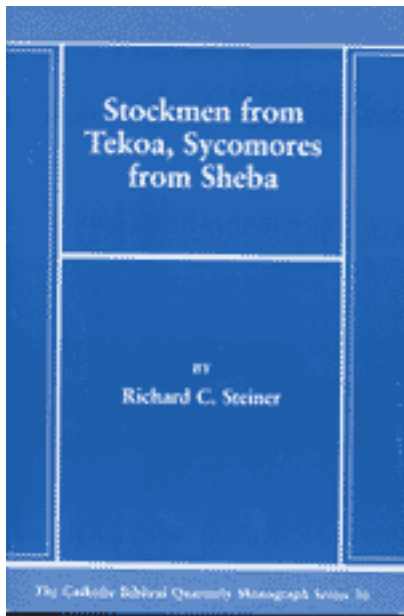


RBL 09/2004



Steiner, Richard C.

Stockmen from Tekoa, Sycomores from Sheba: A Study of Amos' Occupations

Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 36

Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2003. Pp. x + 158. Paper. \$10.50. ISBN 0915170353.

Joseph Cathey
Dallas Baptist University
Dallas, TX 76044

This short but well-written monograph is dedicated to an exploration of the occupation of the prophet Amos. Steiner divides the work into five concise chapters. The first chapter is an excellent overview of the problem concerning the phrase **בולס שקמים**. Initially Steiner surveys both the ancient and medieval interpretations of **בולס**. Methodologically, he is to be commended on this survey, as it has been lacking in a number of major commentaries. The fact that **בולס** appears in the Hebrew Bible as a *hapax legomenon* has led to numerous conjectures as to the nature of the prophet's occupation.¹ Insightful and particularly helpful are the surveys of Mishnaic Hebrew and the Septuagint concerning the phrase. A reading of the Septuagint reveals the rendering of **בולס שקמים** to be **κνιζων συκάμινα**, which Steiner translates as "a scratcher of sycamore figs." Significant research into the verb **κνιζω** has recently revealed an Egyptian horticulture connection. Steiner buttresses his argument of "scratching" by citing accounts from Theophrastus, Dioscorides, and Athenaeus. The author strengthens his case by surveying the relevant literature from the Mishnah. He concludes that a balanced reading of the Mishnah shows conclusively that gashing of sycamore fruit was known in Palestine. This is denoted by

¹ See *HALOT* 1:134. The authors come to some of the same conclusions as Steiner in that both argue that **בולס** carries the connotation of scarring or scratching unripe sycamore figs with a fingernail or iron tool.

the consistent use of the verb סָטַף in the D-stem. However, the author is to be commended for the inclusiveness of his research even when it does not agree with his presuppositions. For example, he notes that Aquila's interpretation does not agree with the definition of "scratching." It appears that Aquila rendered בּוֹלֵס with the Greek participle ἐρευνᾶω, which connotes "seeking or searching." Why Aquila chose this rendering Steiner rightly confesses uncertainty. One might argue that this reading was due to Aquila's lack of Semitic phonology.

The author rightly notes that it is commonly understood that the "editors" of the Septuagint employed a semantic overlap in meaning of συκάμινος. A close reading of the Septuagint reveals that συκάμινος may mean either sycamore figs or a mulberry tree. Steiner proposes a novel understanding of how both meanings became attached to συκάμινος. He argues that Greek sailors first encountered the sycamore while sailing off the coast of Palestine. They adopted the Aramaic name שׁוֹקְמִין, yet with a Greek case ending the word simply became συκάμινος. Steiner further argues that the Greek sailors took this word with them and applied it to both sycamore and mulberry trees. While this thesis is tempting, it is still as of yet unproven. It should be put forth tentatively (as Steiner does) as a theory.

The second chapter, "בּוֹלֵס: Etymology and Meaning," is the shortest in the book, numbering some eleven pages. Yet it should not be dismissed, since it forms a key component in the author's conclusions. At the heart of this chapter is an elucidation of Samuel Bochart's understanding of בּוֹלֵס. It is argued that Bochart understood בּוֹלֵס as a participle of a denominative verb formed from the word for fig. We note that at the heart of this contention is an argument that Classical Hebrew had a noun בּוֹלֵס. Unfortunately, such a noun is unattested in Classical Hebrew. Steiner admits that none of the relevant dictionaries, Levy, Jastrow, or Ben-Yehudah, have anything remotely relevant under the root בּוֹלֵס. A close check of the medieval Mishnah literature reveals three possible options. First, it is argued that the term for sycamore figs may have been בּוֹלֵסִין in one tradition, גּוֹמְזוֹת in the other. Second, according to Steiner it is possible that Mishnaic Hebrew used בּוֹלֵס to refer not to the sycamore fig but to the more common Carian fig. Third, the author's research into Mishnaic Hebrew demonstrates that בּוֹלֵס survives as a noun. Thus he rightly argues that בּוֹלֵס most likely referred to either the sycamore fig or some type of inferior fig. It could be that by the time the Mishnah was edited בּוֹלֵס was supplanted by the more colloquial גּוֹמְזוֹת.

