INTRODUCTION

Seventy-two Hebraists and Biblical scholars met at the Tilburg conference on Narrative Syntax and the Hebrew Bible in October 1996 to study syntax. A blue sky and trees in bright autumn colours, visible through the glass wall of the conference room, formed the backdrop to their activities. A season of transformation, outdoors as well as indoors. The trees in the park show their changing colours: the oak shining in red, the maple in yellow and the beech in coppery colours, all dominated by the chestnuttree with its full yellow-brown crown; the holm oak shows, on the other hand, no readiness for change, and the fir and pine remain green “forever”. Inside the conference room Biblical Hebrew syntax appears to be in a period of transition, too. The eminent scholars know their own stages of development. The person with the brightest colour of change has been one of the first to change his view. Some begin later and reveal their own coloration. Others still represent the evergreen and show a slight dislike for the colour alteration of the more changeable minds.

During the summer of Biblical Hebrew grammar all scholars concentrated on morphology and on the temporal and aspectual values of the verb forms, and restricted this morpho-syntax to the sentence boundaries. An increasing need was felt for a text-syntactic study: the traditionally oriented Biblical Hebrew word- and sentence-based grammar was criticised as inadequate. The predominant green colour turned out to differentiate itself in manifold autumn-colours: text-syntactic studies of the Biblical Hebrew verbal system appeared, in which morphological forms were analysed in their different narrative functions. Various studies of the contextual and communicative aspects of syntax were made. Biblical Hebrew word-order was studied afresh. Models inspired by pragmatics, discourse analysis and cognitive linguistics were developed. A spectrum of narrative syntaxes became perceptible. Traditional Hebrew grammar sometimes rejected these new approaches or at other times criticised its lack of analytical foundation and its eclectic range of biblical texts.

Summer or autumn, it was time for a discussion. Not only theoretical argumentations, but also practical analyses needed to be examined. Six scholars acquainted with the field were asked both to present
a paper on their theories and ideas of the Hebrew syntax and to lead a workshop in which the consequences of their insights are shown in the syntactic analysis of Exodus 19–24 or 1 Samuel 1, two notoriously difficult narrative texts. Both kinds of contributions are collected in this volume, which explains the differences in style, in the number of footnotes and discussions in the theoretical articles on the one hand and the workshop papers on the other.

The articles differ in breadth of treatment and topic. However different they may be, in the end one may discover, surprisingly, a certain convergence. In the beginning, twenty years ago, Biblical Hebrew narrative syntax arose as a reaction to the traditional sentence-syntax, as if the one had to exclude the other. The articles in this volume tend to hold a less exclusive, more inclusive view. Verb forms, word-order and other syntactic features function at more than one level: in the clause and the sentence, in a hierarchy of clauses or textual units, in a story. A combination of a morpho-syntactic study at the sentence level and a text-syntactic approach should be made. From this point onwards the scholars concentrate on different levels.

Joosten explicitly elucidates an inclusive approach. Following Benveniste, who described the different levels of words which are composed of phonemes, but are themselves integrated into sentences (phonemes are not integrated in sentences), Joosten defends the distinction between verb forms functioning at the level of the sentence, and sentences integrated into a textual unit. Therefore, according to Joosten, verb forms are not integrated into a text; sentences, however, are. Joosten himself consequently focusses mainly on the verbs and their temporal, aspectual and modal functions in a sentence, and does not enter into detail concerning the textual arrangement of the sentences. Joosten’s position is similar to Muraoka’s on the one hand, and to Talstra’s on the other: his work on the sentence-level is similar to Muraoka’s approach, his acknowledgement of the integration of sentences into a larger unit corresponds to Talstra’s hierarchical arrangement of clauses.

Talstra systematically builds up his elements: he starts with the morphological forms in the clauses, distinguishes grammatical clause types, lists the morphological and lexical correspondences between clause constituents in two clauses, the syntactic marking of paragraphs and the set of actors in a text, and consequently arranges the related constituents into a hierarchy of clauses, thus unfolding the coherence in a text. He very systematically elaborates the thesis defended by
Joosten: the relation of the elements occurs at one level, while the integration takes place at a higher hierarchical level. He explains this both at a theoretical and a practical level in his workshop paper. Although Van der Merwe is more generally descriptive in his articles and seems less interested in defending his own position, his choices seem to be close to Talstra's. He starts with the forms of the verbs and other words in clauses, and consequently proceeds to their discursive functions.

Alviero Niccacci starts at the sentence level too, and concentrates first on the verb forms and the place of the verb in the clause. He describes a theory of two sentence types, with either a verb form in first-place position or a verb form in second-place position. At the text-level he makes a distinction between "historical-narrative texts" and "direct speech texts". Thus he is able to describe the basic syntactic structures of Biblical Hebrew narrative and the functions of the verb forms in these structures. Niccacci considers the Hebrew verb form and the word-order in a clause as the indicators of their function in the prose text, either indicating the main line of action or the interruption of this main line. At the same time he acknowledges the tense aspects of the distinct verb forms both in the sentence and at the textual level, i.e. in the historical narrative and direct speech.

Muraoka differs markedly from Niccacci, as he begins and ends with the morphological form at the sentence level, meticulously analyzing the differences in form. He carefully argues on the basis of these forms within sentence boundaries, in order to prove or disprove the alleged final function of the Biblical Hebrew syntagm <waw + volitive verb form>. Generally speaking, one might say that they represent the extremes of the scale: Muraoka being on the morphological end of the scale, summarized as "from verb form to function in the sentence", and Niccacci on the functional end of the scale, which can be summarized as "from textual function to verb form".

These papers are preceded by two general and introductory articles, which do not present a theoretical model but elucidate the backgrounds of the actual developments; no workshop was presented in combination with these introductions. In the first article Van der Merwe gives an overview of the recent developments in Biblical Hebrew linguistics. He shows what necessitated a new approach to the study of Biblical Hebrew, and presents the trends in Biblical Hebrew narrative syntax. In the second article Van Wolde concentrates on recent
developments in general linguistics and pragmatics which show tendencies very similar to the approaches in Biblical Hebrew narrative syntax. She relates the research of form and function to that of linguistic motivation and states that Biblical Hebrew narrative syntax has to deal with the question of “why” a certain form is used in a specific clause or textual context. These two introductory articles are intended to clarify the background to the discussion, and therefore the book starts with them.

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