

MOSES: MEEK OR MISERABLE?

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"Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth" (Num 12:3). This famous statement regarding the character of Moses as found in most translations¹ has been the cause of much concern and consternation.² How could a person call himself the meekest or most humble man on earth? The suggestion offered here is that the word in this context could be translated "bowed down with care," "oppressed," "burdened down," or "miserable."³

I. SUPPORT FOR THE TRANSLATION "MISERABLE"

1. *The evidence of etymology.* One must heed the warnings of James Barr concerning the misuse of etymology,⁴ but at the same time occasional misuse of a method does not demand abandonment of the method itself. Etymology can provide basic ideas contained in a word as well as directions that the development of the word may take. One must, however, be especially aware of how a word is used in a given context.⁵

The basic root of the word *ʾanāw*⁶ is probably *ʾnh*, which means "to be bowed

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¹For example *KJV*, *NEB*, *NIV*, etc.

²"The obliqueness of the reference to Moses and the self-commendatory nature of the statement occasioned difficulties to older commentators, who were bound by the theory of the Mosaic origin of the Pentateuch." G. B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1965) 123. See also H.-J. Kraus, *Geschichte der Historische-Kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1969) 62.

³The suggestion is not necessarily new but has never gained much support. Luther translated the verse: "Aber Mose war ein sehr *geplagter* Mensch über alle Menschen auf Erden." The revised Luther translation (1964), however, renders the verse: "Aber Mose war ein sehr *demütiger* Mensch, mehr als alle Menschen auf Erden."

⁴J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1961) 107-160. For a slight corrective to Barr's objections see the review by B. S. Childs, *JBL* 80 (1961) 374-377.

⁵For a discussion of some of the linguistic and structural approaches to word studies as applied to Hebrew see W. Richter, *Grundlagen einer Althebräischen Grammatik* (St. Ottilien: Eos, 1978) 1-34; H. F. Fuhs, *Sehen und Schauen die Würzel hzh: Im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament* (Würzburg: Echter, 1978); I. Riesener, *Der Stamm ʾabad im Alten Testament. Eine Wortuntersuchung unter Berücksichtigung Neuerer Sprachwissenschaftlicher Methode* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979).

⁶L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon* (3d ed.; Leiden: Brill, 1968) 804. The Q reading is *ʾanāyw*, indicating that the last syllable is to be pronounced. See Gray, *Numbers* 124.

down, afflicted.”⁷ Three other verbs have the same radicals, but with different meanings: (1) “to answer, respond”; (2) “to be occupied, busied with”; (3) “to sing.”⁸ Some have sought to discover connections between some of the roots, but it is best to keep them separate.⁹

The root occurs several times in Phoenician with the meaning “to bow down,” “to bring to submission.”¹⁰ It is most probably to be understood in Phoenician as a Piel causative form.¹¹ One text describes the expedition of the king Azitawadda:

“I have subdued (*w'n*) powerful countries in the west which the kings who were before me had not been able to subdue (*n*). I, Azitawadda, subdued them (*ntnm*).”¹²

The Moabite Stone reports that “Omri, king of Israel, . . . humbled (*wy'nw*)¹³ Moab many years.”¹⁴

The verb also occurs in Aramaic with the same meaning. One interesting example is found in an inscription ascribed to King Zakir of Hamath.¹⁵ Although Rosenthal translates the second line “a humble man I am,”¹⁶ the reading

⁷See BDB 776. See also KB 719; Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebräisches* 804; F. Buhl, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über des Alte Testament* (Berlin: Springer, 1962) 603–604; E. König, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (Leipzig: Dieterich'sche, 1936) 338; E. Robinson, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston: Houghton, 1880) 800; esp. R. Martin-Achard, “*nh* II, elend sein.” *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (ed. E. Jenni and C. Westermann; München: Chr. Kaiser, 1976), 2. 341. He explains the root meaning as “gebeugt, gedrückt sein.”

⁸BDB 772–777.

