

New Perspectives in Biblical and Rabbinic Hebrew

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Hornkohl, Aaron D., and Khan Geoffrey, eds. *New Perspectives in Biblical and Rabbinic Hebrew*. Cambridge Semitic Languages and Cultures 7. Cambridge: University of Cambridge & Open Book Publishers, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0250>

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Semitic Languages and Cultures 7.

ISSN (print): 2632-6906

ISSN (digital): 2632-6914

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-164-8

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-165-5

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-166-2

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0250

Cover image: Genizah fragment of the Hebrew Bible with Babylonian vocalisation (Num. 18.27-28, Cambridge University Library T-S A38.12; courtesy of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library). Genizah fragment of the Mishnah (Ḥallah 1, Cambridge University Library MS Add.470.1; courtesy of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library). Linguistic analysis of Ps. 1.1 (Elizabeth Robar). Images selected by Estara Arrant.

Cover design: Anna Gatti

A TENSE QUESTION: DOES HEBREW HAVE A FUTURE?

Aaron D. Hornkohl

1.0. Introduction

This paper's admittedly ambiguous title refers to verbal semantics, specifically, to the question of the relevance of the notion of future tense—and of tense, more generally—to Biblical Hebrew (BH).

For many, the answer may seem so straightforward as to obviate the need for the question. But I expect something other than unanimity on just what the obvious answer might be. Some will take for granted the relevance of future tense in BH, since the language clearly provides means for reference to eventualities (i.e., actions, events, states, etc.) temporally posterior to the present. For others, the assumption will involve the patent irrelevance of the concept of future as one long ago discarded by BH scholars in the broader rejection of the semantic category of tense in favour of more appropriate categories. Among other things, the co-existence of these 'obvious' answers (along with others) justifies revisiting the question.

2.0. Clarifying the Argument: Tense, but Not Only Tense

In the context of current research on the BH verbal system, when one asserts that the forms express tense, there is a risk of misunderstanding from the outset. For the sake of clarity: I do not agree with older (and similar contemporary) claims that BH verbal semantics can be adequately described in terms of purely temporal reference. The semantic category of tense alone—whether construed as absolute or relative—is not sufficient to comprehend the full range of BH verbal semantics. But this differs from saying that BH verbal forms are not employed to express tense or that the BH verbal system may be adequately explained without recourse to tense. Tense is a legitimate and relevant, though by no means exhaustive, semantic category when discussing Hebrew verbs; Hebrew scholars and learners are not only justified, but obligated to speak of it in accounts of BH verbal semantics.

Happily, similar views are espoused by others, including some with articles in this volume. Consider the words of Matthew Anstey from a 2009 article on the *qatal* form:

This article follows those who think BH is tense-prominent... and adopts the position that QV [*qatal*] has Past as its core meaning, for the following straightforward reason: in the range of functions discussed below, Past is clearly the default interpretation in narrative and in reported speech. The other uses occur in much more restricted constructions and contexts (827).

On the *yiqtol* Anstey (827) says: “the Nonpast *yiqtol*, although also multifunctional, has a range of functions that is typical of

nonpast forms, namely, various imperfective and modal nuances, as well as habitual and generic uses.” Even more refreshing than Anstey’s ‘common-sense’ tense-prominent take on the BH verb,¹ is the fact that, in using the description ‘tense-prominent’, he explicitly acknowledges the reality of polyvalent semantics, i.e., the expression of other Tense-Aspect-Mood (TAM) values along with tense.²

3.0. Examining Questionable Assumptions

Scholarly fixation with uncovering the underlying, all-encompassing semantic category of the BH verbal system is deeply entrenched within the BH grammatical tradition, where its influence remains pervasive, but largely unnoticed and, problematically, unexamined. The basic assumptions behind the quest for a unifying semantic value warrant critical examination, as do the considerations that led to the rejection of certain values in favour of others. In many circles one encounters a troubling reticence to admit genuine tense expression via BH verbs.

Focusing, by way of example, on the prefix conjugation *yiqtol*—to be sure, students are routinely informed of some vague correlation between the *yiqtol* and futurity. Yet they are just as often warned that this is a sort of convenient, but misleading fiction, a well-meaning deceit grudgingly perpetrated against them

¹ For an application Bhat’s (1999) notion of tense-prominence (as opposed to aspect- and mood-prominence) to the BH verbal system, see Hornkohl (2018, 28–33).

² See also, more recently, Anstey (forthcoming). Buth (1992) also emphasises the combined TAM values of BH verbal forms.

by instructors pained by regret for, in the name of simplicity, misrepresenting the ancient Hebrew verb and mind. While one must avoid forcing BH grammar into categories foreign thereto, it is no less fallacious on the basis of real or perceived differences between BH and other known languages prematurely to exclude whole semantic categories from the analysis of BH.

To some extent, this is precisely what has been done. Already by the early modern period scholars had become convinced that tense was inadequate to encompass the totality of BH verbal meaning, especially because the relevant verbal forms not infrequently expressed meanings beyond, and even contrary to, what would be expected of them in a pure tense system. But all that this proved was that the category of tense was too narrow a parameter on its own for comprehending the full range of BH verbal semantics—not that the entire notion of tense needed to be discarded. While Hebrew instructors should certainly acquaint students with the pertinence and usefulness of all the TAM categories, aspect and mood should not be privileged at the expense of tense, as if the latter were merely a popular notion with no place in serious scholarly discussion or some sort of epiphenomenon of a deeper, truer reality.

Yiqtol is used to express far more than just the indicative future, but given both the frequency of its use to express indicative future semantics and its status as a default option for expressing the same, it is inaccurate and misleading to exclude from a description of *yiqtol* reference to tense, in general, and to future tense, more specifically.

