

Alexander Sperber's recently published study of the grammar of biblical Hebrew proposes a drastic revision of a number of hitherto "established" canons of Hebrew grammar. In reaching his conclusions he relies heavily on his studies of early editions of the Masoretic Bible,¹ manuscripts of the Massorah² and his studies of pre-Masoretic Hebrew.³ To this is added a very careful scrutiny of the critical editions of the MT⁴ from which a very large number of examples are drawn. In this work he presents not only some new conclusions but also a shift in the method of studying biblical Hebrew which he considers a new approach (p.ix).

Some of his more striking conclusions are the following. The original vowels of pre-Masoretic Hebrew, a, i, and o/u, were not distinguished according to quantity as long or short (p.454). Accordingly, gameš and pataḥ were "promiscuously used and there is not the slightest semblance of evidence that they were meant to indicate two distinct vowels" (pp.56lf.). There is no basis for a

¹ Such as the edition of Jacob ben Chayim, Biblia Rabbinica (Bomberg, Venice 1524/5). Cf. his Foreword, p. vii.

² Ch. D. Ginsberg, The Massorah, Vol. I (London, 1880) and Vol. II (London, 1883).

³ Cf. his Septuagintprobleme (Stuttgart, 1929); idem, "Das Alphabet der Septuaginta-Vorlage", OLZ 32 (1929), pp. 533-539; idem, "The Problems of the Septuagint Recensions," JBL 54 (1935), pp. 73-92.

⁴ Biblia Hebraica, R. Kittel, ed. (Leipzig, 1913), hereafter, BH², and Biblia Hebraica, R. Kittel, A. Alt and O. Eissfeldt, eds. (Stuttgart, 1937), hereafter, BH³.

distinction between dagesh lene and dagesh forte in pre-Masoretic Hebrew (pp.455f.). The terms "context-forms" and "pausal-forms" of nouns and verbs are "based on a misconception" (p.456). Thus vocalization does not depend on accentuation. "Pausal forms of nouns are in reality another form of the noun in the absolute state and represent a different class of the root in question (p.456)." The segolate nouns in their various forms with suffixes and "in pause" exhibit a mixture of two originally different classes of noun: gatl and gitl (p.457). The verbal system in biblical Hebrew represents the combination of two originally distinct systems (pp.230,501ff.). This short catalogue is by no means exhaustive, but it should indicate to one acquainted with traditional Hebrew grammar the kind of surprises to be found in Sperber's book.

Sperber's main thesis is that the Hebrew of the Bible represents a mixture of two different dialects, one a northern "Israelitish" dialect, the other a southern Judean dialect.⁵ The bulk of the evidence assembled in the book is marshalled in support of this thesis. Thus in Chapter Two he collects evidence from transliterations of proper names in the Septuagint, the second column of Origin's Hexapla and transliterations of St. Jerome, concluding that behind each of these sources lie two different systems of pronunciation and grammar (pp.107,110ff.,228). Similarly, from a comparison of parallel texts in 1) the MT and the Samaritan Pentateuch, 2) I Samuel to II Kings and I and II Chronicles, 3) the ketib and gere, he draws the inference that the Bible reflects two dialects (pp.234-297). These two dialects, he maintains, could be descendants of a common ancestor, Urhebräisch, but represent two separate branches each with its own phonetic development (p.229). Both dialects appear to have survived to a relatively late date since traces of them appear in Septuagint transliterations (pp.227f.), in the differences between the MT and the Samaritan Pentateuch (p.231) and even within the Tiberian vocalization system which itself arose as a combination of various ways of pronouncing Hebrew (p.220). However, the two dialects must be reconstructed since no source preserves them in their purity (p. 231).

Sperber's method, as he outlines it, is to seek "a new and unbiased examination of the facts themselves," and to "approach our task unburdened by any preconceived theories." Thus he limits himself to assembling

⁵ Cf. especially pp. 229-234 for a summary of this position.

the evidence from the Bible letting that evidence speak for itself (pp.420f.). Rather than correct the sources in accord with some preconceived scheme he would prefer to construct the grammar from the sources (p.103). In doing so he excludes references to analogous grammatical phenomena in cognate languages, since he feels the time has not yet arrived for a comparative grammar of Hebrew (p.19).

It seems to us that Sperber is quite right in insisting that language is prior to grammar, and that in his criticism of the editors of BH² and BH³ and of various grammars and translations he has made some sound points.⁶ The danger of circular reasoning and of eliminating living language by an appeal to grammar is always present. That danger is perhaps greater in historical grammar where the sources can't defend themselves against arbitrary emendation and selection for the purpose of having clear laws and norms. In this respect Sperber's method cannot be faulted. However it seems equally arbitrary to exclude systematically from consideration all evidence from comparative philology or other studies which might shed light on vexed problems (cf. p.19).

