

CRITICAL NOTES

JANUS PARALLELISM IN GEN 49:26

Writing in the recent Naphtali Lewis *Festschrift*, Cyrus Gordon discussed the phenomenon of “Janus parallelism.” He wrote:

The subtleties of parallel structure in ancient Near East literatures are many, so many that centuries of intensive analysis of the Old Testament have not yet uncovered all of them in the Bible. One kind of parallelism is quite ingenious, for it hinges on the use of a single word with two entirely different meanings: one meaning paralleling what precedes, and the other meaning, what follows.¹

Gordon cited an excellent example, Cant 2:12:

הנצנים נראו בארץ
עת הזמיר הגיע
וקול התור נשמע בארצנו

The blossoms appear in the land,
The time of זמיר has arrived,
The voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

The word זמיר can mean either “pruning season” or “music.” In this case, it means both. Gordon commented: “The poet knew how to exploit the double meaning of *zāmîr*. Retrospectively it parallels the first member of the tristich pertaining to the growth of the soil; proleptically it parallels the final member pertaining to song.”²

A second example of Janus parallelism may be seen in Gen 49:26a:³

ברכת אביך גברו
על ברכת הורי עד
תאות גבעת עולם

The blessings of your father surpass
The blessings of הורי עד
The delight of the eternal hills.

In this tristich, עד הורי is to be translated both “my progenitors of old” (when pointed עד הורי as in MT) and “mountains of old” (when pointed עד הורי⁴).⁵ Its familial connotation resumes אביך in the first stich and its topographic connotation anticipates גבעת in the third stich.

The first meaning was recognized by *Tg. Onqelos*, which translated הורי as אבהתי, “my fathers,” by *Tg. Pseudo-Jonathan*, which translated הורי as אבהתוי, “my fathers,” and by *KJV*,

JPSV, and various other English versions. Vulgate *patrum eius* also points to such a reading.

The second meaning was recognized by the LXX, which translated הורי as *ὄρεων μόνιμων*, “steadfast mountains,” by Rashbam, who wrote גברו . . . גברו אביך . . . גברו, “The blessings of your father . . . surpass the blessings of the mountains,” and more recently by *RSV* and several other English renderings.

An attempt to combine the two connotations of הורי may be exhibited in the *Tg. Yerushalmi*. It translated Gen 49:26a as follows:

ברכתא דאבוך יתוספון על ברכתא
דבריכו יתך אברהם ויצחק דמתילין בטוריא
ומן ברכת ארבעתי אמהתא דמתילין בגלימתא
שרה ורבקה רחל ו Leah

May the blessings of your father be added to the blessings
Wherewith Abraham and Isaac who are like mountains blessed you,
And to the blessings of the four mothers who are like hills,
Sarah and Rebekah, Rachel and Leah.

The patriarchs Abraham and Isaac are equated with טוריא, “mountains,” and the four matriarchs are equated with גלימתא, “hills.” The second of these comparisons was probably facilitated by *נבעת* in the *Urtext*. The first of these equations may have been an ingenious attempt by the Aramaic translator to deal with the two meanings of the Hebrew הורי. The familial connotation is embodied in ויצחק, the topographic connotation is embodied in טוריא, and the “equal sign” is represented by ב- דמתילין, “who are like.”

The attempt by some scholars⁶ to emend the text is unnecessary. In so doing, they fail to see one of the beautiful subtleties of Hebrew poetry. As Gordon concluded, “The skillful exploitation of twin meanings, providing through a single word twofold parallelism, is artistry of a high order.”⁷

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¹C. H. Gordon, “New Directions,” *BASP* 15 (1978) 59.

²*Ibid.*, 59–60.

³The Masoretes divide the verse after הורי and connect תאות with a *maqṣeph*. The division here is that which appears in *BHK*.

⁴The use of *hōlem* to represent *ā* presents no problem. Cf. C. H. Gordon, “Hebrew Language,” *IDBSup*, 394, where he stated, “Occasionally Ashkenazic pronunciation preserves ancient features. The rendering of every *qameṣ* as *o* is corroborated by *matres lectionis* in texts from Talmudic Babylonia in which קרוך is spelled בורוך; עולם is spelled עולום, etc.” For Biblical examples, cf. הוילך in Josh 6:13, גלון in Josh 20:8, 21:27, ניסף in I Sam 27:4, שוחט in Jer 9:7, and בישורים in Ezek 34:25.

⁵A similar polysemy may occur in Amos 1:13:

על בקעם הרות הגלעד
למען הרחיב את גבולם

The first line is generally translated “for their ripping open the pregnant women of Gilead,” but a second, simultaneous translation, “for their storming (or invading) the mountains of Gilead,” is also possible. Although “mountains” never appears as הרות in Hebrew, contextually this second translation makes sense. Gilead is a mountainous region and the second line refers to the Ammonites expanding their border. The two ways of capturing Gilead are to depopulate it, as implied in the translation, “for their ripping open the pregnant women of Gilead,” and to occupy it, as implied in the translation, “for their storming (or invading) the mountains of Gilead.” This

simultaneous double meaning of the stich is facilitated by the ambiguous nature of the biconsonantal root **הר**.

⁶E.g., E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1964) 363, 369–70, who emended the first stich to read **וּבְנֵי וּבְנֵי וּבְנֵי** and **הוֹרֵי** to read **הֶרְרִי**, and thus translated, “Blessings of grain stalk and blossom, Blessings of mountains eternal, The delights of hills everlasting.”

⁷Gordon, “New Directions,” 60.

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