

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_jbl-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php)

sought to reattach Syria to Egypt, and among other cities captured those of Judæa" — a period to which I have ventured to assign Ps. xlii.—xliii. and (with some hesitation) Ps. lxviii. (*The Origin of the Psalter*, etc., p. 114). M. Halévy, it is true, assigns Ps. lxviii. to "the *coterie* which so vehemently strove with Jeremiah and his partizans." He says "our Psalmist utters the same prediction as Hananiah the son of Azur (Jer. xxvii. 16, xxviii. 17); viz. that the Babylonian invaders shall be entirely destroyed and the Jewish captives restored." He even thinks that, "the likeness being so great," Hananiah, "the personal enemy of Jeremiah," may be the author of our psalm (*Revue des Études Juives*, Juillet-Septembre, 1889, p. 15). Many bold exegetical suggestions are offered in support of this view, with which I will not occupy the space of this JOURNAL. M. Halévy seems to have undertaken to reconstruct the literary history of the Old Testament on the ruins of the criticism of the last eighty years!

---

## Light Thrown on Some Biblical Passages by Talmudic Usage.

DR. MARCUS JASTROW.

IT is a fact to be greatly regretted that the Talmudic and Midrashic literature is but rarely consulted for the interpretation of difficult Biblical passages. This is as true of Christian as it is of Jewish commentators of modern times; nor is it difficult to account for this neglect. The modern interpreter desires, by means of grammatical and etymological analysis, to arrive at the true and direct meaning of words and sentences, irrespective of religious, or dogmatic, or even homiletical associations which may be found in the text or, more often, put into it.

No such plain and unbiased interpretation is expected of the Talmudic or Midrashic discussions on Biblical texts; and the attempt, therefore, to search the vast "Ocean of the Talmud" — as this literature is often called — for an accidental pearl of good, sound, verbal explanation is soon abandoned, if ever made. And yet it must be obvious to every unprejudiced Biblical student that those among whom the Biblical language was still, to a certain extent, a living tongue, or, to say the least, a living stream of tradition, must have

harbored a deeper and truer, though unconscious, conception of the meaning of the Hebrew word than any at which we can arrive by the artificial means of comparative philology; and the question must naturally be asked, Could we not, even beneath the homiletical, dialectical, and even dogmatical layer, discover the plain and spontaneous understanding of the letter of the Bible then current in the — I might say — unconscious consciousness of the Jewish scholars?

Instead of solving this question analytically, I should prefer the synthetical method, and offer, as a slight contribution towards its final solution, a few specimens of Biblical passages which acquire a clearer sense from Talmudic usage or even direct exegesis.

Here is Gen. xlix. 11: **אָסְרִי לְגַפְּנֵי עֵיִרָה וְלִשְׂרָקָה בְּנֵי אֶתְנֹו**, which is invariably translated, by Jew and Christian, from King James' version to Leeser's and Benisch's Bibles, and from Luther to Zunz, "He binds his foal unto the vine, and his ass's colt unto the choice vine."

I shall not urge the objection that the root **אָסַר** in connection with beasts of burden always means 'saddle, or harness,' not 'tie, fasten to.' The poetic style of the Blessing of Jacob may account for this anomalous usage. But what is meant by the action here described?

The usual interpretation is this, that Judah's land will be so abundant in vineyards that he will not mind spoiling a few vines by tying his foals to them. Heilprin, in his *Historical Poetry of the Ancient Hebrews* (I. p. 36), finds in these words a severe criticism of Judah's savage recklessness, which the Ephraimitic author of *Jacob's Blessing* took occasion to emphasize. But who, be he ever so savage, ties a young, untamed foal to a tender vine? Does he not know that the animal can easily break or uproot the plant and make good its escape?

How, then, did the Talmudic tradition understand the passage under observation?

In *Babli Kethuboth*, 111<sup>b</sup>, we read:

"When Rab Dimi came (from Palestine to Babylonia) he said, 'What is that which is written **עֵיִרָה לְגַפְּנֵי אָסְרִי**?' [Answer.] 'There is not a vine in Palestine which does not require one foal for harvesting its produce.' 'And what is the meaning of **אֶתְנֹו בְּנֵי אֶתְנֹו**?' 'There is not a tree (comparatively) barren<sup>1</sup> which does not bear enough to load two she-asses.'"

What is the literal understanding behind this homiletical interpre-

<sup>1</sup> **אֶתְנֹו** is here homiletically taken in the sense of the Talmudical **אֵילָן שְׂרָקָה**, "a tree bearing no fruits."

tation? How would Rab Dimi have rendered the verse literally? Obviously by saying, "He harnesses for a vine his foal, and for a choice vine his ass's colt," or — since he read **בְּנֵי** for **בְּנֵי** — "his colts."

We find the same interpretation less disguised in *Midrash Rabba* (Genesis, s. 98) : "Rab Judah explains, 'for a vine of lesser fertility they harness a Libyan ass,<sup>2</sup> for a choice vine, two young asses.' "

Rashi, in his commentary on the Pentateuch, adopts this interpretation, without any further remark, which, to every one acquainted with this author's conscientious methods, is an evidence that this was, in his circles, the current conception. And yet it has remained unnoticed, as far as I can tell, by all his successors, and is surely ignored by modern versions.

