

## DOUBLE TROUBLE

MEREDITH G. KLINE\*

If we speak of the double of something, we might have in mind either twice its amount or its twin. A similar ambiguity in certain Biblical words usually rendered "double" has caused interpreters trouble, in part because they have not recognized the presence of the ambiguity or at least have not always reckoned sufficiently with the translation option of "equivalent" or "matching image" rather than "twofold." The most important issue that turns up in an examination of this matter is a theological question concerning God's justice. Through a mishandling of the troublesome "double" words the equity of the divine justice has been beclouded. We will make that theological issue the focus of this study, subordinating the lexical investigation to it. Of the lexical items, primary attention will be given to Hebrew *kāpal* (verb)/*kepel* (noun), but we will also deal with the other "double" terms that figure in passages involving the alleged double divine punishment—namely, Hebrew *mišneh* and Greek *diploō* (verb)/*diploous* (adjective).

### I. KEPEL IN ISAIAH 40

In Isaiah 40 assurance is given that God's people may expect the coming of the Glory of Yahweh to them (vv 3 ff.), his reward with him and his recompense before him (v 10), because payment for their sins has been completed (v 2). By virtue of the full satisfaction of the debt of their iniquity, which had incurred alienation from the Lord and separation from his Presence, the way was now open to restoration. Verse 2 underscores the fact that the punishment for Jerusalem's covenant-breaking has been meted out in full by expressing it in three synonymous statements. The third of these contains the noun *kepel* (dual form) and is usually (mis)translated: "She has received from the hand of Yahweh double for all her sins."

To solve the problem of this apparent imbalance in the scales of divine justice, with two talents of punishment loaded on one side for each talent of sin on the other, resort has been had to various expedients. Some, assuming that the Babylonian exile is the episode in view, suggest that Israel in exile suffered for the sins of the Gentiles as well as paying for their own. But this solves one problem by replacing it with another, for a

\* Meredith G. Kline is professor of Old Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts, and at Westminster Theological Seminary in California.

role of vicarious atonement impossible for sinful beings to perform is thus attributed to Israel.

Another proposal is that double payment signifies simply full measure. This is theologically innocent enough, and it does catch the general drift of the clause. But its particular assumption about the significance of doubling as simply completeness wants demonstration. Our intention is to show that the problem of the unbalanced scales of divine justice is obviated by the recognition that *kepel* is to be translated "equivalent" rather than "double."

The meaning of the last of the three statements in Isa 40:2 may be approached by examination of the first two, with which the third must be consistent.

According to the first statement, something (denoted by the noun *šābā*<sup>2</sup>) has been fulfilled or completed. Usually translated "warfare" or "hard (military) service," *šābā*<sup>2</sup> is best understood here as a specified period of labor. The idea is more that of hired or contracted service than rigorous service. Such a meaning for *šābā*<sup>2</sup> is found in a series of passages in Job that refer to the day laborer who is obligated to complete a contracted period of service (Job 7:1; 10:17; 14:14; cf. Num 4:23; Dan 10:1). Thus in Job 7:1 the parallel to *šābā*<sup>2</sup> is "the days of the hireling," the stipulated time he must work, yearning the while for its completion and his appointed pay (cf. v 2). Similarly in Job 14:14 (cf. 10:17) the picture is that of the laborer waiting for his wages<sup>1</sup> through "all the days of my work term (*šābā*<sup>2</sup>)." Here then is the background of the imagery in the first statement in Isa 40:2: a laborer's set period of work with its stipulated wages, its due equivalent according to the current scale. Agreeably the verb (*mālē*<sup>2</sup>) of which *šābā*<sup>2</sup> is the subject in this statement is commonly used with terms of time, like days and years, to signify their being completed. The clause may therefore be translated: "Her assigned term of service is completed."

From the second statement in 40:2 we learn that the appointed time that is declared fulfilled is actually a period of punishment for iniquity. Corresponding to the verb *mālē*<sup>2</sup> used in the first clause for completing the work term is the verb *rāšā*, which means to make up for, to make good what is owed, to acquit a debt. It is used in the Job 14 context mentioned above for the hireling working off his due time of service (v 6).<sup>2</sup> Of particular importance is the usage in Leviticus 26. There, in v 34, *rāšā* refers to the land that lay fallow during the time of the Israelites' absence in exile and so made up for the sabbatical years denied to it through the centuries it should have been afforded that rest. Then in v 41 *rāšā* describes the captive Israelites in the land of their enemies making up for their iniquity (both words, verb and object, the same as in Isa 40:2). These

