

English isn't God's first language.

The Bible's native tongue is Hebrew. Three quarters of the Bible was originally written in that language.

Since translators inevitably fail to capture everything taking place in the source language, the purpose of this book is to help readers find what's lost in Bible translation.

THREE AUDIENCES will particularly enjoy this book:



CHRISTIANS OF ALL TYPES of who never took a Hebrew class but want new tools. Learning biblical Hebrew—even snippets of it—helps us understand how the writers of the Bible expressed their experiences, thought about reality, and viewed the world.



MANY SEMINARY STUDENTS preparing to become pastors don't know why they should take a course in Hebrew. Or, they're in a Hebrew class but can't see why it matters. As they memorize verb conjugations and cram vocabulary words into their already full brains, they struggle to connect their studies with the life of the church. By reading this book alongside their grammars, students can see in fresh ways the vast importance of what they are learning.

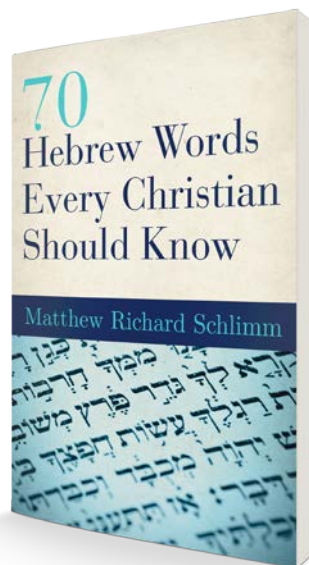


Ministry is extremely demanding, and few **PASTORS** have time to review class notes from seminary. This book serves as a refresher focused on features of Hebrew that matter deeply to understanding the Bible.

This book isn't comprehensive, but many of these seventy words are very popular. In fact, they appear more than thirty thousand times in the Bible. They show up in nearly fifteen thousand verses. More than 60 percent of the verses in the Old Testament contain at least one of the seventy words mentioned here.

This sample includes the table of contents and introduction. It is for promotional purposes only.

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70

Hebrew Words
Every Christian
Should Know

Matthew Richard Schlimm

 Abingdon Press[®]
Nashville

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Introduction

English isn't God's first language. The Bible's native tongue is Hebrew. Three quarters of the Bible was originally written in that language.

No translation is perfect. Translators inevitably fail to capture everything taking place in the source language.

Many Bible translators even talk about the violence of translation.¹ In the fourth century, Saint Jerome translated the Bible into Latin, the most common language of his day. He said that translators acted like invaders who went inside foreign lands, stole thoughts, and brought them back home.² More than a thousand years later, Martin Luther translated the Bible into German. Under heavy fire from critics, Luther said he had to choose whether to “demolish” the German language or “depart from” the biblical word. In passages of greatest importance, he insisted he deformed German rather than harm the Bible.³

In recent times, biblical scholar Robert P. Carroll picked up on this metaphor:

The need to transform . . . the ancient languages of the Bible (Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek) into a modern language, thereby modernizing the language, thought, and culture of the Bible by means of such translation does unimaginable violence to the text. It wrenches the text from its home in the ancient cultures and languages, deports that text and exiles it in foreign languages and cultures. The cultural transformations required to make the translation work in its new language and culture often involve serious violations of the text. Radical changes between cultures are not easily accommodated by translation techniques and each cultural translation shifts the text further away from its roots in ancient culture.⁴

The imagery and its implications are striking: translation is war. Loss and destruction inevitably occur.

The purpose of this book is to help readers find what's lost in Bible translation. It helps them locate nearly forgotten prisoners of war and remains of the dead. This book allows readers to rebuild the rubble left by Bible translations, or at least imagine the glory of the structures that once stood in their splendor before translations demolished what lay in their path. This book is an important first step in seeing the riches of God's word in its original language.⁵

A Useful Resource for . . .

I write this book for three primary audiences. The first is Christians of all types of who never took a Hebrew class but want new tools to dig more deeply into the Bible. Learning Biblical Hebrew—even snippets of it—helps us understand how the writers of the Bible expressed their experiences, thought about reality, and viewed the world.

The second audience is seminary students. Many people preparing to become pastors don't know why they should take a course in Hebrew. Or, they're in a Hebrew class but can't see why it matters. As they memorize verb conjugations and cram vocabulary words into their already full brains, they struggle to connect their studies with the life of the church.⁶ By reading this book alongside their grammars, students can see in fresh ways the vast importance of what they are learning.

