

Breaking Old Paradigms: Further Reflections on Hebrew Pedagogy

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In my previous essay, "Killing a Dead Language: A Case against Emphasizing Vowel Pointing when Teaching Biblical Hebrew,"¹ I argued that an emphasis on Tiberian pointing is counterproductive to the Hebrew pedagogical process. Here I propose that many of the traditional methods and expectations which are found in the bulk of Biblical Hebrew textbooks--old and new--are inefficient, confusing to students, and fraught with trivia. Methodologically these grammars are a mixture of approaches for teaching Latin and other European languages² with a healthy dose of Jewish tradition, applying western linguistic labels which do not fit this ancient Semitic language. Many of these methods and emphases, while well entrenched within academia, have been uncritically accepted as necessary. However, as Rahel Halabe has noted, "there is hardly any research to be found dedicated specifically to ancient language pedagogy."³

A number of authors have noted that most recent Hebrew grammars are basically the same. As Frederick Greenspahn has said,

"For decades, courses in biblical Hebrew relied on a handful of textbooks. . . . Over the past ten years, however, there has been a seemingly endless flood of new books, each claiming to have features that set it apart from the others, whether in terms of content or pedagogic method. Several of these recent books present themselves as being tailored for specific audiences, such as evangelicals or students who already know modern Hebrew. The fact of the matter is that they are all fundamentally alike."⁴

Similarly, a review of a recent Hebrew grammar concludes as follows:

"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 [does little] to justify the need for its own existence."⁵

¹SBL Forum , n.p. [cited May 2007]. Online: <http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=675>

²As Arthur Walker-Jones has said, "Biblical scholarship may need to have a critical discussion about the extent to which a grammar, largely identified with the grammars of Latin, Greek, and the European languages, has been imposed on Hebrew." Arthur Walker-Jones, " New Life in the Biblical Studies Classroom," *SBL Forum* , n.p. [cited July 2005]. Online:<http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=423>

³Rahel Halabe, "Ancient Languages are Still Around, But Do We Really Know How to Teach Them?" *SBL Forum* , n.p. [cited Feb 2008]. Online:<http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=756>

⁴Frederick E. Greenspahn, " Why Hebrew Textbooks Are Different From Those For Other Languages," *SBL Forum* , n.p. [cited July 2005]. Online:<http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=420>

⁵ Max Rogland, "Review of Robert R. Ellis, Learning to Read Biblical Hebrew: An Introductory

REFER TO CHART: HEBREW GRAMMARS

An analysis of a number of old and recent grammars bears out Greenspahn's point that they are "fundamentally alike." If there is any recent trend, it is to put off the introduction of verbs until well into the first semester (Seow, Pratico/Van Pelt, Fuller/Choi, Garret/DeRouchie, Webster). Otherwise the differences are minor.

So should we all just go back to Lambdin and call it a day? I suggest that something far more radical is needed: a new paradigm for introductory Hebrew pedagogy which keeps in mind what should be the ultimate goal: learning to read the Hebrew Bible in the original language and translate it with precision, rather than preparing students to jump through academic hoops, established though they may be. We should reduce the emphasis on lists and charts, take the relative frequency of concepts into consideration, and take other steps to increase efficiency and reduce confusion. In particular, this means:

1. Teach Biblical Hebrew as language, not as lists. Many current grammars take an atomistic approach, giving students list after list of parts of speech, while not even introducing them to the verbless clause until well into the first semester. The result is that students see lists and charts, but not language. The assumption seems to be that students will easily make the transition from seeing the language dissected into the ability to read. But is this assumption warranted? Do they actually make that transition? If we were to hand them piles of Legos, sorted by shape and color, would we expect them to visualize a space shuttle? While it is neither practical nor possible to introduce all aspects of a language at once, the degree to which elements of the language are separated needs to be reconsidered.

One way to accomplish this is by giving students verbless clauses and verbs early. By doing so they are more likely to have a sense of accomplishment because they are actually using the language, rather than merely regurgitating lists. These simple sentences can progressively augmented by other parts of speech.

2. Begin the introduction to Hebrew with simple sentences, without purely relying on exact examples from the Hebrew Bible. It is becoming trendy to only use examples in a grammar which specifically come from the HB, rather than having some simplified sentences to get students started in the language. I agree that it should be our goal to get them into the actual text of the HB as quickly as possible. Nevertheless, there is value in beginning the language with a "Dick and Jane" approach, for we should be teaching them to learn the logic of the language, anticipate what is to come, and reason with the wide range of possibilities. Thus having students begin with sentences like "The king is in the house" or "The man is on the road" can get them started.

