FOUR OLD TESTAMENT PROBLEM TERMS

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The following article gives a brief account of several theories recently put forward as possible solutions to problems of Old Testament translation. None of these theories represents the tested opinion of the majority of Old Testament scholars, and should therefore not normally be adopted in actual translations of the Old Testament. None the less, readers may be interested to see the way in which scholars attack this kind of problem. Ed.

Lively interest in and discussion of Old Testament word meanings and translation problems characterize a number of recently-published articles. We wish to pass on to translators the suggestions which have been made concerning four O.T. terms, in the hope that these may prove of interest. Each term is, in some sense, still in the problem category. The discussions relate, respectively, to: (1) the meaning of *m^{e}kērōtē(y)hem* in Gen. 49:5; (2) the significance of *wayyukū* in Ex. 5:14; (3) the meaning of *nassōt* in Ex. 20:20; and (4) the significance of the divine epithet *sadday*, found in Gen. 17:1 and numerous other references.

1. Habitations, swords, or . . .? (Gen. 49:5)

The term *m^{e}kerote(y)hem* is still a problem, as *Old Testament Translation Problems* (p. 5) points out. It was rendered in the Authorized (King James) Version as "habitations," in the Revised Standard Version as "swords". Other renderings have been suggested. Not the least of the difficulties with this term is that it occurs nowhere else in the Old Testament. The Septuagint (LXX) is of little help, since its translation seems to suppose a Hebrew text different from the Masoretic.

Recently, Mitchell Dahood addressed himself to this problem and has suggested a plausible solution. [1] Having observed that the term is a derived noun formed, as is common, by the prefixation of *m-* to a verbal root, he analyzes it as form based on the root *k-r-t*, 'cut'. Many other nouns, similarly derived, express the idea of the instrument used for performing the action designated by the root. By analogy, this term would mean "an instrument for cutting." The main question is: precisely *what kind* of cutting instrument was intended by the word?

Dahood observes acutely that the context has clear reference to the events of Genesis 34. This passage relates how, in anger over dishonor done to their sister by Shechem, the son of Hamor, the sons of Israel deceived the men of Hamor's city into being circumcised. Then, when the men were thus incapacitated, Simeon and Levi slew them. Dahood also observes that the verb *k-r-t*, 'cut, cut off', is used to describe circumcision in Ex. 4:25, which would give a presumption for its being the base for *m^{e}kērōtē(y)hem*. He thus concludes that the reference in Gen. 49:5 is to *circumcision knives*.

[1] "MKRTYHM in Genesis 49, 5," Catholic Biblical Quarterly 23:1 (Jan. '61): 54-56.

The presumption is that the Israelite men had lent their circumcision-knives to the men of Shechem, who did not normally practice this ritual. The implication of Jacob's comment would be that an act which had been suggested as a way to insure peace between Israel and the city of Hamor and Shechem had been turned into a violent outcome by Simeon and Levi. A possible translation of the verse would then be: "Simeon and Levi are brothers—instruments of violence are their *circumcision-knives.*"

2. Were beaten (Ex. 5:14)

Theophile Meek takes exception to the RSV rendering of *wayyukū,* a rendering which perpetuates that of the King James: "were smitten." [2] The form *wayyukū* is a passive (sixth conjugation) of the root *n-k-h,* 'strike, smite', so that it would seem that this rendering would be adequate.

However, the idiom of the Hebrew makes a different understanding of this form probable. Translated somewhat literally, the passage reads: "*wayyukū* . . . the overseers (subj.) of the children of Israel, whom the taskmasters of Pharaoh had set over them, to say . . ." The clue that *wayyukū* does not mean literally "were beaten" comes from the presence of the form *lē'mōr,* 'to say' or 'saying', followed by a direct quotation. In Hebrew idiom, *lē'mōr* is regularly preceded by a verb denoting *speech activity,* therefore the form in question should represent some such activity.

If it is remembered that "smiting" may be done *verbally* as well as with a stick or weapon, the difficulty disappears. Meek therefore suggests that the form should be understood to mean "were berated, scolded", and this meaning seems to suit the context well. Independently of Meek's suggestion, we note that the verb *n-k-h* is used in this way in Jer. 18:18, in the phrase "smite with the tongue." A rendering made possible by this suggestion would be: "And the officers of the children of Israel . . . were berated, saying, Why have you not completed your task, etc.?" [3]

3. To prove (Ex. 20:20)

The term *nassōt* is a pi'el (third conjugation) infinitive form of the verb *n-s-h,* and occurs in the sentence: "And Moses said to the people, 'Do not fear; for God has come *to prove* you . . ." (RSV) Concerning this, Moshe Greenberg has suggested that the translation of this form

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[2] "Translation Problems in the Old Testament," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 50:1 (July '59):50.

