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## Verbal System: Medieval Hebrew Poetry

The Medieval Hebrew flourished as a written language during the Golden Age of Jewish culture in Spain between the 8th and the 12th century. Though abundantly documented, it is, however, hardly ever a subject of linguistic analysis, since the marked differences between the language systems of the leading authors do not allow for an overall analysis (see Sáenz-Badillos 1996:202–226), so that the language of each of its representatives should be investigated separately, as an autonomous system.

The following entry aims to briefly define the verbal structure (see Comrie 1976; 1986) in the poetry of Yehuda Halevi, who—being an exceedingly productive writer and one of the leading figures of Jewish culture in Spain in the first half of the 12th century—placed himself among the few to set standards of the literary Hebrew of the time, whose main aspiration was to emulate the language of the Bible.

Even though corresponding to the Psalmic structural tradition, the language of his lyrics proves itself to be a grammatically independent unit based on some innovative rules. While the main principle governing the distribution of the five flexible forms: *qatal*, *waqatal*, *yiqtol*, *wayyiqtol*, and *qotel* seems to be based mainly on the semantic value of the verbs used, some general remarks on how each of the inflected verbal forms functions within the frames of Halevi's poetry are presented below.

### 1. YIQTOL

The *yiqtol* is the form used most frequently by Halevi (so too in the Bible). In the majority of its appearances it functions within the frames of subjectively orientated predications.

Thus it appears in all of the possible biblical modal usages—as expressing the deontic (commissive, directive, volitive) epistemic or irrealis modality:

אֲדֹנָי נִגְדָה כָּל־תְּאוּנוֹתַי  
וְאִם לֹא אֶעֱלֶנָּה עַל שְׁפָתַי  
רְצוֹנָה אֲשַׁאֲלֶה רְגַע וְאֶגְוֶה

'ādōnāy neḡdākā kāl-ta'ūwātī  
wə-'im lō 'a'ələnnā 'al šəpātī  
rašōnqā 'eš'ālā rēgā wə-'egwā

'O Lord, toward You is all of my desire,  
Even though I cannot bring it to my lips.  
If only I could ask for just a moment of your  
favor, and then perish...' (Brody, vol. III, 266).

It appears also very commonly in rhetorical questions, after the interrogative pronouns *מה* *ma* 'what?', *איך* 'ēk 'how?', *אנה* 'ānā 'to where, whither?', *מי* *mī* 'who?'), which are also strongly volitive, directive, or epistemic in their character:

מִי יַעֲשֶׂה לִי כַנְפַיִם וְאַרְחִיק נֶגֶד

*mī ya'āše lī knāpayim wə-'arḥiq neḡōd*

'Who would make me wings, so that I could  
fly afar?' (Brody, vol. II, 155).

The *yiqtol* is also widely used with *verba sentiendi, dicendi*, or *declarandi* (which in the Psalter is characteristic for the *qatal* form):

וְמָה יִחְשַׁב כָּל־חֹשֶׁב אֲשֶׁר בְּעֶפְרַיִם יִסְוֶה

*u-ma yahšōb kāl-ḥōšēb 'āser bə-'āpār yasōdām*

'What should a reasonable being think,  
Whose origin is but dust?'

In these usages the distribution of the *yiqtol* seems to disregard the two basic grammatical categories—tense and aspect. Instead it is employed in the types of utterances which could be defined as strongly illocutionary (see Wunderlich 1976), concentrating not on the content, but on the desired effect exerted by the speech act.

In the remaining cases (apart from but a few archaizing usages, where it is used as a preterite) *yiqtol* refers to the future, sometimes the present, presented as a consequence of some previous situation. In such usages the form appears with an action verb and, surprisingly enough, in principle expresses the perfective aspect:

עֲבָדִים בָּהֶם מְשֻׁלּוֹ וּמִקְרָא לָךְ לֹא יִחְדְּלוּ  
עַד אֲשֶׁר תָּשִׁיב שְׁבוּתֵנוּ וְתַנְחִים חֲרָבוֹתֵינוּ

'ābādīm bāhem māsālū u-miqrō lākā lō yehdālū  
'ad 'āser tāsīb šəbūtēnū u-tnahēm ḥārḇōtēnū

'They are ruled by slaves,  
But they will never stop calling You,  
Until the day, when You shall return us from  
our captivity  
And console our waste lands' (Brody: vol. III, 111).

