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וְהָיָה of the Past

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THE use of וְהָיָה, in the sense of "and it shall be" or "and it shall come to pass", to introduce future states or events, especially when they are dependent on certain circumstances, is a very familiar construction. The instances in which the same form is used to introduce past states or events in similar circumstances are comparatively few. In these latter passages the usual rendering is "and it came to pass", or something similar, as if the Hebrew were וַיְהִי; but the two words are by no means equivalent. Indeed, וְהָיָה itself does not always have the same meaning; that is to say, does not, for various reasons, introduce equivalent constructions. The examples that occur can best be discussed in classes and subdivisions according to their peculiarities:

1. The most numerous and important of these classes is composed of passages in which the verb or verbs of the apodosis or principal clause have a frequentative meaning. These verbs may be either imperfects, or perfects with *waw* consecutive.

a. The cases in which the leading verb of the apodosis is an imperfect are the following:

Ex. 33 7: "And it came to pass, whenever any one was seeking (part.) Yahweh, that he went out (יָצָא) unto the tent of meeting."

Ex. 33 8: "And it came to pass, whenever Moses went out (inf. with וַ) unto the Tent, that the people arose" (יָקוּמוּ).

Ex. 33 9: "And it came to pass, whenever Moses went into (inf. with וַ) the Tent, that the pillar of cloud descended" (יָרַד).

Ju. 2 19; "And it came to pass, when the judge died (inf. with **ב**), that they returned (**יָשָׁבוּ**) and dealt more corruptly than their fathers", or better, "And it came to pass, whenever a judge died, that they again dealt corruptly, more corruptly than their fathers."

In all these passages the leading verb stands at the beginning of the apodosis, and in all but the first there are one or two coördinate verbs in the perfect connected with it by *waw* consecutive.

b. More frequently, when the leading verb of the apodosis stands at the beginning of the clause, it is in the perfect with *waw* consecutive. The following are the examples:

Gen. 30 41: "And it came to pass, whenever the stronger of the flock conceived (inf. with **בָּעֵת**)¹, that Jacob placed (**וַיִּשֶׂם**) the rods before the eyes of the flock."

Gen. 38 9: "And it came to pass, if he went in (pf. with **אָם**) unto his brother's wife, that he spilled (**וַיִּשְׁתַּת**) it on the ground."

Ex. 17 11: "And it came to pass, whenever Moses uplifted (impf. with **כִּאֲשֶׁר**) his hands, that Israel prevailed" (**וַיִּנְבֵר**).

Nu. 21 9: "And it came to pass, if a serpent had bitten (pf. with **אָם**) a man, that he looked (**וַיִּבִיט**) unto the serpent."

Ju. 6 3: "And it came to pass, if Israel had sown (pf. with **אָם**), that the Midianites came up" (**וַעֲלָה**).

Ju. 19 30: "And it came to pass, whenever any one saw (part.) it, that he said" (**וַאֲמַר**).

1 Sam. 16 23: "And it came to pass, whenever the spirit of God was (inf. with **ב**) on Saul, that David took (**וַיִּלְקַח**) a harp."

2 Sam. 14 26: "And it came to pass, from year to year, whenever he sheared himself (impf. with **אֲשֶׁר**), that he cut it" (**וַיִּגְלַח**).

2 Sam. 15 5: "And it came to pass, whenever a man drew near (inf. with **ב**), to do him obeisance, that he put forth (**וַיִּשְׁלַח**) his hand."

In these passages, also, the coördinate verbs are regularly in the perfect with *waw* consecutive. Thus, there is a second in Nu. 21 9 and 2 Sam. 14 26, a third in 2 Sam. 15 5, and no fewer than five in all in 1 Sam. 16 23. In Ju. 6 3f. the succession is

¹ See Gen. 31 : 10.

interrupted by the introduction, after the second verb, of two imperfects with *waw* consecutive, and, when the frequentative thought re-appears, the verb, being separated from the connective, regularly takes the form of an imperfect.

There is one other passage that should be cited under this head, namely, Ju 12 5: "And it came to pass, whenever the fugitive Ephraimites said (impf. with כִּי), Let me pass over, that the men of Gilead said (וַיֹּאמְרוּ) to them (lit. him), Thou art an Ephraimite."

