

Why Learn Hebrew?

“Learn Hebrew and you will be healed!” So said Eliezer Ben-Yehuda at the end of the 19th century. Whatever his motive, one of his objectives has certainly been achieved: The restoration of Hebrew as the common language of the Jewish residents of what was then known as Palestine. Today, increasing numbers of people, both Jews and non-Jews are being prompted to learn Hebrew. If you are one of these people, you will need encouragement both to start and to continue in your studies.

Here are some “reasons why” you should learn Hebrew.

1. Hebrew is the primary language of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Rav Shaul (Paul) wrote, “All Scripture is G-d breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training.” (2 Tim. 3:16). At that time there was no recognized Scripture other than what is now commonly known as the Tanach (Torah, Prophets, and Writings), which is almost entirely written in Hebrew and a small portion in Aramaic.

2. Hebrew especially helps us to understand the good news.

There are a number of early witnesses who report that the life of Yeshua was originally written down in Hebrew. Among them is Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis in AsiaMinor (circa 130 A.D.), who says, “Matthew put down the words of the L-rd in the Hebrew language, and others have translated them, each as best he could.” However, since the mid-nineteenth century it has become fashionable to believe that Hebrew was not the primary language of Yeshua and his contemporaries. Therefore, Dr. Robert Lindsey, a senior member of the Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research and author of *Jesus, Rabbi & Lord*, writes, “Passages in the Gospels have become unclear and are easily misunderstood, or the meaning entirely missed, because their interpretation has become separated from an understanding of their Hebrew linguistic and cultural roots.” Recent analysis by scholars of the Jerusalem School has shown that there is indeed a Hebrew “undertext” lying behind nearly half of the B’rit Chadasha (New Testament). At least the first three Gospels and probably, also, the first half of the book of Acts.

3. Hebrew helps us to understand the use of Hebrew Scriptures in the B’rit Chadasha (New Testament) and to use the Scriptures properly ourselves.

Have you ever been puzzled that New Testament writers often go beyond the apparent contextual meaning of the Tanach passages which they quote? If we are to use the word of truth correctly (2 Tim. 2:15), wouldn’t we do well to recover, for ourselves, the ancient methods of interpretation which these writers used with such creativity?

4. Hebrew gives firsthand access to early Jewish literature.

The sages and teachers of Israel have preserved important information about the historic, religious, cultural and linguistic context in which Yeshua and Rav Shaul taught. They complement the Scriptures and often fill important gaps in our understanding, yet much of this literature remains unavailable in English.

5. Hebrew deepens understanding of Christianity's spiritual roots and identity.

Sharing a common language helps to reinforce a sense of kinship. Those who study Israel's ancient literature and share in the communal life of Jewish people, gain an enriched and constantly deepening appreciation of their common root in the G-d of Israel. This can only strengthen the Church against flowing with the rising tide of anti-Semitism in the world and the dangers of alienation from the Jewish people.

6. Hebrew enables us to participate in and benefit fully from the Hebrew service of the synagogue.

Synagogue attendance was taken for granted and remained habitual for Yeshua, Rav Shaul and members of the early Messianic Jews in the land of Israel until the exile of the Jews in 135 C. E. Elsewhere, both Gentile Christians and Jewish believers continued to take part in synagogue services until at least the fourth century C.E.

7. Hebrew gives insight into the world view of the people who speak it.

Dr. Clifford Denton is editor-in-chief of Tishrei, a quarterly journal which explores the Christian faith through its Jewish roots. He writes, "Immersion in a language produces far more than conversation. A language determines the very mind-set of a person. A person who thinks in Hebrew is a different person from one who thinks in English, all other things being equal. Thus, the Hebrew language gives more than an accurate understanding of words. It is within the very root structure of what it is to be a Jew."

8. Hebrew is the lingua franca of modern Israel.

It goes without saying that anyone who visits or lives in Israel will do better if he or she speaks the language of the people. Even a little is helpful, because people tend to be warmer and more responsive if one tries to communicate with them in their own language. Modern Hebrew and biblical Hebrew are very similar. One forms an excellent foundation for learning the other.

9. Hebrew is relatively easy to learn.

David Bivin, co-author of a Hebrew language course and of a book on the Hebrew background to the life and teaching of Yeshua, writes, "Hebrew is to a large extent a phonetic language with a relatively small vocabulary. Generally it is based on a simple three-letter root system which provides a helpful memory aid in the formation of various verbs and nouns; nothing like the complexity of many modern European languages."

10. There is something special about reading the scriptures in their original language.

But you'll only find out if you learn how! The student begins to reap the benefits of learning Hebrew immediately. However, language learning is a cyclic process. At times one is elated by the advances one has made, at others one seems to be getting nowhere. In either case, to make further progress it is essential to push steadily on, even if slowly. "He who gathers little by little will become rich" Mishlei (Proverbs).13:11