As for notion that all exercises and examples in a grammar must utilize only those forms which occur in the HB, I must admit that I find it somewhat amusing and contradictory that the same grammars which exclusively use Biblical examples (or come close to it, e.g. Seow, Pratico/Van Pelt, Webster)) then use קטל as their strong verb--a verb which only occurs 3 times in the HB (Job 13:15; 24:14; Ps 139:19)! Incidentally, I have no objection to the use of קטל, כתב, or boxes (וי□□□י) to represent the strong verb.

3. Begin with high frequency vocabulary, and then move to the less common. This will help students gain an entrance into Biblical texts early in the learning process and reduce the number of words they have to look up. If, by the end of the course, students are taught the bulk of the 50+ words, they will be able to translate most of what they encounter with the aid of a reader's lexicon such as Armstrong, Busby, and Carr.⁶ As for low frequency words, these should be glossed instead of being part of vocabulary lists which are expected to be memorized.⁷

This is another reason to introduce verbs early. If one picks up a vocabulary book such as Mitchel's,⁸ it is quite clear that verbs are among the highest frequency words which occur, and that they populate a significant portion of every high frequency vocabulary list.

SEE CHART: VERB TENSE, PERSON, AND GENDER STATISTICS

3. Instead of traditional verb charts, introduce the third person, tense by tense, and then other persons. Most introductory Hebrew grammars in the last century have extensively relied on verb paradigms. These paradigms place an equal emphasis on all forms, regardless of the frequency of the particular forms. Further, there is the general assumption that requiring the memorization of verb paradigms is the most efficient way to learn the Hebrew verb system.

It is at this point where I truly suggest breaking the old paradigms by avoiding paradigms altogether. Since most verbs in the Hebrew Bible are third person, why not introduce students to the third person, tense by tense? Introduce second and first person verbs later--separately from each other. Not only are students not bombarded by a multitude of forms at once (many of which they will rarely see), but they have the opportunity to get used to Hebrew word order at a more leisurely pace. The following sequence could be used:

Grammar" *RBL* 10 (2008), n.p.

⁶Terry Armstrong, Douglas Busby, Cyril Carr, *A Reader's Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989.

⁷Contra what sometimes occurs in Lambdin's and Seow's grammars.

⁸Larry A. Mitchel, *A Student's Vocabulary of Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984.

- a. he/she, then they (past)
- b. he/she, then they (future)
- c. he/she/they converted to past (imperfect vav consecutive)
- d. he/she/they converted to future (perfect vav consecutive)

At this point they can read many sentences and edited passages from the HB, as well as become accustomed to syntax. I have done this with my students, and it worked quite well. Of course, I doubt that this suggestion will work with any of the existing grammars.

REFER TO CHART: BINYAN AND TENSE STATISTICS

4. Focus on the most common verb types first, and minimize the treatment of uncommon forms. The most common verb type is Qal, followed by Hiphil, Niphal, Piel. *These combined make up 97% of all verbs.* Further, while most grammars present Qal and Piel at different stages and try to make strong distinctions between the two, these *binyanim* can be combined--consonantly they are the same (except for the *mem* prefix on the Piel participle),⁹ and most high frequency verbs prefer either the Qal or the Piel, not a mixture of the two. This can be followed by the Hiphil, and then passives. As for the extremely uncommon verb types¹⁰--which they will not remember anyway--students just need to know that some other forms exist which will have to be looked up.

5. Limit the emphasis on linguistic terminology, and opt for a more pragmatic, descriptive approach, for it is the rare student who will step into a beginning Hebrew class who is also a linguist. For example,

a. Eliminate the emphasis on the terms *first person, second person, and third person*, for students do not readily translate 1, 2, 3, into "I, you, she." Instead, replace them with something like "I/we," "you/y'all"¹¹ (a Southern dialect helps a lot here!), and "he/she/they."

b. Scrap traditional parsing, for it does not readily "translate" into accurate translation. I have seen many students through the years who can parse with great accuracy and then mistranslate the same words. The problem is that the traditional parsing emphasis (for both Hebrew and Greek) adds an unnecessary mental step into the translation process which is both inefficient and gives another opportunity to make a mistake. Instead, employ *practical parsing*, that is, have them give the meaning of the form (e.g., "he will kill y'all ladies" instead of "Qal imperfect 3ms with a 2fp plural pronominal suffix from קטל, to kill").

