

A three-dimensional approach to the gender/sex of nouns in Biblical Hebrew

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Abstract

The phenomenon of the gender/sex of nouns is normally handled two-dimensionally. Two levels are distinguished: (grammatical) gender and sex. Gender refers to the morphological and syntactic features of the noun, sex to the extralingual reality. This use of the term gender rests on the assumption that the morphological and syntactic features of a noun are normally consistent. This assumption is tested and the results show that a three-dimensional approach would be better. In the relevant literature, there are indications of such a three-dimensional differentiation, where gender is used to indicate only the syntactic features of a noun. In this article it is proposed that morphological gender, syntactic gender and semantic gender (: sex) should be distinguished consistently. A list of 23 different combinations were found among nouns occurring most frequently. These combinations are illustrated with examples. Morphological, syntactic and semantic statistics are also given which illustrate the unique characteristics of the three levels.

1. The traditional approach is two-dimensional

The phenomenon of the gender/sex of nouns is normally handled two-dimensionally in Classical languages and in Biblical Hebrew. The two levels that are distinguished are (grammatical) gender and natural gender (i.e. sex). Each noun has a gender which does not necessarily correspond with the sex of the referent in reality. Gender is a grammatical category, but sex refers to an extralingual reality.

2. Grammatical gender implies morphological *and* syntactic gender

A noun will be classified in terms of (grammatical) gender according to certain formal and syntagmatic features. *Gender* can be defined as “grammatical classification ... of objects roughly corresponding to the two sexes and sexlessness” (Concise Oxford, 1973:508). *Grammar* refers to both morphology and syntax:

Art & science dealing with a language’s inflexion or other means of showing relation between words as used in speech or writing, & its phonetic system (usu. divided into phonology, accidence, & syntax) (Concise Oxford, 1973:534.)

Compare the definition of *grammatikale geslag* (i.e. gender) in the HAT (1991:277): “Klas woorde, veral selfstandige naamwoorde en voornaamwoorde, wat bepaalde vorm- *en* sintaktiese elemente gemeen het ...”.¹

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that, in the traditional approach, no clear distinction is made between the morphological and syntagmatic features of nouns. Both are handled as (grammatical) gender in contrast with sex. This two-dimensional approach is a very old tradition, but it is still widely accepted:

The innovative and creative grammarians of *the Sophist school* anticipated the findings of *modern linguistics* by noting two principles in the field of gender: (1) gender *formally marks the agreement* between words in some kinds of phrases and other syntactic groups, and (2) the correspondence between (*linguistic*) gender and (*natural*) sex is only partial. (Waltke & O’Connor, 1990:97.)

3. The two-dimensional approach in Hebrew syntax

The two-dimensional approach is also found in standard works on Hebrew syntax. Gesenius (1976:389, §122a), for example, uses the distinction between *gender* and *sex*.

Waltke and O’Connor (1990:99) uses the same opposition pair:

Modern linguists agree that *grammatical gender* serves only in part to denote *sexual differences* among animate beings.

1 All italics in quotations are those of the author of this article.

Originally gender in the Semitic languages probably had nothing to do with natural sex, but only represented classes of basic (now masculine) forms in contrast with derived (now feminine) forms (Waltke & O'Connor, 1990:102).

Michel (1977:31, 63, 79) is of the opinion that the original function of the \aleph/\aleph_{f} -ending was to build *nomina unitatis* (single members of a collective group) from collective concepts and that this principle is still operative in Biblical Hebrew. This theory is supported by the use of \aleph_{f} -, and \aleph_{m} -. The original function of \aleph_{m} -, the plural of \aleph/\aleph_{f} -, was to indicate a plurality with emphasis on its single members. \aleph_{f} -, indicated a plurality with emphasis on the group as such. The next phase of this development of differentiating between nouns on the basis of gender involved class-distinctions being made – distinctions such as: person-thing, big-small, important-unimportant, significant-insignificant. Small, unimportant and insignificant things were represented by ‘feminine’ nouns. In adjoining adjectives the gender of the ‘feminine’ was expressed by the endings of *nomina unitatis*. Consequently, they became the markers of this gender. Substantives kept their old endingless forms for a while, but finally the distinction based on natural gender came into being. The female sex was also marked with the endings \aleph/\aleph_{f} - and \aleph_{m} -. Consequently, the old system of marking semantic gender (sex) by different word stems fell into disuse.

Lambdin (1980:3) uses the expressions *grammatical gender* in contrast with *natural gender (sex)*, or *gender* in contrast with *meaning*. Van Rooy (1984:1) uses the same distinction: “Hebreeus onderskei, net soos die ander Semitiese tale ’n manlike en vroulike *grammatikale geslag*, wat van die *natuurlike geslag* onderskei moet word.”

