

The Syntax of Elliptical Comparative Constructions

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0 Introduction

Comparative statements in Biblical Hebrew encompass a wide range of constructions, involving a variety of comparative words, such as the prepositions כּ and מן, as well as כּן, כאשר, and כּה.¹ In describing comparative clauses, the standard reference grammars have generally focused on constructions in which both halves of the comparison are fully articulated, as in (1), where the first half of the comparison is introduced with כאשר and the second half with כּן:

(1) Isa 66:22

כּי כאשר השמים החדשים והארץ החדשה אשר אני עשה עמדים לפני
נאם יהוה כּן יעמד זרעכם ושמוכם:

For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I am making, *remain* before me, says the LORD; so your descendants and your name *shall remain*.

However, in many comparative sentences, the comparison is reduced in some way, requiring the hearer or reader to supply the missing information, as in (2):

(2) Deut 5:14b²

לא תעשה כל-מלאכה אתה ובנך ובתך ועבדך ונאמרתך ... למען ינוח עבדך
ונאמרתך קמוך:

... You shall not do any work, you and your son and your daughter and your male servant and your female servant ... so that your male servant and your female servant *may rest as you* [rest].

The preposition plus pronominal suffix, קמוך, stands for a clause in which the verb has been deleted.³ The pronominal suffix on the preposition must be understood as the subject of the elided clause, even though in the surface syntax it is the object

This paper was presented at the Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew Section of the Society of Biblical Literature (Philadelphia, 2005). The research was supported by grants from the Graduate School of the University of Wisconsin–Madison and by the Ettinger Family Foundation.

¹ See the discussions in Joüon-Muraoka 1993:§§133g–h, 174; Waltke and O’Connor 1990:202–205; Meyer 1992:442–43; Ewald 1891:279–82; Brockelmann 1956:104–105; Brensinger 1996:152–74 on the syntactic patterns of similes within the prophetic books; and especially the comprehensive analysis in Jenni 1994 on comparisons with the preposition כּ.

² Portions of verses are referred to by “a” or “b”, indicating material before or after the *’athnah*, respectively, and by a number indicating the clause. For example, “10a1” indicates the first clause in the first half of verse 10.

³ See Buccellati 1976 for a similar understanding of Akkadian comparisons as involving underlying clauses with some elements “deleted.”

of the preposition. In (3), however, a clause is similarly reduced, but now the same pronominal suffix represents the object of the elided clause:

(3) Lev 19:18a3

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמֹדֶךָ

... and you shall love your neighbor as [you love] you(rself) ...

Our interpretation of the pronominal suffixes in (2) and (3) as embedded subject or object, respectively, crucially depends upon the syntactic reconstruction of the elliptical portion of the comparison.⁴

While it is clear that the comparisons introduced with the preposition כּ in (2) and (3) involve syntactic ellipsis, other comparative expressions do not.⁵ Consider the comparison represented by the prepositional phrase כְּשׁוֹפֵר, in (4):

(4) Isa 58:1a2

כְּשׁוֹפֵר הָרָם קוֹלְךָ ...

Like a ram's horn raise your voice.

cf. *Like [one raises] a ram's horn raise your voice.⁶

In this case, restoring the comparison syntactically is not possible (as indicated above by the asterisk), since in the Bible the action of sounding the ram's horn is described with the verb 'blow' (תִּקַּע) rather than with the verb 'raise' (הִרִים). Instead, the comparison in (4) must be supplied semantically – raise your voice so that it proclaims the message loudly, just as a ram's horn would.⁷

Nonetheless, prepositional phrases headed by כּ in surface structures that are precisely identical to that in (4) (viz., prepositional phrase, verb, object) may be the result of syntactic ellipsis, as illustrated in (5):

⁴ Notice that in English, the pronominal forms in comparisons reflect the underlying sentence roles of subject and object. Lees (1961:174–75) uses this fact to argue that comparative constructions are derived from two underlying, symmetrical sentences (cf. *I know him better than she [knows him] and I know him better than [he knows] her*).

