EXEGETICAL GEMS FROM BIBLICAL HEBREW

A REFRESHING GUIDE
to Grammar and Interpretation

H. H. HARDY II

"This handy volume polishes and exposes the brilliance of the nuggets to be mined in the soil of Biblical Hebrew morphology and grammar. With thirty selected topics and carefully chosen examples, Hardy demonstrates the value of paying close attention to the details of language to discover the precious truths of Scripture. The collection itself is a major gemstone. I regret that I did not possess this treasure five decades ago, when I was learning Hebrew, and that it was not previously available to all my Hebrew students."

—**Daniel I. Block**, Wheaton College

"Many theological students spend hours laboring to learn the grammar of Biblical Hebrew. Although many excellent grammars are available, few works help students take the next step and see the exegetical payoff from studying the Old Testament in Hebrew. Hardy's helpful resource now addresses this problem. With well-chosen examples from the biblical text, the author leads students through key areas of grammar, lexica, and syntax. This book provides an important bridge to help students move from a knowledge of grammar to informed exegesis of the Hebrew text."

—**David Firth**, Trinity College, Bristol

"Truly a 'refreshing guide' to Hebrew grammar and Old Testament interpretation! Hardy's mastery of the biblical languages is matched with clear explanations and great exegetical examples. He writes with the skill of a scholar, the seasoning of a teacher, and the heart of a shepherd who cares deeply about biblical faithfulness. This book will motivate students to persevere in Hebrew study, and it will show them how to apply the concepts they are learning. I am delighted to have such a volume to use in the classroom."

—**Jason S. DeRouchie**, Bethlehem College and Seminary

"Hardy leverages his considerable knowledge of Biblical Hebrew to demonstrate the exegetical payoff from learning the language. Each chapter concisely introduces a key topic related to Biblical Hebrew and then illustrates how that topic relates to the interpretation of a particular passage. This is an ideal resource for newer students and

for those who want to dust off their Hebrew skills through practical application."

<div align="right">

—**Nicholas J. Reid**, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

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"Eve's temptation, Abraham's ram, Leah's eyes, Aaron's goats, David's heart, the Shunammite woman's son, Zedekiah's danger—*Exegetical Gems from Biblical Hebrew* zeros in on exegetical questions arising from specific biblical verses. Hardy draws on his expertise in ancient Near Eastern languages and cultures, skillfully walking us through grammatical topics, strengthening our grasp of Hebrew, and proposing helpful solutions to interpretive dilemmas. This book will be valuable to students, lecturers, and anyone wishing to revive their Hebrew. I look forward to using this material with my students."

<div align="right">

—**Jill Firth**, Ridley College, Melbourne

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To Peter J. Gentry and Daniel I. Block

המבינין בראת האלהים

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This book is dedicated to my earliest teachers of Hebrew, one of whom is known to quip spiritedly, "One cannot have good theology without good morphology!"

While this aphorism may offer little comfort to a first-year Hebrew student languishing under the heavy weight of weak-verb paradigms, vocabulary cards, and never-ending derived stems, the sentiment is exactly right. Christian theology requires understanding Hebrew (and Greek).

Yahweh uses language to create the world. His words produce reality, and reading the Scriptures forms our understanding of him. No proper knowledge of God can be constructed apart from careful attention to his words. What's more, God uses the standards of human language (i.e., grammar) to communicate his message. Grammar is our interface to engage the Bible and ultimately God. It is the hilt of the double-edged sword of God's Spirit (Heb. 4:12). Without such a handle, the blade cannot be wielded. It returns void.

Believers throughout time witness this truth. Our Lord (himself a dutiful student, see Luke 2:46!) urges his disciples to discern carefully the Scriptures that were written about him (Luke 24:25–27, 44–45). His is a story that does not begin in a Bethlehem crib but at the birth of creation (Gen. 1:1; John 1:1). From beginning to end, his admonition is to inspect studiously the authoritative Word of God to confirm him (John 5:39). Understanding his mission and message as κατὰ τὰς γραφάς (according to the Scriptures) is a constant refrain throughout the Gospels and the NT (Acts 18:28). Even his death and resurrection, we are told, fulfill the longings of the

ancient writers (1 Cor. 15:3–5). The Bereans took that call seriously, searching daily the depths of the Scriptures and believing as a result (Acts 17:11–12). Paul argues for the primacy of these Scriptures (Acts 17:2; Rom. 16:25–27). He exegetes the message of the Messiah from the words of the prophets and Moses (Acts 26:22–24) and even asks for τὰ βιβλία (the scrolls) while he awaited execution (2 Tim. 4:13).[1] Expounding the images and likenesses evidenced in the Law and the Prophets, Ephrem brings together the revelation of the mysteries of the Messiah as human and divine.

