

CONFUSED LANGUAGE AS A DELIBERATE LITERARY DEVICE IN BIBLICAL HEBREW NARRATIVE

by

Gary A. Rendsburg

Cornell University

0. Introduction

- 0.1.** The Egyptian story of the Shipwrecked Sailor is a text that imposes few difficulties on its readers. Our only extant manuscript is in excellent condition, hardly a sign is in doubt, and the reading is smooth.¹ The main exception to the smooth reading is lines 36-37 (repeated in lines 105-106): in ht hwi n-i s(y) literally “by wood, struck, to me, it” (with apologies for the lack of subscript diacritical marks). This line occurs in the Sailor’s description of his adventures, first to his Commanding Officer (lines 36-37) and then to the Snake (lines 105-106), with specific reference to the shipwreck itself.
- 0.2.** The syntax is so confusing that scholar after scholar has deemed the phrase too difficult to render with any certainty.² Here is a sampling: Adolf Erman: “It was a piece of wood that . . . it to me,” with a footnote “The whole account of the storm is unintelligible to us.”³ W. K. Simpson: “There was a plank which struck it (the wave) for me,” with a footnote “This passage difficult in the original.”⁴ Miriam Lichtheim: “The mast—it (the wave) struck (it),” with a long footnote justifying her rendering and an honest statement that “this admittedly imperfect solution is presented largely in order to emphasize that the passage remains problematic.”⁵ R. B. Parkinson: “Only the mast broke it for me,” with a footnote “An obscure phrase: *it* is probably the wave, so that the sense is that the mast sheltered the sailor from the storm.”⁶ Note further the difficulty and uncertainty reflected in the Hebrew translation of Y. M. Grintz, with two different renderings: נִאֲחַזְתִּי (?) עֵץ for lines 36-37 and עֵץ-נִאֲחַזְתִּי בַר for lines 105-106, even though the Egyptian original is the same in both places.⁷

- 0.3.** But the difficulty and unintelligibility of this passage are exactly the point and represent the stylistic device employed here.⁸ I propose that we view these words from the mouth of the Sailor as a clever literary device in which confused syntax is utilized to portray the confusion that characterized the moment. A ship is in danger at sea, the wind is howling, and an eight-foot wave (see line 36 [=105]) strikes the ship (by this statement I do not mean to imply that I accept Lichtheim's rendering, others are equally possible). In the very next sentence we read that "the ship stood a death" (lines 37-38 [=106]). What occurred between the great wave and the ship sinking is one minute of mass confusion for the Sailor. The language bears this out with its confused and irregular syntax.⁹
- 0.4.** With this example as our paradigm,¹⁰ we can turn to the Bible and see the same technique in use in a variety of contexts. I shall present seven cases from biblical narrative: the first two have been discussed previously in the literature; the remainder (presented in the order of their appearance in the canon) have occasioned comment by scholars, but typically the approach has been to assume that the text is in error and in need of correction. In four of these cases (examples 1, 4, 6, 7), the syntax itself is confused. In the other three (examples 2, 3, 5), there is nothing wrong with the syntax per se, but the language still does not allow clear comprehension. In all the cases, I propose that we view the confused language as a deliberate literary device invoked to portray confusion, excitement, or bewilderment.

1. 1 Sam 9:12-13: The maidens answer Saul

- 1.1.** In 1 Sam 9:10-11, Saul and his attendant, on the outskirts of Samuel's city, encounter a group of young maidens who have exited the city to draw water. They ask a simple question:

הֲיֵשׁ בְּזֶה הַרְאָה "is the seer here?" to which the girls respond as follows:

יֵשׁ הַנְּהַלְפָנִיךְ מֵהַר עֵתָה כִּי הַיּוֹם בָּא לַעִיר כִּי זִבַּח הַיּוֹם לַעַם בַּבֹּמָה
 כְּבֹאֲכֶם הָעִיר בֶּן תִּמְצָאוּן אוֹתוֹ בְּטֶרֶם יַעֲלֶה הַבִּמְתָּה לֶאֱכֹל כִּי לֹא יֵאָכֵל הָעֵם עַד בָּאוּ
 כִּי הוּא יִבְרַךְ הַזֹּבַח אַחֲרָי כִּן יֵאָכְלוּ הַקְּרָאִים וְעֵתָה עָלוּ כִּי אֲתוּ כִּהְיוּם תִּמְצָאוּן אֶתוֹ

(vv. 12-13)

I offer here an attempt at a translation: “Yes, here before you; hurry now, because today he is coming to the city, because the sacrifice is today for the people at the high-place. When you come to the city, thus you will find him, before he goes up to the high-place to eat, because the people cannot eat until he comes, because he must bless the sacrifice, afterwards the invited-ones can eat; so now go up, because him, this very day you will find him.”

- 1.2.** Avi Hurvitz already has described the Hebrew of this passage: “Now if we judge the quality of the style employed in the passage solely according to strict formal linguistic standards of grammar and syntax, we would undoubtedly conclude that this is deficient Hebrew. However, if we consider the peculiar circumstances of the episode, it becomes clear that the confused speech created here by the biblical writer is an attempt to reproduce the effect of the girls all talking at once in their excitement at meeting Saul. The confused style is thus a deliberate device intended to reflect the heroines’ mood and feelings.”¹¹ Although Hurvitz developed the notion further, he was indebted to a simple remark by Martin Buber who referred to these verses as “Mädchenschwatz.”¹² In sum, in their excitement over seeing the tall, handsome Saul, the girls prattle all at once, creating a cacophony of voices represented by the language of the text.

