Semitic circumstantial qualifiers in the Book of Judges:
A pilot study on the infinitive

Bo Isaksson
Uppsala

Introduction

It is commonly held that the frequent syntagm consisting of the infinitive construct with lāmed – the so-called liqtōl – because of the prefixed preposition י has “a strong value for the direction, the aim, the purpose of an action”, as in Gen 31:19 לֹא וַיַּהַד תֶּלֶת לַעֲבוֹר לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל “now Laban had gone to shear his sheep” (J-M § 124l). At the same time many grammars recognize that in the liqtōl syntagm the preposition י “often has a very weak meaning or even no meaning at all” (J-M, § 49f), and that the syntagm is also used to express adverbial ideas, as in Gen 18:19 יֵשֶׁר וַיִּשְׂאֵל לְאָדָם לִשֵּׁשׁ “they shall keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justness” (J-M § 124o). Such an adverbial usage is sometimes described as equivalent to the Latin gerund (J-M § 124o).

It might appear strange to consider an infinitive preceded by a preposition י “to, for” as a possible circumstantial qualifier, but the compound liqtōl is generally recognized to be more closely integrated than the combination of other prepositions with the infinitive construct. Gesenius-Kautzsch § 45 f–g) describes how the infinitive construct with י forms “A kind of Gerund”, where the two morphemes have fused into “a single grammatical form”, cf. dāgēš lene in תִּקְרָא (Ps 118:13) with the absence of dāgēš in נִקְרָא (Job 4:13) and 2) תִּקְרָא הַמַּתְנָה שָמָא Sam 3:34). Since the morpheme י in many cases has practically “no meaning at all” the syntagm liqtōl must “have been felt to constitute a closer unit”, as an infinitive in itself (J-M § 49 f). The usage of liqtōl as infinitive must be very old, and is used as an infinitive side by side with qētōl throughout Biblical Hebrew.

It goes without saying that the adverbial functions of the Hebrew infinitive construct has a Semitic parallel in the Arabic masdar used in the accusative; fada'aw-tuhu rağā'a 'an takāna tilka bi’T “I invited him hoping that this would happen within me” (The Sīra of Ibn Ishāq). In this example from one of our earliest texts in classical Arabic, the rağā'a is an infinitive with an accusative ending, formed from the verb rağā (“hope, wait”).

An infinitive in the accusative case after the finite verb is a normal syntactic


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device in Arabic to express background information or an adverbial qualification, called ِهَل. And because of its general – unmarked – meaning, the Arabic ِهَل is capable of expressing a gamut of subordinated meanings: final, consequential, causal and temporal. In Hebrew, such functions of the infinitive are recognized only as a very special case, called “gerundial” or “epexegetical”. In a Semitic perspective, however, it would be worth investigating whether the Hebrew ِلَجِنْتُل is not instead a general construction, the specialized meanings of which are inferred from the context rather than explicitly stated by the syntagm itself.

H. S. Nyberg, who was a foremost Arabist, supplies some examples of such a circumstantial usage of ِلَجِنْتُل in his Hebreisk grammatik (§ 91c):

Gen 24:63 Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the turn of the evening

Gen 2:3 because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation (NRSV)

1Sam 20:36 As the boy ran, he shot an arrow making it pass over him.

The examples suggest that the Hebrew ِلَجِنْتُل-syntagm in such adverbial functions might correspond to the Arabic ِهَل-infinitive when it is put in the accusative. If such be the case, the specific nuances of finality in many usages of the ِلَجِنْتُل are due to the unmarked character of the ِلَجِنْتُل as such, rather than the morpheme ِهَل. Circumstantial qualifiers in Semitic possess a general ability to express purpose by inference, such as is expressed in the English sentence “he arrived at the bookshop searching for a dictionary”, where “searching” by inference gets the nuance of “with the intention of”, although this intention is never explicitly marked by the expression. In Arabic the infinitive in the accusative case is used to express purpose as in َمَأَرَأَبُن أَلَجِنْتُلأ لَحَو “I slapped my son in order to discipline him”, where َلَجِنْتُل is an infinitive in the accusative with a nuance of finality (Wright II: 121B).

