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A Grammatical and Theological Analysis of the *Hitpael* Form and the Tree Identification in Genesis 3:8

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Abstract

This article examines the theological significance of the reflexive verb form *hitpael* in Genesis 3:8 and investigates the identity of the tree mentioned as Adam and Eve's hiding place. The study explores how grammatical structures and narrative elements reflect the spiritual condition of fallen humanity. Employing qualitative methods that combine grammatical and narrative analysis of the Hebrew text, the study finds that the *hitpael* form in *vayyithabba*' denotes a deliberate, self-directed action motivated by shame and alienation. The singular use of the word "tree" (עֵץ) suggests it may refer to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, highlighting theological irony. This act of hiding symbolizes humanity's futile attempt to find refuge in the very object of disobedience, underlining the enduring need for divine grace and restoration.

Keywords: *Hitpael*, Genesis 3:8, Tree of the Knowledge, grammatical theology, sinful man.

INTRODUCTION

The story of the fall of man in Genesis 3 is one of the main pillars of Judeo-Christian theology, depicting the existential dimension of man after violating the divine command. One of the important parts of the event is the act of Adam and Eve who hid from the presence of God after realizing their nakedness (Genesis 3:8) because they violated God's command by eating from the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This act marks not only a moral violation, but also a psychological and spiritual response of man to sin. Theologians such as Bonhoeffer and Barth interpret this act as a form of rejection of divine judgment and a form of alienation from the relationship with God (glassaetcq, 2023). It is from here that the origin of evil and the consequences of disobedience emerge (Waite & Martin, 2005).

An exploration of the Hebrew verb "hitpael" in Genesis 3:8 reveals significant theological implications, particularly regarding shame and alienation. The reflexive nature of "hitpael" suggests a conscious act of self-reflection, indicating Adam and Eve's awareness of their disobedience and subsequent separation from God (Noonan, 2010). Furthermore, the single reference to "tree" in the context of their hiding place points specifically to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, symbolizing the profound consequences of their actions. This tree serves as a symbol of temptation and the resulting fall, in keeping with the ancient Near Eastern literary tradition of viewing gardens as sacred spaces (Levison, 2000). This perspective invites further discussion of the complexities of sin and redemption in biblical theology.

Linguistically, the verb form *hitpael* in Hebrew, as explained by Waltke and O'Connor (1990), generally indicates a reflexive, intensive, or reciprocal action, performed by the subject towards himself (Arad, 2005). In Genesis 3:8, the verb וַיִּתְחַבֵּא (vayyithabba', "and he hid himself") comes from the root חָבַא (h-b-', "to hide") in the *hitpael* form, indicating that the action was done consciously and had a deep psychological dimension.

The *hitpael* form often indicates an action performed by the subject upon himself, as seen in *vayyithabba*.' (Benton, 2009). This reflexivity is supported by semantic overlap with the *niphal* form, which also has reflexive and passive meanings (Baden, 2010). Some verbs in

hitpael, such as הִתְהַלֵּךְ (“to walk”), challenge the traditional reflexive interpretation, suggesting a wider semantic range that includes durative actions (Garr, 2022). This complexity is relevant to understanding the depth of Adam's actions in Genesis 3:8.

In addition to the grammatical aspects, this passage also contains a narrative problem regarding the identity of the hiding tree. The phrase “בְּתוֹךְ עֵץ הַגָּן” (betok ʿets ha-gan) uses the singular form 'ets (tree), not the plural form 'etsim (trees), which leaves open the possibility that the tree in question is a specific tree—most likely the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil itself (Bums, 1987; Eiselen, 1910; Holmstedt, 2011). This choice of words adds a layer of irony, since Adam is hiding behind the evidence of his disobedience. If this is true, then there is a profound theological irony: man is hiding from God behind the very object that is evidence of his transgression. This irony is reinforced by the reflexive nature of the hitpael form, which emphasizes Adam's conscious decision to hide (Noonan, 2010).

