

Roles and Relations in Biblical Law: A Study of Participant Tracking, Semantic Roles, and Social Networks in Leviticus 17-26

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Christian Canu Højgaard, *Roles and Relations in Biblical Law: A Study of Participant Tracking, Semantic Roles, and Social Networks in Leviticus 17-26*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0376>

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Semitic Languages and Cultures 25

ISSN (print): 2632-6906

ISSN (digital): 2632-6914

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-149-8

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-150-4

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-151-1

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0376

Cover image: A fragment of a Hebrew Bible manuscript (Leviticus 18.15-19.3) from the Cairo Genizah (Cambridge University Library, T-S A3.30). Courtesy of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

The main fonts used in this volume are Charis SIL, SBL Hebrew, and SBL Greek.

8. CONCLUSION: THE SOCIAL NETWORK OF LEVITICUS 17–26

1.0. Summary of Research

The aim of this study has been to develop and discuss a social network model for capturing the roles of the participants in the Holiness Code. The law text contains 59 human/divine participants related to one another in a variety of ways. The participants thus form a network of interaction closely related to the content matter of the law. It is the claim of this study that the ethical values of the law text are related to the participants and their internal relationships—in other words, their roles. The methodology developed in this thesis contrasts with traditional approaches to the characterisation of literary participants in significant ways. Within Biblical studies, it has been common to focus on one participant or a small set of participants and to employ literary, linguistic, and historical insights to interpret the role of the participant(s). An obvious advantage of this approach is a multifaceted characterisation not limited to certain features of a text. The downside is the often narrow focus on one participant, at the cost of viewing said participant in light of the other participants in the text. In particular, there is a risk that the role of a participant is over- or underemphasised, or even misunderstood, because its embeddedness in a network of interacting partici-

pants is not taken seriously. Chapter 2 illustrated this methodological issue by reviewing previous research on the participants of H. It was shown that previous interpretations have led to rather diverse characterisations of the participants and their roles, and it was contended that a social network approach better accounts for the participants' roles within the text at large. Consequently, a sociological framework was outlined and integrated with a literary approach to H. In particular, recent narratological and rhetorical readings of Biblical law were invoked to argue that H is not an arbitrary collection of laws, but a carefully written document that lends itself to literary analysis, even though it may not meet the literary criteria of modern critics. In light of this framework, it was further argued that the participants should not be treated as discrete entities but as members of a social community implied by the text. Accordingly, the participants were claimed to form a social network connected by physical, perceptual, and emotional exchanges. By implication, the role of each participant can be explained in light of the entire network. The social network model necessitated a structured harvesting of data to ensure a consistent and transparent mapping of the participants. The two datatypes required were participant tracking data and some abstract measures of interaction between the participants. Both data types demanded careful investigation, and four chapters were dedicated to that task.

Chapter 3 explained the participant-tracking strategy developed by Eep Talstra and pursued in this study. The methodology is essentially a bottom-up linking of linguistic entities to textual participants. Talstra developed his methodology primarily

on the basis of narrative and prophetic texts, and it was the aim of this chapter to review the tracking procedure on the basis of a concrete dataset of the participant references in H. Three important insights were yielded by the research.

Firstly, as a law text, H offers its own complications in terms of participant tracking. Most significantly, the usage of *אִישׁ* ‘a man/anyone’ is a literary convention in Biblical law to introduce an indefinite, hypothetical participant. The participant is commonly disambiguated by means of adding complex phrases, relative clauses, or temporal/circumstantial clauses. In order for a computational algorithm to account better for legal texts, these linguistic devices for disambiguating participants need to be taken into consideration. Furthermore, the algorithm did not always handle nominal clauses well. For a participant-tracking analysis, it is crucial to discern whether the non-verbal predicate of a nominal clause identifies or classifies the subject, since an identifying clause involves one participant and a classifying clause two. A two-step procedure was proposed to discern 1) the phrase functions (predicate and subject) and 2) the overall semantics of the clause on the basis of definiteness.

