

The Canopy of Translation: Research on the Biblical Hebrew Verbal Tense System in the Light of Bible Translations

Ohad Cohen

University of Haifa

παρακέκλησθε οὖν μετ' εὐνοίας καὶ προσοχῆς τὴν ἀνάγνωσιν ποιεῖσθαι καὶ συγγνώμην ἔχειν ἐφ' οἷς ἂν δοκῶμεν τῶν κατὰ τὴν ἐρμηνείαν πεφίλοπονημένων τισὶ τῶν λέξεων ἀδυναμεῖν· οὐ γὰρ ἰσοδυναμεῖ αὐτὰ ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ἐβραϊστὶ λεγόμενα καὶ ὅταν μεταχθῇ εἰς ἑτέραν γλῶσσαν. Σοφία Σειράχ, Prologue.¹

Introduction

Drawing on linguistic research on the translation of Hebrew verb forms, the present article endeavors to shed light on the manner in which nineteenth and early-twentieth century grammarians formulated the questions that underpinned their study of the Hebrew verbal system. One of the central problems that European scholars grappled with from the very outset of modern research into the Hebrew verbal system was that the verb forms, especially *קטל* and *יקטל*, can be and often are rendered into European target languages in multiple ways. For example, a survey of English translations demonstrates that a single Hebrew verb form, such as *קטל*, is likely to merit a wide array of translations—as the simple future, present, simple past, present perfect, and past perfect—in the different versions.

In his study of the various theories on the Hebrew verbal system from the Middle Ages to the 1950s, McFall claims that one of the cardinal problems

¹ This article was translated by Avi Aronsky, whom I thank for his work and friendship. English translation: “Wherefore let me entreat you to read it with favor and attention, and to pardon us, wherein we may seem to come short of some words, which we have labored to interpret. For the same things uttered in Hebrew, and translated into another tongue, have not the same force in them” (Wisdom of Sirach, Prologue).

of these works is that “every tense (‘order of time’) in the English language is required to translate the five Hebrew verb forms.”² However, McFall does not take into account the fact that the English and Hebrew verb systems are based on completely different logical foundations, a point on which I will soon expand. For the most part, this distinction is obfuscated in studies on the Hebrew language that are grounded in the translational counterparts of its various forms. Roman Jakobson contends that the art of translation involves two identical utterances, which come to expression within the framework of two different “code systems.”³ However, much of the relevant nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century literature ignored the structural differences between Hebrew and the translational languages.

In the pages ahead, I will examine how this oversight influenced the development of research. With the objective of understanding the European grammarians’ mindset, I will begin with a presentation of the overarching ideological background of the West’s intellectual discourse from the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century. Thereafter, I will introduce two key linguistic terms: reference time; and absolute/relative tense systems. In the third part of this article, these same terms will help to elucidate the relation between verses from the Hebrew Bible and their translations into modern European languages. Finally, I will examine how the translation influenced the manner in which research was conducted and formulated during the period in question.

The nineteenth and early-twentieth century research on the Hebrew verbal system indeed produced a large and variegated literature, so that the scope of this paper is too narrow to encompass the output of all the era’s grammarians. Instead, I will focus on a few prominent scholars whose work

² L. McFall, *The Enigma of the Hebrew Verbal System: Solutions from Ewald to the Present Day* (Sheffield: Almond, 1982), 176.

³ R. Jakobson, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” *Selected Writings*, 2: *Word and Language* (The Hague - Paris: Mouton, 1966), 262.

is fairly representative of the general discourse: Samuel R. Driver (1846-1914), Heinrich Ewald (1803-1875), as well as *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*.⁴

a. The Ideological Framework of the Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century Hebrew Grammarians

The linguistics of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century was rooted in the ideological conceptions and movements of its time. The grammarians that I will discuss were heavily influenced by the European discourse on the concept of the “person.” Among the period’s terms that had a substantial impact on the humanities and social sciences was the “noble savage,” including the attendant dichotomies between “natural” and “domesticated,” “wild” and “cultured,” “pre-logical” and “logical” thought, as well as “irrational” and “rational.”⁵ These ideas concerning the “essence of man” shaped the anthropological research of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, particularly the work of Edward Tylor and Franz Boas,⁶ and also left their mark on the field of linguistics.

One of the more prominent linguistic arguments to arise from the “noble savage” discourse was the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. According to this theory, members of different groups speak different languages because they think in a different manner; in turn, modes of thought are what shape the grammatical structures of language.⁷ Even the study of the Hebrew verbal

⁴ *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch, tr. A. E. Cowley (2nd English ed., based on the 28th German ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1910).

⁵ The scholar who advanced the idea of the “noble savage” to the heart of eighteenth-century discourse was Rousseau, who inseminated the idea of the savage’s romantic attitude, vis-à-vis the blandness of European society, into the minds of his contemporaries. See J. J. Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, trans. M. Cranston (London: Penguin, 1984).

⁶ See E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Research into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: Murray, 1871); F. Boas, “The History of Anthropology,” *Science* (1904), 513-24.

