

# Again on the Tel Dan Inscription and the Northwest Semitic Verb Tenses

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In a recent article, his third publication on the prefix conjugation in the ninth-century Tel Dan Aramaic inscription, J. Tropper (1996) continues a debate on the prefix conjugation as attested in the inscription against the Northwest Semitic, principally Hebrew, background. His article has been preceded by another study by J. Emerton (1997), who also addresses the same subject matter. Since the present writer happens to have the pleasure of having triggered their publications, that by Tropper (1997) in particular, he may be allowed to respond.<sup>1</sup>

Our position, first enunciated in Muraoka 1995a, has been pretty consistent. This position may be summarised as follows:

1. Our inscription contains at least seven<sup>2</sup> reasonably certain cases of preterital pc<sup>3</sup> forms.
2. Two of these instances are not preceded by the conjunction Waw.
3. We lack sufficient evidence to allow us to assume the formal identity of the phenomenon with that in Biblical Hebrew.
4. These preterital pc forms in the inscription may attest the so-called short imperfect.

In the following we shall offer some remarks on the above propositions.

## *1. Preterital pc forms*

Until the discovery of our inscription we knew of only three cases of preterital pc, all from the Zakkur inscription.<sup>4</sup> Given the locality where the Tel Dan inscription was found and its contents, one cannot entirely preclude a possible influence of Hebrew on Aramaic, though no real case has been made for such an influence as regards the cases in the Zakkur inscription. In this regard it is important to remember that comparative Semitics – Akkadian, Biblical Hebrew, Geez, and Classical Arabic – correlates the short pc with the preterital function. The same comparative evidence also reminds us that all those ancient Semitic languages use the short pc also as volitive in a broad sense with more precise nuances indicated by terms such as jussive, precative and vetitive. Whether or not the precative use and the volitive had

<sup>1</sup> Tropper directs his criticism also to Müller (1995).

<sup>2</sup> Possibly nine if one include a partly restored *[w]yħmlk* 'and he made king' (line 4) and *[w]ᵑpq* '[and] I departed' (line 5). Thus Degen's wish has been fulfilled: he (Degen 1969:115 end) had cautioned against drawing a far-reaching conclusion concerning the alleged religious colouring of the syntagm as known at the time only in three examples in the 8th century Zakkur inscription. Sasson (1997) has introduced into the discussion a different kind of stylistic and literary parameter, though unconvincingly to our mind: see Muraoka – Rogland 1998.

<sup>3</sup> pc = prefix conjugation; sc = suffix conjugation.

<sup>4</sup> We leave out of account the controversial Deir Alla plaster texts.

at one stage some common denominator, we believe it important to keep both uses in view when we discuss the function and usage of the short pc. From this perspective we would emphasize that the volitive use of the short pc is very firmly established throughout Classical Aramaic down to Qumran Aramaic and with no geographical limitation. There is no point in speaking of Canaanism or Hebraism in this last respect.

As to the importance of this new and firm evidence for the preterital pc in Old Aramaic there is no argument between Tropper and me.

## 2. No Waw preceding

We stand by our earlier statement that “the fact that two of these six preterital prefix conjugations are *not* preceded by the conjunction Waw cannot be over-emphasized” (Muraoka 1995a:20). The statement was made, for one thing, from the perspective of *Forschungsgeschichte*. Namely, the only relevant Old Aramaic instances known prior to the discovery of our inscription, those of the Zakkur inscription, had been viewed by a number of previous scholars, starting with Nöldeke (1908:21), in terms of Waw converse as well as preterital force.<sup>5</sup> Whether or not one accepted the theory of Canaanism,<sup>6</sup> which is for all intents and purposes Hebraism,<sup>7</sup> it appeared to us important to highlight his detail. It is not self-evident, however, that these are all short pc’s: on which see below, (4).

In our very first study (1995a:20) we stated in no ambiguous terms that “the use of the originally preterital short prefix conjugation with the conjunction *waw* in a special phonetic shape [emphasis added] is a feature unique to Classical Hebrew.”

