The Verbless Clause in Biblical Hebrew


In the early seventies, Francis I. Andersen (The Hebrew Verbless Clause in the Pentateuch, 1970) and Jakob Hoftijzer (The Nominal Clause Reconsidered, 1973) engaged in an influential discussion on the Biblical Hebrew clause in which a verb is lacking. The present volume, originating in a session of the Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew Section of the 1996 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, constitutes “both a tribute to and an extension of [Andersen’s and Hoftijzer’s] earlier scholarship on this important syntactic construction” (xi).

The volume has twelve contributions, covering a wide range of approaches, sometimes showing some overlap, and sometimes proposing divergent views. They are grouped into three parts: “Basic Issues”, “Syntactic Approaches”, and “Semantic and Pragmatic Approaches”. However, there are several themes that occur throughout the volume. In fact, there appear to be two large groups of discussions. First, there is the theoretical question as to whether the nominal/verbless clause should be treated as a separate category at all. The volume shows a trend toward a negative answer. It contains several attempts to formulate a unifying theory that captures each and every clause type, whether it contains a verb or not. Second, there are rather more practical studies into several aspects of the verbless/nominal clause, such as the identification of Subject and Predicate, and the order of words or constituents.

The authors contributing to this volume are all leading specialists of Biblical Hebrew. Unfortunately, Andersen and Hoftijzer themselves were unable to contribute. Of the younger generation, Tamar Zewi and Jan Joosten might in addition have been included, both of whom find themselves referred to quite often.

In her introductory essay on “Pivotal Issues in Analyzing the Verbless Clause” (3-17), the editor, Cynthia L. Miller, presents the program and structure of the volume as a whole. Terminology and definition are among the main issues, as becomes clear already from the titles of Andersen’s and Hoftijzer’s papers, dealing with “verbless” and “nominal” clauses, respectively. The title of the present volume is significant in this respect, although it does not express a view held by all authors.

Walter Gross, “Is There Really a Compound Nominal Clause in Biblical Hebrew?” (19-49), discusses and refutes this notion. A compound nominal clause is most commonly understood as a clause starting with a nominal element, typically the Subject, followed by a predicate that is itself a clause, and which may contain a verb. Gross argues that the
position of words in a clause should not be used as a discriminant between clause types. Rather, it is “the type of word in the predicate” (38) that distinguishes one clause type from another.

Cameron Sinclair, “Are Nominal Clauses a Distinct Clause Type?” (51-75), argues that, ultimately, the nominal or verbless clause is not a separate clause type at all. The verblessness in such a clause is to be understood merely as “The Ø Variant of hyh” (56). The copula has been dropped in the surface structure, but essentially it is still in place. Having read Gross’ essay, the reader recognizes that this position was already formulated by Gesenius.

The second group of essays cover several “Syntactic Approaches” of the verbless/nominal clause. Randall Buth, “Word Order in the Verbless Clause: A Generative-Functional Approach” (79-108), advocates the use of a “generative-functional” or rather “Praguian-generative-functional” approach to the “nominal (or verbless) clause”, particularly with respect to the order of Subject and Predicate. Buth argues that Subject-Predicate is, in fact, the basic order in verbless and participial clauses.

Vincent DeCaen, “A Unified Analysis of Verbal and Verbless Clauses within Government-Binding Theory” (109-131), confidently advocates the application of the so-called Government-Binding Theory, a relatively recent syntactical model, to Biblical Hebrew syntax. GC can be described as an approach that includes all features of a clause into one model, rather than treating things like tense, aspect, word order, etc. separately. Within such a model, the presence or absence of a verb is just one of the variables. Consequently, there is no need for a separate theory on verbless clauses. In spite of many differences, there is some similarity here with Sinclair’s proposal.

Janet W. Dyk and Eep Talstra, “Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic Features in Identifying Subject and Predicate in Nominal Clauses” (133-185), take the rather more data-oriented perspective of a computer. Their main goal is to teach the software parsing their database, how to identify Subject and Predicate in clauses that lack a finite verb. They find that this can be done on the basis of formal syntactic data alone. In fact, “two parameters — phrase-type and determination — [are] sufficient if arranged in a hierarchically meaningful manner along an axis of relative deictic power” (185).

