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Modality and the Biblical Hebrew  
Infinitive Absolute

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## Foreword

The present study is the product of years of research into the employment of the infinitive absolute in Biblical Hebrew. I gratefully acknowledge profound debt to scholars of several generations and diverse nationalities with whom I have interacted either personally or through their works. Special thanks go to three of them. The first is Timothy O'Brien of the United States Naval Academy, who introduced me to the critical study of written texts. I also specifically thank my doctoral advisor and friend, George Klein of Southwestern Seminary, and Robert Chisholm of Dallas Seminary, both of whom were particularly influential in my initial training in Biblical Hebrew and my discovery of my academic calling.

The interlibrary loan personnel of the A. Webb Roberts Library at Southwestern Seminary and the Nimitz Library at the United States Naval Academy, especially Florene Todd, deserve special commendation for their persistence and professionalism in acquiring rare resources for me as I completed this study. Support from my wife and parents has fostered the completion of this work through the varied seasons of life, and no amount of thanks could adequately express my gratitude and love for them.

If the findings reported in this book deepen the reader's understanding of the function of the infinitive absolute and thus enhance the apprehension of the message of the Hebrew Bible, then my work will have met its ultimate goal.

Scott N. Callaham  
Thanksgiving Day 2009

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Statement of the Problem

#### Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Infinitives

Infinitives are verbal nouns that “name” a verbal idea.<sup>1</sup> Lacking inflections, infinitives are the “unmarked form *par excellence*.”<sup>2</sup> Though infinitives appear in all major *binyanim*, they do not carry person, gender, number, tense, aspect, or modality information in their morphology. Unlike contemporary Indo-European languages such as English, Biblical Hebrew employs two kinds of infinitive: the “infinitive construct” and the “infinitive absolute.”

Among its various uses in Biblical Hebrew, the infinitive construct most closely approximates the familiar “to + verbal idea” concept of the English infinitive when it pairs the ל preposition with a verbal root. The infinitive construct accounts for approximately 89% of all infinitives in the Hebrew Bible, according to the Westminster Hebrew Morphology.<sup>3</sup> Since the time of the first known translation of the Hebrew Bible into another language, the remaining 11% of Hebrew infinitives have been particularly noteworthy for possessing no analogous counterpart in translation receptor languages.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Emil F. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, trans. Arthur E. Cowley (New York: Clarendon, 1910), 123, 339. In view of the functions of Biblical Hebrew infinitives, one could easily label infinitives “nominal verbs” rather than “verbal nouns.”

2 Holger Gzella, *Tempus, Aspekt und Modalität im Reichsaramäischen*, VOK 48, ed. Walter W. Müller (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004), 310.

3 A search on Bibleworks 8 with Westminster Hebrew Morphology 4.10 (2008) indicates the presence of 6,591 infinitives construct and 818 infinitives absolute in the Masoretic text. Electronic analysis with another database version or a different coding system would likely return varying results. Indeed, the Westminster Hebrew Morphology reduced its infinitive absolute count from 875 in version 4.0 (2003) to 873 in version 4.4 (2005) to 818 in version 4.10 (2008). The present study identifies 865 infinitives absolute in the Hebrew Bible. Appendix 1 lists these infinitives absolute and displays them in tabular form with data pertinent to the study.

4 However, a number of other ancient Semitic languages also feature an infinitive absolute. See Burton L. Goddard, “The Origin of the Hebrew Infinitive Absolute in the Light of Infinitive Uses in Related Languages and Its Use in the Old Testament” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1943), 12–29; J. Lewy, “Paronomastic Infinitives in Classic Akkadian,” *Or* 15 (1946): 410–5; John William Wevers, “The Infinitive Absolute in the Phoenician Inscription of Azitawadd,” *ZAW* 62 (1949–1950): 316–7; William L. Moran, “The Use of the Canaanite Infinitive Absolute as a Finite Verb in the Amarna Letters from Byblos,” *JCS* 4 (1950): 169–72; John Edward Huesman, “The Infinitive Absolute in Biblical Hebrew and Related Dialects” (Ph.D. diss., The Johns Hopkins Uni-

