Some Notes on the Syntax of Biblical Hebrew *zeh*[1]

Na'ama Pat-El[2] *(Cambridge, USA)*

1 Introduction

The demonstrative in Biblical Hebrew usually follows the noun it modifies and agrees with it in gender, number and definiteness, much like the adjective.[3] There are very few examples in the Bible of a demonstrative standing before its head noun. Most of the examples are attributive. Joosten (1991) dealt with demonstratives preceding a proper noun, and explained it as grammatical marking of an emotional distance between the speaker and the referent of the proper noun (1991: 413).

However, the deictic element *zeh* seems to precede its head noun in some constructions, that are not attributive. A very frequent one is the *zeh 'eśrîm šānāh* pattern. I will try to explain the reasons for the irregularity of this word order and agreement in the following pages.

2 *zeh 'eśrîm šānāh*

This construction consists of a temporal noun,[4] always pragmatically plural,[5] with *zeh* positioned directly before it. The noun phrase almost always contains a quantifier, usually a number.[6] However, there is no agreement between the demonstrative and the noun phrase; the demonstrative is always *zeh*, whichever noun it precedes[7]. Therefore, we may say that syntactically *zeh* is not masculine or singular, because there are no equivalent feminine or plural forms in similar

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[3] There is however one deviation regarding definiteness: after a construct the demonstrative never appears with a definite article, ex. *bənênû zeh sôrēr ûmōreh* (Deut. 21, 20) "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious."
[4] Including the noun *pa'am* "(one)" time with the meaning of an occurrence in time (BDB 1906: 822a).
[5] In the phrase *zeh 'eśrîm šānāh*, *šānāh* is pragmatically, though not morphologically, plural. Syntactically, when tens above the first ten precede their noun, they take singular of certain nouns (Gesenius 1910: 433).
[6] But also adjectives *zeh yāmîm rabbîm* (2Sam. 14,2; Josh. 22,3) "many days", and adverbs *zeh kammāh šānîm* (Zech. 7,3) "several days". A rare exception is *zeh yāmîm 'ô zeh šānîm* (1Sam. 29,3) "days or years".
[7] No reference to this example of incongruency is found in Levi (1987).

constructions. Furthermore, as I have mentioned in the introduction, the position of *zeh* before the noun phrase and not after it is highly irregular. The relationship between the noun and the demonstrative is therefore not very clear.

Pragmatically, this construction is used when referring to time streched from a certain past time to the present. The time that has already passed by is affecting the present speech. Thus, for example, Delilah says to Samson: *zeh šālōš pəʿāmîm hētaltā bî* (Judg. 16,15) "you have fooled me three times now", after Samson had ridiculized her thrice; and when Joab gives directions to the woman of Tekoa, he tells her: *wəhāyît kəʾiššāh zeh yāmîm rabbîm mitʾabbelet ʿal mēt* (2Sam. 14,2) "and you will be as a woman who is mourning a one who has died for many days now", and he means that she should act as if she has been mourning for many days already.

On examining which elements may appear in the same syntactic slot, namely the position preceding temporal nouns, it is clear that *zeh* belongs syntactically with adverbs.[8]

- Ø – *wayyārem mōšeh ʾet yādô wayyak ʾet hasselaʿ bəmaṭṭēhû pa"māyim* (Num. 20,11) "And Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice."
- Adverb – *kî zeh šənātayim harāʿāb bəqereb hāʾāreṣ wəʿôd ḥāmēš šānîm "šer ʾên ḥārîš wəqāṣṣîr* (Gen. 45,6) "For the famine has been in the land for two years now and for five years more there is no plowing nor harvest."

As an adverb, it does not have motio, i.e. inflection, nor corresponding feminine or plural equivalents. We need to explain then how it came about that *zeh* undertook an adverbial function in this construction, presumably indicating time, bearing in mind that in other constructions it mainly indicates space.

