

Bible Languages

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Learning Biblical Languages

Principal, **Brian Rosner**, explains how an investment in learning biblical languages pays dividends.

STUDYING GREEK AND HEBREW

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The Bible was originally written in three languages: most of the Old Testament in Hebrew, a small part of the Old Testament (predominantly parts of Daniel and Ezra) in Aramaic, and the New Testament in Greek. Ridley College, like many tertiary-level theological colleges, offers the study of biblical Hebrew and Greek in our three-year degrees. Aramaic is also taught, but less regularly.



So why bother learning the original languages when we can read the Bible in our mother tongue?

At first blush, teaching the biblical languages may seem like a puzzling practice. After all, excellent English Bible translations are in abundant supply. So why bother learning the original languages when we can read the Bible in our mother tongue?

The story of Bible translation is one of 'biblical proportions', if you'll excuse the pun, and is a cause for great thanksgiving and celebration. At last count, the whole Bible has been translated into 670 languages, the New Testament into 1,521 languages, and Bible portions or stories into a further 1,121 languages. Part of the DNA of the Reformation was the commitment to vernacular Bible translations so that all God's people, not just the clergy, could read and understand God's Word.

Some colleges have given up the study of Hebrew and Greek, believing a student's time can be better spent on other subjects. Why, then, is Ridley still committed to the study of Hebrew and Greek?

The first thing to say is that it is not because we think English Bible versions are faulty, or that you cannot understand the message of the Bible in translation.

Rather, we are convinced that the investment of time and effort in learning Hebrew and Greek pays dividends for accurate Bible interpretation. A major responsibility of all Christian workers is to 'do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth' (2 Timothy 2:15). And if you can understand the Bible in English, you can understand it even better in the original.

I use two illustrations to encourage students starting out with the study of the biblical languages. Knowing some Hebrew and Greek enables them to 'turn left' (to sit in business or first class) when they enter the airline of biblical exegesis. Learning Hebrew or Greek means that they will have a richer experience on the journey and arrive in better shape.

Or it's like going from watching black-and-white television to watching colour television. They'll be watching the same programs, but with a greater depth and appreciation of shade and nuance. And in some cases, to extend the metaphor, the access to colour will be vital for understanding a show – watching a game of snooker, for example!

Careful study and exposition of biblical texts benefits enormously from some understanding of Greek and Hebrew. And many theological debates cannot be followed without some such knowledge.

Bible Languages

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2019 Events

April 1

Women's Preaching Network

April 6

Graduation and Commissioning

May 6

Women's Writing Group

May 22 and 23

Ridley Open Day and Evening

July 29

Women's Preaching Network

August 3

Evangelical Women in Academia Conference

Grounded: in the Body, in Time and Place, in Scripture

with Katya Covrett and Katy Smith

August 20 – 22

Annual Preachers' Conference

Salt and Light: Preaching the Sermon on the Mount

with Mike Raiter and Alan Stanley

September 9

Women's Writing Group

September 17

Leon Morris Lecture in N.T. Studies

Remembering Stuff!

with John Dickson

October 16 and 17

Ridley Open Day and Evening



For further details visit the Ridley website:

ridley.edu.au/events

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Revising Translation

Brian Rosner describes the four types of changes the Translation Revision Committee made to the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*.

FROM THE PRINCIPAL

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At Ridley, along with being the Principal, I teach New Testament. This teaching includes first-year introductory survey units as well as advanced units on the interpretation of certain books, such as the Gospel of John and 1 Corinthians. Another use to which I've put my study of the Greek New Testament is in the task of Bible translation.

I've always greatly admired graduates who venture out to undertake the mammoth assignment of producing a new Bible translation in a language that has never had one. My project was much more modest.

Back in 2012 I was invited to join the Translation Revision Committee for the New Testament of the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*. Thankfully, we weren't starting from scratch. Rather, we were given the task of making changes to a version that was already good, hoping to make it even better.



For example, we changed Paul's address to believers, both male and female, from 'brothers' to 'brothers and sisters' because the Greek word in question refers to both genders in certain contexts.

The work took five years and involved many early morning conference calls with five colleagues in North America and a trip to Nashville, Tennessee for a week-long final push to get us over the line. It was a great learning experience and resulted in thousands of tiny changes to the text of the *HCSB*.