> The teachers were ashamed that they grieved the Son,
> For, truly the Law carries all likenesses [ܕܡܘܬܐ] of Him,
> And likewise, the Prophets, as servants, carry
> the images [ܨܘܪܐ] of the Messiah who rules everything.
> Nature and the Scripture together carry
> the mysteries [ܪܐܙܝ] of his humanity and of his deity.[2]

Ephrem claims that these mysterious truths are manifest through careful attention to the Scriptures.

To this end, Martin Luther admonishes his pupils to engage the languages. "Young divines ought to study Hebrew" (*Tabletalk* §425). Hebrew is, according to Luther, the originating spring from which all theology flows, and "no one can really understand the Scriptures without it."[3] Heinrich Bitzer cautions of the danger in not taking this task seriously in his book *Light on the Path*: "The more a theologian detaches himself from the basic Hebrew and Greek text of Holy

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1. From the confines of his own cell awaiting execution, English Bible translator William Tyndale echoed Paul's request in a letter dated 1535: "But above all, I beg and entreat your clemency earnestly to intercede with the lord commissary, that he would deign to allow me the use of my Hebrew Bible, Hebrew Grammar, and Hebrew Lexicon, and that I may employ my time with that study." Anne M. O'Donnell and Jared Wicks, eds., *An Answere vnto Sir Thomas Mores Dialoge*, vol. 3 of *The Independent Works of William Tyndale* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 308.

2. This is my own translation of Ephrem, *Hymns on the Unleavened Bread*, 4.22–24. The standard edition is Edmund Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Paschahymnen (De azymis, de crucifixione, de resurrectione)*, CSCO 248–49 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1964).

3. Quoted in Pinchas E. Lapide, *Hebrew in the Church: The Foundations of Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, trans. Erroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 4.

Scripture, the more he detaches himself from the source of real theology!"[4]

Why This Book?

In my more than two decades of teaching, one student question seems to be a near universal truism: *How will this material ever be helpful?* There are at least two sides to this inquiry. First, such a sentiment often is expressed at a point of frustration. The wise response requires encouragement: *hard work pays off!* Second, this question could be expressed out of a genuine interest in the application of what is typically an abstract concept. Like learning about mathematical ratios, a student may see the usefulness of the concept only when required to reduce the size of a cookie recipe. Grammar is as theoretical as algebra, physics, or chemistry. The actual referent can easily get lost in its conceptualization, but it is also tremendously applicable. The answer to this aspect of the student question entails providing real, meaningful examples of abstract concepts. The finest teachers inspire students to maximize their aptitudes beyond what they might consider their own capacity to learn. And they are prepared to encourage students with refreshing applications before delving back into reviewing Hebrew reduction patterns, comparing pronominal suffixes, and memorizing verb paradigms.

The book's subtitle, *A Refreshing Guide to Grammar and Interpretation*, hints at exactly this approach. What if instead of learning grammar as only a list of abstract concepts, it was possible to apply it in a more refreshing way? Could studying grammar be encouraging? Is it possible to engage the abstract concepts of grammar with concrete examples as motivation? This book is an attempt at doing just that. The aim is to wrestle with key interpretive questions in specific passages and arrive at exegetically informed answers. It is intended to serve as a guide. The end is not merely to arrive at a kind of linguistic nirvana where the student has memorized every

4. Heinrich Bitzer, ed., *Light on the Path: Daily Scripture Readings in Hebrew and Greek* (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 10. Quoted in John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville: B&H, 2002), 81–82.

grammatical category or rule. But this guide provides grammatical signposts along the textual landscape in search of interpretive treasure or, one might say, "exegetical gems."

How to Use This Volume

Each of the "gems" (i.e., chapters) covers one aspect of Hebrew grammar pertinent to the interpretation of a particular verse of the Hebrew Bible. The book follows the order of most second-year Hebrew syntax and exegesis courses. It begins with issues of textual criticism and lexical analysis. Then it moves to the essential elements of Hebrew grammar: nouns, adjectives, verbs, particles, and clause structure. The chapters reference each other where the material overlaps; otherwise they are independent and may be read in any order.