Reciprocal and Reflexive Constructions: The hitpael form is part of a wider system of reflexive and reciprocal constructions in Biblical Hebrew, which often involve complex semantic roles and argument structures (Jo, 2009; Siegal, 2024). This complexity is reflected in the nuanced interpretations of actions such as hiding, which have both literal and metaphorical meanings.

The Hebrew verbal system, including participles and staves, exhibits a “dual nature” that complicates a straightforward grammatical classification (Cook, 2008: 1–19). This typological perspective can inform the interpretation of verbs such as *vayyithabba'*, which combine nominal and verbal characteristics. This article formulates three main problems that are the focus of the study, namely: What is the grammatical and theological meaning of the verb form hitpael in Genesis 3:8? What is the identity of the tree that is referred to as the hiding place of Adam and Eve? How do these two aspects reflect the inner and spiritual condition of humans in facing sin? This study aims to integrate the linguistic analysis of hitpael with theological interpretation of the symbolism of the tree in the story of Genesis 3:8.

To answer the questions above, this study will be conducted through a grammatical and narrative approach to the Hebrew text of Genesis 3:8. Analysis is carried out on the morphological form of the verb hitpael and the syntactic structure of phrases related to the hiding place. After that, the author develops a theological reflection based on the results of the analysis, by comparing the views of Hebrew linguistic experts, classical Jewish interpretations, and Christian theological thinking on sin and human responses to it.

This study aims to uncover the theological dimensions of the reflexive form of hitpael in the act of human hiding, narratively identify the tree mentioned in Genesis 3:8, and interpret its significance in the context of human spirituality and inner being. The main focus is on how the grammatical form of hitpael reflects the human response to sin, especially in Genesis 3:8, and how the identity of the tree that becomes the hiding place of Adam and Eve reflects the inner condition of humans after sin. The form of hitpael (*vayyithabba'*) indicates a reflexive act, indicating that Adam and Eve's hiding is a self-directed response to their awareness of sin (Ellens, 1997)].

This study seeks to understand the deeper meaning behind the act of hiding as a spiritual and existential expression of fallen humans. The hitpael form in the verb וַיִּתְחַבֵּא

(vayyithabba') not only indicates physical hiding but also reflects a deeper spiritual and psychological distance between humans and God. This act is a reflection of shame, awareness of guilt, and fear of divine judgment, all of which are consequences of violating God's command. It serves as a physical manifestation of the spiritual state of Adam and Eve, depicting their attempt to escape divine scrutiny and the consequences of their actions (De Paula, 2013). Thus, the analysis of hitpa'el provides a deeper understanding of the inner mechanisms of human response to sin.

In addition, this study also explores the identity of the tree mentioned in Genesis 3:8. The phrase *בֵּתוֹךְ אֶץ הָאֵן* (betok' ets ha-gan) uses the singular form 'ets (tree), not the plural 'etsim (trees), indicating that the tree is a specific tree. Based on the storyline, this tree is most likely the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which symbolizes human transgression (Ellens, 1997).

Theological irony arises when man hides behind the object that is evidence of his disobedience, reflecting the human tendency to seek false protection behind the fruits of his own transgressions. The act of hiding can be seen as a universal human experience, reflecting the ongoing struggle with sin and the desire for reconciliation with the divine (Schroer, 2013).

Through an integrative approach between linguistics and theology, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the inner condition of sinful humans and their relationship with God. The act of hiding in Genesis 3:8 becomes a universal paradigm in human responses to sin: building distance, rejecting judgment, and trying to cover up mistakes without true repentance. On the other hand, the theological irony of hiding behind the Tree of Knowledge shows the fundamental need of humans for the restoration of their relationship with God through His grace and mercy.

