

MI ׀: A Word Study

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MI ׀ is a difficult Hebrew word for an English speaking person to translate. Often it is rendered “forever.” While this is sometimes an appropriate translation, it is far from the only meaning of the word. In fact, it is not even the basic meaning of the word. In order to avoid confusion, the exegete must realize that MI ׀ has other meanings as well. The difficulties of the word can be alleviated by a study of the basic meaning of the word.

The root meaning of MI ׀ is “long duration, antiquity, futurity” (BDB 761).¹ Another way of defining the word is “most distant times,” which can refer to the most distant past as well as the future (TWOT 672).² When the exegete begins with this sense of the word and lets context define the long duration, the difficulties with MI ׀ are lessened.

Oftentimes MI ׀ is used to refer to past time. This may be the time of one’s elders, though this is merely a conjecture. TWOT cites only Deuteronomy 32:7 and Job 22:15 to support this meaning; neither one of these passages is conclusive in establishing that usage (672). In Proverbs 22:28 & 23:10 it points back somewhat farther, in reference to boundary stones established by one’s forefathers. In Isaiah 61:4 it refers to the time period before the exile, when Isaiah writes that the people will rebuild the ancient ruins. In Isaiah 63:9,11 it refers back to the days of the exodus. In Genesis 6:4, MI ׀ is used to denote the pre-flood days. In all of these instances MI ׀ refers to time in the past, yet never a limitless time in the past. Rather, it is used to denote a time that is remote from the experience of the one speaking. This usage fits under both of the definitions listed above: it is a long duration of time in the past or most distant times in the past. Note that in these instances MI ׀ does not mean forever.

MI ׀ is used more often to refer to future times. In this usage the basic sense of the word is an indefinite futurity (BDB). The “most distant times” definition in reference to coming events takes on a shade close to perpetuity (TWOT). While this may and often does refer to eternity, this is not always the case and should not be assumed before the context is taken into account.

Deuteronomy 15:17 is one example. This passage speaks of making another man one’s MI ׀ dbׁe This man would be a slave into the most remote times, into perpetuity. In I Kings 1:31 Bathsheba wishes that King David might live MI ׀ I ; In

¹ BDB stands for *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 1906.

² TWOT stands for *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*; Harris, Archer, Waltke, 1980.

both of these instances there will be an end to the time period denoted by **MI ׀**. The slave will only be a slave so long as he lives. And despite Bathsheba's wish, King David also died. Yet in each case the meaning of an indefinite futurity fits well. As humans, the authors and speakers of these words did not know precisely when the time period in question would come to an end. Specifically, the time period in these instances is the life span of the individuals mentioned. By using **MI ׀** the authors could state that the conditions would be in effect indefinitely—until the person died, whenever that might be.

MI ׀ can also refer to the continuous existence of things. In Ecclesiastes 1:4 it is written that the earth will stand **MI ׀ I**; I Samuel 2:30 is an interesting example. Here God declares that he had promised that Eli's house and his father's house would minister **MI ׀ -d** (But now he would cut short the strength of his family because he did not honor God. The references later in the chapter to a faithful priest and Eli's descendants begging him for a priestly office show that this promise was a reference to ministering in the Old Testament priesthood (v. 35-36). In these instances **MI ׀** is used to denote a longer time period than one's lifetime. However, while the time period will be longer, it is not an eternity. Scripture plainly teaches that the world will come to an end someday. The Old Testament priesthood was merely a shadow of what was to come. It was not meant to last forever, but to end when Christ came. Therefore God's promise that Eli's house would minister before him **MI ׀ -d** (As a promise that they would minister for an indefinite time period, not an eternal one. They would minister until the Old Testament covenant with its worship practices would be replaced, whenever that might be. Again, the basic meanings of long duration or remotest times fit well in this context, yet the word does not mean forever.

In many cases **MI ׀** is used to describe God or his attributes. In these cases the long duration does refer to eternity. For instance, in Genesis 21:33 Abraham calls god **mi ׀ I**) For eternal God. In Jeremiah 31:3 the word is used to describe an everlasting love. In Isaiah 9:6 **MI ׀ -d** (A describes the reign of the Messiah. In these instances the word does take on the sense of eternal, but this meaning comes from the root meaning of long duration; it is not the basic sense of the word. The context determines that in these cases **MI ׀** means eternity.

The syntax of **MI ׀** also shows that its root meaning is not eternity. The word is never used independently. It is either the object of a preposition denoting direction, an adverbial accusative of direction or as the genitive of a construct (TWOT 672). The word is never used absolutely, but is always dependent on something else. The context that **MI ׀** is dependent on establishes the meaning of the word in each verse. As the genitive of a construct, as in **mi ׀ I**) it is best rendered by an adjective in English. Yet the parallel construction **MI ׀ dbē** from Deuteronomy 15:17 shows that when it is in a construct chain it is not always rendered "eternal." In these instances it is still necessary to begin with the root meaning of the word and let context define the meaning in the verse.

Hebrew grammar will sometimes intensify **MI ׀** when it does mean eternity. In Isaiah 45:17 the plural, **MymI ׀** is used to define an everlasting salvation. Another way of intensifying **MI ׀** is to double the word. Psalm 90:2 is one example of this, using the phrase **MI ׀ -d (MI ׀ māo** to describe God's eternal nature.

MI ׀ has a wide range of meanings. While this presents a difficulty for the English translator, who does not have a comparable word in English, the difficulty is alleviated if the translator begins with the basic meaning of the word, then uses context to define the long duration or the remotest times. Perhaps the basic meaning given by Prof. Nass³ to his Hebrew students is the best place to start. He advised the student to begin with the definition “unbounded time” and use context to nail down the specific nuance in a given passage.

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