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THE FABULIST'S ART: SOME BRIEF REMARKS ON SOLOMON'S LIONS (1 KINGS 10:18–20) WITH A MINOR RECEPTION HISTORY

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Abstract

In his description of King Solomon's throne in 1 Kgs 10:19–20, the author of this passage employs two different plural endings (one masculine and one feminine) of the lions which line the steps of this throne. The present work suggests that a semantic distinction is intended by the use of these two different forms. It considers the wider aesthetic project of 1 Kgs 9:10–10:29 and suggests that, in light of this project, we may fruitfully consider interpreting these lions as living creatures. It then turns to several midrashic passages which lend some support to this interpretation.

These are the fascinations of the fabulist's art,
these lurking forces of expansion, these necessities
of upspringing in the seed, these beautiful
determinations, on the part of the idea enter-
tained, to grow as tall as possible ...

HENRY JAMES

1 Kgs 10:18–20 appears towards the end of a long section — beginning at 1 Kgs 9:10 and ending at 1 Kgs 10:29 — which serves to detail the divers splendours of Solomon's reign. Glory and grandeur are the operating principles of this portion of Kings.¹ Perhaps the

¹ And the kinds of information it imparts — the size of Solomon's annual income; statistics regarding his household's daily consumption; the rates of exchange given during his rule for certain luxury goods — suggest annalistic and archival sources. For the most straightforward treatment of this text as an historical report (probably that can be found), see Montgomery 1951. We might do well to remember, though, that there exist narratives which contain elements the nature of which the reader is not ever asked to question, for she realises that she is not to take them literally. 1 Kgs 10:27, for example, reads: 'And the king made silver to be in Jerusalem as stones, and cedar he made as plentiful as the lowland sycamores'. Such a principle might well extend to other portions of this text as well. The question here

point d'appui of this section — if it is not that moment where the Queen of Sheba is left breathless by it all — lies in 10:18–20, where we are confronted by Solomon's throne:

- 18 And the king made a great throne of ivory and overlaid it with pure gold.²
 19 The throne had six steps and the top of the throne was round behind, and on both sides of the seat were armrests, and two lions (אֲרִיֹת) stood beside the rests.
 20 And twelve lions (אֲרִיִּים) stood there on the steps, on the one side and on the other ...

Given the aniconic disposition of the Hebrew Bible — where accounts of the way things are made typically substitute for descriptions of what they look like — our narrator here seems dangerously close to having indulged himself in a little *ekphrasis*.³ This is a literary genre — or at least a *topos* — by which a writer attempts the verbal description of a work of the plastic arts, typically a painting, but also an object, a photograph, a monument, etc.⁴ Much of this paper will deal with such potential indulgences on the part of our narrator,

is to do with the historicity of historical narrative, and how far — or how loosely — any such narrative reflects the 'facts' that may lie behind it. What the narrator seeks to convey here — the magnificence of Solomon's reign — should not necessarily be confused with how he does so: under the guise of history. Such apparent magnificence may have required departure from the historical facts, in order that it be made more fully available to the reader's apprehension.

² See the Talmud, *Yoma* 44b, for a discussion of various gradings of gold. See Hokhberg 1980: 116 for a stimulating collection of metallurgical reflections in the rabbinic literature.

³ For a useful series of introductory articles to (the paradox that is) aniconic iconography, see Eidevall and Scheuer 2011.

⁴ Here is Spitzer, for example, in his famous essay on Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', in which he identifies the ode as part of the long tradition of *ekphrasis* (he divorces the term from its rhetorical understanding, and institutes it as an essentially poetic genre): '... [the ode] belongs to the genre, known to Occidental literature from Homer and Theocritus to the Parnassians and Rilke, of the *ekphrasis*, the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art, which description implies, in the words of Théophile Gautier, "une transposition d'art," the reproduction, through the medium of words, of sensuously perceptible *objets d'art* ("ut pictura poesis")' (1962: 72). Spitzer's was an enormous innovation — one will note that he gives no source for his definition — and the best study I know of since his is Hollander's *The Gazer's Spirit* (1995). Hollander distinguishes in his introduction between poems written about paintings that are imaginary (not real), a practice which he terms 'notional ecphrasis', and 'actual ecphrasis', the practice of writing a poem based on a real painting or monument. Whether we are dealing with notional or actual *ekphrasis* here is a question for the historians and archaeologists.

whose fascinations here — to paraphrase Henry James — would seem to be those of the fabulist's art: his are those forces of expansion, the necessities of upspringing in the seed, which serve to grow the initial idea as tall as possible.⁵

