

LESSON 8: Vav (ו) Prefix Flips the Tense of Verbs; Consonantal Confusion; Spelling Issues.

VOCABULARY

יַרְדֵּן	Jordan [river]
בֵּית-אֵל	Bethel (city)
כְּנָעַן	Canaan [כְּנַעֲנִי Canaanite]
אָדָם	human, Adam
בֶּן	son [usu. pointed בֶּן meaning “son of”]
מִזְבֵּחַ	altar ⁶⁵
מַיִם	water
רֹאשׁ	head, top, chief
רָע, רָעָה; רָעָה	evil (moral or physical), bad, wicked; calamity
חַטָּאת	sin
מִשְׁפָּט	judgment, justice, legal decision, punishment, way of life
גַּם	also, even, too, both (also used for intensification and emphasis)
אַחֵר	behind, after
עַד	unto, until, as far as (time or space)
בְּתוֹךְ	in the midst of
אֲחֵר	other, another
כְּאֲשֶׁר	as, just as, according as, when

Verbs

לָקַח	take (he took)
שָׁתָה	drink (he drank)
מָת	die (he died, he is dead) [מֵוַת in lexicons]
מָצָא	find (he found)
חָטָא	sin (he sinned)

⁶⁵ מִזְבֵּחַ has two peculiarities. First, the accent is not on the last syllable. Second, the “a” vowel under the ך is pronounced *before* the ך, not after (*miz-be-ach*, not *miz-be-cha*).

Possible confusion:

אַחַר (after) and אֲחֵר (other). Unpointed these are the same.
אחד (one) and both אַחַר (after) and אֲחֵר (other)

CONVERTED VERBS: TENSE FLIPPING USING ו

Biblical Hebrew has a feature which might seem odd to English speakers. When a ו is prefixed onto a verb, the tense is flipped. In other words, a ו prefix turns a past verb into a future, and it turns a future verb into a past tense one. Consider these examples:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים	And God said [not “And God will say”]
וַיִּקְרָא יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֶל הָאֲנָשִׁים	And Joshua called to the men
וְדַבֵּר לְךָ אֶל הָעָם	And he will speak for you to the people
וַתִּשְׁמַר	And she watched
וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ לְקוֹלְךָ וַיָּבֹאוּ	and they will obey you and they will come

This construction, often called “the vav-consecutive”, “the vav-conversive”, or “converted”, is extremely common in Biblical Hebrew narrative.⁶⁶ This grammar will use the descriptive designations “*converted-to-past*” and “*converted-to-future*”.⁶⁷ You might have noticed in English translations how often “*and*” begins a sentence from the Hebrew Bible. This is because of these verbs. In fact, it is more common to find these forms than their unconverted counterparts.

A ו prefix flips the tense about 95% of the time. Occasionally the tense does not flip, and you will just have to look at the context to determine these situations. (Non-flipping is more likely with Hebrew poetry than with narrative.) The Masoretes pointed the ו differently when they thought the tense flipped than when

⁶⁶These do occur in Hebrew poetry, but far less often.

⁶⁷See Lesson 22 for a discussion of the wide variety of terms different grammars use as labels for verb “tenses.”

they thought the tense did not flip. However, ancient Israelites only saw the ו, and they usually would have thought the tense flipped.⁶⁸

The consonantal form of most verbs is identical, with the only difference being a prefixed ו. However, the “*he did*” form of final ה verbs, converted [from future] to past, tends to lack the final ה:

ויען and he answered [vocab. Lesson 9]
וירא and he saw

CONSONANTAL CONFUSION

Now that you are used to working with Hebrew consonants, you may have noticed that many look and/or sound similar. English speaking students commonly confuse the following consonants:

א and ע (sound)	ד and ר (appearance)	ו and ז (appearance)
א and ה (sound)	ב and כ (appearance)	ט and ת (sound)
כ and ק (sound)	ו and ן (appearance)	ה and ה (appearance and sound) ⁶⁹

It is extremely important that you do not just know how words sound, but that you also know how they look. Otherwise many Hebrew words get confused. For instance, the English speaker is likely to pronounce קרא, קרה, כרה, כרע, and קרע the same. Also, be careful with similar looking consonants. One classic example is when people confuse the verbs הלל (praise) and הלל (profane). You should see how one consonant makes a big difference in translation!

SPELLING ISSUES

Compared to the history of humanity, the notion of consistent spelling is a fairly recent issue. For this reason and others, you should not be surprised when you see

⁶⁸ Many grammars claim that there must be an unconverted instance of the equivalent time frame non-converted word to start the sequence, but this is just not the case. In fact, twelve books in the Hebrew Bible begin with converted forms.

⁶⁹ Ancient manuscripts indicate that Hebrew scribes sometimes made the same mistakes.

consonantal spelling differences in the Hebrew Bible, a collection of texts which covers up to a thousand years. In addition, from around the sixth century B.C.E., the consonants ה, ו, and י were often added by scribes to represent vowels.⁷⁰

- ה “a” (and sometimes “e”) at the end of words
- ו “o” and “u”
- י “i” and “e”

The spelling of words which normally (according to the Masoretic Text) have these consonantal vowel markers but lack them is often called “defective” spelling, when in reality it is more likely to be original. One of the most common examples is the feminine plural suffix תִּ-ֵ. Often this lacks the ו, showing up as just a ת. The Masoretes indicated the “missing” ו with an “o” vowel (e.g., תִּֿֿֿֿ).

Many Dead Sea Scrolls have an even greater number of these added consonants. The Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsaiah^a) even adds א to כִּי (i.e., כִּיא) and other two-consonant words which end with י!

⁷⁰ Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman, *Early Hebrew Orthography* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1952), 58; see especially their excursus, “Orthographic Problems in the Massoretic Text,” 65-70.