<sup>1</sup> On this meaning of *hālīpā* cf. *helep* in Num 18:21, 31.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Job 20:10a, where *rāšā* signifies to make good, specifically to indemnify the poor who have been plundered.

two ideas are brought together in v 43: the land making up for its sabbaths, and the people making up for their debt to divine justice. The effect of that is to give the penal debt that Israel must make good a temporal character; it becomes the judicial sentence of a set period of time to be spent in exile. In the historical event this took the specific form of the seventy years of captivity predicted by Jeremiah (25:11-12; 29:10).<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah's prophecy of the seventy years and the Leviticus 26 identification of the exile as a time when the land would make up for its sabbaths are combined in the record of the fulfillment in 2 Chr 36:21. It is this covenant curse of the determined period of exile predictively threatened in Leviticus 26 that is the underlying, unifying image of Isa 40:2 as a whole. And Lev 26:41 is clearly the primary source of the language in the second of the statements in that verse, which may be translated: "The debt of her iniquity has been paid."

We are now in a position to take up the third statement in Isa 40:2 with its troublesome "double" word, *kepel*. Surely this final pronouncement is to be understood in harmony with the sustained emphasis of the preceding clauses on the fact that sin has received its exactly balancing recompense of punishment. It must make an affirmation consistent with the allusive analogue of the hireling who punctually fulfills the stipulated period of labor as the contractual equivalent of his wages. Hence we translate: "She has received from Yahweh's hand matching punishment as the payment for<sup>4</sup> all her sins."

Not only would the emphatic teaching of an equivalency of punishment and sin found in the preceding statements of 40:2 be contradicted if *kepel* were translated "double" in the last clause, but a survey of the use of *kepel* elsewhere indicates that "duplicate" rather than "double" is consistently its preferable if not its necessary rendering. We will examine that evidence supportive of our interpretation of 40:2 after a concluding expository comment on this prophetic proclamation of comfort to Jerusalem.

The covenant curse of the allotted seventy years of exile as recompense for Israel's apostasy is, as we have said, the underlying image in Isa 40:2, but in accordance with regular prophetic idiom this typological imagery drawn from the old covenant is parabolic of new covenant reality. Through it, Isaiah is prophetically assuring the new covenant beneficiaries of all ages that their debt of sin has been paid and the divine justice perfectly satisfied. This is accomplished by the suffering of that Servant of the Lord whom Isaiah proceeds to set forth in the following chapters. On this One the Lord lays the iniquity of the many, and he endures the curse due to them, making atonement for them (52:13-53:12). Israel's exile sufferings were not typological of the cross as an atoning sacrifice offered by the

<sup>3</sup> Note in these passages the use of *mālē* for completing the seventy years and the characterization of the exile as a period of service to the Babylonian master.

<sup>4</sup> *Bêt* of cost.

righteous One as a substitute in the place of sinners. Those sufferings were the due punishment for Israel's own sin, like the punishment endured by the lost in hell. However, in that Israel's completion of the allotted time of punishment, the seventy years of captivity, did constitute a full payment, a recompense commensurate with their sins, it could provide a figurative groundwork for the gospel pronouncement of 40:2. Comfort my people: In Christ they have received the hell punishment, the eternal seventy years of banishment from the divine Presence, the just wages, the full equivalent payment that matches and cancels their debt of sin. When it is thus recognized that Isa 40:2 describes God's justice operative in Christ's atonement, it is all the more evident how scrupulously exact the description must be and how inappropriate would be the insertion here of the notion of an inequitable double payment.

## II. KĀPAL/KEPEL IN THE OT

The conclusion reached concerning *kepel* in Isa 40:2 is confirmed by an examination of the several appearances of *kāpal/kepel* elsewhere in the OT. What we find is that the meaning definitely required in most passages is, for the noun *kepel*, "duplicate, twin, matching equivalent" and, for the verb *kāpal*, "produce a duplicate or duplex," or, with respect to an action, "repeat," while the idea of a double amount is not clearly demanded in any passage.

The verb *kāpal* is used in the book of Exodus with reference to cloth material that is folded over so as to produce a pocket of matching front and back pieces facing each other or twin flaps side by side. Exodus 28:16; 39:9 are concerned with the breastpiece of the high priest's vestments. *Kāpal* here describes the linen as folded double to make the square pouch in which the Urim and Thummim were kept (28:30). The material was not doubled in amount but doubled over, folded in half. The result was a double in the sense of a duplicate or matching face, not twice the quantity.

