The Historical Depth of the Tiberian Reading Tradition of Biblical Hebrew

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Cover image: T-S AS 8.129. A leaf from a Cairo Geniza biblical codex containing Gen. 30.17–20 and showcasing Moshe Moḥe's non-standard Tiberian pointing of the standard Tiberian pronunciation of *Issachar* (see within, ch. 4), courtesy of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

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16. *WAYYIQṬOL*

One of the defining characteristics of Masoretic BH is the *way-yiqṭol* verbal form. Especially common in narrative, it typically encodes perfective past semantics. The Tiberian biblical tradition distinguishes it from the consonantally homographic volitive *we-yiqṭol* by means of gemination of the verbal preformative (or a compensatory vowel shift in the 1CS form).[1] However, converging lines of evidence relevant to the development of *wayyiqṭol* have recently led to the hypothesis that Iron Age *waw-yiqṭol* was a polysemous syntagm and that its differentiation into mainly preterite *wayyiqṭol* and chiefly jussive/purpose *we-yiqṭol* was secondary and relatively late. If so, Masoretic *wayyiqṭol* may well represent an extremely pervasive instance of dissonance between the consonantal tradition of early biblical material and the recitation tradition embodied in the accompanying vocalisation.

The present chapter deals with *wayyiqṭol* in general, especially evidence for (a) the early underdifferentiation of narrative (preterite) and modal *waw-yiqṭol*, (b) the late secondary differentiation into geminated *wayyiqṭol* and non-geminated *we-yiqṭol*, and (c) the historical depth of the semantic distinction between the two. In order to lay the groundwork for reviewing a recent

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[1] Notwithstanding the modern convention of transcribing *shewa* as *e/ə*, in the Tiberian pronunciation the chief distinction between *wayyiqṭol* and *we-yiqṭol* was one of gemination, not vowel quality. This is clear from evidence showing that the default realisation of *shewa* in Tiberian BH was as short *a*, identical to the realisation of *pataḥ* (Kantor 2020, 59, 66–91; Khan 2020, I:305; 2021, 332).

proposal by Khan (2021), the discussion first centres on three strands of evidence on which Khan builds, namely: secondary developments in proto-Masoretic Hebrew, transcriptional evidence for the phonetic realisation of preterite and modal *waw-yiqṭol* forms in antiquity, and non-preterite *wayyiqṭol* semantics.

The subsequent chapter (ch. 17) focuses specifically on 1st-person forms. Striking diachronic patterns involving 1st-person *wayyiqṭol* morphological alternatives—manifest in both the consonantal and vocalisation traditions—not only come as arguable confirmation of the general correctness of (a), (b), and (c) above, but allow for greater precision in the relative periodisation of the Masoretic written and reading traditions with respect to the *wayyiqṭol* form.

1.0. Supporting Evidence

The following subsections summarise research into three lines of evidence fundamental to the view that the Iron Age situation of semantically undifferentiated *waw-yiqṭol* gave way in the Second Temple Period to one in which perfective past *wayyiqṭol* and volitive/purpose *we-yiqṭol* were secondarily differentiated.[2]

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[2] Limitations of space preclude exhaustiveness in citation of the voluminous bibliography related to *wayyiqṭol*. Smith (1991) remains an oft-cited resource, with more recent references in Bloch (2007); Robar (2013; 2015, 78–112; 2021); Gzella (2018); Kantor (2020); and Khan (2021).

