

BIBLICAL HEBREW STUDIES IN THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS: A RELIABLE KEY TO ACCURATE INTERPRETATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT – AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the notable role biblical Hebrew studies have inside theological colleges as a tool for obtaining an accurate interpretation of the Old Testament. This emphasizes the importance of connecting with the original language to find subtleties, cultural contexts, and theological concerns sometimes lost in translation. The study reveals the challenges students face. Among these challenges are a lack of skilled teachers, too much curriculum content to cover, and student apprehension about language study. It argues that these obstacles hinder good learning and therefore affect the standard of pastoral duties and theological education. The research emphasizes the need of having a strong command of the Hebrew language in relation to preventing translation mistakes and doctrinal misinterpretations, improving exegetical and hermeneutical abilities, and appreciating the literary merits of the writings. This study uses case studies and academic viewpoints to draw attention to examples of misperception brought on by linguistic constraints. The study also argues for the relevance of Hebrew studies in the training of next leaders for efficient ministry. Recommendations at the conclusion of the study can be implemented to enhance language programs, promote early exposure to Hebrew, leverage technology, and create learning environments supporting cooperation. By stressing Biblical Hebrew studies, theological colleges can provide students with the fundamental tools needed for precise biblical interpretation. This helps people to better serve others and grasp theology more. Faithful and well-informed Old Testament interpretation calls for a close involvement with biblical Hebrew, as this assessment confirms that such an involvement is absolutely vital.

Introduction

Biblical interpretation is crucial to theology because it helps us understand sacred writings that shape religious beliefs and behaviors. One needs to know the original languages, especially Hebrew for the Old Testament, to understand these sections. This research emphasizes the importance of Biblical Hebrew studies in theological institutions for a healthy theological education. Students and researchers can get insights that are

sometimes lost in translation by actively engaging with the original language, which deepens their understanding of the Bible.

Biblical interpretation is essential to theology since it forms ideas, ethics, and practices (Klein et al., 2017; Klink III & Lockett, 2012). A precise interpretation helps theologians understand God's revelation to humanity by revealing biblical passages' intended meanings. Theological interpretations affect both individual and faith community beliefs. In a world of many interpretations, Christians must maintain theological integrity and unity to practice rigorous biblical exegesis (Gorman, 2020; Klink III & Lockett, 2012). Accurately reading scripture allows people to apply biblical ideas to modern issues, making the faith more relevant in culture (Hiebert et al., 2024; Klein et al., 2017).

The Old Testament is a foundational scripture for Judaism and Christianity, including many historical, theological, and moral themes (Moberly, 2013; Routledge, 2012; Walton, 2017). It covers God's covenant with His people, creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. Although old, the Old Testament texts encapsulate the foundation of the Christian faith and provide the context for understanding the New Testament (Collett, 2020; DeSilva, 2018). Therefore, understanding the Old Testament is vital for any theological framework because it lays the groundwork for understanding God, His relationship with humans, and redemption history (Routledge, 2012; Walton, 2017). Even though the Old Testament is crucial, this information gap often leads to reader misinterpretations and superficial understanding of texts. If they can't read Hebrew, students may use translations that distort meanings or miss nuances. This circumstance may prevent pastors from conveying the fullness of the biblical narrative to their congregations, raising questions regarding theological education and ministry effectiveness.

Biblical passages are sometimes misunderstood due to a lack of understanding of their original languages (Fee & Stuart, 2014; Klein et al., 2017). Despite their value, translations might contain biases and mistakes that obscure the writers' intent. Colloquial terminology and cultural connotations may not transfer effectively, leading to misconceptions of key theological beliefs (Alexandra, 2025; Bowman & Valk, 2014). To make matters worse, current interpretations of Hebrew grammar and syntax can change the meaning of texts. This lack of language competency affects individual comprehension and the authenticity of doctrinal and theological teachings (Anderson Jr, 2019; Cartledge, 2012). This study evaluates biblical Hebrew studies to ensure proper Old Testament comprehension. This study shows how mastering the original language improves theological education and biblical understanding (Duvall & Hays, 2012; Richards & Bredfeldt, 2020). This will be done by assessing Hebrew language teaching in theological

institutions. This study will mostly focus on theological institutions and Biblical Hebrew studies courses. The paper will examine how these schools teach Hebrew, the challenges pupils face, and how this affects Bible reading (Collins, 2014; Collins, 2025). The research will focus on a variety of Hebrew studies areas, but it will also recognize some restrictions, such as the large range of religious institutions and the varied degrees of priority placed on language studies in different contexts.

