Article

Culture as an Underlying Factor for Xhosa and Biblical Hebrew Aspectual Verbs

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Abstract

Scholars have long observed that Biblical Hebrew differs from English and other Indo-European languages in its verbal system. Levinsohn notes that Hebrew conveys aspect rather than tense, requiring translators to infer tense from context, while LaSor underscores the importance of interpreting Hebrew terms within their native linguistic framework. This article explores why Biblical Hebrew prioritises aspect over tense and investigates whether this distinction carries significant implications for interpretation and the construction of meaning. To engage these questions, the study examines how cultural world-views serve as an underlying factor in the prominence of aspectual verbs in Xhosa and Biblical Hebrew, providing a comparative lens for deeper linguistic and hermeneutical insights.

Keywords: aspect; chronological time; event-based time; imperfect-perfect; past-present-future; tense

UNISA
Journal for Semitics
Volume 34| Number 1-2| 2025| #19265 | 18 pages
https://doi.org/10.25159/2663-6573/19265
ISSN 2663-6573 (Online), ISSN 1013-8471 (Print)

Introduction

Various scholars, including LaSor (1988) and Levinsohn (2013), have highlighted the unique challenges of interpreting Biblical Hebrew verbal systems, particularly when translating them into tense-focused languages. From an English-speaking point of view, William S. LaSor describes the Biblical Hebrew (BH) verbal system as follows:

> The Semitic verbal system is unlike systems with which most of us are familiar. We must seek to understand the Semitic pattern. Many of the terms are the same, but what they represent is not like our English equivalents. We must learn what the terms mean as they are used with reference to Hebrew. (Lasor 1988, 85)

In a similar vein, Stephen H. Levinsohn argues: "English verbs convey both tense and aspect. … Hebrew verbs do not convey tense. Rather, when translating a Hebrew verb into a language whose verbs indicate tense, the tense has to be deduced from the context" (Levinsohn 2013, 1). In light of these observations, this article considers the complexity of the tense-aspect relationship. Acting on this consideration, the article aims to explain the difference between tense and aspect by presenting the general cultural background of traditional communities, focusing on Xhosa communities as a specific example.

This aim is pursued through two central questions, each designed to illuminate the relationship between cultural temporality and the grammatical encoding of tense and aspect. The first question is: What underlying factors explain Biblical Hebrew's preference for aspect over tense in structuring verbal meaning? The second question is: How does the distinction between perfect-imperfect tenses and past-present-future tenses affect Biblical Hebrew's representation of time? This explanation of the difference between tense and aspect by presenting the general cultural background of traditional communities will unfold in three layers: (1) establishment of the cultural basis of aspectuality (cultural foundations), (2) Biblical Hebrew/Xhosa comparison (world-view comparison), and (3) application of a cultural lens to the Biblical Hebrew (BH) verbal system (methodological bridge).

The use of Xhosa to make sense of the relationship between ancient Israel's cosmology and BH grammar also serves to circumvent what Jacobus A. Naudé and Cynthia L. Miller-Naudé call "the essential inadequacy of nearly every grammar of Biblical Hebrew for African students" (Naudé and Miller-Naudé 2011, 691). They notice that "teaching grammars of Biblical Hebrew are written from the perspective of Western languages (English, Afrikaans, French, German) and not African languages" (ibid.). Victor Zinkuratire viewed it as a problem that Bantu-speaking students learn BH in English, which "is very different both from Hebrew and the Bantu languages" (Zinkuratire 2001, 217), while "African languages have some features which are closer to Hebrew than Western languages are" (Naudé and Miller-Naudé 2011, 692). For example, English is a predominantly analytic language, while BH and Bantu languages

are predominantly synthetic languages (Cezula 2022, 5–6; Moravcsik 2013, 112).[1] Also, similar cosmologies underlie both languages. There are, however, contemporary developments that have challenged the status quo in this matter.[2] In addition to Naudé and Miller-Naudé, Kevin Chau employed language typology for teaching BH in Cantonese-Chinese (Chau 2017), and Tshokolo J. Makutoane employed language typology for teaching BH pronouns in Sotho (Makutoane 2019).

At this point, for the sake of emphasis, it might be helpful to register John A. Cook's observation of a controversy of alternative answers to one question: "Do BH verbal forms primarily express tense or aspect?" (Cook 2006, 21). Without providing all the alternative answers, in a later book, Cook convincingly responds to the question. He asserts as follows:

> There are, in fact, aspectual, tensed, and mood grams in BH so, to speak about it as a tense or aspect *or* mood system is problematic except as I have qualified it in terms of the "prominence" of one or the other parameter. (Cook 2012, 260)

