

Doing Bible Research without Knowing Hebrew or Greek

[Exact characters for Greek and Hebrew letters used in this chapter cannot be replicated here. See the published version.]

The Old Testament manuscripts on which the King James Version of the Bible is based were written in Hebrew, while the New Testament manuscripts were written in Greek. Those who know these languages are at an advantage when they study the Bible because they can see how the translation affects the meaning, something the rest of us do not usually notice. Obviously, we can learn a great deal from the Bible without knowing either Greek or Hebrew. The KJV is a good translation, and we have the guidance of modern scripture, modern prophets, and the Holy Ghost to help us understand scripture. Nevertheless, knowing the original languages of the Bible can be an advantage.

Some connections between words or verses of scripture may have been lost in translation. For example, knowing that *boasting* in Romans 3:27 and *rejoicing* in 2 Corinthians 1:12 are translated from the same Greek word may help us compare those two verses in new ways. Those who know Greek or Hebrew can speculate about the meaning the translators may have intended when it is ambiguous in English. Genesis 39:6, for example, tells us that Joseph was goodly. The Hebrew word for *goodly* can also be translated “fair” or “handsome.” Knowing the meanings of some Hebrew and Greek words can sometimes give us deeper insight into what the KJV means. For example, knowing that the Hebrew word for *covenant* is from a word that can also mean “to select” as well as “to feed” may help us think more deeply about the meaning of the sacrament.

Most of us do not have the time to learn these two difficult languages. It is important that some people learn them, but not everyone can. If we want or need to know more about the Hebrew or Greek words from which the Bible was translated, we usually must rely on those who have already learned these languages. Fortunately, however, we can do quite a bit of research ourselves, even if we do not read one Greek or Hebrew letter. (Learning the Hebrew and Greek alphabets, however, can be useful and is not difficult. An hour or so for each will suffice. For those who wish to learn these alphabets, charts and a brief introduction are provided on pages 81–86.) There are many study aids to help us learn about the original Greek and Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible, even if we decide not to learn the Greek and Hebrew alphabets.

Strong’s Concordance

The key to researching Hebrew and Greek words is Strong’s *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*.¹ In 1890 James Strong, a Protestant minister, published a Bible concordance that was important because each English word in the concordance was keyed to the Hebrew or Greek word from which it was translated. Strong made a Hebrew dictionary of all the words that appear in the Old Testament and a Greek dictionary of all the words that appear in the New Testament. He then numbered each word in each dictionary, from 1 to 8,674 for the Old Testament and from 1 to 5,624 for the New Testament. He placed the corresponding number from the dictionaries next to each English word in the concordance. To find out the Hebrew or Greek word from which an English word was translated, simply look at the number next to the word and then find that same number in the appropriate dictionary. Using Strong’s concordance, we can discover the definition of the Hebrew or Greek word from which the English word was translated, even without knowing any Hebrew or Greek.

Suppose we have just read Genesis 15:18: “In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates.” Because

understanding covenants is part of understanding the story of Abraham and our own relation to Heavenly Father, we may want to know more about what the word *covenant* means. We can learn a great deal by studying the various scriptures that discuss covenants, reading general conference addresses on covenants, and even looking up the word *covenant* in English dictionaries. But to further deepen our understanding, we may also want to know more about the meaning of the Hebrew word used in this verse.

We can look up the word *covenant* in an edition of Strong's concordance that has the Hebrew and Greek lexicons, or dictionaries, in the back. Because anyone can publish Strong's concordance, there are many versions of it. Any will do if it has both the numbers and the lexicons.

Following is the entry for the word *covenant* in Strong's concordance:

Ge 15:18 the Lord made a **c.** with Abram 1285

Strong gives the book title first: *Ge* stands for Genesis. Then comes the chapter and verse reference followed by a quotation of the phrase in which the word appears. The first letter of the word is substituted for the word. Last is Strong's number. That number means that the 1,285th word in Strong's Hebrew lexicon is translated "covenant" in Genesis 15:18. Following is the entry for word number 1285 in Strong's Hebrew lexicon:

1285. **b^eriyth**, *ber-eeth'*; from 1262 (in the sense of *cutting* [like 1254]); a *compact* (because made by passing between *pieces* of flesh): —confederacy, [con-] feder[-ate], covenant, league.