The unique contribution of this article lies in the theological interpretation of the hitpa'el form as a human inner response to sin, which offers an integrative approach between linguistic analysis and biblical theology. Thus, this study not only provides new insights into the interpretation of Genesis 3:8 but is also relevant in the pastoral context and modern theological application.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach by combining philological analysis, narrative, and theological reflection to explore the meaning of the hitpa'el form in Genesis 3:8 and the identity of the tree where Adam and Eve hid. This approach was chosen because the complexity of the biblical text requires in-depth exploration from various perspectives, both linguistic, literary, and theological, to understand the dimensions of its meaning comprehensively.

The primary data are obtained from the Masoretic text of Genesis 3:8 in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS), which is the standard critical edition in Biblical Hebrew studies. The main focus is on the verb *וַיִּתְחַבֵּא* (vayyithabba') in the context of hitpa'el morphology and the phrase *בֵּתוֹךְ אֶץ הָאֵן* (betok' ets ha-gan).

Secondary data includes classical and modern exegetical literature, including rabbinic commentaries such as Rashi and Nahmanides, modern biblical commentaries such as Sarna,

Wenham, and Hamilton, and linguistic literature such as Waltke & O'Connor providing a framework for analyzing the morphology and semantics of hitpa'el forms, which are essential for interpreting the nuances of the text (Levison, 2000). This literature was selected based on its relevance to the morphological analysis, narrative structure, and theological implications of the text of Genesis 3:8.

The analysis process begins with an examination of the morphology and semantics of the hitpa'el form to understand the grammatical nuances in the context of the text. Next, a narrative analysis of the story structure of Genesis 2–3 is conducted, focusing on the use of the phrase **וַיִּתְּחַבֵּא אָדָם בְּעֵץ הַדְּרִי** and its relationship to major themes in the narrative. The analysis also includes a search of academic literature on tree symbolism in the Jewish and Christian traditions, including apocryphal and midrashic literature, to broaden the interpretative horizon.

Theological reflections are then developed based on the results of grammatical and narrative analysis. The act of hiding in the form of hitpa'el is interpreted as a post-sin spiritual and existential expression, reflecting the condition of humans alienated from God. The theological implications of the irony of the tree as a hiding place are also explored to understand the dynamics of human relations with God after the violation of His commandments.

To ensure the reliability of the findings, the results of the analysis were validated through comparison with the views of linguistic experts, classical interpretations, and modern theology. Alternative arguments were also considered to provide a more balanced perspective. These steps were taken systematically to ensure that the study not only produced in-depth interpretations but was also theologically and contextually relevant.

The justification for using this combined method lies in the need to understand the text of Genesis 3:8 holistically. Philological analysis is needed to reveal the linguistic structure of the Hebrew text, while narrative analysis helps to understand the literary and symbolic context of the Garden of Eden narrative. Theological reflection, on the other hand, is essential to connect the linguistic and narrative findings with relevant theological implications in the Judeo-Christian tradition. With this approach, this study aims to offer new insights into the inner response of humans to sin and the need for divine grace in the restoration of relationship with God.

This study also acknowledges limitations, particularly in terms of the scope of the secondary literature used and the focus on the Judeo-Christian perspective. The symbolic interpretation of the tree and its theological implications are restricted to this tradition, although brief references to Ancient Near Eastern mythology are included to provide a broader historical context (ISuria and Ming.D, 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Grammatical analysis of hitpa'el in Genesis 3:8, and its reflexive and intensive meanings

The hitpa'el form in Biblical Hebrew is one of seven verb patterns (binyanim) used to describe verbal actions. According to Waltke and O'Connor (1990), this form generally indicates three main types of actions: Reflexivity, which is an action performed by the subject

towards himself. Intensity, which is an action that is reinforced or performed with high intensity, and reciprocity, which is an action involving two parties acting towards each other (Bruce K. Waltke & M. O'Connor, 1990).

