

THE FUNCTION OF THE TERM 'āḥû IN GENESIS XLI 2,18*

Giovanni Mazzini

1. At the very beginning of the famous narrative of the Pharaoh's dream about seven cows (Genesis 41), Pharaoh is described as standing in front of seven cows that are grazing on the bank of the Nile. In the passage mentioned, the term denoting the bank of the Nile (line 2) is 'āḥû. Even though this term is very rare, considering that it occurs only twice more time in the Old Testament, namely Gen 41,18 (the same narrative) and in Jb 8,11¹, there is general agreement as to its meaning, for example, such «reeds, rushes»². When focusing on the term under a linguistic perspective, we can note that Skinner's proposal³, according to which 'āḥû would be an Egyptian loanword⁴, has generally been accepted.

Yet, after a closer examination of the passage as a whole, I believe that further reflection is needed as to why an assumed Egyptian loanword should be used exclusively within this chapter of Genesis (apart from its use in Job, see footnote 12 below);

* For many helpful observations I am grateful to Prof. P.-G. Borbone and Prof. P. Xella.

¹ Significantly, the term was no longer clear in the translation of LXX where the phonetic equivalent «akhei» is given, which has no meaning in Greek. More interesting, instead, are the renderings *marga*⁷ of the Peshitta, in *locis palustribus (in pastu paludis*, line 18) of the Vulgate and *aḥawa* of Targum PsOnqelos, which at least show a literal understanding of the Masoretic text. As to the strictly philological question concerning the term 'ḥym (Masoretic 'aḥim) in Hs 13, 15 (which could conceal the root ḥHW, as supposed in S.R. Driver - A. Plummer - Ch. A. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Amos and Hosea*, Edinburgh, 1905, p. 405), I am not able here to discuss in detail; hopefully the present note might contribute to stimulating a new critical revision of the entire passage (see the following statement: «the emendation of 'ḥym to a form of 'ḥw is unnecessary» in F.I. Andersen - D.N. Freedman, *Hosea*, The Anchor Bible, New York, 1980, p. 641, see also P.-G. Borbone, *Il libro del profeta Osea. Edizione critica del testo*, Supplemento a *Henoah*, XII, 1, 1990).

² We can cite some recent translations, E.A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Bible, New York 1981, p. 309: «(...) seven cows (...) grazed in the reed grass»; H. Schweizer, *Die Josefsgeschichte*, Tübingen, 1991, Teil II, p. 18: « (...) und sie weideten im Riedgras»; A. Catastini, *Storia di Giuseppe*, Venezia 1994, p. 95: « (...) sette vacche (...) pascolavano nel canneto». A similar rendering is in F. Brown - S.R. Driver - Ch. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Oxford 1972, p. 28.

³ J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 2nd ed., Edinburgh, 1930, p. 465.

⁴ The present assumption is also accepted by D. Cohen, *Dictionnaire des racines sémitiques*, 1, Leuven, 1994, p. 15; T.O. Lambdin, "Egyptian Loan Words in the Old Testament", *JAOS* 73, 1953, pp. 145-155, in particular p. 146; J. Vergote, *Joseph en Égypte*, Louvain 1959, pp. 57-66; D.B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50)*, Leiden 1970, p. 46; M.H. Pope, *Job*, The Anchor Bible, New York 1979, p. 66.

furthermore, the assumption itself of a loanword should be reconsidered from a wider perspective.

