

“WHITE” TEXTILES IN BIBLICAL HEBREW AND IN MISHNAIC HEBREW

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I

THE WORDS *šēš*, *būš*, *hūr*, and *karpas* of biblical Hebrew refer to certain types of cloth made of natural fibers, such as linen or cotton. All four types had two qualities in common:

- a. There is no evidence that they were dyed, e.g., no coloring additives and/or mordants were applied to them. As Herszberg (1924, p. 221) points out, the art of making fine “white” linen or similar cloth, although involving no usage of pigments or dyes, was known and practiced in ancient Israel during the biblical era.
- b. They were all expensive — in many instances they are mentioned together with other aristocratic types of cloth, notably purple (both *’argāmān* and *tākēlet*), as symbols of wealth and authority.

Because they were colorless they fall under the blanket designation *beḡādīm lābānīm* “‘white’ garments,” which occurs as such in one late instance only in the Hebrew Bible, namely Eccl 9:8.

Like many other “culture words” designating extra-linguistic entities which travel across borders of territories and boundaries of languages, satisfactory etymologies for *šēš*, *būš*, *hūr*, and *karpas* are not easy to trace. The dual purpose of this paper will be therefore to attempt to uncover the etymologies, as well as to relate the terms to their non-linguistic references.

II

The diachronic differences between the earlier *šēš* and the later *bûš*, both denoting 'fine white linen,' were well established by Hurvitz (1967, pp. 117–121; 1974, pp. 33–34).¹ The terms differ in etymology, that is, they should be seen against separate cultural and geographical differences as well as chronological factors, although the identity of the product designated by both seems not to have changed. *šēš* is of Egyptian provenance,² while *bûš* is of a properly Semitic origin. The latter continued to be alive in Mishnaic Hebrew (= MH) and in Aramaic, through which it passed into Greek and other European languages (Hurvitz, 1967). Recent attempts to establish a Sanskrit or Egyptian provenance for *bûš* as well are far from convincing.³ Moreover, a 'white' denotation — even if only secondary to the notion of *bûš* itself — apparently underlies it. Cognates to this are to be found in Arabic *'abyad* 'white'; Hebrew **bêšāh* 'egg,'⁴ probably after the color of the shell; and Akkadian *pîšû*, *pâšû* 'be white, hueless' and *pešû* 'white,' 'colorless'; see Landsberger, 1967, pp. 141–142). *pešû* is especially appropriate as an analogical term, for in Akkadian texts it functions as a modifier for 'wool' and 'clothes' as well as for other lexemes. Veenhof (1972, p. 189) lists the cases for *pešû* 'cloth' and 'wool' in Old Assyrian, and Landsberger (1967, pp. 141–145) adds to these other applications—to 'human skin,' 'physical appearance' and others — from other periods of the language. Therefore *bûš*, or more specifically the Semitic root *byd*, seems to have originally evoked a color property identical or similar to the *lābān* notion of biblical Hebrew.

Another equivalent to *šēš*, but a synchronous one, is *bad* = 'white linen material.' Such is the meaning of *bad* in the P sources which describe the priestly garments,⁵ Ezekiel⁶ and Daniel,⁷ but also in the syntagm *'ēpôd bad*, which appears in the Samuel and David cycles of narratives,⁸ and cannot be considered late on any count.⁹

hûr is peculiar to the book of Esther. In 1:6 we have a cluster of textiles — *hûr karpas ûtākēlet . . . bûš wə'argāmān*; and in 8:15—*bilbûš malkût tākēlet wāhûr . . . wətakrîk bûš wə'argāmām*. If we disregard *karpas* for a moment — for it seems to denote roughly the same entity as *hûr*, or at least a material of the

1. Similarly also Grintz (1975, pp. 179–180).

2. So both Grintz (1975) and Ellenbogen (1962, p. 164).

3. See KBL³, vol. I, p. 111b and Lambdin (1953, pp. 147–148).

4. BDB, p. 101; KBL, p. 114. Gradwohl (1963, pp. 49–50).

5. Exodus (twice); and Leviticus, chapters 6 and 16 (8 times).

6. In Ezekiel, chapters 9 and 10 (5 times).

7. In Daniel, chapters 10 and 12 (3 times).

8. 1 Sam 2:18, 22:18. 2 Sam 6:14. 1 Chr 15:27.