⁷ This hypothesis was named after Edward Sapir (a student of Boas) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (Sapir’s student). Joining these two researchers under the same heading is somewhat problematic. Although their views regarding this topic are similar, there are pronounced differences. Sapir’s formulation is cautious and flexible, whereas Whorf takes a firmer stance on all that concerns the relation between language and culture. See, e.g., B. L. Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. J. B. Carroll (Cambridge, MA: Technology Press of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1997 [orig.

system was heavily influenced by this notion. For example, in his account of the Hebrew verbal system, Driver asserted that there is a connection between a language's syntactical constructions and the cultural-cognitive development of its speakers:⁸

I wish some of our good Hebrew scholars were sound Poly and Melanesian scholars also. I believe it to be quite true that the *mode of thought* of a South Sea islander resembles very closely that of a Semitic man [...] The Hebrew narrative viewed from the Melanesian *point of thought* is wonderfully graphic and lifelike. The English version is dull and lifeless in comparison [...] [T]he Hebrew's mind (and his speech) moved on with his thought and was present with the whole range of ideas included in the thought.

By dint of the terms “mode of thought” and “point of thought,” Driver argued that the differences between Hebrew and English could be attributed to the primitive consciousness and pre-logical way of thinking of the ancient Israelite.

The primitivistic approach to the Hebrew verbal system is exemplified in the following passage from the writing of Ernest Renan, the French historian and linguist:⁹

Even though one can find certain kin relations between them, the Aryan and Semitic languages differ from one another in an essential manner. The Aryan language is vastly superior with respect to the inflection of the verb. This marvelous instrument, which was created by means of the primitive man's instinct, contained the seed for all the

pub. 1956]); and E. Sapir, *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1921).

⁸ S. R. Driver, *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew and Some Other Syntactical Questions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1892), 6 (italics in the original).

⁹ E. Renan, *Histoire du Peuple D'Israël* (5 vols.; Paris: Calmann Levy, 1887), 1.9.

metaphysics that would subsequently develop in the Indian genius, the Greek genius, and the German genius. In contrast, the Semitic language has a flawed side in all that concerns the verb. The biggest mistake of that race [i.e., the Semitic one] was to adopt such a poor mechanism for the mode of using the verb; as a result, the expressions of the tenses and the modi were always confused and incomplete.¹⁰

Driver's and Renan's assumptions concerning the Israelites' mode of thought were commonplace in the works of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century grammarians. While Driver exhibited a Romantic worldview and Renan a condescending attitude, both of them believed that the ancient Semite was a "primitive man" with a pre-logical mode of thinking. This Eurocentric perspective served as a convenient ideological expedient for using the so-called "logical" European languages to describe the Hebrew verbal system. For the sake of evaluating the impact of translations on the accounts of the Hebrew verbal system, let us begin by explicating some of the key linguistic terms that pertain to this field of research.

b. Fundamental Concepts in the Linguistic Research of Verbal Systems

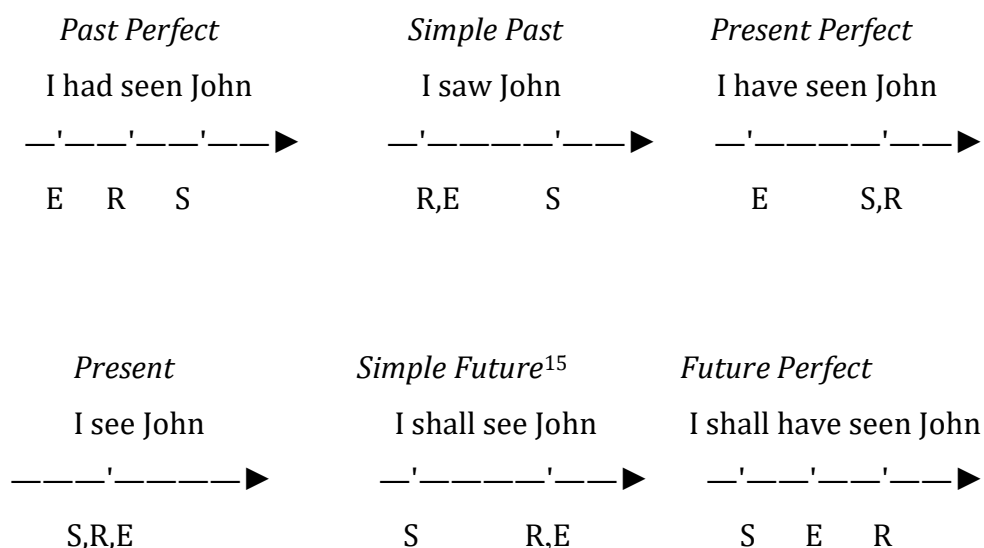
1. Reference Time

One of the philosopher Hans Reichenbach's major contributions to the general theory of tense systems was the concept of "reference time" (R-time).¹¹ The traditional approach towards logical tense systems is to analyze the chronological relations that are expressed by different verbs entirely in

¹⁰ In the original: "Les langues des Aryens et des Sémites étaient essentiellement diverses, bien qu'on pût remarquer entre elles certains airs de parenté. La langue aryenne avait une grande supériorité, surtout en ce qui touche à la conjugaison du verbe. Ce merveilleux instrument, créé par l'instinct d'hommes primitifs, contenait en germe tout la métaphysique que devaient développer plus tard le génie hindou, le génie grec, le génie allemand. La langue sémitique, au contraire, prit tout d'abord, en ce qui concerne le verbe, un parti défectueux. La plus grande erreur que cette race ait commise [...] a été d'adopter pour la manière de traiter le verbe un mécanisme si mesquin, que l'expression des temps et des modes a toujours été pour elle imparfaite et embarrassée."

