Beginning Biblical Hebrew: Intentionality and Grammar by Robert Sacks

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Readers of this journal will undoubtedly be familiar with the biblical scholarship of Robert Sacks. His commentaries on the Book of Genesis and the Book of Job first appeared in *Interpretation* before being published as books in their own right (in 1990 and 1999, respectively).1 In his distinguished career as a teacher and scholar at St. John’s College for more than five decades, Sacks has dedicated much of his work to a noble cause: restoring the Bible as a worthy source of Western civilization. The project is rooted in the belief that the well-being of the West depends on two sources, reason and revelation. As he writes in his introduction to the commentary on Job:

> We of the Western tradition have the blessing and the curse of finding ourselves heir to two quite different ways of life and hence to two quite different ways of thought. Although they sit uneasily together, the struggle between them has formed much of the life behind the growth of both our daily language and of our highest contemplations. They are, then, the foundation of both our deepest insights and our deep-

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est prejudices. As such they have given rise to that particular horizon within which we live, and beyond which we constantly strive to peer.²

It is difficult to say which part of this statement would meet with greater skepticism among contemporary intellectuals. Many would undoubtedly reject both philosophy and revelation as offering profound guidance to living well.

Indeed, the arguments against the Bible as a source of wisdom are so well established that they themselves form a kind of tradition. One of the most formidable attacks on revelation, for example, Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (TTP)*, was published in 1670. If modern readers tend to view the Bible as a corrupt text, not “worth studying as closely as the works of great philosophers or poets,” this impression is likely the result of Spinoza’s critique of the Bible.³ In the *TTP*, Spinoza claims to have proved conclusively that scripture is “faulty, truncated, adulterated, not consistent with itself, that we have only fragments of it, and, finally, that the transcript of God’s compact that he compacted with the Jews has perished.”⁴

One reason Spinoza’s argument is so persuasive is that he builds his critique of scripture on his impeccable knowledge of Hebrew grammar. The importance of grammar in Spinoza’s analysis is evident not only in the *TTP*, where he presents a minitreatise on grammar beginning in chapter 7, but also in the fact that he continued to study and write on grammar throughout his life. He had already completed thirty-two chapters of a work entitled *Compendium grammatices linguae Hebraeae*, when he passed away prematurely at age forty-four. The unfinished work was published posthumously by his friends in 1677, but provides us a clear sense of the importance of grammar to his overall project. The primary reason that Spinoza devotes so much effort to Hebrew grammar is that it is a prerequisite for a method that will provide “a full and certain knowledge” of scripture.⁵ In his account, the Bible presents an unfinished compilation of sources that was arranged so hastily that textual errors and variant readings crop up repeatedly in the manuscripts. Despite the later efforts of the Masoretes between the fifth and tenth centuries to resolve these problems, variant readings and grammatical irregularities remain. The real problem, for Spinoza, with this

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² Sacks, *Book of Job with Commentary*, ix.
⁵ Ibid., 91.
situation gradually becomes clear in his treatise, namely, that the debate over the meaning invites endless speculation and quarrels among readers:

we see almost everyone passing off his own comments as God’s word and eager for nothing else but compelling others, under the pretext of religion, to think as he does. We see Theologians often worried over how they could twist their own fantasies and wishes out of Scripture and fortify them with divine authority, and not doing anything with less misgiving and more rashness than interpreting the Scriptures.⁶

The uncertainty of scripture’s literal meaning owing to its corruption encourages superstition and quarreling and obscures the simple, salutary teaching of caritas which is essential to salvation and political stability. The TTP initiates a broad theological project to limit speculation over the meaning of scripture. Spinoza develops a hermeneutic that considers scripture’s claims mere reflections of the cultural background and prejudices of its authors. But the central element of this hermeneutic is a systematic grasp of Hebrew grammar which effectively forecloses speculation about the literal meaning of scripture.

Because Spinoza assigns Hebrew grammar such a prominent role in his theological-political project, he is tempted to ignore or downplay ambiguities and grammatical irregularities in ancient Hebrew.⁷ He presents ancient Hebrew as having a clear-cut, systematic, formal grammar. Some scholars have claimed that his tendency to exaggerate the grammatical clarity of Hebrew results from his prior philosophical commitments. According to Michael Morgan, Spinoza’s grammar “is guided...by his commitment to a priori reasoning akin to that found in geometry—or, in this case, in Latin, viewed by him as reflecting a pure, a priori structure.”⁸ More likely, though, Spinoza simply wished to discourage theological speculation on the literal meaning of scripture, and so constructed a Hebrew grammar “in an artificial manner, [with] certain rules to the Hebrew Language that are to all appearances borrowed from Latin.”⁹

