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PROTO-SEMITIC EXISTENTIALS: **YΘAW* AND **LAΘΘAW*[1]

ABSTRACT

A historical relationship has long been suspected between the Northwest Semitic existential particles like Biblical Hebrew יֵשׁ *and Biblical Aramaic* אִיתַי*, negative existentials like Syriac* layt *and Akkadian* laššu*, the Arabic negative copula* laysa*, and the East Semitic verbs* i-ša-wu *"to exist" (Eblaite) and* išû *"to have" (Akkadian). But due to various formal and semantic problems, no Proto-Semitic reconstruction from which all these words can regularly be derived has yet been put forward. This article argues that the Akkadian sense of "to have" is typologically the oldest and reconstructs a Proto-Semitic grammaticalization of* *yiyθaw *"it has" to* *yθaw *"there is/are". Also in Proto-Semitic, a negative counterpart was formed through contraction with the negative adverb "not", yielding* *layθaw *and* *laθθaw.

In memoriam Barend Meijer (Bob) de Vries, ישׁשכר בן יעקב ז״ל

The Northwest Semitic languages are characterized by particles expressing existence or presence ("there is/are", like French *il y a* or German *es gibt*), such as Biblical Hebrew יֵשׁ (1), Biblical Aramaic אִיתַי (2), Syriac *iṯ* (3), and Ugaritic *ỉṯ* (4).[2]

(1) Gen 18:24

אוּלַי יֵשׁ חֲמִשִּׁים צַדִּיקִם בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר

"Maybe **there are** fifty righteous men within the city".

(2) Dan 2:28

בְּרַם אִיתַי אֱלָהּ בִּשְׁמַיָּא גְּלֵא רָזִין

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1 The research for this paper was conducted as part of a Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO) senior postdoctoral fellowship, project number 1231920N. I thank the reviewers for their helpful suggestions. I am also grateful to Ahmad Al-Jallad for his corrections and insightful comments on the accepted version of this paper, which I was unfortunately not able to incorporate in this final version. Symbols used: > means "(which) becomes", < means "(which) comes from", * marks reconstructed forms and meanings. *C* represents any consonant, and *V* represents any vowel.

2 All translations are my own.

"But **there is** a god in heaven who reveals mysteries".

(3) Matt 13:27

*aymekkå **it̲** be zizåne*
"Whence **are there** weeds in it?"

(4) *KTU* 1:6:III:21

*k **it̲** zbl bʿl ảrṣ*
"For the Prince, the lord of the earth **exists** (= is alive)!"

These particles largely function the same and share a formal resemblance, but deriving them from one and the same reconstruction runs into several formal problems. These problems are only exacerbated when these existentials are connected with similar forms in other Semitic languages that behave more or less like verbs, like Classical Arabic *laysa* "to not be" and Akkadian *išû* "to have" and *laššu* "to be absent",[3] a connection that has often been proposed (e.g., Blau 1972; Gensler 2000:235; Testen 2000:86 n. 14; Măcelaru 2003; Rubin 2005:61), but never satisfactorily substantiated. In this paper, I will argue that all these forms can be connected by reconstructing a Proto-Semitic existential particle **yθaw* etymologically meaning "has", as well as a negative existential **laθθaw* derived from it. We will start by examining Northwest Semitic, where a great diversity of forms is attested, and work our way up the family tree, resolving formal, syntactic, and semantic problems as they arise at each stage of the reconstruction.

1. NORTHWEST SEMITIC REFLEXES OF THE EXISTENTIAL PARTICLE

As illustrated in Examples (1-4), the Northwest Semitic languages attest various, clearly related forms of the existential particle. These generally do not show subject agreement and semantically indicate the presence or existence of what follows, often in a specified location. Together with the preposition *l*-, they are also used to express possession, as in (5), another example from Biblical Hebrew.

3 I will not discuss Modern South Arabian *śi*, which is connected to the other Semitic forms by Măcelaru (2003) and Wilmsen (2014; 2022), but formally completely distinct from the rest and presumably unrelated (Al-Jallad 2015; 2018:112 n. 4).

(5) Gen 33:9

יֶשׁ־לִי רָב

"I have (*lit.* **there is** to me) enough".

Suchard (2021a) additionally notes that the existential is used to highlight the truth or falsehood of the entire following sentence in Biblical Hebrew (6) and in Biblical Aramaic (7).

(6) Gen 24:42

אִם־יֶשְׁךָ־נָא מַצְלִיחַ דַּרְכִּי

"Now if you **are indeed** going to make my journey a success …"

(7) Dan 3:14

לֵאלָהַי לָא אִיתֵיכוֹן פָּלְחִין

"**Is it so that** you do not worship my gods?"

This last use is not attested elsewhere in Northwest Semitic, but it has parallels in other Semitic languages, as will be discussed below.

Turning to the various languages, the oldest attestation of the Northwest Semitic existential may now be found in the newly published Amorite-Akkadian bilingual tablets (George and Krebernik 2022). Line 22 of the first text reads *la-ma-a-a la* ⌜*i*?⌝-[*ša*?]-*a i-lu bé*-[*na*?]-*a-na*, which the editors plausibly read as *la-mā*(*h*)-*ya lā* (*y*)*iθay ʔilu bēnay-nā* "why is there no god among us?" (p. 121); this is hauntingly glossed by a threefold repetition of the Sumerian phrase É.LÍL.LÁ "house open to the winds". Unfortunately, the relevant signs are partially damaged. If the signs are correctly restored as *i-ša-a*, this could stand for *yiθay*, *ʔĭθay*, or even *yθay*, based on the situation in the rest of Northwest Semitic. Note that in any case, a final diphthong *-ay* seems to be present.