He contends that the BH verbal system is aspect-prominent, but like "any of the world's verbal systems, this aspect-prominent system can express a wide range of aspectual, tensed, and modal meanings" (Cook 2012, x). This article, therefore, maintains that BH has an aspect-prominent verbal system. Departing from this premise, this further asserts that language serves as both a medium of communication and a reflection of cultural world-views (Naudé and Miller-Naudé 2014, 600; Torto 2020, 25). Comparatively, Biblical Hebrew and Xhosa, despite emerging from distinct linguistic traditions, share a fundamental characteristic: they prioritise aspect over tense. Since this article is classifying and comparing Hebrew and Xhosa aspectual verbal systems, it employs language typology as methodology. "Two words are central to typology, namely, classification and comparison" (Cezula 2022, 3). This article explores the relationship between the perfect and imperfect tenses and the notion of time in general in BH. It draws inspiration from Naudé and Miller-Naudé, who, referencing Eli Hinkel, state: "A second or foreign language can scarcely be learned or taught without addressing the culture of the community within which it is used" (Naudé and Miller-Naudé 2014, 600). They then argue that there is a need for "cultural aspects of ancient Israelite society … to be integrated into the actual teaching of Hebrew grammar. The teaching of Biblical Hebrew, however, has usually taken place in a cultural vacuum without reference to the physical world of ancient Israel or to the cultural concepts that permeated ancient Israelite society" (ibid.). Considering all the issues raised, the article will explore the notion of time both in Xhosa and BH. It starts by discussing the event-based times in the traditional African culture and the ancient Israelite culture. It then explores the

1 Analytical languages are languages "in which every word is monomorphemic," and synthetic languages are languages "in which complete utterances are formed by affixing morphemes to a root" (Whaley 1997, 2).

2 Naudé and Miller-Naudé (2011); Elelwani Farisani (2012); Kevin Chau (2017); Tshokolo J. Makutoane (2019); and Ntozakhe Cezula (2022), to name a few.

cultural context of the event-based time. It then discusses the notion of tense and aspect. In this part of the discussion, the role of the literary context is illuminated. Concluding remarks bring the discussion to a close. To begin, let us discuss the event-based times in Africa.

Event-Based Times in Traditional Africa and the Hebrew Bible

Since a world-view is abstract information, it cannot be perceived until it culminates in behaviour. According to the anthropologist Lloyd E. Kwast, culture is a layered phenomenon. Behaviour is the outermost observable layer. However, behaviour is not random; it is determined by norms and values (what is right or wrong) just below it. Norms and values are also determined by beliefs (what is true) below them. Beliefs are, in turn, determined by the world-view (what is real), which is at the bottom, the heart of culture (Kwast 1997, 397–399). As the world-view is perceptible in behaviour, only the behaviour of communities can demonstrate a people's worldview. This means the event-based African time can be demonstrated by exploring the lives of the diverse African communities. On this basis, in this discussion, the lives of the amaXhosa are being explored. This is based on the presupposition that diversity does not preclude shared patterns. Africa is indeed diverse, but this does not invalidate the existence of pan-African philosophical tendencies; hence, the title of this section is "Event-Based Times in Traditional Africa and the Hebrew Bible," while the contents discuss the life of the amaXhosa.

Event-based time is evident in the writings of John A. Chalmers about Tiyo Soga, whose lives intersected meaningfully in the context of nineteenth-century South African mission history and African intellectual formation. Chalmers (1837–1888) was a Scottish missionary, educator and mentor to Tiyo Soga and his biographer. According to Chalmers: "The date of a Kafir[3] infant's birth is invariably marked by some noted occurrence during that year" (Chalmers 1878, 4). "One is registered in the memory of friends as having been born in the year of the comet; another in the year of the fruitfulness of the Karob tree; another in the year of the great winter flood; another in the year of the caterpillar; another in the year of some great historical event" (ibid.). Not only the year, but the month also is approximated: "the mother relates that it was in the spring-time, when the crops were being sown, between the increscent and decrescent moon or it was when the pleiades [*sic*] appeared before the dawn above the eastern horizon" (ibid.). Tiyo Soga (1829–1871) himself, being the first ordained Black South African minister, Xhosa intellectual, translator, and hymn composer, did not know the calendar date of his birth, reports Chalmers (ibid.). On one occasion, Soga was reading *The Wrongs of the Kafir Race* by Justus. He exclaimed: "This book has enabled me to discover the exact year of my birth. My mother tells me I was born during the year that Makoma was expelled from the Kat River, and I find that the event took place in 1829" (Chalmers 1878, 4–5). Jeffrey B. Peires corroborates this event-based dating of

3 This word is not acceptable anymore.

birthdays. Writing about his oral sources for his dissertation on the history of the amaXhosa, he reports: “Birth dates … were deduced from important events (such as the Rinderpest Epidemic of 1897) which occurred at the time of their birth” (Peires 1976, 229).

