

The Interrogative-Indefinite Puzzle in the Context of Biblical Hebrew

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Abstract

The biblical corpus features a number of verses in which interrogative pronouns appear in non-interrogative contexts. The same phenomenon is observed in many other languages and gives rise to the question known in the linguistic literature as “the interrogative-indefinite puzzle,” namely, what is the natural connection between the interrogative and indefinite functions. This paper seeks to explore how this question should be examined in the context of the Biblical Hebrew data. It will be argued that a consideration of typological observations can yield important insights into this question. Subsequently, it proposes a formal semantic analysis of the indefinite pronouns in question and shows how the proposed approach can help explain their distribution.

Keywords: Biblical Hebrew; semantics; diachrony; indefinite pronouns; interrogatives

Introduction

The Biblical Hebrew corpus features a number of verses in which interrogative pronouns such as $\text{מָה}/mā$ (what) appear in non-interrogative contexts. In these contexts, the pronouns assume an indefinite function, as illustrated in (1):

- (1) $\text{וְהִגַּדְתִּי לָךְ, מָה, וְרָאִיתִי מָה, וְהִגַּדְתִּי לָךְ}$
wě-rā'ītī mā wě-higgadī l-āk
 and-see.prf.1.SG what and-tell.prf.1SG to-2.M.SG
 “If I see anything, I will tell you” (1 Sam 19:3)

The same phenomenon is observed in many other languages, and gives rise to the question known in the linguistic literature as “the interrogative-indefinite puzzle,” namely, what is the connection between the interrogative and indefinite functions (see, e.g., Bhat 2000; 2004, Chapter 10; see also Cheng 1991, 78–111; Haspelmath 1997,

Section 7.3; Haida 2008) (when referring to the pronouns independently of their meaning I will henceforth use the term *wh*-forms).

This paper seeks to explore how this question should be examined in the context of the Biblical Hebrew data. I will begin by considering this phenomenon with a typological perspective. Besides the trivial fact that features of languages can be grouped together and studied cross-linguistically in order to observe general trends and similar characteristics, I will argue that in this specific issue a consideration of typological observations can yield important insights into this question. Subsequently, I will propose a formal semantic analysis of the indefinite pronouns in question and show how the proposed approach can help explain their distribution.

The main contribution of this paper is therefore on the methodological level: it provides a methodology for tackling not only this particular puzzle but also other related questions in the study of Biblical Hebrew. To be more specific, the current discussion is relevant to the following methodological issues in the study of Biblical Hebrew grammar: (1) How should grammatical questions be approached when the instances of the grammatical phenomenon in question are very few? (2) What is the value of generalisations concerning the data in such cases? (3) When forms have more than one function, should their multifunctionality be explained in diachronic terms or in semantic-synchronic ones?

The next section introduces the grammatical forms classified as indefinite pronouns, and briefly presents some of the previous literature on these forms in Biblical Hebrew. Thereafter, the Biblical Hebrew data relevant to a discussion on the interrogative-indefinite puzzle is presented. It surveys the contexts in which the *wh*-forms, which generally function as interrogatives, assume an indefinite meaning, and then considers the data from a cross-linguistic perspective. The next section introduces and develops a semantic analysis that accounts for both uses of the *wh*-forms. The final section is devoted to conclusions and to reflections on the methodological aspects of this paper.

Indefinite Pronouns

Indefinite pronouns are grammatical forms such as *somebody*, *something*, *somewhere*, *anything* and *anytime* in English, or *dareka* “somebody, anybody,” *dokoka* “somewhere, anywhere,” *daremo* “anybody, nobody” and *nanimo* “anything, nothing” in Japanese. The term “indefinite pronoun” aims to capture both the syntax and the semantics of these forms. “Pronoun” indicates that many of these forms have the distribution of noun phrases (although some have the distribution of adverbial phrases and other expressions), whereas “indefinite” alludes to the fact that these forms are indeterminate in their meaning.

