

The General/Gnomic Usage of Hebrew Morphologies in the Book of Isaiah.

BY ANDREW BOWLING, PH. D.

Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics

Abstract

The goal of this working paper is to demonstrate two discourse features of the book of Isaiah: 1) that it uses expository discourse (in which the qtl form can have a general descriptive meaning) for general description; and that it can use descriptive parallel pairs made up of qtl and yqtl forms in which the two morphologies are practically identical; in meaning. This is preliminary to demonstrating that these same two usages are also found in other bodies of Old Testament literature.

0. Introduction.

In 1997, the *Journal of Translation and Textlinguistics* published an article in which I posited a discourse-based approach to the tense, aspect, and mode analysis of the Hebrew verb (Bowling 1997). In that article I suggested that there were four discourse-based Hebrew *macrotypes*,¹ which, taken together, could give a more transparent and less ambiguous conceptual framework for assigning meanings to the Hebrew verb. Though not stated in that article, those macrotypes were viewed as being four different sets of rules for determining and recognizing the meanings of clause structures in the contexts defined by the macrotypes. Later I learned that they represented the same kind of underlying principle, which Longacre had already described as a “constellation of verb/clause types.” Longacre, speaking of those same “constellations”, continued to note that, “The uses of a given tense within a given cluster may differ quite strikingly from the uses of the same tense within another cluster (discourse type).” (Longacre 1992: 177-178).

The obvious method for testing the correctness or pragmatic usability of those macrotypes was to test them by applying each of them to appropriate bodies of Old Testament Hebrew to see how well they served to describe and analyze those selections. If these macrotypes do, in fact, provide an effective and accurate analytic tool, that will be, for me, evidence of the “correctness” of the approach behind this article. If they do not do so, then that failure can demonstrate that still another approach to the biblical Hebrew verb is needed. The purpose of the original paper—and of this adaptation of it—is to apply one of these, the general gnomic macrotype, to a specific body of Old Testament Hebrew literature, that is, to appropriate portions of the book of Isaiah. In dealing with the general/gnomic macrotype, it will be helpful also to deal with several examples of parallel statements in which one verb is a qtl form and the other is a yqtl form to see if this usage has any implications for the this topic.

However, before proceeding further, it will be helpful to present the structure of this paper. This paper will deal with the following four issues:

1. The more significant role that the general idea plays in Hebrew than in English.
2. Changes in my view of the macrotypes since the original article.
3. The General/Gnomic Mode in Isaiah.
4. The usage of qtl forms and yqtl forms in parallel pairs.

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¹Though only three macrotypes were listed in the JOTT article, those three, wyyqtl narrative, the general/gnomic usage, and the wqtl sequence, together with what I then called the “default” meanings of Hebrew morphologies, made up the four macrotypes. I am indebted to Dr. Robert Longacre for suggesting the term, *macrotypes*, for the four structures under discussion.

1. The General Concept in Hebrew.

For the first point, though I am not presently prepared to argue for it strongly, I believe that the general usage of the verb plays a far more distinctive and imposing role in biblical Hebrew than in English and other closely related Indo-European languages. Two related facts show this minimizing of the general idea in English and related languages. First, there is the tendency to deal with general usages as one of the usages of the normal tenses (i.e. *general* present, and *general* future). In English, the term, *present*, was, in my early education, applied to the habitual usage of the verb, eg. "I play golf." This further minimized any independent status of the general usage. By contrast, in Biblical Hebrew, the *general/gnomic* usage, the most characteristic expository discourse, makes up a discourse type with a unique structure. It is a way of speaking, a usage, or a macrotype, in which virtually any verb usage, perfective (or *qtl*), imperfective (or *yqtl*), participial sentences, waw-conversives with the imperfective (i.e., *wyyqtl*)², verbless sentences, and even infinitive sentences, may occur together almost indiscriminately and all with gnomic or static meaning.³ Speaking in terms of discourse types, such portions are expository, that is, they communicate non-logically structured, general truth.⁴ Unlike English, the original tense meanings of these morphologies are almost completely subordinated to the general meaning of the macrotype. The central portion of the book of Proverbs (10:1-22:16) is made up of such general/gnomic materials.

