

On the Importance of Biblical Hebrew

in Catholic Seminaries and Academic Institutions

André Villeneuve, Ph.D.

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In Heaven only shall we be in possession of the clear truth. On earth, even in matters of Holy Scripture, our vision is dim. It distresses me to see the differences in its translations, and had I been a Priest I would have learned Hebrew, so as to read the Word of God as He deigned to utter it in human speech. –St. Thérèse of Lisieux¹

In all her simplicity, the Little Flower and Doctor of the Church arrived at a profound insight: When God first deigned to utter His eternal Word to man in human speech, He chose to do so in the Hebrew language. Of all the tongues spoken by man, it is first and foremost in Hebrew that “the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse.”²

Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek studies are the *sine qua non* of biblical and theological studies in any serious academic institution. The study of Sacred Scripture cannot go far below the surface without at least a basic knowledge of the biblical languages. This investment in teaching them, however, is not always shared by Catholic seminaries and academic institutions, where language study is often overlooked in favor of other disciplines that are deemed more practical or useful. Moreover, if they give any attention to the Biblical languages at all, a disproportionate emphasis on Latin and Greek in Catholic institutions often comes at the expense of Hebrew.

The study of Latin is rightly privileged in Catholic seminaries of the Latin rite—as mandated by the Second Vatican Council and Canon Law—not only because of its significance as the liturgical language of the Church and of the Vulgate, but also so that seminarians are able to “understand and make use of the sources of so many sciences and of the documents of the Church.”³ Likewise, the importance of Greek for the study of the New Testament is obvious. But are these reasons sufficient to justify a neglect of Hebrew, the original language of divine revelation and of the greater part of Sacred Scripture?

The present paper argues that the current imbalance in scholarly attention paid to each of the biblical languages cannot be reasonably justified. One may ask why this disparity is so widespread: Is Hebrew deemed less important than Greek for the study of the Sacred Page? Is it too difficult to learn, so that it is only accessible to scholars and specialists? Is it neglected for theological reasons, because of neo-

¹ *Counsels and Reminiscences of Soeur Therese, The Little Flower of Jesus* in Saint Thérèse of Lisieux and T. N. Taylor, *The Story of a Soul* (London: Burns and Oates, 1912), p. 249.

² *Dei Verbum* 13.

³ *Optatam Totius* 13; cf. CIC 249.

Marcionist⁴ or supersessionist attitudes that tend to depreciate the value of the Old Testament? Is Hebrew perhaps given less attention because of a “classical bias” that has dominated Western education since the Renaissance, traditionally favoring Latin and Greek over Hebrew and the Semitic languages?⁵ Or do the rigors of language study simply clash with a pragmatist, utilitarian mentality that places more value on getting a quick, practical “return on investment” from academic studies geared towards pastoral work, rather than on the theological depth that comes with the knowledge of the sacred languages?

I would like to propose ten reasons why the serious study of Hebrew is essential—and at least as important as Greek and Latin—in Catholic seminaries and theological institutes. In so doing, I do not intend to present any groundbreaking arguments that have not already been made elsewhere. My goal is to contextualize these arguments for Catholics and to make a case as to why learning Hebrew is not an elitist task reserved for experts and biblical scholars (and Protestants!), but an imperative practice for all students of Sacred Scripture in biblical and theological schools, and seminaries.

1. The Church Says So

*Seminarians should be provided with the opportunity to learn some elements of biblical Hebrew and Greek, through which they can engage with the original biblical texts. Special attention should also be given to a knowledge of the biblical culture and context, especially the history of the People of Israel, so as to improve the understanding of Sacred Scripture and to come to a proper relationship with the people of the Old Covenant.*⁶

The Church asserts that acquiring knowledge of the biblical languages—alongside the “biblical culture and context, especially the history of the people of Israel”—is a foundational prerequisite to gain a sound understanding of the Sacred Scriptures. The Second Vatican Council’s *Decree on Priestly Training* emphasizes the priority of this task. Given the fact that seminarians must be prepared “for the ministry of the word: that they might understand ever more perfectly the revealed word of God,”⁷ they need to be “formed with particular care in the study of the Bible, which ought to be, as it were, the soul of all

⁴ Marcion (c. 80-c. 155) was one of the most influential heretical Christians of the second century. He advanced the thesis that the Christian Gospel was wholly a Gospel of Love to the absolute exclusion of Law, leading him to completely reject Judaism and the OT. He distinguished the inferior God of the OT (Demiurge) and the superior God of the NT as two separate deities: the former was “fickle, capricious, ignorant, despotic, cruel,” in sharp contrast to “the Supreme God of Love whom Jesus came to reveal.” “Marcion” in F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. rev. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 1040; A.G. Padgett, “Marcion,” in Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds., *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, 1st edition (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 1997), pp. 705–708; CCC 123; Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “‘The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable’ (Rom 11:29): A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations,” December 10, 2015, 28.

⁵ David M. Green, “Why Study Biblical Hebrew,” *Foundations*, no. 57 (Spring 2007): 25.

⁶ Congregation for Clergy, “The Gift of the Priestly Vocation: *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*,” December 8, 2016.

⁷ Decree on Priestly Training *Optatam Totius* 4.

theology.”⁸ For this reason, “a suitable knowledge of the languages of the Bible and of Tradition should be greatly encouraged.”⁹

Along the same line, the USCCB’s 2006 *Program of Priestly Formation* (PPF) asserts that “the various theological disciplines should recognize Sacred Scripture as foundational and as the point of departure and soul of all theology.”¹⁰ Therefore, a knowledge not only of Latin but also of the biblical languages is “foundational and should be given the emphasis that the Church accords it.”¹¹

The Church’s insistence on the importance of learning the biblical languages goes back to two pioneering papal documents on the study of Sacred Scripture. In his 1893 encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, Pope Leo XIII encouraged the study of the biblical tongues, with a special emphasis on the Semitic languages, suggesting,

it is most proper that Professors of Sacred Scripture and theologians should master those tongues in which the sacred Books were originally written; and it would be well that Church students also should cultivate them, more especially those who aspire to academic degrees. And endeavours should be made to establish in all academic institutions—as has already been laudably done in many—chairs of the other ancient languages, *especially the Semitic*...¹²

Among the “Church students” who “aspire to academic degrees” are certainly Catholic seminarians who will teach and preach the Word of God for most of their lives. Seminaries should therefore take seriously Leo’s recommendation and provide ample opportunities for their students to cultivate the original languages of the sacred Books, “especially the Semitic.”

Fifty years later, Pope Pius XII made a similar point, underlying the priority of biblical languages in his 1943 encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* on promoting biblical studies:

In this our time, not only the Greek language... is familiar to almost all students of antiquity and letters, but the knowledge of Hebrew also and of their oriental languages has spread far and wide among literary men. Moreover there are now such abundant aids to the study of these languages that the biblical scholar, who by neglecting them would deprive himself of access to the original texts, could in no wise escape the stigma of levity and sloth. For it is the duty of the exegete to lay hold, so to speak, with the greatest care and reverence of the very least expressions which, under the inspiration of the Divine Spirit, have flowed from the pen of the sacred writer, so as to arrive at a deeper and fuller knowledge of his meaning.¹³

⁸ *Optatam Totius* 16; cf. *Dei Verbum* 24.

⁹ *Optatam Totius* 13.

¹⁰ USCCB, “Program of Priestly Formation,” 2006, par. 198.

¹¹ USCCB, “Program of Priestly Formation,” 2006, par. 182.

¹² Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* 17; emphasis added.

¹³ Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* 15.

For Pius XII, the knowledge of not only Greek but also Hebrew is so essential to arrive at a “deeper and fuller knowledge” of the meaning of the words communicated by the Holy Spirit to the sacred writer that the biblical scholar is not at liberty to neglect this task, lest he be accused of “levity and sloth”!

The recent magisterial documents of the Catholic Church thus underline the importance of acquiring a familiarity with the biblical languages as a basic prerequisite for the study of Sacred Scripture.

2. The Holy Language

When people of different nationalities love each other, they usually learn one another’s language. Why do the children of God, especially those who are cultured, not learn the original languages of the Bible? –Richard Wurmbrand¹⁴

Hebrew is the principal language of divine inspiration and revelation. As seen in the following table, approximately two thirds of the Catholic Bible was originally revealed and written in Hebrew (including a few chapters written in its close Semitic cousin, Aramaic):

	Number of verses (NAB)	Percent
Hebrew (& Aramaic) OT	23,209 (ca. 269 in Aramaic)	65.3%
Greek OT (LXX additions)	4,362	12.3%
Greek NT	7,956	22.4%
Total	35,526	100%

Yet the significance of Hebrew for the study of Sacred Scripture is much more than a quantitative one. For those who hold to a high view of divine inspiration, the Hebrew Old Testament records and transmits to us the actual words God used to reveal Himself to Israel and to the world. By contrast, the sayings of Jesus as recorded in the Greek Gospels and New Testament are, for the most part, not his actual words but a translation: even though Jesus would likely have been conversant in Greek, in all probability he read and quoted the Scriptures in their original Hebrew and preached and explained them in Aramaic, the commonly spoken language of the Jews in Galilee and Judea at the time¹⁵

Because it is the language of sacred texts, the rabbis consider Hebrew itself to be sacred and imbued with a deep mystical meaning. The sacredness of Hebrew even goes back to the origins of the universe. In Jewish tradition, it is the language of creation, the language that God spoke when he uttered the words that brought the world into existence:

In post-biblical times, (Hebrew) was referred to as *lashon ha-kodesh*, the holy language. Hebrew was often thought to be the language of the angels, and indeed, of God. According to rabbinic tradition, Hebrew was the original language of humanity. It was spoken by all of humankind

¹⁴ Richard Wurmbrand, *If Prison Walls Could Speak* (London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, 1974), p. 95.

