

What Colour is the Dove's Plumage? A Study of the Colour Adjective *yraqraq*, in Ps 68.14

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ABSTRACT

Psalm 68 is well known for the difficulties of interpretation it presents. As YHWH addresses his people using the image of a dove, the poet describes its wings and plumage through a beautiful parallelism and a recurrent literary motif: that of *silver-gold*. However, unlike silver, the gold here is described with the adjectival lexeme *yraqraq*, suggesting a hue which has been much discussed both among exegetes and in modern versions of the Bible. Today, the field of cognitive linguistics provides us with a theoretical framework and a series of useful lexicographical tools for this study, including the need for an encyclopaedic knowledge that will situate us in the world of speaker. From this, we can deepen our knowledge of the psalm's context and the referents of the colour term: *dove* and *gold*. We have concluded that the dove's plumage is imbued with a greenish gold colour.

Keywords: colour term, cognitive linguistics, bible, hue, green

INTRODUCTION

It is enough to open one's sleepy eyes on some summer morning to contemplate, perhaps unconsciously, the array of colours that give life to the reality the darkness has kept hidden. This visual perception has been going on as long as man has existed. However, what has varied over time is the way in which these colours are named, and the concept of colour itself. Since antiquity, the poet has with his calamus tried to capture in words what he feels and to infuse what he sees with colour. This is the case of the psalmist of Psalm 68. He sings joyously of the triumph of the chosen people, comparing it to a dove whose wings are like silver and whose feathers are like gold (Ps 68.14). This use of colour, however, is not limited to the classic literary motif of *silver-gold*, but adds a personal touch by describing gold with an adjectival lexeme that denotes colour: *yraqraq*.

The question that arises is how to approach today the chromatic nuance denoted by *yraqraq*, when our own concept of colour is so different from that held in antiquity, and when many chromatic terms in Hebrew appear to us as being polysemous. As will be shown here, the field of cognitive linguistics provides us with just such a theoretical framework for the lexicographical study of these terms and the tools needed to unlock their meaning.

THEORY

Cognitive linguistics (CL) is an interdisciplinary discipline that considers language to be a faculty related to other cognitive faculties. According to CL, language is not autonomous, as it is related to the thinking and bodily experience of the individual. The study of language thus becomes focused on usage. Its essence is meaning and, to gain access to this, it is necessary to know the world of the speaker (Ibarretxe, 2010).

Following this hermeneutic framework, accessing the meaning of *yraqraq*, obliges us to start from a definition of colour that will serve as a connective link between the concept of colour that existed in antiquity and ours today, as well as to deepen our knowledge of the speaker's world. This aspect is vitally important to the study of colour, as colour adjectives are used to describe concrete entities. In some cases, a detailed study of the entity described enables us to determine the tonality reflected by the adjective.

We are following here the definition of colour proposed by John Lyons (1999): 'colour is the property of physical entities and substances which is describable in terms of hue, luminosity (or brightness) and saturation and which makes it possible for human beings to differentiate between otherwise perceptually identical entities and substances, and more especially between entities and substances that are perceptually identical in respect of size, shape and texture'. Our motives for adopting this definition are three: a) it respects the concept of colour that was held in antiquity (a quality of physical substances; that which is visible); b) it allows us to consider that the chromatic lexicon of antiquity expresses, above all, luminosity; c) it synthesises the characteristics of our current concept of colour: tone, luminosity and saturation.

As for knowing the world of the speaker, the modern scholar is forced to pose a series of questions, the answers to which will gradually situate him within the universe of the text. To do this, a variety of scientific disciplines come into play –linguistics, literature, archaeology, biology, botany, history, etc.– and these provide the encyclopaedic perspective from which the meaning will emerge.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned before, Ps 68.14 poetically describes the people of Israel as a dove with wings of silver and feathers of gold. The peculiarity of the pericope lies in the poet's description of gold with the adjectival lexeme *yraqraq*. This lexeme is considered to be a colour term which, combined with a greenish tonality (BDB; Bulakh, 204), denotes a number of chromatic variations that reflect luminosity or lack of saturation (Brenner, 124), such as pale green (BDB), yellowish green (HALOT) or yellow (Hartley, 135; Bulakh, 204). This explains the fact that modern translations oscillate between highlighting either the hue of gold –*yellow* (ASV; KJV; NKJV) or *green* (NRSV)– or the quality of luminosity: *bright* or *shining* (NIV). At first glance, the meaning of *yraqraq* may correspond to any of the proposed translations, as gold is usually yellow (for which it is the classic epithet), or greenish (when mixed with silver or bronze), or has a particular brightness that can be emphasised by the use of *yraqraq*.

This same diversity can already be seen in early translations of the Bible:

- LXX interprets the adjective *yraqraq*, as having a nominal function and *charuts*, by contrast, an adjectival one. *Χλωρότητι χρυσίου* is thus translated as *golden greenness* (NETS).
- The Vulgate presents two different interpretations, as it is well known that Jerome did two translations of the Psalter: the *Psalterium iuxta Hebraeos*, following the principle of *veritas hebraica*; and the Gregorian Psalter, which is the translation of the Greek version. In the *Psalterium iuxta Hebraeos*, *yraqraq* is translated as *viror* (*green colour, greenness*), while in the Gallican Psalter (*pale colour, paleness*) is used for *χλωρότης*.
- The Targum of Psalms omits the chromatic description of the adjective *yraqraq* and resorts here to a gloss: *pure gold*.

