

New Perspectives in Biblical and Rabbinic Hebrew

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הִיָּה IN BIBLICAL HEBREW

Daniel J. Wilson

1.0. Introduction

The relationship between subject and predicate is one of the most fundamental elements in natural human language. While there is certainly great diversity among the world's languages in how this relationship is manifested, all languages seem to have a means of predicating an entity or property of a subject. Biblical Hebrew (BH), broadly speaking, presents a relatively straightforward system for this kind of relationship, which has experienced a robust research tradition.¹ These works do not coalesce in agreement on every issue, but there has emerged an overall consensus which features the verbless (or nominal) clause as the construction for non-verbal predication in present tense and the verb הִיָּה functioning in one of two ways: as a copula hosting tense, aspect, and mood (TAM) features, like an auxiliary, and as a 'true' verb in the sense of *become*, *exist*, *happen*, etc.

As is often the case in the study of natural language, however, things are rarely as straightforward as they may appear.

¹ Andersen (1970); Bartelmus (1982); Waltke and O'Connor (1990, 72); Niccacci (1990; 1993; 1999); Miller (1999); Zewi (1994; 1999; 2013).

First, it has been accepted that the copula הָיָה licenses TAM features, but exactly which TAM features has not been demonstrated in an exhaustive study. Second, as Wilson (2018; 2019; 2020a) has recently demonstrated, it is possible to account for the semantic variation of הָיָה in a uniform way typical of auxiliaries. If so, the ‘true’ verb function observed by many can be understood as an extension of the role of הָיָה as an auxiliary. Third, in research on copular sentences, both theoretical and cross-linguistic, there is usually a separate construction—the existential—that shares many of the same morphosyntactic pieces as copular sentences, but that makes a fundamentally different assertion. In BH, the particles יָשׁ and אָיִן are typically discussed with respect to existentials, but examples such as (1) demonstrate that הָיָה may also be used in an existential construction.

(1) וַיְהִי־אִישׁ מִהַר־אֶפְרַיִם וּשְׁמוֹ מִיכָהוּ:

‘There was a man from the hill country of Ephraim and his name was Micah.’ (Judg. 17.1)

Thus, the two goals of this paper are as follows. First, I will introduce existentials as a separate construction, distinct from copular sentences, which also utilise הָיָה. Second, I will demonstrate which TAM features are correlated with the presence of הָיָה, as opposed to the default verbless clause, based on an exhaustive study of the finite forms of הָיָה in BH. Before discussing these two points, it is necessary to provide a basic description of copular sentences with הָיָה in BH.²

² This paper is based on a poster presented at the conference *Biblical and Rabbinic Hebrew: New Perspectives in Philology & Linguistics* at the University of Cambridge, 8–10 July, 2019. The work is a summary of

2.0. The Basics of Copula Use in BH

BH, like many other languages (Arabic, Russian, etc.), does not permit an inflected verb in present tense copular sentences, as in (2).

- (2) וְאָבִיךָ אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה
 ‘Your father (is) a man of war’. (2 Sam. 17.8)

As is common in many languages, BH also utilises a copular verb to license future tense, as in (3).

- (3) וְהָיִיתִי גַּע וְנָדָר בְּאֶרֶץ
 ‘But I will be a stranger and a foreigner in the land.’ (Gen. 4.14)

One unique difference between BH and other languages, such as Arabic and Russian, is that an overt copula is not required for a sentence to be grammatical in past tense. In fact, Wilson (2018) states that there are more examples in the Hebrew Bible of past-referring verbless clauses than clauses with an overt form of הָיָה.

It has been noted that in BH, a verbless clause may carry the tense of the surrounding context without requiring an overt copula in every case. The sufficiency of context to carry the tense of an expression forward in other languages has been noted in

some of the central claims of the author’s doctoral dissertation. The book-length adaptation of the dissertation published in Wilson (2020a) includes a much more technical treatment of these and many more issues. This paper distils the results of that volume and makes them accessible to those who may not work in the formal frameworks utilised in the original research.

research by Progovac (2006, 55). Examples are abundant in past-referring contexts in BH, but also occur less frequently in future-referring contexts, as in (4).³

- (4) וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה גַּם אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל עִמָּךְ בְּיַד־פְּלִשְׁתִּים וּמָחָר אַתָּה וּבְנֵיךָ עִמִּי
 ‘so that YHWH will give Israel as well as you into the hand
 of the Philistines and tomorrow you and your sons (will be)
 with me.’ (1 Sam. 28.19)

