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JOHN A. COOK,
ASBURY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

1. INTRODUCTION

The last few decades have given rise to a strange state of affairs in Hebrew studies.[1] On the one hand, renewed discussions of the Hebrew verb and the application of linguistics to understanding the verbal system in Biblical Hebrew have continued unabated.[2] On the other hand, the appearance of new elementary grammars of Biblical Hebrew has increased tremendously over the same period of time.[3] Oddly, however, there seems to be very little influence between these two trends: the elementary grammars seem all but unaware of the verb discussion of the past decades and even the last century. Part of the reason may be a pragmatic attitude on the part of Hebrew instructors, something like, "If it ain't broke, doesn't fix it." In other words, even if the long-standing explanations of the Hebrew verbal system found in the grammars are not exactly accurate, they "work" well enough at the elementary level, so let the students figure out the "correct" analysis later on in their course of study. Another reason for this disconnect may be the fact that the field is still so reliant on older reference grammars and lexica, so that it is felt that students need to at least be familiar with the older nomenclature and theories in order to intelligibly use the available resources.

In any case, this state of affairs is disturbing pedagogically, both because students deserve the most accurate grammar description of Biblical Hebrew and not just the most expedient, and because the traditional

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[1] This is a revised version of a paper delivered at the 2007 National Association of Professors of Hebrew Annual Meetings, in a session entitled "The Hebrew Verb: Advances in Linguistics and Pedagogy." I want to thank the other participants and attendees for their feedback.

[2] Examples (since 1990), Andersen 2000; Buth 1992, 1994; DeCaen 1995, 1999; Cook 2001, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006; del Barco 2003; Eskults 1990; Dallaire 2002; Dobbs-Allsopp 2000; Furuli 2006; Gentry 1998; Goldfajn 1998; Gropp 1991; Hatav 1997, 2004, 2006; Heller 2004; Joosten 1992, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2006; Ljungberg 1995; Niccacci 1990, 1994, 1997, 2006; Roglund 2000, 2003; Shulman 1996, 2000; Talstra 1997; Warren 1998.

[3] Examples (since 1990), Bergman 2005; Bartlet 2000; Bornemann 1998; de Claissé-Walford 2002; Dobson 2005; Ellis 2006; Futato 2003; Garrett 2002; Hostetter 2000; Kelley 1992; Kittel, Hoffer, and Wright 1989 (2d ed. 2004); Martin 1993; Pratico and van Pelt 2001; Rocine 2000; Ross 2001; Seow 1995 (2d ed.); Vance 2004; Walker-Jones 2003.

description has tended to portray the Hebrew verbal system as this strange beast without any parallel among human languages. In this short article I want to counter the disconnect between recent research on the Hebrew verb and the continued proliferation of elementary grammars by showing how modern linguistics, and particularly linguistic typology, provides a means of describing the Biblical Hebrew verbal system as "human." That is, the verbal meanings and its configuration as a system are paralleled in other languages and make sense with what is known about verbal systems across the world's languages. Anyone who has struggled to help students get past the "strangeness" of Biblical Hebrew can appreciate the importance of explaining the verbal system in a way that is both more accurate and more linguistically plausible to students than the traditional explanations.

Practical considerations lead me to restrict my remarks to the *vav*-prefixed verb forms, which simply means that I am not going to engage extensively with the long-standing debate over tense, aspect, and modality. I will begin with a survey of the traditional approach to the *vav*-prefixed forms, according to which they are usually labeled the *conversive* or *consecutive* forms, and I will illustrate how this traditional approach is entrenched in most of the grammars of the past century and up to the present. This survey provides a foil against which I want to present an updated understanding of the verbal system, informed by linguistic typology, with illustrations of how this understanding can be conveyed to first-year students.

