

[MJTM 11 (2009–2010) R1–R3]

BOOK REVIEW

Lee M. Fields. *Hebrew for the Rest of Us: Using Hebrew Tools without Mastering Biblical Hebrew*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008. xiii + 281 pp. Pbk. CDN\$32.49.

There is, of course, a variety of opinion on the appropriateness of tools such as interlinears that appear to give some access to the original Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic texts to those who have not studied the languages. Some believe that the end goal of any study of these languages should be proficiency. They think that those who have not put in the work should not be given a false sense that they are somehow accessing the original. Such people will find little value in this book. I believe, however, that it is quite appropriate to provide whatever tools can be developed to assist believers to gain as deep an understanding of Scripture as their ability and life circumstances allow.

I was very excited to hear about Fields's *Hebrew for the Rest of Us*, as I thought it had the potential to make a valuable contribution to students of the Hebrew Bible who lack the resources or opportunity to learn Hebrew. The book is written to help the reader "move toward a greater independence in OT studies" (ix). Fields seeks to provide an orientation to the Hebrew language, and direct the reader to popular-level tools, so that she or he can understand the English Bible better and be able to use more advanced commentaries and reference works. While readers overview the concepts of Hebrew grammar, there is no intention at all to teach the language itself.

The book is broken down into 21 chapters, divided into six weeks so that it can be used as half of a one-semester course. It is intended to complement William D. Mounce's *Greek for the Rest of Us* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007) used as the first half of the course, or to be part of a more general course on

hermeneutics. The transliteration system and table formats, however, have enough in common with Zondervan's *Basics of Biblical Hebrew* by Gary Pratico and Miles Van Pelt to allow for a smooth transition for students who want to go further.

Week 1 covers the consonants and the history of the Hebrew language, and includes practice drawing the letters. Week 2 covers the vowels and adds a chapter on how we got the Old Testament. The inclusion of chapters on the history of the Hebrew language and the origin of the Old Testament seems to be to allow students time to learn the alphabet and the vowels, which are essential for the rest of the book. No other significant memory work is required. Week 3 looks at the Hebrew root system, and discusses clauses, conjunctions, and prepositions. Week 4 covers nominals, including the article and adjectives. Week 5 covers verbals, overviewing all conjugations and stems, including infinitives and participles. Only concepts are learned, with a selection of strong forms presented for illustration. Week 6 looks at how Hebrew poetry and prose function, as well as how to do a word study, and what resources are available.

On the whole the book achieves its goal admirably. A reader who masters its material will have a decent understanding of Hebrew syntax and be able to follow commentaries that discuss Hebrew grammar. Fields has done a good job of anticipating and teaching the grammatical terms that readers will need in order to read commentaries, grammars, and other secondary sources. For example, Fig. 13.3, "Various Names Used for Hebrew Tense Forms," helps the reader understand the relationships of the terms *qatal*, *qtl*, "suffixed," and "perfect" to each other with reference to conjugation (152). His presentation of complex matters is necessarily simplistic, but he warns the reader of this and his simplifications are comparable to those typical of first-year courses. In fact, perhaps the warnings of oversimplification are more likely to be heeded by his readers than by students who are learning to translate.

The tone of the book stays light and occasionally humorous. Chapter titles and comments throughout the book introduce light humour that occasionally elicits a groan, and helps to keep the book engaging through some very dense and complex material.

The reader is also reminded throughout this book that she or he has not learned the language. This is stated explicitly in the preface, and is a recurring theme as Fields constantly refers to the reader as a “pre-Hebrew student” and clarifies at times what the reader has been shown how to do and what the reader should not assume he or she can do.

Unfortunately, there are some problems with the book. Perhaps the most serious is the overuse of abbreviations. Fields lists three pages of abbreviations (xiv–xvi), including 68 abbreviations for grammatical terms. And this list is not exhaustive, excluding, for instance, D and Dp for Piel and Pual respectively. While each abbreviation is explained when first introduced, the reader can quickly lose track of them, and they become an unnecessary barrier to learning. If Fields is concerned about page length, a better solution may be to more narrowly focus the book and remove some of the material on general study of the Hebrew Bible that is not specifically related to the language. This general material is helpful but is also readily available elsewhere.

The Hebraist will also find Fields’s use of non-Hebrew grammatical categories, especially the list of kinds of “accusative” and “genitive” nouns (118, 121–25) more reminiscent of a Greek grammar. While these discussions may be useful for students who have just completed a similar survey of Greek, and do allow for the discussion of subtleties of form usage, they will more likely hinder both the student coming to Hebrew without prior study of Greek or Latin, and one who goes on to study Hebrew further and finds these categories absent from the discussion.

While the book has made some questionable choices, and could perhaps use another work-over, it definitely has a valuable place in the church. It is quite accessible to motivated students despite a very complex topic. This book will find its place in the church among laypeople who are interested in doing more serious Bible study, as well as those intending to study Hebrew in the future.

James Bowick
McMaster Divinity College