CHAPTER 1

Hebrew Tense and Aspect

The meaning of the verb forms is arguably the major outstanding problem in the study of ancient Hebrew grammar. The problem is especially acute when applied to the Hebrew writings from Qumran. Of the three main bodies of ancient Hebrew literature—the Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Mishnah—only the Bible and the Mishnah have received substantial attention on the matter of the semantics of the verb forms, and even in these two cases, consensus has been elusive.

Most of the research on this question, which Leslie McFall has called “the enigma of the Hebrew verbal system,” has restricted itself to Biblical Hebrew, that is, to the Hebrew of the period immediately before the Qumran literature. Much less effort has been devoted to study of the verbal system of Mishnaic Hebrew, and even less to that of Qumran Hebrew. Yet the voluminous research on the ancient Hebrew verbal system has not yielded consensus regarding which of three linguistic categories was encoded by the so-called “perfect”

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1 I apply the label “Qumran Hebrew” to the language of these texts (excluding biblical copies) without implying they constitute a homogenous linguistic entity. Nor do I use it to imply that all of the “Qumran Hebrew” texts were written at Qumran, or composed by a single sectarian group, or even that they are all from the caves near Wadi Qumran. For example, in this study, the Cairo Damascus document is included as a witness to Qumran Hebrew because the text of CD closely follows the copies of the Damascus Document from Qumran Cave 4. The specific corpus used here is described on page 83.

2 The Tannaitic midrashim also belong to this stage of the Hebrew language subsequent to Qumran Hebrew.


4 By “encode” I mean the signalling of semantic features by grammatical forms and systems. “Grammaticalize” is the equivalent term used by much of the standard linguistic literature, e.g., Frank R. Palmer, Mood and Modality, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–4; Bernard Comrie, Tense (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). But I avoid “grammaticalize” because it has another quite different meaning, “the process whereby lexical items and constructions come in certain linguistic contexts to serve grammatical functions, and once grammaticalized, continue to develop new grammatical functions” (Paul J. Hopper and Elizabeth Closs Traugott, Grammaticalization, 2nd ed., Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], xv).
suffix conjugation\(^5\) (the \textit{qatal} form) and the “imperfect” prefix conjugation (the \textit{yiqtol} form). Tense, aspect, and mood are these three primary linguistic categories signalled by verbal morphology in most of the world’s languages.\(^6\) As W.R. Garr noted,

At the end of the twentieth century, semantic analysis of the verb is conventionally separated into three component parts: tense, mood, and aspect. In temporal analysis [tense], a situation is located in time, whether relative to the moment of speaking or relative to another situation in context. In modal analysis [mood], an utterance is assessed in terms of speaker belief, certainty, and knowledge, or alternatively, speaker attitude and will. And in aspectual analysis [aspect], the focus shifts to “different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation”; a situation may be viewed as a single whole, or in its (sub)phases and internal structure.\(^7\)

The question is especially unresolved for Qumran Hebrew for two reasons. First, Qumran Hebrew falls chronologically between Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew, but these two stages of the language are quite different with

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\(^5\) The nomenclature for Hebrew verb forms is not entirely standardized. Throughout the present work, I refer to the two basic “conjugations” in ancient Hebrew as \textit{qatal} (the suffixing conjugation) and \textit{yiqtol} (the prefixing conjugation). These terms have the advantage of describing form rather than function. In other literature, \textit{qatal} is called “perfect”, “perfective”, “past”, or “suffix conjugation”; the \textit{yiqtol} is called “imperfect”, “imperfective”, “future”, or “prefix conjugation”. (For the inflectional category “binyan,” encompassing Qal, Piʿel, etc., which some call “conjugation,” I use the term “stem.”)

\(^6\) Tense encodes the precedence relationship between the event time and another time. Absolute tense involves the order of event and speech; relative tense involves the order of event and reference time. In English, the difference between “I do” and “I did” involves absolute tense (albeit indirectly), and the difference “I do” and “I have done” is one of relative tense. Aspect encodes the overlap relationship between event time and reference time. In English the difference between “I did” and “I was doing” is a difference of aspect. “While I was reading, John arrived” indicates that the arriving (perfective aspect) occurred totally within the time of the reading, and the reading (imperfective aspect) extended beyond the time of John’s arrival. Mood characterizes the actuality of an event by comparing the event world(s) to a reference world, termed the actual world. In English, the difference between “I do” and “I may do” is a difference of mood. These categories are explained in more detail on pages 86, 88, 90, respectively.