

THE PERFECT INDICATIVE IN THE GREEK PENTATEUCH AND THE HEBREW QATAL¹

Anssi Voitila

The present article deals with the methodological issues concerning alleged Hebrew interference in the Greek Pentateuch. What does it mean that a certain form in a source text has or has not influenced another form in the translation? The Greek perfect indicative rendered by Hebrew qatal serves as an example of the problem of definition.

The theme of this article arose from a few puzzling facts that I had encountered concerning the use of the perfect indicative in the Septuagint. Here are the facts²:

- 1) The aorist indicative appears as the most common equivalent of the qatal in the Greek Pentateuch.
- 2) The perfect indicative is the next most common equivalent.
- 3) Qatal is also rendered by the present indicative and rarely by the imperfect indicative.
- 4) The perfect indicative has the qatal as its Hebrew counterpart in most of its occurrences, the other Hebrew forms it renders being in a clear minority.
- 5) In our text the perfect indicative only occurs in direct discourse or in ὄτι- or similar clauses demanding the tenses of direct discourse.

Fact no. 1 clearly demonstrates that for the translator the qatal was a verbal form that expresses past action. The two following facts, however, show that this is only one side of the coin.

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² These facts are to be found in Evans 2001, 147ff. and in my unpublished licentiate thesis "*Verbal Forms in the Septuagint: Translation of the qatal, the wayyiqtol, the yiqtol and the weqatal in the Greek Pentateuch*" (in Finnish), Helsinki (Theology Library of the University of Helsinki) 1995.

The perfect indicative only appears in a certain type of text (fact no. 5). The methodologically correct way to proceed is to compare the perfect indicative cases solely with the cases of other verbal forms which appear in the same type of text as does the perfect indicative.³ In consequence, the statistical difference⁴ between the perfect and the majority equivalent, the aorist indicative, is reduced, and, if we take into consideration fact no. 4 as well, the proportion of the perfect indicative increases so remarkably that it calls for an explanation.

During the last few decades, the Hebrew verbal system has been the subject of growing interest on the part of linguists (see e.g. McFall 1982; Gentry 1999). The problem has been approached from different linguistic points of view. Only recently, I myself (Voitila 2001) have provided evidence from the LXX translation of the Pentateuch that seems to support a theory that Hebrew combines tense, aspect and modality in a system which shows certain similarities with that of English, although the material studied then included only the present and imperfect indicative. According to this theory, qatal expresses anteriority with regard to the moment of speaking⁵ (Joosten 1997, 62; Voitila 2001, xvi–xvii; cf. also DeCaen 1995; Hatav 1997).

I have shown (Voitila 2001, 55–68) how the qatal is also translated by the present indicative in the same type of text, when it appears translated by the

³ In order to prove his “negative conclusion regarding bilingual interference in choice of the perfect indicative form” Evans (2001, 153) should not compare qatal with wayyiqtol (although wayyiqtol sometimes appears in the direct discourse too) but the qatal translated by the aorist indicative with the one translated by the perfect indicative in direct discourse, and explain why the perfect indicative is used almost exclusively to translate qatal.

⁴ **Statistics:** Indicative forms translating qatal in direct discourse and in ὄτι-clauses depending on verbs of perception

	All qatals	Aor. ind.	Perf. ind.	Pres. ind.	Impf. ind.
Genesis	247	161	47	20	2
Exodus	154	71	54	20	2
Leviticus	20	15	3		
Numbers	147	85	34	15	6
Deuteronomy	180	145	13	6	10
Total / %	748/100	477/ 64	151/ 20	61/ 8	20/ 3

These statistics cover only the sections treated in my aforementioned study (Voitila 2001, xxv). The perfect ὀἶδα is included in the number of cases of the perfect indicative, unlike in my previous study, due to its different objective. Evans gives the figures of all the cases in the entire Pentateuch, irrespective of the text type. In using these results, one should take into consideration the nature of the direct discourse, i.e. how much it contains reportive utterance, which influences the number of aorist indicatives in the text. For example, the relatively high percentage of aorist indicatives in Deuteronomy is due at least partly to this fact. The highest proportion of the perfect indicative occurs in Exodus (35 % of all the qatal cases) and Leviticus attesting to the lowest.

⁵ This is not at all a generally accepted theory of the function of the Hebrew verbal system.

perfect indicative. This seems only natural if we take into account that according to several linguists the qatal is used in the sphere of the present in two of its functions: the qatal of stative verbs⁶ and the so called “coincidence qatal”⁷ and performative qatal⁸, where it has the present value. I came to the conclusion that the qatal had usages that were liable to be rendered by the present indicative in Greek.

