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Greenspahn, Frederick

An Introduction to Aramaic

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In this recent addition to the well-known SBL Resources for Biblical Study, Frederick Greenspahn offers a rudimentary guide to the Aramaic language. The format is that of a 230-page workbook that includes two introductory chapters, thirty lessons, a brief recommended bibliography, paradigms, and a glossary. While the title suggests that at least several dialects of Aramaic are discussed, Biblical Aramaic is the central topic and is addressed in all but five chapters of the book.

Greenspahn plainly states in the foreword several key assumptions that figure into the pitch of the book. The intended reader is a student who is just beginning to study Aramaic after having studied Hebrew. Such a reader is envisioned also to be interested in Aramaic as a vehicle to studying other Semitic languages and other Aramaic texts. This work is not a reference work but an attempt to foster the intelligent use of reference grammars. From the perspective of this reviewer, it is oriented toward the undergraduate level.

At least four key elements commend this book for use in the classroom. Unlike many textbooks, the level of this work is calibrated to the student who seeks to engage the material but may be easily intimidated by its potential complexity. Greenspahn builds on what the student knows already (Biblical Hebrew) and introduces him or her to the concept of cognates and low-level comparative Semitics. This naturally helps the student

in terms of vocabulary acquisition. By way of example, in chapter 5 (“Vowels”), the reader is reminded of the Canaanite shift in Hebrew and is shown how cognate roots may have similar, if not the same, meanings in both languages.

The presentation of verb forms carries through from common Hebrew grammars and so, again, makes good use of the knowledge that the student already possesses. Greenspahn does not shy away from using the technical terms of *pe[˘]al*, *pa[˘]el*, and the like, but he equates those terms with a shorthand commonly employed in beginning Biblical Hebrew courses: G, D, and so forth. The result is that the student will learn to recognize the verb more rapidly than with the hurdle of traditional jargon.

While many exercises are included for the sake of practicing the relevant lessons, the meat of each chapter is a section of text. From chapter 3 (the first chapter on grammar), the student is exposed to progressively larger sections, most of which are taken from the Hebrew Bible. By the last chapter on Biblical Aramaic, the student is expected to translate all of Dan 7. This manner progressively builds confidence and skill in extended reading.

A final point of commendation is in the latter sections of the work. The bibliography in the afterword contains a list of the many significant works in Aramaic Studies. This is followed by paradigm lists that will be helpful for many students. The last section is a ten-page Aramaic-English glossary of the vocabulary used in the exercises.

While this work is a fine introduction for the uninitiated, the value of several aspects of the book are questionable. Starting with chapter 6, the student is required to perform reverse translation from English into Aramaic. While this will certainly force students to learn their lessons well, it serves simply to reinforce a deductive grammatical package. Such teaching does not help the student to bridge out to other texts, part of the intent of this work as stated in the foreword, and does not catalyze the sensitivity to linguistic nuances needed in dealing with other texts.

A second questionable practice is the editing of biblical texts to fit the pedagogical needs of the work. This is no doubt meant to inspire interest in students and encourage them with the notion of reading the Bible in “the original.” While students of any subject must learn to walk before learning to run, one should not necessarily “water down” the subject matter to affect this. A more effective method for the long term is likely to be the use of actual texts worked through slowly, albeit with the common excuse, “We need not worry about that for now.” Such a method helps students feel at ease in dealing with the critical edition, something they will need in their future studies.

Finally, the inclusion of texts from several nonbiblical corpora was seemingly meant for purposes of exposing the student to nonbiblical dialects. However, these texts serve only to fill out a few more chapters and do not significantly complement the rest of the work. The discussion of the texts is virtually nonexistent save for detailing the historical setting of the documents and noting one or two aspects of grammar. The work would be more effective as an introduction to Biblical Aramaic if these chapters were to be excluded. This would afford more space to touch on Biblical Aramaic in greater depth.

These reservations aside, this work is an excellent introduction to the rudiments of Biblical Aramaic. For a single-volume, basic work at the undergraduate level, one will not do better.

[Managing Editor's note: The first edition of Frederick Greenspahn, *An Introduction to Aramaic*, is no longer available, but the second edition (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) will be released in May 2003 and may be ordered for \$47.95 at the Society of Biblical Literature online store (<https://secure.aidcvt.com/ProdDetails.asp?ID=060346P&PG=1&Type=BL&PCS=SBL>).]