ALTHERNATIVES FOR THE NOMINATIVE IN BIBLICAL HEBREW

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1 Introduction

In the traditional approach to Biblical Hebrew (BH) the concept 'nominative' is often used with reference to nouns in the same way as in classical languages and in other Semitic languages (cf. Waltke and O'Conor 1990: 125–35, Williams 1980: 10). However, the nominative should rather primarily be seen as a morphological concept because it refers to a certain group of case endings. Although a case can be made diachronically for the nominative function in BH, case endings do not occur. Therefore, the use of the term and concept 'nominative' for BH is confusing and not acceptable if one wants to describe BH synchronically. Furthermore, it has to be remembered that cases are not used in exactly the same way in different languages — compare Latin's six cases, Greek's five and some Semitic languages' three. Greek's dative roughly fulfils the functions of both the dative and ablative in Latin. The nominative, accusative and genitive are not even used in exactly the same way in those Semitic languages with case endings. In Classical Arabic the copulative verb is followed by the accusative, while the other languages normally have a nominative. Therefore, it is not obvious what is meant by the concept 'nominative function'.

If the concept and term 'nominative' cannot be used anymore, alternatives have to be found, especially for expressions like 'predicate nominative', 'nominative of address' and 'nominative absolute' (or nominativus pendum) (cf. Waltke and O'Conor 1990: 128–30, Gesenius 1976: 457–8, §143). The best solution for this is to differentiate between the morphological, syntactic and semantic aspects of this phenomenon.
2 Morphological Aspects

Morphologically speaking there are no specific case endings for nouns in BH. The only word class which has different forms ('cases') for different syntactic functions is the pronoun.¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'Nominative'</th>
<th>'Accusative'</th>
<th>'Genitive'</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>יָאָה / עַתָּה</td>
<td>יָאָה</td>
<td>יָאָה - my</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>יָאָה you (m.)</td>
<td>יָאָה you</td>
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<td>יָאָה you (f.)</td>
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<td>יָאָה you (m. pl.)</td>
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<td>יָאָה - your</td>
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<td>יָאָה y (f. pl.)</td>
<td>יָאָה you</td>
<td>יָאָה - your</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>יָאָה they (m. pl.)</td>
<td>יָאָה מזֶּה / יָאָה מזֶּה</td>
<td>יָאָה - their</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>יָאָה they (f. pl.)</td>
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<td>יָאָה - their</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, these are not real cases. This is suggested by the fact that when the 3rd person is used as a demonstrative adjective ('that', 'these'), the basic (or 'nominative') form is used even if the noun is a direct object ('accusative') or postconstruct ('genitive').

יאָה חֲעָרַת יָאָה And you will bring out that man (direct object) (Deut. 17:5).

יאָה חֲעָרַת יָאָה And the gold of that land (postconstruct) is good (Gen. 2:12).

It is impossible to compile a similar list for the noun. The same form of a noun is used whether it is the subject, copula-complement,² direct object or other complement of the verb, indirect object (without preposition, e.g. after נָעַר), complement of a preposition, adjunct (e.g. 'adverbial accusative'), postconstruct ('genitive'), addressee ('vocative')³ or dislocative (casus pendens, 'rhetorical absolute').⁴ Even the direct object marker נָא is not a case ending, but a particle. The same particle is sometimes used to mark the subject of a passive action clause, the subject of a process or a state, or the copula-complement in a nominal clause.⁵ These are called the 'nominal functions' of נָא.⁶ On the analogy of other Semitic languages the subject, copula-complement, addressee and dislocative are said to be in the nominative. The basic form of the independent personal pronoun can be used as a copula in a nominal clause.⁷ Nouns in the so-called 'nominative function' can appear in the absolute state or construct state, they can have the article or they can be combined with suffixes, as do words in the so-called accusative or genitive functions. The addressee can also be marked by the article (which should not be translated with 'the')⁸ or by the particle מִ.

Although the postconstruct (or 'genitive') has the same form as any other syntagm, it can never be the subject, copula, copula-complement, addressee or dislocative in a clause. It is always an attribute to the noun which it qualifies. Even in a constructio ad sensum where the predicate agrees with the postconstruct, syntactically the head of the clause (in the construct state) remains the subject.

