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THE SYNTAX OF THE SENTENCE IN HEBREW*

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HEBREW syntax may not be a very exciting subject for a Presidential Address, but it is an exceedingly important one for the interpretation of the Hebrew text. We may be able to parse correctly every form in a passage and may know the exact meaning of each word, but if we err at any point in the syntax, even though slightly, our translation and interpretation cannot be correct. For the correct understanding of the text nothing is so important as the correct understanding of the syntax. At every point it presents a challenge to the serious student and in its interpretation he can never be too precise or too meticulous.

It is a truism that each language has its own peculiar syntax, with the idiom of one language never completely that of any other; and yet this is a truism that is all too frequently ignored. Take such a simple example as the second person. In Hebrew the singular and plural are carefully distinguished. So they used to be in English, but in modern usage the pronoun "you" is made to do duty for both singular and plural, and the singular "thou" is seldom used, the only exception in prose being in addresses to deity. This means that the second person of the Hebrew, when applied to creatures other than God, should regularly be translated "you" into English irrespective of the number in Hebrew, but deity should be addressed as "thou," because that is the English idiom. A literal translation, such as we have in most English versions of the Bible, is Hebrew-

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English and not a real translation. On the other hand, a translation that uses "you" in addresses to deity, as Goodspeed does in his translations,¹ is even worse because it violates a common idiom of modern English and is offensive to our ears.

A more serious divergence between English and Hebrew is in the construction of the compound sentence; that is, the sentence composed of two or more clauses. In Hebrew originally, as all scholars know, there was no punctuation of any sort and no division of the consonants into words or of the words into phrases and clauses. Accordingly there was nothing to indicate the beginning of a new clause except an introductory particle and this in most cases had to be *waw* (ו), which in such instances is purely determinative and not conjunctive at all. After division into words, vocalization of the consonants, and punctuation marks ('accents') were introduced, there was no longer the same need of the many *waws* and they tended to be dropped, but there was a time when they were a very necessary adjunct to the proper reading of the text, and they still remain in considerable abundance. Furthermore, the Hebrew language is a more primitive, less complex, language than our own, and where we use grammatical subordination in our sentence structure Hebrew is more likely to use grammatical coördination. As a matter of fact the grammatical subordination of clauses is comparatively rare in Hebrew, as it is in the other Semitic languages, but we have to go to a cognate language like Old Babylonian to find out exactly how rarely it does occur. In this language the verb of every grammatically subordinate clause has a suffixed *-u* to identify it,² and from this we learn that only those clauses are grammatically subordinate that are in the genitive or that are introduced by a subordinating particle, and such particles are of comparatively rare occurrence. All other clauses are coördinate. For these two reasons the many *waws* of the Hebrew text are not to be monotonously translated "and," as they are in so many English translations. Sometimes they are simply guides to the

¹ Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The New Testament: An American Translation* (1923); *The Apocrypha: An American Translation*. (1938).

² To this rule there is an exception when the verb ends in *-a* or *-am*; otherwise these endings and their significance would be lost.

reading of the text and hence determinative, like our capital letter at the beginning of a sentence, and in that case they are to be ignored in the translation. At other times they introduce a grammatically coördinate clause, which, however, is logically subordinate (that is, subordinate in meaning) and has to be so translated into English, because a true translation must reproduce the idiom of one language, not in literal terms, but in the idiom of the other language. This means that every occurrence of *waw* in Hebrew will have to be painstakingly examined to determine its force in the sentence and out of this will come its proper translation. The result will be, not the Hebrew-English of so many translations, but idiomatic English faithfully rendering the original.

We have already noted the fact that where English uses subordinate clauses Hebrew is more likely to use coördinate clauses, but in some instances at least it is clear that to the Hebrews themselves this grammatical coördination meant logical subordination, even as it does with us. This is assuredly true in the case of what are logically purpose clauses. When these are introduced by a *waw*, as they often are, it is always a simple *waw* with the imperfect or a related form (cohortative, jussive, or imperative) that is used and never a *waw* consecutive,³ and yet *waw* consecutive is elsewhere the regular construction in classical Hebrew prose.⁴ The fact that Hebrew should deviate from its

³ No grammar that I know says that the perfect with *waw* consecutive can express purpose, and yet all the translators of the Old Testament blindly follow one another in translating it thus in a good many instances; as, for example, in Deut 5 1, where the last two finite verbs are translated as expressing purpose when they are clearly precative, parallel to the imperative of the first clause: "Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances which I am delivering in your hearing today, and learn them, and be careful to observe them." On the other hand, the clear instance of a purpose clause at the beginning of Deut 10 2 (simple *waw* plus the imperfect) is universally overlooked and the *waw* is translated as conjunctive, which is impossible for the Hebrew of the time of Deuteronomy. That would have required *waw* consecutive with the perfect.