2.1 Previous studies

Joüon (1991: 531) claims that *zeh* in Hebrew was originally a demonstrative adverb, meaning "here, hic", as in *haʾatāh zeh bənî ʿēśāw ʾîm lōʾ* (Gen. 27,21) "Is that you, my son Esau?" or *hinneh zeh* (1Kg. 19,5). The temporal sense, according to him, is a further development. However, Joüon does not explain how an adverb became a demonstrative adjective. Moreover, it is not very plausible diachronically that *zeh* was originally an adverb. There are enough comparative data to safely assume that the *ḏ*-element in Proto-Semitic is a demonstrative-relative.[9] Any function deviating from the demonstrative function should be explained, and not vice versa.

Furthermore, the two examples given by Joüon for an adverbial use are not of the same category. The first is a relative in a cleft sentence, much like *māh-zzeh*.[10] The second is indeed an adverb. However, *hinneh-zeh* appears only four times in the

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8 Blau (1976: 103) rightly takes the whole pattern [*zeh* + temporal noun] to be an adverb, but does not discuss the synchronic function of *zeh*.

9 Huehnergard (2006: 110–114).

10 Joüon-Muraoka (2000: 533). See also Goldenberg (1977: [119]).

Bible, two of which are in *Song of Songs*. This "adverbial" use can be easily explained as a result of a process during which the demonstrative, which served to mark deixis, namely, immediacy in space, became a marker of immediacy in general.[11] Therefore, there is no reason to assume that the alleged adverbial function of *zeh* is original.

Brockelmann analyses *zeh* in this pattern as a demonstrative pronoun which indicates a plural noun, if it stands at the beginning of the sentence (1913: 77; 1956: 20). However, Brockelmann occasionally renders this pattern as a cleft sentence, without further explanation.[12]

Waltke & O'Connor (1990: 311) attempt to explain this construction as an extension of constructions like *hayyôm hazzeh* (as in *hayyôm hazzeh 'āḥēl gaddelkā* (Josh. 3,7) "On this day, I will begin to exalt you"). This explanation is syntactically impossible for several reasons:

- Definiteness – in *zeh 'eśrîm šānāh*, *zeh* is always absolute, whereas in *hayyôm hazzeh*, *zeh* is always definite.
- Word order – in *zeh 'eśrîm šānāh* constructions, *zeh* precedes the noun it modifies, whereas in *hayyôm hazzeh*, *zeh* follows the noun it modifies.
- Gender – *zeh* in *hayyôm hazzeh* is in agreement with a masculine noun, and therefore masculine itself. *hayyāmmîm hazzeh is ungrammatical. In *zeh 'eśrîm šānāh*, *zeh* seems to have no gender, because it can appear with both masculine and feminine plural nouns, without a change of form.[13]
- Number – *zeh* in *hayyôm hazzeh* is singular and has a plural form, *'ēlleh* (as in *haššānîm haṭṭōbōt habbā'ōt hā'ēlleh* Gen. 41,35). *zeh* in *zeh 'eśrîm šānāh* has no grammatical number. It appears solely with plural nouns, but has no plural counterpart.

Another possibility Waltke & O'Connor consider is to take *zeh hayyôm* as the origin of the expression under discussion (as in *zeh hayyôm* *ᵃšer nātan 'et sîsrā' bᵊyādekā* (Judg. 4,14) "This is the day on which God has handed over Sisera to your hands."). Again, *zeh hayyôm* is unlikely to be the source of *zeh 'eśrîm šānāh*, for several reasons. *zeh hayyôm* is a full nexus, when it stands at the beginning of a sentence and followed by a relative clause.[14] The only example of *zeh hayyôm* which is not a

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11 Demonstratives with deixis to immidiate referent are often erroneously translated as involving spatial adverbs, as "here, there", when infact they mark the direct referent of the speaker, which may or may not be geographically closer to the speaker, but definitely closer in context.

12 Ex. *zeh 'eśrîm šānāh 'ānōkî 'immākᵊ* (Gen. 31,38) is translated as "Es sind jetzt 20 Jahre, daß ich bei dir bin." Brockelmann (1956: 10).

13 Waltke & O'Connor (1990: 311) claim that the construction *zeh 'eśrîm šānāh* appears rarely with *zō't*, when in fact there is only one example of *zō't* is *zō't happa'am 'eṣem mē"ṣāmay* (Gen. 2,23) "this time, a bone from my bones" where the temporal noun is unusually singular.

