

## A Land Flowing with Fat and Honey

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### Abstract

The author contends that the word *ḥlb* in the phrase *ʾrṣ zbt ḥlb wdbš* should be read *ḥēleb* (fat), and not *ḥālāb* (milk), drawing support from biblical and Ugaritic texts.

### Keywords

milk and honey, fat, oil, Canaan, land, pointing

The idiom *ʾrṣ zbt ḥlb wdbš* (generally translated “a land flowing with milk and honey”) is employed numerous times in the Bible, usually to illustrate Canaan’s purportedly plentiful quality. The nature of the *ḥlb* element is not entirely apparent. Several targums interpret the idiom as “a land producing good fruit, *pure as milk* and sweet as honey”.<sup>1</sup> Another ancient interpretation is that the animals of the land, rather than the land itself, produce copious amounts of milk, again suggestive of a rich land.<sup>2</sup> According to some scholars, milk carries with it connotations of fertility, implying by extension that the land itself is fertile.<sup>3</sup> Others have argued that the image reflects an ancient mythological notion of a heavenly river of milk—the Milky Way.<sup>4</sup> A somewhat different suggestion is that the semantic field of *ḥlb* includes not only milk, but also white wine, and that the latter is intended in this context, suggesting a land abundant in grape vines.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> So Neofiti in all instances, as well as Fragment Targum Paris on Num 16:13, Fragment Targum Vatican on Deut 6:3 and 26:15, and Genizah fragments AA on Deut 26:9, 15; 27:3, and D on 27:3. (See M. L. Klein, *Genizah Manuscripts of the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch* [Cincinnati, 1986], pp. 343, 345, 347, 349.)

<sup>2</sup> See *b. Ketub.* 111b.

<sup>3</sup> So J. H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia, 1996), p. 438.

<sup>4</sup> So T. K. Cheyne, *Traditions and Beliefs of Ancient Israel* (London, 1907), p. 455.

<sup>5</sup> So R. Margolies, *hammiqrāʾ wʾhammʿsōrāh* (Jerusalem, 1964), pp. 62-64.

We would like to propose an alternative reading of the phrase that is radically different from all the above in meaning, but which stems from a simple rereading of the text.

In conjunction with the late (and inherently interpretive) Tiberian pointing, the literal sense of the phrase is indeed unambiguous. However, the same cannot be said of the consonantal Hebrew, which allows for an alternative reading for the word in question: not *ḥālāb* (milk), but its homograph *ḥēleb* (animal fat, or suet).<sup>6</sup> The two words are entirely dissimilar in meaning, and they are also etymologically unrelated,<sup>7</sup> but it is clear how one might be mistaken for the other. Let us consider the advantages of the latter reading.

First, the idea of the idiom is immediately evident. Honey is exceptionally rich in flavor and consistency, and an image of a land flowing with it suggests a rich, fertile land. Fat is the epitome of richness, and a “fatty” land can be nothing if not bountiful. Indeed, whereas land is nowhere else described as “milky”, the Bible is replete with images of an oleaginous land. For example, “I will give you the best of the land of Egypt and you shall live off *the fat of the land*”<sup>8</sup> (*ḥēleb ḥā’āreṣ*). The Hebrew word used for “fat” here is precisely that which we suggest is found in *’rṣ zbt ḥlb wdbš*. An analogous idiom appears in Isaac’s blessing of Jacob: “May God give you Of the dew of heaven and *the fat of the earth*” (*šemannê ḥā’āreṣ*),<sup>9</sup> and Moses directs the spies to determine if the land of Canaan is “rich (*šmēnāh*) or lean”.<sup>10</sup>

In further support of our reading, fat/oil and honey are frequently paired in the Bible. For example, Prov 5:3 reads, “For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey (*nōpet*); Her mouth is smooth from oil (*šemen*)”.<sup>11</sup> Deut 32:13 is even more germane: “He set him atop the highlands, To feast on the yield of the earth; *He fed him honey (d’bāš) from the crag, And oil (šemen) from the flinty rock*”. In this instance, not only are honey and oil paired, but they are in fact

<sup>6</sup> See examples in *HALOT* 1:315d-16a. See also J. Milgrom, *Leviticus*, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis, 2004), p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> See *BDB* 316b,d and *HALOT* 1:315c,d.

<sup>8</sup> Gen 45:18, NJPS.

