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Hebrew Words that Every Christian Should Know

A BITE-SIZED BIBLE STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

Spicy, Savory Words

Have you noticed the latest food trend? Growing numbers of people are into artisanal foods. They love organic cheeses and heirloom vegetables, farmer's markets and food co-ops. They want to eat *slow* food, not fast food. It takes more time and effort, but it's worth it, they say.

You know what? I'm into artisanal Bible study.

As Christians, we all know that it's important to sustain ourselves daily with the Scriptures. But time is short, so many of us do Bible study microwave-style nowadays. We gulp down a pre-packaged devotion with a few slurps of coffee before heading off to work. Is it at all surprising when it's as bland and unmemorable as a vending-machine sandwich?

There's actually a way to spice up your study, by getting to know some of the Bible's wise Hebrew words. They're aromatic and savory, carrying a distinct scent of the rich, earthy depths of their ancient origins.

Have you ever tasted fresh pita bread made by the Bedouins? It's out of this world—chewy and hot, crispy in spots, and a little smoky from the open fire. When a veiled, wiz-

ened old woman flops a piping-hot piece into your hands, you need to rip off a chunk and pass the rest on before your fingers burn. Smearred with olive oil and dried hyssop, it's like nothing you've ever tasted before.

It's the same with Hebrew words. Out of necessity for us to read them, we've had to "package" them into English sentences, like the bagged pitas you find at the grocery store. But some of their more subtle flavors simply don't travel well across languages and time, even if their "nutritional value" hasn't changed. In order to taste the breadth of expression of the Bible's ancient words, you have to travel back mentally into their original Middle Eastern setting.

Why Hebrew? Well, Hebrew is God's heart language—the mother tongue of the Scriptures Jesus read. Hebrew is also an extremely rich, poetic language that looks at the world in very different ways than English. Grasping the depth of even a few words greatly clarifies and enriches reading, and casts new light on things that you *thought* you understood. You'll see humor, irony and timeless wisdom where you passed it by before.

Often, knowing the original, fuller sense of a biblical idea will challenge and change you, as its ancient wisdom puts your life into the perspective of God's eternal Word.

Roomy Suitcases

Let's look at Hebrew words another way. Rather than being "packaged" into sentences, you could say that words *themselves* are packaging. Words are the luggage that we use to transport our thoughts into the minds of others.

In English, we have an enormous number of “suitcases,” words with various shades of meaning and formality. Some dictionaries put the number at 100,000, some more. But believe it or not, biblical Hebrew has only about 4000 words, a tiny fraction of the vocabulary of English.

You might wonder how Hebrew can communicate with so few words. The reason is that each “suitcase” is roomier inside—deeper, wider, more spacious. Many Hebrew words carry a wider range of meaning than the corresponding word in English. Unpacking the ideas within a Hebrew “suitcase” is often enormously helpful in Bible study.

We English speakers are used to very precise meanings, and we expect to have everything carefully defined. But Hebrew words paint scenes in broad brushstrokes, leaving the listener to discern the meaning from the context.

The prophets and biblical writers actually seemed to delight in pondering the nuances of their language. They often made wordplays based on a word’s ambiguity, deliberately invoking multiple layers of a word’s meaning.

For instance, the word *ruach* (roo-AKH) means “breath,” “wind,” and “spirit.” When God’s *ruach* blew through the Valley of Dry Bones to bring new life in Ezekiel 37, we see that *all* of its various meanings are intended.

I’ve always imagined that God chose to reveal his Word in Hebrew because the language invites us to think more deeply. As we read the Scriptures, we ask God what he is saying to us again and again.

Hebrew is helpful not just for reading the Old Testament (which was mostly written in Hebrew), but the New Testa-

ment too. Although it was written in Greek, it was composed almost entirely by Jews growing up in a Hebrew-speaking, Semitic-thinking culture. Often you hear a Hebraic “accent” even in the Greek text. Knowing more about the Hebrew way of looking at the world is helpful in reading the Scriptures from beginning to end.

(eBook Sample)

CHAPTER ONE

Yirah

Turning Fear into Worship

The idea that we should “fear the Lord” is found dozens of times in the Old Testament. You also find “fear” in the New Testament. The Gentiles who believed in God were called God-fearers, and the early church was said to be built up in the “fear of the Lord” (Acts 9:31). Why is there so much fear in the Bible?

To solve this mystery, you need to know that the word we translate as “fear” has a much broader range of meaning than we have in English. To us, “fear” is the opposite of trust, and its synonyms are fright and dread. But the Hebrew equivalent, *yirah* (pronounced YEER-ah) encompasses meanings from negative (dread, terror) to positive (worship, reverence) and from mild (respect) to strong (awe). Believe it or not, every time you read “revere” or “reverence” in English, the Hebrew word behind it is *yirah*!