⁹See for example E. Bammel, *TWNT* 6 (1959) 888. He attempts to explain the relation between “to be bowed down” and “to answer.” In relation to *'āni* he says that it is the answer in willingness to submit and adopt a lowly place. For an opposing view, however, see Martin-Achard in *Theologisches*, 2. 341; E. Kutsch, “Deus Humiliat et Exaltat,” *ZTK* 61 (1964) 197.

¹⁰See KAI, 26. 18–20; 181. 5–6. See also R. S. Tomback, *A Comparative Semitic Lexicon of the Phoenician and Punic Language* (Missoula: Scholars, 1978) 252–253, who gives the meaning “to humble.” Martin-Achard in *Theologisches*, 2. 341, gives the meaning “bedrücken,” “unterwerfen”; see also *DISO* 218.

¹¹For the meaning of the Piel see E. Jenni, *Das Hebräische Piel* (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1968); S. A. Ryder, *The D-Stem in Western Semitic 2* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974) esp. 94–101.

¹²KAI, 2. 41; J. Friedrich and W. Röllig, *Phönizisch-Punische Grammatik* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1970) 83 ff.; *ANET* 500.

¹³KAI, 2. 168: “er bedrängte Moab” (“he oppressed Moab”).

¹⁴*ANET* 320.

¹⁵For this text see KAI, 1. 37; 2. 204–211; see also *ANET* 501–502.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 501; cf. KAI, 1. 37; 2. 204, “ein denütiger Mensch bin ich”; cf. also R. Degen, *Altaramäische Grammatik* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1969) 82: “ein niedriger Mensch bin ich.”

of the text is very unclear and cannot be used with any degree of certainty.¹⁷ Without giving any examples Baumgartner explains the meaning of the Aramaic verb as being “to become poor,” “to afflict,” “to humble oneself.”¹⁸

It would appear then that the basic meaning of the Semitic root is “to be bowed down.” The word could take different directions depending on the idea one wished to express. One could be bowed down with force, which meant “to be subdued” or “to subdue.” It could also mean “to be bowed down with submissiveness”—that is, “to be humble.” Or it could mean “to be bowed down with care or trouble”—that is, “to be miserable or afflicted.”

2. *The evidence of usage.* The evidence of usage supports the basic observation of etymology. The word under consideration—*ʿānāw*—is an adjective that describes the state or condition of being “bowed down.”¹⁹ It appears in Aramaic in Dan 4:24. Here the meaning is given as “miserable”²⁰ and describes the condition of those to whom King Nebuchadnezzar is to show mercy. The word occurs in the Hebrew OT about twenty-one times, but the only place it appears in the singular is Num 12:3.²¹

The relation between *ʿānāw* and *ʿānī* has been the subject of much discussion.²² Some have supposed that the two words are totally different (*ʿānī* meaning “poor” and *ʿānāw* meaning “humble”).²³ Others have thought that the two words are related, but there are different theories as to how they are related. Some explain *ʿānāw* as a dialectal variation of *ʿānī* or as a later Aramaic form,²⁴ while others claim that *ʿānī* is earlier and had the original meaning “poor

¹⁷“Die Interpretation dieses Satzes muss bis auf weiteres unsicher bleiben” (KAI, 1. 206). See also J. C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1975), 1. 12–13, who mentions the term “oppressed” but chooses “pious.”

¹⁸KB 1110. See also K. Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1984) 662; for the word in Old South Arabic see Martin-Achard, *Theologisches*, 2. 347; K. C. Rossini, *Chrestomathia Arabica Meridionalis Epigraphica* (Rome: Instituto per L'Oriente, 1931) 210: “humilis, deminus juit.” The example: “Ergo humiliatus est et se demisit et se contrivit.”

