DIGLOSSIA IN ANCIENT HEBREW
AS REVEALED THROUGH COMPOUND VERBS

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There existed in the Hebrew of Greco-Roman times a diglossia which
has generally not been recognized. By far the largest number of texts
from this period are the rabbinic works such as the Mishna, the Tosefta,
and the early Midrashim, which are composed in a Hebrew remarkably dif-
ferent from literary Biblical Hebrew (BH). The language of these texts
is called Mishnaic Hebrew (MH), and whereas formerly most scholars con-
sidered it an artificial, scholarly language (Geiger 1845; Strack and
Siegfried 1884), MH is now universally recognized as the spoken Hebrew
of the time (Segal 1927 and 1936; Chomsky 1964:160-8, 208-11, 303-4;
Rabin 1970:318; Kutscher 1971b:1590).

A smaller number of texts from this period are the Dead Sea Scrolls
(DSS), composed in a Hebrew which is basically the same as BH (Yalon
1967:71; Kutscher 1971a:1584). Thus the Hebrew of Greco-Roman times
existed in basically two forms: a spoken dialect represented by MH and
a written dialect represented by the Hebrew of the DSS. This statement
is not only consonant with linguistic science -- that is, that people
speak and write quite differently (Woolbert 1922; Bloomfield 1933:52,
291-2; Joos 1967; Malmstrom 1977:85-6) -- but also makes sense when we
take note of the two different literatures.

The DSS are true literary achievements. They include thanksgiving
hymns which rival the canonical Psalms, law codes which recall the legal
istic language of portions of the Pentateuch, and apocalypses which be-

token the book of Daniel. The Mishna and related works, on the other
hand, were not even written originally, but rather were collections of
legal sayings and interpretive tales of the Palestinian rabbis. More-
over, when the Mishna etc. were committed to writing, they were recorded
in the spoken dialect so that all, even the uneducated, could understand
their contents.

The same two dialects are synchronically attested several centuries
earlier as well. From the preface of the Greek translation of Ben Sira
(Ecclesiasticus), we can infer that the Hebrew original was composed ca.
180 B.C. Ben Sira's contemporaries, Yose ben Yoezer and Yose ben Yoha-
nan (Herford 1962:25), are quoted in one of the earliest portions of
the entire Mishna, Avot 1:4-5 (and elsewhere occasionally, e.g., Pesa-
ḥim 1:6, Ketubbot 8:11), where not only their speech but also the speech
of their predecessors is unmistakably MH. But the sayings of Ben Sira
are couched in BH (Segal 1972:20). Again, whereas Ben Sira set out to
write a true literary work and thus used BH, the Mishna merely recorded
the sayings of his contemporaries who undoubtedly spoke MH.

It is easily seen that parallel written and spoken dialects of He-
brew coexisted in Greco-Roman times. This same diglossia must also have
existed in Biblical times, as will be demonstrated below. Furthermore,
since the literary works of Biblical and Greco-Roman times show a marked
similarity, there is no reason to believe that the spoken Hebrew of the
two periods was distinctively different. And since MH represents the
spoken Hebrew of Greco-Roman times, anticipations of MH in the Bible
may be used as a guide to the spoken Hebrew of Biblical times.

Anticipations of MH in the Bible are legion. Among the more obvi-
ous ones are the use of the personal pronoun אנו /ʔănû/ "we" in Jr 42:6[1]
instead of the usual אנחנו /ʔănaḥnû/; the use of the demonstrative pro-

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[1]אנו appears in the written consonantal text. The Masoretes in an
attempt to expunge this vulgarism from the text instructed the reader
to vocalize it as אנחנו /ʔănaḥnû/.

noun זו or זה /zô/ or /zôʰ/ "this" (fem. sg.) in II Kg 6:19, Ek 40:45,
Ho 7:16, Ps 132:12, Qo 2:2, 2:24, 5:15, 5:18, 7:23, 9:13 instead of the
usual זאת /zôʔt/; and the use of the relative pronoun שׁ /še/, /ša/, /šā/
"that" or "which" in Gn 6:3, Ju 5:7, 6:17, 7:12, 8:26, II Kg 6:11, Jn
4:10, La 2:15, 4:8, 5:18, I Ch 5:20, 27:27, commonly in Psalms, Canti-
cles, and Qohelet, and in the proper names מתושאל /mətûšāʔēl/ "Methu-
sael" and מישאל /mîšāʔēl/ "Mishael" instead of the usual אשר /ʔăšer/.