¹⁵ David M. Green, “Why Study Biblical Hebrew,” *Foundations*, no. 57 (Spring 2007): 26.

prior to the dispersion described in the Tower of Babel story in Genesis. In addition, the Hebrew language was thought of as the tool that God used to create the world. A midrash states that, “Just as the Torah was given in *lashon ha-kodesh*, so the world was created with *lashon ha-kodesh*.” Similarly, the mystical book *Sefer Yetzirah*, describes the creation of the world through the manipulation of the Hebrew alphabet.¹⁶

Rabbi Louis Jacobs further comments on the divine origin and cosmic role of Hebrew:

In [Jewish] mystical texts, Hebrew is the original language of mankind and is God’s language, the language in which He “spoke” to Moses and the prophets. For the mystics, Hebrew letters are not mere conventions, as are the letters of other languages, but represent on Earth spiritual, cosmic forces.¹⁷

Jewish mystics even consider the Hebrew letters to be a sort of “Divine DNA” that when studied could reveal secrets of the Cosmos. Consequently, every word and letter of the Hebrew Bible is significant and divinely inspired:

In traditional Jewish thought, each letter—its name, pictorial form,¹⁸ numerical equivalent, and respective position in the alphabet—is ordained by God. As a corollary of this principle, Jewish law has decreed for millennia that every letter of a Torah scroll must be perfect, or else the entire scroll is forbidden to be used.¹⁹

Whether or not these religious claims are true, and even if they are dismissed as the product of pious legends, they do reveal the high regard that devout Jews have for the inspired text of the Hebrew Bible. Should Catholics—and especially future priests—not approach the Sacred Page with at least as much reverence, devotion and love?

One early Catholic pioneer who was convinced of the importance of Hebrew in the Church is St. Jerome. Commissioned by Pope Damasus around A.D. 382 to revise the Latin Bible—then largely based on the Greek Septuagint and existing in a multiplicity of translations and versions—Jerome set out to correct

¹⁶ “The Hebrew Language,” *My Jewish Learning*, accessed November 4, 2015, <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/2/Languages/Hebrew.shtml>. On the mystical and cosmic role of the Hebrew language, see also “Hebrew: In Ancient Jewish Scriptures,” *Jewish Virtual Library*, n.d., <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/hebscripture.html>. Dan Cohn-Sherbok, “Creation Mysticism: Fashioning the World from Letters,” *My Jewish Learning*, accessed November 4, 2015, http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Theology/Kabbalah_and_Mysticism/Origins/Creation_Mysticism.shtml.

¹⁷ Louis Jacobs, “Hebrew: Its History and Centrality,” *My Jewish Learning*, accessed November 4, 2015, http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/2/Languages/Hebrew/History_and_Centrality.shtml.

¹⁸ The Hebrew alphabet was originally written using a pictographic script. See http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Grammar/Unit_One/Pictograms/pictograms.html

¹⁹ Edward Hoffman, *The Hebrew Alphabet: A Mystical Journey* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998), as quoted in *My Jewish Learning*, accessed November 4, 2015, http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/2/Languages/Hebrew/Letters_and_Vocabulary/Mystical_Hebrew/Letters_in_Mysticism.shtml.

and improve the Old Latin text.²⁰ While Jerome originally worked from the Septuagint, he ultimately became convinced of its inadequacy as a primary source for his work, and acknowledged that only a manuscript in the original Hebrew could be a satisfactory source for the production of his Latin translation. Around 390, Jerome decided to start anew and produce his own translation of the “Hebrew verity” (*Hebraica veritas*).²¹ Perhaps influenced by the Jewish scholars who taught him Hebrew, Jerome believed in the superiority and even sanctity of the Hebrew text—not without controversy and opposition.²² While he generally favored a “dynamic equivalency” approach to translation, Jerome held the Scriptures to be in a class apart that required a more precise, word for word translation:

For I myself not only admit but freely proclaim that in translating from the Greek (except in the case of the holy scriptures where even the order of the words is a mystery) I render sense for sense and not word for word.²³

Jerome thus concurred with the rabbis: He was convinced that Hebrew, being “God’s language,” possesses an inherent sanctity and mystical meaning that is conveyed only partially and imperfectly in even the best translation.

3. Bridging the Historical, Geographical and Cultural Gap

You are urged therefore to read with good will and attention, and to be indulgent in cases where, despite our diligent labor in translating, we may seem to have rendered some phrases imperfectly. For what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language. Not only this work, but even the law itself, the prophecies, and the rest of the books differ not a little as originally expressed. —Prologue of Sirach

The Greek translator of the Book of Sirach, writing only two generations after his grandfather authored the book, expresses dissatisfaction with his own translation, which by his own account “differ[s] not a little” from the original Hebrew text. If this is the case for a work that was translated from Hebrew to Greek barely 60 years after it was authored, not too geographically distant from its place of origin,²⁴ what happens to a text that is read in translation thousands of years after it was written, thousands of

²⁰ “Vulgate,” in Scott Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York: Image, 2009), p. 944.

²¹ P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Bible: Volume 1, From the Beginnings to Jerome* (Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 515; Stefan Rebenich, “Jerome: The ‘Vir Trilinguis’ and the ‘Hebraica Veritas,’” *Vigiliae Christianae* 47, no. 1 (March 1993): 52; Leslie J. Hoppe, O.F.M., “St. Jerome: The Perils of a Bible Translator,” *St. Anthony Messenger*, September 1997, <http://americancatholic.org/messenger/Sep1997/feature2.asp>.

²² Some of Jerome’s contemporaries, such as Ephiphanius and Rufinus, rejected his approach because they recognized the Septuagint as the only true and legitimate version of the Old Testament. They perceived Jerome’s recourse to the *hebraica veritas* as a rejection of the “divinely inspired” Septuagint and a “judaization” of the Old Testament that deviated from Christian tradition! (Rebenich, “Jerome,” 53, 63; Ackroyd and Evans, *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, p. 521).

²³ Epistle 57,5, as quoted in Ackroyd and Evans, *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, p. 523.

²⁴ Most scholars agree that Sirach was written in or near Jerusalem and translated in Egypt, probably in Alexandria.

miles away from its geographical setting, in a language and culture radically different from its original Semitic context?

To illustrate how a language changes over time, I usually ask a student in my beginner's Hebrew class to read a passage from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1386), such as the following:

O Cupide, out of alle charitee!
O regne, that wolt no felawe have with thee!
Ful sooth is seyde that love ne lordshipe
Wol noght, hir thankes, have no felaweshipe.
Wel fynden that Arcite and Palamoun.
Arcite is riden anon unto the toun,
And on the morwe, er it were dayes light,
Ful prively two harneys hath he dight,
Bothe suffisaunt and mete to darreyne
The bataille in the feeld bitwix hem tweyne.

After I give the students a minute or two to try to decipher the medieval English, I make my point: If a text is barely comprehensible when read *in the same language* some 630 years after it was written, how much more is “lost in translation” in the vast gap of 2,500-3,000 years that stand between the original text of the Hebrew Bible and our modern English translations—not to mention the geographical and cultural gap that exists between the ancient Semitic culture of the Levant and twenty-first century North America. Does this great chasm not justify the study of the language of divine revelation if one is serious about understanding what God has to tell us?

4. Understanding the Old Testament

Reading the Bible in translation is like kissing your new bride through a veil.
—Haim Nachman Bialik (*Jewish Poet, 1873-1934*)

The above quote by Haim Nachman Bialik poetically expresses the reality that reading a translation of the Bible is like “listening to God through an interpreter, rather than hearing directly.”²⁵ Indeed, every translation is an interpretation, because every language has nuances, expressions, idioms and ideas that are difficult or impossible to translate accurately.

