The three-fold use of the word יָרָשׁ in Chapter xix of the Book of Job has always been one of the puzzles of Biblical Exegesis. The Massoretic Text and English translation of these verses reads: ¹)

"My bones cleave to my skin and to my flesh, and I have escaped by the skin of my teeth (20)... and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then without my flesh I shall see God (26)".

The ancient translators, reading יָרָשׁ in each of these places, understood it to mean “skin”. This, however, compelled them to create such meaningless metaphors as “skin of the teeth”, “bone in the teeth”, “lips”, etc. Further, in the one place where the meaning “skin” seems surest (20A), because of the juxtaposition of the word for flesh, they fashioned yet another series of confusing metaphors. The Medieval Jewish commentators were equally puzzled by these verses and the modern commentators have been able to do little better. Dr. Gray, in the textual notes to verse 26A notes: ²) “Line is altogether obscure and uncertain” and he leaves the first clause untranslated. Dr. Driver in his philological notes begins: ³) “...uncertain, ambiguous, difficult” and later in the note adds: “The uncertainties and difficulties of H. in this verse being so great, it is not surprising that attempts at emendation have been numerous and ingenious, if not convincing” ⁴).

Contemporary linguistic method, however, can aid in the solution of this ancient puzzle. Research into the origins of the word יָרָשׁ show that, for the meaning of “skin”, there is no formal etymology, the closest cognate being the Phoenician word רכשׁ ⁵). Rather, this

¹) All translations are from the Revised Standard Version, N.Y. (1952).
³) Ibid., II: 128, 130.
⁴) M. Pope, Job, The Anchor Bible, N.Y. 1965, while most recent, is of no help.
⁵) L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros, Leiden (1953), 691.
meaning of הָוָא is clearly ascertainable from such unambiguous contexts as Ezekiel xxxvii 6 וַיְרַמֵּץ עִלְיֹבָה רוּר, “...and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin”, and Leviticus xiii 2 which speaks of בְּכוֹר בְּשֶׁר, “the skin of his body”.

The Hebrew root הָוָא, however, could be related to the Arabic roots عَار, or غَار ¹) of which LANE ²) gives the following derivatives:

(A) غَار: From the root غَار, “a disgrace; a shame; a thing that occasions one’s being reviled”; in the II form, the verb means “to reproach or blame”; in the VI form, the verb means “to reproach, revile, or vilify one another” (V: 2208: 2 — well attested in the sources).

(B) عُوْرَة: All having the connotation of disgrace, abuse, foulness, blemish, disfigurement, etc. similarly in Dozy ³).

(C) غَار: “The portion of the upper part of the mouth which is behind the الخَوَر (or thin bone of the palate): or the hollow which is between the two jaws; or the interior part of the mouth, or as some say the two parts whereof each is called نَعْم (apparently meaning the anterior part of the palate and the corresponding part next the lower gums) in the جُنَبَان (or palate and the part corresponding to it below). This is well attested in his sources; this appears in مَعُور, which is related to and means the same as the Hebrew מַעְרָה, “cavern”. (VI: 2307: 3)

In the Lexicon Linguae Aethiopicae by DILLMANN ⁴), there is a cognate root which means “exponere, in discrimen offere, contemnere” and a related noun meaning “exprobatio, opprobrium” (all connoting disgrace, abuse, dishonor, etc.)

In the light of these data, the Job passage may be interpreted as follows:

verse 20A: בְּכוֹר בְּשֶׁר וְרָקְחָה עִצָּמִי

The Bible uses בְּשֶׁר and עִצָּמִי separately in describing severe illness and its consequent depression (cf. Ps. cii 6 and La. iv 8). However, here and in La. iii 4, בְּכוֹר בְּשֶׁר וְרָקְחָה עִצָּמִי, “He has made my

¹) G. BERGSTRÄSSER, Hebräische Grammatik, Hildesheim (1962), 14D. E.
³) R. DOZY, Supplément Aux Dictionnaires Arabes, Leiden (1881), ad loc.
⁴) G. DILLMAN, Lexicon Linguae Aethiopicae, Leipzig (1865), ad loc.