### Paronomastic Infinitives Absolute

Ancient translators encountered the infinitive absolute twice in Isa 6:9, displayed in a slightly darker and bolder font hereafter:<sup>5</sup>

וַיֹּאמֶר לֵךְ וְאָמַרְתָּ לָעָם הַזֶּה שְׁמָעוּ וְאַל־תַּחֲבִינוּ וְרֹאֵוּ  
וְאַל־תִּדְעוּ:

The Septuagintal rendering of Isa 6:9 illustrates the difficulty of transferring the Hebrew infinitive absolute concept into ancient Greek:

καὶ εἶπε Πορεύθητι καὶ εἰπὸν τῷ λαῷ τούτῳ Ἄκοῦ ἄκούσετε καὶ οὐ  
μὴ συνήτετε καὶ **βλέποντες** βλέψετε καὶ οὐ μὴ ἴδῃτε.<sup>6</sup>

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versity, 1955), 81–107; Rainer Degen, *Altaramäische Grammatik der Inschriften des 10.–8. Jh. v. Chr.*, AKM 38/3 (Wiesbaden: Kommissionsverlag Franz Steiner, 1969), 116–7; W. Randall Garr, *Dialect Geography of Syria-Palestine, 1000–586 B.C.E.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 180–4; Daniel Sivan, *A Grammar of the Ugaritic Language*, HOS 28 (New York: Brill, 1997), 123–4; Eran Cohen, “Paronomastic Infinitive in Old Babylonian,” *JEOL* 38 (2004): 105–12; Yoo-ki Kim, *The Function of the Tautological Infinitive in Classical Biblical Hebrew* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 112–28; Shigeo Takeuchi, “The Tautological Infinitive Absolute in Northwest Semitic Languages in the First Half of the First Millennium B.C.E.,” (Japanese, with English abstract) *J Gen Ling* 10 (2007): 79–91; Scott W. Booth, “Using Corpus Linguistics to Address Some Questions of Phoenician Grammar and Syntax Found in the Kulamuwa Inscription: Identifying the Presence and Function of the Infinitive Absolute, the Suffixed Conjugation and the *Wāw*” (M.A. thesis, Trinity International University, 2007), 54–103; Steven E. Fassberg, “The Infinitive Absolute as Finite Verb and Standard Literary Hebrew of the Second Temple Period,” in *Conservatism and Innovation in the Hebrew Language of the Hellenistic Period: Proceedings of a Fourth International Symposium on the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Ben Sira*, ed. Jan Joosten and Jean-Sébastien Rey, STDJ 73 (Boston: Brill, 2008), 47–8.

5 The present study draws attention to certain Hebrew words through employing vowel pointing and a darker font than surrounding unpointed text. Unless otherwise indicated, bold type then identifies the corresponding concept in translation, as shown in the case of Isa 6:9 above. Incidentally, employing bold type as an emphatic device in English translation resembles Richard Elliott Friedman’s technique of placing verbs repeated by infinitives absolute in italics. See Richard Elliott Friedman, “He Shall Surely Die: Translating the Emphatic in Biblical Hebrew” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the SBL, Atlanta, Ga., November 22, 2003); idem, *The Hidden Book in the Bible: The Discovery of the First Prose Masterpiece* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 64 n. 10.

6 This citation is from the Göttingen Septuagint: Joseph Ziegler, ed., *Isaias*, 3rd ed., *Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum* 14 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983). The referent of the term “Septuagint” is notoriously fluid in scholarship, for there is no single, homogeneous ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. See

And he said, “Go and say to this people, ‘By **hearing**, you will hear, but never understand, and **seeing**, you will see, but never actually see.’”<sup>7</sup>

The Greek text employs the dative feminine singular noun ἀκοή to render the first Hebrew infinitive absolute שְׂמוּעָה, but then selects the present active participle βλέποντες to represent the second infinitive absolute רְאִי. C. F. D. Moule classifies these two techniques for representing the Hebrew infinitive absolute as “Semitisms,” for the corpus of non-biblical Greek literature contains few such repetitive verbal constructions.<sup>8</sup> Awkwardness of translation in Isa 6:9 signals that the ancients grappled with the problem of the meaning of Hebrew infinitives absolute appearing in concert with cognate verbs. Their solution was a literalistic translation that was unidiomatic in Koine Greek, just as the wooden English rendering above stands apart from contemporary English usage.<sup>9</sup>

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Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 29–44. K. Elliger, W. Rudolph, and H. P. Rüger, eds. *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1990), commonly abbreviated BHS, serves as the Hebrew text for the present study. Biblical citations follow the BHS enumeration of verses.

