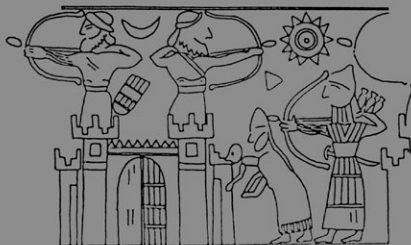


# TOPIC, FOCUS AND FOREGROUND

IN ANCIENT HEBREW NARRATIVES

*Jean-Marc  
Heimerdinger*





**JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT  
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**Jean-Marc Heimerdinger**

Journal for the Study of the Old Testament  
Supplement Series 295



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**Published by Sheffield Academic Press Ltd  
Mansion House  
19 Kingfield Road  
Sheffield S11 9AS  
England**

**Printed on acid-free paper in Great Britain  
by Biddles  
Guildford, Surrey**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

**A catalogue record for this book is available  
from the British Library**

**ISBN 1-84127-014-8**

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## PREFACE

This study has its origin in my PhD dissertation at Reading University, Department of Linguistic Science. The research has been intertwined with so many other events and occupations that there are inevitably many people who, knowingly or unknowingly, have played a part in its formation. I would like to make particular mention of the following.

I would first of all like to gratefully acknowledge the understanding and support of my colleagues at the London Bible College. For the first three years of study, I received financial assistance from the College for which I am thankful.

I have had the good fortune throughout the time of my research of being able to be in contact with the Summer Institute of Linguistics at their headquarters in England. In particular, I should like to thank Dr Ivan Lowe and Dr John Callow whose prompting and encouragement have been of the highest value.

I am most thankful to Dr I. Philippaki-Warburton of Reading University for her help, comprehension and encouragement in her role as supervisor and also to Professor D.A. Wilkins for acting as supervisor for one year in her absence.

On a personal level, special thanks are due to my wife Jenny whose advice and perception have so often helped to clarify and formulate ideas.

Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to two groups of people. First to the many students who have followed my Hebrew courses over the years at London Bible College. It is while reading and studying the Hebrew Bible with them that many of the data were discovered and that a clearer picture of the means of prominence in narratives emerged. Their interest, curiosity and valuable comments have been a constant encouragement. Secondly, my gratitude goes to the still too small group of pioneering scholars who have sought to break the bonds of grammatical tradition and have sought to integrate Hebrew grammar with insights from discourse analysis. Their names and works appear in the bibliography.

## ABBREVIATIONS

### *Linguistic Terms*

A	Adverbial
ADVP	Adverbial Phrase
C	Complement
DFE	Dominant Focal Element
DO	Direct Object
IO	Indirect Object
N	Noun
NP	Noun Phrase
O	Object
P	Predicate
PRO <sup>1</sup>	Pronoun
S	Subject
V	Verb
VP	Verb Phrase

### *Other Terms*

<i>BHS</i>	<i>Biblia hebraica stuttgartensia</i>
<i>GKC</i>	<i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> (ed. E. Kautzsch, revised and trans. A.E. Cowley; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910).

### *Other Nomenclature*

Fronted	An element is fronted when it has been moved to the right without altering the clause initial position of the V.
Forefronted	An element is forefronted when it has been moved in preverbal position and so has become clause initial.

1. In this study the abbreviation is not used with the meaning it has in government-binding theory (i.e. a base-generated S of certain infinitives). It refers to the closed set of items which can be used to substitute for a noun phrase or a noun.

## INTRODUCTION

### 1. *Background to Research*

In the study of Old Hebrew,<sup>1</sup> there have been two important developments over the last 30 years. These form the background and the motivation for the research presented in this work.

The first development is that, since the 1960s or so, the study of Old Hebrew has begun to take account of methods of description and investigation which are those used in modern linguistics. Up to that time descriptive techniques had been fairly unsophisticated and the explanations for grammatical or morphological facts were dominated by historical explanations or by analogies drawn from other Semitic languages. A change took place as Hebraists became dissatisfied with explanations which came exclusively from outside the language itself and sought instead to understand specific linguistic features through a consideration of Old Hebrew as forming a system in its own right, within which there were rules for choosing among different possible units or forms. This new perspective also led progressively to increased attention being directed to the systematic analysis of Old Hebrew linguistic features beyond the limits of the sentence, ranging from the paragraph to the study of a whole discourse. In the field of discourse analysis of Old Hebrew texts, one can perhaps loosely speak of one group of Hebraists working within the context of a developed tagmemic theory, which includes Andersen, Longacre and Dawson. Another group of mainly

1. It is more appropriate to use this designation to refer to the Hebrew found in the Hebrew Bible than the traditional term Biblical Hebrew, or the term Classical Hebrew. This form of Hebrew was used not only for recording the religious writings of the Hebrew scriptures but was more generally the language which the Israelites and Judaeans used in speaking and writing, as the discovery of epigraphical material demonstrates (see, for example, Davies 1991 and Lemaire 1977). One can identify three stratifications of Old Hebrew reflected in the Hebrew Bible and corresponding to the diachronic development of Old Hebrew: Archaic Hebrew (twelfth–tenth century BCE), Classical Hebrew (tenth–sixth century BCE) and Late Hebrew (late sixth–third century BCE).

German biblical scholars such as Richter, Gross and Schneider have developed their own concepts of structural linguistics in their analytical methods. Today, however, it seems correct to say that Longacre's model, fully exploited in his book, *Joseph: A Story of Divine Providence. A Text Theoretical and Textlinguistic Analysis of Genesis 37 and 39–48* (Longacre 1989) has come to dominate the world of Old Hebrew discourse analysis and his conclusions are often accepted without reservations. A book recently published by one of Longacre's followers, David A. Dawson, demonstrates this well. Its aim is to make Longacre's method understandable to the non-specialist, to show why Longacre's approach is better than some others and to apply it to specific texts. Dawson's unreserved acceptance of Longacre's method and conclusions is reflected in his eulogistic tone. In his opinion, Longacre's book containing a discourse analysis of the Joseph's story 'represents the most significant advancement in Hebrew textlinguistics seen to date. It contains much of near-revolutionary value to the student of Classical Hebrew syntax' (Dawson 1994: 56).

The analyses which are set out in the present work contrast radically with Dawson's assessment of Longacre. In fact, they have arisen from a profound disagreement with both Longacre's method and his conclusions. This divergence was prompted by reflection arising from the second significant development in Old Hebrew studies: the so-called 'literary approach' to the texts of the Hebrew Bible.

Indeed, just like the study of the language of the Hebrew Bible, so also the study of biblical narrative has undergone a considerable change over the past thirty years. It has shifted its focus away from a critical study of the texts seen as historical documents, to a study of the narratives as literature. The advent of modern literary criticism (in fiction particularly) led biblical scholars to an ever-increasing appreciation of biblical narratives as literary artefacts which could be understood by precise and expert analyses whose aim was to elucidate the actual literary techniques and devices used by the authors. Numerous literary analyses of Old Hebrew stories have been offered in specialised journals or books.<sup>2</sup> All these various literary approaches have led to the elaboration of a poetics of biblical narratives, that is, a description of the basic devices and components of Old Hebrew stories and the rule

2. A historical survey of the literary approach to the Bible is found in D. Norton (1993: 262-300; 357-88). Among well-known studies are those written by Alter, Bar-Efrat, Gunn and Fewell, Berlin and Sternberg.

governing their use.<sup>3</sup> The features receiving attention are matters such as repeated words or patterns, structuring techniques, anticipatory information, resumptive repetitions, symmetries, stylistic techniques, modes of narration, characterization techniques, the question of point of view and so forth. Working together, these features are clues given to the reader or hearer, which act as prompts in the determination of meaning. They represent nothing less than communicative techniques.

When one turns from the findings of the literary approach to Longacre's analysis and its results, the question which inevitably arises is how it is that none of the devices identified by literary critics are captured by Longacre's text-linguistic analysis. A consultation of Longacre's *Joseph* shows that his conclusions, in spite of their technicalities, are frustratingly rudimentary, explaining very few of the numerous patterns or devices identified by his literary colleagues. One could surmise that this refusal to examine all aspects of language is a deliberate choice: the 'literary' devices could be regarded as belonging to the domain of stylistics and not linguistics. Such a dichotomy, however, has proven not to be valid. Linguists have found that even everyday stories told in conversation display much of the sophistication attributed to artistic prose and that the so-called 'literary' devices are not merely aesthetic or ornamental but perform very distinctive linguistic or pragmatic functions. The very specificity of literary language is being re-examined. Deborah Tannen, for example, bases her book, *Talking Voices*, on the central idea 'that ordinary conversation is made up of linguistic strategies that have been thought quintessentially literary' (1989: 1). Even if one accepts that literary discourse has specific features, from a discourse point of view, stylistic or rhetorical evidence is no different from any other kind of linguistic evidence. As a result, it is to be expected that a discourse approach should be able to account at least for some of these features.

An explanation which can be offered for the absence of any linguistic account of the literary devices is that it is the method of analysis itself which is inadequate. This is the conclusion one is forced towards when, starting with a thorough familiarity with the biblical stories and an appreciation of the richness of its technique, one reads Longacre's

3. A. Berlin defines poetics as 'an inductive science that seeks to abstract the general principles of literature from many different manifestations of those principles as they occur in actual literary texts ... Poetics strive to write a grammar, as it were, of literature' (1983: 15).

building-block analysis of the Joseph story (1989: 209-310) or tries to reconcile his information-based view of foreground-background with the whole range of saliency devices available for story-telling.

It will be shown in the course of this study that it is, in fact, the overall notion of foreground-background, based as it is on the nature of information contained in clauses, which poses a problem. An artistic and visual metaphor will help to identify the problem better. Grounding by level of information as proposed by Longacre may be compared to the drawing of a picture in black and white. Foreground clauses provide the contour shape of the object, and the pragmatic weighting of information from background to foreground is similar to the light and shade applied to the sketch. Through contrast and the casting of clear-cut shadows, this weighting throws the texture and contours of the object into sharp relief and makes it stand out from the background. In contrast, the view of foregrounding which is derived from literary studies is not one of a picture in which things are made to stand out, but rather one which has the function of creating centres of interest. A picture depicting a scene which lacks a centre of interest remains dull. Through selective illumination, the artist, as a manipulator of light, must succeed in concentrating the viewer's attention on one or more specific areas of the picture. Metaphorically, this is what happens in Old Hebrew stories. Foregrounding, or the assignment of saliency, may be broadly compared to a paintbrush operation resulting in some of the narrative material being brought to the attention of the reader.

One of the concerns of this study has been the identification of some of the main linguistic mechanisms which contribute to this kind of foregrounding. For this purpose, it was thought that the best way to proceed was first to understand better the pragmatic articulations (topic-comment; presupposition-focus) in the clause and secondly to find out the role these articulations may have in foregrounding. As Longacre's theory is centered upon the narrative verbal clause, which he sees as having a foregrounding function, the research was circumscribed to an analysis of the two main types of third person verbal clauses (vayyiqtol clause and NP + qatal clause) which function in close cooperation in narratives. In the last chapter of the work other analytical categories, sociolinguistic and cognitive in particular, are applied.

An additional incentive for this research, this one more peripheral, must be mentioned. It has to do with the methods used and conclusions reached in many of the modern linguistic analyses of Old Hebrew texts.

Overall, these studies might be characterized as abundant in formal analyses but somewhat skimpy on meaning.<sup>4</sup> A good justification for describing Old Hebrew through the analyses of forms and their distributions might be found in the fact that such methods provide an objective entry point into the understanding of a language of which there are no native speakers. However, one of their major drawbacks is that, in the end, what is drawn out of the inventory of the forms is a 'formal meaning', that is meaning described in terms of relationship between items in a complex of relations. Other kinds of meanings (for example pragmatic meanings), of which there is so much in narrative texts, are left out. The descriptive studies of forms and constructions are of value since they represent systematic and rigorous inventories of specific linguistic phenomena. They sort out items and classify them, giving a clearer picture of the linguistic material at hand in Old Hebrew. But one has to remember that it is not syntactic forms and construction types on their own which produce meaning in natural language understanding.

A re-examination of the notion of foregrounding and its mechanisms, together with a concern for meaning, necessitated that new analytical tools should be used and tested to study Old Hebrew texts. These tools are not used only to highlight the problems arising from Longacre's view of foregrounding applied to Old Hebrew texts, but also, more positively, to offer new perspectives and show new directions of research, using notions not employed so far in Old Hebrew studies and exploring areas not yet investigated (such as the role of the pragmatic presupposition/non-presupposition distinction on elements of the clause, or cognitive activation). To this end, an inductive method of investigation has been chosen intentionally and the approach deliberately leans towards the discussion of specific examples. It is hoped that this will serve to demonstrate how these new analytical notions can be successfully applied.

## 2. Procedure

In order to examine the notion of prominence accurately, it will be necessary to analyse the clause from a pragmatic point of view. It has already been indicated that this study would take as its point of

4. I have in mind the distributional analyses of Schneider (1985), Talstra (1983), Richter (1980) and Niccacci (1990), and also the functionally-oriented studies of Gross (1987).

departure the two pragmatic articulations of topic–comment and presupposition–focus. These two articulations belong to four inter-related sets of categories that are present in what has been called the information structure of a sentence (Halliday 1967). The latter concept can be explained in the following way. Information structure is the component of a language in which propositions as conceptual representations of state of affairs undergo pragmatic organization according to the utterance contexts in which these states of affairs are to be communicated. In particular, the structure of a clause reflects a speaker's assumptions about the hearer's state of knowledge and consciousness at the time of an utterance. The connection between speaker assumptions and the formal organization of the sentence is governed by rules of grammar, in a grammatical component called information structure. As information structure deals with the way a speaker tailors an utterance to meet the particular needs of the intended hearer or receiver, it reflects the speaker's hypothesis about the hearer's assumptions and beliefs and it is concerned with the form and structure of utterances in relation to the assumed mental states of speakers and hearers.

Four interconnected categories can be identified in the information structure of a clause.

The first set of categories comprises the presupposition and pragmatic assertion which have to do with the speaker's assumptions about the hearer's state of knowledge and awareness at the time of an utterance. The presupposition is a set of propositions that the speaker assumes the hearer already knows and takes for granted. The assertion, on the other hand, is the proposition expressed by a sentence, that the hearer is expected to know as a result of hearing the sentence uttered.

The second set of categories is identifiability and activation. A referent is identifiable when a shared representation already exists in the speaker's and hearer's minds at the time of the utterance. Activation has to do with the changes the representation of a given referent undergoes in the development of discourse.

The third category is the topic of a clause. The topic is the discourse referent which the proposition expressed in the sentence is about.

The fourth category is the focus of a clause. The focus is the element of information whereby the assertion differs from the presupposition. It is the element that cannot be taken for granted at the time of speech, the element that permits shared and not yet shared knowledge to be differentiated from each other.

The analyses which follow examine the relationship between the structure of narrative clauses and the linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts in which these sentences are used as units of propositional information. It assesses the range of options that the grammar allows for expressing propositional contents in a variety of grammatical forms and under varying discourse circumstances.

In the last chapter, yet another type of assumptions is examined. These have to do with the general knowledge of life shared by speakers and hearers and with their common expectations expressed linguistically in specific knowledge structures. Speakers can exploit these structures in order to highlight some specific information.

All these devices have been left insufficiently explored in Old Hebrew studies. A few studies, however, can be found which are concerned with the question of prominence understood in terms of foreground-background. Before launching into the analyses, it will be useful to briefly outline some of the explanations and theories that have been offered by Hebraists, particularly explanations of verbal forms that are rooted in discourse considerations. Additionally, discussions on the way the Hebrew verbal clause should be defined need to be considered as well.

### 3. *Previous Relevant Discourse Research*

The main peculiarity of the verbal system, in the Old Hebrew classical period especially, is that the two forms *qatal* and *yiqtol* can be used preceded by the proclitic *waw* ('and') when the verb occurs in a clause initial position. The prefix form *yiqtol* with proclitic *waw* has the form *vayyiqtol*, the suffix form *qatal* with proclitic *waw* has the form *veqatal*. As a result, four verbal forms, *qatal*, *vayyiqtol*, *yiqtol*, *veqatal*, are central to the verbal system.<sup>5</sup> Scholars, however, do not agree on the meaning these forms express.<sup>6</sup> Opinions range from a description of Old Hebrew as a typical example of a tenseless language<sup>7</sup> to the other extreme claim that 'the verbal system of biblical Hebrew does not mark

5. For a recent study, see Revell (1989a: 1-13).

6. Leslie McFall (1982) wrote a thorough survey of the various explanatory theories offered until the 1950s. Waltke and O'Connor (1990: 455-75) provide a good account of more contemporary explanations.

7. Siedl (1971: 7) asserts that every analysis of a tense system in Semitic languages must start from the fact that the Semitic tense is simply not a tense.

aspect' and that 'the ascription of aspect without tense to Hebrew must be considered as having had its day'.<sup>8</sup> These explanations fall into three categories: tense, aspect and mixed theory. Whichever theory is advocated, the claims are always asserted unequivocally and with a striking confidence, as if no disagreement or doubt existed.<sup>9</sup> However, it is not so much the temporal or aspectual meanings of the verbal forms which of relevance here, but rather other types of explanations which are discourse-based.<sup>10</sup> Among studies made, Longacre's work must be singled out as a more thorough attempt at providing coherent explanations of the Hebrew verb using a well-defined methodology. His approach will be examined in detail separately in Chapter 2. Here other studies will be summarized.

Kustár's study (1972) may be described as providing the first pragmatic insights, however crude, into the use of the verbal forms in discourse. Kustár seeks primarily to explain the use of qatal and yiqtol. He rejects the temporal explanations of Bauer, the action categories of S.R. Driver and the aspectual categories of Rundgren. Explanations must combine aspect and action together. Qatal and yiqtol have an aspectual meaning inasmuch as they represent the way the speaker envisages the action. An action may be viewed by a speaker as 'determining' that is as being the starting point, the motive, the purpose, the consequence or outcome of another action. Then it is encoded in a qatal verbal form. Alternatively, an action may be seen as 'determined' (1972: 55). It depends exclusively on the view and the judgment of the speaker, which actions he views as determining and which as determined.

Kustár does not expand his analysis of the notions of 'determining' and 'determined', but his description reminds one of the foreground-background distinction, although the terminology is not used. Qatal clauses would describe facts or events disengaged from the flow of

8. Zevit 1988: 26.

9. A more systematic examination of the counter-examples would cause the number of peremptory statements made by scholars to be reduced. McFall (1982) lists a number of exceptions to the tense theory in Appendix 1, p. 187-89; counter-examples for the aspectual theory are given in his critical analysis of Ewald's theory (1982: 35, 50-56).

10. It will become clear when we consider Longacre's theory that discourse explanations of the verbal forms lead almost inevitably to a primarily temporal understanding of the Old Hebrew verbal system. Longacre writes of the *vayyiqtol* form: '... this form is historically descended from an archaic preterite' (1992a: 179).

action and expressing presuppositions, causes, purposes, recapitulations and evaluations. *Yiqtol* expresses actions resulting from these facts. As for the *vayyiqtol* and *veqatal* forms, Kustár rejects the idea that the forms with *waw* represent a mere grammatical extension by which a new meaning is produced (1972: 32). The difference between *yiqtol* and *vayyiqtol* is not semantic but syntactic. The *waw* in *vayyiqtol* and *veqatal* indicates a connection between clauses and has no temporal value. The verbal forms with *waw* are used when the speaker wishes to underline the close connection of sentences and to construct series of thoughts and actions (1972: 29, 40).

Kustár's hypothesis was a novel one; unfortunately it was not further investigated by scholars. But we have here in an embryonic form an interesting reflection on the pragmatic role of the *waw* as a clause connector and on the grammatical coding of pragmatic choices made by the speaker.

F.I. Andersen (1974) has been a pioneer in using discourse analytical principles in the study of the Old Hebrew sentence.<sup>11</sup> Examining the formal features of the prose of the Pentateuch, he notes that clause types and verbal forms have a discourse function. The chains of *vayyiqtol* clauses constitute the main building blocks of the discourse. Other clause types (subject-predicate clauses, for example) are most of the time situated at the margins of *vayyiqtol* clause clusters: their function is to indicate the boundaries of these clusters. Thus, clearly delimited episodes or paragraphs can be identified. The non-*vayyiqtol* clauses mark either episode onset, interruption or close out; they are circumstantial clauses.

Givón (1977) associates discourse phenomena with types of clauses and word order in the clauses. Verbal clauses have distinct discourse functions. Those using the imperfect verbal form,<sup>12</sup> have a continuity

11. This study was preceded by an analysis of the royal inscription on the Moabite stele from a discourse perspective (1966). The study is relevant to Old Hebrew as the language of the inscription is a closely related dialect of Canaanite. Andersen discovered that sentences describing the actions of King Omri use the *waw* consecutive, whereas his other various achievements, such as building operations, are reported in general with different verbal forms. The clause patterns create distinct groupings of clauses which can be called 'paragraphs'.

12. Givón uses 'imperfect' in an unusual way. The term designates a combination of three different forms: the Imperfect proper used mainly with future meaning, the Jussive (imperative of the third person) and the *vayyiqtol* form. Although the three forms are identical for many verbs, they do differ in a number of cases.

function: they express the continuity of the same subject. In realis clauses they present in-sequence, punctual events, and advance the storyline. They have a characteristic VS order. Anteriority clauses interrupt the chronological flow of events and so do not advance the storyline. These 'out-of-sequence' clauses use the perfect form of the verb. They describe events which, in real time, took place earlier than the time reached at that point by the storyline. Anterior clauses have a SV order, having an element (subject, object, prepositional phrase) placed before the verb. As for non-verbal clauses, copular clauses represent states, do not advance the action and so are SV most of the time. In participial clauses the 'verb' is used as a noun in the majority of cases and so the clauses do not normally advance the storyline. It has usually a SV order.

Finally, in his study of the verbal system, Niccacci (1990) makes a meticulous use of the theoretical model created by the German linguist Harald Weinreich (1977).<sup>13</sup> It had been previously applied to Old Hebrew by Wolfgang Schneider (1974, 1982: sixth edn). Niccacci makes an initial distinction between narrative and discourse<sup>14</sup> and identifies primary and secondary verbal forms in each group. The primary verbal forms are *vayyiqtol* in narrative and *yiqtol* in discourse.<sup>15</sup> The secondary forms are *qatal* in narrative and *qatal* as well as *veqatal* in discourse. Niccacci then carefully studies the distribution of forms

13. Viewing language as a means of communication, Weinreich considers that to give an account of the syntax of a language is first to distinguish between language items which belong directly to the communication situation (hearer-speaker) and those which are not directly related to the communication. Thus for example, verbal forms can be classified as either referring directly to the communication situation (present, perfect and future) or referring to what lies outside this situation (simple past, pluperfect, conditional). Weinreich calls this distinction 'linguistic attitude'. The two other distinctions are: (A) Linguistic perspective, with its three levels: 1. retrieved information (flashback); 2. degree zero (level of the story); 3. anticipated information (disclosure); (B) Emphasis, with two levels: 1. foreground; 2. background.

14. In narrative, the third person is used as it deals with persons or events which are not present or current in the relationship involving writer-reader. Discourse in which the speaker addresses the listener directly is subdivided into 'discourse' and 'comment'. Comment occurs 'when the writer holds up the story in order to relate his reflection on the events narrated or to define them in some way' (1990: 33-34).

15. Schneider (1985: 48) had reached the same conclusion: 'Imperfekt und Imperfekt consecutivum sind die Haupt-Tempora.'

and of their positioning in texts. I shall focus here only on what Niccacci has to say about narrative texts. Vayyiqtol is used to narrate an event and chains of vayyiqtol verb clauses constitute the foreground of a narrative. Niccacci observes that in narrative a qatal verb is never clause initial and so the qatal clause has always a [x-qatal] order; x may be a conjunction or a particle in the case of a retrospective qatal or it can be a nominal or an adverbial element. Niccacci examines particularly the [waw-x-qatal] clause and how it functions within a chunk of text (1990: 36-41). The kind of information conveyed by the [waw-x-qatal] clause depends on its place in the narrative and on the types of clause which either precede or follow it. When it occurs at the very beginning, it reports retrospective information, recalling information given earlier. The sequence of clauses is: (1) [waw-x-qatal] + (2) [vayyiqtol], and their functions are: (1) antecedent information + (2) beginning of narrative. When the [waw-x-qatal] clause is non-initial, it interrupts the narrative flow to communicate various kinds of background or peripheral information such as antecedent circumstance (flashback), a simultaneous event, contrast, or circumstance of following vayyiqtol (1990: 64-66).

Another kind of qatal clause has the order [ve-qatal]; it interrupts the vayyiqtol chains in order to also impart background information, namely a repeated action, when used together with a [waw-x-yiqtol] clause type. A last type of clause, [x-qatal], expresses emphasis (1990: 69-71).<sup>16</sup> Finally a nominal clause (verbless clause) provides the background information of a simultaneous event (1990: 65).

Niccacci's study seems to demonstrate that, with a limited number of forms, the verbal system creates meaning through (a) the disposition of formal elements in clauses; (b) the combination of clause types in the text; (c) the particular positions of these clauses in the text. This highly formal description of the verbal system provides an initial classification of the material which is useful. It is arguable, however, whether this kind of formal classification can also lead to entirely satisfactory explanations. Niccacci identifies patterns, combinations of clause patterns and position of patterns in a narrative, but the semantic or pragmatic explanations of these formal arrangements are reduced to a few

16. Niccacci is inconsistent here as he classifies this clause later (p. 71) in the group [waw-x-qatal].

functions. Such a classification may provide a starting point for pragmatic functions, but it needs also to be developed and refined. Some new explanatory parameters need also to be added.

#### 4. *The Verbal Clause: Syntactic Aspects*

Two kinds of clauses use a subject-predicate construction: the verbal and the verbless clause. In a verbless or nominal<sup>17</sup> clause the predicate has no overt verb form.<sup>18</sup> A verbal clause has a predicate containing an overt verb form. But the presence of a verb is not always seen by Old Hebrew grammarians as indicative of the nature of the clause.

##### a. *Defining the Verbal Clause*

There is still a difference of opinion as to which criteria should be selected to classify a clause as verbal. Some consider that the decisive criterion is the nature of the initial element in the clause.<sup>19</sup> In using this rule, they follow the approach of Arab grammarians who traditionally have called 'nominal clause' any clause which begins with the subject (noun or pronoun) and verbal clause a clause which begins with a verb. Niccacci writes: 'The following definition, which follows the model of Arabic grammarians, is better suited to Hebrew syntax than the generally accepted definition: a verbal clause begins with a verb, a noun clause begins with a noun' (1990: 23). He complicates the classification by calling a noun followed by a verb a 'complex noun clause'. Similarly, Schneider considers that not only the clause without a verb, but also the clause which begins with a noun (even when a finite verb

17. Most Hebraists use the designation nominal clause to refer to the verbless clause. For GKC (par. 140e), any sentence which has a noun or its equivalent (a participle) as subject or predicate is a nominal sentence. Joüon and Muraoka (1991: 562 n. 2) would prefer the term 'non-verbal clause' but decide to use the conventional nomenclature, which, they claim, accommodate more readily the participle as predicate. See also Blau (1976: 85; par 58.2). The traditional term 'nominal clause' will be used here too, but it is important to note that the predicate of a nominal clause is not necessarily a noun.

18. The nominal clause is a construction consisting of the juxtaposition of a subject with a noun or a pronoun, an adjective, an adverb, a prepositional phrase, a participle used as noun or an infinitive used as noun.

19. R. Meyer (1966: 72), D. Michel (1960: 182-84), Schneider (1985) and Niccacci (1990) hold this view.

follows) belong to the group of nominal clause (1985: 160, par. 44.1.2.3).

One important consequence of this perspective, which is also a significant drawback, is that the word orders S-V (S-P in a verbless clause) and V-S are each respectively and exclusively bound to one particular kind of clause. The order S-V will always be found in a nominal clause. This prohibits an adequate account of the use and function of word order at discourse level in the verbal clause. The correlation created between word order and clause type leads to explanations based on clause types only and excludes a proper study of the pragmatics of word order.

The choice of the positional criterion of an element to determine the nature of a clause comes from the Arabic grammatical tradition and may reflect justifiable linguistic intuition in Arabic.<sup>20</sup> But Arab grammarians never took the notion of grammatical Subject as a starting point for their analyses. Rather they were primarily interested in the semantic notion of Agent and the position of agent is understood as the starting point of a predication. If such a view were to be applied to Old Hebrew a precise study of case roles would need to be done first, but as it stands, this theory leaves the question of basic word order in the clause unexamined.

The definition of a verbal clause chosen here is based on the nature of the clause predicate. In order for a clause to be verbal its predicate must have as its head word a verb.<sup>21</sup> Usually the verb will be finite.

#### b. *Word Order in the Verbal Clause*

The SVO word order appears only with a qatal verb. The following example illustrates word order in qatal transitive clauses:

20. David Cohen's article (1970: 224-28) seeks to bring out the linguistic validity of such an approach. He says: 'Il n'est peut-être pas inutile d'essayer de discerner la part d'intuition linguistique qui peut motiver dans une certaine mesure une telle conception' (p. 225). Cf. also *GKC*, p. 451, par. 140f: 'this more complicated view of the Arab grammarians may be regarded as at least relatively correct, namely, in classifying verbal clauses according as the subject precedes or follows the verb, a distinction which is often of great importance in Hebrew also.'

21. This definition agrees with most definitions found in grammars. For example, *GKC*, p.450, par. 140b: 'Every sentence, the subject of which is a noun (or pronoun included in a verbal clause) and its predicate a finite verb, is called a *verbal-clause*.' Similarly, Jónin and Muraoka (1991: 579).

## 22 *Topic, Focus and Foreground in Ancient Hebrew Narratives*

Gen. 36.2:

עשו לקח את־נשיו מבנות כנען

Esau took his wives from the Canaanites.

Clause sequence in narrative is characterized by the clause initial connective *waw*. However, when *waw* and *qatal* are combined in a past narrative environment, the resulting *veqatal* form may take on various specific aspectual meanings such as iterative, durative or habitual as in 1 Sam. 16.23.<sup>22</sup>

ולקח דוד את־הכנור ונגן בידו

[And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul] David took the lyre and played.

As a result, whereas the VSO word order in a *qatal* clause is commonly found in direct speech, in narrative sequence where it is preceded by *waw*, its occurrence is rarer because of the specific meanings *veqatal* may have.

When S is not clause initial, a NP in the function of O or A may be fronted as in Exod. 14.6:

ואת־עמו לקח עמו

And his army he took with him.

By contrast with *qatal*, the VSO order is found only with a *vayyiqtol* verbal form. The reason is that *vayyiqtol* prohibits the occurrence of any preverbal element, such as S or O between the connective *waw* and the verb itself. This normal word order is found when constituents are NPs, as in Num. 20.14:

וישלח משה מלאכים מקדש אל־מלך אדום

And Moses sent messengers from Qadesh to the king of Edom.

When the O or A is a pronoun it is usually found immediately after the verb, as in 2 Sam. 13.27:

וישלח אתו את־אמנון

And he sent Amnon with him.

With verbs which have full NPs as DO and IO, the word order is: V-(S)-DO-IO, as in Exod. 20.1:

וידבר אלהים את כל־הדברים האלה לאמר

And God spoke all these words, saying ...

22. In non-past contexts *veqatal* is used with a future meaning as in Lev. 14.12: 'and the priest shall take one of the lambs.'

Negation is typically formed by the adjunction of the negative particle  $\text{לֹא}$  before the main verb, or the nominal predicate. As *vayyiqtol* is prevented from having any preverbal element,  $\text{לֹא}$  cannot be used before the form *vayyiqtol*. When a verb is used with the negation it is the qatal verb which must be used, as in Gen. 31.33:

וְלֹא מָצָא

And he did not find.

