

Discourse Approaches to the Biblical Hebrew Verb System in Poetry¹

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January 2011

1. Introduction. The Semitic verbal system has long been a source of debate. Of primary interest to scholars has been the question of whether the opposition between the *qatal* and *yiqtol* forms primarily indicates tense (past::future) or aspect (perfect::imperfect). As the common nomenclature of "perfect" for *qatal* and "imperfect" for *yiqtol* indicate, the aspectual approach has tended to dominate in the grammars. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find *yiqtol* forms in past tense contexts or *qatal* forms in present or future contexts. It is not always clear, however, what type of aspectual nuance is being indicated by the choice between *qatal* and *yiqtol*, and indeed the majority of *qatal* forms are translated in English as simple past while *yiqtol*s are commonly translated as simple future.

Discourse approaches to the verb, therefore, have emphasized the pragmatic, rather than semantic, nature of the opposition between *qatal* and *yiqtol*, while also drawing attention to the importance of the *wayyiqtol* and *weqatal* forms in the system. For instance, *wayyiqtol* is considered to be the default narrative tense which is used for the main events of the story. A switch to a *qatal* form usually indicates a break from the main story and describes an event that happened prior or simultaneously. Adding the pragmatic dimension creates a four-way alternation in which *qatal*::*yiqtol*, *wayyiqtol*::*qatal*, *weqatal*::*yiqtol*, and *wayyiqtol*::*weqatal*.

While the narrative genre provides some constraints on the interpretation of tense and aspect, in poetry things become much more complicated. For instance, in Ps 24:2 we find the following couplet:

כִּי־הוּא עַל־יַמִּים יִסְדָּהּ	For he founded it (the earth) upon the seas	Ps 24:2
וְעַל־נְהָרוֹת יִבְנֶנָּהּ	and upon the rivers he established it	

Here we have a switch from a *qatal* verbal form in the first colon to a *yiqtol* form in the second without any apparent change in the temporal reference (since they both describe the main event) nor any type of modal or aspectual nuance. Adele Berlin describes *qtl* // *yqtl* as grammatical

1. This is a draft copy only. Feel free to distribute this essay freely as long as it is properly attributed to me. Note that this originally appeared as a series of posts at balshanut.wordpress.com interacting with a series of posts by Phil Sumpter at Narrative and Ontology exploring Alviero Niccacci's approach to the verb in biblical Hebrew poetry, which is summarized in his essay "The Biblical Hebrew Verbal System in Poetry" (Pages 247-268 in *Biblical Hebrew in its Northwest Semitic Setting*, edited by Steven Fassberg and Avi Hurvitz, Eisenbrauns, 2006). I have edited the posts into a single document and changed the tone at places to be more appropriate for an essay.

parallelism (*Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, 36) and groups it with other phenomena such as negative // positive, singular // plural, or active // passive.

It is important to emphasize that the *qtl-yqtl* shift, of which we have given only a few examples, occurs not for semantic reasons (it does not indicate a real temporal sequence) but for what have been considered stylistic reasons. But this is not something vaguely "stylistic"; we can now recognize it for what it is—a kind of grammatical parallelism.

The difference, however, in these other cases is that the poet chooses contrasting forms for variation, but still uses them normally. For instance, Jer 20:14 is an example of both positive // negative (*cursed be // let it not be blessed*) and passive // active (*I was born // my mother bore me*):

אָרוּר הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר יָלַדְתִּי בּוֹ יוֹם אֲשֶׁר-יָלַדְתָּנִי אִמִּי אֶל-יְהִי בְרוּךְ:	Cursed be the day on which I was born; the day on which my mother bore me let it not be blessed	Jer 20:14
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Therefore, even if *qtl // yqtl* is an instance of grammatical parallelism, some have protested that a poet cannot violate the semantics of the *yqtl* form merely for the sake of poetics. For instance, Alviero Niccacci's instinct, with which I agree, is that the verbal forms in poetry must have some basic relation to the verbal system of prose.

There are a few solutions to the problem. The *yiqtol* form in the second colon could be translated as a present tense and taken as a sort of historical present (*upon the rivers he establishes it*). In narrative, however, it is the participle which is used as a historic present (following הִנֵּה for instance). Conversely, the *yiqtol* could be taken not as a normal "imperfect", but as the older short prefixed preterite form (a simple past tense) which has generally fallen out of use but is preserved by the erudite poet. This approach is also problematic since the short form can often be diagnosed by the use of the *-ehu* 3ms pronominal suffix instead of the *-ennu* form which preserves the original nunation of the long imperfect. In Ps 24:2 we would seem to have the long form.

2. *The foreground::background distinction*. Following the discourse approaches briefly summarized above, Niccacci has suggested that the tense switch may be pragmatic rather than semantic. That is, just as the switch from *wayyiqtol* to *qatal* indicates a departure from the main storyline, the switch from *qatal* to *yiqtol* in poetry indicates a departure from the main theme to secondary information. In the literature, this distinction between main and secondary information has been described with the Gestalt terms foreground and background.

The distinction of foreground from background information was first developed in the analysis of

narrative. The idea began with Labov, among others, who sought to distinguish between narrative and non-narrative clauses within a text where narrative clauses contain the events of the story which are temporally sequenced. The terms foreground and background seem to have been introduced by Hopper and Thompson. Foreground refers to the sequential events which are presented on the primary storyline of the narrative, while background is everything else that is presented off-line (Labov's "non-narrative" material). Longacre includes the criteria that the sequential events must also be contingent upon each other. In the following example the foregrounded verbs are given in CAPITALS, while the backgrounded verbs are in *italics*:

(1) Yesterday I WENT to the grocery store. (2) It *was* the Kroger down the street. (3) I SAW my neighbor John there, (4) and he SAID that (5) our friend Bob *had been hit* by a car. (6) While we *were talking*, (7) Bob WALKED UP on crutches. (8) We ASKED him (9) how he *was doing* (10) and he SAID (11) he *was* okay.

