

CHAPTER IV: THE NOUN

§ 134. Gender of nouns

Noun gender presents multiple difficulties. The biblical texts allow a us to determine the gender of only about half of the nouns⁽¹⁾. The gender of several nouns varies for various reasons⁽²⁾. It is up to lexicographers to indicate them.

As we saw in § 89 a, gender is often indicated by gender endings. Here we shall only offer some observations about the nexus between the gender of words and their meaning.

(1) Cf. K. Albrecht, "Das Geschlecht der hebr. Hauptwörter," *ZAW* 15 (1895) 313-25; 16 (1896) 41-121. Cf. a critique of Albrecht by J. Blau, *JOS* 2 (1972) 66f.

(2) Thus the figurative meaning can cause a change of gender: עַיִן (fem.) eye is treated as masc. Zech 3.9; 4.10[†] where reference is made to *engraved eyes* (but perh. altered texts; cf. M. Lambert, *REJ* 71 [1920] 206); שֵׁן (fem.) tooth is masc. when talking about a rocky *crag*, 1Sm 14.4,5. Conversely, see the feminine form used for the figurative sense, § q.

With living beings the nouns for the male and the female naturally b have the corresponding gender (physical gender).

For certain beings, the feminine noun is distinguished from the masculine noun by the addition of a feminine ending: אח brother, אחות sister; אב husband's father, אמה* husband's mother; בן son, בת daughter; עַלָם (2 x) young man, עַלְמָה young woman; מֶלֶךְ king, מַלְכָּה queen; עֵגֶל calf, עֵגֶלָה heifer, פֶּרֶם steer, פָּרָה cow; כֶּבֶד lamb, כֶּבֶדָּה ewe-lamb; גֹּדִי kid, גֹּדִיָּה young she-goat.

For some other beings, the male and the female are indicated by distinct nouns: אִישׁ man, אִשָּׁה woman; אָב father, אִמָּה mother; אֵיל ram, רְחֵל ewe; חֵיִשׁ he-goat, יַעֲזָ she-goat; חֲמֹר jack-ass, חֲמֹרָה she-ass.

But sometimes there is (or we find) only one noun, either masculine c or feminine, which designates any individual of the species, regardless of sex (*nomina epicoena*: which share one gender)⁽¹⁾. Thus for bear there is only the noun דִּב, which is always treated as masc. (when talking about the female: Ho 13.8 דִּב שְׂבוּל she-bear deprived of her cubs), except 2Kg 2.24. Only the masc. is found for כָּלֵב dog, זָאב wolf; only the fem. for אַרְנָבֶת hare, יוֹנָה dove, חֲסִידָה stork (*avis pia*), דְּבוּרָה bee,

גַּמְלָה ant.

(1) On גַּמְלָה girl see § 16 f 3.

- d In some cases a masculine noun is treated as feminine when talking about a female, e.g. גַּמְלָה camel is fem. in Gn 32.16 מִיִּנְיָקוֹת גַּמְלִים *milch camels*; the collective בָּקָר oxen is fem. in Gn 33.13 (*milch cows*); Job 1.14. Comp. אֱלֹהִים god used 1Kg 11.5 for goddess⁽¹⁾.

On the other hand the collective צֹאן *small cattle* (ovine and bovine species), which is feminine, sometimes seems to be treated as masculine. (It is masc. in MH).

(1) Noteworthy is the fact that Hebrew has no proper word for goddess.

- e Apart from living beings gender is metaphorical: some nouns are masculine, by analogy with male beings; the others are feminine, on the analogy of female beings. We must admit, however, that the reason which determines the gender often escapes us⁽¹⁾.

Abstract nouns with feminine ending are feminine; the others are masculine: e.g. שְׁאֵלָה request, אֶלְהָ oath; masc.: חֵיל strength, כְּבוֹד glory.

Concrete nouns with feminine ending are almost all (cf. § 89 b) feminine. The others are either masculine or feminine. Some useful observations about the gender of these concrete nouns without feminine ending may be made.

(1) According to E.A. Speiser (*JAO* 56 [1936] 39), the gender distinction in substantives is, morphologically speaking, a device mainly for creating derivative stems with some special modification of meaning. We ought to note however that the gender distinction in the verb inflexion, to which that of the substantive is closely linked both morphologically and syntactically, is an integral part of the whole system, hardly a marginal or secondary feature. Take, for instance, the gender distinction in the imperative forms and the personal pronouns, which many would consider a most primitive part of any linguistic system. Cf. M. Féghali and A. Cuny, *Du genre grammatical en sémitique* (Paris, 1924); M.H. Ibrahim, *Grammatical Gender. Its Origin and Development* (The Hague/Paris, 1973).

For a recent attempt to address this question, see D. Michel, *Grundlegung einer hebräischen Syntax. Teil I, Sprachwissenschaftliche Methodik: Genus und Numerus des Nomens* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1977).