The third audience is pastors who once took Hebrew but have since forgotten it. Ministry is extremely demanding, and few pastors have time to review class notes from seminary. This book serves as a refresher focused on features of Hebrew that matter deeply to understanding the Bible.

A few additional notes about my intended audiences: readers of this book need no prior knowledge of Hebrew. If you would like to learn the Hebrew alphabet, I've provided an explanation in the appendix. However, you don't need to know that material to enjoy this book.

This book isn't comprehensive. I've stuck to examples that have moved me, and I hope they'll strike you as interesting, too. Most people who know Hebrew have favorite examples, and space limitations unfortunately don't allow me to treat every significant word.

Nevertheless, many of these Hebrew words are very popular.⁷ In fact, these seventy words appear over thirty thousand times in the Bible. They show up in nearly fifteen thousand verses. More than 60 percent of the verses in the Old Testament contain at least one of the seventy words mentioned here.

This Book and Biblical Scholarship

In the first half of the twentieth century, many biblical scholars perceived a fundamental connection between biblical Hebrew and biblical theology.

Unfortunately, they sometimes did sloppy work that later received criticism. In 1961, in his book *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, James Barr vigorously attacked previous work.

For several decades, his ideas held sway. However, more recent scholars have realized that while many insights can be gained from Barr, one can also go too far and fail to see the important links between language and thought. This book is part of this more recent stream, heeding Barr where necessary but also moving beyond his limitations.

As Enio Mueller puts it, “Barr’s work represented a major development in modern Biblical interpretation, one from which nobody can safely turn back. His criticisms were in order. . . . Nevertheless, the main tenet of Barr’s view, the absence of correlation between thought and language, has itself proved inadequate.”⁸

look quite different.

To help as broad an audience as I can, I’ve minimized technical jargon. However, I recognize that some readers might use this book as a springboard to deeper studies. So, I’ve included various textboxes that provide important quotes, explain more academic work, and define technical terms for those who are interested. When you see a parenthetical remark like the one at the end of this paragraph, feel free to check the textbox if it interests you. (See **This Book and Biblical Scholarship**.)

This book isn’t an introduction to biblical Hebrew vocabulary. Such an introduction would include Hebrew words for “the,” “on,” and the like. On a related note, this book doesn’t treat Hebrew grammar at all. Naturally, more can be unlocked from the Bible by learning how sentences are put together. However, grammar is too big a topic to cover here.⁹ (See **Sentence Versus Word**.)

Sentence Versus Word

Many people working with languages have argued that studying words alone isn’t worthwhile, that meaning truly resides on the level of sentences. A more balanced position is advocated by John C. Poirier:

The claim that meaning resides in the sentence rather than in the word is naïve and simplistic. . . . To say meaning resides in the sentence rather than the word is like saying flavor resides in the recipe rather than in the ingredients. In short, it is [a] hasty and unjust exclusion of a middle position.

It is far better to think of meaning—that is, the codified aspect of transcribed meaning—as a bifocal field, mapped through the give-and-take between words and the sentences they comprise. Meaning resides in the sentences, but it also resides in both larger and smaller loci.¹⁰

Introduction

My website www.MatthewSchlimm.com provides several additional resources:

1. A concordance listing verses in which the words discussed in this book appear in the Bible. This concordance is especially important for those wanting to apply insights from this book to other biblical texts.
2. Sound files explaining how to pronounce the words.
3. Various reading schedules. While it makes sense to read this book from beginning to end, it's also possible to read the introduction and then read about particular words as they are memorized for a course. The reading schedules on the website explain how to read this book alongside popular Hebrew grammars.

The Necessity of This Book

Some might object to the premise behind this book. After all, Christianity has always been comfortable translating the Bible into other languages. Many of Jesus's followers used a Greek translation of their Hebrew scriptures. The Gospel writers even wrote in Greek, despite the fact that Jesus spoke Aramaic most of the time. So, since its inception, Christianity has embraced God in translation.¹¹ Islam, in contrast, prides itself on maintaining its holy book in Arabic.¹² Most Muslims today would insist that any translations of the *Qur'an* are only approximations, not the *Qur'an* itself.

So, why is this book, which introduces Christians to Hebrew words, ultimately necessary?

The basic message of the Bible can be understood in any language. At the same time, many biblical texts are hard to understand. They don't quite make sense when translated into English. Something is missing. Quite frequently, what readers miss has been lost in translation. (See **Translation: A Beginning**.) The original language allows various parts to click together like well-constructed puzzle pieces.

