A PLAY ON WORDS IN
THE NINETEENTH CHAPTER OF JOB

The three-fold use of the word רוע in Chapter xix of the Book of Job has always been one of the puzzles of Biblical Exegesis. The Massoretic Text and English translation of these verses reads: 1)

בשדלי ובเกษריו רבבות שמות ארבעים ו-four ב告诉我们
של מי שיש

“My bones cleave to my skin and to my flesh, and I have escaped by the skin of my teeth (20)...and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then without my flesh I shall see God (26)”.

The ancient translators, reading רוע in each of these places, understood it to mean “skin”. This, however, compelled them to create such meaningless metaphors as “skin of the teeth”, “bone in the teeth”, “lips”, etc. Further, in the one place where the meaning “skin” seems surest (20A), because of the juxtaposition of the word for flesh, they fashioned yet another series of confusing metaphors. The Medieval Jewish commentators were equally puzzled by these verses and the modern commentators have been able to do little better. Dr. Gray, in the textual notes to verse 26A notes: 2) “Line is altogether obscure and uncertain” and he leaves the first clause untranslated. Dr. Driver in his philological notes begins: 3) “...uncertain, ambiguous, difficult” and later in the note adds: “The uncertainties and difficulties of H. in this verse being so great, it is not surprising that attempts at emendation have been numerous and ingenious, if not convincing” 4).

Contemporary linguistic method, however, can aid in the solution of this ancient puzzle. Research into the origins of the word רוע show that, for the meaning of “skin”, there is no formal etymology, the closest cognate being the Phoenician word Ṭawrā 5). Rather, this

1) All translations are from the Revised Standard Version, N.Y. (1952).
3) Ibid., II: 128, 130.
4) M. Pope, Job, The Anchor Bible, N.Y. 1965, while most recent, is of no help.
5) L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros, Leiden (1953), 691.
meaning of כירא is clearly ascertainable from such unambiguous contexts as Ezekiel xxxvii 6 קְרֵמאֵת עֵילָמָה כּוּר, “...and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin”, and Leviticus xiii 2 which speaks of כירא בְּשָׂר, “the skin of his body”.

The Hebrew root כירא, however, could be related to the Arabic roots עַר, or עָר of which Lane 2) gives the following derivatives:

(A) עַר: From the root עַר, “a disgrace; a shame; a thing that occasions one’s being reviled”; in the II form, the verb means “to reproach or blame”; in the VI form, the verb means “to reproach, revile, or vilify one another” (V: 2208: 2 —well attested in the sources).

(B) עַר: All having the connotation of disgrace, abuse, foulness, blemish, disfigurement, etc. similarly in Dozy 3).

(C) עַר: “The portion of the upper part of the mouth which is behind the האדור (or thin bone of the palate): or the hollow which is between the two jaws; or the interior part of the mouth, or as some say the two parts whereof each is called בְּגֶנֶסְי (apparently meaning the anterior part of the palate and the corresponding part next the lower gums) in the כירא (or palate and the part corresponding to it below”. This is well attested in his sources; this appears in כירא, which is related to and means the same as the Hebrew מָעָר, “cavern”. (VI: 2307: 3)

In the *Lexicon Linguae Aethiopicae* by Dillmann 4), there is a cognate root which means “exponere, in discrimen offere, contemptere” and a related noun meaning “exprobatio, opprobrium” (all connoting disgrace, abuse, dishonor, etc.)

In the light of these data, the Job passage may be interpreted as follows:

*verse* 20A: כירא וּבְשָׂרָה בֵּיתָו טַפָּר

The Bible uses כירא and בְּשָׂר separately in describing severe illness and its consequent depression (cf. Ps. civ 6 and La. iv 8). However, here and in La. iii 4, כירא בְּשָׂר וּרְוִי וּבְשָׂר נְצַמוּת, “He has made my

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3) R. Dozy, *Supplement Aux Dictionnaires Arabes*, Leiden (1881), ad loc
4) G. Dillmann, *Lexicon Linguae Aethiopicae*, Leipzig (1865), ad loc
flesh and my skin waste away, and broken my bones”, these words appear together, creating what seems a redundancy—either “skin” or “flesh” would have been sufficient. It is possible that both texts are conflate. But, keeping in mind that the poets are trying to picture for us the advanced stages of a body-consuming disease, it is reasonable to assume that they would use the most graphic description possible. They, therefore, use both רוש, “skin”, and בשר “flesh”—each noun supplementing the other, and intensifying the total picture. Taking עצמות as a collective noun and noting that common usage in English permits speaking of skin and flesh adhering to the bones and not the other way around, the idiomatic translation would read:

“My skin and flesh cling to my bones”  
(lit.—“My bones cleave to my skin—flesh”).

verse 20B: Hebr. האהמותה בשר שומ

Having used רוש in its usual sense of “skin” (even if used in an unusual construction), the author now calls upon a secondary usage which was similar to that of the Arabic 실탼 and has reference either to the bones in which the teeth are set (Os Maxilla and Os Mandíbula) which are part of the skeleton, or to the cavity of the mouth. In either case, the poet is again making use of a vivid image to describe the advanced stage of Job’s disease. The word שומ serves to differentiate the בשר associated with בשר (flesh) from the שומ associated with שומ (teeth), and should not be translated literally. It is our clue to a play on words. Taking האהמותה in the meaning usually ascribed to it here, the idiomatic translation would read:

“And I am left with (only) my skull”  
(lit.—“The bone in which my teeth are set”).

combining clauses A and B of this verse, we can read:

“My skin and flesh cling to my bones,  
and I am left with (only) my skull”.

verse 26: והחר עורי נקם את מבשרי את-hover אלוות

In this verse too there is a play on the word רוש, this time based on the Arabic עמר, meaning “disgrace” or “abuse”, (note the large number of Arabic derivatives and the parallel root in Ethiopic cited above.)
The poet is saying that there will come a time when God will put an end to all of Job's suffering, disgrace, and abuse. Then, God will reconstitute Job's body, through which he, Job, will again be able to perceive God as he had been able to do before his tribulations began. The close relationship with God that had once existed will be restored, and Job will be vindicated—even if only the Redeemer (God) be left on earth as witness. Taking 1Dp3 as a passive 1) and the of מַמָּשׂ as “in”, “out of”, or “from within” (cf. Job iii 11, Is. xxix 18, Ezek. i 4), the translation, then, should read (taken with verses 25 and 27):

“For I know that my Redeemer liveth, and though He be the last being in the universe, when the period of my abuse is at an end, (all) this will be struck away, and then, from my (reconstituted) body, I shall see God, Whom I once envisioned, Whom my eyes once saw, and Who was (then) not strange to me...” 2)

So much for the main pun of this chapter. There may be a secondary pun with the word בשר. It occurs in verse 20 together with לָמָּה תָּרָדְמוּנָה כּוֹדָא תָּמָשׂ (בּוֹטֶה יָבֶשֶׂר), again in verse 22, מַמָּשׂ אִל. “Why do you, like God, pursue me? Why are you not satisfied with my flesh”?, and once again in verse 26, juxtaposed to מַמָּשׂ אָרָה עָרוֹגַ נָפָה (בּוֹטֶה יָבֶשֶׂר). The Hebrew and Arabic dictionaries list ample evidence for the use of בּוֹטֶה to refer to actual flesh, or, by metonomy, to the body as a whole 3). And it is certain that the former is intended in the intensive construction in verse 20, while the latter is intended in verse 26. Only the phrase in verse 22, מַמָּשׂ אִל, which is usually taken to refer to some proverb or common usage since lost to us, remains a puzzle.

Here, too, contemporary linguistic method can aid in solving the puzzle. The Hebrew בּוֹטֶה could be cognate with an Arabic بر or

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1) KAUTZSCH, 144G where this verse is cited; KOEHLER and BAUMGARTNER, ad loc, where Is. 10: 34, 24: 13, 29: 1, 3: 24 are cited. Perhaps related to the root בּוֹט, cf. Ex. 32: 25, etc.
2) For the use of the imperfect to denote actions “which continued throughout a longer or shorter period...very frequently alternating with a perfect”, see KAUTZSCH 107B, and note parallel use of YQTL form in Ugaritic.
   For the use the feminine demonstrative pronoun, נָא, “in the sense of neuter”, see KAUTZSCH 136B.
   For the use of the third person plural verb “to express an indefinite subject, where the context does not admit of a human agent”, see KAUTZSCH 144G where this verse is cited.
3) e.g., Ezek. 11: 19, 36: 26; Ps. 63: 2; etc.
The following possibilities are cited in LANE: (A) בּוֹרֵעָר: "A face frowning; or contracted, or grinning, or displaying teeth with a frowning, or contraction, or a stern, or austere, or a morose look". His source in the Qur'an 75:24 and one later source (probably dependant on the Qur'an). (B) פָּסָוֹר: "A well known disease, a swelling or tumor which nature drives to every part of the body from a humor that comes from the anus..." LANE explains this to be hemorrhoids or piles. It is well attested in his sources and cited by DOZY too. (C) בּוֹרֵעַ: "cheerfulness, pleasantness, etc."

It is possible that the poet is using בּוֹשָׁה here in the meaning of "cheerfulness", with strong sarcasm of course. Yet, although Job does not hesitate to use sarcasm, the context before us does not seem to be one that would evoke a sarcastic response. The nuance of a "frowning face", while possible, does not seem the best suggestion.

The most reasonable possibility is that of פָּסָוֹר, the disease which spreads over the whole body (although this does not seem to be the meaning implied in xxxi 31 where the phrase recurs). Job's accusation here should read then:

"Why do you persecute me as God does? Isn't my illness enough for you?"

The structure of Chapter xix is now much clearer. Job starts this speech by accusing his friends of lack of sympathy and treachery (1-5), describes his condition—spiritual, social, and physical (6-20), appeals to his friends (21) and then accuses them again (22). Turning to the monologue form, he expresses his immutable faith that he will be proven just in the end, that he and God will again meet on intimate terms (23-27A). Brought back to reality by his pain (27B), he turns for a parting shot at the friends (28, 29) before Zofar feels impelled to interrupt.

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4) BERGSTRÄSSER, 14D. While this is not common, it certainly is not unknown: e.g.,

 удар and שער
שער and שער
שפת and שפה
שמאל and شمال
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