In sharp contrast to Spinoza’s efforts to limit the meaning of biblical Hebrew, Sacks attempts to extend the grammatical structure of

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⁶ Ibid., 83.
Hebrew historically to include the ancient Semitic languages, from Akkadian to Ugaritic. According to Sacks, “the Semitic languages form a much more closely interrelated group than do the Indo-European languages. It would be appropriate to think of the Semitic languages as comparable to the Romance languages in terms of their proximity” (3). Many of these languages are more ancient than Hebrew, and preserve more ancient forms of grammar and meaning. As such, they offer valuable clues to the origins and development of Hebrew.

But Sacks extends the scope of Hebrew grammar in an even more fundamental way. Traditional or formal grammars view the structure and rules of language as abstract, given facts. This is a sensible approach when the objective is the acquisition of language. Speculating on the development of language or relation of grammar to the thoughts of past generations might distract a student from the task of learning the rudiments of a language. But the unavoidable consequence of those introductory grammars is that they leave the student with the impression that Hebrew presents a permanent set of grammatical forms that express a fixed conceptual world. Sacks laments this situation and compares formal grammar to a child who has lost the ability to decipher meaning in art: “imagine a child born into the world in which abstract art had so taken over the field that the child would no longer be aware of the possibility of representational art. Like those islanders who, we are told, cannot recognize a picture as a picture, the child might find Rembrandt’s self-portrait a beautiful and well-balanced combination of colors—no more and no less” (2). Formal grammar is particularly inadequate for the study of biblical Hebrew because it ignores its development and so limits its meaning in artificial ways. In the case of Spinoza at least, the formal character of his Hebrew grammar was the product of a conscious effort to resolve a theological-political problem. Formal grammar, to the contrary, is characterized by its forgetfulness of the origins and meaning of beautiful forms. It accomplishes the same thing as Spinoza’s grammar by inuring us to the ancestral thoughts embedded in language (cf. 30).

Sacks’s intentional grammar does not ignore the formal rules, but rather focuses on their development in relation to the people who sought language to express logos. In offering a definition of a noun, for example, Sacks does not merely provide a synonym. An example of this sort of analysis—in fact, the example which inspired Sacks to pursue this non-traditional approach to grammar—is the participle of the verb “to speak,” medaber. A formal grammar would simply define the word as an established
fact. But Sacks’s teacher once pointed out to him that it is likely a construct from the Hebrew words *mi* and *dabar*; that is, literally *medaber* means “he who speaks.” Once we recognize that words have histories that reflect the intentions and thoughts of their speakers, the study of grammar becomes an investigation into the development of thought itself. This approach to grammar, which invites us “to rethink the position of the person who possessed the verb and needed the noun,” opens up a new path for biblical study (3).

Sacks concedes that the title of his book, *Beginning Biblical Hebrew*, is a bit misleading. If the reader expects an introduction to formal grammar, he may be a bit perplexed by the organization of the work. Topics that would appear at the beginning of a traditional grammar appear later in Sacks’s work. For example, the ordinal numbers are not introduced until chapter 13; prepositions are not covered until chapter 19. In addition, although there is a brief introduction to some grammatical rules, the book is devoted to a careful reading of a single chapter (chapter 21) of the First Book of Samuel. The reason for these idiosyncrasies is that Sacks intends to introduce readers to an intentional approach to grammar, a subject that cannot be taught directly but must be observed: “Intentional grammar is not and cannot become a subject matter. It cannot be taught: a book can do no more than invite the reader to participate in the activity” (3).

One reason that Sacks’s approach to language cannot be taught is that it lacks a single, concrete method for arriving at linguistic certainty, nor can we arrive at a clear account of the origins of language. And “if we do not know where language begins,” Sacks asks, “how shall we know where we should begin?” If various languages shared elements of a common grammatical structure or vocabulary, then we could point to its natural origins and craft a method, like Euclid, with precise definitions, postulates, and axioms (1). But while language points at times to a common origin, the profound grammatical differences between languages frustrate our quest for quasimathematical certainty. What is worse, the pursuit of such certainty comes at the cost of destroying or ignoring the very phenomena we are trying to capture. The conceptual world behind language and our awareness of such history “imperceptibly shade off into the vaguely remembered and the dimly seen.” In light of this terrain, Sacks says, “we have no other choice than to try to make the thoughts and the half-dead expressions that inhabit the morgue of our minds live again—not because they are true, but because they remain a part of us and yet are only intelligible in their living state” (171). The evidence
for the thoughts of the ancients oftentimes is no more than a “scrap” that jogs “some reminiscence” of logos (164).

