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SOME GENERAL POINTS ABOUT HEBREW VERBS

The following is a collection of some very general information about verbs in biblical Hebrew. I gathered this information purely to give me some kind of perspective on how verbs are used in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. It is in that sense that I present it in this article. The information here has been mostly taken from the ONLINE BIBLE, which includes much helpful material regarding the biblical languages.

1) In the Old Testament there are 69870 occurrences of HEBREW verbs, and a further 1060 occurrences of ARAMAIC verbs, thus making a grand total of 70930 verb occurrences.

2) Each verb has A ROOT and A MOOD. The "moods" are the same ones for the Hebrew and the Aramaic verbs, but the "roots" have different names in Aramaic.

3) There are 7 major roots for the Hebrew verbs and 6 equivalent roots for the Aramaic verbs. In the following assessment I will ignore the Aramaic verbs, and only consider the Hebrew verbs (the Aramaic verbs merely duplicate the things we'll see with the Hebrew verbs anyway).

Considering the 69870 Hebrew verb occurrences:

4) These 7 major roots between them occur exactly 69366 times.This amounts to 99,278% of all Hebrew verb occurrences. These 7 roots are: QAL + HIPH'IL + PI'EL + NIPH'AL + HITHPA'EL + PU'AL + HOPH'AL.

The remaining 17 minor roots are used in the remaining 0,72% (or 504) of all verb occurrences. Thus, to grasp the meaning of Hebrew verbs in the Old Testament, it is important to understand especially the above 7 roots and their significance. Since the other 17 roots occur only very infrequently, their significance can be examined as and when the need arises.

Now let's take a closer look at the 7 Hebrew roots of verbs in the order of frequency of usage in the Old Testament.

QAL:

This root appears 47292 times (i.e. 67,69% of the total). This expresses the "simple" or "casual" action of the root in the active voice. THIS IS THE DOMINANT VERB PATTERN USED!

Examples are: he sat, he ate, he went, he bought.

HIPH'IL:

This root appears 9471 times (i.e. 13,56% of the total). This usually expresses the "causative" action of QAL. The following examples illustrate this:

QAL	HIPH'IL
he ate	he caused to eat, he fed

he came	he caused to come, he brought
he reigned	he made king, he crowned

PI'EL:

This root appears 6489 times (i.e. 9,29% of the total). This usually expresses an "intensive" or an "intentional" action. Examples are:

QAL	PI'EL
he broke	he broke to pieces, he smashed
he sent	he sent away, he expelled

Sometimes PI'EL introduces a new meaning to the QAL form:

he counted	he recounted, he told
he completed	he paid, he compensated

Sometimes PI'EL expresses a "repeated" or "extended" action:

he jumped	he skipped, he hopped

Some intransitive verbs (i.e. not having a direct object) in QAL become transitive in PI'EL:

to be strong	to strengthen, to fortify
to become great	to make great

NIPH'AL:

This root appears 4182 times (i.e. 5,99% of the total). This expresses the "passive" of QAL. The following examples illustrate this:

QAL	NIPH'AL
he saw	he was seen, he appeared
he saw the angel	the angel was seen
he sent	he was sent
he created	it was created

NIPH'AL sometimes expresses a "reflexive" action:

he guarded	he was guarded; also he guarded himself

Several verbs use NIPH'AL although they express simple action and are active in English. Common examples are: he fought, he remained, he swore, he entered.

HITHPA'EL:

This root appears 1016 times (i.e. 1,45% of the total). This primarily expresses a "reflexive" action of QAL or PIEL. The following examples illustrate this:

QAL	HITHPA'EL
he wore	he dressed himself
he washed	he washed himself
he fell	he flung himself, he fell upon, attacked
he sold	he sold himself, he devoted himself

It also expresses a reciprocal action:

they saw	they looked upon one another
they whispered	they whispered to one another

Also, some verbs in HITHPA'EL are translated as a simple actions and the reflexive action is understood, e.g. he prayed, he mourned, he became angry.

