The mysterious Hebrew word שַׂרָקִים in Zechariah 1:8

The Hebrew word שַׂרָקִים in Zechariah 1:8 is a mysterious word. The disappearance of the Hebrew word שַׂרָקִים in Zechariah 1:8 from the rest of the Book of Zechariah and the unknown meaning of שַׂרָקִים itself are the reasons for this mystery. Zechariah 1:8 does not only abandon two colours: the black horses and the spotted (dappled) horses but also this verse adds שַׂרָקִים or the sorrel ones, which are not recorded in Zechariah 6:2–3 and 6:6–7. The appearance of שַׂרָקִים in Zechariah 1:8, therefore, creates disagreement colours with Zechariah 6:2–3 and 6:6–7. In addition, Gelston states that the Hebrew word שַׂרָקִים is probably unknown to the ancient translators. This unknown meaning causes different translations of שַׂרָקִים in ancient texts. This article, thus, attempts to unveil this mystery with textual criticism as its methodology.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This research emphasises on the importance of textual criticism to unveil the unknown meaning of שַׂרָקִים in Zechariah 1:8.

Keywords: textual criticism; lexical analysis; Zechariah; Old Testament; Semitic languages.

Introduction

As the problematic Hebrew word שַׂרָקִים appears only once in the book of Zechariah (1:8), then it raises two problems. The first problem is the disharmonious colours between the colours of the horses in Zechariah 1:8 with Zechariah 6:2–3 and 6:6–7. The Hebrew text of Zechariah 1:8 has three colours: שַׂרָקִים, רדִים, or the red ones, the sorrel ones and the white ones. Zechariah 1:8 adds one more colour that is not recorded in both Zechariah 6:2–3 and 6:6–7: שַׂרָקִים or the sorrel ones. In summary, Zechariah 1:8 is not only missing the black horses and the spotted (dappled) horses (cf. Zch 6:2–3 and 6:6–7), but also adding שַׂרָקִים or the sorrel ones that are foreign to Zechariah 6:2–3 and 6:6–7 (cf. Chia 2022a, b). The second problem is stated by Gelston in Biblia Hebraica Quinta or BHQ. Gelston argues that the Hebrew word שַׂרָקִים is probably unknown to the ancient translators (Gelston 2010:134). This unknown word, therefore, causes different translations in the ancient texts. Gelston’s statement could be validated because the Hebrew word שַׂרָקִים only occurs five times (Jdg’s 16:4; Is 5:2, 16:8; Jr 2:22; Zch 1:8). Three occurrences communicate vine or grapes (Is 5:2, 16:8; Jr 2:22), Judges 16:4 denotes a location, whereas the Hebrew word שַׂרָקִים reveals a colour translation only in Zechariah 1:8 (cf. five Hebrew lexica such as the Dictionary of Classical Hebrew, Brown–Driver–Briggs [BD], Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament [HALOT], Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament [TWOT], Holladay).


To solve these problems, this research uses a textual criticism as its methodology (cf. Barthélemy 2012). Therefore, this article argues that שַׂרָקִים is a distinct and different colour than Zechariah 6:2–3 and 6:6–7 and the colour of שַׂרָקִים is reddish brown. In addition, the summary of previous research of the Hebrew word שַׂרָקִים is discussed and analysed briefly in this article.

Note: Special Collection: African Hermeneutics.
Proposals

First proposal: Emend שׁחרים to שׂרקים

As the colours of the horses in Zechariah 1:8 share no harmonisation with Zechariah 6:2–3 (red, black, white and dappled) and 6:6–7 (black, white and dappled), then some scholars emended כהריים to a different colour or שׂרקים to solve this disharmony. Barthélemy records this first proposal from scholars to overcome this problem (Barthélemy 1992:935). Marti (1904), Duhm (1911), Kautzsch (1909), Cent (1928–1947), Riesller (1911) and Sellin (1922) corrected the Hebrew word שׁחרים or the sorrel ones with שׂרקים or the black ones. There are two implications of this proposal. Firstly, this emendation eradicates שׁחרים or the sorrel ones or the black ones consistent in Zechariah 6:2–3 and 6:6–7. Secondly, the emendation to שׂרקים or the black ones offers consistent colours to Zechariah 6:2–3 and 6:6–7: the red ones, the black ones and the white ones.

Although this emendation is plausible, this proposal does not answer why the Hebrew text has שׁחרים or the sorrel ones at the first place. In other words, the difficult reading is more likely the original text because the translators tend to facilitate the problematic words, grammar and syntax (Barthélemy 2012:90; cf. Chia 2021a,b:1–4). In addition, this comparison method – between Zechariah 1:8 with Zechariah 6:2–3 and 6:6–7 – does not offer a solution because this comparison does not address the missing dappled horses in Zechariah 1:8.

