

***A Linguistic Approach to Ellipsis
in Biblical Poetry
(Or, What to Do When Exegesis of What Is There
Depends on What Isn't)***

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Biblical Hebrew poetry frequently exhibits ellipsis (or gapping) of the verb, but the precise patterns of ellipsis have not been identified previously. A linguistic approach to ellipsis involves identifying universal features of ellipsis, as well as those features that are specific to Biblical Hebrew. Understanding the shapes of elliptical constructions in Biblical Hebrew provides a powerful exegetical tool for evaluating alternative readings (and hence exegetical understandings) of difficult verses (e.g., Ps 49:4 and Prov., 13:1).

Key Words: poetry, parallelism, gapping, ellipsis, Hebrew syntax, Ps 49:4, Prov 13:1

1.0. INTRODUCTION

Ellipsis has been called a "basic stylistic resource of Hebrew verse."¹ Indeed, ellipsis of the verb has been considered by some to be the crucial feature that distinguishes Hebrew poetry from Hebrew prose.²

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1. O'Connor, *Hebrew Verse Structure* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1980), 401.

2. *Ibid.*, 124-29. For a dissenting opinion, see James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and its History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 321-23.

But ellipsis by its very nature is elusive, since in talking about ellipsis, we are talking about words that simply are not there.

From a linguistic point of view, ellipsis involves constructions in which a grammatically required element is omitted by the speaker, thus creating a structural hole or gap.³ By this definition, ellipsis produces utterances which are *grammatically* incomplete in their surface structure. Less technically, the term "elliptical" is sometimes used to describe utterances which are *contextually* incomplete and require the hearer to supply contextual information.⁴ This second use of ellipsis is not in view in this discussion; rather, I am concerned with ellipsis as a grammatical process that results in the fragmentation of the surface syntax.⁵

Biblical scholars have long recognized the presence of ellipsis in biblical poetry, though they differ with respect to whether they focus attention on the item that is retained or on the item that is deleted. The Medieval Hebrew grammarians took the first approach, describing ellipsis in terms of the item that is retained "standing for" or "serving for" the item that is deleted.⁶ For example, in (1), the medieval grammarians would describe the verb 'shall be redeemed' in the first line as "standing for" the missing verb in the second line.

(1) Isa 1:27

צִיּוֹן בְּמִשְׁפָּט תִּפְדָּה
וְשָׁבִיָּהּ בְּצִדְקָה _____

Zion by justice shall be redeemed,
and her repentant ones by righteousness _____.
= and her repentant ones by righteousness [*shall be redeemed*]

3. With this definition, I am excluding from consideration here those sentences in which the second line is appositional to the final constituent of the first line. See, for example, Jer 31:7: הַיְשַׁע יְהוָה אֶת־עַמּוֹ שְׂאֲרֵי־תִשְׂרָאֵל 'Save, O LORD, your people, / the remnant of Israel'. The noun phrase 'the remnant of Israel' is in apposition to 'your people'. If this sentence were encountered in prose, we would not consider it to have a structural hole or gap.

4. John Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 174-75; see also the important discussion of this distinction in M. A. K. Halliday and Rugaiya Hasan, *Cohesion in English* (English Language Series 9; London: Longman, 1976), 142-43.

5. The distinction between contextually incomplete and grammatically incomplete sentences will be further explored in n. 42, below.

6. Qimhi, for example, catalogs various types of "ellipsis and elision," though most of his examples do not involve verbal ellipsis; see William Chomsky, *David Kimhi's Hebrew Grammar (Mikhlol)* (New York: Bloch, 1952), 356-58. See also ibn Nūh's list of verses where a word is elided (Geoffrey Khan, *The Early Karaite Tradition of Hebrew Grammatical Thought: Including a Critical Edition, Translation and Analysis of the Diqduq of 'Abu Ya'qūb Yūsūf ibn Nūh on the Hagiographa* [Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics 32; Leiden: Brill, 2000], 128-31).

Among modern biblical scholars, Dahood coined the adjective "double-duty" to describe the item that is retained.⁷ His description of ellipsis is strikingly similar to that of the medieval grammarians, though he seems unaware of that fact.⁸ Other modern scholars take the second approach, describing instead the item that is deleted, using the adjectives "gapped" or "elided."⁹ From this point of view, the missing verb 'shall be redeemed' in the second line of (1) is said to be "gapped" or "elided," since the second line is not a complete sentence—'and her repentant ones by righteousness' is a sentence fragment. On the issue of whether to describe what is retained or what is deleted in elliptical constructions, I will follow the latter scholars in describing ellipsis in terms of deletion. But because linguists use the term "gapping" to refer to a specific kind of verbal ellipsis, I will use the more general term "elision."¹⁰

Elliptical constructions pose distinctive problems for biblical interpretation. The biblical scholar must recognize that ellipsis has occurred and then must transform the sentence fragment into a meaningful sentence. For native speakers of a language, these challenges are ordinarily met without difficulty and, in fact, unconsciously. Given the English sentence in (2a):

(2) a. John ate apples and Sue oranges

the hearer knows that the sentence fragment *Sue oranges* can only be resolved as *Sue ate oranges*. But given the sentence in (2b):

b. On Monday John ate apples and on Tuesday oranges

the hearer knows that, although the sentence on Tuesday oranges is incomplete, the underlying sentence—and the one actually being

7. Mitchell Dahood., *Psalms III: 101-150* (AB 17A; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), 429-44; and *Ugaritic-Hebrew Philology* (BibOr 17; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965), §13.44a. A conceptually similar approach would describe the verb at the end of the first line as a "pivot" that serves for both lines; see Daniel Sivan and Shamir Yona, "Pivot Words and Expressions in Biblical Hebrew and Ugaritic Poetry," *VT* 48 (1998): 400 n. 5; and "Style and Syntax: Pivotal Use of Extrapositional Syntagms in Biblical Hebrew," *UF* 26 (1995): 443-54. However, because the "pivot" approach is applicable only when the deleted constituent is at the caesura of the lines, it describes only a small subset of the patterns of verbal ellipsis.