Delineating the semantic functions that are expressed by indefinite pronouns cross-linguistically, Haspelmath (1997) discerns the following types:

Semantic types:

- a. Specific, known to the speaker
(2) Somebody called while you were away: guess who!
- b. Specific, unknown to the speaker
(3) I heard something, but I couldn't tell what kind of sound it was.
- c. Non-specific, irrealis
(4) Please try somewhere else.
- d. Polar question
(5) Did anybody tell you anything about it?
- e. Conditional protasis
(6) If you see anything, tell me immediately.
- f. Standard of comparison
(7) In Freiburg the weather is nicer than anywhere in Germany,
- g. Direct negation
(8) Nobody knows the answer.
- h. Indirect negation
(9) I don't think that anybody knows the answer.
- i. Free choice
(10) Anybody can solve this simple problem.

Specific indefinite pronouns in particular languages generally have several of the functions on this list. This list therefore serves primarily to draw typological maps as in Figure 1, capturing generalisations about the distribution of such forms. Figure 1 indicates that, “[w]hen an indefinite series expresses two non-adjacent functions on this map, the prediction is that it also expresses all the other functions in between these two functions” (Haspelmath 1997, 236).

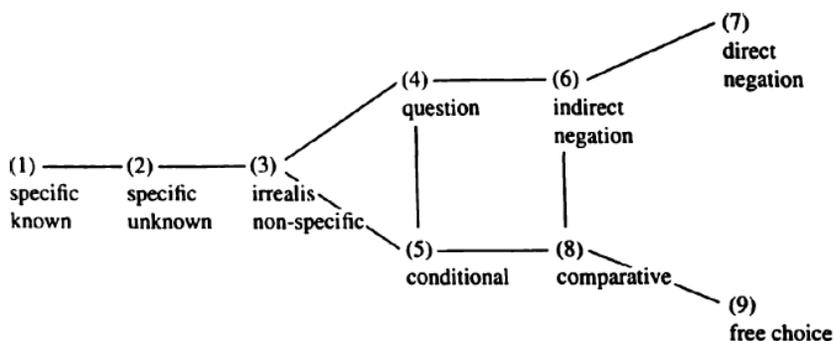


Figure 1: Typological map for the uses of indefinite pronouns (Haspelmath 1997, 236)

Note that all of the above-listed functions except for standard of comparison (f) and free choice (i) involve existential quantification. At this point of the discussion, we need not determine whether these forms express the quantifier directly or inherit their quantificational force from an external operator, à la Heim (1982), (see Cheng 1991). This question will be addressed in the semantic discussion below. As for free-choice expressions, there is a longstanding debate in the linguistic literature as to whether their meaning is best captured as existential or universal quantification (for a recent summary of the literature see Alonso Ovalle and Menéndez-Benito (forthcoming)).

Before turning to the discussion on the interrogative-indefinite puzzle in the context of Biblical Hebrew, a brief note about the literature on indefinite pronouns in the biblical corpus. A number of grammar books list the pronominal expressions that serve the abovementioned functions in Biblical Hebrew. Discussions of specific forms mostly revolve around the Negative Polarity Item מְאוּמָה and the forms that can be safely assumed to be historically derived, via bleaching, from lexical nouns such as אִישׁ, אָדָם, דָּבָר (Grant 1977; Faber 1988; Stein 2008; Bar-Asher Siegal 2012; Keren 2012; 2015; Moshavi 2018, 2019; Naudé and Rendsburg 2013; Stein forthcoming, who also reviews comments in dictionaries and grammar books about these forms). A comprehensive treatment of this topic in Biblical Hebrew has yet to be published.

Interrogatives as Indefinite Pronouns in Biblical Hebrew and Beyond

This section introduces the data from Biblical Hebrew relevant to the discussion on the interrogative-indefinite puzzle and considers this data from a cross-linguistic perspective.

