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A Linguistic Analysis of the Biblical Hebrew Particle *nā'*: A Test Case

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Abstract

The potential for advancing our understanding of biblical Hebrew by a more rigorous application of the principals of linguistics is illustrated by the particle *nā'*, which has been translated in widely divergent ways. The research of Shulman (1999) forms the basis for the proposal that this so-called “particle of entreaty” actually represents a previously unidentified syntactical element in biblical Hebrew—the “propositive” particle—whereby a speaker indicates an intention to pursue a particular course of action. Interpreting *nā'* as a “propositive/exhortative” more convincingly explains its biblical usage. Evidence of the propositive mood includes the felicity of *nā'* as a sentence-initial compound element, reduplication of *nā'* within Hebrew clauses, the linguistic vacuum of alternative polite circumlocution, and the need for cogent interpretation of *nā'* when used with deliberative cohortative verb forms.

Keywords

Hebrew language—particles, Hebrew language—terms—nah—na, Hebrew language—propositive mood

Summary of Research¹

The particle *nā'* is often encountered following the modal verbs of biblical Hebrew: the jussive, the cohortative, and the imperative. It is found following the negative *'al*, as well as following *hinnēh*, and, less often, *'im*. Where it does follow *nā'*, it does so as a constituent of the polite phrase, *'im-nā' māṣāti ḥēn bē-'ēnēkā*.² Traditionally, *nā'* has often been viewed as a so-called “particle of entreaty” that would be equivalent in most contexts to the polite word

¹ The author wishes to acknowledge Dr. William Barrick for his insights into specialized topics in Hebrew grammar and his encouragement to conduct further research, of which the present study is the result.

² Ahouva Shulman, “The Particle Nah in Biblical Hebrew Prose,” *HS* 40 (1999), p. 57.

“please” in English. In some instances, other polite expressions, such as “I beg you” or “For pity’s sake!” could be fitting.³ Gesenius-Kautzsch indicate that the particle is as “frequently added to the imperative as to the jussive, sometimes to soften down a command, or to make a request in a more courteous form... sometimes to strengthen an exhortation uttered as a rebuke or threat... or in ridicule”.⁴ Gesenius-Kautzsch also label the particle as an interjection.⁵

Shulman’s 1999 study⁶ notes the opinion of Bar-Magen⁷ that *nāʾ* does not bear a single meaning in all circumstances. Since *nāʾ* has been interpreted by both the Talmud and the Aramaic Targummim as a temporal particle (“now”) as well as a particle of entreaty, a single semantic category cannot be defined for it. Rather, a speaker would lengthen his utterance using *nāʾ* so as to draw attention to himself, and the semantics would have to be understood from the context.

Lambdin views *nāʾ* as denoting “that the command in question is a logical consequence either of an immediately preceding statement or of the general situation in which it is uttered”.⁸ In this assessment, there is little to favor translations like “please”, “I pray”, and so forth, as the particle functions as a sort of semantic vacuum. Apparently concurring with this conclusion are Waltke and O’Connor: “Lambdin’s understanding finds further support in the use of *nāʾ* with the logical particles *ʾim* and *ʾattāh*, and its use with the cohortative of resolve in passages where a precative use is unlikely”.⁹ Fassberg essentially concurs with the findings of Lambdin,¹⁰ while Kaufman argues for an understanding of “please” and related meanings.¹¹

³ P. Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, ed. and rev. T. Muraoka, Subsidia Biblica 14/I and II (Roma, 1993), §105c. Hereafter, Joüon-Muraoka.

⁴ A. E. Cowley (ed.), *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar as Edited and Enlarged by the Late E. Kautzsch* (2nd edn., Oxford 1910 = the 28th German edn.) §§105, 110 n. 1. Hereafter, GKC. *Erratum* Shulman, p. 57 fn 1.

⁵ GKC, §105. Similarly, Joüon-Muraoka, §105c, define *nāʾ* as an interjection “used for the purpose of adding a usually weak entreating nuance, which is roughly equivalent to a stressed and lengthened ‘Please’ in English”.

⁶ Shulman, pp. 57-58.