All of these forms appear regularly in MH to the exclusion of the
usual BH forms. They and others like them must have been characteris-
tic of the spoken Hebrew of Biblical times. That the BH forms had not
become extinct by Greco-Roman times is evidenced by their attestation
in the DSS (Kuhn 1960:20, 24, 63). How such forms as אנו /ʔănû/, זו or
זה /zô/ or /zôʰ/, and שׁ /še/, /ša/, or /šā/, crept into the Biblical
text was explained by G. R. Driver: "Colloquial expressions are com-
mon in all spoken languages and indeed often make their way into liter-
ature; and the Old Testament is no exception to the rule..." (Driver
1970:232).

The above examples are all very basic items in Hebrew morphology;
indeed they are all pronouns. The diglossia of ancient (i.e.,
and Greco-Roman) Hebrew can also be demonstrated through more complex
forms. One such construction is the compound verb.

Every grammar of BH recognizes the fact that the classical Hebrew
verbal system possessed the perfect and the imperfect, the perfect with
waw consecutive and the imperfect with *waw* consecutive, and the parti-
ciple. (Forms such as the imperative, the jussive, the cohortative,
the construct infinitive, and the absolute infinitive are also recog-
nized but generally they fall outside the scope of this study.)

Grammars of MH are quick to point out that MH lost the perfect
with *waw* consecutive and the imperfect with *waw* consecutive (as well as
the jussive, the cohortative, and the absolute infinitive), but that it
developed a compound verb consisting of the finite part of the verb היה
/hyh/ "to be" (whether perfect, imperfect, or imperative) plus the par-
ticiple (either active or passive) (Segal 1927:72-3, 150, 156-7; Segal

1936:110-1, 124-5, 130-1; Kutscher 1971b:1600).

What is not commonly recognized is that BH too used compound verbs, to wit, the perfect with *waw* consecutive and the imperfect with *waw* consecutive, or more simply the consecutive tenses. In the former, the finite verb is preceded by the existential particle (or copula) *wa-*, and in the latter, the finite verb is preceded by the existential particle (or copula) *wa-* plus an assimilated consonant (probably *-n-*).

This *wa-* is to be identified with Egyptian 𓇋𓅱 *iw* (Young 1953; Gordon 1957:275-6; Gordon 1965:110-1), "an old verb...with the meaning of the copula ('is', 'are', etc.)" (Gardiner 1957:35). This 𓇋𓅱 *iw* is the most common element in Egyptian in the formation of compound verbs, just as *wa-* is the most common element in Hebrew in the formation of compound verbs.[2] The assimilated consonant, which converts the normally future imperfect into a past, is perhaps' to be identified with the Egyptian 𓈖 *n*, the indicator of the past tense (Young 1953: 252; Gordon 1957:276).[3]

The analogies between the Hebrew consecutive tenses and the Egyptian evidence go beyond the realms of phonetics and morphology. Syntax too can enter into our discussion. Egyptian 𓇋𓅱 *iw* often is combined with the perfective[4] 𓄿𓅓 *sdm-f* to form the 𓇋𓅱𓄿𓅓

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[2]This identification may also be recognized in another instance. Both Hebrew *wa-* and Egyptian 𓇋𓅱 *iw* may be used to introduce circumstantial clauses. In the case of Hebrew, it is the regular way to introduce circumstantial clauses. In the case of Egyptian, it is used when the subject is a suffix-pronoun (Gardiner 1957:247; Thacker 1963: 168), though in Coptic, circumstantial clauses are regularly introduced by Є ĕ (derived from Egyptian 𓇋𓅱 *iw*) (Till 1970:167-8). Note the similarity between Hebrew והוא ישב /wəhû? yôšēb/ "as he was sitting" in Gn 18:1 and Egyptian 𓇋𓅱𓆑 *iw-f ḥr mdt* "as he was speaking" in Sinube B:2.

[3]The assimilated consonant of imperfect with *waw* consecutive may also be identified with Ugaritic *-n* (Gordon 1965:110-1).

[4]Egyptology has adopted the terms "perfective" and "imperfective" while Semitics uses the terms "perfect" and "imperfect". Generally speaking, Egyptian perfective and Semitic (especially West Semitic) perfect correspond, and Egyptian imperfective and Semitic (especially West Semitic) imperfect correspond (Thacker 1963:158).

iw sd̲m-f construction. Most interesting is the fact that the addition of the ⟨𓇋𓅱⟩ *iw* converts the perfective ⟨𓂋𓈖𓏤⟩ *sd̲m-f* used to express past events (Gardiner 1957:287) into a verb which is imperfective in meaning (Gardiner 1957:385). In Hebrew, the addition of *wa-* to a perfect verb does the exact same thing! It causes a verb which normally expresses past tense to express the future tense.

