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WHEN PHARAOHS RULED: ON THE TRANSLATION OF JUDGES 5:2

Abstract

The first two words of the Song of Deborah have posed great difficulties for translators since antiquity. After a review of the various proposals, this essay proposes a translation that solves the quandary of apparent Israelite ignorance of Egyptian domination of Palestine in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages.

IT is often noted that the Bible does not mention campaigns in Palestine by Merneptah and Ramesses III in the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BC.[1] In fact, after the Exodus, the Bible does not mention Egypt again as a nation until the story of Saul. Yet Papyrus Anastasi 3 shows that during the reign of Ramesses III (until 1155 BC), Egypt held a powerful grip on parts of Palestine in response to the Hittite conquest of Syria,[2] particularly in the south of the country, the Jezreel valley, and the Jordan valley.[3] Palestine supplied Egypt with grain, wine, oil, slaves, and horses.[4] Even in the highlands, Egyptian power did not collapse until the end of the reign of Ramesses III,[5] and possibly not until the end of Ramesses IV (1149 BC).[6] Ramesses IV seems to have held power of some sort in Galilee, the Jezreel valley, Judah, and the along the coast.[7] Canaanites bring tribute to

[1] William H. Stiebing, Jr., *Out of the Desert* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1999), p. 54.

[2] Amelie Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East c. 3000–330 BCE* (Routledge History of the Ancient World, 4; London: Routledge, 1995), vol. 1, p. 328.

[3] J. Weinstein, 'Collapse of the Egyptian Empire in the Twelfth Century B.C.', in William A. Ward and Martha S. Joukowsky (eds.), *Crisis Years* (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1992), p. 142.

[4] Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East*, vol. 1, pp. 328–9. The text of Wen-Amun (*ANET* 25=P. Moscow 120; dated early 11th-c.) has an extensive, and seemingly accurate, portrayal of Dor (*ANET* 25: 9 ff.); Hans Goedicke, *Report of Wenamun* (Johns Hopkins Near East Studies, 6; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1975), pp. 4–5, 9.

[5] Itamar Singer, 'Beginning of Philistine Settlement in Canaan and the Northern Boundary of Philistia', *Tel Aviv* 12 (1985), p. 117.

[6] Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East*, vol. 1, p. 209.

[7] E. Lipiński, *On the Skirts of Canaan in the Iron Age* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 153; Louvain: Peeters, 2006), pp. 46–7.

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Ramesses V (1149–1145).[8] Egyptian material continues to be found archaeologically in the Jezreel valley, at Hazor, in Judah, the Negev, and along the coast even from the reign of Ramesses VI (1145–1137).[9] There was, therefore, a clearly targeted Egyptian administrative and military presence well into the twelfth century.[10] Does the Bible's failure to recognize any Egyptian influence in Canaan in the books of Joshua and Judges reflect a total lack of knowledge of the real situation of thirteenth- to eleventh-century Palestine?

This brief note proposes that there is a biblical reference to Egyptian rule in Canaan in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages. The reference is found in the opening lines of the Song of Deborah (Judges 5). Many scholars still consider this poem quite ancient, perhaps even from the twelfth to eleventh centuries.[11]

The opening words of the song are found at the start of Judg. 5:2. They are *bipĕrōaʿ pĕrāʿôt*. The first word is Qal infinitive construct, and the second is a feminine plural noun. As will be shown below, there have been many different translations given for these words. But first, it should be noted that they clearly form the colophon or 'byline' of the song. Whatever the song's relationship with the events in the narrative of Judges 4 (and I do not consider it a given that the song does relate to them), the temporal setting of the song is given in the superscription *bipĕrōaʿ pĕrāʿôt*.[12]

[8] Viz. *Chester Beatty Papyrus I*, ed. Alan H. Gardiner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931), verso B.31.

[9] Bernd U. Schipper, 'Vermächtnis und Verwirklichung', in *Königtum der Ramessidenzeit* (Ägypten und Altes Testament, 36.3; Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2001), pp. 250–1.

[10] Ann E. Killebrew, 'New Kingdom Egyptian-Style and Egyptian Pottery in Canaan', in G. N. Knoppers and A. Hirsch (eds.), *Egypt, Israel, and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Probleme der Ägyptologie, 20; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2004), p. 342.