In this article we shall examine the syntactical function of the Hebrew infinitive. The underlying thought is that this syntactic construction is a common Semitic heritage, and that that which belonged to the oldest known stage of Arabic was also part of the Semitic heritage of Classical Hebrew. Circumstantial qualifiers, both in the form of phrases and complete clauses, play an extraordinarily important role in Semitic syntax, and one such circumstantial expression was the infinitive, in Arabic in the accusative case, and in Hebrew, which did not possess case endings, in the form of either َجِنْتُل or ِلَجِنْتُل.2

We have chosen as a corpus text the Book of Judges. The advantage of such a

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2 Hebrew does not lack case markers, as can be seen in the object particle َبَع. From time to time Hebrew scholars like S. R. Driver (1892), Ewald (1891), Kuhr (1929) and Meek (1929) have discussed parallels with Arabic in a Semitic perspective, but a comparative Semitic approach is uncommon in the current scholarly discussion on Hebrew syntax.
procedure is that we deal only with early biblical Hebrew.3 And in order to achieve a complete view of the functions of the infinitive we will register also those usages that do not correspond to an Arabic َhalt, for example the liqtol as an object complement.

The compounds with other prepositions (in Judges פ, כ, ה, י, י) form rather trivial adverbial adjuncts.

כ with the infinitive construct (18x) is a specific temporal complement. A very typical usage is after an introductory macrosyntactic marker wayhi and following wayyiqtol: וַיַּחֲרִית מֵאֲשֵׂרֵי צְפֹומָה וַיַּחְמֹל וַיַּקְבִּיל וַיַּכְרִיחוּ נְגֵד הַמַּעֲשֶׂה וַיְשָׁוְּלוּ "When he arrived, he sounded the trumpet" (3:27). כ with the infinitive (9x) often forms a temporal complement (7x) equivalent in meaning to כ + infinitive, or a comparative complement as in 5:31, וַיַּנְעוּ בְּאֶרֶץ מַגָּלָה "and Zebul drove out Gaal and his kinsfolk, so that they could not live on at Shechem"; and כ + infinitive (7x) is a final-temporal complement (“until”): וַיִּקְרֵא נָאוֹמֶה כִּי כִּדְרָכָה "I will stay until you return" (6:18).4

The infinitive construct with initial ל

The infinitive construct with initial ל (liqtol) occurs as frequently as 170 times in Judges. It is an exceedingly common device, and it must be considered to be of the utmost importance for a correct exegesis to fully understand its different functions. It is our intention to examine whether liqtol is a marked final/consecutive syntactic device (“in order to”/”so that”) or has a more general (unmarked) meaning (that makes a final/consecutive nuance possible by inference).

The 170 cases of liqtol in Judges will be classified into mutually exclusive groups. One will contain those liqtol’s that have a clear circumstantial meaning. In another group we shall put those liqtol’s that have a final or consecutive nuance. There are, of course, also cases where a final nuance and a circumstantial function are equally possible. Such uncertain instances will be put in a third group.

The doubtful group is put aside in the discussion, so that only reasonably clear cases are considered in the discussion. This group turns out to contain 13 uncertain instances.5 One instance in which both interpretations are possible is found in 7:5, וַיְשָׁוְּלוּ כִּי כִּדְרָכָה "all those who kneel down to drink (or when drinking)”. An interpretation of lišt with a nuance of finality might seem natural in this

3 By this we mean basically pre-exilic Hebrew. Ch. 1 and 19-21 belong to the exilic redactional layer of Judges (Boling 37), but the samples from those chapters are few in number and do not in any way alter the conclusions drawn in the article.

4 When evaluating the attested texts kabḥ has been given priority. If qarē also exhibits an infinitive, the passage is reckoned only once in the statistics.

5 Those cases where liqtol may be interpreted either as a general circumstantial qualifier or as a final adverbial complement are 1:9, 2:6, 7:5, 6, 9:24 (labārōg), 10:1, 9, 11:32; 40, 12:1 (lāhibhāhem), 18:14, 17, 21:21.

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instance, but against that points the fact that the focus of the passage is not so much on the intention to drink, but on the manner of drinking. How did they drink? Kneeling down or not? An interpretation of *liššot* as a general circumstantial adjunct (“when he drinks”) is consequently more in accord with the context. A nuance of finality in *liššot* is, however, possible, and 7:5 is accordingly relegated to the uncertain group.

