

BOOK REVIEW

Moț, Laurențiu Florentin, *Morphological and Syntactical Irregularities in the Book of Revelation: A Greek Hypothesis* (Linguistic Biblical Studies, 11; Leiden: Brill, 2013). xii + 289 pp. Hbk. \$166.00.

Moț's study explores the topic of John's grammar in the Apocalypse. I found this work to be detailed and comprehensive, despite some methodological issues that weaken Moț's conclusions.

He notes that there have been two main approaches to what he terms grammatical 'irregularities' in this ancient document: the Semitic hypothesis and the Greek hypothesis. Both hypotheses attempt to explain the provenance of numerous atypical formulations in John's writing. The former view attributes John's atypical grammar to Semitic influence, claiming that irregular Greek is the result of interference from John's primary languages, Aramaic and Hebrew. Those who argue for the latter view claim that John's usage of Greek is consistent with the standards of spoken—and perhaps even some forms of written—Koine Greek in the late first century. The Semitic hypothesis has received sustained treatment. Moț seeks to test the Greek hypothesis, which, by contrast, has received little sustained treatment.

In particular, he proposes and addresses five research questions: what is the extent of the grammatical anomalies in Revelation?; how should these anomalies be classified?; how intentional was John's grammar?; how can these anomalies be explained?; and do they obfuscate or otherwise affect the message of the text?

Moț's method is eclectic, a 'fourfold methodology' as he describes it (pp. 44, 244). This eclecticism does present some difficulties. First, Moț uses textual comparison to identify sections of text that later scribes considered grammatically unacceptable. Textual comparison is thus used to delimit the dataset that Moț analyzes. This stage of his methodology is an important one, because the dataset would otherwise seem to be arbitrary. That is, apart from changes made by scribes, it would have been unclear just what counted as a grammatical anomaly.

However, the issue of Moṭ's dataset remains unclear in some respects, in light of his conclusions as I will discuss below. As well, in his analysis of 'sentential errors' (p. 95), Moṭ claims that his list of errors is the result of his own reading, along with lists provided by other authors—not, notably, through textual comparison. Secondly, Moṭ uses grammatical analysis to evaluate the dataset—whether the anomalies previously collated are indeed erroneous. Thirdly, Moṭ attempts to determine whether Semitic interference has occurred. Finally, Moṭ examines the anomalies from the perspective of 'Discourse Analysis', which essentially means that he examines the impact of and possible intention behind the anomalies in regard to the larger message of a passage. Moṭ does not explicitly acknowledge that discourse analysis must take place within a larger linguistic framework in order to provide meaningful results. This oversight convolutes his appeal to discourse analysis. The 'three criteria' Moṭ appeals to in his description of this methodological step are (a) comparison with alternative wordings, (b) 'the choice can be intuitive or conscious, but the result from the reader's angle is the same' (p. 44) and (c) choice implies meaning. It deserves noting that only (a) can be understood as a criterion for determining intentionality or impact on a message of particular language usages. Ambiguous methodological criteria leave their mark on Moṭ's analysis, with the result that his conclusions remain, to some extent, unsupported.

Moṭ's analysis is divided into two major sections, morphological irregularities ('barbarisms') and syntactical irregularities ('solecisms'). After analyzing each alleged barbarism, Moṭ claims that 'There is no blatant barbarism in the language of the Johannine Apocalypse. There exist morphologically irregular words but none of them deserve the label of barbarism' (p. 107). Of the 221 alleged solecisms, Moṭ found 45 actual solecisms, 'without linguistic explanation' (p. 218).

His conclusions are as follows. First, he claims that grammatical deviations are not as frequent as previously alleged. This conclusion is helpful and should serve as a correction to numerous exaggerations. Secondly, anomalies should be classified on the basis of the grammatical rule being broken, Moṭ claims. This conclusion can only be useful if there is a clear, rule-based description of canonical Koine Greek from which deviations can be noted. Thirdly, concerning the degree of John's intentionality, Moṭ concludes that John is consistently intentional from a grammatical standpoint, even if there is not a

consistent stylistic explanation for his irregularities. Concerning the degree of Semitic influence on John's Greek, Moṭ identifies a mere two examples of Semitic transfer—where the explanation for a construction can only be found in the first, and not the second language (e.g. 'to fight against [μετά]', Rev. 2.16). Though he identifies a number of Semitic facilitations, such as the use of distributive singulars in place of plurals and the use of participles in place of finite verbs, such constructions are possible in both languages, and thus only potentially indicate the indirect influence of Hebrew and Aramaic on John's Greek.

