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 subleties 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:

הנק続ける næʾer nĕḵet
עשת חותם לוח
וֹקֶל הַחַטַּר נִשְׁפְּסֵי מְאָרֶצֶנִי

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

The word næʾer 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 næʾir. 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 מאור
על ברכת אוהד תכ
אקרי נשת עלם

The blessings of your father surpass
The blessings of אוהד תכ
The delight of the eternal hills.

In this tristich, אוהד תכ is to be translated both “my progenitors of old” (when pointed אוהד תכ as in MT) and “mountains of old” (when pointed אוהד תכ).⁴ Its familial connotation resumes אסף in the first stich and its topographic connotation anticipates נבטי in the third stich.

The first meaning was recognized by *Tg. Onqelos*, which translated אתבַּהַי אֶלֶּה "my fathers," by *Tg. Pseudo-Jonathan*, which translated אתבַּהַי אֶלֶּה as "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 it as ὑφοίμα, “steadfast mountains,” by Rashbam, who wrote המאכרים ... בנהי, “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 הררי may be exhibited in the Tg. Yerushalmi. It translated Gen 49:26a as follows:

May the blessings of your father be added to the blessings
Where with 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ぎょうり，“mountains,” and the four matriarchs are equated withひらぎ、“hills.” The second of these comparisons was probably facilitated by대교 in the Utext. The first of these equations may have been an ingenious attempt by the Aramaic translator to deal with the two meanings of the Hebrew הררי. The familial connotation is embodied inארה, the toponymic connotation is embodied inぎょうり, and the “equal sign” is represented by 다, “who are like.”

The attempt by some scholars 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.”

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2Ibid., 59–60.
3The Masoretes divide the verse after הררי and connect והeditary with a maqqeph. The division here is that which appears in BHK.

4The use of הולמ to represent ṣ appears no problem. Cf. C. H. Gordon, “Hebrew Language,” IDBSup, 394, where he stated, “Occasionally Ashkenazic pronunciation preserves ancient features. The rendering of every qamey as o is corroborated by matres lectionis in texts from Talmudic Babylonia in which הולמ is spelled אֹס, רכָּה, בּדרבר, etc.” For Biblical examples, cf. ד to ד in Josh 6:13, ק to ק in Josh 20:8, 21:27, י to י in I Sam 27:4, י to י in Jer 9:7, and ד to ד in Ezek 34:25.

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

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 הררי 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 רַדְרַדְר יְאָבָדָה מַעֲשֵׂה וַתְּבַנֵּל.

E.g., E. A. Speiser, Genesis (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1964) 363, 369–70, who emended the first stich to read הָרָדְרָדְרָד יְאָבָדָה מַעֲשֵׂה וַתְּבַנֵּל יְיָּהָיָה, and thus translated, "Blessings of grain stalk and blossom, Blessings of mountains eternal, The delights of hills everlasting."

'Gordon, "New Directions," 60.