

LINGUISTIC MARKERS OF POLAR INTERROGATIVES IN BIBLICAL HEBREW*

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What marks a yes/no question as a question in biblical Hebrew? In the vast majority of cases, the answer to this question is the ה interrogative. However, there are several clear cases of polar interrogatives without clause initial ה that must have some other linguistic marker of interrogative modality. The present article examines possible syntactic and prosodic markers in these clauses and compares their grammatical features with polar interrogatives in the book of Genesis that have the ה interrogative. After establishing the grammatical patterns of polar interrogatives with prefixed ה , I examine the cases without interrogative ה and argue that while shifts in word order do not correspond to the ways in which polar interrogatives are marked, prosodic shifts in intonation—largely inaccessible to modern readers—must have produced the interrogative sense. This raises the issue of whether some clauses that are typically understood as declaratives might be construed as questions when the context allows for both possibilities. I also find that although syntactic shifts do not produce interrogatives, word order does relate to the focus of questions, indicating the questioned topic.

Polar interrogatives, otherwise known as yes/no questions, are almost invariably marked in Biblical Hebrew by proclitic ה on the first word of the clause. While Biblical Hebrew grammars rightly state this as a rule, there are a handful of exceptional polar interrogative clauses that do not prefix the ה interrogative.¹ Grammarians appropriately assume that intonation marks the interrogative sense of polar questions because it is a linguistic universal feature.² Indeed, all languages use intonation to distinguish between declarative statements and interrogatives by raising or lowering pitch (final or non-final).³ Since Biblical Hebrew is no longer spoken and the written text of the Bible does not have punctuation analogous to the English question mark, there is seemingly no way to identify polar interrogatives without the ה except on the

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¹ E. Kautzsch, ed. *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (trans. A. E. Cawley; 2nd ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), p. 473, asserts, after noting the exceptions, "As a rule, however, the simple question is introduced by *He interrogative*."

² For example, P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Subsidia Biblica 27; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2006), p. 574, claim, "A question, even when genuine, can be indicated, as in many languages, merely by the rising intonation."

³ D. Hirst and A. Di Cristo, "A Survey of Intonation Systems," in *Intonation Systems: A Survey of Twenty Languages* (ed. D. Hirst and A. Di Cristo; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 1.

basis of context. The purpose of the present study is to investigate the nature of polar interrogative clauses with and without the ה interrogative in narrative contexts. The primary questions include: Is there a linguistic explanation for the omission of ה ? Do linguistic features such as prosody (tempo and intonation signified by accent marks) or syntax (word order shifts) mark clauses as interrogative? This essay begins by looking closely at these issues in clauses with the ה interrogative in the Genesis narrative. Then I survey polar interrogative clauses without the ה prefix throughout the narrative portions of the Hebrew Bible. The intention is to compare those with the ה to those without, so as to discover the productive linguistic features that mark polar interrogatives. As the study progresses, the common use of fronting in interrogative clauses to mark rhetorical questions becomes evident. Therefore, the investigation will also consider linguistic features that possibly distinguish between genuine and rhetorical meaning.

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE POLAR INTERROGATIVE

For the sake of analogy, it is useful to look briefly at yes/no questions in English. Here, speakers use syntactic movement and intonation to form interrogative clauses. The most common form of movement for this purpose is auxiliary inversion. For example, the statement “You are going to the store” becomes a yes/no question by moving the auxiliary verb “are” to the front of the clause (“Are you going to the store?”). English also inserts “do” at the front of declarative statements to form questions (“Do you want to go to the store?”) when there is no auxiliary verb in the surface structure of the corresponding declarative statement. This is somewhat analogous to what Hebrew does with the ה prefix, which almost invariably begins the interrogative clause, although ה does not have the verbal quality of the English “do” and attaches to both verbal and verbless clauses.

English also uses intonation, marking questions with pitch variation. The following questions have a slightly different meaning (*italics indicate rise in pitch*):

1. Is she going to the *store*?
2. Is *she* going to the *store*?
3. She *is* going to the *store*?
4. *She* is going to the *store*?

In declarative sentences, the pitch lowers on the final word, but in each of these questions, the pitch rises.⁴ Additionally, longer vowel duration often coincides with rise in pitch. This change in the intonation of the last word marks the clause as interrogative. Any other word in the sentence that raises intonation is an emphatic mark of focus. Coming first in the above list is a genuine yes/no question about the future trip to the store. The questioner is simply seeking information about the action and anticipates receiving an answer. The second question stresses “she” in order to focus the question on the person rather than the action of going to the store. The third and fourth questions are syntactically identical to declaratives but the rise in pitch marks the interrogative modality. In (3), the questioner is confirming an expected action of a woman really going to the store. The fourth question places the focus on the person going to the store rather than the action of going. It is as if a group of people is going to the store and the questioner wants to know if a particular woman is going too. The questioner uses pitch, vowel lengthening, and pause to form the question that emphatically relates surprise, doubt, or possibly frustration that the woman is going to the store. While the question mark makes the interrogative sense obvious in written English texts, interrogatives in speech are always marked by intonation and often by auxiliary movement. Frequently, prosody alone is the linguistic feature that is responsible for indicating the focus of the question.

