

THE USE OF EQUIVOCAL WORDS IN THE FIRST SPEECH  
OF ELIPHAZ (JOB IV-V)

0.0 The unique character of the Hebrew language of the book of Job is widely recognized among scholars. This uniqueness is not limited to one linguistic aspect but is manifest in the syntax, lexicography and etymology of the language of the book. In this article we shall illuminate one interesting feature, which is typical of only two chapters (iv-v), viz. the use of ambiguous, equivocal words. Although it is found in other chapters as well, it is nowhere else so clear and meaningful. It is our contention that such a usage is by no means accidental in these chapters, and it is one of the most important ways used by the author to reveal his opinion about the character of Eliphaz. It was K. Fullerton who first directed our attention to the "Double Entendre in the First Speech of Eliphaz", *JBL* 49 (1930), pp. 320-74, but he was concentrating on aspects other than the linguistic, and so that specific phenomenon was not fully discussed by him. Therefore, the present note can be regarded as to some extent a supplement to Fullerton's study, though in no way indicating complete agreement with all his views.

1.1 *hinnēh yissartā rabbīm*—iv 3. The root *yṣr* usually means "to discipline, chasten, admonish". It is used to describe the Lord's conduct towards his people (Lev. xxvi 23; Jer. xxxi 18) and his righteous servants (Ps. cxviii 18), the father's method of educating his children (Prov. xix 8, xxix 17), the king's harsh attitude towards his people (1 Kings xii 11, 14; Ps. ii 10), etc. This meaning is not unacceptable here, but we should not ignore the fact that (a) as a parallel to *yṣr* we have here *ḥzq* ("strengthen") and *'mṣ* ("encourage"), and (b) in Hos. vii 15 we read *wa'anī yissartī ḥizṣaqtī ṣ'ērō'ōtām*—"and I strengthen their arms". Hence Job iv 3 can also be understood as saying "behold, you have strengthened many", and not only "you have chastised". The difference between these two possibilities must not be underestimated. If Eliphaz is saying that Job used to strengthen suffering people, then he actually praises and encourages Job by reminding him that he himself, Job, realized that suffering people could be helped. On the other hand, if *yṣr* is interpreted here as chastisement, then Eliphaz blames Job for hypocrisy: you dared to chastise other people, but now, when you share their misfortune, you blaspheme God! Since this ambiguity is placed at the beginning, it can determine the nature of the entire exhortation.

1.2 *h'ālō' yir'ātekā kislātekā tiqwātēkā wētōm derākekā*—iv 6<sup>1</sup>). This verse contains two ambiguous words: *yir'ātekā* and *kislātekā*. *yir'āb* may mean "fear" (e.g. Gen. iii 10, xxxii 8; Ps. xci 5) or, more frequently, the "awe" of God (Ex. xx 20; Jer. xxxii 10; Jon. i 16, etc.). Both can be meaningful in this context. However, the first possibility is conditioned by a certain interpretation of the second ambiguous word—*kislātekā*.

1.21 The root *ksl* at times denotes "stupidity, folly"; e.g. Eccles. vii 25 (parallel to *siklūt*, "stupidity"),<sup>2</sup> Ps. xlix 14; *kesil*, "stupid, fool", in Ps. xlix 11; Prov. i 22, etc. In other places it means "confidence, hope": Job xxxi 24 (parallel to *mibtāb*), Ps. lxxviii 7; Prov. viii 27<sup>3</sup>). The English translations prefer here the second meaning,<sup>4</sup> but some commentators do not disregard the first<sup>5</sup>) which, combined with *yir'ātekā*, "your fear", is to be understood as: Is not your fear (of the present situation as well as of the future) an indicator of your stupidity? However, since *yir'ātekā* appears here in parallel with *tiqwātēkā*, "your hope" (or with *tōm derākekā*, "your honesty"), this explanation of *yir'ātekā* must be rejected in favor of the second, i.e. "your awe of God". Thus, in this context only, the word *kislātekā* presents us with a considered ambiguity, which permits two different ways of understanding the verse.

1.22 One possible way of understanding Eliphaz's intention is: was not your awe of God, your honesty, your hope, just a result of your stupidity? i.e. you were not a true believer, and out of stupidity you thought that good behavior would automatically be followed by good fortune<sup>6</sup>). If this interpretation is right, then Eliphaz chastises Job very severely and does not regard him as a righteous or a pious man.

1.23 The second interpretation is: should not your awe of God be your confidence, your hope, that you will be saved? Accordingly, Eliphaz is trying to encourage Job by stressing that his honesty is an assurance of his good fortune.

