DIFFICULTIES FOR EXEGESIS AND TRANSLATION
The Inversion in Genesis 18.7a

ANTHONY ABELA

The author is a UBS translation consultant based in Malta.

Genesis 18.7a opens with an inversion that has an important narratological function generally neglected by both commentaries and translations.

1. Following the exposition in Gen 18.1-5, v. 6 begins Scene One.[1]

Abraham hurried to enter Sarah's tent to urge her to bake with all haste a number of עגות ("bread cakes"), as would be expected, for the guests who were waiting under the tree, probably just outside her tent. We are not told about Sarah's reaction, nor whether she did, in fact, bring or send the bread cakes to the guests. We presume that she did.

In the meantime, Abraham continued with the preparations for the "frugal" lunch he promised his guests (vv. 4-5). We are told by the narrator[2] that Abraham ran to the herds, took a good calf from the herds, and gave it to his servant to prepare. Then he took the calf that had been prepared, together with curds and milk, carried them to his guests, and served them this good food; and while they ate, Abraham remained in attendance (v. 8). Most of the clauses in this stretch of

---

1 For this term from biblical narratology one may consult Jean Louis Ska, *"Our Fathers Have Told Us": Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1990), 21-22.

2 On the narrator in biblical narrative, see ibid., 43-54.

text are unmarked,[3] that is, they are normal verb initial, with the verb in *wayyiqtol* form. In other words, they are in the narrative form. One of the few exceptions is the clause in v. 7a, where the narrator writes ואל־הבקר רץ אברהם ("and to the herds ran Abraham"). Contrary to the normal narrative form of the clause where the verb is clause initial, we have here the complement "and to the herds" in a marked position, followed by the verb in *qatal* form, and finally the subject. Here the narrator seems to be commenting instead of narrating the story and its facts. What is the narrator hoping to achieve? Have translations noticed the syntactic difference between this clause and the other clauses in the wider text? How have they handled the inverted word order in this clause?

2. What is the literary function of the inverted order of the words in the clause just mentioned?

In chapter five of his popular book on biblical narratology, *Narrative Art in the Bible*,[4] Shimon Bar-Efrat discusses style; among the items of style described, he mentions "inversion." He explains inversion with the help of Gen 4.4: "Inversion generally emphasizes the beginning of the sentence, but sometimes . . . expresses contrast." In Gen 4.4 the narrator expresses contrast. In our text the narrator does not contrast one statement with another, but inverts the order of the words to create emphasis.[5] The meaning of this emphasis is to be gleaned from the global text. The clause under study is embedded within a series of narrative *wayyiqtol* verb-initial clauses (leaving out, of course, the direct discourse, which normally has a slightly different syntax) so that one has to ask why the narrator is emphasizing Abraham's running to the herds.

The answer in part lies in reading this clause within the wider narrative. In the narrative exposition (18.1-5), Abraham promises his guests that the meal he is going to prepare for them will take no time; instead he goes first to his wife Sarah to ask her for the bread cakes, and then he runs to the herds to have a good calf dressed and prepared on behalf of his guests. The narrator's original addressees probably knew that the herds would not be kept very close to the living quarters within a normal camp. So, if Abraham meant to prepare a very frugal meal for his guests for which they had to wait only a short time (18.4-5), he would not have been expected to go to the herds at all. This was the meaning of the narrator's strategy of halting the narrative flow to insert a comment by putting first in the clause the place to which Abraham ran, thus emphasizing this element.

In translation, one cannot use the same stratagem because inversion is specific to the Hebrew language, and inverting the order of the words in the receptor languages would not normally create the same effect. The LXX translator thought otherwise, though, and reproduced exactly the same word order of the *Vorlage*: καὶ εἰς τὰς βόας ἔδραμεν Αβρααμ. But his formal equivalence strategy does not mean that he achieved the same rhetorical effects of the Hebrew source text in his Hellenistic Greek text.

---

3 On this concept one may read Alviero Niccacci, "Basic Facts and Theory of the Hebrew Verb System in Prose" in *Narrative Syntax and the Hebrew Bible: Papers of the Tilburg Conference 1996* (ed. Ellen van Wolde; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 176.

4 (2d ed.; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1984), 197-237.

5 Regarding Gen 18.7a, E. A. Speiser wrote, "Heb. is inverted for special emphasis" (*Genesis* [AB 1; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964], 130), but he does not indicate what that special emphasis was.

3. In the translation tradition, how was this element of style treated by scholarship, especially by translators? Has it been noticed? How was it rendered in receptor languages?

