

On Teaching Tanakh in an Asian Theological College

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As Macaulay would have said, every schoolboy knows that Tanakh is simply the Hebrew name for the Hebrew Old Testament. That is why this title is appropriate for the whole article, for it is concerned with the looking at Hebrew Literature through Hebrew eyes and the study of the Hebrew language as a necessary key to this, and therefore as a necessary key to the study of what we Christians call the Old Testament.

Let me first define the title. Although the subject of the article could be said to be the teaching of Hebrew it is not the teaching of Hebrew in itself, but as a tool to the acquisition of something far more important than knowledge of another Semitic language: of this, we shall speak later. Secondly, it is restricted to an Asian context, although I am not sure that its methods and approached could not be equally appropriately applied in a Western context. Thirdly, it is talking about the teaching of Hebrew in a Theological College, not in a University to those who are already committed to a faith and a life-pattern, and who will, in the normal course of events, proceed to being pastors and evangelists in local churches in Asia. Some will feel that this unfairly restricts the range of the paper. Others will feel that it sharpens its goals and aims. Most of us, if we are honest, will admit that whatever the theoretical advantages or disadvantages, it corresponds to the facts of the situation and may therefore be prepared to accept it pragmatically.

Let us start then by outlining the nature of the problem or problems, and they are not insignificant. In many not all "higher" Theological Colleges in Asia, an inordinate amount of time is spent in acquiring a superficial knowledge of the Biblical languages, Greek and Hebrew. This is particularly true in the first year or years of the course. Such heavy concentration was difficult enough in older days when Bible subjects formed the main core of all theological college courses. Now, with the plethora of new subjects demanding a place, it is virtually impossible, unless we lengthen the courses

still further-which seems equally impossible. Students are married. Students are older. Churches are impatient. Students are impatient. What shall we do? Besides, it is a hard task, for student and teacher alike. It is hard to get qualified teachers who are both able and willing to undertake it. Hence the task is often left to less qualified and experienced junior faculty members, who are not yet high enough on the "pecking order" to be able to refuse it, and may not be very enthusiastic about something which both they and the students regard as a regrettable and dull necessity. So the subject is not always well taught. So the vicious circle continues. Is it any wonder that many seminaries quietly drop Hebrew, and that some even drop Greek, because of all this? Small wonder that only a few study Hebrew, and these only with a view to becoming professional scholars, with study overseas the immediate goal, and teaching in theological college as a secondary goal. This is not to say that these things are wrong, but it is say that they are very limited and inadequate objectives.

Equally serious is the fact that very little use is made afterwards of the knowledge so painfully acquired, at the cost of so many hours of hard work that could have been well spent on other subjects. Most students, once the minimum amount of Greek or Hebrew has been done, put their grammars from them with a sigh of relief, and never look at the original texts again. This is regrettable but true, as we can easily verify for ourselves. The most that will be done is to recognise the Greek or Hebrew words that occur, nowadays, for reasons of printing, usually in transliteration in the better commentaries. That is something achieved, no doubt, but not much.

Perhaps, since this is essentially a personal approach, I may be forgiven if I explain the background from which it comes. After some ten years of church work in South-East Asia, I found myself teaching Old Testament and Hebrew at Trinity Theological College from 1962 till 1968, when family circumstances forced a return to Australia. here I found myself teaching the same subject at Moore Theological College and Sydney University. In 1988, however, I was able to return to Trinity College, still teaching the same subjects. It is on the basis of this experience that I have gradually worked out my present system, for good or bad, with special reference to conditions in an Asian Theological College. I quite recognise that conditions will vary greatly in other Colleges, but I venture to suggest that the principles outlined below will still apply in some form or other.



What, therefore, are the goals and aims? For these will clearly determine the methods and tools and it is by the measure of attainment of these that success or failure must be rated. I must say that these are not the goals that were before me when I learned Hebrew in the University myself long ago, nor are they the goals that I set when I was myself teaching Hebrew in a University in another continent: but that does not shake my conviction that they are right for a Theological College in Asia today. Indeed if I returned to teaching Hebrew in a University in Australia, I am not sure that I would not try to embody some, if not all, of them.

The first aim, then is not to produce Hebrew scholars in the technical sense, but a broad pool of students with real love for, and understanding of Hebrew, from which no doubt a few such scholars will one day emerge. The target is not therefore the brilliant few, but the humdrum many - to produce a generation of pastors with an adequate and lasting knowledge of Hebrew. That will not necessarily mean a lower level, but it will mean a different approach.