### 2. QATAL

The *qatal* is the second most frequent form. It generally has a perfect function expressing

a durable, resultative state. As opposed to the *yiqtol*, it describes all passive, process-, and state-orientated situations, stretching freely in time (also into the future) with a distinct imperfective aspect, or even more commonly, with perfective aspect, i.e., where a clear starting point initiates a durative process:

הַעֲמַדְנוּ מִשְׁמַרְתֵּנוּ לְשֹׁמֵר מִשְׁפָּטֵי צִדְקָה  
וְאִם שִׁדְדָה אֲדַרְתֵּנוּ וְנִגְרַשְׁנוּ מִחִיקָה  
וְהִיָּתָה שְׂפָחָה גְבֻרָתֵנוּ וּמִשְׁלוֹ בְּנוֹ רַחֲקִיךָ  
הַחֲזֹקֵנוּ בַּעֲטָרְתֵנוּ נִזֹּר

*he'ēmadnū mišmartēnū lišmōr mišpātē  
šidqekā  
wə-'im šuddadā 'adartēnū wə-nigrašnū  
mē-hēqekā  
wə-hāytā šiphā gəbirtēnū u-māslū bānū  
rahēqekā  
heḥēzaqnū ba-'āṭartēnū nēzer*

'We stand on our watch  
To guard your just judgments.  
Even when glory has been plundered  
And we have been chased away from your bosom,  
Even if our maid will become our mistress  
And those, who are so far from You, will dominate us  
We will still hold on to our crown' (Brody, vol. III, 111).

In some cases the subject is barely an agent, but rather a patient or an experiencer:

שְׁלוּחִים שָׁמְעוּ  
שְׁמְעוּ וְזָעוּ  
וְלִבָּם קָרְעוּ  
טָרֵם בְּגָדָם

*šəlūḥīm šām'ū  
šām'ū wə-zā'ū  
wə-libbām qār'ū  
ṭerem biḡdām*

'The pilgrims have heard the news  
They listened and trembled  
While their hearts were torn apart  
Sooner than their robes'

Exceptionally there can appear a distinct agent, yet always in situations where the undergoer of the action is the subject of the whole discourse, the main protagonist in the poem:

גָּלְגַל נָחֵם  
בֵּין קָר וּבֵין חֵם  
הוּא הַצְמִיחָם  
וְהוּא הוֹלִידָם

*galgal nāḥām  
bēn qar u-bēn ḥām  
hū hišmihām  
wə-hū hōlīdām*

'The spheres, they lead them  
Through cold and hot  
They feed them  
And bread them'

When necessary—though seldom, since we are dealing with a non-narrative discourse—the *qaṭal* functions as a past perfective form describing events performed by an active agent (however, in these cases it usually depicts background or a starting point for some other central events and thus often preserves the perfect aspect):

יְדִידִי הִשְׁכַּחְתָּ חֲנֻתְךָ בֵּינִי שָׂדֵי  
וְלִמָּה מְכַרְתָּנִי צְמִיתָ לְמַעַבְדָּם

*yəḏīdī ḥā-šākaḥtā ḥanōtkā ba-bēn šāday  
wə-lāmmā məkartanī šamīṭūt la-ma'bidām*

'My love, have you forgotten,  
How You used to rest between my breasts?  
And why have You sold me  
To those, who enslave me?' (Brody, vol. III, 4)

As common and natural as the form is in Halevi's lyrical style, the *qaṭal*'s functions are markedly narrowed when compared to those in biblical discourse. What is more, unlike in the Bible, it is rarely used to express the perfect. Its usual state-orientated character seems to harken back to the most archaic usages (corresponding to the historically nominal *qaṭīla/qaṭala* form, which functioned as a noun or expressed a state). The visible reversal of proportion between the classically prevalent past usage of *qaṭal* and the archaic one is all the more apparent in the light of the scarce appearance of the clearly perfective usages of the form in Halevi's work.

