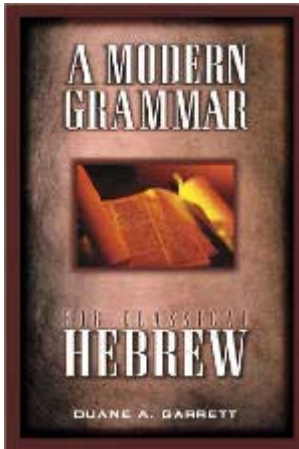


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Garrett, Duane A.

A Modern Grammar for Classical Hebrew

Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002. Pp. 395, Paperback, \$34.99, ISBN 0805421599.

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This “first-year textbook for elementary Hebrew courses” claims to be one of the few Hebrew grammar books that was written with the student in mind rather than the scholar. According to the author, Biblical Hebrew is not an easy subject, but the language is governed by relatively few core principles. This textbook tries to explain these principles, to build a student’s vocabulary and expose students to unedited biblical texts. “It also seeks to give students a perspective on Hebrew grammar, syntax and poetry that takes into account recent advances in Hebrew studies.” (v).

The content of the book is structured as follows: At a macro level the content is divided into seven parts: I. The alphabet and phonetics of Hebrew; II. Nouns, adjectives, prepositions, and the basics of verbs; III. The Hebrew verb system in summary; IV. The Qal stem in detail; V. The derived stems in detail; VI. Additional details and introduction to advanced issues and VII. Appendixes, which includes Hebrew-English vocabulary, English-Hebrew vocabulary, a list of proper names, a glossary, an answer key to the exercises of individual chapters and charts with paradigms and derived stem vowel patterns.

At a micro level the content is presented thematically in the form of 62 chapters or lessons. At the end of each lesson new vocabulary to be learnt is provided as well as a number of exercises to be done. From the fourth lesson an “unedited” text from the Hebrew Bible is given, richly annotated to serve as “guided reading”. Each lesson is concluded with a short summary of the most important issues of a particular lesson. Students are told what to memorize. The layout of each lesson is very user-friendly. Each page is provided with a header and footer. Footers of the even pages indicate the relevant

“main part” of the book and the footers of the odd pages indicate the particular chapter/lesson involved. This makes navigating to particular topics easy. Most of the explanations represent well-contemplated attempts to move from familiar to less familiar ground. Most of grammatical processes involved at the level of the phonetics and morphology are illustrated by means of diagrams. These illustrations and the accompanying explanations are evidence of an author with years of classroom experience in the teaching of Biblical Hebrew.

The author in my opinion succeeds in his attempt to draw out the general principles that govern the grammar of Biblical Hebrew. In this way he provides students with valuable general rules that could be memorized and applied instead of burdening them with the memorizing of arrays of paradigms. His succinct summaries at the end of each lesson I find especially useful since they help students to identify the gist of each lesson and give them an indication where to spend most of their energy. However, in time where morphologically tagged texts of the Hebrew Bible are freely available one is still tempted to ask whether with even this more practical approach of Garret not too much time is devoted to the parsing of every possible form in Biblical Hebrew.

The author’s attempt to expose students as soon as possible to authentic texts must be welcomed. I do not fully understand, though, why he starts with poetic texts and then proceeds to the book of Jonah. For me it would have made more sense to start with the narrative material. Furthermore, the guided reading sections would have been much more useful if he did not concentrate on explaining only the morphology and lexical meaning of the expressions. We have learnt from studies in the teaching of reading in a second language that the reading competency of second language learners can be significantly enhanced if they are supplied with some contextual information about what they read.

The author expects students to memorize a fairly large amount of Biblical Hebrew lexical items. His innovative idea to give students “chunks” or what he calls “special vocabulary” is in line with recent research into the way in which people normally acquire new lexical items, viz. in chunks. However, I do not think that he went far enough as far as maximizing the effectiveness of acquiring a basic Biblical Hebrew vocabulary. Firstly, it does not seem as if he took the frequency of lexical items into account. This is important since if learners of a second language are not confronted with newly acquired lexical items on a regular basis, they tend to forget them easily. Secondly, if newly acquired terms are enriched with visual or cultural relevant material, learners tend to remember those items longer.

Among the exercises, students get what the author calls “diglot weaves”. This is the use of an English text interspersed with newly acquired Hebrew expressions. The known English text is then used to give a clue to the meaning of the Hebrew expression. I think this is an excellent way to help students “entrenching” their vocabulary. However, it would have been even more valuable if those texts were from the English Bible or texts about the history or geography of the Bible.

Part VI of the grammar contains a number of “additional detail” (e.g. ordinal numbers, finite verbs with pronominal suffixes) and more “advanced” issues. The latter indeed includes topics, e.g. the basics of Hebrew poetry, basic concepts in Hebrew text linguistics, and reading Biblical law, which are as a rule not treated in an introductory BH grammar. This effort to bridge the gap between teaching the grammar of Biblical Hebrew and then applying it in reading different text types in the Hebrew Bible is laudable. However, I am not so sure whether presenting it only as an add-on will have the necessary effect on learners’ competency of Biblical Hebrew. Furthermore, one may ask whether it is prudent to expose students to a text linguistic approach of which the theoretical status is questionable. I refer here, for example, to the syntax-based notions “mainline” and “offline”. It will be quite confusing to students to learn that “offline” information can be 1. background information, 2. the focus of the text or 3. hinge material (p.319).

To conclude: I think that this publication is indeed a useful introduction to Biblical Hebrew. It is in many ways innovative and its explanations of the principles that govern Biblical Hebrew morphology is “as good as they can get.” One may argue that insights from Second Language Learning and taking the availability of electronically tagged texts into consideration could have benefitted this work, but as it is, it is certainly a step in the right direction.