Word order is a formal indication of a noun's function. In an unmarked verbal clause the subject follows directly after the finite verb. In an unmarked nominal clause the subject is the first element, and the copula-complement the second. The addressee may appear at the beginning, middle or end of a clause. A dislocative will appear before the nucleus of the sentence, from which it may be separated by the conjunction מ. Marked word order is often used to indicate pragmatic functions (cf. Walde and O'Conner 1990: 129–35; Jolion-Muraoka 1991: 567–73; Van der Merwe, Naudé and Kroeze 1999: 344–50). Agreement between the subject and the predicate is the only other formal indication of a noun's function (see below).

¹ Williams (1980: 10).
² Cf. Hofstetter (1965: 23–9, 81).
⁴ Cf. Walde and O'Conner (1990: 136): 'A noun in the nominative in a verbal clause may be... a vocative.'
⁵ Cf. Walde and O'Conner (1990: 136): '... all major roles in a verbless clause are nominative. It is possible to form a complete clause using nouns only in the nominative.'
⁶ According to Walde and O'Conner (1990: 247) the article is used to mark a definite addressee, pointing out a particular individual who is present to the speaker. The article is not used when the reference is to persons not present or who are more or less imaginary (cf. Jolion-Muraoka 1991: 508).
3 Syntactic Aspects

Hebrew is an appositional language: the pronominal subject is contained in the finite verb, and it is sufficient, but it may be explicature by a noun or pronoun (cf. Dik 1977: 156–8). The verb is governed by the nominal subject and must agree with it in person, gender and number. A dual subject takes a plural predicate (because the verb, adjectival and pronoun do not have dual forms). If the subject is a compound of masculine and feminine nouns, the predicate is in the masculine plural form.

And on the seventh day He (subject contained in finite verb) rested from all his work (Gen. 2:2).

And the woman (subject explicature by noun) said to the serpent (Gen. 3:2).

And you (subject explicature by independent personal pronoun) have abandoned Me (Judg. 10:13).

And may the eyes (du.) of my lord the king see (pl.) it (2 Sam. 24:3).

And Abraham (m. s.) and Sarah (f.s.) were old (m. pl.), advanced (m. pl.) in age (Gen. 18:11).

Non-verbal clauses also have subjects, and if the copula-complement is an adjective or participle, it must agree in number and gender with the subject.

And the men (m. pl.) of Sodom were bad (adj. m. pl.) and very sinful (adj. m. pl.) against the Lord (Gen. 13:13).

And the earth (f. s.) is standing (exists) (part. f. s.) forever (Eccl. 1:4).

There are a number of exceptions to the basic agreement rule (cf. Gesenius 1976: 462–8, §145–6). A collective singular noun as subject may have a plural predicate.

And the people (coll. m. s.) feared (m. pl.) the Lord (Exod. 14:31).

A collective singular noun with feminine gender as subject may have a masculine plural predicate.

Otherwise the land (coll. f. s.) might say (m. pl.) (Deut. 9:28).

If a plural subject, which refers to persons, has a singular predicate, the singular is used distributively, especially if the subject is a participle used substantively.

And everyone (of the) righteous (m. pl.) is confident (m. s.) like a lion (Prov. 28:1).

Everyone (of those) who curse you (m. pl. part.) is cursed (m. s.) (Gen. 27:29).

Plural nouns with a singular meaning (e.g. royal plural, masculine plural abstract nouns) as subjects may have a singular predicate.

In the beginning God (royal plural) created (s.) the heaven and the earth (Gen. 1:1).

The mercy of (m. pl. cs. st. — abstract noun) the wicked is cruel (s.) (Prov. 12:10).

When plurals of names of animals or things, and of abstracts, whether they be masculine or feminine, are used as subjects they may have a feminine, singular verb.

Even the animals of (f. pl. cs. st.) the field long (f. s.) for you (Joel 1:20).

Thorns (m. pl.) will grow (f. s.) over its strongholds (Isa. 34:13).

Auguish (f. s.) and sorrow (m. pl.) have taken hold (f. s.) of her, as of a woman in labour (Jer. 49:24).