8. As illustrated by Edward L. Greenstein, "The Study of Deletion (Double-Duty) Phenomena in Ugritic and Biblical Hebrew" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Oriental Society, 1978).

9. See, for example Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (JSOTSup 26; Sheffield: SOT Press, 1984), 303-4; and Paul E. Dion, *Hebrew Poetics* (2d ed.; Mississauga: Benben, 1992), 14-16.

10. The patterns of verbal ellipsis in Biblical Hebrew include phenomena known as gapping, VP-ellipsis, bare argument ellipsis, and conjunction reduction. I will not discuss these distinctions here, but see nn. 11 and 12 below.

communicated by the speaker—is on Tuesday John ate oranges.¹¹ Native speakers are able to process sentence fragments of this type effortlessly because they have two kinds of innate syntactic knowledge—knowledge of the underlying syntactic structures of their language, and knowledge of the ways in which ellipsis operates upon those structures. Nonetheless, syntax alone is not sufficient for interpreting elliptical structures; native speakers also must rely on their knowledge of semantics (the meanings of words) and pragmatics (the uses of words within the speech context). Consider, for example, the sentence in (2c):

c. John ate the apples slowly and the horse quickly.

sentence fragment: the horse quickly = NOUN PHRASE + ADVERB

resolve the sentence fragment:

option 1#: John ate the apples slowly and the horse
[ate the apples] quickly.

option 2#: John ate the apples slowly and [John ate]
the horse quickly.

The native speaker has two syntactic options available for resolving the sentence fragment *the horse quickly*.¹² Option #1 is immediately selected—ellipsis has resulted in the deletion of the verb and its object. The underlying sentence is understood to be *the horse ate the apples quickly*. Option #2—*John ate the horse quickly*--is rejected on the basis of native-speaker knowledge concerning the social context of speaking: most people in America do not eat horses, though the culinary situation is different in other countries. Contrastively, upon hearing the example in (d), an English speaker processes the sentence differently:

d. John ate the apples slowly and the candy quickly.

sentence fragment: the candy quickly = NOUN PHRASE + ADVERB

resolve the sentence fragment:

option #1: John ate the apples slowly and the candy [ate
the apples] quickly

option #2: John ate the apples slowly and [John ate] the
candy quickly.

11. Both (a) and (b) are examples of what linguists call "gapping." Gapping involves the ellipsis of the verb (and sometimes additional material, such as the subject in [b]) from structurally identical coordinate structures to leave only two constituents, one before the gap and one after. Sometimes the gapped material can be quite extensive; for example: *Fred tried to talk the dean into recommending that the linguistics department teach semiotics and Wilma _____ dialectology*; see James D. McCawley, *The Syntactic Phenomena of English* (2 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 2:534.

12. The two options involve two different elliptical processes. Linguists refer to the kinds of ellipsis in option #1 as "gapping," in that the verb and object are deleted to leave a higher level constituent (the subject) and a lower level constituent (the adverb); see further the definition of gapping in n. 11. Option #2 involves "conjunction reduction." Conjunction reduction involves the ellipsis of any identical constituents in conjoined sentences.

In this case, the hearer resolves the sentence fragment *the candy quickly* using option #2—ellipsis has resulted in the deletion of the subject and verb. The sentence fragment is not resolved with option #1 (i.e., *the candy ate the apples quickly*), because in the real world candy does not eat fruit, but people do.

In (2c) and (2d), the English sentences are superficially identical in syntax.¹³ Resolving the sentence fragments requires first an understanding of the syntactically possible shapes of ellipsis. But because two different elliptical processes are possible, the native speaker uses the differences in meaning of the two noun phrases (*the horse* and *the candy*) as well as real-world knowledge (horses eat, but candy is eaten) to resolve the sentence fragments.

As we read biblical poetry, it is often a simple matter to identify a line as elliptical and just as simple to resolve the sentence fragment. But as nonnative readers of ancient Hebrew, we process the elliptical constructions of the Bible largely through the semantics of the verse, rather than through a consideration of syntax." Consider (3):

(3) Prov 26:14

הַדֶּלֶת תִּמְסֹב עַל-צִירָהּ
וְעֵצֶל עַל-מִטָּתוֹ:

The door turns upon its hinge(s),
and the sluggard upon his bed.

verbal ellipsis = and the sluggard [*turns*] upon his bed
verbless clause = and the sluggard *is* upon his bed

In this case, we consider the second line to be elliptical—the verb of the first line ('turns') has been elided from the second line: 'The door turns upon its hinges, and the sluggard [*turns*] upon his bed'. It would be grammatically possible, however, to read the second line of (3) as a complete sentence without ellipsis, since a noun phrase plus a prepositional phrase can form a perfectly acceptable verbless sentence in Hebrew.¹⁵ The second line would then be read: 'The sluggard *is* upon his bed'. No one has suggested this rendering because the proverb "hinges" upon drawing a similarity between a door and a sluggard,

13. In spoken English, the sentences in (2c) and (2d) would differ with respect to intonational patterns. In (2c), there would be a pause before the adverb *quickly*. In (2d), the adverbs *slowly* and *quickly* would have focus intonation.

14. The patterns of verbal ellipsis in Modern Hebrew differ from those in Biblical Hebrew in a number of ways, especially with respect to backwards ellipsis, which is not possible in Modern Hebrew. For a summary of some of the features of verbal ellipsis in Modern Hebrew, see Edit Doron, "V-Movement and VP Ellipsis," in *Fragments: Studies in Ellipsis and Gapping* (ed. Shalom Lappin and Elabbas Benmamoun; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 124-40.

