DOES THE BIBLICAL HEBREW CONJUNCTION -ו HAVE MANY MEANINGS, ONE MEANING, OR NO MEANING AT ALL?

RICHARD C. STEINER
rsteiner@ymail.yu.edu
Yeshiva University, New York, NY 10033

In the Hebrew Tongue, there is a Particle consisting of but one single Letter, of which there are reckoned up, as I remember, seventy, I am sure above fifty several significations.

—John Locke[1]

Many ideas about Biblical Hebrew have changed in the three centuries since Locke wrote these lines, but the belief that the conjunction -ו was ambiguous is still as strong as ever. Rare is the biblical scholar who would challenge the view expressed by B. Z. Dinur forty years ago: "It is well known that the meanings and senses of the conjunction -ו in the Bible are many and varied."[2]

To be sure, the number of meanings attributed to -ו today does not approach the numbers cited by Locke, but it is still remarkably high. The recent dictionary of D. J. A. Clines lists more than fifteen meanings and sub-meanings:

[1] J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (ed. P. H. Nidditch; Oxford: Clarendon, 1975) book 3, chapter 7, sec. 4; see also chap. 6, sec. 44ff. I am indebted to M. J. Steiner for this reference. Locke's source is probably Noldius; see n. 30 below.

[2] B. Z. Dinur, "וי״ו הייחוד במקרא ומשמעותה," *Leš* 22 (1957–58) 199.

1a. and, . . . 1e. upon, after, . . . 1f. and another, and a different, . . . 1h. of, . . .
2. . . . or, . . . 3. together with, in the company of, . . . 4. but, on the contrary,
. . . 5. . . . and especially, in particular, . . . 6. . . . that is, . . . 7. (and, but) as for,
. . . 8. so, in that case, . . . 9. when, even though, . . . 10. for, because, . . . 11.
(so) that, . . . 12. likewise, just as, just like, . . . 13b. then, . . . 14. if, . . . 16. . . .
now, now then. . . .[3]

Section 15 gives many examples of -ו "appar. used redundantly" (i.e., with no meaning at all). A disclaimer at the beginning of the entry suggests that some nuances may have been overlooked: "distinctions below not exhaustive. . . ." The dictionary of L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner gives a smaller, but still respectable, number of meanings.[4] In this article, I shall attempt to show that there is no basis for the conventional view that -ו was ambiguous.

I. Origins of the Conventional View

It is commonly supposed that the conventional view goes back to antiquity. After all, the disjunctive interpretation of וּמַכֵּה/וּמְקַלֵּל אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ מוֹת יוּמָת in Exod 21:15, 17 ("he who strikes/curses his father *or* his mother shall be put to death") is found already in the LXX.[5] Similarly, R. Yonatan (second century CE) takes Exod 21:15, 17 to mean "he who strikes/curses his father *and/or* his mother shall be put to death," and Lev 20:9, כִּי־אִישׁ אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יְקַלֵּל אֶת־אָבִיו וְאֶת־אִמּוֹ מוֹת יוּמָת to mean "any man who curses his father *and/or* his mother shall be put to death." His interpretation is recorded in the *Mekhilta* and the Talmud:

משמע שניהם כאחת ומשמע אחד (אחד) בפני עצמו עד שיפרוט לך הכתוב יחדיו.[6]

It means both of them together and it means each one separately, unless Scripture specifically says "together."[7]

Thus, the disjunctive interpretation is well attested in antiquity; however, contrary to appearances, it does not imply that -ו can mean "or."[8] R. Saadia

---

[3] D. J. A. Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993–) 596–98; henceforth *DCH*.

[4] L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994–) 258–59; henceforth *HALOT*.

[5] Exod 21:15, ὃς τύπτει πατέρα αὐτοῦ ἢ μητέρα αὐτοῦ, θανάτῳ θανατούσθω; 21:16 (= MT 17), ὁ κακολογῶν πατέρα αὐτοῦ ἢ μητέρα αὐτοῦ τελευτήσει θανάτῳ.

[6] *Mek. Mišpaṭim parašah* 5 = מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל (ed. H. S. Horovitz and I. A. Rabin; Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrman, 1960) 265, 267–68; *b. B. Meṣ.* 94b–95a, *Sanh.* 66a, etc. This interpretation is found also in modern editions of the *Sifra*, but not in the ninth/tenth-century Vatican manuscript (Codex Assemani LXVI).

[7] In other words, if the verse meant "he who strikes/curses his father *and* his mother shall be put to death," it would contain the word "together," as in Deut 22:10, 11. Some manuscripts of the *Mekhilta* read עד שיפרוט לך הכתוב אחד, "unless Scripture specifically says 'one.'"

[8] It is generally assumed, by both traditional talmudists and critical scholars, that the notion of disjunctive -ו, albeit not the term (וי"ו לחלק/המחלקת/החילוק), is already implicit in this hermeneu-

Gaon (late ninth-early tenth century) and Profiat Duran (late fourteenth-early fifteenth century) both managed, each in his own way, to interpret the phrase as a disjunction without making -וֹ ambiguous. We must begin our brief historical overview with Saadia, the earliest Hebrew grammarian; Profiat Duran's approach will be presented later in the article.

In the introduction to his Torah commentary, Saadia writes: "One trope[9] of -וֹ . . . is its standing in place of אוֹ, as in Exod 21:15, וּמַכֵּה אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ, Deut 17:3, וְלַשֶּׁמֶשׁ אוֹ לַיָּרֵחַ, and the like."[10] In this formulation, -וֹ stands in place of the word for "or"; it does not itself mean "or."

In formulating the matter thus, Saadia may well have been influenced by one of his Muslim predecessors. Abu ʿUbayda (early ninth century) writes: "The Arabs put ʾaw in place of the *wāw* of conjunction."[11] By contrast, Ibn Qutayba and Al-Mubarrad say that ʾaw takes on the meaning (*maʿnā*) of *wāw*.[12]

---

tical principle; see Ḥayyim Hezekiah Medini, שְׂדֵי חֶמֶד הַשָּׁלֵם (New York: A. I. Friedman, 1962) 2.284–86, s.v. לחלק וי״ו §§6–13, and the sources cited there; and D. Halivny-Weiss, "נטייתו של־ תקצירי הרצאות לסדנא על הנושא: דקדוק לשון in ,"הבבלי לראות את הוי״ו כו״ו החיבור סוגיות בלשון חכמים חכמים ומילונה במכן ללימודים מתקדמים (Jerusalem: Institute for Advanced Studies, Hebrew University, 1991) 51–52. There is certainly no explicit basis for this view in the Talmud. The view that the Talmud (*b. Shebu.* 27a) attributes to R. Yonatan in this context is quite different: לחלק לא, צריך קרא "for disjunction, no scriptural element is needed." The term לחלק used by the Talmud in this context is not a linguistic term but a legal term meaning "to disjoin the factors contributing to guilt/liability, making each a sufficient condition"; see אנציקלופדיה תלמודית (Jerusalem: הוצאת אנציקלופדיה תלמודית, 1947–) cols. 385–408, s.v. חילוק מלאכות. In cases where the factors are itemized in a verse, R. Yonatan holds that they may be interpreted disjunctively even if there is no conjunction joining them. He requires no disjunctive expression, unlike R. Yoshaya, who requires some halakically redundant word or phrase for disjunction, whether it be אוֹ (Exod 21:33; 22:13; Lev 22:28) or some other phrase, such as אוֹתָהּ (Lev 22:28), לֹא יֵרָאֶנּוּ (Lev 17:9), or וְנִפְּל־שָׁמָּה (Exod 21:33). It is not even certain that the Talmud views אוֹ as being more of a disjunctive for the purposes of midrash than any other word. In *b. Ḥul.* 78b, the Talmud initially suggests using the אוֹ of Lev 22:28 for inclusion rather than disjunction.

[9] This rendering of *majāz* does not do real justice to the term as used by Saadia. See H. Ben-Shammai, "הקדמת ר׳ סעדיה גאון לישעיה," *Tarbiz* 60 (1991) 380–82 and the literature cited there.

[10] M. Zucker, פירושי רב סעדיה גאון לבראשית (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1984) 20, lines 1–3: ומן מנ׳אז אלואו . . . קיאמה מקאם או מת׳ל קולך ומכה אביו ואמו, ולשמש או לירח [ונט׳[אירדהמא.

