Kleine Untersuchungen zur Sprache des Alten Testaments und seiner Umwelt

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The Article in Epigraphic Hebrew

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Some grammatical remarks
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Current issues in the study of the Biblical Hebrew verbal system

John A. Cook – Asbury Theological Seminary

For almost two centuries now the Biblical Hebrew verbal system has been the object of continuous study by Hebraists and Biblical scholars. Although there is growing common ground in the field, methodological issues hinder the requisite clarification of (dis-)agreements among the various theories. These issues include attention to terminology and their definitions as derived from linguistic discussion, and the critical use of the biblical data along with better awareness of the necessarily philological goal of the field. In this article I examine these issues in historical perspective and offer clarification on the issues. I suggest that without clarification significant progress in the examination of the Biblical Hebrew verbal system (especially the variation evident within the biblical corpus) will remain severely hindered.

Introduction

Interest in the Biblical Hebrew verbal system has not significantly abated for almost two centuries now. This is unsurprising given how central a verbal system is to the grammar of a language. To paraphrase John Lyons (1977: 714), few parts of a language system illustrate better than its tense-aspect-mood system the validity of the structuralist dictum *Tout se tient* ‘everything hangs together’. Attempting to explain the Hebrew verbal system necessarily draws one into explaining many

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1 A version of this article was delivered in January 2014 as a plenary address to the participants of the New Research in Hebrew Language and Culture conference held at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa and to the members of the Old Testament Colloquium: Recent Works on the Hebrew Verbal System, at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY. I am grateful to the organizers of each group for inviting me, and I want to thank the participants for the constructive exchanges that each venue afforded. I am grateful also to Robert D. Holmstedt, who read a draft and provided helpful feedback.
other parts of the grammar, just as almost any other area of study of Hebrew grammar brings one into contact with questions about its tense-aspect-mood system. All this to say that a monograph would be required to treat adequately all the manifold issues currently under discussion or even to provide a complete critical survey the many recent studies on the Biblical Hebrew verbal system. In this article I am aiming at the more modest goal of offering some historical perspective on the study of the Hebrew verbal system through which to reflect critically upon the current state of the field. Although I engage with a number of studies in the course of my discussion, I have made no attempt to be exhaustive in my treatment, since my use of these is for the purpose of illustrating current issues in the study of the BHVS. This article is intentionally methodologically oriented and forward-looking, because I want to encourage further advancement in the study of the Biblical Hebrew verbal system by critically reflecting on the methods used (albeit from a historical perspective) rather than simply summarizing the latest wave of studies to have appeared.

One of the greatest hurdles to overcome upon entering the discussion of the Biblical Hebrew verbal system is terminology, especially when engaging the long history of the field. I begin, therefore, by clarifying some of the terms that I use interchangeably in this article. My focus is on those verbal forms that continue to be debated most, and in general I refer to them in the most neutral way possible, by their simplified transliterated forms, *qatal*, *yiqtol*, *wayyiqtol*, and *wɔqatal*. The list in (1) shows the equivalent labels employed in the following discussion, though I will make no secret of the fact that my sympathies lie with the right-most terms in the list.

(1) Terminological equivalencies for Hebrew verb forms
   a. *qatal* = preterite/past = affix form = perfect/perfective
   b. *yiqtol* = future = prefix form = imperfect/imperfective
   c. *wɔqatal(tti)* = waw-conversive preterite
      = waw-consecutive perfect = irrealis perfect/*qatal*
   d. *wayyiqtol* = waw-conversive future = waw-consecutive imperfect = past narrative
The other terminological clarification I want to make is with respect to the term “gram.” This term is employed as an abbreviation for “grammatical construction,” and has proved useful in linguistic discussions of tense-aspect-mood systems that are a mixture of inflected verbs and periphrastic constructions (see Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca 1994: 2 on the origin of the term). While gram is therefore less restrictive than referring to verbal “forms,” I use conjugation, form, and gram almost interchangeably in this article.

The study of the Hebrew verb in historical perspective

A retrospective view on the study of the Biblical Hebrew verbal system reveals several features that illuminate the current state of the field. In this section I make four statements characterizing this history. The first is that the “debate” over the Hebrew verb is of finite duration. Before the beginning of the nineteenth century the treatment of the Hebrew verbal system was highly uniform, in part due to a singular indebtedness to the medieval Jewish grammarians (e.g., Elias Levita 1518; see Cook 2012b: 83–84). The popularity and uncontested character of this approach is well exemplified in Ashworth’s Hebrew grammar published in 1792. In it he describes the Hebrew “tenses” as follows:

Verbs have several moods and tenses in each conjugation [i.e., bin-yanim]. The moods have much the same signification as in other languages. One preterite expresses all the kinds of past action, and the future what is yet to be done. It also signifies the continuance of any thing, or that it is customary, possible, lawful, reasonable, or desirable, to do it. Instead of a present tense the participle of the present is used, hence called benoni, between, i.e. the past and future. The tenses are often used promiscuously, especially in the poetic and prophetic books (Ashworth, 1792: 16).

Several pages later Ashworth introduces the peculiar use of the waw conjunction with the verbal tenses in these terms:

\` sometimes changes the preterite, as to its signification, into the future, and is called *conversivum preteriti.* \` conv. pret. is prefixed as the conjunction, but may often be distinguished from it by its throwing the accent to the last syllable; as גְּנֵבֵת thou hast learned, גְּנֵבֵת thou wilt learn, or and thou wilt learn.
1 sometimes changes the future in signification into a preterite; it is thence called *conversivum futuri*, and is prefixed by pathah and dagesh, as יִלְמוֹד he will learn, יַלְמוֹד he learned (Ashworth 1792: 24).

