The Story of Ancient Hebrew
ʾăšer

Robert D. HOLMSTEDT

Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations
University of Toronto
4 Bancroft Avenue
Toronto, ON M5S 1C1
CANADA
E-mail: holmstedt@utoronto.ca

Abstract

This study is an investigation of the history of the Hebrew word *ʾăšer*, 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 *ʾăšer* 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 *ʾăšer* has a single function throughout ancient Hebrew: to nominalise clauses.

Introduction

The Hebrew grammatical word *ʾăšer* has recently been touted as a "parade example" of grammaticalisation, in which the focus is upon *ʾăšer* in its comparative Semitic context and in relation to the other relative words, specifically *še*.[1] It has also been asserted that *ʾăšer* 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 *ʾăšer* serves only two functions in BH: to introduce

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[1] Huehnergard 2006, p. 121.

[2] Givón 1974, 1991.

[3] See Holmstedt 2006; the interested reader may contact me (robert.holmstedt@utoronto.ca) for a prepublication copy.

relative and complement clauses.[4] 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: *ʾăšer* is used to nominalise clauses.[5]

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 *ʾaṯar*, 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 ostracon found at Ḥorvat ʿUza in the eastern Negev; these data are given in (1) and (2), respectively.

(1) **Moabite ʾšr**

   wʾnk mlkt[y ʿl] mʾt bqrn ʾšr yspty ʿl hʾrṣ

   'I became king [over the] hundreds in the towns **that** I have added to the land' (KAI 181, lines 28–29)

(2) **Edomite ʾšr**
   wʿt tn ʾt hʾkl ʾšr ʿmd ʾḥʾmh
   'and now, give the food **that** Ahiʾimo prepared(?)' (Beit-Arieh and Cresson 1985, 97, lines 3–4)

Both of these are clearly instances of relative function words. In both cases, the *ʾšr* introduces a verbal clause that modifies a nominal head, *towns* and *food*, respectively. Additionally, both *ʾšr* 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 *ʾšr* are unarguably relative in use, as in (3).

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[4] Holmstedt 2001, 2002.

[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 ʾšr**

wgm kl spr ʾšr ybʾ ʾly ʾm qrʾty ʾth

'and also any letter **that** comes to me, surely I can read it' (Lach 3:10-12[6])

If we only had these data, the analysis of *ʾăšer* would be straightforward: it nominalises clauses specifically in modification of nominal antecedents; *i.e.*, it introduces relative clauses.[7] However, when we admit the BH data, the picture becomes slightly complicated.

Biblical Data

While there is little disagreement that *ʾăšer* functions as a relative word by the earliest stage of Hebrew for which we have data — of almost 5,500 occurrences of *ʾăšer* in the Hebrew Bible well over 5,000 are unarguably relative in function, all analyses assume that further change has occurred *within Hebrew*.[8] This approach is succinctly summarised in BDB: apparently *ʾăšer* 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.[9]

The complement clause function of *ʾăšer* is illustrated in examples (4)–(5). Example (4) presents a complement clause introduced by function word *kî*.

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[6] Arad 5:3–4, 9-10; 8:9; 18:6–8; 21:7; 29:7; 30:1; 40:4–5, 15; 71:2; KhBeitL 4:1–2; KunAj 16:1; Lach 2:5–6; 3:4–6, 10–12; 4:2–3, 3-4, 11–12; 9:4–9; 17:3; 18:1; MHash 1:6–8, 8–9; Mouss 1:1; 2:4–6, 6–8; PMur17a 1:2; NahY 1:1; SamBas 1:1; Silw 2:1, 2–3; 3:2; L Seal 6:2; Avig Hecht Seal 1:1–2; Avig HB 1 (=2), 3. See Davies 1991, pp. 293–94; 2004, pp. 137–38; Gogel 1998, pp. 168–72; Dobbs-Allsop, *et al.* 2005, p. 664.

[7] Note that the the term "relative pronoun" is nowhere used in this study, nor is it at all linguistically appropriate. The item *ʾăšer* does not carry agreement features like Hebrew pronouns, nor does it appear in similar syntactic environments. Rather, we may generally refer to *ʾăšer* 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 *ʾăšer* (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. 81. The reference grammars of GKC, IBHS, JM, and BHRG, as well as the lexicons of BDB, DCH, and HALOT list a combined 58 examples of *ʾăšer* used to introduce non-relative and non-complement clauses. Note that these 58 examples are out of almost 5,500 occurrences of the word *ʾăšer* 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-ʾ-h] 'to see'.