2. Changes in my views since the 1997 article.

At this point we must observe that there have been some changes in my views since the 1997 article. The number and identity of the macrotypes has changed. The original list was made up of four macrotypes: 1) *wyyqtl* narrative, 2) default verb meanings, 3) the general/gnomic mode, and 4) sequences of *wqtl* forms. Of the original four, default meanings have been redefined as the meanings characteristic of reported Hebrew conversation. The general/gnomic mode has been renamed as *expository/descriptive discourse*. For the remainder of this paper all such portions will be designated as *expository discourse*. The *wqtl* sequence has been dropped from the list and off-line usages (whose usage is governed by relative-tense principles) have taken that place. To these I have added the principles that would govern Old Poetic narrative. I now characterize these different sets of usages as differing sets of rules, which govern differing types of discourse. If we add to these five sets of rules two additional sets of rules, the rules governing *wyyqtl/qtl* past general description and the rules governing old poetic past description, we could define seven different sets of rules. In terms of Longacre's terminology, quoted above, each of these represents a different "constellation of verb/clause" meanings. These seven new sets of rules would be those governing:

- 1.) *wyyqtl* narrative,
- 2) conversational usage (including the elevated literary style used in much prophecy and poetry),
- 3) expository discourse,
- 4) off-line verbal usages (whose tense meaning is almost always relative⁵ to the absolute tense of the clause to which they are ancillary),
- 5) old poetic narrative (Ex. 15),
- 6) *wyyqtl/qtl* (*non-sequential*) past general description, almost always evaluative (2 Kgs 19.3-7a), and

²From this point on I will use the terminology here indicated in parentheses (*qtl*, *yqtl*, and *wyyqtl*) to designate Hebrew verbal structures. In addition to those above, I will use *wqtl* to designate the waw-conversive with perfective (i.e. *qtl*) structure.

³ The sentence marked by this footnote needs to be modified by research that would recognize varying degrees of generality for the passages and clause structures under study. These varying shades of generality for individual morphologies may well turn out to parallel Longacre's saliency clines for expository discourse.

⁴For the moment, I wish to leave open the possibility that logically structured exposition might involve a different discourse structure or even a different macrotype.

⁵ As far as I have discerned, there has been no thorough treatment of this concept till the present.

7) old poetic past general description (Ps 106.40-46).⁶

3. Expository discourse in Isaiah.

I have, tentatively, recognized two different types of embedded expository portions in the book of Isaiah:

- 1). the use of expository discourse to recognize generality that is innately obvious to a typical observer, and.
- 2). the use of expository discourse to impute generality that might not be that innately obvious to the audience..

As noted above, the general/gnomic mode or expository discourse in biblical Hebrew involves the usage of virtually any Hebrew morphological form in contexts, often extended contexts, with a static, gnomic, omnitemporal, or other very general meaning.⁷ The goals of this short working paper are limited to demonstrating that such expository discourse exists in the book of Isaiah and to documenting the closely related usage of *qtl/yqtl* parallel pairs with nearly identical, general meanings.

3.1 Passages Involving Innate generality.

In some contexts, the content is innately general, that is, the writer presumes that the general truth being presented is well known to the audience. The meaning would be seen as general or gnomic even if the discourse structure did not indicate that this was so. One of the clearest examples of this usage in Isaiah is the expository, general description of the method of the farmer in Isaiah 28:24-29:⁸

- 24.a. When a farmer **plows** (*yqtl*) for planting,
 - b. does he **plow**⁹ (*yqtl*) continually?
 - c. Does he keep on **breaking up** (*yqtl*)
 - d. and **harrowing** (*yqtl*) the soil?
- 25.a. When he **has leveled** (*qtl*) the surface,
 - b. does he not **sow** (*qtl*) caraway
 - c. and **scatter** (*yqtl*) cummin?
 - d. Does he not **plant** (*qtl*) wheat in its place, barley in its plot, and spelt in its field?

⁶ This portion is marked as past general description by the mix of salient *wyyqtl* forms and salient *yqtl* forms. At this moment, I would tentatively describe the rules of old poetic literature, both sequential narrative and past general description, as being rules that permit the usage of varying mixtures of *qtl*, *wyyqtl*, and *yqtl* forms on the mainline, both for sequential history and past general description.

⁷ In addition to the long central core of Proverbs (10:1-22:16), some typical passages of this sort are the following: Psalm 1, the description of the good life based on the Law; Proverbs 26, a description of the prudently wise life; Job 28: 1-19, a description of the methods and limitations of deep earth mining; and Proverbs 31:10-31, a description of the successful, female, household entrepreneur.

⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes from the Bible are taken from the NIV (1984). As shown below I will mark the relevant verbal forms with bold face and will indicate the underlying Hebrew morphology in parenthesis immediately after the verb.

⁹ This and the preceding example of *plow* are one verb in the original. The duplication of the verb occurs because of the stylistic demands of the NIV translation. More literally—and probably less accurately—we could translate, “Does the plower plow all day for planting?”

- 26.a. His God **instructs** (*qtl*) him
 b. and **teaches** (*yqtl*) him the right way.
- 27.a. Caraway is not **threshed** (*yqtl*) with a sledge,
 b. nor is a cartwheel **rolled over** (*yqtl*) cummin;
 c. caraway **is beaten** (*yqtl*) out with a rod, and cummin with a stick.
- 28.a. Grain **must be ground** (*yqtl*) to make bread;
 b. so one does not **go on threshing** (*yqtl*) it forever.
 c. Though he drives (difficult form; identity uncertain) the wheels of his threshing cart over it,
 d. his horses do not **grind** (*yqtl*) it.