Let us begin by observing the plural endings employed in verses 19 and 20 of אַרִי, a masculine noun, 'lion'.⁶ The first of these is *-ôt*, giving the expected form אַרִיֹּת, which occurs seventeen times across the Hebrew Bible. The second is *-îm*, giving אַרְיִים, which occurs just once in the Hebrew Bible, here.⁷ The use of two different plural end-

⁵ I do not forget that we are dealing with historical narrative here, but wish to suggest that other determinations play a larger role than the historiographic function in this portion of Kings (at the same time that they work partly in service of that function). Sternberg's *Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (1985) provides a most useful frame in this regard: he describes how the Hebrew Bible is regulated by a set of three principles: ideological, historiographic, and aesthetic. How these three principles (divergent in the abstract) cooperate and are coordinated is a tricky question. What interests me in this portion of the Bible — the first and most ambitious of large-scale coordinators — is the relation of the aesthetic function to the historiographic and the ideological. How it is that the author of this portion of Kings makes rhetorical use of *ekphrasis* — or the vivid deployment of language and description, used to excite the reader's imagination and win her over to the rhetor's point of view — in service of his historiographic and ideological goals. As to what the latter may be, one may consult any of the commentaries for a grab-bag of divers opinions, or Kang's useful study — which collects much of the relevant literature — *The Persuasive Portrayal of Solomon in 1 Kings 1–11* (2003).

⁶ This denotes the full-grown animal, with no regard to sex. King of the beasts, the lion merits six designations in the Hebrew Bible. Five of these may be found together in two hard-working verses of Job 4:

10 The roaring of the lion (אַרִיָּה), and the voice of the fierce lion (שֹׁחַל),
and the teeth of the young lions (כַּפְרִיִּים), are broken.

11 The old lion (לֵישׁ) perisheth for lack of prey,
and the stout lion's (לְבִיאָ) whelps are scattered abroad.

The last of these six is אַרִי, which, like several other masculine nouns in the Bible, has two plural forms: one masculine and one feminine. Both these plurals, like the noun from which they are formed, function syntactically as masculine nouns, as their predication by verbs in the masculine gender indicates (Ezek. 22:25; 1 Kgs 10:19–20). For the semantics and etymology of each of these six designations, as well as their occurrences across scripture, see Kaplan's 1981 study. For a similar enough volume, one may also consult Strawn 2005. On the question of grammatical concord, see, for example, Waltke and O'Connor 1990: 109–10 and the literature cited therein.

⁷ Chronicles—in its description of Solomon's throne — adopts אַרִיֹּת in both instances. Various theories have been proposed to account for this one-off usage of אַרְיִים. We shall come to some others in the body of this paper shortly, but I point here to the following suggestions: that it is a diminutive form (Böttcher 1864, cf. the Vulgate, which translates אַרְיִים as *leunculos*, 'small lions'); an analogical formation (Delitzsch 1920); an original singular after a numeral (Nöldeke 1904);

ings so close together — they are six words apart, and are thus unlikely to result from an error in the case of אריים — would seem to imply some kind of semantic difference.⁸ For when it comes to double plural forms, sometimes the two different forms each mean something different. Unfortunately, there is 'no single semantic principle that applies in an identical fashion to all the nouns; i.e. there is no fixed identification of a specific plural morpheme with a specific fixed meaning' (Tubul 2007: 193).⁹ We have two options here. It is possible that those cats which stood beside the armrests were lionesses, while those which stood on the steps had manes. But since both spellings may refer to male lions, this is not certain; and anyway, it seems unlikely the author was striving for ambiguity in regard to his sexes. What this may mean is that we are dealing here not with a distinction between male and female lions, but between live lions and statues of lions.¹⁰ It is possible that our author wished here to empha-

or a metaphorical usage (Stade 1879). It should also be noted that the commentaries are sorely inadequate on this question.

⁸ On nouns with double plural forms in Biblical Hebrew, see Tubul 2003; 2007 and the literature cited therein. As Tubul points out, these double plural forms raise an important (theoretical) issue that ought to prefigure any analysis of the nouns themselves: are the two plural forms connected by just one singular form — the one recorded in Biblical Hebrew — or were there originally two singular forms corresponding to the two plural forms?

