ISAIAH 40:4 : ETYMOLOGICAL AND POETIC CONSIDERATIONS

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ISA 40:4 READS:

<div dir="rtl">

כל גיא ינשא

וכל הר וגבעה ישפלו

והיה העקב למישור

והרכסים לבקעה

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This verse is usually translated:

> Every valley shall be lifted up,
> And every mountain and hill shall be made low;
> The crooked shall be made straight,[1]/ The uneven[2]/ steep[3]
>   shall be made level,
> And the rough places/ridges[4] a plain.

The difference in the rendering of the third stich reflects the different interpretations of the word *h'qb*. This paper will evaluate the existing interpretations and propose a new one.

1. Thus LXX, Targum, Vulgate, King James. It is so understood by Ibn Ezra. Cf. also Kissane (1943, p. 5).

2. Thus RSV. Cf. Marti (1900, p. 271). "Rugged" found in NEB and New JPS is close to this.

3. Thus Peshitta. Cf. Condamin (1905, p. 241); North (1964, p. 32); McKenzie (1968, p. 15).

4. For *hrksym* see Brown, Driver, Briggs (1952, p. 940). Muilenburg (1956, p. 427) comments: "The word translated *rough places* occurs only here in the O.T. Its meaning is by no means certain, but the context makes the rendering plausible." A literal rendering might also yield "the impassible will be cut through."

When ascertaining the meaning of a difficult or unusual word both etymol-
ogy and context must be considered. The meaning of the word may be derived
from other words of the same root in Hebrew, or from cognates in related
languages. However, the use of cognates is sometimes misleading since the
same word may have different connotations in different languages. Even
knowledge of the root meaning in Hebrew is not always sufficient for un-
derstanding a particular form or word without relying on the second factor, i.e.
context. The proposed meaning of the word must satisfy the semantic and
syntactic requirements of its context, *as well as the poetic requirements*.[5] We
will, therefore, first consider the etymology of *h'qb* and then examine the
poetic structure of this verse.

The form *'āqōb* appears only here and in Jer 17:9 (a completely unrelated
context). The root *'qb* occurs often and has two basic meanings. *'qb* 1 means
"twisted, tortuous, deceitful."[6] Hence the translation "crooked." This mean-
ing is also applicable to Jer 17:9. "Rugged, uneven" is an extension of
"crooked," or, if one prefers, a different dimension of "crooked." "It is not
the winding road but the unevenness of the surface that is referred to."[7] The
meaning "steep, hilly" (a further extension of "crooked"), although it appears
in the lexicons,[8] cannot be substantiated from elsewhere in the Bible; it is based
on Syriac and Arabic cognates.[9] *'qb* 2 means "heel, footsteps, traces;"[10] in
short, a heel or heel-like identation. Thus we find that all translations of Isa
40:4 cited above are based directly or indirectly on *'qb* 1.

We now turn to a consideration of the semantic and poetic aspects of the
verse. It is clear from v. 3 and the first two stichs of v. 4 that the prophet is
speaking of smoothing the way, both literally and figuratively, for the returning
exiles. It is also clear that v. 4 contains two pairs of parallel stichs,[11] and that
there is a relationship among all four stichs. Unfortunately, many commen-
tators have failed to take into account both the parallelism of the last two stichs

    5. Cf. Lowth (1778, pp. xxivff).
    6. Cf. Ben Yehuda (1910-59, vol. IX, 4668f) and Brown, Driver, Briggs (1952, p. 784).
    7. Muilenburg (1956, p. 427).
    8. See note 6.
    9. Yellin (1939, p. 39) makes the following connection between "crooked" and "hilly":
        The root *'qb* is one of the five roots (*'qb, 'ql, 'qm, 'qp, 'qš*) which express
        curvature, and when it speaks here of "mountain and hill" the meaning of *h'qb* is:
        the path which winds in spirals for ascent up the mountain in order to make the
        steepness of ascent and descent easier for the wagons. And the meaning [of the
        verse] is: after "every mountain and hill is made low," they will go on a straight
        path without the need for twisting spirals.
    10. See note 6.
    11. The parallelism of the last two stichs is emphasized by the phonetic correspondence between
'qb and *bq'h* (noted by Sacon, 1974, p. 108), and between *myšwr* and *rksym*.

and their relationship to the first two stichs. Thus, for example, Kissane (1943), whose translation reads "And the crooked shall be made straight," explains the verse as a whole by suggesting that the first two stichs deal with leveling, the third with straightening, and the fourth with smoothing (p. 7). It is not clear to me what the difference is between leveling and smoothing, except one of degree. That leaves stichs *a*, *b*, and *d* expressing more or less the same idea, with stich *c* expressing a different one. Thus the translation "crooked," while most defensible from an etymological point of view, is the least appropriate from a poetic-structural point of view. This was already recognized by Robert Lowth (1778), whose main translation reads the same as Kissane's, but who noted (p. 313): "The word *'qb* is very generally rendered *crooked*; but this sense of the word seems not to be supported by any good authority." He preferred to understand the word from its Ethiopic and Syriac cognates because "Thus the parallelism would be more perfect: 'the hilly country shall be made level, and the precipices a smooth plain'." Lowth, however, never bothered to relate the last two stichs to the first two.[12] His translation yields a stanza with the first stich speaking of a valley and the other three of mountains —an ABBB pattern.

