Ken M. Penner


In *The Verbal System of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Ken Penner takes up the question of the semantics of verbal forms in Qumran Hebrew. According to the conventional view of the development of Hebrew, Biblical Hebrew verbs encode aspect and Mishnaic Hebrew verbs encode tense. If this view is correct, a major change in the Hebrew verbal system must have taken place during the period when the Dead Sea Scrolls were being composed and transmitted. In this study, Penner “seeks to discover which of the categories (tense, aspect, or mood) was most prominent in Qumran Hebrew” (4).

Chapter 1 lays the groundwork for the rest of the study by giving an overview of three topics: the state of scholarship on the question of the semantics of verb forms in Qumran Hebrew, the range of opinion on the semantics of verbs in Biblical Hebrew and the methodologies of scholars studying this topic, and trends in the evolution of verbal semantics in the later biblical books and Ben Sira. This chapter, while useful in displaying the lack of scholarly consensus on the meaning and function of verbs in Hebrew, comprises one-third of the study and is thorough to the point of tedium.

In Chapter 2, Penner lays out his methodology. Since context is important for determining the function of a verb, the study includes only fairly well-preserved texts from Qumran: 1QM, 1QS, 1QSa, 1QSB, 11QTα, 1QHα, the Damascus Document (CD), 4QMMT, and the non-biblical portions of the pesharim (83–4). Using these texts, Penner has created a database to analyze “all finite verbs and verbs with functions overlapping those of the finite verbs” (83). Penner’s intention is to find “bidirectional correlations” between form and function—that is, he intends to determine not only (for example) whether the qatal form generally refers to past events but also whether past events are usually referred to with a qatal form (84–6). In this chapter, Penner also lays out clearly the method he used in creating his database, which is available online. He walks the reader through the tagging of the first three lines of the Damascus Document as an example of his methodology (113–23).

The major methodological problem that Penner must solve in order for this study to be viable is how to determine the function of a verb form without relying on the verb form itself—that is, how to avoid circularity in his analysis—and this is where the study falls somewhat short. Penner stresses the importance of objectivity such that his results would be reproducible by another scholar (93). He also recognizes that in some cases the context does
not allow for an unambiguous determination of the function of a verb and excludes verbs that he considers ambiguous from his primary analysis. However, at times Penner’s certainty that the context necessitates a certain function of a verb seems unwarranted. For example, he confidently states that the verb יעשה in CD 1:2 must have a future reference because “the audience knows from experience that the event, judgement, has not yet occurred at speech time” (105). However, there is no temporal adverb in the text to strengthen this argument (עתה at the beginning of CD 1:1 applies to the time of speaking, not to the time of the event) and he does not explain why the reference could not be to God’s present or past judgement. Hence, despite Penner’s best efforts to avoid circularity in his analysis, at times he does fall into that trap.

In Chapter 3, Penner presents the analysis of the data he has collected. He provides a number of charts that present the data in a variety of ways, with explanations alongside the charts. His statistical analysis of the correlation between verb forms and each of tense, aspect, and mood shows that verb forms are correlated most strongly with tense and mood, not with aspect (126). This finding holds across both poetry and prose texts, although the correlation is stronger in prose. Furthermore, he finds that wqtl and wyqtl forms take their function from the preceding verb: when following a yiqtol verb, they are correlated with the future tense and modality, and when following a qatal, they are correlated with the past tense and non-modality (133–8). Penner concludes the chapter with a brief discussion of 4QMMT, which does not follow the same patterns of verbal semantics as the other texts under consideration.

Finally, in Chapter 4, Penner applies his findings to two interpretive problems: whether some of the qatal verbs in the Hodayot that refer to salvation should be understood as “prophetic perfect” verbs with a future reference, and whether the verb forms used in the pesharim can provide information as to whether the figures mentioned are living at the time of composition and thus help to establish the sequence of events and time of writing. The problem of circularity resurfaces in Penner’s discussion of the Hodayot, since his argument that the qatal does not have a future reference when the topic is salvation depends on his search of his own database, in which he made decisions about the time reference of each verb based on his understanding of its context (174–5). Regarding the identification of figures in the pesharim, Penner argues that based on his findings, qatal verbs rarely refer to the future and yiqtol verbs almost never refer to the past, so the burden of proof lies on any scholar who wants to argue otherwise in a specific case, such as that of the Lion of Wrath in 4QpNah or the temporal relationship of the Wicked Priest to the Kittim in 1QpHab (189–94).