

CLARIFYING
BAFFLING
BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE POOR MUST NOT BE
DENIED ASSISTANCE
DEUT 15:4 AND 15:11

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VIII

THE POOR MUST NOT BE DENIED ASSISTANCE

DEUTERONOMY 15:4 AND 15:11

INTRODUCTION

Expectations expressed in Deu 15:4 and 15:11 concerning the poor appear to be in disagreement. The former verse states clearly **לֹא יִהְיֶה־בְּךָ אֶבְיֹן** “but there will be no poor among you.”¹ But the latter verse seems, at first glance, to state with equal clarity **כִּי לֹא־יִחַדֵּל אֶבְיֹן מִקְרֶב הָאָרֶץ** “for the poor will never cease out of the land.”² The Septuagint reads with equal clarity *and* ambivalence: ὅτι οὐκ ἔσται ἐν σοὶ ἐνδεής “for there shall not be a poor person in you” (15:4); and οὐ γὰρ μὴ ἐκλίπη ἐνδεής ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς “for the poor shall not cease from the land” (15:11).

Commentators have been of little help in resolving this tension. Driver (1902: 181) basically reversed the sequencing of the verses stating, “[15:11 is] the ground of the preceding injunction [in 15:4]: the poor will never cease out of the land, and hence it [the injunction] will never become superfluous.”

On the other hand, von Rad (1966: 106–107) appealed to a two source theory—one tradition from the legislator (15:4) and the other tradition from the preacher (15:11)—stating:

This preacher has realistic ideas about poverty; he knows that Israel will always have to deal with it (v. 11). This conception seems to have provoked a contrary opinion, namely, that complete obedience will be answered by a complete divine blessing, and hence by the end of all poverty (vv. 4–6). In both conceptions, but more clearly in the second one, there is expressed the negative and quite unascetic estimate of poverty characteristic of the earlier Israel. It is an evil out of which nothing of value can be extracted.

Such literary and theological discussions have only highlighted the tension between these verses. A careful philological inquiry about the cognates of לִּחְרֹם will provide better options for addressing the textual tensions, irrespective of whether the tradition is from a single author or from a legislator and a preacher.

PHILOLOGICAL ALTERNATIVES

A fresh interpretation was offered by Freedman and Lundbom (1980: 221) who argued that the verb לִּחְרֹם in 15:11 was not from לִּחְרֹם stem I, “to cease,” but from לִּחְרֹם stem II, “to grow fat.”³ They concluded, “The preacher is not saying, ‘The poor will never cease out of the land,’ but ‘The poor from the land will never grow fat.’” They concluded

This [verse 15:11] caps a rhetorical argument that seeks to move the people to charity. After telling his audience to remember the poor (15:1ff.), he then says they need not fear that the poor will grow rich, at least not on what they have given them. The poor will never grow fat on that!

Their reasoning was that this verse gave assurance to those of the upper class who gave to charity (in accordance to the legislation of 15:5–10) that they could relax because their gifts would be insufficient for the poor to make their way out of poverty. Even with charity, poverty “will not cease from the midst of the land.” Such an interpretation means that Deu 15:4, “there will be no poor in the land,” cannot be taken seriously, and certainly not literally. This interpretation *assumes* the traditional understanding of 15:11 that “the poor will never cease in the land” even though the text is translated quite differently as “the poor will never get fat.”

