

Though I am grown aged, yet I have had a longing  
 desire, to see with my own eyes, something of that most  
 ancient language, and holy tongue, in which the Law  
 and oracles of God were wrote; and in which God,  
 and angels, spake to the holy patriarchs, of old  
 time; and what names were given to things,  
 from the creation. And though I cannot  
 attain to much herein, yet I am refresh-  
 ed, to have seen some glimpse hereof;  
 (as moyses saw the Land of ca-  
 nan a fair of) my aime and  
 desire is to see how the words,  
 and phrases lye in the  
 holy text; and to  
 discern somewhat  
 of the same,  
 for my own  
 Content.



# HEBREW FOR LIFE

Strategies for  
 Learning, Retaining, and Reviving  
 Biblical Hebrew

Adam J. Howell, Benjamin L. Merkle,  
 and Robert L. Plummer

Foreword by Miles V. Van Pelt

  
**Baker Academic**  
 a division of Baker Publishing Group  
 Grand Rapids, Michigan

וְהָאֲרֶץ מְלֵאָה מִיְּהוָה The earth is full of the presence of Jehovah	שֵׁם פֶּחָדוֹ פֶּחָד לֹא הָיָה פֶּחָד Then they feared a fear, when no fear was
וַיֹּרֶא אֱלֹהִים כִּי טוֹב And God saw that it was good	חֹזֶן יוֹסִיד רַעִים רַבִּים Riches gather many friends
לֹא טוֹב הָיִיתָ הָאָדָם יָחִיד It is not good that man should be alone	רַע רַע יֵאמָר הַקֹּנֶה It is naught, it is naught, saith the buyer
כָּבוֹד אֲתִיאֲבִיד וְאֵת אִמִּי honor thy father, and thy mother	מִצָּא אִשָּׁה מִצָּא טוֹב he that findeth a wife findeth good
וְשִׂמְחָה מֵאִשְׁתִּי גִדּוּרִי And rejoice with the wife of thy youth	וַיָּבֹא כֶלֶב חֲסִדָּה אֲבוֹתָ כִּיתָה But of a multitude of thy mercies, will come into thy house
וְנָתַתָּ נַעַם וְחִירוֹשׁ וְיִפְתָּלֶךָ rejoice, and mine, and mine take away the heart	וְקָנָה כַּעַץ שְׂחֹל עַל-פְּלִי מִים And he shall be as a tree planted by the brooks of waters
קוֹל דְּמֵי אֲחֵיהֶם צוֹעֲקִים אֵלַי The voice of thy brothers' blood crieth unto me	תִּכְסֹּת נָשִׁים בְּנִתָּה בֵּיתָהּ A wife woman buildeth her house
הָיִיתָ מִדָּם being wringed the	נָקִי כַפִּים וְנָקִי לֵבָב Innocent in hands & pure in heart

3. Where are you employing your Hebrew in your ministry to others? If you currently are not doing so, where can you start connecting your reading of the Hebrew Bible with your practical study?
4. Is there someone else to whom you can teach Hebrew? A group at church? Your children? A homeschooling cooperative?
5. Jot down three forms of increased accountability for your study and reading of Hebrew (e.g., certain incentives or disincentives, a public record of your habits, or the active involvement of a friend or fellow student).

---

### The Double-Edged Sword of Biblical Languages: The Case of Job's "Repentance"

Dominick Hernández

---

The book of Job is *sui generis* in its rhetoric, style, and theology, making it arguably the most difficult biblical book to translate and thereby interpret. Modern students of the Bible have the advantage of the recovery and decipherment of related "pious sufferer" texts from the ancient Near East (e.g., *Ludlul bel nemeqi*; "The Babylonian Theodicy"), written in related Semitic languages (e.g., Akkadian), which shed considerable light on the language, structure, and content of Job. This, along with modern advancements in grammatical and syntactical analyses of Biblical Hebrew, should make translation and interpretation of biblical texts remarkably easier, right?

Well, it depends on which text.

Sometimes knowledge of biblical languages clarifies previously challenging texts, facilitating interpretation and consequently permitting readers to apply the principles of the text to their lives in relevant ways. On other occasions, however, proficiency in biblical languages calls traditional interpretation into question, demanding that the reader reexamine the text, reconsider its meaning, and perhaps dissent from a previously long-standing interpretation. As readers, we generally prefer the first option over the second—that is, we prefer clarification over complication. However, as Bible students who are bound to the authoritative words of the biblical text, an improved knowledge of the biblical languages compels us to perpetually reconsider even those deeply rooted interpretations of passages. In this sense, knowledge of biblical languages is functionally a double-edged sword: it permits the reader to profoundly engage with and understand intricacies of the biblical text, yet it simultaneously humbles the reader by forcing a perpetual reexamination of conclusions relating to the text.

