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## סִנְיָו (sansinnāyw; Song of Songs 7:9) and the *Palpal* Noun Pattern

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The word סִנְיָו (*sansinnāyw*; Song 7:9) is a *hapax legomenon*, and there is no scholarly consensus about its meaning. It has been variously identified as denoting the branches of a date palm, clusters of dates, or the blossoms or the fruit of a date palm. The word *sansinnāyw* belongs to the class of noun pattern termed *palpal* (פִּלְפַּל). This article maintains that some of the words of the *palpal* noun pattern share a common semantic characteristic. This characteristic enables one to determine the precise meaning of the word סִנְיָו: a fruit-laden cluster of dates.

As is well known, Hebrew nouns can be categorized according to classes of patterns (*mišqal*). Some of the classes of noun patterns include words that share a common semantic characteristic, and it is possible to discern groups of meaning within the pattern.<sup>1</sup> The shared semantic characteristic may not appear in every single word in a particular noun pattern,<sup>2</sup> but this fact should not prevent us from recognizing the distinct groups of meaning. Hebrew language textbooks tend to feature instructive tables of noun patterns and their meanings. Thus, for example, words of the *qattelet* pattern relate to diseases and afflictions: יִלְפַת, יִבְלַת, בְּהֶרַת, עֲנִיָּה, and with modified vocalization for guttural letters: קְדַחַת, קְרַחַת, סַפַּחַת, יִצְרַחַת, גְּבַחַת.<sup>3</sup> Even if they are not entirely systematic, the shared semantic aspect of words in noun patterns can help in determining the meanings of doubtful words.

<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (trans. and ed. T. Muraoka; 2 vols.; SubBi 14; Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1996), 2:238.

<sup>2</sup>It must be emphasized that it is necessary to distinguish between the synchronic and diachronic divisions between nominal root types. Thus, for example, the words זֵרוּעַ (e.g., Exod 6:6) and בְּרוּשׁ (e.g., Isa 41:9) appear to belong to a single noun group, but comparison with other languages demonstrates that זֵרוּעַ belongs to the *qitāl* type, whereas בְּרוּשׁ is of the *qutāl* type. See, e.g., Yehoshua Blau, *Torat ha-Hegeh ve-ha-Tsurot* (7th ed.; Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad, 1992), 209.

<sup>3</sup>See, e.g., Lev 13:2, 42; 21:20; 22:22; Deut 28:22. As noted, the phenomenon is not fully systematic, and in each pattern there are words that do not share a common semantic attribute.

The word סַנְסַנָּי (sansinnāyw; Song 7:9), from the quadrilateral root סנסן,<sup>4</sup> belongs to the noun pattern known to Hebrew language specialists as *palpal* (פַּלְפַּל). To the best of my knowledge nobody to date has suggested a semantic association connecting the words of this pattern. It appears to me that at least some of the words belonging to the *palpal* pattern share a common semantic characteristic: they refer to something that is round, or roughly circular, that occurs in replicating multiples. In this matter, it appears that we must distinguish between the shared semantic characteristic of *palpal* nouns, גלגל, תלתל, דרדר, סלסל, זלזל and סנסן (which I will discuss below),<sup>5</sup> and the shared semantic characteristic of the verbs of the *palpal* pattern, which is separate and expresses repetition and intensification of the action.<sup>6</sup>

The word גלגל (*galgal*, “wheel”) reflects the semantic characteristic noted above for words in the *palpal* pattern: a wheel is round and, significantly, the speed of its revolutions creates an optical illusion of multiple circles. Moreover, the primary function of the wheel is to propel a cart or chariot. Accordingly, the word “wheel” tends not to occur alone but almost always within a group of wheels. This is emphasized in verses such as Jer 47:3, “The rumbling of their wheels [גלגלין]”; Isa 5:28: “Their chariot wheels [גלגלין] like the wind.”<sup>7</sup>

The word תלתל (*taltal*, “curl”) also clearly expresses the proposed semantic significance of the *palpal* pattern. So, in Song 8:11, “His locks are *taltallim*.” Curls in hair appear as an abundance of replicating circles.