14 Consider also the following examples: *zeh hayyôm 'āśāh yhwh* (Psa. 118,24) "this is the day, which the lord has made"; *zeh hayyôm šeqqȋwwînūhû* (Lam. = lamentations 2,16) "this is the

nexus is *wəhēqîm yhwh lô melek 'al yiśrā'ēl ᵃšer yakrît 'et bêt yārābə'ām zeh hayyôm* (1Kings 14,14). It is obvious from the word order, that *zeh hayyôm* in this example is not the main nexus, but rather an attributive demonstrative.[15] In addition, the noun *hayyôm* in all of those examples is singular and definite, unlike the nouns in *zeh 'eśrîm šānāh* pattern.

Pennacchietti (1980) is the only article solely dedicated to this syntactic question. He rejects the opinion that *zeh* is an adverb and prefers to retain its original function as a demonstrative. Pennacchietti analyses these sentences as cleft sentences (1980: 236).[16] He claims that the sentences are the result of a transformation of a sentence with a temporal adverbial accusative, a construction known well in other Semitic languages (1980: 238). Pennacchiatti assumes the existence of a suppressed relativizer, which subordinates the main clause to the temporal expression. *zeh* functions as the subject of a nominal sentence, with a temporal noun as a predicate. This sentence functions as the logical subject in a cleft sentence, while the remaining part is the logical predicate. Thus the process may be decribed as the following: *hētaltā bî [šālôš pə'āmîm]^{Acc.}* → **zeh šālôš pə'āmîm [Ø]^{Rel.} hētaltā bî* (Judg. 16,15) "è 3 volte che ti sei burlato di me" (Eng. "it is three times that you made fun of me"). Pennacchietti's explanation lies heavily on the position of the *zeh* clause. In order to analyse as clefts the sentences where the *zeh* construction follows the main predicate, Pennacchietti needs to assume the latter is a later construction. This is a rather circular argument; it is not substantiated and the only reason to assume such a process is to substantiate the claim of a cleft sentence. There is no apparent difference in distribution between preceding and following *zeh*; therefore there is no reason to assume a diachronic process here. Pennacchietti's analysis, though very imaginative, also fails to explain examples such as *ṣamtem wəsāpôd baᵃmîšî ûbaššəbî'î wəzeh šĭbə'îm šānāh* (Zechariah 7,5) "you have fasted and mourned on the fifth and seventh month, and (it has been like that) for seventy years now", where the temporal expression is syntactically marked as separated with *waw* from what, according to Pennacchietti, is its subordinated clause.[17]

Like Pennacchietti, Zewi (1992) takes this pattern to be cleft (1992: 48).[18] She interprets the pattern as similar to Type C, in her division of sentence types in Biblical Hebrew. According to the analysis suggested in her dissertation, *zeh* is the subject and *'eśrîm šānāh* is the predicate, while the rest of the sentences is implicitly subordinated to it. On a higher level of syntactic interpretation, the

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day we hoped for", where the main predicate is clearly *zeh hayyôm* and the rest of the sentence is subordinated to it, whether as an asyndetic or a syndetic clause.

[15] The position of the attributive demonstrative before its head noun is irregular, but not impossible. See Joüon-Muraoka (2000: II 533) for many more examples and Blake (1912: 172) and Joosten (1991) for discussion.

[16] *frasi scisse*. Pennacchietti bases his analysis in part on Brockelmann and Blau. While the first does translate this pattern as a cleft, though without explaining his reasons, the latter does not offer any translation or analysis that could be interpreted as a cleft.

[17] Oddly enough, the *waw* is missing from this sentence in Pennacchietti's list of examples (p. 226).

[18] This analysis is missing from Zewi (1994).

pattern *zeh 'eśrîm šānāh* is the predicate of the following clause.[19] Zewi too, refers only two sentences where the pattern *zeh 'eśrîm šānāh* appears at the beginning of the sentence. However, in 14 occurances out of 24 occurances of this pattern in the bible, this pattern stands at the end of the proposition, and thus this pattern is very unlikely to be cleft.