Semitic languages in particular are quite different from English and other European languages that derive from Greek and Latin—and this is not just because they are read from right to left. Generally, Biblical Hebrew is less precise than English (and Greek). It has no verbal tenses—no past, present or future—or moods, so that it is difficult to differentiate between statements of fact, doubtful assertions, wishes or commands. Statements that may seem clear or precise in Greek or in English can be quite

²⁵ Green, “Why Study Biblical Hebrew,” 23.

ambiguous in Hebrew, so that words must derive their meaning from context much more than in the classical and European languages.²⁶

In other cases, Hebrew is more precise than English. For example, whereas modern English has only one second person pronoun (you), Hebrew has four: *אתה* (*atah*, masculine singular), *את* (*at*, feminine singular), *אתם* (*atem*, masculine plural), *אתן* (*aten*, feminine plural). When reading texts that contain a lot of dialogue such as the Song of Songs, for example, this is crucial. The ambiguity of the English pronoun “you” makes it virtually impossible for an English reader to read the Song and know exactly who is speaking to whom. This is why some translations add superscriptions throughout the text (“HE” and “SHE”) in order to identify the speaker.

This element of translation can even cause the obscuring of entire passages of Scripture. A good example is seen in Genesis 18, which narrates the Lord’s appearance to Abraham while he is simultaneously visited by three men. The Hebrew text is full of ambiguity that cannot be conveyed in modern translations. Who is speaking to Abraham? Is it the Lord, or the three men? In Gen 18:3, according to the NAB, Abraham says “Sir, if it please you, do not go on past your servant.” According to the RSV, Abraham addresses his visitor(s) as “My lord.” Which is it? The Hebrew says *Adonai* (אֲדֹנָי), which could mean “Lord,” “my lord,” “my lords,” or “Sir,” but Abraham then goes on to address his guest(s) in the singular. Is Abraham speaking to God or to the three men? An English translation must inevitably decide one way or another, thus dissolving the tension and mystery that is inherent (and likely intentional) in the Hebrew text.

Behind a language stands a whole mentality and worldview. Unlike Greek, which is precise, descriptive, and excellent in communicating abstractions, Hebrew is concrete, action-centered, and lacking in abstract terms. For the Hebrews, “truth was not so much an idea to be contemplated as an experience to be lived, a deed to be done.”²⁷ The active Semitic mentality is reflected in the Hebrew sentence structure, which usually begins with the verb. Hebrew has been called “a language of the senses” in which words primarily expressed “concrete or material things and movements or actions which struck the senses or started the emotions.”²⁸ Hebraisms often communicate abstract thoughts or immaterial conceptions by means of material or physical terminology:

“look” is “lift up the eyes” (Gen. 22:4); “be angry” is “burn in one’s nostrils” (Exod. 4:14); “disclose something to another” or “reveal” is “unstop someone’s ears” (Ruth 4:4); “have no compassion” is “hard-heartedness” (1 Sam. 6:6); “stubborn” is “stiff-necked” (2 Chr. 30:8; cf. Acts 7:51); “get ready” or “brace oneself” is “gird up the loins” (Jer. 1:17); and “to be determined to go” is “set one’s face to go” (Jer. 42:15, 17; cf. Luke 9:51).²⁹

²⁶ Green, “Why Study Biblical Hebrew,” 27.

²⁷ Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 136.

²⁸ Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, p. 137.

²⁹ Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, p. 137.

Moreover, some Hebrew terms—often theologically significant—are virtually untranslatable. A well-known example is the word *hesed*, whose usual translations (“mercy,” “loving kindness,” or “steadfast love”) all lack the essential quality of covenant loyalty.³⁰

Other important theological insights are easily missed without knowledge of Hebrew. For example, from the perspective of Christian (Trinitarian) theology, it is significant that the most common word used for God, אֱלֹהִים (*Elohim*) is in the plural. Likewise, the name of the Lord, יְהוָה (*YaHWeH*), is of little meaning in English, but is pregnant with meaning in Hebrew as a combination of the perfect, participle, and imperfect forms of the verb “to be,” which could be loosely rendered as “was” = הָיָה (*hayah*), “is” = הוּא (*howeh*), and “will be” = יִהְיֶה (*yihyeh*).³¹ Thus the very name of the Lord connotes eternity when read in Hebrew.

Moreover, the concept of the “Law” is misunderstood by many Christians due to an ignorance of the Hebrew language. Pious Jews rarely refer to the “Torah” as “law.” They simply say “Torah,” because the term has a meaning that is not accurately conveyed by “law” (which has the connotation of an undesirable burden of legal obligations). The word Torah (תּוֹרָה) derives from the root יָרָה (*yarah*), which means to throw, to cast, or to shoot (an arrow) and hit the mark. This is also the root of the word “teacher” (מוֹרֵה—*moreh*), so Torah really means “instruction” or “teaching” more than “law.” This conveys a very different relationship between mankind and God. We are not delinquents, but pupils striving to realize His goal for us, and He is not law enforcer, but tutor providing instruction on how to get there. Thus the Torah is something like an instruction manual that helps man to “hit the mark” and reach the purpose for which he was made, in contrast to “sin,” which is to miss the mark of our vocation as children of God, created in His image and likeness.

Also, much is lost in translation in the rich realm of Hebrew names. For the Hebrews, names are not just a label; they express the very identity of the person. This is seen, for example, in the description of the birth of the sons of Jacob in Genesis 29:31–30:23, where the name of each son is a pun related to the circumstances of his birth. With no knowledge of Hebrew, the entire pericope remains opaque. Some examples:

Leah conceived and bore a son (בֵּן), and she called his name Reuben (רְאוּבֵן—*Reu'ven* = “look, a son”) (Gen 29:32)

“This time will I praise (root יָדָה—*yadah* = to praise) the LORD;” therefore she called his name Judah (יְהוּדָה—*Yehudah* = “praised”) (Gen 29:35).³²

³⁰ Green, “Why Study Biblical Hebrew,” 27.

³¹ The perfect, participle and imperfect in Biblical Hebrew are not exactly the equivalent of the past, present, and future tense (as in modern Hebrew), but they are usually translated as such because they roughly denote, respectively, a completed, ongoing, and incomplete action.

³² Cf. also Gen 49:8: “Judah, your brothers shall praise you” (יְדוּכָה—*yodukha*).

“God has judged me” (דַּנַּנִּי–*dannani*)... therefore she called his name Dan (דַּן–*Dan* = “judge”):
(Gen 30:6)

Likewise, it is difficult to see the connection in English between the names Joshua, Hosea, Elisha, Isaiah, and Jesus. When read in Hebrew, however,³³ it is immediately evident that these names are all closely related, being all based on the same Hebrew root for “salvation” (יָשַׁע–*yasha* or יְשׁוּעָה–*yeshuah*).

Often, a name can reveal much about a person’s character or mission. Consider, for example, the names of the prophets Ezekiel (אֱלִיָּהוּ–“God strengthens”), Nahum (נַחֻם = comfort, compassion), and Habakkuk (חַבְבְּקוּם = embrace, or “hug”).

The Hebrew Bible is also full of literary and poetical devices, and puns that are entirely lost in translation. For example:

The LORD God formed man (אָדָם–*ha’adam*) of dust from the ground (אֲדָמָה–*ha’adamah*). (Gen 2:7)

Therefore its name was called Babel (בְּבֶל–*bavel*), because there the LORD confused (בָּלַל–*balal*) the language of all the earth. (Gen 11:9)

Note the alliterations in the following examples, such as the repetition of the sounds “*she*” and “*sha*” in the well-known psalm:

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! May they prosper who love you! (Ps 122:6)
(שְׁלֵוֹ אֶרֶץ יְרוּשָׁלַיִם יִשְׁלָחוּ שְׁלֹמֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם – *sha’alu sh’lom Yerushalayim, yishlayu ohavayich*)

...and he looked for justice (מִשְׁפָּט–*mishpat*), but behold, bloodshed (מִשְׁפָּח–*mispach*); for righteousness (צְדָקָה–*tsedakah*), but behold, a cry (צַעֲקָה–*tse’akah*)! (Isa 5:7)

Terror, and the pit, and the snare (פַּחַד וּפְחָת וּפָח – *pahad va’pachat va’pach*) are upon you, O inhabitant of the earth! (Isa 24:17)

Acrostics are another literary device that are completely lost in translation, that is, texts where every line or verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet (e.g. Pss 34; 111-112; 119; 145; Prov 31; Lamentations).

These few examples suffice to demonstrate the limitations of translations and to raise again the question: Should Catholics—and especially future priests—be content with “listening to God through an interpreter”? God’s word is worthy of some investment in time and effort, so that we may understand as accurately as possible what the Lord has to say to His people.

³³ Respectively: יְהוֹשׁוּעַ–*Yehoshua*, הוֹשֵׁעַ–*Hoshea*, יֵשׁוּעָה–*Yeshayahu*, אֵלִישָׁעַ–*Elisha*, יְשׁוּעָה–*Yeshua*.

