

Hebrew Words for "Teach"

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CHRISTIAN education principles and procedures should be based squarely on God's Word and be fully consistent with it. Otherwise one may question if it is really Christian education.

Bible teachers and Christian education workers in churches and schools should constantly be checking their teaching to see that they are following Biblical principles.

One of the ways Christian teachers can check their teaching with the Word of God is through knowing something of the Hebrew and Greek words translated "teach." What these words mean and how they are used illustrates the teaching-learning process as God designed it to be. This article will deal with the Hebrew words, and a future article will deal with the Greek words.

אלף ALAPH

The word אלף occurs only four times in the Hebrew Old Testament. Its basic meaning is "to become familiar with, to accustom oneself to, to befriend." From this verb comes the adjectival noun form אלף, "friend, companion." When used of animals, אלף means "tame, docile."

In the simple Qal form, אלף means "to learn by being familiar with." This is its meaning in Proverbs: "Make no friendship with an angry man. .lest thou learn (אלף, become familiar with) his ways and get a snare to thy soul" (Prov. 22 :24-25). In its three other uses, all in the Book of Job, this verb occurs in the Piel form. The Piel form usually intensifies the simple Qal (for example, the verb "to ask" means in the Piel "to beg, to ask repeatedly"), but here it has a causative force: "to cause to learn, to cause to become familiar with."

In Job 15 :5, Eliphaz stated that Job's mouth taught Job to

sin. In Job 33:33, Elihu stated that he would teach Job wisdom (i.e., he would cause Job to be familiar with wisdom). And according to Job 35:11 God teaches us more than He teaches the animals.

בִּין BIN

The word בִּין means basically "to distinguish, to separate." From this is derived the common meaning, "to discern, to see distinctions, to perceive." In the causative Hiphil form, means "to cause to discern, to cause to perceive."

According to this verb, teaching is not simply imparting facts (though it certainly includes that), but it is helping others acquire the ability or skill to discern. Gabriel, for example, caused Daniel to understand (בִּין) the vision of the ram and the male goat (Dan. 8 :16). When Ezra opened God's Word before the people, the Levites caused the people to understand or perceive it (Neh. 8:7-9). Jojarib and Elnathan, "men of discernment" (מַגִּינִים, Ezra 8 :16), were teachers. The Levites were teachers-men who helped others discern the things of God (2 Chron. 35:3). And some of them, including Chenaniah, were music teachers; they helped others understand and discern music (1 Chron. 15:22).

Real perception into spiritual matters comes only from God ("the Almighty giveth them understanding," Job 32:8), and such insight comes only in accordance with His Word (Ps. 119:109). Believers need spiritual insight and perception from the Lord so that they may keep His law (Ps. 119 :34), learn His commandments (Ps. 119:73), know His testimonies (Ps. 119:125), and live (Ps. 119:144). Teaching, then, is helping others grow in spiritual perception so that as a result, they may live for God.

It is striking that in some verses the verb בִּין is followed by two accusatives--one the person, and the other the subject matter (see Ps. 119:27; Isa. 28:9; Dan. 10 :14). In other words, according to these verses both pupils and content are to be "taught." God helps others have perception and discernment, but it is with reference to divine content-His written revelation.

זָהַר ZAHAR

According to some writers this word originally meant "to

shine" or "to enlighten." With this meaning in mind, Powell writes: "The teacher is to illuminate the pupil so that he can see for himself. He is to have a clear vision of spiritual realities and is to enable others to see."¹ But Brown, Driver, and Briggs question this meaning of יָהַר. According to them יָהַר means "to warn or admonish."² When teaching includes the giving of a warning or admonishment, this verb is used. For example, by His judgments (Ps. 19:9) God teaches or admonishes His servants how they should live (19:11).

The Hiphil form³ suggests that teaching is causing others to be warned or admonished. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, suggested that Moses teach the Israelites God's ordinances and laws, i.e., that he admonish them by calling to their attention God's commands (Ex. 18 :20).

God told Ezekiel to warn (teach by admonishing) the wicked to turn from their iniquitous ways (Ezek. 33 :8-9).

יָדַע YADAH

This verb in the simple Qal form is the common word meaning "to know." In the causative form the verb means "to cause to know" and, therefore, "to teach." No one can teach the Lord (Isa. 40 :13), for in His omniscience He has full knowledge.

The Authorized Version sometimes translates this verb by the words "to show." But these words fail to convey the thought of causing to know. Two examples of this are Exodus 18 :20 (the same verse in which the verb יָהַר occurs), "show them [cause them to know, teach them] the way wherein they must walk," and Psalm 16:11, "Thou wilt show me [teach me] the path of life." Christians are guided by the Lord into paths of godly living as they are taught by Him.

Sometimes an impersonal object follows the verb יָדַע ("teach the statutes of God," Ex. 18 :16; "multitude of years should teach wisdom," Job 32:7). Other times a personal object follows ("teach a righteous [man], and he will increase in learning," Prov. 6:6; "teach them that know not," Ezra

¹ Ralph E. Powell, "From the Professor's Desk," *Baptist Herald*, 41 :16, September 12, 1963.

² Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *11 Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 264.

³ This verb is used only in the Niphal (simple reflexive or passive) form, which is the form in Ps. 19 :11, and in the Hiphil (causative) form.

7:25). And at other times the verb is followed by an infinitive, which suggests that the acquiring of knowledge is for an intended purpose ("So teach us to number our days," Ps. 90:12; "such as taught to sing praise," 2 Chron. 23 :13).

יָסַר YASAR

This word commonly means "to chasten, to correct." Included in the verb is the idea of teaching by correcting, or giving instruction that involves chastisement. Chenaniah, head of the Levites, was a music teacher, one who corrected voice students in their singing (1 Chron. 15 :22).

Lemuel the prophet was taught by his mother (Prov. 31:1). The intensive Piel form suggests influence by Lemuel's mother.

According to Jeremiah 6 :8, Jerusalem needed to be taught, but not simply to acquire more knowledge, as the wording in the Authorized Version wrongly implies ("Be thou instructed"). The inhabitants of the city needed teaching that would result in a correcting of their ways.

Teaching, then, is a process of involving the correcting of pupils' wrong ways or ideas. In this sense education is disciplinary, guiding pupils to discipline themselves in the right ways.

יָרָה YARAH

This is one of the most interesting words in this series, for it refers to teaching that "points the way."

In the simple Qal form יָרָה means "to throw, to cast" (cf. the shooting of arrows, 1 Sam. 20 :36). But in the causative Hiphil, the verb means "to direct, to point the way" (cf. the throwing out of one's finger to point the way, Gen. 46:28, ASV). Teaching or educating is a matter of guiding, directing, pointing the way.⁴

This word. is frequently used with reference to the direction or teaching given by the priests in religious matters. Interestingly, from the verb יָרָה comes the noun תּוֹרָה (Torah), meaning

⁴ Since only the Hiphil of יָרָה means "to teach," it seems wrong to base a definition of teaching on the Qal form as Van Horn does. This indicates the teacher's responsibility to cast out or present new ideas to the pupils (Leonard T. Van Horn, "Teach, Teaching, Teacher," Baker's Dictionary of Theology, 512). The Hiphil form means "to direct" in the sense of throwing out one's finger to guide, not throwing out new ideas.

"direction, instruction, law." The Torah (law) points men to God's holy standards.

The priests were the chief instructors in the days of Israel. They taught God's judgment, God's law (Deut. 31:10), and God's statutes (Lev. 10:11). Jehoida the priest directed Jehoash, the seven-year-old king, into the ways of Jehovah (2 Kings 12 :2). In the days of Asa, Israel had been without a "teaching priest" (2 Chron. 15:3). Also Zadokite priests and Samaritan priests were teachers (Ezek. 44:23; 2 Kings 17:27-28). The priests' teaching carried with it a note of authority, for they were God's representatives (Deut. 17:11-12).

Bezaleel and Aholiab, skilled craftsmen, were filled with the Spirit of God to direct others in those skills (Ex. 35:30-35); and Moses himself was a teacher, pointing others to God's commandments (Ex. 24:12).

The verb **יָרָא** also frequently refers to God as a Teacher. The psalmist often prayed that God would teach him His way (Pss. 27:11; 86:11; 119:33; cf. 119:102). In the millennium God will teach others His ways (Isa. 2:3; Mic. 4 :2). (Also see Ex. 4:12,15; Judges 13:8; 1 Kings 8:36; Job 6:24). Teaching, then, according to this word is guiding others into the ways of God. Actually only God Himself can do this ("Who is a Teacher like Him?" Job 36:22), but He has commissioned others to teach for Him and therefore to teach authoritatively (i.e., with His divinely bestowed authority).

לָמַד LAMAD

Whereas the verb **לָמַד** means "to know" and in the Hiphil, "to cause to know," **לָמַד** means "to learn" and in the Piel, "to cause to learn."⁵ The former verb indicates the acquiring of knowledge, but the latter indicates the training to do the right thing.⁶

In the Qal **לָמַד** basically means "to beat" in the sense of training animals with a goad. For this reason the noun **מִלְמַד** is an ox-goad used in training cattle (Judg. 3 :31). From the idea of training animals (see Hos. 10 :11) the word came to be used of soldiers trained for war (1 Chron. 15 :18). An animal trained by the goad or a soldier trained for war accustoms

⁵ Cf. Deut. 4:9b (**לָמַד**) with Deut. 4:10b (31"). Also see Ps. 25:4a (**יָדַע**) and 24:4b (**לָמַד**).

⁶ This is the verb from which comes the word Talmud (**תַּלְמוּד**).

himself to his situation; therefore the verb means "to learn by being accustomed to." ("Learn not—don't accustom yourself to--the way of the heathen," Jer. 10:2. "Learn to do well --accustom yourself to doing well," Isa. 1:17. Also see Jer. 2:24; 13:25.)

Rather than using the causative Hiphil, לָמַד uses the causative Piel form, which means "to teach, to train in the ways of."⁷ The psalmist pleads, "Teach me thy statutes" (Ps. 119 :12, 26, 64, 68, 124, 135; cr. 119:171); "teach me thy good judgments" (Ps. 119:108). He knows that being taught God's law brings blessing (Ps. 94:12).

