

Application

The above study points out the importance of analyzing structure in understanding Hebrew chiasmic poems. In this case the whole prayer has a chiasmic structure in content emphasizing the "goodness" of God in giving them the "land", and a final emphasis on the plight of the people on the "land". Furthermore, the stanzas have both a word meaning and a metrical chiasmic structure which emphasize their central lines. These central lines are shown to relate thematically both internally within the stanza, and to their counterparts in the overall structure of the prayer. I believe that any serious interpretation or translation of Hebrew poetry must include a discourse analysis concentrating on metrical patterns and chiasmus in word meaning in both the overall text and the individual stanzas.

The translator first needs to try to find help in handbooks and commentaries to be able to recognize these patterns in the Bible. Then he needs to think what systems his own language has for emphasizing the high point and key words in the text. A biblical chiasmic peak will likely have to be restructured in order to convey the message properly. It will probably be necessary to put the important phrase in a different form using some appropriate marker in the language. This may be some special word, affix, or grammatical variation. It is sometimes a change of pace, such as the number of words per sentence, or the number of verbs as over against other parts of speech. It is sometimes clearer if the order of clauses is changed so the peak comes at the end or the beginning of the passage instead of in the center like the Hebrew. Section headings can also be used to highlight the main point, especially in cases such as this with the overall prayer. Other suggestions are to put the key words of the high point in italics or bold print, or to use slanted indentation to show the peak by the way the text is printed. These methods may work in highlighting peaks in the individual stanzas. Marking the peak is an important task for the translator. The biblical message should not lose the impact the original style gave it.

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NEW TESTAMENT SEMITISMS

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New Testament scholars agree that the grammatical character of the New Testament conforms to the standards of the *koine*, or "common", Greek of the first century A.D. The authors of the New Testament have usually observed, though as by mere instinct, numerous constructions which are typically Greek. But while there is no special "New Testament

grammar", we are nevertheless justified in examining the language of the New Testament by itself to gain a knowledge of its special characteristics, just as we might do with any book written in modern English. One of the influences which gives to the Greek of the New Testament a distinct complexion is the subject of this article: the presence of Semitisms—characteristic features of a Semitic language occurring in another language.

No one who knows Hebrew or another Semitic language can fail to be impressed by the Semitic tone and flavor of the New Testament and by its obvious adoption of Semitic modes of speech. This applies to such fundamental matters as sentence structure and the meaning of words. For example, in an earlier issue of *The Bible Translator* I argued that the expression "he opened his mouth" in the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5.2) cannot be interpreted solely as Greek, but must also be read in light of Semitic language patterns. When the Semitic background is understood, the phrase is best rendered in a way that indicates the beginning of some profound or solemn pronouncement, as in NEB's "he began to address them." Another example is the common expression *apokritheis eipen* "answering he said". No Greek of any period, left to himself, would say or write *apokritheis eipen* any more than you or I would say, "He answered and said," unless we were seeking to imitate biblical language. These are but two indications that the New Testament cannot be interpreted solely in terms of Greek grammar, but must also be studied in terms of its Semitic background.

To understand New Testament Semitisms we must be aware of how they arose in the first place. The occurrence of Semitisms in the New Testament can be attributed to four basic causes. First, by the time the New Testament was written, koine Greek had absorbed many Semitic words and idioms that were in use by Greek writers who knew no Hebrew or any other Semitic language. Second, all the New Testament writers except Luke were Jews whose usual language of speech was Aramaic (or possibly Hebrew) and who had a considerable knowledge of the Hebrew Bible. Third, these writers consciously modelled themselves after the style of the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, which often gives a literal translation of the original Hebrew. Finally, it is possible that the New Testament writers incorporated oral or written sources which were translations of Aramaic or Hebrew into Greek, and which contained Semitisms in proportion to the literalness of the translation. Thus it would indeed be surprising if speakers whose linguistic background was Semitic did not betray in their use of Greek some Semitic influence.

The most common Semitisms

In this article I want to draw attention to some of the more frequent Semitisms which are found in the New Testament and which are most likely to cause difficulty to the Bible translator. The more advanced student of Greek may be referred to the appendix "Semitisms in the New

Testament" in volume 2 of Moulton's *Grammar*.

Order of words. In all Semitic languages the verb tends to come first in its sentence or clause. This tendency is sometimes found in New Testament Greek. Examples include the second half of the Magnificat (Lk 1.51-55), the position of the imperatives in the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6.9-13), and the initial place of the verb in the series of clauses in the credal hymn of 1 Tim 3.16. No native Greek, uninfluenced by Semitic sources or a Semitic language, would have followed this pattern. It is possible that a large number of the instances of the verb in initial place come from translation Greek sources.

