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You Pity the Plant : A Misunderstanding

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A puzzling passage in the book of Jonah is 4:6-11. God appoints first a plant, and then a worm to destroy it. Naturally Jonah suffers discomfort and is understandably angry. God says, 'Do you do well to be angry?' which we should take to mean, 'Should you be so angry about losing your sun shade?' Then comes the puzzling part: 'You pity the plant, for which you did not labour, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night.' Clearly Jonah does not pity the plant, and this is why Wolff¹ treats this statement as ironical. Yet this is scarcely satisfactory, since an argument follows, and no valid argument can be based on an ironical premise.

All the modern translations I have consulted choose this understanding of the text, with no marginal notes, and the commentaries available, with the exception of Calvin and Wolff, fail to mention the problem. This is strange, for a solution is readily available. The verb in question is *hus*, which in *BDB*² is given as meaning 'Pity, look with compassion'. Yet even here, Gen. 45:20 (R:JE) is given as 'let not your eye *look with regret* upon your stuff'. Obviously Joseph's brothers will not pity the possessions which they leave behind: they will simply be sorry to lose them. Similarly, I suggest that God says to Jonah, 'You are sorry to lose the plant'. This means that the same sense will be intended in the following parallel: 'And should I not be sorry to lose Nineveh, that great city with its 120,000 people and many animals?' In other words, what we have here *primarily* is not the pity of God but the pain of God, although the relation between the two is quite close.

We may note that what is said about Jonah's relationship to the plant is contrasted with God's relationship to Nineveh. Thus we

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¹ H. W. Wolff, *Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament : Dodekapropheten 3, Obadja, Jona*, Neukirchner Verlag, 1967, pp. 146f.

² Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Oxford, 1907.

infer that the latter has a long-standing connection with Nineveh: he has done much for it, he made it grow—in fact, he is its Maker. What Yahweh is saying to Jonah is this: ‘You feel sorry to lose the plant only because you have lost your relief from the sun; if Nineveh is destroyed I lose much more than that.’ Yet we should not exclude God’s pity. Nineveh is not just a city, but a city of people ‘who do not know their right hand from their left’. We might even say they are ‘like sheep without a shepherd’. A look at the usage of the verb *hus* will, I believe, substantiate this interpretation.

*KB*³ gives the first meaning of *hus* as *betrübt sein (wegen)* with the following sub-division:

- (a) with ‘eye’ as subject + ‘al: Gen. 45:20 (v.s.); Deut. 7:16, 13:9, 19:13; Isa. 13:18; Ezek. 7:4, 20:17.
 (b) the same without ‘al: Deut. 19:21, 25:12; Ezek. 5:11, 7:9, 8:18, 9:5, 10.

The deuteronomic passages are concerned with the punishment of a wrong-doer. The context favours the meaning ‘pity’ rather than ‘feel sorry about’ for it is pity that would waive the punishment, and this is what the writer wants to avoid: ‘and you shall destroy . . . your eye shall not pity’ (7:16); ‘you shall not yield to him (one who entices you to follow other gods) or listen to him, nor shall you conceal him, *but* you shall kill him’ (13:8); ‘your eye shall not pity . . . but you shall purge . . .’ (19:13). The same is true of Isaiah 13:18 as the parallel shows: ‘they will have no mercy (*r-h-m*) on the fruit of the womb; their eyes will not pity children.’ The case is no different in the passages from Ezekiel, where the language is in any case dependent on Deuteronomy. There is no strong reason for assuming a meaning different from the parallel words. Thus, for example, Ezek. 5:11 (literally): ‘and even I, I will cut (you) down,⁴ and my eye will not pity, and even I, I will not spare.’⁵

The distinction may be made because *KB* believes the literal meaning of *hus* to be ‘flow’, an explanation rejected by Wolff who believes that the verb referred to a sad, sorrowful look.⁶ Wolff notes that the verb only twice refers to things, viz. Gen. 45:20 and Jon. 4:10. We should, I think, also include 4:11—Nineveh and possibly the cattle.

The second meaning given by *KB* is *mitleidig blicken* (look with pity). The references are clear in meaning. They are: Ezek. 16:5 (with ‘eye’ as subject); Joel 2:17; Ps. 72:13; Neh. 13:22; Jer. 13:14.

³ L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *Hebraisches und aramaisches Lexicon zum AT*, Leiden, 1967.

⁴ Adopting *g-d-* with KO^r VarP 10 MSS Ed Symm Tg Vg; not *g-b-*, withdraw; LXX, L and Sy apparently read *g-’-l*, loathe.

⁵ *h-m-l*

⁶ *betrübten, traurigen Blick*, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

The third meaning given is *verschauen* (spare). This is also a suitable translation for the references cited, Isa. 24:11 (EVV 10); Jer. 21:7; Ezek. 24:14, though the justification for the division is not clear. See, for example, Ezek. 5:11, 16:5, 24:14 (in the first, second and third divisions respectively), or Deut. 13:8; Jer. 13:14, 21:7 (similarly).

I would submit that the only clear division of the usage of the verb into different meanings is (a) referring to persons, and (b) referring to things. I suggest that this was the basic distinction in Hebrew usage, and that it is for this reason that the verb was so appropriate for the writer of Jonah.