Do the Finite Verbal Forms in Biblical Hebrew Express Aspect?

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0.1. *The problem*

The verbal system of Biblical Hebrew (BH) has been subjected to a wide variety of competing hypotheses. In recent years, scholars have argued that the Hebrew verbal forms express:

- tense, whether absolute or relative;[1]
- aspect: perfective vs. imperfective,[2] or stative vs. dynamic;[3]
- mood: indicative versus non-indicative;[4]

1. Relative tense has been argued for by R. Bartelmus, *HYH. Bedeutung und Funktion eines hebräischen "Allerweltswortes"—zugleich ein Beitrag zur Frage des hebräischen Tempussystems* (St. Ottilien, 1982); S. Bombeck, *Das althebräische Verbalsystem aus aramäischer Sicht* (Frankfurt a. M., 1997). Absolute tense underlies the theories of A. Rainey, "The Ancient Hebrew Prefix Conjugation in the Light of Amarnah Canaanite," *HS* 27 (1986), 4–19; E. J. Revell, "The System of the Verb in Standard Biblical Prose," *HUCA* 60 (1989), 1–37; V. J. J. DeCaen, *On the Placement and Interpretation of the Verb in Standard Biblical Hebrew Prose* (Ph.D. diss., Toronto, 1995); T. Goldfajn, *Word Order and Time in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* (Oxford, 1998). A more nuanced position is taken by T. Muraoka and his students who find in the Biblical Hebrew verb an expression of both tense and aspect: see P. Joüon, T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew. Part Three: Syntax* (Rome, 1996), 353–420; M. F. Rogland, *Alleged Non-Past Uses of* QATAL *in Classical Hebrew* (Ph.D. diss., Leiden, 2001).

2. See D. Cohen, *L'aspect verbal* (Paris, 1989); J. Huehnergard, "The Early Hebrew Prefix-Conjugations," *HS* 29 (1988), 19–23; B. K. Waltke, M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, 1990); R. S. Hendel, "In the Margins of the Hebrew Verbal System: Situation, Tense, Aspect, Mood," *ZAH* 9 (1996), 152–81; W. R. Garr, "Driver's *Treatise* and the Study of Hebrew: Then and Now," in S. R. Driver, *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew*, new ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1998), xviii–lxxxvi; P. J. Gentry, "The System of the Finite Verb in Classical Biblical Hebrew," *HS* 39 (1998), 7–39; J. Tropper, "Althebräisches und semitisches Aspektsystem," *ZAH* 11 (1998), 153–90; D. Pardee, Review of Z. Zevit, *The Anterior Construction*, *JNES* 60 (2001), 308–12; F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "Biblical Hebrew Statives and Situation Aspect," *JSS* 45 (2000), 21–53.

3. See M. Eskhult, *Studies in Verbal Aspect and Narrative Technique in Biblical Hebrew Prose* (Uppsala, 1990); J. C. L. Gibson, *Davidson's Introductory Grammar. Syntax*, 4th ed. (Edinburgh, 1994).

4. See B. Zuber, *Das Tempussystem des biblischen Hebräisch*, *BZAW* 164 (Berlin, 1985).

- text-linguistic functions;[5]
- "exotic" functions.[6]

In light of these diverging views, no consensus can be said to exist. Nevertheless, the theory according to which the verbal forms of BH have an aspectual function is by far the most influential one.[7]

In embryonic form, the theory was formulated by H. Ewald, in his Arabic grammar, as far back as the beginning of the 19th century.[8] It was embraced by S. R. Driver and developed in his classic monograph.[9] In the 20th century it was picked up by C. Brockelmann,[10] and given a broad theoretical basis by F. Rundgren.[11] More recent years have seen an enrichment of the hypothesis in reference to general linguistic studies on verbal aspect.[12] As it turns out, verbal aspect is a widespread phenomenon. Many languages of the world distinguish in their verbal systems *perfective* forms from *imperfective* ones. Although every language has its own particular structure, the aspectual opposition is sufficiently constant to lend itself to cross-linguistic comparison. According to Comrie: the **perfective aspect** looks at the situation from outside, without necessarily distinguishing any of the internal structure of the situation; the **imperfective aspect** looks at the situation from inside, and as such is crucially concerned with the internal structure of the situation.[13]

The definitions of C. Smith are more precise and less intuitive, but they stress the same points: sentences with a **perfective** viewpoint present a situation as a single whole. The span of the perfective includes the initial and final endpoints of the situa-

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5. See R. E. Longacre, *Joseph: A Story of Divine Providence. A Text Theoretical and Textlinguistic Analysis of Gensis 37 and 39–48* (Winona Lake, 1989); A. Niccacci, *The Syntax of the Verb in Classical Hebrew Prose*, *JSOT* Supp. 86 (Sheffield, 1990). Since a verbal form may have both TAM (tense-aspect-mood) and text-linguistic functions, the theories of these scholars are not necessarily incompatible with any one of the other approaches. The aspect approach and the text-linguistic approach are explicitly combined by Eskhult, *Studies*.

6. See D. Michel, *Tempora und Satzstellung in den Psalmen* (Bonn, 1960); L. McFall, *The Enigma of the Hebrew Verbal System* (Sheffield, 1982).

7. Pardee (Review of Zevit, 308) correctly speaks of "the century-old tide of describing the Biblical Hebrew verbal system as aspectual."

8. G. H. A. Ewald, *Grammatica critica linguae arabicae*, Volumen prius (Leipzig, 1831), 112–13. I do not think that DeCaen's effort to reinterpret Ewald's hypothesis in terms of anteriority vs. non-anteriority is successful; see V. DeCaen, "Ewald and Driver on Biblical "Aspect": Anteriority and the Orientalist Framework," *ZAH* 9 (1996), 129–51. DeCaen is correct in stating that Ewald did not use the term "aspect." The first scholar to apply this term in its technical-linguistic meaning to Hebrew and other Semitic languages is, to my knowledge, B. Landsberger, "Die Eigenbegrifflichkeit der babylonischen Welt. Ein Vortrag," *Islamica* 2 (1926), 354–72, at 360. Landsberger distinguished the subjective *Aspekt* from the objective *Aktionsart*—a distinction that was still a novelty in general linguistics in 1926.

9. S. R. Driver, *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1892).

10. C. Brockelmann, "Die 'Tempora' des Semitischen," *Zeitschrift für Phonetik und allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft* 5 (1951), 133–54. See also M. Cohen, *Le système verbal sémitique et l'expression du temps* (Paris, 1924).

11. See F. Rundgren, *Intensiv und Aspektkorrelation* (Uppsala, 1959); idem, *Das althebräische Verbum. Abriss der Aspektlehre* (Uppsala, 1961).

12. Influential treatments of aspect in general linguistics are B. Comrie, *Aspect. An Introduction to the Study of Verbal Aspect and Related Problems* (Cambridge, 1976); Ö. Dahl, *Tense and Aspect Systems* (Oxford, 1985); C. Smith, *The Parameter of Aspect* (Dordrecht, 1991).

13. Comrie, *Aspect*, 4.

tion: it is closed informationally; **imperfective** viewpoints present part of the situation, with no information about its endpoints. Thus imperfectives are open informationally. The unmarked imperfective spans an interval that is internal to the situation.[14] The opposition between perfective and imperfective as defined in the literature is felt to correspond to what is expressed by the QATAL and YIQTOL forms in BH.[15]

This hypothesis will be put to the test in the present article. Evidence will be presented showing that, contrary to the majority opinion, the category of aspect should not be applied to the BH verb. The weak point of the theory is BH YIQTOL. The view that YIQTOL expresses imperfective aspect does not do justice to the function of this verbal form, nor does it contribute to a correct description of the way the verbal system is organized.

0.2. *Binary aspectual systems*

A theoretical challenge to the aspectual interpretation of Semitic tenses was formulated by J. Kurylowicz in 1973.[16] In Kurylowicz' view, a language needs to express tense before it can express aspect: only when a language opposes more than one form within the same time frame can there be a morphological expression of aspect.[17] The classical Semitic languages such as Arabic and Hebrew, relatively poor in verbal forms, do not fulfill that condition.[18] The verbal forms of these languages do not, therefore, give expression to aspect, although they may be used with aspectual implications in certain contexts.

Kurylowicz' remarks are illuminating to the extent that they show how the classical Semitic languages are different from languages such as Russian or classical Greek. In Greek, for instance, both the aorist indicative and the imperfect positively express the past tense. Within this time frame, the aorist will typically present past activities as single complete wholes while the imperfect presents them as in process.[19] The opposition between perfective and imperfective forms is expressed also in the subjunctive, the optative, the infinitive and the participle: it cuts right through the whole verbal system but is represented by distinct forms for every morphological and notional category.[20] Languages like Arabic and BH do not have such a plethora of

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14. Smith, *Parameter*, 103, 111.

