

"WHAT IS IT?" INTERPRETING EXODUS 16:15

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In Exodus 16:15, we read how the Israelites reacted when they first saw the miraculous food that God had provided for them in the wilderness: *When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, 'What is it? [man hu]' – for they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, 'This is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat . . .'* Later, *The house of Israel named it manna [man]* (Ex. 16:31). This origin for the term *man*, based on the question that the Israelites asked when they first saw it, raises a simple, yet fundamental question. If the Israelites spoke Hebrew, and since the Hebrew word for "what" is *mah*, why did they ask *man hu* when seeing this food? Based on proper Hebrew, they should have asked *mah hu* and named the manna *mah* instead of *man*. The answer to this question leads to different approaches to understanding and translating Exodus 16:15. The central issues are: Is this phrase Hebrew or another language? Is this phrase a question or a statement?¹

WHAT IS IT?

In the JPS translation of Exodus 16:15, the phrase *man hu* is understood to be a question: *'What is it?'* Many commentators affirm that the Israelites who said *man* instead of *mah* must not have been speaking typical Hebrew at that time. The tenth-century grammarian Dunash ben Labrat explains that the word is related to the Aramaic *man*, meaning "who." He writes that sometimes the word "who" is used in place of "what." He gives 1 Samuel 18:18 as an example: When David says *'what is my life?'* [mi hayyai], he uses the word for "who" instead of "what." This approach was approved by Rabbenu Tam.²

The early medieval sages Rashbam, Yosef Bekhor Shor, and Hizkuni explain that *man* is the Egyptian word for "what," and at the time the Israelites spoke a version of Hebrew that was heavily influenced by Egyptian. Rashbam writes that this is an example of the Bible using a foreign word, like the Aramaic *yegar sahaduta* [stone of witness] (Gen. 31:47) and the Persian *pur*

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[lot] (Esther 3:7). Since the Israelites named this food after the Egyptian term that they first expressed when they saw it, the Bible quoted their words verbatim, even though *man* was not pure Hebrew.³

The rest of the Bible is written in a more normative Hebrew, without Egyptian-influenced expressions. The idea that the Israelites may have conversed in Egyptian can be seen to contradict the well-known midrash (Lev. Rabbah 32:5) stating that the Israelites did not change their language during their sojourn in Egypt. It has been suggested that they spoke a kind of Hebrew-Egyptian hybrid that was still a peculiarly Israelite language, just as the Yiddish of later times is a Hebrew-European hybrid.⁴

According to E.A. Wallis Budge in his *Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary*, one of the words for the interrogative "what" in ancient Egyptian was in fact *ma*, just as in Hebrew.⁵ Modern scholars accept that the word *man* derives from a foreign source, though from ancient Semitic rather than Egyptian. S.D. Luzzato in his commentary on Exodus explains that the word is derived from the Syrian word *mana*, meaning "what."⁶ Cassuto gives a similar explanation, and writes that in ancient Caananite languages the word for "what" is *man*.⁷ In Ugaritic it is *mn* and in the Caananite of the El Amarna letters it is *mannu*. The Israelites, then, were using an "ancient dialectic variant."⁸

But why were they using this outdated term instead of the normative *mah*? Are we to say that the Israelites in the wilderness spoke a different dialect of Hebrew than the one common at the time the Bible was written? Amos Hakham, in his *Da'at Mikra* commentary, explains that it is customary for people to use archaic terms to display great astonishment.⁹ It was only in this rare and extraordinary circumstance that the Israelites used an ancient term. It has also been suggested that this may have been a slang form with which we are no longer familiar.¹⁰

Based on this approach, the verse is correctly translated as the question "What is it?" but the word *man* in the Bible is not standard Hebrew.¹¹

IT IS A PREPARED FOOD

The *Artscroll Chumash* translates this passage not as a question but as a declaration: '*It is food!*'¹² The translation in the Gutnick edition of the Torah gives a different rendering: '*It is a prepared food.*'¹³ This follows the approach of Saadiah Gaon and the definition of tenth-century grammarian Me-

naḥem Ibn Saruk in his dictionary, the *Mahberet*. He explains that the word *man* means "prepared food" in Hebrew, giving as an example Jonah 2:1, where *va-yeman* means "[he] prepared."¹⁴ This approach was also adopted by Rashi, who gives an example of this usage in Daniel 1:5 where the word *va-yeman* means "provided food."¹⁵ Ibn Ezra follows this approach as well, declaring that it is a mistake to regard this word as not being Hebrew.¹⁶

The twelfth-century grammarian Yosef Kimḥi, in his *Sefer ha-Galui*, disagrees with Dunash here and explains that *man* means "a gift."¹⁷ He writes that it does not make sense that the Israelites would give this food the name "who" or "what."¹⁸ His son, David Kimḥi (Radak), also explains *man* as "gift and portion from God."¹⁹ This is in accordance with Onkelos, who translates *man* as "*mana* [מנא] – a daily portion."