Although intentional grammar is more elusive than formal grammar, Sacks takes great pains as a teacher to gently guide his readers. He outlines the scholarly controversies over the development of Hebrew grammar, recommends further reading, and even offers helpful tips for using a lexicon (145). He encourages readers in the light of formidable difficulties and reassures them to keep searching even in unpromising terrain. In considering whether prepositions emerged from nouns or verbs, he observes: “Even if it should prove impossible to recoup those ancient thoughts which still remain part of us, such scraps as these may help a little to jog some reminiscence of what it meant to participate in the passage from noun to preposition and the dawning of a new way of thought” (163–64). At the end of this passage, Sacks tells his readers that he has done his best to begin the investigation, “to think the transition through.”

More fundamentally, Sacks repeatedly reminds us that we can never be certain of the origins of language, and so must always approach it with wonder. Beginning Biblical Hebrew is an introduction in the sense that it urges us to return to the beginnings, to wonder about the origins of grammatical structures and the meaning of words. In his discussion of the word *nefesh*, for example, Sacks resists telling us the traditional definition of “soul.” Instead he shares the relevant data: the Akkadian origins of the word, the diverse meanings of the term in ancient Hebrew, its various uses in the Bible. The point is to invite readers to ponder the original concept that Hebrews sought to convey. His conclusion is simply an invitation to think: “I hesitate to offer a definition of the word *nefesh*, but will instead leave you to the dictionaries and to your own reflections” (82).

These few examples suffice to indicate that Sacks’s objective concerns more than supplementing the defects of modern linguistics. Intentional grammar aims at rediscovering ancient thought buried in modern grammar, and the first step is scrutinizing “our own speech and our present ways of thinking” (171). In his discussion of the preposition “of,” Sacks observes that it is natural for us to simply accept prepositions as a natural part of our grammar and as entirely consistent with our experience in the world. But prepositions “are arrived at by human thought. That means that an act of human thought lies within our own daily speech and modes of thinking which we ourselves have never thought. To that extent we lack self-understanding. It is this situation that makes it necessary for us to go back
with such care in order to get a clearer glimpse of ourselves, and of the things that we thoughtfully take for granted” (70).

Language provides us a handy set of concepts for organizing the world that we tend to accept without further scrutiny. We have inherited prepositions, but we can appropriate them only “by thinking through the gap between its present formality and those antique feelings which were its progenitors” (122). Sacks’s suggestion is that in order to examine ourselves honestly, we need to excavate the thought behind our concepts, to rediscover “the archaic process of thinking” (86). Intentional grammar in this sense is a prerequisite not only for studying revelation, but also for philosophy.

Whereas Spinoza’s method closes off scripture as a source of wisdom, Sacks’s method has the very opposite effect. Consider the example of the notational accents, or ta’amim, which appear above and below letters in scripture. These markings do not appear to operate according to fixed rules. Nor is it clear whether their function is to indicate tone or grammar. Are they intended to signify pitch, emotional states, inflections, attitudes? Are they primarily musical or grammatical markers? Because they elude fixed rules of usage, Spinoza urges us to abandon the attempt to find meaning in them, by suggesting instead that they have become hopelessly corrupted over time. He also rejects the idea that everything in scripture has meaning, let alone infinitely many profound meanings. Sacks suggests an alternative: it may be the case that the ta’amim have become corrupt, but we cannot determine this until we make an investigation. In one of the most striking sections of his book, he sets out to discover their purpose in a Socratic spirit: “the secret of such investigations is to be as naïve as possible and not to fear spelling out the obvious” (102). His investigation leads him to reflect upon the relation of language and music, and the differences between Western and biblical musical notation and grammar. Despite his findings, however, he does not rule out the possibility that Spinoza may have been right; instead, he urges us to carry on the investigation.

Sacks does not venerate the ancients simply because of their age, nor does he take progress for granted and assume the superiority of the moderns. Rather, he seeks to clarify the difference because we have inherited the ancient world in our language. If we wish to know ourselves, and ultimately the truth of things, we cannot avoid exploring the history of logos despite the fact that it is deeply hidden in language. When he explores

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10 Spinoza, Theologico-Political Treatise, 140.
the Hebrew term for “time,” Sacks notes how the word evolved from the notion of a special occasion to the more modern notion of magnitude, that is, the view of time we have inherited: “This new concept of time as a magnitude, like other keystones of the modern world, has buried itself within our consciousness and now masquerades as part of our nature; but it was not always so” (144).

