

8. The Generation of Verbs

It is customary in Hebrew grammar to take the roots **פעל** and **קטל** as paradigmatic for all roots. Each of these two paradigms is used in its own way, **קטל** for specifying the vocalic mode and **פעל** for designating the individual root letters. For example, the word **אָדָם** is said to have the form **קָטַל**, whereas the noun **אָדָם** is said to have the form **קָטַל**. On the other hand, in the root **אָדָם**, the **א** is said to be the **א** of the root, **ד** is called the **ל**, and **מ** is called the **ל** of the root.

The most primitive words had the form **קָטַל**. Later they were given a variety of meanings and nuances through two distinctive methods, and it is by means of these that the language grew into what we know as Biblical Hebrew. One of these methods, as we have seen, was to vary the vocalic modes. The other was to conjoin the root with the pronouns. This latter method was done in a myriad of ways, each giving its own kind of nuance. Accordingly, having a fundamental grasp of the Hebrew language is almost identical to understanding the various ways in which the pronouns can attach themselves to the roots, while understanding the significance of each way.

The simplest forms of the verb arose out of the two most basic vocalic patterns, **קָטַל** and **קִטְלָה**. We shall call the form **קָטַל** the *solid state*, and the form **קִטְלָה** the *hollow state*.

The solid state spoke of solid things, that is, things as they were, or as they had been. People used the hollow state, on the other hand, to speak about things that were less substantial, such as their dreams and their fears, or their hopes and expectations. Roughly speaking, the solid state is equivalent to the perfect tense in English, while the hollow state is the imperfect. When restated in terms of time, the solid state is usually translated by the English past tense, the hollow state by the English future tense.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the basic pattern **קָטַל** became **קָטַל**, whose leaning form was **קָטַל**. A word like **קָטַל** could be closely joined to other words by means of the leaning

form, **כָּתַב**. Such conjunction of words became the foundation of the solid state. For example, **כָּתַב דָּוִד** conjoined with the word **דָּוִד** forms the sentence **כָּתַב דָּוִד**, which means *David is a writing one in the solid state*—or, as we would say, *David wrote*. The leaning form was also conjoined to the pronouns to beget what we know as *verbs*, as indicated in the table below.

The reader should take care to notice where the accent mark falls in the table entries. In Hebrew, the accent generally falls on the last syllable, except for those forms which have retained their final vowel. Remember, when applying this rule, that the 3rd person feminine singular was once **כָּתַבְתִּי**.

Formation of the Solid State Verb¹

| | | <i>Singular</i> | | | |
|--------------------|---|-----------------|---|---------------|-----------|
| כָּתַב | ← | — | + | כָּתַב | 3rd masc. |
| כָּתַבָּה | ← | <u>ת</u> | + | כָּתַב | 3rd fem. |
| כָּתַבְתָּ | ← | <u>אָתָּה</u> | + | כָּתַב | 2nd masc. |
| כָּתַבְתְּ | ← | <u>אָתְּ</u> | + | כָּתַב | 2nd fem. |
| כָּתַבְתִּי | ← | <u>אֲנִי</u> | + | כָּתַב | 1st c. |
| | | <i>Plural</i> | | | |
| כָּתַבוּ | ← | lengthening | + | כָּתַב | 3rd c. |
| כָּתַבְתֶּם | ← | <u>אֲתֶם</u> | + | כָּתַב | 2nd masc. |
| כָּתַבְתֶּן | ← | <u>אֲתֶן</u> | + | כָּתַב | 2nd fem. |
| כָּתַבְנוּ | ← | <u>אֲנֵנוּ</u> | + | כָּתַב | 1st c. |

As you can see, the verb is merely a contraction of the pronoun and the leaning form of the old verb-like noun. If that contraction had not taken place, it is doubtful whether there would have been any reason at all to speak of verbs when discussing Semitic grammar. This doubtfulness increases when we remember that the two roots **אָנַת** and **הוּוּה**, which form the pronouns, both contain nothing but weak letters. Had that not been the case, it is hard to know whether they would ever have joined with nouns to make up what we look upon as a grammatical form. To that

1. In this chart, the stressed syllable is underlined.

extent, one might almost regard the coming-to-be of the verb as being accidental. It is also hard to know whether these conjunctions took place through the exercise of skill, or through laziness on the part of the speakers.

