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978-1-107-64541-7 - A Short Account of the Hebrew Tenses

The Rev. R. H. Kennett

Excerpt

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A SHORT ACCOUNT OF THE HEBREW TENSES.

THE name 'tenses' as applied to Hebrew verbs is misleading. The so-called Hebrew 'tenses' do not express the *time* but merely the *state* of an action. Indeed were it not for the confusion that would arise through the application of the term 'state' to both nouns and verbs, 'states' would be a far better designation than 'tenses.' It must always be borne in mind that it is impossible to translate a Hebrew verb into English without employing a limitation (viz. of time) which is entirely absent in the Hebrew. The ancient Hebrews never thought of an action as past, present, or future, but simply as *perfect*, i.e. complete, or *imperfect*, i.e. as in course of development. When we say that a certain Hebrew tense corresponds to a Perfect, Pluperfect, or Future in English, we do not mean that the Hebrews thought of it as Perfect, Pluperfect, or Future, but merely that it must be so translated in English. The *time* of an action the Hebrews did not attempt to express by any verbal form.

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THE PERFECT.

The fundamental idea denoted by the Perfect is that of a completed act; and this idea underlies all its various uses. Thus the Perfect is used to describe the following classes of actions:

I. Actions completed at a definite moment in the past: e.g.

בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. i. 1)

מִים שָׁאַל חֶלֶב נָתַנָּה

Water he asked, milk she gave (Judges v. 25)

II. Actions completed in the past of which the effect remains: e.g.

הוֹשִׁיעָה לוֹ יְמִינוֹ וְיָרֵדָה קִדְשׁוֹ

His right hand and His holy arm have gained Him the victory (Ps. xcvi. 1)

הַמֶּלֶךְ שָׁדַי לִי מֵאֵד

Shaddai has brought sore trouble upon me (Ruth i. 20)

III. Actions completed in the immediate past, in which case the Perfect passes over into the meaning of the Present: e.g.

כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה

Thus saith Jehovah (passim)

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הֲרַמְתִּי יָדִי אֶל־יְהוָה אֵל עֲלִיּוֹן

I lift up my hand to Jehovah God most high (Gen. xiv. 22)

and similarly,

יָדַעְתִּי *I know*, זָכַרְתִּי *I remember*.

N.B. The Perfect of so-called 'stative' verbs is naturally used to express a state complete in the present: e.g.

קָטַנְתִּי *I am small*, אָהַבְתִּי *I love*, שָׂנְאֵתִי *I hate*.

לֹא קִצְרָה יַד יְהוָה מִחֻשִׁיעַ וְלֹא כְבֵדָה אָזְנוֹ מִשְׁמוֹעַ

Jehovah's hand is not too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear (Isaiah lix. 1)

IV. Actions completed in the future, which in Latin would be expressed by the Future Perfect or Subjunctive Perfect: e.g.

וְאִם־כֵּן אֶמַר לְעָלָם.....לָךְ כִּי שְׁלַחְךָ יְהוָה

But if I say thus to the youth....., go, for Jehovah will have sent thee away (1 Sam. xx. 22)

אֶל־תִּעְצֹר־לִי לְרֹכֵב כִּי אֶם־אֶמַרְתִּי לָךְ

I will not have thee stop driving unless I tell thee (shall have told thee) (2 Kings iv. 24)

יִבְקְשׁוּ אֶת־אֲדֹנֶיךָ פֶּן־נִשְׂאוּ רוּחַ יְהוָה

Let them seek thy master, lest the wind of Jehovah may have taken him up (2 Kings ii. 16)

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V. Actions completed before some definite point of time in the past, which in Latin would be expressed by the Pluperfect: e.g.

וַיִּשְׁבֹּת בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מִכָּל-מְלָאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה

*And He desisted on the seventh day from all His work
which He had done* (Gen. ii. 2)

וְרַחֵל לָקְחָה אֶת-הַתְּרָפִים

Now Rachel had taken the teraphim (Gen. xxxi. 34)

לְשִׁמְעַע אָזְנוֹ שְׁמַעְתִּיד וְעַתָּה עֵינִי רָאִתִּיד

*By the mere hearing of the ear had I heard of Thee, but
now my own eye has seen Thee* (Job xlii. 5)

N.B. It must not however be forgotten that, although the Perfect may frequently be translated by our Pluperfect, yet the Pluperfect idea is foreign to Hebrew thought. A Hebrew merely stated the *completion* of an action, and left the *time* of its completion to be inferred from the context. Thus in the first of the three examples given above the verb עָשָׂה merely states the completion of the act of doing. It is obvious from the context that this act of doing was completed before God desisted from the work of creation. So likewise in the second illustration it is merely stated that Rachel took the teraphim, the context making it sufficiently clear that she took them before her father began to look for them.

