

Book Review: *The Rewards of Learning Greek and Hebrew: Discovering the Richness of the Bible in its Original Languages*

McDowell, Catherine L., and Philip H. Towner. 2021. *The Rewards of Learning Greek and Hebrew: Discovering the Richness of the Bible in its Original Languages*. Peabody: Hendrickson Academic. xvii, 134 pp. ISBN: 978-1-68307-401-4. Approx. 195 ZAR (11 USD). Kindle.

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Philip H. Towner is a former Dean and Director of the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship at the American Bible Society (New York) and is currently a Professor of Translation Studies at Pontifical Urban University in Rome. He is a translation scholar with a particular focus on the Pastoral Epistles. His publications include contributions to the *IVP New Testament Commentary Series* (2010); the *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (2006); and the *International Critical Commentary* (A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles, 2004). Both authors are

well experienced and qualified to speak authoritatively on their subjects of Hebrew within the OT context, and biblical Greek study respectively.

As the title suggests, the book's primary purpose is to motivate the study of biblical Hebrew and Greek in order that Scripture may be better examined and understood. It is divided into two parts—the first being Hebrew (authored by McDowell) and the second Greek (authored by Towner). With catchy chapter titles such as “When God Uses Italics” and “A Preview of Coming Attractions,” and bite-sized chapter lengths, it makes for an easy read. One is drawn into exploring each chapter as its own contained lesson, which provides thought-provoking learning experiences. Strategically chosen Scriptures are used to explain key grammatical terms, but through the study, insight into those Scriptures is also given. This all engenders a desire to delve deeper into the study of God's Word through the biblical languages.

The Hebrew section gives slightly more accessible learning points within the texts discussed than the Greek does, but that does not detract from the point being driven home; namely, that a reading knowledge of Hebrew and Greek is invaluable for good and intimate study of God's Word. The authors are not reticent to interact with significant grammatical terminology such as inflection, anaphora, case, euphemisms, assonance, paronomasia, apposition, yet they do so in a concise and tangible manner that makes the concepts comprehensible to those who have not yet studied the grammar of the biblical languages. But for the language scholar, the familiar terms are well-represented in the scriptural texts in a way that validates language study and also provides new insights.

The book is peppered with quotations and charming motivational testimonies to encourage language study from prominent academics and authors in the field (both current and classical) to graduate students (e.g., Bruce K. Waltke, Philip Melancthon, Craig A. Evans, Robert Alter, F.W.

“Chip” Dobbs-Allsopp, Adolf Deissmann, Carolyn J. Sharp, Scot McKnight and many more). The book ends with extensive resources for further study—including QR codes to courses, institutes, and supplementary resources.

Part 1: Hebrew, comprises ten chapters that mostly highlight how the English translation falls short of capturing the full force of the original text, whether at the level of word or that of syntax. McDowell thereby makes the significant point that “Although our English translations are reliable and trustworthy, they are not perfect” (p. 6). She goes on to show in each of her chapters how an intimate knowledge of the Hebrew text allows one to understand more clearly the author’s message, which can better inform spiritual formation, as well as preaching and teaching.

The following are merely examples of chapter *foci*. Chapter three presents a clever wordplay that spans not only pericopes or books but the greater scriptural witness. The point is made using the connection between Adam’s responsibility in the garden (Gen 2:15) and the Levitical duties in the Tabernacle (Num 3:7–8, 8:26, 18:5–6) where the same word phrases are used. Therefore, Eden imagery permeates the Tabernacle not just visually, but also in priestly duties. Chapter six brings greater clarity to the idiom “a man after God’s own heart” (1 Sam 13:14). This chapter also gives an example of how extra-biblical literature can bring insight to biblical texts. Chapter seven explains the Hebrew language of idol imagery, particularly in prophetic writings, with attention given to nuance and irony. Chapter eight features the attention-grabbing power of puns and their value in emphasizing a point that can only be truly understood if one has a working knowledge of the original language.

