The Meaning and Syntax of *taʿărōg*

Jonathan Nathan | ORCID: 0000-0002-6417-5729
Faculty of History, University of Cambridge
Cambridge, United Kingdom
jsn32@cam.ac.uk

Published online: 26 April 2021

Abstract

The word *taʿărōg*, which appears three times in the Hebrew Bible, has been traditionally interpreted as a third-person feminine form. This article proposes that it instead be treated as a second-person masculine form, and that the two verses in which it appears be re-analysed accordingly.

Keywords

Biblical syntax – Psalm 42 – Joel – lexicology – sicut cervus

According to BDB and HALAT, the verb *ערג* is attested three times in classical Hebrew: once at Joel 1:20 and twice at Ps 42:2.

(David Stec, author of the volume ס–פ of the DCH, posits a fourth occurrence at Job 24:10. It is there attested, he says, in the present participle *ערוים הלכו*, which is to be translated “they go about longing.” He notes, however, that *ערוים* appears only if the text is not emended to *הילכו ערוים*. This is unaccountable, for *הילכו ערוים* is already the Masoretic reading. The basis of Stec’s statement is an article from 1974, whose author Arie de Wilde emended *הילכו ערוים* to *שׁוּעֹרְגִים הִלְּכוּ בְּלִי לְבוּש* , “they go naked without clothes,” to *שׁוּעֹרְגִים הִלְּכוּ בְּלִי לְבָשׂ*, “though they weave, they go without clothes.” De Wilde had apparently confused *ערג* with *ארג*, “to weave.” David Clines, the general editor of the DCH, later cited de Wilde with *ארג הילכו בלי לובש*, “to weave.”

---

1 Stec, DCH 6.
2 De Wilde, “Vervreemding.”
Wilde’s article in his commentary on Job but silently corrected it, making the emended verse read “longing, they go without clothes.” Stec then reproduced Clines’ paraphrase in his entry for the DCH on ערג, but apparently mistook the emendation for the Masoretic text. The supposed fourth attestation of ערג is thus a garbled paraphrase of a charitable reworking of a garbled conjecture. It can be safely disregarded.)

In all three genuine attestations, the word takes the singular imperfect form ערג (spelt defectively in the latter verse). Here it is in Joel 1:20:

גַּם־בַּהֲמוֹת שָׂדֶה תַּעֲרוֹג אֵלֶיךָ כִּי יָבְשׁוּ אֲפִיקֵי מָיִם וְאֵשׁ אָכְלָה נְאוֹת הַמִּדְבָּר׃

And here in Ps 42:2:

כְּאַיָּל תַּעֲרֹג עַל־אֲפִיקֵי־מָיִם כֵּן נַפְשִׁי תַֽעֲרֹג אֵלֶיךָ אֱלֹהִים׃

The word presents two problems which have vexed commentators for centuries. The first is lexical: the meaning of the verb ערג is unestablished. Some evidence for its sense comes from the context of its attestations. Joel 1:20 is preceded by אלהים יקראּ אֶלֶיךָ כִּי אֵשׁ אָכְלָה נְאוֹת מִדְבָּר וְלֶהָבָה לִהֲטָה כָּל־עֲצֵי הַשָּׂדֶה. The verse itself is then introduced by גם, which suggests that the two clauses אלהים יקראּ אֶלֶיךָ and ערג אֲפִיקֵי מָיִם are to be taken as parallel instances of the same phenomenon. Ps 42:2, meanwhile, is followed by צמאָה נַפְשִׁי לֵאלֹהִים לְאֵל חָי, which suggests an idea of urgent desire.

The earliest attested translations of ערג seem to be guesses informed by these contexts. Joel 1:20 was rendered in the LXX like this:

καὶ τὰ κτήνη τοῦ πεδίου ἀνέβλεψαν πρὸς σέ, ὅτι ἐξηράνθησαν ἀφέσεις ὑδάτων καὶ πῦρ κατέφαγεν τὰ ὡραῖα τῆς ἐρήμου.

And Ps 42:2 like this:

ὃν τρόπον ἐπιτοθεῖ ἡ ἔλαφος ἐπὶ τὰς πηγὰς τῶν ὑδάτων, οὕτως ἐπιτοθεῖ ἡ ψυχή μου πρὸς σέ, ὁ θεός.

Similarly, the tenth-century grammarian Dunash ben Labrat glossed ערג contextually as “to cry out,” making it a specialized synonym of קרא.