¹⁹For the word formation see R. Meyer, *Hebräische Grammatik 2* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969) 25; Beyer, *Althebräische* 47. In commenting on Aramaic *ʿnh* Gibson says that it is “probably an adjective in the form of the passive participle from *ny* = Protosom. *nw* ‘humble, poor, afflicted’ Hebr. *nw*; *ny*”; Gibson, *Textbook*, 1. 12. See also A. Rahlfs, *ʿānī und ʿānāw in den Psalmen* (Göttingen: Dieterich’sche, 1892).

²⁰KB 1110; cf. J. A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1950) 235, 242–243. He translates the word as “afflicted” and notes that its basic meaning is “to be lowly.”

²¹Martin-Achard, *Theologisches*, 2. 345.

²²For literature on this matter, as well as a summary of the results of the discussion, see *ibid.*, 2. 342–344.

²³*Ibid.*, 2. 343.

²⁴*Ibid.*

without means"—that is, "without sufficient property (real estate)."²⁵ According to this theory 'ānāw is the result of postexilic prophetic influence that spiritualized the concept of "poor" into the meaning "humble or pious."²⁶ Such ingenious suggestions, however, are not really convincing. The most logical explanation is that both words are related to the same root with the basic meaning "to be bowed down." The word 'ānī connotes "affliction, poverty," and 'ānāw means "afflicted, poor, humble."²⁷ In one sense the words are the same, but the use of the two varies as to the type of distress or affliction.²⁸

The word 'ānāw occurs in the prophets to describe those who are socially oppressed and miserable. In Amos 2:7 it parallels *dallim* ("poor, helpless")²⁹ and indicates that those who are "bowed down" or "oppressed" are not given their legal rights in court cases.³⁰ Isa 11:4 uses the same parallelism, both words indicating those who have been socially oppressed.³¹ The LXX translates both with *tapeinos*. The word is used again with the same idea in 29:19; 61:1 (cf. LXX *ptōchoi*). Here it is the Messiah who will meet the need of the oppressed and afflicted. Zeph 2:3 uses the word in the same sense as in Amos and Isaiah³² (LXX *tapeinoi*—that is, "those who are oppressed and downtrodden but who trust in the Lord"). These are to seek righteousness and humility ('ānāwā). Certainly there is a play on words, but it is also clear that the word 'ānāw here does not mean "humble" since then the command would not make sense—that is, "the humble" would be seeking "humility."

The most frequent occurrence of the word is found in the wisdom literature. It occurs thirteen times in the Psalms (9:13, 19; 10:12, 17; 22:27; 25:9 [twice]; 34:3; 37:11; 69:33; 76:10; 147:6; 149:4), three times in Proverbs (3:34; 14:27; 16:14) and once in Job (24:4).

In the Psalms the word indicates generally either those who are "poor" or

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷BDB 776–777; cf. Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebräisches* 720–721.

²⁸See Martin-Achard, *Theologisches*, 2. 345: "'ānāw ist in der Bedeutung nicht grundlegend von 'ānī unterschieden."

²⁹Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebräisches* 212–213; Fabry, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1974), 2. 221–244. This word occurs in Ugaritic as verb, adjective and noun. The verb means "to make low," "to despise," the adjective "weak" or "poor," and the noun "one who makes low." See J. Aistleitner, *Wörterbuch der ugaritischen Sprache* (Berlin: Akademie, 1964) 744; *UT* 664.

³⁰See J. L. May, *Amos: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 46; H. W. Wolff, *Joel, Amos* (BKAT; Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1969) 202. He gives the meaning of the word as "die Gebeugten, Niedergedrückten."

³¹See H. Wildberger, *Jesaja* (BKAT; Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1972) 453.

³²For the textual problem see W. Rudolph, *Micah, Nahum, Habakuk, Zephanja* (KAT; Gütersloh: Güterloher, 1975) 273–274.

those who are "afflicted."³³ Although there is a difference of opinion as to whether these represent a particular group in Israel who were being oppressed by the rich or those who were poor and oppressed in general,³⁴ it seems clear that the major emphasis of the word has to do with the actual affliction and misery they were suffering. It is out of their hapless condition that the poor and afflicted cry out to God and cast themselves utterly upon him. In this way they were "humble" and "meek."³⁵

When one turns to the usage of the word in the QL and the rabbinical writings, it is clear that the concept of "humble" was further developed.³⁶ The word generally is used in the religious sense of submission to God, the meekness and humility characteristic of one who casts himself completely on God.