The second "Negative" aim flows naturally from this: no attempt will be made to acquaint the students with all the fine points of Hebrew Grammar. Nothing kills interest as quickly and surely as such an approach, which has been abandoned long ago by teachers of modern languages, at whatever level. Grammar should only be taught inductively, as it occurs in the text. The text does not obey the rules of grammar, as we were taught long ago. Rather Grammar springs from observation of the text, as a means of explanation of it. No effort will therefore be made to acquaint students with the forbidding and archaic grammatical terms still found in many old-fashioned Hebrew grammars. But more of this below.

A third "negative" is that no attempt will be made to dragoon the student into translating English exercises into Hebrew, as was the practice in earlier days. I know full well the weighty arguments that are usually given in favour of this, but I think the practical arguments against it far outweigh them, and many Hebrew teachers would agree here. A fourth "negative" is that I will not even require of students the ability to "point" correctly-that is, to insert the correct vowels in purely consonantal texts. This is very dangerous ground. I can only plead that the average Israeli today, whose native language is Hebrew, care rarely "point" with accuracy, although they can certainly read the texts. This I do require, but I think that it can be obtained by other means, as I shall try to show below.

I quite agree that many if not all, of these demands will enter later, but I think that to introduce them at an early stage would be to defeat the whole purpose, and is indeed largely responsible for the present position. I also agree that if any student trained in my method wished subsequently to pursue semitic studies at some University overseas, whether in Israel or elsewhere, he or she will find that hard work is needed to reach the standard attained by those trained by traditional older methods. But brilliant students will find this easy, and others should not be pursuing this route. Besides, I flatter myself that all will have already gained insights and feeling for the language that they could not otherwise have gained. In any case, this system is aimed at the many, not the few, and it is by its effects on them that it must be judged.

What, on a happier note, are the positive aims? The first is simple, and indeed all-embracing: to enable students to read and understand the Hebrew Bible (or at least parts of it) as soon as possible. Everything else must come second to this. Now this will at once cause an outcry: do we not all aim at this anyway? The simple answer is: no. We may pay lip-service to it, but that is all. The methods that we employ virtually rule it out. He was a wise Puritan divine who said "Christ still hangs crucified betwixt Greek and Hebrew". If he was referring to the exaltation of grammar above text, he was right.

I have said "understand" rather the "translate" deliberately, for we want far more than mechanical word-by-word translation. We want the ability to understand Hebrew thought and expression-what a German would call "feeling for the language". I shall not enter into the vexed question as to whether there is such a thing as "Hebrew thought" as opposed to "Greek thought". Since the fulminations of James Barr on the subject, this is a minefield. And in any case modern linguists would not use this form of statement. But James Barr suffered from being a Westerner who had never lived in a multi-cultural society like Asia. We at least know that the methods of expression used by, say, any of the Chinese group of languages are totally different from those used by, let us say, the South Indian group. We also know from linguistics that any language develops adequate means of expressing whatever it wants to express, or feels the need to express, even if these means are quite different between one group and another. I have no need to carry this argument further, although I think that I could. It is enough to say that if we want to understand the message, we must first understand the means of expression. To put it more simply: to understand the Old Testament, we must understand, if not Hebrew ways of thought, at least Hebrew ways of expressing that thought.

It has often been suggested that this skill can be attained without the labour of learning Hebrew. For instance, a course of lectures could be given in English (or any other language) explaining either Hebrew thought-patterns or speech-patterns, according to our preference. As one who has tried this method, I can only say that it is very difficult to do and a very poor second-best to real language study. Nothing can take the place of even a slight exposure to the original text. Another suggestion is the use and comparison of several translations, preferably modern, and the use of good commentaries. Apart from the fact that these are not always available in Asian languages, this method is also a poor second-best, although the only one open to many ordinary church members. As pastors, we must know more than that in order to help our members. Hence the need to study the original languages.

Hopefully, our knowledge will rescue church members from creating problems for themselves through failing to understand Hebrew methods of expression which are misrepresented in the translation and that do not exist in the original text. I need only mention the absence of indirect speech in Hebrew. What look to us like "exact words" must be given, even if they vary greatly in different accounts. Knowledge of this simple fact will at once lift a heavy load from simple and conservative church members. The Hebrew fondness for approximation, not to say downright exaggeration, of numbers for the sake of effect will be already familiar to some Asians: "ten thousand" or "lakh" or "crore" have the same overtones to us. All of these can be illustrated in Hebrew very simply from Biblical text, and once seen, will never be forgotten. Other examples could easily be multiplied.

