

## BOOK REVIEW

Mathewson, David, and Elodie Ballantine Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar: Syntax for Students of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016). xxiv + 307 pp. Hbk. \$32.99.

There is seemingly no end to the publishing of introductory works in biblical studies. Few areas experience a glut like introductions to the ancient languages of Koine Greek and of Hebrew. Only a handful of quality textbooks actually assist students to move beyond the introductory level. Addressing this void, Mathewson and Emig have offered an outstanding service to students and lecturers with their *Intermediate Greek Grammar*. There is much to commend in this critical, erudite and user-accessible tool, which is worthy of adoption in seminary curricula.

The authors draw upon their extensive teaching experience to understand the needs of students and lecturers alike. The book is laid out in a sensible order to be read from cover to cover, yet with subheadings for finding particular entries for focused study and review. Unlike many books on the ancient languages, this one will serve as a reference tool for students long after graduation. There are also copious examples that will undoubtedly be useful for papers and exegetical projects.

The authors have worked hard to thoughtfully pare down unnecessary details to keep the book from becoming overwhelming. Until now, students progressing from introductory textbooks faced a daunting jump to such classics as Robertson (1454 pp.), BDF (352 pp.), Moulton and Turner (4 vols.) and Wallace's now two-decade-old intermediate grammar (827 pp.). Robertson and Wallace are overwhelmingly large, repetitive and pedantic. Students can easily become distracted trying to learn terms like 'ecbatic', which may impede how well they improve their Koine knowledge. While BDF and Moulton are still useful resources for advanced studies, they can be even harder to work through. Thankfully, Mathewson and Emig have critically drawn

from prior works to focus on the key elements students need for focusing on biblical studies. The authors show a keen awareness of what students need to know at the intermediate stage of learning, but also keeping in mind their long-term goals.

The introduction lays out some important distinctive features. While far too many textbooks on Koine are decades behind in language research, Mathewson and Emig demonstrate that they are a pair well researched for the task. They draw extensively and eclectically from advances in linguistics by incorporating a broad range of monographs and articles. There are four linguistic principles that serve a foundational role in their approach to Koine grammar.

First, they hold to the position of minimalistic grammar, which means that they see semantics as a product of co-textual features working together rather than investing maximal meaning into individual linguistic items. They charge many textbooks with ignoring the linguistic axiom that meaning is a product of features working together, rather than any individual item being vested with extensive theological significance. This critique leads to their second foundation—starting with a realistic view of language. They contend that many forget that Koine was the common language used by people from all walks of life. It was not a holy language that fell from the sky. Paul was trying to communicate clearly to Gentiles. The Gospels were written for the masses. The New Testament authors used common language, not some idiosyncratic invention.

A third linguistic foundation is that the authors adopt the linguistic principle of being descriptive and doing a synchronic study. Mathewson and Emig are certainly correct to abandon the subjective comparison of the New Testament against Attic Greek or some other language. Ferdinand de Saussure also pointed out over a century ago that grammatical analysis must be descriptive of a particular period and not evaluative. Thus, one will not find subjective statements that a particular syntax is ‘sloppy’ or ‘incorrect’ according to modern hubris.

Perhaps the most significant feature with the most extensive ramifications is the explicit attention given to form and function. Mathewson and Emig explain that previous works fail to distinguish between semantics and pragmatics. For instance, they show that a participle and a genitive are specific grammatical forms, each with a specific meaning. The grammatical forms, however, can function in a variety of co-textual settings. They find that some previous approaches

are linguistically deficient and lead to classifying thirty-three types of genitives and twenty-seven types of datives. In reality, there is only one type of genitive and dative, as they each have only one form, but they can be used in a variety of ways. This might seem like a subtle nuance to beginners, who are the primary audience of the book, but this point has important and far-reaching effects in approaches to exegesis.

The authors repeatedly show that the failure to focus on analyzing both form and function has taught students to handle Koine wrongly. The minimalist approach adopted in their book is more linguistically informed and less theologically motivated by the whimsical game of ‘pin the label on the grammatical construction’ (pp. 2, 217). Furthermore, abandoning this theological enterprise disguised as language study has the pedagogical benefit of relieving students of learning endless and needless nomenclature. It is hard to imagine a student who is preparing to be a preacher or biblical counselor needing to learn the pedantic terminology of ablative genitive or whole genitive. Rather, the authors believe teaching the specific semantics of the cases or forms leads to greater accuracy in biblical studies.

