

Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar — The Various Uses of the Plural-Form

**Wilhelm Gesenius edited and enlarged by Emil
Kautzsch**



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§124. *The Various Uses of the Plural-form.* [1]

1. The plural is by no means used in Hebrew solely to express a number of individuals or separate objects, *a* but may also denote them collectively. This use of the plural expresses either (*a*) a combination of various external constituent parts (plurals of *local extension*), or (*b*) a more or less intensive focusing of the characteristics inherent in the idea of the stem (*abstract plurals*, usually rendered in English by forms in *-hood, -ness, -ship*). A variety of the plurals described under (*b*), in which the secondary idea of *intensity* or of an *internal multiplication* of the idea of the stem may be clearly seen, is (*c*) the *pluralis excellentiae* or *pluralis maiestatis*.

Examples of (*a*): Plurals of *local extension* to denote localities in general, but especially level surfaces (the *b surface-plural*), since in them the idea of a whole composed of innumerable separate parts or points is most evident, as שָׁמַיִם (§ 88*d*) *heaven* (cf. also מְרוֹמִים *heights of heaven*, Is 33¹⁶, Jb 16¹⁹; elsewhere מְרוֹם); מַיִם *water*; יַמִּים (the broad surface of the sea) poetically for יַם *sea*; פְּנִים (prop. the side *turned towards* any one, then) *surface* in general, usually *face*; אַחֲרֵי *the back*, Ex 26¹², 33²³, &c., צַוְאֵרִים *neck nape of the neck*^[2]; also מְרֵאשׁוֹת *the place at the head*, מְרֵגְלוֹת *place at the feet*; עֲבָרִים *place on the other side* (of a river); מְעַמְקִים *depth*,

מְרַחֵקִים (also מְרַחֵק) *distance*, מְשַׁכְּבִים *bed*, Gn [49⁴](#) (unless, with Dillmann, it is to be explained in the sense of *double bed*, i.e. *torus*), מְשַׁכְּנִים ψ [46⁵](#), and מְשַׁכְּנוֹת [43³](#), [84²](#), [132⁵](#), *dwelling* (perhaps also אֶהְלִים *encampment*, in passages like 1 S [4¹⁰](#)). The last four belong, however, to poetic style, and are better reckoned amongst the *plurals of amplification* treated under *d-f*. So perhaps יַצְעִים *bed* (ψ [63⁷](#), Jb [17¹³](#); but Gn [49⁴](#), ψ [132³](#), &c., in the singular); probably, however, יַצְעִים (prop. *strata*) refers to a number of coverings or pillows.

The plural of extension is used to denote a lengthened period of *time* in עוֹלָמִים *eternity* (everlasting ages).

Rem. The plural of extension includes also a few examples which were formerly explained as simply *C* poetic plurals, e.g. Jb [17¹](#) לִי קִבְרִים *graves are* (ready) *for me*, i.e. the place where there are many of them (as it were *the graveyard*) is my portion, Jb [21³²](#), 2 Ch [16¹⁴](#); cf. 2 K [22²⁰](#).

Of (*b*): the tolerably numerous abstract plurals, mostly of a particular form (*q^etûlîm*, *qiṭṭûlîm*, &c.), may be *d* divided into two classes. They sum up either the *conditions* or *qualities* inherent in the idea of the stem, or else the various single *acts* of which an action is composed. Cf. for the first class, בְּחֹרִים and בְּחֹרוֹת *youth*, זְקֵנִים *old age*, נְעוּרִים *youth*; בְּתוּלִים *maidenhood*, כְּלוּלוֹת

bridal state; מְגוּרִים condition of a sojourner, בְּשָׂרִים fleshliness (only in Pr 14³⁰), חַיִּים life (the abstract idea of the qualities of a living being); שְׂכּוּלִים childlessness, סְנוּרִים blindness, עֲוֵעֵים perverseness.

