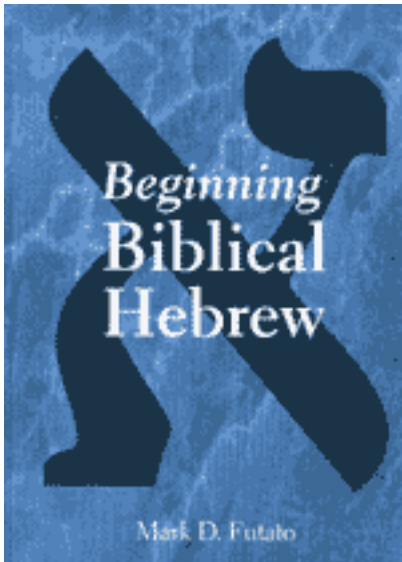


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**Futato, Mark D.**

***Beginning Biblical Hebrew***

Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003. Pp. xii + 351.  
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Steven D. Mason  
University of St. Andrews  
St. Andrews, Fife, Scotland KY16 9AJ

Mark D. Futato's new Hebrew grammar is a simple, thoughtful, and straightforward work that reflects genuine empathy for the beginning Hebrew student. The agenda of the book is to provide the fundamentals of the language unencumbered by information that may fog the road toward basic Hebrew competency.

*Beginning Biblical Hebrew* comprises forty chapters in the body of the book and three appendices at the back. The chapters include a grammar, vocabulary, and practice section within each lesson. The appendices consist of a list of paradigms that a first-year Hebrew student should commit to memory, a list of the vocabulary introduced in the grammar, and answers to practice drills offered in each chapter.

Futato's tenure in the classroom and interface with Hebrew novices prove to be an asset to *Beginning Biblical Hebrew*. The grammar's strength is Futato's keen pedagogical sensitivity reflected at various points in its appearance and presentation of the language. Futato chooses to impart his expertise in a larger book using larger type, even in the English sections of the book. This provides a positive and welcoming effect for the beginner and helps prevent the student from becoming overwhelmed with the data on a page. His student-centered approach is detected no later than in the introduction of the Hebrew alphabet, where the characters are displayed not only in typed form but also in handwritten style with detailed instructions as to how to fashion the letters. He also uses

unique ways of getting the student to adjust to reading right to left and uniquely capitalizes upon the student's familiarity with English to grow comfortable in the pronunciation of foreign letters and words.

Futato's goals and objectives listed in the introduction demonstrate a realistic vision for the beginning student's anticipated abilities after working through the book. The student's expectation is set at the right place in order to avoid frustration and disappointment. For example, the goal for mastery of vocabulary is set at four hundred words. This gives the student a handsome yet attainable target for mastery. He then connects the vocabulary presented in the book to Raymond B. Dillard's *Hebrew Vocabulary Cards* (Springfield, Ohio: Visual Education Association, 1981), which provides a convenient link to a helpful memory aid.

Unlike many grammars, which often pack too much information within a single chapter for the average beginner, Futato introduces the language in compact and wieldy units. The chapters are short and manageable, naturally pacing the student by staging smaller doses of material. This takes the pressure off instructors, who often have to cut out portions of chapters and break the original continuity of the lesson in order to reduce exposure to new ideas. The practice section is strategically divided into four headings entitled, "Focusing on New Material," "Reviewing Previous Lessons," "Putting It All Together," and "Reading Your Hebrew Bible." Separating the information into these respective segments keeps the mounting material in perspective and reminds the student of his or her current position in the big picture of learning the language. Futato also challenges the student with biblical text from the outset of the exercises yet shows wisdom in taking the liberty to slightly modify the sentences to maintain an appropriate level of reading.

The grammar effectively uses color and shading in the lessons, charts, vocabulary, and practical exercises to emphasize key points of instruction. For instance, blue shading of words in the vocabulary lists is used to highlight when stress should fall on syllables other than the ultima. This helps the student learn proper pronunciation of common words through an effective visual aid. He also offers clever ways for the student to check one's own progress in translation and other exercises by presenting questions and answers in uneven chart form. These constructions enable the student to proceed through the drill by easily covering the answers provided on one side of the chart and then swiftly check one's work before continuing through the list. These qualities of the grammar contribute to the degree of independence with which a student may work through the material.

Futato's considerations in teaching Hebrew demonstrate his care for establishing a strong foundation in handling the fundamentals of the language and a genuine interest in

growing the confidence of the beginning student. However, in the attempt to keep the grammar free of unnecessary information for the beginning Hebrew student, some inevitable exclusions may be observed in the grammar. For example, the grammar does not provide its reader any specific help in dealing with a standard Hebrew lexicon. Yet most dictionaries and other Hebrew tools are a bit intimidating for the beginning student. Along that line, there is no orientation to handling the Hebrew Bible, which can also be a daunting task for the beginner. The book also lacks a discussion of reading markers, accents, and pausal forms within the Hebrew text. Even a cursory overture to these aspects of Hebrew study would be helpful.

A related liability of the grammar is that it frequently avoids using technical language. The problem with this is that the student may become confused or inhibited while accessing other grammars, dictionaries, and Hebrew tools, especially the older ones, that employ such terms. A simple list of “synonyms” at the back of the grammar could easily alleviate this potential problem.

Other notable absences include no topical or scriptural index in back of the book to aid in using the grammar as a reference tool. Nor is there a compact listing of abbreviations or other devices used in the book. This information is in the book but only presented inductively. Futato also fails to provide a rationale for which vocabulary terms are chosen to be included in the grammar (other than connecting it to Dillard’s cards).

*Beginning Biblical Hebrew* may need to be supplemented in a few areas to cover all that the beginning Hebrew student may encounter as he or she enters the world of Hebrew language study. Nonetheless, this work does provide in a most exemplary way everything *essential* for a quality introductory Hebrew grammar. That is why the strengths of Futato’s grammar far outweigh any weaknesses. He offers everything a Hebrew student needs to form a substantial foundation for further Hebrew study while being user-friendly, creative, strategic, and judicious. This combination makes *Beginning Biblical Hebrew* one of the best Hebrew grammars available to the student and instructor today. Futato’s work is commendable and deserves the attention of those who are serious about teaching or learning biblical Hebrew.