Similarly, in the case of the directions for the goats' hair covering over the tabernacle in 26:9 the verb *kāpal* indicates what is to be done to the end curtain of the eleven curtains that were joined together, the one at the front of the tent. Obviously there is no thought of doubling its size; all eleven curtains were to be the same size (v 8). Rather, the curtain in question was somehow folded over, apparently by drawing together its outside edges toward the center of the front elevation of the tent and so producing two matching sides, a kind of diptych.

A striking paronomasia appears in connection with the occurrence of the verb *kāpal* in Ezek 21:14 (19).<sup>5</sup> The paronomasia reinforces the symbolism of the commanded act of clapping palm against palm (*kap ʿel-kap*)

<sup>5</sup> The choice of *kap*, not *yad* (cf. e.g. Ezek 25:6), and the expansion of the expression *hikkā kap*, "clap hands" (cf. e.g. 2 Kgs 11:12), by *ʿel-kap* are dictated by the design of echoing *wētikkāpēl*. This argues against repointing *wtkpl* as Qal instead of Niphal, which would diminish this sound equivalence.

as an image of the action (*wētikḱāpēl*) to be performed with respect to the sword of judgment.<sup>6</sup> In the symbolic act one hand meets its mate in a duplicating sort of process, producing a matching pair.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, there is to be a duplicating of the sword; a sword matching the original is to be forthcoming. Such then is the meaning of *kāpal* here, with the resultant translation “the sword will be replicated (or multiplied).” This action denoted by *kāpal* is qualified by *šēlišītāh*, “to a third.” Evidently the idea is that the replicating of the sword is to be repeated up to the point<sup>8</sup> of a third sword.<sup>9</sup>

Two instances of the noun *kepel* are found in Job. Though not without its difficulties, Job 41:13 (5) contains a reasonably clear description of a fearful duplex pair in the armament of leviathan. Light is thrown on this verse by the next one, which repeats the same imagery, these two verses together being arranged in an AB//A'B' pattern. Verse 14 (6) reads: “Who would open the doors of his face? His encircling (*sēbībōt*) teeth (are) terror.”<sup>10</sup> In this parallel structure, *kepel* (v 13) corresponds to *sēbībōt* (v 14), and v 13 (5) is to be read: “Who would open his armored face? Within that pair (*kepel*)<sup>11</sup> of jaws who would enter?” The B-stich in each verse thus refers to the jaws studded with terrifying teeth, and in both cases the point made is not the quantity of the teeth as such (a double amount) but the particular array of this weaponry, the arrangement of the teeth in facing rows, threatening from both sides, from above and below, whatever dared this gantlet. It is this duplex pattern of matching upper and lower jaws that is denoted by *kepel*.<sup>12</sup>

The other appearance of *kepel* is in Job 11:6. The verse is quite obscure but, once more, to interpret *kepel* in terms of double quantity would not seem to fit. Here again structural parallelism may supply an interpretive clue. For vv 5-6a apparently form another AB//A'B' pattern. Curiously the idea of an opening of the mouth is present here as in 41:13-14. In view this time are not the jaws of leviathan but the lips of God. “But would that God would speak, that he would open his lips like<sup>13</sup> you!” (v 5).

<sup>6</sup> Does the paronomasia even suggest a popular etymologizing of *kepel* as based on *kap*, after the pattern of nouns formed with affixed *lāmed*?

<sup>7</sup> In Prov 6:1, where the clapping of one's hand to the hand of another accompanies a commitment to become surety for the other, the symbolism might be that as hand matches hand, so a pledge of resources is given by one to match the debts of the other.

<sup>8</sup> Thus the force of the appended *-āh* in *šēlišītāh*.

<sup>9</sup> If *kāpal* meant doubling the amount, the *šēlišītāh* would mean “to a third time” and the result would be the improbable idea of six swords.

<sup>10</sup> Possibly the verb “enter” from the corresponding B-stich in v 13 does double duty here. Translate then: “Who would enter the circle of terror, his teeth?”

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the listing *kapallu* in *UT* 422, said to designate an object of apparel that comes in pairs.

<sup>12</sup> Even on the interpretation of v 13 (5) as referring to a two-layered coat of mail rather than two rows of teeth, *kepel* would still signify the matching layers rather than double quantity.

<sup>13</sup> By so translating the preposition *im* (cf. e.g. Ps 143:7) we bring out the comparison with the boasting words of Job's lips (v 2), to which the opening of God's lips is to provide a rebuttal.

Corresponding to “lips” in the parallel B-stich of v 6a is *kiplayim* (dual). Since *kepel* consistently refers to a matching pair, and especially in view of its use in 41:13 for the duplex form of the mouth, it may be understood here as a poetic synonym for lips. This pairing is corroborated by the use of the dual form *kiplayim*, which answers to the dual *šēpātāyu*,<sup>14</sup> “lips.” Verse 6a is then to be translated: “Would that he would declare to you the hidden things of wisdom, that he would open<sup>15</sup> his lips (*kiplayim*) in understanding!”

