INCORPORATING ANCIENT ISRAEL'S WORLDVIEW INTO THE TEACHING OF BIBLICAL HEBREW[1]

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ABSTRACT

Modern language instruction always includes a cultural component – students do not learn just isolated words, morphology and syntax, but rather the cultural context of the language and its speakers. The teaching of Biblical Hebrew, however, has usually taken place in a cultural vacuum without reference to the cultural concepts that permeated ancient Israelite society. In this paper we describe an initiative to embed the teaching of Biblical Hebrew within the cultural world-view of ancient Israel in accordance with modern language pedagogy. Because South Africa is a multi-cultural society, we pay particular attention to the differing cultural backgrounds that our students bring to the learning of ancient Hebrew.

INTRODUCTION

Modern language instruction always includes a cultural component – students do not learn isolated words, morphological forms and syntactical structures, but rather they are introduced to the cultural context of the language and its speakers (see, e.g., Soars & Soars 2003).[2] As Hinkel (1999:2) notes: "Applied linguistics and language teachers

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[2]   A comparison of the Routledge grammars of Biblical Hebrew and Modern Hebrew as advertised on the Routledge web-site is instructive. The Biblical Hebrew grammar by Kahn (2014) does not include the culture of ancient Israel, whereas the Modern Hebrew grammar by Etzion (2009) explicitly includes "Cultural notes to introduce students to Israeli society".

have become increasingly aware that a second or foreign language can scarcely be learned or taught without addressing the culture of the community within which it is used." The teaching of Biblical Hebrew, however, has usually taken place in a cultural vacuum without reference to the physical world of ancient Israel or to the cultural concepts that permeated ancient Israelite society.[3]

In the plethora of pedagogical grammars of Biblical Hebrew recently published, there are only a few exceptional ones which include some component of culture. The recently published grammar by Verbruggen (2014) includes brief summaries of cultural aspects of ancient Israelite society, but these do not seem to be integrated into the actual teaching of Hebrew grammar. For example, the chapter on "Nouns" includes a description of "The family" and the chapter on "The imperfect" includes a section on "Marriage in the Hebrew Scriptures". In Overland (2014) numerous cultural discussions and photos of cultural artefacts are presented. For example, in the chapter that prominently features לֶחֶם "bread" in the readings, there is a discussion about the meaning of the term in the Hebrew Bible, and how bread was baked, what was eaten with bread and biblical metaphors employing the term (Overland 2014/I:184-185).

Much is known about the culture of ancient Israel (see, for example, King 2002, Borowski 2003, Dever 2012) and especially of its conceptual world (see Walton 2006). This paper presents an approach to teaching Biblical Hebrew developed at the University of the Free State in which cultural aspects of ancient Israelite society are

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Cf. www.routledge.com/cw/kahn-9780415524803/ and http://documents.routledge-interactive.s3.amazonaws.com/hii/about.html (accessed 26 September 2014).

[3]   Among the recently published grammars which do not include the culture of ancient Israel are the following: Bornemann (2011), Cook & Holmstedt (2013), Dobson (2005), Garrett & DeRouchie (2009), Hackett (2010), Halabe (2011), Nicholsen (2011), Simon, Resnikoff & Motzkin (2005), and Webster (2009). Pratico & Van Pelt (2007), for example, includes exegetical insights and biblical/theological reflections in each chapter, but not specifically Israelite culture. Similarly, Putnam (2010) includes a paragraph of "enrichment" at the end of each lesson relating to the use of a grammatical feature in understanding the biblical text. Cook & Holmstedt (2013:16) note in their introduction that Hebrew provides "a window" for understanding the ancient Israel worldview with the result that students can "appreciate its contribution to our own modern world view" as well as "examine issues from a viewpoint different from our own".

integrally involved in teaching Biblical Hebrew. In addition, our pedagogical method employs linguistic typology, complexity theory, and Biblical Performance Criticism.