That introduces another aim, closely connected with the above. Study of Hebrew will aid in sound exegesis of the Old Testament scriptures, which are sorely abused by many pastors in Asia today. The Old Testament seems to suffer much more in this regard than the New Testament, presumably because its language and means of expression are less congenial. I have no need to give examples, for all of us will be familiar with this type of exegesis. Proper understanding of the text must precede proper exegesis, and this is where study of the text in its original language is invaluable, while of course we cannot say indispensable. This leads me to another aim in teaching Hebrew, which will greatly affect the methods employed: it is to use Hebrew as a means of teaching Old Testament theology. I shall speak more of this later. All I shall say now is that this requires a careful selection of the material read, thus at one and the same time acquainting the students with the words

used and the theology conveyed. This is not a mere academic exercise, nor is it merely a necessary background to the New Testament and its theology. It is a blunt recognition that the Old Testament in its own right is also the word of God, and a desire to expose the student to that word in all its raw strength. Here I will freely admit myself to be an old-fashioned pietist (in the English, not the German, sense of the word) I recognise that we are training pastors, not just teaching university students: we are "committed", not scientifically uncommitted. I want the result of my teaching to be not only more instructed pastors but more godly pastors. The aim is to teach them to apply all the lessons learnt to themselves first, and then to their churches. Seen in this light every Hebrew class is also a class in practical theology. I do not think that this involves preaching at the student. The Old Testament will do that for itself. All that it involves is direct exposure of the student to the text in all its force, and ideally that involves the text in the original language. It certainly need not cause a rift between the "academic" and the "devotional" to use somewhat crude terms. At a later stage, I shall try to show how these aims can be combined.

A last aim, with which not all might agree, is to enable students to appreciate Hebrew as a living language. This is not done from the point of view of Israeli nationalism (not a popular concept in many of our countries) but on pragmatic grounds: it is a living language, in a way that Babylonian is not. Further, it saves students from looking on Hebrew as a "dead" language like Latin. It immediately wakens their interest, in a way that nothing else could, and it makes the learning process much easier (especially for Asians) in ways that I shall suggest below.

Next we come to the methods to be employed, which is indeed the heart of the matter. Forty years ago in learning Chinese, we were not even allowed to use the Chinese system of phonetic symbols, let alone any of the many, some very grotesque, system of Romanisation. We worked directly from Chinese characters. This Spartan system may have worked for some; it certainly discouraged many others. Nowadays, whether in mainland China or overseas, the use of "pin-yin" or simple standard Romanised is universal as a teaching medium, and very commonly in dictionaries. The same method can be very profitably used in teaching Hebrew. From the start I therefore use romanization not instead of, but in tandem with, Hebrew letters. This is not of course original. Several standard modern grammars, whose names I will mention later, do the same; either in the initial stages, or at least for the

paradigms of the Hebrew verbs. (which are otherwise somewhat "craggy" for beginners). As one scholar has said, newcomers to the language have enough trouble memorising the forms without having to grapple with the unfamiliar letters as well. What is new is the extent to which I use it. I not only give students a complete romanised version of the chosen grammar, even including the exercises. I also give them a romanised version of the chapters of the Hebrew Bible which we shall be reading. I find that this leads to confidence and speed in reading. When they are familiar with the sentence or passage in romanised Hebrew, they can turn to it and read it with ease in Hebrew script.

I may say that, although I am anxious to get students on to reading the Hebrew Bible as soon as possible, I do not start with either the Bible or the Grammar, but with some fifty short sentences, chosen because they contain all the letters and most of the sounds of Hebrew, in fairly simple words. Students are drilled in these, reading aloud, until they are familiar with all the letters and sounds. The sentences are also chosen for their practical utility. They contain no words or constructions that are not Biblical Hebrew, and yet they are also phrases that can be used in everyday Hebrew conversation. This increases the interest of the students enormously, conveying as it does the sense of Hebrew as a living language. When there is time I encourage simple conversation based on these sentences.

That introduces a mainspring of my system. I aim to teach students to speak before they can read. That seems the natural order. Too many students learn Hebrew by eye, not ear, and purely as a "book" language. I have always found it far easier to learn a language by ear, not by eye, and I think that most Asian students would agree. I have also found it far easier to learn "grammar" by usage rather than by rule from a book. And that too seems natural. It does mean a somewhat "selective" knowledge of the grammar, but that can always be filled in later by wider Biblical reading. I therefore lay great stress on reading aloud at every stage. Incidentally, it is interesting that this was the very method used by traditional teachers for centuries, before modern educational methods were adopted. Perhaps they were wiser than we.