A similar approach is taken by Ya'akov ben Asher (Ba'al ha-Turim) in his commentary to Exodus. He provides two possible meanings for the word *man*: either it is "provided food" as in Daniel 1:10, or "a gift" [*manah*] as in 1 Samuel 1:5. The Israelites called it that because it was a gift from God.²⁰ Avraham Menahem Rappaport, a sixteenth-century Italian sage, in his book *Minḥah Belulah*, explains that the Israelites called what they saw "prepared food" because it was ready to eat, with no cooking required.²¹ This also explains why they might have referred to it as "a gift."

Yosef Bekhor Shor disputes this interpretation on the grounds that the verse states *they did not know what it was*, meaning that they were not calling this food by a name but asking a question about it. Moses then answered: *This is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat . . .*²² For that reason, Bekhor Shor insists that the phrase *man hu* must be understood as a question, even if the Hebrew is difficult. An interesting response to this criticism is found in the writings of the seventeenth-century Italian rabbi Azariah Figo. He explains that the word *man* should be understood to mean both "food" and "preparation," but in the sense of an appetizer, a food that prepares one for the main course. The Israelites did not understand what this food truly was; they thought that what they saw was just an appetizer. Moses then corrected them and explained that it was in fact the main course: *This is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat . . .*²³

It is interesting to note that according to E.A. Wallis Budge, in his *Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary*, the word *men* in ancient Egyptian means "daily

gift" and *man-t* means "daily food" or "provisions." Hence the interpretations of Onkelos (a daily portion), Rashi (provided food) and Kimḥi (a gift) are actually based on an Egyptian word.²⁴

IT IS 'MANNA'

The Judaica Press translation renders the phrase *man hu* as a declaration: *When the children of Israel saw it, they said to one another, 'It is manna,' for they did not know what it was.*²⁵ This follows the approach of the fifteenth-century sage Isaac Arama in his work, *Akedat Yitzḥak*. Arama does not accept that the phrase is a question, for if so "the wording should have been *they asked one another* instead of *they said to one another*." Arama explains that when the Israelites noted a layer of fine particles, they believed it was the manna with which people are familiar. That is why the verse reads: *they said to one another it is manna, because they did not realize what it actually was*. They were wrong! Moses then pointed out their mistake, explaining that it was not a medication, but food Moses said: *'This is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat'* [i.e.,] it is not what you thought it was. Since they had already named it, however, the name stuck All this is to let us know that although the Israelites called the food manna, it is not identical with the manna generally known.²⁶

Accordingly, the Israelites named what they saw *man* because it looked like *tamarix mannifera*, a sticky, sweet substance excreted by scaly insects that feed on the sap of the tarfa tree, a kind of tamarisk, the biblical *eshel*. This substance contains glucose and protein and has been collected for generations by the Beduin, who call it *man*. In many ways this substance is similar to the biblical manna; it melts in the sun, it hardens into white granules, and it can be used as a substitute for honey.²⁷ It was well known in the ancient world and is mentioned by Josephus, who wrote: "it is a mainstay to dwellers in these parts against their dearth of other provisions."²⁸ Moses had to explain to the Israelites that what they saw was not the natural sap-derived *man*, but a miraculous substance sent by God. The Israelites named the food they found after the natural *man* found in the desert.

Abarbanel disputes this interpretation, stating that the natural substance called *man* by the Beduin is in fact named after the miraculous *man*, not the

other way around. He prefers the interpretation that *man* means "gift."²⁹ Even so, Arama's view was accepted by Benno Jacob³⁰ and many modern scholars.³¹

ORIGIN OF THE CONTROVERSY

We have seen that the different interpretations of the phrase *man hu* go back to tenth-century grammarians and early medieval commentators. Their approaches became the most widely accepted interpretations among later translators. Naftali Tsevi Yehudah Berlin, in his commentary *Ha'amek Davar*, says of this verse that the argument goes back to the Midrash, as we find two opinions on interpreting this phrase in the Mekhilta (Beshalah 3).

When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another; like a person who says to his friend, "what is it?", so they said to each other "what is it?" Dorshei reshumot [commentators who give figurative interpretations] say that the Israelites called it man.

All three approaches discussed above may be read into the Mekhilta. Berlin understood that the first opinion in the Mekhilta is that of Rashbam, that *man hu* is a question, and the second opinion is that of Rashi, that *man* means "food." Menaḥem Kasher writes that the second opinion can be understood as that of Arama: that the Israelites thought it was the natural *man*.³² The eleventh-century work *Midrash Lekah Tov* quotes the first approach found in the Mekhilta and adds that in Egyptian the word for "what" is *man*, explicitly connecting the first approach in the Mekhilta with that of Rashbam.³³

The expression *man hu* has puzzled interpreters of the Bible from the earliest periods of recorded biblical exegesis. The different opinions continue to be represented in translations to this day, interpreting the phrase as either a question or a statement.³⁴