Biblical Hebrew

Most of the Old Testament was composed in biblical Hebrew, an ancient Semitic language (Moberly, 2013; Van der Merwe & Naudé, 2017). It is distinguished by its distinct vocabulary, syntax, and alphabet, all of which diverge greatly from those of contemporary languages. The language is full of meaning and frequently uses a range of literary techniques, like metaphor and parallelism, to explain difficult concepts. Since they add to the overall meaning and theological value of the scriptures, an accurate interpretation of the text depends on an understanding of these linguistic elements (Shreve, 2017).

Biblical Hebrew is a living language that reflects the culture and worldview of its speakers, making it more than just a historical curiosity. It is crucial for academics and theologians to study the language since it is intricately linked to ancient Israel's religious customs and beliefs. Students can gain a deeper grasp of the Old Testament and its significance to modern Christianity by delving into the subtleties of Biblical Hebrew.

Beginning in the second millennium BCE, Biblical Hebrew underwent several stages of evolution until taking on its ultimate form during the Babylonian Exile. The language underwent a dramatic change during this time, absorbing elements from neighboring cultures but maintaining its own features. This development is reflected in the Hebrew Bible, which was written over several centuries and demonstrates the language's versatility and depth.

Biblical Hebrew was used as a medium for religious expression as well as communication throughout its history (Blondheim, 2015; Klein, et al, 2017; Law, 2013; Pratico, & Van Pelt, 2019; Van der Merwe, & Naudé, 2017; Rezetko, & Young, 2014). The Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings are among the works written in this language that contain the moral and religious lessons of ancient Israel (Walsh, 2017). Biblical Hebrew's significance in Jewish and Christian traditions is further highlighted by the fact that it has continued to be used in liturgy and academia for centuries. Despite being a direct descendent of Biblical Hebrew, Modern Hebrew differs greatly from Biblical Hebrew. Modern Hebrew has changed significantly over time, adjusting to new language patterns and cultural

influences. The grammatical structure has somewhat simplified, but the vocabulary has grown to reflect contemporary ideas and technological advancements. When students try to use their understanding of Modern Hebrew to read Biblical texts, this discrepancy may cause miscommunications.

Furthermore, there are significant differences in the contexts in which the two languages are utilized. Biblical Hebrew, which focuses on ancient writings and their interpretations, is mostly used in scholarly and religious contexts. Modern Hebrew, on the other hand, is a living language that is utilized in media, literature, and daily conversation. For theological students, it is essential to comprehend these differences because they emphasize how important it is to interact with the original language in order to properly appreciate the Old Testament.

The great bulk of the Old Testament's writings are in biblical Hebrew, which is the original language of the book. Because it enables researchers to access the complexities and cultural contexts buried within the language, this linguistic foundation is essential for reading the scriptures. Biblical Hebrew provides the greatest framework for understanding the literary creativity, historical tales, and theological issues of the Old Testament. Therefore, anyone who wants to study the Old Testament in depth and its significance for faith and practice must have a solid command of this language.

Theological Education and the Curriculum

Equipping people for successful ministry and leadership within religious communities is the main goal of theological institutes (Hardy, 2016). These establishments offer a structure for studying the Bible, theology, and pastoral care, creating an atmosphere where students can grow in their comprehension of faith and its real-world implications. By fostering critical thinking, spiritual development, and a dedication to helping others, theological education equips graduates to confront the intricacies of modern society from a biblical standpoint.

