THE CASE OF THE BLASPHEMER
(Leviticus XXIV 10 ff.)

Lev. xxiv 10 ff. describes an incident alleged to have occurred in the Israelite camp during the time of Moses' leadership, in which two men became involved in a brawl. The one was the son of an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father, while the other was a pure Israelite. In the course of the brawl the man of mixed parentage uttered words which offended the religious scruples of the bystanders and they brought him to Moses for trial. Moses did not know how to deal with this case and he referred it to divine judgment. The verdict given by the divine oracle was that the man had committed a heinous crime and the penalty to be exacted was execution by public stoning.

The crime of the accused, as stated in the above Hebrew text (v. 11), was that נעה נье ואָנָשָׁא. The RSV follows the hitherto accepted understanding of this line by translating: 'he blasphemed the Name and he cursed'. The NEB 1) rendering, however, is 'he uttered the Holy Name in blasphemy'. A study of both verbs in this verse (נעה ובלייל and וייל) shows that the conventional translation represented by the RSV in misleading, for it implies that the first verb involves the notion of deliberate impiety, while the rendering of the second verb as 'he cursed' may be admitted only if it is understood in the sense of reviling. On the other hand, the NEB translation gives the true sense of the line, as will be demonstrated in this brief study.

The verb נעה, when taken in isolation, could be the Kal Imperfect of either the Double 'Ayin root כָּרְצָה 'cursed', in the sense of invoking evil upon 2) or of the Pe Nun Verb כָּרְת 'named, mentioned by name'. That it is the latter root which appears in our text is made amply clear by its use in the statement of the new law in verse 16 which was promulgated by divine decree as a result of this incident— AtomicInteger "Utters the Name of the Lord shall be put to"

2) The NEB rendering of שמה by 'the Holy Name' when it refers to YHWH seems to be warranted; it conveys the sense of the Hebrew term in English thinking by introducing the adjective 'Holy' and writing both words with capital letters.
3) It is well known that certain Hebrew words for situations, activities, ideas and objects may, in relevant context, denote their application and effect. 'Law' may also mean the application of the law, namely, the 'verdict'. Similarly the Hebrew verb for 'cursing' may also imply its effect, that is, 'the bringing on of a calamity'. The same may be said about the verb בָּרֶך 'blessed'.
death' (NEB correctly). The verbal forms בָּקָר in verse 11 and בָּקַר in verse 16 carry no implications beyond the sense of uttering the Name of God.\(^1\) The second verb in verse 11 (יוֹדֶל) refers to the behavioural circumstances in which the Name was uttered by the accused. We turn, therefore, to a summary account of this latter root in its various verbal Forms.

One must mention, of course, that the Piel Form בָּקַר does often mean ‘cursed’ in the sense of invoking calamity upon someone as evidenced, for example, by its occurrence in 2 Kg. ii 24. In this passage the narrator relates an incident in which the prophet Elisha was jeered at by some young boys, who called after him ‘baldhead’. The prophet cursed them in the Name of the Lord—ירִלְוָל בֵּשָׂם היָוָה—so that two she-bears came out of the wood and mauled 42 of them. In certain contexts, however, this derived Piel Form conveys the sense of reviling, as we shall now demonstrate.

The Stative verb היה (ָלִים) has the primary meaning ‘was light’ and so ‘was of small account’ as in Job xl 4 ישׁבָרָא בֵּית מִן יהוֹדֶל. 'Behold, I am of small account, what shall I answer thee'?\(^2\) The sense of this verb in Kal is quite clear. The Niphal of this root has the derived meaning of being or becoming an object of small account, that is, an object of contempt. In Gen. xvi 4 (and also v. 5) the writer speaks of the deterioration in Sarah’s standing in the estimation of her handmaid Hagar, when the latter had become pregnant with Abraham’s child as הָיְתָם בְּנֶרֶאָת בִּשְׁמִיתוֹ. The translations ‘she (Hagar) looked upon her mistress with contempt’ (RST/NEB) and ‘she (Hagar) despised her mistress’ (RSV) do not represent the precise sense of this expression. The

\(^1\) Though the Talmudic Rabbis engaged in discussion as to which of the two roots (בָּקָר or בָּקַר) underlies the word בָּקָר (Sanhedrin 56a) the Mishna which gave rise to the discussion (Sanhedrin VII. 5) states explicitly דְּרָא צְאַר אֱלֹהִים דְּרָא צְאַר אֱלֹהִים ‘the blasphemer is not culpable unless he had expressly pronounced the Name’ (i.e. the Tetragrammaton). The Rabbis certainly knew the correct meaning of בָּקָר, but they were prone to engage in this kind of spurious discussion in order to bring out the sense of the word more pointedly or Midrashically extend its range. Targum Onkelos, reflecting the authoritative Rabbinic view, rightly represents his word by צְאַר ‘he clearly pronounced’, as well as translating מֵתָנָה of v. 16 צְאַר. This root is used in the Rabbinic term for the expressed Divine Name אֱלֹהִים בָּקָר. We note that RSV takes בָּקּוּ to mean ‘he who blasphemes’. It may be that, because of the extreme penalty exacted for a breach of this prohibition, commentators saw in this word the implication of blasphemy. We shall later suggest that the objection was to the indiscriminate use of the Name of God.

\(^2\) The NEB reverses the order of the verse and translates: ‘What reply can I give thee, I who carry no weight?’