1. Introduction: the prose-poetry divide

By comparison with the plethora of prosed-based studies in recent decades, there is a dearth of studies of the Hebrew verbal system in biblical poetry. Since Dilthem Michel’s singular study on Psalms, published more than 45 years ago (1960) now, there have been only a handful of essays and theses, and no monographs, that treat the Hebrew verbal system in poetry.\(^1\) Explanations for this lack are not difficult to find. Biblical scholars have continued to dutifully stand by the dictum that the grammar of biblical poetry is an entirely different animal from that of biblical prose. This assessment has been buttressed time and again by analogy with the prose-poetry division in Ugaritic.\(^2\) As a result, the grammar of biblical poetry, and particularly the verbal system, continues to be treated only tentatively if at all. In practice, the result is the continued free-for-all found in translations and commentaries, some of which leave one wondering whether or not the Hebrew verbal forms in poetry have any semantic value at all.

1.1 Form-function and diachrony-synchrony

A more real and serious hindrance to understanding the Hebrew verbal system in poetry arises from two related erroneous linguistic notions. The first is the commitment to a “strictly synchronic” approach, versus a “diachronic” one. The second, which often accompanies the first, is the idea that each verbal form should be equated with just one distinct meaning or function. In the case of Michel’s work, his espousal of these two principles motivated his refusal to recognize any significant semantic distinction between \textit{yiqtol} and \textit{wayyiqtol} in Psalms, despite the abundant evidence from the Bible as a whole of divergent meanings for the two forms.\(^3\) A more recent illustration of these two misunderstandings is provided by Niccacci’s essay on the verb in poetry (which appears in the Fassberg-Hurvitz volume). In it he states, “one should expect different verbal forms to play different functions and analyze the texts accordingly on a synchronic level, rather than make the analysis depend on comparative, diachronic
considerations.” It should be unnecessary to point out that languages are not as neat as Niccacci would like one to “expect.” Rather, the vicissitudes of language history often result in multiple functions being expressed by a single grammatical form, as well as multiple forms expressing the same or closely related meanings. In light of this form-meaning asymmetry, we must acknowledge inherent limitations in attempting to delineate the finer semantic and discourse pragmatic nuances among seemingly alternative grammatical constructions in ancient Hebrew.

The “synchronic” approach, espoused by both Michel and Niccacci, stands in opposition to the diachronically based recognition of an archaic prefix preterit verb in Hebrew poetry. Although this distinction between synchronic and diachronic approaches has been rhetorically powerful, it is methodologically problematic. This is because this synchronic approach simply rejects the possibility of homonymy in Biblical Hebrew, which is by definition, a synchronic phenomenon. In other words, just because one discounts the comparative and historical evidence that some think point to the development of homonymous prefix forms in pre-Biblical Hebrew, does not mean one has thereby avoided a determination of the presence of partial homonymy among Preterit, Jussive, and imperfective prefix conjugations in Biblical Hebrew. Such homonymy in Biblical Hebrew is a synchronic phenomenon, regardless of its possible origins in historical or diachronic processes, such as the loss of final short vowels.

1.2 A new approach
Against the background of this brief critique, I want to present a new approach to the Biblical Hebrew verbal system in poetry and illustrate it with some sample analyses. Without getting into a long, though important, discussion of theories of poetic meaning, I am starting with three interrelated assumptions: the first is the concept of poetry as verbal art; the second is that the technique of verbal art, as other artistic mediums, consists, at least in part, in making things “unfamiliar”; and the third is that we experience the results of this technique of making things unfamiliar in verbal art as a poetic aesthetic.
To restated these assumptions with respect to biblical poetry, I am positing at the outset that the biblical poets created their poetry against the foil of prose grammar, intentionally making it unfamiliar or difficult and often grammatically and/or lexically ambiguous, the perception of which is part of the aesthetic of biblical poetry.

