The Patterns of Translation of the Active Biblical Hebrew Verbal Stems in the LXX Pentateuch and Former Prophets

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The differences between the three "active" verbal stems of Biblical Hebrew, the qal [G], the piel [D] and the hiphil [C], have long been debated. This presentation aims to present the ways which the differences were perceived by those who translated the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets into the Greek of the Septuagint, by comparing the translations of Hebrew verbs of the same root which appeared in several active verbal stems. Having conducted these comparisons, four key patterns emerge which give some insights as to how the translators of the LXX understood Biblical Hebrew in the 3rd to 1st centuries BCE.

Pattern 1: verbs following this pattern show no distinction in translation across verbal stems – they are translated using the same Greek verb. Often where this pattern occurs, the meaning of the verbs in different stems is similar and their transitivity value is the same. The implication with verbs following this pattern is that, given the Greek translation alone, it would be almost impossible to determine the verbal stem of the underlying Greek verb. E.g. קדש : [piel] וַיְקַדֵּשׁ אֹתוֹ = καὶ ἡγίασεν αὐτὴν : [hiphil] הִקְדַּשְׁתִּי אֹתָם = ἡγίασα αὐτοὺς; שבר: [qal] וָאֶשְׁבֹּר = καὶ συνέτριψα : [piel] וָאֲשַׁבְּרֵם = καὶ συνέτριψα.

Pattern 2: verbs following this pattern exhibit a voice difference in translation across verbal stems – generally the verb in the verbal stem with the lower transitivity level is translated with a passive Greek verb, while in a verbal stem with a higher transitivity level they are translated in the active voice. This pattern is seen for several verbal roots which are stative in the qal. E.g. בער : [qal] בָּעֲרוּ = ἐξεκαύθη : [piel] וּבִעַרְתִּי = ἐκκαύσω; שׂמח : [qal] וְשָׂמַחְתָּ = καὶ εὐφρανθήσῃ : [piel] וְשִׂמַּח = εὐφρανεῖ.

Pattern 3: these verbs are translated with Greek verbs of the same Greek stem – often the verb in the verbal stem with the lower transitivity level is translated with a bare Greek verb, while in a higher transitivity verbal stem they are translated with a compound of the same Greek verb. E.g. אמץ : [qal] וְאִמְצוּ = καὶ ἴσχυε : [piel] וְאַמֵּץ = καὶ κατίσχυσεν; נגשׁ : [qal] וַיִּגַּשׁ = καὶ ἤγγισεν : [hiphil] וַיַּגֵּשׁ = καὶ προσήγγισεν.

Pattern 4: verbs here show a combination of the previous patterns in their translation. E.g. שׁכב : [qal] וְשָׁכַבְתָּ = καὶ κοιμηθήσῃ ; [hiphil] שָׁכֵב = κοιμίσας (a combination of patterns 2 and 3).

As well as showing how the translators characterised the differences between the verbal stems of Biblical Hebrew, it is also clear that for certain roots they either did not perceive a difference in meaning between the stems or, if they did, thought it impossible or unnecessary to indicate using the morphology of the Greek verb. This provides an insight on the perception of Hebrew grammar before the medieval period, and could impact the understanding and criticism of texts which are found in Greek but are believed to be translations from Hebrew.

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