In all that is stated, McDowell is wise and careful not to undermine the value of translations of the Bible. She does, however, show how interpretive choices made through translation inevitably lead to something

of the original being lost. Therefore, she highlights that the knowledge of biblical languages allows one to understand these interpretive choices, fostering a capacity for critical thinking about potential alternatives. Furthermore, this knowledge advances the maturity of one’s interaction with and study of Scripture. These are possibly the most worthwhile points that McDowell makes in her section of the book. Her summation is: “Studying biblical languages ... is, I would argue, the most untapped means of spiritual formation” (pp. 30–31).

Although the motivation to study Hebrew is compelling throughout her chapters, McDowell does give the impression that mere knowledge of biblical Hebrew automatically unlocks wonderful insights into texts and themes across Scripture hitherto inaccessible. This is an unrealistic expectation. Any scholar of literature is aware that the nuances of themes or wordplays often require lengthy and careful study—even when done in one’s mother tongue. The type of insights she presents are gained through in-depth study and meditation, often over an extensive period of time. These will not likely be gleaned immediately when reading in the source text language. But the point is certainly taken that interacting with a text through translation alone makes these rewards less attainable.

Part 2: Greek, comprises nine chapters in which Towner advocates for the study of Greek, not merely for NT interaction, but for greater comprehension and appreciation of Scripture as a whole. Towner (pp. 57–62) begins this section by mentioning two overarching benefits of studying *Koine* Greek, with which most biblical language teachers would agree: firstly, “proximity” (experiencing the text as if one were the original audience), and secondly, “disorientation” (having to read the text more slowly thereby creating a fuller awareness of its individual components).

Towner goes on to present other rewarding avenues Greek study may potentially take one down, such as providing a unique window into the NT’s

cultural context and the subtleties of its rhetoric. In chapter twelve, the study of the Septuagint is presented as a means to deepen one's understanding of the NT because of the significant role it played in the NT production. He uses Matthew 1:23 (see Isa 7:14) and 1 Corinthians 15:54 (see Isa 25:8) as specific examples. Paralleled to this, in chapter thirteen, Towner explains the value of intertextuality in biblical research (the interplay between NT and OT texts)—which is often not overt, and therefore requires good and frequent interaction with the Greek text. In chapter fourteen, he unveils rhetorical argumentation in texts such as Romans 5 and the letters to the Corinthians that show traces of oral presentation (with assonance, repetition, and tempo). Many of these elements are difficult to capture in English and therefore their force and effect is lost in translation. These are merely samples of what the chapters cover.

Ultimately, in engaging with this section of the book, it becomes obvious that knowing Greek on a lexical or grammatical level is not enough. To receive the full benefit of what Towner envisions, one must have an intimate knowledge of the language—what he repeatedly calls “a reading knowledge of Greek.” He contends that knowledge of the language at this level allows one “to participate in the research, discussions, and debates that comprise New Testament studies” (p. 117). In other words, Towner does present the more realistic expectation that identifying and understanding the elements he unveils requires a good and intimate knowledge of both Greek *and* the texts in question. However, for the potential language student (the book's target audience), this comes at the cost of fully comprehending Towner's chapters and therefore may be less motivating than those of McDowell.

Towner ends his section (and the book) with a call to approach biblical study through language study. He invitingly uses the metaphor of NT study

as a house with many rooms, and a reading knowledge of Greek is the key that opens its doors to reveal the treasures within. In an earlier chapter he states that biblical study remains “an unfinished task” (p. 58) and “the Greek text itself, read today in conversation with what we are still learning about ancient culture, politics, and art, promises still more treasures for those who are able to read it with understanding” (p. 62). Therefore, the invitation is to open these doors. He chooses to highlight two specific fields of potential study: the “Pauline Tradition” and “Textual Criticism.”

My final analysis is this: any experienced language educator knows that the primary challenge in teaching biblical languages is to maintain motivation because, for the most part, language study is difficult and time-consuming. Much preparation and hard work are required before the student is equipped to dig the soil of Scripture to unearth valid treasures often less accessible through a layer of translation. Therefore, it is like wind in our sails when books like this are released that speak with a voice of agreement and validation that biblical language study is truly worthwhile. It is a welcome publication.

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