

REDUNDANCY IS INFORMATION: THE LITERARY FUNCTION OF PARTICIPANT REFERENCE IN BIBLICAL HEBREW NARRATIVE

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Introduction

Biblical Hebrew is flexible in the ways it refers to participants who have already been introduced into a narrative. Person, gender, and number are shown by the form of the verb, and once a character is introduced, the thread of events in which that character is the subject can be carried forward by verbs alone (e.g., Judg 15.4-5, 1 Kgs 18.31-34). This is often the case even where we might expect some attempt to distinguish between participants. For example, in a conversation between two male speakers, the speech frames are often simply “and he said . . . and he said” (*vayyomer . . . vayyomer*, e.g., Gen 18.27-32; 27.34-36; 32.26-28; 33.5-8; 1 Kgs 13.14-18; 18.43-44; 20.14; 2 Kgs 3.7-8). Independent pronouns may be used for focus constructions (e.g., Judg 14.3d, where both subject and object independent pronouns are used for focus) or for points of departure (e.g., Josh 2.8). But sometimes when the referent of a verb is obvious, the author nevertheless goes to the trouble of referring to the participant with a full noun phrase—sometimes a complex one—repeating information the reader already knows. In English, this sort of over-specification sounds clunky and inept. In Hebrew, however, it is a subtle literary technique, similar to the technique moviemakers use when they zoom in for a moment on some seemingly incidental detail which is in fact very important to the story line.

The function of redundant participant reference in Hebrew

An example of this technique occurs in the story of Jacob. Laban is first mentioned to him by his mother Rebekah as “my brother”* (Gen 27.43) and is referred to by the title “mother’s brother” in chs. 28 and 29. In ch. 30 he is referred to simply as “Laban.” But Gen 31.20 suddenly calls him “Laban *the Aramean*,” and repeats this title in v. 24. Throughout much of the Old Testament, the Arameans are seen as enemies of Israel (see, for example, 2 Sam 8.3-13; 10.6-19; 1 Kgs 11.23-25; 20; 22; 2 Kgs 5.2; 6.8-7.16; 8.11-13, 28-29; 9.14-15; 12.17-18; 13.3-7, 17-19; 15.37; 16.5-9; 24.2; 1 Chr 2.23; 18.5-6; 19.6-19; 2 Chr 18; 22.5-6; 24.23-25;

* All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

28.5, 23; Ps 60 heading; Isa 7.1-6; 9.11-12; Jer 35.11; Amos 1.3-5). The reader already knows his nationality, because it was mentioned in 25.20 in Rebekah's genealogy, but its abrupt re-appearance here marks a transition in the narrative from Laban as *uncle* to Laban as *adversary*. Suddenly the situation is more serious than the earlier family squabbles. The narrative uses military terminology (*barakh* "flee," *radaf* "pursue," *shevuyoth herev* "captives of the sword," *gazel* "plunder"), and although the patriarchs do not quite come to blows, they end up setting a territorial boundary and calling down a curse on whichever aggressor crosses it. The redundant reference is in fact highly loaded.

A somewhat different example occurs in Josh 9, as the Israelites are conducting their holy war against the Canaanite tribes. A dilemma arises: here are some messengers wanting to make a peace treaty. But are they really from a distant country, as they claim, or is it a trick? The reader has been clued in from vv. 3-4 that it is, in fact, a trick; the Israelite leaders do not have this information. All they have is the circumstantial evidence of worn-out clothes and moldy bread (vv. 4-5), together with the messengers' claim (v. 6). Then v. 7 introduces a name that has not been used specifically for the messengers so far, but was introduced in v. 1 as one of the tribes in the land: "the men of Israel said to *the Hivites*." Use of the name "Hivites" subtly heightens the suspense. Standard Biblical Hebrew discourse grammar would allow for a pronoun to be used here (and if a full noun phrase were necessary to clear up any ambiguity, then the term "people of Gibeon" from the preceding verses could have been used again). But the reader knows that God has specifically told Israel to destroy the Hivites (Exod 23.23-24; Deut 7.1-2; Josh 3.10), and using that term here labels these messengers as the enemy. The fact that they are the enemy is not new information to the reader; it is just a significant fact highlighted for the reader though unknown to the Israelite leaders.

Another example is found in Josh 14.6-14, which discusses the land allotted to Caleb within the territory of Judah. Caleb is introduced in v. 6, identified as "son of Jephunneh, the Kenizzite." The narrative describes his request for land and his reasons (faithfulness to God in spite of the other spies' faithlessness, and Moses's promise), and then v. 14 suddenly pulls in the whole long identification phrase again, as well as a lengthy title for God: "That is why Hebron became the inheritance of *Caleb son of Jephunneh, the Kenizzite*, up to this day, because he wholeheartedly followed *YHWH the God of Israel*." Although there is some dispute, it seems most likely that Caleb was not an Israelite. Many commentators, such as Budd (2002, 144), Milgrom (1990, 224, 391), and Walton and Matthews (1997), identify the Kenizzites as a non-Israelite tribe, and the overspecification of the participants in v. 14 supports that view. This verse seems to offer an explanation of how a foreigner came to inherit Hebron: Why did a *Kenizzite* inherit Hebron? Because he wholeheartedly followed the God of *Israel*. Note the comment in 15.13: "To Caleb son of Jephunneh he gave a portion among the Judahites, as YHWH had said"—it seems that his inheriting among the Judahites was a special provision.

