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Yērāqôn, a natural colour: ‘the colour of the fear’ (Jer 30.6)

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ABSTRACT

Although in the Hebrew Bible a specific term does not appear to refer to ‘colour’, unlike what happens in its Greek and Latin versions, colour terms are used in the different books that it is composed of to denote the various chromatic spectrum that nature shows. In the Semitic world colour is what is perceived on the objects and human beings through sight due to the presence of light. For this reason, the study of colour in the Bible is intrinsically joined to the study of the entity imbued by colour. In the most of the cases the modern reader can identify the tonality expressed by colour terms precisely through the entity mentioned. Indeed, sometimes, the objects of nature themselves are used to denote colour as occurs with precious stones, metals or cloths.

In the Book of Consolation the prophet Jeremiah uses the nominal lexeme *yērāqôn* to describe the faces of the soldiers terrified before the attack of the enemy (Jer 30.6). It is a peculiar use because *yērāqôn* appears 5 times in the Hebrew Bible joined to *šidāpôn*, ‘blight’, with the meaning of ‘mildew’ (Deut 28.22; 1 Kings 8.37; Jer 30.6; Amos 4.9; Hag. 2.17; 2 Chr. 6.28). In fact, the main dictionaries and studies about colour propose that *yērāqôn* has two different meanings: achromatic that is the most frequent (mildew) and the other one chromatic (paleness). Nevertheless, neither Greek neither Latin version, having colour terms that could be equivalents, use them and instead they resort to a term expressing a skin disease characterized by the fact that the person acquires a yellow hue as happens with mold: ἰκτερός ‘jaundice’ and aurugo ‘jaundice’. Thus, it is logical asking if *yērāqôn* denotes effectiveness ‘paleness’.

As it is mentioned, Jeremiah utilizes *yērāqôn* to describe the soldiers’ faces (Jer 30.6). As today, in Israel, the face reflects the emotions that the human being experiences, through gestures or a colour change on the face, as it can naturally turn red or pale. As it is known, one of the fear effects is the unexpected paleness. So it stands to set out that *yērāqôn* does indeed mean paleness. However, how can we explain the origin of this new meaning? Jer 30.6 appears in the context of divine punishment as occurs when it has the meaning of mildew. The mildew, attacking the plants, discolours them and they acquired a hue of low saturation between green and yellow. It seems that Jeremiah pays attention in the colour of the plants and, through a cognitive metonymy of kind ENTITY and SALIENT PROPERTY, uses *yērāqôn* to express only the colour acquired by a person, not ill as the plants, but terrified by fear. This explains that *yērāqôn* does not denote a plant illness, but the colour of fear.

KEYWORDS

colour | emotion | paleness | fear | Bible

INTRODUCTION

Although in the Hebrew Bible a specific term does not appear to refer to ‘colour’, unlike what happens in its Greek and Latin versions that use *χρῶμα* (4x: Exod 34.29-30; Esth 15.7; Wis 15.4) or *χρόα* (3x: Exod 4.7; 2 Mac 3.16; Wis 13.14) and *color* (31x: Gen 30.37.39; 31.10; Exod 39.3.5; Lev 13.2-4,10,21,26,32,36,39,42; 14.56; Num 11.7; Judg 5.30; 1 Chr 29.2; Esth 1.6; Job 28.16; Prov 23.31; Wis 13.14; 15.4; Sir 43.20; Lam. 4.1; Ezek 23.14; 27.18; 2 Mac 3.16; 2 Esdr 6.44; 14.39), colour terms are used in the different books to denote the various chromatic spectrum that nature reveals: green grass (Gen 1:30), white snow (Ps 51,7), etc. In the Semitic world, as also happens in the Greek and Latin, colour is what is perceived on the objects and human beings through sight due to the presence of light. For this reason, the analysis of colour in the Bible is intrinsically joined to the study of the entity imbued by colour. The colour terms are shown as ‘embodied’ on an entity (object, animal, human being). In many cases the modern reader can identify the tonality expressed by the colour terms precisely through the entity mentioned, for example *yereq* denotes green because it is embodied on *ēšeb* ‘grass’ (Gen 1.30). Indeed, sometimes, the objects of nature themselves are used to denote colour as occurs with precious stones, metals or cloths.

