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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“TWO UNRECOGNIZED WORDS
IN ISAIAH 53:9a AND
EZEKIEL 43:7b”

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XIV

TWO UNRECOGNIZED WORDS

IN ISAIAH 53:9a AND EZEKIEL 43:7b

The seven Hebrew words in Isa 53:9a have presented a number of problems for interpreters. The following text and its varied translations speak for themselves.

Masoretic Text

וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־רְשָׁעִים קִבְרוֹ וְאֶת־עֲשִׂיר בְּמִתּוֹ

Septuagint

καὶ δώσω τοὺς πονηροὺς ἀντὶ τῆς ταφῆς αὐτοῦ
καὶ τοὺς πλουσίους ἀντὶ τοῦ θανάτου αὐτοῦ

And I will give the wicked for his burial,
and the rich for his death (Brenton's *Septuagint*, 1851)¹

Vulgate

*et dabit impios pro sepultura et divitem pro morte sua*²

The different English translations include

- And he shall give the ungodly for his burial, and the rich for his death (Douay Rheims),
- And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death (KJV, WEB, RWB),
- And they made his grave with the wicked, and with a rich man in his death (ASV, RSV),
- And they made His grave with the wicked — But with the rich at His death (NKJ),
- He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death (NIV, NIB),

Septuagint, though, read the אָת as the sign of the direct object. The third word, רְשָׁעִים “wicked (ones),” and the fourth word, קִבְרוֹ “his grave,” have not been problematic—but the initial ἀντὶ in the Septuagint and the initial *pro* in the Vulgate have no corresponding preposition in the MT.

The sixth word, עֲשִׂיר “rich,” has led to much speculation since it is not a fitting parallel for the preceding רְשָׁעִים “wicked ones.”⁴ Several scholars, cited in BDB (799), proposed emending the רְשָׁעִים to פְּשָׁעִים “transgressors” and then changing the עֲשִׂיר to רְשָׁעִים “wicked (ones),” thereby restoring parallel synonyms.⁵ More recently John McKenzie (1968: 130) emended the MT עֲשִׂיר “rich” to עֲשֵׂי רָע “evildoers” in order to get an appropriate parallel for the רְשָׁעִים “wicked.” The emendation was followed by the NAB in 1970.

But the real problem with the MT עֲשִׂיר is not with the consonants but with its etymology and vocalization. The unpointed Hebrew עֶשֶׂר could be the cognate of five different Arabic words, including

- عَشْر (‘*ašr*) “ten” (BDB 796; Lane 5: 2050–2052).
- عَشْر (‘*ašîr*) and عشيرة (‘*ašîrat*) “a relation, a friend, a man’s kinfolk” (Lane 5: 2053).⁶
- غَثْر (‘*gāṭara*) “to abound with herbage or with goods” and غَثْرَة (‘*gāṭrat*) “abundance of the goods, conveniences, or comforts of life” (BDB 799; Lane 6: 2230).
- عُسْر (‘*usr*) and عُسْرَة (‘*usrat*) “poverty, littleness of possessions, of property, of wealth, or of power” (Lane 5: 2043).

- **غثر** (*ḡutru*) and **غثراء** (*ḡatrâ'u*) “the low, base, vile, ignoble, mean, sordid, or the refuse, or rabble, of mankind” (Lane 6: 2230). Castell (1669: 2949) included the definitions, “*injuria, molestia, . . . tyrannus, iracundus, truculentus, . . . Homo improbus, impudicus, scelestus*” (abuse, trouble, tyrannical, angry, ferocious, morally unsound, shameless, infamous).⁷

Tradition and translators have, partly for theological reasons, taken the **עָשִׂיר** of Isa 53:9 to be the cognate of **غثرة** (*ḡatrat*) “rich”; and some have cited this verse as a prediction of Jesus’ being buried in the tomb of the rich Joseph of Arimathea. However, the contextually desiderated parallel for the **רָשָׁעִים** “wicked (ones)” is obviously the last in the list, i.e., **غثر** (*ḡutru*) “vile, ignoble.” In light of the *u* vowel of this cognate the MT **עָשִׂיר** can be repointed as **עֶשִׂיר** or as a segolate **עֶשֶׁר**, with the **י** removed as a later scribal addition once the word was misunderstood as the widely used word for the “rich” rather than the rare word used for the “vile.”⁸

The fourth cognate cited above, **عسر** (*ʿusr*) “the poor” or “the powerless,” should also be kept in focus. The prophet may well have intended a *double entendre* constructed with rare words for “the poor” and “the lowly.” No honor would be bestowed on those buried in a potter’s field or a cemetery for sinners.

The last word of 53:9a, **בְּמִתְיוֹ** can be vocalized as **בְּמִתְיֹו** “his high place” (which in context would mean “his burial mound”) or **בְּמִתְיֹו** (with the MT) meaning “in his death” (BDB 119 and 560).⁹

A similar ambiguity with the **במותם** occurs in Ezek 43:7, which reads

וְלֹא יִטְמְאוּ עוֹד בֵּית־יִשְׂרָאֵל שֵׁם קִדְשִׁי
הַמָּוָה וּמַלְכֵיהֶם בְּזוֹנוֹתָם וּבַפְּגָרֵי מַלְכֵיהֶם בְּמוֹתָם

KJV

and my holy name, shall the house of Israel no more defile,
neither they, nor their kings, by their whoredom,
nor by the carcasses of their **kings in their high places**.

