

# Non-Progressive and Non-Habitual Uses of Imperfective Aspect in Ancient Hebrew

Holger Gzella – Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich

*The strong association of the “long imperfect” with imperfective aspect, in addition to non-past and modal usages, is universally accepted in modern linguistically informed research on the verb in Ancient Hebrew. It adequately accounts for the frequent employ of this form for ongoing or repeated actions in past narrative, the durative character of which often clearly emerges from the context. However, a number of instances have not yet been sufficiently explained: these feature “long imperfects” in past-tense contexts that are neither overtly ongoing nor habitual, but may express inchoative, conative, or epistemic-modal nuances instead. The present paper argues that such uses logically derive from the underspecified nature of durativity, as a result of its inherent unboundedness, with which the notion of imperfective aspect is inextricably linked.*

## 1. *The Encoding of Imperfective Aspect in Ancient Hebrew*

It is widely, and indeed rightly, acknowledged that the literary prose register of Ancient Hebrew – here defined as the formal language that is directly documented in the Judaeen inscriptions dating from the monarchic period and that also underlies Classical Biblical Hebrew – has two finite conjugations that regularly, though not exclusively, mark notions of imperfective aspect: the so-called “long form” of the “imperfect”, or “prefix conjugation”, and the “perfect consecutive”, or “suffix conjugation” with a prefixed *w-* and, in most cases, final stress in the first singular and second masculine singular persons.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This can be considered common ground in modern functional descriptions from different theoretical vantage points, compare, e.g., P. Joüon/T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, Rome 2006, 339–341, H. Gzella, *Probleme der Vermittlung von Tempus, Aspekt und Modalität im Hebräischen*, KUSATU 12–14

A contextual analysis clearly shows that in prose narrative, when the time-reference is in the past, the aspectual nuance becomes dominant in both forms. Hence they are generally used in order to present actions as non-semelfactive, be they progressive (i.e., depicted as ongoing) or habitual (i.e., repeated with characteristic regularity at different points in time). Variation in terminology notwithstanding (e.g., some linguists utilize the notions “habitual” and “iterative” synonymously, whereas others confine “iterative” to event-internal repetition, as in “to knock on the door”, or to potentially enumerable actions), these nuances can be employed at the speaker’s or writer’s liberty, just as “he used to go”, “she would always say”, or similar circumlocutions in English, and are not intrinsic to the lexical semantics of a verb such as “to sleep”, “to dance”, etc. As a result, they are usually subsumed under the category “viewpoint aspect” as opposed to “lexical aspect”.<sup>2</sup>

This imperfective use, which comes right to the fore in narrative, ties in with the wider functional range of both the “long imperfect” and the “perfect consecutive” in Hebrew. The “long” form of the “imperfect” was a proper morphological category in earlier stages of Semitic and functionally as well as formally always distinct from the “short” one, which survives in the Hebrew jussive and also underlies the “imperfect consecutive”. Both became morphologically indistinguishable in sound roots in Hebrew, yet the original division into two separate paradigms still appears from different sets of forms for other root classes, e.g., “long” *yibnē* versus “short” *yibæn* or “long” *yāqūm* versus “short” *yāqom*; from a secondary complementary distribution of non-initial

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(2011), 24–27, and J. Cook, *Time and the Hebrew Verb*, Winona Lake 2012, 217–223 as well as 244–249 on the “long imperfect” and Joüon/Muraoka, *Grammar*, 373–374, Gzella, *Probleme*, 21–24, Cook, *Time*, 249–256, and B. Isaksson, *The So-Called we-qatal Conjugation in Biblical Hebrew Once Again*, *KUSATU* 19 (2015), 71–117 on the “perfect consecutive”, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> See the nuanced discussion of terms and concepts in P. M. Bertinetto/A. Lenci, *Habituality, Pluractionality, and Imperfectivity*, in: R. I. Binnick (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Tense and Aspect*, Oxford 2012, 852–880.

position for the “long” form as opposed to initial position for the “short” one; and from a complementary semantic spectrum.<sup>3</sup>

The imperfective nuance is limited to the “long imperfect”, where it is part of an inherited functional range (also known from Ugaritic) that includes present-future tense and (mostly epistemic) modality, both without overt aspectual distinctions, as well. Its low degree of markedness results from extensive interactions of tense, aspect, and modality, corresponding to notional overlaps: first, between present tense and imperfective viewpoint aspect, since the present is always in motion; second, between future tense and modality, since the future is by definition uncertain; and third, between imperfective aspect and epistemic modality (“could”, “might”, etc.), possibly – though this particular intersection is still little known – since both are unbounded and non-actual and thus less specific than perfective aspect, which targets punctual and hence sharply delimited events, or deontic modality, which typically occurs in clearly-defined injunctions. Such overlaps between the temporal, the aspectual, and the modal domain thus share a common cognitive basis and are well attested in many languages.<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, the “perfect consecutive” employed for past repetition or the continuation of a preceding modal form appears to be an innovation in Classical Hebrew without direct parallels in cognate languages. It seems to have emerged as an epiphenomenon of the rise of a formal narrative prose style for advanced storytelling in the early monarchic period, just like the “imperfect consecutive” for perfective past in narrative as its polar opposite. In terms of function, its use may have been patterned after the “long imperfect”, even if the exact path of

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<sup>3</sup> For a recent survey of the historical background, see H. Gzella, *Untypical way-yiqtol Forms in Hebrew and Early Linguistic Diversity*, in: E. C. Jones (ed.), *The Unfolding of Your Words Gives Light. Studies on Biblical Hebrew in Honor of George L. Klein*, University Park 2018, 21–37, here 22–28.