<sup>9</sup> Gen 27:28, NJPS. See also v. 39 there. Whereas *ḥēleb* refers to animal fat (see note 6), *šemen* ordinarily denotes plant oil, particularly olive oil. (See examples in *BDB* 1032a,b, *HALOT* 1567-9.)

<sup>10</sup> Num 13:20. Similar expressions may be found also in Isa 28:1; 30:23; Neh 9:25, as well as *KTU* 1.3 II 39 and IV 43, which both read *šmn ’arṣ*. (In S. B. Parker [ed.], *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* [Atlanta, 1997], pp. 109, 114.)

<sup>11</sup> Translation ours. NJPS and others render “smoother than oil”. Be that as it may, the coupling of the two words is not in question.

used to describe the remarkable yield of Canaan's soil, as is the idiom under discussion.<sup>12</sup>

Our proposal finds surprising support in the Ugaritic text *KTU* 1.6 III 12-13. It reads: "The heavens rain oil, The wadis run with honey".<sup>13</sup> Philip Stern noted the similarities between this passage and the biblical idiom and argued:

[The Ugaritic] vision is so close to the biblical expression that it is difficult not to imagine that "a land flowing with milk and honey" has its origin in the rivalry with Baal... [But] YHWH may have been doing one better than Baal, if Israelites valued dairy products over vegetable fat. The biblical formula holds that the land will be fit for animal husbandry and bee-keeping, a slightly different idea of abundance from its predecessor, but in the end the product of the deity's beneficent rule over the land.<sup>14</sup>

But there is no reason to suppose, as Stern does, that the Hebrew idiom carries with it any anti-Baal undertones, nor is there cause to imagine a conscious Hebrew adaptation of a Canaanite phrase. Furthermore, the assumption that the Israelites were uniquely partial to dairy products begs the question. As we have seen, the biblical text allows for a reading that is entirely analogous to the Ugaritic version. The god of the Hebrews, like Baal in Ugarit, causes the land to flow with honey and oil/fat.<sup>15</sup>

We may not be the first to thus read the biblical phrase. *Sifre to Deut 37* records the following:

Just as deer (flesh) is the easiest to digest of that of all domestic and wild animals, so the fruits of the Land of Israel are easier to digest than those of any other land. You might think that since they are easy to digest they are not rich; hence Scripture says *A land flowing with ḥlb and honey*—rich (*šmnyṃ*) as *ḥlb* and sweet as honey.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See also Deut 8:8b which is suggestive of similar imagery, and Psalm 81:17, which pairs *ḥēleb ḥittāb* with *šūr d'baš*.

<sup>13</sup> S. B. Parker (ed.), *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (Atlanta, 1997), p. 158. See also *ibid.*, lines 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> P. Stern, "The Origin and Significance of 'The Land Flowing with Milk and Honey'", *VT* 42 (1992), pp. 554-557.

<sup>15</sup> That *ḥēleb* is described as "flowing" should come as no surprise. The idiom is poetic in nature, and an image of a land flowing with animal fat in its (heated) liquid state is no more or less fanciful than a land flowing with honey, or oil streaming from a rock.

<sup>16</sup> R. Hammer, *Sifre on Deuteronomy* (New Haven, 1986), p. 72. See next note. See also parallel passage in *b. Ketub* 112a.

Most take the unpointed phrase “rich as *hלב*” to mean “rich like *milk*”, as it is presumed to be an exposition on “a land flowing with *milk* and honey”.<sup>17</sup> But given the fact that milk is hardly the paragon of richness, it seems considerably more plausible that the intent here is “rich like *fat*”.<sup>18</sup> The same tradition is also reflected in Pseudo-Jonathan which five times (all in Deut) translates *’rš zbt hלב* as *’r’(’) dpyrh’ šmynyn khlb*,<sup>19</sup> in contrast to variations upon *ngyyyn khlb’*, as found in Neofiti and others.<sup>20</sup>