4.0. A Brief History of Scholarship

4.1. The Medieval Period

A brief history of scholarship might help to explain how Hebraists came to feel so insecure about the future. Medieval Jewish grammarians apparently had no such misgivings, as they commonly spoke in terms of temporal categories (Téné et al. (1971) 2007, 58; McFall 1982, 1–10; Becker 2013, 124, 126). And since many of them had recourse to comparison with Arabic, not just western European languages, it must be emphasised that their adoption of a tense-prominent explanation for the BH verbal system was no likelier due to western scholarly bias than was the later western adoption of alternative descriptions.³

³ In the forceful words of Rainey (1990, 408–9):

In the present context, it remains to state the obvious fact that the behavior of the suffix verbal forms in the el-‘Amânah letters, as in the Hebrew Bible, is in flat contradiction to the prevailing theory that the basic meaning of the Suffix Conjugation is completed action. So we reject outright the use of the term “Perfect” for this conjugation pattern. It is irrelevant, inaccurate, and misleading. Our acceptance of the term “Imperfect” should in no way be construed as acquiescence to the common view that the ancient Semitic verbal systems were based on the expression of “aspect” rather than tense. The ancient Semites knew when to sow their fields and to milk their cows; their own language was quite adequate to explain these things to their sons. The idea that the Semites only viewed verbal action as completed or incomplete is a European conceit. It has no basis in fact.

4.2. The Enduring Influence of Early Modern Concepts

When we come to early modern scholarship, things get complicated. On the one hand, as already noted, certain early modern objections to a purely tense-based approach to the BH verb were and remain valid, especially the obvious intersection of tense and non-tense semantics in several of the forms.

Particularly vexing was the full *yiqtol* form (derived from PS *yaqtulu*, as opposed to, for example, the short *yiqtol* form that developed from PS *yaqtul*). That it serves regularly in BH to express values associated with all three tenses—future, gnomic (i.e., generic and habitual) present, gnomic (i.e., generic and habitual) past⁴—belied a unidimensional tense-based approach. The following examples showcase *yiqtol* forms with absolute future, (1)–(3) relative future (4)–(6), habitual present (7)–(9), and habitual past (10)–(12) semantics.⁵

⁴ For generic and habitual aspect as subtypes of gnomic imperfectivity, see Carlson (2012); Bybee et al. (1994, 126, 141) equate generic and gnomic. The basic distinction that Carlson (2012, 829–31) draws is that between expressions with individual or group subjects (habituals) and those with “[g]eneric noun phrases that do not intuitively designate any particular individuals or group of individuals.” I am grateful to Geoffrey Khan for highlighting this distinction.

⁵ Bybee et al. (1994, 126–27) usefully distinguish between habituality (customary action over a period of time), frequentativity (frequent customary action over a period of time), and iterativity (repeated action on one occasion); see also Comrie (1976, 26–27); Carlson (2012, 828–31). In BH, the former two categories more consistently correlate with explicit imperfective encoding than does the latter, e.g., the perfective iterative in וַיִּשְׁתָּחוּ אֶרְצָה שִׁבְעַת פְּעָמִים ‘and he bowed to the ground seven

4.2.1. Absolute Future

- (1) וַיֵּשֶׁם יְהוָה מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר מָחָר יַעֲשֶׂה יְהוָה הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה בָּאָרֶץ:
 ‘And YHWH set a time, saying, “Tomorrow YHWH **will do** this thing in the land.”’ (Exod. 9.5)
- (2) כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה וְהָיָה | בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יַעֲלֶוּ דְּבָרִים עַל־לִבְכֶּךָ וְחִשְׁבֹּת מִחֲשַׁבֶּת רָעָה:
 ‘Thus says the Lord YHWH: “On that day, thoughts **will arise** into your mind, and you will devise an evil scheme.”’ (Ezek. 38.10)

times’ (Gen. 33.3). Other semantic notions associated with imperfectivity, such as progressiveness (durativity of dynamic events), continuousness (durativity of states), and lexical frequentativity (e.g., English *blabber* from *blab*, *crackle* from *crack*) are also routinely conveyed without resorting to dedicated imperfective encoding. For example, the expression of continuousness with *yiqtol* or *weqatal* forms is not rare (see, e.g., Joosten 2012, 286, on statives), but is frequently formulated otherwise, e.g., *qatal* for extended and repeated action and for states (often associated with specific lexical aspects), as well as the participle for continuity of verbal eventualities (Driver [1892] 1998, 13, 15–16, 35–36; Joosten 2012, 84–93, 195–200, 242–43). Yet there are exceptions, in which various sorts of imperfectivity are identically coded, e.g., שְׂרָפִים עֹמְדִים | מִמַּעַל לּוֹ שֵׁשׁ כְּנָפַיִם שֵׁשׁ כְּנָפַיִם לְאֶחָד בְּשֵׁתָיִם | יְכִסֶּה פָנָיו וּבְשֵׁתָיִם יְכִסֶּה רַגְלָיו וּבְשֵׁתָיִם יַעֲוֹפֶף: וְקָרָא זֶה אֶל־זֶה וְאָמַר קָדוֹשׁ | קָדוֹשׁ קָדוֹשׁ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת מְלֵא כְּלֵי־הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ: ‘Seraphim were standing above him, each with six wings: with two **they covered** (continuous) their faces, with two **they covered** (continuous) their feet, and with two **they flapped** (iterative). And each **called** (frequentative) to the other **and said** (frequentative) ‘Holy, holy, holy is YHWH of hosts. The whole land is filled with his glory.’ (Isa. 6.2–3).

- (3) ...וּמֶלֶךְ שָׁשָׂדַ יִשְׁתָּה אַחֲרֵיהֶם:

‘...And after them the king of Babylon **will drink**.’ (Jer. 25.26b)

4.2.2. Relative Future

- (4) וַיִּכְנְנוּ אֶת־הַמִּנְחָה עַד־בּוֹא יוֹסֵף בְּצַהֲרִים כִּי שָׁמְעוּ כִּי־שָׁם יֵאָכְלוּ לֶחֶם:

‘And they prepared the gift for Joseph’s coming at noon, for they had heard that **they would eat** there.’ (Gen. 43.25)

- (5) וַיִּקַּח אֶת־בְּנוֹ הַבְּכוֹר אֲשֶׁר־יִמְלֹךְ תַּחְתָּיו וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ עָלָה עַל־הַחֻמָּה...

‘Then he took his oldest son who **was to reign** in his place and offered him as a burnt offering on the wall...’ (2 Kgs 3.27)

- (6) וְאַלִישֶׁעַ חָלָה אֶת־חֲלָיו אֲשֶׁר יָמוּת בּוֹ...

‘Now when Elisha fell ill with the illness from which **he would die**...’ (Jer. 50.44)

4.2.3. Habitual Present

- (7) ...עַל־כֵּן אֲנִי זֹבֵחַ לַיהוָה כָּל־פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם הַזָּכָרִים וְכָל־בְּכוֹר בְּנֵי אִפְיָה:

‘...Therefore I sacrifice to YHWH all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons **I redeem**.’

