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The Function of the Preposition ב in Psalm 119:89

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In the continuing discussion surrounding the issue of contemporary, vernacular English versions and the KJV, it has been suggested that in considering the topic of “preservation” that Psalm 119:89 does not indicate *where* (locative - “in heaven”) but *how* (instrumental - “by heaven”) or *by what/whom* (agency - “by heaven”) God’s Word has been preserved.¹

¹Compare Thomas M. Strouse, “Fundamentalism and the Authorized Version,” a photocopied handout at the 2nd Annual National Leadership Conference of Calvary Baptist Ministries in Lansdale, PA, February 29, 1996. Strouse states in footnote 9 on page 4, “The preposition ב [ב] (*be*) may be translated “by” instead of “in,” rendering the verse “For ever, O Lord, thy word is settled *by* heaven.” Although Strouse does not indicate which function of the ב he is proposing, it is clear from the text of his handout that he intends to refute a locative understanding as he states “this view causes consternation . . . because the preservation of God’s words in heaven (but not on earth) does little good on the earth.”

Explanation of Functions

The preposition ב is very common in the Hebrew OT² and the three functions under consideration are legitimate uses of the ב within the scope of the OT. The question is whether the use of the preposition ב in the phrase בַּשָּׁמַיִם ("in heaven," KJV) functions as locative, instrumental, or indicates agency in Psalm 119:89. The three different functions produce distinctly divergent understandings of this verse. (1) Locative function: If the preposition ב is used in the locative sense in this verse, then the psalmist is indicating *where* God has established (נִצָּח - "to stand firm") His Word. "God established His Word *in the heavens*." (2) Instrumental function: If the preposition ב is used in the instrumental sense in this verse, then the psalmist is indicating *what* God used to establish His Word. "God established His Word *by (using) the heavens*." Thus "heavens" is the instrument used by God to establish His Word. (3) Agency: If the preposition ב is used to indicate agency in this verse, then the psalmist is indicating *who or what agent acted* to establish God's Word. "God's Word is established *by the agency of the heavens*." Thus the "heavens" is understood to be the actor-agent which accomplishes the establishment of God's Word. This understanding apparently requires that the term "heavens" be understood as synonymous with "God."

While it might seem confusing that the same preposition can function to indicate either location, agency, or instrumentality, its function in a sentence is not necessarily obscure. For example, consider 2 Kings 23:11 which contains all three elements -- agency, instrumentality and location (the latter two being marked by the preposition ב).

²According to Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 196, the preposition ב is "the second most common in Hebrew." Francis I. Andersen and A. Dean Forbes indicate in *The Vocabulary of the Old Testament*, Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1989, 23, that the preposition is found 15,731 times in the Hebrew OT.

And he [King Josiah] (agent) took away the horses that the kings of Judah had given to the sun, at the entering in of the house of the LORD, by the chamber of Nathanmelech the chamberlain, which [was] *in* (locative) the suburbs, and burned the chariots of the sun *with* (instrument) fire.

The agent of the action is King Josiah who initiates the activity and sees that it is carried to its intended end. The instrument for the destruction of the chariots is fire (שָׁרִיף - “with fire”). King Josiah used the instrument of fire to destroy the chariots which had become part of Judah’s idolatry. The location is “*in* the suburbs” (בְּפְרָוֲרִים). The location in which Josiah’s activity took place extended from “the entering in of the house of the LORD” to “the suburbs.” The agent is the actor that brings about (or at least initiates) the verbal activity, while the instrument is what is used by the actor to accomplish the activity. The agent is the animate entity in the activity and the instrument is the non-animate entity.³ Whether expressed or not, the instrumental idea has an agent behind it who initiates and/or carries out the action which is accomplished by the instrument.

The standard example of the function of ׀ as agency is Genesis 9:6:⁴

Whoso sheddeth man's blood, *by man shall his blood be shed*: for in the image of God made he man.

³Waltke and O'Connor identify the instrument as “non-animate” and the agent as “animate” (*Biblical Hebrew*, 197).

