

KAPPÖRET – “THE MERCY SEAT” OR THE LID OF THE ARK?

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1. INTRODUCTION

Martin Luther translated the whole Bible into German and was criticized for so doing. Some of Luther's thoughts concerning his translation of the Bible have been preserved and scholars can study how he replied to the criticism which he encountered. In the case of several books of the Old Testament Luther recalls that the task was often very difficult. For example, concerning the Book of Job Luther writes that he was obliged to struggle many days with a single verse only and remarks that readers of his translation have no idea how much work has been done when they easily read the results of his efforts in German. Luther never ceased to improve his translations.

Professor Tapani Harviainen collaborated in the new Finnish translation of the Bible which was a long process, taking about 20 years. In order to illustrate how difficult the task of translating the Old Testament can be I have chosen not one verse but a single word, *kappōret*.

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE KAPPÖRET

Exodus 25:10-22 contains instructions on the construction of the Ark. A special part of this Ark is the *kappōret* which is described as follows (NRSV):

25:17 Then you shall make a *mercy seat* (= *kappōret*) of pure gold; two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its width. 25:18 You shall make two cherubim of gold; you shall make them of hammered work, at the two ends of the mercy seat. 25:19 Make one cherub at the one end, and one cherub at the other; of one piece with the *mercy seat* you shall make the cherubim at its two ends. 25:20 The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the *mercy seat* with their wings. They shall face one to another; the faces of the cherubim shall be turned toward

the mercy seat. 25:21 You shall put *the mercy seat* on the top of the ark; and in the ark you shall put the covenant that I shall give you. 25:22 There I will meet with you, and from above *the mercy seat*, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant, I will deliver to you all my commands for the Israelites.

This English translation follows the interpretation of Luther who connected the *kappōret* with ὁ θρόνος τῆς χάριτος in Hebr 4:16 and renders his “Gnadenstuhl” or “the mercy seat”. This interpretation was also adopted in the Finnish translation from 1930's while the new version refers to “the lid (of the Ark).” Is there any connection between these two translations? Or how should *kappōret* be interpreted? The aim of this article is to study how *kappōret* has been understood in the Old Testament and early Jewish documents. When we seek an accurate translation of the term *kappōret* we should not only examine the etymology of *kappōret* (and the verb *kipper*) but also investigate the theological concepts which are connected with *kappōret* in the Old Testament and in early Jewish writings. Etymological and theological questions are intertwined.

3. KAPPŌRET AND YHWH'S KINGSHIP

The description of the *kappōret* contains few details. We are informed that it consists of a golden plate of some kind (v. 17) which can be placed on top of the Ark (v. 21). At the ends of the *kappōret* are two cherubim. The cherubim face each other and the *kappōret*, which they overshadow with their wings (vv. 18-20). This description implies that cherubs are an important feature of the *kappōret* and the Ark. There are strong arguments that the title of Yhwh, *yōšēb hakk^erūbīm* (“he who is enthroned on cherubim”) should be associated with the Ark. The Hebrew verb *yāšab* has a special meaning in this phrase: “who is enthroned on cherubim”. The epithet is attested in 1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2 (= 1 Chr 13:6) where reference is made to the Ark. In 1 Sam 4:4 the Ark was moved to the Israelite camp indicating that the Ark played an important role in the Yhwh-war. 2 Samuel 6:2, in turn, refers to the transfer of the Ark to Jerusalem. After the removal of the Ark to Jerusalem and its placement in the Temple (during the reign of Solomon, 1 Kings 8) it is reasonable to assume that the epithet was closely connected with the Temple. This explains 2 Kings 19:15 [= Isa 37.16]; Ps 80:2; 99:1 (cf., also 2 Sam 22:11; Ps 18:11). 2 Kings 19:15 is connected with the invasion of Sennacherib, Psalm 80 is a petition that Yhwh will show His mighty power and destroy the enemies of Israel. Psalm 99 in turn is a text which glorifies the kingship of Yhwh and His mighty power over nations. This being the case, we have good reason to conclude that the kingship of Yhwh was closely connected with the Ark and the *kappōret*. Furthermore the Ark with the *kappōret* was regarded as a cultic setting where Yhwh's royal seat was situated. In a similar way the young bull was used in

ancient Syrian and Palestinian religions as cult symbol of the deity who stands on this ox. The young bulls placed in the temples of Bethel and Dan by the first Israelite king, Jerobeam, were an example of this cultic setting.

