

The Biblical Hebrew *Beth Essentiae*: Predicate Marker

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Abstract

The Biblical Hebrew (BH) preposition *beth* is used with a surprising range of meanings. One familiar use of the preposition is traditionally called the *beth essentiae*. The standard example is Exod 18:4: **כִּי־אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי בְעֻזִּי** ‘for the God of my father (is) my help.’ Most scholars agree that this usage of *beth* marks an equivalence or predication, the notable exception being Whitley (1972). The goal of this paper is to provide a syntactic analysis that supports the majority view and to respond to Whitley’s two most important counterarguments, namely that *beth* is unnecessary as marker of predication since BH allows null copula clauses and that the cooccurrence of *beth* with the verb **הָיָה** shows that *beth* must have some other function or else be pleonastic. Working within the framework of generative minimalism, I propose that the *beth essentiae* is an (optional) overt marker of predication, both in copular clauses and in secondary predicates (see Jenni 1997; cf. Joüon 1947). Following Bowers (1993; 2001), I present my case using a unified approach to predication. Every predication, whether a main verb, a null copula, or a secondary predicate, can be represented using a functional predication projection PrP. In this model, *beth* is the overt realization of the functional head Pr. This syntactic argument is supported by cross-linguistic data from Arabic, Egyptian, and Scottish Gaelic, all of which use the preposition ‘in’ to mark a predication in specific constructions.

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1 Introduction

The Biblical Hebrew (BH) preposition *bēth*, which has the basic meaning ‘in,’ occurs with a surprising range of constructions and connotations. This presentation focuses narrowly on the usage traditionally called the *bēth essentiae*, but which has also been called *bēth of essence*, *bēth of identity*, *bēth of equivalence*, *bēth of predication*, and *pleonastic beth*. The classic examples of this *bēth* are Exod 18:4 and 6:3, which are included in your handout.

- (1) וְשֵׁם הָאֲחֵר אֱלִיעֶזֶר כִּי־אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי בְעֶזְרִי וַיַּצֵּלְנִי מִחֶרֶב פְּרָעָה:
 ‘...and the name of the other (son) (was) Eliezer, because “The God of my father (is/was) my help, and he delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh.”’
 (Exod 18:4)
- (2) וְאָרָא אֶל־אֲבִרְהָם אֶל־יִצְחָק וְאֶל־יַעֲקֹב בְּאֵל שַׁדַּי וְשְׁמִי יְהוָה לֹא נִדְעָתִי
 לָהֶם:
 ‘I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El Shaddai. But (as for) my name, Yahweh, I was not known to them (by it).’ (Exod 6:3)

Most scholars who have treated this use of *bēth* recognize its function as marking an equivalence or predication, and so I will refer to it as the *bēth of predication*. There is, however, one notable dissenting voice. In a 1972 paper, C. F. Whitley argued that as a marker of predication *bēth* would be pleonastic. He argues, contrary to Manross (1954), that this *bēth* is not a copula and should not be translated ‘is’ since it sometimes cooccurs with the copular verb *hāyâ* ‘to be.’ Moreover, since null copula clauses are amply attested in BH, he argues that there is no need for a copular *bēth*. In Whitley’s view, the classic examples of *bēth essentia* are better understood as an emphatic marker.

In my paper I retain the majority view, but I want to pay attention to what Whitley is noticing. Sharpened by his critique, I nevertheless seek to provide a syntactic analysis which supports the majority view. I argue that the so-called *bēth essentia* is best regarded as a marker of the predicate, and that this can be supported by data from other languages such as Arabic, Egyptian, and Scottish Gaelic. Following the generative approach of Bowers (1993, 2001), I argue that the relevant attestations of *bēth* are overt realizations of a functional predication head Pr. Bowers’ unified approach to predication makes good sense of the *bēth of predication* in copular clauses and in secondary predications.

