

Introduction to Biblical Hebrew

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Welcome to Introduction to Biblical Hebrew! In this course, we will be just scraping the surface of the beautiful language behind the Old Testament. But first, why learn biblical Hebrew at all? Through this course, I hope to share with you the joys of a better understanding of the scriptures, as well as give you insight into just how difficult the work of translation is. Translation is not a simple “word for word” conversion, but is a complicated process that involves making choices. That’s why typing something from another language into Google translate often comes back confusing. (For a humorous example of why simply translating the words doesn’t work well, check out the youtube channel “Translator Fails” and this Google translated version of Disney’s “I Won’t Say I’m in Love.”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4_4pNlxNac) Every translation involves choices, and being informed about those places where the translators had to make choices can open the scriptures in new ways.

So why only an introduction to the language? Well, because learning a language is a hard task. When I took Hebrew, it was a full school year of 90 minute classes twice a week with two to four hours of homework in between, and that was geared toward students in college, in practice of studying, and who had studied other languages in the past. In a setting like this where we will have one hour a week, it is unreasonable to expect to learn the language, but it is enough time to gain an appreciation for the beauty of the language, some of the nuance we miss in English, and an appreciation for the hard work of translators.

Furthermore, the act of learning a language in itself has been shown to encourage empathy and help people be more open to different ways of thinking about the same things. Languages are all systems of logic and patterns, but each language has its own internal logic and patterns; practicing learning a new language helps exercise those mental and spiritual muscles of understanding things outside our experiences and listening to others. It is also an opportunity to practice patience with ourselves. Learning a new internal logic is not fast. Hebrew has a particularly tricky learning curve right at the beginning. Be patient.

Now, I realize that many of you will have different goals in studying Hebrew. For some of you, simply learning the alphabet (aleph-bet, in Hebrew) will satisfy you. Others will hope to learn some interesting points that will inform your reading of the Bible, and help you understand the footnotes in study Bibles. Others will want a deeper understanding of the language, or even to reach the point of understanding an interlinear Bible. For that reason, we’re going to try an experiment. We’re going to go week by week, and whenever you feel like you have gotten what you want out of the class, you can be done, no hard feelings. I will keep going, giving you a new schedule of when I will be teaching every couple months, and we will keep going until I am the only one left. I just ask that when you have received what you want out of the course, that you send me an email so I know you are done, not just absent.

Materials

A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew, revised edition. C. L. Seow

Before you purchase the book, do some thinking about why you want to learn Hebrew. If you're just interested in the early portion of the class, the book may not be for you. A lot of the material in the first chapters is more than we need to know for the purposes of this class, so I will be skipping a fair bit of it. (If you do want to learn more about that, once you have a bit more of a base in Hebrew it will make a lot more sense.)

Flash Cards: this is not optional for learning vocabulary. Making and studying good flash cards is the most effective strategy I have found for learning new vocabulary. Try to avoid putting too much information on the flash cards, and when you study them, say the words out loud if you can. You can use either physical index cards (I like to cut them in quarters so I can slip them in my purse more easily) or a flash card app. I **do not** recommend purchasing or downloading premade flash cards to learn vocabulary. The act of making the flash cards is a valuable learning tool. It works better when you make the physical note cards, but if you are more likely to use the phone app to study than the physical note cards, that outweighs the benefit of making the physical note cards. However, even if you use virtual flash cards, making them helps reinforce the vocabulary. Flash cards work best when you utilize them as visual, audio, and kinetic tools. My two favorite flash cards apps are quizlet and anki (both of which allow you to create flash cards on your computer or phone and use them on both as well). Quizlet will let you separate the vocabulary by chapter, use pictures, and has a variety of ways to use it in the app. Anki will quiz you on all the words you have learned so far using spaced repetition theory. Answering a question correctly will give you more time before it asks you to review that card; answering incorrectly will decrease the time before it asks you that card again. Although anki has a higher learning curve, both work well. This website has a great resource for making your flash cards work better.

<https://collegeinfo geek.com/flash-card-study-tips/>

5+ Colors of writing instruments: while this is optional, I cannot recommend color coding your notes for Hebrew highly enough unless you are color blind. I will be sharing with you my color coding system for Hebrew and sharing with you how I use that system to make the language easier.

Patience: as I stated earlier, Hebrew has a rough learning curve at the beginning. That is okay.

Course Structure

When we meet together I will have either a lecture or a practice session planned. Sometimes, especially once we start working with verbs, we will take multiple weeks per chapter. This textbook is fantastic for working with a class, but it can be intimidating to read on your own. I suggest what my Hebrew professor suggested. Don't read the chapter before class for Hebrew. Join us for the lecture first, then go back and read the portions of the book we studied as a review. Seow is brilliant, but sometimes too brilliant, and he shares things that are beyond what we will be working on in this course. At the start of the chapter, we will go over the vocabulary together, and I will provide a typed version of the vocab for those of you who want digital notecards (just because typing in Hebrew is a whole other skillset to learn.) The faster you memorize the vocabulary, the easier the lessons will be, so I encourage you to make your flash cards and start studying the vocab early. Finally, in the lectures, I will go through a couple of the exercises with you, and I encourage you to complete as many of the other exercises as you can on your own. Try to at least complete one. Practice is critical to translation, and mistakes are part

of the learning process. Furthermore, studies have shown that we learn languages better when we do a little bit every day, verses cramming once a week. So ten minutes every day will go further than 90 minutes once a week.

We will meet on Sunday nights at 6pm Central Time/ 7pm Eastern via Zoom for discussion and to go through the exercises. Please bring questions and as much of the exercises as you have been able to do and we will go through them together, learning through practice.

A note about the exercises: once we get to the point of translating, as you complete the exercises, practice parsing (describing) the verbs, nouns, and adjectives. We will be discussing what goes into parsing each part as we come to it. This is a *very* useful skill that will help you in your translating. Don't worry about the English to Hebrew exercises unless you are looking for extra practice.

Schedule

Discussion Date	Topic	Homework
Jan 30	No vocabulary Look at alphabet Introduction to the Aleph-Bet	Optional: Alphabet Song https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzIxfKndY5A This is a looped aleph-bet song that does get annoying, but turn it on for five minutes and it will get the sounds into your head.
Feb 6	Chapter 2 Vocabulary: p. 14-15 Introduction to Vowels and Syllables	Chapter 2 Practice writing your name and your family members' names in Hebrew Look at the practice page and try to transliterate the Hebrew into English words.
Feb 13	Chapter 3 Vocabulary: p. 21 Introduction to Nouns	Chapter 3 Practice pluralizing the examples in exercise a Look at exercise c for words you recognize. You won't be able to translate the whole thing, but this is two verses from Proverbs, so it can be exciting to start seeing things you know in the Bible.
Feb 20	Chapter 4 Vocabulary: p. 35-36 Introduction to Hebrew Roots and Patterns	Chapter 4 Exercise A look to recognize patterns. Look at exercise D for words you recognize. Like last week, you still will not be translating the whole thing, but it is an opportunity to practice with a Biblical text.
March 6	Chapter 5 Vocabulary: p. 44 Noun Odds and Ends	Chapter 5 Look at exercise C for words you recognize from Malachi 3:22-24.
March 13	Chapter 6 Vocabulary: p. 60-61 Introduction to Prepositions and articles (also, we'll be able to translate our first full sentence this week!)	Chapter 6 Look at exercise C. These are just partial phrases taken out of context, and we will look at them next week. Try to translate as many as you can.
March 20	Practice Week	We will be looking at Chapter 6, exercise D. I will provide you with a copy of the Hebrew, and we will work through it together. Spend this week reviewing and memorizing.

March 27	Chapter 7 Vocabulary: p. 75 Introduction to Adjectives	Chapter 7 Look at exercise B. These are just partial phrases taken out of context, and we will look at them next week. Try to translate as many as you can.
April 3	Practice Week	We will be looking at Chapter 7, exercise C. I will provide you with a copy of the Hebrew, and we will work through it together. Spend this week reviewing and memorizing.
Break for Easter!		

Additional Resources

Optional: For typing in Hebrew: https://www.sbl-site.org/educational/biblicalfonts_FAQ_Windows8.aspx

Follow the directions for downloading the keyboard. Note that typing in Hebrew is hard; you will need to download the guide to typing as well. I recommend this only for the brave of heart.