On the Meaning of Job 34:20
in Elihu's Second Speech

Aron Pinker

Introduction

In v.20 of Elihu's second speech he makes the following enigmatic statement:

Some die suddenly in the middle of the night;	רֶגַע יָמֻתוּ וַחֲצוֹת לָיְלָה
People are in turmoil and pass on;	יְגֹעֲשׁוּ עָם וְיַעֲבֹרוּ
Even great people are removed – not by hand.	וְיָסִירוּ אַבִּיר לֹא בְיָד

This typical NJPS translation seems to be describing the aftermath of a disaster, calamity, or plague that has hit some nation. What kind of a situation has Elihu in mind? To whom is he referring? Of what relevance is this verse to the Jobian issue? What does the verse mean? These questions have presented considerable challenges to exegetes since the time of the early *Versions*. Beer expressed the prevailing sentiment when he said: "Vers ist jetzt sicher nicht in Ordnung: עם past nicht neben אביר."[1] Pope, a more recent commentator, observed that "the verse is a bit awkward, but emendations can be scouted."[2]

Some specific difficulties of interpretation have been succinctly summarized by Driver and Gray. These scholars note that:

> יגעשו עם ויעברו] a people (the people of such potentates, v.19a, b) are shaken violently, and pass away (Di. Del.). געש is to *shake violently*: of the earth, Ps 18:8a, b, in Hithp. of waves *tossing themselves*, Jer 5:22; of nations reeling to and fro (under fig. of drunkenness), Jer 25:16. But the sense thus obtained is not satisfactory: we expect, as the subject of יגעשו and יעברו not עם, but the שרים and שוע of 19a. Bu. Be. Oo. Honth. שו (שֹׁעִים fallen out after the preceding שׁ –) [Ehrlich שרים] for עָם: Du. מֵעָם for עָם. The fig. of יגעשו is, however, very strong for either שועים (Bu.) or שרים and שוע (Du.): read probably יְגֹרְשׁוּ מֵעָם they are *driven out from* a people (*i.e.* a people in which such men acquire pre-eminence), and pass away. [But the introduction of a special term ("the mighty") in 20c without a parallel in 20b is awkward: and it would be best, if יגרשו מעם be read in 20b, to emend 20c. Richter proposes for 20b, c יגעשו גם יעברו ויסירם אביר

---

[1]   Beer, Text, 218.
[2]   Pope, Job, 258.

לֹא בְיָד, And a mighty one (viz. God) removes them without hand; but this by introducing a term for God as the subject in 20c spoils the effect of the phrase לֹא בְיָד. Till something better than this is proposed, it is perhaps safest to assume that 20b, c each contained a term for the classes mentioned in 19a, b. To avoid the objection taken to יְגֹעֲשׁוּ read יְגֻעֲעוּ; Bu. thought of יְגַּע, but rightly rejected the act. vb. on the ground that God is kept in the background.][3]

In the nearly 100 years since these analyses have been written, little has changed in the exegetical perception of v.20. Clines' relatively recent *opus magnum* on Job makes it abundantly clear that the exegetical suggestions that have been made during the last century do not amount to what Driver and Gray hoped for "something better than this is proposed."[4] Dhorme notes that "This verse has caused much embarrassment to modern commentators who have wished to change the text."[5] Perhaps, this state of affairs has been caused by an incorrect focus by the exegetes. The problem may be, not with the MT but rather the situational image that should be conjured when one reads v.20.

The generally adopted perspective of v.20 is described by Clines as being:

> The picture of how God, far from being unjust himself calls his sub-ordinate rulers to account because of their wrongdoings is continued from v.18. There he named and shamed them, here he brings their life to an end in retribution for their wickedness. They are not of course all kings and princes who are here in view, but only those who have not executed their responsibility for righteous government.[6]

Unfortunately, this perspective forces unreasonable referents on v.20aα and emendations on v.20aβ. Moreover, it separates v.20 from v.21-25, which seems to be providing the rationale for v.20.

The purpose of this study is to suggest that in v.20 Elihu alludes to mighty kings or commanders of armies on a war-path, causing minor kings or city-states on their war-path to tremble. Yet, even these mighty warriors, who can determine the survival of a nation, are indebted for their own life to God. This position is further rationalized and elaborated in v.21-25.

---

[3]   Driver / Gray, Commentary, 258.
[4]   Clines, Job, 751-753.778-779.
[5]   Dhorme, Commentary, 518.
[6]   Clines, Job, 778.

Analysis

Ancient Versions

The translations / interpretations of the ancient versions and modern exegetes will now be considered. This analysis will illustrate the difficulties that the translators and exegetes faced, how they tried to overcome them, and the weaknesses of these efforts.

Septuagint has for v.20 "But it shall turn out vanity to them, to cry and beseech a man; for they dealt unlawfully, the poor being turned aside" (Κενὰ δὲ αὐτοῖς ἀποβήσεται τὸ κεκραγέναι καὶ δεῖσθαι ἀνδρός ἐχρήσαντο γὰρ παρανόμως ἐκκλεινομένων ἀδυνάτων). Dhorme observes that,

> It is impossible to adjust to the MT the text of G Κενὰ δέ αὐτοῖς ἀποβήσεται τό κεκραγέναι καὶ δεῖσθαι ἀνδρός. Perhaps we have here the paraphrase of an interpretation beginning at וחצות and breaking up יגעשו עם into יגע שועם 'and their cry strikes the middle of the night', i.e. their cry has no effect (?). The sequel ἐχρήσαντο γὰρ παρανόμως paraphrases יעברו, and the end ἐκκλεινομένων ἀδυνάτων reads יסורו for יסירו and אובד for אביר, omitting לֹא בַיד.[7]

Duhm raised the possibility that: "die LXX, hat anstatt dieses Stichos [v.20aα] einen Satz, der wahrscheinlich ein ältere Übersetzung von v.25 (bis לילה) vorstellt (etwa עָבְרוּ für יַכִּיר, דַּלִּים für לַיְלָה)."[8]

Targum assumes that Elihu has in mind some historical events and exploits רגע (Lam 4:6) and חצות הלילה (Ex 11:4, 12:29) to form an association with Sodomites and Egyptians. It renders: "In its time will perish the Sodomites and in middle of night are trembling the Egyptian and are passed and the haughty leaders know [that it was] not by the strength of the hand" (בשעתא ימותון סדומאי ופלגות ליליא מתרגפין מצראי ויעברון וידעון דורבני לא בחיל ידא). Whybray is also attuned to the historical connotation, saying "Elihu points out that God is able to destroy a whole people in a single moment as he has destroyed the Egyptian children at midnight (Exod 11:4; 12:29)."[9] However, the plural verbs in v.20 would not agree with God's singularity.

