

Long Hair or Short Hair in Ezekiel 44:20?

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1 Introduction

This study attempts to rescue from oblivion a suggestion offered, then summarily dismissed, by G. R. Driver in his 1926 article “Linguistic and Textual Problems.” In that article, Driver noted that apparent conflicts between Ezekiel 44:20 and certain Pentateuchal passages might be resolved if שָׁלַח in Ezekiel 44:20 were glossed as ‘shave off, strip off’ (< **slh*), rather than as ‘send forth, let grow long’ (< **slh*), as in the traditional interpretation.¹ Although Driver used this analysis merely as a rhetorical foil (later on halfheartedly reaffirming the traditional view), close scrutiny of the evidence shows his now forgotten ‘strip off’ gloss to represent a compelling reinterpretation of this seemingly straightforward form.

Although this attempt at dredging up Driver’s old, ignored gloss might seem, superficially, to constitute little more than an overburdened word study, my real, and somewhat broader, aim is to highlight the widely acknowledged, but in practice often underappreciated, fact that even seemingly straightforward forms like *slh* can hold big surprises if one fails to pay close attention to the anthropological and literary context of the passages in which they are used.

2 The Traditional Approach

As it is generally understood, Ezekiel 44:20 prohibits priests from both radical shortening (גָּלַח ‘make bald, shave’) and radical lengthening (שָׁלַח ‘send forth, let grow long’) of their hair, permitting instead only a moderate trimming (כָּסַם ; cf. Akkadian *kasāmu* ‘cut off, chop’):

וְרֹאשָׁם לֹא יְגַלְחוּ וְיַפְרֹעַ לֹא יִשְׁלְחוּ כִּסּוּם יְכַסְּמוּ אֶת־רִשְׁתָּם

‘They shall not shave their head, nor let [their] hair to grow out; they shall only trim [the hair of] their heads.’

Though presenting a fine, even-handed approach to male grooming, and offering a superficially reasonable gloss for the root *slh*, analysis of *slh*’s overall usage and meaning raises doubts about the wisdom of such an approach. In reality, the biblical

¹Driver, G. R. “Linguistic and Textual Difficulties: Ezekiel,” *Biblica* 19 (103), p. 186.

authors use *šlh* as a verb in just two basic senses: ‘send’ and ‘send away’ (fig. 1). Neither of these senses connotes the sort of slow, undirected growth characteristic of hair and therefore required by Ezekiel 44:20.

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| <p>1. G-stem ‘send’</p> <p>(a) ‘send out, off, forth’</p> <p>(b) ‘stretch out, extend [body part]’</p> <p>(c) = D-stem</p> <p>2. D-stem ‘send away’</p> <p>(a) = G-stem</p> <p>(b) ‘cast out, get rid of’</p> <p>(c) ‘release, let go free’</p> <p>(d) ‘shoot [weapon]’</p> |
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Figure 1: Summary of שִׁלַּח’s Biblical Meanings

It is true that some lexicons offer ‘shoot forth’ (i.e., ‘grow’) for *šlh* in Jer 17:8; Ezek 17:6, 31:5; and Ps 80:12 (so BDB, KB ‘ausbreiten’). And this meaning might, at first glance, appear compatible with the growth of human hair. These passages, however, all apply *šlh* to boughs or roots ‘sent’ to a water source (Ezek 31:5 [a gloss implicitly]). An undirected ‘sprouting up, growing out’ is clearly not the intent there. Had ‘sprout up, grow out’ been the intended meaning, other more obvious roots would doubtless have been used (of hair, e.g., *šmh*, Lev 13:37, Judg 16:22, Ezek 16:7).

Similar arguments might be made about ‘send forth [streams]’ (Ezek 31:4) and ‘release, let go free’ (Job 12:15; Prov 6:14,19; 16:28), which refer to immediate and/or guided actions—clearly not to gradual, undirected hair growth, for which more apt verbs existed (e.g., *gdl*, Num 6:5; ‘lengthening,’ in general, is *rk*; ‘stretching out’ is *nth*; cf. Aramaic *rbh*, Dan 4:30).

