

1 *Introduction*

At the heart of biblical interpretation is the need to read the Bible's *syntax*, that is, to study the way words, phrases, clauses, and sentences relate to one another to create meaning. Biblical Hebrew (BH) is a language far removed from us in time and culture. Beginning students often learn to discern the elementary Hebrew phonology and morphology to "read" the biblical text. But we believe exegesis (or the drawing out of a text's meaning on its own terms) requires more than phonology and verb parsing. Achieving a deep-level reading requires an understanding of syntactical relationships, a topic that beginning grammars simply cannot cover in detail. Thus, our task has been to help the reader grasp the building blocks of BH, that is, the syntactical specifics that constitute meaning. These are the linguistic details through which the most profound of all statements can be made, and have been made – those of Israel's faith and its covenant relationship with YHWH.

We have defined and illustrated the fundamental morphosyntactical features of BH. The volume divides Hebrew syntax, and to a lesser extent morphology ("the way words are patterned or inflected"), into four parts. The first three cover individual words (nouns, verbs, and particles) with the goal of helping the reader move from morphological and syntactical observations to meaning and significance. The fourth section moves beyond phrase-level phenomena and considers

the larger relationships of clauses and sentences. Each syntactical category begins with at least one paragraph, giving definition to that grammatical category. This is followed by a list of the most common exegetical usages of that particular grammatical phenomenon. We have provided at least one example (and in most cases more than one) for each syntactical function. Each example is followed by a translation, in which the syntactical feature in question is italicized and underlined where possible. The translations are often related to the NRSV, although we have frequently taken the liberty of altering the translations at points to illustrate the particular syntactical feature under discussion, at times sacrificing English style to illustrate the Hebrew syntax. This is followed by the biblical reference. All examples are taken directly from the Hebrew Bible; on occasion, certain prefixed or conjoined particles, which have no bearing on the syntactical principle being illustrated, have been omitted for the sake of clarity in the English translation.

Two caveats are needed at the outset. First, the very use of such lists can be misleading. Itemizing or classifying the various nuances of a given grammatical phenomenon may oversimplify the uses of that feature in an effort to explain its function in the language. This may lead the student to assume, incorrectly, that the task of reading a text is done simply by labeling or pigeon-holing a sentence's various parts into categories. This is called the "naming fallacy," in which a reader applies a label or category to the grammatical feature in question, and thereby assumes to have explained it, or "read" the text. The naming fallacy has also been referred to dismissively as "taxonomic" by those who believe compiling and using such classifications is illegitimate because it fails to give adequate description of the linguistic realities of the language. There is a degree of truth in this criticism of using categories of nuanced meaning for each grammatical phenomenon. However, the express purpose of this volume is to make accessible to the intermediate student the most common and easily understood ways in which each such

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grammatical feature is used. There is no attempt made here to provide robust and thorough linguistic explanation for the underlying realities of the language. The footnotes and bibliography will be enough to guide the interested reader into other literature where that is done, even to those treatments that are in disagreement or tension with the few explanations offered here.

And of course, languages do not work simply, nor always according to predetermined, prescribed classifications. Any given morphosyntactical feature of a language carries meaning as determined by the context of its usage. As readers, we observe the various nuances and meanings created in different contexts and in different combinations with other words, and we must admit that the same feature can have multiple significances depending on its context. Grammars attempt to separate those multiple significances into categorized lists, making it as easy as possible for readers to discern the various ways in which a feature functions. Yet there is inherent danger in the assumption that such lists somehow govern the way a language works. The reverse is true, of course, so that grammars simply observe how a language is working, and then map recurring patterns in an effort to inform how a particular feature is functioning in a given context. Students must avoid the naming fallacy by remembering the artificial way in which grammatical lists categorize a feature's most common usages. Reading an ancient language like BH is therefore an acquired skill, requiring a certain artistic sensitivity. The student first learns to identify the feature (part of speech or parsing of a verb), which is either right or wrong. Then comes the more difficult part of interpretation, which requires this more nuanced "reading" of the word's function in the sentence.

