AN UNRECOGNIZED CONNOTATION OF *NŠQ* PEH WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THREE BIBLICAL OCCURRENCES

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I

The Hebrew root *nšq* is so clearly attested in the meaning "to kiss" that scholars have assumed this sense in all passages where the root occurs, even when the notion of kissing is in no way germane to the context.² Gen. xli 40, Prov. xxiv 26 and Job xxi 27 are three such examples; and in each case commentators have admitted their inability to explain the clause in question convincingly through rendering *nšq* in the usual sense of kissing.

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to an uncommon connotation of this verb, as reflected in the exegesis of both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, as well as underlying a hitherto misunderstood rendering of the Targum, and, on the basis of the connotation, to offer a new interpretation of the three biblical passages referred to above.

The starting-point for our discussion is the well-attested Arabic root *nasqa*, "to seal, fasten together". L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testament Libros* (Leiden, 1953), p. 640, appositely refer to this Arabic root in the entry under the Hebrew verb *nšq*, "to kiss". The action of kissing requires the initial sealing of the lips together; and where the kiss is merely gestured, e.g. from a distance, then the sealing or pursing together of the lips would represent the total extent of the action of kissing.

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In the Palestinian Talmud (‘Aboda Zara 41d, Krotoshin edn) we indeed find the root nsq (in the Hiph’il conjugation), together with the noun peh, in this specific sense of sealing the mouth or lips, with the particular connotation of maintaining silence or restraining oneself from speaking: yš dbrym šmšygyn ‘lyhm t hph. Marcus Jastrow\(^3\) correctly renders the phrase, “There are things on which you should seal your mouth”.

The Babylonian Talmud (‘Aboda Zara 35a) is also aware of this connotation of nsq; and both Talmudic traditions apply it, by means of some rather loose, or even awkward, exegesis, to the verse: yiššaqeni minn’šiqôt pîhû (Cant. i 2). The comment of the Babylonian Talmud is hšwq šptwtyk zw bwz wɔ’l tbhl lhšyb, “Press your lips together\(^4\) and be not hasty to reply”.

We may now proceed to a re-examination of the three biblical passages, applying to them this primary sense of nsq, “to seal the lips (in silence)”.

II

wɔ’l-pîkâ yiššaq kol-ɔmmi (Gen. xli 40)

This clause has defied satisfactory interpretation from the very outset of Bible exegesis.\(^5\) The rendering of the LXX—“And all my people shall be obedient to thy mouth”—appears to be an inspired contextual guess; though it is more likely, as I shall presently demonstrate, that it has preserved the original connotation of nsq in the sense of “to seal the lips”, “maintain silence”.

This significance of the LXX rendering was missed by J. Skinner\(^6\) who quotes the LXX without comment. Skinner’s note con-

\(^3\) A Dictionary of the Targumim, etc. (London and New York, 1903) p. 942, col. 1. Isaac b. Aaron in his commentary on the Palestinian Talmud elucidates the phrase šemaššiqîn ‘alêhen as follows: “The meaning is that one is obliged to stop up one’s mouth, not to reveal them”.

\(^4\) Cf. Jastrow, p. 511. This admonition, together with the verse from Cant. i. 2, was enunciated here by the Talmudic sage in order to justify his refusal to answer a question on a rather delicate issue impinging upon relationships between Jews and heathen. With Midrashic licence the sage gave the following exegetical slant to the verse: “Let him (sc. my questioner) maintain silence [lit. “bind up his mouth”] at my behest (yiššaqîn), through the tight closing of his mouth” (minn’šiqot pîhû).

\(^5\) A. B. Ehrlich, Mikrâ ki-Pheschutô 1 (Berlin, 1899), p. 113, despairs of any attempt to make sense of the phrase. His comment commences with the categorical assertion that “this phrase defies explanation”.

\(^6\) Genesis (Edinburgh 1910), p. 469.