If one considers all of these dates, one might discern a trend. Time is linked to events. According to John Henderson-Soga: “The Xosas [*sic*] in assigning a period to any event or circumstance have no means of calculating with the accuracy and precision of more civilized races. … Their calendar is based upon certain important events” (Henderson-Soga 1931, 420). John Mbiti makes a similar remark about Africans in general: “The question of time is of little or no academic concern to African peoples in their traditional life. For them, time is simply a composition of events which have occurred, those which are taking place now and those which are immediately to occur” (Mbiti 1970, 21). Mbiti further asserts about time in traditional Africa: “Time has to be experienced in order to make sense or to become real. A person experiences time partly in his own individual life, and partly through the society which goes back many generations before his own birth” (Mbiti 1970, 23). To put the foregoing into perspective, calendar-based birthdays are mathematical while the amaXhosa dates are event-based.

This event-based reckoning in traditional African contexts is echoed in biblical narratives, where time is similarly framed by pivotal occurrences rather than numerical precision. In the Bible, a similar world-view is discernible, where time is experienced and understood through the lens of significant events and their impact, rather than as a linear, abstract concept. In 2 Kings 25:27, instead of the narrator saying that in 560 BCE King Jehoiachin was released from prison by Evil-Merodach, king of Babylon, he says:

> And in the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin king of Judah … Evil-merodach king of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, graciously freed Jehoiachin king of Judah from prison.”

“The thirty-seventh year of his exile takes us to 560 B.C.” (Hobbs 1985, 367). However, Hobbs dates the first year of Evil-Merodach’s reign two years earlier than the date of 2 Kings 25:27 so that 560 BCE is actually the year of Evil-Merodach’s assassination (Hobbs 1985, 367). Henderson-Soga and Mbiti underscore a common African approach to time, one rooted in lived experience rather than rigid computation. This same interpretive framework appears in biblical texts, where historical markers are event-driven rather than mathematically fixed. They argue that there is no intention “of calculating with the accuracy and precision” (Henderson 1931, 420) or that “time is of little or no academic concern …” but “a composition of events which have occurred” (Mbiti 1970, 23). In Isaiah 6:1, the vision of Isaiah is located in the year of the death of King Uzziah. Walter Brueggemann dates the death of King Uzziah to 742 BCE: “The mention of King Uzziah, who died in 742 (cf. 1:1), serves perhaps simply to date the reported experience or perhaps to contrast the transitoriness of human kings with the abiding quality of the divine king” (Brueggemann 1998, 58). In Isaiah 14: 28, the oracle

concerning Philistia is dated in the year that King Ahaz died. According to John N. Oswald, "there is no agreement over the absolute dating of Ahaz's death." It could be 727 BCE (2 Kings 18:1, 9, 10) or 716/15 BCE (2 Kings 18:13) (Oswald 1986, 331). Marvin A. Sweeny brings Ahaz's death close to 715–713, "the period when the Philistines were preparing for their revolt against Sargon and the Assyrian empire." Ahaz's death brought hope for the Philistines to persuade Ahaz's son, Hezekiah, to be their ally since Ahaz refused (Sweeney 1996, 238). Whatever the exact date, it is not the concern of this discussion. The point here is that the author of Isaiah 14:28 dated the oracle concerning Philistia according to the death of Ahaz, employing an event-based time, hence the struggle to locate the exact date by Old Testament scholars. According to Hugh G. M. Williamson, "there are three main options for Ezra's date," namely 458 BCE, 398 BCE and 428 BCE (Williamson 1985, xxxix–xl). The reason for these different date suggestions is that the narrator of the book of Ezra dated the coming of Ezra to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. By struggling to provide the date in numerical years, Old Testament scholars in these examples are calculating the mathematical date from the event-based dates provided by the biblical authors. The point here is to demonstrate that the world-view discernible in the dating by the traditional amaXhosa above is also perceptible in the Old Testament.

To conclude this subsection, a few remarks are in order. As demonstrated above, both the traditional African and ancient Israelite world-views on time reflect an understanding of time that is experienced and interpreted through the lens of significant events and their immediate impact, rather than as a linear, abstract concept. The contrast between the mathematical dating employed by the Cape Colony and Old Testament scholars, on the one hand, and the event-based dating used by traditional amaXhosa and biblical narrators, on the other, is the prioritisation of abstract chronology and the importance of the prioritisation of events, respectively. If I may contextualise Vera da Silva Sinha's observations on the language of the Guarani people of Brazil within this discussion, the events referenced above, although they illustrate time, are essentially more significant "than time per se" (Silva Sinha 2018, 35). As both Henderson-Soga and Mbiti made clear, time in this context is not meant to be measured with precision; it holds, as Mbiti puts it, "little or no academic concern" (Henderson-Soga 1931, 420; Mbiti 1970, 21). Understanding these cultural time perspectives is vital for interpreting historical and religious texts, as it aids in appreciating the context and meaning behind recorded events. The conception of time depicted here differs from our understanding of time in the twenty-first-century modern context. While the time described above is characterised as event-based, our time in the twenty-first century context is defined as chronological. The former is typically attributed to traditional communities, whereas chronological times are associated with modern culture. An enlightening example of the tension between the traditional and modern times is provided by Keletso E. Atkins when she describes labour challenges among the amaZulu and Westerners in the nineteenth century, saying:

