The Sense of Possessing the Land in the Hebrew Bible and its Perception in Modern Arabic Translations

Prof. Daniel Ayuch

Introduction

Being a reader of Arabic as a foreign language, I have observed that the Biblical text often shows a different dynamic to the one existing in the European languages when it comes to the issue of possessing and having. Especially from the socio-political background in Lebanon this matter proves to be very important for any dialogue movement, as well as for daily coexistence between the three religions. This communication will try to go to the roots and sources of a culture common to the Semitic peoples living on the East Coast of the Mediterranean and looks for bridges that would improve understanding beyond all religious and geographical boundaries.

The research method is based on a comparative reading between the Arabic translations (SVD 1867; ABJ 1989; GNA 1993) and the original Hebrew text as in BHS4. Thus, we find that many word stems and their derivatives are common to Arabic and to Hebrew, as it is the case in the expression *yrsh 'rz*, (to possess the land), which we are dealing with in this article.

Beyond the comparative reading, we will also apply a canonical approach to the Old Testament, i.e., a mostly synchronic reading that looks, above all, for the meanings of the text in its final edition. Very often the Old Testament has been studied in its different stages of formation and the texts have been segmented in the search for the different editions and for the *Urtext*. The synchronic approach, on the contrary, highlights the value of the final text version, i.e., the version that is considered a part of the Old Testament canon.

After the introduction follows a semantic analysis of the expression *yrsh 'rz* in Hebrew and its connotations. Then, I shall proceed to analyze the Arabic translations of *yrsh 'rz* taking three text patterns from different parts of the Old Testament Canon. The third part will propose some scriptural concepts that would help to choose the proper terminology when rendering *yrsh 'rz* in Arabic. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn.

A. The expression *yrsh 'rz* in Hebrew

The Hebrew stem *yrsh* is parallel to the Arabic stem *wrth*. Both stems match not only morphologically but also semantically, as the following analysis of the verb *yrsh* shall try to demonstrate.

According to the Dictionary of Classical Hebrew (DCH) the stem in all its derivatives is used 230 times in the OT. In addition, the search engines of Biblework 7 show that the Hebrew Old Testament registers 99 matches of *yrsh* in which its direct object is *'rz*.

Having shown these morphological and usage data, we can now proceed to study the semantics of the term. One of the most influential modern studies about this issue is the article written by Norbert Lohfink for the Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (ThDOT).

Lohfink's key theory states that the stem *yrsh* in Hebrew has a wide range of meanings, and that it would be misleading to affirm that its first meaning would cover the concept of inheritance. Therefore he deduces that the senses of taking possession and ownership are the most characteristic of this term and that only in late Ancient Hebrew and under Aramaic influence can be considered that *yrsh* could tend to mean inherit. Lohfink's approach prevails in most modern Bible translations into Western languages and in the modern biblical dictionaries. This is why the stem *yrsh* is mostly rendered with the sense of possessing and taking possession as the first entrance.

My arguments against Lohfink's theory that diminishes the sense of inheriting from the root *yrsh* are the following:
a. The Aramaic influence is the one that prevailed at the time of final editing of the OT canonical books. This implies that if the stem had at an earlier stage the sense of "taking possession" at the time of the canon formation, after the 3rd Century B.C. The term had already the primary meaning of "inheritance".
b. Based on the same texts that Lohfink quotes in his article, one can also deduce that the secular meaning of *yrsh* is primarily that of inheritance and this meaning is present in other Canaanites languages (cf. 380 and 377).
c. The existence of *nHl* does not limit the semantic field of *yrsh* but they should rather be considered as synonyms. The semantic relation of both terms is outlined in paragraph 2.1.
d. The Septuagint translates both *yrsh* and *nHl* as synonyms and with the sense of inheriting or giving the earth as heritage (klhronome,w and derivatives). This fact shows how these terms were interpreted by the middle of the 3rd Century B.C.

B. Analysis of the Arabic translations of *yrsh 'rz*

For this research, I have chosen the three most representative modern translations of the Bible: the so-called Protestant translation (SVD 1867), the Jesuit Bible (ABJ 1989) and the ecumenical translation (1993 GNA). Certainly, due to their distribution and style these three translations are the most appropriate ones for analyzing the different ways of perceiving the Hebrew phrase "to posses the land."

