

AN UNNOTICED DEVICE FOR EXPRESSING THE FUTURE IN MIDDLE HEBREW

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THE PURPOSE OF this paper is to call attention to a syntactic device exhibited by Middle Hebrew for expressing the future tense. Following the terminology of Joshua Blau, I will refer to "Middle Hebrew," for lack of a better term that embraces both the language of the Tannaim and that of the Amoraim.¹

One of the major deviations of Middle Hebrew from Biblical Hebrew occurs in its verbal system and particularly in its syntactic use of tenses. Whereas Biblical Hebrew tends to emphasize what grammarians have described as being the "aspect" of the action expressed by the verb, Middle Hebrew uses the perfect much more systematically as the tense of the past and the imperfect as the tense of the future.²

The very absence of the biblical imperfect consecutive in Middle Hebrew is a clear indication of the evolution that has taken place in the verbal system of the language. As far as the participle is concerned, the departure from biblical usage is also significant, although not radical. It is a well-known fact that in Middle Hebrew the participle becomes the tense of the present. But, as pointed out by Segal (1958, p. 156) "it is by no means confined to the present."

In Middle Hebrew, however, the full significance of a rather simple device used for expressing the idea of futurity has hitherto drawn little attention from

1. See Blau (1978, pp. 4, 13). For Blau, the language of the Tannaim was derived from a living spoken language whereas the language of the Amoraim "had no living Middle Hebrew background."

2. See Segal (1958). On the aspect in Biblical Hebrew, the remarks of Joüon (1964, pp. 29 ff) remain valid. Cf. also S. Moscati *et al.* (1969, p. 131).

scholars. The device under discussion consists of the noun *sôp* followed either by the participle or the infinitive.

To my knowledge, the first such occurrence of *sôp* followed by a verbal form in the participle is to be found in the tractate *Pirqey Abot* (I:5) of the Mishnah. There it is said that a man who engages in much gossip with women will be led to neglect the study of the Torah, and in the end, he will inherit Gehenna (וּסּוּפוּ יוֹרֵשׁ גֵּיהֶנָם). Such a usage is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that in the same tractate (II:6), the word *sôp* appears followed by a verbal form in the imperfect: "And at last (*sôp*) they who drowned you shall be drowned (*ytwpwn*)."³ It would seem that the word *sôp*, at least in this particular instance, is used adverbially, a fact that had already been recognized by Dalman (1960, p. 213).³

In the majority of cases, however, the word *sôp*, when used as a particle introducing a future tense, is followed by a verbal form in the infinitive. One of the clearest examples occurs in *Sipra* (Ed. Weiss 88b):

הא אם גנבת סופך לכחש סופך לשקר סופך להישבע בשמי לשקר

Many similar constructions are found in the Talmud as well. The following ('*Aboda zara* 18b) constitutes a fine example:

שאם הלך סופו לעמוד אם עמד סופו לישב ואם ישב סופו ללון⁴

While investigating the use of *sôp* as a quasi-particle introducing the future tense, I have come across only one case where *sôp* was part of a nominal sentence, but there must be other examples. The phrase appears in *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* (I:31) and reads as follows:

אמר ליה אם לית את מליך סוף את מליך⁵

The origin of the syntactic device under discussion is puzzling. The analogy with Arabic *sawfalsa* prefixed to the imperfect in order to indicate "real futurity," in W. Wright's words, although never discussed by grammarians, comes immediately to mind.⁶ But the differences between the two constructions are equally obvious. Whereas in classical Arabic the use of *sawfalsa* imperfect

3. Other examples of *sôp* followed by a participle are found in the Talmud. See, for example, in the Jerusalem Talmud (*Sanhedrin* X:52b in Rubinstein's edition of the *Yerushalmi*, but given as 29a in Jastrow's dictionary s. v. *sôp*), the phrase: ייא סופיה מתחנקה. Cf. also in the Babylonian Talmud *Nedarim* 20a) the sentence: כל הצופה בנשים סופו בא לידי עבירה.

4. The Soncino translation reads as follows: "If one walks (towards the wicked) he will subsequently stand with them, and if he stands he will at the end sit with them, and if he does sit, he will also come to scorn." For a similar use of *sôp* with the infinitive, see *Zəbahim* 104b (שאין סופו (לצאת), *Hullin* 72a, *Bərakot* 63b (סופו להתנשא) *Shabbat* 110b (אין סופו לנוח), *Šəbu'ot* 9b (שאין סופו לידוע), *Yəbamot* 60a (אלמנה סופה להיות בוגרת).

5. The Soncino translation reads: "If you are not the king you will be eventually."

6. Wright, (1971, vol. I, pp. 282D, 289B). Wright states specifically that there must be a parallel between the Arabic usage and Hebrew *sôp* (Syr. *sawpa'*).

is standardized, in Middle Hebrew the parallel use of *sôp* is at best sporadic and can hardly be classified as an ordinary means of expressing the idea of futurity.

A further difficulty stems from the fact that the Arabic language does not know of a noun **sawf(un)* that would correspond to Heb. *sôp*⁷ Arabic knows only of an invariable particle *sawfa/sa*. Thus the parallel between the Arabic construction and the use of *sôp* in Middle Hebrew becomes somewhat problematic.

7. And yet the phrase *yaqta' tu assawfa* 'he lives on hope,' quoted by Hava in his dictionary (1970, p. 344) might be an indication that such a noun does indeed exist. As far as I know, there is no additional evidence that would permit one to explore further the relation of Hebrew *sôp* to Arabic *sawfa*.

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