Aquila, for his part, used etymology rather than context to derive the meaning of ערג. He translated ערג at Joel 1:20 as ἐπρασιώθη, and ערג at Ps 42:2

3 Clines, Job 21–37, 585 n. 10b.
The basis of these translations was the resemblance between ὡς αὐλὼν and another rare word, ἡμερήμ. (The neologisms ἐπρασιώθη and πεπρασιασμένος are derivatives of πρασια, “planting bed,” which Aquila had used to translate ἡμερήμ wherever it appeared.) Later, Jerome—and thus the whole Latin tradition in the case of Joel 1:20—followed Aquila for the translation of these verses. Probably the word was just as mysterious to all of these pre-modern translators as it is to us.

Scholars since the mid-seventeenth century have tried to establish the meaning of רע from Semitic cognates. In 1648, Louis de Dieu observed that መረገ in Ethiopic and ערג in Arabic both mean “to go up,” and that Ps 42:2 could therefore be translated “sicut cerva ascendit ad decursus aquarum, sic anima mea ascendit ad te.” In 1967 Edward Ullendorff, believing that he was making an innovative application of his learning in Geʿez, unwittingly recapitulated de Dieu’s conjecture.

Two decades after it appeared, Samuel Bochart threw out de Dieu’s translation on the grounds that a beast goes down, not up, to water. In its place he cautiously endorsed the opinion of Dunash that רע referred to a deer’s cries, with the reservation that it could not refer only to deer, since at Joel 1:20 it takes all of the beasts of the field for its subject. Bochart also cited the myth of the huntress Argê, turned into a deer by the sun-god, and mused that her name was derivable from רע.

In 1669, Johannes Coccejus speculated that רע was a derivative or a relative of ערג, with the meaning “to set out [a complaint],” as at Ps 5:4. Hence Ps 42:2 was presumably to be read “as a deer complains for the riverbeds...,” and Joel 1:20 “as the beasts of the field complain ...”

In the same year, Edmund Castell provided a list of cognates to רע from Geʿez and Arabic. From then on, any scholar could review the variety of meanings associated with both መረገ and ערג. Castell himself did not connect any of these meanings to either רע or ערג, and supplied only the
traditional glosses desideravit; glocitavit for the former and areola for the latter.\textsuperscript{12} A century later, however, Johann David Michaelis mined the cognates in Castell’s entry to formulate a new hypothesis. In the first place, he endorsed de Dieu’s theory that עָרָג means “ascendit.” Then he posited that עָרְגוּה was indeed related to עָרָג, but that it must mean something raised, like a trellis, rather than a planting-bed. To prop up this conclusion he cited the Qur’anic word مَعْرَج, which Castell had recorded as meaning “ladder.”\textsuperscript{13}

Such was early-modern learning on the root עָרָג. Wilhelm Gesenius’ much-cited dictionary entries were no more than résumés of this scholarship. He endorsed de Dieu’s opinion and glossed עָרָג as “aufsteigen,” but posited that תַּעֲרוֹג is to be taken in a tropical sense of longing, as the LXX had suggested. As for עֲרוּגַה, he deprecated Aquila’s translation “planting-bed” and cited Michaelis’s conjecture with approval.\textsuperscript{14}

Joshua Blau, departing from the tradition that Gesenius had transmitted, insisted on “to incline” as the basic meaning of עָרָג.\textsuperscript{15} He observed that the Arabic G-stem verb عَرَّج, “to ascend,” is only attested in the Qur’an in the very specialized sense of entering heaven. (The noun مَعْرَج is likewise used only in connection with heaven).\textsuperscript{16} The word in the sense of ascent was therefore likely borrowed; likely from Ethiopic, in which the ordinary meaning of מַעְלָה is indeed “to go up.” Consequently, עָרְגוּה cannot be relied on as a straightforward cognate of עָרָג. The root עָרְג’s native Arabic meaning, however—and the meaning in which it is properly compared to עָרָג—is rather “to incline,” a sense which is apparent in the Qur’anic noun مَعْرَج, “cripple”;\textsuperscript{17} and in other early Arabic sources in the collateral G-stem verb عَرَّجَ, “to limp; to incline,”\textsuperscript{18} in D-stem عَرَّجَ, “to turn, to lame,” and in numerous other derivations of the root (most of which can incidentally be found in Castell’s Lexicon). Blau contended from this evidence that Biblical ערָג is best understood as a verb meaning “to incline.” The LXX’s translations, moreover, were approximately correct all along, for “to long” is a plausible tropical extension of the verb’s intransitive sense. Like Gesenius before him, Blau was perhaps motivated in the last stage

