Book Review


A small but extremely valuable monograph which both practitioners of exegesis and translators will find handy. The author, Dr Lénart de Regt (henceforth LdR) teaches Bible translation and Hebrew at the Free University of Amsterdam and, at the same time works as a Translation Consultant for the United Bible Societies. One may say that this book originated from LdR’s grappling with linguistic theory about reference and from the practical work on texts as he taught future translators their work or monitored translations as these were being elaborated.

The question which LdR attempts to answer in this monograph may be informally formulated in this manner: how are human characters referred to in Biblical texts once they have been introduced into the narrative? Human characters are labelled as ‘participants’ insofar as they participate in the action of the ‘plot’ (p. 2) though the book considers also a number of non-narrative texts. LdR shows that there exist several patterns of reference in the many languages into which the Bible is translated, and that the reference patterns followed by the authors of the Hebrew/ Aramaic Bible need not agree with those of the receptor languages into which such translations are carried out. This underlines the importance of studies like LdR’s both for translators and also for exegetes who take rhetorical issues seriously as they close-read the text for its semantic wealth.

The book is made up of four unequal sections. In the first section(pp.1-12) LdR discusses the theoretical issues involved and situates the study of this linguistic phenomenon in biblical Hebrew and Aramaic within a cross-linguistic environment. Both similarities and idiosyncrasies exist. Naturally, the author had to assume ‘that the transmitted Masoretic text does not represent an artificial language’ (p.6) though a degree of artificiality has always be assumed in literary versus spoken language[ One could perhaps have referred to how the various scholars dealt with this issue in the collection of essays edited by Walter R. Bodine and entitled *Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew* (Eisenbrauns;Winona Lake1992)]. Unfortunately, we cannot test this degree of artificiality since ancient Hebrew is no longer spoken; but
LdR had to mention this assumption that once biblical Hebrew was a living and spoken language since now this language is dead (p.18 note 25). Even if the first section of the monograph concentrates on theory, the target audience of this study is never lost sight of. On pp. 11-12 translators are warned that learning what reference patterns the biblical authors employ is essential for understanding what they want to say of their characters; these patterns may differ sharply from those followed by the language they are working with so that the biblical patterns cannot simply be reproduced into the translation.

In the second section (pp.13-54) LdR discusses ‘usual patterns’ of participant reference. The author assumes that “Overspecifications of previously-mentioned participants, e.g. proper names and proper names with an extended description, are not used arbitrarily or merely for the sake of redundancy for an easier communication flow...” Basically he reviews two uses of such patterns: a) Patterns employed for structural purposes: if a participant already known from foregoing narrative or text is referred to overspecifically, this may mark the beginning of new paragraph or a new action. Overspecifications “...have a discourse structuring function, marking the beginning of a new theme about the discourse entity, thus helping us to analyse the structure of a text; the incoming information is not to be connected to the last sentence read” (p.14). This may sound simplistic. But the biblical authors were using the resources which the language was providing them with; and, as LdR comments in section 3.1.2, this pattern was employed also for implicit commentary and emphasis. b) Patterns linked to the poetics of the composition: In the second part of section two (pp.23-54) LdR treats how major and minor characters fare in participant reference. In other languages major characters are prone to be referred to by pronouns while minor ones by proper names or by nouns. This happens also in biblical Hebrew and as with the other parts of his monograph, LdR provides several examples to register this linguistic phenomenon. So that syntax may betray the narrative strategy of the narrator, because it reveals which of the characters in his narrative he/she considered central and which secondary.

However important the second section is where LdR discusses the normal patterns that we are to expect in reading biblical Hebrew, it is probably the third section that will attract attention; here LdR studies a number of ‘special patterns’. The ones he focuses upon include overspecification (especially through repetition) (pp.57-72), delayed identification (pp.73-80), and what LdR terms, rhetorically significant order in a clause (pp.81-84). The author discusses
as patterns on their own the change of number in the book of Deuteronomy (pp.85-87), pronominal or inflectional references to quoted participants (pp.88-92), and participants being referred to in different names (pp.93-94). Section four (pp.95-97) carries the general conclusions of this research and there follows the list of abbreviations employed in the monograph (p.98), nine pages of bibliography (pp.99-108), and four indexes which makes of the book a valuable tool indeed: biblical references, participants named, the translations in dialogue with which LdR wrote his monograph, and finally that of the authors mentioned or cited.

What can a reviewer say about a monograph of this kind? Such studies are indeed more than welcome for they help understanding the text. The present reviewer would pass two remarks: a) As one reads LdR’s study one cannot escape noticing how frequently the author refers to biblical studies of a synchronic, narratological, or rhetorical nature. The names of Robert Alter, Adele Berlin, Jan Fokkelman, and others feature often in the discussion. This is probably in the nature of things. Participants reference patterns are linguistic phenomena which a writer may be under constraint to use; however, the section on unusual patterns in LdR’s discussion should open our eyes to the margin of manipulation of linguistic phenomena allowed the creative spirit of the writer as he composes his texts. Phonological, morphological, syntactic, and discourse phenomena are made to serve poetic purposes. Knowledge of these phenomena helps detecting authorial agendas especially if this knowledge is compounded with domestication with rhetorical procedures. And as it well known, the first stage towards a correct translation is a correct exegesis which cannot prescind from considering rhetorical matters [Cfr Jan de Waard/Eugene A. Nida, *From One Language to Another. Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating*, (United Bible Societies; New York 1986)].

LdR may have provided plausible solutions to some cruxes interpretum like the dual reference to the merchants who traded Joseph from his brothers in Gen 37 as both Ishmaelites and Medianites (pp.52-53); or the problem of the alternation of singular and plural forms in the book of Deuteronomy (pp.85-88). For these tensions within the text the more popular solutions were of diachronical character; LdR has shown that synchronical explanations when coupled to linguistic observations are not to be excluded. Unfortunately, these solutions of perennial difficulties are never definitive and alternatives cannot be excluded.

b) The writer of this monograph comes from both a linguistic as well as the Old
Testament backgrounds. He is at home in both fields as the handling of the numerous texts has shown. He hinges his observations of the participants reference patterns in biblical Hebrew on solid theoretical pegs in the opening section, as we have seen. One could have perhaps added some reference to what some experts in syntax [Robert S. Kirsner, Iconicity and Grammatical Meaning: Grammar Inside and Outside the Clause(1985); John Haiman, “The Iconicity of Grammar: Isomorphism and Motivation,” Language 56(1980) 515-540; Ettien Koffi applied this theory to biblical Hebrew in his article “There is more to ‘and’ than just conjoining words” in The Bible Translator 49/3 (1998)332-344 though some reserve on his grammatical analysis is probably due] are calling the ‘iconicity of grammar’. This especially in those paragraphs where LdR discusses the order of constituents in a clause (para. 2.2.3 & 3.3). On the other hand, one understands that weighing one’s treatment of linguistic phenomena with too much theoretical information, may harm the purpose of a monograph like this which is meant to serve above all the practical purpose of helping exegetes and translators grasp the meaning of specific texts in the Bible.

The monograph has been well proofread and the present reviewer could detect only two mistakes: on p. 6 one cannot be sure to which book of Scripture the reference 5:13 is being made. On p.46 the initial small letter of ‘den’ should become caps: Den Exter Blokland.

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