The key characteristics of Ashworth’s description are the following: first, he approaches Hebrew from “other,” undoubtedly European, languages, and notes that the verbal “tenses” and “moods” in Hebrew do not differ substantially from these other languages. Second, he identifies the finite forms as *tenses*—namely, the preterite and the future, however, he excludes the participle from the catalogue of finite tenses. Third, he recognizes a degree of “promiscuity” in their meanings especially in the poetic and prophetic books. Fourth, he interprets the *waw* as “converting” the tense meanings of the two finite forms, the preterite and the future.

The second statement regarding the history of the study of the Hebrew verb is that from the time that the terms *perfect* and *imperfect* were introduced as alternatives to the *preterite* and the *future*, debates about the Hebrew verbal system have been framed regularly in terms of “tense” versus “aspect.” Though the details of the introduction of the terms *perfect* and *imperfect* are complex and uncertain in some of the details, the aspectual theory of the Hebrew verb came to be most closely associated with Heinrich Ewald. In his syntax he describes the perfect and imperfect in these terms: “. . . with reference to action, the speaker views everything as either already *finished*, and thus before him, or as *unfinished* and non-existent [i.e., not yet existing], but possibly *becoming* and *coming*” (Ewald 1879: 1).

Ewald also popularized an emerging idea that the so-called conversive *waw* is better understood as “relatively” connecting a verbal meaning to a preceding one to express a temporal or logical sequence. Ewald thus suggested instead of the *waw* conversive, it should be called the

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2 Essentially there is some uncertainty with regard to when and by whom the terms entered the field: Johann Jahn around 1809 (whose quote is mistakenly attributed to Ewald in Waltke and O’Connor [1990: 463]), or Heinrich Ewald in his 1829 Arabic grammar, or by Friedrich Böttcher in 1827 (so Driver 1998: 72). According to McFall (1982: 44), Samuel Lee accused Ewald of plagiarism in his introduction of the terms.
“waw of sequence” or “waw consecutive.” It does not seem an under-statement to say that Ewald’s role in the study of the biblical Hebrew verbal system has been similarly imposing as his student, Wellhausen’s role in Pentateuchal studies.

Third, since the second half of the twentieth century the study of the Hebrew verb has been increasingly indebted to modern linguistic theory. Linguistics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were almost exclusively historical and comparative in character. The comparative-historical approach has continued to contribute to our understanding of the Hebrew verb. A case in point is the explanation of the so-called waw-conversive or waw-consecutive imperfect construction as derived from an old prefixed preterite verb. This view originated from Bauer’s important 1910 historical-comparative study of the Semitic verb in light of Akkadian and is now widely endorsed thanks in part to Rainey’s historical-comparative study of Amarna Canaanite (see esp. Rainey 1986).

At the same time, structuralist linguistics, originating from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, has been more dramatically significant for the study of the Hebrew verb. Consider the indebtedness to structuralist linguistics of the following: Rundgren’s (1961) employment of privative oppositions in his theory of the Hebrew and Semitic verb; Michel’s (1960) insistence that Hebrew must be understood on its own terms before engaging in comparative study of its verbal system; the rise of the notion of relative-tense in Hebrew verb studies; and the introduction of discourse as a factor in explaining the Hebrew verb. Particularly in studies of the Hebrew verbal system from the last quarter of the twentieth century, one can observe a notable increase in the frequency with which studies of the Hebrew verbal system reference linguistic treatments of tense, aspect, and later mood and modality, reflecting the growth of linguistic studies of the world’s verbal systems.

My fourth and final statement about the history of research on the Hebrew verb is simply to note that the effects of all these studies remain little evidenced in commentaries and introductory grammars (see Cook 2008). This is, of course, a relative claim; nevertheless, the similarities

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3 This idea is echoed in Matheus’ (2011: 296) recent comments on Cook (2006), but it remains a problematic approach (see below on the problem of induction).
are striking between the pre-nineteenth century descriptions, such as Ashworth’s (cited above), and those found in some recent elementary grammars. It is especially striking when one recognizes that Gesenius’ grammar, which for its age and for better or ill continues to be cited widely in the field, does not endorse the pre-nineteenth century conver-sive-tense theory of the Hebrew verb. Consider the description offered in a modern elementary grammar:

It is a stylistic device of Biblical Hebrew when narrating a series of past events to begin the narrative with an affix [i.e., perfect] form of the verb and to continue it with a series of verbs in the prefix [i.e., imperfect] form with vav conversive. . . . When a vav ו is attached to the front of an affix form of the verb, it usually serves to give it a future tense translation. Hence the vav “reverses” the tense. The name vav revesive is an analogic extension of the vav conversive for the affix (Kittel, Hoffer, and Wright 1989: 387–88; 2d ed. 2004).

There is little point in attempting to identify the main reason for this lack of dissemination. Undoubtedly there are many, from the datedness of reference grammars, the pragmatism of introductory language instruction that reasons that if it works, why change it, to (and this is the point I really want to drive home) the failure of those engaged in the debate to adequately disseminate their ideas beyond the confines of the debate itself.

Current issues

To the preceding four statements characterizing the history of research on the Hebrew verb, I adjoin here four corresponding statements regarding the current state of the field. The first is that there is more uni-formity in the field than might appear at a glance. This may be due to the fact that the differences are overplayed, or that, as I noted above, the results of recent studies have not been disseminated very well in recent grammars and commentaries. Whatever the reasons, there is benefit to considering precisely where agreement may be had and clarifying where the real differences yet lie.

