

Amicorum communia omnia,
inter quae autem maxime
amici praeceptoris
doctrina lucet

A couple of stone disks or simply a pair of disks?
About the Hebrew word *obnayim* (Exodus 1:16; Jeremiah 18:3)

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The Hebrew lexica of the Old Testament register, besides hapax legomena, also words which, although occurring two or three times in the Hebrew Bible, present like hapaxes a meaning recoverable only through the context. To this group of words belongs **oben*¹, a word which, in the dual form *obnayim*, occurs only twice, namely in Exodus 1:16 and in Jeremiah 18:3. While in the verse Jeremiah 18:3 the meaning of *obnayim* is easily recognizable, in the verse Exodus 2:16 its meaning has not yet been satisfactorily explained.

Let us first check Jeremiah 18:3 in Hebrew:

wā-’ered bêt hay-yôšer w-hinnehû ’ōše mlā’kâ ’al hā-’obnāyim “I went down to the potter’s house, and behold, he was doing work upon the wheel” (RSV).

From the context it is not hard to infer that *obnayim* hints at a potter’s wheel, namely to the round and rotating wood stand on which a mass of clay is transformed into a pot.

Let us now see how Exodus 1:16 reads:

b-yalledken et ha-’ibriyyôt u-r’îten ’al hā-’obnāyim im ben hû’ wa-hamitten ôtô w-’im bat hî’ wā-ḥāyā “When you serve as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them upon the birth stool, if it is a son you shall kill him; but if it is a daughter, she shall live” (RSV).

The translations of this verse in Greek (Septuagint) and in Syriac (Peshitta) sound differently. Septuagint interprets the prepositional phrase *’al hā-’obnayim*, headed by the preposition *’al* which governs

the definite article *hā-* and the substantive *obnayim*, as “(when they are) on bearing”, namely “when they are bearing [i.e. giving birth]”², whereas Peshitta interprets it as “when they kneel down [in order to bear]”³.

It may be objected that the Hebrew preposition *‘al*, approximately “on”, which governs *hā-’obnayim*, points neither to a place (e.g. a delivery room) nor to an event (the childbirth), but rather focuses the attention on a particular object. The question is now what this object might be.

The lexica of the Hebrew Old Testament list several proposals for interpreting *obnayim*. Because of its dual grammatical form, *obnayim* has been explained by some exegetes as “testicles” or as “the male and the female genital organs”⁴, namely the recognizable sex of the newborn children. The interpretation “testicles” derives from the fact that the word **oben* is similar to the word *eben* which, moreover, is written <’BN> exactly like **oben*. The meaning of *eben* is “stone, cobblestone, rock”; furthermore, it also metaphorically indicates a unit of weight⁵. The dual *obnayim*, if interpreted as “two cobblestones”, could by extension mean “testicles”. In contrast the second aforesaid meaning, “both sexes”, seems to find no justification.

Other exegetes have tried to find some possible relation between the occurrence of *obnayim* in Jeremiah 18:3 “potter’s wheel” and that in Exodus 1:16. I list here the proposals I am acquainted with.

1) In 2003 Scott Morschauer supposed that *obnayim* translates the Ancient Egyptian word *nḥp/nḥb*, which usually means “potter’s wheel”, but which, in this particular case, would relate to the mythological potter’s wheel of the ram-headed Egyptian god Khnum, by means of which this god is believed to mold the fertile mud of the Nile and create every kind of being, the human babies included. Therefore Morschauer maintains that the Hebrew sentence *u-r’îten ‘al ha-’obnayim* of Exodus 1:16 means «when you look/determine upon the potter’s wheel [i.e., when you undertake a prenatal examination]»⁶. According to the Egyptian belief, as long as the unborn children lie in their mother’s womb, they are in the hands of

the potter god Khnum. This way of explaining the word *obnayim* nevertheless raises a not negligible question: how could the Egyptian midwives foretell the sex of the babies before their birth? The author gets round this by referring to ancient Egyptian medical texts containing prognostic prescriptions to determine the sex of unborn children as well as prescriptions to interrupt a pregnancy by means of special potions. Anyhow, Morschauer's proposal seems to me rather questionable and somewhat farfetched.