In fact, already in a section devoted to interrogative pronouns, Gesenius (§137) states: “On the meaning of מִי and מַה as interrogative is based also their use as *indefinite*

pronouns (equivalent to *quisquis*, *quodcumque* or *quicquam*.)” I turn now to present all instances in the biblical corpus where the *wh*-forms have an indefinite, rather than interrogative, function. I exclude from this discussion the widespread phenomenon of using these pronouns to introduce a relative clause.¹ The examples below feature the standard JPS translation of the verses, with adaptations in the parts containing the relevant forms. Transliteration and gloss are provided only for those parts of the examples.

(11) 2 Sam 18:

a.

יב כִּי בְּאִזְנֵינוּ צָוָה הַמֶּלֶךְ, אֶתְךָ וְאֶת-אַבִּישי וְאֶת- 12 for in our hearing the king charged thee and Abishai and Ittai, saying: Beware (lest) someone (touches) the young man Absalom.
 אֶתִּי לְאמֹר, שְׁמְרוּ-מִי, בְּנַעַר בְּאַבְשָׁלֹם.

šimrū *mī b-an-na‘ar*
 beware.IMP.2.M.PL who in-DEF-lad
b-‘abšālōm
 in-Absalom

b.

כב וַיִּסָּף עוֹד אַחִימֵעַז בֶּן-צְדוֹק, וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-יֹאבֵב, 22 Then said Ahimaaz the son of Zadok yet again to Joab: “But come what may, let me, run after the Cushite.”
 וַיְהִי מָה, אֲרָצָה-נָא גַם-אֲנִי אַחֲרֵי הַכּוּשִׁי

wī-hī *mā*
 an-be.SUBJ.3.M.SG what

-
- 1 There are various reasons for excluding the use of the *wh*-forms in relative clauses from this paper. 1) The use of these forms in embedded contexts is a well-known phenomenon and their connection to interrogatives is well studied. As noted throughout the paper, I follow in this regard the theoretical linguistic literature in which the Interrogative-Indefinite Puzzle is considered independently of the other usages of these forms. 2) Unlike in the use of these forms as indefinites, the use in relative clauses is not restricted to certain well-defined environments. One of the main questions that interests me in this paper is the restrictions on the uses of these forms when used as indefinites. 3) Relative clauses present additional syntactic complications which requires a different type of discussions that goes beyond the scope of the current paper.
- 2 Some textual variants have לִי “for my sake” instead of מִי “who”; it is reasonable to assume that this change reflects the fact that this is a non-standard use of the *wh*-pronoun. As noted, there are relatively numerous occurrences of these forms in this specific chapter in II Samuel 18. This fact strengthens the assumption that the form מִי is the original in this text. (I wish to thank Adina Moshavi for raising this issue).

(14) Prov. 9:

יג אִשָּׁת כְּסִילוֹת, הַמִּיָּה; וּבִלְ-יָדָעָה מָה. 13 The woman Folly is riotous; she is thoughtless, and knoweth nothing.

u-bal yād'ā mā
and-NEG know.PRF.3.F.SG what

(15) Job 13:

יג הִחַרְיִשׁוּ מִמֶּנִּי, וְאִדְבָּרָה-אֲנִי; וְיַעֲבֹר עָלַי מָה. 13 Hold your peace, let me alone, that I may speak, and let come on me something/what will.

wě-ya 'ābor 'āla-y mā
and-pass.SUBJ.3.M.SG on-1.SG what

Observations

1. Instances of *wh*-forms used as indefinites are few in the Hebrew Bible, and almost half of them are concentrated in a single chapter, 2 Samuel 18.
2. The *wh*-forms appear as indefinite pronouns only in marked environments: negative statements (11d, 14), conditionals (12, 13), imperatives (11a), and statements of a possible event in future time (11b-c, 12, 13, 15). The corpus contains not a single case of past or present assertions (“I saw something,” with a specific reading).
3. The relevant pronouns are often translated into English using an expression consisting of interrogative+ever, conveying indifference (i.e., the referent can be any member of the relevant set). This seems to be the case in all the positive statements (but not the negative ones, and less distinctly in the conditionals).

These observations give rise to the following two questions:

1. What can be learned from the fact that this phenomenon is quite rare in the Hebrew Bible (as noted in observation 1)?
2. Given the small number of examples, what is the value of observations 2–3?

