

BASIL A. REBERA

“HE GOT UP”—OR DID HE? (1 Samuel 20.25)

Dr Basil Rebera is a UBS Translation Consultant based in Canberra, Australia

Translators constantly deal with the meanings of words. And they expect that generally the meanings are clear, and that they can understand which particular meaning is intended in a given context. But this is not always the case; and in this article I want to discuss the situation where a word which has a clear meaning is used in a construction where it does not have that usual meaning—but rather it performs a different function in the structure of a narrative. The text which I propose to look at in detail is 1 Sam 20.25.

One clause in this verse provides a very interesting problem for the translator and interpreter: what do we make of the Hebrew text, which seems impossible to understand as it stands?

1 Sam 20.25 can be divided into four clauses. A literal rendering of the Hebrew text indicates the content of each:

- (a) and he sat the king at his place according to time
upon time at the place of the wall
- (b) *wayyaqom* literally “and arose” Jonathan
- (c) and sat Abner at the side of Saul
- (d) and it was empty the place of David

Perhaps all translators see the impossibility of rendering *wayyaqom* “and arose” in clause (b) as physically rising or standing. How many translators would have a mental picture of Jonathan getting up from a sitting or lying position when Saul entered the room, and sitting again at table at the time Saul and Abner did so? And no one would imagine that the passage conveys any other message than that Saul, Jonathan, and Abner sat down together, probably in that order, at table. Translators must wonder why such an obvious action on Jonathan’s part cannot be plainly and clearly expressed in the Hebrew, and they must wonder what to make of *wayyaqom*—which instead of expressing Jonathan’s obvious action of sitting down seems to do quite the opposite and have him standing up!

Some English translations preserve the Hebrew form and render the clause literally as “Jonathan rose” which does not make sense. Some others resort to the Septuagint to obtain a rendering that seats Jonathan opposite Saul: JB, “Jonathan sat facing him”; GNB, “Jonathan sat across the table from him”; NIV, “Jonathan sat opposite him”. These translations may have assumed that the Septuagint was translating a different original Hebrew text; but the arguments for this are not very convincing.

The problem that the presence of the verb *qum* “arise” in 1 Sam 20.25 poses for the interpreter and the translator cannot be resolved by

concentrating on just the meaning of individual words within the clause structure. The problem has to be approached from a wider discourse perspective. The syntax of the sentence cannot be accounted for in isolation from the larger unit of discourse. The form of the verb *qum*, in this and other instances where the rendering of its normal meaning makes no sense, may have other functions in the structure of narrative.

The idea of **semantic vacancy** (that is, words being used without having any of their normal word meaning) was put forward by F.I. Andersen in describing "coordinated commands in apposition" in his treatment of the Hebrew sentence (*The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew*, page 56). He regards the command forms of certain verbs of motion placed with another command as being "semantically empty", and suggests that the whole unit functions as a single action.

Andersen gives examples of cases in which the first verb functions merely as a command or request particle.

Gen 19.15: **get up** take your wife
 Gen 27.19: **get up** sit down and eat

There are many other instances of the imperative *qum* "arise" functioning in the discourse purely as an exclamatory particle calling attention to the action which is supplied by the verb that follows. This discourse function of *qum* is mostly, though not entirely, with verbs of movement from one place to another. So *qum berah* "flee" (Gen 27.43); *qum lek* "go" (Gen 28.2); *qum se* "go out" (Gen 31.13); *qum 'aleh* "ascend" (Gen 35.1); *qum redop* "pursue" (Gen 44.4); *qum red* "descend" (1 Sam 23.4).

Giving the word *qum* the function of marking an aspect of the verb that follows, or giving it a new meaning, just to make some representation of its presence in translation, as a number of English versions do, results in many inconsistencies. A translator who relies on English versions as bases and models could be confused by what appears like translators' licence!

Andersen's observation of this construction applies so far to two verbs of command next to each other. A feature of the exclamatory function of the first verb that is without word meaning is that very seldom does anything except for *na'* come between the two verbs. But this case can be extended to the *waw*-consecutive form of the verb *qum* coordinated with another verb, even though there are other elements between them. Usually those other elements constitute the subject of the second verb which also doubles as a subject for the first verb.

qum se, literally "arise go out" (Gen 31.13), has already been given as an instance of a construction which Andersen identifies as a coordinated command where the first verb is without word meaning. This command phrase occurs in Jacob's report to his wives Leah and Rachel, of what Yahweh had instructed him to do in a dream. It introduces the central theme of the episode:

now (*qum*) get out from this land and return
to the land of your birth

Leah and Rachel responded by urging Jacob to do as Yahweh had commanded. This is the signal for the storyteller to move to the climax of the episode, Jacob's flight.

The new stage commences with some verbal repetition used as a link of meaning between the command phrase at verse 13 to the consequent action at verse 17:

wayyaqom, literally "and arose" Jacob then lifted
his children and his wives . . .

This time there is another element, "Jacob", which comes between the two verbs. This element is the subject of the second verb "lifted", which also doubles as the formal subject of the first verb *wayyaqom* which has no word meaning. Both verbs function as a single action, but it is the second verb which supplies the action element.

