

## Why Study Biblical Languages?

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Why bother? Why should we take the time, effort, blood, sweat and tears to learn Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek? Isn't it just for the experts? Will it really help me teach? Don't we have enough translations and commentaries so that I don't have to mess with biblical languages? These are good questions and need to be answered.

First and foremost, we need to see that this is a privilege that we each have. God has revealed Himself to us in His Word. His Word is deep, rich and beautiful, and reveals His character and personhood to us. Through His Word we get to know Him better and are better able to imitate Him and make Him know to others. The more I love someone, the more I want to get to know him or her. Being with him or her is a privilege and a joy. I want to know what he/she thinks, how he/she feels, what makes him/her happy and sad. To do that, I must listen. I must listen to that person. I must listen to that person in his-her own words.

God has left us His Word so that we can know Him better and He did this in the languages of the period when He spoke—ancient Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. These were the languages of His people (Israel), and of the nations (first Aramaic, then Greek). To know what He said more accurately and intimately, we need to be able to read it the way He gave it, i.e., in the original languages. This requires sacrifice, but is well worth it. Most things in life that matter, do.

Having said that, we want to avoid two extremes. One extreme is to think that biblical languages are the “magic bullet,” i.e., the key that will unlock the Bible and theology. If we only knew the original languages, we would know it all! With some exposure to Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, we are tempted to think that we can find all kinds of hidden meanings in the text—“golden nuggets” that only we can dig out with our newfound skill. We are tempted to show off our knowledge (regardless of how minute it might be) by quoting Hebrew and Greek words in our sermons, or pontificating on the deep and intricate meaning of a word here or a phrase there. Biblical languages can become our “Protestant Latin” where we, knowledgeable scholars, know the true interpretation of Scripture which our poor laypeople could never understand without us. As the Catholics held down the average pew-sitter by declaring things in a hidden language—unknown and unapproachable—we can unwittingly do the same with too much emphasis in our preaching on the biblical languages.

The other extreme to avoid is one of laziness. In the name of pragmatism, which is often a great enemy of exegesis and theology, we may think it unnecessary to do the groundwork of study, learning the languages, and learning how to use the language tools. We want to “get on with” the real ministry. But would we want our surgeon to have such an approach. “Well, I wanted to hurry up and get out there to practice surgery—there are so many hurting people you know—that I didn't take time to go to medical school,” he says. “Give me the scalpel, and I'll do my best—I really do want the help.” This approach, obviously, won't “cut it.” Just as we want our doctor to not only love us, but also to be knowledgeable in the field of medicine, we should also want our spiritual leaders to not only love us, but also be knowledgeable in the field of Bible and theology, which should include biblical languages.

My conviction is that the contribution of the knowledge of biblical languages is more subtle, and at times “negative”, rather than “positive”. What do I mean by that? Rather than the Bible in the original languages always giving us a “positive” result by providing a new meaning for a word which we can spout in our sermon to impress others, it may simply provide the “negative” guard against improper interpretation. In other words, when seeking to interpret a passage of Scripture, you are often confronted with various possibilities. When looking at a translation, you see various questions that arise regarding interpretation. But if you look behind the translation to the original, you will notice different questions, or different possibilities. In others words, the Greek may not tell you the answer, but it will have you asking the right questions, and prevent you from asking the wrong ones. And of course, an answer is only helpful if it actually answers the right question.

Perhaps some examples would help. Look at the following three translations of Psalm 8:2:

<b>Kaštelan/Duda:</b>	<b>Revidiran Šarić:</b>	<b>Daničić</b>
<i>Jahve, <u>Gospode</u> naš, divno je ime tvoje po svoj zemlji, veličanstvom nebo <b>natkriljuješ!</b></i>	<i><u>Gospode, vladaoče</u> naš, kako je divno ime Tvoje po svoj zemlji! Veličanstvom nebo <b>natkriljuješ.</b></i>	<i><u>Gospodine, Gospodine</u> naš! Kako je veličanstveno ime tvoje po svoj zemlji! <b>Podigao si</b> slavu svoju više nebesa.</i>

The differences in the translations are highlighted above. How are we to know which one is correct? In this case, we have to know what the Hebrew text says and what the possible meanings are? Is it best translated «Gospode», «Vladaoče», or «Gospodine»? Does the text say «natkriljuješ» or «podigao si»? How can we truly know if we cannot investigate in the original languages?

An example of the preventative aspect of knowing biblical languages can be seen in John 1:1: «U početku bijaše Riječ i Riječ bijaše kod Boga i Riječ bijaše Bog». Some cults try to say that since «Bog» at the end of the verse does not have the definite article in Greek, that it teaches that Jesus was a god (not God). With a simple knowledge of basic Greek grammar, however, they would know that there must not be an article in order to differentiate the subject from the predicate nominative. This verse in no way suggests a lower level of deity for Jesus (but rather the opposite). Knowing Greek grammar keeps us from serious error, at least in terms of misinterpretations from certain (Arian) cults.

In conclusion, though there are many good translations and commentaries available, a working knowledge of the biblical languages can give us a more accurate understanding of the Scriptures and guard us from error. It is not the key to solve all theological problems, nor a weapon to use in lording over the laity, but it is an extremely helpful tool in the hands of Bible students. As one teacher phrased it, knowing biblical languages is like watching TV in color. Yes, watching a black and white TV is okay; you can obviously see and hear everything you need to. But in color it is so much richer, vibrant and alive.

May we all be diligent to apply ourselves to learn the Scriptures...in color!