It is interesting that honey is thrice paired with *hem’āh* (rendered milk fat = ghee)<sup>21</sup> in biblical poetry.<sup>22</sup> A priori, this might seem to support the common association of milk and honey, as ghee and milk are both dairy products.<sup>23</sup> But in fact, *hem’āh* is also equated in the Bible with oil, as in Job 29:6: “When my feet were bathed in *hem’āh*, And rocks poured out streams of oil (*šemen*) for me”.<sup>24</sup> This is not surprising, as the substantial difference between the two is in origin, not appearance or quality. Moreover, not only is the Arabic term for ghee *samn*, as noted above,<sup>25</sup> but the Aramaic Targums in fact generally translate Hebrew *hem’āh* as *š’man*,<sup>26</sup> further indicating that these two food categories were often associated. Ghee/honey is thus fully analogous

<sup>17</sup> Hammer, for instance, translates the phrase here: “rich as milk” (*ibid.*)

<sup>18</sup> Y. Felix takes Rabbi Eliezer’s statement in Mekhilta de R. Ishmael to Deut 13:5: “*hלב zh hלב hpyrw*” to mean the “choicest (*hēleb*) fruit”, as in Num 18:12: *kōl hēleb yīshār w’kol-hēleb tīrōš w’dāgān*. (Y. Felix, *’āšē p’rī l’mīnēhem-šimhē hattanak w’hāzal* [Jerusalem, 1994], p. 35 and note 11 there.)

<sup>19</sup> Deut 6:3; 11:9; 26:9, 15; 27:3.

<sup>20</sup> See note 1, above.

<sup>21</sup> M. Haran examines the meaning of the term in his article “Seething a Kid in its Mother’s Milk”, *JJS* 30 (1979), p. 31: “There are those who maintain that the Arabic *leben* is equivalent to what the biblical Hebrew, as well as the Canaanite, call *hem’āh* (rendered by English Versions as ‘butter’, ‘curds’, ‘cream’) . . . It appears to me that the biblical *hem’āh* is actually equivalent to what the Arabs call *samn*, *samnab*, which is the fat of the milk melted over a small fire and, looking like an oil, is considered a kind of food, not a drink (the milk’s fat that is churned into what the Westerners call βούτυρον—*butyrum*—butter cannot be preserved in the climatic conditions of the East). In fact, I find that the CAD (Vol. H, pp. 189-90) renders *himetu*, the Akkadian parallel of the Hebrew *hem’āh*, as ‘ghee’, which is the Indian counterpart of the Arabic *samnab* (the fresh ‘sweetish’ milk, the Hebrew *halab*, however, is called *šizbu* in Akkadian)”.

<sup>22</sup> Isa 7:15, 22; Job 20:17.

<sup>23</sup> Indeed, ghee and milk are coupled in Jud 5:25.

<sup>24</sup> NJPS.

<sup>25</sup> See note 21.

<sup>26</sup> Onkelos and Pseudo-Jonathan on Gen 18:8, Jonathan on 2 Sam 17:29, Isa 7:15, 22. In addition to the above, *hem’āh* is sometimes rendered by the Targums *š’man d’gubnīn*, or variants thereof.

to the two aforementioned pairs, the common denominator of all being the coupling of honey with one of the three most paradigmatically rich food-stuffs: *šemen* (vegetable fat), *ḥēleb* (animal fat), and *ḥem'āb* (milk fat).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27)</sup> In light of all the above, there are a few additional passages worth reappraising. Song 4:11 and 5:1 pair honey with *ḥlb*, pointed *ḥālāb* by the Masoretes. The case against the Tiberian pointing is particularly strong for the former, which thoroughly parallels the language and imagery of Prov 5:3 (discussed above), save for the alternation between *ḥlb* and *šmn*. Regarding Song 5:1, a rabbinic tradition is worthy of mention. Mid. Shir Hashirim reads: “I have drunk my wine with my *ḥlb*—this refers to the drink-offerings and the sacrificial parts of the lesser holy things”, manifestly expounding upon *ḥēleb*, and not *ḥālāb*, as pointed in MT. (H. Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah*, vol. 9 [London, 1939], 230.) We would also tentatively reject the pointing of Joel 4:18 and Deut 32:14. Once again, we would not be the first. For the former, Targum Jonathan reads *w'ramātā yigdān ṭūbā'*, suggesting the reading *w'ḥaggebā'ōt tēlaknāh ḥēleb*, rather than the Masoretic *ḥālāb*. (Cf. his translation of Ezek 34:3, et passim.) With regard to the latter, Targum Fragments Paris and Vatican read *wšmynyn d'n* and *wšmyny 'z*, respectively, reflecting the Hebrew reading *w'ḥēleb šō'n*, against MT.