15. See n. 2 above. A special position is taken by Waltke-O'Connor who attribute a perfective function to QATAL and a non-marked, non-perfective function to YIQTOL.

16. J. Kurylowicz, "Verbal Aspect in Semitic," *Or.* 42 (1973), 114–20. For a recent defense of Kurylowicz' views, see A. Zaborski, "Kurylowicz and the So-called 'Aspect' in Classical and Modern Arabic," *Analecta Indoeuropea Cracoviensia*, vol. II: Kurylowicz Memorial Volume, Part I, 529–41; idem, "On the Interplay of Tense, Aspect and Aktionsart in Semitic Languages," in W. Arnold, H. Bobzin, "*Sprich doch mit deinen Knechten aramäisch, wir verstehen es!,*" O. Jastrow *Festschrift* (Wiesbaden, 2002), 869–76.

17. The German preterite (*er arbeitete*) corresponds to two verbal forms in French, the imperfect (*il travaillait*) and the simple past (*il travailla*). Therefore, according to Kurylowicz, the French system can be said to express aspectual differences while the German system does not. Of course, aspect may be expressed in German by the use of adverbs or by variations in word-order.

18. Kurylowicz allows for the possible exception of Akkadian.

19. This somewhat simplified description of the Greek verbal system serves illustrative purposes only.

20. The perfective-imperfective opposition exists in even more categories in Slavic languages like Russian; it is limited to the opposition between imperfect and simple past in literary French.

different forms. Moreover, any verbal form may typically be used in reference to different moods and time frames.

The question remains whether Kurylowicz' premises are correct. Why should it be impossible for languages to express aspect without reference to time frames?[21] At least theoretically it is possible to imagine a binary system, where all perfective functions would be expressed by one form and all imperfective functions by another form, regardless of mood or time frame. It is such a system that is envisaged by some for BH.[22] The hypothesis is not implausible in and of itself. As will be argued, however, it does not accord well with the facts.

0.3. *Methodological remarks*

Before taking a look at the evidence, three methodological remarks are in order.

Firstly, the analysis of verbal meanings is in principle to be based on a synchronic approach. Of course, languages evolve as do the verbal functions they express. The study of this evolution can be thrilling and illuminating. For the problem at hand, however, the question must be what QATAL and YIQTOL actually express within the language system of BH. It may well be, for instance, that the long form of the prefix conjugation (*yaqtulu*) expresses imperfective aspect in the El Amarna letters, in Ugaritic, or in reconstructed proto-West Semitic.[23] But the function of the cognate forms in these other languages does not determine the function of YIQTOL in BH.

Secondly, this investigation will take as its point of departure prose texts of the classical period, roughly the books of Genesis through 2 Kings. So-called Late Biblical Hebrew will be excluded since its inclusion might skew the synchronic approach. As to poetry, it is a general rule in research on morphosyntax to take on poetic texts only when the prose rules have been approximately established.[24] The occurrence of archaism, code-switching, and other forms of poetic license makes grammatical analysis of poetry particularly hazardous.[25]

Thirdly, an effort needs to be made to distinguish the function expressed by the verbal forms themselves from additional layers of meaning created by the context. No verbal system, however complex, allocates specific forms to every temporal nuance required for human communication. Hebrew, moreover, has a relatively small number of verbal forms. This means that each of the forms will be used in a variety of contextual and pragmatic functions, some of which may well be aspectual in character. What is presently of interest, however, is whether aspect is expressed by the verbal forms as such.

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21. See W. Binnick, *Time and the Verb. A Guide to Tense and Aspect* (Oxford, 1991), 438; R. Stempel, "Aspekt und Aktionsart, Tempus und Modus: Zur Strukturierung von Verbalsystemen" *Indogermanische Forschungen* 104 (1999), 23–44, esp. 35. Against Stempel, see the second article of Zaborski quoted above, n. 16.

22. An explicit statement to this effect is found in D. Cohen, *Aspect*, 87, 91.

23. See, e.g., Tropper, "Aspektsystem," 162–64.

24. See, e.g., Gross, "Partizip," 24, n. 4; Hendel, "Margins," 153; D. Pardee, Review of Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, *JNES* 53 (1994), 152.

25. Many poetic texts, notably Psalms, are also difficult to date, thus complicating matters even further.

1. *Does YIQTOL express cursive aspect?*

The aspectual approach is particularly problematic with regard to the function of Hebrew YIQTOL—the long form of the prefix conjugation.[26] Our discussion will therefore be focused on this verbal form.

1.1. *Core functions of the imperfective not expressed by YIQTOL*

Proponents of the aspectual approach attribute to freestanding YIQTOL an imperfective function. Now it is to be expected, since every language is unique, that imperfective forms should function in slightly different ways in different languages. Determining YIQTOL as an imperfective does not, therefore, imply a functional "job-description" to which the verbal form should conform in all details. Nevertheless, the import of a cross-linguistic category like aspect is that it may be expected to behave in a similar manner in every language in which it is found. Postulating an imperfective function implies a pattern of verbal functions. The most prominent functions attached to the imperfective in recognized aspect languages are the expression of the real present and of attendant circumstances in the past.[27] Since neither of these functions is regularly expressed by YIQTOL in BH there is no point in classifying YIQTOL as an imperfective.

A. *The Real Present*

In all languages where aspect is an undisputed reality, it is the non-perfective that is used to express processes that are really going on at the moment of speaking.[28] Since processes contemporary with the moment of speaking are naturally considered as incomplete and unbounded, this use of the imperfective stands to reason. Several scholars have gone so far as to state that the present is necessarily imperfective.[29]

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26. The long form, historically proto-Hebrew *yaqtulu*, is opposed to the short form, or jussive, historically *yaqtul*. In BH, the long and short forms can still be distinguished with some forms of ל״י and ע״ו verbs, some forms of the Hiphil and some suffixed forms; otherwise they coincide. Even when they coincide they may be distinguished, at least in Classical Hebrew Prose, by paying attention to the syntax: the short form usually takes the first position, the long form a non-initial position in the clause; see A. Niccacci, "A Neglected Point of Hebrew Syntax: Yiqtol and Position in the Sentence," *Liber Annuus* 37 (1987), 7–19.

27. See Y. S. Maslov, "An Outline of Contrastive Aspectology," in idem, ed., *Contrastive Studies in Verbal Aspect* (Heidelberg, 1985), 1–44. Maslov compares the aspectual systems of a number of European languages, showing how the relation between perfective and imperfective varies from language to language (29–38, see the grid on p. 36). He clearly indicates that the expression of the real present and of attendant circumstance in the past belong to the imperfective in every instance, from the unmarked non-perfective in Russian through the very restricted type of imperfectivity as found in the English progressive.

28. In Greek, the present indicative is clearly built on the imperfective stem also attested in the imperfect. In the Slavic languages, too, the present is expressed by the imperfective; the form that should have corresponded to the "perfective present" usually has a future or modal meaning; see Comrie, *Aspect*, 66–71.

29. Thus Kurylowicz, "Aspect," 114: "The grammatical present includes the moment of speaking and may be arbitrarily extended both to the left (into the physical past) and to the right (into the physical future) being thus by its nature always linear, i.e. imperfective." See also Bartelmus, *HYH*, 38–39; Stempel, "Aspekt," 37. In an earlier publication I have pointed out that there are languages that possess both an imperfective and a perfective present, the latter being used for situations the ongoingness of which is not obvious (e.g., states, mental processes); see J. Joosten, "The Predicative Participle in BH," *ZAH* 2 (1989), 128–59, esp. 154–55, n. 101 (cf. Comrie, *Aspect*, 68–69).

Accordingly, proponents of the aspectual approach have insisted that YIQTOL does indeed regularly express the real present in BH.[30] The facts do not bear this out, however. YIQTOL is not the regular means of expressing an action that is going on at the moment of speaking.[31] The examples that have been invoked to argue that YIQTOL does express the real present can practically all be contested:

Gen. 37:15   וַיִּמְצָאֵהוּ אִישׁ וְהִנֵּה תֹעֶה בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיִּשְׁאָלֵהוּ הָאִישׁ לֵאמֹר מַה־**תְּבַקֵּשׁ**

And a man found him wandering in the fields; and the man asked him, "What **are you seeking**?"

1 Sam. 11:5   וַיֹּאמֶר שָׁאוּל מַה־לָעָם כִּי **יִבְכּוּ**

And Saul said: "What ails the people, that **they are weeping**?"

In both these verses, the action described by YIQTOL is indeed going on at the moment of speaking. However, as has been pointed out, this function of YIQTOL is almost entirely limited to questions.[32] A positive statement with regard to the same ongoing action will be formulated with the participle:[33]

Gen. 37:16   וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת־אַחַי אָנֹכִי **מְבַקֵּשׁ**

"**I am seeking** my brothers," he said.

