

CLASSICAL HEBREW TONGUE AND OLD TESTAMENT STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigated the significance of Hebrew tongue to the study of Old Testament. Authors of the 'Hebrew canon, the law and the Book' (Old Testament) wrote in a language and culture far removed from our own and their key contractual obligation was to be intelligible for their own time. It requires training on our part to understand them in their own language. It is discovered that by learning Hebrew one learns the Jewish mindset, world view and Hebraic thought patterns. Hebrew is the key to Jewish self-sufficiency; its universality has helped to break down the barrier between the religious and the secular in Jewish locales. It is the best means and method to remove the clothing from the Scripture for apt intelligibility for our time and culture.

Keywords: Classical, Hebrew, language, Old Testament, Study

INTRODUCTION:

During the first one thousand years of Jewish history, Hebrew was spoken as a language. During the next two thousand years it was mainly used for literary purposes and as the language of worship. In modern times, Hebrew has once again become a living language, as well as the authorized dialect of the Israelites. But the Modern Hebrew is a modern construction which differs widely from biblical or classical Hebrew.

The ancient TaNakh (תנ"ך) (תורה נביאים כתובים), rendered in Hebrew, is today called the Old Testament. Hebrew is the language of the culture, religion and civilization of the Jewish people since ancient times. Akao (1999) posits that Hebrew language is one of the indispensable tools for the study of the Old Testament. For any Old Testament or biblical scholar, a sound or working knowledge of Hebrew language is a pre – requisite.

Biblical or Biblical Hebrew represents the Hebrew language spoken by Jews between 1200 and 200 B.C. Although the language did not remain constant over the years, the form in which we now have it in Old Testament is the standardized form spoken during the Monarchical period, when most of the biblical writings were compiled or written. It may be mentioned in passing that, in the post-exilic era, spoken Hebrew came under the strong influence of other languages like Aramaic, Persian, and later Greek. But Biblical Hebrew was almost unaffected because it had already assumed literary form. This point becomes glaring when biblical Hebrew is compared with Rabbinic Hebrew of the *Mishna*.

Biblical Hebrew has affinities with other cognate Semitic languages. In fact it belongs to the northwest ancient Semitic language family which includes Babylonian, Assyrian, Arabic, Ethiopia, Aramaic, Ugaritic and Phoenician. A comparison with any of these language system helps at times to throw light on a difficult situation arising in course of exegetisation. Excavation in Syria and Palestine since the First World War has helped a lot in aiding textual, epigraphical and comparative philological study of Hebrew and other Semitic languages.

Unlike some of these languages from the same language family, Hebrew was originally written without vowels and its speakers depended, to a great extent for the correct pronunciation, on the context of the oral articulation of the language (Ebo 2005). Before the introduction of vowels, the difference in meaning was indicated and known only through pronunciation. The introduction of vowels was therefore, a welcome innovation to ease the problem of students studying Hebrew as a second language.

The innovation is owed to Jewish scholars called *Massorettes* (traditionalists/transmitters), who in Tiberias during the 9th and 10th centuries A.D. perfected a system of vowel notation and added it to the received consonantal text. And because the modern printed version of the Hebrew Bible derived from the activities of these scholars or Massorettes, it is commonly referred to as the Masoretic Text symbolized as MT.

Apart from the fairly large number of Universities in Nigeria and elsewhere offering courses in Religion or Christian Religious studies, there are over one thousand Christian Theological seminaries. In all these institutions, a working knowledge of Hebrew is an essential tool for a proper study of the Old Testament. Yet only an infinitesimal number of students pass through these institutions with a working knowledge of Hebrew. Students, including ministerial ones, in many countries as a rule no longer seek to learn Hebrew. Instead they would want to cut to the chase and learn how to do what they want to do without knowledge of Hebrew as a basis. In many of these institutions, Hebrew is no longer part of their required curriculum. In others where it is still part of the curriculum, only about two to three Hebrew courses, which are not enough, are devoted casually to the study of Hebrew within the period of graduation of students. It is perhaps worse in post-graduate programmes because the students do not have the required undergraduate foundation or orientation and therefore deficient, hence the need for this study.

