

Biblical Hebrew for translators: January and June 2011

Since UBS is concerned for the future of translators after the completion of Bible translation projects, they recognize it is also important to have some form of formal qualification or accreditation for the training received, be it before or during the course of their project. With this in mind, Dr Margaret Muthwii (the area coordinator:translation of the UBS in Africa) approached the Centre for Bible Interpretation and Translation in Africa (=CEBITA) with a solution. After consultation, it was decided to launch an experiment in which a lecturer in Biblical Hebrew from the University of Stellenbosch would present the equivalent of the university's first-year course in Biblical Hebrew at a central venue in Africa. The 112 contact sessions of this 24 credit module would be spread over two months – this is done so in order, on the one hand, to coincide with the recess at Stellenbosch, and on the other, to ensure that students are not away too long from their families and communities.

On 10 January 2011, 17 students from all over Africa (5 from Uganda, 3 from Malawi, 2 from Sudan, 2 from Botswana, 1 from Benin, Togo, Burkina Faso, Congo Brazzaville and Namibia) enrolled for Short Course 2882 (the equivalent of BH 178). The short course was presented by Prof Christo van der Merwe, director of CEBITA and member of the Department of Ancient Studies, at the Carmelite Retreat Centre in Nairobi. The second leg of the course was presented from 30 May to 23 June 2011.

The students' performance exceeded all expectations. Students completed 20 small and 7 more exhaustive assessments. Their ability to read a Hebrew text aloud was assessed on 3 occasions. Of the 17 students who registered in January, 2 could not attend the second leg. Of the remaining 15, everyone passed the course. The average of the group was 77%. Furthermore, although it was expected of students to work very hard, they responded very positively in their evaluation of the course.

A variety of factors could have contributed to the students' remarkable performance, e.g., many of the students are gifted, some students had done some Biblical Hebrew before in informal workshops, the students were highly motivated and during the eight weeks they focused on only the content of this course. Furthermore, the lecturer was supported on an ongoing basis by one or two translation consultants of the UBS, so that, whenever needed, students received individual attention. Specialized teaching assistance was also provided by Ms Ilse Visser (translation assistant Bible Society Malawi).

The content and structure of the course also played a pivotal role in the positive outcomes of the experiment. In this regard, the long and rich history of the study of Biblical Hebrew and other Ancient Studies at the University of Stellenbosch provided the foundation. The presenter of the course, Christo van der Merwe, specializes, among other things, in recent developments in linguistics and translation studies, as well as foreign language learning that contribute to a (more adequate) description of Biblical Hebrew which could make it more accessible for both learners and translators of the language. The course therefore benefitted from (1) a long term National Research Foundation of South Africa funded project in the creation of an exhaustive Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar, (2) a research project in the optimal use of computer technology in the learning of a non-spoken language that is learned for a special purpose (e.g. translation), and (3) several doctoral projects. Insights from a PhD project concerning the most effective way to acquire the vocabulary of a culturally "distant" language, in particular, were extremely helpful. The fact that the presenter

himself has been deeply involved in several major Bible translation projects during the last 15 years sensitized him for the typical needs of translators as far as the source text of the Bible is concerned.

Such considerations contributed to a course with a clear focus, namely, the understanding of Biblical Hebrew as a language embedded in its cultural world for translators in Africa (who in turn have their own conceptual worlds). For this reason, as an example, more attention was paid to the understanding of the lexicon of Biblical Hebrew in the culture and world of its own time, than to the memorization of all the paradigms of irregular and seldom occurring forms. The advanced research, referred to in the previous paragraph, made it possible to identify those constructions and expressions with the highest frequency. In the teaching of these constructions, their most prototypical functions were concentrated on. By distinguishing between content knowledge and procedural knowledge and skills, memorization was limited to the most relevant aspects of content knowledge, e.g., the most basic paradigms of the regular verbal forms, all lexemes occurring more than 90 times in the Hebrew Bible, etc. For the tracing of information concerning more seldomly occurring constructions, students were trained with the skills to consult and implement reference works.

Course material consisted of a logically structured Biblical Hebrew reference grammar, a pedagogically structured workbook with information from and in reference to the reference grammar, as well as exercises and vocabulary lists, an electronic program with which the parsing of verbs could be practiced at each student's own pace and an electronic program for the learning of new vocabulary.

Paratext is an electronic program that has been developed by the UBS. It is used in all the translation projects of the UBS. It is, on the one hand, a type of purpose-built word processor into which all new translations of the Bible are typed, checked and edited. Translations are also printed directly from Paratext. On the other hand, Paratext contains the Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic source texts, as well as a range of tools and resources that translators may need, e.g., a morphological parser of each expression in the source texts, a range of translations, etc. Although most of the students were acquainted with the "word processing" dimension of Paratext, few could use the source language tools effectively. How to use these tools effectively was part of the procedural knowledge and skills that had to be mastered in the course.

At this stage, it may be reported that students performed very well in Short Course 2882, i.e., in terms of the aims of the short course, viz., understanding the Biblical Hebrew writing system, the relative fluency involved in reading a simple narrative text aloud, sight knowledge of 420 lexemes in their cultural setting, a basic overview of the geographic and cultural-historical background of the world of the Bible and the conceptual world of its people, a thorough knowledge of the basic paradigms, insight into the basic features of the Biblical Hebrew grammar, the ability to translate simple narrative texts and the skills required to use Paratext in the reading of a Biblical Hebrew narrative text.

As is the case with any formal qualification at an elementary level, a high mark does not necessarily entail that translators will or can use and apply their newly acquired knowledge and skills. It can at most be claimed that they were empowered with a foundation on which they can further build. This short course will be followed up in 2012 with the equivalent of modules BH 212, 222, 242 and 252 (again in January and June). This follow-up course will focus on the implementation, as well as the

systematic broadening and deepening, of the knowledge and skills initially obtained in Short Course 2882. The primary aim of the follow-up course is to train students in the optimal use of existing resources in the reading, understanding and translation of the Hebrew Bible.

It is impossible for a full-time lecturer to teach on a regular basis during his/her “research time.” For this reason, an agreement has been made with the UBS that some of their consultants, who have a master’s or doctoral degree in Semitic Languages or the Old Testament, will attend the first round of each short course. They are then introduced into the philosophy of instruction, the course material and electronic tools to be used in that particular course. The consultants also receive the opportunity to take responsibility for some of the lectures, the setting and grading of some of the assessments. The names of the consultants who are most suited to present the short course will be submitted to the Faculty of Social Science and Arts – with the request to accredit them to present the course in the future. All the teaching material for these subsequent courses will be provided by the Department of Ancient Studies. All question-and-answer papers will be moderated by the Department. In 2011, Drs Gerrit van Steenbergen (DLitt Stellenbosch), Andy Warren (PhD Cambridge); Anastasia Malle (PhD), as well as Mr Samy Tioyé (Doctoral candidate at NEGST) attended sections of Short Course 2882.

Short Course 2882 is an example of the activities of a Centre of the University of Stellenbosch which pursues its mission in Africa by supporting Bible translation in Africa, academically (cf. www.cebita.org). High level expertise is used at the grass roots level to serve a community by empowering mother-tongue translators in an innovative way to escape the mould of English and French translations which have typically been used as bases for Bible translation.