BOOK REVIEWS

J. F. Coakley, *Robinson's Paradigms and Exercises in Syriac Grammar*, 6th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Pp. 179; $43.95.

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Theodore Robinson's *Paradigms and Exercises in Syriac Grammar* has remained a touchstone for all English-speaking learners of Syriac during the past century. This year marks the 100th anniversary of its first edition in 1915. It is now in its sixth edition, and for the past two editions Dr. J. F. Coakley has been the editor in charge of revising and refining this established textbook. To Coakley's great credit, he continues to find ways to improve the book for a new generation of students without drastically changing its tried and tested format.

One virtue of Robinson's grammar has always been its typography, which is clear and historically authentic. No other modern grammar compares in this regard. One of the most important changes to the sixth edition is that Coakley has further improved on the typography, using a modified version of the Beth Mardutho "Serto Qezhayya" font. Coakley has himself written a history of Syriac printing and he maintains an independent press, the Jericho Press, under which imprint he publishes books using Syriac metal type.[1] He purchased the type from Oxford University Press in the 1980s when the Press was selling off its letterpress equipment in the midst of the desktop publishing revolution.[2] Coakley is thus the ideal editor to maintain and extend the success of Robinson's grammar typographically. This more legible textbook improves the experience of learning Syriac even in comparison to the fifth edition.

Complementing the improved typography is the enlarged trim size of the volume. The fourth edition paperback reprint (1981 [1962]) measured approximately 4.9 x 7.3 x 0.5 inches, and Coakley's fifth edition (2002) was similar at 4.65 by 7.3 x 0.6 inches.

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[1] J. F. Coakley, *The Typography of Syriac: A Historical Catalogue of Printing Types, 1537–1958* (New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll, 2006). Jericho Press catalogue of letterpress books online: http://www.jericho-press.com.

[2] J. F. Coakley, "Some Syriac Types at Oxford and Cambridge," *Matrix* 10 (1990), 181–191.

The sixth edition, though still pocketable, comes in a larger and much more comfortable trim size at 5.5 x 8.5 x 0.5 inches. This may seem like a minor change, but it effects daily interaction with the grammar and is more conducive to study. The pages feel less cramped, and the beautiful typography of the book is even crisper on the page. Moreover, despite the increased trim size, the price of the paperback version has dropped significantly, from around 75 USD for the fifth edition to 40 USD for the sixth, making the book more accessible to students in every way. Typography, size, and cost may be low-hanging fruit in terms of revisions, but these changes are fundamental for students and, as such, are very welcome.

The question for teachers of Syriac, of course, is whether Robinson's method of focusing on morphology, over linguistics or syntax, is the appropriate way to teach Syriac in a pedagogical climate that de-emphasizes memorization and paradigms. In that regard, the book has not changed much since the first edition, and the sixth edition does not apologize for the method. Nevertheless, the grammar is systematic and thorough, covering the most important topics for reading introductory texts of Syriac. In my own experience of teaching beginning Syriac from Coakley's sixth edition, we were able to complete the textbook in one semester, freeing us to jump straight into Syriac texts in the second. If the goal is to give students the ability to explore the language for themselves as quickly as possible, then Coakley's Robinson is still the ideal tool. There is very little morphology that students will encounter that the textbook has not already covered. This is not the case with syntax, of course, for which Nöldeke, Duval, and other reference grammars remain indispensable.

On the subject of reading, however, one desperately wishes for real Syriac to be used in the exercises or, at least, for short passages from Syriac texts to be added to the end of the exercises. This would bring it in line with standard morphologically-based textbooks from the discipline of Classics (such as Hansen and Quinn for Greek and Wheelock for Latin), as well as Bentley Layton's *Coptic in Twenty Lessons* (Leuven, 2006). This remains, as I think Coakley would acknowledge, the weakness of the book. Nevertheless, the book remains conservative precisely because it has been successful, and these manufactured Syriac exercises, designed to

target the morphology and vocabulary of the chapter, have been one of the book's calling cards from the beginning.

The order of chapters in the sixth edition is unchanged from the fifth, so there is no need to go into detail here, except to emphasize that the fifth and sixth editions represent a dramatic improvement over the fourth edition. The fifth edition introduced a section on writing the script (pp. 4–9), and the sixth edition's new trim size really helps with reading the diagrams of, for instance, the *kaph* and the *shin*. In both the fifth and sixth editions the participle is given its own chapter (pp. 45–49), and morphological categories are dealt with in a much more logical sequence. Between the fifth and the sixth, there are numerous minor differences, but even teachers familiar with the fifth edition would be hard pressed to identify them. Words and phrases are substituted in examples throughout, and several tables of forms have been cleaned up. All the misprints that Coakley found in the fifth edition have been corrected.