¹¹ See H. Reichenbach, *Elements of Symbolic Logic* (New York: Macmillan, 1947).

terms of speech time (S) and event time (E).¹² In other words, the chronological relations conveyed by a verb describe the link between the time at which the speech takes place and the time of the event. Reichenbach showed that this conceptual framework fails to adequately describe many of the nuances expressed by assorted verb forms in different languages.¹³ For example, it is impossible to explain the difference between the simple past and the past perfect in English using the traditional method, for in both cases the event (E) transpires before the speech (S). Therefore, Reichenbach assumed that language signifies chronological relations not only by means of a binary system comprised of E-time and S-time, but also by referring to a third juncture—"reference time" (R). This point of reference allows for a more accurate account of the chronological relations between different forms, as in the following sentences:¹⁴



¹² These terms inform those works that are associated with the Tense Logic school of thought; e.g., A. N. Prior, *Past, Present and Future* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), and J. E. Clifford, *Tense and Tense Logic* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969). For an in-depth discussion of this topic and related bibliographical sources, see G. Hatav, *The Semantics of Aspect and Modality: Evidence from English and Biblical Hebrew* (Amsterdam-Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1997), 2-6.

¹³ Reichenbach, *Elements* (above, n. 11), 287-98.

¹⁴ The sentences and diagrams are taken from *ibid*, 290. The arrows denote the flow of the time axis (from left to right). S = speech time (the present); E = event time; and R = the reference time of the verb.

¹⁵ The location of the R-time in this diagram (adjacent to the E-time) differs from the original, as Reichenbach pairs the R- with the S-time (*ibid*, 290), instead of the E-time. That said, see his discussion in Reichenbach, *Elements* (above, n. 11), 295-97.

Although reference time is indeed a hard concept to pin down, it may be described as the axis that establishes the chronological meaning of a verb.¹⁶ This determination cannot be made without establishing a verb's R-time and its relation to the corresponding event. As we shall see, defining a verb's R-time is crucial to any account of Biblical Hebrew because the language possesses a relative tense system.¹⁷

2. Relative Tense vs. Absolute Tense

The distinction between "relative" and "absolute" tense is critical to our understanding of the Biblical Hebrew tense system. In the ensuing discussion, Reichenbach's categories (E, R, S) will help to illuminate the differences between these two concepts.

According to Bernard Comrie, tense is a grammatical expression of the link to the time axis.¹⁸ One of the principal conditions of this grammatical relation is the existence of a deictic center to which the tense refers.¹⁹ Speech time generally serves as a sort of deictic axis for absolute tense systems: everything before this point is in the past and everything after is in the future. In a relative tense system, though, the deictic center is reference time, not speech time. As Comrie puts it:²⁰

[T]his should be interpreted to mean a tense (i.e. absolute tense) which includes as part of its meaning the present moment as a deictic

¹⁶ For a comprehensive discussion of this topic, see O. Cohen, *The Verbal Tense System in Late Biblical Hebrew Prose* (HSS 63; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 16-19.

¹⁷ This view is advocated in the following studies: J. Hughes, Review of B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, *JJS* 44 (1993), 132-37; T. Goldfajn, *Word Order and Time in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); Z. Zevit, *The Anterior Construction in Classical Hebrew* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998); Cohen, *Verbal Tense* (above, n. 16).

¹⁸ B. Comrie, *Tense* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 9.

¹⁹ In Comrie's estimation, one of the major distinctions between tense and aspect is that the former must have a deictic center, whereas aspect has no such base. See *ibid*, 13-18.

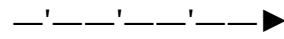
²⁰ *Ibid*, 36. Comrie distinguishes between pure absolute tense systems, namely those in which the verb forms invariably refer to speech time (S), and what he dubs "relative-absolute systems," where the verb forms simultaneously refer to both S- and R-time. Since absolute tense systems are quite rare, this article uses the term "absolute tense system" to signify what Comrie dubs a "relative-absolute system."

center; whereas relative tense refers to a tense which does not include as part of its meaning the present moment as a deictic center.

In sum, the distinction between a relative tense system (as in Biblical Hebrew) and an absolute tense system (e.g., English, French, and German) is tied to the nature of the verb's deictic center. Absolute forms always refer to speech time (S) and reference time (R):

Past Perfect

I had seen John



E R S

The chronological meaning of the verb form “had seen” is denoted by the following equation: $E < R < S$. Put differently, this form expresses the fact that the event precedes both the speech and reference time.

Hackmack outlines the meaning of the English tenses:²¹

	S,R	S<R	R<S
E,R	<i>S,R,E simul. present (simple present)</i>	<i>S<E,R simul. future (simple future)</i>	<i>E,R<S simul. past (simple past)</i>
R<E	<i>S,R<E post. present (simple future)</i>	<i>S<R<E post. future</i>	<i>R<E<S post. past</i>
E<R	<i>E<S,R ant. present (present perfect)</i>	<i>E<S<R ant. future S<E<R E,S<R (future perfect)</i>	<i>E<R<S ant. past (past perfect)</i>

This table illustrates the features of the English tenses, which are defined by both speech and reference time. On the other hand, in a relative tense system,

²¹ See S. Hackmack, “Reichenbach’s Theory of Tense and Its Application to English,” 7 (available online: <http://www.fb10.uni-bremen.de/khwagner/verb/pdf/Reich.pdf>; accessed March 30, 2016). In this table, the parentheses bear the names of the English verb forms that signify the preceding chronological meanings. The two gray squares point to cases in which the English language lacks verb forms that specifically mark the temporal dimensions at hand. In sum, the chart demonstrates that speech time and reference time are prerequisites for establishing the chronological meaning of any verb form.