15. The problematic relationship between verbal ellipsis and verbless sentences is discussed in Michael Rosenbaum, *Word-Order Variation in Isaiah 40-55: A Functional Perspective* (SSN; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1997), 162.

a similarity that depends upon a reading in which both lines share the same verb.¹⁶ But an elliptical reading of (3) is derived primarily from a common-sense consideration of the semantics of the words and the meaning of the bicolon as a whole, rather than from an understanding of how ellipsis works syntactically in Biblical Hebrew.

Biblical poetry, however, is often quite difficult exegetically. It is not always clear on semantic grounds whether two nominal phrases should be understood as a verbless sentence or as a sentence fragment with an elided verb. As test cases, let us consider two verses, each with exegetical ramifications that depend upon whether we understand the syntactical structures as elliptical or not.

As a first test case, consider (4):

(4) Ps 49:4

פִּי יְדַבֵּר חֲכָמוֹת
וְהַגִּוֵּת לִבִּי תְבוֹנֹת:

My mouth speaks wisdom,
and the murmuring of my heart understanding.

verbless clause = and the murmuring of my heart *is*
understanding

verbal ellipsis = and the murmuring of my heart [*speaks*]
understanding

There are two ways to understand the verse. If the second line is understood to contain a verbless sentence, then the translation of the NRSV can be followed: 'My mouth *shall speak* wisdom, / the meditation of my heart *shall be* understanding'. Taken in this way, the second line is understood as characterizing the psalmist's thought processes as insightful. This is the approach of Pleins, who translates "and the meditation of my mind/heart is insightful."¹⁷ Similarly, Rashi understands *הַגִּוֵּת לִבִּי* ('the meditation of my heart') as equivalent to *מַחְשְׁבוֹת לִבִּי* ('the thoughts of my heart'). He translates "as for the thoughts of my heart, they are insights."¹⁸ Understood in this way, the psalmist is

16. As Alter notes, the proverb is a riddle: How is a sluggard in bed like a door swinging on its hinges? (Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* [New York: Basic Books, 1985], 177). Without ellipsis of the verb, there is no similarity and thus no riddle.

17. J. David Pleins, "Death and Endurance: Reassessing the Literary Structure and Theology of Psalm 49," *JSOT* 69 (1996): 20.

18. Mayer I. Gruber, trans. and annotator, *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms 1-89* (Books I-III) (South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 161; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 231 and 235 n. 11. Similarly, Berlin understands the verse to consist of a verbal clause in the first line coupled with a verbless clause in the second line. She translates: "My mouth speaks [words of] wisdom; And my heart's murmurings are [thoughts of] understanding" (Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985], 54). So also Delitzsch: "Side by side with the speaking of the mouth stands *הַגִּוֵּת לִבִּי* . . . the meditation . . . of the heart, and in accordance therewith

drawing a subtle comparison: his mouth audibly speaks wisdom, but the silent meditation of his heart contains understanding. The two lines contrast speech and thoughts.

Another syntactic interpretation is possible. If the second line is understood to be an elliptical construction with an elided verb, then we would translate: 'the meditation of my heart *speaks* insights'.¹⁹ Taken in this way, the line is understood not to be referring to inner thought processes as insightful. Rather, the murmuring of the heart or intellect results in insightful speech.²⁰ This syntactic reading of the verse has not ordinarily been accepted,²¹ although its sense has sometimes been implied by commentators. Gerstenberger, for example, says that vv. 4-5 describe the "contents of the psalmist's message" using "wisdom terms such as 'insights,' 'understanding,' 'saying,' and 'problem'."²² Similarly, although Briggs translates the second line as a verbless clause, his understanding of the verse is similar to that suggested here. Meditation, he suggests, is "not internal of the mind, but the murmur of the voice in giving expression to the reflection of the mind."²³ Other commentators, sensing the need for a verbal form in the second line, want to emend the hapax *הִגִּיתִּי* 'meditation, to a verbal form from the related root *הִגִּי* 'to meditate, murmur'. Dahood, for example, revocalizes the noun *הִגִּיתִּי* as an infinitive absolute *הִגִּי* and translates: "and my heart shall proclaim insight."²⁴

the well-thought-out discourse" (Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms* [trans. Francis Bolton; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1983], 110). See also Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2001), 128.

19. It is possible that this understanding is reflected in the NIV: "My mouth will speak words of wisdom; / the utterance from my heart will give understanding."

20. An intermediate position is implied by Terrien, who translates: "My mouth shall speak words of wisdom, / For my mind whispers to me sensible thought." He apparently understands the verb *הִגִּי* to be elided from the second line; his translation "whisper" rather than "speak" derives from the subject *לִּי* "mind." See Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Eerdmans Critical Commentary Series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 386.

21. For an exception, note Hirsch's translation, which reflects ellipsis of the verb: "My mouth desires to utter what is in accordance with wisdom, / and the meditation of my heart what is seemly to understanding" (Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Psalms* [2 vols.; New York: Feldheim, 1960-1966], 1:347).

22. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms: Part 1 with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry* (FOTL 14; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 204.

23. Charles Augustus Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906), 407.

24. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I: 1-50: Introduction, Translation and Notes* (AB 16; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), 295, 297; see his comment justifying the unusual form of the infinitive absolute on the basis of *שָׁתוּרָה* (Isa 22:13) instead of the usual form *שָׁתַרְהָה* (e.g., Isa 21:5). Seybold also emends to a verb and translates: "Mein Mund redet Weisheiten; / was mein Herz sinnt, das sind Einsichten" (Klaus Seybold, *Die Psalmen* [HAT 1/15; Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1996], 198-99).

The fact that neither translators nor commentators agree on a syntactic reading of Ps 49:4 is troubling. Are both syntactic understandings of this verse possible, or is one preferable? On what basis should one be preferred over the other?