1.1. Semantic Gemination, i.e., Semantic *Dagesh*

'Semantic *dagesh*' refers to secondary gemination in one of the ancient Hebrew recitation traditions for purposes of disambiguating perceived homophones, i.e., to divide a word considered polysemous into morphologically distinct lexemes. Khan (2018, 341–47; 2020, I:524–30) collects numerous examples of 'semantic *dagesh'* from biblical (Tiberian, Babylonian, Samaritan) and non-biblical (rabbinic) traditions. Examples from Tiberian Hebrew include אֱבִיר 'powerful (divine)' versus אַבִּיר 'powerful (human)', עֲצָבִים 'toils' versus עֲצַבִּים 'idols', and, probably, הִרְעִים 'make thunder (divine)' versus הִרְעִים 'vex, irritate (human)'. "The gemination in these pairs of forms most likely originates in existing variant morphological patterns that have been exploited to avoid homophony" (Khan 2020, I:525). While his 2021 article represents Khan's first attempt at a comprehensive account of *wayyiqṭol*'s development incorporating the notion of semantic gemination, he first raised the possibility in 1991 (Khan 1991, 241; 2013, 43; 2021, 330; Kantor 2020, I:104, fn. 23).

1.2. Transcriptional Evidence

In a detailed survey of Greek and Latin transcriptional evidence relevant to the development of *wayyiqṭol*, Kantor adduces compelling evidence of historical evolution in the form's phonetic realisation. In the late Second Temple Period, writes Kantor (2020, 99–100),

> The conjunction *waw* was ***usually pronounced identically*** before a preterite *yiqṭol* and non-preterite *yiqṭol* form, namely, with no full vowel or following gemination. Nev-

ertheless, the conjunction *waw* was also ***frequently pro-
nounced distinctly*** before a preterite *yiqṭol* form, being
vocalised with a full vowel and (probably) gemination….

Subsequently, in the early Byzantine Period, "The conjunction
waw was ***always pronounced distinctly*** before a preterite *yiqṭol*
form (as opposed to before a non-preterite *yiqṭol*), being vocalised
with a full vowel and (probably) gemination…." Extrapolating
back from the diachronic trajectory, Kantor argues that in Iron
Age BH "the conjunction *waw* was ***pronounced identically*** before
a preterite *yiqṭol* and non-preterite *yiqṭol* form, probably with the
original etymological */a/ vowel," meaning "that up to some
point in the Second Temple Period, *yiqṭol* in the sequence **w-
yiqṭol* was a polysemous form, indicating either past or non-past
(usually jussive) semantics according to context."

Significantly, Kantor (2020, 104–5) follows Khan (1991,
241; 2013, 43) in positing secondary semantic disambiguation of
previously undifferentiated *waw-yiqṭol* into preterite *wayyiqṭol*
and non-preterite *we-yiqṭol* as the most plausible explanation for
gemination in Masoretic *wayyiqṭol* (see above, §1.1).

Admittedly, one cannot totally exclude the possibility that
the Tiberian reading tradition reflects an Iron Age realisation that
already distinguished past *waw-yiqṭol* (> *wayyiqṭol*) from non-
past *waw-yiqṭol* (> *we-yiqṭol*) by gemination. But several lines of
argumentation combine to suggest otherwise: (a) the absence of
any such distinction in the Samaritan reading tradition,[3] (b) the

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[3] For an alternative means of distinguishing preterite *waw-yiqṭol* in the
Samaritan reading tradition, i.e., the replacement of *waw-yiqṭol* with

partial but increasing use of the distinction in the period of the Greek and Latin transcriptions, (c) a degree of disagreement between the Tiberian and Babylonian vocalisation traditions, and (d) the broad reality in the Masoretic biblical tradition of multiple cases of dissonance involving early consonantal orthography vocalised according to a characteristically later reading tradition. Such considerations are arguable evidence that the disambiguation in question took place after the Samaritan and Jewish traditions had diverged, was in the process of taking hold at the time the transcriptions were made, and had become solidly established before the division of the Masoretic Tiberian, Babylonian, and Palestinian branches.