The body of the textbook has thirteen sections working through the major areas needed for intermediate Koine. However, unlike introductory works, an intermediate textbook must wade into debated waters. Some students or readers might find the critiques levied at other positions a bit unexpected, but the authors are preparing students for common errors found in the broader literature of biblical studies. Of course, the authors do not come off as arrogant or aggressive in any way. Rather, the goal is to equip students to read through commentaries and articles with a critical eye. The best way to do this is by offering clear critiques, explanations and examples from biblical texts. In fact, beginning with page four, nearly every page is filled with Koine excerpts from the Bible. Their approach focuses students on developing the skills of intermediate Greek to equip them for personal study.

For instance, when approaching prepositions, the authors state that ‘theology cannot be read off of prepositions’ (p. 91). Their remark is in clear contradiction to approaches like Murray Harris in his *Prepositions and Theology*, which ‘over-interprets’ prepositions. Instead, they teach that theological interpretation rests on larger units of text, where prepositions at ‘most allow for, support, or point to important theological teachings’ (p. 92). Their view is clearly a more precise and linguistically justifiable position. Another example of critique is

pointing out that there are ‘no such things as iterative presents, conative imperfects, or ingressive aorists’ (p. 117), as such ideas contradict the semantics–pragmatics distinction. Introducing students to the distinctions between semantics and pragmatics, as well as *Aktionsart*, enables the authors to present recent research on, for example, verbal aspect, where the tense-forms have a particular semantic force that is used in various ways.

Besides the improved approach to the Greek tense-forms, the linguistically-informed foundation enables nuance in many other areas. Two places, I observe, that were well done concern the article and the imperative. As for the article, they explain to students that Koine does not have a definite and an indefinite article; thus, ‘the Greek article is not primarily used to make definite’ (p. 72). Rather, they contend it is a deictic marker that *points* (p. 72). This points (pun intended) students away from exaggerating the significance of the article that leads to poor exegesis. Also, they have the third-person imperative glossed as a real command (e.g. ‘he must’; ‘he should be’) rather than the more common use of the English ‘let’, which does not capture the imperatival force. The authors are consistent in letting the imperative form function as an imperative.

There are some inevitable shortcomings of any book trying to stay within a manageable length while covering difficult material. One such shortcoming is that there is limited analysis of the examples. While they provide students with brief discussion points, they nevertheless cannot elaborate on every detail. For instance, in working through the so-called ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ genitive issues, which they handle well, they do not try to explain the topic in extensive detail or speak to the magnitude of the theological consequences. A student will wonder why ἡ εἰρήνη τοῦ Χριστοῦ (Col. 3.15) is translated as ‘peace from Christ’, while ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ Χριστοῦ (2 Cor. 5.14), which is the same syntactical construction, is translated ‘the love of Christ’ (pp. 14-15). While they explain that Wallace’s categories only further ‘compound the problem’, they are limited by space to explain why the same construction can be understood differently.

Consequently, the book is clearly designed to work alongside classroom lectures. Some topics are discussed without any introductory remarks. Other sections, such as Colwell’s Rule, only offer a single example, which is actually only a critique of Wallace. However, students can look to more examples by accessing the footnoted

material. Moreover, while there are practice sections, these do not sufficiently serve in place of a workbook because there is no answer key. Nevertheless, instructors could easily work these sections into lectures, quizzes or even exams. Therefore, I think few students at the intermediate level will be fully able to appreciate the textbook without a guiding teacher. However, when supplemented in class with lectures and reference to other textbooks, such as Stanley E. Porter's *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* and James Barr's *Semantics of Biblical Language*, any shortcomings will be covered.

In conclusion, Mathewson and Emig have certainly contributed a quality service to the ongoing improvements in Koine learning. Their work will be a welcome textbook for many students and lecturers. When used alongside course lectures and other resources, intermediate-level students will surely obtain a firm grasp of Koine and be prepared for advanced studies in exegesis. I warmly encourage purchasing this book.

Chris S. Stevens  
McMaster Divinity College  
Hamilton, ON