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“BUT THAT THOU WOULDST CLEAR MY WAY BEFORE ME”: A NOTE ON THE PERSONAL AND EMOTIONAL RENDERING OF AN ANCIENT IDIOM IN 2 NEPHI 4:33

Matthew L. Bowen

Abstract: *The biblical Hebrew collocation *pinnâ derek* or *pannû derek* (cf. Egyptian *ir w3.t [n]*), often rendered “prepare the way” or “prepare a way” in English, is an evident stylistic feature of Nephi’s writings. The most basic meaning of this idiom is “clear my way,” which is how it is rendered in 2 Nephi 4:33. Zenos’s use of “prepare the way” (Jacob 5:61, 64) in the context of “clear[ing] away” bad branches also reflects this most basic meaning.*

The Hebrew idiom *pinnâ derek* or *pannû derek* often appears in early English translations of the Hebrew Bible (including the KJV) as “prepare the way” (see, e.g., Isaiah 40:3 [cf. Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4], 57:14, 62:10 [*pannû derek*]; Malachi 3:1 [*pinnâ derek*]). Nephi’s replete use of this idiom constitutes a stylistic marker in his personal writings (see 1 Nephi 3:7; 9:6; 10:7–8 [with reference to Isaiah 40:3]; 10:18; 11:27 [also with reference to Isaiah 40:3]; 14:17; 17:41; 22:20; 2 Nephi 2:4; 4:33; and 9:10).

The basic meaning of the Hebrew verb *pānâ* is “to turn.”¹ In its Piel stem (*pinnâ*), this verb means “to clear away, remove” (Zephaniah 3:15) or “tidy up” (Genesis 24:31; Leviticus 14:36).² As an idiomatic expression, *pinnâ derek* (and its plural imperative *pannû derek*) denotes “clear the

1. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, ND: Brill, 2001), 937–38. Hereafter cited as *HALOT*.

2. *HALOT*, 938.

way”³ or “clear a track”⁴ — namely, “make” a way, road, track, or path “clear, free from obstacles.”⁵ The Egyptian equivalent of this idiom is *ir w3.t n* (“prepare a way for”).⁶ As a Hebrew speaker taught in the “learning of the Jews,” Nephi surely would have been familiar with the former, and as one whose education also included the “language of the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 1:2), he was plausibly familiar with variations of the latter. Thus, Nephi’s apparent use of the idiom in 2 Nephi 4:33 begs further scrutiny. Toward the end of what has come to be called “the Psalm of Nephi” (2 Nephi 4:16–35), a document written immediately after the death of Lehi⁷ and later transcribed by Nephi to his small plates, Nephi petitions the Lord thus:

O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness! O Lord, wilt thou **make a way** for mine escape before mine enemies! **Wilt thou make my path straight before me!** Wilt thou **not place a stumbling block in my way — but that thou wouldst clear my way before me, and hedge not up my way, but the ways of mine enemy.**” (2 Nephi 4:33)

Notably, Nephi mentions a “stumbling block” (Hebrew *mikšôl*)⁸ in his list, a term that also appears in close connection with *pannû derek* in Isaiah 57:14: “Cast ye up, cast ye up, prepare the way [*pannû derek*], take up the stumblingblock [*mikšôl*] out of the way of my people.” The hedge he mentions would have presented a similar obstacle requiring clearing. Hosea, a prophet with whom Nephi would have been familiar, prophesied, “Therefore, behold, **I will hedge up thy way** [*hinëni-šāk*”

3. It is translated “clear the way” in various Bible translations at Isaiah 40:3; 57:14, 62:10. See, e.g., the New American Standard Version, New American Standard Bible (1995, 1997); Amplified Bible; Contemporary English Version, JPS/NJPS Tanakh, NET Bible.

4. HALOT, 938.

5. Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 815.

6. Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute/Ashmolean Museum, 1999), 52. Attested in Percy E. Newberry, *El Bersheh, Part I: The Tomb of Tehuti-Hetep* (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1895), plate 14, column 3: *r ir.t n=f w3.t* (“in order to prepare the way for it”; translation mine). See also the translation given on p. 18: “in order to make for it the road.”

7. See John W. Welch, “The Psalm of Nephi as a Post-Lehi Document,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 72–74.