2. Ruth 2:7: The foreman answers Boaz

- 2.1.** Ruth 2:7 is one of the famous cruxes of the Bible: **זֹה שֹׁבֵתָהּ הִיא בַּיַּת מְעַט**, literally “this, her sitting [in] the house, a little.” This short phrase has engendered considerable discussion in the secondary literature in recent years.¹³ Of the proposed solutions, the one that rises above the others, especially because it entails no emendation of the traditional text,¹⁴ is once more that of Hurvitz. Indeed, it was his reading of Ruth 2:7 that led him to the aforecited discussion of 1 Sam 9:12-13. Once more I quote Hurvitz at length: “We suggest, then, that a similar approach be adopted in the case of Ruth 2:7. Namely, here the overseer speaks in an apologetic and confused manner because he is not sure whether the ‘boss’ will approve of the fact that the overseer has given Ruth his permission to stay (**שֹׁבֵתָהּ**—from **”שֹׁב**) *inside* the house reserved specifically for Boaz’s workers . . . the overseer is

emphasizing the fact that this (זוה) Ruth's stay in 'the house' was very brief and that the whole day 'from early morning until now' (מאז הבוקר ועד עתה) she has remained [working] (תעמדה) *outside* in the field. If this interpretation is accepted, then the peculiar wording of Ruth 2:7 makes perfect sense in its context and need not be attributed to hypothetical scribal errors which occurred in the course of transmission. The awkward formulation of the overseer's words, then, should not be considered a textual corruption created by a *later copyist*, but, rather, an artistic device deliberately employed for dramatic purposes by the *original author* of Ruth¹⁵ (the last line, with the italicized words [in the original] for emphasis, speaks directly to the suggestion of D. R. G. Beattie that the phrase is a later addition to the original story¹⁶).

3. Gen 37:28: Joseph pulled from the pit

- 3.1. In the ongoing debate as to how to make sense of the three different ethnic groups that appear in Genesis 37 in the context of transporting to Joseph,¹⁷ the most crucial verse is the following:

ויעברו אנשים מדינים סחרים וימשכו ויעלו את יוסף מן הבור וימכרו יוסף
לישמעאלים בעשרים כסף ויביאו את יוסף מצרימה

“Midianite merchant men passed; and they pulled and they raised Joseph from the pit; and they sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty silver; and they brought Joseph to Egypt” (Gen 37:28).

As is well known, source critics divide this verse into separate sources, generally attributing “and they sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty silver” to “J,” and the remainder to “E.” We shall proceed on different grounds, following the lead of those scholars who have read the story as an integrated literary unit. The most sophisticated reading of the story, in my opinion, is that of E. L. Greenstein, whom I quote here at length: “A close reading of this verse reveals that it is ambiguous. Two readings converge on one clause . . . The clause in question is **ו ימכרו יוסף לישמעאלים** —‘they-sold Joseph to-the-Ishmaelites.’ According to the syntax of the verse, the verb **ו ימכרו**, ‘they sold,’ follows as the

fourth in a sequence of verbs of which ‘Midianite trading men’ is the explicit subject. Therefore, the syntactic reading is: the Midianites sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites. However, the attentive reader is aware of another reading, which I call the ‘allusive’ reading. The phrase **יֹסֵף לִישְׁמַעֲאֵלִים** **וַיִּמְכְּרוּ**, ‘they-sold Joseph to-the-Ishmaelites,’ only alludes to the words of Judah to his brothers: **לְכוּ נִמְכְּרֵנוּ לִישְׁמַעֲאֵלִים**, ‘Come, let-us-sell-him to-the-Ishmaelites’ (verse 27). With this association in mind, the reader can disregard the syntactic sequence and understand the subject of **וַיִּמְכְּרוּ**, ‘they-sold,’ in verse 28 to be Joseph’s brothers. . . . In a faithful reading, the reader must be sensitive to both messages, leaving them both open . . . In any event, the clause ‘they-sold Joseph to-the-Ishmaelites’ is equivocal in its context, that is, at that point in the narrative’s self-disclosure to us. The equivocation in this clause is merely a microcosm for the equivocal effect created for the surrounding narrative of the sale of Joseph as a whole by the twofold sequence of action.”¹⁸ Though I would go further in presenting the ambiguities inherent in this verse (see below), I am in essential agreement with Greenstein. I also am willing to accept Greenstein’s conclusion: “In the end, the reader cannot be certain of what human events actually took Joseph down to Egypt. . . . By blurring the human factors leading to the enslavement of Joseph, the narrative sharpens our image of the divine factor in bringing it about.”¹⁹

- 3.2.** However, in the specific case of the confusion present in Gen 37:28, I believe that an additional factor is at play, namely, that the language reflects Joseph’s point-of-view. As the recent literary study of biblical narrative has demonstrated, the text often shifts, ever so subtly, from the narrator’s objective third-person point-of-view, to the point-of-view of one of the story’s characters, and back again.²⁰ Such is the case in our passage. Joseph is at the bottom of a pit, unable to see what transpires above, and catching only a few sounds and voices here and there. He cannot put all the clues together, and thus for Joseph the story is unclear. Things happen so fast without his full knowledge, and without his ability to process the events as they are happening, that for Joseph the quick moment of being yanked from the pit is one big blur. The text bears this out with its language.
- 3.3.** In fact, as I intimated above, Greenstein understated the ambiguities of this verse. Not only is it not clear who sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites, it is equally unclear who pulled Joseph from the pit. The

Midianites might be the subject of **וַיִּמְשְׁכוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶת יוֹסֵף**, “and they pulled and they raised Joseph from the pit,” but the brothers also might be the subject. True, the Masora connects this clause more closely to the previous one (with “Midianite merchant men” as the explicit subject) than to the following one, but any number of readings is possible. The Midianites could have pulled Joseph out and then sold him to the Ishmaelites; the Midianites could have pulled Joseph out and the brothers could have sold him to the Ishmaelites; or the brothers could have pulled Joseph out and sold him to the Ishmaelites. Then, whoever winds up with Joseph, in whichever of these scenarios, brings Joseph to Egypt, as per the last clause of v. 28.