Judges 4.17-22 narrates the downfall of Sisera, general of Jabin's army. Jael is introduced in v. 17 as Heber's wife, along with the comment that Heber's family were on Jabin's side. In Jael's first action in the story (v. 18) she is referred to as "Jael," and then in vv. 18-20 the story line is carried forward by bare 3 f. sg. verbs without other subject marking. But all of a sudden v. 21 refers to her as "Jael the wife of Heber"—reminding the reader whose family she belongs to just at the point where she does exactly the opposite of what someone whose family has sided with Jabin/Sisera is expected to do.

This technique is seen throughout the book of Ruth. In ch. 1 the reader is told that Naomi's sons married Moabite women, one of whom was Ruth. Subsequently Ruth is sometimes referred to as "Ruth" or by a pronoun, but over and over—in 1.22; 2.2, 21; 4.5; and 4.10—she is referred to by the longer title "Ruth *the Moabitess*." This is highly redundant, but it hammers home the author's point. "The repetition in Rut's [*sic*] description is very important for one of the purposes of the book—to show how a Moabitess was honorable enough to be an ancestor of King David (Ruth 4.17). Rut was not just another descendant of those father-seducing daughters of Lot. Rut was a Moabitess who would overcome her ancestral shame in chapters 2–4, but especially in chapter 3" (Buth 2009, 11).

Second Samuel 13 chronicles Amnon's scheme to rape his half-sister Tamar. Her first action in the story is related in v. 8, where she is referred to as "Tamar" and he is pointedly called "Amnon her brother." He is variously referred to in the following clauses by affixed and independent pronouns and by name. Then v. 10 repeats the long designation: "she brought them to Amnon *her brother* in the bedroom." The author is highlighting their relationship to underline the shocking nature of the demand that follows in v. 11.

First Kings 18 tells of the showdown between Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal. Interestingly, Elijah is first introduced in 17.1 as merely "Elijah, a Tishbite living in Gilead" and is not called a prophet. The events that follow make it obvious to the reader that he is indeed a prophet, yet he is referred to by pronouns or simply as "Elijah." In ch. 18, he challenges the prophets of Baal to prove the deity of their god, and watches them all day as they pray, shout, jump around, slash themselves, and prophesy, all to no avail. Elijah then repairs YHWH's altar and prepares the sacrifice—and finally in v. 36 we read, "Elijah *the prophet* came near and said, 'O YHWH . . .'" Very subtly the author gives his judgment: the Baal cult, in spite of all their rituals and all their prophesying, were a troop of frauds; the real prophet was Elijah. The contest vindicated YHWH as God—and Elijah as prophet.

In all these cases, there is redundancy of information in the participant reference. But the redundant information is not random. It is deliberately reintroduced to shape the reader's attitudes and/or expectations concerning the character(s) involved. The writers accomplish this very economically, with a redundant word or phrase in just the right spot, and without resorting to crudely obvious statements like, "By the way, Laban was an Aramean and thus among

Israel's enemies" or "As the wife of Jabin's ally Heber, Jael was of course expected to protect Sisera. But instead . . ."

This redundancy, then, is actually a super-compact way of making a comment about a character—simply highlighting a particular attribute and letting the reader fill in the connection of that attribute to that part of the story. It is not mere redundancy; it is subtle communication of information which is lost if the translator trims it out in re-casting.

Translating redundant participant reference

But what is a reasonable way for a translator to handle such redundancy? The literal English translations I grew up with, resolutely reproducing every redundancy of participant reference, simply left me with the impression that the Biblical writers were clumsy storytellers. Any subtleties were completely lost on me. English doesn't use participant reference that way—and the same is true of many other languages. Worse, in African languages, redundant or suddenly different reference terms often indicate not clumsiness at storytelling, but a different participant altogether.

A number of translations opt for deleting the redundancy. For example, in Josh 9.7 there are some translations that completely omit the reference to Hivites, e.g., Good News Arabic, Nuovissima Versione della Bibbia (Italian), and the Vulgate. This may improve the style, but it obscures the connection to God's command and removes the literary tension. Other translations, while omitting the reference to Hivites in v. 7, explicitly qualify the Gibeonites as Hivites when they are introduced in v. 3 to make sure the reader is aware of their nationality, e.g., GNB and Deftere Allah (Cameroonian Fulfulde). This retains the connection to God's command—so long as readers are able to hold that identification in their minds until v. 7—but it still ignores the suspense that the writer creates by the use of "Hivites" in v. 7.