Singularly significant is that the concept of the conversive waw has been all but abandoned in recent research (see e.g., Cook 2012b; Joosten 2012; Andrason 2011a; Notarius 2013; van de Sande 2008; et
The Biblical Hebrew Verbal System

al.). So well established is this rejection as pertains to the wayyiqtol form, that it appears even in introductory grammars, as the following:

In fact, the yiqtol form has two different origins: *yaqṭulu for imperfect and *yaqṭul for the preterite (referring to past situations). But early in the evolution of the Hebrew language, final short vowels disappeared and so the imperfect form (*yaqṭulu > *yaqṭul) became identical to the preterite (*yaqṭul). In time, *yaqṭul (i.e., either imperfect or preterite) developed to yiqtol. Thus, the yiqtol form may be imperfect or preterite. (Seow 1995: 225–26)

The continued endorsement of the conversive waw and related pre-nineteenth-century notions in other introductory grammars is all the more disconcerting given the widespread rejection of this explanation among scholars (see Cook 2008).

At the same time, the exceptions to the majority view are instructive. One notable exception is Hatav (2004, 2011), who has analyzed the wayyiqtol as constructed of the modal yiqtol with the prefixed morphemes ו and patach with following gemination. She argues that these prefixed morphemes function analogously to the definite article on nouns; namely, they anchor the irrealis event of modal yiqtol in a realis or actual discourse world. Usually this actual world is in past or present time since future situations are with few exceptions “possible” and not actual worlds.4

An exception of a different sort is Furuli (2006), who though he gives no credence to the waw conversive idea, objects to the comparative-historical argument that wayyiqtol is distinct from yiqtol. He argues that

4 A less developed version of this theory appears in DeCaen (1995), who likewise treats wayyiqtol as an underlyingly modal conjugation. A recent variation on this approach, but from a historical and typological perspective, is Wikander (2010), who analyzing the waw prefix on wayyiqtol on analogy with the Indo-European augment, as “a marker of past tense and indicative mood” (2010: 265). Our lack of data on the development of the waw prefix (see e.g., Testen 1998) makes it difficult to pass judgment on Wikander’s analogy one way or the other.
the forms are identical in origin and meaning, and that the morphological distinction between the two forms is a late, Masoretic invention determined by the pragmatics of temporal reference.\(^5\)

Despite the differences between Hatav and Furuli, both of them illustrate a fundamental and persistent problem in the treatment of the Hebrew verb, namely, the failure to adequately grapple with the issue of verbal homonymy. Hatav on principle takes a synchronic approach in her analysis, while Furuli dismisses the historical-critical argument as incredible; but both of them gratuitously assume that having dispensed with the historical critical data, it is self-evident that yiqtol and wayyiqtol consist of same verbal conjugation. Even a casual glance at the distribution of these forms in the Bible demonstrates that semantically or functionally if not etymologically we should treat wayyiqtol as a separate conjugation from both the yiqtol and the Jussive form. Regardless of origin, homonymy is a synchronic phenomenon of language, and it can be analyzed synchronically and semantically without recourse to etymological evidence, if one so chooses. At the same time, I would submit that without the historical dimension to our analysis, we will be left with only a plausible description of the grammar without any real explanation. This is because explanation in linguistics can only come from examining the historical development of one language state out of a previous one (Moravcsik 2007: 38).

The rejection of waw-conversive perfect has resulted in somewhat less uniform analysis of the wqatal. However, a growing number of scholars are affirming both the etymological connection of wqatal with

\(^5\) The problems with Furuli’s theory are much more serious that this brief description admits (see my review, Cook 2010): his reasoning is viciously circular in that he assumes the Masoretes intended to preserve a pragmatic temporal distinction of temporal reference between yiqtol and wayyiqtol, but at the same time he freely attributes errors to the Masoretes in this distinction whenever the data do not fit his pre-determined viewpoint. A variation on Furuli’s approach is Robar’s (2013) analysis of wayyiqtol as “a narrative present, that is, a relative present (deriving past time reference from the narrative’s reference time) with perfective aspect” (2013: 34). Her appeal to Neo-Aramaic is unconvincing and her theory presents no significant advance over Driver’s (1998: 72) nineteenth-century analysis of יָשָׁע as “and-he-proceeded-to-say.”
qatal at the same time as they recognize a distinct irrealis-mood semantics for the waw-prefixed qatal (e.g., Cook 2012b; Matheus 2011; Joosten 2012; Andrason 2011b, 2012). Joosten has been the foremost and one of the longest standing proponents of the irrealis or modal interpretation of wǝqatal. He subscribes to the hypothesis I also have endorsed, that the origin of the irrealis meaning of the wǝqatal lies in the use of the qatal form in conditional apodoses (see Joosten 2012: 16; Cook 2012b: 249–52). Beyond this, however, treatments vary significantly: Matheus (2011: 377) appears to be resigned to no explanation; van de Sande (2008) explains the irrealis meanings as due to a preserved imperfective meaning from the qatal form’s stative origins, a view based on the speculative ideas of Andersen (2000); my own proposal consists of arguing for a verbal–system-wide realis-irrealis word order distinction, thus presenting a unified approach to the expression of irrealis mood by qatal, yiqtol, and the Imperative–Jussive system (Cook 2012b: 233–56). My argument runs counter to Joosten’s (2012: 19) claim that irrealis qatal and yiqtol form a “single paradigm” in which the primary distinction between the two is word order, and sometimes temporal succession. Joosten’s view, in keeping with his generally traditional treatment of the verbal forms, thus retains an element of the nineteenth-century consecutive theory. However, I am uncertain whether he grasps the implication of his argument, which is that in contrast to the verb-subject word order of wǝqatal, the contrasting word order of irrealis yiqtol must be subject-verb. But this runs counter to the well-established argument, going back at least to Rosén 1969, that the irrealis function of yiqtol is frequently distinguished from its realis or indicative meaning by verb-first word order (see also Revell 1989). Joosten’s (2012: 18 n. 26) “corollary,” that all waw-prefixed yiqtol forms are actually Jussives is problematically circular.6

In contrast to Joosten, I believe that finer nuances of meaning can be discerned among the irrealis mood forms, and I have made suggestions as to what sort these may be in my analysis of the irrealis system in Biblical Hebrew, summarized in (2), in which distinctions with regard

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6 His corollary redefines possible counterexamples (i.e., waw-prefixed yiqtol or verb-subject yiqtol) to non-clause-initial yiqtols as Jussives, because they are clause-initial.
to specific types of irrealis modalities are evident among the Impera-
tive-Jussive directive system, irrealis *yiqtol*, and irrealis *qatal*.

