

Ve-'Ed Ya'aleh (Gen 2:6)

Essays in Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies
Presented to Edward L. Greenstein

Volume 1

Edited by

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SBL PRESS

Atlanta

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2021945088

These volumes are dedicated
in loving memory of Ed's parents
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וּיְצַלְהוּ מִיָּדָם: Proleptic Summaries, Conative Imperfects, and Harmonization in the Joseph Story and Other Biblical Narratives

Richard C. Steiner

The scrupulous reader ... will observe that [Gen 37:21] also bears the seeds of ambiguity.¹

Several questions have been raised about the words וּיְצַלְהוּ מִיָּדָם in Gen 37:21. Do they belong in verse 21 or later in the narrative? How do they relate to לְמַעַן הַצִּיל אֶת־וְיָבִיא אֶת־יֹסֵף מִצְרַיִם (37:22), and to לְמַעַן הַצִּיל אֶת־וְיָבִיא אֶת־יֹסֵף מִצְרַיִם (37:28)? In this study, I shall examine answers that have been given to these questions and attempt to evaluate them.² In so doing, I shall pay special attention to two concepts—one literary and the other linguistic—that appear frequently in discussions of וּיְצַלְהוּ מִיָּדָם: *proleptic summary* and *conative imperfect*.³ I shall argue that the former is more important than previously realized, while the latter lacks an adequate evidentiary basis. I shall conclude with a brief discussion

I am much indebted to Shalom Holtz, Aaron Koller, S. Z. Leiman, Adina Moshavi, Jordan Penkower, and Sara Steiner for their helpful comments on this essay and to Mary Ann Linahan and Zvi Erenyi for their generous assistance.

1. Edward L. Greenstein, “An Equivocal Reading of the Sale of Joseph,” in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives: Volume 2*, ed. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis and James S. Ackerman (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 118.

2. For a discussion of other questions surrounding v. 21 (and v. 22), see Richard C. Steiner, “‘He Said, He Said’: Repetition of the Quotation Formula in the Joseph Story and Other Biblical Narratives,” *JBL* 138 (2019): 473–95.

3. As used in this essay, *proleptic* is a synonym of *anticipatory*. For the term *imperfectum de conatu* “imperfect of trying” used in studies of Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin, and for the various uses of the term *conative*, see Nigel Vincent, “Conative,” *Linguistic Typology* 17 (2013): 269–89.

of a third concept that underlies some ancient and medieval renderings of וַיְצַלְהוּ מִיָּדָם, renderings that have been adopted by a good number of prominent source critics: *harmonization*.

1. Proleptic Summaries in Biblical Narrative

It is not uncommon for a biblical narrative (or a section of one) to begin with a general statement—a one-sentence summary of a series of events—and then start over again with a detailed exposition, backtracking to the first event of the series. Sometimes, when the backtracking is substantial, it creates redundancy, which serves to call attention to the bipartite structure.

The general statement in this structure could be described as a cross between a heading and a topic sentence. Over the years, it has been the recipient of many other descriptions and names: בלל (see below), *vorläufiges Summar* (Delitzsch), *anticipatory* (Driver), *Vorausandeutung* (Strack), *summary report* (Leupold), *proleptically* (Saydon), *summary statement* (Kidner), *sommaire proleptique* (Ska), and *proleptic summary* (Genung).⁴

To illustrate the use of the proleptic summary, I have chosen a narrative that contains two instances of it: Joab's report to David of Uriah's death. The narrative begins with a general statement: וַיִּשְׁלַח יוֹאָב וַיִּגְדַּל לְדָוִד אֶת־כָּל־ (2 Sam 11:18). In the next verse, it backtracks: וַיֵּצֵא אֶת־הַמֶּלֶךְ: דְּבַר־יְהוָה הַמְּלֹחָמָה לְאִמֵּר. The backtracking ends several verses later with: וַיֵּלֶךְ הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיָּבֵא וַיִּגְדַּל (11:22). But these words, in turn, constitute a new general statement,⁵ followed by the details of the report (11:22–24).

4. See, in order, Franz Delitzsch, *Neuer Kommentar über die Genesis* (Leipzig: Dörffling & Franke, 1872), 441; S. R. Driver, *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew and Some Other Syntactical Questions*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1881), 100; Hermann L. Strack, *Die Bücher Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus und Numeri* (Munich: Beck, 1894), 81; H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1942), 966; P. P. Saydon, "The Conative Imperfect in Hebrew," *VT* 12 (1962): 126; Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), 186; Ska, "Sommaires proleptiques," 518–27; Jean-Louis Ska, "Quelques exemples de sommaires proleptiques dans les récits bibliques," in *Congress Volume: Paris, 1992*, ed. J. A. Emerton (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 315–26; Matthew C. Genung, *The Composition of Genesis 37: Incoherence and Meaning in the Exposition of the Joseph Story* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 55.

5. Both general statements in this example contain the word בל, derived from the same root as בלל, the Hebrew term for "general statement"; however, it is only in the

This second proleptic summary appears to work in tandem with the first. We shall see another example of this in the next section.

The earliest description of the proleptic summary (or something similar) is probably that of Mishnat R. Eliezer:⁶

... כָּלֵל שאחריו מעשה ואינו אלא פרטו שלראשון.

... a general statement followed by an event that is merely a detail of the former.

The commentary section of the work provides further explanation:⁷

הרי כָּלֵל, ואחר כך פירט את מעשיו... השומע סבור שהוא מעשה אחר, ואינו אלא פרטו שלראשון.

It gives a general statement and afterwards relates its (component) events in detail.... The listener thinks that it (= what follows the general statement) is another event, but in reality it is just a detail of the previous.

