Anteriority and Justification: 
Pragmatic Functions of the \(W^x\)-qatal Form in Direct Speech in the Book of Genesis

WILLIAM R. OSBORNE (COLLEGE OF THE OZARKS)

ABSTRACT

Recognizing that scholarship has long struggled with the so-called “freeness” of Hebrew word order in direct speech, this study seeks to demonstrate that the primary pragmatic functions of the \(w^x\)-qatal form within direct speech in classical biblical Hebrew are justification and anteriority. Examining the issues of word order and the syntactical opposition between the wayyiqtol and \(w^x\)-qatal, the work concludes by presenting numerous examples of both functions in Genesis texts. The implications of the study are an improved understanding of clausal relationships within direct speech and improved translations and interpretations of these passages.

Within the last three decades, the discipline of discourse analysis—or text linguistics—has altered the way biblical Hebrew grammarians approach sentence structure. By highlighting the significance of larger units of text, linguists have come to recognize language as a “multi-level hierarchical code,”¹ in which each level must be understood and examined in light of those above and below. This recognition has led grammarians to move beyond issues of morphology and grammar in order to begin focusing on the importance of syntax and narrative relationships within larger units of a text. As a result, many studies have been produced in recent years that examine the linguistic structures characteristic of biblical narrative.² However, much of this research

has focused on the narrative genre with little being said about direct speech imbedded within the larger narratives. The present study seeks to offer a contribution to this often overlooked genre by examining the pragmatic function of the \( w^x \)-qatal form in direct speech.\(^3\)

In a recent work titled *Word Order in the Biblical Hebrew Finite Clause*, Adina Moshavi seeks to clarify the grammatical function of pre-verbal material in biblical Hebrew by examining such constructions in the book of Genesis. She argues that fronting, or preposing, can generally be understood as focusing and topicalization.\(^4\) However, she concludes that her analysis does not account for the numerous verb-second constructions encountered in direct speech:

The statistical analysis revealed significant differences between preposing patterns in direct speech and in narrative. The impression that word order in direct speech is “freer” than in narrative is due to two factors: first, direct speech has a significantly higher incidence of preposing than narrative, and second, direct speech has a higher
proportion of preposed clauses the pragmatic function of which is unclear. 5

Unlike Moshavi’s analysis which does not place any type of strictures on the verbal form or preposed material, the following study focuses specifically on the w'x-qatal form. The study will only examine those forms which occur in direct speech within the book of Genesis, 6 with the hopes of providing more insight into the function of these preposed formations which occur in this genre. The goal and challenge of the present work then is to unite form and function. 7

Before proceeding, however, the subject of Hebrew word order must be addressed. In order to determine whether a clause is syntactically “marked” and pragmatically significant, a generic word order must be established as the syntactical norm. 8 In a recent study Robert D. Holmstedt examines Hebrew word order in the book of Genesis. 9 Holmstedt too was prompted by Moshavi’s work, but the focus of his argument is the defense of his position that biblical Hebrew is a subject-verb (SV) language as opposed to the traditional understanding of verb-subject (VS). Holmstedt rightly points out the significance of the word order debate in dealing with matters of syntax: “Aside from simple accuracy in a description of the language’s syntax, the implications for assessing the pragmatic structure of ‘simple’ SV and VS clauses—and thus being able to interpret such clauses in a contextually