A more difficult test case is found in (5), Prov 13:1:

(5) Prov 13:1

בֵּן חָכָם מוֹסֵר אָב
וְלִץ לֹא־שָׁמַע גְּעֵרָה:

The verse has multiple difficulties. As it stands, it literally reads: 'A wise son admonition of father, / but a scoffer does not heed rebuke'. The first line is quite problematic. Although syntactically it could be read as a verbless sentence, the semantics seem awkward regardless of which noun phrase is considered the subject. In what sense can a wise son be said to be the admonition of the father? Or how can the admonition of the father be a wise son? Various means have been attempted to supply a verb and thus avoid the problems involved in understanding the first line as a verbless sentence. A number of scholars have resorted to emendation, suggesting, for example, that instead of אָב 'father', we should read אָהֵב 'loves' and translate 'a wise son loves admonition'.²⁵ This solution is accepted by the NRSV.²⁶ But other scholars have suggested that the verb שָׁמַע 'hear' from the second line should be understood as elided from the first line.²⁷ The NIV accepts this approach and translates: 'The wise son heeds the admonition of the father, but the scoffer does not listen to rebuke'. Ellipsis neatly solves the problem of the first line, but raises a larger issue: Is it legitimate to understand that a verb that is present in the second line has been elided from the first line? Or, in other words, is it possible that the direction of elision is backwards, rather than forwards? Without the native speaker's knowledge of underlying syntactic structures and permissible patterns of ellipsis, it is impossible to be sure.

We see, then, that elliptical constructions present particular problems for biblical scholars. On the one hand, we might fail to recognize

25. See the similar wording in Prov 12:1a: אָהֵב מוֹסֵר אָהֵב דַּעַת 'The one who loves admonition loves knowledge'. Other emendations have been suggested. One could read אָב, a participle from the otherwise unattested verbal root אָוַב (understood as equivalent to אָהֵב; G. R. Driver, "Problems in 'Proverbs'," *ZAW* 50 [1932]: 144). Another possibility is to emend מוֹסֵר to מוֹסֵר and translate: "a wise son (is one) chastened of (= by) a father" (G. R. Driver, "Hebrew Notes on Prophets and Proverbs," *JTS* 41 [1940]: 174).

26. The NRSV reads: "A wise child loves discipline, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke."

27. Van Leeuwen accepts this solution, describing the verb as "double-duty"; see Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *The Book of Proverbs: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections* (NIB 5; Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 131.

an instance of ellipsis and read the verse incorrectly. This is a greater problem in reading Biblical Hebrew than in reading English, since verbless sentences are fully grammatical in Hebrew. On the other hand, we might assume that ellipsis is present in an instance in which it is syntactically impossible. Without a clear understanding of how ellipsis operates in general and in Biblical Hebrew in particular, we are left only to context and interpretation. When the context is ambiguous or the exegesis difficult, we have no sure means of deciding on a correct reading.

In this paper, I examine ellipsis in biblical poetry from a linguistic point of view.²⁸ Only ellipsis of the verb is considered here, because ellipsis of other items (such as prepositions and negatives) operates differently. My goal is to demonstrate that a linguistic understanding of Biblical Hebrew provides insights into Hebrew syntax that are crucial for exegesis. It is my hope to present the fruits of this analysis in a jargon-free manner apart from the introduction of one new linguistic term.

Before describing the features of ellipsis in biblical poetry, it is important to make explicit the linguistic premises that shape the analysis.²⁹ First, all languages have elliptical constructions, but no language allows ellipsis to occur "promiscuously." By this I mean that no language allows ellipsis to operate in unlimited or unconstrained ways. Instead, every language allows only a discrete set of patterns for ellipsis. These patterns are unconsciously recognized and used by native speakers; they can be identified and described by means of linguistic analysis. Biblicists have tended to operate on the assumption that anything can be deleted anywhere, so long as the result "makes sense" within the context. But this assumption is not supported by linguistic studies of ellipsis.

Second, languages can be grouped into types on the basis of the kinds of patterns that they allow. The patterns of ellipsis in Hebrew are not like those in English, but there are other languages with elliptical constructions like those in Hebrew. Cross-linguistic comparisons provide an important control on our analysis—we do not want to posit patterns or Hebrew that are otherwise unattested among the languages of the world.

Third, the patterns of ellipsis are sensitive to underlying syntactic structure. Or, in other words, the kinds of sentence fragments visible

28. This essay summarizes work currently in progress that provides a complete analysis of elliptical constructions in Biblical Hebrew. I omit here the linguistic argumentation that underlies the analysis.

29. For a linguistic overview of ellipsis, see Shalom Lappin, "The Interpretation of Ellipsis," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Semantic Theory* (ed. Shalom Lappin; Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 145-75.

on the surface reflect underlying structure. This is an important premise that informs the analysis, but not one that I will develop here.

Accepting the linguistic premise that Biblical Hebrew allows specific patterns of ellipsis, our goal must be to identify those particular patterns that are present. It is therefore important that we begin by cataloging and analyzing the instances of verbal ellipsis that are exegetically clear and uncontroversial. Then we can use those insights as a tool for examining the syntactical parameters of exegetically difficult verses.

2.0. BASIC FACTS ABOUT VERBAL ELLIPSIS IN BIBLICAL HEBREW

2.1. *Universal Features of Ellipsis*

What, then, do we know about verbal ellipsis in Biblical Hebrew poetry? We must begin with an understanding of three universal conditions that must be present for ellipsis to operate. First, ellipsis operates on coordinate structures. In the English examples in (2), we can see that the sentences are coordinate and marked with the conjunction *and*. In biblical poetry, verbal ellipsis similarly requires coordinate lines. In the majority of cases, the two lines are joined with the conjunction *waw* 'and', as in (6):

(6) Ps 88:13

וַיִּדַע בְּחֹשֶׁךְ פְּלִאָה
וַצַּדִּיקוֹתַי בְּאֶרֶץ נִשְׁיָהּ

Are your wonders made known in darkness,
and your righteousness in the land of oblivion
= and your righteousness in the land of oblivion [*is made known*]?

