

Assessing Recently Published Biblical Hebrew Grammars
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In the past decade, publishers of biblical literature have produced more *Introductions to Biblical Hebrew* than anyone would have predicted twenty years ago. Although the field was in need of new and fresh approaches to the teaching of the language, authors have saturated the market with an array of textbooks of various levels of quality, from ‘excellent in content, format, presentation, and originality’ to ‘doubtful in value’.

A list of the most recent introductory textbooks published during the last 15 years appears on the handout, listed by year of publication, publisher, title and author (any omission is my error). Unless I have missed some, they number 23.

2006 - Kregel	<i>Invitation to Biblical Hebrew</i> Russell Fuller and Kyoungwon Choi
2006 - Baylor	<i>Learning to Read Biblical Hebrew: an introductory Grammar</i> Robert Ray Ellis
2005 - Cambridge	<i>The Cambridge Biblical Hebrew Workbook</i> Nava Bergman
2004 - Brill	<i>Introduction to Classical Hebrew</i> Donald Vance
2004 – Virtualbookworm.com	<i>Learn to Read Biblical Hebrew</i> Jeff Brenner
2003 - Eisenbrauns	<i>Beginning Biblical Hebrew</i> Mark Futato
2003 - SBL	<i>Hebrew for Biblical Interpretation</i> Arthur Walker-Jones
2002 - Broadman & Hollman	<i>A Modern Grammar for Classical Hebrew</i> Duane Garrett
2002 - Concordia	<i>Fundamental Biblical Hebrew</i> Andrew Bartelt (republished in 2004 with the Aramaic by Andrew Steinmann)
2002 - Yale Univ. Press	<i>Biblical Hebrew for Students of Modern Israeli Hebrew</i> Marc Zvi Brettler
2002 - Shangri La Publ.	<i>Introduction to Biblical Hebrew</i> Charles Isbell
2002 - Chalice Press	<i>Biblical Hebrew: an introductory textbook</i> Nancy deClaissé-Walford
2001 - Baker	<i>Introducing Biblical Hebrew</i> Allen Ross
2001 - Zondervan	<i>Basics of Biblical Hebrew</i> Gary Pratico & Myles Van Pelt
2000 - Smyth & Helwys	<i>Learning Biblical Hebrew: a new approach using discourse analysis</i> – Bryan Rocine
2000 - Sheffield	<i>An Elementary Grammar of Biblical Hebrew</i> Edwin Hostetter

1999 – SIL	<i>Learn Biblical Hebrew</i> (2 nd edition) John Dobson
1999 - Wingpress	<i>Biblical Hebrew: an analytical introduction</i> Lehmann, Raizen & Jakusz-Hewitt
1999 - Jerusalem Perspective	<i>Living Biblical Hebrew for Everyone</i> Randall Buth
1998 – Univ. Press of America	<i>A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew</i> Robert Bornemann
1997 – Vance Publ.	<i>A Practical Grammar of Biblical Hebrew</i> Laurence Vance
1996 – SPCK (Society for the Publication of Christian Knowledge)	<i>Biblical Hebrew for Beginners</i> Dan Cohn-Sherbok
1993 - University Press of America	<i>Hebrew for Theologians</i> Jacques Doukhan

In addition to these publications, several highly needed workbooks, grammars, and readers of *intermediate and advanced biblical Hebrew* have been produced by scholars such as Christo van der Merwe / Jackie Naude / Jan Kroeze, Bill Arnold & John Choi, Andrew Steinmann, Robert Chisholm Jr., Gary Pratico & Myles van Pelt, Donald Vance, and others. In addition to these printed materials, new software and online resources for Hebrew study are now available for individual and corporate use.

(More ‘introductory’ textbooks needed?)

Looking at the list of textbooks mentioned above, one may ask: “What motivates a scholar to write a new introductory grammar when so many are in print today?” This question can be answered in several ways.

1. First, some scholars have recognized areas of need that were still unmet by the publications available on the market. For example, Professor Marc Brettler’s textbook entitled *Biblical Hebrew for Students of Modern Israeli Hebrew* addresses a specific type of audience. It is intended to reach students who have a basic knowledge of biblical Hebrew, but have never received formal training in Hebrew grammar; and *second*, the book is written for students who have some knowledge of Modern Israeli Hebrew (MIH), and wish to become proficient in the Hebrew of the biblical period.