Secondly, the dataset under consideration also exhibited some abnormalities, including the frequent first-person references to YHWH in Moses’ speeches and the alternation between plural and singular references to the addressees. It was argued that both types of participant shifts were rhetorical devices outside the scope of participant tracking. Nevertheless, a computational analysis has the merit of revealing abnormalities, because,

unlike human interpreters, it is not prone to harmonising or ignoring tensions. Thus, a formalised participant-tracking procedure shows both the internal coherence of the text, due to its ability to link participant references across the span of a text, and also the 'knots' and 'gaps' of the text, whether they are intentional or not.

Finally, it was shown that participants are not always entirely distinct entities. Often, they overlap in terms of group membership, that is, a participant can be referred to individually or as a member of a group. In other words, the participants form a hierarchy, and this hierarchy must be respected in a participant analysis (SNA included), because references and events ascribed to an individual participant cannot necessarily be ascribed to other members of the same group.

Chapter 4 developed a framework for capturing semantic roles of verbal events. In light of the present project at large, the major aim was to define a feature that could be quantified across any given verbal event so that it could function in a social network analysis. Agency was found to be one such feature, because any event involves some degree of agency. Agency is a compositional entity and involves notions of volition, sentience, causation, and dynamicity. As an example, a volitional participant is generally considered more agentive than a non-volitional participant. In turn, by analysing verbal events in terms of agency, it would be possible to rank semantic roles and thereby deduce how much agency participants of the Holiness Code invested in concrete events. Apart from the internal aspect of the verb (also known as *Aktionsart*), agency is also affected by the relational

properties of the arguments of the verb and the pragmatic context of the clause. A multifaceted analysis was therefore required to capture the degree of agency entailed by a verbal event. The chapter prioritised the verbal properties of dynamicity and causation, arguably the most significant verbal features with respect to agency. The Role and Reference Grammar approach to lexical decomposition of verbs proved useful, because it offers a strict procedure to follow from determination of *Aktionsart* to indexing of semantic roles. In particular, verbs index their semantic roles according to dynamicity (states vs activities) and causation. Since Biblical Hebrew is an ancient language, however, the determination of *Aktionsart* is more complicated than for modern languages. Canonical RRG has incorporated Dowty's test-questions to 'interrogate' the verbs, but these test-questions assume an intuition about the language that we can hardly possess for ancient languages, including BH. It was therefore argued that statistical approaches are needed alongside traditional ones insofar as they take seriously the frequencies of actual attestations in the corpus.

Chapter 5 was dedicated to the analysis of dynamicity. To identify dynamic verbs, a collostructional analysis was applied, whereby the reliance of BH verbs on selected adverbials was investigated. The analysis showed a clear distinction between verbs which are attracted by directional adverbials and verbs which are not. Thus, the analysis provided a statistical basis for distinguishing states and activities. More generally, the research illustrated the benefits of applying quantitative methods to the analysis of BH. In future research on BH *Aktionsart*, other adverbials and

constructions should preferably be considered, in order to substantiate the findings of the present study.

The other major feature contributing to agency, causation, was analysed in chapter 6. Biblical Hebrew has two morphological causative stems, *hif'il* and *pi'el*. The *hif'il* is generally acknowledged as a 'real' causative, while the *pi'el* is more likely factitive. Not all verbs occurring in these stems, however, appear to be causative or factitive. It was therefore investigated whether morphological causatives can be identified on the basis of the ratio by which they increase in transitivity when they alternate from the non-causative stem, the *qal*, to the *hif'il* or the *pi'el*. The statistical analysis showed clearly that prototypical morphological causatives have a high tendency towards adding an external causer in the *hif'il* and the *pi'el*, while ambiguous and true negative cases have a lower or even negative tendency towards transitivity increase. Apart from a statistical analysis, each stem was conceptualised with RRG logical structures, and it was shown that the two stems in fact express finer causative distinctions, namely factitive (*pi'el*) and 'real' causative (*hif'il*). Importantly, when a verb is attested in both the *hif'il* and the *pi'el*, it often indexes different semantic roles according to the causative type of the stem. The analysis was primarily restricted to verbs attested in Lev. 17–26, so further research into the remaining verbs of the HB is required to validate this hypothesis.

