Barry, Bandstra

*Genesis 1–11: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*

Baylor Handbook on the Hebrew Text


Paul L. Chen
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Houston, Texas

Bandstra’s *Genesis 1–11: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* is the second volume of the Baylor Handbook on the Hebrew Text series. This volume is basically divided into three parts. The first part covers the preface and the abbreviations (xi–xvi); the second part, the introduction and the “handbook” of Gen 1–11 per se (1–612), and, finally, the glossary, bibliography, and index (613–29). While the preface provides the author’s academic background and explains the lengthy journey to his approach, it is in the introduction and the glossary that one finds the key to understand this new text-linguistic methodology. The introduction is a type of “crash” course where the author introduces the innovative concepts, the new categories, and the techniques of the so-called functional grammar. The glossary is helpful in that it explains all the new descriptive terms. In fact, without a careful reading of the introduction, this handbook would be unintelligible and even hard to use. Bandstra endorses this fact in his preface, where he calls the attention of the reader to note that, only by working “through the Introduction and refer[ring] to the Glossary throughout, will any of this make sense at all” (xii).

Bandstra starts his introduction by pinpointing the deficiency of introductory courses in classical Hebrew grammar. He argues that these courses basically focus on the grammatical forms and vocabulary and do not provide adequate tools to go beyond the clause level. He targets students at the intermediate and advanced levels and intends to take them a step further to a better understanding of the structure of the language and the
biblical text (1). Then he proceeds to explain his approach based on the principles of functional linguistics. The functional approach used in this handbook is called “systemic functional grammar” and is based on the work of M. A. K. Halliday’s work (An Introduction to Functional Grammar [London: Matthiessen, 2004]).

Bandstra identifies three core usages of language in human verbal and written communication. He explains that people use language: to give their worldview; to interact with others; and to shape messages in the larger context. Under these premises, the functional grammar “sorts out these factors into three main areas of meaning, called Metafunctions, and each metafunction has an effect on the wording of a clause” (2). In addition, by viewing these metafunctions together “as three overlays of meaning, much like multiple transparencies on an overhead projector that project a single image” (3), they enhance the meaning of a text.

These three kinds of function in the clause are labeled Mood, Textuality, and Transitivity. Mood is the first metafunction, and it is related to the interpersonal interaction between a speaker and a hearer. There are two basic components in the Mood: the Subject and the Definite. The second metafunction is Transitivity, and it is related to the experiential expression of the speaker. The basic components of this metafunction are Process, Participants, and Circumstance. Finally, the third metafunction, Textuality, “has to do with how the clause is structurally related to the larger message” (19). The two components identified in Textuality are Theme and Rheme. Throughout the introduction Bandstra explains in detail each of these metafunctions, along with their constituents and components (see the summary diagram on 37).

Following the introduction comes the main portion of this handbook, which is the application of the functional analysis to the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Bandstra defines a certain passage that he calls a “clause complex” and then examines each verse in the clause complex according to the functional grammar. However, it is not clear how Bandstra does it. In chapters 1 and 5 he seems to follow the Masoretic annotation for open (ו) and closed (ס) paragraphs. However, in other chapters it seems that these passages are chosen arbitrarily by the author, although Bandstra himself states that the key “to analyzing biblical text using functional approach is identifying and delineating clauses” (34).

Bandstra follows the same pattern throughout the analysis of Gen 1–11. First he provides the passage under analysis, for instance, Gen 1:1–5; an English translation then follows. Each verse in Hebrew (Masoretic Text) is analyzed at the clause level, where the constituents and its component are defined and laid out in a chart. The analysis and a chart for Gen 1:1 is reproduced here as illustration.
In this verse Bandstra takes the constituents of the three metafunctions in this way: Textuality is appositive expansion because it has no prefixed conjunction. Mood is declarative and is related to past occurrence. This means that this verse is a statement about the past. Finally, Transitivity is material and denotes an action; that is, it is a straightforward declaration about a deity creating the heavens and the earth. Then all the components of the constituents of the metafunctions are defined and placed in a chart.

This is the methodology Bandstra uses throughout the analysis of Gen 1–11. This approach is interesting in that it allows the student of biblical Hebrew to see, in some instances, how the clauses are built to achieve a certain purpose. However, in other instances the functional grammar seems to impose linguistic principles instead of allowing the text to uncover its richness. For instance, in the analysis of the relationship between Gen 1:1 and 1:2, Bandstra takes verse 1 as a title verse for the creation account that follows. In a simplistic assessment, he argues that this verse provides “a statement that stands on its own” (42). As result, Bandstra takes all the clauses in verse 2 as paratactic expansions of verse 1. Yet this is only one among other viable analyses for this controversial discussion, as Bandstra admits in his assessment (42). Another example is found in Gen 6:3, where the Masoretic notation is neglected in lieu of a preconceived idea. Though Bandstra calls the attention of the readers to how the “system of conjunctive and disjunctive accents … are useful in delimiting multi-word constituents within transitivity structure of the clauses” (31), in this verse he takes בָשָׂר הֻוֹ as a hypotactic clause dependent on the following clause. In this way he renders this verse as follows: “Since also he is flesh, his days will be 120 years” (331). However, the Masoretic disjunctive accent athnach on the word בָשָׂר seems to work against
this rendering, mainly because it divides the meaning of this verse in the middle. In other words, this approach seems to present some shortcomings for the interpretation and the delimitation of the clauses. Still, as a refinement in the study of the biblical text, it may provide, in some cases, alternate insights in the functionality of the clauses.

Another point of concern is the complexity of this approach. Bandstra admits in his introduction that the functional grammar may seem “complex and daunting” (38) to the reader, unless one follows his methodology strictly (38–39). It is evident that this is not a user-friendly tool and that the student of biblical Hebrew is expected to have reasonable knowledge of linguistics. It is the opinion of this reviewer that this is not a commonplace even for the students at the intermediate or advanced levels. In spite of these challenges, this handbook introduces a new perspective for the study of the biblical Hebrew text and can certainly be used as an additional resource for research purpose.

I noted also the following typographical errors. On page 17 the word “stystem” should be “system.” On pages 41, 45, 46, and 47 “Transivity” in the chart should be “Transitivity.” On page 505, the passage should include verse 29 in the translation and analysis. For a new edition’s improvement, on pages 205, 220, and 224 the words “Textuality, Mood and Transitivity” in the chart should be written in bold; on page 262 the word “Textuality” in the verse 4:16 chart should also be in bold.