In *Aspect, Communicative Appeal, and Temporal Meaning in Biblical Hebrew Verbal Forms*, Ulf Bergström addresses the lack of consensus and clarity surrounding the temporal meanings and grammatical terminology for the Biblical Hebrew verbal forms. In the introductory chapter, he suggests this lack of agreement hinders both practical translation and theoretical analysis. The research question this book seeks to answer is: How are temporal meanings expressed in the verbal forms of Biblical Hebrew? To answer this question, Bergström sets out to (1) define aspect, (2) show how tense meanings derive from aspectual meanings, (3) apply this theory to the Biblical Hebrew verbal system, and (4) identify the semantic differences between forms on the same diachronic pathway. Bergström introduces the problem by pointing out that not every Hebraist agrees on a common theoretical basis and prefers the same grammatical terms. As much as we might hope for resolution to this situation, it is too much to expect from a single monograph because one cannot eliminate diverging suggestions. One can only suggest another theoretical basis and hope that it is more plausible and holds more explanatory power than previous proposals.

Chapter 2 describes the state of Hebrew studies regarding tense, aspect, modality, linguistic attitude (*Sprechhaltung*), and grammaticalization. Bergström explains some of his unique terminology; for example, his term “focused time” (F) refers to what others call “topic time,” “assertion time,” or “reference time”: the interval of the event (E) brought into mutual focus of attention by the speaker and listener during communication.
In chapter 3 Bergström presents his ideas toward a theory of aspect and tense. He acknowledges the role of contextual factors in establishing the temporal reference and that the obligatory morphological marking can be redundant. He claims that tense meanings can develop through the reanalysis of “stage-based” aspects. By stage-based aspect Bergström means a type of phasal aspect that includes only preparative, progressive, and resultative phases (84).  

1. I do prefer Bergström’s terminology, although it would be helpful to have the identity of these labels explained earlier in the discussion. Bergström discusses the distinction between grammatical aspect and lexical aspect (Aktionsart), since their combinations can result in various event depictions.

Bergström describes aspect as the F:E relationship, and Binnick would agree: “Aspect has to do with the relationship of the event time E to the reference time R; complexive (perfective) aspect has E within R, imperfective has E and R overlapping, and perfect has E preceding R.” Bergström’s description of stage-based aspect is a more nuanced analysis of these relationships between E and R. The three stage-based aspects described are resultative, progressive, and preparatory. Resultative aspect refers to the telos or outcome of an event and can be applied to both telic and atelic verbs. The progressive form focuses on the preresult stage of an event. The preparative aspect highlights the preparatory stage of an event. Bergström here includes a section on temporalization that addresses the second purpose of his book: to explain how tense meanings derive from aspectual meanings. The temporalization process is an explanation for how the internal structure of events led to the development of past or future meanings from resultative and preparative constructions.

Chapter 4 delves into the analysis of certain verbal forms in Biblical Hebrew, specifically qotel, yiqtol-L (long prefix conjugation), qatal, and yiqtol-S (short prefix conjugation). Bergström discusses their potential meanings, including progressive, resultative, completive, and future perfect. He presents examples to support the idea that stage-aspectual meanings are fundamental to the verbal forms in Biblical Hebrew. He argues that qatal and yiqtol-S (in the form of wayyiqtol) have basic resultative meaning, while qotel in predicative position and yiqtol-L express progressive meaning. Qotel, in particular, also conveys preparative meaning. He acknowledges that yiqtol-S actually does not often convey resultative meaning, although he argues that the resultative meaning is basic to the form in that it is the meaning that explains other meanings (10). However, the use of wayyiqtol to indicate resultative meaning is relatively rare, and the same can be said for dynamic

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progressive meanings with yiqtol-L, especially in Late Biblical Hebrew. Because the aspectual meanings of all these forms remain consistent in both present and nonpresent contexts, Bergström concludes that the verbal system is intrinsically aspectual and nontemporal. In fact, he argues that the prevailing temporal meanings conveyed by these forms can be inferred from their respective stage-aspectual meanings. For instance, he says qatal and yiqtol-S likely developed past meaning from their resultative meanings, while qotel and yiqtol-L derived future meaning from their progressive/preparative meaning. He suggests that even the modal function of yiqtol-L are pragmatic inferences based on its future meaning, and the volitive (jussive/cohortative) meanings of yiqtol-S stem from its past meaning, although this reconstruction requires further investigation. Regarding the modal meanings of qatal, Bergström suggests that the counterfactual meaning (possibly including the precative) might have developed in a way similar to the volitive meanings of yiqtol-S. In contrast, the volitive meanings of weqatalti are not inferred from the form’s semantics, and the basic resultative meaning of qatal remains unchanged.

