The Grammatical Voice of Infinitives in Biblical Hebrew

Kent Aaron Reynolds, Berlin

Introduction

Because of the system of the *binyanim*, which indicates whether a verb is active, passive, or reflexive, one might expect that there is little room for discussion about the grammatical voice of infinitives in biblical Hebrew. However, Joüon-Muraoka explicitly states that the infinitive construct is "neutral in respect of voice, namely the active form can be passive in force."[1] He cites Genesis 4:13 to support the claim:

Example 1.   Genesis 4:13

ויאמר קין אל יהוה	Then Cain said to the LORD,
גדול עוני מנשא	"My penalty is too great to be borne."

The infinitive is the last word of the verse, which he renders with the passive "to be borne." Other grammars make similar statements. "Active infinitives may have a passive sense."[2] "Seinem nominalen Charakter zufolge bezeichnet der Inf. constr. von Haus aus die Handlung an sich, ohne Rücksicht auf Aktiv und Passiv; daher werden im Hebr., wenn es auch besondere passive Infinitive besitzt, doch gelegentlich auch die aktiven Infinitive in passiver Bedeutung gebraucht…"[3]

In the present study, I argue that active infinitives are not used with a passive function or sense. If this is true, it raises the question of why Hebraists make such a claim, and why other scholars perpetuate it. Thus, this article has two goals: 1) to defend the thesis that formally active infinitives are not used with a passive function and 2) to explore what linguistic features of infinitives led

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1   P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Subsidia Biblica 27; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2006), 409. The same comment is found on page 439 of the previous edition (Subsidia Biblica 14; 2 vols. 1991).

2   Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 603.

3   Gotthelf Bergsträsser, *Wilhelm Gesenius' Hebräische Grammatik mit Benutzung der von E. Kautzsch bearbeiteten 28. Auflage* (Leipzig: Vogel, 1918; reprint, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1962), 55. It seems likely, since they all use the same examples (Gen. 4:13; Josh. 2:5; Jer. 25:34; Est. 7:4), that later grammarians consulted earlier ones and perpetuated the lack of precision on this topic. I discuss each of these examples in this study.

grammarians to make the opposite claim.[4] Support for my arguments are presented from two different perspectives: first, a syntactic analysis of all the infinitives construct in Genesis, and second, an examination of cross-linguistic studies of both infinitive and passive constructions.

Definition of Terms

When discussing grammatical voice, "agent" and "patient" are crucial terms. An "agent" is a noun or noun phrase identifying who or what is performing some action. In the active sentence *Mary drove the car*, the agent is the grammatical subject "Mary." In the passive sentence *The car was driven by Mary*, the agent is still Mary, but it is no longer the grammatical subject. A "patient" is a noun or noun phrase that identifies an entity undergoing some process or targeted by some action. Thus, using the same sample sentence, the patient is the "car." In the active realization of the sentence, the "car" is the object, and in the passive sentence the "car" is the subject. Yet in both cases it is the patient. Therefore, a passive sentence is a sentence in which the grammatical subject is also the patient.[5]

Embedding is the inclusion of one clause or sentence in another. In the sentence *I know what you mean*, the words "what you mean" are a clause that functions as the object of the verb "know." Thus, there are two clauses in the sentence: the words "I know" are the framework or matrix into which the second clause, *what you mean*, is embedded. In traditional grammars the embedded clause is often referred to as the "dependent" clause, while the matrix clause is labeled "independent." In this study the terms "matrix clause" and "embedded clause" are used.

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4 Another way of describing this phenomenon is that it is a problem of translation. In other words, the only reason that there is any ambiguity is due to the differences between Hebrew and English (or Hebrew and German in the case of the grammar from Gesenius). When I have discussed this problem with native speakers of Hebrew, the most common reaction is that the thesis stated here is self-evident. It does not even need to be stated. However, I provide some examples at the end of this study that show it is still a problem that affects interpretation, and as I note on the first page of this paper, it is still a position that is maintained in important reference grammars.