Vulgate[6]	Ipse vero ad armentum cucurrit
TILC (1985)	Egli stesso corse dove teneva gli annimali
NBS (2002)	Abraham courut vers le bétail
REB (1989)	He then hastened to the herd
NIV (1984)	Then he ran to the herd
NJPS (1988)	Then Abraham ran to the herd
CEV (1997)	After saying this, he rushed off to his herd of cattle
RSV (1966)	And Abraham ran to the herd
PdV (2001)	Ensuite, Abraham court vers le troupeau
GuNB (1997)	Dann lief er zum Vieh
GNB (1992)	Then he ran to the herd
BJ (1978)	Puis Abraham courut au troupeau
Saydon[7]	U ġera Abraham lejn il-baqar
Sant[8]	U Abraham mar jiġri ħdejn il-baqar

Comments:

a) The translations are quite similar in structure: most of them have some chronological marker to separate this clause from the previous one. REB's version may be taken as typical: "He *then* hastened to the herd." In most cases, the subject follows, either as a proper name or as a personal pronoun referring to Abraham. The next component often is the verb, which may be a literal translation of the Hebrew רץ or some adaptation. The last component in the clause of the translations usually consists of a lexeme or phrase of an adverbial nature showing the direction or destination of Abraham's running: "to the herd."

b) Most of these translations ignore the inversion in the Hebrew text as well as its rhetorical function. They translate the clause in v. 7a as if it were an unmarked narrative *wayyiqtol* sentence-initial clause just like the one at the beginning of v. 6 or the clause that follows it in v. 7 itself. And thus they simply ignore the narrator's strategy of focusing on the complement "to the herd" by pushing it to the beginning of the clause.

c) The only two exceptions to this analysis are the Vulgate and TILC. Both of these translations put some emphasis on the subject of the clause. The Vulgate

---

6 *Biblia Sacra Vulgata* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1969; 4th ed., 1994). The identical text is found in *Nova Vulgata* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998).

7 *Ktieb il-Ġenesi* (Malta: The Empire Press, 1929). This is the first edition of Msgr. Prof. Peter Paul Saydon's translation of the Bible, which took him thirty years to finish. The second edition of this first complete Bible in Maltese was published in the seventies and eighties in three volumes under the general title *Bibbja Saydon*. The volume containing Genesis was the first volume of the OT and was published in 1982. There were no changes between the first edition and this second edition regarding the verse under study. The same can be said of the third edition of this Bible, published by the Societas Doctrinae Christianae in 1995 under the title *Il-Bibbja* and typeset in Malta by Veritas Press but published by Charles Letts in Scotland.

8 Carmel Sant was the general editor of the Bible published in 1984 by the Malta Bible Society. As Sant states in the foreword, he prepared the first draft of the translation of Genesis (xi); in this article I attribute this translation to him even though he confesses in the same foreword that the entire team that worked with him could have contributed to the final form of the text during the several revisions the text underwent while it was being prepared. A redaction history of this 1984 text has not yet been prepared to establish which translator could have been responsible for the final form that was published in 1984. This text had three subsequent editions (1996, 2004, and 2008), but the verse in question remained the same throughout.

achieves it by choosing the personal pronoun *ipse* and introducing the adverb *vero*, both of which were emphatic strategies in Latin; the *Bibbia in Lingua Corrente* (TILC) adopts a similar solution emphasizing thereby that Abraham himself went to the herds, something perhaps beneath his dignity given his role as *paterfamilias*. Unfortunately, the Hebrew narrator is not putting the stress on the fact that Abraham himself ran to do the errand and did not send a servant to choose the calf and dress it for his guests. Rather, the emphasis is on the fact that Abraham, notwithstanding his time limitation, still chooses to go to the herds. A better translation of this clause is: "even to the herds did Abraham go in all haste."

In view of what he promised his guests in vv. 4-5, Abraham shouldn't have done what he did in vv. 7-8, though the narrator plays down the duration of these preparations, never referring to it directly. All in all, the narrator approves of Abraham's behavior as host, a behavior that could have been interpreted as excessive in view of the short time his guests could spend at Abraham's camp. This translation takes seriously also the hint given by the narrator that the place of the herds was not too close to the living quarters of the people who were staying at the camp. This explains why Abraham had to run (רץ) to the place of the herds so that he would waste as little time as possible. All this leads to the conclusion that the Vulgate and TILC put the stress not on what the narrator meant to underline but on something different. But that means that these renderings actually constitute mistranslations, while the other versions cited above somewhat under-translate Gen 18.7a.