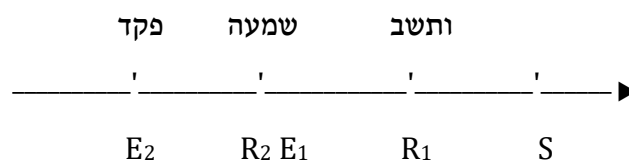
the only deictic center is reference time, around which all the chronological meanings are arrayed. Additionally, the forms in a relative system express anteriority, concurrence, and posteriority instead of the past, present, and future. For instance, the chronological meaning of the קטל and יקטל forms in Biblical Hebrew are $E \leq R$ and $E \geq R$, respectively.²²

c. The Relations between Hebrew Verb Forms and their Translational Counterparts

The ensuing section examines a handful of verses from the Hebrew Bible and their translations into English and/or French and German²³ with the objective of highlighting the theoretical difficulties that rendering the Hebrew verb forms קטל and יקטל into modern European languages imposes on the research.

1. וַתָּקֵם ה' וְכַלְתִּיהָ וַתָּשָׁב מִשְׂדֵּי מוֹאָב כִּי שָׁמְעָה בְּשִׂדָּה מוֹאָב כִּי פָקַד יְהוָה אֶת עַמּוֹ לָתֵת לָהֶם לֶחֶם

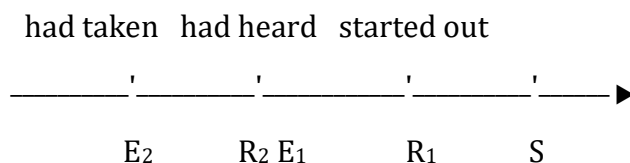
She *started out* with her daughters-in-law *to return* from the country of Moab; for in the country of Moab *she had heard* that the Lord *had taken* note of His people and given them food. (Ruth 1:6; NJPS)



Past Perfect Past Perfect Simple Past

²² See Cohen, *Verbal Tense* (above, n. 16).

²³ These translations attest to some of the fundamental problems of rendering Biblical Hebrew into modern languages. Since researchers are not privy to the exact translations used by Driver, Ewald, and other nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century grammarians, these examples are merely intended to outline a general phenomenon. The following abbreviations are used for the English Bibles: NJPS = the New Jewish Publication Society; NRSV = the New Revised Standard Version; and REB = the Revised English Bible. For the details concerning the French and German Bibles, see nn. 24 and 29.



From a chronological standpoint, the קטל forms in this verse express the fact that their respective actions transpire after the event they refer to ($R > E$), as God comes to his people's aid *before* Naomi hears about it and subsequently returns to her land. Hence, the translator's decision to utilize the past perfect accurately depicts the relations that are signified by the Hebrew verbs.

2. וַיֹּאמֶר אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים אֶל הַמֶּלֶךְ אִם תִּתֵּן לִי אֶת חֲצִי בֵיתְךָ לֹא אָבֹא עִמָּךְ וְלֹא אֲכַל לֶחֶם וְלֹא אֶשְׁתֶּה מִיָּם בְּמָקוֹם הַזֶּה. כִּי כֵן צִוָּה אֶתִּי בְּדִבְרֵי ה' לֵאמֹר לֹא תֹאכַל לֶחֶם וְלֹא תִשְׁתֶּה מִיָּם וְלֹא תָשׁוּב בַּדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר הָלַכְתָּ

But the man of God replied to the king, “Even if you give me half your wealth, I will not go in with you; nor will I eat bread or drink water in this place. For so I was commanded by the word of the Lord: You shall eat no bread and drink no water, *nor shall you go back* by the road by which *you came*. (1 Kgs. 8-9; NJPS)

Car ainsi me l’a ordonné la parole du Seigneur, disant: Tu ne mangeras pas de pain, tu ne boiras pas d’eau, et *tu ne reviendras pas* par le même chemin que *tu auras pris pour aller*. (Kahn)²⁴

In this passage, the קטל form (הלכת) appears in an embedded clause and its R-time—the verb תשוב—is in the main clause. The speaker cites the instructions that he had previously received from God. It is understood from the context that both תשוב and הלכת are situated in the future, for the command was given when the “man of God” was still in Bethlehem. Furthermore, the קטל form denotes that the act of going will precede the act of returning. As such, the logical relation herein is what Reichenbach calls

²⁴ *La Bible, traduite du text original par les membres du Rabbinate Français sous la direction de M. Zadoc Kahn* (10 vols. ; Paris: Les textes sacres, 1964 [orig. pub. 1926-1930]).

“the first anterior future” (R>E>S).²⁵ According to Hackmack’s above-cited table, the English form that reflects this chronological relation is the future perfect. However, the NJPS and many other English Bibles turn to the simple past, which fails to convey the fact that in the Hebrew text the events transpire in the future.²⁶ It stands to reason that the translator’s decision to use the simple past was influenced by the fact that קטל’s predominant role in Biblical Hebrew is to denote the past. The French translation is truer to the original, as the *futur antérieur* maintains a similar relation to the one in the Hebrew version.²⁷

3. חֲזַק וְאַמֵּץ כִּי אֶתֶּה תִּנְחִיל אֶת הָעָם הַזֶּה אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאֲבוֹתֶם לָתֵת לָהֶם:

Be strong and resolute, for you **shall apportion** to this people the land that **I swore** to their fathers to assign to them. (Josh. 1:6; NJPS)

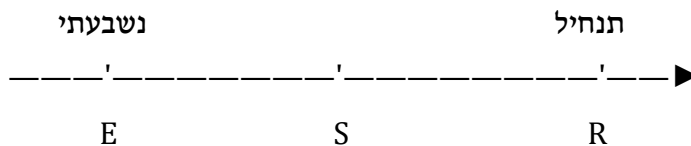
From a structural standpoint, this case differs only slightly from the previous two, as the קטל form appears within an embedded clause and its point of reference (R) is in the future. The essential difference between these examples is that the action in this verse—the taking of an oath—is situated in the past. More specifically, God commands Joshua to bequeath the land to the people (in the future), thereby fulfilling a promise that was made to their forefathers (in the past). Reichenbach terms this relation “the third anterior future” (R-S-E).²⁸ Here too, the reader senses that the קטל form ignores the speech time (S):

²⁵ Reichenbach, *Elements* (above, n. 11), 297.