Since it is the case that a context set in past time is sufficient to license the tense for copular sentences, the question arises: Why are there preterite and suffixed forms of הָיָה and what purpose do they serve? Do they serve merely to disambiguate the tense in copular sentences? An exhaustive analysis of the data reveals that a precondition for answering these questions is establishing the distinction between existential and predicational sentences. Second, it is necessary to recognise the reality of features in addition to tense that control the manifestation of הָיָה. Copulas and auxiliaries are frequently used to express different features in different contexts depending on the language. This is consistent with the analysis of auxiliaries by Bjorkman (2011). These points will be made in turn.

3.0. The Existential/Predicational Distinction

Existential sentences are distinct from predicational sentences both semantically and syntactically, though in many languages the syntactic distinction is not as obvious as the semantic. In English, the distinction is often made through the expletive *there* and

³ Thanks to Jesse Scheumann for discussion about these constructions.

the inversion of the copula in an existential, e.g., the inversion of *is* and *book* in (5).

(5) There is a book on the bookshelf.

This is distinct from the predicational counterpart in (6).

(6) A book is on the bookshelf.

The semantic distinctions between sentences like (5) and (6) have been discussed thoroughly in Francez (2007, 2009). One of the defining features of existentials is the alternate encoding of the figure-ground relationship, which is also present in predicational locative sentences (Creissels 2014). Partee and Borschev (2002; 2008) provide a clever metaphor, which illuminates the semantic distinction between existentials and predicational locatives:

An analogy may be made with a video camera and “what the camera is tracking”. A predicational sentence keeps the camera fixed on the protagonist as she moves around (THING as Center); an Existential sentence is analogous to the way a security camera is fixed on a scene and records whatever is in that location (LOC as Center). (Partee and Borschev 2008, 156)

The anatomy of existentials generally consists of a pivot, e.g., *book* in (5), and a coda, e.g., *on the bookshelf* in (5), and either a particle or a verbal copula (Bentley et. al. 2013). The pivot of an existential is considered the object, while the subject is the contextual domain which can be further specified by the coda (Francez 2007; 2009), though this point is debated (Stowell 1978; McNally 2011).

In BH, the syntactic encoding of existentials is clearest in sentences employing the particle *יש* for positive existentials (7) and the corresponding *אין* for negative existentials (8).

(7) אוֹלֵי יֵשׁ חֲמִשִּׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר
 ‘Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city.’ (Gen. 18.24)

(8) אֵין־לָהֶם חֶלֶב אֶל־תַּחַת יָדַי
 ‘There is no common bread on hand.’ (1 Sam. 21.5)

The data demonstrate, however, that *היה* is also used in both positive (9) and negative (10) existential sentences.

(9) וַיְהִי רָעָב בְּכָל־הָאֲרָצוֹת
 ‘There was a famine in all the lands.’ (Gen. 41.54)

(10) וְלֹא־הָיָה מַיִם לְעֵדָה
 ‘There was no water for the congregation.’ (Num. 20.2)

These are clearly existential, because the nominal—*רָעָב* ‘famine’ in (9) and *מַיִם* ‘water’ in (10)—must be a pivot, and not a subject, for the sentence to be grammatical. If ‘famine’ was the subject of a predicational sentence, it would likely have a definite article, since it is active in the common ground. *היה* is present in sentences like (9), because BH existentials, as opposed to predicationals (cf. §2, ex. (4), above), require a form of *היה* in both past and future contexts. Further comment is provided in Wilson (2020a) and Naudé, Miller-Naudé, and Wilson (2019; forthcoming) on the alternation and diachronic development of the existential particles and *היה* in existential sentences. The fact that existentials as a distinct clause type require some form of *היה* (when an existential particle is not present) accounts for many manifestations of the copula in the Hebrew Bible.

4.0. Features Controlling the Presence of הִיָּה

Copula systems in languages around the world represent different feature bundles that control the presence and shape of their copulas or copula-like elements.⁴ These feature bundles include TAM features, evidential features, and others. Often, taxonomic variables (i.e., types of predicates) also contribute to the variation in copular sentences.⁵ The copula system of BH is controlled by aspect/mood features, *Aktionsart* features, and additional eventive features, which are noted in Wilson (2020a).

Imperfective/habitual aspect is reflected in (11) which, though existing in a past tense context, utilises the prefixed form to represent imperfective aspect.