2. BIBLICAL HEBREW VERB THEORY AS REFLECTED IN ELEMENTARY GRAMMARS

There is a parallel development between the linguistic study of tense, aspect, and mood or modality and the study of the Biblical Hebrew verb. When in the 1940s Reichenbach (1947) reinvigorated the philosophical and linguistic discussion of tense with his reference point theory, Hebraists were engaged in reanalyzing the Biblical Hebrew verbal system in terms of Bauer's (1910) tense-model of Semitic (e.g., Blake 1946, 1951; Hughes 1955, 1962). Similarly, a renewed interest in aspect among linguists, marked by Comrie's (1976) brief but influential book, was paralleled by the renewed debates of the 1980s and 1990s over tense and aspect in Biblical Hebrew (see note 2 above). True then to this pattern, the latest shift in the past couple decades to a renewed linguistic interest in mood and modality is reflected in the recent focus on modality in Biblical Hebrew (e.g., DeCaen 1995; Dallaire 2002; Shulman 1996, 2002; Warren 1998).

However, despite all the debates and recent advances in our understanding of the Biblical Hebrew verbal system, these accomplishments are all but unnoticed in the recent spate of introductory grammars. For example, the following description of the *vav*-prefixed forms appears in the grammar by Kittel, Hoffer, and Wright:

> It is a stylistic device of Biblical Hebrew when narrating a series of past events to begin the narrative with an affix form of the verb and to

continue it with a series of verbs in the prefix 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 reversive is an analogic extension of the vav conversive for the affix (Kittel, Hoffer, and Wright 1989: 387–88; 2d ed. 2004).

This description of the *vav*-prefixed forms as having a special "converting" form of the *vav* appears already early in the sixteenth century, as described by Elias Levitas:

> Notice, when you want to convert a past into a future you place a *vav* with a *šwa* in front of it, as in the case of 'keep' in '*And* Yhwh *will keep…*' [ושמר, Deut 7:12], which is like '*and he will keep*' [וישמר]. Likewise, '*And* the sons of Israel *shall keep* the Sabbath' [ושמרו, Exod 31:16]. It is like '*and they shall keep*' [וישמרו]. . . . And notice that the style in the Bible is to use a past in place of a future and a future in place of a past (my translation; cited in Leo 1818: 226).

Admittedly, however, few grammars continue to embrace the conversive theory as wholeheartedly as Kittel, Hoffer, and Wright. More frequently, they cite the conversive as one alternative alongside the consecutive theory, as illustrated in the following passage from Bornemann's grammar:

> To express *consecutive narration in the past* the first verb is in the perfect (completed action) or its equivalent, and all the following verbs are in the imperfect and prefixed with ·ו… .This narrative device is called *vav consecutive imperfect*. . . . For *consecutive narration in the present or future* the process is simply reversed. The first verb is in the imperfect (incomplete action) or its equivalent (including the imperative), and all the following verbs are in the perfect and prefixed with ו pointed exactly like the simple conjunction וְ (Bornemann 1998: 80–82).

This consecutive relationship, which Bornemann leaves unexplored, was explained by Ewald over a century earlier as follows:

> But as, in creation, through the continual force of motion and progress, that which has become, and is, constantly modifies its form for something new; so, in thought, the new advances which take place (*and thus, then*) suddenly changes the action which, taken by itself absolutely, would stand in the perfect, into this tense, which indicates becoming—the imperfect. . . . As, therefore, in the combination previously explained [i.e., *vav*-consecutive imperfect], the flowing sequence of time or thought causes that which has been realized, and exists, to be regarded as passing over into new realization; so in the present case [i.e., *vav*-consecutive perfect], it has the effect of at once representing that which is advancing towards realization, as entering into full and complete existence. Hence, each of the plain tenses gracefully intersects the other, by interchanging with its opposite (Ewald 1879: 20, 22–23).

