The Story of Ancient Hebrew

‘āšer

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Abstract

This study is an investigation of the history of the Hebrew word ‘āšer, from the earliest inscriptional and biblical data to Mishnaic Hebrew, including the language of Ben Sira and the Qumran Scrolls. I consider the argument that ‘āšer witnesses a diachronic development, adding non-relative functions to the original relative function in later stages of ancient Hebrew, and conclude that the data do not support such an analysis. Instead, I argue that ‘āšer has a single function throughout ancient Hebrew: to nominalise clauses.

Introduction

The Hebrew grammatical word ‘āšer has recently been touted as a “parade example” of grammaticalisation, in which the focus is upon ‘āšer in its comparative Semitic context and in relation to the other relative words, specifically še.1 It has also been asserted that ‘āšer undergoes further grammaticalisation within biblical Hebrew (BH).2 Since I have critiqued the former proposal elsewhere,3 this essay will consider the second proposal, particularly in light of my previous claims that ‘āšer serves only two functions in BH: to introduce

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1 Huehnergard 2006, p. 121.
3 See Holmstedt 2006; the interested reader may contact me (robert.holmstedt@utoronto.ca) for a prepublication copy.
relative and complement clauses. In this essay I will extend my analysis to include non-biblical data up through Mishnaic Hebrew, and will offer a refinement of my earlier proposal by suggesting that the two functions, relative and complement clause subordination, can be subsumed under one syntactic function: 'âšer is used to nominalise clauses.

Pre-Hellenistic Period non-biblical Data

If we start with the earliest Hebrew and closely-related Canaanite dialectal data, we find that there are few early first-millennium examples of Semitic *âtar, as either a noun or as a relative word: we have only one occurrence in Moabite, from the royal "Mesha Stele" inscription, and one in Edomite, from an ostraca found at Horvat 'Uza in the eastern Negev; these data are given in (1) and (2), respectively.

(1) Moabite 'âšr

\[ w'nk mlkt[y] l] m't bqrn 'âšr yspty l h'rî \]
'I became king [over the] hundreds in the towns that I have added to the land' (KAI 181, lines 28–29)

(2) Edomite 'âšr

\[ w't tn 'i h'kl 'âš rd' mh \]
'and now, give the food that Ahi'imô prepared(?)' (Beit-Arieh and Cresson 1985, 97, lines 3–4)

Both of these are clearly instances of relative function words. In both cases, the 'âšr introduces a verbal clause that modifies a nominal head, towns and food, respectively. Additionally, both 'âšr relative clauses are restrictive, meaning that these clauses provide crucial information for the identification of the referent of each relative’s head. If we continue to set aside the biblical Hebrew data for the moment and examine the language of the first-millennium Hebrew inscriptions, we find similarly that all the extant occurrences of 'âšr are unarguably relative in use, as in (3).

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5 A 'nominal' item is not to be equated with 'noun'; 'nominal' is a broader category that includes all items that have [-verb] features, such as nouns, pronouns, adjectives, agentive participles, and even prepositions. Thus, 'to nominalise' is to take a non-nominal item and subcategorise it so that syntactically it may function as a nominal item.
(3) Hebrew 'āšer

\[\text{ugm kl spr 'āšer yb' ly 'm qr' ty 'th}\]

'and also any letter that comes to me, surely I can read it’ (Lach 3:10-12)

If we only had these data, the analysis of 'āšer would be straightforward: it nominalises clauses specifically in modification of nominal antecedents; i.e., it introduces relative clauses. However, when we admit the BH data, the picture becomes slightly complicated.

**Biblical Data**

While there is little disagreement that 'āšer functions as a relative word by the earliest stage of Hebrew for which we have data — of almost 5,500 occurrences of 'āšer in the Hebrew Bible well over 5,000 are unarguably relative in function, all analyses assume that further change has occurred within Hebrew. This approach is succinctly summarised in BDB: apparently 'āšer further changed so that it “weakened in Heb[rew] to a mere particle of relation”; in other words, it came to introduce a wide variety of subordinate clauses, including complement, causal, result, purpose, and conditional clauses.

The complement clause function of 'āšer is illustrated in examples (4)–(5). Example (4) presents a complement clause introduced by function word kl.