First is the number of the word, then the word written in Hebrew, followed by a transliteration. The word and its transliteration are in boldface type. The English pronunciation is given in italics. Strong then explains that *b^eriyth* is derived from word 1262, *bârâh*, meaning "select" or "feed." In parentheses Strong notes that number 1262, like word 1254, *br*, meaning "to create" or "to cut down," can have the sense of cutting, and *b^eriyth* comes from that sense of cutting. Finally, Strong defines word number 1285. In just over two lines Strong gives us a great deal of information about the Hebrew word translated "covenant," information that can be food for thought.

Strong's numbering system was so useful that other people developed additional study aids using it. For example, various Hebrew and Greek lexicons give more extensive definitions than Strong but are coded using Strong's numbers. We can use these lexicons without knowing any Greek or Hebrew. There are also Greek and Hebrew concordances that use Strong's numbers. One such concordance tells us that word 1285, *b^eriyth*, was sometimes translated "league" by the KJV translators, as in Joshua 9:6, and was once translated "confederacy" (see Obadiah 1:7).²

Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament

The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*³ is much like a dictionary, but it gives fuller discussions of the words it contains. For example, unlike Strong's Hebrew lexicon, which has a short paragraph that defines *covenant*, the *Theological Wordbook* has a more detailed definition and about one and one-half pages of discussion of what the word *covenant* means in the Old Testament. It also includes a bibliography about three-quarters of a page long for further reading. Because the *Theological Wordbook* is interpretive, we must be cautious in using it. It was written by conservative Protestants, with whom we share many understandings of the Bible, but because we understand

certain biblical teachings differently than they do, we must not simply accept their interpretations without thinking. Nevertheless, the *Theological Wordbook* is generally reliable.

Like Strong's concordance, the *Theological Wordbook* numbers the words in the Bible. However, because it arranges the words differently, the numbers in the *Theological Wordbook* are different from the numbers of the same words in Strong's concordance. Some editions of the *Theological Wordbook* have a cross-referencing index at the end of the second volume that correlates Strong's numbers to the *Theological Wordbook* numbers. It is best to use an edition that has this index.

To find a word in the *Theological Wordbook* using Strong's numbers, look up Strong's number in the index at the end of the second volume of the *Theological Wordbook*. Next to Strong's number is the number of the word in the *Theological Wordbook*. Use that number to look up the word.

For example, the word *covenant* is number 1285 in Strong's concordance. The index of the *Theological Wordbook* shows that its number for the word is 282a. Using that number to look up the word, we find the following entry:

282 (*brh*) **II. Assumed root of the following.**

282a (*b^erit*) **covenant** (ASV and RSV) between nations: a treaty, alliance of friendship; between individuals: a pledge or agreement; with obligation between a monarch and subjects: a constitution . . . The etymology of the word is uncertain. It may be related to the Akkadian word *burru* . . .

The *Theological Wordbook* lists words according to their root words rather than in alphabetical order. That is why its numbering differs from Strong's. The entry for word 282 tells us that linguists believe that several words share a common root (*brh* when transliterated). *Brh* is not, however, a word in use in the Bible. It may have been an older word that disappeared from usage, and the words derived from it remained. The *a* after the number indicates that this is the first word considered under the assumed root. The number for each word that comes from the same root has a different letter attached to the number of the root; thus the second word considered in this section would be 282b.

The entries are arranged like Strong's concordance. First the Hebrew word is given, then an English transliteration, then the English word used in the KJV (called ASV in the *Theological Wordbook*) and the Revised Standard Version (RSV), followed by a more detailed definition than is found in Strong's concordance. After the definition is an essay on the meaning and use of the word in the Old Testament.

Notice the typographer's dagger (cross-shaped mark) that appears before the Hebrew word. The dagger means that the word is discussed in an essay. Words without such daggers are defined, but they are not discussed in an essay.

Hebrew and Greek Concordances

As mentioned, some of the most useful study aids that use Strong's numbers are concordances for Hebrew (the Old Testament) and Greek (the New Testament). Often these are called Englishman's concordances. A variety of such concordances has been published, but all are used in the same way. These concordances can help us find verses in which the same Hebrew or Greek word is translated several different ways in the Bible. For example, in 1 Peter 1:15–16 the word *holy* appears. Strong's number for that word is 40. One New Testament concordance that uses Strong's numbers indicates that word number 40, *hagiōs* (ἅγιος), is also translated "saint," as in 1 Corinthians

1:2.⁴ It might be profitable to compare these two verses with that correlation in mind. In this way a Greek concordance can provide cross-references that do not show up in an English concordance.