The book of Job requires more reexamination than any other book in the Bible. Edward L. Greenstein concisely states one of the primary reasons this is the case: "The greatest obstacle before the translator of Job, however, is the necessity to overcome the many presuppositions that have accompanied the book since antiquity."<sup>8</sup> One of the most common assumptions concerning Job relates to 42:6:

"Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (ESV, NIV)

עַל־כֵּן אֶמְאָס וְנִחַמְתִּי עַל־  
עֲפָר וָאֵפֶר:

Following the above translations, many commentators suggest that Job repents of the comments that he made about God during the dialogues with his companions. If this is the case, then why does God, twice in 42:7–8, speak favorably about Job's speech?

8. Edward L. Greenstein, "Challenges in Translating the Book of Job," in *Found in Translation: Essays on Jewish Biblical Translation in Honor of Leonard J. Greenspoon*, ed. James W. Barker, Anthony Le Donne, and Joel N. Lohr (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2018), 189.

"The LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: 'My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.'" (42:7 ESV)

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אֱלִיפָז הַתֵּמָנִי  
חָרָה אַפִּי בָּךְ וּבִשְׁנֵי רֵעֶיךָ כִּי לֹא  
דִּבַּרְתֶּם אֵלַי נְכוֹנָה כְּעַבְדִּי אִיּוֹב:  
(42:7)

"For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has." (42:8b ESV)

כִּי לֹא דִּבַּרְתֶּם אֵלַי נְכוֹנָה כְּעַבְדִּי  
אִיּוֹב: (42:8b)

These positive comments relating to Job's speech appear in the context of God's rebuke of Job's companions' speeches. This fact precludes the suggestion that God is commending Job's statement of "repentance" in 42:6. God is actually endorsing Job's speech from the dialogues, in which he engages in a discussion with his friends about their view of an incontrovertible system of just retribution. While Job's friends direct their comments toward Job—initially striving to convince Job to return to God and then condemning Job as one of the wicked—Job directs his complaints (mostly) toward God. It is apparently this speech that God is commending.

For readers familiar with Job's complaints toward God, this is a hard sell. It is unquestionably more theologically comfortable to somehow conclude that Job said "sorry" about the bad things he said when he was complaining about his tragic situation. So don't take my word for it! Let us briefly take a look at the facts of the case.

As Job directs his complaint toward God, his speech is filled with hostile comments relating to how Job perceives God acting toward him. Job's comments in chapter 9 are a perfect example of what *not* to say to God about God. For example, in Job 9:5–10, Job appears to be praising God for his immense power exhibited through his authority over creation. God can move mountains (v. 5), can shake the earth (v. 6), commands the sun and the stars (v. 7), stretches out the heavens, and creates constellations (vv. 8–9). At first glance, Job appears genuinely awestruck by the greatness of God . . . that is, until verse 10. In verse 10, it becomes evident that Job is not amazed by God's power but is actually parodying one of his companion's

(Eliphaz's) statements in order to assert that God's "marvelous deeds" (נִפְלְאוֹת) are manifested in God's abuse of creation. This is evident through the almost exact quotation of Eliphaz's words relating to God's "marvelous deeds":

Eliphaz in 5:9 עֲשֵׂה גְדֻלוֹת וְאֵין תִּקְרַן נִפְלְאוֹת עַד־אֵין  
מִסְפָּר:

Job in 9:10 עֲשֵׂה גְדֻלוֹת עַד־אֵין תִּקְרַן וְנִפְלְאוֹת  
עַד־אֵין מִסְפָּר:

Job proceeds to explicitly state that God is more interested in continually mistreating him for no apparent reason than in helping him in his pathetic state (9:14–19). As if this were not enough, Job then claims that God is indiscriminate in judgment (9:22), bringing the righteous and the wicked to the same end (תָּם וְיָרָשׁוּ הוּא). Since Job's fate in the present life is not contingent on his righteousness, he concludes that God is apathetic about the fates of human beings in the afterlife. All must meet the same fate, whether righteous or wicked (cf. 3:13–15). According to Job, God is a violent and capricious mocker, who heartlessly scoffs at the innocent in their times of greatest need (9:23).

Not only is God indiscriminate in judgment according to Job, but God actively perverts justice (9:24)! God permits the wicked to inherit the earth, blessing them with dominion over all things (9:24: תָּם וְיָרָשׁוּ הוּא | אֶרֶץ | נָתַן בְּיַד־רָשָׁע). Job's assertion utterly contrasts with traditional biblical wisdom that indicates that the wicked are cut off from the face of the earth (cf. Ps. 37:9). To Job, God bestowing the land on the wicked demonstrates God's arbitrariness, which is exemplified by God actively impairing judgment on the earth by "covering the faces of its judges" (פָּגַי־שֹׁפְטֵיהָ יָכֹסֶה) (Job 9:24).