- (8) הֲלוֹא זֶה אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁתָּה אֲדֹנִי בּוֹ וְהוּא נֹחֵשׁ יִנְחֹשׁ בּוֹ...

‘Is it not with this that my lord **drinks**, and with this that he **practices divination**?...’ (Gen. 44.5)

- (9) פֶּה אֶל־פֶּה אֲדַבֵּר־בּוֹ וּמִרְאֵה וְלֹא בַחֲדִידֹת וּתְמִנַּת יְהוָה יִבְיט...

‘Mouth to mouth **I speak** with him, clearly, and not in riddles, and **he looks** upon the form of YHWH.’ (Num. 12.8)

4.2.4. Habitual Past

- (10) וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם וַיִּזְבַּח אֶלְקָנָה וְנָתַן לַפְּנִינָה אִשְׁתּוֹ וְלְכָל-בְּנֵיהָ וּבָנוֹתֶיהָ מְנוֹת: וּלְחַנָּה
יָתֵן מִנֶּה אֶחָת אֲפִים...

‘On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he would give a double portion...’ (1 Sam. 4–5a)

- (11) וְהָעֲרָבִים מִבֵּיָאִים לֹא לֶחֶם וּבִשָּׁר בַּבֹּקֶר וּלְחֶם וּבִשָּׁר בְּעָרֶב וּמִן-הַנָּחַל יִשְׁתָּה:
‘And the ravens would bring him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening, while from the brook **he would drink**.’ (1 Kgs 17.6)

- (12) וְאֶת-בְּרוּךְ שָׁאָלוּ לֵאמֹר הִגְדֵּנָא לָנוּ אֵיךְ כָּתַבְתָּ אֶת-כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה
מִפִּיו: וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם בְּרוּךְ מִפִּי יִקְרָא אֵלַי אֶת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְאֲנִי כָתַב
עַל-הַסֵּפֶר בְּדִין:

‘Then they asked Baruch, “Tell us, please, how did you write all these words from his mouth?” Baruch answered them, “He **would read** all these words to me, and I would write them with ink on the scroll.”’ (Jer. 36.17–18)

None of the above meanings is anomalous; examples of each could be multiplied. While specific senses are especially characteristic of particular genres and/or text types—e.g., future *yiqtol* of direct speech, gnomic present *yiqtol* of proverbial statements, and habitual past *yiqtol* of background description within narrative—no meaning is limited to a specific genre or text type. Language users disambiguated meaning via inference from context, including a range of linguistic and extra-linguistic clues. An observation relevant to the future examples above: all of these exemplify indicative future, which term refers to the expression of

a verifiable future fact (see below). It should be noted that this is one of just several future-oriented semantic values commonly expressed by means of BH *yiqtol*, many of which have varying degrees of deontic or weaker epistemic modal force (see below). As a standard option for all of the above semantic values, the *yiqtol* form is polysemous, being regularly employed to express several semantic combinations of TAM values. From this perspective, the *yiqtol* form is no more easily explained today by recourse to a single, all-explanatory semantic dimension than it was in previous generations.

Early modern approaches were hampered by more than just reductionism. They were also impaired by fundamental misunderstandings regarding the development of BH (and other Semitic languages) and simplistic and/or conflation in TAM notions. Though he is not always cited, S. R. Driver's views continue to influence scholarship. As such, the misplaced assumptions and misunderstandings that played a part in his (and contemporaries' as well as successors') rejection of tense in favour of aspect need to be acknowledged and rectified. One acknowledged problem in Driver's approach was conflation of short *yiqtol* (< PS *yaqtul*, used mainly as a jussive or as a simple past in *wayyiqtol*) and full *yiqtol* (< PS *yaqtulu*),⁶ whereby he was compelled to posit a fundamental semantic value capable of explaining a BH *yiqtol* that was not just temporally polysemous, but very nearly pansemic: simple *and* habitual past, habitual present, indicative and

⁶ See Garr's critique in Driver ([1892] 1998, xxv–xxvi).

volitional future ([1892] 1998, 75–79).⁷ Given the strong inclination to uncover a single comprehensive category for BH verbal semantics, it is no wonder that Driver (and others) rejected tense.

In hindsight, it might be argued that the very attempt to describe a multi-dimensional object in terms of a single dimension was from the outset ill-conceived and destined to fail.⁸ No monovalent description was ever going to capture a polyvalent reality. But in this case, the replacement of tense with aspect consisted not merely in the substitution of one semantic category with a different, equally valid one, but in the replacement of a strongly relevant semantic category with a faulty version of one far less relevant. A glaring weakness in Driver's and similar approaches was the problematic nineteenth-century conception of what is today called grammatical or viewpoint aspect—a conception that, due partially to Driver's stature, continues to plague Hebrew studies to this day. Rather than a system combining the notionally distinct (though often practically and linguistically intertwined) categories of tense and aspect, the proposal was to account for apparent tense expressions as functions of aspect. 'Past' was replaced with 'perfect' or 'complete' and 'future' with 'imperfect', 'incipient', and 'nascent'. Beyond the fact that such substitution in no way resolved the basic problem of collapsing multiple dimensions into one, the theory suffered the same fatal vulnerability as modern iterations thereof: conflation of distinct

⁷ To his credit, Driver ([1892] 1998, 35–36, 166–168) correctly viewed the active participle, not the *yiqtol* form, as the default for progressive/continuous action, both past and present.

⁸ Cf. Haspelmath (1998, 55 n. 23).

semantic categories, namely, the popular misconception of a one-to-one correspondence between *past tense* and *perfective aspect* and between *future tense* and *imperfective aspect*. Rather, it must be emphasised that multiple tense–aspect combinations are possible. Past eventualities can be presented perfectly or imperfectly, e.g.,

- (13) past tense + perfective aspect

I **showered** this morning.

- (14) past tense + imperfective (progressive/continuous) aspect

I **was showering** this morning (when the phone rang).

- (15) past tense + imperfective (habitual) aspect

When I lived in Galveston, I **showered/would shower/used to shower** at least twice a day.