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On philological grounds this interpretation is seriously flawed. A careful look at Lane's (1865: 711) definition of *خدل* (*ḥadala*) reveals that this cognate means, "he was, or became, large, and full [or plump], in the shank and fore arm." The words "shank, fore arm, and ankle" actually appear twenty-two times in the thirty-nine line definition of *خدل* (*ḥadala*) and its by-form *خدلج* (*ḥadallaj*)—with *never* a mention of "fat" anywhere in the definitions, although "juice" was one of the definitions.⁴ In medical jargon *خدل* (*ḥadl*) would mean "peripheral edema," *not* "obesity." It is a referent to excessive "juice" (= fluid) in the limbs, not excessive fat of the torso.⁵

In light of this evidence, there is good reason to concur with Lewis (1985:108), followed by Schloen (1993: 23), that it is best "to resist the entry of *ḥdl*-II ["to become fat"] into our Hebrew lexicons," even though the NRSV (1989) used "grew fat" in Jud 5:7. While *خدل* (*ḥadl*) "peripheral edema" is of no real help in resolving the tensions between Deu 15:4 and 15:11, two other cognates need to be considered, namely, *حدل* (*ḥadala*) "to treat unjustly" and *خذل* (*ḥadala*) "to refuse to help someone."

The former cognate is not cited in Lane's lexicon but it was noted by Castell (1669: 1137) "iniquus fuit" and is cited by Wehr (1979: 192). If *חדל* is the cognate of *حدل* (*ḥadala*), the MT *כִּי לֹא־יִחַדֵּל אֶבְיוֹן מִקְרֹב הָאָרֶץ* would need to be read as a *Niph^cal* passive (*יִחַדֵּל*), "for the poor from the midst of the land must not be treated unjustly." The implication would be that poverty perpetuates itself through injustice. Were justice to prevail poverty would cease in the midst of the land.

The equation of חָדַל with the Arabic خذل (*ḥadāla*), “to leave, to abandon, to forsake” (Lane 1865: 713–714) is a bit problematic,⁶ but Winton Thomas (1957: 9) rightly asserted,

The equation of חָדַל = Arabic خذل [*ḥadāla*] can be accepted without hesitation, and a consideration of the meanings of the Arabic root forms the best starting point for our observations on the root as it is found in the Hebrew Bible.

Winton Thomas correctly cited Lane’s definition of خذل (*ḥadāla*) as “abstained from, neglected, *aiding* [italics mine]; held back from (as a gazelle holds back from going after the herd); left, forsook, deserted.” But in his discussion of חָדַל the *aiding* element is omitted and חָדַל is redefined as (1) “held back from, left, forsook”⁷ or (2) “held oneself back, refrained from,” or (3) “ceased, come to an end.” But in Lane’s one-hundred line definition the words “assistance” and “aid” occur twenty-five times, which is to say that the basic meaning of خذل (*ḥadāla*) is “to fail to render aid” or “to neglect giving assistance.” Thus, the חָדַל which is a cognate of خذل (*ḥadāla*) does not mean just “to refrain” or “to hold back”. It specifically means “to refrain *from giving aid*” and “to fail *to assist*,” with the italicized English words belonging to the root meaning of the Arabic/Hebrew word itself.⁸

Castell (1669: 1137) defined خذل (*ḥadāla*) as “*frustratus fuit, ope, et auxilio destituit*” and listed the following verses where خذل (*ḥadāla*) appeared in Arabic translations for Hebrew רָפָה or נָטַשׁ or עָזַב, all of which can mean “to forsake, to abandon”: (1) Jos 1:5, לֹא אֶרְפֶּךָ וְלֹא אֶעְזֹבְךָ = ولا اخذلك ولا اتركك (*wala’ aḥḍuluka wala’ atrukka*) “I will not fail you or forsake you”; (2) Jud 6:13, נָטַשְׁנוּ = خذلنا (*ḥadālanā*) “he deserted us”; (3) I Kings 6:13, וְלֹא אֶעְזֹב =

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ولا اخذل (*wala' aḥḍulu'*) “I will not forsake”; and (4) I Kings 8:57, וְאַל-יִתְּשֵׁנוּ, וְיִחְזְלֵנוּ = ولا يخذلنا (*wala' taḥḍulana'*) “may he not forsake us.”