These assumptions along with my critique of earlier studies are the basis for several methodological principles that characterize my own approach to the Hebrew verbal system in poetry. First, there is a basic identity between the Biblical Hebrew verbal system in prose and poetry. Peculiarities and ambiguities of verbal meaning in biblical poetry are in part a means of constructing poetic aesthetic, and this aesthetic is constructed against the foil of prose grammar. In other words, without the assumption of a “standard” prose grammar as the starting point for biblical poets, their aesthetic technique of making things unfamiliar would be missed.

Second, my aim in describing the verbal system in poetry is not to identify a single meaning for each verb form without any reference to their meanings in prose. Instead, taking their conventional prose meanings as a starting point and recognizing the asymmetrical character of the Biblical Hebrew verbal system (in contrast to Niccacci, Michel, and others), the goal of my analysis is to delineate the range of meanings that may be expressed by each verbal form in biblical poetry.

Third and last, with regard to a synchronic versus diachronic approach, I interpret the linguistic data as pointing to the presence of partially homonymous prefix forms in Biblical Hebrew poetry, schematically illustrated for you on the front page of your handout. On the one hand, overlap between the (short) Jussive and (long) imperfective *yiqtol* forms is undisputed. On the other hand, the historical and comparative evidence raise the prospect of an archaic prefix preterit in biblical poetry, homonymous with the Jussive form, and thus in turn resulting in partial three-way homonymy among the prefix preterit, Jussive, and imperfective *yiqtol* forms. Combined with the recognition of inherent form-meaning asymmetries in the system, it becomes clear that the prefix forms are descriptively the
most challenging part of the verbal system in biblical poetry.

2. An outline of the Biblical Hebrew verbal system in prose and poetry

The remainder of my presentation consists of three parts. First, I will summarize my theory of the Hebrew verbal system in prose, as the starting point for an analysis of the verbs in poetry; second, I will comment on some of the gross statistical characteristics of verbal forms in the poetry of Psalms versus biblical prose; and finally, I will illustrate my approach to the verbal system in biblical poetry with the analysis of two psalms.

2.1. The Biblical Hebrew verbal system in prose: a summary

I begin with a brief summary of the verbal system in prose based on my earlier research. In contrast to Niccacci’s approach, for example, in which an attempt is made to equate each verb form with a single meaning, my approach is typological. That is, I associate each Biblical Hebrew verb form not with a single meaning, but with a specific universal typological category of verbal meaning. These associations are based on comparing the typical range of meanings found cross-linguistically for verbs in each typological category with the range of meanings of each Biblical Hebrew verb form.

Based on this approach, I have identified the core opposition in the Hebrew verbal system as an aspectual one between perfective *qatal* and imperfective *yiqtol*. Each of these forms has not only a core aspectual value but also concomitant temporal meanings: namely, perfective *qatal* is associated with past time reference, and imperfective *yiqtol* is predominantly used in non-past expressions. In addition to these indicative meanings, each of these forms may express irrealis (or subjunctive) mood, which is distinguished from their realis (or indicative) functions syntactically: realis mood has an underlying subject-verb word order, whereas irrealis mood has an underlying verb-subject word order. The imperative-jussive-cohortative directive modal system is a subcategory of irrealis mood in that it syntactically patterns like irrealis *qatal* and *yiqtol*. Possible semantic and/or discourse-pragmatic distinctions among the irrealis forms have yet to be fully explored.
On the realis (or indicative) side of the system, there is semantic overlap between qatal and wayyiqtol, on the one hand, and between yiqtol and the predicative participle, on the other. These overlaps are the result of similar paths of development for each pair. Wayyiqtol is a past tense form, distinguished from perfective qatal most notably by its specialized discourse-pragmatic role as a narrative verb. Although the participle, which is a verbal adjective, is not an integral part of the verbal system in Biblical Hebrew, it often appears with an overt or, more often, covert copula, expressing progressive aspect where one might well expect the imperfective yiqtol to appear.

