

1 Assumptions and methodology

Every interpretation of a text, whether ancient or modern, is coloured by the tinted lens of the reader's foundational presuppositions, whether the reader is consciously aware of his subjectivity or not. Presuppositions, however, are not to be *removed* from the process of thoughtful reading and interpretation (which would be an impossible task), but instead, are to be both *understood* and *evaluated*. That is, the reader must ask "Why am I reading the text this way?", and perhaps more fundamentally, "Why am I reading this text at all?"

Although not part of formal biblical criticism *per se*, the foundational assumptions underlying the purpose and methodology of this study shed light on the theological motivation lying behind the critical exploration of the *asher*-verb formula. Briefly, the three presuppositions are:

1. The Christian Bible, and in this specific instance, the Old Testament, is composed by the tradition of a variety of distinct literary works, and subsequently reflects many different literary styles. For reasons briefly expanded upon later, this study assumes that their collection into the Old Testament is not accidental, but is rather purposeful and logical.
2. The Bible is of divine origin and contains divine revelation (i.e., the words and thoughts of God presented through the writings and teachings of his various representatives).¹ To conclude that the Bible is of divine origin would then seem to logically suggest that the voice of God can somehow be discerned in the written words contained therein.
3. The Bible contains communication from God to humanity. That is, this study assumes that the intent of the biblical authors is not only to inform humanity of the divine message, but also to call humanity to respond to the divine message.

Of course, these three assumptions neither validate nor invalidate any of the methodological approaches employed in this study – they simply state the context, or worldview, within which all research and careful postulation (described below) takes place.

1.1 Synchrony and diachrony

As is evident by the identification and brief explanation of the specific critical exegetical methods described below, the underlying core methodologies of this study are essentially synchronic in nature. Of course, an accurate understanding of the history of the biblical text (that is, diachronic analysis) forms the basis for a canonical approach and is the essential first step in the careful study of any ancient text. As such, the history of the Old Testament text is

1. A discussion about the nebulous concept of the Bible's (or any other sacred text) "divine inspiration" is beyond the scope of this study. However, it is assumed and believed by the author that the text of the Bible is more than mere human words of human origin. In fact, it is this starting point of "belief" that forms the impetus to explore the *asher*-verb formula in the first place.

explored in 1.2.4, and any significant text-critical concerns are appropriately identified and analyzed throughout the study. In summary, and as described below, the careful literary and narrative analysis of the twelve biblical *asher*-verb formula pericopes is primarily concerned with the text as it is in its present form,² given this study's literary approach and emphasis on "final-text exegesis".³

1.2 Text linguistics / discourse analysis

Every critical method has a unique and definable set of goals, and a specific collection of methodological techniques. Despite its relative newness⁴ to the study of biblical Hebrew, the discipline of text-linguistics⁵ is no exception. In essence, the goal of every text-linguistic analysis is to discover the patterns and repetitive characteristics of a particular language and/or text, and then to state them as consistently and systematically as is reasonably possible.⁶ The methodology then, in general terms, involves:

1. The observation of identifiable linguistic structures that are present at the paragraph level, and
2. The identification of the appropriate and distinct text-type of which the linguistic structure(s) are a part.

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2. As discussed in 1.2.4 and 1.2.5. For example, although some grammarians have suggested that אָשֶׁר may be a feature of late biblical Hebrew [see Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew, Subsidia Biblica ; 14 (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1991):118 and C. H. J. Van der Merwe, Jackie A. Naude and Jan H. Kroeze, A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999):259], this study's primary concern is with *the text as we have it today*, not with the various theories of biblical Hebrew language and manuscript development.
 3. See Alphonso Groenewald, "Once Again Methods. Is There a Method in the Madness?," Old Testament Essays 17.4 (2004):552. He observes that "Texts are now read as texts, that is, as literary entities and canonical wholes" Groenewald, "Once Again Methods. Is There a Method in the Madness?":550. In a similar vein, while discussing the composite nature of the biblical text, Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: Basic Books, 1981):20 earlier noted that "we have seen ample evidence of how brilliantly it has been woven into a complex artistic whole".
 4. David Allan Dawson, Text-Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series ; 177 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994):21 writes "We are accustomed to analysing phrase-, clause-, and to some extent sentence structure, but paragraph- and text-structure are relatively new to us". See also Walter Ray Bodine, Discourse Analysis of Biblical Literature: What It Is and What It Offers (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1995):1-7.
 5. For the specific purposes of this study, the terms "discourse analysis", "text-linguistics", and "universal syntactic structures" are essentially equivalent. To that end, the term "text-linguistic" is preferred and is used throughout the study.
 6. Here again, the perspective of Dawson, Text-Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew:45 is an appropriate reminder: "a goal of any linguistic description is 'elegance' – that is, a linguist seeks to describe data accurately and fully, yet as economically as possible" and his desire for a "clear description of the patterns that occur at a 'text' level" [Dawson, Text-Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew:77]. Robert A. Dooley and Stephen H. Levinsohn, Analyzing Discourse: A Manual of Basic Concepts (Dallas, Tex.: SIL International, 2001):9-10 suggest that discerning the communicative intent of the writer is also a part of discourse analysis.