Nouns with double plural forms are known in other Semitic languages, but are a particularly common phenomenon in Hebrew: Tubul 2007 counts ninety-three nouns in Biblical Hebrew with double plural forms: seventy-two of these end in the singular with the morpheme $\emptyset$, seventeen with the morpheme *-alt*, while four are *pluralis tantum*. Such forms are discussed in almost all the grammars, and we will see what Gesenius has to say about our leonine instance shortly. Joüon 1913, Laybel 1965 and Michel 1977 focus on explaining the phenomenon principally — sometimes exclusively — by way of semantic variables. Tubul summarizes such an approach: '... the two plural morphemes *-im* and *-ot* consistently distinguish different and clearly defined meanings: the *-im* plural designates the complete plural, whereas the *-ot* plural designates separate units, which although appearing in the plural form, are still perceived as individual units' (2007: 190). See, for example, Joüon 1913: 139–41 on the forms שדים and שדות.

⁹ For the various uses to which double plural forms may be put, see Tubul 2007.

¹⁰ On the denotative possibilities of animacy and inanimacy in double plural forms, Koehler-Baumgartner, for example, note a semantic distinction between the two plural forms of עצם: the *-im* plural form (which occurs sixteen times) would seem to refer to living limbs, while the *-ot* plural form (documented 68 times) would seem to denote bones. This is something like the distinction Gesenius draws between living and inanimate objects. On an analogy with the dual form — '[where a] difference of meaning appears in several names of members of the body, the dual ... denoting the living members themselves, while the plur. in ות expresses something like them, but without life, e.g. ידיים *hands*, ידות *artificial hands*, also e.g. the

size a most specific meaning, and so used a most uncommon plural morpheme — to oblige the reader to note the difference between the common usage of the word and the specific meaning he intended.¹¹ Archaeological discoveries indicate that some ancient Near Eastern thrones had arms that were supported by carved animal figures,¹² but our text goes to some pains — relatively speaking — to show that these lions stood *beside* the arm rests. They were not supports. This distinction would support the suggestion that we are dealing here with live animals.¹³ That these lions were living would add to the complement of more or less exotic creatures which populate the surrounding descriptions of Solomon's kingdom, whose menagerie folds itself into the broader scope of the passage: Solomon's stupendous grandeur: '... gold, and silver, ivory, and apes, and peacocks' (1 Kgs 10:22).

Such an interpretation would shelter our author somewhat from the charge — brought only by this paper, and only then in a manner of speaking — of *ekphrasis*. It is also confirmed by two acrostic poems in the Solomon passages of Targum Sheni (which serve also to describe the splendour of Solomon's kingship).¹⁴ In the first of these — for the line under ל — we read of Solomon:

arms of a throne; כפים, *hands*, כפות, *handles* (Lat. *manubria*); פעם, *foot*, פעמות, *artificial feet* (of the ark), קרנים, *horns*, קרנות, *horns* (of the altar) ...' (§ 87o) — he points to תמר and תמרה, a *palm* and a *palm-like column* respectively, and their plurals תמרים and תמרות, and then to our example. He suggests that אריות means *lions* and אריות the *figures of lions* on Solomon's throne.

¹¹ On this phenomenon, and for examples, see Tubul 2007: 196–8. However, Tubul believes the use of אריות here to 'be the result of stylistic considerations: to vary identical forms that appear very close to one another' (201).

¹² For the design of such furniture, see Kyrielis 1969. More specifically, Canciani and Pettinato's 1965 study of Solomon's throne is most useful in this regard.

¹³ I would suggest, *pace* Gesenius, that אריות, the accepted plural form, which refers in most cases to living lions, is reinforced here by אריות, in reference to two living lions standing beside Solomon, while the form אצל is used to show — in contradistinction to the אריות — that the remaining ten lions are images or statues. But it is equally possible, and more fantastic, that we have here ten live lions and two statues.

¹⁴ Targum Sheni on Megillat Esther contains, within its multitude of aggadic insertions, several passages dealing with Solomon. Targ. Est. II 1.2 gives us the two acrostics above, as well as a longer passage which deals with Solomon's throne; we shall come to this shortly. With regard to the latter, one should also be aware of the Geniza fragment of this passage — Cambridge University Library T-S B 12.32 — which can be found in Kasher and Klein 1990, as well as two later *midrashim* dealing again with Solomon's throne. These are to be found in Jellinek vol. 2, 83–5 and vol. 5, 33–9. (See also יתהלל אל מדראש in Jellinek vol. 6, 106–8, which concerns itself with stories from the lives of Solomon, David and Korah.) Any further

... ferocious beasts and (other kinds of) spirits were delivered under his control. (Ego 2001: 60)