In the third chapter, "בּוֹלֵס and שְׁקָמָה: Linguistic Evidence for the Origin of the Biblical Sycamore," Steiner explores the transplanting of the sycamore fig tree into Palestine. It is noted that four distinct time periods are possible for the introduction of the sycamore into Palestine: (1) Bronze Age, (2) end of the Neolithic Period, (3) the Natufian (Mesolithic)

Period, and (4) the Tertiary Period. Steiner quickly rules out all but the Bronze Age for the introduction of the sycamore. In support of his arguments it is noted that many of the Egyptian pharaohs and Assyrian kings transplanted trees both in and outside of Canaan. Geographically, it is argued that **בולס** and **שקמה** are both distributed lexically in Israel and Yemen but not Saudi Arabia. The older theories of an Egyptian source for the importation of the sycamore can no longer be supported. Rather, it is now argued that the linguistic evidence points to Yemen as the logical source. Steiner argues this based on two relevant facts. First, it is noted that Yemen is the only place in the world where the sycamore goes wild due to the pollinating wasp. Second, it appears to be the place where the lexical roots originate. If this is the case, then it seems likely that the sycamore figs or saplings were transplanted from Yemen to Israel sometime during antiquity.

The fourth chapter is the longest in the book and most likely one of the greatest interest to biblical scholars. In this chapter Steiner explores the semantic meanings of **בוקר**, **בנקדים**, and **מאחרי הצאן**. Quickly Steiner rightly identifies **בוקר** as a wealthy cattleman due to the rhetorical insinuation of the word within the text. Unstintingly, Steiner argues that **בוקר**, much like the Akkadian *nāqīdu*, is a specialist stockbreeder who owned and managed part of the herds and flocks. Ingeniously, Steiner argues that due to the inhospitable region of Tekoa it is best to locate both the cattle and sycamores outside this sphere. Steiner next explores the meaning of **בנקדים** within the context of Amos. The author seeks to answer three relevant questions: (1) Is this term restricted to people who deal exclusively with **צאן**, or is it also used of people who deal in **בקר**? (2) Does the term **בנקדים** have socioeconomic connotations? and (3) Does the term have sacral overtones? In answering the first question, Steiner argues that much light has been shed on the term via comparative Semitic studies. For example, a close reading of both Sumerian and Akkadian texts illustrates the broad understanding of *nāqīdu*. The Sumerian NA.GAD is used of a breeder who raises sheep, asses, and cows, whereas the Akkadian *nāqīdu* can be one who raises **צאן** (*nāqīdu ša sēni*), **בקר** (*nāqīdu ša lāti*), or **צאן ובקר** (*nāqīdu ša sēni u lāti*). Clearly, as Steiner has argued, the word has a much broader semantic range than many modern commentators have argued. Answering the second question, Steiner differentiates *nāqīdu* from *re'u*. It is true that both may be translated as “shepherd,” yet as Steiner points out it is the status of the shepherd that is in question. German and Scandinavian scholarship has argued the meaning of *nqd* versus *r'u* for more than seventy years. Contemporary scholarship has tentatively concluded that the *nqd* were not part of the temple structure. Rather, it has been recently argued that the *r'u* were part of the internal temple structure. If, as Steiner has argued, the term is not connected with the *r'u*, then no sacral overtones exist.

In the fifth chapter Steiner argues persuasively that Amos was a part of a collective group. This group consisted of members that followed hereditary trades much like the

Neo-Babylonian *Kapru-ša-nāqidāti*. Essentially the members of the group lived and worked together to further the trade. Economically, one may argue that, if this group did exist, then it may have supported the Jerusalem Temple some 16 km away. Parallels do exist at Uruk, where herdsmen supplied the temple with animals for sacrifice. Furthermore, it is argued by Steiner that self-employed stock breeders in eighth-century Israel was a necessity due to the shifting economic structure. In the affluent society attacked by both Amos and Hosea, the demand for meat could not be satisfied by small farms. The author gives three options concerning the location of Amos's figs. Geographically, figs may grow in the Shephelah (as per the Targums), near the Dead Sea, or in the Jericho Valley. It appears that the location in the Jericho Valley is the most attractive location for figs. Evidence adduced to support this contention is given from both the times of Elijah and Elisha as well as that of the Roman occupation. Lastly, Steiner links both occupations of herdsman and fig tender. It is not a question of which was the primary occupation for Amos but how he integrated both into a whole. Steiner argues that the sycamore trees provided shade and food for the livestock. Likewise, the height and vantage point of the sycamore provided the herdsman a place of security. The necessity of large amounts of water for the sycamore tree ensured that the animals had plenty to drink. It would seem natural that the two professions, animal herdsman as well as tender of figs, were by nature compatible. Thus logically there is no reason that Amos could not have participated in both occupations for his livelihood.

Steiner makes excellent use of not only biblical sources for his study but also Mishnaic materials as well. It is the Mishnah materials that made the work most interesting for this reader. The author is obviously well read in the medieval works, as illustrated by his copious references throughout the work. I can exuberantly recommend this work for those interested in prophetic literature. Interestingly, the methodology of Steiner is such that I would not hesitate to recommend the work for those students seeking to employ linguistic analysis of the Hebrew text.