Furuli, Rolf

A New Understanding of the Verbal System of Classical Hebrew: An Attempt to Distinguish Between Semantic and Pragmatic Factors


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In this version of his 2005 University of Oslo dissertation, Rolf J. Furuli presents the results of his analysis of all 79,574 finite and infinite verbal forms found in the Hebrew Bible, the Qumran material, Ben Sira, and the inscriptions. He studies 4,261 of these forms in detail, with particular attention to their temporal reference, modality, and discourse functions, in order to determine how many conjugations are found in the classical Hebrew verbal system. Going against the common view that there are four conjugations, Furuli argues that there are only two because the waw prefix of wayyiqtol and weqatal is a syntactic, not a semantic, marker. Therefore, they are not two independent conjugations with semantic meanings distinct from yiqtol and qatal.

Furuli posits that all four of these forms, plus weyiqtol, can have past, present, and future reference, showing that tense is not grammaticalized in classical Hebrew. In addition, all of these forms can describe incomplete or completed actions, which argues against the Hebrew conjugations representing aspects, at least in the usual sense of the word. Such conclusions put him at odds with the dominant views regarding the Hebrew verbal system, and Furuli attributes this difference to the uniqueness of the method he employs.

That unique approach is best reflected in the book’s subtitle—a distinction is made between semantic and pragmatic factors, the latter designated here by the somewhat lumbering phrase “conversational pragmatic implicature.” The entire corpus of classical
Hebrew is examined synchronically, and Furuli points out that a comprehensive analysis that downplays diachronic issues distinguishes his study from previous ones. Along the way, a number of traditional assumptions about the Hebrew verbal system are tested and rejected: that the *wayyiqtol* has an older preterite antecedent; that the *yiqtol* with past reference represents durative past; and that the *qatal* with future reference is best understood as a prophetic perfect.

Furuli identifies the Masoretes as the unwitting inventors of the four-conjugation model of the Hebrew verbal system. In unpointed texts only two conjugations are visible, the prefix conjugation and the suffix conjugation, and some of these have a prefixed *waw*. But in the MT four or five conjugations are visible due to the addition of vowel markings. Furuli notes that the pointing was done before the rules of grammar had been firmly set, so the Masoretes were basing their decisions on what they heard in the synagogue rather than conforming to established grammatical norms. In other words, it was pragmatic factors, rather than semantic ones, that most influenced the way the vowels were added to the text. But as systematic study of Hebrew began in the century after the Masoretes completed their work, grammarians mistakenly interpreted the verbal conjugations in semantic terms and ignored the pragmatic factors. That approach has dominated ever since, and this book is an appeal to scholars to consider the pragmatic dimension of the verbal system and to adjust their understanding of it accordingly.

Furuli sees communication as the act of making some things visible and other things invisible from the reservoir of possible meaning. It is the context that primarily does this, and this is at the heart of the difference between semantics and pragmatics for him. Semantics is concerned with words, which are stable and static, but pragmatics is concerned with context, which is elusive and dynamic. The features of the verbal system that cannot be changed or cancelled by the context comprise the semantic meaning, and those features that can be changed are the pragmatic ones. Furuli identifies three among the former: durativity, telicity, and dynamicity. Nothing in the context can cancel or nullify these three features in a given verb, so they constitute the verb’s semantic meaning.

The four Hebrew conjugations can be distinguished on the basis of morphology and accent, but this does not prove they are semantically distinct. According to Furuli, the statistics indicate that the four forms are not semantically fixed because there is no uniform temporal distribution for any of them. Each can function in reference to the past, present, and future, challenging the idea that tense is grammaticalized in classical Hebrew. For example, by Furuli’s count, 6.9 percent of *wayyiqtols* have nonpast reference, and 5.9 percent of *weqatalss* have past reference. Similarly, 2,505 (18 percent) of *qatalss* have present reference, and 965 (6.9 percent) have future reference. Each conjugation is
used more with a particular time reference than with others, but Furuli claims this is due to pragmatic factors that have nothing to do with semantics.

