

A Basic Introduction to Biblical Hebrew

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with CD

Jo Ann Hackett

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◀ HOW TO USE THIS BOOK ▶

This textbook is meant as a one-semester or one-term introduction to the basics of Biblical Hebrew. It is divided into 30 lessons in order to fit into 15-week semesters and 10-week terms. Any instructor will find, however, that the last 6 lessons are more challenging than the first 24, so the ideal division into two or three lessons per week will probably never be followed. In the following paragraphs, I explain some of my thinking behind various aspects of this grammar, in the hope that it will make that thinking transparent, to use a timely term.

The boxes and paradigms in this textbook present words from right-to-left, or top-to-bottom and right-to-left, in the hope that using the Hebrew order will help to familiarize students with that aspect of the writing system. In general, anything in boxes with single lines around them is information that is interesting for the student to know but not necessary for learning the language. Information in boxes with double lines around them, however, is something that is essential to the language.

As noted in the book, I have presented verbs in the vocabularies according to the 3ms suffix conjugation, even before the suffix conjugation is introduced. Since this is the way most verbs in Biblical Hebrew are “named” (‘to guard’ is שָׁמַר), I have continued that tradition. The exception is the middle-weak verbs, which are usually “named” according to their infinitives construct (‘to arise’ is קוּם). More controversial is that I have listed the verbal paradigms in the order first-person, second-person, then third-person, unlike the traditional Biblical Hebrew textbook order, which begins with the third-person, since that is in the suffix conjugation the simplest form of the verb. Most of us have learned the verbal paradigms in the traditional way, but I have found that listing pronominal suffixes from first-person to third-person (אֲנִי, אַתָּה, and so on), while listing verbal forms from third-person to first-person, is confusing to many students. This is especially so as modern languages, including English, present the verbs in the order first-person, second-person, third-person, and that is the order students are used to when they first approach Biblical Hebrew.

study, the impossibility of some of my combinations will not affect their learning the usefulness of the system as a whole. Those who know biblical accentuation well will cringe, but the students will know what to do with the most common accent marks when they approach the biblical text.

This leads me to explain another decision: most of the exercises are artificial; they are not generally biblical passages. As my professor Thomas Lambdin once said (and here I am supplying my own examples), if the biblical text has a sentence such as “He struck the cat” and we know the word for “dog,” it does not matter that “He struck the dog” is nowhere in the biblical text. We still know how it would have been said/written. On the other hand, in making up examples of biblical prose, I have risked introducing Hebrew phrases and syntax that never, in fact, existed. I can only say that I hope I have avoided that pitfall.

Thus, not every form for a given “model” verb in a paradigm will be found in Biblical Hebrew. If, however, that form that is not found in the “model” verb is found in another verb, it will usually be provided in the paradigm as part of the “model” verb (with exceptions such as הָנִיחַ in the *hishtaphel*). A blank space in a paradigm indicates that the form is not found in *any* verb of the type that the paradigm represents.

I have always found it useful for students to memorize a few paradigms because their forms are used again and again. The endings of the paradigm of the preposition ךַּ plus pronominal suffixes are almost exactly the same as those of singular nouns with possessive pronominal suffixes, but the ךַּ paradigm is much easier to remember. Likewise, לְ plus pronominal suffixes prepares one for the plural nouns and their possessive pronominal suffixes. Furthermore, learning the entire paradigm of the *qal* strong verb makes recognizing the same forms in other stems, and even in the weak verbs, a much easier task.

This textbook includes a CD with a great deal of pronunciation supplied for the beginning student: of some necessary but unfamiliar English words (for lesson 1); of many of the paradigms; and of all of the vocabulary words. It also includes pronunciation of all the Hebrew-to-English exercises in lessons 1–15 and of the first two exercises in lessons 16–30. Assuming the computer has speakers, the vocabulary words can be heard by passing one’s cursor over the word in the vocabulary list. The phrases and sentences of the exercises can be heard by passing one’s cursor over those phrases and sentences. At first, the reading seems painfully slow—painful for the instructor, but probably not for the student. Gradually the speed of reading is increased. Moreover, many Biblical Hebrew instructors use Genesis 22:1–19 as a sample text to help students learn to read more quickly and correctly, and I have included it on the CD as well. It is a well-known text for most students, and it has

the helpful feature that the consecutive preterite of most of the common Biblical Hebrew verbs are part of the passage. On this textbook's CD, John Huehnergard and I are the readers, except for the recording of Gen 22:1–19 made by Prof. David Levenson of Florida State University. Both Prof. Huehnergard and Prof. Levenson have kindly given me permission to use their voices for this textbook.