Theological programs must include language studies, especially in Biblical Hebrew and Greek. Through direct interaction with the biblical texts, these courses help students improve their interpretation abilities and get a deeper comprehension of theological ideas. Theological institutions emphasize the value of language skills in promoting correct biblical interpretation by including language studies in their curricula (Skerrett, 2014; Umaru, 2024). In addition to enhancing students' academic experiences, this concentration equips them for successful ministry in a variety of settings. A number of variables, including student interest, faculty specialization, and institutional interests, affect how much Hebrew is studied in seminaries and Bible colleges. Comprehensive Hebrew

language programs with several teaching levels and advanced exegesis and hermeneutics courses are available at certain universities. Others could limit students' abilities to interact with the original literature by offering just beginning courses or little exposure to the language. The effectiveness of theological education in preparing upcoming leaders for the difficulties of biblical interpretation and ministry is called into question by this discrepancy (Harris, 2022; Klink III, & Lockett, 2012; Robinson, 2025; Tripp, 2012).

When learning Biblical Hebrew, students frequently face a number of difficulties, such as the intricacy of the grammar, new vocabulary, and the requirement for constant practice. The demands of language learning can overwhelm many pupils, which can cause dissatisfaction and disengagement (Lin, 2012; Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2022). These difficulties can be made worse by a lack of resources and trained teachers, which can further impede effective learning. Students may thus find it difficult to acquire the skills required to interact with the Old Testament in a meaningful way, which could have an effect on their theological education as a whole.

Importance of Biblical Hebrew for Old Testament Interpretation

A thorough study of Biblical Hebrew is necessary to comprehend the Old Testament's original context and meaning (Arnold, & Beyer, 2015; Moberly, 2013; Routledge, 2012; Stuart, 2022; Walser, 2013; Wurthwein, & Fischer, 2014). The language is full of theological ideas, idioms, and cultural allusions that are frequently lost in translation. For example, the Hebrew term "hesed," which is sometimes translated as "loving-kindness," has a wider variety of connotations pertaining to covenant fidelity, loyalty, and mercy. Students can learn more about the authors' original intentions and the texts' historical significance by examining these linguistic subtleties.

Furthermore, academics might unearth levels of meaning that inform theological knowledge by reading and interpreting the Old Testament in its original language. For instance, the parallelism and chiasmus that define Hebrew poetry's structure help the reader better understand the text's artistic quality and religious profundity. Students who interact with the original language get a more comprehensive comprehension of the scriptures and are able to recognize the depth of God's revelation (Bartholomew, 2015; Duvall, & Hays, 2012; Rohr, 2022).

Knowing biblical Hebrew is crucial to preventing doctrinal misunderstandings and translation problems that might result from depending too much on secondary sources. Significant differences in interpretation might result from the prejudices and theological stances of the translators of many Old Testament translations. As an illustration, translating the Hebrew word "nephesh" as "soul" may result in a Western interpretation of

the term that differs from its original meaning, which includes concepts of life force and being. Students can identify these subtleties and gain a more precise comprehension of important theological ideas by closely interacting with the Hebrew text.

Students who have a strong foundation in Biblical Hebrew are also more equipped to assess translations and commentaries objectively, which promotes discernment in their theological studies (Duvall, & Hays, 2012; Tov, 2022). The integrity of theological teachings and practices is protected when interpretations are in line with the original intent of the biblical authors, which is made possible by this critical engagement.

When comprehending the Old Testament, the literary characteristics of Biblical Hebrew—such as wordplay, parallelism, and structural elements—are essential. Hebrew poetry is known for its parallelism, which is the recurrence of related or opposing themes that improves the rhythm and meaning of the poem. For example, the parallel structure in Psalm 23 conveys concepts of protection and guiding by highlighting the bond between the shepherd and the sheep. A deeper understanding of the text's theological meaning and an enhanced reading experience are made possible by an understanding of these literary methods.

