Wayhi and Wayyiqtol in Genesis 37 and 39

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In his dissertation, published under the title, *Narrative Structure and Discourse Constellations* (2004), Roy Heller observes the difficulties in analyzing Biblical Hebrew (BH) narrative. Unlike other languages that have the ability to convey more complex sentences with subordinate clauses, BH discourse contains many shorter clauses that can be read independent of one another. Therefore, discourse structure offers more clues to complex meaning than does grammar.

BH narrative is comprised of a series of clauses governed by preterit verbal forms. This preterit or narrative form is variously called the “preterit,” “waw-consecutive” (WC), “converted imperfect,” the transliteration “*wayyiqtol,*” or some other term. Many scholars have observed the imprecision of such terms, which each describe some feature of this verbal form. The common understanding is that the WC clause advances the narrative in some way, whereas other forms (*waqatal, yiqtol, wayiqtol, wə-X qatal*) introduce new narrative sections or provide background information.

The contrast between the WC and other clauses is the key to understanding which clauses are to be read as part of the story-line. Heller notes, “By noting how the text itself syntactically defines paragraphs, the interpreter can better know what elements of the narrative are to be read together or separately” (2004, p. 429, emphasis original). He posits a structural approach for understanding the different disjunctive clauses and their functions in breaking up WC chains. He tests his approach by analyzing two passages generally understood by source-critics to be coherent narratives: the Joseph Novella (Gen. 37, 39-47) and David’s *Thronnachfolge*, or Succession Narrative (2 Sam. 9-20, 1 Kgs. 1-2).

While the WC is understood as the predominant verbal form used in narrative, even a casual reading of BH narrative will reveal that there are exceptions to this pattern. The present study will pose three potential weaknesses with Heller’s system; these weaknesses will be demonstrated in the first two chapters of the Joseph Novella. Bryan Harmelink’s work on the function of *wayhi* in narrative will be posited as an alternative to Heller’s understanding.

The first weakness in Heller’s approach is that it fails to provide an adequate understanding of *wayyiqtol* forms occurring “off-line,” as part of a paragraph of background information. Because the overwhelming use of the WC is to advance the narrative, the exceptions to this rule are intriguing and difficult to understand. In some instances the WC seems to function as a consecution of the tense/aspect of the primary verbal form in the sentence. In other instances, the WC is used in direct narrative discourse, in which a character in the story is himself telling a story. This sort of usage is less perplexing.

Second, Heller acknowledges but fails to sufficiently explain the presence of WC clauses that summarize preceding or succeeding WC-governed narrative. In some of these instances the WC clearly cannot temporally or logically advance overall narrative.

Finally, Heller’s understanding of *wayhi* is too rigid and fails to adequately distinguish between its verbal function and its function as a paragraph boundary. He asserts, “In all cases a temporal clause is a metasyntactical marker for the beginning of a paragraph. This phenomenon is almost a universal marker of paragraph initiation in biblical Hebrew prose” (2005, p. 434). This does not provide a satisfactory explanation for several uses of *wayhi*, particularly in Genesis 39.

**Off-Line Wayyiqtol Forms**

The text of Genesis 37 and 39 contains numerous examples of WC-governed clauses that occur outside of a narrative sequence. If a WC chain is the backbone of narrative, the non-WC
paragraphs can be viewed as providing “off-line” background information (Heller, 2004, p. 52). The presence of WC clauses in background information is puzzling, but it poses a problem for Heller, who states, “WAYYIQTOL by its nature causes the action of a narrative to progress” (2004, p. 52). Heller also decides (apparently arbitrarily) that three consecutive WC clauses constitute a chain.

The following instances of disconnected WC clauses occur in Genesis 37 and 39:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Clause</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>37:1</td>
<td>בְּעָלָם יִתְקַטְּבָה</td>
<td>And Jacob lived…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>יָבֹא וְיָשָׁב</td>
<td>And Joseph brought…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>וֹשְׁבָה וַשְׁבִּיתָם</td>
<td>And they prostrated themselves…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39:1</td>
<td>וַיִּקְשֶׁם מִפְּלִיסֵר</td>
<td>And Potiphar purchased…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The WC in 37:7 is notable, but can be allowed as an anomaly because it occurs in the context of direct discourse. The instance in 37:1 begins the chapter by shifting the focus to Jacob in the context of Esau’s movements and generations (Gen. 36). It is followed immediately by the וַיַּלְכֶהוּ statement, which signals the shift to Joseph’s story. The statement, “And Jacob lived in the land of the land of his father’s sojournings,” does not technically advance the story; it merely states the facts of Genesis 35 as the narrator rejoins Jacob’s camp.

