

Hebrew for Christians – A Beginning Grammar

By Ross K. Nichols

Preface

“A quiver of steel arrows, a cable with strong coils, a trumpet of brass crashing through the air with two or three sharp notes – such is the Hebrew Language. The letters of its books are not to be many, but they are to be letters of fire. A language of this sort is not destined to say much, but what it does is beaten out upon an anvil. It is to pour floods of anger and utter cries of rage against the abuses of the world, calling the four winds of heaven to the assault of the citadels of evils. Like the Jubilee horn of the sanctuary it will be put to no profane use; but it will sound the notes of the holy war against injustice and the call of the great assemblies; it will have accents of rejoicing, and accents of terror; it will become the trumpet of Judgment.”

Ernest Renan, 1887

This project is the result of my own attempts to learn the Hebrew language without the benefit of a teacher. I find that the language intimidates most students and therefore few push through to reach a level that allows them to work within the texts of the Hebrew Bible. This is regrettable. The reward is worth the effort. As with anything else, the student must put time towards the thing that they desire to learn. As the famous Puritan minister and scholar, Cotton Mather (1663-1728) said; *“I promise that those who spend as much time morning and evening in Hebrew studies as they do in smoking tobacco, would quickly make excellent progress in the language.”* (Quoted by Bea Stadtler in “Hebrew’s Influence on English,” *Jewish Advocate*, October 22, 1987, p. 19)ⁱ

I will not try and convince you that knowledge of Hebrew will come to you without work. I do promise that the approach I have taken in this book will ease the student’s journey.

ⁱ Our Father Abraham, *Jewish Roots to the Christian Faith*, by Marvin Wilson, p. 128

“A good Hebrew grammar for students beginning the study is still a desideratum. Our writers of Hebrew grammars have aimed to write for scholars rather than for students. They have been ambitious on most points to say all that could be said, without studying to say only that which is needful to be said.” (Hermeneutics and Homiletics, Methodist Quarterly, 48 (1886), 372.)ⁱⁱ

Introduction

Welcome to a course designed to teach you the language of heaven!

The **Hebrew Language** has served as the vehicle for divine communication. Through this tongue, God spoke to the prophets of old. It was the language of Moses, Isaiah, and Jesus of Nazareth (*Acts 26:14*), to name a few. No other language can make such exalted claims for itself. It has been called *Edenspeak*, the ‘language of God’, and the ‘tongue of angels’. Even though our oldest surviving New Testament manuscripts are in Greek, Church historians record that at least Matthew was originally penned in Hebrew.

One might ask, “Why should *Christians* be interested in Biblical Hebrew?” After all, the New Testament came to us in Greek. It should be remembered however that Christianity as a religion is the result of one group’s interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, better known to modern Christians as the Old Testament. The writers of the New Testament only had the Old Testament, or more to the point; none of the disciples or Jesus himself for that matter, ever had a ‘new’ testament. It was from Ancient Israel’s collection of sacred texts that they derived their beliefs about Jesus and the faith that was to emerge in his name. The writer of Acts tells us that Jesus spoke Hebrew (*Acts 26:14*); and certainly the ancient prophets of Israel did as well. Many of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels, as will be shown by this grammar, are better understood as being derived from the Hebrew rather than the Greek.

Early sources tell us that Matthew originally wrote his gospel in Hebrew, and for this reason, many of the exercises in this grammar will use Matthean texts to make

ⁱⁱ Biblical Hebrew, A Text and Workbook by Bonnie Pedrotti Kittel, Vicki Hoffer, and Rebecca Abts Wright, p.63.

grammatical points. Sadly, we do not have the original Hebrew Matthew, for if we did, perhaps we would better understand the beginnings of Christianity. To date, neither monastery nor cave has yielded so much as a scrap of the original composition. We are for the most part left with scholarly attempts at reconstructing the approximate wording of Matthew by translating Greek manuscripts into Hebrew. There are a few exceptions to the above rule. We do possess a few late Hebrew manuscripts of Matthew's gospel. These will be described later in the grammar. I have used some of the more interesting variant readings found within these texts in the examples throughout this grammar. It is my hope that this will be exciting to Christians, and will afford the student a new look at somewhat familiar material in a different light.

The study of Biblical Hebrew by Christians is not a new thing. Early American settlers were deeply rooted in the Hebrew aspects of the Christian faith. Universities advocated a study of the Hebrew language and this found a place within the curriculum of many of our nation's top colleges, to include Columbia, Dartmouth, Harvard and Yale. The Jewish Historian Henry Feingold, commenting on the early days of American education, reported, "Congregationalists were better Hebraists than Jews." (Feingold, "The Jewish Role in Shaping American Society," in *A Time to Speak*, page 46) In the year 1722, Rabbi Judah Monis was appointed to Harvard as a professor of Hebrew. He once wrote, "*I think the more acquainted the ministers of the Gospel are with the Hebrew tongue, and so with the Old Testament, the better able they will be to understand the New Testament and so to preach..*"ⁱⁱⁱ (Marvin Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, page 129, Eerdmans Publishing Company)

This grammar is unique in that it is written primarily for Christians in as simple a manner as possible. I have made every effort to make this grammar interesting to Christians, for besides presenting the basic elements of Hebrew grammar, I have included items that show the original Hebraic perspective to the Jesus narratives. I believe this 'Hebrew' approach to gospel origins comes nearest to the roots of Christianity, and I have labored to prove this point herein. I trust that it will be widely read and produce

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in *Our Father Abraham, Jewish Roots to the Christian Faith*, by Marvin Wilson, p. 129

fruit for many years to come. It is my small contribution to restoring the faith of Jesus, by teaching the masses the language that he spoke for those three years of ministry that forever changed the world.

From my study, March 1998