> Time was at the nexus of the "kafir labour problem". No sooner was a work agreement made than confusion arose from the disparate notions of the white employer and his African employee regarding the computation of time. … European units of measure, did not accord with the African mode of temporal reckoning. … Like most preindustrial people, the Zulu used the moon and stars to keep track of time. … Coming as they did from a culture that had adopted and adapted precision instruments and other convenient methods of timekeeping – watches, clocks, solar calendars, etc. … – whites contemptuously referred to the lunar reckonings as the "kafir month." (Atkins 1988, 230–231)

Atkins demonstrates how the event-based time of the amaZulu and the chronological time of the Westerners clashed in real-life situations. This helps us to appreciate the differences between the two modes of time computation. To have a meaningful grasp of event-based time, we need to examine its cultural context. Recognising this shared world-view enriches biblical interpretation, urging scholars to engage with the cultural foundations that shape how time is recorded and understood in sacred texts.

Cultural Context of Event-Based Time

The difference between event-based time and chronological time is not arbitrary but culturally influenced. This means that the notion of event-based time is part of a broader cultural category known as traditional culture vis-a-vis modern culture. Both traditional Xhosa and ancient Israelite cultures fall into this category. Thus, traditional culture is the cultural context of the event-based time. The most important characteristic of traditional cultures for such a discussion is that they conceptualise time cyclically. This cyclical frame of time is reflected in Silva Sinha when discussing "time reckoning practices in three indigenous cultures … of Brazil." She says: "Event-based time intervals in all these cultures are based upon seasons, 'happenings' in the natural environment, the movements of heavenly bodies, and the regularities of social life and habitus" (Silva Sinha 2019, 1). Time is perceived as recurring cycles—like the seasons, the phases of the moon, or the life-death-rebirth processes observed in nature. Concerning traditional African people, Mbiti says:

> There is the cycle of the seasons with their different activities like sowing, cultivating, harvesting and hunting. The key events or moments are given more attention than others, and may often be marked by religious rites and ceremonies. Unusual events or others which do not fit into this rhythm, such as an eclipse, drought, the birth of twins and the like, are generally thought to be bad omens, or to be events requiring special attention from the community, and this may take the form of a religious activity. The abnormal or unusual is an invasion of the ontological harmony. (Mbiti 1970, 31)

Regarding the amaXhosa specifically, Peires says:

> The annual cycle of stellar constellations, associated as these were with the changing of the seasons and the pattern of agricultural production, accustomed the Xhosa to expect every year the return of the circumstances of previous years. The rites of passage

> concerning birth, maturation and death represented human life not as an irreversible ageing process but as a repetitive cycle comparable to the repetitive cycles of seasonal and agricultural change. (Peires 1987, 54)

A similar idea about ancient Israelites is stated by Elmer C. Chen when she says:

> The Old Testament represents cyclical time in the natural cycles of days, weeks, seasons, and years—each built into creation to provide rhythm and structure to life (Gen 1:14–18; 8:22). The Hebrew calendar was structured around lunar cycles and annual agrarian seasons. The patterns of Sabbath days, Sabbath years, daily sacrifices, and annual feasts were central to their social and religious life (Exod 20:8–11; 21:2; 23:10–12, 14–19). (Chen 2016, n.p.)

All the above observations mention cyclical lunar phenomena and annual agrarian seasons. Peires captures the cyclical nature of amaXhosa temporality in his observation that "the annual cycle of stellar constellations … accustomed amaXhosa to expect every year the return of the circumstances of previous years" (Peires 1987, 54). From Chen's observations, the same can be said of the ancient Israelites. The expectations of the return of previous circumstances draw focus on happenings. The happenings, or events, become the main features of time. Thus, time becomes event-based.

