

15 April 2016

Dear Dr Kutsko

The steering committee of the Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew section writes with respect to the communications from the Program Committee concerning the non-renewal of the Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew section in the last few months. We address this letter to you instead of the chair of the program committee because of on-going difficulties in communicating with the program committee chair and because the decisions of the program committee reflect neither the status of the field nor the wishes of SBL's membership, as detailed below. We are not aware of any other appeal process to the program committee's decisions.

We wish to protest in the strongest possible terms both the outcome and the process of the renewal of our section. After indicating the problematic aspects of both outcome and process, we present our proposal for a *via media* for the future. We appeal to you for your assistance in resolving this cul-de-sac.

## **1.0 The non-renewal of LBH as a section**

### **1.1 The importance of linguistic inquiry to the study of Biblical Hebrew**

The Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew (LBH) section has provided a unique forum at SBL for the application of linguistic theory and methodology to the Hebrew Bible since 1983. Despite the outcome of the committee's decision, there remain many linguistic questions concerning Biblical Hebrew which must critically be sorted out in order to further the exegesis and interpretation of the biblical text. The work of the section must therefore continue, even if it must do so in another venue.

When LBH encountered difficulties in renewal last October, the chair of the section contacted the most important scholars in the area of philology to inquire whether the field of philology really had changed in recent years so as to render the Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew section irrelevant. Without exception, all of them strongly affirmed the importance of linguistics and its distinction from philology. LBH also submitted more than ten letters of support from a wide range of SBL sections, including Philology in Hebrew Studies (PHS), affirming the importance of the section and recommending that it be continued. LBH also provided extensive documentation concerning publications that have resulted from presentations within the section. We are deeply concerned that all of this documentation has had no influence on the committee's decision. Instead the committee is convinced that "integrating the two [viz. LBH and PHS] best serves the interests of scholarship" (2 March 2016 letter). We strongly disagree with this assessment and we have the support of our colleagues in Biblical Hebrew and adjacent fields.

### **1.2 The question of overlap with Philology in Hebrew Studies**

Based upon the upgraded status of PHS as a section and the downgraded status of LBH to a seminar (which we discuss below in section 2) as well as their desire that LBH merge with PHS, it seems that the program committee is convinced that philology encompasses linguistics and that philology has primacy over linguistics as a discipline. These two aspects of philology we have strongly argued against in our letter for renewal dated 10 November and we ask that you re-read this letter which is attached. Instead of revisiting those arguments here, however, we wish only to draw attention to the description of the two sections as listed on the SBL web-site

**Philology in Hebrew Studies description** -- This program unit aims to take up the dual challenge of reflecting self-critically on the nature of philology as a discipline and developing rigorous methodologies of philological study, particularly as may pertain to the Hebrew Bible and related literature

**Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew description** -- The goals of this section include: (1) to provide a unique, cross-disciplinary forum for the application of modern linguistic theory and methodology to the study of biblical Hebrew; (2) to encourage interest in linguistics and its advantages for biblical exegesis and interpretation among biblical scholars who do not have prior training in linguistic theory; (3) to promote publication of scholarly works which apply linguistics to biblical Hebrew

What is telling in the two descriptions is that Philology is still searching for “the nature of philology as a discipline” and on “developing rigorous methodologies of philological studies.” In other words, Philology is not sure how their discipline should be delimited nor do they have at their disposal rigorous methodologies. By contrast, Linguistics has at its disposal rigorous, empirically-based methodologies and a well-defined discipline. There could not be a more stark difference between the two.

The differences between Philology in Hebrew Studies and LBH can also be clearly discerned in their respective Calls for Papers in 2016:

**Philology in Hebrew Studies** -- For 2016, the Philology in Hebrew Studies section invites papers for an open session. Proposed papers should either (a) reflect self-critically on the nature of philology as a discipline, including how we develop and maintain rigorous methods of philological study; or (b) model and apply such reflection in the study of some aspect of the Hebrew Bible and related literature. In addition to this open call for papers, we are planning one invited session on the role of intellectual history in philological study and one review panel of E. Mroczek's *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity* (Oxford: OUP, forthcoming 2016).

**Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew** -- The Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew section solicits papers for four joint sessions. The first session (co-sponsored with Biblical Hebrew Poetry) is entitled “Linguistic Features of Biblical Hebrew Poetry.” This session will examine the question of whether poetry and prose in the Hebrew Bible have different linguistic features, what those features are and how they should be described. At one end of the spectrum are scholars who believe that prose and poetry are distinct linguistic systems; at the other end of the spectrum are scholars who believe that prose and poetry comprise one linguistic system. We are also interested in analyses that account for (give reasons for) the linguistic variation and/or differences between prose and poetry. The second session (co-sponsored with NAPH) is entitled “Mitigation and Intensification in Biblical Hebrew.” Research in pragmatics and discourse studies have shown that speakers make use of a rich variety of mitigating and intensifying strategies in order to heighten the effectiveness of the conversational interaction. This session will explore mitigating and intensifying devices in Biblical Hebrew, including, for example, restrictive adverbs, modal expressions, deictic shifts, negative polarity items, rhetorical and conducive questions, conditionals, and oaths. The third session (co-sponsored with NAPH) is entitled “Interrupted Syntactic Structures.” This session will explore various syntactic phenomena that “interrupt” the sentence syntax including vocatives and terms of address, parenthetical remarks, sentence fragments, “scrambling” and ellipsis. The fourth session (co-sponsored with NAPH) is non-thematic and

entitled “Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew.” Papers that address the study of Biblical Hebrew using a well-articulated linguistic method are welcome, and those that apply linguistics to particular Biblical Hebrew texts are especially encouraged.

As can be clearly seen, there is in fact no overlap. There is no interest on the part of Philology to engage in critical linguistic questions with respect to Biblical Hebrew. Instead, they work to define their discipline and to develop rigorous methodologies which might be applied to the Hebrew Bible, they examine the intellectual history of philology and the literary imagination in Jewish antiquity. We support them in their endeavors in this regard, but we do not see overlap between their interests or areas of inquiry and those of linguistics.

We also wish to state clearly that there is no expertise within PHS to set up linguistically-oriented sections or to vet linguistically-oriented proposals. It is therefore impossible for SBL to relegate linguistic inquiry into Biblical Hebrew to the Philology section. In this regard, the recommendation of the AMPC that LBH “merge with Philology” is particularly troubling.

Finally, we take issue with the claim of the program committee (21 December 2015 letter) that “Since the program unit’s second main goal is to further biblical exegesis, however, we see that some of the two groups’ central goals are indeed intimately related.” The LBH steering committee wishes simply to note that biblical exegesis is the goal of scores of SBL program units, but they address biblical exegesis from varying methodologies, disciplines and perspectives. The program committee has therefore provided no compelling reason for LBH and PHS to be integrated. Put differently, if LBH must be integrated with PHS on the grounds of shared exegetical interests, then there are literally scores of other program units that must be integrated with PHS as well.

### **1.3 The downgrading of LBH to a seminar**

The steering committee of LBH is especially troubled by the downgrading of the LBH section to a seminar for several reasons. First, a seminar involves only a small group of scholars and is not practical for LBH. This year LBH had 34 proposals, which would be impossible in a seminar. These proposals reflect research on a wide spectrum of linguistic questions and cannot be accommodated in a seminar format. Second, LBH has a very well-defined plan for joint sessions with adjacent sections, as set out in our letter for renewal. This also is not feasible with a seminar format. Third, LBH routinely has more than 100 persons attending their sessions. Fourth, one of the goals of LBH as a section is to educate biblical scholars about applying linguistics to Biblical Hebrew – this is not possible in a setting in which papers are summarized and discussed but not read.

In sum, to go from a section to a seminar seems to reflect an erroneous view of the AMPC that LBH is irrelevant to biblical studies and that its sessions are attended only by a few individuals, but this viewpoint does not comport with the views of many members of SBL or with the attendance and participation in LBH sessions.

We address the issue of the process by which LBH became a seminar in 2.2 below.

### **1.4 The requirement that LBH collaborate with PHS**

The LBH steering committee objects to the requirement of collaboration with Philology for the following reasons. First, the methodologies, goals and interests of the two sections are quite disparate (see 1.2 above). Second, it is not feasible. How exactly does a seminar “collaborate” with a section when they have completely different manners of working? (We sought clarification concerning the collaboration requirement on 30 December 2015 and have thus far not received

specific information on this regard. Reiterating the “requirement” on 2 March and 12 April without any further information is not helpful.)

