

A Possible Mesopotamian Background to the Joseph Blessing of Gen. xlix

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Gen. xlix, 22 reads: בן פרת יוסף בן פרת עלי-עין בנות צערה עלי-שור. The first word is usually taken to mean »son, a member of a certain category«, and פרת as the equivalent of פרייה¹, from the root פרה, »be fruitful«. Thus the English Versions render: »Joseph is a fruitful bough« (RV Marg.: »the son of a fruitful tree«). This is not an impossible idiom, but except for the very doubtful Ps lxxx 16, is unique in the Old Testament. More difficult, if both words have the same meaning, is the change of gender in the second half of the line to בנות, which, incidentally, has to be understood as a collective singular to agree with the singular verb². The root of this verb is צער, »march«, and to obtain any sense at all reference has to be made to the Arabic *ša'ida*, »ascended« and thus »climbed«³. The meaning of the verse is still far from clear, however, and some of the interpretations have been remarkable⁴.

LXX read the previous line as having to do with a tree⁵, and it is not surprising if our text offers a reasonable solution of its difficulties when understood as carrying on the same figure. The word בין occurs in Isa xlv 4 as the name of a tree, parallel to ערבה, both being used as metaphors for »Israel«⁶. This word is widespread throughout the cognate languages but with varying connotations. Its usual translation is »tamarisk« but, properly speaking, it is a species of *Moringa* from the seeds of which an aromatic oil is prepared. It grows in dry

¹ Or פרתית (P. DE LAGARDE, *Aramäischen, Arabischen und Hebräischen übliche Bildung der Nomina*, 1889, p. 81); cf. GESENIUS-KAUTZSCH, *Grammar*²⁸, 2nd Eng. ed. COWLEY, § 80g; Isa. xxxii 12.

² According to FRZ. DELITZSCH, *A New Commentary on Genesis*⁵, Eng. tr. S. TAYLOR, ii, 1889, pp. 392f., the Massoretes took the בן as plural, בנות as a feminine singular, »branch«, and פרת as an adjective to it; cf. G. J. SPURRELL, *Notes on the Text of the Book of Genesis*², 1896, p. 394. T. NÖLDEKE, *ZDMG*, xxxviii, 1884, p. 411, thought the ending ית might be the old fem. plural ending of the verb (cf. J. P. PETERS, *Hebraica*, iii, 1887, p. 111; v, 1888, pp. 190f., and others). For the more conventional interpretation of the singular verb, see GESENIUS-KAUTZSCH, *op. cit.*, § 145^k; A. B. DAVIDSON, *Hebrew Syntax*³, 1901, § 116.

³ Cf. *The Oxford Lexicon*, s. v.

⁴ E. g., RASHI: בנות מצרים היו צועדות על החומה להסתכל בימין (cf. Targ. ONKELOS) and J. P. PETERS (*JBL*, vi, 1886, p. 111): »daughters have marched in procession to a bull«.

⁵ Νεφθαλεί, στέλεχος ἀνεμμένον, ἐπιδοδούς ἐν τῷ γενήματι κάλλος.

⁶ Cf. ZAW, lxiii, 1951, pp. 154ff.

places¹ and in shape and general characteristics is not unlike the tamarisk². It is clear, however, from these texts and from references in ancient Arabic poetry that the name was also used to describe a very different tree, growing beside water and whose slender and supple branches could be used to describe tall and beautiful young women. LANE, in his lexicon, says that in modern times the name *bān* is popularly given to the *hīlāf* (*halāf*)³, which word we can trace back via the Assyrian *haluṣṣu* to the Sumerian ^{G1S}HA-LU-ÚB⁴. The *hīlāf* grows in wet places⁵ and closely resembles the willow, especially in its lower leaves⁶. It is, however, rather to be identified with the *Populus euphratica*, and is thus merely another name for the Arabic *ḡarab*, Hebrew עֲרָבָה⁷, showing that the parallelism in Isa xlv 4 is exact, and that the popular identification of the *bān* with the *halāf* is at least as old as the sixth century B. C. In our Genesis text the technical designation *Populus euphratica* is strikingly paralleled by בֵּן פְּרִי, for the latter word is nothing more than פְּרִי, »Euphrates«⁸.

In II Sam v 24, it is recorded that David was told to listen for the sound of עֲרָבָה in the tops of the עֲרָבָה. These trees have also been identified with the *Populus euphratica*⁹, and we may take it that עֲרָבָה was the name of a sound particularly associated with the poplar. This is readily understandable if we connect the word with the Arabic *ṣu'adā'*, »deep sigh«¹⁰. We may then re-point our Genesis phrase בְּנוֹת עֲרָבָה, »daughters-of-sighing« an apt and beautiful equivalent for בֵּן פְּרִי, »Euphratean poplar«. The parallelism is still not exact, however, since the one is plural and the other singular agreeing with the object of the metaphor, Joseph. It is for serious consideration, therefore,

¹ Cf. G. E. POST, *Flora of Syria, Palestine and Sinai*² (American University of Beirut, Publications of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Natural Science Series No. 1), i, 1932, p. 292.