In response to Whitley’s objections, I argue that there is no pleonasm when *hāyâ* and *bēth* cooccur since each lexeme does indeed serve a distinct function. While *bēth* serves to mark the predicate, *hāyâ* is employed to realize otherwise stranded features like past or future tense as proposed by DeCaen (1999) and Cowper and DeCaen (2017). As regards the comparison between null copula clauses and those marked

with *bēth*, I argue that the existence of zero-marked predicates does not rule out the explicit marking of predicates with *bēth*. Natural language is, after all, replete with redundancy.

2 *Bēth of Predication*: Definition and Observations

Since the notion of a *bēth of predication* is well established, let me begin with some observations. According to Charlesworth (1990, 69):

- (3) “The *bēth essentiae*... is the *terminus technicus* for a compounded *bēth* prefixed to a predicate (often a predicate nominative or a predicate adjective), and denoting the quality, essence, or characteristic of a thing or person.”

Two features of this definition may be noted. First, Charlesworth recognizes that *bēth* is not itself part of the predicate, but is rather prefixed to it. Second, the *bēth of predication* may mark a predicate either in copular clauses on the ‘predicate nominative’ (see (2) above) or in verbal clauses marking a secondary predicate, which is how I’ve understood Charlesworth’s reference to a ‘predicate adjective’. Jenni (1997, 186) confirms this, noting further that *bēth* may mark what I call subject-oriented and object-oriented secondary predicates, such as the one in example (4):

- (4) Object-Oriented SP:

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים | אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ

way-yibrā³ ʔēlōhîm ʔet=hā-ʔādām bə-ṣalm-ô

and-3MSG.created God DOM=the-human PRED-image-his

‘And God created humanity in His image.’ (Gen 1:27a)

A third observation arises from the secondary literature. There is general agreement that the *bēth of predication* is associated in particular with substantives. Joüon (1947, §133c) states that this *bēth* ordinarily occurs with substantive predicates and only rarely with adjectives. Charlesworth (1990, 72) is more strict, arguing that “the *bēth essentiae* is not employed with an adjective.” And Jenni (1997, 185) restricts the field even further, insisting that the substantive that follows *bēth* must be a person or thing, and not, for example, a location, time, abstraction, or circumstance.

To the above I add a fourth observation based on my gathered examples. Although a predicate marked by *bēth* may be determined by a pronoun suffix or proper name, as a rule such predicates are not determined by the article; that is, they are ‘anarthrous.’ This is consistent with my findings in parallel work regarding what I am calling the *purposive lamed*, which is also a predicate marker.

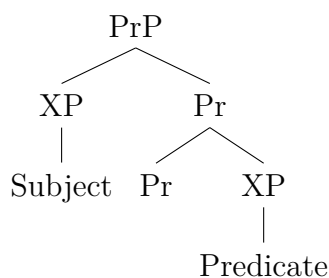
3 ‘In’ as Cross-Linguistic Predicate Marker

Biblical Hebrew is not the only language to employ what is usually the preposition meaning ‘in’ to mark predication. In the paper I cite examples from Arabic, Egyptian, and Scottish Gaelic, showing that there is a cross-linguistic tendency to grammaticalize the preposition ‘in’ as a predicate marker. As far as I can tell, the association with nominal predicates seems to extend to those languages as well, perhaps giving a clue as to what motivates predicate marking in the first place. It may well be that nominal predicates are more likely to be confused for the subject, and therefore it is expedient to disambiguate them by using an explicit marker.

4 A Generative Syntactic Approach to Predication

The point of this paper is to outline a generative syntactic analysis that can explain the Biblical Hebrew *bēth of predication*, as well as the cross-linguistic data. I follow Bowers (1993, 2001) in adopting a unified approach to predication such that every predication, whether copular, verbal, or secondary, shares a functional structure, which I label PrP for Predication Phrase. In this model the subject and predicate are hierarchically ordered and joined together by a predication head, Pr. The functional head Pr may be phonologically null, as it often is in Biblical Hebrew, or it may be realized overtly.