⁴Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew*, 197; Gesenius' *Hebrew Grammar*, 389; Williams, *Hebrew Syntax*, 45; and Jouon and Muraoka, *Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 483 all list Genesis 9:6 as the example of ׀ functioning to indicate agency. The only other examples listed are Numbers 36:2, Isaiah 14:3b, and Hosea 14:4; however, both Numbers 36:2 and Isaiah 14:3b are questioned. The scarcity of clear examples doubtless reflects the rarity of this function.

In the highlighted clause the agent who carries out the action is introduced by the preposition **בְּ** -- **בְּאִישׁ** ("by man"). The action is indicated by the passive verb **יִשָּׁפַךְ** ("shall be shed"). And the object of the action is **דָּמָו** ("his blood"). Neither the instrument by which the action is to be carried out or the location of the action is mentioned. The clause is designed to emphasize the agency of the act -- it is mankind's responsibility to bring the murderer to justice.

To advocate an instrumental function for the preposition **בְּ** in Psalm 119:89 is to claim that God used the "heavens" as a means to establish His Word. To claim that the preposition **בְּ** shows agency is to claim that the "heavens" was the actor that established God's Word. To claim a locative use of the preposition **בְּ** is to point out where God's Word is established -- "in the heavens."

Consideration of the Data

Occurrences of **בְּ** with the Noun **בְּשָׁמַיִם**

The phrase **בְּשָׁמַיִם** ("in the heavens") is found forty-two times in the Hebrew OT.⁵ An examination of each occurrence reveals that of the forty-one occurrences other than Psalm 119:89, each is locative in function. At times the indication of locative usage is (1) a juxtaposed reference to "earth" (Exod 20:4; Ps. 73:25); (2) a directional reference (Deut. 4:39); (3) a reference to entities found in the "atmospheric heavens," such as "birds" (Deut 4:17; Jer. 8:7), "wind" (Ps. 78:26), and weather related phenomena (1 Sam 2:10; Ps. 18:13); and (4) mention of God's throne or associated sovereignty (Pss 2:4; 103:19). The prominence of the locative function of **בְּ** with the noun **בְּשָׁמַיִם** is consistent with the evaluation of Hebrew linguists

⁵Compare Bible Windows 4.0 (Silver Mountain Software, Cedar Hill TX, 1995) and Solomon Mandelkern, *Veteris Testamenti Concordantiae Hebraicae Atque Chaldaicae*, Editio Altera Locupletissime Aucta et Emendata (Apud F. Margolin, 1925), 1196. Actually Mandelkern lists forty-one occurrences; however, the indefinite use in Psalm 36:6 is included to bring the total to forty-two.

that the basic or fundamental usage of the בְּ is locative.⁶ The occurrence of the phrase בְּשֹׁמְרַיִם in the Hebrew OT overwhelmingly supports a locative function and excludes both agency and instrumentality.

Occurrences of בְּשֹׁמְרַיִם with the Verb נָצַב

Contextually the phrase בְּשֹׁמְרַיִם is preceded by the verb נָצַב in Psalm 119:89.⁷ However, the combination of the verb נָצַב followed by a prepositional phrase introduced by בְּ occurs three other times in the Hebrew OT -- Numbers 22:23, 31 and Psalm 82:1.⁸ In each of these occurrences the prepositional phrase describes the location in which the action of “standing” (נָצַב) is taking place. In Numbers 22:23 and 31 the Angel of the Lord stands “in the road” to block the advance of Balaam’s donkey. In Psalm 82:1 God takes his stand “in the congregation of the mighty.” In any of these three contexts it would be difficult, if not ridiculous, to attempt to justify a usage as instrumentality or agency for the preposition בְּ with the verb נָצַב .

Syntactical Considerations

A cursory inspection of the verse appears to indicate a complete passive construction. Complete passive constructions

⁶Compare Waltke and O’Connor, *Biblical Hebrew*, 196, “Spatial senses are basic.” Jouon and Muraoka, *Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 486, “In the first place it expresses the fact of finding oneself (or of moving) in a place.” *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, 379, “Underlying the very various uses of the preposition is either the idea of being or moving within some definite region, or some sphere of space or time.”

⁷The only other occurrence of the noun שֹׁמְרַיִם and the verb נָצַב within five words of each other (Bible Windows 4.0) is in Genesis 28:12: “And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up (נָצַב) on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven (שָׁמַיִם): and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.”