In the preceding chart you can observe a peculiarity we mentioned at the conclusion of Chapter 6—that the third person requires no personal endings. Part of the reason for this is that the subject of a sentence clearly plays the role of the pronoun; for example, compare *כָּתַב...אֵי* with *כָּתַב דָּוִד*. On the other hand, a word like *כָּתַב* can sometimes stand alone, as if in expectation of a subject. When it does, it means *he writes-in-the-solid-state*, that is, *he wrote*. The ending of the third-person feminine is clearly nothing more than the normal feminine ending, but the plural third person might present a puzzle. The ך of the 3rd plural, though at first it may appear to be part of the root *הוה*, is in fact merely the vestige of an old notion of plurality, as we shall see in the next chapter. It is also interesting to note that the first person requires no distinction in gender, since it is known. The lack of gender in the third person plural, however, is of late origin.

Formation of the Hollow State Verb

Singular

| | | | | | |
|-------------|---|--------|---|-------|-----------|
| יְכָתֹב | ← | כָּתַב | + | — | 3rd masc. |
| תְּכַתֵּב | ← | כָּתַב | + | — | 3rd fem. |
| תְּכַתֵּב | ← | כָּתַב | + | אֵת | 2nd masc. |
| תְּכַתֵּבִי | ← | כָּתַב | + | אֵת | 2nd fem. |
| אֶכְתֹּב | ← | כָּתַב | + | אֲנִי | 1st c. |

Plural

| | | | | | |
|---------------|---|--------|---|---------|-----------|
| יְכָתְבוּ | ← | כָּתַב | + | — | 3rd masc. |
| תְּכַתְּבֵנָה | ← | כָּתַב | + | — | 3rd fem. |
| תְּכַתְּבוּ | ← | כָּתַב | + | אֵתְּם | 2nd masc. |
| תְּכַתְּבֵנָה | ← | כָּתַב | + | אֵתְּן | 2nd fem. |
| נְכַתְּבֵם | ← | כָּתַב | + | אֲנֵנוּ | 1st c. |

In the case of the hollow state, the pronoun was placed at the beginning and the process of contraction was not quite so straightforward. In the second-person singular, contraction

effaced the distinction between feminine and masculine. Thus it was necessary to append the old second-person feminine ending.

Although the ׁ of the third person looks as though it might come from the root אהו, it probably does not. To understand it, we must look more carefully at the contractions involved in the other persons, in order to see where the hireq came from. When אָתָּא and כָּתָב were contracted, only the ת remained, leaving a form אָתָּבּ. The first syllable, אָתָּ (if one may even call it a syllable) is composed of a resting shewa and a moving shewa. As we have seen in such cases, the first shewa then regularly becomes a hireq. The ׁ in the third-person masculine, then, probably arose as a means of giving substance to the hireq. The final ׁ's and ׁ's are merely plural forms, as we shall see in the next chapter. The use of the ת in the third-person plural feminine is of some interest and may be a further indication of an attraction between the feminine and the combined first and second persons, as they are contained in the root אנת.

I noted previously that the Hebrew solid state is often rendered in English as the past tense, and the hollow state as the English future tense. But such translations are only approximate and will not do in all cases. Before considering the matter more deeply, we must first reconsider the English tense system.

As children, we all learned that English has three simple tenses: a past, a present and a future. The past and present tenses seem fairly clear, but the future tense is somewhat hazy. The verb *run* has a perfectly good past tense, *ran*. The past tense in English is formed either by an inner vocalic change or by the addition of the suffix *ed*. But we have no similarly independent future form; instead we use the phrase *he will run*. This way of speaking seems to have arisen in a manner comparable to the expression *he has run*. We all understand that *he has run* is a kind of present tense. That is to say, it speaks about a past experience which the subject presently holds as a past experience. *I did my homework last night* speaks about the way in which I spent those hours. *I have done my homework* implies that I presently possess a certain experience of the past, and am now prepared for class. Odysseus is more than a man who *once saw* "many ways and many lands." He presently is a man who *has seen* "many ways and many lands." This form speaks of the present condition as the result of the past.

In the same manner, *I will go* seems to be a shortened form of the phrase *I will to go*. Originally, it was not an attempt to predict the future, but rather to speak of present animate desires and inanimate tendencies. Perhaps it is partly because the future form has lost its original force that we so often tend to avoid the use of the future altogether. In common speech, we prefer to stick with the present tense by using such forms as *I am going on Wednesday* or *he leaves on Thursday*. Here we have returned to the original sense of the future by speaking about present intention.

Having completed this excursion, which was intended to loosen the tight notion of time that is characteristic of English, let us again turn to the solid and hollow forms as they appear in Hebrew.

