Old Testament Exegesis, Fourth Edition

A Handbook for Students and Pastors

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Note: Excellent sources of alternative translations are the authors' translations in technical commentaries. A scholar who has studied a book intensively is usually best equipped to offer a nuanced translation. And for late-breaking information on more precise meanings of individual Hebrew words, check the annual listing of words discussed in such databases as *Old Testament Abstracts* (4.12.1), via either its book format or its computerized format.

2.3. Grammatical Data

Here is where all those hours spent learning your Hebrew grammar can finally pay off. The goal of grammar is accuracy. In any language, bad grammar may offend our tastes, but its greater danger is that it may block our comprehension. In the exegesis process, a failure to appreciate the grammar in an OT passage is not simply a failure to observe niceties of speech; it is a failure to be sure that you know exactly what was or was not said.

2.3.1. Identifying grammatical ambiguity: Judges 19:25

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וַיַּחֲזֵק הָאִישׁ בְּפִילַגְשׁוֹ וַיֹּצֵא אֲלֵיהֶם

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So the man seized his concubine, and brought her out to them.

Exegeting Judges 19, you become aware of a puzzling apparent inconsistency. The Levite seems rather inconsiderate (v. 28) of what he has put his concubine through in giving her over to a gang of rapists (vv. 22–25), and yet later he seems so furious at what they (predictably) have done to her that he calls all Israel to war over the matter (vv. 29–30; chap. 20). Carefully, with an eye toward precise grammar, you reread the relevant portions to determine if your initial impression has been accurate. Your special interest is in understanding exactly who the parties involved in verse 25 were.

You note that each of the characters in the story is referred to in more than one way. Specifically, the Levite is referred to as אִישׁ לֵוִי ("Levite," v. 1); אִישָׁהּ ("her husband," v. 3); חֲתָנוֹ ("his son-in-law," vv. 5, 9); and הָאִישׁ ("the man," vv. 7, 9, 17, 22, 28, etc.). The Ephraimite man in whose house he stayed at Gibeah is called אִישׁ זָקֵן ("an old man," v. 16); הָאִישׁ ("the man," vv. 16, 22, 23, 26); and הָאִישׁ הַזָּקֵן ("the old man," vv. 17, 20, etc.). You see from a quick comparison that either the Levite or the old man can be referred to as simply הָאִישׁ (the man). Who then is the actual

grammatical referent for הָאִישׁ (the man) in verse 25? The concubine's identity is rather clear, but הָאִישׁ (the man) is apparently ambiguous. Deciding requires weighing the evidence on two fronts.

First, you observe that outside of verse 25, both the Levite and the old man may be called strictly הָאִישׁ (the man) or may be called הָאִישׁ (the man) with a modifier, as in הָאִישׁ הָאֹרֵחַ ("the man who was traveling," v. 17) or הָאִישׁ בַּעַל הַבַּיִת ("the man who owned the house," v. 22). Thus הָאִישׁ (the man) in verse 25 is truly ambiguous. The lack of a modifier makes it so.

Second, you note that in verses 22–25 it is clearly established that the owner of the house was in conversation with the rapists, but there is no indication that the Levite was. You then decide, rightly, that הָאִישׁ (the man) has as its grammatical referent the old man, not the Levite.

Grammatical analysis does have its limits. In the instance of Judges 19, a separate question remains: Would not the Levite know what the old man had done? Grammar can lead to that question but cannot answer it. Its solution is found both in the analysis of the structure of the passage (a typically laconic biblical narrative, the passage omits all but essential details and expects you to realize that the Levite was unaware of the old man's actions) and in the analysis of the historical context (as we know from archaeology, many Israelite houses had their living/sleeping quarters—where the Levite presumably was—in a back room, as far from the courtyard door as possible, so it would have been difficult for the guest to hear what was going on when the old man confronted the rapists).

2.3.2. Identifying grammatical specificity: Hosea 1:2

לֵךְ קַח־לְךָ אֵשֶׁת זְנוּנִים וְיַלְדֵי זְנוּנִים כִּי־זָנֹה תִזְנֶה הָאָרֶץ מֵאַחֲרֵי יְהוָה

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Go, marry a woman of prostitution and have children
of prostitution because the land is completely
committing prostitution away from Yahweh.