²⁶ For a description of the simple past’s functions in English, see G. N. Leech, *Meaning and the English Verb* (London: Longman, 1971).

²⁷ For more on the *futur antérieur*, see P. Imbs, *L’emploi des temps verbaux en français modern: Essai de grammaire descriptive* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1960), 109-10. To the best of my knowledge, none of the English translations of this verse uses the future perfect.

²⁸ Reichenbach, *Elements*, 297.

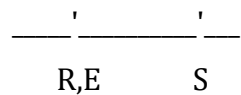


According to Hackmack, the chronological relation $R>S>E$ is also supposed to be marked by the future perfect, but most English renderings of this verse avail themselves of the simple past:

Be strong and courageous for *you shall put* this people in possession of the land that I *swore* to their ancestors to give them. (NRSV)

Simple Past

I swore



Consistent with the Hebrew version, the NRSV's use of the past form locates the verb in the absolute past, but there is no indication that the reference time is positioned in the future.

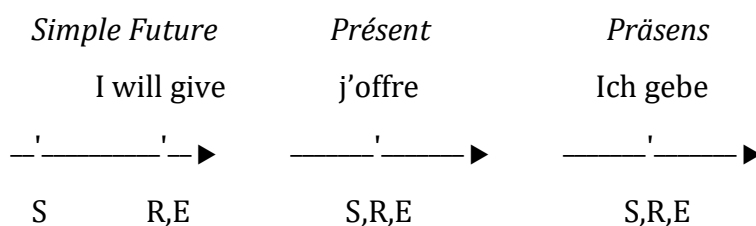
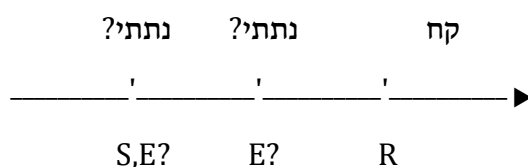
4. אם אתה לו שמעני נותני כסף השדה קח ממני ואקברה את מתי שמה (בר' כג 13)

If you only will listen to me! I *will give* the price of the field: *accept* it from me, so that I may bury my dead there. (Gen. 23:13 ; NRSV)

Ah! s'il te plaît, écoute-moi: *j'offre* le prix de ce champ, *accepte-le*, que j'y puisse enterrer mon mort. (Kahn)

Aber möchtest du selbst mich nur hören! *Ich gebe* den Silberwert des Angers, *nimm* ihn von mir *an*, daß ich dorthin meinen Toten begrabe. (Buber-Rosenzweig)²⁹

²⁹ M. Buber and F. Rozenzweig, *Die Schrift* (Cologne: Hegner, 1954 [orig. pub. Berlin: Schneider, 1925-37]).



As I have argued, it is impossible to definitively establish from the Hebrew context the event's location on the absolute time axis. Abraham attempts to persuade Ephron to sell him the plot before he weighs the money (the reader is only informed of the weighing in v. 16). In other words, the קטל form (both here and in v. 11) signifies that the tender precedes the acceptance (which is expressed in the imperative form) and that these actions have yet to occur. Since the Hebrew verse only signifies the relation $R > E$, the precise timing of the event is vague. All things considered, there appear to be two plausible alternatives: Abraham either intends to hand over the money in the (near) future or at the very moment he makes the offer (S). The disparate ways in which this verse has been rendered attest to the lack of clarity. Whereas the NRSV places the action in the future, the French and German translations place it in the present.³⁰ However, none of them reflects the anteriority of the event vis-à-vis the reference time ($E < R$).

In all these examples, the קטל forms denote the chronological relation $E < R$. A wide array of verb forms are used to translate קטל because Hebrew does not define the location of the event (E) on the absolute time axis. Conversely, the order expressed by יקטל forms is $R < E$; but as we shall see, the translations of this form contend with an identical problem.

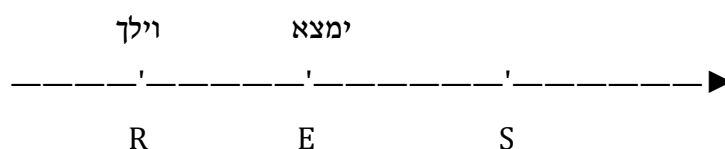
³⁰ The French and German renditions provided herein testify to the wide range of possible alternatives for translating this verse.