5. Understanding Jesus and the New Testament

The Hebrew language is the best language of all... If I were younger I would want to learn this language, because no one can really understand the Scriptures without it. For although the New Testament is written in Greek, it is full of Hebraisms and Hebrew expressions. It has therefore been aptly said that the Hebrews drink from the spring, the Greeks from the stream that flows from it, and the Latins from a downstream pool. –Martin Luther³⁴

Although the author cited here does not exactly hold the highest authority for Catholics, there is much truth in this particular statement of his. Even though the New Testament is written in Greek, it remains a thoroughly Jewish book, written almost entirely by Jewish authors who spoke Hebrew.³⁵ This means that a knowledge of Hebrew is essential not only for understanding the Old Testament, but for entering into the mind of the New as well. “Jesus was and always remained a Jew,”³⁶ an observant, orthodox Jew who knew, spoke, and prayed in Hebrew. We must always keep in mind that “the Son of God is incarnate in a people and a human family”³⁷—that is, the eternal Word became flesh as a Jewish, Hebrew-speaking man who was “at home in the Jewish tradition of his time, and was decisively shaped by this religious milieu.”³⁸ One may ask, then, to what extent it is possible to really know Jesus in his humanity—his *Jewish* humanity—without some understanding of Judaism and the Hebraic mindset. The latest document of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews makes the same point:

One cannot understand Jesus’ teaching or that of his disciples without situating it within the Jewish horizon in the context of the living tradition of Israel; one would understand his teachings even less so if they were seen in opposition to this tradition.³⁹

Green notes that because of the “classical bias,” however, New Testament Greek has been historically viewed “through the lens of classical Greek, rather than through the lens of Hebrew or Aramaic, the first language(s) of all but one of the New Testament authors.”⁴⁰ In their book *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, Bivin and Blizzard forcefully underline why Hebrew is essential in order to understand Jesus’ Semitic and Jewish culture:

It should be emphasized that the Bible (both Old *and* New Testaments) is, in its entirety, highly Hebraic. In spite of the fact that portions of the New Testament were communicated in Greek,

³⁴ *Table Talk*, as quoted in Pinchas E. Lapide, *Hebrew in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. x.

³⁵ Cf. Acts 21:40; 22:2; 26:14; Jn 5:2; 20:16. Luke is probably the only NT author who was not Jewish.

³⁶ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church,” 1985, III.1.

³⁷ “Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church,” III.4.

³⁸ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable,” 14.

³⁹ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable,” 14.

⁴⁰ Green, “Why Study Biblical Hebrew,” 25.

the background is thoroughly Hebrew. The writers are Hebrew, the culture is Hebrew, the religion is Hebrew, the traditions are Hebrew, and the concepts are Hebrew.⁴¹

Many of Jesus' sayings are Hebrew idioms, so that "many Gospel expressions are not just poor Greek, but actually meaningless in Greek."⁴² Difficult or cryptic expressions in Greek, often mistranslated in English, become clear when one discovers the Hebraisms that lie behind them. Take, for example, Jesus' statement in Mt 6:22-23: "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness." What is the meaning of this? It turns out that the puzzling expression in English (and in Greek) becomes quite clear when approached from a Hebraic perspective, for the expressions "good eye" and "bad eye" are common Hebrew idioms for "generous" and "miserly."⁴³

Bivin and Blizzard go as far as saying that the Synoptic Gospels are "not really Greek, but Hebrew words in Greek dress." They argue that there is much evidence pointing to Hebrew sources lying behind the present Greek texts, including hundreds of semitisms in the Gospels and the testimony of several Church Fathers who assert that the Gospel of Matthew was originally written in Hebrew.⁴⁴ On the basis of this evidence, Bivin and Blizzard state in no uncertain terms:

It is most unfortunate that our Bible colleges and seminaries focus their attention on Greek and Hellenistic theology, and fail, by and large, to equip their students with the proper tools that would allow them to do serious biblical exegesis. A strong statement, to be sure; but sadly, all too true. *It cannot be overemphasized*, that the key to an understanding of the New Testament is a fluent knowledge of Hebrew and an intimate acquaintance with Jewish history, culture, and Rabbinic Literature.⁴⁵

To take another simple example, consider the angel's instructions to Joseph concerning the naming of Jesus. These do not make much sense either in English or Greek: "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus (Ἰησοῦς), for he will save (σώσει) his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). When the verse is translated back into Hebrew, however, the reason for Jesus' name is evident: "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus (יְהוֹשֻׁעַ—*Yeshua*), for he will save (יְשׁוּעָה—*yoshia*) his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). *Yeshua* and *yoshia* share the same root *yasha*—*yasha*, which means to rescue or save.

Hebrew and Aramaic words and idioms are found throughout the Greek New Testament. Some of the better known include *mammon*, *abba*, *korban*, and "Eli Eli lama sabachtani." When Jesus declares "You

⁴¹ David Bivin and Roy Blizzard, *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus: New Insights from a Hebrew Perspective* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 1994), p. 4.

⁴² Bivin and Blizzard, *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, loc. 151.

⁴³ Bivin and Blizzard, *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, loc. 153.

⁴⁴ "Matthew composed the words in the Hebrew dialect, and each translated as he was able." [Papias, quoted in Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 3:39]; "Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect." [Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3:1; Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 5:8]. Cf. also Origen in Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 6:25; Epiphanius, *Refutation of All Heresies* 29, 9, 4; Jerome, *De Viris Illustribus* 3.

⁴⁵ Bivin and Blizzard, *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, loc. 159–62. Emphasis in the original.

will not see me again, until you say, ‘blessed is he who comes (בָּרוּךְ הַבָּא—*baruch haba*) in the name of the Lord.’” (Mt 23:39), the translation fails to convey that the expression *baruch haba* simply means “welcome” in Hebrew. In other words, Jesus says that he will not return until Jerusalem welcomes him as their Messiah.⁴⁶ And when he says “peace be with you” (שְׁלוֹם לָכֶם—*shalom lachem*, or *shalom aleichem*) to his disciples, what sounds like a solemn episcopal blessing for Catholics is in fact a common Jewish and Semitic greeting (as is its Arabic equivalent, *assalam aleikum*).

In addition, knowledge of rabbinic literature, largely written in Hebrew, can shed much light on Jesus’ teachings, parables, and prayers. Consider, for example the closeness of the Jewish *kaddish* prayer to the Our Father:

May His great name be exalted and sanctified in the world which He created according to His will! May He establish His kingdom and may His salvation blossom and His anointed be near during your lifetime and during your days and during the lifetimes of all the House of Israel, speedily and very soon! And say, Amen.⁴⁷

In its 2002 document “The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible,” the Pontifical Biblical Commission notes that Jewish exegetical methods are frequently employed in the NT. These include Second Temple methods of interpretation, similarities in how the NT and the Qumran community make use of the Hebrew Scriptures, and rabbinic methods of exegesis. The frequent use of rabbinic styles of argumentation thus “undoubtedly attests that the New Testament emerged from the matrix of Judaism and that it is infused with the mentality of Jewish biblical commentators.”⁴⁸

In short, as Leslie Allen rightly states, “it is strange but true that knowledge of Hebrew makes one at home in the Greek New Testament.”⁴⁹ Is it right, then, to deprive Catholic seminarians and future priests of such essential keys to unlock and access the Sacred Scriptures? Pawlikowski warns that this deficiency impacts not only exegesis but also Christian spirituality:

Christians are coming to recognize that without deep immersion into the spirit of the Hebrew Scriptures, they are left with a truncated vision of Jesus’ message—which in fact relied heavily on “the Scriptures”— and hence an emaciated version of Christian spirituality.⁵⁰

Marvin Wilson adds:

⁴⁶ Daniel Botkin, “The Importance of Studying Hebrew,” n.d., 2, <http://robt.shepherd.tripod.com/ivrit.html>.

⁴⁷ See Bivin and Blizzard, *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, loc. 346–398 for several examples of Hebrew prayers and parables that are closely related to the prayers and parables of Jesus.

⁴⁸ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002), 12–15.

⁴⁹ Leslie C. Allen, “Why Not Learn Hebrew?,” *TSF Bulletin* 30 (Summer 1961): 4.

⁵⁰ John T. Pawlikowski, “The Re-Judaization of Christianity,” *Relation*, 1984, 61.

The authors of God's Word—virtually every one of them a Jew—have a profoundly Hebraic perspective on life and the world. If we are to interpret the Bible correctly, we must become attuned to this Hebraic setting in the ancient Near East. Thus we must look primarily not to Athens but to Jerusalem for the biblical view of reality. For the prophets and apostles produced a Book that is, without question, Hebraic in composition and orientation... Our tutors to Christ are Moses and the Prophets, and not Plato and the Academies.⁵¹

Hence we see that the usefulness of Biblical Hebrew is not limited to the OT. It is also essential in order to understand the words of the Jewish Jesus and the message of the NT, which is thoroughly immersed in Hebrew thought and culture.

6. Praying the Psalms

In the liturgy of the hours the Church in large measure prays through the magnificent songs that the Old Testament authors composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The origin of these verses gives them great power to raise the mind to God, to inspire devotion, to evoke gratitude in times of favor, and to bring consolation and courage in times of trial.