⁴ Besides the simple *waw* to express purpose the only other use of simple *waw* with a finite verb in classical Hebrew prose is when two or more verbs, closely tied together in meaning and thought, follow one another in rapid succession, as in 1 Sam 12 2 or Deut 2 30.

regular usage in the case of purpose clauses and use simple *waw* with the verb instead of the usual *waw* consecutive indicates that by this unusual construction the Hebrews were suggesting something unusual and were trying to indicate that grammatical coördination here was to be interpreted as having the force of logical subordination; that is, the clause, although grammatically coördinate with the main clause, was to convey an idea subordinate to it, exactly as some similar clauses do in English, as, for example, "Eat and live," which is equivalent to saying, "Eat in order that you may live," or "If you eat, you will live." Logical subordination here is expressed by grammatical coördination as so very often in Hebrew.

Another kind of clause which to the Hebrews must have carried with it the idea of subordination, although grammatically coördinate, is the so-called circumstantial clause, because it deviates at nearly every point in its structure from that of the regular clause. As is well known, instead of *waw* consecutive it has simple *waw*; instead of having the verb first it has the subject; and instead of using a finite verb it regularly uses the participle, all of them devices to indicate the circumstances accompanying the action of the main clause. By using a structure different from the regular structure the Hebrews were indicating, as in the case of the purpose clause, that the clause was something out of the ordinary and hence we are entirely justified in interpreting it as circumstantial, although never forgetting that it is grammatically coördinate and not subordinate. But its equivalent in English is grammatical subordination, and this is the way in which it is regularly reproduced. The *waw* that is used to introduce this kind of clause must be simply a determinative to indicate the beginning of a new clause, and in course of time it accordingly came to be dropped occasionally.⁵

As in other languages, the clause in Hebrew can be used in any case in which a noun is used: nominative, genitive, or accusative. As genitive it may be governed by a noun in the construct, as in the very first verse of the Old Testament, Gen 1 1, where the construct noun **רֵאשִׁית** governs the clause that

⁵ See, e. g., Gen 12 8; Ex 12 11; 22 9, 13; II Sam 18 14.

immediately follows;⁶ or it may be governed by a preposition, as in Am 2 8, where the preposition על governs the whole clause immediately following and not simply the following noun, as the Massoretic punctuation would indicate: "and because they stretch out garments taken in pledge beside every altar." Ordinarily a clause is governed by a conjunction in Hebrew, but its government by a preposition also occurs rather often, more often than is generally recognized. It is a construction that is very common in the East Semitic languages⁷ and it occurs quite often in Hebrew with the preposition למען,⁸ but in such instances למען has regularly been called a conjunction, as if the same word could function in two such different capacities as preposition and conjunction. It would seem to be much more consistent and in better accord with the usage of words to regard the preposition as always a preposition, although sometimes governing a whole clause rather than a single word (a noun or an infinitive). When governed by a preposition the clause usually begins with אשר,⁹ in which case אשר is said to make the preposition into a conjunction, but this is scarcely correct. As we note elsewhere in this paper, the particle אשר is sometimes used to introduce a clause in the nominative or a clause in the accusative; by the same token it may also introduce a clause in the genitive, so that we should not call a word like כאשר a conjunction, but we should divide it into its two elements: the preposition כ and the particle אשר introducing a clause in the genitive. And this is supported by instances where the אשר-phrase is definitely genitive, as in Is 2 8 after the preposition ל, "to that which their fingers have made," or in Jer 15 4 after the preposition על, "because of what he did in Jerusalem."