Two examples are given: Gen 1:27 (כלל) with 2:7, 21, 22 (פרטים); and Isa 1:1 (כלל) with 6:1, 14:28, and 36:1 (פרטים). These examples differ from the ones given by modern scholars and even some medievals (see below) in that their פרטים are not all contiguous with one another or with the כלל.

second general statement that the כל phrase actually corresponds to (more precisely: has the same referent as) the detailed exposition that follows it.

6. H. G. Enelow, *The Mishnah of Rabbi Eliezer, or The Midrash of Thirty-Two Hermeneutic Rules* (New York: Bloch, 1933), 10 (thirteenth rule); see also Wilhelm Bacher, *Die Exegetische Terminologie der Jüdischen Traditionsliteratur* 2 vols. (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1899), 1:112. For the controversy surrounding the dating of the three sections of this work, see Richard C. Steiner, “*Muqdam u-Me’uḥar* and *Muqaddam wa-Mu’ahḥar*: On the History of Some Hebrew and Arabic Terms for *Hysteron Proteron* and *Anastrophe*,” *JNES* 66 (2007): 39–40 with n. 41 (arguing against Moses Zucker’s post-Saadianic dating; see n. 8 below). Some scholars have pointed to Hillel’s כלל ופרט rule (Bacher, *Die Exegetische Terminologie*, 1:80) as the earliest description of the proleptic summary; see, for example, Jean-Louis Ska, “Sommaires proleptiques en Gn 27 et dans l’histoire de Joseph,” *Bib* 73 (1992): 518 n. 2; and Genung, *Composition of Genesis 37*, 58 n. 39. However, Rabbi Eliezer’s rule is a closer parallel. It is used of *clauses* in *narrative* (הגדה), while Hillel’s rule is used of *phrases* in *legal* texts.

7. Enelow, *Mishnah of Rabbi Eliezer*, 24–25.

Saadia Gaon (tenth century) discusses the second of these examples in his commentary to Isa 1:1, using the terms כָּלֵל and פֵּרַט together with their Judeo-Arabic equivalents, קוֹל גְּמֵלוֹהַּ and תַּפְצִייל.⁸ Rashi (eleventh century) discusses the first example in commenting on Gen 2:7 (after 2:8), citing Mishnat R. Eliezer by name and using much of its phraseology. Rashbam (twelfth century), too, cites Mishnat R. Eliezer by name in commenting on its first example (at Gen 1:27), and he finds additional examples in the Torah and elsewhere.⁹ In discussing them, he says that Scripture “gives/gave a general statement and then explains/explained” (כּוֹלֵל/כָּלֵל וְאַחַר כֵּךְ (מִפְרָשׁ/פִּירֵשׁ).

Abraham Ibn Ezra (twelfth century) is not dependent on the phraseology or examples of the aforementioned predecessors. Take, for example, his comment on וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב מִבְּאֵר שֶׁבַע וַיֵּלֶךְ חֲרָנָה: וַיִּפְגַּע בְּמָקוֹם וְגו' (Gen 28:10–11), which at first glance seems to place Jacob's arrival in Harran before, or at the same time as, his arrival in Luz-Bethel. Unlike Saadia Gaon, Rashi, and Rashbam, Ibn Ezra solves the problem by taking 28:10 as a proleptic summary: “The Gaon said that חֲרָנָה וַיֵּלֶךְ means ‘to go (to Harran),’¹⁰ but this is not so; rather, it has its normal meaning, and then *it goes back to explain* what he came upon [פָּגַע] on the way.” Here and in his long commentary to Exod 2:15, he uses the formula לִפְרָשׁ/לְפָרֵשׁ לְדוֹמַר to refer to backtracking following a proleptic summary.

8. תַּפְסִיר יִשְׁעִיָּה לְרַב סַעֲדִיָּה, ed. Yehuda Ratzaby (Kariat Ono: Mkhon Moshe, 1993), 157 last 3 lines. For this parallel (and other, less compelling ones), see Moses Zucker, “לפֵּתרוֹן בְּעִית לִב מְדוּת וּמִשְׁנַת רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר,” *PAAJR* 23 (1954): 17–18; and Zucker, על תּוֹרוֹת רַסְׁג לְתוֹרוֹת (New York: Feldheim, 1959), 251–53.

9. See his commentary to Gen 1:27; Exod 2:15; 19:8–9 (citing additional examples from Lev 9:24–10:2; Judg 17:3–4); Lev 12:2–5. This commentary and most of the other Hebrew commentaries cited in this article can be conveniently located at <http://mg.alhatorah.org/>.

10. See Joseph Derenbourg, ed., *Oeuvres complètes de R. Saadia ben Iosef al-Fayyūmī*, 5 vols. (Paris: Leroux, 1893–1899), 1:43 lines 13–14: כֵּרַג ... לִימְצִי אֵלַי חֲרָנָה = Rashi's לִכְתּוֹב לְחָרֵן יֵצֵא. By paraphrasing חֲרָנָה וַיֵּלֶךְ as an infinitive phrase modifying וַיֵּצֵא (rather than an independent clause), these exegetes eliminate any suggestion that Jacob had arrived at his destination. This paraphrase calls to mind וַיֵּצֵאוּ לְלֶכֶת אֶרְצָה כְּנַעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ (12:5), where וַיָּבֹאוּ is added—after לְלֶכֶת—to signify arrival; and וַיֵּצֵאוּ יְרֵמְיָהוּ מִירוּשָׁלַם לְלֶכֶת אֶרֶץ בְּנִימִן (Jer 37:12), specifying a destination that was never reached. Contrast Rashbam's paraphrase הֵלֵךְ לְצַד חָרֵן “he headed for Harran [lit., he went toward Harran].” This paraphrase makes חֲרָנָה וַיֵּלֶךְ atelic (i.e., an activity rather than an accomplishment) by taking the suffix of חֲרָנָה to mean “toward” instead of “to.” It represents a different tactic for removing from v. 10 any suggestion of arrival at the destination.