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Exegeting Hosea 1, you are immediately confronted with an interpretational question: Did God actually command Hosea to marry a prostitute? Many commentators have answered in the affirmative, often suggesting that Hosea's wife probably turned to prostitution sometime after their marriage; and Hosea, looking back on his past at a later point when he was seeking an analogy for Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh, recast the story of his marriage as if he had been commanded to marry a

prostitute in the first place. However, these interpreters do not necessarily have Hebrew grammar on their side.

There are only three words for "prostitute" in Hebrew: קְדֵשָׁה (cult prostitute), זֹנָה (common prostitute), and כֶּלֶב (male prostitute). You observe the obvious: None of the three is used here. Instead, a special compound term appears: The word אִשָּׁה for "woman" or "wife" is used in what Hebrew grammarians call the "bound form" or, most commonly, the "construct form" in combination with a governing noun in the masculine plural, זְנוּנִים. Checking any Hebrew reference grammar (4.3.1), you are reminded that the masculine plural is one standard way in Hebrew for conveying abstraction—in this case, not "prostitute" but the concept "prostitution," thus in theological contexts, the opposite of "faithfulness." Moreover, you find that nouns in the "construct" are often related logically to their governing noun in the manner of "something characterized by," so that אֵשֶׁת זְנוּנִים would tend to mean "a woman characterized by [the abstract concept of] prostitution" rather than "a prostitute." You also observe that Hosea's children are called יַלְדֵי זְנוּנִים, "children of prostitution," in a precisely parallel Hebrew construction: "children characterized by [the abstract concept of] prostitution" rather than "children of a prostitute." You note as well that the verse goes on to say that the land (of Israel) זָנֹה תִזְנֶה, "is completely committing prostitution." Finally, the grammars tell you that the preposition employed at the end of the verse, מֵאַחֲרֵי, "away from," is a compound preposition literally meaning "away from after," thus here "in the other direction from going after [following]" Yahweh.

Thus the same thing is being said about Hosea's wife, about the children that are eventually born to him, and about the land of Israel in general—and in no case is the literal meaning apparently related to actually selling sex. But what, then, is being said? If neither the wife nor the children nor the population of Israel are being called literally "prostitutes," what is the charge against them? You must answer that question partly by reference to literary context and biblical context, though still with a keen eye to the Hebrew grammar involved. Looking at the way that the Hebrew root in question, *znh* (זנה), is used predominantly elsewhere in Hosea (and other prophetical contexts, notably Ezekiel), you find that it is employed mainly metaphorically, to convey the sense of "ultimate [religious] unfaithfulness" to Yahweh. Returning to Hosea 1:2, you conclude that the verse is conceptually parallel to Isaiah 64:6 or Psalm 14:2–3 (cf. Rom. 3:10–12). It makes the point, in a somewhat hyperbolic manner, that all Israel has abandoned Yahweh's covenant, so that even Hosea's wife and

children—no matter whom he marries—will be tainted by the same unfaithfulness that "the land" in general displays.

2.3.3. Analyzing orthography and morphology

As 1.3.2 states, the analysis of Hebrew orthography or morphology is not a task that beginning students can easily undertake. But its value is often inestimable in connection with problem passages, especially where the decisions of the medieval Masoretes about how words were to be understood may be suspect.

Orthographic analysis removes an oddity: Genesis 49:10

לֹא־יָסוּר שֵׁבֶט מִיהוּדָה
וּמְחֹקֵק מִבֵּין רַגְלָיו
עַד כִּי־יָבֹא שִׁילֹה
וְלוֹ יִקְּהַת עַמִּים

In the third line, the Hebrew seems to say "until Shiloh comes" or "until he comes to Shiloh." Both meanings, you conclude, are odd, and your reading reveals a general dissatisfaction on the part of translators with the masoretic vocalization as it stands. In this case a convincing solution will require some ability to appreciate ancient Hebrew orthography (spelling style), which requires a knowledge of Hebrew beyond the beginner level (see 1.3.2).