A third understanding of the *vav*-prefixed forms, which generally masquerades under the label of consecutive, is illustrated by Hostetter: "From these examples it can be seen that the verb that stands first in such a series determines both the time (past or future) and the mood (indicative or subjunctive) of the verbs that come next" (Hostetter 2000: 84). Compare Hostetter's statement with Gell's early nineteenth-century explanation of what was termed the *vav*-inductive theory:

> When Verbs are connected in Hebrew (the connexion being generally indicated by the sign **ו** prefixed to the latter), the Power, whether temporal or modal, of the first or Governing Verb is communicated from it, and inducted into the Verb following. And whatever be the power proper to the latter Verb, it still retains its use subordinately; but that which is inducted becomes the prevailing power. If a third Verb follows in connexion, and so on, the power communicated from each successive Verb to that next following, without destroying its proper subordinate power, is the same as was previously inducted into the former (Gell 1818: 8; quoted in McFall 1982: 25).

Another early nineteenth-century theory, called the *vav*-relative theory, is also preserved in recent grammars, as illustrated by Futato: "The *vav*-relative is a special use of the conjunction *vav* (**ו**) when attached to a *pf* or *impf* verb. This *vav* 'relates' the verb to which it is attached to a previous verb" (Futato 2003: 162). Compare Futato's explanation with that of Schoeder's description of the *vav*-relative on the imperfect form:

> Apart from these various usages, the Future [*yiqtol*] has yet another, unique and peculiar to the Hebrews, in that it receives the force of our Past, and designates a matter as truly past; not however by itself nor absolutely, but viewed in relation to some preceding past event. When different events are to be narrated that follow the one from the other in some kind of continuous series, the Hebrews consider the first as past, the others, however, that follow, as future on account of the preceding. Consequently, this describes something that, in relation to another past event, is itself later and future; it may be called the Future relative (Schroeder 1824: 239–40, my translation from the Latin).

Finally, Ellis presents a mixture of theories, as seen in the following excerpts from his recently published grammar:

> Perfect and imperfect verbs can also take a *vav* consecutive (*vav cons*) which has two functions. One is to convey the idea of a conjunction, just as the simple *vav conj* does. The other is to invert the meaning of the verb's tense, so that a perfect verb with a *vav cons* has generally the same meaning as an imperfect, and an imperfect verb with a *vav cons* has roughly the same meaning as a perfect verb. . . . A *perf + vav cons* typically follows another clause or phrase which establishes the action in a text as incomplete, then the *perf + vav cons* continues the incomplete action. As the term "consecutive" implies, *vav cons* usually appears in a language sequence that is governed by the temporal sense of a preceding verb or

> phrase. . . . An imperfect with *vav cons* (*impf* + *vav cons*) typically follows another clause or phrase which establishes the action in a text as completed, then the *impf* + *vav cons* continues the notion of completed action (Ellis 2006: 160, 161, 164).

This treatment contains elements of the conversive, consecutive, and inductive theories, all of which have roots traceable back two centuries or more. Sadly the advances in our understanding of the Hebrew verb are not influencing the recent generation of introductory grammars.

3. UPDATING THE DESCRIPTION OF THE BIBLICAL HEBREW VERBAL SYSTEM

What are those linguistic advances that have been made in the understanding of the vav-prefixed forms? Briefly, they are the following: first, comparative data have led to a fairly wide-spread consensus that two separate forms underlie the imperfect and the vav-prefixed imperfect; second, likewise comparative data have shown, by contrast, that the perfect form and the vav-prefixed perfect are a single conjugation; third, research on word order and the traditional modal forms of jussive, cohortative, and imperative has shown that the vav-prefixed perfect form is more closely aligned syntactically and semantically with these modal forms, than with the non-modal or indicative forms. I will elaborate on each of these three points in turn.

