

Issues in Bible Translation, 4

Acts 4, 25a: Recognizing a Concentric Arrangement

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Scholarship's approach to this verse has always been text critical and grammatical but never literary and rhetorical; this explains why this verse has always been experienced as a crux by both 'tradents' of textual traditions¹ as well as by exegetes and translators.

"The text of this verse is in a very confused state. The reading of the old uncials is anomalous both grammatically (how is the phrase τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν to be construed?) and theologically (where else does God speak through the Holy Spirit?). Many attempts have been made to account for the confusion in the manuscripts."² In their *A Translator's Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles*³, Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida comment that the Greek text of this verse "is not strictly grammatical nor entirely clear." Ernst Haenchen qualifies the text of verse 25 as "the most ancient attested in manuscripts, even though grammatically impossible."⁴ In his commentary on Acts Professor Joseph A. Fitzmyer writes that "The text of this introductory clause in the Alexandrian text is garbled"⁵ and cites M. Dibelius's description of it as "one of the most impossible clauses in the entire Book of Acts."⁶

The solutions offered to date were text critical and translational. By the former we mean those attempts made in view of understanding the text by adding or subtracting components from the current version as we find it in Nestle-Aland,

1. For this concept of 'tradents' cf. D.C. Parker, *The living text of the Gospels*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997; James A. Sanders, "the Issue of Closure in the Canonical Process" in Lee Martin McDonald & James A. Sanders (eds.), *The Canon Debate*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody Massachusetts 2002, 252-266.
2. Cf. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, United Bible Societies, Stuttgart 1971, 321.
3. United Bible Societies, New York 1972, 105.
4. *The Acts of the Apostles*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1971, 226.
5. *The Acts of the Apostles*, Anchor Bible 31, Doubleday, New York 1998, 308.
6. M. Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, SCM Press, London 1956, 90.

*Novum Testamentum Graece*⁷; by the latter we understand most old and modern translations which approach the text *ad sensum* without accounting for its syntax.

Why has Acts 4, 25a become a *crux interpretum*? One should first keep in mind that this is not a simple ‘introductory clause’ to direct speech⁸ notwithstanding the participle εἰπὼν marking the beginning of a citation from the Greek text of Psalm 2,1-2. It forms part of what Cynthia L. Miller would call a ‘quotative frame’⁹ by which she means ‘the speech of a reporting speaker’, and distinguishes this discourse genre from ‘quotation’ which is the ‘speech of the reported speaker’.¹⁰ It consists of one of two declarative, very emphatic statements appended as qualifications of the specifying personal pronoun¹¹ σὺ in verse 24 which, in turn qualifies the sentence initial vocative Δέσποτα that refers to God.¹² The other statement is found in verse 24b.

It is the syntax of verse 25a that troubled textual tradents and exegetes. It is made up of the article ὁ that opens the statement (one wonders why the narrator¹³ has not used the conjunction καὶ to marry the two statements) and the participle εἰπὼν that introduces the citation in vv.25b-26 and that is defined by the statement initial article; these two clausal components envelop two series of nominals, all in the morphological form of the genitive, and an instance of the preposition διὰ. The problem touches the lack of clear explanation for the genitive morphology of the greater part of the nominals; it is evident that the preposition διὰ governs¹⁴ the phrase πνεύματος ἁγίου; but what is governing the phrases τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν and στόματος Δαυὶδ παιδὸς σου?

Text tradents and textual critics attempted to resolve the situation either by pruning

7. Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart ²⁷1993.
8. Pace Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 308.
9. “Discourse Functions of Quotative Frames in Biblical Hebrew Narrative” in Walter R. Bodine(ed.), *Discourse Analysis of Biblical Literature. What it is and What it Offers*, Scholars Press, Atlanta, Georgia 1995, 155-182.
10. *Ibid.*, 156 note 3.
11. For this use of the personal pronouns cf. Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield ²1994, 129.
12. Cf. Haenchen, *Acts*, 226.
13. Understood narratologically; cf. Jean Louis Ska, “Our Fathers Have Told Us.” *Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives*, Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, Rome 1990, 39-64; Paul A. Buhagiar, *Strutturi Narrativi fir-Rumanz Malti*, PhD Dissertation, University of Malta, 2004.
14. Cf. Liliane Haegeman, *Introduction to Government & Binding Theory*, Blackwell, Oxford ²1994 for this concept in syntax.