- 7 This is a literalistic translation of the Greek text, not the Hebrew. All translations into English in the present study derive from the author.
- 8 C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 177–8. See also James Hope Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 3rd ed., vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, James Hope Moulton and Wilbert Francis Howard (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), 75–6; idem, vol. 2, *Accidence and Word-Formation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), 428–30; idem, vol. 3, *Syntax*, Nigel Turner (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 156–7; A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 94; F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 106, 218; Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, trans. Joseph Smith (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963), 21; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 168–9.
- 9 Specialized studies on Septuagintal translation of the Hebrew infinitive absolute include G. R. Hauschild, *Die Verbindung finiter und infiniter Verbalformen desselben Stammes in einigen Bibelsprachen* (Frankfurt: Gebrüder Knauer, 1893); Henry St. John Thackeray, “Renderings of the Infinitive Absolute in the LXX,” *JTS* 9 (1908): 597–601; H. Kaupel, “Beobachtungen zur Übersetzung des Infinitivus absolutus in der Septuaginta,” *ZAW* 61 (1945–1948): 191–2; Henry S. Gehman, “The Hebraic Character of Septuagint Greek,” *VT* 1 (1951): 85; Raija Sollamo, “The LXX Renderings of the Infinitive Absolute Used with a Paronymous Finite Verb in the Pentateuch,” in *La Septuaginta en la investigación contemporánea (V Congreso de la IOSCS)*, TECC 34, ed. Natalio Fernán-



Partnering an infinitive absolute with a cognate verb represents the most frequent employment of the infinitive absolute in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>10</sup> Joüon and Muraoka describe the function of the infinitives absolute in Isa 6:9 above as “accusative of internal object.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Bergsträsser describes the infinitive absolute as “inner object,”<sup>12</sup> while Ernst Sellin’s dissertation on Hebrew verbal nouns applies the label “absolute object.”<sup>13</sup> These grammarians describe the infinitive as the “object” of its paired finite verb because the infinitive is a verbal noun. Muraoka employs the notional construction קטל יקטל to claim that the noun-like infinitive by itself conveys no emphasis: “[by] a slaughter he will slaughter.” The infinitive duplicates the verbal idea, and it is this repetitive dynamic that generates any emphasis or intensification.<sup>14</sup>

Gideon Goldenberg instead prefers terming this characteristic use of the infinitive absolute “tautological,” though Goldenberg’s label may unintentionally imply that the presence of the infinitive is unnecessary and thus syntactically and pragmatically insignificant.<sup>15</sup> Two twentieth-century dissertations on the meaning of the infinitive absolute select the less technical phrase

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dez Marcos (Madrid: Instituto “Arias Montano” CSIC, 1985), 101–13; Emanuel Tov, “Renderings of Combinations of the Infinitive Absolute and Finite Verbs in the LXX – Their Nature and Distribution,” in *Studien zur Septuaginta – Robert Hanhart zu Ehren: Aus Anlaß seines 65. Geburtstages*, MSU 20, AAWG, Philologisch-Historische Klasse 190, ed. Detlef Fraenkel, Udo Quast, and John William Wevers (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 64–73.