Another crucial aspect of Biblical Hebrew that can shed light on the meaning of the text is wordplay (Andrews, 2025; Kalimi, 2018; Kline, 2016; Schlimm, 2018). For instance, using puns or homophones might invite readers to interact with the text more deeply by expressing several levels of interpretation. This grammatical richness is frequently lost in translation, underscoring the significance of learning the source language in order to completely understand the authors' intended meaning. The overall meaning and impact of the scriptures are also influenced by the structural components of Hebrew texts, such as the way stories are arranged and the repetition that is employed (Walsh, 2017). Readers can determine the author's intent and the text's theological implications by identifying these structures. Students can strengthen their exegetical abilities and get a more sophisticated comprehension of the Old Testament by studying the literary elements of Biblical Hebrew.

Students' exegetical and hermeneutical abilities are greatly improved by studying Biblical Hebrew (Gorman, 2020; Hayes, & Holladay, 2022), enabling them to comprehend the Old Testament more deeply and accurately. Understanding language, context, and literary elements is necessary for exegesis, which is the critical interpretation of biblical texts. Being proficient in Hebrew enables students to conduct direct text analysis, leading to a more knowledgeable approach to interpretation (Schwartz, & Asli, 2014). Students can discover the subtleties of meaning that underpin theological comprehension through this interaction with the source language, which results in more reliable and correct

interpretations. Additionally, studying Biblical Hebrew helps students strengthen their hermeneutical abilities, which are crucial for interpreting the texts in modern settings. The concepts and techniques of interpretation known as hermeneutics help readers comprehend how biblical passages apply to their own lives and religious communities. Students can guarantee that their interpretations stay true to the text while tackling the intricacies of contemporary life by firmly establishing their hermeneutical approach in the original language. Future leaders are better prepared to interact with the Old Testament and its implications for faith and practice because to this dual emphasis on exegesis and hermeneutics.

Misinterpretation

Numerous case studies illustrate the misinterpretation of biblical texts resulting from language barriers. For instance, a common example is the translation of the Hebrew term "elohim" (אֱלֹהִים) ('Ēlōhah) as "God" in many English translations. While "elohim" is indeed often used to refer to the one true God, it is also employed in the plural form to denote divine beings or rulers (Davis & Hoskisson, 2013; Merkle & Merkle, 2012; Ottuh & Ojighoro, 2015; Römer, 2015). This distinction can lead to theological confusion if not adequately addressed, as it raises questions about the nature of God and the understanding of divine authority. Such examples underscore the necessity of engaging with the original language to avoid misinterpretations that can have significant theological implications.

"Nephesh" (נֶפֶשׁ)

Common English Translation: *Soul*

Misinterpretation: In English, "soul" often implies an immaterial, immortal essence distinct from the body.

Hebrew Meaning: *Nephesh* more accurately means a "living being," "life," or "self." It refers to the whole person or life force—not a separate soul apart from the body. For example, in Genesis 2:7, when God breathed into Adam and he became a "living nephesh," it meant he became a living creature, not that he received an immortal soul.

Why It Matters: This misinterpretation fuels dualistic theology (body vs. soul), which is not a Hebrew concept.

"Sheol" (שְׁאוֹל)

Common English Translation: *Hell* or *Grave*

Misinterpretation: English translations often render *Sheol* as "hell," giving it connotations of eternal torment.

Hebrew Meaning: *Sheol* is the realm of the dead, a shadowy place where all the dead go, both righteous and wicked. It is not equivalent to the fiery "hell" of later Christian theology.

Why It Matters: Misinterpreting *Sheol* as "hell" distorts the Hebrew understanding of the afterlife and divine justice.

"Torah" (תּוֹרָה)

Common English Translation: *Law*

Misinterpretation: Translated simply as "law," often giving it a rigid, legalistic connotation.

Hebrew Meaning: *Torah* comes from the root "yarah" which means "to teach" or "to instruct." Torah is better understood as "guidance," "instruction," or "teaching" rather than cold legal code.

