
Keeping up Biblical Languages while in the Ministry

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It is to be feared that many ministers receive instruction in biblical languages, but within a few years the knowledge, which was obtained through hard work, has evaporated. The minister is reduced to an elementary knowledge in an area where he should be fluent. It is almost as if he never spent those years in the Greek class.

Philip Eveson has comprehensively dealt with the usefulness of the biblical languages in a previous *Foundations* article.¹ The purpose of the present article is to explain some practical ways of keeping up and developing our knowledge of biblical languages while engaged in a busy ministry. It is not intended that all the suggestions given would be feasible; and even those which may be practical need to be modified and applied to our situation. It should be pointed out that all the ideas suggested are the result of practical experience gained by one who has little natural bent towards languages. They are made to encourage those men who are aware of their own ineptitude in biblical languages, yet, out of concern to propagate the truth, have been forced to take up their study.

We will consider, first of all, general methods of language learning, and then apply this to find specific ways for the pastor to keep up his biblical languages.

Language Learning Patterns in General

For missionaries, Eugene Nida is one of the best known writers on foreign language learning.² Although he especially concerns himself with a modern spoken language, some of his comments are relevant to the study of biblical languages. He writes, "Learning to speak a language is very largely a task of learning to hear it." Listening to the nationals speak provides us with the correct pronunciation, the appropriate vocabulary and the usual syntax. It is an interesting observation on human nature that often a missionary's wife is more fluent than her husband! Now if we apply this to biblical languages we can draw the conclusion that it is not primarily a case of repeatedly trying to memorize the irregular paradigms, but of exposing oneself as much as possible to the languages. Knowledge of the irregular paradigms has its place in the initial part of language learning, but Nida warns about the person who "may spend so much time with the Masoretic pointing of Hebrew vowels that he does not get a chance to read the language extensively". So the first general language learning pattern is that we are to experience the Greek or Hebrew in as many different situations as possible. The solution to our problem lies not in going through Wenham again, but in continually reading and using the Greek we know.

A second essential aspect of language learning is the need for a regular or daily encounter with the language. This advice is often given, but in the midst of pastoral pressures it is ignored. The missionary who uses the language for a few hours each day will progress; those whose work leaves little time for personal contact may never be able to speak the language even after several years. A national newspaper carried an advertisement for language learning, which offered to those participating that they would be speaking the language of their choice after 30 to 45 hours. If we take the higher figure as realistic, it is equivalent to a pastor studying thirty minutes per day, five days a week for over four months. Now if we had that kind of diligence in our study of Greek and Hebrew, progress would be made. The second general learning pattern is the need for a continual, preferably daily, use of the language. As Gresham Machen says, "Ten minutes a day is of vastly more value than seventy minutes once a week."³

Specific Learning Patterns

1. The Basing of Sermons on the Original Languages

The desirability of basing our sermons upon the exegesis of the Scriptures in their original languages should be obvious to evangelical ministers. Such exegesis provides us with seed thoughts not noted in the English translation; we become less dependent upon commentaries and so the borrowing of other men's thoughts; and all this leads to freshness and originality in the sermon. One important factor in the brilliance of Calvin's expository ministry was his use of the Scriptures in Greek and Hebrew. For instance in his public lectures on Daniel he would evidently first read the text in Hebrew, then translate it into Latin, and then lecture extemporaneously for about an hour.⁴

The feasibility of using the original languages depends upon the size of passage chosen. It would be difficult to find time to work through the Hebrew of three chapters of Genesis each week; but a few verses from Malachi or a chapter of Jonah are practical. On the New Testament side, some books such as John can be worked through far more quickly than say 2 Corinthians or 1 Peter.

Two practical comments may be added. Firstly, it is necessary to make an early start in the week if we are to exegete the original languages. An hour spent on both Tuesday and Wednesday mornings could well be sufficient to translate and form our own opinions regarding the passage. Secondly, a manageable lexicon should be employed. It is not doubted that Arndt and Gingrich is the prince of New Testament lexicons, but it is time-consuming to use because of its bulkiness and comprehensiveness. A middle-sized lexicon that will provide not simply a translation of the word but some background information and its usage in other parts of Scripture provides for quicker work.⁵

2. Daily Audible Reading

Gresham Machen's advice regarding the Greek of the New Testament is of importance: "A language cannot be easily learned by the eye alone. The sound as well as the sense of familiar passages should be impressed upon the mind, until sound and sense are connected without the medium of translation ... The Greek Testament should be read every day without fail, Sabbaths included ... The Greek Testament is a sacred book, and should be treated as such. If it is treated so, the reading of it will soon become a source of joy and power." In a similar vein Berkeley Mickelsen makes the interesting comment that Germany has produced some of the greatest classical linguists, who have come from a teaching tradition emphasizing the need to vocalize the language.⁶

For daily reading it is useful to have a plan and John Skilton has suggested a programme for reading all the Greek New Testament each year.⁷ A daily Hebrew reading programme may not be so easy to practice due to our weakness on Hebrew vocabulary. But the language should still regularly be read audibly. Whatever system is chosen for reading it is important that it is a practical one which can be completed. Initially it would be useful to experiment with different reading systems until a feasible one for our own situation is found.

