Vance, Donald R.

*Introduction to Classical Hebrew*


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Donald R. Vance’s *Introduction to Classical Hebrew* is a reference grammar in the guise of a first-year textbook. This assertion is not meant to be heard automatically as pejorative. To a degree beyond anything that I have seen in my twenty-plus years as a teacher of the subject, Vance’s work is lucidly organized and cross-referenced, as well as replete with historical explanations of phenomena in the language, in a way sure to prove valuable to students who return to it after their introductory course for purposes of review or reference.

The book is organized into twenty-eight chapters, or one per week for two fifteen-week semesters or three ten-week quarters (plus two weeks allowed for tests). Each of the chapters (except for the first) begins with a highlighted summary of the material to be covered therein. Following an introduction, in which Vance defines “Classical Hebrew” as “the Standard Biblical Hebrew found in the prose sections of Genesis through 2 Kings” (xix) and in which he sets forth his pedagogical principles and suggestions for use of the text, the first two chapters cover the history of the Hebrew alphabet, its traditional and modern Israeli pronunciation, the Masoretic vowel system, and other Masoretic phenomena (e.g., dageshes, shewas, vowel letters, and syllabification). Chapters then follow on nominal forms (independent personal pronouns, adjectives and verbal
adjectives, nouns, prepositions, the construct state, and segholate nouns), after which he takes up verbs (with six chapters on the Qal and four on the derived stems). Along the way in this third part of the book, he turns at selected moments either to cover other nominal forms (such as pronoun suffixes on nouns and demonstrative pronouns) or to deal with other phenomena (such as interrogative and relative clauses, hinnēh, and various syntactical issues). His concluding chapters cover numbers, gerundive stems, conditionals, noun patterns, remaining syntax, and uncommon verbal stems that typically occur with hollow or geminate roots (e.g., Poel). Every chapter concludes with exercises, and all from the third chapter on include a vocabulary list to be memorized. Beginning with chapter 17 the assignments include the translation of portions of the Hebrew Bible, except for the final lesson, in which the student is to translate Lachish Letter 4. The book concludes with fifty pages of paradigms, then alphabetized Hebrew-to-English and English-to-Hebrew vocabulary lists, and a subject index.

The author is at pains to ensure that students will be equipped to deal with the variety of technical vocabulary in use in classical Hebrew in their future studies. In cases where he employs less-common terminology, he almost always introduces the more traditional term as well (except for his “middle-weak” verbs: the more common “hollow roots” only appears once, later, on page 226). While he prefers the terminology of verbal stems from comparative Semitics (G, N, D, Dp, tD, etc.), he includes the more traditional Qal, Niphal, Piel, and so forth (albeit in Hebrew script). He favors the mainstream view of the verbal system as aspectual but prefers to use morphological terms: “suffix conjugation” for perfective; “prefix conjugation” for imperfective. However, he rejects the usual terminology of wāw-conversive or consecutive. After presenting the argument that the “converted imperfect” is historically a distinct preterite or old perfective, he uses the term “wāw-retentive” for both the “converted imperfect” and the “converted perfect.” He explains the “wāw-retentive + suffix conjugation” as “not a particular archaic form, but [retaining] the semantics of an earlier stage of the suffix conjugation, that is, an imperfective expression of simple state” (143)—a less secure explanation than that he gives for the “wāw-retentive + prefix conjugation” (cf. Waltke and O’Connor, Biblical Hebrew Syntax, §29).