[11] Abu ʿUbayda Maʿmar Ibn al-Muṯannā, *Majāz al-Qurʾān* (Cairo[?], 1954) 2.148, ʾal-ʿarabu taḍaʿu ʾaw fī mawḍiʿi wāwi l-muwālāh; see also 2.175. According to Ibn Taymiyya, Abu ʿUbayda was the first to use the term *majāz* (E. Almagor, "The Early Meaning of Majāz and the Nature of Abū ʿUbayda's Exegesis," in *Studia Orientalia Memoriae D. H. Baneth Dedicata* [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1979] 307). (I am indebted to Naphtali Kinberg ז״ל for these two references.) Several scholars have pointed out the similarities between Saadia's use of the term and Abu ʿUbayda's; see J. Wansbrough, "Majāz al-Qurʾān: Periphrastic Exegesis," *BSOAS* 33 (1970) 259–65; and Zucker, פירושי רב סעדיה, pp. מה-מג.

[12] ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Muslim Ibn Qutayba, *Taʾwīl Muškil al-Qurʾān* (Cairo: Dār al- Turāt, 1973) 543: wa-rubbamā kānat bi-maʿnā wāwi n-nasaq, "sometimes [ʾaw] is with the meaning (*maʿnā*) of the *wāw* of conjunction." Muḥammad Ibn Yazīd al-Mubarrad, *Kitāb al-Muqtaḍab* (ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Khāliq ʿUdaymah; Cairo: al- Majlis al-ʾAʿlā lil-Šuʾūn al-ʾIslāmiyyah, 1966) part 3, p. 301:

There is another, more important, reason for Saadia's formulation. Saadia appears to have held that ‑וֹ is a letter rather than a word, and letters, unlike words and sentences, have no meaning.[13] Throughout his discussion of the *majāz* of the letters, he is careful to avoid ascribing meaning to them. Take, for example, his discussion of the previous letter: "One trope of ‑ה . . . is its standing in place of ‑א as in 2 Sam 3:18, בְּיַד דָּוִד עַבְדִּי הוֹשִׁיעַ אֶת־עַמִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל, whose meaning is אוֹשִׁיע, 'I will deliver,' and Zech 7:3, הַנָּזֵר כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי, whose meaning is אֶנָּזֵר, 'shall I practice abstinence?' and the like."[14] Here he uses the word "meaning" twice, but only in connection with words. Similarly, in discussing the ‑וֹ in Exod 27:14, וַחֲמֵשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה אַמָּה קְלָעִים לַכָּתֵף, "fifteen cubits of hangings on the one flank," and the second ‑וֹ in 1 Chr 5:24, וְאֵלֶּה רָאשֵׁי בֵית־אֲבוֹתָם וָעֵפֶר וְיִשְׁעִי, "and these were the chiefs of their clans: Epher and Ishi," he does not say that it has no meaning; rather, it is "of no use" (גִיר נאפע).[15] In other words, it is pleonastic, to be ignored in interpreting the sentence.

Even if we are right in concluding that Saadia himself believed that one cannot attribute meaning to ‑וֹ, the view that Biblical Hebrew ‑וֹ has many meanings was probably inspired by his *Tafsir*, in which at least forty-seven different Arabic expressions correspond in position to ‑וֹ and can be viewed as translations of it.[16] Saadia's *Tafsir* had a great deal of influence on his successors, especially Ibn Janaḥ.

ṭumma yattasiʿu bihā l-bābu fa-yadḫuluhā l-maʿnā l-lāḏī fī l-wāw, "then the range of [*ʾaw*] widens, and the meaning of *wāw* enters it." The lists of meanings attributed to *ʾaw* by the Arab grammarians tended to grow with time. Al-Mubarrad recognized only two meanings for *ʾaw*, rejecting the meaning *bal* ("nay rather") on the grounds that its proponents had adduced only one attestation; see *Kitāb al-Muqtaḍab*, 304. Ibn Hišām (fourteenth century) points out that, while the early grammarians recognized at most three meanings for *ʾaw*, the later ones listed twelve; see ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Yūsuf Ibn Hišām, *Muġnī al-Labīb ʿan Kutub al-ʾAʿārīb* (ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd; Cairo: Al-Maktabah al-Tijāriyyah al-Kubrā, 1964[?]) 1.61, 67. In the twelfth century, Al-Anbārī opposed this trend, attributing the following principle to the early grammarians of Baṣra: "The rule for every particle is that it signifies only that to which it was assigned [in the "first imposition" of the language]—not the meaning of any other particle"; see ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-Anbārī, *Al-ʾInṣāf fī Masāʾil al-Ḥilāf bayna al-Naḥwiyyīna al-Baṣriyyīna wa-l-Kūfiyyīna* (ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd; Sidon/Beirut: Al-Maktabah al-ʿAṣriyyah, 1987) part 2, p. 481: *wa-l-ʾaṣlu fī kulli ḥarfin ʾan lā yadulla ʾillā ʿalā mā wuḍiʿa lahu wa-lā yadulla ʿalā maʿnā ḥarfin ʾāḥar*. I am indebted to Naphtali Kinberg ז״ל for all of the references in this footnote.

[13] The same view seems to be reflected in Judah Ibn Balʿam's סֵפֶר אוֹתִיּוֹת הָעִנְיָנִים (כְּאָב חָרוּף) אלמעאני, published in S. Abramson, שְׁלוֹשָׁה סְפָרִים שֶׁל רַב יְהוּדָה בֶּן בִּלְעָם (Jerusalem: קִרְיַת סֵפֶר, 1975) 89–142. Included in this book are prepositions such as אֶל, מִן, and עִם, but not ‑בְּ, ‑כְּ, and ‑לְ. Also discussed are conjunctions such as אוֹ and אַךְ, but not ‑וֹ. The omission of ‑בְּ, ‑כְּ, ‑לְ, and ‑וֹ is striking, since they are חָרוּף in two senses of the word: "particles" and "letters." What they are not, apparently, is חָרוּף אלמעאני, "*meaningful* particles."

[14] Zucker, פֵּירוּשֵׁי רַב סַעֲדְיָה, 19, lines 28–30: בְּיַד [קִיא]מַה מַקַאם אלאלף כַּקוֹלַךְ בְּיַד ... וּמִן מִנ׳אז אלהא. דָּוִד עַבְדִּי הוֹשִׁיעַ אֶת־עַמִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל מַענַאה אוֹשִׁיע הַנָּזֵר כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי מַענַאה אֶנָּזֵר וּמַא אשבההם.

[15] Ibid., 20, line 1.

[16] See Y. Ratzaby, הוֹרָאוֹת הַוָּי״ו בְּתַפְסִיר רַב סַעֲדְיָה גָּאוֹן, in סֵפֶר יוֹסֵף בְּרַסְלְבִי (ברסלבסקי) (Jerusalem: קִרְיַת סֵפֶר, 1970), 445–60. The list is limited to correspondences attested at least three times. In an earlier article, I made the following remark about this list: "Since Saadia did not distin-

Ibn Janaḥ, like Ibn Qutayba and Al-Mubarrad before him,[17] had no problem with the notion that -וֹ has meaning. He drew up a list of meanings for -וֹ: "together with," "and then," "is it the case that," "and how much less (a fortiori)" "over," "and if," "before," "after," "or," "and when," "is equivalent to," "but," "even though," "in order that," "that," "with (by means of, in possession of), and "in." To most of these, he applies the term "meaning" (*ma'nā*); however, in speaking of "or," he borrows Saadia's formulation (minus its implications), stating that -וֹ "may be in place of אוֹ."[18]

Ibn Janaḥ shows his dependence on Saadia in his choice of proof texts as well. With one minor variation (Exod 21:17 for Exod 21:15), he incorporates all four of the verses cited by Saadia in his discussion of -וֹ: Exod 27:14 and 1 Chr 5:24 (pleonastic); Exod 21:15 and Deut 17:3 ("or").[19] Some of the proof texts for other meanings are accompanied by Arabic renderings or Hebrew paraphrases that are very similar or identical to Saadia's Arabic translations, for example, Exod 1:5, וְיוֹסֵף הָיָה בְמִצְרָיִם = מע יוסף אלד'י כאן במצר, "together with Joseph, who was in Egypt";[20] Job 28:17, לֹא־יַעַרְכֶנָּה זָהָב וּזְכוֹכִית יְקָאומהא = ולא/מא, אלד'הב פכיף אלזנ'אנ', "gold does not match it, *how much less* glass";[21] Exod 3:13, וְאָמְרוּ־לִי מַה־שְּׁמוֹ = פאן קאלו לי מא אסמה, "*and if* they say to me 'what is his name'";[22] Exod 4:23, וַתְּמָאֵן לְשַׁלְּחוֹ = פאן אבית אן תטלקה/אטלאקה, "*and if* you refuse to release him";[23] Lev 9:22, (וַיְבָרְכֵם) וַיֵּרֶד = בעד אן נזל, "*after* he descended";[24] Exod 2:21, וַיּוֹאֶל מֹשֶׁה = פלמא אמען מוסי, "*and when* Moses persisted";[25] It appears, then, that even if Saadia was reluctant to attribute meaning to -וֹ, he laid the exegetical groundwork for Ibn Janaḥ's list of meanings.[26]