It would be too rigid to make a strict division between genuine and rhetorical questions. While the former seek more information than the latter, all questions are openings that seek to be closed. The rhetorical aspect of a question relates to the ways in which it invites opening and imposes closure.⁵ In the analysis that follows, I use “genuine question” to label questions that are open and do not strongly impose closure. They require answers and do not imply assumed responses. Rhetorical questions are still questions but they do not require or anticipate answers. They impose closure and leave little room for unexpected replies. While these terms are useful for categorization, in reality questions fall on a scale of genuineness, some being more open than others to possible answers.⁶ Syntax and prosody are the primary determining factors in distinguishing between the two poles: genuine and rhetorical. I also

⁴ Of course, in an actual spoken language, intonation contours are much more complex: see J. R. Taylor, *Linguistic Categorization* (3rd ed.; Oxford Textbooks in Linguistics; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 186–199, for a fuller discussion of intonation in English and the multiple meanings of high key intonation.

⁵ K. M. Craig, *Asking for Rhetoric: The Hebrew Bible's Protean Interrogative* (BibInt 73; Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 2.

⁶ J. R. Taylor, *Linguistic Categorization*, pp. 181–184.

use “emphatic” as a middle category of questions where special emphasis is placed on particular components but answers are still anticipated.⁷ In the examples above, question (1) is genuine because it necessarily seeks information. Questions (2), (3), and (4) can be either emphatic or rhetorical. Context is the important distinguishing factor in these cases. Syntax, prosody, and context must all be taken into consideration as we turn to yes/no questions in Biblical Hebrew.

2. DESCRIPTION OF הִי INTERROGATIVE

The הִי interrogative occurs 1,119 times in the Hebrew Bible.⁸ It is most often vocalized with *hatef patah*, as in הִיִּשׁ ‘is there?’⁹ The morpheme is best classified as an adverbial particle, meaning approximately “is it that?” It is most commonly prefixed to the negative particle לֹא (278 occurrences), which is the regular way of forming rhetorical questions that expect positive answers.¹⁰ As a rule, the הִי interrogative is a bound morpheme prefixed to the first word in the interrogative clause. The הִי occasionally follows the infinitive construct of verbs of perception, usually לְדַעַת ‘to know’ (e.g., Gen 24:21;

⁷ A. Moshavi, “Two Types of Argumentation Involving Rhetorical Questions in Biblical Hebrew Dialogue,” *Bib* 90 (2009): 38, makes a similar distinction between “conducive” and rhetorical questions. Unlike the latter, the former do not serve as implicit assertions. Conducive questions also do not display the reversed polarity of the rhetorical ones: for example, “Are you not going to the store?” assumes the opposite, that the addressee is indeed going to the store. See also W. Bublitz, “Conducive Yes-No Questions in English,” *Linguistics* 19 (2009): 851–870.

⁸ B. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), p. 684 n. 45.

⁹ J. Blau, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Porta Linguarum Orientalium 12; Wiesbaden: Gottingen, 1976), p. 44, summarizes the phonological rules for vowel lengthening before certain consonants. When הִי precedes a consonant with *shwa* as in הִיִּבְרָכָה ‘is it a blessing?’ or before gutturals as in הִיִּעוֹד ‘is it any longer?’ it is vocalized with a *patah*. However, if a guttural is followed by *qamets*, the הִי is vocalized with a *segol* as in הִיאֲנִי ‘am I?’ It does not cause doubling in the following consonant as does the definite article. In some cases, a *dagesh* appears in the consonant with *shwa* following הִי, as in הִיִּבְנָה בְּנֵה ‘is it the coat of your son?’ Evidently, the *dagesh* indicates that the *shwa* is vocal and that it is not the coda of the first syllable. This is what Blau calls “*shwa medium*”: see J. Blau, *Phonology and Morphology of Biblical Hebrew* (LSAWS 2; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010), p. 140. The *hatef patah* after הִי lengthens to *patah* in order to avoid consecutive vocal *shwas*.

¹⁰ Medieval Jewish grammarians called the prefix the “*he* of surprise,” since it often marks exclamatory (rhetorical) statements, which are formulated as questions: see P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *Grammar*, pp. 308 n. 2, 574. In this view, הִיִּלֵּא־הִיא כְּתוּבָה ‘is it not written?’ in Josh 10:13 is equivalent to “surely it is written.” R. Gordis, “A Rhetorical Use of Interrogative Sentences in Biblical Hebrew,” *AJSL* 49 (1993): 212–217, explains the use of הִיִּלֵּא as a type of primitive diplomacy wherein one seeks an affirmative answer rather than new information. On the widespread use of the negative in rhetorical questions, see C. Han, “Interpreting Interrogatives as Rhetorical Questions,” *Lingua* 112 (2002): 201–205. See A. Moshavi, “Rhetorical Questions,” p. 37 n. 33, for the discussion of הִיִּלֵּא as a marker of negative rhetorical questions or assertions with clausal adverb.

Deut 13:4; Judg 3:4) or לְרֹאוֹת ‘to see’ (e.g., Gen 8:8; Ps 14:2; 15:3).¹¹ In Gen 8:8, ה־ marks an indirect question, וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶת־הַיּוֹנָה מֵאֵתוֹ לְרֹאוֹת הַקְּלוּ הַמַּיִם מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה ‘He sent the dove from him to see whether the water let up from upon the ground’. In this case, ה־ may still be understood as introducing a separate clause, making it literally, “To see—has the water let up?” Genesis 18:21 is a similar occurrence with an imperfect verb: וְאֶרְאֶה הַכְּצַעְקָתָהּ הַבְּאָה אֵלַי עָשׂוּ כָּלָה ‘I will see—have they done entirely according to its outcry that has come to me?’¹² Even in these indirect questions where a verb of perception precedes the question, it is possible to understand ה־ as clause initial.¹³