Second proposal: Insert שׁחרים before שׂרקים

Wellhausen (1898), Horst (1954) and BHS apparatus (1997:1064) insert שׁחרים or the black ones after שׂרקים or the sorrel ones in Zechariah 1:8. This proposal, thus, consistently keeps both שׁחרים or the sorrel ones and the black horses from Zechariah 6:2–3 and 6:6–7.

This insertion, nevertheless, faces some challenges because it is based on the comparison method. This comparison does not provide an answer on why Zechariah 1:8 adds שׁחרים or the sorrel ones in comparison to Zechariah 6:2–3 and 6:6–7. Also, this proposal also does not address the missing of the spotted (dappled) horses in Zechariah 1:8.

Third proposal: brדים corresponds to שׁחרים

The third proposal comes from McComiskey. He argues that brדים corresponds to שׁחרים (McComiskey 1992:1035). The basis of his argumentation is the list of horses in Zechariah 6:1–8 that share similar colours to Zechariah 1:8.

Although this comparison harmonises the three colours (red, the dappled and white), this comparison method again fails to bring an answer to the missing of the black horses in Zechariah 1:8. Furthermore, the dappled one is a translation of the Hebrew word יָדִים (cf. 6:3 and 6:7). Klein also opposes this proposal. He sees that the Hebrew lexica – BDB, HALOT and Holladay – do not support the reading of ‘dappled’ horses (Klein 2008:139).

Fourth proposal: Ancient translations

This proposal will weigh on available manuscripts on שׁחרים or the sorrel ones or Zechariah 1:8. The first witness is coming from Aquila. In Hexapla, Origen records Aquila’s Greek translation in manuscript 86: ψαροὶ or bay or chestnut mares (ed. Field 1875:1021). The notable characteristic is his literal translation or his fidelity to the source language. He usually translates a Hebrew word for the same Greek equivalent that sometimes leads to inappropriate translation to the context. Jobes and Silva (2000:39) describe that Aquila’s translation represents a Hebrew vocabulary in the most consistent fashion, even at the cost of acceptable Greek. His extreme literalness is also revealed in the unusualness of Greek grammar and syntax (Dines & Knobb 2004:88). Another feature of Aquila’s translation is his Greek translation based on an eye on etymology (Natalio 2000:116). In other words, Aquila’s translation is a representation of a faithful translation to the source language. In short, Jobes and Silva (2000:29) picture Aquila as a Jewish proselyte who attempted to represent every detail of the Hebrew text consistently.

This translation, therefore, follows the Hebrew text שׁחרים or the sorrel ones.

Although the LXX’s translation (Thompson 1999) does not explain the missing of the black horses in 1:8, the mystery of the combination of two colours שׁחרים ψαροὶ as one kind of horses in 6:3, and the missing of the red horses in 6:6–7, the focus of this article is שׁחרים or the sorrel ones. The LXX has two kinds of colour to translate שׁחרים and ψαροὶ and καιροὶ. While Chia argues that to translate faithfully and consistently the colours of all horses according to the Hebrew text is the motivation of the LXX’s translator (6:2–3 and 6:6–7; Chia 2022a,b:1–5), this argumentation does not apply to Zechariah 1:8, because LXX uses two colours to translate שׁחרים. BHS’ apparatus rightly states that the occurrence of ψαροὶ equals הבנים in Zechariah 6:3 and 6:7 (BHS 1997:1064). Both Zechariah 6:3 and 6:6–7 translate שׁחרים and ψαροί as שׁחרים and ψαρוὶ respectively (cf. Barthélemy 1992: 936). Thus, these facts – LXX reserves שׁחרים for שׁחרים and ψαρו (“varii”) and ψαρο (“varii”) respectively – communicate that the meaning of שׁחרים is unknown to the LXX’s translator (cf. Gelston 2010:134).

The Latin Vulgate (Weber & Gryson 2006) and the Syriac Peshitta (Gelston 1987) translate שׁחרים as varii [or various ones] and חַסְפִים [or spotted ones]. Gelston states that both translations borrow from the LXX’s שׁחרים (Gelston 2010:134). Nevertheless, Gelston’s statement is incorrect for a couple of reasons. The Latin Vulgate translates both שׁחרים and ψαρο (“varii”) with varii [or various ones]. This translation reveals that the Latin Vulgate might be troubled by the unknown meaning of שׁחרים. The Syriac Peshitta, on the other hand, always translates שׁחרים or ψαρο (“varii”) with חַסְפִים [or spotted ones], whereas שׁחרים and ψαρו as

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In Zechariah 6:3 and 6:6. It is clear that the Syriac Peshitta differentiates the Hebrew word שׂחרים and אדמים in its translation although no textual variant is omitted.