The format of each chapter consists of (1) introduction, (2) overview, (3) interpretation, and (4) further reading. The introduction presents an exegetical question involving a grammatical topic from a particular text. The overview provides a brief review of the relevant issue of Hebrew grammar. It seeks to outline the information needed to answer the exegetical question raised in the passage. The interpretation section applies the grammatical overview to the verse and offers a solution to the question raised in the introduction. Each chapter concludes with a list of relevant resources, which provide additional opinions and insights without trying to be exhaustive.

Who Can Benefit from This Book?

I hope this book can benefit a variety of readers in various contexts.

1. *College and seminary students*. This book is intended to benefit three types of students. For first-year Hebrew students, this book helps connect the grammatical concepts you are learning to practical issues of exegesis. It supplements your beginning grammar. For second-year Hebrew students, this book provides an accessible guide to learning more advanced grammatical and syntactical concepts. It focuses on connecting these somewhat

abstract concepts to exegesis. For more advanced students, this book summarizes elementary and advanced grammar without parroting a reference grammar. It serves as a practiced guide for letting proper grammatical analysis drive interpretation.

2. *Former Hebrew students*. Most students spend 300–500 hours in their first year of studying Hebrew. That is a lot of time! It's as much as a dozen forty-hour work weeks. This immense effort is motivated by an interest in engaging the original language of Scripture. Further, you were encouraged along the way by fellow learners, instructors, assignments, and grades. Many of us excel in this environment, but our motivation can fade quickly without it. Demanding schedules and other activities crowd out continued learning. Ultimately, discouragement leaves many of us content with our static and decreasing ability to read Hebrew. This book seeks to enliven your interest once again. The interpretation-oriented presentation is intended to add a fresh and practical outlook on reviewing grammar. The hope is to get you back to reading and loving God's Word. It is designed as a keen refresher of the most important aspects of grammar—a quick charge for a depleted Hebrew battery.

3. *Hebrew instructors*. For teachers, this book may be best used as a supplement to your current classes. Asking the students to read one chapter per class or week can transform their desire to learn Hebrew grammar. You can align the topics with your current schedule or require reading it in full as a secondary grammar review. Even if you cannot assign this text, please consider using the examples as a way of motivating your Hebrew students and demonstrating the relevance of language learning for interpretation.

Acknowledgments

This volume is a shared venue of so many people in my life. Ben Merkle deserves at least half the credit for coming up with the concept and has been a constant encouragement along the way. He has written

the companion volume, *Exegetical Gems from Biblical Greek*.[5] Bryan Dyer, of Baker Publishing Group, was a keen and enthusiastic supporter of this project from the beginning, providing helpful feedback and suggestions. Multiple people provided extensive comments on drafts, including Graham Michael, Matthew McAffee, Brian Gault, John Meade, and (Mrs.) Billie Goodenough. The community at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary continues to inspire my personal and professional life. Finally, this volume would not have been completed without the kindness, patience, and support of my dearest wife, Amy. I am immensely grateful to each of you.

רָחוֹק מֵרְשָׁעִים יְשׁוּעָה כִּי־חֻקֶּיךָ לֹא דָרָשׁוּ׃

Deliverance is far away from the wicked
for they do not study your decrees. (Ps. 119:155)

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5. Benjamin L. Merkle, *Exegetical Gems from Biblical Greek: A Refreshing Guide to Grammar and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).

1

HEBREW LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Ezekiel 9:4

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלָו עֲבֹר בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר בְּתוֹךְ יְרוּשָׁלֶם וְהִתְוִיתָ תָּו עַל־
מִצְחוֹת הָאֲנָשִׁים הַנֶּאֱנָחִים וְהַנֶּאֱנָקִים עַל כָּל־הַתּוֹעֵבוֹת הַנַּעֲשׂוֹת
בְּתוֹכָהּ׃

Introduction

The challenge for the exegete and translator of the Hebrew Bible is to understand and communicate ideas from ancient literatures and cultures that are often vastly different than their own. To bridge this gap, interpreters must understand Hebrew grammar, that is, the shared linguistic standards of the ancient communities. Other aspects of communication must also be spanned in order to interpret the message of the OT. The exegetical task incorporates comparative studies of literature, archaeology, history, geography, anthropology, and language. Last, exegetes must consider how best to communicate the literature of a nonnative people into their own linguistic and cultural context.

