Summary and Conclusions

The present study has shown that it is indeed possible to systematically account for the use of verbal forms in Biblical Hebrew poetry by taking into account the roles of clause-level syntax and of syntactic patterns attested at higher levels than that of the individual clause. In this final part, let us briefly summarize our findings.

In the first chapter, we have paid ample attention to the questionable attitude in Old Testament Studies with regard to Hebrew’s use of the verb. We have shown that the dominant role that was initially awarded to literary and rhetorical analysis by Sir Robert Lowth has been preserved for centuries and that Lowth’s views even nowadays function as central guidelines for most Hebraists studying the Hebrew Bible’s poetic texts. Linguistic analysis, if conducted at all, has never been able to exchange its merely instrumental function for a more independent and systematic one. As a result, the language attested in poetic texts, including its use of verbal forms, has rarely been subject of thorough linguistic studies. Instead, poetry’s verbal functions have usually been identified as exceptional and divergent or have even been simply neglected. The consequences of this approach can be seen in the present-day chaos in the renderings of verbal forms in poetic passages by Bible translations and commentaries.

In the second chapter, we observed that the lack of consistency in the assignment of functionalities to Hebrew’s verbal forms does not only regard the use of the verb in poetry, but also that in prose. A survey of recent grammars and studies on the Hebrew verbal system has revealed another problematic tendency, namely the inclination to analyze the Hebrew verb in terms of the verbal categories that are attested in the native languages of the scholars themselves. Consequently, Hebraists are usually forced to assume, or sometimes even invent, a wide range of (unrelated) functions fulfilled by a single form. In addition, most studies explicitly or implicitly (by focusing only on problematic cases, for instance) claim that the verbal system regulating the use of verbal forms in Hebrew prose is not shared by Hebrew poetry.

The findings presented in the first two chapters suggest that the main problem underlying the low degree of linguistic system found in Biblical Hebrew poetry’s use of the verb is of a methodological nature. Therefore, a methodological paradigm shift has been proposed in the third chapter. Instead of focusing on the individual verbal form and its clause, we favoured a text-linguistic approach in which grammatical analysis is not restricted to the linguistic unit of the sentence, but also includes the identification and analysis of higher-level patterns and communication processes in a text. We decided to continue the formalist-distributionalist type of text-linguistic research conducted by Schneider, Niccacci and Talstra and took some of their views as a starting point for our own analyses.

Before moving on to the higher textual levels, we first investigated in the fourth chapter to which extent clause-level syntactic analysis could help us to consistently assign specific functions to Hebrew’s verbal forms. We concluded that in *yiqtol* clauses clause-level syntax and morphology cooperate in marking default volitive and non-volitive functionalities. In most cases, the functional values marked by the syntax and morphology overlapped, but sometimes they did not. For those cases, we have been able to identify a hierarchical ordering of markings in which volitive morphological marking (as cohortative or jussive) takes initial position. If volitive morphological marking is not realized, clause-level syntax (*yiqtol* form in initial position marks volitivity; *yiqtol* form in non-initial position marks non-volitivity) is decisive, even if the clause contains an explicit non-jussive or non-cohortative form.
Yet, the Hebrew Bible, particularly its poetic literature, contains a considerable number of *yiqtol* clauses that cannot fully be accounted for by the clause-level categories of morphology and clause-internal syntax. Thus, we have encountered numerous non-volitive verb-initial *yiqtol* clauses and volitive (*w-*)x-*yiqtol* clauses. In the fifth chapter we proved that these problematic cases could be explained by assuming the activation of higher-level processes of inheritance and blocking. In this chapter, we elaborately discussed all pairs of a mother and a daughter clause in which these processes affect the assignment of (non)volitive functionality to the verbal forms. For each of the pattern types, we defined the parameters determining whether or not the process of inheritance or blocking was activated and provided numerous sample texts to illustrate our findings. We also paid attention to the recursive character of the inheritance and blocking processes and thus showed it to be required to take into account not only the individual pair of mother and daughter clause, but also the longer chain of clauses in which a specific clause pair is located, since mechanisms of inheritance and blocking operating earlier in the chain may also affect the assignment of functionality to clauses further down in the chain. At the end of the chapter, we stressed that it is exactly at this point of verbal patterns and higher-level processes that prose and poetry differ in their preferences with regard to the use of the Hebrew verbal system. Most of the patterns and processes examined in this chapter were attested much more often in the poetic texts of our corpus than in the prosaic ones. At the same time, all attestations of a given pattern (whether in prose or in poetry) could be analyzed in a single, consistent manner, which revealed the presence of a single verbal system.

The final chapter was entirely dedicated to the functioning of Hebrew’s verbal forms and clause types at the level of the whole discourse. Inspired by the work of Schneider, we started with the identification of several default communicative functions of the different verbal forms in terms of the type, level and perspective of communication they indicated. Subsequently, we investigated how these default functions were concretized in the specific clause sequences attested in the Book of Psalms. We elaborately examined how in each type of clause patterns the distribution of discourse functionalities was affected by several parameters including transitions between communicative domains and the degree of subject and participant continuation between mother and daughter clause. In the end, we were able to identify a structured and well-defined set of functional categories that each represented a specific type of functional shift in terms of the default discourse functions fulfilled by the verbal forms attested in a clause pattern.

All in all, we conclude that though the alternation of verbal forms in Biblical Hebrew poetry indeed has a far less monotonous nature than that in prosaic, particularly narrative, texts, it should not be characterized as ‘unsystematic’ or ‘arbitrary’. Instead, by combining the three types of clause level, clause pattern level and discourse level analysis in the way illustrated in the final three chapters, a clear verbal system can be defined which is shared by all Biblical Hebrew texts and is explored to its full extent in the poetic books. This verbal system is not to be defined in terms of the traditional verbal categories of tense, aspect and mood, but should be seen as a system of clause relations, in which there is an interaction between the position of a verbal form within its clause, the mechanisms of inheritance and blocking, and a clause’s functioning within a specific domain of discourse.

In order to show that this system is not just an abstract or imaginative product of speculation, but is indeed a consistent set of grammatical rules regulating the use of verbal forms in concrete texts, we have not only included numerous quotations in our dissertation, but have also granted the reader the opportunity to see the system in action in each of the 150 Psalms on the website...
that is a complement to this thesis. The reader is strongly recommended to visit this website. I myself have increasingly become impressed by the high level of consistency attested in the Biblical Hebrew poetry’s use of the verbal forms. It is my desire that, with this dissertation and its companion website, the reader will be able to share this experience!