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5 Moshavi, Word Order, 168.
6 77x – Gen 4:6; 14:24; 17:16, 20; 18:12, 13, 20; 20:5 (2x); 21:23, 26 (2x); 22:16; 24:7 (2x), 31, 35, 46, 56; 26:9, 27; 27:36, 37; 28:16; 29:25; 30:6, 29; 31:5, 6, 7 (2x), 16, 27, 28, 29, 30, 38 (2x); 32:11 (2x), 13; 35:12; 37:7 (2x); 38:22, 23; 39:8, 9; 40:10, 15; 41:13, 15, 21; 42:10, 21, 22; 43:14, 22, 23; 44:20 (2x), 28; 45:3, 8, 13, 19; 46:32; 47:1, 5, 6, 9 (2x); 48:6, 11, 22; 49:6, 7, 15 (poetic); 50:20.
7 “Perhaps the reason syntax has been, and continues to be, such a challenge to linguists is that it protrudes most obviously into the semantic dimension (to borrow Longacre’s term, which he uses in a slightly different sense, the ‘soft underbelly of language’) and sits squarely on the hazy border between linguistic form and function. It may, for these reasons, prove to be the watershed in the development of a linguistic theory which will prove able to endure ongoing scrutiny.” Walter R. Bodine, “How Linguists Study Syntax,” in Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew (ed. Walter R. Bodine; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 103.
8 “The word order with a broader contextual distribution is the unmarked or basic order. . . Because the unmarked order is pragmatically acceptable in all contexts, the use of the marked word order is always optional,” Moshavi, Word Order, 8. See also Edwin L. Battistella, The Logic of Markedness (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
sensitive way—is at stake.” Holmstedt’s study carefully and systematically examines the various verb clauses in the book of Genesis. The detailed precision of Holmstedt’s work, along with his salient point concerning the lack of simple verb-first sentences, cannot be overlooked. However, further research needs to be carried out in order to overturn the general consensus that Hebrew is VS language. Therefore, the present study will operate from the assumption that biblical Hebrew as a VS language.

A PRE-VERBAL CONSTITUENTS OF THE W\textsuperscript{X}-QATAL FORM IN DIRECT SPEECH

Table 1 records the various pre-verbal constituents, along with their frequency, that are found with the w\textsuperscript{X}-qatal forms used in direct speech in the book of Genesis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-verbal Constituent</th>
<th># of Occurrences (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Noun/Noun Phrase (without pronouns)\textsuperscript{13}</td>
<td>29x (37.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative particle  (\text{נָלַע})\textsuperscript{14}</td>
<td>19x (24.6%) 6x with pronoun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Pronoun\textsuperscript{15}</td>
<td>16x (20.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particle  (\text{סָה} )\textsuperscript{16}</td>
<td>8x (10.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal Adverb  (\text{תָּמַר} )\textsuperscript{17}</td>
<td>5x (6.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative Pronoun\textsuperscript{18}</td>
<td>4x (5.2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{10} Holmstedt, “Typological Classification,” 27.
\textsuperscript{12} 88 occurrences are listed instead of 80 due to cases of overlap among the constituents within a single verse.
\textsuperscript{14} Gen 21:26 (2x); 22:16; 28:15; 31:7; 31:27; 28, 3 (2x); 38:23; 39:9; 40:15; 41:21; 42:21, 22; 44:28; 45:3; 45:8; 47:9.
\textsuperscript{15} Gen 20:5 (2x); 21:26 (2x); 24:31; 26:27; 28:16; 31:6; 32:13; 38:23; 41:15; 43:14; 45:8; 45:19; 48:22; 50:20.
\textsuperscript{16} Gen 17:16; 20:5; 21:26 (2x); 24:46; 30:6; 37:7; 38:22; 40:15.
\textsuperscript{17} Gen 27:36; 31:16, 30; 32:11; 45:8.
Determining marked syntactic constructions is important for the interpreter because marked constructions “have pragmatic meaning, that is, they encode aspects of meaning which are not semantic but concern the relation of an utterance to its context.” Recognizing “markedness” requires the interpreter to have some understanding of the grammatical and syntactical options maintained by the author at the time of writing. If the “normal” word order for a VS language such as biblical Hebrew is verb-subject, then it naturally follows that any constituent placed in the pre-verbal field should have syntactical significance. That is, the author appears to have made an intentional effort at changing the normal VS structure for some pragmatic reason. Robert Longacre has stated “that a N+qatal clause, like any NV clause in Biblical Hebrew, by its very highlighting of the noun presents an action as a participant-oriented action. The noun is highlighted and the verb is demoted.” Longacre’s observation speaks specifically to preposed nouns, because the non-noun constituents included in Table 1 are necessarily clause initial, and thus have little syntactical value. When preposed, the negative אֵּל, independent pronouns, interrogatives, the focus particle וְ, and other discourse markers (e.g., מִי and פִּיו) all have semantic value but little syntactical significance because they almost always occupy the pre-verbal field.

