BILINGUAL WORDPLAY IN THE BIBLE

The recent article by A. Wolters, "Sōpiyyā (Prov 31:27) as Hymnic Participle and Play on Sophia", JBL 104 (1985), pp. 577-87, which interprets sōpiyyā in Prov. xxxi 27 as a Hebrew pun on the Greek word σοφία is convincing. The word bears two meanings in its present context: "she watches over" (if we parse the word as the feminine singular participle of the Hebrew root ṣph) and "wisdom"

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(if we read the word as Greek). Although Wolters notes the existence of bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian puns in Mesopotamian literature, he suggests that the example of Prov. xxxi 27 is "unique, both in the acrostic song and (as far as I know) in the OT as a whole, [in] that it appears to involve a bilingual play on words" (p. 584).

The purpose of the present note is to point out other examples of bilingual wordplay in the Hebrew Bible, specifically, one series involving Hebrew and Egyptian and the other illustration involving Hebrew and Assyrian.

The best example among the former is Exod. x 10 ṭe₂â ki rāʾâ neg-ed pēnēkem "see that evil/Ra is before you". J. Seliger, J. Bloch, S. Rosenblatt, and U. Cassuto all have noted this pun.¹ Pharaoh is telling Moses and Aaron that the day he lets them leave with their women and children, be warned that Ra shall be before you. Or as Cassuto put it: "The sense is: know that the power of my god will oppose you".²

This interpretation is already found in rabbinic literature. Midrash Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 15a-15b reads: "Pharaoh said, 'I see that the unlucky star of Ra will meet you, and this indicates blood' ", a passage which is quoted by Rashi as well.³ Other instances where rāʾâ or rāʾ bears double meaning are Exod. v 19, xxxii 12, both noted by Cassuto,⁴ and perhaps also Exod. xxxii 22, Numb. xi 1. The former verse continues the pun of Exod. xxxii 12; the latter verse sets the stage for the people's renewed desire to return to Egypt expressed in Numb. xi 5, 18-20.⁵

A bilingual wordplay involving Hebrew and Assyrian has been pointed out recently by P. Machinist. Isa. x 8 has the prophet quoting the Assyrian king as follows: ḫalô₂ šāray yahdāw mēlākîm "are not my commanders all kings?" Machinist writes: "In light of the irony otherwise evident, one may wonder if this further charge of hubris is not based on a conscious play on Hebrew šar as 'subordinate official' and the cognate Akkadian šarru as 'king' ".⁶

It is doubtful that the three examples of bilingual puns discussed herein exhaust the instances of such wordplays in the Bible. We have cited cases involving, respectively, Hebrew and Greek, Hebrew and Egyptian, and Hebrew and Assyrian. One can assume that additional examples are to be found not only with these languages, but presumably with others as well, e.g., between Hebrew and Aramaic.
The Israelite literati were masters of their craft who could, when necessary, depict life in other lands quite accurately. Without entering into the issue of their historicity, consider, for example, the Joseph Story set in Egypt and the book of Esther set in Persia. It is certainly not beyond belief that these same writers could use bilingual polysemy to enhance the quality of their literary creations. The extent to which educated Israelites were fluent in other Near Eastern languages is a moot point. But it is hard to imagine that, if an Assyrian such as Rabshakeh could speak Hebrew (see 2 Kgs xviii 26; Isa. xxxvi 11; 2 Chr. xxxii 18), there were not some Israelites who knew Assyrian. The evidence assembled by Machinist in the article cited above virtually assures this. Besides, even if one were not conversant in neighboring languages, one could reasonably assume that an educated Hebrew speaker would know the meanings of Greek σωφία Egyptian rī, and Akkadian šarru, just to use the examples presented above. All three are common words in the general cultural, religious, or political spheres.

Moreover, there appear to be instances where biblical writers could color their Hebrew composition sufficiently to reflect the speech of non-Israelites. S. A. Kaufman recently has explained the Aramaic-like language in pericopes such as Isa. xxi 11-14 and Prov. xxxi 1-9 as intentional reflections of the speech of denizens of the Syrian Desert. This technique could also explain the presence of Assyrian elements in Rabshakeh’s speech in 2 Kgs xviii 19-25, 27-35 = Isa. xxxvi 4-10, 12-20, as noted by Cohen (see n. 10). In Kaufman’s words: “The biblical authors apparently did not hesitate to use ‘style switching’ to reflect differences in the speech of their characters” (see n. 11).

All this goes to show that it should not be surprising to find bilingual puns in the Bible. Clearly this was another device in the arsenal of techniques available to Hebrew writers. Exegesis should be on the lookout for other such instances.

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THE STRUCTURE OF PSALM LXXXVII

In a recent issue of this journal, Th. Booij\textsuperscript{3} analyses the difficulties of Ps. lxxxvii. One further feature salient to the interpretation of this psalm is a concentric pentacolon,\textsuperscript{2} which creates order and meaning for the whole composition:

A \textsuperscript{b}æk, "in you" (v. 3)
B šām, "there" (v. 4)
C bāh, "in her" (v. 5)
B' šām, "there" (v. 6)
A' bāk, "in you" (v. 7)

This structure shapes the poem in three ways. First, it ties vv. 3-7 into an integral whole, perhaps indicating that vv. 1-2 function as a thematic preface to what follows. Secondly, the structure balances a three-fold use of the preposition b- plus pronominal suffix referring to Zion with the double use of the particle šām referring to the nations. These particles not only emphasize Zion; they also place