The changes we made were not exactly momentous. Four types occurred regularly. First, we made changes for consistency, seeking where possible to translate the same

Greek words and constructions with the same English words. For example, in 1 Corinthians 1:12 we changed 'I'm with Paul' to 'I belong to Paul', to coincide with its ultimate correction 'you belong to Christ' in 1 Corinthians 3:23.

Second, we made changes in accord with modern English usage. For example, we changed Paul's address to believers, both male and female, from 'brothers' to 'brothers and sisters' because the Greek word in question refers to both genders in certain contexts.

Third, we made changes to keep pace with advances in scholarship. For example, recent scholarship has shown that in 1 Corinthians 7:1, Paul is referring to a certain kind of sex, namely sex merely for one's own pleasure. So we changed the text to read 'It is good for a man not to use a woman for sex.'

And fourth, we made changes to mirror Greek form and style. A simple example is Paul's brief and punchy closing charge in 1 Corinthians 16:14, which we changed from 'Your every action must be done with love' to 'Do everything in love'.

It was a pedant's playground, and while hard work was also lots of fun. But the privilege and responsibility in seeking to render the Bible accurately into contemporary English kept us focused.

The resulting revision is the *Christian Standard Bible* (CSB rather than HCSB). I am proud of the translation and personally think it is amongst the best Bible translations in English. We were aiming for a translation that is accurate and also readable.

I am grateful for my colleagues who are scholars of the Greek New Testament, both those who taught me personally and for the many who have devoted their lives to helping us all better understand God's living and active Word.



Acquiring Biblical Hebrew

Sarah Baker explains why hearing an ancient language helps to develop reading fluency.

NEW IMMERSIVE HEBREW ONLINE UNIT

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Biblical Hebrew pedagogy has moved in some exciting directions in recent years, thanks to perspectives from modern research on ‘second language acquisition’, that is, how people learn to communicate proficiently in a new language. Some of the most significant insights from this research, as it relates to learning an ancient written language, centre around the tightly interrelated four-part nature of how we use language to communicate through speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Whether we’re speaking with a friend or reading a 3,000-year-old text, the core of language is communication, the successful transmission of ideas from one person to another. So how do our brains process the communication of thoughts through language, and what does this have to do with studying biblical languages?

Ancient language classrooms have traditionally focused on reading (and for good reason, since our goal is to explore written texts!), but the oral component of the language is actually the primary feature that our ‘language-learning brains’ are hardwired to pick up. Just think about how you learned your first language as a child, years before learning to read.

Literate adult language learners can take some shortcuts by learning to read and write a new language alongside studying its vocabulary and other grammatical building blocks. But the fact remains that the oral component is integral to the human process of internalizing a language. As we move toward this more spontaneous, internalised fluency in a biblical language, we start to understand the text better

on its own terms (literally) instead of settling for the ability to ‘decode’ Hebrew or Greek in terms of our own native language.

One of the distinctive features of Ridley’s new online Hebrew course is that we’re giving students significant audio exposure to the language. Rather than focusing simply on reading comprehension and possibly some writing, we’re also building the students’ skills in listening comprehension and even some speaking. Why is it so important to include the aural element in the study of biblical languages when none of us are (or will meet in this life) native speakers of ancient Hebrew or Greek? The answer goes back to the interrelated nature of how our brains process language.

When we read something, even in our own language, in some sense we’re also hearing as we read. The echo of what we’ve just ‘heard’ sticks around in our short-term memory just long enough to enable our brains to process a larger chunk of meaning (such as a complete sentence) as a whole, even when we’re technically reading word-by-word. When reading an ancient language, especially one with an unfamiliar writing system such as Hebrew, it’s even more important that our brains fluently associate those written symbols with sounds, and that the sound of a whole word ‘echoes’ naturally in the language-learners’ short-term memory while they continue reading the next part of the sentence. Only then can the brain keep up with the visual reading quickly enough to process those larger units of meaning and understand them in Hebrew, instead of relying on morpheme-by-morpheme translation notes.

With this research in mind, we’re infusing as much oral Hebrew as we can into Ridley’s online course, immersing students in meaningful audio input to reinforce their visual study of the language. Reading and writing new vocabulary is certainly helpful, but it sticks more closely when students repeatedly hear each word—not just in isolation, but also in comprehensible contexts, such as an excerpt from a Bible verse in which the word is surrounded by other vocabulary that they already know. We’ve had fun brainstorming some ways to get our students actively involved in the whole range of language learning (listening/speaking/reading/writing), and we’re excited to see our next group of learners engage with Hebrew in this integrated framework!