The first verb *wayyaqom* has other discourse functions. It marks the transition to and the start of a new stage in the episode. It brings the main character, Jacob, into focus, and marks the shift to a series of verbs of motion of which he is the subject.

The root verb *qum* has the basic meaning of physically rising from a lying or sitting position. From this basic meaning of rising, the verb is used figuratively to mean taking up office, to establish, to confirm, to stand firm, to oppose, to attack, to rebel (that is, to rise against). The imperfect form of the verb with *waw*-consecutive is, as expected, used in a variety of coordinated constructions. We now look at this form further regarding the way it functions in narrative discourse.

1 Sam 28 tells the story of Saul's meeting, through a female medium in Endor, with Samuel, who had died. Samuel's message to Saul caused him to collapse in fear. The woman tried to urge him to get up and eat some food. The narrative continues in verse 23:

- (a) but he refused. He said "not I will eat."
- (b) But they urged him his servants and also the woman
- (c) and he listened to them.
- (d) Then he rose (*wayyaqom*) from the ground
- (e) and he sat on the couch

wayyaqom is one of a series of imperfects with *waw*-consecutive in a series of coordinated constructions. Clauses (d) and (e) are in sequence, and both the context and the words "from the ground" that follow indicate that physically rising from the ground was an action that happened before Saul sat on the couch. The representation of *qum* with its normal meaning, "get up", makes sense in the translation here.

However, we should notice that "he got up from the ground" could be omitted in translation and the message would still be complete and make very good sense. It was Saul's condition caused by his fasting that

made both his men and the medium anxious. Their urging was that he should eat something. The significant event in the two coordinated clauses is not the action represented by *qum* but the action represented by *yasab* “sit”. There is a change of position when Saul sits on the couch, and his action which ends that stage of the episode is the signal for the woman to begin preparation of the meal, which is the next stage of the episode. So while *wayyaqom* “and he got up”, could contribute an element of action in this context, more significantly it functions as a device that signals a shift from the nature of the previous actions of refusing, speaking, urging, listening, to one of motion.

In the last stage of the episode, which begins at verse 24, the woman cooks a meal and serves it to Saul and his men, and they eat it. The close of the episode reads:

wayyaqumu, literally “they arose” they went in the night
that very one.

Here is an instance of two coordinated verbs of motion, one next to the other with nothing in between, functioning in the same way as the coordinated commands described by Andersen. The first verb *wayyaqumu* has no word meaning. The two verbs together function as a single action with the second verb, “they went”, supplying the action element and ending the episode. GNB in fact treats *wayyaqumu* as having no word meaning, and renders verse 25: “She set the food before Saul and his officers, and they ate it. And they left the same night.” *wayyaqumu* as the first verb in the construction serves as a device with the function of signalling transition to an action of motion that changes the location after a series of actions of a different nature: butchering, taking, kneading, baking, serving, and eating.

This discourse function of *wayyaqom* can be demonstrated again in the story of Abraham’s response to God’s demand of the sacrifice of Isaac, in Genesis 22.1-19. Verse 3 runs as follows:

- (a) and he made an early start Abraham in the morning
- (b) and he strapped up his donkey
- (c) and he took two of his servants with him and Isaac
his son
- (d) and he cut wood of the burnt offering
- (e) *wayyaqom*, literally “and he arose” and went to the place

A feature of this discourse is the pattern of the narrative—five coordinated clauses each opening with a verb in the imperfect with *waw*: “he began early”, “he strapped up”, “he took”, “he cut”, “he went”. It is important to note that in this sequence each of the first four clauses has a single action represented by a single verb. The last clause also has a single action, but it consists of two verbs next to each other. The verbs in the first four clauses express actions connected with the preparation for a journey with a very special purpose. The second verb in the final clause

expresses the action of the conduct of that journey itself. It is an action of motion from one place towards another. The first verb in the final clause has no word meaning, but it functions in the discourse as a device marking the shift from the preparation to the journey itself, which ends that stage of the episode. Verse 4, the sighting of the place for the sacrifice on the third day of the journey, begins another stage of the story and should be marked in translation by a separate paragraph.

1 Sam 23.1-13 tells the story of how David, who was on the run escaping from Saul, saved the town of Keilah from the Philistines. David was still in Keilah when he heard that Saul was planning to try to capture him there. A series of events then occurs. David gets the priest Abiathar to bring the ephod. He inquires of Yahweh if the citizens of Keilah will surrender him to Saul. Yahweh says that they will. So, finally, in verse 13:

- (a) *wayyaqom*, literally “and arose” David and his men
about six hundred
- (b) and they went out from Keilah
- (c) and they went to where they went

wayyaqom and the verb of clause (b), “they went out”, are two separated verbs, but again they represent a single action, the action of movement that gets David and his men out of the city. The first verb has no word meaning, the second expresses the action. This time again the two verbs are separated by other clause elements in between. These elements make up the compound subject of the second verb. The first verb *wayyaqom* signals the shift from the previous actions to the action of movement to a different location which ends the episode.