⁶ For other examples see Paul Joüon, *Grammaire de l'hébreu biblique* (1923), pp. 392 f. A rather frequent example is the noun עקב in the adverbial accusative (having the force of a preposition), construct to the following clause in the genitive, with the clause sometimes introduced by אשר or כי.

⁷ So also A. Ungnad, *ZA* 18 (1904) 63 ff. Most scholars interpret the prepositions thus used (e. g., *ištu*, *adi*, *ina*, and *kima*) as conjunctions, making them prepositions only when used with an infinitive or a noun, but it is doubtful whether the same word can be both preposition and conjunction.

⁸ Strictly a preposition plus a noun in the construct.

⁹ Occasionally כי is used in place of אשר.

The clause in the genitive is definitely subordinate in Hebrew, both grammatically and logically, as is clearly demonstrated by Old Babylonian, where such a clause always has the subordinating suffix *-u* attached to its verb.¹⁰ On the other hand, a coördinate clause that is logically the subject of a verb and hence nominative is of course not grammatically subordinate even though subordinate in meaning, but again we have to go to Old Babylonian to prove this. For example, in that language, as in the other East Semitic languages, what is logically a conditional clause is introduced by *šúmma*, usually translated "if," but most surprisingly the clause that follows does not have the subordinating suffix *-u*, indicating that *šúmma* is not a subordinating conjunction, as its translation would suggest, but the impersonal (third masculine singular) permansive II 1 of the verb *ši'āmum* (Hebrew שים) plus the particle *-ma*,¹¹ which must be explicative here, meaning "namely." Literally translated the phrase is accordingly "it is established namely," which is the equivalent of "it is established that" or "it being established that," and this in turn is the equivalent of "if," the regular translation. That is, the clause which follows *šúmma* is grammatically coördinate to it, but logically it is the subject of the verb *šúm* and the particle *-ma* is explicative. Exactly the same construction appears in Hebrew. First comes an impersonal verb and then an explicative *waw* introducing a coördinate clause which in meaning is the subject of the verb and is regularly translated thus. A frequent and well-known example is the impersonal use of the verb "to be, to come to pass," followed by a coördinate clause; for example, ויהי בעת ההוא ויאמר in Gen 21 22, literally "And it came to pass at that time, namely, he said," but more properly in English, "It came to pass at that time that he said." The

¹⁰ See, e. g., R. F. Harper, *The Code of Hammurabi* (1904; henceforth abbreviated *CH*), XXIV, 79: *i-na bît i-pu-šu*, "in the house which he built," where the clause is genitive to the construct noun *bît*; or *CH*, XXXIV, 10: *i-na i-du-u*, "when I knew," where the clause is genitive to the preposition *ina*. For other examples see A. Ungnad, *ZA* 18 (1904) 59–65.

¹¹ Ungnad was close to the right interpretation of *šúmma* when he said that it was the permansive of שים in the intensive stem, perhaps third feminine plural in the sense of our neuter (*ZA* 18 [1903] 362 f.).

second clause stands in apposition to the impersonal subject of the verb of the first clause, showing that the *waw* introducing it is explicative, and in accordance with the use of the explicative *waw* with a noun¹² it may on occasion be omitted, as in Deut 9 11 or Is 7 1. That we are justified in regarding the second clause as a subject clause, even though it is grammatically coördinate, is shown by the fact that it is sometimes introduced by **כִּי**¹³ and hence definitely subordinate. The subject clause may also be introduced by the subordinating particle **אֲשֶׁר**, as in Gen 6 15, where **זֶה** is the predicate and the following clause introduced by **אֲשֶׁר** is the subject.¹⁴ Thus it is to be noted that the same idea can be expressed by three different constructions in Hebrew, one coördinate and the other two subordinate, but the former is much the more frequent. On the other hand, all three have to be reproduced as subordinate in English, because that, in contrast with Hebrew, is the English idiom for all of them.