(4) **Complement Clause introduced by *kî***

wayyōʾmᵊrû rāʾô rāʾînû **kî** hāyâ yhwh ʿimmāk

'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 *ʾăšer*.

(5) **Complement Clause introduced by *ʾăšer***[10]

ûbammidbār ʾăšer rāʾîtā **ʾăšer** nᵊśāʾăkā yhwh ʾĕlōhêkā

'and in the wilderness where you saw **that** Yhwh, your god, carried you' (Deut. 1:31)

We cannot understand the *ʾăšer* 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 *šām* '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**

wayyiqrāʾ yaʿăqōb ʾet šēm **hammāqôm ʾăšer** dibber ʾittô **šām** ʾĕlōhîm bêt ʾēl

'and Jacob named **the place**ᵢ **that** God spoken with him **there**ᵢ Bethel' (Gen. 35:15)

(7) **BH Relative with no Overt Resumption of Head**

wayyaṣṣēb yaʿăqōb maṣṣēbâ bam**māqôm ʾăšer** dibber ʾittô

'and Jacob set up a pillar in **the place**ᵢ **that** he [God] spoke with him Øᵢ;' (Gen. 35:14)

What is significantly different about *ʾăšer* complement clauses is that there is no such open or resumed position within the clause, as is clear from the

¹⁰ 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; Pss. 10:6; 89:52 (2x); Qoh. 5:4, 17; 7:18, 22, 29; 8:11, 12, 14; 9:1; Esth. 1:19; 2:10; 3:4; 4:11; 6:2; 8:11; Dan. 1:8 (2x); Ezra 2:63; Neh. 2:10; 7:65; 8:14-15; 10:31; 13:1, 19, 22; 2 Chr. 2:7; 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 *ʾăšer* 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 *ʾăšer* 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 *ʾăšer* 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) *ʾăšer* **Introducing a "Subjunctive Complement"**

wayyōʾmer hattiršātāʾ lāhem ʾăšer lōʾ yōʾklû

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

(9) *ʾăšer* **Introducing a "Verbal Complement of Cognition"**

kî higgîd lāhem ʾăšer hûʾ yəhûdî

'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 *ʾăšer*; however, the paucity of *ʾăšer* examples among the inscriptions should deter us from drawing any firm conclusions (*i.e.*, the absence of an *ʾăšer* 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

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[11] Givón 1974, 1991.

[12] Note that Givón incorrectly categorises constructions with the accusative marker *ʾet* immediately preceding *ʾăšer* as complement clauses (1974, p. 18). The fact that *ʾet* never precedes the other complement clause subordinator, *kî*, suggests that cases of *ʾet ʾăšer* 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 *ʾăšer* 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 *ʾăšer* used to introduce complement clauses, although since few instances of *ʾăšer* 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 *ʾăšer* complement clauses are distributed throughout the remaining linguistic strata, illustrated in (10)–(12).

(10) **"Earlier Standard" BH**

*ûləkōl bənê yiśrāʾēl lōʾ yeḥĕraṣ keleb ləšōnô ləmēʾîš wəʿad bəhēmâ ləmaʿan tēdəʿûn **ʾăšer** yaplê yhwh bên miṣrayim ûbên yiśrāʾēl*

'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**

*wayyōʾmer ʾēlāyw hammelek ʿad kammeh pəʿāmîm ʾănî mašbiʿekā **ʾăšer** lōʾ tədabbēr ʾēlay raq ʾĕmet bəšēm yhwh*

'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 pəʿāmîm rabbôt yādaʿ libbekā **ʾăšer** gam ʾattā (Qr) qillaltā ʾăḥērîm*

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 *Peʾah*, of the first order, *Zeraʾim*). 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 ʾăšer is present in each of the discernible "post-archaic" stages of BH, Rooker also noticed a trend towards increased use of ʾăšer to mark complement clauses in "later BH."[14] 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 ʾăšer takes the grammaticalisation path *Relative > Complementizer*[15] while retaining the relative function. But if we set aside the absence of ʾăšer 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 ʾăšer 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,[16] we should perhaps refrain from making any strong statements on the supposed grammaticalisation of ʾăšer from the early to the later stages.[17]

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

[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 ʾăšer 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.