Let us now return to 1 Sam 20, the story of David and Jonathan, and re-examine the structure of verse 25, which is part of a unit of text that begins in the previous verse.

Clause 1—verse 24b

and it was the New Moon festival and sat down the king
to the meal to eat

Clause 2—verse 25a

and sat down the king upon his place (the customary one)

Clause 3—verse 25b

wayyaqom, literally “and arose” Jonathan

Clause 4—verse 25c

and sat Abner next to Saul

Clause 5—verse 25d

and was empty the place of David

A point that many translators miss is that a new episode begins at verse 24b, and this should be marked by a new paragraph in the translation. *wayehi* “and it happened”, along with a general time

reference ("at the New Moon festival") is the classic Hebrew discourse marker which signals the start of a new episode. This phrase marking the opening of the episode is followed by a unit made up of five clauses. The problem clause, verse 25b, is one of the five; and it is bounded by two clauses on each side of it.

Clauses 1 and 2 refer to the same person, and on the surface clause 2 seems to be redundant. But not so. Clause 1 provides the specific time frame for the events of the first day. Clause 2 provides a specific place reference in respect of the person: the king **sat in his customary place by the wall**.

Clause 4 provides a specific place reference in respect of another of the participants: Abner **sat in his (customary?) place beside Saul**. Then clause 5 provides a specific place reference in respect of yet another participant: but David's **place was empty**.

Each of the clauses 2, 4, and 5 names a person and provides a specific place reference in respect of that person, with a relevant verb of action.

Seeing that clause 3 is bounded on both sides by clauses that have the same function of providing a place reference with a relevant action, the reader would naturally think of clause 3 as having the same function too, and expect to find a specific place reference in respect of the person mentioned, and also a relevant verb of action. Clause 3 therefore can only be interpreted as a clause which has two missing elements, these being the place reference for the participant Jonathan and the relevant action for him. Both of these missing elements can be supplied by repeating items which are present in the adjacent clauses.

Verse 25a states that Saul sat in his customary place beside the wall. Verse 25c states that Abner sat next to Saul. The action in both clauses is provided by the same form of the same verb, "he sat". This same verb then supplies the missing action in clause 3, "and arose (*wayyaqom*) Jonathan". The meaning of verses 25b and 25c could be presented partly as:

(25b) and sat	Jonathan			
(25c) and sat	Abner	beside	Saul	

This does not complete the picture however, since Jonathan must have a specific place reference. Why must there be a specific place reference for Jonathan? For the same reason that one is provided for Saul, Abner, and David. The seating arrangement at the meal is most important for the events of the first day at the New Moon festival.

In the first episode of the story of David and Jonathan (1 Sam 20.1-24a), David seeks Jonathan's approval to stay away from the festival. He is counting on Saul not noticing his absence (verses 5-6). Jonathan however is certain that David's absence from the meal on the first day of the festival will be noticed, and even more so on the day after (verses 18-19), and makes his plans accordingly.

The second episode begins at the meal time on the first day of the

festival (1 Sam 20.24b). But the main point of the story is the seating arrangement and not the meal. Saul is not preoccupied with other matters as David may have hoped. The fact that everyone is in his customary place makes David's vacant seat obvious to Saul. The specific place reference in respect of each of the participants is what makes David's absence be noticed immediately.

The second missing item in clause 3 therefore must be the specific place reference in respect of Jonathan. Clause 2 is clear in stating that Saul sat in his customary seat. Jonathan, as heir to the throne, would also have had a customary place when the king and those with him sat down to a meal. "At his sitting place", which gives the specific place reference of the king in clause 2, does double duty to supply the missing place reference for Jonathan in clause 3.

The full meaning of clause 3 can now be completely represented as:

then he sat Jonathan at his sitting place

wayyaqom is absent as far as the word meaning is concerned, but it has its place as a structural item marking the start of the clause and anticipating the missing action.

The translators and interpreters who are distracted by the need to supply a word meaning equivalent for *wayyaqom* miss the storyteller's strategy and therefore overlook the missing elements in the clause. Leaving these elements unstated is a device adopted by the storyteller to focus attention on the significance of the seating arrangement and to anticipate the climax of the unit—which is that David's absence would be betrayed by an empty seat.

So the Hebrew text of 1 Sam 20.25 is quite trustworthy. There is no need to resort to reconstruction based on conjecture or a questionable Septuagint rendering. When it is recognised that the verb *wayyaqom* has no word meaning in the clause and that there is no possible alternative interpretation, the Hebrew can easily be translated as it stands.

1 Sam 20.24a ends the first episode of the story of David and Jonathan. 20.24b-26 makes up one unit in the second episode and could be rendered as:

24b At the New Moon festival King Saul came to the meal. 25 He sat, as he always did, in his place by the wall. Jonathan sat in his usual place, and Abner sat next to the king. David's place was empty. 26 The king said nothing that day. He thought, "Something must have happened to make David ritually unclean—yes, he has to be unclean."