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Modality and the Biblical Hebrew
Infinitive Absolute

2010
Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

ISSN 0567-4980
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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.¹ Lacking inflections, infinitives are the “unmarked form *par excellence.*”² 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 ב 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.³ 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.⁴

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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.

Paronomastic Infinitives Absolute

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

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

καὶ ἐπεὶ Πορεύθητι καὶ εἰπάνυ τῷ λαῷ τοῦτῳ Ἀκόη ἀκοῦσέτε καὶ οὐ μὴ συνήτε καὶ βλέπουτε βλέψετε καὶ οὐ μὴ ἔδητε.⑥

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., Isaías, 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.’”

The Greek text employs the dative feminine singular noun ἀκοῇ to render the first Hebrew infinitive absolute ἵκνειν, but then selects the present active participle βλέποντες to represent the second infinitive absolute קָנָה. 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. 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.


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.


Partnering an infinitive absolute with a cognate verb represents the most frequent employment of the infinitive absolute in the Hebrew Bible.\(^\text{10}\) Joüon and Muraoka describe the function of the infinitives absolute in Isa 6:9 above as “accusative of internal object.”\(^\text{11}\) Similarly, Bergsträsser describes the infinitive absolute as “inner object,”\(^\text{12}\) while Ernst Sellin’s dissertation on Hebrew verbal nouns applies the label “absolute object.”\(^\text{13}\) 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 לְּפָרַת 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.\(^\text{14}\)

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.\(^\text{15}\) Two twentieth-century dissertations on the meaning of the infinitive absolute select the less technical phrase

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\(^\text{10}\) 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: mehkarim 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.


\(^\text{13}\) Ernst Sellin, Die verbal-nominale Doppelnatur der hebräischen Partizipien und Infinitive und ihre darauf beruhende verschiedene Konstruktion (Leipzig: Ackermann & Gla- ser, 1889), 70.

\(^\text{14}\) 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.”

“intensive use.”16 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,17 this title excludes other possible nuances. The standard reference grammars list numerous divergent shades of meaning for the so-called “intensive” infinitive.18 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.19 Indeed, Georg Heinrich Ewald asserts that repetition is the strongest means of emphasis available in Biblical Hebrew.20 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.
18 Joüon, 2:422–5; Kautzsch, 342–5; Bergsträsser, 62–4. See Figure 1 below.