BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN LINGUISTICS AND LITERARY STUDIES OF ANCIENT BIBLICAL AND JEWISH TEXTS: A PROPOSAL EXEMPLIFIED BY A STUDY OF GEN 9:8–17

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Abstract

Because Gen 9:8–17 uses the word קשת in relation to the deity and to the clouds, the inference has been made in biblical scholarship that the text refers to a rainbow. The plausibility of this inference is tested in this article. Attention is given to the various linguistic aspects of this word in the Hebrew Bible and to the specific textual composition of Gen 9:8–17 as well as to the broader ancient Near Eastern framework established by comparative literary and iconographic evidence. The conclusion is reached that the word קשת designates in Gen 9:8–17 a warrior’s bow which represents both the deity’s might and power as well as his willingness to transfer his power over the earth to those living on it.

There are billions of neurons in our brains, but what are neurons? Just cells. The brain has no knowledge until connections are made between neurons. All that we know, all that we are, comes from the way our neurons are connected.

Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the web

In 1906 Sir Charles Sherrington published The Integrative Action of the Nervous System, which was a collection of ten lectures delivered two years before at Yale University in the United States. In this monograph, Sherrington summarized two decades of painstaking experimental observations and his incisive interpretation of them and it is no exaggeration to say that Sherrington’s book changed the subsequent course of neurophysiology. He was one of the first to describe the human brain as “an enchanted loom where millions of flashing shuttles weave a dissolving pattern, always a meaningful pattern, though never an abiding one.” Since then, neurophysiology, neurobiology, and related disciplines have revealed the importance of neurons, the nerve cells in our brains specialized in connection and communications. We know now that our brains are complex networks in which new nodes preferentially attach to existing nodes that

already have many nodes. When we acknowledge that connectivity characterizes the human brain, and all kind of human interactions including their literary products or texts, the question arises for our study of biblical and ancient Jewish literature: How to acknowledge ancient literary texts in their connectivity, examine them as meaningful patterns that developed out of human cognition in interaction with its cultural and natural environment? And how do we attach new nodes to these networks of existing nodes? The aim of this article is to consider the connectivity of words, grammar, and texts in close relation to cognition and to exemplify this cognitive linguistic approach in a study of Gen 9:8–17, the so-called rainbow-text of God’s covenant with Noah and the earth.

_Bridging the Gap between Linguistics and Literary Studies:_

_A Cognitive Linguistic Approach_

The goal of a cognitive linguistic approach is to study meaning embedded in language, culture, and cognition by exploiting verifiable semantic methods for the analysis of linguistic expressions. In contrast to other, non-cognitive types of semantic research which is lexicographically (language-internally) oriented, cognitive linguistics examines words, concepts, and texts

a. as embedded in cognition, that is to say, in semantic relationships (i.e., language-internally), in cognitive configurations (i.e., figuring in experiential, conceptual, and social routines), and in metonymical and metaphorical networks of meaning;

b. in relation to the world views and cultural categories of the times in which they functioned;

c. in relation to the communicative contexts of use.

These basic tenets explain why cognitive linguistics cannot accept a dictionary-view of meaning, but takes an essentially encyclopedic view of meaning in which even the meaning of common, everyday terms is seen as supported by a vast network of interrelated knowledge. The cultural concerns of cognitive linguistics are obvious: the study of dictionary and encyclopedia as closely related phenomena is, in fact, a study of the rich repository of cultural knowledge.

Consider, for example, the concept of the word ‘island.’ In our common understanding, an island is a mass of land completely surrounded by water. In a sense, an island is nothing more than ‘land.’ The land is what the word profiles, or designates. However, it is not the land as such, but