⁷ M. Bar-Magen, “הַמְלֵה נָא בְּמִקְרֹו”, *Beit Mikra* 25 (1980), pp. 163-171.

⁸ T. O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (New York, 1971), p. 170.

⁹ Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, 1990), §34.7. Hereafter, *IBHS*.

¹⁰ Steven E. Fassberg, *Studies in Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Jerusalem, 1994), pp. 70-73.

¹¹ Steven A. Kaufman, “An Emphatic Plea for Please”, *Maarav* 7 (1991), p. 196.

Modal Verb Forms and the Energetic Ending

On the basis of comparative studies in Ugaritic and Amarna Akkadian, Gottlieb and Lambdin have argued that the particle is related to the—*anna* energetic ending.¹² For Lambdin, this understanding seems to solve certain philological difficulties related to the source of the formal diversity of the injunctive verbal paradigm in biblical Hebrew: 1st person jussive, 2nd person jussive and imperative, and 3rd person jussive. Lambdin notes the frequency with which the *nā'* particle occurs with the dagesh forte conjunctivum and postulates for its source the *yaqtula* form of Amarna Akkadian in conjunction with the—*anna* energetic ending.¹³ This has the added benefit of explaining the emergence of the so-called emphatic imperative—the *qotlāh* form¹⁴—as well as explaining (in part) the verbal postpositive specimens of *nā'*.

Gottlieb, as well, noted the special tendency to utilize the energetic verbal form in contexts of exhortation, wish, or command. For Gottlieb, the particle *nā'* in Hebrew also represents the application of the energetic mood to voluntative, jussive, and imperative verb forms, but Gottlieb further adduces what he considers evidence from Ugaritic scribal practices that *nā'* began to function as an independent lexeme.¹⁵

¹² Hans Gottlieb, "The Hebrew Particle Nā", *AcOr* 33 (1971), p. 170; Thomas Oden Lambdin, "The Junctural Origin of the West Semitic Definite Article", in William Foxwell Albright and Hans Goedicke (eds.), *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright* (Baltimore, 1971), pp. 51-53.

¹³ The affinity of Amarna Canaanite *yaqtula* with Hebrew cohortative had already been proposed by W. L. Moran, "Early Canaanite *Yaqtula*", *Or* 29 (1960), pp. 1-19, but certain "formal problems" had been left unresolved. For instance, Lambdin asks, was the final vowel of *yaqtula* long or aneaps, and how did it survive (what he assumes was) the loss of short vowels in Pre-Hebrew?

¹⁴ A study by M. Tsevat [*A Study of the Language of the Biblical Psalms* (Philadelphia, 1955)] referenced by neither Lambdin nor Gottlieb, notes that the lengthened 2ms imperative *qotlāh* form is the *normal* imperative form found in the Psalms, occurring more than 8 times as frequently as the *qētol* form. Since the Psalms frequently involve the language of exhortation and prayer, this may strengthen the proposed connection between the *yaqtula* and Hebrew injunctive verbal forms. On the other hand, the predominance of the *qotlāh* form in the Psalms may be attributable at least partly to euphonic reasons.

¹⁵ Lambdin, "The Junctural Origin of the West Semitic Definite Article", pp. 51-53. Word dividers in Ugaritic cuneiform texts (represented in transliteration by a point) are sometimes used in such texts to segment what Gottlieb understands to be the energetic ending from the verbal stem. According to Gottlieb, "this beginning development toward an independence of the energetic element, which we find sporadically in Ugaritic, and which was expressed also in the language of the Amarna letters—where the ending *-na* could be added to an Akkadian verbal form—was continued in Hebrew where we recognize the element in the enclitic particle

It must be borne in mind, however, that theories of linguistic genesis are not incontrovertible and are liable to shifting semantics in the evolution of language. We cannot conclude solely on the basis of the Semitic evidence that *nā'* represents a vestigial form of the energetic ending, and, thus, a potentially vacuous semantic element. What the hour requires is a careful survey of actual biblical usage, a task which has been undertaken by Wilt and Shulman.¹⁶

