

Esther: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text

Robert D. Holmstedt and John Srenock. *Esther: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015. 303 pp. \$39.95. Paperback. ISBN: 9781602586789.

With *Esther: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*, Robert D. Holmstedt and John Srenock offer a phrase-by-phrase grammatical analysis of the Hebrew text of the book of Esther. Their purpose is to address the “surprising lack of attention to the [Hebrew] grammar” of this “artistic, well-crafted, and entertaining” book (1). The authors begin with an extensive, thirty-page introduction covering “the background and terminology necessary for understanding” their grammatical analyses (1). Starting with “constituents,” the most basic components of syntax, and moving through units of increasing complexity, they offer “brief descriptions” of the concepts they use in their analysis (2-4). For example, rather than employing “Latin case-based terms,” the authors use “complement” and “adjunct” to “cover all syntactic roles” within verb phrases, distinguished by whether or not the semantics of the phrase require an object (3). The authors also introduce the concept of “valency,” part of a verb’s “lexical composition” that refers to “the number of arguments the verb requires in order to be semantically ‘complete’” (4). They suggest this term is “better suited” to Hebrew grammar than the distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs, and they use it throughout this handbook. Other topics Holmstedt and Srenock cover in their introduction include summaries of the *Qere-Ketiv* in the book, verbal semantics, word order, subordinate clauses, and numerical syntax. They then briefly consider the manuscript history of the book of Esther and conclude their introduction with a lengthy essay on linguistic dating.

Turning to the Hebrew text of Esther, the authors divide the book into ten episodes, arranged in three major parts, with a concluding epilogue. Part I, comprising episodes 1 and 2, introduces the main characters and tells how Esther replaced Vashti as Queen of Persia. The five episodes in Part II describe Haman’s conflict with Mordecai, and how Esther courageously intervened to bring about the downfall of the former and the exaltation of the latter. Part III includes three episodes that describe how the Jews fought to save themselves from the fate Haman had in store for them and how they instituted a festival to commemorate their triumph.

Holmstedt and Srenock subdivide each episode into sections. In each section, they provide their translation and then proceed through the Hebrew text, verse by verse and phrase by phrase. They parse every verb, identifying its stem (*binyan*) and root. For uncommon verbs or those whose form and/or context suggest a particular translation, they offer a basic gloss, include cross-references to other scholars and to entries in standard Hebrew lexicons (Brown, Driver, and Briggs; the *Hebrew-Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*; and the *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*), and indicate other occurrences of the particular form of the verb in question. Holmstedt and Srenock discuss the valency of select verbs and indicate which other syntactical components of the verse or phrase under examination serve as adjuncts or complements. They also identify some less-common nouns and adjectives and they note nuances effected by various prepositions. As noted in the introduction, they also point out *Qere-Ketiv* textual variants and whether these affect the meaning of the passage. While they focus primarily on grammar, with due attention to lexical and semantic analysis, they also offer some commentary on the meaning and significance of larger blocks of text.

Those familiar with the Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament series who expect this handbook on the Hebrew text of Esther to prove equally useful may be somewhat disappointed. Whereas the works in the Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament series are clearly intended to offer beginning and intermediate students intuitive, word-by-word guides to the Greek text, it is unclear for whom this handbook on the Hebrew text of Esther is intended. On the one hand, the manner in which the authors present the text — translating larger blocks of text rather than translating each phrase and providing minimal lexical information on individual words — suggests that the authors presume a high level of familiarity with Hebrew. On the other hand, their treatment of the text is peppered with information any first-semester Hebrew student learns, e.g., that when the conjunction ׀ is attached to words beginning with ך, ם, or ץ it takes the form

י (37). Likewise, while they employ rather technical grammatical, syntactical, and linguistic terminology in their analyses (e.g., “In contrast to the triggered inversion with finite verbs, fronting does not trigger inversion with null copulas” [91]), the authors also seem compelled to explain basic concepts, such as the function of a “parenthetical clause” (35).