(2) The expression of irrealis mood in BH (shaded boxes represent
functional areas; from Cook 2012b: 255).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Irrealis mood</th>
<th>Modalities Directives (Impv.-Juss.)</th>
<th>Irrealis <em>yiqtol</em></th>
<th>Irrealis <em>qatal</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>directive</td>
<td>(subjective)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(procedural)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>volitive</td>
<td>(merger with Directives)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>epistemic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dynamic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contingent</td>
<td>(more lexically marked)</td>
<td>(less lexically marked)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>habitual</td>
<td></td>
<td>(procedural)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the same time, crucial differences remain among the current treat-
ments of *qatal* and *yiqtol*. We might note several points of view en-
dorsed for each of these forms: *qatal* is identified as a relative-tense
anterior verb, a perfective aspect gram, or, though less frequently, a
simple past tense form; and *yiqtol* is understood to be imperfective as-
psect, future tense, or a modal or irrealis mood form. These differences
underscore both the lively preservation of the tense-versus-aspect
framework of the debate and also point to the need to clarify definitions
and terminology if we are to adequately compare the different theories
of the Hebrew verb.

And this constitutes my second point, namely, that we need to clarify
our definitions and terminology both to facilitate comparison and also
so that we might progress beyond the reductionistic tense-versus-aspect
characterization of the debate. To begin with, I urge the field to adopt
the agreed-upon definitions of the various parameters of tense, aspect,
and mood/modalitiy from the field of linguistics. It stands to reason that
given the indebtedness to linguistic theory and data on tense-aspect-
mood systems, Hebrew verb studies would adopt linguists’ definitions
as the basis of their own analysis—and thankfully this is more fre-
cently the case than not. At times, however, the ambiguity of termino-
logical choices appears to betray a desire to enlarge the procrustean bed
into which one wants to fit all the relevant Hebrew data. A case in point
is Joosten’s use of “future-modal” to describe the *yiqtol* form, espe-
cially when he makes vague claims such as that “there is something
inherently modal about questions” (Joosten 2002: 54; cf. Matheus
2011: 297). In don’t think Joosten actually intends to say what he
appears to say here. Rather, I suspect his point is that, given his argument
that *yiqtol* is a future-modal verb, it is unsurprising from a cross-lin-
guistic perspective, that such a form would frequently be preferred in
questions. But this explains very little about the preference of *yiqtol* in
questions, since there is no clear restriction to modal or irrealis mood
verbs in questions in Biblical Hebrew, as illustrated for you by the ex-
amples in (3).

(3) a. Gen 37:15 (question with *yiqtol*)

מַה־תְּבַקֵּשׁ
‘What are you seeking?’

b. Gen 4:10 (question with *qatal*)

עָשִׂיתָ
‘What have you done?’

c. Judg 18:3 (question with predicative Participle)

וֹמֶה אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה בָּזֶה...
‘. . . and what are you doing in this (place)’?

A much more egregious terminological misstep is found in Furuli’s
(2006: 49, 58) study, in which he rejects the notion that aspect can even
be cross-linguistically defined, arguing instead that Hebrew has a par-
ticular kind of perfective: imperfective aspectual distinction that differs
from, say, that of English. He states quite puzzlingly: “because aspect
is a kind of viewpoint, it is not obvious that it has the same nature in
different aspectual languages.” This claim runs counter to the long-
standing employment of labels like perfective and imperfective pre-
cisely to compare aspectual grams cross-linguistically. So although he
might argue that the perfective : imperfective opposition, as defined by
linguists, is unexpressed in the Hebrew verbal system, he cannot simply
adopt these terms while also giving them his own idiosyncratic defini-
tions.

Another sort of confusion prevails among relative-tense theories, which
is more prominent in discussions of the Semitic verb system generally
than in recent monographs on the Hebrew verb. Joosten’s theory is a
prominent and notable exception. However, it is not immediately clear
that his theory features relative tense because he intentionally eschews
that label as too restrictive, leading him to talk about “time reference”
as something distinct from “tense”: “QATAL and the predicative parti-
ciple are –TENSE but +TIME REFERENCE, the former expressing an-
teriority, the latter expressing contemporaneity” (Joosten 2012:
27). But this is nonsense. Although linguists have long disting uished
between tense and temporal location, in such discussions the definition
of tense is grammaticalized time reference (e.g., Comrie 1985: 9), beg-
ging the question of what a verb marked for time reference could pos-
sibly be if not some sort of tense marked form. As I discuss further
below, Joosten’s ideas regarding time reference (i.e., relative tense) de-
rive from Kuryłowicz’s (1973) now outdated model of the Semitic verb
(Kouwenberg [2010: 95] also traces the origins of the relative tense the-
ory applied to Akkadian to Kuryłowicz). Not only is Kuryłowicz him-
self as unclear as Joosten is in his description of his grand opposition of
anteriority : simultaneity (see discussion in Cook 2012: 135–39), but
Kuryłowicz’s central claim that tense distinctions are more basic to lan-
guage than aspectual ones has been undermined by recent typolog ical
data on the world’s verbal systems (esp. Bybee and Dahl 1989: 83; see
tense theories of the Semitic verb make the same misstep when they try
to argue that secondary meanings of relative tense are primary mean-
ings for the Semitic verb oppositions (e.g., Streck 1995: 241–42).7