5. וַיֵּלֶךְ הָאִישׁ מִהָעִיר מִבֵּית לָחֶם יְהוּדָה לָגוּר בְּאֶשֶׁר יִמָּצָא

This man *had left* the town of Bethlehem of Judah to take up residence wherever *he could find* a place. (Judg. 17:8; NJPS)

He *had left* the city of Bethlehem *to go and find* somewhere to live. (REB)

The Hebrew version signifies that the act of finding comes after the departure from Bethlehem. In other words, the context for this יקטל is a past event—a relation that Reichenbach refers to as “the first posterior past” (S>E>R).³¹



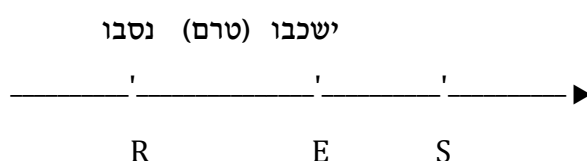
According to both Reichenbach and Hackmack, this chronological relation is not denoted in English by means of a concrete verb form. With respect to the verses in question, NJPS's solution is the construction “he could find,” which expresses feasibility in English. Alternatively, the REB uses the infinitive form “to go and *find*,” which in this case signifies intent. These solutions contend with a pair of translational obstacles: the Hebrew form signifies a chronological meaning that lacks a precise morphological counterpart in English; and the use of an ostensibly future form, יקטל, to express an event that takes place in the past.

6. וַיִּפְצַר בָּם מָאֵד וַיִּסְרוּ אֵלָיו וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל בֵּיתוֹ וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם מִשְׁתָּה וּמִצּוֹת אֶפֶה וַיֹּאכְלוּ: טָרָם
וַיִּשְׁכְּבוּ וְאִנְשֵׁי הָעִיר אִנְשֵׁי סָדֵם נִסְבּוּ עַל הַבַּיִת מִנֹּעַר וְעַד זָקֵן

³¹ Reichenbach, *Elements* (above, n. 11).

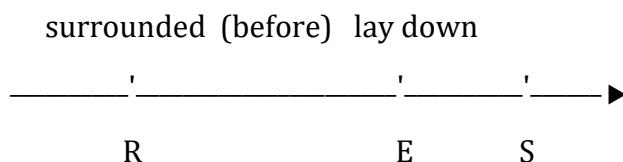
But he urged them strongly, so they turned his way and entered his house. He prepared a feast for them and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. **They had not yet lain down** when the townspeople, the men of Sodom, young and old—all the people to the last man—gathered about the house (Gen. 19:3-4; NJPS)

In this passage, the יקטל form also signifies, albeit with a hand from the adverb טרם, that the action it expresses transpires after the R-time.



But *before* they *lay down*, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, *surrounded* the house. (NRSV)

The translator employs two verbs in the past tense, while the adverb “before” helps clarify the chronological relation between them:



Despite the accuracy of this translation in all that concerns the relation between the verbs, it fails to express the anteriority that the Hebrew verb signifies. Therefore, the English reader is liable to come away with the erroneous impression that ישכבו denotes the past.³²

³² In many grammar books, the examples that are brought of a יקטל form trailing the adverb טרם are described as cases in which the verb expresses the past; e.g., *GKC* §107c; *JM*, §113j.

7. וְאָמַר אֶלְלֶה אֶתְכֶם מִצָּרִים אֶל אֶרֶץ הַכְּנָעֲנִי

I declare that *I will bring* you up out of the misery of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites. (Exod. 3:17; NRSV)

In this verse, the יקטל form appears within the framework of direct speech and expresses posteriority vis-à-vis the speech time (i.e., it is situated in the future). Consequently, the logical English translation is indeed the future tense.

d. The Impact of Translations on Accounts of the Hebrew Verbal System

As demonstrated in the previous examples, the fact that the Hebrew language offers no denotation of the chronological relation to the absolute time axis has forced translators to avail themselves of a wide array of different verb forms in an effort to capture the essence of the original text. In response to this problem, Heinrich Ewald (1803-1875) developed an approach according to which the Hebrew verb forms do not inherently mark temporal distinctions. The terminology in Ewald's first book of Hebrew grammar (1827)³³ was influenced by that of Johann Jahn (1750-1816). In order to contend with the implications of the Hebrew verb forms' versatility, namely their ability to express the past, present, and future, Jahn took the unprecedented step of replacing the terms past/present with first/second aorist.³⁴ Following in the German Orientalist's footsteps, Ewald presented these two categories as a pair of modi:³⁵ "*Zwei Formen* hat die Sprache, die mehr den Unterschied des *Modus* als des *Tempus* heben: sie werden hier der *erste* und *zweite Modus* genannt."

³³ H. Ewald, *Kritische Grammatik der hebräischen Sprache* (Leipzig: Hahn, 1827).

³⁴ See McFall, *Enigma* (above, n. 1), 43-44. The term aorist is taken from the Greek grammar (= borderless or not defined). Its exact meaning is the subject of debate, especially on account of the complex character of the Greek aorist, which signifies in the indicative both tense and aspect. Jahn captured the essence of his theory with the following words: "Aoristus primus sistit rem perfectam, jam praesentem, jam praeteritam, jam futuram. Aoristus secundus sistit rem imperfectam, jam praesentem, jam praeteritam, jam futuram." See *ibid*, 44.

³⁵ Ewald, *Kritische Grammatik* (above, n. 33), 219.