⁵ Jenni (1994:28) describes another type of comparison which does not involve ellipsis, namely, cases where the prepositional phrase with כּ modifies a noun phrase, in much the same way as a relative clause. He cites Neh 6:11a הֲאִישׁ כְּמוֹנֵי יְבָרָח 'should a man like me flee?' No ellipsis is involved; that is, the sentence is not *'should a man [flee] like I flee?'

⁶ Ungrammatical sentences, following standard linguistic practice, are preceded by an asterisk.

⁷ Drawing from Napoli's discussion of comparatives (1983:686–87), compare the following English sentences containing comparisons with *like*: (a) *Mary eats like a tornado* [*eats]; (b) *Mary eats like a bear does*. The sentence in (a) involves a comparison between a sentence and the noun phrase constituent following *like*. The sentence in (b) involves a comparison between a sentence and another sentence involving deletion following *like*.

(5) Isa 42:13a2

... כְּאִישׁ מִלְחָמוֹת יַעִיר קִנְאָה ...

Like a warrior [stirs up his fury], he stirs up his fury.

In this verse, God is said to stir up his fury like a warrior stirs up his fury. The noun phrase אִישׁ מִלְחָמוֹת within the prepositional phrase is the subject of the elided clause.

We can more clearly demonstrate that an elided clause may underlie comparative sentences (as is the case in [5]) when where more than one constituent of the elided clause remains, as in (6):

(6) Isa 59:10a1

... וְנִשְׁשָׁה כְּעֹרְרִים קִיר ...

We grope like blind men [grope] a wall.

The noun קִיר ‘a wall’ must relate to the action of the blind men and not to the metaphorical action of the people of Israel. In other words, קִיר is the object of the elided verb; it is not the object of the explicit verb.⁸

In this paper, I consider syntactically reduced comparative constructions; I will not consider further here comparative constructions such as (4), which require a semantic interpretation.⁹ Rather, I am interested in exploring the various syntactic patterns of ellipsis that are found in comparative constructions involving the preposition כְּ.¹⁰

⁸ For additional examples in which a constituent following the prepositional phrase must relate to the elided verb include Isa 38:19a (הַיִּחַי הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יוֹדֵךָ כְּמוֹנֵי הַיּוֹם) ‘the living, the living – they praise you as I [praise you] today’; Isa 60:8 (מִי־אֵלֶּה קָעַב תְּעוֹפְיִנָה וְכִינֹיִם) ‘Who are these flying like a cloud [flies] / like doves [fly] to their coops’; Mic 4:12b (כִּי קִבְצָם כְּעֹמֵר גֶּרְנָה) ‘for he will gather them like [one gathers] sheaves to the threshing floor).

Isa 53:2a1–2 requires a more nuanced analysis: וַיִּנְעַל כִּינּוֹק לְפָנָיו וְכִשְׂרָשׁ מֵאֲרֶץ צִיָּה ‘and he grew like a young plant [grows] before him and like a root [grows] from dry ground’. It is clear that the prepositional phrase in a2 (‘from dry ground’) must relate to the elided verb within the reduced comparative clause, rather than to the main clause. It is less clear whether the prepositional phrase in a1 (‘before him’) relates to the activity of the servant’s growth before God (i.e., the prepositional phrase relates to the verb in the main clause) or to the activity of the plant (i.e., the prepositional phrase relates to the elided verb in the reduced comparative clause).

⁹ Although many of the comparative constructions examined here may semantically be classified as similes, there does not seem to be any syntactic difference between non-figurative comparisons and figurative similes. For a linguistic definition of simile and its application to biblical Hebrew poetry, see Long 1993, esp. 64–67.

¹⁰ The data for this paper are drawn largely, but not exclusively or exhaustively, from Isaiah.

1.0 Comparative ellipsis on the phrasal level

I begin with comparative constructions that involve ellipsis at the level of the phrase, rather than the clause.¹¹ We have already seen that the lengthened form of the preposition, *כְּמוֹ*, may form part of a reduced clausal construction, as in (2) and (3) above. It may also form part of a reduced phrasal construction, as in (7):

(7) Num 23:10b2

וְתֵהִי אַחֲרֵיטִי כְּמֵהוּ

... and may my end be like his [end].