Biblical Usage of *nā'*

Wilt provides a useful overview of the intersection of sociolinguistic concepts with the study of the biblical particle *nā'*. Shulman utilizes many of these concepts in a thorough review and grammatical categorization of *nā'*, selecting a corpus for study that includes the Torah as well as the Former Prophets.¹⁷ Although the present author reads the evidence somewhat differently, the treatment of Shulman is judged both ample and lucid.¹⁸ It is the use of the particle with cohortative verb forms that raises questions and compels the present attempt to offer a more nuanced understanding of the grammatical function of *nā'*.

nā' with Jussives and Imperative Forms

Upon examination of the various contexts in which *nā'* occurs, Shulman refers to clear differences of the "speech acts".¹⁹ The speech act relating to the

nā'" (Gottlieb, p. 52). Of course, there is still a required linguistic leap—the evolution of *nā'* to the free morpheme—and one could argue a phonological similarity between what are really two disparate forms (the *-anna* energetic and an enclitic particle, *nā*). On the other hand, the collocation of the energetic form with the modal verb in biblical Hebrew and its linguistic cousins seems too remarkable to be coincidental.

¹⁶ Shulman, op. cit.; Timothy Lloyd Wilt, "A Sociolinguistic Analysis of *Nā'*", *VT* 46 (1996), pp. 237-255.

¹⁷ Other researchers, as noted by Shulman, have followed the approach of selecting a prose corpus as well: E. J. Revell, "The System of the Verb in Standard Biblical Prose", *HUCA* 60 (1989), pp. 1-37, and Cynthia L. Miller, *The Representation of Speech in Biblical Hebrew Narrative: A Linguistic Analysis*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 55 (Atlanta, 1996).

¹⁸ The reader is referred to Wilt for more detailed explanation of the sociolinguistic framework than can be provided here, and to Shulman for much more thorough discussion, examples and usage statistics.

¹⁹ A "speech act" is a concept in pragmatics that signifies the intended effect for which a given speech utterance is vocalized; in other words, the end result intended by the utterance. Jerrold Sadock in his informative essay in *The Handbook of Pragmatics* interprets and summarizes the

incidence of *nā'* most often appears to be the polite request. In the judgment of Shulman, the speech act is always the polite request.²⁰ Although this conclusion will be disputed, polite request is the rule with respect to *nā'* following the third person use of the jussive form. In the corpus of the Former Prophets, the speaker is inferior relative to the addressee in 29 of 34 instances of *nā'*. In 2 passages the speaker is equal in status to the addressee, and in 3 the speaker is even superior.²¹ For instance, in Judges 6:39, we have Gideon making his request to God:

Let it be dry (*yēhî-nā'*) upon the fleece alone, and upon all the ground let there be dew.

With regard to *nā'* following imperative forms, Shulman is correct when she states:

... the function of *nā'* following an imperative is similar to its function with the jussive... The particle follows the imperative in contexts where the speaker wishes to present a polite request and avoid the impression that he orders or forcefully commands the addressee.²²

The use of *nā'* with the imperative demonstrates some of the limits of imposition which even socially superior speakers are willing to exert in their speech to inferiors. Thus, in the 152 occurrences of *nā'* in the Shulman corpus, we have 70 instances of a superior speaker using *nā'* with an inferior, 46 instances with speakers of equal status addressing one another, and 36 in which an inferior speaker addresses a superior speaker.²³

nā' Following Cohortative Forms

The cohortative occurs most frequently with the first person singular and plural. In the Shulman corpus including the Former Prophets, "*nā'*" occurs thirty one times: seventeen times in speeches of an inferior, ten times in

innovations of the pioneering work of Austin [(J. L. Austin, J. O. Urmson, and M. Sbisáa, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1975)] in describing one aspect of this effect as the 'illocutionary act,' which is an act "done in [emphasis in the original] speaking (hence illocutionary), including and especially that sort of act that is the apparent purpose for using a performative sentence: christening, marrying, as so forth". (Sadock, pp. 54-55).