Note that the foregrounded verbs are simple past tense, as is common in most languages for narrative, and that they all occur in main independent clauses. Descriptive and equative clauses such as (2) are naturally off the storyline since they do not narrate an event. Subordinate clauses also tend to report events that are off the main storyline as in (5). Lastly, durative and progressive forms such as (6) tend to be circumstantial, providing context for other punctual events.

The relationship between foreground and background material is not strictly binary, and scholars have argued for a scalar approach with degrees of "backgroundedness". If you think of a narrative as a painting, foregrounded information would appear closer to you while background material is further and further off in the distance. Note the subtle shift happening here. Foreground and background information were originally based on temporal ordering, but it seemed natural that the foreground information was also the most important in the discourse while background information was secondary. Keeping with the analogy of the painting, what is in the foreground is also largest and therefore most prominent. In linguistic jargon this is usually also referred to as salience. Along with coherence (the way that the individual pieces of information relate to one another) salience is one of the more important features of a discourse.

How then does an author "move" information from the background to the foreground? From the previous description, it can be inferred that the tense/aspect forms chosen to encode an event often correlate to grounding. Hopper and Thompson have argued that the coding of transitivity is also related to discourse prominence. In formal grammar, transitivity is often defined by the number of participants in a clause. A clause with one participant (S) is intransitive while those with two participants (A and O) are considered transitive. Hopper and Thompson argued, however, that Transitivity (note the big "T") should be conceived of as a scalar property of a clause as a whole. They offered ten transitivity parameters as shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1. Hopper and Thompson's Transitivity Parameters (adapted from pg 252).

Parameter	High T	Low T
1. Participants	2 or more, A(gent) and O(bject)	1
2. Kinesis	Action	Non-action
3. Punctuality	Punctual	Non-punctual
4. Volitionality	Volitional	Non-volitional
5. Affirmation	Affirmative	Negative
6. Mode	Realis	Irrealis
7. Agency	A high in potency	A low in potency
8. Affectedness of O	O totally affected	O not affected
9. Individuation of O	O highly individuated	O non-individuated

They found that clauses with more high transitive parameters were more likely to code foreground events in narrative. The assumption is that storylines seem to be advanced by events in which characters perform actions that change things—a backbone of cause → effect relationships.

The scholar most associated with discourse approaches to biblical Hebrew, at least in North America, is probably Robert Longacre, who has also done work with English discourse. Following Hopper and Thompson, Longacre has developed a salience scheme which ranks clauses. He has also added the parameter of sequentiality to account for an action that may be highly transitive but off the main storyline (for instance, clause (5) in the example above). He posits 7 bands for English narrative as in Figure 2:

Figure 2. Longacre's English Salience Scheme (adapted from pg 24-25).

Band 1. Storyline	simple past tense, contingent sequence, main clause
Band 2. Background	past progressive
Band 3. Flashback	pluperfect
Band 4. Setting	intransitive verbs with inanimate subjects
Band 5. Irrealis	negatives and modals/futures
Band 6. Evaluation	Past tense, gnomic present
Band 7. Cohesion	repetition, back reference

There are two things to note at this point. First, the TAM (Tense/Aspect/Mood) of the verb has a

strong correlation with the discourse role of the clause, but it is also not the only parameter and it can be modified by other parameters in certain cases. For instance, in clause (5) I could have said “Bob WAS HIT by a car” using the simple past rather than pluperfect, but it would still be off the main storyline since it is in a subordinate clause and does not occur in sequence. Longacre gives the example of the use of the punctiliar adverb ‘suddenly’ in English as a way to promote information onto the storyline. In the following example, “I couldn’t see” is technically unrealis, and thus should be in Band 5, but it is given a punctual aspect and placed onto the main sequence by the adverb:

Yesterday I *was walking* in the park when I SAW dark clouds *approaching*. Suddenly, I COULDN’T SEE a thing and I RAN back to my car blindly before the deluge *could soak* me.

Items can also be demoted from the main storyline by being placed in a subordinate clause, as Thompson notes (See her “Subordination” and Narrative event Structure’ in the Tomlin volume). Consider the following example:

Yesterday I MADE some toast for breakfast. It *was* cinnamon and sugar toast like I *used to make* when I *was* a kid. After I *cleaned* the dishes, I TOOK my shower...

“I cleaned the dishes” is punctual and occurs sequentially and contingently between the events of making toast and taking a shower. However, it is placed in a fronted adverbial clause which is a cohesion device used here to reorient the reader to the main storyline after a digression. This would place it in Longacre’s Band 7, the lowest level of salience.

The other thing to note is that so far we have only discussed narrative discourse, and the ordering principle of narrative discourse is sequence. It seems natural that these principles can be extended to other types of discourse that rely on either temporal or logical sequence, and indeed Longacre has also discussed prophecy and procedural discourse (step by step instructions). But, the question remains how the foreground :: background distinction applies to discourse which is organized differently, say thematically instead of sequentially. Obviously this will be important when we turn to poetry.

3. Grounding in BH Narrative. Biblical Hebrew narrative lends itself well to discussions of grounding. As mentioned above, one of the well-known quirks of the BH verbal system is the existence of both a *qatal* form that seems to be primarily used in past tense contexts and the so-called “waw-consecutive imperfect” *wayyiqtol*, also primarily past tense. It has long been recognized that chains of *wayyiqtol* verbs are used for the main action of a narrative, which corresponds with our definition of foregrounding. Thus some have better labeled *wayyiqtol* a narrative preterite or narrative tense. The system would work nicely if *qatal* was reserved for backgrounded clauses, and in general this scheme seems to fit.