⁸Bible Windows 4.0 (Silver Mountain Software, Cedar Hill TX, 1995).

indicate the agent of the action.⁹ The verb נָצַב may be passive¹⁰ and is followed by a prepositional phrase with אֶל prefixed to a noun. However, three factors mitigate against this function of אֶל as being agency.¹¹ First, as Waltke and O'Connor point out "in Hebrew the agent with the *Niphal* is only rarely indicated by a prepositional phrase."¹² Second, a survey of *Niphal* stem uses of the verb נָצַב reveals that the stem is intransitive in every other occurrence; that is, *Niphal* stem uses of נָצַב do not transfer action to an object.¹³ Third, agency requires the אֶל be prefixed to an animate noun which "heaven" is not.

An examination of the occurrences of שָׁמַיִם ("heavens") in the Hebrew OT is beyond the scope of this study due to the number of occurrences of the term.¹⁴ However, an examination of lexicons indicates that all OT usages of this term are in reference to a place or location (not an animate noun) whether it be (1) the atmospheric heavens where birds fly; (2) the spatial heavens which contain the sun, moon, and stars; or (3) the celestial heavens where God is

⁹Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew*, 385.

¹⁰Although the normal passive stem for the lexical root נָצַב is the *Hophal* stem, the breadth of usage in the *Niphal* stem does include the passive where it is "equivalent to 'be stationed' by appointment or in fulfillment of duty" (Milton C. Fisher, "נָצַב," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, edited by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, 2:591; hereafter referred to as *TWOT*).

¹¹However, in Psalm 119:89 if the alleged use of the preposition אֶל to express agency is allowed, then the clause would contain both agency/actor ("heavens") and object ("thy Word") contrary to the intransitive nature of the stem.

¹²Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew*, 383. Also see Williams who observes that agency is "usually expressed by לְ" and not by אֶל (*Hebrew Syntax*, 45); and Gesenius' *Hebrew Grammar* (p. 389), "the efficient cause (or personal agent) is, as a rule, attached to the passive by לְ."

¹³Milton C. Fisher, "נָצַב," *TWOT* 2:591 "it has transitive force only in the *Hiphil*."

¹⁴The term occurs 459 times in the Hebrew OT (Andersen and Forbes, *The Vocabulary of the Old Testament*, 437).

enthroned and the angels minister.¹⁵ A fourth use (based on the previous three) is a figurative use where the term “heavens” is used by the writer in a figure of speech known as personification.¹⁶ For example, Psalm 19:1, “The heavens declare the glory of God” or Isaiah 1:2, “Hear, O heavens, and give ear O earth.” When used as a figure of speech the “heavens” may be attributed with characteristics of man and thus for revelational purposes appear able to speak or to witness about God’s judgment.

It should also be noted that the occurrence of a prepositional ׀ phrase following a passive verb is not an automatic indication of agency. Note, for example, the following examples which involve Niphal stem verbs and prepositional ׀ phrases.

Psalm 119:23 Princes also did sit [and] speak
against [׀] me: [but] thy servant did meditate in
thy statutes.

גַּם יֹשְׁבוּ שָׂרִים בִּי נִדְבְּרוּ עֲבָדָי יֵשִׁיחַ בְּחֻקֶּיךָ:

Psalm 119:117 Hold thou me up, and I shall be
safe: and I will have respect *unto* [׀] thy statutes
continually.

סְעַדְנִי וְאֵינִי שָׁעָה וְאֵינִי שָׁעָה בְּחֻקֶּיךָ תָּמִיד:

These two examples are the only other occurrences of this construction in Psalm 119. In verse 23 the prepositional phrase functions adversatively (“*against me*”). The psalmist’s testimony is

¹⁵Compare Harris, Archer, and Waltke, *THOT* 2:935-36; and F. Brown, S.R. Driver, and C.A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1972), 1029-30.

¹⁶In these cases the writer ascribes animate characteristics to non-animate entities. Compare E.W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprinted 1968), 861-69.

that even though he was being slandered (spoken *against*) he maintained his meditation in God's statutes. In verse 117 the prepositional phrase functions idiomatically with the verb הָיָה to indicate the object of non-physical activity ("have respect *unto* thy statutes").¹⁷ Consequently no occurrence of a prepositional בְּ phrase following a Niphal verb in Psalm 119 indicates agency.