²⁰ Shulman, p. 61.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., p. 68.

speeches of speakers equal in status to the addressee, and once in a speech of a superior. It also occurs three times in a soliloquy, where the speaker reflects and ‘speaks’ to himself”.²⁴

nā’ and Deliberative Uses of the Cohortative

The 31 instances in which *nā’* follows a cohortative form in dialogue follow a similar pattern of polite usage to that of the jussive and imperative forms. In deliberative situations in which the cohortative occurs without *nā’*, this writer concurs with the judgment of Shulman that the speaker relays a settled intention to act, rather than a proposal for a course of action. Thus, we have the resolution of Israel in Genesis 45:28:

Then Israel said, “*That’s enough to convince me!* Joseph is still living. I will go and see him before I die”.

However, it is those instances of *nā’* that occur in soliloquy that provide strong evidence that a new, more expansive grammatical conception is necessary. We will present the examples here with some comment, then return to them in more detail. In Exodus 3:3, Moses considers the burning bush:

Let me turn aside (*’āsūrāh-nnā’*) and see this great sight.

In 2 Samuel 14:15, the woman from Tekoa expresses to King David:

So your maidservant said, “Let me speak (*’adabberāh-nnā’*) to the king; perhaps he will do what his maidservant asks”.

In Genesis 18:21, God contemplates observing for Himself whether the moral outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah are commensurate to the reports about them, saying, “Let me go down (*’ēradāh-nnā’*) and see”. In addition to these examples from the Shulman corpus of the Former Prophets we have one at Psalm 122:8. David resolves to seek for the blessing and peace of Jerusalem:

For the sake of my brothers and companions, let me say (*’adabberāh-nnā’*), “Peace *be* within you.”

²⁴ Ibid.

Shulman offers the following explanation of the use of the cohortative with *nā'* in the soliloquy texts:

Where the cohortative is followed by *nā'*, the suggestion that a speaker is asking permission from, or showing politeness to himself may seem surprising. But a plausible explanation of the usage can be advanced. In soliloquy passages where the cohortative is followed by *nā'*, the speaker is portrayed as debating with himself whether or not to act. *nā'* is used when the speaker is still contemplating his course of action, possibly trying to persuade himself to act, by saying to himself, "Let me..." or "It may be a good idea to...".²⁵

What this account seems to lack is the essential element of social *imposition* that necessitates the need for the polite request in the first place (in the language of pragmatics, the *redressive action*).²⁶ Shulman's own glosses (as well as my own above) of the passages in question betray the fact that the meaning cannot be simply be "please", as "please" is conspicuously absent from them.²⁷ Consider the infelicity of the following constructions (marked by * as hypothetical):

- | | |
|--|---|
| a. Exodus 3:3 [Moses addressing <i>himself</i>]: | *Let me please turn aside and see this great sight. |
| b. Genesis 18:21 [God talking to <i>Himself</i>]: | *Let me please (!) go down and see. |
| c. 2 Samuel 14:15 [Tekoite speaking to <i>herself</i>]: | *Let me please speak to the king. |
| d. Psalm 122:8 [David speaking to <i>himself</i>]: | *Let me please now say, "Peace be within you". |

This crucial observation leads to the conclusion that the grammatical function of *nā'* extends beyond that of the polite/honorific to that of an exhortative, or propositive, particle. The particle functions to signal that the speaker is *proposing* a course of action with which the addressee may or may not agree or choose to accommodate. The surface syntactic element *nā'* appears to be a manifestation of a deeper, more abstract, sentence-level tagmeme, a concept

²⁵) Ibid., pp. 77-78.

²⁶) Penelope Brown and Steven Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics 4 (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 69-70. For more on the anthropology of self-address in the OT, see Robert de Vito, "Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity", *CBQ* 61/2 (1999), pp. 217-38.

²⁷) Shulman, p. 78.

we will explore more in depth in the following section. As such, *nā'*-sentences appear to be more polite than a command (imperative sentence type), but less so than requests (interrogative sentence types).

