

Ruth 3:3 - וירדתי

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Introduction

Ruth 3:3 contains an unusual Hebrew verb form: וירדתי. The verb appears to be a Paal first person perfect vav-consecutive. "I will go down". However the context demands, "You shall go down" – a feminine 2nd person tense - for Naomi is commanding Ruth to go down, and Ruth does indeed go down. The Massorets supplied vowels for the 2nd fem form. At first glance the verb would simply appear to be misspelled - someone accidentally added a yud. However, we also have within the same set of instructions from Naomi to Ruth, the word ושכבתי, which also has an extra yud. As will be seen below, other instances of 2nd feminine singular perfect verbs ending in yud are found in other books of the bible, in addition to other archaic forms that are found in Ruth.

Explanations of the form:

Gesenius-Kautzsch-Cowley (Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar):

Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar makes the following observations related to this unusual verb form (44h - p121):

Jeremiah 31:21 הלכתי – apparently a 2nd fem sing. perfect form, however the other five verbs in this verse are all feminine imperative, which all have a final Yud. Interestingly though, both here and in Ruth 3:3, three commands are given and the fourth verb has this 2nd fem yud ending.

Jeremiah 2:33 has למדתי which also appears to be 2nd fem sing perfect.

Jeremiah 3:4-5 has קראתי as a 2nd fem sing perfect?? - translated as 'you will call' and thus a past tense verb being used as a future tense. Also appearing in these verses is the verb דברתי, which seems to be used as 2nd fem sing. form.

Jeremiah 4:19 שמעתי possibly as a 2nd fem. sing. However by ignoring the Taamim (Masoretic accents) in this verse, שמעתי makes sense as a 1st perf. sing. In other words נפשי begins the next clause and is similar in use to מעי at the beginning of the verse. That is to say that the prophet pauses to address his soul after saying “I have heard”.

Jeremiah 46:11 הרביתי used as a 2nd fem perf sing.

Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar also states that the 2nd fem with a final yud is common in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. To be noted is that in all the passages above and also in Ezekiel 16:18 (ינתת) and in Micah 4:13 (והחרמתי), God is talking to Israel as an older person to a child (notice Micah 4:13 - בת ציון), thus similar to the way Boaz and Naomi relate to Ruth.

Elsewhere, Gesenius reports that the final yud reappears when pronominal suffixes are added. This lends weight to yud originally being part of the conjugation. Also Gesenius points to the original yud ending of the feminine pronoun את (32h).

Gesenius puts forward the suggestion that the yud or yud-nun ending, which occurs in multiple places in Ruth, is related to the to the principle pause in the sentence which are shown by the Taamim (47o). Jeremiah 31:22 תתחמקין is another example of this phenomenon. See also Isaiah 45:10 and 1st Samuel 1:14 תשתכרין where the older Eli is talking to the younger Hannah.

Concordance Results for ירדתי:

The form ירדתי exists in the vav-consecutive in three other places:

Numbers 11:17 - The significance here is that God is giving instructions and then at the

end of the instructions says "I will go down".

Judges 11:37 - Here Jephthah's daughter asks to be allowed to "go down on the mountains" and bewail her virginity. This shows a typical first person etymology of this form of the verb.

Nehemiah 6:3 - Nehemiah is simply saying he cannot "go down"

Additionally the form exists without the vav in two places:

Jonah 2:7 - simple use of descending in the past tense.

Song of Songs 6:11 - simple use of descending in the past tense.

The only significance of the concordance results for ירדתי is the first entry above, which shows it being used at the end of a command sequence and then being used in the first person. This would lend extremely weak support to the idea that Naomi is using the verb of herself saying that she will go down. The Concordance results do however show that the normal understanding of ירדתי as a first person tense is consistent throughout the biblical period, from Numbers to Nehemiah.

Other Unusual Verbal Forms in Ruth:

תדבקי 2:8 - Boaz is giving instructions to Ruth. Also used in 2:21 when Ruth is quoting Boaz.

יקצרו 2:9 - Boaz is giving instructions to Ruth.

ישאבו 2:9 - Boaz is giving instructions to Ruth.

תעשי 3:4 - Naomi's final instruction to Ruth in these sentences.

תדעי 3:18 - Naomi is giving Ruth instructions again.

