

The Mock of Baal in 1 Kings 18:27

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ONE OF THE MOST MEMORABLE SCENES in the entire Bible is the contest between Elijah the prophet of Yahweh and the 450 prophets of Baal atop Mt. Carmel. The confrontation, recorded in 1 Kings 18, called on both parties to attempt to produce rain, with the Baal prophets going first and Elijah scheduled second. When the former's efforts from morning until noon had produced no results, Elijah began to taunt his opponents about the inefficacy of their god. His exact words are as follows: "Shout in a loud voice, for he is a god, *kî śîah wēkî śîg lô*, or he may be on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping or waking up" (1 Kgs 18:27).

The words left untranslated apparently form a hendiadys, i.e., the use of two words (*śîah* and *śîg*) to express one idea (compare the English "bits and pieces" or "odds and ends").¹ Unfortunately, however, none of the usual meanings of these Hebrew words fits the present context, so the phrase has proved to be most enigmatic for scholars.

In late antiquity, Jewish tradents were nearly unanimous in associating the word *śîah* with the idea of "conversation" or "meditation," based on the

¹ The hendiadys is perhaps reflected in the LXX's use of but one word, viz., *adoleschia* ("meditating, talking"), to translate the two Hebrew words. Recognition of the hendiadys militates against the proposals of G. R. Driver that *śîg* is a secondary gloss to explain *śîah* ("Problems of Interpretation in the Heptateuch," *Mélanges bibliques rédigés en l'honneur de André Robert* [Paris: Bloud & Gay, 1957] 67), and of H.-P. Müller that *śîah* was included secondarily as an alternative spelling of *śîg* (presuming early spirantization of /g/) ("Die hebräische Wurzel *śyh*," *VT* 19 [1969] 369).

well-known Hebrew root *śyh*. Thus, e.g., the LXX renders the phrase with *adoleschia* (“meditating, talking”), and the *Tg. Jonathan* translates it as *šwcy* (“talk, conversation”). But the context of Elijah’s taunt hardly would suggest associating Baal with cognitive processes such as meditating and conversing.

Modern English translators have not met with much success either. Most versions simply have continued the older tradition and have used “meditating” (*NAB*), “musing” (*RSV, JPSV*), or “in conversation” (*NJV*). (The last cited version notes, however, that the meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain.) One scholar several decades ago suggested that *śiaḥ* means “vegetation” (cf. Gen 2:5) and considered our passage a reference to Baal as the god of fertility.² But this approach again does not fit the context, which has Elijah mocking the deity and not recording his attributes.

An interesting step in the right direction, but for the wrong reasons, was taken by G. R. Driver. He proposed that *śiaḥ* be repointed to *śiaḥ*, with the meaning “to dig a hole,” a euphemism for defecating.³ As we shall see, the passage does indeed refer to excretion, but there is no need to move the diacritical mark to alter the *śin* to *šin*.

The evidence for seeing our phrase as a reference to excretion is considerable. The latter verb *śig* (usually *śig*) bears the meaning “go aside, move away,” but the question remains: for what purpose would Baal have gone aside? *Tg. Jonathan* renders *śig* with *štdp, štdyp*, which has been viewed as a euphemism for “eased himself.”⁴ The medieval Jewish exegetes (e.g., Rashi) concur that Baal’s sidetrip is for the purpose of excreting.⁵

If *śig* alludes to excreting, then its partner *śiaḥ* should also refer to bodily discharge. We can, therefore, discard the traditional idea of *śiaḥ* equaling “converse, meditate,” and posit instead the meaning “excrete.” Hebraists are always on the hunt for cognates in other Semitic languages, and in the present instance the desired etyma are readily forthcoming. In Arabic the root *śhh* means “urinate, defecate”; in the modern South Arabian dialect of Soqotri *śhh* means “urinate”;⁶ and in the Ethiopian language of Harari

² L. Heyman, “A Note on I Kings 18:27,” *JNES* 10 (1951) 57-58.

³ Driver, “Problems,” 67; see also J. Gray, *I and II Kings* (OTL; 2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 398.

⁴ M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (2 vols.; London: Luzac, 1903) 2. 1525.

⁵ See conveniently J. A. Montgomery and H. S. Gehman, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings* (ICC; New York: Scribner’s, 1951) 302, 310-11; but also E. Ben Yehuda, *Millon ha-Lashon ha-Ivrit* (16 vols.; ed. N. H. Tur-Sinai; New York and London: Yoseloff, 1959) 16. 7548-49; I. W. Slotki, *Kings* (The Soncino Books of the Bible; London: Soncino, 1950) 132; and J. Robinson, *The First Book of Kings* (Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1972) 209-10.

⁶ W. Leslau, *Lexique Soqotri* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1938) 427.

šāhat means “urine,” and *šāhat āša* means “urinate” (literally “make urine”).⁷ As far as I am aware, only the great dictionary of Eliezer Ben Yehuda⁸ has noted the relationship between Hebrew *śīah* and Arabic *šhh*. However, this wonderful goldmine is heavily underutilized by biblicists,⁹ so Ben Yehuda’s interpretation has not been cited in the scholarly debate surrounding 1 Kgs 18:27.¹⁰

In short, there is good reason to conclude that both elements in the hendiadys, *śīah* and *śīg*, refer to excretion and that the phrase should be rendered “he may be defecating/urinating.” These would certainly be powerful words from the mouth of Elijah and would be a most appropriate mock of the Canaanite god Baal.