Casus pendens. Although casus pendens (a common technical term in grammar taken from the Latin for "a hanging case") is used with effect in classical Greek, the construction is much more frequent in Hebrew and Aramaic than in the koine. A typical example is Mt 6.4: *kai ho pater sou ho blepon en to krypto autos adoposei soi*. This would be expressed idiomatically in Hebrew as "And your Father who sees in secret, he will repay you." This is an unusually complicated way of saying "And your Father who sees in secret will repay you" (see GNB, NIV, NEB). While such constructions cannot be described as uniquely Semitic, their preponderance in the sayings of Jesus supports the view that a translation Greek tradition is to be found there.

Missing conjunctions. The absence of a conjunction where one might be expected is known in technical jargon as asyndeton (Greek for "unconnected, loose"). Most scholars agree that this feature is contrary to the spirit of the Greek language. Most Greek sentences are linked by a connecting particle, and, where asyndeton is found, it is generally used with rhetorical effect (for a notable example, see Acts 20.17-35). But when all allowances have been made for Greek uses of the construction, there remains a high number of non-Greek uses, especially in the Gospels and Acts. The frequent use of asyndeton in the fourth Gospel (see, for instance, Jn 5.3) is best explained as the result of Semitic influence. Asyndeton in the synoptic Gospels occurs almost exclusively in the sayings and parables of Jesus, suggesting the existence of a sayings-tradition cast in translation Greek (see, for instance, Mt 15.19).

Coordination of clauses. In classical Greek, sentences usually contained one main verb, and all other verbs were subordinated in adverbial clauses of one kind or another. Hebrew, on the other hand, tended to place main verbs side by side, joining them together with a simple conjunction (the Hebrew *waw* "and"). This is known as parataxis, from the Greek verb *paratasso* "I set side by side". In koine Greek the construction is not uncommon, and this alone has been thought to explain its frequency in the New Testament. But the constantly recurring "and" (Greek *kai*) of the Gospels is certainly an overstraining of Greek literary usage. In the Gospels this type of construction is most characteristic of Mark, who has only a single instance of a longer Greek sentence with subordinating participles (see 5.25-27). A typical example of Mark's style is found in 10.33-34:

“Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and (*kai*) the Son of Man will be delivered up to the chief priests and scribes, and (*kai*) they will condemn him to death, and (*kai*) they will deliver him up to the Gentiles. And (*kai*) they will mock him and (*kai*) spit upon him and (*kai*) scourge him and (*kai*) kill him, and (*kai*) three days later he will rise again.” Here a more typical Greek style would, perhaps, have subordinated one or more of these clauses by means of participles or relative clauses. Translations such as KJV and RSV reflect the Semitic style and are stylistically awkward in English; but other English translations, recognizing the Semitic idiom involved, restructure the grammar slightly to produce more acceptable English (see GNB, NIV, JB, NEB).

Redundant pronouns. The Hebrew relative pronoun is indeclinable and genderless, and therefore requires a personal pronoun in the clause which follows. This has influenced a few New Testament passages in which an unnecessary pronoun appears after a relative, as in Mk 7.25, which literally reads, “A woman **whose** little daughter **of her** had an unclean spirit.” This construction may be possible in Greek, but it is not native to it, as it is in Hebrew and Aramaic.

Substitutes for the indefinite pronoun. The use of *heis* “one” and *anthropos* “a man, a person” as substitutes for the indefinite pronoun *tis* “a certain person, someone, a” is paralleled in the koine, but its source in the New Testament is almost certainly Semitic. Instances of *heis* as an indefinite pronoun fall into two classes: (1) where *heis* is an adjective, as in Mt 8.19, “a scribe”, and (2) where it is a full pronoun, generally followed by the genitive construction or partitive *ek*, as in Mk 5.22, “a ruler of the synagogue”. The use of *anthropos* “man”, in this way (like Hebrew *ish* and Aramaic *barnash*) is found most frequently in the sayings of Jesus, and most examples come from Mark’s Gospel (see, for instance, 1.23; 3.1; 4.26; 5.2; 10.7,9; 12.1).