קניתי 4:5 - Boaz is speaking but this time to the closer kinsman-redeemer. We do not know the age of this other man, whether younger than Boaz or not. Also it is obvious

Boaz is talking to a man and not a woman, thus we have this form being used as a 2nd masculine form. The verb in this verse has also been rendered as קניתה in a few medieval Manuscripts and in Qumran, however this spelling is also unusual because of the addition of the letter Heh at then end of the masculine form.

Myers counts a total of ten archaic forms in Ruth (Myers p11).

Significance of the speaker

Both in Ruth 3:3-4 and in the other passages with unusual verb forms, it is a member of the older generation that is speaking (Naomi or Boaz) and is addressing someone of the younger generation. This phenomenon has been shown above to have parallels in the Prophets and in the book of Samuel. The exception to this phenomenon maybe Ruth 4:5, as noted above. Additionally these verb forms only occur in dialogue/monologue, both here in Ruth and also elsewhere in the bible.¹

Chapter 2 v 3 - Initiation of the Plan(s)

In Chapter 2 it is Ruth's idea to go out and glean in someone's field in order to support her and Naomi. Also in Chapter 1 we see Ruth deciding to follow Naomi, to go to the Land of Israel, to worship the God of Israel and become part of Naomi's people. In Chapter 3, we see Naomi instigating a plan, and later we see Boaz coming up with a plan to redeem Ruth.

My explanation of Ruth 3:3-4

The ArtScroll Series and other Rabbinical commentators put forward the idea that Naomi's 'authority' or 'reputation' was 'going down' with Ruth, thus encouraging Ruth

¹ A similar explanation is proposed for the masculine ending of final mem occurring where a final nun is expected. The exception to this is Ruth 1:19 (שתייהם) where the context is narration and not someone speaking. However my explanation for these mem endings is purely poetic. Myers concludes in his book that Ruth contains "at least a poetical nucleus" (Myers p64).

not to be afraid and not to worry about her reputation. Therefore Naomi says ‘I will go down’ and ‘I will lie’.

The *Five Scrolls* Rabbinical commentary (in Hebrew) claims, in addition to the above, that these are ancient verbal forms. Myers agrees that this is probably an archaic spelling, or possibly a “revival of historical spelling” (Myers p11). Interestingly Myers points out ירדתי used in Isaiah 51:12. This lone occurrence is in so called 2nd Isaiah. Though this is likely more of an indicator that Isaiah is all pre-exilic and ought not be divided. Regardless the yud 2nd fem endings are well attested throughout Isaiah and occur more often than not. Myers also points out that this ending does not occur in very late books (Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, etc...) (Myers p11).

The Anchor Bible Commentary points out that both of the forms ending in yud (ירדתי and ושכבתי) are at the end of a series of commands and may have been a form of ancient Hebrew syntax. Ruth 4:5 might support this idea, though the ABC misses this point.

Brian Irwin puts forward the highly speculative idea that a scribe is deliberately removing Ruth from the context of sexual implications and replacing her with Naomi. Thus Naomi says, "I will go down" and "I will lie". On the surface such an idea seems to create more problems than it solves, for the text still has Ruth uncovering Boaz in 4:4.

My view is that the yud and yud-nun endings are from the first temple period. Clearly they are used as late as the period of the Babylonian captivity by the Prophet Ezekiel and a little earlier by Jeremiah, earlier still by Isaiah and Micah. They are also used in Samuel. I believe the unusual verb form of ירדתי as well as related 2nd fem verbs with the yud ending or yud-nun ending may represent a form of colloquial Hebrew.

Perhaps they were used occasionally by an older generation when addressing a young female. This idea seems to be supported not only by the testimony within Ruth but also from the uses elsewhere in the Bible. However another possibility must be considered, which is that Ruth did not use them in her Moabite dialect, for this is the other difference we see – the two girls from Moab do not use these forms.

Whatever the explanation of these first temple period forms in the book of Ruth, the question remains as to whether the original author implemented them or if they were added later. A third possibility is that Ruth is a very early book and a later scribe updated much of the language but left these few archaic forms because they were being used in dialogue. This later idea would be supported by the work of the scribes who apparently left ancient Hebrew forms unchanged in songs such as that of Deborah, while updating the surrounding text. It is further supported by the poetic nature of Ruth (Myers p33-62), for the poetic sections of the Bible are what seem to come down to us in the most archaic forms.

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