

w'lo' yitbōšāšū (Gen 2,25) and Its Implications

In this note I shall offer an alternate translation for a verbal form which occurs in Gen 2,25. By doing so, I hope to permit additional perspectives on a well-known episode in Hebrew Scriptures.

The syntax of Gen 2,25 is complex and obviously forces proportioning the sentence into three discrete units, and the Masoretes punctuated accordingly. *wayyiheyū šenēyhem 'arūmmīm*, “Now both of them were naked”, is given a *zāqēph qāṭōn*; *hā'ādām we' ištō*, “the man and his spouse”, is halted by an *'atnāh*, a major disjunctive accent; *w'lo' yitbōšāšū*, the focus of our study, has a *sillūq* before *sōph passūq*. The vocabulary in 2,25 permits the sentence to act as pivot from episodes concerned with the creation of Adam's mate and with the lesson that can be gathered through this singular event — man will cleave to his wife in sexual embrace —, to those which introduces the serpent, its deception and the inevitable consequences. This program is conducted *thematically* by using the word *'ištō*, “his spouse”, and *parason-antically* by playing on *'arūmmīm*, a word which rather unsubtly focuses attention upon the serpent's wiley attribute: *'ārūm*. For this reason, it would be insensitive to regard Gen 2,25 solely either as *end* to chapter 2 or as *beginning* for the “fall”. It does both, as is common to Hebrew narratives wherein are strung multiple scenes⁽¹⁾.

w'lo' yitbōšāšū needs further comments, however. The conjunction here obviously establishes a disjunctive relationship with the previous statements and ought, therefore, be rendered by something more striking than a mere “and”. Some have therefore opted for “yet”, others for “but”, either one of which will adequately permit the reader to realize that the author's observations regarding *w'lo' yitbōšāšū* are not necessarily supplementing his comments regarding the pair's nakedness; rather it fosters a sharp shift from vocabulary describing the protagonists' physical state to one which gives access to their inner contemplation and reactions.

The verbal form *yitbōšāšū* is in the imperfect, but as noted by grammarians and commentators, its use is frequentative⁽²⁾. That is, it connotes a

⁽¹⁾ See my comments to the last verses for each chapter in the book of Ruth, *Ruth. A New Translation, with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (Baltimore 1979) 226. B.N. WAMBACQ argues for taking Gen 2,25 as inaugurating the “Fall” rather than ending the “Creation of Woman” episode, “Or tous deux étaient nus, l'homme et sa femme, mais ils n'en avaient pas honte”, *Mélanges bibliques en hommage au R.P. Bédaride Rigaux* (Gembloux 1970) 553-556.

⁽²⁾ E.g., J. SKINNER, *Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh 1930) 50, endnote.

continuous act even as it unfolded in past time. Therefore, the pair's reaction was not one which occurred at one single moment of discovery, but was actually a state which they shared from the moment of their creation. Hence the tense of the verbal form underscores the banality of nakedness to persons who had neither attained sexual wisdom nor had come to realize, let alone appreciate, the physiology of conception⁽³⁾.

The stem of *yitbōšāšū* is of most interest to me here. The root **bōš* has received adequate treatments in the dictionaries⁽⁴⁾. In the G (*qāl*), the verb carries a range of meaning which conveys "to feel shame". As in most verbs that are "middle weak" (CW/YC), the *hitpa'el* appears as a *hitpolel* or as a *hitpo'el*, with the final vowel in mostly finite verbal forms lengthening to a *qāmeš* when in pause. Lexically, the *hitpolel* partakes of the D (*pi'el*) stem's intensive and factitive qualities, the latter of which seems to obtain most in "middle weak" verbs: e.g., *qūm*, "to rise", **hitqômēm*, "to make oneself rise (usually against someone)"; *bîn*, "to discern", **hitbônēn*, "to make oneself discern = to show interest, to be attentive". The *-ta-* infixed within this stem allows the *hitpolel* often to express the distributive and the reciprocal (i.e. "to one after the other, to each other") rather than only the reflexive ("to oneself") or the selfish ("for one's own interest"). In the case of *yitbōšāšū* of 2,25, some renderings allow for the infix and offer "They felt no shame in front of each other" (BI) or translate by means of the nebulous "but they had no feeling of shame towards one another" (NEB). Almost all

⁽³⁾ WAMBACQ, *ibid.*, 549-553, studies the mention of nakedness in the OT and argues that it is not to be associated with sexuality, but rather with human frailty and misery: "Les premiers hommes n'en rougissaient pas, parce qu'ils n'en étaient pas conscients, du fait qu'ils vivaient dans l'amitié et la protection divine" (553). But as is common to many literatures, ancient as well as modern, nakedness can be made symbolic of various emotions, and only the contexts will determine whether that emotion represents pride, humility, rebirth (spiritual), protest, disinterest, asceticism, seduction, etc...; see the rich article of J. Z. SMITH, "The Garments of Shame", *History of Religions* 5 (1965) 217-237, especially 223 n. 23. When Wambacq inspects the prophetic literature, therefore, nakedness is bound to be conventional for humility. It is otherwise when it is found in the narratives (e.g. Gen 9,22-23; 1 Sam 20,30); cf. *BDB* sub 'ārāh, 'erwāh, 'ūr, 'ērôm, 'ārôm. Moreover, Wambacq finds it difficult to explain the ensuing narrative of the Fall. "C'est une première tentative de se réhabiliter" (*ibid.*) is not a satisfying answer to why Adam and Eve's first act upon partaking the fruit is to clothe themselves.