Under such circumstances, events take over to provide structure to the life of that culture. To borrow from Silva Sinha's insights, speakers tend to "locate past and future events in embodied cognitive and perceptual processes, rather than locating them along an oriented timeline" (Silva Sinha 2018, 188–189). Sinha's research is essentially significant for this article in another respect. Among other things, it investigates the linguistic conceptualisation of time. Concerning the languages of the three Brazilian indigenous cultures Sinha investigated, she says: "Event-based time intervals give structure to a complex and traditional lifeworld. The grammar of time is also … focusing on completion and incompletion of events" (Silva Sinha 2018, 188–189). The last remark concurs with Jacobus C. Oosthuysen when he says: "In isiXhosa, tense does not primarily reflect a line from past, present to future, as it does in some other languages. It depicts a circle from action to inaction, from event to result, from incomplete to complete, from imperfect to perfect" (Oosthuysen 2016, 188; 2017, 164–165). It may provide perspective to conclude this subsection with Naudé and Miller-Naudé's remarks that: "Biblical Hebrew is like the Bantu languages … in that they are all aspect-prominent languages, but Biblical Hebrew is also typologically similar to every aspect-prominent language world-wide" (Naudé and Miller-Naudé 2011, 696). This means that both Xhosa and Biblical Hebrew are aspect-prominent languages. If I may adapt Oosthuysen here, in both Xhosa and Biblical Hebrew, "tense does not primarily reflect a line from past, present to future, as it does in some other languages." Tense, in these languages, "depicts a circle from action to inaction, from event to result, from incomplete to complete, from imperfect to perfect" (2016, 188; 2017, 164–165). Again, taking a cue from Naudé and Miller-Naudé, it may not be far-fetched to say that Biblical Hebrew is like Xhosa in that they are both aspect-prominent languages, and they are

also "typologically similar to every aspect-prominent language world-wide" (Naudé and Miller-Naudé 2011, 696).

This is the background behind the event-based nature of Biblical Hebrew time. This should be able to answer our first research question as to what underlying factors explain Biblical Hebrew's preference for aspect over tense in structuring verbal meaning. It is because the cultural context of Biblical Hebrew is traditional culture vis-à-vis modern culture. The cyclical rhythm of stellar constellations, the changing of the seasons, and the pattern of agricultural production that characterise traditional cultures accustomed the members of these traditional cultures to expect every year the return of the circumstances of previous years. The expectations of the return of previous circumstances drew focus on happenings or events. This led to events taking over to provide structure to the lives of ancient Israelites. As Sinha observes in his study of Brazilian communities, Israelite speakers tended to "locate past and future events in embodied cognitive and perceptual processes, rather than locating them along an oriented timeline" (Silva Sinha 2018, 188–189). This orientation, he argues, shaped a grammar that emphasises "completion and incompletion of events" rather than abstract temporal coordinates (Silva Sinha 2018, 188–189). Oosthuysen similarly describes Xhosa tense as depicting a circular movement—from action to inaction, from event to result, from incomplete to complete, from imperfect to perfect (2016, 188; 2017, 164–165). Such patterns reflect the broader tendency in traditional cultures to conceptualise time cyclically rather than linearly, a worldview that manifests linguistically through aspect-prominence rather than tense-driven grammatical structures. This is precisely why Biblical Hebrew prioritises aspect.

We may as well respond to the second research question now. The question is how the distinction between perfect-imperfect tenses and past-present-future tenses affects Biblical Hebrew's representation of time. This question becomes even more important considering that while English prioritises past-present-future tenses, it does contain perfect-imperfect tenses. Similarly, while Biblical Hebrew prioritises perfect-imperfect tenses, it also contains past-present-future tenses. This is contrary to Levinsohn, who says Hebrew verbs do not convey tense. It is, therefore, not insignificant to ask this question. The response is that the distinction between perfect-imperfect tenses and past-present-future tenses affects Biblical Hebrew's representation of time consequentially. Since we do not have access to the flesh and blood communities of ancient Israel, the consequential difference between aspect-focused and tense-focused languages can be demonstrated by considering a real-life example from amaXhosa communities in the Little Karoo, Eastern Cape.[4]

One of the things that the amaXhosa in the small rural towns of the Little Karoo are always looking forward to every year is the return of friends and family members who

4 Eastern Cape is one of the nine provinces that make up the Republic of South Africa. It is rated as the poorest province in South Africa (Alexander 2024).

work in other provinces as migrant workers, especially during the December holidays. Njwambe et al. provide a mental image of the mood of this time when they report about Xhosa-speaking migrants who journey between Centane, in the former Transkei homeland, and Cape Town, saying:

> The ability to perform rituals in the presence of family and kin, at the site where one's ancestors reside, was considered a necessity and a significant motivating factor for returning home. Rituals and ceremonies considered important to perform included the unveiling of tombstones, wedding ceremonies, negotiations of bride wealth, initiation rites for young men and ritual beer drinks to thank ancestors for success in the city. (Njwambe et al. 2019, 426)

This time becomes the time of abundance. It becomes defined not by the Gregorian calendar, but by the return of those who left, echoing Peires's observation that the amaXhosa expect "the return of the circumstances of previous years" (1987, 54). Those who remain in the rural areas anticipate this time not by date, but by its social and material consequences: full fridges, new clothes, shared meals, and reunions. It is not experienced as a linear progression towards the future but as a repetition of blessing—a return of people, resources, and relational warmth. The past is not left behind but re-enacted in the present, and the future is anticipated not as an abstraction but as the return of what has been. People even go to the extent of comparing the current year to the previous years in terms of abundance. In the communal imagination, December ceases to function as a mere calendar month and becomes a sacred season of return, marked by the ritualised homecoming of migrant workers and the renewal of relational abundance.