3. -ה־ INTERROGATIVE CLAUSES IN GENESIS

There are fifty-three occurrences of the ה־ interrogative in the book of Genesis.¹⁴ A survey of these occurrences shows that ה־ prefixes to verbs, nouns, participles, prepositions, pronouns, adverbs, negative and positive particles, and infinitives absolute. In thirteen of these clauses, ה־ prefixes to לֹא.¹⁵ Notably missing from the list is the common coordinating proclitic particle *waw* ‘and’, which does not attach to ה־. The only case of *waw* + ה־ interrogative in the entire Bible is in 2 Sam 15:35 (וְהִלּוֹא). Since ה־ is almost invariably at the beginning of a clause in direct speech, coordination is not usually necessary or expected. However, in the cases where two clauses would typically be coordinated with *waw*, they are simply set in apposition. The first two interrogatives in Gen 43:7 exemplify this, לֹא־אָמַר הָעוֹד אֲבִיכֶם חַי הַיֵּשׁ לְכֶם אָח ‘Saying, “Is your father still alive? Do you have a brother?”’. There is no phonological reason for the omission of *waw* before ה־.¹⁶ It seems as though ה־

¹¹ Compare Gen 2:19 (וַיָּבֵא אֶל־הָאָדָם לְרֹאוֹת מֶה־יִקְרָא־לוֹ) ‘and brought to Adam to see what he would call it’ where the interrogative pronoun מֶה introduces an indirect question.

¹² One difference in the case of Gen 18:21 is that it marks a disjunctive question with the additional אִם (אִם־הָאֵדָעָה לֹא־אֲדָעָה). See P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *Grammar*, p. 575, on disjunctive structures. The *waw* before אִם is unusual. Along with the second verb of perception, אֲדָעָה, it indicates that this is a separate clause: “and if not, I will know.”

¹³ P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *Grammar*, p. 576, argue that this is not necessarily the case for all interrogative particles. Their examples include Exod 16:7 (וַנִּחְנוּ מָה) ‘what are we?’) and Isa 49:21 (וְאֵלֶּה מִי גִדַּל) ‘who has reared these?’). These are likely exceptions to the typical rule of clause initial interrogative particle. Alternatively, at least some of their examples may be *casus pendens*: thus, Isa 49:21 is translatable “And as for these, who has reared them?” but this requires emendation, taking the הֵן that follows גִּדַּל as the 3fp pronominal suffix rather than the typical deictic interjection “behold.”

¹⁴ Gen 3:11; 4:7, 9; 8:8; 13:9; 16:13; 17:17; 18:13, 14, 17, 21, 25, 28; 19:20; 20:4, 5; 24:5, 21, 23, 58; 27:21, 36 (twice), 38; 29:5, 6, 15, 25; 30:2, 15; 31:14, 15; 34:23, 31; 37:8, 10, 13, 32; 40:8; 41:38; 42:16, 22; 43:6, 7 (three times), 27, 29; 44:5, 15, 19; 45:3; 50:19.

¹⁵ Gen 4:7; 19:20; 20:5; 27:36; 29:25; 31:15; 34:23; 37:13, 32; 40:8; 42:22; 44:5, 15.

¹⁶ An early claim of Gesenius that the ה־ is omitted especially before gutturals due to euphony was discounted by H. G. Mitchell, “The Omission of the Interrogative Particle,” in *Old Testament Semitic Studies in Memory of W. R. Harper* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1907), pp. 123–125. Mitchell shows (p. 123) that

takes the place of *waw* as a kind of coordinator, resisting the *waw* at the morphological level—or, perhaps it was simply felt unnecessary to coordinate independent questions.

There is, however, a correlation between the lack of הַ and the presence of *waw* in contexts of opposition.¹⁷ Eight out of twenty-four interrogatives that omit the הַ begin the clause with *waw* and all eight are in oppositional contexts.¹⁸ For example, in 2 Sam 11:11, Uriah protests against David's suggestion:

הָאָרוֹן וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל וַיְהוּדָה יֹשְׁבִים בְּסֻכּוֹת וְאֹדְנֵי יוֹאָב וְעַבְדֵי אֹדְנֵי עַל-פְּנֵי הַשָּׂדֶה חֲנִים
וְאֲנִי אָבוֹא אֶל-בֵּיתִי לֶאֱכֹל וְלִשְׁתּוֹת וְלִשְׁכַּב עִם-אִשְׁתִּי

The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord, Joab, and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field, *and I* will go to my house to eat and to drink and lay with my wife?

Context makes it clear that Uriah's protest takes the form of a rhetorical question. It is not marked with הַ because *waw* is necessary to show opposition. Where the הַ interrogative does appear in Genesis, it is never in oppositional contexts, lending support for the argument that the הַ is dropped when *waw* begins the second of two oppositional clauses.

3.1. Word Order in הַ Interrogative Clauses in Genesis

With the exception of the indirect question in Gen 8:8, the interrogatives in Genesis are all in direct speech and do not consistently differ from the typical word order of declaratives in such an environment.¹⁹ Both questions

the הַ is omitted before gutturals in only half of the occurrences. Moreover, it occurs before gutturals 118 times. He concludes, "The Hebrews actually used the interrogative particle before all the gutturals, in almost all the possible combinations, with the several vowels." Mitchell (pp. 115–117) also discusses the text-critical evidence and concludes that the following verses originally had the הַ: Gen 27:24; 1 Sam 16:4; 30:8; 2 Sam 18:29; 2 Kgs 5:26.

