

The use of *kî* at the boundary between quotative frame and quotation in ancient Hebrew  
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The purpose of this paper is to examine all instances of *kî* at the boundary between frame and quotation in Biblical Hebrew and identify those examples in which *kî* is best understood to be a complementizer relative to a head clause recoverable from context. The standard grammars and lexica interpret examples of *kî* at the boundary between quotative frame and quotation as if it were equivalent to *dî recitativum* in Aramaic or *hoti recitativum* in Greek whenever that possibility is not precluded by the semantics of the passage in question. But it makes more sense, in line with Cynthia L. Miller, *The Representation of Speech in Biblical Hebrew Narrative: A Linguistic Analysis* (HSM 55; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996) 103-116, to replace that default interpretation with another, namely, that *kî* is a clause-initial conjunction which subordinates the clause it heads to a matrix clause in all cases in which a semantically appropriate matrix clause, expressed or unexpressed, is recoverable from the context.

For example, the matrix clause to which the *kî*-introduced clause in Exod 3:12 relates is gapped from the preceding context (3:11): “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should lead the Israelites out of Egypt?” He said, “[You should go to Pharaoh and you should lead the Israelites out of Egypt] because I am with you.” This is an example of a specialized use of a *kî*-introduced clause in an adjacency pair; that is, a unit of conversation that contains an exchange of one turn each by two speakers (though an adjacency pair may be rounded off by a third element in conversations of unequal power distribution; more than one example of rounding off is attested in Exod 3). In an adjacency pair, the first turn elicits a response of a certain kind in the second turn; both turns have identifiable linguistic profiles. The examples to be discussed include, but are not limited to, Exod 3:11-12; Num 22:28-30; Judg 6:15-16; and Ruth 1:8-10.

### Introduction

The correct understanding of a simple word like **כִּי** in context has the potential of illuminating the sense of an entire passage. Despite the fact that the standard grammars and lexica interpret **כִּי** at the boundary between quotative frame and quotation as if it were equivalent to **ܕܝ** *recitativum* in Aramaic or **ὅτι** *recitativum* in Greek whenever that possibility is not precluded by the semantics of the passage in question, I hope to show, by way of example, that it makes more sense, in line with Cynthia Miller 1996, to replace that default interpretation with another, namely, that **כִּי** is a clause-initial conjunction which subordinates the clause it heads to a matrix clause in all cases in which a semantically appropriate matrix clause, expressed or unexpressed, is recoverable from the context.

### I

I will treat Miller’s default interpretation as a working hypothesis, and test it to see how well it works wherever **כִּי** occurs at the boundary between quotative frame and quotation. For a list of said occurrences I depend on Esh 1957 and Miller 1996.

We will begin by looking at the cases of Ex 3:12 and a syntactically parallel passage, Jdg 6:16. If the understanding of the syntax of כִּי a clause-initial conjunction which subordinates the clause it heads to a matrix clause recoverable from the context is correct in these instances, the interpretation of the passages reflected in the standard English versions, including KJV, NASB, HCSB, NET, and ESV, is fundamentally off.

Here is Ex 3:10-12:

“Go, then! I hereby send you to Pharaoh.  
Lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

But Moses said to God,

“Who am I  
that *I* should go to Pharaoh  
and that *I* should lead the Israelites out of Egypt?”

He said,

“[You shall do so] because I am with you.  
And this will be the sign that it was I who sent you:  
when you have led the people out of Egypt,  
you shall worship God on this mountain.”

וַעֲתָה לְכָה וְאֶשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה  
וְהוֹצֵא אֶת־עַמִּי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם:  
וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים  
מִי אֲנִי  
כִּי אֵלֶּךְ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה  
וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם:  
וַיֹּאמֶר  
כִּי־אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ  
וְזֶה־לְךָ הָאוֹת כִּי אֲנִי שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ  
בְּהוֹצִיאֲךָ אֶת־הָעָם מִמִּצְרָיִם  
תַּעֲבֹדוּן אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים עַל הָהָר הַזֶּה:

The matrix clause to which the כִּי-introduced clause in 3:12 relates is gapped from the preceding context. “Who am I, that *I* should go to Pharaoh and that *I* should lead the Israelites out of Egypt?” He said, “[You should go to Pharaoh and you should lead the Israelites out of Egypt] because I am with you.”