5 This definition of a passive sentence is somewhat limited, but it is sufficient for the purpose of this study. What I am describing is a grammatical category, and this must be distinguished from a general description of the activity of a character. For example, "he remained passive in the situation." Linguists will find this rather banal, but unfortunately biblical scholars have not always been careful with this distinction. For a more detailed linguistic discussion see Edward L. Keenan and Matthew S. Dryer, "Passive in the World's Languages," in *Language Typology and Syntactic Description*, 2d ed., vol. 1 *Clause Structure*, ed. Timothy Shopen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 325–361.

Limits of the Study

The database for this study is all of the infinitives construct in Genesis. Since Cynthia Miller has shown that לאמר does not function as an infinitive, it is excluded from consideration.[6] Infinitives absolute are also excluded, in part to eliminate an additional variable and also because they typically function adverbially. I therefore use the word "infinitives" throughout the study as a shorthand for "infinitives construct." A few verses outside of Genesis are discussed, because grammars list them as examples to show that infinitives may be passive in force. Since this study only examines the infinitives construct in Genesis, the conclusion may be considered provisional.[7] However, the number of infinitives analyzed – more than 300 – is more than adequate sample size for the study.

In any language, grammatical voice is interrelated with several other elements that together constitute the contours of action – elements such as transitivity, causativity, fientivity, and so on. Such linguistic features are taken into account in the following analysis; for example, a verb that is intransitive cannot have a corresponding passive. However, for sake of space, not each feature is discussed for every example.

Infinitives in the Derived *Binyanim*

An obvious place to begin when discussing grammatical voice in biblical Hebrew is with the *binyanim*, since for finite verbs the *binyanim* encode the grammatical voice.[8] Infinitives in the derived *binyanim* constitute one-third of the infinitives in Genesis, and all of them are unambiguous with respect to grammatical voice.[9] There are 88 infinitives in Genesis that occur in D and H (36 in D and 52 in H). All 88 are unambiguously active. In the passive or reflexive *binyanim* there are 21 infinitives (14 in N and 7 in HtD), and all of them are passive or reflexive. There are no Dp infinitives construct in Genesis.

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6   Cynthia Miller, *The Representation of Speech in Biblical Hebrew Narrative: A Linguistic Analysis*, Harvard Semitic Monographs, ed. Peter Machinist, vol. 55 (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1996), 163–212.

7   In a separate study I also analyzed all of the infinitives construct in the book of Jeremiah with the same results.

8   Some grammars use the term "stem," e.g., Bruce Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 351f, or in German "*Stammform,*" e.g., Hans Bauer and Pontus Leander, *Historische Grammatik der hebräischen Sprache des Alten Testamentes*, (Halle: Niemeyer, 1922; reprint, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1965), 279.

9   I use the word "derived" here simply as a way to refer to all of the *binyanim* except G; this is not a claim regarding the origin or development of the *binyanim*.

The following example provides a clear illustration of how the *binyanim* indicate grammatical voice, since it contains two infinitives construct of the same root – one in D and the other in HtD.

Example 2.   Genesis 37:35

| ויקמו כל בניו וכל בנתיו | And all his sons and daughters arose |
| לנחמו וימאן להתנחם | **to comfort** him but he refused **to be comforted**. |

The D infinitive is active, and the HtD infinitive is passive. This example clearly shows that an infinitive can be marked as a passive by means of the *binyan*. This fact alone is a strong argument against the claim that formally active infinitives can have a passive function. The functions of the *binyanim* in this example correspond with the functions of the *binyanim* for finite verbs. Although the derived *binyanim* receive little attention in the remainder of this study, all the infinitives in the derived *binyanim* support the thesis that formally active infinitives are not used with a passive function.

Infinitives in G

The 232 infinitives in G are the focus of the following sections, and the examples are organized according to how the agent (or grammatical subject) of the infinitive occurs.[10] This arrangement is helpful because identifying the agent of an infinitive is the first step to determining its grammatical voice. Additionally, I propose that a failure to consider the agent of the infinitive is what has led grammarians to claim that active infinitives can function as passives. Grammars typically identify and describe the various functions of infinitive clauses or the relationship between the infinitive clause and the matrix clause, e.g., purpose, result, complement, etc. This relationship has no affect on the grammatical voice of the infinitive, and it is therefore not discussed.