(5) Predication Phrase: Basic Structure



It has been suggested, for example, that Pr can be overtly realized in English by *as*. Example (6) in your handout reads as follows:

(6) English *as* Marking an SP:

“Under the notion of Protestants, we should consider ourselves **as** christians reformed.” (emphasis mine) (D’hoedt and Cuyckens 2017, 17)

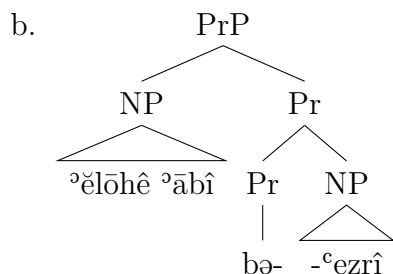
Notice that it would be acceptable to say ‘we should consider ourselves Christians Reformed,’ without the *as*.

Other realizations of the predication head Pr which have been identified by linguists include the German word *als* and the Scottish Gaelic word *ann*, which is the preposition meaning ‘in.’ My claim here is that we may add the Biblical Hebrew *bēth*, the Arabic *bi*, and the Egyptian *m* and *r* to the list of overt realizations of Pr. In particular, Biblical Hebrew *bēth* sometimes realizes Pr in copular clauses and in secondary predications.

Consider example (1), reproduced with morpheme by morpheme glossing as (7a). The structure of the predication **כִּי־אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי בְּעֶזְרִי** would be diagrammed as in (7b). Here the particle *bēth* is not considered to be a preposition, but rather a marker of the predicate **עֶזְרִי**. Note that the translation in (7a) using ‘(is/was)’ reflects the fact that nothing in the clause itself specifies tense, aspect, or mood, also called the TAM features. Translators must deduce the appropriate TAM features from the context. In a moment I will make a big deal out of the fact that it is not a function of the *bēth of predication* to specify TAM features.

(7) a. **כִּי־אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי בְּעֶזְרִי**

kî ʔēlōhê ʔāb-î bə-ʕezr-î
because God father-my PRED-help-my
‘Because “The God of my father (is/was) my help.”’ (Exod 18:4)



The *bēth of predication* is also used to mark some subject-oriented and object-oriented secondary predicates. I adopt the following definition of secondary predicates from Susan Rothstein with slight modification:

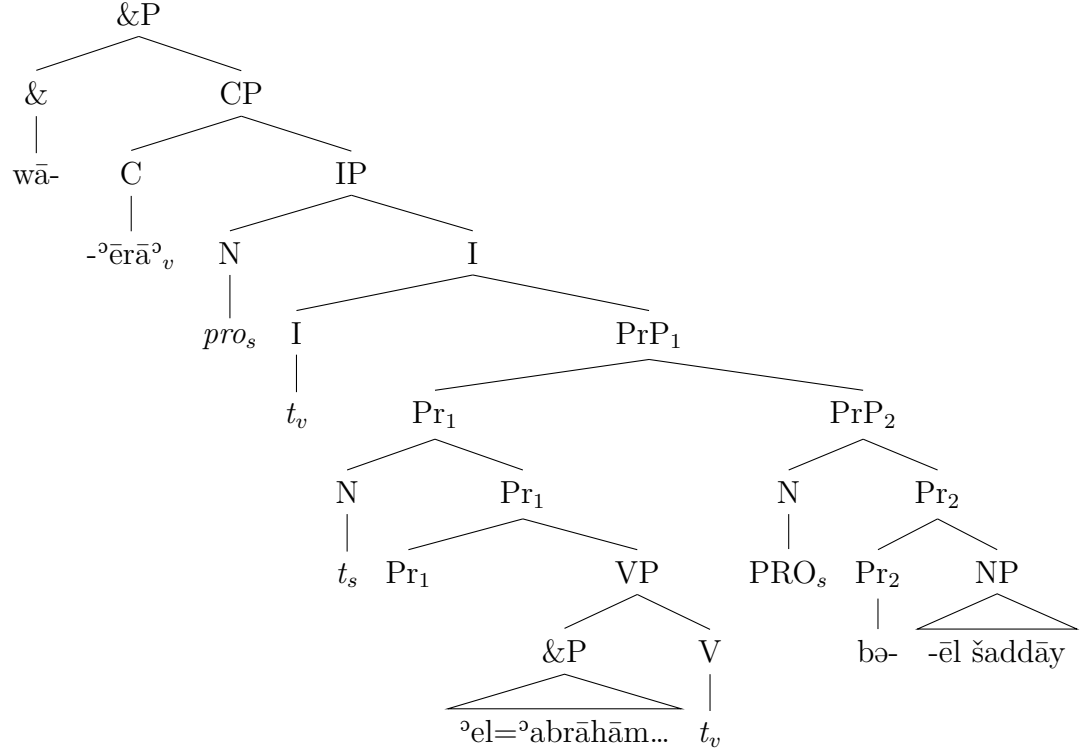
- (8) A secondary predicate is a one place, non-finite predicate expression which occurs under the scope of a main verb. Crucially, the secondary predicate shares an argument with the main verb such that the subject of the secondary predicate is either the subject or the direct object of the main verb. (cf. Rothstein 2011, 1442)