---

guish between the translations of a word and its meanings, the multiplication of translations was equivalent in his eyes to the multiplication of meanings" ("Saadia vs. Rashi: On the Shift from Meaning-Maximalism to Meaning-Minimalism in Medieval Biblical Lexicology," *JQR* 88 [1998] 223). I overlooked the likelihood that Saadia did not view -וֹ as having meaning by itself and that he would have labeled Ratzaby's list "forty-seven different ways of translating a word containing the letter וי'" as a prefix" or perhaps "forty-seven different functions of the prefixed letter וי'."

[17] See n. 12 above. For Al-Mubarrad's influence on Ibn Janaḥ, see D. Becker, "יונה אבן ג'נאח ותלותו במדקדקים הערבים," *Leš* 57 (1992) 137–45; idem, "למקורותיו הערבים של ר' יונה אבן ג'נאח," *Te'udah* 9 (1995) (Eliezer Rubinstein memorial volume) 143–68.

[18] Jonah Ibn Janāḥ, *Le livre des parterres fleuris* (ed. J. Derenbourg; Paris: F. Vieweg, 1886) 52, line 25 או מוצ'ע פי אלואו ותכון So too Ya'qub Qirqisani, *Kitāb al-Anwār wa-l-marāqib: Code of Karaite Law* (ed. L. Nemoy; New York: Alexander Kohut Foundation, 1939–43) 927, line 1: אלואו . . . פי אלנסק תקום מקאם או וד'לך נט'יר ומקלל אביו ואמו אלד'י מענאה או אמו . . . ," -וֹ in conjunction stands in place of או as in Exod 21:15 וּמְכֵּה אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ, whose meaning is או אמּוֹ."

[19] Ibn Janaḥ, *Parterres fleuris*, 50, lines 7–8; 52, lines 26–27.

[20] *Œuvres complètes de R. Saadia Ben Iosef al-Fayyoûmî* (ed. J. Derenbourg; Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1893–99) 1.81; Ibn Janaḥ, *Parterres fleuris*, 50, line 12.

[21] *Œuvres complètes*, 5.84; Ibn Janaḥ, *Parterres fleuris*, 51, line 11.

[22] *Œuvres complètes*, 1.84; Ibn Janaḥ, *Parterres fleuris*, 51, line 16.

[23] *Œuvres complètes*, 1.86; Ibn Janaḥ, *Parterres fleuris*, 51, line 18.

[24] *Œuvres complètes*, 1.155; Ibn Janaḥ, *Parterres fleuris*, 52, line 15.

[25] *Œuvres complètes*, 1.83; Ibn Janaḥ, *Parterres fleuris*, 53, line 5.

[26] Ratzaby may be right when he argues that the extent of Saadia's influence in this area has

The multiplication of meanings is typical of Saadia and Ibn Janaḥ. Even though the middle of the tenth century saw the beginning of a gradual shift away from such "meaning-maximalism" in the biblical lexicology of Spain and Provence, Ibn Janaḥ, writing in the first half of the eleventh century, is still far from being a meaning-minimalist.[27] It is only around 1300 that we find a Sephardic lexicographer writing that "the desire of the exegetes to posit many meanings turns them away from the straight path."[28]

This shift to meaning-minimalism can be detected in discussions of the meanings of Biblical Hebrew -ו. Ibn Parhon and David Qimḥi list far fewer meanings/uses for -ו than Ibn Janaḥ, and Profiat Duran launches a verse-by-verse attack on Ibn Janaḥ's list of meanings, with the aim of eliminating everything but the meaning "and."[29] The Christian Hebraists, however, reversed this shift. Knowing nothing of Profiat Duran's discussion, they adopted the earlier view that Biblical Hebrew -ו was ambiguous. Their study of the issue culminated in a list of seventy-six meanings published by Christian Noldius in 1679[30] and Locke's statement published in 1690.

II. Modern Discussions of Pseudo-Polysemy

The general stance that I adopt in this article—that many seeming ambiguities are imaginary—is commonplace today among philosophers of language and linguists. In my 1977 paper I referred to discussions of pseudo-polysemy by U. Weinreich, L. Zawadowski, W. V. O. Quine, and W. P. Alston.[31] Today, it is possible to cite discussions that are more directly relevant, discussions questioning the ambiguity of the words for "and" in English, German, Greek, and Hebrew itself. Nevertheless, Weinreich's analysis is still indispensable:

> When we contemplate the variety of "meanings" which a word like *take* has in English (*take offense, take charge, take medicine, take notice, take effect,* etc.), we come to the conclusion that this is a case not of abnormally over-developed polysemy of a word, but rather of its semantic near-emptiness. In

---

not been recognized, that most of the meanings cited by later grammarians and lexicographers can be found among the forty-seven different translations of -ו in Saadia's Tafsir.

   [27] See my "Saadia vs. Rashi," 213–36, 251–53.

   [28] I. Last, "*Sharshoth Kesef:* The Hebrew Dictionary of Roots, by Joseph Ibn Kaspi," *JQR* 19 (1907) 665: רצון המפרשים להניח ענינים רבים יטה יסה אותם מני דרך הישר. This remark was called to my attention by S. Holtz, in his term paper "Meaning-Minimalism and Ultra-Meaning-Minimalism in Ibn Kaspi's *Sharshot Kesef.*"

   [29] Solomon b. Abraham Ibn Parhon, מחברת הערוך (ed. S. Gottlieb Stern; Pressburg: Typis Antonii Nobilis de Schmid, 1844) 1:1c–d; David Qimḥi, מכלול (ed. I. Rittenberg; Elk: T. H. Petzoll, 1862) 44a–45a; Isaac b. Moses (Profiat) Duran, מעשה אפד (ed. J. Friedländer and J. Kohn; Vienna: J. Holzwarth, 1865) 74–79.

   [30] C. Noldius, *Concordantiæ Particularum Ebræo Chaldaicarum* (Hafniæ [Copenhagen]: Literis Reg. Majest. & Acad. Typogr., 1679) 268–329. See further below.

   [31] See now my "Saadia vs. Rashi," 228.

these contexts, *take* may be said to function as little more than a verbalizer, not quite unlike *-ize* and other affixes.[32]

The phrase "abnormally overdeveloped polysemy" or, as Weinreich calls it elsewhere, "infinite polysemy"[33] is certainly an apt description of Noldius's list of seventy-six meanings. We need to consider the possibility that it also fits the more modest lists of the modern dictionaries.

J. D. McCawley's discussion of the meaning(s) of English *and* is also instructive:

> In the chapters that follow, we will often have reason to ask whether some class of sentence is ambiguous. For example, consider the question of whether the logicians' standard account of *and* really accords with the use of *and* in ordinary English. This logicians' rendition of *and*, which I will henceforth symbolize with ∧, is completely symmetric: A ∧ B is true under the same circumstances as is B ∧ A, and anything that can be inferred from A ∧ B can be inferred from B ∧ A. But there are instances in which ordinary English *and* appears to be asymmetric; for example, under the most obvious interpretation, 1.3.1a would be true under different circumstances from those under which 1.3.1b is true:
> 1.3.1 a. John got up and fell down.
> b. John fell down and got up.
> These sentences are normally taken as referring to an order of events that matches the order of the conjuncts: in 1.3.1a the rising precedes the falling, and in 1.3.1b the falling precedes the rising.
> Logicians who have confronted sentences such as 1.3.1 have generally adopted the position that English *and* is ambiguous between (at least) two senses: a "symmetric" sense which conforms to the logicians' ∧, and a "consecutive" sense in which the order of the conjuncts agrees with the purported temporal order of the events reported in the conjuncts. . . . This conclusion may very well be correct. However, logicians have been remiss in simply accepting it without even attempting to provide arguments that English *and* really is ambiguous. There are a number of possible alternatives to the position that *and* is ambiguous: (i) Perhaps there is only one *and*, it is basically asymmetric, and the logicians who have concerned themselves with a symmetric *and* have deluded themselves by restricting their attention to instances where the order of the conjuncts happened not to be of any particular significance. (ii) Perhaps there is only one *and*, it is basically symmetric, and the supposed asymmetry of *and* in 1.3.1 is really something else, namely, either (iia) an ambiguity in some other element in the sentence (for example, in the

---

[32] U. Weinreich, "On the Semantic Structure of Language," in *Universals of Language* (ed. J. H. Greenberg; 2d ed.; Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1966) 180.