**liqtōl** as circumstantial qualifier

The infinitive construct with prefixed ש is a reasonably clear circumstantial qualifier in 45 instances. The most frequent such infinitive is לארשי (29x), in which the loss of the glottal stop and compensatory lengthening of the prefix vowel – the expected form would have been לֶמֹר – already indicates that the phrase has fossilized into a particle that marks the beginning of direct speech. This fossilized function of לֶמֹר cannot reasonably have developed from a marked final function of *liqtōl*. A more probable origin is that of a circumstantial complement “in that he said”, “saying”, which correlates to the preceding matrix sentence. A typical example is: “the Israelites inquired of the LORD, (saying) ‘Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites’” (1:1). The circumstantial nuance is discernible in a few instances, as in 6:32: לֶמֹר וּלְיַזָּה לְאָדָם נַעֲרַב בַּאֲלֵהוֹת הָאָרֶץ. Therefore on that day Gideon was called Jerubbaal, *that is to say*, ‘Let Baal contend against him’. The circumstantial לֶמֹר in 6:32 gives the reader a piece of information about the reason behind the name Jerubbaal.

Besides the formulaic instances of לֶמֹר there are 16 other examples of *liqtōl* as circumstantial qualifier in the Book of Judges. In 2:19 Israel’s repeated backsliding is expressed by a series of three *liqtōl*s, which constitute adverbial adjuncts to the matrix sentence:

2:19 But whenever the judge died,  
they relapsed and behaved worse  
than their ancestors, *following* other  
gods, *worshiping* them *and bowing*  
down to them.

Another example of a *liqtōl* as circumstantial qualifier is found in 6:5, where the Midjanites’ ravages are described. They are like swarms of locusts, penetrating the land with devastation and destruction. A final interpretation of the *liqtōl* clause (“in order to waste the land”) does not fit well into the context:

6:5 They and their livestock came up  
and *consumed* the land.  

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6 The inclusion of the ‘ālāef in the transcription only refers to the Hebrew orthography, not the pronunciation.

7 2:17, 19 (3x), 22, 5:16, 28, 6:5, 9:56, 11:27, 13:19, 17:8 (2x), 9, 19:26, 20:10 (Joshua). Two of these belong to the layer of composition that is considered “Deuteronomistic”, belonging to the “post-587 edition”, Boling 37.
(repeatedly), and they even brought their tents, as thick as locusts; neither they nor their camels could be counted; so they came in wasting the land.

Finality (purpose) is even less discernible in the liqtōl phrase describing the punishment of Abimelech in 9:56:

9:56 Thus God repaid Abimelech for the crime he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers;

God punishes Abimelech for his crime when he killed his brothers. Here it is not possible to interpret the infinitive as conveying nuance of finality, nor does the lahrōg express a consequence of something. It simply states the character or content of Abimelech’s crime. The significance of a crime is expressed by a liqtōl phrase in 11:27 as well, where Jephthah conveys his message to the king of the Ammonites.

11:27 It is not I who have sinned against you, but you are the one who does me wrong by making war on me.

The focus in Jephthah’s message is on who is doing wrong and on the kind of evil that is being done. The king is doing wrong, not in order to attack, but by attacking Israel. Another liqtōl that more closely describes or more specifically determines an action is met in the phrase 13:19(הפרשה עשה את אביו לברך אתמרומים), which describes the Lord as “He who is unfathomable in doing”, that is, “He who works wonders”. Here la'āsōr is an adverbial complement to maplō.

In the story of Micha there is a wonderful episode about a Levite who went out walking. It exhibits how a correct interpretation of a liqtōl phrase is essential for a correct translation. Using the infinitive lāgūr the passage describes that he lived as a guest and stranger during the journey:

17:8 This man left the town of Bethlehem in Judah, living wherever he could find a place. He came to the house of Micah in the hill country of Ephraim making his own way.

Many translators feel that the liqtōl phrase lāgūr must express a purpose (NRSV: “to live wherever he could find a place”). But this would be to overstretch the text. The purpose of the journey was hardly to live in this way. The lāgūr is an expression of
the circumstances under which he travelled. The other liqtol phrase in 17:8, laeosot
darko, is an adverbial adjunct as Boling (1975, 257) translates, “making his own
way”.

A liqtol phrase expressing a temporal circumstantial qualifier is found in 19:26
“made to come in” (Boling, 1975, 273, cf. Gen 24:63). Here a final or consecutive interpretation would be impossible.