This is cyclical time in action: the past (last year's abundance) returns in the present, and the future is anticipated not as an abstract projection but as a repetition of the same blessing. The euphoria that ensues influences even the language spoken. "When is so-and-so arriving?" becomes the buzz word. The question is less about the specific date and more about seeking reassurance that the person is indeed returning. Phrases like "the Capetonians have arrived" or "the Johannesburgers are back" do not necessarily refer to the past tense but encode the benefits that are being enjoyed owing to such arrivals. These benefits signal the closure of a cycle from the previous December to the current December. This is a cyclical cultural framework of time, spanning from December to December, with a focus on how December unfolds. From this reasoning, the arrivals are viewed more in terms of how they unfold, and thus, in terms of their having happened (aspect) rather than when they happened (tense). From this world-view naturally arises grammatical emphasis on aspect. This linguistic prioritisation of aspect over tense means that verbs in Xhosa predominantly communicate the completeness or progression of actions rather than anchoring them to a fixed point in chronological time. As a result, interpretation requires sensitivity to context and the cyclical rhythms of life rather than rigid temporal mapping. Without overburdening this example, let us further demonstrate that there is a consequential difference between the perfect-imperfect tenses and past-present-future tenses or aspect and tense, respectively.

Tense and Aspect

The foregoing section placed event-based time into a cultural context. It demonstrated that, unlike tense, which situates actions within a fixed temporal framework (past, present, future), aspect highlights the completeness or progression of an action, making it integral to understanding languages where event-based time is prioritised. Because the cultural context of BH is traditional culture vis-à-vis modern culture, BH prioritises the perfect-imperfect tenses instead of the past-present-future tenses. I reckon this is a satisfactory answer to the first question. Despite that, BH also uses tense. The second question, therefore, remains pertinent. For this reason, it is necessary to provide another example to respond to the second question. But before we do that, an insight from Richard T. Torto may be a proper introduction. He opines that "language serves as the vehicle for the expression of," among other things, thoughts, sentiments and values of its speakers. "As a tool of communication, language also conveys traditions and values related to group identity" (Torto 2020, 25). If one considers that sentiments and values are important to their adherents, and that language conveys those sentiments and values, one may appreciate the translation of a language from one to another as accurate as possible. This means accurately capturing tense and aspect ensures that communication is precise, reducing ambiguity and misunderstandings. It is especially vital in cross-linguistic or cross-cultural settings where different systems of marking tense and aspect can affect how messages are interpreted. Bearing this in mind, it may be empowering to realise what Torto further says: "Aspect is often confused with the closely related concept of tense because they both convey information about time. If this distinction is not explicitly captured, communication may be affected" (Torto 2020, 29). It is the idea of communication being affected that we now need to explore. Let us examine a sentence which is part of Genesis 18:10.

This sentence is a statement directed to Abraham by either one of his three visitors or by the Lord. As the NET Bible translation with notes[5] indicates: "Some English translations have specified the referent as the Lord (cf. RSV, NIV) based on vv. 1, 13, but the Hebrew text merely has 'he said,' at this point, referring to one of the three visitors" (NET 2006; Gen 18:10). Never mind the speaker, the statement to Abraham says: אָשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כָּעֵת חַיָּה וְהִנֵּה־בֵן לְשָׂרָה אִשְׁתֶּךָ. This sentence is translated differently by different Bible translations. Specifically, the focus is on the subordinate temporal clause constituted by two words, namely כָּעֵת and חַיָּה. כָּעֵת is the preposition כְּ plus noun common singular construct עת, meaning "at a time." חַיָּה is an adjective, feminine singular absolute of חי, meaning to be alive. This phrase, כָּעֵת חַיָּה, is where the crux of the matter lies in the translation of this sentence. This subordinate clause is preceded by the verbal phrase, which is its main clause: "I will return to you" and succeeded by an independent clause, "and Sarah, your wife shall have a son." The NIV translates the whole sentence as: "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah, your wife, will have a son." The ESV translates it similarly: "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah, your wife shall have a son." These two translations are

5 There is also a NET Bible version without notes.

exactly the same except that the NIV says, "Sarah **will**" while the ESV says, "Sarah **shall**." According to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary:

> There are traditional rules as to when to use shall and will. These state that when forming the future tense, shall should be used with I and we (*I shall be late*), while will should be used with you, he, she, it, and they (*he will not be there*). However, when expressing determination or a command this rule is reversed: will is used with I and we (*I will not tolerate this*), and shall is used with you, he, she, it, and they (*you shall go to school*). In practice, however, these rules are not followed so strictly and the contracted forms (*I'll, she'll*, etc.) are frequently used instead, especially in spoken and informal contexts. (Soanes and Stevenson 2004, n.p.)

