

# Book Review: *A Book-by-Book Guide to Biblical Hebrew Vocabulary*

## Dustin Burlet

Osborne, William R. and Russell L. Meek. 2020. *A Book-by-Book Guide to Biblical Hebrew Vocabulary*. Peabody: Hendrickson. Paperback. vi + 194 pp. CDN \$26.95 (approx. R415). USD \$19.95 (approx. R307). ISBN: 978-1-68307-086-3.

Typically, upon successful completion of their first year of Hebrew studies, many individuals (rightly) believe that they have a relatively firm grasp on the basics of the language, as a whole. At the same time, while many students will, undoubtedly, know a “significant portion of the Hebrew lexicon” (usually words that occur 100 times or more in frequency) they will, most likely, find themselves “awash in unfamiliar vocabulary” upon turning to the Prophets, many sections of Hebrew poetry, or even an unfamiliar narrative passage (2020, 1). William R. Osborne and Russell L. Meek, authors of *A Book-by-Book Guide to Biblical Hebrew Vocabulary*, state:

We created this volume to help students who have studied Hebrew for at least one year transition effectively toward reading the individual books of the Hebrew Bible by increasing their knowledge of the less frequently occurring words specific to each book. We do this by providing users with an alternative method of moving beyond the vocabulary they acquired in a first-year course.... The book-specific

nature of the vocabulary lists found in this volume allow teachers and students—as well as those who are no longer engaged in formal study of the language—to focus their time and energy on whatever biblical book they currently wish to read, study, or teach. (p. 1)

Incontrovertibly, Osborne and Meek succeed in reaching their intended goal(s) for this text. The question remains, how, specifically, this book differs from the plethora of other volumes that also seek to provide guidance with respect to Hebrew vocabulary acquisition and retention.

To be clear, while *A Book-by-Book Guide to Biblical Hebrew Vocabulary* does begin with a frequency-based list of the 418 words that occur more than 100 times in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (for easy review, these four hundred eighteen words are also divided into twenty-one sub-lists of twenty words each, except for the last list, which contains only eighteen words), each subsequent chapter is devoted to the vocabulary of a single biblical book. Exceptions to this include the twelve so-called Minor Prophets (i.e., the Book of the Twelve), which are grouped together into one chapter, and also Samuel, Kings, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles, which are each also treated as being just one book. For each book, except a handful of the shorter ones, namely the five Megillot (see below), fifteen lists of twenty words each are included. Osborne and Meek clarify:

To further facilitate ease in learning the vocabulary, we have used horizontal lines to subdivide each twenty-word list into three roughly equal sections. This allows readers to focus their attention on a smaller portion of a list at a given time, if they wish. Each chapter’s fifteen book-specific lists present, in order of descending frequency, the 300 words that occur most frequently in the biblical book in question beyond the words that are included in our volume’s initial chapter. (p. 2)

With respect to the *Megillot*, fewer than fifteen lists were necessary due to the smaller amount of vocabulary that appears in each of the books. Thus, “Lamentations and Ecclesiastes have fourteen lists, Song of Songs has twelve, Esther has nine, and Ruth has five” (p. 2). A few more clarifying comments are in order with respect to frequencies. Osborne and Meek maintain:

For the longest biblical books, the lowest-frequency words presented in this volume occur three times in the books in question. For shorter books, the lowest frequency words presented in this volume occur either two times or one time in the biblical book in question. For books of this kind, however, we have only included in our lists words that *also* occur between three and 100 times in the Hebrew Bible as a whole. In other words, no words that occur either two times or one time in the Bible *as a whole* are found in this volume. We have excluded such words from our lists for two reasons: First, the meanings of rare words (such as *hapax legomena*) are sometimes unsure or even unknown. Second, for words that occur only once or twice in the Bible, as a whole, we believe that it is most efficient not to memorize them in the context of a vocabulary list but rather to learn them by encountering them in the passages in which they occur. (p. 2, italics original)

The glosses that are provided within *A Book-by-Book Guide to Biblical Hebrew Vocabulary* depend highly on the words’ contextual uses (book-by-book). For verbs, the authors state:

We have listed glosses for *all* the stems in which a given root appears in the biblical book under study, including distinct glosses for the Qal Passive, if relevant. (In the volume’s initial list of words...we have only

listed glosses for stems in which a given root appears *ten times or more*.) We have treated the Qal Passive as its own category for the reader’s convenience, since, while the meaning a root has in the Qal Passive can often be easily intuited from the root’s active meaning in the Qal, this is not always the case. (p. 2, italics original)

There is much to commend in this slim volume. Linguistically speaking, Osborne and Meeks ably distinguish between each of the different Hebrew stems with respect to their sense and meaning (Qal, Niphal, Piel, Pual, Hiphil, Hophal, Hithpael, etc.). In this way, their analysis is free from many of the all-too-common exegetical and “word-study” fallacies (such as the “root fallacy” or “basic meaning fallacy”) that often plague various language studies.

