SHORT NOTE

THE STATUS CONSTRUCTUS OF ADJECTIVES
IN BIBLICAL HEBREW

In the course of our current study on the Aramaic of the Palestinian Pentateuch fragments from the Cairo genizah our attention was drawn to an interesting mode of translation displayed in the Peshitta version, which reads at Gen. xli 18 wo-hâ men nahrâ sâlqân šva’ tâvrâtâ šamminân bo-besrên wo-šappir beqwhên for MT wâbinnê min hayê ’ôr ’ôlot ševa’ pârôt bârî’ot bâsêr wîpôt tô’ar. The Syriac translator’s understanding of the Hebrew syntax of the verse is doubly striking. Firstly, the lack of concord with regard to the status between tâvrâtâ (st. determinatus) and šamminân (st. absolutus) indicates that he saw a complete nominal sentence in the corresponding Hebrew part: “and behold there came up from the river seven cows. They (were) fat in their flesh”. The second peculiarity, which is the main concern of this study, is that the syntactically coordinate phrase yâpôt tô’ar was not only understood again as constituting a complete clause, but the adjective was construed with heqwâ as its subject: “and their appearance (was) beautiful” 1).

These considerations suggest the possibility of two different ways of interpreting the familiar Hebrew syntax which can be typified by ’îšâ yapat tô’ar “a good-looking woman” and which involves the use of the construct form of an adjective. From the grammatical agreement between the adjective and the immediately preceding feminine noun it is obvious that there subsists subject-predicate relationship between them, and consequently the logical relationship is identical with the one which underlies the sentence hâ’îšâ yâpâ or yâpâ hâ’îšâ “the woman is good-looking”. And yet we have seen above that this might not be the only possible interpretation of the syntax involved. The logical immediate subject of the adjective could be the following noun tô’ar. Then ’îšâ yapat tô’ar could be rewritten, if an element of clumsiness is to be excused, ’îšâ ’èket tô’ar yâpe, ’îšâ ba’âlat tô’ar yâpe, or ’îšâ ’âker yâpe tô’arâb. In fact, in the sequel to the above quotation from Genesis we meet with (vs. 19) ševa’ pârôt ’âhêrôt . . . dallôt worâ’ôt tô’ar followed by (vs. 21) úmar-’êhen ra’.

Vetus Testamentum, Vol. XXVII, Fasc. 3
In the case of this particular combination, *yəpat tō'ar* or *yəpē tō'ar*, one might object that the argument is a rather hair-splitting exercise, because the simple combination *'iṣṣa yāpā* is perfectly normal. Then the noun *tō'ar* would represent a case of the so-called *accusativus relationis* or *specificationis*, the Arab grammarians' *tamyīz*, and indeed König 2) so treats all cases of *'iṣṣa yəpat tō'ar* type, including cases of passive participle like 2 Kg. xviii 37 *qārūtē bagādīm* 3).

However, our examination of a fair number of combinations of analogous syntax has revealed 4) that the above-mentioned interpretation peculiar to the Peshitta of *yəpāt tō'ar* is in some cases quite justifiable and preferable, whilst in some others one is definitely dealing with the limitative genitive or Tamyīz. As has been hinted above, a reasonably objective decision can be reached in this matter by examining with which of the two nouns positioned immediately before and after it a given adjective in the construct enters a natural subject-predicate relationship. This relationship could manifest itself in basically four surface structures: i) nominal phrase composed of a substantival nucleus followed by an attributive adjective, “a beautiful woman”; ii) nominal clause including its past and future tense realisations, or verbal clause of the same meaning in which the adjectival concept is expressed by a form of its etymologically related verb, “the woman is (was, will be) beautiful”, iii) verbal clause indicating a relation of causation, “they made (or: declared) the woman beautiful”, and iv) construct phrase with the corresponding abstract noun of the adjective, “beauty of appearance”.

Thus in Isa. i 4 *'am kebed *āwōn*, the adjective is better construed with *āwōn* in view of usages like Ps. xxxviii 5 *āwōndatay 'aḥrū rōš* *kōmāsštā* *kābēd yikbōdā mimmenē*. Cf. also Gen. xviii 20 *hāṭṭā'ātāt mištī kī kābōdā mō'ēd* and Isa. xxiv 20 *kabād* *ālēbhā piš'āb*. In normal circumstances *'am kābēd* means “massive, numerous people”; so Num. xx 20 and 1 Kg. iii 9. Some other idioms with the est. of *kābēd* are probably susceptible of a similar interpretation: Exod. iv 10 *kēbad pē*; ib. iv 10 and Ezek. iii 5, 6 *kēbad lā'ōn*.

In contrast, in the case of *pārōt bōrōt bāšār* quoted right at the beginning of this article, the affinity of the adjective is definitely with *pārōt*, for *bārā* normally 6) has an animate being as its subject.

On the following pages, we shall list some of the more significant combinations containing an adjectival or participial construct. The *kebed *āwōn* type will be marked A-N II, and *bōrōt bāšār* type N I-A 6). Moreover, a Roman numeral preceding biblical references