Put more simply and succinctly: Classical Hebrew has perfectly good verbs for ‘let grow long’; *šlh*, ‘send,’ is not one of them.

3 Evidence from Ancient Versions

Examination of the versions yields a mix of evidence on וּפְרַע לֹא יִשְׁלַחוּ. Targum Jonathan, for example, offers וּפִירוּעַ לֹא יִרְבוּן ‘and long locks they may not grow out.’ The Vulgate and Pešitta concur, offering *neque comam nutrient* and *wqwšthwn l’ nrbwn*. Symmachus, in contrast, renders יִשְׁלַחוּ as ἀφῆσσουσιν (< ἀφῆγειν) ‘send forth, send out’. A similar gloss appears in the margin of Syro-Hexaplar Codex Ambrosianus (*nšbqwn*). The body of that codex, however, renders it as *nsprwn* (<

spr ‘cut, trim’),². The Septuagint is in the same ball park, translating ישלחו as φιλώσσοσι (< φιλώω ‘strip off, denude [of feathers, hair, etc.], bare’).

This curiously disjointed collection of meanings leaves us with a small mystery: Why is it that the Targums, Vulgate, and Pešitta show an interpretation, ‘let grow long,’ nearly the reverse of those found in the Septuagint and Codex Ambrosianus (‘strip’ and ‘cut, trim’), with Symmachus and the Ambrosian marginal reading occupying an amorphously literalistic middle ground (‘send’)?

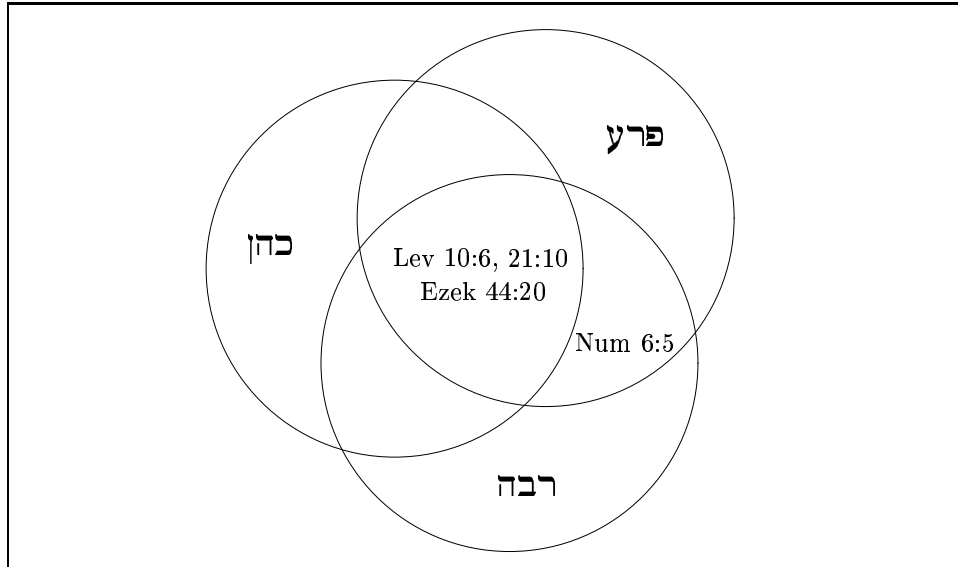


Figure 2: Targumic relations between four ‘hair’ passages

A probable explanation, at least for the approach taken in the Targums, Vulgate, and Pešitta, may be elicited from Targumic interpretations of three key Pentateuchal verses: Lev 10:6, 21:10; and Num 6:5. In Lev 10:6 and 21:10, Targums Onqelos and Pseudo-Jonathan use רבה to translate Hebrew פרע. According to these versions, Lev 10:6 and 21:10 disallow Aaron’s sons (temporarily) and the High Priest (permanently) from letting their hair ‘grow out’ in mourning. In Num 6:5, Targums Onqelos, Pseudo-Jonathan, and the Pešitta once again use רבה, this time to translate גדל (what the *nazir* does to his hair during his vow period). Given the common hair-length theme that runs through all these passages (fig. 2),³ it is understandable that the Targums (followed by the Pešitta and Vulgate⁴) inject ‘grow out’ into Ezekiel’s discussion of hair in 44:20.

