

"DOVÉR" AND "M'DABER"

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John Sawyer has characterized recent attitudes toward biblical scholarship, and in particular toward Semitic philology, in four specific ways.¹ In the first place, there is a greater refinement in semantic analysis, achieved by examining the criteria which led an author to choose a particular word in preference to another and thereby clarifying distinctions between apparent synonyms.

Secondly, a greater appreciation exists of the tremendous contribution of traditional Jewish exegetes towards Bible studies, recognizing the ingenuity they exhibit in interpreting texts which they are inhibited from emending. Furthermore, it is now generally recognized that post-biblical Hebrew can throw valuable light on biblical use of language.

Thirdly, he refers to the structuralist approach of analyzing larger literary units and their use of identical or similar language, rather than concentrating as in the past on single words and sentences.

Fourthly, he speaks of the "canonical approach," or what he calls "synchronistic semantics"; acceptance of a text as it stands, on its own terms, rather than over-concern with hypothetical reconstructions of a proto-text.

In the present study, an attempt is made to take these critical attitudes into account in analyzing the usage of two apparently synonymous words derived from the same stem, comprising the same Hebrew consonants, and differing only with regard to the vowels.

The root "*d-v-r* [דבר]" appears in the Bible more than 1,000 times in the *piel* [active] conjugation "*m'daber* [מדבר]," and 41 times in the *kal* [simple] conjugation *dovér* [דובר], 39 of them in its participle form. Even-Shoshan in his Hebrew dictionary differentiates between the usage of the *kal*, which indicates "pronouncing with one's lips" and the *piel*, which denotes "expressing one's thoughts in words."

Nyberg² has dealt with this phenomenon in some detail. He places the *kal* participle form of *d-v-r* within a group of verbs consisting of "*q-v-h* [קח]," "*k-s-h* [כסה]," "*k-z-v* [כזב]" and "*k-v-s* [כבס]," which are normally used in

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the *piel* but occur in the *kal* only in participle form. He regards these forms as denominative participles, which express a habitual act, the "profession" or "nature" of the one who performs it.

Thus *dovér* is used of one who habitually or because of his nature speaks in a "constant" manner. Examples are found frequently in the Psalms, such as:

15:2: *dovér emet* – one who (habitually) speaks the truth;

5:7 and 58:4: *dovrei kazav* – those who speak untruthfully, that is, liars;

28:3 *dovrei shalom* – those who speak peace.

There are also examples in other books, including Esther 10:3: *v'dovér shalom* – speaking peace; Isaiah 45:19 *dovér tzedek* – speaking righteousness.

Dovér is therefore used preferentially in the context of revelation to refer to God or to Divine messengers (angels) who through their communications are in constant contact with men. One example is in Genesis 16:13, *the name of the Lord Who spoke [ha-dovér] to her [Hagar]*. Another is in Zechariah 1:9, *the angel that spoke [ha-dovér] through me* – that is, that used me as his vehicle, habitually.

In a few rare cases, this use of the *kal* participle is extended to God when speaking in a specific situation. Examples are:

The Lord spoke [va-yedaber] to Moses saying . . . 'Speak to [daber] Pharaoh king of Egypt everything which I am saying [dovér] to you' (Ex. 6:29).

'Hear O Israel the statutes and judgments which I am speaking [dovér] in your hearing today' (Deut. 5:1).

' . . . proclaim to her the message which I am speaking [dovér] to you' (Jonah 3:2)

'Hear now the word of the Lord, that which I am speaking [dovér] to you' (Jer. 38:20).

From a theological standpoint, this usage need not surprise us, as the "constancy" of God's nature is a fundamental principle of Jewish biblical thought. Thus, even when God speaks "specifically," from the human point of view it is habitual, since it is but a reflection of His constant nature.

Normally, however, it is the *piel* conjugation which is used when it is desired to convey the idea of speaking in a specific situation, while the *kal* participle is reserved for general or habitual contexts.

Expanding on Nyberg's theory, Jenni³ describes the *kal* form of *d-v-r* as expressing words or messages which are intentionally left unspecified, while the *piel* form is used in cases where the speech content is clearly defined, or is at least implied if not actually quoted or specified. Compare for instance:

She called the name of the Lord Who spoke [ha-dovér – kal] to her 'You are a God of seeing me' (Gen. 16:13).