[33] U. Weinreich, "Explorations in Semantic Theory," in *Semantics* (ed. D. D. Steinberg and L. A. Jakobovits; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971) 322 (reprinted from *Current Trends in Linguistics* [ed. T. A. Sebeok; The Hague: Mouton, 1966] vol. 3).

past tense marker) or (iib) the result of something outside logic and gram-
mar. . . . [34]

Although McCawley ultimately concludes that the "symmetric" and "consecu-
tive" senses of English *and* are probably both genuine, the Hebraist cannot
afford to ignore the alternatives he raises.

In my view, alternative (iia) is particularly relevant, because much of the
ambiguity that has been attributed to -ו actually resides elsewhere in the sen-
tence, sometimes elsewhere in its surface structure ("but," "while" and "that
is") and sometimes elsewhere in its underlying structure ("or" and perhaps
"then").

R. Posner examines German *und,* concluding that it does not have a sepa-
rate consecutive meaning in sentences such as *Peter heiratete Anna, und Anna
bekam ein Kind* and *Anna bekam ein Kind und Peter heiratete Anna.*[35] It is
impossible to do justice to his discussion within the framework of this article.
Suffice it to say that, for him, the most telling argument against a consecutive
und is that admitting its existence requires one to admit the existence of a loca-
tive *und,* a directional *und,* an instrumental *und,* a conditional *und,* an explana-
tory *und,* an adversative *und,* a diagnostic *und,* and so on, ad infinitum.[36] But
then one would have to explain how speakers could learn to use a form with
infinitely many meanings. This argument is already implicit in Weinreich's use
of the term "infinite polysemy."

G. Vanoni argues that Posner's approach is equally valid for Biblical
Hebrew -ו: ". . . a meaning-maximalist descriptive procedure . . . produces for
conjunctions an almost endless series of entries in the lexicon and leads the
comprehensibility of language *ad absurdum.*"[37] He strengthens the *reductio ad
absurdum* through the use of Noldius's list of seventy-six meanings, which
makes it clear that Posner's discussion of infinite polysemy is more than just a
theoretical possibility.[38] He could have added that some of the meanings on this
list are opposites.[39] Thus Noldius gives both *antequam,* "before the time

---

[34] J. D. McCawley, *Everything That Linguists Have Always Wanted to Know about Logic—
But Were Ashamed to Ask* (2d ed.; Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 5–6.

[35] R. Posner, "Bedeutungsmaximalismus und Bedeutungsminimalismus in der Beschreibung
von Satzverknüpfern," in *Die Partikeln der deutschen Sprache* (ed. H. Weydt; Berlin/New York: de
Gruyter, 1979) 378–94.

[36] Ibid., 384–86

[37] G. Vanoni, "Zur Bedeutung der althebräischen Konjunktion ẇ=," in *Text, Methode und
Grammatik: Wolfgang Richter zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. W. Gross, H. Irsigler, and T. Seidl; St.
Ottilien: Eos, 1991) 569–70.

[38] Ibid., 570 n. 46.

[39] This is true of Ibn Janāḥ's list of meanings as well; see above. Early Jewish lexicographers
accepted the view of the Arab lexicographers that words may have opposite meanings.

that,"[40] and *postquam,* "after the time that,"[41] not to mention *dum,* "during the time that."[42] He lists *interim, interea,* "in the meantime,"[43] as well as *postea,* "afterwards."[44]

So much for the general approach. It is time now to deal with specifics. In the remainder of this article, I shall examine a few of the meanings that have been attributed to -ְו: "but," "while," "or," "then," "that is," and "and." The strategies that I shall employ in dealing with them can be used for all or most of the other meanings that have been proposed.

III. Some Meanings Attributed to -ְו

Does wāw Have the Meaning "But"?

The introduction to the NJPSV assigns a number of adversative meanings to Biblical Hebrew -ְו:

> . . . the Hebrew particle *wāw* . . . had the force not only of "and," but also of "however," "but," "yet," "when," and any number of such other words and particles, or of none that can be translated into English.

Now the fact that English usage prefers *but* in many contexts where Biblical Hebrew uses -ְו is hardly a proof that -ְו had the specific meaning "but" in addition to the general meaning "and." Surely it is not legitimate to use English translations to establish the ambiguity of words such as נחשת (rendered with *copper* or *bronze*), עור (rendered with *skin* or *leather*), and אחרון (rendered with *later* or *last*). Each language must be viewed in its own terms. Hebrew has the right to ignore distinctions that are obligatory in English or to express them differently. English prefers to use an adversative conjunction (rather than a general, copulative one) to connect contrasting clauses; Hebrew does not.

Vanoni makes a similar point about the difference between German and Biblical Hebrew. He admits that -ְו often requires translation with *aber* in German (e.g., in Jer 17:11 and 2 Chr 21:20), but he denies that it follows that -ְו has an adversative meaning.[45] He cites one of J. Blomqvist's arguments against the existence of an adversative καί in Late Greek:

> Ist καί in diesen späten Texten, wenn es relevante Gegensätze verknüpft, mit den adversativen Partikeln synonym? . . . Die deutsche Übersetzung der aktuellen Textstellen gibt uns . . . keinen Anhalt für die Beurteilung der

---

[40] Noldius, *Concordantiæ,* 271, meaning 7.
[41] Ibid., 290, meaning 42.
[42] Ibid., 275, meaning 16.
[43] Ibid., 283, meaning 33.
[44] Ibid., 289, meaning 41.
[45] Vanoni, "Zur Bedeutung," 572–73.

Frage. Obgleich wir καί mit "aber" übersetzen müssen, kann die Ursache dafür die sein, dass der deutsche Sprachgebrauch in weiterem Umfang als der spätgriechische die Markierung der relevanten Gegensätze fordert, und nicht die, dass καί mit "aber" und folglich mit den adversativen Partikeln des Griechischen synonym geworden ist.[46]

In fact, much of what Blomqvist says about "adversative καί applies equally well to "adversative -וֹ." This is hardly surprising, since "Zeune bemerkte dazu, dass dieser Gebrauch von καί besonders in der LXX und im NT häufig sei und dort auf hebräischem Einfluss beruhe."[47] Blomqvist himself cites two examples from the LXX of "adversative καί" rendering "adversative -וֹ" (Song 1:5, Μέλαινά εἰμι καὶ καλή = שְׁחוֹרָה אֲנִי וְנָאוָה; and Jer 23:21, οὐκ ἀπέστελλον τοὺς προφήτας, καὶ αὐτοὶ ἔτρεχον· οὐκ ἐλάλησα πρὸς αὐτούς, καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐπροφήτευον = לֹא־שָׁלַחְתִּי אֶת־הַנְּבִאִים וְהֵם רָצוּ לֹא־דִבַּרְתִּי אֲלֵיהֶם וְהֵם נִבָּאוּ), and he notes: "Im Hebräischen war bei Gegensätzen eine adversative Partikel nicht obligatorisch, sondern wᵉ "und" konnte sowohl Nicht-Gegensätze als . . . Gegensätze einleiten."[48]

An argument for the existence of an adversative -וֹ might be constructed on internal grounds, using parallel passages in which -וֹ interchanges with אַךְ, "but," without affecting the meaning. Such an interchange occurs in 1 Sam 29:6, יָשָׁר אַתָּה וְטוֹב בְּעֵינַי צֵאתְךָ וּבֹאֲךָ אִתִּי בַּמַּחֲנֶה כִּי לֹא־מָצָאתִי בְךָ רָעָה מִיּוֹם בֹּאֲךָ אֵלַי עַד־הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה וּבְעֵינֵי הַסְּרָנִים לֹא־טוֹב אָתָּה, "you are an honest man, and I would like to have you serve in my forces, for I have found no fault with you from the day you joined me until now, *but* (-וֹ) you are not acceptable to the other lords,"[49] and 1 Sam 29:9, יָדַעְתִּי כִּי טוֹב אַתָּה בְּעֵינַי כְּמַלְאַךְ אֱלֹהִים אַךְ שָׂרֵי פְלִשְׁתִּים אָמְרוּ לֹא־יַעֲלֶה עִמָּנוּ בַּמִּלְחָמָה, "I know; you are as acceptable to me as an angel of God, *but* (אַךְ) the Philistine officers have decided that you must not march out with us to the battle."