The multi-cultural background of South Africa and especially of the University of the Free State requires a multi-cultural approach to teaching and learning. Because our university is officially a parallel medium university, all instruction is offered in parallel English and Afrikaans sessions and all teaching and administrative material must be available in both languages. In our Biblical Hebrew classes, instruction is offered in English and Afrikaans; because of a recent PhD student who is a Sesotho speaker, we are currently able to offer introductory Biblical Hebrew with explanations in Sesotho for students whose home language in Sesotho. This multi-cultural and multi-lingual context provides major challenges as well as exciting opportunities for teaching and learning.

Second language acquisition and language typology

Because Biblical Hebrew in South Africa is taught within a multi-lingual environment, it is critical that we have a way to describe the grammatical features of Biblical Hebrew to speakers with different mother-tongues. We are therefore developing the use of language typology with respect to second language acquisition (see Naudé & Miller-Naudé 2011 for a more detailed discussion). Language typology classifies languages (or individual structural components of languages) based upon shared formal characteristics (Whaley 1997:7). With this methodology, languages that are genetically unrelated and that have no geographical proximity can be grouped together by structural features. As a result, typologists can make relatively broad claims concerning the types of language structures represented among the world's languages, the ways in which languages vary structurally, and the limits to this variation (Haspelmath, Dryer, Gil & Comrie 2005:1).

We introduce students to grammatical features of Biblical Hebrew within a typological framework. After presenting the range of constructions available among the languages of the world, we show how Hebrew fits within that typology. Students are guided to explore for themselves how their own language fits into the typological

possibilities. They then are shown how to connect the grammatical features of their own language to the grammar of Biblical Hebrew.

As an example of language typology, we can consider grammatical gender as an agreement feature of nouns. Among the languages of the world, some languages (such as English and Afrikaans) do not have grammatical gender; this is the predominant pattern cross-linguistically. Some languages, such as Hebrew, mark all nouns with one of two genders, masculine or feminine. Other languages, such as Sesotho, have a complicated system of multiple noun classes with agreement features (Corbett 1991, 2005). In teaching Biblical Hebrew, the notion of grammatical gender as an agreement feature of nouns is foreign to speakers of Afrikaans and English. It is well-known to speakers of Sesotho as soon as they understand that their noun classification system is equivalent to the simpler Hebrew system of two genders. The typological difference between English and Afrikaans, on the one hand, and Hebrew and Sesotho, on the other, helps to explain why Sesotho students have no difficulty in grasping the Hebrew notion of nouns having agreement features, whereas English and Afrikaans students find it more difficult to master this aspect.

Second language acquisition and complexity theory

Research in second language acquisition is concerned with the development of language knowledge and use by individuals who already know at least one other language. Second language acquisition as a field of research began in the 1960s and since then there have been at least six successive generations of theories (Long 2012). At present, there is not a dominant theory in the field (Long 2011:728). A representative selection of these theories has previously been surveyed with particular attention to complexity theory (Miller-Naudé & Naudé 2014). We will therefore only summarise complexity theory here.

Complexity theory provides in the first instance a new view of language (Ellis & Larsen-Freeman 2009). Language as a complex system is never in an entirely stable state. Instead, language involves adaptation (language is continually adapting to contextual changes and it may change either internally or externally as a result), self-

organising (language changes alter the structure of the system), and emergence (language may emerge at a higher level of organisation at a later stage in its development). Language learning, then, is seen as language development (a process of dynamic adaptation) rather than language acquisition (something which is possessed after being learned) (Larson-Freeman 1997; Larson-Freeman & Cameron 2008:157). Another feature of languages as identified within complexity theory is that languages are dissimilar in their degree of complexity. The contribution of complexity theory for second language acquisition is that it views language-learning as an on-going process of adaptation and change which must be approached in a multi-faceted way.

Second language acquisition and performance biblical criticism

The new field of biblical performance criticism recognises ancient Israel as a predominantly oral culture and views the biblical traditions as originating in oral performances (Rhoads 2009). In this way, the orality of the biblical text is similar to modern oral traditions. In these traditions, memorisation (or, learning by heart) is central in that the oral performance from memory is the proof that the performer has mastered the ancient traditions. Biblical performance criticism claims that biblical scholarship must shift to the perspective of an oral/scribal culture and must reframe the biblical materials in the context of traditional oral cultures. As a result, biblical performance criticism attempts to reconstruct the ancient performances of the biblical text in modern contexts as a means to interpret anew the traditions of the Bible (Maxey 2012:2-3; see also Naudé 2014).

