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BOOK REVIEW

Larry A. Mitchel. *A Student's Vocabulary for Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic: Frequency Lists with Definitions, Pronunciation Guide, and Index*. Updated ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017. 129 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-310-53387-0. \$16.99.

Without a doubt, effective vocabulary acquisition and retention is one of the most arduous yet vitally necessary aspects of gaining proficiency in biblical Hebrew and Aramaic. That being said, however, there are a number of tools that are available to aid the fledgling student in this difficult and, at times, rather tedious process, one of them being *A Student's Vocabulary for Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic* by Larry A. Mitchel. Initially published in 1984, Mitchel's work has been a standard, trusted resource for learning the vocabulary of biblical Hebrew and Aramaic for over thirty years. Now, in this updated edition of this volume, the Mitchel tradition lives on.

Essentially, what this volume does is provide lists of the Hebrew words that appear ten times or more in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and all of the Aramaic words in the same corpus. The lists are arranged according to word frequency, thereby allowing the beginning or intermediate student of the Semitic biblical languages to pay special attention to the words they will encounter most often when reading and translating. Complete alphabetical indices of all the Hebrew and Aramaic terms, listing the number of occurrences of each word, are also included. In these indices words are unpointed, except for forms with identical consonantal spelling. Helpfully, root numbers in parentheses differentiate between identical spellings with different meanings.

Aside from the brief orientation sections, which also include some suggestions for improving one's abilities in learning vocabulary (more on this later), *A Student's Vocabulary* is divided

into six major sections. Five are devoted to Hebrew (words occurring more than 500 times, between 500 and 200 times, between 199 and 100 times, between 99 and 50 times, and between 49 and 10 times), and one is devoted to Aramaic. Within each major section are smaller subsections that are also divided according to word frequency. For instance, section 1 has a total of one hundred six words that are divided into four smaller subsections, each of which contain between twenty-five and twenty-eight words.

The book states that a section containing Hebrew words occurring less than ten times was also prepared for this project but “for considerations of length it has not been included in this volume. (It was twice as long as Sections 1–4, both in number of entries and estimated page length!)” (10). Mitchel also says that “most Hebrew students would probably find little use for this section of Hebrew vocabulary” (10).

The vocabulary lists within the smaller subsections provide essential information about each word, such as what part of speech the word is (demonstrative, interrogative, preposition, conjunction, etc.), the basic meaning of the word (note that if the meaning of a verb varies according to the particular stem, each meaning of the word is given), any and all *ketiv/qere* variants, and the like.

A variety of symbols indicate other important information concerning the listed words. For instance, the † symbol indicates an Aramaic cognate that is spelled like a Hebrew word, the ‡ symbol indicates an Aramaic cognate with different vowels from Hebrew, and the § indicates an Aramaic cognate that is spelled differently but still recognizably. Fortunately, these symbols are used quite sparingly. A comma divides words that are more or less synonymous, whereas a semicolon sets off extended meanings or definitions that are rather different from one another. Roman numerals in parentheses refer to one of two or more roots with an identical spelling in Hebrew and Aramaic, a practice that follows William L. Holladay's once-popular *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

Though most subsections of the Hebrew portion of this book

contain about twenty-five to twenty-eight words, a range in keeping with the author's intention to produce "consistently short, manageable lists" (10), many of the subsections contain thirty to forty words in total and some are larger still, the largest having as many as seventy-eight. Although the author states explicitly that "the ideal" of having "lists not in excess of thirty words" only "holds true until sheer numbers of words of identical frequency make smaller lists impossible, short of artificially breaking up longer lists alphabetically" (10), recent research concerning word-list sizing and vocabulary acquisition indicate that memorizing words in groups of up to seven is most effective. Although students will undoubtedly tinker with the lists on their own to make them work in an effective fashion, it would have behooved the editors of this volume to do some of the work themselves to aid in this process and lighten the load.

Another concern of mine is the continued reliance upon Holladay's lexicon, even though more recent lexicons do appear in the select bibliography. Although Nancy Erickson, a senior editor at Zondervan, states in the publisher's preface that "in the process of preparing the updated edition, care was taken to re-check and update definitions where necessary and to confirm Mitchel's frequency lists" and that "minimal updates needed to be made" (13), the huge amount of focused analysis on lexical matter that has been done since the publication of Holladay's lexicon renders it a far less useful tool today than it was for Mitchel in 1984, when the first edition was published. Indeed, though Mitchel himself states that the meanings that he offers "are in no sense full and exhaustive" and that "individual language teachers may wish for whatever reason to supplement or emphasize (and even in some cases supplant) given definitions" (16), the likelihood of this occurring with the updated volume would probably be far less had a more linguistically sensitive and up-to-date lexicon been the primary text of choice. However, it remains true that, for the beginning student, "the meanings given for the Hebrew words . . . provide base meanings that will serve those needs" (16).

A few other quibbles that I have with the volume are the following: First, though the content itself is of good quality, the

presentation is lackluster. There is little that appeals to the eye when reading—there are no visuals, no charts/graphs, and no images to illustrate the words on the page. Second, *A Student's Vocabulary* does not have any sort of accompanying website or the like where students can pool their resources and energy together with respect to compiling their own personal mnemonics or other memory-aiding devices. Given the usefulness of such things for helping students memorize difficult words, this is somewhat unfortunate.

All this being said, given what this volume sets out to do, *A Student's Vocabulary* will certainly be of good service to beginning and intermediate students of biblical Hebrew and Aramaic. Its inexpensiveness, accessibility, and ease of use also make it a good choice for faculty as they select their course texts.

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