Chapter 5 then builds on Bühler’s model of linguistic communication, which categorizes utterances as symptoms (expressive function), signals (appeal), or symbols (representation). Specifically, Bergström considers the extent to which “appeal” is what distinguishes the Hebrew verb forms. Three main criteria for full appeal are identified: imminence, nonexpectancy, and efficiency. According to Bergström, imminence refers to the perceived event being in the proximal zone of the listener or the need for the represented event/action to be carried out. Nonexpectancy pertains to the mental state of the receiver, where a signal with full appeal can affect the listener’s behavior regardless of one’s general alertness or focus of attention. Efficiency refers to the directness and simplicity of the signal. It is no surprise, then, that full appeal is found to be associated with the progressive present and directives and reduced appeal with preterite and the simple present (despite its imminence). Bergström finds that qatal is normally unmarked regarding appeal. In present contexts qatal carries full appeal, but normally (in past contexts) it has reduced appeal. Wayyiqtol has reduced appeal and diminished efficiency. Qotel has full appeal mainly when it occurs with hinneh but reduced appeal in nonpresent and stativized uses. Yiqtol-L, although progressive, has reduced imminence, and because as a way of expressing volition it is relatively indirect, in volitive contexts it has reduced efficiency. Only in the imperative do we find full appeal. So reduced appeal correlates with both prefix forms; qatal, qotel, and the imperative all correlate with (but are not marked for) full appeal (170, 177, 180). Based on these patterns, Bergström claims that “yiqtol-L and yiqtol-S are distinguished from qotel and qatal with regard to their appeal” and that “reduced appeal is a distinguishing semantic feature in the prefix forms.”

Finally, in the concluding chapter 6, Bergström includes summaries of each of the chapters of the book.

Aspect, Communicative Appeal, and Temporal Meaning in Biblical Hebrew Verbal Forms bears some marks of a doctoral thesis. Although no such thesis is acknowledged in this book (even in the bibliography), I was not surprised to learn it is a revision of the author’s thesis, “Temporality and the Semantics of the Biblical Hebrew Verbal System,” defended at Uppsala University in 2014, supervised by Eidevall and Holst, with opponent John A. Cook. For example, the introductory chapter appears to retain elements from a dissertation proposal in its presentation of the problem as lack of unanimity among Hebraists, and the second chapter reads like a literature review of the state of the question. This chapter serves to signal that the author is up-to-date on discussions of Hebrew verbal semantics.

Although Bergström presents the research problem as a lack of consensus among Hebraists, he contributes to this terminological variety by introducing new terms and using existing ones in nonstandard ways. For example, I would prefer that Bergström had not used the expression “aorist meaning” for “the aspect that views the event from beginning to end, as a total, nonanalyzable whole, from outside” because this perpetuates a misunderstanding of the Greek aorist tense. Instead, I would think perfective would be a clearer term for aorist meaning that is more generally accepted cross-linguistically, but he explains that he avoids this term because if the confusion surrounding it (35–38). He claims that “absolute tense locates focused time relative to the time of speech. Relative tense, by analogy, locates focused time relative to a secondary deictic center,” but the reader should be aware that both these claims are nonstandard (though Bergström is not the first to question the conventional terms). Comrie’s view is that “absolute tense always has S as one of its arguments, whereas a relative tense uses an unanchored reference time (R) instead of S. In both cases, the other argument of the tense is E; thus an absolute tense orders E relative to S, while a relative tense orders E in relation to R.” Also readers should be aware that Bergström uses deictic center in a nonstandard way; typically the deictic center is assumed to be the time of utterance, the present. But Bergström also speaks of a “secondary deictic center” for what is usually labeled R (reference time), adding a fourth component to the S-R-E model, as do Klein, Smith, Declerck, and Bohnemeyer. So whereas Bergström claims tense is the F:D relationship, most would say it is E:S or E:R. On the other hand, the contribution I found most valuable was Bergström’s treatment of “stage-based” aspect, which uses the helpful terms resultative, progressive, and preparatory.

Bergström successfully positions himself with mastery of recent developments in scholarship on the semantics of the Hebrew verb forms. I agree that the grammaticalization approach can be helpful if the diachronic typology is used to inform our understanding of the synchronic state of

verbal semantics. For the purpose of answering the research question of this book, diachrony is secondary to synchrony. Grammaticalization could be important if it were used to explain why a verb form in earlier texts exhibited one semantic value and in later texts exhibited another; I wish Bergström had gone on to take the next step and provide such an explanation. Hopefully in his future work he will take up this question.

I agree with Bergström that redundant contextual factors help establish temporal reference, and I would further argue that this redundancy is the key to explaining Hebrew verb form semantics. A persuasive theory of a verbal system will indicate under which circumstances it is appropriate to use one verb form rather than another. That is why chapter 4 should be the core of the book. It could benefit from an even clearer explanation of how these results contribute to the broader purpose, by showing how these patterns help us answer the research question.

Linguistic attitude has to this point received little attention among Hebraists, and Bergström’s assessment of its value for Hebrew is welcome. I appreciate the evidence presented in chapter 5 because it allows readers to interpret it for themselves. Although appeal may not be the primary criterion a Hebrew speaker/writer considered when selecting a verb form, the aversion to yiqtol forms when full appeal needs to be expressed is consistent. In such contexts, the reduced appeal associated with the yiqtol-forms helps the writer/speaker to dismiss those forms in favour of qotel and the imperative.

The book addresses an important problem in Biblical Hebrew studies, and individual chapters are helpful in themselves. The presentation could benefit from a unified purpose and a clear compelling way forward, with stronger integration of grammaticalization, temporalization, and phasal aspect into the overall argument. It would especially be helpful to see a conclusion that addresses how these diverse advances in recent years can together help answer the main research question. Bergström has shown he is well-positioned to be part of that conversation.