Peshitta assumes that v.20 refers to someone who says about the king that he is wicked though the king is a good ruler over princes and governors (v.18). This forces the Peshitta to make "for they are all of his hands" (כי־ מעשה ידיו כלם) parenthetic, since it contains a natural subject ("all") for v.20. The Peshitta translates: "In a moment shall he die, and be consumed at

---

[7] Dhorme, Commentary, 518. Budde notes: "da deren Wortlaut in v.20 kaum mit MT zusamengehalten warden kann." Cf. Budde, Buch, 204.

[8] Duhm, Buch, 165.

[9] Whybray, Job, 147.

midnight, and pass away; he will be rendered powerless by the Almighty." Peshitta omits עם, and reads ויכירו "and they will recognize" instead of MT ויסירו.

Vulgate seems to be separating the referent כלם into two, by translating "They shall suddenly die, and the people shall be troubled at midnight, and they shall pass, and take away the violent without hand (*subito morientur et in media nocte turbabuntur populi et pertransibunt et auferent violentum absque manu*).[10] It reads *populi* instead of MT עם. According to the Douay-Rheims translation used here, the word "they" in v.20 refers to "all" in the preceding colon "all are the work of his hands."

Clearly, the ancient *Versions* were at a loss about the referents in v.20. Their attempts to find these referents in the preceding verses did not lead to cogent interpretations of v.20. As we shall see in the following section modern exegesis has been plagued by similar perceptions.

Modern Exegesis

The MT of v.20 does not present any particular difficulties to the commentator; it does not have any *hapax legomena* or unusual phrases, and all the words are well attested in the Tanakh. Commentators, however, struggled with the thematic content of the verse, its inner-verse coherence, and its relation to the preceding verses. These challenges compelled an evaluation of the MT and led to numerous textual emendations.

Whybray notes that "In v.18-20 Elihu tries to support his case by giving examples of how God uses his power for good, showing impartiality in his dealings with human beings. As the creator of all both rich and powerful and poor and defenceless, he treats them all impartially according to what they deserve."[11] This perspective would make "all" (כֻּלָּם), at the end of v.19, the referent for v.20aα, which is patently neither justified nor true.

Andersen felt that in v.20 "oppressive rulers seem to be the particular objects of God's destruction, and the fact that they can be broken suddenly without human help seems to Elihu to be sufficient evidence that God is at work."[12] However, nowhere in v.18-19 does Elihu imply that the rulers and functionaries that he mentions were 'oppressive.' Who are the 'oppressive rulers' that Elihu refers to in Andersen's opinion? Are these the שָׂרִים ("chieftains") and שׁוֹעַ ("noble")? Were these functionaries empowered to

---

[10] Caspari, Buch, 101. Jerome has: *una eis euenient, ut lament et rogent uirum. abusi sunt enim inique, cum excluderentur infirmi.*
[11] Whybray, Job, 147.
[12] Andersen, Job, 254.

make a nation tremble, or remove a אַבִּיר ("potentate") by their say-so? Moreover, Elihu could never expect that Job would consider the demise of such functionaries as 'evidence that God is at work' because he never doubted that to be the case.

Modern exegesis generally went to great lengths in its attempts to find proper subjects for the verbs ימתו "they will die," יגעשו "they will shake up," יעברו "they will pass," יסירו "they will remove," in v.20.[13] Also, while various forms of געש occur in the Tanakh, it was felt that יגעשו might be corrupted and various emendations were suggested. In what follows a sample of such efforts would be presented and analyzed.

A relatively recent commentary renders v.20: "In a moment they may die, in the middle of the night. The nobles are shaken, and they pass away, and the mighty are taken away without effort."[14] This translation raises the following questions:

1. To who does the first "they" refer?
2. What is the significance of "they" dying "in a moment"? Isn't death, as a discontinuity of life, always instantaneous?
3. What is the significance of "they" dying in the middle of the night?[15] Don't people usually die at any time of day or night?
4. Why are only the nobles shaken, who shakes them, and why does this cause them to pass away?
5. What is the difference between the nobles and the mighty ones?
6. What is the difference between "passing away" and being "taken away"? Why are the two classes treated differently?
7. If "passing away" and "taken away" are euphemism for "death" what does "without effort" add to the description of the death procedure?
8. Why did not the nobles and mighty ones die among those identified as "they" at the beginning of the verse?

Modern exegesis did not provide coherent answers to all of these questions, and often introduced new obscure notions.

For instance, Good translates v.20: "Suddenly they die when it's mid-night, he touches nobles, and they pass on, and they remove a mighty one

---

[13]   Beer, Text, 218. Beer notes that v.20-22 are missing in Ken. 180; ימתו is missing in Ken. 237; Ken. 188 has ימת; Ken. 17 has ויסורו; Ken. 191 has ויסיר; Ken. 248 has אבירים; and, 4(5) Ken. MSS have ולא.

[14]   Clines, Job, 744.