In summarizing the evidence it could be said that the usage of the word indicates that the basic concept of "bowed down" is developed in two directions.³⁷ An early and widespread meaning was that of "afflicted" or "miserable," a meaning that could sometimes arise from poverty. The mental attitude of one afflicted was that of trust in God or of humility. It is this developed meaning that dominated the later uses of the word.

3. *The evidence of context.* In approaching a specific context one must try to decide which of the existing meanings the writer intended in each instance.³⁸ The question: "Which of the possibilities fits the context of Num 12:3—'meek' or 'miserable'?" In viewing the general context one finds the people of Israel in dissent. They have been freed from Egypt and have received the law from God. As they move from Sinai the people begin to complain,³⁹ and God is angry (11:1).

³³See e.g. Rahlfs, *Psalmen*; P. A. Munch, "Einige Bemerkungen zu den 'nyym und den rš'ym in den Psalmen," *Le Monde Oriental* 30 (1936) 13–26. For further discussion of various viewpoints see J. J. Stamm, "Ein Vierteljahrhundert Psalmenforschung," *TRu* 23 (1955–56) 55–60; L. Delekat, "Zum Hebräischen Wörterbuch," *VT* 14 (1964) 35–49; H.-J. Krause, *Theologie der Psalmen* (BKAT; Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1979) 188–193; P. C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (Waco: Word, 1983) 115.

³⁴See e.g. H. Binkeland, *ʿANĪ und ʿANĀW in den Psalmen* (Oslo: I Konmisjon Hos Jacob Dybwad, 1933).

³⁵See W. Brander, "Humility," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 2. 257–258; F. Hauck and S. Schulz, *TDNT*, 6. 647–648; E. Bammel, *TWNT*, 6. 888–894; R. Leivestad, "The Meekness and Gentleness of Christ, 2 Corinthians 10:1," *NTS* 12 (January 1966) 156–164.

³⁶E.g. 1QS 2:24. Here it occurs in connection with other positive attributes such as "truth" and "love of loyalty." The term certainly indicates a low submissive and obedient attitude. See also 1QS 3:8; 4:3 (*wrwḥ 'nwh*); 1QM 14:7. The meaning here, however, may be "those with an oppressed spirit"; cf. 1QH 14:3, *b'ny rwḥ*. For the rabbinical references see M. Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumin, The Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and The Midrashic Literature* (New York: Pardes, 1950), 2. 1094.

³⁷Summary of the usages found in KB: "bei a) und b) ist ʿā- = *gebeugt, niedergedrückt, bei c) ist ʿā- ebenfalls, gebeugt, aber im Sinne von demütig, fromm.*"

³⁸According to a structural approach the *lingua* are the total possibilities of a language and the *parole* would be the specific usage in a given context. See F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 14–15.

³⁹The word "complain" is a Hithpael participle, emphasizing the continual complaining.

It is only through the intercessions of Moses that the people are spared (11:2). The mixed multitude again grumbles and complains about the food (11:4–5), and as Moses hears the continual weeping of the people he is unhappy and complains to the Lord (11:10–15) that the Lord has caused him trouble by placing this people upon him as a burden or load⁴⁰ (11:11). Moses complains that he is not able to bear the load because it is too heavy for him (11:14). The Lord answers Moses that he will provide those who will help him bear the burden of the people (11:17). The general context indicates that Moses was bowed down with the responsibility of a complaining congregation. This was not to be a passing thing with the people, for the complaints continued (e.g. Numbers 13–14). All of this fits the idea of Moses being the most “bowed down” or “miserable” man on earth.