HEBREW AND OLD TESTAMENT STUDY:

It is recognized in almost every field of study that solid theory must under gird any type of practice. If the theory and content that are supposed to back up a discipline are not there, eventually the one that practices that discipline will not succeed very well. When an Old Testament student decides that Hebrew is not important enough to study, he is cutting himself off from the best source of content and theory he can ever get. Hebrew is the primary document of Old Testament and Christian faith and practice. If Hebrew is ignored, the Old Testament student destines himself for an enterprise of second – hand knowledge and that certainly is not practical.

Apart from the obvious utilitarian need of the knowledge of Hebrew for the Christian theologian or priest - in – training, says Ayo in Akao (1999), there is also the purely educational value of acquiring a mastery of an ancient language, a consideration which explains the mandatory learning, until recently, of Latin by all scholars throughout the world. The mental discipline and liberating influence of learning a second language is clear enough, that of acquiring a working knowledge of an ancient language and a very important one such as

Hebrew must be regarded infinitely more rewarding, for it offers the student an intimate view of the development of human civilization without entirely relying on secondary sources.

Harvard University in America is one of the best in the world. Bible is one of the most popular subjects at Harvard. Most students admitted into Harvard are fluent in a second language, which is very often the language of their native culture. Students who enter Harvard with proficiency in Hebrew can place out of the language requirement and get credit for the foreign cultures requirement by taking courses that require a reading knowledge of Hebrew. Students with Hebrew have access to advanced rather than introductory courses. Today's emphasis on multiculturalism assumes that people belong to some ethnic group or other. The more of its equipment a person carries, the more confident he or she can be.

When America was being formed newly as a nation, in the days when there was strong opposition to United Kingdom, a lot of settlers wished to substitute British dialect with another tongue for the new America. Hebrew was among other dialects considered and this surely would have transformed the track of events.

According to Wisse (2004), in the practical experience of being a Jew and an Old Testament student, Hebrew plays important role in building confidence. Knowing Hebrew is like knowing how to drive. You can take the car out any time and go wherever you like in Jewish studies, in exploring the Bible Land of Israel and its culture, in plumbing Jewish history. Without Hebrew it means always having to rely on a tour guide and a driver to lead and drive one around Jewish world. Proficiency in Hebrew is the democratizing force in modern Jewish life. Egalitarian Judaism, no matter in what denomination or sphere begins with equal access to Hebrew. It is the key to Jewish self – sufficiency.

All too often, the distinctiveness of the Jewish people is debated around the question of the Holocaust, as though the destruction of the Jews were the prism through which we wanted to claim our uniqueness. Actually, the ability of the Germans and their assistants to destroy most of the Jews of Europe says more about the former's distinctiveness than it does about the Jews. But the record of the Hebrew language really is unique, and it helps to explain the distinctive nature of the Jewish people.

In post - exilic Israel, the priest Ezra instituted the custom of reading the Law in Hebrew, Ezra read it aloud to them, but a group of priests (Levites) then gave an oral translation of God's Law and explained it so that the people could understand it (Drane, 1990). This was necessary because the Law itself was written in Hebrew, whereas the people then spoke Aramaic, the local vernacular. As this custom was continued in later generations, the rabbis also required universal education, so that the majority of the Jews could read the Torah and pray in Hebrew, no matter where they lived and no matter what other languages they might adopt. The custom of studying Bible remained as Ezra had instituted it – moving from the original Hebrew to the local vernacular, which made it clear that Hebrew was the constant in Jewish history, uniting all Israelites everywhere, while other languages might be subject to change.