Why It Matters: Seeing Torah only as "law" minimizes its nurturing and instructive nature. It reflects God's covenant love more than just rules.

"Hesed" (חֶסֶד)

Common English Translation: *Mercy* or *Kindness*

Misinterpretation: While "mercy" or "kindness" are close, they often fall short of the word's depth.

Hebrew Meaning: *Hesed* is a covenantal, loyal, faithful love—a deep, steadfast, and enduring kindness rooted in commitment. It's more than emotion; it's action-backed love.

Why It Matters: Hesed is one of God's core attributes (e.g., Psalm 136). Understanding it enriches the theology of God's relationship with Israel and with all humanity.

"Ruach" (רוּחַ)

Common English Translation: *Spirit* or *Wind*

Misinterpretation: Often simply translated as "spirit," which can suggest something abstract or ghostly.

Hebrew Meaning: *Ruach* means "breath," "wind," or "spirit"—a powerful, life-giving force. It's the animating presence of God, as in Genesis 1:2 ("the Ruach of God hovered over the waters").

Why It Matters: In Hebrew thought, *ruach* is tangible and dynamic. Misunderstanding it weakens the concept of God's active presence in the world.

Adonai (אֲדֹנָי)

Common English Translation: *Lord*

Misinterpretation: Often translated as "Lord" without context, it loses the reverence and substitutional role it plays.

Hebrew Meaning: *Adonai* means "My Lord" and is used in place of YHWH (God's sacred name), especially when reading Scripture aloud. It expresses both intimacy and reverence, acknowledging God's authority as Master and Sovereign.

Why It Matters: Simply reading "Lord" in English misses the deep reverence and personal relationship implied in the original Hebrew usage.

YHWH (יהוה) – The Tetragrammaton

Common English Translation: *LORD* (in all caps)

Misinterpretation: Often translated as "LORD" in all caps, which masks the original name of God.

Hebrew Meaning: YHWH is God's personal name, revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14. It is closely linked to the phrase "*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*" ("I AM that I AM"), emphasizing God's eternal, self-existent nature.

Why It Matters: The English replacement with "LORD" hides the covenantal and relational nature of God's personal name, and obscures the depth of His unchanging identity.

El Shaddai (אֱלֹהֵי שַׁדַּי)

Common English Translation: *God Almighty*

Misinterpretation: Often interpreted only as "Almighty," suggesting sheer power.

Hebrew Meaning: *El Shaddai* can also mean "God of the mountains" or "God who nourishes"—some scholars associate *shaddai* with the root word for "breast" (*shad*), pointing to God as nurturer and sustainer, not just a powerful force.

Why It Matters: Viewing God only as a distant “almighty” power leaves out the tender, life-giving, and motherly attributes of God’s nature.

Many scholars see Hebrew proficiency as an essential component of theology education and ministry preparation (Chapman, 2021; Forshey, 2015). They contend that a thorough understanding of the original language is required for correct biblical interpretation and effective preaching. Scholars note that the intricacies of Biblical Hebrew can have a considerable impact on theological meanings of texts, therefore future leaders must gain linguistic abilities (Howe & Green, 2014; Klein et al., 2017; Wilhoit & Ryken, 2012). This campaign emphasizes the necessity of incorporating Hebrew studies within theological institutions' curricula, ensuring that graduates are prepared to engage with the Old Testament effectively (Shaw, 2022; Wang et al., 2023).

Testimonies from both theologians and students emphasize the importance of Biblical Hebrew studies in theological education (Kalimi, 2012; Klink III & Lockett, 2012; Schmid, 2019; Wilhoit & Ryken, 2012). Many theologians claim that their grasp of the Old Testament has been greatly enhanced by their interaction with the original language. Students frequently describe how learning Hebrew has changed their perspective on scripture, helping them to grasp the depth and complexity of the passages.