Ugaritic attests the particle as *ỉṯ* (Tropper 2000:§88.1). This can be used with reference to noun phrases of any gender and number, e.g., *ỉṯ šmt ỉṯ ʿẓm* "there was fat (f.sg.), there was bone (f.sg.)" (*KTU* 1:19:III:39), *bnšm dt ỉṯ ảlpm lhm* "people who have cattle", lit. "people to whom there is cattle (m.pl.)" (*KTU* 4.422:1; for *ỉṯ* with m.sg., see [4] above). However, inflected forms also occur: the third person feminine singular and first person singular are both spelled *ỉṯt*. Tropper (2000:§75.212.3) suggests vocalizing the third person masculine singular (the default form) as /ʾ*iṯâ/a*/, third person feminine singular as /ʾ*iṯâ/at*/, and first person singular as /ʾ*iṯ*(*ê*)*tu*/, indicating inflection as either a III-y or a biradical verb, and following the suffix conjugation (perfect) in both cases. The Ugaritic particle is never combined with pronominal suffixes (Tropper 2000:§88.1).

In Aramaic, the particle is attested from Imperial Aramaic onwards. The usual form in Imperial and Middle Aramaic is איתי (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995:50), presumably reflecting **ʔītay* (cf. Biblical Aramaic אִיתַי), but a shorter form אית also occurs. Dialects like that of Targum Onqelos, Syriac and Classical Mandaic also reflect shorter forms – אִית, *iṯ*, and *e(i)t* respectively (Nöldeke 1904; 1964) – all from **ʔīt*; this also underlies Jewish Babylonian Aramaic אִית כָּא > אִיכָּא "(here) there is" (Sokoloff 2002) and similar forms in Mandaic (Nöldeke 1964:294). With suffixes, the longer stem also appears in Targum Onqelos (אִיתֵיכוֹן "you [m.pl.] are", Deut 13:4) and Syriac, e.g. *iṯayk* "you (sg.) are". The pronominal suffixes are normally the possessive ones, but in some dialects, object suffixes occur, as in איתיני "I am", lit. "there is me" (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995:50). Aramaic also attests separate forms for the negation, like Old Aramaic לישה "it did not exist" (*KAI* 216:16), Targum Onqelos לֵית (e.g., Gen 2:5), and Syriac *layt*, pointing to Proto-Aramaic **layθ*; Targum Onqelos again shows a longer stem before suffixes (e.g. לֵיתוֹהִי "he is gone", Gen 42:36), while, e.g., Syriac and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic do not (e.g., *layte*, ליתיה "he is gone"). These occur besides forms that are transparent combinations of the existential with a negation, such as Imperial Aramaic לאית (*TAD* D7.2.03) and לא איתי (*TAD* D7.3.02). The language of the Deir Alla plaster inscription, with affinities to both Aramaic and Canaanite (Gzella 2015:87-91; Pat-El and Wilson-Wright 2015), may similarly attest ליש "there is not" (Sjörs 2018:195 n. 16; analyzed differently by Hackett 1984:99).

Biblical Hebrew attests יֵשׁ, with reflexes in all later stages of Hebrew. The long *ē* is an effect of the accent: when the word is proclitic, it is vocalized as יֶשׁ־ (cf. Example 5 above). The stem also attests a short vowel in the rare instances where it is followed by a suffix: 3m.sg יֶשְׁנוֹ, 2m.sg יֶשְׁךָ, and 2m.pl. יֶשְׁכֶם and (with an interrogative proclitic) הֲיִשְׁכֶם, and possibly also in the personal name יִשְׁשָׂכָר (vocalized thus by Ben Naphtali instead of Ben Asher's יִשָּׂשכָר; Khan 2020:1:94; Hornkohl 2023:83-91). The particle is thus reconstructible as **yeš*, continuing older **yiθ*. An alternative form אֵשׁ is attested twice (2 Sam 14:9; Mic 6:10); both instances are spelled defectively, raising the possibility that the long vowel is secondary and due to Aramaic influence, the original reading perhaps being **ʔeš* with dissimilation of **ye* to **ʔe*. A similar situation obtains in the name of King David's father. Normally, this is vocalized יִשַׁי, but the first vowel is always written defectively. Based on LXX's transcription Ιεσσαι with short *e*, the

consonantal text probably represents **yešay*.[4] Only 1 Chron 2:13 reads אִישַׁי, referring to the same person. Based on the similarity to Biblical Aramaic אִיתַי, this probably reflects Aramaic influence, with the vocalization being leveled to the majority of cases which were spelled *yšy*. The epigraphic spelling איש from the Second Temple period (*hapax*, Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995:472) could similarly reflect Aramaic influence or another secondary development of **yeš*. Finally, the El Amarna letters attest the use of the Akkadian verb *īšu* "he has" (on which see below) as an existential, as in *ardūtīšu ša īšû ina* GN "his servants who are in GN" (*CAD s.v. išû*), which tells us little about the shape of the particle in Bronze Age Canaanite but confirms its existence (but cf. Rainey 1996:2:317-319).

Taking Biblical Aramaic אִיתַי and Biblical Hebrew יֵשׁ as two maximally different forms, we may note three discrepancies that complicate the particle's reconstruction (cf. Blau 1972:59-60):[5] (1) initial **ʔ*- vs. **y*-; (2) long *-*ī*- vs. short *-*i*- in the stem; (3) presence vs. absence of the final diphthong *-*ay*.[6] An ingenious solution to the first two problems was put forward by Lipiński (2001:§49.23), who reconstructs **yθ*. The unusual consonant cluster would then have been resolved in different ways: through epenthesis of *-*i*- in an ancestor of Hebrew, giving **yiθ*, and with prothesis of **ʔi*- in an ancestor of Aramaic, giving **ʔiyθ* > **ʔīθ* (the vocalism of Amorite and Ugaritic is uncertain, but all the possibilities seem derivable from **yθ*). The negative Aramaic form **layθ* can be seen to preserve the original *yθ* cluster, as it is preceded by a vowel due to the univerbation with **lā* "not".