\textsuperscript{12} Castell, Lexicon heptaglotton.
\textsuperscript{13} Michaelis, Supplementa, 1968–1969.
\textsuperscript{14} Gesenius, Handwörterbuch, 892–894.
\textsuperscript{15} Blau, לבירון.
\textsuperscript{16} Blau’s citation of جَرَّحَهَ at Q Munāfiqūn 63:33 must be corrected to Q Zukhruf 43:33.
\textsuperscript{17} Attested at Q Nūr 24:61 and Q Fatḥ 48:17 in the phrase ولا على الأرجح مَعْرَج, “the sun went down,” to which one might compare Lat. sol inclinat.)
of his argument by a wish to save the appearance of the traditional translations. Below, by contrast, I will argue that there is no objection at all to treating תערוג as a transitive verb, or even to interpreting it literally.

Putting the lexical problem aside for now, our second puzzle is grammatical. In all three of its attestations the verb ערע takes the form תערוג, which has been universally interpreted since the LXX as a 3fs imperfect form. So understood, it does not agree with two of its three apparent subjects: plural בַּהֲמוֹת and masculine אַיָּל.

In his commentary on Joel 1:20, Abraham ibn Ezra wrote that singular תערוג referred to each single animal in a herd, as if its subject were bestiarum quæque. He cited בנות צעדה at Gen 49:22 as an example of the same phenomenon.19 Wilhelm Gesenius, by contrast, posited that בַּהֲמוֹת שָׂדֶה תערוג was an instance of a plural subject’s taking a singular feminine predicate, just as non-human plurals do in Arabic.20 As for Ps 42:2, ibn Ezra noted that nouns which usually refer to male animals can sometimes denote females too, like יִשְׁתַּחַת at Num 15:27.21 Eight centuries later, Emil Kautzsch gave precisely the same explanation.22 All of these are serviceable ad-hoc exculpations of their respective verses, but none of them accounts on its own for both problematic instances of תערוג.

Twentieth-century editors of the Masoretic text saw another way out, offering emendations rather than grammatical explanations. Frants Buhl proposed in his edition of the Psalms that כְּאַיָּל תערוג is haplographic for כְּאַיֶּלֶת תערוג, and thus that the animal in question is a doe after all.23 All of his successors have followed him, down to Hans Bardtke in the BHS. Thomas Cheyne, by contrast, suggested that תערוג in Ps 42:2 had been metathesized from תערToLocal angry.”24 At Joel 1:20, Wilhelm Nowack made the tentative conjecture of בָּהֲמוֹת for בַּהֲמוֹת שָׂדֶה in order to account for the singular form תערוג.25 Otto Procksch retained this emendation for the BH3, and even deleted Nowack’s fortasse. Certainty, however, was no protection from posterity. Karl Elliger, editor for the BHS, recorded the conjecture, but deprecated it in favour of his own emendation תערוגה for תערוג. Finally, Anthony Gelston did away with both proposals in the BHQ.26 It is just as well that he did so, for there is nothing to recommend Nowack or Elliger’s emendations apart from the comfort of the lectio facilior.

---

19 כל אחת ואחת כדרך בנות צעדה:גם בהמות תערוג.
20 Gesenius, *Hebräisches Elementarbuch*, §143.3.
21 על לשון נקבה כמו עז בת שנתה:ואיל.
23 Kittel, *Biblia Hebraica*.
24 Cheyne, “Occurrences of גער”.
25 Kittel, *Biblia Hebraica*.
26 Gelston, *Twelve Minor Prophets*. 
Indeed, all these grammatical explanations and textual emendations are embarrassed attempts to evacuate the scandal of a rare verb that appears in only one form. It is *that* form, תַּעֲרוֹג, which we must account for: parsimony warns against dodging the problem with piecemeal explanations.

I propose the following solution: عبرג is to be treated in the first place as a transitive verb. And عبرג is not a 3fs, but rather a 2ms verb whose implied subject is in all attested instances “God”; and whose direct objects are אַיָּל, נַפְשִׁי, and בַּהֲמוֹת. This analysis resolves all disagreements between subject and verb. It also lets the Masoretic text stand without modification.