Other Study Aids

Many study aids use Strong's numbers to help those who do not read Hebrew and Greek. For example, there are many detailed lexicons that use Strong's numbers. Most of the other study aids are relatively simple to use with Strong's concordance. For example, Hendrickson Publishing produces concordances and lexicons for both Hebrew and Greek.

Alternate Bible Translations

The LDS Church uses the King James Version of the Bible. One reason for this may be that the KJV is more literal than most more recent translations. Literal translations have their drawbacks, and translators produce nonliteral translations for good reasons. For example, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English in the KJV is much older than contemporary English, and sometimes people have a bit of difficulty reading the KJV because it is so literal. Also, a literal translation may obscure an author's writing style. The book of Mark, for example, is written in quite plain Greek. The language of the KJV and the fact that it is a literal translation make Mark seem more formal than it really is. On the other hand, literal translations have the advantage of retaining some linguistic connections that may be lost in less literal translations. For example, parallels between Old Testament and New Testament usage are more common in literal translations than in less literal translations.

It can be argued that something is gained and lost with any translation. Why keep the linguistic connections in the KJV but lose the "flavor" of the various books? Were it not for Latter-day revelation, there would be no answer to this question. However, Latter-day Saints prefer the KJV to other translations possibly because the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price use KJV-like language, thus linguistically connecting themselves to the Bible. For example, they often use phrasing from the Bible without noting that connection. One familiar with the scriptures may notice that connection, subconsciously or consciously, and it may influence his or her understanding of the scriptures. Doctrine and Covenants 89 is a good example of this. It contains the phrases *word of wisdom, keep and do these sayings, walking in obedience, health in their navel and marrow to their bones, and shall run and not be weary, and shall walk and not faint*, all of which appear in various places in the KJV. Through such allusions to the KJV, section 89 strengthens its message. We may miss that depth of meaning if we use a different Bible translation (or if we "translate" Latter-day scriptures into contemporary English). Such linguistic connections are one of the ways that the scriptures testify of and support each other. I believe that preserving the unity of scripture and the depth of meaning created by their interconnectedness depends on our continuing to use the KJV.

Nevertheless, we should not be afraid to consult other translations of the Bible. Because the language of the KJV is often difficult to understand, other translations can clarify many passages that we may not otherwise understand. Modern translations of the books of Romans or Isaiah, for example, can be very helpful.

We can use other translations as guides and as aids for understanding the meanings of verses we find difficult, but we must be careful not to let those other translations replace the KJV. We may miss much of what the Book of Mormon and other Latter-day scriptures have to say.

Following are charts showing how to read and pronounce the Greek and Hebrew alphabets. Though learning Greek or Hebrew is more than most are able to do, it is not difficult to learn how to read words written in these alphabets. That ability will allow us to consult lexicons and dictionaries with more scholarly information than is found in the resources that rely on Strong's numbers. For example, if we can read Greek words, we can use the extensive discussions found in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*⁵ and Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.⁶ The ability to read Hebrew words gives us access to such resources as Brown, Driver, and Briggs's *Hebrew and English Lexicon*.⁷

The Greek Alphabet

Letter	Name	Transliteration	Pronunciation
A α	alpha	a	f <u>a</u> ther
B β	beta	b	<u>b</u> ed
Γ γ	gamma	g, ng	go; k <u>ing</u> when double or before κ
Δ δ	delta	d	<u>d</u> og
E ε	epsilon	e	<u>b</u> ed
Z ζ	zeta	z	da <u>z</u> e or <u>t</u> s
H η	eta	ē	da <u>y</u>
Θ θ	theta	th	<u>th</u> in
I ι	iota	i	me <u>t</u> eor; poli <u>c</u> e
K κ	kappa	k	<u>k</u> ing
Λ λ	lambda	l	<u>l</u> ion
M μ	mu	m	<u>m</u> any
N ν	nu	n	<u>n</u> ew
Ξ ξ	xi or ksay	x	la <u>x</u>
O ο	omicron	o	<u>o</u> der
Π π	pi	p	<u>p</u> ie
P ρ	rho	r	<u>r</u> ow
Σ σ, ς	sigma	s	<u>s</u> ign
T τ	tau	t	<u>t</u> ell
Υ υ	upsilon	y, u	French: <u>t</u> y
Φ φ	phi	ph	<u>f</u> lat
Χ χ	chi	ch	Scottish: lo <u>ch</u>
Ψ ψ	psi	ps	gyp <u>s</u> y
Ω ω	omega	ō	<u>b</u> oat