Although Brettler treats Biblical Hebrew and Modern Israeli Hebrew as (and I quote) “two different languages—or at the very least, two substantially different dialects of the same language” (p. ix), he successfully integrates examples of both dialects throughout the grammar, while including much appreciated humor and entertaining

illustrations to connect and compare both dialects. Brettler recognizes that the Hebrew language exists on a continuum and that it should be treated accordingly in the classroom.

This view is echoed by Professor Frederick Greenspahn who notes, in the November issue of *Iggeret*, that as professors of Hebrew, we should broaden the horizon of our students by exposing them to the Hebrew of various time periods, and consequently to different facets of the same culture, including its classical and contemporary phases. He states that (and I quote) “Modern Hebrew, like all of the language’s post-biblical phases, is permeated by the Bible . . . in much the same way that the biblical language is laced with echoes from other ancient Near Eastern Cultures.” (*Iggeret*, Fall 2006, No. 78, p.1).

For a long time, Hebrew was compartmentalized into categories defined by specific time periods and specific bodies of Jewish literature. Biblical, rabbinic, medieval, and Modern Hebrew were studied in independent courses with little or no integration of linguistic and cultural features of the various periods. Recent publications have challenged this trend and have integrated features of the various dialects in introductory materials for the study of biblical Hebrew’.

2. A second reason for the publication of new grammars is the integration of *First Language Acquisition methods* into the study of biblical Hebrew. This approach has been successfully demonstrated by Randall Buth’s publication entitled *Living Biblical Hebrew for Everyone*. Based on solid evidence, Buth advocates that ‘second language learning can reflect the same processes as first language acquisition.’ (handout by Sharon Alley – SBL, Nov 2005). Since children learn their mother tongue through total physical responses to spoken language’, adults should be able to acquire a second language first through listening comprehension, then, through developing reading skills and finally, through the acquiring the elements of grammar and syntax. This innovative approach is producing excellent and highly motivated students of Hebrew who have internalized the language through repetition and memorization of biblical texts, and who can transfer their learning to the various dialects of Hebrew.

This type of learning reflects the phenomenon that takes place with the acquisition of one’s first language. Listening comprehension followed by natural responses comes

before understanding grammatical and syntactical concepts. We are the proof of it! Although grammar and syntax are necessary components of a language, they need not consume the acquisition of a language.

I recently received an email that demonstrates that grammar needs not be mastered before a language can be understood. The message was entitled:

“The Power of the Human Mind” (on HANDOUT)

The power of the human mind: according to a research at Cambridge University, it doesn't matter in what order the letters in a word are, the only important thing is that the first and last letter be in the right place. The rest can be a total mess and you can still read it without a problem. This is because the human mind does not read every letter by itself, but the word as a whole. Amazing huh? yeah and who awlays tghuhot spelling was important!

P.S. Disable your spell checker before sending this on.....

3. A third reason for writing a new introductory grammar is the integration of Second Language Acquisition or SLA methods into the study of biblical Hebrew. The field of SLA has been active for decades in addressing issues of modern language acquisition, from the assessment of students to the production of teaching materials in the areas of *speaking, listening comprehension, reading and writing*. Scholars of classical languages are beginning to consider the National Standards in Foreign Language Education in their development of new teaching materials. One such attempt is currently under way under the leadership of Dr. Paul Overland of Ashland Seminary. The CoHeLeT project, which stands for ‘Communicative Hebrew Learning and Teaching’, is currently exploring strategies for adapting to the study of biblical Hebrew the insights uncovered in the field of Second Language Acquisition. A Design Team of Hebrew and SLA scholars are combining their expertise to produce new teaching materials for the acquisition of Hebrew both as a classical and as a living language. A Field Test Team will experiment with the new materials and work with the Design Team until the teaching material is functional and ready for publication.

In addition, studies in the field of education have shown that most classrooms include at least four types of learners: the visual (looking, seeing), the auditory

(listening), the tactile (handling, touching), and the kinesthetic learner (moving, doing, experiencing). New teaching materials must therefore consider this phenomenon and develop new materials to reach each learning style.

