A review of

Joosten’s work is a landmark publication and the capstone of his career-long study of the Hebrew verbal system—an interest that extends back to the beginning of the 1980s, as he explains in the preface. Joosten’s analyses of the Hebrew verbal forms, scattered in various journal articles and book chapters, appear together here in a work whose scope is ambitious. In the first four chapters, he discusses the basics of the inventory of forms and their semantic and text-linguistic functions (chap. 1), he provides an overview of the system through an examination of the oppositions among the verbal forms (chap. 2), he explores meaning variation for the verbal forms due to interactions with lexical semantics, adverbial modification, and similar syntactic configurations (chap. 3), and he treats inter-clausal relationships among verbal forms (chap. 4). At this point he returns in detail to the “usage” of each of the main verbal forms in turn—the wayyiqtol, qatal, predicative participle, yiqtol and weqatal, and the volitives, respectively (chaps. 5–9). The final three chapters he devotes to text-linguistic perspectives on the verbal forms (chap. 10), changes to the system in late Biblical Hebrew (in contrast to the focus of his work on the Classical Biblical Hebrew corpus; chap. 11), and the function of the verbal forms in poetry (chap. 12). In the back of the book are a bibliography, index of Scripture references, and a detailed table of contents, which presumably serves in lieu of a topical index.

Although Joosten’s book should represent a welcome addition to the field, I found the book to be disappointing because of the confused and problematic analyses in it. It is easy enough to quibble over analyses of individual passages in a book that treats so much data, as this one does. But what the reader needs to be aware of are two problems that are pervasive in the book and undermine its contribution to the field. First, the linguistic theory is
underdeveloped and outdated, leading to incomplete analyses, ad hoc explanations, and special pleading regarding the data. Second, the book shows repetitious, uneven treatments related to the lengthy development of the manuscript, so that the reader sometimes faces multiple and potentially contradictory explanations of the same phenomenon.

The origin of these two pervasive problems can be identified from Joosten’s opening comments. In the acknowledgements he states that his interest in the Hebrew verbal system began at the beginning of the 1980s, and he cites F. Rundgren (1921–2006) and J. Kuryłowicz (1895–1978) as the early and formative influences on his thinking (p. ii). It is evident that Joosten’s thinking in many regards has progressed little beyond these early formative influences, even while the linguistic discussion of tense-aspect-mood has advanced markedly. He begins the body of the book by stating his intent “to keep theory and technical terminology to a minimum,” so as to fulfill his “practical” goal of providing exegesis with “a dependable analysis” of the Hebrew verbal forms (p. 1). It is laudable to keep theoretical discussion from hindering the reader’s understanding of the analysis of the data. But it is a problem if keeping theory “to a minimum” glosses over a faulty, underdeveloped, or outdated theory behind the analysis. Joosten does not provide a theory-uncluttered analysis as much as a theory-thin and outdated one. This is particularly evident in his vague and underdeveloped idea of future-modal/irrealis, in his idiosyncratic understanding of anterior qatal, which is indebted to Kuryłowicz’s outdated ideas, and in his inadequate accounting for the role of situation aspect and the semantic property of boundedness.

Joosten states in his acknowledgements that the first two chapters were “in near-final form” after a sabbatical in 2001–2002 (p. i). This claim is substantiated by the difficulty in finding any post-2000 sources cited in the first two chapters. It is also evident from the repetitive organization, whereby Joosten summarizes in preliminary form in chapters 1–3 what he revisits in more detail in chapters 5–9. While not a problem per se, the time-lag between the “near-final” writing of the first two chapters and the later treatments has left its mark in the form of incongruous and sometimes contradictory explanations between corresponding sections. Below I explore these two central problems with the book.

Joosten applies the labels “future-modal” and “irrealis” both to the yiqtol and weqatal pair as well as the cohortative-imperative-jussive group. The latter group he distinguishes from the former pair by labeling them as “volitives” and defining them in fairly recognizable terms as expressing the will
of the speaker in commands, wishes, requests, and the like (e.g., pp. 32, 65–67, chap. 9). The *yiqtol* and *weqatal* pair, however, are defined in vague and mostly negative terms: they denote events as somehow not real (irrealis), and are generally (see p. 67) not an expression of a speaker’s will (non-volitive) (e.g., pp. 32, 93). Positively, the *yiqtol* and *weqatal* “express futurity and other modal nuances” (p. 93). The imprecision of this definition results in ad hoc, and sometimes contradictory explanations for the data. For instance, Joosten provides at least three separate explanations for the use of future-modal/irrealis *yiqtol* in questions: questions are “inherently modal” (p. 62), this is a “residual” function of *yiqtol* from its imperfective stage (pp. 78, 279), and it is “idiomatic” (p. 279). It is unclear how the reader is supposed to arbitrate between these alternative explanations.