Niccacci's description of the clause types is rather standard (though his explanations are a bit idiosyncratic, and much of his terminology is inherited from Harald Weinrich through Schneider and Talstra). The *wayyiqtol* is described as the foreground narrative tense which is “degree zero,” meaning it is in line with the tense of the main narrative. There are four basic “tense shifts” which signal a shift from foreground to background (note that *x* represents some other clause initial element):

- (1) *wayyiqtol* > *waw-x-qatal*
- (2) *wayyiqtol* > *waw-x-yiqtol*
- (3) *wayyiqtol* > *wəqatal*
- (4) *wayyiqtol* > *waw* + simple nominal clause

Shifts (2) and (3) are used for repetitive or habitual action. Note that in all cases except (3) the shift from foreground to background is also accompanied by a non-verbal element occupying clause initial position (Niccacci describes (1) and (2) as complex nominal clauses, even though they contain a verb, since they begin with a nominal, hence the designation “simple nominal clause” for (4). This is one of the aforementioned idiosyncrasies and is certainly mistaken). In each of these shifts, the background clause somehow breaks the temporal succession whether as a flashback or a contemporaneous action. However, when the shifts occur in the opposite direction, Niccacci argues that the background clause specifically indicates an event antecedent to the *wayyiqtol* clause.

While relying in part on the work of Schneider, Talstra, and Niccacci, Robert Longacre has developed the notion of grounding much further, and his scheme has probably been the most influential. Like for English, Longacre has attempted to create a saliency hierarchy to rank clauses in biblical Hebrew as shown in Figure 3:

Figure 3. Longacre's Clause Hierarchy for biblical Hebrew (adapted from “A Discourse Perspective on the Hebrew Verb” in *Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew*, p 180).

Band 1: Storyline	1.1. <i>wayyiqtol</i> (Primary storyline)
	1.2. <i>qatal</i> (Secondary storyline)
	1.3. Noun + <i>qatal</i> (Secondary storyline with noun in focus)
Band 2: Background Activities	2.1. Noun + <i>yiqtol</i> (Durative/repetitive)
	2.2. <i>hinneh</i> + participle
	2.3. participle (durative)
	2.4. Noun + participle
Band 3: Setting	3.1. <i>wayəhi</i>
	3.2. <i>hayah</i>

Band 4: Irrealis
 Band 5: Cohesion

- 3.3. Verbless clause
- 3.4. Existential clause w/yēš
- 4. Negation of verb
- 5.1. General reference
- 5.2. Script predictable
- 5.3. Repetition

Since the *wayyiqtol* form is used as the foreground narrative tense, the *qatal* form can be used for what Longacre calls secondary storylines. This is slightly different from his original scheme (see his *Joseph: A Story of Divine Providence*, 1989) which placed the *qatal* form in Band 2: Backgrounded Actions with participle clauses were in Band 3: Backgrounded Activities. Longacre gives Gn 40:20-23 as an example of the various bands (I have added my translation with foregrounded verbs in CAPS as before).

20 וַיְהִי בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי יוֹם הַלֵּדָת	So on the third day, the day on which
אֶת־פַּרְעֹה וַיַּעַשׂ מִשְׁתֶּה לְכָל־עֲבָדָיו וַיִּשָּׂא	Pharaoh was born, he HELD a banquet for
אֶת־רֹאשׁ שֵׁר הַמַּשְׁקִים וְאֶת־רֹאשׁ שֵׁר	all his servants, and he LIFTED the head
הָאֲפִים בְּתוֹךְ עֲבָדָיו:	of the chief cupbearer and the head of the
21 וַיָּשָׁב אֶת־שֵׁר הַמַּשְׁקִים עַל־מִשְׁקָהוּ וַיִּתֵּן	chief baker in the midst of all his servants.
הַכּוֹס עַל־כַּף פַּרְעֹה:	And he RETURNED the chief cupbearer
22 וְאֵת שֵׁר הָאֲפִים תָּלָה כַּאֲשֶׁר פָּתַר לָהֶם	to his office, and he PLACED the cup in
יוֹסֵף:	Pharaoh's hand.
23 וְלֹא־זָכַר שֵׁר־הַמַּשְׁקִים אֶת־יוֹסֵף	But the chief baker he hanged, just as
וַיִּשְׁכַּח:	Joseph had interpreted for them.
	And the chief cupbearer did not remember
	Joseph, and he FORGOT him.

The section begins with a *wayəhi* clause for setting, and the narrating proper begins with a *wayyiqtol* (וַיַּעַשׂ). Verse 22 breaks the sequence of *wayyiqtol*s by fronting the chief baker and uses a *qatal*. Longacre suggests that the clause is participant-oriented rather than action-oriented (I haven't explained this yet, but you can get the gist) marking it as a secondary storyline. In the next verse it is the cupbearer who is important and who continues the story. Verse 23 begins with an irrealis clause, by definition off the main storyline, but the second half uses a *wayyiqtol* and is on the main storyline.

So, in general, the *wayyiqtol* is used to narrate the foreground, while other happenings (to use Longacre's preferred term) which are off the main storyline use different clause types.

4. *Exceptions and Refinements*. Both Niccacci and Longacre agree that *wayyiqtol* clauses in BH

narrative are foregrounded while other clauses are backgrounded. Longacre goes one step further by ranking the other types of clauses and assigning them to various bands of salience within a typical narrative. However, it is not always the case that a *wayyiqtol* is in the foreground or that a clause with *qatal* is in the background. Remember also that there are multiple parameters that contribute to the cline of saliency beyond the semantics of the verb.

