

Electronic Dictionaries of Biblical Hebrew: A Demonstration

Part Four: The binyanim of אכל

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Which morphologically tagged *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* outclasses the others? Based on my study of the verb אכל, that prize goes to the [Westminster Hebrew Morphology 4.2](#) (version 4.4, unavailable to me, is being marketed by [Accordance](#)). Read on to see why.

The binyanim of אכל attested in MT appear to be four: qal, niph'al, pual, and hiph'il. The binyanim of אכל to which the text underlying MT plausibly attests are also four: qal, qal passive, niph'al, and hiph'il. Let me explain.

In an essay of enduring importance, Jeremy Hughes argues against an approach to Hebrew grammar in functional denial about the existence of non-primitive linguistic phenomena in Tiberian masoretic Hebrew.¹ A distinction can and must be made between the understanding of biblical Hebrew reflected in the orthography and vocalization of the Tiberian masoretic text and biblical Hebrew insofar as we are able to reconstruct it based on linguistic analysis of MT and sources that predate it.

For example, it is possible to identify and remove a number of errors of grammatical analysis which are integral to the received text. The examples Hughes cites are or should be uncontroversial: cases in which an original hiph'il infinitive absolute was misconstrued as a 3ms hiph'il perfect (e.g., Gen 15:6; 21:25; 31:7; and 34:5); cases in which an original qal passive imperfect was misparsed as a hoph'al (e.g., Gen 4:15, 24; 12:15; 18:4; 24:33; 50:26), qal (Gen 50:26; Exod 30:32), piel (Isa 1:20), or niph'al (e.g., 2 Sam 3:2 [the ketiv in my view probably reflects an original וילדו]) imperfect; cases in which an original qal passive perfect was misparsed as a pual perfect (e.g., Gen 4:26; 10:21, 25; 35:26; 41:50; 46:22, 27); and cases in which a fs participle was misconstrued as a 3fs (e.g., Gen 18:21; 46:27; Job 2:11; Ruth

¹ Jeremy Hughes, "Post-Biblical Features of Biblical Hebrew Vocalization," in *Language, Theology, and The Bible: Essays in Honour of James Barr* (ed. Samuel E. Balentine and John Barton, Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) 67-80.

1:22; 2:6; 4:3) or 3ms perfect (1 Kgs 11:9; Gen 22:13; Isa 56:3. A close reading of Hughes' essay leaves the impression that the reading tradition preserved in MT accurately reflects the vast majority of grammatical details the texts it transmits instantiate, but this impression depends on a concomitant recognition that it sometimes does not.

Other examples where MT's accuracy cannot be taken for granted have been pointed out by others. As Hughes notes, James Barr concluded that the reading tradition has inserted the article under inseparable prepositions in a number of cases where it was not originally present.² Stephen Kaufman points out a set of hypercorrections in Deuteronomy and Judges in which paragogic *nun* was added to non-indicative imperfect forms via misapplication of a rule whereby the final nun of the imperfect indicative assimilates to the initial consonant of the next except in pause and when the next word begins with a consonant that does not allow assimilation (א and possibly ע). He also notes in passing the "ubiquitous and quite erroneous Masoretic practice" in which *w^eyiqtol* forms have been mispointed as consecutives via assimilation to perfect forms with which they co-occur. He cites the example of וַיִּאֲתָיִן in Isa 41:5. One might wish Kaufman would cite more examples and dedicate an essay to the topic.³

With the partial exception of [eBDB](#), [eHALOT](#), and DCH, reference tools currently available tend to turn a blind eye to the issues mentioned and others like them. To the extent that they do, they lack scientific rigor and lull students of biblical Hebrew into a false sense of security.

Even-Shoshan, eBDB, and [WIVU](#) list five occurrences of אכל as examples of pual forms (Nah 1:10; Neh 2:3, 13; Exod 3:2; Isa 1:20). But אכל is not otherwise attested in the D stem. These forms are best revocalized as Qal passives.⁴ [WHM 4.2](#) so parses them, as does [AFAT](#), except in Isa 1:20. eHALOT is equivocal.