In the cases of the present indicative used to translate coincidence and performative qatal, the translators did not consider that the qatal shared a temporal or aspectual value common to all qatal forms, but they noted a usage similar to one that the Greek present indicative has. Even if this feature of the translation seems to be perfectly elegant Greek and does not seem to share the basic value of its Hebrew counterpart, it does not mean that it does not at the same time reflect the forms of the parent text. The context was, of course, the determinative factor operating in the translator’s mind when he came to interpret a qatal in this way, but the verbal form in the Hebrew text was the element which set the process in motion. Thus it is more likely that the use of the present in the performative utterances reflects the same use of the qatal form in the parent text. We should ask accordingly whether there is something in the semantic field of the qatal or its usages that evokes the Greek perfect indicative.⁹

In traditional Greek linguistic works and grammars the basic value of the Greek perfect is been characterised as “a completed action the effects of which still continue in the present” (Smyth 1956 § 1945). According to Chantraine (1927) and Wackernagel (1904) the perfect was originally formed almost only from intransitive verbs and denoted solely the state of the subject. But in the 5th century B.C. it developed a resultative perfect which indicates a state (of an object) resulting from a previously accomplished action (“continuing effects of the action upon the object”) (*resultative perfect*). In some recent studies (Sicking-Stork 1996; Evans 1999, 199–202; 2001, 147ss)¹⁰, however, it is argued that the present state of the subject constitutes the basic value of the perfect stem in Greek. The verbal

⁶ Joüon-Muraoka 1991 § 112 a; Blake 1951 § 10.1.5; Hendel 1996, 154, 155ff.; Hatav 1997, 103, 179.

⁷ Gesenius-Kautzsch § 106 i; Joüon-Muraoka § 112 f; Brockelmann 1956, 40; Meyer 1976, 189–190; Waltke-O’Connor 1990 § 30.5.1d; DeCaen 1995, 253ff.; and Hendel 1996, 156, who give definitions which seem to include the so called “performative qatal”.

⁸ Hillers 1995. For the problems involved in this sort of definition of oral presentation, see Voitila 2001, 61. For example are we to interpret the וַיִּתֵּן in Ex 7:1 as performative, or as the translator seems to have done, as referring to the previous “installation” of Moses in Ex 3?

⁹ Evans came to a negative conclusion in his 2001 study. He states, “The only type of Hebrew influence apparent is contextual ... but there is no special connection between these forms [ie. between Greek perfect indicative and the Hebrew qatal] ... Choices are dictated by natural Greek preferences.” (Evans 2001, 153).

¹⁰ The resultative perfect theory was already criticised by McKay 1965 and Rijksbaron 1984.

form does not denote the corresponding past situation¹¹ but is only implied or presupposed, and it is seen only as a lexical effect. In fact, the perfect of the stative situation type does not even have this implication.

In Hebrew linguistics there are those scholars who consider the stative and the coincident qatal as expressing the same value that they wish to attach to the Greek perfect (see Gesenius-Kautzsch). According to others (Rundgren 1961 §22; 1963, 63–64; DeCaen 1995, 250–253; Joosten 1997, 62f.), the qatal expresses the verbal content as seen after its “term”, which is anterior to the moment of speaking. With stative verbs, particularly those relating to an activity of the inner person, this term is the initial one (post-terminal meaning).¹² Joosten (1997, 63, note 42) and Rundgren (1961, 64–65), however, emphasize that the situation is not to be seen as the result of previous action but the focus is on the state outside the term. This post-terminal static value is also attached to the Greek perfect in a work by the Spanish structuralist Martin S. Ruipérez (1982 §99–103).

These obvious similarities between the two languages are not without significance for our theme. The Hebrew qatal at least implies *two poles* of a single situation: a past situation and the present effect of that previous situation.¹³ The translators’ way of dealing with the qatal seems to indicate that they shared this view, even if they worked only on the basis of their intuition. And this ambivalence of the qatal is to be seen particularly in the textual type where the reference point is the moment of speaking.

The translators seem to have treated the qatal of stative verbs in direct discourse as present tense and the qatal of action verbs as past tense. This is the case with the stative וְיָ , which is almost always translated by the present indicative ($\text{γινώσκειν/ἐπίστασθαι}$) or by the perfect indicative generally seen as indicating a present meaning (οἶδα) (Voitila 2001, 58–59).¹⁴ Thus the *stative qatals* in direct discourse have present interpretation even if seen “after the initial term”. If we compare the present indicative φιλεῖ in the ὅτι -clause depending on the verb of perception in Gen 37:4 and the perfect indicative ἠγάπηκα in Ex 21:5, we notice that there is no great difference between the present and the perfect. It may be

¹¹ This word is used in this article following Comrie (1976) as a general term to cover such words as “state”, “event”, “action”, “process”, etc.

¹² “ וְיָ does not mean “I have known (but have forgotten)”, but “I have come to knowledge, I know.” Joosten 1997, 63.

¹³ This means that the verbal content of the stative situation type verbs is viewed after the situation has started.

