

On Ante-Position of the Attributive Adjective in Classical Syriac and Biblical Hebrew

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If there is one rule of syntax which may safely be postulated for proto-Semitic it is post-position of the attributive adjective.¹ In all the classical Semitic languages substantive-adjective is the regular sequence if the adjective functions as attribute, indeed in most of them it is the exclusive sequence.² Though in languages belonging to different branches of Semitic the opposite sequence is attested, the distribution of this phenomenon suggests that it is not a part of the proto-Semitic heritage which was preserved in some and lost from other languages, but the result of relatively recent independent parallel developments.³ The use of the sequence adjective-substantive has been researched fairly extensively for Ge'ez.⁴ The phenomenon is noted, though not treated in depth, in the major grammars of Syriac.⁵ With regard to Biblical Hebrew the usage has never clearly been recognized.⁶ In the present note some examples of ante-position representing a specific syntactic type will be gathered for Classical Syriac. The same type will then be identified in Biblical Hebrew.

In Syriac, ante-position of the attributive adjective is relatively frequent with the adjectives (ܐܘܪܐܝܢ) *hrēn* "other" and *saggī* "numerous".⁷ Also, it is rather the rule with certain laudatory or blaming adjectives accompanying proper nouns, almost in the way of *epitheta ornantia*, like in *ṭūbānītā Maryam* "blessed Mary" or *šanyā Ma(ܐ) nī* "crazy Mani". Other cases of ante-position are relatively rare and disparate.⁸ At least in as far as poetry is concerned, it seems that ante-positioning

¹ The question may perhaps be raised whether the attributive use of the adjective was not in this way distinguished from its predicative use, which would normally imply the sequence adjective-substantive (i.e. predicate-subject).

² C. Brockelmann, *Grundriß der vergleichenden Grammatik der semitischen Sprachen*, Bd. II (Berlin 1913), 202-203, §§ 125-126.

³ F.R. Blake, *Comparative Syntax of the Combinations Formed by the Noun and its Modifiers in Semitic*, *JAOS* 32 (1912), 135-267, esp. 158.

⁴ A. Gai, *The Place of the Attribute in Ge'ez*, *JSS* 26 (1981), 257-265, with discussion of earlier literature.

⁵ T. Nöldeke, *Kurzgefaßte syrische Grammatik* (Leipzig 1898²; repr. Darmstadt 1977), 160-161, § 211B; R. Duval, *Traité de grammaire syriaque* (Paris 1881; repr. Amsterdam 1969), 342-343, § 363. No specific information seems to be available for the other Aramaic dialects.

⁶ Except for a few cases involving the adjective *rab*. See, e.g., P. Joüon, *Grammaire de l'Hébreu biblique* (Rome 1923), 435, § 141b.

⁷ See the grammars quoted in n. 5. For an example with *z^cōr* „few“ see L. Leloir, *Saint Ephrem. Commentaire de l'évangile concordant. Texte Syriaque* (Dublin 1963), 188, § 31.

⁸ This judgment is based on fairly extensive reading in mostly early Syriac sources.

the attributive adjective was simply an option which might sometimes be exercised by the author.

However, one relatively homogeneous group of examples can be found which allow of a straightforward explanation. When the substantive is an insignificant "prop" carrying no semantic information, the adjective, which then carries the essential information, may precede it. Examples:

Mara b. Serapion,⁹ p. 47, l. 27 *hallēn dmeškḥān lamqabbālū ʿāqāthōn dḥallāšē bnaynāšā* "... steadfastness and endurance) which are able to bear the griefs of feeble men."

Thomas,¹⁰ p. 316, l. 15 *prīšīn bīšē bnaynāšā* "The bad men have been separated."

Rom 7:24¹¹ *dāwyā (ʿ)nā barnāšā mannū npaššēn(y) men pagrā hānā dmawtā* "I am a miserable man!¹² Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

Ahiqar, p. 22, l. 1,¹³ *ber(y) ḥabbar ḥakkīmē nāšā dāḥlay men ʿalāhā* "My son, associate with wise men, who fear God."

