Robert D. Holmstedt has taught Hebrew for over 15 years, and has for the last 10 years pursued, published, and presented significant research in the area of Hebrew linguistics. Working from a generative framework he has contributed in particular to discussions of word order (Holmstedt argues that Hebrew is S–V) and to analysis of the relative clause. Current projects include extensive involvement with the syntax database in development for Accordance Bible Software. It is thus out of both a love for teaching and a rich awareness of linguistics that Holmstedt approaches his task in Ruth. My own interest in Holmstedt’s work (and in the Baylor series) stems from similar interests: on the one hand, I desire to find a tool I could place in the hands of students who have finished a first-year Hebrew course for self-study; on the other, I would like to see a potential textbook with a particular ability to showcase Hebrew linguistics for the uninitiated. With some minor caveats I may say that Holmstedt’s Ruth: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text admirably fulfills both of these longings.

The introductory sections are very helpful; the commentary is insightful and rewarding. The only caveat regarding content is rather small: the uninitiated reader will need more background on Hebrew linguistics than found here—but this is, after all, a commentary. My own interest in Holmstedt’s work (and in the Baylor series) stems from similar interests: on the one hand, I desire to find a tool I could place in the hands of students who have finished a first-year Hebrew course for self-study; on the other, I would like to see a potential textbook with a particular ability to showcase Hebrew linguistics for the uninitiated. With some minor caveats I may say that Holmstedt’s Ruth: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text admirably fulfills both of these longings.

The work is divided into four preliminary sections and the commentary proper in four acts, followed by bibliography and author and subject indices. Helpful additions for a future edition might include a glossary of linguistic terms and an index of Scripture citations.

Section two comprises a brief introduction to Holmstedt’s linguistic model with focus on syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. While this section is helpful and necessary it is in some ways disappointing, for while the presentation is sufficient for researchers already familiar with linguistics, it is all too brief to be of help to most students who have completed a first year of Hebrew. (For instance, semantics and pragmatics are introduced in a total of three pages—including two charts.) Some of this oversight is tempered by §2.5, “Putting All the Pieces Together: Constituent Movement” (pp. 11–16), which is mostly concerned with word order but identifies and discusses specific examples of topic, focus, etc. as it proceeds. The section does state that more detailed information may be sought in Holmstedt 2005, Holmstedt 2009a, and Cook and Holmstedt 2009, all of which are readily accessible from Holmstedt’s faculty page [1]

In contrast to the spartan overview of Holmstedt’s linguistic model, §3 is a 23-page discussion of linguistic issues in dating Ruth. After discussing the proposal of dates ranging from Solomon to the postexilic period he notes the challenge of Young, Rezetko, and Ehrensvärd[2] to the notion of observable chronological stages in Biblical Hebrew. Holmstedt proceeds to consider matters of orthography, assimilation of the nun in rá, morphological features (paragogic nun 2fs qatal verbs with rá– endings, and π– pronouns with apparent feminine antecedents), use of wayyiqtol and modal qatal forms, numerous syntactic features, and lexical features (including archaisms, mixed early/late items, and various potential borrowings from Aramaic). Holmstedt concludes that “all the relevant data suggest (but not strongly) that Ruth was written during a period of Aramaic ascendancy but not dominance, and thus it may come from the early Persian period” (p. 39). A more detailed argument (with more direct engagement of Young, Rezetko, and Ehrensvärd) is available on the author’s website.

The fourth section, “The Use of Language to Color Characters’ Speech” (pp. 41–49), brings together linguistics, sociolinguistics, and literary considerations to demonstrate how the storyteller “manipulat[es] language for the purpose of characterization” (p. 41). Illustrations from Pygmalion, Beowulf, and the Canterbury Tales help show how this technique operates across languages, but there is no shortage of instances in Ruth, either. For example, Holmstedt “suggest[s] that the narrator has used marginal—but understandable—language to give the book a foreign (Moabit-isch?) or perhaps archaic (i.e., “back in those days they talked funny”) coloring” (p. 47, in reference to the apparent gender-confusion of pronouns, suffixes, and verb in 1:8, 9, 11, 13, 19, 22; 4:11). Also, regarding “[t]he grammatical mess at the end of 2:7, יִהְיָדֹ֣ה יִתֵּן נַפְלֵי...I take the overseer’s confused language as a reflection of his nervousness. In other words, the end of the verse is not grammatical Hebrew and intentionally so” (p. 48). Such helpful insights permeate the commentary as well.

The commentary proper in its four acts is laid out by scene. Each scene has a brief synopsis followed by the author’s translation and extended comment on each verse. Headings on each page identify the verses under discussion, making it very easy to find a particular reference quickly. The commentary is particularly rich not only for its linguistic and literary observations, but for Holmstedt’s keen ability to address the “what on earth is that?” issues that sometimes seem to overwhelm intermediate students set loose in real Hebrew texts, for instance, why is there a dagesh qaf in the ב in יִתְבַּה in 1:1 (p. 54), or, why does Act II Scene 2 begin with a qatal form instead of a wayyiqtol (2:4, p. 112).

The introductory sections are very helpful; the commentary is insightful and rewarding. The only caveat regarding content is rather small: the uninitiated reader will need more background on Hebrew linguistics than found here—but this is, after all, a commentary. My other concerns and disappointments are exclusively with the type-setting, which is truly a disservice to the author (though not one that by any means nullifies the usefulness of the work). Most grievous is the unfortunate line spacing in the commentary: whole phrases are reproduced where they are commented on, and the size of the Hebrew font and the spacing of the lines means that at times vowels and accents are printed on top of one another, requiring the reader to reference a separate Hebrew Bible or turn back a page to where the whole verse is printed with adequate spacing (see, for example, pp. 55, 58, 68, 89, 129, 151, 185, and perhaps the most atrocious: 190). Numerous typos also persist, generally of the type that distracts rather than obfuscates (for example, “The challenges to the model
In summary, Holmstedt has provided Hebrew students, teachers, and researchers with an invaluable tool for the book of Ruth. He has further demonstrated the power of linguistics in considering the style and features of a whole text, while addressing many puzzling questions of morphology, phonology, syntax, and semantics along the way. Would that many more such works may follow.

Anthony R. Pyles, McMaster Divinity College