However, in the syntactically identical verse in (7), *waw* does not occur. Instead, the lines are asyndetically coordinate, that is, they are coordinate without an overt conjunction.

(7) Ps 88:12

וְיִסְפַּר בְּקִבְרֵי חַסְדֶּיךָ
שְׁמוֹנָתֶיךָ בְּאַבְדּוֹן

Is your faithfulness recounted in the grave,
your constancy in Abaddon _____?
= your constancy in Abaddon [*is recounted*]?

The requirement that ellipsis must operate on coordinate structures is important since it tells us, for example, that we should not expect verbal ellipsis to occur from a main clause to a subordinate clause.

And that is in fact the case in Biblical Hebrew. We do not find sentences such as:

(8) Unattested sentence (ellipsis from main clause to subordinate clause):

Zion by justice shall be redeemed (הִפְדָּהּ),
so that (לְמַעַן) her repentant ones by righteousness [*might be*
redeemed (יִפְדֶּה)]

Verbal ellipsis is possible between two lines (a bicolon) within biblical verse only when together the lines form a coordinate sentence with each line comprising a clausal conjunct; not all bicola meet this requirement.

A second universal requirement of ellipsis is that the two halves of the coordinate sentence must correspond syntactically, though languages differ in the nature of the correspondence. In Biblical Hebrew, this requirement usually means that the constituents in the two lines match exactly. For example, in Prov 26:14, repeated here as (9), the constituents in the first line are subject, verb, prepositional phrase. The constituents in the second line are subject, (elided) verb, prepositional phrase. The constituents of the two lines match exactly, and thus ellipsis of the verb is possible.

(9) Prov 26:14

הִדְלֹת תִּסּוּב עַל־צִירָהּ
וְעֵצֶל _____ עַל־מִטָּתוֹ :

The door turns upon its hinge(s),
and a sluggard [*turns*] upon his bed.

Order of constituents:	Subject	Verb	Prepositional Phrase
	Subject	[<i>verb</i>]	Prepositional Phrase

Under certain specifiable syntactic conditions, verbal ellipsis is possible in Hebrew when the constituent structures do not match exactly.³⁰ However, in order to simplify the discussion here, I will

30. Two conditions w.11 be mentioned briefly. First, within a finite clause an adverbial phrase in one line may correspond to a prepositional phrase in the other line. For example, Ps 121:6: הָיָמָה הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לֹא־יִכָּבֵה / וַיָּרֶחַ כֹּל־יְלֵהּ, 'By day the sun will not strike you / and the moon [*will not strike you*] by night'. The noun יָמָם, (daily') with the adverbial suffix and the prepositional phrase כֹּל־יְלֵהּ ('in the night') are parallel adverbial modifiers of the verb. Second, the constituent structures sometimes match only as far as a clause boundary within the line. For example, in Mic 7:1, the existential predicate אֵין has been elided from the beginning of the second line: אֵין / אֲשָׁכּוּל לְאֹכּוּל / בְּבוּרָה אֹתָהּ נַפְשִׁי 'There is no grape cluster to eat [*there is no*] ripe fig [which] my soul desires'. The two lines match only at the highest syntactic level; they differ in that the subject in the first line (אֲשָׁכּוּל) is modified by a infinitival clause, whereas the subject in the second line (בְּבוּרָה) is modified by an unmarked relative clause.

examine only instances in which the constituent structures of both lines match precisely.

A third universal requirement of ellipsis is that the verb that is present and the verb that is deleted must be lexically identical. However, the other ways in which the two verbs must be identical depend upon the individual language. In Biblical Hebrew, this requirement means that the two verbs agree with respect to stem (or, *binyan*)—for example, it would be impossible to have an active Qal form of the verb in one line and a passive Niphal in the other. However, the two verbs need not be identical in person, gender, or number. Example (10) illustrates disagreement in gender:³¹

(10) Jer 48:45

בִּי־אֵשׁ יֵצֵא מִחֶשְׁבֹן
וְלִהְבֵּהּ _____ מִבֵּית סִיחֹן

For a fire (m.) went out (m.) from Heshbon
and a flame (f.) _____ from the house of Sihon.

The subject in the first line, אֵשׁ 'fire', is masculine; the subject in the second line, לִהְבֵּהּ 'flame', is feminine. Verbal ellipsis is possible even though the verb in the first line is masculine and the elided verb in the second line would be feminine.³²

With an understanding of these three universal features of ellipsis, we turn to the specific features of ellipsis found in Biblical Hebrew.

2.2. Distinctively Hebrew Features of Ellipsis

2.2.1. Direction of Ellipsis

The first feature relates to the direction of ellipsis, since languages differ in this respect. All of the Hebrew examples we have looked at thus far (except for one potential reading of our "test case" in [5]) involve forwards ellipsis, that is, the verb is present in the first line and is deleted from the second line. Although verbal ellipsis in Biblical Hebrew usually occurs in the second line, ellipsis may occur in the first line, a situation known as backwards ellipsis. An example with two instances of backwards ellipsis is given in (11):

31. As noted by Edward L. Greenstein, "How Does Parallelism Mean?" in *A Sense of Text: The Art of Language in the Study of Biblical Literature* (JQR Supplement; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 46-47.

32. For an example in which the verb that is present and the verbs that are deleted do not agree in person, see (11) below. The verb that is present is first-person plural; the deleted verbs would be third-person plural. For an example in which the verb that is present and the verb that is deleted do not agree in number or gender, see (1) above.