The foregoing may be schematized as follows:

	FORM	TENSE
Hebrew perfect	קָטַל /qāṭal/	past
Egyptian perfective	*sd̲m-f*	past
Hebrew perfect with prefixed *wa-*	וְקָטַל /wəqāṭal/	future
Egyptian perfective with prefixed *iw*	*iw sd̲m-f*	future

The other common compound verb in Egyptian, the ⟨𓇋𓅱𓂋𓈖𓏤⟩ *iw sd̲m-n-f* form, is the regular past tense form (Gardiner 1957:56). This construction corresponds exactly to the Hebrew imperfect with *waw* consecutive (and assimilated consonant). The phonetic and morphological parallels are easily seen in the following parsing of the two forms:

HEBREW	EGYPTIAN[5]	PART OF SPEECH
ו /wa/	*iw*	existential particle (or copula)

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[5]Whereas the Hebrew compound verb is parsed in the order in which the morphemes appear, it is important to note that the Egyptian compound verb is not, viz., ⟨𓇋𓅱𓂋𓈖𓏤⟩ *iw sd̲m-n-f* not *$*iw$-n-f-sd̲m*. The past indicator ⟨𓈖⟩ *n* does not occur after ⟨𓇋𓅱⟩ *iw* in Egyptian in the sense that *$*wan$-* occurs in Hebrew (or *wn* in Ugaritic).

י /yy/ < *ny   〰 _n-f_   past tense indicator
                                   and personal pronoun

קטל /qṭl/   _sḏm_   verb stem

More important is the use of these two analogous compound verbs.
The Egyptian is used most often at the beginning of narrative sentences
and moreover "gives a certain smoothness and elegance to recitals of
past events" (Gardiner 1957:56). The same holds true for the Hebrew
form. The imperfect with _waw_ consecutive can only be used at the head
of a sentence (or clause), and it too gives a certain elegance to story
telling. Any speaker of Hebrew will readily realize the difference be-
tween ויאמר האיש /wayyômer hā?îš/ and אמר האיש /?āmar hā?îš/ or האיש אמר
/hā?îš ?āmar/. All three mean exactly the same: "the man said". The
only difference is that the first one is reserved for literary style,
and the latter two are more colloquial.

The same holds for the perfect with _waw_ consecutive. It too can
only appear at the beginning of a sentence (or clause) and it also is
reserved for the written dialect. There is little question then that
the Hebrew consecutive tenses are to be treated as compound verbs.
Phonetically, morphologically, syntactically, and stylistically, they
are to be identified with the Egyptian compound verbs
iw sḏm-f and   _iw sḏm-n-f_.
This identification has generally gone unnoticed in Egypto-Semitic
studies. As a case in point, we may cite T. W. Thacker's otherwise stim-
ulating article on "Compound Tenses Containing the Verb 'Be' in Semitic
and Egyptian". After listing all the various Semitic compound verbs
formed by the verb "to be" plus the finite part of another verb, Thacker
(1963:164) noted:

> ...it is interesting to note that Hebrew alone has no compound
> verb-form consisting of the verb "be" with the perfect or imper-
> fect of another verb. Why this should be is difficult to see,
> unless the existence of the common idioms ויהי "and it came to
> pass" and והיה "and it shall come to pass" hindered such a devel-
> opment.

What Thacker failed to realize is that the same verbs which he thought
prevented the development of such compound verbs in Hebrew are in actu-
ality the very verbs he thought were lacking. Accordingly, Hebrew, like
all the other Semitic languages listed by Thacker, did possess compound
verbs consisting of the copula and the finite part of another verb,
namely, the perfect with *waw* consecutive and the imperfect with *waw*
consecutive.

To back up my suggestion that the Hebrew consecutive tenses were
used solely for the written dialect,[6] we may again turn to the diglossia
of Greco-Roman times. In the spoken dialect of the time as represented
by MH, these forms are completely absent (Segal 1927:72 and 1936:124).
In the written dialect of the time as represented by the Hebrew of the
DSS and of certain liturgical pieces, these forms are used (Segal 1927:
72 and 1936:124; Kutscher 1971a:1587). The same must have been true
during the Biblical period. The written dialect used the consecutive
tenses, viz., their regular appearance in BH. The spoken dialect doubt-
less did not.