If the predicate precedes the subject (usually denoting animals or things) it may be in the most simple form (3 m. s./m. s.). Subsequent predicates must agree with the subject.

Let there be (m. s.) lights (m. pl.) and let them be (m. pl.) for signs (Gen. 1:14).

And righteous are (m. s.) your judgements (m. pl.) (Ps. 119:137).

in agreement with the subject (cf. Gesenius 1976: 325–6, 428, 465–6, §110k, §132d, §145p, u). ‘Second feminine plural forms of verbs are rare, and are usually replaced by the masculine... Similarly the masculine is used for the third feminine plural imperfect’ (Williams 1980: 42).

And you brought (2 f. s.) your days near and you came (2 m. s.) to your years (Ezek. 22:4).

And behold, a strong wind (f. s.) came (3 f. s.)... and struck (m. s.) (Job 1:19).

Hear (2 m. pl.) this word, O cows (f. pl.) of Bashan (Amos 4:1).

If the girls (f. pl.) of Shiloh come out (3 m. pl.) (Judg. 21:21).

A cognate, singular participle as subject, as well as a plural participle as subject/copula-complement, is used to express the indefinite, personal subject (‘somebody’, ‘one’, ‘they’). The 3 m. s., 3 f. s., 3 m. pl. and 2 m. s. forms of the verb can also be used for this function, as well as the passive (cf. Gesenius 1976: 460–1, §144d–k).

Will one (the plougher) (cognate s. part.) plough the whole day in order to sow? (Isa. 28:24).

And they will bring out (pl. part.) all your women and your children to the Chaldeans (Jer. 38:23).

Therefore someone (they) called (3 m. s.) its name Babel (Gen. 11:9).

And the name of the wife of Abram was Habec the daughter of Levi, whom somebody (3 f. s.) bore to Levi in Egypt (Num. 26:59).

Because people watered (3 m. pl.) the flocks from that well (Gen. 29:2).

You can catch (2 m. s.) a lizard with (your) hands (Prov. 30:28).

Then it was begun (people began) (passive) to invoke the name of the Lord (Gen. 4:26).
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The impersonal subject ‘it’ is expressed by the 3 m. s. or 3 f. s. of the verb (Gesenius 1976: 459, §144b, c).

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And it (3 m. s.) became narrow to him (he was distressed) (Gen. 32:8).

And it (3 f. s.) became very narrow to David (David was very distressed) (1 Sam. 30:6).

In the so-called double subject construction (cf. Gesenius 1976: 461, §144l-p) the ‘second subject’ should rather be analysed as a nominal adjunct.

With my mouth I cried to Him (Ps. 66:17).

The basic (‘nominative’) form of the independent personal pronoun can also be used as a copula.

ב יד יתבש יתבש Because the Lord is God (Deut. 4:35).

This analysis is preferable to the idea that in such a clause the first element is a dislocative and the second the real subject (‘As for the Lord — he is God’, cf. Waltke and O’Connor 1990: 131–2, 297–9). This is shown by examples in which the person of the first and second elements differ and where it consequently does not make sense to interpret the second element as the subject.12

You are God (not: with regard to you, he is God) (2 Sam. 7:28).

The extra-clusal constituents of addressee14 and dislocative15 are also traditionally dealt with in terms of the nominative.16 Syntactically these elements are unconnected with the nuclear clause. They are

12 On the other hand, similar disagreement is found in the address construction with a modifying phrase or clause referring to the addresser. The third person pronoun is used and not the second person pronoun as in English (cf. Waltke and O’Connor 1990: 77). This could be due to the fact that the noun which acts as addressee is regarded as inherently third person. See footnote 20.

13 Extra-clusal constituents (1) are neither clause nor parts of clauses; (2) precede, interrupt or follow the clause proper; (3) are bracketed off by a pause like inflection in intonation; (4) are not sensitive to clause internal grammatical rules (although co-reference and the same case marking are possible); (5) are not essential to the integrity of the internal structure of the clause (Dik 1997: 49, 311).

14 ‘Nominative of address’ (Waltke and O’Connor 1990: 130).