So how do our brains process the communication of thoughts through language, and what does this have to do with studying biblical languages?

וְרֵאשִׁית בְּרֵא אֶרֶץ
אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ
וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תְּהוֹ וּבְהוֹ
וְהָאָרֶץ עֲלִפְנֵי תְּהוֹם וְרוּחַ
אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-

Below: Rob Turnbull, Diane Hockridge, Sarah Baker and Wayne Chan planning the immersive Hebrew online unit.



Sarah Baker is a lecturer in Biblical Hebrew at the University of Texas at Austin. She designed and is the tutor for the new Ridley Online Biblical Hebrew unit in 2019.



Uncovering Translations from Egypt

Ridley PhD student, **Rob Turnbull** reflects on the usefulness of Arabic manuscripts.

PHD STUDENT

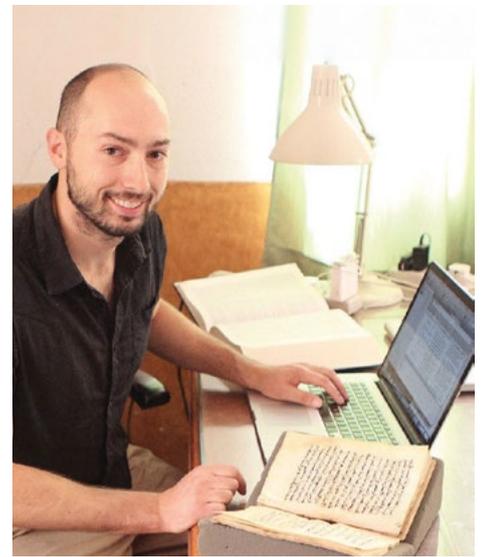
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In 2009 I visited a theological college in Beirut where I was told about a Lebanese scholar who had just finished his PhD on Arabic translations of the Gospels. I'm now embarrassed to admit that at the time I thought this work must have been a colossal effort for a limited benefit. Who could afford to dedicate so much time to such a minor matter? This sentiment is echoed by some scholars who think that Arabic translations of the Bible occurred late in history and after the New Testament text has already been basically standardised and so Arabic manuscripts do not shine any light on the early history of New Testament textual variants.

But even if this was true, the Arabic manuscripts still give us important insights into the communities that translated, copied, and used them in worship. Every translation of the Bible is shaped by the translator's theology and understanding of the text. How did Eastern Christians respond to the massive social and religious upheaval as a result of the Arab conquests in the 7th century? We need to look at the ways they adapted to the new Arabic language and incorporated it into their religious life in order to understand this crucial stage in

Christian history. As a descendent of these Arab Christians myself, I want to understand this heritage and how it helped shape the religious life of Arab communities today. Furthermore, the manuscripts themselves are precious historical artefacts. There is rich historical information in, for example, the way the scribes assembled and numbered their pages and in the comments added by the scribes and later readers down the centuries. I remember reading a comment by a scribe named Michael who wrote a manuscript in about the year 902, where he asked those reading the manuscript to pray to God on his behalf. Leaving aside Protestant reservations about praying for the dead, it was moving to have someone addressing me from over a thousand years ago.

However, the assumption that Arabic translations do not contribute significantly to the understanding of textual variants now needs to be rejected. In 1975, a monk at St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai discovered a room containing a great number of manuscripts that had been untouched for hundreds of years. One of the many discoveries made by the Lebanese scholar mentioned above was



an Arabic translation of the Gospels that had been translated from an early type of Greek text. Our modern printed editions of the Greek New Testament are highly reliable but further refinement in assessing textual variants will only come about through better understanding the overall history of the copying process and how various manuscripts relate to each other. This Arabic translation is one more piece of the puzzle revealing the complicated history of how the Bible was copied down through the centuries. So now, ten years after dismissing the idea of studying Arabic Gospel manuscripts, I am now attempting to follow in that scholar's footsteps, by delving more deeply into a small part of what he covered in his PhD. Hopefully now I am a little more humble and more ready to learn.

Rob Turnbull previously worked in the Middle East helping with translations into Arabic sign language. He is now completing his PhD on Arabic Gospel manuscripts.

Biblical Hebrew Online

Learn Biblical Hebrew through reading, writing, listening and speaking. A world-class immersive online biblical language unit. **Find meaning that has been lost in translation.**

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