Likewise, future eventualities can be served up in various sorts of aspectual packaging, e.g.,

- (16) future + perfective aspect

I'll **arrive/I'm going to (or gonna) arrive/I'm arriving/I arrive** tomorrow afternoon.

- (17) future + imperfective (progressive) aspect

(When you call me) Tomorrow afternoon at 4:30, I'll **be arriving/I'm going to (or gonna) be arriving**.

- (18) future + imperfective (habitual) aspect

(Now that you've hired me, you'll find I'm very reliable.)
I'll **arrive** on time every day.

The key is that, contrary to what students are often led to believe by BH grammar books, in no way does the completive, global sense of perfective aspectual presentation dictate anterior

temporal location, nor is the open-endedness of imperfective aspect a 'natural' fit for future. By the same token, neither do past and future tense by default entail, respectively, perfectivity and imperfectivity.

To be sure, in the world's languages certain common tense–aspect combinations come to be represented by dedicated encoding. For example, the combinations past–perfective, past–imperfective, and various types of present–imperfective are far more commonly associated with dedicated morphological, syntactic, and/or lexical coding than, say, future–imperfective, as in (17)–(18), above, or present–perfective.⁹ Though BH is not unique among the world's languages in having verbal forms (i.e., *yiqṭol*, *weqaṭal*) doubly tasked with conveying both future tense and imperfective aspect, there is no logical requirement according to which the two values must be combined within a single form. Indeed—and this is a crucial point not often mentioned in grammar books—in BH *the two values generally do not combine*: when *yiqṭol* is employed to express a future eventuality, it is most often

⁹ In both English and BH (as in many languages), the default aspectual interpretation of present tense forms is in the nature of things imperfective, since principal uses are to describe what is currently happening (actual present) or what happens with a degree of regularity (generic present), neither of which entails an end point. However, certain specialised uses of present-tense forms must be categorised as perfective, e.g., performatives (*I hereby confirm...*), sports commentating (*He shoots! He scores!*), and choose-your-own adventure/joke/riddle genres (*You enter a bedroom. There are thirty-four people. You kill thirty. How many are in the bedroom?*). Note: these differ from the so-called 'historical present', whereby present-tense grammatical forms are for the sake of vividness used to narrate past events.

to be construed as perfective, i.e., with the eventuality viewed as a global, completive whole, including starting and end points, or as aspectually undefined.¹⁰ Conversely, when *yiqtol* has genuine imperfective aspectual force, crucially, it refers not to the future, but to present or past.¹¹ Compare, in this connection, the perfective reading of the examples of future *yiqtol* in (1)–(6), above, with the imperfective character of non-future *yiqtol* in examples (7)–(12). Clearly, the *form* is versatile, covering both futurity and imperfectivity, *but its future and imperfective values are in reality mutually exclusive*. This stands in stark contrast to what one finds in many teaching grammars and well-intentioned blogs, and even some dedicated scholarship. Despite years of scholarly critique,

¹⁰ In agreement with Cook (2012, 221). In English, too, the default interpretation of future verbs is perfective or undefined, with inference of alternative meaning based at least partially on the lexical aspect of the relevant verb. In the interests of clarity, it is worth emphasising that default perfective interpretation of future forms is not limited to the English construction known as *future perfect*. In other words, the future options *He will return/is returning/returns/is going to (or gonna) return tomorrow at 7pm* is no less perfective than *He will have returned by tomorrow at 7pm*. In all options, the act of returning is understood as a completive whole, rather than as progressive, durative, or habitual. The difference is that the future perfect is a relative tense option denoting temporal location in relation not just to speech time (like the other alternatives), but to a reference time as well. The future perfect makes an assertion about a future situation relative to a completed event, not about the event itself.

¹¹ See Hornkohl (2018, 29–30) for examples in BH of both the default perfective or undetermined aspectual character of the future and the explicit signalling of future imperfectivity via alternative means.

it seems fair to say that the fallacy of a purely aspectual paradigm that conflates tense and grammatical aspect still afflicts the field. This is lamentable, not just because the relevant categories of tense and mood get short-changed, but because the category of aspect itself—also essential for understanding BH verbal semantics—is still so poorly understood among non-specialists.

4.3. Representative Examples of Recent Scholarship

Certain elements in modern aspect- and mood-prominent approaches to BH are compelling; others arguably obfuscate, rather than clarify, matters. One difficulty confronting any approach, whatever the semantic category (or categories) deemed prominent, is the semantic opacity and underspecification of *yiqtol* morphology. Unlike the *qatal* form, whose morphological and semantic development can be confidently traced,¹² such clarity in the case of proto-Semitic *yaqtul* morphology is conspicuously lacking.¹³ Based on cross-linguistic tendencies in the evolution of verbal semantics, along with what can be gleaned about the verbal systems of other ancient Semitic languages, scholars have reconstructed more or less plausible semantic values for the proto-

¹² Cook (2012, 203–4). Examples of historically traceable development within other language families include the transparent voluntative origins of English future *will*; Romance futures built from infinitive + ‘have’, e.g., Latin *amare habeo* ‘I have to love’ > Italian *amerò* ‘I will love’; Germanic perfects composed of ‘have’/‘be’ + past participle.

¹³ In agreement with Cook (2012, 219): “The second complication for substantiating imperfective *yiqtol* is that the comparative-historical evidence is simply not as transparent for the form compared with the case for *qatal*.”

Hebrew forms from which the values of documented BH verbs allegedly developed. It is important to emphasise, though, that such reconstructions are no more than learned exercises in conjecture, not even offering something approaching real probability. If one could be sure of the nature of the prehistoric proto-Semitic verbal system(s), or even of the nature of the systems in the documented ancient Semitic languages, then perhaps—and *only perhaps*—on the basis of that knowledge, one could achieve probability regarding the general character of the BH verbal system. As things stand, however, the obsolete approaches, lack of consensus, and uncertainty typical of scholarship on the intensively studied BH verbal system also characterises—to varying degrees and in varying combinations—scholarship on the verbal systems of its often less intensively studied sister languages, to say nothing of their respective linguistic antecedents. With this in mind, when it comes to ancient Semitic languages, proposals regarding developmental probabilities based on typology and common grammaticalisation paths must be judged speculative.¹⁴ In view of the paucity of ancient Semitic verbal morphology, it seems possible, if not likely, that TAM values were variously combined in the Semitic languages from the earliest times.

