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To A. Dolinina,
with gratitude

Tarafa's She-camel and the Ark of the Covenant

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Describing his she-camel in the 11-12 bayts of his *mu'allaka*,
Tarafa said:

11. *wa-²innī la-²amdī l-hamma 'inda-ḥtidārihi//*
bi⁵awā²a mirkālīn tarūhu wa-taytadī
12. *²amūnin ka²alwāhi l-²irāni...*

which may be translated as «I overcome the trouble, as soon as it appears, [riding] on a she-camel which is so impetuous that cannot go straight, very rapid no matter by day or by night, solid as the planks of the chest...».

The beginning of verse 12 can of course be understood quite literally (as it is done in the translation given above). We believe, however, that a more subtle explanation of this somewhat unusual comparison can be proposed. All three words involved here are not isolated in Arabic. They are found in other Semitic languages, and this comparative evidence may certainly improve our understanding of the passage.

Arab. *²irān-* 'brancard (sur lequel on a déjà placé le mort); li-tière' [BKI 27]; 'arca lignea; feretrum ligneum' [Fr I 29]¹ is to be compared with Phoenician *²RN*, which is widely attested with the meaning 'sarcophagus' (once also 'chest') [Tomback 31]. Further, the word *²ARN* in an economic text from Ugarit was interpreted as 'chest' by C. Gordon [Gordon 366] (not found in [Aist]); note also Akk. *arānu* 'chest, coffer' [CAD A II231], which is regarded as a West Semitic loanword by [KB 85]. Heb. *²ārōn* is by far the best attested and the most known parallel to this Arab. word. *²ārōn* is found several times in the Bible in its secular meaning 'chest, box', and once denoting the sarcophagus into which the mummified body of Joseph was put in Egypt [Gn. 50. 26.]. The cultic usage of the

word in Biblical texts is, however, of greater importance. *ʿārōn* (*habbərīt*) 'the Ark (of the Covenant)' is repeatedly found throughout the Bible as the designation of the sacred chest where the Tables of Law were kept.

Arab. *lawḥ*- (broken pl. *ʿalwāḥ*-) 'table, planche, plaque longue et étroite (en pierre, en bois ou en os, sur laquelle on trace des caractères, des inscriptions etc.)' [BK II 1039] also has some Semitic cognates: Akk. *lēʿu* 'wooden board, writing board' [CAD L 156], Ugar. *lh* 'tablet' [Gordon 427], Gz. *lawḥ* 'board, table, parchment' [LGz 320, considered an Arab. loan-word by Leslau; cf. *luḥ* 'plank of wood, timber' (!) *ibid.*], Heb. *lūāḥ* 'stone tablet on which the Ten Commandments were written' (for another meaning of the Heb. word see below). As comparative evidence shows, this word was used to denote a writing board from the earliest times of development of Semitic, but the primitive meaning 'timber, table as material' was also preserved marginally. It is curious that the latter usage of the word *lūāḥ* in the Bible is again connected with the Ark, this time denoting the tables which were the material it was made of [Ex. 27. 8, 38. 7].

The fact that the two words in question were closely associated in Hebrew is evident not only from many contexts where they occur side by side (e. g. 1Reg. 8. 9. *ʿēn bāʿrōnr ʿaḳ šanē lūḥōt hāʿābānīm ʿāšār hinnīāḥ šām mōšā bəḥōrēb* 'there was nothing in the Ark except the stone tables which Moses put there on the Horeb'), but also from such set expressions as *lūḥōt habbərīt* 'tables of the Covenant' and *lūḥōt hāʿēdūt* 'tables of the Testimony' (cf. *ʿārōn habbərīt*, *ʿārōn hāʿēdūt* respectively). That this association was still alive in Rabbinic times is clear from the quotations from postbiblical sources in [Ja 696].

To sum up, Ṭarafa may have compared his she-camel not with an unknown chest famous by its solidity (note the definite article preceding *ʿirān*- !), but rather with the Biblical Ark of the Covenant so that all the passage can be translated: «...reliable as the Tablets of the Ark...».

Of course, we do not know anything exact about Ṭarafa's acquaintance with Jewish and Christian cultures, which is a necessary condition for our interpretation of the passage. Being a court poet of ʿAmr b. Hind, king of Ḥīra [Corriente 79], he certainly had an opportunity to get in touch with both Christians and Jews who undoubtedly were present there, although such an assumption remains, unfortunately, purely hypothetical².

Our purpose, however, was not just to propose a different translation of this verse, detecting a couple of new Hebrew-Aramaic

loan-words in Arabic. In fact, the picture which emerges in our case is much more complicated, since neither *ʔirān-* nor *lawḥ-* look as Canaanite-Aramaic borrowings. Moreover, we believe we are able to prove it by the evidence from comparative Semitic phonology.