Translation: A Beginning

"Translation is of course the beginning of an exegetical argument—and one of which many monolingual readers in the West are entirely unaware."¹³

—Ellen Davis

So, given the Bible's sacred status, there's immense value in studying it as carefully as possible. In many ways, it's the difference between an old-fashioned television and a new high-definition one. With Hebrew in mind, interpreters see new details they didn't realize were missing before. They make new connections. They immerse themselves in scripture more fully.

What's Lost in Translation?

Throughout this book, we'll see that English cannot capture everything the original biblical languages convey. The next chapter looks at cases in which the sound of the original Hebrew is very important, but English translations give readers no clue what's taking place audibly in the text. The Bible is filled with puns and wordplays that cannot survive translation. This chapter shows some of these missing connections. It examines ten Hebrew words worth knowing because of how they shed new light on various texts:

- the story of Adam, Eve, and their children (Gen 2:4b–4:16)
- the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9)
- a parable Isaiah tells (Isa 5:1-7)
- one of the prophet Amos's visions (Amos 8:1-3)
- a well-known part of Numbers (Num 6:24-26)

Learning these words allows readers to see these scriptures in fresh ways.

Chapter 2 shows how English translations sometimes convey the sound of Hebrew words without explaining what those words mean. This problem arises most commonly with [1] names and [2] words such as “hallelujah” that have leapt from Hebrew to English (also known as “loanwords”). In these cases, it's nice that English readers hear echoes of Hebrew sounds (unlike the words in the previous chapter). However, it's unfortunate that Hebrew meaning is lost. So, this second chapter recaptures meanings lost from names and loanwords:

- names in Genesis 2:4b–4:16
- a sampling of other names in the Bible
- amen
- hallelujah
- Sabbath
- Satan

This chapter helps readers learn what these words mean.

Introduction

Chapter 3 looks at Hebrew words worth knowing because they don't have precise equivalents in English. Sometimes, English words can only approximate Hebrew meaning. Readers don't see all the nuances of what's in the original text. So, we'll learn the richer meanings of words that are often translated as:

- create
- heart
- soul
- the LORD
- Sheol
- ban

As we'll see, the Hebrew words behind these English words have dimensions uncaptured in translation.

Chapter 4 turns to Hebrew words that have more than one meaning. When English translators encounter such words, they have to pick a single English word to replace the Hebrew. However, the Hebrew sometimes carries overtones that convey more than just that one meaning. So, we'll examine Hebrew words that mean:

- hear and obey
- evil and disaster
- justice and judgment
- breath, wind, and spirit
- hoping and waiting
- law and instruction

Many texts make use of these words' various meanings, so these words are well worth our study.

Chapter 5 looks at Hebrew words that have lost their concrete meanings in translation, being replaced by abstract concepts that are more difficult to understand than the original text. We'll see how there are vivid images conveyed by the Hebrew behind the following words:

- vanity
- transgression
- keep (as in "keeping the law")
- sin and forgiveness
- repentance
- blessing

Introduction

The Hebrew equivalents to these words evoke concrete images that can help people enormously in learning the basics of faith.

Chapter 6 examines cases in which translators have replaced Hebrew words with outdated English words. It provides useful alternatives to the following translations:

- behold
- woe
- alas
- atone
- deliver
- redeem
- host

People today tend either to avoid using these words or to use them in a different sense than the writers of the Bible had in mind. By looking at the Hebrew, we can learn what's really taking place in the text.

Chapters 7 and 8 turn to the fact that words have both dictionary and encyclopedia definitions. When translating Hebrew to English, it's relatively easy to find words that align in terms of dictionary definitions. However, encyclopedia definitions are obviously much longer, and it's precisely here that we find grand differences between Hebrew words and the English typically used in translation. Chapter 7 focuses on three practices and three objects that differ in biblical Hebrew and modern English:

- remember
- covenant
- walk
- horses
- gates
- houses

Then, chapter 8 examines cultural values understood in very different ways by the Bible and modern readers:

- peace
- love
- cleanliness
- holiness
- glory
- wisdom
- fear

Introduction

By learning the encyclopedia definitions of the Hebrew behind these words, readers can imagine new ways of thinking about practices, objects, and values.

The final concluding chapter summarizes the book's findings, showing how biblical Hebrew can enrich our knowledge of God and enable faithful living.