Table 1: Pre-verbal Constituent Occurrences in Direct Speech in Genesis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituent Type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interrogative particle</td>
<td>3x (3.9%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentative Particle</td>
<td>2x (2.6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protasis אֵּל</td>
<td>1x (1.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B “MARKEDNESS” AND HEBREW VERB FORMS

18 Gen 24:7 (2x); 30:29; 48:6.
19 Gen 4:6; 26:9; 29:25.
20 Gen 37:7; 48:11.
22 Moshavi, Word Order, 1.
23 “A distinction must be made between instances where a particular word order of constituents is obligatory (most due to syntactic considerations) and instances where speakers have a choice in their ordering of constituents.” See Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jackie A. Naudé, and Jan H. Krooze, A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar (vol. 3 of Biblical Languages: Hebrew; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 337.
Wayyiqtol and w‘qatal forms, by their use of the waw-consecutive, must also be clause initial. Scholars have generally accepted the theory that the wayyiqtol form grew out of the Canaanite *yaqtul,26 and consequently functions as the primary vehicle for perfective aspect in sequential clauses and is thus “the backbone of the narrative”27 in biblical Hebrew. The w‘qatal has proved to be more problematic—or at least enigmatic.28 Throughout classical biblical Hebrew, the w‘qatal form nearly always communicates an imperfect aspect (future or modal) following a yiqtol or volative form. However, a question of significance for the present study is whether or not classical biblical Hebrew differentiates between the w‘qataltí (waw-consecutive with an accented ultima) with an imperfective aspect and w‘qatálti (waw-conjunctive with an accented penult) with a perfective aspect, despite the identical consonant and vowel formation?29

Axel van de Sande rightly questions the significance of this delineation according to the para-textual accent. He writes: “…the existence of a form (analogical) weqataltí different from weqatálti or a simple coordinated qatal, is seriously in doubt.”30 Van de Sande argues that whatever emphasis might have been detected by the Masoretes would have been one of “prosody” (i.e. rhythm, stress, or intonation) and that there was no real semantic distinction between the forms until later Jewish grammarians identified it as such.31 Van de Sande’s proposal possesses significant explanatory power with regard to classical biblical Hebrew’s strong aversion for using a w‘qatal form to communicate a perfect aspect.32 Following van de Sande’s position, if there


32 “As a matter of fact, in the classical idiom, the forms w-qatálti and I killed and w-yiqtol and he will kill are generally avoided (apart from the pure juxtaposition, e.g. Jr 22.15 he ate and drank). The reason for this is no doubt as follows: w-qatal
was not a clear grammatical or morphological way to indicate that a qatal form with a conjunction was to be perfective in aspect, did the author of Genesis make an intentional decision when using a w'x-qatal form? Yes, but the decision was between using the w'x-qatal form and the wayyiqtol, not the w'qatalí.

C THE WAYYIQTOL AND WeX-QATAL FORMS

The wayyiqtol form is used frequently in Genesis in direct speech and occurs forty-nine times in the first person alone. Therefore, it is a viable alternative for communicating the perfective aspect within direct speech in classical biblical Hebrew. In a thorough evaluation of the x+verb structure in Genesis, Aaron Hornkohl adopts the continuity/discontinuity model of Randell Buth for explaining the relationship between the wayyiqtol and the w'x-qatal.

Hornkohl offers up the following illustration to present this position:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pragmatic Continuity</th>
<th>Past – Perfect – Realis</th>
<th>Non-Past/Future – Imperfective – Irrealis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic Discontinuity</td>
<td>wayyiqtol</td>
<td>Weqatal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(we)X+qatal</td>
<td>(we)X+yiqtol</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Relationship between Wayyiqtol and the W'x-qatal forms

Moshavi criticizes Buth’s model for maintaining inconsistencies, and it is true that lines between continuity and discontinuity are sometimes blurry. However, this system fits well with the data from Genesis, and coheres with is usually used as an inverted form (namely, w-qatalí and I will kill); since in many cases the stress cannot be shifted, considerable confusion would have arisen if w-qatal could also have been used as a non-inverted form (namely, w-qatalí and I killed).” See Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka, A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew (2nd ed; Rome: Gregorian Biblical Press, 2009), 585. Note that Gen 21:25 (ሃзван) is an exception to this aversion.

33 “The opposition between the historical news with wayyiqtol and the oral report with qatal [in 2 Sam 12:26-27] concerning the same event is striking. As the analysis of the evidence shows, qatal can be [sic] first-place or second-place verb form (i.e. qatal, or x-qatal) with no difference, because in both cases it contrasts narrative wayyiqtol and therefore conveys mainline information.” See Niccacci, “The Biblical Hebrew Verb System,” 175.


