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TRANSLATING HEBREW *'ĀSĀH*

Some of our readers are called on to compile the first dictionary of the language into which they are translating; many others have to use old dictionaries in which they are constantly adding new material or correcting the old. The same process goes on in Hebrew and in Greek. In the accompanying article we see it applied to one of the most frequently occurring words in the Hebrew Old Testament by a scholar who is deeply involved with the study of Hebrew lexicography. Advances in the study of comparative philology suggest new renderings which are first discussed by scholars, after which many of them find their way into new dictionaries and new versions of the Bible. Ed.

The Hebrew verb *'āsāh* 'to make' is of very frequent occurrence and is known to every Hebraist. The main purpose of this article is to show that in fact there are two Hebrew verbs *'āsāh*, and to recover their true meanings. A distinction is indeed made in the Oxford Hebrew Lexicon, where we find on the one hand the verb 'do, make' and on the other hand the verb meaning 'press, squeeze', which occurs in the intensive form only, and with a sexual sense in Ezek. 23: 3, 8, 21.[1]

The distinction proposed in this article however maintains that the first *'āsāh* is cognate with the Arabic *ghashā* which bears the meanings 'do, press, cover', while the second is cognate with the Arabic verb *'ashā* and means 'turn'.

It would follow that the distinction made in the Oxford Hebrew Lexicon is unreal, for 'squeeze' or 'press' is regarded simply as an intensive form of 'making' or 'doing'. The cognate verb in Arabic *ghashā* has the basic sense of 'entering unexpectedly or inadvisedly upon a course of action and this can easily have been weakened into that of engaging in an activity, or doing an act'. (This basic meaning helps to explain the sense of the second half of Isa. 5: 4 'wherefore, when I looked to *get* (*la'asōṯ*) grapes, did it (i.e. the vineyard) *get* (*wayya'as*) bad grapes?)[2]

The Meaning 'Cover'

The sexual sense which the verb has in the Ezekiel passages already mentioned may also be found in Prov. 6: 32 'He who commits adultery with a woman lacks sense, He destroys himself who *presses* (covers) *her*

[1] Brown–Driver–Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 796. With the sense 'press' W. F. Albright compares *'shy*, 'attack', in the Ras Shamra texts (*Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 94, 1944, p. 35).

[2] See G. R. Driver, *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy presented to Professor Theodore Robinson*, ed. H. H. Rowley, pp. 53 f., and refs. there.

(*ya'asennāh*)'.[1] This sense 'cover', which *'āsāh* like its Arabic cognate *ghashā* bears, may be seen in several other O.T. passages.

The following passages provide instances where *'āsāh* (Arabic cognate *ghashā*) in terms of the context would appear to convey the meaning 'cover':

Gen. 6: 14 'With reeds[2] *shalt thou cover* (*ta'aseh*)[3] the ark.'

Num. 15: 24 'It shall be that, if [a sin] committed inadvertently *is hidden* (*ne'es^{e}ṯāh*)[4] from the eyes of the congregation (i.e. they have no knowledge of it), all the congregation shall offer. . . .' Cf. Lev. 4: 13 'And if the whole congregation commit a sin inadvertently and the thing *is hidden* (*ne'lam*) from the eyes of the assembly. . . .'

Isa. 32: 6 'For a fool utters folly, and his heart *conceals* (*ya'^{a}seh*)[5] iniquity so as to practise ungodliness.'

Ezek. 17: 17 'For not by a mighty army nor by a great company will Pharaoh *cover* (protect, *ya'^{a}seh*)[6] him in the war.'
R.V. has here 'make for' while R.S.V. has 'help'.

Obad. 6 Here R.S.V. translates 'How Esau has been pillaged,
his treasures sought out!'
Parallelism would suggest that *'ēsāw* should be translated as 'his hidden things' to balance 'his concealed treasures' (*maṣpūnāw*) in the next line, so giving 'How are his hidden things exposed,/his concealed treasures sought out!'
The name Esau, which is the sense in which *'ēsāw* is generally understood in this verse,[7] may perhaps be explained from this same verb. The name will then mean 'covered' (with hair), that is the shaggy one.[8] Cf. Gen. 25: 25.

Psa. 9: 15 (Hebrew v. 16) 'The nations are sunk down in the pit which *they hid* (*'asū*); In the net which they hid is their foot caught.'
While 'the pit which they made' yields good sense, the parallelism (*'āsū* and *ṭāmānū* 'they hid') strongly suggests

[1] As proposed by J. J. Reiske, *Coniecturae in Iobum et Proverbia Salomonis*, 1779, p. 176. Cf. L. Kopf, *Vetus Testamentum*, IX, 1959, p. 270. The 'doeth it' of the English versions leaves the antecedent of the feminine suffix in the verb unexplained. For *ghashā* with meaning 'compressed' (a woman), see E. W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, p. 2261.

[2] For this meaning—reading *qānīm* for *qinnīm*, 'nests'—see G. R. Driver, *Vetus Testamentum*, IV, 1954, p. 243.

[3] *Ibid., loc. cit.*

[4] See A. B. Ehrlich, *Randgl. z. hebr. Bibel*, II, pp. 166 f. The feminine in *ne'es^{e}ṯah* refers to a subject not definitely expressed, but suggested by the context, here perhaps *haṭṭāṯ* 'sin'; see Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 2nd ed., Kautzsch-Cowley, 144b.