The sense of عبرג need not be fixed here. But if we borrow Joshua Blau’s hypothesis that عبرג means “to bend” (without endorsing his further conclusions) we can read the verses like this:

Joel 1:20:
*Quin et bestias agri ad te torques, nam alvei aquæ exsiccati sunt, et ignis consumpsit prata deserti.*
Thou also turnest the beasts of the field unto thee, for the rills of water are dried up, and fire hath consumed the meadows of the wilderness.

Ps 42:2:
*Sicut cervum ad alveos aquæ, ita animam meam ad te torques, O Elohim.*
As thou turnest a deer unto rills of water, so turnest thou my soul unto thee, O God.

This would be nothing unusual: נַפְשִׁי is very often construed with verbs of spatial manipulation.27

Alternatively, we might attribute to عبرג the same tropical sense as חול and *torqueo*, viz. “to torture”:

Joel 1:20:
*Quin et bestias agri de te angis, nam alvei aquæ exsiccati sunt, etc.*
Thou also puttest the beasts of the field in anguish for thee, etc.

Ps 42:2:
*Sicut cervum de alveis aquæ, ita animam meam de te angis, O Elohim.*
As thou puttest a deer in anguish for rills of water, so puttest thou my soul in anguish for thee, O God.28

---

28 Here מ is to be read like צַר־לִי עָלֶיךָ אָחִי יְהוֹנָתָן at 2 Sam 1:26.
It might be objected that I have visited the grammatical iniquity of אַיָּל תַּעֲרֹגוּ, whose traditional interpretation poses no problem of agreement. It is true that the sv interpretation anima mea desiderat is prima facie plausible. But it is no violent innovation to treat נפשי תערוג as an ov-ordered clause. We find the Psalms replete with such constructions, even if we restrict our selection to the form נפשי. Consider, for instance, נפשי השבח at Ps 23:3, where the implied second-person subject is God, and where the predicate is placed after the object. Or else Ps 143:3, נפשי חコレ; or Ps 86:4, אֵלֶיךָ אֲדֹנָי נפשי אֵשׁא. With this grammatical possibility in mind, indulge a thought experiment. Consider Ps 16:10:

לֹא־תַעֲזֹב נַפְשִׁי לִשְׁאוֹל—but imagine that עזב were an otherwise-unattested root of unknown meaning. I insist that there would be no way of knowing a priori whether נפשי were the subject or the object of תעוזב. We would need to look for all available clues to determine the answer and confess ignorance if none were available. In the case of נפשי תערוג, however, we do have a clue to the correct syntactical interpretation. It is the very fact that תערוג does not agree in gender and number with the two nouns besides נפשי that are traditionally purported to be its subjects, and that it is much more comfortably treated in those cases as a transitive verb that takes those nouns as objects.

Besides their advantages in agreement, my readings also eliminate a serious syntactical difficulty, which is that על and אֶל would be awkward prepositional complements for a verb meaning “to long.” Consider Ps 63:1:

צָמָאָה לְךָ נַפְשִׁי כָּמַהּ לְךָ בְּשָׂרִי בְּאֶרֶץ־צִיָּה וְעָיֵף בְּלִי־מָיִם׃

And Ps 42:3:

צָמָאָה לְאֵל חָי׃

The traditional view is that Joel 1:20 and Ps 42:2 are parallel cases in syntax as well as meaning to these two passages. Observe, however, that הצמא and הכמה both take the preposition ל, whereas only לע and לא appear in Ps 42:2. In fact, Hebrew verbs of hungering, thirsting, and longing almost always take the complement ל—not לע or לא—before the thing longed for. If תערוג were to be interpreted as a synonym of הצמא, then its construction with לע לא would be odd indeed. A seeming exception is Ps 119:20, נרָאָה נְפַשׁלֶּאָהּ אֲלָמָשֶּפֶתּ בְּכָל־עֵת. But there, נרָאָה is not an independent complement of a verb, but is rather set within a prepositional phrase that complements the object-noun אֲלָמָשֶּפֶתּ בְּכָל־עֵת. When the verb אֲלָמָשֶּפֶתּ appears later in the psalm, it does take the complement ל after all.
The LXX, the Rabbis, and our dictionaries tell us that תערוג is an intransitive 3f form. But tradition is no substitute for the evidence, which urges us to draw another conclusion.

Bibliography


Coccejus, Johannes. Lexicon et commentarius sermonis Hebraici et Chaldaici Veteris Testamenti. Amsterdam: Johannes à Someren, 1669.


