Book Review


Anyone working with Semitic texts, whether as expositor, literary/textual critic, or translator, will benefit from studying these studies, and those who are prepared to make the effort necessary to grasp the themes, and to suppress any Luddite tendencies they may be nursing, will enjoy them as well as deriving benefit. Different readers will fall at different fences, depending on the complexity of technical language they are prepared to engage with, but even the comparatively computer-illiterate will be well rewarded with improved insight into the methodology of computer-assisted textual analysis and the interactions between programmers, linguists, and biblical scholars.

In the fields of linguistics and textual analysis there have been misunderstandings between computer-linguistic scholars and those taking a more traditional text-critical approach. The initiators of the CALAP (Computer-Assisted Linguistic Analysis of the Peshitta) project believe that mutual understanding can be reached and that it is worth the effort to do so: the contents of this book give strong support to their belief. Once it is acknowledged that linguistic phenomena constitute one aspect of the essence of a text, the relationship between such analyses and traditional textual criticism and history is clear.

This book is mainly comprised of papers presented at the CALAP seminar held in 2003; some additional contributions have been included. The main focus is the methodology of the interaction between information technology, linguistics and textual criticism and textual history,
with a well-justified emphasis on the need for open-minded discussion. The brief accounts that follow here should whet the reader’s appetite.

Jenner et al. discuss CALAP. This is a joint research project of the Peshitta Institute Leiden and the Werkgroep Informatica Vrije Universiteit (WIVU). It has widened the focus of the latter by bringing into its remit the comparison of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* with the Peshitta: two witnesses, two different language systems. The term ‘language system’ itself has recently increased its scope: linguists whose focus was once structuralist and synchronic increasingly take into account diachrony, psycho- and socio-linguistic factors, and respond to pragmatic influences. Talstra et al. discuss the formulation of research questions, concentrating on the production and presentation of textual data, the adaptation of analytical procedures developed at WIVU for work on Biblical Hebrew (BH) for application to Classical Syriac (CS), and the synoptic presentation of BH and CS.

The studies by Bosman and Sikkel and by their respondents (Borbone; Forbes) survey current issues in word level analysis in corpus linguistics and the relationship with natural language processing. The former aims to describe and explain language; the latter aims to produce robust and efficient annotation systems. The balance between correctness and robustness is explored. The distinction between rule-based and data-driven systems is explained, and the possibility of combining these approaches, which are by no means mutually exclusive, is discussed. Languages such as BH and CS, which have a strong morphology, are well suited to computer-assisted word level analysis. The additional problem of definition that is often associated with analysis of texts in these languages—where extant manuscripts differ from one another, what should the analyst take as ‘the’ text, and how should variants be handled—is discussed. Forbes considers the balance between the rationalistic and the empiristic approaches. Dyk shows how data worked on at lower linguistic levels, at the level of words and phrases, according to the CALAP system, enable comparison of Hebrew and Syriac texts at several levels, including study of the distribution of tenses. Khan’s presentation will strike a chord with readers of the more traditional school, emphasizing the importance of historical and indeed ongoing change in language and the need to see beyond synchronic analysis.

The studies by van Peersen and his respondents (Goldenberg; Joosten; Muraoka) demonstrate the range of disciplines included under the umbrella of ‘Syriac linguistics’. They pick up specific points of particular