(11) Ps 20:8

אֱלֹהֵי בָרָכָב _____
 וְאֱלֹהֵי בָסוּסִים _____
 וְאִנְחֵנוּ בְּשֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ נִזְכִּיר :

Some on chariot(s) _____,
 and some on horses _____,
 but we on the name of the LORD our God will call.³³

Here there are three clauses, but only the last clause has a verb; the verb has been elided backwards to the first and second clauses.³⁴

2.2.2. Position of the Verb

The second feature of ellipsis in Biblical Hebrew involves the position of the verb in the clause.³⁵ Ellipsis may occur when the verb is in initial, medial, or final position with respect to the other clausal constituents.³⁶ The most common position is initial position, as illustrated in (12):

(12) Isa 17:13

וְנִדְדָּף כַּמֶּזֶץ הָרִים לְפָנֵי־רוּחַ
 וְ_____ כַּגִּלְגֵּל לְפָנֵי סוּפָה :

They will be chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind,
 and _____ like whirling dust before the storm.

33. The Hiphil of זָכַר usually means "to mention," "to make known," "to profess, praise" (*HALOT* 1:170. In this verse, the verb has been translated "call" (e.g., NJ PSV, NJB) or "trust" (e.g., KJV, NIV). Other translations follow the LXX rendering μεγαλυσθη—σόμεθα and translate "boast" (RSV) or "take pride" (NRSV). The lexical semantics of נִזְכִּיר do not affect the syntactic analysis.

34. This example also illustrates an important point: a poetic line may, or may not, be coterminous with a clausal conjunct. Ellipsis, however, is sensitive to the syntax of the clause and not to the poetic line. In many cases, the boundaries of the clause and the line are identical. 1 Ps 20:8, the first poetic line contains two clauses (each with an elided verb); the second line contains a single clause.

35. This analysis adapts the work of Robert R. van Oirsouw, *The Syntax of Coordination* (Croom Helm Linguistics Series; London: Croom Helm, 1987). Van Oirsouw identifies the positions where deletion can take place as follows: (1) initial sites (including instances in which one constituent precedes the deleted constituent), (2) final deletion sites, and (3) verb deletion sites. However, in Biblical Hebrew, a separate category is not needed for verbal deletion. But Hebrew does require the identification of medial position as a separate category, because the syntactic patterns of ellipsis for medial verbs are more highly constrained than those for verbs in initial position. With these two modifications, van Oirsouw's theory describes the Hebrew data with ease.

36. Verbal ellipsis sometimes occurs in combination with ellipsis of other constituents. For example, initial verbal ellipsis co-occurs with final ellipsis of a prepositional phrase in Mic 7:14: _____ צֹאן נַחֲלֵתְךָ / עֹמֵד בְּשֹׁכֶטְךָ / Shepherd your people with your staff, / [*shepherd*] the sheep of your inheritance [*with your staff*].⁷

Medial ellipsis was illustrated above in (3).³⁷ Final ellipsis was illustrated above in (1).

Examining the position of the verb together with the direction of ellipsis, we discover an important correlation. When the verb is in initial or medial position, the direction of ellipsis is always forwards. However, when the verb is in final position, the direction of ellipsis may be either forwards, as we saw above in (1), or backwards, as in (11). In other words, backwards ellipsis only occurs when the verb is in final position. This observation about backwards ellipsis corresponds to what we know about ellipsis cross-linguistically. Languages that allow backwards ellipsis, such as Russian and Japanese, do so from final position.³⁸ The positional restriction on backwards ellipsis in biblical poetry is not a result of limited data, but rather is in accord with cross-linguistic patterns of ellipsis.

2.2.3. Order of Constituents

A third unique feature of ellipsis in Hebrew involves the order of constituents. Unlike English, Hebrew allows ellipsis to take place when the order of constituents is chiasmic, although chiasmic order is less common.

In such cases, the verb is usually deleted from the initial position, as in (13):

37. Medial ellipsis refers to sentences in which the verb is neither in initial position nor in final position. Biblical Hebrew usually has two or three clausal constituents in a line; rarely, there are four. Using a representative corpus of 1,225 lines, O'Connor identifies only 25 lines (2%) that have four constituents within a single sentence (O'Connor, *Hebrew Verse Structure*, 355). In elliptical constructions involving four constituents within a clausal conjunct, medial ellipsis would describe ellipsis of the second or third constituent.

38. For example, Japanese allows only backwards gapping of verbs, and verbs are always final in the clause: *John-ga raisu-o Bill-ga sushi-a tabeta* 'John rice ____ and Bill sushi ate' (van Oirsouw, *The Syntax of Coordination*, 134). Russian allows both forwards and backwards gapping of verbs: (a) forwards gapping: *Ja č'itaju naučnuju stat'ju, a on detektiv* 'I read a scientific article, and he ____ a detective novel' or *Ja naučnuju stat'ju čitaju, a on detektiv* 'I a scientific article read, and he a detective novel ____'; (b) backwards gapping: *Ja naučnuju stat'ju, a on detektiv čitaet* 'I a scientific article ____, and he a detective novel read' (van Oirsouw, *The Syntax of Coordination*, 122). A comparison of the Russian and Japanese patterns of verb gapping is particularly instructive. Russian allows either forwards or backwards gapping. However, backwards gapping occurs only when the verb is in final position in its clause. When the verb is not in final position, only forwards gapping is possible. In contrast, Japanese allows only backwards gapping. As in Russian, backwards gapping in Japanese is possible because the verb is in final position in the clause. However, the fact that Japanese only allows backwards gapping of the verb is not predictable from the cross-linguistic evidence; Russian verbs in final position may gap either backwards or forwards. Ugaritic is similar to Hebrew in that it allow backwards ellipsis only from final position in the clause; see my article "Patterns of Verbal Ellipsis in Ugaritic," *UF* 31 (1999-2000): 333-72.

(15) Ps 49:2-5

Ps 49:2

Hear this, all you peoples;
give ear, all inhabitants of the world

שְׁמַעוּ-זֹאת כָּל-הָעַמִּים
הֲאִזְנִינוּ כָּל-יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ:

Ps 49:3

both low and high,
rich and poor together.