It is impossible to treat the whole of Sperber's work in this review, but some of his conclusions on the Hebrew verbal system ought to be singled out for particular comment.

It is his contention that the two tenses of the Hebrew verb, the perfect and the imperfect as they are commonly called, actually represent two independent verbal systems belonging to the two dialects which are combined to form biblical Hebrew as we know it. One system, built on the schema CaCC, consisted of the perfect (suffix tense) to express time, and the absolute infinitive to express modal meanings (imperative, infinitive). The other system, built on the schema CCoC, consisted of the imperfect (prefix tense) to express time and the infinitive construct to express modal meanings (p.318). Thus, of the two tenses in biblical Hebrew he says:

⁶ E.g., on the variety of time-reference of the prefix (yqtl) and suffix (qtl) tenses and the gratuitous emendations offered, cf. pp. 66f. On the petitio principii often involved in deciding whether a syllable is open or closed, and whether it has a long or short vowel, cf. pp. 415ff. On the inconsistencies in emendation in BH³, cf. pp. 52f. On the translations (especially the JPS), cf. pp. 33ff.

Each of these tenses (the suffix tense and the prefix tense) may indicate any and every time. They do not complement one another in order to form a complete verbal conjugation expressing past and future, respectively, but they run parallel to one another, representing two possibilities of expressing one and the same time. The difference that exists between the suffix tense and the prefix tense was not of a temporal but rather of a dialectic character... (p. 592)

Further, on the distinction between waw consecutive and waw conjunctive, he says:

The term waw consecutivum, which the grammar had to invent in order to explain the use of an imperfect with the meaning of a perfect, and vice versa, thus becomes obsolete. Neither the vocalization nor the function justify the differentiation of the preposition (sic) waw into waw conjunctivum and consecutivum. (p. 592)

Before considering in more detail the evidence for these contentions, three general observations can be made. 1) The fact that a grammatical phenomenon does not appear everywhere does not mean that it appears nowhere. 2) The Bible embraces material from sources widely differing in time of composition.⁷ This must be considered in constructing an historical grammar. 3) One must also distinguish between prose and poetry, since each can have its own canons of usage.⁸ In presenting his evidence for the existence of two parallel verbal systems and for dispensing with the distinction between waw consecutive and waw conjunctive, Sperber does not seem to have taken these three points into account.

Thus, his contention that the perfect can have a future meaning and that the imperfect can have a past meaning is clearly established (cf. his examples on pp.589f.),

⁷ To mention only the poetry, some poems like the Blessing of Jacob, Gen. 49:1-27 or the Song of Deborah, Jdg. 5:2-31, are dated before the period of the monarchy while others like Ps. 137 are evidently exilic or later. On the date of Jdg. 5 & Gen. 49, cf. for example E. A. Speiser, Genesis in the Anchor Bible, Vol. I (New York, 1964), p.371.

⁸ G. Bergsträsser, Hebräische Grammatik II (Leipzig, 1929), p. 34 notes that it is particularly in poetry that the yqtl form of the verb "retains its old preterite meaning." C. Gordon, Ugaritic Textbook (Rome, 1965) notes the distinction between poetry and classical prose in Hebrew especially with respect to the use of the waw conversive (13.29) and the use of the article (14.4). M. Held, "The YQTL-QTL (QTL-YQTL) Sequence of Identical Verbs in Biblical Hebrew and Ugaritic," Abraham A. Neuman Festschrift (Leiden, 1962), pp. 281-290 points out a special stylistic feature of poetry where the two forms of the verb complement one another.

but this fact has long been known to grammarians.⁹ It is not at all clear from this that they never complement each other as past and future tenses or in other ways. Nor is it clear that variation in usage may not in part reflect a development within Hebrew, as other students of the Hebrew verb have contended.¹⁰ The three examples of parallel passages from Leviticus given by Sperber (p.587) in which the tenses are apparently simply interchanged are not sufficient to prove the total interchangeability of the tenses for biblical Hebrew.¹¹ The fact that perfects can follow imperfects in the same line (or vice versa), and with the same tense meaning, does not mean that they are not complementary members of the same verbal conjugation; nor does it mean that they may not have different meanings in literature of a different style (e.g. narrative, legal, poetic, oracular) or of a different age.¹² What Sperber seems to have shown is that in poetic passages in particular the two forms of the verb tend to co-exist without being strictly bound to one kind of time reference. The fact that one form of the verb frequently occurs in the first stich and the other in the second stich

⁹ S. R. Driver, A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew (Oxford, 1881), Nos. 13,14,17,19,26,27,30,31.