2. Proleptic Summaries in Gen 37

In his reconstruction of what he believes to be the text of J in Gen 37, Hermann Gunkel moves וַיִּצְלְהוּ מִיָּדָם from verse 21 to the end of verse 23.¹¹ Similarly, John Skinner writes that וַיִּצְלְהוּ מִיָּדָם “is premature (v. 23): the clause might stand more naturally in J between 23 and 25, though the rest of the v[erse] must be left where it is (so Gu[nkel]).”¹²

It is clear that Gunkel and Skinner found it difficult to understand why the narrative speaks of Reuben’s intention to save Joseph (לְמַעַן יִצְלֶה אֹתוֹ מִיָּדָם in 37:22) *after* asserting that he saved him.¹³ What is not clear, however, is why these scholars mention only this heavy-handed solution to the problem. Why do they ignore the suggestion of several predecessors that the words וַיִּצְלְהוּ מִיָּדָם be viewed as proleptic (rather than misplaced), introducing an episode that extends to the end of verse 22 or, more probably, verse 24?¹⁴ This would seem to be a far more economical solution.

According to another suggestion ignored by Gunkel and Skinner, וַיִּצְלְהוּ מִיָּדָם is not the only proleptic summary in Gen 37. Franz Delitzsch and Hermann L. Strack note that there is another one in verse 5.¹⁵ In a later study, Benno Jacob points to the one in verse 18: “The first וַיִּצְלְהוּ מִיָּדָם of Reuben relates to his following speech in the way that וַיִּתְנַכְלוּ of the brothers related to their following speech.”¹⁶ Similarly, Derek Kidner, Jean-Louis Ska, and Matthew Genung take both וַיִּתְנַכְלוּ אֹתוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ and וַיִּצְלְהוּ מִיָּדָם as

11. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis übersetzt und erklärt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901), 367.

12. John Skinner, *Genesis*, ICC (New York: Scribner, 1910), 447.

13. See, for example, Antony F. Campbell and Mark A. O’Brien, *Sources of the Pentateuch: Texts, Introductions, Annotations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 232.

14. ספר נתיבות שלום והוא חבור כולל חמשת חמשי תורה, ed. Moses Mendelssohn, 2nd ed., 5 vols. (Vienna: Schmid, 1795), vol. 1 (Solomon Dubno), s.v. “ויצלהו מידם”; Delitzsch, *Genesis*, 441; and Strack, *Die Bücher*, 81. So, too, Benno Jacob, *Quellenscheidung und Exegese im Pentateuch* (Leipzig: Kaufmann, 1916), 33; Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 966; Ska, “Sommaires proleptiques,” 524–26; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, WBC 2 (Dallas: Word, 1995), 353–54; and Genung, *Composition of Genesis 37*, 55.

15. Delitzsch, *Genesis*, 441; Strack, *Die Bücher*, 81; see also Driver, *Treatise on the Use of the Tenses*, 100.

16. Jacob, *Quellenscheidung und Exegese*, 33.

proleptic summaries.¹⁷ Indeed, Kidner counts *four* summary statements in the chapter.¹⁸

In contrast to these scholars, Baruch Schwartz dismisses the idea that וַיִּתְנַבְּלוּ אֹתוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ is a proleptic summary on the grounds that “there is no necessity to interpret in this way, and, according to its plain sense, Scripture tells of the plot two times.”¹⁹ These assertions are at odds with the common-sense rule that the critic should first “take the text as it is, do all possible synchronic analysis, and then add a diachronic dimension to deal with whatever problems remain.”²⁰ They are at odds with the literature cited immediately above as well. The view that וַיִּתְנַבְּלוּ אֹתוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ is a proleptic summary cannot be simply brushed aside without any mention of the fact that it is only one of several proleptic summaries that have been noted in this chapter.

When we examine the proposed examples more carefully, we find that the ones in verses 18 and 21, like the pair of proleptic summaries (2 Sam 11:8, 22) discussed in the previous section, work in tandem. They are parallel summaries serving to highlight the stark contrast between Reuben and the nine brothers who came with him to Dothan. Those brothers hatched a plot to kill Joseph (וַיִּתְנַבְּלוּ אֹתוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ), while Reuben devised a plan to save him (וַיִּצְלֵהוּ מִיָּדָם).²¹

To my mind, these structural considerations are, by themselves, sufficient to refute Schwartz’s claim, but there is more. One of the striking features of Gen 37 is that the main actors in it are contrasted with one another. The contrast between Joseph and his older brothers is vividly described in verse 3 and signaled by contrastive focus in verse 4: אֹתוֹ אָחָיו. In verse 11, Jacob is contrasted with his ten oldest sons, with the inverted word order in שָׂמַר אֶת־הַדְּבָרַי making the

17. Kidner, *Genesis*, 186; Ska, “Sommaires proleptiques,” 524–27; Genung, *Composition of Genesis 37*, 55, 58–59.

18. Kidner, *Genesis*, 186. In my opinion, one of Kidner’s examples, v. 13, may be omitted because the overlap with v. 14 claimed by some critics is illusory.