The significance of using the incomplete passive structure¹⁸ in Psalm 119:89 appears to emphasize the location of the action as "*in* heaven," in contrast to either instrument or agent. Agency cannot be emphasized since none is indicated. Instrumentality cannot be emphasized since none is indicated. There are no standard syntactical or adverbial indicators that the action is being emphasized. The psalmist's emphasis is not on who accomplished the action, but on where God's Word remains in this condition.

Historical Considerations

A complete survey of the history of interpretation of this verse is beyond the scope of this article. However, a brief review of an historical usage indicates that the alleged function of the preposition בְּ in Psalm 119:89 as an indication of agency is implausible. To understand the בְּ as introducing the agent of the action requires that "heaven" be understood as animate and most likely as synonymous with "God." This involves an historical fallacy of interpretation. The fallacy being the reading of inter-testamental (and subsequent) usage into the OT text. It cannot be denied that the term "heaven" was used by pious Jews as a circumlocution for the name of God. "The sanctity attached to the names of God and the prohibition against taking God's name in vain led to a reluctance to use biblical names,

¹⁷See Holladay, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 379; Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1043; and Waltke and O'Connor, *Hebrew Syntax*, 198-99.

¹⁸'Incomplete' passive constructions do not indicate the agent; see Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew*, 384.

and various circumlocutions were substituted.”¹⁹ However this practice does not appear to pre-date the period of the exile.²⁰ The use of “heaven(s)” as a circumlocution for “God” in the NT is explained by the post-exilic religious atmosphere and context in which the NT characters lived and ministered and may not be read back into the OT.²¹ The possibility that “heavens” should be understood as personification in this verse and thus able to function as the agent of action is incongruous with the vocative of address -- “O LORD.” This focus on the Lord is carried into the second line of the verse by the masculine singular pronominal suffix on the noun דְּבָרְךָ (“Thy word”).

Rhetorical Considerations

In the larger context of the whole psalm, the psalmist clearly represents God as the agent who establishes His Word directly and eternally. In verse 4 the psalmist states, “You have commanded your statutes . . .” ($\text{אַתָּה צִוִּיתָהּ פְּקֻדָּיךָ}$). By using the pronoun “you”

¹⁹Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *A Dictionary of Judaism & Christianity* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991) 110. See also Yehoshua M. Grintz, “God—In Talmudic Period,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, edited by Cecil Roth and Geoffrey Wigoder, (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971) 7:655, “one finds many euphemisms employed as substitutes for the names of God, such as . . . *Shamayim* (“Heaven”).”

²⁰Compare Lambdin who suggests that it “may predate the Christian Era,” (Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971, 52-53). However, Israelstam indicates that “the term was used before the Persian and Greek periods (Marmorstein, A., *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God*, p. 14 and pp. 105-6, . . .);” see I. Epstein, ed. *The Babylonian Talmud*, volume 8 *Seder Nezikin, Aboth Mishnah* 3, translated by J. Israelstam, (London: The Socino Press, 1935), 3.

²¹For example this helps to explain Matthew’s use of “kingdom of heaven.” Compare Werner Foerster, *From the Exile to Christ: A Historical Introduction to Palestinian Judaism*, translated by Gordon E. Harris, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 183, “‘Heaven’ in the expression ‘kingdom of heaven’ is only a Judeo-Palestinian circumlocution for ‘God.’ Thus ‘kingdom of heaven’ is found almost exclusively in the Matthean Gospel written for Jewish Christians.”

(אֱלֹהִים) emphatically before the verb the author emphasizes the fact that God himself is the agent involved in this action -- it was God and God alone who commanded. There is no intermediary agent or instrument involved and there is no circumlocution (i.e., "heavens"), which might cloud the statement involved. In verse 38 the psalmist prays, "Establish Thy word to Thy servant . . ." (לְעַבְדְּךָ אֱמַרְתֶּךָ). The psalmist does not seek an intermediary agent or instrument and does not use circumlocution to make his request. His desire is for God to directly establish His word. Perhaps the closest parallel to verse 89 is found in verse 152. The psalmist states, "From old I have known from your testimonies, that you have established them forever" (יָדַעְתִּי מִיְסֻדֹתֶיךָ כִּי לְעוֹלָם יִסְדָּרְתָּם). The verbs in the two verses ("stand" נָצַב, v. 89; "established" קָם, v. 152) are synonyms²² -- God's word is made firm, established in both verses. The duration of the establishment of God's word in both verses is said to be "forever" (לְעוֹלָם, vv. 89, 152). Although agency is unexpressed in verse 89, the agency of the establishment is clearly revealed in v. 152 "you have established them" (יִסְדָּרְתָּם). Instrumentality is absent from both verses. It is beyond the contextual evidence of the psalm to allege that either the agency or the instrumentality of establishing God's Word in verse 89 is "by the heavens."