Infinitives in G with an Explicit Subject

When the infinitive occurs with an explicit subject, there is no question about the grammatical voice; in all occurrences the infinitive is active. Explicit subjects can occur as a separate word (example 3) or as a suffix (example 4).[11]

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10 The percentages listed in the following sections are based on this number (232), rather than the larger number of all the infinitives construct in Genesis. This seems to be the most helpful and clear presentation of the data.

11 "Word" is used here to describe a unit that is set off by spaces in writing or printing, which is sufficient for the purposes here.

Example 3.   Genesis 16:16

ואברם בן שמנים שנה ושש שנים   Now Abram was eighty-six years old,
בלדת הגר את ישמעאל לאברם   when Hagar bore Ishmael for Abram.

The subject of the infinitive (בלדת) is Hagar, and the object is Ishmael as indicated by the use of את. The grammatical voice is unambiguously active. It is relatively rare – only 19 occurrences or less than 10 percent – for the subject of an infinitive to occur as a separate word as in example 3. It is much more common for the subject to occur as a suffix on the infinitive, such as in the following example.

Example 4.   Genesis 28:4

ויתן לך את ברכת אברהם   And may he give you the blessing of
לך ולזרעך אתך   Abraham, to you and to your seed with you,
לרשתך את ארץ מגריך   in order that you would possess the land of
    your sojourning ...

It is clear that the agent of the infinitive (לרשתך) is the suffix "you" – what some grammars label a "subjective suffix." The agent of the infinitive occurs as a suffix 51 times or about 22 percent of all examples.
Infinitives with an explicit agent in Genesis thus total 70. This is slightly less than one-third of the infinitives in Genesis. In all 70 examples there is no question about the grammatical voice; it is everywhere unambiguously active.

Infinitives in G without an Explicit Subject

Infinitive clauses often occur (more than two-thirds of the time) without an explicit subject; that is, the agent of the action is not expressed in the infinitive clause.

Example 5.   Genesis 11:5a

וירד יהוה   Then the LORD went down
לראת את העיר ואת המגדל   to see the city and the tower...

The agent of the infinitive "to see" is "the LORD," who is the grammatical subject of the main verb, "went down."[12] When the agent of the infinitive is co-referential with the subject of the matrix clause, it is not repeated in the infinitive clause.[13] This is the most common infinitival construction in Genesis; it occurs

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12 Some linguists call the LORD the "notional subject" of the infinitive, which is what I am calling the "agent."
13 In fact, it is not grammatically possible to repeat the agent of the infinitive; see footnote 18.

111 times or about 48 percent of the time.[14] In all 111 cases the grammatical voice of the infinitive is unquestionably active.

In the following example (6) the agent of the infinitive is not co-referential with the subject of the matrix clause but rather with the object.

Example 6.   Genesis 2:15

וַיִּקַּח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם	Then the LORD God took the man
וַיַּנִּחֵהוּ בְגַן עֵדֶן	and placed him in the Garden of Eden
לְעָבְדָהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ	to work it and to keep it.

"The man" is the agent of both infinitives at the end of the verse. Examples 5 and 6 are similar, since an argument from the matrix clause serves as the agent of the infinitive in both cases. The difference between the two examples is the function of the argument in the matrix clause – either subject (example 5) or object (example 6). Cases in which the agent of the infinitive is co-referential with an object of the matrix clause are much less common. This occurs less than 10 percent of the time (19 examples), and in all these cases, the grammatical voice of the infinitive is active.

The above categories account for approximately 90 percent of the G infinitives construct in Genesis, and all of the infinitives are unambiguously active in function. There are 23 examples remaining in which the agent of the infinitive is not explicit in the text and is not co-referential with the subject or object of the matrix clause. Before addressing these remaining examples, the following section explores why Hebraists claim that formally active infinitives can have a passive function, specifically by comparing passive constructions and infinitives in biblical Hebrew with other languages.