### 3. QOTEL

The active participle is the third most used form in terms of frequency. There are about twice as many usages of the *qaṭal*. Be that as it may, once introduced, the *qotel* form is the dominant in discourse. It expresses a strongly imperfective aspect, usually durative or habitual, often gnomic, without any possible time reference. In most cases the *qotel* is used when some absolute forces (such as God or love) are being described:

אַתָּה יוֹשֵׁב כְּרוּבִים אַתָּה שׁוֹבֵן שְׁחָקִים

*'attā yōšēḇ kəruḇīm 'attā šōkēn šəḥāqīm*

'You sit upon the cherubim,  
And you dwell in the heavens' (Brody, vol. III, 150).

Note that, though the state is being described, the roles of agent and patient are coreferential—the undergoer (unlike in the case of the *qatal*) is not an experiencer of the process, but both the goal and the source simultaneously.

The *qoṭel* is used also to portray a state and/or condition of reality or people influenced by those dominant forces:

כְּבוֹדְךָ מָלֵא עוֹלָם

*kəbōḏkā mālē ‘ōlām*

‘The world is filled with your grace’ (Brody, vol. III, 150)

It often accents the intensity of the action:

וְאֲנִי מִיָּסָר בְּאַכְזָרִיּוּת מוֹסֵר,  
גּוֹלָה וְנֶאֱסָר

*wa-ʿānī mayyussār ba-ʾakzariyyūt musār*  
*gōle wa-neʿēsār*

‘And I am chastened with cruel punishment  
Exiled and imprisoned’

These timeless, progressive usages correspond logically to the nominal character of the participle as such. However, *qoṭel* also appears commonly with action verbs, obviously with an agentive subject:

אֵשׁ וְשָׁמַיִם  
וְעָפָר וּמִיִּם  
(...)  
יִלְדִים וְשׁוֹכְלִים  
וְנוֹתְנִים וְאֹכְלִים

*ʿēš wa-šāmāyim*  
*wa-ʿāpār u-māyim*  
(...)  
*yōldīm wa-šōklīm*  
*wa-nōṭnīm wa-ʾōklīm*

‘Fire and air,  
earth and water  
(...)  
They breed and consume  
They feed and devour’

The *qoṭel* form is hence usually used to describe the unlimitedness or omnipotence, and the durative or habitual imperfective aspect is the syntactic domain of its grammatical meaning. Those features correspond vividly to the usage characteristic of the Psalter, where the *qoṭel* appears as the main verb expressing the timeless imperfective nature of the action described.

#### 4. WAYYIQTOL

The *wayyiqtol* is a form appearing much less frequently than the three described above. Still

it manifests its presence quite regularly as supplementary to the *qatal*, when it appears as the perfective past form. Halevi pairs each *wayyiqtol* with the preceding *qatal*, allowing the former to continue the grammatical meaning of the latter. On the semantic level the verbs in the *wayyiqtol* form either paraphrase and complement the actions described by those with the *qatal* or present the following, consequential events:

דָּלְקוּהָ אוֹיְבִים וַיַּעֲזְרוּ עָלֶיהָ אִיבָהּ  
הִטְבְּעוּ בִּבְיָ רַגְלֶיהָ וַתִּשְׁכַּב לְמַעַצְבָּהּ

*dālāqūhā ʿōybīm wa-ʿfōrārū ʿālehā ʿēbā*  
*hāṭbaʿū ba-bōš raglēhā wat-tiškab la-maʿāšēbā*

‘Enemies have pursued her, they have awakened  
hatred against her  
Her feet have been sunk into the mire, and she  
has laid down with sorrow’

The functions of the *wayyiqtol* as compared to those in the Bible are greatly narrowed. Halevi’s usages correspond closely to the biblical ones. However, in his work the form appears much less commonly and is less productive, since he rarely uses the *wayyiqtol* form in its most characteristic classical function of introducing new threads and expressing sequential events.