Though many European Jews wanted to continue speaking German or Yiddish, the leaders of the people persuaded their fellow Jews that they would have to bring Hebrew up to date. Hebrew was the only language that united Jews diachronically and synchronically, through time and space. Although some religious Jews still refuse to “debase” Hebrew by using it as a daily language, its universality has helped to break down the barrier between the religious and the secular. Realizing its power, the Soviet Union banned the use of Hebrew in its war against the Jewish religion and nationhood. Thus when Soviet Jews began to fight for their liberation, they studied Hebrew as the mark of their defiance.

Language really is an expression of nationhood. By studying a language one discovers other things. By studying Hebrew one discovers a nation. Coke (2005) says that the study of Hebrew can be beneficial to knowing the cultural terrain of the past, the mindset and the real thing being said and done together with the reason behind the saying and the doing.

Israelites of today discovered that to get well married with the present their past, especially the language, would come into play. The Hebraic language integrated all the particles of Israelite nationality in the expression of their being and survival. All other dialects used by the Israelites one way or the other incorporated Hebraic letters in other to show the significant nature of the Hebrew language and its sacredness. It is Ebo's (1993) view, that Hebrew is rich in picturesque description and lends itself effortlessly to understanding. Its three root verbal application accentuates pictorial emphasis of all sorts. The Scripture as the Hebrews appropriately call the Old Testament, has in its language rendering all it takes to elucidate the rest of the Bible. Effort on the part of the learner with time shows that every biblical author made use of the theological vocabularies available in the expression of themselves to their then audiences. It is necessary to know Hebrew at least in its primary stage for better appreciation of the Bible.

Different aspects of sense become clear in the Old Testament with acquaintance of Hebrew. Prophet Isaiah in

chapter 66:24 describes the dead who lived wicked life as having worms and fire which cannot be separated by their death. The term translated “their fire” is formed by combining “fire” (אֵשׁ) and the possessive “their (m)” suffix (ֵם). Their fire is a good translation but the word accurately could be read “guilt” which means their guilt is not removed. It is their guilt that provides the fuel for their fire (Isaiah 66:24).

In furtherance of the discussion on the importance of studying Hebrew, Botkin (1999) posits that turns of phrases and figures of speech and mean much in the study of language. Lack of knowledge of them can throw one off balance in the real appreciation of meanings. Hebrew as a language has lots of them and their knowledge surely can make much difference in the understanding of the Hebrew scripture.

For instance, this turn of phrase - (בְּרִיךְ הוֹיָהּ), means plainly “holy is he that comes”. One who knows Hebraic expressions translates it as “welcome”. It was used of Jesus in the book of Matthew to denote that he would not come to Jerusalem again until they are ready to welcome him. Poetry as opposed to prose in the scripture possesses much of these figurative expressions and their understanding is vital to scriptural knowledge.

ISAIAH HAS SOME FEW EXAMPLES IN HIS BOOK:

“He (Yahweh) looked for judgment (מִשְׁפָּט) but behold oppression (מִשְׁפָּה), for righteousness (צְדָקָה), but behold a cry (צִעֲקָה) (5:7). ...for it is a day of trouble (מַהוֹמָה), and of treading down (מְנוּסָה), and of perplexity (מְנוּכָה) (22:5). ...teaching have to be on principle, guideline upon rule, row upon column, column ahead row, here a little, and there a little (צוֹ לְצוֹ צוֹ לְצוֹ קוֹ לְקוֹ קוֹ לְקוֹ זַעִיר שָׁם זַעִיר שָׁם) (28:10)

To appreciate the Scripture more, some knowledge of Hebrew acrostics is needed. Psalms and Lamentations and the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 are composed in such a manner that the first verse begins with the first Hebrew letter *Aleph*, the second with the second Hebrew letter *Beth*, the third with the third Hebrew letter *Gimel*, and so on.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of trying to learn the original language of the Old Testament lies in the familiarity one gets from understanding the Hebraic cosmology which provides one with unlimited explanations of things and events and the reasons behind them. Of course the mind can be renewed by reading the Old Testament in Hebrew where the word order, thought pattern and sentence structure is amply beautified.

