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STUMP OR STALK: ISAIAH 6:13 IN THE LIGHT OF THE ANCIENT VERSIONS

ABSTRACT

This contribution examines two lexical problems in Isa 6:13 (שלכת and מצבת). It is argued that the common understanding of both words (“being felled” and “stump” respectively) is not supported by any of the ancient versions, nor by any evidence in Classical Hebrew. In dealing with the lexical problems involved it will turn out that unlike modern scholarship the ancients were on the right track. The article then explores what the proposed interpretation of both words (“shedding [leaves]” and “stalk” respectively) means for the exegesis of the verse as a whole.

1. INTRODUCTION

In preparing the Isaiah volume for the *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* (BHQ) I am faced with difficult passages, one of them being Isa 6:13. The Hebrew (MT) text of this verse is obscure, in particular as far as the meaning of two words – שלכת and מצבת – is concerned. The verse is usually translated as follows:

And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains standing when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump. (RSV)

Even though a tenth part of the people were to remain, they too would be destroyed like an oak or terebinth when it is felled, and only stump remains. Its stump is a holy seed. (REB)

En as nog 'n tiende deel daarin is, dan sal dit weer wees tot verwoesting; *maar* soos by die eikeboom en die terpentynboom – as hulle omgekap word – 'n stomp oorbly, *so* sal die heilige geslag die stomp daarvan wees. (OAV)

These quoted translations contain a rendering of the clause אשר בשלכת במצבת based on an interpretation of the two words which is quite common in modern translations and commentaries – שלכת in the sense of trees “being felled” (cf. “omgekap”), and מצבת understood as “stump” or “trunk” (cf. “stomp”). In the present contribution in honour of Johann Cook and Paul Kruger, I would like to offer a discussion of the meaning of these two words. The issue at stake is that the alleged meaning of the

words is not attested elsewhere in Classical Hebrew. Moreover, as I will argue below, it strikes one that the ancient versions, though displaying an interesting variety of interpretations, do not support the exegesis of either word as found in modern commentaries and dictionaries. In what follows I will first of all provide a brief discussion of the way the ancient versions have interpreted both words in the clause under discussion. Secondly, in discussing the meaning of the two words, I will argue that the interpretations given in these versions are still relevant for solving the lexical problems involved.

2. *ANCIENT VERSIONS*

Before dealing with the ancient versions, it is of course appropriate to pay attention to the great Isaiah scroll (1QIsa^a), which is the only direct ancient witness of the Hebrew text of Isa 6:13.

1QIsa^a

The text of this scroll is slightly different from MT. It contains two variant readings: *משלכת* instead of *בשלכת*, and *במה* instead of *בם*. Moreover, the scroll is marked by a space between *מצבת* and *במה* indicating that, unlike in MT, the latter word was taken together with the following words. The reading *במה* has given rise to a number of sometimes fanciful ideas,¹ but scholars agree that it is best understood as a long form of *בם* (“in them”). The other variant is a participle, but it is not clear whether it was read as a participle Hiphil or Hophal. The remaining word, *מצבת*, is in line with MT, but since we do not know how it was interpreted (by the scribe), it is hard to know how the clause in 1QIsa^a (*אשר משלכת מצבת*) was understood. Proposals that have been made are: “when (their) stalk sheds (leaves)” (Brownlee 1964); “which throws out a stump” (Sawyer 1964), and “which are cast down from their stumps” (Emerton 1982).²

LXX Isaiah

ὡς βάλανος ὅταν ἐκπέσῃ ἀπὸ τῆς θήκης αὐτῆς
 “like an acorn when it falls from its husk”

The comparison in the Old Greek is about an acorn falling from its husk. The use of ὅταν reflects the preposition *ב*, whereas the choice of ἐκπίπτω

1 The word *במה* has been understood as “high place”, and *מצבת* as standing stone, *maššeba*; see e.g. Iwry (1957).

2 For a more detailed discussion, see Emerton (1982:100-103, 111-113); Evans (1989:56-58).

as rendering for the root לש has a parallel in LXX Job 15:33 (“But may he – the impious – [...] fall off [ἐκπέσοι] like an olive blossom”). In the MT version of this verse the Hiphil of the root לש is employed conveying the sense of “shedding (blossom)”. The rendering ἀπὸ τῆς θήκης αὐτῆς for מצב , or more likely for מצבת at the end of the verse,³ is not easy to understand. It may have been understood in the light of the Hebrew מצב in Isa 22:19 (“position, office”).⁴ As I have argued elsewhere, the choice of “acorn” instead of “oak” was made to evoke the idea of losing a position or office (van der Kooij 2012:75).