VI. Actions of which the time is quite indefinite, the completion of the single act alone being regarded¹: e.g.

¹ This is the so-called Perfect of Experience: it scarcely occurs in ordinary prose.

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יֵבֶשׁ הָחֵצִיר נָבֵל צִיץ כִּי רוּחַ יְהוָה נִשְׁבָּה בּוֹ

Grass withers, flower fades, when Jehovah's wind has blown upon it (Isaiah xl. 7)

חָתַר בַּחֲשֵׁךְ בָּתִּים

He breaks into houses in the dark (Job xxiv. 16)

VII. Actions the sphere of which belongs to the future, the certainty with which they are regarded being thus expressed¹: e.g.

חֲלֹקֶת הַשָּׂדֶה.....מָכְרָה נָעֲמִי

Naomi is selling (has determined to sell).....the plot of land (Ruth iv. 3)

הַשָּׂדֶה נָתַתִּי לָךְ

The whole field I give thee (Gen. xxiii. 11)

¹ This Perfect of Certainty is frequent in the writings of the Prophets, and is therefore sometimes called the Prophetic Perfect. Examples of its use are: בְּבָלָה יִשְׁלַחְתִּיכֶם לְמַעַנְכֶם *For your sake will I send to Babylon* (Isaiah xliii. 14); בִּלְעַד הַמּוֹת לֹנָצָה *He will annihilate death for ever* (Isaiah xxv. 8).

In an interrogative sentence the Perfect of Certainty acquires a meaning resembling that of the Deliberative Subjunctive in Greek: e.g. הֲחִרְלֹתִי אֶת־רִשְׁנִי *Am I to leave my fatness?* (Judges ix. 9); and, somewhat similarly, מָאֲנָתָּ עַד־מָתִי *How long refusest thou?* (Ex. x. 3). This latter use of the Perfect, however, is rare, and some of the instances which may be assigned to it are capable of a different explanation: thus in the quotation from Exodus x. 3 the Perfect מָאֲנָתָּ may be explained on the analogy of 'stative' verbs (see above, § III, note) or even as a Future Perfect.

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N.B. It must be remembered that, as there is no *time* in the Hebrew tenses, the Perfect may refer to the *future equally well as to the past*. It is incorrect to say that the Hebrew said 'I have done' when he meant 'I will do': in reality he merely described the completion of the act of doing *without specifying the time*. But as there is no more emphatic way of predicting an event still future than by describing its result (see, for example, Isaiah xiii., where the certainty of the fall of Babylon is brought out by the description of its future desolation), so an event which is obviously future, when described as completed, is impressed upon the hearer's mind as certain.

VIII. Hypothetical actions, completed

(a) at or before some definite time in the past: e.g.

לֹא הִחַיְתֶם אֹתָם לֹא הֲרַגְתִּי אֹתְכֶם

If ye had saved them alive, I would not have slain you
(*I would not slay you*)¹ (Judges viii. 19)

לֹא הִתְמַהֲמַהְנוּ בִּי עַתָּה שִׁבְנוּ זֶה פַּעַמַּיִם

If we had not delayed, we might by this time have
*returned twice over*² (Gen. xliii. 10)

¹ The use of the Perfect הֲרַגְתִּי in the *apodosis* to express an action still future may be explained on the analogy of the Perfect of Certainty.

² The use of the Perfect in the *apodosis* of this sentence does not materially differ from its use in the *protasis*. Thus the Perfect שִׁבְנוּ expresses the hypothetical completion of the act of return at some moment in the past in consequence of a previous hypothetical action.

To this heading may be assigned such a sentence as Genesis xxi. 7
מִי מָלַל לְאַבְרָהָם הַיִּנְיָקָה בְּנִים שָׂרָה
(sc. if he had known the circumstances), *Sarah is to suckle children?*

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(b) in the past, but with effect continuing into the present: e.g.

אֶם-עָשִׂיתִי זֹאת.....יִרְדָּף¹ אֹיֵב נַפְשִׁי

*If I have done this (the guilt of which still continues).....
then let an enemy persecute my soul (Ps. vii. 4, 6)*

אֲמִיּהוּהָ הִסִּיתָךְ בִּי יְרַח מְנַחָה

*If it be Jehovah that has stirred thee up against me,
let him smell an offering (1 Sam. xxvi. 19)*

(c) in the future: e.g.

אֶם-זָרַחָה הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ עָלָיו דָּמִים לוֹ

*If the sun shall have risen upon him, there shall be
bloodguiltiness for him (Ex. xxii. 2)*

אֶם-דָּרְחִין אֲדָנִי אֵת צֹאת בָּנוֹת צִיּוֹן

*If (when) the Lord shall have washed away the filth of
the daughters of Sion (Isaiah iv. 4)*

(d) at some indefinite time or times, i.e. when the verb in the *apodosi*s expresses what is habitual: e.g.