There are numerous examples of four-stich stanzas in the Bible. The thoughts in such stanzas are usually arranged in one of the following patterns:[13]

AABB The ox knoweth his owner,
      And the ass his master's crib;
      But Israel does not know,
      My people does not consider. (Isa 1:3)

ABAB For thy work shall be rewarded, saith the Lord,
      And they shall come back from the land of the enemy;
      And there is hope for the future, saith the Lord,
      And thy children shall return to their own territory.
      (Jer 31:16b-17)

ABBA And they move on everyone in his ways,
      And they entangle not their paths;
      Neither does one thrust another,
      They march everyone in his highway. (Joel 2:7b-8a)

The ABBB pattern, which results from translating "valley ‖ mountain" and "hilly ‖ ridges," is, to my knowledge, otherwise unattested. The only one of the

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12. This is all the more surprising in light of his discussion of four-line stanzas on pp. xiff.
13. Cf. *ibid.* and Gordis (1971, pp. 78–82).

traditional translations that produces an acceptable poetic structure is "valley‖ mountain"; "uneven‖ rough." This is the structure accepted by Krinetzki (1972, pp. 63–64), who explains that 4*a-b* contains an antithetic parallelism continued and expanded by the synonymous parallelism in 4*c-d*. That is, the pattern is AABB.

In light of the foregoing discussion I would like to propose a new interpretation of the word *h'qb* which can be justified on etymologic grounds and yields a better poetic structure.

In the pair *h'qb-myšwr* we have perhaps an echo of the names *y'qb = yśr' l* (cf. Hos 12:4).[14] The name *y'qb* has two etymologies in the Bible, one from *'qb* 1 in Gen 27:36, and one from *'qb* 2 in Gen 25:26. We have seen that all of the above mentioned interpretations of *h'qb* in Isa 40:4 have been derived from *'qb* 1. My interpretation derives from *'qb* 2; I understand the word to mean "indentation, depression, concavity." It is true that there is no confirmation for this meaning from the Bible or any other contemporaneous source (no more than there is for "hilly"), but the word does appear with this meaning in the medieval Yosippon (Pseudo-Josephus). This source is admittedly very late, but it obviously reflects the verse in Isaiah and understands it exactly as I propose to. The passage reads:

ויעש המלך מישור סביב לבית, וימלא את כל העקוב,
ויעש את כל העקוב (המקום: variant) מישור.[15]

The king made a level (area) around the Temple;
and he filled in every *'āqôb,* and he made every *'āqôb* (variant: the whole place) level.

Adopting this meaning for *h'qb* in Isa 40:4 yields a very nice poetic pattern. The entire verse reads:

Every valley shall be lifted up,
And every mountain and hill shall be made low;
The depression shall become level,
And the ridges a plain.

14. Hos 12:4 derives the name *yśr' l* from the root *śry*, as does Gen 32:29. But in Gen 32:29 (cf. also Gen 35:10) the names Jacob and Israel are juxtaposed as if they are antithetical (compare Ruth 1:20). This perhaps suggests an underlying play on the antonyms *'qb* and *yśr* (which is phonetically very close to *śry*). This interpretation is hinted at by Speiser (1964, p. 255): "The name [Israel] is best explained etymologically as 'May El persevere' (Dr.). But both Jacob and Israel are treated here symbolically, to indicate the transformation of a man once devious (Jacob) into a *forthright* [italics mine — A.B.] and resolute fighter."

15. Wertheimer (1958, p. 193).

The pattern found here is one which I call interlocking or echoing parallelism. It consists of two parallel stichs followed by two stichs which are both parallel to each other and echo the parallelism of the first pair. It is difficult to know whether to analyze the pattern as ABAB or AABB. In Isa 40:4 stichs *a* and *b* are parallel to each other, as are stichs *c* and *d*; but *c* echoes or refers back to *a*, and *d* echoes *b*. That is, "the depression" echoes "every valley" and "the ridges" echoes "every mountain and hill." The correspondence between the echoing terms is further reinforced by the morphology of the verse: *gy'* and *h'qb*, both referring to low places, are both singular; *hr wgb'h* and *hrksym*, both signifying high places, are plural or compound (requiring a plural verb).[16]

The image in Isa 40:4 is complete and symmetrical. It expresses the equalizing of concavity and convexity on a large scale and on a small scale: raising the valleys and lowering the hills; filling in the depressions and smoothing down the protuberances. In this way the road is made level through the *midbār* ‖ *'ărābā* (v.3), a region which contains mountains and ridges of various heights as well as depressions ranging in size from ditches and wadis to huge craters.

16. Another example of echoing parallelism occurs in Ps 126:5-6:
> They that sow in tears,
> In joy will they reap:
> He who goes weeping, carrying the seed bag,
> Will come back joyfully, carrying his sheaves.

Here the morphology (plural-plural; singular-singular) and the relative length of the lines suggest an AABB analysis, but there is an ABAB word pattern (*zr'* in *a* and *c*; *rnh* in *b* and *d*) which stresses the semantic relationship between *a* and *c*, and *b* and *d*. Echoing parallelism is apparently achieved by having different levels of the parallelism (e.g. the semantic, grammatical, and lexical levels) in different patterns. I discuss echoing parallelism in more detail in Berlin (forthcoming).

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