NAS and NAU

And the house of Israel will not again defile My holy name, neither they nor their kings, by their harlotry and by the corpses of their **kings when they die**.

McDaniel

And the house of Israel will not again defile My holy name, neither they nor their kings, by their harlotry and by the corpses of their **child-sacrifices at their high places**

The last word in the MT, **בְּמוֹתָם**, was translated in the Septuagint as ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῶν “in their midst,” evidently having a *Vorlage* with **בתוכם** for the MT **במותם**. The Vulgate has *in exelsis*, which is reflected not only in the Douay Rheims and KJV, but also in the ASV, NKJ, NIV, NIB, NAB, WEB, and YLT—all having “their high places.” But the NRS has “at their deaths,” like the NAS and NAU which have “when they die,” as if the text were **בְּמוֹתָם**. The RSV and the NJB have nothing for the **בְּמוֹתָם**, evidently viewing the **במותם** as a variant dittography of the MT **בְּתַתָּם** “in their placing” which begins the next verse.

The clue for deciding whether to read **בְּמוֹתָם** as “their high places” or “in their dying” is found in a proper understanding of the second **מִלְכִיָּהֶם** in Ezek 43:7b. The first occurrence of **מִלְכִיָּהֶם** in the verse certainly means “their kings,” but the second **מִלְכִיָּהֶם** needs to be repointed as **מִלְכִיָּהֶם**, a segolate plural meaning “their child-sacrifices”—which accounts for the reference to all of the dead bodies. The noun **מִלְךָ** “child-sacrifice” is well attested, although traditionally it was treated as the name of the deity mentioned in I Kings 11:7, “Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech (**מִלְךָ**) the abomination of the Ammonites.” But in I Kings 11:5, the Ammonite Molech appears as **מִלְכָם שֶׁקָן עַמֹּנִים**, “Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites.” This difference suggests that the **מִלְךָ** of 11:7 is simply a misspelling of the **מִלְכָם** of 11:5, 11:33, II Kings 23:13, as well as the **מִלְכָם** (Μελχομ) in Jer 49:1, 4, and Zeph 1:5—all of which the NIV and NIB transliterated as Molech. (Noteworthy also is the **מִלְכָם** of II Sam 12:30 and I Chron 20:2, where the Septuagint has the doublet Μελχολ τοῦ βασιλέως αὐτῶν, “Melchol their king.”)

In light of Otto Eissfeldt’s study in 1935, in which he convincingly argued that **מִלְךָ** was not a divine name but a technical term for a child-sacrifice, the reference to “Molech” in the seven verses cited next should be read as the noun meaning “a *molk*-sacrifice” or “a child-sacrifice” rather than the name “Molech” appearing in the translations. The pointing of the preposition in the following texts as **לְ** (= **לְ** + **הֵ**)

reflects the scribal recognition that מֹלֶךְ was a common noun, not a proper name:

- Lev 18:21 וּמִזְרַעְךָ לֹא־תִתֵּן לְהַעֲבִיר לְמֹלֶךְ, “You shall not give any of your children to devote them by fire to Molech” (i.e., “for a *molk*-offering” or “for child-sacrifice”).
- Lev 20:2, אֲשֶׁר יִתֵּן מִזְרָעוֹ לְמֹלֶךְ מוֹת יוֹמָת, “who gives any of his children to Molech shall be put to death.”
- Lev 20:3, מִזְרָעוֹ נָתַן לְמֹלֶךְ לְמַעַן טַמֵּא אֶת־מִקְדָּשִׁי, “he has given one of his children to Molech, defiling my sanctuary and profaning my holy name.”
- Lev 20:4, בָּתְחוּ מִזְרָעוֹ לְמֹלֶךְ לְבַלְתִּי הָמִית אֹתוֹ, “when he gives one of his children to Molech, and do not put him to death.”
- Lev 20:5, כָּל־הַזֵּנִים אַחֲרָיו לְזִנוֹת אַחֲרֵי הַמֹּלֶךְ, “all who follow them in prostituting themselves to Molech.”
- II Kings 23:10, לְהַעֲבִיר אִישׁ אֶת־בְּנוֹ וְאֶת־בָּתּוֹ בָּאֵשׁ לְמֹלֶךְ, “that a man make a son or a daughter pass through fire for Molech.”
- Jer 32:35, לְהַעֲבִיר אֶת־בְּנֵיהֶם וְאֶת־בָּנוֹתֵיהֶם לְמֹלֶךְ, “to make their sons and their daughters pass through fire for Molech.”