[15]   A number of commentators suggest that the phrase וחצות לילה indicates a time when people are unaware of what happens, being asleep. Note that in the Tanakh חֲצֹות is always associated with לילה.

without a hand," admitting "I do not know who 'they' are" in "they remove."[16] However, it is not clear to who refers any pronominal in Good's translation. Moreover, his emendation יִגְעָשׁוּ עָם = יִגַּע שׁוֹעִים "he touches nobles" introduces an obscurity. Budde rightly says: "Leicht wäre יִגַּע שׁוֹעַם abzuteilen (Acc. Wie Gen 26:29, Rt 2:9, besser freilich בְּ); aber der ganze Vers scheint, nach dem לֹא בְיָד zu urteilen, Gott im Hintergrund zu lassen."[17] While God's touching a human is attested in the Tanakh (1Sam 10:26, 6:9, Job 19:21, 2:5, Jer 1:9) it is not always onerous, nor is it obvious.

Fohrer thinks that Elihu speaks in v.19b-20 about a divine prerogative that is grounded in the creative act (*Diese Überlegenheit is Gottes Schöpfertum begründet*). God can be impartially just, because the rulers and the poor are equally his creations. On this common ground God can punish them with death. They die prematurely without a human hand touching them – by God. Thus, according to Fohrer in v.20 *they* refers to *all*, and the *dying* is a consequence of punishment.[18] Fohrer links v.20 with v.18-19 and leaves unanswered most of the questions that arise with Clines' translation.

Duhm is sensitive to the criticality of the meaning of כלם in v.19c. In his opinion כלם refers only to the dignitaries that are mentioned in v.18. Duhm says:

> "*Denn das Werk seiner Hände sind sie alle*, nämlich nicht die Vornehmen und die Geringen, welche letzteren nur des Gegensatzes wegen erwähnt wurden, sondern die Könige und Fürsten, die ihre Stellung nur Gott verdanken (v.24) und durch sie also nicht vor verdienter Strafe geschützt."[19]

---

[16] Good, Turns, 144-145. Hirzel suggests that the subject of ויסירו is undefined. Cf. Hirzel, Hiob, 204.

[17] Budde, Buch, 204. Budde suggests: "Lies deshalb lieber יִגְעֲשׁוּ שׁוֹעָם. Die Pluralendung von ויסירו (‚man entfernt'?) passt ebenso wenig, sie dürfe nach ויעברו verschrieben sein. Auch hier ist יוּסָר einem יָסִיר vorzuziehn."

[18] Fohrer, Buch, 468. Fohrer (463) translates v.20: "sie sterben jählings und mitten in der Nacht, <Die Vornehmen kommen um> und vergehen, und der Gewalthaber <weicht> ohne (mentschliches) Zutun." He (464) notes: "b) Es ist יִגְעוּ שׁוֹעִים (Hölscher) stat ‚Die Leute warden ins Schwanken gebracht' zu lesen. c) Es ist וְיָסוּר (Budde und andere) statt ‚sie beseitigen' zu lesen." It is difficult to justify the reading יִגְעוּ שׁוֹעִים on text-critical grounds.

[19] Duhm, Buch, 165. The author could have expected a typical reader to reach out so far back in the text for a referent. Duhm says: "In v.20b ist wohl מֵעָם für עָם zu schreiben und das Verb pregnant zu fassen: sie werden ins Schwanken gebracht (und entfernt) vom Volke hinweg, über das sie herrschten oder sonst hervorragten. In v.20c endlich ist יָסִיר für יָסִירוּ nötig wegen des Schlusses: nicht

Delitzsch avers that

> "The subject of v.20a are the previously mentioned princes. … Verse 20c refers back to the possessors of power, and in the interval, ver. 20b describes the fate of those who belong to the people which has become subservient to their lust of conquest."[20]

Similarly, Ewald assumes that God "often quickly, as in one night, punishes the potentates of the earth."[21] Hahn suggests that v.20 is a "Nähere Erklärung durch die Hinweisung Elihu's auf den plötzlichen und gänzlichen Untergang der hohen Sünder."[22] However, such destruction of the elite is hardly realistic or constitutes evidence of God's impartiality.

Kissane also adopts the notion of a more inclusive but still elite referent for v.20. He says that in v.19c-20 "*They* here refers to the 'kings,' 'princes,' 'nobles' and 'rich' of 18-19. As they are all His creatures, He can suddenly withdraw their 'spirit,' and they die. (Cf. 17)."[23] Kissane seems to assume

---

durch Anwendung einer Hand, was nur auf Gott gehen kann." The *Qere-Ketib* apparatus attests to a missing מ but not at the beginning of a word. A מ is missing in the following cases: 2Sam 22:16 ויהמם (K) but ויהם (Q); 2Kgs 12:12 הפקדים (K) but המפקדים (Q); 2Kgs 17:16 שנים (K) but שני (Q); 2Kgs 17:24 וספרוים (K) but ומספרוים (Q); Ez 44:23 לשפט (K) but למשפט (Q); 2Sam 22:16 ויהמם (K) but ויהם (Q); 2Kgs 12:12 הפקדים (K) but המפקדים (Q); 2Kgs 17:16 שנים (K) but שני (Q); 2Kgs 17:24 וספרוים (K) but ומספרוים (Q); Ez 44:23 לשפט (K) but למשפט (Q).

[20] Delitzsch, Commentary, 255. Also Dillmann states "Subj. sind allerdings nach dem Zusammenhang (vgl. Auch V.23ff.) die Mächtigen." He apparently assumes that כלם in v.19 refers only to the *Mächtigen*, which makes no sense in context. Cf. Dillmann, Hiob, 295. Hakham takes as the referent of v.20aα only the שרים and נדיבים, perhaps as categories. Cf. Hakham, ספר איוב, 264.

[21] Ewald, Commentary, 337. Ewald has for v.20: "suddenly they die at midnight, they stagger in crowds and pass away; the strong man is removed – not by hand."