גַּם-בְּנֵי אָדָם גַּם-בְּנֵי-אִישׁ
יַחַד עָשִׂיר וְאֶבְיֹן:

Ps 49:4

My mouth shall speak wisdom;
the murmuring of my intellect [*shall*
speak] understanding.

פִּי יִדְבַר חֲכָמוֹת
וְהִגִּיתָ לִּבִּי _____ תְּבוּנוֹת:

Ps 49:5

I will incline my ear to a proverb;
I will solve my riddle to the music of the
harp.

אָטָה לְמִשְׁלַל אָזְנִי
אֶפְתָּח בְּכִנּוּר חִידָתִי:

We are now able to observe that ellipsis in Ps 49:4 is syntactically possible. In an elliptical interpretation, the two lines are coordinate and match syntactically—subject, verb, object. The subject of the first line is masculine, the subject of the second line feminine, but we have seen that this is not an obstacle to verbal ellipsis. The verb is in medial position and the direction of ellipsis is forwards. All of these features are in accord with our description of ellipsis in Biblical Hebrew.

Why, then, has ellipsis not been understood to operate in this verse? The reason, I believe, lies first in our tendency to read the exact words on the page, unless we are compelled to do otherwise. In this case, it is *possible* to understand the second line as a verbless sentence, with the result that we interpret the two lines as drawing a contrast between speech and thought. But an examination of the broader context of the verse suggests that reading the second line as a verbless sentence may not be the best option.

Instead, this first section of the psalm plays upon the complementary actions of hearing and speaking. At the beginning of the stanza, vv. 2 and 3 are a command to everyone to hear. At the end of the stanza, v. 5 describes the fact that the psalmist himself will hear the proverb that he will pose in the remainder of the psalm. In v. 4 at the center of the stanza, the psalmist characterizes his own speech which will be presented in the remainder of the poem. In the same way that his mouth speaks wisdom, the murmuring of his heart speaks understanding. The first line focuses on the mouth as the locus of wise speech; the second line on the heart (or, intellect) as the source of insightful speech.⁴⁰

40. The use of a nominal form of the root הגה with a verb of speaking is not an impediment to this interpretation, even though there are no instances of a nominal form of הגה attested as the subject of a speech verb. In fact, the only place where an explicit

The example of Ps 49:4 cautions us to examine whether a sentence that looks like a verbless clause from the perspective of surface syntax might, in fact, be an elliptical construction. Because the semantics of the bicolon are not always decisive, if ellipsis is syntactically possible, we must look to the broader discourse context. A more explicit understanding of the patterns of ellipsis will help us to remember to consider the possibility that ellipsis has occurred.

3.2. *Prov 13:1*

Our second test case was Prov 13:1, repeated here as (16):

(16) Prov 13:1

בֶּן חָכָם מוֹסֵר אָב
וְלִזְלָתָא לֹא שָׁמַע גְּעֵרָה :

The wise son the admonition of the father,
verbless clause = the wise son is the admonition of the father
verbal ellipsis = the wise son [*heeds*] the admonition of the father.
 but the scoffer does not heed rebuke.

This verse bears some features that make it a candidate for ellipsis. If we consider the first line to be elliptical, then the two lines have the same constituents in the same order—subject, verb, object—and the lines are explicitly coordinated with the conjunction *waw*. However, the verb is in medial position in the second line and backwards ellipsis is attested elsewhere in Biblical Hebrew only from final position. Backwards ellipsis from nonfinal position is not a grammatical syntactic construction in Biblical Hebrew, a grammatical restriction that, as we have seen, accords with cross-linguistic generalizations.

Another argument against backwards ellipsis in this verse involves the fact that the verb in the second line of Prov 13:1 is negated. Understanding this case as having backwards ellipsis would mean that the verb gaps backward, but the negative particle does not. This is an entirely unattested syntactic pattern in Biblical Hebrew, regardless of the position of the verb and the direction of ellipsis.⁴¹

verb is used with such a nominal form as subject occurs in Job 37:2, where the verb **וַיִּזְכַּר** is used with the noun **וַיִּזְכַּר**: 'the rumbling goes out from his mouth'. However, we do have instances where the verb **וַיִּזְכַּר** has a subject that is an organ of speech (e.g., the mouth [Ps 37:30], the tongue [Ps 71:24], the lips [Job 27:4], and the palate [Prov 8:7]). These collations of organs of speech with the verb **וַיִּזְכַּר** suggest that the root does not refer exclusively to thought processes, even though this meaning does seem to be present in some passages (e.g., in Prov 15:28 and 24:2, where the verb seems to refer to activity that is in contrast to speech). See the discussion in A. Negoit, "וַיִּזְכַּר *hāgāh*," *TDOT* 3:321-24.

41. There are three syntactic patterns of ellipsis involving negation in Biblical Hebrew poetry. In the first pattern, negative plus verb are present in the first line and both

Therefore, we must conclude that verbal ellipsis is not at work in Prov 13:1, even though it would "make sense" in the context and would solve other difficulties. The first line, however difficult, must be read as a verbless clause or emended.⁴²

Backwards ellipsis is the most opaque form of ellipsis for those of us who are native speakers of English, and it is the easiest elliptical structure for us to overlook.⁴³ But if we realize that backwards ellipsis only occurs when the verb is in final position, it becomes much easier to recognize.

Let us consider a final pair of examples. In (17), the Masoretic Text literally reads:

(17) Ps 70:2

אֱלֹהִים לְהַצִּילַנִי
יְהוָה לְעִזְרָתִי חַיְשָׁה

O God, to save me,
O LORD, to help me hurry.