Besides the clause in the nominative and that in the genitive there is also the clause in the accusative and in various uses of the accusative: the accusative as the direct object of a verb, the appositional accusative, the accusative of manner, and the accusative of specification. In the first of these, the accusative as the direct object of a verb, the clause is usually subordinate, being introduced by the subordinating particle **כִּי** or **אֲשֶׁר** with or without the sign of the accusative **אֹת**. Occasionally, however, the same thing will be expressed by a coördinate clause. That this coördinate clause is logically an object clause is further demonstrated by the fact that it sometimes alternates with the infinitive construct in the accusative. For example, **וּשְׁמַרְתָּ לַעֲשׂוֹת**, "and you must be careful to do" in Deut 6 3 appears in Deut 16 12 as **אֵת וּשְׁמַרְתָּ וְעָשִׂיתָ**, "and you must be careful and you do," which in English must be rendered "and you must be careful that you

¹² See T. J. Meek, *JAOS* 58 (1938) 123 f. A good illustration of a clause in the nominative without an introductory *waw*, standing in apposition to the subject of a verb, is in Deut 13 15, where the last clause stands in apposition to **נִכּוֹן**, the subject of **הִרְבִּיר**.

¹³ See, e. g., Gen 37 26; II Sam 18 3; Ruth 2 22.

¹⁴ Other examples are Ex 29 38; Josh 10 11; Jer 33 16. A good example of an **אֲשֶׁר**-clause in the *casus pendens* is in Judg 1 12.

do." Here are two different constructions saying exactly the same thing so that the coördinate clause in the second example, which replaces the infinitive construct of the first, must have been interpreted by the Hebrews themselves as an object clause even though it is grammatically coördinate and not subordinate. And that raises the question whether its introductory *waw* may not be simply a determinative to indicate the beginning of a new clause and nothing other than that. In support of this contention is the fact that such a clause occasionally appears without any *waw* at all.¹⁵ This confirms what we said earlier in our paper that many of the *waws* in Hebrew are purely determinative and are used simply to mark the beginning of a new clause.

Another kind of accusative clause, but closely related to the first, is one standing in apposition to a word or phrase itself in the accusative. It may be introduced by *אשר*, as in Deut 11 4-6, with six occurrences in three verses, or by an explicative *waw*, as it is so frequently after *כה*,¹⁶ for example, in Deut 7 5, "Thus shall you do to them: you must tear down their altars, smash their sacred pillars, cut down their sacred poles, and burn up their carved images." Here we have a series of four clauses, all accusative in apposition to *כה* in the first clause.

Still another kind of accusative clause is that in the adverbial accusative of manner. Since I have discussed this kind of clause at length elsewhere,¹⁷ I need only call attention to its existence here. It usually has no introductory particle, but occasionally it is found with *waw*, in which case the *waw* must be determinative. An example is found in Am 7 12, which is usually translated "O thou seer, go, flee thee away into the land of Judah, and there eat bread, and prophesy there," but the last clause is clearly in the adverbial accusative so that the translation into idiomatic English of today should be "O seer, away, off with you to the land of Judah and there earn your living by prophesying there."

¹⁵ See, e. g., Gen 12 13; 41 15; Num 22 6; Judg 9 48; Am 5 12.

¹⁶ In direct narration after *כה* the *waw* is omitted, as after the familiar expression in prophecy *יהיה אמר*.

¹⁷ *JAOS* 49 (1929) 156 ff.; 58 (1938) 125 f.; *AJSL* 47 (1930) 51 ff.

A fourth kind of accusative clause is that in the accusative of specification. The best example that I know is one to which I have elsewhere called attention.¹⁸ It is in Lam 2 17, which verse rather strikingly, contains three clauses in the accusative, each of a different kind. The clause *אשר זמם* is in the accusative as the direct object of the verb *עשה*. The last clause *ולא חמל* is in the adverbial accusative, expressing the manner in which the action of the preceding verb *חרס* was carried out. The clause preceding *חרס* has regularly been taken as a relative clause, but to do this is to destroy the parallelism of the passage and turn poetry into prose:

Yahweh has done what he planned; he has carried out his word,
Which he decreed long ago; he has devastated without mercy.

The clause in question is not relative at all, but a clause in the accusative of specification, and hence should be translated literally "in the matter of that which he decreed long ago," or in better English, "as he decreed long ago." When this is recognized, the resultant translation is perfect poetry, with climactic or ascending parallelism, and the original is in the *qinah* (3:2) meter:¹⁹

Yahweh has done what he planned,
he has carried out his word;
As he decreed long ago,
he has devastated without mercy.

