

CLARIFYING
BAFFLING
BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ARABIC COGNATES
WHICH CLARIFY
THE SONG OF SONGS 1:3

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ARABIC COGNATES WHICH CLARIFY THE SONG OF SONGS 1:3

INTRODUCTION

As a simple 3 + 3 + 3 tricolon, following a 3 + 3 bicolon, the poetic pattern of the Song of Songs 1:3 is very transparent. But the meaning of the second line (italicized below) has puzzled commentators and has been variously translated.

לְרִיחַ שְׁמֹנֶיךָ טוֹבִים
שֶׁמֶן הַיֹּרֶק שְׁמֶךָ
עַל־כֵּן עֲלָמוֹת אֶהְבֹּדָה

Sweet is the odor of thy perfumes,
Which perfume thou art, by thy name defused abroad.
Therefore do the damsels love thee.
(Ginsburg [1857] 1970: 130)

L'arôme de tes parfumes est exquis;
*ton nom est une huile qui' sépanche,*¹
c'est pourquoi les jeunes filles t'aiment.
(Robert 1963: 63)

Than the smell of your precious oil.
Turaq oil is your name.
Therefore girls love you.
(Pope 1977: 291)²

The fragrance of your perfume is pleasing,
flowing perfume, your name,
 therefore the maidens love you.
 (Murphy 1990: 124)

Pope (1977: 300) commented, “The word *tûraq* remains obscure . . . *trq* is a term of some type of high grade cosmetic oil, as suggested by the context of its occurrence in the Song of Solomon.” Murphy (1990: 127), who essentially concurred with Pope, observed, “Although the word “flowing” [תִּזְרַק] is problematical, the intention is to intensify in some way the compliment that has just been made; now his very ‘name’ or person, is itself perfume.”³ Murphy concluded that the “Θ (ἐκκενωθεν) and ὕ (*effusum*) are guides to the meaning of ‘poured out.’”

UGARITIC AND ARABIC COGNATES

Pope’s brief comment on עַלְמוֹת “girls” (1977: 300) that “the basic sense of the root *’lm* (Ugaritic and Arabic *ǧlm*) has reference to sexual ripeness . . .” provides the methodological clue for interpreting the entire poetic line, namely, checking all the applicable Arabic and Ugaritic cognates.

The first word of verse 3, לְרִי־יָהּ, calls to mind two Ugaritic cognates: the emphatic particle *l* (= *lû*) “verily, surely” and *rh* “scent.”⁴ Murphy (1990: 124–125) applied this cognate in his translation (“Truly, your kisses are better than wine”). Ginsburg ([1857] 1970: 130) sensed this meaning, without the benefit of the Ugaritic cognate, when he stated, “The ל in

לְרִיבָהּ signifies *in, as regards, quoad*, and is frequently used for the sake of giving prominence to an idea.”

There are seven commonly recognized Arabic cognates related to the words in this verse: (1) עֲלָם and غلام (*gulām*) “boy, girl, youth,” (2) רִיחַ and ريحة (*riḥat*) “smell, odor,” (3) שֶׁמֶן and سمن (*siman*) “fat, oil, ointment, perfume,” (4) טוֹב and طاب (*tāba*) “good, pleasant, delightful, delicious, sweet [in taste or odor],” (5) עַל and على (*‘alay*) “upon, on, over,” (6) לְכֵן and لكن (*lakin*) “then, but,” and (7) לָ and ل (*la*) “surely, verily, truly.”⁵

In addition, all the words in the phrase שֶׁמֶן הַזָּהָב שֶׁמֶן have cognates in Arabic, which until now have gone unrecognized. First, the cognate of שֶׁמֶן (stem III) is ثمن (*taman*) “price, high-priced, of high value” and ثمين (*tamīn*) “costly, precious, valuable.”⁶ Secondly, the רֶק of הַזָּהָב is cognate to راق/روق (*ruq/râqa*) “to be clear/pure, to surpass, to excel, to please, to delight,” rather than a cognate of راق/ريق (*riq/râqa*) “to move to and fro, to pour out.”⁷ Thirdly, the שֶׁ of שֶׁמֶן, when repointed as שֶׁמֶן, can be read as the cognate of شم (*šamma*) “smelling, smell, scent, odor.”⁸