¹⁴ There seemed to be no difference in meaning between these verbs in Greek. On the contrary, the stative translated by past tense indicative forms in Gen 18:19; 22:12 and Ex 18:11 refer to knowledge that is explicitly gained at the moment in question (Voitila 2001, 59). On the contrary, the present and perfect indicatives denote a knowledge, the initial point of which was not specified in the context.

argued that the present would denote the ongoing character of the situation and that the perfect underlines rather the state of mind of the subject (I am loving – I love).¹⁵

By contrast, most of the perfect indicative forms used to render qatal in the material studied appear to imply or to denote a past action which is explicitly stated or else implicitly presupposed in the previous context.

One also encounters examples of this kind with stative verbs. In cases like Gen 18:13 (למה זה צחקך שרה לאמר האמנם אלד ואני זקנת.) – Τί ὅτι ἐγέλασεν Σάρρα ἐν ἑαυτῇ λέγουσα Ἄρα γε ἀληθῶς τέχομαι; ἐγὼ δὲ γεγήρακα) or in Gen 27:2, it is only the perfect that expresses the present state of the subject (the first person singular), “I am old”, whereas the present indicative would have indicated that the specified state had not yet been reached, “I am growing old”. Yet, although it is rather difficult to point to the exact moment, it cannot be denied that the situation presupposes a point at which the subject entered the state in question.

Consider the following two instances of the verb ὁράω: Gen 40:8: κλημν κλοη αηο – Εὐύπνιοιον εἶδομεν, καὶ ὁ συγκρίνων οὐκ ἔστιν αὐτό. And Gen 41:15: κλοη κλοη κλοη – Εὐύπνιοιον ἑώρακα, καὶ ὁ συγκρίνων οὐκ ἔστιν αὐτό. In both these cases the previous situation of “seeing a dream” is indicated, while only in the last one is the content of the dream told. In the first case, the translator used an aorist indicative to indicate a mere fact – “we saw a dream”, whereas in the next case, the author wished to emphasise the state in which the subject finds himself – “I have seen a dream, I am a seer of a dream”.¹⁶ Both interpretations by the translator seem to agree with the value of the qatal given before: the reader’s attention is differently focused in relation to the final term of the situation: in the first interpretation the focus is on the term itself and in the second one it is on the state after the term.

A most interesting case for our discussion is the numerous occurrences of the qatal ית. It is translated by present, perfect and aorist indicatives. For example, in Genesis the form ית is translated four times by the present indicative, four times by the aorist indicative and seven times by the perfect indicative.

In Gen 23:11 (השדה נתתי לך והמערה אשר-בו לך נתתיה לעיני בני-עמי נתתיה לך) – τὸν ἀγρὸν καὶ τὸ σπήλαιον τὸ ἐν αὐτῷ σοι δίδωμι· ἐναντίον πάντων τῶν πολιτῶν μου δέδωκά σοι) the qatal נתתי appears three times in the MT, of which only two have an equivalent in the translation: the first is rendered by the present

¹⁵ According to Sicking-Stork (1996, 139), “by a Perfect the State is presented as unalterable or immutable” and by a present the state “will be discontinued”. Their examples do not unequivocally support this view.

¹⁶ This is what is meant in my previous article (Voitila 1993) by the words, “I am the one who has seen this dream”, i.e. the state of the subject. All the connotations concerning the sentiments that this state might include are a matter of context. See the critique of my view in Muraoka 2001, 20–21.

indicative and the second by the perfect indicative.¹⁷ The first and second qatals represent a performative kind of action,¹⁸ the transaction/bargain is being made.¹⁹ The third may be seen at least as a process that has already started, but more reasonably it refers to the previous performative action (it happened before an audience) which is having its effects on a situation going on in the present: “I am the person who has made this transaction before witnesses”²⁰. It is important to note that outside this performative usage which gives this situation a closed interpretation,²¹ the present indicative of the verb διδόναι means that the act of giving has not yet been accomplished (the term has not been reached) and we do not know at that moment if it ever will be, i.e. the situation before its term (see Smith 1997, 75). Instead, the perfect indicative views the situation after the term, “I have given, I am the giver”. The aorist indicative seems to have a reportive function, it solely states a past situation, as in Gen 27:37 (נתת – ἐποίησα) or in Gen 30:18 where the qatal in the relative clause refers to a previous giving in Gen 30:9. In Dtn 3 we encounter seven נתת qatals rendered by the aorist indicative ἔδωκα, found in a catalogue-like presentation of regions conquered and given to named tribes of Israel.

The cases where the Lord is the subject of the giving are sometimes problematic when the supposed previous act of giving is not indicated (see for ex. Gen 1:29; 9:3). In these cases, the perfect indicative seems to be used to translate the situation the first time it is materialised. It may be however that the translator has expressed the idea that the decision to give and so the giving proper was already made in heaven.

