H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Rahel Halabe**. *Hinneh: Biblical Hebrew the Practical Way.* Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2011. 3 vols. $75.00, ISBN 978-965-493-606-4; ISBN 978-965-493-608-8; ISBN 978-965-493-610-1.

**Reviewed by** Jennifer Noonan

**Published on** H-Judaic (November, 2012)

**Commissioned by** Jason Kalman

## A New Approach to Teaching Biblical Hebrew

*Hinneh: Biblical Hebrew the Practical Way* by Rahel Halabe is a thorough and creative textbook for first-year students of biblical Hebrew. This introductory grammar comes in three volumes, which are all oriented like Hebrew books (i.e., back-to-front from an English perspective). Halabe has designed the first two volumes as a combined textbook and workbook, including both grammar instruction and student exercises with blanks and charts to fill in. The first volume covers nominal forms and verbal forms through the Qal stem prefix and suffix conjugations, including many weak forms. The shorter, second volume picks up with other verbal forms in the Qal stem (infinitives, imperatives, etc.), followed by the remainder of the verbal stems. Volume 2 covers all of the verbal forms and then all of the weak patterns in each stem before introducing the next stem, thus covering all of the basic grammar of biblical Hebrew. At the end of each of the first two volumes, Halabe includes an answer key to the student exercises.

The third volume is titled "Toolbox" and contains a number of supplementary materials, including parsing charts for the textbook/workbook exercises, the Hebrew letters (consonants and vowels), frequently occurring vocabulary, a glossary of grammatical terms, and paradigm charts for items such as pronouns, prepositions, and numbers. The largest component of the Toolbox and by far the most valuable is the extensive set of verb charts, which provide full paradigms of common verbs. Halabe includes fifty-five different verbs fully parsed for the Qal stem alone.

The text itself typically follows a Grammar-translation model of teaching. One characteristic of this method is a grammar-driven syllabus, as opposed to a task- or function-oriented syllabus. Thus, Halabe includes the easiest grammatical elements, such as nominal clauses, early in the course and the most complex grammatical elements, such as weak verbs in the derived stems, in the last chapters of the second volume. Halabe's text also reflects a Grammar-translation approach to teaching in its typical lesson design. Each lesson includes explicit instruction on a particular grammatical item with examples, followed by translation exercises, the hallmark of the Grammar-translation method. One Grammar-translation element lacking in Halabe's typical lesson is a list of vocabulary words to memorize, although she does include target vocabulary in the Toolbox. As with most grammars for biblical Hebrew, *Biblical Hebrew the Practical Way* lacks pictures and color and any true communicative exercises, although Halabe does introduce a few simple conversations to memorize in the earliest chapters.

Halabe's work has a number of strengths. First, the textbook is very thorough, covering all of the requisite grammar you would expect in a first-year course, with full descriptions of each grammatical pattern and its exceptions. Second, when describing many of the grammatical elements, Halabe uses some of the more typical or traditional names, such as "Qal," "Piel," etc. for the verbal stems. However, for other items, the text incorporates more simple designations that are intended to prevent potential confusion, such as "prefix" or "suffix" forms, "vav past" (also called "vayyiqtol"), and "vav plus suffix form." The glossary of grammatical terms also

serves the student well in this regard.

In addition, this grammar is obviously written with both the teacher and student in mind. Halabe offers a number of tips and suggestions for the teacher, primarily located in the introductory materials in the first volume. Students will also find plenty of resources, including an abundance of paradigms in the Toolbox and complete answer keys in the textbooks for immediate feedback. In addition, the grammar presentations use a number of consciousness-raising techniques, such as bolding and italicizing, to help draw the students' attention to important features. Halabe also incorporates some innovative ideas and study tips, such as a "timeline" to help students understand verbs, suggestions for color-coding as a learning aid, and cloze exercises as a means of incorporating biblical texts early. In Halabe's cloze exercises, the student receives a partially translated verse from the Bible and must fill in a blank with the appropriate English word to complete the translation. Examples and exercises from the first lesson onward include scripture, which is a strong motivator for students and keeps the material relevant.

However, this grammar also has a few drawbacks. First, the text has a limited appeal. While the intended audience for this text is the first-year learner, Halabe seems to have in mind students who have some background in modern Hebrew. Her first lesson includes instruction on how biblical Hebrew is different from modern Hebrew, and the mini-conversations she introduces in the first lessons have a few modern expressions rather than their biblical counterparts. In addition, she assumes prior knowledge of the consonants and vowels and does not include any instruction on these, although the Toolbox includes a chart of both. Finally, her text uses a modern-style font for the Hebrew script, something that may not be as familiar for students of biblical Hebrew who primarily work with the Hebrew block script such as that found in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. Therefore, students with no exposure to modern Hebrew may struggle a bit with this text, especially at first.

In addition, the textbooks/workbooks contain only a limited number of exercises, leaving the teacher and student with few choices when assigning homework or in-class practice. More exercises would provide greater flexibility with the possibility of additional reinforcement, if needed. While Halabe indicates in the introductory materials that she may be able to provide interested teachers with quizzes and tests via e-mail, this limited offer does not go far enough to make up for the lack of student exercises.

Overall, Halabe has added another solid introductory grammar for biblical Hebrew to the many options already available. In addition to its thorough treatment of grammar, her text incorporates some innovative teaching strategies and resources for students. However, while innovative, her text remains rooted in the traditional Grammar-translation approach to teaching language and is limited to students who have had some prior experience with modern Hebrew. This course would work well in a college Judaic studies program for students who have already received instruction in modern Hebrew. The teaching tips would be particularly helpful for newer instructors of the language, although seasoned veterans may also find some creative ideas to aid in their classrooms.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic

**Citation**: Jennifer Noonan. Review of Rahel Halabe, *Hinneh: Biblical Hebrew the Practical Way*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. November, 2012.

**URL**: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35174

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.