

“To rule” or “To be like”? Genesis 3:16 in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context

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This article explains the author’s translation of Gen 3:16b, “In spite of this, you will still want to be with your husband, just as he likewise will want to be with you.” It also clarifies that the typical translation, “childbearing,” in Gen 3:16a, should instead be “pregnancies.”

***Mashal*, “to be like”**

The first meaning of the Hebrew term *mashal* in the standard *Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew-English Lexicon* is “represent, be like.”¹ The verb occurs seven times in the OT (Job 30:19; Ps 28:1; 49:12, 20; 143:7; Isa 14:10; 46:5),² and there are many OT occurrences of the similar derived nouns meaning “proverb,” “parable,” or “likeness.” This lexicon gives the verb’s secondary meaning as “use a proverb or speak in parables or sentences of poetry.” The word *mashal* has common cognates in most Semitic languages, including Arabic, Ethiopic, and Aramaic, that translate as “mirror” or “to be like.” The third lexical entry for *mashal*, “rule, have dominion,” does not occur in any Semitic language except Hebrew.³

Early twentieth-century scholars hypothesized the development of the meaning “to rule” from “to be like” and “to mirror, reflect.” For example, citing Semitic cognates, Paul Haupt (1858–1926) writes that two Hebrew derivatives of *mashal*, “to liken” and “to cause to rule,” share the primary connotation of “to shine.” For example, the similar word *mamshala* in Gen 1:16 may mean the sun and moon are “to shine, illuminate,” not “to rule.” And the related Hebrew noun *moshel*, “ruler,” is a person who shines; that is, an eminent and distinguished person.⁴

Allen H. Godbey (1864–1948) argues that the Hebrew translation “to rule” evolved from the mentality involved in the idea of sympathetic magic; that is, that symbolic action (here, ruling action) resembles the effects it hopes to reproduce. He suggests three places where *mashal* should be translated “be like” rather than “rule.” In Gen 37:5 and following, Joseph tells a dream of the grain-sheaves of his brothers bowing to his own. The brothers’ response, “Shalt thou indeed be king over us?” should rather be, “Shalt thou be anything like that to us?” (*mashol timshol*).⁵ Upon hearing of Joseph’s next dream, in which the sun, moon, and eleven stars bow to him, the brothers again understand it the same way. The narrative establishes that such sheaf-action or star-action is a *mashal* or parable that shows that its “likeness” or “resemblance” is sure to occur in real life.

For Gen 4:7, after Cain and Abel appeal to the judgment of God, and the defeated one is angry, Godbey suggests the translation, “Were there no wrong on your part, would you not be accepted? and would not your brother’s longing be toward you? and you would feel likewise toward him.” Similarly, he prefers the common-sense translation of Gen 3:16, “Thy longing shall be toward thy husband; and he shall be likewise (A.V. ‘rule’) toward thee” (and not toward another).⁶

The authors of the United Bible Societies’ *Handbook on Genesis*, published as a guide for global Bible translators, explain that, although modern translations understand *mashal* as the man dominating or controlling the woman, some scholars argue that such an interpretation is not suitable in Gen 3, nor does the OT generally support it. The Hebrew word *mashal* can also mean “to be like.” Accordingly, some interpreters understand that the man will “be like” the woman in wanting to be with her just as she desires to be with him. The *Handbook* suggests that, with this in mind, we translate the last two lines as “you will want to be with your husband just as he likewise will want to be with you” or “your desire will be for your husband, just as his desire will be for you.”⁷

***Teshuqah*, “want (to be with)”**

“Desire” translates the noun *teshuqah*, meaning “urge, want, yearning, longing.” The sense is that of “attraction” and is used in Song of Songs 7:10 of the man’s desire for the woman. The French Common Language Version translates, “you will feel yourself drawn to your husband”; the Spanish Common Language Version has, “but your desire will take you to your husband.” Since “desire” is a general term, it may be too vague in translation, suggesting more than the Hebrew text intends. Several modern translations extend its meaning to specify “desire to control,” which is not indicated either in the text or in the context. The UBS *Handbook* recommends as better, “you will still want to be with your husband,” “you will still want to remain close to your husband.” “Still” emphasizes the continuing of the desire. In some translations this is expressed as “you will keep on wanting your husband.”⁸ The last line of Gen 3:16 begins with the general Hebrew connector, which can be translated “and,” “but,” “yet,” etc., and the context here indicates a contrast. Thus, “yet your desire shall be for your husband” (RSV), “in spite of this” (TEV). Why would the woman not want to be with her husband? The contrast is with the first half of the verse that predicts that the woman will have increased “toil” and “pregnancies.”

***Haron*, “pregnancy”**

Inferring the notion of general male domination from the second half of the verse is a distortion. Even if *mashal* were understood as “dominate,” it would refer narrowly to the sense of the man’s sexual desire predominating over any reluctance of the woman to have increased pregnancies and increased work. We should read the verse against its social background of agrarian life. Instead of the familiar, “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing,” the verse should begin, “I will greatly increase your work and your pregnancies.” The Hebrew word for “work,” *itsabon*, is the same word God used in his statement to the man in the following verse. The usual translations “pangs” or “pain” are much less accurate and reflect a modern Western urban experience. In addition, the woman will experience more pregnancies. The Hebrew word *haron* is “pregnancy,” not

“childbearing” (ESV, NIV, NRSV, etc.) or “childbirth” (NASB, NRSVue, etc.) as most versions have it. Women, in other words, will bear multiple children and must work hard alongside their husbands in field work to support their large families.⁹ The verse is a mandate for intense productive and reproductive roles for women; it described and approved of what life meant for Israelite women. Women might resist repeated pregnancies because of the dangers of death in childbirth, but for the survival of the community, women needed to bear many children. Between a high infant death rate and low average life span, the issue was not overpopulation but maintaining the population. Not having sexual relations and not bearing children would result in the death of the community.¹⁰

As for the men, they wanted children, especially sons, to carry on the family name and lineage, and in the long term, the sons would grow up and work with them in the fields. But, in the short term, more children would mean more mouths to feed and harder work. The agrarian culture with high infant mortality and short life span would make good sense of the rendering, “In spite of this, you will still want to be with your husband, just as he likewise will want to be with you.”

Notes

1. *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Hendrickson, 1979) 605.
2. Ps 49:12, 20 are Ps 49:13, 21 in the versification of the Hebrew text.

The Isa 14:10 occurrence of *marshal* is Niphal, Isa 46:5 is Hiphil, and Job 30:19 is Hithpaal.

3. V. P. Hamilton, s.v. *māšāl* 1258, in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer Jr., and B. K. Waltke (Moody, electronic edition, 1999) 533.
4. Paul Haupt, “Hebrew *Māšāl*,” *JBL* 36/1–2 (1917) 140.
5. Allen H. Godbey, “The Hebrew *Māsāl*,” *AJSL* 39/2 (Jan 1923) 89–90.
6. Godbey, “The Hebrew *Māsāl*,” 105.
7. W. D. Reayburn and E. M. Fry, *A Handbook on Genesis* (United Bible Societies, 1998) 92–93.
8. Reayburn and Fry, *A Handbook on Genesis*, 92–93.
9. Carol Meyers, “Eve,” in *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*, gen. ed. Carol Meyers, assoc. eds. Toni Craven and Ross S. Kraemer (Eerdmans, 2000) 81.
10. Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans, eds., *The IVP Women’s Commentary* (InterVarsity, 2002) 8.



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