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**Stump or Stalk: Isaiah 6:13 in the Light of the Ancient Versions**

*ABSTRACT*

*This contribution examines two lexical problems in Isaiah 6:13 (*שלכת *and* מצבת*). It is argued that the common understanding of both words (“being felled” and “stump” respectively) is not supported by any of the ancient versions, nor by any evidence in Classical Hebrew. In dealing with the lexical problems involved it will turn out that unlike modern scholarship the ancients were on the right track. The article then explores what the proposed interpretation of both words (“shedding [leaves]” and “stalk” respectively) means for the exegesis of the verse as a whole.*

*1. INTRODUCTION*

In preparing the Isaiah volume for the *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* (BHQ) I am faced with difficult passages, one of them being Isa 6:13. The Hebrew (MT) text of this verse is obscure, in particular as far as the meaning of two words – שלכת and מצבת – is concerned. The verse is usually translated as follows:

And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains standing when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump. (RSV)

*2. HEADING*

*2.1* *Heading*

2.2.2 Heading

The Aramaic version provides a rendering which reflects, first of all, the interpretation of the root שלך in the sense of “falling” of the leaves. The phrase “when their leaves drop off” is also found in Tg Isa 1:30, where it says, “For you will be like a terebinth when its leaves fall”, although the verb employed in Hebrew in this verse (נבל) is not the same as in 6:13. This link between these two passages may also shed light on the wording “appear dried up” (cf. the reference to a garden “without water” in 1:30).

The second part of the passage in the Targum offers a positive picture based on the idea that the trees retained their moisture. One wonders how the Hebrew מצבת has been interpreted here. It seems to me that this word was taken as derived from Aramaic נצב “to put up, plant”. If so, the clause was read literally as “there is a plant in them”, but was rephrased for the sake of clarity.

*3. HEADING*

As stated above, the idea that שלכת refers to the “felling” of trees has no parallel in Classical Hebrew. It has been suggested that this meaning “may be derived without difficulty from the meaning ‘to throw, cast’” (Emerton 1982:106), but the difficulty with this is that the root שלך (Hiph‘il) is never used for the “felling” of trees. On the contrary, the verbs conveying this meaning are instead: כרת (1 Kgs 5:20; Isa 14:8), נפל (2 Kgs 3:19, 25), or גדע (Isa 9:9; 10:33). On the other hand, the usage of שלך (Hiph‘il) in the sense of a tree shedding its leaves is supported by Job 15:33. I therefore would propose to take the word שלכת in the sense of “loss of foliage”. It was understood this way not only by Symmachus and the Targum, and presumably by Quinta/Theodotion, but it was also interpreted that way by scholars such as Jarchi and Kimchi, as well as by those scholars who produced Bible translations in the 16th and 17th centuries (cf. Luther, KJV, Statenvertaling) (Williamson 1997:120). The word שלכת may well be regarded a noun (cf. Quinta/Theodotion), but could also be regarded an unusual form of the infinitive construct Pi‘el.[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. Emerton (1982:106). A few scholars have interpreted the noun as proper name, i.e., the name of a gate of Jerusalem (see 1 Chr 26:16). So, e.g., Barthélemy (1986:44): “dont à Shallèkèt il ne reste qu’un tronc”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)