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7 This is not to diminish the value of distinguishing primary and secondary
This sort of argument seems to derive from a persistence of the either- 
or mentality about the categories of tense, aspect, and mood (i.e., if it 
expresses relative tense it cannot be aspectual or vice-versus), and is 
shown to be greatly impoverished compared with the recent advances 
among linguists about the predictability of tense values of primarily as-
pectual grams (e.g., Smith 2008, on which see further below).

It is instructive to compare the definition-inherent disagreements in the 
field of Hebrew verb study with the high degree of uniformity in the 
understanding of these terms in linguistic studies. A glance through ma-
jor reference works such as the Atlas of Linguistic Structures (2005) 
and the Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics (2006) among others 
shows widespread agreement between their presentations of tense, as-
pect, and mood as well as consistency with the touchstone monographs 
on each parameter, such as Comrie 1976 and 1985, and Palmer 1986. 
This is not to say that linguists are in complete agreement with one an-
other. In fact, it is helpful to point out that the debates about qatal and 
yiqtol in some respects hinge on long-standing open questions in lin-
guistics.

The first of these open questions is whether the anterior or perfect is 
best analyzed as a tensed or aspectual gram. On the one hand, Reichen-
bach’s R-point relative tense theory, introduced in 1947, ingeniously 
incorporated the perfect gram into a tense theory whereas previous 
models, notably Otto Jespersen’s (1924: 269) had been unable to in-
clude it. On the other hand, the traditional label “perfect” and its expla-
nation as relating a state to a preceding situation is well-rooted in as-
pectual thought. The fact is that whether analyzed as anterior relative 
tense or perfect aspect, this particular gram is unique by virtue of its 
ability to combine both with other tense distinctions, such as in the En-
lish Past or Future Perfect, and other aspectual distinctions, such as in 
the English Progressive Perfect, illustrated in (4).

meanings (see Gzella 2011: 12), which is akin to Jakobson’s division of general 
and specific that I embrace below. Streck, however, simultaneously accepts 
Comrie’s general description of relative tense while dismissing, with little argument, 
Comrie’s characterization of relative tense as a secondary meaning of aspectual 
grams.
(4)  a. She had done this. (Past Perfect)
    b. She will have done this. (Future Perfect)
    c. She will have been doing this. (Future Progressive Perf.)

A similar open question exists with respect to future expressions: are all references to future situations inherently irrealis mood, or can we speak about a realis or actual (tensed) future? While many languages exhibit a good deal of promiscuity among future and irrealis mood expressions (e.g., English Future will), rarely a future tense marking may combine with irrealis grams, such as the Latin Future Imperative or Spanish Future Subjunctive.

We could argue, as some have, that it is irrelevant whether these forms are identified as tense, aspect, or mood, since anterior or perfect and future or irrealis are the real building blocks of a tense-aspect-mood system. However, such an argument misses the crucial structuralist dimension that tense-aspect-mood systems are comprised of oppositions, which give the labels of these broader domains their significance. As Lindstedt (2001: 770) observes: “The perfective and imperfective aspect . . . cannot be conceived of without each other.” Lack of appreciation of standard definitions and this insight about oppositions has led to anomalous configurations being proposed for the Hebrew verbal system. For example, see my remarks (Cook 2006: 27) on the system advanced by Joosten, and note Notarius’ (2013: 15, 20) misleading (at best) choice of “perfect” and “imperfective” as labels for the qatal and yiqtol, respectively, based on convenience or a failure to grasp the crucial standard linguistic distinction between the perfect and perfective aspect.

But unfortunately more is required than simply agreed-upon definitions. There is a long-standing, caricature-like thinking that if one applies a label like, for example, perfective aspect to a verb form, it is thereby barred from any ability to express temporal distinctions associated with tense. This single-parameter stigmatization, as we might term it, has elicited some of the most animated rhetoric in the field, such as Rainey’s (1986: 7) well-known remark that “[t]he ancient Israelite farmer certainly knew when to milk his cow and his language was adequate to explain the routine to his son” So let us be clear, with Rainey: human languages have adequate means with which to express an array
of temporal meanings associated with the categories of tense, aspect, and mood/modality—distinctions which are predominantly associated with verbal systems.