- 3.4.** It is important to note that **יֹסֵף** “Joseph” appears three times in this verse, each time as the object of the verb(s), and that never does the text replace the name with a pronominal form (either **אֹתוֹ** or attached to the verb). This has two functions. First, it marks each clause as an independent one, thereby allowing the possibility of a different subject for each clause. For example, if the reading were **וַיִּמְכְּרוּ אֹתוֹ לְיִשְׁמַעֵאלִים** “and they sold him to the Ishmaelites,” then we would be forced to assume, with no evidence to the contrary, that whoever pulled Joseph out of the pit also sold him to the Ishmaelites. Secondly, the mention of “Joseph” by name three times brings him into the reader’s mind more forcefully than pronominal references would, thereby directing the reader to see Joseph’s point-of-view in this verse. In sum, the ambiguity in Gen 37:28 reflects Joseph’s confusion in processing the events as they occurred.

4. Gen 37:30: Reuben to his brothers (or is it to himself?)

- 4.1.** Upon discovering that Joseph was missing from the pit, Reuben returns to his brothers and says **בֶּן אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי וְאֵי נָנוּ הַיֵּלֶד אֵי נָנוּ וְאֵי נָנוּ** “the child is not, and I, to where shall I come?” (Gen 37:30). I emphasize the final word in the phrase, **בֹּא**, and my English rendering thereof “come.” Not a single modern translation (in any language) that I have checked renders the word in this fashion, but that of course is the plain meaning of **בֹּא**. The reason why translators do not render **בֹּא** as “come” in this instance, but instead are compelled to use “go” (see below for examples), is clear.

In Leo Depuydt's words, "In questions asking for the destination to which a person is moving, the verb 'to go' is compulsory, because using 'to come' equals assuming that the destination is already known, namely [to] the speaker (or hearer). So, we do not say 'Where are you coming?', but rather: 'Where are you going?'"²¹ Depuydt further noted, correctly and not surprisingly, that "this is the only case where **הָיָא** goes together with **בָּרַח**, against 11 examples with **הָלַךְ**."²² Accordingly, we have here another case of confused—or in this case, impossible—syntax.²³

4.2. This will explain why even those translations that make every attempt at rendering the Hebrew text literally, simply cannot render **בָּרַח** as "come" here, but are forced to use "go." Thus, for example, *RSV* "where shall I go?", and Everett Fox, who more than anyone else has attempted to capture the essence of the Hebrew text in his English translation, "where am I to go?"²⁴ Fox's spiritual mentors, Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, may have recognized the difficulty, since in their rendering "wo soll ich hin?" the clause lacks a main verb altogether (as opposed to, for example, "wo soll ich hingehen?").²⁵ Translations which allow for a more idiomatic rendering offer such phrases as "what am I to do?" (thus *NJPSV*; similarly *REB* and *NJB*) and "where can I turn?" (*NAB*, *NRSV*, and Robert Alter's new translation²⁶). Of interest is the following from Victor Hamilton's commentary: he first presented his English rendering of the text "What am I going to do!" then added a footnote stating "Lit., 'and I, where shall I go?'"²⁷ Of course, to be truly literal, one should render as I have, with "come," but Hamilton's (and everyone's!) sense of English (and other [all?] languages) is that "go" is required here. Happily, Martin McNamara, while in the process of translating Targum Neofiti, captured the Hebrew correctly: "'and I, where (shall) I come' (=go)."²⁸

4.3. If we have a look at the ancient versions, we see the same process at work, with the exception of two Targumim. As Depuydt noted,²⁹ the LXX and the Vulgate used the Greek and Latin equivalents of "go," respectively *poreuomai* and *ibo*.³⁰ Depuydt did not present the Targumic evidence, which I now include. Following suit, Targum Neofiti and the Syriac Peshitta both have **הָיָא** "go." The only exceptions to all these renderings are Targum Onqelos and Targum Pseudo-Yonatan, which both used Aramaic **בָּרַח** "come" to render Hebrew **בָּרַח**. In the case of Targum Onqelos, the use of **בָּרַח** is one more sign of that ancient text's slavish devotion to the Hebrew *Vorlage* (exceptions such as

the poetry in Genesis 49 notwithstanding); while in the case of Targum Pseudo-Yonatan, presumably the influence of Targum Onqelos is at work.³¹ Strikingly, however, when modern translators of these Targumim render the Aramaic phrases into English, the result is Bernard Grossfeld's "where to shall I go?" for Targum Onqelos, and Michael Maher's "where shall I go?" for Targum Pseudo-Yonatan,³² once more an indication of how difficult it is to use "come" in this context.³³

4.4. But to return to the Hebrew text itself: it is clear that the phrase

הַיֶּלֶד אֵינִי וְאֲנִי אֵינִי אֲנִי בָּא "the child is not, and I, to where shall I come?" in Gen 37:30 presents confused—or as I said above, impossible—syntax. The use of this syntax here is once more a case of form following content. Reuben, with no knowledge of what has become of Joseph and in a fretful state, can barely speak. His twofold use of the word אֵינִי is one indication of this (though even this is not replicated in some of the translations discussed above (e.g., *REB* and *NJB*). An even more glaring indication is the phrase אֲנִי הָאֵינִי, the product of a confused mind.