For instance, in his analysis of the Joseph narrative, Longacre himself sometimes assigns the *wayyiqtol* to a lower rank. In Gn 37:12 Longacre assigns the first *wayyiqtol*, וַיֵּלְכוּ, to the setting band:

<p>12 וַיֵּלְכוּ אֶחָיו לְרֻעוֹת אֲתֶּצֵאן אֲבֵיהֶם בְּשֶׁכֶם:</p> <p>13 וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־יוֹסֵף הֲלוֹא אֶחָיֶךָ רְעִים בְּשֶׁכֶם לָכֵה וְאֶשְׁלַחְךָ אֲלֵיהֶם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הִנְנִי:</p>	<p>So his brothers went to pasture their father's flock in Shechem.</p> <p>And Israel said to Joseph, "Look, your brothers are pasturing in Shechem. Come, I will send you to them." And he said to him, "Here I am".</p>
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The *wayyiqtol* corresponds to foreground material because it is often punctual and sequential. However, הלך is an intransitive verb of motion, which is naturally durative. Longacre suggests that it belongs to the setting band because it removes the brothers from the scene (they don't appear again as a subject until verse 18 in Dothan, a new setting) and seems to prepare directly for Israel's statement in the next verse. One might be tempted to translate, "Now Joseph's brothers had gone to pasture their father's flock in Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, 'Look your brothers are pasturing in Shechem...'"

The most sustained critique of Longacre has come from Jean-Marc Heimerdinger who listed further exceptions to Longacre's verb ranking. For example, he gives 2 Kg 4:36-37:

<p>36 וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־גִּיחִזִּי וַיֹּאמֶר קְרָא אֶל־הַשְּׁנַמִּית הַזֹּאת וַיִּקְרָאָהּ וַתָּבוֹא אֵלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר שְׂאִי בְנִיךָ:</p> <p>37 וַתָּבֹא וַתִּפֹּל עַל־רַגְלָיו וַתִּשְׁתַּחוּ אֶרְצָה וַתֵּשֶׂא אֶת־בְּנָהּ וַתֵּצֵא</p>	<p>He summoned Gehazi and said, "Summon this Shunamite." So he called her and she came to him and he said, "Take your son."</p> <p>She came and she fell at his feet and she bowed upon the ground. Then she took her son and went out.</p>
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In verse 37 there is a string of 3 *wayyiqtol* verbs, but they do not seem to be equally important to the story line, and Heimerdinger argues that וַתִּשְׁתַּחוּ could be removed without losing anything from the plot. In fact, this is a good example of a chain of *wayyiqtol*s that are non-sequential. Instead they seem to be describing aspects of the same action, thus the ESV translates, "She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground." In Longacre's defense, he also recognizes that

this is a common characteristic of the *wayyiqtol*. If the subject remains constant, two successive verbs may be used to describe a single event. It is most common with verbs of speaking such as *ענה* and *אמר*, “And he answered and said...” Again though, note that there is nothing grammatically special about *וַתִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ אֶרְצָה*. The only way to know that it is non-sequential is the semantics, thus Heimerdinger reminds us that there is not an isomorphic relationship between the grammatical form of the clause and grounding.

So *wayyiqtol* is not always in the foreground, but is the reverse true? Can a non-*wayyiqtol* clause ever be pushed into the foreground? Heimerdinger gives the example of Gn 25:34, but the whole story is interesting:

29 וַיֵּזֶד יַעֲקֹב נָזִיד וַיָּבֹא עֲשׂו מִן־הַשָּׂדֶה וְהוּא עֵיף:	Jacob cooked a stew and Esau came in from the field and he was tired.
30 וַיֹּאמֶר עֲשׂו אֶל־יַעֲקֹב הֲלִעִיטֵנִי נָא מִן־הָאֵדָם הָאֵדָם הִזֶּה כִּי עֵיף אָנֹכִי עַל־כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמוֹ אֶדּוֹם:	Esau said to Jacob, “Please let me eat some of this red stuff because I am tired.” Therefore they called his name Edom.
31 וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב מְכֹרָה כִּיּוֹם אֶת־בְּכֹרְתִי לִי:	Jacob said, “Sell your birthright to me today.”
32 וַיֹּאמֶר עֲשׂו הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ לָמוּת וְלָמָּה־זֶּה לִּי בְכֹרָה:	And Esau said, “Look, I am going to die, what is a birthright to me?”
33 וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב הִשְׁבַּעָה לִּי כִּיּוֹם וַיִּשָּׁבַע לוֹ וַיִּמָּכֶר אֶת־בְּכֹרְתוֹ לְיַעֲקֹב:	And Jacob said, “Swear to me today.” So he swore to him and he sold his birthright to Jacob.
34 וַיַּעֲקֹב נָתַן לְעֲשָׂו לֶחֶם וְנָזִיד עֲדָשִׁים וַיֹּאכַל וַיִּשְׂתֵּי וַיָּקָם וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּבֶז עֲשׂו אֶת־הַבְּכֹרָה	And Jacob gave bread and lentil stew to Esau and he ate and he drank and he rose and went. And Esau despised his birthright.

The story begins immediately with a *wayyiqtol* in verse 29, which seems to belong to the setting band as in Gn 37:12 above. The ESV translates, “Once when Jacob was cooking stew”, clearly putting it into the background. In contrast, the first clause in verse 34 is clearly sequential, but an <x>-*qatal* clause, which Longacre would analyze as participant-oriented, and which *should* signal a break in sequence. Here is where some native speakers would really be helpful. Is this clause meant to be slightly backgrounded, or is something else motivating the grammar? And how can we measure it without falling into circular reasoning?

I could possibly see this as a background clause. I noted in an earlier post that sequential actions can be backgrounded if put into a subordinate clause, so it is not totally unexpected. Also, notice

that the chain of *wayyiqtol*s from the end of verse 33 through to the end all have Esau as subject. Moreover, beginning at וַיֵּאכָל the clauses include only a verb, narrating the successive actions in a short burst, which tends to be typical for the peak of a story. Lastly, the final summary clause tells us that the point of the story is to condemn Esau, which would suggest that Esau is the main subject of the story, and thus Jacob's role could be secondary in this concluding series of verbs.