#### 5. WEQATAL

The *weqatal* is used by Halevi with about the same frequency as the *wayyiqtol*. This fact is in itself significant, in that the *weqatal* form has a different distribution from what is found in biblical poetry, where it makes hardly any appearances. The form is used by Halevi in one function, very narrow and characteristic. It appears in the continuation of clauses with the *qatal* (in its state and process-orientated usages) and tends to continue the imperfective meaning by paraphrasing or complementing the previously described situations:

מֵת גִּבּוֹרָם  
וְהוֹסֵר פָּאֶרָם  
וְהַשְׁלֵךְ נִזְרָם  
וְנִשָּׂא רִדִּידָם

*mēt gibōrām*  
*wa-hūsar pāʿerām*  
*wa-hūšlak nizrām*  
*wa-niššāʾ rəḏīdām*

‘Their hero is dead,  
The glory is gone  
And their crown removed,  
The mourning robes are worn’

Occasionally the *weqatal* is introduced after a *qoṭel* form or a verbless clause, where it also continues their universal, durative character:

לְגֹנֶן עֲלֵיהֶם בְּרַחֲמֶיךָ שְׂדֵי הַשָּׁלִיט  
גָּנוֹן וְהַצִּיל פָּסוּחַ וְהַמְלִיט

*laḡōnēn ‘ālēhem ba-rahāmekā šadday haš-šallit*  
*gānōn wa-hiṣṣil pāsōaḥ wa-himlīt*

‘So that you shield them with your mercy, the Almighty One,  
Defending and rescuing, passing over and delivering’

The usage of *weqatal* after the *qatal* form is completely innovative when compared to the biblical distribution of the two forms. However, it is still bound with the historically motivated strongly imperfective aspect.

In sum, Halevi’s distribution of the five Hebrew verbal forms exhibits some differences from Biblical Hebrew and can be described as a skillfully designed template, on one hand based to a significant extent on the semantic information encoded in the verbs, on the other logically corresponding to select classical functions of the forms. Thus, because of its consequence and its non-accidental character it can be recognized as a coherent grammatical system.

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## Verboid

‘Verboid’ (meaning ‘verb-like’) was introduced into linguistic usage by Jespersen (1937: Ch. 39) as a cover term for verb-like entities such as ‘participle’ and ‘agent noun’. The term was adopted by Rosén (1965:83–84; 1966:214–215; 1977:107–113) to designate a group of expressions in Israeli Hebrew whose syntactic behavior is verb-like. These include the existential expression יש *yeš* ‘there is/are’ used with the preposition *le-* ‘to’ to express possession (along with אין *en* ‘there is/are not’ and the relevant past and future forms of היה *haya* ‘there was/were’), as exemplified in (1).

- (1) יוֹסֵף יֵשׁ לוֹ כֶּסֶף  
*yosef yeš lo kesef*  
Yosef there.is to-him money  
‘Yosef has money’.

Other verboids include nouns such as שֵׁם *šem* ‘name’, מְקוֹר *maqor* ‘source’, פִּירוּשׁ *peruš* ‘meaning’, and מַחִיר *mexir* ‘price’ (in their dependent forms: *šm-*, *meqor-*, *peruš-*, and *mexir-*) with 3rd-person possessive suffixes, e.g., שְׁמָהּ *šma* (name-her ‘her name’), as shown in (2).

- (2) הַחֲבֵרָה שְׁלִי שְׁמָהּ תָמָר  
*ha-xavera šeli šma tamar*  
the-girl.friend of.mine name.her Tamar  
‘My girl friend, her name is Tamar’ / ‘My girl friend is called Tamar’.

Although technically such sentences look like Left Dislocation (LD) constructions, in Rosén’s view they are not, since they are standard