READING NARRATIVES IN THE SEPTUAGINT: A DISCOURSE ON METHOD

Dichk M. Kanonge
North-West University, Potchefstroom

A. INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of texts depends greatly upon their literary genres. Narratives are the predominant genre in the Septuagint. More than a third of the Hebrew Bible, even without the Apocrypha, consists of narratives. Despite its abundance however, this literary genre is often interpreted without taking its distinctiveness into account.

Narrative interpretation is still dependent either on grammatical-historical or on historical-critical analysis. It is the contention of this article that, with regard to narrative analysis, these two approaches are limited, unless they are coupled with rhetorical analysis. Principles “for dealing with the literary form of the text as part and parcel of the

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1 This article is a version of a paper read at the annual conference of the Association for the Study of the Septuagint in South Africa, held at the University of Stellenbosch in 2008 (August 14 to 15). It is a part of the author’s Ph.D. thesis at North-West University, Potchefstroom campus, under the supervision of Prof P. J. Jordaan.


3 The grammatical-historical approach was the preferred method of the reformers because “they were concerned to recover the original sense, which they felt had been buried under centuries of spiritual interpretation” K. J. Vanhoozer, Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 118. Jordaan argues that the reformers’ use of this method ultimately produced a dogmatic interpretation of Scriptures. The reformers were primarily interested in the defence of the soul of the church. The literary form, genre and structure of texts were wittingly or unwittingly neglected or ignored because these were not their main concern in studying Scriptures. See P. J. Jordaan, “A Brief History of Exegesis: Calvin, Luther and further to Cognitive Linguistics, Some Recommendation for the Writing of New Testament Greek Texts Books,” Ekklesiastikos Pharos 89 (2007): 214-223.

meaning of the text\textsuperscript{5} are not the main focus of the abovementioned approaches.

An adequate theory for reading narratives is expected to take into account the complexities of this genre. Greimassian narrative semiotics was purposely formulated to address this challenge. Due to the fact that despite its efficiency, Greimas theory is feared for its alleged complexities, this article commends Everaert-Desmedt simplified version of Greimas’s theory for the interpretation of LXX narratives.\textsuperscript{6} The approach centres on the data of the text and pays careful attention to the macrostructures of narratives. It is assumed that a narrative only makes sense when read as a whole. Greimas’s approach to narratives is by now accepted by scholars as part of the canon of narratology. The article will not, therefore, scrutinise Greimas and thus Everaert-Desmedt critically. The main concern is to show the efficiency of Everaert-Desmedt’s approach for investigating LXX narratives in general and the story of Susanna in particular.\textsuperscript{7}

\textbf{B. POINT OF DEPARTURE}

Greimas’s theory consists of three levels of analysis: deep structures, surface structures and structures of manifestations. The approach is based on the assumption that:

\begin{quote}
\ldots in order to achieve the construction of cultural objects (literary, mythical, pictorial, etc.), the human mind begins with simple elements and follows a complex trajectory, encountering on its way both constraints to which it must submit and choices it is able to make.
\end{quote}

Our aim is to give a rough idea of this trajectory. We can consider that it moves from immanence to manifestation in three principal stages: (1) \textit{Deep structures} define the fundamental mode of existence of an individual or society, and subsequently the conditions of existence of semiotic objects. As far as we know, the elementary constituents of deep structures have a definable logical status. (2) \textit{Surface structures}