Takamitsu Muraoaka, “The Tripartite Nominal Clause Revisited” (187-213), discusses the nominal clause that has a 3rd person pronoun in addition to the two main non-verbal constituents. He argues that the pronoun adds emphasis to the constituent that precedes it, rather than fulfilling the more neutral function of copula.

Alviero Niccacci, “Types and Functions of the Nominal Sentence” (215-248), argues that clauses with a verb form in second position are to be seen as nominal clauses “because the verb plays the role of a noun” (243). The notion of a nominal clause with a verb in second position is explicitly contradicted by Gross, cf. above). Niccacci’s terminology is rather idiosyncratic, which makes it hard to follow the argument. The essay lacks a conclusion.

In the third group of contributions, on “Semantic and Pragmatic Approaches”, Kirk E. Lowery, “Relative Definiteness and the Verbless Clause” (251-272), takes up the issue of the identification of Subject and Predicate. His perspective, like that of Dyk and Talstra, is the computer-assisted analysis of biblical texts. Lowery specifically and convincingly argues that the relative definiteness of the nominal constituents is an important criterion in this regard, since the more definite constituent tends to be the Subject, and the less definite one, the Predicate (similar positions to be found with Randall Buth, and Dyk and Talstra). Lowery uses a scale of definiteness proposed by Andersen.

Lénart J. de Regt, “Macrosyntactical Functions of Nominal Clauses Referring to Participants” (273-296), explores the functions of the “nominal clauses” to be found in a limited corpus of mainly non-poetical biblical texts dating from various periods. The nominal clause turns out to have a range of macrosyntactical functions, as pointed out already by Wolfgang Schneider in his Grammatik. However, the biblical books differ considerably with respect to the relative frequencies of these functions. Reference to participants in the story is only one of those functions, and it receives less attention than the title of the essay suggests.

Ellen van Wolde, “The Verbless Clause and Its Textual Function” (321-336), argues that verbless clauses are to be seen as “marked, because they differ from the default (unmarked) verbal clauses” (330). Their function is to provide background information. In her brief analysis, Van Wolde takes a view resembling those expressed by De Regt and Lowery, but from a rather more explicitly theoretical perspective.

Regrettably, many of the contributions are written in a less elegant style. Notable exceptions are the essays by Cynthia Miller and Kirk Lowery. On the other hand, the book has excellent typography (minor lapses on pp. 238, 289), and has been edited carefully, with Indexes of Topics, Authors, and Scripture. One would have liked to see a more uniform treatment of bibliographical matters. In all, this volume may prove to be a stimulus as well as a touchstone for the debate that will not fail to continue.

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Arian VERHEIJ


This book is a revision of Endo’s doctoral dissertation submitted in 1993 to the University of Bristol. Its main focus is to investigate the hypothesis that the “sequentially” between verbal clauses may shed light on the Classical Hebrew (= CH) verbal system. Hence the subtitle “An approach from discourse analysis.”

In Chapter 1 Endo provides a useful overview of the age old debate on the Classical Hebrew verbal system. He scrutinizes the main three types of solutions, viz. (1) explaining
the verbal system as aspectual, explaining it (2) from a historical comparative and (3) from a discourse analysis perspective. He then concludes that although there is no consensus on how the CH verbal system must be understood, each of these different perspectives, as well as the traditional notion that CH has a tense system, contains some element of truth. He hypothesizes that the notion “sequentiality” holds the key to better understand the CH verbal system. The method he sets out to use in his investigation, he formulates as follows: “We shall examine the function of verbal forms through the above parameters (i.e. tense, aspect and word order (CHJvdM) as well as by asking the following questions: In a given context, does the clause with the verbal form have a sequential relation with the adjacent clause or not? If so, what sort of sequence can be observed at the semantic level? What is the interaction between “tense,” “aspect,” and “word order,” and “verbals sequence” (p. 29). He also investigates whether the distinction “background” and “foreground” has any relevance for the study of the verbal system and whether temporal or logical succession expressed the function of the wayyiqtol form adequately. He does not say why, but chooses not to work in terms of a specific theoretical frame of reference. His own notional framework he also does not explain. This, unfortunately caused him to resort to a number of vague and apparently psychological grounded concepts, e.g. “goal, flow of the story, stepping stone, standing still, full stop.” Endo chooses Gen 37-50 as his corpus, maintains a distinction between prose and poetry and distinguishes between direct discourse and narrative material (pp. 29-31).

