JACK COLLINS

MIQREH IN 1 SAMUEL 6.9: "CHANCE" OR "EVENT"?

The author is Associate Professor at Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri.

It is a commonplace to assert that the Old Testament lacks a word for "nature," and perhaps even to conclude from this that the *concept* of "nature" is unbiblical.[1] Lexicographers, who know not to identify the lexical stock of a people with its conceptual stock, are suspicious *in general* of statements like the above.[2] The purpose of this short note is to argue that the *particular* sentiment is erroneous.

The RSV renders 1Sam 6.9:

> And watch; if it goes up on the way to its own land, to Bethshemesh, then it is he who has done us this great harm; but if not, then we shall know that it is not his hand that struck us, it happened to us *by chance* (Heb. *miqreh*).

The passage under consideration comes in the narrative of the captivity of the Ark of the Covenant (4.1b—7.2). In vv 7-9 the Philistine clergy (*kôhānîm wĕqôsemîn* "priests and diviners," v 2, that is, people with insight into the supernatural) propose a simple test by which they can infer whether their troubles ("tumors," v 5) are the product of agent causation (i.e. divine intervention) or not: by seeing whether the cows drawing the Ark act according to their "natural properties." If they do not return to their calves (i.e. if they act contrary to their "natural" action), they will know that Israel's God has brought this great trouble (v 9a); if they do return to their calves, then they will know that it was not his hand (i.e. intervention) that touched them, it happened to them *miqreh*.

Most of our versions, like the RSV cited above, render this last word "by chance,"[3] but it is worth questioning whether this is what the word designates. It appears in 1Sam 6.9; 20.26; Ruth 2.3; Eccl 2.14, 15; 3.19 (3 times); 9.2, 3. In Ecclesiastes it refers to what happens to everyone (they die), and is misleadingly rendered "fate" in the RSV/NRSV (except in 2.15), NIV, and NASB. In 1Sam 20.26

---

1 Examples are easy to multiply. E.g. H. Wheeler Robinson, *Inspiration and revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford University Press 1962), 1; G. Harder, "Nature," in C. Brown, ed, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Exeter: Paternoster 1976), 2:656-662, at 658. As J.W. Rogerson, "The Old Testament view of nature: Some preliminary considerations," in H.A. Brongers et al., eds, *Instruction and interpretation* (Oudtestamentische Studieën 20; Leiden: E.J. Brill 1977), 67-84, points out, this line of thinking supposes that a concept of "nature" necessarily involves its independence of God, and this is a fallacy.

2 E.g. B. Siertsema, "Language and world view (Semantics for theologians)," *BT* 20 (1969) 3-21, at 12-13.

3 So NRSV, NASB, NIV; cf CEV "simply bad luck," Segond "par hasard." *BDB*, 899b, gives "accident, chance, fortune" as the glosses for this word. Commentaries simply accept this and make little or no comment, e.g. Robert Gordon (*I&II Samuel: A commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1986]); R.W. Klein (WBC; Waco: Word 1983); Y. Kiel (Da'at Miqra; Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook 1981); P.K. McCarter (AB; Garden City: Doubleday 1980), who simply repeats the translation of S.R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew text and the topography of the books of Samuel* (Oxford University Press 1912), 55; C.F. Keil (Keil-Delitzsch; ET Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1876). S. Amsler, s.v. *qrh* in E. Jenni and C. Westermann, eds, *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (München: Chr. Kaiser/Zürich: Theologischer Verlag 1976), ii:681-684, says (683), "In 1 Sam 6,9 wird *miqræ* in ausdrücklicher Unterscheidung von Gottes Urheberschaft als »(böser) Zufall« definiert." P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome: Editrice Pontifico Istituto Biblico 1993), §158a, render the last clause "it is a *coincidence* that has happened to us" (following Joüon's original French, *rencontre*), which is less committed to the "chance" interpretation.