There is much to be admired about this text. By beginning the book with concurrent instruction in the Hebrew alphabet and Masoretic vowel system, he deals immediately with one of the greatest challenges of learning the language and avoids a later, painful shift from transliteration to script (although transliteration is employed heavily throughout, especially in discussing the historical development of forms, so that students must be able to decipher it). In paradigms his use of light gray for parts of the form that do not vary, while printing the parts that do change in black, is a masterstroke. A particularly helpful example is his comparison of the “G suffix conjugation” with the
corresponding independent personal pronouns: without going into the details of Buccellati’s theory of the origin of the conjugation as a merger of the verbal root with a form of those same pronouns, the student can observe the repeated resemblance (90). His explanation of participles, infinitive constructs, and infinitive absolutes as verbal adjectives, verbal nouns, and (usually) verbal adverbs, respectively, is a model of clarity (chs. 5 and 15), as is his discussion of the uses of ʿāšer (ch. 19). Lastly, his inclusion of Lachish Letter 4 as the final translation exercise shows the student clearly that classical Hebrew was not limited to the Hebrew Bible, much less a concoction of the scribes.

At the same time, the book exhibits a number of features that could hamper its effectiveness in its expressed purpose as an introduction. By and large, they fall under the heading of “too much of a good thing.” Thus, while the consistent movement from English grammatical categories to their Hebrew equivalents is calculated to drive linguistic purists mad, it is, I believe, pedagogically defensible. But why spend a full page explaining the difference between restrictive and nonrestrictive relative clauses in English, only to note immediately thereafter that no such distinction is made in Hebrew (202–3)? Or, while one may concede that complete mastery of the language certainly requires a thorough understanding of the vowel changes that result from shifts in stress, why insist already in chapter 4 that beginning students absolutely must memorize a thirteen-point “Reduction Rule” that, with all due respect, has the syntactical flow of an IRS regulation (39)? In my experience, students get a lot further a lot faster by being taught a very few reduction patterns and then being left to infer what is happening in unfamiliar forms. To be sure, there is then a later “cleaning up” process, but, as the author notes, even if one masters the entire, complex rule, there are still exceptions (75). Thirdly, the book’s treatment of syntax is a rare feature in an introduction, taking up the better part of three chapters (chs. 19, 27, and 28), but it surprisingly lacks an explanation of the oath formula, and the explication of the uses of hinnēh in Lambdin’s 1971 grammar remains superior in my judgment. Finally, the use of historical explanations of forms is often illuminating, but it can be a bit much: Does the introductory student really need to master Philippi’s law and the Canaanite vowel shift (82, 148, and elsewhere)? In sum, whatever one thinks of the specific examples adduced above, there comes a point where the first-year student of Hebrew is more apt to be overwhelmed than enlightened, as he or she must sift out what must be learned to attain basic competence from what can be left for a second pass through.

Two more practical, pedagogical concerns are that, with only a single set of exercises at the end of each chapter, their distribution over a week’s worth of classes is problematic (unless the class meets only once per week, an unlikely approach with an introductory language course). The other is perhaps simply a function of the book’s absolute devotion to the deductive method: the student does not confront actual, attested classical Hebrew
until chapter 10 in the lessons, chapter 11 in the exercises, and chapter 17 in extended translation assignments.

As one would expect from a Brill publication, there are few errata: I found only one in Latin (Leningradensia for Leningradensis [xvii]) and one in English (posses for possess [275]).

There is a final stumbling block to the adoption of this text, and I raise it reluctantly, as it may well have been entirely outside of the author’s control. The list price of $160 (clothbound) places the volume outside of what I could ever, in good conscience, ask students to bear, particularly when one adds in the simultaneous cost of the Hebrew Bible, plus a lexicon to boot. (I am advised that Brill has now released a paperbound version of the book that will sell for $53. This certainly brings the cost within reason for a textbook, vis-à-vis what other Hebrew introductions cost. On the other hand, the less expensive binding will presumably limit its use as a reference tool over the long haul.) Whatever one’s conclusions on the price-value calculus for students, I recommend Vance’s work highly to colleagues as a worthy investment for their own libraries (and those of their institutions). Whatever one’s pedagogical inclinations (deductive, inductive, or some combination thereof), this book rewards close review: its clear explanations and its selection and progression of topics will stimulate thoughtful reconsideration of how best to lead one’s students to competence in reading Classical Hebrew.