'Therefore My people shall know My name; therefore shall they know on that day that I am He Who speaks [ha-m'daber – piel] Here am I!' (Isa. 52:6).

In the case of Hagar, the Divine message has no reference to a specific context, whereas in the case of Isaiah, the text of God's speech is quoted immediately.

Let us now return to the rare cases where the *kal* participle of *d-v-r* is used of God speaking in a specific situation, instead of a general one. These cases appear in Exodus 6:29, Deuteronomy 5:1, Jonah 3:2, and Jeremiah 38:20.

FIRST EXAMPLE

The Lord spoke [va-y'daber] to Moses saying 'I am the Lord; speak [daber] to Pharaoh king of Egypt all that I say [dovér] to you' (Ex. 6:29).

Jenni explains that this is not referring to a completely specific situation. The object of the participle in *kal* form has to be understood as unspecified – "everything that I am *going* to tell you," even words which will eventually become specific, but are as yet unspecified and unexpected. Total obedience is demanded of Moses whenever he is given any message whatever to deliver, and the use of *dovér* is intended to illustrate the willingness of Moses to act as spokesman. Only afterwards, in Exodus 7:1-2, where God's message to Moses and Aaron is described, and we know the exact words, is the *piel* used: *'You shall speak [t'daber] all that I command you: and Aaron your brother shall speak [y'daber] to Pharaoh that he let the children of Israel go out of his land.'*

Interesting in this connection is the comment of Rashi on *attah t'daber*: "[This implies] speaking each message [just] once, [exactly] as you have heard it from Me."

Our suggestion is that the use of *dovér* here in Exodus 6:29 (and in other places too) implies the idea of authority, thus having a more conspicuous association with the noun *davar* than does the *piel*. This would provide an

additional reason for the choice of the *kal* in preference to the *piel*; that is, the Divine speaker commands His messenger, who must therefore show complete obedience even before the message becomes specific, no matter what is required of him.⁴

SECOND EXAMPLE

Moses called all Israel and said to them: 'Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak [dovér] in your hearing this day' (Deut. 5:1).

Jenni does not comment on this, but presumably would explain it as referring to "whatever words I speak or am about to speak to you," thus having an unspecified connotation of total obedience to authority. Here, too, we suggest that *dovér* implies authority and obedience – whatever God will command, especially here within the context of a preamble to the recapitulation of the Ten Commandments.

THIRD EXAMPLE

'Arise, go to Nineveh that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell [dovér] you' (Jon. 3:2).

Here, Jenni interprets "whatever I bid you."

Compare this with the first example. Ibn Ezra points out in his commentary to Jonah 1:1 that the prophet was not alone in his reluctance to transmit the message of God. Moses preceded him, albeit for different reasons. Following his attempted flight, after being disgorged by the great fish, Jonah, presumably chastened by the experience, receives a second message from God: *'Arise, go to Nineveh and proclaim the message whatever I tell you [asher anochi dovér eleykha].'* There is to be no prevarication this time; the prophet of God has to obey implicitly. Thus the use of *dovér* here again indicates authority (of the speaker) and submission by the "object" (Jonah), complementing Jenni's theory that the *kal* usage implies a presently unspecified message, which when delivered is to be in its exact specified form as received and without change. Whatever Jonah is told, he must obey, and has to be ready to fulfil his Divinely-ordered mission, come what may.

FOURTH EXAMPLE

But Jeremiah said: 'They shall not deliver you. Obey, I beseech you, the word of the Lord which I speak [dovér] to you . . . ' (Jer. 38:20).

Here, too, the use of *dovér* indicates Jeremiah's reassurance to King Zedekiah that if he obeys the prophetic message he will live – but the obedience must be total. As in the previous example, he must be ready to obey even instructions that are at first unspecified.

More examples occur in the Torah. The two tribes of Reuben and Gad, eager to show their willingness to fulfil the agreement that they will cross the Jordan and fight beside their brethren in order to gain the land they desire on the east bank, proclaim to Moses: '*Your servants will cross over just as my lord states* [ka-asher adoni *dovér*]' (Num. 32:27). That is, whatever conditions he may yet stipulate.

God gives His approval to the request of the daughters of Zelophehad to be given an inheritance in the land of Israel by declaring '*the daughters of Zelophehad are speaking* [doverot] *correctly*' (Num. 27:7) – whatever they claim is according to Jewish law!

