

# *The use of desire in Genesis 3:16b – part one*

*Paul Wyns*

## *Introduction*

The term desire **תְּשׁוּקָה** (*t<sup>c</sup> šúqâ*) is used only three times in the Old Testament. It is employed twice in Genesis (3:16, 4:17) and once in Song of Songs (7:10). The term has generated much controversy<sup>1</sup>, particularly in its use in Genesis 3:16b; “*Your desire shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you.*”<sup>2</sup> The verse 3:16 has been debated over the centuries; more so recently by feminist interpreters; probably as a reaction against extremely chauvinistic (sometimes verging on misogynistic) interpretations.<sup>3</sup> Because Lexical and etymological studies of the term have yielded scant results, Irvin Busenitz concludes that the central consideration in the interpretation of Genesis 3:16b **is context**; the meaning of "desire" is best determined in the light of its immediate contextual setting.<sup>4</sup> This is essentially the approach adopted by this article; the term is analyzed within its wider context, but first text critical emendations are proposed. On the hand of the proposed textual emendation a fresh contextual reading will be offered.

---

<sup>1</sup> S. Foh, “*What is the Woman’s desire?*” (*WTJ* 37, 1974/75:376-83),376-77

<sup>2</sup> All quotes are from the NKJV unless otherwise stated

<sup>3</sup> Tertullian wrote regarding women: “And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. *You* are the devil’s gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: *you* are the first deserter of the divine law: *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account of *your* desert — that is, death — even the Son of God had to die”. Roberts, and Donaldson, (eds), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, (v.4 [4], translated by the Rev. S. Thelwall: Ages Software), 1997,25

<sup>4</sup> Irvin A. Busenitz, *Woman’s Desire for Man: Genesis 3:16 Reconsidered*, (*Grace Theological Journal* 7.2, 1986: 203-12), 211

### *The necessity for textual criticism*

The function and purpose of textual criticism is to reconstruct the original wording of the Biblical text and to establish the history of transmission of the text through the centuries. However, in no single instance is the autograph available and therefore the reconstruction of a critical text is always, to a certain extent, subjective. In order to analyze the Hebrew term translated as “desire” in Gen 3:16b it is appropriate to compare it with Gen 4:7 as it demonstrates parallel verbal usage. However, although scholars readily acknowledge the similarity in grammatical construction between 3:16b and 4:7, they discount the usefulness of Gen 4:7 in determining the meaning of 3:16b as it is itself considered to contain interpretive uncertainties.<sup>5</sup> The similarity between the texts is immediately recognizable:

Your desire *shall be* for your husband, And he shall rule over you." **(3:16b)**

And its desire *is* for you, but you should rule over it." **(4:7b)**

### *The problem with Genesis 4:7*

Many scholars admit that the verse is one of the most difficult in all of the OT to understand. Skinner<sup>6</sup> has observed: "Every attempt to extract a meaning from the verse is more or less of a *tour de force*, and it is nearly certain that the obscurity is due to deep-seated textual corruptions."

The text is grammatically challenged, for in **הַשִּׁקְתּוֹ** ("his desire") the pronominal suffix is masculine. If the antecedent were "sin [חַטָּאת] crouching at the door," one would expect a feminine pronominal suffix, since "sin" is feminine. "Sin" in Genesis 4:7 is usually understood as a zoomorphism, Gerhard Von Rad comments: "In v. 7b the final *t* of *hattā't* ("sin") is best taken as the initial letter of the following verb form and read *ḥēt' tirba'* ("sin lies in wait"); then one obtains the expected feminine form. The comparison of sin with a beast of prey lying before the door is strange, as is the purely figurative use of “door” (door of the heart?) in such an ancient

---

<sup>5</sup> Irvin A. Busenitz states: "Furthermore, to appeal to Gen 4:7 with its manifold obscurities to unlock the interpretive door of Gen 3:16 is to throw exegetical caution to the wind" (1986:210).