This argument, too, is unconvincing. Synonymy cannot be established on the basis of interchangeability in a single pair of parallel passages, that is, in a single context. What is required is interchangeability in all contexts.[50]

The danger of relying on a single context may be illustrated using Num 22:8, לִינוּ פֹה הַלַּיְלָה and 22:19, שְׁבוּ נָא בָזֶה גַּם־אַתֶּם הַלַּיְלָה. It seems indisputable that these two sentences have the same meaning ("stay here tonight," ignoring גַּם־אַתֶּם), and thus that the verbs לִינוּ and שְׁבוּ interchange in them without affecting the meaning. But it is equally clear that the semantic relationship

---

[46] J. Blomqvist, *Das sogenannte KAI adversativum: Zur semantik einer griechischen Partikel* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1979) 55. Vanoni cites only part of this passage.

[47] Ibid., 9.

[48] Ibid., 46.

[49] So NJPSV.

[50] I am indebted to Carl J. Posy for reminding me of this truism.

between these verbs is not synonymy but hyponymy,[51] for לין, "stay overnight," entails ישב, "stay," but not vice versa. How can we account for this apparent paradox? The answer is that the contrast between the two verbs is neutralized by הַלַּיְלָה, "tonight." The phrase ישב לילה is semantically equivalent to לין, which, in turn, is semantically equivalent to the tautological לין לילה.

Now 1 Sam 29:6, the verse in which -ו allegedly means "but," has a neutralizing factor similar to הַלַּיְלָה. It exhibits "topicalization," the inversion of word order from וּבְעֵינֵי הַסְּרָנִים to וְלֹא־טוֹב אַתָּה בְּעֵינֵי הַסְּרָנִים. Since topicalization seems to signal contrast, we can hardly use this verse to prove that -ו has the specific meaning "but" (roughly equivalent to "and by contrast") in addition to the general meaning "and."[52] In other words, our single pair of parallel passages does not suffice to show that the semantic relationship of אך to -ו is one of synonymy rather than hyponymy.

The same goes for many other examples where NJPSV inserts a *but* (or some equivalent) based on the sense, for example, Gen 4:5–6: וַיִּשַׁע ה׳ אֶל־הֶבֶל וְאֶל־מִנְחָתוֹ: וְאֶל־קַיִן וְאֶל־מִנְחָתוֹ לֹא שָׁעָה, "the Lord paid heed to Abel and his offering *but* to Cain and his offering he paid no heed"; 17:20–21: וּלְיִשְׁמָעֵאל שְׁמַעְתִּיךָ הִנֵּה בֵּרַכְתִּי אֹתוֹ . . . וְאֶת־בְּרִיתִי אָקִים אֶת־יִצְחָק, "As for Ishmael, I have heeded you. I hereby bless him . . . *but* my covenant I will maintain with Isaac . . ."; 40:21–22: וַיָּשֶׁב אֶת־שַׂר הַמַּשְׁקִים עַל־מַשְׁקֵהוּ . . . וְאֵת שַׂר הָאֹפִים תָּלָה, "he restored the chief cupbearer to his cupbearing . . . , *but* the chief baker he impaled"; 41:54: וַיְהִי רָעָב בְּכָל־הָאֲרָצוֹת וּבְכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הָיָה לָחֶם, "there was famine in all lands, *but* throughout the land of Egypt there was bread"; Exod 12:27: בְּנָגְפּוֹ אֶת־מִצְרַיִם וְאֶת־בָּתֵּינוּ הִצִּיל, "when he smote the Egyptians *but* saved our houses"; 33:23: וְרָאִיתָ אֶת־אֲחֹרָי וּפָנַי לֹא יֵרָאוּ, "and you will see my back *but* my face must not be seen"; 1 Sam 29:6 (see above); 1 Kgs 1:25–26: וַיִּקְרָא לְכָל־בְּנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וּלְשָׂרֵי הַצָּבָא וּלְאֶבְיָתָר הַכֹּהֵן . . . וְלִי אֲנִי־עַבְדֶּךָ וּלְצָדֹק הַכֹּהֵן וְלִבְנָיָהוּ בֶן־יְהוֹיָדָע וְלִשְׁלֹמֹה עַבְדְּךָ לֹא קָרָא, "he invited all the king's sons and the army officers and Abiathar the priest . . . *but* he did not invite me your servant, or the priest Zadok or Benaiah son of Jehoiada, or your servant Solomon"; Jer 4:22: חֲכָמִים הֵמָּה לְהָרַע וּלְהֵיטִיב לֹא יָדָעוּ, "they are clever at doing wrong *but* unable to do right"; Ezek 33:31: וְשָׁמְעוּ אֶת־דְּבָרֶיךָ וְאוֹתָם לֹא יַעֲשׂוּ, "and [they] will hear your words *but* will not obey

---

[51] Hyponomy is "the relationship which obtains between specific and general lexical items, such that the former is 'included' in the latter. . . . For example, a *cat* is a hyponym of *animal, flute* of *instrument, chair* of *furniture,* and so on" (D. Crystal, *A First Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* [Boulder, CO: Westview, 1980] 176).

[52] Cf. J. R. Payne's analysis of the corresponding English case: "While '[. . . rich *but* happy]' always has an adversative sense, the corresponding unmarked form '[. . . rich *and* happy]' may perhaps in context require an adversative reading, but is essentially vague" ("Complex phrases and complex sentences," in *Language Typology and Syntactic Description* [ed. T. Shopen; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985] 2.4). Note Payne's use of the term "vague" rather than "ambiguous," implying that there is only one meaning.

them"; 34:8: וַיִּרְעוּ הָרֹעִים אוֹתָם וְאֶת־צֹאנִי לֹא רָעוּ, "for the shepherds tended them-selves *instead of* tending the flock."

These translations are unexceptionable, but how is the contrastive or adversative relationship between the conjoined clauses expressed in the Hebrew? If there is anything in these verses that explicitly signals contrast, it is the word order.[53] The presence of ‫ו‬- is not sufficient to make a clause adversa-tive, nor is it necessary. NJPSV does not hesitate to insert *but* in places where there is no ‫ו‬-, e.g., Ezek 34:3: אֶת־הַחֵלֶב תֹּאכֵלוּ וְאֶת־הַצֶּמֶר תִּלְבָּשׁוּ הַבְּרִיאָה תִּזְבָּחוּ הַצֹּאן לֹא תִרְעוּ, "you partake of the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, and you slaughter the fatlings; *but* you do not tend the flock" (contrast 34:8 above); Prov 10:5: אֹגֵר בַּקַּיִץ בֵּן מַשְׂכִּיל נִרְדָּם בַּקָּצִיר בֵּן מֵבִישׁ, "he who lays in stores during the summer is a capable son, *but* he who sleeps during the harvest is an incompe-tent"; 10:20; 26:26.

We conclude that "adversative ‫ו‬-" is an illusion. It is really copulative; its meaning does not go beyond that of the logical connective "&".

Does wāw Have the Meaning "While"?