In the context of Genesis 3:8, the hitpael form of אָבָהוּ (vayyithabba' , "and he hid himself") indicates that the act of hiding is not only physical, but also inner and conscious. It reflects the complex human response to sin—an act that is personally directed and reflective. Why is it not written in the niph'al form? Although niph'al can also indicate reflexivity, hitpael is more intense and explicit in indicating a personally directed act. For example, if niph'al were used in this context, the act of hiding might seem more passive or unintentional. However, hitpael indicates that Adam and Eve were actively and consciously trying to escape. Or why is it not also written in the hifil form. The hifil form tends to indicate causal action (the subject causing something to happen to someone else). If hifil were used, this would change the meaning of the narrative, as it would indicate that Adam and Eve were causing someone else to hide. However, hitpael insists that this act was directed entirely toward themselves (Baden, 2010).

The verb vayyithabba' comes from the root אָבָהוּ (h-b-'), which basically means "to hide." In the hitpael form, it has a richer semantic dimension than other forms such as niph'al. The hitpael form indicates that Adam and Eve actively and consciously hid themselves. This was not an impulsive or involuntary reaction, but a personally directed and introspective action (Velleman, 2001). They became aware of their new condition after the fall—shame, nakedness, and fear of divine judgment. The intense nature of hitpael suggests that this act of hiding was done with utmost effort. Adam and Eve were not only trying to escape physically from God's presence, but they were also trying to "hide" their moral and spiritual identities that had been damaged by their transgression of God's command. Their actions reflect a desire to escape the consequences of their sin, indicating a deep internal struggle (Kurth & Nelson, 2021; Thomason, 2018). The interpretation of hitpael in this context can be expanded to include psychological aspects. The act of hiding reflects the defense mechanism of post-sinful humans: they try to escape from the reality of their guilt by creating a "distance" between themselves and God. This is in line with the theological view of sin as a profound relational disorder (Hanscombe, 2012; Lewis, 2003).

The hitpael form emphasizes that the act of hiding is a deep inner response. It reflects human awareness of their fallen condition—shame, fear, and alienation from God. In this sense, the hitpael becomes a universal symbol for how humans react to the consequences of sin (Biddle, 2006).

There is a strong theological irony in the use of hitpael. Humans, who try to hide from God, are actually demonstrating their weakness and inability to truly escape from His presence. This dynamic underscores the need for divine grace, for sin not only disrupts the relationship with God but also highlights the urgent need for reconciliation (Weaver, 2013).

The act of hiding in hitpael becomes a universal paradigm for the human response to sin: distancing oneself, rejecting judgment, and attempting to cover up one's guilt without true repentance. In the contemporary pastoral context, individuals often seek to escape guilt

rather than confront it through confession, reflecting a continuing struggle with sin (Vicens, 2021).

The identity of the tree as the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and its theological irony

In Genesis 3:8, the phrase *בְּתוֹךְ עֵץ הַגָּן* (*betok ʿets ha-gan*, "among the trees of the garden") uses the singular 'ets (trees), not the plural 'etsim (trees) (Tonstad, 2008). This suggests that the tree in question was a specific tree, not just any tree in the Garden of Eden. Since Adam and Eve hid after eating from the Tree of Knowledge, it makes sense that this was the tree where they hid. The narrative creates a direct connection between their transgression and the location of their hiding place, adding a profound symbolic dimension (Grimes, 2013).

The Tree of Knowledge is not only a physical object, but also has theological significance. This tree represents a turning point in humanity's relationship with God, when humans chose to define good and evil autonomously, rather than relying on divine wisdom (Eiselen, 1910). The use of the singular form 'ets emphasizes that this tree is central to the narrative, drawing the reader's attention to the moral and spiritual consequences of the act of disobedience.

In this tradition, the Tree of Knowledge is often interpreted as an ambivalent symbol—offering knowledge but also bringing downfall. It is a reminder of the complexity of humanity's relationship with God, where knowledge without obedience can lead to destruction (Duda, 2011).

Trees in Ancient Near Eastern mythology often symbolized fertility, wisdom, or even divine power (Bauks, 2012). In this context, the Tree of Knowledge can be seen as a boundary between the human and divine worlds, which humans transgress.