Moreover, rather than employing commonly used terminology, Holmstedt and Screnock use technical terms that even they acknowledge are likely to be unfamiliar to those without a background in linguistics (270). For example, rather than identifying nouns in the “construct state,” the authors use the connotatively more colorful term “bound.” Similarly, the authors frequently use abbreviations to direct readers to other sources, but the editors neglected to include a list of abbreviations, and not all of the sources to which they make reference are likely to be well-known to non-specialists (e.g., CAD = *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, which makes sense, but admittedly was not my first guess). These decisions detract from the overall usefulness of this book. Readers may find themselves consulting the handbook’s glossary to help them understand the handbook as much as they consult the handbook to help them understand the Hebrew text of Esther.

This is not to suggest that the work is without merit. Despite its uneven mixture of technical vocabulary and elementary concepts, intermediate and advanced students are likely to find this work quite useful. For example, the authors’ extensive discussion of subordinate clauses (10-14) is clear and well illustrated and would likely prove beneficial to exegetes of all levels of expertise. They offer a compelling interpretation of the phrase וְכִּי אֶפְשֶׁר אֶבְרָתִי אֶבְרָתִי (‘‘and however I perish, I perish’’ [Esther 4:16]) that differs from many English translations but more closely reflects the Hebrew and makes more sense in the story (158). And while it may be elementary, I found their distinction between the imperfect forms of שׁוּב (‘‘he turned’’) and יָשָׁב (‘‘he sat, he dwelled’’) to be helpful (189). While the concept of ‘‘valency’’ may be unfamiliar to some readers, Holmstedt and Screnock’s discussion of מְלֵא in Esther 7:5 is but one example of the utility of the concept in helping readers better understand grammatical relationships (198).

Unfortunately, the overall structure of the book obscures such helpful insights. While it certainly makes good sense to consider the text on a clause-by-clause or phrase-by-phrase basis, this does lead the authors to repeat information unnecessarily and can make it somewhat challenging to find information on a specific word (e.g., the phrase וַיִּבְרָא יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי בְרָהּ appears twice on page 92). Formatting the information in paragraphs rather than word by word makes for cumbersome and ambiguous prose, such as when the authors discuss a series of participles yet do not clearly delineate to which word they are referring (135). Rather than stringing their parsing information in one ‘‘sentence,’’ it would be clearer, and more useful, to parse and discuss each word sequentially and separately. The constraints required by formatting the content in paragraphs also leads to unfortunate and confusing divisions of Hebrew words (see, for example, קוּל לֵשׁ on page 147).

As commentators, Holmstedt and Screnock are at times ambivalent. For example, they outline two ‘‘syntactic explanations’’ for the phrase ‘‘all of the Jews’’ (Esther 3:13), but offer no indications as to which is preferable, or why (133). At other times, they are quite dogmatic: ‘‘identifying a clause as ‘circumstantial’ reflects a judgment concerning the relationship of two adjacent clauses and, as such, combines various constructions in an ill-conceived categorical menagerie’’ (107). They censure the reader for reading back ‘‘an implicature arising from the sequence of events’’ on the ‘‘grammatical value of 56) (‘‘ו), yet do not hesitate to infer the intentions of the narrator (cf. 78, 153).

Unlike Baylor’s Handbooks on the Greek New Testament, I would not recommend including this handbook in our reference collection. While this handbook on the Hebrew text of Esther includes enough insightful analysis to warrant purchase, it will be most helpful for more advanced students. Beginning and intermediate students may glean some good information but may also find some of the terminology obscure and confusing. Libraries connected with schools with strong biblical languages programs or Ph.D. programs in biblical studies may want to consider adding this book to their circulating collections.

Finally, in the interest of full disclosure, I should note that I have recently completed three semesters of Hebrew at Perkins School of Theology. While I have obtained some degree of familiarity with the language, I regard my abilities as intermediate at best. Thus some of the shortcomings I have perceived in this work may be my own, though this once again raises the question of intended audience.

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