THE VERB AND THE PARAGRAPH IN BIBLICAL HEBREW
A COGNITIVE-LINGUISTIC APPROACH[1]

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The last few decades have witnessed a continual stream of publications on the biblical Hebrew verbal system, arguing whether it is fundamentally about aspect, or tense, or mood, or discourse pragmatics; or whether it is best understood synchronically, diachronically, or panchronically. In admittedly another work on the verbal system, this thesis constructs a theoretical framework that goes beyond postulating an additional possibility: it comprehensively includes the other views and explains how they relate to each other, including what value each has to offer. Within this framework, the thesis also suggests a new analysis of the *waw*-prefixed forms, the paragogic suffixes (including energic *nun*), and the semantic analysis of *qatal* and *yiqtol*.

Chapter one lays a foundation in cognitive linguistics, which understands language as but the tip of the iceberg in its reflection of human cognition (thought). To appreciate language, the larger reality of cognition must first be analysed. Critical to human cognition is the ineluctable desire for coherence, even if the mind has to manufacture data to attain this coherence. Until coherence has been attained, the mind is ill at ease. When coherence is achieved, the result is a centre-piece ('figure') within a context ('ground'). A coherent unit is defined as a unit with a central, prominent, part (the figure), with every other part related in some way to that central part. Coherence requires relative levels of prominence, such that the figure is more prominent than any other part. (A coherent *text* is defined as one with a 'theme' that in some way ties together the entire text. An easily understood text has a clearly prominent theme; a more difficult text requires more

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[1]   Elizabeth Robar, 'The Verb and the Paragraph in Biblical Hebrew: A Cognitive-Linguistic Approach' (Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge University, 2013); Supervisor: Prof. G.A. Khan.

processing before the theme is clear. The intended complexity of a text determines the depth of processing required to grasp the intended theme.)

The 'shape' of cognition involves both linearity in time (at least as communicated verbally) and a hierarchical nesting of smaller thoughts within larger thoughts. To communicate a thought, this shape must be conveyed, so the listener can reconstruct the boundaries of the various thought units. The pragmatic phenomena of topic and focus reflect the mental journey of processing language: the topic is where attention lies at the beginning of a unit, and focus is where attention rests at the end. Topic indicates the opening boundary of a thought unit, and focus indicates the theme, or central part, of a thought unit. When topic and focus are indicated within the grammar itself, they are directions from the author as to how a clause (or other unit) was intended to be interpreted.

Grammar can only indicate, or mark, so many features. Markedness theory provides a framework and vocabulary for analysing grammatical features. Grammar may mark (explicitly indicate) a grammatical feature, such as masculine gender in *drake*, or it may leave unmarked (not indicate at all) the grammatical feature, such as in *duck*. When a pair of marked and unmarked forms occurs together, they are interpreted as opposites (female *ducks* vs male *drakes*), but without the context, the unmarked form on its own is ambivalent (*ducks in the park*). The theory stipulates that all grammar is built on such binary oppositions, one nested in another to build an entire system. Further, markedness is a principle of cognitive organisation itself. Because linguistic systems will reflect this, they are best analysed as hierarchies of marked and unmarked pairs.

The markedness value of a word is not stable, however. Markedness shifts happen when words take on new meanings and the markedness values realign. Across languages, there are certain patterns of grammatical shift that recur consistently. These are considered evolutionary paths of grammatical change, in which, notably, words gradually become more and more 'grammatical', or more and more abstract in their meaning (such as 'past tense' rather than a more concrete meaning such as 'to walk'). The evolutionary paths for verbal systems have been so well documented that, given only so much data for a language, a larger, diachronic view of the language may often be

posited based on already known patterns from other languages. (This reality underlies the semantic analysis provided in chapter four.)

In chapter two, the *waw*-prefixed forms are analysed as forming various patterns that effectively delineate the shape of larger thought units: roughly, paragraphs. The *wayyiqtol* form is analysed not as a preterite, but a narrative present form that has come to mark 'continuity' within a paragraph, since it indicates the continuing development of a paragraph, in contrast to the beginning of a new paragraph. The *wəqatal* and *wəyiqtol* forms are also found capable of indicating continuity, but with different implications for semantics and hierarchical nesting, depending on the genre and sequence of their occurrence. Whereas *wayyiqtol* will continue as a narrative present (usually translated as an English simple past tense), *wəqatal* will continue a unit with either the semantics of *qatal* or a consecutive future, and *wəyiqtol* will continue a unit with volitional semantics.

A shift from one *waw*-prefixed form to another will often indicate the presence of an inner, embedded paragraph. The shift often also indicates a change in semantics, but at times it only indicates structural embedding, with the different forms indicating different levels within the structural hierarchy. The difference between a sequence of like forms (e.g. *qatal* or *yiqtol* forms) and a sequence including *waw*-prefixed forms is that the latter explicitly indicates the shape of the paragraphs. The former may be structurally connected or unconnected.

Chapter three analyses unexpected verbal forms: *wəqatal* where one would have expected *wayyiqtol*, and verbs with paragogic suffixes. The paragogic suffixes are capable of multiple meanings which correspond to different stages along the evolutionary path for imperfective verbs. Alongside various semantic meanings is the possible function of 'thematic marking', in which a prominent theme of a text seems to be indicated from within the grammar. This seems to happen in texts whose theme is not transparent, but whose rather complex interpretation becomes considerably easier if the paragogic suffixes are considered pointers to the theme. (This is demonstrated from texts in Genesis, Deuteronomy, Samuel-Kings and Job.)

The unexpected *wəqatal* forms seem to have a similar function, particularly drawing attention to repeated lexical roots that underscore a theme. This ability to mark a theme, however, does not derive from historical, evolutionary reasons as with the paragogic suffixes; rather, it is a prominence inherent to the meaning of the perfect.

Chapter four opens with the viability of discussing synchronic 'systems' within language, such as the verbal system. Concluding that such systems are justifiable, it proceeds to outline a synchronic overview of the biblical Hebrew verbal system. The prefix conjugations (long *yiqtol* as well as short *yiqtol*) together constitute the present tense system, and the suffix conjugation constitutes the past tense system (as well as contingent modality). The many possible meanings for each system are arranged as a binary tree of pairs of marked (explicitly indicating a grammatical feature) and unmarked (ambivalent depending on context) forms.

Within the present system, short *yiqtol* has two roles. It is an indicative form unmarked for aspect (but usually perfective): a narrative present, with a similar role to that of the simple past in English. This is the *wayyiqtol* form, contrasting with the long *yiqtol*, marked for imperfective aspect. The short *yiqtol* also appears in the slot of the jussive, which, as its name indicates, is marked for jussive semantics (or 'deontic' modality).

Chapter five concludes, discussing the nature of discourse patterns that have not yet become part of the grammar itself. The thesis suggests discourse patterns for basic structural organisation (the shape of paragraphs) as well as discourse patterns for thematic marking (relative prominence among themes). The legitimacy of this interpretation for various verbal forms is argued from standard evolutionary paths on which the forms have most likely traveled. The chapter directly addresses the work of Andrason on panchrony (disagreeing with his alleged history of **yaqtul/*yaqtulu*) and concludes with some possible implications for our understanding of the larger Semitic verbal system.