Within the context of the *lamedh* strophe (vv. 89-96) the use of the preposition בְּ to indicate either instrument or agent would be inappropriate to the rhetorical development of the psalmist. In the first three verses (vv. 89-91) the psalmist establishes a broad foundation of propositional truths. Then in the next four verses (vv. 92-95) he makes personal application of those truths to his own life. The final verse (v. 96) serves as a summary of the strophe.

In the opening verses (vv. 89-91) of the strophe the psalmist declares the stability of God's creation. The three main verbs of the verses are synonymous and speak of stability, firmness, establishment

²²Ron B. Allen, "עָמַד," *TWOT*, 2:673.

("stand" עָמַד, v. 89; "established" כָּבַד, v. 90; "stand" עָמַד, v. 91).²³ God's word is established in the heavens (v. 89). The earth is established by God (v. 90). All creation is established by God's ordinances ("They continue . . .," v. 91).²⁴ At the same time, while developing the propositional truths, the psalmist narrows the temporal focus ("forever," v. 89; "to all generations," v. 90; "this day," v. 91) in preparation to introduce his personal application. Eternal truths have practical applications for daily living.

The transition from the foundation of propositional truths is indicated by a shift to the first person and by a shift from the indicative mood as indicated by the use of participles and perfect verbs in verses 89-91 to the conditional, volitional, and subjunctive mood in verses 92-95 (as indicated by the particle לִיגִי in verse 92 as well as by the use of imperfect and imperative verbs). The stability evident in creation due to God's word was available to the psalmist for daily life. Whether life threatened him with perishing (v. 92) or destruction (v. 95), God's word offered resuscitation (v. 93) and deliverance (v. 94). The psalmist concludes (v. 96) that, "all things have their limit, only the commandment of Yahweh has an unlimited range of efficacy."²⁵

In such a rhetorical development it would at best be confusing and more likely defeating the psalmist's rhetorical aim to indicate that the agent or instrument by which God's word is established is the

²³Ron B. Allen, "עָמַד," *TIWOT*, 2:673.

²⁴The plural verb "they continue" (עָמַדוּ) refers to the whole of creation as is indicated by the use of "heavens" (v.89) and "earth" (v. 90) as well as by "all things" (הַכֹּל v. 91b). See also A.A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms* (Greenwood, S.C.: The Attie Press, 1972), 2:832; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 418; A.F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge: University Press, 1957), 719; Avrohom Chaim Feuer, *Tehillim* (New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1985), 1458-59; F. Delitzsch, *Psalms*, Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1973), 254-55; and Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 21 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), fn 91.a., 137.

²⁵Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 418.

“heavens.” The psalmist’s rhetorical aim is to establish the truth of God’s sovereignty in establishing all realms of creation and to reveal that those eternal truths are available (and necessary) to man’s daily living. As Allen notes, “The *lamed* strophe contrasts what stands with what perishes. The stable universe is a visible token of Yahweh’s faithfulness. The results of the divine word in its creative and sustaining role are seen in the ordered world, whose order is a homage to its Master.”²⁶

Conclusion

The suggestion that the preposition בְּ in Psalm 119:89 functions to indicate agency or instrumentality is entirely unsupported. Both alleged functions are inconsistent with any other OT occurrence of the preposition בְּ prefixed to the noun שָׁמַיִם or preceded by the verb נִצַּח . The view that the בְּ functions to indicate agency creates an historical fallacy of interpretation. There is no exegetical, linguistic, contextual, or historic reason to understand the function of the preposition בְּ as anything other than locative. Thus the psalmist under inspiration declares that God’s Word is established “in heaven” (KJV).

²⁶Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 143.