Lexical causatives proved harder to decompose, since there are no syntactic clues to distinguish non-causatives and causatives, apart from transitivity, insofar as intransitive verbs cannot be causative. There is some correlation between causation and

the semantic transitivity hypothesis proposed by Hopper and Thompson (1980), since causatives are likely to involve an instigating causer and a fully affected undergoer. The correspondence was tested on BH verbs using Næss' (2007) semantic transitivity parameters: instigation, volition, and affectedness. Some correlation was noted, but since causation is a multifaceted concept (see Talmy 2000) and includes, e.g., permission, non-intervention, and hindrance—in addition to the prototypical direct causation—one cannot escape a logical, lexical decomposition of the verb itself, despite the obvious challenges presented by an ancient language. The chapter concluded with the proposal of a hierarchy of semantic roles, arranged according to dynamicity and causation, as well as clausal properties. The hierarchy provides a useful means of ranking participants according to their roles in concrete verbal events. Thus, although Lev. 17–26 contains 181 different verbal predicates denoting a wide range of events, the agency hierarchy allows for comparing 'apples and oranges', so to speak.

Chapter 7 combined the results of the participant tracking and the semantic role analysis in order to investigate the roles of the participants within the social network of Lev. 17–26. The participants were conceptualised as network nodes and the verbs and agency scores as edges connecting the nodes. Although SNA has previously been applied to the study of literature, the present approach differed in several respects. Firstly, it was the first time that the social network implied by a single law text has been analysed. Secondly, the conceptualisation of agency as network edges is unique, and particularly apt for a law text in which agency plays a significant role. Thirdly, it was the first time that

the syntactic structure of the text was incorporated into SNA as a third dimension alongside participants and agency. The ‘control network’ derived from the syntactic structure of the text proved useful in explaining the role of *Moses*. In the ordinary social network, *Moses* was found to have a limited role, because many participants have direct interactions with *YHWH* besides *Moses*’ mediation of divine revelation. However, the control network ‘restored’ his role, because he was shown to be the second-most ‘controlling’ participant next to *YHWH*, due to the fact that the vast majority of interactions recorded are part of *Moses*’ direct speeches. Hence, the syntactic structure is a crucial component in capturing the roles of the participants, and an SNA risks misrepresenting the participants if this component is not considered.

More generally, three clusters of participants were identified using the node2vec algorithm for structural role detection. One cluster consisted of core participants: *YHWH*; the *Israelites* (2MP1); an individual, directly addressed Israelite (2MSg); a third-person *Israelite*; the *sojourner*; *Aaron*; and *Aaron’s sons*. Another cluster consisted of intermediate participants, less frequently attested, but with connections to multiple core participants. This group included *Moses*, the *blasphemer* of Lev. 24.10–23, and the *brother*, among others. The last cluster consisted of peripheral participants that occur very infrequently in the network and often with low agency invested (i.e., the participants are more often undergoers of an event than actors). Most women of the text belong to this group, as well as the *father*, among others.

