

Isaiah 40: 20, Towards a Solution

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40: 18. 'To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? 19, The idol! a workman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold, and casts for it silver chains. 20, He who is impoverished chooses for an offering wood that will not rot; he seeks out a skilful craftsman to set up an image that will not move' (RSV).

The purpose of this note is to re-state an old explanation of the first clause of verse 20, *hamsukkān t'rumā 'ēs lō yirqāḥ yibhār*. Traditional understanding of these words assumes a contrast between this verse and 18, 19; the idol of metal is assumed to be the gift of a rich man, while the pauper can afford only a wooden one.¹ This, however, is not obvious as there is neither mention of a rich man as the one who commissions the precious idol nor is there any indication that more than one idol is in question, representing idols as a class. *hamsukkān* is a unique word. No root *skn* 'to be poor' is known from which it could be formed and re-pointing as *hammiskēn* 'poor man'² introduces a word otherwise only found in Ecclesiastes and borrowed from Akkadian *muškēnu*. The fact that none of the ancient translations understood any reference to poverty militates against such a rendering, for they recognize the word in Ecclesiastes. The Vulgate and Peshitta omit the phrase and the Septuagint paraphrases ὁμοίωμα κατεσκευασεν αὐτον, 'he made it a likeness' which is an even less likely interpretation.³

A different meaning is given by the Targum Jonathan, 'ōrān bārē, 'he cuts down a fir tree'. The idea that the name of a tree lies here was also known to Jerome, who stated that *amsuchan* was a kind of hard wood used for making images and stood here in apposition to 'ēs lō yirqāḥ.⁴ Saadya, writing in the tenth century AD, was aware of this possibility, he translates 'he has set aside an holm-oak'.⁵ These hints were seen to have some basis when Assyrian inscriptions

¹ So AV, RV, RSV (with note 'Hebrew uncertain') following Kimchi's commentary.

² G. R. Driver, *J.T.S.*, XXXVI, 1935, p. 397.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ 'Commentarii in Isaiam Prophetam', J. P. Migne (Ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, XXIV, col. 408.

⁵ J. and H. Derenbourg, *Oeuvres Complètes de R. Saadia ben Iosef al Fayyūmī*, III (Paris, 1896), *ad. loc.*

were found to mention a wood *musukkannu* as an item of tribute used in the construction of buildings and for furniture. The clear parallel was noted by H. Zimmern, who thought the wood was palm.⁶ Recently a strong case has been made for identification with the *sissoo*, a tree with very hard wood now found in western Persia, sometimes confused with, or substituted for, ebony in ancient times.⁷ Many Assyrian texts describe *musukkannu* as ‘a durable wood’ (*iššu darû*)⁸ an epithet closely comparable to ‘a wood that will not rot’.

If the identification of *hamsukkân* as the object of the clause is allowed, the problem of *têrûmâ* remains. Zimmern proposed that the wood served as a pedestal for the metal statue, although he was uncertain.⁹ G. R. Driver has associated Akkadian *tarimtu*, applied to objects dedicated to a deity, repointing *têrîmâ*.¹⁰ Since *têrûmâ* is normally a technical term for an offering, perhaps a levy,¹¹ but basically denotes something raised or made high, it might be a suitable word for a plinth or podium. At present no more can be said.

This section of Isaiah 40 emphasizes the foolishness of reducing God to the stature of a powerless idol, a theme resumed in 44: 12–20. After the figure has been fashioned a firm foundation must be supplied. To this end one of the toughest woods must be found, and as it is unusual or little known, its nature is made plain by the phrase ‘a wood that will not rot’.¹² Thus the following translation may be proposed:

18, ‘To whom will you liken God? What form will you compare with him?’

19, The idol—a craftsman casts, a goldsmith plates it with gold, smelts for it silver bands.

20, One chooses *sissoo*, an unrotting wood, for the base, seeks out a wise craftsman to set up an idol that will not totter.’

⁶ Z.A., IX, 1894, pp. 111–112; cf. S. Smith, *Isaiah XL–LV: Literary Criticism and History* (London, 1944), pp. 171–173; M. Ellenbogen, *Foreign Words in the Old Testament* (London, 1962), pp. 106–107.

⁷ I. Gershevitch, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, XIX, 1957, pp. 317–20; cf. A. R. Millard, *Iraq*, XXVI, 1964, n.40.

⁸ *The Assyrian Dictionary*, D (Chicago, 1959), p. 118a, s.v. *dârû*.

⁹ *loc. cit.*; he made an alternative suggestion that the wood was the core of the image.

¹⁰ *loc. cit.*

¹¹ G. R. Driver, *J.S.S.*, I, 1956, p. 103.

¹² G. R. Driver, *Orientalia et Biblica Lovaniensia*, I, 1957, p. 129, regards *hamsukkân têrûmâ* as a gloss, but it is hard to find any motive for the introduction of *têrûmâ*, and the difficult word, *hamsukkân*, is more probably original.