[16] For both defenses and critiques to the traditional three-stage model of biblical Hebrew, see the contributions in Young 2003 as well as the NAPH symposium contributions published in *Hebrew Studies* 46: Zevit 2005, Joosten 2005, Young 2005, Eskhult 2005; for recent studies dealing with 'northern Hebrew,' see Kaufman 1988, Schniedewind and Sivan 1997, and Rendsburg 1992, 2002, 2006.

[17] It must be noted that after Givón presents the bulk of his diachronic argument, he then acknowledges the presence of complement and 'subjunctive' ʾăšer 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 ʾăšer 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 ʾăšer 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 ʾăšer 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 *ʾăšer*

Regardless whether one accepts that the relative and complement clause role for ʾăšer can be unified under the label *nominaliser*, or if there is a discernible diachronic relationship between the two functions, the fact that ʾăšer introduces these two clauses types is indisputable. What is arguable is whether any other functions should be listed under ʾăšer 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 ʾăšer 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 ʾăšer, provided in (13)-(16).

(13) **Causal**[18]

   wayyāmot ben hāʾiššâ hazzōʾt lāylâ **ʾăšer** *šākĕbâ ʿālāyw*

   'then this woman's son died in the night, **because** she lay on him'
   1Kgs. 3:19 NRSV)

(14) **Purpose**[19]

   haqhel lî ʾet hāʿām wĕʾašmiʿēm ʾet dĕbārāy **ʾăšer** *yilmĕdûn lĕyirʾâ ʾōtî kol hayyāmîm ʾăšer hēm ḥayyîm ʿal hāʾădāmâ*

   '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) **Result**[20]

   wĕśamtî ʾet zarʿăkā kaʿăpar hāʾāreṣ **ʾăšer** *ʾim yûkal ʾîš limnôt ʾet ʿăpar hāʾāreṣ gam zarʿăkā yimmānê*

[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**[21]

ʾăšer nāśîʾ yeḥĕṭāʾ wĕʿāśâ ʾaḥat mikkol miṣwōt yhwh ʾĕlōhāyw ʾăšer lōʾ tēʿāśênâ bišgāgâ wĕʾāšēm

'**if** 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; see DCH, p. 433; HALOT, p. 99)

Hellenistic and Roman Period Non-Biblical Data

The broad range of functions for the word ʾăšer 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 ʾăšer clauses in the book of Ben Sira. Both assign to ʾăšer relative, conditional, temporal, purpose, result, and causal subordinating functions; thus, Ben Sira's use of ʾăšer is considered to be similar to its supposed usage in BH. Consider the representative examples in (17)–(20).[23]

(17) **Relative**

ʾl tmʾs bšmyʿt šbym **ʾšr** šmʿw mʾbtm

'do not reject the report of the aged, **who** heard (it) from their fathers' (8:9[A])

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[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, 33; 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 ʾăšer, although two are listed twice and two are listed by mistake (they include še not ʾăšer). This leaves 60 legitimate ʾăšer clauses in Kaddari's study, to which we must add seven that he has overlooked: 10.9[A]; 13.2[A], 7[A]; 16.15[A]; 36.31[D[2x]]; 38:13[margin].

[23] Taking all of the Ben Sira Hebrew manuscripts together, as in the edition prepared by the Academy of Hebrew Language (*The Book of Ben Sira* 1973), there are 67 occurrences of ʾăšer in 48 verses: 3:22[C]; 6:37[A]; 7:31[A]; 8:9[A], 14[A];10:9[A]; 12:15[A]; 13:2[A], 7[A]; 15:11[A[2x]B], 16[AB], 17[A]; 16:7[AB], 15[A]; 18:32[C]; 30:19[B], 20[B]; 33:4[B + margin], 5[B]; 34:15[B[margin]], 16[B]; 36:31[B[2x]C[2x]D[2x]]; 37:12[B[2x]D], 15[BD]; 38:13[B+ 1x margin], 14[B], 15[B], 27[B]; 40:11[B[3x]M]; 44:9[B[3x]M], 20[B]; 45:23[B], 24[B]; 46:1[B], 11[B]; 47:13[B], 23[B[2x]]; 48:1[B], 4[B], 11[B], 15[B]; 49:10[B]; 50:1[B], 2[B], 3[B], 24[B], 27[B[2x]]; 51:8[B]. This includes three conjectured reconstructions of the text: 30:19[B]; 36:31[C]; 37:12[D] (see *The Book of Ben Sira* 1973, pp. 99–100).