Nevertheless, some obstacles in the presentation remain. Occasional grammatical topics are dealt with in oblique ways, often not in the chapter that makes the most linguistic sense. As a result, morphology has a domineering effect on the grammar, encouraging students to associate false linguistic friends with one another only because their forms are similar. For instance, p. 42: "It is convenient to deal here with another set of feminine nouns which look similar, although strictly speaking they have 'invariable' vowels." Likewise, why does the objective pronominal suffix as indirect object show up at the end of Chapter 23 (p. 132), even though two chapters devoted to suffixes appeared earlier (pp. 84–94)? No justification is given, except that the late chapter deals with "pronominal suffixes attached to *lamad-yod* verbs". Similarly, the book's discussion of passive participles in an active sense is merely tacked on to the end of Chapter 21 (p. 101). Presumably, this location was chosen because it is only in this chapter on *pe-alaph* verbs that the student is equipped to encounter the verb *eḥad* ("to seize"), one of the principal verbs to exhibit this use of the passive participle. Yet this is less help to the student who dimly remembers the book's discussion of this grammatical concept and is looking for a refresher.

One further example of linguistics submitting to morphology appears on p. 46: "*Active participles as nouns and adjectives.* The active

participle is formally a kind of *nomen agentis* ('agent-noun'; in English: kill*er*). It is not, however, the usual one, which in *peʿal* is ...مُهِنْلا The participle is more often found in such phrases as: ..." Thus, the sentence begins with the linguistic relationship between the participle and the *nomen agentis*, the latter is then introduced obliquely, and only subsequently do we learn the purpose and syntax of the participle. This is an improvement over the fourth edition, which avoided the participle almost entirely, but it is confusing for the student who is learning about participles, not the *nomen agentis*. Conversely, if you are interested in constructing the *nomen agentis*, how would you go about finding it when it appears as a parenthesis in the participle chapter? To be fair, Coakley's Robinson is not meant to be a reference grammar, but the indirectness of some points adds more complexity than assistance. This occasional obscurity could perhaps be offset by a comprehensive index, which would benefit the student who uses the book for reference in the second semester or second year of Syriac.

A basic set of full paradigms for the strong and the weak verb, both with and without suffixes, would increase the book's utility. I remember photocopying such paradigms from Nöldeke when I was first learning and folding them into my copy of Robinson's fourth edition. It surprises that this crude stopgap is still necessary for what is otherwise an elegant and complete introductory grammar.

Qushaya and *rukaka* signs are only marked in cases "when pronunciation is unexpected or might be in doubt" (p. 12). This is understandable in the sense that Syriac manuscripts do not all employ "the dot" or employ it consistently.[3] But in practice it is confusing for the beginning student who struggles with where dots belong and, even, why they are used in the first place. This method introduces unnecessary complexity, despite the very helpful appendix on rules for *bgdkpt* letters. Artificial as this suggestion may seem to paleographers, it may be better to mark all *qushaya* and *rukaka* signs throughout the book in an effort to reinforce proper pronunciation. This would parallel the universal presence of vocalization despite the fact that students are destined to meet unvocalized texts early in their studies. And artificiality is not a problem in a textbook as long as it does not instill bad habits (e.g., many older textbooks

[3] See now George A. Kiraz, *The Syriac Dot: A Short History* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2015).

of beginning Greek eschew accents, to the detriment of the student). Consider the following artifice that is completely justified on both historical and practical grounds: Coakley's Robinson uses the West Syriac script and vowels but vocalizes and transliterates Syriac throughout in the East Syriac tradition (p. 12, with n. 4 and Appendix C).

Despite these quibbles, Coakley's sixth edition of *Robinson's Paradigms and Exercises in Syriac Grammar* remains the textbook to beat. Coakley has shown reverence for the format of the grammar's traditional presentation while also significantly improving it. Some changes are obvious, like the enlarged trim size, but some are subtle, such as the many small corrections and adjustments throughout. If you own the fifth edition and wonder whether to buy the sixth edition, this reviewer offers an unqualified yes, and if you are still using the fourth edition, then run, do not walk, to buy Coakley's sixth edition! The grammar has reached, in many ways, the perfection of the form that Robinson inaugurated in 1915.

As a consequence of its refinement, if the grammar is going to be improved upon in the future the editor will now be forced to rethink certain constituent elements of the book that have been a part of it since the beginning. Chief among these is the question of using passages from Syriac literature in the exercises. I would advocate either employing authentic sentences from texts (and adjusting the vocabularies accordingly), or, keeping the original exercises while introducing reading selections taken from the Bible or from simple prose and verse in idiomatic Syriac (with appropriate glosses). This would further improve what is already an excellent grammar. Instead of a key to the exercises as they stand—a desideratum often requested by students—what is in order for the seventh edition is a thorough rethinking of the exercises. That said, Coakley's sixth edition is a venerable and compelling textbook and should have a place in every university library as well as on the shelf of every Syriacist.