

How Biblical Languages Work

By Peter James Silzer & Thomas John Finley (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004), 258 pp., \$8 (paperback).

From the back cover:

An ideal supplement to first-year Hebrew and Greek grammars, this practical guide makes learning the biblical languages a less daunting task. by introducing the students to characteristics and functions of all human languages, experienced linguists Peter James Silzer and Thomas John Finley create the basis from which to describe the major features of Hebrew and Greek: how the sounds are pronounced, how words are put together, how phrases and clauses are structured, how words convey meaning, and how languages change.

Since I have already undergone several years of schooling in both Hebrew and Greek, I don't really represent the target audience for this book: the first year Hebrew or Greek student. Still, I found aspects of the book helpful, although probably less so than someone who was just getting exposed to the biblical languages for the first time.

One of the great strengths of the book is its emphasis upon the seemingly obvious fact that languages develop and evolve primarily from the perspective of spoken sounds. Students of Hebrew and Greek can sometimes lose sight of this because the original biblical languages are no longer actively spoken—they are not “living” languages. After months and years of memorizing vocabulary and charts of various declensions and conjugations, all of which are in print format, the student can easily forget that the language codified on the printed page of the Old and New Testaments was, like all other languages, once *spoken among people*.

Because of this emphasis, the authors provide additional understanding about why certain “rules,” which students wrestle with about how words change in various grammatical constructions, exist. Although it may seem to the student at times that these obscure changes are merely to make the language difficult to learn, the real reason is to be found in vocalization and linguistics: the practical aspects of speaking words using the human vocal anatomy.

That being said, I'm not sure the book provides as much value as I had originally hoped: much of what is learned provides interesting background, but is not necessarily of great value aiding in the task of actually learning to read the original languages themselves. In other words, this is not a primary text that a student with limited funds should be concerned to acquire. Perhaps its greatest value is in providing a gentle introduction to what can otherwise seem a daunting task. It is also helpful in getting the reader to think through aspects of the language they already know (English) in relation to Hebrew and Greek idioms and constructions.

Two systems of transliteration are employed by the authors: SBL (Society of Biblical Literature) and IPA (International Phonetic Association). Although linguists may prefer the IPA transliteration because of its universal applicability, students of the biblical

languages will find it of less value since other works in the field overwhelmingly prefer the SBL notation. One wonders at the inclusion of the IPA notation since it would presumably apply mainly to readers whose primary area of interest was linguistics rather than the biblical languages—seemingly a small audience.

Reviewed by Tony Garland of www.SpiritAndTruth.org.