The idea that the imperfect and *vav*-prefixed imperfect are two separate conjugations with distinct origins is widespread in the literature (see esp. Rainey 1986). This conclusion is based most notably on two pieces of evidence: the one is the comparative data of Akkadian, which has a prefixed past verbal conjugation (i.e., *iprus*); the other is evidence in the Amarna correspondence that the ancient Canaanite scribes likewise had a past prefix conjugation in their native West Semitic language, the precursor of Hebrew. This analysis of the *vav*-prefixed imperfect is prevalent enough to be appearing in elementary grammars, albeit in most cases relegated to footnotes. An example of this historical explanation prominently given is in the following quote from Seow's grammar:

> In fact, the *yiqṭōl* 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 *yiqṭol*. Thus, the *yiqṭol* form may be imperfect or preterite. In its latter function, of course, there is some overlap with the perfect. (Seow 1995: 225–26)

By contrast, the comparative data related to the perfect with the *vav*-prefix exhibit a situation quite unlike that just summarized regarding the *vav*-prefixed imperfect. On the one hand, there is no evidence for two historically distinct suffixed conjugations—the perfect and *vav*-prefixed

perfect are one and the same, morphologically speaking. On the other hand, the phenomenon of the perfect form expressing non-past or modal nuances alongside its past-perfective indicative sense is widespread in Semitic, including in Classical Arabic (Wright 1962: 2.14–17), Ethiopic (Dillman [1899] 1974: 548), Imperial Aramaic (Folmer 1991) and Syriac (Nöldeke [1904] 2001: 203–5, 265), Ugaritic (Tropper 2000: 715), Phoenician (Krahmalkov 1986), and Amarna Canaanite (Rainey 1996: 355–65). In particular, in these languages and in Biblical Hebrew modal meanings are correlated with the perfect form when it appears with a conjunction at the beginning of a conditional protasis or apodosis clause, as illustrated by example (1).

(1) לֹא־יוּכַל הַנַּעַר לַעֲזֹב אֶת־אָבִיו וְעָזַב אֶת־אָבִיו וָמֵת:

The boy is unable to leave his father. If he leaves his father, then he (i.e., his father) will die (Gen. 44:22)

At this point there is an important parallel between the *vav*-prefixed perfect and the traditional modal system in Biblical Hebrew. Revell (1989) and some of his students have developed an analysis in recent years showing that the prefix-pattern conjugations (imperfect, jussive, cohortative, and imperative) forms are syntactically distinct from the indicative forms in that they consistently appear in verb-subject word order. Revell (1989) argued that the imperfect appears at the head of its clause when it expresses modal or non-indicative meanings, and within its clause when expressing indicative meanings. Shulman (1996) demonstrated that in more than 96% of the occurrences of imperatives and morphologically distinct jussives and cohortatives in Genesis through 2 Kings, the forms appear at the beginning of their clause. DeCaen (1995) noted the syntactic similarity of the *vav*-prefixed forms and the imperative-jussive-cohortative modal system in Biblical Hebrew and argued that the *vav*-prefixed forms are modal conjugations. On the strength of the comparative data, however, I disagree with half of DeCaen's argument: rather, it is only the *vav*-prefixed perfect that is truly comparable with the modal system, meaning that it is both syntactically and semantically comparable.

Thus, I hold that the *vav*-prefixed perfect form is a syntactically distinct modal use of the perfect conjugation in Biblical Hebrew. This modal use of the perfect is analogous with the modal use of the imperfect, which is syntactically distinct from the indicative imperfect in the same way (see Revell 1989). I would tentatively posit that the development of this modal use of the perfect conjugation came from its widely evidenced use in conditional clauses through a "conventionalization of implicature" (Dahl 1985: 11). In other words, the perfect became prevalent enough in conditional clauses, in which its modal nuance derived from the modal (protasis-apodosis) syntactic construction, that eventually that implied modal meaning came to be seen as integral with the form when used in VS position, so that it could be used apart from the protasis-apodosis context and still retain the associated modal meaning. This explanation is consonant with the available data and the way in which languages may develop new meanings for existing forms.

The implications of these conclusions based on comparative evidence is that the Biblical Hebrew verbal system looks much different than the traditional portrayal, so much so that I would argue we need to approach our treatment of it in a wholly different manner than in the traditional descriptions.

