

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sir,

In the recent issue of *JBQ*, Min Suc Kee suggests that the meaning of *mayim* is "closely associated with its original meaning as a pair" (Min Suc Kee, "A Study on the Dual Form of *Mayim*, Water," *JBQ* 40:3 (2012), p. 183). The author finds support for this thesis in the Creation story of the Bible and that in *Enuma Elish*. It seems to me that Min Suc Kee's suggestion is fundamentally wrong, because it assumes that the meaning of a most basic word of any language, "water," referring to a natural necessity for human existence, was originally crafted and shaped to reflect notions in some creation legends.

When and how the original language from which Hebrew evolved actually developed is not known. Jewish tradition maintains that Hebrew was the first language spoken by mankind. Whatever the case, it seems to me that the term for "water" was so important to humans that it was among the first to be formed in any vocabulary. Also, being so essential to human survival, this word probably did not admit any ambiguity. It is therefore difficult to accept the notion that the term had to wait for legends of creation to develop before it came into being. Obviously, these legends could not have been created without first having the term "water."

Min Suc Kee can certainly claim that "the literary evidence so far demonstrates that the waters above and below [the firmament] were understood as a pair that was originally one body but separated later into two" (p. 186). This understanding, however, does not mean that the duality is reflected in the word *mayim*. Thus, the claim that "In ancient Israelite verbal and written communications *mayim* (water) must clearly have been pronounced and written as 'dual'; and this practice would have been closely associated with a belief that the waters were divided in two as a pair" has not been demonstrated and cannot be demonstrated. Min Suc Kee's understanding of *shamaym* as consisting of  $(sh)a + maym/mu$  = "one of the waters/of the waters" gives an indeterminate term.<sup>1</sup>

My personal view is that *mayim* was perhaps derived from the onomatopoeic *yam* ("lake" or "wide stretch of a river"), connoting the sound of water movement, as the root *hnh* ("murmur, roar") connotes the noise of waves

(Jer. 5:22, 31:35; Isa. 51:15). Notably, *ham* and *yam* are homophones. The word *mayim* could originally have designated "that which was brought from the sea, or river." Although it has the form of a masculine plural, *mayim* is in no sense a plural. The first speakers of Hebrew, observing that water comes from heaven in the form of rain, may well have named the heavens *shamaym* because that was a place "where water was" (*sham mayim*).

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#### NOTE

1. Aaron Marcus, *Barzilai: Massah be-Toledot ha-Lashon ha-Ivrit* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1983) pp. 58-59. Marcus suggests that *shamaym* is derived from the root (*sh*)*mm* in the sense of "awestruck, amazed" (Jer 2:12). This is also a position in *Genesis Rabbah* 1:4. Marcus states that *shamaym* can be viewed as the plural of *sham*. This seems to be flimsy etymology, even though in several Semitic languages (Akkadian, Phoenician, Sabean, Arabic, Ethiopian, Aramaic) the word for "heaven" begins with (*sh*)*m*.



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