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7 Note that the the term "relative pronoun" is nowhere used in this study, nor is it at all linguistically appropriate. The item 'āšer does not carry agreement features like Hebrew pronouns, nor does it appear in similar syntactic environments. Rather, we may generally refer to 'āšer as a "relative word," or technically as a "complementiser." The linguistic definition of complementiser is a function word that introduces a clause and allows it to be subcategorised as a noun phrase. While the term shares some similarity to the more general term "complement," this should not be taken to indicate that a complementiser introduces only complement/object clauses. Therefore, in this work, I use "nominaliser" instead of "complementiser," which I believe better describes the syntactic function of 'āšer (see above, n. 2).
8 For the lone dissenting voice, see Schwarzschild 1990. For a critique of Schwarzschild's proposal, see Holmstedt 2002, pp. 8–17.
9 BDB, p. 8t. The reference grammars of GKC, IBHS, JM, and BHRG, as well as the lexicons of BDB, DCH, and HALOT list a combined 38 examples of 'āšer used to introduce non-relative and non-complement clauses. Note that these 38 examples are out of almost 5,500 occurrences of the word 'āšer in the Hebrew Bible. This statistic alone should raise a red flag in terms of grammatical economy.
The salient syntax of this construction is: a clause, headed by a function word, filling the syntactic role of the complement of a transitive verb, in this case, the verb \([r^-h]\) 'to see'.

(4) **Complement Clause introduced by \(kî\)**
\[
\text{wayyō\textsuperscript{marū} rā\textsuperscript{ā} rā\textsuperscript{ā}nū kî hāyā yhu\textsuperscript{h} immāk}
\]
‘then they said: We saw clearly that Yhwh was with you’ (Gen. 6:28)

Compare that to the nearly identical syntax of (5), with the primary difference that the complement clause is introduced by \(\text{āṣer}\).

(5) **Complement Clause introduced by \(\text{āṣer}\)**
\[
\text{ūbammidbār \text{āṣer rā\textsuperscript{ā}tā'\text{āṣer nā\textsuperscript{ā}kā yhu\textsuperscript{h} ēlōhēkā}}}
\]
‘and in the wilderness where you saw that Yhwh, your god, carried you’ (Deut. 1:31)

We cannot understand the \(\text{āṣer}\) in clause like Deut. 1:13 as a relative word. Within relative clauses there is a position that corresponds to the head (whether the head is overt or covert). In ancient Hebrew that position inside the relative clause is often marked by a resumptive pronoun or resumptive adverb (such as the Hebrew word \(sām\) 'there'), as in (6), but the position may also be left as a trace (or gap), as in (7).

(6) **BH Relative with Overt Resumption of Head**
\[
\text{wayyiqrā' yā\textsuperscript{ā}gōb 'et ŝēm bammāqōm\textquoteright \text{āṣer dibber 'ittō ŝām ēlōhēm bēt 'ēl}}
\]
‘and Jacob named the place, that God spoken with him there, Bethel’ (Gen. 35:15)

(7) **BH Relative with no Overt Resumption of Head**
\[
\text{wayyaṣēb yā\textsuperscript{ā}gōb maṣēbā bammāqōm\textquoteright \text{āṣer dibber 'ittō}}
\]
‘and Jacob set up a pillar in the place, that he [God] spoke with him Ø;’ (Gen. 35:14)

What is significantly different about \(\text{āṣer}\) complement clauses is that there is no such open or resumed position within the clause, as is clear from the

\[\text{See Gen. 24:3; Exod. 11:7; Lev. 5:5; 26:40; Num. 32:23; Deut. 1:31; 3:24; Josh. 4:7; 1 Sam. 15:20; 18:15; 2 Sam. 1:4; 14:15; 1 Kgs. 2:44; 22:16; Isa. 38:7; Jer. 28:9; Ezek. 8:12; 20:26; 1 Chr. 28:7; 18:15.}\]
example in (5). The lack of either a trace or resumption syntactically distinguishes relative clauses from complement clauses when the same lexical item introduces both.

**Are the Relative and Complement Functions of ‘āšer Related?**

The diachronic question that I will take up from here is whether one of these two functions, relative or complement, proceeded from the other. Givón, using the framework of grammaticalisation, argues that ‘āšer developed from an initial relative marker to also introducing complement clauses at a later stage of the language.11 Givón marshals data from biblical texts that he designates as either “early” or “late,” and he asserts that the early biblical examples of ‘āšer all represent relative clauses, while the later biblical examples exhibit first the additional function of introducing “subjunctive complements,” as in (8) below, and then finally the function of introducing verbal complements for verbs of cognition, as in (9).12

(8) ‘āšer Introducing a “Subjunctive Complement”

\[
\text{wayyō’mer hattiršātā’ lāhem ‘āšer lō’ yō’klū}
\]

‘The minister told them that they shouldn’t eat’ (Ezra 2:63; trans. Givón 1974, p. 15; emphasis mine)

(9) ‘āšer Introducing a “Verbal Complement of Cognition”

\[
\text{kî higgīd lāhem ‘āšer hū’ yōhūdī}
\]

‘because he had told them that he was a Jew’ (Esth. 3:4; trans. Givón 1974, p. 16; emphasis mine)

