An Ancient Near Eastern Pun and Its Poetic Function:

Exegesis of Job 3:1–12

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Abstract: The story of Job is part of a larger ancient tradition. Situating the possible translations of Job 3:8 within the Ancient Near Eastern context, this essay focuses on how the poetic language functions in Job 3:1-12. I suggest that both renditions of "day" and "sea," albeit the difference, are faithful in their approaches to the original text. the rendition of "sea" echoes the primary meaning found in other ancient texts. Translating yom as "day" has a three-fold significance: it preserves the recurring words' linguistic equivalence in the source text[1] and coheres with the structure of intensification, underscoring the author's desire to strengthen the power of the curse.[2] The use of the Aramaic pronunciation cre-ates the pun as it expresses the secondary meaning, "day," which also seeks to intensify the curse.[3] We note that "sea" associated with the sea god, Yamm, and Leviathan, echo several Ancient Near Eastern motifs, especially the curses found in their literary traditions and those found on incantation bowls.

Keywords: Job 3:1-12, Old Testament, Wisdom Literature, biblical poetry, translations,

[1] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (version New and rev. ed.). (New York: Basic Books, 2011). p. 95.

[2] Ibid., p. 655.

[3] Greenstein, "The Language of Job and Its Poetic Function." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 4 (Wint 2003), p. 654.

phonetic, poetic intensification

The story of Job is part of a larger ancient tradition. Throughout Mesopotamia, Syria and Egypt there are accounts of the suffering of the pious man.[1] The author employs poetic devices such as "intensification," imagery, word-play (puns) as well as "themes, motifs, and languages found in earlier texts" incorporated in the Hebrew Bible.[2] Unlike the prose narrative in the preceding Chapters 1 and 2, the passage of Job 3 and 4:12-21 are identified as the Joban complaint (Ch.3, 4:12-21)[3] in his poetic dialogue with his companions and, at the last, God. The beginning of this complaint, Job 3:1-12, is a curse, which employs various rhetorics, for instance, the recurrent rubric for introducing the speeches found in Deut. 26:5, the rhetoric of curse found in Judg. 5:31, personifications found in Jer. 20:15, and the same term for sufferer in Lam. 3:1 and Ps. 94:14, *etc.*.[4] In contrast to Mrs. Job (*Sitidos*[5])'s suggestion, Job, instead of cursing God, "pronounces a curse on the day of his birth and the night of his conception (the beginning and end of gestation), as if wishing it to be obliterated from the calendar."[6] Cursing the day of someone's birth is a reversal of an ancient tradition that recites incantations offered on behalf of women to insure both

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[1] Edward L. Greenstein, "Job" in *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 1491.

[2] ibid., p. 1491.

[3] ibid., p. 1490.

[4] ibid., p. 1500.

[5] ibid., p. 1499. *Sitidos* is the Greek translation. The name Uzit for Job's wife, Mrs. Job, is from the apocryphal book *Diver Lyov*. https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/wife-of-job-apocrypha

[6] James L. Crenshaw, "Job" in *The Oxford Bible Commentary.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 335.

successful conceptions and deliveries.[1] What is more, when Job speaks of "that day (light)" and darkness in 3:4-5, he seems to undo the creation of that one day in Gen.1:3![2]

In his annotation of the book of Job in the Jewish Study Bible, Edward L. Greenstein reminds the readers that "there are many difficulties in the poetry of Job, making the interpretation of words, verses, and even chapters uncertain." [3] For instance, the meaning of "what blackens" in Job 3:5 is uncertain. Moreover, the "day" in Job 3:8 can also mean "sea," as the Hebrew word *yom* for day can be changed by a vowel point to become *yam*, the Hebrew for sea.[4]

Let us focus on function of poetic language in our *pericope*, Job 3:1-12, even as we situate the possible translations of Job 3:8 within the Ancient Near Eastern context. I suggest that three issues are worth noting:

1) Both renditions of "day" and "sea," albeit the difference, are faithful in their approaches to the original text.

2) Translating *yom* into "day" has a three-fold significance.

   A.　It is coherent with the structure of intensification, preserving the "lexical equivalents for recurring words" in the source text.[5]

   B.　The phonetic and syntactic pattern tied with the meaning underscores the author's purpose: Doubling the power of the curse.[6]

   C.　It outlines the second meaning of the double entendre, produced by engaging a neighbouring Phoenician pronunciation.[1]

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[1] Edward L. Greenstein, "Job" in *The Jewish Study Bible : Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 1500.

[2] ibid.

[3] ibid.

[4] ibid., p. 1501.

[5] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (version New and rev. ed.). (New York: Basic Books, 2011). p. 95.

