

A NOTE ON JUDGES 13:20-21: SORTING OUT THE SYNTAX

ROBERT CHISHOLM

Judges 13:20 tells how an angel ascended in the flame of the sacrificial fire, prompting both Manoah and his wife to fall to the ground and hide their faces. Having seen the angel's remarkable exit, Manoah finally realized the messenger's identity (v. 21b). It is most natural to understand verse 21b as sequential in relation to verse 20, with verse 21a being parenthetical, as The Jewish Publication Society translation of verses 20-21 suggests:

*(20) As the flames leaped up from the altar toward the sky, the angel of the Lord ascended in the flames of the altar, while Manoah and his wife looked on; and they flung themselves on their faces to the ground. (21) The angel of the Lord never appeared again to Manoah and his wife – Manoah then realized that it had been the angel of the Lord.*¹

Having noted that the angel ascended in the fire, the narrator interjects a parenthetical note of interest. We could paraphrase verse 21a: "By the way, he never appeared to them again." With the particle "az [then]" he resumes the story, indicating that the being's dramatic exit is what convinced Manoah of his angelic status.²

Y. Zakovitch interprets the syntax differently. He understands verse 21 to mean that Manoah realized that the being was the Lord's angel only when he failed to reappear. As Zakovitch points out, Manoah would likely have come to this conclusion when he saw the being ascend in the fire (v. 20). So, Zakovitch reasons, verses 19-20 must be secondary to the narrative. He states that "the description of Manoah's meeting with the angel and his sacrifice does not read smoothly." After pointing out an alleged inconsistency in verses 15-17, he argues:

Verse 21, "The angel of the Lord did not appear again to Manoah and his wife; then Manoah knew that he was the angel of the Lord," is hardly consistent with the preceding account of the sacrifice (vv. 19-20): had Manoah seen the angel going up in the flame, he would have already realized that this was a supernatural being and

would not have required additional proof of that from the fact that the angel never appeared again.³

An analysis of the two closest syntactical parallels to Judges 13:21 undermines Zakovitch's proposed redactional analysis of the passage. The clausal structure of Judges 13:21, an independent clause beginning with a negated *qatal* form (a so-called perfect verbal form) followed by an independent clause introduced by *az* with a *qatal* form, appears as well in I Kings 8:11-12 (= II Chronicles 6:1). There the clause introduced by *az* (v. 12a) does not give a consequence of the preceding clause (v. 11), but rather relates sequentially to verse 10a:

10a *When the priests came out of the sanctuary –*

10b *for the cloud had filled the House of the Lord*

11 *and the priests were not able to remain and perform the service because of the cloud, for the Presence of the Lord filled the House of the Lord –*

12a *then Solomon declared*

In the same way, Judges 13:21b relates sequentially to verse 20, not to verse 21a (which is parenthetical).

In I Kings 22:49-50 the clause introduced by *az* (v. 50a) does not give a consequence of the preceding clause (v. 49b), but rather relates sequentially to verse 49a:

49a *Jehoshaphat constructed Tarshish ships to sail to Ophir for gold.*

49b *But he did not sail because the ships were wrecked at Ezion-geber.*

50a *Then Ahaziah son of Ahab proposed to Jephoshaphat:*

50b *'Let my servants sail on the ships with your servants.'*

Chronologically the order is verses 49a – 50a – 49b.⁴ In the same way the chronological order in Judges 13:20-21 is verses 20 – 21b – 21a.

The syntactical parallels cited above support the JPS translation of Judges 13:20-21 and call into question the redactional critical proposal of Zakovitch.

The clausal structure of Judges 13:20-21 may be outlined as follows:

20a *As the flames leaped up from the altar toward the sky,⁵*

20b *The angel of the Lord ascended in the flames of the altar,*

20c *while Manoah and his wife looked on;*

20d *and they flung themselves on their faces to the ground –*

21a *The angel of the Lord never appeared again to Manoah and his wife–*

21b *Manoah then realized that it had been an angel of the Lord.*

NOTES

1. See *Jewish Publication Society Hebrew-English Tanakh: The Traditional Hebrew Text and the New Jewish Publication Society Translation, Second Edition* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003) p. 549; or A. Berlin and M. Z. Brettler (eds.), *The Jewish Study Bible Featuring The Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) pp. 540-41.
2. See G. F. Moore, *Judges, International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1895) p. 324.
3. Y. Zakovitch, "Assimilation in Biblical Narratives," in J. H. Tigay (ed.) *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985) p. 193.
4. On the chronology here, see M. Cogan, *I Kings, Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 2001) p. 500.
5. Verse 20a begins a more focused description of what the amazing act (v. 19) entailed. It is also circumstantial in relation to the statement that follows.



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