Challenges of Hebrew Studies in Theology

One of the most serious problems to Hebrew studies in theological schools is a lack of skilled instructors (Elwell & Yarbrough, 2022; Shaw, 2022; Wilhoit & Ryken, 2012). Many schools struggle to recruit faculty members with the appropriate experience in Biblical Hebrew, which can degrade the quality of language training. This shortage of experienced instructors may result in insufficient training for students, limiting their capacity to engage with the original language effectively. Addressing this issue will necessitate a determined effort to attract and maintain skilled instructors who are enthusiastic about teaching Biblical Hebrew and dedicated to developing students' linguistic ability. Curriculum overload is another difficulty for students studying Biblical Hebrew (Wilhoit & Ryken, 2012). The demands of theological education frequently compel students to balance many courses, limiting their time and energy for language studies. As a result, pupils may fail to reach the competency level required for meaningful engagement with the Old Testament. To solve this issue, religious institutions should examine ways to streamline curriculum and promote language studies, ensuring that students have ample opportunities to improve their linguistic skills. Student indifference or fear of language studies can also limit involvement with Biblical Hebrew. Many students may be overwhelmed by the intricacy of the language, making them hesitant to pursue language study. Fear can lead to disengagement from the learning

process and a lack of enthusiasm to improve one's Hebrew ability (Walters, 2019). To tackle this difficulty, theological institutions should create supportive learning environments that encourage students to pursue language studies while also providing tools to assist them succeed.

Financial and institutional constraints present further hurdles for Hebrew studies in theology education (Ram, 2015). Many institutions suffer budget constraints that limit the availability of resources for language instruction, such as textbooks, technology, and skilled teachers. Furthermore, some universities may favor other fields of study above language programs, reducing students' opportunity to engage with Biblical Hebrew; addressing these limits demands advocating for the value of language studies in theological education, as well as a commitment to allocating resources to promote Hebrew training.

Conclusion

Lack of qualified instructors is a major issue for Hebrew study at theological colleges. Many institutions struggle to hire Biblical Hebrew-experienced instructors, which can lower language instruction. Students may not receive enough training to effectively use the original language due to a lack of experienced instructors. To solve this problem, we must recruit and retain passionate Biblical Hebrew teachers who are committed to student language development.

Another issue for Biblical Hebrew students is curriculum overload. Theological education often requires students to take multiple courses, restricting their language study time. Therefore, students may not be able to interact meaningfully with the Old Testament. Religious organizations should streamline curricula and promote language studies to give students plenty of chances to develop their language skills.

Biblical Hebrew participation can also be limited by student aversion to language studies. Many pupils are intimidated by linguistic complexity and avoid language studies. Fear can make you lose interest in learning Hebrew. Theological institutions should foster language learning and provide resources to help students thrive. Financial and institutional constraints hinder Hebrew studies in theology education. Textbooks, technology, and trained teachers are scarce in many schools due to budget constraints. Some colleges prioritize other majors above language studies, limiting students' Biblical Hebrew exposure. Addressing these restrictions requires promoting language studies in theological school and dedicating resources for Hebrew instruction.

Recommendations

1. Theological institutions should offer Biblical Hebrew introduction, intermediate, and advanced courses. To help students use their language abilities in ministry, this project should incorporate exegesis and hermeneutics into the curriculum.
2. Undergraduate and high school Biblical Hebrew courses should be offered. Early language exposure can foster motivation and familiarity, making the transition to advanced subjects easier and more enjoyable for pupils.
3. Technology-integrated language training improves student learning. Online resources, language learning apps, and interactive platforms should be used to give students different Biblical Hebrew practice methods.
4. Theological institutions should host Old Testament exegesis seminars and workshops. These activities can help students, teachers, and guest academics collaborate on Hebrew Bible interpretation, encouraging inquiry and discussion.
5. Faculty development initiatives for Biblical Hebrew should be funded to solve the instructor shortage. This program can assist recruit and retain talented instructors, assuring high-quality education.
6. Collaborative Hebrew learning settings can build community and support. To improve students' language skills and learning experiences, institutions should encourage group study, peer tutoring, and mentorship.

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