And in the second — an acrostic running backwards from the end of the alphabet to the beginning — for ך and ם we find that:

He understood upon hearing, the expressions of birds,
together with those of cattle, (and) wild beasts.
Stags and rams ran before him,
lions and tigers ...¹⁵ (Ego 2001: 62)

I would suggest the possibility that these several verses derive in part from an understanding of the lions in 1 Kgs 10:18–20 as being live; wild beasts were obedient to Solomon. Regardless — even if they do not — they go some way to confirming the possibility of such an interpretation: that the lions beside Solomon's throne *could* be seen as living. It is in this vein that I would like to suggest that the interpretive agenda of Targum Sheni is here most responsive to the sense of its source text. When it comes to the broader arts of the fabulist, the Solomonic portions of Targum Sheni are most sensitive to what I would suggest is the spirit in which we ought to read 1 Kgs 9:10–10:29.¹⁶ They show a great determination, on the part of the idea

discussion of these *midrashim* is for a broader study than this one. For a useful introduction to the Solomon literature in Targum Sheni — the reasons for the insertion of this material into the Esther narrative, the extant manuscripts, their dating, etc. — see Ego 1996; 2001, both with references to further literature.

¹⁵ Grossfeld 1991 arranges these lines as follows: '... He understood upon hearing, the expressions of birds together with those of cattle, (and) wild beasts, stags and rams. Lions and tigers ran before him.'

¹⁶ Perhaps the best method for dealing with the historiographic function in this section of Kings — and, for instance, the numbers it bandies about (1Kgs 10:14 being the best example) — is to be found in Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*. We are *not* to proceed

... in imitation of that prudent method observed by many other philosophers and great clerks, whose chief art in division has been to grow fond of some proper mystical number, which their imaginations have rendered sacred, to a degree, that they force common reason to find room for it, in every part of nature; reducing, including, and adjusting every genus and species within that compass, by coupling some against their wills, and banishing others at any rate. (1774: 39)

There is no need here to force common reason to account for what we meet in 1 Kgs 9:10–10:29. We should rather accept the text in every part of its nature, which is to say that 666 talents of gold per annum ought to be accepted as the fantastic number it is, and as likely as live lions standing beside Solomon's throne. This is not to rubbish the text as history, but only to acknowledge that so grand a history as Solomon's was met by its narrator with the appropriate rhetorical flourishes.

entertained, to grow as tall as possible; they elaborate the wealth and prestige of Solomon — as in 1 Kings: up to and beyond the borders of legend — most admirably. This is most evident in the treatment of Solomon's throne. While the passage in question does not depict our lions as living, it does show the animals which line Solomon's throne as moving in elaborate mechanical contrivance: Targ. Est. II 1.2 switches out the twelve lions for a lion opposite an ox on the throne's first step; a bear opposite a lamb on the second; a tiger opposite a kid on the third; an eagle opposite a peacock on the fourth; a cat opposite a hen on the fifth; and a hawk opposite a bird on the sixth; all of gold.¹⁷ Here is what is said — in a rough composite of Jellinek (ii, 83–5; v, 33–9) and Targ. Est. II 1.2 — of Solomon's ascent to the throne. When it came time for him to mount it, the ox, by some unidentified mechanism — presumably the same contrivance by which the throne followed Solomon wherever he wished to go — stretched forth its leg, onto which Solomon stepped. A similar action took place in the case of all the animals which lined the six steps, by which Solomon was delivered to the sixth. There the eagles raised the king and set him in his seat, whence his crown was placed upon his head by the largest eagle, and the twelve lions — now present — as well as the eagles, moved upward to form a shade over him. An elaborate procedure, the life-likeness of whose participants was further compounded by the terrifying shrieks, roars and bellows they then emitted in order to encourage honest testimony from Solomon's subjects.

Conclusion

The elaboration we encounter in Targum Shenī is — I would suggest — not read *into* 1 Kgs 9:10–10:29, but *out* of it. Its basis in the fantastic lies already in the biblical book. The present work has looked briefly at one small portion of that book, in order that we might see how its interpretation might be improved. What the author of Kings intended by his unexpected use of the plural אַרְיִים we cannot say with certainty, but we may suggest the likelihood of his wishing to

¹⁷ The throne itself is now overlaid not just with gold from Ophir but with emeralds, carbuncles, diamonds and any number of other precious stones. For a detailed description and elaboration of its different motifs, see Ego 1996: 159–68.

portray — in light of his wider project; its lists and legends and divertissements — some two to ten of the lions which lined the steps to Solomon's throne as being alive.

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