The word דרדר (*dardar*, generally translated as “thistle”)<sup>8</sup> occurs twice in the Bible, both times alongside the word קוץ (“thorn”): “Thorns and *dardar* shall it sprout for you” (Gen 3:18); “Thorns and *dardar* shall grow on their altars” (Hos 10:8). A number of scholars have attempted to identify *dardar* with a specific plant.<sup>9</sup> It seems to me, however, that the collocation “thorn and *dardar*” invites us to conclude that, like קוץ, *dardar* has a general meaning that is not restricted to a particular type of plant. It may be that the sense I proposed for words of the *palpal* pattern can clarify the fine distinction between the word “thorn” and the word *dardar*. The seasonal plants in the land of Israel dry out in the summer, and the hills and valleys become covered with vast expanses of yellow vegetation. When the edges of the leaves of the plants dry out, they become sharp, and when the flowers of the plants

Cf., e.g., the following nouns of the *qattelet* type: גַּחְלֵת (Isa 47:14), יְבֶשֶׁת (Ps 95:5), לְהֶבֶת (1 Sam 17:7), צִלְחַת (2 Kgs 21:13).

<sup>4</sup>Cf. also from the root סנסן the city Sansannah (Josh 15:31).

<sup>5</sup>For פרפר and ערער, see n. 15 below.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. פצפץ and פרפר (Job 16:12); קרקר (Num 24:17; Isa 22:5); חרחר (Prov 26:21).

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Ezek 23:24; 26:10. Biblical citations follow the JPS translation.

<sup>8</sup>In modern Hebrew, the word דרדר is used specifically for plants of the genus *Centaurea*. Of course, this does not offer proof concerning the original meaning of the word.

<sup>9</sup>E.g., Immanuel Löw, *Die Flora der Juden* (1924–34; 4 vols.; repr., Hildesheim: Olms, 1967), 1:405–7.

shrink and shed their leaves, what remains are dried balls that hang at the edge of the stem. Perhaps we may distinguish between thorn and *dardar* on the basis of this schematic division: the dried-out, pointy, prickly edges of the leaves are the thorns,<sup>10</sup> and the dried-out flowers—the countless dry balls that cover the hills and fields in summer—are the *dardar*. If this proposal is correct, then *dardar* too bears the shared semantic attribute of the words in the *palpal* pattern.

I would suggest that סלסל (*salsal*) and זלזל (*zalzal*) also reflect the sense I have proposed for the *palpal* pattern, even though their meaning is indeterminate. Jeremiah 6:9 states, “Like a vintager over *salsillôt*.” Exegetes remain divided in their opinions. Some associate the word *salsillôt* with “basket” (*sal*). Others understand the word to mean the thin branches of the vine, the tendrils, which they take to be a secondary form of *zalzal*, a word that appears in Isa 18:5, “He will trim away the *zalzallim* with pruning hooks.”<sup>11</sup> If *salsillôt* is in fact the baskets in which the vintager places his grapes during the grape harvest, then, like other baskets in antiquity, it would have been made of reeds or interwoven threads.<sup>12</sup> The appearance of multiple circles is also applicable if the word *salsal*, like the word *zalzal*, means the tendrils of the grapevine. The tendril is a very thin and atrophied branch that winds around in circles, serving the vine by attaching to nearby bushes and trees. Whether *salsillôt* means basket or tendril, the word *salsal* had acquired, by an early period, a meaning similar to *taltal* and came to signify hair care. Thus, for example, in *b. Roš Haš. 26b*, in the criticism, “How long will you be *mēsalsel* with your hair?”<sup>13</sup> From here, it was a short path to an adaptive usage in the sense of respect, honor, and style in general, without any association with hair: “Acquire wisdom; with all your acquisitions, acquire discernment. *Salsēlehā* [= *salsel* her] to you and she will exalt you” (Prov 4:7–8). This is simply the result of assimilation due to the shared semantic attributes of the words in the *palpal* pattern.<sup>14</sup>

The shared semantic characteristic of the nouns in the *palpal* pattern<sup>15</sup> can

<sup>10</sup> Cf. “lacerating thorns” (Ezek 28:24).