A prime example of the multifaceted interpretive challenges is found in the oracle concerning the judgment of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 8–11. Prior to Yahweh's departure from the temple, he commands a linen-clad man with a writing case to designate all those distressed by the abominations of Israel (Ezek. 9:1–11). These individuals alone would be saved from the impending slaughter. The scribe is instructed וְהִתְוִיתָ תָּו עַל־מִצְחוֹת, which all major English translations render as "put a mark on the foreheads" (Ezek. 9:4). Before he finishes his task, the executioners begin their gruesome work. The details of what this scribe wrote are not entirely clear. What was the sign? How was it marked? To explore these particulars, we must account for the vast separation of time, location, and culture between the context of ancient Israel and our contemporary moment.

Overview of Hebrew Language and Literature

Let us begin to investigate these questions by considering some of the distinctive elements of Hebrew language and literature. Most English speakers communicate through electronic messages using Latin characters and emojis (text messages, emails, websites, ebooks), whereas ancient Hebrew speakers communicated primarily through spoken words in person or, at times, through messengers. Only rarely were scrolls (or other surfaces) written on using a linear Canaanite script and read aloud by professional scribes. The literature contained in the Bible is a collection of many different works written over a period of hundreds of years in Hebrew and to a lesser degree Aramaic. Our access to this material comes through written texts that were preserved for generations after they were composed.

During the time of composition and preservation, Hebrew language and writing went through significant changes. Although the genealogical ancestry of Israel was traced from the Aramaeans (Deut. 26:5) and the Amorites (Ezek. 16:3), Israel adopted a dialect similar to their neighbors (see Isa. 19:18). Biblical Hebrew is grouped with other Semitic languages and subcategorized as a Canaanite language. The Canaanite family includes Phoenician, Moabite, Ammonite, and Edomite. Speakers of these languages lived in the land of Canaan and interacted with Hebrew speakers (Num. 13:29; Deut. 1:7).

Biblical Hebrew is commonly separated into three temporal stages—Early Biblical Hebrew, Standard Biblical Hebrew, and Late Biblical Hebrew. These phases are roughly contemporaneous with the premonarchy, the Israelite/Judahite monarchies, and the postmonarchy periods. But they should be considered as overlapping rather than consecutive stages.[1] This time frame provides for some of the differences between the later period works, like Esther or Chronicles, and the earlier works, such as the Song of Deborah. Various regional dialects of Hebrew are also reflected in the biblical material.[2] The dialects of the northern Israelites and Judeans diverged because of their cultural and political separation, with the former assimilating somewhat to Phoenician.[3] And a distinct Ephraimite dialect is even mentioned in Judges 12! Just as with any living language, linguistic variation occurs through time, particularly when populations interact closely, split apart, or are segregated.

Written Hebrew changed constantly. Hebrew speakers initially adopted their writing system from other Canaanite speakers. The linear script was invented more than a millennium before its use in the Hebrew monarchy. It was principally adapted to inscribe scrolls and papyrus but could be engraved or inked on a number of other harder mediums, such as stone, clay, and precious materials.[4] The twenty-two characters of the alphabet were polyphonic; that is, each symbol could represent multiple sounds. The script accounted primarily for consonantal values, but some vowels were differentiated by the time of the earliest known Hebrew inscriptions.[5] Following the Babylonian exile, a new script

1. Ian Young and Robert Rezetko, with Martin Ehrensvärd, *Linguistic Dating of Biblical Texts*, 2 vols. (London: Equinox, 2008). For various responses, see Cynthia Miller-Naudé and Ziony Zevit, eds., *Diachrony in Biblical Hebrew*, LSAWS 8 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012).

2. Gary Rendsburg, *Diglossia in Ancient Hebrew*, American Oriental Series 72 (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1990).

3. Chris A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age*, SBL Archaeology and Biblical Studies 11 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010).

4. For a discussion of the medium of writing in ancient contexts, see H. H. Hardy II, "Semitic Inscriptions," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al., rev. ed. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016).