In essence, therefore, there is no consequential difference between the NIV and the ESV translations. This translation is also embraced by the 1996[6] and 1999 Xhosa Bible translations. The 1996 version says: "*Malunga neli xesha kunyaka ozayo ndobe ndibuye. USara umkakho woba enomntwana oyinkwenkwe*" (About this time next year I will return, your wife, Sara, will be having a son). The 1999[7] translation, colloquially known as *Ndikhoyo* (translation by ordinary believers), after the translation of YHWH as Ndikhoyo[8] (the Present One), translates as follows: "*Ngokuqinisekileyo ndiya kubuyela kuwe kunyaka ozayo ngeli xesha, yaye, khangela! uSara umfazi wakho uya kuba nonyana*" (Definitely, I will return to you next year this time. Also, see! Sarah your wife will have a son). The NRSV introduces another dynamic in this translation of Genesis 10. It translates this verse as: "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." Instead of saying "about this time next year," it says, "in due season." Both the NIV/ESV translation and the NRSV translation convey a sense of timing and expectation, but with a nuance, depending on how time is portrayed and understood. Whereas the year is often conceived as a linear progression—marking time in discrete, non-repeating units—the season evokes a cyclical temporality, grounded in return, renewal, and the patterned rhythms of life. This contrast underscores the event-based nature of Biblical Hebrew, where timing is determined more by contextual appropriateness than chronological precision. "This time next year" can be located on a timeline, even though the exact day or moment may not be pinpointed. One can thus say it uses tense. "Due season", on the other hand, is much less precise and more metaphorical or dependent on context. It refers to an appropriate or expected time, often tied to cycles or natural rhythms, without specifying a fixed point on a timeline. It highlights the idea of something happening when the time is "right" rather than at a measurable, precise moment. One may say it leans on aspect, emphasising the process of the movement of time rather than a fixed time. The core sense is that the event has not happened yet, but will happen instead of at what specific point as measured in time. The phrase כָּעֵת חַיָּה, translated as "in due season," does not merely indicate when Sarah

6 All the translations are by the Bible Society of South Africa except the 1999 version.

7 By Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania.

8 The usual translation is uYehova for YHWH. This translation replaces uYehova with uNdikhoyo (the Present One).

will conceive but rather locates the event within a broader cyclical framework. This distinction influences how translators convey expectation and fulfilment in different linguistic traditions. This distinction is not merely linguistic; it impacts theological interpretation, shaping how different communities engage with biblical prophecy and fulfilment.

The next translation is by the NET Bible translation. It is as follows: "I will surely return to you when the season comes round again, and your wife Sarah will have a son!" The 1859 Xhosa translation translates as follows: "*Ngokwenene ndobuya ndize kuwe ekutwaseni kwelixesha; kanjalo, bona ke, u-Sara umfazi wako woba nonyana*" (Indeed I will return to come to you at the advent of this season, also, see, Sarah your wife will have a son). The 1975 Xhosa translation translates as follows: "*Ndiya kubuyela kuwe, lakubuya eli xesha; yabona, uSara umkakho uya kuba nonyana*" (I will return to you when this time returns; see, Sarah, your wife will have a son). The 1975 translation, as an updated version of the 1859, revised the verb form "*ndobuya*" to "*Ndiya kubuyela*," incorporating an applicative conjugation *-el*. The indirect object "*kuwe*" (to you) in both sentences carries the applicative sentiment, rendering the difference in verb forms inconsequential. Concerning כָּעֵת חַיָּה, the 1859 versions says at the advent of this season, and the 1975 says when this season returns. Essentially, they both express the NET Bible translation: "… when the season comes round again." This translation is somehow similar to "in due season," reflecting a cyclical perspective of time. It emphasises a recurring, inevitable moment within the natural order of seasons. While it can indicate a specific event within a cycle (e.g., a particular season), it is not pinned to a precise date but rather to the return of a recurring pattern. Both "in due season" and "when the season comes round again" are deeply rooted in cyclical time, emphasising the inevitable unfolding of events rather than strict temporal precision. They speak more to the character or quality of the time (aspect) rather than the exact when (tense). The transition from a mathematically measured year to a cyclical renewal encapsulates the interpretive distinction between tense and aspect. Whereas tense positions events within strict chronological bounds, aspect embraces the fluidity and inevitability of life's unfolding. Interestingly, the NET Bible translation inserted a footnote that says: "'as/when the time lives' or 'revives', possibly referring to the springtime" (2006; Gen 18:10, fn. 31). This footnote will be integrated into the forthcoming discussion.