Gemser (1975:192-193) merely uses the expression *grammatikale geslag* (gender) without differentiating it from sex. Here the supposed correspondence between the morphological and syntactic features is very obvious:

By die naamwoord ... onderskei Hebreeus maar twee geslagte, manlik en vroulik ... Die manlik enkelvoud het geen besondere uitgang of kenmerk nie, die vroulik het gewoonlik die uitgang \aleph_{f} - ... Daar is ook vroulike woorde sonder bepaalde uitgang ... (Gemser, 1975:27.)

This assumption is substantiated by the following statement:

Die *grammatikale geslag* van die naamwoord ... moet goed in die oog gehou word, aangesien die bybehorende adjektief en werkwoordsvorm daardeur bepaal word. (Gemser, 1975:192.)

Williams (1980:8) does not give a definition of gender at all – he only lists its uses. Here too the distinction between grammatical and natural gender is very vague. They are not separate features, but two uses of gender: “to indicate the male sex ... to indicate grammatical gender for inanimate objects ...”.

4. The underlying assumption of the two-dimensional approach

The two-dimensional approach to gender/sex probably rests on the assumption that the morphological and syntagmatic features of nouns usually correspond. This implies that these features do not have to be treated separately. Cases where these features diverge are treated as exceptions to the rule. Compare the following statement in Gemser (1975:193): “n Vroulike woord is *nie altyd* aan die vroulike uitgange ... kenbaar nie.” The implication is that the gender of nouns can usually be deduced from their morphological endings.

5. Testing the underlying assumption

In order to test this assumption the relationship between on the one hand the form, and on the other hand the concord-features of the 328 nouns occurring most frequently in Biblical Hebrew was examined. The list of Claassen (1976:20-34) was used as point of departure.² He lists the 346 non-verbs or nouns occurring more than 50 times in the Old Testament. Adjectives and prepositions were omitted from this study. The dual and plural forms, as well as the gender of all the words were checked in Brown, Driver and Briggs (1979). The following results can be recorded:

Words with masculine forms and masculine concord:	48,2%
Words with masculine forms and and feminine concord:	6,4%
Words with masculine forms and common concord ³ :	2,4%
Words with feminine forms and feminine concord:	20,1%
Words with feminine forms and masculine concord:	3,0%
Words with feminine forms and common concord:	0,0%
Words with mixed forms ⁴ and masculine concord:	11,9%
Words with mixed forms and feminine concord:	4,0%
Words with mixed forms and common concord:	4,0%

2 The list of Claassen fully corresponds with the list of Watts (1967:17-27).

3 Words with masculine forms which agree with masculine or feminine verbs or adjectives.

4 Words with different gender marking in the singular and the plural.

According to these results, the form and concord features agree in 68,3% of the 328 nouns occurring most frequently. This is the majority and can be used to justify the use of the term (grammatical) gender. However, the group representing cases where the form and concord features do not agree, is so large (31,7%), that it cannot merely be viewed as exceptions which can be ignored. In almost one out of three nouns these two features differ (at least in some respect).

6. A possible solution: a three-dimensional approach

A possible solution would be to refrain from using the term (grammatical) gender and to consistently distinguish between the form and concord features of nouns. Consequently, the gender/sex of nouns in Biblical Hebrew should be a three-dimensional phenomenon. This means that a noun has *morphological gender*, *syntactic gender* (the concord features) and *semantic gender* (natural gender or sex). With other linguistic phenomena too, a more consistent differentiation of the levels of morphology, syntax and semantics could possibly supply better solutions than those found in the traditional approach. (Compare Kroeze, 1991: 140-142 and 1993:69-70 on the differentiation of these three levels concerning the so-called Hebrew genitive.)

7. Indications of a three-dimensional differentiation in standard works

All the authors referred to in the preceding part of the article basically operate with a dichotomy (gender vs. sex). However, they see the need to differentiate between the morphological and syntagmatic features of nouns, although this is not done clearly and consistently. Gesenius (1976:389, §122a) uses the opposition pair *gender* and *sex*, but adds: “To *indicate* the latter (i.e. the *feminine gender* –JHK) a special feminine ending is generally used ...”. The morphological ending is a marker which does not necessarily correspond with the gender of a noun. This means that gender is no longer a grammatical (morphological *and* syntactic) category, but has become a syntactic category.

The language, however, is not obliged to use the *feminine ending* either for the purpose of distinguishing the *sex* of animate objects ..., or as indication of the (*figurative*) *gender* of inanimate things which are regarded as feminine ... (Gesenius, 1976:389, §122a.)

