



INTRODUCTION TO SYNTACTICAL ANALYSIS

D. MIN. OT SEMINAR

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Distinctions Between the Usage of the “Perfect” and “Imperfect”

One of the most misunderstood and debated areas of biblical (or, classical) Hebrew grammar involves the Hebrew verb system. Verb identification as “perfect” and “imperfect” are unfortunate. Many Hebraists prefer to refer to these two verb forms as simply *qatal* and *yiqtol* (transliterations of the basic ground forms) or as “suffix conjugation” and “prefix conjugation.”

Deciding what to call these two categories of verbs, however, comprises a very small matter compared to defining their distinctive usages or meanings. In turn, how one defines the distinctions has a great deal to do with how these verbs affect one’s translation and interpretation of the text of the Hebrew Bible.

Let’s begin with a basic Hebrew grammar tool and progress through the more technical resources in a discussion of the nature of these two verb forms. First, Gary A. Long, in *Grammatical Concepts 101 for Biblical Hebrew*, provides the following description for the “perfective aspect” (= the suffix conjugation or *qatal*):

The perfective aspect, or perfectivity, views *a situation from the outside, as whole and complete.*¹

He goes on to further describe the perfective by explaining that it

expresses the *totality* of the situation, without dividing up its internal temporal structure. The *whole* situation is presented as an undivided

¹ Gary A. Long, *Grammatical Concepts 101 for Biblical Hebrew: Learning Biblical Hebrew Grammatical Concepts through English Grammar* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 92 (all emphases are Long’s own).

whole. The beginning, middle, and end are rolled up into one. ... it makes no attempt to divide the situation into various phases.²

In contrast, consider Long's description of the "imperfective aspect" (= the prefix conjugation or *yiqtol*):

The imperfective aspect, or imperfectivity, views *a situation from the inside*. It considers the internal temporal structure of a situation.³

In any given context imperfectivity might involve such grammatical concepts as repeated or habitual actions, actions in progress, and completed actions without a view to result.⁴ In other words, in contrast to the suffix conjugation, the prefix conjugation might identify a situation with regard to a particular phase of the action (its beginning [= inceptive], middle [= durative], or end [= culminative]), rather than looking at it as a totality.

Long's distinctions are in general agreement with the more technical discussions of Joüon and Muraoka. They indicate that one of the primary characteristics of the suffix conjugation is that its aspect refers to action that is "unique or instantaneous."⁵ In fact, they remind readers that "The *unity* of the action can, and sometimes must, be emphasised in our languages."⁶ In other words, an accurate understanding of the suffix conjugation should affect the translation of the Hebrew into other languages (English, French, and Japanese being perhaps foremost in Muraoka's mind). It is instructive to consider some of their examples:

Judges 19:30, כָּזָאת ... לֹא־נְהִי־תָהּ = "such a thing has *never* (*not even once*) been done"

Isaiah 66:8, מִי־שָׁמַע כָּזָאת = "who has *ever* heard?"

In addition, Joüon and Muraoka point out that, by the employment of the suffix conjugation, "all the actions of a series or of a category can be considered in a global way . . . ; thus one can explain the use of qatal in certain cases, especially for truths of experience: שָׁמְרוּ Jer 8.7 *they observe* (after יָדְעָה *it knows*); .."⁷

One must be aware, however, that Joüon and Muraoka identify a number of exceptions to this simplified view of the suffix conjugation.⁸ As with any element of biblical Hebrew grammar, the potential for exceptions is always present. In some cases, however, it is actually a matter of one's interpretation being imposed upon the grammar in order to find an exception. For example, Muraoka points to Job 4:3 (יָסַרְתָּ רַבִּים) *you have instructed many*) as an example of the suffix conjugation indicating multiple actions.⁹ While that is a possible explanation, it seems to be more consistent to view it as

² Ibid., 93 (emphasis is Long's).

³ Ibid., 94 (emphases are Long's).

⁴ Ibid., 95.

⁵ Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, trans. and rev. by T. Muraoka, Subsidia Biblica 14/I-II (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1996), §112d.

⁶ Ibid. (emphasis is Joüon and Muraoka's).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Joüon and Muraoka tend to categorize *qatal* as a past tense and *yiqtol* as a future tense (§§112f, h, 113a). This tense definition of the Hebrew verb forms is unconvincing and weak.