<sup>11</sup> On the expression of this controversy in the Middle Ages, see the summary in Eliezer Ben Yehuda, *A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew* (in Hebrew; 16 vols.; repr., Jerusalem: Makor, 1980), 4078 n. 1; and see, *inter alios*, Gustaf Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina* (1928–39; 7 vols.; repr., Hildesheim: Olms, 1964), 4:301; John Bright, *Jeremiah: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 21; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 44; HALOT 2:758, s.v. זלזל; Yair Hoffman, *Jeremiah: Introduction and Commentary* (in Hebrew; 2 vols.; Jerusalem: Magnes, 2001), 1:22.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Gen 40:16: “three openwork (or: wicker) baskets.”

<sup>13</sup> For additional examples, see Ben Yehuda, *Complete Dictionary*, 4076–78.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in Jewish sources in the Middle Ages, the words *salsal* and *taltal* already appear as a common collocation, and both of them acquire metaphorical meanings of respect and style. In a poetic paraphrase of the verse “His locks are *taltallim*” (Song 5:11), Immanuel Haromi criticizes those “who *yistalselū* with their *taltallim*” (Dov Jarden, *Mahberoth Immanuel Haromi* [...]/Jerusalem: D. Jarden, 1985], vol. 1, 12:229, line 282).

<sup>15</sup> In 2 Kgs 5:12, the river פַּרְפַּר (*parpar*) is mentioned, but it is impossible to know how it

help us determine the precise meaning of the word סַנְסִינְיָו (*sansinnāyw*). Song of Songs 7:8–10a reads, “Your stately form is like the palm, your breasts are like clusters. I say: let me climb the palm, let me take hold of its *sansinnāyw*; let your breasts be like clusters of grapes, your breath like the fragrance of apples, and your mouth like choicest wine.”<sup>16</sup>

The word סַנְסִינְיָו in 7:9 is a *hapax legomenon*, and there is no consensus about its correct meaning. In Jewish exegesis across the ages, there is broad agreement that סַנְסִינְיָו means the branches of the date palm.<sup>17</sup> Among the moderns, however, there is controversy. There are those who maintain that the meaning really is the branches of a date palm,<sup>18</sup> but others suggest that the word refers to clusters of dates, and generally they specify that the intended meaning is the thin stems of the cluster that hold the dates or the blossoms that precede the fruit, or that it is the fruits themselves.<sup>19</sup>

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got its name. See Michael C. Astour, “The Origin of the Terms ‘Canaan,’ ‘Phoenician,’ and ‘Purple,’” *JNES* 24 (1965): 350. In contrast, the animal known in modern Hebrew as *parpar*, that is, butterfly, also reflects the semantic attribute we have identified in the *palpal* pattern. A butterfly has four rounded wings which, when in motion, create an illusion of multiple circles. For the possibility that the tree ערער (Jer 17:6) is *Juniperus phoenicea* and for illustration of its multiple rounded fruits, see Jehuda Feliks, *Plant World of the Bible* (in Hebrew; Ramat Gan: Massada, 1968), 82–83.

<sup>16</sup>Verse 9 should be read in accordance with the LXX, εἴπα ἀναβήσομαι ἐν τῷ φοίνικα (אמרתִי אעלה בתמר), with the definite article, and not following the MT בְּתַמַּר. The continuation of v. 10 is in the words of the beloved woman: “Let it flow to my beloved as new wine gliding over the lips of sleepers.”

<sup>17</sup>Thus the medieval exegetes, for example, Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Isaiah Di-Trani, Gersonides; see Sara Japhet, “The Anonymous Commentary on the Song of Songs in Ms. Prague: A Critical Edition and Introduction,” in “To Settle the Plain Meaning of the Verse”: *Studies in Biblical Exegesis* (ed. Sara Japhet and Eran Viezel; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2011), 247. See also Eliezer Halevi Grunhut, *Midrash Shir Hashirim Printed from a Geniza Manuscript* (Jerusalem: Ktav Yad Vasefer Institute, 1981), 116. Similarly, too, see the medieval lexicons, e.g., Angel Sáenz-Badillos, *Mēnaḥem Ben Saruq Maḥberet: Edición crítica e introducción* (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 1986), 66\*; Wilhelm Bacher, *Sepher Haschoraschim [...] von Abulwalid Merwān Ibn Ġanāh (R. Jona)* (Berlin: H. Itzkowski, 1896), 348.