What then of the aforementioned compound verbs used in MH? These
verbs, which consist of the verb היה /hyh/ "to be" and the participle,
were used by spoken Hebrew in antiquity. The best evidence for this
comes again from the Greco-Roman period. These forms, commonly called
progressive tenses because they generally are used "to indicate repeated,
usual, concurrent, etc., action" (Kutscher 1971b:1600), are common in
MH but practically absent from DSS Hebrew (Kuhn 1960:55, 57-9).[7]

That the progressive tenses were also current in the spoken Hebrew

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[6]For the variant views of S. R. Driver, Jacob Milgrom, and Joshua
Blau (and my arguments against their opinions), see below.
[7]Progressive pasts are not attested. Except for the cliché which
appears in Ml 8:11, 9:1, 9:7, 16:9, 17:15, progressive futures appear
five times, in Se 1:18, Ml 2:6-7, 7:12, 8:6, and Dm 4:12. Progressive
imperatives are also wanting. These figures do not include the recent-
ly published Temple Scroll which reportedly contains several more exam-
ples of the progressive tenses (Milgrom 1978:106). (I am unable to cite
these examples by verse as a copy of the *editio princeps* [Yadin 1977]
has not yet reached me.)

of Biblical times is evidenced by their occasional attestation in BH.
The present author has collected 74 examples of progressive tenses in
BH.[8] The following are a few examples of the progressive past:

Gn 39:22	הוא היה עשה	
	/hûʔ hāyā^h ʕôśe^h/	
	"he was doing"	
Ex. 3:1	משה היה רעה	
	/môše^h hāyā^h rôʕe^h/	
	"Moses was shepherding"	
I Sm 2:11	והנער היה משרת	
	/wəhannaʕar hāyā^h məšārēt/	
	"and the lad was ministering"	

The following is an example of the progressive future in BH:

Ne 13:22	יהיו מטהרים	
	/yihyû miṭṭaharîm/	
	"they will be purifying themselves"	

The following is an example of the progressive imperative in BH:

Ps 30:11	היה עזר לי	
	/hĕyē^h ʕôzēr lî/	
	"be helping me"	

For those who wish to check the other examples of progressive tenses in

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[8]While 74 examples of progressive tenses in BH may seem a large
amount, it cannot be considered evidence for the progressive tenses
having been characteristic of written Hebrew. Two reasons militate
against this: (1) these 74 verbs represent less than 1% of the verbs
in BH, and (2) the data from the Greco-Roman period demonstrate that
the progressive tenses were used in speech and not in writing.

BH, cf. Gn 37:2, 42:11, 42:31, Lv 13:45 (twice), Nu 14:33, Dt 9:7, 9:22,
9:24, 31:27, Js 5:5, Ju 1:7, 11:10, I Sm 17:34, II Sm 3:6, 6:17, 7:16,
10:5, I Kg 2:45, 5:1, 10:3, 12:6, 18:3, 22:35, II Kg 4:1, 6:8, 9:14,
17:33 (twice), 17:41, 18:4, Is 2:2, 59:2, Jr 14:16, 26:18, 26:20, 32:30,
Ek 34:2, 43:6, 46:1, Zc 3:3, 13:1, Ps 10:14, 30:8, 113:2, 122:2, Jb 1:
14, 1:21, La 1:1, 1:16, Dn 8:5, 8:7, 10:2, 10:9, Ne 3:26, 5:18, 6:14,
6:19 (twice), 13:5, 13:26, I Ch 17:14, 19:5, II Ch 10:6, 18:34, 22:4,
Si 5:13, 18:32, and line 3 of the Yavneh Yam inscription (Gibson 1971:
28). As to how these colloquialisms got into the Biblical text, we may
again refer to G. R. Driver's (1970:232) quote cited above: "Colloquial
expressions are common in all spoken languages and indeed often make
their way into literature; and the Old Testament is no exception to the
rule..."

