Double Polysemy in Genesis 49:6 and Job 3:6

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The subject of polysemy in the Hebrew Bible is one which is receiving increased attention in recent years.¹ In this short notice, I should like to extend the discussion to include the double polysemy in Gen 49:6a and in Job 3:6.

The text of the former reads as follows:

בָּשַׁשְׁתֵּא וּלְךָ נָשֹׁאָה
בּעָרַקֵל אֶלִיתָחֲלֵה בּהָר

Although there are problems with these lines,² there is a consensus that the two verbs are to be translated “enter” and “be united.”³ I propose that they may be rendered simultaneously “desire” and “rejoice.”


² See p. 50 below.

³ M. Dahood (“A New Translation of Gen 49.6a,” Bib 36 [1955] 229) proposed that thd be rendered “be seen,” but H. L. Ginsberg (“Lexicographical Notes,” Hebräische Wortforschung [VTSup 16; Leiden: Brill, 1967] 71-72) is correct in his opposition to Dahood’s
The meaning “be united” is arrived at by taking חֲזַר הָעֵנִים as the 3d fem. sing. impf. qal of the root yhd (PS h as second root letter). Without the Masoretic vocalization, the verb may also be treated as the 3d fem. sing. impf. qal of the root hdh (PS h as first root letter), “rejoice.”

The rendering, “let my spirit not rejoice in their company,” fits contextually just as well as, “let my spirit not be united with their company.”

Parallel to the meaning of חֲזַר, “rejoice,” is חָבַב, “desire.” As well as being vocalized חָבַב, this verb may also be read חָבָב, from the root ḫbh, as it is in Prov 1:10. This is accomplished through a lamedh-he/lamedh-aleph metaplasm and the dropping of the initial aleph in the imperfect of pe-aleph verbs.

Many commentators would emend חָבָב in Prov 1:10, in which case the translation “desire” in Gen 49:6 would be untenable, but the MT is to be retained. The clever author of the opening of Proverbs included in חָבָב an acrostic which is deciphered in 1:15, viz., the words חָבָב מֵאָמוֹן מִשְׁאָל בֶּןֶּוֵי אָבֹת in 1:10 and the phrase in 1:15 are both preceded by the word מֵאָל, and both verses begin with בֶּןֶוֵי. Only the most clever of readers would discern the hidden message, but this is the very purpose of the entire book! Prov 1:6 says clearly that the aim of Proverbs is to allow the wise “to comprehend the proverb and the parable, the words of the wise and their riddles.” Ingeniously, the author includes one of these riddles in his introduction. In short, emending Prov 1:10 to חְבַב or still another reading is unwarranted.

Since חָבָב has the meaning “desire” in Prov 1:10, it is easy to see how it has it in Gen 49:6 parallel to חֲזַר, “rejoice.” This is reflected in the targumim as well. Tg. Ps.-Jonathan reads: בֵּיתהוּ לָא אַחֲרוּיָה יִנְשַׁי and Tg. Yer. II reads: בֵּיתהוּ לָא אַחֲרוּיֶה יָנָשׁ. The two differ only by the phonetic variation of one consonant and both mean “in their council my soul had no pleasure.”

suggestion. Ginsberg further refined ṭb’b- from “enter” to “be joined,” based on, among other passages, Isa 19:23 (see the NJV). This proposal deserves serious consideration.

4 Relying on Exod 18:9; Job 3:6, we would vocalize this verb as חָבַב; naturally, this is the apocopated jussive, not the regular imperfect.

5 See GKC, 185-86, 216-17.


8 It might be objected that the root ḫbh never takes an object following ḫb- in Biblical Hebrew, but this is at most a minor syntactic problem. The few times that ḫbh does take a direct object, it either lacks a preposition as in Prov 1:25 or it follows ḫ as in Prov 1:30. Given this variation among the few times that ḫbh does take an object, who is to say that the object could not follow ḫb- as well? Even if the object following ḫb- were ungrammatical, we may allow the author some poetic license to achieve an outstanding feature of poetry, multiple meanings.
In other words, faced with הָבֵא in Gen 49:6, the targumic translators chose הָרָעַס, “had pleasure.”

