

Fine-Tuning the Blueprint of the Verbal Structure of Biblical Hebrew.

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September 2, 2008

Abstract

Biblical Hebrew, *BH*, could be seen as primarily a verbal language [1], with an average verse of the Hebrew Bible containing no less than three verbs and with the biggest part of its vocabulary representing morphological derivations from verbal roots, almost entirely trilateral, or triconsonantal, – the feature *BH* shares with all Semitic and a few other Afro-Asiatic languages. The unique peculiarity of this triconsonantal morphological pervasiveness did not completely escape the attention of previous generations of Western linguists, as shows the following “methodological” warning opening a popular Hebrew grammar edited more than a century ago [3]:

«The roots, whatever may have been their original form, are in the Old Testament almost entirely trilateral, ... thus imposing upon the memory a very heavy strain. ... Every verb has to be learned separately; the verbs to go out, to go up, to go down are quite different, having nothing in common with one another and being quite unrelated to the verb to go.»

This amusing résumé has the merit to recognize, even if under the guise of an earnestly banal pedagogical clueing in, two extraordinary fundamental linguistic phenomena common to all Semitic languages, the very objects of the present study:

First, the extreme parsimoniousness, from the point of view of Information Theory, of the triconsonantal representation of verbs: with more than one and less than two thousand known *BH* verbs, two consonants would be not enough and four would be too much. This exquisite formal combinatorial precision, deprived of any etymological association, is the real source of the deplored above arduousness of mechanical memorization of verbs.

Second, the meaningful morphological topology of the body of *BH* verbs, a fundamental feature of the *BH* architecture. Two triconsonantal verbs are morphologically or, equivalently, *topologically* neighboring if they differ in just one consonant, with many pairs of topological neighbors having close, or similar, or related *semantical values* [2]. Thus, the aforementioned verb to go, «*he-lamed-kaph*», «*to progress step by step toward a goal*», is both semantically and morphologically neighboring the verb «*he-lamed-qoph*», «*divide and portion*», and not the verbs to go out, to go up, to go down, which are neighboring the verbs to extend, to master, and to scrape or scratch, respectively.

Bibliography

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[3] John Mauchline, Davidson’s Introductory Hebrew Grammar, 26th ed. T.&T. Clark, Edinburgh (1978).