Saul explains David's absence as due to David being unclean, and calls it *miqreh*; the point is that it is not due to intention.[1] Likewise in Ruth 2.3 it is contrasted to purposive action: "her *event* happened [*wayyiqer miqrehâ*, combination of *miqreh* with cognate verb *qrh*] upon a portion of the field belonging to Boaz" (this statement is ironic).[2] We are in search of a theory of the word's meaning that accounts for all the examples and does so with the fewest complications; and while the translation "chance" may seem to "fit" the contexts of 1Sam 20.26 and Ruth 2.3, it does not adequately suit the other contexts, nor is it required for these it "fits." If we suppose that the word designates "what happens [in the ordinary course of things]," or "an ordinary event," in contrast to (perceived) purposive action, we have a sense that fits all occurrences.[3]

In biblical Hebrew "chance" in the negative sense is probably represented better by *pega'*: e.g. 1Kgs 5.18 [ET v 4], *pega' ra'* "bad chance," i.e. "misfortune"; Eccl 9.11 "time and chance (*'et wapega'*) overtake them all." The expression rendered "at random" in 1Kgs 22.34/2Chr 18.33 is *lëtummô*, literally "in his innocence," and refers to lack of intent rather than true chance. The Pi'el of the verb *'nh* is used in the sense "(God) allows something to happen to someone" in Exod 21.13 (NRSV and NEB "by an act of God" here is misleading); the passive form appears in Ps 91.10; Prov 12.21. The term refers to divine providence in contrast to the intention of the one to whom it happens.[4]

By this semantic theory we would render the noun *miqreh* as something along the lines of "natural outcome" in Ecclesiastes (in context, as apparently mindless event). To reflect this we may modify the RSV of Eccl 2.14b-15a from

> ...and yet I perceived that one *fate* [*miqreh*] comes to [verb *qrh*] all of them. Then I said to myself, "*What befalls* [*miqreh*] the fool will befall [verb *qrh*] me also..."

to

> ...and yet I perceived that the same *outcome* comes to all of them. Then I said to myself, "*The outcome that comes* to the fool will come to me also..."

In Eccl 3.19 the RSV has

> For the *fate* of the sons of men and the *fate* of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other,

which would more accurately be

> For the *outcome* of the children of man and the *outcome* of the beasts is one *outcome* [or, *the same*]; as one dies, so dies the other.

And the relevant parts of Eccl 9.2-3 in the RSV are:

> ...since one *fate* comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and

---

1 Cf v 27, where David's absence on the next day requires a more "teleological" explanation: "*Why* has not the son of Jesse come to the meal, either yesterday or today?"

2 Cf C. John Collins, "Ambiguity and theology in Ruth: Ruth 1.21 and 2.20," *Presbyterion* 19.2 (Fall, 1993), 97-102, for the view of providence underlying Ruth.

3 Compare also A. Even-Shoshan, *Millôn Hâdâs* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sepher 1955), 895a, s.v. *miqreh*, sense 1, who also finds "non-intention" to be part of the sense of the word.

4 Compare *BDB*, 58b, s.v. *<-n-h* III.

> him who does not sacrifice.... This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that one *fate* comes to all....

which would be better as:

> since one *outcome* comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice.... This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that one *outcome* comes to all....

As already indicated above, the nuance in 1Sam 20.26 and Ruth 2.3 emphasizes the non-intentional nature of the event. The RSV of these passages reflects this reasonably well:

> 1Sam 20.26: Yet Saul did not say anything that day; for he thought, "*Something has befallen him* [Hebrew *miqreh hû'*; literally, *it is an unintentional event*]; he is not clean, surely he is not clean."
>
> Ruth 2.3: So she set forth and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and *she happened to come* [see above] to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.

So in 1Sam 6.9 the contrast is between special divine action (*yâdô* "his hand"), which indicates purposive action, and the ordinary course of things (*miqreh*, i.e. "just one of those things that happen"). A literalistic rendering of 1Sam 6.9 would thus be:

> And see: if by way of its (own) territory it[1] goes up to Beth Shemesh, he[2] is the one who did this great evil to us; and if not, then we shall know that it was not his hand that touched us, it was an (ordinary) event that happened to us.

To reflect this we might adapt the RSV very slightly to say,

> And watch: if it goes up on the way to its own land, to Beth Shemesh, then it is he who has done us this great harm; but if not, then we shall know that it is not his hand that struck us, it happened to us *by coincidence*.