***nā'*, Generative Grammar, and the Propositive Particle: A New Proposal**

We have suggested that the particle *nā'* instantiates a sentence-level grammatical type, that of the exhortative, or propositive, which a speaker uses to enlist the assistance, agreement, or participation of the addressee in a particular course of action. Before we adduce more evidence in this regard, it would be beneficial to elaborate further on the notion of proposition as a sentence-level grammatical phenomenon. Intuition may be an unreliable aid, since the English language, for instance, does not realize a surface grammar including propositive particles that easily mark the proposition sentence type. Nevertheless, this sentence type is evidenced in some other modern languages. The existence of the propositive particle in the Korean language is noted by Sadock²⁸ and Kim.²⁹ In the Korean language, the verb systems are not inflected for the injunctive moods. However, each of the major sentence types is marked by a particle in sentence-final position: declarative (*-ta*), interrogative (*-ni/nya*), imperative (*-e-la*), and exhortative, or propositive (*-ma*).³⁰ The propositive particle is an element of the generative grammar of the Korean language.

The English language is completely *unmarked* for the propositive particle, either in sentence-final position, as in Korean, or elsewhere. Proposition as a sentence-level type is realized at the surface level of the grammar with a variety of constructions: (1) introducing a deliberative verb phrase, "Let us..." (2) restatement as an interrogative: "Shall we...?" (3) circumlocutory optative main verbs, "Would you like to...?" or more subtly by conversational implicature,³¹ including (4) more extensive circumlocution (i.e., "Wouldn't it

²⁸) Sadock, p. 72.

²⁹) Nam-Kil Kim, "Korean," in Bernard Comrie (ed.), *The World's Major Languages* (New York, 1990), pp. 881-98.

³⁰) In addition, Korean is generally understood to evidence exclamative, premonitive, and permissive moods. Refer to the discussion of Paul H. Portner, *Korean Particles and Clause Types* (Georgetown University, 2004, accessed Oct 15th 2007); available from <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/portnerp/nsfsite/KoreanParticlesMiokPak.pdf>, pp. 21-22.

³¹) Conversational implicature refers to the non-propositional or inferred truth value of a speaker's utterance. In some instances (particularized conversational implicature) the inferred content is dependent upon the context of the utterance. For example, the question, "Would you like to go to the movies?" may, in many contexts, indicate a proposal to actually *go* to the

be a good idea to..."). As a result, synonymous expressions for the word "please" in English are encountered relatively frequently: "If you please...", "Pray that...", "I beseech you...", "I'm begging you...", "Would that...", "Could you...?" and similar modal and adverbial expressions: "Would you be so kind...?" and "Would you *kindly*...?"

We conclude that *nā'* represents a broader linguistic genre than a simple particle of entreaty; rather, it appears to operate as something of a grammatical marker for the propositive clause, or sentence, type, in concert with the jussive or cohortative mood. Biblical Hebrew propositive sentences can apparently be either marked or unmarked with the propositive particle *nā'*. This is also true of the interrogative particle, *h*, although biblical Hebrew is strongly marked for *h*. With the imperative form *nā'* seems to function productively as a morphemic polite particle.

Biblical Hebrew evidences an instantiated interrogative particle, a non-instantiated declarative particle, a non-instantiated imperative particle, and—perhaps—an instantiated propositive particle. There are essentially four lines of evidence to support the notion of the propositive particle.

nā' as Sentence-Initial Compound Element

One evidence of the status of *nā'* as a propositive particle is its distribution in near sentence-initial position, in combination with the presentational elements *hinnēh* and *'im*. If *nā'* began to evolve gradually from a bound verbal morpheme into a free morpheme, as Gottlieb suggests, it is interesting to note that where *nā'* is instanced as a—let us say "freer" morpheme (still bound to *hinnēh* and *'im*)—its placement with respect to the sentence is prepositive—like the interrogative modal particle *h*.³² This would tend to strengthen the contention that *nā'* bears earmarks of a sentence-level syntagm. As *h* functions to mark a sentence type whose mood is interrogation, so *nā'* would indicate a sentence of the *propositive* mood—albeit one operating "fluidly" in a continuum somewhere between the clause, or sentence, level grammar (propositive particle) and adverbially as one of the clause's phrasal-level constituents (with the imperative and, perhaps, other injunctive forms). In this view, we have a deep structure elemental *nā'* that is realized in the

movies. In other instances, the inference in most cases would be generally valid, unless *specific* contextual clues indicates otherwise (generalized conversational implicature). For a fuller discussion, refer to G. L. Ward, "Implicature", in L. R. Horn, G. L. Ward (eds.) *The Handbook of Pragmatics* (Malden, 2006), pp. 3-28.