This is a very instructive example of the general/gnomic mode¹⁰. Its truth is innately general, that is anyone would have agreed that this was the way farmers generally worked in that society. As is normal in typical expository discourse, this passage uses *qtl* and *yqtl* forms without any *easily* discernible difference in meaning. Since all of the other commonly used morphologies can be used in their typical or conversational meanings to express general truth, it is the presence of *qtl* forms, which clearly marks this as being in the general/gnomic or expository category. The NIV translates both forms as general presents except the case of 'levelled' (v. 25.a; see Ps 1.1 for such general prior situations translated as present). In this case the *qtl* could express relative tense, i.e. of prior, meaning with respect to sentence 25.b. As such, it expresses the general precondition, i.e. the leveling of the soil, for the following general acts expressed by the verbs, "sow" and "scatter".

This passage contains two noteworthy cases in which *qtl* and *yqtl* forms are used as nearly exact parallels. The leveling of the field is followed by sowing or scattering two kinds of seed (25b & c). In the first of these scatterings, "sow", is a *qtl* form; in the second "scatter" is expressed by *yqtl* form. The acts are exactly parallel, and there is no contextual reason whatsoever to see one as perfective and the other as imperfective. Examples such as these do not attest to any significant difference in meaning between these two forms in such parallels. In this particular discourse setting, they are differing ways of expressing general truth. The same conclusions are clear in the case of the two parallel expressions for God's teaching the farmer how he should operate; one is *qtl*, the other is *yqtl*. While we could follow traditional grammatical theory and read into this context an idea such as, "His God has instructed him and [still] teaches him the right way", the context gives no support for such a distinction. Nor do the NIV translators, in this case also, recognize such a difference.¹¹

Proverbial statements also are innately definite. The following example:

The ox **knows** (*qtl*) his master, the donkey his owner's manger (Isaiah 1:3a)

is not particularly instructive since the *qtl* of *yāda*^c, can regularly be treated as a stative verb and thus be used with progressive or durative present meaning.

¹⁰Other possible examples of this usage in Isaiah are 40: 6b-8 and 40:12-18.

¹¹ The presupposition of this paper is that we should assume that the *qtl* in such parallel pairs is perfective and the *yqtl* in imperfective only after it has been supported by compelling empirical observations in the particular type of discourse under study. It is true that diachronic, metalinguistic studies of Hebrew morphologies create an expectation that we will find such parallel pairs in which a *qtl* form is perfective and a *yqtl* form is imperfective. However, that expectation should not be implemented until such meanings are **clearly** demanded by particular contexts. While any of us may overlook decisive examples in such a large corpus as the Old Testament, I have not observed decisive examples to document such usage in the Old Testament. Any readers who have noted such clear examples are invited to call the examples to my attention. I have been wrong before.

3.2 Passages involving imputed generality.

In contrast to those general passages, which are innately general, there are other passages in which the author may be seen as making his own general assertions about the subject under discussion. A good example of such a passage is Isaiah's mockery at idolatry (44:9-20)¹². In this passage Isaiah is attributing or imputing general qualities to idolatry. Recognizing this usage expository structure is part of properly understanding Isaiah's message. For the sake of brevity, I will analyze only verses 9-14 since these will suffice to illustrate the necessary features of this structure:

- v9.a. All **who make** (*ptc.*) idols are nothing (*vblsS*),
 - b. and the things they **treasure** (*pass. ptc.*) **are worthless** (*yqtl*).
 - c. Those who would speak up for them **are blind** (*yqtl*);
 - d. they **are ignorant** (*yqtl*), to their own **shame** (*yqtl*).
- v10.a. Who [Whoever] **shapes** (*qtl*) a god
 - b. and **casts** (*qtl*) an idol,
 - c. which **can profit** (*inf.*) him nothing?
- v11.a. He and his kind will **be put to shame** (*yqtl*);
 - b. craftsmen are nothing but men (*vblsS*).
 - c. Let them all **come together** (*yqtl*)
 - d. and **take their stand** (*yqtl*);
 - e. they will be **brought down to terror and infamy** (*yqtl*).
- v12.a. The blacksmith **takes** (*qtl*) a tool
 - b. and **works** (*qtl*) with it in the coals;
 - c. he **shapes** (*yqtl*) an idol with hammers,
 - d. he **forges** (*yqtl*) it with the might of his arm.
 - e. He gets **hungry** (*qtl* or *adj.*) and
 - f. **loses** his strength (*vblsS*);
 - g. he **drinks** (*qtl*) no water
 - h. and **grows faint** (*wyyqtl.* or BHS text note reads as *yqtl*)
- v13.a. The carpenter **measures** (*qtl*) with a line
 - b. and **makes** (*yqtl*) an outline with a marker;
 - c. he **roughs** (*yqtl*) it out with chisels
 - d. and **marks** (*yqtl*) it with compasses.
 - e. He **shapes** (*yqtl*) it in the form of man, of man in all his glory,
that **it may dwell** (*purpose inf.*: but possibly *InfS.*) in a shrine.
- v14.a. He **cut down** (*verbal inf*) [In order **that he may cut down**]¹³
(*purpose inf.*) cedars,
 - b. or perhaps **took** [he takes] (*wyyqtl* or *yqtl* in text footnote) a cypress or oak.
 - c. He **let** [lets] it **grow** (*wyyqtl* or *yqtl* in text footnote) among the trees of the forest,
 - d. or **planted** [plants] (*yqtl*) a pine,