To summarize, the following word orders, with full NPs, are the most common in the qatal and *vayyiqtol* narrative clauses:

ve-S + qatal + O	<i>vayyiqtol</i> + S + O + A
ve-O + qatal + S	
ve-A + qatal + S + O	

The sequence S + qatal is possible as well, but rare.

### c. *The Participial and Infinitive Clauses*

The problem of the grammatical status of the quasi-nominal categories of uninflected forms such as the participles both active and passive and the infinitives construct and absolute has been solved in various ways. In this study, the participial clauses will be categorized as a special type of verbal clause. The unusual feature of the verb is that it is non-finite, as it agrees with the head noun S in number and gender, but not in person.<sup>23</sup> The unmarked word order in a declarative participial clauses is S-Predicate, whether the S is a N or PRO, as exemplified in Gen. 25.27 and Gen. 14.12.

Gen. 25.28:

רַבְקָה אָהַבָה אֶת־יַעֲקֹב

Rebekah loved Jacob.

23. A participle may function as either a noun or a verb. Andersen (1970) includes the clauses with predicate participles in the group of verbless clauses. In the same way *GKC*, p. 450, par. 140a says: 'Every sentence, the subject and predicate of which are nouns or their equivalents (esp. participles) is called a *noun-clause*.' Blau (1976: 95, par. 58.2) distinguishes between clause types and grammatical functions: a sentence having a participle as its predicate behaves as a nominal clause but participles often govern as verbs. Waltke and O'Connor acknowledge that the participle has a 'verbal character' (1990: 624, par. 37.6b) but add that a participle is often used as the predicate of a verbless clause (1990: 623, par. 37.6a) on grounds which are not very clear. They say that the usual syntactic structure for a participial predicate is a verbless clause (1990: 624, par. 37.6b).

Gen. 14.12:

וְדָוָא יֹשֵׁב בְּסֹדֹם

And he was dwelling in Sodom.

Old Hebrew has two infinitive types: the infinitive absolute and construct. Both are non-finite verb forms and both may be used as nouns (with functions of S, O, C, etc.) or verbs.<sup>24</sup> When used as a noun, the infinitive construct is a nuclear constituent of a clause functioning, for example, as S or C of a verb. But most characteristic is its use as an extra-nuclear constituent, in a gerundive phrase which functions in a clause-modifying adverbial capacity. Commonly, the infinitive construct forms a prepositional phrase expressing time, purpose or result, with often overt S, as in Gen. 4.8:

וַיְהִי בְּהִיוֹתָם בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיִּקָּם קַיִן

And when they were in the field, Cain rose up ...

### 5. *Word Order in Old Hebrew*

Research on word order in Old Hebrew has been following two paths. Most studies consider that there is only one homogeneous group of verb initial clauses. They do not pay attention to the fact that the determinants of word order in *vayyiqtol* clauses are different from those of other verbal clauses. In other studies, the atypical features of *vayyiqtol* clauses is noted but, as a result, *vayyiqtol* clauses are excluded altogether from the discussion on word order.

Waltke and O'Connor represent the first approach:

For verbal clauses the basic Hebrew word order is *verb + subject* (VS). This verb-first word order usually obtains where a clause has no introductory material, where a clause begins with a *waw*-relative (i.e. *waw* consecutive) construction, or where a clause begins with adverbial materials.<sup>25</sup>

Lambdin maintains that in the verbal sentence the verb usually stands first, then the subject, object, and various adverbial elements (1973: 39). Similarly, Mayer writes that the normal word order in a verbal clause is verb-subject-object (and adverbial) (1972: 437).<sup>26</sup> Jongeling affirms:

24. However, the infinitive absolute as finite verb occurs in direct speech only.

25. Waltke and O'Connor 1990: 12.

26. The accompanying explanation (par. 1277, note 3) is linguistically doubtful:

'The VSO order is best considered to be the basic order of classical Hebrew' (1991: 106). GKC maintains the same view on the basis of a correlation between clause type and word order. It is argued that in the verbal clause the emphasis rests upon the action which proceeds from (or is experienced by) the subject, and accordingly the verb naturally comes first (1910: 455, par. 142a).<sup>27</sup>

Muraoka is representative of the second approach. Starting from the premise that V-S is the unmarked word order in Hebrew (1985.30),<sup>28</sup> he examines the relative order of V and S in the verbal clause. He notes that in *vayyiqtol* clauses the word order is automatically V-S and so draws the conclusion that such clauses are of little value for the purpose of examining neutral word order and emphatic order in verbal clauses. As a result, he takes the methodological decision of excluding the *waw* consecutive forms altogether from his investigation (1985: 28-30). Although Muraoka identifies eight grounds for the fronting of S, some of them semantic, others pragmatic,<sup>29</sup> his decision not to consider *vayyiqtol* forms certainly results in an impoverished analysis of word order and particularly of the emphasizing system at work in the narrative clause.

Mention must also be made of views which do not agree with the traditional description of Old Hebrew as a V-S language. Jotūn maintains that the word order of the unmarked verbal clause is S-V (1965: par. 155k).<sup>30</sup> Hadas-Lebel makes the observation that word order in the

'Cet ordre prouve que, d'habitude, en hébreu, on insiste sur l'acte; c'est pourquoi le verbe précède le sujet.'