The authors also judiciously note that by providing “book-specific glosses” they not only help readers develop the ability to read a given biblical book “more quickly and proficiently, they will also help students learn more about the semantic ranges of words for which they may have memorized only a basic gloss in their first year of study” (p. 2).

Alongside this, the authors utilize and leverage many of the standard lexicons, including BDB, HALOT, and Cline’s *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield, 1993–2016). While some may quibble at the absence of some other works, such as TWOT, NIDOTTE, TLOT, TDOT, or Cline’s *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew Revised* (Sheffield, 2018–), it is most likely that their inclusion would have made only the most marginal of differences.

Typographically speaking, *A Book-by-Book Guide to Biblical Hebrew* is exceptionally well done. There is a good use of white space and ample margins. The numerous “breaks” in the lists themselves make for easy tracking. A small detail that also helps with these things is the fact that all glosses for non-verbs are provided in italics (NB: the Hebrew font for all

non-verbs is pointed). The effective use of shading and bold face type is also much appreciated. Lastly, the Hebrew font itself is well sized (all accents and vowels are clear) and quite pleasing to the eye.

That said, it is an overstatement to say that “this tool is markedly superior to competing vocabulary textbooks” (back cover, endorsement by Duane Garrett). Landes’s *Building Your Biblical Hebrew Vocabulary: Learning Words by Frequency and Cognate*, 2nd ed (SBL 2001) has proven its worth over time and is the only resource I am familiar with that includes a helpful morphological mini-grammar. Mitchel’s *A Student’s Vocabulary for Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic*, 2nd ed. (Zondervan, 2017) has the added bonus of including Aramaic (and a pronunciation guide!) while only Pleins and Homrighausen’s *Biblical Hebrew Vocabulary by Conceptual Categories* (Zondervan, 2017) organizes the nouns of biblical Hebrew into logical categories of related words, thus allowing more mental space for making clearer connections between words. The extreme thoroughness that is provided with Van Pelt and Pratico’s *The Vocabulary Guide to Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic*, 2nd ed. (Zondervan, 2019) is also easy to appreciate and, lastly, only Van Pelt and Pratico’s *Biblical Hebrew Vocabulary in Context: Building Competency with Words Occurring 50 Times or More* (Zondervan 2019) allows readers to improve their sight-reading of biblical Hebrew without a BHS/BHQ at hand.

In brief, we suffer from an embarrassment of riches and each of the above texts has its own unique, niche strengths and shortcomings. It is, therefore, more reasonable to say:

Portions of the Old Testament contain highly specialized and concentrated vocabulary at times unique to a particular book,

including technical terms that may be genre-specific.... Osborne and Meek have provided a helpful way to immerse oneself in the literature of the Hebrew Bible, without getting sidetracked or distracted by such technical vocabulary. (back cover, endorsement by Bill T. Arnold)

To conclude, *A Book-by-Book Guide to Biblical Hebrew Vocabulary* is a most welcome new addition to the ever-growing library of Hebrew language study vocabulary books. Its unique format makes it especially amicable to self-study, while many educators will also appreciate the volume’s unique book-by-book approach for teaching exegesis courses.

To this end, Osborne and Meek state:

If a professor decides to teach an exegesis course on Genesis [for example], this book immediately provides all of the vocabulary lists that his or her students would need for their semester-long exploration of that biblical book. The fifteen twenty-word lists can be easily accommodated into a semester of study, and professors can rest assured that their students will not simply be learning words that occur frequently in the Hebrew Bible as a whole but rather those they will encounter most frequently in the book being studied. It is therefore our hope that this volume will serve both students and professors, as well as others who wish to develop their Hebrew skills, as an easy and effective way to increase their knowledge of Hebrew vocabulary. (p. 3)

Its primary users are likely beginner/intermediate Hebrew students in Bible colleges, seminaries, Christian university colleges, and, one hopes, the studious pastor. Highly recommended!

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