4. A fourth reason for publishing a new introductory grammar is the integration of new technologies into the acquisition of classical languages. Developments in technology during the past twenty years have enabled creative scholars to develop audio, video, and online materials that are now supplementing printed resources. In this day and age, a teacher is responsible to reach generations of students who are technologically savvy, whose learning occurs in short intensive building blocks, and whose elementary and secondary education included a variety of interactive and hands-on activities through the use of technology.

With this awareness, some of the recent authors of 'introductory Biblical Hebrew grammars' have incorporated a technology component into their teaching materials. For example:

1. Randal Buth's introductory program of *Living Biblical Hebrew for Everyone* is accompanied by a series of CDs in which learners listen to words, phrases, dialogues and conversations in order to assimilate the new language.

2. Fuller & Choi's *Invitation to Biblical Hebrew* includes a series of CDs through which a student can observe Dr. Fuller teach new grammatical concepts in the order in which they are presented in the textbook. These can be reviewed as often as is necessary for a student to absorb the material.

3. The *Basics of Biblical Hebrew* program by Pratico & van Pelt includes a textbook CD that contains an abundance of printable color charts and overheads, with an audio component to assist students learn the vocabulary. Recently, Semlink, Gordon Conwell's distance learning department produced a series of exceptional videos of Dr. Pratico's live teaching of Hebrew grammar, in the order in which it appears in the textbook. Again, this interactive CD enables students to review at their own pace each lesson with the help of excellent visuals. Online technical support is also available for anyone who uses the program.

4. Additional authors whose materials include a technology component are Mark Futato, Charles Isbell, Nava Bergman, and John Dobson.

5. Additional reasons for publishing new introductory grammars include one's own personal teaching philosophy and methodology, requirements for tenure, and the publication of one's own material accumulated over years of teaching an introductory course. As stated by Fuller and Choi, "a grammar, no matter how well written, will never satisfy all. Each grammar represents the training, pedagogy, and personality of the author." (p. xvii) Some of the new grammars include unique and appealing features that reveal the creativity of each author. For example: the 'Lessons-at-a-Glance' (Allen Ross – *Introducing BH*), 'Diglot Weaves' (Duane Garrett – *Modern Grammar for Classical H*), 'Ivrit be Ezrat HaShem' (Nava Bergman – *Workbook*), 'a discussion of the preterite in the explanations of the *wayyiqtol*' (Andrew Bartelt - *Fundamentals*), 'caricatures and humorous illustrations' (Marc Brettler – *BH for Students of MIH*), 'exegetical insights and biblical-theological reflections' (Gary Pratico & Myles van Pelt – *Basic of BH*), a review section entitled 'What we already know' (Bryan Rocine – *Learning BH*), and 'an introduction to textual criticism and masoretic notes' (Robert Bornemann – *Grammar of BH*).

To change or not to change? That is the question.

There is evidence that faculty members are not quick to change their pedagogy and to adopt new grammars for use in their classrooms. An interesting survey on the teaching and learning of Biblical Hebrew was conducted recently by Jennifer Quast, a doctoral candidate at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. Her questionnaire was sent to over 100 academic institutions in the US and abroad where biblical Hebrew is currently being taught as a core course in the curriculum. Jennifer graciously accepted to share some of her findings with me and allowed me to disclose them in this presentation. One area of the survey reads: "*Which introductory grammar or textbook do you currently use for biblical Hebrew, if any? How long have you used this text? If you are not currently teaching introductory biblical Hebrew, what was the last textbook you used? For how long?*" The responses to this query reveal that the

majority of responders are using introductory grammars that have been in print for more than 15 years (see HANDOUT).