4.5. The surface meaning of the text is that Reuben is speaking to his brothers. But in a penetrating study of this passage, M. Niehoff made a strong case for reading these words as Reuben speaking to himself.³⁴ The presence of confused syntax in Reuben's words could support Niehoff's proposal—Reuben's mind, filled with pain and "inner conflict,"³⁵ has not quite sorted out the individual words. On the other hand, my identification of confused syntax in Reuben's words may have no bearing on this approach, since in cases 1 and 2 treated above the confused syntax is in speech clearly spoken aloud.

5. Judg 18:14-20: The disturbance at Micah's house

5.1. Judges 18 relates the story of the migration of the tribe of Dan from their original homeland in the southern coastal plain to the town of Laish/Dan in northern Israel. En route, while passing through the territory of Ephraim, the five men who had reconnoitered the land inform their fellow tribesmen that in the house of a certain Micah there is present אֶפֶוד וְתַרְפִּים וְפָסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה "an ephod

and teraphim, and an idol and a molten-image” (Judg 18:14). The five men then add the words **ועתה דעו מה תעשו** “and now, know what you are to do” (ibid.), no doubt coded language for “let’s take action.”³⁶ With six hundred armed Danites surrounding the house, the five men enter the house and take **את הפסל ואת האפוד ואת התרפים ואת המסכה** “the idol and the ephod, and the teraphim and the molten-image” (v. 17). Immediately the reader notices that the order of the four items has changed. The normal pairings of “ephod and teraphim” and “idol and molten-image,” which appear in v. 14, and which occur as early as Judg 17:3-5 in the introduction to this story, now are changed to the unnatural pairings “idol and ephod” and “teraphim and molten-image.” The effect is to give a sense of ransacking.³⁷

- 5.2.** But there is more. In the second telling of what occurred—a telling which most likely gives us the perspective of the priest in Micah’s house—the narrator refers to the items as **את פסל האפוד ואת התרפים ואת המסכה** “the idol of the ephod, and the teraphim and the molten-image” (v. 18). Now the confusion is even greater, since there can be no such combination as “an idol of the ephod.” The looting is intensified, or at least the priest perceives the scene as even more chaotic than it actually was. Finally, when the priest decides to join the Danites, we read that he took **את האפוד ואת התרפים ואת הפסל** “the ephod, and the teraphim and the idol” (v. 20), omitting one of the four items. The effect is to convey the haste with which the priest departed, leaving behind **המסכה** “the molten-image.” Furthermore, as the priest grabs the things, note that now the ephod is by itself, no longer paired in the impossible construction **פסל האפוד** “the idol of the ephod” as earlier, but that there still is a bit of a mix-up since the traditional pair “ephod and teraphim” is still not quite together—the Masoretic accents separate the two items and place the teraphim with the idol. The cumulative effect of the four phrases—beginning with the normal pairings in v. 14, then creating abnormal pairings in v. 17, then positing an impossible construction in v. 18, and finally omitting one item in v. 20—is to portray the confusion which reigned in Micah’s house.
- 5.3.** Once more we may note that the standard translations—both ancient and modern—smooth over the difficulties in the text. For example, the LXX omits the listing in v. 17; reads “the graven-image and

the ephod and the teraphim and the molten-image” in v. 18 (with no recognition of the construct phrase פסל האפוד); and then recreates the original string “the ephod and the teraphim and the graven-image and the molten-image” in v. 20, thereby putting everything back in order and including מסכה which is lacking in MT.³⁸ The interested reader can check the various English versions and see what modern translators have done. The most egregious change is represented in both *NJPSV* and *REB* at v. 18, with an implied Hebrew text ואת האפוד ואת התרפים ואת המסכה ואת הפסל, thereby presenting the four items in their normal pairing (though, to their credit, both translations included a footnote presenting the literal rendering of the Hebrew text).

- 5.4. Happily, one ancient text followed MT throughout, namely Targum Yonatan,³⁹ including the reproduction of the construct phrase פסל האפוד in v. 18 with צילם אי פודא.⁴⁰ Not surprisingly, Buber and Rosenzweig adhered to MT in their translation. They rendered the key phrase in v. 18 as “das Schnitzbild mit dem Umschurz, die Larven, den Aussenguss,”⁴¹ which, while not following MT in exact fashion, at least creates a separate expression to render האפוד פסל.
- 5.5. I also take the opportunity to comment on another stylistic device utilized by the author, especially since it too has not been properly understood by commentators. In v. 17 the actions of the five men are described as follows . . . באו שמה לקחו . . . “they came there, they took . . .” (with the listing of the four items taken, as noted above). Several scholars have disapproved of this phrase. G. F. Moore noted that “the asyndeton is without parallel in simple narrative,”⁴² while A. B. Ehrlich used the rather strong term “unhebräisch.”⁴³ But certainly this view is a misunderstanding of what the author is attempting to convey here. The lack of the conjunction is an indication of the suddenness by which the men swooped into the house and took the desired items. The text is not “un-Hebraic” here, but rather once more form follows content. Just as confused syntax is utilized to indicate the confusion of the moment, so is speeded syntax (if I may use that term) used to indicate the speed with which an event occurs. A parallel usage is found in Song 5:6, where the wording חמק עבר

וַדָּוִדׁי “my beloved had turned, had gone” indicates the instantaneous disappearance of the male lover from the female lover’s fantasy.