In this instance the temporal clause has an imperfect, like that of Ex. 17 11 and 2 Sam. 14 26, but the apodosis is peculiar in that it has an imperfect, instead of a perfect, with *waw* consecutive. Perhaps the latter was the original reading, or perhaps one, following the Greek Version, should omit כִּי וַיְהִי and read וַיֹּאמְרוּ in both clauses. In the latter case the passage would cease to have any bearing on the present discussion. If the present text be retained, וַיֹּאמְרוּ might be explained as due to the sudden transfer of the writer's attention from the fleeing multitude to an individual Ephraimite.

2. In the class of passages thus far considered וַיְהִי is used because the apodosis has a frequentative verb or verbs and the introductory verb should suggest the same idea. This form, however, may mean, not only "it used to be", but "it continued to be." It is therefore not strange to find that twice, at least, it introduces a sentence in which the verb of the apodosis denotes continuous action. The following are the examples noted:

1 Sam. 1 12: "And it came to pass, as she prolonged (pf. with כִּי) her prayer, Eli was watching (part.) her mouth."

1 Sam. 25 20: "And it came to pass, as she was riding (part.) on an ass, and coming down (part.), . . . that behold David and his men were coming down" (וַיֵּרְדוּ).

3. There is one passage which, if the text is correct, constitutes a class by itself. It is Am. 7 2, which, in the Authorized Version, reads, "And it came to pass that, when they made an end (pf. with אֵם) of eating the grass of the land, then I said (וַיֹּאמֶר), O Lord God, forgive, I beseech thee; by whom shall

Jacob arise? for he is small"; and the Revisers have made no material change in the translation. At first sight this rendering seems satisfactory, and warranted by Ju 6 3 and other passages in which **DN** is used before the perfect; but when these two are compared, it becomes clear that, while in Ju 6 3 "when Israel had sown" means whenever they had so done, the prophet Amos in 7 2 certainly did not mean to imply that the act of making an end of eating the grass of the land was one that he had seen repeated. Indeed, there are the best of reasons for denying that he intended to represent it as ever carried into execution. He says that he interceded. Of what avail would it have been to intercede after the grass, or better, herbage, of the land had been completely devoured? Finally, he says (v. 3) that his intercession was effectual, that Yahweh changed his mind and gave him the assurance, "It shall not be."

There is evidently something wrong with the text or the translation. What the prophet intended to say may be inferred from v. 4, where he says that the fire summoned by Yahweh "devoured the great deep, and was devouring" (pf. with *waw*), that is, was about to devour, or, as the Revised Version has it, "would have devoured", "the field." Similarly, in v. 2 he must have said, or meant to say, "when they (the locusts) would have completely devoured the herbage of the land." This being the case, the next question is whether the language of the Massoretic text can properly be so interpreted. There is something to be said for this opinion. In the first place, since, as appears from v. 4, the perfect with *waw* consecutive may denote an action begun or attempted, but not completed, it is not strange to find הַיָּהּ introducing a compound sentence in which this species of action is evidently intended. That the inchoative idea is found in the protasis, but not in the apodosis, is not, as is shown by Ju. 12 5, if the text is correct, a fatal objection. Nor is **DN** out of place in such a connection, for, although in most cases in which it is rendered "when" it has the force of "whenever," Ju. 21 21 is proof that it was used of distinct and isolated events. As for the tense employed, the use of the perfect to denote what might under other circumstances have occurred, is too familiar to the student of the Old Testament to

need defense or illustration. It occurs several time after **במעם**, which might have been used by Amos in this connection. See Ps. 73 2; *GK.* 106, 4.

The above explanation takes for granted the correctness of the Massoretic text. There are those who prefer to emend it. Thus, Wellhausen, for **והיה אם**, reads **ויהי טרם**; but Harper goes farther and, for **והיה אם כלה**, substitutes **ויהי הא מכלה** by this means making the whole verse read, "And it came to pass, when they (the locusts) were completely devouring the herbage of the land", &c.; which, although there is nothing like it in the book of Amos, is a perfectly defensible Hebrew construction. See 2 Kgs. 13 21.