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4 I.e., "(DN) exists", cf. Aramaic names like איתיבל "Bel exists" (e.g., in Nabataean; Norris and Al-Manaser 2020). Lipiński (2001:§49.23) cites Old Akkadian names like *i-su*-DINGIR "God exists" (without reference), but these could also be interpreted as "I have DN", given the normal meaning of *išû* "to have" in Akkadian (see below) and the attestation of names like DN-*nīšu* "we have DN" (Stamm 1939:128-32, 293). A reviewer informs me that *ilam išû* is an idiom for "to be successful".

5 Note that Aramaic **θ* > ת, Hebrew שׁ, Ugaritic *ṯ*, and Amorite <Š> all regularly continue Proto-Northwest-Semitic **θ*. The correspondence of the (inter)dentals and sibilants is thus as expected.

6 *Pace* Al-Jallad (2018:112), who states that "[t]he North-West Semitic forms can easily be derived from an original *ʾiṯ/*yiṯ" (but note that his focus is on the interdental, which is indeed unproblematic).

Lipiński does not account for the third problem, however, the presence or absence of final *-*ay*. Moreover, **yθ* would seem to consist of two consonants and no phonemic vowel, a word shape which is not otherwise reconstructed for any stage of Semitic.[7] Both of these issues can be resolved by modifying Lipiński's reconstruction to conform to another pattern that is reconstructible: that of particles ending in word-final *-*a* which changes to *-*ay*- before suffixes.

*2. PARTICLES WITH *-A/*-AY-*

Unlike the different outcomes of **yθ*, the presence or absence of the final diphthong cuts across languages and even dialects. Hebrew normally lacks the diphthong, but it is present in the name reconstructed above as **yešay*. In Aramaic, the unsuffixed form reflects either **ʔīθ* or **ʔīθay* depending on the dialect, while both stems alternate within the same paradigm in e.g., Syriac. These facts suggest that as in those dialects, the diphthong was originally only present in certain parts of the paradigm, with most languages then leveling either the stem with or that without the diphthong.

As noted, Syriac attests the diphthong when pronominal suffixes follow, but not otherwise. The same distribution of a diphthong (or its reflex) before suffixes that is otherwise absent is seen in a number of prepositions, not just in Syriac and other dialects with **ʔīt* : **ʔītay*- but across Aramaic and also in Hebrew. A prototypical example is the preposition "on": contrast "on" with a short stem vs. "on you (m.sg.)" with a long stem in Syriac (*ʿal* vs. *ʿlayk*), Imperial Aramaic (עליך vs. על), and Biblical Hebrew (עָלֶיךָ vs. עַל).

This pattern, where prepositions end in a reconstructed diphthong before suffixes but not when suffixes are absent, is also prevalent in another Semitic language from outside the Northwest Semitic group: Ge'ez (Classical Ethiopic). Unlike the Northwest Semitic languages with an attested vocalization, Ge'ez has preserved final *-*a*, and this vowel is found on the unsuffixed form, while the suffixed form has -*e*-, reflecting *-*ay*-. Thus, we find alternations like *lāʿla* : *lāʿle-hu* "on (him)", *tāḥta* : *tāḥte-hu* "under (him)", *qədma* : *qədme-hu* "before (him)", etc. (Tropper and Hasselbach-Andee 2021:§§4.2.4.5.6, 4.5.2.4.1). -*a* is also a common prepositional ending in Classical Arabic, and several frequent prepositions end in -*ay*- before suffixes, but the alternation has been given up, with one

7 Testen's (1993) suggested reconstruction of Akkadian *ul*, Hebrew and Aramaic אַל, etc. "not" as **ʔl* would provide another example of a word with this shape, but it is unconvincing in light of the more likely derivation of *ul* from *ulă̆* (Old Assyrian and Old Akkadian) < **wa-lā* "and not" (Sjörs 2018:63-112).

form of the stem being used throughout the paradigm: thus "under (him)" is *taḥta* : *taḥta-hū*, while "on (him)" is (**ʕalay*) > *ʕalā* : *ʕalay-hī*.[8] The frequent occurrence of *-a* at the end of prepositions in Ge'ez and Classical Arabic and especially the interchange with *-e-* < **-ay-* in Ge'ez strongly suggests deriving the Northwest Semitic prepositions like עַל "on" from reconstructions like unsuffixed **ʕala*, suffixed **ʕalay-*.[9]

If Proto-Aramaic **ʕal* : **ʕalay-* can be further reconstructed as **ʕala* : **ʕalay-* (with subsequent loss of unstressed **-a* in Proto-Aramaic), the same reasoning can be applied to **ʔīθ* : **ʔīθay-*. The unsuffixed form should then be reconstructed with a final **-a* for Proto-Northwest-Semitic. Combining this with Lipiński's suggestion gives us a reconstruction of unsuffixed **yθa*, suffixed **yθay-*. This is an improvement in two major ways. First, while Lipiński's **yθ* has a unique shape (**CC*), **yθa* (**CCV*) is paralleled by other words that feature a word-initial consonant cluster followed by a vowel (Testen 1985), notably III-wy imperatives like **bki* "weep (m.sg.)" (Suchard 2017). And second, it plausibly explains the distribution of **-ay* in the various languages, which can now be understood as leveling of either unsuffixed **-a* or of suffixed **-ay-* throughout the paradigm (or retention of the alternation, as in Syriac). It also makes it easier to understand the inflection of Ugaritic *i̱t* as a perfect: if the unsuffixed form ended in /*-a*/ (like /ʾi̱ta/), this could have been reinterpreted as the third person masculine singular perfect ending (as in /*qaṭal-a*/), giving rise to its replacement by /*-at*/ in the third person feminine singular and /*-tu*/ in the first person singular (hence the inflected forms like 3f.sg. /ʾi̱t-*at*/ and 1sg. /ʾi̱t-*tu*/). Finally, the reconstructed form **yθa* receives further confirmation from several pseudoverbs or particles in Classical Arabic, which we will consider next.