4. TEACHING THE MODAL PERFECT TO ELEMENTARY HEBREW STUDENTS

In particular, I want to make three suggestions toward a different approach to the Biblical Hebrew verbal system based on the analysis of the *vav*-prefixed forms that I have just presented. As so many other Hebrew teachers, I too have turned to writing my own grammar. Thus, I will illustrate how the theory of the Hebrew verb I have just described can be presented to first-year students by citing portions of an unpublished grammar that I have co-authored with Robert Holmstedt of the University of Toronto (Cook and Holmstedt 2007).[4]

First, the *vav*-prefixed forms should not be treated as analogous or identical phenomena. They deserve separate treatments in the grammar discussion and descriptions that relate them to something with which the students are familiar or at least with which they are more familiar than Hebrew grammar. Thus, for example, in Cook and Holmstedt the *vav*-prefixed imperfect is labeled the "past narrative" form and described as follows:

> Languages typically use a past tense or perfective aspect verb form for narrating past events (e.g., English Simple Past). Some languages, however, may devote a particular verb form entirely to literary narrative (e.g., French Passé Simple). In Biblical Hebrew an archaic past tense verb predominates and is mostly restricted to past narrative passages (Cook and Holmstedt 2007: 57).

The modal use of the perfect is presented in the grammar without any reference to the distinct and separate phenomenon of the past narrative form, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

> The Perfect Conjugation was described in Lesson 4 as expressing <u>perfective aspect</u>. The Perfect is also used to express **non-indicative modality**. . . . The most common modal function of the Perfect is to mark (semantically) subordinate clauses. These are equivalent to English clauses beginning with 'if/when/so that/in order that/because', i.e., conditional, purpose, result, or causal clauses. . . . The **modal use of the Perfect** is distinguished from the indicative by its word order: the Perfect functioning modally will have a <u>verb-subject</u> word order (Cook and Holmstedt 2007: 53).

Admittedly, teaching beginning students of Biblical Hebrew to distinguish forms based on word order is a challenge, thus there is a certain practicality

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[4] A draft of the grammar may be freely downloaded: http://individual.utoronto.ca/holmstedt/Textbook.html

required, as evidenced by the following note appended to the preceding quote:

> Often the subject is not explicit in BH clauses; in such cases, it is impossible to identify whether a perfect is used modally or not based on the word order. However, because most modal Perfects are prefixed with the *vav* conjunction, the presence of the conjunction is a good introductory way to distinguish the modal from the indicative use of the verb. (Cook and Holmstedt 2007: 53).

Note, however, that while this note directs the student to pay some attention to the prefixed *vav*, it is not because the conjunction in any way contributes to the form or meaning of the modally used perfect. Rather, given Biblical Hebrew's predilection for coordinated clauses, the *vav*-conjunction is a useful indicator of the clause boundary.

This presentation of the modal perfect raises two difficulties that deserve to be addressed further. First, there is the issue of word order in Biblical Hebrew. While the analysis of the modal perfect presented here does not require adopting the word order theory espoused in the grammar, it makes more sense when taken together with it. The word order view underlying the grammar is that Biblical Hebrew has a basic subject-verb word order in indicative clauses, and a verb-subject word order in non-indicative or modal clauses, as illustrated by the contrastive examples in (2) and (3).

(2) *Indicative (subject-verb order)* וְאָבִיו שָׁמַר אֶת־הַדָּבָר
'and his father <u>kept</u> the word' (Genesis 37:11)

(3) *Modal (verb-subject order)* וְהַדָּגָה אֲשֶׁר־בַּיְאֹר תָּמוּת וּבָאַשׁ הַיְאֹר
'And the fish that are in the Nile will die <u>so that</u> the Nile <u>stinks</u>' (Exodus 7:18)

Alongside this basic word-order division between indicative and non-indicative clauses, virtually all of the grammatical function words in Biblical Hebrew cause triggered inversion, so that clauses in which these words appear have verb-subject word order, regardless of whether they are modally indicative or non-indicative (see example 4 below). On this basis, the past narrative form is explained as being verb-subject word order not because it has a modal meaning, but because it consistently undergoes triggered inversion, perhaps because of a function word that is preserved now only in the doubling of the form's prefix (example 5; and see Holmstedt forthcoming).

