

Cotrozzi, Stefano, *Expect the Unexpected: Aspects of Pragmatic Foregrounding in Old Testament Narratives* (LHBOTS, 510: New York: T & T Clark, 2010). Pp. xviii+290. Hardcover. US\$120.00. ISBN 978-0-5675-6838-0.

"The demands being made of PhD thesis writers of the present generation are becoming altogether excessive. They, rather than their teachers, are now being expected to produce the research on which the field depends and develops, and results are being published frequently with little or no modification, when in fact they need substantial maturing." In this manner, the respected Assyriologist, W. G. Lambert, began his review of a Harvard doctoral dissertation.^[1] Fifteen years later, his words remain valid and provide the context in which the dissertation under review should be judged. The present generation of doctoral students is expected to be well-versed in languages and history, in linguistics and literature, in past and current theoretical developments in their field and in cognate disciplines. Combined with a push towards interdisciplinary approaches, the task for doctoral dissertations seems insurmountable. Stefano Cotrozzi's thesis is a serious attempt to meet all these expectations and the work testifies to a tremendous amount of educational effort. In fact, the author has acquainted himself with intricacies of the use of the participle in Arabic as well as the relationship between aging and memory for expected and unexpected objects in real-world settings. Although all this vast knowledge is gathered with admirable diligence, one wonders whether the project contributes in a significant manner to the understanding of the mechanics of biblical storytelling and the peculiarities of the Hebrew verbal system. While the title of the book suggests a study concentrated on an aspect of biblical narratives, Cotrozzi explores several

claims about the verb, particularly the existence of an historic present within the Biblical Hebrew verbal system.

Summary of the Book

Chapters 1 and 2 are to be read as one unit since they present the concept of foregrounding, from its introduction by the Prague School Circle, through its development by the Russian formalists, and up to recent refinements by the British literary critics. From this panorama one learns that foregrounding is actually a complex phenomenon that involves defamiliarization, deviation from the expectations raised in the course of the narrative and the use of evaluation devices.

Chapter 3 provides key concepts for the analysis of foregrounding understood as defamiliarization and deviation from expected schemata. In this chapter Cotrozzi uses the perspective of cognitive science and briefly presents the ways in which knowledge is conceptualized and schematized. Indeed, knowledge of any element of the world and of any activity (for example, what is "a face" or what does it mean "to borrow a book in the library") can be described as familiarity with a series of standard and expected objects and actions. The concepts used to describe these objects and actions, their roles and interactions are: schema, frame, scenario, scripts, plans, goals, and themes. Ideas about each of these elements are culturally sensitive. This interrelation of knowledge and culture requires from the biblical scholar familiarity with the typical way in which the Bible conceptualizes and describes objects and events. Only one who is well acquainted with the usual and the expected elements of the biblical narrative can recognize unexpected turns and unusual features that deviate from the blueprint. These deviations constitute specific chunk discourse that the narrator chooses to foreground.

Chapter 4 provides examples of foregrounding in the Hebrew Bible in which the biblical narrative departs from the usual frames, schemata, plans, goals and themes.

For each of these categories a few examples are collected and briefly commented upon. The main conclusions the author draws are: 1. every type of knowledge can be foregrounded; 2. the foregrounded piece of information may be embedded both in the narrative and in the direct speech; 3. foregrounding may be strengthened by the use of literary devices such as wordplay, repetition or assonance and by syntax; 4. the length of the foregrounded material can vary from one to several clauses, and 5. foregrounded clauses may employ any verbal form.

Chapter 5 appeals to the work of the American sociologist, W. Labov, specifically his study of evaluation devices in oral narratives of personal experience. These devices are clauses that depart from expected narrative syntax to convey the importance and significance of the narrated events so that the listener or the reader is guided in their interpretation.

Chapter 6 applies the Labovian model (following refinements proposed by R. E. Longacre and L. Polanyi) to the biblical texts in order to describe the evaluation devices. According to Cotrozzi, such devices include symbolic use of numbers, repetition, piling up of synonyms, and wordplays. The author concludes that evaluative devices are drawn from every level of linguistic structure, may consist of single words or of entire clauses, and may occur both in narrative sections and in direct speech.

Chapter 7 begins a section of the book that is concentrated on an internal evaluative device, namely, the historic present. From a cross-linguistic survey the following characteristics emerge: 1. the historic present occurs mostly in complicating sections of a narrative that advance the plot, and thus it marks narrative peaks; 2. both perfective and imperfective forms can be used in the historic present, but most commonly it encodes momentous events; 3. it occurs more readily in positive rather than negative clauses; and 4. verbs of motion,

perception, speech, killing and wounding are those which quite often occur in the historic present. The second section of chapter 7, after a short criticism of H. Weinrich's theory of the narrative use of tenses, proceeds with a survey of the alleged use of the imperfect and the participle as the historic present in Semitic languages. According to Cotrozzi's review, the existence of the historic present was proposed for many Semitic languages but it is probable only in Neo-Aramaic.