For Tropper, the complex, or syntagm, consisting of the conjunction Waw and the immediately following pc, more specifically short pc, and not merely the preterital use of the pc, is a significant isogloss, an areal isogloss characterising West Semitic languages (Tropper 1996:637-38).<sup>8</sup>

## 3. Comparability between Biblical Hebrew and Old Aramaic

The single most important disagreement between Tropper and us concerns the nature and extent of affinity between Biblical Hebrew and Old Aramaic. We both agree that the two languages share the use of the pc, most likely short pc, as a punctiliar, preterital tense form.

<sup>5</sup> For an illuminating historical survey of the analysis of the Zakkur evidence, see Degen 1969:114, n. 21.

<sup>6</sup> So still Segert (1975:377): “sicher ein Kanaanismus.” See also a short discussion on the question by Emerton (1997:438-39).

<sup>7</sup> Though a similar phenomenon is attested in Moabite and the Deir Alla dialect.

<sup>8</sup> Gibson (1975:15) attempts to cut the link between the preterital use of the pc and the Waw by referring to some examples in Biblical Aramaic. Most of the examples, however, are not convincing. *yhk* Ezr 4.12 is found in a temporal clause introduced by ‘*ad* ‘until,’ *ydhlunny* and *ybhlunny*, besides being long pc’s, do not have to be preterital, and *yhyt* is morphologically and lexically difficult anyway. The only remaining example is *ytwb* Dan 4.31.

According to Tropper (1994:490) the usage in the two languages is “durchaus vergleichbar,” which one may translate “totally analogous.”<sup>9</sup> His latest position (Tropper 1996:644), slightly nuanced with the word “durchaus” conspicuously missing, is summed up as follows:

... altwestaramäisches *wyqtl* und masoretisch-hebräisches *wayyiqtol* formal und funktional vergleichbar sind: Sie haben dieselbe Genese (beide enthalten die semitische PKKF [= Kurzform der Präfixkonjugation] und dieselbe konsonantische Gestalt. Sie teilen außerdem die gleiche Hauptfunktion, nämlich die Bezeichnung des präteritalen Tempus sowie des perfektiven Aspekts, und dienen übereinstimmend als narrative Erzählformen für – meist im Progreß verlaufende – perfekte Sachverhalte der Vergangenheit. Die Bezeugung zweier *yqtl*-Formen ohne vorausgehendes *Waw* in der Dan-Inschrift ist kein stichhaltiges Argument gegen die Vergleichbarkeit von aram. *wyqtl* und hebr. *wayyiqtol*.

From the very first we have been sounding a warning against imprecise terminology whereby the usage in our inscription (and the Zakkur inscription) was totally identified with the *Waw* consecutive with the imperfect in Biblical Hebrew.<sup>10</sup> Apart from the undesirable imprecise terminology, such an approach obscures the fact that the major contribution made by our inscription to the question of the verb tenses is precisely the preterital use of the *pc* (and possibly irrespective of the presence or absence of the conjunction *Waw*). Moreover, while Biblical Hebrew displays a roughly complementary distribution of *wayyiqtol* in prose and free-standing *yiqtol* in poetry, we find both juxtaposed in a single inscription. This latter fact cannot be explained away, as Tropper (1996:638) does, by saying that the overwhelming majority of stelae in the Ancient Orient are witnesses of artistic prose (“Kunstprosa”) or narrative poetry. Apart from the fact that to call the Tel Dan inscription a piece of poetry you must have a unique sense of aesthetics, much of Biblical narrative, which is universally agreed to be poetic, surely “Kunstprosa,” does not mostly mix the two features.