This use of the participle will be further explored below.

The restriction of YIQTOL's use as a real present to questions is relevant for two reasons. First, in questions a process is not stated but questioned. There is something inherently modal about questions, a fact that can be verified by cross-linguistic comparisons.[34] Second, in all the instances, a non-indicative reading is possible. Thus Gen. 37:15 may be rendered "What *might* you be seeking?" and 1 Sam. 11:5 "What ails the people that they *should* weep?" In the positive statement of Gen. 37:16, such a nuance is impossible: "I might be seeking my brothers" would be an absurd rendering. In view of these remarks it seems unwise to ascribe a real-present function to YIQTOL on the basis of its use in questions.

Another problematic category is the use of YIQTOL in present-tense statements using the verbs יכל "to be able" or ידע "to know":

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30. See Driver, *Treatise*, 33 (§ 28); *GKC*, 315 (§ 107f); Waltke-O'Connor, *Syntax*, 504–5.

31. This has long been realized by the more pragmatically oriented grammars; see the following note.

32. See A. B. Davidson, *Hebrew Syntax* (Edinburgh, 1896), 68; P. Joüon, *Grammaire de l'hébreu biblique* (Rome, 1923); R. C. Steiner, "Ancient Hebrew," in R. Hetzron, ed., *The Semitic Languages* (London & New York, 1997), 158. Other examples of prent-tense YIQTOL in questions: Gen. 16:8; 24:31; 32:18, 30; 37:15; 42:1; 44:7; Exod. 2:13; 3:3; 5:15; 14:15; 17:2; Num. 11:12; 16:3, 11, 13; 32:7; Deut. 12:30; Josh. 9:8; Judg. 16:15; 17:9; 18:24; 19:17; 1 Sam. 1:8; 2:23; 6:6, 20; 11:5; 21:15; 24:10; 28:16; 2 Sam. 1:3; 2 Kgs. 20:14

33. See Gross, "Partizip," 46; D. Cohen, *La phrase nominale et l'évolution du système verbal en sémitique* (Louvain, 1984), 306.

34. See, e.g., W. Chafe, "The Realis-Irrealis Distinction in Caddo, the Northern Iroquoian Languages, and English," in J. Bybee and S. Fleischman, eds., *Modality in Grammar and Discourse* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia 1995), 349–65, 350 (I thank Randall Garr for this reference).

Gen. 24:50   וַיַּעַן לָבָן וּבְתוּאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ מֵיהוָה יָצָא הַדָּבָר לֹא נוּכַל דַּבֵּר אֵלֶיךָ רַע אוֹ־טוֹב

Then Laban and Bethuel answered, "The thing comes from the LORD; we **cannot** speak to you bad or good."

1 Kgs. 3:7   וְעַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהָי אַתָּה הִמְלַכְתָּ אֶת־עַבְדְּךָ תַּחַת דָּוִד אָבִי וְאָנֹכִי נַעַר קָטֹן **לֹא אֵדַע** צֵאת וָבֹא

And now, O LORD my God, thou hast made thy servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a child; **I do not know** how to go out or come in.

This usage is not particularly rare.[35] But the lexical meaning of the verbs involved makes it difficult to view these cases as attesting a real-present function for YIQTOL. Indeed, neither verb expresses a process that can easily be viewed as ongoing at the moment of speaking.[36]

Apart from the two categories reviewed above, YIQTOL is almost never found as an expression of the real present.[37] In the prose parts of Genesis–2 Kings the only possible examples are:

1 Sam. 21:15(14)   וַיֹּאמֶר אָכִישׁ אֶל־עֲבָדָיו הִנֵּה **תִרְאוּ** אִישׁ מִשְׁתַּגֵּעַ

Then said Achish to his servants, "Lo, **you see** the man is mad"

2 Kgs. 6:19   וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם אֱלִישָׁע לֹא זֶה הַדֶּרֶךְ וְלֹא זֹה הָעִיר לְכוּ אַחֲרַי וְאוֹלִיכָה אֶתְכֶם אֶל־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר **תְּבַקֵּשׁוּן**

And Elisha said to them, "This is not the way, and this is not the city; follow me and I will bring you to the man whom **you seek**."

2 Kgs. 9:20   וַיַּגֵּד הַצֹּפֶה לֵאמֹר בָּא עַד־אֲלֵיהֶם וְלֹא־שָׁב וְהַמִּנְהָג כְּמִנְהַג יֵהוּא בֶן־נִמְשִׁי כִּי בְשִׁגָּעוֹן **יִנְהָג**

Again the watchman reported, "He reached them, but he is not coming back. And the driving is like the driving of Jehu, the son of Nimshi; for he **drives** furiously."

These examples could be explained otherwise.[38] But even if they are genuine instances of a real-present usage, they provide far too slender a basis to argue that YIQTOL is a regular expression of processes that are really going on at the moment of speaking.[39]

The infrequent use of YIQTOL as a real present is not due to to the fact that the Bible happens to contain few present-tense statements.[40] BH does possess a regular

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35. It is particularly frequent with יכל, the cases from Genesis being: Gen. 19:19, 22; 24:50; 29:8; 31:35; 34:14; 44:26. Cases with ידע are rarer: Exod. 10:7, 26.

36. In English, too, the verbs "can" and "know" express the present in an atypical way.

37. For the general or habitual present, see below in section 1.3.

38. The YIQTOL form in 2 Kgs. 9:20 may express the habitual present; in 1 Sam. 21:15 ("lo you can see the man is mad") and 2 Kgs. 6:19 ("the man you want") the verb may be modal.

39. A few more examples may be found outside the corpus: Job 2:10; Num. 23:9.

40. Pardee (Review of Zevit, 311) speaks of "the absence of a form of which the primary function is to express present tense." If, however, one distinguishes between the real present—the expression of processes as going on at the moment of speaking—and the general-habitual present (see in section 1.3), it will be seen that the former is regularly expressed by the predicative participle.

expression of the real present: not YIQTOL but the predicative participle.[41] We have already noted the examples where a participle clause is used in reply to a question formulated with YIQTOL. That is not the only case where we find the participle. Wherever the real present is needed, the participle will take on this function:[42]

Gen. 4:10   וַיֹּאמֶר מֶה עָשִׂיתָ קוֹל דְּמֵי אָחִיךָ **צֹעֲקִים** אֵלַי מִן־הָאֲדָמָה

And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood **is crying** to me from the ground."

Gen. 16:8   וַתֹּאמֶר מִפְּנֵי שָׂרַי גְּבִרְתִּי אָנֹכִי **בֹּרַחַת**

She said, "I **am fleeing** from my mistress Sarai."

Num. 11:27   וַיָּרָץ הַנַּעַר וַיַּגֵּד לְמֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמַר אֶלְדָּד וּמֵידָד **מִתְנַבְּאִים** בַּמַּחֲנֶה

And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad **are prophesying** in the camp."

This usage is naturally compatible with presentative particles such as הנה or הלא. Such particles underline the vividness of the action without changing the essential function of the clause:

1 Sam. 14:33   וַיַּגִּידוּ לְשָׁאוּל לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה הָעָם **חֹטָאִים** לַיהוָה לֶאֱכֹל עַל־הַדָּם

"Then they told Saul, "Behold, the people **are sinning** against the LORD, by eating with the blood."

Gen. 37:13   וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־יוֹסֵף הֲלוֹא אַחֶיךָ **רֹעִים** בִּשְׁכֶם

And Israel said to Joseph, "**Are** not your brothers **pasturing** the flock at Shechem?"

These examples could easily be multiplied.[43]

A comparison of the uses of YIQTOL and of the participle discussed in this section must lead to the conclusion that the natural means of expressing the real present in BH is the predicative participle. It may be that YIQTOL did express the real present in an earlier stage of the Hebrew language. The usages of YIQTOL enumerated above may be residual. On the synchronic level, however, there is no reason to believe that YIQTOL is capable of expressing the real present. If YIQTOL is incapable of expressing the real present, this is hardly compatible with its being an imperfective verbal form.

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41. See, e.g., S. H. Siedl, *Gedanken zum Tempussytem im Hebräischen und Akkadischen* (Wiesbaden, 1971), 9–10. For the definition of the "predicative" participle, see Joosten "Participle," 128, n. 1 (with literature).

42. Mark Smith has argued that the present-tense use of the predicative participle is still incipient in BH and limited to direct speech; see M. Smith, "Grammatically Speaking: The Participle as a Main Verb of the Clause (Predicative Participle) in Direct Discourse and Narrative in Pre-Mishnaic Hebrew," in T. Muraoka, J. F. Elwolde, eds., *Sirach, Scrolls and Sages. Proceedings of a Second International Symposium on the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Ben Sira, and the Mishnah, held at Leiden University, 15–17 December 1997* (Leiden, 1999), 278–332. The limitation of the present-tense function to direct speech is only natural, however; narrative is concerned with the past. As to incipiency, from a diachronic point of view this may be correct. What is relevant is to note that the participle is necessarily used to express the real present in BH.