our text, which has been consistently considered as the oldest, out of components which were supposed to have grown on to a simpler form of the text, and/or by adding another διὰ in front of the phrase στόματος Δαυὶδ παίδος σου. In this regard, it will suffice to cite *in toto* Haenchen's text critical comment: "This text has been overloaded with two interpolations: τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν was added to Δαυὶδ παίδος σου but now stands in the wrong place; διὰ πνεύματος ἁγίου was inserted before διὰ στόματος, but at the same time the second διὰ dropped out."¹⁵ The most popular solution that was offered would excise the phrase τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν and add the preposition διὰ before στόματος. Such textual critical operation is presupposed in the version of *The Revised English Bible*: "you said by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of David your servant." According to Metzger¹⁶, the editorial committee responsible for *The Greek New Testament*¹⁷ decided to maintain the text untouched even though its members recognized it as unsatisfactory: "the Committee nevertheless considered it to be closer to what the author wrote originally than any extant forms of the text".

The text in modern translation traditions

On the other hand, most translations rendered the text *ad sensum*, that is, they sought to make sense of text's various components without bothering to draw a coherent exegetical picture of each component part: "c'est toi qui as dit par l'Esprit Saint et par la bouche de notre père David, ton serviteur," *La Bible de Jerusalem* (1978). [The editors add a note: "Texte altéré et traduction incertaine."] "Tu che per mezzo dello Spirito Santo, per bocca del nostro padre Davide tuo servo, hai detto...", *La Bibbia Nuovissima Versione* (1983); "You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant our father David...", *New International Version* (1984); "Tu per mezzo dello Spirito Santo hai fatto dire a Davide, nostro padre e tuo servitore, queste parole profetiche," *Bibbia in Lingua Corrente* (1985); "you have put these words in the mouth of David, our father and your servant, through the Holy Spirit...", *Christian Community Bible* (1988); "It is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant...", *New Revised Standard Version* (1989); "By means of the Holy Spirit you spoke through our ancestor David, your servant, when he said," *Today's English Version*² (1992); "toi qui as mis par l'Esprit Saint ces

15. *Acts*, 226 note 3. For other detailed discussions of these textual issues cf. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 321-323; Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 308-309; Gerhard Schneider, *Gli Atti degli Apostoli*, Paideia, Brescia 1985, 490-491.

16. *Textual Commentary*, 323.

17. United Bible Societies, Stuttgart⁴1993.

paroles dans la bouche de notre père David, ton serviteur,” *Traduction Oecumenique de la Bible* (1995); “Durch dem Heiligen Geist hast du unseren Vater David, deiner Diener, sagen lassen,” *Gute Nachricht Bible* (1997); “And by the Holy Spirit you spoke to our ancestor David. He was your servant, and you told him to say,” *Contemporary English Version* (1997); “qui Spiritu Sancto per os patris nostri David pueri tui dixisti,” *Nova Vulgata*; “Toi, tu as parlé par la bouche de notre père, ton serviteur David, par le souffle sacré, et dit,” *La Bible Chouraqui*¹⁸; “Tu as donné ton Esprit Saint à David notre ancêtre et ton serviteur. Tu as dit par sa bouche;” *Parole de Vie* (2001); “C’est toi qui, par le Saint-Esprit, as fait dire à David notre ancêtre et ton serviteur” *La Bible Expliquée* (2004).

A few comments are required: a) One should notice that *La Bible de Jerusalem* has been the only version that registered in note the presence of difficulties for translation of the text. b) Although these translations more or less agree on how to understand the various components of the text, they differ in the translation strategy they adopt. For instance, who is the subject of the participle εἰπών? By far, the majority takes σὺ as the subject. The third edition of *Il-Bibbja* published by the Malta Bible Society in 2004 reads:

Int li nebbajt bl-Ispirtu s-Santu lil David missierna,
gaddej tieghek, u b’fommu ghedt...

“You have inspired by the Holy Spirit our Father David,
your servant, and through his mouth you have said....”

But a handful of renderings, especially those who belong to the dynamic equivalent tradition, give the impression that David is the speaker and the one responsible for the subsequent utterance in vv.25b-26 (see TEV). Others make David the beneficiary of God’s revelatory activity (BLC). c) Some unwittingly make the Δεσπότης utter his message in Ps 2,1-2 ‘by the Holy Spirit’ as if He was Himself inspired (NRSV and Nova Vulgata)! The last two versions listed as well as the Maltese version make it a point to clarify the role of the Holy Spirit in the revelatory process which has the Lord for ultimate source.