PU'AL:

This root appears 487 times (i.e. 0,7% of the total). This expresses the "passive" of PI'EL. The following examples illustrate:

PI'EL	PU'AL
he smashed	it was smashed
he told	it was told

HOPH'AL:

This root appears 429 times (i.e. 0.61% of the total). This expresses the "passive" of HIPH'IL. The following examples illustrate:

HIPH'IL	HOPH'AL
he told	it was told
he threw	he was thrown

This takes care of the 7 dominant Hebrew roots used in the O.T.. The other 17 roots can be understood by examining how they relate to these 7 roots we have already examined.

5) Here are all 24 roots and how they relate to each other:

There are 4 categories of ACTIVE VOICE ROOTS and each of these has a PASSIVE VOICE

COUNTERPART. The other roots all are either "identical" to these 8 groups, or are "equivalent to" these 8 groups or "function like" these 8 groups. The differences are based on such things as "reduplicating" the final root letter or the final root syllable or the initial root syllable, etc. This can even be seen from the names of these different roots.

We have thus far only examined 7 of these 8 main roots, because the other one is used only 8 times in the whole O.T..

The 8 key roots are:

QAL = simple, casual action; used 47292 times

NIPH'AL = the Passive Voice of QAL; used 4182 times

PI'EL = an intensive or intentional action; used 6489 times

PU'AL = the Passive Voice of PI'EL; used 487 times

HITHPA'EL = a reflexive action of QAL or PI'EL; used 1016 times

HOTHPA'EL = the Passive Voice of HITHPA'EL; used 8 times

HIPH'IL = the causative action of QAL; used 9471 times

HOPH'AL = the Passive Voice of HIPH'IL; used 429 times

Into this framework we can fit the other 16 stems as follows:

PALPAL = functions just like QAL; used 1 time

NITHPA'EL = combines both the qualities of NIPH'AL and HITHPA'EL; it is a passive, intensive, reflexive form; used 2 times

HITHPALEL = is equivalent to HITHPA'EL; used 2 times

HITHPOLEL = is equivalent to HITHPA'EL; used 75 times

HITHPALPEL= is equivalent to HITHPA'EL; used 24 times

HITHPOEL = functions like HITHPA'EL; used 26 times

TIPHEL = functions like HIPH'IL; used 3 times

PILEL = is equivalent to PI'EL; used 11 times

PILPEL = is equivalent to PI'EL; used 54 times

POLEL = functions like PI'EL; used 180 times

POEL = functions like PI'EL; used 74 times

PULAL = is equivalent to PU'AL; used 22 times

POLPAL = functions like PU'AL; used 1 time

POAL = the Passive Voice of POEL, thus functions like PUAL; used 13 times

POLAL = is identical to POAL; used 5 times

POALAL = is identical to POAL; used 3 times

Some time ago I made myself a little chart, which shows these relationships in a graphic way. Once the four basic concepts of these roots, and their Passive Voice counterparts, have been clearly understood, then the other roots, which are only used very rarely anyway, should not present any difficulties. They need only be consulted as the need arises in examining a particular verb.

6) There are basically 5 different MOODS with which each of these stems we have looked at can be used. The 5 different MOODS are:

-IMPERATIVE

-IMPERFECT

-INFINITIVE

-PARTICIPLE

-PERFECT

Let's look at these "moods" more closely:

<u>IMPERATIVE MOOD:</u>

This mood indicates an order or a command. Examples are:

- GO UP to the city

- WASH YOURSELF

- HEARKEN unto the Eternal.

This mood is used 4240 times.

<u>IMPERFECT MOOD:</u>

This expresses an action, process or condition which is incomplete. It is more vivid and pictorial than the PERFECT MOOD. It adds colour and movement by suggesting the "process" preliminary to the completion. Examples are:

- HE PUT FORTH his hand to the door

- IT CAME TO A HALT

- I BEGAN TO HEAR

- Why ARE YOU DISTRESSED? (implying continuation)

The unfinished condition of an action may consist of its frequent repetition; in the present:

- a wise son MAKETH GLAD his father;

and in the past:

- the manna CAME DOWN (regularly)

- a mist USED TO GO UP

- he SPOKE (repeatedly)

and in the future:

- now SHALL YOU SEE what I WILL DO

- he took his son who WAS TO REIGN.

