

שִׂיד or שָׂרִי? A Note on Isaiah 33,12

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The prophecy in Isa 33 deals with the destruction of the enemy of Judah without identifying by name the treacherous tyrant. According to Isa 33,11 the cruel actions of Judah's foe will prove to be short lived and ultimately self destroying. They will conceive hay (חֶשֶׂשׁ), they will bring forth straw (קֶשׂ), but their anger will be like fire which will consume them. This imagery of consuming fire is continued in v.12, closely relating the two verses. At the first sight the Massoretic Text (MT) and meaning of Isa 33,12 seems to be clear:

וְהָיוּ עַמִּים מְשֻׂרְפוֹת שִׂיד The nations will be burnings of lime,¹
קוֹצִים כְּסוּחִים בְּאֵשׁ יִצְתּוּ (Like) thorns cut down, they will be set on fire.

Yet at the same time it is striking that the metaphor of שִׂיד, “lime” diverges from the plant-images of both v.11 (חֶשֶׂשׁ, קֶשׂ) and v.12 (קוֹצִים). Nevertheless, reading שִׂיד with the MT is supported by the Peshitta² and the Vulgate.³ Although there is some uncertainty concerning especially the letter in the middle (with a horizontal stroke above it), it is also most likely שִׂיד which appears in 1QIsa^a as well. The MT is further confirmed in rabbinic exegesis, as a *midrash* to Hos 2,1 makes this clear:

Another exposition of the text, “*As the sand of the sea.*” Israel is compared to the sand and the other nations to lime; as it is said: *And the peoples shall be as the burnings of lime* [referring to Isa 33,12]. If you do not put sand into lime it lacks solidity. So without Israel, the other nations could not survive.⁴

¹ There are some variations in modern translations regarding the sense of the expression שִׂיד מְשֻׂרְפוֹת, but it is common to all of them that they read and render שִׂיד, “lime”, in this verse. See, e.g., KJV, ASV: “as the burnings of lime”; NASB: “(will be) burned to lime” (cf. also Einheitsübersetzung and the Revidierte Lutherbibel: “zu Kalk verbrannt”; the TOB: “brûlés à la chaux”); NIV: “(will be) burned as if to lime”; NRSV: “(will be) as if burned to lime”; NAB: “as in a limekiln” (cf. Louis Segond: “[seront] des fournaies de chaux”).

² Cf. *mwqdyn* 'yk klš', “they will be burned like lime”. Syriac *keššā*, “lime” translates שִׂיד also in Deut 27,2.4. In Am 2,1 שִׂיד is rendered by *saydā*, “lime”, with a variant reading *sirā*, “dust”. See Payne Smith, Dictionary, 216.374.376.

³ The Latin *quasi de incendio cinis*, “like the burning of ashes”, basically corresponds to the MT, even if it seems to be somewhat paraphrasing. Cf. *sicut lapides cineris adlisos* for כְּאֲבִיגֵר מְנַפְצוֹת in Isa 27,9; לְשִׂיד [...] לְשִׂיד in Am 2,1 is translated by *incenderit [...] ad cinerem*; in Deut 27,2.4 שִׂיד is rendered as *calx*.

⁴ Slotki, Midrash, 55.

However, a different tradition concerning Isa 33,12 is represented by the Aramaic version of Isaiah. The expression corresponding to *שִׂיד מְשֻׂרְפוֹת* in the Targum is *נור* יְקִידָת, “burning of fire”.⁵ Although in general, when it comes to textual reconstructions, the Targum is not the most reliable textual witness to the original text of Isaiah.⁶ It is here nevertheless remarkable that while all syntactical elements of the Hebrew text of v.12 reappear in the Aramaic version in literal translation, *שִׂיד* is seemingly a different case, being paralleled by *נור*, “fire”. The problem was obviously not the unfamiliarity of Targum with the meaning of *שִׂיד*.⁷ The construction *נור* + *יְקִידָה* reappears in the Targum to Isa 1,7; 9,18 and 64,10. In all these cases *נור* corresponds to *אש*.⁸

There are two possibilities to explain the Aramaic version of Isa 33,12. One could presuppose that the Targum presents an interpretive rendition of the Hebrew text, probably because it considered the meaning of Isa 33,12 problematic. The other option is that *נור* stands here for a different Hebrew word.