10 There are 507 of these constructions, accounting for 59% of all infinitives absolute. Strangely, the infinitive construct mimics the infinitive absolute in this manner in Neh 1:7, Ps 50:21, and Ezek 30:16. See Steven E. Fassberg, “The Overlap in Use Between the Infinitive Construct and the Infinitive Absolute in Biblical Hebrew,” (Hebrew) in *Shai le-Sarah Yafet: mehkirim ba-Mikra, be-farshanuto uvi-leshono*, ed. Mosheh Bar-Asher (Jerusalem: Mosad Byalik, 2007), 428. The infinitive absolute pairs with false cognates seven times: 2 Sam 15:8 (*Qere*), Isa 24:19, Isa 28:28, Jer 8:13, Jer 42:10, Jer 48:9, and Zeph 1:2. The spelling of the infinitive absolute in Ezek 14:3 is anomalous.

11 Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 2 vols., trans. and ed. Takamitsu Muraoka, SubBi 14 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2000), 2:421. Citations of the Joüon grammar are from this edition unless otherwise noted.

12 Gotthelf Bergsträsser, *Hebräische Grammatik* (Leipzig: F. C. W. Vogel, 1918), 62.

13 Ernst Sellin, *Die verbal-nominale Doppelnatur der hebräischen Participien und Infinitive und ihre darauf beruhende verschiedene Konstruktion* (Leipzig: Ackermann & Glaser, 1889), 70.

14 Joüon, 2:422, 429. See also Takamitsu Muraoka, *Emphatic Words and Structures in Biblical Hebrew* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 86. In this regard Muraoka draws attention to Hermann Reckendorf, *Über Paronomasie in den semitischen Sprachen* (Gießen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1909), 104. Here Reckendorf discusses the infinitive absolute as “inner accusative.”

15 Gideon Goldenberg, “Tautological Infinitive,” *IOS* 1 (1971): 36–85.

“intensive use.”<sup>16</sup> Each of the suggested labels above carry certain liabilities. For example, designating the infinitive absolute an “object” militates against evidence that the infinitive functions verbally, in unison with its cognate verb. Further, while the concept of an “intensive” or “emphatic” sense for the infinitive absolute appears well-established in introductory grammars,<sup>17</sup> this title excludes other possible nuances. The standard reference grammars list numerous divergent shades of meaning for the so-called “intensive” infinitive.<sup>18</sup> Lack of agreement between reference grammars on their semantic categories indicates that serious discussion of the infinitive absolute paired with another verb of the same root requires a label that accurately encompasses all usages.

In order to offer a descriptive term without biasing interpretation in the direction of either the noun sense of “object” or verbal idea intensification, the present study selects the term “paronomastic” infinitive. Thus the concatenation of an infinitive absolute and a verb of the same root receives the somewhat unwieldy label “paronomastic infinitive construction.” This is a standard technical term rather than a description of “word-play,” as the concept of “paronomasia” might otherwise suggest.

In general, Biblical Hebrew employs repetition of a word or its root to reinforce the significance of the word or to apply some kind of stress.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Georg Heinrich Ewald asserts that repetition is the strongest means of emphasis available in Biblical Hebrew.<sup>20</sup> Another emphatic device manifesting verbal root repetition is the cognate accusative, also known as the *schema etymologicum* or *figura etymologica*. An example of the cognate accusative appears in Ps 14:5:

16 Goddard, 30; Huesman, 8.

17 Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (New York: Scribner, 1971), 158; Choon Leong Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 182; Jacob Weingreen, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 79.

18 Joüon, 2:422–5; Kautzsch, 342–5; Bergsträsser, 62–4. See Figure 1 below.

19 Israel Eitan, “La répétition de la racine en Hébreu,” *JPOS* 1 (1920–1921): 171.

20 Georg Heinrich Ewald, *Syntax of the Hebrew Language of the Old Testament*, trans. James Kennedy (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1879), 162. Van der Merwe, Naudé, and Kroeze write, “When a speaker has used this construction, a listener would not be able to claim at a later date that the [speaker] had not expressed [himself] clearly enough.” See Christo H. J. Van der Merwe, Jackie A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*, BLH 3, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Richard S. Hess (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 158. Van der Merwe is aware of the problematic ambiguity of the term “emphasis,” though he employs it for describing the function of the paronomastic infinitive construction. See Christo H. J. Van der Merwe, “The Vague Term ‘Emphasis,’” *JSem* 1 (1989): 130 n. 44.