ABSTRACT

It appears to be a common phenomenon in the OT texts that the references to participants are unstable with regard to their gender, number and person characteristics. As a consequence, textual coherence is constantly at risk from a modern perspective. This applies especially to prophetic and poetic texts. While, for example, within the speech of YHWH in Jer 50:26-40 Babel is referred to in 3sgF (Babel=she) during the first clauses, the dialogue proceeds with addressing Babel in 2sgM (Babel=you [masculine]) before it switches back into 3sgF (Babel=she) forms and then continuing with 3plM references (Babel=they). As a consequence it is often unclear to the reader whether the reference to a participant has shifted because a new participants was introduced, or because the speaker has shifted, or because the speaker is no longer speaking to the same dialogue partner. Within the reading process the reader is constantly asking questions like “Who is speaking?” and “Who is addressed?”. This book, then, brings the generally ignored but omnipresent textual phenomenon of participant reference shifts into focus.

In this book we decide to discuss the phenomenon of participant reference shifts as they appear in the book of Jeremiah. Since this book contains almost 600 of these shifts it delivers enough data for getting at grips with the phenomenon and allowing a meaningful data-oriented analysis.

In our analysis of the phenomenon we pursue two aims. On the one hand, we let the few but diverse comments about the origin and function of these participant reference shifts by different exegetical traditions cause an investigation into the ontological and epistemological foundations of exegetical methodology. On the other hand, our exegetical interest will analyze the distributions of the shift phenomena in the book of Jeremiah phenomenologically in order to derive patterns and suggest possible, data-oriented functions of these shifts in the book of Jeremiah.

In the first chapter we present our methodological reflections. They contain a general phenomenological analysis of the processes and interrelated entities that make interpretation possible, a phenomenological description of the biblical text and a representation of the different and conflicting interpretations given on some of the most important phenomena of the biblical text.

After our methodological reflections, we are entitled to argue in the second chapter for the need of a text-linguistic analysis of the book of Jeremiah. This is an indispensable first step to be taken by any exegetical methodology, independent of their specific operative frameworks of interpretation. Our attitude towards data as well as our treatment of data receives a clear expression in this second chapter. However, the presented analytical instruments, which will visualize the text-grammatical structure of the text, will not allow for a “complete” interpretation of textual data. This is because we present our text-linguistic analysis not as a complete exegetical methodology. To propose a complete exegetical methodology cannot be part of this dissertation as it involves the construction of an interpretation of Reason, implying the research into the fields of ontology and epistemology.

After our methodology is laid out we confront in the third chapter the different commentary traditions and their treatment of PNG-shifts with our PNG-shift database (see 5.2) and assess their interpretations by means of our hermeneutical framework as developed in chapter 1. This results in the detection of what we explain in our methodological reflections - the final and the formal condition of each respective commentary tradition. The basic difference between diachronic and synchronic approaches becomes visible.
Chapter 3 has set the floor for decision taking with regard to the diachronic or synchronous nature of PNG-shifts. In order to arrive at a conclusion in this matter, we investigate Jeremianic doublets, Qumran fragments and the Septuagint in the fourth chapter. The question will be answered to what extent the textual transmission process and redactional activities are responsible for the presence of PNG-shifts. Our conclusion helps us to put our phenomenological analysis of PNG-shifts into a nuanced perspective of diachronic and synchronous dimensions.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, we analyze from a synchronic perspective the distribution of the different PNG-shift phenomena within the book of Jeremiah and propose specific PNG-shift interpretations. Here we will strongly depend on our PNG-shift database and its shift indexation. As a complete interpretation on all PNG-shifts is only possible if operated with a rather complete exegetical methodology, our interpretative results remain limited, as they focus, as far as possible, on those types of PNG-shifts that appear in large quantity, i.e. have a large distribution. As a result we will argue that most shifts have a synchronic function. While many shifts function on the level of syntax-grammar, others have a discourse organizing function, signaling the reader the beginning of new dialogues or modification of dialogues and guiding the reader through the text material. Besides the syntax- and text-grammatical nature of participant reference shifts, shifts can also function on a rhetorical level. Here the role of participants as well as the distance between speakers and the addressed ones can be changed dynamically.

In our final sixth chapter we point out some of the implications our study has for Bible-translation and exegetical methodology. We will conclude that “a priori” phenomenological description of the textual material in terms of syntax-grammar and text-grammar is a prerequisite for an ethical reading of the biblical text in general. Such reading can make a great difference in how a problematic case like ours (participant reference-shifts) is interpreted. A text-syntactical approach as first methodological step bears the chance that much of what is first experienced as awkward by the modern reader can now be understood as pointing at a system inherent to the ancient Hebrew language practice contributing to the communicational potential of a text.