The problem may involve vocalization, orthography, and even word division. The combination עַד כִּי (until) seems clear enough. But is there another way to construe יָבֹא שִׁילֹה? Since שִׁילֹה (Shiloh) is the really odd factor here, you decide to try to reanalyze it. Removing the vowels will remove the medieval Masoretes' possibly incorrect opinion as to vocalization. You now have שׁילה. Can the word be divided? Could a spacing problem have resulted in שׁילה? You divide שׁי from לה. Looking up שׁי, you find that its consonants are those of a normal Hebrew word (שַׁי) meaning "gifts(s), present(s), tribute(s)." But what about לה? Referring to Cross and Freedman's *Early Hebrew Orthography* (4.3.2), you learn that לה was how לוֹ (to him) was once spelled. Accordingly, שׁילה could be שַׁי לה, "tribute to him." Now you look closely at יָבֹא. Again, removing the masoretic accentuation so as to have a fresh look at vocalization, you get יבא. Cross and Freedman tell you that in early poems like Genesis 49, the original orthography was without vowels and thus quite ambiguous. So the consonants יבא could represent what was later vocalized as יָבֹא (comes) or יָבִיא

("brings," hiphil) or יוּבָא ("is brought," hophal), and so on. The last option catches your attention, because it fits the context so well.

You conclude (with some well-justified second-guessing of the Masoretes, whose vocalizations, after all, represent only their opinions about how words were to be construed long after a passage was originally written) that the "Shiloh" line of the poem should read as follows:

עַד כִּי־יוּבָא שַׁי לֹה

until tribute is brought to him

The fact that this meaning comports perfectly with the following parallel line ("And the obedience of the nations is his") confirms your conclusion.

A check of the relevant literature (step 2.12) provides welcome support: W. L. Moran proposed precisely this interpretation, by far the most convincing in the literature, in an article in *Biblica* 39 (1958): 405–25, titled "Genesis 49:10 and Its Use in Ezekiel 21:32."

Some of the same sort of skill necessary to produce a conclusion may be necessary to evaluate a conclusion confidently. Even if it might never have occurred to you to reconstrue Genesis 49:10 as above, choosing among the options that have occurred to others still requires some careful work. Thus your exegetical effort will reward you as an evaluator of scholarship, not just as a creator of scholarship. In other words, as your exegetical skills develop, you become a better reader—not just a better writer—of exegetical studies.

2.4. Lexical Data

Considerable subjectivity is involved in deciding which words and phrases are the most important ones in a passage. That is one reason why this step comes here in the process rather than earlier. You need to be as familiar with your passage as possible before choosing and ranking terms for close study. Let your own curiosity and the knowledge level of your audience guide you. Where necessary, see which words the commentators select to comment on. But be careful here. A commentator who has dwelt on a word in chapter 5 of a commentary may not be inclined to belabor it again in chapter 10. Trust your judgment as to what is important. For the frequency of occurrence of a given word in the OT, you can consult almost any computer concordance, or, for example, Even-Shoshan's concordance (4.4.2). For an idea of how much might be said about a term if one wanted

to be relatively exhaustive in one's analysis, see, for example, *TDOT* or *TWOT* (4.4.2).

2.4.1. The value of looking at key words: 2 Chronicles 13

Following the instructions in 1.4, you go through the chapter, picking out terms that you think might call for an explanation. At first you choose freely, without concern for how many terms you will end up with. These are the terms you select:

verses		
3, 17	אֶלֶף	thousand
3, 17	אִישׁ בָּחוּר	able-bodied soldier
4	הַר צְמָרַיִם	Mount Zemaraim
4	כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל	all Israel
5	מַמְלָכָה	kingship
5	לְעוֹלָם	forever
5	בְּרִית מֶלַח	covenant of salt
6	עֶבֶד שְׁלֹמֹה	Solomon's servant
7	רֵקִים	worthless
7	בְּלִיַּעַל	good-for-nothing
7	רַךְ־לֵבָב	indecisive
8	לֵאלֹהִים	as gods
9	לְמַלֵּא יָדוֹ	to consecrate himself
9	לֹא אֱלֹהִים	no gods
10	בַּמְלֶאכֶת	in the work
11	הַשֻּׁלְחָן הַטָּהוֹר	the clean table
15	וַיָּרִיעוּ	and they raised the cry
15, 20	נָגַף	routed/struck
18	אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיהֶם	God of their fathers
19	(בֵּית־אֵל) וְאֶת־בְּנוֹתֶיהָ	(Bethel) and its surrounding villages
22	מִדְרַשׁ הַנָּבִיא עִדּוֹ	commentary of the prophet Iddo