- 5.6.** To return to the main point: the narrative in Judges 18 employs confused language to portray the ransacking of Micah’s house. This reading stands in contrast to that of a distinguished previous commentator: “The account of the way in which they got possession of the images is badly confused by interpolations and glosses, and baffles emendation or analysis.”⁴⁴ Confused, yes; but that is the very point.

6. 1 Sam 14:21: Confusion in the Philistine camp

- 6.1.** 1 Sam 14:20-21 describes an Israelite encounter with the Philistines. In the latter half of v. 20 we learn that the confusion among the latter was so great that the Philistines actually attacked each other. The narrator adds curtly: **מְהוּמָה גְדוּלָה מְאֹד** “a very great confusion.” The next verse, v. 21, is another example of confused syntax:

וְהָעִבְרִים הָיוּ לְפִלְשְׁתִּים כְּאֶתְמוֹל שֶׁלְשׁוֹם אֲשֶׁר עָלוּ עִמָּם בְּמַחֲנֵה סָבִיב
וְגַם הָמָּה לְהַיּוֹת עִם יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר עִם שְׂאוּל וַיִּוָּנְתָן

“and the Hebrews were to the Philistines as before, that had gone up with them into the camp all around; and even they to be with Israel that were with Saul and Jonathan.” I have translated the passage as it reads, without any attempt at smoothing over the difficulties. The latter, of course, is what typically occurs in English translations, e.g., *NRSV* “Now the Hebrews who previously had been with the Philistines and had gone up with them into the camp turned and joined the Israelites who were with Saul and Jonathan.”⁴⁵ Now something like this is presumably what happened in the battle, but the biblical writer did not describe it in such smooth terms. Instead, to evoke the confusion in the Philistine camp, he produced language that by its very confusion describes the battlefield.

- 6.2.** The difficulties in this verse are several. I present here a sampling of what some commentators have noted. First, as many scholars have noted, it would be helpful to have a relative pronoun,

presumably אֲשֶׁר, after וְהַעֲבִירֵם “and the Hebrews,” thus enabling a reading such as “and the Hebrews who were with the Philistines.”⁴⁶ Secondly, the word עִמָּם is a bit odd, since by stating that the Hebrews had gone up with them, i.e., the Philistines, the text implies that Philistines had gone up into their own camp. Note that the LXX omits any equivalent to “with them.”⁴⁷ Third, in the words of J. P. Fokkelman, “The verse founders on the *atnax* in the MT and requires correction.”⁴⁸ His proposal, like that of many, is to move the *'atnax* back one word, and to emend slightly, producing a text that would look like בַּמַּחֲנֶה סָבְבוּ גַם הַמָּה (with the *'atnax* on בַּמַּחֲנֶה) “. . . into the camp; they too turned . . .”⁴⁹ Fourth, though I have found no scholar who stated so explicitly, the infinitive construct לֵהִי וְתֵּן “to be” has no verb to support it, though of course by emending the text to read סָבְבוּ “turned” this difficulty is alleviated.

- 6.3.** But the free hand of the emender is the wrong approach here. The verse is intentionally confused: it depicts the confusion that reigned in the Philistine camp. Any attempt either to emend the Hebrew original or to smooth over its difficulties in a modern translation misses the point entirely.

7.1 Sam 17:38: Saul dresses David with his armor

- 7.1.** My final example is 1 Sam 17:38:

וַיִּלְבַּשׁ שָׂאוּל אֶת דָּוִד מְדִיו וְנָתַן קֹבֶעַ נְחֹשֶׁת עַל רִאשׁוֹ וַיִּלְבַּשׁ אֹתוֹ שְׂרָיוֹן

This passage is uniformly rendered as a series of consecutive acts: as in *NJPSV*: “Saul clothed David in his own garment; he placed a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him in a breastplate.”⁵⁰ But if we take a closer look at the verbs in this passage: we note that only the first and the third are in the *wayyiqtol* form and that the second of them is in the *weqatal* form. A typical approach is to declare “וְנָתַן is syntactically impossible” and to emend the verse.⁵¹ More sober is the approach of two recent studies from the field of discourse analysis, one by R. E. Longacre and one by C. H. J. van der Merwe, both of whom isolated this passage as among the most difficult nuts to crack in the biblical narrative corpus.⁵² While neither was able to supply an answer to the

problem of why וַיָּנַח (instead of the expected וַיִּתֵּן) is used here (and their respect for the text precluded emendation as a solution), it was their discussion of this passage which motivated me to hunt for a solution.