[3] "Saying" seems somewhat awkward following a passive verb with an unspecified actor, yet this represents the actual Hebrew, Smoother rendering would require something like the following alternatives: (1) "And they were berated..... *in words like these.....*" or (2) "And they were berated *by the taskmasters..... who said.....*"

by "to prove" misinterprets the stated purpose of the Sinaitic theophany, as described in Ex. 20:1-21. [4]

Greenberg argues that the meaning "test, prove" for *n-s-h* in this context runs into difficulties for several reasons. First, as a reason assigned to God's appearance, it sustains no close connection with the next reason given, *viz.*, "and that the fear of him may be before your eyes . . ." Next, no explanation is ever given as to what is to be proved or tested, a fact which has led to conjecture by a number of commentators. Further, comparison with Ex. 19:9, and with the expanded versions of this theophany given in Deut. 4:10 and 5:24-27, leads to the conclusion that the basic reason for this theophany was to give the people an experience of God which would so impress them that they would properly reverence ("fear") him and teach their children to do so. Finally, a study of the use of this verb in a number of other contexts indicates that its basic meaning is "to have an experience of, get to know, learn about," from which the meaning "to test or prove" developed.

Since the pi'el conjugation of many verbs has a causative sense, and apparently has in this case, the meaning adopted is "to give an experience of." This would yield a rendering: "God has come in order to give you an experience of (himself) and in order that the fear of him may be before you so that you may not go on sinning."

4. The meaning of shaddai (Gen. 17:1 et passim)

The precise meaning of the divine epithet *šadday* (or, *shaddai*, as commonly transliterated) has been a matter of etymological speculation for a long time. One of the last detailed discussions was presented by W. F. Albright in 1935 in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*. [5] In this article Albright argued learnedly for an etymology which resulted in the meaning "one of the mountains." Yet, he recognized some problems inherent in his reconstructed etymology. He also recognized that although Shaddai-Yahweh (Ex. 6:3) was closely allied in poetic thought with a mountainous milieu, the Old Testament never represents his being worshipped either as a strictly mountain deity or as a local storm god.

In a recent article, Norman Walker suggests a new etymology and meaning for *šadday* which seems worth considering. [6]

He takes as his starting-point the divine name SHA(G)-ZU which appears in the seventh Babylonian Creation Tablet. In this context, the title of the deity means "one who knows the heart (or, inward parts)" of man. Walker then shows how an etymological development

[4] "NSH in Exodus 20:20 and the Purpose of the Sinaitic Theophany," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79 (1960):273-76.

[5] W. F. Albright, "The Names SHADDAI and ABRAM," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 54 (1935):173-204.

[6] "A New Interpretation of the Divine Name 'Shaddai'," *Zeitschrift fur die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 72 (1960):64-66.

from Akkadian SHA(G)-ZU to Hebrew *šadday* could be possible. If the etymology can be sustained, the meaning "heart-knower" seems assured.

There are several considerations to support the idea. First, the epithet appears in the record of God's self-revelation to Abraham, who had lived much of his life in the Akkadian sphere of influence. Presumably it was a term with which he was familiar. Second, it seems characteristic of the appearance of the divine epithets that the initial appearances, at least, occur in contexts in which the meaning of the divine epithet is a key factor. That is, the significance of the divine name is closely linked to the circumstances in which it is first used. As a divine epithet, Shaddai first occurs in Gen. 17:1, in connection with Abraham's great desire to have a natural son and heir. The entire chapter deals with God's self-revelation as a response to Abraham's state of mind. God is seen assuring Abraham, and confirming the divine promise made to him. The relevant portion of Gen. 17:1, following Walker's suggestion, could be translated: "Yahweh (the Lord) appeared to Abraham and said, 'I am El (God), *the heart-knower;* live in my presence, and be upright'." Note that God's command to Abraham to "be upright" has to do with moral virtue, a matter of the heart. God's revelation of himself as the "heart-knower" is appropriate in this context.

By way of further support of this suggestion, it is to be noted that the meaning "heart-knower" for Shaddai seems peculiarly appropriate in other contexts in Genesis. Gen. 35:11 is a case in point. Here again is recorded a self-revelation of God as "El Shaddai," this time to Jacob, at a time when Jacob had had ample proof that God was, indeed, the one who knew his heart. Also, the fact that Shaddai is used so frequently in Job may be significant. One of the major emphases of this book has to do with the state of Job's heart before God: a matter which is in dispute with his friends, but which Job is sure is known to Shaddai. Finally, one cannot avoid the feeling that the term *kardiognôsta,* 'heart-knower', used by the apostles as a vocative of deity (Acts 1:24), in some way echoes the meaning which Walker attributes to *šadday*. However, we well recognize that these considerations do not constitute final proof for Walker's suggestion.

REVISED SEGOND NEW TESTAMENT

A trial edition of 10,000 copies of the revised Segond New Testament in French came off the press at the beginning of May 1962. The final edition is expected to be published in about two years time. Copies may be obtained from the French Bible Society.