Now, I do not think that these exceptions bring the whole idea of a relationship between grounding and clause types crashing down. However, it does call into question the direction of that relationship. That is, the choice of verbal forms cannot be explained simply by some discourse-pragmatic grounding function, but rather several other parameters are in play. It seems to me more likely that *wayyiqtol* is simply the unmarked narrative verb, ie it is the natural choice for a main narrative clause regardless of its relative saliency. To the extent that foreground corresponds to the main sequential events in the narrative clauses, *wayyiqtol* corresponds to the foreground. But, *wayyiqtol* is not necessarily sequential or highly transitive.

Sequence in narrative tends to be iconic. Iconicity describes a property of language where the form matches the meaning (A good example is the use of a doubled morpheme for plurality). In a narrative, if you have a series of simple past tense verbs it is assumed that they are ordered sequentially. Note that in English you do not have to say "then...and then..." It is the non-sequential verbs that should be marked either by the tense form or a preposition. In Hebrew and other NW Semitic narrative, iconic sequence also seems to correspond to the verb-initial position, hence *wayyiqtol* is always verb-initial. I agree with Longacre that clauses which front a non-verbal element shift the focus to that element, and away from the verb, which usually also implies a break in the temporal sequence. Thus the main issue with poetry will be the extent to which verb-initial and non-verb initial clauses still correspond to foreground and background when a sequential backbone is no longer assumed.

5. *Beyond Narrative*. The distinction between foregrounded and backgrounded clauses began with the observation that a narrative can be subdivided into clauses which narrate a sequence of events and those that do not, termed narrative and non-narrative clauses. Non-narrative clauses may present events that are out of sequence, such as flashbacks, or may not narrate events at all, such as descriptions or explanations. Since a narrative tends to be about a sequence of temporal events, it seemed natural that the narrative clauses would be the most salient, hence the term foreground. The non-narrative clauses were considered less salient, and hence background.

To what extent, however, does this distinction hold as we move away from the narrative genre? Here is where the approaches of Longacre and Niccacci begin to diverge. To understand Niccacci's approach, it is important to begin with the work of Harald Weinrich. Weinrich approached language from the perspective of text-linguistics and made a fundamental distinction between two registers of text which reflect the orientation of the author to the subject: *Erzählen* and *Besprechen*. The former is translated as narrative, and the latter is variously translated as

comment, discussion, discourse, etc. I will use discourse here, since that is what Niccacci seems to prefer, but note that it differs from Longacre's definition of discourse which is more similar to Weinrich's "text", ie the largest unit for analysis. Also, Weinrich is interested in texts so *Besprechen* doesn't refer to actual spoken language, but rather to when an author makes use of more conversational language. Narrative is impersonal and tends to be related in the third person and past tense, while discourse is more intimate, bringing the author and reader into the situation by using first and second person along with present and future tense.

Within each of these groups, Weinrich identifies two further axes which motivate the choice of verbal form. Perspective is something like relative tense, and depends on whether the event is contemporary (called neutral or null degree), anterior, or posterior to the reference frame. For narrative the temporal reference is past tense, so the simple past is the null degree form, while in discourse the normal null degree form is the present. Lastly, Weinrich describes relief, which is the use of tense forms to distinguish foreground from background. The parade example is French where the *passé simple* is the narrative form appearing in foregrounded clauses while the *imparfait* appears in background clauses.

As far as I can tell, Weinrich only discusses the use of specific verbal forms for expressing relief within narrative. This is because narrative is the special case. As seen in the French example and in Biblical Hebrew, among others, it is not uncommon for languages to develop special forms for narrative. In fact, Schneider, through whom Weinrich's ideas impacted the study of Biblical Hebrew, specifically states that in discourse foreground and background are not expressed by the use of verb tenses, but by other means:

Vordergrund und Hintergrund der Rede werden – anders als in Erzählung – nicht durch die Tempora – sondern durch andere Zeichen (Satzstellung, Partikeln, Hinweise auf die Sprechsituation) bezeichnet (*Grammatik* §48.3.1.1, 188).

Niccacci, however, extended the idea to non-narrative texts. Of course, since there are many more tense forms available in discourse, the system becomes much more complicated. For the present tense, the normal clause type is the simple nominal clause. This type is used for both foreground and background, which must be distinguished by other means.

In the past tense, the system is the same as in narrative, except that the initial verb in a sequence is an (*x*)-*qatal* form while the following foregrounded clauses use *wayyiqtol*. Background is again expressed by *x-qatal*, non-verbal sentences, *x-yiqtol*, and *wəqatal*.

For the future, Niccacci distinguishes between indicative and volitive moods. A future indicative text begins with an *x-yiqtol* (Niccacci argues that all clause initial *yiqtol*s are volitive) and the foreground verbs then switch to *wəqatal*. Background information is signified by the switch *wəqatal* > *waw-x-yiqtol* which is analogous to the shift *wayyiqtol* > *waw-x-qatal* in narrative. The

future volitive begins with a volitive form (cohortative, jussive, imperative). Niccacci argues that the following foregrounded verbs then switch to *wəyiqtol* if the volitional mood is to be continued, but to *wəqatal* if the mood switches to indicative future, ie as a succession of events that will naturally follow.

Longacre has also extended the correlation of verbal forms with grounding beyond narrative, but with slightly different parameters. He has not followed the distinction of narrative and discourse, but instead suggests two basic parameters: contingent temporal succession and agent-orientation. For our purposes, the more important is contingent temporal succession, which is basically the existence of a chronological backbone to the text. Texts without such a backbone are organized logically or thematically. Thus a prophetic text is similar to a narrative, only with a future orientation. Instructional and procedural texts describe how something usually is or should be done, and also follow a sequence of steps. In all three, Longacre argues that *wəqatal* is the primary tense while *x-yiqtol* is used for secondary themes.