<sup>6</sup> John Skinner, *Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969), 107

narrative. **One suspects that the meaning of the passage was once quite different.**" <sup>7</sup> Robert Alter states that the poem is archaic and enigmatic: "The first clause of verse 7 is particularly elliptic in the Hebrew, and thus **any construal is no more than an educated guess**".<sup>8</sup> Terje Stordalen suggests that the rare word **תְּשׁוּבָה** only received a linking function (between 3:16 and 4:7) "*late in the redactional process of Genesis.*"<sup>9</sup>

The Septuagint version further complicates the matter as the translators of the LXX attempted to clarify their understanding of the term "desire" by translating it with the Greek ἀποστροφή [*apostrophē*] in Gen 3:16 and 4:7. *Apostrophē* can be rendered in a positive sense of "turning, turning back, refuge, or bend in a direction toward"- it may also be employed in a negative sense of "turning away from." The LXX rendering of Gen 3:16 is, "Your desire is toward your husband," (πρὸς τὸν ἄνδρα σου ἢ ἀποστροφή σου).<sup>10</sup> In Gen 4:7 (πρὸς σέ ἢ ἀποστροφή αὐτοῦ), the LXX translators interpreted this as a reference to Abel's "desire, toward his brother." In both instances, the preposition πρὸς with the accusative expresses "direction toward "- πρὸς may only carry the meaning "against" when it follows a verb of disputing or hostility, which is not the case in these instances.<sup>11</sup> William Loader attempts to resolve the problem by understanding *apostrophē* as "returning" - he detects symmetry between the woman repeatedly *returning* (ἢ ἀποστροφή σου) to the man (from which she was taken) in order to get pregnant and the man to *return* (ἀποστρέψαι) to the earth from which he was taken – both relationships

---

<sup>7</sup> Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: a Commentary*, (trans. John H. Marks; OTL; London: SCM Press, 1961), 105

<sup>8</sup> Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, (W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 17

<sup>9</sup> Terje Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden: Genesis 2-3 and Symbolism of the Eden Garden in Biblical Hebrew Literature*, (Contributions to Biblical Exegesis & Theology, Peeters, 2000), 209

<sup>10</sup> Version ID: BGT Description: BibleWorks Greek LXX/BNT

<sup>11</sup> The LXX translators would most likely have used ἀντί [*anti*] if they meant Gen 3:16 and 4:7 to mean "desire that resists or works against." George B. Winer, *A Grammar of the Idiom of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957), 717

are defined by pain and toil (man/earth, woman/man).<sup>12</sup> This may well achieve a plausible exegesis for 3:16b but it breaks down when applied to 4:7b; “Here, too, LXX translates ἡ ἀποστροφή (“return”), where probably with reference to sin returning and to Cain’s needing to rule over it”(Loader:2004:47fn.55). This explanation is unsatisfactory and does not account for the grammatical inconsistencies in the masoretic text. Far more plausible is the suggestion made by Hamilton<sup>13</sup> and Bergmeier that the LXX translators were apparently reading the Hebrew, *t<sup>e</sup> šûbâ* (return) for *t<sup>e</sup> šûqâ* (desire) and translating it with the Greek *hē apostrophē*.

### *Proposed textual amendment*

Genesis 4:7 obviously suffers from deep seated textual corruptions, particularly surrounding the word “desire” - this article proposes that instead of *t<sup>e</sup> šûqâ* (desire) the ancient Hebrew originally had *t<sup>e</sup> šû’â* (salvation) or, *t<sup>e</sup> šûrâ* (gift) – the unpointed Hebrew varies in only one letter and the Septuagint translators mistakenly reconstructed the original as *t<sup>e</sup> šûbâ* (return), which they expressed as, *hē apostrophē* in the Greek. The proposed alternatives achieve a better contextual reading of Genesis 4:7b and in turn, of Genesis 3:16b.

### *A contextual reading of Genesis 4:7b*

The first principle of good hermeneutics is context. If a text is damaged or corrupted (either purposely or through transmission) then it can only be reconstructed or corrected by careful contextualisation.