15 ‘Nominative absolute’ (Waltke and O’Connor 1990: 128).

16 Gesenius (1976: 457, §143a) even calls them subjects.

As sure as you live, O king (3rd person), I don’t know (1st person) (1 Sam. 17:55).

O my Lord (3rd person / in apposition to you), you (subject / addressee) swore (2nd person) (1 Kgs 1:17).

Hear (2nd person), O peoples (3rd person, all of you (3rd person ‘them’)) (Mic. 1:2).

Rejoice (2nd person), O just one (3rd person), in the Lord; O upright ones (3rd person), praise (3rd person) is fitting (Ps. 33:1).

17 A noun is by definition always third person: as subject it always governs the verb in the third person.

18 This is an indication that a noun as addressee is to be regarded as third person.
The Lord (3rd person) is with you, O mighty warrior (3rd person) (Judg. 6:12).

The dislocative\(^{19}\) is an element which is displaced (or copied) from its normal position in the clause (cf. Waltke and O'Connor 1990: 76–7, 131). In BH it usually occurs at the beginning of a sentence.\(^{20}\) It can be replaced (but does not have to be) by a resumptive pronoun (independent of suffix) or adverb in the clause, or even by a new noun. The dislocative can even be separated from the clause by the conjunction -ו or -ו. A dislocative marked by סמך קרן should not be regarded as a 'nominate' because this particle can also be used as an adjunct marker (or the so-called 'adverbial accusative') — cf. 1 Sam. 2:11. It can also be marked by the preposition/emphatic particle ב.\(^{21}\) A dislocative can also be copied in the same form that it would have had in a normal clause (e.g. with a preposition).

**And with regard to the matter (which you and I discussed), behold the Lord is between you and me forever (without resumptive pronoun) (1 Sam. 20:23).**

**All of us — we (resumption by independent personal pronoun) are sons of one man (Gen. 42:11).**

**As for him who sheds human blood, his (resumption by suffix) blood will be shed by a human (Gen. 9:6).**

**And all the hills... — you will not go there (resumption by adverb) (ISA. 7:25).**

**Because whoever eats of the leavened (bread), (and — separation by -ו) that person (resumption by new noun)\(^{22}\) shall be cut off from Israel (Exod. 12:15).**

**Anyone from you — if (separation by -ו) he brings an offering (Lev. 1:2).**

**And as for my decrees (marking by נַעַבֹּד), they did not follow them (Ezek. 20:16).**

**And as for princes (marking by ה), they will rule with justice (Isa. 32:1).**

**And to the king of Judah... — thus you must say to him (preposition repeated) (2 Kgs 22:18).**

A word in apposition\(^{23}\) to the complement of an object marker or preposition, or to a pronominal suffix may be in the simple absolute state and without the marker being repeated. Syntactically, an apposition is an attribute. However, these examples are not treated as 'nominatives' in traditional grammars, supposedly because a word in apposition is regarded to be in the same case as the head of the phrase.\(^{24}\)

**And he sent Joab and the whole army, the warriors (in apposition to direct object) (2 Sam. 10:7).**

**And Cain said to Abel his brother (in apposition to complement of prep.) (Gen. 4:8).**

Your carcasses (you\(^{25}\), in apposition to suffix) shall fall in this desert (Num. 14:32).

A phrase can replace a noun as subject, copula-complement and disjunct (addressee or dislocative) (Jotino-Muraoka 1991: 565; Gesenius 1976: 451, §141a.b; Waltke and O'Connor 1990: 70).

**וּלְאֵנָּא (one of him) (preposition phrase as subject) became a prince (1 Chron. 5:2).**

\(^{19}\) Gesenius (1976: 457–8, §143d) calls it 'the compound sentence'. This is not in line with the general use of this term to indicate a sentence consisting of more than one clause (cf. Waltke and O'Connor 1990: 69).

\(^{20}\) 'Über die Formen der Rechtsversetzung im Hebräischen... ist m.W. nichts bekannt' (Gross 1987: 22). Compare Josh. 7:15 for a possible example of right dislocation in Hebrew. The example from 2 Sam. 7:28 referred to above ('You are God' p. 40) may also be interpreted as an example of right dislocation: 'With reference to God, you are Him. Cf. Zewi (1990b:41–55).