Quinta (Theodotion)

ἐν τῇ ἀποβολῇ τῶν ἐστηλωμένων ἐν αὐτοῖς

“in the loss of the things that have been set up in them”

The rendering of Quinta, which Lütkemann (1915:6) pointed out can be regarded in this case as the version of Theodotion, is interesting as it is the only one which takes the Hebrew לש as a noun. The equivalent used – ἀποβολή – carries the meaning of “throwing away, loss”. The second part of Quinta/Theodotion reads: “of the things that have been set up, stand firm, among them”. It reminds one of LXX 2 Sam 18:18, where the same verb (στηλόω) is used for the root נצב . Of note is also the version of LXX-Ms A of 1 Kgs 9:23 ([οἱ ἀρχοντες] οἱ ἐστηλωμένοι for Hebrew הנצבים). Furthermore, unlike the other versions, the second part is marked by the plural, “the things that have been set up”, apparently reflecting an understanding of מצב in the plural.

Symmachus

ἥτις ἀποβαλοῦσα (+ τὰ φύλλα Tht.) ἴσταται μόνη

“which having shed (its leaves) stands alone”

This version conveys the idea of a tree that has “shed (its leaves)”; cf. the use of the same verb (ἀποβάλλω) in LXX Isa 1:30 (ὡς τερέβινθος ἀποβεβληκυῖα τὰ φύλλα). It has been suggested that Symmachus may here be reflecting a participle as in 1QIsa^a,⁵ but in view of the verbal form that follows (ἴσταται), the choice of a participle is rather due to the aiming at writing good Greek, which is a feature typical of Symmachus.

3 On the issue of the shorter version of LXX being due to *homoioarkton*, see van der Kooij (2012:70).

4 For a more detailed discussion of this and other features in LXX Isa 6:13, see van der Kooij (2012:70-76).

5 Cf. BHS; HUB Isaiah; Barthélemy (1986:41).

Furthermore, like in Quinta/Theodotion, the rendering ἵσταται is based on the root נצב “to stand”. The picture of Symmachus, a tree standing “alone” after having shed its leaves may well be a reference to Jerusalem being “alone” after the dramatic events of 135 CE, when the Jews were no longer allowed to live in Judea (van der Kooij 1981:245).

Targum

“(or the oak) which when their leaves drop off (דבמיתר טרפיהון) appear dried up, and even then they are green enough to set up from them the seed (לקיימא מינהון זרעא)” (Chilton 1987:15 [with slight modifications])

The Aramaic version provides a rendering which reflects, first of all, the interpretation of the root שלך in the sense of “falling” of the leaves. The phrase “when their leaves drop off” is also found in Tg Isa 1:30, where it says, “For you will be like a terebinth when its leaves fall”, although the verb employed in Hebrew in this verse (נבל) is not the same as in 6:13. This link between these two passages may also shed light on the wording “appear dried up” (cf. the reference to a garden “without water” in 1:30).

The second part of the passage in the Targum offers a positive picture based on the idea that the trees retained their moisture. One wonders how the Hebrew מצבת has been interpreted here. It seems to me that this word was taken as derived from Aramaic נצב “to put up, plant”. If so, the clause was read literally as “there is a plant in them”, but was rephrased for the sake of clarity.

Peshitta

“and like an acorn that has fallen from its cup”

This is one of the instances where the Syriac version betrays influence from LXX.

Vulgate

(sicuti quercus) quae expandit ramos suos

“(like an oak) that has expanded its branches”

Interestingly, the Vulgate offers a rendering and meaning which is quite opposite to the Targum and the other versions: no trees shedding leaves, but trees expanding their branches! The Latin text of the verse is best understood as a Christian interpretation of the metaphorical language of Isa 6:13. It refers to the idea of new branches to which Rom 11:19-20 alludes: “You will say, Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in. That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast only through faith”. This positive picture is also given

expression in the rendering of the preceding part of Isa 6:13: *et convertetur et erit in ostensionem* (לבער interpreted via לבאר), “and it (the tenth part) will be converted and shall be manifest”. The tenth part seems to be equated here with the “holy seed” at the end of the verse, which, as Jerome explains in his commentary, refers to the “shoot” (*germen*) of the Apostles from which the Christian church sprouted. It is interesting to note, though, that the lemma in his commentary on Isaiah represents a more literal understanding of the first part of the verse: *et rursum erit in depraedationem sicut quercus quae proiecit fructos suos*, “and it (the tenth part) will again be for plunder like an oak that throws away its fruits”. This version of Isa 6:13 reflects the idea of a second disaster (cf. “again for plunder”), which, according to Jerome, did happen at the time when Judea was devastated by Hadrian, in 135 CE.