¹⁷ P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *Grammar*, p. 574, maintain, "The omission of the interrogative הַ is common after וַ introducing an opposition." They cite Job 2:10 (וְאֵת-הַרְעָה לֹא נִקְבֵּל וְאֵת-הַטּוֹב מֵאֵת הָאֱלֹהִים וְאֵת-הָרָע לֹא נִקְבֵּל) "We will receive the good from God, but shall we not receive evil?", which omits the הַ before the oppositional question (וְאֵת-הָרָע לֹא נִקְבֵּל).

¹⁸ Exod 8:22; Judg 14:16; 1 Sam 20:9; 25:11; 2 Sam 11:11; 15:20; 2 Kgs 19:11; Jonah 4:11.

¹⁹ Unmarked word order in Biblical Hebrew is debated among scholars. In narrative contexts, it is typically verb-subject-object because of the dominance of *wayyiqtol* verbs, but in direct speech, subject-verb-object appears regularly. For a current synopsis of the debate, see A. Moshavi, *Word Order in the Biblical Hebrew Finite Clause* (LSAWS 4; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010), pp. 7–17, who argues for verb-subject-object unmarked word order, and R. D. Holmstedt, "The Typological Classification of the Hebrew of Genesis: Subject-Verb or Verb-Subject?" *JHebS* 11 (2011): 2–39, who favors subject-verb-object. Holmstedt contends that only declarative clauses with lexical noun phrase subjects and without *wayyiqtol* should be analyzed to

and their declarative answers have the same word order variation; indeed, one answers a yes/no question not with “yes” but by echoing the question minus the interrogative particle.²⁰ For example, in Gen 29:5, Jacob asks, *הֲיָדַעְתֶּם אֶת־לָבָן* ‘Do you know Laban?’ and the response is *יָדַעְנוּ* ‘We know’. First Samuel 23:2 provides a fuller example of parallel word order. David inquires of Yhwh, *הֲאֵלֶּךְ וְהִכִּיתִי בַּפִּלְשְׁתִּים הָאֵלֶּה* ‘Shall I go and strike these Philistines?’ and the deity answers *לֵךְ וְהִכִּיתָ בַּפִּלְשְׁתִּים וְהוֹשַׁעְתָּ אֶת־קַעֲיֵלָה* ‘Go and strike the Philistines so that you will save Keilah’. The answer begins with a repetition of the questioned element using the same word order and then proceeds with new information, which, in this case, is the deity’s explanation of its affirmative answer.

Biblical Hebrew consequently does not use word order to mark questions as distinct from declaratives. It does, however, regularly front the focus of both declaratives and interrogatives. This shift in pragmatic structure is used to convey meaning for both verbal and verbless clauses. The unmarked order of Hebrew verbless clauses is subject-predicate but it is common for at least part of the predicate to be fronted for emphasis or focus.²¹ Waltke and O’Connor argue, following Andersen, that the subject-predicate order corresponds to clauses of identification, in which the subject identifies the predicate nominative (e.g., Gen 43:29, *הֲזֶה אֶחִיכֶם הַקָּטָן* ‘Is this your youngest brother?’).²² The predicate-subject order corresponds to clauses of classification, in which the predicate describes what the subject is like (e.g., Gen 30:2, *הֲתַחַת אֱלֹהִים אָנֹכִי* ‘Am I in the place of God?’). While this is generally a correct description, I consider these clause types coincidental and attribute the

determine the basic word order. In spite of the disagreement between the two camps, they agree that verb-subject-object is the typical surface structure in interrogatives and other modal clauses: see R. D. Holmstedt, “Typological Classification,” p. 13, for this point.

²⁰ See R. C. Steiner, “Ancient Hebrew,” in *The Semitic Languages* (ed. R. Hetzron; New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 167. He adds, “Answers to other types of questions follow the word order of the question in which the questioned element comes first.” Responses to questions are usually short echoes of their topics: see, for example, Exod 2:7–8; 2 Kgs 6:21–22; Jonah 4:9. For negative responses, Biblical Hebrew occasionally uses one-word clauses, for example, in Hag 2:11–12 (one-word response *אֵל*); Judg 4:20 (one-word response *יֵשׁ*), which is similar to yes/no systems: C. L. Miller, “Linguistics,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books* (ed. B. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), p. 660.

²¹ R. Buth, “Word Order in the Verbless Clause: A Generative-Functional Approach,” in *The Verbless Clause in Biblical Hebrew: Linguistic Approaches* (ed. C. L. Miller; LSAWS 1; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999), pp. 79–108; T. Muraoka, *Emphatic Words and Structures in Biblical Hebrew* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), pp. 7–9. For a discussion of the different models of fronting and the distinction between emphasis, topicalization, and focus in fronting structures, see A. Moshavi, *Word Order*, pp. 18–47. I use “emphasis” in a general sense and understand focus as the primary purpose of fronting.

²² B. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *Hebrew Syntax*, pp. 130–132; F. I. Andersen, *The Hebrew Verbless Clause in the Pentateuch* (JBL Monographs 14; Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), pp. 31–34.

semantic description of Waltke and O'Connor to the pragmatic shift of fronting the focus.²³ In interrogatives, the element in question begins the clause, immediately following the הַ interrogative unless there is another intervening particle such as לֹא or וְ. If the subject is in question, the word order is usually subject-predicate and this occasionally happens to produce clauses that identify. For example, in Gen 43:29, הֲזֶה אֶחִיכֶם הַקָּטָן 'Is this your little brother?' is Joseph's request for Benjamin's identification.²⁴ If predicate is the topic of the question, predicate-subject order is typical and this often coincides with "classification" of the subject. For example, Gen 19:20 classifies a city as small, הֲלֹא מְצָעֵר הוּא 'Is it not a little one'.²⁵ Note, however, the opposite word order in the preceding declarative clause that also classifies, הִנֵּה-נָא הָעִיר הַזֹּאת קְרִיבָה לָנוּס שָׁמָּה וְהִיא מְצָעֵר 'Look, this city is near to flee to, and it is a little one'. What accounts for this word order variation if not the clause function (identification or classification) or type (declarative or interrogative)? In my view, the interrogative in Gen 19:20 fronts the predicate (מְצָעֵר) as the focus to rhetorically emphasize the small size of the city, matching the rhetorical nuance that is also produced by the repetition of the clause and its introductory הֲלֹא. The main point here is that it is best to consider word order variation in verbless interrogative clauses the result of pragmatic shifts that front the focus.