This mood is used 28980 times.

PERFECT MOOD:

This expresses a completed action. This mood is often used where the present is employed in English. Some examples are:

- I HAVE COME to tell you the news

- I HAVE NOT SEEN a righteous man forsaken

- God saw everything HE HAD MADE

It is also used in prophetic language, as in:

- my people ARE GONE INTO CAPTIVITY (i.e. SHALL assuredly go)

It is used of general truths which have been often observed:

- the grass WITHERS

- the sparrow FINDS a house.

This mood is used 19405 times.

INFINITIVE MOOD:

There are 2 forms of this mood: as a verbal noun corresponding to the English verbal noun ending in "-ing", and as the infinitive absolute which does not allow prefixes or suffixes.

As a verbal noun it is used as the subject:

- TO KEEP the judgments

- TO SEEK your heart

and as the object:

- in his WRITING ...

- he spoke, SAYING ...

As the infinitive absolute it is used with another verb to emphasize the verbal idea; and then it is often rendered by an English adverb such as "SURELY", "UTTERLY", etc.:

- he will SURELY visit you

- he UTTERLY destroyed the people.

This mood is used 7239 times.

PARTICIPLE MOOD:

This represents an action or a condition in its unbroken continuity and it corresponds to the English verb "to be" with the present participle. It is used of present, past or future time. Used of the present time:

- what ARE you DOING?

Used of the past time:

- he WAS STILL SPEAKING when another came

Used of future time:

- we ARE DESTROYING (i.e. are about to destroy).

This mood is used 3205 times.

PARTICIPLE ACTIVE MOOD:

This is the active form of the participle and it appears only with the QAL root, with which it is used 5386 times.

PARTICIPLE PASSIVE MOOD:

This is the passive form of the participle and it also appears only with the QAL root, with which it is used 1415 times.

7) THE TENSES:

Every conjugation has the same tenses. They are formed as follows:

PAST TENSE:

This is formed by adding a suffix to the root.

PRESENT TENSE:

This is formed by adding the masculine or the feminine (singular and plural) pronouns to the participle.

FUTURE TENSE:

This is formed by adding a prefix to the root.

8) A BRIEF LOOK AT THE 13 ARAMAIC ROOTS OF VERBS:

These roots are only used very seldom ... together there are only 1060 occurrences. Compared to the Hebrew roots, they are as follows:

ARAMAIC ROOTS:		HEBREW EQUIVALENT ROOTS:
PEAL	used 706 times	QAL
APHEL	used 169 times	HIPH'IL
PAEL	used 68 times	PI'EL
ITHPEAL	used 39 times	HITHPA'EL
ITHPAEL	used 35 times	HITHPA'EL
PEEL or PEIL	used 9 times	PU'AL

Even though there are 66 times as many occurrences of Hebrew verbs compared to Aramaic verbs, yet the frequency-of-use of the roots follows the same basic pattern for the corresponding Aramaic stems as it is for the Hebrew stems.

Here are the other Aramaic stems, which are used only very rarely, as can be seen, with the corresponding Hebrew stems listed in each case:

ISHTAPHEL	used 3 times	HITHPA'EL
ITHPEEL	used 8 times	HITHPA'EL + PI'EL combined
ITHPEIL	used 7 times	HITHPA'EL + HOPH'AL combined
SHAPHEL	used 6 times	HIPH'IL
HITHPEIL	used 1 time	HOPH'AL
PEIL	used 8 times	PI'EL
ITHPOLEL	used 1 time	HITHPOLEL

These 13 roots are used in the same moods as the Hebrew verbs.

9) IN THE MASORETIC TEXT THERE ARE NO VOWEL-POINTINGS.

