

PREFACE

My oft-stated goal for my students is that I want them to **read with comprehension and translate with accuracy**. With that outcome in mind, I have radically changed my approach to teaching elementary Hebrew. Gone are the long lists of rules and the endless paradigms to be memorized. Instead, the focus is on creating the most efficient and simple way to achieve our overall goal, that is, to help students see Biblical Hebrew as language, understand it correctly, and perhaps even enjoy it.

This grammar reduces the emphasis on lists and charts, as well as on pointing, vowel rules, the dagesh, and accents. It also takes the relative frequency of concepts into consideration, and takes other steps to increase efficiency and reduce confusion. All of these measures further the goal to make a greater portion of the Hebrew Bible accessible to students at an earlier stage than traditional approaches.

TREES VS. THE FOREST

One major problem with many past and current approaches to teaching Biblical Hebrew is that they have been too atomistic: focusing on little bitty parts, while frankly ignoring syntax. The assumption seems to be that students will easily make the transition to reading after seeing the language in a dissected form. But is this assumption warranted? Do they actually make that transition? If we were to hand them piles of Legos, sorted by shape and color, would we expect them to visualize a space shuttle? Words mean nothing without a context. Syntax considers the context. With this in mind, this grammar takes more of a big-picture approach, putting a stronger emphasis on syntax as it strives to more efficiently help students to obtain the skills which we should be inculcating: reading comprehension and translation precision.

One way of promoting this goal and avoiding such an atomistic approach is by avoiding paradigms altogether. Since most verbs in the Hebrew Bible are third person, we first introduce students to the third person, tense by tense. Second and

first person verbs are introduced later--separately from each other. Not only are students not bombarded by a multitude of forms at once (many of which they will rarely see), but they have the opportunity to get used to Hebrew word order at a more leisurely pace. The following sequence is used:

- a. he/she, then they (past)
- b. he/she, then they (future)
- c. he/she/they converted-to-past (imperfect vav consecutive)
- d. he/she/they converted-to-future (perfect vav consecutive)

At this point students can read many sentences and edited passages from the Hebrew Bible, as well as become accustomed to syntax.

A common occurrence of overly atomistic presentation is the technical exercise of parsing. However, traditional parsing does not readily "translate" into accurate translation. I have seen many students through the years who can parse with great accuracy and then mistranslate the same words. The problem is that the traditional parsing emphasis (for both Hebrew and Greek) adds an unnecessary mental step into the translation process which is both inefficient and gives another opportunity to make a mistake. Students do not readily translate 1, 2, 3, into "I, you, she." Rather, they start with the surface structure (the original text), reduce it to the deep structure (direct processing in the brain), convert it to a 1-2-3 surface structure (parsing), then hopefully re-reduce it to deep structure and bring it out to an English surface structure. Thus traditional parsing requires students to translate the text into an additional language which the brain does not actually process as a language. This is why they often can parse correctly but translate incorrectly, and vice-versa.

This grammar never introduces the extraneous step of traditional parsing, allowing students to immediately gather meaning from the original text. Instead, we employ *practical parsing*, that is, we ask students to give the meaning of the form (e.g., "he will kill y'all ladies" instead of "Qal imperfect 3ms with a 2fp pronominal suffix from קטל, to kill").

Traditional: Hebrew->brain->parsing->brain->English.

Practical: Hebrew->brain->English.

LIMITED USE OF VOWEL POINTING

Students do not need a thorough knowledge of Tiberian pointing if the goal is to read with comprehension and translate with precision. Instead, the use of Tiberian pointing should be limited to aiding students with their pronunciation, since "proper" vowel pronunciation is not necessary for translation accuracy.

To many, the notion of de-emphasizing Masoretic pointing probably sounds foolish at best or heretical at worst, and one suspects that this has never even occurred to others. However, students can read Biblical Hebrew with comprehension and translate with accuracy without learning the intricacies of Tiberian pointing. In fact, this method simplifies and speeds up the learning process, reducing students' confusion level without sacrificing translation precision.

I am not making students learn all the details of propretonic reduction, the rule of sheva, and the like. Instead, I tell them that vowels tend to change when prefixes and suffixes are added to words, and often in ways which are difficult to predict.

Rules for noun plurals are also greatly simplified. From a consonantal perspective, most changes involve affixing -im and -ot. Students must also know changes such as the loss of the final *he* or the shift from *he* to *tav*, but this is considerably simpler than learning propretonic reduction and the host of other vowel changes.

Students who have learned Biblical Hebrew from a consonantal perspective more easily recognize roots than their pointing-inundated counterparts. Similarly, a consonantal focus seems to help students who have learned one form of a word (e.g., the noun) to recognize another one that they have not yet learned (e.g., the verb).

Students can easily learn to read unpointed Biblical Hebrew if they are exposed to it. I frequently assign unpointed Hebrew to my students on all levels (elementary, intermediate, and advanced). While it tends to look odd to anyone whose first year was entirely with pointed texts, many get so that they prefer it.

INTRODUCTORY MEANS INTRODUCTORY

An introductory Hebrew grammar should bridge the gap between critical scholarship and the student.

It is the rare student who will step into a beginning Hebrew class who is also a linguist. For this reason, it is our aim to avoid technical nomenclature as much as is practical, defining that which is necessary, and to limit our discussion of topics to that which belongs in an *introductory* grammar. A detailed treatment in an elementary grammar just serves to confuse students. I sift a lot of details out, focusing on the more common elements of the language and leaving the oddities for further study in a more advanced course.

We begin with high-frequency vocabulary, and then move to the less common; never do we expect a student to learn a low-frequency (occurring less than 50 times) vocabulary word in this first year of study. This allows the focus to remain on what is more common, and thus, more useful to the student. Similarly, we focus on the most common verb types first, and minimize the treatment of uncommon forms. The most common verb type is Qal, followed by Hiphil, Niphal, Piel. *These combined make up 97% of all verbs.* Other verbs types are briefly mentioned so as to make the student aware they exist, but are otherwise left untouched, adhering to the introductory purposes of this grammar.