\(^{21}\) Gesenius (1976: 458, §143e).


\(^{23}\) Syntactically an apposition is always an adjectival modifier.


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Because his mercy is for ever (preposi-
tion phrase as copula-comple-
ment) (Ps. 136:1).

Please listen, O Joshua, high priest,
you and your colleagues who sit before
you (noun phrase as addressee)
(Zech. 3:8).

As for Sarai your wife (noun phrase
as dislocative), you shall not call her
name Sarai (Gen. 17:15).

Clauses can also function as subject,
copula-complement and dis-
locutive (addressee or dislocative) (Williams 1980: 80; Walke
and O'Connor 1990: 70, 320, 337; Gesenius 1976: 457, §143a, Foot-
ote 2; Jotinson-Muraoka 1991: 588).

When it was told Saul that David
had escaped from Keilah (subject
clause) (I Sam. 23:13).

And if the report is established as
ture that this abomination has been
committed among you (clause in ap-
position to subject) (Deut. 13:15).

This is how you are to make it (copu-
la-complement clause) (Gen. 6:15).

Tell me, O (you) whom I love (ad-
resse clause) (Song 1:7).

With reference to the fact that some-
one attacks Kirath-spher and takes
it (dislocative clause), (and) I will
give him my daughter Achsah as
wife (Josh. 15:16).

4 Semantic Aspects

Semantically speaking subjects can fulfill the role of agent, positioner,
processed, force or zero, and in passive clauses also that of patient.26

And from there Abraham (agent)
travelled to the country, the Negev
(Gen. 20:1).

26 For a discussion of these and other semantic functions, compare Dik (1997:
118, 121, 214, 229–31, 243–5). For the patient Dik uses the term god, which can
be confused with purpose.

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And his father (positioner) kept the
matter (in mind) (Gen. 37:11).

And Ahaziah (processed) fell through
the lattice in his upper chamber
(2 Kgs 1:2).

The fire (force) consumed both
ends of it (Ezek. 15:4).

Not many (zero) are wise (verbal
clause) (Job 32:9).

A rich man (zero) is wise in his own
eyes (nominal clause) (Prov. 28:11).

A son (patient) was given to us (Isa.
9:5).

In the so-called double subject construction the second ‘subject’
(which could rather be interpreted as a nominal adjunct) has
the semantic function of instrument (especially the organ) or manner (cf.
Gesenius 1976: 461, §144–m).

With my voice (aloud) I cry to the
Lord (Ps. 3:5).

You trampld the sea with your
horses (Hab. 3:15).

The noun as copula-complement can have the semantic function of
class (the noun is indefinite)27 or identity (the noun is definite),
and an adjective as copula-complement has the semantic function of
quality.28

Jehovah is a lion’s cub (class: class-
membership) (Gen. 49:9).

A man is a head (class: class-inclu-
sion) to his family (Num. 1:4).

The Lord is our29 king (identity)
(Isa. 33:22).

27 If the subject is definite and the copula-complement is indefinite, the copula-
complement has the semantic function of class-membership (the X is a Y). If the
subject and the copula-complement are indefinite the copula-complement has the
semantic function of class-inclusion (every X is a Y) (cf. Dik 1980: 103–104).

28 Dik (1997: 205) uses the term ‘property assignment’. (He uses the term
‘quality’ for ‘role’ or ‘capacity’.) In the Semitic Languages (and in this article) the
semantic term ‘quality’ is used to indicate a characteristic. BF does not differenti-
ate between bare nominals and indefinite nouns; therefore, a ‘bare nominal’ cannot
indicate quality as in Dutch and English.

29 A noun with a pronominal suffix is definite.
the gold of that land was good (quality) (Gen. 2:12). If the nominal copula הוא or שהוא is used absolutely (without copula-complement), it has the semantic function of existence.

But there is holy bread (1 Sam. 21:5). Because the day exists (Jer. 31:6). And there is no understanding (Prov. 17:16). And there is no deliverer (Isa. 5:29).

The nominal copula itself (pronoun, existential particle) has no semantic function if it is used in combination with a copula-complement.

