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TWO UNRECOGNIZED TERMS IN THE PLASTER TEXTS FROM DEIR 'ALLA

VICTOR SASSON

Several scholars who have worked on the difficult and tantalizing Deir 'Alla plaster texts have offered various suggestions regarding the meaning of *'tm* and *smr* in the First Combination. In my opinion these suggestions do not offer satisfactory solutions to the meanings of these two words. The present note, which is an extract from my forthcoming detailed study of the First Combination, will present simpler solutions which are also more congruent with the immediate context of these two words.¹ My division of the lines in the text differs from those found in the *editio princeps*² and in the studies of other scholars.³ In my discussion below, however, I shall use the line numbers as used by the original editors. The transliteration and translation at the end of this study will, on the other hand, indicate my own line divisions.

'tm and *smr* are best understood within the context of lines 8–9 and specifically where the *'lhn* inform Balaam of the *šdyns* conspiracy. The *šdyn* (= evil deities) have ordered *šgr w'štr* (probably an astral-fertility goddess) to shut out the sun's light with heavy clouds and thereby bring utter darkness and confusion to the world. The words *'tm* and *smr* continue directly the theme of darkness and confusion. This thesis is supported by what follows after *'tm* and *smr-ht* and, after the lacuna in the text, *hšk*. I will now discuss *'tm* and *smr* separately and in some detail.

'tm — Hoftijzer confesses he has difficulties in interpreting this word. To resolve his difficulties, however, he offers unlikely meanings based on unlikely suppositions (*ATDA*, 197). *'tm* is, surely, related to *tm*. Compare Isa. 9.18, *b'brt YHWH šb'wt n'tm 'rš*: 'The land is all darkness because of the fury of the Lord' (*NEB*). In v. 19 we actually read of heavy columns of smoke caused by fire — hence the prevailing darkness in the land. Arabic adds weighty support to our interpretation. *'atama* (II) means 'to darken, obscure, cloud, black out', and *'atma*, 'gloom, darkness'.⁴ Both noun and verb are not exclusively literary words. Native speakers of Arabic use both noun and verb in spoken language in reference to heavily clouded skies which make the day look or appear like night.

It is interesting that Hebrew *'tm* means 'to close, to seal'.⁵ It is clear that Hebrew *'tm* and *tm*, Arabic *'atama*, and *'tm* in our text all have closely related significations. It may well be, therefore, that all these forms have had some common semantic origin.⁶

An interesting biblical parallel to *'tm w[šrh]* in line 9 would be *šrh whšk* in Isa. 8.22. The verse reads: *w'l 'rš ybyṭ whnh šrh whšk*.

Caquot-Lemaire, Levine, and McCarter avoid the problem of identifying *'tm* by emending a sound and clear text. The *t* of *'tm* is clear enough (see Plate 9-ic in the *editio princeps*). It is not clear to me, however, how Caquot-Lemaire can read *d* instead. To read *l* for *t*, as McCarter does, is unacceptable. As to the letter *m*, its ink is mostly faded but it has retained its visibility.

[*b*] *smrky* — For *smrky*, Hoftijzer offers 'the dread of you'. Levine follows McCarter who, according to the former, 'ingeniously suggests rendering *smr* "bristling light"'. As Levine himself admits, such a meaning 'is not actually attested'.

The reliance of scholars on the occurrence of *smr* in Job 4.15 and Ps. 119.120 is misplaced. Hoftijzer (*ATDA*, 198) assumes that *smr* is in some way parallel in meaning to *yr* in Ps. 119.120. Although *smr* is used in close proximity to *yr* and *phd*, its meaning is not synonymous with these

words. The physiological reaction which a person experiences, denoted by *smr*, is the outcome of the psychological process denoted by *yr*⁵ and *phd*. Thus the dread of the Lord makes the psalmist's flesh creep (*NEB*). It is erroneous to equate *smr* with 'fear'.

As with ʿ*tm* above, the meaning of *smr* must be sought in Arabic. Arabic *samar* can also mean 'night, darkness'.⁷ In Arabic-speaking countries a person of brown or dark-brown skin is called *asmar* (fem. *samrā*), in a purely neutral sense. Some poems in classical Arabic as well as some present-day popular songs even sing the praises of a lover who is *asmar*, or dark, like the night.

The following transliteration and translation of the text discussed also show the reconstructions and line divisions I have adopted.

Transliteration

[s]k̄f̄y. šmyn. b'bk̄y.
šm. ḥšk. [w'l.] ngh.
ʿtm. w̄ [šrh.]
[b] sm̄rky. thby. ḥt̄.
[wyrb.] ḥšk̄.
w'l̄ [.] thḡy. ʿd. ʿlm.

Translation

'[S]hut the heavens with thy dense clouds!
Let darkness rule there [and not] light,
Impenetrable gloom and [distress!]
[With] thy darkness, bring about terror,
And obscurity [will increase,]
And keep thou silent forever!

The proposed meanings for ʿ*tm* ('impenetrable gloom') and for *smr* ('darkness') appear to me philologically sound and contextually suitable.

NOTES

¹ The draft of the detailed study on which this note is based was first written down in April–May 1982.

² Hoftijzer, J. and van der Kooij, G., *Aramaic Texts from Deir ʿAlla* (Documenta et Monumenta Orientis Antiqui, 19. Leiden, 1976). This will be referred to as *ATDA*.

³ Caquot, A. and Lemaire, A., 'Les Textes araméens de Deir ʿAlla', *Syria*, 54 (1977), 189–208; Levine, B. A., 'The Deir ʿAlla Plaster Inscriptions', *JAOs*, 101 (1981), 195–205; McCarter, P. Kyle, 'The Balaam Texts from Deir ʿAlla: The First Combination', *BASOR*, 239 (1981), 49–60.

⁴ See E. W. Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon*, Book 1, Part 5, 1949–50; H. Wehr, *Arabic–English Dictionary*, 590.

⁵ *BDB*, 31–32. Note the use of the verb *skr* in our text (see Transliteration).

⁶ On the non-emphatic dental plosive *t* and the emphatic plosive *t̄*, see S. Moscati (ed.) *An Introduction to the Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages* (Wiesbaden, 1964), 31. Certain emphatic and non-emphatic consonants interchange in biblical Hebrew — e.g., *ṣ* and *ṣ̄* (in *ṣḥq* and *ṣḥg*). Cf. also *g* and *k* (in *sgr* and *skr*). In fact, Hebrew has *sgr* and *skr* whereas Arabic has only *skr*. It is possible that in the dialect of Deir ʿAlla ʿ*tm* is closely related to Hebrew and Arabic ʿ*tm*.

⁷ See Lane, *Lexicon*, Book 1, Part 4, 1424–26; Wehr, *Dictionary*, 429.