

ISAIAH 40:4 : ETYMOLOGICAL AND POETIC CONSIDERATIONS

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ISA 40:4 READS:

כל גיא ינשא
וכל הר וגבעה ישפלו
והיה העקב למישור
והרכסים לבקעה

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/} steep³
shall be made level,
And the rough places/ridges⁴ 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 etymology 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 understanding 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 meaning 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 indentation. 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 commentators 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

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 *4a-b* contains an antithetic parallelism continued and expanded by the synonymous parallelism in *4c-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 = yšr' 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:

יעש המלך מישור סביב לבית, וימלא את כל העקוב,
יעש את כל העקוב (המקום: 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 *yšr' l* from the root *šry*, 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 *yšr* (which is phonetically very close to *šry*). 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* || ‘*ārābā* (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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Isaiah's vision of the future is nothing less than a portrait of shalom involving peace, wholeness, and hope both for the human community and the earth. Throughout the scroll, imagery drawn from nature affirms that renewal of life, like the renewal of the earth, is possible for the human family. The essays in this volume explore the poetic artistry and symbolic imagery in the Isaiah scroll. They examine specific texts, interpreting important language and imagery in those texts, delineating the functions and implications of such imagery and metaphors throughout the entire book of Isaiah, and pre Volume 77 Issue 3-4. A Poetic Analysis of Isaiah 40: English | François. Harvard Theological Review. 6 On the nature of the scene, see Cross, Frank M., "The Council of Yahweh in Second Isaiah," JNES 12 (1953) 274-77 and his Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973) 187-88. More recently, see Mullen, E. Theodore Jr, The Assembly of the Gods (HSM 24; Chico: Scholars, 1980) 217ff. 7 If one replaces קִי by simple יְהוָה or yhwah, as in 41:21 and 66:9, the thorn is pulled. 8 Exod 6:7; Lev 26:12; Deut 26:17-18; 29:12; 1 Sam 12:22; 2 Sam 7:24; Jer 7:23; 11:4; 30:25; Ezek 11:20, and many other examples. 9 The exclamatory effect is registered by the Vg's voc Isaiah 40:2 "Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins." "Iniquity is pardoned" double for all her sins: Cruel slaughter and captivity at the hands of the Babylonians were sufficient payment for past sins; so someday after worldwide dispersion, Israel will return to her land in peace and in the glory of Messiah's kingdom. Verses 3-5: A prophetic exhortation told Israel to prepare for the revelation of the Lord's glory at the arrival of Messiah. Scripture sees John the Baptist in this role (Matt. 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23). It likewise sees the future forerunner who is to be like Elijah preparing for Christ's second coming (Malachi 3:1; 4:5-6). The authoritative and scriptural status of the Book of Isaiah is consistent with the messianic beliefs of the community living at Qumran, since Isaiah is known for his prophecies of judgment and consolation, and his visions of the End of Days and the coming of the Kingdom of God. Modern scholarship considers the Book of Isaiah to be an anthology, the two principal compositions of which are the Book of Isaiah proper (chapters 1-39, with some exceptions), containing the words of the prophet Isaiah himself, dating from the time of the First Temple, around 700 BCE, and Second Isaiah (Deutero-Isaia...). Several prophecies appearing in the Book of Isaiah have become cornerstones of Judeo-Christian civilization.