2.2 Comparative data

Temporal constructions with demonstrative in other languages are almost always definite, as for instance in Mishnaic Hebrew *'ôtô hayyôm* "the same day" (*'ābōdā zārā* i. 3).[20] A slightly different structure is used in the Aramaic of the Palestinian Targum *b-hdh š'th, b-hdh zmnh* meaning "now" with a reverse order of demonstrative and noun (Fassberg 1990: 121). Fassberg explains the inversion in these forms as an imitation of Biblical Aramaic *bāh ša*ᵃ*tāh* (1990: 122).[21] However, the Biblical Aramaic phrase does not make use of demonstratives with temporal nouns. At any rate, both dialects differ from the Biblical Hebrew pattern, since the noun used is definite. Moreover, the adverbial function of the Aramaic pattern is due to the preposition, and is not inherent to this pattern.[22]

In Colloquial Egyptian Arabic there are instances of the feminine demonstrative before temporal nouns (of any gender), as in *dīk 'in-nahār* "the other day", where both the gender and the word order are unusual. Brustad attributes this phenomenon to the "non-specific nature of temporal noun" (2000: 127). She suggests that this may be similar to the feminine singular agreement with collective nouns in Classical Arabic, i.e. a neuter gender (2000: 139). She also points to the phenomenon of gender neutralization of the adjective in Egyptian Arabic (2000: 62ff.).

Pennacchietti compared the Hebrew constructions to their Syriac, Arabic and Ethiopic translations, and found that none of these languages translated the Hebrew using a similar pattern (1980: 228-232). Moreover, he concluded that this pattern is absent from all the Semitic languages.[23]

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[19] Zewi may be influenced also by Israeli Hebrew, where the structure is sometimes understood as a cleft. A well-known Israeli song opens with the line: *zeh kəbār kammāh yāmîm šebbə-ṣawtā' môpî'a zamār məhuppāś* (Shlomo Artsi, *Ṣawta*) "it is a few days now that a disguised singer appears in *Ṣawta*" (a famous club in Tel Aviv).

[20] This form stems from the nota accusativi, *'t* which took a definite noun in previous stages of Hebrew. Segal (1927: 202).

[21] The word order in both dialects is noun-demonstrative, ex. *rāzā' dənāh* "this secret", *qirayatā' dāk* "this city".

[22] In Syriac there is a construction with *d*-without a governing noun, which introduces a temporal noun. The whole construction forms a temporal adverb, ex. *d-ša'tā* "immediatly" (Lit. "of the hour"), *d-hāšā* "now" (Lit. "of here"). Nöldeke (2001: 167). Moreover, the Syriac construction contains a singular noun in the emphatic state (Syriac adverbs tend to be in the absolute) while the Hebrew one is plural and absolute.

[23] "Tanto più che costruzioni del genere risultano assenti in ogni altra lingua semitica". Pennacchietti (1980: 227). He also notes that the only exception is Targumic Aramaic,

2.3 Syntax

There could be another explanation for the syntax of the demonstrative in this pattern. First, regarding its temporal adverbial qualities, one would argue, and rightly so, that *zeh* in this pattern does not indicate time at all. Granted, it is positioned as part of a temporal adverbial phrase, but the indication of time lies in the nouns involved, not in *zeh* itself.[24]

Furthermore, according to Diessel (1999), typologically, there are very few examples of demonstratives, which originally indicated spatial terms and were later shifted to indicate temporal terms (1999: 139-140). However, all of the examples listed in his study are of what he calls "adverbial demonstratives", that is, forms like Eng. *"here, there"*, Gr. *"entautha"* and the like, which in fact did not change their syntactical function, since they were, and remain, adverbs, but rather slightly changed their semantic field (1999: 140, tables 68 and 69).[25] It is evident, therefore, that even in world languages the shift from demonstrative adjective to adverb is very rare.

Close examination of other patterns with *zeh* may clarify the question at hand. *zeh* is found in prepositional possessive clauses, where it functions as a neuter subject. Consider the following examples:

1 *wəzeh lləkā tərûmat matānām* (Num 18,11) "and you will have this as gift offering"

2 *wəzeh lləkā hā'ôt* (1Sam. 2,34) "and you will have this as a sign"

Notice that there is no congruency between the subject and other elements in these sentences.[26]

The structure with temporal nouns is built on the same principles:[27]

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however all the incidents of *dənān/dənā* with a temporal noun are slavish translations of the Hebrew pattern.

