

CHAPTER IV: THE NOUN

§ 134. Gender of nouns

Noun gender presents multiple difficulties. The biblical texts allow 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. a

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 have the corresponding gender (physical gender). b

For certain beings, the feminine noun is distinguished from the masculine noun by the addition of a feminine ending: אחָ brother, אחָה sister; אבֹת husband's father, אִמָּה* husband's mother; בֶּן son, בַּת daughter; עָלָם (2 x) young man, עֹלְמָה young woman; מֶלֶךְ king, מַלְכָּה queen; עֵגֶל calf, עֵגֶלָה heifer, פָּר steer, פָּרָה cow, כֶּבֶד lamb, כֶּבֶדָה ewe-lamb; גֵּידִי kid, גֵּידָה 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; אִישׁ he-goat, אִשָּׁה she-goat; חֲמֹר jack-ass, אִשָּׁה she-ass. c

But sometimes there is (or we find) only one noun, either masculine 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 דֵּב, which is always treated as masc. (when talking about the female: Ho 13.8 דֵּב שֶׁבֹּוֹל she-bear deprived of her cubs), except 2Kg 2.24. Only the masc. is found for דָּבֶלֶב dog, זָבֵב wolf; only the fem. for אַרְיֵה hare, יוֹנָה dove, חֲסִידָה stork (*avis pia*), דְּבוּרָה bee,

הַמְלֵךְ *ant.*

(1) On מַלְכָּה *girl* see § 16 f 3.

- d** In some cases a masculine noun is treated as feminine when talking about a female, e.g. מְלֵכָה *camel* is fem. in Gn 32.16 מִיְּמֵי קִוְיָהּ מְלֵכָה *milch camels*; the collective קָרָנִים *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 קָרָנִים *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*, אֵלֶּךְ *oath*; masc.: חֵזֶק *strength*, קְבוֹרָה *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 (*JAOS* 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*, אֵרֶץ *canal*, נַחַל *wadi*, הַיַּרְדֵּן *this Jordan* Gn 32.11 etc.; other nouns relating to

water: מַיִם *water*; יָם *sea*; the nouns for *rain*: מְטָר, גֶּשֶׁם, אֶרֶם. But fem.: בְּאֵר *well*, עַיִן *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*; עֵילָם *21.2*; מְרִי *ib.*; קָנָר *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 בָּבֶל, בַּת צִיּוֹן (§ 129 f), בַּתוּלַת בַּת צִיּוֹן etc. (§ 129 r).

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

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

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

4) Nouns of **double members** or which are found in pairs⁽¹⁾: עַיִן *eye* (and *spring*, § f), אָזְנוֹ *ear*, שֵׁן *tooth*, לְחֵי *jaw*, כַּתֶּף *shoulder*, זְרוּעַ *arm* (generally), יָד *hand* (and also, perh. by analogy, יְמִינִי *right hand*), כַּף *palm*, אֶצְבָּע *finger*, צֵלַע *rib*, יָרֵךְ *hip, thigh*, בְּרִיחַ *knee*, שׁוֹק *leg, thigh*, רֶגֶל *foot*; קַרְנֵי *horn*, כַּנְף *wing*.

Exception: שֶׁד *breast* (m.) *Ho 9.14*; מְתָנִים *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*), הִנָּה *(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*, זְמַן *time*, almost always fem. (prob. מ of the fem.), e.g. בְּעֵת הַהֵיאָט *at that time*, רֵיחַ *wind* (wind nouns likewise: צְפוּן Is 43.6; Ct 4.16, תִּימָן *ib.*; cf. § h), שֶׁמֶשׁ *sun*.

(1) Masculine in Ps 104.4 לֵהָטָה; see J. Blau, *IOS* 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*, גַּי *valley*, כַּרְמֵי *vineyard*, חֲצֵר *enclosure, yard, court*, שַׁעַר *gate*; מְקוֹם *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), עֲלֵ-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.)*, נְכוֹנוֹת *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: דְּלֵיָה *poor people* (2Kg 24.14), אֶרְקָה *caravan* (properly speaking *which makes its way*); גּוֹלָה *community in exile*, but יוֹשְׁבַת *female inhabitant* (Is 12.6 etc.), אֵיבָת *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 רֵגְלָה *fish* is mainly collective, רֵג *mainly noun of unit*. טוֹבָה and רָעָה denote *a concrete, single act of kindness or wickedness* respectively. Note also the following pairs: צִיָּה/צִיָּר; נִצָּה/נִצַּח; שִׁירָה/שִׁיר; יַעֲרָה/יָעַר.
- q** Sometimes a **feminine doublet** is found in the figurative sense: מִצְחָה (m.) *forehead*, מִצְחָה *greave* (kind of *forehead* for the legs); יָרֵךְ (f., § j) *hip, thigh*, יַרְכְּתַי *sides*. (Comp. § 91 d: fem. plural instead of dual for the figurative sense).
- r** **Doublets** (masc. and fem.) of abstract nouns (§ e) are numerous: נִקְמָה (17 x) and נִקְמָה (27 x) *vengeance*; עֲזָרָה and עֲזָרָה *help*; טֵמֵד and טֵמֵדָה *tempest*; מְעוֹנָה and מְעוֹנָה *dwelling-place*; מַעֲלָה and מַעֲלָה *step*; Is 13.1

מְשַׁעֲנֵן וְיִמְשָׁעֵנָה support and support = any sort of support. For differences between מְשַׁעֲנֵן and מְשַׁעֲנָה, see BDB, s.v. מְשַׁעֲנָה 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. אֲרָמָה 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; מְשַׁעֲנֵן the pitterpattering tribe, זָרְזֵר 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); מְרִיר worms; דְּמְעָה tears (the plural is very rare and poetic⁽⁴⁾); צִיצִית fringes, tufts; גְּבֻלָּה corpses. (See also § 134 o, p). Without feminine ending: מְשַׁעֲנֵן 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.