Are There Examples of Enclitic *mem* in the Hebrew Bible?

The decipherment of the Ras Shamra tablets and the reading of their contents have shed much light on the religious and literary world in which the people of ancient Israel lived. The discoveries have also added considerably to our knowledge of the Northwest Semitic background of the language in which the Hebrew Bible was written. At the same time, not every suggested new interpretation of the biblical text has stood the test of time, and it can scarcely be denied that all such theories need to be subjected to rigorous examination before they deserve to be accepted.

The purpose of the present article is to examine one theory that Moran claimed “has cleared up scores of grammatical and logical inconcinities of the Hebrew text,”¹ and that has won wide acceptance, namely, the theory that Classical Hebrew, like Ugaritic, had an enclitic *mem* of which examples may be found in the Hebrew Bible.

The letter *m* is added at the end of some words in Ugaritic, including even nouns in the construct state. The function of this *m* is uncertain, but its presence is undeniable. A comparable phenomenon has been “found in Mari names . . . and in a variety of uses in Amarna,”² as well as in Epigraphic South Arabian.³ It has, therefore, seemed plausible to suppose that there may be traces of it in the Hebrew Bible, especially in early Hebrew poetry. As long ago as 1936, H.L. Ginsberg claimed to have found an example in Ps. 29:6, and since then many other alleged instances have been detected.

In 1957, H.D. Hummel published an article in which he discussed enclitic *mem*, collected all the examples that he could find of suggestions that had been made, and advanced some further suggestions of his own or of his teachers and friends. He wrote:

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2 Ibid.

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it can now be considered as established beyond any reasonable doubt that enclitic mem was once a prominent feature of literary Hebrew, especially in poetry, just as in Ugaritic. Some of these enclitics survived later editings and revisions until the time came when it was sacrilege to alter the consonantal text.4

He thought that “this now useless feature of the language was discarded . . . about the time of the Exile.”5

It was thus maintained that the evidence was sufficient to show that the theory was “established beyond any reasonable doubt.” But not everyone agreed. The year before the publication of Hummel’s article, G.R. Driver had claimed that “all the examples cited can be otherwise explained or the text may be suspected.”6 Moran commented:

After H.D. Hummel’s completely convincing study on the subject, a skepticism which prefers to suspect the text rather than accept a linguistic feature attested in Amorite, Ugaritic, and Amarna (Jerusalem!) should be virtually impossible.7

To this he added a reference to Driver that showed at whom his remarks were directed. Nevertheless, some years later, Driver remained skeptical and described the alleged phenomenon as “growing like a weed in the M.T.” and claimed that “all the supposed instances of this -m can be explained within the rules of Semitic grammar or Hebrew palaeography.”8 He doubtless also continued to suspect the text in some places.

In seeking to reach a conclusion about the presence of enclitic mem in the Hebrew Bible, it is necessary to distinguish between two types of alleged examples. First, there are examples on the basis of which it may be argued that the phenomenon existed in Hebrew. If there are “grammatical and logical inconcinnities” (to borrow Moran’s phrase) in the MT that are more satisfactorily solved by postulating enclitic mem than by any other theory, then they are positive evidence in its support. Second, if the first type of example can establish

5 Ibid., 104 and 106.
7 Moran, “Hebrew Language,” 60.