A theological reflection on sin, shame, and false protection

Theological reflections on sin and false refuge highlight the human tendency to seek refuge in sin rather than in God, a concept rooted in the Christian understanding of the Fall. This act of hiding, driven by shame and fear, is seen as a misguided spiritual defense mechanism. The Tree of Knowledge, as an ambivalent symbol, represents both transgression and false refuge, depicting post-Fall humanity's search for salvation without true repentance. This dynamic is explored through a variety of theological perspectives, emphasizing the relational disruption between humanity and God caused by sin and the subsequent need for divine grace for restoration.

Theological Reflections: Sin, Shame, and False Protection

Sin is essentially a disruption of the proper relationship between man and God, leading to spiritual death and separation from divine grace (Fr.Dr., 2020; Weaver, 2013). The concept of sin necessitates the coming of Jesus Christ, who offers salvation and deliverance, which highlights the Christian belief in the need for divine intervention to restore broken relationships (Fr.Dr., 2020). Sin is not simply a moral failing, but a theological term that places wrongdoing in the context of one's relationship with God, emphasizing its relational and moral dimensions. The Role of Shame in Sin and False Protection Shame is an important

factor in the concealment of sin, acting as both an obstacle and an opportunity for spiritual growth (Christoffersen, 2021). Shame involves hiding and isolating oneself, which can lead to a false sense of protection and hinder true repentance (Jin-song, 2008). Pastoral theology explores the dual nature of shame, showing that while it can be a barrier, it also has the potential to foster moral and spiritual development (Christoffersen, 2021).

The use of the hitpael form in the word אָבָהוּ (vayyithabba' , "and he hid himself") indicates that this act was a conscious and reflexive choice. This emphasizes that sin is not just an external act, but also an internal transformation that affects how humans view themselves and their relationship with God. Sin changes humans' paradigms of identity, freedom, and responsibility, which is reflected in their shame and fear.

Shame often leads to avoidance behavior, where individuals hide their mistakes rather than confront them, as noted by Klinker—De Klerck, who emphasizes that shame cultures prioritize honor and shame, affecting one's relationship with God (Myriam Klinker—De Klerck, 2023)

Bavinck highlights that shame arises from self-judgment, suggesting that it can hinder spiritual growth if not properly addressed (Bavavinck, 2023). Instead, shame can encourage self-reflection and a desire for reconciliation with God, serving as a starting point for repentance.

Adam and Eve's hiding behind the Tree of Knowledge reflects the human tendency to seek false refuge in the fruits of their own transgressions. The Tree of Knowledge, which originally symbolized human ambition to be like God (Gen. 3:5), now becomes a false refuge. This is a profound theological irony: humans try to escape the consequences of sin by using a symbol of sin itself.

This perspective is reinforced by Levison's (2000) interpretation, which highlights that the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life are not merely physical entities, but also have significant symbolic meanings. The Tree of Knowledge symbolizes man's decision to define good and evil autonomously, while the Tree of Life symbolizes a perfect relationship with God. By choosing the Tree of Knowledge, man loses access to the Tree of Life, reflecting the loss of divine grace and eternal fellowship with God (Otto, 2024). The act of eating from the Tree of Knowledge results in death and labor, not as punishment but as a natural consequence of violating divine boundaries (Kelly, 2024).

Although the act of hiding reflects divine judgment against sin, the Genesis 3:8 narrative also shows God's initiative to seek out the lost humans. The phrase "the Lord God was walking in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen. 3:8) indicates that God did not abandon the humans in their isolation but came to restore the broken relationship. This initiative is a reflection of divine grace, which offers hope of restoration despite the immediate consequences of sin.

God's provision of clothing made of animal skins (Gen. 3:21) also symbolizes a greater act of grace. This act shows that God not only punishes humans for their sin but also provides a solution to cover their vulnerability and restore their dignity. From a Christian theological perspective, this is an eschatological picture of redemption through Jesus Christ,

which offers a full restoration of humanity's relationship with God. This perspective invites a broader understanding of human experience in relation to divine grace.