- f Nouns of rivers are generally masculine: נָהָר river, יָאֵר canal, נָחַל wadi, הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה this Jordan Gn 32.11 etc.; other nouns relating to

water: מַיִם *water*; יָם *sea*; the nouns for *rain*: מָטָר, גֶּשֶׁם, זָרַם. But fem.: בְּאֵר *well*, עֵיִן *spring* (and *eye*, § j).

On the other hand several categories of concrete nouns are **feminine**:

1) Names of **countries** (prob. on the analogy of אֶרֶץ (f.) *country, land, earth*) and of **cities** (prob. on the analogy of עִיר [f.] *city*): בָּבֶל *Babel* (*Babylon and Babylonia*), צִידוֹן *Sidon* (*city and country*). Several names designate both the people and the land: they are masculine in the first case, feminine in the second, e.g. יְהוּדָה masc. Is 3.8; fem. 7.6; אֲרָם masc. Nu 20.20; fem. Jer 49.17. However names of peoples are sometimes treated as feminine (§ 150 e), e.g. יִשְׂרָאֵל 1Sm 17.21; 2Sm 24.9; מִצְרַיִם Ex 12.33; מוֹאָב 2Sm 8.2; אֲרָם 2Sm 8.5,6; Is 7.2; עֵיִלָם 21.2; מְרִי *ib.*; קָדָר 42.11; שָׁבָא Job 1.15. Moreover the population of a country or of a city may be personified and represented as a woman, e.g. Is 54.1; hence the frequent use of בַּת, e.g. בַּת צִיּוֹן, בַּת בָּבֶל (§ 129 f), בַּתוּלַת בַּת צִיּוֹן etc. (§ 129 r).

Observation. Names of cities with בֵּית (m.) are masculine, e.g. בֵּית־לָחֶם Mi 5.1; בֵּית־אֵל Am 5.5.

2) The **Earth and its parts**: אֶרֶץ *earth, land, country* (cf. § g), עִיר *city* (cf. § g), תְּבִלָּה (poetic) *the orb, the earth's disc*; שְׁאוֹל *Sheol, inferi* (abode of the dead), כְּכָר (territorial) *circle*; צָפוֹן *north*, תֵּימָן *south*.

3) Nouns of **instruments** and other objects: חֶרֶב *sword*, יָתֵד *peg*, כּוֹס *cup*, בֵּר *jug*; נַעֲלָי *sandal* (dual, § 91 c), לְפָדָשׁ *bed*.

4) Nouns of **double members** or which are found in pairs⁽¹⁾: עֵיִן *eye* (and *spring*, § f), אָזְן *ear*, שֵׁן *tooth*, לֶחִי *jaw*, כַּתֵּף *shoulder*, זְרוּעַ *arm* (generally), יָד *hand* (and also, perh. by analogy, יָמִין *right hand*), כַּף *palm*, אֶצְבָּע *finger*, צִלְעַ *rib*, יָרֵךְ *hip, thigh*, בִּרְךָ *knee*, שׁוֹק *leg, thigh*, רֶגֶל *foot*; קֶרֶן *horn*, כַּנָּף *wing*.

Exception: שֶׁד *breast* (m.) Ho 9.14; מִתְנַחִים *loins, sides* (m.).

(1) These nouns have a dual, § 91 b.

Other feminine nouns: אֶבֶן *stone*, בֶּטֶן *belly*, נֶפֶשׁ *soul* (sometimes treated as masc. by sense agreement: for *man*, Gn 46.25,27; Nu 31.28), נִגְוָה (poet.) *flash* (of *light*).

Nouns usually feminine: אוֹת *sign*, almost always feminine (ת of the fem.), אֵשׁ *fire*⁽¹⁾, דֶּרֶךְ *way* (in the sing. usually fem., in the pl. al-

ways masc.), לְשׁוֹן *tongue*, זֶמַן *time*, almost always fem. (prob. ת of the fem.), e.g. בְּעֵת הַהִיא *at that time*, רֵיחַ *wind* (wind nouns likewise: צְפוֹן Is 43.6; Ct 4.16, תִּימָן *ib.*; cf. § h), שֶׁמֶשׁ *sun*.

(1) Masculine in Ps 104.4 לֵהָטָה; see J. Blau, *JOS* 2 (1972) 65f.

