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BOOK REVIEW

J. David Pleins and Jonathan Homrighausen. *Biblical Hebrew Vocabulary by Conceptual Categories: A Student's Guide to Nouns in the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017. 176 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-310-53074-9. \$17.99.

Arguably, there are few things (other than memorizing paradigms, perhaps) that the beginning or intermediate student of biblical Hebrew tends to find more frustrating and difficult than building up his or her vocabulary in an effective fashion. However, as the authors of *Biblical Hebrew Vocabulary by Conceptual Categories (BHVCC)* state, “A command of Hebrew vocabulary is the essential key to an enjoyable encounter with sacred Scripture” (16). While a plethora of tools already exists to help ease the challenge of gaining proficiency in the language without “tedious page-flipping exercises through lexicons,” what makes *BHVCC* so unique among its counterparts is that the words are grouped into “logical categories” (16). Unlike resources such as Miles V. Van Pelt and Gary D. Pratico’s *The Vocabulary Guide to Biblical Hebrew* (2003) and the numerous apps, flash cards, CDs, and other tools that are available for biblical Hebrew vocabulary acquisition, only *BHVCC* organizes the nouns of biblical Hebrew into logical categories of related words. As Pleins and Homrighausen assert, “This approach is crucial because the mind constructs its mental space for languages by making connections between words. Without these associations, vocabulary building is reduced to rote memorization that all too often becomes an exercise in futility” (16).

The book itself is divided into four main sections: (1) “The Created Order,” (2) “The Human Order,” (3) “The Social Order,” and (4) “The Constructed Order.” Underneath each of these four orders are numerous head categories and subcategories that

are “designed to group specific meanings and create logical connections” (17). For example, under the first main section (“The Created Order”), one will find the head category “Heavens and Earth.” Within that head category one will also find several sub-categories, such as “Cosmology,” “Sky/Firmament,” “Stars,” “Sun,” and “Moon.” Other head categories under the first section include “Colors,” “Time,” “Flora,” and “Animals.” In short, “the entire book is carefully arranged to create sensible groupings of related terms” (17).

Each entry consists of the Hebrew word (with vowel pointing written in a clear, well-sized font) followed by an initial gloss (devised, in part, by Pleins himself) and, sometimes, alternative definitions that seek to reflect the findings of “technical scholarly studies or major lexicons” (17). These glosses are marked with an abbreviated form of the name(s) of those person(s) who were responsible for the relevant studies. Additional glosses are placed in parentheses after the alternatives offered above if they are derived from a specific lexicon. The authors note that every effort was made to “avoid outmoded English words or obsolete definitions” (17). Interestingly (and quite helpfully), the authors also state that one of their objectives in producing this volume was “to alert the student to debates about the meaning of many words, especially those that are rare” (17). Lastly, each entry contains a biblical verse for reference. Pleins and Homrighausen state, “While in some cases the choice [of a biblical verse for reference] simply provides an example of usage, many of these were selected with a view to presenting the word in a context in which the meaning is more readily apparent” (17).

Each of the subcategories is grouped into relatively short lists so as to allow the student to build up a working vocabulary in manageable blocks. The lists are mainly organized by Hebrew alphabetical order. Sometimes, however, the arrangement follows an “underlying logic, as in the case of ‘Human Anatomy,’ which runs from head to toe” (17). Notably, if the word in question only appears in the plural form, the authors print the plural form, but if a word is in a construct state or has a possessive suffix or a preposition, they are removed, and the lexical form is provided. It should also be known that because of ranges

of meaning (and to make some lists more complete), certain words appear multiple times.

Users of this volume may be interested to know that according to Andersen and Forbes' volume *Vocabulary of the Old Testament* (2nd ed., 1993), there are 9,980 unique words in the Old Testament, of which roughly only 21 percent (2,148 words) occur ten times or more (18). Many of the words in *BHVCC* occur fewer than ten times, so to help assist users with respect to low-frequency terms, all *hapax legomena* are marked with an "H," and all words that are used less than ten times are marked with an "R" (18).

With respect to the authors' decision to focus specifically on nouns, it should be noted that *BHVCC* occasionally notes participle forms that are used as nouns and also notes some verbs when they seem key to the semantic field as a whole. They also suggest that "a solid command of Hebrew nouns will make the memorization of the related verbal forms much easier in the long run" and that it is therefore "much better to encourage students to work extensively on nouns after their basic grammar work has been completed" (19). They also focus on "concrete nouns rather than abstractions or qualities" and therefore "have words for 'teachers' and 'students'" but not "terms for wisdom or for other abstract qualities . . ." (19). Such matters, however, do not undermine the overall effectiveness of the volume and should not be understood to be a compromise in either the quality of the volume or the overall presentation of the nouns themselves.

Aside from a Scripture/Hebrew-word index and a brief guide to using *BHVCC*, the volume also has two appendices: (1) "Guide to Further Reading," which is basically an annotated bibliography of the many specialized studies that were used to comprise *BHVCC*, and (2) "Cluster Verses for Study," which offers a list of some of the more useful passages to help in memorizing the vocabulary in *BHVCC*.

My few minor criticisms of the volume are the following: First, the text itself is rather straightforward and matter-of-fact. Though the content is good, it is presented in a way that is visually plain and uninteresting. Second, there is no accompanying website where readers can connect with each other and assist

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each other in learning the vocabulary included in the book. Third, there is no author index. Although the volume does not make extensive reference to specialized monographs and the like, for the sake of thoroughness and ease of use, an author index would surely have proved beneficial.

Aside from these points, it is difficult to criticize this volume. The authors' sensibilities with respect to the area of lexical semantics as it pertains to biblical interpretation are to be especially commended. In sum, *BHVCC* is a skillfully crafted volume that serves its target audience well. Its affordability and usability would also make it an excellent supplementary textbook for academic courses. I highly recommend it.

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