43. For many additional examples, see Joosten, "Participle."

B. Attendant Circumstance

Another function typically expressed in aspect languages by imperfective forms is the presentation of activities as concomitant with the main event. The sentence "John was reading when I entered" is a parade example often used in studies on aspect to illustrate the opposition between imperfective ("was reading") and perfective ("entered") aspect.[44]

Again, the expression of attendant circumstance is attributed to YIQTOL by champions of the aspectual hypothesis.[45] And again the facts indicate that YIQTOL is not used in this way. In BH prose, YIQTOL is not regularly employed to express actions concomitant with the main event in the narrative.[46] In a sentence like "John was reading when I entered" BH would not use YIQTOL in the first clause.

To be excluded from consideration in this connection are the cases where YIQTOL expresses repeated action in the past. This is indeed a regular, and frequent, use of YIQTOL, and it will be discussed below in section 1.2. But repeated or habitual actions are not to be confused with actions that are going on concomitantly with the main action.

Instances where YIQTOL could be held to express attendant circumstance are infrequent and generally doubtful. The following list should be fairly exhaustive:

Exod. 8:20 (24) וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה כֵּן וַיָּבֹא עָרֹב כָּבֵד בֵּיתָה פַרְעֹה וּבֵית עֲבָדָיו וּבְכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
תִּשָּׁחֵת הָאָרֶץ מִפְּנֵי הֶעָרֹב

And the LORD did so; there came great swarms of flies into the house of Pharaoh and into his servants' houses, and in all the land of Egypt the land **was ruined** by reason of the flies.

Exod. 19:19 וַיְהִי קוֹל הַשּׁוֹפָר הוֹלֵךְ וְחָזֵק מְאֹד מֹשֶׁה יְדַבֵּר וְהָאֱלֹהִים יַעֲנֶנּוּ בְקוֹל

And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses **spoke**, and God **answered** him in thunder.

1 Sam. 1:10 וְהִיא מָרַת נָפֶשׁ וַתִּתְפַּלֵּל עַל־יְהוָה וּבָכֹה תִבְכֶּה

She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and **wept** bitterly.

1 Sam. 13:17–18 וַיֵּצֵא הַמַּשְׁחִית מִמַּחֲנֵה פְלִשְׁתִּים שְׁלֹשָׁה רָאשִׁים הָרֹאשׁ אֶחָד יִפְנֶה אֶל־דֶּרֶךְ
. . . עָפְרָה . . . וְהָרֹאשׁ אֶחָד יִפְנֶה דֶּרֶךְ בֵּית חֹרוֹן וְהָרֹאשׁ אֶחָד יִפְנֶה דֶּרֶךְ הַגְּבוּל

And raiders came out of the camp of the Philistines in three companies; one company **turned** toward Ophrah . . . , another company **turned** toward Beth-horon, and another company **turned** toward the border . . .

2 Sam. 15:37 וַיָּבֹא חוּשַׁי רֵעֶה דָוִד הָעִיר וְאַבְשָׁלֹם יָבֹא יְרוּשָׁלִָם

So Hushai, David's friend, came into the city, just as Absalom **was entering** Jerusalem.

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44. Comrie, *Aspect,* 3.

45. See Driver, *Treatise,* 31–33 (§ 27), 206; *GKC,* 314–15 (§ 107b, d); Waltke-O'Connor, *Syntax,* 503–4; Garr, "Driver's *Treatise,*" l–li; Eskhult, *Studies,* 32, 64, 101.

46. This has been recognized by D. Cohen, *Phrase nominale,* 317; Hendel, "Margins," 166; Steiner, "Hebrew," 157.

2 Sam. 23:10   הוּא קָם וַיַּךְ בַּפְּלִשְׁתִּים . . . וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה תְּשׁוּעָה גְדוֹלָה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וְהָעָם
יָשֻׁבוּ אַחֲרָיו אַךְ־לְפַשֵּׁט

He rose and struck down the Philistines . . . and the LORD wrought a great victory that day;
and the men **returned** after him only to strip the slain.

The interpretation of YIQTOL in these verses is not self-evident on any account. It is
possible to take them as an expression of concomitant, backgrounded action, but other
explanations are equally possible. In Exod. 8:20; 1 Sam. 1:10; 13:17, 18 and 2 Sam.
15:37 YIQTOL may be taken as prospective, while in Exod. 19:19 and 2 Sam. 23:10
it could be read as iterative.

In two other cases the circumstantial reading of YIQTOL is made more difficult
by negation (an action that did not come about cannot be concomitant):

Gen. 2:25   . . . וַיִּהְיוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם עֲרוּמִּים הָאָדָם וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְלֹא **יִתְבֹּשָׁשׁוּ**

And the man and his wife were both naked, and **were** not **ashamed**.

2 Sam. 2:28   וַיִּתְקַע יוֹאָב בַּשּׁוֹפָר וַיַּעַמְדוּ כָּל־הָעָם וְלֹא־**יִרְדְּפוּ** עוֹד אַחֲרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

So Joab blew the trumpet; and all the men stopped, and **pursued** Israel no more.

Finally, there are four problematic cases of the sequence YIQTOL–WAYYIQTOL:[47]

Gen. 37:7   וְהִנֵּה אֲנַחְנוּ מְאַלְּמִים אֲלֻמִּים בְּתוֹךְ הַשָּׂדֶה וְהִנֵּה קָמָה אֲלֻמָּתִי וְגַם־נִצָּבָה וְהִנֵּה
תְסֻבֶּינָה אֲלֻמֹּתֵיכֶם וַתִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶיןָ לַאֲלֻמָּתִי

Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf arose and stood upright; and
behold, your sheaves **gathered round** it, and bowed down to my sheaf.

Deut. 2:12   וּבְשֵׂעִיר יָשְׁבוּ הַחֹרִים לְפָנִים וּבְנֵי עֵשָׂו **יִירָשׁוּם** וַיַּשְׁמִידוּם מִפְּנֵיהֶם

The Horites also lived in Seir formerly, but the sons of Esau **dispossessed** them, and destroyed
them from before them.

1 Kgs. 20:33   וְהָאֲנָשִׁים **יְנַחֲשׁוּ** וַיְמַהֲרוּ וַיַּחְלְטוּ הֲמִמֶּנּוּ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אָחִיךָ בֶן־הֲדַד

Now the men **were watching** for an omen, and they quickly took it up from him and said,
"Yes, your brother Ben-Hadad."

1 Kgs. 21:6   . . . וַיְדַבֵּר אֵלֶיהָ כִּי־**אֲדַבֵּר** אֶל־נָבוֹת הַיִּזְרְעֵאלִי וָאֹמַר לוֹ

And he said to her, "Because I **spoke** to Naboth the Jezreelite, and said to him . . ."

The examples listed clearly do not suffice to establish the use of YIQTOL to express
attendant circumstances in a past-tense context. No other examples of concomitant
YIQTOL appear to exist.

The regular means of expressing attendant circumstance in BH is, once more, the
predicative participle. A systematic search of Genesis, Joshua 1–10, Judges, 1–2

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47. See also Jer. 52:7 where the prospective interpretation is possible: "All the men of war *wanted to
flee*, and they went out of the city. . . ." The verse is text-critically difficult, however (see the Septuagint and
the parallels in Jer. 39:4 and 2 Kgs. 25:4).

Samuel, 1–2 Kings revealed more than 170 examples of the predicative participle expressing concomitant action in a past-tense context. The usage may be briefly illustrated with some examples.

The verb involved often expresses a state:

Gen. 19:1   וַיָּבֹאוּ שְׁנֵי הַמַּלְאָכִים סְדֹמָה בָּעֶרֶב וְלוֹט **יֹשֵׁב** בְּשַׁעַר־סְדֹם

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening; and Lot **was sitting** in the gate of Sodom.[48]

But the clause may also involve a verb of perception or movement:

Judg. 13:20   וַיְהִי בַעֲלוֹת הַלַּהַב מֵעַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וַיַּעַל מַלְאַךְ־יְהוָה בְּלַהַב הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וּמָנוֹחַ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ **רֹאִים**

And when the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar while Manoah and his wife **looked on**.[49]

Josh. 3:17   וַיַּעַמְדוּ הַכֹּהֲנִים נֹשְׂאֵי הָאָרוֹן בְּרִית־יְהוָה בֶּחָרָבָה בְּתוֹךְ הַיַּרְדֵּן הָכֵן וְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל **עֹבְרִים** בֶּחָרָבָה

And while all Israel **were passing** over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan.[50]

And quite frequently, the clause contains a dynamic action verb:

Judg. 6:11   וַיָּבֹא מַלְאַךְ יְהוָה וַיֵּשֶׁב תַּחַת הָאֵלָה אֲשֶׁר בְּעָפְרָה אֲשֶׁר לְיוֹאָשׁ אֲבִי הָעֶזְרִי וְגִדְעוֹן בְּנוֹ **חֹבֵט** חִטִּים בַּגַּת לְהָנִיס מִפְּנֵי מִדְיָן

Now the angel of the LORD came and sat under the oak at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, as his son Gideon **was beating out** wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites.