In this case, the head of the noun phrase *אַחֲרֵיטִי* has been deleted from the comparative phrase and only the possessive pronoun remains. O'Connor describes this kind of ellipsis as "blitz" (1980:122).¹²

A structurally similar example occurs in (8), where the head of the noun phrase has been deleted and only the free member of the construct phrase remains (Williams 1976:§583):

(8) Psa 18:34a

מִשְׁנֵה רַגְלֵי כְּאַיִלֹת

He makes my legs like [the legs of] the deer.

We must understand that the construct noun *רַגְלֵי* has been deleted within the prepositional phrase.¹³ The syntactic process of deletion in both of these examples is the same: the head noun of a phrase is deleted when it is preceded by a lexically identical noun.¹⁴

In some cases, the comparative phrase occurs in the middle of the main clause, as in (9):¹⁵

(9) Psa 92:11a

וְתָרֵם כְּרָאִים קַרְנֵי

You raised, like [the horns of] wild oxen, my horn.

- a. (unattested sentence) *you raised my [horn] like the horns of wild oxen.
 b. (underlying order) you raised my horn like [the horns of] wild oxen.

¹¹ In distinguishing phrasal comparatives from clausal comparatives, I am not offering any argument that the phrases are base-generated as opposed to being derived from underlying clauses through syntactical ellipsis. On the distinction, see Hazout 1995:1–2.

¹² See also Jer 50:9b.

¹³ 2 Sam 22:34 is identical in the qere; the kethiv has *רַגְלֵי*. A similar construction occurs in Hab 3:19.

¹⁴ See Judg 13:6 for an example without ellipsis: *וּמְרֵאָהוּ כְּמְרֵאָה מִלְּאֵךְ הָאֱלֹהִים* 'and his appearance is like the appearance of an angel of God.'

¹⁵ Hos 14:7 *וְיִהְיֶה כְּבֹיֹת הַדֹּדוּ וְיִהְיֶה לֵבָנוֹן כְּרֵיחַ לֵבָנוֹן* 'and will be like [the beauty of] the olive tree his beauty' and *וְיִרְיַח לֵבָנוֹן כְּרֵיחַ לֵבָנוֹן* 'and his fragrance (will be) like [the fragrance of] Lebanon'.

There are no examples in which backwards ellipsis of a head noun occurs, as hypothetically illustrated in (9a). In other words, there are no examples where the deleted portion appears before its antecedent. Therefore, we assume that ellipsis of a head noun must be forwards and not backwards.¹⁶ As a result, deletion of the construct noun קָרְנֵי must have occurred when the constituents were ordered as in (9b). After deletion, the reduced comparative phrase moved to the center of the main clause between the verb וַהֲרִם and its object קָרְנֵי . As we will see below, it is quite common in poetry for the reduced comparative construction to move to the center of the clause. This example is also important for what it shows about the constraints on identity between the elided noun and its antecedent: there must be categorial identity (the same word class, here both are nouns); lexical identity (the same word); and structural identity (the head of a noun phrase). However, the elided noun and its antecedent need not be identical in number – in (9), the antecedent is singular and the elided noun is plural.¹⁷

2.0 Comparative ellipsis on the clausal level

Ellipsis on the clausal level involves many more complexities than ellipsis on the phrasal level. As background to the discussion, it is important to consider comparative sentences in which the preposition כִּי introduces a non-reduced clause with a finite verb, as in (10):

(10) Psa 42:2

$\text{כְּאַיִל תֵּעָרַג עַל־אִפְיֻקְיָמוֹם כִּן נַפְשִׁי תֵעָרַג אֵלֶיךָ אֱלֹהִים:}$

As a deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God.

The comparative clause is introduced with כִּי and the main clause is introduced with כִּן . Note that finite verbs from the same root appear in both parts of the sentence.

The use of a finite verb within the comparative portion of the sentence introduced with the preposition כִּי is not frequent. More commonly a reduced verbal form, typically an infinitive, is found, as in (11):

(11) Isa 10:14a2–3

$\text{וְכַאֲסֹף בִּיצִים עֲזָבוֹת כֹּל־הָאָרֶץ אֲנִי אֶסְפְּתֶיהָ}$

... and like gathering abandoned eggs, all the earth I gathered ...