From the 99 occurrences of the phrase *yrsh 'rz*, it can be noticed that the translation of the Hebrew verb *yrsh* alternates between two main Arab stems: the stem *wrth* which has been already introduced in the previous paragraph, and the stem *mlk* that has the meaning of possessing. You will find next a table that registers the diffent Arabic translation stems for the Hebrew *yrsh*.

		SVD		ABJ		GNA	
WRTH			30		90		32
MLK			69		8		63
(فعل)	I	8		1		10	
(تفعل)	V	3		2		2	
(افتعل)	VIII	58		5		51	
Other			0		1		4
Total			99		99		99

This table highlights the main differences for the semantic value of *yrsh* as it is registered in the modern Arabic translations. Both the Protestant translation and the Ecumenical one would prefer the sense of possessing while the Jesuit translation almost uniformly abides by the meaning of inheritance. Undoubtedly, these variations witness a certain interpretive approach by the translators.

Since the Arabic library does not have linguistic Bible lexica for Arabic-Hebrew languages, we can assume that the translators consulted the existing lexica in English and/or French (ThDOT for instance). It is also clear that each Arabic translation has adopted a reference Western Bible that would give the identity of each publication. For instance, the protestant one chose the KJV, the Jesuit Bible has both the FBJ and the TOB as reference works and the ecumenical translation has the NIV or the GNT. It is precisely

the influence of this reference material that led the Arabic translators to insert the stem *mlk* as one of the possible meanings of *yrsh*.

In a language where the simplest indicative of possession, the verb "to have", has no entry in the dictionary and where phrases like "having a house", "having a child" or "having a book" are expressed through such phrases as "a house for me" (لي بيت), "God has given me a son" (رزقني بولد) or "at my place a book " (عندي كتاب), the verb *mlk* (to possess) and its derivatives demand a certain semantic field that could justify their use.

In Hebrew, the root *mlk* is used only to refer to the king or to the action of ruling as a king. However, the same Arabic root has developed with time several meanings. According to classical and modern Arabic dictionaries, the Arabic literature, like all worldly literature, conceived the idea that men share with God the attribute of possessing property and of havig all kinds of objects, land, animals, slaves, and even the word wife may be the direct object of the verb "possess" (Lisan al-Arab 4266-69, Biberstein, 1151). Taking into consideration this data, we can now analyze three texts containing *yrsh 'rz* and see how *mlk* and its derivative *imtlk* cannot express the idea of the original text.

I will first analyze Gen 15:7-8: "Then he said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess. But he said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" Genesis 15 contains God's Coventant with Abram and is the only text that employs *yrsh 'rz* throughout the Genesis. Certainly, we have here an ancestral story with a high theological content. It manifests Abram's faith and exposes a particular reading of God's beloved people's beginnings. Unlike the NRS and the LUT, to name a few examples, no Arabic translation has hesitated to interpret these two uses of *yrsh* in the sense of inheriting and not in the sense of possessing as this text does. Indeed, Abram and his offspring should inherit the earth here directly from God, who is the true owner of creation. Therefore, it is impossible to think that God would give to Abram the right of <u>possessing</u> creation. The use of *mlk* would be in Arabic more than contradictory since the context sees the worldly authority as oppression (see v. 13s.16). In fact, the Pentateuch editors give in this text a hermeneutical key to interpret *yrsh* throughout their work. In this scene, God manifests himself as the true owner of the world and as the one who decided to give a legacy to Abraham's offspring, an offspring that will spread all over the earth (v. 18) and therefore a legacy that is valid for all peoples of the earth (v. 19).

The second text comes from Deuteronomy, the book where the expression *yrsh 'rz* is used the most (49 times). In Dt 5:31-33 we have the end of the speech of God to Moses on Mount Sinai: " But you, stand here by me, and I will tell you all the commandments, the statutes and the ordinances, that you shall teach them, so that they may do them in the land that I am giving them to <u>possess</u>. You must therefore be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn to the right or to the left. You must follow exactly the path that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you are to <u>possess</u>." In this case, the translations in Arabic differ. This text stresses the need to observe the Law in the Land where God's people dwell. It is impossible to translate into Arabic *yrsh* with *mlk* in any form, since few verses earlier, in the commandments, it is prohibited even to desire the neighbors' properties (v. 21). If *yrsh* would have the sense of possession, the text itself would be very contradictory, because it would mean that Israel would be allowed by divine mandate to take what belongs to the neighbor. Therefore, to render *yrsh* with *mlk* is to contradict a crucial meaning of the text. In Arabic the only option here would be *wrth*.