An example of a clause in the emphatic accusative of specification (discussed later in this paper) is found in Num 22 6, which reads literally "I know, with respect to him whom you bless, that he is blessed," or in idiomatic English, "I know that he whom you bless is blessed."

We have already noted that the clause in the genitive is always grammatically subordinate, whereas the clause in the nominative, when introduced by *waw* or standing alone, is never subordinate. The clause in the accusative follows the usage of the latter, as

¹⁸ *JBL* 59 (1940) 3.

¹⁹ For this kind of parallelism and meter see T. J. Meek, *JR* 9 (1929) 531, 544 ff.

is demonstrated again by reference to the cognate languages that have a particular form for the verb of the grammatically subordinate clause. All of these clauses, however, whether genitive, nominative, or accusative, must be translated into English as grammatically subordinate because, we repeat, that in contrast with Hebrew is the English idiom. To translate literally is to fail utterly to bring out the correct meaning of the original.

When we turn to the construction of the clause itself, other differences between English and Hebrew at once appear. I mention only a few which to my mind have not before been properly interpreted.

A peculiar construction in Hebrew is the use of a noun in the accusative as the virtual subject of a clause. An examination of the examples of this shows that they fall into two classes, something that no grammar has noted so far as I know.²⁰ In one the accusative as the virtual subject follows the predicate and this is always impersonal (third masculine singular if verbal), irrespective of the person, number, and gender of the virtual subject.²¹ A good example is found in I Sam 20 13, where the verb is impersonal and the virtual subject following it in the accusative is feminine singular. The explanation of this accus. is that it is explicative and the clause should accordingly be translated literally "It is pleasing to my father, namely, evil against you." A frequent use of this explicative accusative is found with the passive verb, as, for example, in Gen 27 42, where the impersonal passive verb has as its virtual subject a masculine plural noun in the accusative: "It was told to Rebekah, namely, the words of Esau," or in idiomatic English, "The words of Esau were told to Rebekah." Another example is in Am 4 2, וְנִשָּׂא אֶתְכֶם, "One shall be carried off, namely, you," or in proper English, "You shall be carried off." This construction would seem to hark back to primitive usage when the verb

²⁰ The two classes are not distinguished in an article as recent as M. G. Slonim, *JBL* 63 (1944) 300 f.

²¹ An apparent exception is II Kings 18 30, but the text here cannot be correct; a goodly number of Hebrew manuscripts and the parallel passage in Isa 36 15 do not have אַתָּה with הַעִיר and this is clearly the correct reading, as scholars have long since recognized.

had only one form; and person, number, and gender were not indicated.

A second class of examples has the virtual subject in the accusative, but it precedes the predicate and this always agrees with it in person, number, and gender. The accusative here must be explained as the accusative of specification used before the verb for the sake of emphasis. A good example is found in Judg 6 28, the literal translation of which is "With respect to the choice bull, it had been offered up on the altar." Another example is II Sam 21 22, "With respect to these four, they were born to the giants in Gath," where the verb is third masculine plural to agree with its virtual subject which precedes it but rather oddly is in the accusative. Numerous examples occur with the active verb in constructions that look like the *casus pendens*,²² but they cannot be that because they are accusative, as indicated by the particle **אֵל**, and the *casus pendens* in accordance with its name must of course be in a neutral case, which in the Semitic languages must be the nominative.²³ To prove this we again go to Old Babylonian where the case-endings are carefully observed. Here the *casus pendens* always appears in the nominative, as in CH, XIII, 71-3, *šum-ma a-wi-lum hu-bu-lum e-li-šu*, "If, as for a noble, there is a debt against him." There is, however, a variant construction to this in the accusative. It appears at the beginning of the clause for the sake of emphasis and is taken up later by a pronoun or a pronominal suffix, exactly like the *casus pendens*, as, for example, in CH, XXV, 80 f., *a-wi-lam šu-a-ti i-ka-sú-šu-ma*, "With respect to that noble, they shall bind him." Here are two different grammatical constructions with exactly the same force, one of them the *casus pendens* and the other the emphatic accusative of specification. Identically the same two constructions appear in Hebrew and it so happens that they appear together in a single verse, Num 5 10, where **שֵׁנִי** is in the *casus pendens* and **אֵת־קִרְשָׁיו** is in the accusative of specification: "As for anyone, in the matter of his sacred things, they are his," or in idiomatic English, "Anyone's sacred things

²² This is the way that I interpreted them myself in JAOS 58 (1938) 122 f.

