Mr Beetham’s book is described by his publisher in the blurb as a ‘course for absolute beginners’, and by himself in the Preface as ‘a quick course for those who wish to read Homer in the original tongue but know no Greek’ and as a course which ‘assumes no previous knowledge of Greek’. The course is also described as being ‘suitable for independent study’.

In that case, there could be no better qualified a reviewer than the writer, who wished to learn Classical Greek mainly for the purpose of reading Homer in the original, and who has tried and failed to do so on a number of occasions, in spite of a successful record as a student of both Latin and several modern languages. In chronological order, then, I have failed to learn using Wilding’s *Greek for Beginners*, failed to learn under private tuition, failed to learn using Mr Beetham’s book, succeeded in a comprehensive way using *Reading Greek*, and now have re-perused Mr Beetham’s book for the purpose of reviewing it.

Are the above descriptions correct?

In its physical presentation the book is well-bound and of a suitable size for a text-book, being smallish and light-weight. The paper is of good quality and the print fonts are neat, clear, and simple. But for some reason only the preface is distinguished by an upper case heading and a bold print sub-heading, separated by spaces from each other and from the text; the 25 sections and several appendices have headings which are not distinguished in any way at all from the subsequent text. Within the sections, the
layout is equally cramped, and the transitions from topic to topic are rarely marked in an immediately visible way. Nor does the layout adequately reflect the fact that, for learners, blank spaces between blocks of text are vital in the ordering of the material to be learned. The book therefore appears to have no structure. For beginners, their struggle to orient themselves among the pathless jungle of the material they have to assimilate is made rather more difficult by the message they receive from the text that it, too, cannot impose some order and pattern on its own content. And how can beginners learn, if not by having the material ordered for them in some basic, assimilable fashion, subject to refinement as their grasp of the basics becomes more secure?

Mr Beetham himself acknowledges that '{t}he order in which the grammar is presented is naturally influenced by the need to begin reading Odyssey V as soon as possible'. No doubt there are as many different views on the best order of presentation of Greek grammar as there are teachers of it, and, in particular, there could be some merit in considering the order in terms of the mix and relative timing of concepts with which English speakers are familiar (such as tense) and concepts which are strange to them (such as aspect). That having been said, if Mr Beetham's order of presentation reflects the relative prominence in Odyssey V of the various grammatical forms, then there cannot be much quarrel with the rationale for his choices. He does, however, seem to lose sight at an early stage of the 'absolute beginner' for whom his work is intended; for example, on 21 he refers in his first footnote twice to the 'aorist' and once to the 'aorist passive', when the only reference to the aorist up to that point has been in a single sentence on 11; the much-enduring learner must wait until 32 for a further two sentences on this important subject, and until 60 for a fuller explanation (although that in turn seems to me to concentrate too much on tense rather than aspect).

There are numerous examples of both the fact and the manner of the presentation of concepts that are not only not necessary for beginners, but are downright unhelpful. At the very simplest
level, there is no need to introduce words like ‘paratactic’ (vi),
when all beginners need for their encouragement is to be told that
in Epic the content is often presented in clauses strung together like
beads on a string, rather than enclosed in each other like a nest of
boxes. Or, on a more complex point, the following passage (97),
quite suitable for an experienced student, seems too heavy for a
beginner:

‘In Homer subjunctives are sometimes found with short vowels,
e.g.
άλλα ἄγ γών αὐτός πειρήσομαι ήδε ἰδωμαι.
(Odyssey VI, 126)

“But come, let me myself try and see for myself”

where πειρήσομαι by itself would be ambiguous and could be
future “I shall try”, except that ἰδωμαι is unambiguously aorist
subjunctive, and the formula ἄγε! (“come!”) is frequently
followed by a subjunctive. This use, in Homer, of a short vowel
where we should expect a long one in the subjunctive is
especially common with weak aorist subjunctives where the
aorist indicative ends—(σ)α and the aorist subjunctive ends—
(σ)ω (called “sigmatised aorists” on 61). When the short-
vowel aorist subjunctive has the same form as the future
indicative, they have to be distinguished by the context e.g.

“ἀμφίπολοι, στῆθ’ οὐτώ ἀπόπροθεν, ἄφρ’ ἐγώ αὐτός
ἀληθ’ ἠμοίν ἀπολούσομαι, ἀμφὶ δ’ ἐλαίῳ
χρίσομαι ή γὰρ δηρὸν ἀπὸ χρόνος ἐστιν ἀλοιφή.
ἀντὴν δ’ οὐκ ἄν ἐγώ γε λοέσομαι.” (Odyssey VI, 218-
221)

“Maidservants, stand far away like this, so that I myself may wash
the salt from my two shoulders and anoint myself around with
olive oil; for indeed, for a long time from my skin embrocation is (= has been and still is) absent; but I would not wash myself in front
(of you).”
(Clearly ἀπολούσαμαι is the subjunctive of ἀπελουσάμην, and χρίσομαι the subjunctive of ἔχρισαίμην because they come after ὁφρα and λοέσσομαι is probably aorist subjunctive because it occurs here with ἃν ["would"]).

The two and a half pages of mainly technical material on the Homeric hexameter which appear in the middle of Section [Lesson] 4 is both too much, at that stage in a beginner's progress, and too little, in terms of explanatory content, and would in any case have been better relegated to an appendix.

On the other hand, the principles and indeed the existence of contracted verb endings are dealt with in the body of the text through footnotes, and then by an appendix which sets the material out quite adequately. Mr Beetham seems ambivalent about how forthcoming he should be on this topic, perhaps because the Epic 'dialect' is not consistent in its usages, but in my opinion it would have been clearer had he dealt with the matter fairly early in the text and left it to the student to recognise the uncontracted forms whenever they occurred. Incidentally, Mr Beetham speaks of the Epic 'dialect' as though it were lexically equivalent to the Attic dialect, the Ionian dialect, the Aeolian dialect and so forth; a rather careless manner of speaking, though perhaps not liable to mislead anyone intelligent enough to be tackling his book. Mr. Beetham is not, in fact, as nice in his use of language as a language teacher ought to be; take, for example, the following note (8): 'The prefix α- meaning "un-" is called α-privative because it cancels the meaning of what immediately follows'.

Finally, there is a marked concentration on accidence at the expense of syntax. The accusative and infinitive construction, for example, does not rate a mention—yet on 104 we find an example which begs for some elucidation, but is translated as 'look, he affirms a man to be here (= look, he says that there is a man here [now]).'
It will be clear that I do not consider Mr Beetham’s book suitable for a beginner. He is not sufficiently focused on the needs of beginners; they need clarity, simplicity, and above all repetition; one needs to draw on their existing knowledge of English without overloading them with technical terms.

Still less do I agree with this further claim by the publisher: ‘The basic knowledge acquired will enable the new student to read in Greek, with discernment, the rest of the journey’s story, and will open the door to all of Homer’s work.’ The new student has been reading Homer, if at all, on the basis of Mr Beetham’s recipe of 6 to 10 lines of text to the rest of the page in footnotes. Unless students are prepared to memorise the greater part of this vast mass of footnotes, they will be lost without them, since the rest of the material simply does not provide a sufficient foundation for further self-study.

One would like to think that Mr Beetham’s diligence in assembling his material will in fact be of use to some class of students, if not to beginners. For myself, I would like to use his footnotes as a commentary to parts of the Odyssey—except that there would remain a nagging unease lest his lack of judgement about how to teach beginners’ Homer extended also to more advanced levels of commentary.

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