[22] Hahn, Commentar, 273. Hahn observes that in v.20aβ; "Das Subjekt ist aber nicht עָ, sondern wie in a die hohen Sünder, und עָ ist akkusativische Bestimmung dazu: *Taumeln haufenweise und vergehen*, nicht in einzelnen, seltenen Fällen blos, sondern zahlreich und oft."

[23] Kissane, Book, 233. Kissane (228) translates v.20: "In a moment they die, even at midnight, He smites the rich, and they pass away, And He removes the mighty, and not by violence." He reads יִגַּע שׁוֹעִים instead of MT יְגֹעֲשׁוּ עָם; and, וְיָסִיר instead of MT וְיָסִירוּ, and assumes יִגַּע = "smites," which might be rather tenuous. Kissane (233) explains, "Sometimes they are smitten with a fatal disease, sometimes they die suddenly and mysteriously. The first part of the verse is corrupt. Hebrew reads: 'the people are shaken and pass away.' A differ-

implicitly that these dignitaries are wicked and deserve to be exterminated. However, Elihu does not associate any wrongdoing with the elite. Moreover, in v.18-19 Elihu also mentions the דָּל ("poor") on an equal footing with the 'princes' and 'nobles,' yet Kissane excludes the poor from the all inclusive כֻּלָּם ("all"). On what grounds can he do that? Finally, if God makes all the dignitaries (which were mentioned in v.18-19) perish in v.20aα, why are the rich and mighty singled out in the last two cola, as having been smitten and removed by God?

Gordis is explicit about the negative nature of the elite; opening his commentary with the statement: "This difficult verse apparently contains a description of the instantaneous destruction of the wicked."[24] He believes that understanding עם as "the upper classes, i.e. the People that count" (hence stich b = "the rulers are shaken up and pass away") resolves all the difficulties associated with v.20. However,

(1) there is no indication that the dignitaries mentioned were wicked;
(2) there is no explanation why the elite is shaken and passes away; and,
(3) there is no explanation for the special mentioning and described treatment of עם and אביר in v.20.

Hitzig explains that "Vers 18 ist ein Ausläufer, hinter welchen an anknüpft; und zwar begründet Vers 19 die erstere, Vers 20 die letztere Kategorie."[25] This implies that the referent of v.20aα is the all inclusive כלם, which makes v.20aα banal. Dhorme correctly identifies the problem of v.20 as being one of thematic linkage, but he erroneously thinks that it can be resolved by repositioning one of the verbs. He says:

> In reality the anomaly begins at 1ˢᵗ hemistich, where we have a statement 'in a moment they die' (cf. רגע in 20:5), followed by 'and in the middle of the night' which, in the light of Ex 11:4 and Ps 119:62, connects with what follows rather than with what precedes. … But if

---

rent division of the consonants gives the sense required: 'he smites the rich, and they pass away,' which forms a good parallel to 20c. *He smites*, with a fatal illness or plague (1:11, 19:21). Not by violence, lit. 'not by hand,' i.e. mysteriously (Dan 2:34, Lam 4:6).

[24] Gordis, Book, 389. Gordis argues that "יגעשו עם has been emended to יִגַּע שׁוֹעִים which is taken to mean 'He smites the princes' (Budde, Kissane), or to יִגְוְעוּ שׁוֹעִים (Beer, Duhm, Driver-Gray, Hölscher), or שָׂרִים (Ehrlich), 'Princes die,' but the proposed changes are unnecessary. עַם is here obviously idiomatically in the connotation of 'the upper classes, i.e. the People that count,' cf. אמנם כי אתם־עם 'indeed you are the People' (cf. Job 12: 2 and see the Commentary)."

[25] Hitzig, Buch, 253.

וחצות begins the 2nd clause there is a complete lack of balance between the first two hemistichs. Everything becomes clear if we suppose that ויעברו has been accidentally transposed. If we replace it in position after ימתו we obtain as 1st hemistich: 'In an instant they die and pass away', which recalls: 'Thou dost attack him and for ever he departs', an allusion to the death of man in 14:20. The 2nd hemistich is then: 'and in the middle of night a people are shaken with tumult'. The plural יגעשו is used because of the collective עם. The *pu'al* of געש assumes a meaning similar to the *hithpo'el* in Jer 46:8, 'to be agitated' (speaking of waves). The author refers to tumult of a people in the throes of revolution. The sequel then becomes quite natural: 'and effortlessly deposes a potentate'.[26]

Dhorme explains that "Elihu is stressing the vicissitudes of social life. For God, there is no distinction between king, noblemen, princes, rich and poor (v.18-19). They are all alike subject to death (v.20a), and those in high places may become the victims of a popular rising (v.20, bc)."[27] With this explanation Dhorme reverses his correct original insight. Indeed, an analysis of Dhorme's words reveals the following facts.

1. Dhorme recognizes the error of connecting v.20a with v.18-19, rather than with what follows. Unfortunately, his wrap-up of Elihu's view connects v.20a with what precedes, though Dhorme takes "all" (כֻּלָם) as being the subject of v.20a. This results in the trite statement "all die."

2. The perception that יגעשו עם refers to a revolt in the middle of the night is rather unlikely, since little happened in ancient times when darkness set in (Qoh 2:14). Also, Clines notes: "But this interesting proposal does not give full force to 'and they will pass away' (ויעברו), which Terrien removes to the first colon, and, more tellingly, it makes the improbable suggestion that popular revolt is God's preferred means of dealing with unrighteous rulers."[28]

Tur-Sinai divides v.20 into two lines differently than in MT, and he capitalizes on the word עם; finding in it the meaning "dusk, darkness," if the word is assumed to be Aramaic. In his view:

---

[26] Dhorme, Commentary, 518b-519a. In Dhorme's view the verb הסיר "set aside," "remove" has the same connotation in 1Kgs 15:13, to remove from power, i.e. "to depose." אביר is "mighty one," "potentate," as in 4:22. The phrase לא ביד "not by hand," i.e. without having to use force, is similar to לא בדעת "without knowledge" and לא בהשכיל "without reason" in v.35.