35 Moshavi, Word Order, 40.
two of Moshavi’s own proposals for pragmatic functions of the \(w^*x\)-qatal form in direct speech: anteriority and justification.

1 \(W^*x\)-qatal and Anteriority

Almost always translated as the perfect or pluperfect, the \(w^*x\)-qatal form indicates anteriority in nearly all of the preposed nouns examined in this study.\(^{36}\) 30 out of 45 uses of the \(w^*x\)-qatal having a preposed noun phrase indicate a tense shift toward anteriority. Note the following brief examples:

- **“Surely the Lord is in this place, but I did not know!” (Gen 28:16).**
- **“But the God of my father has been with me,” (Gen 31:5).**
- **“. . . and now I have become two camps,” (Gen 32:11).**
- **“Yet you have said. . .” (Gen 32:12b-13a).**
- **“. . . and all that I have done. . .” (Gen 45:13).**

This shift in tense appears to be the basic syntactical function in these forms, and consequently, the idea of temporal succession must be addressed when discussing the syntax of the \(w^*x\)-qatal.\(^{37}\)

Many have recognized the significant role the \(w^*x\)-qatal plays in communicating the pluperfect. Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka state: “Hebrew has no other way of expressing the value of the pluperfect than by avoiding wayyiqtol in this way.”\(^{38}\) However, for the sake of clarity, it should be noted that the wayyiqtol form can be used to communicate the pluperfect at times (e.g., Gen 24:35 below), but primarily in a sequential position and not at the head of clause.

2 \(W^*x\)-qatal and Justification

Moshavi posits that when preposing follows a rhetorical question or a directive (i.e., an assertion indeed of support) in direct speech, that it likely marks “the

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\(^{36}\) Examples of simultaneity include Gen 18:12, 31:38, and 38:23. In each instance the \(w^*x\)-qatal is preceded by a qatal verb.

\(^{37}\) Zevit rightly notes that aspect and tense are not mutually exclusive terms for describing verb system. See The Anterior Construction, 39-48.

\(^{38}\) Joüon and Muraoka, A Grammar, 362.
Justification, then, should be understood as a specific function within the broader category of anteriority. The following examples confirm this proposal:

2a Justification with a Fronted Personal Pronoun

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“Shall I indeed bear a child for I have become old?”
“Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?” (Gen 18:13, NRSV).
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“I do not know who has done this thing, for you have not told me, and I have not heard until this day.”
“I do not know who has done this; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today.” (Gen 21:26, NRSV).
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“Why do you stand outside, for I have cleaned up the house…”
“Why do you stand outside when I have prepared the house…” (Gen 24:31, NRSV).
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Why have you come to me? For you have hated me…”
“Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me…” (Gen 26:27).
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And may he send back your other brother and Benjamin, for as I have been bereaved, I am bereaved.”
“So that he may send back your other brother and Benjamin. As for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved,” (Gen 43:14, NRSV).
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And may he bring you back to the land of your fathers. For I have given you a shoulder/ridge…”
“And [he] will bring you again to the land of your ancestors. I now give to you one portion…” (Gen 48:21-22, NRSV).
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2b Justification with a Fronted Subject

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“Shall I indeed bear a child for I have become old?”
“Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?” (Gen 18:13, NRSV).
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“I do not know who has done this thing, for you have not told me, and I have not heard until this day.”
“I do not know who has done this; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today.” (Gen 21:26, NRSV).
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“And [he] will bring you again to the land of your ancestors. I now give to you one portion…” (Gen 48:21-22, NRSV).
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“I am the servant of Abraham. For YHWH has greatly blessed…”
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40 While supporting the basic feature of justification, the double use of ָּּוּ Berkshire does seem to set this verse apart as a special case.

“I am Abraham’s servant. The LORD has greatly blessed…” (Gen 24:34-35, NRSV).

“Do not delay me, for YHWH has prospered my way…”
“Do not delay, since the LORD has made my journey successful…” (Gen 24:56, NRSV).

“Do not be afraid; your God and the God of your father must have put treasure in your sacks for you…” (Gen 43:23, NRSV).

“We have a mother who is an old man and the child of his old age—the youngest, for his brother has died…” (Gen 44:20, NRSV).