It is a well established fact that the development of Proto-Semitic short vowels in pretonic syllables in Hebrew was not uniform: while **a* was lengthened into *ā* (*ā*), **i* and especially **u* were reduced into *šəwā* (or, naturally, some of the *ḥātēps* if the preceding consonant was a laryngeal) [Blau31]. Thus compare Heb. *ʔātōn* 'she-ass' ~ Arab. *ʔatān-*, Heb. *šālōm* 'peace' ~ Arab. *salām-*, but Heb. *zə rōāʕ* 'elbow' ~ Arab. *ḍirāʕ-*, Heb. *ḥāmōr* 'he-ass' ~ Arab. *ḥimār-*, Heb. *ʔānōš* 'all men, mankind' ~ Arab. *ʔunās* (a broken plural of *ʔinsān-* 'man'), Heb. *bərōš* 'cypress' ~ Akk. *burāšu*. Accordingly, *ā-* in the Hebrew word (erroneously transcribed as *ʔārōn* in [Tomback 31] and [Gordon 366]) is not accidental, but regularly corresponds to *ʔi-* of the Arab. *ʔirān-*, which, should it be a loanword, would be expected to appear as **ʔarān-* in Arabic.

The Arab. *lawḥ-* is also to be considered a genuine Arabic word. A borrowing from Heb./Aram. *lūāḥ* is difficult phonetically, since the Arab. word is of the pattern **CaCC-* while the Heb. belongs to the *CuCC-* pattern (the root-vowel variation may be accounted for a sporadic assimilation of *a* to the neighbouring *w*; note a similar phonetic development **-aw-* > *-uw-* > *-ū-* in Heb. *kūr* 'furnace, melting pot' and *ḥūt* 'rope' versus Eth. *kaḥw* [LGz 300] and Mand. *ḥawṭā* [DM 117] respectively).

Thus, we deal here with an interesting case when two (or even three³) genuine Semitic words may have acquired in Arabic specific meaning under the linguistic influence of the neighbouring Jewish and Christian cultures. Such a picture perfectly fits the notion of «loan translation» (as opposed to «loan-word»). For the distinction between the two terms see, for instance, [Boyd 69-70, footnote 78]. The author, discussing the phonetic and semantic relationship between the Arab. root *nḍr* and Common Semitic **nḍr*/**ndr* observes: «The attestation of Ar. *naḍīr* (= NWSem. *nāzīr*) requires that, in this particular instance, a distinction between "loan-word" and "loan translation" be considered... Ar. chose to "borrow" the idea inherent in the NWSem. root *nzr* (Heb. > Aram. > Syr.), using its own root semantically capable of rendering *nāzīr* (as well as *ndr*) no matter how imperfectly...».

Just in the same way the genuine Arab. words *ʔirān-* and *lawḥ-* (possibly also *ʔamūn-*) may have acquired a new specific meaning under the influence of the respective words of cognate (and geographically neighbouring) tongues.

We may conclude that the detecting of such «loan translations» may be of great importance both for the history of a particular Semitic language and for Proto-Semitic reconstruction. It is well known that Arabic, for instance, is full of loan-words from other Semitic languages. These words are in many cases very difficult to recognize, since their phonetic appearance is that of aconite, and not a borrowing (it is especially true for South Semitic loan-words — Ethiopic, Old and Modern South Arabian — since the phonemic structure of these languages is very close to that of Arabic). Now, we can argue that in many of such cases we deal not with loan-words proper, but rather with a borrowed meaning. As for the Common Semitic level, a good example of such kind is the word **lawḥ-* treated above. It would certainly be anachronistic to reconstruct a Proto-Semitic word for 'writing board'. On the contrary, it seems quite reasonable to think that West Semitic peoples borrowed this word from Akkadian, the language of the people which is likely to be the first among the Semites to get acquainted with the art of writing. However, a direct borrowing from Akkadian is very difficult to assume, since the phonetic aspect of the word in West Semitic is much closer to the prototype than that of the Akk. *lē'u* (the shift **-ah-* > *-ē-* in Akk. is certainly prior to every document written in a West Semitic language⁴). Accordingly, the unique plausible solution is the following: the West Semitic words are cognates to the Akk. (with a proto-meaning 'wooden board') rather than borrowings from it; what indeed might have been borrowed, was the derived meaning 'writing table', which spread from one language to another, finally reaching the remotest areas of Semitic expansion.

Notes

1. Curiously enough, the word by which az-Zawzanī explains *'irān-* in his commentary is *tabūt 'aḍīm* 'a large chest'; *tabūt* 'chest' is a well known loanword from Aramaic (*təbūtā*), or Ethiopic (*tābot*) [LGz 570, with references], both of which go back to Heb. *tēbā* 'Noah's Ark'.

2. That the meaning 'Tables of the Commandments' for *'alwāḥ-* was certainly known to pre-Islamic Arabs is obvious from the usage of this word in the Koran (e. g. *Sūrah* 7. 142/145).

3. It is not impossible that the adjective *'amūn-* 'sūr, qui ne bronche pas (cheval, monture)' [BK I 57] was chosen to strengthen the comparison. The word is derived from the wide spread Semitic root *'MN* 'to be firm, solid', which acquired in some languages an ethical nuance of 'true, reliable' (see first of all the Heb. *nā' āman* (*Nip⁵*) 'to be reliable, faithful, trusty').

4. The phonetic history of Akk. *lē'u* is to be reconstructed as **lawḥu* > **lahwu* > **lēwu* > *lē'u*. Metathesis *R₂ - R₃* is typical for nomina segolata tertiae gutturalis in Akkadian (cf. *māru* (<**ma²ru*) 'son', *zēru* (<**za⁵r-*) 'seed' versus Sem.

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mar*²-, **dar*⁵- respectively). Otherwise the word would appear as **lū* (lū*²*u*) in Akk. (note that such a variant is indeed quoted in CAD).

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