3. ARABIC LAYSA AND LAYTA

The Northwest Semitic existential particles have commonly been associated with the Classical Arabic pseudoverb *laysa* (Wilmsen 2016:329-331), now also attested (as *ls*[1]) in Safaitic, an epigraphic variety of Arabic from the first centuries (B)CE (Al-Jallad 2018; 2021). This is basically a

8 See Suchard (2019:191-192).

9 The poetic Biblical Hebrew forms עָלַי "on", עָדַי "unto", and אֵלַי "to" derive from leveling of the suffixed stems **ʕalay-*, **ʕaday-*, and **ʔilay-* to the unsuffixed forms, as is also the case with Arabic *ʕalā* < **ʕalay* "on" and *ʔilā* < **ʔilay* "to". Akkadian *eli* < **ʕalay* "on" and *adi* < **ʕaday* "until" probably directly continue the original form of these prepositions; see below.

negative copula, meaning "to not be" (Al-Khawalda 2012). It is inflected as a perfect (and not in any other tenses), and in the first and second persons, the stem becomes *las*-, as in *las-tu* "I am not". Given the meaning, it is often seen as a contraction of *lā* "not" and a cognate of the Northwest Semitic existential marker. Reconstructing the existential marker as **yθa* accounts perfectly for *laysa*'s syllable structure, which is otherwise hard to explain Arabic-internally (cf. Al-Jallad 2018:116). Long vowels preceding two different consonants regularly shorten in Arabic, giving **lā-yθa* > **layθa*. The reflex of **θ* as *s* can be understood as dissimilation from *t* in the forms containing the personal endings *-tu*, *-ta*, *-ti*, *-tum*, and *-tunna* (first person singular and all numbers and genders of the second person), which was then leveled to the third person, *laysa* etc.[10] **-θt-* > *-st-* is not a regular development in Arabic, but then, **-yθt-* is an exceptional cluster, which may have undergone exceptional sound changes; cf. the irregular dissimilation from *d*/assimilation to *s* in **sādiθ-* > *sādis-* "sixth". Finally, **ay* monophthongized to **a* in the first and second person forms like **laystu* > *lastu* (Brockelmann 1908:§71bα). The fact that *laysa* does not mean "there is not" but "it is not" or even just "not" suggests that it grammaticalized from a construction similar to that identified for Biblical Hebrew and Biblical Aramaic by Suchard (2021a), where the existential followed by a non-verbal sentence asserts the truth or falsehood of that sentence.[11]

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10 Alternatively, scholars such as Lipiński (2001:§49.23), Al-Jallad (2015:44-45; 2018), and with some reservation Kogan (2015:404 n. 1159) have suggested borrowing to account for the unexpected *s*. In my opinion, the proposed scenarios do not account for the vocalism of *laysa* as convincingly as the derivation from **lā yθa* does. It is also difficult to accept that an ancestor of Arabic would have borrowed *laysa* and apparently nothing else from Neo-Assyrian, as suggested by Al-Jallad (2018), while his alternative of borrowing from Taymanitic or another North Arabian language suffers from the lack of an attested source word. Măcelaru (2003), on the other hand, reconstructs the root as **y-s* and suggests that **y-θ* and **y-ś* were byforms (similarly Blau 1972). Excluding Modern South Arabian *śi* and explaining Arabic *laysa* as we have done here eliminates the need for reconstructing a Proto-Semitic sibilant in this root.

11 A form that has sometimes been connected with *laysa*, Q 38:3 *lāta* "there was no longer", is textually uncertain and has been explained in different ways; see Lane (1863:2683) for the traditional accounts and Blau (1972:62) for an alternative suggestion. Al-Jallad (2018:112) calls it "quite transparently a borrowing of Aramaic *layt*" but does not explain why *-ay-* appears as *-ā-*, or

Another Arabic word that can be connected with the existential marker is *layta* "if only", "would that" (Lane 1863:2683). It can be used with an inherent existential meaning, as in (8-9):

(8) Q 43:38

*yā-**layta** baynī wa-baynaka buʕda l-mašriqayni*
"Oh, **if only** the distance between the east and the west **were** between you and me!"

(9) Q 28:79

*yā-**layta** lanā miθla mā ʔūtiya qārūnu*
"Oh, **if only** we had (*i.e.,* **there were** to us) like what Korah has been given!"

Counterfactual wishes can alternatively be expressed with the particle *law*. It is therefore attractive to see *layta* as a combination of counterfactual *law* and an existential marker, a construction which is exactly paralleled in Biblical Hebrew (10-11):[12]

(10) Num 22:29

לוּ יֶשׁ־חֶרֶב בְּיָדִי כִּי עַתָּה הֲרַגְתִּיךְ׃
"**If only there were** a sword in my hand, then I would kill you right now!"

(11) Job 16:4

גַּם | אֲנִכִי כָּכֶם אֲדַבֵּרָה **לוּ־יֶשׁ** נַפְשְׁכֶם תַּחַת נַפְשִׁי
"I too would like to speak like you. **If only it were** your life instead of mine!"

While we must once again appeal to exceptional sound changes to explain the occurrence of *t* instead of *θ*, *layta* can fairly easily be derived from **law yθa*;[13] in any case, such a derivation is less complicated than if the

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where the final *-a* comes from (nor does Jeffery 1938:253, whose judgment Al-Jallad follows).

12 On the correspondence between Arabic *law* and Hebrew *lū*, see Huehnergard (1983); Steiner (1987).

13 For instance, we may envision **law-yθa* > **layyθa* (assimilation of **w* to **y*, as in **ʔaywām-* > *ʔayyām-* "days", albeit in the opposite direction) > **laytta* (mutual assimilation of **yθ* > **tt*, similar to **sidθ-* > *sitt-* "six [f.]"; again, this is irregular, but **-yyθ-* is an irregular cluster) > *layta* (simplification of geminate **-tt-* after another consonant).

existential marker is reconstructed otherwise, e.g., **yiθ* (one of the options suggested by Măcelaru 2003; Al-Jallad 2018). Both *laysa* and *layta* thus support the reconstruction of the existential marker as **yθa*, with a **CCV* pattern.