The inscriptional data partially support Givón’s diachronic analysis since there are no examples of complement clauses among the occurrences of ‘āšer; however, the paucity of ‘āšer examples among the inscriptions should deter us from drawing any firm conclusions (i.e., the absence of an ‘āšer complement clause could be coincidental, given the number and types of inscriptional texts). And if we set aside Givón’s problematic assumptions concerning the dating of the texts in his corpus and the size of his corpus,13 and examine the

12 Note that Givón incorrectly categorises constructions with the accusative marker ‘et immediately preceding ‘āšer as complement clauses (1974, p. 18). The fact that ‘et never precedes the other complement clause subordinator, kî, suggests that cases of ‘et ‘āšer are best understood as null-head relatives (see Holmstedt 2002, p. 9, n. 8).
13 Givón’s limited corpus prohibits him from seeing precisely the type of examples he proceeds to argue are non-existent in that material. For what he calls “early” BH, Givón 1974 uses
distribution of complement āšer within the traditional three-stage framework that is held by the majority of scholars, a slight pattern does in fact emerge.

First, the texts typically identified as archaic (i.e., Genesis 49, Exodus 15, Numbers 23–24, Deuteronomy 32–33, Judges 5, Psalm 68) lack any examples of āšer used to introduce complement clauses, although since few instances of āšer in these passages are actually in the early poetic material but are instead in the prosaic frames that could be part of a later redactional layer, we should be careful not to make too much of this. Second, outside of the so-called archaic Hebrew material, the āšer complement clauses are distributed throughout the remaining linguistic strata, illustrated in (10)–(12).

(10) “Earlier Standard” BH

ūlḵōl bonē yisrā’el lō’ yehēras keleb lōšōnō lomē’ōs wa’ad bōhēmā lom’an tēdz’ān āšer yaplē yhwḥ bēn miṣrayim ābēn yisrā’ēl ‘and a dog shall not growl at any of the children of Israel, whether people or beasts, so that you may know that Yhwh makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.’ (Exod. 11:7)

(11) “Later Standard” BH

wayyō’mer ‘elāyw hammelek ‘ad kammeh pɔ’āmim ‘ānī maibī’ēkā āšer lō’ tədabber ‘elāyw raq ‘ēmet bāšēm yhwḥ ‘The king said to him: Up to how many times must I make you swear that you will say to me only the truth in the name of Yhwh?’ (1 Kgs. 22:16)

(12) “Late” BH

kî gam pɔ’āmim rabbōt yādā’ libbēkā’ āšer gam ’attā (Qr) qillaltā āḥērīm

the first 20 chapters of Genesis and the book of Joshua, and Givón 1991 uses 35 chapters of Genesis, 20 chapters of 2 Kings. For what he identifies as “late” BH, both articles use Lamentations, Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Ezra and Nehemiah. For the post-biblical Hebrew, both articles use the first 17 chapters of the Mishna (the first two tractates, Berakhot and Pe’ah, of the first order, Zera’im). Besides the problems that this limited corpus causes, biblical scholars will no doubt have issues with Givón’s simplified dating scheme. For example, the identification of Genesis and Joshua at “early” BH represents an oversimplification of the complex dating issues for both the texts and the language data within the Hebrew Bible, regardless of where one stands in the increasingly vigorous debate on the history of BH (on this issue, see below, n. 16). Genesis 49 is arguably early BH, but the remainder of the book is commonly considered ‘standard’ or ‘classical’ Hebrew dating to the early pre-exilic period, and is even considered post-exilic or later by some who are challenging the twentieth century majority position (i.e., three stages — archaic, classical in the pre-exilic period, and late in the post-exilic period).
'Because your heart also knows many times (over) **that you yourself** have cursed others.' (Qoh. 7:22)

While the complement use of 'âšer is present in each of the discernible "post-archaic" stages of BH, Rooker also noticed a trend towards increased use of 'âšer to mark complement clauses in "later BH."

Thus, if we accept the three-stage model and the typical association between individual books and the three stages, Givón might be correct that BH 'âšer takes the grammaticalisation path Relative > Complementizer while retaining the relative function. But if we set aside the absence of 'âšer complement clauses in the inscriptions and "archaic" BH on the grounds that the data are too few to be conclusive, the increased use of complement 'âšer in books typically classified as "later" or "late" BH could simply be coincidental. In fact, given the numerous recent challenges to the three-stage model, as well as the greater interest in identifying remnants of a northern dialect of Hebrew in the biblical material, we should perhaps refrain from making any strong statements on the supposed grammaticalisation of 'âšer from the early to the later stages.