One of the principal arguments advanced by Tropper (1996:635-36) against my proposition that we lack hard evidence for assuming the identity between the *Waw* in our inscription (and the Zakkur inscription) and that of BH *wayyiqtol* is that the phonetic shape uniquely characterizing the BH syntagm, namely the vowel *a* of the conjunction and the gemination of the prefix consonant, is a secondary and late (“sekundär und spät”) feature of Massoretic Hebrew. Nonetheless, he speaks of *wayyiqtol* throughout his study, even in the title of his article, and he obviously thinks that this syntagm is very ancient in Hebrew, going back at least to the 9th century B.C.E., the date of our Aramaic inscription. On the other hand, he cites a footnote we added to our translation/revision of Joüon’s grammar (Joüon – Muraoka

<sup>9</sup> For my gloss of “vergleichbar” as “analogous,” note that Tropper formulates his thought as “Aram. *wyqtl* und hebr. *wayyiqtol* sind morphologisch identisch und auch funktional vergleichbar” (1997:634).

<sup>10</sup> The latest example is Sasson 1997, which is entitled “Some observations on the use and original purpose of the *Waw* consecutive in Old Aramaic and Biblical Hebrew.” That imprecise terminology does lead to a misunderstanding is illustrated by what Emerton writes (1997:437).

1991 § 118a<sup>11</sup>) where we had drawn attention to the absence of the first two features in the second column of the Origenian Hexapla and the Samaritan reading tradition of the Hebrew Pentateuch. This makes one conjecture that Tropper would probably date the introduction of this phonetic shape to the post-Christian era. But this presupposes an oversimplified, linear development of the language. Would he go as far as to suggest that the Massoretic distinction between *w-yiqtol* and *wayyiqtol* is a purely artificial feature introduced by Massoretic scholars and it had no basis in a tradition of Bible reading handed down from a period when Hebrew was still a living language, and that the Hexapla and the Samaritan tradition prove that no such distinction ever existed in an earlier stage of Hebrew? What else would he mean by “sekundär und spät”? In fact, his “sekundär und spät” are opposed to his “alt bzw. ursprünglich” (Tropper 1997:635). Systematic and deliberate introduction of such a far-reaching feature in the Massoretic period seems to us intrinsically implausible, little less implausible than the now generally discredited Kahle’s theory on the Massoretic tradition with respect to the allophonic distribution of the six plosives and the morpheme of the second person masculine singular. On the other hand, we are quite comfortable with the notion that this morpho-phonemic distinction is an inner-Hebrew development whereby the original vowel *a* of the conjunction was reduced when followed by an ultima-stressed long pc (*yiqtol*), whereas the penultimately stressed short pc (*yiqtol*), instead of lengthening the preceding vowel of the conjunction, lengthened the immediately preceding prefix consonant by way of gemination.<sup>12</sup> Such an inner-Hebrew development amounts to what we called its unique feature. Since this inner-Hebrew development presumably took place as a result of an accent shift, one would at least have to postulate a similar shift in Old Aramaic in order to argue that the same morpho-phonemic distinction obtained there, too. The fact is, however, that, in comparison with Hebrew, we have too little tangible evidence in Aramaic to base such an assumption on.

In sum, at the moment we have no internal Aramaic evidence which would support Tropper’s contention that the Aramaic *wyqtl* and BH *wayyiqtol* are “morphologisch identisch.” “Morphologisch” should mean more than “konsonantische Gestalt,” for one term of the equation, *wayyiqtol*, contains more than a sequence of consonantal morphemes. In an etymological sense they are certainly “vergleichbar,” and invite and stand comparison, but having compared them, one cannot assert without qualification that they are formally identical.

Incidentally, if partly restored *wqtl*[t ‘and I killed’ (line 8) be correct,<sup>13</sup> it would neutralize the opposition between *wyqtl* and *wqtl*, thus weakening Tropper’s hypothesis on the comparability between Old Aramaic and Biblical Hebrew.

#### 4. The short preterital imperfect

The question as to whether the pc forms in our corpus is short or long has already been mentioned above a couple of times.

<sup>11</sup> Wrongly given as “119a” (Tropper 1996:635, n. 4).

<sup>12</sup> So Bergsträsser 1929:22, Bauer – Leander 1922:218-19, Blau 1972:228, n. 9, and Ben-Hayyim 1977:81.