[27] Dhorme, Commentary, 519.

[28] Clines, Job, 779.

The meaning of the first words is clear: men great and small perish before God in a moment, at midnight, between one day and the next. But the sentence-division is doubtful, in part because of the strange combination of singular and plural forms in יגעשו עם ויעברו. It seems preferable to assume as the first stich (bipartite in metre and contents): רגע ימתו חצות לילה יגעשו, that is to say: "In a moment they die and at midnight they (all men) are shaken" (from their places, like mountains and the waves of the sea).[29]

As to the meaning of עם in the remaining text Tur-Sinai argues that:

> … we have not to do with a form of עם "people', but with the noun עְמִי, which, as in Palestinian Aramaic (עמיא), means "dusk, evening", and is here used, in parallel to "at midnight", in the sense of "at dusk, in the darkness". Cp. especially Ruth Rabba III, 2 (*ad* Ruth I, 17): לעידן עמיא סלקן תרויהון לאיגר פלטין "at the time of dusk both ascended to the roof of the palace". Accordingly, for עם ויעברו, we should read עמי יעברו "they pass away in the dusk."[30]

An analysis of Tur-Sinai's position leads to the following observations.

1. Tur-Sinai links v.20 to the preceding verses. He correctly understands that this position forces taking "all" (כֻּלָּם) of the preceding verse as the subject of the first colon in MT: "men great and small perish before God in a moment, at midnight, between one day and the next."

2. Tur-Sinai's attaching of יגעשו to the first colon results in a colon that is strange logically; "In a moment they die and at midnight they (all men) are shaken" implying that the dead are shaken.

3. Tur-Sinai finds cleverly an Aramaic noun עְמִי in עם ויעברו, which he assumes to be the Palestinian Aramaic עמיא "dusk, evening," and is here used, in parallel to "at midnight" in the sense of "at dusk, in the darkness." One might wonder why the author used the Aramean word rather than the common and frequent Hebrew חֹשֶׁךְ ("darkness"), as in v.22a.

4. Tur-Sinai obtains for v.20 the following translation: "All men pass away at dusk, are removed (read יְסֻּורוּ) as if flying away in the wind,

---

[29] Tur-Sinai, Book, 481.

[30] Tur-Sinai, Book. Tur-Sinai says: "אַבִּיר in Job means 'flying away', as אֶבְרָה, אֵבֶר "wing" and the verb האביר "to fly" below, XXXIX, 26." However, Job 39:26 is the only verse in the Tanakh where the verb אבר occurs. In this verse יַאֲבֶר parallels יִפְרֹשׂ כְּנָפָו "spreads his wing."

without a hand moving them." This meaning does not correspond to reality.[31]

Ehrlich thinks that v.20 deals with the unseating of the rulers. In this context he finds speech of death in v.20a being untenable and reads יִתַּמּוּ instead of MT יָמֻתוּ. Also, עם is impossible since "da nicht ein leuchtet welche Rolle das Volk bei dem beschriebenen Ende der Herrscher spielt. Für עם ist שָׂרִים zu lesen." Moreover, "Zu ויסירו passt ולא ביד durchaus nicht." He opts for וְיוּסָרוּ "and they were unseated" (Jud 9:29, 1Kgs 15:13). Finally, Ehrlich notes that "Auch für אביר liest man wohl besser אבירים, doch absolut nötig ist dies nicht." [32]

Ehrlich's approach to v.20 leads to the following observations:

1. The validity of a thematic perspective which compels so many emendations should be questioned.
2. Text-critical methods can justify reading יִתַּמּוּ instead of MT יָמֻתוּ. However, this emendation appears to be gratuitous, since יִתַּמּוּ is often equivalent to יָמֻתוּ in the Tanakh (Nu 14:35, Jer 14:5, 44:12, Ps 104:35). The term can refer to years (Ps 102:28) or days (Deut 34:8), but then the reader would be in a quandary; not knowing whether the function or the existence ceased.
3. No text-critical methods can justify reading שָׂרִים instead of עם.
4. Reading of וְיוּסָרוּ instead of ויסירו involves a couple of common scribal errors and a revocalization.

The preceding analysis indicates that commentators could not agree on the circumstances that would fit the described annihilation in v.20. Most commentators perceived v.20 as describing the demise of a country's wicked elite in a rather general manner. Some felt that the tenor of impartiality of the preceding verses forces expansion of the group of afflicted, and making it include all people in a country. Others suggested that v.20

---

[31] Pinker, Psalms, 497-522. Pinker notes: "The ancient could not have imagined man flying. In the Tanakh only locust (Nah 3:16), birds (Deut 4:17, Isa 31:5, Hab 1:8, Hos 9:1, Prov 23:5, 26:2, Ps 55:7) and angels (Isa 6:2, 6, Dan 9:21) are mentioned as having the capability to fly. In Ps 55:7 the psalmist asks rhetorically: 'Can someone give me wing as a dove, so that I would fly and settle down?' The answer to this question is an obvious 'No.' The psalmist has to remain in his place; man cannot fly." Isaiah 11:14a means "They shall pounce on the back of Philistia to the west."

[32] Ehrlich, Randglossen, 316.

deals with a mass revolt (Cox,[33] Terrien,[34] Dhorme), or earthquake (Noyes[35]). These perspectives tried to maintain the linkage between v.20 and the preceding v.18-19, and compelled commentators to make many emendations. Yet, the resulting understandings of verse 20 raise many questions that undermine the interpretative coherence of the verse.

Proposed solutions

Most commentators recognized the criticality of v.20aβ for the understanding of v.20. However, their efforts focused on textual emendations rather than on finding a concrete situation to which Elihu might be alluding, which could serve as a framework for the interpretation of the verse. Thus, v.20 has been mostly viewed from the rather abstract perspective of gentry that is wicked. While Job belonged to the gentry, was rich and respected (v.1:3), he is not presented as a political or military figure with the potential to influence the fate of masses. Elihu clearly speaks about "shakers and movers" that are beyond Job's status; those that are capable to "shake a people." Who are they? This paper suggests that v.20 refers to commanders, or kings of great armies, engaged in military campaigns.

