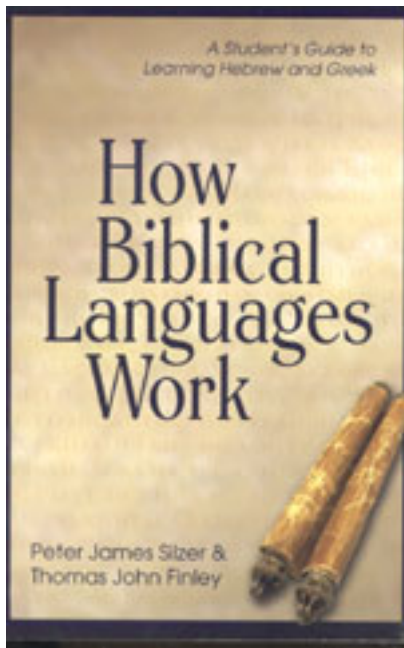


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Silzer, Peter James, and Thomas John Finley

How Biblical Languages Work: A Student's Guide to Learning Hebrew and Greek

Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004. Pp. 258. Paper. \$16.99.
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Knowing the biblical languages and utilizing them in exegesis is a dream for many students. Using the primary texts and analyzing them firsthand is an experience that cannot be replaced by even the best-written commentaries. However, many college, seminary, and graduate students become anxious when it comes to the task of actually learning the languages. *How Biblical Languages Work* offers a guide for students who are beginning this task and aims at introducing Koine Greek and Classical Hebrew in a way that is less intimidating and mediates the experience by making comparisons between the ancient languages and English. That is, the book “relates the biblical languages to the normal characteristics and functions of human language so that you may come to a better understanding of how biblical languages work” (15). It is commonly understood that a grammar book should utilize both inductive and deductive methods in order to be most effective. Understanding this principle, Silzer and Finley’s guide is meant to provide a solid foundation in the linguistic patterns of Greek and Hebrew that are expected to be built upon through later instruction.

The work begins broadly, narrows into the details of language composition and interpretation, and then expands again to summarize and provide helpful suggestions for

further study. Chapter 1 presents an overview of the basic characteristics of all languages and how they interact within their particular cultures. This “big picture” introduction lays the foundation for why one studies the biblical languages and how they relate to the basic structure of all languages. In chapter 2, Greek and Hebrew are introduced by an explanation of their symbolic and phonetic makeup with an in-depth explanation of writing and pronunciation. Chapter 3 continues with a basic overview of the morphological structures of Greek and Hebrew, and chapters 4–6 introduce matters of syntax, including discourse and semantic analysis.

Most grammars primarily deal with morphology and introduce syntax at later levels, but Silzer and Finley also add a chapter on the importance of understanding diachronic elements of a language, such as the various semantic, pronunciation, and morphological alterations that any particular language goes through. Finally, chapter 8 offers practical suggestions that can help students to acquire the biblical languages by understanding patterns of learning based on factors such as personality and motivations.

This work succeeds in providing a coherent introduction to biblical linguistics overall but faces several challenges that may hinder some students. First, unlike texts such as D. A. Black’s *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek* (Baker, 2000), *How Biblical Languages Work* attempts to introduce to students to linguistic patterns for both Greek and Hebrew. Although Silzer and Finley express confidence in the fact that many linguistic features overlap between the two languages, the anxious student might still be intimidated by continually switching from Greek to Hebrew in each chapter. The chapter that deals primarily with morphology (ch. 3) can be particularly onerous, given the complexities of elements such as differences in inflection, declension, and conjugation.

A second challenge this book faces is a major concern with the study of linguistics in general: an endless number of jargon and technical terms. Many grammars limit and simplify older and more complex terminology for this very reason (e.g., using “reversing *waw*” instead of “conversive *waw*”). Although many terms are defined and the glossary is thorough, many students may have to look up nouns phrases such as a “velarized alveolar fricative” (206) even by the end of the book. Of course, the discipline of linguistics is difficult to study without utilizing the appropriate vocabulary, but it can nevertheless be a serious hindrance to an already uneasy student.

A third challenge comes in understanding how this book will relate to the grammar books that the student will use in the classroom. Since *How Biblical Languages Work* is only a supplement to the grammar textbooks, the areas of overlap can be confusing. This problem would come to a head especially with morphology. Grammars present paradigms in different ways that may differ significantly from the way Silzer and Finley

present them. Additionally, *How Biblical Languages Work* is sometimes unclear with respect to what information should be memorized and what should simply just be understood. Some sections abound with charts and paradigms and can seem to be quite convoluted at times. But many of these challenges that have been mentioned are very difficult to avoid. And despite some of these obstacles, *How Biblical Languages Work* still has a great deal to offer the student who seeks to understand the biblical languages and how they are designed.

These complications, though, ultimately do not prevent the book from accomplishing its purpose as a useful introduction for students of the biblical languages. There are four primary reasons why it is successful. First, the book is organized in a clear fashion. The chapters move from the smallest elements of composition (e.g., morphemes, endings) and move progressively toward the largest elements of discourse (phrases, sentences, and paragraphs). As mentioned before, the first chapter establishes a solid foundation in linguistics before going on to apply the techniques to the biblical languages. Then the summary puts the various morphological and syntactical elements in perspective. The structural clarity makes the book easy to read and simple to navigate when going back to it as a reference.

Second, the concepts are communicated in a simple and manageable way. Silzer and Finley presume that the reader has no exposure to another language. The text even provides a review of English grammar alongside the various introductions to features in the biblical languages. This kind of clarity comes from the authors' linguistic expertise. Each chapter contains numerous examples and explanations that are taken from a variety of languages, including Spanish, "old" English, Mandarin, Turkish, Hindi, French, German, and Aramaic. Every time another language is utilized to make a point, the reader is able to see even better how linguistics works. Also, because of the constant use of Greek and Hebrew, the text presents both languages in a transliterated form (*SBL Handbook of Style*) in order to facilitate reading.

Third, the book may be worth acquiring simply for its excellent resources. The glossary contains more than 250 linguistic terms that can be used in conjunction with grammars as well. Also, charts and diagrams are utilized frequently in order to present concepts and to compare and contrast linguistic elements in a lucid and precise manner. Aesthetics is not a *sine qua non* of quality, but the effectiveness of presentation makes the charts valuable resources for repeated use.

Finally, Silzer and Finley keep the attention of the reader and make language-learning fun and interesting. They accomplish this in various ways. Of course, examples are taken from assorted languages both modern and ancient and applied to several cultures. And

How Biblical Languages Work also goes beyond simple grammar and syntax in order to talk about discourse features and semantic analysis—the grounds upon which hermeneutical battles are often waged. Silzer and Finley understand that students are more motivated to study a language when its interpretive value is apparent. Additionally, the final chapters on unique elements among languages (ch. 7) and practical tips (ch. 8) appeal to eager students. The former chapter taps into the human fascination with cultural differences, and the latter gives the student helpful and practical advice for approaching the languages from a range of backgrounds and personality types, whether one is a visual learner, an auditory learner, or a tactile learner.

In the end, Silzer and Finley offer a guide that will be valuable to many students who have little experience with language acquisition and are looking for a simple and easy introduction to the basic patterns of linguistics. Presented in a fun and accessible way, *How Biblical Languages Work* taps into a method of study that will save a student time by enabling him or her to see how Greek and Hebrew are alike and different. With the appropriate amount of time and concentration, many students will benefit from the clarity, style, and appeal that this guidebook offers to the apprehensive language learner.