2.2. The Biblical Hebrew verbal system in the poetry of Psalms: an overview
Aside from the prospect of a prefix preterit form appearing in biblical poetry, I am arguing that the semantic analysis I have just sketched is broadly valid for the Biblical Hebrew verbal system in both prose and poetry. In making this argument, however, I am not thereby ignoring obvious differences in the distribution and patterning of the verb forms in prose and poetry. The statistics in the table on your handout underscore some of the notable differences between the verbal system in the poetic material of Psalms and in the largely prose narrative material of Genesis, Samuel, and Kings.9

Based on these statistics, the poetic character of Psalms versus prose narrative is evident. On the one hand, note the relative infrequency of wayyiqtol forms in Psalms compared to its predominance in the prose narrative books. On the other hand, the directive modal forms—the Imperative, Jussive, and Cohorative—are more prevalent in Psalms, along with first- and second-person verb forms generally. These divergences are explained by the general distinction between historical description, which characterizes biblical narrative, and experiential description, found in biblical poetry. This division between historical and experiential is referred to variously in literary scholarship and is described in the following way by the linguist John Lyons:

The term used here, ‘historical’, is intended to suggest that narration of events, ordered in terms of successivity and presented dispassionately with the minimum of subjective involvement; and this
mode of description clearly relates to the static, non-deictic, objective conception of time. The term ‘experiential’, on the other hand, is suggestive of the kind of description that might be given by someone who is personally involved in what he is describing; and this mode is no less clearly related to the dynamic, deictic, subjective conception of time.10

This division between descriptive modes is exemplified in the Hebrew Bible by the contrast between the omniscient and dispassionate narrator of prose narrative versus the psalmists as experiential narrators, who speak out of their situation, often petitioning God or inveighing against their enemies with directive modal verb forms.11

3. The Biblical Hebrew verbal system in the Psalms: illustrative examples
In the remaining time I want to illustrate my approach by commenting on the verbal patterns in two poems from the the book of Psalms: the hymnic poem of Psalm 33 and the lament poem of Psalm 143. The texts for both of these are provided on your handout, with the verbal forms highlighted.

3.1 Song of Praise: Psalm 33
Psalm 33 consists of 22 verses—the usual number for an acrostic poem. It begins with an imperative-based invocation to praise in verses 1–4. The body of the poem deals in succession with the topics of “the word of Yahweh,” verses 5–9; “the counsel of Yahweh,” verses 10–12; the eye of Yahweh, verses 13–15; and a confessionally styled section on Yahweh as rescuer in verses 16–19. The psalm concludes with a statement of trust in verses 20–22.

Verses 1–4 The opening invocation in verses 1–4 is fairly typical of both praise songs and laments: a framework of irrealis directive calls to praise or for aid interspersed with realis clauses giving reason for the call. This invocation in Psalm 33 has an opening imperatival clause in verse 1a followed by a juxtaposed realis qatal clause in 1b, justifying the call to praise. The stative qatal predicate in 1b, נָאוָ֥ה, expresses a present generic (or gnomic) statement. As realis the clause has an underlying subject-verb word order, but that order is inverted following the fronted prepositional phrase לַ֝יְשָׁרִ֗ים. Another present generic realis clause justifying the invocation appears in verse 4—a verbless clause introduced by כִי.
**Verses 5–9** The first main body section in this psalm, verses 5–9, is constructed on a framework of relative participles—a regular feature of praise songs in Psalms: “who loves (vs. 5) . . . who collects . . . who places (vs. 7).” The first of these, אֹ֭הֵב, verse 5a, is followed by a realis stative qatal clause in verse 5b, with a fronted oblique complement, explaining the verb-subject word order as triggered inversion: “with Yahweh’s kindness the earth is filled.” The predicate in verse 6a is a Nifal qatal form נַעֲשׂוּ, which is gapped in the second half of the verse. Based on the subject matter, this verb unambiguously expresses a passive past-perfective sense: “were made.” The prefix forms in verse 8, יִֽירְאוּ and יָ֝ג֗וּרוּ, are best understood in the context as Jussives, as the NRSV and the NJPS render them: “may all the earth be afraid before Yahweh; may all the world’s inhabitants be in dread before him.” This Jussive identification is supported by the verb-initial word order in the first half of the verse. The word order in the second half of the verse admits of several explanations: the fronting of the prepositional phrase מִמֶּ֥נּוּ may signal a heightening effect through focus: it is Yahweh alone before whom the world should stand in dread; alternatively, it may be explained in terms of partial inverted (chiastic) ordering, or right dislocation of the subject כָּל־יֹשְׁבֵי תֵבֵֽל. Finally, verse 9 illustrates the typical, though infrequent, use of wayyiqtol in Psalms to express narrative sequences following qatal: these two terse narrative sequences provide the culmination to this section on Yahweh’s word: “for he himself spoke and it came to be; he himself commanded and it stood.”