Although Gesenius does not state it clearly he distinguishes between three levels of gender, namely morphological (*ending*), syntactic (*gender*) and semantic (*sex*).

Waltke and O'Connor also use a two-dimensional opposition pair (*gender* vs. *sex*), but distinguish between a morphological, a syntactic and a semantic side. Although they more than once stress that gender is primarily a syntactic issue, they twice state that it is a morphological feature. This makes the confusion regarding the term (grammatical) gender very clear.

As an aspect of morphology, gender affects both syntax and the lexicon; through the lexicon, gender is a facet of semantics, that is, of the way the world around us is represented in words (Waltke & O'Connor, 1990:95).

Here Waltke and O'Connor view gender primarily as a morphological aspect which affects syntax and semantics secondarily. A similar, though more careful statement is:

The grammatical genders are part of the system of Hebrew *accidence*, that is, gender-markings show that certain parts of speech agree with other parts of speech (Waltke & O'Connor, 1990:101).

Accidence is "the part of grammar ... dealing with the variable forms of words" (Concise Oxford, 1973:9), i.e. morphology. (It should be noted that it is not always true that the gender-endings indicate concord with other elements. Many unmarked (masculine) words agree with elements which are marked feminine, and many words marked feminine (especially in the plural) agree with elements marked masculine.)

However, at various other points Waltke and O'Connor stress that gender is primarily a syntactic feature. Compare the following statements:

- The primary function of various systems of gender is *syntactic*; gender is one of the *concord systems* that connect related words within a sentence. (Waltke & O'Connor, 1990:99.)
- ... *grammatical gender* does not primarily denote sex in animate beings and 'analogous' features of inanimates. Rather, *gender is primarily a matter of syntax* (Waltke & O'Connor, 1990:99).
- Genders are classes of nouns reflected in the behaviour of *associated words*. (Waltke & O'Connor, 1990:101.)
- ... *grammatical gender* does not attribute sex to inanimate objects and only imperfectly designates it in animate objects; it is *chiefly a syntactic feature*, whether the noun be animate or inanimate, not a strictly referential-semantic one (Waltke & O'Connor, 1990:101).

Where Waltke and O'Connor (1990:101) use *gender* to indicate *syntactic* gender, they use gender-marking to indicate morphological gender.

Jouïon and Muraoka (1991:266, §89a) distinguish between syntactic and morphological gender too: “One must carefully distinguish between *gender* and *gender-endings*.” By *gender* they mean syntactic gender. This becomes clear when they state: “The gender of substantives is known to us mainly through their agreement with adjectives ...”. The concord with a feminine verb, attributive demonstrative pronoun and cardinal numbers 3-10 can also indicate the (syntactic) gender of a word.

From the discussion of the uses of gender in Williams (1980:8) it can be concluded that he most probably means syntactic gender:

Proper names of countries and cities are usually *construed* as feminine ...
When *treated* as masculine, they normally refer to the inhabitants ...

He lists many words with masculine forms in the feminine part which implies that words which are listed as feminine have feminine agreement (i.e. concord/congruence), but not necessarily feminine endings.

Lambdin (1980:3) also uses the expression (grammatical) gender in the sense of a syntactic quality. He states: “Gender should therefore be learned for each noun, since it cannot be deduced safely from form or meaning.” On the other hand he states: “There are some formal indications of gender ...”. These formal indications are the morphological gender. The word *indications* seems to imply that the masculine and feminine endings are always an external expression of the syntactic gender. However, this is not always the case.

Michel (1977:79) too uses the term *Genus* (gender) to indicate syntactic gender. He states that in adjoining adjectives the gender of the feminine was expressed by the endings of *nomina unitatis*. Consequently, they became the markers of this gender. He also gives a list of (syntactic) masculine and feminine words with unexpected feminine or masculine forms in the singular or plural (Michel, 1977:35-38).

8. Morphological gender vs. syntactic gender vs. semantic gender

As was indicated above, there is a fluctuation between a two-dimensional approach and a three-dimensional distinction in current standard works on Hebrew grammar. In this article a consistent three-dimensional approach is proposed. The three levels of *morphological gender*, *syntactic gender* and *semantic gender* (*natural gender*/sex) must be consistently distinguished, both in terminology and in content.

Morphological gender refers exclusively to the form of a word. An unmarked singular noun can be seen as morphologically masculine, in contrast to nouns marked feminine. In the dual and plural all nouns are marked as either masculine or feminine. The morphological gender of some words are different in the singular, the dual and the plural.