Borrowing from the proposed categories and matrixes of (Dawson:98) and (Longacre:8-13), a modified text-type matrix that reflects the particular linguistic structure of the *asher*-verb formula is as follows:

	+ Agent Orientation	- Agent Orientation	
+ CTS	NARRATIVE Future Historical	PROCEDURAL How to do it How it was done	+ Projection - Projection
	BEHAVIOURAL Judgment Epitaph	EXPOSITORY Proposal / Essay Scientific Paper	+ Projection - Projection

- *Agent Orientation* refers to the participants: either who is doing it (+) or what is done (-).
- *Contingent Succession* refers to whether or not the events are chronologically dependant upon prior events (+) or are logically dependant (-)
- *Projection* refers to a viewpoint oriented toward the future (+) or not (-).

With regard to the specific verb forms that are employed within these literary contexts, it is beneficial to consider the observation of (Dawson:101) that “every distinctive text-type in a language has a clause type that it prefers”. In the case of the *asher*-verb formula, the text-types of Behavioural epitaph, Narrative historical and Behavioural judgment are marked by the presence of perfective (suffix conjugation) verbs, and the Narrative future text-type reflects the usage of imperfective (prefix conjugation) verbs.

Within biblical Hebrew narrative, text-linguistic criticism suggests that narrative discourse may be marked by the *wayyiqtol* form, and predictive discourse may be marked by the *weqatal* form.⁷ As well, the three commonly observable narrative distinctions of mainline, secondary line, and direct speech⁸ appear to be evident in the twelve *asher*-verb formula pericopes. However, as this study’s focus is on the particular nuances of the specific *asher*-verb combinations, the division of each pericope into specific sentence/clause breaks is limited to the stylistic presentation of each passage by means of a Hebrew/English translation (for example, see 2.1.3).

As is discovered through the conclusions of this study, the *asher*-verb formula occurs exclusively within the four text-types of + Agent Orientation, which is not surprising, given the narrator’s use of the formula in contexts of character / participant evaluation. Naturally, there is a degree

7. See Robert E. Longacre, The Grammar of Discourse, Topics in Language and Linguistics, 2nd ed. (New York: Plenum Press, 1996):18-21 for a brief summary of the significance of the verb forms and their level of usefulness for a text-linguistic analysis.

8. Alviero Niccacci, "Analysis of Biblical Narrative," Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics, ed. R. D. Bergen (Winona Lake, IN: Summer Institute of Linguistics; Distributed by Eisenbrauns, 1994):176-179.

of overlap, but in general, the general characteristics of each text-type are:

Behavioural epitaph – the participant’s life is given an overall final evaluation.

Narrative future – the participant’s stated desire for a future event or development,

Narrative historical – the participant is evaluated in light of a specific past action or actions, and

Behavioural judgment – the participant will experience particular events because of past actions.

1.3 Narrative criticism

The inter-relationships between biblical characters and passages is often better understood by examining how the characters themselves develop, how the plot changes, how the narrator⁹ presents the changes in the characters, etc.¹⁰ Often overlapping with delimitation criticism and structuralism, the general assumptions of narrative criticism are useful in suggesting the themes and purposes of specific passages and how each particular passage may relate to the rest of the Old Testament.

This study carefully considers the methodology and results of a literary analysis, and therefore places a high level of importance upon the viewpoint and perspective of the narrator.¹¹ It is essential that the narrator’s credibility be thoughtfully understood, since he is the “source” of our information, in literary terms. As suggested by (Sternberg:51), “On the one hand, the Bible always tells the truth in that its narrator is absolutely and straightforwardly reliable ... [but] on the other hand, the narrator does not tell the whole truth either”.¹² Stated another way, in terms of the biblical text, this study assumes that the narrator’s assessment of a character is reliable.¹³

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9. Throughout this study, the term “narrator” refers to the person(s) responsible for the final text and the person(s) who composed the various literary units.
 10. The merit of defining narrative in terms of character, plot and word-play is also suggested, and this study places a heavy emphasis on “the *patterning play of words*” [see D. M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford Bible Series (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993):3].
 11. A. Phillip Brown, "Point of View in the Book of Ezra," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162.647 (2005):313 suggests that the narrator “establishes the ideological framework for the narrative. His comments also insure that the readers get the point of the story or the specific purpose of a given event. As a result attention to the narrator’s ‘voice’ and his point of view are critical to interpret properly the message of the Bible’s narratives”. Also, Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*:3 conclude that “Narrators can profoundly shape the terms by which we understand a character through repetition, even by so simple a device as the repeated use of a single epithet”.
 12. Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*:53 expand on Sternberg’s assertion by suggesting that the narrator “does not make mistakes, give false or unintentional information, or deliberately deceive us”. Further, J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999):56,58 suggests that: 1) the biblical text indicates “one of the main characteristics of the narrator: he is *omniscient* – but in a literary rather than a theological sense”, and 2) the narrator is selective in his presentation of material.
 13. See R Christopher Heard, "Narrative Criticism and the Hebrew Scriptures: A Review and Assessment," *Restoration Quarterly* 38.1 (1996):36-37 for a brief discussion on the differences between the narrator’s