For similar reasons, it cannot be claimed that ‫ו‬- has the meaning "while" when it occurs at the beginning of a circumstantial (*ḥāl*) clause,[54] such as Gen 18:1: וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' בְּאֵלֹנֵי מַמְרֵא וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח־הָאֹהֶל כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם, "The Lord appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre *while* he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot." Such clauses are distinguished not by their conjunc-tion but by their word order: where the subject is definite, it comes first, whether the predicate is a perfect (e.g., Gen 24:31), an active participle (e.g., Gen 18:1), a stative participle/adjective (e.g., Gen 18:12), or a prepositional phrase (e.g., Lev 7:20). It follows that the temporal relation between the two clauses is conveyed by the word order rather than by the conjunction. Indeed, omission of the conjunction does not change the meaning of the sentence. In Exod 22:13, וְכִי־יִשְׁאַל אִישׁ מֵעִם רֵעֵהוּ וְנִשְׁבַּר אוֹ־מֵת בְּעָלָיו אֵין־עִמּוֹ שַׁלֵּם יְשַׁלֵּם, "when a man borrows (an animal) from another and it dies or is injured *while* its owner is not with it, he must make restitution," the circumstantial clause בְּעָלָיו אֵין־עִמּוֹ has no ‫ו‬-; it is a circumstantial clause by virtue of its syntax. The same goes for אֵין רֹאֶה, "*while* no one was watching" in Exod 22:9. In such cases, one suspects

---

[53] Cf. the careful statement in BDB, 252, meaning 1e: "it connects *contrasted* ideas, where in our idiom the contrast would be expressed explicitly by *but*; in such cases prominence is usu. given to the contrasted idea by its being placed immed. after the conj." For a rigorous investigation into the function of inverted word order, see A. Mosak Moshavi, "The Pragmatics of Word Order in Biblical Hebrew: A Statistical Analysis" (Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University, 2000).

[54] According to Ibn Hishām in *Muġnī al-labīb,* 458, the claim that the Arabic *wāw al-ḥāl* means *ʾid* ("when") was made already by Makkī. I am indebted to Naphtali Kinberg ז״ל for this ref-erence.

that -ו has no meaning at all, for it contributes nothing to the meaning of the entire sentence.

Does *wāw* Have the Meaning *"Or"*?

Profiat Duran gives a long answer to this question, of which I shall quote only part:

> He [Ibn Janaḥ] said: "and the -ו can be in place of או [as in] וּמְקַלֵּל אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ meaning 'his father *or* his mother.'" And everyone I have seen [discuss] its meaning followed him in this opinion. They believe that among the uses proper to -ו is that it takes the place of או, and they consider this an inescapable necessity in many places in Scripture. But since the use proper to -ו is copulative conjoining, as posited,[55] and the use of the word או is the opposite of that, it is very difficult, in my view, to make the copulative -ו into the disjunctive או. Therefore, I say that it is copulative in all of those verses where he said it was in place of או. [In] וּמְקַלֵּל אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ, the conjunction [of וְאִמּוֹ] does not go back to אָבִיו, implying that he is not punished until he curses both of them. Rather the conjunction there is to וּמְקַלֵּל, as if it said וּמְקַלֵּל אָבִיו וּמְקַלֵּל אִמּוֹ, which consists of two statements, not one.[56]

In modern terms, we might say that וּמְקַלֵּל אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ מוֹת יוּמָת is derived from וּמְקַלֵּל אָבִיו מוֹת יוּמָת וּמְקַלֵּל אִמּוֹ מוֹת יוּמָת via a Coordination Reduction transformation and that the allegedly disjunctive -ו is really copulative. The illusion that the -ו is disjunctive is created by a well-known law of logic.[57] The logical structure of the verse is, "If a man curses his father he shall be put to death, and if a man curses his mother he shall be put to death," that is, *if p, then r, and if q, then r*. However, consolidation of the two clauses through deletion of redundant elements and rearrangement makes it look as though the verse were derived from the logically equivalent *if p or q, then r*.

In negated clauses, the same illusion is produced, but it is easier to see

---

[55] Alternatively: as imposed (as the basic, original meaning in the "first imposition" of the language; see n. 12 above). This is the sense of הנחה in Maimonides' מורה נבוכים, part I, beg. of chap. 30; cf. beg. of chap. 11.

[56] Duran, מעשה אפד, 77: "ותהיה הואו מקום או ומקלל אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ ר"ל אביו או אמו" [ר' יונה] אמר וכל מי שראיתי ענינו נמשכו אחריו בסברא זו והאמינו כי מהשמושים המיוחדים לואו שהיא תעמד מקום או וחשבו זה במחוייב אין להנצל ממנו במקומות רבים בכתוב. ולפי שהשמוש המיוחד לואו הוא העטיפה כמו שהונח ושמוש תיבת או הוא בחלוף זה, יקשה בעיני מאד לעשות הואו העוטפת או המחלקת. על כן אומר שהיא עוטפת בכל אותן כתובים שזכר שהיא מקום או. והנה ומקלל אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ העטף לא ישוב לאָבִיו שזכר עד שלא יענש עד קלל שניהם אבל שם העטף ל'ומקלל והוא כאלו אמר ומקלל אָבִיו ומקלל אִמּוֹ והם שני דבורים לא דבור אחד. . . .

[57] The analysis presented below (but not the passage from Duran) was included in my 1977 paper (see the acknowledgments above). Since then, another scholar has expressed a similar view; see M. Azar, ר"ו הבררה במקרא ובמשנה, *Bals̆anut 'Ivrit* 27 (Jan. 1989) 5–12 (I am indebted to Gad Sarfatti for this reference). Azar's analysis of Exod 21:15, etc. is basically the same as the one presented here. Nevertheless, he continues to speak of -ו in such verses as "ambiguous" (p. 5, end of §1.1).

through. Take, for example, Exod 12:9: אַל־תֹּאכְלוּ מִמֶּנּוּ נָא וּבָשֵׁל מְבֻשָּׁל בַּמָּיִם.
NJPSV translates: "Do not eat any of it raw *or* cooked in any way with water."
Saadia, on the other hand, avoids disjunctive -ו by repeating the negation:
לא תאכלו שיא מנה ניא ולא טביכ׳א מנצ׳ג׳א במא.[58] Similarly, Menaḥem b. Saruq lists
this verse among his examples of double-duty negation.[59]

Consider also Num 6:3: מִיַּין וְשֵׁכָר יַזִּיר חֹמֶץ יַיִן וְחֹמֶץ שֵׁכָר לֹא יִשְׁתֶּה וְכָל־מִשְׁרַת
עֲנָבִים לֹא יִשְׁתֶּה וַעֲנָבִים לַחִים וִיבֵשִׁים לֹא יֹאכֵל. NJPSV translates: "he shall abstain
from wine and any other intoxicant; he shall not drink vinegar of wine *or* of any
other intoxicant, neither shall he drink anything in which grapes have been
steeped, nor eat grapes fresh *or* dried." The word *or* is used to render -ו with
לֹא יִשְׁתֶּה/יֹאכֵל, "he shall not drink/eat," in the second and fourth clauses, but not
with the semantically equivalent מִ- יַזִּיר, "he shall abstain," in the first. Never-
theless, there is no difference in the meaning of -ו in these clauses. This can be
demonstrated by substituting מִ- יַזִּיר for לֹא יִשְׁתֶּה in the second clause. The
result is מֵחֹמֶץ יַיִן וְחֹמֶץ שֵׁכָר יַזִּיר, where the -ו must be rendered by English *and*.

It is apparent that the second clause is derived from חֹמֶץ יַיִן לֹא ישתה וְחֹמֶץ
שֵׁכָר לֹא יִשְׁתֶּה via Coordination Reduction, and that the fourth clause is derived
from עֲנָבִים לַחִים לֹא יאכל ועַנָבִים יְבֵשִׁים לֹא יֹאכֵל. In other words, the logical struc-
ture of these clauses is really ~p & ~q, but the transformational deletion of one
occurrence of the negation makes it look as though it were derived from the
logically equivalent ~(p ∨ q).

In the same vein, we may note that the third clause, וְכָל־מִשְׁרַת עֲנָבִים לֹא
יִשְׁתֶּה, can be combined with the second and reduced as well, yielding חֹמֶץ יַיִן
וְחֹמֶץ שֵׁכָר וְכָל־מִשְׁרַת עֲנָבִים לֹא יִשְׁתֶּה. In this new clause, the -ו of וְכָל־מִשְׁרַת עֲנָבִים
must be rendered by *or* in English, even though its meaning, when viewed
from the perspective of Hebrew, is still *and*.