In proceeding to the next following verse, **חַבְלֵי עֵינָיִם מִיַּיִן**, **וְלֶבֶן שָׁנִים מִחֶלֶב** we meet again with a difficulty of an intrinsic nature. What can the author have meant by saying, "Eyes red with wine, and teeth white with milk"? He undoubtedly meant to *praise* Judah, not to expose him as a drunkard. Besides, though far from claiming to be an expert in this line, I doubt whether even excessive wine-drinking produces red eyes, unless it be connected with night vigils and debauchery (as in Prov. xxiii. 29). Sure, however, is it that nobody ever believed that drinking milk made white teeth. And even granted that all these misconceptions are due to the author's faulty physiological knowledge, and, furthermore, granted that he intended to describe Judah as an excessive wine-bibber, how does this agree with the sober, nomadic habit of milk-drinking? The drunkard, it is well known, has no special craving for that softest of all drinks. Besides, does the author wish to blame Judah for this habit too? And are white teeth a blemish?

Here, again, if we divest the Talmudic interpretation of its homiletical garb, we find the following rendition : "The sparkling of the eyes, brighter than wine; the whiteness of the teeth, whiter than milk."

Here is a description both of Judah's physical beauty and of his bright and laughing humor : "He who causes his neighbor to show the white of his teeth," — *i.e.* he who cheers his neighbor up to good-natured laughter — "has done more than if he gave him milk to drink." "Let thine eyes sparkle," says Israel to the Lord, "that is sweeter than wine."<sup>3</sup> Such is the homiletical or allegorical applica-

<sup>2</sup> For **בְּרִיקָם** **לֵה** read **לִבְרִיקָם**.

<sup>3</sup> *Babli Kethuboth*, III<sup>b</sup>.

tion of the verse in question, from under which you can cull its natural meaning.

Having given instances of implicit Talmudical textual interpretation, we shall offer now a suggestion concerning the meanings of Biblical words to be derived from post-Biblical usage.

In Balaam's Blessing we read (Num. xxiii. 9) **הַיְזִים לְבָדָד יֹשֵׁב וְנַנְיִים לֹא יִתְחַשֵּׁב**, which is generally translated, "Behold a people that dwells alone, and is not to be reckoned among the nations."

Is this praise? And is it in agreement with the general drift of Biblical thought concerning Israel's position among the nations of the earth? Israel is the head of the nations, the first-born son, the select from all nations, but not a recluse.

I admit the verse may be so interpreted as to mean a superiority of Israel to all other nations, but then it must be admitted that the diction would, in this case, be out of keeping with the elevated and sustained style of the poem which has been found worthy of a place in the Mosaic code.

Turning to Talmudic usage, we find **חשב** in the Hithpael used in the sense of 'conspiring, forming an alliance.' In *Tosefta Abodah Zarah* (II, 7) we read: "You may take part in the siege of a (Jewish) city, if undertaken for the sake of restoring law and order, but **אם מתחשב הרי זה אסור**, *i.e.*, if one (the Jew) conspires (or forms an alliance), it is forbidden." The parallel passages in *Babli* and *Yerushalmi* serve to restore the corrupt text of the *Tosefta* and also to make the sense clear. There we read, "provided he is not conspiring with them." We know who "they" are. They are the Roman invaders. Now the siege of a fortress, if undertaken for the sake of order,—that is to say, against lawless people,—is a legitimate pursuit, and the Jew may take part in it. But if the Jew joins the Romans as an ally to strengthen the foreign government, if it is an expedition against Jewish patriots who fight for independence, he is a traitor and a murderer. From the obscurity of expression and the whole context we can see that the law (or Halakhah) took its rise during the last war of independence of Judæa, and who knows but it may have been directed against the numerous Romanizers of whom Agrippa II. was one of the leaders, or perhaps against such men as Josephus, who rendered services to the Romans of a very suspicious nature?

Having thus established the meaning of **התחשב** as 'planning with others,' we return to Balaam's prophecy, "How shall I curse

whom God has not cursed? or how shall I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced? For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him; lo, it is a people that dwells alone and conspires not against nations."

It is a peaceful people, the prophet says; it forms no political alliances for the sake of crushing other nations; it has not the political ambition which dictates conquest and aggrandizement. It claims only its own.

This is *one* side of the people, which the prophet sees from his high observatory. But he turns to another elevation, and from there he sees another feature of this peculiar people (verse 24):

"Behold, it is a people that rises as a lioness, and as a lion it raises itself; he does not lie down until he has eaten the prey, and drunk the blood of the slain."

It is a peace-loving people, it is true; it has no political ambition; but beware of attacking it, for its God has endowed it with a lion's courage.

With a truly poetic contrast to the first link, the tri-partite prophecy over Israel winds up by saying (xxiv. 9), "He (Israel) is couched and has lain down as a lion, who will stir him up?"