7.2. In keeping with the approach taken above, I propose to explain the linguistic peculiarity of 1 Sam 17:38 as follows. Given the three items mentioned in this verse, the expected order of dressing would be מִדְּיָם “body-suit,” then $\text{וַיִּתֵּן$ “breastplate,” and finally קַוֵּבַע “helmet.”⁵³ In the entire history of human armor, the last item to be donned is always the helmet. The most explicit evidence comes from the numerous textual references to the donning of armor in ancient and medieval literature (*Iliad*; *La Chanson de Roland*; and many other works), all of which refer consistently to the helmet as the last item to be affixed.⁵⁴ One of the overall goals of the author of 1 Samuel, as many scholars have noted,⁵⁵ is to show the inadequacy of Saul. The present passage should be understood as part of the portrayal. Saul’s bewilderment at the presence of the shepherd boy David on the battlefield and his volunteering to fight Goliath has caused the king to become so flustered that he is unable even to dress another man properly.⁵⁶ The language of 1 Sam 17:38 parallels the scene, both through the order of the objects mentioned and by use of the *weqatal* form וַיָּנַח “he placed” (clearly, the verb is not a perfect or a pluperfect here). I propose an English rendering of 1 Sam 17:38 such as “Saul clothed David in his body-suit, then he even placed a bronze helmet on his head, and he clothed him with a breastplate,” with the highlighting *weqatal* verb indicated by the expression “then he even placed”; or more radically, “Saul clothed David in his body-suit, then placed he a bronze helmet on his head, and he clothed him with a breastplate,” with the inverted word order “then placed he” replicating the most unusual presence of the Hebrew *weqatal* form.⁵⁷

8. ENDNOTES

¹ The standard edition is A. M. Blackman, *Middle-Egyptian Stories* (Bibliotheca Aegyptiaca 2; Brussels: Édition de la Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élizabeth, 1932), pp. 41-48.

² For detailed discussion, see H. Goedicke, *Die Geschichte des Schiffbrüchigen* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1974), pp. 21-22.

³ A. Erman, *The Ancient Egyptians: A Sourcebook of their Writings* (trans. A. M. Blackman; ed. W. K. Simpson) (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 30 and n. 5 (German original 1923, first English edition 1927).

⁴ W. K. Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 52 and n. 6.

⁵ M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 212 (translation) and p. 215, n. 1 (comment).

⁶ R. B. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and other Ancient Egyptian Poems 1940-1640 BC* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), p. 93 and p. 98, n. 6.

⁷ Y. M. Grintz, *Mivxar ha-Sifrut ha-Mitsrit ha-^cAtiqa* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1958), pp. 5, 7. My thanks to Hanan Eshel of Bar-Ilan University for drawing my attention to this volume.

⁸ For further discussion and for other stylistic devices in this text, see G. A. Rendsburg, "Literary Devices in the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor," *JAOS* (forthcoming).

⁹ This approach serves as a counter to the view of J. Baines, "Interpreting the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor," *JEA* 76 (1990), p. 58 and n. 15: "The story's status as written literature, as against a papyrus that records an oral composition, is demonstrated by textual corruptions that must have a written origin," with the footnote adding: "The best example is the phrase jn-ht hh n.j-s(w) (36-7, 105-6), which occurs twice but is not meaningful as it stands" (and again apologies for the lack of subscript diacritical marks which naturally do appear in Baines's citation of the text). I agree with Baines' conclusion that the narrative is written literature (though I doubt very much whether an ancient Egyptian or anyone in the ancient Near East would have understood the modern scholarly distinction between written composition and oral composition), but I disagree with his presumption of scribal error in lines 36-37 (=105-106) as evidence thereof.

¹⁰ For a second example from an ancient Near Eastern literary text, in the Apology of Esarhaddon, see H. Tadmor, "Autobiographical Apology in the Royal Assyrian Literature," in H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld,

eds., *History, Historiography and Interpretation: Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literatures*

(Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983), p. 40. In addition, see N. C. Veldhuis, “The Fly, the Worm, and the Chain: Old Babylonian Chain Incantations,” *OLP* 24 (1993), pp. 41-64. Veldhuis dealt with a specific literary genre, namely, incantation texts, but his statement about grammar is applicable to all literature: “The rules of grammar are not laws of nature—the existence of which, after all, is generally doubted. Ungrammaticality, or deviant grammar, is often a mark in that it draws our attention to something special, as readers of modern poetry well know. Therefore the object of our interest must be the deviation as well as the rule” (p. 46). My kind thanks to Scott Noegel for this reference.

As Victor Avigdor Hurowitz reminded me (oral communication), one interpretation of the confused language in lines 2-3 of the Mesad Hashavyahu inscription entails understanding these words as representing the emotional status of the petitioner. Thus already J. Naveh in the *editio princeps*: “A Hebrew Letter from the Seventh Century B.C.,” *IEJ* 10 (1960), pp. 131-132; and more forcefully S. Ahituv, *’Asufat Ketuvot ‘Ivriyot* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1992), p. 98. In fact, both of these scholars cited Gen 37:30, one of the biblical texts that we will consider below, as a parallel.

Finally, for other examples of peculiarities in the biblical text, ranging from orthographic issues to lexical issues, see S. B. Noegel, *Janus Parallelism in the Book of Job* (JSOTSS 223; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 146-147; and S. B. Noegel, “A Slip of the Reader and Not the Reed,” *JBQ* 26 (1998), pp. 12-19, 93-100.

¹¹ A. Hurvitz, “Ruth 2:7—‘A Midrashic Gloss’?” *ZAW* 95 (1983), p. 122.

¹² M. Buber, “Die Erzählung von Sauls Königswahl,” *VT* 6 (1956), p. 126. It appears that J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 4: *Vow and Desire* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1993), p. 387, had Buber’s specific comment in mind when he wrote, after attempting to show some order to the chaos of these lines, that “These observations yield enough material to prevent our labelling the contribution of the women ‘chatter’.” Fokkelman did not cite Buber on this particular passage, but he cited Buber’s lengthy treatment of the Saul narrative in several other places (e.g., p. 383, n. 31).