Let us leave the first question aside for the moment and tackle the second by taking a cross-linguistic look at the phenomenon under discussion. As stated above, the phenomenon of forms that have both an interrogative and an indefinite function is common cross-linguistically (not to mention languages in which interrogatives can be transformed into indefinites by adding an indefiniteness marker). In fact, in some languages sentences containing these expressions are systematically ambiguous between an indefinite and interrogative reading. Cook (1966, 339) provides an example

(16a) from Mundari (an Austro-Asiatic language) and Kotek and Erlewine (2019) demonstrate this ambiguity with (16b), from Chuj (a Mayan language):

(16)

a. oko kami menai

what work is

(i) “What work is there?”

(ii) “There is some work.”

b. Ix-Ø-k-il tas

PRFV-B3-A1P-see what

(i) “We saw something.”

(ii) “We saw what?” (echo question)

In most languages, including Biblical Hebrew, in which the interrogative and indefinite expressions are homophonous, there is no ambiguity at the sentential level. Below are examples from a variety of language families (see Haspelmath 1997, 170 for a review of the prevalence of this phenomenon, and for references for the examples below):

(17)

a) Classical Greek:

τίς “who?” *τις* “someone”

ποῦ “where?” *που* “somewhere”

b) Chinese

shei “who?”, “someone”

shénme “what?”, “something”

c) Hopi (Uto-Aztecan):

hak “who?”, “someone”

haqam “where?”, “somewhere”

d) Newari (Sino-Tibetan)

su “who?”, “nobody” (with verbal negation).

chu “what?” “nothing” (with verbal negation)

e) Dyrbal (Pama-Nyungan):

wanya “who?”, “someone”

minya “what?”, “something”

f) Khmer (Austro-Asiatic):

qwɔy “what?”, “something”

naa “where?”, “somewhere”

Haspelmath (1997, 171–72), and Bhat (2004, 234–48) identify a variety of strategies used by languages to distinguish the interrogative uses of the *wh*-forms from the indefinite ones, most of them differences in syntactic distribution. In Biblical Hebrew, for example, the interrogative forms are fronted to a clause-initial position, while the indefinite ones remain *in situ*.

It is interesting to note that in a cross-linguistic review of the Semitic languages, Faber (1988) finds indefinite pronouns with the enclitic *-ma* that are based on interrogative pronouns. She argues that the enclitic *-ma* was originally a negative marker added to the bare form of interrogatives. If we accept her assumption, it is reasonable to speculate that, at an early stage, bare interrogatives in Semitic languages often doubled as (positive) indefinite pronouns, and that these indefinite pronouns also had a negative form (parallel to *somebody* vs. *nobody* in English).

Reviewing the semantic and syntactic environments in which *wh*-forms function as indefinites in the Indo-European languages, Haspelmath notes that “the conditions for the use of bare interrogatives in these languages are remarkably similar.” He lists the following environments:

Conditional clauses

(18)

a) Latin:

Si quis mortuus fuerit non habens filium...
 if who dead becomes not having son
 “If someone dies, having no children...” (NT Matt. 22: 24)

b) Old Church Slavonic:

Ašte kŭto xoštetiš po mŭne iti...
 if who wants after me go:iNF
 “If anyone wants to come after me...” (NT Matt. 16: 24)

Questions

(19)

a) Old High German:

Habet ir hier waz, thaz man ezzem mugi?
 have you here what that one eat might
 “Do you have anything to eat here?”

b) Slovene:

Se je zatreskala v kašnega fanta?
REFL is fallen in which young.man
“Has she fallen in love with some young man?”

As part of indirect negation

(20)

a) Latin

neque Patrem quis novit, nisi filius
and.not Father.ACC who knows if.not son
“neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son” (NT Mat 11:27)

b) Gothic

Ni manna in analaugnein hwa taujiþ
not man in secret what does
“Nobody does anything in secret” (NT John 7: 4).