It is reasonable to assume that King A, who embarked on a campaign against an influential King B afar from his own territorial domain, had as one of his major concerns securing his route to and from the battle site. Thus, on the way to his main objective, King A would be interested to obtain the fealty of the smaller kingdoms that border this route, but not become embroiled in many small battles that would sap his strength and reduce his potency against King B. His fear is that returning from the battle against King B, scarred and exhausted, he could become pray for a coalition of small kingdoms on his return march. Another concern of King A is providing his troops on the march with food, and burden animals for his supplies and baggage train. Through coercion and bribery King A would try to unseat rulers that are antagonistic towards him or are too independent and adventurous, and install leadership that would not be predisposed to hinder his movements, and would support his campaign. Obviously, when this strategy did not work, King A had to destroy strong cities on his way or change his route.

A typical historical instance that illustrates these concepts is Sargon II's campaign against the Urartu in 714 BCE. In the 8th century BCE, the

---

[33] Cox, Commentary, 448.

[34] *Apud* Clines, Job, 752. Clines notes that Terrien has for יגעשו "se révolte."

[35] Noyes, Book, 189. He says: "The allusion seems to be to some capital city overthrown by an earthquake."

Assyrians had the largest standing military army in the Middle East; a force of 150,000 to 200,000 men. Though no historical sources are available, it seems reasonable that in the expedition against the Urartu Sargon II commanded a force of about 50,000 men.[36] When Sargon II reached the land of the Manna, one of Assyria's vassals, he ordered its king Ullusunu to provide him with large numbers of horses, sheep, cattle and supplies. Obviously, the appearance of such a massive force in front of any fortified city shook up profoundly (יגעשו) its populace (עם) and strained its economy until they passed (יעברו), and after.

Maneuvering east and south of Lake Urmia Sargon entered Median territory, where the Median governors submitted to him. In this case there was no need to unseat the governors (יסירו אביר) by use of military force (ביד).[37] The governors pledged fealty to Sargon and provided him with steppe peoples, horses, swift mules, camels, cattle and sheep, which were very valuable possessions and critical for the functioning of their own economy.

Having secured his eastern flank, Sargon returned to his forward base in Manna. To reach Urartu, Sargon had two options: take the direct route northwest from Lake Urmia to Tuspar (modern Van) on Lake Van, or take a more circuitous route around the northern shore of Lake Urmia near Tabriz and then straight west. The topography in both options was very difficult, but there were fewer Urartu fortifications on the circuitous route. Sargon opted for the circuitous route because he wanted to preserve as much as possible of his strength for the main objective. Still he had to capture 12 fortified cities and 84 villages. No wonder that commanders of such expeditions often engaged in considerable psychological warfare to achieve their goals (Isa 36:4-22), which might have included removal of a current unfavorable king and replacing him with a more favorable royal prince.

While Sargon II was maneuvering on his way to Urartu, King Rusa I of Urartu was scheming to force Sargon into a battlefield that would be advantageous to Urartu forces. However, to be able to match the Assyrians forces, Rusa had to rely on a coalition of local princes. Such coalitions of

---

[36] Carey, King, 70.

[37] In the 5th year of Rehoboam , king Seshonk (biblical Shishak) of Egypt, tried to unseat Rehoboam and appoint Jeroboam king also over Judah (2Kgs 12:1-4). See Isa 10:13. Note also that the concepts נתן ביד (Deut 1:27, Judg 1:12, 2:14, 6:1, 7:2,9, 14, 15, 8:3, 7, 12:1, 15:12, 1Sam 14:10, 12, 37, 2Sam 5:19, 2Kgs 3:10, 13) and לא ביד (Ex 3:12, 2Sam 23:6) appear to be opposites; the first concept indicating the achieving of a goal in battle, and the second achieving a goal without a battle.

minor powers were a bane for a major power engaged in a military cam-
paign. Thus, commanders of major military expeditions were intent on reduc-
ing this possibility by manipulating the political regimes of states bordering
the route to the battlefield. In the eventual clash with the Urartu forces
Sargon made some brilliant military decisions and was able to defeat king
Ruso I by outflanking him. The defeat of the Urartu army opened the way to
the Urartu capital at Tuspar. Sargon advanced toward Tuspar destroying
systematically every fortress, city and town on his path. Carey notes that
Sargon II's 714 BCE campaign against Urartu

> … was a textbook example of how to conduct a punitive expedition in
> hostile territory. He shored up his relationship with Ullusunu and
> made alliances with the Medes, gaining much-needed supplies and
> protecting his flank. By securing his lines of communication through-
> out his march, Sargon was able to operate in hostile territory more
> than 300 miles from his home base.[38]

Similar practices are described succinctly in Habakkuk's beautiful poem
(1:7-11b). Habakkuk says:

They are terrible, dreadful;	אָיֹם וְנוֹרָא הוּא
They make their own laws and rules.	מִמֶּנּוּ מִשְׁפָּטוֹ וּשְׂאֵתוֹ יֵצֵא
Their horses are swifter than leopards,	וְקַלּוּ מִנְּמֵרִים סוּסָיו
Fleeter than wolves of the steppe.	וְחַדּוּ מִזְּאֵבֵי עֶרֶב
Their steeds gallop – their steeds	וּפָשׁוּ פָּרָשָׁיו וּפָרָשָׁיו
Come flying from afar.	מֵרָחוֹק יָבֹאוּ
Like vultures rushing toward food,	יָעֻפוּ כְּנֶשֶׁר חָשׁ לֶאֱכוֹל
They all come for rapine.	כֻּלֹּה לְחָמָס יָבוֹא
The trust of their van is forward,	מְגַמַּת פְּנֵיהֶם קָדִימָה
And they amass captives like sand.	וַיֶּאֱסֹף כַּחוֹל שֶׁבִי
Kings they hold in derision,	וְהוּא בַּמְּלָכִים יִתְקַלָּס
And princes are a joke to them;	וְרֹזְנִים מִשְׂחָק לוֹ
They laugh at every fortress,	הוּא לְכָל-מִבְצָר יִשְׂחָק
They pile up earth and capture it.	וַיִּצְבֹּר עָפָר וַיִּלְכְּדָהּ
Then they pass on like the wind and are gone.	אָז חָלַף רוּחַ וַיַּעֲבֹר