¹⁴ The same does not necessarily apply, however, to modern Semitic chronolects, e.g., vernacular Arabic dialects, Neo-Aramaic dialects, Modern Hebrew, where scholars often have access to far more information, including both considerable historical data and data from mother-tongue informants.

4.3.1. Aspect and Aspect Prominence

John Cook's oft-cited 2012 aspect-prominent treatment of BH is arguably one of the more lucid, current, and thoroughgoing on offer. Cook seeks to account for the intricacies of BH verbal semantics on the basis of common cross-linguistic patterns of TAM development, typological comparisons, and grammaticalisation paths. His account is persuasive in some cases (e.g., the proposed evolution aspect > tense in the case of BH *qatal*); it is intriguing, but open to question, in others. For example, on *yiqtol* Cook himself (2012, 221) admits that the "progressive-imperfective path of development does not adequately account for the future and irrealis mood meanings that the *yiqtol* conjugation expresses in BH."¹⁵ He manages to explain the centralisation of *yiqtol*'s ostensibly once-peripheral "general (perfective) future" and "subjunctive" values on the assumption that an early progressive *yiqtol* with peripheral future and habitual force lost its progressive meaning due to competition with the participle.¹⁶ This proposal merits far more attention than it can be given here.¹⁷ Of immediate pertinence is Cook's explicit acknowledgement of genuine temporal, aspectual, and modal semantics. Albeit endorsing an aspect-prominent view of the BH verb, he readily acknowledges

¹⁵ Citing Andrason (2010, 36 n. 50).

¹⁶ Cook's argument is based on Haspelmath's (1998) work on old present tense forms that develop anomalous meanings.

¹⁷ In this connection, it is pertinent to cite Geoffrey Khan's contribution to the present volume, in which he traces the path progressive > habitual > modal/future for the Neo-Aramaic historical participle *qāṭel*.

the reality, and even *centralisation*, of temporal and modal expression, too.

The most obvious problem with an aspect-prominent classification of BH is its lack of synchronic explanatory power:¹⁸ whatever the upside of an aspect-prominent account of the development of BH verbal semantics, as Hornkohl (2018, 29–30) notes, a decisive downside is the limited role that aspectual distinctions actually play in the classical BH verbal system as documented in ancient sources. Whereas aspectually prominent languages regularly oblige users to select between aspectual alternatives (such as the choice in the case of many ancient Greek verbs between perfective and imperfective roots in the past, imperative, and infinitive), in BH this choice is relevant only in the sphere of the past, since, as already stated, future tense verb

¹⁸ Cook (2012, 208) readily acknowledges the diachronic perspective of his approach. In his discussion of the *qatal* form he summarises: “This reconstruction has been argued, not based on statistical analysis of individual examples, but primarily on the basis of typological arguments along with the consensus views regarding the primary meanings of the conjugation in each period.” Aside from the fact that the best that such typological arguments can offer is probability based on comparison—which is hardly probative, since, in respect of the semantic development of any given feature, it is possible that BH (or any language) simply ‘took the road less travelled’—as noted above, there are considerable grounds for suspicion when it comes to “consensus views regarding primary meanings.” At least as far as BH is concerned (and likely other ancient Semitic languages, too), scholars have all too often simply rehashed outmoded theories and dressed them up in modern linguistic jargon, without properly addressing the questionable or even fallacious assumptions on which they rest.

forms default as aspectually perfective or undefined and present tense verb forms are by default imperfective.¹⁹ Further, even in the sphere of the past in BH, the unambiguous expression of habituality via use of an explicitly imperfective *yiqtol* or *weqatal* is optional; even where adverbials and/or verb forms in the context indicate habituality, eventualities can be expressed with the default perfective past forms (*qatal*, *wayyiqtol*), e.g.,

- (19) וַיֵּצְאוּ שְׂרֵי פְלִשְׁתִּים וַיְהִי | מִדֵּי צֵאתָם שָׁכַל דָּוִד מִכָּל עֲבָדֵי שָׁאֻל...
 ‘Then the commanders of the Philistines came out to battle, and as often as they came out, David **succeeded** more than all the servants of Saul...’ (1 Sam. 18.30)
- (20) וַיִּלְקְטוּ אֹתוֹ בַּבֹּקֶר בַּבֹּקֶר אִישׁ כִּפִּי אָכְלוּ וְחֵם הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וְנָמַס׃
 ‘**And they gathered** it morning by morning, each one according to their consumption, but when the sun would grow hot, it would melt.’ (Exod. 16.21)
- (21) שֹׁטְוֹ הָעָם וְלִקְטוּ וְטָחְנוּ בָרֶחִים אֹ דָבָו בַּמִּדְּכָה...
 ‘**The people set out** and they would glean and they would grind it with a hand mill or **they beat** it in a mortar...’ (Num. 11.8)²⁰

¹⁹ The BH imperative also defaults as aspectually perfective or undefined, a given verb’s lexical aspect and other clues aiding in semantic disambiguation. By contrast, RH, often deemed less aspect-prominent than BH (Cook 2012, 208, 221–22), allows for imperfective imperatives, as it permits the volitional use of the *hāyā* + participle construction, chiefly restricted to the sphere of the past in BH.

²⁰ For further examples of *wayyiqtol* forms where one might expect imperfective alternatives, see the lists given in Joosten (2012, 174, 178).

The explicit signalling of grammatical aspect is neither obligatory nor pervasive in the BH verbal system.²¹

This dissonance between Cook's theory and reality inevitably results in strange terminological and notional pairings in his argumentation, some of which are disturbingly reminiscent of early modern attempts to unite all verbal semantics under the banner of a single value. Despite Cook's aforementioned awareness that Hebrew verbal semantics can be plotted along all TAM dimensions, his version of aspect-prominence seems to ill-suit the facts on the ground. Thus, Cook (2012) insists on a "perfective *qatal*" (205–8) that is largely the semantic equivalent of "simple past" *wayyiqtol* (256–65), and on an "imperfective *yiqtol*" that "only infrequently expresses past and present imperfective" meanings, "while (general) future and subjunctive meanings are becoming primary functions" (221). More categorically on *yiqtol* semantics:

while *yiqtol* continues to be employed for some imperfective expressions, the progressive [i.e., predicative participle] is the more favored construction for these expressions, while *yiqtol* is preferred for future and subjunctive (irrealis) expressions, which tend toward perfective aspect (267).