Sacks’s approach to grammar will remind readers of his approach to the biblical text, particularly his rejection of method as a starting point. This is hardly an accident; in fact, his grammar predates the study of revelation. He admits that “the bulk” of Beginning Biblical Hebrew was written nearly forty years ago (171). The search for linguistic intentionalism is an essential part of his approach to scripture. Both approaches cannot be considered “methods” because they are characterized by their awareness that we do not yet know the nature of revelation. Sacks’s approach to both grammar and scripture is characterized by this openness:

Of recent times it has become the custom to preface any work of this nature with a discourse concerning Methods of Interpretation, and yet it is difficult to see how that can be done. To do so would presuppose that we already know how to read the book before we begin. Unfortunately that is untrue. Each book has its own way about it, and generally we begin to learn how to read a book by stumbling around in it for a very long time until we find our way. Otherwise we risk the danger of reading the book by a method foreign to the intent of the author.11

In the case of revelation, Sacks urges to proceed with caution. In the absence of a method, we cannot be sure whether we are discovering something real or imagining it to be so. Even as we start to uncover a sense of the whole, this is only a “minor guarantee” that we have discovered something about the origins, or the intentions of the author.

In fact, Sacks’s interpretation of the Hebrew Bible does point us toward a central theme, namely, God’s attempt to guide men toward the highest good despite the ongoing resistance of creation, both earth and man, to this education. Sacks describes this education in terms of lifting human desires toward the good as “the New Way.”12 But the story is hardly straightforward and does not proceed in a linear fashion. As one reader explains, “the

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11 Sacks, Commentary on the Book of Genesis, ii.
book of Genesis tells the story of this lifting, but only by constant references backward upon itself and forward to other incidents in the history of Israel. The constant interweaving of past, present, and future, and the constant forgetting and remembering that such weaving creates, are the material of Genesis, which cannot be understood apart from the other books. Simi-
larly Sacks’s analysis of Hebrew grammar points us to striking insights into subjects as diverse as causality, intellect, plurality, will, personal identity, and time. It is hard to deny that Sacks is on to something, even though it is difficult to verify his findings with quasi-mathematical certainty. In fact, the virtue of Sacks’s method is that its conscious openness to any and all difficulties encountered in the quest to discover meaning ennobles that quest by allowing readers to avoid dogmatic claims to knowledge and to return again and again to the text.

We began with Sacks’s observation that reason and revela-
tion are the dual sources of Western civilization, and like Jacob and Esau, “they sit uneasily together.” This uneasiness is hard to deny, yet also easy to exaggerate. In his efforts to promote political stability, for example, Spinoza suggests that reason and revelation will have nothing to do with each other. Efforts to reconcile them lead invariably to the assertion of the superiority of one over the other. He notes in chapter 15 of the TTP that such efforts usually lead to either dogmatic belief, which rejects reason altogether, or dog-
matic rationalism, which always attempts to subordinate revelation to reason. Spinoza suggests, therefore, that the two be permanently separated. But this means that revelation can make no claims to the truth, and that reason must sometimes defer to revelation despite the absence of truth. Both options are unattractive. The achievement of Robert Sacks is to suggest an alternative which, though not an ultimate solution, allows the two protagonists to sit— albeit uneasily—together. As we have seen, his critical innovation is a method that allows one to approach scripture as a serious guide to a flourishing life without succumbing to dogmatic belief. This solution may have been sug-
gested to him by one of his teachers, Leo Strauss, who pointed out:

If orthodoxy claims to know that the Bible is divinely revealed, that every word of the Bible is divinely inspired, that Moses was the writer of the Pentateuch, that the miracles recorded in the Bible have hap-
pened and similar things, Spinoza has refuted orthodoxy. But the case

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14 Sacks, Book of Job with Commentary, vii.
is entirely different if orthodoxy limits itself to asserting that it believes the aforementioned things, i.e., that they cannot claim to possess the binding power peculiar to the known. For all assertions of orthodoxy rest on the irrefutable premise that the omnipotent God whose will is unfathomable, whose ways are not our ways, who has decided to dwell in the thick darkness, may exist.¹⁵

Through his commentaries on the Bible and his *Beginning Biblical Hebrew*, Sacks offers us an alternative to the dogmatic acceptance of revelation, a position that inevitably undermines reason. He helps us to see that the quest for understanding revelation involves reason and can never abandon it. In doing so, Sacks’s approach contributes significantly to the reinvigoration of revelation as a noble source of Western civilization.