It is interesting that Givón muses about whether the syntactic-semantic functions of 'âšer are "organically" related; I think that this is the kernel of a viable alternative model for understanding the function of 'âšer in ancient Hebrew. Like English *that* and French *que*, the two functions of Hebrew 'âšer are reducible to a single semantic and syntactic classification: nominaliser. Whether used as a relative word or a verbal or nominal complementiser, 'âšer

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14 Rooker 1990, pp. 111–12, 123; Givón makes this point as well (1974, pp. 15–17). Note that this tendency towards the increasing use of 'âšer to introduce complement clauses had been noticed by the beginning of the twentieth century, e.g., Davidson, 1901 [1958]), p. 196.

15 Relative > Complementiser is listed as a known grammaticalisation path in Heine and Kuteva 2002, p. 254. Note, however, that Heine and Kuteva actually cite Songs 1:6 (as an example of 'early' BH, no less!) for this progression from relative to complementiser, no doubt relying on Givón’s studies. If their other supporting data are as suspect, the validity of this pathway becomes questionable.


17 It must be noted that after Givón presents the bulk of his diachronic argument, he then acknowledges the presence of complement and 'subjunctive' 'âšer clauses in the material he calls early BH, i.e., Genesis and Joshua (1974, pp. 8–19). He seems not to recognise the significance of even a few such examples (and there are many more than he lists) for his proposal: if they existed at an early stage, then they were a part of the 'grammar' of Hebrew, and thus one cannot argue for the re-analysis of 'âšer in this way (i.e., reanalysis is not an 'on-again, off-again' phenomenon; either it happened or it didn't). Givón has confused the usage of a language with the grammar of a language.
is a grammatical word that allows clauses to be categorised as nominal items. In other words, in relative clauses ‘āšer nominalises a clause so that it may function as an adjective-like modifier of a noun (e.g., the man that…), and in complement clauses ‘āšer nominalises a clause so that it may function as a complement of a noun (e.g., the fact that…) or verb (e.g., he swore that…).

Other Supposed Functions of ‘āšer

Regardless whether one accepts that the relative and complement clause role for ‘āšer can be unified under the label nominaliser, or if there is a discernible diachronic relationship between the two functions, the fact that ‘āšer introduces these two clauses types is indisputable. What is arguable is whether any other functions should be listed under ‘āšer in the lexicon: in other words, does it add at some point the function of introducing causal, purpose, result, conditional, and temporal clauses? Or to put in another way, is the grammatical meaning of ‘āšer further bleached so that it becomes an all-purpose subordinator? I will propose an alternative below, but here let us simply consider the examples typically cited to support this multi-valent approach to ‘āšer, provided in (13)-(16).

(13) Causal18

wayyâmot ben hâ’îṣî hazzô’t läylâ ‘āšer sâkêbâ ’âlâyw
‘then this woman’s son died in the night, because she lay on him’ (1Kgs. 3:19 NRSV)

(14) Purpose19

haqhel lî ‘et hâ’îm wâ’âsmî ‘êm ‘et dêbârây ‘āšer ylimêdûn léyîr ‘â’otî kol hayyâmîm ‘âšer hêm hayyîm ‘al hâ’âdâmâ
‘assemble the people for me, and I will let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me as long as they live on the earth’ (Deut 4:10 NRSV)

(15) Result20

wâ’âsmî ‘et zarêkâ hâ’âres ‘âšer ‘îm yûkal ‘î limnôt ‘et ‘âpar hâ’âres gam zarêkâ yimmânê

18 For other supposed examples, see Gen. 30:18; 31:49; 34:13; 27; 42:21; Num. 20:13; Deut. 3:24; Josh. 4:7; 23; 22:31; Judg. 9:17; 1 Sam. 2:23; 15:15; 20:42; 25:26; 23; 2 Sam. 2:5; 1 Kgs. 15:5; 2 Kgs. 12:3; 17:4; 23:26; Jer. 16:13; Job 34:27; Eccl. 8:11, 12; Dan. 1:10.
19 For other supposed examples, see Gen. 11:7; 24:3; Exod. 20:26; Deut. 4:40; 6:3 (2x); 32:46; Josh. 3:7; 1 Kgs. 22:16; Neh. 8:14.
20 For other supposed examples, see Gen. 22:14; Deut. 28:27, 35, 51; 1 Kgs. 3:8, 12, 13; 2 Kgs. 9:37; Mal. 3:19.
'I shall make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted.' (Gen. 13:16 NRSV)

(16) **Conditional**

\[\text{’ašer nāšî’ yeḥēţa’ wē`āśā āhat mikkol miṣwōt yhwî ᵇlōhāyw ’ašer lô} \]

‘if a ruler sins and inadvertently does one of any of the commands of Yhwî, his god, which should not be done, and he incurs guilt…’ (Lev. 4:22; see DCH, p. 433; HALOT, p. 99)