וְאִם-בָּא לִרְאוֹת שְׂוֵא יִדְבֹּר

*And if he come (whenever he may have come) to see, he
speaks (is wont to speak) that which is vain
(Ps. xli. 7)*

וְאִם-זָכַרְתִּי וְנִבְהַלְתִּי

*And whenever I think (sc. of the injustice in the world),
I am panic-stricken (Job xxi. 6)*

¹ Point thus.

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(a) in the past: e.g.

לֹא־מָתְנוּ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! (i.e. If we had died in the land of Egypt, it had been well with us)

(Numbers xiv. 2)

(b) in the present: e.g.

מִי־יֵתֵן יִדְעֵתִי

O that I knew! (i.e. Who will give—O that one would give—the state described by the word יִדְעֵתִי)

(Job xxiii. 3)

(c) in the future: e.g.

לֹא־קָרַעַת שָׁמַיִם

O that thou wouldst rend the heavens! (Isaiah lxiii. 19)

X. The Perfect is also frequently used in sentences which western idiom puts into a hypothetical form, but which, technically, are scarcely hypothetical in Hebrew. In such sentences the division into *protasis* and *apodosis* is misleading: they are in reality coordinate clauses, and the graphic Hebrew idiom with its absolute method of expression, that disdains saving clauses and particles,

¹ This must not be understood as implying a belief in the so-called 'Precative' Perfect, the existence of which in Hebrew is extremely doubtful. The Perfect, though it may express confident expectation, does not of itself express a wish. The illustrations given above under (a) and (c) are in reality merely the *protases* of hypothetical sentences of which the *apodoses* are suppressed.

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introduces what is in reality only hypothetical or possible as though it were fact or certainty¹. Illustrations are

מָצָא אִשָּׁה מָצָא טוֹב

If one has found a wife, one has found a good thing
(Prov. xviii. 22)

[In this sentence the two clauses are coordinate. The Hebrew, so to speak, paints a picture of the finding of a wife as an accomplished fact, and likewise the finding of a good thing as parallel to it, the *time* being quite indefinite.]

הֲנִפְסָה דָּבָר אֵלַי תְּלֹאָה²

If one were to attempt to speak to thee, wouldst thou be wearied? (Anglice *would it be too much for thee?*)
(Job iv. 2)

הֲלֹא נִפְּעַ יְתָרָם (יְתָרָם) בָּם יָמוּתוּ²

When their cord (? tent-peg) is plucked up in them, do they not die? (Job iv. 21)

¹ Similar sentences, viz. hypothetical in English but not in Hebrew, are found even where there is no verb in the first clause: e.g. מִשָּׂא וְלֹא יִתְּנָה לְעַבְדִּי מִשָּׂא *Then if not* (i.e. assuming that the refusal to accept a present is unalterable), *let there be given to thy servant a load*, etc. (2 Kings v. 17), cf. 2 Kings x. 15; and similarly with the Participle: e.g. הֲנִהּ יֵהוּהָ עֹשֶׂה אֲרָבוֹת בַּשָּׁמַיִם הִיהִיָּה הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה *Supposing that Jehovah be even now making windows in the heavens, can such a thing come to pass?* (2 Kings vii. 2).

² In this instance the interrogative particle, although placed at the head of the sentence, really belongs to the second verb, or perhaps it would be more true to say that the interrogative particle belongs to the whole sense conveyed by the two closely coordinated clauses.

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THE IMPERFECT.

The Imperfect in its fundamental meaning denotes actions as incomplete, i.e. as in process of development. It does not express the mere *continuance* of an action, which would be expressed by the Participle, but the *development* of it *from its beginning* towards its completion. Whereas the Perfect, so to speak, paints a single picture of an action as completed, the Imperfect paints a series of pictures. Thus in the words נִפְלָה בָּבֶל we have a picture of the fall of Babylon as an accomplished fact, without any specification of the time; in תִּפֹּל בָּבֶל, on the other hand, we have, as it were, a cinematographic representation of the fall of Babylon, stopping short however of the complete end. In the Imperfect, as in the Perfect, there is no definition of *time*: the *time* of an action denoted by it can only be inferred from the context.

I. The Imperfect is accordingly used to denote actions regarded as in process of development,

(a) in the past: e.g.

וְהַבַּיִת יִמְלֵא עָשָׁן

And the house began to fill (and kept filling) with smoke
(Isaiah vi. 4)

וּבְכָל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם תִּשְׁחַת הָאָרֶץ

And in all the land of Egypt the land began to be destroyed
(implying that the destruction went on from one stage to another) (Exodus viii. 20)¹

¹ Similarly the Imperfect is commonly used after אָז 'then' and כֹּרֵם 'not yet,' since both words call attention to the origin and