Given that the expression *yraqraq charuts* describes the wings of the dove, it is fitting to wonder whether the poet is thinking of a real or a figurative dove, as when this referent is identified we can better understand the tonality expressed by the adjectival lexeme. For the first case, two hypotheses have been proposed:

According to John Hartley (2010), the poet is thinking of the liberation of doves during a victory celebration. On their ascent toward heaven, their feathers would take on a yellowish tone as they reflected the sun. This proposal is supported by two archaeological artefacts: 1) the ivory plaque of Megiddo, which shows the king receiving the spoils of war while birds similar to doves are seen flying around him; 2) representations of doves in Egyptian palaces, a custom which may have spread to the Israelite world.

On the other hand, *Easton's Bible Dictionary* indicates that there is in fact a species of dove in Damascus whose characteristic colour is yellow, with the exception of its wings. Lourdes García Ureña (2016) has suggested that this could be *Treron phoenicoptera*, whose colouring is predominated by shades of grey, yellow (bright yellow, mustard) and greenish:



Figure 1: *Treron phoenicoptera*.

As for the figurative dove, a military trophy in the form of a dove has been proposed (Oesterley, 1962; Lipiński, 1973; Gray, 1977). In this case, however, there is no unanimous interpretation of *yraqraq*. Some are inclined to read this as a greenish colour, as this is the tonality presented by the paleness of gold and bronze damascene work, such as that found in the excavation at Minet al-Beida, or of silver-plated gold, while others propose the yellowish tone or the brightness characteristic of gold in general.

These proposals, however, are still only hypotheses. No military ornamentation or insignia in the form of a dove has been found whose dating is consistent with the psalm's composition, nor is it certain that the term refers to a real dove. Consequently, the dove reference does not serve to clarify the tonality of *yraqraq*.

It is necessary, then, to analyse in detail the entity described by the adjectival lexeme *yraqraq*:

charuts, gold. Gold was considered a precious metal from the earliest times (Gen 2.11), even though it is rarely found in archaeological sites. It is mentioned frequently in the Bible, as it was used for priestly vestments, cult objects, jewellery, decoration, temple construction and commerce. It came from Arabia, Sheba and Ophir (1 Kings 9.28; 10.1; Job 28.16), but not from Palestine. Its natural characteristics (brightness, form and quality) and its various types were well known (*Easton's Bible Dictionary*). Indeed, the Bible, along with *charutz*, uses different terms to refer to gold (*zahab, yellow gold*, Exod 25.11; *kethem, pure gold*, Job 28.19; *paz, refined gold*, Ps 19.11; Prov 8.19) and even nuances these types through the use of nouns (*sagur zahab, pure gold*, 1 Kings 6.20) or adjectives (*zahab tahor, pure gold*, 2 Chron 3.4; *zahab towb, fine gold*, 2 Chron 3.8). From this intertextual perspective, the adjectival lexeme *yraqraq* would describe a specific type of gold. Moreover, it is not first time in the Masoretic Text that the literary motif *silver-gold* is enhanced by an adjective to describe gold. Thus, for example, in Prov 8.10 it is said that gold was *nivchar, chosen*.

What type of gold, then, is described by *yraqraq*? Considering the triumphal context in which it appears, the poet seems to be referring to a gold which was extremely precious. Its quality is emphasised not only by the presence of the lexeme *yraqraq*, but also through syntax. The poet places the preposition *be* together with the adjective *yraqraq*, rather than with the noun *charuts*, as he had done in an earlier verse with silver. Some scholars have proposed that the outstanding characteristic of this type of gold is its brilliance (Hartley, 2010); however, this interpretation is not convincing, as in the biblical world it was well known that precious metals have similar characteristics and that brilliance is a quality of both gold and silver. It seems, rather, that *yraqraq* does not describe luminosity, but some tonality of gold that gives it an added value, that accentuates this value and that was familiar to the community that recited the psalm. For this reason, of the yellowish or greenish tonalities suggested for *yraqraq*, the first of these may be dismissed as it merely adds a redundant value to gold which does not concord with the emphasis that the poet confers to the pericope. On the other hand, a greenish hue would accentuate a type of gold that departs from the standard variety that was characterised by a golden or yellowish colour. This proposal is supported by the commentary to Ps 68.14 composed by one of the leading medieval exegetes, Dunaš ben Labrat (c. X):

“*yraqraq charuts* is the gold which comes from the country of Hawilah and the country of Kuš: an extraordinarily fine gold, which is neither green nor red, and this is why they called it *yraqraq*, ‘greenish’, just as ‘reddish’ white *’adamdam*, is neither red nor white. This explains the reduplication found in *yraqraq* and *’adamdam*. And we know that *yraqraq charuts* does not take on the aspect of red gold until silver is added in the forging process”.

This same chromatic description of gold is also found, centuries earlier, in Latin literature (The Etymologies of Isidore, 16. 7. 16).

Therefore, it may be concluded that *yraqraq* denotes the greenish tone of a variety of very precious gold. This would account for the gloss of the Targum and the interpretive variants found in the LXX and the Vulgate.

CONCLUSION

Following CL guidelines, and after establishing a definition of colour that may serve as a bridge between the concept of colour that existed in antiquity and that of today, we have acquired the necessary encyclopaedic knowledge of the lexeme *yraqraq*, having studied the available lexicographical sources, the poetic context in which it appears, the various types of dove that the

poet may be referring to, the characteristics of gold and its use as a literary motif in the Bible. In the light of this study, we propose that the feathers of the dove have a *greenish gold* colour. This is moreover a fitting hue for both types of dove under consideration, as well as for the war trophy and for *Treron phoenicoptera*.

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