¹²Other possible examples of this usage in Isaiah are 51:4b-5; 57:1-2; and 59:1-8.

¹³In examples in which my analysis departs from the NIV, I indicate that variation by putting my translation underlined and in brackets as in the present example.

e. and the rain **made [makes]** (*yqtl*) it grow.

This section illustrates almost all the features of the general/gnomic mode. The only common verbal structure not illustrated is the participial sentence. *Wyyqtl* forms with general meaning are also attested elsewhere so that it is no problem that they are used here with general meaning.

The usage of past forms by the NIV translators in verse 14 draws our attention to an important issue. The passage is general in that it describes the general process by which the idol maker assures that the proper tree trunks are available for making idols. It is (relative) past in that this general procedure is prior to or relative past to any particular case of getting wood for an idol. The challenge is how to capture both of these aspects in one translation. The error to avoid is a translation which sounds as if it is relating punctiliar past events.

4. The usage of *Qtl/Yqtl* Parallels in General Settings.

One feature of biblical Hebrew is the usage of pairs of clauses, each pair having a *qtl* clause and a *yqtl* clause parallel to each other, with little clear variation of general meaning. These usages represent both the extremes in general meaning discussed earlier ranging from usages that are present descriptive to those that are components in larger expository settings.

Perhaps the best known example of this usage is the two parallel pairs which open Psalm 2:

- v1 Why do the nations **conspire** (*qtl*)
and the peoples **plot** (*yqtl*) in vain?
v2 The kings of the earth **take their stand** (*yqtl*)
and the rulers **gather** (*qtl*) together against the LORD and
against his Anointed One.

The NIV clearly reflects, I believe, that there is no significant difference in meaning between the *qtl* and the *yqtl* forms in these two verses. It, as well as almost every other translation available, reveals the consensus that such parallel pairs express a present descriptive usage. This contrasts with the understanding that one verb in such parallel pairs, represents a perfective perspective and the other represents an imperfective perspective on the action referenced by the two verbs.

The chiasmic sequencing of the verbs also indicates that something other than fine shading of meaning is involved in the choice of morphological forms. Actually, in Hebrew, the chiasmic reversals involve both a reversal of subject-verb order within each verse and the reversal of the order of verb types between the two parallel pairs. These elements of the Hebrew text may be charted as follows:

v. #	Element 1	Element 2	Translation
v. 1	Verb (<i>qtl</i>)	Subject	Why do the nations conspire
	Subject	Verb (<i>yqtl</i>)	And the people plot in vain?
v. 2	Verb (<i>yqtl</i>)	Subject	The kings of the earth take their stand
	Subject	Verb (<i>qtl</i>)	And the rulers gather

Recognizing the ambiguities always possible for syntax level analysis, another possible example of this present descriptive usage from Isaiah is:

My soul **yearns** (*qtl*) for you in the night;
in the morning my spirit **longs** (*yqtl*) for you. (Isaiah 26:9)

One such parallel pair in Isaiah seems to mark a future descriptive meaning:

The rising sun **will be darkened** [**will be dark**](*qtl*)
and the moon **will not give** (*yqtl*) its light. (Isaiah 13:10b)

Such parallel pairs may carry more general or gnomic meanings. In addition to the examples already given above (Isa 28:25b and 28:26) other examples are:

As for an idol, a craftsman **casts** (*qtl*) it,
and a goldsmith **overlays** (*yqtl*) it with gold (Isaiah 40:19)
and
They **hatch** (*qtl*) the eggs of vipers,
And **spin** (*yqtl*) a spider's web. (Isaiah 59:5a)

This last example is in a general/gnomic or expository section which extends to 59:8.

4. Conclusions

If the examples we have presented are genuinely representative of real usages in Isaiah and in the rest of the Old Testament—and I believe that they are—then these two usages, expository general usage and the parallel usage of *qtl/yqtl* forms with general meaning, deserve to be more prominent parts of the analytic structure we bring to understanding the Hebrew text.

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