The extensive use of liqtol as a circumstantial qualifier, occurring in at least 45
instances out of a total of 170, indicates that this function of the syntagm is original,
and not an innovation in preexilic Hebrew.

liqtol as a (necessary) complement to a finite verb

A necessary complement is “any word or phrase (other than the verb itself) which
is an obligatory constituent of the predicate” (Lyons 1968, 345). All-in-all there are
24 instances of such complements in the Book of Judges expressed by a liqtol
functions are similar to the English infinitive used as an object complement. There
there is hardly any final and consecutive shade of meaning in such constructions. We
encounter in them the liqtol phrase as a pure verbal noun in the position of an
object, as in 1:14: wattasitetha liqvul “he nagged her to ask”. Another example of
such a verb requiring a complement is the verb in 3:18: “When he had finished presenting the tribute” (Boling, 1975, 84).

A closely related usage of liqtol is when the infinitive expresses the main action,
and the preceding finite verb only indicates an adverbial modification of the action
(Ges-K § 114m). In such cases, liqtol is syntactically still an object complement to
the finite verb, but semantically the construction is similar to a hendiadys (with two
syntactically co-ordinated but semantically subordinated verbs, Nyberg § 97v). There
are 21 such instances in Judges, the following verbs being used before liqtol:
“go on to = again” (2:21, 3:12, 4:1, 9:37, 10:6, 13, 13:1, 20:22, 23, 28), “begin to (ingressive action)” (10:18, 13:5, 25,
16:19, 22, 20:31, 39, 40), “very much, abundantly” (20:38). One example
should be enough to illustrate this usage of liqtol:

2:21 I will no longer drive out before
them any of the nations that
Joshua left when he died.

8 The same expression is used again in 17:9.
9 With three following infinitives.
In 2:21 the finite verb יָּסֶּר together with the negation semantically contributes the adverbial meaning “no longer”, and the infinitive יָשְׁרֵּש expresses the main action “drive out”.

We may conclude that neither the 24 instances of לִיתְוַל as complement to a verb nor the 21 instances of לִיתְוַל in a hendiadys-like construction confirms the opinion that the syntagm would have an intrinsically final och consecutive meaning. It is instead confirmed that לִיתְוַל is a verbal noun that can be used in a multitude of positions, among which we have attested that of an object complement after a transitive verb.

So far we have treated 45 + 45 = 90 instances of לִיתְוַל in the Book of Judges, that is, about 53% out of a total of 170, and in all those cases the לִיתְוַל syntagm either functions as a circumstantial qualifier or as a complement to a transitive verb.

לִיתְוַל with final or consecutive shade of meaning

In 48 instances in the Book of Judges the לִיתְוַל has an unmistakable, or at least probable, final shade of meaning. All-in-all there are 51 such instances out of a total of 170 לִיתְוַל. Among the examples with nuances of finality, the overwhelming majority (32 of 48) occur as complements to the most frequent motion verbs in the Hebrew language: 9) יָּשָׁר, 3) יָּשָׁר (ַל), 3) יָּשָׁר (ַל), 1) יָּשָׁר (ַל), 2) יָּשָׁר (ַל), 1) יָּשָׁר (ַל), 1) יָּשָׁר (ַל), 1) יָּשָׁר (ַל), 1) יָּשָׁר (ַל). Some instances are וְתָּצָא לְקַלֶּכֶת בְּנֵי צְפִים “and shall I go to sway over the trees” (9:9, 11, 13), “have you come to me to fight against my land?” (11:12). It is questionable if the final shade of meaning in such examples represents the basic or “fundamental meaning” of ל in this syntagm (thus Ges-K § 114f). It is easy to interpret לִיתְוַל even in those examples as adverbial complements, “shall I go swaying over the trees”, “have you come to me fighting against my land”, which by inference receives the final shade of meaning from the context and the motion character of the preceding verb.