It also was the method developed during World War II for the rapid learning of foreign languages, and commonly used today. For some reason the teaching of Hebrew, especially when it is treated as a "dead" language, has lagged far behind. This raises the question as to what material

is to be used. I shall discuss the question of various available Grammars later, under the heading of "Tools". In brief, I had to create my own material at this stage. I therefore drew up a list of some fifty to a hundred short Biblical sentences or phrases, containing key theological terms and ideas, with Hebrew and romanized script in tandem, and drilled the class on them. They were now familiar with a small but useful vocabulary. However, I must be honest. The purpose here was not merely to teach Hebrew, but to teach Tanakh. I wanted them to be directly exposed from the start to the great theological truths of the scriptures, and to meditate on them. Further, I wanted, as far as possible, that they should be so familiar with them that they could meditate on them in Hebrew, without consciously translating them. That is the first step to "thinking in Hebrew". So I shamelessly use these passages as a means of teaching at least the basic elements of Old Testament Theology. It is too late to wait to do this until they know Hebrew thoroughly, as though we could split the Old Testament neatly into linguistics and theology. It is a unity, and the purpose of learning the language (for us at least) is that we may learn the theology. Hebrew ways of expression and (dare I say it?) Hebrew patterns of thought will emerge naturally from this, as will many more of the grammatical forms, all quite naturally. And incidentally the attention and interest of the student will be maintained. A further aid to the latter is the introduction and singing of Hebrew songs, both ancient and modern, dependent naturally on the musical ability of the class. Again, songs can easily be chosen that have simple Biblical vocabulary and some theological content, like the well-known number "A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey", or even simple vocalisations of passages of scripture.

A necessary corollary of all this is that some standard pronunciation of Hebrew must be adopted, and here Sephardi seems obviously the wisest and best. It is the most wide-spread. It is the pronunciation officially used in Israel today. And it is much more simple than the artificial reconstruction of Biblical Hebrew taught in many "Western" universities. I may say that I am a "convert" to Sephardi, as indeed I am to convinced of its practical utility. It also enables a class to make use of any of the excellent language-acquisition cassettes and records produced both inside and outside Israel today. Unfortunately but naturally, these are mostly directed to the learning of modern rather than Biblical Hebrew and while the basic vocabulary and structure of the language is the same, there are also important differences which may confuse the beginner. However, I do introduce simple phrases from selected "Hebrew for Travellers" books. This builds up vocabulary,

increases interest, and gives confidence. The only trouble is that even Sephardi has no standard system of Romanisation corresponding to the Chinese "pin-yin". As in the days of the Judges, every writer does what is right in his own eyes, so I have had to do the same.

I have said that the aim is to plunge into the text of Scripture as soon as possible, and I have already done this with the short selected "theological phrases". The best next step is to commence reading the first three chapters or so of Genesis. Despite a few grammatical peculiarities, they are basically written in simple Hebrew, and better still are the theological seedbed of much of the Old Testament, let alone the New. I hasten to say that this is quite independent of any questions of date of authorship. I am simply concerned here with the language and the theology, which, as I have said above, cannot be divorced. It can be well imagined that, in a modern age, with much discussion of the relation of man and woman, these chapters will form the basis of lively debate, not merely on the intellectual level.

I then, in a highly traditional pattern, added chapters of Ruth, Jonah and Esther; partly because of the diversity of verbal forms included. I now see that this was a mistake. I should have chosen passages (perhaps from Samuel or elsewhere) that were of equal simplicity and utility, but which had a higher theological content. Nevertheless, these books are not devoid of theological content, and I have tried to use them accordingly, so that every lesson is one of theology as well as of linguistics. I endeavour at present to remedy this defect by a second-year "Hebrew Reading Course" where I deliberately choose what might be described as theological "purple patched" from the Prophets and Psalms, particularly those often described as "Messianic". This also introduces the students to Hebrew "verse" style, as opposed to the samples of "prose" style met earlier.

So far the impression might have been given that Grammars are not used at all. Of course, this is not so. A good Grammar with exercises must be used in parallel all the time, although it is regarded as the minor, not the major, partner. As above, a romanised version of all its vocabularies, exercises, and paradigms should be provided, if not already included in it. Only its Hebrew-English translation exercises will be used, not its English-Hebrew, and the more forbiddingly grammatical sections will be skipped along with the arcane grammatical terminology still used in some, though not all.