¹³ See M. S. Moore, “Two Textual Anomalies in Ruth,” *CBQ* 59 (1997), pp. 238-243, for a recent survey of opinions.

¹⁴ By traditional text, I mean the Masoretic Text with all its parts. Thus, e.g., D. Lys, “Résidence ou repos? Notule sur Ruth ii 7,” *VT* 21 (1971), pp. 497-501, proposed a reading that ignored the accent marks; and D. R. G. Beattie, “A Midrashic Gloss in Ruth 2:7,” *ZAW* 89 (1977), pp. 122-124, proposed an interpretation based on a repointing of the vowels. Of course, other scholars have suggested more radical alterations, i.e., emendation of the consonantal text.

¹⁵ Hurvitz, “Ruth 2:7—‘A Midrashic Gloss’?” pp. 122-123.

¹⁶ See Beattie, “A Midrashic Gloss in Ruth 2:7.”

¹⁷ Most scholars contend with only two different ethnic groups, the Midianites and the Ishmaelites, but Gen 37:36 introduces a third group, the Medanites. That the Midianites and the Medanites are distinct entities according to the biblical tradition may be seen in Gen 25:2.

¹⁸ E. L. Greenstein, “An Equivocal Reading of the Sale of Joseph,” in K. R. R. Gros Louis, ed., *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), pp. 119-121. I have taken the liberty of retroverting Greenstein’s transliterations to the Hebrew original.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 122-123.

²⁰ See, for example, A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), pp. 59-73.

²¹ L. Depuydt, “On the Notion of Movement in Egypto-Coptic and Biblical Hebrew,” in S. Israelit-Groll, ed., *Pharaonic Egypt: The Bible and Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1985), p. 37. The bracketed word “to” at the end of the first sentence in this quotation is missing in the original; I have added it because I think it is necessary to bring out Depuydt’s intended meaning (unless I have misunderstood him in some way).

²² Depuydt, “On the Notion of Movement in Egypto-Coptic and Biblical Hebrew,” p. 37.

²³ I fully recognize that words for “come” and “go” do not equate in all cases in all languages. There may be instances of הָלַךְ where “come” is the desired English equivalent, and there may be instances of בָּרַח where “go” is the desired English equivalent (see also the use of both words collocated in וַלְכֹוּ בָאֵן in Gen 45:17). But Depuydt is correct in this case, since with הָלַךְ the only “correct” option is הָלַךְ and the use of בָּרַח creates confused syntax.

²⁴ E. Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken, 1995), p. 179.

²⁵ The Buber-Rosenzweig translation appears in various editions. I cite the text from the 15-volume edition: M. Buber and F. Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift* (Berlin: Schocken, 1926-n.d.) vol. 1, p. 147. Martin Luther's translation, incidentally, is the same.

²⁶ R. Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), p. 214.

²⁷ V. P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 421 and n. 12.

²⁸ M. McNamara, *Targum Neofiti I: Genesis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 173, n. 20.

²⁹ Depuydt, "On the Notion of Movement in Egypto-Coptic and Biblical Hebrew," p. 37.

³⁰ Though one must admit that this is not the only instance of the LXX utilizing the verb *poreuestai* for **סָבַח**. There are eight other cases, according to E. Hatch and H. A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1897), pp. 1189-1194, namely, Gen 24:62, Exod 5:23, Numb 32:6, 1 Sam 17:45, 26:5, 2 Sam 15:37, 1 Kgs 16:18, Prov 2:19. But see above n. 23 and more importantly Depuydt's important observation that only here is the verb **סָבַח** "come" collocated with the interrogative **אֵימָה** "whither."

³¹ On this point see the discussion by M. Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), pp. 1-2, with a survey of scholarly opinions and bibliography in n. 5.

³² B. Grossfeld, *The Targum Onqelos to Genesis* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988), p. 128; and Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, p. 126.

³³ As with my comments above re Hamilton, so too here with Grossfeld and Maher: I intend no criticism towards these scholars, but rather I use these examples to demonstrate how odd and difficult a phrase such as "where shall I come?" is to English (and other) ears.

³⁴ M. Niehoff, "Do Biblical Characters Talk to Themselves? Narrative Modes of Representing Inner Speech in Early Biblical Fiction," *JBL* 111 (1992), pp. 577-595, especially pp. 587-588.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 588.

³⁶ In the words of G. F. Moore, *Judges* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1895), p. 395: "No more than the hint was needed."

³⁷ Though he did not go far enough in recognizing the true import of the change in wording, see the suggestion of D. N. Freedman *apud* R. G. Boling, *Judges* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), p. 264.

³⁸ Based on the LXX, many modern scholars emend MT to include מַסְכָּה in v. 20; thus, e.g., Boling, *Judges*, p. 264.

³⁹ I follow BM Or. 2210, the text utilized by both A. Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic*, vol. 2 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959), and M. Cohen, *Miqra'ot Gedolot ha-Keter: Sefer Yehoshua^c - Sefer Shofetim* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1992). W. F. Smelik, *The Targum of Judges* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), utilized different manuscripts of Targum Yonatan, many of which read מַרְכָּתָא (as opposed to צַלְמָא) in v. 20, thus producing one variant with MT (as noted by Smelik on p. 227; and see already Sperber's critical apparatus on p. 85).