Considering the importance of the context of the narrator's evaluative capacity, (Gunn and Fewell:60) conclude that "clear examples of direct and unambiguous evaluation by the narrator are hard to find". However, given this study's identification of the evaluative role of the *asher*-verb formula, such clear examples are no longer hidden within the Hebrew text.

Regarding the plot and structure of any given narrative (whether an individual pericope, or the larger narrative context of which it is a part), it is good to consider the general progressive outline of (Amit:47) throughout the process of narrative analysis: Exposition, Complication, Change, Unravelling, and then Ending. The three central elements of Complication (the events that lead up to the main event), Change (the main event of the story), and Unravelling (the consequences of the main event), form the bulk of any narrative story. Although it is the "Change" component that normally functions as the climax to a narrative, it is within either the "Exposition" or "Ending" sections¹⁴ that the *asher*-verb formula occurs, dependant upon the temporal viewpoint of the evaluator. That is, it seems that the narrator's use of the *asher*-verb formula is often not within the climax (or main descriptive story line) of a given narrative, but rather functions as a concluding evaluation of events that are described earlier in the text. As is shown throughout this study's analysis of the selected pericopes, the *asher*-verb formula often provides an "outside of the narrative" perspective that reflects on events of the story presented elsewhere in the biblical text.

1.4 Synthesis and exegetical process

In light of the methodological tools and goals described above, three broad areas of interest emerge: the text itself, the literary context, and the analysis of the text. For each of the twelve pericopes, these three areas of concern are carefully explored throughout this study's literary-structural analysis. The process of identifying and articulating both the presence and significance of the *asher*-verb formula can be summarized in the following five general, and sometimes overlapping, steps:

- 1) Establish the limits of the text (Delimitation criticism)
- 2) Confirm the "indicator" and the "text-type" (Text-linguistic analysis)
- 3) Resolve textual inconsistencies (Textual criticism)
- 4) Articulate the presence of the *asher*-verb structure (Structuralism)
- 5) Suggest the function of the *asher*-verb formula (Narrative criticism)

1.5 Hypothesis

"omniscience" and "reliability".

14. The "triple ring structure" of Fokkelman, Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide:15 is not sufficient for the purposes of this study, in that the presence of the *asher*-verb formula is within the "Exposition" and "Ending" elements of Amit's five-stage concentric structure.

As is discovered throughout this study, the *asher*-verb formula reflects a remarkably consistent literary structure, and as such, the careful reader can begin to anticipate and discern the presence of the formula in the Hebrew text. After the initial identification of the subject, there is the placement of either a single or repeated subordinate אשר immediately followed by a verb (either perfective or imperfective, dependant upon the context) that qualifies or explains the narrator's observation about the subject. In fact, the evidence suggests that *the asher-verb formula is a specific and unique linguistic feature in biblical Hebrew that contributes to the reader's literary and theological understanding of both the text and the subject character in multiple ways*, and it occurs within the following four text-types (or literary contexts):

- *Behavioural epitaph* ("seeing wider") – a concluding analysis of a character's life and influence,
- *Narrative future* ("seeing farther") – an evaluation focussed on the future, spoken by someone other than the subject character,
- *Narrative historical* ("seeing closer") – a general historical assessment, either of an individual or a national group, and
- *Behavioural judgment* ("seeing deeper") – the Lord's divine judgment on either an individual or an entire nation (as a result of an individual).

Within each literary context, the presence of either single or multiple *asher*-verb combinations provides a clearer understanding of the narrator's rationale for presenting a particular character as incomparable. Often used in conjunction with one of the three formal textual indicators and/or further revision through the use of repeated prepositions,¹⁵ the *asher*-verb formula is a sophisticated linguistic tool that sheds additional light on the literary skill, artistry and narrative intention of the ancient biblical writers.

15. Although there are certainly other instances of character evaluation within the Old Testament (eg, Noah in Gn 6:9 and Saul in 1 Sa 15:10-11), the *asher*-verb formula stands unique due to the multi-layer technique that is often used: layer 1 – formal indicator, layer 2 – *asher*-verb combination(s), layer 3 – repetitive preposition(s). The relative complexity of each formula is explored within the appropriate sections of this study.