It is however the vowel-pointing system, invented only long after the Old Testament had been completed, that distinguishes between these roots in many cases. Thus it is quite possible to read a Hebrew word that has no vowel-pointing in different ways. The same basic word with different vowel-pointings (which didn't exist in O.T. times, remember) can and often does have different meanings. That is why you may find different ways of translating the same passage.

At Hebrew University there is a Japanese professor of Hebrew who was recently interviewed on Iraeli TV. He was asked what he thought was the major difference between written Hebrew and Japanese. His answer is very enlightening. He basically said words to this effect:

The difference between written Hebrew and most other languages, including Japanese is this:

In most languages you can understand what is being said AS YOU READ ALONG. However far in a sentence you have read, you can understand what is being conveyed. In Hebrew (without vowel-pointings) you have to approach what you read with certain preconceived ideas about what is being said. If, when you finish reading the sentence or section, it makes sense, then you know you are correct and you continue reading. But if, at the end of a sentence, what you have read doesn't make sense, THEN YOU GO BACK TO THE START and try to read a different preconceived idea into the text. In such cases usually you'll get it right on the second or third try.

In Israel newspapers are printed without vowel-pointings (it would be too complicated to include them). When an Israeli comes across an unfamiliar word in the paper, it is not at all uncommon for him to misread it the first time round. Once he is familiar with the word, he no longer needs the vowel-pointings.

This shows that an accurate understanding of the whole text of the Old Testament depended a great deal on REGULARLY READING THE TEXT ALOUD to people, so that words would not be confused (in the absence of vowel-pointings). If a scroll was not read for 50 years or more, no priest would know the correct word in cases of ambiguity (without vowels). Thus (usually minor) differences in understanding could creep in. And so different schools of interpretation had arisen by New Testament times.

This is something we English-speakers might not have immediately thought of, because all our written words include all the vowels. We never have to interpret whether the written word "bt" is supposed to mean: "bat, bet, bit, but, bait, beat, bite, boat or beauty" in any given written passage. This is just one single word, the word "bt". Nw wt f vry wrd n vry sntnc ws wrttn wtt vwls? (i.e. Now what if every word in every sentence was written without vowels?) How often would we also have to repeatedly read a sentence before the meaning would be totally clear to us?

Can we see how important it was that the Old Testament Hebrew text was frequently and regularly read out aloud? It was familiarity with the text that ensured a correct understanding of the written record. If even one generation passed, where nobody heard the written text read out aloud, the reading of the scrolls immediately became a more difficult task.

10) <u>THE VERB "TO BE":</u>

The Hebrew verb "to be" is "HAYAH". But this is not used in the present tense. In the present tense the verb "to be" is omitted. It is understood to be there. Thus the verb "to be" is only used for the past tense and the future tense.

When translating Hebrew into English, this can cause some misunderstandings. Since there is no verb "to be" in a specific sentence, THE ABOVE APPROACH is usually used. In other words:

the sentence is read AS IF the verb "to be" is implied. IF this makes sense to the reader, it is assumed to be correct and no other possible ways of reading it are considered. IF providing the verb "to be" doesn't make sense to the reader, then other possible explanations are looked for, until a satisfactory one is found. This can lead to grammatically correct, but different readings of the same text.

In the case of a controversial passage: we need not assume that the people, who dogmatically tell us that in this passage the verb "to be" MUST be provided, are necessarily correct. It really depends on how you chose to read the text as to whether the verb "to be" must be provided or not. Majority opinion is not necessarily proof for a correct understanding of the text. The most helpful thing in such a situation is really a clear understanding of the rest of the Scriptures and the specific context of the text in question. Deuteronomy 6:4 is a good example in this regard.

For more detailed information, see the ONLINE BIBLE with its information about verbs. Specifically, the ONLINE BIBLE includes a lengthy article about the Hebrew language ("A Dissertation concerning the Antiquity of the Hebrew Language, LETTERS, VOWEL POINTS,

and ACCENTS." by John Gill, D.D.), which provides some very helpful information for those who desire to make a deeper study into the Hebrew language.

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