4. In the cases of 1 Sam. 1 12 and 25 20, where some scholars would replace **והיה** by **ויהי**, or delete it, as well as in Am. 7 2, there are reasons for retaining the Massoretic reading, but there are certain passages in which the use of this introductory form is indefensible.

a. In some of these the apodosis has the imperfect with *waw* consecutive. Thus,

1 Sam. 10 9: "And it came to pass, when he turned (inf. with **ב**) his back to go from Samuel, that God gave him another (**ויהסך**) heart,"

1 Sam. 17 48: "And it came to pass, when the Philistine arose (pf. with **כי**), . . . that David made haste" (**וימהר**).

2 Kgs. 3 15: "And it came to pass, when the minstrel played (inf. with **ב**), that the hand of Yahweh was (**ותהי**) on him."

Jer. 37 11: "And it came to pass, when the Chaldean force was brought up (inf. with **ב**) from Jerusalem, that Jeremiah went forth" (**ויצא**).

Jer. 38 28b—39 3: "And it came to pass, when Jerusalem had been taken (pf. with **כאשר**), that the princes . . . came in" (**ויבאו**).

b. Less frequently, the verb of the apodosis, because it is separated from the connective, is in the perfect.

1 Sam. 13 22: "And it came to pass, in the day of battle, that there was not found (**נמצא**) a sword or a spear in the hands of all the people."

2 Sam. 6 16: "And it came to pass, as the ark of Yahweh was coming into (part.) the city of David, that Michal, the daughter of Saul, leaned (נִשְׁקְפָה) out of a window, and saw (וַתֵּרֶא) King David.

The passages quoted under a and b, although they differ as just described, and take a variety of forms in the protasis, or circumstantial clause, have this in common, that, whatever the background, each of them, in the apodosis, adds one or more distinct items to the history of the past. Now, there are scores of similar cases in the Old Testament, but in all the rest of them the introductory verb is not in the perfect with *waw* consecutive, but takes the familiar form וְהָיָה. With 1 Sam. 10 9 and 2 Kgs. 3 15 compare Gen. 12 14; with 1 Sam. 17 48, Gen. 26 8; with Jer. 37 11, Gen. 4 8; with Jer. 38 28b, Gen. 12 11; with 1 Sam. 13 22, Gen. 4 3; and with 2 Sam. 6 16, 2 Sam. 13 30. It is natural, therefore, to suppose that the passage in question originally had וְהָיָה, and this inference is favored by the fact that, in 1 Sam. 10 9, Kenn. 1 and 80, and in Jer. 37 11, Kenn. 30 and 180, have this reading; also 1 Chr. 15 29, the parallel to 2 Sam. 6 16. It is adopted, in the notes on the passages cited, in Kittel's Bible; but there is room for doubt whether it should be applied without exception. The Hebrews, in the better period of their literature, were reasonably consistent in the use of the imperfect with *waw* consecutive after a perfect denoting completed past action, but, in later times, they adopted, to a greater or less extent, the simpler Aramaic usage, which does not require a change of tense after the connective. See Ecc. 9 14 ff. &c. If, therefore, any of these passages can, on other grounds, be shown to be of late origin, it becomes possible that וְהָיָה should be retained; but, if so, it should be interpreted as the equivalent in meaning of the earlier וְהָיָה. Perhaps 2 Sam. 6 16 a and Jer. 38 28 b, where, as appears from the Greek Version, the text is corrupt, are to be treated in this way. In 1 Sam. 10 9, 13 22, and 17 48 and Jer. 37 11, on the other hand, וְהָיָה is apparently a copyist's error occasioned by the occurrence of one or more perfects with *waw* in the immediate context. In 2 Kgs. 3 15 a preceding imperative may have led the scribe astray. Perhaps, however, in this instance some words have been lost,

the original of the verse having read, "And now, fetch me a minstrel: and it shall come to pass when the minstrel playeth, [that the hand of Yahweh will be on me. And they did so; and it came to pass when the minstrel played],² that the hand of Yahweh was on him."