The evidence suggests, nay demands, that ancient Hebrew developed
two types of compound verbs. The written Hebrew of both Biblical and
Greco-Roman times used compound verbs composed of the existential par-
ticle (or copula) *wa-* and the perfect or imperfect (with assimilated
-n-). The spoken Hebrew of both Biblical and Greco-Roman times used
compound verbs composed of the inflected copula היה /hyh/ and the par-
ticiple.[9]

Most Hebrew grammarians have been oblivious to this dichotomy.
Whereas I treat these compound verb types synchronically, most authors
have treated them diachronically. S. R. Driver (1969:170), for example,

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[9]A third type of compound verb, which I call "consecutive progres-
sives", also existed in ancient Hebrew. These verbs are actually triple
compound verbs composed of (1) the existential particle (or copula) *wa-*
or *wa-* plus assimilated *-n-*; (2) the finite part of the verb היה /hyh/
"to be"; and (3) the participle. Examples of consecutive progressives
are ויהי בנה /wayhî bône^h/ "and he built" in Gn 4:17, והיית ממשש /wəhâ-
yîtā məmaššēš/ "and you will grope" in Dt 28:29, and ואהי צם /wāʔĕhî ṣâm/
"and I fasted" in Ne 1:4. Although many scholars (Bergsträsser 1962:73-
4; S. R. Driver 1969:170-1; Segal 1936:131; Thacker 1963:161) lump the
consecutive progressives and the simple progressives together, they
should be distinguished. The former, like all consecutive tenses, are
wanting in MH and thus are to be considered characteristic only of the
written dialect.

considered the progressive tenses a late development in Hebrew, though
he did recognize the fact that they are used in the early Biblical books.
He wrote:

> But altogether the more *frequent* use of the combination is charac-
> teristic of the later writers -- in the decadence of a language,
> the older forms are felt to be insufficient, and a craving for
> greater distinctness manifests itself: the rarer, however, its
> occurrence in the earlier books, the more carefully it deserves
> notice.

The above enumeration of Biblical verses, however, shows that the
progressive tenses are not much rarer in the early books. Of the 74
examples cited, 21 (or 28%) are from the time of David or earlier (about
34% of the Bible).[10] These figures do not suggest the chronological
development which Driver seeks to impart. In fact, these figures show
that progressives are only somewhat less frequent in the earlier books
of the Bible.

Furthermore, for Driver to be correct in viewing the progressive
tenses as a chronological development, the literary works of the Greco-
Roman period would have to exhibit as regular a use of the progressives
as does the Mishna. We have already seen that such is not the case.
To the contrary, progressive tenses are rare in the Hebrew of the DSS
(cf. above, fn. 7). Driver's statement, while it may have looked good
in 1892 (55 years before the discovery of Qumran), must be discarded in
favor of the explanation offered here.

Whereas Driver is excused for his never having reaped the benefit
of the DSS, contemporary scholars are not. In discussing the recently
published Temple Scroll (the last of the major Qumran documents to be

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[10]I recognize the pitfalls in using such statistics. The debated
dating of virtually every book in the canon makes this arithmetic almost
meaningless. On the other hand, no one can deny the general statement
presented here: progressive tenses are not much rarer in the earlier
portions of the Bible.

published), Jacob Milgrom (1978:106) noted:

> The language follows biblical style, but slips of contemporary
> syntax and idiom betray the scribe. The following examples will
> suffice: compound verbs with the auxiliary "to be"...

Milgrom implied that such compound verbs are contemporary only with the
Qumran scribe and not with the Biblical period. Would he likewise ex-
plain the 74 examples of progressive tenses found in BH? This argument
may hold for the 71 progressives in the Bible canon and for the two ex-
amples in Ben Sira, but it cannot suffice for the one example which oc-
curs in the Yavneh Yam inscription of the 7th Century B.C. (Gibson 1971:
27)!

The opposite approach was chosen by Joshua Blau. Blau (1971:26)
concluded that since the standard BH verbal system employs the consecu-
tive tenses ויקטל /wayyiqṭōl/ and וקטל /wəqāṭal/, we can "assume a sim-
ilar system in the spoken language". In light of all the evidence pre-
sented above, this cannot be the case. From the diglossia of Hebrew in
Greco-Roman times -- where consecutive tenses are wanting in the spoken
dialect (MH) but are used in the written dialect (DSS Hebrew) -- we can
infer the same dichotomy in the Hebrew of Biblical times. Moreover,
the comparative Semitic evidence, namely the Egyptian,[11] suggests that
the consecutive tenses were employed to create an elegant literary
style.

Whereas Milgrom's analysis neglected the totality of the Biblical
evidence, Blau's analysis neglected the Mishnaic and DSS evidence. At-
tention to all of the available evidence reveals the following conclu-
sion: *compound verbs of the progressive type were used by spoken He-
brew throughout antiquity and compound verbs of the consecutive type
were used by written Hebrew throughout antiquity.*

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[11]For the propriety of calling Egyptian a Semitic language, see
the evidence collected by Otto Rössler in his masterly article entitled
"Das Ägyptische als semitische Sprache" (Rössler 1971).

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