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Review of Bekins, P. (2020) Inscriptions from the world of the Bible: a reader and introduction to Old Northwest Semitic
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Citation

Staps, C. (2021). Review of Bekins, P. (2020) Inscriptions from the world of the Bible: a reader and introduction to Old Northwest Semitic. *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, 78(5-6), 723-726. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3641664>

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3641664>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

SEMITISCH

BEKINS, P. — *Inscriptions from the World of the Bible. A Reader and Introduction to Old Northwest Semitic.* Hendrickson and Rose Publishers, Peabody, 2020. (26 cm, XXIII, 261). ISBN 978-1-68307-209-6. \$ 79.95.

This book aims to help students who studied Biblical Hebrew in a context focused on translation and exegesis to bridge the gap to historical grammar (p. xiii). Although it sounds like this targets a small niche, the author assumes no knowledge of Hebrew in particular, and the book can be used by anyone familiar with square script and at least one Northwest Semitic language who wishes to become more familiar with the broader context of the first half of the first millennium BCE. To this end, the book provides a comparative grammar and a total of twenty-four readings from six languages (Old Phoenician, Old Hebrew, Moabite, Deir Allan, Samalian, and Old Aramaic), with commentary and glossary.

It is true that there is already a variety of grammars, language handbooks, and text collections available, but the book under review makes a valuable contribution on several fronts. First, it provides a comparative grammar: not only does it describe the individual languages, it also gives the most likely reconstruction for the proto-form, and manages to do so in a way that is accessible to students without background in historical linguistics. Second, it combines grammar and readings in a single book with many cross-references between the two parts. Third, it combines six languages in doing so, enabling the student to easily compare the different language variants on the basis of larger text samples.

Of course, combining all this information in a single book means sacrificing some depth. For instance, the author does not give all possible reconstructions or readings, limiting himself to the most likely ones. He does, however, point to additional bibliography where appropriate. Additionally, an appendix provides a list of materials for further reading with the most important text editions, grammars, dictionaries, language handbooks, and text collections.

The grammar section follows the traditional subdivision into an introduction to the relationships between the various languages, followed by sections on orthography, phonology, morphology, and syntax. In the introduction, the author limits Old Northwest Semitic to the tenth century BCE until the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, thus excluding Ugaritic and later languages like Punic and the various Aramaic offshoots. Incorporation of these languages would have required a significantly larger grammatical description and would probably not have been beneficial from a pedagogical point of view, so this has been a good choice. The author then describes the Northwest Semitic family with a tree diagram and gives the distinguishing features. It is commendable that the author does not make a decision as to the position of Deir Alla and Samalian in this diagram; instead, he describes the difficulties with their classification and gives an alternative representation of the languages in a wave diagram.

Although the structure of the grammar feels most like that of a reference grammar, not a student grammar, terms that students without a linguistic background may struggle with are explained briefly. These descriptions are short and technical, but where possible examples from the readings are given. This enables the student to understand these sections of the grammar without looking up the linguistic jargon.

However, some methodological aspects remain somewhat underexposed. For example, the author generally provides Proto-Northwest Semitic reconstructions in the grammar, but an explanation of how one arrives at these forms is lacking. To give a concrete example, the reconstruction of the 1CS personal pronoun as *'anākū* is explained based on Phoenician *'anōkī* with the Canaanite shift (**ā > ō*) and subsequent dissimilation (**u > i* following *ō*) or analogy with the bound 1CS pronoun *-ī* (p. 19). The method is not made explicit, however: the Canaanite shift is taken as a given without explaining how one might set out to gather evidence for it (p. 12), and there is no description of processes like dissimilation and analogy in general. The reader should therefore be aware that this book does not provide an introduction to historical linguistics *an sich*, even though the reader learns a lot about it in an inductive manner.

This is then also how the readings are best used. The student can start with a text closest to the languages they are already familiar with, and work through the references to the grammar in the commentary. The grammar (and the commentary itself) will then provide comparisons with other texts, which the student can then study to compare. In this way, the book stimulates constant comparison between the various language variants. The student gradually grows more attentive to the differences that are relevant for historical linguistics without being actively taught to do so. When used in this way, the book lends itself well (but not exclusively) to self-study.