There are also a number of plurals, found almost exclusively in poetry (sometimes along with the *e* singular), which are evidently intended to intensify^[3] the idea of the stem (plural of amplification), as אוֹנִים might, Is 40²⁶; אֲמוּנִים (as well as אֲמוּנָה) and אֲמוּנוֹת faithfulness; אֲשָׁרִי (according to §931, only in the construct state plural or with suffixes = *the happiness of*), happy; כּוֹשְׁרוֹת (complete) prosperity, ψ 68⁷; בִּינוֹת Is 27¹¹ and תְּבוּנוֹת Is 40¹⁴, &c. (keen) understanding; עֲצוֹת (true) counsel, Dt 32²⁸; דְּעִים Jb 37¹⁶ and דְּעוֹת 1 S 2³ (thorough) knowledge; בִּטְחוֹת Jb 12⁶ and מְבִטְחִים Is 32¹⁸ (full) confidence; בְּרָכוֹת (abundant) blessing, ψ 21⁷; גְּבוּרוֹת (exceptional) strength, Jb 41⁴; הָזוֹת ψ 5¹⁰ (very) wickedness; חֲמוּדוֹת Dn 9²³ (greatly) beloved; חֲמוֹת ψ 76¹¹, &c. (fierce) wrath; חֲרָפוֹת Dn 12² (utter) contempt; יִשְׁעוֹת (real) help, Is 26¹⁸, &c.; מְרֵאת Gn 46² (an important) vision; מִישָׁרִים uprightness; תְּהַפְּכוֹת perversity; נְקָמוֹת (complete) vengeance, Ju 11³⁶, &c.; חֲשֵׁכִים and מְחֲשֵׁכִים (thick) darkness; מְסֻתָּרִים a (close) hiding-place; נְגִידִים nobility; שְׂמָנִים Is 28¹ fatness; צַחְצְחוֹת (complete) aridity; מְמִתְקִים sweetness;

מְהַמְדִים *preciousness*; שְׂעֵשְׂעִים *delight*; עֲדָנִים and תְּעַנְגִים *pleasure*; רַחֲמִים *compassion*; מְנוּחַת ψ [23²](#) *rest, refreshment*; מְהוּמַת Am [3²](#) *tumult*. Probably also יְדִידָת (heartfelt) *love*, ψ [45¹](#); מְרֻרוֹת (extreme) *bitterness*, Jb [13²⁶](#); מְרָמוֹת (base) *deceit*, ψ [38¹³](#); צְדָקוֹת (true) *righteousness*, Is [33¹⁵](#), &c.; שְׂמְחוֹת (the highest) *joy*, ψ [16¹¹](#). On the other hand, חֲכָמוֹת *wisdom* (Pr [1²⁰](#), &c.) can hardly be a *plural* (=the essence of wisdom, or wisdom personified), but is a singular (see [§ 86 l](#)).

A further extension of this plural of amplification occurs according to P. Haupt's very probable suggestion (*SBOT*, Proverbs, p. 40, line 50, &c.) in יְאֵרִים *the great river* (of the Nile, generally יְאֵר) Is [7¹⁸](#), [19⁶](#) (though with the predicate in the plural), Ez [30¹²](#), ψ [78⁴⁴](#), but in Is [37²⁵](#), Ez [29³](#) the usual explanation, *arms or channels of the Nile*, can hardly be avoided; also in נְהָרוֹת ψ [24²](#) of the ocean, which encircles the earth, 137:1 of the *great river*, i.e. the Euphrates, but in Is [18¹](#) כּוֹשׁ נְהַרֵי is evidently a numerical plural.—In Pr [16¹³](#) מְלָכִים (acc. to P. Haupt=the *great king*) is very doubtful. In Ez [19¹](#) the second *yôdh* is evidently due to dittography, since יִשְׂרָאֵל follows.

The summing up of the several parts of an action is expressed in חַנְּמִים *embalming*, כְּפָרִים *atonement*, *f* מְלֵאִים (prop. *filling*, sc. of the hand) *ordination to the priesthood*, שְׁלָחִים *dismissal*, שְׁלָמִים *retribution*, פְּתָחִים

engraving (of a seal, &c.); אֶהָבִים fornication, זְנוּנִים whoredom, נְאָפִים adultery; נְחֻמִּים (prop. no doubt, warm compassion) consolation, תְּחִנוּנִים supplication, נְדָדִים Jb 7⁴ (restless) tossing to and fro, פֶּלְאִים wonder La 1⁹, עֲלִלוֹת gleaming; perhaps also נְגִינוֹת ψ 4¹, 6¹, &c., if it means the playing on stringed instruments, and שְׂלֵמָנִים Is 1²³ bribery, unless it be a plural of number.^[4]