<sup>18</sup>Thus in some biblical translations, e.g., RSV (1952), NKJV (1982), JPS Tanakh (1985). See, *inter alios*, Ben Yehuda, *Complete Dictionary*, 4126; Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations: A Study, Modern Translation and Commentary* (rev. and augm. ed.; New York: Ktav, 1974), 97; Peter Jay (trans.), *The Song of Songs* (Poetica 6; London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1975), 22; Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 7C; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 593, 636; Philip S. Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles: Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes* (ArBib 17A; Colledgeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 182. There are those who maintain that the word denotes specifically the base of the palm branch, from which the dates are suspended. See, e.g., Abraham Even-Shoshan, *A New Dictionary* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1996), 1821; Elie Assis, *The Infinity of Love in the Song of Songs: A Literary Analysis* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronot and Chemed Books, 2009), 164.

<sup>19</sup>See, e.g., the following translations, NJB (1990); NASB (1973); NIV (1984); ESV (English Standard Version; 2001). See also, *inter alios*, Löw, *Die Flora der Juden*, 2:336–37; BDB, 703; Duane

The lack of agreement is especially evident in a number of scholarly publications whose authors preferred not to determine the correct meaning of the word.<sup>20</sup> This exegetical controversy is also found in the ancient versions. The LXX seems to take the word סְנִינִי to mean “branches”: “I will take hold of its heights” (ὑψεω αὐτοῦ). In contrast, the Vulgate renders the word as “fruit” (*fructus*).

Close reading of the text does not help shed light on the meaning of סְנִינִי. The beloved man compares his beloved woman to a date palm and imagines himself ([אמרתי בלבני])<sup>21</sup> climbing the tree.<sup>22</sup> Two activities are mentioned in v. 9: the beloved ascends (“let me climb the palm,” אַעֲלֶה בְּתֶמָּר), and then he grasps (“let me take hold of its סְנִינִי,” אֶחְזֶה בְּסִנְיָיו). The root עלה (“to climb”) calls to mind climbing, as up a ladder, or stairs (e.g., Gen 28:12; Exod 20:23). It is true that climbing up a date palm differs from climbing other trees and somewhat resembles climbing up a ladder: the trunk of the tree is encircled with stumps that have withered or were removed by the owner of the tree in order to grant access to the fruit. These stumps serve as a ladder and make the climb much easier. As some scholars have emphasized, אָחַז + ב (generally translated as “[take] hold of”) is a verb that denotes a decisive and directed action. Its occurrences in the biblical text indicate strenuous effort.<sup>23</sup> It thus seems that we ought to distinguish between the stage of climbing up the tree, which is simple and easy, like ascending a ladder, and the stage of grasping the סְנִינִי, which demands considerable effort, and to determine that this grasping occurred after the ascent, that is, at the top portion of the tree. The context allows us to determine the location of סְנִינִי, but it does not allow us to determine if it is the branches that the beloved grasps or, rather, the fruit.

A number of scholars base their opinion concerning the correct meaning of the word סְנִינִי on the Akkadian *sissinnu*.<sup>24</sup> However, the meaning of this word too is subject to dispute, essentially the same dispute that exists regarding the word סְנִינִי: there are those who maintain that the meaning of *sissinnu* is a branch of a

Garrett, *Song of Songs* (WBC 23B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 245; HALOT 2:761; Menahem Zevi Kaddari, *A Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2006), 759.

<sup>20</sup>See Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 183; J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 238.

<sup>21</sup>Thus many commentators. Cf. the paraphrase of Moshe Ibn Tibbon, “I say if only it were so...” (*Perush al Shir ha-Shirim* [Lyck: M’kize Nirdamim, 1874], 21b).