We wish to note that the requirement of collaboration appears to be an evolving one. We were initially informed (21 December 2015) that we must collaborate with PHS or *consider* working as a seminar: “Should you decide against a closer collaboration with philology, the AMPC would suggest that you continue your work as a seminar.” However, before we ever received clarification concerning the type of collaboration and whether or not we were collaborating on an equal footing with Philology as two sections, we were then informed on 2 March that we are a seminar. We are now also informed (12 April) that we must collaborate with Philology even as a seminar. The result is that collaboration is dictated to LBH without regard for the fact that linguistics is a discipline separate from philology with different methodologies and different goals.

In 3.0 below we suggest a possible path forward.

## 2.0 The Process

The process of the review has often been confusing, unprofessional, ad hoc and, it seems, prejudicial. We also are troubled by the correspondence (and lack thereof) from the chair of the program committee. (We attach all correspondence with the program committee chair for documentation.) We wish to highlight the following particularly troubling aspects.

### 2.1 Overview of the process

The review process proceeded as follows:

A	30 September 2015	On-line submission of LBH renewal materials, including letters of support from adjacent sections
B	20 October 2015	Request from AMPC for revised proposal regarding relation to Philology in Hebrew Studies and “perceived impact of the unit’s work on related scholarship”
C	20 October 2015	Request from LBH chair for further clarification
D	22-27 October 2015	Correspondence between LBH chair and Charles Haws concerning clarification from the AMPC
E	3 November 2015	Reply from AMPC refusing to provide additional information
F	10 November 2015	Submission of LBH letter with additional information for renewal
G	18 November 2015	LBH letter to Charles Haws requesting information concerning when a decision concerning renewal can be expected
H	19 November 2015	Reply from Charles Haws that the committee is meeting during SBL
I	3 December 2015	LBH letter to Charles Haws requesting information concerning the decision before the Call for Papers must be posted on-line
J	7 December 2015	Reply from Charles Haws that the committee is “working diligently to get you an answer”
K	9 December 2015	Computer-generated letter from Charles Haws to submit the LBH section Call for Papers on-line before 14 December deadline
L	21 December 2015	Letter from AMPC with response to renewal application
M	30 December 2015	Request from LBH chair for clarification of type and nature of “collaboration” and whether PHS also has a requirement of collaboration with LBH

N	30 December 2015	Reply from Charles Haws that “Anselm and I will be in conversation the first week of January and then in touch with you.”
O	27 January 2016	Letter from LBH chair to Charles Haws requesting reply to questions.
P	28 January 2016	Reply from Charles Haws that the “committee has been unable to meet to discuss your latest email. It is, however, working in that direction and will be in touch with you as soon as it can.”
Q	2 March 2016	Letter from AMPC indicating downgrading of section to seminar and requirement of collaboration with PHS
R	17 March 2016	Letter from LBH chair to Charles Haws requesting clarification concerning the status of LBH as a section in 2016.
S	12 April 2016	Letter from AMPC chair that LBH is a section in 2016 and then a seminar in 2017-2021. Reiteration of requirement of “collaboration” with PHS section.

## 2.2 Problems with the review process and decision making

We object in the strongest possible terms to the way in which the review process was handled, the decision made and the decision communicated with LBH.

First, the letter of 21 December should have indicated clearly the outcome of the review process. However, there is nothing in the letter that explicitly states whether or not the section is reviewed. There is instead only the requirement of collaboration with PHS and the suggestion that “should you decide against a closer collaboration with philology, the AMPC would suggest [N.B. not “dictate” or “demand” or “decide”] that you continue your work as a seminar.”

Another troubling aspect of the letter was the fact that it did not indicate that PHS also has a requirement to collaborate with LBH. Communication of the LBH chair with the chair of PHS in December and early January indicated that PHS was granted status as a section without any prerequisite of collaboration with LBH. The members of the steering committee of LBH believe that it is unfair to ask for a one-sided collaboration. Instead, collaboration must be a two-way requirement between equal partners. Attempts to clarify the nature and relationship of collaboration (letter of LBH chair to program committee chair on 30 December 2015) are still not answered, but the letter of AMPC of 2 March implicitly accepts that collaboration must be two-way in the sense that PHS must now also make a plan for collaboration with LBH.

Second, the goalposts for the renewal of the section are constantly shifting. On 20 October 2015, the AMPC was concerned about the “perceived impact” of LBH. On 21 December 2015, the AMPC is concerned about the “fragmentation of the program.”