---

<sup>12</sup> William R. G. Loader, *The Septuagint, Sexuality, and the New Testament: Case Studies on the Impact of the LXX in Philo and the New Testament*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 121-122

<sup>13</sup> V.P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17*,(1990),201; See also R. Bergmeier, “Zur Septuagintaübersetzung von Gen3:16”, *ZAW* 79, 1967,77-79

Firstly, Cain was the expected realisation of the promise made to Eve in the previous chapter (3:15-16) – as far as Eve was concerned Cain was the fulfilment of the promised salvation.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, the sacrifice of Cain was rejected because it came from the cursed ground and therefore represented the “sweat of his face.”<sup>15</sup> Thirdly, the sacrifices imply a place of cultic worship – a sanctuary. The Garden of Eden was itself modelled after the pattern of the

---

<sup>14</sup> NKJ **Genesis 4:1** Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, "I have acquired a man from the LORD."

<sup>BHT</sup> **Genesis 4:1** wəhāʔāḏām yādaʕ ʔeṭ-ḥawwāh ʔištō wattáhar wattéled ʔeṭ-qáyin wattóʔmer qānítî ʔiš ʔeṭ-yhwh(ʔādōnāy)

The Hebrew *qánitish* (gotten or acquired) is a play on *qáyin* (Cain) –the Canaanites were merchants and smiths. Note that the ‘et’ (עַת) that proceeds each name is not translated with the exception of the **last name** where the participle is erroneously translated as “**from**” (or, “with the help of” in the KJV), however, it is a demonstrative pronoun similar to the Greek *autos* (self, this same) –according to Gesenius this primitive word lost its demonstrative power when set before nouns and pronouns that are already definite and thus became superfluous. It is the context which determines how the prefix is translated the phrase [with].....**the help of** is a translators guess. A more suitable translation would be: ‘*And the man knew (even or the same) Eve his wife; and she conceived and bore (even or the same) Cain, and said: 'I have gotten a man (even or the same) YHWH.*

<sup>15</sup> Many commentators regard the divine rejection of Cain’s worship as a mystery, or worse, as an arbitrary or capricious act by God - Christadelphians have long recognised that Cain knew that blood sacrifice was required to cover sin (Gen 3:21) and that the ground (and its produce) was under a curse (Gen 3:17) – God would not accept what had been grown ‘in the sweat of thy face’ (justification by works) as *a sin offering* (although agricultural produce was sometimes offered together with blood sacrifice, or for different occasions). Garry Herion comes to a similar conclusion regarding the cursed ground in his essay; *Why God Rejected Cain's Offering: The Obvious Answer*. It was therefore a deliberate, pre-meditated act of defiance on Cain’s part. Garry Herion, *Fortunate the Eyes That See*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 52-65.

“heavenly sanctuary” (like the tabernacle) and reflects ancient cosmogony.<sup>16</sup> If the context is allowed to speak for itself, then Genesis 4:7 should read as follows:

If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?<sup>17</sup> But if you do not do what is right, the sin-offering is lying at the door [of the sanctuary]; his **gift** is for you, and you will overcome. (Genesis 4:7)