**Hellenistic and Roman Period Non-Biblical Data**

The broad range of functions for the word \textit{’ašer} illustrated in (13)–(16) is also generally accepted for the second-century BCE Hebrew of Ben Sira, and the second-century BCE to first-century CE Hebrew of the Qumran Scrolls. Fassberg and Kaddari\(^{22}\) both provide recent discussions of \textit{’ašer} clauses in the book of Ben Sira. Both assign to \textit{’ašer} relative, conditional, temporal, purpose, result, and causal subordinating functions; thus, Ben Sira’s use of \textit{’ašer} is considered to be similar to its supposed usage in BH. Consider the representative examples in (17)–(20).\(^{23}\)

(17) **Relative**

\[\text{’} l \text{tm’s bǐmîy’t ḥyhm ’} š r \text{šm’w m}’\text{btm} \]

‘do not reject the report of the aged, who heard (it) from their fathers’ (8:9\(^{a}\))

\(^{21}\) For other supposed examples, see Lev. 25:33; Num. 5:29; Deut. 11:26–28; 18:22; Josh. 4:21; 1 Sam. 16:7; 1 Kgs. 8:31; 31; Isa. 31:4.

\(^{22}\) Fassberg 1997; Kaddari 2005. Kaddari explicitly sets out to provide a “full and detailed” description of the relative clauses in Ben Sira, and he lists 64 occurrences of \textit{’ašer}, although two are listed twice and two are listed by mistake (they include \textit{le} not \textit{’ašer}). This leaves 60 legitimate \textit{’ašer} clauses in Kaddari’s study, to which we must add seven that he has overlooked: 10.9\(^{a}\); 13.2\(^{a}\); 15.7\(^{a}\); 16.15\(^{a}\); 36.31\(^{D[\text{marg}]}\); 38.13\(^{\text{marg}}\).

\(^{23}\) Taking all of the Ben Sira Hebrew manuscripts together, as in the edition prepared by the Academy of Hebrew Language (\textit{The Book of Ben Sira} 1973), there are 67 occurrences of \textit{’ašer} in 48 verses: 3:22\(^{a}\); 6:37\(^{a}\); 7:31\(^{a}\); 8:9\(^{a}\); 14:9\(^{a}\); 10:9\(^{a}\); 12:15\(^{a}\); 13:2\(^{a}\); 7\(^{a}\); 15:11\(^{B[\text{marg}]}\); 16\(^{AB}\); 17\(^{a}\); 16:7\(^{AB}\); 15\(^{a}\); 18:3\(^{2}\); 30:10\(^{B}\); 20\(^{B}\); 33:4\(^{B[\text{marg}]}\); 5\(^{B}\); 34:14\(^{B[\text{marg}]}\); 16\(^{B}\); 36:31\(^{D[\text{marg}]}\); 37:12\(^{B[\text{marg}]}\); 38:13\(^{B[\text{marg}]}\); 40:3\(^{a}\); 44:9\(^{B[\text{marg}]}\); 20\(^{B}\); 45:23\(^{a}\), 24\(^{a}\); 46:1\(^{B}\); 11\(^{B}\); 47:13\(^{B[\text{marg}]}\); 48:4\(^{a}\); 4\(^{a}\); 7\(^{B}\); 51:8\(^{a}\). This includes three conjectured reconstructions of the text: 30:19\(^{a}\); 36:31\(^{C}\); 37:12\(^{2}\) (see \textit{The Book of Ben Sira} 1973, pp. 99–100).
(18) **Conditional**

*mh ytbr prwr 'i spr 'sr hw' nwqš bw whw' nibr*

‘How can the pot go with the vessel? If they knock together, the pot will be smashed’ (13:2A; Fassberg 1997, p. 60)

(19) **Temporal**

a) *kšr ybw‘ mk l' yglh lk*

‘when your people comes, he will not reveal himself to you’ (12:15A; Kaddari 2005, p. 260)

b) *bqn'w l'wly kl wy'md bprš 'mw 'sr ndbw lbw wykpr 'l bny yšr‘*

‘in his zeal for the God of everything, and he stood when his people burst out, when his heart prompted him and he atoned for the children of Israel’ (45:23B; cf. Kaddari 2005, p. 258)

(20) **Purpose/Result/Causal**

a) *w'm kl 'hl h'rl l' 'sr ykyn b'mt š'dk*

‘and with all of these, pray to God in order that (or: because) he shall direct your step in truth’ (37:15D; cf. Kaddari 2005, p. 258)

b) *lkng gm lw hqym hq bryt ilwm lklk md bprš 'sr thyb lw wlr'w khwnh gdwlb 'd 'wlm*

‘therefore also for him he established a principle, a covenant of peace, in order to sustain the sanctuary, so that the great priesthood shall be for him and his descendants forever’ (45:24B; cf. Kaddari 2005, p. 258)

Similarly, if translations of the Qumran sectarian texts are any indication of common grammatical analysis, Qumran Hebrew, too, parallels BH in the use of *âšer*. Consider the examples in (21)–(23)24 (from a 232 *âšer* clause corpus taken from the Damascus Document [CD], the Community Rule [1QS], and the War Scroll [1QM]).25

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24 Each example in the text is provided with translations from Wise, Abegg, and Cook 1996.