The infinitive construct אֶסְפֶּה in the comparative clause is lexically related to the finite verb אֶסְפְּתֶיהָ in the main clause. An infinitive construct is especially used in

¹⁶ For a description of forwards and backwards ellipsis and the constraints on each in Biblical Hebrew, see Miller 2003 and Miller forthcoming.

¹⁷ For additional argumentation concerning constraints on ellipsis in Biblical Hebrew, see Miller forthcoming.

order to avoid specifying the agent of the comparative clause. (Note also that כֵּן does not introduce the main clause.) We can now compare (11) to (12):

(12) Isa 49:26a2

וְכַעֲסִים דָּמָם יִשְׁכְּרוּן

... and like [drinking] wine, their blood they will drink ...

The syntax in (11) and (12) is precisely identical, except that the underlying infinitive construct has been deleted in (12) to leave only the object 'wine' in the reduced comparative clause.

In some reduced comparative sentences, a noun that is cognate to the verb is used in the comparison rather than a verbal form, as in (13):

(13) Isa 17:13a1

לְאֲמִים כְּשִׂאוֹן מַיִם רַבִּים יִשְׂאוּן

Nations, like the roar of many waters, roar ...

- a. (hypothetical, reduced) לְאֲמִים כְּמַיִם רַבִּים יִשְׂאוּן
Nations, like many waters, roar.
- b. (correct underlying) Nations, like many waters [roar (V)], roar (V).
- c. (impossible underlying) *Nations, like [the roar (N) of] many waters, roar (V).

In the biblical example, a comparison is made between the roaring action of the nations and the roaring sound of many waters. Let us suppose, however, that we encountered a reduced comparative construction like that in (13a). Because ellipsis requires both lexical and categorial identity between the deleted item and its antecedent, we must understand the underlying structure to be that in (13b) in which both the deleted item and its antecedent are verbs. An underlying structure like that in (13c), where the antecedent is a verb, but the deleted item is a noun is syntactically impossible. A sentence very close to (13b) is attested:

(14) Isa 17:12a

הוּי תְּמוֹן עַמִּים רַבִּים כְּתְּמוֹת יַמִּים יְהַמְּיוּן

Ah! The roar of many peoples, like seas roar (infinitive), they roar.

The reduced comparative clause has the infinitive תְּמוֹת, from the same lexical root as the finite verb יְהַמְּיוּן in the main clause.¹⁸

We are now ready to examine the clausal patterns of comparative ellipsis involving the preposition כִּי in which minimally the verb has been deleted and ordinarily only one constituent remains.

It is quite striking that reduced comparative clauses appear in three positions with respect to the main clause, namely, at the end of the main clause, at the beginning of

¹⁸ For another similar example, see Jer 6:23a4: קוֹלָם כְּיַם יְהִמָּה 'Their voice, like the sea, roars'. For evidence that the verb הִמָּה may have waters as the subject, see Ps 46:4; for evidence that nations may be the subject, see Ps 46:7, 83:3.

the main clause, and in the middle of the main clause. We begin with instances in which the reduced comparative clause is after the main clause, that is, it is in its original location.

When the reduced comparative clause is in final position, the comparative clause may have additional remaining constituents, as we saw in (6) above, where both subject and verb remain. Similarly, in (15), the underlying verb has been deleted, leaving two additional constituents, a noun phrase and a prepositional phrase:¹⁹

(15) Isa 17:13b1

וַרְדֵּף כְּמִזְן הַרִים לִפְנֵי הַרוּחַ

and it is driven like chaff [is driven] (on) the mountains before the wind.

The additional material that remains within the comparative clause probably contributes to its location at the end of the main clause – cross-linguistically, phonologically “heavier” constituents tend to occur at the ends of sentences. Furthermore, in final position, the reduced comparative clause is easiest to process, since the antecedent always precedes the deleted item. Nonetheless, in most cases, the comparative clause in final position consists only of a single constituent in the surface syntax, as in (16):

(16) Isa 49:18b3

וַתִּקְשְׁרֵם כַּכֶּלֶה:

... and you will bind them on like a bride [binds them on]

When the reduced comparative clause is in initial position, deletion ordinarily removes all of the embedded clause except for one nominal constituent, as in (17):

(17) Isa 40:11a1

כְּרֹעֵה עֶדְרוֹ יִרְעֶה

Like a shepherd, he shepherds his flock.