<sup>13</sup> As for a possible infinitive absolute at this point, see Muraoka 1995:19.

Degen's analysis (1969:114) of the three Zakkur inscription as "Kurzipf." must be based on syntagmatic consideration, for there is no morphological indication supporting such an analysis.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, Tropper has assumed all along that the same applies to the Tel Dan inscription, without, however, demonstrating it, for the actually attested forms provide no formal clue to allow us to settle the question. The only example which I thought (Muraoka 1995a:19) might provide such a clue, namely *w<sup>2</sup>šm* 'and I placed' (line 9), is not acceptable to him as an orthographic indication of the short stem vowel *i*: in the light of the graphic contrast in Fekheriyān between *lšm* 'Let him place,' a precative (line 11) as against *wyšym* 'and he will place,' an indicative, long *pc* (line 12), I had argued that *w<sup>2</sup>šm* in the Tel Dan inscription could suggest a short *pc*. Tropper's reasoning is that the use of mater lectionis for long vowels in non-wordfinal positions is unattested in West Aramaic inscriptions prior to 800 BCE. But we have not heard of any pre-800 Old Aramaic inscription of western provenience in which there is an occasion to use a word-medial mater lectionis.<sup>15</sup>

This question has also bearing on one's analysis and interpretation of the two Wawless forms: *ysq* 'he went up' (line 2) and *yhk* 'he went' (line 5). Since the context of the first instance is only partly preserved, we shall focus on the better preserved second: *wyškb ʔby yhk ʔl [ʔbhwh]h wy<sup>c</sup>l mlky[š]r<sup>2</sup>l ...*, which may be tentatively glossed as 'and my father lay, he went to his [forefathers] and the king of Israel entered ...' Emerton (1994:257) had proposed taking *yhk* as circumstantial, and in a recent study (Emerton 1997:432-35) he attempts to clarify and elaborate his position on this matter. He concurs with the view that "*wyškb* is the main verb and that *yhk* describes the circumstances rather than a fresh action: 'he died, going to [his fate ...]'. " The decision seems to depend on two matters. Firstly, how should one restore the lacuna? Biran and Naveh, in their publication of the first fragment (1993:91), cited an Akkadian idiom *ana šimtišu illik* 'he went to his fate' as synonymous with 'he died,' without, however, restoring a corresponding Aramaic phrase. Even after the publication by Biran and Naveh of the second fragment and their proposal to restore the text as given above, Emerton still prefers the editors' pseudo-restoration, and "going to his fate" can be indeed interpreted as circumstantial or rather explicative and elaborating, best expressed in German with *indem*. Secondly, how should one take the meaning of the main verb, *škb*? "To lie in bed, whether death-bed or as a sick man" or simply a synonym of *mwt* "to die" as in Emerton's translation? Our preference lies with the first. The verb in Qal is often – more than 30 times according to BDB, s.v. – used, referring to death, but not "meaning" it. This occurs in collocation with the phrase "with one's forefathers," and significantly most of these examples are attested in the book of Kings of a closely related genre as our inscription. The use of the verb on its own with similar nuance appears to be confined to poetic texts, in some of which, e.g. Is 14.8, it does not necessarily refer to death. We believe that the collocation originally meant "to come to lie in ancestral grave." Thus we have some difficulty in translating the verb in our inscription

<sup>14</sup> In that sense his wording is illogical: "Als 'wa-yiqtol' hat das Kurzipf. in 3 Belegen in der Zkr-Inschrift die Funktion der Erzählform."

<sup>15</sup> Tropper does not consider Samalian as representative of such an idiom.

“died,” as Biran and Naveh 1993 did, who, in their 1995 article, have opted for an alternative rendering suggested by themselves earlier: “lay down, ... went to his [ancestors] (*viz.* became sick and died),” which seems to us an improvement. Should one opt for this interpretation of *wyškb* and Biran – Naveh’s restoration meaning “to his forefathers,” one could not maintain that the second action is circumstantial: it is rather a fresh action, the two actions being distinct and occurring the one after the other.

