

**“The Role of the Biblical Languages
– Hebrew and Greek –
in the Theological Education”**

eller

**“Hvad skal vi med hebraisk
og græsk når vi har Bibelen
på hverdagsdansk?!”**

Why original language exegesis?

Professor of Old Testament

Jens Bruun Kofoed

How acquire and maintain language skills in Biblical Hebrew?

Professor of Old Testament and Information and Communication Technology

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Global Learning Initiative

SUPPORTING OPEN BIBLE-DRIVEN LEARNER-DIRECTED EDUCATION

Martin Luther 1524



“Let us be sure of this: we will not long preserve the gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit [Eph. 6:17] is contained; they are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined; they are the vessel in which this wine is held; they are the larder in which this food is stored. . .

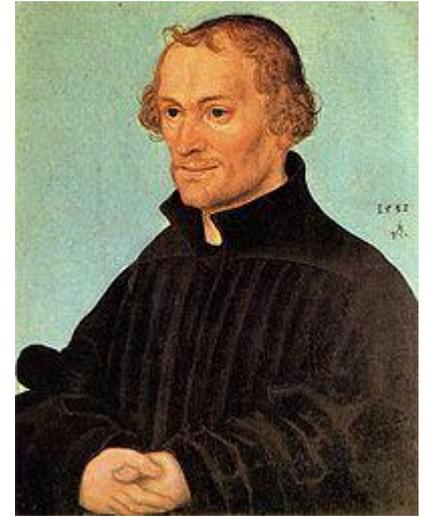
If through our neglect we let the languages go (which God forbid!), we shall . . . lose the gospel.”

“I know full well that while it is the Spirit alone who accomplishes everything, I would surely have never flushed a covey **if the languages had not helped me** and given me a sure and certain knowledge of Scripture. I too could have lived uprightly and preached the truth in seclusion; but then **I should have left undisturbed the pope, the sophists, and the whole anti-Christian regime.”**

“Although the gospel came and still comes to us through the Holy Spirit alone, we cannot deny that it came through the medium of languages, was spread abroad by that means, and must be preserved by the same means.”

Phillip Melanchton 1518

“Only if we have clearly understood the language will we clearly understand the content. . . . If we put our minds to the [Hebrew and Greek] sources, we will begin to understand Christ rightly.”



Disclaimers!

Not everyone needs to learn Hebrew and Greek!

“The Levites ... helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (Neh 8:7b-8)

“And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language” (Acts 2:6)

Even the simple can understand Scripture when the Holy Spirit interprets it

“The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple” (Ps 19:7)

“The unfolding of your words gives light, it imparts understanding to the simple” (Ps 119:130)

“These words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children” (Deut 6:6-7).

“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:14).

Knowledge of Hebrew and Greek does not ensure correct interpretation

Proclaimers!

- Using the biblical languages exalts Jesus, the Word, by affirming God's wisdom in giving us his Word in a book (**God's Word as foundation**).
- Using the biblical languages gives us greater certainty that we have grasped the meaning of God's Book (**studying God's Word**).
- Using the biblical languages enables a fresh and bold expression and defense of the truth in preaching and teaching (**teaching God's Word**).
- Using the biblical languages can assist in developing Christian maturity that validates our witness in the world (**practicing God's Word**).

God's word as a foundation

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Matt 5:17-18).

“And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book” (Rev 22:7).

Sola scriptura: Scripture alone is authoritative for the faith and practice of the Christian. The Bible is complete, authoritative, and true.

Studying God's word

A student without Hebrew and Greek cannot deal with all the problems of interpretation at first hand, but in a thousand important questions is at the mercy of the judgment of others.

If we want to understand the culture to which God revealed himself, we must understand the languages he used.

Christians expect theologians to know the Bible, and our work is basically to be mediators between the ancient Scriptures and the contemporary world.

Gen 1:1 – 3

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

[...] The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep,

And Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said: »Let there be light« and there was light.

בְּרֵאשִׁית

- "In the first time..."
- "In the absolute beginning..."
- "When..."
- "In Wisdom..." or "By Christ..."

בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים

- creation of nothing?
- creation on the basis of existing matter?

אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ

- title?
- sequential introduction?

וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֵהוֹ וְכָהוּ

- chaotic and rebellious?
- unproductive and uninhabitable?

וְחַשְׁךָ עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם

- the spirit of God?
- a storm from God?
- the breath of God?

וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אֹר וַיְהִי-אֹר

- neutral primeval sea?
- personified chaos power?

- sunlight?
- daylight?

- God?
- gods?

Conflicting Bible Translations

Relative beginning

- NRSV 1. **In the beginning when** God created the heavens and the earth, 2. the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. 3. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light (v. 3).
- GNT 1. **In the beginning, when** God created the universe, 2. the earth was formless and desolate. The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness, and the Spirit of God was moving over the water. 3. Then God commanded, Let there be light – and light appeared.
- ALTER 1. **When God began** to create heaven and earth, 2. and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep and God’s breath hovering over the waters, 3. God said: ‘Let there be light.’ And there was light.
- NJPS 1. **When God began** to create the heaven and the earth – 2. the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water – 3. God said, “Let there be light”

Absolute beginning

- ESV 1. **In the beginning,** God created the heavens and the earth. 2 The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. 3 And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.
- BFC 1. **Au commencement** Dieu créa le ciel et la terre. 2 La terre était sans forme et vide, et l’obscurité couvrait l’océan primitif. Le souffle de Dieu se déplaçait à la surface de l’eau. 3 Alors Dieu dit : « Que la lumière paraisse ! » et la lumière parut.
- NASB 1. **In the beginning** God created the heavens and the earth. 2. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. 3. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.

Teaching God's word

Knowledge of the Biblical languages is necessary to judge teaching.

“Even though what they said about a subject at times was perfectly true, they were never sure whether it really was present there in the passage where by their interpretation they thought to find it” (Martin Luther 1524).

Dogmatics is based on Scripture – not vice versa!

Knowledge of the Biblical languages is necessary to ascertain that the preacher is teaching from the text!

Teaching God's word

Those without knowledge of Hebrew and Greek often employ uncertain, indefensible, and inappropriate expressions.

The biblical languages sharpen preaching to make it as pointed, accurate, and penetrating as possible.

Practicing God's Word

Knowledge of the Biblical languages not only help us to understand the Biblical message but also to conform ourselves to it.

Because our knowing God and living for God develops only in the context of the Word and because Bible study is best done through the original languages, Hebrew and Greek serve as instruments of God to develop holiness, which enhances the mission of the Church.

(Luther's) Conclusion

Since it becomes Christians then to make good use of the Holy Scriptures as their one and only book and it is a sin and a shame not to know our own book or to understand the speech and words of our God, it is a still greater sin and loss that we do not study languages, especially in these days when God is offering and giving us men and books and every facility and inducement to this study, and desires his Bible to be an open book. **O how happy the dear fathers would have been if they had had our opportunity to study the languages and come thus prepared to the Holy Scriptures!** What great toil and effort it cost them to gather up a few crumbs, while we with half the labor--yes, almost without any labor at all--can acquire the whole loaf! O how their effort puts our indolence to shame! Yes, how sternly God will judge our lethargy and ingratitude

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Martin Luther".

Martin Luther (1524)