⁹ Ibid., §112d note 3.

a statement looking at the totality of the situation rather than looking at frequency. Identifications of verb usages are not necessarily a scientific, objective process. Such identifications result from an individual interpreter's view of the context as colored by his or her own presuppositions. Therefore, the careful exegete must consider the various identifications or classifications of usage as a list of options that might be considered in any given situation. By the process of elimination the exegete works through the options to locate the one or more of them that seem to best fit the particular context.

For the *yiqtol* (prefix conjugation) Joüon and Muraoka state that the aspect may be “unique or repeated, instantaneous or durative.”¹⁰ In their discussion of stative verbs they come closest to the kind of values attributed to *qatal* and *yiqtol* that were observed by Long. The suffix conjugation stative verb appears to merit a translation employing a form of the verb *be* while Joüon and Muraoka present the prefix conjugation overwhelmingly with a translation employing a form of the verb *become*.¹¹ In other words, a stative verb represents a state of *being* (a static stative) in the suffix conjugation, but a state of *becoming* (a dynamic stative) in the prefix conjugation.¹²

Waltke and O'Connor provide a very thorough discussion of the history of the treatment of Hebrew verbs.¹³ They conclude that “the basic structure of the system, though it allows for time reference, is aspectual.”¹⁴ An interesting result of their detailed analysis is that they offer a view of the *yiqtol* that allows it to be universal in nature:

it may signify more than a blending of tense and aspect or pure tense; it may also signify either real or unreal moods — the indicative as well as degrees of dubiety and volition. In short: a form that can signify any time, any mood, and imperfective aspect (but not perfective) is not imperfective but non-perfective, “a more than opposite” of the suffix conjugation. (The term “aorist,” meaning without limits or boundaries, is not inappropriate.)¹⁵

Association of the *yiqtol* with the Greek aorist makes a good deal of sense. And, just as the Greek aorist suffered extensive abuse due to grammarians' long misunderstanding,¹⁶ so, too, the *yiqtol* often suffers from a similar lack of understanding.

For the suffix conjugation Waltke and O'Connor focus on the fact that “the perfective does not emphasize the **completedness** of a situation. Earlier researchers commonly erred in characterizing the suffix conjugation as indicating **completed** action, instead of indicating a *complete* situation.”¹⁷ It behooves the careful exegete to be equally

¹⁰ Ibid., §113b.

¹¹ Ibid., §113p.

¹² E.g., the *qatal* of הָיָה in Gen 1:2 (הָיָה) is a static stative: “was.” However, the *yiqtol* of in Gen 1:3 (יָהִי) is a dynamic stative: “become” or “come to be” or “happen.” Other stative verbs, such as אָרַם, should be translated in the same manner: *qatal* אָרַם (Gen 18:15) = “she was afraid” or “she feared”; but *yiqtol* אָרַם (Exod 9:30) = “you have not yet become afraid” or אָרַם (Gen 3:10) = “so I became fearful” or “became afraid.”

¹³ Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), §§29.2–29.6.

¹⁴ Ibid., §29.6a.

¹⁵ Ibid., §29.6e.

¹⁶ Cf. Frank Stagg, “The Abused Aorist,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91, no. 2 (June 1972): 222–31.

¹⁷ Ibid., §30.1d (italic emphasis is theirs; bold emphasis is mine).

distinct and accurate when it comes to the terms “**completed**” (= accomplished, finished, past) and “**complete**” (= whole). These terms are not identical in meaning when discussing the grammar of Hebrew verbs.

The inherently complex nature of language forms a major factor when one attempts to derive a consistent definition for the *qatal* and *yiqtol* forms of the Hebrew verb. This shows up in Waltke and O’Connor’s observation that

The non-perfective prefix conjugation has two major values: to signify either an imperfective situation in past and present time, or a dependent situation. In the latter use, the situation may be dependent on the speaker, the subject, or another situation.¹⁸

Obviously, context is the 500-pound gorilla in the exegesis of the Hebrew text. Context will consistently be the defining and refining factor if the exegete is sufficiently careful and desirous of as objective an interpretation as possible. In each situation the exegete must first identify the grammar and then ask, “So what? What is the exegetical significance of this form in this passage?” The task of exegesis can easily fall victim to either the extreme of over-simplification or the extreme of over-complexification, but the exercise must be pursued nonetheless.