25 CD 1:3, 12, 13, 14, 16, 18; 2:13, 15, 18, 19, 20; 3:13, 14, 15, 19, 20; 4:11, 6, 9, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20; 5:2, 4, 6, 17; 6:6, 7, 9, 11, 13; 7:4, 8, 10, 11, 14, 16, 19; 8:1, 3, 4, 9, 13, 14, 17, 20, 21; 9:1, 2, 3, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 16, 116; 10:12, 13, 15, 16; 11:16; 12:2, 3, 7, 9, 11, 13, 16, 18; 13:13, 16, 19, 20, 23; 14:1, 6, 8, 11, 14, 15, 16, 18, 20, 21, 22; 15:1, 8, 12, 13; 16:4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 1; 19:3, 5, 7, 11, 14, 15, 21, 26, 30, 33; 20:5, 6, 9, 10, 12, 14, 16, 21, 22, 25, 31; 1QS 1:2, 4, 17, 26; 3:10; 5:1, 4, 8, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 22; 6:1, 3, 6, 9, 11, 12, 16, 17, 24, 25, 27; 7:1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 22, 24, 25; 8:14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 25; 9:8, 10, 15, 16, 24, 25, 26; 10:1, 2, 12, 13, 11:6, 7, 16; 1QM 2:11, 13, 19; 3:13, 14; 5:17; 7:4, 6; 10:11, 6, 8, 9, 16; 11:4, 5; 14:3; 17:2; 18:5; 19:10, 11.
(21) Causal
a) nplw ['yd] bšmy m hh n‡zw 'ś̄r l ym˘w msw l 'the Guardian Angels of Heaven fell and were ensnared by it, for they did not observe the commandments of God’ (CD 2:18; WAC, p. 53)
b) 'ś̄r qr' l t kwlm ś̄r̄m 'because God had called them all princes’ (CD 6:6; WAC, p. 56)

(22) Conditional
'l yny 'yš ibw h 'ś̄r l ydn h hm lby m h̄y w̄m lb̄y 'he should not annul an oath if he does not know whether it should be allowed to stand or be annulled’ (CD 16:11; WAC, p. 66)

(23) Purpose/Result
my k̄mwh l ś̄r̄l bšym wb's ś̄r ȳh km'ykh hgdwlym 'who is like You, O God of Israel, in heaven and on earth, that he can do according to Your great works?’ (1QM 10:8; WAC, p. 160)

Beyond the Qumran texts, the next large corpus of Hebrew material is that of the Mishna, which ostensibly dates to the first to third centuries CE. At this point in Hebrew, we find a slight change in the use of 'āšer. According to Pérez Fernández, 'āšer is “reserved only for biblical quotations and liturgical texts.” Indeed, the majority of the 69 occurrences (in 54 verses) in the Mishna appear in a biblical quotation, and the remainder are demonstrably liturgical, with “elevated and semi-Biblical” style. The examples in (24)–(25) illustrate each type.

(24) Biblical Quotation
wèkol hehārim 'āšer bammā'dēr yēädērūn 'and any hills that are hoed with a hoe’ (Pe’ah 2:2; quoting Isa. 7:25)

(25) Liturgical
r' tarpōn w 'āšer gē'ālānū wēgā' al et 'ābôtēnū mimmiq’

26 Pérez Fernández 1999, p. 50.
27 Pe’ah 2:2; Maas. Sh. 5:11, 12, 13; Hal. 4:10; Bik. 1:3, 4, 5; Pes. 10:6; Yoma 5:5; R. ha-Sh. 2:9, 2:10; Ta’an. 2:3, 3:1; Hag. 1:5; Yev. 12:6; Ned. 3:21; Sot. 2:2, 4:1, 5:2; 7:4, 5, 8; 8:1, 2, 4; 9:5, 6; Qid. 4:14; Arayot 5; B.Q. 9:12; San. 10:3, 5; 11:2; Mak. 1:3, 6; 2:2; 3:15; Avot 3:3, 6; 8; 5:8; Zev. 10:1; Men. 5:2, 6; Bek. 1:7; Arak. 7:5; 9:2, 3; Ker. 4:3; Neg. 12:5, 6; 14:10; Yad. 4:8.
28 Segal 1927, p. 42.
‘Rabbi Tarfon says: … who redeemed us and redeemed our ancestors from Egypt’ (Pes. 10:6)