Finally, forestalling the argument that Cook is interested only in the historical development of BH verbal semantics, rather

²¹ These are two of Bhat's (1999, 95–97) four criteria for assessing TAM prominence within verbal systems, the other two being grammaticalisation and systematicity (paradigmatisation). Morphosemantic uncertainty involving PS *yaqtul* hinders assessment of the extent to which TAM categories have been grammaticalised or systematised in BH.

than dominant synchronic uses, his summary tables explicitly classify the BH *qaṭal* as perfective (208) and the *yiqṭol* as imperfective (222).

Table 1: BH *qaṭal* resultative path (adapted from Cook 2012, 208)

<i>Common Semitic</i> <i>resultative</i>	>	<i>West Semitic</i> <i>perfect</i>	>	<i>BH</i> <i>perfective</i>	>	<i>RH</i> <i>simple past</i>
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Table 2: BH *yiqṭol* progressive path (adapted from Cook 2012, 222)

<i>Central Semitic</i> <i>progressive</i>	>	<i>BH</i> <i>imperfective</i>	>	<i>RH</i> <i>irrealis</i>
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Even if one accepts the basic correctness of the suggested ‘resultative path’ for *qaṭal* and the ‘progressive path’ for *yiqṭol*, based on the dominant BH uses of these forms and in the absence of documented forms of BH in which *qaṭal* and *yiqṭol* have as their core meanings the semantic values schematised in the tables, it would be more accurate to substitute ‘proto-Hebrew’ for BH and postpone BH on the developmental continuum, closer to RH.

4.3.2. Modality and Mood Prominence

It is also sometimes argued that BH verbal semantics operates on the basis of a fundamentally modal distinction: *realis* versus *irrealis*. In his classic work on tense Comrie (1985, 45) notes that languages that draw this distinction often group perfective past and actual present in the *realis* category, while “*irrealis* is used for more hypothetical situations, including situations that represent inductive generalisations, and also predictions, including predictions about the future.” The potential relevance of this dichotomy for BH verbal semantics is apparent. In addition to

indicative (absolute and/or relative) future—asserting the certainty of an eventuality posterior to the present—*yiḡtəl* and *weqatəl* are employed to express various shades of deontic and less-than-certain epistemic modality, and the habitual present and past, but—crucially—*not* the cardinal realis values of progressive, whether the actual present or past continuous (i.e., present and past progressive, respectively, in BH both the purview of the active participle), or perfective past (typically conveyed in BH via *qatəl* and *wayyiḡtəl*). Joosten’s 2012 (31–33) monograph on the BH verbal system is a recent application of a modal approach to BH.

Even so, it seems prudent to raise a few considerations. First, as Comrie (1985, 44) writes:

...the question of whether future time reference is subsumed under tense or mood, whether in general linguistic theory or in some specific language, is an empirical question that can only be answered on the basis of the investigation of grammatical expressions of future time reference across a number of languages.²²

I take this to mean that, from a linguistic perspective, evidence of TAM categorisation in real human language data should trump arguments from other domains of enquiry, e.g., philosophy, psychology, theology, physics, quantum mechanics, etc. In this vein it is telling, though not decisive, that some concerned typologists entertain serious doubts as to the centrality of the realis–irrealis dichotomy, highlighting the notional looseness of modal categories as well as the various and idiosyncratic ways in which

²² See also Lyons (1968, 311).

individual languages differ with respect to assigning meanings to the so-called realis and irrealis categories.²³ There are, also, of course, alternative (partially overlapping) modal dichotomies, e.g., indicative versus subjunctive or assertion versus non-assertion (Palmer 2001, 3–4) and epistemic versus evidential (Palmer 2001, 8–9).²⁴ However, notwithstanding the diverse degrees to which apparently mood-prominent languages fit prototypical mood-prominent divisions, it must be admitted that semantic distinctions in BH conform well to a common cross-linguistic pattern of modality expression, lending apparent credence to a modal

²³ See Bybee et al. (1994, 236–39); cf. Palmer (2001, 2, 188–91). One of Cook’s (2012, 219) objections to Joosten’s mood-prominent theory of BH is that the latter “must make the category ‘modal’ endlessly elastic, such as by the claim that ‘there is something inherently modal about questions (Joosten 2002, 54).” While defining mood remains problematic, interrogative modality is recognised cross-linguistically (Palmer 2001, 172) and would seem to have relevance for the semantics of the BH *yiqtol* form. It is interesting that the prose examples of progressive *yiqtol* cited in both Waltke and O’Connor (1990, 504) and Cook (2012, 268) are restricted to questions. Arguably, the modal character of interrogatives is intrinsically both epistemic (involving uncertainty) and deontic (imposing the questioner’s will on the interlocuter in the form of expecting an answer). This accounts for the reference to the actual present via a mix of *yiqtol* in the question and predicative participle in the answer in *וַיִּמְצְאוּהוּ אִישׁ וְהָיָה תַּעֲהָ בַשָּׂדֶה וַיִּשְׁאַלְהוּ הָאִישׁ לְאָמֹר מֶה־תִּבְקֹשׁ: וַיֹּאמֶר* ‘And a man found him wandering in the countryside. And the man asked him, “What **are you looking for?**” And he said, “**I am looking for** my brothers...”’ (Gen. 37.15–16a).

²⁴ Indeed, together with tense, aspect, and mood, some scholars treat the parameter of evidentiality as a fundamental semantic category, in which case TAM becomes TAME (Dahl 2013).

categorisation of BH centring on the realis/irrealis distinction. Be that as it may, mood-prominent approaches to BH arouse doubts similar to those that attach to aspect-prominent approaches.

Pedagogically, it is legitimate to ask whether this is just one more way for students to misunderstand the BH verbal system, specifically, and ancient Israelite cognition, in general. With special regard to the notion of future, will learners misconstrue the idea of a concept of future defined as inherently irrealis as evidence that BH users conceived of time posterior to the present as particularly hazy or nebulous compared to that envisioned by users of other languages? This would be unfortunate. Given persistent misconceptions regarding the BH verbal system among not just students, but professional academic practitioners in such fields as Hebrew studies, Semitics, linguistics, Biblical Studies, and theology, it is especially incumbent upon Hebrew language specialists, whatever TAM-prominence they avow, to combat such fallacies by emphasising the combined TAM expression of the BH verb system.