<sup>4</sup> See H. Gzella, *Some General Remarks on Interactions between Aspect, Modality, and Evidentiality in Biblical Hebrew*, *Folia Orientalia* 49 (2012), 225–232, with further references to general-linguistic bibliography.

development – including the stress shift in the first singular and in the second masculine singular – has not yet been rigorously explained.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, periphrastic constructions with the active participle of the main verb and the “perfect” (for past-tense reference) or the “imperfect” (for future tense) of the auxiliary verb *hyī* “to be” explicitly and transparently mark durative or habitual and iterative events. Yet such constructions only gained wider currency in post-classical stages of Hebrew, possibly under the influence of Aramaic, where this phenomenon can first be observed regularly. Eventually, they take over the aspect-marking function from the two less semantically transparent finite conjugations that served this purpose in the Classical period.<sup>6</sup>

In the light of empirical functional description and linguistic typology as well as theory, it is now incontestable that both the “long imperfect” and the “perfect consecutive” regularly express notions directly related to the overarching category of imperfective aspect. Deviant opinions in even a few recent contributions generally only result from an improper use of technical terms and concepts by exegetes with no linguistic training (whatever the merits of such manuals as collections of examples may be); these will not be further discussed here.<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, a handful of instances are difficult to square with the otherwise well-established imperfective use of the “long imperfect”, since they apparently refer to non-repeated events without overtly stressing

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<sup>5</sup> A concise account can be found in A. D. Hornkohl, *Ancient Hebrew Periodization and the Language of the Book of Jeremiah. The Case for a Sixth-Century Date of Composition*, Leiden 2014, 254–266.

<sup>6</sup> P. Joüon/T. Muraoka, *Grammar* (see fn. 1), 382 give a few examples; cf. also W. van Peursen, *Periphrastic Tenses in Ben Sira*, in: T. Muraoka/J. F. Elwolde (eds.), *The Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Ben Sira. Proceedings of a Symposium held at Leiden University (December 1995)*, Leiden 1997, 158–173.

<sup>7</sup> J. Cook, *Putting Old Wine in New Wineskins. A New Synthesis of the Verbal System of Biblical Hebrew that is neither New nor a Coherent Synthesis*, *Hebrew Studies* 55 (2014), 379–388, for one, perceptively points out the countless “confused and problematic analyses” in a particularly misguided case, as well as the shortcomings of the “faulty, underdeveloped, or outdated theory” on which they depend.

their progressive and ongoing character either. Therefore commentators are regularly at a loss when it comes to explaining why it is 'a<sup>a</sup>lāē for “I brought” in Jdg 2:1 instead of the expected “perfect” hae<sup>w</sup>līt, as in 1 Sam 10:18, or why the regular “imperfect consecutive” wayyābō “he entered” with Hushai as the subject in 2 Sam 15:37 is paralleled by yābō with Absalom in the parallel clause and not by the “perfect” bā, which would be normal after fronting of the subject for chiasmic word-order variation, even though the temporal, aspectual, and modal nuance involved otherwise seems to remain the same.<sup>8</sup>

Before the examples of an underspecified employ of durative notions are analyzed in greater detail, however, a few remarks on the distributional pattern of the two relevant conjugations are appropriate. That will subsequently facilitate the decision whether one should consider this non-mainstream imperfective function without clear durative or habitual implications a hallmark of the “long imperfect” in particular, or explain it at a conceptual level as a side effect of durativity at large.

## 2. *Distribution of “Long Imperfect” and “Perfect Consecutive”*

While the “long imperfect” and the “perfect consecutive” each have a distinct historical-linguistic origin and display a different overall functional range, as has been argued above, their occurrence in identical contexts shows that they are semantically indistinguishable when used for duration or repetition in the past. According to contextual information where available, they both regularly target the same type of non-semelfactive events even in quite homogeneous layers of prose narrative. The only difference is that the “perfect consecutive” appears in syndetic chains, whereas the “long imperfect” does not normally occur with prefixed *w*- in Classical prose. (The very few cases where it does seem to refer to an intended result, but it is at present unclear whether these reproduce a genuine, albeit marginal, use or are false analogies

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<sup>8</sup> S. R. Driver, *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew and Some Other Syntactical Questions*, London <sup>3</sup>1892 (Reprinted Grand Rapids 1998), 32–33, too, emphasizes their “exceptional character”.

modelled after the “short imperfect” or the cohortative after an imperative or in conditional clauses.<sup>9</sup>) Consider the following example:

They kept on overthrowing (*yah<sup>a</sup>róšū*, “long imperfect” for on-going or repeated action in the past after fronted subject) the towns and each man would cast (*yašlīkū*) a stone on every good field and fill it (*ūmil’ūhā*, “perfect consecutive”, here syndetically attached because of the clause-initial position). And all the springs they stopped (*yistómū*, again “long imperfect” after fronted object) and every good tree they cut down (*yappilū*, same) ... (2 Kgs 3:25)

The context would allow for both a distributive interpretation, in the sense that the Israelites destroyed the Moabite cities one by one after their invasion, and a durative-circumstantial one, the point of which would be to outline the background to the measures taken by the king of Moab according to verses 26–27, of these five verbs. Regardless of such subtle nuances, however, they evidently all have the exact same tense-aspect-modality value. Hence the employ of either the one or the other verbal form is governed by syntactic and not by semantic or discourse-pragmatic reasons: the four “long imperfects” appear when the clause-initial slot is already occupied, while the “perfect consecutive” *ūmil’ūhā* is used when the verb takes the first position.