*4. WEST SEMITIC *YΘA AND EAST SEMITIC *YΘAW*

The remaining forms that can be connected with the existentials we have seen so far occur in East Semitic: Eblaite and Akkadian. Here, we find forms that reflect a final **-w*. In Eblaite, a verb *i-ša-wu* /*yiθāwu*/ occurs in lexical lists, where it is glossed with Sumerian A.GÁL and AN.GÁL "to exist" (Gensler 2000:235).[14] As this is ostensibly an infinitive, it does not inform us about the exact morphology of the verb, but the radicals *y-θ-w* are clearly attested.

Akkadian possesses several relevant verbs. Most prominently, there is the verb *išû* "to have". Together with *edû* "to know", this is the only verb that is inflected as a preterite with stative meaning, e.g., *īšu* "he has", *tīšu* "you (m.sg.) have". Occasionally, it is brought in line with the normal situation in Akkadian and inflected as a stative, like *īšuāku* "I have". Kossmann and Suchard (2018) argue that the preterite inflection is an archaic retention from a shared ancestor of Semitic and Berber in which **yiCCaC* was stative, not perfective or preterital (similarly Testen 2000). These authors follow Kouwenberg (2010:467 n. 76) in reconstructing this verb as **yi-ysaw* based on its spelling in Old Akkadian. Kogan and Krebernik (2020:13) point out, however, that it is only attested in texts that do not consistently distinguish **s* from **θ* (although the same apparently applies to the Eblaite cognate; Gensler 2000:235). The Akkadian verb can therefore unproblematically be connected with both the Eblaite and West Semitic forms and reconstructed as **yi-yθaw*.

The stem of this verb, **yθaw*, clearly resembles the particle **yθa* as we have reconstructed for West Semitic, the obvious difference being the presence or absence of final **-w*. This absence of a word-final glide finds many parallels in West Semitic. In III-wy verbs, Classical Arabic and Biblical Hebrew show "apocopate" forms with the third radical missing in the jussive and the imperative when no suffixes follow, like Arabic *yabni* "that he build", *ibni* "build (m.sg.)", and Hebrew וַיִּבֶן "and he built" < **wa-yabni*, בְּנֵה "build (m.sg.)" < **bni*, all from *b-n-y* (Suchard 2017). Roots III-w and III-y have merged in Hebrew and all show the same stem vowels,

14 A reviewer notes that the normal Sumerian counterpart of Akkadian *išû* is TUKU.

but Arabic shows both that root-final **w* also goes missing word-finally and that the quality of the preceding vowel does not matter, as in *yadʕu* "that he call" (*d-ʕ-w*), *yansa* "that he forget" (*n-s-y*), and *yarḍa* "that he be pleased" (*r-ḍ-w*). Some other West Semitic languages have analogically restored the glide in these verbal forms, like Aramaic (Aristar 1987), while the forms in yet other languages do not show whether the glide was present or not, like most of the relevant forms in Ge'ez (cf. Al-Jallad 2014). As discussed above, however, these last two languages do attest another class of words where glides are conspicuously absent when they would appear in word-final position: that of the prepositions like **ʕala* : *ʕalay-* "on". As no such cases of missing word-final glides are attested in East Semitic, these facts can all be explained by positing an apocope of **-w* and **-y* in Proto-West-Semitic: while word-internal **-w-* and **-y-* were preserved, word-final glides were deleted (*pace* Blau 1977:27-29). Just like **yabniy* > **yabni*, **yirṣaw* > **yirṣa*, and **ʕalay* > **ʕala*, this deletion of word-final glides would have affected the stem **yθaw*, yielding our reconstructed West Semitic form, **yθa*.

The other major form of interest is Akkadian *laššu* "there is not". In Old Assyrian, this may be inflected as a stative, e.g., *lá-šu-wa-ku* "I am not there", *lá-šu-a-tí* "you (f.sg.) were not there" (*CAD s.v. laššu*). In other dialects, and rarely in Old Assyrian as well (Kouwenberg 2017:§22.1.1), the default 3m.sg. form is used for other genders and numbers, e.g., Middle Assyrian *šumma aššassu laššu* "if he does not have a wife" lit. "if his wife (f.sg.) does not exist". The origin is usually given as a contraction of *lā īšu*, a negation of the verb mentioned above (e.g., Von Soden 1995:§111a; Rubin 2005:46). But this explains neither *laššu*'s *a*-vowel nor the gemination of *š*.[15]

Both these features, however, can be understood from a reconstruction as **layθaw*, if we posit that **-yθ-* has assimilated to **-θθ-*: **layθaw* > **laθθaw* which regularly becomes *laššu*. This assimilation parallels the assimilation of **w* to a directly following coronal posited for Proto-Semitic by Huehnergard (2006). Huehnergard's suggestion is based on the assimilation in Hebrew verbs like יִצֹּר "he forms" (**w-ṣ-r*) and on that in the t-stems of Arabic and Akkadian I-w verbs like *ittakkala* "he trusted"

15 It accounts well, however, for the Neo-Assyrian form spelled *la-a-šú* etc., if this represents /*lăysu*/, perhaps secondarily formed after the model of (a precursor of) Imperial Aramaic **lā ʔītay*. If so, /*lassu*/ vs. /*lăysu*/ represents the same distinction between an irregularly formed inherited particle and a regular, new formation seen in the Aramaic reflexes of **layθ* vs. **lā ʔīθ(ay)*.