The immediate context is also one of complaints, but this time from within the family. Miriam and Aaron speak against⁴¹ Moses, their brother. The unity of the family had been broken, which is a very grave matter.⁴² Though the main reason given is that Moses had married a Cushite woman, the real reason seems to be pride and envy⁴³: “The Lord did not really speak only by Moses, did he?” (12:2). The context then is one of misery and complaining against Moses. It is difficult to see how a statement about Moses’ “meekness” would fit such a context.

An examination of the verse itself fits the interpretation also. It is introduced by a simple *wāw*, introducing a nominal sentence that gives a brief explanation of the circumstances. This means that the statement is vitally joined to the context of complaining and describes a constant state contemporaneous with the main action.⁴⁴ It should also not be overlooked that the adjective has the descriptive word “very,” “exceedingly” (*mē’ōd*).⁴⁵ It is hard to see how the idea of “meekness” or “humility” could bear such a description. In addition the element of comparison is an integral part of the statement. This state of Moses is more than that of “any human being on the face of the earth.” Does “meekness” have degrees that can be compared? It is certainly even more difficult to see how a truly meek person could make such a claim for himself. The idea of “miserable,”⁴⁶ however, fits perfectly. In the complaining of the

⁴⁰The word “burden” indicates that which was carried about—a “load” or “heavy responsibility”; cf. BDB 672 and esp. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (ed. R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, Jr., and B. K. Waltke; Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2. 601–602.

⁴¹The preposition *bē-* is used in a hostile sense, BDB 187; cf. LXX *kata Mōysē*.

⁴²See J. Pedersen, *Israel, Its Life and Culture* (Copenhagen: Branner OG Korch, 1946), 1–2. 46–60.

⁴³“This elevation of Moses excited envy on the part of his brother and sister.” C. F. Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament: The Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 3. 75.

⁴⁴GKC 453 (see also 489–490).

⁴⁵BDB 547; *Theological Wordbook*, 1. 487.

⁴⁶The Q reading is *’ānāyw*, which has caused much discussion and many theories. They range from seeking a distinction between *’ny* and *’nw* to viewing it as a scribal error or as an addition by a later scribe. For discussion see Rahlfs, *Psalmen* 95–100; Birkeland, *In den Psalmen* 18 ff., 90 ff.; Delekat, “Zum Hebräischen” 45 ff. See n. 6 *supra*.

people heightened by the complaining of his own sister and brother it would be the most natural thing in the world for someone to describe himself as the most miserable person on earth.

II. SUGGESTIONS FOR THE ORIGIN OF THE UNUSUAL TRANSLATION "MEEK"

1. *The translation by the LXX.* The LXX translators used the word *praus* in Num 12:3. The word in Greek seems to have a much wider range than the Hebrew word⁴⁷ and was therefore too broad to be limited to only one of its aspects. The word indicates the patient, submissive spirit that, in the midst of difficulties, does not strike back but yields in faith to God. The aspect of being in difficult circumstances suits the Hebrew word and the context. The other elements of submission and faith are not as strong in the Hebrew word but would be understood from the context. The LXX, however, does not take into account either the comparative aspects of the statement⁴⁸ or the speaker who would be making the statement of himself.

2. *The term in Judaism.* Although some OT passages used the term in the "religious" sense (e.g. Zech 9:9), it is in Judaism that the term takes on a strong theological nuance. Humility was a noble quality, and Moses was an important person in Judaism.⁴⁹ These two factors along with the LXX rendering may have contributed to the translation "meek."

III. CONCLUSION

The meaning of the word and its specific context make it appear that the best understanding of Num 12:3 is that Moses was saying that in light of the burden of the people and the complaint of his family he was the most "miserable" person in the world. Who has not made this statement about himself at some point in life?

⁴⁷See n. 35 *supra*.

⁴⁸The word is not used in a comparative sense in either LXX or NT.

⁴⁹For the position of Moses in Judaism see J. Jeremias, *TWNT*, 4. 849–850; H. Seebass, "Moses," *New International Dictionary*, 2. 639–643.