

## The Hebrew Corner

Did you know that Hebrew verbs do not have tense, that is, a past, present, or future time? For example, in English, if we say, “I went to the store,” we can definitely state that the verb went is describing an event that happened in the past. Hebrew verbs do not carry this information. Instead, Hebrew verbs have what is known as aspect, or type of action. Two aspects that Hebrew verbs express are completed action and incomplete action. In Hebrew, the verb form known as perfect is the form used for completed action, and the verb form known as imperfect is used for incomplete action. However, complete or incomplete action can happen in the past, present, or future. Take, for example, the verb *zakar* (זָכַר, zah-KAHR). The meaning of this verb is to remember, and the verb in the form given above, is in the perfect conjugation, also masculine, singular, and third person (he or it), but does it mean, he remembered, or, he has remembered, or, he will have remembered? All represent completed action (remembering), but only context will tell us whether the action was completed in the past, present, or future.

Conversely, the imperfect conjugation for this verb, masculine, singular, and third person is (יִזְכֵּר, yihz-KOHR), which can mean, he will remember, he has been remembering, he had been remembering, he used to remember, or even, he may remember. So clearly, we must rely on the context of the Hebrew verb to distinguish between the possible meanings.

This feature of Hebrew verbs is what makes it such an excellent prophetic language. God knows the beginning, the life, and the end

of a person or a nation, because he is not situated within time, but is apart from it. He has the perspective of a timeless observer. The verb that has no tense, then, can best represent God's point of view, and why a prophet can make use of these verb forms to express his perspective.

This is how the prophet Isaiah can make this statement, although the event described would not happen for about 700 years into the future (Isaiah 9:6):

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: ...”

The verbs used in this passage for born and given are forms of the Hebrew verbs *yalad* (יָלַד, yah-LAHD) meaning to bear or bring forth, and *natan* (נָתַן, nah-TAHN) meaning to give, put, or set. Both verbs in the text are in the perfect conjugation, indicating completed action. Here Isaiah, as a prophet, is speaking from God's perspective.

One aspect of Hebrew verb usage that is not well understood concerns the usage of sequential verbs. Specifically, a series of verbs in a passage may have a special *vav* (ו) placed in front of each verb to indicate a storytelling sequence or a prophetic sequence of events. The various names that are given to these sequences suggest the different ways of understanding the usage. For example, some refer to the sequences as *vav* conversive, because they see the *vav* in front of the verb form as converting the aspect from perfect to imperfect or vice versa, and some refer to the sequences as *vav* consecutive to emphasize that the verbs in the sequence continue the aspect of the first verb in the chain of verbs. For an example of a *vav* consecutive sequence, consider the following passage (Deuteronomy 5:1):

“And Moses called all Israel, and said unto them, ...”

In Hebrew the passage is written as follows:

(וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים)

Since this passage is relating the story of Moses giving his final instructions from God to his people Israel before his passing, it is clear that the story is narrating past events sequentially. The verbs *qarah* (קָרָא, kah-RAH) and *amar* (אָמַר, ah-MAHR) are in the imperfect conjugation, and both have a *vav* attached to the front, which may be viewed by some as converting the time of the verb from future to past. However, this understanding is not required by the form of these verbs but due to context only. The reader may ask, why is an imperfect verb form used to describe a completed action. The reason may be that the switch from perfect to a *vav* plus the imperfect form may serve simply to identify this as a storytelling or prophetic sequence, and that each consecutive verb with the same form is part of the sequence.

The Genesis account of creation also makes use of *vav* consecutive sequences, for example, in Genesis 1:8:

“And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.”

In Hebrew the text is as follows:

(וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לַרְקִיעַ שָׁמַיִם וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר יוֹם שֵׁנִי)

Again we see the *vav* consecutive in two verb forms, *qarah* and *haya* (הָיָה, hah-YAH), in all instances in the imperfect conjugation. This passage and others in the creation account are normally considered

to be, and translated as, a past narrative telling the story of how God created the earth and all life on the earth in six days. However at least one author has viewed the account, not as a past narrative, but instead as a future prophetic sequence.

In a book published in 1840 titled “Treatise on the Chronology and the Prophetical Numbers of the Bible,” authored by Duncan MacDougal, a British accountant and teacher, a very different understanding of Genesis 1 is presented. MacDougal understood the repetitive uses of the imperfect verb forms in Genesis 1 to indicate a prophetic sequence, in which the six days of creation were symbolic of yet to be fulfilled events from the viewpoint of the beginning of human history on earth. He associated each day of creation as 1000 year periods in the future, referring to Psalms 90:4 and 2 Peter 3:8 to make the association. MacDougal translates the passages of Genesis 1 phrase-by-phrase, so joining his phrases together into coherent English, we get the following for Genesis 1:8:

“Then God shall call everywhere to the expanse as heaven. Then shall be evening, then shall be morning, a second day.”

MacDougal saw the accounts in Genesis of the six days of creation and the seventh day of Sabbath rest as symbolic. For example, he used the following passage of 1 Peter (quoting Isaiah) to identify the grass of Genesis 1:11-12 as representing mankind (1 Peter 1:24):

“For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away:”

While this type of a future rendering of the creation account of

Genesis is outside the realm of the normal interpretation, it does show that the Hebrew verb forms and sequences can be understood in different ways, due to the context dependency of the point of time of the verbs. Thus there is the possibility that a passage may represent a past event, and have a future, prophetic significance within the same text. As we read scripture, we need to carefully consider the full passage and other related passages, focusing on the context, and above all consulting the Holy Spirit for guidance, to gain a proper understanding of the scriptural passage that will benefit us. May your future be bright under the blessings that God has for you!