Less formally, secondary predicates are a means of incorporating two predications into a single clause. What might otherwise have been ‘I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob’ in one clause, and then ‘(At that time) I was El Shaddai

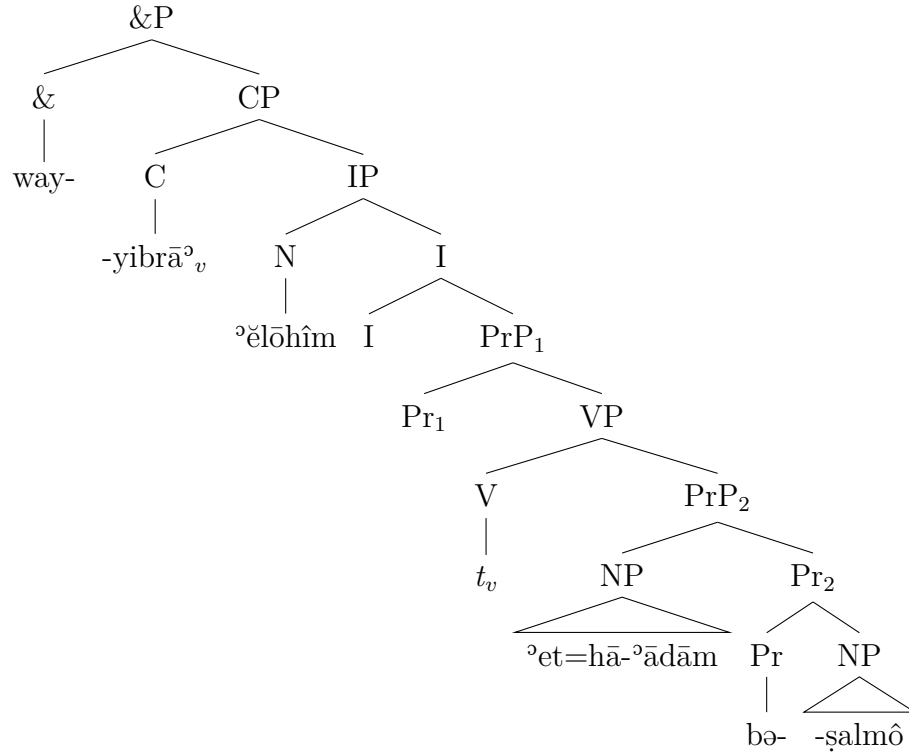
(to them)’ in another, becomes a single clause as in example (2): ‘I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El Shaddai.’