The third text we shall study comes from the Deuteronomistic history, the book of Joshua, the book of "The Land Conquest", as it is usually labeled. Let us read Jos 1:11: "Pass through the camp, and command the people: 'Prepare your provisions; for in three days you are to cross over the Jordan, to go in to <u>take possession</u> of the land that the Lord your God gives you to <u>possess</u>." This text may seem the most difficult to deal with in favor of the "inheriting" meaning, since it forms part of an account about the preparations for the conquest. Actually, by reading critically the book of Joshua one notices that the only one who fights in the battles is the Lord and that the role of the people is restricted to obey God's commands (see, for example, the fall of Jericho in Jos 6; Achan's episode in Jos 7:8-12 and the rereading of the work of God in Jos 24:1-14). Therefore the people in Joshua do not take possession, but rather get the title of heir of what actually belongs only to God. Once again, the use of *mlk* in Arabic gives the text a complete different meaning. Particularly, when one reads Joshua till the end, it is crystal clear that God's people never "ruled" or "were powerful," i.e., the people never truly "possessed" in the secular meaning of *mlk*.

The translation as an act of interpretation

The practical reasons that may have influenced in choosing the meaning of the verb *yrsh* have been mentioned above: the use of Western lexica and the adoption of a pattern translation for each Arabic Bible version.

The SVD and the GNA translations, in particular, present the books of the Old Testament as constitutional narratives about the origins and the history of a nation whose official religion is the worship of YHWH. This way of understanding the historical books limited the horizons of their prophetic content and reduced them to mere royal archives that record the official History of a monarchy that today does not even exist. It is this approach which really causes an *a priori* rejection of the Old Testament by Arabic readers who understand then the Old Testament as the "book of the Jews" which contains the foundations for modern Zionism. Indeed, the translation of *yrsh* by "possess" makes of the Old Testament Israel a nation just like the other nations, being the sole difference that God would have given them the divine right of dispossessing Canaanite peoples from the land where they were dwelling.

Those texts that have an undisputable prophetic and spiritual nature, such as the ones in the book of Psalms, make such an interpretation unsuitable to the Hebrew Canon. That is why both the SVD and the GNA have been unable to translate *yrsh* by *mlk* in the Psalm. This confirms that their approach to the historical books is different from the one to the rest of the canonical text.

Therefore, it is clear that beyond the technical reasons which allow translators to choose *mlk* for *yrsh*, there are, above all, hermeneutical reasons. In a time when literal interpretations of the biblical narrative are considered methodologically inaccurate (see Marguerat, Ska, Senechal, Metz), it becomes difficult to justify any attempt to read the Old Testament as a mere narrative of historical facts. This is why, I shall suggest some interpretative keys that may lead not only to a non-exclusive interpretation of the Old Testament, but also to a better understanding between the peoples who live together in the same land.

C. Owning or inheriting: Suggesting a new approach

The Holy Scripture affirms that men and women were created in the image and likeness of God but does not give them the right to possess creation. Mankind must manage and take care of creation, just as a good child would do for his/her father's wealth, just as a good and true heir would do. The sense of responsibility and the ability to manage material goods should not be confused with domination and power. Being able to discern this slight but crucial difference is essential in order to understand one of the fundamental issues involved throughout the books of Scripture.

Who exercises power? Who is the first one? Who is the chosen one? Who rules? These are issues that are present from the scene of the fall (the power struggle between man and God), passing through the scenes of Cain and Abel (the fight between brothers), Isaac and Esau (two nations), Saul and David (two kings), up to the disciples of Jesus in the New Testament who also showed their interest for power (10:35 Mc-45par and Acts 1:6-7). The man's eternal struggle for power is reflected in the whole history of salvation. The Bible always says no to settlement in cities (Babel), no to realms and kingdoms (deuteronomistic history), no to worldly power (the prophets).

Precisely for this reason it is inconceivable that the God of the Old Testament give the people who just flew out of Egypt the privilege to have power over other nations and dominate the territories of other nations. In this case the Israel of the wilderness would be preparing to be a new Pharaoh and oppressor of nations. Hence the Bible is very careful with the terminology used to possess or conquer the land. Hence it does not use but the verbs *yrsh* and *nHl* and does not develop a term that really speaks of possessing by the people of God. Hence the use of the Arabic *mlk* to translate *yrsh* turns out to be not only wrong but also mischievous.