Like all language textbook authors, I considered not including answers for the exercises, because too many students simply use the answers given to them without struggling with the exercises first, and then, of course, they are in trouble when they take exams. On the other hand, anyone attempting to use the book outside an organized class will definitely need an answer key. Hendrickson suggested a compromise: the answers to the exercises are included in this package, but they are on the CD rather than in the textbook itself. This at least forces people to go to some trouble to find the answers, and I hope it will promote working on the exercises in the book without access to the answers, then checking the work with the answers on the CD, if one wants to.

It was Allan Emery's idea to number each lesson in Arabic numerals augmented on the left and right with the same numbers in the Hebrew system, which uses Hebrew consonants to represent numbers: *aleph* is "1," *bet* is "2," and so on. This system adds to the distinctive appearance of the beginning of each lesson and painlessly teaches students the look of the Hebrew numbers 1–30. The student will notice that in the traditional Hebrew numbering system "15" is written טו rather than טה, because the latter looks too much like the Tetragrammaton, the name of Israel's god, יהוה. "16" is טז rather than טי for the same reason.

Finally, a second book is in the works that will depend on this basic textbook. It will consist of graded readings of biblical passages, with glosses where necessary, additional vocabulary, and references to this book when something basic might need to be reviewed. I hope instructors and students alike will appreciate the approach and the contents of this basic introduction.

Jo Ann Hackett
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◀ ABBREVIATIONS ▶

1cp	first person common plural (in paradigms)
1cs	first person common singular (in paradigms)
2fp	second person feminine plural (in paradigms)
2fs	second person feminine singular (in paradigms)
2mp	second person masculine plural (in paradigms)
2ms	second person masculine singular (in paradigms)
3cp	third person common plural (in paradigms)
3fp	third person feminine plural (in paradigms)
3fs	third person feminine singular (in paradigms)
3mp	third person masculine plural (in paradigms)
3ms	third person masculine singular (in paradigms)
adj.	adjective
B.C.E.	Before the Common Era
BH	Biblical Hebrew
<i>BHS</i>	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>
ca.	<i>circa</i> , about
C.E.	Common Era
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare
cohort.	cohortative
cons. pret.	consecutive preterite
cs.	construct
def. art.	definite article
dir.	direct
dir. obj.	direct object
du.	dual
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example
esp.	especially
f	feminine (in paradigms)
fem.	feminine
fp	feminine plural (in paradigms)

fs	feminine singular (in paradigms)
I-א	Hebrew letter <i>aleph</i> for first consonant (in a verbal root)
I-G	Hebrew guttural letter for first consonant (in a verbal root)
I-נ	Hebrew letter <i>nun</i> for first consonant (in a verbal root)
I-weak	Hebrew “weak” letter for first consonant (in a verbal root)
II-ו	Hebrew letter <i>vav</i> for the second consonant (in a verbal root)
II-G	Hebrew guttural letter for second consonant (in a verbal root)
II-י	Hebrew letter <i>yod</i> for second consonant (in a verbal root)
II-weak	Hebrew “weak” letter for second consonant (in a verbal root)
III-א	Hebrew letter <i>aleph</i> for third consonant (in a verbal root)
III-G	Hebrew guttural letter for third consonant (in a verbal root)
III-ה	Hebrew letter <i>he</i> for the third consonant (in a verbal root)
III-weak	Hebrew “weak” letter for third consonant (in a verbal root)
III-ת	Hebrew letter <i>tav</i> for the third consonant (in a verbal root)
impv.	imperative
inf. abs.	infinitive absolute
inf. cs.	infinitive construct
juss.	jussive
LBH	Late Biblical Hebrew
LXX	Septuagint
m	masculine (in paradigms)
masc.	masculine
mp	masculine plural (in paradigms)
ms	masculine singular (in paradigms)
MH	Mishnaic Hebrew
MT	Masoretic Text
obj.	object
pref. conj.	prefix conjugation
pl.	plural
ptcp.	participle
SBH	Standard Biblical Hebrew
suff. conj.	suffix conjugation
sf.	suffix
sg.	singular

Biblical references

Gen	Genesis
Exod	Exodus

Lev	Leviticus
Num	Numbers
Deut	Deuteronomy
Josh	Joshua
Judg	Judges
1, 2 Sam	1, 2 Samuel
1, 2 Kgs	1, 2 Kings
P(s)	Psalm(s)
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Hab	Habakkuk
Zeph	Zephaniah

