This book presents a state-of-the-art overview of the field of Semitic linguistics, both comparative and historical. It is not a book for beginning students but instead requires some familiarity with the languages and the research. It is a comprehensive guide to the research in the field with wide-ranging reference to the corpus of research over the past century.

The work is divided into sixteen units, beginning with an ‘Introduction’ (1–9), setting out the author’s approach, methodology, and transcription, and glossing conventions. The next unit, ‘Languages’ (10–20), gives an overview of the Semitic languages, both ancient and modern. Next is a unit on the ‘Distribution of the Semitic languages’ (21–29) with several detailed maps showing the areas where the languages were or are spoken. ‘Writing systems and scripts’ (30–43) briefly discusses the several writing systems employed for Semitic languages from ancient times to the present.

The next unit, ‘Genetic classification’ (44–57), sets out the approaches and problems with the internal classification of this language family, with its long history of intimate contact between the languages involved. Of particular interest here is the author’s discussion of the vexing problem of the position of Arabic in the family. The following section, ‘Special achievements of Semitic linguistic traditions’ (58–63), is a discussion of the medieval traditions of Arabic and Hebrew grammatical analysis. The first six units form the background for the rest of the work (units 7–16), which deals with the phonology, morphology, and syntax of the Semitic languages, with reference to both the older and the modern languages.

Of note in the section on ‘Phonology’ (64–80) is the brief discussion of irregular or ‘sporadic sound changes and lexical diffusion of sound change’ (70) that interfere in the regularity of sound correspondences. Of interest here, too, are the discussions of issues in modern South Arabian phonology (76–77) and in the phonology of Ethiopian languages (77–80). The characteristic features of Semitic nominal, pronominal, and verbal morphology are extensively treated in the next three units (81–139). The remaining sections (140–311) discuss, in considerable detail, syntactic issues and how they relate to the morphological structures of the languages.

Throughout the book there are well-organized and useful comparative paradigmatic tables and extensive glossed example sentences in transcription. The clear glossing conventions are given at the beginning of the work (xvii–xix). There is an extensive bibliography (313–50) followed by detailed index (351–63). A useful feature of the organization in the book is the summary of the topic of each section given at the beginning of each unit.
This is a very comprehensive and user-friendly work, which will be most valuable to scholars versed in Semitic and Afro-Asiatic languages, but it will be also of interest to typologists and historical linguists.