No subtle or complicated linguistic theory is needed to explain the inversion of the normal sequence substantive–adjective in these examples. The adjectives are in every case the significant element in the nominal phrase; what information is added by the substantive is secondary or even superfluous.¹⁴ The more significant element then received the first position in the nominal phrase, for reasons of expressivity. The correctness of this analysis is buttressed by a few examples in which the substantive, though not merely a prop, adds no new information and takes the second position in the phrase:

Acts 6:1 *wabhōn byawmātā hānnōn kad sgīw talmīdē raṭṭen(w) (h)waw yawnāyē talmīdē ʿal ʿebrāyē* "Now in these days, when the disciples increased in number, the Greek disciples murmured against the Hebrew ones."

Since it was already clear from the context that disciples are meant, the second *talmīdē* does not add any meaningful information. It has almost become an empty "prop" as in the examples with *barnāšā/bnay (ʿ)nāšā* above. This seems to be the reason of the exceptional order adjective–substantive.

Dan 8:21 *wšepṛāyā dʿezzē malkā dyawnāyē wqarnā rabbīā dʿīr bēt ʿaynaw(hy) hūyū qadmāyā malkā* "And the he-goat is the king of the Greeks, and the great horn between his eyes is the first king."

As Brockelmann remarks, ordinal adjectives have a tendency in different languages to take a position before the substantive.¹⁵ However, this may be precisely for the

⁹ The letter of Mara bar Serapion, in W. Cureton, *Spicilegium syriacum* (London 1885).

¹⁰ The Acts of Thomas, in W. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1 (London 1865).

¹¹ According to the Peshitta version.

¹² In this example, the sequence adjective–substantive is discontinued by the 1st p. pronoun which functions as the subject of the clause.

¹³ S. Grünberg, *Die weisen Sprüche des Achikar* (1917).

¹⁴ One may wonder, indeed, why the substantives were added at all, since the adjectives – being "substantivized" – could very well have expressed the same meaning by themselves: *ḥallāšē* "weak ones" etc. Possibly, the substantive was added only to give some additional weight to the nominal phrases in question.

¹⁵ VG II (see n. 2), 202.

reason we observe here, namely that with ordinal numbers, the substantive is often well understood.¹⁶

To recapitulate we may say that, in Syriac, attributive adjectives may take the first position in the nominal phrase when they transmit the decisive information. This is the case when the substantive is a) a "prop" word devoid of semantic value; b) known from the context as the entity under discussion.

There seems to be no modern grammar of Biblical Hebrew which recognizes the sequence adjective–substantive.¹⁷ Yet a number of cases exist that may be analyzed in the same way as the Syriac examples discussed above. The first four examples involve the "prop" word *ʾādām* "man, human being".

Ezek 44:25 *w^e ʿel mēt ʾādām lō ʾyābō ʾl ʿṯom ʾāh* "They shall not defile themselves by going near to a dead person." (RSV)¹⁸

Job 15:7 *h^ar(ʾ)īšōn ʾādām tiwālēd* "Are you the first man that was born?" (RSV)

Prov 15:20 *bēn ḥākām y^ʿsammaḥ-ʾāb uk^ʿsīl ʾādām bōzeh ʾimmō* "A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish man despises his mother." (RSV).

Prov 21:20 *ʾōšār neḥmād wāšemen binwēh ḥākām uk^ʿsīl ʾādām y^ʿball^ʿennū* "A precious treasure and oil are in the house of the wise, but a foolish man devours it."

The usual analysis of these phrases has been to regard the adjective as *status constructus* and to take *ʾādām* as a genitive expressing *genus*.¹⁹ An argument in favour of this view is the clear case of *status constructus* in Isa 29:19 *ʿebyōnē ʾādām*. This phrase, however, is in any case a bit different form the ones quoted above; it may actually carry a superlative meaning.²⁰

A more simple and adequate view is to recognize in the four examples cases of ante-position of the adjective. The RSV, or other modern translations, show that the sense of the phrases so understood fits the context.²¹ And the Semitic parallels from Syriac (and Geʿez, see below) show this analysis to be linguistically plausible.

Moreover, other examples cannot be explained as *status constructus*. One example involves the plural "prop" word *b^enē ʾādām* "human beings, men":

¹⁶ Another example in 1 Cor 15:26.

¹⁷ Except the cases with *rab* as noted above (n. 6). To these should be added two cases involving *ʿeḥād*, which on all accounts is to be considered an adjective in BH, Num 31:28, 30. For exceptional cases of ante-position of the adjectival demonstrative, see J. Joosten, *The Syntax of zeh Mošeh* (Ex 32,1,23), ZAW 103 (1991), 412-415.