With imperatives

(21)

a) Slovene:

Piši kaj iz Pariza
write:IMPV what from Paris
“Write something from Paris!”

b) Belorussian:

Njaxaj jana paprosic' kago pamagčy
let her ask whom to:help
“Let her ask somebody to help her!”

In future/uncertain statements

(22)

a) Gothic

skal þus hwa qipan
I.must to:you what say
“I must tell you something.” (NT)

b) Polish

Może on jeszcze kiedy przyjedzie
maybe he still when will.arrive
“Perhaps he will still arrive sometime.”

Returning to the typological map, we find that in western Indo-European languages *wh*-forms used as indefinites appear in all non-emphatic non-specific contexts but are excluded from past or current present affirmative declarative clauses. Haspelmath therefore asks: “Why should bare interrogatives used as indefinites be restricted in this way?” He does not provide an answer to this question but adds that “the facts from the western Indo-European families ... are fairly robust, and the generalisations cannot be due to coincidence” (1997, 173).

As noted above, the Biblical Hebrew pronouns present a similar picture. This brings us to a crucial point regarding the Biblical Hebrew data. Given the small size of the Biblical Hebrew data-set, one might suspect that the distribution of the forms is accidental, namely, due to an incidental absence of other attestations. However, the fact that a similar distribution is observed in another language family suggests that this is not the case, and that the available data faithfully reflects the range of syntactic/semantic environments in which these pronouns assumed an indefinite function.

The cross-linguistic data gives rise to the following questions:

- 1) Why are the same *wh*-forms used both as interrogatives and as indefinite pronouns?
- 2) Why are *wh*-forms restricted to particular environments when functioning as indefinite pronouns?

On a higher level, one may also ask questions about the *nature* of questions 1 and 2:

- a. Are these diachronic or synchronic questions?
- b. Is there a common diachronic path of development from one of the functions to the other?
- c. What is the relationship between the diachronic and the synchronic questions?

Haspelmath (1997, 174–76) provides a detailed review of the literature on questions 1 and 2 but concludes that no satisfactory answers are suggested for them. He does, however, state that there is no evidence to suggest that these questions should be addressed in diachronic terms. The rest of this paper is dedicated to answering these questions. The next section proposes a semantic analysis of the *wh*-forms that associates them with the same basic meaning in all environments, which can take either an interrogative or an indefinite reading, depending on context.

The Semantics of Interrogative-Indefinite Pronouns

Bhat (2004) argues that, since questions can be asked without interrogative pronouns, the *wh*-forms themselves cannot be the origin of the interrogative force. He therefore concludes that *wh*-forms are basically “indefinites”—which he defines as forms indicating the speaker’s ignorance regarding the particular identity of the referent—and that questions involve two additional meaning components: (i) an act of request for information; and (ii) a restriction of this request to a particular syntactic constituent (marked by the pronoun).

In this analysis, the quantification must be part of the meaning of the indefinite pronouns themselves. This approach encounters two major problems:

- 1) Lack of compositionality: since free choice expressions seem to involve universal, rather than existential, quantification, how can the forms express different quantification in different sentences? (Cf. Cheng 1991.)
- 2) Lack of explanatory force: this approach cannot explain why these forms are never used in assertions.

In light of these problems, it seems better to adopt the approach proposed by Heim (1982), which attributes the quantificational force not to the *wh*-forms themselves but to an (overt or covert) external operator, and can therefore associate the pronouns with different quantifiers. I will follow Kratzer and Shimoyana (2002), who established the connection between the interrogative and indefinite functions using Hamblin's (1958, 1973) analysis of the semantics of questions. I will show that this approach can also account for the restrictions on the uses of these forms.

In this proposal, the indefinite reading of the pronouns results from a combination of two elements:

- i) The semantics of the *wh*-forms: they denote sets of propositions.
- ii) A logical operator that interacts with the *wh*-forms and involves possibility/modal/negative quantification over propositions.

According to this approach, the meaning of the *wh*-forms in questions is the basic one, and the interaction with different quantifications leads to the various functions of the *wh*-forms. The Biblical Hebrew examples, like many examples attested in other languages, also exhibit this connection at the morphological level, in that the same forms are used in both contexts.

