

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

GARY RENDSBURG

Canisius College
Buffalo, NY 14208

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:

בְּסֶדֶם אֶל־תְּבֹא נַפְשִׁי
בְּקִהְלָם אֶל־תִּחַד כְּבֹדִי

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.”

¹ The most comprehensive work is that of W. Herzberg, *Polysemy in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: [unpublished] New York University dissertation, 1979). See also C. H. Gordon, “New Directions,” *BASP* 15 (1978) 59-60; and G. Rendsburg, “Janus Parallelism in Gen 49:26,” *JBL* 99 (1980) 291-93. Most recently, D. Grossberg delivered a talk on “Words of Multiple Meaning” at the Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies, Boston, MA, 23 December 1980. A wealth of material is to be found in J. Finkel, “An Interpretation of an Ugaritic Viticultural Poem,” *The Joshua Starr Memorial Volume* (New York: Conference on Jewish Relations, 1953) 29-58.

² See p. 50 below.

³ M. Dahood (“A New Translation of Gen 49,6a,” *Bib* 36 [1955] 229) proposed that *ihd* 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 תחד 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.”⁴ 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 תחד, “rejoice,” is תבא, “desire.” As well as being vocalized תבא, this verb may also be read תבא, from the root ³*bh*, 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.⁵

Many commentators would emend תבא in Prov 1:10,⁶ 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 תבא an acrostic which is deciphered in 1:15, viz., the words תבא in 1:10 and the phrase in 1:15 are both preceded by the word ³*al*, and both verses begin with *bēnī*. 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 תאבה or still another reading is unwarranted.⁷

Since תבא has the meaning “desire” in Prov 1:10, it is easy to see how it has it in Gen 49:6 parallel to תחד, “rejoice.”⁸ This is reflected in the targumim as well. *Tg. Ps.-Jonathan* reads: לא אתרעיית נפשי בעטתהון and *Tg. Yer. II* reads: בעצתהון לא אתרעיית נפשי. 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 *tb³ 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 תחד; naturally, this is the apocopated jussive, not the regular imperfect.

⁵ See GKC, 185-86, 216-17.

⁶ See, e.g., C. H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* (ICC; New York: Scribner, 1899) 19.

⁷ For this explanation of *tb³* in Prov 1:10, see C. H. Gordon, “New Light on the Hebrew Language,” *Hebrew Abstracts* 15 (1974) 29.

⁸ It might be objected that the root ³*bh* never takes an object following *bē-* in Biblical Hebrew, but this is at most a minor syntactic problem. The few times that ³*bh* does take a direct object, it either lacks a preposition as in Prov 1:25 or it follows *lē* as in Prov 1:30. Given this variation among the few times that ³*bh* does take an object, who is to say that the object could not follow *bē-* as well? Even if the object following *bē-* were ungrammatical, we may allow the author some poetic license to achieve an outstanding feature of poetry, multiple meanings.

In other words, faced with תבא in Gen 49:6, the targumic translators chose אתרעיית, “had pleasure.”⁹

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 with/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 תבא and that two meanings be inherent in תחר. 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, *kēbōdī* need not be emended to *kēbēdī*, for, as E. A. Speiser noted, “liver” is not a logical parallel to “soul.”¹⁰ I have chosen the translation “spirit” simply from the context and the poetic parallelism.¹¹ Second, because *kēbōdī* is masculine, many have questioned the apparently feminine verb תחר. Speiser and Dahood suggested that it arose due to attraction from תבא,¹² and Benno Jacob considered it to be 2d masc. sing.,¹³ but it seems much simpler to parse it as a 3d masc. sing. with preformative *t-* known from Amarna Canaanite¹⁴ and elsewhere in the Bible.¹⁵

⁹ Is it possible that the targumim attempt to recreate both meanings of *tb*?, “enter” and “desire”? In the Aramaic *ithpe*^cel, the root *r*^cy 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*^cel, 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.

¹¹ *Ibid.*; cf. G. von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961) 419; and the translation in *NAB*.

¹² E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, 365; M. J. Dahood, “A New Translation,” 229.

¹³ *Das erste Buch der Tora: Genesis* (Berlin: Schocken, 1934; reprinted, New York: Ktav, 1974) 897.

¹⁴ E. Ebeling, “Das Verbum der El-Amarna-Briefe,” *Beiträge zur Assyriologie und semitischen Sprachwissenschaft* 8 (1910) 46, 48, 51.

¹⁵ See N. M. Sarna, “The Mythological Background of Job 18,” *JBL* 82 (1963) 317-18; H. J. van Dijk, “Does Third Masculine Singular **taqtul* Exist in Hebrew?” *VT* 19 (1969) 440-47; and M. Dahood, “Third Masculine Singular with Preformative *t-* in Northwest Semitic,” *Or* 48 (1979) 97-106. Many of the examples cited in these articles are subject to varying interpretations, but many are cogent as well (e.g., Hab 3:4; Ps 42:2; Job 18:14-15).

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:

הַלַּיְלָה הַהוּא יִקְחֶהוּ אֶפֶל
אֶל-יַחַד בְּיָמֵי שָׁנָה
בְּמִסְפַּר יָרְחִים אֶל-יָבֵא

Because יַחַד and יָבֵא 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 *hdh*, "rejoice." Most commentators revocalize the verb to יַחַד and translate "be united."¹⁶ More recently, L. L. Grabbe¹⁷ and R. Gordis¹⁸ have made a strong argument for retaining the MT. The latter goes so far as to suggest that both meanings of יַחַד are intended, calling the phenomenon *talhin*.¹⁹

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

¹⁶ Cf. N. H. Tur-Sinai, *The Book of Job* (Jerusalem: Kiryath Sepher, 1957) 54-55; and M. H. Pope, *Job* (AB 15; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973) 30.

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, *tawriyya*, to describe the situation where two meanings are intended simultaneously.

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

by
Gary Rendsburg

Reprinted from
The Catholic Biblical Quarterly

Vol. 44, No. 1

January, 1982

ISSN: 0008-7912