To begin with the first, what could have caused the dilemma in Isa 33,12? As it was noted above, the imagery of “lime” used alongside three other metaphors taken from the plant world (hay, straw and thorn) is striking and distorts the parallelism of v.12. Those who accept the MT at this point, generally relate Isa 33,12a to Am 2,1.⁹ In the context of the prophecies concerning the nations, Am 2,1 proclaims judgment on Moab, *עַל־שִׂרְפוֹ עַצְמוֹת מֶלֶךְ־אֲדוֹם לִשְׂיֵד*, “because it burned the bones of the king of Edom to lime”. In accordance with this text, scholars assume that in Isa 33,12 YHWH announces his intentions to destroy the enemy by burning the nations to lime.

However, the parallelism between Am 2,1 and Isa 33,12 is not as evident as it looks to be initially. First, Am 2,1 speaks about burning bones or skeletons (*עַצְמוֹת*) to lime and not, as Isa 33,12, about burning nations (*עַמִּים*), i.e. incinerating corpses. The prophecy in Am 2,1 probably alludes to burning the *dead*, i.e. the desecration of royal graves, and not the burning of a living king of Edom. Destroying by fire the skeletons of royal ancestors was a humiliating act against the enemy, as well as an abominable sin in a world where ancestor worship was so important.¹⁰ Second, there is also a syntactic problem in relating Isa 33,12 to

⁵ Cf. also the Aramaic of Jer 34,5; 2Chr 16,14; 21,19.

⁶ See for instance the largely divergent rendering of Isa 33,11 in the Aramaic.

⁷ *שִׂיד* is rendered in Aramaic as *גִּיר* (Am 2,1; cf. Isa 27,9) or *סִיד* (Deut 27,2.4).

⁸ In Isa 1,7 *נור יְקִידָת* stands for Hebrew *שִׂרְפוֹת אֵשׁ* (burning of the city), in 9,18 for *אֵשׁ מֵאֲכֹלֶת אֵשׁ* (burning of the people), in 64,10 for *שִׂרְפוֹת אֵשׁ* (burning of the temple). See also Isa 9,4; 10,32; 37,19; 44,16.19.

⁹ E.g., Duhm, Buch, 243; Fohrer, Buch, 141; Young, Book, 415; Kaiser, Prophet, 274; Wildberger, Jesaja, 1301-1302; Oswalt, Book, 598; Beuken, Isaiah, 265.

¹⁰ This interpretation is followed in Am 2,1 by Andersen / Freedman, Amos, 288, who

Am 2,1, since the phrase לִשְׂרֹף שִׂיד, “to burn (bones) to lime” is syntagmatically different from שִׂיד מִשְׂרֵפוֹת, “they will be (like) burnings of lime”.¹¹

An ancient witness to an alternative reading of the MT – that in my view also offers the solution to the problem – is the LXX. The Greek translators contract the two verse lines of Isa 33,12 as follows: καὶ ἔσσονται ἔθνη κατακακαυμένα ὡς ἄκαυθα ἐν ἀγρῶ ἐρριμμένη καὶ κατακακαυμένη, “and the nations will be burned like thorns on the field are cast out and burned”. Similarly to the Targum, the LXX did not translate שִׂיד as “lime” here. Wildberger assumed that the Greek had no corresponding word for שִׂיד, presuming that the meaning of this word was unknown to the translators.¹² However, שִׂיד does not belong to the most exotic expressions of the Hebrew Bible.¹³ Was it not rather another word that the LXX translated in v.12?

The Greek text has an unparalleled expression in the MT, namely ἐν ἀγρῶ, “in the field”. This is not a freely inserted word on this place, but one that matches שִׂיד, which was, however, read here as שְׂדֵי, “field”.¹⁴ If that is true, in Isa 33,12 we have another example of transposing two letters inside one word,¹⁵ perhaps as an accidental error probably influenced by Am 2,1. The construction ἄκαυθα ἐν ἀγρῶ corresponds to the contracted reading of שְׂדֵי קִוצִים, “fields of thorns”. However, this vocalisation and verse division would result in a cumbersome Hebrew text. It is nevertheless possible to vocalise שְׂדֵי instead of

note that “when ‘bones’ are mentioned alone it is often a reference to a dead body, especially in the context of burial”. A similar suggestion also appears in Jeremias, Prophet 16, though this is not the explanation which Jeremias concurs with.