The next section will present the analysis in formal semantic terms, with non-formal paraphrases for readers who are less familiar with the formal approach.

The Semantics of Questions

Hamblin (1958, 1973) makes two basic assumptions regarding the semantics of questions:

- 1) The meaning of a question is equivalent to the set of its possible answers.
- 2) The possible answers to a question constitute an exhaustive set of mutually exclusive possibilities.

Accordingly, *who* and *what* should be regarded as denoting sets of individuals, namely the set of all humans and the set of all non-human elements respectively (although in most cases the sets are obviously subjected to additional domain restrictions).

For example, “who” in (23a) denotes the set of propositions in (23b):

(23)a. Who walks?

b. {"Mary walks", "John walks", ... and so on for all individuals in the domain}

Pragmatically speaking a question sets up a choice-situation between a set of propositions, namely, those propositions that count as answers to it. (Hamblin 1973, 48)

The assumption that the possible answers to a question are an exhaustive set of mutually exclusive possibilities explains, among other things, the fact that an answer given to a question entails the negation of all other alternatives (24):

(24)A. Who walks?

B. Marry walks [infer: John doesn't].

The Semantics of *Wh*-Forms

Kratzer and Shimoyana (2002) suggest a compositional formulation of Hamblin's proposal which derives both the interrogative and the indefinite reading of *wh*-forms from the same basic meaning. They note that i) in Hamblin semantics, while most lexical items denote singleton sets, indefinite pronouns denote sets of individuals, or sets of individual alternatives, and ii) via pointwise functional application, the alternatives created by the indefinite pronouns can "expand".

More formally, for all possible worlds w and variable assignments g :

$[[\mathbf{who}]]^{w,g} = \{ x: \text{human}(x)(w) \}$ \Leftarrow **Who** denotes the set of all humans.

$[[\mathbf{walk}]]^{w,g} = \{ \lambda x \lambda w'. \text{walk}(x)(w') \}$ \Leftarrow The verb **walk** denotes a singleton set containing the property "walk"

$[[\mathbf{who walks}]]^{w,g} = \{ p: \exists x [\text{human}(x)(w) \ \& \ p = \lambda w'. \text{walk}(x)(w')] \}$

The denotation of the sentence "who walks" is a set of propositions of the form {'a walks', 'b walks', 'c walks', etc.}. To compute this set, we apply functional application 'pointwise'.

In Hamblin semantics, the alternatives expand until they encounter a relevant operator that selects them. The following are the most common operators:

Possibility modals (epistemic or deontic):

For $[[\alpha]]^{w,g} \subseteq D_{\langle st \rangle}$: $[[\text{possible } \alpha]]^{w,g} =$

$\{ \lambda w'. \exists w'' [w'' \text{ is accessible from } w' \ \& \ \exists p [p \in [[\alpha]]^{w'',g} \ \& \ p(w'') = 1]] \}$

In words: There is a world that is accessible from the relevant world in which a proposition among the set of the alternatives is true.

Necessity modals (epistemic or deontic):

For $[[\alpha]]^{w,g} \subseteq D_{<st>}$: $[[\text{possible } \alpha]]^{w,g} =$

$$\{\lambda w'. \forall w'' [w'' \text{ is accessible from } w' \ \& \ \exists p [p \in [[a]]^{w',g} \ \& \ p(w'') = 1]]\}$$

In words: For all worlds accessible from the relevant world there is a proposition among the set of the alternatives that is true [the proposition that is true can be, but does not have to be, the same one for all the worlds].

Negative operator:

$$\{\lambda w'. \sim \exists p [p \in [[a]]^{w',g} \ \& \ p(w') = 1]]\}$$

In words: The possible worlds in which none of the propositions among the set of alternatives is true.