Performance serves critical pedagogical functions in the teaching of an ancient language: it forces students to use the language orally, thus improving their skills in pronunciation and understanding. Furthermore, it helps students to connect the words and structures they are learning with real-world situations.

INCORPORATING CULTURE INTO TEACHING

We now consider specific examples of how to incorporate the cultural world-view of ancient of ancient Israel into the teaching of Biblical Hebrew.

Teaching the alphabet as a cultural artefact

The first thing that first year students of Biblical Hebrew typically learn is the alphabet – the names of the letters in order, how to write each letter and the sound value of each letter. In the context of ancient Israel, however, the alphabet had special functions that are not present, or are only weakly present, in the modern world. Specifically, the alphabet was used as a structuring feature for compositions. These alphabetic acrostics used successive letters of the alphabet to begin poetic lines. The use of the alphabet as a compositional method seems to have served two cultural purposes in ancient Israel: first, it served as a memory device for remembering poems which were originally oral compositions. Second, it signalled that the composition comprehensively examined a topic (see van der Spuy 2008 and, with greater nuance, Assis 2007). The alphabetic acrostics of the Book of Lamentations, for example, can be culturally understood as presenting the full range of grief over the fall of Jerusalem.

After presenting the cultural background of alphabetic acrostics to students, we explain that there are different patterns of alphabetic acrostics in the Bible:

- Psalm 9   2 verses for each of the 22 Hebrew consonants
- Psalm 10   2 verses
- Psalm 24   1 verse each
- Psalm 34   1 verse each
- Psalm 37   2 verses each
- Psalm 111   ½ verse each
- Psalm 112   ½ verse each
- Psalm 119   8 verses each
- Psalm 145   1 verse each

We ask students to open their Hebrew Bibles to each chapter and identify the letters of the alphabet at the beginning of each line so that they can understand the structure of each poem. They then must do the following exercise:

Exercise — Alphabetic Acrostics
By using the Hebrew text in your *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia* determine the acrostic structure of Lamentations 1 and 3.
1.   Lamentations 1

Identify the pattern of Hebrew consonants that begin each verse. How many lines are assigned to each consonant in this poem?

2.   Lamentations 3

Identify the pattern of Hebrew consonants that begin each verse. How many lines are assigned to each consonant in this poem?

Indicate any deviation in the traditional order of consonants.

This exercise accomplishes the following for students in the very first weeks of studying Hebrew: students learn about the cultural meaning of the alphabet in ancient Israel, students immediately apply what they have learned about the alphabet to examining the alphabet in the context of the Hebrew Bible, students learn that there were alternative orders of the alphabet in ancient Israel. In addition, students consult their Hebrew Bibles in the initial weeks of their study of Biblical Hebrew, learning how to open the Bible and locate the passages that they must examine.

Culture and grammar in names and naming

Biblical names are an excellent way of teaching vocabulary and grammar, since almost every name has a meaning and many consist of a small sentence. Furthermore, names provide a window into the cultural world of ancient Israel.

We begin by providing an example of the range of names found in the Bible using the root נתן:

Ancient Israelite Names with נתן

1.0 Names consisting of verbal forms of נתן

נָתָן 'He gave' – eight persons in the OT, including a son of David (2 Samuel 5:14) and a prophet in David's time (2 Samuel 7:2 etc.).