By the late first century, then, the relative word ˆâšer was no longer in common use, but had become a lexeme associated with the biblical period and biblical language. It is interesting, though, that all the examples that are not direct quotes from the Hebrew Bible are simple relative uses of ˆâšer. The contributors to the Mishna clearly saw ˆâšer as a relative word, and nothing more. This fact poses a problem for the grammaticalisation approach to Hebrew ˆâšer, since one of the pillars of grammaticalisation theory is the unidirectional nature of the process.29 But the approach sketched so far means that ˆâšer became more grammatical during the biblical period, and then by the later Mishnaic period became less grammatical.

An Alternative Proposal: Everything is Relative

If Hebrew ˆâšer has not undergone grammaticalisation, what are we to make of the item’s function up to the Mishnaic period? I have argued previously that all of the supposed non-relative, non-complement examples of ˆâšer in the Hebrew Bible are in fact relative clauses;30 the question here is whether this approach adequately accounts for the non-biblical data.

As with the biblical data, the key is being able to identify the head accurately. In many cases, the head of a relative in Hebrew is covert (what I have called null-head relatives) or placed at a distance from ˆâšer, that is, “extraposed” relatives. In (26)–(29) I have presented again the biblical examples from (13)–(16) above, re-analysed as relative clauses, in order to illustrate what I have argued for BH.

(26) [=(13)] Extrapos ed Relative

\( \text{wayyāmōt ben, hāʾissā hazzōʾ lāylā [t, ˆâšer šākēbā ʿālāyw] } \)

‘then the son, of this woman died (at) night, [t, that (she) laid upon him]’ (1 Kgs. 3:19)31

31 There are two possible heads for this extrapos ed relative: ‘the son of this woman’ or just ‘this woman’. ‘The son’ is the subject of the clause and the initial logical choice for the head of the relative. If we analyse the relative clause as modifying ‘the son’, the non-restrictive (and extrapos ed) relative provides further information about the son that would appear to be necessary in order to place blame upon the boy’s mother for his death. Although it is possible to analyse the relative as modifying the second half of the larger construct phrase, ‘this woman’, this is rather awkward in that the relative clause would modify a DP-internal, non-argument constituent.
(27) [= (14)] Normal Relative


‘assemble the people for me, and I will let them hear [my words that they must learn in order to fear me as long as they live on the earth]’
(Deut. 4:10)

(28) [= (15)] Normal Relative (resumption by full copy of the head)


‘I will make your offspring like [the dust of the earth that if one can count the dust of the earth your offspring also can be counted]’
(Gen. 13:16)

(29) [= (16)] Null-headed Relative (semantics of null head supplied by context)

[Ø ‘āser nāsî ‘ehētā wē‘āsî ‘āhat mikkol missîr yhwh ‘ēlōhîyw ‘āser lī’ tē‘āsēnâ bigâqâ wē‘āsēm]

‘[(the day/time/occasion) that a ruler sins and inadvertently does one of any of the commands of Yhwh, his god, which should not be done, and he incurs guilt]…’
(Lev. 4:22)

Does this alternative analysis work for the non-biblical data like those that I cited above in (17)–(23)? A one-word answer is “yes.” All 67 of the ‘āser clauses in Ben Sira and 232 ‘āser clauses isolated in the Qumran texts CD, 1QS, and 1QM can be analysed as relative clauses. In (30)–(35) I have presented again most of the examples from (18)–(23) above, re-analyzed as relative clauses.

(30) [= (18)] Ben Sira Null-Headed Relative

mh ythbr prwr ‘l yr [Ø ‘sr hw’ nuq’ bw] whw’ nîbr

‘How can the pot go with the vessel? [(The day/time/occasion) that they knock together], the pot will be smashed’
(13.24)

(31) [= (19a)] Ben Sira Null-Headed Relative

k [Ø ‘sr yhw’ ‘mk l’ yəqlh lk
'at32 [(the time) that your people comes], he will not reveal himself to you' (12.15\textsuperscript{a})

(32) [=20b] Ben Sira Normal Relative
\[\text{lkn gm lw bqym bq bry slwm lklk} \text{[mqds} 'sr thyh lw wr} \text{w lwnh gdwlh d 'wm]}\]
'therefore also for him he established a principle, a covenant of peace, in order to sustain [the sanctuary that (= where) the great priesthood shall be for him and his descendants forever]' (45.24\textsuperscript{b})