Only the subject, רֹעֵה ‘a shepherd’, remains within the reduced comparative clause.²⁰ The placement of the comparative clause at the beginning of the main clause means that on the surface structure the embedded subject, ‘a shepherd’, can share the object and verb of the main clause. This arrangement makes the sentence as a whole much easier to process.

Less frequently, more than one constituent may remain when the reduced comparative clause is in initial position, as in (18):

¹⁹ See also Isa 17:13b2; 38:19a; 59:10a1.

²⁰ Although in isolation the sentence in (17) could be understood without ellipsis (i.e., ‘like a shepherd shepherds his flock ...’), such an understanding is not likely in light of the following lines, which describe additional actions of God that are like those of a shepherd.

(18) Isa 63:13b

כָּסוּס בַּמִּדְבָּר לֹא יִכְשָׁלוּ

Like a horse in the wilderness they do not stumble.

a. Like a horse [does not stumble] in the wilderness, they do not stumble.

b. Like a horse (which is) in the wilderness [does not stumble], they do not stumble.

In this remarkable example, the negative particle plus the verb have been deleted from the comparative clause. It is not clear, however, how the prepositional phrase *בַּמִּדְבָּר* ('in the wilderness' or 'in the open country') relates to the internal syntax of the reduced comparative clause. Should it be considered an adjunct of the deleted verb (i.e., 'as a horse [does not stumble] in the open country'), as in (18a)? Or should it be considered a bare relative clause that modifies the subject (i.e., 'as a horse [that is] in the open country [does not stumble]'), as in (18b). Fortunately, the semantic difference between these two syntactic readings is not very significant.

When the reduced comparative clause occurs in the middle of the enclosing sentence, the construction as a whole has the greatest complexity and is the most difficult to process linearly.

(19) Isa 34:4a2

וְנִגְלוּ כְּסֵפֶר הַשָּׁמַיִם

... and will be rolled up, like a scroll [will be rolled up], the heavens

In (19), the main sentence that surrounds the reduced comparative clause has the order Verb Subject. Between those two constituents, the reduced comparative clause, consisting on the surface only of the subject, has been moved.

When the reduced comparative clause is in the middle of the clause, the subject of the reduced comparative clause may occur immediately after the subject of the enclosing clause, as in (20):

(20) Isa 53:6a1

כָּלֵנוּ כְּצֹאן תְּלֵינוּ

All of us, like sheep, have gone astray.

a. All of us, like sheep [go astray], have gone astray.

b. *All of us (who are) like sheep have gone astray; (others of us ...)

It is important to note that the juxtaposed reduced comparative clause cannot be read as if it were a bare relative clause that modifies the main subject. In other words, we cannot read the sentence as in (20b): 'All of us (who are) like sheep have gone astray'. Bare relative clauses, that is relative clauses without an overt relative word such as *אֲשֶׁר* or *שׁ*, always have a restrictive (as opposed to non-restrictive) interpretation. A restrictive interpretation means that the relative clause provides information necessary for identifying the exact referent of the head word from other possible referents (Holmstedt 2002:114). In Biblical Hebrew, as is true cross-linguistically, bare relative clauses are always restrictive (Holmstedt 2002:118; McCawley 1998:445–47). In (20), reading the prepositional phrase *כְּצֹאן* as a bare relative

clause modifying כְּלֹנִי would give precisely the wrong meaning, namely, that all of those people who are identified as being like sheep have gone astray, but implying that there are other people who are not like sheep and thus have not strayed. Instead, we must understand that a verb has been deleted: 'All of us go astray like sheep [go astray]'. The poetic movement of the reduced comparative clause so that its embedded subject 'sheep' is juxtaposed to the main subject 'all of us' serves to highlight the comparison between the universal delinquency of the people and the proclivity of sheep to stray.

Thus far, we have primarily examined cases where the constituent that remains in the reduced comparative clause is the embedded subject.²¹ This situation obtains in the vast majority of cases.²² However, example (12), repeated here, provides a notable exception, in which the reduced comparative clause consists only of the object:

(12) Isa 49:26a2

וּכְעָסִים דָּמוֹם יִשְׁכְּרוּן

... and as wine (object), their blood (object) they will drink ...

