

Flowing with Fat and (Bee) Honey: Evidence from Ancient Egypt¹

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Abstract

An Egyptian text sheds light on the biblical idiom *ʾrš zbt ḥlb wdbš*, helping establish the nature of both *ḥlb* and *dbš*.

Keywords

fat – milk – honey – Egyptian – bee

Recently, I proposed in this journal that the biblical idiom *ʾrš zbt ḥlb wdbš*, typically taken to mean “a land flowing with milk and honey,” is better understood as “a land flowing with *fat* and honey.”² This phrase, I argued, parallels other biblical pairings of honey with oleaginous substances (plant oil and milk fat), especially in the context of fertile land.³

In addition to biblical evidence, I cited a Ugaritic text in support of my thesis. Following a period of drought due to Baal’s demise, the god of fertility returns and makes “the heavens rain oil, the wadis run with honey.”⁴

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2 “A Land Flowing with Fat and Honey,” *Vetus Testamentum* 60 (2010), pp. 172-176.

3 In using the term “fat,” I do not mean to comment on consistency. Plant, animal, and milk fats can all be rendered in various viscosities.

4 KTU 1.6 III 12-13. Cf. 6-7. Simon B. Parker (ed.), *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (Atlanta, 1997), p. 158.

In this short note, I would like to draw attention to another ancient Near Eastern text. The Egyptian *Story of Sinuhe*, which dates to the early second millennium BCE, contains the following passage:⁵

He let me choose for myself of his land, of the best that was his, on his border with another land. It was a good land called Yaa. Figs were in it and grapes. It had more wine than water. *Abundant was its honey, plentiful its oil.*⁶ All kinds of fruit were in its trees. Barley was there and emmer, and no end of cattle of all kinds.

It is readily apparent that this depiction of fertility draws on imagery similar to that found in the Bible and Ugarit, thus reinforcing the reading “fat,” as opposed to “milk,” and, significantly, the land of Yaa was located in Syro-Palestine.⁷

This Egyptian text may have something else to contribute to the understanding of the Hebrew idiom. There has been some disagreement among linguists and Bible scholars as to the precise meaning of *dēbāš* in this context. Historically, most scholars have been of the opinion that the idiom refers to syrup produced from dates or other fruit, whereas some—especially of late—have maintained that bee honey is intended.⁸ The recent discovery of a 9th or 10th century BCE apiary in Tel Rehov introduced a new dimension into what had been a purely philological dispute. No longer can it be said that an absence of bee-honey production in Iron Age Canaan obligates us to conclude that the land was reportedly abundant in fruit syrup.⁹

The coupling of *šemen* with the unambiguously apian *nōpet* in Proverbs 5:3 may support a reading of *dēbāš* as bee honey whenever paired with sebaceous

5 Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1 (Berkeley, 1973), p. 226.

6 ϵ_3 *b̄i.t=f* ϵ_3 ; *b_3k=f*. See Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow (eds.), *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache*, Vol. 1 (Leipzig and Berlin, 1926), pp. 424, 434; Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 78, 79.

7 See, e.g., Michael Green, “The Syrian and Lebanese Topographical Data in the Story of Sinuhe,” *Chronique d’Égypte* 58 (1983), p. 54. Tellingly, Green paraphrases this passage as depicting “a land of milk and honey.”

8 See, e.g., Mekhilta de R. Ishmael to Deuteronomy 13:5 for a pre-modern discussion of the issue. For a more current submission of the bee honey hypothesis, see Tova Forti, “Bee’s Honey: From Realia to Metaphor in Biblical Wisdom Literature,” *Vetus Testamentum* 56 (2006), pp. 327–341.

9 See Amihai Mazar and Nava Panitz-Cohen, “It is the Land of Honey: Beekeeping at Tel Rehov,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 70 (2007), pp. 202–219. On the dating of Tel Rehov, cf. Israel Finkelstein and Eli Piasezky, “¹⁴C and the Iron Age Chronology Debate: Rehov, Khirbet en-Nahas, Dan, and Megiddo,” *Radiocarbon* 48 (2006), pp. 373–386.