Selected participants of each cluster were closely inspected with an eye to their structural importance and the degree of agency invested by them in interactions with other participants. The most important participant is *YHWH*, who controls most of the network and has the most connections with the most important participants. It is therefore safe to conclude that the Holiness Code is *YHWH*'s law. Not only does it originate with *YHWH* as divine speeches, it is also orientated towards him. Although H is commonly viewed as community-orientated, in contrast to the cult-oriented P, *YHWH* is the organising principle of the community implied by the text. The *Israelites*, who are the primary addressees of *Moses*' speeches, are the second most important participants. Most other participants are referred to in relation to the *Israelites* or the individually addressed *2MSg*, e.g., 'your (Sg) brother', 'your (Pl) enemies', and 'the sojourner who dwells among you (Pl)'. The particular perspective of the author on the society implied by the text is thus that it is the covenantal community formed by *YHWH* and the people of Israel. The roles of the participants are derived from this perspective. Like any other law text, H presupposes and reacts against violations of the social order. In this particular law text, the covenantal relationship with *YHWH* is at stake, and the members and outsiders of the community are presumed to be willing to violate the order of society by reaching out for more wealth, power, and privileges at the expense of others. The covenantal community thus finds itself under constant threat of injustice and disentanglement. It is threatened by the greedy individual Israelite (*2MSg*), the transitional

brother who drifts away from his family and the community because of poverty and oppression, and the rebellious *blasphemer* who attacks the community and curses its god. The purpose of the law, then, is to constrain the behaviour of the members of the community for the purpose of preserving order and holiness.

In sum, the SNA provides a multifaceted picture of the participants and the network of the Holiness Code. More than that, the participant roles derived from the SNA shed light upon the ethical and theological 'expectancies' pertaining to the social community. The social community implied by the author may not be an ideal community. After all, there is always the threat of internal disentanglement and ritual impurity, as well as attacks from outsiders. Nevertheless, while the society implied by the author may not be an ideal society, the participant roles reveal how the lawgiver expects his addressees to act in this particular society under certain circumstances. More than anything, the lawgiver values the covenantal community between *YHWH* and the *Israelites*, and this community can only be upheld if the people fulfil certain roles, e.g., if the *priests* respectfully facilitate the sacrifices offered by the *Israelites*, and if the individual *Israelites* sustain and care for their poor fellows. In other words, if holiness is the unifying theme of the Holiness Code, as often argued, the expected participant roles are the manifestations of the author's view on holiness. Holiness is manifested and maintained through social interaction.

2.0. Recommendations for Further Research

Finally, I want to indicate some trajectories for further research along the lines of the present study. First, as was pointed out in the participant tracking of H (chapter 3), participant references cannot easily be resolved into clearly delineated participants. In general, participants fluctuate between group membership references and individual references, and they can be referred to by a variety of synonyms. In fact, quite distinct participants can be referred to by the same references. The most curious phenomenon is the reference גַּר 'sojourner', which typically refers to non-Israelite residents but is also used to designate the status of the Israelites (25.23). This change of reference evidently introduces a play on identity, because the Israelites, who are clearly set apart from non-Israelite sojourners, are in some sense sojourners themselves. In other words, the text consciously blurs the referential boundaries of the participants for ideological reasons. The task of participant tracking has to deal with such phenomena, and the present study has discussed how participants should be thought of as semantically overlapping. Still, further research is required in order to be able to retrieve hierarchies or networks of overlapping or fluctuating participants. More concretely, it was suggested that additional linguistic parameters should be included in the disambiguation of participants, because the text frequently employs complex phrases or relative clauses to specify the identity of the participants. Further, nominal clauses deserve more attention, in order to further validate the two-step approach suggested in this book for tracking the participants of these particular clauses.

Second, along with participant tracking, the analysis of semantic roles (chapter 4–6) formed the backbone of the SNA of H. It was the goal of this study to propose ways of linguistically determining semantic roles given the inherent aspect (*Aktionsart*) of the verb. In particular, quantitative methods were applied to explore dynamicity on the basis of collocations of verbs and selected adverbials, as well as to explore morphological causatives on the basis of transitivity alternation between non-causative and causative stems. As for the collocation analysis, much more research is surely needed to confirm or reject the conclusions of this study. Additional collocations should be explored, not least collocations of verbs and temporal modifiers, in order to further scrutinise the inherent aspect of Biblical verbs. Also, the study of morphological causatives was limited primarily to those attested in H, but the transitivity alternation model should preferably be expanded to the entire Biblical corpus, in order to validate the approach and explore morphological causatives further.