Cross-linguistic Evidence

"Cross-linguistic" study or language typology is "the study of linguistic patterns or generalizations that hold across languages."[15] An example of a pattern that holds across languages, which some linguists call a "universal," is the formation of passives.[16] In languages that use passives – not all do – there is always some

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14 This is also the most common construction in other languages of the world; see the discussion below of cross-linguistic evidence.

15 R. E. Asher, ed. *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, (New York: Pergamon Press, 1994), s.v. "Typological Approach to the Study of Grammar," by William Croft.

16 "Language universals are cross-linguistic generalizations that hold over the set of all or most human languages." William J. Frawley, ed. *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), s.v. "Typology and Universals," by Suzanne Kemmer.

indication of the passive in the verb phrase.[17] It may be a morphological change in the verb itself, the addition of an auxiliary verb, or some combination of the two. The salient point is that the change must occur in the verb phrase. This can be highlighted by stating a negative corollary: Passives are not formed by changes in the noun phrase. Changes in the noun phrase may accompany the passive construction, but that is only a secondary phenomenon.

Biblical Hebrew follows the pattern found in other languages, since passives are indicated on the verb itself by means of the *binyanim*. As seen in example 2, the formal indication of a passive occurs in infinitives, and there are 21 infinitives in Genesis that are marked as passive or reflexive (N and HtD). Since there is nothing necessarily unique about passive constructions in biblical Hebrew, the claim of standard grammars that a formally active infinitive can function as a passive is improbable at best. If there was not any formal means of marking an infinitive as a passive in Hebrew, then the functional claim might be plausible. But that is not the case, and the grammars make no effort to explain why an infinitive that is not marked as a passive would be used with a passive function, despite the fact that marked forms did exist.

The examination of passive constructions provides no clues about why Hebraists claim that formally active infinitives can function as passives; however, an examination of infinitives does. Infinitives, as the name suggests, are not limited with respect to person, number, or gender, but they may be inflected for other categories. In classical Greek for example, infinitives are inflected for tense-aspect. Michael Noonan states that infinitives may be inflected for verbal categories "such as tense-aspect, voice, object agreement, etc."[18] Yet they are inflected for fewer of these categories than finite verbs. Noonan arranges a hierarchy of the possible categories to indicate which are more common or less common. He includes grammatical voice in the hierarchy, and it is "almost always coded on infinitive complements."[19]

One verbal category that cannot be coded on infinitives is subject agreement. The question of grammatical voice is interrelated with the issue of subject agreement, because grammatical voice describes the relationship of the subject to the action. In my opinion, this linguistic feature of infinitives is what led Hebraists to claim that active infinitives can function as passives, and this is the reason why the above presentation of examples is organized by whether or not the infinitive clause includes an explicit subject. As seen in examples 5 and 6, infinitive clauses in Hebrew may lack an explicit subject. Because the deleted

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17 Edward L. Keenan and Matthew S. Dryer, "Passive in the World's Languages," in *Language Typology and Syntactic Description*, 2d ed., vol. I *Clause Structure*, ed. Timothy Shopen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 328.

18 Michael Noonan, "Complementation," in *Language Typology and Syntactic Description*, 2d ed., vol. II *Complex Constructions*, ed. Timothy Shopen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 67.

19 Noonan, "Complementation," 67.

agent is "equivalent" to an argument in the matrix clause, some linguists call this phenomenon "equi-deletion."[20]

Equi-deletion does not occur in some languages, and other languages only allow it when the subject of the matrix clause is deleted. In languages that do allow equi-deletion involving an object, it is much less common than the deletion of the subject of the matrix clause.[21] The data in Genesis follow this statistical distribution. Specifically, in almost half of the G infinitives in Genesis (48 percent) the agent of the infinitive is co-referential with the subject of the matrix clause. In less than 10 percent of the infinitive clauses, the agent of the infinitive is co-referential with an object in the matrix clause.