How does all of this affect exegesis? Take Genesis 1:5 as an example:

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאוֹר יוֹם וּלְחֹשֶׁךְ לַיְלָה וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד:

What is the difference between the *wayyiqtol*¹⁹ וַיִּקְרָא (which is still a prefix conjugation, note the *yiqtol* in its name) and the suffix conjugation וַיִּקְרָא? The prefix conjugation views the situation of God naming the light as that which is either initiated, progressing, completed (without a view to the result), or some other factor internal to the action. “Then God named the light ‘Day’” is an accurate enough translation. Interpretatively, however, the exegete must be aware of the fact that Moses was not making an overall descriptive statement that views the totality of the situation. However, the latter verb, being a suffix conjugation, does look at the totality of the situation without regard to any internal progress of action.

What does this mean? How does it affect the exegete? The suffix conjugation is used in order to distinguish its action from the sequential narrative framework of *wayyiqtol* verbs. In order to interrupt the chain smoothly, the object (וּלְחֹשֶׁךְ) is placed first (a non-emphatic use since it is merely interrupting the chain and producing a disjunctive clause). By looking at the totality of the situation, the second act of naming of the darkness is not made a separate sequential act to the naming of the light. This sequence of verb forms in this kind of syntactical structure is a common Hebrew way of making certain that the reader does not attempt to understand two sequential acts, but only one act with two parts without regard to any sequential concept. It does not matter which was named first or even if the two were named separately. Therefore, any expositor

¹⁸ Ibid., §31.1.2a.

¹⁹ Hebrew students too often erroneously associate the name *wayyiqtol* with just the *waw* conjunction. *Wayyiqtol* is the name for the verb form, not the conjunction. The *way-* portion of the name is the conjunction; but the *-yiqtol* portion is the verb. This is equally true of the *w^eqatal* verb form.

attempting to make some preaching point of the order of divine naming here is in direct conflict with the actual grammar of the text.

One more example (from Psalm 1:1–2) should help to make these points more lucid:

אֲשֶׁר־יֵאָמֵר אֲשֶׁר לֹא הִלְךְ בְּעֵצַת רְשָׁעִים וּבְדַרְךְ חַטָּאִים לֹא עָמַד וּבְמוֹשֵׁב
לְצִיִּים לֹא יִשָּׁב: ² כִּי אִם בְּתוֹרַת יְהוָה חָפְצוֹ וּבְתוֹרַתוֹ יִהְיֶה יוֹמָם וּלְיָלֵלָה:

Why did the psalmist choose to employ the suffix conjugation for the three negated verbs in verse 1 while employing the prefix conjugation for the verb in verse 2? The suffix conjugation verbs of verse 1 (לֹא הִלְךְ, לֹא עָמַד, and לֹא יִשָּׁב) were intended to make the reader view the situation as a totality without regard to any phases. This particular insight is consistent with and confirmed by the Masoretic accents. On the other hand, the prefix conjugation verb in verse 2 does draw the reader's attention to the internal nature of the action rather than looking at it from the outside as a whole. Confirmation comes in the adverbs that follow and modify יִהְיֶה. This action is viewed as either habitual, repetitive, or continual: the godly individual will "habitually (*or* repeatedly *or* continually) meditate day and night." Note how the context is consistent with the identified usage. Biblical Hebrew writers and speakers selected their verb forms on the basis of the context in which each verb form was employed. To do otherwise would create a dissonance for the reader or hearer. In some cases, such dissonance was purposefully utilized for emphasis or other literary effect.

Elements of Hebrew Grammar That Are Exegetically and Expositionally Significant

The following list of exegetically and expositionally significant grammatical elements in the Hebrew Bible are those to which the exegete must give attention even in the most cursory approach to the text. These elements are most often the carriers of significant meaning. They must not be ignored. Neglecting their significance can result in misrepresentation of what the text says.

For each of these elements a brief description is presented and then a listing of the most beneficial resources dealing with that element. In some cases (e.g., the cognate infinitive absolute) major Hebraists disagree on the nature of the meaning represented by the grammatical element. However, such disagreement does not lessen the exegetical and expositional significance of that element's use. It merely means that the exegete must be more cautious and careful in how he supports the ultimate result. Remember, the ultimate factor is context. Context can diminish the normal impact of an element on meaning or it can enhance the impact. In a dialogue such matters may have turned on a gesture or vocal emphasis (tone). On the written page, however, such gestures and tones are rarely visible.

1. *Wayyiqtol* and *W^eqatal*

In biblical Hebrew these two forms are primarily found in narrative and prophetic literature, respectively. *Wayyiqtol*, whose dominance in narrative is undisputed, focuses on **sequence of action** and is thus best termed a **consecutive imperfect**. *W^eqatal*, whose domain is that of prophetic literature, focuses on the **logical relationship** of actions and concepts. It is better classified as a **correlative perfect**.

