NOTES ON THE SHIFT FROM ACCUSATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS TO PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES IN HEBREW AND ARABIC

In an article published in the early sixties, M. Bogaert shows certain groups of verbs which in Biblical Hebrew (as well as in other north-western Semitic languages) may govern verbal suffixes instead of "dative" prepositions. This phenomenon is called by him "non-accusative verbal suffixes".¹

In his article "'et = 'el 'to, towards' in Biblical Hebrew", S. Izre'el argues that the particle 'et sometimes occurs in contexts that elsewhere require the prepositions 'el "to, towards" or 'im "with". He concludes that 'et is a preposition which in Modern Hebrew may be rendered by 'im or 'el, similar to the Hebrew preposition ba- which is sometimes translated into English as "in" and at other times as "at"), according to the context.²

In the following pages I would like to suggest another interpretation which considers examples of the kind adduced by the above-mentioned authors as an archaic phenomenon of accusative constructions which, in later layers of the language, were replaced by prepositional phrases. This phenomenon reflects the shift from a synthetic to a more analytic type of language, a process characteristic of the Semitic languages.

For this purpose I would like to show some examples manifesting how direct objects and adverbial complements, which in Classical Arabic and Biblical Hebrew are often rendered by the accusative, are subsequently replaced by prepositional phrases. Finally, I would like to show how biblical verses of the kind adduced by Bogaert and Izre'el can be better explained as accusative constructions, in equivalence to Arabic which also uses the accusative case-ending after verbs of that kind.

¹ M. Bogaert, "Les suffixes verbaux non accusatifs dans le sémitique nord-occidental et particulièrement en hébreu", *Biblica*, XLV, 1964, 220–47.
As is well known, Biblical Hebrew quite often uses asyndetic adverbial complements of time, manner or cause. In other cases these adverbials may be rendered by the prepositions *bi* - “in, at”, *b* - “to”, *el* “to, towards”, *biglal* “because of”, *ka* - “as”, e.g.:

1. *wa-y-yiz'aq ha-m-melekh qol gadol*  
and the king cried with a loud voice

2. *shovi 'almänä bhêt 'ăbbîkh*  
sit as a widow at your father’s house

3. *wu-hû yôshêbh pêtaâ hâ-’ôhel*  
while he was sitting at the tent door

4. *wu-hemnän humtî bîmê qâür bâ-rîshônîm tahlîl qaṣîr šô’îrim*  
and they were killed in the days of harvest, in the first days, in the beginning of barley harvest

5. *wu-y-yiqrâ ’aryê*  
and he cried as a lion

6. *wu-y-yesstû shânêhem ha-š-šâdê*  
and both of them went out into the field

7. *lâlêkhêt tarshîsh*  
to go to Tarshish

8. *lô tăbhit shâmmâ yîr’ât shânîr wâ-shâyît*  
you will not come there because of the fear of briers and thorns

When the adverbial complement is definite, it may be preceded by the accusative particle *’et*, even in contexts where one would rather expect the prepositions *bi* - “in” or *min* “from”:

9. *massôt yê-ăkhel ’et shibhât ha-yâmîm*  
unleavened bread should be eaten throughout the seven days

10. *rag b-’êt zîgnâ tô hâlâ ’êt raglâw*  
only in his old age was he diseased in his feet

11. *wu-’êt huqqûqay tô hâlkhû bhâhem*  
and they did not walk in my statutes

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4 Gen. 38:11.

5 Ibid., 18:1.

6 2 Sam. 21:9.

7 Is. 21:8.

8 1 Sam. 20:11.

9 2 Chron. 20:36.

10 Is. 7:25.


12 1 Kings 15:23. Note the significant version in 2 Chron. 16:12: *wu-y-yehele âsâ . . . bo-raglâw* “And Asa was diseased . . . in his feet”, which uses the preposition *bo*- instead of *’et*.

13 Literally: “and my statutes they did not walk in them”. Ezek. 20:16.