5. The explanation above given, if valid, removes the passages explained from the category of exceptions and negatively establishes the rule, that וְהָיָה in the sense of "and it came to pass" requires that the verb or verbs of the apodosis have a form denoting customary or continuous action. The question now arises whether the converse is true, that is, whether a verb of the form described in the apodosis is always introduced by וְהָיָה, and whether, if there are exceptions, they are real and original departures from the regular construction. The list of passages quoted in section 1 will serve as illustrations of the rule. The following are introduced by וַיְהִי, although in each case the verb in the apodosis is a frequentative:

Jos. 6 8: "And it came to pass, when Joshua spake (inf. with כ) to the people, that the seven priests . . . were passing (יַעֲבִיר)."³

1 Kgs. 14 28: "And it came to pass, as oft as the king went into (inf. with מָדִי) the house of Yahweh, that the guard bare them (יִשְׂאוּם) and brought them back" (וְהָשִׁיבוּם).

2 Chr. 12 11: "And it came to pass, as oft as the king went into (inf. with מָדִי) the house of Yahweh, that the guard came (יָבִיאוּ),⁴ and bare them (וְנִשְׂאוּם), and brought them back" (וְהָשִׁבוּם).

2 Kgs. 4 8: "And it came to pass, as oft as he passed by (inf. with מָדִי), that he turned in (יָסַר) thither."

Jer. 36 23: "And it came to pass, when Jehudi had read (inf.

² Words omitted: וְהָיָה עָלֶיךָ יְהוָה וַיַּעַשׂוּ כֵן וַיְהִי כַנְגֵן הַמְּנֻן.

³ The Massoretic text has עָבְרוּ, but, since it is followed by a perfect with *waw* consecutive, the original reading must have been an imperfect. See also the Greek Version.

⁴ The Massoretic text has בָּאוּ, but since the one who inserted this new verb must have changed the one following from יִשְׂאוּם to יָבִיאוּם, the original form must have been an imperfect. See also the Greek Version.

with כ) three or four leaves, that he (the king) cut them out (יִקְרַעֵם)⁵ with a penknife."

It is not so easy to account for the הָיָה of these passages as for the exceptional use of הָיָה in those above discussed. The first explanation to suggest itself is that here again the copyists are to blame for the irregularity; but 2 Kgs. 4 8, which begins with a הָיָה, and which, in two manuscripts (Kenn. 56, 96), has הָיָה in place of this one, is the only case in which such an explanation seems warranted. A better one would seem to be that מָדַי, with which the protasis in 1 Kgs. 14 28 and 1 Chr. 12 11 as well as 2 Kgs. 4 8 begins, influenced the form of the introductory verb. A certain plausibility is given to this suggestion by the fact that, in 1 Sam. 18 30, מָדַי is followed in the apodosis by the perfect instead of a frequentative imperfect; but 1 Sam. 7 18, where the perfect with *waw* is found both before and after מָדַי, makes it worthless. Perhaps, however, 1 Sam. 18 30 will be helpful in discovering the real reason why הָיָה takes the place of הָיָה in these exceptional passages. It is a late addition to the story of David, not found in the Greek Version. The substitution by its author of the perfect for the frequentative imperfect in the apodosis indicates a tendency to neglect the nicer shades of meaning among the Hebrews. The same tendency is illustrated in Jos. 6 8 and 2 Chr. 12 11, where, although in each case the leading verb of the apodosis was originally an imperfect, the scribes have transformed it into a perfect. Note, now, that all the passages in which a genuine הָיָה is properly rendered "and it came to pass", before a verb denoting customary or continued action, belong to the earlier narratives, while the first clause of Jos. 6 8, as well as 1 Sam. 18 30, is an interpolation, not found in the Greek Version, and 1 Kgs. 14 28, 2 Kgs. 4 8, Jer. 36 23, and 2 Chr. 12 11 belong to the later literature, and it will not be difficult to believe that these passages, except perhaps 2 Kgs. 4 8, furnish actual exceptions to the rule that, in the Old Testament, when הָיָה is used to introduce a verb denoting customary or continued action, it takes the form of the perfect with *waw* consecutive.

⁵ The Massoretic text has יִקְרַעֵם.