⁴⁰ However, D. J. Harrington and A. J. Saldarini, *Targum Jonathan of the Former Prophets* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987), p. 93, departed from the actual text in their English rendering of v. 18 with “the graven image, the ephod, and the figures, and the molten image,” ridding the passage of the construct phrase.

⁴¹ Buber and Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift*, vol. 7, p. 91.

⁴² Moore, *Judges*, p. 397.

⁴³ A. B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel*, vol. 3 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1910), p. 146.

⁴⁴ Moore, *Judges*, p. 394.

⁴⁵ The translation in *NJPSV*: “And the Hebrews who had previously sided with the Philistines, who had come up with them in the army [from] round about—they too joined with the Israelites who were with Saul and Jonathan,” with a footnote marking the entire sentence save the last six words “Meaning of Heb. uncertain,” is a bit better at preserving some of the difficulty of this verse.

⁴⁶ Thus, e.g., S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Samuel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1890), pp. 84-85; H. S. Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Samuel* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1899), p. 113; and Ehrlich, *Randglossen*, vol. 3, p. 213. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 2: *The Crossing Fates* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), pp. 61-62, n. 53, proposed adding -וּ, a less radical emendation, instead of אֲשֶׁר. But he qualified his remark on p. 721.

⁴⁷ See P. K. McCarter, *1 Samuel* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), p. 237.

⁴⁸ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 2: *The Crossing Fates*, p. 61, n. 53.

⁴⁹ Thus McCarter, *1 Samuel*, pp. 234, 237, with an eye to the LXX. See also Driver, *Samuel*, p. 84; Smith, *Samuel*, p. 113; Ehrlich, *Randglossen*, vol. 3, p. 213; and *BHS*, *ad loc.* This emendation underlies those translations that include the word “turned” in their rendition, e.g., the aforesaid *NRSV*, as well as *RSV* and *NAB*. Probably *REB* “changed sides” and *NJB* “defected” have a similar basis.

⁵⁰ Reading the last part of the verse with the footnote; the main text reads “and fastened a breastplate on him.”

⁵¹ McCarter, *1 Samuel*, p. 288.

⁵² R. E. Longacre, “*Weqatal* Forms in Biblical Hebrew Prose: A Discourse-modular Approach,” in R. D. Bergen, ed., *Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1994), p. 75; and C. H. J. Van der Merwe, “Discourse Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew Grammar,” in R. D. Bergen, ed., *Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1994), p. 28.

⁵³ I admit to some difficulty here in rendering the terms מַדְיָה and שָׂרֵי יָוֹן. The former is a generic word for “garment,” and the latter is typically translated “body armor” or “coat of mail.” In the present instance, it appears that מַדְיָה must be a body-suit with some protective function and that שָׂרֵי יָוֹן would then be the breastplate. Note that M. J. Fretz, “Weapons and Implements of Warfare,” *ABD* 6 (1992), p. 894, allowed for מַדְיָה = “armor” and שָׂרֵי יָוֹן = “breastplate.” In any case, the exact designations of these terms in the present context is not the main concern here, since however one understands them, it is clear that the helmet should be donned last.

⁵⁴ For the *Iliad* references, see J. P. Brown, *Israel and Hellas* (BZAW 231; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), pp. 163-170. For numerous examples from medieval literature, see F. Buttin, *Du costume militaire au moyen âge et pendant la renaissance* (Memorias de la Real Academia de Buenas Letras de Barcelona 12; Barcelona: Real Academia de Buenas Letras, 1971), pp. 15-16, 20, 154-159. In addition, the final placement of the helmet can be inferred from numerous medieval artworks depicting the wearing of armor; a basic introduction, with many illustrations, is C. Ffoulkes, *The Armourer and His Craft* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1912). I take this opportunity to thank Pierre Terjanian, Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellow in

European Arms and Armor at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, for his assistance in this matter and for these references to medieval literature and art. Even Mark Twain got it right in his very detailed description of donning armor, ending with the helmet, in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 134-135 (in Chapter XI entitled "The Yankee in Search of Adventures").

⁵⁵ See, for example, D. M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul* (JSOTSS 14; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980); and M. Garsiel, *The First Book of Samuel: A Literary Study of Comparative Structures, Analogies and Parallels* (Ramat-Gan: Revivim, 1983); as well as the succinct remarks by J. Rosenberg, "1 and 2 Samuel," in R. Alter and F. Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 127-128.

⁵⁶ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 2: *The Crossing Fates*, p. 176, noted, "The line concerning the bronze helmet already makes us suspect that something is not quite right, for it is too similar to v. 5a, Goliath's line, and is also followed by the armour (5b-38c)." This is a fine point, but it is not clear to me whether or not he was guided as well by the unusual verbal syntax. Though in "Appendix I: Accounting for the selected text," Fokkelman (p. 727) called attention to F. E. König, *Historisch-comparative Syntax der hebräischen Sprache* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1897), pp. 529-530, who considered our example "eine Digression," with the comment: "so ist ausmalend-epexegetisch 1 S 17 38: und zwar gab er." This insight from König is close to my own reading of the passage, and I am happy to have been anticipated by this classic scholar (I came to the König reference only in the last stage of preparing this article). See also H. J. Stoebe, "Die Goliathperikope 1 Sam. xvii 1 - xviii 5 und die Textform der Septuaginta," *VT* 6 (1956), p. 407.

⁵⁷ For further treatment, especially on the translation issue, see G. A. Rendsburg, "The Literary Approach to Bible and Finding a Good Translation," in F. W. Knobloch, ed., *Biblical Translation in Context* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, forthcoming).