Other passages composed in the same literary register confirm that this distributional pattern reflects normal Classical Hebrew prose use. The durative or habitual interpretation of the forms in question in these examples is basically uncontested in the scholarly literature:<sup>10</sup>

Moisture was welling up (*ya’alā*, “long imperfect” for past durativity or habituality) from the earth and kept watering (*whišqā*, “perfect consecutive” syndetically joined to the

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., 1 Kgs 15:19b; 18:5; 2 Kgs 6:17; Jer 21:2 and compare Y. Endo, *The Verbal System of Classical Hebrew in the Joseph Story. An Approach from Discourse Linguistics*, Assen 1996, 98–99; Gzella, *Probleme* (see fn. 1), 27. The matter is still in need of a modern in-depth analysis.

<sup>10</sup> So, for instance, also Joüon/Muraoka, *Grammar* (see fn. 1), 340 and 373 on Gen 2:6 as well as on 1 Kgs 14:28, and Isaksson, *Conjugation* (see fn. 1), 93 on Gen 6:4, no doubt correctly.

preceding clause for marking continuity of the ongoing action in the past) all the surface of the earth. (Gen 2:6)

The giants were (*hāyū*, simple “perfect” for past tense after a fronted subject) on the earth in those days, and also after that, when the sons of God used to come (*yābō’ū*, “long imperfect” for habitual past) to the daughters of man, and they would bear (*wyāldū*, “perfect consecutive” syndetically joined to the preceding clause in order to mark continuity with the action expressed by the preceding “long imperfect”) them offspring. These are the heroes of old, men of fame. (Gen 6:4)

Whenever the king came (*bō*, infinitive in a temporal expression) to the house of the Lord, the guards would bear them (i.e., the shields; *yīśšā’ūm*, “long imperfect” for habitual past) and then bring them back (*wəhæšībūm*, “perfect consecutive” in clause-initial position, continuing the preceding “long imperfect”) to the guardroom. (1 Kgs 14:28)

The imperfective past-tense use of both the “long imperfect” and the “perfect consecutive” began to erode in the post-classical period. 2 Chr 12:11, the parallel passage to 1 Kgs 14:28, for instance, supplies the simple “perfect” *bā’ū* “(the guards) came” and replaces the past-habitual “long imperfect” *yīśšā’ūm* by the “perfect” *ūnsā’ūm*. In doing so, the Chronicler creates a sequence of what seem to be copulative (i.e., merely syndetic) “perfects”, in accordance with the general tendency in post-exilic Hebrew to employ the “perfect” together with *w-* “and” for simple past narrative (cf. Neh 9:7–8), which is unusual in Classical Hebrew. Instead, the periphrastic construction with the active participle and a finite form of the verb *hyī* “to be” over time took the place of the default imperfective marking device. It exhibits no formal difference between durative, iterative, and habitual either.

Given the far-reaching semantic equivalence of the “long imperfect” and the “perfect consecutive” in Classical narrative prose on the one hand and the seamless integration of the imperfective function into the wider semantic range of the “long imperfect” on the other, occasional “long imperfects” that, according to the context, are neither overtly progressive nor habitual (or iterative) should not be ascribed to a special function of this particular morphological category beyond its normal

semantic range, but to the notional properties of the conceptual category “durativity” that underlies them. In other words, the employ of a form otherwise associated with imperfective aspect for actions or situations that are not prototypically imperfective is not solely a matter of specific morphosyntax but of the very nature of imperfectivity.

### 3. *Non-Progressive and Non-Habitual “Long Imperfects”*

In all examples cited in the preceding section, the progressive or habitual nuance of the imperfective forms for past actions that are presented as ongoing during a longer period of time (Gen 2:6, here presumably employed for a more subjective rendering of the gradual origin of life in the non-Priestly Creation story, as opposed to the objective, scientific, prose of the Creation according to the Priestly Source with its plain narrative style) or as taking place at a regular rate (Gen 6:4; 1 Kgs 14:28; 2 Kgs 3:25) clearly appears from the context. Very occasionally, however, the “long imperfect” with past-tense reference crops up for single, i.e., non-repeated, events, but without there being any obvious contextual indication – such as the use for a subordinate action concomitant with a main event, as in 1 Sam 1:10, where Hannah’s weeping (*tibkē*, “long imperfect” for background) accompanies her prayer (*wattipallel*, “imperfect consecutive” for mainline action) – that would sufficiently account for their presentation as progressive.

Against the backdrop of both the normal usage of the “long imperfect” in Hebrew and its similar functional range in other Semitic languages, all these instances, too, would have to be understood as imperfective, although they all refer to single events. It is a hitherto unsolved problem of Hebrew grammar what exactly triggered the employ of a form otherwise strongly associated with durativity in such cases.<sup>11</sup> After all, no coherent use pattern emerges from a comprehensive study of the material, and the subtle nuances are hard to specify with precision.

