

TWO NEW HUNTING TERMS IN PSALM 140:12

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PSALM 140 CONTAINS an unusually large number of rare expressions and *hapax legomena*, most of them in vss. 10–12 where the poet prays for, or predicts, misfortunes that should or will befall his enemies. It is an indication of passion that the poet was not content with standard language but reached for the exotic in order to endow his maledictions with vigor. Unfortunately for us, this has resulted in obscurity precisely where the poem is most original.

Consider the end of vs. 12: אִישׁ־הָמָס רָע יִצְוֶנּוּ לְמַחֲרֹפֵת. Interpreters as far back as the translators into Greek have attached *rā'* ("evil") to the following clause, as the subject of the verb *yəṣūdenū* ("shall hunt him")—against the masoretic accentuation that makes it qualify *'iś hāmās* ("lawless man") and so leaves the following verb without a subject. The idea—that the agent of the enemy's downfall is his own evil—is like that of vs. 10 *'āmal šəpātēmō yəḵassēmō* ("the mischief of their lips cover them"); one may compare the personification of evil as a hunter in Prov 13:21 *ḥaṭṭā'īm təraddēp rā'ā* ("evil pursues the sinners").

The real difficulty resides in *yəṣūdenū ləmadhēpōl*. Greek renders "(the unjust man evil) will hunt to *diaphthoran* (destruction, ruin)"—the usual rendition of Hebrew *šahaṭ* ("pit"); Peshiṭta, "will hunt him to destruction (*l'bdn*)"; Targum, "(the angel of death) will hunt him, will beat him in Gehenna." These three renderings appear at bottom to be the

same, a reference to the grave or underworld. Modern renderings diverge: Old Jewish Publication Society, "shall be hunted with thrust upon thrust" (so Brown *et al.*, 1907, s.v.)—of which the Chicago ("Good-speed") Bible gives a variant, "pursue . . . with blow upon blow"; Revised Standard Version, "hunt down . . . speedily," of which the New American Bible is a variant, "abruptly entrap." The new JPS and the New English Bible echo the old versions, "hound/hunt him to destruction," while Dahood (1966–70) offers "hunt . . . into Exile" ("a place name = the underworld").

There are two problems here: the *hapax madhēpōt* and the sense of *lə-* prefixed to it. The noun form *maqtēlā* points in two major directions: an embodiment of the root idea in instrument (*mahrēšā* "plow"; *mazmērā* "pruning tool"), place (*madmēnā* "dungheap"; *ma'sēbā* "place of pain"), or thing (*massēka* "molten image"; *maṣṣēbā* "pillar") on the one hand, and on the other, an abstraction (*mahrēkā* "overthrow"; *maštēmā* "persecution"; *margē'ā* "tranquility"). The verb *dāḥap* is found in late biblical Hebrew and in Aramaic with the meaning "push, drive." Hence *madhēpā* can theoretically be either an instrument or place by/in/to which there is pushing (e.g., Gehenna—a midrash [*Tanḥuma*, Mešora' 1] has Balaam *nidḥap laḡēhinnām* "driven to Gehenna" by his mouth—or Dahood's "Exile"), or an abstract noun "push." Those who choose the former sense take *lə-* as directional—" (hunted) to *madhēpōt*." Those who choose the latter sense take *lə-* as adverbial ("wise"): Balaam saw Israel arrayed *lišbāṭaw* "by its tribes" (Num 24:2); Ezekiel is to empty the cauldron *linjāhēhā* "piece by piece" (Ezek 24:6), so here the enemy will be hunted *ləmadhēpōt* "with thrust upon thrust" (Brown *et al.*, 1907; Koehler-Baumgartner, 1953, 1974). The modern innovation "speedily, abruptly" appears to be a tertiary derivation from the secondary sense "rushed, in haste" attached to the passive participle *dāḥūp* in Esth 3:15; 8:14 (|| *məbōhālīm* in 2 Chr 26:20) whose basic sense is merely "driven"; it is clever but unpersuasive.

From this impasse an exit is opened by a shift in perspective offered by the observation that in Mishnaic Hebrew *šad lə-* has the technical, pregnant sense of "hunt (by driving game) into an enclosure." Mishnah, *Shabbat*, 13:5 reads *haššād šippōr ləmigdal ušəbī ləbayit* ("he who hunted a bird [by driving it] into a tower or a gazelle [by driving it] into a house"). Accordingly, in our passage *lə-* is to be connected with *yəšūden-nū* as part of this pregnant technical expression, and *madhēpōt* must then be some sort of enclosure into which game was "driven" or "pushed" by hunters.