Is the solution to go ahead and spell out the connection in the way I earlier described as "crudely obvious"? Joshua 9.6-7 could read, "They came to Joshua at the camp in Gilgal and said to him and the Israelites, 'We come from a faraway country and we want you to make a treaty with us.' The Israelites didn't know that they were actually Hivites and thus under the ban. But they said, 'Maybe you are from around here. How can we make a treaty with you?'" I don't know if you could get that past a translation consultant or not. As Weber (2005, 54) cautions, "Explicating to help the hearer compute the implicatures should be done with . . . great caution. . . . Since the hearer expects interpretive compensation, added material is likely to trigger all sorts of inferences, often unintended ones."

One solution might be to use footnotes calling the reader's attention to the significance of the repeated information. FC, like GNB, mentions in v. 3 that the Gibeonites were Hivites and then omits the name from v. 7, but provides a footnote in v. 5 explaining the trick and giving the reader the cross-reference to Deut 20.16-18. This solves more difficulties than the renderings mentioned so far. However, all the usual arguments against footnotes apply here (i.e., most people

don't read them, many people confuse them with the body of the text, too many footnotes become distracting, etc.). Curiously, CEV, which deletes the reference to Hivites in v. 7, then puts "Gibeonites" as the subject of the clause that begins v. 8 and provides a footnote that says "Hebrew 'Hivites.'" This respects English style while retaining the original in a footnote (although moved to a different part of the text), but accomplishes no more than the literal translations; even the diligent reader who checks all the footnotes is still left in the dark as to what the significance of the designation "Hivites" is.

Another solution might be to provide readers with a few concise clues—not fully spelled out as in the "crude" examples above, but pointing them in the general direction. One could put the information in a separate clause, while not making all the implications and connections explicit, for example Josh 9.6-7 in Nigerian Fulfulde (I have italicized the relevant information): "So they went to Joshua there at the camp in Gilgal. They spoke to him and the Israelites they said, 'From a certain country far away we have come. So make a treaty with us.' *But really they were Hivites.* Well, the Israelites said to them . . ."

Sometimes it may be possible to include the descriptive word which is in focus, followed by "that is" plus the usual name. In Nigerian Fulfulde in Gen 31.20, we originally omitted "Aramean," because saying "Laban the Aramean" when the previous verse has just called him "Laban" would indicate in Fulfulde that this is now a different Laban not previously mentioned. However, eventually we decided that the author's implication that Laban belongs with Israel's enemies should not be ignored, and we amended the translation to, "Well, Jacob tricked *that Aramean, that is Laban*, he didn't tell him he was fleeing." Whether this is enough information may be a matter of debate; it will require a reader familiar with the rest of the Old Testament to pick up on the implication.

In some of the above verses, "though" could be included:

Josh 14.14 That is why Hebron became the inheritance of Caleb son of Jephunneh, *even though he was a Kenizzite*, up to this day, because he wholeheartedly followed YHWH the God of Israel.

Judg 4.20-21 He said to her, "Stand in the tent doorway, and if anyone comes and asks you if there's anybody here, say no." Then Jael—*Heber's wife though she was*—took a tent peg and a hammer and crept up to him.

In many of the verses throughout Ruth where the full phrase "Ruth the Moabitess" is used, the phrase can perhaps be retained because it is being used in summary or in formal legal agreements. In 2.21, however, it intrudes in the middle of a story—the middle of a conversation, in fact—in a way that is decidedly strange in many languages. But even there it may be possible to use the "though" construction: "Ruth said, 'He even told me I should stick with his servants until they finish his entire harvest'—*and this even though she was a Moabitess!*" This can help convey to the modern reader the information which

the original author was highlighting: the negative attitude of the Israelites toward the Moabites and the surprising generosity of Boaz.

Although some African languages, including Nigerian Fulfulde, do not refer to a participant by a long title once he has been introduced, I do sometimes hear Fulfulde speakers refer to a participant using a single word or a short phrase (not the name), depending on what they want to highlight about that participant. Translations of the Bible tend (in good American style) to default to keeping the name and cutting out the redundant description; it may be that in some languages it is better to cut out the name and keep the description. For example, one could translate 2 Sam 13.10, “He said to Tamar, ‘Bring the food into the bedroom so I can eat from your hand.’ So she took the cakes that she had made and brought them into the bedroom to *her brother*.”

In 1 Kgs 18.36, how can one reflect the subtle reference to Elijah as a genuine prophet, as opposed to the 450 frauds? Many translations omit the word “prophet” because it seems intrusive, many others render the title literally, but most readers probably miss the point no matter which translation they read. Perhaps a little extra help would be in order: “Then *the real prophet* came near: Elijah. He said”

The above ideas represent just a few of the possibilities; there may be better options for the verses mentioned, and other passages will require still different solutions. Admittedly, there are dangers involved in trying to translate such subtleties. One pitfall is inserting the information into a translated text in a way that makes the text stilted or unnatural. Another pitfall is making the information too prominent, or making too much information explicit, thus obscuring the main point of the narrative. Obviously each context is different, and one cannot write a rule that will produce appropriate renderings in every case. It takes a human reader to figure out the implicatures, properly associate each participant reference with its function in the narrative and re-express it naturally. But it is important to do so, and not just thoughtlessly dismiss the redundancy as padding. It relates important information which should be conveyed in our translations if at all possible.

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