Now, does this sound like a person ready to "repent"? Even after the whirlwind speeches, Job lacks the answers to the issues that he repeatedly presents throughout the dialogues. Job never finds out why he is suffering and is apparently never privy to the details of the prologue. Job is essentially left in ignorance with regard to why his tragic circumstances came upon him. Thus, even after the whirlwind speeches, Job is disheartened and prepared to make a statement

expressing his wretched emotional condition. Lo and behold, taking a fresh look at Job 42:6 discloses a statement that fits this context. In fact, an analysis of the Hebrew of 42:6 demonstrates that its traditional interpretation is anything but obvious.

First, translators seem to have an issue with the verb **מָאָס** being used intransitively (i.e., without a direct object). Since this verb frequently appears with a direct object (i.e., it is used transitively), translators tend to supply a direct object, rendering the conjugated form **אֲמָאָס** as something akin to “I despise *myself*.” This is obviously interpretive, as “myself” is simply nowhere to be found in the Hebrew text. In fact, a cursory look at Job 7:16 demonstrates that **מָאָס** can mean something like “to be fed up” when used intransitively in the *qal* (**אֲחִיָּהּ לֹא-לֵעֲלָם אֲמָאָסְתִּי** [“I am fed up! I will not live forever!”]).<sup>9</sup> Job being fed up with his circumstances after being humbled by God through the whirlwind speeches and still not receiving any answers regarding his personal situation seems to distinctly fit the context of Job 42.

Second, translators grapple with the meaning of the word **נָחַם** in the *niphal*, which is frequently translated “to repent.” A cursory look at the dictionary reveals that this verb is multivalent (see, e.g., BDB, 636–37, *niphal*). For example, in 1 Samuel 15:29, the writer indicates that God does not lie or “repent” (**לֹא יִשְׁקַר וְלֹא יִנָּחֵם**), and in verse 35 of the very same chapter, presumably the same author asserts that God does indeed “repent” that he made Saul king over Israel (**וַיִּהְיֶה נָחֵם בְּיַד מְלִיךְ אֶת-שָׁאוּל**). So, wait, does God repent or not?

Clearly, the word **נָחַם** is being used differently in these two neighboring verses. In the case of 1 Samuel 15:29, **נָחַם** means to confess some sort of wrongdoing—which God cannot do. In the case of 1 Samuel 15:35, the word represents God as being “sorry”—a sentiment reflecting Israel’s unfortunate situation resulting from Saul’s poor leadership. In fact, the translators of the Septuagint of 1 Samuel understood that **נָחַם** was being used differently in these verses, rendering the word in 1 Samuel 15:29 as μετανοέω, “to re-

9. Translators also frequently supply a direct object to the verb in this context, despite the fact that it is clearly being used intransitively (cf. ESV, NIV, NRSV).

pent” (LSJ, 1115), and in 1 Samuel 15:35 as μεταμέλομαι, “to regret” (LSJ, 1114).

Third, translators wrestle with the phrase **עָפָר וָאֵפֶר** in Job 42:6. Many translations render this phrase literally as “dust and ashes,” perhaps depicting Job’s condition at the beginning of the book (cf. 2:8). However, **עָפָר וָאֵפֶר** can also simply refer to the human condition. For example, Job seems to use this phrase in this manner in 30:19, while Abraham makes clear that he is only a human being in the presence of the deity by using this exact phrase (Gen. 18:27).

Perhaps instead of the understanding that Job “repents” in the sense of asking for forgiveness, a better understanding of Job 42:6 in the context of God’s commendation of Job’s speech (42:7–8) portrays Job as fed up and feeling sorry about the human condition. This makes sense in light of God’s revelation through the whirlwind speeches leaving Job without any semblance of a reason for his calamitous situation. In this context, Job does not appear to repent but, rather, states:

“Therefore, I am fed up. I am  
sorry about dust and ashes”  
(i.e., the human condition).

עַל-כֵּן אֲמָאָס וְנָחַמְתִּי עַל-עָפָר  
וָאֵפֶר:

This is admittedly a difficult verse with weighty theological implications. Nevertheless, regardless of where one stands on this issue of Job’s “repentance,” this matter is more intricate than most translations portray, which pragmatically demonstrates the necessity to utilize biblical languages in preaching and teaching the Scriptures. As teachers, it is impossible to sufficiently explicate the message of a text unless we first engage with the critical issues therein.

One final point must be accentuated: upon encountering difficult biblical texts, it is especially important to refrain from importing traditional understandings of the text, despite the fact that they might facilitate a simplified translation and fortify established interpretation. The student of the Bible must recognize the nature of the double-edged sword of biblical languages and appropriately divide the text, even if that same sword slashes our traditional interpretation and chisels a new understanding.