[24] There is only one example of an adverbial *zeh* without a following noun: *ʿlû zeh bannegeb wa ʿlîtem 'et hāhār* (Num. 13,17) "come up in the Negev and up the hill side". Most translators translate *zeh* here with a spatial meaning. This unique use of *zeh* seems to differ from the construction under discussion in that it refers to the future and does not imply any temporal reference. It is rather closer to the use of *zeh* in the *hı̄nneh zeh* pattern.

[25] Most of Diessel's examples are better termed "Semantic shift", rather than "grammaticalization".

[26] Compare Eng. *it* in *it was many years before we met again*.

[27] Possessive-like constructions referring to time are extant in other languages as well: Fr. *J'ai vingt ans* "I am twenty years old", literally "I have twenty years". Note also Syriac *d-'ı̆t lhān lam šet šnîn dlā rēšē* (Hist. de l'église d'adiabene, 4, l. 4) "they are without a leader for 6 years now", where a possessive construction (*'ı̄t l-*) is used to express length of time.

3 *zeh llî 'eśrîm šānāh bəbêtekā* (Gen. 31,41) "I have been in your house for twenty
    years now."

We may postulate a process by which an adverbial circumstantial sentence, much
like the Arabic *ḥāl*,[28] originally finite, lost the possessive marker *l-*, perhaps first in
colloquial parlance, and became more and more dependent on the main sentence
until it was understood to be a circumstantial adverbial phrase, rather than a clause
with full nexus.[29] As an adverbial clause or phrase, it may be positioned in different
places in the sentence, thus we can find both word orders:

4 *lāqōb 'ōybay qərā'tîkā wəhinneh bērktā bārēk zeh šālōš pə'āmîm* (Num. 24,10) "I
    have called you to curse my enemies, and instead you have blessed them three
    times."

5 *zeh šālôš pə'āmîm hētaltā bî wəlō' higgadətā llî bammeh kōḥªkā gādôl.* (Judg. 16,
    15) "You have mocked me three times now and did not tell me what makes your
    strength great."

This process may explain some of the apparent abnormalities of the construction.
Since in the original sentence the predicate was possessive *l* + pronominal suffix, not
a noun phrase, there is no agreement between the demonstrative and the noun phrase.
The unexplainable function of the demonstrative is thus accounted for, as a remnant
of the previous construction.[30]

3 Conclusion

The rare instances of Biblical Hebrew *zeh* as an adverb should be explained as a
remnant of a quite regular nominal sentence which lost its independence and became
an adverbial phrase. Since all stages of this process are attested, such an explanation
does not force us to assume functions which do not accord with the form's general
syntactic function in the language or with the linguistic evidence.

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28 Cf. the adverbial use of *waw* in *kî ṣamtem wəsāpôd baḥªmîšî ûbaššəbî'î wəzeh šîbə'îm šānāh*
    (Zech. 7,5) "when you have fasted and mourned on the fifth and seventh month for seventy
    years [is it for me that you fasted?]".

29 Blau (1976) briefly notes that those patterns were "presumably originally independent clauses
    opening with deictic *zeh* ('it is twice', 'it is two years')" (p. 103).

30 A somewhat similar construction is the Levantine Arabic *ṣar-li sa'a binṭur* "I have been
    waiting for an hour", where the original sentence which underlies the adverbial phrase is still
    apparent. In classical Arabic *ṣāra* (from the root *ṣyr* "happen, become") takes *l-* which
    indicates the party affected. Presumably, the sentence originally contained two separated
    clauses and meant "it happened to me for an hour; I waited". *ṣar-* is no longer the main verb
    in the sentence, but rather the present habitual *binṭur*, and *ṣar-li sa'a* is understood to be a
    temporal adverbial phrase.