—General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours, 100

The psalms are at the heart of the Hebrew Bible, a “microcosm” of the Old Testament that summarizes—albeit in non-systematic fashion—all the great themes of salvation history, from creation to the patriarchs, the Exodus and wilderness wanderings, the Israelite monarchy, the Babylonian exile and the return to Zion.⁵²

Jesus prayed the psalms in Hebrew. He meditated upon them throughout his life and saw himself as their ultimate fulfillment. All four evangelists—with the other writers of the NT—apply the psalms to Jesus in order to disclose his identity and mission. Indeed, the Psalter is the most quoted OT book in the NT.⁵³ One thinks, for example, of God’s “son” in Psalm 2,⁵⁴ of “the LORD said to my Lord” in Psalm 110,⁵⁵ or of the use of Psalm 118 in all four Gospels, bringing together themes such as “the stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (v. 22),⁵⁶ Israel’s call for the Lord’s salvation through the acclamation *Hoshana* (v. 25), and the words “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (v. 26) that are to welcome Jesus when he returns.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, p. 9.

⁵² C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction*, Encountering Biblical Studies (Baker Academic, 2004), pp. 99–118.

⁵³ Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, p. 89.

⁵⁴ Cf. Acts 13:33; Heb 1:5; 5:5.

⁵⁵ Cf. Mat 22:44; Mk 12:36; Lk 20:42; Acts 2:34; Heb 1:13.

⁵⁶ Cf. Mat 21:42; Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:7;

⁵⁷ Cf. Mat 21:9; Mat 23:39; Mark 11:9-10; Luke 13:35; 19:38; John 12:13;

The Psalter is also the beating heart of both Synagogue and Church—and a potential bridge between them. Both communities of faith have been praying the psalms with devotion and love since biblical times. Used as “hymnbook” in the Temple until its destruction, they were integrated in the Jewish liturgy that developed after the fall of Jerusalem, becoming the “spiritual girders of the synagogue worship.”⁵⁸ The psalms also became part of the liturgy of the early Church and integral to the writings of the Fathers. St. Athanasius called the Psalter “an epitome of the whole Scriptures,” and Basil of Caesarea saw it as “a compendium of all theology.”⁵⁹ Today, the psalms are prayed in every Eucharistic liturgy, and they form the core of the Liturgy of the Hours. It may indeed be said that “no collection of poems has ever exercised as much influence on the Western world as the Book of Psalms.”⁶⁰

The Psalms are moving when prayed in any language, but they are particularly beautiful and powerful when prayed in the original Hebrew, communicating the raw emotion of their human authors, the nuances and poignant expressions of Hebrew poetry, and the power of their divine inspiration.

*The praying of the Psalms, which continually ponders and proclaims the action of God in the history of salvation, must be grasped with new warmth by the people of God. This will be achieved more readily if a deeper understanding of the Psalms, in the meaning in which they are used in the liturgy, is more diligently promoted among the clergy and communicated to all the faithful by means of appropriate catechesis.*⁶¹

What better way to pray the psalms with “new warmth” and to come to a deeper understanding of them, as Paul VI asks the Church, than to learn the original language in which they were composed, prayed and sung?

7. Recovering Our Jewish Roots

Without her Jewish roots the Church would be in danger of losing its soteriological anchoring in salvation history and would slide into an ultimately unhistorical Gnosis.

—The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews⁶²

The importance of Hebrew in the Church touches upon the broader issue of the Jewish roots of the Christian faith. It is now widely acknowledged that Christianity suffered no small loss as it gradually separated itself from its Hebrew and Jewish heritage in the early centuries of the Church. Kurt Cardinal Koch, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, is one of many scholars and churchmen who are convinced that “the

⁵⁸ Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, p. 93.

⁵⁹ Cf. Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms*, How to Read Series (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 1988), p. 52.

⁶⁰ Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, p. 15.

⁶¹ Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution *Laudis Canticum* promulgating the revised book of the Liturgy of the Hours, November 1, 1970.

⁶² Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable,” 13.

schism between synagogue and church forms the first split in the history of the church.”⁶³ Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, Preacher to the Papal Household, and the late Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini of Milan concur. Both see the original split between Judaism and Christianity as the “proto-schism” that has historically impoverished Catholicism by the loss of living contact with its Judaic roots. In Cantalamessa’s words:

The great original schism afflicting the Church and impoverishing it is not so much the schism between East and West or between Catholics and Protestants, as the more radical one between the Church and Israel.⁶⁴

Cardinal Martini adds that this original schism has had a particularly detrimental effect on the health and vitality of the Body of Christ:

Every schism and division in the history of Christianity entails the deprivation of the body of the Church from contributions which could be very important for its health and vitality, and produces a certain lack of balance in the living equilibrium of the Christian community. If this is true of every great division in Church history, it was especially true of the first great schism which was perpetrated in the first two centuries of Christianity.⁶⁵

The impoverishment caused by the loss of the Church’s Hebrew and Jewish roots has had far-reaching consequences. What began as a shift from Hebrew to Greek thought and culture soon led to the development of supersessionist (or “replacement”) theology claiming—contrary to Scripture (see Rom 11:28-29)—that God had rejected Israel as His chosen people and replaced them by the Church.⁶⁶ From there, the “primal rift” between Jews and Christians led to the gradual deterioration of the relationship between them so that “the awareness of belonging to the same family was gradually lost.”⁶⁷ With the historic triumph of Christianity, what began as religious polemics devolved into discriminatory, anti-Jewish legislation and “great strain and hostility which has in many cases unfortunately led to anti-Jewish attitudes involving outbreaks of violence and pogroms against the Jews.”⁶⁸

⁶³ Kurt Cardinal Koch, “Theological Questions and Perspectives in Jewish-Catholic Dialogue,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 7, no. 1 (January 5, 2012): 1, <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr/article/view/2072>.

⁶⁴ Raniero Cantalamessa, *The Mystery of Christmas: A Comment on the Magnificat, Gloria, Nunc Dimittis*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1989. As quoted in “Christ, the Glory of Israel,” *Catholics for Israel*, accessed November 8, 2015, <http://www.catholicsforisrael.com/articles/israel-and-the-church/100-christ-the-glory-of-israel>.

⁶⁵ “The Relation of the Church to the Jewish People,” p. 13, as quoted in Pawlikowski, “The Re-Judaization of Christianity,” 61.

⁶⁶ The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews describes supersessionism as follows: “the promises and commitments of God would no longer apply to Israel because it had not recognised Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God, but had been transferred to the Church of Jesus Christ which was now the true ‘new Israel’, the new chosen people of God.” “The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable,” 17.

⁶⁷ Koch, “Theological Questions and Perspectives in Jewish-Catholic Dialogue,” 1.

⁶⁸ Koch, “Theological Questions and Perspectives in Jewish-Catholic Dialogue,” 1. For surveys of the history of Christian anti-Semitism, see J. Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism* (Meridian Books, 1961); Edward Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews: Twenty-Three Centuries of*

The Church suffered the prolonged hardship of this division for too long—a division that unfortunately tarnished her witness of Christ to the Jewish people. In 1965, the Vatican II declaration *Nostra Aetate* sought to amend this by authoritatively and definitively rejecting the heritage of supersessionism and anti-Semitism. *Nostra Aetate* set the Church on a new course—or rather, a corrected course—that was more faithful to the biblical and Jewish foundations of the Christian faith. It not only acknowledged the permanence of God’s covenant with Israel but also recalled that the Church “draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree”—a well-known metaphor for Israel in the OT.⁶⁹ This point is repeated even more emphatically in the aptly titled document, “The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable” (34): The image of the olive tree is “to be taken seriously in the sense that the Church draws nourishment and strength from the root of Israel, and that the grafted branches would wither or even die if they were cut off from the root of Israel.” The Church now asserts that “[a] replacement or supersession theology which sets against one another two separate entities, a Church of the Gentiles and the rejected Synagogue whose place it takes, is deprived of its foundations.”⁷⁰ Therefore, “it should be evident for Christians that the covenant that God concluded with Israel has never been revoked but remains valid on the basis of God’s unfailing faithfulness to his people.” Moreover, “the Church without Israel would be in danger of losing its locus in the history of salvation.”⁷¹

In its 1974 document, “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, No. 4,” the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews acknowledges that “although Christianity sprang from Judaism, taking from it certain essential elements of its faith and divine cult, the gap dividing them was deepened more and more, to such an extent that Christian and Jew hardly knew each other.”⁷² To remediate this situation, the *Guidelines* propose that

Christians must therefore strive to acquire a better knowledge of the basic components of the religious tradition of Judaism; they must strive to learn *by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience.*⁷³

The recovery of the Church’s Hebraic roots thus goes far beyond recognizing the permanent value of the Old Testament as “an indispensable part of Sacred Scripture” because the Old Covenant “has never been revoked” by God.⁷⁴ It is a bare minimum to acknowledge that “without the Old Testament, the

Antisemitism, 2nd edition (New York: Paulist Press, 2004); Michael L. Brown, *Our Hands Are Stained with Blood* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 1992); William Nicholls, *Christian Antisemitism: A History of Hate* (Jason Aronson, Inc., 1995).

