

Imperatives and prohibitives in Biblical Hebrew*

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1 Introduction

Directive sentence types are sometimes distinguished by polarity. IMPERATIVES are positive directives that request or command the addressee to undertake a particular action, as illustrated in (1a). PROHIBITIVES are negative directives that request or command the addressee to refrain from undertaking a particular action, as illustrated in (1b).

- (1) a. Hotze, please tell me about imperatives and prohibitives.
- b. Don't tell me you've never thought about this problem.

Imperatives have been widely studied both in the typological and the theoretical literature. The consensus is that (i) imperatives are universally attested; (ii) they typically permit or require a null subject whose discourse referent is the addressee; and (iii) in languages with so-called rich agreement, imperative verbs are typically not inflected for person (van der Auwera & Lejeune 2013b). Prohibitives are also known as negative imperatives, a term which would seem to imply that they are simply a subtype of imperative.

The primary goal of this squib is to compare the properties of imperatives and prohibitives in Biblical Hebrew, in order to determine the relationship between them. First, I show that imperatives and prohibitives have different verb forms. Then I show that this language has one type of imperative, but two types of prohibitives. This would seem to indicate that prohibitives are not simply negated imperatives. This is not a new idea. For example, Birjulin and Xrakovskij (2001:37) propose that imperative and prohibitive “paradigms should be viewed as independent, although semantically related entities.” In Section 3, I very briefly outline some of the questions raised by the facts of Biblical

* This squib was inspired by and written for my dear friend and colleague, Hotze Rullmann. Our conversations about syntax, semantics, and their interface are among my favourite memories of time well-spent doing linguistics. As I was writing about this little problem, I kept thinking how much I wished I could have talked it through with you. I hope one day I will.

Hebrew — and by comparable facts in other languages — that have not, to my knowledge, received a satisfactory answer in the existing literature.

2 The morphosyntax of Biblical Hebrew directives

In this section I describe the distinctive morphology of the verbs, negation markers and discourse particles that appear in Biblical Hebrew directives. I begin with verbs, which are typically inflected for person, number, and gender. This is the case for both the perfect and imperfect verb forms.¹ However, imperative verbs are inflected for number and gender only. They are identical to the imperfect second person forms, except that they lack the person prefix (*ti-*) (van der Merwe et al. 1999). See, for example, the imperative and imperfect forms of the verb ‘write’ in Table 1 below:²

Table 1: Imperfect and imperative forms of verb ‘write’³

	Imperfect	Imperative
2MSG	ti-kətov	kətov
2FSG	ti-ktəvi	kitvi
2MPL	ti-ktəvu	kitvu
2FPL	ti-kətovna	kətovna

(adapted from van der Merwe et al. 1999:70–71)

Like many languages, Biblical Hebrew does not use imperative verb forms in its prohibitive sentences (van der Auwera & Lejeune 2013a). Moreover, the form of the verb in a prohibitive sentence depends on whether or not the prohibition is specific to the discourse situation and

¹ Perfect and imperfect are labels for verb paradigms and are often referred to as tenses in the Biblical Hebrew literature, though the choice between them typically depends on aspectual considerations (cf. Pratico and van Pelt 2007:130). The perfect is used for states of being and for completed events. The former is typically translated into English with present tense verbs, and the latter with past tense verbs. In contrast, the imperfect is used for incomplete events.

² The following abbreviations are used in this paper: 1/2/3: first/second/third person; DEF definite; DEM demonstrative; EMPH emphatic; F feminine; IMPF imperfect; IMPTV imperative; INF infinitive; JUSS jussive; M masculine; NEG negation; O object; OM object marker; PART participle; PERF perfect; PL plural; SG singular.

³ The vowel pattern alternations that distinguish the imperfect and imperative in the feminine singular and masculine plural verb forms are entirely predictable, and hence, are not considered relevant for the characterization of the similarities and differences between these two sets of verb forms. Specifically, the [i] results from the fusion of two audible instances of [ə] (van der Merwe et al. 1999:71).

the intended addressee. Henceforth, I will refer to these as specific and nonspecific prohibitives, respectively. Specific prohibitives require the jussive form of the verb, whereas nonspecific prohibitives require the imperfect form of the verb.⁴ (In Biblical Hebrew, the jussive is identical to the imperfect form for most verbs, including the verb ‘write’ as in Table 1, and otherwise is a short form of the imperfect derived by apocoping the final vowel.)

Turning next to negation, Biblical Hebrew has two markers of negation, *’al* and *lo*, and their distribution is as follows: *’al* only occurs in specific prohibitives, *lo* occurs elsewhere — it is used both for clausal and constituent negation. The examples in (2) and (3) illustrate the use of *’al*. Note that in both examples the speaker is instructing the current addressee to refrain from doing something. The examples in (4), which are from the ten commandments, illustrate the use of *lo* in non-specific prohibitives; they apply to anyone at any time. Similarly, the example in (5), which also contains *lo*, explicitly states that the prohibition applies to everyone, everywhere and at all times. The examples in (6) demonstrate that *lo* is the default clausal negation marker, as they illustrate the uses of this particle in declaratives with perfect and imperfect verb forms.