Esau is Edom (Gen. 36:8). Is anyone here? (Judg. 4:20). Is there a king to us (We don’t have a king) (Hos. 10:3).

The addressee disjunct, which is a pragmatic function, does not have a semantic function with relation to the verb, neither does the dislocative disjunct which also has a pragmatic function, namely that of theme (cf. Dik 1997: 311).

5 Conclusion

Because no real cases are found in Biblical Hebrew the concept ‘nominative’ should not be used. Nouns in the so-called ‘nominative function’ should morphologically simply be parsed in terms of person (always 3rd), gender (m./f.), number (s./du./pl.) and state (absolute, construct, indeterminate, determinate, suffixed). Morpho-

Waltke and O’Connor (1990: 131) calls this a ‘dummy’ or ‘pleonastic pronoun’. See footnotes 12 and 20.

Cf. Dik (1997: 366–7): ‘The only known case form which expresses a pragmatic function is the not very common “vocative” case, which expresses the clause-external pragmatic function of Address.’

Waltke and O’Connor (1990: 76, 74) calls the dislocative the focus or topic, but according to Dik’s FG (1997: 310–38) focus and topic are distinctive clause-internal pragmatic functions. Cf. Jolton-Muraoka (1991: 586, footnote 1): the dislocative is the topic, and the clause is the comment.

Other pragmatic functions of the dislocative are to indicate contrast or to allow a grammatically complex part of a clause to stand on its own for the sake of clarity (Waltke and O’Connor 1990: 76–7).

logically there is no difference between nouns used as subject, copula-complement, addressee or dislocative. Adjectives differ from nouns in that they do not have person or dual number. Pronouns can have first, second or third person; singular or plural number; masculine, feminine or common gender; different forms are used for subjects, objects and postconstructs. However, even these are not real cases. The construct phrase, word order and agreement are the only formal indicators of a word’s function.

On the syntactic level ‘nominative’ nouns can be analysed as subjects, copula-complements and extra-clausal constituents (addressee and dislocative). The basic form (or ‘nominative’) of the independent personal pronoun can also be used as a copula. Phrases and clauses can also fill these slots. Words in apposition (attributes) can be in the simplest form, even if the head word is a direct object, postconstruct or the complement of a preposition (however, traditionally these are not treated as nominatives).

Subjects can fill the semantic functions of agent, positioner, processed, force, zero and patient. A copula-complement can have the semantic function of class, identity or quality. The nominal copula, if used absolutely, has the semantic function of existence. The extra-clausal elements of addressee and dislocative have no semantic functions, but pragmatic functions.

Instead of using the concept ‘nominative’ for the description of a nominal, the relevant morphological, syntactic and semantic analyses should be presented, for example Gen. 1:1-5:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Morphological parsing</th>
<th>Syntactic function</th>
<th>Semantic function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>יְהֵנָה</td>
<td>Noun (proper name), m. (royal) pl., abs. st.</td>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Agent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Zero</td>
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<td>Copula-complement</td>
<td>Class</td>
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<tr>
<td>וָרָא</td>
<td>Noun, m. s., abs. st.</td>
<td>2nd Copula-complement</td>
<td>Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>נָשִׁין</td>
<td>Noun, m., s., abs. st.</td>
<td>Subject</td>
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<tr>
<td>נָשִׁין</td>
<td>Noun, f. s., cs. st.</td>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>נָשִׁין</td>
<td>Qal act. part. f. s., abs. st. (_eta)</td>
<td>Copula-complement</td>
<td>Action predicate embedded as quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>נָשִׁין</td>
<td>Noun (proper name), m. (royal) pl., abs. st.</td>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>נָשִׁין</td>
<td>Noun, m., s., abs. st.</td>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Zero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>נָשִׁין</td>
<td>Noun phrase (noun, m., s., abs. st. + attributive adjective [cardinal / ordinal?], m., s.)</td>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Role</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Zewi, Tamar. 1996. 'The Definition of the Copula and the Role of 3rd Independent Personal Pronouns in Nominal Sentences of Semitic Languages'. *Folia Linguistica Historia* 17, 41-55