

Haiim B. Rosén

Outlines of a history of Hebrew verbal tenses

Biblical Hebrew evinces residues of a tense-system that preceded the one which is generally valid therein. Double prefix-tense forms such as *yittē* vs. *yinnâte* bear witness to a system which, using the support of cognate languages, can be interpreted as expressing a distinction of “time” (past : non-past).

At this stage the verbal nominals, e.g. *qōṭēl*, *qāṭal*, contrasted with the prefix-forms as expressing non-cursivity, in particular the latter form which could receive a personal subject suffix, in the value of a “stative”. After the two prefix-tenses merged into one (a process due to certain phonological developments, especially in the *verbum sanum*), the “stative” took over as a “perfect-narrative” counterpart in opposition to the one “non-past-non-perfect” prefix-tense surviving. The old non-stative nominal acquired the function of an all-purpose participle, occasionally substantivizable, but only where the verb was lexically classifiable as being of an “event” content.

With “qualitative” verbs (e.g. *q-t-n*), it was nominal morphology rather than a base pattern that distinguished the new (substantive) participle from the verbal “present”-characterized suffix-form (*qāṭōn*: *qāṭōnî*), while the prefix-tense of such verbs appears to express a time-uncharacterized (and occasionally gnomic) content. Notwithstanding a decisive diachronic event — the loss of the division into syntactically conjoined and non-conjoined tense-subsystems — the distinction between “event” and “quality” tense systems subsisted into post-Biblical Hebrew which, mainly under the influence of some types of Aramaic, reinterpreted it as “point” vs.

“linear” and marked the latter by periphrastic predicative tense-forms, such as *hāyā yōšēb* : *yihye yōšēb* : *yōšēb*, a development which was eventually conducive to the emergence of a tripartite tense-system as it is now valid in Israeli Hebrew.

For the principal bibliographic references see the notes in the Hebrew text.