Book Review

Na’ama Pat-El

243 pp.

The present book is a revised version of the author’s 2008 Harvard dissertation. It consists of three case studies united by a common approach and methodology: All three deal with historical syntax. As the author makes clear from the very start (the book opens with methodological remarks and only thereafter, on p. 7, introduces the reader to the subject), it is primarily in the realm of methodology that she wishes to contribute to the field. In particular, Pat-El seeks to bring together two disciplines that do not usually meet: historical syntax, with its grounding in general linguistics, and Aramaic studies, which is to a large extent a philological discipline. This is indeed a promising match, as will be obvious to anyone who reads through the status quaestionis at the beginning of the book. Studies on the syntax of Aramaic dialects are rare, and studies on the historical syntax of Aramaic are almost non-existent. Even for Semitic languages in general, such studies are hard to come by. On the other hand, Aramaic languages are attested over a period of 3,000 years and are therefore a potential gold mine for the historical linguist.

In the book under review, Pat-El stakes her claim, starts digging, and presents the first nuggets. With a double audience in mind, she carefully glosses all examples to make her findings accessible to both Aramaists and historical linguists. For the benefit of the latter, the introduction includes a short overview of Aramaic dialectology and presents the different subdivisions suggested by various scholars. Pat-El adopts Joseph Fitzmyer’s division into five phases, which is also employed in her presentation of the impressively large corpus of texts and grammars on which her work is based (pp. 14–16).

The first case study is dedicated to ‘Adverbial Subordination’ (pp. 21–88). An overview of adverbial subordination in Semitic prepares the ground for identifying inherited subordinators in Aramaic. Negative result clause subordinators, dlmˀ in particular, are discussed in detail. The following subsections treat conditional particles and causal and result subordinators (bdyl d-, mtwl d-). Pat-El identifies prepositional phrases and interrogatives as the main sources
from which such subordinators developed. In Neo-Aramaic, derivation from nouns and borrowing supplement these two sources. Pat-El concludes that Aramaic is unique amongst the Semitic languages in that it dispensed with the use of nouns for subordination and that all subordinators are dependent on the relative particle. To account for this finding, she suggests that “most subordinators were introduced after the change from a case-based system to a particle-based system” (p. 84), and that this change happened earlier than in other languages (p. 87).¹

The next chapter treats ‘Nominal Modifiers’ (pp. 89–145). It begins with a survey of the order of adnominal demonstratives in Semitic and, in much more detail, in Aramaic. Pat-El notes a shift from noun (N)-demonstrative (Dem) word order to Dem-N word order in Late Aramaic; by and large, this situation continues in the modern dialects. She suggests that this change in word order is connected to the spread of proleptic constructions from Official to Late Aramaic, which, in turn, is related to the weakening of the definite article in Late Aramaic. She discusses a regular exception in Syriac, where N-Dem prevails before an additional attribute, and ingeniously connects this pattern with a special relative form found in some North Eastern Neo-Aramaic dialects.

The third case study deals with ‘Direct Speech Representations’ (pp. 147–191). The various ways of asyndetically introducing direct speech in Aramaic are presented, including a discussion of the quotative marker l’mr. Starting in Official Aramaic, one observes the growing tendency to introduce direct speech syntactically, since Middle Aramaic with the particle d-. In addition, Official Aramaic and Syriac l’m and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic (JBA) nammē are discussed. Pat-El holds that the former is an emphatic particle, not a quotative, and derives from the asseverative la and a focusing enclitic -m. The JBA form, on the other hand, is said to possibly be a loan from an Iranian language.

The ‘Summary and Conclusion’ (pp. 193–203) focus on the relevance of the findings for defining the peculiarities of Aramaic in relation to the other Semitic languages and on their contribution to the discussion of the internal subdivision of Aramaic. Note that the wording in this chapter is quite audacious when compared to the actual findings from the case studies: The statement that l’m is “in most early attestations is not associated with speech” (p. 190) is unsupported by the findings presented in the table on p. 179. Additionally, when marshaling support for the claim that l’m and nammē are unrelated, it is

¹ It is a pity that Samalian, the one Aramaic dialect that shows remnants of the case system, does not attest to adverbial subordinators. It would have made a wonderful test case.