In addition to marking the focus of the question, that is, the element of the interrogative clause that is being questioned, fronted material in interrogatives often seems to correspond to the nature of the questions, whether they are genuine, emphatic, or rhetorical. In the verbless polar interrogatives of Genesis, predicate-subject order almost invariably appears in rhetorical contexts.²⁶ For example, Gen 4:9, הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אָנֹכִי 'A keeper of my brother am I?' places the participial phrase before the subject pronoun, specifically questioning, and placing emphasis on, Cain's role as his brother's custodian.²⁷ Since no response is necessary in the question's context, its rhetorical sense is clear.

²³ For a critical response to Waltke and O'Connor's explanation of verbless clauses, see R. Buth, "Word Order," pp. 94–100. For focus structure in all types of clauses, see K. Shimasaki, *Focus Structure in Biblical Hebrew: A Study of Word Order and Information Structure* (Maryland: CDL Press, 2002).

²⁴ See also Gen 27:21; 44:5. Note that some subject-predicate questions do not identify, for example, Gen 29:6 הֲשָׁלוֹם לוֹ? 'Is it well with him?'; 42:16; 43:27.

²⁵ I do not include particles, such as לֹא, in my descriptions of word order since they obligatorily come first.

²⁶ See Gen 4:9; 18:17; 27:38; 29:15; 30:2; 31:14; 34:23; 40:8; 50:19.

²⁷ I consider the participial phrase as a kind of verbless clause: see R. Buth, "Word Order," p. 87. In verbless clauses, it is often very difficult to identify the subject and predicate. I try to follow Miller's first two strategies, looking first at lexical and morphological features and second at semantic or pragmatic features: C. L. Miller, "Pivotal Issues in Analyzing the Verbless Clause," in *The Verbless Clause in Biblical Hebrew: Linguistic Approaches* (ed. C. L. Miller; LSAWS 1; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999), pp. 11–12.

Genuine yes/no questions, in which the speaker does not project an expected answer, tend to follow the subject-predicate order.²⁸ Possible exceptions to this in Genesis include the predicate-subject questions that anticipate answers, such as Gen 37:32 (הַכְּתָנֶת בְּנֵךְ הוּא אִם-לֹא) ‘Is it the tunic of your son or not?’); 43:7 (הֲיֵשׁ לָכֶם אָח) ‘Do you have a brother?’). However, the speakers in both of these texts already know the answers before they ask. The brothers know that the cloak belongs to Joseph and Joseph knows that his interlocutors do have a brother, so the questions are not entirely genuine.

This may be contrasted with the first question in Gen 43:7, הָעוֹד אֲבִיכֶם חַי ‘Is your father still alive?’ which is a case where a genuine question aligns with the subject-predicate order. Here, Joseph genuinely seeks information about his father, but what follows is a yes/no emphatic question since he suspects that the visitors do indeed have another brother.²⁹ Still, even if this is the case, the emphatic question is not rhetorical; it requires a plain affirmative or negative response.³⁰ Genesis 31:14 has the same construction, interrogative הֲ + adverb + indirect object + subjects + prepositional phrase (הָעוֹד לָנוּ חֵלֶק) ‘Is there still to us a portion and inheritance in our father’s house?’), but here it is clearly rhetorical. The comparison reveals the difficulty with correlating word order of verbless clauses with the rhetorical nuances of interrogatives. The exceptions make it clear that varying levels of genuineness do not directly correspond to syntactic rules. While word order has a pragmatic role in fronting the questioned element, there are no hard and fast *rules* for constructing specific types of questions.

This premise is supported by verbal clauses. The two verbal clauses with fronted objects in Genesis (3:11; 20:4) are yes/no emphatic questions. In the latter verse (הֲגוֹי גַם-צְדִיק תִּהְרַג) ‘Will you slay even an innocent nation?’), the object גוֹי and adjective צְדִיק are fronted to stress the character of the group that God considers destroying. Still, as with the verbless clauses, emphasis is

²⁸ See Gen 24:23; 27:21; 29:6; 43:7, 27; 45:3.

²⁹ The term “emphatic” is used when the questioner has an obvious motive and/or seems to expect a certain response but still wants an answer. For example, in Gen 3:11, God (the questioner) seems to know that Adam and Eve have indeed eaten from the tree of knowledge but there is still the expectation that they will respond. P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *Grammar*, p. 574, cite this as the “exclamatory nuance” of הֲ and translate, “you have indeed eaten.” In my view, this misses the dialogical character of God’s question.