The secondary predicate examples (2) and (4) can be diagrammed as (9) and (10) respectively.

(9) Structure for a Subject-Oriented SP (Exod 6:3):



(10) Structure for an Object-Oriented SP (Gen 1:27):



The key thing to note for now about these two-in-one predications is that tree diagrams involving secondary predicates must incorporate two Predication Phrases: a PrP₁ for the main verb and a PrP₂ for the secondary predication.

5 Responding to Whitley's Counterarguments

Now is the time to heed that one voice of opposition and let it sharpen the analysis already proposed.

5.1 Optional Predication Marking in BH

For starters, Whitley (1972, 204-205) is quite correct to note that null copula clauses like example (11) are possible and even quite common in BH:

- (11) וְשֵׁמוֹ אֶלְקָנָה בֶּן־יִרְחָם בֶּן־אֵלִיָּהוּ בֶּן־תְּחוּ בֶּן־צִוִּי אֶפְרָתִי
 ‘And his name (was) Elkanah son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuph, an Ephrathite.’ (1 Sam 1:1)

Whitley argues that since null copula predications are abundant, there is no reason to require *bēth* as predicate marker. If that is all that *bēth* does, then it is

redundant. However, this fact by itself does not rule out the possibility that *bēth* is used to mark predicates. It is a fact that natural languages sometimes contain redundancies. Diachronic studies of language sometimes note the competition between multiple equivalent strategies over time. Equivalent strategies may coexist for a period leading to the decline of one and the prevalence of the other, or they may continue to coexist indefinitely. The point is, we cannot rule out *a priori* the possibility that the *bēth of predication* is a simple variant of zero-marked predication like the null copula.

In the paper I support this claim by providing examples of other apparently redundant elements in Biblical Hebrew predications. The optional elements I mention are the pronominal copula and the *purposive lamed*, neither of which are absolutely necessary, and yet each one serves a function when it is used. The pronominal copula serves to specify present tense Holmstedt and Jones (2014, 61), while the *purposive lamed*, much like the *bēth of predication*, serves to mark nominal predicates.

5.2 The BH Verb ‘to be’ as an Auxiliary

Consider examples (12) and (13):

(12) פֹּט וְלוּבִים הָיוּ בְּעִזְרָתְךָ

‘Put and Lubim were your help.’ (Nah 3:9)

(13) כִּי־יִהְיֶה יְהוָה בְּכִסְלְךָ

‘For Yahweh will be your confidence.’ (Prov 3:26)

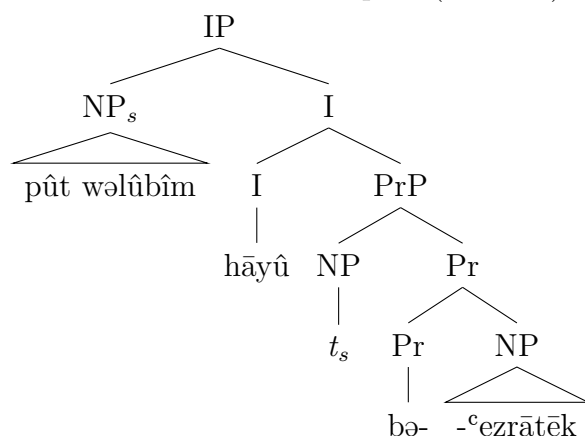
Whitley (1972, 203) notes these as proof that *bēth* cannot be a marker of predication. According to him, a form of the verb *hāyâ* (הָיָה in Nahum 3:9 and יְהִי in Proverbs 3:26) is sufficient as copula, and therefore *bēth* must have some other function. On this last point, I agree with Whitley. What we disagree about is what that other function of *bēth* could be. Whitley argues that it marks emphasis, but I say that it simply identifies the predicate.