If it is true that "disjunctive -ו" is an illusion created by the aforementioned
logical laws, we should expect to find it only in negated clauses and in condi-
tional clauses (or phrases whose underlying logical structure is a conditional
clause). It appears that that is indeed the case.[60] In fact, the restriction was
noticed already by Qirqisani in the tenth century: "as for the claim concerning
-ו standing in place of אוֹ, this does not occur in (positive) commands, only in
prohibitions like Lev 22:8, נְבֵלָה וּטְרֵפָה לֹא יֹאכַל, and Lev 22:24 וּמָעוּךְ וְכָתוּת וְנָתוּק
אִישׁ אִמּוֹ וְאָבִיו תִּירָאוּ. But in a (positive) command like Lev 19:3, וּכָרוּת לֹא תַקְרִיבוּ,

[58] *Œuvres complètes*, 1.97.
[59] Menaḥem ben Saruq, *Maḥberet* (ed. A. Sáenz-Badillos; Granada: Universidad de
Granada, 1986) 139* לא הראשון עומד במקום שנים.
[60] There is one exception for which I cannot easily account: וְיָדְעוּ כָּל־שְׁאֵרִית יְהוּדָה הַבָּאִים
לְאֶרֶץ־מִצְרַיִם לָגוּר שָׁם דְּבַר־מִי יָקוּם מִמֶּנִּי וּמֵהֶם (Jer 44:28). So too Azar, ר׳ו הברירה, 11 n. 2. M. J. Steiner
suggests that וּמֵהֶם מִמֶּנִּי is a list that is not part of the sentence but is merely referred to in the sen-
tence—a list of possibilities in which -ו means "and" rather than "or."

it is not possible that the meaning is 'or his father'—the obligation pertains to both."[61]

Moreover, if "disjunctive ‑וֹ" can occur only in the presence of the negative or conditional operators, we should expect to find a reflection of that fact in alternations between ‑וֹ and אוֹ. Such alternations are indeed attested. Thus, the phrase "turn to the right *or* to the left" occurs twice in the account of Asahel's pursuit of Abner, expressed once, in a negated clause, with ‑וֹ (2 Sam 2:19, וְלֹא־נָטָה לָלֶכֶת עַל־הַיָּמִין וְעַל־הַשְּׂמֹאול, "and he did not turn to the right *or* to the left") and two verses later with אוֹ (2 Sam 2:21, נְטֵה לְךָ עַל־יְמִינְךָ אוֹ עַל־שְׂמֹאלֶךָ, "turn to the right *or* to the left"). And the phrase "linen *or* wool" occurs twice in the law of the affected cloth, expressed once, in a conditional clause, with ‑וֹ (Lev 13:48, לְפִשְׁתִּים וְלַצָּמֶר, "of linen *or* wool") and three verses later with אוֹ (Lev 13:52, בַּצֶּמֶר אוֹ בַפִּשְׁתִּים, "in wool *or* linen").

In conclusion, it should be noted that the pseudo-meaning "or" is quite different from the other pseudo-meanings of ‑וֹ discussed above, "but" and "while." Sentences in which ‑וֹ is rendered with English *but* or *while* normally have a different surface structure than those in which ‑וֹ is translated *and.* Even when they do not, there is no real ambiguity, only generality. By contrast, a clause like חֹמֶץ יַיִן וְחֹמֶץ שֵׁכָר לֹא יִשְׁתֶּה is genuinely ambiguous. Although the context calls for "he shall not drink vinegar of wine *or* vinegar of any similar intoxicant," it can also mean "he shall not drink vinegar of wine *and* vinegar of any similar intoxicant (together)," as can be seen by comparing Lev 18:17, עֶרְוַת אִשָּׁה וּבִתָּהּ לֹא תְגַלֵּה, "you shall not uncover the nakedness of a woman *and* her daughter." However, the ambiguity is not lexical, as commonly supposed, but syntactic. Although the surface structure of עֶרְוַת אִשָּׁה וּבִתָּהּ לֹא תְגַלֵּה is quite similar to that of חֹמֶץ יַיִן וְחֹמֶץ שֵׁכָר לֹא יִשְׁתֶּה, its deep structure is not; it is not derived from עֶרְוַת אִשָּׁה לֹא תגלה וערות בתה לא תגלה.

Does wāw Have the Meaning "Then"?

DCH assigns the meaning "then" to the ‑וֹ that sometimes conjoins the protasis (antecedent) and apodosis (consequent) of conditional clauses, e.g., Lev 6:21, וְאִם־בִּכְלִי נְחֹשֶׁת בֻּשָּׁלָה וּמֹרַק וְשֻׁטַּף בַּמָּיִם, "if it was boiled in a copper vessel, *then* (the vessel) shall be scoured and rinsed with water."[62] We cannot exclude the possibility that ‑וֹ in this environment is pleonastic; however, the two logicians I consulted believe that it is meaningful. They arrive at this conviction via different routes, one syntactic and the other semantic.

---

[61] Qirqisani, *Kitāb al-ʾAnwar*, 927, lines 10–13: . . . אלד׳י אדעוה מן אן אלואו יקום מקאם או פלא יקע פי אלאמר ואנמא יקע פי אלנהי פי אלנהי וטרפה לא יאכל ומת׳ל פאנה לא יכון מענאה או בצ׳תות ונתוק וכרות לא תקריבו פאמא אלאמר אלד׳י הו מת׳ל איש אמו ואביו תיראו פאנה לא יג׳וז אן יכון מענאה או ד׳לך לאזם פי אלנמיע.

[62] *DCH*, 597–98, meaning 12b.

Mark J. Steiner takes the syntactic route, suggesting that the logical struc-
ture of this sentence may be וְאִם־בְּכְלִי נְחֹשֶׁת בְּשָׁלָה, בשלה ומֹרַק וְשֻׁטַּף בַּמָּיִם, in
which case this -וְ, too, means "and" in the logical structure. He notes that the
truth table of *if p, then q* is equivalent to that of *if p, then p and q,* and that this
is often reflected in English sentences of the form *if p, then also q.* In Biblical
Hebrew too, גַּם, "also," or וְגַם, "and also," can be inserted before the apodosis,
e.g., Jer 31:37, אִם־יִמַּדּוּ שָׁמַיִם מִלְמַעְלָה וְיֵחָקְרוּ מוֹסְדֵי־אֶרֶץ לְמָטָּה גַּם־אֲנִי אֶמְאַס בְּכָל־זֶרַע
יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ, "if it were possible for the heavens above to be mea-
sured, and for the foundations of the earth below to be fathomed, then it would
also be possible for me to reject all the offspring of Israel for all that they have
done"; Jer 33:20–21, אִם־תָּפֵרוּ אֶת־בְּרִיתִי הַיּוֹם וְאֶת־בְּרִיתִי הַלַּיְלָה וּלְבִלְתִּי הֱיוֹת יוֹמָם־
וָלַיְלָה בְּעִתָּם: גַּם־בְּרִיתִי תֻפַר אֶת־דָּוִד עַבְדִּי מִהְיוֹת־לוֹ בֵן מֹלֵךְ עַל־כִּסְאוֹ, "if it were possi-
ble for you to break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night,
so that day and night should not come at their proper time, then it would *also*
be possible for you to break my covenant with my servant David so that he
would not have a descendant reigning upon his throne"; Zech 3:7, אִם־בִּדְרָכַי
תֵּלֵךְ וְאִם אֶת־מִשְׁמַרְתִּי תִשְׁמֹר וְגַם־אַתָּה תָּדִין אֶת־בֵּיתִי וְגַם תִּשְׁמֹר אֶת־חֲצֵרָי, "if you go in
my ways and keep my charge, then you will *also* rule my House and you will
also guard my courts." It is thus possible that the so-called *wāw apodosis* corre-
sponds to the *and* of *if p, then p and q* rather than to the *then*.

Carl J. Posy's semantic explanation will be presented below.

Does wāw Have the Meaning "That Is"?

Both *HALOT* and *DCH* include "explanatory" -וְ, glossed "that is," among
their categories of -וְ.[63] Among the examples in *DCH* is Exod 27:14, וַחֲמֵשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה
אַמָּה קְלָעִים לַכָּתֵף, "fifteen cubits of hangings on the one flank," since it is part of
an explanation of 27:13, הֶחָצֵר לִפְאַת קֵדְמָה מִזְרָחָה חֲמִשִּׁים אַמָּה, "and for the width
of the enclosure on the front, or east side, fifty cubits."