Particularly striking is the appearance of a “long imperfect” in contrastive expressions in narrative, which seem to juxtapose a punctual/per-

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<sup>11</sup> So, e.g., Joüon/Muraoka, *Grammar* (see fn. 1), 340 n. 2 with reference to Jdg 2:1, 1 Kgs 21:6, and similar cases where a “perfect” would normally be expected: “These examples and others of the same kind are not satisfactorily explained.”

fective and a durative/imperfective form even for parallel events that would otherwise call for the sequence “imperfect consecutive” (which is strongly marked for punctual past) – “perfect” (as in, e.g., Gen 1:5, 33:7, etc.). Consider the following examples, once again taken from what are considered quite homogeneous literary layers:

And Hushai, David’s friend, entered (*wayyabō*, “imperfect consecutive” for a successive main event, as expected) the city whereas Absalom was entering (*yābō*, “long imperfect”) Jerusalem. (2 Sam 15:37; narrative)

Look, my sheaf rose (*qāmā*, “perfect” for a single past event in direct discourse) and even stood upright (*niššābā*, same), while look: your sheaves gathered around (*tsubbānā*, “long imperfect”) ... (Gen 37:7; direct discourse)

Without native speaker intuition, it is impossible to determine whether the unexpected shift to *yābō* in 2 Sam 15:37 and to *tsubbānā* in Gen 37:7 was simply meant to highlight the contrast, perhaps as a conclusion, just as the merely stylistic or perhaps rhythmic juxtaposition of the German preterite and present perfect in the famous ending of Goethe’s *Werther*: “Handwerker trugen ihn. Kein Geistlicher hat ihn begleitet”, or whether it would also have semantic implications like an inchoative nuance “went on to enter” in 2 Sam 15:37 and “began to move round” in Gen 37:7, respectively.<sup>12</sup> The latter verges on the conative use (on which see below) and would thus be easy to accommodate with the general association of the “long imperfect” with imperfective aspect, comparable to the occasional use of the imperfect in Greek for the beginning of an action (even if the existence of a proper “inchoative

<sup>12</sup> S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel*, Oxford 1913, 318, for instance, suggests an inchoative shade for 2 Sam 15:37, just like G. J. Spurrell, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Book of Genesis*, Oxford 1887, 273 for Gen 37:7, while Endo, *System* (see fn. 9), 119–120 deems it “a matter of individual interpretation” whether the form in Gen 37:7 has a durative sense or not. Cook, *Time* (see fn. 1), 218 subsumes such cases simply under “past imperfect”.

imperfect” in Greek is debated).<sup>13</sup> Whatever stance one adopts on the semantic or pragmatic effect here, the marked choice of form as such remains peculiar. (Conversely, the older interpretation of 2 Sam 15:37 as a circumstantial clause seems unlikely, since then one would expect a participle instead of an “imperfect” in narrative.<sup>14</sup>)

In a couple of other instances, the “long imperfect” seems to further specify a complex main action by individuating its constituent parts:

The raiding-party set out (*wayyēšē*, “imperfect consecutive” for a successive main event in narrative, as expected) from the camp of the Philistines in three companies, with the one turning (*yīpnā*, morphologically unambiguous “long imperfect”) to the way of Ophra towards the land of Shual, another turning (again *yīpnā*) the way of Beth Horon, and another turning (yet again *yīpnā*) the border road that overlooks the valley of Zeboim in the direction of the wilderness. (1 Sam 13:17–18)

And to me each one who trembled at the words of the God of Israel kept gathering (*yē’āspū*, “long imperfect”) ... (Ezr 9:4)

At face value, the durative force of the “imperfect” in these two instances appears to be related to the normal way of presenting an event as evolving over time in Classical Hebrew: the gradual departure of a raiding party in different companies in 1 Sam 13:17–18, which would then underscore the size of the Philistine army as opposed to the small Israelite one, and a crowd that steadily continued to grow in Ezr 9:4.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See the discussion and examples in E. Schwyzer/A. Debrunner, *Griechische Grammatik. Zweiter Band. Syntax und syntaktische Stilistik*, Munich 1950, 277.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. M. Eskhult, *Studies in Verbal Aspect and Narrative Technique in Biblical Hebrew Prose*, Uppsala 1990, 32, who nonetheless accepts this analysis (“just as Absalom was entering Jerusalem”), if only as an exceptional case, and cites Gen 33:14 as a parallel from conversational discourse. Yet the resulting shift of focus with an emphasis on Hushai, not the principal agent, would be strange.

<sup>15</sup> W. Dietrich, *1 Samuel 13–26 (BKAT VIII/2)*, Neukirchen 2015, 49, with his characteristic feel for the literary sophistication of Samuel, correctly states that the entire passage depicts “die ungleichen Kräfteverhältnisse zwischen Israeliten und Philistern” (although he does not comment on verbal usage). See also the insightful note on Ezr 9:4 in H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemia*, Waco 1985, 126.