The last translation is by the King James Version (KJV), and it is as follows: "I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son." The KJV translation is vastly different from the NIV/ESV translations. It translates כָּעֵת חַיָּה as "according to the time of life." It is somehow similar to the NET Bible footnote translation: "as or when the time lives or revives." The new Contemporary Xhosa Bible 2024 (CXB24) embraces this translation: "*Ndiya kubuyela kuwe, okunene ngexesha lodla ubomi; yabona, uSara umkakho uya kuba nonyana. Weva uSara umnyango wentente ngasemva kwakhe*." It translates כָּעֵת חַיָּה as *ngexesha*

lodla ubomi[9] (during the time to enjoy life). The phrase "the time of life" has a layered, almost poetic quality to it. It seems to transcend the mere measurement of time, evoking something deeper—perhaps tied to cycles of renewal, vitality, or divine timing. The King James translation, therefore, establishes a foundation for interpreting time not just as a chronological measure but as something layered and poetic, tied to rhythms of renewal, vitality, and divine timing. It introduces the broader concept of time as imbued with deeper significance, where moments are pregnant with possibility and renewal, transcending mere temporality. This metaphor of life is deepened by Gerald J. Janzen when he says: "Yahweh speaks (v. 10), promising not Abraham but Sarah a son 'in the spring', literally 'in the time of life'. Spring is called 'the time of life' because then vegetation turns green and begins to grow fruit after the winter sleep and animals then give birth" (Janzen 1993, 55). Janzen's remark on vegetation turning green and animals giving birth frames "the time of life" as a cyclical, inevitable period in which nature fulfils its generative promise, echoing the concept of divine timing. Spring becomes not just a season but a metaphor for assured renewal, even in seemingly impossible circumstances, such as Sarah's promised son despite her advanced age. The KJV translation and Janzen illustrate a profound truth that is affirmed in other traditional cultures as well. For example, discussing rituals among the amaXhosa, Dorah Nompumelelo Jafta reflects this profound truth when she says:

> There were winter rituals that marked the death of vegetation and spring rituals that marked the birth of vegetation. Similarly, the development of man was also associated with seasons in terms of symbolic death and rebirth. A parallel can be drawn between the beginning of life in plants and human beings. A seed is planted and symbolically dies before it germinates to give rise to new life. (Jafta 1978, 13)

Janzen's and Jafta's perspectives affirm a shared interpretive framework across cultures where time is not merely sequential but deeply symbolic, tied to patterns of death, renewal, and promise. Both Janzen and Jafta emphasise that human life mirrors the larger cycles of nature, where what seems barren, or dead can transform into abundance and vitality. The "time of life" gives assurance of renewal that life unfolds in cycles, offering hope even after seasons of barrenness or despair. What כָּעֵת חַיָּה communicates, according to the King James version, especially if understood from the perspectives of Janzen and Jafta, is that spring is not just a season but a metaphor for assured renewal, even in seemingly impossible circumstances of Sarah's barrenness, a son is promised. I close this part of the discussion with Ephraim A. Speiser's translation of כָּעֵת חַיָּה: "When life would be due." Speiser translates the sentence as: "When I come back to you when life would be due, your wife Sarah shall have a son!" (Speiser 1964, 128). Does כָּעֵת חַיָּה emphasise the year or life? Put otherwise, does כָּעֵת חַיָּה emphasise time or aspect? Regardless of whether כָּעֵת חַיָּה centres on the measurable passage of time or the assured rhythm of renewal, one thing remains clear: translation choices shape theological

9 There is ambiguity in the statement. It may mean "time to live" or "time to enjoy life." It may also mean "time of life." Deducing from context, I translate it as "time to enjoy life."

interpretation, impacting how biblical time is understood across linguistic and cultural contexts.

Conclusion

To conclude this discussion, I draw attention to cognitive artefacts of time reckoning—tools and markers that humans use to measure, organise, and conceptualise time, shaping how actions and speech unfold in relation to time. Modern societies rely on watches and calendars to impose a structured, mathematical framework upon time, while traditional cultures orient themselves around recurring natural cycles—seasons, celestial movements, and significant events that shape communal rhythms. These artefacts hold deep cultural significance, reflecting communities' beliefs, rituals, values and behaviours. These cognitive artefacts of time reckoning profoundly shape how the respective cultural communities conceptualise and measure time. Modern time is linear and mathematical, and traditional time is cyclical and event-based. This distinction between linear and cyclical time is not merely theoretical—it is embedded in language itself. Biblical Hebrew and Xhosa reflect this world-view through their prioritisation of aspect over tense, emphasising the unfolding of events rather than fixed chronological markers. Importantly, on the part of Xhosa and Biblical Hebrew, emphasising aspect over tense not only aligns with traditional and biblical worldviews but also provides a more intuitive and culturally relevant approach to understanding time and events. Recognising this framework enriches biblical interpretation, urging scholars and students alike to navigate texts with sensitivity to the temporal lenses embedded within the linguistic and cultural traditions that shape them—an awareness that inevitably informs theological understanding. Beyond biblical interpretation, this approach deepens language learning and fosters a more profound appreciation for linguistic diversity, reminding us that every language encodes the unique way its speakers experience time and reality. The distinction between aspect and tense affects the structuring of verbal meaning.

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