²³ The grammars are quite wrong in saying that the *casus pendens* can be used with **אֵל**, because that puts the word immediately in the accusative case.

are his," in which translation, however, the emphasis of the Hebrew is completely lost, as it always must be in such constructions.²⁴ The *casus pendens* is always nominative in Hebrew, just as it is in Babylonian, and this is shown, for example, by Josh 23 9, where אהם, which can only be nominative, is in the *casus pendens*, or by Gen 9 9, where אני is in the *casus pendens*. And so in hosts of other examples. On the other hand, what looks like the *casus pendens* and functions like it, but is in the accusative, is to be interpreted as the emphatic accusative of specification. An illuminating example is the familiar phrase in Gen 1 4, which reads literally "God saw, with respect to the light, that it was good," or in idiomatic English, "God saw that the light was good." What God saw was not "the light," but "that the light was good." This construction, so far as I know, has not before been properly interpreted and it is found much more frequently than is generally recognized. For example, it has universally been overlooked in Deut 7 11, where אתהמצוה has been taken as the direct object of ושמרת, but it is clearly the emphatic accusative of specification as is shown by the pronominal suffix at the end of the verse and by the variant construction in Deut 8 1, which reads "All the charge that I am enjoining on you today you must be careful to observe." Deut 7 11 must accordingly be translated literally "So you must be careful, with respect to the charge, namely, the statutes and ordinances that I am enjoining on you today, to observe them," or in idiomatic English, "So you must be careful to observe the charge, namely, the statutes and ordinances that I am enjoining on you today." In these two passages the author is saying exactly the same thing, using two different grammatical constructions to emphasize the word "charge": by putting it at the beginning of the clause in Deut 8 1 and by putting it in the emphatic accusative of specification in Deut 7 11.²⁵

A variant construction of the *casus pendens* and the emphatic

²⁴ In translating from one language into another something is usually lost, particularly when the idiom is different, as it so often is; see, e. g., J. M. Powis Smith, *JR* 5 (1925) 164 ff.

²⁵ Other examples, wrongly interpreted however as *casus pendens*, are given by the present writer in *JAOS* 58 (1938) 123.

accusative of specification is the emphatic ל of specification;²⁶ as, for example, in I Sam 9 20, "With respect to your asses (לאחנות) that were lost three days ago, take no thought of them because they have been found." In Num 15 29 we have this construction actually coördinated with a *casus pendens*, namely, לנו, the ל of specification in an emphatic position at the head of the clause, parallel to the *casus pendens* האורה. An example where the ל of specification takes the place of an accusative of specification is in Lev 4 26, ונסלח לו, literally "It will be forgiven with respect to him," or in idiomatic English, "He will be forgiven." Exactly parallel to this is the use of ל as a variant of the accusative, the direct object of a verb. The grammars explain this ל as introducing the accusative²⁷ and set it down as late because it is so common in Aramaic. However, it is found in writings as early as Amos²⁸ and it is simply the ל of specification used in place of the accusative, for the sake of emphasis originally, but later merely as a variant construction.

Such, in brief, is the syntax of the Hebrew sentence in some of its particulars. The discussion is not intended by any means to be exhaustive, but enough has been said, I hope, to show the importance of the subject. Syntax may be a dry and tedious study, but it is a rewarding one nevertheless and not one merely of academic interest. It leads to a more correct translation of the text and thus to a truer interpretation of the culture reflected in the text. As biblical students we are interpreters of an ancient and glorious past, and that ought to give us pause because it makes us guardians of the future as well; for out of the past must grow the future. Whether that future will be good or bad will be dependent to no inconsiderable degree upon us as interpreters of the past, teachers of the present, and creators of the future.

²⁶ Because of its likeness to a Latin construction this has usually been called the dative of specification, but there is no dative case in the Semitic languages, and a noun after a preposition is of course in the genitive case.

²⁷ See, e. g., Paul Joüon, *op. cit.*, p. 371.

²⁸ Am 6 3; 8 9; see also I Sam 23 10; Ex 32 13; Deut 9 27.