However, the study of the entity is not enough to determine the meaning of a color term in the Hebrew Bible, it is also necessary:

- a) to acquire what cognitive linguistics calls ‘encyclopedic knowledge’, that is, the knowledge that the native speaker had. Since there is no native speaker, the way to access it today is to study, on the one hand, the information provided by the main dictionaries and specific studies on colours and, on the other hand, how the text was interpreted by the ancient versions of the Bible, since Hebrew was a living language at the time the Bible was translated into Greek and Latin.
- b) The study of the context where the pericopes appears.

Following this methodology, we will study the use that Jeremiah makes of the nominal lexeme *yērāqôn* to describe the faces of the terrified soldiers before the imminent battle (Jer 30.6). As we will see below, *yērāqôn* is not a colour term and this is how the early versions of the Bible interpret it. It is therefore logical to ask whether *yērāqôn* denotes colour as proposed by the modern versions of the Bible (NRSV, ASV, Navarra Bible).

DISCUSSION

According to the main dictionaries and studies on colour, *yērāqôn* has two different meanings: achromatic, ‘mildew’, which is the most frequent (Deut 28.22; 1 Kings 8.37; Jer 30.6; Amos 4.9; Hag. 2.17; 2 Chr. 6.28) and the other chromatic, ‘paleness’ that appears only in Jer 30.6. Specific colour studies such as those by Athalya Brenner and Maria Bulakh, follow this same line. Robert Gradwohl, however, offers an interesting analysis of this particular nominal lexeme, in which he considers *yērāqôn* to be a term related to the world of plants, together with the rest of its lexical family. In any case, *yērāqôn* refers to a specific state that occurs during the process of constant change undergone by vegetation. While *yereq* expresses the phase of growth and maturity of cereal crops, *yērāqôn* refers to the phase of ageing and, therefore, yellowing. According to Gradwohl, *yērāqôn* is in fact the name of a crop disease. From this arises the meaning of ‘paleness’, as *yērāqôn* loses its original connection with plants and indicates, rather, the change in the colour of someone’s face as the result of fear.

Neither the Septuagint nor the Vulgate uses a colour lexeme to translate *yērāqôn*, which seems strange as both possess specific colour lexemes for similar contexts in their respective languages: *χλωρός* or *χλωρότης*, *pallidus* or *pallor* (indeed, the Vulgate uses this term to describe terrified faces: Jdth 6.5; Esth 15.10). Both versions use lexemes (*ἰκτερος*, *aurugo*) that denote both a disease of plants, as *yērāqôn* originally meant in Hebrew (1 Kings 8.37; Hag 2.18; 2 Chron 6.28), as well as human beings, i.e. jaundice, which is characterized by its yellow colour. Thus, it is logical to ask if *yērāqôn* in effect denotes ‘paleness’.

Once the encyclopaedic knowledge has been obtained, we will delve deeper into the study of the context and the entity.

Jer 30.6 is part of a literary unit referred to as the ‘Book of Consolation’ (Jer 30.1-33.26), written during the late reign of Zedekiah (587 BC) or shortly after. The pericope under study here belongs to one of the sections focused on judgment and punishment, which describes the suffering and anguish of the people (Jer 30.5-7). Jer 30.6, specifically, establishes a parallel between soldiers and women in labour, an image used in this book (Jer 30.6; 48.41) and which is also found in Isaiah (Isa 13.8; 21.3):

Ask and see if a man has ever given birth. Why, then, do I see every man with his hands on his loins like a woman in labour, and all their faces turned *yērāqôn*?

Unlike the other pericopes in which the prophet uses the image of a woman giving birth to underscore the idea of physical pain (Jer 4.31; 22.23), on this occasion the image describes not only pain (the hands placed on the kidneys), but also the fear which characterizes childbirth, from not knowing when it will take place and because it is inevitable once labour has begun. Jeremiah compares the fear of childbirth to the fear felt by men faced with punishment. Paradoxically, it is they who must defend and protect their people militarily. However, the panic they feel is so great that it cannot be concealed, and so they shrink back.