Even less common is equi-deletion involving some argument other than a subject or object of the matrix clause, but it does occur. In my opinion, this is the best explanation of example 1.

Example 1.   Genesis 4:13

ויאמר קין אל יהוה	Then Cain said to the LORD,
גדול עוני מנשא	"My penalty is too great to be borne."

Instead of arguing that the infinitive functions as a passive, one should recognize that the agent of the infinitive "to bear" (נשא) is the speaker Cain. The verse should be translated, "My punishment is too great for me to bear." The fact that "me" is not explicit in Hebrew can be represented as follows: "My$_i$ punishment is too great for Ø$_i$ to bear." Since this sort of equi-deletion occurs in other languages, this is a plausible interpretation of Genesis 4:13.

Equi-deletion occurs in many examples in Genesis, but in some cases there is no argument in the matrix clause that can be identified as the agent of the infinitive. Noonan states that it needs to be clear from the context who the subject of the infinitive is, or "subjects may not be overt when they have a general or nonspecific reference."[22] This is the case in Genesis 19:20.

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20 In the above discussion, this equivalence is referred to as "co-referential." Some linguists prefer to avoid the term "deletion," since it implies something about the deep structure of the language. The fact that infinitival clauses often lack an explicit subject is described in different terms by linguists, depending on their theoretical framework. See the following articles for related discussions; all are from Keith Brown, gen. ed., *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Elsevier, 2006), s.v. "Syntactic Development" by E. L. Bavin [especially the section "The Prodrop Parameter and Argument Ellipsis"]; s.v. "Lexical Functional Grammar" by M. Dalrymple; and s.v. "Valency Grammar" by D. J. Allerton [especially the section "The Special Status of Subjects"].

21 Noonan, "Complementation," 78.

22 Noonan, "Complementation," 78.

Example 7.   Genesis 19:20

הנה נא העיר הזאת קרבה   Behold this city is near [enough]
לנוס שמה והיא מצער   to flee there, and it is small.

The point is that *anyone* could flee there; thus the agent of the infinitive does not need to be specified.[23]

The examples discussed in the previous two paragraphs provide additional categories for the analysis of infinitival clauses. Specifically, equi-deletion may involve an argument in the matrix clause other than the subject or object (example 1), and the agent of an infinitive may be non-specific (example 7). With the addition of these two categories all of the remaining 23 infinitives construct in Genesis can be clearly explained, and all are active.[24] Thus, all of the examples in Genesis, without exception, support the thesis that formally active infinitives are not used with a passive function. Some grammarians have made

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23 Eduard König already noted the possibility of "das allgemeine Subject" and argued that this was the case in numerous passages where Friedrich Böttcher [*Exegetisch-kritische Ährenlese*, 1849] interpreted active infinitives as passives. E. König, *Historisch-comparative Syntax der Hebräischen Sprache* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1897), 112. Joüon-Muraoka also has a discussion of the "vague personal subject"; see especially sections 155b and 155i. The examples often involve 3 m.pl. verb forms.

Some languages have no passive constructions. Instead they use a non-specific or impersonal subject. For example, rather than stating "John was slapped," these languages would have a sentence such as "Someone slapped John." (cf. Edward L. Keenan, "Passive in the World's Languages"). Because of the semantic similarity between these constructions, it is not surprising that scholars have construed them as passives in biblical Hebrew. Chaim Rabin presents a wealth of data, showing that ancient translations often used passive constructions to render Hebrew verbs with an indefinite subject, but he does not specifically address infinitives. See his article "The Ancient Versions and the Indefinite Subject," *Textus* 2 (1962) 60–76.

Verbs with nonspecific subjects occur in biblical Aramaic, and they are often translated with passives. Johns labels this a "peculiarity of BA grammar." He states that the "object of the verb is then actually the subject..." Algers F. Johns, *A Short Grammar of Biblical Aramaic*, Andrews University Monographs vol. 1 (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1972), 26. However, it is not clear that this is a peculiarity of Aramaic; see the discussion of impersonal subjects in § 64–68 of C. Brockelmann, *Grundriß der vergleichenden Grammatik der semitischen Sprachen*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Reuther und Reichard; reprint, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1966).