Redundant use of the preposition. A characteristic feature of Semitic usage is the repetition of a preposition before every noun of a series which it governs. Such a construction is intolerable in literary Greek. Semitic repetition occurs no less than eleven times in Mark alone (see, for example, 3.7-8; 6.56; 11.1). It is interesting to see the way in which different English translations treat redundant prepositions. Some repeat the preposition each time it occurs in a series, as in Mk 3.7-8 (see KJV, RSV); others translate only the initial preposition, a practice which is more in keeping with the English idiom (see NIV, JB, NEB).

The use of the positive adjective for the comparative or superlative. The Semitic languages, with the exception of Arabic, have no special forms for the comparative and superlative adjectives (such as “bigger”, “biggest”). Instead, the positive adjective is used “big”. Although the comparative is often used for the superlative in the koine, there does not appear to be any parallel in Greek to the Semitic use of the positive for the comparative or superlative. A good example of the idiom occurs in Mk 9.43: “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better (Greek *kalon*, literally ‘good’) for you to enter life crippled than having

your two hands to go to hell.” Note also the following examples: Mk 12.28, “the most important” (literally, “the first”); Lk 5.39, “better” (literally, “good”); and Jn 2.10, “you have kept the **best** (literally, ‘good’) wine until now.”

Redundant use of “saying”. Indirect speech is unknown in biblical Hebrew; all speech is recorded directly, whether the words recorded were the actual words spoken or represented the general meaning of what was said. The Hebrew word most closely corresponding to the Greek participle *legon* “saying” is used to introduce the quotation. This idiom is well illustrated in Mk 8.28: “And they said to him, saying (*legontes*), ‘John the Baptist’.” RSV correctly smooths this out to read, “And they told him, ‘John the Baptist’.” For other examples of this idiom, see Mt 23.1-2; 28.18; Lk 14.3; 24.6-7.

Contrast in extreme terms. Contrast in Hebrew is often stated in extreme terms for the sake of emphasis. The words of Mal 1.2-3, “I loved Jacob, but Esau I hated,” illustrate this feature of Hebrew speech. A New Testament example is the Lord’s solemn affirmation: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14.26). What Jesus means, of course, is that his disciples must give all other objects of love second place in relation to him—a meaning brought out in the parallel passage in Mt 10.37: “He who loves father or mother **more than me** is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter **more than me** is not worthy of me.” Luke’s version preserves the Hebraic style, Matthew’s the Greek.

Introductory “It came to pass”. The peculiar use of the Greek verb *egeneto* with another verb often reproduces a closely corresponding Semitic idiom meaning “it was so” or “it came to pass.” This Semitism appears far more frequently in Luke’s writings than elsewhere (Mark has only four examples of it). An example is Lk 2.6: “And it came to pass (*egeneto de*) that while they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth.” Recognizing the unnaturalness of the expression, most modern translations begin simply, “While they were there” (see GNB, NIV, JB, NEB, RSV). For other examples of this idiom, see Lk 2.1,6,15; 3.21; 5.1,12,17; 6.1,6,12; 7.11; 8.1,22; 9.18,28,37,51; 11.1,27; 14.1; 17.11; 18.35; 20.1; 22.24; 24.4.

Adjectival substitutes. In Hebrew the so-called construct state largely took the place of the adjective. In this construction two nouns stand together, and the second noun (as genitive) limits or qualifies the first one. Greek has a corresponding use of the genitive case of a noun in an adjectival sense. The two most characteristically Semitic idioms are (1) the genitive of an abstract noun in place of an adjective of quality, and (2) the use of “son” (*huios*) with a following genitive of origin or definition. The former idiom, sometimes called the “Hebrew genitive”, is found for example in Phil 3.21, where Paul describes “our lowly body” (literally “the body of our lowliness”), and “his glorious body” (literally “the body of his glory”). New Testament instances of *huios* and

the genitive include Lk 10.6, "a peace-loving man" (literally "a son of peace"), 1 Th 5.5., "people who belong to the light" (literally "sons of light"), and Col 1.13, "his dear Son" (literally "the son of his love").

Future indicative used as an imperative. The Hebrew verb form most closely corresponding to the Greek future indicative is often used to express commands. This construction has probably influenced a passage like Mk 9.35: "If anyone wants to be first, **he shall be last of all.**" In this passage greater emphasis is given by taking the future **he shall be** as an imperative, as in NIV, "Whoever wants to be first, **he must be** the very last," (see also GNB, JB, NEB, RSV). The same can be said for the use of the future indicative in Lk 1.13: "And **you shall call** his name John," which GNB renders, "**You are to name him John.**" Compare also Mt 19.18-19 in the various translations.