This explanatory relationship between the phrases was noted already by
Saadia in his commentary: "The expression . . . לַכָּתֵף] קְלָעִים אַמָּה עֶשְׂרֵה וַחֲמֵשׁ
[אַמָּה עֶשְׂרִים מָסָךְ הֶחָצֵר וּלְשַׁעַר . . . עֶשְׂרֵה חֲמֵשׁ הַשֵּׁנִית וְלַכָּתֵף . . . is not an addition, mak-
ing the width of the enclosure one hundred cubits, but rather it is an explana-
tion and specification . . . ."[64] And yet in his introduction, as we have already
seen, Saadia classifies the -וְ in this phrase as pleonastic.[65]

Saadia's position is perfectly consistent: the phrase is explanatory but the -וְ

---

[63] *HALOT,* 258, meaning 5; *DCH,* 597, meaning 6.
[64] Y. Ratzaby, פירושי רב סעדיה גאון לספר שמות (Jerusalem: מוסד הרב קוק, 1998) 345, lines
14–15: קו׳ וַחֲמֵשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה אַמָּה קְלָעִים [לַכָּתֵף . . . וְלַכָּתֵף הַשֵּׁנִית חֲמֵשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה . . . וּלְשַׁעַר הֶחָצֵר מָסָךְ עֶשְׂרִים
אַמָּה] ליס הו זיאדהֿ פכאן ערץֿ אלחצר יכון קׄ דׄראע ולכנה שרח ותפציל . . . .
[65] See p. 252 above.

is not. Indeed, it is virtually identical to Rashi's position on the very similar example in Exod 25:12: וְיָצַקְתָּ לּוֹ אַרְבַּע טַבְּעֹת זָהָב . . . וּשְׁתֵּי טַבָּעֹת עַל־צַלְעוֹ הָאֶחָת וּשְׁתֵּי טַבָּעֹת עַל־צַלְעוֹ הַשֵּׁנִית, "and you shall cast four gold rings for it . . . : two rings on one of its side walls and two on the other." Rashi writes: וּשְׁתֵּי טַבָּעֹת עַל־צַלְעוֹ הָאֶחָת—These are the same as the four rings at the beginning of the verse; (here) it explains where/how they were. And this -וֹ is superfluous; the interpretation is like that of שְׁתֵּי טבעות.[66] In both of these examples, once the -וֹ is ignored, we have apposition, which expresses the meaning "that is." Once again, the meaning attributed to -וֹ really resides in the syntactic construction.

Does wāw Have the Meaning "And"?

There are many examples of -וֹ functioning as a semantically empty all-purpose connector. Thus, it is commonly used in the *casus pendens* construction (e.g., the second -וֹ of Jer 6:19, וְתוֹרָתִי וַיִּמְאָסוּ־בָהּ, "and as for my instruction—they rejected it"). Here -וֹ is not pleonastic in the strict sense of the word, since it has a grammatical function; nevertheless, it has no lexical meaning.

This view of -וֹ also explains its ability to replace other grammatical particles on occasion, for example, כִּי in Gen 42:10, לֹא אֲדֹנִי וַעֲבָדֶיךָ בָּאוּ לִשְׁבָּר־אֹכֶל, "no, my lord, your servants have come to buy food" (cf. 42:12, לֹא כִּי־עֶרְוַת הָאָרֶץ בָּאתֶם לִרְאוֹת, "no, you have come to see the nakedness of the land"); Gen 47:6, וְאִם־יָדַעְתָּ וְיֶשׁ־בָּם אַנְשֵׁי־חַיִל, "and if you know that there are capable men among them" (cf. 2 Kgs 5:8, וְיֵדַע כִּי יֵשׁ נָבִיא בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, "and let him know that there is a prophet in Israel"); Ps 144:3, מָה־אָדָם וַתֵּדָעֵהוּ בֶּן־אֱנוֹשׁ וַתְּחַשְּׁבֵהוּ, "what is man that you should care about him; mortal man that you should think of him" (cf. Ps 8:5, מָה־אֱנוֹשׁ כִּי־תִזְכְּרֶנּוּ וּבֶן־אָדָם כִּי תִפְקְדֶנּוּ, "what is man that you should be mindful of him; mortal man that you should take note of him"); and perhaps אֲשֶׁר in Gen 11:4, וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם, "and a tower whose top is in the sky."[67] Here too -וֹ is not superfluous, but it still has no lexical meaning.

One the other hand, there are very many contexts in which -וֹ does seem to be meaningful. First and foremost are those in which -וֹ functions in the underlying structure as what linguists call a "clause-level coordinating conjunction" (as opposed to "phrase-level") and what logicians call a "sentential connective."

If so, we wind up with two categories of -וֹ, one meaningful and the other meaningless. Having said this, two questions remain unanswered.

First, to which category should we assign the instances of -וֹ corresponding to the English comma in sentences such as Exod 9:21, וַאֲשֶׁר לֹא־שָׂם לִבּוֹ אֶל־דְּבַר

---

[66] וּשְׁתֵּי טַבָּעֹת עַל־צַלְעוֹ הָאֶחָת:—168 (1962 ,קריה נאמנה :Jerusalem) רש״י על התורה ,A. Berliner הן הן ארבע טבעות שבתחלת המקרא ופירש לך היכן [היאך] היו, והוי״ו זו יתרה היא ופתרונו כמו שתי טבעות.

[67] It is also possible that in this last example -וֹ replaces asyndesis.

ה׳ וַיַּעֲזֹב אֶת־עֲבָדָיו וְאֶת־מִקְנֵהוּ בַּשָּׂדֶה, "but as for him who paid no regard to the word of the Lord, he left his slaves and livestock in the open," and Deut 20:10, כִּי־תִקְרַב אֶל־עִיר לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ וְקָרָאתָ אֵלֶיהָ לְשָׁלוֹם, "when you approach a city to fight against it, you shall call on it to make peace"? It is natural to view these examples of ־ו as semantically empty, like Jer 6:19; indeed, Exod 9:21 exhibits the same *casus pendens* construction as the latter. Nevertheless, they could be considered meaningful if we could prove that these complex sentences are derived from compound sentences like לֹא־שָׂם לִבּוֹ אֶל־דְּבַר ה׳ וַיַּעֲזֹב אֶת־עֲבָדָיו תִּקְרַב אֶל־עִיר לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ וְקָרָאתָ אֵלֶיהָ לְשָׁלוֹם and וְאֶת־מִקְנֵהוּ בַּשָּׂדֶה, respectively. Alternatively, since Exod 9:21 and Deut 20:10 seem to have the logical structure of conditional sentences, the explanation given on pp. 263–264 above for the *wāw apodosis* of Lev 6:21 may apply to them as well.

Second, what is the meaning of those instances of ־ו that are meaningful? Traditionalists will probably be happiest with the familiar "and," but more intrepid souls may wish to consider the possibility, raised by Carl J. Posy, that the meaning of Biblical Hebrew ־ו is not "and" but rather the common denominator of "and" (&), "or" (∨), "then" (→), etc. The meaning of each of these is expressed by the following 4-line truth tables.

I		p	q	p & q
	1	T	T	T
	2	T	F	F
	3	F	T	F
	4	F	F	F

II		p	q	p ∨ q
	1	T	T	T
	2	T	F	T
	3	F	T	T
	4	F	F	F

III		p	q	p → q
	1	T	T	T
	2	T	F	F
	3	F	T	T
	4	F	F	T

Thus, the logical connective "and" (&) is defined as an operator such that "p & q" is true when p is true and q is true, but false whenever one or both of them are false. The connective "or" (∨) is an operator such that "p ∨ q" is false

when both p and q are false but true whenever one or both of them are true. The connective "then" (→), as defined in table III, is false when p is true and q is false but true under all other conditions.

When these tables are examined in pairs, they are seen to agree in two of their four lines. Tables I and II agree in lines 1 and 4; tables I and III agree in lines 1 and 2; tables II and III agree in lines 1 and 3. However, when all three are examined simultaneously, they agree in only one line, line 1. In that line, p is true, q is true, and p &/∨/→ q is true. That line is the common denominator—the core meaning of these three operators. According to Posy, that core meaning may be the meaning of Biblical Hebrew -וֹ. In that case, Biblical Hebrew -וֹ would be an operator with only a single condition on its use: that *p wĕ-q* be true whenever *p* is true and *q* is true.[68]

In summary, then, -וֹ is sometimes meaningful and sometimes meaningless. All of the meaningful instances can be viewed as having one and the same meaning, whether it be the full four-line truth table of the logical connective "&" or only one line of that truth table. There is no need to have recourse to any of the other meanings that have been attributed to it. And if there is no need to attribute those meanings to -וֹ, we should refrain from doing so, based on the principle, enunciated by William of Ockham, that "entities are not be multiplied beyond necessity."

---

[68] It should be noted that this semantic solution obviates the need for the syntactic solutions proposed for the alleged meanings "or" and "then," but that it does not account for the restricted distribution of אוֹ in Biblical Hebrew.