Third, requests for clarification and further information are ignored, delayed or rebuffed. To give only two examples, the request on 30 December for clarification concerning the AMPC’s decision of 21 December received no reply until 2 March (and then only a partial reply). Of even greater concern was the refusal to provide information concerning what exactly the committee wanted as conveyed by Charles Haws to the LBH chair on 3 November 2015: “The committee would refer back to its letter and other information in my previous emails. The committee did not think that the point you make below is necessarily helpful in addressing what the committee would like to see.” What exactly the committee would “like to see” is still not known.

Fourth, the delay in receiving the outcome of the review process meant that the 2016 program had to be put on-line before actually receiving any notification of the decision that the AMPC made

during the annual meeting in November. This was compounded by the delay in replying to the letter of the LBH chair seeking clarification of the 21 December letter which was only written on 2 March, after the call for papers closed.

Fifth, we object to the fact that the section was turned into a seminar on 2 March after the review process was complete in November 2015 and the results communicated to LBH on 21 December. It is our belief that the renewal decision should not be an evolving one. As we noted in our e-mail to Charles Haws on 17 March 2016, we also object to changing the section into a seminar after the call for papers is closed. The AMPC seems to agree, since on 12 April they granted LBH the status of a section through 2016.

Sixth, we object to the statement in the letter of 2 March that “Charlie Haws will follow up with both units about a brief explanation of this collaboration after this year’s Annual Meeting.” To wait until *after* the annual meeting to explain to us how collaboration might work is not feasible. We need to know now so that we can communicate within the LBH steering committee and with PHS concerning how such a collaboration should take place. It is not feasible to wait until after the annual meeting since the Call for Papers 2017 will be due shortly afterwards. In addition, the annual meeting provides an opportunity to meet with the PHS steering committee in person, which would be very fruitful.

In sum, we find the workings of the AMPC to be confusing, contradictory, constantly evolving and filled with unnecessary delays which make our work as a steering committee more difficult than it needs to be.

### **3.0 A proposed path forward**

In light of the significant differences between linguistics and philology and the well-defined methodologies of linguistics, it is our belief that both LBH and PHS should continue as sections. However, the present situation in which LBH is denigrated to seminar status and PHS becomes a section is not acceptable.

We request the following modifications to the plan of the AMPC:

1. LBH will continue alongside PHS as a section through 2021.
2. LBH and PHS, as equal section partners, will plan one joint thematic session each year for 2017 and 2018. After the 2018 meeting, LBH and PHS will jointly re-evaluate whether there is interest in such a joint session and whether new knowledge is created as a result of the joint session. At the present time, we do not agree with the AMPC’s insistence on the collaboration with Philology, but we are willing to explore the feasibility and productivity of this arrangement for two years.
3. In addition to the joint session with Philology, LBH will continue with our plans for future joint sessions with other sections.

In conclusion, we wish to state that we are committed to the application of linguistic theory and methodology to Biblical Hebrew as one means to further biblical exegesis. We believe that our stance represents the viewpoint of many members of SBL. It is our hope that the AMPC and the council will respect the viewpoints of their members.

### **4.0 Further matters for consideration**

We are very concerned about the ways in which the program committee operates. We note with concern that there are other important sections relating to the languages of the Bible that also have

not been renewed in recent years, specifically, Applied Linguistics for Biblical Languages and Bible Translation. This is a troubling trend.

In our view, the program should be shaped so that it meets the needs of the membership of SBL. In this regard, it should be a grassroots, bottom-up process, rather than a top-down process, especially since we do not see individuals on the program committee who can evaluate the value of linguistics for Biblical Hebrew. In our view, a decision concerning the renewal of a section in which linguistics is applied to Biblical Hebrew should be made on the basis of the success of the section and its standing within the field. If a program unit can demonstrate they have paper proposals and can put up quality sessions and if they have the support of their colleagues in adjacent fields, then the program unit should be renewed, even if the program committee does not understand or care about linguistics.

The concern of the program committee with respect to the “fragmentation of the program” is, we believe, a red herring. A conference of more than 10,000 people *should* have enormous variety reflecting multiple viewpoints and methodologies in the study of the Bible. For such a conference to attempt to force sections into uniformity and “integration” seems to us to be in conflict with SBL’s goals of reflecting the diversity of vantage points in the study of the Bible.

In conclusion, we thank you for your time in considering this appeal. We hope you will respect our section and the time and energy as volunteers that we have put into making it a success.

We respectfully request a timely response to this letter and to our proposal for a way forward.

Kind regards  
Jacobus A. Naudé, chair LBH  
Tania Notarius  
Adina Moshavi  
John A. Cook