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Perfective and Imperfective

The way Biblical Hebrew handles time perspectives has been one of the most widely examined and debated topics in Biblical Hebrew scholarship. While Mishnaic Hebrew and later phases of the language exhibit a fairly simple tense-based system with past, present, and future tense expressed by the verb, the system in Biblical Hebrew is more complex, as any verb form can be used in reference to any of the tenses. As a greatly simplified frame of reference, we will provide the following observations:

•Hebrew has two major conjugations, one characterized by a set of prefixes, the other by a set of suffixes. We will refer to these as the prefix conjugation and the suffix conjugation, respectively. The features of the two conjugations are discussed in the section on the [Hebrew verb system](.).

•The conjugations represent a perspective on a situation or action. By and large, the prefix conjugation represents an action that is viewed as incomplete (ongoing, yet to occur, repetitive, habitual, etc.), and the suffix conjugation an action that is viewed as complete, that is, single and whole. These perspectives, referred to as imperfective and perfective, respectively, constitute what is known as the "aspect system" of Biblical Hebrew. They reflect the position taken by the discourse on the onset, duration, and completion of a situation or action.

•Forms in both conjugations occur both independently and with a prefixed *vav*. The *vav*, referred to here as "*vav* consecutive," ties together verbs within the discourse and points to the way they relate to one another both in terms of their role in particular narratives and in terms of the aspectual perspective on the events and situations featured in the narrative. Thus, the aspectual perspective is closely tied to the technique used in piecing together the components of a Biblical narrative.

The Narrative Sequence

The typical narrative in Biblical Hebrew consists of a sequence of sentences whose verbs are in

the imperfective (prefix conjugation). The sentences, opening with a verb in accordance with the normative sentence structure of the language ([verb-subject-object](#)), are linked with the conjunction *vav* in its function as a *vav*-consectuive, that is, a *vav* that indicates that the sentences are related to one another as part of a sequence within a narrative. The narrator often breaks away from this sequence in order to highlight variance within the narrative, e.g., embedded parenthetical statements or side narratives, statements that stand in contrast to others, reflections on past events, and the like. Narratives told from the "complete" aspectual perspective usually open with a sentence whose verb is in the perfective (suffix conjugation), and continue with a series of verbs in the imperfective with *vav*-consecutive. The multitude of verbs in Genesis 1 is a good example—the narrative begins with the verb בָּרָא *he created* (perfective) of verse 1, and continues with a series of verbs in the imperfective. In three verses (6-8), for example, we find seven instances of a verb in the imperfective with *vav*-consecutive:

ו וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי רָקִיעַ בְּתוֹךְ הַמָּיִם וִיהִי מַבְדִּיל בֵּין מַיִם לָמָיִם. ז וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָרָקִיעַ וַיַּבְדֵּל בֵּין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מִתַּחַת לָרָקִיעַ וּבֵין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מֵעַל לָרָקִיעַ; וַיְהִי-כֵן. ח וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לָרָקִיעַ שָׁמָיִם; וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר יוֹם שֵׁנִי.

God said: Let there be a vault in the midst of the water, and let it separate between water and water. God made the vault, and separated between the water which were below the vault and the water that were above the vault, and it was so. God called the vault "heavens". There was evening, and there was morning, a second day.

In prophetic texts, where the events described are yet to take place (an "incomplete" perspective), a common sequence begins with a verb in the imperfective, and continues with a series of verbs in the perfective with *vav*-consecutive. Consider, for example, Ezekiel 14:13, a verse which opens a long statement by God on the fate of a sinful people:

בֶּן-אָדָם אֶרֶץ כִּי תֶחֱטָא-לִי לִמְעָל-מַעַל וְנָטִיתִי יָדִי עָלֶיהָ וְשָׁבַרְתִּי לָהּ מַטֵּה-לָחֶם; וְהִשְׁלַחְתִּי-בָהּ רָעָב וְהִכְרַתִּי מִמֶּנָּה אָדָם וּבְהֵמָה.

Son of man, if a land sins against me with an act of betrayal, I stretch out my hand against it and break its supply of bread. I send famine upon it, and cut off from it both man and beast.

The opening verb, תֶחֱטָא *she sins*, is in the imperfective, and all the rest are in the perfective with *vav*-consecutive.

The Narrative Sequence: Some Variations

A reader who is aware of the conventions of the narrative sequence is likely to notice the variations that the narrator chooses to introduce and, thus, become attuned to the nuances within the narrative. Genesis 1:10, for example, includes three distinct clauses:

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וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לַיַּבָּשָׁה אֶרֶץ
וּלְמִקְוֵה הַמַּיִם קָרָא יַמִּים
וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים כִּי-טוֹב

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God called the dry land Earth
And the gathering of waters he called Seas
And God saw that it was good

The second clause begins with an object that is fronted, that is, moved to the head of the clause, for emphasis, followed by the verb in the perfective, קָרָא, as opposed to the וַיִּקְרָא (imperfective with *vav*-consecutive) in the first clause. As the waters are distinguished from the dry land, the distinction, by way of a statement that stands in opposition to the previous one, is signaled by the broken narrative sequence, to which the narrator returns in the third clause of the verse. A parallel structure can be observed in Genesis 1:5, where the darkness is distinguished from the light:

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וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לָאוֹר יוֹם וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ קָרָא לָיְלָה; וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד.

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God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.

The creation narrative begins with the verb בָּרָא *he created* (perfective) of Genesis 1:1, and continues through a series of verbs in the imperfective all the way to Genesis 2:25, with variations like the ones noted above introduced at a number of points. Genesis 3:1 introduces a new narrative, that of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Appropriately, it begins with a sentence whose structure is different, with an emphasis on the subject, the serpent, which is fronted, and the verbs in the perfective:

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וְהַנָּחָשׁ הָיָה עָרוּם מִכֹּל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים;

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Now, the serpent was more cunning than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made.

The continued narrative follows the conventions, with the verb in the imperfective with *vav*-consecutive:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-הָאִשָּׁה אַף כִּי-אָמַר אֱלֹהִים לֹא תֹאכְלוּ מִכֹּל עֵץ הַגָּן.   וַתֹּאמֶר הָאִשָּׁה אֶל-הַנָּחָשׁ   מִפְּרִי עֵץ-הַגָּן נֹאכֵל.

He said to the woman: Even though God had said "you should not eat from any tree of the garden"…
Then the woman said to the serpent: "Of the fruit of the garden trees we should eat."

The intricacies of the aspect system are not simple to describe or comprehend, but at this point it will suffice to develop awareness to the interplay of perfective and imperfective, and to the role the two conjugations play in organizing the narrative sequence.