The reduced comparative object is in initial position.²³ In (21), the reduced comparative object is in medial position:²⁴

(21) Isa 59:17b2

וַיַּעַט בְּמַעִיל קְנָאָה:

And he wrapped himself, as (with) a garment, (with) jealousy.

In (22), the reduced comparative object is in final position:²⁵

(22) Isa 59:17a1

וַיִּלְבַּשׁ צְדָקָה בְּשָׂרוֹן

And he clothed himself (with) righteousness, as (with) a breastplate.

²¹ Reduced comparative constructions in Akkadian are similar in that normally only one constituent is retained. Usually the retained constituent is the subject; less frequently, the object is retained; and still less frequently a prepositional phrase or adverb is retained (Buccellati 1976:62–63).

²² Instances when the reduced comparative clause is in initial position include: Isa 29:16a2; 35:1b2–2a1; 40:11a1; 42:13a2; 42:14b1; 43:17b3; 59:11a2; 63:13b.

Instances with the reduced comparative clause in medial position include: Isa 9:17a1; 10:13b2; 16:11; 30:33b3; 34:4a2; 38:12b1; 42:13a1; 50:9b1; 51:6a3; 51:6a4; 53:2a1; 53:6a1; 58:8a1; 59:11a1; 60:8a; 60:8b; 62:1b1; 62:1b2; 64:5b1; 64:5b2; 65:25a2; 66:14a2.

Instances with the reduced comparative clause in final position include: Isa 5:29a2; 14:10b1; 14:19a1; 24:20a1; 24:20a2; 27:10a2; 35:1b; 38:12a; 40:31a2; 42:19a2; 42:19a3; 42:19b2; 49:18b3; 50:4b; 51:20a2; 59:10b2; 59:19b.

²³ See also Isa 51:8a1, 51:8a2.

²⁴ See also Isa 10:14a1; 40:15a1, 40:15a2; 40:15b; 40:22b1; 40:22b2; 40:24b2; 44:22a1; 44:22a2; 49:18b2; 58:5b1.

²⁵ See also Isa 30:22b1; 41:25b1; 59:10b1.

Other types of constituents are only rarely found as the sole constituent within a reduced comparative clause. In (23), the noun phrase represents a temporal adjunct of the embedded clause:

(23) Isa 59:10b1

כְּשֶׁלְנוּ בַצְהָרִים כְּנֹשֶׁף

We stumble at noon as twilight.

- a. (deleted preposition) We stumble at (כְּ) noon as [we stumble at (כְּ)] twilight.
 b. (adverbial accusative) We stumble at (כְּ) noon as [we stumble] (at) twilight.

Sentences such as (23) have often been cited by grammarians as examples in which the preposition כְּ has the “ability to absorb” other prepositions (König 1897:§319g; see also Waltke and O’Connor 1990:§11.2.9). If that is the case, then underlyingly the preposition כְּ preceded the noun נֹשֶׁף ‘twilight’, as represented in (23a), and was deleted along with the verb. Alternatively, one could view נֹשֶׁף as an adverbial accusative, as represented in (23b). In that case, there is no underlying preposition כְּ which was deleted. Do we have any reason to prefer one analysis over the other? To answer this question, we must consider in more detail the syntactic contexts in which the preposition כְּ purportedly “absorbs” other prepositions.

It is clear that when the verb is deleted from a comparative clause, prepositions that mark the direct relationship of noun phrases to the verb are deleted also:

(24) Psa 83:10

עֲשֵׂה־לָהֶם כַּמְדִּין כְּסִסְרָא כְּיָבִין בְּנַחַל קִישׁוֹן:

Do to them as [you did to] Midian, and as [you did to] Sisera, and as [you did to] Yabin at the Wadi Kishon.

In (24), the preposition לְ marks the indirect objects of the imperative עֲשֵׂה. In the reduced comparative clauses that follow, both the verb and the preposition have been deleted.²⁶

Similarly, in verbless clauses that form their predication with the preposition לְ, deletion within a comparative clause removes the preposition:

(25) Isa 5:29a1

שִׁאֲנָה לוֹ כַּלְבִּיא

The roar (belonging) to him (is) like [the roar (belonging) to] the lion.