Therefore, not only is “enter” parallel to “be united,” but “desire” is parallel to “rejoice.” We may now translate Gen 49:6a:

Let my soul not enter/desire their council;
Let my spirit not be united/rejoice in their company.

Most important is the recognition of the fact that the original reader did not have to choose between the two double meanings. The poet intended that two meanings be inherent in אשת and that two meanings be inherent in רוח. This is, after all, the sign of great poetry, viz., the multiplicity of meanings which may be derived from a single verse. It is incorrect to ask which of the meanings did the author wish to convey; he intended to convey both meanings, or in this case, with the twofold use of polysemy, all four meanings.

We should also comment on two problems which have plagued scholars who have dealt with Gen 49:6. First, קֶבֶדֵי need not be emended to קֶבֶדִּי. For, as E. A. Speiser noted, “liver” is not a logical parallel to “soul.” I have chosen the translation “spirit” simply from the context and the poetic parallelism. Second, because קֶבֶדֵי is masculine, many have questioned the apparently feminine verb רוח. Speiser and Dahood suggested that it arose due to attraction from אַשָּׁה, and Benno Jacob considered it to be 2d masc. sing., but it seems much simpler to parse it as a 3d masc. sing. with preformative ת- known from Amarna Canaanite and elsewhere in the Bible.

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9 Is it possible that the targumim attempt to recreate both meanings of יְבַכֵא, “enter” and “desire”? In the Aramaic ithpe’el, the root יְבַכֵא means “have pleasure,” but in the Hebrew qal and derived conjugations the root means “associate.” The first meaning is definitely intended by Tg. Ps.-Jonathan and Tg. Yer. II because they both use the ithpe’el, but the Jewish bilingual reader may have recognized the second meaning shining through as well. For another example where Tg. Yer. II may have tried to duplicate the polysemy found in the Hebrew Bible, cf. G. Rendsburg, “Janus Parallelism,” 292.

10 Genesis (AB 1; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) 365.
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Now that the twofold polysemy in Gen 49:6 has been established, our attention should be turned to Job 3:6. The verse reads as follows:

הַנַּלֵּלָה הַדְּרָה יִשְׂחָה אֶפֶל
אלָבֹד בֵּית שֵׁה
בָּמָשַׁר הַקָּחָה אֶלְיְבוֹא

Because רָזִים and אֶבֶּא are parallel in this verse, we may raise the issue of whether its author also intended manifold meanings. The MT points the former as derived from הָדְּרָה, “rejoice.” Most commentators revocalize the verb to רוּז and translate “be united.” More recently, L. L. Grabbe and R. Gordis have made a strong argument for retaining the MT. The latter goes so far as to suggest that both meanings of רוּז are intended, calling the phenomenon תָּלִיִּין.

Gordis is correct, but he did not go far enough. If two meanings are intended in רוּז in the second stich of the verse, then its parallel member אֶבֶּא in the third stich should also convey two meanings. Therefore, Masoretic אֵבֶּא, “enter,” is parallel to the revocalized form רוּז, “be united,” and revocalized אֵבֶּא (à la הָדְּרָה in Prov 1:10), “desire,” is parallel to MT רוּז, “rejoice.”

By recognizing the same double polysemy in Job 3:6 as we have in Gen 49:6, the former may now be translated:

That night, may gloom seize it!
Let it not be united with/rejoice in the days of the year;
In the number of months let it not enter/desire.

Again it is important to observe that the original reader of Job did not have to choose between the two double meanings. Faced with a purely consonantal text, the reader was readily able to discern the double polysemy.

17 Comparative Philology and the Text of Job (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1977) 34-35.
18 The Book of Job (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1978) 34. I thank Prof. Daniel Grossberg for calling this reference to my attention.
19 J. Finkel (“Ugaritic Viticultural Poem,” passim) and C. H. Gordon (oral communication) prefer another Arabic term, тawriyya, to describe the situation where two meanings are intended simultaneously.
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