18. Desclé de Brouwer, Paris 2001.

A better solution

A better solution to the explanation of apparent ‘ungrammaticality’ and ‘unacceptability’¹⁹ of the current text under study would take into consideration two other possibilities besides the textual issues: a) the possibility that beneath the present word order of the components within the participial clause there exists an authorial rhetorical intent; b) the possibility that grammatical analysis has not been exhausted by exegetes and translators.

a) *Rhetorical intent in the disposition of the components in the clause* Exegetes applying traditional New Testament grammar could not understand how the nominative form of the article ὁ that heads the clause is immediately followed by the genitival phrase τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν even if they have learned in the meantime to consider as ‘acceptable’ and hence ‘grammatical’ “the occasional freedom of word-order which we encounter in Acts” because it is not “exclusive to Luke” but is “widespread in Hellenistic literature.”²⁰ Nor could they explain by traditional parsing the other genitival phrase or phrases στόματος Δαυὶδ παιδὸς σου. Apparently, this cluster is not under the government of the preposition διὰ. Or is it?

On the other hand, the presence of the participle εἰπὼν to close the declarative statement and at the same time to introduce the subsequent citation from Psalm 2, together with a number of similarities in syntax to the first declarative statement in v.24b, raised the possibility for exegetes that situate Luke-Acts within Hellenistic literary tradition, that the author of Acts is employing rhetorical devices which would require changes in word-order, and hence one should not seek to exegete the text pretending to find the clause components in a linear sequence. “Luke was very aware of what language does and made good use of rhetoric to achieve his goals.”²¹

19. For these concepts in modern approaches to syntax cf. Haegeman, *Government & Binding Theory*, 7-9; N. Smith & D. Wilson, *Modern Linguistics. The Results of Chomsky’s Revolution*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1979, chapters 1-2.

20. Haenchen, *Acts*, 78.

21. James M. Robinson, “Acts” in Robert Alter & Frank Kermode (eds.), *A Literary Guide to the Bible*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1987,470. For the consequences of taking rhetoric of the texts in due consideration in exegesis and translation cf. Jan de Waard, “Hebrew Rhetoric and the Translator” in L. J. de Regt et alii (eds.), *Literary Structure and Rhetorical Strategies in the Hebrew Bible*, Van Gorgum, Assen 1996,242-251.

Such exegesis would note two phenomena of rhetoric: i) That the couple of statements containing two creedal formulae about God as creator (v.24b) and God as revealer through Scripture (v.25a)²², are actually disposed chiasmically ABB¹A¹ with the AA¹ representing the two participles defined by the article $\acute{\omicron}$, and the BB¹ representing the material in between, though one should also notice that the material in verse 24b is actually governed by the participle ποιήσας while that coming before the verb εἰπών qualifies this verb of saying adverbially.²³ ii) That verse 25a has in turn been organized into a concentric structure²⁴ around the centre διὰ πνεύματος ἁγίου στόματος Δαυίδ. The other elements in this concentric composition are the outermost components, that is, the article and the participle both in the nominative, and the two genitival phrases τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν and παιδὸς σου which intuitively are seen as qualifying David and relating him to the speakers and the addressee of the utterance. Graphically explained, the elements are disposed in this manner:

a	$\acute{\omicron}$	
b	τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν	
c	διὰ πνεύματος ἁγίου στόματος Δαυίδ	
b ¹	παιδὸς σου	
a ¹	εἰπών	

From this disposition it becomes evident that the a/a¹'s refer to the addressee of the prayer, the Master or Lord, the two b/b¹'s elements refer intuitively to David who is related to the speakers as their ancestor and to the addressee as his servant. The composition explains clearly the place of these two relational phrases. The centre of the structure contains the διὰ phrase, all in genitival morphological form, but does the preposition govern the entire phrase or only the first two words, 'Holy Spirit'?

22. Cf. commentaries for the relevance of these elements of theological contents.

23. On chiasmus one may consult John W. Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity. Structures, Analyses, Exegesis*, Gerstenberg Verlag, Hildesheim 1981; Nils W. Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1942; Dionisio Mínguez, *Pentecostés. Ensayo de Semiótica narrativa en Hch 2*, Biblical Institute Press, Rome 1976, 27-28.