Underlyingly, the comparative clause is כַּשִׁאֲנָה לְלְבִיא ‘like the roar (belonging) to the lion’.²⁷ The head noun and the preposition have been deleted.

²⁶ See also Lev 19:18; 19:34; Deut 3:20; Josh 1:15; Isa 63:2b.

²⁷ Compare Zech 5:9a5: וְלִהְיֶה כְּנָפִים כְּנָפֵי הַחֲסִידָה ‘the wings belonging to them were [lit., to them (were) wings] like the wings of the stork’. There is no ellipsis of the noun ‘wings’ between the first half of the sentence and the second because the two halves of the sentence do not match syntactically.

Preliminarily, then, we can conclude that prepositions that relate noun phrases to predications, whether verbal or non-verbal, are deleted along with the predication. An additional line of evidence for this analysis is the fact that there are no instances of the preposition כ compounded with the preposition ל or with the object marker את.²⁸ However, it is possible, though by no means frequent, for the preposition כ to be compounded with other prepositions, including ב, על (Isa 59:18ab; 63:7; Ps 119:14; 2 Chr 32:19), and possibly מן (Gen 38:24), מפני (Lev 26:37), and את (Gen 34:31) (Joüon-Muraoka 1993:§133h). The fact that כ can be compounded with these prepositions raises the question of whether adjuncts such as נִשְׁפָּךְ in example (23) were underlyingly related to the verb with the preposition ב.

To answer that question, we need to look at instances in which כ is governed by כ. A verse with two examples of כ plus כ is found in (26):²⁹

(26) Isa 1:26

וְאֲשִׁיבָה שְׁפָטֶיךָ כְּבָרָאשְׁנָה וְיַעֲצִיךָ כְּבִתְחִלָּה

And I will restore your judges as at beginning and your counselors as at the first.

a. *And I will restore your judges as [I restored them] at the beginning ...

b. And I will restore your judges (to be) as at the beginning ...

The function of the prepositional phrase with כ in this sentence, however, is not that of a reduced comparative clause, which would give us the incorrect reading in (26a). Instead, the sentence has the reading without ellipsis as indicated in (26b).

I conclude, therefore, that within a reduced comparative clause, all prepositions are usually deleted so that on the surface, the preposition כ immediately governs a noun phrase. This analysis provides us with a principled way to describe when the preposition כ “absorbs” other prepositions, as in examples (23), (24), and (25), and when it does not, as in example (26).³⁰

We are now ready to look at two verses whose syntax is difficult. The first is Isaiah 10:14:

(27) Isa 10:14a

וְתִמְצָא כֶּקֶן יָדֵי לַחִיל הָעַמִּים
וּכְאֶסֶף בֵּי צִים עֲזוּבוֹת כָּל־הָאָרֶץ אֲנִי אֶסְפְּתִי

My hand found like a nest the wealth of the peoples /
and like gathering abandoned eggs, all the earth I gathered.

²⁸ In Hab 3:14, the long form of the preposition (כְּמוֹ) precedes an infinitive construct prefixed with ל. BHS suggests emending to פִּימוֹ.

²⁹ See also the combination of כ plus כ in the phrases כְּבָרָאשְׁנָה (Judg 20:32; 1 Kgs 13:6b2–3; Jer 33:7b, 11b), כְּבִתְחִלָּה (Isa 1:26b), כְּבִתְחִלָּה (1 Sam 14:14) (Jenni 1994:24).

³⁰ Three possible exceptions to this principle occur in Judg 20:32, Lev 26:37, and Ps 119:14, all of which may be reduced comparative clauses in which a preposition has not been deleted. However, the reduced comparative clauses in Lev 26:37 and Ps 119:14 seem to have a modal or counterfactual sense and this fact may account for the exceptional retention of the preposition (see Lev 26:37a1 וְכִשְׁלוּ אִישׁ־בְּאֶחָיו כְּמִפְּנֵי־חֶרֶב ‘and they will stumble as (if) [they stumble] from before the sword’).