The perceived confinement of a single-parameter definition for the Hebrew verb forms has elicited an opposite but equally unhelpful approach, represented by the recent works of Alex Andrason. According to this approach, in which the diachronic and synchronic dimensions are collapsed, the various meanings that a verbal gram exhibits over its history are “all viewed as contemporaneous” (Andrason 2010: 18). Thus the task of defining a gram becomes a matter of identifying its universal path of development and its various trajectories, rather than associating it with a single parameter. At a terminological level this would appear to solve the dilemma mentioned above of having to decide between anterior or perfective or past for *qatal* and, likewise, imperfective, future, or irrealis for *yiqtol*. Unfortunately, this “panchronic” approach introduces a whole other set of difficulties because panchrony is a mirage or rhetorical flourish at best (so Newmeyer 1998: 284–94): as Hale (2007: 33) so trenchantly observes, in contrast to changes in the physical universe, which involve modifications of the same substance, in the case of language change, “we must confront the fact that there is, in a very real sense, a different object (a different grammar) with each new generation.” The problems of panchrony are reflected in the fatal inconsistency of Andrason’s claims, as pointed out by Bergström (2014: 58–59): on the one hand, Andrason argues that the BH verbal grams, synchronically viewed, present a “heterogeneous” grouping of “contemporaneous” meanings that cannot be associated with a single-parameter (homogeneous) meaning; on the other hand, he argues that diachronically he can identify a single-parameter homogeneous gram from which these heterogenous meanings are “easily derivable” (2010: 28). Given the inherently cyclical character of grammaticalization (see Hopper and Traugott 2003: 9; Croft 2003: 253), if Andrason’s argument about the heterogeneous character of the meaning of verbal grams is valid at one stage of the language, it should apply to all stages of the language. Thus, one would be as unlikely to find a diachronically homogeneous origin for the heterogeneous meanings as a synchronic one.
Instead of a panchronic approach, what the Biblical Hebrew data call for is an approach that distinguishes among diachronically related yet distinct (i.e., each synchronically coherent) grammars, because although each successive generation is dependent on the output of the grammar of the previous generations, some intergenerational differences in grammar cannot grammatically coexist without confusion. This is well illustrated by the argument in Cook 2012a, in which I argue that there is a discernible shift in the encoding strategies for present states of stative predicates in Biblical Hebrew (see examples in 5): at an earlier stage a stative predicate like ידע ‘know’ encoded with the perfective qatal conjugation could express a present state, whereas at a later stage, the Participle or qatal could express a present state, whereas at a later stage, the Participle or viqtol was employed to express present states with ידע and other stative predicates.

(5) Encoding strategies and the interpretation of ידע (from Cook 2012a: 90)

a. Qal Perfect = present state

כִּי יָדַע עֲבָדְךָ אֲנִי קָפָא

‘For your servant knows that I have sinned.’ (2 Sam 19:21; see also 2 Sam 14:22)

b. Qal Perfect = past state

כִּי־יָדְעוּ יְהוָה בְּשֶׁלִּי כִּי־מִלִּפְנֵי הָאֲנָשִׁים

‘For the men knew that he was running away from Yhwh.’ (Jon 1:10)

c. Qal Active Participle = present state

כִּי אָנִי יוֹדֵעַ בְּשֶׁלִּי כִּי פְשָׁעַי

‘For I know that on my account this storm has (come) upon you.’ (Jon 1:12)

d. Qal Imperfect = present state

כִּי־יָדְעוּ אֶלְהֵנִי הַגָּדוֹל הַסַּעַר

‘For I know my transgressions / and my sin is continually before me.’ (Ps 51:5)

The point I want to make from this example is that if my argument about ידע is correct, there had to have been a time when the form ידע (Qal...
Perfect 3ms) could no longer have been employed to express a present state, ‘he knows’ without being misunderstood as ‘he knew’; instead, the speaker of that grammar would have been required to encode the present state with the Participle or Imperfect. Such diachronic shifts in meaning cannot be treated adequately as “contemporaneous.”

Beyond this central objection to the panchronic approach, I want to mention two other problems with Andrason’s study of the Hebrew verb as a segue to my third and fourth points. The first is his uncritical use of examples from the standard grammars, particularly his apparent treatment of their taxonomies as self-evidently valid, even when it involves the attribution of a rare or contested meaning. A case in point is his citation of Ps 22:30 to illustrate the future meaning of wayyiqtol. Despite the impression one gets from the consistent future rendering of this qatal-wayyiqtol series in modern translations, the ancient versions overwhelmingly favor a past rendering, as shown in (6). This evidence should at least give us pause regarding the validity of the future interpretation.8

(6) Ps 22:30a

אכלו ישתו כל דשניאירימ

‘All the fat/rich of the earth ate/will eat and bowed down/will bow down.’

LXX (Aorists):

ἔφαγον καὶ προσεκύνησαν πάντες οἱ πίστες τῆς γῆς

Vulgate (Perfects):

comederunt et adoraverunt omnes pingues terrae

Targum (Perfects):

שעדו ראעון כל דודני ארשא

Peshitta (Imperfects):

8 The Septuagint, Targum, and Vulgate all render with past-time verbs; the Peshitta uses Imperfect verbs. Neither Gesenius (Kautzsch 1910) nor Joüon (2006) cite this example to illustrate future wayyiqtol, though Waltke and O’Connor (1990: 557) do.
Andrason’s justification for his use of such examples as being merely illustrative hardly helps when he defends his approach in the following terms:

The unquestionable physical fact is that there are about 15,000 instances of the *wayyiqtol* in the Hebrew Bible. . . . Since the meaning is a sense that the construction conveys in a given context, at a certain level of analysis, every single use will receive a different meaning. Thus, 15,000 cases of the gram will generate 15,000 distinct meanings. Furthermore, because the total meaning of the gram is a computation of all specific values (i.e. of meanings conveyed in concrete uses), if we wish to present the *wayyiqtol* (define it or explain its overall meaning) in an absolutely accurate manner, faithfully according to the objective reality, we would have to provide all 15,000 examples and impartially state: “this is what the *wayyiqtol* is” (2011a: 23 n. 32).

This statement illustrates well the other, associated problem with Andrason’s theory: it is philologically useless, because he intentionally avoids any claims that one or another meaning of a gram is more or less likely in a given context. Rather, his entire theory is predicated on the assumption that we already understand all the “concrete uses” of these verb forms, and his task is merely to assign the seemingly “random and unconnected” meanings to a single universal path.9

This brings us quite naturally to the third of my four main points, the problem of induction. We cannot assume, as Andrason does, that we already understand the meanings of the Hebrew verbal forms in every instance.10 At the same time, we cannot simply generalize from our philological analyses of some individual examples to a meaning that is

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9 Though less seriously, Bergström (2014) falls into this same error of assuming the interpretation of individual examples is unproblematic, and what is really required is merely a coherent theoretical basis for the exhibited range of meanings.