² Cf. JOHN PARKINSON, *Theatrum Botanicum*, 1640, p. 239, who describes the ben tree and discusses its confusion with the tamarisk. For a sight of this work and much kind help with these botanical matters, the writer is indebted to Dr. W. O. Howarth of the Botany Department, the University of Manchester.

³ In 'Alf Laila wa-laila the names are found together as one, *bān-halāf*; cf. E. W. LANE, *The Thousand and One Nights*, etc., i, 1859, p. 191, n. 7.

⁴ Cf. Aram. חִלְפָּא.

⁵ Cf. POST, *op. cit.*, ii, 1933, pp. 533f.

⁶ Cf. W. AINSWORTH, *Researches in Assyria, Babylonia and Chaldea*, 1838, pp. pp. 124f.

⁷ Cf. N. McLEAN and W. T. THISELTON-DYER, *Encycl. Biblica*, iv, 1903, col. 5302.

⁸ The use of this comparatively late term for Euphrates here is interesting.

⁹ Cf. POST, *op. cit.*, p. 534.

¹⁰ From the root *ṣa'ida*, »ascended«. The word, although translated as a singular, in fact is of plural form, whose singular would presumably be the participle, *ṣā'idūn*, »something rising up« (cf. W. WRIGHT, *Grammar*³, i, p. 219 B).

whether our בַּנִּית (bānīt) should not be regarded as the singular noun for »daughter« written here uniquely in the Old Testament with the original *Nun*, like the Assyrian *bintu*¹.

In an ancient Mesopotamian hymn to Tammuz, the god is referred to as a *bīnu ša ina musarī mē la ištū*, »poplar in a garden which hath not drunk water«². The Sumerian word (id. SAR/ŠAR), from which the Assyrian *musarū* (*musarrū*, *mušarū*) has come, is used of a place where orderly cultivation is carried on, and thus comes to mean »furrow, row«, as well as »plantation, garden«³. In 1884, HALÉVY suggested that there was a connection between this word and the Hebrew שורה⁴, and it is suggested that שור here is the same word. We should thus read our line, »A Euphratean poplar is Joseph, a Euphratean poplar by a spring, a daughter-of-sighing in a garden«⁵.

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Zur Übersetzung von Ps 105 (104)₁₈:

בְּרוּל בְּאֵה נִפְשׁוּ

Von Prof. Dr. Joh. Brinktrine in Paderborn
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Ps 105 gibt einen kurzen Überblick über Israels Geschichte von den ältesten Zeiten bis zur Besitzergreifung des Landes Kanaan. v. 17 ff. handeln von Joseph.

¹ Cf. Arabic *bint*^{un}.

² Cf. Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia, ed. H. C. RAWLINSON, iv, 1875, pl. 27, No. 1, lines 5–6. This hymn has been often quoted, but see C. J. BALL, PSBA, xvi, 1894, pp. 196f., and R. C. THOMPSON, A Dictionary of Assyrian Botany, 1949, pp. 313f., for discussions on the plants involved.

³ Also a row or line of writing, and thus = *šataru*, »write«.

⁴ ZK, i, p. 268, § 14; cf. Isa. xxviii, 25 (but see G. A. COOKE, North Semitic Inscriptions, 1903, p. 176) and probably Job xxiv, 11. Aramaic and NH have שורתא, שורה, שורה, »line, order, series«, and the Arabic *sūrat*^{un} means »a row of stones in a wall« as well as »a verse of the Qurʾān« (see A. JEFFERY, The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān, 1938, pp. 180ff., for the doubt which has been long expressed over the Semitic origin of this word).

⁵ The idea that the Biblical Joseph saga has certain connections with Tammuz is, of course, well known, but those who have sought such a reference here have usually been concerned to find zodiacal allusions in this and the following lines; cf. H. ZIMMERN, ZA, vii, 1892, pp. 164ff.; A. JEREMIAS, Das AT im Lichte des alten Orients⁴, 1930, p. 390; E. BURROWS, The Oracles of Jacob and Balaam, 1938, pp. 37ff. In the Mesopotamian hymn quoted, the reference is probably to the »gardens of Tammuz«, cf. S. LANGDON, Sumerian and Babylonian Psalms, 1909, p. 301; Tammuz and Ishtar, 1914, p. 13.