1.24 Essentially, the ambiguity of the whole verse does not depend solely on the equivocal character of the word *kislātekā*, since even the interpretation in 1.23 is ambiguous. It assumes a consequential link between awe of God and confidence and hope, an assumption which is obscure in this context. If Eliphaz's starting point is the conviction that Job is a righteous believer, then the inevitable conclusion will indeed be that he has nothing to fear, and his future is assured. If, on the other hand, Eliphaz's point of depar-

ture is Job's present condition, then the converse of the above meaning is the import of his statement: your suffering (i.e. your hopelessness, your lack of confidence) attests the fact that you are not truly righteous. The ambiguity of the verse is thus twofold.

1.3 'āwen, 'āmāl (iv 8, v 6) both have the double meaning "sorrow, trouble" (Gen. xxxv 18; Deut. xxvi 7, 14; Jer. xx 18; Ps. x 7, xxv 18; Prov. xii 21, xxii 8) and "sin, transgression" (Is. x 1; Mic. ii 1; Hab. i 3, 13; Ps. vi 9, vii 15, x 7, 14), and they are frequently used in parallel. The author makes two different uses of this ambiguity.

1.31 In iv 8 we read: *ka'āšer rā'itī ḥōrēšē 'āwen wezōre'ē 'āmāl*. The only meaningful way of understanding 'āwen and 'āmāl is "sin"; e.g. the KJV: "Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness". Yet the next word in the verse is *yiqšerūhū*, "they shall reap it", and the accusative pronominal suffix *hū* cannot be traced back to the same meaning of 'āwen and 'āmāl, and should be interpreted only according to their second significance. No wonder, therefore, that no translation is capable of transmitting this characteristic<sup>7</sup>).

1.32 In v 6 the author takes advantage of the ambiguity of 'āwen and 'āmāl in quite a different manner. Since both meanings are plausible here, there are four ways of interpreting the verse, though the general meaning will remain the same. *kī lō-yēšē' mē'āpār 'āwn ūmē'ādamāb lō-yišmah 'āmāl*, "Since 'āwen cometh not forth of the dust, neither doth 'āmāl spring out of the ground". The four possibilities are as follows:

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|----------------------|------------------------------------|
| a. 'āwen = "sin",    | 'āmāl = "sin".                     |
| b. 'āwen = "sin",    | 'āmāl = "sorrow", i.e. punishment. |
| c. 'āwen = "sorrow", | 'āmāl = "sorrow".                  |
| d. 'āwen = "sin",    | 'āmāl = "sorrow".                  |

What is noteworthy and striking here is the acceptability of all these interpretations, not as alternatively right but as complementary; and only by taking them all into consideration can Eliphaz's approach be comprehensively appreciated: moral causation does govern the world, irrespective of the angle from which it is viewed.

1.33 Similarly, a clever use by the author of Hebrew syntax though without employing equivocal words, is found in Job ix 3, Job's response to Bildad: *'im-yahpōš lārīb 'immō lō-ya'anennū 'ābat minnī-'ālep*, "If he wants to contend with him, he will not answer him one of a thousand".<sup>8</sup>) The four possible ways of understanding the verse are:

- If God wants to contend with a man, the man will not be able to answer God.
- If God wants to contend with a man, God can do so without even speaking to the man (namely, just by punishing him).
- If a man wants to contend with God, God will not even answer the man.
- If a man wants to contend with God, this man will not be able to answer God.

Here again all the four possibilities are not to be regarded as acceptable as alternatives. Conversely, only awareness of them all can assure the comprehensiveness of their meaning: no matter what he does, no man can ever prove his innocence when he must contend with God's justice.

1.4 *ha'enōš mē'ēlōah yišdāq*—iv 17. The *mem* in *mē'ēlōah* has been understood by commentators in two different ways: (a) in a comparative sense—"more than" (Lev. xxi 10; Ju. xiv 18; Ez. xxviii 3, etc.)—as translated in the KJV, "Shall a man be more pure than his maker?"; (b) "from, before" (Ps. xviii 22; Nu. xxxii 22), hence, "Can a mortal be just before God?" (Driver and Gray), or "Is a mortal man righteous in the presence of Eloah?" (Dhorme).

The two interpretations are contradictory, and they determine to a great extent, not only our understanding of Eliphaz's attitude towards Job, but also his theory of divine retribution. The first interpretation (a) reveals a severe accusation of Job, as if he claimed to be more righteous than God, and hence juxtaposes the righteousness of them both as two alternatives, namely, either Job or God can be right. This unavoidably leads to the conclusion that Job is wicked. According to the second interpretation (b), Job is not accused of any specific sin, and his personal piety is not questioned.

