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Some More Delocutives in Hebrew

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In 1967, D. R. Hillers called attention to the phenomenon of delocutives in Biblical Hebrew. Delocutives are similar to denominatives but, instead of being derived from nouns, they are derived from locutions or formulas used in discourse. Thus English “to hail” and “to welcome” are derived from the greetings “Hail!” and “Welcome!” Similarly, Latin salutare is derived not from the vocable salus ‘well’ but from the wish salus/salutem ‘Hail!’ with which one greets another; and Arabic has such verbs as kabara ‘to say ‘allah akbar’; sallama ‘to say ‘as-salam alaykum’; and basmala ‘to utter the invocation bismillahi ‘ar-rahman ‘ar-rahim’ (‘In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful’). ²

Author’s note: I am grateful to W. Randall Garr and Michael Sokoloff, who helped me clarify the issues discussed here, though they are not responsible for my formulation or conclusions.


Hillers argued that several Hiphil and Piel verbs in Biblical Hebrew are best explained as delocutives and not simply declaratives. The most impressive, in my opinion, is רָאוֹ (Piel) 'to say רָאוֹ ("how fortunate") to/ of someone'. Hillers' list can be supplemented by the Talmudic Hebrew verb הלֵך (Piel) 'praise', which Saul Lieberman explained as meaning literally 'say kalos ("beautiful!")', a Greek loanword.

Some verbs that are not derived from locutions have specific nuances that are. For example, the Piel of לאה and לאֹ, which both normally mean 'strengthen' (Isa 35:3, Job 4:4), also have a delocutive sense, 'say the formula לאה or לאֹ לאה "be strong" or "be strong and resolute" to someone'. In English, we could translate the idiom as 'to hazaq (or hazaq ve'emus) someone'. This sense is found in such passages as Deut 13:8 and 3:28, where God commands Moses, with reference to Joshua, לאה וואֹ, and וואֹ וואֹ. That these commands mean 'say (וַאָהוּ) לאה ("be strong [and resolute]!" ) to him', not 'imbue him with strength (and courage)' (נָּהוֹ), is clear from Deut 31:7, where Moses carries out this instruction by saying to Joshua, לאה לאה לאה (cf. 31:23 and Josh 1:6-9, 18).

The Piel and Hiphil forms of שָׁרֵב seem to have delocutive nuances in Jewish liturgy. The Kaddish, the angelic declaration of Isa 6:3, is regularly introduced by passages declaring the worshipper's intent or the angels' preparations to recite it, expressed by שָׁרֵב and שָׁרֵב. The introduction to the רַב שָׁרֵב, the Kaddish before the Shema in the morning service, describes the angels preparing "שָׁרֵבִים their Creator" and then reciting the Kaddish. Similarly, in the Kaddish of the Shaharit 'Amidah, the worshipper's declaration "שָׁרֵב Your name on earth..." is followed by their reciting the same passage. In these contexts, the verbs probably do not mean 'sanctify' or 'declare holy', but 'recite your name high and to the heavens...'. "Holy, holy, holy! The Lord of Hosts! His presence fills all the earth!"—in short, "to qados God."

3. Gen 30:13; Mal 3:12; Ps 41:2; 72:17; Prov 31:28; Job 29:11; Cant 6:9.
4. S. Lieberman, "כָּלָה לְלֵך" in A. Schocken Festschrift (Jerusalem, 1951-52) 75-81. The Talmudic verb should not be confused with biblical לֵך, 'scorn, mock.'
5. The formula is common; see, for example, 2 Sam 10:12, Isa 41:6, Hag 2:4, Ps 27:14, Eza 10:4.
6. Note the paraphrases in the commentary of Y. Weingarten, כָּלָה וְכָלָה (Jerusalem: Gefen, 1991): מַלְשָׁנָה = מַלְשָׁנָה מַלְשָׁנָה מַלְשָׁנָה מַלְשָׁנָה (p. 128); מַלְשָׁנָה (in the Sephardic text of the Shaharit 'Amidah) = מַלְשָׁנָה מַלְשָׁנָה מַלְשָׁנָה מַלְשָׁנָה (p. 148). This meaning is confirmed for the Shaharit 'Amidah by the Seder Rav Amram, where the wording is: מַלְשָׁנָה מַלְשָׁנָה מַלְשָׁנָה מַלְשָׁנָה. The introduction to the Kaddish in the Musaf service, מַלְשָׁנָה מַלְשָׁנָה, based on Sop. 161:2 and the Siddur of Saadia Gaon, might suggest that מַלְשָׁנָה must mean something like 'declare Your awesomeness'. However, this wording is an allusion to Isa 29:23, and it probably is based on the biblical verse.
8. See also 2 Sam 6:18; 1 Chron 24:13b presumably refers to a prayer (or psalm) at 2 Sam 2:5; Ruth 2:20, 3:10-12, 4:5, 5:3; 1 Sam 15:13a and Ruth 2:4b (Heb. 2:4).
However, the picture is complicated by passages in which the Hiphil of שָׁדַי appears in a string of verbs that refer to praising God, not to reciting a specific formula. For example, shortly before the Hiphil שלדֵי, the text reads that all the angels open their mouths and שַלְדָּה מִשְׁפַּטְיָה יַבְרִיָּה אֱלֹהִים ‘bless, praise, glorify, declare awesome, sanctify, make known, and declare sovereign God’s name’. Since none of the other verbs in this string refers to a specific formula, it is difficult to insist that here מִשְׁפַּטְיָה means ‘recite שָׁדַי שָׁדַי שָׁדַי’. This leaves us uncertain that worshipers would understand the verb to have that meaning a few lines further on.