1.1 Theophoric element at the end of the name

נְתַנְאֵל 'God gave' (6 persons in OT), e.g. fourth son of Jesse (1 Chronicles 2:14)

נְתַנְיָהוּ or נְתַנְיָה 'Yahweh gave' (4 persons in OT)

1.2 Theophoric element at the beginning of the name

יוֹנָתָן or יְהוֹנָתָן (16 people) – 'Yahweh has given'

2.0 Names consisting of nominal forms related to נתן

מַתָּן 'n.m. gift' and also n.pr.m. (2 persons)

מַתַּנְיָהוּ or מַתַּנְיָה 'Gift of Yahweh' (4 or more persons)

מַתְּנַי n.pr.m. (abbreviation of previous name) (2 persons)

We discuss with students the significance and meaningfulness of names within the

ancient Near East. We discuss the notion of theophoric names and the possible relationship of theophoric names to religious practice (Tigay 1986, 1987; Fowler 1988). We also discuss the connection of nominal roots to verbal roots through the various kinds of names that are attested.

To link the names to the South African context, we ask students to reflect on the use and cultural value of names in their home culture. This stimulates very interesting discussions between the Afrikaner students and African students. Whereas in traditional African cultures, names are meaningful (in a way that is similar to the culture of ancient Israel), for Afrikaner students the giving of names is culturally determined in traditional Afrikaner society – the eldest son receives the name of the paternal grandfather, the second son receives the name of the maternal grandmother, the eldest daughter receives the name of the maternal grandmother, the second daughter receives the name of the paternal grandmother, etc.

Cultural view of the world

The unit on the ancient Semitic worldview provides one of the foundational units within the first semester course. The students are provided with a schematic drawing of the world and its various components are described.[4] The idea is not that the students memorise all of the components on the chart, but rather that they gain an appreciation of the distance between the ancient Israelite view of the world and our own, even with reference to two of the most common nouns in the Bible – אֶרֶץ and שָׁמַֽיִם.

The Ancient Semitic Worldview

The people of the ancient Semitic world viewed the world as consisting of three storeys:
שָׁמַֽיִם heaven (Genesis 1:1)
אֶרֶץ: earth (Genesis 1:1)
שְׁאוֹל, שְׁאֹל underworld, Sheol (Job 11:8; 17:16)

Within these three spheres, the following components are indicated:
רָקִיעַ firmament, dome (Genesis 1:7)

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4   The drawing of the ancient world as shown in Sarna (1970) provides a good example.

אוֹצָרוֹת storerooms (above the firmament):

אֹצְרוֹת רוּחַ storehouses of wind (Psalm 135:7)

אֹצְרוֹת שֶׁלֶג storehouses of snow (Job 38:22)

אֹצְרוֹת בָּרָד storehouses of hail (Job 38:22)

אֲרֻבֹּת הַשָּׁמַיִם the windows of the heaven (as an exit for the contents of the storerooms) (Genesis 7:11; 8:2)

עַמּוּדֵי שָׁמַיִם pillars of heaven = the pillars of the heaven (Job 26:11)

מוֹסְדוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם the foundations of the heaven (2 Samuel 22:8)

עַמּוּדֵי אֶרֶץ pillars of earth = the pillars of the earth (Job 9:6)

מוֹסְדֵי אֶרֶץ foundations of an earth = foundations of the earth (Psalm 82:5; Isaiah 24:18)

טַבּוּר הָאָרֶץ the centre of the earth (Ezekiel 38:12)

תְּהוֹם primeval flood, watery deep (Genesis 7:11)

מַעְיְנֹת תְּהוֹם fountains of watery deep = the fountains of the watery deep (Genesis 7:11; 8:2)

נְהָרוֹת rivers (of the underworld) (Psalm 24:2)

שַׁחַת pit, realm of the dead (Psalm 94:13) = שְׁאוֹל

John Walton (2011:119-121) has demonstrated that in the cosmology of ancient Israel as depicted in Genesis, creation does not involve the creation of matter, but the creation of function, order, diversity and identity. The architecture of the cosmos focuses on separating heaven from earth (not manufacturing either of them) and on earth's emergence from the cosmic waters.[5] In a functional ontology, the earth is seen as being suspended over the cosmic waters below, parallel to the heavens that are stretched out over the upper cosmic waters (Walton 2011:142). Temples in the ancient Near East were designed to be models of the cosmos. The rule of the world originated in the temple, which was ordained as the control room of the cosmos. In the Genesis account of creation, God rests on Day 7. Similarly, when a temple was inaugurated in ancient Mesopotamia, the deity entered his prepared residence and rested there, assuming his role as ruler of the cosmos from his throne. In the ancient Near Eastern worldview, people and God work together to ensure the preservation of order and the smooth operation of the cosmos.