³⁰ The categories of “yes/no” and “rhetorical” help differentiate meaning but are recognizably rigid. In reality, a speaker usually has a motivation or expectation when he or she poses a question. As M. Heidegger, *Being and Time* (trans. J. McQuarrie and E. Robinson; New York: Harper, 1962), p. 24, says, “Every question is seeking. Every seeking gets guided beforehand by what is sought.” For the relationship between Hebrew interrogatives and expectation, see K. M. Craig, *Asking for Rhetoric*, pp. 1–5. He rightly concludes, “The traditional division of questions into two basic types does not do justice to the protean forms. In short, the two traditional categories obfuscate the rich variety of rhetorical devices which the authors of the Hebrew Bible use with great effect.”

not always accomplished through fronting. Genesis 18:28 (הַתְּשִׁיחַת בְּחַמְשָׁה) אֶת-כָּל-הָעִיר ‘Will you destroy the whole city on account of five?’; 24:5 (הֲשִׁיב אֶת-בְּנִי) ‘Must I bring back your son?’) are yes/no emphatic questions but here the object follows the verb. If the expectation for word order is the same for these interrogatives as it is in similar declarative clauses, then the verb-object order is unmarked.³¹ The point here is that the expected verb-object order and the marked object-verb order may express the same emphatic or rhetorical interrogative meaning, making it clear that word order is not the productive linguistic element in forming various types of questions.

3.2. Prosody in הִי Interrogative Clauses of Genesis

While word order does not produce interrogative modality in Biblical Hebrew clauses, intonation must have been productive. Biblical Hebrew is not a tonal language in which tone marks lexical and grammatical meaning phonologically (contrast, for example, Mandarin Chinese). Still, as with all languages, pitch, stress, vowel length, and pause signify meaning at the clause level in Biblical Hebrew. These are the features that were highlighted in the English questions discussed earlier (e.g., “She is going to the *store*?”). The question of prosody in Biblical Hebrew is quite difficult since we only have written texts, making it seem that prosody is now inaccessible to readers. If anything indicates pitch contours in the Masoretic version, it is the Tiberian system of accentuation.³² The best case for accentuation marking prosody comes from Drescher, who argues that there is a correspondence between prosodic hierarchy and various levels of disjunction in the Tiberian accents.³³ He shows that the Tiberian system departs from syntactic structures according to

³¹ The subject is intentionally left out here because there is much debate whether the unmarked word order in Hebrew is subject-verb-object or verb-subject-object; see n. 19 above.

³² See R. Buth, “Word Order,” p. 84 n. 12, who acknowledges that the accents are useful for constituent analysis in showing which words go together and where clause and phrase boundaries occur, but they do not help the reader negotiate pragmatic features of syntax and semantics. K. Shimasaki, *Focus Structure*, p. 58 n. 5, agrees with Buth but hopes that further study will reveal a relationship between Masoretic accents and pitch contours. He does not find a correlation between the accents and the focus patterns that he studies.

³³ B. E. Drescher, “The Prosodic Basis of the Tiberian Hebrew System of Accents,” *Language* 70 (1994): 1–52. J. Price, *The Syntax of Masoretic Accents in the Hebrew Bible* (Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 27; New York: Edwin Mellen, 1990), pp. 13–14, argues that the accents are primarily musical in nature but based on the traditional reading. See also R. Buth, “Word Order,” p. 83 n. 10. Drescher (pp. 47–48) concedes that variation in accentuation is due to the requirements of musical cantillation but argues that the variation happens within the bounds of disjunctive categories. For example, *pashta* is replaced by *yetiv* when it falls on a monosyllable even though these two accents have the same level of disjunction. Therefore, such variation does not affect the tempo aspect of prosody. In this way, the accentual levels of disjunction and conjunction reflect prosody, so that the musical cantillation of the text would still adequately represent spoken language.

the principles of prosodic theory. A simple example of this is the fact that accentuation treats two lexemes in construct joined by *maqfef* (e.g., דָּבַר־יְהוָה) as a single phonological word. Construct phrases without *maqfef* have a conjunctive accent on the first lexeme (e.g., תּוֹרַת אֱלֹהֵינוּ), thus marking two phonological words.³⁴ This variation in accentuation is best accounted for prosodically, by verse length, rather than syntactically, by sentence grammar.³⁵ Dresher's study demonstrates that the prosodic elements corresponding to accentuation have to do with relative tempo and length of pause within each verse for the purposes of oral reading. Unfortunately for my study, the only prosodic feature that the accents do not fully mark is the intonational phrase, the very one that would mark interrogatives as distinct from declaratives.³⁶

Dresher hypothesizes that pausal forms occur at the end of intonational phrases, exhibiting greater stress and vowel length, but these pausal forms do not always correspond to particular accents that signify rise or fall in pitch.³⁷ If the variation in musical pitch that is marked by accentuation corresponds to meaningful, pragmatic shifts in intonation, we might expect that questions and declaratives would be consistently marked with different accents. In 1 Sam 23:2, a question and an answer with parallel syntactic structures occur consecutively.

וַיִּשְׂאֵל דָּוִד בְּיְהוָה לֵאמֹר הַאֵלֶּךְ וְהִכִּיתִי בַּפְּלִשְׁתִּים הָאֵלֶּה
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־דָּוִד לֵךְ וְהִכִּיתָ בַּפְּלִשְׁתִּים וְהוֹשַׁעְתָּ אֶת־קַעִילָה׃

David asked the Lord, "Shall I go and strike these Philistines?"

And the Lord said to David, "Go and strike the Philistines so that you will rescue Keilah."

The differences in accentuation are minimal. In the question, there are three levels of disjunctive accents. The *atnah* on the final demonstrative is the strongest one, marking the end of the question; then *zaqef qatan* identifies the verbs as a prosodic unit; finally, a *tifha* indicates a slight pause between the object and the demonstrative. The response groups the two verbs and the object (Philistines) as a prosodic unit with a *zaqef qatan*. This unit is further divided with a minor disjunctive *yetiv* under the imperative (לֵךְ); the additional

³⁴ See B. E. Dresher, "The Prosodic Basis," pp. 4–7, for a discussion of these construct phrases in Isa 1:10.