¹⁸ G.R. Driver, *Ezekiel: Linguistic and Textual Problems*, Bibl 35 (1954), 310, criticizes the RSV because it is "grammatically impossible"; that, however, is precisely the question. He analyzes *mēt* as *status constructus* and takes "a man's dead" in the sense of "someone else's dead". In view of the parallel Lev 21:1-2 I find this exegesis unconvincing.

¹⁹ GKC, 416, § 128l.

²⁰ GKC, 428; § 132c; add, perhaps, the difficult *ḥakmōt nāšīm*, Prov 14:1.

²¹ Compare also the renderings in the Vulgate: Ezek 44:25 *mortuum hominem*; Job 15:7 *primus homo*; Prov 15:20 *stultus homo*; 21:20 *imprudens homo*.

Psalm 57:5 *napšī b^ctōk l^cbā^oṭīm ʔeš^kbāh loh^aṭīm b^cnē ʔādām šinnēhem ḥ^anīt w^cḥiṣṣīm* "I lie in the midst of lions, fiery men, whose teeth are spears and arrows."²²

In the following example, the substantive is probably not to be regarded as a "prop" word, but since it has been mentioned several times in the immediate context, it functions as such:

Gen 17:14 *w^cārēl zākār ʔāšer lō^o-yimmōl ʔet-b^cšar ʕorlātō...* "Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin..." (RSV).²³

In both Psalm 57:5 and Gen 17:4 the masoretic accents separate the adjective from the following substantive. This indicates that the masoretes did not recognize the grammaticality of the sequence adjective–substantive.²⁴

Conclusion

The remarkable parallelism – if the validity of the examples be granted – between Syriac and Biblical Hebrew syntax on this point, is further reinforced by a comparison with Ge'ez. It was observed by Amikam Gai that ante-position of the attributive adjective occurs under specific circumstances which, we now see, resemble those of Syriac and Hebrew:

In special contexts, however, it is the attribute which can have the main informative value. In a sentence like "I want to drive the red car", the concept "car" is understood in relation to the verb "to drive", and in this particular instance it is only the colour which is the really new information of the entire noun-phrase. In other cases the noun has no informative value at all, and serves only as a basis, i.e. a grammatical prop, to the attribute. In such cases the attribute in Ge'ez can (but need not!) precede the noun.²⁵

No one will attempt to derive the concurrence of Syriac, Hebrew and Ge'ez on this point from a common parent-language. We may be certain, therefore, to have traced a striking instance of independent parallel development in the syntax of the three languages.

Abstract:

The attributive adjective's following the substantive it describes is part of the proto-Semitic heritage in the different Semitic languages, as is confirmed by the reviews of Brockelmann and Blake. Yet in languages of different branches of Semitic, cases of ante-position of the attributive adjective occur, manifestly as the result of later development of the syntax of these languages.

In the present note, one set of conditions under which anteposition occurs is investigated with regard to Classical Syriac and Biblical Hebrew. When the substantive has little or no informa-

²² In The Dutch translation of the Bible Society: "Ik lig neder te midden van leeuwen, vlammen spuwende mensenkinderen, hun tanden zijn speer en pijlen."

²³ F.E. König, *Historisch-kritisches Lehrgebäude der hebräischen Sprache*, Bd. III (Leipzig 1897), 407, § 334ḡ, holds that *ārēl* is the substantive and *zākār* the adjective. Note, however, that in the immediate context *zākār* figures several times as a substantive.

²⁴ As indeed this type of syntax seems to be absent from post-biblical Hebrew.

²⁵ A. Gai, *JSS* 26 (1981), 257-258. Gai speaks of the attribute in general since his study includes other types of adnominals, besides adjectives.

tive value, the attributive adjective may, in these languages, be positioned before it. This is the case when a) the substantive is a mere "prop" word (like 'man' or 'human being'); b) the substantive has been mentioned earlier in the context and is well understood. Ante-position has been shown to occur under the same conditions in Ge'ez by A. Gai. The concurrence of Hebrew, Syriac and Ge'ez on this point is certainly due to independent parallel development in the syntax of these languages.

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