24. Chiasmus and a concentric structure are not identical though they have been thus confused in the past. While in the former the centre is constituted by the innermost corresponding members of the construction, in the latter the nucleus consists of one element around which the entire structure revolves. Cf. Mínguez, *Pentecostés*, 27-29; Roland Meynet, "The Question at the Centre: a Specific Device of Rhetorical Argumentation in Scripture," in Anders Eriksson et alii (eds.), *Rhetorical Argumentation in Biblical Texts*, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 2002, 200-201.

b) *An elliptical phrase* The attempts to resolve the problems via textual emendation usually involved the preposition διὰ within the nucleus of the concentric composition. The most popular variant was that which inserted another διὰ in front of the cluster στόματος Δαυίδ. But it is possible that it was this repetition of the preposition that the writer wanted to avoid making use of a syntactical procedure that his language allowed, ellipsis or brachylogy. According to F. Blass and A. Debrunner²⁵ there are ‘ellipsis in the broad sense’, ‘ellipses proper of the formulaic (conventional) type’ and ‘brachylogy’. Probably the first and the third apply best for our case. Ellipsis in the broad sense “applies to any idea which is not fully expressed grammatically and leaves it to the hearer or reader to supply the omission because it is self-evident” (479). Among the possible cases of such family of ellipses the authors cite what classical grammarians termed the ἀπὸ κοινοῦ figure which consists of the repetition of a grammatical element which is left to be supplied by the addressee of the discourse. The other phenomenon, brachylogy, “is the omission, for the sake of brevity, of an element which is not necessary for the grammatical structure but for the thought” (483).

Probably the first of the two phenomena is slightly better suited to explain our text here. Staying by the entries in *A Concordance to the Greek Testament*²⁶, the phrase constituted by the preposition διὰ + the genitival form of the nominal στόμα normally defined by the article + the name of the writer or speaker concerned + some kind of grammatical nexus to the other phrase διὰ πνεύματος ἁγίου may be considered as stock in Luke-Acts for saying that a particular citation from the ‘writings’²⁷ has been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (cf. Lk 1,70; Acts 1,16; 4,25; 8,18.21). The implied reader²⁸ would have recognised immediately what the writer wanted to say even though he, for aesthetic reasons, dropped the preposition διὰ, or alternatively loaded its only instance with a double duty pretending that it serves (by commanding) both the first phrase πνεύματος ἁγίου as well as the immediately following cluster στόματος Δαυίδ which is then further qualified by the two relational adjuncts in b/b¹.

25. *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1961, art.479-484.

26. H.K. Moulton(ed.), T&T Clark, Edinburgh⁵1978, 905.

27. For the concept of ‘writings’ as Holy Scripture cf. R. Mayer, “Scrittura/γραφή” in L. Coenen & E. Beyreuther & H. Bietenhard, *Dizionario dei Concetti Biblici del Nuovo Testamento*, Edizione Dehoniane, Bologna 1976, 1704-1713.

28. For this concept cf. Ska, “Our Fathers Have Told Us”, 42.

Conclusion

The current text of Acts 4,25a as reproduced in the Nestle-Aland's *Novum Testamentum Graece*, the 27th edition, is not to be considered as simply "closer to what the author wrote originally than any of the other extant forms of the text", as the committee that edited *The Greek New Testament* of the United Bible Societies thought²⁹; it is very probably the original text as it coheres with the degree of literary sophistication often attributed to the author of Luke-Acts. Its exegesis requires from operators in the field: a) recognition that the clause components are concentrically rather than linearly disposed; b) awareness that the author resorts to ellipsis in order to avoid having at the very centre of the structure two instances of the preposition διὰ commanding two instrumental phrases when the language allowed him to use one preposition while playing two roles; c) acceptance that the focus of this creedal formula is that the contents of the utterance had ὁ δεσπότης³⁰ as its ultimate source, and the agency of the Holy Spirit, and of 'our ancestor David your servant' who was acting (composing) under the direct influence of the Holy Spirit; d) restructuring in the manner Prof Jan de Waard understood it³¹; this restructuring should avoid making God 'speaking by the Holy Spirit' as REB and NRSV have done; at the same time the agency of the Holy Spirit and that of David who did the actual speaking are closely related within the structure so that this connection needs to feature within the restructured text. The present reviewer believes that the text as reproduced by *Il-Bibbja*, or *Parole de Vie*, or *Contemporary English Version*, or that of *La Bible Expliquée* is to be preferred to others which translate the concept of agency in the preposition διὰ through other prepositions.³²

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29. Cf. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 323.

30. "God is so addressed precisely as Creator," Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 308.

31. "Hebrew Rhetoric and the Translator," 244.

32. Thanks are due to Dr David Clark for proof-reading the text.