However, the role of numerals and quantifiers, too, would have to be considered in determining the choice of aspect: the impression one gets is that of an unspecified series to which another element can always be added, hence it is unbounded and thus akin to imperfectivity, whereas numerical specification would imply boundedness and thus tend towards perfectivity, as in Romance. This merits further study. Another instance of a non-overtly durative “long imperfect” in a distributive numerical expression may also belong here, if indeed it is not simply habitual-generic, describing a typical property of objects:<sup>16</sup>

King Solomon made (*wayya ‘as*, “imperfect consecutive” for a successive mainline-event) two hundred large shields of hammered gold; six hundred shekels of gold went up (*ya ‘alā*, morphologically unambiguous “long imperfect”) upon each individual shield. (1 Kgs 10:16)

The relatively largest and most diverse group, finally, comprises a variety of declarative, conative, abilitative, and other aspectual and modal shades, both in narrative and in past-tense accounts in direct discourse, that are impossible to pin down in each individual case:

I (actually?) brought you up (*‘a ‘alā*, morphologically unambiguous “long imperfect”, here perhaps with a declarative-epistemic modal shade) from Egypt ... (Jdg 2:1)<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The latter seems to be what C. F. Burney, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Kings*. With an Introduction and Appendix, Oxford 1903, 148 had in mind when he says that “The Imperf. describes the norm which characterized each shield of the class”.

<sup>17</sup> The apparatus of the BHS corrects *‘a ‘alā* to an “imperfect consecutive”, but that would leave the problem of the “long” form unexplained (“imperfect consecutives” based on the “long imperfect” do not normally occur in Judges but tend to cluster in Kings, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, cf. Gzella, *Forms* (see fn. 3)). For more complicated text-critical proposals, see C. F. Burney, *The Book of Judges*. With Introduction and Notes, London 1920, 38 and, similarly, G. F. Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges*, Edinburgh 1903, 58.

The men could take (or: began to take) it as a good omen (*ynah<sup>a</sup>šū*, “long imperfect”) ... (1 Kgs 20:33)<sup>18</sup>

I was speaking (or: tried to speak; <sup>a</sup>*dabber*, “long imperfect” presumably for a conative nuance or in order to exclude an actuality entailment, because the envisaged talk had no effect) to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him ... (1 Kgs 21:6)<sup>19</sup>

Then King Joram returned to recover in Jezreel from the wounds the Arameans indeed inflicted (or: managed to inflict) on him (*yakkūhū*, “long imperfect”, possibly with a declarative-epistemic modal nuance). (2 Kgs 8:29)<sup>20</sup>

Conative expressions in particular have a natural propensity to occur with forms marked for imperfective aspect, even if they do not render ongoing or repeated events, as regularly in English in the jargon of sports, e.g., “he is running” for “he was trying to run”, and frequently in Classical Greek, Latin, and Russian as well.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, epistemic modality intersects with imperfectivity, too (as has been pointed out in the introductory part of this paper). This implies that conative or epistemic-modal interpretations of the passages cited here are fully

<sup>18</sup> Here, too, the text has been emended by various commentators who wish to read a “perfect” instead of the puzzling “long imperfect”, see W. Thiel, 1. Könige 17–22 (BKAT IX/2), Göttingen 2019, 333, who endorses this proposal. By contrast, Burney, Notes (see fn. 16), 239 rightly argues that a conative interpretation (“and the men began to divine”) is perfectly adequate.

<sup>19</sup> Similarly to his note on 1 Kgs 20:33, Burney, Notes (see fn. 16), 245 opts for a conative nuance (“‘I speak’ or ‘begin to speak,’ when immediately negotiations are cut short by a definite refusal”). The alternative suggestion by Thiel, Könige (see fn. 18), 452 presupposes a modal interpretation with declarative force (“in der nachdrücklichen Darstellung vergangener Geschehnisse”), which seems equally possible.

<sup>20</sup> Here even Burney, Notes (see fn. 16), 296 despairs and simply calls the use of the verbal form “inexplicable”. The parallel passage in 2 Chr 22:6 has a straightforward “perfect”; J. A. Montgomery/H. S. Gehman, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings, Edinburgh 1951, 398 change the text accordingly. The Vulgate idiomatically translates with a pluperfect *vulneraverant* “had inflicted”.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., R. I. Binnick, Time and the Verb. A Guide to Tense and Aspect, Oxford 1991, 59–60, with a few examples from different languages.

compatible with the known functional range of the “long imperfect”, even for a contextually non-ongoing and non-repeated event. They are neither inexplicable, nor do they inevitably require textual emendation.

Unfortunately, the subtlety of the nuances involved precludes a watertight taxonomy that leaves no room for disagreement: if one opts for an inchoative analysis for 2 Sam 15:37 and Gen 37:7 (see the discussion at the beginning of the present section), both could also be included here. The same applies to a few instances of the “long imperfect” that may otherwise be subsumed under the more frequent usage for expressing purpose or consequence (e.g., *yāšūbū* “so that they returned” in 2 Sam 23:10; *ya<sup>a</sup>lū* “so that one could go up” in 1 Kgs 6:8; or *tiššāheṭ* “so that it was corrupted” in Ex 8:20, where the apparatus of the BHS nonetheless suggests to read an “imperfect consecutive” instead) on the one hand and durative-habitual events (e.g., *yḏabber* ... *y<sup>a</sup>nənnū* “he spoke ... he answered him [every time]” in Ex 19,19, if these two forms are not to be understood as rare instances of the historical present; *yāḥō’ū* “they used to come” in 2 Kgs 13:20, but the text is uncertain and two manuscripts have the “perfect” *bā’ū* here) on the other.

