A ROOT TO LOOK UP?
A STUDY OF THE HEBREW נָּסַמְךָ יָנ

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Among those whose earliest introduction to Biblical Hebrew was through the medium of translation into a modern European language, there can be few who do not recall the combined sense of wonder and amusement with which they encountered the fact that God’s ancient people so often “lifted their eyes” before they saw. The extensive use and influence of the Authorized Version (= AV) ensured that its literal rendering of the Hebrew נָּסַמְךָ יָנ was, as in so many similar cases, slavishly followed for centuries, so that familiarity with its form bred complacency about its meaning. Progress and modernity do, however, ultimately overtake even the most reactionary of teachers and in recent years it has become fashionable to prefer the more idiomatically satisfying translation “look up”, or its other European equivalents, on the assumption that it is this physical activity that is being described by the Hebrew phrase under discussion.

For scholars reasonably well acquainted with the post-biblical form of the language any feeling of satisfaction that this modern translation “look up” is a universally accurate as well as an idiomatically pleasing rendering is soon tempered by an awareness that the linguistic evidence from Tannaitic and later Hebrew supports no such blanket assumption. However negligent some previous generations of biblical scholars were about taking due account of the rabbinic sources in their researches into the emergence and development of Biblical Hebrew expressions, there are surely few who would today dare to offer a definition of the semantic range of any such expression without making a critical comparison with the later evolution of the language. Important as cognate languages are for lexicographical work, their use is best complemented by a judicious examination of internal linguistic developments.¹ In the case under discussion such an examination undoubtedly invites a comprehensive

¹ See e.g. my remarks about the mediaeval Jewish commentators, and the relevant documentation, on the first page of my article “Ibn Ezra on Psalm i 1-2”, VT 34 (1984), pp. 232-6.
analysis of past and present translations of the phrase and their degree of reliability.

True as it is to claim, as has been claimed above, that the AV was once the dominant factor in the translation of common Hebrew phrases, it is no less valid to point out that contemporary versions such as the New English Bible (= NEB), the Jerusalem Bible in the English edition (= JB) and the New JPS Translation (= NJPS) both reflect and influence current trends in the translation of Biblical Hebrew.\(^2\) A comparison of their renderings of the phrase נָשָׁה יָנָה with those of their earlier counterparts reveals a slight but distinct move away from "lift the eye" towards less literal and more interpretative translations. At the same time, however, there is still a considerable lack of consistency, both within each version and between the versions, in the treatment of the phrase in its various contexts, so that it remains unclear which of the renderings, if any, is truly indicative of the way forward for the accurate translator.

Having dealt with the statistical evidence and established that in the majority of cases today's versions still adopt the rendering "lift the eye" and what are regarded as its more idiomatic equivalents, I shall seek the source of this rendering in the ancient versions and trace its occurrence through the mediaeval Jewish commentators and lexicographers to their modern counterparts. It will then be necessary to examine those sources—modern as well as ancient, classical and mediaeval—that provide evidence of alternative renderings and to reach a conclusion about the extent to which these alternatives are scientifically justifiable. In the light of such a conclusion it will be possible to offer some general guidelines about the types of rendering that are required and to judge whether the tendency of contemporary scholarship and translation is soundly based and should be more consistently applied.

The various forms of the phrase נָשָׁה יָנָה occur a total of 50 times in the Hebrew Bible, 18 of them in the Pentateuch, 6 in the Former Prophets, 20 in the Latter Prophets and 6 in the Hagiographa. If these occurrences are divided according to the literary form in which they are to be found, 23 are in classical narrative prose, 18 constitute part of a prophetic or poetic utterance and 9 belong to the introductory phraseology preceding the report of a prophetic revelation.\(^3\) As far as the sense of the phrase in


\(^3\) The fifty cases are, according to this tripartite classification: a) Gen. xiii 10, 14, xviii 2, xxii 4, 13, xxiv 63, 64, xxxi 10, 12, xxxii 1, 5, xxxvi 7, xxix 25, xxxix 7, xlii 29; Exod. xiv 10; Deut. iii 27; Josh. v 13; Judg. xix 17; 1 Sam. vi i 13; 2 Sam. xiii 34, xviii 24; Job ii 12; 1 Chron. xxi 16; b) Deut. iv 19; 2 Kings xix 22; Isa. xxxvii 23, xl 26, xlii 18, li 6, lx 4; Jer. iii 2, xiii 20; Ezek. vii 5 (first), xviii 6, 12, 15, xxii 27, xxxii 1, 25; Zech. v 5; Ps. cxxi 1, cxxii 1; c) Num. xxiv 2; Ezek. viii 5 (second); Zech. i i 1, 5, v i, v 9, vi 1; Dan. viii 3, x 5.