Seow, L. *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew*. 1987 – 30%
Ross, Allen. *Introducing Biblical Hebrew*. 2001 – 14%
Simon, E., I. Resnikoff, and L. Motzkin. *The First Hebrew Primer*. 1992 – 12%
Kelley, P. *Biblical Hebrew: an Introductory Grammar*. 1992 – 9%
Pratico G. D. & M. V. van Pelt. *Basics of Biblical Hebrew*. 2001 – 7%
Lambdin, T.O. *Introduction to BH*. 1973 – 7%
None – I use my own notes – 7%
Kittel, B.P., V. Hoffer, and R.A. Wright. *Biblical Hebrew: a Text and Workbook*. 1989 – 5%
Hunter, Vanlier. *Biblical Hebrew Workbook: an inductive Study for beginners*. 1988 – 2%
Eickmann, Paul. *Biblical Hebrew for Beginners*. 2002 – 2%
Bartelt, *Fundamental Biblical Hebrew and Fundamental Biblical Aramaic*. 2004 – 2%
Ellis, Robert. *Learning to Read Biblical Hebrew*. 2006 – 2%

Although these textbooks are fine and of high-quality, it is well known in education that faculty members tend to adopt the default position of teaching the way they were taught, using of the same textbooks they utilized in their initial acquisition of the material.

A second question on Jennifer's questionnaire reads: *What other introductory textbooks have you used in the past?* The participants answered as follow (see HANDOUT):

Weingreen, 1959 - 19%
Seow, 1987 – 19%
Lambdin, 1973 – 17%
Kelley, 1992 – 13%
Pratico & van Pelt, 2001 – 6%
Ross, 2001 – 6%
Kittel, Hoffer & Wright, 1989 – 6%
Others 2% each

This list of authors includes scholars on whose shoulders we stand and whose grammars we have devoured before entering the field of academia. This said, the percentages listed here seem to indicate that older grammars are slowly being replaced by newer publications.

Choosing a grammar of Biblical Hebrew:

Choosing a grammar of biblical Hebrew can be a daunting task. With such a wide selection of introductory grammars, how is a faculty member to determine which grammar will meet both the needs of students and the educational outcomes of the course? By what criteria is one to determine the most appropriate textbook for use in the classroom?

Before choosing a textbook, a faculty member must remember that no textbook can replace sound pedagogy. Printed materials should be treated as servants to the teacher and not as

masters of the classroom. Although they can provide a basic framework on which to develop a class, they should be treated as springboards from which creativity and ideas flow, and provide prompts for imaginative instruction in the classroom. No textbook is meant to dictate the course of actions of a teacher.

The HANDOUT provides a non-exhaustive list of factors that will determine the choice of an *introductory* textbook for any Biblical Hebrew course:

1. Know your audience. Students enroll in biblical Hebrew courses for a variety of reasons. For some, the course will fulfill a requirement in their undergraduate or graduate degree program in a university or seminary setting. For others, the aim is to develop exegetical skills for the pastorate or for personal edification. Performative skills matter for students who are preparing for the rabbinate and the teaching profession. For lay adults, high school students, distance learning students, prospective candidates considering a seminary education, an introduction to Hebrew will serve as a foundation for further study in the language.
2. What teaching method do you prefer? Do you wish to use an inductive or a deductive approach, or a blend of both? Your own teaching style will guide you in determining your choice of textbook.
3. Will the textbook allow for the integration of innovative ideas? Can you deviate from the textbook, interject new activities, and still accomplish your goals and objectives?
4. Does the textbook include a technology component, whether in the form of CD, DVD, or online resources? If so, is it well done, appealing to eye, and practical for students? Does it allow students to review the material on their own pace?
5. Does the textbook include tasks that use authentic language? In other words, how much biblical text will students be exposed to by the end of the semester, trimester, or academic year. Is the material appropriately challenging? There is a relationship between the introduction of the verbal system and the treatment of ‘authentic text’ in a Hebrew grammar. Where the verbal system is introduced early, students have access to larger portions of the biblical text and can measure their learning progress more easily. The earlier a student is exposed to ‘authentic text’, the greater the reward to the student and the better the results of our teaching.
6. Is the format clear, interesting, and easy to navigate, or is the material cluttered and difficult to decipher? If the visual is not appealing to the instructor, it will not be appealing to the student either.

