

The Rhetorical Quality of Waw Consecutive and its Exegetic Implications

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The waw consecutive of biblical Hebrew, unlike the waw conjunctive, is commonly ignored in current translations and is treated by readers as merely a technical conversionary device, changing the formal meaning of the tenses from imperfect to perfect, and vice versa. I purpose to show that this waw possesses profound rhetorical force of consequential significant. As already sketchily noted by Gesenius (§ 49), the waw consecutive (like the waw conjunctive) has a connective and linking role, indicating order, consequence, and consecutivity. This grammatical feature, I purport, may often transform the content and context of the biblical statement, with crucial exegetic implications for the study of biblical narrative. Consideration of the rhetorical quality of this crucial waw may forcefully effect our understanding of the "factual" details of the narrative and thus deepen our appreciation of its potential moral and religious lessons.

By focusing on four selective examples of biblical verses let me demonstrate how this waw effects our literary appreciation of both form and content of the biblical verse, revolutionizing our common understanding of basic factual, ideational, moral, conceptual, and theological messages of Scriptures. By contrasting the two forms of the same verb, one with and the other without the waw consecutive, we will examine questions of both form and content.

Example One: On sexual intimacy (ידע "knowledge")

Compare the "knowing" of "the Adam" [*sic*], והאדם (Gen. 4:1) with the "knowing" of Cain, קין (Gen. 4:17): Both parallel verses are commonly perceived and rendered invariably (as in KJV); the former (4:1), "And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain," and the latter (4:17), "And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bare Enoch." In Hebrew, however, the former verse employs the verb in its pure perfect tense, without *waw*, קין את חוה ונתהר ותלד את חנוך, while the latter, in its imperfect tense, with *waw* consecutive, וידע קין את חוה ונתהר ותלד את חנוך. In translation, both pivotal events -- encompassing as they do the entire propagational process (of the first human being and of his first son), from sexual intimacy ("knowledge" by ידע), to pregnancy (הרה, imaging a woman "sporting a mountain"), to the birth of a named child -- seem all the same. The sensitive reader, however, must ask: Does indeed the drastic change of style in the original Hebrew -- between ידע והאדם, the subject, with an irregular definite article ("the Adam;" proper noun?) preceding the verb (ידע without any *Waw*), and קין וידע, the verb (ידע with the *Waw*) preceding the subject (Cain; a proper noun) -- carry no rhetorical value?

The first biblical commentator (to my knowledge) to pay attention to this stylistic variant is the classic Jewish exegete *Rashi* (Rabbi Shelomo ben Yizhak, France, 1040-1105), commenting on 4:1 (my translation):

והאדם ידע: [All this took place] already before the events related above, before he failed and was expelled from the garden of Eden; and so, too, the pregnancy and birth [*transpired before the expulsion*]. For had it been written וידע אדם it would imply that only after the expulsion he begot children.

Rashi's hermeneutics probably entails a dual purpose, literary and theological. Literarily, *Rashi* seems to base his insight on an axiomatic premise, an implicit syntactical rule of biblical narrative, that when a series of verbs with Waw Consecutive (seemingly merely "conversing" imperfects into perfects) is followed by a perfect, it has somewhat of a pluperfect sense, the action it describes having taken place prior to the event mentioned immediately before it. Theologically, so it appears, *Rashi* aims to score a polemic point about the intrinsic sanctity of licit (matrimonial) sexuality and the human primary duty of procreation (1:28, in the first account; 2:24, in the second). As soon as the first couple was created, while in the Garden of Eden, both innocently unclothed and clinging to one another, without hesitation, even before the events of the serpent story (ch. 3), the two blissfully and lovingly engaged in divinely ordained propagation. The definite article is emphatic: "The" Adam, being wholly human, in his pristine humanity, "knew..." As for Cain's "knowing," it perforce transpired after he settled in the land of Nod (נֹד; from נדה or נדד, implying, ironically, banishment and wandering); only then he could duly attend to his matrimonial duties. The *waw* clearly implies a consecutive motion: Subsequently Cain knew his woman.

Example Two: On trusting God (אמן *emuna*)

Compare the "trusting" [having confidence, אמונה from אמן, "believing"] of Abra[ha]m in God (Gen. 15:6), והאמן ביהוה, and the "trusting" of the people of Israel in God and His servant Moses after the crossing of the Sea of Reeds (Ex. 14:31), וייראו העם את יהוה ויאמינו ביהוה ובמשה עבדו. Both are indistinguishably rendered: The former (KJV), "And he believed in the Lord;" the latter (KJV), "and the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord, and his servant Moses." Now, the Waw Consecutive is clearly properly in place in the Exodus narrative, as it is dramatically powerfully effective in describing a line of consequential events: As a direct (or inevitable) result of the people realizing God's "great hand" (decisive impact) in the wondrous culmination of their Exodus from Egypt, then, they affirmed their adherence and loyalty, their אמונה, in the Lord and His servant Moses. Is there a good reason why this syntax is absent in the Patriarchal narrative? Why does it not simply state in the established formulaic style, ביהוה [אברם] ויאמן?