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[5]   For a detailed discussion of the Babylonian creation myths and especially the notions of the splitting of heaven and earth, of waters above and waters below and the organisation of the cosmos, see Lambert (2013a and 2013b, especially pp. 169-180).

Cardinal direction terms

The ancient Semitic worldview is further expanded in a following unit of the first semester which introduces four of the cardinal directional terms used in Biblical Hebrew.[6] The cultural context is explained by using the Medeba Map (see the entry on "The four winds of the heavens and their names" in Aharoni & Avi-Yonah 1977). The reading for the lessons consists of Genesis 13:14-15, which is supplemented with interlinear glosses where necessary. In addition to the adjective, the accusative and negative marker, the language focus section involves the locative *heh*. The cultural world view of ancient Israel is discussed with respect to the orientation towards the east and the geographical setting in which "west" (יָמָּה) is "seawards". The vocabulary of the four cardinal directions is re-enforced by singing the song "Ufaratsta" from Genesis 28:14.

The Four Winds of the Heavens and Their Names
Genesis 13:14-15

וַיהוָֹה אָמַר אֶל־אַבְרָם אַחֲרֵי הִפָּרֶד־לוֹט מֵעִמּוֹ שָׂא נָא עֵינֶיךָ וּרְאֵה מִן־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה שָׁם צָפֹנָה

וָנֶגְבָּה וָקֵדְמָה וָיָמָּה: כִּי אֶת־כָּל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה רֹאֶה לְךָ אֶתְּנֶנָּה וּלְזַרְעֲךָ עַד־עוֹלָם:

And the LORD said to Abram, after Lot had parted from him, "Raise your eyes and look out from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west, for I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring for ever."

Song – *Ufaratsta* (Genesis 28:14)

וּפָרַצְתָּ יָמָּה וָקֵדְמָה וְצָפֹנָה וָנֶגְבָּה

And you shall spread out toward the west and toward the east and toward the north and toward the south.

The units on the ancient Semitic world view and the cardinal directions provide a springboard for other units in the first two years of study, including those on the festivals of ancient Israel and the cosmology of ancient Israel within the prophetic literature and the Psalms. The readings for the units are chosen with a view to not only teach grammatical features and build vocabulary, but primarily to build exegetical and theological understanding through cultural awareness.

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[6]   See O'Connor (1991) for a comprehensive survey of all of the directional terms used in Biblical Hebrew, their etymologies and the various orders in which the terms appear.

Performance criticism and narrative structure

Performance biblical criticism is based upon the premise that the biblical text must be performed as a part of the exegetical interpretive process. In other words, the demands of performance require the exegete to ask questions of the text that might not otherwise be asked. We believe that performance criticism can also be harnessed for the teaching of Biblical Hebrew grammatical structure.[7]

After we have translated the passage and discussed its grammatical structure, we briefly discuss various cultural aspects of the narrative – the social status of widows in ancient Israel, debt slavery, oil as an economic commodity, containers for oil, and the pragmatics of deferential language (e.g. עַבְדְּךָ "your servant", שִׁפְחָתְךָ "your maidservant"). We then ask students to divide into small groups and prepare a performance of the story, with one individual as the narrator and other students as the various characters in the story (Elisha, the woman, and the two sons). As students work on orally performing the story, they internalise the vocabulary of the story, their pronunciation of Hebrew improves, and they remember the morphological forms better (see also Lübbe 2011). However, performing the story also helps them to see the connection between the broader narrative structure of the story and the grammatical features that it employs.