(11) וּבֵעֶרֶב יְהִיָּה עַל־הַמִּשְׁכָּן כַּמְרֹאֵה־אֵשׁ עַד־בֹּקֶר

‘In the evening, it would be over the tabernacle like the appearance of fire until morning.’ (Num. 9.15)⁶

Example (12) demonstrates that the suffix conjugation can be used to represent the perfect tense/aspect.⁷ Wilson (2018;

⁴ I adopt the definition of features in the research tradition of Distributed Morphology, specifically the Late Insertion hypothesis, which postulates that syntactic terminals are bundles of features which receive their pronunciation post-syntactically (Halle and Marantz 1993). For a more detailed account of how this works, see Wilson (2020a).

⁵ Stassen (1997); Pustet (2003); Roy (2013).

⁶ Also see Exod. 40.38.

⁷ For a review of the perfect as a conflicting category in theories of tense-aspect, see Ritz (2012).

2020a) argues that the suffixed copula in Gen. 1.2 should also be understood as (past) perfect, (13).

(12) אֲנָשֵׁי מִקְנֵה הָיוּ עֲבָדַי מִנְעוּרֵינוּ וְעַד-עַתָּה

‘Your servants have been men of livestock from our youth until now.’ (Gen. 46.34)

(13) וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתָה תְהוֹ וְבָהוּ

‘The earth had been formless and empty.’ (Gen. 1.2)

The mood features controlling הָיָה are obvious, since they have distinct morphology. A well-known example is (14).

(14) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אֹר

‘And God said, “Let there be light.”’ (Gen. 1.3)

There are both jussive forms (3ms יְהִי: 67 examples; 3mpl יְהִי: 21 examples; 2fs תְּהִי: 28 examples; 2fpl תְּהִינָה: 4 examples) and imperative forms (ms הִיָּה/הָיָה: 15 examples;⁸ fs הִיָּה/הָיָה: 2 examples; mpl הִיָּה: 9 examples).

In addition to these simple aspect/mood examples, there are more complex examples, which reflect different semantics in terms of subject and complement. Example (15) illustrates the well-known -לִי הָיָה construction noted by Jenni (2000).

(15) וְאַתָּה תִּהְיֶה לְנָגִיד עַל-יִשְׂרָאֵל

‘You will become leader over Israel.’ (2 Sam. 5.2)

This is rightly classified as an inchoative construction, which presents the subject as acquiring a state. This function of הָיָה moves

⁸ For the alternation between *waw* and *yod* as the second radical in some forms of the copula, see Katz (1996, 143).

beyond stative to eventive *Aktionsart*, and, more specifically, indicates an achievement (see, inter alia, Vendler 1957). It is not uncommon, even in English, to see copular sentences with eventive *Aktionsart*. Consider (16), which has an agentive subject and eventive *Aktionsart*.

(16) Sam was rude three times.

Research on copular sentences in other languages has demonstrated how common this is.⁹ Another example of achievement *Aktionsart* in BH copular sentences is the ‘directional’ construction, as in (17).

(17) וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־שְׂמוּאֵל

‘The word of YHWH came to Samuel.’ (1 Sam. 15.10)

In addition to a prepositional predicate, the directive *heh* may also be used, as in (18).

(18) וְהָיוּ תֵצְאוֹתָיו הַיָּמָה

‘Its extremities went to the sea.’ (Josh. 16.8)

Rather than inchoative, these examples demonstrate telic achievements with experiencer subjects. Marin and McNally (2011) have demonstrated the relationship between inchoative and telic achievements, which are similar though separated by a principal concern with *boundary happenings*. While inchoative achievements note the *onset* boundary, telic achievements note the *end* boundary. Normal events are concerned with intervals, while boundary happenings are concerned with points. Examples

⁹ Adger and Ramchand (2003); Markmann (2008); Cowper (2010).

(17) and (18) are non-durative and focus principally on the points of the boundary happenings.

One more example illustrates this phenomenon. These constructions are ‘complement-less’ copular sentences. They are also achievement predicates, which require the presence of הָיָה.