Third, while most Biblical studies are oriented towards the historical context of Biblical texts, in order to understand the *Sitz im Leben* of the text, the present study has deliberately refrained from historical questions. This choice is legitimate insofar as the object under consideration was not the historical setting of the Israelite community depicted in H, but the author's portrayal of and ethical stance towards the community. Nevertheless, texts are products of historical authors and reflect historical contexts in one way or another. It is therefore relevant to relate the observations made here about the implied society and the expected

social roles to more general considerations of the historical context of H. Given the claim that the author does not stipulate how the society should look, but rather how different participants are to act within a given society, it is reasonable to expect the implied society to reflect a historical one. In particular, due to the lack of external evidence, the question of authorship has often focused on indirect evidence, that is, which social group can be said to benefit more from the legislation. I have argued that the Holiness Code does not benefit the priestly class in any significant way. This conclusion was based on the role the priests fulfil in the social network. Hence, SNA can inform the ongoing debate on authorship attribution.

Fourth, the methodology developed in this project can be applied to other legal collections, most importantly the Covenant Code (Exod. 20.22–23.33) and the Deuteronomic Code (Deut 12–26), in order to characterise the participants of those texts. As a matter of fact, SNA is more efficient when similar social networks are compared and contrasted. For example, does YHWH have a more prominent role in H than in the other law texts? And is the sojourner characterised differently in H to in the other codes, as often suggested? It is my contention that valuable insights on Biblical law and ethical roles could be gleaned by applying SNA to these texts as well. Importantly, SNA need not be limited to Biblical corpora. In fact, SNA has already been applied to the study of cuneiform archives as a method for mapping tablets and the participants mentioned in those tablets (see the summary of Mesopotamian research in chapter 7, §2.3). However, along the lines of the present study, SNA could also be applied to individual

Mesopotamian and Egyptian law texts in order to map the ethical and social roles of the participants involved. The Code of Hammurabi, for example, has often been compared to the Biblical laws. A similar SNA of the Code of Hammurabi would qualify the comparisons even further.

Fifth, the methodology developed here can be applied to other genres of the Hebrew Bible. Although SNA has already been used for narratives (e.g., Che 2017), the present methodology captures interactions in a unique way by including all types of interactions and by quantifying the interactions by means of agency. It is reasonable to believe that narratives form small social networks with core and peripheral participants. The social network methodology developed here provides statistical tools for measuring the structural prominence of participants, and quantifying their interactions according to agency. The drawback of the methodology is its reliance upon advanced semantic data that cannot automatically be extracted from the text. On the other hand, the demanding work of participant tracking and semantic role annotation can itself uncover important structural and literary features relevant for the interpretation of participant roles. Hopefully, the research documented here has broken new ground for further studies into BH semantics.

Sixth, it is my contention that more general studies of Biblical ethics would benefit from a network analysis of Biblical law. As shown, the laws of the Holiness Code are addressed to concrete participants in concrete situations. By implication, a particular law does not necessarily apply to everyone (although some

laws might in fact do). Thus, in my opinion, it is much more fruitful to observe how the Israelites should act in specific contexts with respect to specific participants, rather than deriving abstract ethical principles divorced from their situational contexts. For example, while H is indeed concerned with social order and equality, this concern is embedded in a holiness framework, and this framework determines how the individual social laws should be interpreted and evaluated. Accordingly, I have argued that the purpose of the anti-incest laws in Lev. 18 and 20 is not to protect the property of males, nor to protect the legal rights of women, but to preserve the purity and sanctity of the people by prohibiting certain sexual interactions. Thus, to rightly interpret Biblical law from an ethical point of view, the laws need to be related to the participants, the specific situation (if stated), and the roles of the participants in their social setting. The present study has laid the foundation for exploring the ethical potential and scope of Biblical law by taking seriously the network roles of the participants and their concrete relationships with other participants. Having done this detailed research, I believe that the theological and ethical values of the law can be more adequately evaluated and related to modern ethics through SNA.