This theological reflection has important implications in the modern pastoral context:

The act of hiding in Genesis 3:8 shows that humans tend to cover up their mistakes rather than confess their sins. In a pastoral context, this emphasizes the importance of creating a safe space for individuals to admit their guilt without fear or shame. Pastoral care should foster an environment where individuals feel safe to admit their mistakes without fear of judgment, as shame can hinder healing (Christoffersen, 2021).

This narrative invites believers to rely on God's grace rather than seeking false refuge in human efforts. This is relevant in preaching and pastoral counseling to emphasize that only through genuine repentance and acceptance of God's grace can people find restoration. This dependence is essential in pastoral counseling to facilitate genuine repentance (Christoffersen, 2021). Confessing sin can lead to forgiveness and personal growth, transforming guilt into a path to healing (Halstead, 2010). This story also shows that sin can be the starting point for moral and spiritual transformation if it is directed towards repentance. In theological education, this can be used to teach the importance of the process of sanctification through faith and obedience to God.

This story illustrates that sin can initiate moral and spiritual transformation when directed toward repentance, emphasizing the process of sanctification in theological education (Townsen, 2002). Pastoral counselors must balance their theological commitments with clinical practice, ensuring that faith informs their therapeutic approach (Townsen, 2002).

The act of hiding in Genesis 3:8 is a universal paradigm of human response to sin: Humans tend to create distance between themselves and God in response to guilt. The act of hiding reflects a rejection of divine judgment, which is often perceived as a threat. Humans try to cover up their guilt in ineffective ways, such as seeking false protection.

CONCLUSION

The study of Genesis 3:8 through grammatical and narrative approaches shows that Adam and Eve's hiding has a deep theological meaning and cannot be reduced to a mere physical reaction to transgression. The use of the verb hitpael in the word וַיִּתְחַבֵּב (vayyithabba') reveals a reflexive aspect that shows that the hiding is a conscious and active choice of sinful humans to withdraw from the presence of God, as a result of shame, awareness of guilt, and fear of divine judgment. Furthermore, the phrase בְּתוֹךְ עֵץ הַגָּן (betok'ets ha-gan) suggests the possibility that the tree in which Adam and Eve hid was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil itself. This interpretation contains a theological irony: man tries to hide himself from God by using the symbol of his own transgression as a place of refuge. This shows the tendency of post-sinful man to seek false protection in the fruits of his transgression, rather than turning to God. Thus, the act of hiding in Genesis 3:8 reflects the alienated inner condition of human beings, and at the same time illustrates the fundamental human need for a restored relationship with God through grace. This hiding becomes a universal paradigm in the human response to sin: distancing oneself, rejecting judgment, and trying to cover up

one's guilt without true repentance. "The unique contribution of this article is the theological interpretation of the Hitpa'el form as an inner human response to sin, offering an integrative approach between linguistics and biblical theology."

Suggestion

Based on the results of this study, several suggestions that can be put forward are as follows:

For Bible interpreters, it is advisable to pay more attention to the morphological and structural aspects of the original language in interpreting the text, because grammatical elements such as hitpa'el can open up a richer and more contextual theological understanding.

For preachers and pastoral ministers, History of Genesis 3:8 can be used as material for pastoral reflection regarding human defense mechanisms against guilt and how the Gospel offers a path to recovery through recognition and acceptance of God's grace.

For advanced researchers, it is advisable to further explore the use of the hitpa'el form in other parts of the Bible that relate to human responses to God, as well as to explore the symbolic meaning of trees in apocryphal, midrashic, or intertestamental literature to broaden symbolic and typological insights in biblical theology.

For theological education, the results of this study can be used to strengthen the study of Biblical Hebrew linguistics and narrative interpretation as an interdisciplinary approach that brings together grammar, narrative, and theology in a complete and relevant reading framework.

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