(18) **Conditional**

mh yṭbr prwr ʾl syr ʾšr hwʾ nwqš bw whwʾ nšbr

'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) *kʾšr ybwʾ ʿmk lʾ ytglh lk*

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

b) *bqnʾw lʾlwhy kl wyʿmd bprṣ ʿmw ʾšr ndbw lbw wykpr ʿl bny yšrʾl*

'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) *wʿm kl ʾlh hʿtr ʾl ʾl ʾšr ykyn bʾmt ṣʿdk*

'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) *lkn gm lw hqym ḥq bryt šlwm lklkl mqdš ʾšr thyh lw wlzrʿw khwnh gdwlh ʿd ʿwlm*

'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 ʾǎšer. Consider the examples in (21)–(23)[24] (from a 232 ʾǎšer clause corpus taken from the Damascus Document [CD], the Community Rule [1QS], and the War Scroll [1QM]).[25]

[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, 21; 3:13, 14, 15, 19, 20; 4:1, 6, 8, 9, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20; 5:2, 4, 6, 17; 6:6, 7, 9, 11, 13; 7:4, 8, 10, 11, 14, 16, 18, 19; 8:1, 3, 4, 9, 13, 14, 17, 20, 21; 9:1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 16; 10:1, 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; 15:5, 8, 12, 13; 16:4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 15; 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, 12, 13; 11:6, 7, 16; 1QM 2:11, 13, 19; 3:13, 14; 5:17; 7:4, 6; 10:1, 6, 8, 9, 16; 11:4, 5; 14:3; 17:2; 18:5; 19:10, 11.

(21) **Causal**

a) *nplw {ʿydy} hšmym bh nʾḥzw ʾšr lʾ šmrw mṣwt ʾl*

'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) *ʾšr qrʾ ʾl ʾt kwlm šrym*

'**because** God had called them all princes' (CD 6:6; WAC, p. 56)

(22) **Conditional**

ʾl ynyʾ ʾyš šbwʿh ʾšr lʾ ydʿnh hm lhqym hyʾ wʾm lhnyʾ

'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**

myʾ kmwkh ʾl yšrʾl bšmym wbʾrṣ ʾšr yʿśh kmʿśykh 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 *ʾăšer*. According to Pérez Fernández, *ʾăšer* is "reserved only for biblical quotations and liturgical texts."[26] Indeed, the majority of the 69 occurrences (in 54 verses[27]) in the Mishna appear in a biblical quotation, and the remainder are demonstrably liturgical, with "elevated and semi-Biblical" style.[28] The examples in (24)–(25) illustrate each type.

(24) **Biblical Quotation**

*wĕkol hehārîm ʾ**ăšer** bammaʿdēr yēʾādērûn*

'and any hills **that** are hoed with a hoe' (Peʾah 2:2; quoting Isa. 7:25)

(25) **Liturgical**

*rʾ ṭarpôn ʾw ʾ**ăšer** gĕʾālānû wĕgāʾal ʾet ʾăbôtênû mimmiṣ*

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[26] Pérez Fernández 1999, p. 50.

[27] Peʾah 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; 3:8; Taʿan. 2:3; 3:3; Hag. 1:5; Yev. 12:6; Ned. 3:11; 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. 10:1, 5; 11:2; Mak. 1:3, 6; 2:2; 3:15; Avot 3:3, 6, 8; 5:18; 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 anscestors from Egypt' (Pes. 10:6)

By the late first century, then, the relative word *ʾăšer* 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 *ʾăšer*. The contributors to the Mishna clearly saw *ʾăšer* as a relative word, and nothing more. This fact poses a problem for the grammaticalisation approach to Hebrew *ʾăšer*, since one of the pillars of grammaticalisation theory is the unidirectional nature of the process.[29] But the approach sketched so far means that *ʾăšer* 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 *ʾăšer* 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 *ʾăšer* 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 *ʾăšer*, 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)] **Extraposed Relative**

wayyāmot ben$_i$ hāʾiššâ hazzōʾt lāylâ [t$_i$ ʾăšer šākĕbâ ʿālāyw]

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

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[29] Hopper and Traugott 2003, pp. 99–139; see also Heine 2003, Haspelmath 2004.