19. Baruch J. Schwartz, “ירידתו של יוסף למצרים: חיבורו של בראשית לז ממקורותיו,” *Beit Mikra* 55 (2010): 5.

20. Joep Dubbink, “A Story of Three Prophets: Synchronic and Diachronic Analysis of Jeremiah 26,” in *Tradition and Innovation in Biblical Interpretation: Studies Presented to Professor Eep Talstra on Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Wido Th. van Peursen and Janet Dyck (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 13.

21. See further at n. 45 below.

contrast reasonably explicit.²² In verses 21–22, 26–27 we have an *implicit* contrast between Reuben and Judah, which is reinforced later, in 42:37, 43:8–10.²³

The most striking contrast in the Joseph narrative is the one—articulated by Joseph himself—between humans (Joseph’s brothers) and God or, more precisely, between petty, base human motives and the lofty divine plan (Gen 45:4–8).²⁴ This contrast is so fundamental to the Israelite conception of history and theodicy that it is repeated at the conclusion of the book (Gen 50:20). The capsule history in Psalms presents the contrast in parallel hemistichs: שֶׁלַח לַפְּנֵיהֶם אֵישׁ // לְעֶבֶד נִמְכַר יוֹסֵף (Ps 105:17). There could not be clearer evidence for Robert Alter’s claim that “it is the inescapable tension between human freedom and divine historical plan that is brought forth so luminously through the pervasive repetitions of the Bible’s narrative art.”²⁵

22. The translations that have “but” (or “while”) in this verse are too numerous to mention. For the use of subject-verb word order following verb-subject word order to express contrast between two clauses, whether strong contrast (“but”) or weak contrast (“while; and for their part”), see Gen 32:1–2; 33:14; 1 Sam 14:46; 23:18; 24:23; 26:25; and, in the Joseph narrative, Gen 42:8 (לֹא הִכְרָהוּ וְהֵם אֶת־אֶחָיו יוֹסֵף). This is simply a special case of the use of topicalization to express contrast, e.g., Gen 41:54; see, for example, Richard C. Steiner, “Does the Biblical Hebrew Conjunction ו- Have Many Meanings, One Meaning, or No Meaning At All?” *JBL* 119 (2000): 259–60; and Adina Moshavi, *Word Order in the Biblical Hebrew Finite Clause* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 155–61. Contrast Baruch J. Schwartz, “How the Compiler of the Pentateuch Worked: The Composition of Genesis 37,” in *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, ed. Craig A. Evans et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 270. Schwartz takes שָׁמַר as a pluperfect, but he fails to explain how that makes sense in the context of v. 11. If וְאָבִיו שָׁמַר אֶת־הַדְּבָר meant that Jacob *had kept* the matter of Joseph’s second dream in mind, it would imply that Jacob knew of that dream well before Joseph told it to him.

23. George W. Coats, *From Canaan to Egypt: Structural and Theological Context for the Joseph Story* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1976), 69; James S. Ackerman, “Joseph, Judah, and Jacob,” in Gros Louis and Ackerman, *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, 2:99–103; and Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 121.

24. Ina Willi-Plein, “Historiographische Aspekte der Josefsgeschichte,” *Henoch* 1 (1979): 315. See also Isa 10:5–7.

25. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 141.

3. The Conative Interpretation of וַיִּצְלֵהוּ

P. P. Saydon has argued that the word וַיִּצְלֵהוּ (v. 21) is problematic: “וַיִּצְלֵהוּ ‘and he delivered him,’ so RSV, E. König, H. Junker..., de Vaux... But Reuben did not deliver Joseph. He only tried to deliver him, but his plan was, at least partially, frustrated by his brothers.”²⁶ Saydon, like many other scholars, assumes that וַיִּצְלֵהוּ מִיָּדָם refers to saving Joseph in the sense of *restoring him to his father*. The problem, of course, is that this interpretation, presumably based on (one reading of) לְמַעַן הַצִּיל אֹתוֹ מִיָּדָם (37:22), seems to contradict the rest of the story, from וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶל-אָבִיו (37:22) onward. For Saydon and most of the others, the solution is simple: וַיִּצְלֵהוּ here means “and he *tried* to save him.”

Given the amount of discussion that has been devoted to contradictions in Gen 37,²⁷ it is surprising to discover that *this* contradiction is not discussed by source critics at all.²⁸ Despite intensive searching, I have been able to find only one explicit statement of the contradiction, the one by Saydon, which makes no mention of source division.

The conative interpretation of וַיִּצְלֵהוּ has a long history before the twentieth century, which modern scholars, including Saydon, have failed to acknowledge. Already in the Vulgate to Gen 37:21 (ca. 400 CE), Jerome eliminated the contradiction by means of a harmonizing rendering: *nitebatur liberare eum*, “he *strove* to deliver him.”²⁹ The Judeo-Arabic rendering in the standard edition of Saadia Gaon’s *Tafsir* is virtually identical: טלב, “he *sought* to save him.”³⁰ Martin Luther’s rendering is volitive

26. Saydon, “The Conative Imperfect in Hebrew,” 125.

27. See, for example, Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37–50*, trans. J. J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1986), 23: “Source division found its strongest arguments in this chapter—different names for the same persons, doublets, contradictions.”

28. As used in this essay, the term *contradiction* means “prima facie contradiction.”

29. For an early modern Latin rendering that is *literally* conative, see Peter Martyr Vermigli, *In primum librum Mosis ... commentarii* (Zurich: Froschauer, 1569), 152a: “conatus est eripere eum” (contrast 152b: “Ruben contendit eripere ... iam suo consilio eripuerat”).