Of (c): the *pluralis excellentiae* or *maiestatis*, as has been remarked above, is properly a variety of the *g* abstract plural, since it sums up the several characteristics^[5] belonging to the idea, besides possessing the secondary sense of an *intensification* of the original idea. It is thus closely related to the plurals of amplification, treated under [[Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar/e#|]], which are mostly found in poetry. So especially אֱלֹהִים *Godhead, God* (to be distinguished from the numerical plural *gods*, Ex 12¹², &c.). The supposition that אֱלֹהִים is to be regarded as merely a remnant of earlier polytheistic views (i.e. as originally only a numerical plural) is at least highly improbable, and, moreover, would not explain the analogous plurals (see below). That the language has entirely rejected the idea of numerical plurality in אֱלֹהִים (whenever it denotes *one* God), is proved especially by its being almost invariably joined with a singular attribute (cf. § 132 *h*), e.g. אֱלֹהִים יְצַדִּיק ψ 7¹⁰, &c. Hence אֱלֹהִים may have been used originally not only as a numerical but also

as an abstract plural (corresponding to the Latin *numen*, and our *Godhead*), and, like other abstracts of the same kind, have been transferred to a concrete single god (even of the heathen).

To the same class (and probably formed on the analogy of אֱלֹהִים) belong the plurals קִדְשֵׁי־יְהוָה *the Most Holy* **h** (only of Yahweh), Ho [12¹](#), Pr [9¹⁰](#), [30³](#) (cf. אֱלֹהִים קִדְשֵׁי־יְהוָה Jos [24¹⁹](#), and the Aram. וְלִיּוֹנִין *the Most High*, Dn [7¹⁸](#), 22, 25); and probably תְּרַפֵּי־יְהוָה (usually taken in the sense of *penates*) the image of a god, used especially for obtaining oracles. Certainly in 1 S [19¹³](#), 16 only *one* image is intended; in most other places a single image *may* be intended^[6]; in Zc [10²](#) alone is it most naturally taken as a numerical plural. In Ec [5⁷](#) גְּבוּהֵי־יְהוָה *supremus* (of God) is doubtful; according to others it is a numerical plural, *superiores*.

Further, אֲדָנִים, as well as the singular אֲדוֹן (lordship) *lord*, e.g. קִשָּׁה אֲדָנִים *a cruel lord*, Is [19⁴](#); אֲדוֹנֵי־אֶרֶץ *the lord of the land*, Gn [42³⁰](#), cf. Gn [32¹⁹](#); so especially with the suffixes of the 2nd and 3rd persons אֲדָנֶיךָ, אֲדָנָיו, אֲדָנֵינוּ, &c., also אֲדָנֵינוּ (except 1 S [16¹⁶](#)); but in 1st sing. always אֲדוֹנִי.^[7] So also בָּעֲלָמִים (with suffixes) *lord, master* (of slaves, cattle, or inanimate things; but in the sense of *maritus*, always in the singular), e.g. בָּעֲלָמִים Ex [21²⁹](#), Is [1³](#), &c.^[8]

On the other hand, we must regard as doubtful a number of participles in the plural, which, being used *k* as attributes of God, resemble *plurales excellentiae*; thus, עֲשֵׂי my *Maker*, Jb [35¹⁰](#); עֲשֵׂיִךְ Is [54⁵](#); עֲשֵׂיוּ ψ [149²](#); עֲשֵׂיהֶם Is [22¹¹](#); נֹטִייהֶם *stretching them out*, Is [42⁵](#); for all these forms may also be explained as singular, according to § [93 ss.](#)^[9]—נֹגְשֵׂיוּ Is [3¹²](#) might also be regarded as another instance, unless it be a numerical plural, *their oppressors*; moreover, מְרִימֵיו *him who lifteth it up*, Is [10¹⁵](#) (but read probably מְרִימוֹ); שְׁלֵחֵיו *him who sendeth him*, Pr [10²⁶](#), [22²¹](#) (so Baer, but Ginsburg שְׁלֵחֵי), 25:13 (in parallelism with אֲדָנָיו). These latter plurals, however (including מְרִימֵיו), may probably be more simply explained as indicating an indefinite individual, cf. o below.—For שְׁמֵרֵיךְ ψ [121⁵](#) (textus receptus) and בּוֹרְאֵיךְ Ec [12¹](#) (textus receptus) the singular should be read, with Baer.