[30] Holmstedt 2001, 2002.

[31] There are two possible heads for this extraposed 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 extraposed) 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**

*haqhel lî ʾet hāʿām wěʾašmiʿēm ʾet [**děbāráy ʾǎšer** yilmědûn lěyirʾâ ʾōtî kol hayyāmîm ʾǎšer hēm ḥayyîm ʿal hāʾǎdāmâ]*

'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)**

*wěśamtî ʾet zarʿǎkā [**kaʿǎpar hāʾāreṣ ʾǎšer** ʾim yûkal ʾîš limnôt ʾet ʿǎpar hāʾāreṣ gam zarʿǎkā yimmānê]*

'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 **ʾǎšer** nāśîʾ yeḥěṭāʾ wěʿāśâ ʾaḥat mikkol miṣwōt yhwh ʾělōhāyw ʾǎšer lōʾ tēʿāśênâ bišgāgâ wěʾāšēm]*

'[(**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 *ʾǎšer* clauses in Ben Sira and 232 *ʾǎšer* 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 ytḥbr prwr ʾl syr [Ø **ʾšr** hwʾ nwqš bw] whwʾ nšbr*

'How can the pot go with the vessel? [(**The day/time/occasion**) that they knock together], the pot will be smashed' (13.2^A)

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

*k [Ø **ʾšr** ybwʾ ʿmk lʾ ytglh lk*

'**at**[32] [(**the time**) **that** your people comes], he will not reveal himself to you' (12.15[A])

(32) [=(20b)] **Ben Sira Normal Relative**

*lkn gm lw ḥqym ḥq bryt šlwm lklkl [**mqdš ʾšr** thyh lw wlzrʿw khwnh gdwlh ʿd ʿwlm]*

'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[B])

(33) [=(21a)] **Qumran Extraposed Relative**

nplw {ʿydy} hšmym$_i$ bh nʾḥzw [t$_i$ ʾšr lʾ šmrw mṣwt ʾl]

'**the Guardian Angels of Heaven**$_i$ fell and were ensnared by it, [t$_i$ **that** did not observe the commandments of God' (CD 2.18)

(34) [=(22)] **Qumran Normal Relative (resumption of the head inside the relative)**

*ʾl ynyʾ yš [**šbwʿh ʾšr** lʾ ydʿnh hm lhqym hyʾ wʾm lhnyʾ]*

'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**

myʾ$_i$ kmwkh ʾl yšrʾl bšmym wbʾrṣ [t$_i$ ʾšr yʿšh kmʿšykh hgdwlym

'**who**$_i$ is like You, O God of Israel, in heaven and on earth, [t$_i$ **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 *ʾăšer*? First, the data suggest that by the time of the Hebrew for which we have evidence, the word *ʾăšer* 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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[32] Waltke and O'Connor propose that what is sometimes labeled as the 'temporal' use of *ka*- is in fact related to either approximation ('about that time') or correspondence ('at the (same) time') (IBHS 1990, p. 205). For a discussion of the *kaʾăšer* type of Hebrew relative clauses, see Holmstedt 2002, pp. 73–79.

complement clause strategy. Concerning the extreme few examples of ʾăšer 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 ʾăšer did not undergo reanalysis.

Postscript

Out of the nearly 5,500 ʾăšer 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;[33] Dan. 1:10; Neh. 2:3. Here I want to address these very few cases, which are continually cited as representative non-relative ʾăšer clauses: consider (36)-(37).

(36) *hābâ nērədâ wənābəlâ šām śəpātām **ʾăšer** lōʾ yišməʿû ʾîš śəpat rēʿēhû:*
'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) *²⁶rəʾê ʾānōkî nōtēn lipnêkem hayyôm bərākâ ûqəlālāh ²⁷ʾet habbərākâ **ʾăšer** tišməʿû ʾel miṣwōt yhwh ʾĕlōhêkem ʾăšer ʾānōkî məṣawwê ʾetkem hayyôm:*
'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 ʾăšer 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 ʾăšer 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

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[33] The use of ʾăšer 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 ʾăšer 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 *ʾăšer* 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.[34] 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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[34] For an insightful discussion the nature of ancient Hebrew as a linguistic remnant that adequately represents a language system, see Miller 2004.

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