Chapter 8 evaluates the claim that the imperfect is used in Biblical Hebrew as the historic present. Since the pattern of use of the imperfect does not match the features characteristic for the historic present in other languages, Cotrozzi concludes that the imperfect should not be interpreted as the historic present.

Chapter 9 investigates J. Joosten's proposal that the participle in the syntagms w^e + noun phrase + resumptive pronoun + participle and $w^ehinnēh$ + noun phrase + participle is employed as the historic present. With a methodology similar to the one used in chapter 9, the author arrives at a similar conclusion: the participle is not the Biblical Hebrew historic present.

Chapter 10 elaborates on the function of the syntagm $w^ehinnēh$ + noun phrase followed by other constituents. The thesis of A. Berlin and M. Sternberg that this syntagm functions as a marker of free indirect speech (that is, a description of a character's perception of the external world) is accepted and supported with additional arguments.

Some controversial points

As is the case with every other study concentrated on literature, Cotrozzi's interpretations and conclusions can be contested. Unfortunately I find myself often in disagreement with his grammatical and narrative-literary analysis of the selected texts. Some examples shall illustrate the nature of my objections.

While analyzing the Akkadian historic present, Cotrozzi parses the form *i-ta-aḥ-zu-nim* as the preterite and the form *is-sà-qar-šū-nu-ši* as the present (pp. 156–157). Both these forms can and probably should be understood as the perfect. Since the understanding of these forms as the present is crucial in Cotrozzi's analysis, one expects an explanation why they should not be parsed as the perfect.

A similar problem occurs in Cotrozzi's reading of a short passage in Rabbinic Hebrew (p. 191). He discusses the participle as the historic present and quotes a short narrative in which two participles are rendered with the present tense ("calls," "says") by J. Elwolde, the translator of the Spanish original of *An Introductory Grammar of Rabbinic Hebrew* by M. Pérez Fernández. In this example Cotrozzi argues that the use of the participle as the historic present conforms to a cross-linguistic pattern. In fact, cross-linguistically the historic present often advances the plot and occurs frequently with the verbs of speech. The author, however, overlooks the fact that the two verbs that open the narrative and that are rendered by Elwolde/Pérez Fernández with the past tense ("went out," "wanted") are actually participles too. The occurrence of these participles requires, of course, a modification in Cotrozzi's analysis of the passage.

Similarly, some analyses of selected passages from the Hebrew Bible are questionable. In commenting on Exod 3:2d ("He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed"), Cotrozzi observes that the last phrase is foregrounded (p. 53). He explains that in this case foregrounding is due to the departure of the narrative from the natural laws of physics. He notes that it is not unusual for bushes in a desert to catch fire but it is unexpected for them not to be consumed. However, both actions (burning and not being consumed) are encoded in the same participial form, and the particle *hinnēh*, a marker of the unexpected *par excellence*, is placed at the beginning of the clause that reports the

burning of the bush. Hence, on the basis of syntax, I prefer to conclude that both the actions are presented by the narrator as equally unexpected ("foregrounded").

The next passage, also on p. 53, is 2 Sam 11:4. Cotrozzi thinks that David's lying with Bathsheba is foregrounded. I concur with the author's argumentation that from the perspective of the entire narrative this action is unexpected because the narrator consistently builds the picture of David as a man fully committed to God and his commandments. But this unexpected action of David is expressed in one word only, with the same *wayyiqtol* form as all other "unforegrounded" actions in this verse, and it is not highlighted by the narrator in any way. Therefore, I would say that David's action is deliberately presented by the narrator without any emphasis or foregrounding, even if this action stands out in the perspective of the entire Davidic story.

Conclusions

Returning to the initial point of this review, that is, to Lambert's assessment of the expectations placed upon PhD writers, this thesis is certainly emblematic. It investigates the entire biblical corpus, makes use of current literary methodologies and shows excellent familiarity with the bibliography of various fields. But these characteristics of Cotrozzi's thesis also epitomize weaknesses of current biblical research. Indeed, it seems to me that the wealth of information from the cognate languages and literary and linguistic approaches is hardly matched by an in-depth study of the text of the biblical narratives.

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[1] W. G. Lambert, Review of Studies in Third Millennium Sumerian and Akkadian Personal Names: The Designation and Conception of the Personal God by Robert A. di Vito, *Orientalia* 64 (1995): 131–132.