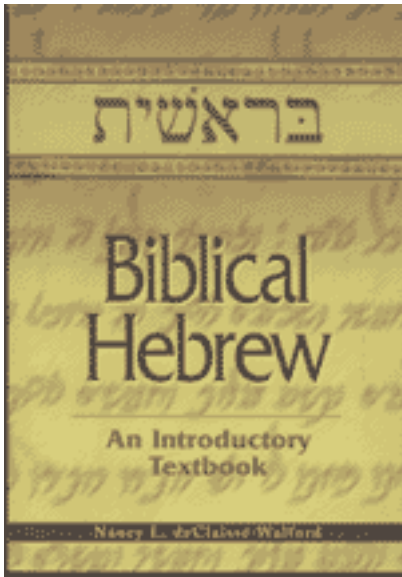


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deClaissé-Walford, Nancy L.

Biblical Hebrew: An Introductory Textbook

St. Louis: Chalice, 2002. Pp. vii + 280. Paper. \$39.99.
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Biblical Hebrew: An Introductory Textbook, by Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, has the limited scope of a first course (presumably three credits) in Biblical Hebrew, as the title indicates. The chapters are organized, after the requisite treatments of alphabet and pronunciation, by morphology, including eleven out of twenty chapters on the notoriously difficult Biblical Hebrew verb. The choice to organize by morphology may have induced the author to leave the noun sentence practically unmentioned. The explanations are usually adequate, correct, and concise. At the end of each instructional chapter a review of the chapter's most important points appear in flagged boxes called "Shortcuts," which are also compiled at the end of the book. The last two chapters guide the student through a reading of Jonah 1:1–16. In addition to the compilation of shortcuts at the end of the book one finds an answer key to the exercises, a small Hebrew-English glossary, and a series of "Helpful Charts." The charts could provide, by themselves, a concise handbook of Biblical Hebrew morphology for those people who might consult the Hebrew Bible throughout their lives but never gain independence as readers. In general, the brevity of explanation and lack of rigor in the exercises probably make the help of an instructor essential for learning Biblical Hebrew with this book.

DeClaissé-Walford's work appears in the context of many recent and many stand-by treatments of the same subject. The suggestion, in the publication of so many first-year

teaching grammars, especially recently, is that something is rotten in the state of instruction in Biblical Hebrew that should be fixable. To combat student discouragement, which deClaissé-Walford cites as either sickness or symptom in Biblical Hebrew instruction, she utilizes large print, lots of white space, brief explanations that use linguistic jargon sparingly, and visual emphasis on and repetition of key points. Even so, some of her less-is-more treatments wax unwieldy. For instance, the basics of verb root, aspect (read: *qatal* and *yiqtol* forms), person, gender, number, and stem are presented in only two chapters that are visually as well as instructionally very crowded. An instructor would have to help a student know what to key on or even how closely to look at the charts, as well as what to actually commit to memory. In any case, such aids for the student are not unique.

More essentially, deClaissé-Walford has adjusted the aim of a first course in Biblical Hebrew, which has, in turn, reduced the workload for her students. In so doing—not to suggest that the course is trite—we note that she makes little serious effort to help students gain independence or competence as *readers* of the Hebrew Bible. For instance, the practice exercise(s) for each chapter might take a student only an hour or two to complete. She includes in the course only seventeen verses of actual biblical text. The Hebrew text she has written for exercises is so cleansed of the linguistic complexities and variation common to Biblical Hebrew word order and idiom, it is hardly Biblical Hebrew. Even with this reduced challenge, the course may indeed bring students to a certain comfort level when using morphological charts and reference grammars, so they may consult the Hebrew Bible in preparing translations, sermons, and so forth. The course would indeed prepare a student of the Hebrew Bible to better use the morphological tools in a computer program for Bible study—not bad gains. Competence in using lexicons would require more explanation and practice than the book now provides.

We may wonder if deClaissé-Walford has missed the implication of her students' cry, as quoted in her preface: "Just get me through this (course)!" The cry may not be a cry of pain at the discouragingly heavy workload as it is the students' accusation of irrelevance. We realize, after all, that these same students are navigating the academic challenges of high-level math, philosophy, science, and the like. We should not think that learning Hebrew is just plain too hard. Furthermore, we can assume seminary students come to class very interested in reading the Bible. It seems instructors would do best to mine motivation from that interest. In other words, it is much more likely that seminary students will find joy in *reading the Book* as written in its original Hebrew than in gaining competence in using charts and lexicons. In short, the biggest disappointment of the course is the mere seventeen verses of real biblical text.