Other texts which speak of child-sacrifice, without using the technical term מֹלֶךְ, include Psa 106:37–38; Isa 57:5–9; Jer 7:31–32; Ezek 16:20–21; 23:36–39; and Mic 6:7.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

Once the second מַלְכֵיהֶם of Ezek 47:3 is repointed as מַלְכֵיהֶם “their child-sacrifices,” there is no need to repoint the MT בְּמוֹתָם “their high places” as בְּמוֹתָם “when they die” or “at their dying.” A reference in the same half-verse to “high places,” where sacrifices were made, and the technical term for a “child-sacrifice” seems contextually quite natural. However, the last word of Isa 53:9a, בְּמוֹתָיו “in his dying” needs to be repointed as בְּמוֹתָיו “his (burial) mound”—the perfect parallel to קִבְרוֹ “his grave.”

The two words which have to date gone unrecognized by most translators and interpreters are (1) the מֶלֶךְ “child-sacrifice” in Ezek 47:3, where it provides paronomasis with מֶלֶךְ “king,” and (2) the עֲשִׂיר / עֶשֶׂר “vile, ignoble, base” in Isa 53:9a, which, for theological reasons, has been identified as the well attested עֲשִׂיר “rich.”¹¹ Therefore, for philological reasons, the translation of the NAB for Isa 53:9a is preferable: “A grave was assigned him among the wicked and a burial place with evildoers”—recognizing that the MT *Qal* רַשָׁעִים can be read as the passive *Hoph'al* רַשָׁעִים and that the Hebrew has the plural “wicked (ones)” followed by the singular “vile.” Repointing some vowels in the MT is necessary, but no emendation of the consonants is required.

The correct translation of Ezek 47:3, as proposed above, is “And the house of Israel will not again defile my holy name, neither they nor their kings, by their harlotry and by the dead bodies of their child-sacrifices at their high places.” The

vocable עֶשֶׂר / עֶשֶׂיר “vile, ignoble, base” needs to be added to adjectives listed in the lexicons of Biblical Hebrew.

NOTES

1. James McDonough (private communication, 2004) translated the Greek somewhat more literally as, “And I will give away the wicked men instead of that man’s burial and [I will give away] the rich men instead of that man’s death.”

2. McDonough noted also that the antecedent of the Vulgate’s *sua* could be “the rich man” or the the subject of the verb: “And *he* shall give away impious men for burial and [he shall give away] the *rich man* for *his* death.”

3. The Dead Sea Isaiah Scroll (IQIs^a) has a plural verb. The line reads ויתנו את רשעים קברו ועם עשירים בומתו. Differences from the MT include (1) the plural verb, (2) the plural עשירים “riches”/“vile ones,” (3) the preposition עם [the ם being overwritten by a indistinguishable correction] for the second את, and (4) בומתו, which can mean “his (burial) mound” but cannot mean “with his dead/death.” The ם of the עשירים is blurred but the letters are clearly in the text.

4. Whybray (1975: 178) commented,

That the burial place of rich men and criminals should be identical is highly improbable, and makes the lines meaningless. Of the emendations which have been proposed, *‘oś ê ra^c*, ‘doers of evil’ and *ś^{ec} irîm*, ‘demons’, are the most plausible, but the text may be correct: it has been suggested that *‘āšîr* here is unconnected with *‘āšîr* meaning ‘rich’, but related to an Arabic word meaning ‘refuse, rabble’.

5. Albright (1956: 246), in light of Lev 17:7, “they shall no more slay their sacrifices for satyrs,” emended the עֲשִׂיר to שְׂעִירִים and translated, “His grave was put with the wicked. And his funerary installation with the demons” (with the plural “demons” reflecting the plural עֲשִׂירִים in DSIs^a).

6. This cognate probably contributed to the later tradition that Joseph of Arimathaea, “a rich man” (אָרָם עֲשִׂיר), was also a “kinsman” (עֲשִׂיר) of Joseph, Mary and Jesus.

7. See Reider, 111–130, especially page 118.

8. Westermann (1969: 266) translated the synonyms as “malefactors and miscreants.”

9. In light of the בּוֹמְתוֹ in 1QIs^a where the medial ו reflects the vowel shift from *â* to *ô*, Albright (1956: 244–246) proposed the emendation of MT בְּבִמְתָיו “in his deaths” to בְּבִמְתוֹ “his burial mound.” Reider (1952: 118) proposed emending the MT בְּבִמְתָיו to בֵּית מוֹתוֹ “the house of his death,” meaning in this context “his tomb.”

10. See below Chapter XVI, “Deceived or Deceiving Prophets,” for a full discussion of Ezekiel 14:9 and 20:25–27.

11. In light of the following four Gospel statements about Joseph of Arimathaea, it is very difficult to associate him or his tomb with the wicked and their graves, or to make Isa 53:9 a prophecy about Jesus’s burial in Joseph’s tomb:

- “there came a rich man of Arimathaea, named Joseph, who also himself was Jesus’ disciple. . .” (Matt 27:57).
- “Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also looking for the kingdom of God . . .” (Mark 15:43).

- “Behold there was a man named Joseph, who was a councillor, a good and righteous man, who had not consented . . .” (Luke 23:50).
- “And after this Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly . . .” (John 19:38).