10 A converse sort of argument to Andrason’s (above) is the objection Pardee (2012: 287 n. 10) raises with regard to my past-tense theory of the *wayyiqtol* form based on his understanding of a single case: “I remain, however, unconvinced (I see no reason to take *wayyiqbah* in Isa 5:16, for example, as past tense and no reason to doubt that more forms with this function would be attested in a larger corpus).”
inherently valid in all occurrences, which appears to be the aim of scholars who provide us with a statistical tally of their own philological judgments. The only solution to this vicious circle is to find some external means of validating our theories of the Hebrew verb, and given the absence of native speakers, the only recourse I see for such external validation is the extensive linguistic typological data on the world’s verbal systems.

Advocacy of this approach is found throughout my own work on the Hebrew verb, so I do not want to enter into a lengthy defense of my own position here. Instead, let me just illustrate the sort of insights we can glean from the typological data with just a couple of examples. The first comes from my exchange with Joosten in the *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* (Joosten 2002 and Cook 2006). There I examined the underlying difference in our analyses of the Hebrew verbal system as that between relative tense (Joosten’s view) and aspect (my view). Joosten’s comments pointed to an endorsement of Kuryłowicz’s (1973) long-standing claim that relative tense is a more “basic” distinction in the world’s verbal systems than is aspect. As reasonable as that claim may have been when Kuryłowicz made it in 1973, the immense amount of research on tense-aspect-mood systems since then point overwhelmingly to the reverse situation. Bybee and Dahl (1989) observe that the type of verbal system that occurs in about every other language in their extensive typological studies of the world’s verbal systems is one consisting of a basic aspectual opposition with a secondary tense distinction. The contrast between the configuration Bybee and

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11 The misuse of statistics in the field is particularly egregious: for statistics to be useful, that which is measured must be objective, such as morphological form. A statistical report of a scholar’s philological analysis is nothing more than that—a tally of their philological opinion about the text.

12 For this reason we cannot advocate abandonment of linguistics for a purely philological approach to the verb. Joosten (pers. comm.) has quipped to me that while I deal with “theory” he is focused on “data,” which appears to me to betray just such an attitude. That his recent treatment of the verb (Joosten 2012) appears so traditional when compared with Gesenius’ (Kautzsch 1910) Driver’s (1998) seems to confirm my impression.
Dahl observe and Kuryłowicz’s model is illustrated in (7) on the following page.

These results thus provide an external argument that the aspecual explanation of qatal and yiqtol are intrinsically more likely to be correct than a relative-tense analysis of the Hebrew verbal system.¹³ Thus typological studies enable us to measure our theories about the Hebrew verb as more or less plausible given the variety of ways in which tense-aspect-mood systems are configured among the world’s languages (see further Cook 2012b: 199–201).¹⁴

(7) Kuryłowicz’s (1973) and Byblee and Dahl’s (1989) tense-aspect models.

   a. Kuryłowicz’s tense-aspect model
      past : non-past
      perfective : imperfective

   b. Bybee and Dahl’s tense-aspect model
      perfective : imperfective
      past : non-past

The second example involves the yiqtol conjugation. Waltke and O’Connor (1990: 476–77) claim that the range of meanings broad enough to warrant labeling yiqtol “non-perfective,” since it is not simply the logical opposite of perfective qatal but “a more than opposite” conjugation. Joosten (2002; cf. Cook 2006) determines the irrealis meanings of yiqtol to be so dominant as to warrant identifying it as

¹³ Matheus (2011: 296) displays complete ignorance of the problem of induction and the value of linguistic typology when he claims that this argument (as made in Cook 2006: 32) is “null” because each verbal system must be studied separately (so also Michel 1960: 1).

¹⁴ For this reason it is helpful to talk about aspect-prominent versus tense-prominent languages (see Bhat 1999), since it is the “prominence” of marking in the tense-aspect-mood system that is the real focus of debate, not whether the language lacks all ability to express one or the other sort of temporal distinctions.
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a future-modal gram and attempting, with difficulty, to explain away the few examples of realis yiqtol as actually irrealis.

Unfortunately, both the non-perfective and future-modal labels are too general and vague to allow any cross-linguistic comparison. But if we approach the issue from the other direction, by looking in the typological data for grams with similarly broad semantics, we find analogous cases to yiqtol among imperfective grams. In particular, linguists have identified cases in which an imperfective gram has shifted to primarily expressing general future and irrealis mood because of competition with other grams that semantically overlapping with its prototypical imperfective meanings (Haspelmath 1998). Analyzing the Biblical Hebrew data in light of such examples, we can see how competition between imperfective yiqtol and the predicatively used Participle expressing progressive aspect has led to the shift towards the dominant future and irrealis functions of yiqtol. Thus, the typological data confirm the imperfective identification and provide us with comparable cases to explain the broad and largely irrealis meanings associated with imperfective yiqtol.

My fourth point, which also emerges from my critique of Andrason, is that we have to keep before us the philological aim of our study of the Biblical Hebrew verb. Andrason’s work fails biblical scholars on precisely this point: it provides no guidance to the philologist for deciding which possible meaning is more probable for a form in a particular passage. It is perhaps inattention to this goal that has contributed to the lack dissemination of the results of Hebrew verb studies, because for students of Hebrew and biblical commentators the final question is bound to be: how does your theory help me decide how to interpret this particular verb in this particular text? To answer such a question, we cannot use Andrason’s one-dimensional model that treats all meanings as “contemporaneous,” nor should we settle for verdicts such as Joosten’s (2012: 19) that the yiqtol and woqatal make up “a single paradigm,” without being open to discerning further nuances between them as our research on specific passages advances.

