CHAPTER THREE

ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH SELECTED VERBS

The pages to follow focus upon the peculiar distribution of certain verbs that mark DD in biblical Hebrew. The marking of DD is not uniform throughout the Bible, and most of the verbs discussed in this section serve as reminders, each in a distinctive way, of the uneven text now in our possession. These words underscore how precarious it is to attempt a generalization of DD marking in biblical Hebrew that attempts to encompass all narrative or all poetry under one umbrella.

3.1 "SPEAK"

What is the difference between רָבָּה and רָבָּה אָמַר when they mark DD? Particularly when the alternation between the two occurs within a single passage, the query is inevitable: what prompts this variation and to what degree is it meaningful? In his commentary on Deuteronomy 2, Rashi tries to account for the sudden appearance of רָבָּה אָמַר in v. 17, for speech before this verse is marked by the root וַיֹּאמֶר and not רָבָּה אָמַר:

From the time that the spies were sent out up until this point, the word וַיֹּאמֶר is not used in this section—only רָבָּה אָמַר—to teach you that during the 38 years that Israel was out of favor, the Divine Utterance [דִּבְּרָה] did not converse with him [Moses] intimately, face to face.

But if וַיֹּאמֶר indicates a greater intimacy than is reflected in וַיֹּאמֶר, why are God’s further words, spoken in this restored relationship, marked by וַיֹּאמֶר (Deut 2:31; 3:2)? Rashi makes no suggestion, and his attempt to account for the alternating verbs remains inadequate.

It is striking that the root וַיֹּאמֶר here is interpreted with a significance opposite to what is attested in other traditions, namely that וַיֹּאמֶר contains a dimension of severity in the words spoken. Rabbinic sensitivities reflected a tendency to emphasize this verb’s strong and even harsh overtones, reinforced by a proof text like Gen 42:7 and 42:30: "He spoke (רָבָּה) to them harshly" (נָפַל, סְמַכָּה; BT Makkot 11a, Sifrei Numbers 99). Dissenting opinions cited passages like Mal 3:16 ("Those who feared Yahweh spoke [רָבָּה] to one another") where congenial speech is also reflected by this root. But they were over-ruled in this particular case since the stem (niphal) differs from the more common piel. The general rabbinic view of harshness associated with the verb רָבָּה is occasionally echoed in
contemporary scholarship (Shiloah 1964:261). Contemporary proponents of dibbēr as an intense form (e.g., Zobel 1985:19) inappropriately appeal to its piel form, which in reality has little to do with intensity (Jenni 1968; Ryder 1966).

Exegetes and theologians have been persistent in seeking the elusive contrast between the verbs נואם and דיבר. The centrality of "speech" as a metaphor for central religious concepts in early Judaism and Christianity is reflected in the logos of Philo and the New Testament, along with the the dibbēr and especially the memrā of Targumic literature, the latter term having its origin in the root רנה "to say."1 Among those who see a deliberate selection of vocabulary by biblical writers, it has been observed that the verb נואם is originally verbal while the verb דיבר is denominative, derived from the noun dibbēr.2 It has been argued from this perspective that there is a stress in the verb דיבר upon the concrete content (since denominative) and events which are achieved by the speech, i.e., "speech which aims at an event," in contrast to נואם, which relays information.3 But one may use this same observation to argue a contrary position, namely that because the verb נואם is primarily verbal, it focuses attention on the activity and not simply upon the words and the information that they bear.4 One may also argue from usage that נואם underscores content (since it is usually followed by the words spoken) while דיבר emphasizes activity (since it is often used without accompanying quoted speech and simply states that speech is occurring; cf. Gerleman [THAT I 434f.]). Others have argued from context that the special directives in the cult are marked by דיבר (in P) in order to distinguish them from the banal words of men (which employ נואם in P; Koch 1965:251-93). Or, in trying to account for a shift from נואם in one verse to דיבר in the next (Ex 6:1-2), "hat pi. allgemein-umfassende [sic!] Bedeutung 'ein Gespräch führen, reden,'...während eine Form von נואם 'sagen' den Inhalt der Rede einleitet (Schmidt 1988:280-81). One may have recourse to a difference in the quality of the speech marked by these words, so that דיבר "may imply eloquence" or that one may "speak well" in contrast to simple נואם (Wilson 1870:408). Lapointe (1971:242) speculates that נואם seems to be preferred by "les ouvrages plus réalistes ou en tous cas psychologiques" such as J and Ruth, while "des écrits doctrinaux et oratoires" like Deuteronomy and P show a preference for דיבר. One generally finds that in theological

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1 "Understood as covering the conceptual field of divine speaking, inclusive of the deliberation behind, and the results of, that speaking" (Chilton 1989:132).
2 For a critique of various analyses of the root דיבר see Barr (1961:129-40).
3 "Eine Anrede, die auf ein Ereignis hinzielt" (Heller 1979:176-77).