This approach explains why the *wh*-forms can be used as indefinites only in modal environments³ and in negative sentences.⁴ According to this analysis, the alternatives must be caught by an operator (a quantifier or the negative operator) otherwise they will continue to expand. They do not denote a proper subset of the domain (a specific man, a specific car ...), since they refer to the entire set of alternatives.⁵

In this regard the *wh*-forms are different from indefinite pronoun like “someone” in English, or from the biblical forms that diachronically derive from words denoting individuals (שׂוֹמֵר, אִישׁ etc.), which may retain a component of their original meaning as singleton indefinites, i.e., as existentials whose domain has a singleton extension (Schwarzchild 2002).

3 Conditionals, for our purposes, also fall into the category of modal environments, as they involve quantification over possible worlds.

4 As noted earlier (observation 3 above), in some context there is an additional sense of indifference. This can be captured as a requirement for distribution across accessible possible worlds:
 Distribution Requirement (an implicature)
 $\lambda w'. \forall p [p \in [[a]]^{w',g} \rightarrow \exists w'' \text{ is accessible from } w' \ \& \ p(w'') = 1]$
 In words: Every alternative is true in some world.
 Kratzer and Shimoyana (2002) argue that this is an implicature, and that it is due to a Gricean principle (otherwise an explicit statement would had been made).

5 It must be clarified that the sentence “who walks” does not mean “everyone walks” since there is no universal quantification. An expression that has the set of alternatives on itself does not include a quantification.

Conclusions and Methodological Comments

This paper introduced Kratzer and Shimoyana's (2002) explanation for the interrogative-indefinite puzzle, which is based on the proposal that the *wh*-forms uniquely denote an entire set of alternatives. This paper added some clarifications as to how this approach can explain the restrictions on the range of environments in which *wh*-forms can be used as indefinite pronouns. The main contribution of this paper is to the study of Biblical Hebrew at the methodological level.

As noted, the Bible yields only a few examples of bare *wh*-forms used as indefinite pronouns. As in the case of other grammatical phenomena that are only sparsely attested in the Bible, it is impossible to determine why the examples are so few.⁶ But whatever the reason, phenomena of this sort give rise to a methodological problem, namely to uncertainty about the linguistic significance of generalisations made on the basis of the limited data-set. A case in point is the observation made above, that none of the indefinite *wh*-forms appear in assertions about past or present events. One might wonder whether the absence of such examples is not purely incidental. However, a solution in such cases is to examine whether the generalisation corresponds to cross-linguistic typological observations. Since the generalisation in question is also observed in Indo-European languages, it is less likely to be incidental.

The discussion here also highlighted the caution that must be taken in explaining multifunctionality in Biblical Hebrew (and in ancient languages in general). There is no one single type of explanation for such phenomena—even when examining a single grammatical category. In the case of indefinite pronouns, it seems reasonable to assume the use of the form דָּבָר/*dābār* both as a lexical item “a thing” and as an indefinite pronoun “something” should be explained in diachronic terms, as a process of grammaticalisation that involves bleaching (Moshavi 2018, and see fn. 4 in her paper for references to grammar books and lexicons). By contrast, in the case of the forms that have an interrogative and an indefinite function, it is difficult to identify a diachronic trajectory in which one of the meanings is the original one. Thus, it seems more reasonable to explain the phenomenon in synchronic terms, by exploring the semantics of the forms. When both meanings are functional/grammatical rather than lexical, a synchronic semantic analysis seem to be preferable. I have made a similar observation about the history of the NP-strategy construction for expressing reciprocity (Bar-Asher Siegal 2020, Chapter 1). It is therefore worth exploring whether these are instances of a

6 Elsewhere I noted about a similar phenomenon in the case of the constructions of the NP-strategy for expressing reciprocity (“reciprocal constructions”) that occasionally the Mishnaic construction appears in the Bible (Bar-Asher Siegal 2012), or in the case of non-typical agreements (Exodus 25–30, see Bar-Asher 2009, 42–43), that certain chapters of the Bible exhibit a different grammar.

broader methodological generalisation that can be made regarding the preferable type of explanation for different types of multifunctionality.

Finally, it is my hope that this study has demonstrated that formal semantics can be relevant and useful to the study of Biblical Hebrew grammar.

Acknowledgments

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