The use of the WC in 37:2 advances the story in the sense that it gives new information about an event that occurred prior to the story being picked up again in verse four. However, its primary function is as a part of a larger paragraph of background information explaining the source of his brothers’ hatred. The extent of this paragraph will be addressed below.

The inclusion of וַיִּקְשֶׁם מִפְּלִיסֵר (39:1) in this list might be questioned on the grounds that the narrative proceeds from that point with a series of רָאִים clauses. However, this is significant because some of these רָאִים clauses are temporal or even disjunctive. The WC in 39:1 does not indicate a return to the direct chain of the story line, but a return to Joseph as the focus of the story (from Judah and Tamar).

It is obvious from the overwhelming use of the WC in these chapters that the WC form does primarily comprise the main story line. However, these non-narrative uses of the WC present some difficulty for Heller’s thesis, which appears to be too rigid.

Non-Sequential Wayyiqtol Forms

One of the strengths of Heller’s work is his categorization of the disjunctive functions of non-WC clauses. In his analysis of Genesis 37, he states:

…Whereas the WAYYIQTOL clauses provide a “chain” or “backbone” upon which the different events of the story are sequentially joined, the six disjunctive clause types outlined above all break the sequential progression of the narrative.

Although their foundational effect upon the narrative is similar, however, the narrative and structural functions of these six disjunctive clauses are not completely uniform… (2004, p. 54, emphasis original)

However, Heller’s understanding of the WC fails to account for non-sequential uses of this form. Harmelink cautions, “Under certain pragmatic or narrative conditions, the sequentiality of the WAYYIQTOL and the anteriority of the QATAL are suppressed in favor of other features which
come into play under those conditions” (2004, p. 114, emphasis original). His featured example is 2 Samuel 11:14-15:

And when morning came, David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah. And he wrote in the letter, “Grant that Uriah…"

Obviously, David could not have written the letter after it had been sent in Uriah’s hand. The second cannot be temporally consequent to , and thus it breaks the flow of the narrative in that sense. Harmelink speculates as to why the narrator chose not to use a disjunctive form (such as ) to provide this background information. He argues that the use of the waw + nominative + qatal, though a logical possibility based on other factors, would undercut the narrator's intention somewhat. The use of the “maintains the focus on David as agent without shifting focus to the letter itself” (2004, p. 116).

Genesis 37:5-6 contains another example of this usage of the WC where “sequentiality is not the feature in focus” (Harmelink, 2004, p. 116):

Verse five serves as a summary of the events that occur in verses 6-8. This becomes more vivid in the restatement of the brothers’ hatred in 8b. (v. 5) and (v. 6) are the same event. There is no temporal adverb or other linguistic marker; context is the lone clue.

In these cases the WC is utilized in ways that appear awkward in comparison to previously observed patterns. This is an indication that the story-maker is subtly crafting narrative-time for the sake of perspective. It may be the case that the entire first half of Genesis 37 is a prelude to 37:18-36. The early events described—Joseph’s coat, his dreams, and his journey—function as background information to explain the climactic event—his brothers’ betrayal.

Uses of Wayhi in Genesis 39

Genesis 39 can be roughly divided into three sections: the success of Joseph in Potiphar’s house (vv. 1-6), Joseph’s encounters with Potiphar’s wife and her accusations (vv. 7-18), and Joseph’s imprisonment and success (vv. 19-23). This division is evident given the similarity of language and content between the first and third sections (“YHWH was with Joseph,” Joseph found favor in his masters’ sight, his masters paid no attention to anything in Joseph’s charge, etc.).

One remarkable feature of Genesis 39 is the narrator’s prolific use of wayhi, which occurs fifteen times in the chapter. No other chapter in Genesis has even half as many occurrences, except the first chapter (Harmelink, 2004, pp. 138-39).

Heller rightly observes that Genesis 39 can be divided even further into smaller paragraphs according to the occurrences of temporal wayhi clauses. He divides the middle section into three paragraphs, each beginning with a wayhi clause (vv. 7, 11, 13). The remaining
three *wayhi* clauses occur as an “extra-paragraph comment” (v. 10) and as temporal clauses in direct discourse (vv. 15, 18). (Heller, 2004, pp. 78-79)

This middle section of Genesis 39 demonstrates the strength of Heller’s approach. His breakdown of the narrative according to disjunctive and *wayhi* temporal clauses truly reflects the natural movement and feeling of the story. It is worth noting, however, that a careful look at even the most woodenly literal translation of the story in the English would probably lead a reader with no knowledge of BH to divide Genesis 39:7-18 into the same sections, simply based on context and the events of the story. Heller’s system is an accurate *description* of how this particular story works; his approach begins to run into difficulty when he attempts to apply it *prescriptively* to the introductory and concluding sections of the chapter.