1 Sam. 14:13   וַיַּעַל יוֹנָתָן עַל־יָדָיו וְעַל־רַגְלָיו וְנֹשֵׂא כֵלָיו אַחֲרָיו וַיִּפְּלוּ לִפְנֵי יוֹנָתָן וְנֹשֵׂא כֵלָיו **מְמוֹתֵת** אַחֲרָיו

Then Jonathan climbed up on his hands and feet, and his armor-bearer after him. And they fell before Jonathan, and his armor-bearer **killed** them after him.

Judg. 20:33   וְכֹל אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל קָמוּ מִמְּקוֹמוֹ וַיַּעַרְכוּ בְּבַעַל תָּמָר וְאֹרֵב יִשְׂרָאֵל **מֵגִיחַ** מִמְּקֹמוֹ

And all the men of Israel rose up out of their place, and set themselves in array at Baal-tamar; and the men of Israel who were in ambush **rushed out** of their place.[51]

Typically, the circumstantial clause is positioned after the main clause. But a number of cases can be found where the circumstantial clause precedes the main clause:

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48. Other examples: Gen. 14:12, 13; 18:1, 8; 24:62; 25:26; Josh. 8:32–33; Judg. 3:20; 4:2; 7:12; 10:1; 13:9; 16:12; 17:7; 18:17; 1 Sam. 1:9; 22:6; 26:3, 5; 29:1; 2 Sam. 4:5, 7; 11:1, 4; 13:8; 18:9; 23:13; 1 Kgs. 8:14; 11:29; 13:1, 28; 16:15; 2 Kgs. 2:18; 8:7; 22:14.

49. Other examples: Gen. 18:10; 24:20–21; 25:28; 27:4–5; Judg. 13:19; 1 Sam. 1:12.

50. Other examples: Gen. 18:16; Josh. 3:17; 1 Sam. 6:12; 2 Sam. 3:31; 16:13; 2 Kgs. 6:30.

51. Other examples: Gen. 30:36; 32:32; Judg. 20:42; 1 Sam. 18:10 2 Sam. 6:3; 20:15; 1 Kgs. 1:15, 40; 3:22, 26; 15:27; 19:19; 20:12, 16; 22: 20; 2 Kgs. 11:3; 15:5; 17:31; 24:11.

2 Sam. 18:24   וְדָוִד **יוֹשֵׁב** בֵּין־שְׁנֵי הַשְּׁעָרִים וַיֵּלֶךְ הַצֹּפֶה אֶל־גַּג הַשַּׁעַר

Now David **was sitting** between the two gates; and the watchman went up to the roof of the gate.[52]

This sentence comes close, structurally, to the paradigm that was quoted at the outset: "John was reading when I entered."

Two important functions of the imperfective—the expression of the real present and the expression of attendant circumstance—are not regularly expressed with YIQTOL in classical BH prose. The examples that have been alleged for these functions are dubious. Moreover, the regular way of expressing these functions is with a different verbal form, namely the predicative participle. The non-use of YIQTOL to express these two functions is a strong argument against the view that its basic function is the expression of imperfective aspect.

Admittedly, this conclusion has been reached *via negativa*, i.e., from a consideration of what YIQTOL does not express. The regular functions of YIQTOL, some of which are said to favor an imperfective interpretation, have not yet been discussed. This will be done, more briefly, in the following sections.

1.2. *YIQTOL expressing repetition in the past*

A regular and fairly frequent use of YIQTOL is as an expression of repeated action in a past-tense time frame:

Gen. 2:6   וְאֵד **יַעֲלֶה** מִן־הָאָרֶץ וְהִשְׁקָה אֶת־כָּל־פְּנֵי־הָאֲדָמָה

But a mist **went up** from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground (RSV).

The implication of the YIQTOL form is that the process of the mist's (?) going up was repeated again and again during the period to which the narrative pertains.[53] With stative verbs, the equivalent function is not iterative but durative:[54]

2 Sam. 4:2   כִּי גַם־בְּאֵרוֹת תֵּחָשֵׁב עַל־בִּנְיָמִן

For Beeroth **was considered** to belong to Benjamin.

There are more than 100 examples of iterative-habitual (or durative-habitual) YIQTOL in the books of Genesis–2 Kings.[55]

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52. Other examples: Gen. 23:10; Josh. 4:10; Judg. 20:28; 1 Sam. 6:13 2 Sam. 20:12; 1 Kgs. 1:5; 13:11; 2 Kgs. 2:23; 4:38; 6:32; 9:17.

53. The NJPS renders: "a well would flow up."

54. See A. Voitila, *Présent et imparfait de l'indicatif dans le Pentateuque grec. Une étude sur la syntaxe de traduction* (Helsinki/Göttingen 2001), 206, n. 105. Other examples: Exod. 13:22; 33:11; 36:29.

55. Examples: Gen. 2:6, 10, 19; 6:4; 29:2; 30:38, 42; 31:39; Exod. 1:12; 13:22; 17:11; 18:26; 19:19; 33:7–11; 34:34; 36:29; 40:32, 36–38; Num.3:31; 4:7, 9, 11–12, 15; 9:15–23; 11:5, 9; Deut. 11:10; Josh. 23:10; Judg. 2:18; 6:4–5; 9:25, 38; 10:4; 11:40; 12:5, 6; 14:10; 17:6; 18:25; 1 Sam. 1:5, 7; 2:14, 19, 22; 5:5; 9:9; 14:47; 18:5; 21:12; 27:9–11; 29:5 2 Sam. 1:22; 4:2; 5:8; 12:3, 21; 13:18; 14:26; 15:2, 6, 32; 1 Kgs. 3:4; 4:7; 5:7–8, 25, 28; 6:8; 7:15, 22, 26, 38; 10:5, 16–17, 22, 28–29; 13:33; 14:28; 17:6; 2 Kgs. 3:25; 4:8; 9:20; 12:13, 14, 15–17; 13:20; 18:7; 25:14.

The iterative-habitual function of YIQTOL is the one most often emphasized by champions of the aspectual hypothesis.[56] And indeed, in past-tense contexts, a transition from QATAL (and WAYYIQTOL) to YIQTOL or *vice versa* clearly may imply a difference which has nothing to do with temporal ordering of events:[57]

Deut. 11:10   כִּי הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה בָא־שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ לֹא כְאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הִוא אֲשֶׁר **יְצָאתֶם** מִשָּׁם
אֲשֶׁר **תִּזְרַע** אֶת־זַרְעֲךָ וְהִשְׁקִיתָ בְרַגְלְךָ כְּגַן הַיָּרָק

For the land which you are entering to take possession of it is not like the land of Egypt, from which **you have come** (QATAL), where **you sowed** (YIQTOL) your seed and watered it with your feet.

The Exodus, a one-time event, is expressed by QATAL while the sowing in Egypt, a recurring activity, is expressed with YIQTOL.

2 Kgs. 18:7   וְהָיָה יְהוָה עִמּוֹ בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר־**יֵצֵא יַשְׂכִּיל וַיִּמְרֹד** בְּמֶלֶךְ־אַשּׁוּר וְלֹא עֲבָדוֹ

And the LORD was with him; wherever **he went forth**, **he prospered** (YIQTOL). **He rebelled** (WAYYIQTOL) against the king of Assyria and would not serve him.

Hezekiah's successes are recounted as a recurring phenomenon, using YIQTOL, while his rebellion against Assyria is represented as a single event, using WAYYIQTOL.

In general linguistics, the habitual is sometimes defined as a sub-category of the imperfective.[58] And indeed, several aspect languages use imperfective verbal forms when the action is represented as customary or repeated. Thus the iterative use of YIQTOL appears to provide a strong argument in favor of an aspectual interpretation.

On reflection, however, a number of counter-arguments may be made:

(a) Contrary to some general linguistic writing, the association of the iterative function with the imperfective aspect is not self-evident. The imperfective represents the action in an open-ended way, emphasizing the inner constituency of the process described. None of these characteristics is of obvious application to the iterative.

Exod. 33:7   וּמֹשֶׁה **יִקַּח** אֶת־הָאֹהֶל וְנָטָה־לוֹ מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה הַרְחֵק מִן־הַמַּחֲנֶה וְקָרָא לוֹ אֹהֶל
מוֹעֵד וְהָיָה כָּל־מְבַקֵּשׁ יְהוָה **יֵצֵא** אֶל־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד . . .

Now Moses **used to take** the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD, **would go out** to the tent of meeting. . . .

It is difficult to argue that the actions expressed by YIQTOL in this passage are represented as open-ended, with particular attention to the inner constituency the process.

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56. See most recently Pardee, Review of Zevit, 311–12. Even Niccacci, who in principle attributes a prospective function to YIQTOL, explains the iterative function on the basis of aspect, see A. Niccacci, "On the Hebrew Verbal System," in R. L. Bergen, ed., *Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics* (Winona Lake, 1994), 117–37, esp. 128–30.

57. In other cases, however, the opposition does express temporal differences, with YIQTOL expressing relative future with regard to the time-frame of the narrative. For a full inventory of YIQTOL's uses in past-tense contexts see J. Joosten, "The Long Form of the Prefix Conjugation Referring to the Past in Biblical Hebrew Prose," *HS* 40 (1999), 15–26.

58. Comrie, *Aspect*, 26–31.

Rather, each action is represented as a complete element within a chain. What the use of YIQTOL underlines, however, is that these actions were carried out more than once: it was Moses' and Israel's habit to do these things in the desert.

(b) It would therefore appear that the association between iterative and imperfective in languages like classical Greek and modern French is rather accidental. Indeed, in other languages the iterative may be expressed by non-imperfective forms. As has been pointed out, a whole series of aspect languages typically use perfective forms for habitual action.[59] Still other languages express the habitual by means of forms that are not aspectually based. A striking phenomenon is the expression of iterativity by means of modal forms: prescriptive, potential, predictive/future, conditional, optative, etc. The phenomenon has been noted in languages belonging to various families and exhibiting important differences in their verbal systems: Bengali;[60] Camsa;[61] English;[62] Classical Greek;[63] Modern Greek;[64] Kurdish;[65] Macedonian;[66] Nepali;[67] Pashtu;[68] Old Persian;[69] Russian;[70] Serbo-Croatian;[71] Syriac;[72] Modern Turoyo.[73] As is noted on the basis of some of these languages, the phenomenon attests to a close association between iteration and epistemic modality.[74] Although iteration is not itself modal, there is no sharp division between iteration and prediction/supposition/potentiality.[75]

(c) The connection between modality and iterativity throws light on the uses of BH YIQTOL. It makes it possible to argue that the iterative reading is a contextual realization of YIQTOL's main modal function (cf. below, in 1.4.). In past-tense contexts, the potential and prospective value of YIQTOL leads, in certain cases, to an iterative interpretation. This solution has been argued by the present writer for a number of

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59. See in much detail S. Mønnesland, "The Slavonic Frequentative Habitual," in C. de Groot and H. Tommola, eds., *Aspect Bound. A Voyage into the Realm of Germanic, Slavonic and Finno-Ugrian Aspectology* (Dordrecht, 1984), 53–76; more briefly Dahl, *Tense and Aspect*, 78–79.

60. G. Lazard, "La catégorie de l'éventuel," in F. Bader et al., éds., *Mélanges linguistiques offerts à Émile Benveniste* (Louvain, 1975), 347–58.

61. R. Longacre, "Weqatal Forms in Biblical Hebrew Prose. A Discourse-modular Approach," in R. L. Bergen, ed., *Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics* (Winona Lake, 1994), 50–98, esp. 56–57.

62. The English parallel is noted in most publications dealing with this phenomenon. See, e.g., J. Joosten, "Biblical Hebrew *weqatal* and Syriac *hwa qatel* Expressing Repetition in the Past," *ZAH* 5 (1992), 1–14.

63. J. Joosten, "Workshop: Meaning and Use of the Tenses in 1 Samuel 1," in E. van Wolde, ed., *Narrative Syntax and the Hebrew Bible*, Biblical Interpretation Series 29 (Leiden, 1997), 72–83, esp. 82.

64. Mønnesland, "Habitual," 70–71.

65. Lazard, "Éventuel."

66. Mønnesland, "Habitual," 69–70.

67. Lazard, "Éventuel."

68. Lazard, "Éventuel."

69. Lazard, "Éventuel."

70. Comrie, *Aspect*, 70.

71. Mønnesland, "Habitual," 69–70; in this language both imperfective and perfective modal forms are used in habitual expressions.

72. Joosten, "Repetition."

73. H. Ritter, Ṭūrōyō. *Die Volkssprache der syrischen Christen des Ṭūr ʿAbdîn*, C: Grammatik (Stuttgart 1990), 53.

74. Lazard, "Éventuel," 358.

75. Mønnesland, "Habitual," 73.

years.[76] Galia Hatav, in her monograph on the BH verb, arrived at the same explanation independently.[77] Hatav also provides a thorough theoretical discussion of the phenomenon.[78] The theory has been criticized by Niccacci as being counter-intuitive.[79] It appears, however, that the cross-linguistic parallels noted above lend the hypothesis a certain amount of plausibility. Intuition is something that can and should be adjusted to the linguistic data.

In light of these considerations it becomes more difficult to invoke the iterative usage as an argument in favor of a basic imperfective function of YIQTOL.

In a diachronic perspective, it may be possible to argue that iterative YIQTOL in a past-tense context is the residue of the imperfective function of the long form of the prefix-conjugation of proto-Hebrew.[80] That hypothesis might account for the relatively high frequency of iterative YIQTOL. Even if it were correct, however—and the hypothesis cannot be pursued any further in the present study—this would not alter the synchronic necessity to subsume iterative YIQTOL under the head of its main function, namely the expression of modality (*irrealis*).

1.3. YIQTOL *expressing habitual and general present*

YIQTOL is also regularly used to express repetition in a present time-frame:

Num. 12:8   פֶּה אֶל־פֶּה **אֲדַבֶּר**־בּוֹ וּמַרְאֶה וְלֹא בְחִידֹת וּתְמֻנַת יְהוָה **יַבִּיט**

With him **I speak** mouth to mouth, clearly and not in dark speech; and **he beholds** the form of the LORD.

What is stated by God is not that he is speaking, then and there, with Moses, but that it is his habit to do so. In other cases the habit is generalized to the extent of expressing a universal truth:

Exod. 23:8   וְשֹׁחַד לֹא תִקָּח כִּי הַשֹּׁחַד **יְעַוֵּר** פִּקְחִים **וִיסַלֵּף** דִּבְרֵי צַדִּיקִים

And you shall take no bribe, a bribe **blinds** the officials and **subverts** the cause of those who are in the right.

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76. Joosten, "Repetition," 12–14; "Workshop," 82; "Long Form," 21–23. Pardee (Review of Zevit, 311–12) mentions "the use of the prefix conjugation to express iteration and duration in narratives of past events" as one of two strong arguments in favor of the aspectual approach. He adds "until [these uses] are explained satisfactorily, assertions about what should and should not appear in an aspectual system cannot be accepted as authoritative refutations of the aspectual explanation." He does not, however, engage the modal explanation.

77. G. Hatav, *The Semantics of Aspect and Modality. Evidence from English and Biblical Hebrew* (Amsterdam & Philadelphia, 1997), 144–46. See also Longacre, "Weqatal," 56–57.

78. Hatav, *Semantics*, 131–38. Hatav adduces no typological parallels in this section.

79. A. Niccacci, "Basic Facts and Theory of the Biblical Hebrew Verbal System in Prose," in E. van Wolde, ed., *Narrative Syntax and the Hebrew Bible*, Biblical Interpretation Series 29 (Leiden 1997), 167–202, at 198, n. 67: ". . . [the] proposal is by far too subjective and contrary to plain sense to be a proof."

80. For iterative-habitual *yaqtulu* in El-Amarna, see W. L. Moran, "The Hebrew Language in its Northwest Semitic Background," in G. E. Wright, ed., *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Garden City, NY, 1961), 54–72, esp. 63. In archaic BH, the long form of the prefix conjugation does seem to express attendant circumstance, see A. F. Rainey, "Prefix Conjugation," 15–16 (Deut. 32:10, 12).

The present habitual and general functions are frequent. They do not provide an argument for the imperfective interpretation of YIQTOL, however. The habitual or general present is not an obvious instance of looking at a situation from inside, with particular concern for the internal structure of the situation.

As with the iterative past, aspect languages will sometimes use imperfective verbal forms to express the habitual or general present. But other forms, aspectually neutral, such as the English simple present, or modal, such as the Greek future, may also be used in these functions. Nothing prevents us from deriving the habitual and general present function from a basic modal function.

1.4. *The main function of YIQTOL*

Numerically, the most frequent function of YIQTOL is the expression of actions that are *not yet begun.* According to the context, this usage may shade into simple futurity (prediction) or into different nuances of modality (command, necessity, probability, etc.). The relative frequency of future/modal YIQTOL may be established on a statistical basis.