⁶⁹ NA 4; cf. Rom 11:17-24; Jer 11:16; Ps 52:8.

⁷⁰ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable,” 17.

⁷¹ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable,” 33.

⁷² Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, No. 4,” 1974, preamble.

⁷³ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “1974 Guidelines,” preamble. Emphasis added.

⁷⁴ John Paul II, “Address to Representatives of the West German Jewish Community,” November 17, 1980; CCC 121; Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable,” 39.

New Testament would be an unintelligible book, a plant deprived of its roots and destined to dry up and wither.”⁷⁵ Pope Benedict makes the same point in his 2010 apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*:

Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew and the Holy Land is the motherland of the Church: the roots of Christianity are found in the Old Testament, and *Christianity continually draws nourishment from these roots*. Consequently, sound Christian doctrine has always resisted all new forms of Marcionism, which tend, in different ways, to set the Old Testament in opposition to the New.⁷⁶

Going beyond this basic necessity of gaining a renewed appreciation for the Old Testament, Benedict reminds us that, “the Jewish understanding of the Bible can prove helpful to Christians for their own understanding and study of the Scriptures.”⁷⁷ The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews also highlights the importance of an organic integration of Judaism in Christian catechesis:

Because of the unique relations that exist between Christianity and Judaism – “linked together at the very level of their identity” (John Paul II, 6th March, 1982) – relations “founded on the design of the God of the Covenant” (ibid.), *the Jews and Judaism should not occupy an occasional and marginal place in catechesis: their presence there is essential and should be organically integrated*.⁷⁸

In other words, the recovery of a genuine biblical worldview—in order to better understand the “Word made flesh”—not only requires giving the Hebrew Scriptures the attention they deserve; it also calls Christians to acquire a broader and deeper knowledge of our Hebraic and Jewish roots. Can we really know the Jesus who “was and always remained a Jew,” without knowing much about the Torah he embraced, the Jewish festivals he celebrated, the prayers he prayed, and the language in which he studied, lived, and prayed?⁷⁹ Hebrew also helps us to understand our own Christian liturgy by giving us access to the rich blessings, Scriptures, and prayers of the synagogue which Jews have preserved with great devotion for thousands of years. As John Paul II said (Allocution of March 6th, 1982):

the faith and religious life of the Jewish people *as they are professed and practised still today*, can greatly help us to understand better certain aspects of the life of the Church. Such is the case of liturgy.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 84; cf. also “The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable,” 28.

⁷⁶ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2010), 40; emphasis added. Cf. CCC 123.

⁷⁷ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 41. See also *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 22: Christians can “learn much from Jewish exegesis practised for more than two thousand years.”

⁷⁸ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church,” 1985, I.2. Emphasis added.

⁷⁹ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “1985 Notes,” III.1–9.

⁸⁰ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church,” V.1. Emphasis added.

The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews expresses this in even stronger terms, viewing it as “indispensable” that Christians become acquainted with Judaism as it developed over time:

Christians need to refer to the Judaism of Jesus’ time and to a degree also the Judaism that developed from it over the ages for their own self-understanding. Given Jesus’ Jewish origins, coming to terms with Judaism in one way or another is indispensable for Christians.⁸¹

Even though there has been a substantial recovery of the Jewish roots of Christianity in the academic world in the past few decades—some even speak of a “genuine revolution in New Testament scholarship”⁸²— encouraged by the popes and the Magisterium of the Church, we may ask whether this recovery has effectively made its way to the seminary classroom, to the pews, and to the average Catholic. Without questioning the positive values of our classic heritage, it is undeniable that Greek and Latin have so dominated the Western Christian tradition that the distancing of the Church from her Jewish, Hebrew, and Semitic roots has not been entirely overcome. It is telling that even today, Catholic seminarians typically spend more time studying philosophy and Latin in the classroom than Sacred Scripture and Hebrew. Is the Word of God really being given its proper priority in Catholic formation if it is the soul of sacred theology (DV 24)?

Pawlikowski thinks that the “re-Judaization of Christianity” as a whole is a vital necessity: “The restoration of Jesus and his teachings to a fully Jewish matrix by New Testament scholars will not reach its full potential within Christianity until this vision begins to penetrate other theological disciplines.” For now, he believes that these disciplines are still marked by “a fairly widespread, though often subtle, theological anti-Judaism.”⁸³ Thus, for Pawlikowski and Cardinal Martini,

what is here at stake is not simply the more or less lively continuation of a dialogue. It is the awareness of Christians of their bond with Abraham’s stock and of the consequences of this fact, not only for doctrine, discipline, liturgy and spiritual life of the Church, but also for its mission in the world of today.⁸⁴

8. Resurrection of a Language and Nation

Thus says the LORD: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city [...] Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem [...] And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. [...] If it is marvelous in the sight of the remnant of this people in these days, should it also be

⁸¹ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable,” 14.

⁸² “We are witnessing a genuine revolution in New Testament scholarship, made possible in part by a much greater understanding of Hebrew and Aramaic and an enhanced reliance on Jewish materials from the Second Temple...” Pawlikowski, “The Re-Judaization of Christianity,” 67.

⁸³ Pawlikowski, “The Re-Judaization of Christianity,” 68.

⁸⁴ Martini, “The Relation of the Church to the Jewish People,” From the Martin Buber House 6 (September 1984), p. 9; as quoted in John T. Pawlikowski, “The Re-Judaization of Christianity,” *Relation*, 1984, 60–61.

marvelous in my sight, says the LORD of hosts? [...] Behold, I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; and I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness. (Zech 8:3-8)

Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favor of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.' (Zech 8:22-23)

It is marvelous indeed that Hebrew is the only ancient language that has ever been revived as a modern spoken language—providing the only successful instance in human history of a complete linguistic revival.⁸⁵ One hundred and fifty years ago, Hebrew was virtually a dead language, with not a single native Hebrew speaker in the world. Today, the ancient, sacred language of the Bible has come back to life as the living language of a modern nation, spoken by about 9 million people, including over 5 million native speakers.⁸⁶

Although Hebrew continued to be spoken at the time of Jesus, co-existing with Aramaic as the vernacular language of Jews in the land of Israel,⁸⁷ it eventually fell into disuse as a spoken language near the end of the Roman period (around 200 CE).⁸⁸ Hebrew survived as a liturgical and literary language and continued to be spoken by a few Jewish scholars throughout the Middle Ages. But for all intents and purposes, it was a “dead language,” no longer spoken as a mother tongue by anyone.

This changed with the birth of the Zionist movement in the late nineteenth century. Centuries of anti-Semitism in Europe led to a renewal of Jewish nationalistic fervor and the increased desire to reestablish a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Among the early Jewish immigrants who settled in Ottoman Palestine was a young Lithuanian Jew by the name of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858-1922). Influenced by nineteenth century nationalist revivals in Europe, Ben-Yehuda became convinced that the Jews must return to their land and begin anew to speak their ancient language.⁸⁹ When he arrived in Palestine in 1881, the population was already 54% Jewish, and when these Jews from different parts of the world needed to

⁸⁵ “Revival of the Hebrew Language,” *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, October 24, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revival_of_the_Hebrew_language; see also “Language Revitalization,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_revitalization; “List of Revived Languages,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_revived_languages.

⁸⁶ Jeff Kaufman, “The Revival of the Hebrew Language,” December 25, 2005, 1, <http://www.jefftk.com/files/revival.pdf>; “Modern Hebrew,” *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, November 7, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Modern_Hebrew&oldid=689538249.

⁸⁷ “An impressive amount of extra-biblical evidence points to the use of Hebrew in first-century Israel: the testimony of the church fathers, the Dead Sea Scrolls, coins, and inscriptions from the first centuries B.C.-A.D., A.D., the writings of Josephus, and Rabbinic Literature.” (Bivin and Blizzard, *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, loc. 200.)

⁸⁸ Sáenz-Badillos, Angel. *A History of the Hebrew Language*. Translated by John Elwolde. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 171.