(Arabic, *w-k-l*) and *ittabal* "he brought along" (Akkadian, historically *w-b-l*). The absence of examples with I-y roots may be explained by the paucity of such roots in general, and their low probability of forming t-stems (as they are nearly all intransitive). Garnier and Jacques (2012) posit the same kind of assimilation for **y*, but they date it to Proto-Northwest-Semitic (where word-initial **w-* had shifted to **y-*), not Proto-Semitic. This later dating is mainly motivated by the absence from examples of assimilation of **y* before other consonants than **t* (p. 145), which can be understood as the secondary morphologization of the rule in Akkadian and Arabic and its restriction to the *t*-prefix. Suchard (2019:113 n. 36) provides the additional example of Biblical Hebrew אַלּוֹן "great tree" < **ʔayl-ān-* (cf. the byform אֵלּוֹן and Aramaic אִילָן < **ʔiyl-ān-*), which shows assimilation of a **y* that does not go back to an older **w*. This supports the possibility that Huehnergard's assimilation rule did not just affect **w*, but glides in general, as in **layθaw* > **laθθaw*. Arabic *laysa* and Aramaic **layθ* then continue **layθa(w)* with a **y* that was analogically reintroduced from the non-negated form, **yθa(w)*.

To sum up, Akkadian *laššu* is more easily derived from **layθaw* than from an Akkadian-internal contraction of *lā īšu*. As **layθaw* does look like an older contraction of **lā yθaw* "there is not", this shows that the existential marker **yθaw* was also present in an ancestor of Akkadian, despite its absence in the historical phases of the language, where "to be present" is expressed by imperfect forms of the uniquely East Semitic verb *bašû*, like *ibašši* "there is". The fact that Eblaite /*yiθāwu*/ is glossed as "to exist" and not as "to have", the meaning of Akkadian *išû*, also suggests that the root had an existential meaning in Eblaite, not (just) a possessive one. Together with the evidence for West Semitic **yθa*, this allows us to reconstruct existential **yθaw* for Proto-Semitic.

*5. EXISTENTIAL *YΘAW IN PROTO-SEMITIC*

We have seen that existential **yθaw* has left reflexes in East Semitic, Arabic, and Northwest Semitic. The stative preterite **yi-yθaw* "to have", on the other hand, is only attested in Akkadian. Since the Northwest Semitic existential is often used to express possession (as in Example 5 above), one might think that the Akkadian verb developed out of the existential. But this is unlikely for three reasons (*pace* Rubin 2005:61). Syntactically, we would have to posit a change from oblique marking of the possessor and nominative marking of the theme (the thing that is possessed) to nominative marking of the possessor and accusative marking of the theme. Note that

e.g., Modern Hebrew, which can mark the theme as a direct object in colloquial expressions like יש לי את הכסף "I have the money", lit. "the money (direct object) is there to me", maintains oblique marking of the possessor (with the preposition ל "to"). Morphologically, this scenario dictates that existential **yθaw* was integrated into the preterite paradigm, gaining subject-marking affixes like third person singular **yi-*. Like the syntactic change, it is unclear how this would have happened, and that speakers would have started to inflect "to have" as a preterite instead of a stative is inexplicable from the point of view of synchronic Akkadian grammar. And typologically, possessives formed by combining an existential with a locative expression like "to him" (as in most ancient Semitic languages) grammaticalizing into transitive verbs of possession like *išû* is extremely rare (Heine 1997:71; Stassen 2009:230), largely due to the kinds of morphological and syntactic problems just mentioned. When this process is attested, it does not involve extensive syntactic restructuring of the kind we would have to posit if a hypothetical **yθaw lī* (or similar) "there is to me" turned into pre-Akkadian **ʔi-yθaw* "I have". Rather, the old oblique marking remains part of the expression (cf. the examples in Stassen 2009:230-239), although it may undergo phonetic reduction, as with Late Egyptian *wn m.dj-f* "there is near him" becoming Coptic *wɛnta-f* "he has" (Heine 1997:78-82). On the other hand, the opposite development of verbs of possession grammaticalizing into existentials is quite frequent (Heine 1997:205-207; Creissels 2014), either with locative marking, as in Spanish *hay* < *ha ý* "it has there" or Swahili *kuna* *"there has", or without, as in Portuguese *tem* or Modern Greek *échei*, both *"it has". Despite the limited attestation of **yi-yθaw* "to have", this is thus probably the typologically older meaning from which **yθaw* "there is" was derived (similarly Lipiński 2001:§49.23 and cf. Rubin 2005:61).

This presents us with a new problem. Unlike **yi-yθaw* "he has", existential **yθaw* lacks subject agreement. Morphologically, it resembles the bare stem of the Proto-Semitic preterite/jussive. This form is identical to the masculine singular imperative, e.g., **rkab* "ride (m.sg.)",[16] implying

16 Thus Suchard (2017; 2019), who reconstructs the G-stem imperatives as **CCuC*, **CCiC*, and **CCaC*; the other major reconstructions that have been defended in recent decades are **CaCuC*, **CaCiC*, **CiCaC* (Bar-Asher 2008) and **CuCuC*, **CiCiC*, **CiCaC* (Bjøru 2021). The main objections to **CCVC* imperatives center on the assumed impossibility of word-initial consonant clusters occurring in Proto-Semitic, *contra* Testen (1985); Blau (2006). Obviously, this is also a problem for the reconstruction of **yθaw*. Bar-Asher's arguments against word-

that **yθaw* could similarly be an imperative, "have (m.sg.)". But the typological parallels show that existentials tend to develop from third person indicative forms, not from imperatives. We should therefore expect **yθaw* to originally have meant "it has", like the examples of Portuguese *tem* and Modern Greek *échei* discussed above.