> In Genesis 1–11, a count of all YIQTOL forms, excluding jussive forms and excluding forms that occupy the first position in the clause (which may also be jussive),[81] produced the following figures:
>
> YIQTOL expressing futurity/modality: 1:29; 2:16,17; 3:1,2,4,14,14,15,16, 17,17,18,19,22; 4:7, 7,7,12,12,12,14,15,24; 5:29; 6:3,14,15,16,17,19, 20; 7:2; 8:21,21,22; 9:2,2,3,4,5,5,5; 9:6,11, 11,15,25,11:4,6,7—**51** cases.
> YIQTOL following טרם in a past-tense context: 2:5,5—**2** cases.
> YIQTOL expressing repetition in the past: 2:6,10,19; 6:4—**4** cases.
> YIQTOL expressing the prospective in a past-tense context: 2:19—**1** case.
> Problematic YIQTOL in a past-tense context (see above, 1.2): 2:25—**1** case.
> YIQTOL expressing the general present: 2:24; 6:21; 10:9—**3** cases.
>
> This means that YIQTOL expresses actions not yet begun (future or modal) in over 80% of the cases. The figure is typical of the use of YIQTOL in BH prose.[82]

The preponderance of the future/modal function is also confirmed by recent research on the rendering of YIQTOL in the ancient versions.[83]

The future/modal function should not be invoked in arguing for an imperfective analysis of YIQTOL. In given clauses it may be possible to detect an imperfective nuance:

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81. See above, n. 26.

82. Genesis 1–11 may be be composite literarily, but linguistically these chapters would seem to be representative of Classical BH. Counting of forms in other stretches of text leads to similar results. In Joshua 1–10 the following figures were found: future/modal 86 cases; general present 1:9; conditional 1:18; 2:14, 19, 19, 19, 20; 6:26; 7:12; following טרם in a past-tense context 2:8; 3:1; following אז in a past-tense context 8:30; 10:12; real present 9:8 (question); 9:19 (יכל); prospective in past-tense context 9:27; 10:13. Again, the future/modal function is found in over 80% of the cases.

83. According to Voitila, out of 202 occurrences in the Joseph story, YIQTOL is rendered by a present indicative in five cases only; the most usual equivalent is the future indicative (94 cases, 46%); see A. Voitila, "La technique de traduction du yiqtol (l'imparfait hébreu) dans l'histoire de Joseph grecque (Gen. 37, 39–50)," in C. Cox, ed., *VII Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies. Leuven 1989* (Atlanta, Georgia, 1989), 223–37. See also Bombeck, *Verbalsystem*.

Gen. 3:14 אָרוּר אַתָּה מִכָּל־הַבְּהֵמָה וּמִכֹּל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה עַל־גְּחֹנְךָ **תֵלֵךְ** וְעָפָר **תֹּאכַל** כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ

Cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals; upon your belly **you shall go**, and dust **you shall eat**.

One could interpret this to mean "you shall be moving about upon your belly and continually be eating dust." However, this nuance of ongoingness or incompleteness arises here from the meaning of the verbs and from the context (note: "all the days of your life"). In other contexts, future/modal YIQTOL can be quite "punctual," "complete," or "aoristic":

Gen. 2:17 וּמֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וָרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בְּיוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת **תָּמוּת**

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it, **you shall die**.

Whatever one may think of the aspectual value of תֹּאכַל "you shall eat," the form תָּמוּת "you shall die" must be considered to express "complete" and "unanalyzed" action, i.e., perfective aspect. Again this aspectual nuance arises here from the lexical meaning of the verb and from the linguistic context, not from the use of YIQTOL.

In principle, a process not yet begun but simply contemplated cannot easily be observed from inside, with special attention to its inner constituency. It is true that in some languages the future is attached to the imperfective. But in other languages it is instead the perfective that provides future forms.[84] As a matter of fact, one may expect future statements to be aspectually neutral.[85]

Statistics are of limited value in linguistic research. Nevertheless, it would be perverse to disregard the massive predominance of YIQTOL as an expression of future/modal action. If the expression of modality—in the sense of non-reality or contemplated action—is indeed the main function of YIQTOL, the other usages reviewed above could be regarded as context-conditioned subsidiary functions. As was pointed out above, the real-present use, the iterative use, and the habitual/general present use of YIQTOL are all amenable to a modal analysis.

Excursus: YIQTOL expressing *imperfective* modality?

If YIQTOL is basically a modal form, a question arises as to the relation between YIQTOL and other modal forms in BH, notably the jussive, the imperative, and the cohortative.[86] The present study is not the place to elaborate upon this question. One issue will briefly be mentioned, however, since it immediately touches upon our subject. In a bid to uphold the aspectual interpretation of YIQTOL, Huehnergard has argued that the difference between negative commands of the form *'al* + jussive and negative commands of the form *lo'* + YIQTOL reflects a difference in aspect:

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84. Notably in some Slavic languages, see Comrie, *Aspect*, 67.

85. This is admitted by Waltke and O'Connor who speak of the "aoristic" value of YIQTOL when it functions in future/modal clauses.

86. Jussive, imperative, and cohortative make up one single (volitive) paradigm, see G. Bergsträsser, *Hebräische Grammatik* (Leipzig, 1929), 2.45.

. . . Both the zero-form *yaqtul* and what we have been calling the imperfect, Central Semitic *yaqtulu*, were probably unmarked for mood: both could occur in both statements and injunctions. What distinguished the two forms, accordingly, was not mood but primarily a matter of aspect, and secondarily of tense: *yaqtul* is a perfective or punctual form, temporally a specific past; *yaqtulu* is an imperfective or durative form, temporally a future.[87]

As can easily be seen, this proposal leans heavily on the hypothesis that YIQTOL expresses imperfective aspect in past-tense contexts (as opposed to perfective WAY-YIQTOL). If one removes this foundation, the aspectual character of the opposition between *'al* + jussive and *lo'* + YIQTOL is severely weakened. On the surface, this opposition seems to be defined along the lines of an *ad hoc* injunction versus a permanent interdiction:

2 Kgs. 19:6   וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם יְשַׁעְיָהוּ כֹּה תֹאמְרוּן אֶל־אֲדֹנֵיכֶם כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה **אַל־תִּירָא** מִפְּנֵי הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתָּ אֲשֶׁר גִּדְּפוּ נַעֲרֵי מֶלֶךְ־אַשּׁוּר אֹתִי

Isaiah said to them, "Say to your master, 'Thus says the LORD: **Do not be afraid** because of the words that you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have reviled me'"

2 Kgs. 17:35   וַיִּכְרֹת יְהוָה אִתָּם בְּרִית וַיְצַוֵּם לֵאמֹר **לֹא תִירָאוּ** אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים

The LORD made a covenant with them, and commanded them, "**You shall not fear** other gods"

This distinction could perhaps be interpreted in an aspectual framework—aspectual meanings in modal statements are notably polysemous. But other categories as well could account for the opposition. In recent years, several scholars have come down in favor of an opposition along the lines of non-volitive YIQTOL vs. volitive jussive-imperative-cohortative.[88] This would seem to be a preferable analysis. However this may be, taken in isolation, the pair *'al* + jussive and *lo'* + YIQTOL does not provide a solid argument in favor of imperfective YIQTOL.

1.5. *Summary*

Our discussion of the aspectual approach has led to a somewhat topsy-turvy description of YIQTOL's function. In a level-headed grammatical analysis it would have been more logical to start out from the regular future/modal function and to work from there to the more exceptional uses discussed in sections 1.3, 1.2, and 1.1.

Perhaps it is fair to sum up the discussion as follows. If one starts out from the supposition that YIQTOL expresses imperfective aspect, it will be possible to account for all or most of the uses of YIQTOL in prose. However, if one focuses on the uses of the form, one does not develop a picture of an imperfective function: the most typical imperfective functions are not expressed by YIQTOL; the function that has most often been advanced in favor of the imperfective interpretation can be explained otherwise; and the predominant function of YIQTOL is non-aspectual in character. It seems better to abandon the imperfective label for YIQTOL and to describe it as a

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87. Huehnergard, "Prefix-Conjugations," 22.
88. See the very precise discussion in Garr, "Driver's *Treatise*," lix–lxv.

future/modal form—with a number of interesting, and linguistically plausible, secondary functions.

The argument holds not only against those who attribute an imperfective value to YIQTOL but also against Waltke and O'Connor's theory of non-perfective YIQTOL. The idea of a non-perfective allows for a wider range of functions, thus accommodating more easily the different uses of YIQTOL. Nevertheless, the fact that YIQTOL does not regularly express the real present or attendant circumstance (see above, section 1.1) makes this hypothesis equally unlikely. Since the non-perfective, in Waltke-O'Connor's description, includes the imperfective, one would have expected it to express these imperfective functions. A non-perfective that is non-imperfective as well merits being called a non-aspectual.

