A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF נָאְ

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The particle נָאְ occurs exclusively in reported speech utterances and is generally, if not always, used to present a request (Appendix 1). Gesenius-Kautzsch, and somewhat similarly Joüon, noted its frequent use in “polite language” and that it was “frequently added to the imperative, as to the jussive, sometimes to soften down a command, or to make a request in a more courteous form.”¹ However, some more recent grammars have moved away from discussing נָאְ in terms of politeness. A fundamental problem in their approach is that they have not given sufficient regard to the social relationships between the speakers and hearers of the נָאְ-marked volitionals. This article provides a sociolinguistic analysis of נָאְ that indicates that Gesenius's explanation was closer to the mark than those of more recent grammars.

While this article focuses on a particular, frequently-used particle, it also indicates, on a more general level, the necessity of moving beyond the clause to the discourse level for a satisfactory perspective on the dynamics of Biblical Hebrew grammar.

1. Recent descriptions of נָאְ

Lambdin, approvingly referred to by Waltke and O’Connor, states that נָאְ “seems . . . to denote that the command in question is a logical consequence, either of an immediately preceding statement or of the general situation in which it is uttered.”²

The simple claim that נָאְ signals a logical consequence is far too vague; to make it more precise, one would have to address a variety of problems. First, one should be able to explain why נָאְ occurs in

some utterances (§§ 1, 3) but not in others (§§ 2, 4) in which there is an obvious logical link between a request and the "immediately preceding statement" or "general situation."

1. Gen. xxvii 19: "Jacob said to his father, 'I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; Rise (qûm-nâ), sit up and eat of my game . . . ."

2. Gen. xxviii 2: "You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women. Rise (qûm), go to Paddan-aram . . . and take as a wife from there one of the daughters of Laban . . . ."

3. Gen. xvi 2: "Sarah said to Abraham, 'hînnâh-nâ', you see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go (bô-nâ) in to my slave girl . . . ."

4. Gen. xxx 1-3: " . . . Rachel saw that she bore no children . . . and said to Jacob, 'Give me children . . . ' Jacob . . . said, 'Am I in the place of God . . . ?' Then she said, 'hînnâh my maid Bilhah. Go (bô) in to her . . . .""

Second, one would also need to be able to explain why it can be attached to a volitional initiating an utterance (§§ 5, 7) that seems no more closely connected to its context than other utterances without nâ' (§§ 6, 8):

5. Gen. xxxvii 6: "[Joseph] said to [his brothers], 'Listen (śîmû-nâ) to this dream that I have dreamed . . . ."

6. Gen. xxiii 5-6: "The Hittites answered Abraham, 'Listen to us (šēmā-ēnā), my lord . . . ."

7. Gen. xxx 14: "Then Rachel said to Leah, 'Give me (lēnî-nâs) some of your son's mandrakes.'"

8. Gen. xxix 21: "Then Jacob said to Laban, 'Give (hâbâh) me my wife . . . for my time is completed.'"

Third, one would have to explain how nā' differs from wē'attâ which is used like the English "so" or "therefore" (often translated as "now therefore" or "now then") to relate a preceding circumstantial clause to a following volitional clause and which can cooccur with nā' (§ 9):

9. Gen. xlvi 4: " . . . there is no pasture for your slaves' flocks . . . in Canaan. wē'attâ let your slaves settle (yēšēbû-nâ) in the land of Goshen . . . ."

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4 These two elements occur together in thirty-two other narrative passages.