Rem. 1. (a) Coherent substances, &c., are mostly *l* regarded as *single*, and are, accordingly, almost always represented by nouns in the singular, cf. אֶבֶר *fine dust*, אֶפְרָיִם *ashes*, בֵּד *linen*, בְּדִיל *lead*, זָהָב *gold*, כֶּסֶף *silver*, נְחֹשֶׁת *brass*, חֶלֶב *milk*, יַיִן *wine*, עָפָר *dust*, the *ground*, עֵץ *wood*. Plurals are, however, formed from some of these words expressing materials in order to denote separate portions taken from the whole in manufacture (*plurals of the result*) or parts otherwise detached from it; thus, בְּדָיִם *linen garments*; כֶּסֶפִּים *silver pieces*, Gn [42²⁵](#), 35; נְחֹשֶׁתַיִם (dual) *fetters of brass*; עֵצִים *ligna* (timber for

building or *sticks* for burning); also in a wider sense, **בְּדִילִים** particles of *alloy* to be separated by smelting, Is [1²⁵](#); **עֲפָרוֹת** *fragments of earth*, Pr [8²⁶](#), cf. Jb [28⁶](#) **עֲפָרוֹת זָהָב** *dust of gold*.

(b) To the class of *plurals of the result* belong also a few names of natural products, when represented in *m* an artificial condition; thus, **חִטִּים** *wheat* in grain (threshed wheat), as distinguished from **חֵטָה** *wheat* (used collectively) in the ear; cf. the same distinction between **כֶּסֶם** and **כֶּסֶם מֵת** *spelt*; **עֲדָשִׁים** and **עֲדָשָׁה** (the singular preserved only in the Mishna) *lentils*; **שְׂעֵרִים** and **שְׂעֵרָה** *barley*; also **פְּשָׁתִים** *linen*, **פִּשְׁתָּה** (to be inferred from **פְּשָׁתִי**) *flax*.

(c) Finally, the distinction between **דָּם** *blood* and **דָּמִים** requires to be specially noticed. The singular is *n* always used when the blood is regarded as an organic unity, hence also of menstrual blood, and the blood of sacrifices (collected in the basin and then sprinkled), and in Nu [23²⁴](#) of the blood gushing from wounds. On the other hand, **דָּמִים** as a sort of plural of the result and at the same time of local extension, denotes *blood which is shed*, when it appears as blood-stains (Is [1¹⁵](#)) or as blood-marks (so evidently in Is [9⁴](#)). But since blood-stains or blood-marks, as a rule, suggest blood shed in murder (although **דָּמִים** also denotes the blood which flows at child-birth or in

circumcision), דַּמִּיָּד acquired (even in very early passages) simply the sense of a *bloody deed*, and especially of *bloodguiltiness*, Ex 22¹ f., &c.

In some few cases the plural is used to denote an indefinite singular; certainly so in Dt 17⁵ אֶל־שַׁעַר־יָיִךְ **O** unto one of *thy gates*; Zc 9⁹ בְּיַד־אֶתְנֹת (cf. Ct 2⁹); Ex 21²² יְהִי־לְדָךְ! (where evidently only *one* child is thought of, certainly though in connexion with a contingency which may be repeated); cf. also Ec 4¹⁰ (if *one of them* fall).—So probably also Gn 8⁴, 1 S 17⁴³, Dn 2¹, Neh 3⁸, 6²; but *not* Gn 19²⁹, since the same document (Gn 13¹²) makes Lot dwell *in the cities* of the Jordan valley; in Gn 21⁷ בְּנֵי־מִדְיָן denotes the class with which the action is concerned. In Ju 12⁷ instead of the unusual בְּעָרֵי גִלְעָד *in the cities of Gilead* (formerly explained here as *in one of the cities of Gilead*) we should most probably read, with Moore (*SBOT*, Judges, p. 52), בְּעִירוֹ בְּמִצְפֵּה גִלְעָד *in his city, in Mizpeh (in) Gilead*.

2. When a substantive is followed by a genitive, and the compound idea thus formed is to be expressed in **O** the plural, this is done—

(a) Most naturally by using the plural of the *nomen regens*, e.g. גִּבּוֹרֵי חַיִּל *mighty men of valour* (prop. heroes of strength), 1 Ch 7², 9; so also in compounds, e.g. בְּנֵי יְמִינִי 1 S 22⁷, as the plur. of בְּנֵי־יְמִינִי *Benjamite*; but also

(b) By using the plural of *both* nouns,^[10] e.g. גְבוּרֵי חַיִּים 1 Ch 7⁵; וּבְרֵיתֵי כְלָאִים *and in prison houses*, 9 Is 42²²; cf. Ex 34¹, &c., שְׁנֵי־לֶחֶת אֲבָנִים *two tables of stone* (but Ex 31¹⁸ לֶחֶת אֶבֶן); Nu 13³², Dt 1²⁸, Jos 5², 6⁴, 2 K 14¹⁴, 25²³, Is 51⁹, Jer 41¹⁶, Ezr 3³, &c. עַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ *the people of the country*; 2 Ch 26¹⁴; so perhaps אֱלֹהֵי בְנֵי אֱלֹהִים *sons of God*, ψ 29¹, 89⁷ (according to others *sons of gods*); or finally even

