MODALITY, REFERENCE AND SPEECH ACTS IN THE PSALMS

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This study takes the results of linguistic and form-critical work on the biblical Psalms, together with some of the findings of comparative linguistics in the fields of modality and speech acts, to look at forms of reference and modality in the Psalms, focusing particularly on Interrogative, Negative, and Imperative sentence-types. Amongst the most significant results are a full reanalysis of the Hebrew verbal system, primarily in terms of modality (Table 2), and a more systematic distinction between different types of cohortatives (Table 1) and jussives.

The Introduction (ch. 1) firstly surveys the work which has already been done on the distinctive lexis (Tsevat), morphology, and syntax (Sappan) of the Psalter, as well as work in sociolinguistics (Finley, Wilt), formulaic language (Culley), and form-criticism (Gunkel, Westermann, Aejmelaeus, etc.). Then an overview is given of some of the categories and terminology standardly used in some fields of comparative linguistic semantics and pragmatics (Lyons, Levinson), including communication theory, speech-act theory (Austin, Searle) and the study of modality (Palmer). Structuralist method in the study of Biblical Hebrew (Collins, Prinsloo) is considered, as are some of the recent studies of Biblical Hebrew Narrative syntax (Richter, Talstra; Schneider, Niccacci; Andersen, Longacre), as the background to the present treatment of Discourse. The approach taken here is that discourse functions [of individual verbal forms] are secondary, contextual applications of a more basic temporal, aspectual or modal function. Discourse functions are not inherent to the verbal form, but to the clauses within which the verbal form is incorporated.

2 Jan Joosten, handout at conference Narrative Syntax and the Hebrew Bible, Tilburg, 1996.
Reference (ch. 2) considers two distinct features. The first is the pragmatic function of exophoric ‘reference’ to real-world context, particularly in terms of participant reference, the use of the three grammatical persons to refer to the three rhetorical persons (or ‘actants’—the Psalmist, the enemy, and God) and the difference between reference by name, description, pronoun, and verbal morphology. The second is the syntactic function of endophoric ‘relation’ to linguistic context; this covers all kinds of deixis, nominal and adverbial, and requires a discussion of pronoun topicalisation and its most frequent function, adversativity (as in wa“nî).

Mood (ch. 3) considers the cross-linguistic feature properly termed ‘modality’, which may be described as the grammatical reflex of assertivity or reality. Modal forms dominate the language of the Psalter. A language may give modality grammatical realisation in distinct moods, and this is shown to be the case in Biblical Hebrew, which has three moods: a Deontic (or ‘volitional’) mood [+MOD, +VOL] based on short-form yiqtōl, an Epistemic (or subjunctive) mood [+MOD, –VOL] based on long-form yiqtōl, and an Indicative mood [–MOD] based on the Anterior qātal form supplemented by the predicative participle (developing Joosten, Niccacci). The formal systems are labelled D-system, E-system, and I-system respectively, and the schema is developed into a comprehensive account of how Biblical Hebrew verbal forms and functions relate (see Table 2). Apparent exceptions are explained as either secondary, natural extensions of the primary functions as given (e.g. yiqtōl for present potentialis will [tend to], past iterative ‘would [usually]’ and past prospective ‘was about to’) or form-function ‘skewing’ (e.g. precative perfect ‘Oh, that you would’ and preceptive imperfect ‘You will!’). Features closely related to modality are considered, such as embedding and vocative, as well as the question of the scope of Interrogative, Negative, and Imperative force.

Interrogative (ch. 4) looks at the various basic morphemes involved in pronominal, adverbial, and clausal interrogation. Exclamatory and desiderative functions are identified, as well as relationships to subordination, Negation, and conditionality.

Negative (ch. 5) looks at the various types of Negation available in Biblical Hebrew for individual arguments, nominal clauses, infinitives, non-Deontic verbal clauses and Deontic verbal clauses. The functional distinction between lô’ and ‘al is given particular consideration. Some of the rhetorical functions of Negation are described.
Imperative (ch. 6) considers not only the verbal form qētōl (the ‘imperative’), but the entire Deontic class, centred on short-form yiqtōl-x (‘jussive’), and also including ’eqqēlā (‘cohortative’). The chapter begins by considering the particle –nā’ and the Deontic use of modal verbs, then looks in turn at the imperative, cohortative, and jussive in terms of argument structure and illocutionary force (also Speaker and Addressee—see Table 1), and ends by looking at Deontic uses of nominal clauses.

The Conclusion (ch. 7) brings together the results of the preceding chapters, showing how these various features relate to each other on the grammatical level, and how they contribute to the dynamic and texture of a psalm on the rhetorical level. Some suggestions are made as to how the method and results of this work might illuminate other biblical texts.³

### Table 1: Functions of Main-Clause Cohortatives

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1. Primary Functions

Mood: [+MOD] Irrealis  
[-MOD] Realis

Modal System: [+VOL] Deontic  
[-VOL] Epistemic

Relative Tense: [+PAST] Anterior  
[-PAST] Contemporaneous

Aspect: Deontic  
Epistemic

European equivalents: optative subjunctive perfect present simple

2. Verbal Forms

Paradigm Forms: short yiqṭōl-x jussive  
long x- yiqṭōl imperfective  
'eqṭla cohortative  
-qāṭal imperfective  
(l=nu=n paragogicumu)

Negation: 'al-tiqṭōl vetitive  
lō'-tiqṭōl perf. conseuco  
lō'-qāṭal wayyiqṭōl impf. conseuco  
'ēn qōṭēl

Continuation Forms: qōṭāl imperative  
gōṭāl infinitive absolu  
gōṭāl perf. conseuco  
qōṭēl hu' hu' qōṭēl

Person-unmarked Forms: gōṭāl adhortative  

3. Secondary Functions

present potentialis  
past iterative  
past prospective  
Neg, Int, Cond

4. ‘Skewing’

precative perfect  
preceptive impf.  
lō'-tiqṭōl prohibitive

Conditional: 'īm qāṭal  
ki qāṭal  
'lū yiqṭōl

Sequential: wē qāṭal  
wayyiqṭōl  
'āz yiqṭōl

5. Relative Modality irrealis  
realis