Furuli argues that *yiqtol*, *wayyiqtol*, and *weyiqtol* are one conjugation and that *qatal* and *weqatal* are another, with the *waw* prefixes functioning simply as conjunctions. Often the lack of an expected *waw* is a pragmatic feature of a text. For example, in 1,027 cases he finds a *yiqtol* with past reference where he would expect to find a *wayyiqtol*. The most common reason for this is that the author wanted another word element to precede the verb, thus preventing the prefixed *waw*. This is what happens in 896 of those cases, and in the other 131 the *yiqtol* is the initial word in the sentence. In this way, pragmatic features allow Furuli to explain a grammatical irregularity that makes no sense from a semantic point of view.

Throughout the work Furuli cautions against using modern languages such as English to understand the Hebrew verbal system. This is particularly the case when it comes to the concept of aspect. His study leads him to conclude that *yiqtol*, *wayyiqtol*, and *weyiqtol* represent the imperfect aspect, while *qatal* and *weqatal* represent the perfect aspect. The default form for past reference is *qatal*, and the default form for future is *yiqtol*, but other forms can be used for each. Nonetheless, there are certain patterns that indicate that particular verbal forms are used for particular purposes. Furuli’s general rule of thumb is that when the requirement for precision is low any form can be used, but when it is high certain forms must be used. This leads to a relationship between the aspects that is more complicated than that found in English, as the following observations he makes about the Hebrew aspects suggest: (1) both aspects make a part of the situation visible; (2) the imperfect makes some of the details of an event visible, but the perfect does not; (3) the imperfect makes a small part of an event visible, but the perfect makes a greater part visible; (4) the imperfect can include either the beginning or the end of an event, but the perfect can include both the beginning and the end; (5) unlike the perfect, the imperfect can make visible a part before the beginning of an event and a part of the resulting state.

According to Furuli’s theory of how the Hebrew verbal system works, the authors chose their conjugations and forms based on pragmatic considerations such as how much of an event they wished to make visible.

In some places the evidence Furuli cites is ambiguous or open to other interpretations. This is especially so in the poetic material, where it is more difficult to determine the temporal references with certainty and precision. To his credit, Furuli acknowledges this problem and, for the most part, focuses on passages that serve his purposes well. More problematic is the lack of a comprehensive listing of all the data Furuli drew upon to reach his conclusions. The reader is given dozens of tables of statistics and hundreds of biblical passages, in both Hebrew and English, that illustrate and support Furuli’s
findings, but they represent just a fraction of the thousands of examples of usage that are not cited or listed anywhere in the book. We therefore have to take Furuli’s word for it that the somewhat limited evidence he does provide is representative of the large amount of material left untreated. This is one of the drawbacks of linguistic theories that purport to offer a revolutionary way of understanding an entire corpus of writings—they often leave the reader wondering what is behind the curtain.

In addition to the occasional typo, in some places the Hebrew text does not match the English translation of a passage (see, e.g., examples 4c on 186, 279 n. 165, and 7.5k on 360). A final critique concerns Furuli’s use of the cognate languages. He draws upon Akkadian, Ugaritic, Phoenician, and Aramaic when he discusses whether or not an old short prefixed form is the basis of wayyiqtol, but his analysis is somewhat superficial and sweeping. In addition, he makes only a passing reference to Arabic. This is unfortunate because it is well known that Arabic has preserved many ancient features that can be quite valuable for biblical scholars seeking to understand obscure or unusual aspects of Hebrew. In this case, the apocopated jussive form (majzum) in Arabic is a prominent feature of its verbal system that Furuli should have studied carefully.

Semantic considerations have long dominated in treatments of the Hebrew verbal system, and Furuli’s call to take into account pragmatic factors is an important one that is worth considering. How his alternative model will be received remains to be seen, but at the very least his work might encourage some to think of more than just semantics when trying to understand the Hebrew verb.