8. Cf. the Lord acting as a “stone of stumbling” (*‘eben negep*) and a “rock of offence” (*šûr mikšôl*) to the unrighteous Israelites and Judahites in Isaiah 8:14.

darkēk] with thorns, and make a wall, that she shall not find her paths” (Hosea 2:6 [vs. 8 in the Masoretic text]). Zeniff perhaps quoted or had reference to this very prophecy when he states, “For behold, the Lord hath said: I will not succor my people in the day of their transgression; but **I will hedge up their ways** that they prosper not; and their doings shall be as **a stumbling block** before them” (Mosiah 7:29; cf. Isaiah 8:14).⁹

In every other instance in Nephi’s writings, the underlying idiom is rendered as some permutation of “prepare the way” or “prepare a way.” Here, however, the translation renders Nephi’s apparent use of *pinnâ derek* more personally and with more emotional lucidity as “clear the way” even as Nephi intensifies his fivefold plea to have an unobstructed way of escape to the Lord.

“Prepare the Way for Them That They May Grow”: The Work of Clearing the Way

Another Book of Mormon passage offers a very concrete example of how “prepare the way” means to “clear the way.” Zenos evidently uses the idiom *pinnâ/pannû derek* twice in his allegory (see Jacob 5:61, 64). In Zenos’s allegory of the olive tree, the Lord of the vineyard gives his servant specific instructions on what to do in order to rescue his vineyard from corruption, including preserving the tree and branches that represent the house of Israel:

Wherefore, dig about them, and prune them, and dung them once more, for the last time, for the end draweth nigh. And if it be so that these last grafts shall grow, and bring forth the natural fruit, **then shall ye prepare the way for them**, that they may grow. And as they begin to grow ye shall **clear away the branches which bring forth bitter fruit**, according to the strength of the good and the size thereof; and **ye shall not clear away the bad thereof all at once**, lest the roots thereof should be too strong for the graft, and the graft thereof shall perish, and I lose the trees of my vineyard. For it grieveth me that I should lose the trees of my vineyard; wherefore **ye shall clear away the bad according as the good shall grow**, that the root and the top may be equal in strength, until the good shall overcome the bad, and the bad be hewn down and cast into the fire, that they cumber not the ground of my vineyard;

9. Compare how the poisonous serpents “hedge up the way” against the people in Ether 9:33.

and thus will I sweep away the bad out of my vineyard. (Jacob 5:64–66)

The Lord of the vineyard states that the grafted-in branches need room to grow. The “way” will be “prepared” or *cleared* for their growth by “clear[ing] away” the bad branches. Zenos uses a verb translated “clear away” (perhaps the Piel verb *pinnâ* as in Zephaniah 3:15)¹⁰ three times in direct connection with branches and the idiom “prepare the way” (*pinnâ derek*) to emphasize the type of work required to “prepare the way” — or clear the way. Zenos’s words resemble Psalm 80:8–9 in content and theme: “Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt: thou hast cast out the heathen, and planted it. Thou preparedst [*pinnâtâ* — i.e., cleared] room before it, and didst cause it to take deep root, and it filled the land.”

Beyond bad branches, “the bad” that needed to be cleared away may have also included stones in the vineyard (compare Isaiah 5:2) or “stumbling blocks” (2 Nephi 4:33; Isaiah 57:14) that obstruct the movement of people on the covenant path (“the way”) and thus restrict the growth of the tree. It is worth comparing this imagery to 1 Nephi 14:1 and the angel’s promise to Nephi that if the latter-day Gentiles would “hearken” unto the Lord, he would “manifest himself . . . unto the taking away of their stumbling blocks.”

Conclusion

The Book of Mormon English translation’s use of the phrase “clear my way” in 2 Nephi 4:33 appropriately reflects the clearest sense of the Hebrew idiom *pinnâ derek* or *pannû derek* (cf. Egyptian *ir w3.t [n]*) vis-à-vis the more abstract and usual English phrasing “prepare the way”/ “prepare a way” at a point in his psalm where he attempts to convey intense personal distress. Zenos’s apparent use of the idiom *pinnâ derek* (“prepare the way”) in connection with “clear[ing] away” branches bearing bad fruit (Jacob 5:61, 64–66) gives us another example of this idiom that helps us see its semantic range. Both passages are just two more examples that reflect the subtlety and beauty of an ancient text translated by the gift and power of God.

10. See also Genesis 24:31; Leviticus 14:36. Context perhaps suggests that “clear away” in Jacob 5:65–66 more likely reflects the use of *pinnâ* than Hebrew *gāraš* or *nāšal*, which denote to “drive out” or “drive away” and primarily have human beings as their explicit objects (see *HALOT*, 204 and 730), although both remain possibilities given the allegoric nature of Zenos’s text.

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