Commencing with the implications of sequentiality for verbal forms used and its interaction with tense, aspect and word order parameters in one clause verbal utterances in Chapter 2, Endo proceeds to two clause utterances in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4 he treats three clause utterances. Syntactic relationships in multiple-clauses are addressed in Chapter 5 and in volitive clauses in Chapter 6. While in Chapters 2-6 he concentrates on direct discourse, he turns to narration in Chapter 7. Before drawing his conclusions in Chapter 9, he discusses the use of tenses in subordinate sentences in Chapter 8.

Endo comes to the following conclusions: (1) apart from a greater variety of and more free standing verbal forms in direct discourse, the functions that these verbal forms may have do not differ significantly from those in narrative. (2) The position of verbal forms in a sentence does not affect their functions. According to Endo, the function of fronting is either to put a constituent “in a position of information prominence or indicating a topic-switching function.” This finding contradicts that of Walter Gross (Die Satzteilfolge im Verbalsatz alttestamentlicher Prosa. Tübingen: JCB Mohr. 1996) and Ziony Zevit (The anterior construction in Classical Hebrew. Atlanta: Scholars Press. 1998). Both of them also assign other functional values to constructions where a subject is fronted. (3) The distinction between background and foreground is of no direct relevance for the study of CH verbal forms. (4) Except for stative verbs or verbs with a stative sense, passive constructions and performative utterances, the tense distinction past:qatal versus non-past:yiqtol can be drawn in CH. Furthermore, it correlates with the aspectual opposition complete versus incomplete. (5) Although these tense and aspectual distinctions are applicable in free standing conjugations, they do no explain the difference between yiqtol and weqatal in a non-past context, qatal and wayyiqtol in a future context or imperative and weqatal in a volitive context. For these functional opposition, which explains the difference between qatal and wayyiqtol, yiqtol and weqatal and volitive and weqatal respectively, is based on the aspectual contrast stable vs. unstable. He further states: “The parameter of sequentiality and non-sequentiality is purely syntactic, relating to the flow of the story as a discourse function; the non-sequential form stops the flow of the story (i.e. stand still), whereas the sequential form lets the story flow on” (p. 321).

Endo is indeed correct when he observes that terms such “temporal/logical succession,” “consequence” or “explanation” is not comprehensive enough to describe the function of wayyiqtol and weqatal. They may occur in contexts where simultaneous actions or “antithesis” is involved. They may also occur at the beginning of a discourse. However, I am not convinced that Endo’s study really advances our understanding of the CH verbal system. Most of the above-mentioned observations are to be found in S.R. Driver’s classical A treatise on the use of the tenses in Hebrew and some other syntactical questions of 1894. A fourth edition appeared recently (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1998). The type of explanations he offers are exemplified by the statement that I cited from p. 321 of his book in the previous paragraph. They are in terms of vague and linguistically unfounded categories, e.g. what does it mean when a “purely syntactical parameter” relates to “the flow of story”? One may argue that his explanations for cases where non-sequential forms are used to form a sequence (p. 324), are equally unclear, e.g. what does “fade out” and “foreshadowing” exactly mean?

In short, Endo provides a useful summary of the debate concerning the CH verbal system, as well as the range of problems scholars have to deal with when trying to explain the CH verbal system. His identification of a broad correlation of both the tense (past versus non-past) and aspect (complete versus non-complete) categories with the qatal/wayyiqtol versus yiqtol/weqatal pairs, suggests that aspectual based explanations that have often been in the vogue this century, indeed warranted reconsideration. In the end, however, it is his lack of an explicit and linguistically founded theoretical frame of reference that let him down.

University of Stellenbosch, Christo H.J. VAN DER MERWE South Africa, May 1999