Naturally, the question now is: which Grammar? My considered answer is that it does not really matter which Grammar is used, since it is the use made of the Grammar that is decisive. In addition, different teachers will find slightly different teaching methods appropriate to them, even within the same broad philosophy of teaching, so no clear answer can be given. To make the decision more difficult the number of new Grammars is legion, and grows every year. (Unnecessarily, in my humble opinion, for there are no earth-shaking differences, despite the claims on the dust-jackets.) A few may, however, be mentioned more as typical examples than as perfect models. I have not found any of them completely satisfactory, which is why I have found it necessary to devise my own "tailor-made" program. Ideally I would look for one based on purely Biblical sentences from the start. Sentences that give theological "bite" as well as grammatical and linguistic realism, rather than artificial sentences, no matter how cunningly constructed. One learns little theology from dreary sentences of the type "The wife of the prophet is seated in the temple" and little is gained from "sanitising" Biblical verses of any words or forms that have not yet occurred in the learning process. That is like trying to make Amos speak in baby-talk. Also, I would look for a Grammar that uses simple and understandable terminology for Hebrew verbal forms. For example, I would so look for one that explains apparent "irregularities" simply, rather than in correct but forbidding detail of past history of the language. Finally, I would want something suited to the needs of the Asian, not the Western, student and designed for the theological college, not for the University.

In brief, Sawyer (full details of all Grammars quoted will be found at the end of the article) introduces unaltered Bible verses from the start, although he does not choose them for their theological but their linguistic content. This is good. Even better is his system of analysing them theologically at the foot of the page, thus introducing the grammar inductively from the text. He uses some romanised from the start, and it is based on good modern linguistic methods. He does a brief "sweep" of the grammar first, and then returns to more detail later. All these are good features as is his provision of a parallel set of cassettes. But he rejects the traditional grammatical names and heading for an even more forbidding modern set of his own, and his book is really designed as a "crash course" for university students. These very things make it unsuited for use in an Asian theological college, where students can rarely proceed at such a rate.

Lambdin also uses Romanised for at least the first section of his book, which is based on excellent modern philological methods and understandings, and (best of all) has an excellent "key", produced by another outstanding scholar. It is a very thorough work, and, if I were teaching Hebrew again in a University, I would probably use it. But I think it is too "solid" as an initial grammar for my purposes as outlined above. Also (naturally) his aim is more linguistic than theological, and his sentences are not necessarily fully Biblical.

Rosen is typical of the many excellent Grammars produced in Israel but unlike most is written in English, a necessity for our students. It uses romanised in addition to Hebrew script, is philologically sound and grammatically inductive, but again naturally for an Israeli, it uses "unpointed" Hebrew script, without the vowels that are or seem so necessary to the non-Israeli beginner. Further, it is a grammar of modern spoken Hebrew. Biblical Hebrew only appears as a few chapters later in the book. This would not bother the scholar (or the migrant to Israel) but would be a sore trial to our students, as well as being a totally different in its aim from their own.

Weingreen is typical of the older school of Classical Hebrew Grammars. Again, his interest is not theological, but it is at least he uses Biblical verses in his exercises. And at least he acquaints students quickly with a Biblical vocabulary, recognisably based on Genesis in the earlier chapters. He begins with about twenty pages of dreary grammatical introduction, which can easily be skipped. However, he has good print, clear presentation, and delightfully "low-brow" explanations of some of the "irregularities" of Hebrew, presented in a way easily understandable to the intelligent students. I have therefore, with all his faults, chosen to use Weingreen, naturally with many "skippings", additions, and adaptations. However, as I have said, I could probably have used any of the others equally well, with more or fewer adaptations. Please forgive me if I have omitted your favourite Grammar, or, worse still, the one that you have written, or that your Seminary uses. It is not that I do not know them, and it is certainly not that I despise them, but purely that I do not consider the choice of a Grammar very important. The above works have simply been chosen as typical, and to illustrate the various problems.

There, as the lawyers would say, I rest my case, I could mention various other methods that I employ, such as to increase the vocabulary of the

students by showing numerous linguistic parallels in Malay (derived from an Arabic religious substratum) and by using the many names in the Old Testament as means of learning new roots. But not all of these would be equally applicable elsewhere. They are in any case mere details: it is with the board methods that I am concerned

However, let me finally reiterate two points: first, I must be judged on the many, not on the few, and on the long-term, not the short-term results. Secondly, such a system as outlined here cannot possibly hope to cover in one year all the material contained in the average Hebrew Grammar, even at a more superficial level. That is why a second year of "Hebrew Reading" is essential. It not only covers Hebrew verse as well as prose, but also covers the various points not mentioned in the first year. True, in more conventional courses perhaps all could be covered, but as shown above, at a tremendous cost. It is all a matter of weighing the comparative importance of the goals envisaged and attained, and acting accordingly. If understanding the Old Testament, and appreciating its spiritual message, is the most important thing of all, then it is worth any sacrifice, however great.

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