

A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar

Van der Merwe, Christo H. J., Jacobus A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze.
A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar. Second Edition. London:
 Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017. pp. xxxiv, 605. \$47.95. Paperback.
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The first edition of van der Merwe, Naudé, and Kroeze's *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) was a great tool for the intermediate student of Biblical Hebrew. This edition continues offering an easy reference for Hebrew grammar and syntax. The focus of the grammar is the Masoretic Text of the Bible to the exclusion of Hebrew inscriptions, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and later Hebrew texts. There are also occasional references to historical reconstructions, but they are never treated systematically in the grammar. The biggest difference between this second edition and the first is more inclusion of modern linguistic categories. Traditional categories are still kept, but when these traditional terms lead to confusion, modern linguistic ones are chosen (xxxii). The authors strive, however, to present "a solution-oriented source of grammatical information to users which is as theory neutral as possible" (xxxii).

This book stands out for its interaction with and incorporation of cutting-edge linguistics. One standout way that this is presented in the grammar is in Chapter 3, "Key Terms and Concepts," where the authors lay out their methodology and an overview of what grammar is. This chapter is helpful, particularly for the intermediate student, as it helps the reader think about how to put the pieces of beginning Hebrew grammar together to paint a broader picture of the language. Another obvious place to see the pronounced influence of modern linguistics on the grammar is in the detailed and clear glossary in the back of the book. In the content of the grammar, linguistics has also shaped the way that the syntax of the verb has been presented. The analysis of verbal conjugations, verb chains and sequences, and finite and non-finite verbs have all been clarified with categories from modern syntax. Specifically, the section on the verbal conjugations and how tense and aspect are encoded in Hebrew grammar is one of the clearest sections on verbal conjugations I have encountered. The section balances clarity of explanation without the oversimplification that is often found in many Hebrew grammars written for beginning students.

Further application of modern linguistics to Hebrew grammar is found in the way the authors present spatial prepositions. On the one hand, the authors do not present a systematic presentation of the linguistic terminology of "Trajector" (the clause being modified) and "Landmark" (the object of the preposition). On the other hand, they have the terminology well defined in the glossary, and after reading the different descriptions of how those terms apply to different prepositions, the meaning is clear. The grammar would benefit, though, from a more systematic explanation of the spatial terminology used in description of these prepositions. Also, it should be pointed out that it is only the spatial uses of the prepositions that have linguistic descriptions; the non-spatial prepositions are treated in a manner commonly found in more traditional grammars.

One other section of note is the consideration of Hebrew word order. This is another place where the grammar illustrates the usefulness of modern linguistics in providing clear explanations and clear distinctions that help further scholars' understanding of Hebrew grammar. The basic distinction between "marked" and "unmarked" is foundational for all discussion of word order. For Van der Merwe, et al., a marked construction is anything that precedes the verb. Though the authors are not the first to make this distinction, they helpfully apply it to explain these syntactical constructions to the intermediate student.

Unfortunately, linguistic analysis of Hebrew morphology has received the same intense focus as syntax has—and this book also reflects such comparative lack of interest. The morphology sections of this work are adequate. They are generally accurate and helpful, but they do not reach the same competency as Bauer and Leander or Gesenius’s presentation.¹ One frustrating aspect of this presentation is that when presenting ungrammatical forms, the authors do not indicate them as such. For example, the authors write:

יאמר instead of אמר

This layout suffers from requiring the reader to switch reading directions in the midst of the line, which adds to the confusion and lack of clarity. Traditionally, ungrammatical forms are identified with two asterisks; their absence in this work is surprising.

Hebrew nouns can be classified by vocal patterns that have discernible semantic value, yet the authors skip over them. The intermediate student is in the ideal position to start learning these patterns, not only for her understanding of grammar, but also for the expansion of her vocabulary. Waltke and O’Connor include a section on noun patterns, as do the classic reference grammars of Hebrew.² In addition to this, several places throughout the grammar point to a historical reconstruction of the Hebrew language, but there is no place where these are presented systematically or where the authors state the rules of this reconstruction to the student.

Some of the terminology used is a bit confusing. The authors use the term “other words” because “the term ‘particle’ is ambiguous” (322). They include the following categories in “other words”: prepositions, conjunctions, adverbs, predictors of existence, interrogatives, discourse markers, interjections, and oaths. This term, however, is even less descriptive and more ambiguous than the traditional categories used by other reference grammars. In addition, the authors use the term “left dislocation” to refer to clauses or nouns that are placed at the beginning of the sentence or clause and then referred to with a pronoun in the main body of the sentence or clause. As Hebrew is written right to left, these terms are not *left* dislocated, they are actually *right* dislocated. This term is neither illuminating nor descriptive of the grammatical feature it labels. However, the distinction that the authors make between “fronting” and “left dislocation” is an important and helpful distinction, despite the terminology.³

One final problem with this grammar is the citation of statistics for how many times a preposition, particle, or conjunction occurs in the Hebrew Bible. The citation of the number itself is meaningless without context. When dealing with the *waw*, for example, they provide the statistics of the *waw* in relation to the total number of words in the Hebrew Bible, which is slightly more helpful, but this is the only example in the book of the relative value. On the other end of the spectrum, the authors only cite the occurrences of the prepositions אה and עמ in the Pentateuch, which skews these raw numbers, rendering them with little importance.⁴

¹ Hans Bauer and Pontus Leander, *Grammatik des biblisch-Aramäischen* (Halle/Saale: Max Niemeyer, 1927); Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, ed. Emil Kautzsch, trans. Arthur Ernest Cowley, 2nd English ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1910).

² Bruce K. Waltke and Michael O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990).

³ The term fronting describes the placing of an element at the beginning of the sentence to focus on its importance. The authors give the following example: “*Me (and no-one else)* has the Lord sent to anoint you as king” (1 Sam 15:1) [*Me* as the direct object]. For left dislocation they give this example “*Everything I am commanding you today, that* you must take care to do” (Deut. 13:1). Fronting is moving constituent parts to the front of the sentence, while left dislocation is a clause constituent that is placed outside the clause, and then referred to with a pronoun or reference. See pages 492 and 493.

⁴ It is also problematic that these two prepositions are only illustrated with examples found in the Pentateuch. A reference grammar of this scope should cover the full range of the corpus involved.

Despite the negative features noted in this review, this work is an excellent contribution to Hebrew grammar. Moreover, it is an indispensable reference tool for intermediate students, translators, and exegetes. The clarity of explanation and distillation of the most important aspects of Hebrew grammar is praiseworthy, as is the introduction of modern linguistic terminology and resources. This is an important addition to any library that services students who are moving beyond the basics of Hebrew grammar.

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The initial printing of this review had printed the Hebrew words left to right, rather than the normal right to left order of the Hebrew writing system. This has been corrected.