Reading My Bible

By Ray McAllister, PhD

More and more blind people have dreams that involve studying the Bible in the original languages. For some, this study is a means to the end of being successful professional spiritual leaders. For others, there is a deep passion to more fully understand the meaning and beauty of the Biblical texts. Whatever the reason, such a journey presents some most difficult obstacles. Developing ways to overcome these obstacles has been the work of the Semitic Scholars group, three blind or visually impaired individuals who have recently won the top prize in the 2016 Jacob Bolotin Awards from the National Federation of the Blind. In this article, I, Dr. Ray McAllister, share my journey in this project and my dreams for the future.

In 2010 I became the first person to earn a Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible totally blind. To do this, I needed documents of the Biblical text that a blind person could read, but that had more technical characters and markings than the standard Braille Greek and Hebrew original language texts provided. I ended up resorting to using computer-code-style files which used letters, numbers, and punctuations to represent Greek and Hebrew symbols. I had a computer that would convert these symbols into Braille letters and show them on a Braille display, a device using something like magnetic pins that pop up in the shape of Braille. I was grateful to have these resources, but I knew that other blind people would need something that would appear more like Braille Greek and Hebrew, just with the extra symbols.

After I had graduated, I turned my attention to solving this problem. I developed coding for the symbols not already set up in Braille. Hebrew has these accents which help one know when to pause when reading and which also can be used to know how to chant, or sing, the text. Most of these symbols were not already coded in Braille Hebrew. Since chanting is a task a blind person can enjoy, I felt the need to prepare Hebrew Bibles in Braille for the blind with all these symbols. Once I developed these symbols, I had Sarah Blake LaRose peer-review them in use. Mrs. LaRose is a Braille transcriptionist and Hebrew professor who has a Master of Divinity degree and is one of the other members of the Semitic Scholars group.

Once we agreed on a workable system, I was able to prepare texts that the blind could use. One notable text is the Aleppo Hebrew Bible, available in the public domain. Using “search and replace” in MS Word, and a lot of other technical tricks, I converted that entire Hebrew Bible, accents and all, into Braille, and, yes, I have chanted Hebrew from it fluidly. I also converted many other Hebrew documents, Semitic inscriptions, and many Greek documents into Braille using “search and replace.” Then, In 2014 I wrote a Hebrew course for the blind which addresses many difficulties the blind have in learning Braille Hebrew but who also should know how Hebrew works for sighted eyes.

In 2014 I began collaborating with Duxbury Systems, a company that produces software to convert documents of various languages into Braille. This was when I began working closely also with Matthew Yeater, who also has a masters degree and who is the third member of the Semitic Scholars group. He had been working with Duxbury to set up a system for converting Biblical language documents in many languages, with English included, into Braille. This would allow grammars, articles, and dictionaries to be easily Brailled. A think tank was then formed, involving David Holladay and Caryn Navy, from Duxbury, and Mr. Yeater, Mrs. LaRose, and me to perfect this table. Mr. Yeater and I set up the code for Syriac in Braille, and I coded Coptic. Syriac is similar to Hebrew but uses a different alphabet. Coptic is a late form of Egyptian but has letters based on Greek.

I was able to use Duxbury to convert many texts to Braille without having to use “Search and replace” Recently I have begun converting public domain Greek works of Plato and Aristotle into Braille. It’s definitely a lot easier relying on Duxbury to do most of the translation into Braille.

My dreams for the future of this project are simple. I wish to have more texts in these and more related ancient languages in braille formats for the blind. I will be testing my Hebrew course this fall at Dubuque University in Iowa, teaching it by distance education. I have already been doing much distance education teaching for Andrews University, where I received my Ph.D., and so this will broaden my horizons. It is my prayer that this award will give me the recognition I need to negotiate with scholars around the world so I can have access to the text materials I need. Besides this, I have no idea how God will lead. I only know that He has led thus far, and what is to come will only be even more of an adventure.