Second, the categories for classification presented here are by no means exhaustive, which would have required a book many times this size. We have made frequent reference to the leading reference grammars for additional information. We have also omitted discussions of elementary phonology

and morphology, including difficult forms or spellings that may be unique or exceptional in some way, all of which are covered sufficiently by numerous beginning grammars. In our footnotes we have frequently included references to the elementary grammars to encourage the reader to consult a familiar source to review an elementary detail of phonology or morphology, which may have been forgotten. For example, our discussion of “determination” (Section 2.6) reminds the reader that one of the ways a noun may be marked as definite is with the prefixed definite article. Because all beginning grammars explain the morphological details of the definite article, with examples of the various forms it takes depending on the noun it marks, we have not repeated that information here. Instead, we direct the reader to review the beginning grammars where needed.¹ We have also omitted entirely, or in some cases briefly summarized, certain theoretical and complex grammatical issues that regularly make the standard reference grammars unintelligible to the intermediate student. We have, however, included many discussion footnotes dealing with these issues to provide additional background information that we believe will be of particular interest to advanced students and scholars. In this way, we have attempted to create a user-friendly volume of modest size.

For the most part, the features defined and illustrated here pertain to the language used in the extended narratives of the Pentateuch and the Historical Books, along with prose sections of the Prophets and Writings. This language is sometimes known as Classical BH.² At times, we make further observations on Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH), by which we

¹ For more on morphology, beginning students may consult “How Hebrew Words Are Formed” in Landes 2001, 7–39; Garrett and DeRouchie 2009, 366–70; and Silzer and Finley 2004, 91–97. More advanced readers should turn to Blau 2010, 156–286, and specific to the nouns, Fox 2003.

² “BH” will be used throughout for “Biblical Hebrew.” All other abbreviations may be found in Billie Jean Collins, Bob Buller, and John Kutsko, eds., *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Biblical Studies and Related Disciplines*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 216–60.

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mean the language of most of the biblical books written after the exile (1–2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel, selected Psalms, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and portions of others).³ Although LBH has features that are often unique, it also shares many features with BH. Thus, in some cases, we have used examples from both BH and LBH to illustrate the continuity of certain grammatical features of the Hebrew language.

³ This list is only partial because it depends to a large degree on interpretive issues about which scholars are not agreed. For these categories – BH and LBH – we are relying on a widely accepted tripartite subdivision of BH into archaic, standard, and late phases of the language, which are based on the historical periods or stages of its usage; see Kutscher 1982, 12; Sáenz-Badillos 1993, 50–75 and 112–29. The first of these three, the “archaic” phase, consists of the oldest epigraphic pieces of ancient Hebrew, together with some of the poetic sections of the Bible. We refer to this first phase of the language only in background discussion of the history of the language. Our categories of BH and LBH are generally related to the standard and late phases of the language, respectively. For more on these distinctions, see Schniedewind 2013; Naudé 2010; Rooker 1990; Polzin 1976, 1–2; and the essays in Miller-Naudé and Zevit 2012. Others divide the language further into four subdivisions: archaic, standard, transitional, and late; see Lam and Pardee 2016; Gianto 2016; Hornkohl 2016; Morgenstern 2016.

2 *Nouns*

Languages are like people – they relate to each other in families or groups. The language of the Old Testament, BH, belongs to a large group known as the Semitic languages. By comparing evidence from early Semitic languages, scholars have concluded that prebiblical Hebrew, and most likely all the Semitic languages of the second millennium B.C.E., had a declension system for the nouns (i.e., inflections), using cases parallel to those of Indo-European languages.¹ Thus, endings were used to mark a subject case (parallel to our subjective or nominative case, ending in singular *-u*, plural *-ū*, and dual *-ā*), an adjectival case, which was used also with all the prepositions (parallel to our genitive or possessive, and ending in *-i*, *-ī*, and *-ay*), and an object case that also had many adverbial uses (accusative, ending in *-a*, *-ī*, and *-ay*). However, the case endings were almost completely lost in all first-millennium Northwest Semitic languages, and they were certainly lost throughout all attested Hebrew.²

¹ Akkadian retains the cases in most dialects, as does Classical Arabic. Among the Northwest Semitic languages, Amorite, Ugaritic, and the Canaanite glosses in the Tell Amarna texts – all from the second millennium B.C.E. – retain the case endings. On the preservation of cases in Amarna letters written by Canaanite scribes, see the important discussion of Rainey (1996, 1:161–70), although note his preference for “dependent” case over “genitive.”