All existing English translations fail to transfer into target language a functional equivalent to the adjacency pair just noted. The KJV translated the complementizer as an asseverative. The New American Bible Revised Edition which just came out simply translates, “I am with you,” as if the clause was introduced by a כִּי that serves, like a double colon in English, to introduce a direct quotation. I will discuss the English versions in more detail in a moment. Baldly put, all existing English translations are not functionally equivalent to their source text.

What is an adjacency pair? Here is a good working definition from the Summer Institute of Linguistics’ online glossary: **An adjacency pair is a unit of conversation that contains an exchange of one turn each by two speakers. The turns are functionally related to each other in such a fashion that the first turn requires a certain type or range of types of second turn.**

Cynthia Miller 2006: 24 has provided a more comprehensive and precise definition:

The first part of an adjacency pair produces the expectation of a relevant and acceptable rejoinder in the second part. For example, a question by one speaker in the first part prompts an answer by the second speaker in the second part. The pragmatic function or purposive intention of the speaker in the first part (e.g., to elicit information by way of a question), then, constrains the kind of pragmatic function of the second part (in this case, to supply the information requested).

The “causal” force of כִּי in Ex 3:12 (“causal” in the broad sense) might appear to be recognized in the ancient Targumim: Onqelos (אָרִי), Pseudo-Jonathan (אַרוֹם), and Neofiti (אַרוֹם). On the other hand, as Edward Cook pointed out to me, the translation equivalents may simply be an artifact of mechanical translation technique. Furthermore, the range of meanings of the Aramaic function words in question has not been adequately studied. Michael Sokoloff’s magnificent dictionaries fail to acknowledge their existence!

It is no longer the practice of English Bible translators to compare their construals of the text to be translated with the work of the ancient Targumists. It was different in the days of KJV. One might think that such comparative analysis would be an obligatory step if the goal is to produce an authoritative translation. It could be that the rush to get a product out is behind the obvious fact - to me at least - that Bible interpreters and Bible translators rarely consult the Targumim in the course of their work. But now I am officially off-topic. Regardless, it makes sense to think further about the transposition of source text syntax into target text syntax. What if that occurs without ever getting a handle on the pragmatics of the source text?

On the literal-to-paraphrastic continuum of Bible translations, in the case of less literal translations, it’s hard to tell whether the translators misunderstood the syntax of the source text, or simply omitted a translation of כִּי in the target language because it was regarded, in terms of the overall semantics of the passage, as superfluous. In the case of more literal translations it is easier to detect cases in which the grammar of their source has been misunderstood. KJV, NASB, HCSB, and NET all translate as if כִּי were asseverative. Here is KJV Ex 3:12:

“And he said, “Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain.”

NASB: “Certainly I will be with you.” HCSB: “I will certainly be with you.” NET: “Surely I will be with you.”

Apart from the fact that the very existence of an asseverative כִּי needs to be questioned, it amounts to a “Hail Mary” translation in context. The pragmatics of the source text were not understood, the adjacency pair in the Hebrew went unobserved, so the translators went fishing for something, anything, that might work in context.

ESV's rendering is a variation on the same theme: "But I will be with you." Adversative כִּי (= כִּי־אִם) is no doubt an attested usage. But it is not the most plausible way to take כִּי in context.

Bible translators need to give more thought to adjacency pairs, and how to translate them. A pioneering article in this sense is Greenstein 1989. This famous article details the ways in which, in ancient Hebrew, the functional equivalent of "yes" in standard conversational English was expressed. The conventions for "yes" in Hebrew are the flip side of the conventional adjacency pairs discussed in this paper.