**Verses 10–12** The qatal forms in verse 10 are typically rendered as general present generics: “Yahweh frustrates . . . brings to naught.” Kraus, in his commentary, cites Brocklemann’s explanation of these qatal as expressing “repetitive actions.” However, the context and the realis word order of subject-verb in the first half of the verse makes such an irrealis habitual reading unlikely. Elsewhere I have pointed out that qatal is less frequent in present generic expressions than supposed, and that its more usual past-perfective or perfect sense should be read whenever possible: “Yahweh frustrated/has frustrated . . . brought to naught/has brought to naught.” Either rendering is justifiable in light of the...
context: one the one hand, this verse connects the creation of Israel as Yahweh’s people by his counsel with his creation of the world by his word (cf. Ps 136), and a perfect rendering fits this well. On the other hand, if the final verses of this psalm are interpreted as referring to awaiting a new salvific act of Yahweh, then the past-perfective rendering might be more appropriate, implying as it does that Yahweh had at one time frustrated plans but presently there are hostile plans against his people that he has not yet brought to naught. We need not resolve the ambiguity between these readings of the qatal forms; their indeterminacy contributes to the poem’s aesthetic.

Although in verse 11 the subject appears first, the oddity of its separation from the verb by the prepositional phrase לְעֹולָם may signal a fronting of יְ֭הוָה עֲצַ֣ת to contrast it with עֲצַת־גֹּויִ֑ם in verse 10. The verb, תַּעֲמֹ֑ד, which is gapped in the second half of the verse, ambiguously expresses present or future generic, as yiqtol frequently does in biblical proverbs: Yahweh’s plans are ever established and, at the same time, they will stand for all times. Together these readings create a fitting contrast with the past-perfective or perfect rendering of verse 10. This section concludes in verse 12 with a gapped verbless אַשְׁרֵ֣י statement, the subjects of which are modified by a marked and unmarked relative clause in the verse halves, respectively. The marked relative is a verbless clause: “whose God is Yahweh”; the unmarked relative clause features a qatal form that is best understood with a perfect sense: “the people who have chosen him for an inheritance.”

**Verses 13–15** The following section, verses 13–15, contains three qatal forms followed by two relative participles, and a good share of semantic ambiguity. Should the qatal forms הִבִּ֣יט, רָ֝אָ֗ה, and הִשְׁגִּ֑יחַ be interpreted as past (anecdotal) generics, as present generics, or as irrealis mood expressing habitual action? The word order is not determinate since the verb-subject order in verse 13a may be explained as triggered inversion following the fronted prepositional phrase מִ֭שָּׁמַיִם, and the following clauses in verses 13b and 14 lack an overt subject. The relative participles in verse 15 do not resolve the
ambiguity of these *qatal* forms, but raise further questions: Are the participial clauses best interpreted as present generics, or does הַיֹּצֵ֣ר refer to a one-time act of God in the past (cf. Zech 12:1): “who has formed . . . who understands”? Again, I would maintain that such ambiguity is unresolvable and contributes to the poetic aesthetic of the psalm.

