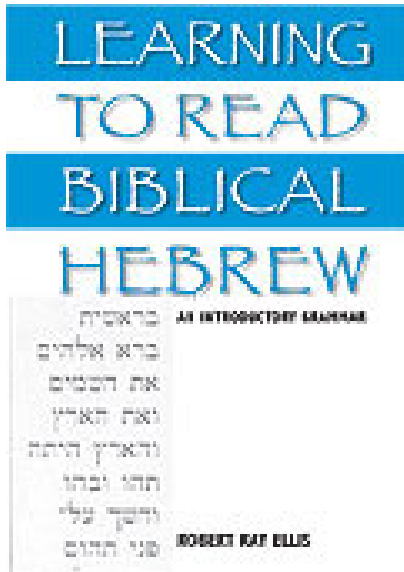


RBL 10/2008



Ellis, Robert R.

Learning to Read Biblical Hebrew: An Introductory Grammar

Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2006. Pp. xvii + 387. Hardcover. \$34.95. ISBN 1932792562.

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As the title of book indicates, this is a grammar intended for beginning students of Biblical Hebrew. In terms of the quality of the edition itself, it is very well done, with an attractive format, clear printing, and excellent binding.

The content of the book is what one would expect in a beginner's grammar. There are a total of twenty-six lessons; in order to cover the required material, this means that the lessons are quite lengthy, and, as a result, in the classroom each lesson would need to be broken into smaller units. The corresponding exercises for each chapter are not conveniently divided for this purpose, however.

The first four lessons discuss the Hebrew consonants, vowels, syllable structure, basic punctuation, and so on. The Modern Hebrew system of pronunciation is quite sensibly adopted, and transliteration skills are taught from the very start. The remaining lessons move systematically through the morphology and grammar of the parts of speech: nouns, verbs, prepositions, adjectives, and so on. There are no real surprises to be encountered here, though I found it odd that stative verbs were not introduced until lesson 21, after the conjugations and stems of strong verbs had been covered in their entirety. The author holds to an aspectual framework for understanding the verbal system; that is, he would deny grammaticalized tense as an element of the system. While I disagree with that theoretical framework, I think that the greater problem in an introductory work such as

this is his inconsistency in his own description of Hebrew aspect. For example, even though he begins by presenting the verbal system as indicating a perfective-imperfective aspectual contrast between “complete” and “incomplete” action (113), he quickly shifts to referring instead to “completed action” (116, 222 with reference to *qatal*; also on 163 n. 1 with reference to the *wayyiqtol* form). But it is precisely the importance of describing perfective aspect as “complete,” rather than “completed,” that Waltke and O’Connor make such a point of in their extensive discussion of the subject in their volume on Hebrew syntax. I do not think that the semantics of the Hebrew verbal system need to be belabored in an introductory grammar such as this, but consistency of description is essential to avoid confusion on the part of the student.

At various points along the way the author includes helpful introductions to using the Hebrew Bible and standard lexica (165ff.), the Masora and critical apparatus of *BHS* (203ff.), and Kethiv/Qere (257). The book ends with four appendices containing, respectively, a grammatical summary of Hebrew morphology and grammar, a method for identifying and analyzing the various parts of speech, the verb paradigms, and Hebrew vocabulary. The first two appendices seem particularly useful for a beginning student.

For my taste, the grammatical description in general seems rather too verbose for a beginner’s textbook, and the exercises accompanying the lessons did not seem very user-friendly. Do I have any major complaints about the book? Not really; even the points mentioned above are relatively minor ones. At the same time, does the book have particular strengths that cause it to stand out significantly from other beginning grammars? Again the answer is no. Having gone through it, I have to confess that I was left with a decidedly ambivalent feeling on the whole. The book is competently written, attractively published, and possesses some nice pedagogical features along with others that are less helpful, but in the end it failed to make a strong impression of any kind, whether positive or negative. And that is perhaps the book’s chief flaw: given the absurd number of introductory Hebrew grammars that are already on the market, along with the several new ones that inevitably appear each year, it does little to distinguish itself as unique among the many options out there and thus to justify the need for its own existence.