Despite obvious affinities between Ezekiel 44:20 and Lev 10:6, 21:10, and Num 6:5, however, neither Symmachus nor the Ambrosian Codex uses these affinities as a

²See Antonio Maria Ceriani, *Codex Syro-Hexaplaris Ambrosianus*, Monumenta Sacra et Profana 7 (Milan, 1874).

³Note also the Hebrew, which has בנרים (Lev 10:6, 21:10; Ezek 44:19), פרע and ראש (Lev 10:6, 21:10, 13:45, 21:10; Num 6:5; Ezekiel 44:20), ין (Lev 10:9; Ezek 44:21), בחולה (Lev 21:13; Ezek 44:22), etc. See *b. Ta’an* 17a, *Nazir* 3a, *Sanh.* 22b; Rambam *Mish. Tor.* 5:6, 1:8–11.

⁴On Jerome’s dependences, see Ernst Würthwein, *Der Text des alten Testaments*, 4th ed. (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1973), p. 95.

basis for interpreting **שִׁלְחוּ**. Neither of these versions, that is, uses Lev 10:6, 21:10, or Num 6:5 as an interpretive key to the warning **לֹא יִשְׁלְחוּ** in Ezekiel 44:20. As noted above, Symmachus essentially gives up, rendering **שִׁלְחוּ** as ἀφῆσουσιν ‘they will send.’ The Syro-Hexapla, and Septuagint, diverge in even more notable ways, translating it as ‘they will cut, trim’ and ‘they will strip off,’ respectively. Though it is possible that the Syro-Hexapla is just fabricating a reasonable gloss based on other passages (Ezra 9:3), this is unlikely. Cutting or tearing the hair off appears in none of the obvious parallels.

Although in the case of the Septuagint the translators may well have been struggling to find a complement to καλύπτω (44:20b), their choice of φιλόω need not be viewed as a fabrication either. Had fabrication been their aim, the Septuagint translators would doubtless have selected a more straightforward verb, like ἀποκαλύπτω ‘uncover’ or, concretely, ἀποκιδάρω ‘remove the headdress’ (Lev 10:6, 21:10).

In light of these facts, it would appear that there is method to the apparent madness of the Syro-Hexapla and Septuagint—specifically, knowledge of a variant Hebrew root, **שִׁלַח** II. ‘tear/strip out/off.’ This root has many cognates in Aramaic, so at the very least we are looking at a snippet of ancient comparative philology.

It might be added that none of the versions ventures a gloss of ‘unbind,’ ‘dishevel,’ or ‘let hang loose,’ which might conceivably be extracted from **פָּרַע** in Lev 21:10 (so RSV) and carried over to Ezek 44:20. Their aversion to such glosses is understandable given that **שִׁלַח** really doesn’t mean any of these things, and given the fact that, aside from disputed Levitical material (Lev 10:6, 21:10), unbinding or disheveling hair is nowhere associated with mourning or death in the Hebrew Bible. (As we will see below [§ 5] association with mourning and death is the reason the action described by **שִׁלַח** is being prohibited to priests in Ezek 44:20.)

4 An Alternative Approach

Although /h/ and */h/ remained separate in speech throughout much of the first millennium BCE,⁵ Hebrew orthography never distinguishes them. (South) Arabic, Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Ethiopic, however, maintain */h/ as a separate phoneme and grapheme. On the basis of these latter languages, therefore, it is possible to reconstruct two possible derivations for **שִׁלַח**, one based on the root *šlh*, and the other based on the root **šlh*.

The first of these two roots, *šlh*, may be found in Arabic as *slh* ‘drop dung’; II., V. ‘arm’; VI. ‘fight’ (cf. Ep. S. Arabic *slh* ‘pollute’?, ‘arms’; Aramaic *šlh* I. ‘send’). **šlh*, on the other hand, corresponds to Arabic *slh* ‘strip off,’ and Akkadian *šalāhu* ‘tear out, off.’⁶ Although it is broadly attested across many Semitic dialects, this latter root, **šlh*, has no apparent reflex in Classical Hebrew, other than the one possible instance here in Ezekiel 44:20, and perhaps also the noun **שִׁלְחֶיךָ** ‘your skin?’ in Song of Songs 4:13.⁷

⁵E.g., Joshua Blau, *On Polyphony in Biblical Hebrew*, Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities 6:2 (Jerusalem, 1982), §§ 10–15.

