

# **Voices: Why you should study the biblical languages**

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Over the seven years I spent pursuing my bachelor's degree and then my Master of Divinity degree, I took three semesters of Hebrew and five semesters of Greek. In hindsight, I wish I had taken more classes. My biblical language skills aren't what I'd like them to be, but I'm working on it.

It grieves me to see seminaries reducing or even eliminating biblical language requirements for their degrees. Pastors need biblical language training. But I would argue it is beneficial for non-pastors also to study the biblical languages. Even if you don't have a seminary or Bible college degree, some level of familiarity with Greek and Hebrew is incredibly valuable.

Why do I care so much about the biblical languages? Why does it matter to non-pastors? How can people without theology degrees gain some level of competency with Greek and Hebrew? Let's consider those questions together.

## **The importance of biblical languages**

The reason the biblical languages are so important is simple: God originally inspired the Bible in Greek, Hebrew and a little bit of Aramaic. Those were the languages of the human biblical authors. The oldest and best manuscripts of Scripture available are written in those languages.

My Greek professor in college told our class once, "All translations are interpretations."

There is no such thing as a “perfectly literal, word-for-word” translation of the Bible.

By God’s grace, we have a variety of excellent and widely available translations today. These mainstream translations agree on the most important issues of biblical teaching, and when you’re reading a standard English Bible today, you can trust you are reading an essentially accurate and faithful expression of what the original languages said.

In other words, the substance of biblical Christianity does not stand or fall on the differences between, for example, the King James Version, the New American Standard Bible and the New International Version.

But those differences do exist, and if you want to dive deeply into the details of Scripture—and you should—facility in the biblical languages can help your Bible study go from monochrome to technicolor.

## **How to study the biblical languages**

The single best way to study the biblical languages is in person with a trained expert. If you have the time and money and there’s a Christian college or seminary near you, I would recommend strongly that you learn the biblical languages by enrolling in—or at least auditing—relevant courses at the school. You don’t have to commit to a full theology degree.

Of course, most *Baptist Standard* readers probably don’t have the time, money and access to in-person instruction to do what I describe above. Another option is online courses through a Christian college or seminary. Of course, this is still a major commitment of time and money, even if such classes are more accessible.

But if you can’t manage in-person or online classes and don’t have ready access to a biblical languages expert, there are two primary options.

One option is to get grammar textbooks, get their accompanying workbooks, and use some other resources to study the biblical languages on your own. This is in some ways the most difficult option. It may be cheaper, more accessible and more flexible, but to see real gains from this method you have to be truly committed and extremely patient.

The second option is to lower your expectations. After all, you don't *need* to be able to read the biblical languages to be a faithful Christian or even a faithful preacher or teacher. But there is a wide gap between complete unfamiliarity with the languages and complete mastery of them. You can be familiar with the languages at various levels without being an expert.

## Resources for self-study

If you want to start studying the biblical languages on your own, the first and most important resource you need is a healthy dose of humility. Far too many students with a few semesters of biblical language study under their belts become convinced they know way more than they really do. You are not more knowledgeable than Bible translation committees.

Second, you'll need resources concerning biblical interpretation and exegesis. See a list of these resources at the end of this article.

Being able to parse Greek verbs and write out Hebrew paradigms will do you little good if you can't integrate that knowledge into sound methods of biblical interpretation. I have [written](#) on such resources before. I also would recommend reading D.A. Carson's *Exegetical Fallacies*.

Third, if you want to dive deeply into the languages, you will need grammars, workbooks, reader's editions of the Greek and Hebrew Bibles, and lexicons. Grammars are textbooks explaining the language.

Workbooks contain guided exercises for applying what you read in the

grammars. Reader's editions have the Greek and Hebrew texts with special apparatuses to help make reading easier. Lexicons are dictionaries.

In addition to the various resources mentioned above, there are many helpful online resources. I particularly recommend [Daily Dose of Greek](#) and [Daily Dose of Hebrew](#).

But perhaps you don't want to go as deep as the above resources would take you. And that's perfectly fine. Perhaps you just want a broader familiarity with Greek and Hebrew. In that case, there are helpful resources for doing that, too, such as *Hebrew for the Rest of Us* and *Greek for the Rest of Us*.

## **The bottom line**

Whether you are pursuing a theological degree with a view toward full-time pastoral ministry or you are a Christian who wants to study the Bible more, familiarity with the biblical languages is a must. God inspired the Bible in specific languages. We should study them.

You don't have to be able to read Greek and Hebrew the same way you can read English, Spanish or other first language to enhance your Bible study with knowledge of the biblical languages. Even simple familiarity with basic vocabulary, grammar and translation methods can help you dive even more deeply into God's word.

More important than anything else, however, biblical language study should prompt humility. When it comes to Scripture, Christians always are students and never masters.

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## Suggested resources:

### For studying Hebrew

- [Basics of Biblical Hebrew Grammar: Third Edition](#)
- [Basics of Biblical Hebrew Workbook: Third Edition](#)
- [Learning Biblical Hebrew: Reading for Comprehension: An Introductory Grammar](#)
- [Learning Biblical Hebrew Workbook: A Graded Reader with Exercises](#)
- [A Reader's Hebrew Bible](#)
- [A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament](#)
- [Hebrew for the Rest of Us](#)

### For studying Greek

- [Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar: Fourth Edition](#)
- [Basics of Biblical Greek Workbook: Fourth Edition](#)
- [Beginning with New Testament Greek: An Introductory Study of the Grammar and Syntax of the New Testament](#)
- [A Reader's Greek New Testament](#)
- [The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament](#)
- [Greek for the Rest of Us: Third Edition](#)

*Joshua Sharp is the pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Orange, and a graduate of Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Mo., and Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary in Waco. The views expressed are those of the author.*