INTERPRETATION OF 1:3

The שֶׁמֶן of שֶׁמֶן הַזָּהָב (1:3a) and the שֶׁמֶן of שֶׁמֶן הַזָּהָב (1:3b) — which have been read as simple repetition — are in fact homographs of two clearly different stems in Arabic, namely, ثمن (*taman*) “high-priced, high value” and سمن (*siman*) “fat, oil, perfume.” Succinctly stated, the שֶׁמֶן was שֶׁמֶן, “the per-

fume was costly,” a highly valued and desirable commodity in and of itself.

In a poetic line which speaks so clearly about the רִיחַ “the scent” of perfume, the רִיחַ in chiasmic parallelism with רִיחַ must surely be the synonym רִיחַ “scent, odor, smell, smelling,” noted above. Although lexicographers have cited the Arabic شَمَامَة (*šâ^cmat*) “north” as a cognate of the רִיחַ of שְׂמאל “the left, the north” (BDB 969), the cognate شَم (*šamma*) “scent” went unnoticed. This oversight is a good example of what Barr (1968: 268) alluded to when he said,

. . . the ancient translators did their task remarkably well, considering the circumstances. Their grasp of Hebrew, however, was very often a grasp of that which is average and customary in Hebrew.

Because רִיחַ “name” occurs over 700 times in the Hebrew Bible, while רִיחַ “scent” occurs perhaps only once, it is not surprising that רִיחַ was misread as רִיחַ.

To make sense out of the MT שֶׁמֶן תִּזְרַק שְׁמֶךָ “perfume flowed your name,” interpreters have appealed to Ecc. 7:1, טוֹב שֶׁם מִשְׁמֵן טוֹב “a good name is better than good (perfume) oil,” and I Sam. 25:25, כִּשְׁמוֹ בֶן־הוּא “as his name so he is.” Ginsburg ([1857] 1970: 131) commented, “. . . the pleasant odours diffused by perfume soon became a metaphor to express the attractions which an agreeable person throws around him . . .” Pope (1977: 300) noted,

In Semitic usage the name represents the essence of a person or thing (cf. I Sam 25:25) hence the justifiable renderings of AT [American Translation], ‘your very self,’ and Gordis ‘thy presence,’ Jastrow ‘thou art.’

But Pope's rendering, "Turaq oil is your name," would be far more convincing if "name" were shifted to "scent," as proposed in this study. There is no reason to stay with an oblique metaphorical use of שֵׁם "name" since the literal meaning of שֵׁם "scent" is available.

As Pope's transliteration of תִּירַק suggests, the *Hoph'al* feminine singular imperfect used with the masculine singular nouns "oil" and "name" has been problematic and several emendations have been proposed.⁹ Although Pope (1977: 300), noted (citing Gordis) that ". . . a number of nouns are ambivalent in gender," שֵׁם and שֶׁמֶן are *not* gender ambivalent. But שֵׁם "scent" could well be like the Arabic مسك (*misk*) "musk" which is clearly gender ambivalent.¹⁰ If so, a feminine תִּירַק is no problem.

Once תִּירַק is recognized as a cognate of راق (*râqa*) "to be clear or pure, to surpass, to excel, to please, to delight," the meaning of the colon becomes transparent: שֶׁמֶךָ "your scent" is the subject of תִּירַק and שֶׁמֶן "costly" modifies שֶׁמֶךָ. The *Hoph'al* imperfect followed by the *Qal* perfect אֶהְבִּיד is another example of the poetic *yqtl*-*qtl* sequencing of verbs.¹¹ The costly perfume was made to *excite* and *delight* (תִּירַק), with both the excitement and delight suggested by the verb. The verse can be repointed (*scriptio plene*) and translated as

לוֹרֵיחַ שֶׁמֶנִּיךָ טוֹבִים
 שֶׁמֶן תִּירַק שֶׁמֶךָ
 עַל־כֵּן עֲלָמוֹת אֶהְבִּיד

Truly, the scent of your perfume is very delightful.¹²
Precious, your scent was made to induce pleasure;
 therefore (young) women have loved you.