⁶Note also Aramaic *šlh* II. ‘send’. Cf. postclassical Yemeni Arabic *slh* I. ‘pluck off, tear off; break off branches.’ Moshe Piamenta *Dictionary of Post-Classical Yemeni Arabic*, 2 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990–91), vol. 1:264. Dialectal Arabic *šlh* is probably an Aramaic loanword.

⁷See the discussion in Marvin H. Pope *Song of Songs* (AB 7; Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), 490–1.

So why, if the root **slh* is not otherwise attested as a verb in Classical Hebrew, should we entertain the notion that it is preserved in Ezekiel 44:20?

In fact, there are several reasons. First and foremost is the reason noted above, namely that, despite the existence of a very common root, *slh* ‘send,’ both the Septuagint and the Syro-Hexapla preserve *slh*-like translations of *שִׁלְחוּ* in Ezekiel 44:20. This brings us to the second reason: That their translators, like us, were completely justified in doing this. *שִׁלַּח* ‘send’ simply does not fit the context.

5 Mourning, Death, and Long Hair

The question of context raises a next obvious question: Although the traditional ‘send’ fits the context in Ezekiel 44:20 rather poorly, does ‘tear out, off; strip off’ offer much of an improvement?

In fact, ‘tear out, off; strip off’ improves vastly over ‘send.’ Not only does it fit the historical derivation of the form, and avoid absurd notions like ‘sending forth the hair,’ but it also dovetails neatly with the overall anthropological and literary context of Ezekiel 44:20, and with what the verse itself seems really to be saying:

וְרֵאשִׁים לֹא יִגְלְחוּ וּפְרָע לֹא יִשְׁלְחוּ כִּסּוּם אֶת־רֵשֵׁיהֶם

‘They shall not shave their head, nor tear off their hair; rather they shall merely trim their heads.’

This verse is not commanding priests to avoid growing (i.e., “sending”) their hair out, as in the traditional interpretation. Although long hair seems to have fallen into increasing disfavor from the hellenistic period onward (e.g., Dan 4:33, 1Cor 11:14), there is no evidence that there was any stigma attached to it earlier on. Nor is there any evidence that it served as a mourning rite, as in later Tannaitic Judaism. If anything, long hair signified holiness, beauty, and strength (e.g., Num 6:5, Judg 13:5, 1Sam 1:11, 2Sam 14:25–26). And, of course, there was nothing preventing a priest from taking the vow of the *nazir*, and growing his hair out like anyone else. So long hair is clearly not at issue here in this priestly section of Ezekiel.

It is entirely reasonable to conclude, then, that message of Ezekiel 44:10 has nothing whatever to do with hair growth, but rather deals with hair *removal*. Its message is that the only way a priest could legitimately remove his hair was by cutting it back. Shaving was out of the question. And so was tearing the hair off (*שִׁלַּח*). Why? Probably because both of these actions were associated with mourning, and hence with the uncleanness that comes from death and corpses (see, e.g., Isa 3:24, 15:2, 22:12; Jer 16:6, 47:5; Ezek 7:18, 23:34?, 27:31; Micah 1:16; Amos 8:10; Ezra 9:3, 23:34).

Although shaving and tearing the hair out are commonly spoken of in connection with mourning, there is not a shred of hard biblical evidence that priests were to shun long hair, or that long hair carried any connotations of death or mourning,⁸ we put ourselves in a vastly more favorable anthropological, literary, and contextual position if we oust the traditional ‘send’ (‘let grow long’) here in favor of ‘tear out, off; strip off.’

⁸On Lev 10:6, 21:10, see R. L. Goerwitz, “What Does the Priestly Source Mean by *פָּרַע*?” *Jewish Quarterly Review* (1996) 86:3/4, 377–394; see especially p. 383–4, where ‘loosening,’ ‘disheveling,’ and ‘growing long’ are shown to lack a solid foundation as mourning rites in the Hebrew Bible.