[6] Greenstein, "The Language of Job and Its Poetic Function." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 4 (Winter 2003), p. 655.

3) The rendition of "sea" and the sea god, *Yamm*, serves as evidence for Job's engagement of foreign features from several Ancient Near Eastern texts, particularly the mythological tradition and the symbolism of the incantation bowls.[2]

I shall begin by comparing two English translations of this passage, the Tanakh translation in the Jewish Study Bible, and the New Revised Standard Version. It is worth quoting both translations in detail to see the similarities and differences in close proximity to one another:

Job 3:1-12 from the Jewish Study Bible:

"Afterward, Job began to speak and cursed the day of his birth. Job spoke up and said:

Perish the day on which I was born,

And the night it was announced,

"A male has been conceived!"

May that day be darkness;

May God above have no concern for it;

May light not shine on it;

May darkness and deep gloom reclaim it;

May a pall lie over it;

May what blackens the day terrify it.

May obscurity carry off that night;

May it not be counted among the

days of the year;

May it not appear in any of its months;

May that night be desolate;

May no sound of joy be heard in it;

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[1] ibid., p. 654.

[2] Ola Wikander, "Job 3,8: Cosmological Snake-Charming and Leviathanic Panic in an Ancient Near Eastern Setting." *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 122, no. 2 (2010): p. 270.

May those who cast spells upon the day damn it,

Those prepared to disable Leviathan;

May its twilight stars remain dark;

May it hope for light and have none;

May it not see the glimmerings of the dawn —

Because it did not block my mother's womb,

And hide trouble from my eyes.

Why did I not die at birth,

Expire as I came forth from the womb?

Why were there knees to receive me,

Or breasts for me to suck?

Job 3:1-12 in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV):

After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. Job said:

"Let the day perish in which I was born,

and the night that said,

'A man-child is conceived.'

Let that day be darkness!

May God above not seek it,

or light shine on it.

Let gloom and deep darkness claim it.

Let clouds settle upon it;

let the blackness of the day terrify it.

That night—let thick darkness seize it!

let it not rejoice among the days of the year;

let it not come into the number of the months.

Yes, let that night be barren;

let no joyful cry be heard in it.

> **Let those curse it who curse the Sea,**
>
> **those who are skilled to rouse up Leviathan.**
>
> Let the stars of its dawn be dark;
>
> let it hope for light, but have none;
>
> may it not see the eyelids of the morning —
>
> because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb,
>
> and hide trouble from my eyes.
>
> "Why did I not die at birth,
>
> come forth from the womb and expire?
>
> Why were there knees to receive me,
>
> or breasts for me to suck?

As Crenshaw points out in his commentary: "In 3:3-10 the curse encompasses the whole creation, seeking to reverse the favourable conditions set into place by God in Gen 1:1-2:40."[1] I wholeheartedly agree with Alter that "we are plunged precipitously into a world of what must be called abysmal intensities."[2] Indeed, the book of Job employs a system of poetic intensifications in order to "take the full emotional measure and to intimate the full moral implications of Job's outrageous fate."[3] The significance of the poetic vehicle can never be overemphasized. The development of the poem itself depends on an intensification of semantic materials.[4] For instance, there are powerful imageries based on notions of day and light, night and darkness, and the sea monster. Alter's analysis of parallelism and day and night is instructive:

> The thematic imagistic terms of "day" and "night," "light" and
>
> "darkness," are introduced, set in sharp opposition, and then the

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[1] James L. Crenshaw, "Job" in *The Oxford Bible Commentary.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 335.

[2] Alter, p. 92.

[3] ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 95.

possibilities of that opposition are strongly developed from image to image and from line to line, until the speaker can imagine no more than the concrete picture of his own nonbirth, shut up forever within the dark doors of the womb. The momentum of intensifying this whole opposition, making the darkness more and more overwhelming in relation to the light, is what carries the poem forward step by step and what in some sense generates it, determining what will be said and what will be concluded.[1]

The rendition of *yom* as "day" in Job 3:8 coheres with the structure of intensification, preserving the repetitive use of linguistically similar words in the source text.[2] Again, in the words of Alter, we discover "a kind of 'conjugation' of the semantic poles of light and darkness in the grammatical mode of imprecation."[3]

Moreover, these foreign elements in Job, with their poetic functions, add weight to the use of "day." Greenstein sides Ginsberg and points out that engaging the neighbouring Phoenician pronunciation is appropriate, given that Job and his companions are all Transjordanian figures.[4] The stressed *a* becoming stressed *o* signifies a double entendre. What primarily means "those who curse Yamm ('the Sea' in the NRSV translation)" now also informs "light of day ('upon the day' in the Tanakh translation)."[5] Greenstein emphasizes,

> The double entendre redoubles the power of the curse: May that night be execrated by the demons whose strength is sufficient to curse the dreaded Yamm/ Leviathan; *and* may that night be cursed, eliminated, as all nights are, by the light of day. Our poet adopts a Phoenician vocalization

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[1] Ibid., pp. 97-98.