30. Derenbourg, *Oeuvres complètes*, 1:58 lines 9–10. This rendering would seem to be a perfect example of Saadia’s declared intention to use translation to eliminate contradictions; see Moses Zucker, ed., *גאון לבראשית רב סעדיה גאון פירושי רב* (New York: JTSA, 1984), 17–18 (Heb. trans., 191–92); and Richard C. Steiner, “Saadia vs. Rashi: On the Shift from Meaning-Maximalism to Meaning-Minimalism in Medieval Biblical Lexicology,” *JQR*

rather than conative: *wolt er jn ... erretten* “he wanted to save him.”³¹ Many modern scholars, including prominent source critics, have adopted one of these two premodern harmonizations,³² attributing them, however, to modern sources if they discuss them at all.

It must be said that the philological basis of these two harmonizations is quite flimsy. This is especially true of the conative one, explicitly rejected already by a leading nineteenth-century Hebraist.³³ To defend

88 (1998): 216–20. On the other hand, virtually all of the early manuscripts accessible to me read לָצַח “he saved him”; see the critical apparatus of Joshua Blau, *הספרות הערבית* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1980), 21–22; as well as T-S NS 339.10 (1v); Oxford heb. d.56/1 (1r); Oxford Opp. Add. Qu. 98 f. 29b; Paris Mosseri III, 197.1 (1r); and St. Petersburg Yevr. II C 1 part 2, f. 90b (copied by a scribe active ca. 1009). It is not impossible that the different readings belong to different editions of the *Tafsir* prepared by Saadia; see Richard C. Steiner, *A Biblical Translation in the Making: The Evolution and Impact of Saadia Gaon’s Tafsir* (Cambridge: Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies, 2010), 77–84. For later Hebrew paraphrases of וַיִּצְלָהוּ with the verb השתדל “he strove” inserted, see the commentary of Levi b. Gershon (Rabag) ad loc. and *פירוש המלבי”ם ... אוצר הפירושים* (Jerusalem: Pardes, 1956), 63.

31. *Biblia, das ist, die gantze heilige Schrift Deudsch* (Wittenberg: Lufft, 1534), 25a.

32. Luther is followed by Carl W. E. Nägelsbach, *Hebräische grammatik als leitfaden für den gymnasial- und akademischen unterricht* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1856), 189 §100.4 n. 2; Paul Volz and Wilhelm Rudolph, *Der Elohist als Erzähler: Ein Irrweg der Pentateuchkritik?* (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1933), 153; and Lothar Ruppert, *Genesis: Ein Kritischer und theologischer Kommentar: 4. Teilband: Gen 37,1–50,26* (Würzburg: Echter, 2008), 86. Jerome is followed by Dominikus von Brentano, *Die heilige Schrift des alten Testaments* (Frankfurt am Main: Varentrapp & Wenner, 1796), 204 (“suchte er ihn ... zu retten”); Karl David Ilgen, *Die Urkunden des ersten Buchs von Moses in ihrer Urgestalt* (Halle: Hemmerde & Schwetschke, 1798), 241; Johann Jahn, *Grammatica linguae hebraicae* (Vienna: Beck, 1809), 155; Emil Kautzsch and Albert Socin, *Die Genesis: Mit äusserer Unterscheidung der Quellenschriften* (Freiburg: Mohr, 1888), 87; Otto Procksch, *Die Genesis* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1913), 216; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, AB 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 291; Westermann *Genesis 37–50*, 33, 34, 41; Victor P. Hamilton, *Genesis Chapters 18–50*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 416 with n. 6; Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 693; Rolf J. Furuli, *New Understanding of the Verbal System of Classical Hebrew* (Oslo: Awatu, 2006), 60–61; Schwartz, “How the Compiler of the Pentateuch Worked,” 267; and Joel S. Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 262 n. 11.

33. See Eduard König, *Historisch-kritisches Lehrgebäude der hebräischen Sprache*, 3 vols. (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1881–1895), 3:88–89 §194d; König, *Die Genesis* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1919), 639. See also Berlin’s comment (*Poetics and Interpretation*, 118) on the rendering “he tried to save him” in NJPS: “One need not go through contortions.”

it, Saydon is forced to blur two crucial distinctions: (1) *yiqtol* (simple imperfect) versus *wayyiqtol* (converted imperfect); and (2) wishing (volitive) versus trying (conative). From the fact that the “volitive [emphasis added] nuance of the simple imperfect *yiqtol* is commonly recognized,” he leaps to the conclusion that *wayyiqtol* (e.g., וַיִּצְלְהוּ) can have a *conative* nuance.³⁴ As we shall see in the next section, Saydon presents no compelling evidence for this conclusion. For the moment, it suffices to note that, although וַיִּצְלְהוּ is derived *etymologically* from an imperfect (more precisely: a “short” imperfect), that fact is not relevant to its *synchronic* meaning. The meaning of *wayyiqtol* must be determined not by its etymology but by its use. The latter shows that *wayyiqtol* is a positional variant of *qatal* (perfect), not *yiqtol*.³⁵

4. Is There a Conative *Wayyiqtol* in Biblical Hebrew?

Let us now look more closely at Saydon’s claim that *wayyiqtol* can have a conative meaning. According to him, there are six *wayyiqtol* verbs in the Bible (including וַיִּצְלְהוּ) that “deserve consideration” as evidence for his thesis.³⁶ Unfortunately, as hinted above, the thesis conflates two distinct concepts. Although the title of his study mentions only the “conative imperfect,” its first words are “the volitive or conative idea.”³⁷ Later in that paragraph he speaks of the “volitive nuance,” and later in the article he translates two of his six examples with “wanted” instead of “tried.” In my opinion, these two meanings must be considered distinct until proven otherwise. The distinction is clear in “I wanted to save my valuables, but it was too dangerous even to try.”