¹⁰ E.g., R. Meyer, "Das hebräische Verbalsystem im Lichte der gegenwärtigen Forschung," Supplement to Vetus Testamentum VII (Leiden, 1960), and a more recent article "Aspekt und Tempus im althebräischen Verbalsystem," OLZ 59 (1964), pp. 117-126. Also, idem, Hebräische Grammatik I (Berlin, 1966), pp. 17-30. For another view, see F. Rundgren, Das althebräische Verbum: Abriss der Aspektlehre, (Stockholm, 1961). Cf. the article of M. Held (above note 8) for examples of stylistic balancing of the two forms of the verb.

¹¹ Lev. 4:31 & 35 הוֹסֵר // הוֹסֵר Lev. 11:5 & 6 יִפְרִים // יִפְרִים Lev. 17:4 & 9 יִבְיֵאוּ // יִבְיֵאוּ . Sperber gives two other examples: one from Deuteronomy 2:25 & 31 אָחַל // אָחַל but they can easily be translated differently - v. 25, "I will begin..." or, "I am beginning..." v. 31, "...Behold I have begun..." the other from Psalms 22:32 בָּנִים יוֹלֵדוּ & 78:6 לֵעַם נוֹלֵד . Here, while the meaning is essentially the same in both cases a different nuance can be expressed: Psalm 22:32 "...and proclaim...to a people yet unborn (determinate - the next generation)." Psalm 78:6 "...that they might know...the children who shall be born (indeterminate - whoever shall follow)." However, the difference must necessarily be a fine one in this case not so much because of the lack of difference in the tenses as because of the meaning of the verb, which borders on the stative in meaning.

¹² The examples of this adduced by Sperber on pp. 587ff. contain a high percentage of poetic passages (28 out of 40 in the case of imperfects following perfects in the same verse: e.g. II Samuel 22:9 עָלָה עָלָה "Smoke went up from his nostrils, and fire from his mouth devoured." Such usage is rather common in Hebrew

of a poetic line points to a certain stylistic balancing of the two forms. On the basis of his evidence the author has not shown that the two forms of the verb are nowhere related to each other as past to present-future, much less that they represent the separate and parallel verbal conjugations of distinct dialects. The evidence from other Semitic languages, Ugaritic for example, shows a verbal system which includes both qtl and yqtl forms of the verb complementing one another. This is at a date well over a millenium before the date Sperber seems to propose for the amalgamation of the two Hebrew dialects.¹³ Would Sperber maintain that Ugaritic, Akkadian or Aramaic also represent a mixture of dialects on the basis of their verbal systems?

What can be said of the evidence that Sperber offers for his contention that the distinction between waw consecutive and waw conjunctive is obsolete? On pp.579f., he cites 56 examples of imperfect consecutives with the waw vocalized w^e instead of the expected wa: וַיִּשְׁמַע instead of וַיִּשְׁמַע (or wa instead of the expected wā before an aleph:

poetry. Cf. Pss. 2:1; 4:4; 6:10; 17:11; 26:4,5; 27:4. The opposite order is also found in poetry, though more rarely: e.g. Pss. 2:2; 5:6b, 7a; 27:11, 12. Accordingly only half - 10 of 20 - of the examples he gives of an imperfect followed by a perfect in the same verse are poetic or semi-poetic sections, that is, passages characterized by parallelism of members, e.g., Isaiah 30:19 "He will surely be gracious to you - יִחַן - at the sound of your cry; when he hears it he will answer you - עֲנֶךָ." Some of the non-poetic passages he cites are not probative as instances of an imperfect followed by a perfect in the same verse with the same meaning: Leviticus 6:21 (RSV 28) "The ... vessel in which it is cooked (חֹבֶשֶׁל) shall be broken, but if it has been cooked (בְּשִׁלָּה) in a bronze vessel ..." The two verbs here can have different meanings. I Samuel 27:11 "And David left alive יָחִי neither man nor woman to bring tidings to Gath, thinking, 'Lest they tell about us and say, "So David has done עָשָׂה." ' " It is apparent that the two verbs are not strictly speaking part of the same sentence. One is included in a quotation within a quotation. Isaiah 45:4 "I surname you though you have not (= do not) known me." אֲנִי יֹדְעֹנִי . אֲכַנֶּךָ ולא ידעוני. One may translate here the perfect as a past tense with good sense, or simply point out that the verb יָדַע is often used in the perfect with present meaning and is not therefore a good choice to exemplify a general rule. Cf. GKC, p. 311, for examples. Therefore, from the examples presented by Sperber to exemplify the use of both forms of the verb in the same tense in the same verse or unit, one finds only 17 (of 60) convincing instances in prose, 7 of which interestingly enough are from Ezekiel.