A Appendix: Examples

1. *wayy'əqbēnî zeh pa ᵃmayim.* (Gen. 27,36)
2. *zeh 'eśrîm šānāh 'ānōkî 'īmmākə.* (Gen. 31,38)
3. *zeh llî 'eśrîm šānāh bəbêtekā ᵃbadətîkā 'arba' 'eśrēh šānāh bîštê bənōtèkā.* (Gen. 31,41)
4. *kî 'atāh šabnû zeh pa ᵃmāyim.* (Gen. 43,10)
5. *kî zeh šənātayim hārā'āb bəqereb hā'āreṣ.* (Gen. 45,6)
6. *wayənassû 'ōtî zeh 'eśer pə'āmîm wəlō' šām'û bəqólî.* (Num. 14,22)
7. *meh 'āśîtî ləkā kî hĭkī̇tanî zeh šālōš rəgālîm.* (Num. 22,28)
8. *'al māh hĭkkîtā 'et 'ətōnkā zeh šālōš rəgālîm.* (Num. 22,32)
9. *watteṭ ləpānay zeh šālōš rəgālîm* (Num. 22,33)
10. *lāqōb 'ōybay qərā'tîkā whĭnneh bērēktā bārēkə zeh šālōš pə'āmîm* (Num. 24,10)
11. *kî yhwh ᵉlōhèykā ... yāda' lektəkā 'et hammĭdəbār haggādōl hazzeh zeh 'arbā'îm šānāh.* (Deut. 2,7)
12. *wəzākartā 'et kāl hadderek ᵃšer hōlîkᵃkā yhwh ᵉlōhèkā zeh 'arəbā'îm šānāh.* (Deut. 8,2)
13. *wəraglə̄kā lō' bāṣēqāh zeh 'arəbā'îm šānāh.* (Deut. 8,4)
14. *zeh 'arəbā'îm wəhāmēš šānāh me'āz dīber yhwh 'et haddābār hazzeh ... wə'atāh hinnēh 'ānōkî hayyôm ben hāmēš ûšəmônîm šānāh.* (Josh. 14,10)
15. *lō' ᵃzabtem 'et ᵃhēkem zeh yāmîm rabîm 'ad hayyôm hazzeh.* (Josh. 22,3)
16. *zeh šālôš pə'āmîm hētaltā bî wəlō' higgadətā llî bammeh kōhᵃkā gādôl.* (Judg. 16,15)
17. *hᵃlô' zeh dāwĭd 'ebed šā'ûl melek yĭśrā'ēl ᵃšer hāyāh 'ĭtî zeh yāmîm 'ô zeh šānîm.* (1Sam. 29,3)
18. *wəhāyît kə'iššāh zeh yāmîm rabbîm mit'abbelet 'al mēt.* (2Sam. 14,2)
19. *zeh šālōš wə'eśərîm šānāh hāyāh dəbar yhwh 'ēlāy wā ᵃdabēr ᵃlêkem.* (Jer. 25,3)
20. *'ad mātay lō' tərahēm 'et yərûšālaim wə'et 'ārê yəhûdāh ᵃšer zā'amtā zeh šĭbə'îm šānāh.* (Zech. 1,12)
21. *ha'ebkeh bahōdeš hahᵃmîšî hĭnnāzēr ka ᵃšer 'āśîtî zeh kammeh šānîm.* (Zech. 7,3)
22. *kî ṣamtem wəsāpôd bahᵃmîšî ûbaššəbî'î wəzeh šĭbə'îm šānāh.* (Zech. 7,5)
23. *zeh 'eśer pə'āmîm taklîmûnî.* (Job 19,3)
24. *wa ᵃnî lō' nĭqrē'tî lābô' 'el hammelek zeh šəlôšîm yôm.* (Esth. 4,11)

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Abstract

The demonstrative zeh in the phrase zeh 'eśrîm šānāh exhibits some irregularities. It appears before its head noun and is not in grammatical agreement with it. In some grammars it has been described as a spatial or temporal adverb. Several scholars believe it to be a cleft sentence. This paper aims at showing that zeh 'eśrîm šānāh is a remnant of an adverbial clause which lost its dependence and became an adverbial phrase. All the phases of this diachronical syntax are attested in Biblical Hebrew.