2) In 2006 Kevin McGeugh, on the basis of ancient Egyptian archaeological finds depicting scenes of childbirth, interpreted *obnayim* as two "birth bricks", namely a pair of adobes on which in olden days the Egyptian women in labor supposedly kneeled during the delivery or on which the midwives ritually laid down the new born children. According to this hypothesis there was a «conceptual link between childbirth and ceramic manufacture in the ancient Near East»⁷. Did not the Lord God form the man of dust from the ground (Genesis 2:7)? However the supposed cognitive connection between ceramic production and human reproduction has no linguistic justification. Actually the root /'BN/ of *obnayim* immediately recalls a stone, not a brick. The way Franz Zorell explains *obnayim* (Jeremiah 18:3 «rota figuli, i.e. duo disci *lapidei* qui volvuntur unus super alium»; Exodus 1:16 «sella mulieris parturientis ... quae in forma primitiva ex 2 *lateribus* constabat») is a clear proof of the semantic confusion which reigned in the mind of some exegetes apropos of "stone" (*lapis*) and "brick" (*later*)⁸. In contrast, people speaking Semitic languages, who may have been producing bricks since the Late Neolithic era, called and continue to call these handiworks by a name which is in no way related to the concept "stone", unlike, for example, German *Ziegelstein*, *Baustein*, *Backstein*, Icelandic *múrsteinn*, Swedish *tegelsten*, Finnish *tiiliskivi* and other languages of North West Europe, an area where bricks have been introduced not earlier than the late Middle Ages. The root the Semitic languages use to say "brick" is /LBN/: see Akkadian *libittu*, Hebrew *lebēnā* [lveyná], Syriac *lebentā* [lvetta] and Arabic *labina* "brick".

3) Since the word **oben* shares with the word *eben* “stone” the root /’BN/, the majority of biblical exegetes obviously explain *obnayim* as a variant of *abnayim*, dual of *eben*. Thus they think they have found a tangible link between the potter’s wheel of Jeremiah 18:3 and the object related to childbirth mentioned in Exodus 1:16.

In order to follow the thread of such an argument we ought to view what a potter’s wheel looks like. It is composed of a vertical cylindrical pivot on whose top a wooden disk is tightly fixed. On this disk one puts the clay to be molded. At the lower part of the cylindrical pivot another wooden disk is fixed so that the potter’s feet can rotate it. As the rotation of the lower disk also involves the cylindrical axis as well as the upper disk, the potter quickly manipulates the clay put on it and gives it the expected shape.

Now, with regard to the Jeremiah 18:3, the compilers of two important Hebrew dictionaries of the Old Testament maintain that in that verse the potter’s wheel has been called *obnayim* on account of the assumed similarity of its two disks to a pair of millstones⁹. Both the pair of disks of the potter’s wheel and the couple of millstones are actually vertical, but one may ask if such a similarity is sufficient to justify the use of the same word for both. Who has ever seen a potter’s wheel whose pair of disks are made of stone?

Otherwise some Hebrew dictionaries of the Old Testament maintain that in Exodus 1:16 the word *obnayim*, being a dual form, hints at a birthing stool consisting of two separated stones on which the women in labor sat¹⁰. I think that, for a woman facing up one of the most crucial moments of her life, nothing is more uncomfortable and anxiety-inducing than a rigid and cold birthing stool of stone. But, apart from this, it is worth mentioning that the Hebrew language and the other Semitic languages, in this case too, have no need to resort to a word meaning “stone” (namely *eben/*oben*) in order to denote the grinding wheels of a mill. Probably since Early Neolithic times they had at their disposal a specific word for “millstone”, making use of the root /RḤY/; see Hebrew *reḥayim*, Syriac *raḥyā*, plur. *rḥawwātā*, Arabic *raḥan*, du. *raḥawāni/yāni*). In contrast, English (*millstone*), German

(*Mühlstein*), Swedish (*kvarnsten*), Polish (*kamień młyński*), Finnish *myllynkivi*, Estonian *veskikivi*, Latvian *dzirnaknens* and other languages of North West Europe have recourse to a compound containing a word meaning “stone”.

Beyond the above-mentioned proposals for interpreting *obnayim* there is still space for a further proposal which, in my opinion, can satisfactorily explain the occurrence of this word in both Jeremiah 18:3 and Exodus 1:16. Up to now, *obnayim* has been regarded as a word deriving from the root /'BN/, the same root as that of the Hebrew word *eben* “stone”. Jacob Barth, it is true, suggested the hypothesis that *obnayim* might derive from the root /BNY/ “to build”¹¹, but, as far as I know, only quite marginally¹² has been considered the possibility that the original root of this word could be /'PN/ “to revolve”, a root which is probably connected with /PNY/ “to turn”.

Linguists dealing with Semitic languages have long known the phenomenon of the exchange of voiceless with voiced consonants and vice versa, especially when they are explosive labials like /p/ and /b/¹³. Look at the following examples:

1) Hebrew *peten*, Jewish Palestinian Aramaic *pitn* and Syriac *patnā* versus Akkadian *bašmu*, Ugaritic *bṭn* and Arabic *baṭan*, “viper”¹⁴.

2) Hebrew, Phoenician Aramaic and Arabic /P'L/ versus Ugaritic and Amorritic /B'L/, “to do”¹⁵.

