

## So You Want to Learn Ancient Hebrew

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If you want to learn ancient Hebrew so as to savor its sounds, understand the nuances of its words and expressions, and recognize the formal structures of its poetry and prose, then you will seek to make the language your own. A standard test of linguistic competence is the ability to engage in simultaneous translation from one language to the other, unaided by a dictionary. When you are able to translate ancient Hebrew into your mother tongue without the aid of a dictionary, you will have moved in the right direction. When you are able to translate from your mother tongue into ancient Hebrew without the help of a dictionary, you will have attained a degree of active competence in the language. Your sense of accomplishment will be great, and rightly so.

If instead your goal is to learn just enough Hebrew to meet your bar or bat mitzvah requirement, or the requirements of your community for ordination as a pastor, priest, or rabbi, then the advice I will offer will not interest you.

In order to fully master a language, it is important to know as much as possible about language with a capital “L.” In the case of a second language, it also helps to know as much as possible about the inner workings of one’s mother tongue. The best students of ancient Hebrew are, by definition, students of language in general.<sup>1</sup>

The corpus of ancient Hebrew literature is diverse in terms of genre. In order to appreciate the variety of generic conventions the parts of the corpus conform to, it is important to know as much as possible about literature with a capital “L.” Collections of extra-biblical texts from the ancient world are

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<sup>1</sup> A satisfactory description of ancient Hebrew from a linguistic perspective has yet to be written. For the time being, I recommend reading a chapter in Rosén or Glinert and asking: and how does that work in ancient Hebrew? See Haiim B. Rosén, *A Textbook of Israeli Hebrew with an Introduction to the Classical Language* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 21966 [1962]); Lewis Glinert, *The Grammar of Modern Hebrew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004 [1989]). For competent descriptions of English, see Randolph Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, and Jan Svartvik, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Essex: Longman, 2000 [1985]); Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Once again, the question to ask upon reading a chapter of these works is: and in ancient Hebrew, what do we find that is comparable?

valuable for comparative and contrastive purposes. They include, at a minimum, exempla from the following genres: proverbs collections and other didactic texts; hymns, prayers, and laments; love poetry; rituals and incantations; omens, prophecies, pseudoprophecies, and apocalypses; tales and novellas; epics and legends; myth; genealogies, king lists, and related texts; historiography and royal inscriptions; legal compilations; treaties, oaths, and grants; letters, contracts, and other archival documents. The best students of ancient Hebrew literature are, by definition, students of literature in general.<sup>2</sup>

Three things are necessary if you wish to make ancient Hebrew your own: (1) a teacher; (2) a course of study; (3) a set of resources that will allow you to make progress on your own.

The ideal teacher of ancient Hebrew is someone who is in love with the language and the literature of the Hebrew Bible. A teacher who has a solid knowledge of a broader spectrum of ancient Hebrew texts (epigraphic Hebrew, Ben Sira, the Dead Sea Scrolls) and familiarity with other ancient literatures (e.g., Ugaritic, Phoenician, Old and Imperial Aramaic, Akkadian, and Egyptian texts) is not easy to find. Count yourself blessed if you find one. She should be able to contextualize the language and literature of the Tanakh in illuminating ways.

In many localities it is possible to find a Hebrew tutor or a Hebrew class at a university or seminary. Is modern Hebrew all you can find? Take the class. You can go on from there to ancient Hebrew, and your ancient Hebrew will benefit from the modern Hebrew you became familiar with.

Someday you will be able to find a teacher online who will teach by podcast and tutor by webcam. As far as I know, that day has not yet arrived.

The course of study to follow will be the one your teacher provides. There are many approaches to learning a language. A class in which a teacher teaches Hebrew in Hebrew is, from a pedagogical point of view, ideal, but this method of teaching is not widespread. This is the method practiced by Randall Buth and associates. He also makes use of other techniques whose effectiveness is emphasized in second language acquisition theory, such as TPR (total physical response) and the use of storytelling buildups. Two teachers are present in class, which allows for creative interchanges between

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<sup>2</sup> For an introduction, see Kenton L. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2005).

teachers and clearer “immersion” communication. For more information, visit this website: [www.biblicalulpan.org](http://www.biblicalulpan.org).

Your teacher, presumably, will choose the method that plays up his or her strengths. For a concise overview of introductory and intermediate textbooks on the market today, see Tyler Williams’ discussion [here](#).

My ideal first year textbook would look like this. In the course of a year of ancient Hebrew, I want students to be introduced to a selection of paragraph-length units culled from the narrative, direct discourse, and poetry of the Bible and from inscriptions and the Dead Sea Scrolls. I want them to learn to tackle a sight reading from a cross-section of ancient Hebrew literature equal to about half its bulk with the aid of the textbook and a lexicon (preferably BDB) alone. Written assignments and exams featuring sight readings would measure progress along these lines.

With the help of the audiotapes and other helps the Academy of Ancient Languages features on its website ([www.aol.org](http://www.aol.org)), it is possible to learn to pronounce Hebrew according to current convention. For a discussion of these tapes and alternatives to them, see the comment section to a recent post by Simon Holloway ([here](#)). I would expect the students to be able to read ancient Hebrew out loud with considerable fluency. Oral assignments and exams would be used as measuring sticks.

My ideal textbook would introduce basic linguistic concepts and describe genre conventions of ancient Hebrew literature where appropriate. It would also emphasize bidirectionality in the learning process, with plenty of English-to-Hebrew exercises throughout. In the case of ancient Hebrew, a degree of bilingualism can be attained and should be attempted.

After a year of ancient Hebrew along these lines, it would be possible to go on to a year-long course, say, in which large portions of the Torah and then the latter half of the Primary History (Joshua-2 Kings) were read in their entirety. From there one might tackle Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Ezekiel, and from there the five Scrolls, Psalms, Proverbs, or Job.

How will you know when you have made ancient Hebrew your own? Robert Frost remarked, “. . . I could define poetry this way: it is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation.”<sup>3</sup> You will know you have made ancient Hebrew your own when you translate from it into your mother

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<sup>3</sup> Taken from “Conversations on the Craft of Poetry,” *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays* (New York: The Library of America, 1995) 856.

tongue and you realize that half of what the Hebrew is saying you left out of translation, and there is no obvious way to put it in.

In my next post, I will survey online resources you might find helpful in the study of ancient Hebrew.

## Bibliography

Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (repr. of 1906 edition; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004). Known as BDB. Order from [Eisenbrauns](#).