Joosten says very little about the expression of epistemic modality (i.e., expressions in which speakers comment about the possibility or necessity of an event) as a subset of irrealis, beyond a passing comment recognizing it as such (p. 32). Thus, on p. 156, where Joosten examines the issue of “subordinated negative volitive,” he has no explanation as to why the ל + *yiqtol* construction (e.g., Gen 43:8, and 1 Sam 5:11) is preferred to the ה + jussive (e.g., 1 Sam 12:19). However, his volitive : non-volitive distinction between jussive and *yiqtol* suggests that there should be a semantic contrast between the two constructions. I submit that more attention to the epistemic function of modal *yiqtol* would have provided Joosten with a convincing explanation of the contrast: the negative jussive in 1 Sam 12:19 is volitive, expressing the speakers’ wish not to die ( görünt תָּבָּאַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּרְגַּג
Habitual has recently been convincingly analyzed as an irrealis modality. Rather than struggling to exclude past-time uses of *yiqtol* as potential evidence for its imperfective identification by relying on the ill-suited label “iterative,” Joosten’s theory would be both bolstered and clarified by adopting the idea that habituality is irrealis, thus better explaining the regular employment of irrealis *yiqtol* and *weqatal* in past habitual expressions.

A final example of the problems with Joosten’s future-modal/irrealis category is his treatment of “general present” (i.e., gnomic statements; pp. 61, 277). He explains that because these expressions refer to events that “recur universally,” it should be unsurprising that the irrealis *yiqtol* form is regularly employed. This explanation is more befitting of habitual *yiqtol* than gnomic *yiqtol*. Although habituality and gnomic statements are semantically related, this analysis wrongly suggests there is something inherently irreal about *yiqtol* gnomic expressions. Joosten recognizes a gnomic meaning for realis *qatal* (p. 205), and the realis participle is the next most common predicate (i.e., leaving aside null-copular expressions) after *yiqtol* in the gnomic expressions of Proverbs. Thus it seems unlikely that *yiqtol* alone and always expresses irrealis in gnomic sayings, especially when we frequently find *yiqtol* and the participle in parallel, as in Prov 15:20 (אֱלֹהִים אֶחְיָה יִבְלֶדֶת אֶחְיָה אֱלֹהִים אֶחְיָה יִבְלֶדֶת “A wise son *gladdens* his father but a dolt of a man *despises* his mother”).

Joosten’s analysis of *qatal* is confusing in large part due to his reliance on Kuryłowicz’s and outdated ideas about tense-aspect systems. Joosten claims that *qatal* and the predicative participle form an “anterior-contemporaneous opposition” best defined as –TENSE and +TIME REFERENCE (p. 27). Such a statement will make little sense to any reader

familiar with the standard linguistic definition of tense as the grammaticalized expression of time reference. It would be tempting for a reader to identify this opposition as one of relative tense, had Joosten not previously ruled that out as too restrictive of a category (pp. 26–27). It is likewise tempting to interpret anterior as a perfect, as some linguists employ the term, except that on p. 74 Joosten identifies the perfect meaning as “intermediate” (diachronically speaking) between the stative and the anterior. More confusing yet, in the same location (p. 74) he also makes the seeming contradictory statement that “QATAL basically expresses the perfect.” Readers may be at a loss to determine where this unique category of non-tensed time reference comes from without reading Kuryłowicz 1973 (cited in the section head) or Joosten 2002, in which he discusses the Kuryłowicz background to his ideas at more length. What one finds in these publications is Kuryłowicz’s idea of a binary time opposition that does not answer to any particular category of tense-aspect in modern linguistic discussion.

An informed reader faces two alternatives: either accept the argument that Biblical Hebrew (and Semitic according to Kuryłowicz) exhibits an idiosyncratic temporal distinction in its verbal systems that has been completely overlooked in recent linguistic literature, or disagree with Joosten’s own denial and recognize that the opposition he describes is one of relative tense. The former option leaves the reader with no means of evaluating Joosten’s analysis of these forms, since there is no basis for understanding the category. The latter leads to serious doubts regarding this aspect of his theory.

Specifically, that linguists regularly recognize relative tense as a secondary function of aspectual verb forms raises the question of whether a more compelling analysis of the qatal and predicative participle “opposition” would be as perfective and progressive aspectual forms that secondarily express relative tense distinctions of anteriority and simultaneity.