- a. cf. the possible, but unattested order: $\text{וַתִּמְצֵא יָדִי לְחֵיל הָעַמִּים כְּכֶן}$ (27a)
 My hand found (*l*-) the wealth of the peoples like [finding] (*l*-) a nest.

The word order of the first line is especially difficult in that the reduced comparative clause כְּכֶן is placed between the verb and the subject of the main clause. If the comparative clause had been placed at the end of the first line, as represented in (27a), the comparison would have focused on the similarities between “wealth” and “nest”. But by placing the comparative clause immediately after the main verb, the comparison focuses on the ease with which “the wealth of the peoples” is seized. Since the constituent within the reduced comparative clause is the object (the preposition ל marking the object has been deleted along with the verb) and on the basis of the parallel line, it is quite likely that the deleted verb is an infinitive construct rather than a finite form.³¹ The first line, which at first blush seems very difficult to process, becomes quite clear.

A more difficult example is found in (28):

- (28) Isa 3:9a1–3

הַכֶּרֶת פְּנֵיהֶם עֲנֹתָהּ כִּם
 וְחַטָּאתָם כְּסֹדֶם הַגִּידוּ
 לֹא כִחְדָּו

- 9a1 Their partiality accuses them³²
 9a2 and their sin like Sodom they declare
 9a3 they do not conceal it.

The second clause (9a2) can be understood in two ways:

- (a) (bare relative) Their sin (that is) like [the sin of] Sodom they declare.
 (b) (reduced comparative clause) Their sin, like Sodom [declared it], they declare.

As we have noted above, bare relative clauses always have a restrictive sense. Reading the sentence as a bare relative, as represented in (a), then, would mean: “they declare their sin that is like the sin of Sodom, but not necessarily other sins.” Reading the sentence as a reduced comparative, as in (b), means that the people of Israel are like Sodom in openly declaring their sin (Kaiser 1972:42), rather than being like Sodom in the nature of the sins that they commit. The reading in (b) is syntactically preferred for two reasons. First, it avoids the restrictive sense of a bare relative, as in

³¹ Additionally, it is possible that we should understand יָדִי ‘my hand’ as “shared” by both main clause and comparative clause on the surface structure. A similar construction of preposition כ , infinitive construct, object, and subject is found in Isa 5:24: $\text{כָּאֵכָל קֶשֶׁת לְשׁוֹן אֵשׁ}$ ‘as a flame of fire consumes straw’.

³² I read $\text{הַכֶּרֶת פְּנֵיהֶם}$ in 9a1 as meaning the same thing as $\text{הַכֶּרֶת פְּנֵיהֶם}$ in Prov 28:21, viz. ‘showing favoritism’ (see also Prov 24:23).

(a). Second, the syntactic structure of the verse, although quite unusual, is not without parallel. The unusual word order – Object, reduced comparative clause with subject remaining, and main clause Verb – probably accounts for the tendency of commentators to consider כְּפָדֶם a gloss.³³ But the overall rarity of the order Object, Prepositional Phrase, Verb in the Hebrew Bible, suggests that we should not expect to find very many sentences like this one, where the Prepositional Phrase in the middle of an object-initial sentence contains the embedded subject. Still, there is a syntactically identical sentence in (29):

(29) Jer 25:30

הִדְרָר כְּדֹרְכִים יַעֲנֶה אֵל כָּל־יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ

A shout, like the grape-treaders [utter], he will utter to all the inhabitants of the earth.

Therefore, example (28) must mean: “They declare their sin just as Sodom declared its sin.”

3 Conclusions

In conclusion, what appear to be simple prepositional phrases introduced with the preposition כְּ may actually be elliptical clauses. An understanding of the syntactic processes and patterns of reduced comparative clauses assists us in untangling the sometimes convoluted syntax of biblical poetry and in correctly interpreting the meaning of comparative sentences.

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³³ Wildberger 1991:125; Marti 1900:38–39.

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Abstract

Comparative statements involving a prepositional phrase introduced with \triangleright sometimes involve ellipsis. On the level of the phrase, comparative constructions may involve the ellipsis of a head noun. On the level of the clause, comparative constructions may involve the ellipsis of the verb and additional constituents. The analysis presented here provides a principled way to account for the observation of traditional grammarians that the preposition \triangleright sometimes "absorbs" other prepositions.