

Make a *Sohar* for the Ark:

Illuminating an Unusual Biblical Word

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Genesis 6:16

צַהַר תַּעֲשֶׂה לַתִּבְיָה וְאֵל-אַמָּה תְּכַלְכְּנָהּ מִלְּמַעְלָה, וּפֶתַח הַתִּבְיָה בְּצַדָּהּ תִּשְׂמֶה, תַּחְתִּים שְׁנַיִם וּשְׁלִישִׁים תַּעֲשֶׂהּ.

Make a “*Sohar*” for the ark and finish it within a cubit from above. Put the door to the ark in its side; make it with second and third decks below.

The word *Sohar* (*tzohar*) is a *Hapax Legomonon*—appearing just once in the entire bible. Its meaning is unclear and several different explanations have been proposed over time.

The ancient *Targumim* translate the word variously. The Septuagint has the word “ἐπισυναγωγή” meaning to *gather together*. This is difficult to understand in context, but could indicate a textual variant utilizing the word צבר (*heap up, bind*) instead of צהר.¹ Targum Onkelos translates it as “נְהוֹר” a “light.” While Targum Jonathan renders it a “*sparkling gem*.” The *midrash* in *Beresbit Rabbah* offers two explanations: (1) *Sohar* means window. (2) *Sohar* is a luminous gemstone.² The Vulgate, follows the first opinion of the Midrash, translating *Sohar* as *Fenestram* (window.) In the Talmud, however, Rabbi Yohanan follows the second opinion of the *midrash*, preferring the meaning of precious stones.³ In both cases the explanation is related to lighting the interior decks of the Ark, and is usually understood as being related to the word צהרים (*tsavoraim*) which means mid-day, when the sun is at its highest point.

Window became the most common translation of *Sohar*, perhaps this is because we read later in our *parasha* (8:6) וַיִּפְתַּח נֹחַ אֶת-חַלּוֹן הַתִּבְיָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made. Where do we find that Noah made a window for the Ark? The *Sohar* must be the window that Noah made.



Old English Hexateuch, British Library, 12th c.

R' David Kimchi (RaDaK) and Chizkuni reject the translation of *Sohar* as window. Precisely because the ordinary word for window, *Halon*, which is used later, is not used here in our verse. This implies that *Sohar* must be something other than a window. Moreover, according to the traditional understanding of verse 8:22, there was no daylight during the flood so a window could not have provided light inside the ark. Instead they connect the word צהר to the word צהר (*yizhar*) meaning newly pressed oil. *Sohar* according to these commentators refers not to a window but to an

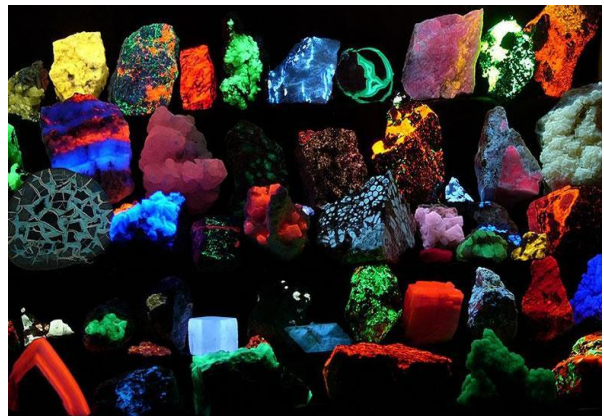
oil lamp - Noah is instructed to hang an oil lamp inside the ark in order to illuminate the lower decks.

¹ The NETS translation of the LXX has: “You shall make the Ark, bringing it together, and shall finish it to a cubit above.”

² Both are quoted by Rashi.

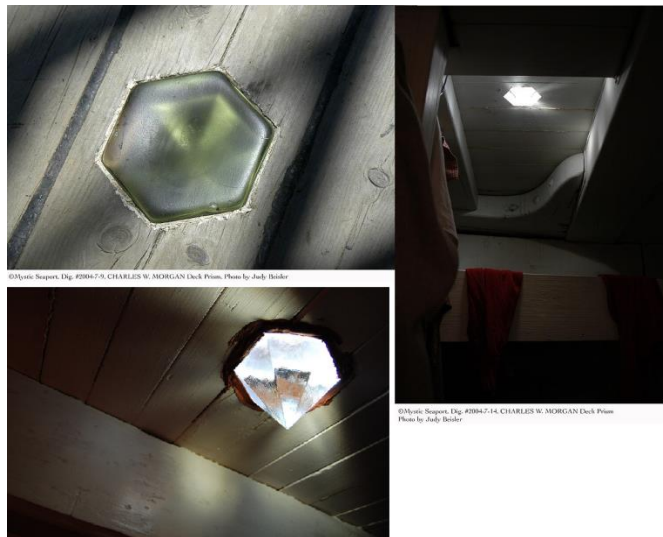
³ Sanhedrin 108b - אבנים טובות ומרגליות

The second opinion in the Midrash is that *Sohar* means a luminous gemstone. In the words of Targum Jonathan this sounds like some kind of supernatural item - “Go thou unto Pishon, and take from thence a precious stone, and fix it in the ark to illuminate you”. Affixing glowing gems in the ark may sound supernatural - but in fact there are many kinds of natural stones that are fluorescent⁴ or aventurescent⁵ and which give off or reflect light.