[5] See I. Eitan, *A Contribution to Biblical Lexicography*, p. 58; and in *Hebrew Union College Annual*, XII–XIII, 1937–38, p. 74. For another view see G. R. Driver, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1944, p. 167.

[6] See G. R. Driver, *Vetus Testamentum*, IV, 1954, p. 243.

[7] Cf. I. Eitan, *A Contribution to Biblical Lexicography*, p. 58; and S. Loewinger, *Revue des études juives*, Nouvelle Série, X, 1949–50, p. 94.

[8] Long ago T. K. Cheyne wrote of the name Esau: 'we must assume a root *'āsāh*, "have thick hair" ', and he translated *'ēsāw* 'the shaggy', comparing Arabic *'athiya*, 'have thick or matted hair', *a'thā*, 'having thick hair' (*Encycl. Bibl.* 1333). Further, D. Yellin, *op. cit.*, p. 454.

that *'āsāh* here is not the common *'āsāh* 'do, make', but rather the less common *'āsāh* 'cover, hide'.[1]

Psa. 139: 15 'My bones were not hid (*niḵḥaḏ*) from thee,
When I was covered (i.e. with skin *'uśśēṭī*) in secret,
skilfully woven in the depths of the earth.'[2]

Prov. 13: 16 'In everything a shrewd man conceals (*ya'ᵃseh*)[3] what he knows,
But a fool makes a display of folly'.
In 12: 23 the verb used of the shrewd man is *kāsāh*, 'conceals'.

Prov. 26: 28 'A false tongue hates innocence,[4]
And a flattering mouth conceals (*ya'ᵃseh*)[5] ruin.

Job 15: 27 'Because he hath covered his face with fat,
And covered (*wayya'as*)[6] his loins with fatness'.
'And covered' (*wayya'as*) is parallel with *kissāh*, 'covered', in the first half of the verse.

The Meaning 'Turn'

The other distinct Hebrew verb *'āsāh* is cognate with Arabic *'ashā* and means 'turn'. This sense can be seen in the following passages:

Ruth 2: 19 'And her mother-in-law said to her, Where hast thou gleaned today, and whither didst thou turn (betake thyself, *'āśīṯ*)'[7]
The R.S.V. translates the verb here as 'worked'.

1 Sam. 14: 32 'And the people turned (*wayya'as*)[8] to the spoil'.
This is the meaning given to the Hebrew verb in the Septuagint (*eklithē*), Symmachus (*etrapē*), and Targum. Emendation of the text, as proposed in Kittel (*Biblia Hebraica*, 3rd ed.) is accordingly unnecessary.

1 Kings 20: 40 'And thy servant was turning (*'ōsēh*) hither and thither, and he was gone'.
This meaning 'turn' is correctly preserved in the Septuagint (*perieblepsato*), Vulgate (*me verterem*), Peshitta Syriac version, and Targum. Emendation, as proposed in Kittel, is

[1] Cf. D. Yellin, *Jewish Studies in Memory of Israel Abrahams*, p. 455.

[2] Cf. J. L. Palache, *Semantic Notes on the Hebrew Lexicon*, p. 57.

[3] See I. Eitan, *A Contribution to Biblical Lexicography*, p. 57. He suggests that the text originally read *ya'ᵃseh da'ath*, and that the Massoretes confused *ya'ᵃseh* with the common *'āsāh*, 'do, make', and so added *beth*. Cf. D. Yellin, *op. cit.*, p. 454. It is unnecessary to emend *ya'ᵃseh* to *kōseh*, 'hides', as proposed by H. Torczyner, *Zeitschrift d. deutsch. morgenländ. Gesellschaft*, LXXI, 1917, p. 107.

[4] This is the meaning given to *dakkāw*, which is of doubtful interpretation, by the Septuagint, Vulgate, Peshitta, and Targum; see G. R. Driver, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1948, p. 168, and *Journal of Theological Studies*, XLI, 1940, pp. 174 f.

[5] See D. Yellin, *op. cit.*, p. 454, and Ben Yehuda, *Thes. totius hebraitatis*, p. 2089.

[6] The suffix in *helbō* is omitted in translation, with most commentators. Further, W. B. Stevenson, *Critical Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Poem of Job*, p. 64.

[7] See G. R. Driver, *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy*, p. 54.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

again unnecessary. The R.S.V. understands the verb here to mean 'was busy'.

Job 23: 9 'On the left hand when he turns (*ba'asōṭō*),[1] but I see him not.' The parallel verb in the second half of the verse is '*āṭap*, 'turn aside'. Once again there is no need to emend the text as in the R.S.V.

1 Chron. 4: 10 '. . . and thou turnest thyself (*'āsīṭā*)[2] from evil so as not to vex me'.

The English versions understand the verb to mean 'keep'.

Conclusion

It will be seen from our enquiry into these verbs that there are a number of passages where the Massoretic text is found to be reliable and the need for conjectural emendation may be dispensed with. A better sense too is obtained.

These two verbs, the first of which is cognate with the Arabic *ghashā* meaning 'do, press, cover' and the second of which is cognate with Arabic '*ashā* meaning 'turn' should therefore be entered in the Hebrew dictionary as '*āsāh I* and '*āsāh II* respectively.

[1] *Ibid., loc. cit.*; cf. D. Yellin, *op. cit.*, p. 454.

[2] See G. R. Driver, *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy*, p. 54.