All this raises the question of why the category of aspect was applied to BH in the first place. As noted above, the aspectual hypothesis was set into motion by Ewald in a treatment of Arabic grammar. In classical Arabic, the long form of the prefix conjugation (*yaqtulu*) does express the real present and attendant circumstance.[89] Except for strictures of the kind opposed by Kurylowicz (see section 0.2), the aspectual theory is therefore plausible for Arabic. Could it be that the "the century-old tide of describing the BH verbal system as aspectual" started out from an undue application of Arabic categories to the Hebrew verbal system?

2. *Other finite forms*

If YIQTOL does not express imperfective aspect this makes the aspectual interpretation of the finite forms in BH unfeasible. Language is a system. One should not postulate an opposition between two forms, one of which expresses aspect while the other does not. If YIQTOL is a modal form it should first be discussed in relation to the other modal forms, WEQATAL on the one hand, the cohortative, imperative, and jussive on the other hand. The entire modal system may then be opposed to the remaining verbal forms.[90]

A brief review of the main function of the other finite verbal forms will be given here. It is intended to show that the perfective-imperfective hypothesis is no more appropriate for these forms than for YIQTOL.

2.1. *QATAL*

The predominant use of QATAL is in direct discourse,[91] where it almost always expresses a past action the result of which is relevant to the present:

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89. In this respect, Akkadian *iparras* and Ethiopic *yᵉqattᵉl* go hand in hand with Arabic *yaqtulu*. Hebrew YIQTOL, however, represents a more evolved stage.

90. For a more fleshed-out proposal, see J. Joosten, "The Indicative System of the Biblical Hebrew Verb and its Literary Exploitation," in E. van Wolde, ed., *Narrative Syntax and the Hebrew Bible*, Biblical Interpretation Series 29 (Leiden, 1997), 51–71.

91. This predominance is not as massive as the future/modal use of YIQTOL. In 1 Sam.; 1–10, I count 72 cases of QATAL in narrative and 73 cases in direct discourse.

1 Sam. 3:5   וַיָּרָץ אֶל־עֵלִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי כִּי־**קָרָאתָ** לִּי וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא־**קָרָאתִי**

And he ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am for **you called** me." But he said, "**I did not call**."

Something like this function can also be found in past-tense contexts:

Gen. 2:22   וַיִּבֶן יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַצֵּלָע אֲשֶׁר־**לָקַח** מִן־הָאָדָם לְאִשָּׁה

And the rib which the LORD God **had taken** from the man he made into a woman.

Here, QATAL expresses a past action the result of which is relevant to the time frame of the narrative.[92]

What this suggests is that QATAL should be described primarily as a "perfect."[93] This function may be regarded as aspectual.[94] It should be kept well apart from the perfective function defined above in section 0.1, however.

Cases of non-perfect, "narrative" QATAL could be explained as secondary uses. As has often been noted, "narrative" QATAL is used instead of WAYYIQTOL when for some reason an element other than the verb occupies the first position in the clause.[95] The non-perfect, preterite use of QATAL represents an extension of its main function.

2.2. WEQATAL

On a descriptive level, WEQATAL is the faithful companion of YIQTOL. In passages employing YIQTOL one will very often find WEQATAL as well. Moreover, the two verbal forms express roughly the same functions: future/modal, general and habitual present, repetition in the past. As was argued above in section 1, the said functions are not specifically aspectual. The basic function of WEQATAL, like that of YIQTOL, is to be described in terms of futurity/modality.

2.3. WAYYIQTOL

While the other verbal forms may be used in any time frame—past, present and future—WAYYIQTOL is almost entirely limited to the past.[96] Since WAYYIQTOL is of very frequent occurrence this statistical fact can hardly be due to chance. WAYYIQTOL should therefore be interpreted as a preterite.

WAYYIQTOL may at times be used to represent the perfective aspect, as the examples at the end of section 1.1.B will show (Gen. 19:1; Judg. 13:20; Josh. 3:17; Judg. 6:11; 1 Sam. 14:13; Judg. 20:33; 2 Sam. 18:24). This meaning would appear to be created contextually, not expressed by the verbal form as such.

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92. The "pluperfect" function is expressed by QATAL in circumstantial and causal clauses as well.

93. See Comrie, *Aspect*, 52–65.

94. Other scholars explain the perfect without reference to aspect, however.

95. Given the rules of Hebrew narrative grammar, such a use of QATAL implies in some way a discontinuity in the story-line.

96. See H. Birkeland, "Ist das hebräische Imperfectum Consecutivum ein Präteritum? Eine Untersuchung der gegen den präteritalen Charakter der Form angeführten Stellen," *Acta Orientalia* 13 (1935), 1–34.

Indeed, in other examples, lexical and contextual factors impose an imperfective interpretation for WAYYIQTOL:

2 Sam. 11:2 וַיְהִי לְעֵת הָעֶרֶב וַיָּקָם דָּוִד מֵעַל מִשְׁכָּבוֹ **וַיִּתְהַלֵּךְ** עַל־גַּג בֵּית־הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיַּרְא אִשָּׁה רֹחֶצֶת מֵעַל הַגָּג

It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and **was walking about** on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing.

Septuagint: καὶ ἐγένετο πρὸς ἑσπέραν καὶ ἀνέστη Δαυιδ ἀπὸ τῆς κοίτης αὐτοῦ καὶ **περιεπάτει** ἐπὶ τοῦ δώματος τοῦ οἴκου τοῦ βασιλές καὶ εἶδεν γυναῖκα λουομένην ἀπὸ τοῦ δώματος

Here the WAYYIQTOL form וַיִּתְהַלֵּךְ expresses an action that is begun but not completed before the next event comes about. The structure is not wholly unlike that of the paradigm "John was reading when I entered the room." The early Greek translator, and the English translators of the RSV, correctly perceived this value of וַיִּתְהַלֵּךְ and accordingly rendered it with an imperfective form.[97]

Considered by itself, WAYYIQTOL should be described as aspectually neutral.

3. *Conclusions and perspectives*

In his book titled *L'aspect verbal* (*Verbal Aspect*) David Cohen writes in the preface:

Il n'y a pas ici une théorie de l'aspect. Une théorie demanderait un accord sur le terme lui-même, sur la notion qui lui correspond, sur son champ d'application. Il n'existe pas.[98]

This is still a correct judgment on the state of aspect studies. Even if one sticks to main-stream linguistic writing and to what has been termed "viewpoint" aspect (as opposed to lexical aspect, or *Aktionsart*), no uniformity exists. Most experts will agree that aspect is a useful linguistic category and that it may be found, though not exactly in the same form, in such languages as classical Greek, literary French and Russian. There is no consensus, however, as to how aspectual oppositions are to be described. Definitions of perfective and imperfective are varied, and most of their authors would probably agree that they are tentative. Trying to determine whether something indeterminate is expressed in a given verbal system, and the verbal system of a dead language like BH at that, would seem to be quite a challenge.

If the present demonstration was nevertheless undertaken, it is because the arguments against the aspectual approach seemed extraordinarily strong. The weakest point of the aspectual approach is the identification of YIQTOL as the imperfective member of the aspectual opposition. The enumeration of the functions that are expressed by YIQTOL, particularly if one keeps an eye on the functions that are not expressed by

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97. For other cases where WAYYIQTOL is rendered by an imperfective form in the Septuagint, see Voitila, *Présent et imparfait*. Some examples outside of the Pentateuch: 1 Sam. 7:6,15; 8:3,6,8; 10:1,21; 11:11; 12:10,11; 13:20; 14:19,32,34,47; 15:6; 17:35; 18:7,13; 19:10,23; 21:14; 22:2,4; 23:13,14,18; 27:8; 28:23; 2 Sam. 2:3,23; 3:16; 5:10; 11:2,17; 12:21; 13:2; 15:2,6; 18:25; 19:4; 20:15; 21:16.

98. "One will not find here a theory of aspect. A theory would require an agreement as to the term itself, the corresponding notion and the domain to which it applies. Such an agreement does not exist"; D. Cohen, *Aspect*, 7.

it, clearly indicates that YIQTOL is not an imperfective but a future/modal. In the continuum between early Canaanite and Mishnaic Hebrew, BH stands closer to the latter than to the former in this regard—although enough differences remain between the verbal system of Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew. If YIQTOL is not an imperfective, the aspectual approach as currently practiced breaks down.

The question might be raised whether the predicative participle should not then be identified as the imperfective member in the verbal system. Since the participle is not a finite tense, this question falls outside the scope of the present article. Nevertheless, the discussion of the other finite forms, notably QATAL and WAYYIQTOL, has indicated that an aspectual interpretation of a system including the participle faces a number of challenges of its own. If QATAL expresses the perfect and WAYYIQTOL past tense, this leaves no obvious place for an imperfective participle. It may be better, therefore, to regard aspectual functions of the participle as context-conditioned.