If we synthesize these two views, you will notice that there are three basic forms used for foreground. In narrative it is the *wayyiqtol*, while in future/modal contexts *wəqatal* and *wəyiqtol* are the foreground forms. The main secondary forms are *x-qatal* and *x-yiqtol* respectively. Note that the foregrounded forms are all clause-initial, while backgrounded forms are not. Again, I think that this reflects iconicity. In a sequential context we expect the events to be given in order of occurrence, and in NW Semitic it is the clause-initial position that is iconic for sequence. However, when the text does not have a sequential backbone, the distribution of the verbal forms no longer corresponds strongly to the distinction of foreground from background. Instead, as Schneider stated, other means are used.

6. *Turning toward poetry*. When I began this series, I agreed with Niccacci that the verb in poetry should function basically the same as elsewhere. It seems counter-intuitive that a poet could grab any verb form they want for stylistic purposes. His contention is that we can partly understand the switching of verbal forms in poetry by looking at the correlation of “tense-switching” (as Niccacci calls it) to the pragmatic function of grounding in discourse (ie non-narrative). The main switches of foreground > background would be:

Past Tense	<i>wayyiqtol</i> > <i>waw-x-qatal</i> <i>wayyiqtol</i> > <i>waw-x-yiqtol</i> (imperfective) <i>wayyiqtol</i> > <i>wəqatal</i> (modal)
Future Indicative	<i>wəqatal</i> > <i>waw-x-yiqtol</i>
Future volitive	<i>wəyiqtol</i> > <i>waw-x-yiqtol</i>

Obviously, you can always switch to a verbless clause as well. Also, if poetry follows discourse,

we should expect a past tense sequence to begin with a *qatal*, a future indicative to begin with *x-yiqtol*, and a future volitive to begin with some sort of volitive form before continuing with the standard foreground forms.

For support, Niccacci brings many examples from Psalm 78, such as Ps 78:29 (his translation):

29 וַיֹּאכְלוּ וַיִּשְׂבְּעוּ מֵאֵד וַתֵּאֱתָם יְבֹא לָהֶם:

And they ate and were well filled;
Indeed, what they craved he was giving them.

Here he interprets the first two *wayyiqtols* as the normal foreground tense (simple past), and the *x-yiqtol* as background (past imperfective). I don't have a problem with this interpretation. In fact, if you take the previous two verses together, the end of verse 25 is a nice summary statement which is probably better as a past habitual:

27 He rained meat on them like dust,
 winged birds like the sand of the seas;
28 he let them fall in the midst of their camp,
 all around their dwellings.
29 And they ate and were well filled,
 for what they craved he would give them.

However, I have reservations about how well this can be applied to poetry as a whole. First, the use of “tense-switching” to express grounding in narrative and discourse relies on three things: use of syndetic clauses, meaningful word order, and contingent temporal succession. In poetry we have none of these consistently. Second, Psalm 78 may be a somewhat misleading example since it is so heavily influenced by narrative. In the whole collection of psalms, the Westminster Hebrew Morphology shows 332 *wayyiqtols*. In Psalm 78 we have 59. The other narrative Psalm, 106, has 54 more.

Thirdly, biblical narrative is written in a standardized, literary dialect (and that includes the direct discourse found within narrative). I would expect the verbal system of poetry to reflect that of the language in general, but we only have a small slice of language represented in narrative. Further, poets are free (and inclined) to pull from archaic language and rare usage, so we should not expect that all the uses of the verbs should be explainable by comparison to narrative texts. In my next few posts, I will consider some of these reservations as I turn toward poetry.

7. *Direct Speech*. Niccacci's main thesis is that the pragmatic implications of tense-switching in direct discourse can also explain the use of tense-switching across cola in poetry. At this point,

therefore, it may be a good idea to look more closely at an example of direct speech within narrative from Genesis 31:

Introduction/Setting

38 זֶה עֲשָׂרִים שָׁנָה אֲנִי עִמָּךְ These 20 years I [have been] with you.

Section 1

רְחִלֶיךָ וְעִזֶיךָ לֹא שִׁבְּלוּ Your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried,
וְאֵילֵי צֹאנְךָ לֹא אָכַלְתִּי: and the rams of your flocks I have not eaten

Section 2

39 טֶרֶפָה לֹא־הֵבֵאתִי אֵלֶיךָ A torn carcass I did not bring to you.
אֲנִי אֶחֱטָאָה I myself would bear its loss.
מִיָּדִי תִבְקַשְׁנָה From my hand you would require it.
גִּנְבְּתִי יוֹם One stolen during the day
וְגִנְבְּתִי לַיְלָה: or one stolen at night.

Section 3

40 הָיִיתִי I was -
בַּיּוֹם אֶכְלָנִי חֶרֶב by day, the heat ate me
וְקָרַח בַּלַּיְלָה and the frost by night,
וְתַדְד שְׁנָתִי מִעֵינִי: so my sleep fled from me.

Section 4

41 זֶה־לִּי עֲשָׂרִים שָׁנָה בְּבֵיתְךָ I have had these 20 years in your house.
עֲבַדְתִּיךָ אַרְבַּע־עֶשְׂרֵה שָׁנָה בְּשֵׁתִי בְּנִתֶיךָ I have served you 14 years for your two daughters,
וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים בְּצֹאנְךָ and six years for your flocks,
וְתַחֲלֶף אֶת־מִשְׁכָּרְתִּי עֶשְׂרֵת מָנִים: and you have changed my wages 10 times.

