

SHORT NOTES

LĀŠŪAH IN GENESIS XXIV 63

In a recent issue of this journal Gregory Vall presented no less than twelve suggestions proffered by scholars towards the elucidation of the enigmatic word *lāšūah* in Gen. xxiv 63 (“What was Isaac doing in the field [Genesis xxiv 63]?”), *VT* 44 [1944], pp. 513-23). The secondary literature in the field of biblical studies is so voluminous that no individual scholar can be blamed for omitting a particular view. Thus, for example, Vall in his attempt to present “a complete survey of proposals” (p. 513) omitted my own suggestion. He is even less to blame for the omission because my proposal appeared in a not-so-well-known publication,¹ and it was mentioned in passing in the context of two other articles.²

Since my proposal was omitted by Vall, I offer it here for readers of this journal. I present my view in streamlined fashion, and direct the interested reader to the more detailed articles cited above.

The Hebrew root *šwh/šyh* means “excrete, urinate, defecate”. It has cognates in Arabic *šḥḥ* “urinate, defecate” and Soqotri *šḥḥ* “urinate”, as well as in the Harari (an Ethiopian language) nominal form *šāhat* “urine”. Apart from Gen. xxiv 63, the root is attested in the following passages: 1 Kgs xviii 27 *ših* (see Targum Yonatan and Rashi); Isa. v 25 *šūhā* (with *samekh* in this case) (see LXX, Vulgate, and Targum Yonatan); Prov. xxiii 29 *šāh* (though less certain, see the Targum to Proverbs); and 1QS VII 15 *lšwh* (where the left hand, widely associated with bodily functions in post-biblical Jewish literature, is mentioned).

In the light of these passages, in which the root *šwh/šyh* “excrete, urinate, defecate” is readily seen, I propose to understand Gen. xxiv 63 in like manner.³

R. Marcus on the Qumran passage and G.R. Driver on the Genesis passage were on the right track in understanding the word *lšwh* to refer to defecation (see Vall [p. 515]); only they erred in viewing the word as a euphemism meaning “dig a pit” derived as a denominative form of *šūhā* “pit”, with the necessary change of *šin* to *sin* (at least in the Genesis passage; the Qumran passage of course includes no diacritical mark to distinguish these two consonants). The Masorah, however, transmitted the pronunciation of the word accurately, and we can confirm the pointing of the first root conso-

nant as *śin*, which corresponds regularly to Arabic *š* and Soqotri *ś*, as in the above cited set of cognates.

Vall rightly attempted to place his interpretation, namely, that *lāsūah* means “complain”, into the broader context of the story. However, I remain unconvinced that Isaac is walking in the field to complain to God, that “having lost his mother, he is discontented and lonely” (p. 523). If indeed he harbored such complaints, he could have expressed them without needing to walk in the field. My suggestion fits the context, since clearly the open field was a place for bodily functions.

E. Ullendorff objected to Driver’s view (as witnessed in the *NEB* marginal note “to relieve himself” [cited by Vall, p. 516, n. 18]) on the grounds that Isaac’s “relieving himself would not be improper; it would be wholly inappropriate”.⁴ Ullendorff adduced no empirical evidence for this statement; I suspect he was guided by his *Textgefühl*. But, as his own article so brilliantly demonstrates, there are other instances in the Bible where apparent bawdiness is not easily explained or where the exact intention of the author is not readily apparent. One cannot exclude irony or “shock value” (to use a contemporary term) as the author’s desire at this point in the narrative.