³⁵ Further arguments in favor of the Tiberian system being a prosodic representation are as follows: 1) the accent marks conform to the verse structure rather than the sentence structure which commonly transgresses the confines of the verse; 2) the extensive system with multiple levels of nesting disjunctive and conjunctive accents exceeds what would be necessary to mark syntax or semantic relationships.

³⁶ B. E. Dresher, "The Prosodic Basis," pp. 2, 11–14.

³⁷ B. E. Dresher, "The Prosodic Basis," p. 14.

verb (וְהוֹשַׁעְתָּ) receives a *tifha*; and the second object is accented with a *silluq*. The only prosodic differences between the two clauses are the minor division in לֵךְ וְהִכִּיתָ and the grouping of בְּפִלְשֹׁתִים in the response but these are necessary because of the new information in the response. There is nothing unique about the accent marks on the question that would mark it as interrogative.

The remaining prosodic issue is whether accentuation might coordinate with focus structures so that certain accents or patterns of accents would reinforce the emphatic or rhetorical force of a question. For instance, we might expect that a heavier disjunctive accent than usual would fall on the fronted material. This is not usually the case. While every rhetorical polar interrogative in Genesis has a disjunctive accent on the fronted material, in these cases they are typically the lighter disjunctives. Additionally, none of the polar interrogatives with clause initial הֲ exhibit in Genesis any special vowel lengthening on focused words.

There are cases of variation that raise other difficult issues. For example, in Gen 43:7 (הֲעוֹד אֲבִיכֶם הִיא) the only disjunctive accent is the *pashta* on the last word. The question is genuine without any recognizable emphatic focus. Conversely, in Gen 45:3 (הֲעוֹד אֲבִי הִיא) there is a disjunctive *tifha* on the second word in addition to the final *atnah*. One could argue that the focus here is more on the father than in Gen 43:7 but the questions are nearly identical and the pragmatic contexts are not easily distinguishable.³⁸ There is no apparent pragmatic reason for the variation. The decisive factor in accentuation seems to be verse length, since 43:7 is about twice as long as 45:3 and therefore requires the disjunctive accents to be more spread out. This is in line with Drescher's argument that the Tiberian accents mark the prosody of the verse rather than the individual clauses or sentences. Regarding question type, for yes/no genuine questions it seems that the accents do not correspond to rising or falling intonation. While rhetorical questions consistently have a disjunctive accent at the end of the fronted component, some genuine questions without emphatic fronting like Gen 45:3 also have disjunctive accents. Disjunctive accents may be more common in rhetorical settings because fronting often

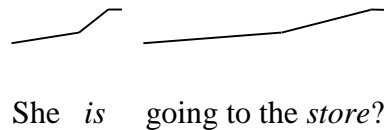
³⁸ In Gen 43:7, the first question is immediately followed by another one. Joseph's brothers quote him as they tell Jacob how Joseph questioned them. Perhaps the two questions are supposed to be read in quick succession to emphasize pragmatically the kind of report the brothers are giving to Jacob. However, this likely reads too much into the accentuation. A. Moshavi, "Rhetorical Questions," p. 42, argues that Joseph's questions were not genuine when repeated by the brothers. At the very least, there is uncertainty as to whether his questions are innocent inquiry.

corresponds to a slight pause, but they are not the primary component in producing rhetorical meaning.

4. POLAR INTERROGATIVES WITHOUT ה INTERROGATIVE

Polar interrogatives without ה bring the question of productivity into focus.³⁹ Obviously, the ה prefix does not cause these clauses to be questions, so what linguistic feature is producing the interrogative meaning? While context mandates interpreting certain otherwise unmarked clauses as interrogatives, it is reasonable to assume that there is a feature at work, syntactic (word order) or prosodic (pitch, tone, or vowel length variation), within the clauses themselves to create such a meaning. The preceding discussion suggests that word order can be largely discounted and intonation is seemingly inaccessible to modern readers.

The polar interrogatives with proclitic ה are comparable to English questions 3 and 4 introduced earlier. While the declarative “She is going to the store” typically lowers intonation on the final word “store,” question 3 raises the intonation progressively and adds stress on “is” and “store” (“She *is* going to the *store*?”). The following drawing roughly illustrates the progressive rise in intonation until it reaches its peak with *is*, which is the focus of the question, the pause after *is*, and the rising intonation on the final word.



The speaker is asking a real question, anticipating an affirmative answer, but without the typical auxiliary inversion “Are you?” The question has a similar sense and converse meaning as “Is she *not* going to the *store*?” which moves the auxiliary verb and adds the rhetorical negative particle.