Tropper (1997:640–43) also addresses himself to this question. He mentions two possible analyses: paratactic and hypotactic.<sup>16</sup> If paratactic, the two verbs would be synonymous, hence the second, according to him, must also match the first formally, i.e. short pc. If hypotactic, an interpretation Tropper favours, the second verb would indicate an accompanying or resultative action (“Begleit- oder Folgehändlung”). He opts for the second analysis on a semantic consideration, namely “to go to one’s father” is a euphemism for “to die.” However, he offers no argument for this semantic choice. Moreover, his translation “und (daraufhin) legte sich mein Vater nieder, um zu sterben / wobei er starb” is problematic: “um zu sterben” is final, not resultative;<sup>17</sup> “wobei er starb” is not exactly an accompanying action in relation to “he lay down.” What is meant by the text is conceivably either “he lay in bed for a while, [then] went to (join) his forefathers” or “he was laid in the ancestral tomb. He went to (join) his forefathers.” Most of the Ugaritic examples of the syntagm <sc – pc> Tropper cites are translated by himself as being final in force: e.g., “Er stand auf, um (Speisen) zu bereiten.” Another Ugaritic example he cites of the syntagm <pc – pc> is to us most illuminating: “Daraufhin (geschah es, daß) Daniel ... sich erhob, um(?) sich den Eingang des Tores zu setzen [*ytsu ytb*] (und Gericht zu halten).” What appears to us to be a significant feature of the whole syntagm and has not been noticed by Tropper is asyndesis. That is the essence of the phenomenon which he wants to illustrate by referring to Nöldeke. The paragraph in the latter’s Syriac grammar (Nöldeke 1898: § 337), which Tropper quotes, follows paragraphs which discuss various types of “Copulativsätze.” Nöldeke’s perspective is evident in the introductory clause which Tropper has omitted: “Das Syr. setzt nun aber überaus häufig zwei Verba, welche a) rasch auf einander folgende oder zusammenfallende Handlungen bezeichnen ... ganz ohne Verbindung zusammen.” Mark the adversative, contrastive “aber” and “auf einander folgende.” In analysing such cases of asyndesis, one needs to face a fundamental, methodological question: are we not mixing up a question of pragmatics, namely translation strategy and that of analysis of linguistic structure? The question becomes acute when a given language has at its disposal forms, whether lexical or syntactic, explicitly marking the function in question.<sup>18</sup> Thus, even if one conceded that the two verbs in the Tel Dan inscription

<sup>16</sup> By “hypotactic” he apparently means “logically hypotactic,” reference being not to a construction with the use of a subordinating conjunction or a non-finite verb form. For in purely formal terms our construction is paratactic.

<sup>17</sup> Emerton (1997:434) seems now to be in favour of the view that the *waw*-less *yhk* can express purpose. It is not clear to us whether he has now abandoned his earlier interpretation, i.e. circumstantial, which is not the same a final.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Muraoka 1997 where the alleged final function of a Biblical Hebrew syntagm is discussed.

can be translated in a way suggesting a form of subordination between them, it does not necessarily follow that the two verbs are morphologically different. Indeed, in all Syriac cases Tropper cites from Nöldeke the verbs are of the same tense.

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### Abstract:

The recently discovered Tel Dan inscription shows (1) that Old Aramaic, in addition to the volitive use, used the prefix conjugation to indicate a one-off (“einmalig”), punctiliar action in the past, and possibly as a free variant of the suffix conjugation for this latter function, (2) this preterital prefix conjugation, just as its volitive variety, was most likely short, and (3) the evidence currently available does not allow one to postulate that Old Aramaic knew a distinction between Waw consecutivum and Waw copulativum in Biblical Hebrew, the former automatically chosen where

the conjunction is proclitically attached to such a preterital *yqt*, and the following initial consonant equally automatically being geminated.

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