[11] For the dating of the Song of Deborah on the basis of linguistic evidence, see Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), pp. 3–42; D. A. Robertson, *Linguistic Evidence in Dating Early Hebrew Poetry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1972); and Bruce K. Waltke and Michael P. O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989), p. 4. For the opposing view, see Michael Waltisberg, 'Zum Alter der Sprache des Deboraliedes Ri 5', *Zeitschrift für Althebraistik* 12 (1999), pp. 218–32.

[12] It is not my contention that the Song has anything to do with Egypt or an Egyptian presence in Canaan; the reference to Egypt is merely a date formula.

All of the various possible translations for these words have been catalogued by Barnabas Lindars.[13] Four can be outlined here. Several major witnesses of the Septuagint, including Codex Vaticanus and Codex Colberto-Sarravianus (4th–5th c. AD), provide the reading 'when the long hair was worn loosely'. This allows the JPS *Tanakh* translation, 'When locks go untrimmed' or the NRSV's 'When the locks are long' (envisaging hair worn long in preparation for battle, but inevitably making readers think of later Jewish custom).

It is acceptable for the first word, *pĕrōaʿ*, to be translated '[hair] being disheveled'.[14] The word is read as an infinitive construct, translated according to the meaning in Lev. 10:6; 21:10; Num. 5:18; 6:5; Ezek. 44:20, and accords with the Aramaic *pĕraʿ* and Arabic *faraʿa*.[15] The second word is taken to be a substantive noun cognate to the verb, in the plural. But it cannot mean 'loose locks' according to the Akk. *Pirtu* and Arab. *farʿ*. Exod. 32:25 is often cited in defence of such a reading, but the text there reads *kî pāruʿa*. The word *pāruʿa* < *paraʿa* cannot be equated with the singular of *pĕrāʿôt*, which would be *paraʿ*. The root *PRʿ* has the attested meaning 'let go, avoid, neglect', and thus Janzen's 'When the rebels cast off restraint',[16] although 'rebels' seems quite a stretch of meaning. Or it is possible to translate the second word as 'gathered up', corresponding to the Akkadian *pir'u*,[17] but it is difficult to see how hair could be simultaneously disheveled and gathered up.

A second option is 'When leaders led'. This is weakly attested, found only in Codex Alexandrinus and the Old Latin, but has been preferred by many since Ewald and Kittel.[18] This is behind the *Revised English Bible*'s 'For the leaders'. It depends on the meaning 'eminent men' behind both words, as in the Egyptian *pr-ʿ* and Arabic *farʿu*.[19] But the latter term's variants rarely mean 'eminent men', more commonly referring to the top of

[13] Barnabas Lindars, *Judges 1–5* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), pp. 225–7.

[14] *KB*[3], 913. 'Disheveled', but not, properly, 'long'; Chaim Rabin, 'Judges 5:2 and the "Ideology" of Deborah's War', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 6 (1955), p. 131.

[15] C. F. Burney, *The Book of Judges* (New York: Ktav, 1970), p. 107.

[16] J. Gerald Janzen, 'The Root *prʿ* in Judges V 2 and Deuteronomy XXXII 42', *Vetus Testamentum* 39 (1989), pp. 393–5, 403.

[17] Peter C. Craigie, 'A Note on Judges V 2', *Vetus Testamentum* 18 (1968), p. 398.

[18] Viz. Burney, *Judges*, 108.

[19] *KB*[3] also ties it to the Ugaritic root *PRʿ*, found in *KTU* 2.31.16 and 1.8.9, but this would leave Judges 5 and Deut. 32:42 as the sole occurrences of this loanword.

the head.[20] Moreover, we would have to explain why, in all its reference to leaders and chiefs, the Hebrew Bible nowhere else uses this word.[21]

Other manuscripts of the Septuagint, including Codex Purpureus Vindobonensis (5th–6th c.) and the Theodotian recension, have 'When men volunteered'. This reading can only be supported by recourse to Arabic *faraġa*.[22]