My proposed solution is to see **yθaw* as an outcome of the expected form **yi-yθaw*, with the prefix being absorbed into the first radical **y*. This could be connected with the loss of short vowels between two identical consonants, as in Biblical Hebrew קַל < **qalla* "he is light" for expected **qalVla* or Classical Arabic *radda* "he turned back" for expected **radada*. This change also affected a precursor of Akkadian, as is clear from statives like *dān* < **dann(a)* < **danVna* "he is strong". It should thus be reconstructed for Proto-Semitic. It seems possible that **yiyθaw* also underwent this change and developed to **yyθaw* > **yθaw*, but there are no other indications that this vowel deletion operated in environments like these.

Alternatively, the change of **yi-yθaw* to **yθaw* can be understood as resulting from phonetic reduction associated with the grammaticalization into an existential marker, possibly connected with an increase in word frequency.[17] A phonetically close parallel readily presents itself in the colloquial realization of the French existential *il y a* /ilja/ (*"it has there") as *y a* /ja/, effectively deleting the subject marking.[18] Like the development of **yiy-* > **yy-* > **y-* suggested above, this is unparalleled in Semitic, but from the perspective of phonetic reduction of a newly grammaticalized particle, this is less problematic.

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initial clusters are addressed by both Suchard (2017:214-215) and Bjøru (2021:332). The latter additionally states that Testen (1985; 1993) reconstructs syllabic resonants (e.g., **n̩θ̩ur* "guard [m.sg.]" with syllabic **n̩-*) and argues that this cannot be generalized in a way that allows for all consonants to occur in clusters at the syllable onset. Bjøru's arguments against Proto-Semitic syllabic resonants are valid, but Testen explicitly argues for Proto-Semitic consonant clusters (1985, with no mention of syllabic resonants), only some of which contained phonetically syllabic or "semi-syllabic" resonants either in Proto-Semitic or in a later ancestor of East Semitic (1993). Hence, I still find Testen's (and Blau's) arguments for reconstructible consonant clusters convincing, making **CVCC* the reconstruction of the G-stem imperative that best explains all the reflexes.

17 I thank Hilde Gunnink for this suggestion.

18 Personal knowledge, confirmed to me by Ch. Bernard (Paris).

Syntactically, there is still a problem with deriving existential **yθaw* from **yi-yθaw* "he has" in the case marking of the pivot (i.e., the noun phrase expressing what "is there"). The object of Akkadian *išû* "to have" is marked with the accusative, and we might expect the same for the pivot of **yθaw* if this originally meant "it has". The evidence on this is mixed. In Akkadian and Classical Arabic, we find that the negative existentials *laššu* and *laysa* take nominative subjects; also note the suggested reading *lā (y)iθay ʔilu* "there is no god (nom.)" in Amorite mentioned above (George and Krebernik 2022:121). If the origin of these forms suggested here is correct, we must interpret this as a syntactic change, presumably already in Proto-Semitic, bringing the case marking in line with the function of the pivot as the logical subject of the sentence. This could have been facilitated by short sentences where the pivot was implicit and its case marking could therefore not be seen, as in *uba'u laššu* "I searched, [but] there was nothing" (*CAD s.v. laššu*). The expected accusative marking occurs, however, in isolated forms like Aramaic איתיני "I am there", Biblical Hebrew יֶשְׁנוֹ "he is there", and regularly with Arabic *layta* "if only (there were)" (Lane 1863:2683). The posited shift from accusative to nominative marking of the pivot thus does not seem to have been complete.

6. CONCLUSION

Let us review the proposed developments from pre-Proto-Semitic to the daughter languages:

1. **Proto-Semitic** possessed a G-stem verb **y-θ-w* "to have". While stative in meaning, this was inflected as a preterite **yi-yθaw* "he has", **ti-yθaw* "she has", etc., a relic from a stage where **yiCCaC* was the stative form of the verb (Kossmann and Suchard 2018).
2. **yi-yθaw* "it has" came to be used impersonally as an existential marker. As part of this grammaticalization, the initial **yiy-* contracted to just **y*, yielding **yθaw* "there is/are" (used in any tense).
3. The negation **lā yθaw* "there is not" contracted into a single word. This further developed to **lāθθaw* with assimilation of **y* to the following coronal (cf. Huehnergard 2006; Garnier and Jacques 2012). Analogical restoration of **y* based on the non-negated form recreated a byform **lāyθaw*. The long vowels in closed syllables then underwent shortening, which will be discussed further below, resulting in **laθθaw* and **layθaw*.

4. At some point after the grammaticalization of **yθaw*, it became grammatical for the pivot of existential sentences to occur in the nominative, e.g., **yθaw kalb-um ʕalay ʔarṣīya* "there is a dog on my land",[19] **laθθaw/layθaw ʔil-um* "there is no god".
5. In **Eblaite**, **yθaw* is apparently preserved as an existential, although it is only attested in the citation form, the infinitive.
6. In **Akkadian**, **yi-yθaw* "to have" and **laθθaw* remain in use, but existential **yθaw* is replaced by the imperfect verb **yi-baθθiy* "there is". The reflexes of **yi-yθaw* and **laθθaw* are occasionally reanalyzed and inflected as statives, with suffixes marking subject agreement.
7. In **Proto-West-Semitic**, **yθaw* and **layθaw* become **yθa* and **layθa* due to the loss of word-final glides.
8. In **Arabic**, **layθa* is reanalyzed as a perfect and starts to be inflected for person. Before suffixes starting with **t*, **θ* dissimilates to **s*, as in **layθ-tu* > **lays-tu* "I am not". **s* is leveled to the third person forms like *lays-a*. In the first and second persons, **-ay-* before two consonants becomes **-a-*, as in **lays-tu* > *las-tu*. The collocation **law yθa* "if only there were" is contracted to *layta*. Otherwise, **yθa* falls out of use.
9. In **Proto-Northwest-Semitic** at the latest, **yθa* is reanalyzed as belonging to the class of particles like **ʕala* which add **-y-* before suffixes, giving rise to suffixed forms like **yθay-ka* "you (m.sg.) are there".
10. In **Amorite**, **layθa* is apparently replaced by a new, transparent combination of negative **lā* and the reflex of **yθa*, which has leveled the diphthong to the unsuffixed form, perhaps **yiθay*.
11. In **Ugaritic**, **yθa* is occasionally reanalyzed as a perfect and inflected for person, like **layθa* in Arabic. Vocalization of **y-* or prothesis of **ʔi-* yields the attested forms of /ʾĭ̯t̲-a/ (3m.sg./default), /ʾĭ̯t̲-at/ (3f.sg.), and /ʾĭ̯t̲-tu/ (1sg.). The suffixed forms and **layθa* seem to have fallen out of use, the latter being replaced by **ʔayna* (Ugaritic *ỉn*; Tropper 2000:§88.2), as in Canaanite (see the following).
12. In **Canaanite**, **yθa* develops into **yiθa* through epenthesis of **i*. This regularly develops into Proto-**Hebrew** **yeš*, Biblical Hebrew יֵשׁ etc. The form without the diphthong is leveled to the suffixed form, but the diphthong is preserved in the abbreviated personal name