Against this traditio-historical background it is also understandable that M. Görg and T. N. D. Mettinger have proposed that the word *kappōret* is etymologically related to the Egyptian *kp (n) rdwj* which means “footstool”.¹ It is clear that this etymological proposal fits in well with the epithet of Yhwh: “who is enthroned on cherubim”. There is also one passage in the Old Testament which may connect the idea of “footstool” with the Temple and the Ark. This text is Isa 66:1 which reads: “Thus says the LORD: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool (לְגַגְּי וְרַגְלֵי); what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting place?”

However, this etymological solution also contains problems. First, it is difficult to explain why the word *kappōret* should be connected with the Egyptian word, in particular, when the verbal root *kpr* and its intensive form is well attested in the Semitic languages. Indeed, *kappōret* can be explained as being a substantive which has been derived from the Hebrew verb *kipper*. Second, the epithet of Yhwh, “he who is enthroned on cherubim”, is also open to other interpretations than signifying that the *kappōret* is the footstool of Yhwh’s throne. These critical remarks lead us to examine more closely the etymology of the Hebrew verb *kipper*.

4. ETYMOLOGY OF *KIPPER*

There is no consensus among scholars concerning the original meaning of *kipper*. Some scholars prefer to connect the verb with the Arabic *kafara*, “cover” (the intensive form *kaffara* in the Koran means “atone”).² This proposal has been supported by the following arguments:³

- (1) The expression אֶל תְּכַסֵּךְ in Neh 3:37 is parallel to the phrase אֶל תְּכַפֵּר in Jer 18:23. The verb כָּסָה can also mean “cover”.

¹ See M. Grg, “Keruben in Jerusalem” *BN* 4 (1977) 13–24; T. N. D. Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth. Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies* (ConBOT 18), Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International 1982), pp. 87–88.

² See Penrice, *A Dictionary and Glossary of the Koran* (Surrey 1971).

³ See J. Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments* (Berlin 1963) 336–337 and J.J. Stamm, *Erlsen und Vergeben im Alten Testament. Eine begriffsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Bern 1940) 62–66; cf., also *ThWNT* 3:302–303 (Herrmann) and *TWAT* 1:842–843 (Maass).

- (2) 4Q156 uses the Aramaic word *kesaja*, “lid, cover”, for *kappōret*, indicating that the verb *kipper* is associated with the idea of “covering”.
- (3) The expression כָּפַר פְּנֵים בְּמַנְקָה (Gen 32:21) is interpreted as meaning “cover the (angry) face (of Esau) with a present”.
- (4) In 1 Sam 12:3 the original etymology of *kōper* has been preserved – it refers to something which has been used as a covering, since the text continues וְאֶעֱלִים עֵינַי בּוֹ, “with it I cover my eyes (from seeing crimes)”.

In the light of these arguments it has been suggested that *kappōret* should be interpreted as the lid of the Ark. This is also the solution of the Finnish translation committee which gave the translations “arkun kansilevy” (the lid of the Ark) for *kappōret*. But this translation was not regarded as corresponding to all aspects of the *kappōret*. Therefore, a footnote is added to Exodus 25 which explains that “The lid of the Ark of covenant was the place for the presence of God and atonement.” That the translation “lid” does not cover the semantic fields of *kappōret* is clear from the following comments on arguments mentioned above.

Jeremiah 18:23 places the verbs כָּפַר and מָחָה, “wipe off,” in parallel, thus connecting the verb *kipper* to the act of removing rather than the act of covering. It is worth noting that the meaning of the verb כָּסַח as “forgive” is well attested in the Book of Psalms (32:1; 85:3), not to mention the verb כָּפַר, which is often connected with the idea of forgiveness. This range of usage indicates that the “parallel” expressions in Neh 3:37 and Jer 18:23 should not be used to establish the basic range of meaning of the verb כָּפַר. Similarly, Gen 32:21 can also be interpreted as stating that the angry face of Esau was eliminated. The argument that the use of the preposition עַל with the verb *kipper* proves that the verb should mainly be understood as “cover” is not decisive because even other prepositions have been used, such as כְּעַד and לְ. In the case of 1 Sam 12:3 we note that *kōfer* functions as a *terminus technicus* for the payment of ransom (Ex 21:30; Num 35:31). Thus the meaning of 1 Sam 12:3 may be that Samuel would have accepted illegal payments of ransom for crimes which deserved much harsher penalties (see, e.g., Num 35:30-34). The idiom in 1 Sam 12:3 concerning *kōfer* and the etymology of *kipper* are two different things.⁴