Habakkuk describes the march of the Babylonian forces. The Neo-Babylo-
nian Empire attempted to take control of the vast territories, which had been
tributaries to Assyria; since after the fall of Nineveh, Assyria could not offer
any effective resistance to the Chaldeans. The description echoes a number
of practices that were used by Sargon II, and also contains the same term

---

[38]   Carey, King, 71.

וַיַּעֲבֹר as in Job 34:20.[39] This term was apparently used to describe the receding of the ordeal posed by the appearance of an expeditionary force that presented taxing demands.

Another critical term in Job 34:20 is וְיָסִירוּ. This term occurs also in 2Chr 36:3-4. Egypt, fearing the rising Chaldean power, sent armies into the field, to join the remaining Assyrians in a coalition against the Chaldeans. At the crucial battle of Carchemish on the Euphrates (609 BCE) Nebuchadnezzar, the son of Nabopolassar, inflicted a crushing defeat on the Egyptian forces. Josiah of Judah (640-609 BCE) sought to prevent the Egyptians from passing the fortress of Megiddo and thus hinder the Egyptian advance. It is not known whether Josiah had a formal treaty with the Chaldeans or if he merely acted in what be considered the best interests of Judah. Josiah was killed in the battle, but the delay may have prevented the Egyptians from joining forces with the remaining Assyrians at a time when they might have challenged the rising Chaldean power (cf. 2Chr 35:20-24). This act forced Egypt to interfere in the political affairs of Judah. Egyptian pharaoh Nekau II dethroned Jehoahaz and, in 609 BCE, installed Jehoiakim as king of Judah (ויסירהו מלך־מצרים בירושלם).[40]

It is being suggested in this study that the concrete political situation to which Elihu alludes in v.20 is one in which a large expeditionary force appears at the gates of a fortified city; that could have reasonably believed to be secure. The masses of the alien military, their equipment, and their behavior had a profound psychological effect on the besieged populace. The dictates of the besiegers were brazen, exacting, and ruinous. The populace felt shaken, impotent, and humiliated. One has only to read chapter 36 in Isaiah (or chapter 18 in 2Kgs) to sense the power of the verbal propaganda that was used, and which was directed at the masses. Yet, the leaders of the expeditionary force, who could exercise such dread on the people in a fortress, could die in a moment and could not hide from this fate even in the darkness of midnight. In this context Elihu's words to Job are particularly apt. The message to Job is stark and clear. God is a just judge, who metes out the right punishment to anyone, and is not influenced by the power or stature that an individual attained.

This understanding of v.20 associates it with v.21-25, rather than with v.17-19. The leader of the expeditionary force, which could be a general or a king is called in v.21 אִישׁ, "an important man" (Num 12:3), and the verse alludes to the path of the expedition in the key words דַּרְכֵי "ways" and צְעָדָיו "steps." While the march was lengthy, consisting of many steps, each step

---

39 Cf. Isa 8:8.
40 Markot, A, 112.

was watched by God, and the mighty leader could lose his life in a moment
(רֶגַע יְמֻתוּ) on the march. וַחֲצוֹת לָיְלָה, "darkness of midnight," anticipates
verse 22, where Elihu says that God sees everything and always; "neither
darkness nor gloom offers a hiding place for evildoers."[41] Verse 23 seems to
be a negation of Habakkuk's observation *They make their own laws and
rules* יֵצֵא וּשְׂאֵתוֹ מִשְׁפָּטוֹ מִמֶּנּוּ (Hab 1:7), and v.24 is an elaboration on the
phrase וְיָסִירוּ אַבִּיר in v.20. Finally, v.25 is a concluding assertion.

From the perspective that v.20 associates with v.21-25, rather than with
v.17-19, the referent of v.20aα (leaders of military expeditions) is delayed,
and then explicated in v.20aβ and 20b. This view of v.20 removes the com-
pelling force that is exercised by the word כֻּלָּם on v.20aα. The sub-unit
consisting of v.20-25 contains a statement (v.20aα), identification of its
referent (v.20aβ and 20b), a rationalization that is marked by the opening כִּי
(v.21-24), and the conclusion (v.25). The unit is identified by the *inclusio*
markers לילה and ימתו in v.20aα that correspond to לילה and ידכאו in v.25. It
is obvious from these considerations that verses 20-25 constitute a well-
formed thematic sub-unit, and this unit would naturally provide the referent
for v.20aα.

Finally, it should be noted that Elihu, a young scion of an outstanding
family (v.32:6), might have had the military experience to use it as an
example of God's greatness, and could expect that Job, the elder aristocrat,
would readily understand him. Elihu's use of military notions is not un-
usual. He uses military notions in 33:5, 10-11, 18, 34:6, 20, 36:12, 14, 23,
and 37:19b. Indeed, the military practices alluded to in v.20 would not have
been alien to the reader of the book, since many were often called to serve in
the army, participated in military expeditions, or were subject to intimidation
by an alien force at the gate of their fortress. It is also conceivable that the
tactics of major kings were subjects for discussion by the educated elite.