As I note in the paper, verbal copulas serve to explicitly mark TAM features that would be unspecified in a null copula clause where there is no such explicit morphology. In the generative approach such TAM features are believed to be encoded at the level of the Inflectional Phrase or IP. Whereas null copula clauses are unmarked for tense, mood, or aspect, the Perfect *hāyâ* is marked for past tense and the Imperfect *yihyê* is marked for non-past tense. But neither the null copula nor the verbal copulas explicitly mark which nominal is the predicate. This latter job is the one fulfilled by the *bēth of predication* in examples (12) and (13).

To illustrate the distinct syntactic weight being pulled by *bēth vis à vis* the verbal copula, consider the tree diagram in example (14) which represents the clause from

Nahum 3:9:¹

(14) Structure for a Verbal Copula (Nah 3:9):



The particle *bēth*, by sitting in the Pr head, disambiguates between the two noun phrases, clearly marking עֲזַרְתֶּךָ as the predicate. The obvious implication is that the other noun phrase, פֹּט וְלִבִּים is the subject. Note that word order alone is not necessarily sufficient to disambiguate the noun phrases since Biblical Hebrew allows pragmatic fronting to Focus and Topic projections above IP. From a strict linear perspective, a phrase before the verbal copula could be the subject in the subject position – if one were to adopt the SVO hypothesis for basic Biblical Hebrew word order – or either the subject or the predicate in a pragmatically marked position.

Following Cowper and DeCaen (2017), I treat the verbal copula as an auxiliary verb, meaning that it is merged directly at I instead of at a V node like main verbs. According to them, auxiliary *hāyâ* is “inserted as a last resort to permit the spellout of otherwise stranded inflectional features” Cowper and DeCaen (2017, 6). In Nahum 3:9 this feature is past tense. By contrast, in a null copula clause like example (11) the I node is empty (i.e. \emptyset), explaining the lack of explicit TAM features.

It is not true, therefore, that the presence of a verbal copula makes the *bēth* of predication redundant. Each lexeme has its own distinct job, which it fulfills in its distinct syntactic position.

5.3 ‘Emphasis’ is the Product of Word Order

Before concluding, let me address Whitley’s theory of an emphatic *bēth*. Whitley (1972, 199-202) argues that in Biblical Hebrew the particles *bēth* and *lamed* are interchangeable in certain functions, including having an emphatic force. He believes

1. I take no stand here on the basic word order of BH, whether VSO or SVO. Example (14) would represent a basic SVO order, but a VSO order with topic marking of the subject could be diagrammed by adding a Topic Phrase layer.

that it is this emphatic function that characterizes the *bēth essentiae*. However, neither *bēth* nor *lamed* have such a function. In my view, any ‘emphasis’ in the texts cited by Whitley is a product of pragmatically marked word order. Words and phrases may be focus- or topic-marked by fronting them to a preverbal position within a Focus Phrase or Topic Phrase respectively.

Whitley mentions the null copula clause **בִּיהַ שְׁמוֹ** from Psalm 68:5 when making his case. In my translation of example (15) the underlining marks ‘Yah’ as the predicate, and the bold face type does the job of the inverted word order, which is to mark pragmatic focus.

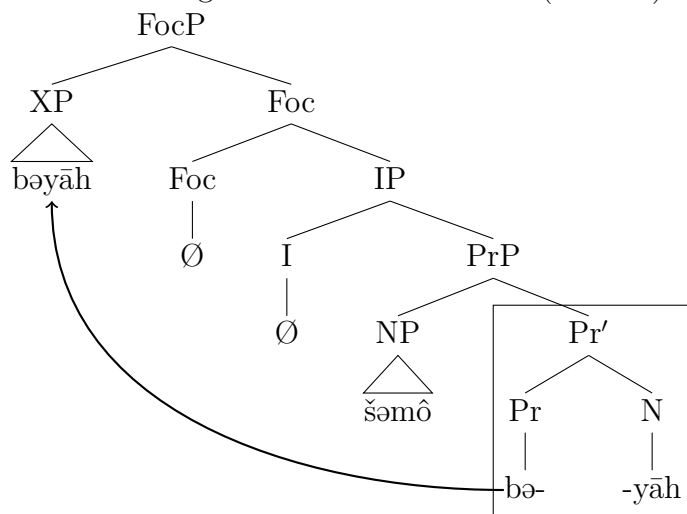
Following Buth (1999) I assume that the neutral word order in null copula clauses is Subject-Predicate. But in **בִּיהַ שְׁמוֹ** we have the inverted order Predicate-Subject.