According to the Bible we are all free, we are all under God's care and there is no need to draw borders to live in peace. The principle of coexistence given through revelation is far more tolerant than the one given by any secular philosophy. The biblical revelation affirms that all human beings belong to one family and that, therefore, everyone works and acts for the welfare of the community that they form and for the welfare of each individual. This is what the Law reveals with the principle of neighborly love at the heart of the Pentateuch: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your

people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."(Lev 19:18). This is also what teach the narratives and prophetic books of the Old Testament teach by defending the poor and the oppressed and by rebuking the oppressors and powerful ones. The Ps 37:14-17 sums it clearly: " The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows to bring down the poor and needy, to kill those who walk uprightly; [15] their sword shall enter their own heart, and their bows shall be broken. [16] Better is a little that the righteous person has than the abundance of many wicked. [17] For the arms of the wicked shall be broken, but the Lord upholds the righteous."

Conclusion

The God of the Old Testament is a living God who lives mostly in the Word of the community of believers. If this is true, any divine promise to give the inheritance to his people is always a project to be fulfilled in the future, because during the time in which the true owner is alive, there is nothing to possess. If believers should decide for themselves to distribute among them the promised inheritance and property, at that very moment they are confessing that God is dead and, therefore, they are proclaiming that there is no reason to exist as a community anymore.

With this simple thought I was trying to reach the conclusion that the stem *yrsh* cannot be translated but in the sense of inheriting. To make of it a synonym of possessing and occupying leads to a biased interpretation of the Bible. The translation of *yrsh* by *mlk*, as defenseless as it may seem, leads to a theology that endorses the rationale for oppression and occupation, and thus leads to rejection of the Old Testament by those who have to endure the injustice of oppression. Today more than ever it is necessary for theologians and for biblical scholars to contextualize our academic work and research to find the most appropriate way to express the biblical message into the communities to which we belong.

Bibliography

Biberstein Kazimirski, Albert de. *Dictionnaire Arabe-Français*, Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1967.

Bible Works.   *Bible Works*, Ver. 7, Bible Works for Windows, Hermeneutika Computer Bible Research Software, 2006, IBM PC Compatible for Windows, CD.

Brown, Francis et all. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon. With an appendix containing the Biblical Aramaic* (BDB).   Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907.

Clines, David J.A.   *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998.

Corriente, F.   *Diccionario Árabe-Español*. Tercera edición. Barcelona: Editorial Herder, 1991.

Dogniez, C. and M. Harl (ed.). *Le pentateuque. La Bible d'Alexandrie*. Paris: Cerf, 2001.

Feghali, Paul.   *Al-Mouhit al-game' fi al-kitab al muqaddas wa a-sharq al-qadim*, Beirut: SBL, 2003.

Gesenius, H.W.F.   *Gesenius' Hebrew Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids (Mi): Baker Books, 2000.

Hamlin, E. John.   *At Risk in the Promised Land. A Commentary on the Book of Judges* (ITC). Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1990.

Hamui, Sobhi.   *Al-Munjed fi al-lugha al-arabiah al-mu'aSira*. Beirut: Dar Al-Mashreq, 2001.

Harris, R. Laird et all. *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament* (TWOT)**.** Volumes 1 & 2. Chicago: Moody Press, 1981.

Holladay, William L.   *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Based upon the lexical work of ludwig koehler and walter baumgartner. Leiden: Brill, 2000.

Ibn Mandhur,   *Lisan al-Arab. Revised New Edition*. Tripoli: Jarrous Press, 1985.

Lohfink, Norbert.   "yāraš." in: ThDOT, 368-390.

Marguerat, D. / Bourquin, Y. *Pour lire les récits bibliques*, Paris, 1998.

Metropolitan Maximos, Eugen Pentiuc et all. (Ed.). *The Orthodox Study Bible*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008.

Metz, J.B.   « Petite apologie du récit », in: **Concilium 85** (5, 1973), 57-69.

Sénéchal, V.	« La recherche des années 80-90 », in : Marguerat, D. et all., **Autour des récits bibliques** (CED 127), Paris 2004, 50-56. Also available on *www.catho-theo.net/plan.php3*.
Ska, J.L.	*Our Fathers have told us,* Roma: Biblical Institute Press, 1990.
Wehr, Hans.	*A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. Edited by J. Milton Cowan. Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1980.