³²) GKC, §150; *IBHS*, §40.3.

surface grammar as a clause or sentence-type particle, on the one hand, and as an adverbial modifier, on the other.

Recursive Grammar and Clausal Reduplication of nā'

Sometimes *nā'* reduplicates within the same clause, fulfilling both roles (clausal particle and adverbial modifier). This apparent grammatical recursion also bolsters the conclusion that *nā'* represents a propositive particle, since recursion is a feature of higher level syntax.³³ Since our hypothesis is that *nā'* represents a clausal tagmeme, we might predict that, in some instances, observable recursion might be one of its grammatical features. Indeed, this appears so.

For instance, in Genesis 19:2 we have:

So he said, "Look, my lord, please (*hinneh nnā'-ādōnay*)! Turn aside, please (*sūru nā'*), to the house of your servant!"

In this example, we ignore the narrative framing of the *wayyiqtol* and focus on the grammar of the actual narrative speech. We find *nā'* bound in sentence-initial position with *hinneh*, functioning as a propositive syntagm linked by *maqgef* with the vocative *'ādōnay*, thus comprising the extra-clausal syntactic unit within the sentence. The main clause is headed by the imperative *sūru*, followed by *nā'*, which, heretofore, we have been conveniently labeling an "adverbial modifier" when it occurs with the imperative form.

However, there is another way to view the function of *nā'* in this instance. If we view the first occurrence of *nā'* as a sentence-level construct, indicating a "propositive sentence" (as opposed to interrogative or declarative), then we may also view the second occurrence, together with the main verb clause, *sūru nā' 'el bêt 'abdēkem* as a "propositive clause". We witness the recursion of the propositive type at the sentence level and the clausal level, being marked in the surface grammar by *nā'*.

To more easily grasp the abstraction, let us first define a rudimentary hierarchy of grammatical types, return again to the phenomenon of VP recursion, and then work by analogy. We may abstract (for our purposes) the

³³ For instance, the recursive verb phrase (VP) is encountered frequently in biblical Hebrew, as it is in English. Consider the example of the English translation of 1 Sam 20:3. Within the hierarchy of the grammar, even this simple sentence demonstrates the recursion of the VP occurring at the higher clausal level, "Your father certainly knows that I have found favor with you", within the subordinate clause, "that I have found favor with you".

highest grammatical type X_0 as the sentence. Occupying the next lower node in the hierarchy, below X_0 , is X' , which (in this case) is the VP within the main clause. Subsumed by X' is X'' , the VP within the subordinate clause. This can be depicted graphically as follows:

Hierarchical Level	Grammatical Type Represented
X_0	Sentence
X'	Main clause (VP)
X''	Subordinate clause (VP)

Figure 1. Abstraction of a Grammatical Hierarchy Involving VPs

Just as the VP can occur in a main clause and recur in a subordinate clause, so the “ $nā'$ -sentence” (propositive/exhortative) can recur as a “ $nā'$ -phrase” (propositive clause). We can represent such recursion as follows:

Hierarchical Level	Grammatical Type Represented
X_0	“ $nā'$ -sentence” type
X'	“ $nā'$ -clause”
X''	Ø

Figure 2. Abstraction of a Grammatical Hierarchy of $nā'$

The difference between VP recursion and $nā'$ recursion is the *level* at which that recursion is observed. In the VP example (Figure 1), we note the recursion at the level of $X' \rightarrow X''$. With the propositive type (Figure 2), we note recursion from $X_0 \rightarrow X'$. Further surface grammar recursion to X'' is not observed in the corpus under study for $nā'$. We witness a similar pattern of recursion with $nā'$ as we do with sentences comprised of VPs.

To conclude, the phenomenon of grammatical recursion is observed with $nā'$ as with other higher-level grammatical elements, such as the VP. While such a parallel is not decisive with respect to the grammatical conception of $nā'$, it is consistent with our theory that $nā'$ represents a higher-level syntactic element.