¹³ Two recensions of Hebrew annals still existed, he thinks, at the time the Greek translation underlying Codex B of the LXX was made, cf. pp. 401, 409.

ואנקש instead of ואנקש). It is interesting that of these 56 instances of "anomalous" vocalization 46 are from poetic passages, where we have already seen that the imperfect can have preterite meaning, and frequently does. Thus we may not have true waw consecutives which are usually considered characteristic of narrative passages.¹⁴ We can discuss only a few of his examples here.

ראו איים ןייראו קצוח הארץ יחרדו קרבו ויאחיון

"The coastlands have seen and are afraid, the ends of the earth tremble; they have drawn near, they come." (Isaiah 41:5)

This does not have to be an instance of waw consecutive. A rendering, "The coastlands have seen and (so) are afraid," makes perfectly good sense.

וארא ואין איש ומאלה ואין יועץ ואשאלם וישיבו דבר

"But when I look there is no one; among these there is no counsellor so that when I ask them they answer." (Isaiah 41:28)

The conjunction at the beginning need not be considered a waw consecutive. It simply means "But" and the verbs that follow can be translated as present or frequentative imperfects.

ואנכי אמרתי איך אשיהך בבנים ואהן לך ארץ חמדה

"I thought how I would set you up among my sons, and give you a pleasant land" (Jeremiah 3:19)

"I thought ואנכי אמרתי " is an example of a passage beginning with waw even though it strictly speaking doesn't continue anything,¹⁵ but ואהן which Sperber thinks is an example of a consecutive really can be considered merely a conjunctive with the imperfect expressing a kind of modal meaning: "...how I would give...". None of these examples are typical instances of waw consecutive which simply continue a narrative or the thought of the preceding verb. It is perhaps worthy of note that none of his examples are drawn from the Pentateuch.

Conversely, on pp.580-582, he lists 81 examples of the imperfect bound to wa (the normal vocalization of waw consecutive according to the grammars, e.g., ויקרא) which he considers really instances of waw conjunctive. Of these,

¹⁴ GKC, p. 326.

¹⁵ GKC, pp. 484f.

34 are comfortably treated as consecutives, and are translatable in the past tense: despite Sperber. For example:

וּבְנֵי עֵשָׂו יִירְשׁוּם וַיִּשְׁמְדוּם
 "...but the sons of Esau dispossessed them, and destroyed them..." (Deuteronomy 2:12)¹⁶

אִזְּ חַבְאָנָה שְׁתֵּי נָשִׁים זָנוּה אֶל הַמֶּלֶךְ וַחֲעֻמְדָּנָה לִפְנָיו
 "Then two harlots came before the king and stood before him." (I Kings 3:16)¹⁷

Of the remaining 47 instances, 41 are in psalms or poetic passages where a certain flexibility in the use of yqtl forms can be expected and where a certain variation in Masoretic vocalization is not unlikely. Again, what Sperber seems to have shown is that waw can enjoy a variety of vocalizations in poetic passages, but he has not made a cogent case for such indifference in narrative.¹⁸

Whatever other merits there may be to Sperber's thesis that biblical Hebrew is a mixture of the two dialects, he has not been convincing in adducing the two forms of the Hebrew verb for corroboration. Similarly, even though he has pointed out the deficiencies of existing explanations, his rejection of the distinction between waw consecutive and waw conjunctive (p.577f.) seems too sweeping.

The plan of the grammar is not easy to follow. There are many minor misprints, and references to other sections within the work are frequently missing.

It is hardly "the last word on Hebrew grammar" as Brill's promotion would have it.

¹⁶ The difficulty here is with יִירְשׁוּם and not with וַיִּשְׁמְדוּם which is a normal consecutive usage.

¹⁷ The imperfect after אִזְּ can often have preterite meaning. Thus, וַחֲעֻמְדָּנָה seems to be a normal consecutive, cf. GKC, p. 314 for examples.

¹⁸ In his examples of the perfect with waw consecutive with anomalous vocalization (wā instead of we) Sperber cites only "hollow verbs" which are either monosyllabic or where the accent falls on the syllable following wā. These forms are usually explained by the term "pretonic qames" which Sperber rejects (p. 586), but the fact that all the examples of the perfect with wā cited have this feature in common weakens his case against the validity of waw consecutive and waw conjunctive. Cf. GKC, p. 306.