Secondly—and most importantly—from the standpoints of actual synchronic language use and terminological and notional precision, it is reasonable to question the legitimacy of describing BH as mood-prominent. The reckoning of modality as pervasive in BH is contingent on a few assumptions. First, mood must be understood to include not only the restricted deontic modality of the first- and third-person directive–volitive *yiqtol* forms—i.e., those with volitive force explicitly signalled by means of clause-initial word order, special morphology (e.g., short jussive, lengthened cohortative), and/or special particles (לָא, אֵין)—but also that

of those *yiqtol* forms that Dallaire (2014, 39) calls ‘nonvolitive modals’, i.e., those that denote shades of deontic and epistemic modality far broader than the modality expressed via the explicit directive–volitives and without the aforementioned syntactic, morphological, and/or lexical indications of volitivity.²⁵ Second, non-volitional modality must be understood to include not just shades of what are traditionally considered meanings associated with deontic and epistemic modality, but also various shades of

²⁵ In addition to Dallaire, the distinction between the modality of the BH directive–volitives and that of the *yiqtol* and *weqatal* forms more broadly has been repeatedly discussed. Hornkohl (2018, 31–32) contrasts the classic BH directive–volitive triad of cohortative, imperative, and jussive with what he calls the ‘unmarked deontic modality’ of standard *yiqtol* and *weqatal* when the latter denote degrees of obligation. Cook (2012, 247–48) distinguishes between the directive–volitive system and irrealis *yiqtol*, the former always indicating subjective deontics (with speaker-oriented obligation), the latter either subjective or objective deontics (where the speaker is not the source of obligation). Cook expressly bases himself on Verstraete (2007, 32–35), but see also Bybee et al. (1994, 177–79), who contrast speaker-oriented modality and agent-oriented modality. For her part, Shulman (2000, 180) distinguishes between jussives, for deontic modality, and indicative forms, for either epistemic or, more rarely, deontic modality. It is not surprising that *yiqtol* should merge deontic and epistemic modality; consider the fact that English modals such as *can*, *could*, *may*, *should*, *ought to*, *must* have both deontic and epistemic modal force. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the merits of these approaches. For present purposes, it is sufficient to note the broad recognition that *yiqtol* routinely expresses deontic modal force including, but also beyond, the narrow semantic confines of the directive–volitive categories. As Dallaire states, the non-volitional modality of BH *yiqtol* is characteristic of BH *weqatal*, which Cook renames “irrealis *qatal*” (2012, 249–56).

habituality and—crucial to the present discussion—indicative futurity.

In this connection, it is worth considering two complicating factors, both raised by Comrie. First,

the so-called future tense in English makes a clear prediction about some future state of affairs, and is in this way clearly distinct from modal constructions that make reference to alternative worlds. Thus *it will rain tomorrow* is a very definite statement about a state of affairs to hold at a certain time subsequent to the present moment, and its truth can be tested at that future time by seeing whether it does in fact rain or not. This can be contrasted with *it may rain tomorrow*, which is simply a claim about a possible world in which there is rain tomorrow; the truth value of this statement cannot be assessed by observing whether or not it rains tomorrow (since both presence and absence of rain are compatible with *may rain*)—indeed, evaluation of the truth of such a modal statement is extremely difficult, involving demonstrating the existence or non-existence of a certain possible world which may not coincide with the actual world. *It is thus possible to have future time reference which is not necessarily modal.* (Comrie 1985, 44; italics mine: ADH).

Second, observing that English has several options for future encoding, Comrie (1985, 46–47) notes that one difference between the future as encoded with the English present tense, e.g., *the train departs at five o'clock tomorrow morning*, is that this usage is generally felicitous only in the case of planned/scheduled events. He compares the generally infelicitous *it rains*

tomorrow.²⁶ This has relevance for BH. Among BH options for expressing indicative future semantics is the active participle, with its default realis progressive force, e.g.,

- (22) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֲבֹל שָׂרָה אִשְׁתְּךָ יֵלֶדְתְּ לְךָ בֵּן וְקָרָאתָ אֶת־שְׁמוֹ יִצְחָק
 ‘God said, “No, but Sarah your wife **will bear** you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac...”’ (Gen. 17.19a)

If future marking is by definition modal, then this means the participle, one of whose default senses is the prototypically realis value of actual present, also has irrealis use as a future. The same logic applies to the participle encoding habitual semantics, e.g.,

- (23) ...עַל־כֵּן אֲנִי זֹבֵחַ לַיהוָה כָּל־פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם הַזָּכָרִים וְכָל־בְּכוֹר בְּנֵי אִפְדָּה:
 ‘Therefore I **sacrifice** to YHWH all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.’
- (24) וְהָעֲרָבִים מִבֵּיָאִים לֹא לֶחֶם וּבָשָׂר בַּבֹּקֶר וּלְחֶם וּבָשָׂר בָּעֶרֶב וּמִן־הַנֶּחֱל יִשְׁתָּה:
 ‘And the ravens would bring him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening, while from the brook **he would drink**.’ (1 Kgs 17.6)

Conversely, perhaps the future use of the participle should be viewed as encoding a relatively indicative futurity in line with the typically realis semantics of the present progressive. But if so, then it stands to reason that when a similar future value is expressed by the *yiqtol*, this should also be categorised as realis future.

With regard to subsuming habituality under modality—by virtue of the fact that they refer to discrete, actualised, falsifiable

²⁶ See also Bybee et al. (1994, 149–50) and, regarding BH, Cook (2012, 232–33).

eventualities, the perfective past and progressive and continuous past and present may deserve a higher realis score than the gnomic or habitual past and present. But surely the realis–irrealis dichotomy is a cline, with *they used to eat cake* and *they eat cake* much closer on the scale to *they ate cake*, *they were eating cake*, and *they are eating cake* than to *they may/could/ should/must eat cake*, *I wish they'd eaten cake*, or *let them eat cake*!

These objections are not necessarily fatal to mood-prominent approaches to BH, nor to the widespread irrealis classification of futurity and habituality, but they do underscore a difficulty inherent in determining the ‘basic’ meaning of a multifunctional form (here, *yiqtol*). As with the suggested modal cline, it is probably advisable to view the modality of futurity as scalar, from absolute certainty, expressing total conviction, and/or mere description, on the one hand, to possibility, doubt, and/or expression of will, on the other.²⁷ This arguably necessitates the recognition of indicative futurity.