In sum, the ancient versions, which, except for 1QIsa^a (משלכת), seem to reflect the consonantal text of MT, testify to interpretations of שלכת and of מצבת different from the prevailing options among modern scholarship.

As to the meaning of שלכת, they attest to a tradition according to which it was understood in the sense of “falling, shedding, of leaves” (cf. Symmachus, the Targum), or similarly in the sense of “falling from” something (LXX, Peshitta). Quinta/Theodotion, which is the only witness containing a noun as rendering of שלכת, may fit in with this tradition, because the term used (ἀποβολή) is related to the verb used by Symmachus (ἀποβάλλω).⁶ The Vulgate is a special case.

The second word under discussion (מצבת) has been interpreted in a twofold way, either as related to the root נצב in Hebrew, hence the meaning of “something standing” (LXX [see above], Quinta/Theodotion, Symmachus), or, alternatively, as derived from its Aramaic cognate “to plant” (Targum). The Vulgate is a special case. These two options are also visible in the way the same word has been rendered at the end of the verse: for the notion of “something standing”, a pillar, see Quinta/Theodotion (τὸ στήλωμα αὐτῆς), Aquila (στήλωσις αὐτῆς), and the Vulgate (*id quod steterit in ea*); for the interpretation based on the Aramaic root “to plant”, see the Targum (“their plant”) and Peshitta (“its plant”). The equivalent used by Symmachus (ἡ ἀντίστασις αὐτῆς), however, though related to the notion of “standing”, is a striking one. In carrying the meaning of “opposition”, it presumably refers to a group of

6 Both the term and the verb could be used in the sense of “loss, shedding” of leaves; see e.g. Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*, I ix, 7.

people, in this way providing a particular interpretation of the image of the text.

3. *LEXICAL PROBLEMS*

Obviously then, the Jewish and Christian scholars who produced the ancient versions in antiquity had an understanding of the two words under discussion that is different from the current one among modern scholars. This raises the question of which one to adopt, the opinion of the ancients or the modern one. Are the interpretations to be found in the ancient versions still relevant for solving the lexical problems regarding both words in Isa 6:13? I think they are.

As stated above, the idea that *שלכת* refers to the “felling” of trees has no parallel in Classical Hebrew. It has been suggested that this meaning “may be derived without difficulty from the meaning ‘to throw, cast’” (Emerton 1982:106), but the difficulty with this is that the root *שׁלך* (Hiphil) is never used for the “felling” of trees. On the contrary, the verbs conveying this meaning are instead: *כרת* (1 Kgs 5:20; Isa 14:8), *נפל* (2 Kgs 3:19, 25), or *גדע* (Isa 9:9; 10:33). On the other hand, the usage of *שׁלך* (Hiphil) in the sense of a tree shedding its leaves is supported by Job 15:33. I therefore would propose to take the word *שלכת* in the sense of “loss of foliage”. It was understood this way not only by Symmachus and the Targum, and presumably by Quinta/Theodotion, but it was also interpreted that way by scholars such as Jarchi and Kimchi, as well as by those scholars who produced Bible translations in the 16th and 17th centuries (cf. Luther, KJV, Statenvertaling) (Williamson 1997:120). The word *שלכת* may well be regarded a noun (cf. Quinta/Theodotion), but could also be regarded an unusual form of the infinitive construct Piel.⁷

It has been argued, however, that the idea of loss of foliage would be “too weak as a figure of speech for the disaster” (Emerton 1982:106), and therefore would not fit “the understanding of the first part of the verse as a prediction of disaster” (Emerton 1982:105). Here we touch upon the interpretation of the verse as a whole. I will come back to this issue below.