⁽⁴⁾ See the articles of H. SEEBASS, *TWAT* I, 568-578 and of F. STOLZ, *THAT* I, 269-270, sub *bōš*.

On the hapax *yitbōšāšū* and its meaning, see the bibliography in WAMBACQ'S article cited above, 584 n. 4. In "Notes de lexicographie hébraïque: *yitbōšāšū* (Gen. 2,25)", *Bib* 7 (1926) 74-75, P. JOÛON points out that the reciprocity available to the *-ta-* infix was not translated by the ancient versions. He would therefore translate the *hitpolel* here no differently than he would the simple *qāl*: "... il ne s'agit pas de la honte, de la confusion ordinaire, mais de cette honte honnête que nous nommons la pudeur". However, it should be noted that reciprocity was presumed by all ancient commentators when they tackled this episode. Moreover, Joüon's own rendering "*se montrer honteux... se sentir honteux... éprouver de la honte*" does not translate a simple *qāl*, but actually recognizes the effect of the infix acting reflexively.

translations, however, ignore the implications of the *hitpolel* and render the verb as it were a *qāl* (e.g. *Torah*'s: "they felt no shame"; RSV's "and were not ashamed")⁽⁵⁾.

I would like to suggest a translation for *lō' yitbōšāšū* which takes full cognizance of the factitive as well as the reciprocal qualities of the *hitpolel*: "yet, they did not shame each other", or, more elegantly put: "yet, they did not embarrass each other". As an alternate rendering for Gen 2,25, this translation is permitted, and in my opinion, even supported by morphology. Moreover, such a translation will allow interesting perspectives on the ensuing narrative. At the outset of the "seduction of Eve" episode, this translation implies the pair did not have the potential to find blemishes with each other because they did not perceive anatomical, sexual, or role distinctions within the species. This state of affairs will end at Gen 3,7, a verse which completes the inclusion by recalling the word *'ēyrummīm*, an alternative adjectival form for *'arūmmīm*: "When the eyes of both were opened, they realized that they were indeed naked. They then stitched together fig leaves, making for themselves loincloths". Note how this sentence splits the series of activities within two spheres. The first, at 3,7a, reverses the condition which had obtained ever since 2,25 since "The eyes of both were opened" fulfills the serpent's prediction. Moreover, recourse to *yēde'ū*, "they realized", in the same phrase allows the pair to partake of the serpent's assessment of God's own mental processes as presented in 3,5 ("Since God realizes [*yōdēa'*] that as soon as you partake of it, your eyes will be opened").

The second half of Gen 3,7, beginning just past the *'atnāh*, shifts the reader's focus to the action of the protagonists at the point in which they had obtained understanding. They stitch leaves of figs — the forbidden fruit? —, and turn them into coverings. The language here, *ya' asū lāhem*, is not precise, but there is no reason to think that the undertaking was mutual. To the contrary, it is more suitable to imagine that Adam and Eve each made their own loincloth and wore it away from each other's sight⁽⁶⁾. It is at this point, therefore, that the pair began to recognize distinctions between each other and to establish separate identity, and I am encouraged to reason this way since precisely at this point begin the mutual accusations.

Adam and Eve, now fully able to embarrass each other, could not be

⁽⁵⁾ Note, however, J. DE FRAINE, *Genesis* (BoeOT; Roermond-Maaseik) 52, who translates "ze voelden zich niet vernederd" (quoted by WAMBACQ, *ibid.*, 548 n. 4).

⁽⁶⁾ This is made plausible by Gen 2,25 wherein *hā' adām we' ištō* invites the reader to recognize the protagonists' individuality by effectively splitting the force behind *šenēyhem*, "the two of them". Thus when *šenēyhem* makes its only other reappearance in this episode at 3,7 the memory finds it possible to assign the deed separately to each. The three attestations of *'adām we' ištō*, in fact, run as leitmotif throughout the scene in order to keep the movements of the pair separate. Thus it reappears in 3,8 when the two find individual hiding places, preparing for God's interview of one out of the other's hearing. [The snake is not questioned, but is summarily cursed.] *'adām we' ištō* is summoned one last time at the end of the scene, at 3,21, when God provides leather clothing *le' adām ūle' ištō*, "to Adam and to his wife".

abandoned to their own devices, and here God steps in. As I have developed it elsewhere, the so-called "curses" addressed to the serpent, to Adam, and to Eve pursue at least two separate programs. One can be read as a *parable* for the transformation of immortality: Once accorded to Adam and his mate through easy access to the Tree of Life, immortality is now granted to the entire species through the gift of birthgiving. That gift is the woman's; consequently she is alone *not* to be cursed by means of the verb 'ārar. The second program is to be read as a *paradigm* for the earthly cycle of life: The serpent survives only by eating the dust of the earth. Its brood is to be an implacable foe, to woman as well as to her descendants. But when a human being's earthly existence comes to an end, its flesh will serve to feed the serpent. And thus will the fate of all three merge into eternal interdependence⁽⁷⁾.

Conception, and the physical intimacy that it will require, however, can now be counted upon to blur Adam and Eve's newly found gender distinctions. As if to underscore this reality, God himself prepares garments of skins and clothes the pair; thus temporarily halting their propensity to embarrass each other.

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(7) J. M. SASSON, "The 'Tower of Babel' as a Clue to the Redactional Structuring of the Primeval History [Gen. 1-11:9]", *The Bible World: Essays in Honor of Cyrus H. Gordon* (New York 1980) 215-216; IDEM, "Unlocking the Poetry of Love in the Song of Song", *The Bible World* 1 (1984) 11-19.



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