Syntactic gender refers to the way in which nouns correspond with adjectives, (as subjects) with verbs, and with the declinable numbers. A problem that emerges is that, given the relatively small corpus of texts that constitute Biblical Hebrew, it is not always possible to determine the syntactic gender of nouns with absolute certainty. In such cases one is obliged to assume that the morphological and syntactic gender correspond. (This is true in the majority – 68,3% – of cases.) Syntactic gender can also be called morphosyntactic or syntagmatic gender. The syntactic gender of a word is constant. “Note that a noun does not change its gender, regardless of the ending it has in the plural.” (Lambdin, 1980:4.)

Semantic gender refers to the natural gender or sex of the word in the extralingual reality.

Morphological, syntactic and semantic gender are thus equal but separate systems which do not control each other. See, in this regard, the two-dimensional definition of Waltke and O’Connor (1990:100): “... it is best to see grammatical gender and the natural sex of animate beings as coordinate systems, neither controlling the other”.

The three-dimensional differentiation is most obvious in Waltke and O’Connor (1990:109) when they state: “Grammatical gender involves three distinct systems: *morphology*, *meaning* with reference to an extra-linguistic reality, and *syntax*.”

Regarding morphology, they then refer to the unmarked masculine (singular) forms in contrast with the marked feminine forms.

In the definition above reference was made to the meaning in the extra-lingual reality. However, in the subsequent discussion Waltke and O’Connor try to make the semantic aspect of gender more language-orientated: feminine endings mark derivative words (which have some special modification of the unmarked alternative) as well as the natural female of animates. This is, however, only true where opposition pairs of words are marked masculine and feminine. The majority of words do not occur in such pairs. Therefore it is better to use semantic gender to refer to the sex of a referent in the extra-lingual reality, that is natural gender or sex.

Regarding the syntactic aspect Waltke and O'Connor (1990:109) state that "the primary function of *gender marking* is to bind parts of speech together by *concord* in the same sentence or discourse". Here *morphological gender (gender marking)* and *syntactic gender (concord)* are mixed up. Because these features differ in almost one out of three nouns, these two levels must be differentiated. Syntactic gender refers only to the way in which words agree (concord). See, in this regard, Gesenius (1976:391, §122h): "The following classes of ideas are usually regarded as feminine, although the substantives which express them are mostly without the feminine ending ...".

Waltke and O'Connor (1990:100) do differentiate between the levels of *morphological gender* and *semantic gender*:

Indeed, even for animate nouns the referential feature can be weakened or even absent. Thus there are nouns in French, that, though feminine in form, refer to men ... In German similar clashes of sex and gender are found.

Waltke & O'Connor (1990:109) refer to the cases where the grammatical form of Hebrew nouns differ from the semantic meaning, for example מוֹלְדֵת which has a feminine form although it refers to *descendants* (both sexes), and קוֹהֵלֵת which also has a feminine form, but which refers to a (*masculine*) *teacher*.

The levels of *syntactic gender* and *semantic gender* should also be consistently distinguished: "With few exceptions no semantically homogeneous value can be attached to the gender assignment." (Waltke & O'Connor, 1990:103.)

9. Implications of the three-dimensional approach

When one works with a three-dimensional approach, theoretically, 96 different combinations of nouns regarding gender/sex are possible:

Morphological gender			Syntactic gender	Semantic gender						
sg	du	pl								
m	m	m	m	m (masculine/male)						
f	f	f	f	f (feminine/female)						
			c	c (common gender/sex=epicene)						
			n	n (neuter = sexless)						
2	x	2	x	2	x	3	x	4	=	96

Among the 328 nouns occurring most frequently, only the following 23 combinations were found:

Group	Morphological gender			Syntactic gender	Semantic gender
	sg	du	pl		
1	m	-	m	m	m
2	m	-	m	m	c
3	m	(m)	m	m	n
4	m	-	m	f	f
5	m	(m)	m	f	n
6	m	-	m	c	c
7	m	(m)	m	c	n
8	f	-	f	f	f
9	f	-	f	f	c
10	f	(f)	f	f	n
11	f	(f)	f	m	n
12	m	-	f	m	m
13	m	-	f	m	n
14	m	-	f	f	f
15	m	(m)	f	f	n
16	m	(m)	f	c	n
17	m	-	m/f	m	m
18	m	-	m/f	m	c
19	m	-	m/f	m	n
20	m	(m)	m/f	f	n
21	m	(m)	m/f	c	n
22	f	-	m	f	f
23	f	(f)	m/f	f	n

The 23 groups can be classified as follows:

A. Nouns with consistent masculine forms

- with masculine syntactic gender 1-3
- with feminine syntactic gender 4-5
- with common syntactic gender 6-7

B. Nouns with consistent feminine forms

- with feminine syntactic gender 8-10
- with masculine syntactic gender 11

C. Nouns with mixed forms

a. sg m – du m – pl f

- with masculine syntactic gender 12-13
- with feminine syntactic gender 14-15
- with common syntactic gender 16

b. sg m – du m – pl m/f

- with masculine syntactic gender 17-19
- with feminine syntactic gender 20
- with common syntactic gender 21

c. sg f – du ? – pl m

- with feminine syntactic gender 22-23

Examples:

Group	Morphological gender		pi	Syntactic gender	Semantic gender	Translation
	sg	du				
1	מֶלֶךְ	-	מְלָכִים	m	m	king
2	עַם	-	עַמִּים	m	c	people/nation
3	יוֹם	יוֹמִים	יָמִים	m	n	day
4	סֶעַז	-	עֲזִים	f	f	nanny-goat
5	רֶגֶל	רְגָלִים	רְגָלִים	f	n	foot
6	גָּמֵל	-	גָּמְלִים	c	c	camel
7	דֶּרֶךְ	דְּרָכִים	דְּרָכִים	c	n	way/road
8	בַּת	-	בָּנוֹת	f	f	daughter
9	בְּחֵמָה	-	בְּחֵמוֹת	f	c	cattle
10	חוֹמָה	חוֹמֹתַיִם	חוֹמוֹת	f	n	wall
11	לַיְלָה	-	לַיְלוֹת	m	n	night
	גַּחְשָׁתַיִם	גַּחְשָׁתַיִם	-			copper
12	אָב	-	אָבוֹת	m	m	father
13	מִזְבֵּחַ	-	מִזְבְּחוֹת	m	n	altar
14	אִם	-	אִמוֹת	f	f	mother
15	כַּף	כַּפַּיִם	כַּפוֹת	f	n	palm, sole
16	עֵין	עֵינַיִם	עֵינֹת	c	n	eye, fountain
17	בְּכוֹר	-	בְּכוֹרִים בְּכוֹרוֹת	m	m	firstborn
18	דוֹר	-	דוֹרִים דוֹרוֹת	m	c	generation
19	מִשְׁכָּן	-	מִשְׁכְּנַיִם מִשְׁכְּנוֹת	m	n	home
20	פֶּעַם	פְּעָמִים	פְּעָמִים פְּעָמוֹת	f	n	foot, time
21	מַחֲנֶה	מַחֲנֵים	מַחֲנֵים מַחֲנוֹת	c	n	camp
22	אִשָּׁה	-	נָשִׁים	f	f	woman
23	שָׁנָה	שָׁנָתַיִם	שָׁנָיִם שָׁנוֹת	f	n	year

The following statistics concerning the different levels of gender/sex were additional results of the research on the 328 nouns occurring most frequently. These statistics illustrate the unique characteristics of the three levels.

Morphological statistics

Nouns with consistent masculine forms	57,0%
Nouns with consistent feminine forms	23,1%
Nouns with mixed forms	
masculine singular – feminine plural	12,1%
masculine singular – masculine/feminine plural	6,7%
feminine singular – masculine plural	0,9%

Syntactic statistics

Nouns with masculine syntactic gender	63,1%
Nouns with feminine syntactic gender	30,5%
Nouns with common syntactic gender	6,4%

Semantic statistics

Nouns with masculine semantic gender	11,3%
Nouns with feminine semantic gender	3,3%
Nouns with common semantic gender	5,1%
Nouns with neuter semantic gender	80,2%

10. Conclusion

The data listed above make it clear that, not only does it make sense to use a three-dimensional approach to the phenomenon of the gender/sex of nouns in Biblical Hebrew, but it is indeed necessary. This approach will eliminate confusion about the concept of (*grammatical*) *gender* which is sometimes used to indicate morphological gender or syntactic gender and at other times to indicate both. The confusion which can be caused by the term *grammatical gender* should not be underestimated. The research has indicated that the morphological and syntactic gender differ in almost one out of three nouns.

In a three-dimensional approach the concepts and terms *morphological gender*, *syntactic gender* and *semantic gender* have to be consistently distinguished. Consequently, this method of approach can be used to re-examine the phenomenon of gender/sex and to evaluate the traditional discussions on this feature of nouns.

List of abbreviations

c	common gender/sex = epicene
du	dual
sg	singular
m	masculine/male
pl	plural
n	neuter = genderless/sexless
f	feminine/female

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