

## SHORT NOTES

### A PLAY ON WORDS IN THE NINETEENTH CHAPTER OF JOB

The three-fold use of the word עור 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: <sup>1)</sup>

בְּעוֹרֵי וּבִבְשָׁרֵי דָבַקָה עֲצָמַי וְאֶתְמַלְטָה בְּעוֹר שְׁנַי  
וְאַחַר עוֹרֵי נִקְפּוּ זֹאת וּמִבְּשָׁרֵי אֶחָזָה אֱלֹהִים

“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 עור 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: <sup>2)</sup> “Line is altogether obscure and uncertain” and he leaves the first clause untranslated. Dr. DRIVER in his philological notes begins: <sup>3)</sup> “. . . 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” <sup>4)</sup>.

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

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<sup>1)</sup> All translations are from the *Revised Standard Version*, N.Y. (1952).

<sup>2)</sup> International Critical Commentary, *The Book of Job*, ed. S. R. DRIVER and G. B. GRAY, N.Y. (1921) 1: 174.

<sup>3)</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 128, 130.

<sup>4)</sup> M. POPE, *Job*, The Anchor Bible, N.Y. 1965, while most recent, is of no help.

<sup>5)</sup> L. KOEHLER and W. BAUMGARTNER, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*, Leiden (1953), 691.



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 עור, “skin”, and בשר “flesh”—each noun supplementing the other, and intensifying the total picture. Taking עצמי 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. ואתמלטה בעור שני

Having used עור 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 غَار<sup>5</sup> and has reference either to the bones in which the teeth are set (*Os Maxilla* and *Os Mandibula*) 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 שני serves to differentiate the עור associated with בשר (flesh) from the עור associated with שנים (teeth), and should not be translated literally. It is our clue to a play on words. Taking ואתמלטה 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: ואחר עורי נקפו זאת ומבשרי אחזה אלוה

In this verse too there is a play on the word עור, this time based on the Arabic عار, 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 *נקפו* as a passive<sup>1)</sup> and the *מ* of *ומבשרי* 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 . . .”<sup>2)</sup>

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 *עור* (. . . *בעורי ובבשרי*), again in verse 22, *למה תרדפוני כמו אל ומבשרי*, *לא תשבכו* “Why do you, like God, pursue me? Why are you not satisfied with my flesh”?, and once again in verse 26, juxtaposed to *עור* (. . . *ואחר עורי נקפו זאת ומבשרי*). The Hebrew and Arabic dictionaries list ample evidence for the use of *בשר* to refer to actual flesh, or, by metonymy, to the body as a whole<sup>3)</sup>. 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, *ומבשרי*, *לא תשבכו*, 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 *בשר* could be cognate with an Arabic *بسر* or

<sup>1)</sup> 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 *גנף*, cf. Ex. 32: 25, etc.

<sup>2)</sup> 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, *זאת*, “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.

<sup>3)</sup> e.g., Ezek. 11: 19, 36: 26; Ps. 63: 2; etc.

4) بشر. The following possibilities are cited in LANE: (A) بَشْرٌ: “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) بَاسُورٌ: “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) بَشْرٌ: “cheerfulness, pleasantness, etc.”

It is possible that the poet is using בִּשְׂר 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 בָּאִסוּר, 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.,

شعر	and	שיאר
شعحر	and	שעורה
شفة	and	שפה
شمال	and	שמאל



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