The Targums and Syriac, as well as Rashi and David Kimhi (12th c.), render the words 'For avenging', with the second word being a cognate accusative of the first. However, the preposition *bĕ* is never used to mean 'for'; it always carries the meanings 'in', 'when', 'with', etc. The closest parallel would be Gen. 18:28, where it has the meaning 'because of', but this is not really what the Targums and rabbis intend. Moreover, 'avenging' is based on wrongly connecting the words with the Aramaic root *PRʿ*, the basic meaning of which in any case is not 'revenge' but 'to repay',[23] and Hebrew never uses this root for vengeance, preferring *nākam*.[24]

The meaning of these words is actually quite clear. The second word is obviously the plural of 'Pharaoh'. The final *he* in *parʿōh* is a *mater lectionis*, as seen by the original Egyptian *pir-ʿo* and the Akkadian rendering of it as *pir'u*. The vast majority of the occurrences of the root *PRʿ* in the Bible refer to Pharaoh. While the plural is not attested, the Hebrew writers attached the feminine form of the plural rather than *îm* because the singular form ended with a *-h mater lectionis*. There are many examples of Latin and Greek words so perceived and treated later in Hebrew.[25] The Arabic plural for *farʿun*, 'Pharaoh', is *fara'inat*, 'Pharaohs', which is treated as feminine, i.e. with an ending of *tâ' marbûtat*.[26]

[20] Rabin, 'Judges 5:2', p. 132.

[21] Burney, *Judges*, p. 108.

[22] Slightly similar is Chaim Rabin's proposal, without manuscript support, of 'When duty was done', based on perceived parallelism in the verse to *hitnaddēb* and on the Arabic *fāraʿa*; Rabin, 'Judges 5:2', p. 133.

[23] Rabin, 'Judges 5:2', p. 132.

[24] Burney, *Judges*, p. 109.

[25] James Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 105. For modern examples in the Neo-Aramaic of Kurdish Jews, see Yona Sabar, 'General European Loanwords in the Jewish Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Zakho, Iraqi Kurdistan', in Wolfhart Heinrichs (ed.), *Studies in Neo-Aramaic* (Harvard Semitic Studies 36; Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1990), p. 57.

[26] Three medieval Classical Arabic lexicons cite the term in its plural form: *Al-Misbâh al-Munîr* form 'Alî al-Muqrî al-Fayyûmî (completed in 1333–4),

The Hebrew writers wished to coin a phrase: 'When the Pharaohs pharaohed.' Namely, they wanted to coin a verb that would cover the action done by a Pharaoh and express the combination as a cognate accusative. Compare Num. 11:4; Isa. 35:2; Ps. 14:5, where the accusative noun is likewise anarthrous (lacking an article).[27] This would best be rendered in English as 'When Pharaohs ruled'. Such a reading eliminates the need of appealing to obscure Arabic words. Moreover, it fits the function of the superscription better than any of the other proposals; it actually provides a date formula that situates the events of the song. It is not necessary to ignore the obvious similarity of construction of the next line—*b* plus infinitive construct. This stich is also part of the colophon, 'When the Pharaohs ruled, when the people volunteered'.[28] I would, however, exclude verse 1 from the colophon as it does not follow the pattern of tetralexic stichs begun in v. 2 and continued in verses 3 and 5 (but not 4).

I also make no claim for the song to be a historical account from the Late Bronze Age of Israelite exploits. I do maintain, however, that we have in this ancient song a vague memory of the days 'when Pharaohs ruled'.

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Al-Qamûs al-Muhît from Al-Fîrûzâbâdî (written between 1368 and 1382), and the later *Taj al 'Arûs*, which builds upon the latter. Words that end with *tâ' marbûtat* are almost always feminine, although words denoting groups of three or more people take the gender of the actual persons they stand for, whether the word ends in *tâ' marbûtat* or in any other way. Hence the plural 'Pharaohs' is masculine gender, but with the 'feminine' plural form. I am indebted to Prof. Federico Bruzone for this information.

[27] Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, p. 167.

[28] Burney cites a 1753 manuscript by William Green of Clare Hall, Cambridge, *The Song of Deborah Reduced to Metre*, which treats all of vv. 1–2 as a colophon.