A CONSIDERATION OF SOME UNUSUAL WAYS OF EXPRESSING THE SUPERLATIVE IN HEBREW 1)

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Hebrew, unlike Arabic, possesses no special forms for the purpose of indicating the comparative and superlative degrees. Forms like "cruel", "deceptive", and "enduring"—which are formed like the Arabic elative form —may indeed be survivals from a time when Hebrew knew elative formations 2). If they are, they are survivals in form only, for they have entirely lost any emphatic value they once may have had. Hebrew, then, resorted to other means to express the superlative, and it developed a quite remarkable variety of ways of doing so. Some of these ways are familiar to every student of the language. There is, for example, the way in which Hebrew uses an adjective which is determined by the article, for example, "the youngest" (1 Sam. xvi 11); its use of an adjective followed by a determined noun, e.g., "the youngest of his sons" (2 Chron. xxi 17); its use of a noun in the construct state before the same noun in the genitive and in the plural, e.g., "a slave of slaves", i.e., "most abject of slaves" (Gen. ix 25); its use of before e.g., (Gen. iii 1) "more cunning than all the beasts of the field"; its use of an adjective followed by e.g., "the fairest among women" (Song i 8); its use of following an adjective; and its use of substantives, such as and with a following noun in the genitive in the


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sense of “best”. All these means of expressing the superlative in Hebrew are well known. There are other ways besides which are less familiar, such as the use of synonymous nouns in a genitive and construct relation, e.g., קְנֶסֶת יהָלָל “my surpassing joy” (Ps. xliii 4).

It is not with any of these ways that I wish to deal in this paper. My aim is to consider three ways in which, it may be claimed, Hebrew expresses the superlative, which are generally less familiar than the ways already mentioned. I begin with the use in Hebrew of the divine names.

It will be convenient to begin by recording eight passages where the A.V. recognizes the divine names אלָהִים and לָא as epithets with an intensifying or superlative force. They are:

- Gen. xxiii 6 A.V. “a mighty prince”. A.V. mg. “a prince of God”.
- Gen. xxx 8 אִישׁ גְּדוֹלָא אָלָהִים A.V. “great wrestlings”. A.V. mg. “wrestlings of God”.
- Ex. ix 28 אָלָהִים גֹּהַיִם A.V. “mighty thunderings”. A.V. mg. “voices of God”.
- 1 Sam. xiv 15 מֵרָתְוֹן אָלָהִים A.V. “a very great trembling”. A.V. mg. “a trembling of God”.
- Jon. iii 3 פְּרָיוֹת גְּדוֹלָה לָא A.V. “an exceeding great city”. A.V. mg. “of God”.
- Ps. xxxvi 7 מַרְדָּכָא A.V. “the great mountains”. A.V. mg. “the mountains of God”.
- Ps. lxxx 11 פְּרָיוֹת גְּדוֹלָה A.V. “the goodly cedars”. A.V. mg. “the cedars of God”.
- Jb. i 16 בְּרוֹאָות אֲלָהִים A.V. “the fire of God”. A.V. mg. “a great fire”.

In this last passage the adjectival force of the divine name is relegated to the margin. In the seven others it is preferred.

The treatment of the Hebrew divine names as epithets with an intensifying or superlative force is to be found, however, earlier than the A.V. As far as the chief ancient versions are concerned, I have been able to find only one example, namely, in Ps. xxxvi 7, where the Targum renders פְּרָיוֹת גְּדוֹלָה “mountains of God” by מַרְדָּכָא 2) מַרְדָּכָא.

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1) P. Jouon, Gramm. de l'hébreu biblique, p. 438.