient meaning with a modern one, but in the addition of a modern sense to a cluster of semantic values associated with a given term. The Modern Hebrew lexical inventory—as employed in its various spoken and written registers—includes not only what may be considered pure modernisms, but usages representative of the entire history of the language, including Biblical Hebrew. These are already encountered at the beginning levels of Modern Hebrew acquisition and only multiply as a learner becomes familiar with academic and literary Hebrew.

Syntax is rightly considered the area in which the disparity between Modern and Biblical Hebrew most affects the student. In some ways, the syntactic structure of an Arabic newspaper article has more in common with Biblical Hebrew than Modern Hebrew has. Even so, the discrepancy between Biblical and Modern Hebrew syntax should not be exaggerated. Among other things, it should be borne in mind that many of the so-called 'modern' developments characteristic of contemporary Hebrew actually date all the way back to the Rabbinic Hebrew of late Second

Temple times. Focusing, by way of example, on the verbal system, it is true that such significant biblical features as the conversive tenses and the infinitive absolute have no place in the syntax of Modern Hebrew and that clauses far more rarely begin with *waw*. But of the seven principal Modern Hebrew verbal forms—i.e., *qatal*, periphrastic *haya qotel*, *yiqtol*, the active participle, the infinitive (construct), the imperative, and the *shem pe'ula* verbal noun, only the last, which, again, is part of the Rabbinic system, is an innovation with respect to Biblical Hebrew. With the exception of certain marginal and/or non-standard uses, along with a degree of morphological simplification, the other six forms are used largely as they were in Biblical Hebrew.² The same may be said of prepositions, head-modifier agreement, and the construct state, to give just a few examples from a list that could go on and on, but which, due to time constraints, I will cite no further.

Perhaps it is best to end with something of a personal testimony. I would like to stress that my advocacy for the benefit of Modern Hebrew for students studying Biblical Hebrew generally and for Bible translation personnel more specifically is not just abstract or theoretical. It is rather very practically rooted in personal experience. While I have taken a handful of excellent Biblical Hebrew courses with teachers who imparted foundational and/or seminal lessons, my own ability to read, analyze, and teach the language and literature of the Bible is *more* a result of linguistic fluency gained thanks to the study of the modern tongue. This is for the simple reason that actually learning Hebrew has proven far more useful than merely learning to talk about it. While the integration of Modern Hebrew within a Bible translation training program can prove challenging—particularly if students are expected to have time for such mundane activities as sleep—it is my sincere hope that this feature of the current program will continue to set it apart among similar programs worldwide.

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² For more detail see Hornkohl 2014.