The interrogatives that omit the ה prefix display a variety of word orders that is similar to those with the ה , including verb-subject-object, verb-object-subject, subject-verb-object, object-verb, subject-verb, verb-subject, as well

³⁹ This study only takes into account interrogatives without the ה in narrative contexts. These include Gen 3:1; 18:12; 27:24; Exod 8:22; Judg 14:16; 1 Sam 11:12; 16:4; 20:9; 21:16; 22:7 (twice); 22:15; 25:11; 30:8; 2 Sam 11:11; 15:20; 16:17; 18:29; 19:23; 1 Kgs 1:24; 21:7; 2 Kgs 5:26; 19:11; Jonah 4:11. Occurrences in non-narrative texts include Isa 14:10; 28:28; 37:11; 44:19; Jer 25:29; 45:5; 49:12; Ezek 11:13; 17:9; 18:11–13; 20:31; 33:25; Hos 4:16; 10:9; Hab 2:19; Zech 8:6; Ps 3:3; Prov 5:16; 22:29; 26:12; 29:20; Job 2:9; 2:10; 10:9; 11:3; 14:3; 30:24; 37:18; 38:18; 40:25, 30; 41:1; Lam 3:33, 36, 38.

as in verbless clauses—subject-predicate and predicate-subject. They certainly do not comply with a strict pattern of word order but, once again, the fronted material generally corresponds to the focus being questioned. If the subject comes first, it is the focus of the question. For example, 1 Sam 11:12 (שָׂאֹל יִמְלֹךְ עָלֵינוּ) ‘Saul will rule over us?’) rhetorically questions whether it is Saul who will rule. Notice also the slight pause after שָׂאֹל marked with *tifha*: this disjunctive may have more to do with the clause length than with rhetorical pause, since the clause is made up of three prosodic words, but the pause does slightly set apart the focus. In Judg 14:16, Samson explains how he kept a secret from his own parents and then rhetorically asks his wife, “But to you I should tell it?” (וְלָךְ אֶגִּיד). Although there is no disjunctive accent on the object (וְלָךְ), the wife—to whom he will or will not tell his secret—is clearly the focus of the question. We only know this clause is a question because of the context in which Samson refuses to disclose the answer to his riddle. If the clause stood alone, it could be construed as a statement of confidence: he did not tell his father and mother but by contrast, he will indeed tell his wife. The object-verb word order would fit in equally with the declarative or interrogative modality. Therefore, the fronted material, while syntactically highlighting the focus, does not produce the interrogative sense.

The fronting of the focus is a meaningful feature for the interpretation of other interrogatives without הֲ. For example, in 1 Kgs 21:7, Jezebel asks Ahab, “You now exercise kingship over Israel?” (אַתָּה עַתָּה תַעֲשֶׂה מְלֹכָה עָלַי) (יִשְׂרָאֵל). In this question, the focus, אַתָּה, is prosodically marked with *zaqef gadol*, which is the second strongest disjunctive accent in the clause, after the final *atnah*. The clause can be interpreted in two different ways: Jezebel is questioning either the fact of her husband being the king of Israel or his ability to rule. Since the subject “you” comes before the verb, the former option is preferable. If the question were focused on Ahab’s actions rather than his status, the verb would likely precede the pronoun or perhaps the clause would not include the pronoun at all. The context of the clause confirms as much when Jezebel proceeds to exercise power in her husband’s stead. Immediately following the question, she takes charge, saying, קוּם אֲכָל-לֶחֶם וְיֹטֵב לְבָבְךָ אֲנִי, אֲתָנֶן לְךָ אֶת-כַּרְמֵי נָבוֹת הַיִּזְרְעֵלִי ‘Get up, eat some food, and let your heart be glad. I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite’.

While the observations made herein may help the interpreter understand *how* to read interrogatives, they have only provided negative evidence for determining linguistic features that produce polar questions. Certainly, the הֲ marks clauses as interrogative but when it is absent, the reader must rely on context to determine the type of the clause. This raises the issue of possible

rhetorical questions in which the context does not demand an interrogative. Do we identify non- ה rhetorical questions only when clauses do not make sense as declaratives? If so, it is likely that some of the clauses traditionally interpreted as declaratives could just as well be rhetorical questions.

Finally, prosody must be a productive factor for Hebrew polar questions. Joüon and Muraoka cite 1 Kgs 1:24, אָתָּה אָמַרְתָּ ‘you have said’, as an example of rising intonation.⁴⁰ Their claim may be correct since all interrogatives cross-linguistically use intonation to mark questions but it does not explain *how* intonation denotes the interrogative sense in Biblical Hebrew. How do we know if interrogatives in Hebrew use rising or falling pitch or where these pitch contours occur within the clause? What, if anything, marks the variation of the intonation? While the early tradition of oral reading may have included such variations, the Tiberian accent system in the Masoretic text does not fully represent intonation, forcing the modern reader to work backwards and impose intonation shifts on the basis of context. Apart from it, the best clue is the placement of disjunctive accents in the Tiberian pointing system. As Drescher has shown, the primary constraint on where accents fall and which accents are used is verse and clause length. This is evident in the example from 1 Kgs 1:24, cited above, which has two prosodic words and therefore no disjunction between them. However, in many clauses requiring disjunction but not constrained by other prosodic concerns, such as 1 Sam 11:12 and 1 Kgs 21:7, the disjunctive accent coincides with the focus of the question.⁴¹

5. CONCLUSION

The present investigation has exhibited the difficulties involved in the task of analyzing the linguistic categories of syntax and prosody in Hebrew polar interrogatives. The evidence leads to conclusions on two levels. First, both the ה prefix and intonation are productive components in the formation of polar interrogatives but word order is not. With ה omitted, prosody alone must have produced the interrogative sense. Second, word order does correspond in the majority of cases to the way in which polar interrogatives convey meaning, with the questioned element marked as the focus by fronting. Intonation and pause must have also been prominent in distinguishing genuine questions from rhetorical ones in the oral recitation of the text. Unfortunately, these features are largely lost to modern readers and must be deduced primarily from

⁴⁰ P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *Grammar*, p. 574.

⁴¹ See also 1 Sam 22:7; 30:8; 2 Sam 11:11; 15:20; 19:23; Jonah 4:11.

the context, with only minor interpretive assistance offered by the prosodic Tiberian system of accentuation.