Chisholm,²⁰ 94–103, 119–23, 128–33
GBHS,²¹ §§3.5.1, 3.5.2, and 3.5.4
J-M,²² §§118–120
HBI,²³ §§2.2.1a and 2.2.3
IBHS,²⁴ §§32–33
Gibson,²⁵ §§69–83
GKC,²⁶ §§111–112
Long,²⁷ 162–76

²⁰ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998).

²¹ Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²² Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, trans. and rev. by T. Muraoka, *Subsidia Biblica* 14/I–II (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1996).

²³ Frederic Clarke Putnam, *Hebrew Bible Insert: A Student's Guide to the Syntax of Biblical Hebrew* (Ridley Park, PA: Stylus Publishing, 1996).

²⁴ Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990).

²⁵ J. C. L. Gibson, *Davidson's Introductory Hebrew Grammar — Syntax*, 4th ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).

²⁶ E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 2nd English ed., trans. and rev. by A. E. Cowley (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1910).

2. Disjunctive Clause

Clauses or sentences commencing with the conjunction *waw* + non-verb are often called disjunctive clauses. Generally speaking, they can be divided into those that are adversative (expressing contrast, *but*) and those that are explanatory. The latter provide background information that is sometimes best treated as parenthetical material (supplemental or circumstantial information) in the text, but might also be utilized to introduce a new section in the text (e.g., Gen 3:1), or to conclude a narrative or scene (e.g., Judg 16:31). As we've seen in the discussion of *wayyiqtol* in Genesis 1:5, the disjunctive clause can also provide description of a synchronic (simultaneous) action.

Chisholm, 124–28
J-M, §172a
HBI, §3.2.2
IBHS, §39.2.3

3. Macrosyntactic וַיִּהְיֶה and וַיְהִי

When either of these two Hebrew verb forms initiates a context, they should be examined for macrosyntactic implications. In other words, they are markers introducing a specialized section of the discourse and sometimes will not even be translatable (e.g., 1 Sam 16:6). In such cases, they point to a significant break in the discourse and enable the translator or interpreter to properly outline the text.

Chisholm, 120
J-M, §118n
HBI, §§2.2.3b and 3.2.1e
IBHS
GKC, §§111f-h and 112y-z

4. Modal Verbs (Imperative, Jussive, Cohortative)

Modal verbs are verbs expressing moods other than the indicative (mood of reality). The exegetical significance of such verbs is that they set the tone of a discourse with regard to reality-irreality or emotive qualities. Great care must be taken to allow the context to be the ultimate determining factor since many modal functions are unmarked by any specialized forms.

Chisholm, 103–12
GBHS, §3.3
J-M, §§114, 116, and 163

²⁷ Gary A. Long, *Grammatical Concepts 101 for Biblical Hebrew: Learning Biblical Hebrew Grammatical Concepts through English Grammar* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002).

HBI, §2.2.4
IBHS, §§30.5.4, 31.4, 31.5, and 34
Gibson, §§86–87
GKC, §§108–110
Long, 99–115

5. Participle of the Imminent Future

This construction used to be called the *futurum instans*, or instantaneous/immediate future. When it occurs, it speaks of something “about to” happen—on the verge of happening. Its full form is normally הַיָּהוּה + pronoun (or pronominal suffix) + participle. It does not always occur in its full form, however, and sometimes can be identified only by the context.

Chisholm, 67–68
GBHS, §3.4.3b.3
J-M, §121e
HBI, §3.3.3b
IBHS, §37.6f
GKC, §116p

6. Participial Usage

Two very special functions of the participle are of great exegetical significance: continuous action and characteristic action. *That horse is eating hay* and *the horse eats hay* illustrate the difference in meaning between the two usages. As with many grammatical elements, the context alone confirms which usage/meaning was intended by the writer.

Chisholm, 67–70
GBHS, §3.4.3
J-M, §121
HBI, §2.2.5
IBHS, §37
Gibson, §§110–113
GKC, §116
Long, 73–79

7. Cognate Infinitive Absolute

This grammatical element is what I have often termed the “CIA twins”: the prepositive intensive cognate infinitive absolute (PI CIA; e.g., Gen 2:17, מוֹת תָּמוּת) and the postpositive continuative cognate infinitive absolute (PC CIA; e.g., Num 24:10, בְּרַכָּה בְּרַכָּה). “Prepositive” refers to the infinitive absolute coming before the finite form of the same verb root. “Postpositive” refers to the infinitive absolute

following the finite form of the same verb root. The exact nature of these two constructions' meanings has been a topic of debate. However, there is much to the view that PI CIA is an emphatic or intensive representation of the verbal action or state while PC CIA expresses a continual or repetitive action or state.