The Akkadian *kuppuru* rituals provide another opportunity to examine the etymology of the verb *kipper*.⁵ *Kuppuru* rituals were cultic actions in which sins were eliminated. Milgrom has noted that the Arabic *kafara* (cover) and Akkadian *kuppuru* “may go back to a common notion: rub”. He goes on to say that “because

⁴ Concerning the etymology of *kipper* see further B. A. Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord. A Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel* (SJLA 5, Leiden: Brill 1974); Janowski, *Sühne als Heilsgeschehen*; B. Lang, כָּפַר, *kipper*, *ThWAT* 4: 303–318.

⁵ See Janowski, *Sühne als Heilsgeschehen*, pp. 29–60.

a substance may either be ‘rubbed on’ or ‘rubbed off’, the derived meanings, ‘wipe’ and ‘cover’, may be complementary and not contradictory.”⁶

The view that *kipper* was understood as “wipe, rub off” receives support from the Septuagint where the Old Testament texts describing the ritual act of *kipper* are translated with ἐξιλιάσκομαι, indicating that the ritual act concerns the elimination of sins (cf., the prefix ἐκ). For example, in Lev 4:26 the expression יתאחזקו מן חטאתם יצאו מן העיר refers to the separation of sinners from their sins, and same idea also occurs in the LXX’s translation of the passage: ἐξιλιάσεται περὶ αὐτοῦ ὁ ἱερεὺς ἀπὸ τῆς ἁμαρτίας. The scapegoat ritual in Leviticus 16 emphasizes that the sins of society are eliminated by banishing the animal to the desert, the place of chaos and death. Leviticus 16:2 also states that Yhwh will appear over the *kappōret* during the Yom Kippur indicating that the ritual act of *kipper* and *kappōret* are closely intertwined.

Therefore we may assume that the central concept of the root כפר was understood in the Old Testament and in late antiquity to refer to the elimination of sins. In this meaning the idea of *kipper* was closely connected with the divine forgiveness and holiness as many translation variants in the LXX indicate: ἀγιάζω (Ex 29:33, 36), καθαρίζω (Ex 29:37; 30:10), ἐκκαθαρίζω (Deut 32:43), περικαθαρίζω (Isa 6:7), ἀφήμι (Isa 22:14), ἀφαιρέω (Isa 27:9), καθαρὸς γίγνομαι (Isa 47:11), ἀθλώω (Jer 18:23), ἀποκαθαίρω (Prov 16:6).⁷

But what of the view that 4Q156 somehow supports the argument that the original etymology of *kipper* is connected with the idea of “covering.” Not even this argument serves to confirm a close connection between the *kappōret* and “covering”. The term *kesaja* indicates simply the position of the *kappōret* in relation to the Ark and has nothing to do with the etymology of *kipper*. This is well demonstrated in the writings of Philo where it is noted that “the lid of the Ark” (τὸ ἐπιθήμα τῆς κιβωτοῦ) is called ἱλαστήριον (*De Fuga et inventione* 100; *De Vita Mosis* 2:95, 97). In *De Fuga et inventione* 100 Philo says that ἱλαστήριον “represents the gracious power (of God).” Thus Philo makes a similar connection between the corresponding Greek words “lid” and “*kappōret*” and gives a clear indication that the etymology of *kappōret* has nothing to do with the idea of “covering.” It is also worth noting that LXX ad Ex 25:17 contains a double trans-

⁶ See discussion in J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (AB, New York: Doubleday), 1079–1084. Quotations are from p. 1080.