In his second book of Hebrew grammar (1828), Ewald described the two *modi* as “aorists from the standpoint of tense.” Put differently, the Hebrew verb forms make no reference to tense whatsoever.³⁶ The distinction between the aorists, in Ewald’s view, is that the first signifies “des Vollendende, das Bestimmte und Gewisse,” whereas the second signifies “das Unvollendende, das Unbestimmte, von den Umständen Abhängige.” The pairing of the aspectual terms *Vollendende/Unvollendende* (complete/incomplete) and the modal terms *Bestimmte/Unbestimmte* (certain/uncertain) indicates that Ewald wavered between the two options. These dichotomies are reminiscent of the perfectum/imperfectum tandem that he subsequently coined in his Arabic grammar (1831).³⁷ Needless to say, these terms soon became immensely popular in the field of Semitic linguistics and are in use to this very day.³⁸

In a later reference to the question of tenses, it is evident that the absolute tense system of Ewald’s native German tongue (i.e., referring to speech time as the central point of reference) influenced his account of the Hebrew tense system:³⁹

All the ancient languages give considerably free range to the imagination and succeed in explaining everything with a great deal of vitality, mobility, and sensuality. . . For this reason, the overlapping tense distinctions are far removed from the simple and cold understanding of the tense’s consistent usage on our [i.e., the Germans’] part. By dint of the ability and freedom of the imagination, it is even possible . . . to use the concepts “complete” and “incomplete” in a sort of manner in which the speaker can place any occurrence

³⁶ See H. Ewald, *Grammatik der hebräischen Sprache* (Leipzig: Hahn, 1828), 223.

³⁷ H. Ewald, *Grammatica Critica Linguae Arabicae* (Leipzig: Hahn, 1831), 112.

³⁸ Ewald’s use of these terms differs from their function in Latin and Greek grammar, as he availed himself of their etymological meaning (similar to that of the terms *Vollendende/Unvollendende*) as a marker of a completed or incomplete action.

³⁹ H. Ewald, *Ausführliches Lehrbuch der hebräischen Sprache des Alten Bundes* (Göttingen: Dietrich, 1870), 350.

that he can think of in any one of the three cycles of tense [the past, present, and future], be it in the capacity of that which has already been completed or that which is taking shape and is destined to happen. In consequence, a very diverse usage has taken form involving two expressions of tense that stand at the disposal of the language; and this distinction regarding tense, which is vastly simple, gives rise to the possibility of many other distinctions that are more exacting.⁴⁰

Ewald bases his argument on the speaker's capacity to swing back and forth along the time axis. It stands to reason that this explanation stemmed from the jumble caused by the inconsistent translation of Hebrew verb forms into German. The movement along the time axis situates the speaker in a sort of perpetual present that enabled Ewald to consider speech time a major facet of the Hebrew verb.

The lively discussion spanning the nineteenth and the early twentieth century on the non-temporal functions of Hebrew forms did not materialize out of thin air.⁴¹ Rather, it echoed the general linguistic discourse in Europe during that same period.⁴² In fact, Ewald's method for describing the

⁴⁰ In the original: "Allein wie die ursprachen überhaupt der einbildung den freiesten spielraum gewähren und mit ungemeiner lebendigkeit beweglichkeit und sinnigkeit alles auffassen. . .: so sind auch diese nächsten zeitunterschiede weit entfernt von der bloßen kalten verständigkeit unserer zeitbestimmungen. Da also die begriffe des vollendeten und unvollendeten nach der kraft und freiheit der einbildung auch beziehungsweise (relativ) só gebraucht werden können daß der redende, in welchem der drei reinen zeitkreise (vergangenheit, gegenwart, zukunft) er eine handlung sich denken mag, sie da entweder als vollendet oder als werdend und kommend sezen kann."

⁴¹ The interest in non-temporal aspects of Semitic verbal systems in general and the Hebrew verbal system in particular merited a prominent spot in the discourse throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. The grammars from that period offer sundry terms for interpreting the roles of the קטל and ויקטל forms. For example, F. E. C. Dietrich uses the terms factitive/cogitative: idem, *Abhandlungen zur hebräischen Grammatik* (Leipzig: Vogel, 1846), 119. F. Böttcher employs the terms perfect/fiends: idem, *Ausführliches Lehrbuch der hebräischen Sprache* (Leipzig: Barth, 1866), 1: §587. E. König turns to perfectum/infectum: idem, *Historisch-kritisches Lehrgebäude der hebräischen Sprache*, 2.2: *Historisch-comparative Syntax der hebräischen Sprache* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1897).

⁴² For more on this topic, see the conclusion of G. Goldenberg, *The Amharic Tense-System* (PhD thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1966), 89 [Hebrew].

relations between temporal and non-temporal functions dates all the way back to the classical grammar, particularly the thought of the Stoics. The classical theory was swept back into the spotlight by James Harris,⁴³ Wilhelm von Humboldt,⁴⁴ and Karl Heyse.⁴⁵ From a terminological standpoint, one of the most important influences on the epoch's grammarians in general and its Semitic grammarians in particular was the work of Georg Curtius.⁴⁶ For instance, Curtius drew a distinction between *Zeitstufe*, which marks the past, present, and future, and *Zeitart* (kind of time),⁴⁷ which distinguishes between *dauernd*, *eintretend*, and *vollendet*. Another pivotal work was Driver's above-mentioned treatise. Aside from providing a methodical and most comprehensive summary of the period's research, Driver applied the concepts that were then prevalent in general linguistics to Hebrew grammar.⁴⁸ As Brockelmann and Goldenberg have shown,⁴⁹ Driver's work should largely be viewed as an adoption of Curtius' terms, which were originally intended for Greek, to the Hebrew system. Driver's book became the most popular and influential account of the Hebrew verb form. Over the course of the twentieth century, numerous scholars followed Ewald's and Driver's lead.⁵⁰

Like Ewald, Driver was vexed by the inconsistent and contradictory translations of Hebrew forms, a problem which led him to the following conclusions:⁵¹

⁴³ J. Harris, *Hermes or Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Universal Grammar* (London: J. Williams, 1771).