- (2) w^a-‘āšārâ ’ānāšîm niməṣə’ û-b-ām
 and-ten people found.3PL and-among-3PL
 wa-yyō’ mərû ’el-yišəmā’el ’al-təmit-ēnû
 and-say.IMPF.3PL to-Ishmael NEG-kill.JUSS.2SG-1PL.O
 ‘But ten men were found among them who said to Ishmael, “Do not kill us, ...” [Jeremiah 41:8]

- (3) ’aḥar ha-dəbārîm hā-’ēlleh hāyâ dəḅar-yəhwâ
 after DEF-things DEM-PL be.IMPF.3SG word-God
 ’el-’abərām ba-mm^aḥāzeh lē’mōr ’al-tîrâ’
 to-Abram in-vision say.INF NEG-fear.JUSS.2MSG
 ’abərām ...
 Abram ...
 ‘After these things the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision, saying, “Fear not, Abram ...” [Genesis 15:1]

⁴ Different authors use different terms for these two types of prohibitives. For example, Van der Merwe et al. (1999) refer to specific and nonspecific prohibitives as direct and indirect prohibitives, respectively. Waltke and O’Connor (1990) characterize specific prohibitives as indicating urgency in contrast to nonspecific prohibitives, which they characterize as indicating legislation.

- (4) **lō'** tirəṣāḥ: **lō'** tinə'āf:
 NEG kill.IMPF.2MSG NEG commit.adultery.IMPF.2MSG
lō' tiḡənōḇ:
 NEG steal.IMPF.2SG
 'Thou shalt not kill. Thou shall not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal.'
 [Exodus 20:13–14]
- (5) wə-leḥem wə-qālī wə-ḵarəmel **lō'**
 and-bread and-roasted.grain and-fresh.grain NEG
 tō'ḵəlū 'aḍ-'ešem ha-yywōm hazzeh 'aḍ
 eat.IMPF.2MPL until-EMPH DEF-day DEM until
 ḥāḇī'ākem 'et-qārəban 'əlōhē-ḵem ḥuqqat
 bring.PERF.2MPL OM-sacrifice god-2MPL law
 'wōlām lə-dōrōtē-ḵem bə-ḵōl
 eternal to-generations-2MPL in-all
 mōšəḇōtē-ḵem:
 dwelling.places-2MPL
 'You shall not eat bread or [flour made from] roasted grain or fresh grain, until this very day, until you bring your God's sacrifice. [This is] an eternal statute throughout your generations in all your dwelling places.'
 [Leviticus 23:14]
- (6) a. wa-'āḍabərā bə-'ēḍōtēy-ḵā neḡeḍ
 and-speak.IMPF.1SG of-testimonies-2MSG against
 mālāḵīm wə-**lō'** 'ēḇwōš:
 kings and-NEG be.ashamed.IMPF.1SG
 'And I shall speak of Your testimonies in the presence of kings, and I shall not be ashamed.'
 [Psalms 119:46]
- b. mi-twōrāt-əḵā **lō'** nāṭīṭī:
 from-torah-2MSG NEG turn.PERF.1SG
 'I did not turn away from Your Torah.'
 [Psalms 119:50]

Significantly, while there are two types of prohibitives, there is only one type of imperative. This can be seen by comparing the examples in (7) and (8). The former is a specific command issued by Abraham to his servant, and the latter is a positive commandment, that is, a non-specific command. Both contain an imperative verb form.

- (7) wayyō'mer ' aḇərāām 'el-'aḇəd-wō zəqan
 and.say.IMPF.3MSG Abraham to-servant-3MSG old
 bêt-wō ha-mmōšēl bə-kāl-'āšer-lwō
 house-3MSG DEF-rule.PART over-all-that-3MSG
 śīm-nā' yād-əkā t^aḥat̄ yərēk-î:
 put.IMPTV.MSG-NA hand-2MSG under thigh-1SG
 'So Abraham said to the oldest servant of his house, who ruled
 over all that he had, "Please, put your hand under my thigh."
 [Genesis 24:2]

- (8) kabēd 'et-'ābî-kā wə-'et-'imm-ekā
 honor.IMPTV.MSG OM-father-2MSG and-OM-mother-2MG
 'Honour thy father and thy mother.'
 [Exodus 20:12]

One final element that is only seen in specific directives is the particle *nā*. This particle is variously analysed as a particle of entreaty, translated as 'please' or 'I pray' or 'I beg you' (Gesenius & Kautzsch 1909; Kaufman 1991), as a logical particle that is best left untranslated (Lambdin 1971; Waltke & O'Connor 1990) or as a propositive particle that signals speaker intention to pursue a particular course of action (Shulman 1999; Christiansen 2009). When it occurs in imperatives, *nā* is suffixed to the imperative verb, as illustrated in (7) above, and when it occurs in specific prohibitives, it is suffixed to the negative particle 'al, as illustrated in (9).⁵

- (9) wa-yyō'mer 'al-nā t^a'āzōḇ 'ōṭānū ...
 and-say.IMPF.3MSG NEG-NA leave.JUSS.2MS OM.1PL
 'and he said "Please do not leave us".'
 [Numbers 10:31]

Significantly, *nā* never occurs in nonspecific prohibitives. In other words, there are no examples of *nā-lo* in the Hebrew Bible.