Rather, it seems imperative to me, in order to address the philological needs, that we retain the useful linguistic distinction of a general mean-
ing for each verb form and specific meanings for them, which are explained by recourse to the general meaning.¹⁵ Such an approach takes seriously the compositional nature of meaning by aiming to account for the contribution of the general meaning of a verbal conjugation to a specific literary and syntactic context. Let me illustrate how such an approach can cut through some longstanding disputes. First, recall the problem of the single-parameter stigmatization manifested as the perfective-aspect versus past-tense argument over qatal. Typological studies point to a close relationship between the two meanings, so that Dahl (1985: 79) was inclined to identify past tense as a “secondary” meaning of perfective verbs. More recently, Smith (2008), in her studies of the “tenseless” languages of Navajo and Mandarin Chinese, argued that such languages have a default temporal interpretation, whereby given a neutral context the perfective verb will default to a past temporal interpretation. Thus, the aspect versus tense argument over qatal can be dismantled, and the predominantly, but not exclusively, past temporal interpretation can be understood as a specific meaning explainable with respect to the general meaning of perfective aspect for the gram.

A second example, also involving qatal, is its use in performative statements, in which the speaker accomplishes something in the act of speaking. Linguists recognize that performative expressions are not limited to a specific verb form. However, depending on how the tense-aspect-mood system is constituted, languages will give preference to one or another gram in performative expressions: specifically, in languages with tensed verbal systems, the present tense is preferred (Dobbs-Allsopp 2004–7: 57), while those with a primarily aspectual verbal system prefer to employ the perfective verb (so Dahl 1985: 81).¹⁶ The reason for this preference of the perfective is easy to explain by its punctiliar quality, whereby the event spoken by a perfective verb in present temporal reference occurs at the moment of speaking. For this reason, linguists recognize a strong restriction on perfective-present

¹⁵ The distinction of general and specific meanings goes back in linguistic studies to Jakobson’s (1936) work on Russian nouns. It has an important conceptual link with Aristotle’s distinction between defining and accidental properties. For a defense of this approach in contrast to “fuzzy” categories, see Cook 2012b: 179.
time expressions, namely, to that of performatives and reportative speech (e.g., play by play sports casting; see Smith 1997: 185; Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca 1994: 126). Thus, the performative use of *qatal* is a specific meaning in a present temporal frame of the perfective aspect gram.

The same sort of approach should be taken with regard to the discourse-pragmatic functions of the Hebrew verbal forms. Discourse studies of verbal systems frequently associate certain discourse-level functions with verbal forms while ignoring the semantics of those forms, which leads to a faulty circular reasoning required to maintain these associations. For example, the argument that *wayyiqtol* simply signals foregrounded narrative events, requires that we be able to recognize foregrounded narrative events independently of *wayyiqtol*, which then begs the question why it would be necessary to mark such events by the *wayyiqtol* form to begin with (see Cook 2012b: 273). Instead, let me suggest that we accept the common-sense observation by linguists that very few items in language have only a discourse function (so Comrie 1986: 21; quoted in Cook 2012b: 274). Rather, semantic meaning and discourse function relate symbiotically, so that the discourse functions are explainable by recourse to the semantic meaning of a verb, and in turn may actually alter the meaning of the form (so Fleischmann 1990: 23). Thus, I would submit that semantic analysis of the Biblical Hebrew verbal system must precede a discourse-pragmatic analysis. Otherwise, the discourse analysis threatens to fall into the circular reasoning I just described, and thereby limit itself to description without actually explaining how the system works.

So to conclude my point about philology, I submit that in order to make headway in the philological application of our studies of the Hebrew verb, we need to recognize that the Biblical Hebrew verbal forms each have a general meaning that enables us to explain each form’s specific meanings as composed of the general meaning and the particulars of the context in which the form appears. Thus, for the philologist, the overarching question with regard to the Hebrew verb must therefore be: given the general meaning of a form and the specific meanings it might have in various contexts, what is the range of meanings this form may
have in this text with which I am dealing? To adapt Umberto Eco’s (1992: 43) comment on literary interpretation: “[The verb in a particular passage] can mean many things, but there are senses that it would be preposterous to suggest.”

Conclusion

Interest in the Biblical Hebrew verbal system continues, but significant progress is hindered by the persistent methodological issues outlined above. Careful use of terminology and an awareness of the field’s dependence on linguistics for its understanding of the terms and categories, along with a more critical approach to the data, all while keeping in focus the field’s philological goal are all necessary for the advancement of the discussion through clarification of agreements substantive differences among theories.

In particular, the sort of advancement needed in the field is the examination of variation in the Biblical Hebrew verbal system, rather than continuing to either grossly lump the entire corpus of data together or cautiously but naïvely restrict one’s analysis to “Standard Biblical Hebrew” (e.g., Joosten 2012) or the like. Recent studies in this vein include such as del Barco’s (2003) discourse examination of prophetic discourse, Notarius’ (2013) analysis of the verb in archaic Hebrew poetry, in Cohen’s (2013) recent investigation of the verb in late Biblical Hebrew, and my own study of the verb in Qohelet (Cook 2013). Without methodological and theoretical clarity of the sort I am advocating here, such studies cannot be easily carried out or assessed and compared with related investigations in the field.

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17 It is helpful to note that as with all hermeneutical enterprises, this process is circular (or spiral-like), because the specific meanings and the general meaning are always susceptible to revision based on the weight of evidence of specific (philological) cases.
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