(c) By using the plural of the *nomen rectum*;^[11] e.g. בֵּית אָב Ex 6¹⁴, Nu 1², 4 ff., &c., as plur. of בֵּית אָב *r father's house, family*; בֵּית הַבָּמוֹת *the houses of the high places*, 2 K 17²⁹ (also בְּרֵיתֵי הַבָּמוֹת 23:19); בֵּית הָאֱלֹהִים *the houses of their idols*, 1 S 31⁹, Ez 46²⁴; cf. also Ju 7²⁵ *the head of Oreb and Zeeb*, i.e. the heads, &c.

Rem. When a substantive (in a distributive sense) with a suffix refers back to a plural, the singular form of the substantive suffices, since the idea of plurality is already adequately expressed by the suffix, e.g. פְּיֵמוֹ (for *ora*) *eorum*, ψ 17¹⁰; יְמִינָם *their right hand*, ψ 144⁸ [so in the English RV.], for *hands*.

1. ↑ Cf. Dietrich, 'Über Begriff und Form des hebr. Plurals,' in the *Abhandl. zur hebr. Grammatik*, Leipzig, 1846, p. 2 ff.

2. [↑] Cf. the same use of the plural in τὰ στέρνα, τὰ νῶτα, τὰ τράχηλα, *praecordia*, *cervices*, *fauces*; on plurals of extension in general, cf. the prepositions of place and time in the plur. form, § 103 *n*. מִפְּרָדִים is not a case in point, in the sense of *letter* (properly a sheet folded into several pages; elsewhere also פְּרָדִים) 1 K 21⁸ ff., 2 K 10¹, 19¹⁴ (Is 37¹⁴; referred to afterwards by the *singular* suffix); Is 39¹, Jer 29²⁵, 32¹⁴ (*after* being folded, previously פְּרָדִים).
3. [↑] Cf. A. Ember, ‘The pluralis intensivus in Hebrew,’ *AJSL*, 1905, p. 195 ff.
4. [↑] Mayer Lambert in *REJ*, xxiv. 106 ff., enumerates no less than ninety-five words ending in *îm*, which in his opinion are to be regarded as *pluralia tantum*.
5. [↑] The Jewish grammarians call such plurals רַבּוּי הַכְּחוֹת plur. *virium* or *virtutum*; later grammarians call them plur. *excellantiae*, *magnitudinis*, or plur. *maiestaticus*. This last name may have been suggested by the *we* used by kings when speaking of themselves (cf. already 1 Macc. 10¹⁹, 11³¹); and the plural used by God in Gn 1²⁶, 11⁷, Is 6⁸ has been incorrectly explained in this way. It is, however, either *communicative* (including the attendant angels; so at all events in Is 6⁸, cf. also Gn 3²²), or according to others, an indication of *the fullness of power and might* implied in אֱלֹהִים (see Dillmann on Gn 1²⁶); but it is best explained as a plural of *self-deliberation*. The use

of the plural as a form of respectful address is quite foreign to Hebrew.

6. † Even in Gn [31³⁴](#), notwithstanding the plural suffix in [מִן־שְׂמִי](#) and [מִן־לִי](#), since the construction of these abstracts as numerical plurals is one of the peculiarities of the E-document of the Hexateuch; cf. Gn [20¹³](#), [35⁷](#), and [§ 145 i](#).
7. † On [מִן־אֱלֹהִים](#) (for [מִן־אֱלֹהִים](#)) as a name of God, cf. [§ 135 q](#).
8. † Euting, *Reise in Arabien*, p. 61, mentions the interesting fact that the subjects of the Emir of Ḥâyel commonly speak of their ruler as *šiyûkh*, a plur. majestatis= *the great sheikh*.
9. † [מִן־לִי](#), which in Is [54⁵](#) is in parallelism with [מִן־שְׂמִי](#), must then be explained as merely formed on analogy.
10. † Cf. König, *Lehrgebäude*, ii. 438 f., according to whom the plural of the principal word exercises an influence on the determining genitive.
11. † Cf. Brockelmann, *Grundriss*, i. 482.

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