⁹I introduce participles much later (with adjectives).

¹⁰E.g., the Polel, Polal, Poel, Palal, Hitpolel, and the Pilpel.

Traditional: Hebrew->brain->parsing->brain->English.
 Practical: Hebrew->brain->English.

c. Be careful about what designations are used for verb “tenses,” and try to be more descriptive. If a student has had a language such as Greek or French, terms like “perfect” and “imperfect” are misleading and confusing, for these terms, as applied to Hebrew, mean something quite different. On the other hand, terms like “qatal” and “yiqtol” are themselves in need of a descriptive translation. *Past* and *future*, while mildly imprecise, nevertheless make sense to students. Precision can be brought into bear later.

6. Do not use English infinitives to define Hebrew verbs. If the lexical form is the 3ms, then give “kill” or “he killed” for the root form (e.g., of קטל), not “to kill.” The problem with using English infinitives is that many students think it is legitimate to translate a 3ms as an infinitive.¹²

8. Even if my “pointless” approach is not accepted,¹³ **reduce the emphasis on pointing, vowel rules, the dagesh, and accents.** A common misconception is that most translation confusion is because students make vowel rule errors. However, I find that those who learn pointing and those who do not learn pointing typically make the same errors in intermediate and advanced courses, and these errors mainly concern the consonantal text. Use pointing to help students pronounce the words, and abandon the notion that elementary students should be able to *replicate* Tiberian logic.

9. What about immersion or conversational methods? As should be evident by now, I share the growing frustration with the typical approach to Hebrew, an approach dominated by the available textbooks. The main alternatives with which I am acquainted are either *immersion* or *conversational* approaches.

a. Immersion. As for a pure immersion method, it runs the risk of promoting imprecise translation. My experience with immersion students is that they can only get the basic gist, if that. On the other hand, having students read and translate a lot of Biblical Hebrew, along with a systematic explanation of grammar and syntax, helps them to internalize the language.

b. Conversational. I have a few reservations about a conversational approach to Biblical Hebrew which I will enumerate below:

First, while undoubtedly conversational Hebrew during ancient times was

¹¹Or whatever version of the 2nd person plural works in your region.

¹²Some grammars already avoid English infinitives for verb definitions.

primarily 1st and 2nd person (as with most languages), the HB is *literature*, and as with much literature in most languages, most of what occurs is third person-- first and second person verbs, compared to third person ones, are far less common in the HB.

Second, unlike conversational language, the bulk of the HB uses some type of a past tense, rather than an even distribution of past, present, and future tenses. A conversational method is unlikely to have past tense narration as its emphasis, and thus, tense-wise, will be an improperly balanced entrance into the Biblical text.

Third, spoken language approaches assume that the auditory significantly aids the understanding of a language. Whether or not this is true when teaching people to read a dead language is debatable. In fact, I find that many who focus on auditory aspects of Hebrew commonly confuse words which sound the same but are spelled differently. This is especially true with words which have *aleph/ayin*, *tet/tav*, *samech/seen*, and *kaph/qoph*.

Thus while a conversational approach is likely to draw students into the language more than traditional approaches, it is also likely to be inefficient when it comes to helping students handle large portions of the Biblical text. As Halabe has noted, not all modern language methods are appropriate for teaching an ancient language.¹⁴

In conclusion, rethinking our paradigms so that the most common elements of the language are emphasized and taught early will reduce confusion and make a greater portion of the Hebrew Bible accessible to our students at an earlier stage than traditional approaches. In addition, placing an emphasis on accurate translation into English instead of on traditional technical terminology will more efficiently help students to obtain the skills which we should be inculcating: reading comprehension and translation precision. The result could be that students will see Hebrew as language, not endless disconnected lists, and that this can in turn help dispel the notion that Biblical Hebrew is an inherently difficult language.

¹³See Griffin, "Killing a Dead Language."

¹⁴Rahel Halabe, "Ancient Languages are Still Around, But Do We Really Know How to Teach Them?" SBL Forum , n.p. [cited Feb 2008]. Online:<http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=756>