Alternative Expressions of Entreaty and the Uniqueness of $nā'$

Another datum favoring $nā'$ as a modal (propositive) particle is that alternative expressions of entreaty in biblical Hebrew (devoid of the particle $nā'$) are especially infrequent. For example, variations on the polite expression, “If it

pleases A... [where A = addressee of the speech segment]" recur only 11 times in the OT.³⁴ However, even within this sharply limited set, special circumstances in departing from the typical expressions involving *nā'* are evident. We note that 9 of the instances occur in direct address to a king, with 7 occurring within a single book alone—Esther. These examples can likely be attributed to the formulaic and exaggeratedly deferential style perquisite to regal address. Another incidence involves Saul, the king of Israel (albeit as a third party; 1 Sam 20:13), and a final one entails the king of Israel, Ahab, pleading with his subject, Naboth, to sell Ahab his ancestral homestead (1 Ki 21:6; cf., 21:2)—a case that may consciously imitate the typical form of regal address in an ironic reversal. Contextually, that Ahab would deign to the level of fulsome pleading with Naboth intimates the depths to which he was willing to go (ultimately leading to his complicity in murder) and the passion with which he covets the land that belongs to the family of Naboth.

Turns of phrase like, "If it seems good to A..." occur only three times in the Hebrew Bible, and once at Ezra 5:17 in the Aramaic. Our Aramaic exemplar once again involves regal address. That of 1 Kings 21:2 occurs in the context of what appears to be a sort of reversal, for dramatic effect, as discussed above. So too does the humble plea of the newly crowned, yet still vulnerable, king David to his countrymen in 1 Chronicles 13:2. Similarly, the particle *bîy* functions as an honorific, occurring a dozen times in the OT (always as part of the phrase *bîy 'adōnîy* or *'adōnāy*) and addressed to the social superior of prophet, priest, or king/national leader.

In sum, we witness in biblical Hebrew a dearth of polite expression achieved by potential alternatives to verbal formulas involving *nā'*. Since our hypothesis is that the particle *nā'* represents a sentence-level grammatical type and mood—that of the propositive—we would expect to observe a corresponding syntactic, phrasal, and lexical vacuity with respect to other polite expressions. If our hypothesis is correct, then, at least to some degree, the linguistic function of *nā'* would obviate these alternative expressions. A speaker would recognize that invoking the propositive sentence type would blunt the "face-threatening" aspect of the injunctive (i.e., the apparently raw demand of an imperative, on the one hand, or the bald request of jussive and inclusive cohortative forms, on the other).

We can better grasp how the propositive form operates by summarizing its relationship to expressions of entreaty in different languages. The deep structure of the grammar includes a propositive/injunctive aspect whose realiza-

³⁴) 1 Sam 20:13; 1 Kgs 21:6; Neh 2:5,7; Est 1:19; 3:9; 5:4; 5:8; 7:3; 8:5; 9:13.

tion assumes a variety of forms: in English, a sentence level grammar that is unmarked for the propositive, and thus admits an array of injunctive forms and surface grammar polite expression at the phrasal, syntactic, and lexical levels; in Korean, a sentence level grammar strongly marked for the propositive, and a verbal system unmarked for injunctive forms and largely devoid of polite expression; and, in Hebrew, a sentence level grammar marked for the propositive mood, but which also evidences injunctive forms and a narrow range of polite expressions.

Cogent Interpretation of nā' with Deliberative Cohortative Verb Forms

One of the strongest arguments against the notion of *nā'* as purely a particle of entreaty is what we noted as the infelicity of the understanding of "please" in contexts in which the cohortative is used in the deliberative sense. Although our sample is admittedly quite limited, each of the contexts examined in the section, "*nā'* and Deliberative Uses of the Cohortative", revealed the incongruity of construing *nā'* with the sole meaning of "please". That Shulman's argument at this point is less than convincing invites us to reconsider its meaning and grammatical function.

Comporting well with the available evidence is our suggested understanding of *nā'* as a propositive particle³⁵ that signals a proposed course of action. By implicature, *nā'* functions as an indicator of polite expression, most strongly so when it is markedly bound with imperative verb forms. Proposition (which we deem as 'P') as a sentence type then becomes the higher-level grammatical category that subsumes two subtypes of expression:

- a. P₀—an unmarked form with basic propositive force occurring with the injunctive verb categories except the imperative (i.e., 1st person cohortative, 2nd person jussive, and 3rd person jussive, and
- b. P'—a form more strongly marked for politeness that functions to cancel the generalized implicature of the imperative form.