⁸⁹ Jack Fellman, “Eliezer Ben-Yehuda & the Revival of Hebrew,” *Jewish Virtual Library*, n.d., http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/ben_yehuda.html.

talk to one another, they did so in a simple “Market Hebrew.”⁹⁰ Encouraged that it was already spoken by the locals, Ben-Yehuda set out with great determination to systematically revive the language. He decided to speak only Hebrew with every Jew he met, beginning with his own wife and son at home. Soon after, he began to teach Hebrew in a school and founded a Hebrew newspaper. He also established a Hebrew Language Council that set out to collect words from Biblical, Talmudic, Medieval and Market Hebrew into a dictionary, coin new words when needed, and standardize pronunciation.⁹¹ Helped by the local population and waves of young, idealistic Jewish immigrants who enthusiastically learned Hebrew and passed it on to their children, Ben-Yehuda’s project miraculously succeeded:

Within a biblical generation, in the forty years between 1881-1921, a core of young, fervent Hebrew-language speakers was formed, with Hebrew as the unique symbol of their linguistic nationalism. This fact was acknowledged by the British mandate authorities, who on November 29, 1922, recognized Hebrew as the official language of the Jews in Palestine. The Hebrew revival was now complete, and Ben-Yehuda’s lifelong dream had been fulfilled.⁹²

As remarkable as this is, the Hebrew language is not the only thing that has been resurrected, for along with it also came the “resurrection” of the nation of Israel. The return of the Jews to the land of Israel in the last century, together with the birth of the modern State of Israel, is in itself an extraordinary event. Until the reestablishment of Israel in 1948, it was unheard of in the annals of human history that a people scattered across the nations—often facing severe persecutions—would not only survive, resist assimilation and maintain their national and religious identity, but eventually return home and re-establish their nation in the land of their forefathers after two millennia of exile. Since the founding of the modern State of Israel, the question of Zionism with all of its theological and moral implications has been a hot topic among Christians, gathering as much ardent support as it has drawn vehement opposition. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that one of the most repeated prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures is the promise that God would eventually return His people to the land of Israel⁹³—a promise that is never revoked in the New Testament.⁹⁴ Could the return of the Jews to the land of Israel in the past century have something to do with the fulfillment of God’s ancient promises to His people? This is the question raised by many, including Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa:

We know that God gave Israel the land but there is no mention of his taking it back again forever. Can we Christians exclude that what is happening in our day, that is, the return of Israel to the land of its fathers, is not connected in some way, still a mystery to us, to this providential order which concerns the chosen people and which is carried out even through human error and

⁹⁰ Kaufman, “The Revival of the Hebrew Language,” 3.

⁹¹ Kaufman, “The Revival of the Hebrew Language,” 5.

⁹² Fellman, “Eliezer Ben-Yehuda & the Revival of Hebrew.”

⁹³ Cf. Deut 30:1-6; Amos 9:14-15; Isa 11:10-12; 14:1; 43:5-6; 49:8-12; Zeph 3:16-20; Jer 3:16-18; 7:5-7; 16:14-16; 23:7-8; 31:10-11, 17; 31:35-37; 32:36-44; 33:6-9, 25-26; Ezek 11:16-20; 28:25-26; 36:8-12, 24-28; 37:1-14, 21-27; 39:25-28; Neh 1:8-9; Zech 2:9; 10:6-12.

⁹⁴ On the contrary, Jesus asserts in the Gospel of Luke that “Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Luk 21:24). These words seem to imply that Jerusalem will return under Jewish sovereignty after the “times of the Gentiles”—i.e. their dominion over the city—comes to an end.

excess as happens in the Church itself? [...] The fact that Israel has remained an ethnic unity throughout the centuries and throughout many historical upheavals is, in itself, a sign of a destiny that has not been interrupted but is waiting to be fulfilled. Many peoples have been driven out of their land over the centuries, but not one of them has been able to remain intact as a people in their new situation.⁹⁵

This is also the view of Christoph Cardinal Schönborn and Pope John Paul II:

“Only once in human history did God take a country as an inheritance and give it to His chosen people,” Schönborn said, adding that Pope John Paul II had himself declared the biblical commandment for Jews to live in Israel an everlasting covenant that remained valid today. Christians, Schönborn said, should rejoice in the return of Jews to the Holy Land as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy.⁹⁶

If the modern restoration of Israel is indeed related to the fulfillment of God’s promises and designs for His people, then learning Hebrew not only connects us with past salvation history; it also connects us with salvation history as it continues to unfold.

The student who decides to study Hebrew thus sets out to learn a remarkable language—not only that of divine revelation, but also the only ancient language that has ever been successfully “resurrected from the dead” in a “resurrected” nation. Even though the study of Biblical and Modern Hebrew are two distinct disciplines, they are close enough that by learning one, the student can quickly learn and understand the other with little effort. Studying the language of Moses, David, and Jesus, therefore, also gives the student access to centuries of Jewish religious tradition and to the rich world of modern Israeli literature, scholarship, arts, and culture.

9. Resurrection of the Jewish Church

For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land... A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within

⁹⁵ Cantalamessa, “Christ, the Glory of Israel.”

⁹⁶ “Roman Catholic Cardinal Endorses Zionism,” *What the Cardinals Believe*, April 4, 2005, http://www.cardinalrating.com/cardinal_97__article_873.htm. As Rabbi David Rosen reports, in an 1994 interview with Tad Szulc, published in *Parade Magazine* shortly after the establishment of relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel, the pontiff stated: “It must be understood that the Jews, who for two thousand years were dispersed among the nations of the world, had decided to return to the land of their ancestors. This is their right... The act of establishing diplomatic relations with Israel is simply an international affirmation of this relationship.” David Rosen, “Christian-Jewish Relations – The Legacy of Pope John Paul II,” *Jewish-Christian Relations*, March 1, 2004, <http://www.jcrelations.net/Christian-Jewish+Relations+%96+The+Legacy+of+Pope+John+Paul+II.2815.0.html?L=3>. See also John Tagliabue, “Pope Offers Conciliation to Jews and Christians,” *The New York Times*, April 3, 1994, <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/04/03/world/pope-offers-conciliation-to-jews-and-christians.html>.

you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. You shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.
(Ezek 36:24-28)

The prophets often link the return of the people of Israel to their land with a spiritual resurrection. In the same passage that announces God's ingathering of Israel from the nations, Ezekiel speaks of a great spiritual purification by which the Lord will give His people a "new heart" and put His spirit within them (Ezek 36:22-36). Ezekiel's famous vision of the valley of dry bones makes the same point: the dry bones, which represent "the whole house of Israel" (Ezek 37:11) will come back to life in a two-staged process: first, the Lord will bring His people home into the land of Israel—illustrated by the sinews, flesh and skin covering the dry bones (Ezek 37:8, 12). Second, the people will experience a spiritual resurrection when God pours out His Spirit upon them—portrayed by the prophet breathing life back upon the slain bodies (Ezek 37: 9-10, 14).

The future spiritual resurrection of Israel is also an integral part of the message of the New Testament. This belief is most clearly seen in Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans, where the apostle expresses great hope that "all Israel will be saved" after "the full number of the Gentiles come in" (Rom 11:25-26). The Catholic Church has adopted this view as her own, believing and hoping in the eschatological salvation of Israel in the fullness of time, as expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

The glorious Messiah's coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by "all Israel," for "a hardening has come upon part of Israel" in their "unbelief" toward Jesus... The "full inclusion" of the Jews in the Messiah's salvation, in the wake of "the full number of the Gentiles," will enable the People of God to achieve "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ," in which "God may be all in all." (CCC 674)

Most enlightening is Paul's famous analogy of the olive tree, which seems to sketch out a road map of salvation from the First Coming of Christ until his return. This map has four stages: First, "natural branches" were broken off the olive tree. These are the Jews who did not believe in Christ when he was proclaimed to them in the first century. Second, "wild olive shoots" were "grafted in their place to share the richness of the olive tree" (Rom 11:17). These are the Gentile Christians who are given a share in the divine promises and gifts originally given to Israel and now made available to all in Christ. One might identify this stage of "Gentile ingrafting" with the historic mission of the Church to the nations. But with it comes a warning:

Do not boast over the [broken] branches. If you do boast, remember it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you... so do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. (Rom 11:18-21)

Paul is warning Gentile Christians not to become proud towards the fallen branches—i.e. the unbelieving Jews—for Israel is still the “root” that supports the Christian Church.⁹⁷ This admonition hints at a third stage: if Gentiles become arrogant towards their Jewish roots, they too could be cut off from the olive tree. Given the disturbing history of supersessionism and anti-Semitism in the Christian West throughout history, and the massive exodus from religious practice and identity in formerly Christian nations in the past century, Paul’s warning to Gentile Christians is striking. Elias Friedman, founder of the Association of Hebrew Catholics, observes:

St. Paul counseled his Gentile proselytes to bow their heads in fear and trembling before the sacred mystery, lest a similar fate overtake them (cf. Rm. 11:20-21). It has. The warning went unheeded. If the truth be told, St. Paul had done more than give a warning; he had prophesied.⁹⁸

Thus, it would appear that stage three warns—and virtually predicts—a future “cutting off” of the Gentiles from grace because of their poor treatment of their Israelite roots. This is followed by the fourth stage: “And even the others, if they do not persist in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again” (Rom 11:23). In other words, if Gentiles were grafted “contrary to nature” into the olive tree, “how much more will these natural branches”—the Jews—“be grafted back into their own olive tree” (11:24). Thus the last stage in the history of salvation seems to predict the future salvation of the Jewish people and their ultimate reconciliation with Christ.