My chief critique regarding Moṭ's study regards the appropriateness of an 'error-oriented study' (p. 95). Moṭ claims he adopts a descriptive–functional approach rather than a prescriptive–formal approach. However, he seems to have employed both perspectives in his study. More specifically, he operates descriptively when it comes to the evaluation of his dataset—as he seeks to explain the function of John's language rather than classify it as correct or incorrect. Nevertheless, he takes a prescriptive approach in order to identify the dataset in the first place: 'the abnormalities', he explains, 'were identified in relation to the rules of Koine Greek' (p. 39). In other words, Moṭ identifies instances of rule-breaking in order to evaluate them using an approach that eschews the very notion of rule-breaking. Moṭ's approach is not invalid in itself, but it brings the purposes of the study into question. For example, if Moṭ is convinced that a descriptive perspective is the correct one, then it would seem to be impossible to disprove his conclusion that John was intentional and meaningful in all of his grammatical choices. Moṭ examines each anomaly to determine whether it is intentional and can be explained as meaningful, but he has already adopted this stance as a methodological assumption. Consider that Moṭ concludes, 'John's Greek should not be considered to be of a lower quality', because, 'it fulfills its purpose of effective communication' (p. 245). Yet he states from the outset of his study that,

Irregular is not mistaken. It is just different and for this reason significant. Accordingly, labels such as correct versus incorrect Greek in the book of Revelation will be avoided as much as possible. This will especially be true when explanations of the choices John made will be sought out and evaluated [*sic*] (p. 44).

Another example is Moṭ's 'fourth finding':

John's grammar is always intentional ... any rendition, including the peculiar, is a result of intention, that is, the writer wanted to express his thought with that very deviant syntax, because that was what he could linguistically perform. If one wants to understand John's thought, he or she needs to assume intentionality in the appraisal of irregularities (p. 246).

This conclusion answers one of his five research questions, and yet the same point can likewise be identified in his discussion of his methodology. From the perspective of discourse analysis, Moṭ claims, intentionality is assumed to be present despite deviations from normal patterns of usage (p. 43). It remains to be seen whether there is a better mode of analysis than one oriented by alleged errors. A more systematic account of John's use of Greek would have made anomalies more objectively identifiable.

The greatest weakness of this volume, in summary, stems from the lack of a canonical morphology and syntax from which morphological and syntactic deviations can be clearly and empirically identified. Such a canonical account would make explicit the 'standard' morphology and syntax of Koine Greek within a specified synchronic period, against which not only John's language but also that of any contemporary documents could be evaluated. At the same time, such a canonical grammar would presuppose a prescriptive-formalist approach to linguistics, which Moṭ wishes to avoid. A conceivable alternative to a canonical grammar would be a register-based model, where particular language usage is determined to participate in a particular sociolinguistic register on the basis of empirical observations about the varieties of Hellenistic Greek. On such a model, John's Apocalypse, and particular passages within it, could be identified as participating to some degree in a given register, or registers. On such an approach, Revelation's non-standard language could be used to specify the register of its communication. As Moṭ's work stands, though, one can only come away with the conclusion that John's language is capable of being explained both descriptively, as a set of intentional choices on John's part, as well as prescriptively, as falling prey to a number of grammatical 'errors'. Thus, because his dataset cannot be objectively delimited, Moṭ's conclusions seem somewhat arbitrary, though they are not un-insightful.

Despite some weaknesses, Moṭ's study is a valuable contribution to the field. In some ways, it constitutes a test of several hundred passages

that have previously been identified as containing grammatical errors. The analysis, therefore, is a fresh and comprehensive perspective on the idiosyncrasies of John's Greek in the Apocalypse. Mot's volume will continue to be a key reference in this discussion due to the author's thoroughness and engagement with different theories about what can be made of deviation from standard patterns in Hellenistic Greek. Those who are studying the book of Revelation would do well to heed Mot's claims that John's language is intentional and meaningful, and not necessarily reflective of either lack of education and sophistication or of Semitic interference. John's language should not be dismissed as incorrect, but rather meaningful explanations should be sought, and Mot's volume documents many such explanations.

Ryder A. Wishart
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, ON