IMPLIED SYNONYMS AND ANTONYMS: TEXTUAL CRITICISM VS. THE LITERARY APPROACH

YAIR ZAKOVITCH

It is well known that in biblical parallelism, the words in the second hemistich present either the synonym or the antonym to the first hemistich. Yet in many cases we find that instead of the anticipated synonym or antonym appears a different word—similar to the expected one either phonetically or graphically. The predominant tendency amongst philologists has been to emend the text in order to ‘restore’ the lost parallelism, with support for the restoration found, in many instances, in textual witnesses.

In this article, dedicated to my good friend and colleague Emanuel Tov, one of the most important textual critics of our generation, I, who represent the literary approach, wish to claim that the hands of these textual critics are too quick on the trigger. Indeed we deal here with a sophisticated and well-designed literary phenomenon in which the poet writes the unexpected word, knowing full well that his reader (who is obviously familiar with the rules of biblical parallelism and word-pairs) will notice the discrepancy and will in fact hear both words: the written and the implied, both of which contribute their parts to the complete meaning of the poet’s words. The phenomenon can be likened to a palimpsest in which the erased text was left slightly visible underneath the newly written one, so that it supplies both readings. The poet actually poses a riddle to his readers, while providing two clear hints to the riddle’s resolution: first, there is the broken parallelism, when the expected word does not appear; second, the word that does appear is similar—either graphically or phonetically—to the implied, expected word. These riddles of implied and written words remind us of a well-known phenomenon in rabbinic literature, the exegetical method called ‘אַל תִּקְרֵי’ (‘al tiqre’),

whereby the reader is told to read—instead of the written word—a similar word which in fact may bring a very different meaning to the verse.

What is the difference, in the end, between a textual critic and a reader like myself? We both sense the broken parallelism, and we both immediately think of the expected word that seems to lie right under the written one. But the textual critic then changes the text—in the belief that the text is thereby restored—whereas I deem the Masoretic Text reliable and see no reason for changing it. On the contrary, I find here an intentional, literary technique by which the poet has succeeded in planting two meanings in one word.

Before continuing, I must emphasize the importance of the work of textual critics. I am the last to underestimate the work of these scholars, without whom many biblical verses would have been left beyond our understanding. However, with regard to the present discussion, when we find so many examples of this phenomenon, I want to erect a sign of caution: Caution! Literary Phenomenon at Work!

Because of limitations of space I will bring here only a very few examples of this phenomenon, ten in number. I have elected not to graze from the entire corpus of biblical poetry, but to limit myself to one small pasture: the book of Proverbs. I will bring the examples according to their order as they appear in that book. Other examples, from Proverbs and other books, will remain hidden for future readers to discover.

1. If they say, Come with us,

   Let us set an ambush to shed blood (םד),
   Let us lie in wait for the innocent (לפ) without cause. (Prov 1:11)

Many commentators have suggested replacing םד, 'blood,' with לפ, 'innocent'—a synonym for לפ in the second hemistich. The emendation is based on the assumption that the phonetic resemblance between ד and ו caused a scribe to mistakenly write םד in place