Take a look at [Leviticus 19:3](#), where God commands us

to “*yirah*” our mother and father. The KJV says that we should “fear” them, but other translations clarify that the sense here really is “respect” or “revere.” How would you translate this word?

On the other hand, *yirah* can often simply mean “be afraid.” In [Genesis 32:11](#) Jacob fears meeting his brother Esau, knowing that he earlier wanted to kill him for cheating him out of his birthright.

How can we know which meaning *yirah* has? From the context. You might find this frustrating, but English does the same thing. You can get a run in your stocking, or get a run in baseball. Our minds are used to inferring meaning from context. Hebrew just does this much more than English does.

Take a look at some other places where *yirah* is obviously very positive:

- [Deuteronomy 10:21](#) says (NIV), “he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome (*yirah*) wonders you saw with your own eyes.” (What does the KJV say?)
- [Psalm 66:3](#) also uses *yirah* to exalt God’s glory: “Shout for joy to God, all the earth!...Say to God, ‘How awesome (*yirah*) are your deeds!’”

You can see here that even though *yirah* can connote fear, the same word can mean something very different, something nearer to “awe,” “respect,” or “reverence.” Often it’s good to have all of these ideas in mind as you read.

An even stronger word for “fear,” *pahad*, (which is often translated “dread”) can also describe jaw-dropping awe. In

Isaiah 60, the prophet describes a stunning vision of God’s final redemption of Israel. The forlorn nation’s long lost children will return, and royalty from distant lands will bring lavish gifts to honor them. As a result, the people’s hearts “will *pahad* and swell with joy.” ([Isaiah 60:5](#)) Here, *pahad* means “thrill”—how much better can “fear” get than that?

This can help with understanding the “fear of the Lord.” Certainly God’s enemies cringe in terror of him, but those who love him should be full of awe. Whenever the Bible speaks about the “fear of the Lord” (*yirat Adonai*) in the lives of people who love him, it is better understood as being an awe and reverence for God that causes us to want to please him. That’s why Proverbs tells us,

Whoever fears the LORD has a secure fortress, and for their children it will be a refuge. The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, turning a person from the snares of death. ([Proverbs 14:26-27](#))

If you’ve always thought that God expects you to shake in fright at him, knowing the wider meaning of “fear” can change the way you see God!

Sometimes *yirah* has yet another sense. Rather than referring to the emotions of “fear” or “awe,” it can refer to how they are lived out in the action of “worship.” This is why we hear of “God-fearers” in the New Testament. They are really “God-worshippers,” people who revere and worship the God of Israel.

Fear and Worship in Jonah

The first chapter of Jonah vividly illustrates the breadth of the word “fear” by deliberately playing on the word’s wide meaning. Use this link to read [Jonah 1](#). Note the difference in how “fear” is translated in verses 9, 10, and 16 between the three Bibles. Then, read my comments below.

- (Jonah 1:9) When the sailors ask Jonah to identify himself, he says that he is a Hebrew who “fears” the God who made the heaven and the earth. Here, “fear” means worship. Jonah is part of the people who worship the true God, not the idols everyone else does.
- (Jonah 1:10) But then the men were exceedingly afraid (literally, “they feared a great fear”) because Jonah was fleeing from this God, who had sent a storm that was now threatening to destroy their ship.
- (Jonah 1:16) After the sailors threw Jonah overboard and the sea grew calm, the sailors again “feared a great fear”—but now in a very different sense. Now, fear has turned into worship. The sailors are awestruck, stunned by the power of God, and now they offer him sacrifices and make vows in order to worship him.

In the KJV, you’ll find “fear” in all three verses, even though in 9 and 16 the idea of “worship” is really closer to the sense of the word. The other two translations actually do a better

job of communicating the intent of the text.

When you grasp how “fear” is being used in this story, you see the utter irony. Jonah was trying to run away from being a prophet to the Gentiles, but in spite of himself, he succeeded at that very task. The pagan sailors had begun to worship the God that he was fleeing from!

It’s a foretaste of what will happen when Jonah gets to Ninevah. The evil city will repent of their sins and bow down to God, but Jonah will just get angry about it. The Gentiles had a lot to learn about God, but Jonah had even more.

For Reflection

Consider God’s words in [Psalm 147:7-11](#). What does the “fear of the Lord” look like in your own life? Is it about being afraid of him, or being full of hope and worshipful awe?

In [Philippians 2:12](#), Paul tells us to “work out our salvation with fear and trembling.” The same phrase, “fear and trembling” is used in an intensely positive way in [Jeremiah 33:9](#). How does your understanding of Paul’s words change when you read it in light of the passage in Jeremiah?

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