THE MEANING OF PRŠDN IN JUDGES III 22

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Judg. iii 15-30 is a masterful vignette relating Ehud’s assassination of Eglon, king of Moab. Its overall meaning is clear. Several obscurities exist, however, notably in vv. 22-3. After telling how the Israelite hero dealt a mortal blow to the obese king the text continues:

22 wyb’ gm hnsb ʔhr hlhb wysgr hhlb b’d hlhb ky lʾ šlb hhrb mbtnw wysʾ hpršdnh 23 wysʾ ʔhwd hmsdrwnh...

22 And the hilt went in after the blade and the fat closed behind the blade, because he did not withdraw the dagger from his belly; and...

23 Then Ehud went out at/by way of the msdrwn...

About this passage B. Halpern has recently remarked, "Crowded into the space of a few verses in the highest concentration of rare and unique vocabulary in the literature of ancient Israel." The two verses contain three hapax legomena: hnsb, hpršdnh, and hmsdrwnh. The first of these is not problematic: it denotes the hilt or handle of a sword. But no satisfactory explanation has yet been put forth for the other two words. Our concern in this article is limited to wysʾ hpršdnh in v. 22. In order to suggest a plausible interpretation of this phrase we must deal with three issues: (1) the etymology of pršdn, (2) structural clues to the meaning of wysʾ hpršdnh, and (3) the syntax of the phrase under discussion.

2 Cf. Arabic nisāb, "hilt (or handle) of a sword".
I. The Etymology of pršdn

Some have despaired of finding an etymology for pršdn, pronouncing the phrase in which it occurs "totally corrupt". Earlier commentators derived the word from prš, "excrement(?)", apparently considering hpršdnh a corruption of this word. This approach, however, in effect lopping three letters off the end of the word, can hardly be justified.

The most recent suggestion appeared over thirty-five years ago in the first edition of Koehler-Baumgartner's Hebrew lexicon. There one finds a reference to Akkadian parašdinu, whose meaning is given as "hole". This misleading entry, and its citation by commentators up to the present day, is an unfortunate example of the uncritical use of Assyriological data by OT scholars. Few who cite it refer or give serious attention to W. von Soden’s important remarks on this lexeme in a 1955 article (to which I shall refer below) or to the information under this entry in his Akkadisches Handwörterbuch.

There are a number of considerations that make it inadvisable to base an etymology of Hebrew pršdn on this word. First, it is a dis legomenon, found only in two lexical lists. This means that it was extremely rare, probable existing only as a lexical entry and not part of the active Akkadian vocabulary at any period. Von Soden

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5 See, for example, K. Buddde, Das Buch der Richter (Leipzig, 1897), p. 31; G. F. Moore, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges (Edinburgh and New York, 1895), p. 97; and recently H. N. Rosel, "Zur Ehud-Erzählung", ZAW 98 (1977), p. 272. This interpretation is reflected in the Targum and in the Vulgate translation: statimque per secreta naturae alvi stercora proruperunt. All these translations apparently read prš for the MT pršdn.
7 Erroneously printed in Koehler-Baumgartner as parašdinun.
9 (hereafter AHz) 2 (Wiesbaden, 1972), p. 832.