A similar ambiguity affects a few “long imperfects” (if that is what they are) with past-tense reference in poetic direct discourse, such as:

From Aram Balaq thus brought me here (*yanḥēnī*, presumably “long imperfect”), the king of Moab from the eastern mountains. (Num 23:7; supposedly “archaic”, i.e., pre-monarchic)

Let the day perish on which I had to be born (*iwwāleḏ*, again in all likelihood a “long imperfect”)! (Job 3:3; post-exilic)

For want of a better explanation – *iwwāleḏ* in Job 3:3, at any rate, seems to be non-ongoing, since the verb is punctual in terms of lexical semantics – one may suppose that an epistemic-modal, declarative, nuance comes to the fore here, similarly as with Jdg 2:1 (see above). That, at least, would account more fully for the use of these “imperfects” in

direct discourse, where functions otherwise known from narrative, such as past-ongoingness or past repetition, are untypical.<sup>22</sup>

Instead of squeezing these different shades into a crystal-clear scheme of identifiable hard and fast meanings, the solution rather seems to lie in the unspecific nature of the notion of durativity as such. As a result of its inherent unboundedness, any grammatical category firmly associated with it covers notions less specific semantically than a form marked for perfectivity and thus for a clearly delimited span of time. Durativity is intrinsically fuzzy and allows for a variety of aspectual and modal tones – including inchoative, conative, and declarative, all of which often make good sense as approximate translation equivalents – that may at times simply be employed for stylistic variation.

Consequently, the “long imperfect” is the Ancient Hebrew conjugation with the lowest degree of markedness. Its past-tense use began to wane when the strong connection of the “long imperfect” with imperfective aspect gradually gave way to a higher prominence of present-future tense-marking, following the restructuring of the verbal system in post-exilic Hebrew. This can also be inferred from the replacement of the “imperfect” in 2 Kgs 8:29 with a “perfect” in 2 Chr 22:6.<sup>23</sup>

In a few cases, the Septuagint nonetheless maintains the distinction between such perfective and imperfective forms in the Hebrew by rendering the latter with a Greek imperfect, as in 2 Sam 15:37, or with a participle, as in 1 Sam 13:17–18, but the aspectual nuance was levelled elsewhere. Similarly the Vulgate with its juxtaposition of perfect and imperfect in 1 Sam 13:17–18, which is quite faithful to the underlying Hebrew, although the Latin normally smoothens the narrative style by translating most of the Hebrew “long imperfects” discussed here with a

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<sup>22</sup> For a brief discussion of these two passages, see H. Gzella, Review of: Tania Notarius, *The Verb in Archaic Biblical Poetry. A Discursive, Typological, and Historical Investigation of the Tense System*, *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 76 (2019), 323–324.

<sup>23</sup> As already A. Kropat, *Die Syntax des Autors der Chronik verglichen mit seinen Quellen* (BZAW 16), Gießen 1909, 17 saw: “Einer von den ... exceptional cases [sc. according to Driver, *Treatise* (see fn. 8) 32–33] der Setzung des Imperfekts wird durch den Chroniker beseitigt”. Ezr 9:4, if indeed it belongs here, may thus be a classicism.

perfect. One may also note the idiomatic rendition of 2 Sam 15:37 *veniente ergo Husai amico David in civitatem Absalom quoque ingressus est Hierusalem*, which puts the focus on the principal agent of the passage by turning the event expressed by the Hebrew “long imperfect” into the main action and, conversely, transforming the “imperfect consecutive” for the salient action in the original text into an infinitive absolute. Such marginal uses of the Hebrew “imperfect” seem to have prompted an *ad hoc* treatment in the Ancient Versions that, at least sporadically, reproduces even very subtle nuances.

The hypothesis that the underspecified nature of durativity itself lies at the heart of instances of the “long imperfect” that are neither overtly ongoing for a longer period of time nor recurring more than once, can be further corroborated by a comparison with the standard marker for durative, habitual, and iterative in Palestinian Aramaic. While the very form is unrelated to the Hebrew “imperfect”, here, too, a few examples occur where a morphological category closely linked to durativity and imperfective aspect seems to render patently semelfactive events.

#### 4. *Punctual Use of the Periphrastic Construction in Aramaic*

Despite an overall similar grammatical blueprint, Aramaic, Hebrew’s sister-language, employs somewhat different strategies for aspect marking. Past-tense uses of the “long imperfect”, which also exists as a morphological category in Aramaic, are much less prominent than in Hebrew, and the relatively few instances in narrative seem to act as historical presents and not as durative, habitual, or iterative markers for events besides the mainline story.<sup>24</sup> Since the middle of the first millennium BCE at the latest, a periphrastic construction consisting of the active participle of a main verb with a “perfect” or “imperfect” of the auxiliary verb *hwī* “to be” for temporal marking, just as its Hebrew counterpart with *hyī*, serves as the default strategy for encoding past or,

<sup>24</sup> See H. Gzella, *Erscheinungsformen des historischen Präsens im Aramäischen*, *Orientalia N.S.* 74 (2005), 399–408; a summary of the situation with further recent bibliography can be found in Gzella, *Forms* (see fn. 3), 35–36. On Aramaic in Palestine, cf. H. Gzella, *The Aramaic Dialects of Early Roman Palestine. History, Variation, Use*, *Orientalia N.S.* 89 (2020), 22–57.

less frequently, future – depending on which finite form of the auxiliary “to be” is employed – progressive (Dan 7:13), habitual (Dan 5:19), or iterative (Dan 6:11) events. Contrary to the “long imperfect” in Hebrew, however, these constructions do not normally exhibit a wider semantic range but are confined to rendering durativity (which may still be prompted by various semantic and pragmatic factors).<sup>25</sup>