What about *מצבת*? The current meaning of “rootstock” or “stump” is closely related to the idea of cutting trees. So, if in line with the above the latter is considered not to be the plausible interpretation, the former too is

7 Emerton (1982:106). A few scholars have interpreted the noun as proper name, i.e., the name of a gate of Jerusalem (see 1 Chr 26:16). So e.g. Barthélemy (1986:44): “dont à Shallèkèt il ne reste qu’un tronc”.

no longer convincing either, especially since it has no parallel in Classical Hebrew. It is important to note, in this regard, that scholars have made other suggestions, the best known being the one proposed by Tur-Sinai and others – “new growth”.⁸ This view is based on the theory that *מצבת* is “derived from a root cognate with Aramaic *nesab*, ‘to plant’” (Emerton 1982:107), representing an interpretation already found in two of the ancient versions (the Targum and Peshitta [end of the verse]). Although this is attractive, in particular as far as the understanding of the last clause of Isa 6:13 is concerned (cf. the Targum and Peshitta), the problem is that there is no evidence for this root in Classical Hebrew. Moreover, it does not fit the *asher*-clause if *שלכת* is taken as a reference to the loss of foliage.

In the light of the available evidence in Classical Hebrew, it seems best to interpret *מצבת* in line with the second option as reflected by the ancient versions, i.e., the one based on the Hebrew root *נצב* “to stand” – “something standing”. Together with the reference to loss of foliage, the notion of something standing easily evokes the picture of a tree having shed its leaves, a bare tree, a stalk. Hence, the clause in Isa 6:13 containing the two words discussed so far can be translated thus: “like a terebinth and like an oak in which is a stalk/bare tree when they have shed their leaves”.

4. FINAL REMARKS

The next question to be asked is what this interpretation might mean for the exegesis of Isa 6:13 as a whole. The verse is a prophecy according to which a tenth part in the land will remain, that again will be burnt, like a terebinth etc. The simile of a terebinth having shed its leaves implies the notion of a great disaster, as is clear from Isa 1:30, which reads, “For you (i.e. rebels and sinners) shall be like an oak whose leaf withers, and like a garden without water”. The loss of foliage does not refer here “to part of the annual cycle, but rather to the result of prolonged drought” (Williamson 2006:161). This text announcing doom for rebels and sinners is obviously about *complete* disaster (cf. the verses that follow). Read from this perspective, the notion of fallen leaves in Isa 6:13 would not be “unsuitable or weak” (Williamson 1997:123), as suggested by Emerton.

However, things seem to be different in Isa 6:13. The picture in 6:13 is not the same as the one in 1:30. In the former passage, the loss of foliage

8 See Tur-Sinai (1961:169); Wildberger (1972:234); HALAT, 587; Nielsen (1989:150).

is not due to an extreme and prolonged drought, but is related to a “burning” of the tenth part in the land. Of course, a burning can also imply a complete disaster, but the image of a bare tree, not a barren one, suggests another idea. Trees like the terebinth are evergreens,⁹ and although being scorched by fire, the result being the loss of its foliage, they still are strong enough to sprout leaves again. This sheds light on the final part of the verse, which may or may not be a later addition – “The holy seed is its stalk”. So the simile of Isa 6:13 seems to imply the notion of hope of new life.

Interpreted this way, one wonders to which historical situation our text may refer. As to this, the Targum offers the following explanation of the simile: “So the exiles of Israel will be gathered and they will return to their land”. The Aramaic version thus interprets the verse by applying the image of trees being dried up to the exiles of Israel. Both the notion of the dropping off of leaves and of being dried up are based on Isa 1:30 (cf. above), but there seems more to it, in particular as far as the element of being dried up is concerned. In view of the application to the exiles of Israel, one gets the impression that the Targumist also had the prophecy of Ezek 37 (about the “dry” bones // the exiles) in mind. Christian scholars like Eusebius and Jerome understood our verse (in Greek) in a different way. In their view, the prophecy of Isa 6:13 came true when the Romans devastated Judea in 135 CE, whereas the “holy seed” is regarded as referring to the apostolic church that originated in Judea.

But what about the Hebrew text of Isa 6:13? Instead of reading this verse as reflecting the total destruction of Judah and Jerusalem in the sixth century BCE, it is tempting to interpret it in line with passages such as Isa 1:7-9 and 37:31-32 – the country of Judah, being the tenth part of the land as a whole,¹⁰ will be destroyed, and the cities burnt, but after being reduced to something like a bare tree, there will be new life going forth from Jerusalem in order to repopulate and rebuild Judah.

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9 Cf. Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*, I ix, 3.

10 The feminine form of the ordinal number is mostly employed to express parts (GCK §98b). For Judah as tenth part of Israel as a whole, see Wildberger (1972:258).

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