For the practice of burning the bones of the dead, see also 2Kgs 23,16-18. The exposure or scattering of the bones of the dead also appears as a form of punishment in Jer 8,1-2, and often in ancient Near Eastern literature. Cf. on this also Stavrakopoulou, Placing.

¹¹ מִשְׂרֵפוֹת only appears once more in Jer 34,5 in the form of מִשְׂרֵפוֹת אֲבוֹתָיךְ where מִשְׂרֵפוֹת alludes to the burning of spices for the dead king Zedekiah, in the manner spices had been burned for his ancestors. A comparison of this place with 2Chr 16,14 and 21,19 suggests that מִשְׂרֵפוֹת is the same as שְׂרֵפָה. שִׂיד מִשְׂרֵפוֹת can then be compared to שְׂרֵפַת הַפָּרָה, “the burning of the heifer”, in Num 19,6 (also שְׂרֵפַת הַחֲטָאָה in v.17).

¹² Wildberger, Jesaja, 1295.

¹³ Cf. κοῦρα for שִׂיד in Deut 27,2,4; Am 2,1; see also Isa 27,9 and Job 28,4, where κοῦρα translates Hebrew גֵר, “lime(stone)”.

¹⁴ For ἀγρός as the translation of שְׂדֵי, cf. Deut 32,13; Ps 50,11; 80,14; 104,11; Isa 56,9; Jer 4,17; Lam 4,9; Hos 10,4; 12,12.

¹⁵ For other cases of metathesis in the Hebrew Bible, see Delitzsch, Lesefehler, 89-91 (§95a); Würthwein, Text, 120; Brotzman, Old Testament, 114.

שָׂדֵי. Isa 33,12a would sound then *וְהָיוּ עַמִּים מְשָׂרְפוֹת שָׂדֵי*, “and the nations will be (like) burnings of field”, i.e. like when the fields are burned down.

It cannot be ruled out that שָׂדֵי was also the lexeme translated by the Targum actually. Aramaic נור is graphically very close to ניר. In Targumic Aramaic (as well as Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew) the verb ניר means “to plough”, “to clear / break new ground”, and the nominal form, ניר, stands for “ploughing”; “newly broken ground”, “cleared land”, or “land to be ploughed”.¹⁶ It may be possible that נור is actually an inner Targumic development from ניר.¹⁷ יקידת נור could be translated as “the burning of the field (to be ploughed)”,¹⁸ where נור – like Greek ἀργός – would correspond to Hebrew שָׂדֵי.

The fact that the reconstructed retroversions of two independent textual traditions reflect the same Hebrew word, שָׂדֵי, suggests that the Greek and Aramaic translations of Isa 33,12 are not merely exegetical variants to the MT, but that they go back to an ancient Hebrew text containing the lexeme שָׂדֵי.

Burning fields or cutting thorns from fields to be ploughed and throwing them on fire are well-known practices in the agricultural world of Canaan (and beyond). When preparing a sowing area, or simply to clear fallow lying fields, the thorns and thistles were cut and burned. We have ample evidence, both ancient and modern, that as an efficient and time effective method of cleansing the cultivated area, entire fields dried up by the hot summer sun and winds were set ablaze.¹⁹

The Isaianic metaphor concerning the destruction of the enemy fits well

¹⁶ Cf. nominal ניר as the translation of Hebrew הָרִישׁ, “land to be ploughed”, in 1Sam 8,12. See further Jastrow, Dictionary II, 909; Sokoloff, Dictionary, 753. See also Jer 4,3; Hos 10,12; Prov 13,23.

¹⁷ The combination יקד + נור appears often, even in Isaiah (cf. note 8 above), so that יקידת נור can be explained as a scribal error, as a case of synchronisation. It is also possible that נור was influenced by the second cola of the parallelism in Isa 33,12b, in which it appears again.