At the temptation Jesus contested every demand of Satan with Scriptures in Hebrew language. Similarly, at his crucifixion, Jesus found strength to face the suffering through words from the Hebrew Scriptures. His cry from the cross “why hast thou forsaken me?” is a direct quotation of Psalm 22:1. Studying Hebrew will give one new insight into the meaning of New Testament writings.

Christ said to his followers that not a “tittle” will bypass from the torah (Matt 5:18). Parsons, (2005) explains that “jot” is the equivalent of “yod(י)”, and the word translated “tittle” (Keraia in Greek) refers to the “horn”, or smallest stroke of a Hebrew letter, probably something like a “serif” in our modern English type faces.

The smallest stroke of the smallest letter of the Hebrew text was important to the Lord Jesus, and, if the Scriptures are esteemed as he did, attention would also be paid to the details of the sacred Writings. But how can a “jot” or a “tittle” be determined without having knowledge of the original Hebrew text? Studying Hebrew will surely create the consciousness about “jots” and “tittles” that shall in no way pass until all is fulfilled.

Hebrew language, of course the modern type, is today used in Israel in both religious and political affairs. One with the knowledge of classical Hebrew definitely will find it easy to adapt and be Israelitesh in every form. Studying Hebrew will help one to better appreciate modern Jewish culture and the people living in Israel where our Lord once lived.

The study of Hebrew will enable one to better comprehend Jewish concepts and literature. One will begin to delight in one’s shared inheritance in the form and nature of heirs to Jewish ancestry and covenant.

When God made individuals, he made every part of them to love and serve him. God should be loved heartily. He should be loved with our strength. He should also love him with our minds. Loving God intelligently requires the full exercise of minds in understanding and comprehending and probing the things of God. Since the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, the full exercise of our minds in his service requires the use of Hebrew language. Most of the tension is found at this level. Students are unwilling to do the hard work necessary to use their minds as fully as they can. Yes, Hebrew is difficult to learn. It demands much time and effort. However, the God who made us, and brought his Word to us deserves no less.

Hebrew is one of the bequests of the Semitic people to human race. Apart from being the vehicle whereby the Scriptures were conveyed, its influence on New Testament Greek and European literature is incalculable, even though much of it on the latter may have come indirectly from the Vulgate version. Among the Hebrew loan-words in English are: Satan, hallelujah, Sabbath, shekel, jubilee, myrrh etc. Some names being borne by people today originated from Hebrew language. Such names are: Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, Samuel, David etc

Only a small percentage of those who study the Bible can be experts in Hebrew, yet some familiarity with the structure and thought pattern of the language is essential for the type of biblical knowledge that a theology student should have (Brown, 1973). Such a demand is again part of the recognition that God has acted in particular place and time and his message would have taken a different form and nuance had it been expressed in another language.

CONCLUSION:

Nehemiah, no doubt cherished Hebrew as the language of his time. The figure of Ezra was magnified in later legend as another Moses, as the man who determined the Hebrew canon. It must be conceded that he oriented the people to an emphasis on the law that characterized Judaism down into the New Testament times. The Jews now became the “people of the Book”.

The authors of the ‘Hebrew canon, the law and the Book’ (Old Testament) wrote in a language and culture far removed from our own and their primary duty was to be intelligible for their own time. It requires training on our part to understand them in their own language. Martin Luther has appreciated Hebrew as a language. In Rhodes’ translation of Pinchas’ (1984) work, Luther is quoted to have said that the Hebrew language was the best language of all, that if he were younger he would have wanted to learn that language, because of Hebraisms and Hebrew expressions.

What else can we do about “the Book” except to study it in its original language? Old Testament can better be understood and appreciated with at least the primary knowledge of classical Hebrew language.

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