Here is Jdg 6:14-16, a text that is built on the same pragmatic, syntactic, and semantic scaffolding as Ex 3:10-12:

וַיִּפֶן אֵלָיו יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר	וַיִּפֶן אֵלָיו יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר
לֵךְ בְּכַחַד זֶה	לֵךְ בְּכַחַד זֶה
וְהוֹשַׁעְתָּ אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִכַּף מִדְיָן	וְהוֹשַׁעְתָּ אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִכַּף מִדְיָן
הֲלֹא שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ:	הֲלֹא שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ:
וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו	וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו
בִּי אֲדֹנָי בְּמָה אוֹשִׁיעַ אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל	בִּי אֲדֹנָי בְּמָה אוֹשִׁיעַ אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל
הֲנִה אֶלְפִי הַדָּל בְּמִנְשֵׁה	הֲנִה אֶלְפִי הַדָּל בְּמִנְשֵׁה
וְאֲנֹכִי הַצָּעִיר בְּבֵית אָבִי:	וְאֲנֹכִי הַצָּעִיר בְּבֵית אָבִי:
וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו יְהוָה	וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו יְהוָה
כִּי אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ	כִּי אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ
וְהִכִּיתָ אֶת־מִדְיָן כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד:	וְהִכִּיתָ אֶת־מִדְיָן כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד:

To keep things interesting, note that I have deliberately used a free, colloquial style of translation.

Once again, an adjacency pair is to be observed. The matrix clause to which the כִּי-introduced clause in 6:16 relates is gapped from the preceding context. Gideon asked, "Why should I deliver Israel?" God replied, "[You will deliver Israel] because I am with you."

The translations previously cited, KJV, NASB, NET, and ESV translate either with an asseverative ("surely") or an adversative ("but"). Given the adjacency pair, both options are unworkable. Even without the hypothesized adjacency pair, it would make better sense to construe כִּי as a subordinating conjunction. In line with Gen 3:17-19 and other passages in which a subordinate כִּי-clause is fronted, one would then translate: "Because I am with you will beat

Midian to the last man.” As an aside, I will point out that David Stein, in response to my translation of כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד as “to the last man,” has suggested that the idiom refers not to the thoroughness of the predicted victory against the Midianites, but rather to the ease and swiftness of its execution. In English idiom: in one fell swoop. I will not argue this point at this time.

## II

The fine detail of the grammatical texture of passages of biblical Hebrew is not only of interest to grammar geeks. It is of interest to anyone who wants to engage in a close reading of the biblical text. Here is another example. Once it is seen that the first כִּי in Num 22:29 is a clause-initial conjunction serving to subordinate the clause it introduces to a semantically appropriate “main” clause recoverable from context, the contours of the passage become sharper. In the process of examining the syntax of this passage, I will also take issue with NLT and TNIV insofar as they wander more than necessary from the lexis and syntax of the source text.

Numbers 22:28-30 is a gloriously funny text. Laurel and Hardy slapstick. Here is a translation that seeks to preserve two of the pivots of the text in Hebrew, the twice-repeated כִּי in v 29:

And יהוה opened the she-ass’s mouth.	וַיִּפְתַּח יְהוָה אֶת־פִּי הָאֲתוֹן
She said to Balaam,	וַתֹּאמֶר לְבִלְעָם
“What did I do to you	מָה־עָשִׂיתִי לָךְ
that you beat me three times in a row?”	כִּי הִכִּיתַנִּי זֶה שְׁלֹשׁ רְגָלִים:
Balaam said to the she-ass,	וַיֹּאמֶר בִּלְעָם לְאֲתוֹן
“[I beat you] because you made a mockery of me!	כִּי הִתְעַלְלָתָּ בִּי
If only I had a sword in my hand,	לוֹ יִשְׁחָרֵב בְּיָדִי
because I would have killed you just now!”	כִּי עָתָה הִרְגָתִיךָ:
The she-ass said to Balaam,	וַתֹּאמֶר הָאֲתוֹן אֶל־בִּלְעָם
“Am I not your own ass	הֲלוֹא אֲנֹכִי אֲתִנָּךְ
that you have mounted all along, to this very day?	אֲשֶׁר־רִכַּבְתָּ עָלַי מֵעוֹדְךָ עַד־הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה
Have I been in the habit of doing the same <i>to you</i> ?”	הֲהִסְכַּן הִסְכַּנְתִּי לַעֲשׂוֹת לָךְ כֹּה
“No,” said Balaam.	וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא:

The matrix clause to which the first כִּי-introduced clause relates is gapped from the immediately preceding context. More literally: “What did I do to you, that you beat me these three times?” Balaam said to the she-ass, “[I beat you three times] because you made a mockery of me!”