In any event, it is not difficult to demonstrate that all six of Saydon’s prooftexts can and should be interpreted differently. Here are Saydon’s examples and arguments,³⁸ followed by my responses to them.

1. וַיִּצַר (1 Kgs 20:1): “But it appears from vv 16–21 that Ben-Hadad did not actually besiege Samaria. How could the men of Samaria go out of the city and attack the Aramaeans if that were besieged?”

34. Saydon, “The Conative Imperfect in Hebrew,” 124–25.

35. Richard C. Steiner, “Ancient Hebrew,” in *The Semitic Languages*, ed. Robert Hetzron (London: Routledge, 1997), 156–57.

36. Saydon, “The Conative Imperfect in Hebrew,” 125–26.

37. Saydon, “The Conative Imperfect in Hebrew,” 124.

38. Saydon, “The Conative Imperfect in Hebrew,” 125–26.

This rhetorical question overlooks the long, well-documented history of siege warfare:

Sorties were very common during sieges. Procopius famously records a total of 69 engagements outside the walls between the Romans and the Goths at Rome.³⁹

Sorties were an essential strategy of defending against a siege. Despite facing superior numbers of forces, a sallying party could often turn the tide of a war (Thuc. 7.24.2–3) or convince an enemy to abandon a siege (Diod. 14.17.10–11).⁴⁰

An interesting parallel to 1 Kgs 20:16–21 is found in Arrian's account (*Anab.* 2.21.8–9) of Alexander's siege of Tyre.⁴¹ According to a common interpretation of that account, the selection of midday for a Tyrian naval sortie was based on Alexander's habit of withdrawing to his tent to eat lunch and rest at that time.⁴² Something similar could perhaps be said of the sortie from Samaria described in 1 Kgs 20:16–21: its midday timing may have been based on intelligence that Ben-Hadad usually had lunch with wine in his quarters at that time.⁴³

Evidence that is even more directly relevant comes from the story of David and Bathsheba in 2 Sam 11. Verse 1 relates that Joab and his men laid siege to Rabbah, the Ammonite capital. That statement does not, in

39. Leif I. R. Petersen, *Siege Warfare and Military Organization in the Successor States: Byzantium, the West and Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 290–93, here 290.

40. Michael G. Seaman, "The Advent of the Night Sortie in Siege Warfare," tinyurl.com/SBLPress064706c1.

41. James Romm, ed., and Pamela Mensch, trans., *The Landmark Arrian: The Campaigns of Alexander; Anabasis Alexandrous* (New York: Pantheon, 2010), 89–90.

42. Paul B. Kern, *Ancient Siege Warfare* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 213–14 (for other sorties, see 109, 121, 133, 169, 173, 207, 218, 254, 257, 265, 284, 301, 304, and 312); Stephen English, *The Sieges of Alexander the Great* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2010), 76–77, esp. 77: "This kind of counter-attack during the enemy's lunch break was as old as Greek warfare."

43. This parallel supports the traditional interpretation of **בִּסְכוֹת** as "in the (military) huts." For the interpretation "in Succoth," see Yigael Yadin, "Some Aspects of the Strategy of Ahab and David (I Kings 20; II Samuel 11)," *Bib* 36 (1955): 332–51; P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel*, AB 9 (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 278, 287; Mordechai Cogan, *I Kings*, AB 10 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 459, 464; and Saydon himself ("The Conative Imperfect in Hebrew," 125).

any way, contradict verses 17 and 23, which describe a successful Ammonite sortie from the city during which many of Joab's men were killed. The verb used in verse 1 is וַיִּצְרּוּ, which is the plural of וַיִּצַר, the verb used in 1 Kgs 20:1. Neither of them means "tried to besiege."

2. וַיִּנָּס (2 Kgs 9:23): "Joram did not flee; for he was shot between his shoulders by Jehu as soon as he made up his mind to flee."

The phrase בֵּין זְרָעָיו (9:24) is comparable to בֵּין יְדֵיָהּ in Zech 13:6, which refers to the back. This is consistent with the sequence of events in 2 Kgs 9:23–24: Joram was shot *after* reining around and calling out to Ahaziah. In short, the arrow struck Joram in the back, while his horses were running away from Jehu; thus, by definition, he was already fleeing. Saydon may be assuming that נֹס is *telic* (an *accomplishment* verb) and thus that, without the conative interpretation, וַיִּנָּס would imply that Joram managed to escape. However, that is not the case, as we see from נָס וַיִּמָּלֵט, "he fled and escaped" (1 Sam 19:10), not to mention וַיִּבְרַח וַיִּמָּלֵט (19:12) and בָּרַח וַיִּמָּלֵט (19:18), with בָּרַח = נֹס. In English, too, "X fled" does not imply that "X escaped." It makes perfect sense to say, "The suspect, who fled on foot, did not manage to escape; he was apprehended a short time later."

3. וַיִּצֵא (Jer 37:12): "But Jeremiah was arrested at the gate of Benjamin and was not allowed to go out of the city."

Jeremiah would hardly have been arrested as a defector if he were still *inside* the gate. The city gate was a large edifice, a major hub of commerce, government, and so on. Thus, Jeremiah could have had many legitimate reasons for being there. No doubt there was a guard post just *outside* the gate—that is to say, just outside the city—where people could be prevented from entering and leaving. It must have been there that Jeremiah was detained, just after walking out. Indeed, Saydon himself uses the phrase "at the gate" (rather than "in the gate") in paraphrasing the words בָּשַׁעַר וַיִּצֵא יְרֵמְיָהוּ מִירוּשָׁלַם לְלֶכֶת אֶרֶץ בְּנֵימִן (Jer 37:13).⁴⁴ It is also possible that וַיִּצֵא יְרֵמְיָהוּ מִירוּשָׁלַם לְלֶכֶת אֶרֶץ בְּנֵימִן has an idiomatic elliptical meaning: "Jeremiah set out for the land of Benjamin from (his home in) Jerusalem" (cf. Judg 19:27). Either way, there is no reason to translate "he *tried* to go out."