7. Is the textbook user-friendly and accessible to students who are self-learners and wish to prepare before class, or are the explanations so complex and convoluted that every new concept needs an explanation by the instructor.
8. Are you comfortable with the terminology used by the author? Do you prefer using the *wayyiqtol*, the ‘inverting-*vav*’, the ‘*vav*-conversive’, the ‘*vav*-consecutive’, the ‘inverted-*vav*’, the ‘*vav*-relative’, the ‘*vav*-retentive’, or another type of *vav*?
9. What is your preferred order for the presentation of the Hebrew verbal system? Do you wish to introduce the strong verb in all stems before introducing the weak verbs or vice versa?
10. How clear and practical are the assignments? Is there a workbook that accompanies the textbook or are all the exercises in the text itself?
11. Are the paradigms and vocabulary lists inviting? Are they clear and user friendly?
12. Does the book introduce students to elements of syntax or will students have to wait until their second year to understand the structure of the language?
13. Are the textbook and its accompanying materials available on short notice and affordable for students?
14. Will the textbook serve as a good resource for the future? Will students want to return to the textbook to review material or will they have developed an aversion towards the language because of the awkwardness of the textbook?

Students are a great asset in helping a faculty member determine the worth of a new textbook. As educators, it is our responsibility to ask adult learners for their feedback and receive it with open minds so that we may make the necessary changes in the classroom.

Ideas for supplementing a Biblical Hebrew textbook:

1. Ask students to learn the Hebrew alphabet before the beginning of the semester. Have students write their name in Hebrew on a large name card at the beginning of the first class.
2. Make the first class of the semester an encounter with the Hebrew language and not an encounter with a grammar textbook.
3. Use Hebrew songs:
 - a. Biblical texts:
 - i. Psalm 133:1 הִנֵּה מִה־טוֹב וּמִה־נְעִים
 - ii. Psalm 118:1 הוֹדוּ לַיהוָה כִּי־טוֹב כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ
 - iii. Psalm 121:4 הִנֵּה לֹא־יָנוּם וְלֹא יִישָׁן
 - iv. Deuteronomy 6:4 שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד
 - b. Modern Hebrew songs: Alphabet songs, Happy Birthday songs
4. Integrate Modern Hebrew and Rabbinic Hebrew texts into lessons of Biblical Hebrew:
 - a. Headlines from *Sha 'ar LeMatchil*
 - b. Mishnayot, simple midrashim
 - c. New Testament verses
5. After several weeks of instruction, teach a session on the History of the Hebrew Language
6. Listen to narration of biblical Hebrew text online from <http://kodesh.mikranet.org.il/> and ask students to write down the vocabulary they recognize
7. After several weeks of class, have students work in pairs and write a dialogue using the vocabulary they have studied so far (allow creativity). Give guidelines for the assignment: how many sentences, types of verbs, construct chains, number of adjectives, etc.
8. Place students in pairs and have them read a Hebrew text out loud to each other to develop performative skills.
9. Use cloze exercises in order to expose students to the biblical text early.
10. Use games such as 'Jeopardy', 'Who wants to be a (Hebrew) Millionaire' and 'Hebrew Scrabble' to review grammar and syntax.
11. Have students work in teams and prepare a lesson on new material from using several biblical Hebrew grammars.

In closing: *'Should scholars continue publishing introductory grammars of Biblical Hebrew?'* To this I would answer NO, if it is more of the same, but a resounding YES if scholars are willing to allow creativity to flourish and to cater to an ever changing culture of active learners.

HANDOUT

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Choosing a grammar of Biblical Hebrew:

1. Know your audience.
2. Inductive, deductive, or a blend of both?
3. Allows for integration of innovative ideas?
4. Use of technology.
5. Tasks in authentic language?
6. Format is clear, interesting, and appealing to the eye?
7. User-friendly yet appropriately challenging?
8. Terminology used by the author?
9. Order of presentation of the Hebrew verbal system?
10. Assignment format and content?
11. Clear and user-friendly paradigms and vocabulary lists?
12. Introduction to elements of syntax?
13. Textbook available on short notice? Affordable?
14. Good academic resource for the future?

Ideas for supplementing a Biblical Hebrew textbook:

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19. Place students in pairs and have them read a Hebrew text out loud to each other to develop performative skills.
20. Use 'cloze' exercises (fill-in-the-gaps) in order to solidify the application of rules of grammar and syntax.
21. Use games such as 'Jeopardy', 'Who wants to be a Millionaire' and 'Hebrew Scrabble' to review grammar and syntax.
22. Have students work in teams and prepare a lesson on new material using various grammars of biblical Hebrew.
23. Memorization of biblical passages.