In short, the “road map of salvation” in Paul’s analogy of the olive tree appears to roughly describe the following four steps in the historic relationship of Jews and Gentiles to the Gospel:

1) Jews reject > 2) Gentiles accept > 3) Gentiles reject > 4) Jews accept

It is significant that in the midst of the great exodus from religious practice and identity in Gentile Christianity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, something else happened that bears momentous theological significance: the rebirth of the Church of the Circumcision. Since the 1967 Six Day War, tens of thousands of Jews across the globe have come to faith in Jesus of Nazareth, in what has become known as the Messianic Jewish movement. Messianic Jews believe that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, but they wish to preserve their Jewish identity without becoming assimilated into Christianity. Since 1967, Messianic Judaism has grown from a small, fringe group to a large movement with congregations in most countries of the world. It has become theologically significant enough to warrant the establishment of a Catholic-Messianic dialogue group in the year 2000 (even involving cardinals of the Church), which continues until today.⁹⁹ In addition, there is also a growing movement of “Hebrew Catholics.” Although much smaller than the Messianic Jewish movement, Hebrew Catholics have had their own vicariate in Israel since the 1950s, the “Saint James Vicariate for Hebrew Speaking

⁹⁷ Cf. Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable,” 34.

⁹⁸ Elias Friedman, *Jewish Identity*, PDF Edition (New York: Miriam Press, 1987), p. 61.

⁹⁹ On the Catholic-Messianic dialogue, see Mark S. Kinzer, *Searching Her Own Mystery: Nostra Aetate, the Jewish People, and the Identity of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015).

Catholics in Israel,¹⁰⁰ while in the U.S. and other English-speaking countries (i.e. Canada, Australia, New Zealand) they are represented by groups such as the Association of Hebrew Catholics.¹⁰¹

The recent rise of the Messianic Jewish and Hebrew Catholic movements, following the extensive loss of faith in the Gentile Christian world, raises a pressing—though speculative—question: could the rebirth of the “Church of the Circumcision” be a sign that we are beginning to enter into the fourth and final stage of Paul’s “road map,” the stage that will precede the return of the Lord? If so, it is worth taking notice, because Saint Paul emphasizes that the salvation of the Jewish people will have a revitalizing effect not only on the Church but also on the whole world: “For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?” (Rom 11:15).

Closely related to the growth of Messianic Judaism and Hebrew Catholicism is the growth of the “Jewish Roots” movement within Christianity. For centuries, a Christianity that appeared to be largely based on Greek and Latin thought, language and culture had little to commend itself to Jews, who perceived it as alien to their own religious and cultural heritage. As Christianity recovers its Hebrew roots and returns to more Semitic and Jewish forms of expression, more and more Jews are realizing that Christianity is in fact not a “Gentile religion” foreign to the spirit of Judaism, but in reality its true fulfillment. This underscores again the importance of having the priests and theologians of the Church formed in the Hebrew language and culture. Will Catholics lead the way or trail behind in the recovery of Christianity’s Hebraic roots?

10. Will Catholics be “Left Behind”?

Tennyson, on hearing that Benjamin Jowett could not read Hebrew, scathingly remarked, “Fancy the priests of a religion unable to read their own sacred books!” There is a wayward Zeitgeist that is blinding its contemporaries to the plain logic of Tennyson’s statement – that is the only way to account for the amazing apathy towards Hebrew. Can one imagine a person who is going to devote his life to appreciating and helping others to appreciate French literature never bothering to learn French? How much less excusable is an ignorance of Hebrew on the part of those who believe the Old Testament to be part of God’s vital message to man.¹⁰²

Will Catholics be left behind? The question here does not pertain to the Rapture, but to whether average Catholics will be “left behind” in the “amazing apathy towards Hebrew” that Allen laments. Or will Catholics, rather, join the renaissance of Hebrew roots that has been taking place across denominational lines in the Christian world in the last generation. This great wave of “Hebraiophilia” is not only a revitalizing influence on the Church, but also a crucial counterweight to the new rise of anti-Semitism that seems to be spreading again in the world. In addition, it is potentially of great significance

¹⁰⁰ <http://catholic.co.il/>

¹⁰¹ <http://www.hebrewcatholic.net/>

¹⁰² Allen, “Why Not Learn Hebrew?,” 2.

for the new evangelization, for the Christian *recovery* of Yeshua as *Jewish* Messiah is turning out to be closely linked to the Jewish *discovery* of the same Yeshua.

Yet it would appear that this Hebrew revival has only slowly trickled down to the Catholic pew. Although an increasing number of Catholics are interested in rediscovering their long-lost Hebrew roots, they often trail behind their evangelical Protestant peers in this respect. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the Messianic Jewish movement has been experiencing dynamic growth in the past generation, while the Hebrew-Catholic movement remains relatively small. If we are approaching or perhaps even entering the time in salvation history when the great falling away or apostasy of the Gentile Church (Rom 11:21-22; 2 Thess 2:3) is to be followed by the “removing of the veil” and salvation of the Jewish people (Rom 11:23-26; 2 Cor 3:14-16), then the best way for the Church to prepare to welcome Jesus’ own kin into the household of faith is to lead the way in the recovery of Christianity’s Hebrew roots.

Tennyson makes a valid point: Does it make sense in the twenty-first century that Catholic priests who preach the Word of God every day are unable to access the Bible in its original language? Is it right that Protestant pastors sometimes study Hebrew for years while many Catholic priests are unable to read a single word in “God’s tongue”? While some may feel hesitant to learn Biblical Hebrew for fear that it is too difficult, in reality the syntax and grammar of Hebrew are far less complex than the inflectional languages of Latin and Greek.¹⁰³ Leslie Allen makes a bold observation:

One suspects that there tends to be a ‘Hebrew-phobia’ abroad. An unfounded rumour that Hebrew is ten times as difficult as Chinese quickly gives rise to the rationalization that, of course, Hebrew is not indispensable and is in fact a luxury which the average theologian may forgo with little loss.¹⁰⁴

Hebrew is neither excessively difficult, nor is it a dispensable luxury for any serious student of Sacred Scripture—let alone for priests. Studying the sacred language of Hebrew follows from our conviction about the importance of the Word of God: It is a fundamental necessity in order to recover the fullness of God’s “vital message to man.”

Conclusion

The present paper has argued that it is time for Catholic seminaries and academic institutions to restore the Hebrew language to its rightful place in the study of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Theology. As important as the language of Caesar, Augustine and Aquinas may be, do Catholics not owe at least as much attention, veneration and love to the language of Moses, David and Jesus?

The Church recommends the study of the Hebrew language, for it is the holy language that God spoke when He revealed Himself to the world. Hebrew is vital to bridge the historical, geographical and

¹⁰³ Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, 145.

¹⁰⁴ Allen, “Why Not Learn Hebrew?,” 2.

cultural gap between the Bible's context and our own. It is an invaluable tool to understand not only the Old Testament but also the New. It is indispensable to understand the words of Jesus, who prayed, read, studied and spoke in Hebrew. It can greatly enrich our own reading and praying of the psalms. Hebrew is the essential foundation for the recovery of Christianity's Jewish roots and for overcoming the error of supersessionism and its tragic fruit of anti-Semitism. Moreover, Biblical Hebrew connects together the past, the present and the future: it provides an excellent foundation for learning Modern Hebrew, connecting the student with the remarkable "resurrection" of not only the language, but also the nation of Israel and the nascent Church of the Circumcision. Hebrew thus opens a new door to the mystery of God's ongoing providence for His ancient people and to the continual unfolding of salvation history, as well as paving the way for the future reconciliation of the Jewish people with their Messiah. Simply put: It makes sense to study Hebrew.

Appendix: Hebrew Words in the New Testament

Passage	Greek	Greek Trans.	Hebrew	Hebrew Trans.	Translation
Mat 12:1	σαββατον	sabbaton	שבתון	shabbaton	sabbath, rest
Mat 23:7	Ραββι	rabbi	רבי	rabbi	master
Mat 26:2	πασχα	pascha	פסח	pesach	passover
Mat 4:10	Σατανας	satanos	שטן	satan	adversary
Mat 5:18	αμην	amen	אמן	amen	amen
Mat 5:22	ρακα	raka	ריק	reyq	empty
Mat 5:22	γεεννα	gehenna	גיא הנם	gey hinom	valley
Mat 6:19	σης	ses	סס	sas	moth
Mark 7:11	κορβαν	korban	קרבן	qorban	offering
Mark 14:36	Αββα	abba	אבא	abba	father
Luke 1:15	οινος	oinos	יין	yayin	wine
Luke 1:15	σικερα	sikera	שכר	shekar	strong drink
Luke 10:13	σακκος	sakkos	שק	saq	sackcloth
Luke 13:21	σατον	saton	סאה	se'ah	measure
Luke 16:19	βυσσος	boosos	בוץ	buts	fine linen
Luke 16:7	κορος	koros	כור	kor	measure
John 6:31	μαννα	manna	מן	man	manna
John 12:13	ᾠσανννα	hosanna	הושעה נא	hoshi'ah na	save now
Rom 9:29	Σαβαωθ	sabaoth	צבאות	tsva'ot	hosts
2 Cor 1:22	αρραβων	arrabon	ערבון	erabon	pledge
2 Cor 11:33	σαργανη	sargane	שרג	sarag	wrapped
Rev 19:1	Ἄλληλουια	halleluia	הללו יה	halelu yah	praise Yah

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