Two things fall out of this merely philological exercise. First, we see here the Philistines' attempt to ascertain whether their troubles are an "event" or an "act" (to use the terms of the philosopher John Macmurray).[3] In this case the "event" or "ordinary course of things" (*miqreh*, "[ordinary] event," i.e., things acting according to their natural properties) is distinguished from the "act," or "design" (God's hand). The Philistines, unlike many modern and postmodern Westerners, assume that divine "design" is not only possible but (at least in principle, and at least sometimes) detectable; and have instituted an empirical (we could even say "scientific") procedure for detecting it that is quite rational given their assumptions.

Second, we may be inclined to write this off as part of the (pagan) Philistine world-view, with no impact on the (authorized) OT ideology. But we should resist such inclinations. The only access we have to the Philistines' ideology and speech

---

1 That is, the Ark (or possibly Yahweh, see next note), which is a masculine noun, not the cart, which is feminine.

2 But does *hû'* "he", refer to the Ark or to Yahweh? I suspect that the syntactical ambiguity is intentional, and points to the theology of God's presence in the Ark; cf 4.3; 5.11 for similar ambiguities.

3 John Macmurray, *The self as agent* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press 1978 [originally 1957]), 146-149.

is through the Israelite narrator, and it is reasonable to assume that he reported his material consistently with his own ideological purpose. The narrative of 1 Samuel 4—6 is shot through with supernaturalism, which is connected with the Ark, e.g. 5.2-4, 6, 9; 6.12, 19: that is, the Ark mediates the divine presence in a way that is over and above any properties of the wood and metal that are its material components (cf the "glory" connected with the Ark, which goes into exile, 4.21-22). The reader of the narrative knows the cause of the Philistines' troubles, and the outcome of their experiment reveals it to them (6.12, 16); ironically the Israelites of Beth Shemesh fail to get the point (6.19, where they "look upon" or "gloat over" the Ark and suffer for their attitude). Note further Yahweh's refusal to act *magically*, which leads to disaster for the Israelites in ch 4. And finally, in this passage the Philistines are presented as acting more sensibly than the Israelites—at least they are learning not to presume on the Ark as a means to control Yahweh (6.6)![1]

So it would seem that the author of Samuel commends to us the contrast between the ordinary course of events ("nature") and divine "interference" ("supernatural" events), as well as the detectability of the latter.

REVIEWS

Poyatos, F., ed: **Nonverbal Communication and Translation**. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins 1997. Xii + 361 pp. $94. ISBN 90 272 1618 5 (Europe) 1-55619-699-7 (US).

Fernando Poyatos has done a great service by editing and publishing this collection of essays on the topic of non-verbal translation. Bible scholars and translators, linguists, critics of literature, film, and culture, along with interpreters, dubbers, subtitlers, cognitive psychologists, semioticians and anthropologists will profit from these essays.

The essays share a common outlook: non-verbal modes of communication have "always been part of the literary texts of every genre" (1). This assumption means that a translator must not only transfer the meaning of verbal messages, but also of non-verbal messages in a text. Non-verbal messages stem from "the emissions of signs by all the nonlexical, artifactural, and environmental sensible sign systems contained in a culture" (1).

The essays range over a wide variety of texts, but they all study these texts in light of three groups of non-verbal sign systems: paralanguage, kinesics, and proxemics. Paralanguage stands for a text's intonation, pitch, rhythm, tempo, and loudness. Kinesics refers to information about body movement, postures, gestures, while proxemics studies the varying spatial distances from one character to another and from characters to their environment.

There are seven groups of essays in this collection, corresponding roughly to seven different applications of non-verbal translation theory and practice: discourse, culture, narrative literature, theater, poetry, interpretation, and film and

1 The motif in which "pagans" outshine Israelites in the moral and spiritual sphere is not an uncommon one, for example, Genesis 20; 2Sam 15.19-22 (David's Gittite troops are more loyal to him than most Israelites); 2 Kings 5 (Naaman the Syrian, especially in contrast to Gehazi); Jonah.