Another possible explanation of this *kiplayim* would be to see in it a reference to the cosmos-encompassing, paired parameters of God’s wisdom—the heights of heaven on one side and the depths of Sheol on the other, which is the theme of the immediately following verses (vv 7–9). These two solutions could even be combined. For it might be that the lips of God, as a metonymy for the words of his wisdom, are pictured as extending from the upper to the lower ends of creation.<sup>16</sup> In any case, it is the understanding of *kepel* as denoting a positionally matching pair that makes possible a satisfactory explanation of this difficult passage.

### III. *MIŠNEH* IN JER 16:18; 17:18

The teaching of a twofold retribution would be found in Jer 16:18; 17:18 if the critical word, *mišneh*, were translated “double,” a meaning it has at times (e.g. Exod 16:5, 22; Job 42:10). There is, however, the option of translating *mišneh* “equivalent” rather than “double,” as is shown by the use of the term elsewhere. Thus in the Hebrew bondservant legislation of Deuteronomy 15 the master is induced to fulfill the requirement to free such a servant in the seventh year by the reminder that during the six years he has received services equal in value (*mišneh*) to six years’ wages of a hired servant (v 18). Though *mišneh* is often translated “double” here, it is difficult to defend the implication that the bondservant would do twice as much work as a regular paid laborer.

Again, in the regulations governing the prospective king of Israel in Deuteronomy 17, *mišneh* denotes the “copy” of the Deuteronomic treaty, the covenant law that was to be prepared for the king from the original kept in the sanctuary (v 18). This, like the two tables of the covenant at Sinai, reflects the practice in ancient treaty diplomacy of providing the vassal with a duplicate of the document while the suzerain retained his copy.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The suffix pronoun here does double duty with *kiplayim*.

<sup>15</sup> The *yiptah* of the parallel B-stich in v 5 does double duty here.

<sup>16</sup> Similarly in the Ugaritic myths the lips of Mot, the god of death, are said to extend from heaven to earth, accommodating the host of victims demanded by his voracious appetite.

<sup>17</sup> Similar to *mišneh* is the Akkadian term *mištannu* found in one of the Alalakh texts (AT.3), a treaty dealing with the extradition of runaway slaves. *Mištannu* denotes what the owner gives for the returned slave, the stipulated bounty, an appropriate payment in a *quid pro quo* arrangement.

This clearly attested option of rendering *mišneh* as “equivalent” deserves the preference in both the passages in Jeremiah that would teach twofold punishment according to customary translations of *mišneh*. The threat presented to the apostates in Jer 16:18 is then simply that God “will repay them (with punishment) equivalent (*mišneh*) to their iniquity and sin.” And the concluding plea in 17:18 is that the petitioner’s foes should suffer destruction like that which they intended for him: “Destroy them with a matching (*mišneh*) destruction.” So translated, this plea is in keeping with the request in the first part of the verse that the persecutors be dealt with according to the talion principle, the shame and terror they purposed for the petitioner befalling them.

#### IV. *DIPLOŌ/DIPLOUS* IN THE NT

Revelation 18 contains a jubilant vision of God’s judgment on the apostate harlot-city of Babylon. In the midst of it a voice from heaven, calling for vengeance on Babylon, clearly specifies that the judgment is to be executed according to the talion principle of punishment equal to the offense. “Give back to her as she has given (v 6a). . . . Give her as much torture and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself” (v 7a).<sup>18</sup> In between the two quoted statements emphasizing proportionate recompense are two others (vv 6b, 6c) in which the relation of Babylon’s punishment to its iniquity is denoted by *diploŏ/diplous*, customarily rendered “double (twofold)” here. Thus *NIV*: “Pay her back double for what she has done. Mix her a double portion from her own cup.” But to translate “double” creates an unacceptable contradiction of the immediately preceding and following call for punishment commensurate with sin. In fact, the imagery of the cup in v 6c itself seems to underscore the talion principle of equivalence. For it is in the very cup of the harlot’s sin, the golden cup full of the wine of her fornication (cf. Rev 14:8; 17:4; 18:3), that her penal potion is to be administered. The idea of pouring her a double amount of punishment would be incongruous with this emphasis on the identity of the vessel of sin and of judgment. Indeed, since Babylon’s cup is described as filled to the brim with her abominations (17:4), getting double that amount of punishment into the very same container would be quite a feat. We propose then that “equivalent” be substituted for “double” in the translation of vv 6b and 6c. How *diploŏ/diplous* acquired in NT usage the nuances of *kāpal/kepel* and *mišneh* is readily accounted for by the fact that they are employed to render these Hebrew words in the LXX. Properly translated, Rev 18:6 declares, consistently with its context, that Babylon’s iniquities were to be balanced by their equal weight of punishment in God’s scales of justice.