3) Phoenician /NBŠ / and /NPŠ/, “soul”¹⁶.

The possibility that the original root of **oben* and its dual *obnayim* was /'PN/ is confirmed by the fact that the Hebrew language preserves two significant words containing this root: **open* [ófen] and *ôpān* [ofán]. The latter means “a wheel of a vehicle”¹⁷, the former means “a circumstance, condition, manner”¹⁸, but it may be that its original meaning was “a turning”¹⁹.

The cluster of concepts “something flat, round and revolving”, “wheel” and “disk” is fully consonant with the meaning of *obnayim* in Jeremiah 18:3. In point of fact a potter’s wheel consists of two revolving wooden disks, certainly not of two disks made of stone. It is certainly harder to find congruency between “something flat, round

and revolving” and the *obnayim* occurring in Exodus 1:16. Nevertheless it may be imagined that the birthing stool of the Hebrew women consisted in ancient Egypt of two wooden disks or of two halves of a wooden disk – one on the right, the other on the left – on which the woman in labor had to sit during the delivery. It is questionable that a specific seat, suited for a woman to be delivered of a child, consisted of stones or bricks.

To conclude, in the light of this hypothesis (**oben* deriving from /'PN/), the twofold occurrence in the Hebrew Bible of the dual word *obnayim* may receive an interpretation which is suitable to both Exodus 1:16 and Jeremiah 18:3: “two flat, round and revolving things (made of wood)”, that is “a couple of disks (made of wood)”. In fact, the potter’s wheel consists of two wooden disks fixed on a vertical rotating axis; probably in Egypt and the surrounding area two wooden disks or two halves of a wooden disk also formed the particular seat of the birthing stools.

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Notes

1. The singular form *oben, written <'BN> and nowadays pronounced [óven], has been reconstructed by analogy with words having the same morphology, e.g. *ōzen* “ear”, written <'ZN> and pronounced [ózen], whose dual/plural is *oznayim*.
2. *Septuagint*, p. 69: *pròs tō tíktein* “on bearing”.
3. *Peshitta*, p. 100: *mā d-bārkān* “when they kneel”.
4. Cf. Koehler - Baumgartner 1958: 7: “genitals”; Zorell 1968: 8: “duo sexus”, “uteri ostium”, “labrum pelvis”.
5. Cf. Artom 1965: 3-4.
6. Morschauer 2003: 733.
7. McGeugh 2006: 311, 318.
8. Cf. Zorell 1968: 8.
9. Cf. Brown - Driver - Briggs 1962: 7: “potter’s wheel (two discs revolving one above the other; name from likeness to millstones); Zorell 1968: 8: “rota figuli, i.e. duo disci lapidei qui volvuntur unus super alium”.
10. Cf. Koehler - Baumgartner 1958: 7: “stones of delivery”; Brown - Driver - Briggs 1962: 7: “bearing-stool, midwife’s stool (from likeness to potter’s wheel)”.
11. Barth 1888: 346, n. 3: «Dessgleichen ist ... die Ableitung des des Wortes *obnayim* von einem Stamm BNH sehr beachtenswerth, aber angesichts der Dunkelheit namentlich der zweiten Stelle schwerlich zu entscheiden».
12. See Zorell 1968: 8: «opportunum tempus (= *opnayim* Pr. 25,11) [Demutatio vocis *eben*]»; *obnayim* as “the right time (for giving birth)”.
13. Cf. Garbini 1956a: 258; — 1956b: 310-11; — 1957: 427-30; — 1959: 43; — 1965: 327-28; — 1988: 136-37; Garbini-Durand 1994: 78.

14. Cf. Garbini 1958: 263-65. In Modern Hebrew *peten* means “cobra”, cf. Sivan - Levenston 1967: 577b.
15. Cf. Lipiński 1997: § 11.4, p. 110.
16. Cf. Segert 1976: 295; Jean - Hoftijzer 1965: 183.
17. Cf. Koehler - Baumgartner 1958: 21; Brown - Driver - Briggs 1962: 66; Zorell 1968: 23. From [ofán] Modern Hebrew derived [ofanáyim] “bicycle”, [ofaná] “cyclist” and [ofananít] “woman cyclist”, [ofaná] “motorcycle”, etc., cf. Artom *Vocabolario*, p. 12.
18. Cf. Koehler - Baumgartner 1958: 78; Brown - Driver - Briggs 1962: 67; Zorell 1968: 74. In the Hebrew Bible **open* [ófen] occur only in the plural: *opānîm* [ofánim]. From [ófen] Modern Hebrew derived [ofná] “fashion”, [ofnú] “formula” and [ifnú] “modulation”, etc., cf. Artom *Vocabolario*, p. 42.
19. Cf. Brown - Driver - Briggs 1962: 67.