⁴⁴ W. von Humboldt, *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1836).

⁴⁵ K. W. L. Heyse, *System der Sprachwissenschaft* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1856). See also the conclusion of Goldenberg, *Amharic* (above, n. 42), 90-91.

⁴⁶ G. Curtius, *Erläuterungen zu meiner griechischen Schulgrammatik* (Prague: Tempsky, 1863 [orig. pub. 1852]).

⁴⁷ This term was subsequently replaced with *Aktionsart*.

⁴⁸ See above, n. 7.

⁴⁹ C. Brockelmann, *Hebräische Syntax* (Neukirchen: Verl. der Buchh. des Erziehungsvereins, 1956), 38; Goldenberg, *Amharic*, 90.

⁵⁰ For a compendium of references to these studies, see J. Joosten, "Do Finite Verbal Forms in Biblical Hebrew Express Aspect?" *JANES* 29 (2002), 49.

⁵¹ Driver, *Treatise* (above, n. 8), 5 (italics in the original).

The use of the Hebrew tenses will be better understood and more thoroughly appreciated if we keep in mind some of the peculiarities by which Hebrew style, especially the poetical and prophetic style, is characterized. One such peculiarity is the ease and rapidity with which a writer *changes his standpoint*, at one moment speaking of a scene as though still in the remote future, at another moment describing it as though present to his gaze.

Driver's premise that the Hebrew writer changes his or her vantage point at will is implicitly predicated on the argument that, as in English, the Hebrew speaker's vantage point (S-time) constitutes the chronological point of reference. While Driver's solution (i.e., the Hebrew speaker changes his vantage point and moves freely between the past, present, and future) indeed grapples with the confusion that is spawned by the fickle rendering of Hebrew verb forms into English, it forces the constraints of English syntax on the syntax of Hebrew relative tenses.

These attempts to divert attention away from the relative syntax are not only manifest in the theoretical discussions on the Hebrew verbal system, but in the coinage of terms aimed at solving the difficulties that are engendered by the transition from Hebrew to modern European languages. For example, grammarians used terms like *perfectum propheticum*, *perfectum confidentiae*, and *perfect preformative* to describe the קטל form. These terms indeed surface in *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*:⁵²

§106i: In direct narration to express action which, although really only in process of accomplishment, are nevertheless meant to be represented as already accomplished in the *conception of the speaker*. . .

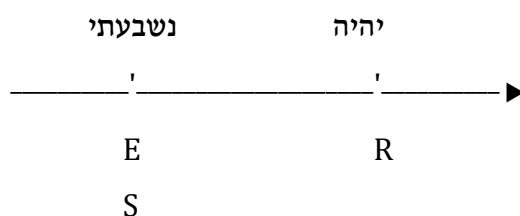
⁵² *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (above, n. 4; italics added).

§106m–n: To express *future* actions, when the speaker intends by an express assurance to represent them as finished, or as equivalent to accomplished facts [...] To express facts which are undoubtedly imminent, and, therefore, in the imagination of the speaker, already accomplished (*perfectum confidentiae*) [...] This use of the perfect occurs most frequently in prophetic language (*perfectum propheticum*). The prophet so transports himself in imagination into the future that he describes the future event as if it had been already seen or heard by him.

A thorough review of the verbs that Gesenius cites in these clauses, as well as the syntactical character of Hebrew's relative tense system, clearly demonstrate that the "conception of the speaker" should not be a factor in the chronological analysis. One of the verses that come up in § 106i is Jer. 22:5:

וְאִם לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ אֶת הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה בִּי נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי נְאֻם ה' כִּי לְחָרְבָהּ יִהְיֶה הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה.

The reference time of the verb X is the time of the verb Y:



In this particular case, the event time overlaps the speech time, so that the chronological relation is $E \leq R$. Put differently, this verse is characterized by a specific usage of the general syntactic rule.⁵³

⁵³ The same can be said for the rest of the verses that are cited in this clause: Gen. 14:22; Deut. 8:19; 2 Sam 17:11; 19:30; Job 9:22; 32:10.

Conclusion

In the epigraph, the translator of *The Wisdom of Sirach* brooded over the frequent disparities between an original text and its rendering. These words, which were put to parchment over 2,000 years ago, reflect a problem that is just as relevant as it was back in the second century BCE. Against this background, the present article examined the problem of rendering the Biblical Hebrew tenses into English and other European languages. With this objective in mind, we compared several verses from the Hebrew Bible with their modern translations. This comparison attests to the intricacy of any transition from one syntactical “code system”⁵⁴ to another. We saw that the heart of the problem is the transition from a relative to an absolute tense system. For example, the speech time in absolute systems serves as the main point of reference, so that everything before this point is in the past and everything after in the future, whereas the speech time in a relative system does not constitute a reference point. As a result, the tenses signify anteriority, synchronicity, and posteriority rather than the past, present, and future.

Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century scholars indeed sensed the difficulty that the Hebrew verbal tense system poses before the researcher. As per the spirit of the times, Hebrew was researched from a “primitivistic” viewpoint. In other words, the European languages were deemed to be logical, while Hebrew was seen as pre-logical. The fact that these scholars worked with two languages featuring disparate expository frameworks certainly influenced the manner in which their research questions and findings were formulated.

⁵⁴ Jakobson, “On Linguistic Aspects” (above, n. 3).