The Aramaic Targum (the comprehensive Aramaic lexicon) translates שׂחרים into three possible translations: קוחין, קוחין, or קוחין in Zechariah 1:8. However, the most common translation is קוחין. A dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period states that קוחין is a corruption of קוח or spotted one (Sokoloff 2002:503b). The Aramaic Targum translates שׂחרים as קוחין in Zechariah 6:3 and 6:6, while it has קוחין for אדמים. In other words, the Aramaic Targum has its own term to render each Hebrew word.

Although the discussion of ancient texts is insightful (cf. Chia 2021a,b), these different variants are rather complicated because of there is no harmonisation. Aquila’s Greek translation renders שׂחרים as ψαροί. While LXX uses two Greek adjectives [και γαρ και ποικίλοι] to translate one Hebrew word שׂחרים, קוחין, the Latin Vulgate has one adjective [varii or various ones] for two Hebrew words שׂחרים and אדמים. The Syriac Peshitta and the Aramaic Targum, on the other hand, have their own rendering of שׂחרים and אדמים, respectively. Therefore, Barthélémy (1992:936) rightly concludes that as the ancient translators have trouble understanding the Hebrew word שׂחרים, they read the other versions and compare Zechariah 1:8 with 6:2–3 and 6:6–7 to seek solutions.

Fifth proposal: שׂחרים should be unveiled within Semitic languages

This article proposes the fifth proposal. This research rejects the comparison method between Zechariah 1:8 with Zechariah 6:2–3 and 6:6–7 because it fails to bring a consistent solution throughout the book. The first proposal, for instance, solves the problematic Hebrew word שׂחרים with שׁחרים, but it does not provide an answer to the missing dappled horses in Zechariah 1:8. The second proposal inserts שׁחרים after שׂחרים in Zechariah 1:8, but again this proposal also does not address the missing of the dappled horses and the addition of שׁחרים in Zechariah 1:8. The third proposal uses the comparison method to correspond שׁחרים and שׂחרים. This proposal, however, also fails to address the missing of black horses in Zechariah 1:8. Therefore, this article finds that the comparison method is not a plausible solution.

Although this article rejects the comparison solution between Zechariah 1:8 with Zechariah 6:2–3 and 6:6–7, this research sees that the comparison among the Semitic texts is fruitful. The Syriac Peshitta and Aramaic Targum shed a light on the mystery of שׂחרים because both texts employ their own terms to render שׂחרים and אדמים, respectively. The non-Semitic language texts (the LXX and the Latin Vulgate), on the other hand, demonstrate the difficulty of translating שׂחרים and אדמים. This difficulty could be caused by the unknown meaning of שׂחרים among the ancient translators (Gelston 2010:134; cf. Chia 2022a,b:83–97) or this Hebrew word has no good rendering to the Greek and Latin language. The Syriac Peshitta, the Aramaic Targum and the Masoretic text render שׂחרים as a different colour of horses than Zechariah 6:2–3 and 6:6–7 in contrast to the LXX, the Latin Vulgate, the first and the second solutions proposed by the scholars. Therefore, this research proposes that the most plausible way to unveil the mystery of שׂחרים is through Semitic languages. The Semitic texts reveal that שׂחרים is a distinct and different colour than the colours of horses in Zechariah 6:1–8.

The last mystery needs to be solved is what is the colour of שׂחרים? There are three common colours that are proposed by the modern English Bible: brown, sorrel and speckled. This article proposes the colour of שׂחרים is reddish brown. This proposal comes from the usage of שׂחרים in the Hebrew Bible, the cognate languages and the Hebrew lexica. The Hebrew word שׂחרים occurs three times (or the 60%) in the Hebrew Bible. It is used to describe the colour of grapes (Is 5:2, 16:8; Jr 2:22), while the 20% of it is employed to denote a location. These occurrences suggest the basic colour of שׂחרים is red. However, as אדמים or red has been used before in Zechariah 1:8, then שׂחרים must be a different type of red than אדמים. The Semitic languages, Arabic and Ethiopic, connect שׂחרים with the colour of sunrise or it is more like a golden brown (Roda 2016:139; Brenner 1982:115). The Hebrew Lexica – BDB, HALOT and Holladay – have sorrel colour.

Conclusion

This article rejects the comparison method – between Zechariah 1:8 with Zechariah 6:2–3 and 6:6–7 – to unveil the mysterious Hebrew word of שׂחרים. The comparison method fails to bring a consistent solution throughout the book of Zechariah. Therefore, this research uses textual criticism especially analysis within Semitic languages to unfold this difficulty. This methodology allows the readers to see that שׂחרים is a distinct and different colour than the colours of horses in Zechariah 6:1–8, and the colour of שׂחרים is reddish brown.

Acknowledgements

The work of Philip Suciadi Chia.

Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

Author’s contributions

Textual criticism and lexical analysis.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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Data availability
Hexapla and BHQ Gelston

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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