THE EXPRESSION MĪ YÔDEĂC IN
THE HEBREW BIBLE

by

JAMES L. CRENSHAW

Nashville

The expression, mi yôdeaC, occurs ten times in the Hebrew Bible, and most if not all instances are in post-exilic texts (2 Sam. xii 22; Joel ii 14; Jonah iii 9; Ps. xc 11; Esth. iv 14; Prov. xxiv 22; Qoh. ii 19; iii 21, vi 12, viii 1; the possible exception is 2 Sam. xii 22). The subjects of anticipated action vary from God, who is mentioned twice and implied once, to a human being, who happens to be female. Where no action is contemplated, the object of the rhetorical question covers a broad spectrum (an unknown heir, calamity, divine wrath, what is good, the animating life principle, and the interpretation of a word).

In four instances the expression, mi yôdeaC, stands at the beginning of a sentence (2 Sam. xii 22; Joel ii 14; Jonah iii 9; Ps. xc 11), and once it dangles at the end (Prov. xxiv 22). Three times, possibly four, the rhetorical question follows a conjunction (waw);¹ once mî yôdeaC appears after the particle ki (Qoh. vi 12). Only twice do particles occur to indicate an either/or situation (Esth. iv 14, ־ה and Qoh. ii 19, ־ה). Within three texts the expression attracts a specific cluster of words (be gracious; turn and repent; 2 Sam. xii 22; Joel ii 14; Jonah iii 9).² The semantic field in Qoheleth is broader; the following clauses occur in connection with the rhetorical question, mî yôdeaC: who can tell him? who can say? one does not know; the wise know; the dead know nothing (see viii 4, 7, ix 1, x 1, 5, 14, xi 5-6).

The occurrences of mî yôdeaC fall into two distinct groups when viewed from the standpoint of the alternatives presented by the rhetorical question. Five of them leave a door open to possible

¹ Esth. iv 14; Qoh. ii 19, vii 1, and perhaps iii 21 (LXX and Syriac).
² The three verbs play a significant role in Moses’ intercession for wayward people (Exod. xxxii 12, šôb mēháron 'appekā and the disclosure of the deity’s nature (Exod. xxxiv 6-7 yhwh yhwh ‘êl raḥamim weḥannān).
response that will change the situation for human good, and the other five seem to assume a closed door to any redeeming action. It comes as no surprise that the latter texts occur in Qoheleth, with one exception (Prov. xxiv 22).

A. An Open Door

1. 2 Sam. xii 22: “Who knows whether the Lord will be merciful to me so that the child may live?” Here we have a self-citation attributed to King David; the occasion was the death of Bathsheba’s child, the consequence of royal lust. The story of David’s desperate attempt to influence God’s decision throbs with wonder and astonishment, for the king made a sharp break with traditional behavior under the circumstances. In the face of a prophetic announcement that sealed the infant’s fate, David dared to hope that his fasting and weeping might bring about a change in the divine heart. Failing in that endeavor, he promptly proceeded to eat and to get on with the business of living. When questioned about his unusual behavior, David reminded his interrogators that hope remained as long as there was breath, but when that precious commodity was snuffed out not even fasting could reverse the situation. To be sure, David’s hope in this instance was ill-founded, but his use of *mi yôdea* functions in the same way the prophetic *ûlay* (“perhaps”) does in Amos v 15 and comparable passages. The emphasis falls on the sovereignty of God, but human beings still dare to hope that compassion will gain the upper hand.

2. Joel ii 14: “Who knows whether [the Lord] will turn and repent, leaving behind a blessing...?” In verses 1-11 it appears that a prophetic oracle of judgement has shut the door against any future possibility, but a call to repentance is nonetheless introduced in verses 12-14 (But even now). This tiny ray of hope arises from two realities: the divine nature and the power of repentance. The former echoes a revered priestly torah, the credal affirmation from the divine disclosure to Moses (Exod. xxxiv 6-8), and the latter pushes beyond ritual practice to genuine moral renewal. Here, too,

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3 Translations are by the author.
4 W. Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust* (Richmond, 1972), p. 36, sees David’s conduct as “an act of profound faith in the face of the most precious tabus of his people”. Brueggemann goes further to assert that “it is not freedom from the moment of death, but from the power of death as it has often been described in myth (e.g., Hos. 13-14)”.