**Verses 16–19** The section in verses 16–19 begins with of a variety of present generic statements. In verse 16 we find a negative verbless clause with a participial complement, followed by a negated *yiqtol* clause. In verse 17 a verbless clause is balanced by another negative *yiqtol* clause. We can attribute this alternation of generic predicates to poetic variation, or we may hypothesize a slight semantic distinction based on the use of verbless and *yiqtol* predicates in the sentence literature of Proverbs. There we find that verbless clauses portray more static types of generic statements, whereas *yiqtols* often have a predictive generic sense: such-and-such *will* be the case. Hence, we might offer a more nuanced reading of these predicates along the lines of: “a king *is* not victorious . . . a warrior *will not be saved*; a horse *is* vain hope for victory . . . it *will not save*.” This section comes to a climax with the verbless clause in verses 18–19, governing a relative participle and infinitival complement. These verses connect with the preceding two sections by the phrase יְ֭הוָה עֵ֣ין, which corresponds with the verbs of seeing in verse 13, and through the theme of saving those who wait on God, which stands in contrast with God’s action towards the counsel of the nations in verse 10.

**Verses 20–22** The concluding portion of this psalm begins in verse 20 with a realis subject-verb *qatal* clause balanced by a verbless predicate. This is followed by two כי clauses in verse 21, the first with *yiqtol* the second with *qatal*. The alternation of verb forms would seem unmotivated. The NRSV treats them all as present generics. Alternatively, one may see a semantic significance to the alternation of *qatal–yiqtol–qatal*, and translate accordingly: “Our soul *has tarried* for Yahweh, he (*is*) our help and our shield. Indeed, in him *we shall rejoice*, for in his holy name *we have placed our trust*.” Rendered in this way, these verses are a statement of confidence by the psalmist and congregation. It begins with
stating the people’s current waiting upon God’s actions on their behalf with a justification of their waiting based on God’s relationship to his people: God is “our help and our shield.” The first כי in verse 21 is well rendered as asseverative, expressing confidence that the people will rejoice יִשְׂמַ֣ח at some future time, when God provides deliverance. The second כי clause expresses the reason for this hope based on the people’s trust in God—expressed by qatal יִחַלְנוּ, corresponding grammatically and semantically to חִכְּתָ֣ה in verse 20a. Finally, typical of songs of praise, this poem ends with a directive—in this case, the distinct Jussive form יְהִֽי followed by a relative clause with qatal כַ֝אֲשֶׁ֗ר יִחַ֥לְנוּ לָֽךְ. The qatal form expresses a perfect sense, providing the justification for the final call to Yahweh: “may your kindness be upon us just as/inasmuch as we have waited for you.”

3.2. Song of Prayer: Psalm 143
Psalm 143 is a somewhat atypically structured song of prayer or petition. It consists simply of an opening invocation, verses 1–2, a description of the psalmist’s distress in verses 3–6, and sundry other petitions in verses 7–12.

Verses 1–2 The invocation consists of imperatival forms in verse 1 and a negated jussive in verse 2a. A כי-yiqtol clause in verse 2b provides the motivation for the negative jussive petition. This yiqtol in this כי-clause is most naturally interpreted as expressing dynamic modality: “no living (person) can be justified before you.” Although the כי normally triggers inversion of the subject and verb, the appearance of the prepositional phrase לְפָנֶ֣יךָ between the verb and subject indicates right dislocation of the subject.

Verses 3–6 The description of distress in verses 3–6 illustrates the how translations and commentaries sometimes ignore the contours of verbal patterns in biblical poetry, defaulting to a general present rendering of verb forms. The NRSV and others interpret the qatal forms in verse 3 as perfects, and as a result translate the wayyiqtol in verse 4a as a present state—a unlikely rendering. By
contrast, I think NJPS’s treatment is more correct: this entire section is oriented to the past; the present point in time is in view only possibly at the end of the section, if one interprets פֵּרַ֣שְׂתִּי in verse 6 as a performative qatal, otherwise not until the following section.

The yiqtolしまם in verse 4 could be understood as a past imperfective in this past context, but the meaning of the root makes a past stative interpretation more plausible (so NJPS). In this case, we can tentatively identify the form as a prefix preterit based on its appearance in parallel with the wayyiqtol יִשְׁתֹּומֵם. A more likely example of past imperfective yiqtol is יָשֹׁחַ at the end of verse 5 based on the past orientation of the preceding verses. The transition to the psalmist’s present is effected through the ambiguity of פֵּרַ֣שְׂתִּי in verse 6: it may be rendered past-perfective based on the preceding context (so NJPS), or as a present performative in light of the following verbless clause (so NRSV). Thus it forms a bridge from this past time oriented section to the present-future oriented set of petitions to follow.

