

INTRODUCTION

CLASSICAL HEBREW DEFINED

The term *Classical Hebrew* refers to the Standard Biblical Hebrew found in the prose sections of Genesis through 2 Kings. To be sure, this grammar prepares students to read the Hebrew of the entire biblical text, but the earlier material is considered paradigmatic. Further, the language of sixth-century Hebrew inscriptions falls into the Classical Hebrew category, and students will translate Lachish Letter 4 as the exercise for the last chapter. This definition is close to that of the *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*.

PEDAGOGY DELINEATED

The pedagogical principle guiding the writing of this grammar is that it is best to begin with the regular phenomena and systematically build to the more complex and irregular. Coupled to this is the observation, stemming from over a decade of teaching Classical Hebrew, that today's students—as a rule—are not well versed in the rudiments of English grammar. Combining these two ideas leads to the organization of this grammar. It begins with two chapters devoted to learning the Hebrew writing system, which for beginning students can be backward, confusing, and nearly incomprehensible. Students become familiar with the historical and modern Israeli pronunciations and the basic rules of Classical Hebrew phonology.

Turning to morphology and syntax, the grammar starts with the personal pronouns, which allows for the introduction of the grammatical concepts of person, gender, and number. By simply learning some of the more famous personal names, students are able to read and form simple nominal sentences. Next the grammar covers the adjectives, which are absolutely regular in the agreement of the morphological gender and number and the underlying physical realities (in contrast to nouns, where one has to deal with forms such as אֲבוֹתָ). Here students learn the reduction rule, which greatly aids and simplifies understanding the morphology of Hebrew substantives.

The grammar next covers the G (or קָל) participles, active and passive, which reinforces the nominal endings learned for the adjectives and also introduces the verb. This grammar uses the comparative Semitic sigla for the verbal stems (e.g., G, N) alongside the traditional

terms (Qal, Niphal—which are also given in Hebrew script, קל, נפעל), so students become familiar with both systems. Next, after the students have become familiar with the concepts of declining words and have thoroughly learned the substantive endings, nouns are introduced. The fact that the morphological gender and number of a noun does not always agree with its syntactic gender and number is much less of a problem now, since the students have already learned the regular nominal endings. The nouns are covered in a systematic and thorough fashion, with chapters devoted to noun states and the segholate nouns (one of the most common types of noun in Classical Hebrew).

After the nouns, the G verbal paradigm is covered. There is a growing consensus that Classical Hebrew should be understood as utilizing aspect, not tense, and this is the approach of this grammar. In lieu of the aspectual terms *perfective* and *imperfective*, however, or the traditional tense designations *perfect* and *imperfect*, the morphologically descriptive terms *suffix* and *prefix conjugations* common in comparative Semitics are used (unless it is the aspect itself that is being discussed). The G suffix conjugation (including the stative verb and weak roots) is covered first, then the G prefix conjugation (also including the stative verb and weak roots) and the *wāw*-retentive. Since the designations *wāw*-consecutive and *wāw*-conversive are misleading or simply wrong in their description, the more accurate and descriptive and hence pedagogically more useful term *wāw*-retentive is used instead.

The order of presentation of the derived stems is designed to progress from the simple to the more complex, hence the H and the Hp are introduced after the N, instead of the D, Dp, and tD, as is typical in traditional grammars. This facilitates the understanding of the relationship between the H and the Hp and that of the D with the Dp and the tD. The weak roots of all the derived stems are treated in a separate chapter, which reinforces the commonalities across the different stems for each category of weakness.

Students translate entire passages from the Hebrew Bible fairly early, working their way through the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1–17), the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9), the birth of Moses (Exod 2:1–10), and the entire book of Ruth. If the class finishes the last two chapters of the grammar, they will also read Ps 1 and Lachish Letter 4, giving them an introduction to Hebrew poetry and inscriptions. For difficult or obscure forms and constructions there are explanatory notes that refer to the standard reference grammars, thus exposing the students to the use of these tools and the wealth of information they contain. The vocabulary lists are presented basically in descending order of frequency so that by the last chapter students have learned all words occurring sixty times or more.

Finally, there are extensive paradigms given at the end of the grammar, including paradigms for nouns. In addition, the grammar offers a Hebrew-to-English glossary (containing all the words given in the vocabulary lists or discussed in the lessons themselves) and an English-to-Hebrew glossary to facilitate the completion of the homework.

COURSE CALENDAR FEATURES

SEMESTER USE

In a fifteen-week semester format, classes will typically cover the basics of the nouns and both conjugations of the G stem in the first semester. My experience has been that giving two exams during the semester (in addition to the final exam) effectively limits classes to covering fourteen chapters in a semester. Thus the second semester begins with the infinitives and volitives of the G stem. In any event, students will learn the substantives and the basic G paradigm (at least for strong roots) in the first semester. Those who take only the first semester will gain enough to at least utilize the lexica and critical commentaries more effectively. By the end of the second semester, students will have read the entire book of Ruth and several other texts from the narrative sections of the Hebrew Bible. They will also have been introduced to Hebrew poetry by reading Ps 1 and to Hebrew inscriptions by reading Lachish Letter 4.

QUARTER USE

The grammar's order of presentation works well with typical ten-week quarters. The noun will be covered thoroughly in the first quarter. In the second quarter students will cover the entirety of the G paradigm, pronominal suffixes, demonstratives, predicators of existence, and relative clauses. In the third quarter, the derived stems will be covered, and students will read through the entire book of Ruth.

This grammar was written with students in mind. Most introductory grammars of Classical Hebrew do not provide enough explanation and do not bring out the remarkably systematic character of the language. These combine to make the learning of the language unnecessarily difficult. It is my hope and prayer that this grammar rectifies these deficiencies and thus enables a new generation of students to view the startling vistas the Hebrew Bible presents only to those who can read the language.