[2] Ibid., p. 95.

[3] Alter, p. 96.

[4] Greenstein, "The Language of Job and Its Poetic Function." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 4 (Wint 2003), pp. 653-654.

[5] Ibid., pp. 654-655.

specifically here with the apparent purpose of adding a pagan, Canaanite nuance to the name of the old Canaanite deity Yamm—perhaps the way that ancient Judeans customarily heard the name from the lips of Phoenicians for whom Yamm/Yom(m) was still a deity.[1]

The translation's use of "day" outlines the second meaning of this double entendre, which was produced by utilizing a neighboring Phoenician pronunciation. The pun deepens both structure-producing and meaning-enhancing effects by reinforcing the coherence through internal rhyme.[2] This phonetic and syntactic pattern, tied with the meaning, underscores the author's purpose in doubling the power of the curse.[3]

The pairing of sea with Leviathan resonates with a later passage in Job 7:12 and other intra-biblical passages in Ps. 74:13, 14 and Isa. 27:1.[4] Likewise, the imagery of *Yamm* the sea god/monster resembles several Ancient Near Eastern texts. It also reflects both the mythological tradition and the symbolism found on incantation bowls.[5] Both Greenstein and Wikander mention the resemblance of a well-known Aramaic incantation on the bowls, which summons these powers in the imprecations.[6] Wikander further argues that "curse *Yamm*" and Leviathan in Job 3:8 resembles two of the Aramaic incantation bowl texts:

Text 2 of Isbell's corpus of these texts contains the following in lines 3f.:

אושפנא לכון באישפא דימא ואישפא דליויתן תנינא

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[1] Ibid., p. 655.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Greenstein, "Job" in *The Jewish Study Bibl*e, p. 1501.

[5] Ola Wikander, "Job 3,8: Cosmological Snake-Charming and Leviathanic Panic in an Ancient Near Eastern Setting." *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 122, no. 2 (2010): p. 270.

[6] Greenstein, "The Language of Job and Its Poetic Function," p. 654. Also: Wikander, p. 266.

I enchant you with the enchantment of Yamm and the enchantment of Leviathan, the sea monster.

In text number 7 an almost identical phrase occurs in line 6-7; the only difference is that the "enchantment of Yamm"(אישפא דימא) is here also described as ("great") רבא. These parallels certainly provide a "horizon of interpretation" for Job 3:8.[1]

This magical charm upon the great sea monster also appears in Ancient Near Eastern myths such as the Babylonian Enuma Elish. In this epic, both the young storm god Marduk and Tiamat use spells as weapons in their battle. What is more, the cunning Ea also uses a spell to subdue the other cosmic "hydro-parent," Apsû.[2] The use of spells to defeat the sea monster is also alive in some later expressions of Near Eastern culture, namely, the Gnostic Hymn of the Pearl and the apocryphal Acts of Thomas.[3] For Wikander, Job 3:8 should be perceived in a "both…and…" approach. It integrates dual traditions into an orderly whole, combining the notion of summoning up the chaos power with the tradition of casting a spell against it.[4] She concludes: "Job 3:8 uses two very old (and rather different) traditional strands concerning the sea monsters (their being enchanted and being 'roused' or 'called up')."[5]

Its larger Ancient Near Eastern context is instrumental to our understanding of the translation of our periscope from Job. In this way, it becomes clear that the rendition of "sea" echoes the primary meaning found in other ancient texts. The use of "day" in Job 3:8 provides the second meaning of the root word, as well as creating continuity with following passages which speak of day and light. To reiterate, translating *yom* as "day" has a three-fold significance: it preserves the recurring words' linguistic

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[1] Wikander, p. 266.

[2] Ibid., p. 267.

[3] ibid., p. 268.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., pp. 270-271.

equivalence in the source text[1] and coheres with the structure of intensification, underscoring the author's desire to strengthen the power of the curse.[2] The use of the Aramaic pronunciation creates the pun as it expresses the secondary meaning, "day," which also seeks to intensify the curse.[3] We note that "sea" associated with the sea god, *Yamm,* and Leviathan, echo several Ancient Near Eastern motifs, especially the curses found in their literary traditions and those found on incantation bowls.

[1] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (version New and rev. ed.). (New York: Basic Books, 2011). p. 95.

[2] Ibid., p. 655.

[3] Greenstein, "The Language of Job and Its Poetic Function." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 4 (Wint 2003), p. 654.

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