The particle *ei* expressing emphatic negation. The Hebrew word which corresponds to the Greek particle *ei* (normally translated "if") can introduce a clause expressing emphatic negation. This idiom appears to have influenced such passages as Heb 4.3, "By no means (*ei*) shall they enter into my rest," and Mk 8.12, "By no means (*ei*) shall a sign be given to this generation."

Verb and cognate noun expressing emphasis. The Hebrew verb form known as the infinitive absolute is sometimes closely associated with another form of the same verb to express emphasis. An Old Testament example is Gen 2.17, "you will surely die" (literally "dying you will die"). A good New Testament example of this idiom is found in Lk 22.15, where the expression *epithymia epethymesa* means "I have earnestly desired" (so RSV, KJV translate literally "With desire I have desired"). Mk 4.41 is a similar example: *ephobethesan phobon megan* "they feared greatly", (literally "they feared a great fear"). Though this idiom is paralleled in classical Greek, in the New Testament it seems to be derived from the Septuagint, especially in Luke and Acts.

Parallelism. Parallelism of lines and clauses is a characteristic of Semitic poetry and can be easily detected in the New Testament even in translation. That the Beatitudes (Mt 5.3-11) were originally cast in poetic form, whether in Hebrew or Aramaic, is obvious from the parallelism we can still see in English. Further traces of parallelism are discoverable in the Lucan hymns (Lk 1-2) and the prophecy of Simeon (Lk 2.34-35). Most other New Testament parallelisms are found in dialogue, as in Mk 11.9-10:

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the kingdom of our father David!"

The presence of such parallelism may be helpful in determining whether portions of a text should be printed in poetic format rather than in prose style.

Redundant use of the verb *apokrinomai*. The expression "he answered and said" (*apokriheis eipen*) closely resembles a common Hebrew idiom. The use of the verb *apokrinomai* "I answer" in this sense is often purely redundant (see Mt 11.25; 12.38; 17.4; 28.5; Mk 9.5;

11.14; 12.35). In cases in which no question has been asked, it may be misleading to translate the expression "he answered". (Compare Mt 11.25 in KJV, "Jesus answered and said", with NIV, "Jesus said".) This idiom is extremely common in the synoptic Gospels, where the writers appear to have modelled themselves after the familiar language of the Septuagint.

The use of *idou*. The particle *idou* "behold!", found in the New Testament especially in Matthew and Luke, is often used in imitation of the corresponding Hebrew expression (*hinne*). It is quite genuine Greek (compare English "look here!"), but used frequently it is a natural product of Semitic speech. New Testament examples include Mt 1.20; 2.9; 3.16; Lk 1.20,31,36; 2.25; Acts 12.7; Jas 5.9. In GNB, NIV, and NEB the term is usually left untranslated.

Various pleonasms, or "fillers". Hebrew often describes activity with a wealth of detail which the Greeks would find unnecessary, though perhaps colorful, as for example, "he arose and went", "he lifted up his eyes and saw", "he took and planted". New Testament examples include Mt 13.33,46; 25.16; Lk 15.18; Acts 5.17. Frequently the verb *archomai* "I begin" is used pleonastically (see Mk 1.45; 5.17; 6.7), but it is not redundant in a passage like Acts 1.1 (Acts continues what Jesus literally began to do and teach).

Transliterations. The most obvious influence of the Semitic languages on the New Testament must also be mentioned: Hebrew and Aramaic words which are simply transliterated into Greek. From Hebrew we have *allelouia*, *amen*, *geenna*, *korban*, *manna*, *pascha*, *sabaoth*, *sabbaton*, and *Satanas*. From Aramaic we find *abba*, *ephphatha*, *korbanas*, *mammonas*, *maranatha*, *rabbi*, *raka*, *talitha koumi*, and *eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani*. The proper method of dealing with these words and expressions has been dealt with in earlier issues of *The Bible Translator*.

The meaning of certain words. Probably the most important kind of influence exerted by the Semitic languages on New Testament Greek is in the meaning of certain theological and ethical terms. The Greek outlook on religion and morals differed greatly from that of the Jews, and Greek terms were of course used to reflect the Greek outlook. But the Septuagint translators used these terms to represent Hebrew words which reflected Jewish meanings, and thus gave these Greek terms a new meaning. It is often this new meaning which attaches to these words when they are used in the New Testament.