6 Semantic Turnabouts

Although ‘tear out, off; strip off’ fits the anthropological and literary context of Ezekiel 44:20 quite well, and fits in with the historical-linguistic and versional evidence, one last question remains: How likely is it, if ‘tear out, off; strip off’ were the original meaning of **יִשְׁלַח**, that the Targums, Vulgate, and Pešitta would have gratuitously reversed this meaning (\rightarrow ‘grow long’)?

One way of answering this question is to draw a parallel with another known case where a meaning like this was reversed. In Deut 21:12 the Torah says that a beautiful woman taken as war booty must shave her head, ‘do’ her nails, and then mourn her parents for a full month. The Septuagint and Vulgate, as well as Targums Neofiti and Pseudo-Jonathan, agree that ‘do’ here (**וַעֲשֶׂהָ**) means to ‘pare,’ which makes sense in the context of shaving (i.e., removing the hair—and the nails). Onqelos, though, and several medieval commentators (e.g., Rashi, Ibn Ezra; cf. Ramban), apparently viewed paring as a form of grooming, and thus as improper in what seemed to them a mourning context. Recognizing the conflict, they felt compelled to re-translate **וַעֲשֶׂהָ** as ‘grow long’—in effect, reversing the sense of the form.

		<i>social practice</i>		<i>language</i>	
		<i>male grooming</i>	<i>mourning</i>	<i>pronunciation</i>	<i>meaning of יִשְׁלַח</i>
<i>TaNaKh</i>		hair (often) long	hair removed	<i>šlh/ *šlh</i> differ	‘tear off’
<i>post-TaNaKh</i>		hair short	hair let grow	<i>šlh/ *šlh</i> same	‘send, let grow’

Table 1: Changing views of **יִשְׁלַח**

Even if Rashi and Ibn Ezra are correct, the point still stands that interpretation of this passage has vacillated between two extremes because of disagreement about the anthropological context and meaning of the ritual being referred to. This same vacillation occurred, I believe, with **יִשְׁלַח**. The tradition reflected in Ezekiel 44:20 originally prohibited only shaving and tearing the hair off. As the root **šlh* fell out of use in Hebrew, however, and as grooming customs changed, the anthropological context of **יִשְׁלַח** grew obscure to some translators. Much as occurred with ‘do’ in Deut 21:12, therefore, an interpretation was placed on it that made some sense of the passage in terms of then-current linguistic usage and grooming/mourning customs (table 1).

7 Conclusion

Whatever precise nuance we cast over the verse, the key point is that G. R. Driver’s notion of deriving **יִשְׁלַח** in Ezekiel 44:20 from **šlh* ‘tear/strip out/off’ offers us decisive advantages over the traditional analysis. Not only does it allow us to avoid stretching the meaning of *šlh* ‘send’ in lexically problematic (§ 2) and exegetically tendentious (§§ 3, 6) ways, but it also offers us a plausible etymology (§ 4), and a measure of otherwise unobtainable congruence with the Septuagint (§ 3). Most importantly, however, it achieves complete consonance, both with the form’s literary context, and with the wider scheme of grooming in the TaNaKh (§ 5)—which not only allows long hair on men, but actually (and this despite its falling out of fashion in Greek, Roman, and later times) seems to revere it.

8 Zusammenfassung

Aufgrund der Vulgata, der Targumim, und einiger angeblich ähnlicher Ausdrücke (Lev 10,6; 21,10; Num 6,5) interpretiert man וַיִּפְרַע לֹא יִשְׁלַחוּ (Ez 44,20) im allgemeinen als ‘sie müssen ihr Kopfhaar nicht lang wachsen (< *šlh*) lassen’. Es gibt jedoch kaum einen Grund anzunehmen, daß *šlh* ‘schicken’ so interpretiert werden soll. Viel besser ist es, aufgrund des Zusammenhangs, der Septuaginta, der Syro-Hexapla und urverwandter Wörter im Arabischen, Aramäischen und Akkadischen וַיִּשְׁלַחוּ hier als **šlh* ‘wegreißen, ausreißen’ zu deuten.