Chisholm, 77
GBHS, §3.4.2b
J-M, §123*d-q*
HBI, §2.2.7a
IBHS, §35.3.1 (Absolute Complement)
Gibson, §101
GKC, §113*l-x*

8. Infinitive Construct

So wide-ranging are the uses of this element of Hebrew grammar that a book could be written on it alone. Even though it is exceedingly complex and has extensive usage in the Hebrew Bible, the student of biblical Hebrew must seek to understand all he can about it. Misunderstanding can lead easily to mistranslation and misinterpretation resulting in misleading exposition. Part of the difficulty is that this form of the Hebrew verb can behave as noun, adjective, or verb and has varying meanings depending upon prepositions attached to it. One example is the highly frequent form לְאָמַר, which should only rarely be translated.

Chisholm, 77–78
GBHS, §3.4.1
J-M, §124
HBI, §2.2.6
IBHS, §36
Gibson, §§104–109, 119–130
GKC, §114

9. Miscellaneous Macrosyntactical Particles (e.g. הִנֵּה, וְעַתָּה, אִם, כֹּה, לְכֵן)

Rarely does a grammar take the time to identify and discuss the usage of the many particles that have macrosyntactic functions. The student is left to look them up one by one in the lexicon or in the grammars' indexes. They ought not to be neglected, however. Without a proper understanding of these particles and their usage, it is as though the reader of the Hebrew Bible had been denied stereoscopic and color vision.

Chisholm, 133
GBHS, §§4.2, 4.3, and 4.5
HBI, §3.3
IBHS, §§39.3.1, 39.3.2, 39.3.4, and 39.3.5

Gibson, §§54, 115–116, and 144

10. Extraposition (Nominative Absolute)

Many students of biblical Hebrew have already taken courses of study in biblical Greek. Therefore, the terms “accusative absolute,” “nominative absolute,” and “genitive absolute” should already be familiar. These constructions consist of nouns that fit outside (thus *extraposition*) the sentence, apparently having no effect on the sentence (e.g., Gen 3:12, הַאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר נִתְּתָה עִמָּדִי הִוא נִתְּנָה לִי). Although the sentence would still say the same thing and have all of its grammatical elements intact if this word was removed, emphasis would be adversely affected.

Chisholm, 61
Gibson, §§149–151
GBHS, §2.1.4
J-M, §156
HBI, §3.3
GKC, §143c

11. The Accusative Marker אֵת

Biblical Hebrew’s accusative marker is a silent marker since it is not a translatable particle. It is distinct from its homonym that acts as a preposition meaning “with.” Just because it is untranslatable, however, does not mean that this marker is void of exegetical significance. It is used with exceptional finesse in the Hebrew text to indicate definiteness and focus.

Chisholm, 76
J-M, §125e-j
IBHS, §10.3
Gibson, §94
GKC, §117a-m

12. Predicate Adjective

Predicate adjectives are actually ignored by some major Hebrew grammars. Their function appears to be simple and in no need of extensive explanation. However, they are therefore the subjects of much abuse in translation and interpretation. Improperly understood, the predicate adjective can be given too much emphasis or insufficient emphasis, depending on the direction and degree of misunderstanding.

Chisholm, 67
GBHS, §2.5.2
HBI, §1.7.2
IBHS, §14.3.2
GKC, §145r

Long, 64–65, 78

The twelve exegetically and expositionally significant grammatical elements given above have been chosen because of the lack of adequate treatment in some grammars and because of the failure of many Hebrew professors to convey their significance. The exegete must pay attention to their existence and their significance if he is to rightly understand the text of the Hebrew Bible.

Many other elements of biblical Hebrew are equally significant (e.g., the construct state, the definite article, apposition, and the factitive verb). However, even the most basic manuals for the student consider these elements in great detail (e.g., Putnam's *Hebrew Bible Insert* on all four of those examples). This section of the syllabus is intended to close part of the gap in the student's knowledge so that he is better prepared to perform accurate and adequate exegesis of the Hebrew text.

Recommended Resources for Hebrew Grammar and Syntax

- Andersen, Francis I. *The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew*. 1974. Reprint, The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1980.
- Arnold, Bill T., and John H. Choi. *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
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