The suffixed verb, **יָשָׁרוּבְיָדְךָ**, ending 1:3 appears also at the end of 1:4, preceded by **מִיִּשְׁרָיִם**, which Pope rendered as “Rightly do they love you,” commenting

The word *mēšārîm* has been considered difficult in the present context. LXX rendered *eu \acute{t} usēs egapēsen se*, “right loves you.” Vulgate *recti*, “the (up)right,” and similarly Syriac, Targum and Luther With the change of the last word from verb, “they loved you,” to noun, “your love,” a striking balance is attained with parallel words for wine and love.¹³

But the MT can be retained once **מִיִּשְׁרָיִם** is read in the light of the Arabic cognate *يسر* (*yusr*) “easiness, richness, opulence wealth, luxury, abundance” (Lane 1893: 2977b; Wehr 1979: 1297). The plural **מִיִּשְׁרָיִם** can be understood as a plural of intensity, like **טוֹבִים**, noted above. In this way, **מִיִּשְׁרָיִם יָשָׁרוּבְיָדְךָ** means “they loved you more than *great luxuries*” (with the “*great*” added to indicate the plural of intensity), which escalates the preceding cohortative comparison, “let us extol your love more than wine.”

CONCLUSION

The consonantal text of Song of Songs 1:3 provides no difficulties to the interpreter, although *scriptio plene* of the emphatic particle as **לוּ** (= **לוֹ**) would have been helpful. The problems have been with the versions and lexicons which

failed to recognize rare words in Hebrew which have widely attested cognates in Arabic. For example, the semantic range of טוב in Arabic includes “sweet” and “pleasant” when applied to wine or perfume; and the cognate of שר” suggests not only “right, upright,” but in certain contexts it indicates “wealth” and “luxury.”

Lapses in oral tradition permitted שֶׁשׁ “scent” to be pointed as שֵׁשׁ “name” and שֶׁשׁ or שֶׁשׁ “costly” to be misread as שֶׁשׁ “oil.” The failure of lexicographers to recognize راق/ريق (*rîq/râqa*) “to please, to delight,” along with راق/روق (*rûq/râqa*) “to pour out,” made subsequent exegesis of 1:3 difficult. However, when cognates of *all* the words of this verse come into focus, the meaning of the tricolon becomes quite evident.

NOTES

1. Following the LXX, μύρον ἐκκενωθῆεν ὄνομά σου “thy name is ointment poured forth.”
2. Pope joined 1:3a with 1:2b “Truly, sweeter is your love than wine, Than the smell of your precious oil.”
3. Murphy (1990: 125) further elaborated on the problem: “The repetition of שֶׁשׁ (‘perfume’) is particularly effective, and it forms a play on שֵׁשׁ (‘name’). However, ‘flowing’ [תִּירָק] is a doubtful translation; תִּירָק would seem to be the *Hop^cal* of רִיק (‘poured out’), but it is not in agreement with שֶׁשׁ, which is always masculine.”

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4. *UT* 425 #1339, 483 #2308 and #2315, respectively. See also McDaniel 1968: 206–208 for a discussion and other references to the emphatic ל.
5. See BDB and KBS, *sub voce*. For the ج (*la*) “surely,” see Lane 1893: 3006 and Wehr 1979: 998.
6. Stem II is used to designate the שׁמַן of שְׁמֹנֶה “eight.”
7. See BDB 937; Lane 1867: 1202–1203, 1190–1192; Wehr 1979: 427, 431.
8. See Lane 1872: 1593–1594; Wehr 1979: 566–567.
9. The proposed emendation are noted in KBS 3: 1228; Pope 1977: 300; and Murphy 1990: 125.
10. See Lane 1893: 3020; Wehr 1979: 1066.
11. Compare Psa 8:7 and Lam 3:22. See McDaniel 1968: 213–215 and references cited there.
12. Reading טֹבִים as a plural of intensity (GKC 124^e).
13. See Pope 1977: 305 for a summary of other proposals to make MT מִיִּשְׂרָיִם into some kind of wine (מִיִּרְשׁ) or songs (שִׁירִים).