A number of translations and commentators emend Ps 70:2, adding the verb רָצָה 'be pleased' to the first line on the basis of the parallel verse in Ps 40:14, as given in example (18):⁴⁴

negative and verb are elided in the second line (e.g., Ps 1:5); the direction of ellipsis is only forwards. In the second pattern, one line has a verb, the other line has a negative plus elided verb. The direction of ellipsis is usually forwards (e.g., Isa 45:13), but may be backwards from final position (Ps 115:1). In the third pattern, the first line has negative plus verb; the second line has an elided negative plus another verb (e.g., Isa 38:18). The direction of ellipsis is only forwards and the negative must be in initial position in the first clausal conjunct. Elsewhere I examined in detail the patterns of ellipsis involving negation in Biblical Hebrew ("Ellipsis Involving Negation in Biblical Poetry" [paper presented to the "Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew" section of the SBL, 2003]).

42. Michael V. Fox (personal communication) understands the first line as a verbless sentence with "blunt juxtaposition" of the two noun phrases (see also Prov 13:18; 15:15b; 15:33a). In blunt juxtaposition, the precise connection between the two noun phrases that form the verbless clause must be teased out by the reader. In other words, rather than supplying the verb "heeds" from the second line based upon an understanding of the first line as syntactically elliptical, the reader must supply an appropriate verb based upon his/her understanding of the context (see n. 5 above for this distinction). He translates as follows: "a wise son (shows) a father's discipline; while an impudent one does not heed a rebuke."

43. Andersen identifies a number of examples of backwards ellipsis that have often been overlooked, though he does not connect them to the position of the verb. See Francis I. Andersen, "What Biblical Scholars Might Learn from Emily Dickenson," in *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed: Essays in Honour of John E. A. Sawyer* (ed. John Davies, Graham Harvey, and Wilfred Watson; JSOTSup 195; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 52-79.

44. See, for example, Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen* (BKAT 15; 2d ed.; Neukirchenvluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1961), 1:486; and Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, 271. The NRSV

(18) Ps 40:14

קִצְּרָה יְהוָה לְהַצִּילַי
 : יְהוָה לְעֶזְרָתִי דְוִשָׁה

Be pleased, O LORD, to save me,
 O LORD, t help me hurry.

Psalm 70 and Ps 40:14-18 are quite similar, but not identical, in wording, and the relationship between the two is debated.⁴⁵ Whatever the textual relationship of the two psalms, our understanding of the patterns of verba ellipsis provides one additional datum for the problem, namely, the fact that the syntax of Ps 70:2 is perfectly acceptable as it stands: the two lines are asyndetically coordinate, the constituents match, and the verb is elided backwards from final position.⁴⁶ On syntactic rounds, there is no reason to emend the verse.⁴⁷

4.0. CONCLUSIONS

Linguistics assists the biblical scholar in the task of exegesis, but it does so indirectly. By identifying the regular patterns of language in exegetically uncontroversial passages, linguistic analysis helps us to understand the language structures of exegetically difficult passages. Much of linguistic research on Biblical Hebrew will, therefore, not be immediately relevant to exegesis because linguistic analysis must concentrate in the first instance on passages that are syntactically and textually uncontroversial. But without the fruits of linguistic research, we must rely on our own linguistic intuitions based on our knowledge of English (or some other language), rather than Biblical Hebrew.⁴⁸ An

emends, but rearranges the word order in English: "Be pleased, O God, to deliver me. / O LORD, make haste to help me!"

45. Some scholars see Psalm 40 as primary, with vv. 14-18 detached from the psalm and reshaped to make Psalm 70 (e.g., Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* [WBC 19; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1983], 313-14). Some scholars see Psalm 70 as primary, with additional material added to form Psalm 40, or the two psalms may be alternative versions of common poetic material (Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* [WBC 20; Dallas: Word, 1990], 204-6; Gerstenberger, *Psalms*, 169).

46. The NJPSV understands the verb קִצְּרָה as providing the predication for both lines, but moves the verb to the first line for a smoother English translation: "Hasten, O God, to save me; O LORD, to aid me."

47. Dahood accepts the MT consonants on the basis of metrical concerns, but he emends לְהַצִּילַי to emphatic לְהַצִּילַי plus Hiphil imperative so that there is a verb in the first line. He translates: "O God, rescue me! / O Yahweh, make haste to help me!" (Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms 1: 51-100: Introduction, Translation and Notes* [AB 17; Garden City: Doubleday, 1968] 167-68).

48. See n. 14 above.

understanding of the linguistic patterns of Biblical Hebrew also helps us to evaluate whether a text might legitimately be emended as corrupt, or whether emendation on syntactic grounds is ill-advised.

A linguistic understanding of elliptical structures in biblical poetry is particularly important since ellipsis must first be identified and then the sentence fragment must be resolved. Understanding the words that are there crucially depends upon the words that are not. Native speakers have innate linguistic competence in the recognition and resolution of elliptical structures. Biblical scholars must acquire a measure of competence through understanding as much as possible about the linguistic properties of Biblical Hebrew.

As we have seen, native speakers use linguistic knowledge of various sorts for identifying and resolving elliptical constructions. One kind of linguistic knowledge involves semantics, the meanings of words. Another kind of linguistic knowledge involves pragmatics, the uses of words within the context of speaking. A third kind of linguistic knowledge involves the underlying syntactic structures of language and the kinds of elliptical constructions that are allowed.

Biblical scholars are certainly well aware of the need to understand Biblical Hebrew as fully as possible. But as exegetes we have tended to concentrate our efforts upon understanding the meanings of words and their uses, particularly when confronted with intractable exegetical difficulties. This effort is not to be disparaged. By concentrating upon semantics and pragmatics, biblical scholars have made valiant efforts at achieving an important part of what a native speaker of Biblical Hebrew would have known. But semantics and pragmatics are not sufficient. Biblical scholars must also achieve a measure of competence in the syntactic patterns of Biblical Hebrew and, especially, in the patterns of ellipsis.

An understanding of the patterns of ellipsis will not solve every problem in biblical poetry: the semantics and discourse-pragmatics of the bicolon and stanza are also critically important. But without an understanding of which patterns of ellipsis are possible—and which are not—the exegete lacks an essential resource for resolving exegetical difficulties.