One example is the Greek word *nomos*, which is usually translated "law". In Greek the basic meaning of *nomos* is "custom" or "convention", for the Greeks held that law was simply codified custom. But in the Septuagint the word is used as the equivalent of the Hebrew term *torah*, which strictly means "instruction" and which was applied to the Books of Moses, "the Law". To the Hebrews, law meant not codified custom, but divine instruction imparted through Moses and his successors. Thus when the New Testament writers wished to speak of law, not in the sense of man's convention, but in the sense of God's

revealed will, the noun *nomos* lay ready at hand. Much the same took place with regard to a number of other words, including names and titles of divine beings, psychological terms, and words denoting such theological concepts as righteousness, mercy, sin, atonement, sacrifice, propitiation, and reconciliation.

Conclusion

Such, in brief, are the most obvious Semitisms which are found in the Greek New Testament. It is obvious from what has been said above that there are two basic kinds of Semitisms, one of which we may call **primary**, and the other one **secondary**. By primary Semitisms we mean those words, phrases and constructions which are strictly peculiar to the Semitic languages, and therefore were transferred more or less directly into the language of the New Testament. By secondary Semitisms we mean those words, phrases and constructions which, though they are also found in Greek authors, strain ordinary Greek usage and probably reflect a Hebraic or Aramaic background. To decide which of these two types operated in the case of the Semitisms of any one author, or any one passage, is often a difficult task. Nevertheless, it makes an essential difference in our understanding of the text whether a form of speech is wholly foreign to the Greek idiom, or, on the other hand, finds in Greek a point of contact. Generally speaking, the more foreign a form of speech is to the Greek idiom, the more difficult the expression will be to translate into the idiom of another language.

To what extent does a knowledge of New Testament Semitisms affect the Bible translator? At least three answers to this question come to mind. First, it should be obvious that a translator with a knowledge of the biblical languages, including Hebrew, has a great advantage over one who has little or no training in Hebrew and Greek. Clearly there is a great deal of insight to be gained from the study of biblical Hebrew, and such a study should be encouraged even for those translators who concentrate their efforts on the New Testament.

Second, it is plain that a word-for-word rendering of the Greek original can easily misrepresent the meaning of the underlying Semitic idiom. This can be avoided in two ways. In some cases it is best to omit the idiom altogether in translation. Nothing is really lost if we leave out the Hebraic introductory formula "it came to pass", which in some languages (like English, German, French) is unidiomatic, or if we omit the introductory "and" of narrative discourse, which often merely indicates a new sentence (much like the capital letter with which a sentence in English begins). At other times it is more appropriate to translate the Semitic idiom into a suitable or equivalent idiom in the new language (as NEB's "he began to address them" for "he opened his mouth" in Mt 5.2).

Finally, we must constantly keep in mind the fundamental importance of the Septuagint for New Testament translation, not only with regard to questions of style, but also in connection with the

meanings of theological terms. The New Testament authors had recourse to the Septuagint whenever they wanted to allude to or quote Old Testament concepts or passages. Thus the meaning of many significant words in the New Testament cannot be found in the ordinary Greek dictionary, but must be sought against the background of the Hebrew Old Testament and its Greek translation, the Septuagint.

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THE USE OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN MALACHI 2.10-16

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Unfaithfulness is the central issue against which Malachi speaks in 2.10-16. On no less than five occasions does the verb *bagad* "be faithless, deceitful" occur, with a supporting role played by the verb *halal* "defile, profane" in verses 10-11. A second feature of this passage is its use of liturgical or religious vocabulary with particular relevance to the priestly class in Judah—"abomination", "sanctuary of YHWH", "bring offerings", "altar of YHWH". Even a superficial reading of the passage, therefore, will convince us that the prophet's concern is with the priests who have not only abandoned their calling, but who, in doing so, have led their people astray. Against the background of 2.1-9, which sets out the Levitical ideals so clearly, this failure on the part of the priests is portrayed as extremely serious.

However, a question must be raised concerning the language of this passage. In particular, does Malachi address the question of priestly marriage and divorce—this view is based on a literal reading of the passage—or is he using these concepts in a figurative manner to deal with the question of the priests' failure to live up to the Levi-model? In this article I will argue that Malachi uses the vocabulary of human relationships in a figurative way. Thus, the issue being treated by Malachi is not marriage and divorce practices among the priests, but the failure of the present generation of priests to live by the demands of the priestly code.

The Problem

Interpreting a writer's language, determining whether an expression is intended to carry a figurative or a literal meaning, is at times problematic. In the biblical material, additional difficulties arise from the lack of obvious signals in the surrounding text. For the most part, the interpreter can only test an understanding of a given text by asking whether a literal meaning actually makes good sense. If it appears that