1.3. Non-preterite *Wayyiqṭol*

Robar (2013; 2015, 78–112) builds a multi-pronged argument against *wayyiqṭol*'s consensus preterite classification. She sees *wayyiqṭol* as a narrative present of unspecified time reference that takes its TAM semantics from the context. While Khan's (2021) theory differs from Robar's at important points, he cites her work favourably and agrees that certain *wayyiqṭol* semantic values are incompatible with core preterite semantics. He proposes a broader realis value that allows for greater semantic flexibility, which, crucially, he explains as a result of the form's fused preterite-modal parentage.

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waw-qaṭal in the case of I-*y qal* verbs, see Khan (2021, 331). See also below, ch. 18, esp. §1.3.

2.0. The Development of *Wayyiqṭol*

Synthesising the aforementioned studies and additional research, Khan's (2021, 319–40) discussion appears in a paradigm-shifting study that employs Construction Grammar to explain the development of *wayyiqṭol* by means of the recognised mechanisms of reanalysis and schematisation. Khan seeks to improve upon existing accounts of *wayyiqṭol*'s development in line with its semantic range, pragmatics, and status as the sole standard remnant of archaic preterite short *yiqṭol* (< PS *yaqtul*).

Khan argues that preterite *yiqṭol*'s preservation almost exclusively after *waw* is due to syntactic and semantic similarity to a "discourse dependent" (Khan 2021, 320ff.) modal short *yiqṭol* in a (normally) purpose/result *waw-yiqṭol* construction, which made preterite *waw-yiqṭol* ripe for reanalysis. In this way, the short *yiqṭol*'s originally distinct preterite and modal purpose/result semantics became fused in a semantically undifferentiated *waw-yiqṭol* construction.[4] The core semantics of the resulting *waw-yiqṭol* had effectively been reduced to a "common denominator" of temporal posteriority relative to preceding context (Khan 2021, 326), which was further schematised to one of broader "topical cognitive relevance" (Khan 2021, 340).

Later, in some Second Temple traditions, the realis (preterite) and irrealis (volitive, often purpose/result) senses of *waw-yiqṭol* were disambiguated via gemination of the preforma-tive in

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[4] Khan (2021, 319, fn. 13) explicitly sidesteps the question of whether the ancient Hebrew preterite and volitional short *yiqṭol* values are themselves reflexes of a single (Huehnergard 1988) or distinct PS *yaqtul* forms (Hetzron 1969; Rainey 1986).

realis (mostly preterite) *waw-yiqṭol*, resulting in a new distinction between realis (mainly preterite) *wayyiqṭol* and irrealis (volitional, often purpose/result) *we-yiqṭol*. Khan sees the frequent LBH conflation of 1st-person realis and irrealis *waw-yiqṭol* strings, i.e., both represented by ואקטלה/ונקטלה, along with sporadic CBH conflation, as confirmation that the relevant realis–irrealis fusion "had already taken place in CBH" (Khan 2021, 321–22, 327; for detailed discussion of 1st-person forms, see ch. 17, below).

Khan thus conceives of a convergence of the *wayyiqṭol* and directive-volitive paradigms earlier and more pervasive than what is usually envisioned. It was not merely due to late analogy with cohortative אקטלה that classical ואקטל shifted to ואקטלה; rather, the antecedents of *wayyiqṭol* וְאֶקְטְלָה and cohortative וְאֶקְטְלָה, though originally conveying distinct preterite and modal senses, respectively, fused in pre-Tiberian CBH in a semantically undifferentiated *waw-yiqṭol* structure broadly associated with temporal consecution—only to be disambiguated anew via Second Temple gemination of realis (mostly preterite) *waw-yiqṭol* > *wayyiqṭol*.

Beyond elegantly explaining the nearly exclusive clause-initial preservation of preterite *yiqṭol* after *waw*, Khan's proposed Iron Age preterite-volitive/purpose *waw-yiqṭol* fusion helps to illuminate *wayyiqṭol*'s semantic range: by acknowledging its mixed preterite-modal parentage, the form is revealed to have genetics consistent with non-past and/or non-perfective semantics, such meanings reflecting the archaic tenseless, aspect-free character of *wayyiqṭol*'s volitive/purpose *waw-yiqṭol* ancestor. The earlier preterite and volitive semantics, however, gave way in pre-Tiberian BH to a broader sense of temporal consecution and discourse de-

pendency. According to this analysis, the old preterite and non-preterite values did not persist, but had to be inferred from context.