- (15)
- שִׁירוּ | לְאֱלֹהִים
וּמְרוּ שְׁמוֹ
סֹלוּ לְרֹכֵב בְּעֶרְבוֹת
בִּיהַ שְׁמוֹ
וְעִלּוּ לְפָנָיו:

‘Sing to God, make music to His name; pile on (praise) to the one who rides through the deserts – His name is Yah – and exult before Him.’ (Ps 68:5)

To show how word order marking is distinct from predicate marking, I provide the structure of **בִּיהַ שְׁמוֹ** in example (16). The particle *bēth* marks the predicate *Yāh* by virtue of its merge position at Pr. The entire phrase *bəyāh*, which forms a Pr-bar node, is fronted to a position in the specifier of the Focus Phrase where it is focus-marked. Notice that the null marker at I is consistent with the fact that null copula clauses are unmarked for TAM features.

- (16) Focus-Marking of a Fronted Predicate (Ps 68:5):



It seems plausible that Whitley, having mistaken the source of pragmatic marking, generalized his observations for cases like Psalm 68:5 to all attestations of *bēth essentiae*, and that this lead him to believe that *bēth* marks emphasis regardless of its position in the clause.

6 Conclusion

Let me conclude. In this paper I have discussed a long recognized use of the Biblical Hebrew particle *bēth* traditionally called the *bēth essentiae*. My primary goal was to provide a syntactic explanation for this *bēth* using the unified approach to predication of Bowers (1993, 2001). In so doing, I have confirmed the majority view which analyses the traditional *bēth essentiae* as a predicate marker. I argued that this *bēth of predication* is an optional overt head of the Predicational Phrase, both in copular clauses and in secondary predicates. This analysis is supported by data from Arabic, Egyptian, and Scottish Gaelic, all of which also use the equivalent of the preposition ‘in’ to mark predicates in particular circumstances.

By responding to Whitley’s counterarguments I have put the function of the *bēth of predication* into sharper focus *vis à vis* the verbal and pronominal copulas. Whereas *bēth* may be used to clearly identify the predicate, the overt copulas serve to specify TAM features by overtly realizing the Inflectional head. Null copula clauses are unspecified for TAM features, and therefore have an empty I node. By contrast, pronominal copulas mark present tense, while verbal copulas specify past and non-past semantics. Finally, the ‘emphasis’ that Whitley attributed to the *bēth essentiae* was shown to be independently marked by word order.

One consequence of the Predication Phrase structure is that the *bēth of predication* must mark the predicate and never the subject, despite what others have previously stated. Two other factors may be considered when identifying a *bēth of predication*. First, *bēth of predication* seems to be particularly associated with nominal predicates, though I do list a few possible exceptions in my appendix. Second, the predicate marked by *bēth of predication* seems never to be determined by the article.

It is not always obvious whether a given *bēth* is a *bēth of predication* or not, and it would be valuable to have stricter guidelines for its analysis. More work should be done to confirm the factors just listed, as well as to confirm the statement from Joüon-Muraoka that “the \beth adds practically nothing to the meaning” of the predicate (Joüon and Muraoka 2006, §133c). Having translated a number of examples for the appendix, I conclude that the *bēth of predication* may sometimes be left untranslated, but may at other times be translated by one of the usual English strategies for marking secondary predicates like ‘as,’ ‘for,’ or ‘to be.’

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