Another example of gapping occurs at the end of the subunit: The she-ass said to Balaam, “Have I been in the habit of doing the same to you?” “No, [I have not been in the habit of doing the same to you,]” said Balaam. The practice of gapping in yes-no questions is a familiar practice in many languages, and thus occasions misunderstanding to a relatively limited degree.

The translation I offer above is unusual in transferring the twice-repeated כִּי in v 29 into target language. It ruins some of the slapstick effect if the reference *to the sword he doesn't have* is not fronted and if the gapping is eliminated, making a fast-moving text unbearably torpid. On the other hand, a paraphrase helps bring out the specific nuances of the Hebrew: “I beat you three times in a row because you made a mockery of me! That’s not all, because I would have killed you just now if I had a sword on my person.”

In her ground-breaking discussion of instances of direct speech in which כִּי appears at the boundary between frame and quotation, Cynthia Miller (1996: 103-116) does not discuss Num 22:28-30. However, Num 22:28-30 is analogous to 1 Kgs 21:5-6 which she does discuss. In both cases, an “adjacency pair provides a pragmatic context” for the gapping of a matrix clause on which a כִּי-initialized subordinate clause depends (107).

An adjacency pair plus gapping works well in vernacular English, but only in a “Why . . . ?” “Because . . .” sequence. Hence it may be appropriate to adjust source text diction “*that* you beat me three times in a row?” to “*why did* you beat me three times in a row?”

NLT first edition captured the sense of the first כִּי of v 29:

Then the LORD caused the donkey to speak. “What have I done to you that deserves your beating me these three times?” it asked Balaam. “*Because* you made me look like a fool!” Balaam shouted. “If I had a sword with me, I would kill you!” “But I am the same donkey you always ride on,” the donkey answered. “Have I ever done anything like this before?” “No,” he admitted.

Even so, “Because” is a bit awkward without a preceding “Why?” I’m not surprised that NLT second edition eliminated it. But it would have been better to retain it and reword the preceding “that” (כִּי again!) clause to a “why” clause.

NLT tries to live up to its trademarked byline: “the truth made clear.” It is an eminently readable translation. But NLT loses points insofar as it eliminates, as often, anatomical references and concrete expressions found in its source text, for example, “opened the donkey’s mouth.” The “body language” of Hebrew diction is not a minor detail. Its elimination destroys the parallelism with the following unit: “the LORD opened the she-ass’s mouth” / “the LORD took the wool off of Balaam’s eyes” (22:31; lit., “uncovered”). Even in the absence of parallelism, body-language is worth preserving in translation. I am officially off topic again, but these are issues that consistently come to the surface at the interface of syntax, pragmatics, and translation. So I will go on a little longer in this vein.

The text's hilarity does not shine through in NLT as well as it might, given NLT's choice to scale up the register of the *verba dicendi* (verbs of speaking) and complicate lexis and syntax ("that you beat me" becomes "that deserves your beating me") on the one hand, and scale down and finally eliminate the "because-ness" of Balaam's peevish response to his donk, encoded by the source text כִּי's, on the other. The absence of an equivalent to Hebrew לְךָ "to you" in translation, furthermore, is inexcusable.

Finally, the presentation of Balaam's death-wish in the source text, expressed by tense-switching to the past with a time indexical nonetheless pointing to the present, is a temporal trope option in English and many other languages, not just ancient Hebrew: "I would have killed you just now, if I had the means to do so." The past presentation also has the effect of releasing some of the tension which would otherwise obtain. Balaam is not *currently* threatening his animal, though many translations describe him as so doing.

An existing translation which captures much of this is NJB:

. . . she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you struck me these three times?"  
Then Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a mockery of me! If there had been a sword in my hand, I would have killed you by now."

However, if I remember right, Laurel and Hardy do not speak in *have dones* and *had beens*. They more commonly use the simple tenses.