Two such methods of hunting are known in the Near East. In one, illustrated on Assyrian reliefs (see, e.g., *'enciclopedia miqra'it* 6, cols. 715–716), an enclosure was formed in open country by raising net fences which converged in a dead end; the game was driven by bowmen into the enclosure (see further, Gerleman, 1945–46). To the second method hangs a tale worth mentioning. Since 1927, ancient stone structures called (after their shape) in archeological jargon “desert kites,” have been found scattered in the deserts of Syria, the Negev of Israel, and Sinai. In shape they are huge funnels, with openings sometimes over 150 meters wide, and walls that may be over 200 meters long. The funnel narrows—often in a wadi bed—into a polygonal area, at whose angles circular “nests” sometimes appear. Meshel has recently illuminated these enigmatic structures, whose use was long debated, by literary evidence from travelers and others on the method of hunting used by the inhabitants of these regions (Meshel, 1974). One such description follows (the apparent discrepancies between it and the structures in question are accounted for by Meshel and cannot detain us here):

On the eastern frontiers of Syria are several places allotted for the hunting of gazelles; these places are called *masiade*. An open space in the plain, of about one mile and a half square, is enclosed on three sides by a wall of loose stones, too high for the gazelles to leap over. In different parts of this wall gaps are purposely left, and near each gap a deep ditch is made on the outside. The enclosed space is situated near some rivulet or spring to which in summer the gazelles resort. When the hunting is to begin, many peasants assemble and watch till they see a herd of gazelles advancing from a distance towards the enclosure, into which they drive them; the gazelles, frightened by the shouts of these people and the discharge of firearms, endeavor to leap over the wall, but can only effect this at the gaps where they fall into the ditch outside, and are easily taken, sometimes by hundreds. (Burckhardt, *Notes on the Beduins and Wahabys*, 1831, pp. 220f., cited from Meshel, 1974, p. 134).

If we must choose between the Assyrian and Syropalestinian methods of such hunting, we choose the latter for its proximity to the authors of the Psalms. Our proposal, then, is to take **madhēpā* as the Hebrew term for these “desert kites,” its proper sense being “corral” (one of whose definitions is “enclosure for capturing wild animals” according to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1976). In our Psalms passage, the plural is used, because such traps, as Meshel shows, might be erected in chains across a huge area; compare the plural of *šāḥaj* (“pit”) used in Lam 4:20,

likewise about a single victim ("the breath of our nostrils, the anointed of the LORD was caught *bišhîîôîām* in their traps").

The appeal of this interpretation is heightened by its accord with the rest of the maledictions, which correspond to the evils done to the psalmist by his enemies as "mirror punishments," measure for measure. Just as vs. 6 describes at length the enemies' devices to entrap the psalmist ("Arrogant men have hidden a trap for me and ropes / They spread a net beside the path / They laid snares for me"), so our colon, together with vs. 11b depict the enemy falling into pits (*mahāmōrōî*) and hunted and driven into corrals.

It may finally be that the ancient versions were right in seeing in *madhēpōî* a reference to the underworld realm of the dead. In vs. 11b the term for pit is the *hapax mahāmōrōî*, whose meaning "(grave-)pit," established in later Hebrew (Ben Sira, Talmud; see Ben Yehuda, 1948, s.v.), is endowed with mythic overtones by its association in Ugaritic mythology with the god Mot. Mot's town is called *hmry*, and one is said to descend (in)to Mot's *mhmrt* (Driver, 1956, p. 103; p. 157, note 21). Now, if *mahāmōrōî* has overtones of death's realm, *madhēpōî* in association with it may, like other trapping terms (*šahaî*, *bôr*), have readily connoted the snares of death (= *môqāšê māweî*, Ps 18:6).

Two entries are thus gained for the biblical Hebrew lexicon: *šād lā-* ("hunt [by driving] into [an enclosure]") and **madhēpā* ("corral"). Although the first is otherwise attested only in Mishnaic Hebrew and the second is derived from a root attested only in Esther and Chronicles, these are not decisive arguments for their lateness. (Dahood's appeal to the *hapax legomena* of this psalm as indications of early date is without merit.) Not decisive because the combination of these terms, as in our passage, is a technical usage that has no other correspondent that might be dated early. That this combination never occurs in literature datable to early times may therefore be purely accidental; indeed there is every reason to say so, since hunting with corrals is not the kind of activity likely to occur in the usual scenes of biblical history.

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