Section 5

42 לוֹלִי אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם וּפָחַד יִצְחָק Had I not had the God of my father, the
הָיָה לִי God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac,
כִּי עָתָה רִיקָם שְׁלַחְתָּנִי you would have now sent me away empty.
אֶת־עָנְיִי וְאֶת־יָגִיעַ כַּפִּי רָאָה אֱלֹהִים My affliction and the labor of my hands,
וַיּוֹכַח אֶמְשׁ: God saw,
and he rebuked [you] yesterday.

First off, notice that every clause is asyndetic except for the second clause of a parallel pair and the few *wayyiqtol* clauses. This is a stark contrast to the chain of syndetic clauses in narrative. Similarly, word order is no longer iconic with sequence, and there is not a verb-initial clause until verse 40 (and after that only the *wayyiqtol*s are clause-initial).

At the risk of over-simplifying, in biblical Hebrew word order has been recognized to be related to the information structure of the sentence. The clause-initial element tends to be the focus of the sentence, ie the new information that is being related. In a narrative clause the normal word order is V(erb)S(ubject)O(bject), and it is the predicate (V + O) that is the focus. The subject has usually already been introduced elsewhere. When other constituents appear clause-initially there are two cases. If the predicate can be presupposed from the context, then the clause-initial constituent is in focus. However, if it is an entirely new event being reported, then the entire sentence is in focus and the clause-initial element is usually being introduced as topic. Thus, within the sentence it is the clause-initial element that tends to be most prominent. A good example of this occurs in verse 39 where a טִרְפָּה is introduced as topic. Notice how all the following references to the טִרְפָּה are anaphoric.

Now, that describes the prominence of the elements within a clause, but how can we measure the prominence of one clause in relation to another? For instance, in Section 1 we have a nice poetic couplet. Both clauses provide evidence of how Jacob treated Laban's animals well, and they are grammatically equivalent. Perhaps Jacob being the subject of the second clause raises its prominence slightly since he is highly salient in the discourse.

In Section 2 we have an interesting sequence of verbs: *lo qatal* (irrealis) > *x + yiqtol* (past habitual) > *x+yiqtol* (past habitual). In narrative these would all be background. Again, all three seem to be evidence toward the point that Jacob worked hard and seem equally prominent (at least there is no indication of prominence related to "tense-switching").

Section 3 is a bit more interesting. Here we have a sequence *qatal* > *wayyiqtol* which would signal a shift from background to foreground. There is a disjunction after the first clause, and the second and third clauses are very poetic, exhibiting both chiasm and ellipsis of the verb. The events are simultaneous so there is no sequence here, but it seems to me that there is a cause > effect relationship that would indeed correspond to a background > foreground shift, something like "It being the fact that the heat ate me during the day and the cold at night, I didn't get any sleep." It is interesting that the idea of not sleeping is flipped around from a negative to a positive, could this have been done specifically to use a *wayyiqtol*?

In Section 4 we again have a *qatal* > *wayyiqtol* shift. This time the relationship is not cause > effect, but more like "despite the fact that I did this...you did this." This again seems to be consistent with a background > foreground shift. The first sentence in Section 6 is an unreal conditional statement, but the second half again shows a shift *qatal* > *wayyiqtol*. Here there is another cause > effect relationship that seems consistent with the background > foreground shift.

In summary, from this one example it seems that "tense-shifting" may still be related to grounding within the smaller structures of the text, ie within major sections, but it does not seem to have any relation to the macro structure which is organized by topicalization, parallelism,

repetition, etc.

8. *Conclusions*. The most obvious difference between direct speech and third person narration is that the biblical narrative style uses a chain of syndetic clauses with very few explicit logical or temporal connectors. Thus tense-switching seems to be the predominate method of implying subordination. However, in the example of direct speech most of the clauses were asyndetic, the only exceptions being the couplets joined by parallelism and the use of the *qatal* > *wayyiqtol* shift to express subordination. As I turn my attention to poetry, it is parallelism that may be the biggest stumbling block for the usefulness of tense-switching as an explanation for the unique use of the verbal system.

Since Kugel's work on parallelism, scholars have been more inclined to view poetry and prose as poles on a continuum. Kugel argued both that parallelism is not restricted to poetry and that a good amount of biblical poetry doesn't use parallelism. He went on to argue against the standard distinction of a poetry corpus within biblical literature, but most scholars have not followed him that far. Still, it is important to recognize that prosaic elements exist within poems and vice versa. For instance, the use of parallelism was integrated seamlessly into Jacob's speech in the last section.

Thus, to the extent that a poetic text includes prosaic features, we would expect the syntax to work as it does in prose. Where a psalm is heavily influenced by narrative, as in Psalm 78, I think it is fitting to consider whether shifts from *wayyiqtol* to other verbal forms have a discourse-pragmatic function of expressing grounding. However, to me this seems to be a small % of texts and not extremely useful for explaining the verbal system in the psalms as a whole. And, even though a psalm like 78 is influenced by narrative, it is not exactly the same as narrative (even in direct speech). How do we account for the poetic features? Should we see a narrative framework with poetic features intruding, or a poetic passage with some *wayyiqtol*s thrown in to give it a narrative feel?

Take a series such as Ps 78:14-15 (Niccacci's translation):

וַיִּנְחֵם בְּעַנְּן יוֹמָם	14	and [He] led them with a cloud in the daytime,
וְכָל־הַלַּיְלָה בְּאֹרֶךְ אֵשׁ:		And all the night with a fiery light.
וַיִּבְקַע צֻרִים בַּמִּדְבָּר	15	By cleaving (' was cleaving') rocks in the wilderness,
וַיִּשְׁק כְּתֹהֲמוֹת רֶבֶה:		he gave them drink abundantly as from the deep.