- m** Nouns whose **gender varies**. From among these nouns, of which there are many, some examples are: אֹר *light*, אֶרֶץ (poetic) *path*, גֵּיא *valley*, כְּרָם *vineyard*, חֲצָר *enclosure, yard, court*, שַׁעַר *gate*; מָקוֹם *place* is very seldom fem.: Gn 18.24; Job 20.9 (cf. Jdg 19.13; 2Sm 17.12).
- n** Some **feminine abstract nouns** are formed by adding the feminine ending to an adjective or to a participle: רָעָה *evil*, טוֹבָה *good*, יְשָׁרָה *right* (Mi 3.9), נְכוֹנָה *that which is just* (Am 3.10), עֲלִי-נִקְלָה *in lightness = lightly* (Jer 6.14). Especially in the plural: טוֹבוֹת *good things* (2Kg 25.28); קָשׁוֹת *harsh things* (Gn 42.7), גְּדִלוֹת *great things* (Ps 131.1), נִפְלְאוֹת *very great things (ib.)*, נְכוֹחוֹת *just things* (Is 26.10). But cf. Gn 2.9 וְרַע וְטוֹב *good and evil*.
- o** Likewise some **feminine collective nouns** are formed by adding the feminine ending to an adjective or to a participle: דִּלְיָה *poor people* (2Kg 24.14), אֶרְצָה *caravan* (properly speaking *which makes its way*); גּוֹלָה *community in exile*, but יוֹשֶׁבֶת *female inhabitant* (Is 12.6 etc.), אֵיבָה *female enemy* (Mi 7.8 etc.) are personifications rather than collective nouns. בַּת צִיּוֹן and the like probably do not belong here; see § 129 f, 7.
- p** Very occasionally, a **noun of unit** is formed by adding the feminine ending to a collective noun without the feminine ending: אֲנִי (m. and f.) *fleet*, אֲנִיָּה *ship*; שֵׁעַר *hair* (coll.), שַׁעֲרָה *a hair*. On the other hand דְּגָה *fish* is mainly collective, דָּג mainly noun of unit. טוֹבָה and רָעָה denote *a concrete, single act of kindness or wickedness* respectively. Note also the following pairs: צִדִּיק/רָעָה; שִׁיר/שִׁירָה; נֶזֶח/נֶזֶחִי; צִיָּה/צִיָּה; יַעֲרָה/יַעֲרָה.
- q** Sometimes a **feminine doublet** is found in the figurative sense: מִצָּח (m.) *forehead*, מִצָּחָה *greave* (kind of *forehead* for the legs); יָרֵךְ (f., § j) *hip, thigh*, יָרֵךְתִּים *sides*. (Comp. § 91 d: fem. plural instead of dual for the figurative sense).
- r** **Doublets** (masc. and fem.) of abstract nouns (§ e) are numerous: נֶקֶם (17 x) and נִקְמָה (27 x) *vengeance*; עֲזָרָה and עֲזָרָה *help*; טֶמֶעַר and טֶמֶעַרָה *tempest*; מְעוֹנָה and מְעוֹנָה *dwelling-place*; מַעֲלָה and מַעֲלָה *ascent* and מַעֲלָה *step*; Is 13.1

מְשַׁעֲזֵן וּמְשַׁעֲזָה support and support = any sort of support. For differences between מְשַׁעֲזֵן and מְשַׁעֲזָה, see BDB, s.v. מְשַׁעֲזָה end(1).

(1) M. Ben-Asher argues that some of these examples may be put down to stylistic differentiation: see his "The gender of nouns in BH," *Semitics* 6 (1978) 1-14. So already Lambert, § 172.

§ 135. Plurality expressed by the collective singular, the singular of species, etc.

The idea of plurality can be expressed not only by the plural (§ 136) and by the dual ending (§ 91), but also by the collective singular⁽¹⁾(§ b) and by the singular noun of species (§ c); finally some ideas analogous to the idea of plurality are expressed by the repetition of the singular noun (§ d).

(1) In Arabic the idea of plurality is expressed extraordinarily frequently by collectives (*broken or internal plurals*), e.g. /'abid/ *the slaves* regarded collectively, *servitium, staff of servans*; on the other hand the plural proper (*external plural*) /'abdūna/ (sg. 'abd) designates several slaves regarded individually.

The collective noun properly speaking designates a plurality of individuals as forming a group⁽¹⁾, e.g. אֶרְבֵּי armentum (a herd of large cattle), a collection of individuals of the bovine species⁽²⁾; צֹאן (f.) pecus (a flock of small cattle), a collection of individuals of the ovine and caprine species⁽³⁾; עֹף the flying tribe, birds; מְשַׁעֲזֵן the pitterpattering tribe, מְשַׁעֲזָה the wriggling or scampering tribe; טַף the tiny tots (sometimes including or implying women; cf. BDB, 1124a); רֶכֶב often collective chariots; פְּרִי fruits. All these collectives are masculine, except צֹאן (f.). (See also § 134 p).

Collectives with the feminine ending: בְּהֵמָה beasts, cattle (large animals, mainly domestic; the plural is rare and poetic); מְדַמָּה worms; דְּמָעָה tears (the plural is very rare and poetic⁽⁴⁾); צִיצִית fringes, tufts; גְּבֻלָּה corpses. (See also § 134 o, p). Without feminine ending: נְפֻשׁ persons⁽⁵⁾.

(1) A collective can be recognised when an adjective, a pronoun or a verb referring to it is in the plural.

(2) Because of their common use, we shall here give a few details about names in the bovine species and in the ovine and caprine species.