3. Extensive Reading of the Languages

A further way of improving our knowledge of the languages is to read as widely as possible in them. As far as the New Testament goes, our own familiarity with the English text often undermines the learning and appreciating of the Greek. It is a useful exercise, both pastorally and linguistically, to read the Greek writings of the early church.⁸ For instance, it is fascinating to read first hand early church customs regarding baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Greek is similar to that of the New Testament, and Arndt and Gingrich is of help with the vocabulary.⁹ A further source of Greek is the Septuagint¹⁰; which can be read in connection with sermon preparation, although the Greek is earlier than New Testament and so some of the vocabulary would not be found in New Testament lexicons.

On the Hebrew side the situation at first appears much more difficult. Outside of the Old Testament Scriptures little seems to be available. However one advantage nowadays is that modern spoken Hebrew has part of its roots within classical Hebrew. Thus it is possible to use the resources and materials available for modern Hebrew to develop our ability in biblical Hebrew. Recently in Spanish a programmed learning text for biblical Hebrew has been published.¹¹ The

approach given is considerably different from the standard Old Testament Hebrew grammars available in English. The author learned his Hebrew while living in Israel, and the procedure is to apply modern Hebrew learning techniques to biblical Hebrew. For instance, the Masoretic pointing as a subject is dealt with in the very last section of the grammar; the personal pronouns are repeated along with the paradigm, with the active participle being learned first.

Among the resources available on modern Hebrew are books teaching the language as a living and spoken one¹²; cassette tapes in modern Hebrew; as well as the possibility of study in formal courses. A knowledge of present day Hebrew then opens up to us the range of modern Hebrew literature.

4. Teaching Biblical Languages

Surprisingly enough William Barclay's 'New Testament Words' started life as a series of short articles for a congregational magazine. It then ran on to be a series in the 'British Weekly'. What amazed Barclay was the interest people showed, "I was surprised at this, for these articles might be defined as an attempt to popularise the Greek dictionary, and to teach Greek to people who do not know any Greek."¹³ If presented in an attractive and relevant manner, most people interested in the Bible are interested in the underlying texts. And one way for the pastor to grasp much better the languages is to teach them.

The aim of a language course in church would be to produce a deeper understanding of biblical truth. To achieve this end it is necessary to major on the side of exegesis and word study. For instance, in a Hebrew class the alphabet, pronunciation and word formation would be initially taught, and then it is possible to go into the Hebrew text, teaching grammar and vocabulary by means of the texts. Short Psalms like 117 or 23 could be exegeted; word studies could be done on the names of God, the Hebrew concepts of holiness, salvation, righteousness and love.

On the Greek side, one pastor who successfully ran courses in mission, city and rural charges stated that his twelve week Greek course had as its proximate aims, "not to master Greek, but to develop a basic working knowledge. Memorization of some 30 words and the alphabet and the ability to use the Greek dictionary in the back of the Bible Society's Greek text to translate 1 John 1."¹⁴ One point to be born in mind is the need for a brief review of English grammar at the beginning of a Greek course.

5. Periodic Study

Although we may regularly read the original languages and so gradually build up our familiarity with them, certain aspects of grammar, syntax or vocabulary will not be understood unless we take time apart to study them. For the busy pastor, one possibility is to have the occasional blitz on the language; studying say once every three months one particular topic. During the intervening period what has been studied will become clearer in the regular use of the language.

Many topics for study would come to mind, but it is best to be clear on the most important aspects of the language. For instance do we understand the significance and characteristics of the different forms of the Hebrew verb — how does the meaning of a *PIEL* differ from a *HIPHIL* and what do we look for to recognise them? How fluent are we in the prepositions of both languages — are we justified 'because of our faith' or 'through our faith'? Are we familiar with the important variations that distinguish Greek tenses and moods — which tenses and moods use a prefix and how can we recognise a subjunctive or an infinitive? Do we understand great biblical words like "covenant" — does it describe a contract or a constitution?

Concluding Comments

Our education system has changed a lot since the days when Samuel Pepys could see school notices written in Latin, Hebrew and Greek. Nor are there many ministers who would be able on their death bed to quote in Hebrew the opening words of Psalm 23 as Edward Irving did.

The maintaining of our knowledge of the biblical languages is not a case of inherent ability; but our own attitude to the importance of the languages. Do we agree with Mickelsen that our working at the languages is like a savings account; the more we put in the greater is the interest received? How do we react to the forceful words of Gresham Machen, "The New Testament, as well as all other literature, loses something in translation. But why argue the question? Every scientific

student of the New Testament without exception knows that Greek is really necessary to his work: the real question is only as to whether our ministry should be manned by scientific students.’

For those who have neglected the languages since College days, now is the time to start the repair work. It will be a painful process, but one eminently worthwhile. How much better it is for us to work from first principles, and base our preaching and teaching upon the most accurate personal understanding of Scripture we can obtain.

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3. J. Gresham Machen, 'The Minister and His Greek Testament', *The Presbyterian*, 7 February 1918; and subsequently reprinted in: *The Banner of Truth*, April 1972 and 'Studying the New Testament Today', ed. J.H. Skilton, *Presbyterian and Reformed*, 1976.
4. T.H.L. Parker, 'Calvin the Biblical Expositor' in 'Courtenay Studies in Reformation Theology: John Calvin', ed. G.E. Duffield, Sutton Courtenay, Abingdon, 1966, p.184.
5. Of those available, for instance, 'A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament', G. Abbott-Smith, T. & T. Clark, 1937 (3rd Edition), fits the role admirably. On the Hebrew side, while bearing in mind Mickelsen's warning of the dangers involved in becoming dependent upon an analytical type lexicon, for those not too fluent, 'The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon', B. Davidson, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, is of great help for quick work.
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