

APPENDIX B

THE GOLDEN APPLE: GRAMMATIC AND ETYMOLOGICAL ISSUES

LANGUAGE AS CAMOUFLAGE FOR DANGEROUS CONTENT

Maimonides engages in a curious act of linguistic exegesis, though it is really a type of camouflage. He seems to want to derive “seeing” from “setting.” To do this he starts with a Hebrew term (*maskiyot*, מַשְׁכִּיּוֹת) proceeds to a completely different Hebrew term (*yashkef*, יַשְׁקֵף) develops its Aramaic equivalent (*istekhe*, אִסְתַּכְי) from Onkelos’ ancient Aramaic translation (c.110 C.E.), and reads that back into the original Hebrew term, a four step process. He made it even stranger since in each case the consonantal roots [radicals] of the three words are spelled differently. What is going on?

Maskiyot מַשְׁכִּיּוֹת: “filigree setting.” In Hebrew grammar, all words are supposedly built on a three consonant root structure (but see Gesenius’ *Hebrew Grammar*, Oxford 1974, pp. 100-102, 30:2). It is unclear what the three root letters of *maskiyot* would be. Normally, despite the tradition of tri-literals, we would now regard every letter here beside “S*K” שַׁכַּ as prefix or suffix (i.e., the “ma” and the “iyot” of *maskiyot* are prefix and suffix), which leaves only those two root letters. We now accept biliteral roots in Hebrew grammar. Biliterally, “S” and “K(h),” *sekh* שֶׁכַּ means either thorn/prick, or booth/enclosure, like a *sukkah*. These meanings combined would probably do nicely for a filigree setting. But but they don’t seem to do anything for Maimonides.

Maskiya מַשְׁכִּיָּה: the singular of *maskiyot*, is a locket in modern Hebrew, but that probably just comes from this use here in Proverbs 25:11. *Meshekh*, מֶשֶׁךְ, “skin,” changing the “S” to “Sh” (שׁ > ש), yields a term, *mesekh orlah*, Maimonides would know from either his medical or Talmudic studies, denoting the stretching of the skin of the penis to disguise circumcision, but the usage still seems distant. What Maimonides needs is for *maskiyot* to mean some kind of jewelry setting that is minimally transparent, in order that the Golden Apple of the interior can be glimpsed, but only close up.

He turns to the *Targum*, the ancient Aramaic translation of the Bible, which Maimonides sometimes treats as a good source. But the *Targum* on Proverbs 25:11 gives the Aramaic for *maskiyot* as *n’goda* נְגוּדָא. According to Jastrow (*Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, 873, which actually cites this passage), *n’goda* is a vessel of beaten metal. Rashi says that *maskiyot* means “covered with silver,” and compares it to Exodus 33:22, “... while My Glory passeth by, I will put thee (Moses) in the cleft of the rock, and I (God) will *cover* (שָׁכַתִּי *sakoti*) thee with my hand until I have passed by.” Maimonides’ predecessor Avraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164), also understood *maskiyot* to mean “covered with silver, i.e., that they were hidden with what was suitable for them (*ganuzim im ha-raui lehem*), such that *the word fitly spoken* was an appropriate saying that did *not* reveal some other secret.”

Succeeding commentators, like Gersonides (1288-1344), divert from this path, but only because they are following Maimonides’ interpretation, rather than Rashi. This includes the 18th century R. David Altschuler, in *Metzudat David*; however, his companion commentary, *Metzudat Zion*, still follows Rashi’s interpretation that *maskiyot* is a beaten metal covering, rather than a filigree covering.

So it seems that Maimonides had to go further afield if he felt he needed an etymological basis to define *maskiyot* as a filigree that is minimally transparent at close viewing. So he turns to the word *yashkef*. In fact,

he really did not need to do that, since his authority was so great that, as we see, successor commentators followed his interpretation, even as they ignored his etymological and grammatical wanderings. Which is why I suggest that this exercise was not really about this ostensible purpose, but was rather meant for the purpose of drawing us into the story of Isaac, Rebecca, and Avimelekh.

Yashqef יִשְׁקֵף: this is a good Hebrew word for glance/observe. Maimonides says, “*va-yashqef* ...is translated [in Aramaic] *va-istekhe*” (p. 12). *Yashqef* has no orthographic or etymological connection with *maskiyot* מַשְׁכִּיּוֹת (or *istekhe*). The “S” in *maskiyot* would have to become “SH” and the “K” (*kaf*) become “Q” (*kuf*), while the “Y” would be either a suffix or a placeholder for a suppressed radical. But the “F” is completely new. By etymological transfer, the root *shaqaf* is a doorway/window, *that which* we look through. Thus, the root not only implies seeing, but also that through which we see, approaching the notion of a filigreed aperture. Maimonides got this far, but why does this continue to interest him? And why does he next bring its Aramaic equivalent *istekhe* (from Genesis rather than Proverbs) ?

Istekhe אִסְתַּכִּי: this is the reflexive form of the Aramaic *sekha* or *sekhi* (Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 989), meaning: to look out. Except for the change from the Hebrew letter *sin* to the letter *samekh* (שׁ > ס , two different letters that sound “S”), it is similar to the Hebrew root of *maskiyot*, filigree, S*K (In the Aramaic *istekhe*, the “T” coming between the “S” and the “Kh” is part of the reflexive prefix, and ignored in radical diagramming). Pines and Schwarz read Maimonides as taking the similarity of the radicals to derive the Aramaic *va-istekhe* from the Hebrew *maskiyot*. But the apparent similarity of the roots of (Heb.) *maskiyot* and (Aram.) *istekhe* is a long way to go for the payoff of reading *maskiyot* to mean a filigreed setting that can be seen through. After all, you are supposed to be able to see through the thatched roof of (Heb.) *sukkah* (which does share the root S*K with *maskiyot*). Maimonides could have just asserted that this was the *pshat* literal meaning of *maskiyot*, and left it at that. The passage “apples of gold in settings of silver” is broad enough to support such a reading, which was exactly the way that Gersonides read it, and without the grammatical sideshow. But that is precisely *not* what Maimonides intended. What is critical for him is the *location* of Onkelos’ linkage of *va-istekhe* to *va-yashqef*, not the linkage itself. Maimonides was not preparing an etymology of *maskiyot*, but, rather, a pointer to a concealed meaning. Precisely like Ibn Ezra, *a word fitly spoken* is a suitable/appropriate (*raui*) locution designed to conceal a secret, a light camouflage.

Maimonides provides no citations for the location of his many biblical references, but his commentators do (including Pines, Schwartz, Kafih), pointing us to Genesis 26:8, where we find *yashqef* coupled with Onkelos’ Aramaic translation *istekhe* belabored by Maimonides. The real interest in that passage is its sexual content, which stands in for the incomprehensible processes of divine creativity. His purpose, as I explained in the essay, is to cause us to look for the explosive content concealed (and sublimated) by the prophetic parable.

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