And when the men of Manasseh fear that, as a consequence of this, their tribe will lose Zelophehad's land to the tribes into which his daughters will marry, Moses proclaims '*the tribe of the sons of Joseph speak* [doverim] *right*' (v. 36:5). This gives, as it were, the seal of Divine approval.

In the last two examples, the sense of rectitude is heightened by the use of the word *ken* [right, justly]. At the same time, Jenni's theory is upheld. The tribes of Reuben and Gad are ready to fulfil Moses' conditions, whatever they may be. The daughters of Zelophehad have received Divine approval of a general nature; they have penetrated to the essence of the law of inheritance. And Moses gives total approval to the statement of the tribe of Manasseh – they are speaking correctly in a general manner – from every point of view.

The distinction between *dovér* and *m'daber* disappeared in mishnaic Hebrew, and we do not find the form *dovér* used either in the Mishnah or in the Talmud. There is, however, an interesting usage that appears in the Hebrew version of Ben Sira, (Ch. 13:22-23):⁵

When the rich man speaks [*m'daber*] he has many supporters; however coarsely he speaks, they vindicate him. When the poor man speaks "away with you" they cry, though he speak wisely [*diber* – specific] he has no standing (v. 22).

When a rich man speaks [*dovér* – whatever he says] everyone pays attention and they extol his words to the skies. When the poor man

speaks [*dovér*] they say "Who is this?" and if he should stumble they too push him down (v. 23).

Since *dovér* here is juxtaposed with *m'daber*, we have a good opportunity to assess their usage in accordance with our afore-mentioned criteria. Here the form *m'daber* in verse 22 is dubious.⁶ However, if accepted, it may be subsumed under the previous headings of the *piel* usage, since we know something specific and definite about the rich man's speech – it is vulgar and coarse – yet receives sycophantic approval because of his social status. *Diber* at the end of the quatrain is also specific, since defined as being wisely spoken, yet it is rejected because of the poor man's low standing.

The two usages of *dovér* in verse 23 substantiate our theory. They also lend support to those who claim that the author of Ben Sira was deliberately imitating biblical style and usage in order to gain acceptance for his work. When the rich man speaks [*dovér* – habitually], whatever he says, his words are considered authoritative, and are to be obeyed. When the poor man speaks (the use of *dovér* here is somewhat ironical in that the same form is used as with the rich man) his words, although deserving at least the same attention and authority as those of the rich man, are habitually rejected because of his low social status. Whatever he says, no matter how wisely, it makes no difference.

It should be noted, however, that due to uncertainties regarding the Hebrew text of Ben Sira, these suggestions must be considered tentative. As a scholar put it, we can only visualize such a dubious text "through the mists of time." Nevertheless, if so, it can be seen that these usages in Ben Sira bear a remarkable resemblance to similar biblical usages and highlight the subtle differences in meaning between the *kal* participle and the *piel* form of the root *d-v-r*.

NOTES

1. *Israel's Prophetic Heritage*, ed. R.J. Coggins, et al. (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1982). I express my deep appreciation to Professor Sawyer for his encouragement and help.
2. H. Geber, *Hebreisk Grammatik*, (Uppsala: Hugo Gebers Forlag, 1952) p.221. My grateful thanks to Lena Dahlkvist of the Swedish Embassy for her help in translating the relevant section.
3. *Das Hebraische Piel*, (Zurich: Evangelischen Verlag Zollikon., 1968) pp. 64-170.
4. Compare article by J. F. Sawyer on "transparency" in classical Hebrew. *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 1967.
5. M. Segal, *Sefer Ben Sira ha-Shalem*, (2nd Ed.) (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1958)

6. Ibid.

עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR
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2005

January	Isaiah	51 - 66
	Jeremiah	1 - 15
February	Jeremiah	16 - 44
March	Jeremiah	45 - 52
	Ezekiel	1 - 20
April	Ezekiel	21 - 48
May	Hosea	1 - 14
	Joel	1 - 4
	Amos	1 - 9

 QUESTIONS from Rabbi Hayyim Halpern's
 book **TORAH DIALOGUES**

1. Besides Pesah, which mitzvot are mentioned in Parashat Bo ?
2. Which major objects found in most synagogues today are reminders of similar ones in the ancient Tabernacle?
3. Moses is our esteemed teacher (*Rabenu*). Yet his human weaknesses are not omitted in the Torah. Comment on his traits as revealed in the incident related in Leviticus 10:16-20.

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