

Why Learn Hebrew? by Richard Peterson

Learn Hebrew and you will be healed!” So said Eliezer Ben-Yehuda at the end of the 19th century. Whatever his motive, one of his objectives has certainly been achieved: The restoration of Hebrew as the common language of the Jewish residents of what was then known as Palestine. Today, increasing numbers of people, both Jews and non-Jews are being prompted to learn Hebrew. If they are like me, they need encouragement both to start and to continue. Here are some “reasons why” which may be of help.

1. Hebrew is the primary language of the Old Testament Scriptures. The apostle Paul wrote, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training.” (2 Tim. 3:16). At that time there was no recognised Scripture other than what is now commonly known as the Old Testament, which is almost entirely written in Hebrew.

2. Hebrew unfolds the riches of the whole body of the Scriptures. Martin Luther wrote, “No one can really understand the Scriptures without it. For although the New Testament is written in Greek, it is full of Hebraisms and Hebrew expressions. It has therefore been aptly said that the Hebrews drink from the spring, the Greeks from the stream that flows from it, and the Latins from a downstream pool.”

3. Hebrew especially helps us to understand the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). There are a number of early witnesses who report that the life of Jesus was originally written down in Hebrew. Among them is Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor (circa 130 A.D.), who says, “Matthew put down the words of the Lord in the Hebrew language, and others have translated them, each as best he could.”

However, since the mid-nineteenth century it has become fashionable to believe that Hebrew was not the primary language of Jesus and his contemporaries. Therefore, Dr. Robert Lindsey, a senior member of the Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research and author of *Jesus, Rabbi & Lord*, writes, “Passages in the Gospels have become unclear and are easily misunderstood, or the meaning entirely missed, because their interpretation has become separated from an understanding of their Hebrew linguistic and cultural roots.”

Recent analysis by scholars of the Jerusalem School has shown that there is indeed a Hebrew “undertext” lying behind nearly half of the New Testament (at least the first three Gospels and probably, also, the first half of the book of Acts). The late Abbé Jean Carmignac, a Roman Catholic scholar who worked on the Dead Sea Scrolls for twelve years, came to a similar conclusion quite independently.

4. Hebrew helps us to understand the use of Old Testament Scriptures in the New Testament and to use the Scriptures properly ourselves. Have you ever been puzzled that New Testament writers often go beyond the apparent contextual meaning of the Old Testament passages which they quote? To our Western, Graeco-Roman minds, such use often seems farfetched, yet we accept it as valid. If we are to use the word of truth correctly

(2 Tim. 2:15), wouldn't we do well to recover, for ourselves, the ancient methods of interpretation which these writers used with such creativity?

5. Hebrew gives firsthand access to early Jewish literature. The sages and teachers of Israel have preserved important information about the historic, religious, cultural and linguistic context in which Jesus and Paul taught. They complement the Scriptures and often fill important gaps in our understanding, yet much of this literature remains unavailable in English.

6. Hebrew helps prevent and correct error. For this reason an 11th century Arabic document berated Christians for abandoning the general knowledge of Hebrew. Dr. Joseph Hertz, late Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, wrote, "The Men of the Great Assembly rightly felt that the Synagogue Service must be in Israel's historic language, which is the depository of the soul-life of Israel. Hellenistic Jewry [in Alexandria] did not share this view, and it dispensed with the Sacred Language in its religious life." Quoting Schechter, he continues, "The result was death. It withered away, and ended in total apostasy from Judaism."

Throughout the centuries of dispersion among other nations, Jewish children have continued to be taught Hebrew and so retained firsthand access to the Hebrew Scriptures. Is it possible that the Church has become more susceptible to error as a result of abandoning the general knowledge of Hebrew? When the common man was given access to the scriptures in his own language, through the mass production of the first printed editions of the Bible in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D., it led to a reformation and a revival of the Church. What if every Christian child were to be taught Hebrew as a second language?

7. Hebrew deepens understanding of the Church's spiritual roots and identity. Sharing a common language helps to reinforce a sense of kinship. Members of the Church are no longer "excluded from citizenship in Israel" (Eph. 2:12). "Our forefathers were all under the cloud and passed through the sea" (1 Cor. 10:1). Those who study Israel's ancient literature and share in the communal life of Jewish people, gain an enriched and constantly deepening appreciation of their common root in the Lord God of Israel. This can only strengthen the Church against flowing with the rising tide of anti-Semitism in the world and the dangers of alienation from the Jewish people.

8. Hebrew enables us to participate in and benefit fully from the Hebrew service of the synagogue. Synagogue attendance was taken for granted and remained habitual for Jesus, Paul and members of the early Jewish Church in the land of Israel until the exile of the Jews in 135 A.D. Elsewhere, both Gentile Christians and Jewish believers continued to take part in synagogue services until at least the fourth century A.D. Today, the service of the synagogue remains open to anyone who wishes to go along.

9. Hebrew gives insight into the world view of the people who speak it. Dr. Clifford Denton is editor-in-chief of *Tishrei*, a quarterly journal which explores the Christian faith through its Jewish roots. He writes, "Immersion in a language produces far more than

conversation. A language determines the very mind-set of a person. A person who thinks in Hebrew is a different person from one who thinks in English, all other things being equal. Thus, the Hebrew language gives more than an accurate understanding of words. It is within the very root structure of what it is to be a Jew.”

10. Hebrew is the lingua franca of modern Israel. It goes without saying that anyone who visits or lives in Israel will do better if he or she speaks the language of the people. Even a little is helpful, because people tend to be warmer and more responsive if one tries to communicate with them in their own language. Modern Hebrew and biblical Hebrew are very similar. One forms an excellent foundation for learning the other.

11. Hebrew is relatively easy to learn. David Bivin, co-author of a Hebrew language course and of a book on the Hebrew background to the life and teaching of Jesus, writes, “Hebrew is to a large extent a phonetic language with a relatively small vocabulary. Generally it is based on a simple three-letter root system which provides a helpful memory aid in the formation of various verbs and nouns; nothing like the complexity of many modern European languages.” Neither should one be put off by the strange-looking alphabet. Its twenty-two letters are relatively easy to learn and can be learned within a week. With practice, they soon become familiar.

12. There is something special about reading the scriptures in their original language. But you'll only find out if you learn how!

The student begins to reap the benefits of learning Hebrew immediately. However, language learning is a cyclic process. At times one is elated by the advances one has made, at others one seems to be getting nowhere. In either case, to make further progress it is essential to push steadily on, even if slowly. “He who gathers little by little will become rich” (Prov. 13:11).