19 On the long case vowel in **ʔarṣ-ī-ya* "my land (gen.)", see Suchard (2021b).

**yešay* "(DN) exists". **layθa* is replaced by **ʔayna* (> Biblical Hebrew אַיִן), perhaps originally "where?" used in rhetorical questions (see the discussion in Kogan 2015:281).

13. In **Aramaic**, **yθa* develops into **ʔīθ*, with prothesis of **ʔi-*, contraction of **-iy-* to **-ī-*, and loss of word-final **-a*. Some dialects level the long stem **ʔīθay-* to the unsuffixed form, some level the short stem **ʔīθ* to suffixed forms, and others still preserve the alternation. **layθa* develops to **layθ* and remains in use in some dialects, while others renew the expression based on the contemporary form of the existential, yielding **lā ʔīθ*, **lā ʔīθay*, etc.
14. In **Ethiosemitic**, the existentials are replaced by the newly grammaticalized verb **hallō* "to be present" (Suchard 2022) and, in **Ge'ez**, the particle *ʾalbə-* "there is not" < *"not in" (Leslau 2006:18). **Modern South Arabian** uses *śi*, normally understood as a borrowing from Arabic *šayʔ-* "thing" (Al-Jallad 2015:39). **Ancient South Arabian** does not appear to use a special construction for existentials, relying on the verb *kwn* "to be".[20] The reflexes of **yθa* and **layθa* thus seem to have been lost in all these languages.

A point that remains to be discussed is the Proto-Semitic origin of **layθaw*. The parallel formation of Aramaic **layθ*, Arabic *laysa*, and Akkadian *laššu* is often noted (e.g., Kogan 2015:399). These are usually seen as independent contractions of *lā* and a reflex of the existential, however this is reconstructed (e.g., Lipiński 2001:§49.23), while Kogan (2015:404) and Al-Jallad (2018) suggest that the negative existential spread through contact. Instead, I have implicitly assumed that it can be reconstructed back to Proto-Semitic, an assumption that should now be justified explicitly. One argument for this can be made from the particle's early attestation. In all three languages, the negative existential occurs either in the oldest attested stage of writing (Old Aramaic, Safaitic) or soon thereafter (Old Assyrian and Old Babylonian). If *lā* contracted with the existential separately in all three languages, it conveniently did so early enough that it was not caught in the act.[21] Moreover, the existential is not attested in this meaning as a separate word in Arabic or Akkadian, which necessarily pushes the contraction back to prehistorical stages of these languages. Furthermore, in order to derive Proto-Aramaic **layθ* from a contraction of *lā* and the

20 https://sabaweb.uni-jena.de (accessed on 20 March 2023).

21 Contrast the later appearance of transparently contracted לא איתי in Imperial Aramaic and possibly /*lăysu*/ (see Note 15) in Neo-Assyrian.

specifically Aramaic outcome of the existential, **ʔīθ(ay)*, a number of sporadic sound changes must be assumed, including the shortening of two long vowels. Aramaic normally maintains long vowels even in closed syllables, whether these arose secondarily, as in **qawamnā* (Suchard 2016) > **qāmnā* "we stood" (e.g., Syriac *qåmn*) or were inherited from Proto-Semitic, as in **pūm* "mouth" (e.g., Biblical Aramaic פֻּם). The derivation of Akkadian *laššu* runs into similar problems; we have discussed the problematic geminate above, but here we may note that like Aramaic, Akkadian normally preserves long vowels in short syllables, as in *bēltum* "lady". Irregular shortening of **lāyθ* > **layθ* and **lāššu* > *laššu* could be explained as yet another example of phonological reduction, but it must then have happened separately in both languages. As argued by Suchard (2021b:72-74), however, long vowels in closed syllables were regularly shortened in a precursor of Proto-Semitic, meaning that we can understand the change of a much older **lāyθaw/lāθθaw* to **layθaw/laθθaw* without invoking any ad hoc sound changes. As no arguments against the Proto-Semitic status of **layθaw*/**laθθaw* are apparent, seeing this as an inherited feature in all three languages is the simplest solution, accounting for the early attestation, occurrence in Arabic and Akkadian without the corresponding positive existential, and irregular vowel shortening in Aramaic and Akkadian.

In conclusion, reconstructing Proto-Semitic **yi-yθaw* "he has" > **yθaw* "there is/are" and **lā yθaw* > **laθθaw* and **layθaw* neatly ties together the various existential and possessive forms occurring throughout the family. It also provides clarity on the origin of the existential particles: as in so many languages, they appear to have developed from a transitive verb "to have". Given the frequent reference in typological studies to Hebrew יֵשׁ in particular (e.g., Reuland and Ter Meulen 1987:2; Freeze 2001), this reconstruction thus has interesting implications not just for the study of the Semitic languages, but for the discipline of linguistics in general.

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