לִיתְוַל in special idioms

לִיתְוַל often occurs in set phrases and special idioms. Of the 16 such cases in the Book of Judges, 11 is actually a preposition which has developed from an infinitive: יָּשָׁר “against”, “in front of”, as in 4:18 יָּשָׁר לְקַלֶּכֶת בְּנֵי צְפִים “Jael came out to meet Sisera”, where it is still possible to discern the original meaning “approaching”, “to approach”. The preposition is more fossilized in לָנַח נַח “Come down against the Midjanites!” (7:24). Other idioms are יָּשָׁר לָנַח “to the approach to” (3:3), and לָנַח לָנַח “to death; until death” (16:16). An idiom that is rare in Judges but is paralleled in the Qumran text is לָנַח לָנַח “they could not drive out the

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10 1:1, 3:1, 2, 4 (2x), 6:11, 7:20, 8:1, 9:8, 9, 13, 24 (2x), 49, 52, 11:5, 9, 12 (וַיִּשְׁרֵש), 12:1 (וַיָּשָׁר), 3, 4, 14, 8 (2x), 15, 15:10 (2x), 12 (2x), 16:23, 17:3, 18:1, 2 (2x), 19:3 (2x), 5, 7, 8, 9, 15 (3x), 27, 20:4, 10 (2x, לְרַבּוּ הַשַּׁלֹּשֶׁת; לְרַבּוּ הַשַּׁלֹּשֶׁת), 14, 21:22.

11 16:5-6, 19:9.
inhabitants of the plain” (1:19), i.e. “it was not (possible) to drive out the inhabitants on the plain”. In 21:3, finally, we encounter liqtól as a verbal noun Ishhipióq in apposition to a feminine zayt, literally: “(How) has this happened in Israel: a counting out today of one tribe from Israel!”.

The infinitive construct without preceding particle

The infinitive construct without preceding preposition (10x),

The infinitive construct with negation

In three instances the infinitive construct is negated with the negation lbhilt (3x). With the negation the infinitive construct functions as a negated circumstantial qualifier, as in 2:23, “the Lord had left those nations, not driving them out at once, and had not handed them over to Joshua”, and in 8:1, “What’s this you have done to us, by not calling us when you went out to fight Midian?” (Boling, 1975, 150). In 21:7 qatól is a negated complement to nishbañ ("we have sworn"), "we have sworn by the LORD that we will not give them any of our daughters as wives?".

The infinitive absolute

The usage of the infinitive absolute in Judges (25x) is dominated by that of an emphatic accusative infinitive (21x) of the same root (often also the same stem form) as the main verb: "but they (Israel) did not in fact drive them out” (1:28). This frequent usage of the Hebrew infinitive absolute corresponds to the Arabic infinitive absolute object (al-maf‘al al-mutlaq, Wright II 54C), although the Arabic usage shows more variation than the Hebrew. The typical case in Arabic is an emphatic function: qatalahu qatlan “he killed him really”. In two passages in Judges the inf. abs. hālōk is used to express increase or repetition (4:24, 14:9) of the main verb, and once, in 7:19, the infinitive absolute replaces a finite verb: "they blew the trumpets and thereby they smashed the jars that were in

their hands” (Nyberg § 91 j, m). The usage of the infinitive absolute in the Book of Judges, and its direct counterpart in Classical Arabic is an indication of a common Semitic set of syntactical constructions, and in particular of partly overlapping stocks of circumstantial expressions in Hebrew and Arabic.

Summary

This article is an investigation into the preexilic usage of the Hebrew infinitive, and in particular the infinitive with a prefixed preposition. As a corpus text, the Book of Judges was chosen as representing a recognized segment of early Hebrew. The basic methodological hypothesis is that the usages of the infinitive in classical Arabic and in classical Hebrew exhibit parallels that are due to a common Semitic heritage. The hypothesis implies that it is fruitful to compare syntactical phenomena in both languages and that syntactical constructions in the two languages — although not identical — mutually elucidate one another. The point of departure of the paper was the accusative infinitive in Arabic: on the one hand the so-called absolute object (al-maf’al al-mutlaq) the reflex of which is the infinitive absolute in Hebrew, on the other the Arabic infinitive being used as a general adverbial qualifier (not bound to the root of the preceding verb) a reflex of which is the circumstantial function of the Hebrew infinitives liqt‘al and qaṭ‘al. It was shown that both liqt‘al and qaṭ‘al may be used as circumstantial complements in the Book of Judges. The frequent usage of liqt‘al as a circumstantial qualifier indicates that the syntagm liqt‘al functions as an alternative infinitive in classical Hebrew, and that the nuances of finality so often perceived in the texts represent inferred meanings that originate from the nature of the infinitive as a general adjunct that is unmarked with respect to subordination.

References


13 It remains for another story to demonstrate that such a continuative function of waqṭāl following a clause using wayyiqt‘al comprises a circumstantial clause that together with the main clause forms a single composite occurrence, a scene.

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