Particularly puzzling, in this respect, are figures in Num 18 where the various sacrifices are granted to Aaron and his sons. נתת is translated seven times by δέδωκα. On the other hand, the perfect indicative is used mostly in cases where the previous situation of giving (here installation) is indicated, such as Gen 16:5

¹⁷ It is not unusual in the Greek Genesis that when one and the same situation is again referred to, the situation is translated by a different verbal form in order to demonstrate a different focus in the discourse. See, for example, Gen 7:17–18 where the same wayyiqtol רבה (there are other wayyiqtol, too, that are not actually of the same verb but only have a similar semantic content) is first translated by an aorist indicative (v. 17) and then by an imperfect indicative (v. 18), Voitila 2001, 163–164, 172, 195.

¹⁸ The situations in Gen 9:13 (τίθημι); 41:41 (καθίστημι); 48:22 seem to require a similar interpretation.

¹⁹ It may well be that this is also the reason why the translator omitted the second one; it had the same value as the previous one and was thus unnecessary.

²⁰ Compare the perfect indicative in Gen 20:16, where the actual sum of money is mentioned only in the Greek version in the previous verse.

²¹ I.e. the situation is performed by uttering it (Smith 1997, 111). The situation is accomplished after the uttering. The imperfective viewpoint normally gives an open interpretation of a situation.

(the actual giving is mentioned in Gen 16:3) and Gen 17:5 (Gen 7:2, 4). It seems that in this way the translator desired to highlight the authority of the Lord (in so doing assigning authority to the person installed) as the subject of the action: the Lord is the giver or installer, as in Ex 3:13, 14 and 15 where the Lord urges Moses to tell the people that “the Lord of our fathers has sent me to you” (Ὁ θεὸς τῶν πατέρων ὑμῶν ἀπέσταλκέν με πρὸς ὑμᾶς – שלחני אליכם אלוהי אבותיכם).

In this respect, another interesting case is the giving of the land. The land is promised to Abraham for the first time in Gen 15:18, where the future is employed (ינתן – δώσω), and is mentioned again in Gen 35:12 and Dtn 1:8 (παράδεδωκα) in a relative clause where ינתן is rendered by the perfect indicative. ינתן also appears in relative clauses referring to “the land that I have given to you” in Num 20:12, 24 and 33:53, translated by the perfect indicative, but in Num 27:12 and Dtn 9:23 it is rendered by the present indicative. It is not without interest that the two last-mentioned occasions refer to a situation where the receiving proper of the land is or is supposed to be near.²² The process is an ongoing one leading to its inevitable conclusion in the future.

There is still one case which deserves to be mentioned in order to illustrate the two poles of qatal in direct discourse, in Num 12:2 (הֲרַק אֶךְ בַּמִּשָּׁה דַּבֵּר יְהוָה הֲלֵא – Μὴ Μωϋσῆ μόνω λελάληκεν κύριος; οὐχὶ καὶ ἡμῖν ἐλάλησεν; καὶ ἤκουσεν κύριος) where the perfect indicative alternates with the aorist indicative. We know for a fact that the Lord spoke to Moses, but what we do not know is whether He had spoken to Aaron and Miriam. In fact, the negative aorist indicative states a simple fact whereas the perfect indicative serves to indicate the existing state, which of course implies that God had spoken to Moses several times previously.

This presentation has not been anywhere near a comprehensive investigation into the use of the perfect indicative in the Greek Pentateuch or into the Hebrew qatal either. Further study of this phenomenon is needed. I believe, however, that enough has been demonstrated as to how complex an issue the definition of particular cases of interference in the translation process can be. A small-scale survey with a few examples here provides us with a model as to how the use of the perfect indicative might be seen as motivated by the qatal in the parent text. Although the context played a determinative role in deciding which pole needs to be brought out, the decisive factor that sets this process in motion is the Hebrew verbal form and its context, the Greek being the result of this interpretative process.

The qatal in direct discourse appears to be a complex verbal form in that it expresses a situation – to use the terminology of Rundgren – after its term. This

²² Compare what was stated on p. 8 in connection with the present indicative of διδόναι.

term may be an initial one, a transitional point between two states or the final point of an earlier situation. The kind of term that should be supposed depends on the type of situation i.e. the lexical meaning of the verb in question, and on the actual context in which the verb form occurs. Although the aorist indicative is the most useful equivalent of this qatal too, it does not obviously always coincide in every respect with the semantic field of qatal, according to the translators. The present indicative was a useful equivalent for the performative and coincidence functions of the qatal and for stative verbs. Rather, the perfect indicative seems to combine both of these poles: the term and its effect at the moment of speaking.

Thus the Greek perfect indicative corresponds in certain respects to Hebrew qatal, although it is not the most common equivalent nor is it idiomatic Greek.

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