24 In my opinion, the other examples listed in the grammars can also be explained in light of these categories. For example, Josh. 2:5 begins with an infinitival clause (ויהי השער לסגר). This clause sets the time as evening, specifically when it was time to shut the gate. The person shutting the gate is not important; that is, the agent is nonspecific. It is not necessary to translate the clause with a passive: "The gate was about to be shut..." Even if one argues that this translation is the best English equivalent, it does not follow that the infinitive is being used with a passive sense. Similarly, I would explain the infinitival clause in Jer. 25:34 as an example with a nonspecific subject. However, I am not arguing that the categories discussed in this paper are sufficient for a comprehensive explanation of all Hebrew infinitives. It seems likely that some infinitives in the Bible are nominalizations, but I did not find examples of this possibility in Genesis.

the opposite claim, due to the fact that subject agreement cannot be indicated on infinitives and infinitive clauses often lack an explicit subject. However, when the agent of the infinitive is identified correctly, there is no need to claim that any formally active infinitive functions as a passive.

Exegetical Benefit and a Hypothesis for Further Study

The two goals of this article have been met. Yet in the first example (Genesis 4:13) there is little difference in meaning between translating the infinitive as an active or a passive, which raises the question of whether there is any exegetical advantage gained from this study. In the following paragraphs, I discuss two examples – one to address this question and another to suggest a more general hypothesis. Example 8 shows that there are benefits for exegesis and demonstrates that precision on this issue is a desideratum. Example 9 illustrates a broader hypothesis that deserves consideration.

Waltke and O'Connor list Esther 7:4 as evidence that formally active infinitives can have a passive sense.[25]

Example 8. Esther 7:4

כי נמכרנו אני ועמי	For we have been sold – my people and I –
להשמיד להרוג ולאבד	to be annihilated, to be killed, and to be destroyed.

The verse ends with three infinitives, which are H, G, and D respectively. Many English translations use passives to translate the infinitives.[26] But this choice obscures something very important in the narrative; namely, Esther omits any reference to the person who is selling her and her people and thereby omits the agent of the infinitives. This omission apparently piques the king's interest, because in the very next verse the king asks, "Who is he? Where is he?" (מי הוא זה ואי זה הוא). Esther then replies, "The adversary and the enemy is this evil Haman" (איש צר ואויב המן הרע הזה). Ignoring the grammatical voice of the infinitives forces one to overlook a clever technique of the author and to miss part of the characterization of Esther, specifically as a character who is more shrewd than the cunning, scheming Haman. When the infinitives in Esther 7:4 are interpreted with linguistic precision, specifically as active infinitives, the

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25 The translation given here is from Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 603.
26 KJV, RSV, JPS, NAS, NRSV, etc. This again raises the question of a translation equivalence and how to best render the verse in idiomatic English. Some might argue that a passive verb is still the best choice for translation, even though the infinitives are not used with a passive sense in the original language.

author's communicative goals are thrown into sharper relief. Furthermore, if the quotation from Esther 3:13 is noted, then an additional layer of complexity in the narrative is retained in the translation: "For we have been sold – my people and I – 'to annihilate, to kill, and to destroy'!"[27]

As a more general hypothesis, I propose that the contours of action, which the *binyanim* indicate, are the same for a specific word regardless of whether or not it occurs as a finite verb or as an infinitive. Elements such as valency, transitivity, fientivity, and causativity are determined both by a word's semantics and the *binyan* in which it occurs but not by the conjugation. If a particular word is active as a G participle, then it is also active as a G infinitive. Similarly, if a particular word is intransitive as a G finite verb, then it is also intransitive as a G infinitive. This statement may seem self-evident, but the example discussed in the following paragraphs (Ezek. 8:6) demonstrates that it is not.

In Ezekiel 8 the "likeness of a hand" grabs Ezekiel by the hair and lifts him up in the spirit in order to bring him to Jerusalem. There God tells him to look at the people in and around the temple and asks him the following question:

Example 9.　　Ezekiel 8:6

הֲרֹאֶה אַתָּה מָה הֵם עֹשִׂים	"Do you see what they are doing –
תּוֹעֵבוֹת גְּדֹלוֹת	the great abominations
אֲשֶׁר בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל עֹשִׂים פֹּה	that the house of Israel is doing here
לְרָחֳקָה מֵעַל מִקְדָּשִׁי	to be far off from my sanctuary?"

The infinitive "to be far off" (לְרָחֳקָה) is in the G stem. As a finite verb in G this word is intransitive, but some commentators claim that the infinitive is transitive in this verse.[28] Block asks, "Who is far from 'my sanctuary'?" He lists several possible answers and then states that "the phrase is best understood as an expression of Yahweh's own alienation from his sanctuary."[29] Block translates, "...abominations that the house of Israel is committing here, driving [me] away from my sanctuary!" His interpretation ignores the fact that the word is intransitive in G – an interpretive error that is only possible because the infinitive lacks an explicit subject.

27　I am thankful to Prof. David Marcus for this observation. It is noteworthy that the English translations listed in the previous footnote all use actives in chapter 3. In that verse, Haman's plot is described, thus the author is also cleverly putting a quote of chapter 3 in the mouth of the title character in chapter 7.

28　Cook notes that the subject of the infinitive is not expressed and that it is possible to interpret the people as the subject; "but it is better to make Jahveh the subj., as the whole series of visions prepares the way for His departure from the temple..." G. A. Cook, *The Book of Ezekiel* in the ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936), 93. Cook does not use the word "transitive," but his interpretation requires a transitive infinitive.

29　Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 287.

Ignoring the transitivity forces one to overlook a clever technique of the author and to miss how this verse contributes to an important motif of the book of Ezekiel. The author repeatedly uses spatial metaphors, and in Ezek. 8:6 the irony of the use of space is a biting indictment. The men of Israel are doing abominations upon an altar near the temple. Yet instead of preparing themselves for the greater ritual purity of the temple itself, the men distance themselves from the sanctuary (מקדש) by their abominations. They are supposed to be moving closer to God but are, in fact, moving away from God. The distance is not physical; it is spiritual. In the ensuing verses of chapter 8, Ezekiel's vision progresses deeper into the temple precincts, and the abominations become greater and greater. "Do you see what they are doing – the great abominations that the house of Israel is doing here [i.e., in my sanctuary] to be far off from my sanctuary?"

The irony is thick, but there is more than irony at stake. God's proximity to the people, to Jerusalem, and to the sanctuary is a repeated and significant motif in the book of Ezekiel. In chapter eleven, for example, God says "even though I have made them distant (הרחקתים) by scattering them among the nations, I will be a temporary sanctuary (מקדש) for them" (Ezek. 11:16). The lexical and thematic links between these two verses (8:6 and 11:16) are only one example of many in the book of Ezekiel, and when the infinitive in Ezek. 8:6 is interpreted with linguistic precision, the irony and the indictment of the people are both more clear.

In this study I have argued that formally active infinitives do not have a passive function despite some claims to the contrary. There are no convincing examples in standard grammars, and none of the infinitives construct in Genesis support the claim. In my opinion, the crux of the matter is identifying the agent of the infinitive correctly, and the failure to do so is what led some grammarians astray. In the above paragraphs, I have proposed a more general hypothesis, and if the broader hypothesis can be supported, then the more specific thesis of this paper is necessarily correct.

Abstract:

Standard grammars of biblical Hebrew claim that an infinitive construct in an active *binyan* can function as a passive. The present study argues that this claim should be abandoned based on a examination of all the infinitives in Genesis and a consideration of cross-linguistic evidence. The study also provides an explanation of why the claim was made and gives several examples of why this issue is important for exegesis.

Address of the author:
Kent Aaron Reynolds, Theologische Fakultät, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin,
Unter den Linden 6, D-10099 Berlin, Deutschland, kent.reynolds@hu-berlin.de