The significance of the qatal

5.2. It is time to begin further developing your understanding of the qatal verb form. The qatal verb form gives an attribute to the subject of the verb.² This is a difficult concept to capture consistently in the English language. Fortunately, our main concern in this course is understanding Biblical Hebrew, not translating it. Therefore, we can “talk our way to the concept.” Translate many of the qatal verb forms which do not follow אֲשֶׁר (or אִם or כִּי) as “attributions.” For your translation, use an -er word or a gerund (-ing noun) + possessive pronoun. In translation, you may need to add an extra word of if the verb is an action verb that takes a direct object.

Translation of אָמַר: He was a sayER (of)
or
His sayING (of)

Notes:

1. The word of is optional. Use of when the clause contains a direct object. In other words, if the action of the verb is done to something or someone you will need the word of in your translation.
2. The use of the er-word will be much more common.
3. The subject or doer of the verb אָמַר is not specified in our lesson verse, so it is translated according to the null affix ending which means 3rd m. s., our he, it. If you would read the verses before our lesson verse in your Bible, you would see that the subject of the verb is יְהוָה God.
4. The significance of the qatal as a verb form that pins an attribute on its subject may seem an overly abstract concept right now. Don’t worry. We will be constantly developing this idea with numerous examples as the book progresses. Allow the course to unfold like a good movie in which each scene’s contribution to the over-all theme of the movie is not instantly clear.

Footnote 2

This description of the verbal semantics of the qatal verb form as an attribution represents one of a few decisions in this book to go down “the road less traveled.” Most grammarians hold that the qatal is the simple past tense of Biblical Hebrew, equal in meaning to a wayyiqtol. See Gesenius, Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar (Oxford: Clarendon U. Press, 1910), §106; Jouon/Muraoka, A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew (Rome: Editris Pontifico Instituto Biblico, 1993), §112; Lambdin, Introduction to Biblical Hebrew (NY: Charles Scribner’s and Sons, 1971), §44.1. Waltke and O’Connor(1990), §30 assign qatal an aspectual rather than time referent asserting