**Verses 7–12** Commentators have described the remainder of this poem as an anthology because of its loose collection of petitions. Nevertheless, there is a close structural resemblance among the several petitions: they have the general form of “please do x . . . because y,” featuring a leading imperative in five cases and a negative jussive in one. Following this series of petitions there is an interesting stylistic shift first to third- and second-person jussives, to irrealis yiqtol forms, and ending with an irrealis qatal.

We may analyze the six petitions as a sort of poetic theme and variations. The first petition, in verse 7a, has a double imperatival clause followed by the present stative qatal כָּלְתָ֪ה. The verb-subject word would appear to indicate irrealis mood, though the precise sense is uncertain (perhaps a temporal meaning?). The second petition, in verse 7b, features a negated Jussive followed by irrealis qatal וְ֝נִמְשַׁ֗לְתִּי expressing negative purpose: “lest I become like . . .” In verse 8 the third petition has an imperatival clause followed by a כי-qatal clause with a perfect meaning: “because I have trusted.” The fourth petition, in verse 8b, features an imperative clause with an embedded relative זֹ + irrealis yiqtol.
“the way in which I should go” followed by another יִרָ֑כ-ְqatal clause with a perfect meaning. In verse 9 a fourth imperative clause is followed by an unmarked reason clause with another perfect qatal. Finally in verse 10a we find another imperative followed by a יִרְכ-verbless clause.

In verse 10b there is a shift to a third feminine singular prefix form, which in the immediate and larger context, is best interpreted as jussive, in which case we have a left-dislocated subject: “as for your gracious spirit, may it lead me . . .” This half-verse also effects an interesting transition to the second masculine singular prefix form in verse 11 because of their inflectional identity. Despite their formal ambiguity, the directive interpretation of יְהוָ֣ה and يتִּנְחֵ֗נִי seems inevitable because of the vocative יְהוָ֣ה and the second masculine singular noun suffixes. This makes it likely that the two following Hifils, תֹוצִ֖יא and תְּצַמְמִ֔ית, are irrealis yiqtol forms expressing the same directive sense as the preceding jussives. The psalm ends with an even more unexpected irrealis qatal form in verse 12b: וְֽהַאֲבַדְתָּ. This can only reasonably be rendered in the context as a directive, semantically parallel to the preceding imperatives and prefix forms.

3.3 Summary
My analyses of these psalms is intended as a glimpse of how I think an investigation of the verbal system in Psalms might proceed. Based on my initial study of all the verbs in Psalms, I can say that these examples illustrate many of the typical form-meaning correspondences and ambiguities found throughout the book of Psalms. By way of summary, I would mention the following.

1. First, the isolated use of wayyiqtol in Psalm 33:9 to express temporal succession following a lead qatal is representative of its few occurrences in the book of Psalms outside of the five narrative poems (18, 78, and 105–7) in which it occurs in more prose narrative-like series.
2. Second, the use of participles in unmarked relative clauses in these psalms is likewise representative of the predominant use of the participle throughout the book of Psalms.
3. Third, the *qatal* forms in these psalms are also representative of the book as a whole: they most often express a past-perfective or perfect sense, as illustrated in Psalm 33:9 and 143:5; they frequently appear in רְכָל-ִֽכְלִּֽוּ clauses providing a reason for the preceding directive as the latter portion of Psalm 143 illustrates; finally, *qatal* forms often express irrealis meanings, which may be indicated by word order as in prose, or must be determined based simply on context.

4. Fourth, these psalms illustrate the inherent ambiguity of the prefix forms:

(a) My tentative identification of a prefix preterit in Psalm 143:4b was based on the general context and the preceding wayyiqtol form, which seems to be a common context for this form in Psalms.19

(b) The Jussive is sometimes disambiguated by negative因地制 ת, as in Psalm 143:2, or by the short form, as יִֽוְיִֽזְרַּ֣שָּ in Psalm 33:22, but in other cases Jussives can only be determined based on context, as I argued with respect to יִֽירְא֣וּ and יָ֝ג֗וּ in Psalm 33:8.

