

## WORD ORDER AND INFORMATION STRUCTURE IN RUTH AND JONAH: A GENERATIVE-TYPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS\*

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### Abstract

The relationship between syntax and information structure is an increasingly popular subject of research within Biblical Hebrew studies. However, there exist two asymmetries within current approaches taken as a whole: first, the only theoretical linguistic frameworks employed are situated somewhere within the functional approach to linguistics (in contrast with formal, and specifically, generative approaches); second, a Verb-Subject typological classification for Biblical Hebrew is assumed without empirical justification. Yet, the relationship between syntax and semantics, on the one hand, and pragmatics, on the other, is primarily unidirectional; in other words, pragmatics necessarily accesses the syntactic and semantic features of a text, but not vice versa. It stands to reason, then, that any model of information structure can only be as accurate as the syntactic and semantic model upon which it builds. This study presents a typological and generative linguistic analysis of the data in Ruth and Jonah, an Subject-Verb classification for Biblical Hebrew and an Subject-Verb based model of information structure.

### Introduction

How an author communicates the message of a text can only partially be accounted for by analysing the formal syntactic and semantic features used within. A great deal of communicative information is conveyed by the manipulation of linguistic features beyond lexical meanings and constituent relationships. The study of *pragmatics*

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takes into account this information beyond syntax and semantics and the analysis of the pragmatic structure of stretches of discourse or texts is referred to as *information structure*. The relationship between syntax and semantics, on the one hand, and pragmatics, on the other, is primarily unidirectional; in other words, pragmatics necessarily accesses the syntactic and semantic features of a text, but not vice versa. It stands to reason, then, that any model of information structure can only be as accurate as the syntactic and semantic model upon which it builds. Herein lies a current problem in Biblical Hebrew (BH) studies. While the growth of interest in information structure of Hebrew texts continues apace,<sup>1</sup> two asymmetries mar this endeavour: first, the only theoretical linguistic frameworks employed are situated somewhere within the functional approach to linguistics (in contrast with formal, and specifically, generative approaches); second, a verb-subject (VS) typological classification for BH is assumed without empirical justification. Using a typological and generative linguistic approach to the data from Ruth and Jonah, I assert in this article a different understanding of BH word order, that it is a subject-verb (SV) language, and sketch a SV-based model of information structure.

This essay has four parts. In the first section I describe the typological study of word order and consider the relevant features from Ruth and Jonah. In the second part I describe a specifically genera-

<sup>1</sup> See, among others, R. Buth, 'Word Order Differences between Narrative and Non-Narrative Material in Biblical Hebrew', in D. Assaf (ed.), *Proceedings of the 10th World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division D, Vol. 1* (Jerusalem 1990), pp. 9–16; C.H.J. van der Merwe, 'The Function of Word Order in Old Hebrew with Special Reference to Cases where a Syntagme Precedes a Verb in Joshua', *JNSL* 17 (1991), 129–44; idem, 'Towards a Better Understanding of Biblical Hebrew Word Order (review of Walter Gross's *Die Satzteilfolge im Verbalsatz alttestamentlicher Prosa*)', *JNSL* 25:1 (1991), 277–300; B.L. Bandstra, 'Word Order and Emphasis in Biblical Hebrew Narrative: Syntactic Observations on Genesis 22 from a Discourse Perspective', in W.R. Bodine (ed.), *Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew* (Winona Lake, IN 1992), pp. 109–24; N.A. Bailey, 'What's Wrong with my Word Order? Topic, Focus, Information Flow, and Other Pragmatic Aspects of Some Biblical Genealogies', *Journal for Translation and Textlinguistics* 10 (1998), 1–29; J-M. Heimerdinger, *Topic, Focus and Foreground in Ancient Hebrew Narratives* (Sheffield 1999); A. Moshavi, 'The Pragmatics of Word Order in Biblical Hebrew: A Statistical Analysis', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Yeshiva University 2000); K. Shimasaki, *Focus Structure in Biblical Hebrew: A Study of Word Order and Information Structure* (Bethesda, MD 2002); C.H.J. van der Merwe and E. Taalstra, 'Biblical Hebrew Word Order: The Interface of Information structure and Formal Features', *ZAH* 15/16 (2002/2003), 68–107; S.J. Floor, 'From Word Order to Theme in Biblical Hebrew Narrative: Some Perspectives from Information Structure', *JS* 12:2 (2003), 197–236; idem, 'Poetic Fronting in a Wisdom Poetry Text: The Information Structure of Proverbs 7', *JNSL* 31:1 (2005), 23–58.

tive approach to the syntactic features of both books. In the third part I introduce the information structure model that I then apply to the data from Ruth and Jonah in the fourth and final section.

### The Typological Study of Word Order

The typological study of word order is most often traced back to Joseph Greenberg's 1963 article, 'Some Universals of Grammar with Particular Reference to the Order of Meaningful Elements'.<sup>2</sup> This essay set in motion a rich comparative linguistic method with the goal of discerning morphological and syntactic 'universals'<sup>3</sup> among human languages. In the first section in Greenberg's essay he focused on 'certain basic factors of word order' and proposed using three criteria to identify the basic word order of any given language:<sup>4</sup>

- (1) the use of prepositions versus postpositions;
- (2) the relative order of subject, verb and object in declarative sentences with nominal subject and object;
- (3) the position of qualifying adjectives, either preceding or following the modified noun.

Although these three criteria have been modified as the typological program has matured, they still reflect the fundamental questions involved in determining how a language patterns: does a head (i.e., the constituent being modified) precede or follow its modifier? For each basic type of head (noun, verb and adposition), there are three basic types of modifiers (complement, adjunct and specifier). *Complements* are constituents that complete the head, and are thus obligatory for forming a larger grammatical item. For instance, transi-

<sup>2</sup> In J.H. Greenberg (ed.), *Universals of Language* (Cambridge, MA 1963), 73–113.

<sup>3</sup> The quotations marks around the word 'universals' simply serve to distinguish the typological notion of language universals (which are rarely without exception) and the Chomskyan generative concept of universals (which are, as principles of Universal Grammar, taken to be without exception and part of the human language faculty).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 76. It should be noted, with regard to the nature of Greenberg's universals, that Greenberg himself lists exceptions in his footnotes. In defence of this loose approach to language universals (which some now call 'tendencies' rather than 'universals'), Thomas Payne suggests that '[l]anguages which deviate from Greenberg's ideal types do not 'violate' Greenberg's universals. They are simply inconsistent with the ideal type. Since the majority of languages of the world are inconsistent, it may be more appropriate to dub a perfectly consistent language as a violation of expectations!' (T.E. Payne, *Describing Morphosyntax: A Guide for Field Linguists* [Cambridge 1997], 90–1).

tive verbs require complements, often in the form of direct objects, but sometimes also in the form of prepositional phrases, and so forth. *Adjuncts*, in contrast, are non-obligatory modifiers, such as adjectives, adverbs, and non-complement prepositional phrases. The *specifier* category includes constituents that ‘specify’ salient features of the head; so, for example, subjects specify the agent/theme/patient of verb phrases and articles specify the definiteness of noun phrases.

Using these three syntactic categories, the basic oppositions for a typological study are ‘head-complement versus complement-head’, ‘head-adjunct versus adjunct-head’ and ‘head-specifier versus specifier-head’.<sup>5</sup> The goal is to determine if and how a language exhibits strong tendencies for each grammatical category and each syntactic relationship. The table in (4) illustrates a simple typological analysis for English, asking the ‘head-initial’ or ‘head-final’ question for each syntactic category.

(4)

Heads	Complements (≈ obligatory modifiers)	Adjuncts (≈ optional modifiers)	Specifiers
Nouns	<i>destruction of the city</i>	<i>big cities, cities in Africa</i>	<i>the/that/our city</i>
Verbs	<i>destroy the city</i>	<i>run quickly, quickly run</i>	<i>They destroyed cities</i>
Adpositions	<i>in the city</i>	<i>runs very quickly</i>	<i>Straight down the street</i>

The examples in (4) illustrate that English is strictly head-initial for the order of head and complement, strictly head-final for the order of head and specifier, and both head-initial and head-final for the order of head and adjunct, with greater weight given to the head-final examples because they occur in less-restricted environments (see below, examples [14] and [15]). English exhibits no one order for all grammatical categories, but is fairly consistent within each syntactic category; in this way, English is a typical SVO language by typological standards. Compare the BH data in (5)–(9).

- (5) Preposition + Nominal Complement (= Preposition + Object): head-initial  
*bā'āres* *'el hayyām*  
 ‘in the land’ (Ruth 1:1) ‘to the sea’ (Jon. 1:4)

<sup>5</sup> See M. Dryer, ‘On the Six-Way Word Order Typology’, *Studies in Language* 21:1 (1997), 69–103; A. Alexiadou, ‘Introduction’, in A. Alexiadou (ed.), *Theoretical Approaches to Universals* (Linguistik Aktuell/Linguistics Today, Amsterdam 2002), 1–13.

- (6) Noun + Nominal Complement (= Construct Phrase): head-initial  
*śadē mō'āb* *yarkatē hassapînā*  
 'territory of Moab' (Ruth 1:1) 'rear parts of the ship' (Jon. 1:5)
- (7) Verb + Complement (= Verb + Object): head-initial  
*wattisse'nā qôlān* *wayhwh hēfîl rūah gādôlā*  
 'and they lifted their voice' 'and Yhwh cast a great wind'  
 (Ruth 1:9) (Jon. 1:4)
- (8) Noun + Adjunct (= Noun + Adjective): head-initial  
*nā'ārā mō'ābîyā* *hā'îr haggādôlā*  
 'a Moabite girl' (Ruth 2:6) 'the great city' (Jon. 1:2)
- (9) Verb + Adjunct (= Verb + Adverb/Adverbial constituent):  
 a. head-initial  
*wattibkênā ôd* *kî ālatā rā'ātām ləpānāy*  
 'and they wept again' (Ruth 1:14) 'because their evil has come up before me' (Jon. 1:2)
- b. head-final  
*wəḵô tidbāqîn 'im nā'ārōtāy* *hēfēb hārā lî*  
 'and thus you shall stick close 'rightly it has angered me' (Jon. 4:9)  
 with my girls' (Ruth 2:8)

As the examples demonstrate, the head-complement relationship in BH (5)–(7) is firmly head-initial while the head-adjunct relationship (8)–(9) shows some inconsistency. Nominal heads precede their adjuncts,<sup>6</sup> illustrated in (8), but verbal heads, illustrated in (9), exhibit both head-initial and head-final tendencies. Overall, the examples in (5)–(9) demonstrate that BH is a strongly head-initial language, though the verb allows some variation with its non-complement arguments. The final category, specifiers, also manifests both head-initial and head-final order, as the examples in (10) illustrate.

- (10) Noun + Specifier:  
 a. head-final (determiner-noun)  
*hā'îš* *hā'îr*  
 'the man' (Ruth 1:2) 'the city' (Jon. 1:2)
- b. head-initial (noun-determiner/possessive)  
*hanna'ārā hazzōt* *rā'ātām*  
 'this girl' (Ruth 2:5) 'their evil' (Jon. 1:2)

While articles precede nouns (10a), demonstrative and possessive pronouns follow nouns (10b). The pattern of verbal heads and their

<sup>6</sup> Numerals can both precede and follow their nominal heads in BH and are thus an exception to the strong head-adjunct order otherwise exhibited by nominal heads. The divergence of numerals from other types of nominal modifiers, though, is quite common in languages.

specifiers (i.e. subjects) is similarly inconsistent. The salient issue is whether the SV/head-final example in (11a) or the VS/head-initial example in (11b) represents the basic order.<sup>7</sup>

(11) Verb + Specifier

a. head-final (subject-verb)

*wəšʕadday hēraʿ lī*  
 ‘and Shaddai has done ill to me’  
 (Ruth 1:21)

*wayhwh hēṭil rūāḥ gədōlā ʿel hayyām*  
 ‘and Yhwh cast a great wind to the sea’  
 (Jon. 1:4)

b. head-initial (verb-subject)

*kī hēmar ʕadday lī məʿōd*  
 ‘because Shaddai has embittered  
 me much’ (Ruth 1:20)

*kī ʿālātā rāʿātām ləpānāy*  
 ‘because their evil has come up  
 before me’ (Jon. 1:2)

When a basic order for any of the categories is not immediately apparent within a linguistic corpus, which (11a) and (11b) demonstrate for Ruth and Jonah, linguists commonly use four criteria to sort the matter out: clause type, frequency, distribution and pragmatics.<sup>8</sup>

### Clause Type

The criterion of *clause type* builds upon Greenberg’s initial approach; however, typologists have since considerably refined the definition of the appropriate basic clause. One example is in Anna Siewierska’s study *Word Order Rules*, in which she defines the basic clause as ‘stylistically neutral, independent, indicative clauses with full noun phrase (NP) participants, where the subject is definite, agentive and human, the object is a definite semantic patient, and the verb represents an action, not a state or an event.’<sup>9</sup> Admittedly, clauses of the sort described by Siewierska may not occur in abundance in a typical

<sup>7</sup> The overwhelming majority opinion is that VS is basic in BH. Advocates of an SV approach are rare; see P. Joüon, *Grammaire de l’Hebreu biblique* (Rome 1923); V. DeCaen, ‘On the Placement and Interpretation of the Verb in Standard Biblical Hebrew Prose’, unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Toronto 1995); R.D. Holmstedt, ‘The Relative Clause in Biblical Hebrew: A Linguistic Analysis’, unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Wisconsin 2002); idem, ‘Word Order in the Book of Proverbs’, in R.L. Troxel, K.G. Friebe, and D.R. Magary (eds), *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays Offered to Honor Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Winona Lake, IN 2005), 135–54; idem, ‘Issues in the Linguistic Analysis of a Dead Language, with Particular Reference to Ancient Hebrew’, *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 6:11 (2006), 1–21.

<sup>8</sup> M. Dyer, ‘Word Order’, in T. Shopen (ed.), *Language Typology and Syntactic Description, Vol. I: Clause Structure*, 2nd edn (Cambridge 2007), 61–131.

<sup>9</sup> A. Siewierska, *Word Order Rules* (London 1988), 8.

text or discourse due to the nature of human communication.<sup>10</sup> For example, in languages that allow subject pronouns to be omitted (that is, ‘pro-drop’ languages, such as Spanish, Italian, and Hebrew), illustrated in (12a), clauses with full noun phrase subjects, as in (12b), will be difficult to isolate.

- (12a) Ruth 1:2  
*wayyābō’û šadê mō’āb*  
 ‘and (they) entered the territory of Moab’

- (12b) Ruth 1:6  
*kî pāqad yhw̄h ’et ’ammô lātēt lāhem lah̄em*  
 ‘that Yhwh had considered his people by giving them bread’

That clauses with full noun phrase subjects are statistically less common in languages like Hebrew in no way invalidates the identification of basic clauses in a text. Rather, it simply indicates that this criterion cannot be used alone but only in careful coordination with the other three criteria.<sup>11</sup>

### *Frequency*

Those who assign primacy, or at least significance, to statistics use the *frequency* criterion. Whereas with the first criterion a basic clause type may be in the statistical minority, the frequency approach demands that the basic order designation be assigned to a statistically dominant pattern.<sup>12</sup> This criterion is one of the most common in BH studies and Takamitsu Muraoka summarized it succinctly in his study of emphatic structures in BH: ‘[W]e are not interested in discussing the theory that [VS] order is normal because action is the most important piece of information to be conveyed by this sentence type called verbal clause. In other words, by saying that V-S is the normal word-order we do not mean that it is logically or intrinsically so, but simply statistically.’<sup>13</sup>

The problems in using simple statistical dominance to determine basic word order are weighty, however. For example, given a 2:1 ratio of VS to SV order in a given corpus, are we justified in classifying that language as VS? The problem is exacerbated when the statistics

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 8–14.

<sup>11</sup> For a concise summary of the basic issues involved in the typological quest for determining ‘basic word order’ in any given language, see F.J. Newmeyer, *Language Form and Language Function* (Cambridge, MA 1998), 330–7.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, J.A. Hawkins, *Word Order Universals* (New York 1983).

<sup>13</sup> T. Muraoka, *Emphatic Words and Structures in Biblical Hebrew* (Jerusalem 1985), 30.

are even closer, as Matthew Dryer notes: ‘In the Auk dialect of Tlingit, for example, a text count ... for the order of subject and verb revealed VS outnumbering SV by 177 to 156. In a case like this, the difference in frequency is sufficiently small for it not to seem reasonable to say that VS is more frequent than SV or that VS is basic.’<sup>14</sup> Additionally, since a given text type, or genre, may be associated with specific clause types, such as the strong association between BH narrative and the *wayyiqtol* form, clause type frequency must be qualified appropriately and may not necessarily represent the basic word order in the grammar of that language (as opposed to the narrower ‘grammar’ of a specific text or genre). For instance, consider the raw numbers from Ruth and Jonah, provided in (13).

(13) Simple Count of Verbs and Clauses in Ruth and Jonah

<i>Verb Count from the Book of Ruth</i>	<i>Verb Count from the Book of Jonah</i>
<b>420 Verbs</b> 313 Finite Verbs 138 <i>wayyiqtol</i> 97 Perfective 78 Imperfective  <i>Clauses with Explicit Subjects</i> <b>47 VS clauses</b> 19 VS <i>wayyiqtol</i> 26 XVS (10 modal, 3 X, 13 C) 2 VS <b>22 SV</b> 20 SV 2 XSV	<b>201 Verbs</b> 149 finite verbs 84 <i>wayyiqtol</i> 38 Perfective 27 Imperfective  <i>Clauses with Explicit Subjects</i> <b>44 VS clauses</b> 35 VS <i>wayyiqtol</i> 8 XVS (5 modal, 3 C) 1 VS <b>17 SV</b> 13 SV 1 XSV

The relative numbers from both books are quite similar. Of the total verbs, seventy-five percent are finite verbs, the type which are typically identified as necessary for the basic clause type. Of the finite verbs,<sup>15</sup> forty-four percent in Ruth and fifty-six percent in Jonah are the past narrative *wayyiqtol*. It is thus immediately clear that one particular form is strongly associated with narrative. More important are the clauses with overt subject constituents. At first

<sup>14</sup> Dryer, ‘Word Order’, 74.

<sup>15</sup> Since finite verbs can be associated with syntactic subjects, they meet the minimal qualification for a word order study that is interested in the relative order of the subject and verb. Non-finite verbs (i.e. infinitives, imperatives, and participles) exhibit additional syntactic complications and should be initially excluded in basic word order analyses.



blush it appears that both books favour VS order by a 2:1 ratio over SV. However, this ratio covers a great number of complicating factors involving both the basic clause type and pragmatics criteria. At this point, it will suffice to point out that the chart in (13) makes it clear that when we consider only clauses without subordinating constituents ('C'), fronted phrases ('X'), or modal verbs, SV is favoured by 10:1, if not more, in both books.

### *Distribution*

The third approach is based on the test of *distribution*. Given two or more alternatives for a syntactic construction, the one that occurs in the greater number of environments is the basic order. Note that this is not the same as statistical dominance, because the issue at hand is not 'occurrence' but 'environment'. For instance, in English, manner adverbs may both precede and follow the verb, as in (14)–(15):

- (14) a. Ethan slowly walked into the room.

ADV    V

- b. Ethan walked into the room slowly.

V                                  ADV

- (15) a. ?\*Ethan is slowly walking.

ADV    V

- b. Ethan is walking slowly.

V        ADV

Although both options exist in English, based on the distributional patterns, it can be argued that V-ADV order is basic because there are environments in which the order ADV-V is not used or is less felicitous, e.g. (15a).<sup>16</sup>

### *Pragmatics*

Finally, we come to the criterion of pragmatics. Attention to the pragmatic features of clauses is particularly significant for so-called 'free-order' languages like Hebrew, that is, languages exhibiting a great deal of word order variation and no immediately apparent basic order. At the core of this approach is the recognition that the majority of language data contains pragmatically 'marked', or 'non-neutral', clauses. Even for languages that have a more rigid word order, such as English, pragmatics can produce extreme but grammatically

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 69.

acceptable examples, as in (16a) and (17a), in contrast with the basic constructions in (16b) and (17b):<sup>17</sup>

- (16) a. Mary, I saw.  
b. I saw Mary.
- (17) a. Into the room came the Prime Minister.  
b. The Prime Minister came into the room.

The analysis of pragmatic features of clauses and texts has added a necessary layer to the investigation of basic word order.<sup>18</sup>

For the analysis of BH word order, frequency is the most problematic of the four criteria. The word order profile of much of the Hebrew Bible is distorted by the dominance of the past narrative verb form, the *wayyiqtol*, which is necessarily VS and which is clearly associated with a particular discourse type. Thus, the other three criteria, particularly clause type and pragmatics, will be given methodological priority in this study.

### A Generative Orientation to Biblical Hebrew Word Order

When the issue of basic word order in BH, specifically the order of the verb and its specifier, the subject (i.e. VS or SV), is approached from a generative perspective, *constituent movement* becomes a critical feature in the analysis. By way of a brief orientation, generative analysis has determined that initial derivations (we could call these ‘clauses-in-the-making’) start with the subject preceding the verb. Since within the generative approach many constituents in the clause ‘move’ from this starting position to higher positions in the clause (that is, towards the front of the clause), it is possible for this deriva-

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>18</sup> Marianne Mithun (‘Is Basic Word Order Universal?’, in D.L. Payne (ed.), *Pragmatics of Word Order Flexibility* [Amsterdam 1992], 15–61) questions whether some languages can be assigned to a typologically word-order category. In particular, for languages with an apparently ‘free word order’, Mithun argues that we should not be looking for a basic word order in terms of the position of subject, verb and modifiers. Rather, she suggests that in these languages it might be the case that the syntactic role of an item (subject, object, etc.) is less important than its discourse role (e.g. topic-hood, identifiability, ‘newsworthiness’). Thus, the order of the constituents, subject noun phrase, verb, complements, etc., will change in a ‘basic clause’, depending on the information status of the constituents. I do not think that Mithun’s observations obviate a basic word order discussion for such languages. I suggest that in clauses in which the constituents all share the same pragmatic marking, e.g. all the constituents are ‘new’, such as in presentative clauses, the observable order could be identified as basic.

tion to result in a clause with VS or SV order (hence, the theoretically passé but still pedagogically useful distinction between 'deep' structure and 'surface' structure).<sup>19</sup>

The typological study of basic word order, when performed within the paradigm of generative linguistics, is able to identify the salient features of constituent order on more than one linguistic level. A typologically-minded generativist recognizes the value of cross-linguistic analysis, the nuanced discussion of which clause type best approximates the basic clause type, the identification of a variety of discourse types, and the typological obsession with compiling vast sets of data. At the same time, the generative approach does not view the final, or 'surface', product as the sole object of syntactic study;<sup>20</sup> in other words, the basic distinction between deep structure and surface structure allows the generativist to identify features potentially relevant to a discussion of word order variation in such a way that a non-generativist cannot.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> On the conceptual changes brought about the Minimalist Program, with particular reference to 'deep structure' and 'surface structure' as components of the model, see A. Marantz, 'The Minimalist Program', in G. Webelhuth (ed.), *Government and Binding Theory and the Minimalist Program: Principles and Parameters in Syntactic Theory* (Oxford 1995), 349–82.

<sup>20</sup> Although Chomsky's earliest comments on the value of 'statistical studies' are somewhat dismissive in tone (he took a slightly more positive approach toward typology within the Principle and Parameters approach in the mid-1980s), the basic critique of Greenberg's initial study has not changed: 'Insofar as attention is restricted to surface structures, the most that can be expected is the discovery of statistical tendencies, such as those presented in Greenberg 1963' (*Aspects of a Theory of Syntax* [Cambridge 1965], 118). Additionally, while Frederick Newmeyer has recently proposed a method by which generativists can *make use* of typology (see above, n. 11), he earlier made the following sceptical observation concerning the linguistic relevance of typology to determining universal grammar: '[T]here is no evidence that 'the collection of valuable facts' has ever led or could lead to the discovery of any generalizations other than the most superficial sort. For example, the seven-year-long Stanford University Language Universals Project (whose results are now published as Greenberg, Ferguson and Moravcsik 1978) carried out Li's program to perfection yet has not led, as far as I know, to any substantial theoretical revisions. The problem is that the fairly shallow generalizations and statistical correlations described in the project's reports were far too sketchily presented to be of much use in ascertaining even the grammatical structure of the individual languages treated, much less shed any light on universal grammar' (*Grammatical Theory: Its Limits and Its Possibilities* [Chicago 1983], 71). Newmeyer has recently again expressed this scepticism in 'Typological Evidence and Universal Grammar', *Studies in Language* 28:3 (2004), 527–48.

<sup>21</sup> From a BH studies perspective, see J.A. Naudé for a similar critique of surface-level approaches ('A Syntactic Analysis of Dislocations in Biblical Hebrew', *JNSL* 16 [1990], 115–30).

It is perhaps easiest to illustrate the implications of constituent movement for our understanding of BH word order by first considering examples from languages in which the choice between SV and VS order is largely dictated by the presence of other constituents. Consider German main clauses, where we find the phenomenon known as ‘verb-second’;<sup>22</sup> this is a syntactic constraint that requires the verb to be in second position in main clauses, as the three examples in (18) demonstrate.

- (18) German
- |  |             |
|--|-------------|
| a) <i>Hans kaufte den Ball</i>         | (S-V-O)     |
| Hans bought the ball                   |             |
| b) <i>Den Ball kaufte Hans gestern</i> | (O-V-S-ADV) |
| yesterday Hans bought the ball         |             |
| c) <i>Gestern kaufte Hans den Ball</i> | (ADV-V-S-O) |
| yesterday Hans bought the ball         |             |

The SV example in (18a) is the typical order in simple main clauses, while the VS orders in (18b)–(18c) illustrate that a non-subject constituent preceding the verb affects the relative order of the subject and verb. Within a constituent movement framework, examples like the German clauses in (18b)–(18c) are taken to be derivations from a common source, presumably (18a).<sup>23</sup>

Within a movement account, the motivation for some types of movement remains within the domain of syntax. Thus, we find constituent movement in English interrogative clauses (19).

<sup>22</sup> German, Dutch and standard Afrikaans are considered to be ‘well-behaved V2 languages’ (i.e., they never allow the co-occurrence of a complementizer and V2 verb in complement clauses of matrix verbs); Danish, Swedish, Norwegian and Frisian are examples of languages categorized as ‘limited embedded V2 languages’ (i.e. only with bridge verbs such as ‘know that...’); Yiddish and Icelandic are examples of ‘general embedded V2 languages’ (i.e. they permit the co-occurrence of complementizers and V2 in all the complements of all matrix verbs). English is an example of a ‘residual V2’ language, in which we find V2 phenomena in, e.g. questions, as in example (19) in the main text above. See S. Vikner, *Verb Movement and Expletive Subjects in the Germanic Languages* (New York 1995).

<sup>23</sup> The derivational approach to clause construction has been shown over the last four decades to fulfill the requirements of descriptive and explanatory adequacy as well as theoretical economy. For instance, a grammar that includes a base word order with a few operations motivating constituent movement, which in turn may result in further movement, is inherently less burdensome than a taxonomic grammar, that is, one that simply lists the numerous, almost infinite permutations. And if the derivation-based grammar explains all and only the grammatical and felicitous examples, then it is to be highly preferred.

## (19) English

- (a) She saw the new Hummer. (S-V-O)  
 (b) [Which new car] did she see? (O-V-S, where the tensed auxiliary = V)  
 (c) [What] did she see? (O-V-S, where the tensed auxiliary = V)

The indicative statement in (19a) represents the base word order in English: SVO. But in both interrogative statements in (19b)–(19c), we find not only the fronting of the WH-phrase ('which new car' and 'what'), but also the inversion to VS order (where the salient verb is the tensed form of *do*). This variation is often labeled 'residual verb-second' and, given the history of English, it is not surprising that it has retained some Germanic syntactic features.

Constituent movement may also be semantically driven, as in (20), where the examples from Kru, a Niger-Congo language, exhibit a switch from SVO order in typical declarative clauses (20a) to SOV in clauses with a negative function word (20b).<sup>24</sup>

## (20) Kru (Niger-Congo)

- (a) *Nyeyu-na bla nyino-na* (S-V-O)  
       man-the beat woman-the  
       the man beat the woman  
 (b) *Nyeyu-na si nyino-na bla* (S-O-V)  
       man-the NEG woman-the beat  
       the man did not beat the woman

Additionally, some African languages vary the word order depending on the *tense* and *aspect* of the verb used; the Sudanic languages Lendu, Moru, Mangbetu, and the Gur languages Natio and Bagassi exhibit SVO order with the perfective verbs and SOV with imperfective verbs.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the Sudanic language Anyuak/Anywa appears to switch from SVO in the present tense to SOV in the past and future.<sup>26</sup>

A helpful comparison for BH is that of the formal registers of modern Israeli Hebrew: when a constituent precedes the subject and verb, the normal SV order is inverted to VS, as in the clauses in example (21).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> T. Givón, *On Understanding Grammar* (New York 1979), 124–5.

<sup>25</sup> A. Siewierska, *Word Order Rules* (London 1988), 95.

<sup>26</sup> C. Perner, *Anyuak: A Luo-Language of the Southern Sudan* (New Haven, CT 1990); M. Reh, *Anywa Language: Description and Internal Reconstructions* (Köln 1996).

<sup>27</sup> L. Glinert, *The Grammar of Modern Hebrew* (Cambridge 1989), 417; idem, *Modern Hebrew: An Essential Grammar*, 3rd edn (New York 2005), 162–4.

(21) Modern Hebrew

(a) *hakəlavim navhu baqəšev* (S-V)  
 'the dogs barked in rhythm'

(b) *'aḥar kakḥ navhu hakəlavim baqəšev* (ADV-V-S)  
 'afterwards the dogs barked in rhythm'

The general process of one constituent motivating the movement of another constituent is often referred to as 'triggering'; in modern Israeli Hebrew a fronted constituent triggers the inversion of the basic SV order to VS order.<sup>28</sup> It is possible, if not likely, that a similar process of triggered inversion operates in BH. A high percentage of VS clauses in the Hebrew Bible, like the example in (22), also contain an initial constituent (e.g. the relative function word *'āšer*); thus, these VS clauses may reflect triggered inversion.

(22) Ruth 4:11(REL-V-S)

*kəṛāḥēl ūkələ'ā 'āšer bānū štēhem 'et bêt yiśrā'ēl*  
 'like Rachel and Leah, who the both of them built the house of Israel'

In contrast, the same is not true of many SV clauses: for instance, in (23) there is no initial constituent that could act as a trigger for the movement of the subject and verb.

(23) Ruth 4:18b (S-V; = Basic; Non-Triggered)<sup>29</sup>

*pereš ḥôlîd 'et ḥezrôn*  
 'Perez begat Hezron'

When we examine the BH data and ask whether the majority of VS and SV clauses fit a triggered inversion account, the answer is yes. The set of potential triggers in BH includes syntactic members, such as relative words (22), interrogatives (24), causal words (25), as well as semantic members, such as modal operators (whether overt [26]<sup>30</sup> or covert [27]) and negative operators (28).

<sup>28</sup> U. Shlonsky and E. Doron, 'Verb Second in Hebrew', in D. Bates (ed.), *The Proceedings of the Tenth West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics* (Stanford 1992), 431–45; E. Doron, 'Word Order in Hebrew', in J. Lecarme, J. Lowenstamm, and U. Shlonsky (eds), *Research in Afroasiatic Grammar: Papers from the third conference on Afroasiatic Languages* (Amsterdam 1996), 41–56; U. Shlonsky, *Clause Structure and Word Order in Hebrew and Arabic* (Oxford 1997).

<sup>29</sup> Note that the use of SV order to mark narrative transitions, e.g. stages in the plot development or 'scene' changes, is a *literary* device not a formal pragmatic operation.

<sup>30</sup> Jon. 1:6 is the sole example in Ruth and Jonah of a clause with an explicit modal word with a VS clause. For examples of triggered VS order with explicit modal words outside of Ruth and Jonah (with the function word *'im* 'if'), see Gen. 47:16, 18; Exod. 22:2; Lev. 13:56; Num. 14:8; 21:9; 30:6; 1 Sam. 21:5; 2 Sam.

- (24) Gen 44:7 (WH-V-S)  
*lāmmā yadabbēr 'ādōnî kaddābārîm hā'ellē*  
 'why does my lord speak according to these words?'
- (25) Jon. 1:10 (CAUS-V-S)  
*kî yād'û hā'ānāšîm kî millipnē yhw hū' bōrēāh*  
 'because the men knew that he was fleeing from Yhwh'
- (26) Jon. 1:6 (MODAL-V-S)  
*'ūlay yit'assēt hā'ēlōhîm lānū*  
 'perhaps God may bear us in mind'
- (27) Ruth 1:8<sup>31</sup> (VMODAL-S; 'modality' = covert Trigger)  
*yā'as' yhw 'immākem ḥesed*  
 'may Yhwh do kindness with you'
- (28) Ruth 4:10 (NEG-V-S)  
*wālō' yikārēt šēm hammēt mē'im 'eḥāyw ūmiššā'ar maqômō*  
 'and the name of the dead man will not be cut off from his kinsmen or the gate of his place'

Additionally, we can easily account for the fixed placement of the past narrative *wayyiqtol*, illustrated in (29), in a triggered-inversion analysis.

- (29) Ruth 1:3 (Ø-V-S)  
*wayyāmot 'ēlimelek 'iś no'ōmî*  
 'and Elimelek, the husband of Naomi, died'

The gemination in the *wa-y-yiqtol* has traditionally been understood as a fully assimilated function word (represented above by Ø)<sup>32</sup> and, if this is so, then the assimilated function word within the *wayyiqtol* form would naturally trigger VS inversion.

5:6; Isa. 4:4–5; 6:11; 24:13; Ezek. 16:48; Job 31:9; 37:20; Prov. 23:15; Song 7:13; Eccl. 10:10.

<sup>31</sup> See also 1:9; 2:4, 12 (2x), 19; 4:11, 12, 14; Jon. 1:11, 12; 3:8b, 9.

<sup>32</sup> What the function word within the *wayyiqtol* was originally is unknown. That it is a function word best explains the phenomenon of this form: the raised verb (due to triggering) is then morphologically fused with the unknown function word that the gemination represents as well as the introductory simple conjunction 'and'. This accounts for the fixed VS order we always see with the *wayyiqtol*. For surveys of both classical and modern proposals regarding the history and semantics of the underspecified function word present in the *wayyiqtol* form see L. McFall, *The Enigma of the Hebrew Verbal System: Solutions from Ewald to the Present Day* (Sheffield 1982), 217–18; B.K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN 1990), 544–5; W.R. Garr, 'Driver's Treatise and the Study of Hebrew: Then and Now' (Preface to reprint of S.R. Driver's *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew and Some Other Syntactical Questions*. Grand Rapids, MI 1998), xviii–lxxxvi.

Returning to the typological criteria for determining basic word order, it becomes clear that no clause exhibiting triggered inversion to VS order qualifies as basic. We can use, therefore, only clauses that do not have any constituent other than the verb or subject at the front of the clause, and from these examples we must determine which word order, VS or SV, is the base from which all other orders derive. Here is where we must draw in the criterion of pragmatics: if, for instance, SV is the base in BH and all other orders are derivative, then a VS clause without a discernible syntactic or semantic trigger, as in (30), must reflect pragmatically motivated triggered inversion.

- (30) Ruth 4:17 (V-S)  
*yullad bēn lno'ōmī*  
 'a son has been born for Naomi'

### Information Structure

In order to identify formal features of this pragmatic layer of ancient Hebrew grammar, I have developed a working model of information structure that includes four core concepts in two layers: Theme and Rheme constitute the first layer, and Topic and Focus the second layer.

The *Theme* is the constituent in a sentence that adds the least information to the communicative setting.<sup>33</sup> It is the existing information that provides an anchor for added information, and is often described as the information in a discourse that is 'old', 'known', or 'given'. The *Rheme* is the information that is being 'added'; this can be new information or information that has been put aside, so to speak, earlier in the discourse and is now being re-invoked.<sup>34</sup> Consider the clause in (31) as the initial component in an anecdote.

- (31) Abigail and Benjamin were drinking juice

<sup>33</sup> J. Firbas, 'On Defining the Theme in Functional Sentence Analysis', *Travaux Linguistiques de Prague* 1 (1966), 267–80, esp. p. 272; idem, 'On the Delimitation of the Theme in Functional Sentence Perspective', in R. Dirven and V. Fried (eds), *Functionalism in Linguistics* (Amsterdam 1987), 137–56; idem, *Functional Sentence Perspective in Written and Spoken Communication* (Cambridge 1992), 72–3; see also M.A.K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (London 1985), 38.

<sup>34</sup> See J. Lyons, *Semantics* (Cambridge 1977), 509; K. Lambrecht, *Information Structure and Sentence Form: Topic, Focus, and the Mental Representations of Discourse Referents* (Cambridge 1994), 206–18. For an explicitly generative formulation, see M.S. Rochemont, *Focus in Generative Grammar* (Amsterdam 1986), 9–10.



As the initial statement in a new discourse, there can be nothing contrastive about any of the constituents. There is also no Theme, presuming that we have not already been discussing *Abigail*, *Benjamin*, or *juice*. Rather, everything is new, or rhematic. Now add, as the second statement, the clause in (32).

(32) *Abigail* wanted to drink another cup

Since *Abigail* is now old information, this constituent is considered a Theme, while *wanted to drink another cup* is the rhematic information. But since the information state of the participants in a discourse is always 'in-process' until the discourse is complete, what we do not know is if there is another statement following that could affect our understanding of the full pragmatic function of *Abigail*. Consider the continuation in (33a):

(33a) And *Benjamin* wanted another one as well

While the thematic status of *Abigail* in (32) and *Benjamin* in (33a) remains the same, the juxtaposition of the two statements provokes the addition of a second layer of information: the *Topic*. Both *Abigail* and *Benjamin* in (32) and (33a) 'orient' the listener to which of three thematic entities (*Abigail*, *Benjamin*, or *cup of juice*) information is being added. In contrast, consider an alternate continuation in (33b), with (32) repeated.

(32) *Abigail* wanted to drink another cup

(33b) But *Benjamin* wanted milk<sup>35</sup>

With (33b) the pragmatic context changes significantly, and, accordingly, so does the total pragmatic information conveyed by both *Abigail* and *Benjamin*. The situation is now a contrastive one, with the entities *Abigail* and *Benjamin* set over against each other. This is *Focus*.

<sup>35</sup> Although I have only identified Focus on the constituent *Benjamin* in (33b) for the sake of the comparison and flow of the presentation, it is clear that *milk* would also carry Focus (i.e., it is contrasted to 'another cup of juice' that Abigail desires in [32]). For discussion of multiple, discontinuous Focus structures like that which (33) exhibits, as well as the similar constructions that correspond with multiple *WH*-questions (e.g. Who bought what?), see M.L. Zubizarreta, *Prosody, Focus, and Word Order* (Cambridge, MA 1998). Her 'assertion structure' is a novel proposal by which we may account for those propositions which have not one, but two open variables (thus two separate constituents marked for focus): 'The A[ssertion] S[tructure] contains two ordered assertions representing the focus-presupposition of a statement; the first assertion is the existential presupposition provided by the context question; the second assertion is the equative relation between a definite variable and a value' (4).

In summary, we have four pragmatic concepts to take into account when dealing with most clauses in any given discourse. They are summarized in (34).<sup>36</sup>

(34)

<b>Theme</b>	Old/known (or presupposed) information
<b>Rheme</b>	New/added (or re-invoked) information
<b>Focus</b>	Information contrasted with possible alternatives
<b>Topic</b>	Thematic information used to 1) isolate one among multiple Themes, or 2) set the scene (e.g. time, place)

Note that Topic has two basic functions: in (32)–(33a) we already considered examples of a Topic orienting the reader to *which Theme* constituent is being modified. In (35) we see the other use: orienting the reader/listener to *scene-setting information* (time or place adverbials).

(35) Yesterday Abigail and Benjamin were drinking juice<sup>37</sup>

The time adverbial *yesterday* establishes a temporal setting for the utterance and is considered thematic since it is assumed that the two parties in the communicative setting both share knowledge of the referent of *yesterday*. (This is an example of a non-contextually defined Theme.)

Finally, it is important to recognize that Topic is restricted to thematic information, but Focus can affect both Themes and Rhemes. Consider the examples of this in (36)–(37).

(36) Abigail and Benjamin were drinking juice  
(*All rhematic, no Topic or Focus*)

<sup>36</sup> For discussions of Topic and Focus, particularly those set weakly or strongly within a generative framework, see Rochemont, *Focus*; E. Vallduví and E. Engdahl, 'The Linguistic Realization of Information Packaging', *Linguistics* 34:3 (1996), 459–519; E. Vallduví and M. Vilks, 'On Rheme and Kontras', in P. Culicover and L. McNally (eds), *The Limits of Syntax* (San Diego 1998), 79–108; Zubizarreta, *Prosody*. See also G. Rebuschi and L. Tuller (eds), *The Grammar of Focus* (Amsterdam 1999); A. Meinunger, *Syntactic Aspects of Topic and Comment* (Amsterdam 2000).

<sup>37</sup> Neither Ruth nor Jonah contains 'Scene-setting' Topic-VS (triggered) examples of the simple type like Gen. 8:14 (*ûbaḥōdeš ḥaššēnî bašib'â w'ēsrîm yôm laḥōdeš yābšâ ḥā'āreš* 'And in the second month on the twenty-seventh day of the month the earth dried up'). The only qualifying example is perhaps Ruth 1:17 with the adverb *kô* 'thus, in this manner/way', e.g. *kô ya'āšê yḥwh lî* 'In this way Yhwh will act towards me'.

(37a) As for the juice, **Abigail** loved it (but not Benjamin)

(*juice* = *Topic*; *Abigail* = *Focus*)

(37b) And they both smiled at their **father** (not their mother)

(*father* = *Rheme* + *Focus*)

Given the information and entities introduced in (36), the clause in (37a) presents an initial Topic, *the juice*, which is obviously a Theme carried over from the previous context, as well as a Focus, *Abigail*, for which the contrast with *Benjamin* can either be inferred from intonational stress or the addition of the parenthetical phrase.<sup>38</sup>

In contrast, the clause in (37b) presents mostly rhematic information, the only Theme being the pronoun *they*, which refers back to the compound subject, *Abigail and Benjamin*, from (36). Significantly, either intonational stress on *father* or the parenthetical phrase *not their mother* makes it clear that part of the new information *their father* is also a Focus constituent.

With this framework in hand, we are ready to consider the Hebrew data from the books of Ruth and Jonah.

### Word Order and Information Structure in Ruth and Jonah

In order to illustrate the manifestation of Topic and Focus in BH, we will now turn to the books of Ruth and Jonah. Since pragmatic concepts are heavily context-dependent, it is advisable to begin the construction of an information structure model for BH by analysing discrete narrative units. Once we have developed a working model, it may be tested and refined against other, larger textual units. Of course, it is linguistically plausible that multiple models will be required to describe all of the texts within the Hebrew Bible, given the diversity of texts, time periods and discernible linguistic influences. Thus, for this study, the results are to be taken as descriptive of the information structure utilized by the authors of Ruth and Jonah only, with the intention that these results later be tested against other corpora.

As a first step, the data we look for are basic SV clauses, namely those that lack the complicating influence of Topic or Focus

<sup>38</sup> For discussion of multiple fronting structures like (37a), see L. Haegeman and J. Guéron, *English Grammar: A Generative Perspective* (Oxford 1999), 333–43, 520–4; N. Erteschik-Shir, ‘Focus Structure and Scope’, in Rebuschi and Tuller, *Grammar of Focus*, 119–50; P. Beninca and C. Poletto, ‘Topic, Focus, and V2: Defining the CP Sublayers’, in L. Rizzi (ed.), *The Structure of CP and IP* (Oxford 2004), 52–75.

fronting. But we find very few, and the simple reason for this is that narratives are informationally complex. They always contain multiple themes as they develop, and so the only place that can contain a clause without at least a Topic constituent is at the beginning of the narrative or scenes with new characters.<sup>39</sup> A parade example is the first verse of the book of Job, provided in (38).

- (38) Job 1:1 (S-V-PP; All Rhematic, no Topic or Focus)

*ʾiṣ hāyâ bəʿereṣ ʾûṣ*

‘a man was in the land of Uz’

We have only one example like this in the book of Ruth, at the outset of the genealogy in chapter four, given in (39), repeated from (23).

- (39) (=23) Ruth 4:18b (S-V-O; S=Theme, V-O=Rheme; No Topic or Focus)

*perēṣ hōlîd ʿet heṣrôn*

‘Perez begat Hezron’

The SV clause presents us with one old entity, *perēṣ*, and two new pieces of information, a new verb and object. Critically, we cannot analyse the subject *perēṣ* as a Topic, because there are no other thematic entities from which to choose. The NP *perēṣ* is the only agentive entity available from the preceding clause to serve as the subject of the verb *hōlîd*. Topic does not function redundantly in this way. Aside from these examples, we, therefore, have clear cases of basic SV word order in Ruth and Jonah, but, as I have explained, this is expected.

In accordance with the features of narrative, the remaining SV examples present us with either Topic or Focus information. Consider example (40):

- (40) Ruth 4:1 (S-V-ADV; S=Topic)

*ûbōʿaz ʿālâ haššāʿar*

‘and Boaz went up to the gate’

This SV example orients the reader to which character is acting at a major transition in the book: Boaz. At the beginning of this new scene, the use of Topic-fronting indicates which of the known characters will carry the plot forward. Similarly, consider (41).

- (41) Ruth 3:4 (S-V-PP-O; S=Topic)

*wəhûʾ yaggîd lāk ʿet ʾāšer taʿāšîn*

‘and he will tell you what you should do’

<sup>39</sup> Besides the initiation of narratives or new scenes with new characters, genealogies and proverbs are the only other consistent source of basic SV clauses.

This example makes it clear that personal pronouns used with finite verbs do not always present contrasts (or better, Focus). In fact, most of the occurrences of personal pronouns are used to present Topics (see also Ruth 1:22, 2:13).

Example (42) adds an important piece of information: some lexical and grammatical items do not function as syntactic operators, that is, they do not trigger inversion; *hinnê* is one of these non-operators (see also Ruth 3:2, 4:1, and example [48], below).

- (42) Ruth 2:4 (S-V-PP; S=TOPIC)  
*wəhinnê bō'az bā' mibbêt lehem*  
 'and surprise! Boaz came from Bethlehem'

As in Ruth, the first two SV clauses in the book of Jonah present us with Topic entities: in 1:4a it is Yhwh that is a fronted Topic, in 1:4c it is the ship upon which Jonah was sailing. Consider (43), which provides 1:4c:

- (43) Jon. 1:4c (S-V-O-PP; S=Topic)  
*wəhā'ōniyyā hiššabā ləhiššabēr*  
 'and the ship was about to break up'

Here we have a case of a thematic entity, the ship (introduced already in v. 3), fronted in order to orient the reader to a new Topic. The narrator had been talking about Yhwh, but has now shifted to a new Topic, the ship. The only other simple Topic-fronting clause in Jonah is in 3:3, given in (44).

- (44) Jon. 3:3 (S-V-PREDNOM; S=Topic)  
*wəninwē hāytā 'ir gədōlā lē'lōhim*  
 'and Nineveh was a great city to the gods'

Nineveh has been a thematic constituent since the second verse of the book, and it is again employed immediately preceding this clause, but as a oblique argument. In (44) it takes on a nominative subject role and is fronted as a Topic entity, marking Nineveh as the item out of all the possible thematic constituents to be modified by a predication.

While (38)–(44) illustrate a subject-Topic structure, in (45) we see an example of an object undergoing Topic-fronting.

- (45) Ruth 4:3 (O-V-S; O=Topic)  
*belqat haššādē 'āšer lə'āhīnū lē'ēlimelek mākrā nō'ōmī*  
 'Naomi is selling<sup>40</sup> the portion of the field that belongs to our kinsman, Elimelek'

<sup>40</sup> I take *mākrā* in this clause as a perfect verb used performatively, i.e. 'Naomi hereby puts up for sale'.

The object in (45) is fronted, in the mouth of Boaz, in order to orient the other redeemer and the elders, to the important Topic at hand: the fact that a plot of land belonging to their extended family is being sold. Certainly this is not a Focus — there is nothing to contrast the field with; no other tracts of land are mentioned or relevant in the context. Note how the pragmatic fronting of the object-Topic triggers VS inversion. Another possible example of object-fronting for Topic exists in Ruth 3:17:

- (46) Ruth 3:17 (O-V-PP; O=Topic)  
*šēš haššō'ōrim hā'ellē nātan lî*  
 'he gave me these six (measures of) barley'

In example (46), Ruth simply begins her description of what Boaz had done for her at the threshing floor by specifying the gift of barley. This is not a Theme shared by Ruth and Naomi *within* the world of the narrative, but it is a Theme known to the audience of the narrative. Interestingly, it is used by the narrator to convey the entirety of what transpired between Boaz and Ruth, since Ruth does not share any of the other details with Naomi in the narrative. Thus, not only is it thematic, for this particular exchange it is *the* Theme.<sup>41</sup>

Before we move on to Focus-fronting examples, we should consider a final, common type of Topic-fronting: that which involves a prepositional phrase. Note that while example (47) does not contain an explicit subject, it does illustrate the use of Topic-fronting nonetheless ('C' stands for 'complementizer', which is the syntactic category label for most subordinators).

- (47) Ruth 1:16 (C-PP-V; PP=Topic)  
*kî 'el 'āšer tēlkî 'ēlēk*  
 'because wherever you go, I will go'

The PP *'el 'āšer tēlkî* after the initial function word presents a Topic isolating the two directions of motion within the narrative up to this point: going back to Judah with Naomi or going back to Moab to family. Orpah has made her choice, now Ruth is making hers clear. In this elegant statement of loyalty, the choice that Ruth makes is fronted to orient Naomi to which of the two directions

<sup>41</sup> It is possible that the clause below, from Ruth 3:11, is another example of a fronted Topic-object, but is not entirely clear whether the fronted object functions as the Topic or a Focus (see also Ruth 3:5).

Ruth 3:11 (O-V-PP; O=Topic)  
*kōl 'āšer tō'mrî 'e'šē llāk*  
 'all that you say I will do for you' (Ruth 3:11)

Ruth will comment upon. This Topic-fronting allows the narrator to contribute to Ruth's character development. Ruth could have made a negative statement (e.g. 'I will not leave you, I will not follow Orpah'), but instead she responds to Naomi's plea to leave her with positive assertions about precisely where she will go, stay, and die.

The next three clauses in this extended statement of loyalty maintain the same pragmatic pattern. Significantly, it might be tempting to read the initial PP as a Focus, contrasting *wherever you go* with the understood opposite *wherever I go (by myself/without you)*, but the absence of explicit personal pronouns in the clause prohibits such a reading. Note also that while there is no subject, example (47) provides valuable information about the complexity of the clause structure at the front of the ancient Hebrew clause. Inside the Complementizer Phrase (CP) — the part of the clause to the left of the subject and verb, where both subordinators and fronted phrases are located — the PP has been Focus-fronted.<sup>42</sup> This suggests the structure of the CP is multi-layered, with a Topic Phrase and Focus Phrase residing within the CP domain.

Let us now turn our attention to Focus-fronting, specifically clauses that exhibit single Focus-fronted items, as in (48).

(48) Ruth 1:15 (V-S; V=Focus)

*hinnê šābā yābimtēk 'el 'ammāh wə'el 'ēlōhēhā*

'look! your sister-in-law **has returned** to her people and gods'

The VS clause in (48) presents us with precisely the type of clause at the centre of the SV versus VS debate: in the VS analysis this clause could be basic. But even the context suggests otherwise (not just the demands of an SV framework). In this example, the verb within the quoted speech is focused and therefore moved to the front of the clause (note again that interjections like *hinnê*, which, along with items like vocatives, are not part of the syntax of the clause proper and do not trigger VS inversion). The Focus presents a contrast between the action of the sister-in-law, *she returned*, and its logical opposite, 'staying'.

One might be tempted to read this clause, at least in English, with contrastive stress, and hence the Focus, on the noun *yābimtēk*, resulting in something like 'Your sister-in-law has returned so you return as well'. The problem with this reading of the verse is that for the

<sup>42</sup> On the general nature of complementizer and complementizer phrases, see A. Radford, *Syntactic Theory and the Structure of English: A Minimalist Approach* (Cambridge 1997), 54–8, 95–6.

subjects to be focused like this would require the pronoun *'att* to exist in the second half. The pronoun does not exist in this clause, thus such a reading is not available. Instead, Naomi, the speaker, is contrasting the courses of action that the two daughters-in-law have taken: one *returned*, one *stayed*.

As a last example of single-item Focus-fronting, consider (49), in which we see a Focus-fronted adverb. Notice, by the way, that the Focus-fronting of the adverb triggers VS inversion.

- (49) Ruth 1:21a (ADV-V-S; ADV=Focus)

*warêqām hēšibānī yhw*

‘(and I full went away) but **empty** Yhwh returned me’

The adverb in (49) is Focus-fronted to highlight the contrast between the manner in which Naomi left Israel, ‘full’, and in her opinion the manner in which Yhwh has brought her back from Moab, ‘empty’. And, of course, this contrast establishes a dominant motif in the book as a whole.

In example (50), the initial function word *kî* should trigger VS inversion, yet we have SV order.

- (50) Ruth 4:15 (C-S-V; S=Focus)

*kî kallātēk 'āšer 'āhēbātek yālādattû*

‘because **your daughter-in-law who loves you** bore him’

It is clear that Topic and Focus-fronting are movement operations that occur after the syntactic triggering process that produces VS inversion. So, in this case, the Focus-fronted subject phrase *kallātēk 'āšer 'āhēbātek* is moved to its position after VS inversion, a move that results in a surface order of SV.

For example (51), the subject *hammāwet* is fronted to contrast it not with contextual alternatives, but with logical alternatives — those established solely from the shared knowledge of the speaker-listener outside of a particular discourse.

- (51) Ruth 1:17 (C-S-V-PP; S=Focus)

*kî hammāwet yaprîd bēnî ûbēnēk*

‘indeed (only) **death** will separate me and you’

So *hammāwet* is contrasted with, basically, anything else that typically might be a reason for a widowed daughter-in-law to leave her mother-in-law, such as other family or new marriage. The addition of the English restrictive adverb *only* better captures this particular Focus structure for us than simply giving heavy stress to the word *hammāwet*. Crucially, the ability of the ancient Hebrew CP to contain both a subordinating function word, such as *kî* in (51) and a



fronted Focus item reinforces the complexity of the ancient Hebrew CP and is further evidence for the existence of a Topic Phrase and Focus Phrase residing within the CP domain.

As with Topic-fronting, prepositional phrases can be Focus-fronted, as we see in (52) and (53) (see also Ruth 2:15 and perhaps Ruth 3:11).

- (52) Ruth 1:10 (C-PP<sub>1</sub>-V-PP<sub>2</sub>; PP<sub>1</sub>=Focus)

*kî 'ittāk nāšûb lā'ammēk*

'Indeed! We shall return **with you** to your people'

- (53) Ruth 2:21 (PP-V; PP=Focus)

*'im hannō'āim 'āser lî tidbān*

'**with the lads that are mine** you should stick close'

The book of Jonah contains three examples of single Focus-fronting, in 1:5, 2:5, and 4:10. The short clause in 2:5 is a simple case of Jonah contrasting his actions ('but I ...') with Yhwh's. This type of Focus in chapter two is instrumental in establishing the accusatory and snivelling tone of the psalm in the Jonah's mouth. At the end of chapter four Focus is used in Yhwh's mouth to contrast his own concept of compassion with Jonah's. However, it is the example in 1:5, provided in (54), that is linguistically most interesting.

- (54) Jon. 1:5 (S-V-PP; ENTIRE CP = FOCUS)

*wəyônâ yāad 'el yarkotê hassəpînâ*

'and **Jonah went down into the rear of the ship**'

In this verse we are presented with an SV clause that, in juxtaposition to the preceding statement that the ship's sailors feared for their lives and were frantically trying to keep the ship afloat, asks the reader to contrast Jonah's actions. It is not just the subject that is contrasted with the possible alternatives (e.g. the sailors) but also the predicate (e.g. with 'lightening the ship'). Therefore, we should view this as a case of an entire clause (CP) being moved to the Focus domain.

While the majority of clauses in narrative fit into one of the two categories we have covered, viz. cases of a single Topic or single Focus-fronted constituent, there are a few examples (and numerous examples in poetic texts) of multiple fronting. We have a single occurrence in the book of Ruth, given in (55):

- (55) Ruth 1:21a (SPRO-ADV-V; SPRO=Topic; ADV=Focus)<sup>43</sup>

*'ānî mālêā halaktî*

'I went away **full** (but Yhwh returned me **empty**)'

<sup>43</sup> The possibility and existence of double-fronting in ancient Hebrew dictates that we cannot classify this language as a V2 language, strictly speaking (as DeCaen, 'Placement and Interpretation', does). The presence of multiple items before the

The clause in (55) presents us with the first part of Naomi's complaint, the second part of which we examined in (49). Not only is the adjective *mālē'â* (used adverbially here) placed before the verb, so too is the personal pronoun *'ānî*. The pronoun orients the reader to the desired Theme — in the preceding verse, Naomi had just stated 'Shaddai has made me very bitter', which means that there were at least two possible thematic items from which to select. The fact that Naomi changes from Shaddai to herself as the subject of the next clause is the motivation for the Topic pronoun referring to herself. The adverbial *mālē'â* is then Focus-fronted and is used to create the contrast between *mālē'â* and *rêqām* that the next clause (presented in [49]) completes.

While the author of Ruth did not frequently employ multiple-fronting, the author of Jonah clearly found it to be a useful strategy. There are three examples of double fronting in the shorter book of Jonah (1:14; 2:9; 4:11), all of which are similar to what we saw in Ruth 1:21. More complex is the example of what is likely a triple-fronting in Jon. 2:10, provided in (56).

(56) Jon. 2:10a (S-PP-V-PP; S=Topic; PP=Focus; V=Focus)

*wā'ānî baqôl tôdâ 'ezbāhā lā*

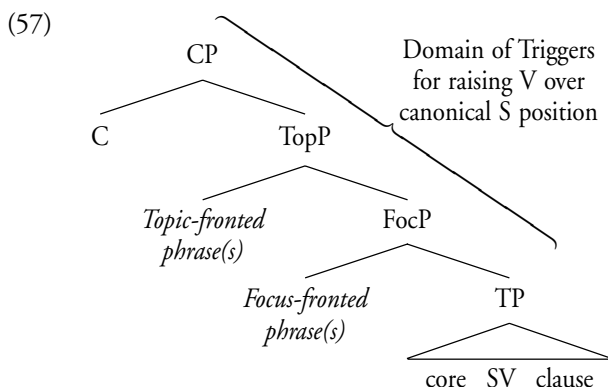
'but I with a voice of thanks, shall sacrifice to you'

In (56) the unambiguously modal verb *'ezbāhā* is preceded by both the subject pronoun *'ānî* and prepositional phrase *baqôl tôdâ*. Why? First, the Topic-fronted subject pronoun orients the reader to the fact that the next predication will concern the referent of *'ānî* (which is, of course, Jonah), not the previously modified 'adherents of worthless idols'. Then the Focus-fronted PP *baqôl tôdâ* presents a contrast between what Jonah's manner of action and the implied manner of thanklessness or silence of those in the previous clause, Jon. 2:9. Finally, the verb *'ezbāhā* also carries Focus in order to contrast how those from v. 9 'abandon' their faithfulness while Jonah not only remains faithful but intends to 'offer a sacrifice' to God.<sup>44</sup>

verb obviously means that the verb cannot be in the second syntactic position in the clause. Hence, the motivation for using the more general reference 'triggered inversion' (after Shlonsky, *Clause Structure*).

<sup>44</sup> It is possible that Ruth 1:14b is also a case of double-Focus, with both Ruth and the verb 'clung' marked for a contrast with Orpah and 'kissed'. However, in order for the verbal contrast to make sense logically, we must assume semantic gapping and reconstruct it: Orpah kissed her mother-in-law and left, but Ruth did *not* kiss (?) her mother-in-law and clung to her. Perhaps, but I am doubtful. Rather, this clause is best taken as a case of subject-Focus fronting, or perhaps Focus on both the subject and verb.

From the data in Ruth and Jonah, it appears that for these authors the domain of fronting, what is also called the ‘left periphery’, has the structure given in (57), which nicely accords with a great deal of current research on the architecture of the left periphery and fronting phenomena.



Since at least the grammars of Ruth and Jonah exhibit multiple Focus-fronting, it must be that the Focus Phrase can project at least two distinct levels. What requires further study is whether ancient Hebrew exhibits multiple Topic-fronting, and whether we can discern an order *within* the Topic and Focus fields when multiple Topic and/or Focus phrases exist.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

The majority of the clause types in Ruth and Jonah (or in any biblical book) do not fulfil the typological criteria used to determine basic word order, especially the basic clause type criterion. This means that at the centre of the VS versus SV basic word order argument stands a small set of clauses, but this is an important set if we want to classify ancient Hebrew typologically and account for information structure accurately. If we start with the VS position, a necessary position is that no SV clause lacks a Topic or Focus operator, but VS

<sup>45</sup> For example, Beninca' and Poletto, 'Topic, Focus, and V2', argue for Italian that 'the encoding of informational relations in the syntax of the left periphery follows a very precise semantic path', which they identify as: [Topic [Hanging Topic [Scene Setting Constituents [Left Dislocation [List Interpretation]]]]][Focus [Contr. Adverbs/Objects [Contr. Circum./Quant. Adverbs [Informational Focus]]]].

clauses may be pragmatically neutral. In contrast, within the SV framework developed in this study, a few SV clauses may actually be basic and thus pragmatically neutral, but any VS clause without a syntactic or semantic trigger must contain a Topic or Focus operator. A case in point is the VS example from (30), repeated in (58).

- (58) Ruth 4:17 (V-S; V=FOCUS)  
*yullad bē lənoʿōmî*  
 ‘a son **has been born** for Naomi’

The conventional VS position would analyse this as a clause with no pragmatic marking. But from the context we already know that the boy has been born, and that Naomi has taken for herself some sort of caretaker role. Moreover, the specific context — an exclamation by the women of Bethlehem — suggests that this is no simple clause; rather, it is a statement of surprise, and what could be more surprising than old Naomi having a ‘son’.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the reason for the Focus-fronting of the verb in (58) is to present a counter-expectation statement: Naomi, a widow who is presumably beyond the age of child-bearing (at least according to her impassioned assertion in 1:12), has, contrary to all expectations (including her own), ‘given birth’, and is thus, in the larger narrative, finally redeemed.

Both this explanation of the VS example in (58), along with the fact that such clauses are very rare in Ruth and Jonah<sup>47</sup> (as well as within all narratives in the Hebrew Bible), suggests that an SV model such as I have proposed here has greater descriptive and explanatory adequacy than VS models. One who adheres to the SV position has a rational explanation for the rarity of simple VS clauses: verbs are rarely focused in discourse; rather, nominal participants (whether agent or patient) or verbal modifiers (e.g. manner, location) are overwhelmingly the focused items. Thus, verbs are rarely raised to the

<sup>46</sup> Note that if there were any Focus-marking for Naomi, which is tempting to read, then we should have the active verb with Naomi as an explicit subject. Instead, the use of the passive clause in Ruth 4:17 makes it clear that the Focus is on the event, not the participants.

<sup>47</sup> The sole VS example in Jonah is in the poem, in 2:6a:

Jon. 2:6a (V-S; *chiasm*)  
*āpāpūnî mayim ʿad nepeš təhôm yəsōbābēnî*  
 ‘(the) waters have encompassed me, up to (my) throat/life, the deep has surrounded me’

In this example, the syntactically and semantically non-triggered verb is not Focus or Topic fronted either. Rather, this is a perfect example of chiasm at its most elegant. The first colon presents V-S order and the second presents S-V order, with the PP ‘up to throat’ acting as a Janus member, facing both cola.

left-periphery unless there exists a focus item that has triggered such movement; in other words, VS order is rare unless something else precedes the verb.

In this article I have sketched a working model for investigating issues of word order variation in BH, a model that is built upon both typological and generative linguistics. Significantly, I have concluded that the data suggest a SV analysis for BH rather than the conventional VS analysis. Taking this empirically-driven SV conclusion as a starting point for an analysis of information structure, I described a framework for understanding the interaction of four core pragmatic concepts: Theme, Rheme, Topic, and Focus. The resulting model of core BH syntax, and the left periphery in particular, allows for the type of flexibility, including multiple-fronting structures, that BH exhibits.