(33) [=21a] Qumran Extraposed Relative
\[\text{nplw} \text{[} 'ydy] h\text{šmym, bh n} \text{hzw [}t, 'sr l} \text{imrw mw} \text{rt l']\]
'the Guardian Angels of Heaven, fell and were ensnared by it, [t, that did not observe the commandments of God]' (CD 2.18)

(34) [=22] Qumran Normal Relative (resumption of the head inside the relative)
\[\text{[} lny} \text{y} \text{[} bu\text{w} 'sr l} \text{yd} \text{nh hm lqmym hy} \text{w} \text{mn lny} \text{]}\]
'he should not annul [an oath that he does not know whether it should be allowed to stand or be annulled]' (CD 16.11)

(35) [=23] Qumran Extraposed Relative
\[\text{my, k\text{mwk}h [} l} \text{yr} \text{l} \text{b}\text{š} \text{mym wbr} \text{š} [t, 'sr y} \text{sh km} \text{šyk} \text{h gdwlym} \]
'who, is like You, O God of Israel, in heaven and on earth, [t, who can do according to Your great works]?' (1QM 10.8)

**Conclusion**

After examining a thousand years worth of ancient Hebrew data, what can we reasonably conclude regarding the word 'āšer? First, the data suggest that by the time of the Hebrew for which we have evidence, the word 'āšer encoded a single syntactic-semantic function, to nominalise clauses. This is manifested in two ways, as a relative clause strategy and as a verb and noun-

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complement clause strategy. Concerning the extreme few examples of ʾāsher that are often analysed as something other than relatives or complements, all but a handful can be analysed as relatives (either simple, null-headed, or extraposed). And second, it does not appear that there are any demonstrable changes in the use of the word from the earliest attested stage of Hebrew through to the Mishna; in other words, ancient Hebrew ʾāsher did not undergo reanalysis.

Postscript

Out of the nearly 5,500 ʾāsher clauses in the Hebrew Bible, the number of cases that do not easily fit a relative or complement analysis are eleven, that is one-fifth of one percent. Those examples are in the following verses: Gen. 11:7; 34:13; Deut. 4:10, 40; 6:3; 11:26–28; 1 Sam. 15:15; Ezek. 36:27; Qoh. 7:21; Dan. 1:10; Neh. 2:3. Here I want to address these very few cases, which are continually cited as representative non-relative ʾāsher clauses: consider (36)–(37).

(36) hābā nēḏāḏa wənāḇalā šām ʾaspāṭām ʾāsher lōʾ yūmō ʾūʾī ᵡôt rēʾēhū:
‘come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech’ (Gen. 11:7 NRSV)

(37) ʾašêr tīmō ʾū el mišwōt yhwh ʾelōhēkem ʾāsher ʾānōkī mṣawweʾ etkem hayyōm:
‘See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today.’ (Deut. 11:26–27 NRSV)

I can see no plausible way to analyse any of these ʾāsher clauses as either a relative clause or a complement clause. Each seems to demand a purpose/result (36) or conditional (37) clause analysis, respectively, as the provided English translations illustrate. What, then, do we do with these apparently aberrant examples? Since they represent less than one-fifth of one percent of the 5,500 ʾāsher clauses in the Hebrew Bible, not including the 299 included clauses from Ben Sira and Qumran, I suggest that we hesitate in recognising them as a part of the grammar of ancient Hebrew. It is possible that they are

33 The use of ʾāsher in the book of Qoheleth/Ecclesiastes as a whole is less than obvious; see my forthcoming The Relative Clause in Ancient Hebrew (Eisenbrauns) for lengthy discussion of the “grammar” of ʾāsher in Qoheleth.
grammatical, particularly if we subscribe to Sapir’s maxim that ‘all grammars leak,’ which suggests that there is room at the edges of a language’s grammar for strange, but grammatical, constructions. However, given the extreme statistical rarity of examples in which ḫser serves a non-nominalising role, I strongly prefer to exclude altogether these examples from the grammar of Hebrew; while they might have been interpretable (an open question for which we shall never have an answer since we lack native speaker input), they are nonetheless grammatically unacceptable.

This should not be a troublesome conclusion, since if we believe ancient Hebrew to be a real language, then we should expect to face marginally acceptable and even outright ungrammatical examples in such a large and varied corpus as the Hebrew Bible. In other words, unless we believe that each one of the authors of the Hebrew Bible represented the “ideal speaker” of ancient Hebrew in the best Chomskyan sense and that they wrote as well as they spoke — a highly improbable situation, any theological convictions concerning the Bible notwithstanding — we should neither be surprised to find errors, nor should we attempt to include them in our grammars as anything other than a footnote. Let us simply identify poor grammar for what it is.

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