<sup>22</sup>On the date palm in the world of images in the biblical period, see Joan Goodnick Westenholz, “The Seven Species, the First Fruits of the Land,” in *Sacred Bounty Sacred Land: The Seven Species of the Land of Israel* (ed. Joan Goodnick Westenholz; Jerusalem: Bible Lands Museum, 1998), 44–50.

<sup>23</sup>See Yair Zakovitch, *The Song of Songs: Introduction and Commentary* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1992), 125; Garrett, *Song of Songs*, 245; e.g. Gen 22:13; 25:26; Exod 4:4.

<sup>24</sup>This is the case, even though they are not perfect etymological parallels. See Benno Landsberger, *The Date Palm and Its By-products according to the Cuneiform Sources* (AfOB 17; Graz: Im Selbstverlage des Herausgebers, 1967), 18 n. 55.

palm, and others who say that the meaning is a cluster of dates, or date blossoms. More recently, opinion has shifted toward the definition of blossoms, and not branches.<sup>25</sup>

My proposal that words of the noun pattern *palpal* share a distinct meaning—a circle or circular appearance that is replicated many times—is a helpful argument in support of taking סְּנִינִי to mean a cluster of the fruit of the date palm, and not the blossoms, and certainly not the branches. The date clusters that grow among the high branches of the date palm are composed of dozens of thin delicate branches, intertwined with one another. The dates are suspended from them, first the flowers of the date, and in the next stage, the fruit. The shape of the fruit, in all its different species and variations, is round, sometimes a near-perfect circle and sometimes a long ellipsis. The appearance of a cluster of dates somewhat resembles a cascade of curly hair. The date thus shares the semantic characteristic identified in other words of the *palpal* pattern. It seems, then, that the beloved in Song 7:9 who grasps the סְּנִינִי of the tree, is not grasping the branches, nor a cluster of dates at the time of their blossoming but rather a cluster laden with fruit.

In light of this, the word “clusters” (אשכולות) in v. 8 (“your breasts are like clusters”) are the clusters of the fruit of the date palm, and they are to be distinguished from the “clusters of grapes” (אשכולות הגפן) that appear in the subsequent verse. If this is the case, then it would indicate the following verse division. In vv. 8–9a, the beloved is compared to a date palm: “Your stately form is like the palm, your breasts are like clusters. I say: let me climb the palm, let me take hold of its סְּנִינִי.” Then, in vv. 9b–10a, the woman is compared to other fruits: “let your breasts be like clusters of grapes, your breath like the fragrance of apples, and your mouth like choicest wine.” The word “clusters” (אשכולות) effects the association between the two groups of similes. If my analysis is correct, then the Masoretic division of the verses does not suit the content of the poem.

<sup>25</sup>See esp. Landsberger, *Date Palm*, 18–19; Harold R. Cohen, *Biblical Hapax Legomena in the Light of Akkadian and Ugaritic* (SBLDS 37; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), 125; CAD 15:325–28, and the bibliography cited there. Another meaning of *sissinnu* is “broom.” Note that in postbiblical Hebrew, the word *makbēd* (מַכְבֵּד) is similarly used for both a cluster of blossoms and a broom (e.g., *Midrash Tanḥ. Mase’ei* 13). Accordingly, *sissinnu* may also be a flowering cluster rather than a branch. For the Syriac *śisnā* in the sense of a flowering cluster, see Immanuel Löw, *Aramäische Pflanzennamen* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1881), 119; R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus* (2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1879–1901), 2617. On the Aramaic סְּנִינִי, סְּנִינִי in the sense of the fruits of the date palm or a cluster of blossoms, see, e.g., Gustaf Dalman, *Aramäisch-Neuhebräisches Handwörterbuch zu Targum, Talmud und Midrasch* (Göttingen: Pfeiffer, 1938), 296; Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period* (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1992), 384. On *ssn* in Ugaritic in the sense of a date palm or branch, see Gregorio del Olmo Lete and Joaquín Sanmartín, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition* (trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson; 2 vols.; HO, Section 1: The Near and Middle East 67; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 2:772.