Linguistically, the hypothesis of the specific use of an «Egyptian» term seems to be a plausible one, considering that the presence of certain Egyptian loanwords within the Old Testament is a well-known lexical feature. On the other hand, however, the Ugaritic term ^ʾ*ah*, recently rendered by Watson⁵ as «shore», may also be compared, as well as the Akkadian term *ahū* related to the general idea of «side, edge» and frequently used specifically for «shore» and «bank»⁶. Although the significance of these parallels has never been sufficiently emphasized, a fact which would lead to preferring a Semitic origin instead of positing an Egyptian loanword, a strictly linguistic approach to the issue does not seem a suitable one to shed light on the question of the use of ^ʾ*ahū* within the narrative of the Pharaoh's dream as told in Gen 41. It is doubtful that both suggestions, a Semitic root and an Egyptian loanword, have a similar and convergent meaning: «the particular place on the bank, such as a marshland, rich in green vegetation, particularly reed grass, especially fitting to pasture». The simplest explanation is that a Hamito-Semitic root underlies to the rare term of Gen 41 as well as the Ugaritic, Akkadian (...) and Egyptian⁷ parallels.

⁵ W.G.E. Watson, "Non-Semitic Words in the Ugaritic Lexicon (2)", *UF* 28, 1996, pp. 701-719, in particular p. 709. However, he assumes that Ugaritic ^ʾ*ah* is also to be taken as a loanword from Egyptian, in particular from the term *ḥḥ*; similarly in *DUL*, Vol. I, p. 36. See also A.F. Rainey, "Observations on the Ugaritic Grammar", *UF* 3, 1971, pp. 151-172, in particular p. 169, whose interpretation of the term is, however, «papyrus thicket». See also J. Tropper, *Ugaritische Grammatik* (AOAT 273), Münster 2000, pp. 192, 285.

⁶ The lexical connection with Akkadian goes back to Ch. Virolleaud, "Anat et la génisse. Poème de Ras-Shamra (IV AB)", *Syria* 17, 1936, pp. 150-173, in particular p. 157. According to him, however, the Ugaritic term has to be interpreted as «prairie, pré», a rendering also accepted by C.H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, Roma 1965, p. 355: «meadow». In this perspective J.C.L. Gibson's comment (*Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions, Volume II, Aramaic Inscriptions*, Oxford 1975, p. 40) on the same term ^ʾ*hwh* attested in Old Aramaic, namely in KAI 222, 29, 32, appears to be most reasonable, showing both possibilities as plausible (Egyptian / Semitic); similarly, J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire*, Rome 1967, p. 47. Interesting observations are also given in B. Couroyer, review of J. Vergote, *Joseph en Égypte*, *RB* 66, 1959, pp. 582-594, in particular pp. 588-589. On the contrary, in KAI, 249 the Aramaic term is considered to be a loanword from Egyptian. See also J.E. Hoch, *Semitic Words in Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period*, Princeton 1994.

⁷ One might suggest the hypothesis that the present Hamito-Semitic root has become rare within the Semitic Languages (or even dead) because of its confusion with the very important root for «brother». In particular one has to notice that in Egyptian this root does not mean «river bank» but «papyrus thicket» (*ḥḥ*), «season of flooding» (*ḥḥ.t*), see in general R.O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*, Oxford 1971, p. 4. Significantly, the name of the town Chemmis (*ḥḥ-bit*) is to be connected to the Nile delta, one of the places in Egypt that is rich in papyrus thickets (W. Helck - E. Otto, *Lexicon der Ägyptologie*, Wiesbaden 1975, Band I, p. 921). Usually the term designating a river bank in Egyptian is ^ḥ*m.t* and only once is the term ^ḥ*w* doubtfully reported in A.H. Gardiner, *Ancient Egyptian Onomastica*, Oxford 1947, Vol I, 8*, n. 39. I have to thank Dr. A. Menchetti, University of Pisa, for his help with the Egyptian sources.

2. Apart from any etymological speculation on the origin of the term discussed here, it would be more useful to discover literary models, that is a tradition underlying the narrative of Gen 41 which might have determined the selection of this particular term.

A first indication seems to be recognizable in the context where the Ugaritic term ʾah occurs, namely in KTU 1.10 II, 9, 12.