Joosten’s introduction to situation aspect (Aktionsart) raises more questions than it answers, when he describes it in these terms: “A process may be

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10 See B. Comrie, Tense, p. 63.
dynamic or stative, durative or punctual, bounded or unbounded, transformative or not” (p. 37). To begin with, using “process” in this way already introduces confusion given that linguists generally apply the term to activities or to activities and accomplishments, but never use it to describe states.11 Hence, how can a process be “dynamic or stative”? Further, it is unclear how durative differs from unbounded and punctual from bounded in Joosten’s discussion. Linguists understand boundedness as distinct from both situation aspect (e.g., durative and punctual events) and viewpoint aspect (e.g., perfective and imperfect).12 Joosten illustrates situation aspect by contrasting the Qal and Hitpael of דֵלֵל (“walk” versus “walk around”), which he classifies as a non-durative: durative contrast (p. 37). But this is a poor example for the purpose of introducing situation aspect: although durative or iterative is sometimes employed to distinguish these two verbs, Benton correctly points out that they do not actually differ in Aktionsart (i.e., situation aspect), at least without some further modification of the predicate.13 Namely, while the Qal verb can be transformed into an accomplishment by the addition of a locative prepositional phrase (e.g., He went to the place, Gen 22:3), the Hitpael cannot be so transformed but remains an activity (e.g., God was walking in the garden, Gen 3:8).

The lack of clarity in introducing situation aspect is matched by imprecise explanations for specific examples. A selection of just a few of these may be given here. On p. 55 Joosten contrasts the qatal and participle of the stative הָלַךְ ‘be sick’. Rather than exploring the interaction of states with qatal (frequently an inchoative meaning) versus the participle (rarely inchoative), he states that “in most cases, the difference can be clearly felt.” On p. 83 Joosten argues that the situation type with wayyiqtol can be punctual or durative, citing as an example of punctual וַיָּכַר אַבְרָם ‘Abram went’ (Gen 12:4) and as durative וַיְלָכָה הָאָדָם ‘Her husband went with her’ (2 Sam 3:16). But there is no such contrast here. In isolation, both these predications are durative activities; in context, they are both durative-telic accomplishments: Gen 12:4 implies that Abram went to Canaan, and 2 Sam 3:16 has an

overt locative expression ‘as far as Bahurim’. On pp. 85–86 Joosten lists prominent examples of non-inchoative wayyiqtol with stative verbs. Unfortunately, three of his examples on p. 86 are not statives but intransitive verbs: עָבֵד in Gen 37:1, עשׂר in Exod 20:21, and בִּשְׁבָּה in Num 11:32. Contrast these with his claim that the intransitive הָבְחַת is a process (p. 98). All of these predicates are classifiable as (dynamic) activities. Joosten introduces his treatment of qatal by noting that “anteriority can imply completion” but that “completion is not a necessary feature with QATAL.” He cites the stative verbs with the qatal conjugation as the prime example of this (p. 196). It would appear that by “completion” Joosten is referring to perfective aspect. But the ensuing discussion makes it evident that the phenomena he is describing have to do with boundedness, which is distinct from, but interacts with, both situation and viewpoint aspect. Thus, stative verbs remain “unbounded” even when expressed by “completion” (whether anterior or perfective) verbs.14

A final area of Joosten’s theory that is problematic is his treatment of word order. While Joosten regularly draws on word order explanations in his analyses, he places the reader at a disadvantage by delaying any formal introduction to the issue until chapter 10. In that chapter he confusingly treats the syntactic word order issue under the heading of “verbal forms in textual perspective.” His clear confusion about the waw conjunction, clause edge, and extrapositioning on p. 292 does not instill confidence in his handling of word order.15 His admittance that “the question of word order in biblical Hebrew is very complicated” (p. 350) does not mesh well with his rather frequent use of word order to explain the verb data. Consider the following claims Joosten makes. Joosten has long argued that the word order of subject-participle versus participle-subject is semantically significant: the former order expresses an event ongoing at the reference time (i.e., progressive aspect) while the latter expresses a contemporaneous event as a fact (p. 231). Aside from the question of whether any other language marks this sort of semantic distinction by means of subject-predicate word order, the argument breaks down. Joosten notes that there are only about 140 cases of participle-subject, whereas the reverse order occurs about eight times more frequently. This statistical spread is widened further by cases of participle-subject word order that express progressive aspect rather than the expected contemporaneous factuality (pp. 236–237, 256–257). Despite these excep-

tions to his already small corpus of examples, Joosten claims that his word order semantic distinction “is certainly more adequate than the alternative explanation according to which the syntagm puts focus on the participle” (p. 256). This is a curious statement to make given that Joosten earlier explains some of the exceptions in terms of focusing on the fronted participle (pp. 236–237). And these are not the only cases of the participle-subject word order that admit an explanation unrelated to his proposed semantic distinction. Joosten observes that “stative verbs show a predilection” for participle-subject order (p. 248). Given the semantic character of statives, is it not more compelling to attribute the contemporaneous factuality of these examples compositionally to the stative verb rather than to the word order?