Our rendering of *diploŏ/diplous* in Rev 18:6 finds support in the two other NT appearances of these terms (actually *diplous* in both cases).

<sup>18</sup> *NIV* translation.

Matthew 23:15 presents one of a series of woes pronounced by Jesus against the scribes and Pharisees. Charging that they made of their proselyte a son of hell, Jesus institutes a comparison between proselytizer and proselyte in terms of that identification. The comparison is expressed by the comparative *diploteros*. If *diploous* means "double" here, the comparative form of the adjective must be ignored, for double is double—there is no such thing as more double. Hence the usual sleight-of-hand renderings "twofold more a son of hell than yourselves" or "twice as much a son of hell as you are." If, however, *diploous* means "matching image," the comparative form becomes more manageable. The idea then is that the proselyte takes on more fully than the Pharisees the likeness of a son of hell.

In 1 Tim 5:17 *diploous* describes the honor of which certain elders are to be considered worthy. The elders in view are those who rule well. If the term *malista* has its meaning of "specifically," the phrase it introduces specifies that these elders are those who labor in teaching the Word. If *malista* means "especially" here, a distinction is drawn between two groups of elders, and the due reception of the contemplated honor by those engaged in teaching is said to be a matter of special importance.

If *diploous* is translated "double," efforts to interpret the verse become problematic and speculative.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand if we translate *diploous* as "equivalent," the problems disappear. For it makes eminently good and simple sense to say that elders who perform their office well are deserving of matching (*diploous*) honor commensurate with their service. In Paul's corroborative observations in v 18 the pay earned by a laborer illustrates the honor due the elders in v 17, and this would point to a normal, commensurate (not extraordinary, double) measure of honor, honor matching the elders' labors.

It appears then that the NT usage favors the translation of *diploō*/*diploous* in Rev 18:6 as "render the equivalent" (rather than "double"), and that removes the alleged teaching of a twofold divine retribution from this text too.

## V. CONCLUSION

On closer scrutiny all the Biblical data customarily cited as evidence of the teaching of a double divine punishment for sin dissolves with the discovery that the key Hebrew and Greek terms either never mean "double" or do not have that meaning in the relevant passages.

<sup>19</sup> If *diploous* means twice as much, a comparison is set up with a group that gets a single measure of honor. Since all who rule well are worthy of double honor, there would have to be a group (not mentioned in the verse) who failed to rule well, who would receive the regular amount of honor—a strange thought. To avoid it, "double" might be construed as two kinds of honor (like respect and remuneration) with no comparison made to a group of unsuccessful elders who received only one kind of honor. But the warrant is lacking for that meaning of *diploous*, and the notion of these two kinds of honor would be abrupt, isolated and speculative.



Notice needs to be taken of the fact that in commentary on these texts one finds reference made, in supportive elaboration of the alleged notion of double punishment, to legislation in Exod 22:1, 4, 7, 9 (21:37; 22:3, 6, 8) that stipulates double (or more) payments in cases of theft. Though not directly inflicted by God, these penalties are divinely promulgated. Overlooked in such argument is the fact that two factors are involved in the double payment demanded of the thief: restitution as well as punishment. Return of the original amount is simply restoration. Only the second half of the double payment constitutes punishment, and thus, in keeping with the talion principle, the thief suffers a loss equivalent to that which he inflicted.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly articulated in Biblical law, the talion principle of eye for eye and life for life is foundational to the temporal, human administration of justice as prescribed by God in Scripture for both the common-grace state<sup>21</sup> and the Israelite theocracy<sup>22</sup> as well as in the direct execution of judgment by the Lord himself.

<sup>20</sup> When fourfold or fivefold payment is required (Exod 22:1), aggravation of the crime beyond simple theft is involved, and the additional penalty may be presumed to be commensurate in the divine assessment with the additional degree of guilt.

<sup>21</sup> Gen 4:15; 9:6. Cf. M. G. Kline, "The Oracular Origin of the State," *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies* (ed. G. A. Tuttle; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 132-141.

<sup>22</sup> Exod 21:23-25; Lev 24:18-21; Deut 19:21. Cf. M. G. Kline, "Lex Talionis and the Human Fetus," *JETS* 20 (1977) 193-201.