¹⁸ The land from which thorns have been removed (*הַשְׂדֵה שְׁנַתְקִינָה*) appears with ניר in *m. Sheb.* 4,2-3.

¹⁹ In the New Testament Heb 6,8 mentions the burning of fields which do not produce useful crops, but only thorns and thistles. Similar to this is the burning of the stubble and dry grass after harvest. In Joel 2,5 the sound of the approaching enemy is compared to the sound of fire devouring the stubble (*לֵהָב אֵשׁ אֹכְלָה קֶשֶׁת*). Nah 1,10 compares the wrath of YHWH to a fire which devours tangled thorns and dried stubble (*כִּקְשׁ יֵבֶשׁ נוֹלֵא*). See also Ex 15,7; 22,5; Isa 5,24; 33,11; 47,14; Ob 18; Mal 3,19. For the removal of thorns from fields, cf. also *m. Sheb.* 4,2; *b. Mo'ed Qat.* 13a; *b. Git.* 44b. A detailed discussion of this phenomenon is provided by Dalman, *Arbeit* 145.326-327.329.

this practice. Israel's foe is compared here to hay, straw, thorns and fields falling prey to fire, representing the judgment of YHWH. It is interesting to note that a similar comparison appears in Jer 51,25. In this text, Babylon – the enemy that is also supposed to figure behind the prophecy of Isa 33 – is compared to a “burned-out mountain” (הַר שְׂרָפָה), that is to say, a mountain with vegetation burned off.

To conclude, it is likely that in Isa 33,12 שׂיד, “lime”, should be emended to שְׂדֵי, “field”. This reading is obviously followed by the LXX and it may have also been the variant that the Targum adopted originally. Reading שְׂדֵי eliminates the problems related to the Massoretic שׂיד, namely the distortion of the imagery of this context and the parallelism of v.12 mentioning the burning of wild-growing-plants as a symbol for the annihilation of the enemy. Moreover, comparing the nations to the burnings of fields (מִשְׂרָפֹת שְׂדֵי) would eliminate the problems related to the interpretation of שׂיד מִשְׂרָפֹת in this verse as presented above.

Summary

This article discusses the MT of Isa 33,12 and argues that the verse line “the nations will be burned to lime (שׂיד)” is difficult in its context and distorts the parallelism, describing the fall of the enemy of Judah with the help of plant-imagery. Although Am 2,1 is often mentioned in connection with Isa 33,12, closer analysis shows that there are differences between the two texts. It is suggested that the LXX should be followed here, which goes back to a Hebrew text reading שְׂדֵי, “field”, “(agricultural) land” instead of שׂיד, “lime”. This emendation (metathesis) is most likely also supported by the independent tradition of the Targum (גִּיר, “field, land (to be ploughed)” < נִיר). The metaphor of burning field not only fits its present context well, but it has biblical parallels and it is supported by agricultural customs known from the Near East.

Zusammenfassung

In dem vorliegenden Artikel über Jes 33,12 weist der Verfasser nach, dass die Lesart „die Völker werden zu Kalk (שׂיד) verbrannt“, wie V.12a übersetzt wird, schwierig in seinen jetzigen Kontext passt (und den Parallelismus zerstört), der den Fall der Großmacht mit Bildern aus der Pflanzenwelt beschreibt (V.11-12). Zwar wurde Am 2,1 oft als Parallele zu Jes 33,12 betrachtet, dies wird jedoch durch die wesentlichen Unterschiede zwischen den beiden Texten erheblich erschwert. Darum wird hier vorgeschlagen, bei Jes 33,12 der LXX-Lesart zu folgen, in deren Vorlage man statt שׂיד „Kalk“ שְׂדֵי „Feld, Ackerland“ vorfand. Diese Emendation (Metathesis) wurde höchstwahrscheinlich auch durch eine andere, unabhängige Tradition des Targums unterstützt (גִּיר, „Feld, Ackerland“ < נִיר). Die Metapher des verbrannten Ackerlandes hat biblische Bezüge und ist aus der Landwirtschaft des Nahen Orients bekannt.

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