Another case of special pleading regarding word order is Joosten’s claim that the modal yiqtol is non-clause initial. This claim is introduced strongly in chapter 1, in which Joosten explains yiqtol and weqatal as a “suppletive paradigm” in which weqatal appears in clause-initial position and yiqtol appears in other positions (p. 18). In a footnote (p. 18 n. 26) he sets aside the counterexamples by the “corollary of this rule,” namely, that weyiqtol occurrences are to be explained as waw-prefixed jussives. The rigor of this rule appears to break down in the course of the discussion. In his chapter on yiqtol and weqatal, Joosten treats “a few exceptions” of clause-initial yiqtols with a variety of footnoted explanations, including one suggesting that the form in Num 20:24 “may be jussive” (p. 266 n. 12). This is an odd statement given the earlier-stated corollary, which suggests that it must be a jussive. When the reader reaches the word order chapter, Joosten further hedges his earlier claims about yiqtol as well as the clause-initial volitives: “The placement rules of YIQTOL and the volitives are not obligatory and unqualified…. These exceptions too show that what lends these forms their modal nuance is not their position in the clause” (p. 354). This line of argumentation would seem to apply mutatis mutandis to the participle and subject word order argument discussed earlier: word order is not a semantically distinguishing feature.

Joosten’s proposed system runs against a long-standing observation that yiqtol itself may express both indicative and modal meanings based on its placement in the clause,16 and sets up the rather awkward case that yiqtol alone is non-clause initial among all the modal forms in the system (i.e.,

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yiqtol, weqatal, and the volitives). Some of the “sizable number of cases” in which qatal does not express anteriority (pp. 201–208) would be better grouped with the following section “modal QATAL” (p. 208–212), suggesting that qatal also exhibits a word-order marked modal distinction as long observed for yiqtol. Consider, for example, the clause-initial qatal forms with ב interrogative in Gen 29:5 (p. 201) and Judg 9:11 (p. 209): the first Joosten explains as an “archaism,” the latter is classified as a case of modal qatal. But (to follow Joosten), if there really is “something inherently modal about questions” (p. 62), should not both cases be classified as modal qatal?

Instead of claiming that the gnomic meaning “represents a derivative function of QATAL” (p. 205), the verb-subject order in Prov 14:6, 18 and the parallel between qatal and yiqtol in the latter verse suggest these also might be classified as modal (habitual) qatals.¹⁷

As a result of these two common problems underlying the presentation, the book is replete with problematic explanations, especially of an ad hoc and special pleading character. The performative function of anterior qatal is explained as unproblematic for his theory because it does not compete with the participle in this functional domain (p. 56) and its interpretation is made evident by the present (versus anterior) time of the speech situation (p. 120). Joosten claims that the present-time use of yiqtol with ל can easily be subsumed under its modal functions (p. 62), but when he returns to the issue, he labels it as an “idiomatic” function (p. 96). On p. 134 he presses the argument that yiqtol does not express real present (except in poetry, p. 102), arguing instead for a prospective reading in a number of instances, including quite unconvincingly Isa 6:4 ווִתְבַּעְתָּ לֵאלָה חַשׁ וַתְּשִׁירֶנָהוּ ‘and the house was about to fill with smoke’. It is telling that Joosten does not translate consistently with his argument, glossing the verse instead as “and the house filled with smoke.”

On p. 138, Joosten treats juxtaposed participle and qatal clauses. He claims that the distinction between those in which the participle expresses simultaneity to the anterior reference time established by qatal and those in which the forms distinctly express contemporaneousness and anteriority with regard to that default reference time “was indicated by intonation.” Finally, Joosten engages in special pleading to explain non-anterior perfects: certain present-stative expressions such as with יִשָּׁהֲבָה ‘love’, יִדְעָה ‘know’, and יִשְׁלַח ‘hate’ are “formulic,” and the non-anterior use of qatal in poetry is “attributed to archaism” (p. 201).

Regrettably, despite high hopes for this book, it is neither a “new synthesis,” as subtitled nor a “reliable guide” as the author intended. Instead, it is a collection of uneven and sometimes inconsistent analyses that must be employed with caution, looking fore and aft among the very pages of the text itself for possible disagreements.