3.0. Pre-Tiberian *Waw-Yiqṭol*

There remains the not trivial matter of how the pre-Tiberian BH verb system 'worked' given a semantically undifferentiated *waw-yiqṭol* form, i.e., whether and how users disambiguated preterite and volitive/purpose senses of a *waw-yiqṭol* emptied of all but the barest of semantic values (temporal posteriority > discourse dependency).

The first thing to acknowledge is the "pathway of purpose > result clause > discourse dependent" (Khan 2021, 324). Next, Khan (2021, 326) observes an important correlation: "In the attested corpus of Biblical Hebrew… purpose and result clauses with jussives have future main clauses, whereas past *wayyiqṭol* is generally preceded by a past clause." In other words, preceding context must commonly have sufficed to disambiguate the past versus volitive/purpose/result semantics of *waw-yiqṭol* forms. However, Khan (2021, 328) also notes the ambiguity of a *way-yiqṭol* given to result interpretation, e.g.,

(1)   ...לְמָה אָמַרְתָּ אֲחֹתִי הִוא וָאֶקַּח אֹתָהּ לִי לְאִשָּׁה

'Why did you say "She is my sister," **so that I took** her for my wife?...' (Gen. 12.19)

Despite following preterite אָמַרְתָּ 'you (MS) said', interpretation of וָאֶקַּח 'so that I took' as heading a pseudo-subordinate result clause is contextually defensible. Indeed, the bare semantic value of temporal consecution combined with the universally attested

grammaticalisation pathway of purpose > result arguably make
a dependent reading more attractive than one of merely sequen-
tial preterites—though both are stops along the same trajectory,
i.e., it is a series of straightforward cognitive steps from 'he went
to the store *that he might buy* cereal' through 'he went… *with the
result that he bought* cereal' to 'he went… *and he bought* cereal'.
The question then arises as to why in this (or any) cases a bare
ויקטל should have been interpreted one way or the other, i.e., as
irrealis purpose/result *we-yiqṭol* וְאֶקַּח or as realis preterite *way-
yiqṭol* וָאֶקַּח. In this case, the preceding perfective past *qaṭal* seems
to have influenced the realisation of the following *waw-yiqṭol* as
a realis preterite form notwithstanding the appropriateness in
context of a volitive-result reading. It is also possible that the
wayyiqṭol realisation was influenced by the appearance of short
(ואקח), rather than lengthened (ואקחה) 1st-person morphology. In
the case of 1st-person forms in the Hebrew of the Masoretic To-
rah, only four *wayyiqṭol* forms have lengthened pseudo-cohorta-
tive morphology (Gen. 24.48; Deut. 1.16, 18); likewise, in the
same corpus, just two *we-yiqṭol* forms eligible for cohortative
marking lack the characteristic suffixed *heh* (Exod. 24.7; Deut.
10.2). The mismatch between the Tiberian realis interpretation
and the probable volitional-purpose pre-Tiberian sense suggests
that the synchronic semantic range of Tiberian *wayyiqṭol* must
extend beyond that of consecutive perfective past eventualities,
though by dint of the regularity of such a semantic value, it can
certainly be considered synchronically prototypical.

