

The mysterious Hebrew word שָׂרָקִים in Zechariah 1:8

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The Hebrew word שָׂרָקִים in Zechariah 1:8 is a mysterious word. The disappearance of the Hebrew word שָׂרָקִים in Zechariah 1:8 from the rest of the *Book of Zechariah* and the unknown meaning of שָׂרָקִים 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 שָׂרָקִים or the sorrel ones, which are not recorded in Zechariah 6:2–3 and 6:6–7. The appearance of שָׂרָקִים 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 שָׂרָקִים is probably unknown to the ancient translators. This unknown meaning causes different translations of שָׂרָקִים 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 שָׂרָקִים in Zechariah 1:8.

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

Introduction

As the problematic Hebrew word שָׂרָקִים 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: אַדְמִים, שָׂרָקִים, לְבָנִים, or the red ones, the sorrel ones and the white ones. Zechariah 6:2–3 has four colours: אַדְמִים, שְׁחָרִים, לְבָנִים, רְדִים, or the red ones, the black ones, the white ones and the spotted (dappled) ones. Zechariah 6:6–7, on the other hand, has three colours again: הַשְּׁחָרִים, הַלְּבָנִים, הַרְדִּים or the black ones, the white ones and the spotted (dappled) ones. Based on Zechariah 6:2–3, then Zechariah 1:8 is missing the colour of the black horses and the spotted (dappled) horses. Based on Zechariah 6:6–7, Zechariah 1:8 also lacks the black horses and the spotted (dappled) horses. Interestingly, Zechariah 1:8 adds one more colour that is not recorded in both Zechariah 6:2–3 and 6:6–7: שָׂרָקִים 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 שָׂרָקִים 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 שָׂרָקִים 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 שָׂרָקִים 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 שָׂרָקִים reveals a colour translation only in Zechariah 1:8 (cf. five Hebrew lexica such as the *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, Brown–Driver–Briggs [BDB], *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* [HALOT], *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* [TWOT], Holladay).

Most modern English Bible translations are also affected by the mysterious Hebrew word of שָׂרָקִים. They translate שָׂרָקִים variously as brown (New International Version, World English Bible, New Living Translation, New Heart English Bible, Christian Standard Bible) or sorrel (International Standard Version, New English Translation Bible, New American Standard Bible, Amplified Bible, American Standard Version, New King James Version, English Standard Version) or speckled (King James Bible, Douay-Rheims Bible).

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

Note: Special Collection: African Hermeneutics.

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Proposals

First proposal: Emend שרקים to שחרים

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 שרקים to a different colour or שחרים to solve this disharmony. Barthélémy records this first proposal from scholars to overcome this problem (Barthélémy 1992:935). Marti (1904), Duhm (1911), Kautzch (1909), Cent (1928–1947), Riesler (1911) and Sellin (1922) corrected the Hebrew word שרקים or the sorrel ones with שחרים or the black ones. There are two implications of this proposal. Firstly, this emendation eradicates שרקים or the sorrel ones in Zechariah 1:8, which is unknown to Zechariah 6:2–3 and 6:6–7. Secondly, the emendation to שחרים 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 שרקים 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 (Barthélémy 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 שרקים before שחרים

Wellhausen (1898), Horst (1954) and BHS apparatus (1997:1064) insert שחרים or the black ones after שרקים or the sorrel ones in Zechariah 1:8. This proposal, thus, consistently keeps both שרקים 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 שרקים 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: שרקים corresponds to ברדים

The third proposal comes from McComiskey. He argues that שרקים corresponds to ברדים (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 ברדים (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 מִקְרָשׁ or the sorrel ones in Zechariah 1:8. The first witness is coming from Aquila. In Hexapla, Origen records Aquila’s Greek translation in manuscript 86: ζαυθοί 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. Jobs 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 & Knibb 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, Jobs 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 שרקים 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 ποικίλοι ψαροί 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 שרקים or the sorrel ones. The LXX has two kinds of colour to translate שרקים: και ψαροί και ποικίλοι. 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 שרקים. BHS’ apparatus rightly states that the occurrence of ψαροί equals אמצים in Zechariah 6:3 and 6:7 (BHS 1997:1064). Both Zechariah 6:3 and 6:6–7 translate ברדים and אמצים as ποικίλοι and ψαροί respectively (cf. Barthélémy 1992: 936). Thus, these facts – LXX reserves ברדים for ποικίλοι and אמצים for ψαροί in 6:3 and 6:6–7, but the LXX uses both και ψαροί και ποικίλοι for שרקים – communicate that the meaning of שרקים is unknown to the LXX’s translator (cf. Gelston 2010:134).

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

ܩܘܚܝܢ in Zechariah 6:3 and 6:6. It is clear that the Syriac Peshitta differentiates the Hebrew word ברדים and שרקים in its translation although אמצים is omitted.

The Aramaic Targum (the comprehensive Aramaic lexicon) translates שרקים into three possible translations: קהחני, חתני, or קוהין in Zechariah 1:8. However, the most common translation is קוהין. A dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period states that קוהין is a corruption of קרוה or spotted one (Sokoloff 2002:503b). The Aramaic Targum translates ברדים as פציהין in Zechariah 6:3 and 6:6, while it has אמצים for קטמנין. 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 שרקים as ξανθοί. While LXX uses two Greek adjectives [καὶ παροὶ καὶ ποικίλοι] to translate one Hebrew word שרקים, the Latin Vulgate has one adjective [varii or various ones] for two Hebrew words שרקים and ברדים. The Syriac Peshitta and the Aramaic Targum, on the other hand, have their own rendering of שרקים: قهحني and קוהין respectively. Therefore, Barthélémy (1992:936) rightly concludes that as the ancient translators have trouble understanding the Hebrew word שרקים, then they read the other versions and compare Zechariah 1:8 with 6:2–3 and 6:6–7 to seek solutions.

Fifth proposal: שרקים 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 שרקים with שחרים, but it does not provide an answer to the missing dappled horses in Zechariah 1:8. The second proposal inserts שחרים after שרקים in Zechariah 1:8, but again this proposal also does not address the missing of the dappled horses and the addition of שחרים in Zechariah 1:8. The third proposal uses the comparison method to correspond שרקים to ברדים. 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 שרקים because both texts employ their own terms to render שרקים: قهحني and קוהין, respectively. The non-Semitic language texts (the LXX and the Latin Vulgate), on the other hand, demonstrate the difficulty of translating שרקים. This difficulty could be caused by the unknown meaning of שרקים 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 שרקים 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 שרקים is through Semitic languages. The Semitic texts reveal that שרקים 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 שרקים? There are three common colours that are proposed by the modern English Bible: brown, sorrel and speckled. This article proposes the colour of שרקים is reddish brown. This proposal comes from the usage of שרקים in the Hebrew Bible, the cognate languages and the Hebrew lexica. The Hebrew word שרקים 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 שרקים is red. However, as אדמים or red has been used before in Zechariah 1:8, then שרקים must be a different type of red than אדמים. The Semitic languages, Arabic and Ethiopic, connect שרקים with the colour of sunrise or it is more like a golden brown (Boda 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 שרקים. 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 שרקים is a distinct and different colour than the colours of horses in Zechariah 6:1–8, and the colour of שרקים is reddish brown.

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Author's contributions

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Data availability

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