

Syntactic variation in Biblical Hebrew: the case of the conjunction of the object clause



SBL Annual Meeting, 23 November 2015 Atlanta

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All hyperlinks below carry you to <https://shebanq.ancient-data.org>, where you can see items in context.

Introduction

In the literature on linguistic variation in Biblical Hebrew in the MT the conjunction of the object clause is often described as a case of variation that can be explained in a diachronic way. In EBH both **כִּי** and **אֲשֶׁר** can be found as the conjunction of the object clause, but in LBH **כִּי** falls into “disuse”. This trend is most evident in Esther and Nehemiah (Ezra and Daniel contain only a few object clauses in the Hebrew portions, of which **Ezra 2:63** is identical to **Neh 7:65**), and in later Rabbinic sources there is a complete absence of **כִּי**. Rooker gives the case of **אֲשֶׁר** in **Ezek 20:26** as an example of the transition of BH to its later form ^[1]. There are several problems with this interpretation of the data. In Chronicles the object clause introduced by **אֲשֶׁר** is rare, the non-biblical DSS use **כִּי** exclusively and concerning the language of Ezekiel, the example in **Ezek 20:26** is the only case of **אֲשֶׁר** in Ezekiel, so Ezekiel clearly shows the early pattern (high frequency of **כִּי**, low frequency of **אֲשֶׁר**, like the EBH books). Finally, the non-biblical DSS use **כִּי** exclusively as the conjunction of object clauses.

Our approach

These problems lead to the question how these data could be interpreted in a more consistent way. How is the choice of the conjunction in the object clause conditioned? In order to solve this issue we made a dataset with all the object clauses in the Hebrew Bible with information about the object clause and its environment. Of each of the object clauses we recorded:

1. Its place in the Hebrew Bible (book, chapter, verse).
2. The root of the transitive verb governing the object clause.
3. The stem formation of the transitive verb.
4. The tense of the transitive verb.
5. The tense of the object clause (or information about the type of clause if it has no finite verb).
6. Presence or absence of question particles or question pronouns
7. The conjunction.

With a combination of statistical techniques and close inspection of the data we arrived at the following results:

1. By far the most frequent transitive verb with an object clause is **יָדַע** (qal). This verb often governs an object clause introduced by **כִּי**, but there is a whole range of transitive verbs that rarely or never have **כִּי** as conjunction of the object clause. Among these verbs are:

בּוֹא (hif) can be found with **אֲשֶׁר**, never with **כִּי**, see ^[2].

יָרָה (hif) can be found with **אֲשֶׁר**, and **אֶת אֲשֶׁר** and without conjunction, never with **כִּי**, see ^[3].

לָקַח (qal) can be found with **אֲשֶׁר**, never with **כִּי**, see ^[4].

נָקַח (piel) can be found with **אֲשֶׁר**, never with **כִּי**, see ^[5].

סָפַר (piel) can be found with **אֶת אֲשֶׁר** or **אֲשֶׁר**, never with **כִּי**, see ^[6].

צָוָה (piel) can be found with **אֶת אֲשֶׁר** or **אֲשֶׁר** or without conjunction, never with **כִּי**, see ^[7].

שָׁמַר (qal) can be found with **אֶת אֲשֶׁר**, and without conjunction, never with **כִּי**, see ^[8].

Another interesting case is **יָדַע** (hif), which can be found with **אֶת אֲשֶׁר**, occ. 3x, without conjunction (5x) and **כִּי**, occ. 1x ^[9].

2. If the object clause contains interrogative pronouns or interrogative particles, there is no conjunction.

3. A closer look at the object clauses in Zechariah shows that all the object clauses having a qatal verb have כִּי as conjunction, and all verbless object clauses and object clauses having a yiqtol verb have no conjunction^[10]. Chronicles behaves very close to this pattern^[11].

In the case of Nehemiah we see the same pattern in most cases. If the object clause has a qatal verb the conjunction כִּי is used, if the object clause is verbless or if it has a participle no conjunction is used. Finally, and this is the main difference with the Zechariah/Chronicles pattern, if the object clause has a yiqtol verb, Nehemiah uses אֲשֶׁר as conjunction^[12]. Esther is generally close to the patterns found in Nehemiah.

Conclusion

In post-exilic texts there is no “disuse” of כִּי as conjunction of the object clause. It continues to be used in all the LBH books in the Hebrew Bible and in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

There is a complex pattern of conditioning of the use of the conjunction in the object clause, in which the transitive verb and the verb form of the object clause play an important role. In post-exilic texts we find at least two different “traditions” of the realization of the conjunction. One is prevalent in Zechariah and Chronicles. These books rarely have אֲשֶׁר as conjunction of the object clause. The other tradition is visible in Esther and Nehemiah, in which we see אֲשֶׁר in the case of a yiqtol in the object clause and with several transitive verbs. However, because there is a relatively small number of cases these have only little predictive power. It is probable that the same can be said about the use of וְ and אֶת in the Song of Songs and Qoheleth.

The use of the conjunction in the object clause is only one case of variation in BH and is not representative of any other feature. However, with new methods, in which every book is judged in its own right, it is possible to get a much better impression of the regularities and irregularities of BH.

Literature

Bergey, R.L., “The Book of Esther--Its Place in the Linguistic Milieu of Post-exilic Biblical Hebrew Prose: A Study in Late Biblical Hebrew”, PhD dissertation, Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, 1983.
Rooker, M.F., *Biblical Hebrew in Transition: The Language of the Book of Ezekiel*, JSOTSup. 90, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990.

[1] Bergey (1983), pp. 61-64. See also Rooker (1990), pp. 111-112.

[2] Gen 18:19, 1Chr 4:10 (hif).

[3] With אֲשֶׁר in Exod 4:12, with אֶת אֲשֶׁר in Exod 4:15, without conjunction in Judg 13:18 and 2Kgs 17:28.

[4] Judg 18:27, 1Sam 25:35, 2Kgs 5:20.

[5] Exod 20:7, Deut 5:11.

[6] With אֶת אֲשֶׁר in Exod 10:2, 2Kgs 8:5, with אֲשֶׁר in Job 15:17-18.

[7] With אֶת אֲשֶׁר in Gen 44:1, without conjunction in Lam 1:10 and with infinitive clauses in Ps 71:3, 1Chr 17:6, 22:6, 22:17 and 2Chr 7:13 and with אֲשֶׁר in Esth 2:10.

[8] With אֶת אֲשֶׁר in Exod 34:11, 1Sam 13:14, 1Kgs 8:24, 11:10, 2Chr 6:15, with infinitive clause in 1Chr 22:13.

[9] With אֶת אֲשֶׁר in Exod 33:12, Num 16:5, 1Sam 10:8, 16:3, Isa 5:5, without conjunction in 1Sam 28:15, Job 10:2, 37:19, with כִּי in Deut 8:3.

[10] With כִּי in 2:13, 2:15, 4:9, 6:15. No conjunction in 1:9, 2:6, 4:5, 4:13, 5:5, 8:23, 9:12. There is one exception, with the root נבט (qatal) the conjunction אֶת אֲשֶׁר is used.

[11] Chronicles also contains a number of object clauses with an infinitive, without conjunction.

[12] With כִּי in 4:1, no conjunction in 2:12, 10:29, 13:15, and אֲשֶׁר in 7:65, 8:14-15, 13:19 and 13:22. 2:16 is a qatal without conjunction, but has a question particle. Bergey(1983), p. 61 gives 1:6, 2:10, 4:6, 10:30-31 and 13:1 as examples of object clauses with אֲשֶׁר, but in our opinion these are suspect cases for various reasons.