

## DOES THE HUSBAND RULE – II?

---

In this article, we complete our reflection on Genesis 3:16. In the previous article, we discovered that the wife is to turn to her husband when suffering the tribulations of childbirth. The more familiar translation – that she will desire him -- arises from a common translation mistake called parablepsis.

Here then is Gen 3:16b as we understand it so far,

*But, towards your husband you will turn and he will **rule** over you."*

We now continue to explore this verse, especially God's revelation that the husband is to **rule** over his wife when she is suffering.

The issue here is not as clear-cut as a simple translation mistake as seen in last month's article. In this verse, the Hebrew word translated as 'rule' comes from the Hebrew word מָשַׁל (mashal). And, while *mashal* can have a number of meanings, derivatives of *mashal* almost always mean some sort of rule, reign, or dominion. In fact, this meaning is far and away the most

widely attested in the Hebrew Bible so its translation as ‘rule’ is not without merit. Put another way, its use cannot be so easily dismissed and manifestly is not a translation mistake like the parablepsis described last month. In fact, in the absence of some overriding context, ‘rule’ should always be the preferred translation. The issue here is not as clear-cut as a simple translation mistake as seen above. In the case of this word for rule, *mashal*, the controversies boil down to informed opinion.

The last clause of 3:16, *vəhu yimshol bakh*, is normally translated as “*he will rule over you* “. But, I would argue that the intent of the author was to show that the woman (and the man) can no longer appeal to the providence of God but must now rely on each other. To convey this meaning, the author uses the verb *yimshol*, whose root, *mashal*, often refers to rulership in service of others. By this I mean to compare it with other Hebrew synonyms such as *radah* and *khivshuah*. But, whereas *radah* and *khivshuah* in the first creation story (1:28) meant the exercise of regal authority on behalf of the ruler or his kingdom, *mashal* connotes the kind of rulership exercised on behalf of the ruled or on behalf of a higher authority. For example, *mashal* is frequently used to connote management over all the material goods of a

master, as his steward. Similarly, *mashal* is used to mean management of all the personnel of a master. For example, in the case of Abraham's "servant", Eliezer of Damascus ruled over all that Abraham owned (Gen 15:2, Gen 24:2). In this same vein, *mashal* is used to mean authority over the direction of the affairs of a large family as "firstborn-designate" is indicated by Joseph's version of the sheaves (Gen 37:8). *Mashal* is also used of Joseph's administration of Egypt as Pharaoh's prime minister. In these cases, the person designated to *mashal* is to care for and maintain people and possessions on behalf of a superior. What one should note is that in this case, to rule in the *mashal* sense is to exercise authority that benefits someone else, not the one doing the ruling

Now, in the context of a wife in distress, God's instruction that the husband will *mashal* over his wife makes eminent good sense. In the patriarchal cultures characteristic of the ANE, the wives and families of the male head of household were called to take care of (*mashal*) their families (recall the discussion of the man's explicit role in taking care of, or standing by, his wife). By contrast, the patriarchs of other cultures had no responsibility to

“care for” their wives except to make sure that they were fit to serve him.

Note also that in this verse the author does not use the more common verbs for kingly rulership. He does not tell that man that he is to *radah* or *khivshuah* over his wives. Rather the husband is to *mashal*, that is, his authority lies in his obligation to care for her. The author is making the case that, no longer able to rely on the providence of Eden, the woman must now rely on her husband. Moreover, her husband’s duty – says God – is to exercise his authority on her behalf - to take of her, as it were.

The context here is important also. Recall Adam and Eve’s discovery of sex following their eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. In this context, if Eve was pregnant at the time of her scolding, the focus on Eve’s [coming] pain in childbirth is perfectly understandable. She is about to give birth, notes God, so He tells her that her only appeal is to her husband.

Here now is a translation that incorporates these findings:

*But, towards your husband you will turn and he will take care of you."*

Now, go and study