But I will follow Vall’s lead and offer a suggestion to place this passage into the broader context of the narrative. Vall noted that in the last passage of the chapter, *v.* 67, “Isaac is comforted over the death of his mother. This notice, coming as it does at the very end of the long pericope concerning the wooing of Rebekah (xxiv 1-67), serves as a framing device in conjunction with the account of Sarah’s death and burial, which immediately precedes the pericope (ch. xxiii)” (p. 522). In following Vall’s approach, I would posit that the reference in xxiv 63 to excretion, coming a few verses before the end of the story, mirrors the references in xxiv 2, 9 concerning the servant placing his hand *taḥat yerek ʿabrāhām* “under Abraham’s thigh” (thus *v.* 9), a euphemism for “sexual organs”.⁵ If such be the case, the specific type of excretion referred to in *v.* 63 would be urination. But such devices carry us into the world of speculation, and I prefer to remain close to the text rather than to stray too far.

Finally, note that Vall (p. 515, n. 17) states that “A. van Selms apparently misunderstands Driver’s interpretation and somehow arrives at the translation ‘to urinate’ (*Genesis deel II* [Nijkerk, 1967]),

p. 46).” Such need not be the case, however. Van Selms referred to 1 Kgs xviii 27 “waar volgens velen het woord een eufemisme voor ‘urineren’ is; dat zou hier [Gen. xxiv 63] goed bij tijd en plaats passen” (ibid.). He may have gained this knowledge from Driver; or he may have read Tur-Sinai in the Ben-Yehuda *Thesaurus* (see above, n. 3); or he may have been aware independently of the traditional Jewish exegesis (Targum Yonatan and Rashi, in particular) on *śāḥ* in 1 Kgs xviii 27 and then applied this knowledge to *lāsūaḥ* in Gen. xxiv 63. Note that van Selms demonstrates some independent thought with his statement that urination fits the time and place of Isaac’s action (i.e., in the field towards nightfall). In short, there is no *a priori* reason to posit a misunderstanding by van Selms of Driver.⁶

In sum, I find Vall’s proposal that *lāsūaḥ* in Gen. xxiv 63 means “complain” unconvincing. It is much more likely that the word here means “excrete, urinate, defecate”, with a hint towards “urinate” in particular stemming from the mirror effect of *vv.* 2, 9.

Ithaca, New York

Gary A. Rendsburg

¹ “Hebrew *śwlyḥ* and Arabic *šḥḥ*”, in Y.L. Arbeitman (ed.), *Fucus: A Semitic/Afrasian Gathering in Remembrance of Albert Ehrman* (Amsterdam, 1988), pp. 419-30.

² “The Mock of Baal in 1 Kings 18:27”, *CBQ* 50 (1988), pp. 414-17, in particular p. 417, n. 15; and “*lūwḥ* in 1QS 7.15”, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 5 (1989), pp. 83-94, especially pp. 92-3. In addition, see my review article of the final volume of *HALAT*: “A Major Hebrew Dictionary Project Completed”, *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 18 (1993), p. 101.

³ I was preceded in my interpretation by N.H. Tur-Sinai, who put forward this analysis, as well as the Arabic cognate, in his work on the final volume of the encyclopaedic *Thesaurus* of E. Ben-Yehuda (*Millon ha-Lashon ha-Ivrit* 16 [New York, 1959], pp. 7531-2). On the underuse of this remarkable resource, see the apt comments by J.F.A. Sawyer, “The Role of Jewish Studies in Biblical Semantics”, in H.L.J. Vanstiphout et al. (ed.), *Scripta Signa Vocis: Studies about Scripts, Scriptures, Scribes and Languages in the Near East presented to J.H. Hospers* (Groningen, 1986), pp. 202-3.

⁴ “The Bawdy Bible”, *BSOAS* 42 (1979), p. 442.

⁵ See M. Malul, “More on *paḥad yishāq* (Genesis xxxi 42, 53) and the oath by the thigh”, *VT* 35 (1985), pp. 192-200; and M. Malul, “Touching the sexual organs as an oath ceremony in an Akkadian Letter”, *VT* 37 (1987), pp. 491-2.

⁶ The van Selms book is rare in U.S. libraries and not easy to obtain. I am able to cite it directly through the kind gesture of J.A. Emerton; I thank him for photocopying p. 46 of the said work and for mailing it to me for inspection.