Following *Rashi's* implicit syntactic rule, the apparent answer is that then (with the *waw*) the implication would have been that only as a result of the previous "stars vision" (verse 5), did the Patriarch achieve trust in God. In its exceptional syntax, however, the verse now makes the opposite point: Even before the divine epiphany and assuring promise, the Patriarch had always maintained trust in God, even while contending with God and questioning Him. Even in apparent "doubt" and protesting posture his trust remained as ever firm. This verse while complementing the Patriarch conveys a message to all his descendants and followers: Doubt and protest are not necessarily antithesis to faith. On the contrary, genuine faith is often a basis for genuine arguing with and questioning of God. The verse concludes that "he" (presumably God) counted it (presumably, this אמונה, this firm, unconditional human faith) to "him" (presumably, to Abram) as צדקה (as righteousness, as virtuous and meritorious). The verse may equally be understood (as by *Nahmanides*) in the opposite direction: That "he" (the Patriarch) counted (this reassuring divine promise) to "Him" (God) as צדקה (a divine gesture of charity and justness). In its teasing ambiguity and blatant opaqueness, however, the verse may be read to mean both, in reciprocity.

Example Three: On father's love of son (*ahava*)

Compare Isaac's love of Esau (Gen. 25:28), ויאהב יצחק את עשו כי ציד בפיו, and Israel's (Jacob's) love of Joseph (Gen. 37:3), וישראל אהב את יוסף מכל אחיו. The former, Isaac's love, is contextually projected as conditional and utilitarian; this point is underlined by the contrast with Rebecca's love of Jacob, in the present tense, ורבקה אהבת את יעקב. Namely, unlike Isaac's love of his favorite son, her love of Jacob is constant and unaffected; she has always and will always love him. The latter, Jacob's love is clearly projected as unconditional. The father has always loved his favorite "son of his old age" (probably since his day of birth as the firstborn son of his beloved woman, Rachel); his love is not a result of the events mentioned in the previous 2 verses. The implication may be, that even after and in spite of these events he still continues to love him as he always did. This love can only shine through the veil of literary expression, if it appears without the *waw* consecutive. Unlike his father's love of his rival brother that was conditional (a consequence of his hunting skills), Jacob's love of Joseph is pristine -- pure and pluperfect.

Example Four: On Jacob/Esau birthright transaction (*bekhora*)

The biblical narrative of the birthright transaction between Jacob and Esau (Gen. 25:27-34) is replete with *waw* consecutive: ויגדלו ויהי ויאהב ויוד ויבא ויאמר ויאמר וישבע וימכר. It concludes however with a drastic switch: ויעקב נתן לעשו לחם וניזיד עדשים. Then again it concludes with swift action filled with *waw* consecutives: ויאבל וישת ויקם וילך ויבן...

Since Esau was biologically the firstborn (*bechor*), he was legally entitled to the birthright (*bekhora*), which in antiquity was a highly valuable asset entailing prestige and privileges (leadership, priesthood and a double inheritance). The gist of the story is that Esau, however, did not appreciate his rank. Being a hunter, constantly subject to mortal danger, he said (Gen. 25:32): "See, I am going to die, what good is a birthright to me!?" Jacob, on the other hand, struggled to obtain the birthright.

The following verses (Gen. 25:27-34) describe the subsequent differences between the brothers as they grew up, and how Esau waived his birthright to his younger brother, Jacob.

- (27) Then the boys grew up; then Esau became a man who knows hunting (*a skilled hunter*), a man of the field (*dwelling in the wild*); while Jacob was a wholesome (*harmless*) man, dwelling in tents.
- (28) Then (*consequently*), Isaac loved Esau, because he would provide game for his mouth (*food to eat*); yet Rebecca has [*always and unconditionally*] loved Jacob.
- (29) Then (*one of the following days*) Jacob was cooking a stew, and (then) Esau came from the field tired [*exhausted and without game*].
- (30) Then Esau said to Jacob: "Pour into my throat, please, [*a gulp*] of this red-red stuff [*ha-adom ha-adom ha-zeh*], for I am tired [*famished/hungry*]!" -- Esau was therefore given the name *Edom*.
- (31) Then [*after Esau ate*], Jacob said to him: "Sell me, in broad daylight, your birthright!"
- (32) Then Esau replied: "See, I am going to die [*being a hunter*], what good is a birthright to me!?"
- (33) Then Jacob said: "Take an oath, in broad daylight [*to confirm the sale*]. Then Esau took the oath, thus confirming the sale of his birthright to Jacob.
- (34) [*All this happened after*] Jacob had already given Esau bread and lentil pottage. Then [*afterwards*], Esau ate, drank, got up and left. Thus [*in this way*] Esau showed his contempt for the birthright.

The final verse (34) serves as both clarification and summation. On the basis of the common translations, Jacob withheld the food from his starving brother until after he had managed to squeeze out from him the birthright. This unkindly conduct is obviously unethical and unlikely and would possibly render the transaction altogether legally invalid. When a person is hungry and begs for food, you must first offer him help and immediately and unconditionally feed him, and never exploit his vulnerable situation (cf., Proverbs 25:21).

Careful study of this story, by paying attention to the *waw* consecutive, will inform the sensitive reader that indeed so acted Jacob. He first fed his famished brother, and only afterwards made the transaction. The Hebrew נתן ויעקב (instead of the expected ויתן יעקב) means that Jacob already had given food to his famished brother, before the birthright transaction took place. Jacob was eager to get the birthright and was ready to pay any price for it, but Esau did not value it at all and gave it away to Jacob simply as payment for the lentil pot.

The few examples clearly demonstrate how the *waw*, acting as a rhetorical clue, can intriguingly inform the sensitive readers as to the subtleties and nuances of the unfolding drama. An effective key for unlocking Scriptures' mysteries, this *waw* provides us insights into the intricacies of the biblical narrative, in a very persuasive way. By analyzing the syntactic and semantic role of *waw* consecutive in biblical literature, as reflected in the above four typical examples, we realize that more than just a versatile stylistic device, this *waw* serves as a powerful literary tool conveying significant aspects in the projection of facts and ideas.

Paper presented on April 15, 1993

at the annual meeting of the Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary