Heller, Roy L.

*Narrative Structure and Discourse Constellations: An Analysis of Clause Function in Biblical Hebrew Prose*

Harvard Semitic Studies 55


Samuel A. Meier
Ohio State University
Columbus, OH 43235

In his first of four chapters, Heller surveys briefly (32 pages) highlights of the ongoing discussion regarding the function of the verb in biblical Hebrew. This overview orients the reader to Heller’s own presentation, which is grounded firmly in discourse-level, synchronic analysis of biblical Hebrew prose, with a nod in particular to the foundational insights of Lambdin (for narrative) and Longacre (for direct discourse). The heart of the work is embedded in the following two chapters, nearly four hundred pages in length (33–427), dedicated to an analysis of the verbs in main clauses that are found in twenty-four chapters in two narrative corpora in the Hebrew Bible: ten chapters of the Joseph Novella (Gen 37; 39–47) and fourteen chapters of the Narrative of David’s Court (2 Sam 9–20; 1 Kgs 1–2). Heller’s fourth and final chapter is a recapitulation and synthesis of the preceding two chapters.

The book is user-friendly on a number of counts. One-third of the book (170 of 494 pages) is simply a reproduction of the Masoretic Text, partitioned, formatted, and labeled according to Heller’s analysis. This luxury serves a purpose in graphically underscoring syntactic macrostructures and in keeping his discussion grounded in the text itself. When one is juggling multiple clause-types, verb forms, and narrative trajectories, there is no substitute for the clarity that comes from a thorough presentation. Indeed, after one has read through three or four chapters of the biblical material along with his commentary,
the simplicity and elegance of Heller’s analysis soon becomes apparent and is easily internalized by the reader. In many ways much of the rest of the book is redundant as it presents more of the same, accumulating data that serve to provide a persuasive statistical weight for the final chapter’s synthesis. This is as it should be, for a theory of sufficient explanatory power must keep special pleading to a minimum. This is one of the gratifying aspects of the work, for it is not filled with an ever-lengthening list of special cases or qualifying hypotheses.

Much of his analysis can be found in other recent works investigating the Hebrew verb. Heller, however, has succeeded in clarifying, simplifying, and integrating the insights of others with his own into an impressive synthesis that works well in the corpus he has investigated. He distinguishes narrative syntax from the syntax of reported speech. In narrative, *wayyiqtol* is the predominant verbal form, identifying actions that occur in sequence. Main clauses in narrative that do not employ *wayyiqtol* alert the reader to two issues, either (1) the beginning or the end of paragraphs (signaled by an independent verbal clause or a temporal clause introduced by *wayhi*), or (2) background information that does not relate sequentially to the main narrative (if *wayyiqtol* appears in this function it must be independent; if other types of verbal clauses appear there must be more than one). For Heller, the background information provided within paragraphs that explains some specific thing in the narrative differs in its presentation from the background information that appears between and separates paragraphs and is less specifically tied to a feature in the narrative. With the former (inner-paragraph comments), one expects verbless clauses, participial clauses, and *hyh* verbal clauses; if *qatal* appears it will have a semantic or syntactic parallel with a preceding verbal clause (e.g., Gen 44:12; 1 Sam 10:10) or appear after *wayhi* in a temporal clause. With the latter (extra-paragraph comments), one expects multiple, verbal, non-*wayyiqtol* clauses.

When Heller analyzes reported speech, he introduces a fifth category, interrogative discourse, supplementing Longacre’s four types (narrative discourse, predictive discourse, expository discourse, and hortatory discourse). *Qatal* (with the sequential continuative form *wayyiqtol*) predominates in narrative discourse. *Yiqtol* (with its sequential continuative form *weqatal*), on the other hand, predominates in predictive discourse. Verbless, participial, incomplete, and *hyh* clauses characterize expository discourse, while hortatory discourse is characterized by imperatives, cohortatives, and jussives. Interrogative discourse is identified by explicit marking of fronted interrogative adverbs or particles.

I made a brief comparison of former works that investigated the same texts discussed by Heller, an exercise that helped clarify the positive contribution that Heller has made. A. Nicacci’s treatment of Gen 39:1–6 (*The Syntax of the Verb in Classical Hebrew Prose*...
[1990], 120–21), for example, shows Heller’s far greater comprehensive simplicity with more explanatory power and less speculation. A comparison with M. Eskhult’s treatment of 2 Sam 13–20 (Studies in Verbal Aspect and Narrative Technique in Biblical Hebrew Prose [1990], 58–68) demonstrates how much of an advance has been made in precision and depth. At the same time, the temporal insights of T. Goldfajn on Gen 41 (Word Order and Time in Biblical Hebrew Narrative [1998], 105–15) could profitably be merged with much of what Heller observes. Indeed, Heller periodically observes that anteriority and chronological antecedents are lurking in the syntax (in particular extraparagraph and inner-paragraph comments, e.g., 337, 449, 551), but the rigor that Goldfajn and Z. Zevit (The Anterior Construction in Classical Hebrew, 1998) provide for this feature does not appear here (neither work is mentioned in Heller’s bibliography).

Heller characteristically provides the overall structural grid for each biblical chapter when he discusses texts from Genesis (e.g., 78, 93, 112). It is unfortunate that he tends to stop providing this guide to the major paragraphs in his corpus in 2 Samuel, for it was frustratingly time-consuming as I found myself trying to reconstruct his perception on the basis of incomplete clues that he provided (e.g., 2 Sam 10 [235]; 2 Sam 17 [338]). This became serious when a typing slip on page 372 (read 1216 for 1126), in conjunction with no summary as to what were the boundaries of the nine paragraphs under discussion, sometimes made for slow reading (cf. the paragraph that spans 2 Sam 17–18, which probably begins with clause 954 (so 338) and not clause 948 (354). Such slips are exceptional and only cast into pleasant relief the generally lucid presentation.

Since one of the key elements of Heller’s analysis is the formal syntactic delimitation of paragraph boundaries, it would have been satisfying had his boundaries corresponded with other evidence pointing to how these boundaries have been traditionally understood. Unfortunately this does not prove to be the case. The pre-Masoretic supra-sentence boundary markers (petuhah and setumah) have very early antecedents that are not always understood, but there is no observable tendency for these to endorse Heller’s proposed paragraph boundaries. For example, Heller’s thirteen proposed paragraph boundaries in 2 Sam 19 only correspond with four of the fifteen breaks (setumah) that MT provides (these same four occurrences are curiously the only four places where MT, NRSV, and Heller all agree together; indeed, NRSV agrees with Heller’s divisions only half of the time in seven cases). At times Heller’s paragraph boundaries divide in half what in the Masoretic Text and English translations appears as a unified sentence (e.g., 2 Sam 19:40, 41). Such inconcinnities are hardly faults that argue against Heller’s proposals, but they do underscore why the quest for rigor in semantically demarcating thought units is not an open-and-shut case. Heller has provided a rigorous foundation that can be easily tested, and where I have applied it to texts outside his corpus I have found it illuminating. One can look forward to its application elsewhere in biblical Hebrew narrative.