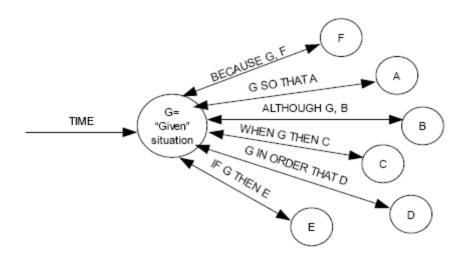(4) כִּי־יָדְעוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים כִּי־מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה הוּא בֹרֵחַ
'because the men knew that he was fleeing from Yhwh' (Jonah 1:10)

(5) וַיָּקָם יוֹנָה לִבְרֹחַ תַּרְשִׁישָׁה מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה
'Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from before Yhwh' (Jonah 1:3)

The other difficulty with this presentation of the modal perfect is how to bring first-year students to an understanding of a complex notion like subjunctive modality—aside from the issue of how best to label it. In teaching I have tended to employ the notion of "contingent modality" to describe the modal perfect, and in fact we include the term in a couple of places in our grammar.[5] To speak of contingent situations with respect to a given situation is to employ the same sort of temporal-spatial metaphor that is so frequently used to explain tense and aspect. In the case of modality, indicative or non-modal statements refer to the given or at-hand situation, whereas non-indicative or contingent modalities relate other states of affairs to the given situation in some sort of contingent manner, such as conditionally, temporally, or imperatively. In each case, the situation referred to by the modal form is in some way "irreal" versus the given "real" or "actual" situation. As illustrated in the following diagram, this concept of contingent modality might be schematized as a sort of mental mapping diagram, in which the central event is viewed as the actual or real situation, and the various irreal situations are related to the real one via various contingency notions.

The result of all of this is a very different sort of configuration of the Biblical Hebrew verbal system than portrayed in the traditional theories. The following chart is the summary of the verbal system presented in Cook and Holmstedt (2007: 88):

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[5] In preparing this article I discovered that I am not the first to employ the term "contingency" for these non-indicative meanings in Biblical Hebrew; Yates (1954: 130) notes that "the Subjunctive Mood is the mood of contingency."

INDICATIVE FUNCTION	SUFF	פָּקַד	Perfect: *perfective (whole view of situation)*
	PREF	(וַ)יִּפְקֹד	Past Narrative (Preterite): *past event in narrative (or poetry)*
		יִפְקֹד	Imperfect: *imperfective (partial view of situation)*
MODAL FUNCTIONS	SUFF	(וּ)פָקַד	Modal Perfect: *contingent modality/command*
	PREF	יִפְקֹד	Modal Imperfect: *command or wish* (it is negated with לֹא)
	PREF	יִפְקֹד	Jussive: *command or wish* (any person; it is negated with אַל)
		פְּקֹד	Imperative: *command or wish* (2nd person only; cannot be negated)

    This chart shows that the indicative-modal distinction is the most salient one in the Hebrew verbal system. Within each of these domains the various conjugations of the suffixed and prefixed pattern function with complementary or overlapping meanings. The *vav*-prefixed forms are listed with the *vav* conjunction in parentheses to indicate that their meanings are in no way dependent on the semantics of the prefixed conjunction.

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, I hope I have persuaded the reader that (1) we *should* teach good, linguistically informed understandings of the verbal system of Biblical Hebrew to beginning students, and (2) we *can* teach such theories in a way that is understandable to first-year language students without resorting to misleading and inaccurate explanations from past centuries.

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