27. More recently Williams (1976: 96, par. 572). However, Muraoka (1985: 4) points out that this view is in no way universally accepted. He stresses that it is important to remember that there is disagreement among hebraists as to the validity of the assumption that there is a word-order polarity discernible in the two main sentence types (i.e. the nominal clause shows the order S-P and the verbal clause the order V-S).

28. This means that in this arrangement neither S nor V receives special emphasis. It is important to note that Muraoka reaches this conclusion on the basis of statistics. This view is reiterated in Jotūn and Muraoka (1991: 579, par. 155k).

29. They are (1985: 33-37): emphasis or contrast; circumstantial clause; avoidance of *waw* consecutive; the subject is 'a man' or 'God'; special groups of verbs denoting movement or knowledge; chiasmic construction; reply to question.

30. For Jotūn, the order S-V is the normal order both in the verbal and the nominal clause.

clause is remarkably flexible, given that Old Hebrew has no case-inflections. The normal word order, she adds, is S-V, but word order inversion is extremely frequent (1977: 93). Revell opts for what seems to be a free word order:

The constituents of a verbal clause are commonly said to appear in standard order, but this order is 'standard' only in the sense of being the most common. In principle any constituent may stand in any position. Their order is conditioned by semantic considerations, not by syntax (1989b: 2).

Although, unfortunately, these authors do not provide detailed clarifications, one gets the impression that such differing views on word order can only be arrived at by isolating the numerous cases of *vayyiqtol* clauses and treating them as special cases of V initial clauses.

*Vayyiqtol* clauses are the main object of Givón's analysis (1977). In his examination of the drift from VSO to SVO in Old Hebrew, Givón combines statistical results with pragmatic explanations. Statistics confirm that there is a basic word order which is syntactically controlled but also affected by various pragmatic reordering processes. Givón takes the view that Old Hebrew is 'a rigid VO language with flexible subject position' (1989: 230).<sup>31</sup> The S position is examined through a statistical study of Genesis (1977: 189) which shows that there is a dominant V-S order in the realis clauses. This order is explained pragmatically: V comes first because it is new information and there is a general tendency in VO languages to put new information in the initial position.

The view arrived at in the course of this research and adopted in it, is that Old Hebrew is a VSO language.

## 6. *The Text Analysed*

This study is based on the standard academic Hebrew text *Biblia hebraica stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1977), the Stuttgart Hebrew Bible, which reproduces the handwritten Leningrad Codex B 19a dating from about 1008 CE. Inevitably, the Hebrew text in this manuscript has not reached us in exactly the same form in which it left the hands of the writers. Ancient texts are affected by the process of

31. Similarly, Givón writes elsewhere (1983: 28): 'This ancient Semitic language (i.e. Biblical Hebrew) is rigidly VO but shows a pragmatically controlled VS/SV variation.'

constant copying, making mistakes, omitting or repeating words or lines for instance, and the Masoretic text of the Leningrad codex B 19a is not perfect or free of errors. At the same time, it is very important that a linguistic study which seeks to examine and analyse facts should be based on an existing and actual text rather than depend on a reconstructed text or reconstructed passages which never existed in reality. Reconstructed readings might solve certain difficulties, but are too speculative and hazardous when we are looking for factual and not conjectural explanations. The choice then of the Masoretic Text of *BHS*, and the decision to adhere to it, are based on methodological principles.

The data for the analysis is found in the following texts of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus 1–12, Numbers 20–25, Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings. The analysis is based on an exhaustive study of these texts. Passages cited in the course of the study are given as examples and are not intended to be all the possible passages that could have been cited. Rather, they are intended to be representative.

A necessary starting point for this type of pursuit is that the stories should be considered from a synchronic viewpoint: the approach employed will concentrate on one stage of the text, in this case the final form of the text. This is in contrast with a diachronic view of the texts that examines the historical development of the literature. The concentration on the final form of the text helps to explore the role of devices in giving a story its shape and to identify clues to its major emphases expressed through word order, arrangement of phrases or larger linguistic units.

### *7. Organization of the Work*

The study which follows is organized in the following way. Chapter 1 describes the approach to the grammatical description used in the analysis, the functional view, and the particular emphasis laid on the communicative aspect of language. Literary narration is viewed as a type of communication between a writer and a reader. A special section describes the particular features of narratives and shows how such texts may legitimately be studied from a pragmatic angle. The purpose of the chapter is not to provide a theory, but rather to describe the mechanisms of communication which underly some of the phenomena later investigated in the thesis.

Chapter 2 is a detailed examination and criticism of Longacre's text-linguistic analysis of Old Hebrew narrative texts. An evaluation is made

of the method as a whole, as well as the theory of foregrounding it contains, and the conclusions drawn by him when applied to Old Hebrew texts.

Chapter 3 studies the grammatical encoding of topical entities in a specific story (Genesis 22) using a method devised by Tomlin, and with special reference to the encoding of topical importance in clauses.

Chapter 4 explore further the grammatical aspects of the encoding of referents as topic. It discusses specifically the correlation between the use of the two types of verbal clause in narration and the activation state of the referents which occur as topics.

Chapter 5 pays attention to the two main narrative clauses from the angle of the presupposition-focus articulation. Having looked at types of focus in the direct speech clauses first, it then examines the role of focus assignment in the throwing into relief of constituents in their clauses.

Chapter 6, finally, studies another two more methods of foregrounding. The first one is extra-clausal and relies upon stereotyped and fixed knowledge structures. The second one is linked to the direct involvement of the narrator or speaker in the story.