Notwithstanding the import of the preceding example, it
would be misleading to say that the Tiberian realisation of *waw-*

yiqṭol forms mechanically follows the TAM of the foregoing ver-bal form. Consider example (2), in which a future-oriented pur-pose *we-yiqṭol* follows perfective past forms:

(2)   קָרָ֤אתִי לַֽמְאַהֲבַי֙ הֵ֣מָּה רִמּ֔וּנִי כֹּהֲנַ֥י וּזְקֵנַ֖י בָּעִ֣יר גָּוָ֑עוּ כִּֽי־בִקְשׁ֥וּ אֹ֙כֶל֙ לָ֔מוֹ
וְיָשִׁ֖יבוּ אֶת־נַפְשָֽׁם׃ ס

'I called for my lovers, but they deceived me: my priests and my elders perished in the city, while they sought for themselves food **that they might revive** their souls.' (Lam. 1.19)

Here, though the broader context shows that וְיָשִׁ֖יבוּ refers to an unrealised purpose rather than a realised achievement, the im-mediately preceding verbs all reference perfective past eventual-ities. Again, given the notional proximity of purpose, result, and simple sequential readings, it is easy to imagine the form וישיבו being realised as *wayyiqṭol* וַיָּשִׁ֖יבוּ 'and they revived'. This, how-ever, would have contradicted the force of the indictment, since the search for revival was unsuccessful. To summarise: a major factor in inferring a pre-Tiberian *waw-yiqṭol*'s TAM reference was the narrow context of TAM values in the closely preceding clause(s). Yet, examples like (2) (cf. also Lev. 9.6 (?); Num. 23.9; 1 Sam. 12.3; 1 Kgs 13.33 (?); 2 Kgs 19.25; see JM, §116e; Joosten 2012, 154–55) demonstrate that the tradition was also sensitive to the text's internal logic.

4.0. *Wayyiqṭol*'s Secondary Status and Historical Depth

The lack of a geminated *wayyiqṭol* in the Samaritan reading tra-dition and the only partial evidence for gemination in the Greek

and Latin transcriptional material reflect a Second Temple lin-
guistic milieu in which disambiguation of preterite and modal
waw-yiqṭol via gemination in the former had not yet become en-
trenched. If so, then Masoretic *wayyiqṭol* conceivably represents
a secondary and relatively late development in line with the read-
ing tradition's known adoption of certain linguistic features espe-
cially characteristic of Second Temple Hebrew.

However, the innovation of 'semantic *dagesh*' also tallies
with what Khan (2021, 330–31) describes as "a general Second
Temple development in the proto-Masoretic reading tradition in-
volving the introduction of strategies to increase care in pronun-
ciation and clarity of interpretation" (see also Khan 2020, I:73–
85). Despite the secondary and late character of the Masoretic
differentiation of *wayyiqṭol* and *we-yiqṭol*, there is in general no
reason to doubt the historical depth of the interpretive tradition
that the distinction reflects. In other words, while the distinction
in phonetic realisation between preterite and modal *waw-yiqṭol*
forms appears to be a relatively late proto-Masoretic innovation,
it bears witness to earlier consciousness of *waw-yiqṭol* polysemy
as well as, presumably, an incipient interpretive tradition (or tra-
ditions) on the basis of which gemination was added to forms
construed as realis. While in most cases of preterite and purpose
waw-yiqṭol there would have been no danger of misunderstand-
ing, instances such (1) and (2) above are exceptions where, for
purposes of interpretation, morphological disambiguation repre-
sentative of semantic distinction proves semantically determina-
tive. Whatever the antiquity of the phonological disambiguation,
it seems clear that it reflects a gradually increasing discomfort

with the perceived semantic ambiguity between preterite *waw-yiqṭol* and modal *waw-yiqṭol* that eventually developed into the fully crystalised Tiberian tradition of semantic gemination to distinguish *wayyiqṭol* from *we-yiqṭol*. The phonological distinction goes back to the period of the transcriptions, at the latest. The discomfort with underdifferentiation between preterite and modal forms may have begun earlier. Certainly, the early and frequent morphological distinction between 1st-person preterite *wayyiqṭol* forms and cohortative *we-yiqṭol* forms (see below, ch. 17) suggests recognition of a semantic distinction within CBH.