A reference grammar of modern Hebrew

By Edna Amir Coffin and Shmuel Bolozky


Reviewed by Craig Soderberg

Anyone who wants a solid reference book for Hebrew grammar would benefit from this book. That would include Hebrew students and Old Testament translators. Coffin and Bolozky, the authors, seem to have extensive experience teaching Hebrew and in publishing both books and articles on Hebrew.

The book is organized as follows: Chapter 1, Preliminary discussion; Chapter 2, Writing and pronunciation; Chapter 3, The verb system; Chapter 4, Verb pattern groups; Chapter 5, The noun system; Chapter 6, Pronouns; Chapter 7, Numerals; Chapter 8, Adjectives; Chapter 9, Adverbs and adverbial expressions; Chapter 10, Particles; Chapter 11, Noun phrases; Chapter 12, Verb phrases; Chapter 13 Modal verbs and expressions; Chapter 14, Clauses and sentences; Chapter 15, Language in context.

I liked the fact that the authors provide numerous examples in illustrating their teaching points. Whenever possible the authors provide Hebrew terminology alongside the English terms to help students benefit more from this textbook. But this was not always the case, as will be mentioned later in this review.

The authors tried to avoid using complex linguistic terms such as those that deal with specific linguistic theories. But the authors were not always successful at avoiding complex linguistic terminology. For example, their chapter on clauses and sentences, Chapter 14, was further broken down as follows: introduction, verbal sentences, nominal sentences, equational sentences, existential sentences, sentences of possession, elliptical sentences, classification of sentences by function, sentence classification by structure, simple sentences, coordinate/compound sentences, complex sentences, complement sentences, attributive sentences, relative clauses, adverbial clauses, conditional sentences, integrated sentences. This chapter structure is okay for linguists but the average Hebrew language learner might benefit more if the chapter was structured in a more user-friendly way. For example, I could not find a section in the book on forming questions in Hebrew. This could be further broken down into questions related to the following types: who, what, when, where, how many, etc.
Also in that chapter (14), only two pages were devoted to subordinate clauses. I would have liked to have seen more details here such as subordinate clauses of time, condition, reason, purpose, extent, concession, means and manner, resemblance, contrast and subordinate clauses without a subordinator. Also the examples that the authors gave on subordinate clauses gave the Hebrew words but did not give the English equivalents. This was unusual since in most of the rest of their book they provided both English and Hebrew equivalents.

The only previous Hebrew reference grammar in English is written by Lewis Glinert. Glinert’s book is an excellent work, but it is expensive, very technical, very heavy on syntax, and often outdated. This new volume is less expensive, less technical, and more current.

Coffin and Bolozky’s book is not a comprehensive grammar with every last detail. For example, it does not go through every verb declension and show how it is used. This requires the user to fill in the gaps. The same is true for prepositions. This may be a problem for those readers that want that level of detail. But I feel this book would still be of great value to the student of Hebrew, from the beginner to the advanced level.

The book does a good job of providing a logical order for presenting the elements of grammar. For example, the book starts by discussing pronunciation and then progresses to discussions of verbs and nouns. The more complex aspects of language (syntax, sentence structure, and language in context) are handled toward the end of the book. The book provides good examples of each component along with variations and exceptions. Pronunciations are aided by English transliterations. There are thorough appendices giving tables of the grammar components.

I was glad to see that the Hebrew sentences on the right side of the page had corresponding English equivalents on the left side of the page and if the authors were emphasizing certain Hebrew words, then the equivalent English words were underlined.

The tables in the back of the book (verb tables, noun tables, particle tables, punctuation tables, plene writing) were helpful but there was no glossary of terms at all in the book. A glossary would have been helpful to define the complex terms that they used in Chapter 14 which were mentioned earlier in this review. There was also no references section referring the reader to other books and articles published about the Hebrew language.

Most of the tables in the appendices were not numbered for identification. I think it would have been more helpful if they were all numbered.

However, overall I would recommend this textbook, since there seems to be no better Hebrew reference grammar which has a better value than this one.