

CRITICAL BOOK REVIEWS

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Oath Formula in Biblical Hebrew, by Conklin, Blane. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2011.

It is not an exaggeration to say that we have been experiencing a revival of interest in Ancient Hebrew language researches in recent times. More and more dissertations are published and books are written on different aspects of the Hebrew syntax. Thus, in 2007 the book *Promises to Keep: The Oath in Biblical Narrative* written by Yael Ziegler was published by Brill and in 2011 the book of Blane Conklin *Oath Formula in Biblical Hebrew* was released by Eisenbrauns. Although these two books are devoted to the same topic, they do not duplicate each other. While Ziegler's study is more concentrated on the question about how different types of asseverative statements are used in their narrative contexts, Conklin's concern is to consider the syntactical structure of oath formulas.

Conklin's book has a clear structure, therefore it is easy to follow his logic. The author starts by defining what an oath is. According to him, every oath should have two essential elements: an authenticating statement and the actual content of the oath (p. 4). The author devotes the second chapter of his book, the first one is an introduction, to the analysis of different authenticating elements. The following chapters deal with the ways of how the content of different oaths can be introduced.

The author makes several important conclusions as a result of his study. He rightly observes that there are two ways of expressing oaths in Biblical Hebrew. One is with the help of conditional clauses. Conklin demonstrates that all of the 74 occurrences of conditional oaths follow the same syntactical pattern as ordinary conditional sentences. The author shows that even when a swearing formula contains only the protasis of the conditional clause, the omitted apodosis is always implied (pp. 37-45). According to Conklin, the reason why the apodosis is absent in many cases is because it is supposed to contain a self-imprecation, and in many

cultures, including the ancient Hebrew culture, the pronouncing of any curse was a language taboo (p. 4).

The other way to express the content of the oath is with the help of the particle *ki*. The syntactical function of this particle in oath formulas is a matter of debates, as the author has demonstrated in his problem statement section (pp. 1-2). Having analyzed many examples of oaths introduced by *ki*, Conklin comes to the conclusion that in most cases, this particle is used as a complementizer, and such construction is usually employed when the content of the oath has a complex syntax (p. 59).

Another conclusion of the author is about the function of the compound particle *ki-'im*. Conklin challenges the well-established consensus that this particle introduces a positive oath-clause and should be translated as "surely" or "indeed." He suggests to treat *ki-'im* as two separate particles where *ki* could be understood as a complementizer and *'im* as a conditional particle. I agree with the author that in some cases, this reading fits the context well. However, his argumentation has not convinced me completely. It should be noted that the reading of the particle *ki-'im* as two separate entities where *'im* introduces the protasis creates some kind of uncertainty regarding the fulfillment of the oath. For example, Conklin suggests the following interpretation of Jer 51:14 "Yahweh of Armies swears by his soul that, if I fill you with men like locusts, (then) they will chant a war cry over you" (p. 74). It is not clear from this reading whether Yahweh intended to fill Babylon with people or not. The presence of the protasis brings some doubt. Any oath is supposed to be a powerful assertion. However, Conklin's reading diminishes the strength of the whole statement. In my opinion, the reading attested in NAS: "The Lord of hosts has sworn by Himself: 'Surely I will fill you with a population like locusts, and they will cry out with shouts of victory over you'" fits much better the context and looks like a real oath.

Moreover, I cannot agree with Conklin's definition of the oath. As has been mentioned above, he suggests two necessary elements of oath formulas: the authentication and the oath itself. According to him, without the authentication, the statement can be considered as a promise but not as an oath (p. 4). However, he himself mentions at least three examples which do not have the authenticating component and which he identifies as oaths (Job 17:2; 22:20; 1 Kgs 20:23 (pp. 41-43). The boundary between an oath and a promise seems elusive. Every oath is a promise by its nature. The difference between them usually lies in the solemn occasion at which the oath is made.

Finally, I did not understand why the author transliterates all Hebrew characters. Usually, it is done when a book is addressed to an audience which is not familiar with the Hebrew language or when publishing

Hebrew characters creates some technical problems. In our days, the latter could hardly be the case, and it is obvious that the book can be of a little help for those who do not know Hebrew at all. Furthermore, the author does not mention which system of transliteration he uses. It makes the reading of the book difficult.

In conclusion, I would like to say that the author successfully accomplished the task of his research. His analysis and classification of different types of Hebrew oath formulas could be of great help for those who want to understand better the Hebrew Bible and the world of ancient Israelites.

Felix Ponyatovsky

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, PHILIPPINES

Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John, by Susan E. Hylen. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009.

Imperfect Believers by Susan Hylen is a recent addition to the growing corpus of literary studies on the Fourth Gospel. Hylen's special interest is in the characterization in John's book. In the introduction she compares the Gospel to other ancient works of literature, including the Old Testament, and argues that characters in these works are not "'flat,' 'static,' and . . . 'opaque,'" (3) as some scholars had suggested. The author discusses such aspects of John's language as dualism, symbol and metaphor that are important for evaluation of the characters. She also argues that the plot of the Fourth Gospel is broader than just revelation and belief, and that the characters' relation to it is more complex than usually understood. Hylen also describes the principles of literary characterization she employed in her book.

The book itself is divided into two parts. The first part deals with some ambiguous characters of the Gospel of John such as Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the disciples, Martha and Mary, and the Beloved Disciple. The second part, being "less exegetical and more conceptual" (16), analyzes 'special' characters such as the Jews and Jesus.

Nicodemus is "one of the Gospel's most ambiguous characters" (23), because he demonstrates both understanding and misunderstanding of Jesus (the latter being understood by Hylen as an example of Johannine irony). The story of Nicodemus in the Gospel is open-ended: he remains ambiguous, and it shows that "there is more to discipleship than belief in Jesus" (37).