Make a Šohar for the Ark: 
Illuminating an Unusual Biblical Word
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Genesis 6:16

צֹהַר เท่าศะ ล่ 통하여 ดำลิ้ว ผิวผิว ผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิวผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผิvผि
The second opinion in the Midrash is that Ṣobar 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 flourescent⁴ or aventurescent⁵ and which give off or reflect light.

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 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 Ṣobar 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 Ṣobar 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 Ṣobar 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 Ṣobar to the Arabic word ẓabrun 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 Ṣobar.

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

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⁴ [http://geology.com/articles/fluorescent-minerals/](http://geology.com/articles/fluorescent-minerals/)
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 ṣuḫru (Ugaritic: Šhr or Šr) with the meaning “on top of.”

From these discoveries most modern scholars now believe that the biblical Ṣōḥar is closely related to these other Semitic words and that all of them stem from the Akkadian word šēruma 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).

Explaining the meaning of an unusual word like Ṣōḥar 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.

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7 For example: EA 232:11 (I bow to thee 7 times and 7 times “ba-āṭ-nu-ma uṣēruma / usubruma” = on my belly and back, probably meaning down and up); EA 147:39 (suḥ-ri-ia / on my back) and KTU 1.14 II 20 (lṣr mgdl / to the top of the tower); KTU 1.169:4 (kîlûm 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)