Nor is this the only reference to Baal and excrement in ancient literature. Marvin Pope¹¹ has called attention to the rabbinic description of ceremonial defecation in the cult of Baal Peor (see *b. Abod. Zar.* 44b; *b. Sanh.* 60b; *m. Sanh.* 7:6 [cited by Pope], as well as *Sipre* 131; *y. Sanh.* 10:2,28d). Pope’s caution on whether this detail stems “from direct knowledge of the pagan cult” or “from play on one of the meanings of the word *p^cr*” is admirable. Now, however, recognition of the allusion to excrement in 1 Kgs 18:27 may tilt the scales in favor of Pope’s former suggestion (notwithstanding the assumption that Baal worship took on different manifestations in different locales, that is to say, that the worship of Baal on Mt. Carmel need not a priori have been the same as the worship of Baal at Baal Peor in Transjordan). We may even reverse the thinking of Pope’s latter suggestion and propose that the name Baal Peor is to be derived from (*p^cr*) “excrete.”¹²

Pope raises the issue of ceremonial defecation in the cult of Baal Peor in connection with explicit reference in a Ugaritic tablet (RS.24.258) to El’s floundering in excrement and urine. It is interesting to note that El in the

⁷ W. Leslau, *Etymological Dictionary of Harari* (University of California Publications, Near Eastern Studies; Berkeley: University of California, 1963) 145. Harari *šāhat* could be a borrowing from Arabic, especially since the Harari are Muslims and have many Arabic loanwords in their lexicon.

⁸ Ben Yehuda, *Millon*, 16. 7531, 7552.

⁹ See J. F. A. Sawyer, “The Role of Jewish Studies in Biblical Semantics,” *Scripta Signa Vocis: Studies about Scripts, Scriptures, Scribes and Languages in the Near East presented to J. H. Hospers* (ed. H. L. J. Vanstiphout et al.; Groningen: Forsten, 1986) 202-3.

¹⁰ The dictionary of L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner (*Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros* [Leiden: Brill, 1953] 919) is another volume which defines the term correctly with the phrase “has to relieve himself,” but it gives no clue as to the source of this information. Moreover, commentators and translators apparently have not been cognizant of this entry.

¹¹ M. H. Pope, “A Divine Banquet at Ugarit,” *The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays. Studies in Honor of William Franklin Stinespring* (ed. J. M. Efrid; Durham, NC: Duke University, 1972) 196-97.

¹² For this meaning see F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1906) 822.

Ugaritic texts occasionally corresponds to Baal in the Bible and elsewhere. For example, El is paired with Asherah at Ugarit, but in the Bible Baal and Asherah are collocated in Judg 6:25-30; 1 Kgs 16:32; 2 Kgs 17:16; 21:3; 23:4, etc. (albeit usually as *habba^cal* and *hā^ʔāšērâ*). In *UT^cnt:III:43* we read of *il dbb* = El-zebub, which reverberates as Baal-zebub in the Bible (2 Kgs 1:2-3,6,16; see also Matt 12:24 and Mark 3:22 in the NT)—notwithstanding the use of *zbl* (“prince”) as an epithet of Baal in the Ugaritic texts, which may have been corrupted to *zbb* in the Bible. Moreover, studies have shown that Baal-hammon and Baal-shamem of Phoenician and Punic religion are not to be identified with Baal of Ugarit, but rather with El of Ugarit.¹³ All of this goes to show that what we know of El in the Ugaritic texts may be associated with Baal further south, e.g., among the Canaanites with whom Elijah struggled atop Mt. Carmel.¹⁴ We know that El defecates at Ugarit, and now we can confirm the same for Baal in 1 Kgs 18:27.¹⁵

¹³ W. F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (London: University of London, 1968) 233-34; F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1973) 23-36; and R. A. Oden, Jr., “*Ba^cal Šāmēm* and *ʔĒl*,” *CBQ* 39 (1977) 457-73.

¹⁴ See Oden, “*Ba^cal Šāmēm* and *ʔĒl*,” 473.

¹⁵ Other biblical passages where the root *šyh* or its byform *šwh* (*swḥ*) may mean “defecate” are Gen 24:63; Isa 5:25; and Prov 23:29. The expression in Sir 13:26, which clearly is based on 1 Kgs 18:27, has a different connotation altogether. But in IQS 7:15 once more *šwh* is to be understood as “excrete.” On these passages see G. A. Rendsburg, “Hebrew *šw/yḥ* and Arabic *šḥḥ*,” *Fucus: A Semitic/Afrasian Gathering in Remembrance of Albert Ehrman* (Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science, Current Issues in Linguistic Theory; ed. Y. L. Arbeitman; Amsterdam: Benjamins, forthcoming). On the Dead Sea Scrolls passage see also Ben Yehuda, *Millon*, 16. 7531.

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Reprinted from
The Catholic Biblical Quarterly

Vol. 50, No. 3

July 1988

ISSN: 0008-7912