(c) In addition, irrealis yiqtol frequently expresses a directive sense as the Jussive, as illustrated by the long Hifil forms in Psalm 143:11–12.

(d) The fairly uncommon occurrence of imperfective-past yiqtol in Psalms makes its identification difficult, though I have put forward a possible example in Psalm 143:5, based on the overall past orientation of the section.

5. Finally, the three-way semantic ambiguity of generic *yiqtol, qatal*, and participle is found throughout Psalms just like in Proverbs; however, I have argued from Psalm 143:3–6 that their variation may sometimes have a semantic significance that should not be overlooked. These and other ambiguities do not always demand resolution, but often simply a recognition of them so that their aesthetic affect is appreciated.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, let me review the major arguments of my paper. First, the verbal system in Biblical
Hebrew prose and poetry is essentially the same system. Second, differences in distribution and occurrences of verb forms in poetry versus prose stem from the difference of descriptive mode, namely, experiential verses historical. Third, an analysis of the verbal system in poetry must aim to delineate the range of semantic ambiguities forms may express based on the recognition that ambiguity and unfamiliar grammar as compared with prose grammar serves a poetic aesthetic.

Along with these major points, I have demonstrated in this brief investigation the misunderstanding inherent in the synchrony versus diachrony debate. The prefix preterit in Biblical Hebrew poetry is homonymous with the Jussive and thus partially homonymous also with the imperfective *yiqtol*. Although I am convinced that there is ample historical and comparative evidence supporting such an identification, the phenomenon itself is synchronic, and thus if such a form is rejected, the unnaturally broad semantic range of the prefix forms in the Bible must be explained.
For example, Buth 1986; Partridge 1995; Warren 1998; de Regt 2006; Niccacci 2006, and see references to his earlier essays there.


See Michel 1960: 11–12 for comments on his synchronic approach. See Furuli 2006 for the most recent incarnation of this nihilistic approach to the verb forms.


I am not implying that there is no diachronic development within the Biblical Hebrew verbal system, but this has not been the argument with regard to the archaic prefix preterit. Rather, the argument is over whether the form coexists in homonymous relationship with other prefix forms within the same passage of poetry.

See Fabb 2002: 2; see also the entries “meaning, poetic” and “syntax, poetic” in Preminger and Brogan 1993.

The use of temporal versus tense is intentional. All verbal systems presumably can express temporal distinctions such as past, present, future, anterior, posterior, etc., but not all verbal system have tense, i.e., grammaticalized temporal distinctions.

The choice of prose books for comparison is based on having a similar number of verses as Psalms (Genesis and Kings) or having similar ratios of verb forms to verses as Psalms (Samuel and Kings).

Lyons 1977: 688; see also Kawashima 2004: 11–14. Surprisingly, this distinction is not noted in those studies that pay attention to reported speech in Psalms, which nevertheless note that the first person is prevalent and defaults for the Psalmist (Warren 1998: 38, 106; Jacobson 2004). It seems problematic to speak of third-person references as simply “narrative” in the context of psalms, without noting that the narrator, the psalmist, is still experientially present.

Although wayyiqtol belongs most naturally to the sphere of of prose narrative, where it predominates, Kawashima’s (2004) argument that it strictly belongs to the mode of historical description while qatal expresses experiential description is not borne out by the statistics in either BH prose or the poetry of Psalms; see my review, forthcoming (Hebrew Studies).

As pointed out to me by Robert D. Holmstedt.

See O’Connor 1980: 393.

Kraus 1993: 374n.10b.

Cook 2005.


Virtually all translations and commentators treat God as the subject of the verb הָעַל, but this entails syntactic violations and goes against the plain syntactic reading of הָעַל as the head of the unmarked relative clause (thanks to Robert D. Holmstedt for pointing this out).

See Kraus 1993: 535.

For examples, see the narrative psalms as discussed in Cook 2003.