NOTES

1. See *Torah Shelemah* on Exodus 16:15, note 90, where Menahem Kasher lists seven possible interpretations for *man*. In this article we will focus on the three most probable and popular explanations.
2. Herschel Filipowski, ed., *Sefer Teshuvot Dunash im Hakhra'at Rabbenu Tam* (London: 1855) p. 20.
3. Commentaries of Rashbam, Bekhor Shor and Hizkuni, to Exodus 16:15.
4. See the exchange on this topic in the journal *Ohr Yisroel*, No. 7 (1997) p. 197, and No. 16 (1998) p. 21.
5. E. A. Wallis Budge, *Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary* (London: John Murray, 1920) p. 279b. See also Aryeh Kaplan, *The Living Torah* (New York: Moznaim, 1981), in his note to Exodus 16:15.
6. Shemuel David Luzzatto, *S. D. Luzzatto's Commentary to the Pentateuch* (Jerusalem: Horev, 1993) p. 297.
7. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1987) p. 135.
8. Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991) pp. 89, 249, n. 26.
9. Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra – Shemot* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1991) p. 305, n. 28a.
10. John Durham in the *World Biblical Commentary: Exodus* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987) p. 225, suggests that it is a vernacular term like the English "whazit?"
11. The early eleventh-century sage Rabbenu Hananel gives an interpretation that attempts to avoid the problems with the "what" approach. He understands the phrase as a question and also as being in standard Hebrew. His understanding is that the words *man hu* mean the same as *me-ayin hu*, "from whence is this?", which would be understood as an expression of astonishment upon seeing something very strange: "Where did this come from?" This approach is followed by Hayyim Paltiel, a French Tosafist. It is also quoted by Rabbenu Bahya in his Torah commentary, although he himself prefers the "gift" and "prepared" interpretations. This approach did not gain much acceptance and popularity. Even though it seemingly avoids the difficulties found in the "what" interpretation, the question "from whence is it?" seems forced, especially when we consider that the expression *man hu* still has to have letters added to it in order to turn it into the Hebrew question *me-ayin hu*.
12. Nosson Scherman, *Artscroll Chumash* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1993) p. 387.
13. Chaim Miller, *Chumash – The Book of Exodus, Gutnick Edition* (New York: Kol Menachem, 2003) p.111. Interestingly, this is also the translation used in *The Jewish Children's Bible - Exodus*, adapted by Sheryl Prenzlau (New York: Pitspopany Press, 1997) p. 30, where it is explained that "In those days, the Hebrew word for 'a portion of food' was *mahn*."
14. Herschel Filipowski, ed., *Sefer Mahberet Menahem* (London: 1854) p. 118.
15. Commentaries of Saadia Gaon and Rashi to Exodus 16:15.
16. Commentary of Ibn Ezra to Exodus 16:15.
17. Henry J. Mathews, ed., *Sefer ha-Galui* (Berlin: Romm, 1887) pp. 14, 15. Note that Binyamin in his glosses to *Sefer ha-Galui* accepts the opinion that *man* is Egyptian for 'what.'
18. However, note the comment of William Propp in *The Anchor Bible: Exodus 1-18* (New York: Doubleday, 1999) p. 596, that "using a pronoun as a proper noun is a perennial joke; fam-

ous examples are . . . Abbot and Costello's 'Who's on first.' This may not be the only humorous element here, as the LXX gives the word *manna* for this food, which is a pun: *manna* is Greek for granules."

19. Chaim Chavel, ed., *Rabbenu Bahya: Bi'ur al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1991) p. 147, in the notes on the bottom of the page.

20. Ya'akov ben Asher, *Peirush Ha-Tur ha-Arokh al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: J. Stern, 1961) p. 150.

21. Yosef Dov Assia, *Humash Otzar ha-Rishonim* (Israel: Makhon Torat ha-Rishonim, 2003) vol. 2, p. 355.

22. Commentary of Bekhor Shor to Exodus 16:15.

23. Barukh Yasher, ed., *Binah le-Itim al ha-Torah Me-Rabbenu Azariah Figo* (Tel Aviv: Sinai, 1962) p. 85.

24. E. A. Wallis Budge, *Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary* (London: John Murray, 1920). The word *men* is on p. 297b, *man-t* is on 278b. It may be of significance that the word *mem* means coriander (p. 296a), one of the ways used to describe the manna (Ex. 16:31).

25. Abraham J. Rosenberg, *The Judaica Press Shemoth* (New York: Judaica Press, 1995) p. 234. The King James Bible also translates the verse in this manner.

26. Eliyahu Munk, ed., *Aqaydat Yitzchaq* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1986) vol. 1, p. 406. (Beshalah, chapter 41)

27. Yehuda Felix, *Nature and Land in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass Publishing, 1992) p. 46.

28. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 3:31.

29. Commentary of Abarbanel to Exodus 16:14.

30. Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav, 1992) pp. 453, 454.

31. See, for example, Theodor Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969) p. 242.

32. *Torah Shelemah* on Exodus 16:15, note 91.

33. *Midrash Lekah Tov* on Exodus 16:15.

34. There are many creative homiletic interpretations as well. For example, R. Hayyim Yosef David Azulai in his book *Nahal Kedumim* suggests that *man* is an abbreviation of the words *ma'aseh nissim* (a miraculous creation). For more homiletic interpretations, see for example the commentary *Kli Yakar* to Exodus 16:15 and R. Isaac Hutner's *Pahad Yitzhak - Sukkot*, 17:2, 3.