

BOOK REVIEWS

Rodney J. Decker, *Reading Koine Greek: An Introduction and Integrated Workbook*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 672 pp.

Rod Decker (1952-2014) taught for many years Greek and New Testament at the Baptist Bible Seminary, Clarks Summit, PA. *Reading Koine Greek* is his major contribution to the study of Koine Greek, with a certain potential to inspire the young generations of students in the language of the New Testament. His style is fluid and easy to follow. He discusses even difficult material in an accessible way, reflecting his excellent command of Koine Greek and teaching skills.

As the title suggests, Decker's aim was to enable people to read Greek: the NT to be sure, but also the LXX, the Pseudepigrapha, and the Apostolic Fathers. The author is convinced that the reader who has a good knowledge of Greek and the thought world of the Koine period can grasp the meaning of the New Testament at a deeper level. To this end, the book is meticulously researched and interacts with cutting edge linguistics. He even provides Randall Buth's compelling alternative to, along with, the standard Erasmian pronunciation. The integrated workbook exercises are another bonus, especially because, like Decker's examples of grammar and syntax, they are not drawn exclusively from the NT.

After an informative, brief history of the language and overview of the alphabet, accents, and pronunciation, Decker begins (Lessons 2-4) with first and second declension nouns, articles, pronouns and their cases (the vocative is covered in Appendix D). His discussion of the nominative and accusative cases is functional and very basic (nominative = subject, accusative = direct object), but that of the genitive and dative is more nuanced. He calls the genitive restrictive and offers a number of examples of ways the case restricts head nominals (p. 47-48). Concerning the dative, he notes that the case designates "various relationships within a sentence," the most frequent of which he lists (p. 53). After reminding the reader that English has two articles, Decker is careful to point out that Greek has only one,

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moreover that it should not be identified as a definite article. Very helpful is the fact that adjectives (including the adjectival uses of ἀπότος) and adverbs are tackled in the same lesson. And unlike many first-year grammars, he mentions adjectives modifying anarthrous nouns and provides solid treatment of the comparison of adjectives and adverbs. Also above and beyond what one might expect from an introductory grammar is the lesson on conjunctions. Not only does he look at the major conjunctions, but he also offers “clues to sentence structure” (p. 133). In other words, he makes students aware of the basic patterns of word order they will encounter as they read more Greek. In Lesson 11, he includes a good explanation of third declension nouns whose stems end in stops and liquids. For the remaining three stem types he merely offers paradigms.

In Lesson 5, he introduces verbs humorously with the present tenses of λύω, “the lion—King of the Verbs” (complete with picture, p. 79) and εἰμί. He doesn’t dive into verbal aspect theory in his first lesson on verbs and takes a gentle approach that might win over some who remain skeptical about aspect. In fact, he doesn’t even mention verbal aspect in the lesson. He merely notes that in English verbs have tenses related to time, whereas in Greek time is more a matter of contextual clues than tense-form selection. In Lesson 7, the aorist is introduced as the most-commonly-used, default tense-form that “simply refers to a situation in summary without indicating anything further about the action” (p. 120). Before this basic definition, however, Decker chose to say first about the aorist that it carries “the main story-line in narrative” (p. 117). That is, he anticipated about how to read stories long before providing any detailed explanation of perfective aspect. That explanation comes in Lesson 13, “Verbal Semantics,” after students have seen quite a few verb forms in the exercises. The lesson incidentally is the first in Part 3 of the book, which focuses on verbs. Along with the three aspects (perfective = action viewed “as a complete event, without commenting on whether or not it is a process,” imperfective = action viewed “as a process” and stative = action viewed as “a state of affairs (a condition) that exists, with no reference to any progress and that involves no change,” pp. 224-225), including a fine paragraph distinguishing aspect from Aktionsart, Decker deals with voice (“deponent” verbs are described as “middle-only” in Lesson 15 and defined as generally having “inherent middle meaning[s]” p. 252) and mood. Lessons 14-21 treat the indicative mood (including stops, liquids and contract verbs), and Les-

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sons 22-29 are devoted to non-finite verbs and the non-indicative moods. The final lessons (30-33) cover conditions (both formal and informal), discourse and $\mu\tau$ verbs.

In addition to his approach to verbal aspect in general, Decker's handling of participles in particular will interest teachers considering using his text. He states succinctly, "The key to the meaning of a participle is verbal aspect" (p. 395). Not surprisingly, he also affirms that adverbial participles deal with time relative to that of the main verb, with present participles tending to indicate contemporaneous action and aorist participles tending to indicate prior action. He skillfully explains more categories of adverbial participles than most introductory grammars, even if many of them are under the heading, "Advanced Information for Reference." At the same time, he warns about standard adverbial labels (causal, modal, temporal etc.): "These categories are summaries of the types of contexts in which the participles are used; they do not describe different kinds of participles" (p. 395). If that were not enough, he continues, "Referring to a 'causal participle' is just a shorthand expression for 'an adverbial participle used in a context where the participle is clearly related to the main verb in a causal way'" (Ibid.). These remarks tend to clarify for the students the often difficult to perceive relationship between a participle and its main verb.

There are little pearls to be discovered throughout the book. The "Greeklish" on page 30 opens an entertaining way to make students focus on case endings instead of word order to determine the grammatical function of nominals. A useful thing for many teachers (and all visual learners) is the fact that Decker begins the practice of incorporating grammatical diagrams into the text in Lesson 3 (the final lesson on cases). And along the same lines, he explains new material by analogy, or lack thereof, to English grammar and syntax. Instead of mice, lions or the more traditional circle, Decker illustrates the spatial prepositions with a wormy apple (p. 158). Right from the start with prepositions, he also makes it abundantly clear that they usually have wide, and often overlapping, ranges of meaning (p. 156). The mnemonic devices, "Saucy a, S own sin os" for third declension endings and "Stealing Chickens" for εἷς, μία, ἕν, though perhaps a bit odd, are also just plain fun. Likewise, he uses Robertson's comparison, borrowed from the classical scholar Voss, of a participle to a mule. These expressions of fun and humor in an otherwise thorough, scholarly grammar relax the the reader's strain of some elements of Greek that may

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seem confusing. The book is well organized and visually pleasing. It appends extensive reference charts and a nicely detailed glossary of Greek vocabulary.

In conclusion, Decker's book is a fine tool available to everyone who wants to engage in the labour of studying the Koine Greek.

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