⁷ See Concordances (I have used Bible Windows). See further E. Lohse, *Martyrer und Gottesknecht: Untersuchungen zur urchristlichen Verkündigung vom Sühntod Jesu Christi* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1955), 18–20; Ch.-H. Sung, *Vergebung der Sünden* (WUNT 2:57, Tübingen: Mohr & Siebeck 1993), pp. 172–173. Lohse notes (p. 19) that the equivalents for the verb *kipper* indicate that “das Spätjudentum nicht nach der etymologischen Ableitung der Wortes fragte, wohl aber damit den Gedanken der sühnenden Leistung, der Vergebung und der Stellvertretung verband”.

lation for כפרת: ἱλαστήριον ἐπίθεμα indicating that ἐπίθεμα alone cannot convey the full significance of the Hebrew *kappōret*. The LXX ad Ezek 43:14, 17, 20 is also worthy of consideration. The Hebrew עזרה is translated as ἱλαστήριον, apparently because the Hebrew word was connected with the altar where the sacrifices (connected with the *kipper* ritual) were performed. Finally, we mention 1 Chr 28:11 where the Temple is called בית כפרת. This expression is rendered in the LXX ὁ οἶκος τοῦ ἕξιλασμοῦ, indicating that the Hebrew *kappōret* was understood primarily to refer to the place where the ritual of *kippurim* was performed on the Day of Atonement. On the other hand, the interpretation “the lid of the Ark” is implicit in the very description of the *kappōret* in Exodus 25.

5. CONCLUSIONS

We have seen that the translation “the lid of the Ark” for the Hebrew *kapporet* is mainly based on the description of the *kappōret* in Exodus 25. However, this interpretation is not sufficient to describe the close connections between the *kappōret* and the *kipper*-ritual as the old translations and Philo’s writings indicate. But what about “the mercy seat”? Can the Old Testament evidence and early Jewish writings help us to understand better Luther’s attempt to use the term ὁ θρόνος τῆς χάριτος, “the Mercy Seat”, in Hebr 4:16 as a translation equivalent for *kappōret*. In two respects this term “Mercy Seat” reflects the theological ideas connected with *kapporet* in the Old Testament.

First, it refers to the royal status of the deity enthroned on the *Seat*. This aspect corresponds to the epithet of Yhwh, *yōšēb hakkērūbīm*, attested many times in the Old Testament. This epithet is closely associated with the Ark and the *kappōret* which consisted of two cherubim. It is worthy of consideration that, according to Philo’s *De vita Mosis* 2:99, the cherubim represent the potencies of God: “the creative and the kingly.”

The *second* aspect of the term “Mercy Seat” is the *merciful* and gracious power of God. This too is clearly attested in the symbolism of the *kappōret* which played a decisive role in the rituals of the Day of Atonement. As we have already noted, *De Fuga et inventione* 100 says that i(lasth/rion represents the gracious power (of God).

This being the case, the term ὁ θρόνος τῆς χάριτος, “the Mercy Seat”, in Hebr 4:16 may be a deliberate attempt to interpret and translate the Hebrew term *kappōret* into more comprehensible Greek. Luther then continued this tradition when he incorporated this Greek translation of *kappōret* in his German version. This same theological tradition is followed even in the new Finnish translation. Even though the comprehensive equivalent “lid” was chosen, the footnote explains the theological context in which this Hebrew word should be understood.

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In this short article I have given an idea of how complicated the translation of one word in the Hebrew Bible can be. This implies that much exegetical work must precede the presentation of the final proposal for a modern translation of the Bible. The exegetical work continues and new proposals will be incorporated in future translations but no one can alter the old Hebrew manuscripts which have been preserved in St. Petersburg inter alia, where professor Tapani Harviainen has studied Karaite manuscripts. The only way to impinge on old manuscripts is to rename them as, for example, *Codex Leningradensis* but the new name only demonstrates that new generations will receive the same old manuscript for examination. This further examination will probably show that our interpretations have not always been right as Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) puts it:⁸

If man were immortal he could be perfectly sure of seeing the day when everything in which he had trusted should betray his trust, and, in short, of coming eventually to hopeless misery. He would break down, at last, as every great fortune, as every dynasty, as every civilization does. In place of this we have death.

But it is a great privilege to be able to study texts which have been transmitted from century to century and which have given a new hope and divine help to the children of God living in distress.

⁸ The complete 8-volume edition of Peirce's writings is entitled *Charles Sanders Peirce, Collected papers* (Vols 1–6 edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss; Vols. 7–8 edited by A. W. Burks. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958–66). Past Masters have made a CD-Rom version of these papers. The quotation is from Vol 2: 653.