These first and last sections of Genesis 39 provide information pertinent to Joseph’s situation, and provide a contrast to verses 7-18, which are sequential. The six uses of *wayhi* in verses 1-6 are particularly difficult to categorize according to Heller’s system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Abbreviated phrase</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 But YHWH was with Joseph</td>
<td>נוהי יוהי אתｲ-לך</td>
<td>Temporal (Introductory)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 And he became a prosperous man</td>
<td>נוהי אחש מְלִיך</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 while he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian.</td>
<td>נוהי בֵּבח ארנֵי הַמִּישָר</td>
<td>Temporal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 And it happened that from that point on he attended…</td>
<td>נוהי מָראָא הַפֵּדֶד אֵחָו בֵּכח</td>
<td>Temporal (Introductory)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 And YHWH’s blessing came upon all…</td>
<td>נוהי בֵּכח יִוהי כְּלֹא אֵשֶׁר שָׁלַח</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Now Joseph was attractive…</td>
<td>נוהי וַיחַק יִפתאָא יֵימֶה מְרָאת</td>
<td>Background</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Heller divides the section into two paragraphs: Joseph appointed over the house (1-4) and the house prospers (5-6). He is obliged to do this because the chapter begins with a disjunctive *w-Y X qatal* formulation. He labels the initial *wayhi* in verse five as temporal, and thus it *must* begin a paragraph (2004, p. 434). All other uses of *wayhi* in this section, along with the two occurrences in verses 20-21, are “inner-paragraph comments” (2004, p. 79).

While “inner-paragraph comment” does seem to describe the occurrence in verse six,¹ it does not seem to be adequate to describe the function of *wayhi* in verses two and five. Verse two is a string of *wayhi* clauses, each functioning slightly differently. The first (“But YHWH was with Joseph”) provides contrast to the previous sentence, stating what the reader might begin to doubt based on the previous verse. The second (“And he became a prosperous man”) seems to be functioning verbally. Finally, the third occurrence (“while he was in the house…”) “comments” the obvious—unless it is taken temporally, which Heller is wont to do.

Heller remarks in a footnote, “*hyh* verbal clauses do not advance the narrative” (2004, p. 79). However, verse two does seem to denote more than a status of being; it describes generally events that happen in Potiphar’s house—events that will be further explained in verses 3-6. This verse is more than a series of comments; it truly advances the story line.

¹ In a personal conversation (March 2009), Bryan Harmelink suggested that this use of *yhiy>* may in fact be verbal—“And Joseph became attractive,” perhaps as a result of the physical labor, which would have been less common for him in his father’s house.
Heller is correct that the first instance of *wayhi* in verse five (“And from that point on…”) is temporal; however, there is also the temporal adverb *זָמֶה* to indicate this. The second instance (“And YHWH’s blessing came upon…”) elaborates that the blessing of YHWH came to all of Potiphar’s house. This is hardly a comment; it continues both the chain of *wayyiqtol* clauses and the verbal idea begun by *יְהוָה*.

The categorizations of the final three occurrences of *wayhi* in Genesis 39 are analogous to previous occurrences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Text (Hebrew)</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5a</td>
<td>נְהַרְיָהְךָ אַלּוֹכְנֵךְ</td>
<td>Temporal (Introductory)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2c</td>
<td>נְהַרְיָהְךָ בִּבְיַת בָּכִיתְךָ</td>
<td>Temporal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a</td>
<td>נְהַרְיָהְךָ אֶת הַיִּרְאֵיתָם</td>
<td>Temporal (Introductory)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion**

It is clear that Heller’s approach to understanding the complexities of BH narrative has merit. Though not discussed here, his categories and criteria for direct discourse within narrative are particularly helpful.

While categorization in language has merit, it also brings the danger of over-systematization, by which words are squeezed into categories that do not do justice to their meaning in a particular context. Heller ascribes “macrosyntactic functions” to certain words or phrases, such as *wayhi*, which do not always have such function. Harmelin cautions, “The main issue with *macrosyntactic* is its lack of precision…. The preference here is to speak of the *discourse-pragmatic* functions of *יְהוָה*” (2004, p. 428). Such an approach takes into account the messiness and flexibility of language, which evolves from common use rather than from prescribed rules.
References