“We have a father, an old man, and a young brother, the child of his old age. His brother is dead…” (Gen 44:20, NRSV).

2c Justification with a Fronted Direct Object

“Behold, I have set him as lord over you, for I have given all of his brothers to him as servants…”
“I have already made him your lord, and I have given him all his brothers as servants…” (Gen 27:37, NRSV).

“And kings shall come forth from your loins. For the land which I gave to Abraham and to Isaac I will give to you.”
“And kings shall spring from you. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you” (Gen 35:11-12, NRSV).

“My master does not worry with me about what is in the house, for all that there is in it he has placed in my hand.”
“My master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand,” (Gen 39:8, NRSV).

In the above examples, the justification always antedates the statement. That is, the speaker always draws from previous knowledge, action, or
information in justifying the statement.\footnote{"Recognizing the dedicated nature of the anterior construction enables the comprehension of compositional subtlety in many biblical passages and engenders appreciation for one of the ways in which the ancient authors solved a problem that hindered them in their representation of reality," Zevit, The Anterior Construction, 16.} It therefore follows, that the function of justification would overlap considerably with anteriority when observing the \textit{w'\text-x-qatal} form in direct speech. While many older grammars have recognized this form as a circumstantial clause, this designation does not accurately communicate the central feature of tense shift in these constructions.\footnote{Describing noun clauses that begin with the \textit{waw} + predicate or \textit{waw} + subject construction, Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar states that these forms are “also to be regarded as circumstantial clauses, in so far as they describe a state which is simultaneous with the principal actions” (italics original), GKC 2nd ed., 489.}

Justification—as a particular form of anteriority—is indeed a demonstrable pragmatic function for the \textit{w'\text-x-qatal} form in direct speech, and that this function needs to be recognized in rendering more accurate translations of the texts. In each of the above examples, the \textit{w'\text-x-qatal} form is preceded by a statement or a question with an underlying statement. The statement is then justified by the information provided in the following clause introduced with the \textit{w'\text-x-qatal}. Justification as a pragmatic function also fits within Hornkohl’s illustration by giving explanation to the proposed pragmatic discontinuity expected with the \textit{w'\text-x-qatal} form. Using the foreground/background model, one might say that the speaker’s statement is the foreground and the justification, introduced with the \textit{w'\text-x-qatal} form is the background.

**D CONCLUSION**

Within direct speech in Genesis, anteriority is the most prominent feature of the \textit{w'\text-x-qatal} form. The discontinuity of the form (often labeled a “disjunctive”) has more to do with a shift in temporal success than with the idea of contrast. This is supported by instances where the \textit{w'\text-x-qatal} form denotes anteriority but within a “consecutive” framework (e.g., Gen 45:13; 46:32; 47:1). Within this larger field of pragmatic function, justification serves a more nuanced use of anteriority within direct speech. Whereas in narrative, it has been argued that the \textit{w'\text-x-qatal} form frequently denotes the idea of parenthesis or resumption\footnote{Tamar Zewi, Parenthesis in Biblical Hebrew (Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics 50; Leiden: Brill, 2007).} in direct speech it nearly always communicates anterior information (background), and at times uses this information as a justification or grounds for a previous assertion (foreground).
After examining the issues of word order and the syntactical opposition between the wayyiqtol and "wx-qatal, this study has sought to explain that two of the primary pragmatic functions of the "wx-qatal form within direct speech in classical biblical Hebrew are anteriority and justification. Both functions cohere with and make sense of the continuity/discontinuity model adopted by Buth and Hornkohl, as well as incorporating the concepts of background/foreground and temporal succession. Moshavi’s proposal for the function of justification, perhaps doubted by some in the field, seems to be truer than she realized. Approximately 33% of the "wx-qatal forms studied with a noun constituent indicate a justification made by the speaker. Recognizing the prominence of the pragmatic functions of justification and anteriority when encountering the "wx-qatal in direct speech will provide Bible interpreters and translators with a clearer understanding of the syntactical dynamics of the passage. How prominent these functions are in direct speech in the rest of the Pentateuch is a question that remains to be answered.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


William R. Osborne, College of the Ozarks, 345 Opportunity Ave., Point Lookout, Missouri, USA. *Email*: wrosborne@cofo.edu