To state the case of P' only slightly less technically, this marked form nullifies the bald directness and face-threatening aspect of the imperative. Forms with

³⁵) We perhaps best capture both aspects of its usage in the descriptor, propositive-honorific. The compound descriptor is deemed necessary because even our extremely cursory comparative linguistic analysis uncovers the fact that honorific and propositive forms can be separated, as in Korean, which maintains a host of *socially required* honorific sentence-terminal particles *in addition to* the propositive particles. Refer to the discussion in Portner, 6.

P' serve to turn a potentially harsh command—the generalized implicature of the imperative—into a proposal. The implicature of the propositive particle is that the addressee may choose whether to comply with the request, since it is only a proposal and not a direct command. Exemplary (if awkward) English constructions, paraphrasing the literal content of a message with P' and capturing its implicature in biblical Hebrew might be, “Go to the movies . . . that is what I propose”, or “Go to the movies . . . but only if you please”.

Conclusion Regarding the Classification of *nā'*

We must modify Shulman's ultimate conclusion that “*nā'* has a single function in all its occurrences: to mark an utterance as a polite and personal request”.³⁶ In practical terms, this is nearly always the case because *by implicature* the propositive particle has a softening effect on the speech segment conveyed to the addressee, suggesting that his response or compliance to the proposal is elective. The generalized implicature of non-compulsion using propositive *nā'* is cancelled in the case of self-address or deliberation, resulting in a settled intention to act. Possessing more explanatory power, the treatment of *nā'* as a propositive particle that can function grammatically at the sentence or clause level is favored. All of the evidence presented from the Shulman corpus supports this conclusion.

Exegetical Significance

Probably the most important fruit from this study is the re-orientation toward understanding *nā'* as a propositive particle (almost always connoting entreaty—but *not*, strictly speaking, a particle of entreaty) rather than serving a deictic or presentational role. The KJV at 2 Samuel 13:24, for instance, translates, “And Absalom came to the king, and said, Behold now, thy servant hath sheepshearers; let the king, I beseech thee, and his servants go with thy servant”. The phrase, “Behold now” unsuccessfully translates the first *nā'* of the verse; the second is acceptably rendered, “I beseech thee”. The KJV translators were evidently reluctant to ascribe exactly the same sense to both instances of *nā'*, but the first, deictic rendering obscures the depth of emotion (actually, manipulation) of the obsequious Absalom in his attempt to set the ruse for his half-brother, whom he intends to murder. Translators and exe-

³⁶ Shulman, p. 81.

getes, then, must take special care not to mute the reduplication of the propositive form. Far from being a semantically trifling particle, it is used with the same exceptional nuance with which propositive/polite forms are used in some languages to subtly convey the speaker's attitude toward the addressee.

Thus, new possibilities can be entertained for translating *nā'* in certain contexts. For instance, in Job 32:21, the propositive nuance of *nā'* following *'al* could suggest the translation, "I have no intention of showing partiality". The occurrence of *nā'* with the imperfect militates against the choice of the simple future declarative: "I will not show partiality to anyone" (Gordis, Tur-Sinai, NRSV, NET; cf., Pope, Vg, KJV, NAB, NJPS).

Ad Futurum

This study exemplifies the power of the rational framework of linguistics in helping to decipher vexing questions related to biblical Hebrew grammar, and the value of comparative linguistics in exposing grammatical phenomena that might not be intuitive given a speaker's native language. Although a more cogent set of conclusions could be reached with a broader base of comparative language study, this limited analysis shows the potential of bringing to bear the "full broadside" of the analytical concepts and tools of linguistics in OT studies.

An interesting question for future study is the role that implicature plays in the Hebrew verb system. In English, as in many languages, verbal aspects like causation are generally conveyed by diction rather than by stem choice, so once again intuition proves an unreliable guide. One wonders how productive the verbal system of biblical Hebrew was in conveying the subtle differences in perspective and attitude that we find in a single particle—*nā'*.