CONCLUSION

In light of this evidence, Hebrew חָדַל, in addition to meaning “to cease” could be a cognate of (1) حَدَلَ (*ḥadala*) “to flatten, to treat unjustly,” and (2) خَذَلَ (*ḥadala*) “to refuse to help (someone), to desert (someone),” as well as (3) خَدَلَ (*ḥadala*) “peripheral edema,” i.e., to have an enlarged fore arm, or shank, or ankle (Lane 1873: 711, 713; Wehr 1979: 192, 267, 268). To refer to *the* root חָדַל in the singular, as did Freedman and Lundbom (1980: 216), is very misleading. There are four independent roots spelled חָדַל, with three different Arabic cognates—rather than one root with its semantic range going in four different directions. The חָדַל which means “to cease, to come to an end” has no Arabic cognate; and, as Winton Thomas (1957: 10) noted, “The meaning ‘cease’, in the sense of ‘come to an end’, is comparatively rare in the O. T., being found perhaps in eight passages only.”

When it comes to Deu 15:11, the חָדַל which best fits the context and removes the tension with Deu 15:4 is either (1) حَدَلَ (*ḥadala*) “to treat unjustly,” requiring the MT of 15:11 לֹא-יִחְדַּל אֲבִיּוֹן to be translated “Indeed, the poor *must not be treated unjustly*”⁹ or (2) خَذَلَ (*ḥadala*) “to refuse to help (someone),” in which case לֹא-יִחְדַּל אֲבִיּוֹן could also be revocalized as a passive and translated, “the poor *must not be denied assistance!*” If the active voice is retained the verse would mean, “Indeed, one *must not abstain from aiding* the poor in the land!” The aspect of necessity is reinforced by the imperative which follows: “Therefore I command you, ‘you

6. Ordinarily the Arabic *ḏ* became a *ṭ* in Hebrew and a *ṭ* in Aramaic and Ugaritic, like (1) Ugaritic *d^c* “to sweat,” (UT 386 # 686) which was cognate to *ṭṭṭ*, Syriac *ܕܘܬܐ* (*dû^c ata^c*), and the Arabic *وَدَعَ* (*wada^ca*) “to flow”; and (2) Ugaritic *dry* “to winnow” which was cognate to *ṭṭṭ*, Syriac *ܕܪܐ* (*dēra^c*), and Arabic *ذَرَا* (*ḏarra^c*) (UT 387 # 702). For the Arabic *حَدَل* (*ḥaḏala*) to be the cognate of Hebrew *חָדַל* it must be assumed that *חָדַל* follows the Ugaritic pattern rather than the usual Hebrew pattern, otherwise the cognate would have been *חָזַל*.

7. Winton Thomas (1957: 11), citing Gesenius-Buhl and G. R. Driver, argued for an active participle in Isa 53:3 (MT *חָדַלְוּ אֲנִי*) “renouncing men,” rather than the traditional passive meaning “rejected of men.” Apparently unnoticed by Winton Thomas was Lane’s notice that *حَدَلْتُ* (*ḥaḏalat*) was “said by some to be inverted [as to meaning], because she [a wild animal] is [not the one that leaves, but] the one that is left.” This notice supports the traditional interpretation “rejected of men.” Another option is to translate 53:3 as “rejected by the despairing,” assuming that *חָדַלְוּ* = *חָדַלְוּ*, the plural participle of the cognate of Arabic *أَيَس* (*ʾayisa*) and *إِيَّاس* (*ʾiyâs*) (Lane, 1863: 137; Wehr, 1979: 47).

8. Nowhere in the presentation of Freedman and Lundbom does this significant component—found in lexicons of Castell, Lane, and Wehr—receive any attention.

9. The *כִּי* is to be read as an emphatic particle (see Blommerde 1969: 30 for a bibliography on the emphatic *כִּי*). The verb has the modal force of necessity like the *לִּי* plus imperfect found in the Decalogue.

10. See Brown (1966: 449) who cited Deu 15:11, without any comment.

11. Note Brown 1966: 45, 422.