"Obedience was the greatest result expected from this type of instruction along with consistency with the will of God."⁸ This desired result is stressed in Deuteronomy. 4:1 ("Now therefore hearken. . . unto the statutes. . . which I teach you, for to do them") and in Psalm 143:10 ("Teach me to do Thy will").

A disciple is a learner or one who is taught (as in Isa. 8:16 and 1 Chron. 25:8).⁹

שָׂכַל SAKAL

The causative form of this verb means "to give insight, to cause to be wise," and is therefore sometimes translated "to teach."

God by His Holy Spirit gave the Israelites wisdom in the wilderness (Neb. 9:20), and today God gives believers insight into (teaches them with regard to) the way they should go (Ps. 32:8). David received wisdom from the Lord with regard to the pattern for the temple (1 Chron. 28:19), and Daniel was given insight from the angel Gabriel into the prophecy of the seventy weeks (Dan. 9:22).

In the authorized Version of Daniel 12:3, 10 the participial form of שָׂכַל is translated "the wise." But it could just as well be rendered "the teachers" (those who cause others to be

⁷ Sometimes the verb takes a single accusative, sometimes a double accusative and an infinite, and other times an accusative with the preposition "to." When used with two accusatives לָמַד means to teach someone something. This is similar to בִּינָה with the double accusative.

⁸ Van Horn, *op. cit.*, 512.

⁹ In 1 Chronicles 25:8 the Authorized Version inadequately translates the adjective תַּלְמִיד by "scholar." A better rendering would be, "disciple" or "learner."

wise). "They that teach shall shine as the brightness of the firmament" (12:3), and "none of the wicked shall understand but the teachers shall understand" (12:10).

Teaching, then, also includes the idea of making others wise, of giving them insight.

שָׁנַן SHANAN

This interesting verb is used only nine times in the entire Old Testament, and its usual meaning is "to sharpen, to whet," as a sword (cf. Deut. 32:41). Only once in these nine uses is it translated "teach"--in Deuteronomy 6:7, and there the Piel (intensive) form is rendered by the English words, "teach diligently." "And thou shalt teach them (God's words, Deut. 6:6) diligently unto thy children. . . ."

Brown, Driver, and Briggs suggest that the verb be translated "teach incisively"¹⁰; Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown state that it refers to "assiduous, earnest, and frequent instruction."¹¹ The Berkeley Version has this translation: "impress them deeply upon your children." Perhaps one of the most beautiful renderings is the German *einscharfen*, "to inculcate, to teach with a driving home force." Parents are commanded by the Lord to be intense, diligent, earnest, and consistent in teaching their children God's Word, so that it is applied to their children's hearts and inculcated into their lives. Parents, as teachers of the things of God, dare not be haphazard, negligent, or halfhearted in the training of their children.

SUMMARY

This study of nine Hebrew words for "teach" suggests several key principles for Christian education.

1. One who teaches must be first of all a learner--and an *intense* learner (cf. the Piel form of the verbs "to learn"). He cannot teach what he himself does not know. And conversely, intense learning should result in teaching.

2. The causative form of these Hebrew words indicates that Christian teaching is helping to learn (or causing to learn). Based on these nine Hebrew words, Christian teaching is (a) making others familiar with divine truths, (b) giving discernment, (c) warning, (d) imparting knowledge, (e) cor-

¹⁰ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *op. cit.*, 1042.

¹¹ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary Critical, Experimental, and Practical*, I, 637.

recting, (f) guiding, (g) training, (h) giving wisdom and insight, and (i) inculcating.

3. The Hiphil form may also show that teaching is helping pupils be what the teacher already is, and helping pupils know what the teacher already knows. In other words, a teacher cannot get his pupils to gain in discernment, knowledge, and insight if he himself does not possess that discernment, knowledge, and insight.

4. Christian teaching includes the imparting of Biblical content. It is causing others to have a knowledge of and discernment in God's Word and ways.

5. Pupils learn as they are familiar with facts, open to correction, willing to be guided, interested in gaining insight, and anxious to grow in wisdom.

6. Learning spiritual truths is ultimately a matter between God and the pupil. In the final sense, only God is the Teacher.

7. Teaching that is lasting and effective must be done with diligence and ardor.

8. Teaching in the home may need to include a correcting of wrong conduct and/or wrong concepts (Prov. 31:1), and it should be done with enthusiasm, repetition, and purpose (Deut. 6:7).

9. Learning God's Word is to be of a transforming character. It is to help pupils be more obedient to the will and ways of God, so that they may do His will and thus glorify Him. What a high privilege then to be engaged in teaching others God's precious Word! To be effective in his teaching, every Bible teacher and Christian education worker should be a student of God's Word, and should pray with the psalmist: "Teach (יָרָה) me thy way, O Lord" (Ps. 27:11; 86:11), and "Teach (לְמַד) me thy statutes" (Ps. 119:12, 26, 64, 68, 124, 135).

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