We note that “sin” is translated as “sin-offering” a translation also offered by Young’s Literal Translation. Harry Whittaker comments: “With hardly an exception, the word “lieth” is used of flocks and herds peacefully lying down. Also, the extremely common word for “sin” (169 occurrences) is a double-meaning word; it also signifies “sin-offering” (116 times). In Leviticus 4, the same word comes translated “sin” 8 times and “sin-offering” 10 times (In Dan 9:24 A.V. has got the wrong meaning). Again, the word “door” (87 times) needs to be taken in a literal sense; the figurative usage of it has hardly a single parallel in Scripture.”<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> The “seven sisters” of the Pleiades (*cf.* seven stars Rev.1: 12; 16; 20) is represented by the tree of life (in Eden) and by the seven-branched Menorah (in the tabernacle). The entrance to Eden and the Tabernacle was from the east (direction of the rising sun) and the tribal layout around the tabernacle was inspired by the Zodiac constellations. Cherubim guarded the way to the tree of **life** (Gen 3:24) and also the ark, which contained within the symbols of **new life** (the resurrection). G.J. Wenham also notes further correspondences between Eden and the later Sanctuaries; God walks in Eden (3:8; *cf.* Lev.26: 12; Deut.23: 15; 2 Sam.7: 6-7) the command to “work” is also applied to the Levites (*cf.* Num.3: 7-8; 8: 26; 18:5-6) the river from Eden (*cf.* Ezek.47: 1-12) and the gold and onyx of Eden (2:11-12) which was used to decorate the later sanctuaries and priestly garments (*cf.* Ex.25: 7, 11, 17, 31 about 100 references to gold and seven to onyx in connection with the Exodus tabernacle) G.J. Wenham, *Sanctuary symbolism in the Garden of Eden story*, Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies 9 (1986),19-25

<sup>17</sup> Alter comments; “The narrative context of sacrifices may suggest that the cryptic *s’eit* (elsewhere, “preeminence”) might be related to *mas’eit*, a gift or cultic offering” (1997:17). Interestingly, the word has a dual meaning, literally “lifting [up]” as in exaltation and often (in Leviticus) “rising” (as in an unclean leprous swelling – Cain’s mark?).

<sup>18</sup> Harry A. Whittaker, *Genesis 1-2-3-4*, (Biblia,1986),126

The “sin-offering” (the lamb) was lying (not crouching ready to jump as suggested by some translations) at the door of the Sanctuary.<sup>19</sup> The verse is therefore not metaphoric – it is not a zoomorphism as suggested by most translations and commentators<sup>20</sup> – but rather a literal picture. Abel had brought more than one lamb (firstlings of the flock Gen 4:4), **he also brought a gift for his brother Cain.** This explains another inconsistency spotted by commentators – Cain does not respond to God, according to McEntire; "Yahweh's statement in v.7 indicates to Cain and the reader that Cain still has the opportunity to do well and find favour...Instead of speaking to Yahweh he speaks unto Abel".<sup>21</sup> The translation offered in this article makes sense of this anomaly; Cain does not respond to Yahweh because Yahweh has told him that he can still be accepted if he offers the lamb that his brother Abel has brought as a gift for him.....this acts as the prompt for Cain to find his brother Abel in the field.....not to thank him for the lamb, or to make “peace” with his brother: “Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt 5:24-25). If Cain had accepted the “gift” he would “overcome” or ruled over the “serpent” (man had dominion over the beast of the field Gen 1:28). Cain’s pride and his envy prevented him accepting his brother’s “gift” – he became the first murderer, making propitiation for his sin by “offering” Abel instead.

---

<sup>19</sup> The flaming sword of the Cherubim at the eastern entrance of Eden (Gen 3:24) may have been the place of sacrifice (cf. Hebrews 4:12-13).

<sup>20</sup> J. L. Teng Kok is reasonably representative of modern scholastic understanding: “God is in effect saying to Cain that if he had done well he would be able to hold his head up high (or be accepted); if not, sin is personified as a demon crouching at the door waiting to pounce (or dominate) and overcome him (4:6-7). The imagery of a predator waiting to an image of sin lurking is used here (cf. Deut 19:11)”. Johnson Lim Teng Kok, *Grace in the midst of Judgment: Grappling with Genesis 1-11*, Reihe: Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 314,(Walter De Gruyter Inc,Berlin:New York, 2002),155

<sup>21</sup> Mark McEntire, *The Blood of Abel: The Violent Plot in the Hebrew Bible*, (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press),26

## *Conclusion*

Lexical and grammatical exegesis can only be useful when supported by proper contextualisation. This article offered reasons for a text critical emendation of “desire” to “gift” in Genesis 4:7b. This fresh reading makes the verse intelligible in its context and offers the hope of a new perspective on Genesis 3:16b, which will be discussed in the next article.