In ancient Israel, as in our own time, a person’s face was felt to reflect emotions being experienced through its expressions or a change in colour, e.g. becoming red or pale. On repeated occasions, the Hebrew version of the Bible uses the language of colour to describe intense emotions expressed in one’s face. For this purpose, the authors employ a variety of terms to denote colour through the effect of metonymy; for example, the verbal lexeme *hāmar*, ‘to boil or burn’ (Job 16.16: ‘my face is burnt [is reddened]’) denotes a reddish colour in the face, the result of weeping, and expresses a feeling of sadness or grief; meanwhile, the nominal lexeme *lahab*, ‘flame’, while also denoting the colour red, expresses mistrust and suspicion (Isa 13.8: ‘their faces are faces of flame’). In contrast, white or paleness denote shame through the use of *hūr*, ‘to be or grow white, pale’ (Isa 29.22: ‘his face will no longer grow pale’). Jeremiah, for his part, heightens this feeling of terror by employing the nominal lexeme *yērāqôn* embodied in *pānīm*, ‘face’ from the cognitive domain of human beings.

Surprisingly, this lexeme is used in the MT 5x in a context similar to that of divine judgment, but in a different cognitive domain (plants-disease), in which the blights which ravage the fields and bring famine are enumerated. In all of these cases, *yērāqôn* is preceded by and coordinated with *šidāpôn* ‘blight’ (Deut 28.22; 1 Kings 8.37; Amos 4.9; Hag 2.17; 2 Chron 6.28). Both lexemes are included in the list of ‘unidentified plants’ elaborated by Harold and Alma Moldenke. According to these authors, the biblical writer does not bother to specify exactly what type of plants are attacked; rather, the terms are used to indicate diseases that can attack any type of plant. They therefore conclude that *yērāqôn* and *šidāpôn* were plant diseases caused by parasitic fungi such as occurs today. Indeed, the medieval exegete Rashi considered that *yērāqôn* was a disease that affected grain, a symptom of which is that the grain acquires a yellowish green tonality. Today we know that mildew is a disease characterized by the appearance of spots on the lower faces of plant leaves, ranging from light yellowish green to yellows and browns, while their upper faces may have a grey, downy coating. There is no certainty, however, that *yērāqôn* can be identified with this.

In any case, it does not appear that Jeremiah uses *yērāqôn* either to refer to a disease of plants or to any other type of affliction. Rather, he chooses the lexeme because it suits the context of divine punishment and because he focuses on the colour of *yērāqôn*, a hue of low saturation between green and yellow, which, when applied to a person, functions in a similar way as when applied to plants, as Gradwohl proposed. Fear produces a decrease in blood flow and the face becomes pale, yellowish. It is, then, a metaphor in which, just as a plant loses its natural colouring and acquires a tone of low saturation, the natural colour of the soldiers’ faces changes through fear to what we would call a ‘sickly’ tone. Jeremiah seems to be giving *yērāqôn* a new meaning through the use of a cognitive metonymy, ENTITY AND SALIENT PROPERTY, of the WHOLE FOR THE PART type, and of a metaphor that enables him to correlate domains: diseases of plants and diseases of human beings. Therefore, the meaning of *yērāqôn* is no longer one of illness, but rather ‘the colour acquired by the face of a person stricken with fear.’ As glosses, we propose ‘paleness’ and ‘yellowish green paleness’.

CONCLUSION

After the research carried out from the acquisition of encyclopaedic knowledge, the analysis of the context and the entity described, as well as the use of metaphor and cognitive metonymy, we can conclude that, in fact, *yērāqōn* is a polysemic term denoting, on one side, a disease of plants when it is used in a vegetal context and, on the other, a natural colour, that from a terrified face. Jeremiah uses *yērāqōn* ‘mildew’, the name of a plant disease that discolours plants in order to describe the effect of fear on the soldiers. He uses the name of the disease because it provoked a colour change on the plants, indeed, the colour was a sign of the presence of illness. So, highlighting the colour of the diseased plant, the prophet chooses *yērāqōn* to describe the natural colour that the face acquires, not from the one who is sick, but from the one who experiences a strong and negative emotion, fear, causing a decrease in blood flow to the face. In this sense, there is a similarity of colour in the vegetation and in the face of the human being. Thus, *yērāqōn* in Jer 30.6 denotes the natural colour that fear causes/provokes in human beings.

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