4. וַיִּבְנוּ (2 Chr 14:5): "As the rebuilding of cities is mentioned in the following verses, this statement is to be taken either proleptically or as

44. For the rendering "at the Benjamin Gate," see, e.g., RSV; ESV; William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 265; William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 2:922.

expressing the king's intention to rebuild the cities. Hence: he wanted to rebuild.”

A genuinely conative interpretation is actually *impossible* here because, as noted by Saydon, the next verse makes clear that Asa did not merely *try* to rebuild the cities. Saydon attempts to solve the problem by replacing “tried” with “wanted,” but he himself mentions a better solution.

5. תְּשׁוּפָנוּ (Gen 3:15). “The woman's seed will completely defeat the serpent, while the serpent will only try, but in vain, to bite the heel of his adversary.”

Snake-bite victims, ancient and modern, would presumably find this interpretation difficult to accept.

6. וַיִּצְלְהוּ (Gen 37:21): “But Reuben did not deliver Joseph. He only tried to deliver him, but his plan was, at least partially, frustrated by his brothers.”

A better interpretation will be presented in the next section.

In short, there is no good reason to accept any of Saydon's examples as evidence that *wayyiqtol* can have a conative meaning in Hebrew.

5. Rashbam's Interpretation of וַיִּצְלְהוּ

Rashbam's comment on וַיִּצְלְהוּ מִיָּדָם is concise: שלא נהרג. In other words, וַיִּשְׁמַע רְאוּבֵן וַיִּצְלְהוּ מִיָּדָם means “Reuben heard (this, i.e., the brothers' plot to kill Joseph) and saved him from (being killed at) their hand(s).” This interpretation assumes that וַיִּצְלְהוּ מִיָּדָם alludes to וַיִּתְּנָבְלוּ אֹתוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ. The assumption is quite plausible because these two clauses are also *structurally* related, as parallel proleptic summaries.⁴⁵ Thus Rashbam's interpretation fits the structure of the narrative perfectly. It is not surprising that this simple and natural interpretation has been adopted by many subsequent scholars.⁴⁶

45. See at n. 21 above. Furthermore, “the word יד in מִיָּדָם also appears in Reuben's speech (and Judah's) in an expression designating murder” (email communication from Adina Moshavi).

46. Sebastian Münster, *Hebraica Biblia* (Basel: Isingrinus & Petri, 1546), 82: “that is, from death; and, in the Hebrew, they do not have ‘he strove to deliver him,’ as our translator [= Jerome] interprets”; Obadiah Seforno, *באור על התורה* (Venice: Giorgio di Cavalli, 1567), 20b: “by preventing impetuous action that would result in irreparable harm (lit., ‘a crooked thing that cannot be made straight’)”; Henry Ainsworth, *Annotations upon the Five Bookes of Moses, the Booke of the Psalmes, and the Song of Songs...* (London: Bellamie, 1627), 135, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ebo/A11649.0001.001?view=toc>: “to weet, in respect of death which they intended

This interpretation of *וַיַּצְלֵהוּ מִיָּדָם* has ramifications for the syntactic relationship between *לְמַעַן הַצִּיל אֶת־אֲבִיו* and *לְהַשִּׁיבוֹ אֶל־אָבִיו*. It implies that the latter is not an appositive modifier meaning “that is, to restore him to his father.” It must be either additive (“and to restore him”)⁴⁷ or adverbial (“in order to restore him”).⁴⁸ Concerning the two halves of *לְמַעַן הַצִּיל אֶת־אֲבִיו*, Kidner writes: “If Reuben’s intention only half succeeded, it was still true that he delivered Joseph.”⁴⁹

6. Harmonization by Source Critics

One sometimes gets the impression that critical scholars, almost by definition, reject all forms of harmonization.⁵⁰ It is now clear that this is not the case. Jerome’s modern followers have interpreted *וַיַּצְלֵהוּ* as a conative in order to harmonize Gen 37:21a with the rest of the story, from 37:28b onward—and perhaps also with 37:22b. Despite the philological flimsiness of this interpretation, a good number of prominent source critics, from the

against him”; Matthew Poole, *Synopsis criticorum*, 5 vols. (London: Fleisher & Roycroft, 1669), 1:249 (alongside the conative interpretation); Mendelssohn, *נתיבות שלום*, s.v. “וַיַּצְלֵהוּ מִיָּדָם”; August Knobel, *Die Genesis* (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1852), 262; Samuel Davide Luzzatto, *חמשה חומשי תורה*, 5 vols. (Padua: Sacchetto, 1871–1876), 1:340; August Dillmann, *Die Genesis*, 4th ed. (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1882), 375; Jakob Horowitz, “Die Josephserzählung,” *Jeschurun* 4 (1917): 678; Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 118; Ludwig Schmidt, *Literarische Studien zur Josephsgeschichte* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986), 146; Yoshinobu Endo, *The Verbal System of Classical Hebrew in the Joseph Story: An Approach from Discourse Analysis* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1996), 279 (alongside the conative interpretation); Jürgen Ebach, *Genesis 37–50* (Freiburg: Herder, 2007), 90; John A. Cook, review of *A New Understanding of the Verbal System of Classical Hebrew*, by Rolf J. Furuli, *JNES* 69 (2010): 250 (rejecting the conative interpretation).