9. Cf. Grintz's dating of the occurrences in P (1975, pp. 13–15).

same color; does not appear in 8:15; and disturbs the inner balance of the double-barrelled pairs — we are left with the formula *hûr*+*bûs*, ‘*argamân*+*takelet*, which refers to expensive ‘white’ and ‘purple’ cloth symbolizing royal splendor, power and authority. *hûr*, then, is a synonym—at least from the aspect of its color, for the type of fiber it is made of cannot be ascertained—of *bûs*,¹⁰ and it is probably employed here for literary and stylistic reasons. Further, the personal name *hûr* was quite popular throughout the biblical period, and the names *hûrî* (1 Chr 5:14), *hûrây* (1 Chr 9:32), and *hôrî* (Num 13:5) may be derivations of the same root, although this is far from proven.¹¹ If *hûr* = ‘cloth,’ *hûr* = some or a few of the occurrences of the personal name, and *hôrây* (Isa 19:9)¹² are derived from the root *hwr*,¹³ — which is the standard Aramaic equivalent of Hebrew *lbn* ‘white,’ ‘colorless’—then we must assume that *hwr* is native not only to Aramaic, but to biblical Hebrew as well. Had we not had the evidence of the personal names, be it as inconclusive as it is, we might have been justified in surmising that the root *hwr*—and the *hûr* of the Book of Esther—are late borrowings from Aramaic. As matters stand, we might try another solution. It is conceivable that *hwr* originally featured in Hebrew stock,¹⁴ but that it was later rejected as an uneconomic doublet of *lbn*, leaving traces only in nomenclature and technical terms (*hûr*, *hôrây*). Then its popularity was renewed through the growing Aramaic influence during the era of the Second Temple, which facilitated the return of *hûr* as an allosemanteme of *bûs*, but of which we have this isolated instance only. Meanwhile *bûs* has supplanted *šēš*, and by and large *hûr* itself has no real significance outside the present formula.

According to Ellenbogen (1962, p. 94), Rabin (1963, p. 240) and Kutscher (1965, pp. 98–99, 117), *karpas* (Esth 1:6) came to Hebrew as a loan from Sanskrit through Persian¹⁵ together with the product (‘cotton’) carrying the

10. Thus the LXX has the rendering *byssôs* for *hûr*. For the V, the Aramaic, and some etymological notes see Gradwohl (1963, p. 49).

11. *hûr* has come down to us as the name of five different persons: 1) In 1 Chr 4:1. 2) In Exod 17:10, 12; 24:14. 3) Grandfather of the craftsman Bezael, in Exodus and in Chronicles. 4) In Neh 3:9. 5) A Midianite king—in Num 31:8 and Josh 13:21. However, an etymological link between the name(s) and the root *hwr* can only be surmised, but not securely established. It is possible, for instance, that a convergence of homonymic forms—only some or a few of them originally related to our *hwr*—is the reason for the apparent identity. And see below, note 13.

12. Although this is often amended to *hâwêrû* ‘paled’; see BH³ and commentaries *ad. loc.*

13. Noth (1928, p. 221) does not relate these proper names to the *hwr* under discussion. See also KBL³, vol. I, p. 287a for alternative suggestions.

14. Cf. Isa 29:22, although this occurrence is considered by some scholars (Melamed, 1962, pp. 142–144) as one of the examples of Aramaic influence on the language of the first Isaiah.

15. On the other hand, Fränkel (1960, pp. 84–85) attempts to derive *karpas* from the Hebrew root *kps*, with a dissimilatory /t/. His explanation is far from convincing—among other things, it disregards the practice of borrowing a foreign term with the introduction of the product designated by that same term.

same name, which was first brought to the Near East from India by Sennacherib (Kutscher, 1965, p. 98). Within our context it functions as a gloss or synonym to *hūr*. Rabin (1963, p. 240) shows how in Sanskrit *karpas* signifies 'natural, undyed cotton,' and this seems to be its meaning here.

III

What happens to all these terms in MH? Let us first deal with the rarer ones. In MH *karpas* hardly features; *šemer gepen* 'wool of the vine' is used instead.¹⁶ Similarly, the Aramaic idiom 'amar (*də*)*gūpnā*' is also reminiscent of Sennacherib's description of the "trees bearing wool" which he planted in his garden (Kutscher, 1965, p. 98) and which are signified by the biblical *karpas*. *hūr*, unless reflected in the Aramaic 'irā' (with a loss of the original /h/, although Jastrow, 1903, p. 60 relates the latter to 'ōr), disappears too. The late biblical tendency to employ *būš* instead of *šēš* continues, to the point that now *būš* seems to be the normative usage, the better known term of the two. When the writer of the archaizing War Scroll from Qumran uses *šēš* rather than *būš*, as is dictated by his biblical source material, he adds the word *lābān* as an explanatory gloss to *šēš* (12:9).¹⁷ However, the more frequent designations for 'white/hueless textiles' in MH are simply *bəgādīm lābānīm*, and *bigdē* or *kālē lābān* 'white garments'. The primary color term *lābān* is thus expanded to denote not only the natural quality of 'white' or 'hueless,' but also the man-made appearance of the same visible attributes. As such 'ereb *lābān* 'white woof' occurs in opposition to *šānī šābūa* 'dyed warp' (Mishna, *Nəga'im*, 11.4). In order to substantiate this equation we would need to find an explicit juxtaposition of *bigdē lābān* on the one hand, and *būš* (the current designation in MH) on the other. This is indeed to be found in the Mishna. Mishna *Yoma*, 3:7 supplies us, as specifications for the High Priest's *bigdē lābān*, with the names for two types of *būš* that could be obtained during the post-biblical period: one is the *pəlūsīn*, from Pelusium in Egypt; and the other *hindəwīn*, from India.

16. See Kutscher (1965 pp. 98–100, 117) for the dropping of the lexeme in MH, its homonymic clash with MH *karpas* 'green herbs,' and the penetration of *ktm* derived terms into various Eastern and European languages.

17. Yadin (1957, p. 302). Hurvitz (1978).

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