(19) וְאֵת־כָּל־אֱלֹהֵי יָדַי עָשִׂתָּהּ וְיָהוּי כָּל־אֱלֹהֵי נְאֻם־יְהוָה

“All these my hand has made and all these came to be”
declares YHWH.’ (Isa. 66.2)

Interestingly, the achievement predicate function of הָיָה has led to the development of *nif'al* נִהְיָה, examples of which are all achievement predicates. Example (20) is the only instance of the inchoative sense. Example (21) demonstrates the directional. Example (22) is complement-less, which is the construction type with the most instances of נִהְיָה.¹⁰

(20) הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה נִהְיִיתָ לְעַם לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ

‘This day you have become the people of YHWH your God.’
(Deut. 27.9)

(21) כִּי מֵאֵתִי נִהְיָה הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה

‘For this thing has come from me.’ (2 Chron. 11.4)¹¹

(22) אֵיכָּה נִהְיָתָה הָרָעָה הַזֹּאת

‘How did these evil things happen?’ (Judg. 20.3)

In addition to these conditions, the manifestation of הָיָה can also be attributed to disambiguation in certain examples. Example

¹⁰ Exod. 11.6; Deut. 4.32; Judg. 19.30; 20.12; 2 Sam. 13.35; 1 Kgs 1.27; Jer. 5.30; 48.19; Ezek. 21.7; 39.8; Joel 2.2; Prov. 13.19; Dan. 8.27; 12.1; Neh. 6.8.

¹¹ Also 1 Kgs 12.24; Dan. 2.1.

(23), for instance, includes both a prefixed and a suffixed form of הָיָה for the sake of temporal disambiguation.

(23) רַק יְהוָה יִהְיֶה אִלֶּיךָ עִמָּךְ כַּאֲשֶׁר הָיָה עִם־מֹשֶׁה
 ‘Only, YHWH your God will be with you as he was with Moses.’ (Josh. 1.17)

Another condition which controls the manifestation of הָיָה is related to participant agreement. BH age constructions reveal an interesting pattern in alternating between overt and verbless sentences. Example (24) has a suffixed form of הָיָה, which is sufficient for representing the pronominal subject.¹² Example (25) has an overt subject and a verbless predicate.¹³

(24) בְּזַעֲשָׁרִים וְחַמֵּשׁ שָׁנָה הָיָה בְּמַלְכוֹ
 ‘He was 25 years old when he became king.’ (2 Kgs 18.2)

(25) בְּזַעֲשָׁרִים שָׁנָה אָחָז בְּמַלְכוֹ
 ‘Ahaz (was) 20 years old when he became king.’ (2 Kgs 16.2)

There is not enough space here to provide a detailed description of why the copula appears in example (24) instead of an independent pronominal subject and a verbless clause. A detailed explanation of this phenomenon is provided in Wilson (2020a).

There is one rare taxonomic variable which appears to control the manifestation of הָיָה in a few examples. There are a few

¹² Other examples include 2 Sam. 4.4; 2 Kgs 8.17; 14.2; 15.2, 33; 18.2.

¹³ Other examples include 2 Sam. 5.4; 2 Kgs 12.1; 16.2; 21.11, 19; 22.1.

examples in the Hebrew Bible which are classified as specificational sentences (Higgins 1979; Stassen 1997), which utilise the BH copula, as in (26).¹⁴

(26) וַיְהִי בְּיֵצֵאת הַיְצָאִים מִן־הַתְּבִיָּה שֵׁם וְחָם וַיָּפֶת

‘The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth.’ (Gen. 9.18)

This is not a requirement, however, as there are many examples of verbless specificational sentences.

5.0. Conclusion

In this paper I have briefly summarised the features and environments that control the manifestation of the copula הָיָה rather than defaulting to the more common verbless clause. I have presented an account which claims that הָיָה can be classified as an auxiliary whose manifestation and shape are attributed to a feature complex for certain BH non-verbal predicates. Readers of BH will find that most of the finite forms of הָיָה in the Hebrew Bible can be explained using one of the conditions specified in this article.¹⁵ The complex copula systems of the world’s languages vary due to language-specific feature requirements which determine when and how copulas, or copula-like elements, appear. The BH copula

¹⁴ For other representative examples see Gen. 5.4, 11; Josh. 19.25.

¹⁵ A notable exception to this is the isolated הָיָה (also called a discourse marker, in previous studies), which precedes sentences, has defective agreement, and has no predication relationship with clause subject, i.e., does not itself function as a predicate. A thorough treatment of this construction has been provided by Wilson (2019; 2020b).

הָיָה appears to be obligatory in existential sentences and is controlled primarily by aspect/mood and *Aktionsart* in copular sentences.

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