Very occasionally, however, Palestinian Aramaic in particular seems to deviate from this otherwise clear-cut use pattern in that periphrastic constructions also appear for non-repeated and punctual events. This usage has not yet been subjected to a thorough analysis. A particularly striking example is the employ of such a durative construction in a Genizah-fragment of the Palestinian Targum to Gen 31:47, where the Hebrew text contains two ordinary non-imperfective narrative forms:

And Laban called (*wqr*’, “perfect”, being the normal narrative form in Aramaic) it Jegar-Sahadutha, whereas Jacob would call it (*hwwh qr*’, periphrastic construction) in the language of the Sanctuary Galed. (PT Gen 31:47)<sup>26</sup>

Both the “perfect” and the periphrastic construction obviously refer to one and the same, punctual and non-repeated, event. There is thus no overtly durative shade involved; that would presumably imply: “as the place is still called today”, but it is the former (i.e., the one with the non-durative form), not the latter designation that appears in Rabbinic lists in order to geographically define the Land of Israel. Instead, the variation seems to reproduce the switch from the “imperfect consecutive” *wayyigrā* to the “perfect” *qārā* in the Hebrew text as a result of the chiasmic word-order, similar to the noteworthy use of a “long imperfect” in a similar construction in 2 Sam 15:37 (see above).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> H. Gzella, *Tempus, Aspekt und Modalität im Reichsaramäischen*, Wiesbaden 2004, 245–254 has an analysis of the material in older Aramaic.

<sup>26</sup> The text is conveniently accessible in M. L. Klein, *Genizah Manuscripts of Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch*, 2 vols., Cincinnati 1986, [vol. I] 62–63.

<sup>27</sup> As Klein, *Genizah* [vol. II] (see fn. 26), 23 states: “inappropriate in the present context, since no durative or repetitive mode is intended”, yet without explanation. Neither does S. E. Fassberg, *A Grammar of the Palestinian Targum Fragments from*

Another instance of the same periphrastic construction for a single past action occurs in a fragment of the Book of Giants from Qumran:

Then his brother 'Ohyah began to speak ([ 'nh hww', periphrastic construction; the reading of the first word is likely but not entirely certain, however) and said (w'mr, "perfect") before the giants: ... (4Q530 2 ii+6–12,15)

The speech introductory formula consisting of the two verbs 'nī "to answer" or "to begin to speak" and 'mr "to say" is well-attested in Aramaic and not otherwise used with the periphrastic construction.<sup>28</sup> In the light of the Hebrew examples previously discussed, and against the wider background of linguistic typology, it seems most likely that the syntagm does not present the action as ongoing over time but expresses a conative or perhaps an inchoative nuance instead, just as the "long imperfect" in 1 Kgs 21:6.<sup>29</sup> As a result, this peculiar and understudied usage, too, can be adequately accounted for if one considers the wider semantic implications of durativity and unboundedness.

### 5. Conclusion, Typology, and Linguistic Explanation

The indisputable association of the "long imperfect" with imperfective aspect in Ancient Hebrew becomes particularly evident in past-tense narrative, where this form normally marks events as either ongoing, that is, in-progress or as habitual, i.e., repeated regularly over time. It thereby acts as a counterpart to both the "imperfect consecutive", which is sharply marked for past punctual events (i.e., past tense plus perfective aspect), for the mainline story and the "perfect", which seems to be chiefly associated with past tense or relative anteriority, for background

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the Cairo Genizah, Atlanta 1990, 170 account for it; K. Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer: samt den Inschriften aus Palästina, dem Testament Levis aus der Kairoer Genisa, der Fastenrolle und den alten talmudischen Zitaten*, 3 vols., Göttingen 1984–2004, here vol. 1, 561; vol. 3, 384 ascribes it to style.

<sup>28</sup> See Gzella, *Erscheinungsformen* (see fn. 24), 406–407 for an analysis of the attestations in older Aramaic.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. the translation in T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Qumran Aramaic*. Louvain 2011, 176: "started answering and saying".

information or in clauses where the verb, due to the fronting of some other constituent, cannot take the initial position.<sup>30</sup>

Even so, in a few instances, such as Gen 37:7; Jdg 2:1; 1 Sam 13:17–18; 2 Sam 15:37; 1 Kgs 20:33; 1 Kgs 21:6; 2 Kgs 8:29; and others, no overtly durative nuance appears, since here the “long imperfect” (instantly recognizable on grounds of morphology at least in Jdg 2:1 and 1 Sam 13:17–18, since *'a<sup>l</sup>lā* and *yīpnā* cannot be “short” forms<sup>31</sup>) occurs with events that are evidently not repeated. Moreover, there is no obvious reason why these single events should be presented as ongoing, regardless of their actual duration, over a longer period. Examples cluster in Classical narrative prose. Judging from parallel passages in Chronicles, they were no longer part of the later language use exhibited by the Chronicler, but, if the interpretation defended here also applies to Ezr 9:4, they may exceptionally survive even into particularly classicizing post-exilic compositions. These mysterious cases have

<sup>30</sup> Very few exegetes still deny the central role of aspect in the Hebrew “long imperfect” in favour of “mood”, but these attempts, which originated in the 1980s, are marred by a confused and underdeveloped idea of “future-modal” and “irrealis” on the one hand and an inadequate accounting for the impact of boundedness as a semantic property and its intersection with temporal and modal properties on the other, as Cook, Wine (see fn. 7) acutely observes; cf. also Cook, Time (see fn. 1), 218–219.