Similar possibilities and problems arise in connection with the use of בָּרָך (Piel). Often, it seems possible to understand the verb as meaning ‘to recite... בָּרָך (or הָרַב)’—in other words ‘to baruk, or to sabaraka, so-and-so’—rather than ‘to bless’. When a person blesses (בָּרָך) another, the blessing frequently says בָּרָךְ ה’ וּבָרָךְ עַל, ‘may so-and-so be blessed by the Lord’ or ‘may the Lord bless you’. Two examples are: רֹבְבֵךְ יָשָׁר בָּרָךְ אֲכַבֵּד, ‘he בָּרָךְ-ed him, saying: “May Abram be בָּרָךְ by God Most High”’ (Gen 14:19), and... ‘I בָּרָךְ-ed the Lord’ (Gen 24:48), referring to v. 27, etc. In Deut 10:8 and 21:5 בָּרָך means ‘recite the priestly benediction, בָּרָךְ ה’ וּבָּרָךְ עַל, “may the Lord bless you and protect you...”’ (Num 6:23–26). The fact that Hebrew, Phoenician, and Aramaic employ two alternative blessing formulas, one using the Piel of בָּרָך and the other its passive participle בָּרָך (also implies that the Piel (with human subject) is delocutive, based on the passive participle. In Ps 17:26, בָּרָךְ ה’ וּבָּרָךְ עַל, ‘may he who enters be blessed in the name of the Lord’ is paralleled by מְבַרְכֶּה מִי זְכָרִי מִי, וּמְבַרְכֶּה תַּבָּרְךָ מִי. // we מָרָכְּעַת מִי מִי, מַעְלֵמִים מִי מִי ‘the blessing of the Lord be upon you we bless you in the name of the Lord’ (cf. Ps 129:8, בָּרָךְ ה’ וּבָּרָךְ עַל, ‘the blessing of the Lord be upon you we bless you in the name of the Lord’; בָּרָךְ ה’ וּבָּרָךְ עַל is yet another blessing formula). In the Arad letters and the pithoi from Kuntillet Ajrud, we find בָּרָךְ ה’ וּבָּרָךְ עַל, ‘I בָּרָךְ you to the Lord’, while votive inscriptions from Ajrud and elsewhere use the formula מְבַרְכֶּה מִי מִי, מַעְלֵמִים מִי מִי ‘may so-and-so be blessed by the Lord’. These equivalences...
imply that the verb was understood as meaning 'to recite... בְּרָכָה (or: הָנָּה בָּרָכָה'). In rabbinic literature and liturgy, the finite verb often means to recite a specific blessing beginning with הָנָּה בָּרָכָה 'may you be blessed, O Lord' (in the sense of 'may you be praised', 'thank you'), such as the blessing over wine or the blessing after meals.

Here, too, however, the picture is complicated by the fact that there are also blessings introduced by the verb בְּרָכָה that do not include הָנָּה בָּרָכָה or בְּרָכָה כָּל. For example, in Gen 24:60, they blessed Rebekah and said to her, "O sister! May you grow into thousands of myriads; may your offspring seize the gates of their foes". There are also passages in which we find the cognate accusative phrase הַמֵּרָכָה הָרֹקָח תַּעֲשֵׂה תַּעֲשֵׂה הָרֹקָח תַּעֲשֵׂה and 'to recite (lit., "bless") a blessing'. In such cases, the verb must mean simply 'bless', 'recite a blessing', and we therefore cannot rule out the possibility that it was understood that way in all cases.

Whatever the precise nuance of שַׁפֵּט and בְּרָכָה in such cases, I am happy to join in this expression of blessing to בְּרָכָה Levine, who has done so much to clarify the history and meaning of blessing and worship in the Bible.

11 See also Gen 27:27–30, 32:27, 35:9–12, 48:2–3; Deut 33:1; 1 Sam 2:20.
12 For example, Gen 27:41; 2. Pesah. 109b; 2. Tammid 5:1. As Hillers notes, "the situation is complicated by the presence of the noun berakah, which may have figured in the derivation, and by the state of affairs with respect to this verb in other Semitic languages, where it also exhibits peculiarities" (Hillers, Delocutive Verbs, 324). B. A. Levine notes that "No satisfactory etymology for the verb בְּרָכָה has been proposed. It is possible that the verb and the participial forms... are all denominative of berakah, 'gift, blessing'"; Numbers 1–20 (AB 4A; New York: Doubleday, 1993) 227.

Poetry and Prose

Robert Alter

From the standpoint of literary analysis, the book of Jeremiah is one of the most frustrating prophetic books in the Bible. On the one hand, the book contains passages that are relatively easy to interpret. On the other hand, it has long been recognized that there is a rich variety of material: first, there are poetic oracles, which are typically numbered and which have been largely taken to reflect the oracles of the prophet; second, there are additional prose oracles, which are typically not numbered but whose prophetic content is often biographical in character. On the other hand, there is agreement on the distinction to be made in Jeremiah between the two types of material. Those in the book, and those that are related to the rest of the book, are known as 'poetry' and the rest are known as 'prose'. The poetry-prose problem in Jeremiah is one of the most challenging problems in the study of the book and the best of the solutions involve understanding the relationship between either type of prose and poetry.

This scholarly debate has been focused on the relationship between the prophetic and biographical prose, and the study of the relationship between the two components of Jeremiah. While the relationship between the two types of material can be isolated and studied in isolation, the relationship between the two types of material and the rest of the book is harder to study. The poetry-prose problem in Jeremiah is one of the most challenging problems in the study of the book and the best of the solutions involve understanding the relationship between either type of prose and poetry.