Compared to NLT, (T)NIV is preferable if evaluated on the criteria I cite above, but far from satisfactory. No less than NLTse, (T)NIV eliminates the "because-ness" of Balaam's response to his she-ass, and dispenses with the temporal trope of past presentation of the now inactual possibility of a she-ass killing to have played itself out in the immediate present internal to the narrative. Like NLT, it also insists on degendering the donkey. TNIV:

Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?" Balaam answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If only I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now." The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" "No," he said.

"Am I not your own donkey?" is giggly nice. However, I object to (T)NIV's killing of the string of *said*s by virtue of a one-time substitution with *answered*. That is not "storytelling" credible. RSV, NRSV, and ESV do not make that faux pas.

### III

Adjacency pairs are cool. Translators do well to watch for them. It would take a full-length monograph to go through the examples of כִּי at the boundary between frame and quotation in the Hebrew Bible and sort out those in which an adjacency pair is operative. Esh 1957 counts 60; Miller 1996 (105, n. 21) adds other possible candidates. Of these, I would identify 15 examples in which an adjacency pair is operative and gapping is to be understood: Gen 20:11; 21:30; 26:9;

27:20; 30:31; Ex 1:19; 3:12; Num 22:29; Jdg 6:16; 1 Sam 13:11; 2 Sam 11:23; 12:43; 1 Kgs 11:22; 21:6; Ruth 1:10.

To quote Luther out of context, “one little word” is enough to “fell” a grammarian. Grammarians trip on function words all too often when they think of them in terms of presumed semantic content. That is a recipe for disaster, since function words tend to be, by definition, lexically empty.

One more example. Ruth 1:10 contains an example of כִּי at the boundary between frame and quotation. Many English translations get the pragmatics of Ruth 1:8-10 right. KJV on the one hand and NIV/ TNIV on the other do not.

Here is Ruth 1:8-10:

And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law,  
“Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home.”  
May יהוה treat you with kindness,  
as you treated your dead and me with kindness.  
May יהוה grant you  
and each of you find, the security of a home with a  
husband.” She kissed them good-bye.  
They wept loudly  
and said to her,  
“No, we will go back with you, to your people.”

וְתֹאמַר נְעָמִי לְשְׁתֵּי כַלְתֵּיהָ  
לִכְנֹה שְׁבֹנָה אִשָּׁה לְבֵית אִמָּה  
יַעַשׂ יְהוָה עִמָּכֶם חֶסֶד  
כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתֶם עִם־הַמֵּתִים וְעִמָּדִי:  
יִתֵּן יְהוָה לָכֶם  
וּמִצָּאן מְנוּחָה אִשָּׁה בֵּית אִישָׁה  
וְתִשְׁקֹ לָהֶן  
וְתִשָּׂאנָה קוֹלָן וְתִבְכִּינָה:  
וְתֹאמְרָנָה־לָּהּ  
כִּי־אֵתְךָ נָשׁוּב לְעַמֶּךָ:

For a discussion of כִּי in this passage, see Miller (1996: 111-113, including n. 43). Following Schoors, Groß, and Esh, Miller favors assigning it an adversative sense. That seems to be the nuance in context. Miller’s paradigmatic example of adversative כִּי is well-chosen: Gen 17:15.

לֹא־תִקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמָה שְׂרַי כִּי שְׂרָה שְׁמָה

You are not to call her Sarai; rather, her name is Sarah.

Nonetheless, from the point of view of pragmatics and syntax, it is essential to note the adjacency pair in Ruth 1:8-10. “Go back, each of you, to your mother’s house!” They said to her, “[We will not go back to our houses of origin]; rather, we will go back with you, to your people.”

NLT got this, however unsatisfactory other aspects of NLT Ruth 1:8-10 may be. Here is NLTse:

But on the way, Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back to your mothers’ homes. And may the LORD reward you for your kindness to your husbands and to me. May



Brill, 1981) 240-76; 256-257; Michael **Sokoloff**, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic* (Dictionaries of Talmud, Midrash, and Targumim 2; Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1992); idem, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic* (Dictionaries of Talmud, Midrash, and Targumim 3; Publications of the Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon Project; Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); idem, *A Dictionary of Judean Aramaic* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003)