Though there are theoretical and philosophical arguments, supported by both cross-linguistic evidence and diachronic typology paths, in favour of the view that future-oriented and habitual utterances should by their nature be deemed modal,²⁸ there are also valid reasons for doubting whether this should necessarily be seen as a linguistic universal (Hornkohl 2018, 31). Just as some of the parameters of tense and aspect are often conflated,

²⁷ I wish to express my thanks to Geoffrey Khan for a useful discussion on the various levels of future certainty.

²⁸ Hatav (1997, 29); Joosten (2012, 33); Penner (2015); on Penner see (Hornkohl 2016).

so some conceptions of modality may gratuitously blur temporal, aspectual, and modal dimensions that it is useful to keep separate. In the light of Bhat's (1999, 175–78) contention that the TAM classification of, *inter alia*, future and imperfective past should be done on a language-by-language basis with reference to the way in which each language patterns in terms of TAM-prominence, and considering the ongoing lack of consensus regarding both modality, in general, and the nature of the BH verbal system, more specifically, the subsuming of apparent temporal and aspectual nuances in BH under a realis–irrealis modal rubric should not be considered a foregone conclusion.

5.0. Conclusion: Indicative versus Modal Future

To bring this discussion to a close, it will be useful to consider various shades of future expression in BH. While there is a growing body of research supporting the semantic distinction in BH between directive–volitive modality and broader modality, it is not obvious that all shades of futurity and habituality should necessarily be included in the latter. Pending a more definitive verdict from language typologists on the suitability of mood, especially the dichotomy of realis–irrealis, as an umbrella concept suitable for encompassing not just modal categories as typically understood, but also values traditionally categorised under tense, *e.g.*, indicative future, and aspect, *e.g.*, habitual, it seems prudent to discuss BH verbs using a clear, notionally distinct, three-dimensional TAM axis with semantics of individual verbs plotted using discrete temporal, aspectual, and modal terminology.

Indeed, even given the acceptance of an over-arching realis–irrealis distinction, TAM terminological precision will remain useful.

As evidence for the enduring explanatory value of the notion of indicative future, consider the contrasting semantics of the following pairs of examples.

(25a) ...אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ תִירָא וְאֹתוֹ תַעֲבֹד...

‘YHWH your God will you fear and him **will you serve**...’

(Deut. 6.13)

(25b) ...וְעַל־חֶרֶבְךָ תַחְיֶה וְאֶת־אָחִיךָ תַעֲבֹד...

‘...and by your sword you will live and your brother **you will serve**...’ (Gen. 27.40)

There is a difference between the future-oriented *prescriptive* ‘you will serve’ in (25a) and the future-oriented, but purely *predictive* ‘you will serve’ in (25b). The former is a clear example of Dallaire’s ‘nonvolitive’ (i.e., agent-oriented [Bybee et al.] or objective deontic [Verstraete; Cook]) modality—not a (directive–volitional [Dallaire], speaker-oriented [Bybee et al.], or subjective deontic [Verstraete; Cook]) wish, but description of obligation (see above, n. 25)—while the latter merely relates a not-yet-realised eventuality as an inescapable future fact. Similar contrastive examples include the following pairs, in each of which example (a) has broad non-volitional modality, while (b) conveys a future eventuality considered an indicative fact:

(26a) גֹּאֵל הַדָּם הוּא יָמִית אֶת־הַרָצָח בְּפָגְעוֹ־בּוֹ הוּא יָמִיתֵנּוּ:

‘The avenger of blood—it is he that **will put** the murderer **to death**; when he meets him, he **will put him to death**.’

(Num. 35.19)

- (26b) וְהָיָה הַנִּמְלָט מִחֶרֶב חֲזָאֵל יִמָּוֶת יְהוּא וְהַנִּמְלָט מִחֶרֶב יְהוּא יִמָּוֶת אֱלִישָׁע:
 ‘And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael Jehu **will put to death**, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu Elisha **will put to death**.’ (1 Kgs 19.17)
- (27a) כִּי אֶל-אֶרְצִי וְאֶל-מוֹלֶדְתִּי תֵלֶךְ...
 ‘Rather to my country and to my kinfolk **you will go**...’
 (Gen. 24.4a)
- (27b) ...עַל-גֻּחֲנֶךָ תֵלֶךְ וְעָפָר תֹאכַל כָּל-יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ:
 ‘...on your belly **you shall go**, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.’ (Gen. 3.14b)
- (28a) ...לְעָם נָכְרִי לֹא-יִמָּשֶׁל לְמַכְרָהּ בְּבִגְדֵי-בָה:
 ‘...to a foreign people **he will have** no **right** to sell her in his betraying her.’ (Exod. 21.8)
- (28b) וְהָיָה יִמָּשָׁל-בָּךְ:
 ‘...and he **will rule** over you.’ (Gen. 3.16b)
- (29a) וְאִישׁ אֶל-מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ תָּשׁוּבוּ:
 ‘...and each to their own family **you must return**.’ (Lev. 25.10)
- (29b) כִּי-עָפָר אַתָּה וְאֶל-עָפָר תָּשׁוּב:
 ‘...for you are dust, and to dust **you will return**.’ (Gen. 3.19b)
- (30a) שֶׁהָ תָּמִים זָכָר בֶּן-שָׁנָה יִהְיֶה לָכֶם:
 ‘A spotless year-old male lamb **it must be** for you.’ (Exod. 12.5)
- (30b) ...לְמָחָר יִהְיֶה הָאֵת הַזֶּה:
 ‘...for tomorrow this sign **will be**.’ (Exod. 8.19)

In such cases, the verbs with indicative future semantics are classifiable as modal only if indicative futures are so deemed by

definition. If this turns out to be the collective decision taken by linguists, based on empirical cross-linguistic typological data, in conjunction with Hebraists, in view of language-specific TAM-prominence patterns, then so be it. However, on the assumption that the aim of an account of BH verbal semantics is (at least partially) to capture how users expressed and interpreted TAM values, then, given the reality of the semantic distinction observed in the foregoing examples, even if the two nuances are conveyed by one and the same verbal form, it is useful, if not essential, to retain a place in BH analysis for indicative future semantics and to keep this notionally and terminologically separate from the category of non-volitional modality.

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