The solid state is normally used to speak of things which are complete and over with: "God took him" (Genesis 5:2a). The solid state is sometimes used as we would use the past perfect: to indicate that the over-and-done-with quality of the act had already appeared at some prior time. For example, "Now Samuel was dead, and all Israel mourned him" (I Samuel 28:3). When God asks Cain, "Where is Abel?" Cain answers in the solid state, "I do not know" (Genesis 4:9). In the context, one has no choice but to use the present tense in the English translation; however, Cain's use of the solid state implies that he has never considered his brother to be any of his concern. Similarly, when Isaac speaks of the food "such as I love" (Genesis 27:4) in the solid state, he is speaking of a quality which existed in the past and continues into the present. When Moses says to Pharaoh, "How long wilt thou refuse to humble thyself?" (Exodus 10:3), he too uses the solid state, as if to say, "How long until your refusing is an over-and-done-with thing?" When Gehazi decides to run after the prophet, the English translation rightly reads, "I will run after him" (II Kings 5:20). But Gehazi was so determined to get the money that he spoke in the solid state, as if he had already left; and when David says to Jonathan, "Whatever your heart desires, I will do it" (I Samuel 20:4), he puts the words *I will do it* in the solid state, as though to say, "It is already as good as done." Such constructions as *begone with thee* or *have done with it* were similar modes of speech in Elizabethan times. The prophets, too, often speak of the future as if it were an accomplished fact. Long before its time, Isaiah says, "Therefore my people are gone into captivity."

The hollow state, which grammarians usually call the imperfect, is normally translated as a simple future. Moses said to

God, “they will not believe me” (Exodus 4:1). But the hollow state may also be used in words of encouragement or indirect command: “Let the dry land appear” (Genesis 1:9), “Let us turn into this city and spend the night there” (Judges 19:11). When used in conjunction with the negative, it is the normal form for commands, as in “Thou shalt not steal” (Exodus 20:15). The hollow state, like the English future, is sometimes used in such a manner as to leave no doubt of its present intention: “I will not bear your iniquity” (Isaiah 1:13). Questions are often put in the hollow state to reflect the unfinished character of the unknown: “What are you looking for?” (Genesis 37:15). Sometimes the hollow state reflects a spatial rather than a temporal continuum: “And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it will part and branch into streams” (Genesis 2:10).

The hollow state also came to be used for statements which are “open” in the sense that they are intended to state something that is true forever: “A wise son makes a glad father” (Proverbs 15:20). Consequently, customs are usually expressed in the hollow state: “And it was a custom in Israel, that the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughters of Jephtha” (Judges 11:40). When the angel asks Jacob, “Why ask you my name?” in the hollow state, one sees immediately that despite the *questioning* being over and done with, the *question* is not over and done with but will reverberate through all of time.

In the phrase, “There came a swarm of gnats ... and the land was devastated” (Exodus 8:20), the final verb (to be devastated) occurs in the hollow state, even though the act is over and done with from the viewpoint of the book. The effect of this is to allow the reader to feel the present threat of the gnats.

The hollow state is often used to speak about recurrent actions, as in Job 1:5: כָּכָה יַעֲשֶׂה אֱיֹב בְּכָל־הַיָּמִים, “Thus did Job all [his] days.” Presumably the hollow state is used because of a certain presupposition that habitual things are not accidental but presuppose some kind of intention in a larger sense of the word. The same thought may be contained in the etymological relationship between the verb *to will* and the English phrase “as he was wont to do.” The Book of Exodus also uses the hollow state in the phrase “Moses would speak and God would answer him by voice” (Exodus 19:19). Again, one should note the relation between the words *would* and *will* as expressing intention, on the one hand, and desire, on the other.

Hebrew also distinguishes between two groups of verbs in a way that is vaguely related to the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs in English. In Hebrew, קָטַל verbs imply actions and are called *active* verbs; an example is נָתַן, *to give*. The קָטַל verbs, on the other hand, imply states rather than actions, and they are often referred to as *stative* verbs. As we know from the beginning of Chapter 5, the old *I*-mode vocalics shifted to the *E*-mode; thus the form קָטַל became קִטַּל. Some examples are כָּבֵד, *to be heavy*; טָהַר, *to be pure*; and חָפַץ, *to desire*. These verbs sometimes have a form קִטַּל, which becomes קִטַּל; an example is קָטַן, *to be small*. Some authors say that the קָטַל verbs tend to reflect more permanent qualities. In any case, the distinction between active and stative verbs exists only in the ground form.