In order to help students to understand the narrative structure of Biblical Hebrew, we ask them to identify the narrative structure of the passage and how the various verbal forms contribute to that structure. We instruct students, therefore, to identify the grammatical forms of the *wayyiqtol* and the chain of sentences that comprise chronologically ordered narrative sequences. We also ask students to look at places where the grammatical structure indicates repetitive or simultaneous events. For example, in 2 Kings 4:5 we have the following sentences:

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[7]   The teaching grammars by Buth (2006a, 2006b) and Overland (2014) also include the performance of pre-determined dialogues. The exercises described in this section differ in that they involve students determining how to perform the biblical text after they have translated it.

2 Kings 4:5

<div dir="rtl">

וַתֵּ֙לֶךְ֙ מֵאִתּ֔וֹ

וַתִּסְגֹּ֣ר הַדֶּ֔לֶת בַּעֲדָ֖הּ וּבְעַ֣ד בָּנֶ֑יהָ

הֵ֚ם מַגִּשִׁ֣ים אֵלֶ֔יהָ

וְהִ֥יא (מֵיצָ֖קֶת) [מוֹצָֽקֶת]׃

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She went from him

And she shut the door behind her and behind her sons

They were bringing to her

And she was pouring.

In this verse there are two sequential, narrative events which are grammatically signalled by the *wayyiqtol* forms – she went away, she shut the door. There are also two sentences which use participles – they (the sons) were bringing the containers to her, she was pouring the oil.

When students begin to work on their performance of the narrative, they must operationalise the narrative structure and the use of the various grammatical forms. In 2 Kings 7:5, for example, they must consider what the two sentences with participles mean for the narrative structure. Specifically, the participle as a marker of continuous activity seems to be used here to indicate repetitive action – the sons repeatedly bring containers to their mother and she repeatedly pours the oil into them. These actions then are in contrast to the one-time, sequential actions indicated by the *wayyiqtol* forms.

In performance, the students can then understand that the sequential performance of the actions correlates with the grammatical structures. This assists students both in comprehension of the verbal forms and in appreciating the value of Hebrew grammar for the insights that it provides into biblical narratives. Similarly, within direct speech, we ask students to identify the grammatical forms of directives, especially those using the *weqatalti* (the so-called perfect consecutive) to indicate consecutively-ordered commands. In 2 Kings 4:3-4, for example, students must identify all of the directives and indicate how they relate to one another:

2 Kings 4:3-5

לְכִי

שַׁאֲלִי־לָךְ כֵּלִים מִן־הַחוּץ מֵאֵת כָּל־(שְׁכֵנָכִי) [שְׁכֵנָיִךְ]

כֵּלִים רֵקִים אַל־תַּמְעִיטִי:

וּבָאת

וְסָגַרְתְּ הַדֶּלֶת בַּעֲדֵךְ וּבְעַד־בָּנַיִךְ

וְיָצַקְתְּ עַל כָּל־הַכֵּלִים הָאֵלֶּה

וְהַמָּלֵא תַּסִּיעִי:

Students gain practice in identifying imperative forms, jussive forms and perfect consecutive forms. Most importantly, by performing the narrative they must understand how the pragmatics of each action relates to the structure of the entire speech. They also will grasp more deeply how the prophet's directives in verses 3-4 are more (or less) precisely mirrored in the narrative compliance of the woman and her sons in verse 5.

CONCLUSION

The teaching of an ancient language such as Biblical Hebrew must not be taught in a cultural vacuum. Where literature and culture are mentioned in Biblical Hebrew classes, it is often done alongside grammar and vocabulary or as separate components, but not integrated with it. In light of this unsatisfactory situation, we suggest a fully-integrated pedagogical approach of grammar, linguistics, literature and culture as a coherent plan based on the pedagogical approach of complexity theory. Language typology provides a way for the cultural differences between ancient Hebrew and the cultural backgrounds of students to be explored. Performance criticism allows students to enter the world of ancient Israel through re-enacting biblical narratives and connecting the grammatical forms of the narrative to a real-world, embodied situation. As students consider the cultural world of ancient Hebrew, they are also encouraged to compare their differing home cultural backgrounds to those of ancient Hebrew and their fellow classmates.

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