In the tablet KTU 1.10, the god Baal is described as hunting in a place called the «ʾah Šmk». Interestingly, this region is connected with a type of animal corresponding to cows, since the expression ʾah Šmk is always specified, within the text, as *mlʾat rʾumm*, «full of, rich in bulls». The geographical setting of the episode is certainly a mythical one, as frequently happens in the Ugaritic literature, hence the difficulty in identifying the exact character of Šmk. At any rate a «lacustrian» environment, as so often proposed, appears to be the most plausible, a fact which seems to justify understanding ʾah as meaning «shore», as already seen above⁸. Significantly, the general background of the narrative introduces the main motif of the entire story told in the tablet, namely a mythical sacred marriage between Baal and a cow selected for him by the goddess Anat from among the many in that locality. Probably, the myth was linked to the motif of fertility, the typical function of Baal that implies the welfare of humanity⁹.

A comparison between this text and the Biblical narrative shows a story where cows/bulls, viewed as a symbol of fertility and welfare, are the protagonists. Since the Biblical narrative is told as a dream, the «mythical» or rather, unreal atmosphere emerging from the Ugaritic text of the tablet KTU 1.10 might have been selected as eminently suitable for the episode of Pharaoh's dream. The Pharaoh, in charge of his country's welfare, sees the cows grazing on the ʾāhû of the Nile. This scene, recalling the mythical language of the Ugaritic source, functions as a general introduction to the main theme regarding the question of the future of Egypt.

⁸ As to the identification of Šmk Ch. Virolleaud, "Anat et la génisse. Poème de Ras-Shamra (IV AB)", *Syria* 17, 1936, p. 157 already suggested Lake Hüle, a proposal accepted by many scholars, see E. Lipinski, "El's Abode. Mythological Traditions Related to Mount Hermon and to the Mountains of Armenia", *OLP* 2, 1971, pp. 13-69, in particular, pp. 16-17 and S. Ribichini, "UDM e ŠMK. Due toponimi 'mitici' ", *MLE* 1, 1982, pp. 51-52; according to A. Caquot - M. Sznycer - A. Herdner, *Textes Ougaritiques, Tome I, Mythes et légendes*, Paris 1974, pp. 275-289, in particular, p. 283, Šmk is rather to be identified as Lake al-ʿAmq or the marshlands of Ghāb.

⁹ The tablet has been subject of many studies, some of them are cited here: H.L. Ginsberg, "Baʿal and ʿAnat", *OrNS* 7, 1938, pp. 1-11; M.B. Brink, *Text IV AB: An Ugaritic Myth of Baal and Anath*, Diss. Stellenbosch University, 1970; Caquot - Sznycer - Herdner, *Textes Ougaritiques*, cit., pp. 275-289; G. Del Olmo Lete, "Mitema de «los amores de Baʿlu y ʿAnatu», in *Mitos y Leyendas de Canaan*, Sabadell (Barcelona) 1981, pp. 463-474; J.C. De Moor, "The Loves of Baal and Anath II", in *An Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit*, Leiden 1987, in particular, pp. 110-116; N. Wyatt, "KTU 1.10: Baal, the Heifer, and Anat", in RTU, pp. 155-160. The edition of the tablet can be found in Ch. Virolleaud, "Anat et la génisse", cit., pp. 150-173, pl. 24 and in M. Dietrich - O. Loretz - J. Sanmartín, CAT, in particular, pp. 31-33. See also the corrections proposed by J. Tropper in his review of the new edition of KTU, *Afo* 42-43, 1995-96, pp. 264-274 in particular, p. 269 and in "Epigraphische Anmerkungen zur Neuauflage von KTU", *AuOr* 13, 1995, pp. 231-239, in particular, p. 232.

A second possible indication may be found in the general Egyptian background against which the whole Biblical story of Joseph is set. In fact, it is well-known that the section of Genesis relating Joseph's adventures in Egypt exhibits a peculiar «Egyptian flavour» within the narrative and significantly even the language plays upon that flavour¹⁰. At the beginning of Chapter 41, the term $y^{\epsilon}\delta r$ is also recognizable as one of these linguistic traits, recalling Egyptian ($y^{\epsilon}\delta r$ is the «River», the Nile, it is a loanword from Egyptian $y(t)rw$). Possibly the expression *safat ha- $y^{\epsilon}\delta r$* as a whole (“the bank of the Nile”) may have sounded quite Egyptian, considering the corresponding use of the Egyptian term *spt*¹¹.