In Greek there are two kinds of marks over vowels. They are called diacritical marks. At the beginning of words that begin with a vowel is either a rough breathing or a smooth breathing. For example, the work **ικετηρία**

(*hiketéria*, “olive branch held by suppliants”) begins with a rough breathing that is indicated above the initial vowel by what looks like a single left-hand quotation mark: ‘. To pronounce this mark, add an *h* sounds to the beginning of the word. In a smooth breathing, as in *ιατρός* (*iatros*, “doctor”), the vowel does not have a rough breathing attached to it. It is marked above the initial vowel with what looks like a single right-hand quotation mark: ’. In Greek there are three accent marks—*acute*, *grave*, and *circumflex*—that mark the accented syllable. For our purposes there is no difference between them. We can also ignore the subscript iota, a small iota that sometimes appears below vowels: *alpha*.

The Hebrew Alphabet⁸

Letter	Name	Transliteration	Pronunciation
א	aleph	‘	silent or glottal stop
ב	bet	b, v or bh	<u>b</u> oy, <u>v</u> ine
ג	gimel	g	girl
ד	dalet	d	<u>d</u> og
ה	hey	h	<u>h</u> orse
ו	vav	v or w	<u>v</u> ine
ז	zayin	z	<u>z</u> oo
ח	het	ch or h	Scottish: <u>l</u> och
ט	tet	t	<u>t</u> oy
י	yod	y	<u>y</u> es
כ	kaph	k, kh	<u>k</u> ing, Scottish: <u>l</u> och
ל	lamed	l	<u>l</u> ook
מ	mem	m	<u>m</u> other
נ	nun	n	<u>n</u> ew
ס	samech	s	<u>s</u> un
ע	ayin	‘	silent or glottal stop
פ	pey	p, f or ph	<u>p</u> rice, <u>f</u> ool
צ	tsade	ts or tz or ş	<u>n</u> u <u>t</u> s
ק	qoph	q	<u>k</u> ing
ר	resh	r	<u>r</u> ose
ש	shin	sh or š	<u>s</u> hip
ש	sin	s	<u>s</u> ilk
ת	tav	t	<u>t</u> oy

Hebrew is read from right to left. In Hebrew, vowel sounds are expressed by placing small marks known as points in and around the letters:

Point	Pronunciation
א	<u>f</u> ather
א	h <u>a</u> d

א	l <u>i</u> d
א	bee
א	sa <u>y</u> .
א	sa <u>y</u> .
א	sa <u>i</u> d
א	l <u>o</u> w
א	l <u>o</u> w
א	z <u>oo</u>
א	z <u>oo</u>
א	silent or schwa

In a Hebrew lexicon, verb entries are divided into sections such as Qal, Niphal, Piel, Pual, Hiphil, Hophal, and Hithpael. These are the names of conjugations and may be roughly illustrated by the forms of the verb *to kill*:

Conjugation	Meaning
Qal	to kill
Niphal	to be killed
Piel	to murder
Pual	to be murdered
Hiphil	to cause to kill
Hophal	to be caused to kill
Hithpael	to kill oneself

For our purposes, these differences between conjugations rarely matter. The meaning or potential meanings are most important. Note that verb conjugations in Indo-European languages (such as Greek, which, like Hebrew, has a complex conjugation system) express temporal relationships between the subject and the verb (past, past perfect, etc.). In contrast, in Hebrew, verb conjugations express other kinds of relationships, such as intention. See “Hebrew versus Greek Thinking” in the appendix (pages 135–53) for more information about these differences and their implications.

Notes

1. James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980).
2. George V. Wigram, *The New Englishman’s Hebrew Concordance Coded to Strong’s Concordance Numbering System*, ed. Jay P. Green (Peabody Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1984), s.v. “ברית.” (Strong’s number 1285).
3. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980).

4. George V. Wigram, *The New Englishman's Greek Concordance and Lexicon*, ed. Jay P. Green (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1982), s.v. "ἅγιος" (Strong's number 40).
5. Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1964–77).
6. Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).
7. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).
8. The following tables and explanations were compiled using several Hebrew grammars: Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971); Menahem Mansoor, *Contemporary Hebrew-1: An Introductory Course in the Hebrew Language*, ed. Priscilla Fishman (West Orange, N.J.: Behrman House, 1977); C. L. Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995); J. Weingreen, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).