5. David Noel Freedman, A. Dean Forbes, and Francis I. Andersen, *Studies in Hebrew and Aramaic Orthography*, Biblical and Judaic Studies 2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992).

based on Aramaic was implemented. This shift occurred in conjunction with the increasing prominence of Aramaic as an international language of correspondence in the Persian period and later. While some communities continued using the older Hebrew writing, the Aramaic square script was authorized by the rabbis as the only means of copying the Hebrew Bible.[6] Along with this script change, scribes increased the number and frequency of their use of *matres lectionis*, the designation of vowels using the letters *heh*, *waw*, *yod*, and sometimes *alef*. This practice is evidenced in the famous Great Isaiah Scroll found near the site of Khirbet Qumran.[7] Around the middle of the first millennium CE, several vocalization traditions provided a supra- and/or sub-linear system of designating Hebrew vowels more fully. This culminated with the Tiberian tradition, which also employs the elaborate system of cantillation marks seen in most modern editions of the Hebrew Bible.

Interpretation

An awareness of the history of the changes in Hebrew allows for a more thorough examination of Ezekiel 9:4. Yahweh's instructions hinge on the second part of the command. The *hiphil wəqatal* form וְהִתְוִיתָ (see chap. 10, "Verb Conjugations 2") is followed by its cognate object תָּו (*taw*). Most Hebrew dictionaries designate the noun as a generic "sign, mark," but it is likewise the name of the final letter of the alphabet. The denominative verb וְהִתְוִיתָ indicates the writing of the *taw*.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלָו עֲבֹר בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר בְּתוֹךְ יְרוּשָׁלָ͏ִם וְהִתְוִיתָ תָּו עַל־
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בְּתוֹכָהּ׃

Yahweh said to him, "Go throughout the city, Jerusalem, and <u>mark a *taw*</u> on the foreheads of anyone who groans and sighs over all the abominations being done within it." (Ezek. 9:4)

6. Saverio Campanini, "The Quest for the Holiest Alphabet in the Renaissance," in *A Universal Art: Hebrew Grammar across Disciplines and Faiths*, ed. Nadia Vidro et al., Studies in Jewish History and Culture 46 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 196–246.
7. Eugene Ulrich and Peter Flint, eds., *Qumran Cave 1.II: The Isaiah Scrolls: Part 1 and 2*, 2 vols., DJD 32 (Oxford: Clarendon, 2011).

While it is tempting to end the analysis here, a follow-up query is important. Which *taw* is being written? Is it the three-sided character of the Aramaic square script (ת) or the cross-like shape of the old Hebrew script (✗). Since Ezekiel's vision preceded the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, the *taw* would have originally been written in the old Hebrew script.[8] But this solution does not entirely resolve what was intended by this sign. The only other use of the letter name תָּו is in the book of Job. In this context (Job 31:35), the noun is found with the first-person personal pronoun indicating a guarantee or authenticating designation. As such, the intended connotation is closer to that of an authenticating seal than a particular shape. It is a guarantee of what is contained in the missive, like the signature line on a document or email. If this is so, Ezekiel 9:4 may explain an intriguing aspect of the tradition of marking the forehead known from the NT and other Jewish texts from late antiquity.

In the book of Revelation, two contrasting marks indicate those who belong to Yahweh (7:2–3; 9:4; 14:1; 22:4) and those aligned with the beast (13:16–17; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). The origin of the seal has often baffled commentators—in particular, how it connects with the mark in Ezekiel 9:4.[9] If the assessment above is correct, the mark guarantees or identifies the individual as belonging to one side or the other. This idea connects with the notion of writing one's name on one's own possessions. לְיהוה (belonging to Yahweh) is a self-identifying mark of those who have the spirit of Yahweh (Isa. 44:5). It is attached to the hands and between the eyes (Exod. 13:16; Deut. 6:8; 11:18). This identification is similar to the לַמֶּלֶךְ formula uncovered on hundreds of ancient seals from bulla and jar inscriptions.[10] Like a

8. See Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel 1–24*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 307.

9. See, e.g., G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 409–10.

10. Nadav Na'aman, "Hezekiah's Fortified Cities and the LMLK Stamps," in *Ancient Israel and Its Neighbors: Interaction and Counteraction* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 1:153–78. Also see Oded Lipschits, Omer Sergi, and Ido Koch, "Royal Judahite Jar Handles: Reconsidering the Chronology of the *lmlk* Stamp Impressions," *Tel Aviv* 37, no. 1 (2010): 3–32; David Ussishkin, "The Dating of the *lmlk* Storage Jars and Its Implications: Rejoinder to Lipschits, Sergi and Koch," *Tel Aviv* 38, no. 2 (2011): 220–40.

monogram or a logo, Yahweh designates those who are his with his name and the name of the Lamb (Rev. 3:12; 14:1). But those taking the opposing sign stand in opposition to his kingship and mission.

Further Reading

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