3. Summing up, we can suggest that, in the light of these two main motifs, the author of the text might have played upon the twofold allusive potential of $\text{'}\bar{a}h\bar{u}$.

On the one hand, the term $\text{'}\bar{a}h\bar{u}$ may be viewed as a rare (and probably archaic) one belonging to a Canaanite tradition. It is not surprising to find such a term within a parallel context attested by an Ugaritic tablet. The term was a very specific one evoking a literary motif, cows/bulls grazing on the bank of a river within an unreal atmosphere; the same motif is used as the general literary motif at the beginning of Chapter 41 of Genesis. Apparently the use of $\text{'}\bar{a}h\bar{u}$ in such a context was perceived as effecting an inner literary allusion, by which the Biblical narrative is linked to the Ugaritic text.

On the other hand, it turns out that the sound of $\text{'}\bar{a}h\bar{u}$ may recall similar Egyptian words indicating the same meaning as the Semitic term, that is «marshland, green vegetation, etc...». This effect is particularly appropriate to the context of Genesis 41 because of the general Egyptian flavour given to the whole episode. Clearly the use of $\text{'}\bar{a}h\bar{u}$ within the present context is likely to bring about the other literary device, that is the connection of the Biblical narrative to the Egyptian cultural setting¹².

In other words, the Biblical text, through the use of $\text{'}\bar{a}h\bar{u}$, seems to make it possible to realize a double intertextual effect¹³.

¹⁰ D.B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph*, cit.; J. Vergote, *Joseph en Égypte*, cit.

¹¹ The presence of a parallel episode should be not forgotten, namely Chapter 2 of Exodus, particularly vv. 1-6, telling the story of Moses being abandoned on the Nile; a similar Egyptian flavour may again be detected. Interestingly, however, the term $\text{'}\bar{a}h\bar{u}$ is not attested there even though the episode takes place in the same context, the bank of the Nile; a plausible reason for this, and hence further proof of what I am suggesting here, is the fact that there is no mention of a cow either. One should also keep in mind that another Egyptian term, the sound of which might have been evoked by the use of $\text{'}\bar{a}h\bar{u}$ in this particular context, is $y\bar{h}$. It is probably not mere chance that in fact in Egyptian the term $y\bar{h}$ means «cow».

¹² The usual understanding of the other attestation of $\text{'}\bar{a}h\bar{u}$ in the Old Testament, in Jb 8,11, may also be explained in the light of the present suggestion and it might offer further support for the above proposal; in Jb 8,11, in fact, the term $\text{'}\bar{a}h\bar{u}$ is simply taken as an Egyptian loanword, with no special stylistic function, to match *gōmē*³, the other term contained in the passage, which is a well-known Egyptian loanword meaning «papyrus» (in the present case the Greek translation correctly gives *papyrus* - *gōmē*³/ *boutomon* - $\text{'}\bar{a}h\bar{u}$); see also M.H. Pope, op. cit., p. 66.

¹³ In this perspective the literary device in question seems to fit the general reconstruction proposed by A. Catastini as to the historically cultural significance of the long established Jewish community in Egypt; see in particular: “Le testimonianze di Manetone e la «storia di Giuseppe» (Genesi 37-50)”, *Henoch* 18, 1995, pp. 359-366; “Ancora sulla datazione della «storia di Giuseppe» (Genesi 37-50)”,

This complex and refined function of the term 'āḥû, which emerges from the passage we have discussed here, may be taken as further evidence of a more general tendency that pervades the Biblical text. The literary strategy evidently requires sharp eyes for its full complexity to be revealed.