² Blau 2010, 266–70; Garr 1985, 61–63; Sáenz-Badillos 1993, 23; Moscati 1980, 94–96; Bergsträsser 1983, 16–17; Harris 1939, 59–60; Joüon and

BH compensates for the lack of case endings through a variety of means, primarily word order (as in modern English) and syntactical relationships, as well as through the use of prepositions. The uses we most often associate with the nominative case are discerned by word order and the lack of other markers. The genitive is identified by the construct relationship (Section 2.2), and the accusative primarily by the definite direct object marker תָּ/תָּךְ and other syntactical relationships (Section 2.3). Keep in mind the distinction between *form* and *function* when thinking about BH noun usage. Because of the loss of case endings “all these originally morphological categories are now largely syntactic ones.”³ In other words, the categories used here to describe noun usage were once marked by morphology, or the actual formation and spelling of the nouns, but are now unmarked and discerned mostly by syntax, or the arrangement of the nouns with other parts of speech in phrases or clauses. Once the noun endings were lost, the language found other ways to connote these functions.

We use the terms *nominative*, *genitive*, and *accusative* to describe the *functions* of BH noun uses, not the *forms* of the nouns. Although we are able to trace the history of the three case functions in ancient Hebrew by comparing other Semitic languages, some authorities believe we should abandon these

Muraoka 2006, 255–56; Bauer and Leander 1991, 522–23. Earlier grammarians believed the unaccented Hebrew ending הַ, used on certain nouns denoting direction, was a vestige of the old accusative case ending (so אֶרֶץ, the so-called directive הַ, or *he locale*). However, Ugaritic has a separate adverbial suffix *-h* in addition to an accusative case ending *-a*, proving beyond doubt that the *he locale* in Hebrew is not a remnant of the accusative (Waltke and O'Connor 1990, 185; Seow 1995, 152–53; and for the older – now outdated view – cf. Kautzsch 1910, 249), or perhaps that it was composed of both the accusative *-a* and the adverbial ending *-h* (Blau 2010, 269). The closest BH comes to having cases is in the declension of the personal pronoun (cf. van der Merwe, Naudé, and Kroeze 1999, 191).

³ Joüon and Muraoka 2006, 410.

grammatical labels altogether (especially “nominative”) when describing BH syntax.⁴ Our objective is to identify and describe the *functions* of the noun. Because the nouns in BH function syntactically in the same distinct “cases” as its parent language, it is still helpful to distinguish three case *functions* in BH using the terminology *nominative*, *genitive*, and *accusative*.⁵ We will introduce other designations for these functions where appropriate to assist the advanced student.

2.1 Nominative

Because a noun’s case function is not marked morphologically, the nominative can be detected only by the noun’s or pronoun’s word order, by its agreement in gender and number with a verb (although with many exceptions), or by the sense of the context. Generally, the nominative may be categorized as follows.⁶

⁴ So, e.g., Jan Kroeze accepts the use of “subject” as a designation for Section 2.1.1, but proposes the following alternative designations for the others: “copula-complement” for *predicate nominative* (2.1.2), “addressee” for *vocative* (2.1.3), and “dislocative” for *nominative absolute* (2.1.4); Kroeze 2001, 47. Others will speak of “case relations” to describe the subjective, objective, and attributive semantic categories occurring in BH; Cook and Holmstedt 2013, 134–35. However, it is possible that referring to the case system – nominative, genitive, accusative – clarifies features of noun usage “more effectively than a rigid functional analysis alone” (Levinson 2008, 98). If the reader remembers that we are describing the *syntactical* functions of these nouns rather than their grammatical morphemes, we believe the traditional terminology is more helpful, and will enable the reader to compare the uses of the noun in BH to other languages. Cognate languages from antiquity preserving the morphological form, as well as function include Classical Arabic, Akkadian, and Ugaritic; Joüon and Muraoka 2006, 410.

⁵ It should be remembered that pronouns may serve in all these functions as well.

⁶ Van der Merwe, Naudé, and Kroeze 1999, 247–49; Kautzsch 1910, 451–55; Waltke and O’Connor 1990, 128–30; Lambdin 1971a, 55; Chisholm 1998, 61; Williams and Beckman 2007, 11–12.