Fluorescent Minerals

Interestingly, there was an old nautical practice to build “deck prisms” into the top deck in order to illuminate the lower deck below. These deck



Deck Prisms from above and below

prisms were multi-faceted glass lenses built into the deck. The light entering the prism from above would be refracted in many directions and diffuse throughout the lower deck below. The explanation that the *Sohar* could be a precious or cut stone should not be simply dismissed as something supernatural - such prisms have in fact been used to illuminate ships.⁶

Whether the *Sohar* is translated as a window, lamp, or, precious stone, all these early explanations are related to light. The prevailing explanation among modern scholars, however,

is that *Sohar* means the roof of the Ark, and that Noah was instructed to construct a sloped, or gabled, roof above the ark to make sure that rainwater would run off and not collect on top. The similarity of the word *Sohar* to the Arabic word *zabrun* meaning “back” was already pointed out by Albertus Schultens in the 18th century. This was later quoted by Solomon D. Luzzatto (ShaDaL) during the mid-19th Century who offers “roof” as a possible meaning for the word *Sohar*.



From Luzzatto's commentary on Genesis with his drawing of the slanted roof atop the Ark

This theory became much more prevalent after the discovery of the El Amarna tablets in 1887 and the deciphering of Ugaritic in 1929 which gave scholars a new corpus

⁴ <http://geology.com/articles/fluorescent-minerals/>

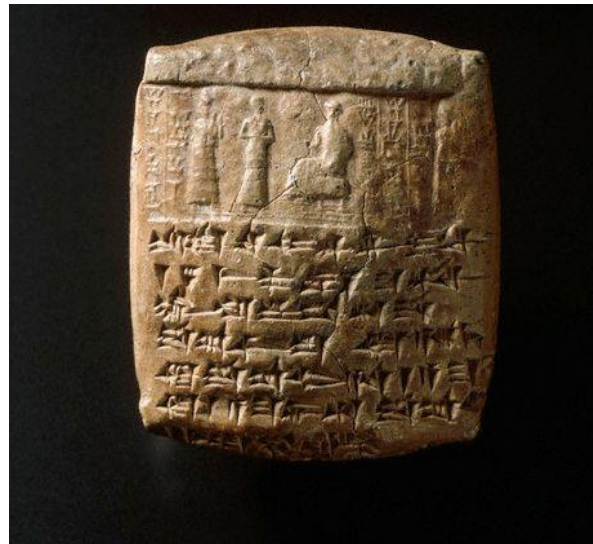
⁵ <http://geology.com/gemstones/aventurine/>

⁶ See for example https://glassian.org/Prism/Deck/Charles_W_Morgan/index.html

of ancient Western Semitic texts (dating from about 1400-1300 BCE) to compare with biblical Hebrew. Both in El Amarna and in Ugaritic we find texts with the Western Semitic word *ṣuḥru* (Ugaritic: *Ṣhr* or *Ṣr*) with the meaning “on top of.”⁷



Cuneiform Tablets from El Amarna (c.1350 BCE)



Cuneiform tablet with seal of King Mursil II, 1345-1320 BCE From the palace at Ugarit, Ras Shamra, Syria

From these discoveries most modern scholars now believe that the biblical *Ṣobar* is closely related to these other Semitic words and that all of them stem from the Akkadian word *ṣērūma* meaning *back* or *top*. In our context *צֹהַר* then refers to the roof on top of the Ark. Accordingly, our verse is probably best translated: **Make a sloped roof for the ark and finish it to (a point) one cubit higher (than the level of the walls).**⁸

Explaining the meaning of an unusual word like *Ṣobar* is just one example of the way in which the archeological finds at El Amarna and Ugarit have helped modern scholars understand the language of the bible. Without exaggeration we can say that these ancient texts help *illuminate* the Torah.

⁷ For example: EA 232:11 (I bow to thee 7 times and 7 times “*ba-aṭ-nu-ma uṣērūma / uṣuḥruma*” = *on my belly and back* בַּטְנִי וְצֹהַרִי *, probably meaning *down and up*); EA 147:39 (*ṣuḥ-ri-ia / on my back*) and KTU 1.14 II 20 (*lṣr mgdl / to the top* of the tower); KTU 1.169:4 (*kylm ṣrh/like goats toward the summit*)

⁸ See James Franklin Armstrong, A Critical Note on Genesis VI 16aα, *Vetus Testamentum* Vol. 10, Fasc. 3 (Jul., 1960)