47. So Septuagint and Peshitta. For additive parallels, see *לְשַׁבֵּת אֶת־נֹחַ לְהִיחַ לְעַם* (Gen 34:22) and *לְמַעַן הַבִּיא אֶת־נֹחַ לְתֵת לָנוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ* (Deut 6:23). The closest parallel in the Joseph story itself is *לְשַׁבֵּב אֶצְלָה לְהִיחַ עִמָּה* (Gen 39:10), where there is general agreement that the relationship is not appositive, even if it is unclear whether the understood conjunction is *and* (see, e.g., b. Sota 3b and Rashi) or *or*.

48. So Saadia Gaon’s *Tafsir* in Derenbourg, *Oeuvres complètes*, 1:58 (לִירְדָה “to restore him”); and in Blau, *הספרות הערבית היהודית: פרקים נבחרים* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1980), 22 n. 57 (לִירְדָה, but וִירְדָה “and restore him” in one witness).

49. Kidner, *Genesis*, 182.

50. See, for example, Michael Fishbane, *Jewish Hermeneutical Theology*, ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 199: “fundamentalistic or harmonizing”; and Schwartz, “ירידתו של יוסף,” 7 n. 13: “harmonistic, farfetched.”

eighteenth century to the present, have been willing to accept it—presumably because the Documentary Hypothesis was unable to account for this particular contradiction.⁵¹ This willingness is a tacit admission that synchronic explanations (e.g., harmonization of contradictions) can obviate the need for diachronic ones (e.g., source division).⁵²

Another contradiction in the Joseph story worth mentioning here is the one between Gen 37:23–24 and 42:21 (רָאִינוּ צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהַתְּחַנְּנוּ אֵלֵינוּ). The contradiction is pointed out by Gunkel in his commentary to Gen 42:21: “The description of Joseph’s anguish is not found in the account of Gen 37.⁵³ That is ‘made up for’ here.” Horst Seebass, citing Gunkel, comments simply that the description is “very meaningful here but not to be added in chapter 37.”⁵⁴ Here we see a source critic providing a harmonizing, *literary* explanation when the Documentary Hypothesis is unable to account for a contradiction.⁵⁵

Before dismissing these as isolated cases of little significance, we would do well to recall that Gen 37 is the chapter in which “source division found its strongest arguments.”⁵⁶ It is in that very chapter that important critics have treated harmonization as a legitimate—and even indispensable—tool of biblical scholarship.

7. Conclusions

The clause וַיִּצְלְהוּ מִיָּדָם (Gen 37:21) is proleptic (anticipatory) rather than misplaced or conative (see below). The appearance of proleptic summaries in biblical narratives is noted already in Mishnat R. Eliezer and the commentaries of Rashbam and Abraham Ibn Ezra. Some scholars have identified three or four proleptic summaries in Gen 37 alone, including וַיִּצְלְהוּ מִיָּדָם and וַיִּתְּנָבְלוּ אֹתוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ (37:18). These two are parallel, serving

51. According to all versions of the Documentary Hypothesis, both J and E agree on one point: Joseph was not saved in the sense of being brought back to his father.

52. See at n. 20 above.

53. Horst Seebass, *Genesis III* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000), 88.

54. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 401; see also Skinner, *Genesis*, 476. Today this contradiction (see n. 28 above)—like the one between Gen 42:13 (Joseph did *not* ask about their family) and 43:7; 44:19 (Joseph *did* ask about their family)—is viewed as the result of gapping followed later in the narrative by gap-filling.

55. Both Gen 37:23–24 and 42:21 are assigned to E.

56. See n. 27 above.

to highlight the stark contrast between Reuben's plan and his brothers' plot. This is but one manifestation of a striking feature of Gen 37: the main actors are contrasted with one another.

Some scholars assign a conative sense to וַיִּצְלֵהוּ: "and he *tried* to save him." This interpretation, appearing already in the Vulgate and defended by P. P. Saydon, arose from the assumption that וַיִּצְלֵהוּ מִיָּדָם is to be interpreted—based on (one reading of) אֶל-אָבִיו לְהַשִּׁיבוֹ מִיָּדָם אֹתוֹ הֲצִיל אֹתוֹ מִיָּדָם (37:22)—as a reference to restoring Joseph to his father. Interpreted in that way, וַיִּצְלֵהוּ מִיָּדָם seems to contradict the rest of the story, from וַיָּבִיאוּ אֹתוֹ מִצְרַיִם (37:28) onward. Saydon suggests that a conative interpretation can resolve this contradiction—and five others—in the Bible.

The arguments for the existence of a conative *wayyiqtol* provided by Saydon are far from compelling. The same goes for his examples, including וַיִּצְלֵהוּ מִיָּדָם. As first noted by Rashbam, that clause does not contradict the continuation of the story when it is interpreted as a reference to saving Joseph from his brothers' *murderous* plot, that is, as an allusion to וַיִּתְנַבְּלוּ אֹתוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ, the parallel proleptic summary. This interpretation is perfectly compatible with two of the three syntactic readings of אֹתוֹ הֲצִיל מִיָּדָם לְהַשִּׁיבוֹ אֶל-אָבִיו.

Despite Rashbam's solution, a good number of prominent source critics, from the eighteenth century to the present day, have followed Jerome in using the philologically flimsy conative interpretation of וַיִּצְלֵהוּ to harmonize Gen 37:21a with 37:28b onward. Their treatment of this contradiction, in the chapter that has long served as the poster child for source division, is a tacit but powerful admission that harmonization is a legitimate—and even indispensable—tool of critical scholarship.

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