The readings are grouped by language. Each chapter has a one-page introduction to the language, its cultural context and main linguistic characteristics. This is followed by a set

of readings and a glossary with complete references to the readings. The readings are chosen for linguistic peculiarities, historical significance, or relevance to the Hebrew Bible. For each reading, some archaeological and cultural context is given, followed by the text, a word-by-word commentary, and a translation. Spaces have been added to some texts to improve legibility where word dividers are absent or do not follow the conventions of biblical orthography. This enables the more advanced student to read the text using the glossary, whereas a novice can look at the commentary to break up the text first. The commentary gives a vocalized transliteration and parsing information for all but the most basic forms, but does not normally give a translation; this way, one can read with constant reference to the commentary if needed without running into too many spoilers.

With a book like this, one can always find things that could have been explained in somewhat more detail, or alternative readings that could have been considered; it serves no purpose to give examples of these. The commentaries are more than sufficient to arrive at the generally accepted interpretation of the text, and if the reader has unanswered questions, they can refer to their teacher or the bibliography in the back of the book.

The layout and binding of the book are excellent. The book is case bound and falls open easily on any page, making the translation experience very comfortable. A dust jacket provides two flaps for bookmarks. Typographical errors are practically absent, but one does occasionally find a confusing cross-reference. For instance, the commentary on the $\text{ר} \text{3MS}$ suffix for plural nouns in אהבו *ʿahibaw* ‘those who love him’ in Ketef Hinnom 1:5–6 (p. 136) refers to the form אנשו *ʿanašaw* ‘his men’ in Lachish 3:18 (p. 123), which refers to the form אלו *ʿilaw* ‘to him’ in Meshad Hashavyahu 13 (p. 111), which refers to the grammar section §3.A.2.d. That section only mentions the example from Lachish 3:18. It would be simpler if each commentary referred directly to the grammar section, and the grammar section mentioned all three instances. In another case, the author discusses the form יברך *yabarrīk(akā)* ‘may he bless (you)’ in Kuntillet Ajrud B:7–8 and provides two solutions for the lack of a pronominal object suffix (the final *kaf* may be doing double duty, or it may be provided from the following form, ישמרך *yišmarak(ā)* ‘may he keep you’). He then writes, “see also יברך in Ketef Hinnom 1:14–15 but יברך in Ketef Hinnom 2:5.” However, the form in Ketef Hinnom 1 is also יברך (also a single *kaf*), and the function of “but” is not clear, because Ketef Hinnom 2 just gives an additional example which does not contradict the others. Fortunately, such issues are a rare occurrence and do not prevent the reader from understanding the main points.

Nevertheless, I have two recommendations to make the book still easier to use. First, in the grammar section, the header and/or margin should provide more location information. Currently, the number or letter of a (sub)section is only given on the first page, which makes it hard to find a reference like §4.B.2.c as the reader does not know the paragraph number of the current page. Second, it is also somewhat hard to find the glossaries. Since there is a separate glossary per language these are found in the middle of the book, but one has to simply browse forward from a text until one finds it. If the front edge of the pages where the section of the next language begins were coloured, this could help to locate the glossaries. Alternatively, a single glossary at the very end of

the book could be used. This would also make translating the small-corpus languages a little bit more challenging, and could also be instructive to compare how a word is handed down to or used in different languages (for instance, the difference between Old Aramaic יום *yawm* and Old Hebrew יום *yôm/yôm*).

These minor recommendations should not spoil the fun. With this book, Bekins has created a valuable stepping stone for students of Biblical Hebrew who want to branch into historical linguistics. I wish it had been available when I found myself in this situation some years ago. But the book also allows for casual browsing, and the Old Hebrew texts can be used as an excursion in a Biblical Hebrew course. All in all, the book manages to give a good, well-balanced introduction to the historical grammar of Northwest Semitic, and after having worked through it one is happy to have it on the shelf to fall back on.

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July 2021

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