<sup>31</sup> This fact invalidates the old hypothesis that similar instances like 1 Kgs 21:6, where, in the light of accident alone, the verb could be either a “long” or a “short” form, are remnants of the archaic preterite use of the “short imperfect” (so, e.g., G. R. Driver, *Problems of the Hebrew Verbal System*, Edinburgh 1936, 144–145). Surprisingly, Cook, Time (see fn. 1), 260 n. 94 – perhaps by accident? – includes Jdg 2:1 among such cases, despite the use of an unmistakable “long imperfect” there. Some morphologically clear and textually uncontested instances of the non-jussive “short imperfect” do occur in Job, to be sure: they either assume nuances otherwise associated with the “long imperfect” (e.g., Job 23:9; 37:4–5) or, at least at a first glance, seem to preserve the inherited past-tense function in gnomic utterances in main clauses, for which the “perfect” would normally be used (as in 18:9; 33:26–7; 36:14–15). Because of their appearance in non-narrative prose and their conspicuous concentration in the same book, however, they are better treated apart, especially since they all may derive from secondary analogy in a highly sophisticated and creative yet not purely Classical Hebrew style. For the time being, see the brief remarks in H. Gzella, Review of: Hans Rechenmacher (ed.), *In Memoriam Wolfgang Richter*, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 63 (2018), 498–500, here 499–500.

been labelled “inexplicable” or “not satisfactorily explained” in standard grammars, commentaries, and topical studies for the past hundred years, and have also been subjected to textual emendation.

However, general-linguistic considerations regarding the phenomenon of imperfectivity suggest that such attestations do not reflect a proper, albeit hitherto undefined, function of the Hebrew “long imperfect” in particular. Instead, the solution lies in the underspecified nature of “durativity” that is part of the semantics of imperfective aspect. Due to its inherent unboundedness, it appears less clearly circumscribed than nuances associated with perfective aspect, such as punctuality and telicity. The temporal or modal value of the utterance in question and its actuality thereby become less salient. Consequently, the “long imperfect” here focuses on the action as such or on its circumstances at the expense of the result, so the semantic nuance can easily shade into different aspectual or modal notions, such as conative or declarative.

A comparison with a few untypical instances of durative marking in Palestinian Aramaic supports the view that non-progressive and non-habitual uses of the “long imperfect” in Ancient Hebrew relate to general semantic and notional issues, not to specific morphosyntactic ones. In Palestinian Aramaic, the periphrastic conjugation, too, which normally acts as a most straightforward imperfective (progressive or habitual, also iterative) marking strategy, occurs sporadically with events that are non-repeated, yet without there being any clear hints in the context why these events should be presented as ongoing by the speaker. In short, the same conceptual phenomenon – the unspecific and less salient semantic profile of durativity – surfaces in two historically and functionally distinct morphological categories in Semitic.

The wide variety of nuances that underspecified instances of durativity assume in individual cases, may also be compared to the many different uses of the “general factual meaning” of so-called imperfective verbs in Russian, where aspectual phenomena are infinitely better attested than in Hebrew. General-factual imperfective verbs appear even when an action is completed and thus neither progressive nor habitual or iterative, provided the focus, for whatever reason, does not rest on the result (otherwise the perfective verb would be used), which may be unknown, no longer applicable, or simply irrelevant, but on the fact that the action as

such happened, or on the circumstances in which it took place. Compare, for instance, Я его предупреждал “I warned him” (imperfective: the speaker uttered words of warning, but it remains unclear whether they had any effect on the addressee) versus Я его предупредил “I warned him” (perfective: the addressee is a warned man); Я брал эту книгу в библиотеке “I borrowed that book from the library” (imperfective: the book has been returned since then) versus Я взял эту книгу в библиотеке “I borrowed this book from the library” (perfective: the book is still in the speaker’s possession); or Где апельсины покупали? “Where did you buy the oranges?” (imperfective: only the circumstances matter, not the result) versus Кто написал «Войну и мир»? “Who wrote ‘War and Peace’?” (perfective: the speaker explicitly focuses on the final result).<sup>32</sup> Minimal pairs like these, too, reflect the employ of imperfective categories for verbal events that are presented as generally less salient and less specific.

In short, the untypical and seemingly elusive behaviour of the Hebrew “long imperfect” in certain past-tense contexts cannot be adequately understood by way of theory-light, allegedly “practical”, analyses at the morphosyntactic level that are written by and geared towards non-linguists. If, on the other hand, the individual nuances that can be retrieved from a close-reading of the texts are related to their conceptual underpinnings, as has been attempted here, the Hebrew data can meaningfully contribute not only to broader linguistic theory and typology, but also to a refined understanding of the language itself and to a richer, more objective contextual interpretation.

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<sup>32</sup> See H. R. Mehlig, *Negation und Verbalaspekt im Russischen*, Wiener Slawistischer Almanach 77 (2016), 229–265 for a recent survey of the discussion in Russian linguistics with extensive bibliography; cf. also A. Grønn, *The Semantics and Pragmatics of the Russian Factual Imperfective*, Oslo 2004. I owe the examples cited, their finer nuances, and their explanation to my former Leiden colleague Jos Schaecken.

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