How many of these terms you want to or are able to discuss—and to some extent even which ones you will select initially—depends on the scope of your paper/project. You try to choose relatively few words for detailed

analysis, realizing that terms needing no extensive discussion can be commented on in the translation notes or elsewhere in the exegesis. You choose five terms as requiring substantial discussion. They are the following:

אֶלֶף, "thousand" (vv. 3, 17)

Your reading has informed you that אֶלֶף probably means "military unit" rather than literally "1,000" here, and you need to explain the significance of this in your exegesis.

בְּרִית מֶלַח, "covenant of salt" (v. 5)

This unusual term, attested already in Numbers 18:19 and attested in concept although not exact wording in Leviticus 2:13 and Ezra 4:14, will certainly shed light on what Abijah thinks of the Davidic-lineage kingship.

לֹא אֱלֹהִים, "no gods" (v. 9)

Such a term is bound to be important for the understanding of polytheism/idolatry from the orthodox Judean perspective.

נָגַף, "rout, defeat, strike down," and so on (vv. 15, 20)

Most translations render the word differently in verse 15 from verse 20. Understanding its usage can help to identify the divine role in the events described.

מִדְרַשׁ הַנָּבִיא עִדּוֹ, "commentary of the prophet Iddo" (v. 22)

An understanding of this document would surely contribute to your appreciation of how the Chronicler compiled his history and the audience for whom he was writing.

From this group of five you decide to choose בְּרִית מֶלַח to analyze by a full word study. You must now follow the process described in 4.4.3 for both בְּרִית (covenant) and מֶלַח (salt). Referring also to the theological dictionaries (4.4.4) as well as the larger Bible dictionaries (*IDB*, *ISBE*, etc.; cf. 4.12.5), you learn that בְּרִית מֶלַח is a way of saying, in effect, "perpetual covenant" and perhaps even "perpetual royal covenant," because of the role of salt as a preserver/perpetuator (cf. Lev. 2:13) and because of the association of salt with royal covenant meals (cf. Ezra 4:14). Indeed, the richness of this term occasioned a book by H. C. Trumbull titled *The*

Covenant of Salt (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899), which, if available to you, would certainly be worth consulting carefully in the process of your word study.

2.5. Form

Knowing the form of a passage invariably pays exegetical dividends. If you can accurately categorize a piece of literature, you can accurately compare it to similar passages and thus appreciate both the ways in which it is typical and the ways in which it is unique. Moreover, the form of a piece of literature is always related in some way to its function.

The example below concentrates especially on this relationship of form and function. In the process it touches on aspects of the analysis of general literary type (1.5.1), specific literary type (1.5.2), subcategories (1.5.3), life setting (1.5.4), and relative completeness of form (1.5.5; 1.5.6).

2.5.1. Form as a key to function: Jonah 2:3–10 (Eng. 2–9)

In the course of analyzing the literary context of this Psalm of Jonah, you become aware that there is a question about its placement in the book. Some scholars have considered it an interpolation, inappropriate to its present context. Indeed, some have even suggested that its style is not consistent with the style of the rest of the book, ignoring the fact that style is virtually always a function of genre and form, so that a poetic psalm could hardly fail to reflect a different style from that of the rest of the book, which is narrative. However, to evaluate their arguments effectively and fully, you must determine what type of psalm it is: its form.

For this purpose you consult a book or commentary that categorizes psalms according to their forms. You happen to choose Bernhard W. Anderson's *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (with Stephen Bishop, 3rd ed. [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000]) and from it conclude that the Psalm of Jonah is apparently a "thanksgiving psalm" because it has the five features that Anderson tells you make up most thanksgiving psalms. They are (a) an introduction that summarizes the psalmist's testimony (v. 3 [2]); (b) a main section describing the past affliction (vv. 4–7a [3–6a]); (c) an appeal for help (v. 8 [7]); (d) a description of the deliverance (v. 7b [6b]); (e) a conclusion in which God's grace is praised and the psalmist promises to demonstrate appreciation to God (vv. 9–10 [8–9]). Thanksgiving psalms, you note, are prayers of gratitude for rescue from a misery now past.