DISCOURSE LINGUISTICS AND
THE STUDY OF BIBLICAL HEBREW

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1. Introduction

The fields of biblical studies and linguistics have a longstanding relationship, with often neglected common grounding in earlier modes of discussion and inquiry. As the fields themselves change, it is necessary continually to reconsider their relationship, to recalibrate the types of interactions possible, and to reassess their utility. These reconsiderations have to be undertaken with a sense of the distinct goals of the fields. It is the goal of biblical studies to understand a text and the ways in which it has come into being and grown, been understood and made use of. The goal of linguistics is to describe the phenomenon of language and its workings, as a feature of the brain and of society, as productive now and in the past.1 The goals are distinct, although not at odds with one another.

The era of modern linguistics is generally reckoned to begin with the various waves of nineteenth-century linguists, the Romantic collectors, the historical grammarians, and the Junggrammatiker. The summa of these endeavors was the work of the great Swiss scholar Ferdinand de Saussure, who recapitulated the entire course of nineteenth-century scholarship before he finished his nineteenth year. With Saussure began the concern with system and signification that was characteristic of twentieth-century linguistics.2 After Saussure began the shift from the

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1 James D. McCawley identifies as the “question that a linguist must always ask himself: ‘How general are the phenomena we are discussing?’,” *The Syntactic Phenomena of English* (Chicago, 1998), p. xvii. Roman Jakobson observed in a 1957 essay, “There is no difference in principle ... between the linguistic systems ... of the world,” in: L. R. Waugh and M. Monville-Burston (eds.), *On Language*, (Cambridge MA, 1990), p. 143, and typically insisted that this view was anticipated by the thirteenth-century Franciscan scholastic Roger Bacon (*On Language*, p. 153).

lonely lexeme as the focal point of study to larger units, the phrase, clause, and sentence. It is a common mistake to see linguistics as having devoted the first seventy-five years of the last century exclusively to these entities, but it is fair to say that the bulk of working linguists concentrated on these. There were good reasons for the focus on the domain of phrase and sentence, and two of them may be mentioned. First is the practical consideration that twentieth-century linguistics, in America and elsewhere, was often a field-based endeavor. Whether for the purposes of ethnography, missionizing, or both, linguists spent much of their time working on languages not previously committed to writing, and the sheer complexity of that labor often forced the focus down to the phrase and sentence level.\(^3\) The second reason is perhaps only an armchair restatement of the first: the workings of language on those levels are complex enough to fill a lifetime and still leave much unstudied.\(^4\)

In fact, linguists in the first three-quarters of the last century were concerned with the modeling of communication that has come to the fore in more recent work, and it would be wrong to neglect the ground-breaking models of, for example, Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) or Kenneth L. Pike (1912–2000) or J. Raymond Firth (1890–1960).\(^5\) Behind each of these is an array of other interests that shaped their scholarly work; Jakobson was committed to art and literature, Pike was a


\(^3\) See, e.g., John Gumperz, Discourse Strategies, Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics i (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 15–16.

\(^4\) Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949) is usually credited or blamed with keeping the focus on the sentence. The page on which he explains what a sentence is therefore bears careful rereading; Bloomfield was not as narrow as some make him out to be; see Language (New York, 1933), p. 170. For an example of rich study of a clausal-level phenomenon in Biblical Hebrew, see Andreas Michel’s essay on heavy-NP shift, Theologie aus der Peripherie: Die gespaltene Koordination im Biblischen Hebräisch, BZAW 257 (Berlin, 1997).