² James Barr, "'Determination' and the Definite Article in Biblical Hebrew," *JSS* 34 (1989) 307-35; 325-33.

³ Stephen A. Kaufman, "Paragogic *nun* in Biblical Hebrew: Hypercorrection as a Clue to a Lost Scribal Practice," in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield* (ed. Ziony Zevit, Seymour Gitin, and Michael Sokoloff; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995) 95-99.

⁴ Recent discussions of the Qal passive stem in biblical Hebrew include Ronald J. Williams, "The Passive *Qal* Theme in Hebrew," *Essays on the Ancient Semitic World* (ed. John W. Wevers and Donald B. Redford; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970) 43-50; Jouon-Muraoka §58; Waltke and O'Connor §26; Pieter A. Siebesma, *The Function of the Niph'al*

eTregelles lists תִּאֲכַלְהוּ in Job 20:26 as a piel. AFAT so parses as well. On this construal, MT תִּאֲכַלְהוּ might be a mixed form, that is, a stand-in for two alternatives: תִּאֲכַלְהוּ (Piel) and תִּאֲכַלְהוּ (qal). Driver and others so aver, but the hypothesis is not compelling. In later Hebrew, the qal, niphil, hiphil, hithpael, and nithpael of אכל are securely attested; the D stem of אכל apparently is not, beyond the pual participle. The example Jastrow lists under piel is a pual participle. If so, it is perilous to posit the existence of the piel of אכל in earlier Hebrew on the basis of MT Job 20:26 תִּאֲכַלְהוּ.

Qimron lists an example of אכל piel in the DSS under “Words Mainly Attested in the DSS and in the Tannaitic and Amoraitic [MH²] Literature”: 4Q513 2 II:5 (Qimron, 98). Abegg, Bowley, and Cook do not so parse it. The context is broken, making it difficult to know how to construe the form in question. The construal of the relevant phrase implied by García Martínez and Tigchelaar, הַזֹּנוֹת מֵאֲכַלֵּיהֶם ‘the fornication of their food,’ in which they treat the form as an example of the well-attested noun מֵאֲכַל, seems more probable than that suggested by Qimron.

As I will now argue, WHM and WIVU correctly parse MT Job 20:26 תִּאֲכַלְהוּ as a qal imperfect. As the vocalization demonstrates, Isa 1:20 תִּאֲכַלְהוּ was understood as a pual imperfect in MT, but WHM, with Hughes and others, correctly parse it as a qal passive, given the weak to non-existent attestation of D active אכל elsewhere. The following pairs illustrate a phenomenon in masoretic Hebrew whereby a form which disambiguates and “protects” a medial א occurs alongside another which does not.

(bound form)	לְשֹׂאת	שֹׂאת
(bound form)	בְּאֲשׁוּ	בְּאֵשׁ
(bound form)	בְּאֲרוֹת	בְּאֵרוֹת
	תִּאֲהָבוּ	תִּאֵהָבוּ

(first form from Prov 1:22; the second, Zech 8:17)

תִּאֲכַלְהוּ* תִּאֲכַלְהוּ* תִּאֲכַלְהוּ

(MT Isa 1:20 is a byform of the second form, which goes back to the third)

תִּאֲכַלְהוּ* תִּאֲכַלְהוּ

(first form from Job 20:26; the second by analogy with Gen 3:17 תִּאֲכַלְנוּ)

in Biblical Hebrew (SSN 29 [28]; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1991); and Jeremy Hughes, “Post-Biblical Features,” 71-76.

In cases (1) – (3), the phenomenon occurs according to a rule. In cases (4) – (6), it apparently does not.

This foray into morphological analysis has shown that older reference works retain interest. [Logos](#) is to be commended for producing [eTregelles](#). It was also seen that newer works incorporate the results of recent research very unevenly. In terms of MT, WIVU consistently reports the parsing implied by it. WHM alone parses the six occurrences discussed here in full recognition of the rediscovery of the qal passive by modern philologists. The importance of having multiple resources at one's fingertips is patent.