Conclusion

Exegetical efforts to understand v.20 as referring to the corrupted classes
mentioned in v.17-19 have not led to satisfactory interpretations of the
verse. This perspective forces unreasonable referents on v.20aα and emen-
dations on v.20aβ. Moreover, it separates v.20 from v.21-25, which seem to
be providing the rationale for v.20. This study suggests that v.20 refers to
the vulnerability of the commanders of an expeditionary force on their war-
path. The ordeals associated with such movements of armies were well-
known to the ancient reader; mentioning of some key-words immediately

---

[41]   Cf. Ps 119:62 and Ex 11:4 (חצות הלילה): elsewhere חצי (ה)לילה.

conjured to them the bitter experiences associated with such events. Elihu does that in v.20.

Assuming that in v.20 Elihu refers to the mighty leaders of military expeditions, v.20 can be paraphrased: "They can die in a moment (רֶגַע יָמֻתוּ), and the darkness of midnight (וַחֲצוֹת לָיְלָה) would not conceal them and save from this fate; those who can shake up a people (יְגֹעֲשׁוּ עָם) passing by (וְיַעֲבֹרוּ), and unseat leaders (וְיָסִירוּ אַבִּיר) by mere say-so (לֹא בְיָד)." This understanding has the following advantages:

1. It uses a clear, realistic, and familiar situation to frame the content of v.20.
2. Obvious key-words help to conjure the framework.
3. The MT need not be emended.
4. The MT fits the context of the text that follows (v.21-25).
5. The verse is in line with other biblical texts.

Summary

Most commentators perceive v.20 as describing the demise of a country's wicked elite. Some felt that the tenor of impartiality of the preceding verses (v.18-19) forces expansion of the group of afflicted, and making it include all people in a country. A number of commentators have suggested that a mass revolt was the cause of the described annihilation. Others felt that v.20 alludes to a capital city overthrown by an earthquake. These perspectives tried to maintain the linkage between v.20 and the preceding v.18-19, and compelled commentators to make many emendations. Yet, the resulting interpretations raise many questions that undermine their validity. This paper argues that v.20-25 form a cohesive thematic sub-unit, which describes the vulnerability of the commanders of an expeditionary force on their war-path.

Zusammenfassung

Die meisten Ausleger sehen in V.20 den Untergang der gottlosen Elite eines Landes. Die vorangehenden Verse (V.18-19) sind von einer Tendenz zur Unbestimmtheit geprägt, woraufhin manche vermuteten, dass die Gruppe der Angesprochenen auszudehnen ist, sodass alle Menschen im Land einschlossen werden müssen. Etliche Kommentare nehmen an, dass die Ursache für die beschriebene Vernichtung eine Massenrevolte gewesen ist. Andere wieder vermuteten, V.20 weise auf eine durch ein Erdbeben zerstörte Hauptstadt hin. Diese Erklärungen versuchen die Verknüpfung zwischen V.20 und den vorangegangenen V.18-19 aufrechtzuerhalten. Diese Annahme zwang die Ausleger zu vielen Korrekturen. Die Interpretationen, die von diesen Voraussetzungen ausgehen, werfen viele Fragen auf, welche ihrerseits die Gültigkeit der Auslegungsergebnisse fraglich erscheinen lassen. – Die vorliegende Abhandlung zeigt, dass die Verse 20-25 eine zusammenhängende thematische Untereinheit bilden. Sie beschreibt die militärische Verwundbarkeit der Kommandeure eines Expeditionskorps.

Bibliography

Andersen, F.I., Job. An Introduction and Commentary, London 1976.

Beer, G., Der Text des Buches Hiob, Marburg 1897.

Budde, K., Das Buch Hiob übersetzt und erklärt, Göttingen 1896.

Carey, B.T., Assyrian King Sargon II's Urartu Campaign of 714 BC was as sensible as it was, in: Military History 22,6 (2005) 64.70-71.

Caspari, C.P., Das Buch Hiob (1,1-38,16) in Hieronymus's Uebersetzung aus der alexandrischen Version nach einer St. Gallener Handschrift, Christiania 1893.

Clines, D.J.A., Job 21-37 (WBC 18A), Nashville, TN 2006.

Cox, S., A Commentary on the Book of Job, London 1894.

Delitzsch, F., Biblical Commentary on the Book of Job, II, Edinburgh 1869.

Dhorme, E., A Commentary of the Book of Job, London 1967.

Dillmann, A., Hiob, Leipzig 1891.

Driver, S.R. / Gray, G.B., A Critical Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Job, II. (ICC), Edinburgh 1921.

Duhm, D.B., Das Buch Hiob erklärt (KHC), Tübingen 1897.

Ehrlich, A.B., Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel. Textkritisches, Sprachliches und Sachliches, VI, Psalmen, Sprüche, Hiob, Hildsheim 1968.

Ewald, G.H.A., Commentary on the Book of Job, London 1882.

Fohrer, G., Das Buch Hiob (KATXVI), Gütersloh 1963.

Good, E.M., In Turns of Tempest; A Reading of Job with a translation, Stanford, CA 1990.

Gordis, R., The Book of Job: Commentary. New Translation, and Special Notes, New York 1978.

Hahn, H.A., Commentar ueber das Buch Hiob, Berlin 1850.

Hakham, A., ספר איוב, Jerusalem 1981.

Hirzel, L., Hiob, Leipzig 1885.

Hitzig, F., Das Buch Hiob übersetzt und erklärt, Leipzig 1874.

Kissane, E.J., The Book of Job, Dublin 1939.

Markot, R., The A to Z of Ancient Egyptian Warfare, Lanham 2010.

Noyes, G.R., The Book of Job, Boston, MA 1838.

Pinker, A., The Famous But Difficult Psalms 90:10, in: OTE 28 (2015) 497-522.

Pope, M.H., Job (AnB 15), Garden City, NY 1986.

Tur-Sinai, N.H., The Book of Job, Jerusalem 1967.

Whybray, N., Job, Sheffield 1998.

Dr. Aron Pinker
11519 Monticello Ave.
Silver Spring, MD 20902
USA
E-Mail: aron_pinker@hotmail.com