1.5 *'ewil*—v 2, 3. The essential meaning of *'ewil*, a typical word of the wisdom literature,<sup>9</sup>) is "a stupid, foolish man", usually in contrast to *ḥākām*, "a wise man"; see Jer. iv 22; Prov. xi 2, xv 2. However, it sometimes expresses the essence of a sinful, wicked man, a semantic widening which is easily grasped when one considers the views and conventions of the wisdom literature. See Prov. x 21, where it is contrasted with *šaddiq*, "pious"; xxiv 9—in connection with *ḥattā't*, "sin", and *tō'ēbāb*, "abomination"; xiv 19—the *'ewilim* make a mock of a sin (*'āšām*); Ps. cvii 17—in relation to *peša'*, "crime". Thus, by applying here the common meaning "stupid" one is suggesting that Eliphaz insinuates that Job is foolish, which, though far from being

a compliment, is nevertheless not as severe an accusation as wickedness, which is implied by the second exegesis <sup>10)</sup>.

1.6 *ka'as*—v 2. The most frequent significance of *ka'as* in the Old Testament is “anger, vexation” (Ps. cxii 10; Ez. xvi 42; Neh. iii 3, etc.), but a second meaning, which must not be overlooked here and in other passages, is “sin, evil”. Thus in 1 Kings xv 30 the sins (*batto't*) of Jeroboam are parallel to *ka'sō*, and the same meaning is found in Ez. xx 28; Ps. x 14; Deut. xxxii 21; 2 Kings xxi 6.

1.61 The equivocal character of *'evil-ka'as* determines the ambivalence of the whole passage v 2-5, either as accusing Job of wickedness—hence a severe chastisement—or as considering him a silly, impatient person, which is forgivable in the circumstances.

2 It is the purpose of this article to highlight one linguistic feature of the book of Job which is typical only of chapters iv-v. Whether this use of equivocal words was premeditated or accidental is of minor consequence. The interpreter is always obliged to treat the text as it is presented to him. Therefore, we suggest that the exceptional use of ambiguous words in the first speech of Eliphaz is meaningful and must not be underestimated when one seeks to comprehend his views as well as his character. It remains a question for a separate study whether this phenomenon leads us to regard Eliphaz as either a hypocrite, or a good, sensitive friend who does not wish to inveigh harshly against Job, or rather a harsh doctrinaire whose dogmatism, when confronted by Job's misfortune, causes him internal confusion, manifest in the ambiguity of his words.

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<sup>1)</sup> The syntax of the verse is strange, since the conjunctive *waw* in *w'etom* is expected before *tiqvāt'kā*. However, we find a similar construction in 2 Sam. xv 34. See G.K. § 143 d. According to this construction, it is a compound sentence with two subjects (*yir'āt'kā*, *tiqvāt'kā*) and two predicates (*kislātekā*, *tōm d'rākekā*). Another possible way to understand the syntax is to regard *yir'āt'kā* as the subject and the rest as three predicates, or to regard *kislātekā* as the predicate and the other nouns as subjects.

<sup>2)</sup> As a result of a transposition of consonants: *skl-ksl*.

<sup>3)</sup> The Arabic root *ksl* means “hick, sluggish”; the semantic separation of which into two different meanings such as “stupidity” and “confidence” is comprehensible.

<sup>4)</sup> Thus KJV; S. R. Driver and G. B. Gray, *Job* (Edinburgh, 1921); R. Gordis, *The Book of God and Man* (Chicago, 1965); E. Dhorme, *Le Livre de Job* (Paris, 1926)—E.tr. *A Commentary on the Book of Job* (London, 1967).

<sup>5)</sup> Rashi writes “Your piety was not the consequence of a real understanding, but of stupidity”.

<sup>6)</sup> Rashi. Ralbag also suggests this interpretation, preferring the second meaning of *kislātekā*. He explains: Your awe of God was a result of your hope that nothing wrong would happen to you.

<sup>7)</sup> KJV translates *yiqs'erūbū* “reap the same”; but does it make sense to reap iniquity? Driver and Gray, Gordis, and Dhorme all follow KJV, and none is to be blamed, for the Hebrew construction of the verse depends on the ambiguity of *'āven* and *'āmāl*, which is probably untranslatable.

<sup>8)</sup> KJV does not follow the Hebrew literally, for it adds “cannot” (“he cannot answer him”, instead of “he will not answer him”).

<sup>9)</sup> 43 out of 51 occurrences of the root *'wl* in the Old Testament are in Proverbs and Job.

<sup>10)</sup> All the English translations mentioned above disregard this second possibility.