2.1 Nominative

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2.1.1 Subject

The noun or pronoun serves as the subject of an action: בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים, “*God* created” (Gen 1:1), וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, “And *God* said” (Gen 1:3). In the same way, when used with stative verbs the noun or pronoun may serve as the subject of a state: הָאָרֶץ מְלֵאָה הָאָרֶץ, “*the earth* is filled with violence” (Gen 6:13).

Rarely (and surprisingly), the definite direct object (DDO) marker אֵת/אֶת commonly used to mark the accusative function of the noun (see Section 2.3), will occur on a subject noun. This use of the particle אֵת/אֶת, by some counts occurring twenty-seven times in the Bible, has led to speculation that BH shared with other Semitic languages an *ergative*, in which the subject of an intransitive verb may share the same marking as the object of a transitive verb.⁷ However, the idea that BH had an *ergative* use of the noun is in doubt, and some of those occurrences with אֵת/אֶת have other explanations.⁸ The intermediate student should merely note the possibility when observing the exceptional use of the DDO with subject nouns.

2.1.2 Predicate Nominative (Copula-complement)

The noun or pronoun is equated with the subject by a “to be” verb (stated or implied): יְהוָה מֶלֶךְ, “YHWH *is king*” (Ps 10:16). In this example, the *subject* noun (2.1.1) is YHWH, and the *predicate nominative* is “king.” In some grammars, this will be known as a *copula-complement*.

⁷ Barton offers the following potential examples: Gen 4:18, 17:5, 21:5, 27:42; Num 3:46, 5:10, 35:6, 35:7; Deut 11:2, 15:3; Josh 22:17; Judg 20:44, 20:46; 1 Sam 17:34, 26:16; 2 Sam 11:25; 2 Kgs 6:5, 10:15; 2 Chr 31:17; Neh 9:19, 9:34; Jer 36:22; Ezek 10:22, 17:21, 35:10, 44:3; Dan 9:13; Barton 2012, 33. Compare Waltke and O’Connor 1990, 182–83.

⁸ Blau 2010, 24–25 and 266–67; at times called *determinative accusative*, Williams and Beckman 2007, 24.

The *predicate nominative* is often a clause of *identification*, in which case the word order is likely subject-predicate: אָנִי יְהוָה, “I *am* YHWH” (Exod 6:2), אַתָּה הָאִישׁ, “You *are* the man” (2 Sam 12:7).⁹ However, the word order is flexible, as this clause of *description* illustrates, also with subject-predicate order: מִשְׁפָּטֵי־יְהוָה אֱמֶת, “the ordinances of YHWH *are* true” (Ps 19:9 [Eng 19:10]). The *predicate nominative* is one of several ways nominal clauses are constructed (see Section 5.1.1, a).

2.1.3 Vocative (Addressee)

The noun designates a specific addressee and normally has the definite article (see Section 2.6.2): הִנֵּה הַחֲנִיית הַמֶּלֶךְ, “here is the spear, O king” (1 Sam 26:22 *Ketib*). The addressee is always defined conceptually and therefore definite, but in practice the definite article is often omitted.¹⁰

The vocative noun stands separate from the clause’s syntax and is often juxtaposed to a second-person pronoun (or pronominal suffix) reflecting the direct speech: חַי־יִנְפְּשֶׁךָ הַמֶּלֶךְ, “as your soul lives, O King” (1 Sam 17:55), דְּבַר־סֵתֶר לִי אֶלֶיךָ הַמֶּלֶךְ, “I have a secret message for you, O King” (Judg 3:19). The second person may be expressed by the imperative: הוֹשִׁיעֵנו אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, “Save us, O God of our salvation” (1 Chr 16:35), הוֹשִׁיעָה יְהוָה, “Save now, O YHWH” (Ps 12:2 [Eng 12:1]).

2.1.4 Nominative Absolute (Dislocation)

The noun is isolated or dislocated from the following sentence (sometimes by an intervening subordinate clause or

⁹ Andersen 1970, 31–34.

¹⁰ Joüon and Muraoka 2006, 476. With so many examples of vocative nouns without the definite article, some prefer to say that “common nouns used as vocatives may be either indefinite or definite”; Miller 2010. However we choose to describe it, vocative is most often identified by the context.