Niccacci sees the shift *wayyiqtol* > *yiqtol* from verse 14 to 15 as grounding, and he takes the *yiqtol* as past imperfective (I think this would be better translated as a past habitual: "He would

cleave rocks in the wilderness and give them drink abundantly as from the deep.”) However, we would expect a switch to past habitual to be signaled by *wayyiqtol* > (*waw*)-*x-yiqtol*, not a clause-initial *yiqtol*. Niccacci argues that here we do have *x-yiqtol*, but that a sentence initial pronoun has been dropped through ellipsis, thus poetry has intruded on the narrative. However, consider the sequence in verses 49-50:

49 יִשְׁלַח-בָּם חֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ	He let loose on them his burning anger,
עֲבָרָה וְזַעַם וְצָרָה	wrath, indignation, and distress
מַשְׁלַחַת מַלְאֲכֵי רָעִים:	a troop of angels of disaster
50 יַפְלִס נָתִיב לְאַפּוֹ	He made a path for his anger
לֹא-חָשַׁד מִמּוֹת נַפְשָׁם	He did not spare them from death
וְחַיֵּיהֶם לְדַבֵּר הַסָּגִיר:	But their lives he handed over to the plague

Notice that both of these verses begin with initial *yiqtol*s, but there is no tense-switch from or back to *wayyiqtol* for the foreground. Instead, the sequence is *yiqtol* (יִשְׁלַח), *yiqtol* (יַפְלִס), *qatal* (לֹא-חָשַׁד), *x-qatal* (וְחַיֵּיהֶם לְדַבֵּר הַסָּגִיר). The temporal reference remains past tense during the entire section, and it is hard to see how the *yiqtol*s can be taken as imperfective. Rather, we seem to have a *yiqtol* used as a simple past tense, which opens up the possibility that back in verse 15 יִבְקַע was really just a simple past tense also. Thus, it could be that what we have there is not the poetic feature of ellipsis obscuring the normal narrative syntax of *wayyiqtol* > *x-yiqtol* indicating a switch to background information (which is a weak argument in the first place), but merely the use of a different, albeit rare, past tense form – the short preterite.

When we turn to look at the normal situation in poetry, *parallelismus membrorum*, I think that this solution becomes more appealing. Nicholas Lunn has written a fine dissertation investigating word-order in biblical poetry. He found that the word order of the first colon, the a-colon, largely tends to follow the standard order (ie VSO, with the expected shifts for pragmatic reasons of topicalization or focus). However, the b-colon often deviates from this with an unexpected word-order. Lunn explains this with the concept of defamiliarisation. This is a device by which poets purposefully make language more difficult to understand in order to prolong the process of experiencing the art. Alter has noted that defamiliarization is evident not only in word-order, but also in the choice of rare words which seem to occur more frequently in the b-colon. I would suggest, therefore, that perhaps also rare verb forms such as the old short preterite are more likely to be used in the b-colon. It is no coincidence then that the most common switch seems to be *qatal* > *yiqtol*, and not the opposite.

Further, the relationship between the cola in *parallelismus membrorum* is different than sequential clauses within a narrative or discourse where an idea is developing progressively. Often, the point of a b-colon is to stop and repeat the same idea using synonymous (or antithetical) language. In such a situation, I don't know that it is proper to think of one clause as

being subordinate to the other. take for example Psalm 78:5:

5 וַיִּקַּם עֲדוּת | בִּיעֲקֹב And he established a testimony in Jacob
וַתֹּרֶה שֵׁם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל And a law he appointed in Israel.

Here both cola refer to the same event, but the *merismus* "Jacob and Israel" has been split and expanded into two cola (which is a common feature of biblical poetry). Therefore, the switch from *wayyiqtol* to *qatal* probably should not be taken as a signal of background or subordination, but a by-product of the insertion of parallelism into the flow of thought. This happens in narrative texts as well, take Gen 21:1:

21:1 וַיְהִי וַיָּבֹא יְהוָה אֶת־שָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר And the Lord visited Sarah as He said
וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה לְשָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר: And he did to Sarah as He spoke.

The next verse picks up again with a *wayyiqtol* and continues the narrative. Another reason why I don't think tense-switching between parallel cola should be taken pragmatically as a mark of backgrounding is the great number of parallel cola that do not switch tense at all. For example, Psalm 78:16:

16 וַיּוֹצֵא נְזִלִים מִסֶּלַע He caused streams to come out of the rock
וַיּוֹרֵד כַּנְּהָרוֹת מִיָּם and he caused water to flow down like rivers.

Here we have synonymous parallelism, but both cola use *wayyiqtol*s. I can see no difference in the context between the function of parallelism here and elsewhere, but perhaps I am missing something.

In conclusion then, it seems to me that tense-switching as a mark of background ultimately fails to add to our understanding of the use of the verb in poetry. Rather, I think the majority of cases of a switch from *qatal* > *yiqtol* can be explained by defamiliarisation. That is, the poet has used a rare preterite form for the b-colon to make it bit more difficult to understand. I do think Niccacci is right to be more sensitive to the past imperfective use of *yiqtol*, especially in narrative-like contexts. There are some cases where I agree that a past habitual may be a better translation than simple past, and from a quick scan of the Psalms I see many examples where *yiqtol* is used in obviously past imperfective situations. For example, Ps 39:4:

4 חֵם־לִבִּי | בְּקִרְבִּי My heart became hot within me
בְּהִיגִי תִבְעַר־אֵשׁ While I mused, fire was burning
דִּבַּרְתִּי בְּלִשׁוֹנִי: I spoke with my tongue

Again, note that we do not have any of the standard tense-switching constructions here as the other verbs are both clause-initial *qatals*. In poetry then, I think that we must be more sensitive to the semantics of the verb on its own, rather than expecting the elegant system found in narrative where we can rely on the word-order.

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