The following table summarizes the properties of imperatives, specific prohibitives and nonspecific prohibitives described above:

⁵ The particle *na* can also occur on the complementizer *im* 'if', as illustrated in (i):

- (i) wayyō'mar 'ādōnāy 'im-nā' māšā'-tî ḥēn bə-'ēney-kā 'al-nā'
 and.said my.lord if-NA found-1SG favour in-sight-2SG NEG-NA
 t^a'āḇōr mē'al 'aḇəde-kā:
 pass.away from servant-2SG
 '... and said, My lord, **if now** I have found favor in thy sight, pass not away, I pray
 thee, from thy servant'
 [Genesis 18:3]

Table 2: Properties of Biblical Hebrew Directives

	Imperatives	Specific Prohibitives	Nonspecific Prohibitive
Verb form	imperative	jussive	imperfect
Verb agreement	number, gender	2nd person, number, gender	2nd person, number, gender
Negation marker	n/a	'al (prohibitives only)	lo (default clausal negator)
Entreaty particle	nā	nā	NONE

In the next section I identify some of the questions raised by this array of properties regarding the morphosyntax of these three types of directives, and the similarities and differences in their semantic interpretation.

3 Questions (for Hotze) about imperatives and prohibitives

The facts described in the last section raise a number of questions. First, why do Biblical Hebrew imperatives and prohibitives require different verb forms? Is this simply because when negation is present it blocks some kind of syntactic feature checking or movement operation that is obligatory in imperative clauses? Various researchers have suggested explanations along these lines hypothesizing that imperative verbs check a feature in a higher functional head, such as Mood or C or Force (e.g., Rivero 1994; Rivero & Terzi 1995; Zanuttini 1997).

Note, however, that — as is the case in many languages — Biblical Hebrew imperative verbs are not just different from verbs in other paradigms, they are *defective* in the sense that they lack person features. What is the significance of this defect? Does the absence of person in imperative verbs tell us that they are inflected for imperative force or imperative mood, but not tense/aspect? If so, should we interpret the lack of defective verbs in prohibitives as an indication that these sentences are not in fact imperative? And if so, are they inflected for tense/aspect, rather than (imperative) force or mood?

Imperatives are commands, requests, suggestions, etc. to *do* something. However, prohibitives are commands, requests, suggestions, etc. to *refrain* from doing something. This would seem to be the crux of

the difference between imperatives and prohibitives. Does this mean that they constitute different illocutionary acts? For example, Portner (2004) analyses imperatives as instructions to add an item to the addressee's to-do list, but an analysis along these lines cannot be straightforwardly extended to prohibitives: We all have to-do lists that are longer than they should be, and they often look like a list of imperatives, for example, *buy groceries, finish this squib*. But who keeps a to-don't list, and what would that look like?

Another set of questions is raised by the fact that there are two types of prohibitives. My intuition is that what I am calling specific prohibitives are uttered when the speaker believes that the addressee would otherwise do whatever it is they are telling them not to do in the (near) future. Nonspecific prohibitives, on the other hand, require no such belief on the part of the speaker. In other words, they are not restricted to the current addressee or the current discourse situation. As has often been noted, they typically express rules or laws to be followed by everyone in every relevant situation. This can be illustrated with the English examples below:

- (10) a. Don't park here! (This means YOU.)
 b. No parking.

The example in (10a) is a specific prohibitive. It is something that a curmudgeon might post on his back fence to keep his next-door neighbours from parking there — in other words, it is an instruction to be interpreted as immediate and personal. The example in (10b), on the other hand, is a nonspecific prohibitive. It could be posted by a municipality or other institution to indicate that a particular area was not available for parking by anyone at any time. I suspect that the contrast in (10), and similar pairs in Biblical Hebrew provided above, differ in that the specific prohibitive requires a representation of the current addressee and the current discourse situation, while these elements are missing in the representation of non-specific prohibitives. See Ritter and Wiltschko (2019) for a similar treatment of personal and impersonal *you*.

Additional support for a distinction along these lines comes from the observation that the particle *nā* is unavailable for non-specific prohibitives. While its precise semantic contribution to the sentences in which it appears is subject to debate, it frequently expresses something about the speaker's intentions or some aspect of their relationship to the current addressee, much like English *please*. Woods (2021) proposes that *please* alternatively marks a sentence as a request or reinforces the

speaker's and addressee's respective roles in the request. In either case, she argues that it is part of sentence structure, and as such is syntactically represented as a head in what Miyagawa (2022) refers to as the syntactic treetop — the topmost layer of syntactic structure, whose function is to represent aspects of the speech act (Speas & Tenny 2003), or conversational interaction (Wiltschko 2021), including the speaker, the addressee, and the illocutionary force. If an explanation along these lines is correct, it begs the question as to whether there are also (perhaps more subtle) differences between specific and non-specific imperatives. Think about that. But since this is for you, Hotze, perhaps I should say, think about that, please, won't you, Hotze?

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