[1] Three Translations of Psalm 81:3

Compare the following three translations of Ps 81:3. In the Hebrew text this is numbered Ps 81:4.

Ps 81:3 [KJV], “Blow up the trumpet in the new moon, in the time appointed, on our solemn feast day.”

Ps 81:3 [NRSV], “Blow the trumpet at the new moon, at the full moon, on our feast day.”

Ps 81:3 [Covered Theory], “Blow the trumpet at the new moon, at its being covered, on our feast day.”

A literal translation of Ps 81:3 that preserves the Hebrew word order and avoids translating the Hebrew word keseh is: “Blow in [the] new-moon the ram's horn, in keseh on [the] day of our feast.”

These three translations are very different for the Hebrew word keseh, where the KJV gives “time appointed”, the NRSV gives “full moon”, and some have suggested the verb “its being covered”. The original intent of the Hebrew can only mean one of these choices.

[2] Error in the KJV for Psalm 81:3

There is a clear explanation for the KJV's translation of the Hebrew prepositional phrase b-keseh as “in the time appointed”. Within Orthodox Judaism the most respected Jewish commentator on the Hebrew Bible as well as the Talmud is Rashi (1040-1105). His commentary on Ps 81:3 is found on page 383 of Gruber 1998 where Gruber translates, “AT THE kesse, the day appointed, prepared and fixed for it. In the same vein 'He will
come home at the kesse' (Prov. 7:20) [i.e.], at the appointed time which has been fixed.” In the previous quote the part in parentheses and square brackets are from Gruber. The concept of “preparing and fixing an appointed time” means “to determine and specify beforehand an appointed time”.

Pages 394-395 of Franz Delitzsch 1952 explains the reasoning behind Rashi’s interpretation, along with other Jewish scholars who later agreed with him, where Delitzsch wrote, “... a time fixed by computation (from [Hebrew] kasah = [Hebrew] kasas, [Latin] computare).” I added the square brackets for clarity. The Hebrew word kasas is explained here by the Latin word computare, which means “to compute”. When you compute an appointed time, you determine and specify beforehand an appointed time through a computation. This excessively brief explanation by Delitzsch is saying that Rashi favored the view that the Hebrew word now in the Hebrew Bible was originally the Hebrew word kasas. Thus Rashi is asserting that the last letter in this word got copied incorrectly and all subsequent surviving copies duplicated this error. Rashi favors the meaning of the different Hebrew word kasas that he supposes was the original word. Rashi used this technique of textual criticism frequently in his corrections to the Talmud. During the time of Rashi, Orthodox Jews were opposed by the Karaites in the determination of the calendar. The Orthodox scholar Rashi favored the modern calculated calendar, and he chose an explanation of Ps 81:3 that implied a computation to fix the day. My opinion is that Rashi was motivated to favor an explanation that supported a calculated calendar.

Few people would imagine that the KJV in Ps 81:3 would favor a translation that was based upon Rashi’s textual criticism of the Hebrew text.


Ps 81:3 contains the double word b-keseh, which is the Hebrew preposition bh prefixed to the Hebrew word keseh. This preposition most typically means “in”, “at”, or “on”. The meaning of keseh in this verse is partly determined by its attachment to this preposition just as the movement of a boat is partly determined by its rudder.

This verse has two prepositional phrases: “in [the] new-moon” and “in keseh” using the same preposition to begin each phrase. In both cases the preposition is attached as a prefix.

Some computer programs that use the Hebrew words will allow the user to do a search on any specific string of Hebrew letters. If such a search is made on the three Hebrew letters in keseh, it can be discovered that in the following 15 places in the Hebrew Bible,
This verb *kasah* occurs 152 times in the Hebrew Bible, but in all except those 15 places, that combination of three letters in that order does not occur. A Hebrew verb has many different forms that vary according to the grammar. This verb is found on pages 491-492 of the BDB lexicon and on pages 607-608 of the Wigram concordance. None of these 15 places have a prepositional prefix such as *bh* found in *b-keseh*. The amazing fact is that there is a grammatical reason why there could not be such a preposition prefixed to this form of the verb *kasah*. The reference work AKOT lists the grammatical form of every Hebrew verb in the Bible. Its author taught Hebrew for several decades before composing this valuable reference work. I have examined the Hebrew word *kasah* in all 152 of its occurrences in AKOT, and I have noted the grammatical form of the verb in each case.

Note 2 on page 85 of the biblical Hebrew grammar book by William Harper states, “Only to the Infinitive Construct may prepositions be prefixed or suffixes added.” This is saying that the “infinitive construct” form of a verb may have a prepositional prefix, but no other verb form may have a prepositional prefix. Having looked up and given specific attention to all of these 15 places in AKOT, I can say that none of them are called the infinitive construct. Furthermore, there are 14 places among the 152 where the verb form is indeed identified as the infinitive construct (Ex 28:42; Num 4:15; I Ki 7:18, 41, 42; II Chr 4:12, 13; Ps 104:9; Ezek 24:7, 8; 38:9, 16; Hos 2:9; Mal 2:13). All except two of these 14 places do have a prepositional prefix. All of these 14 places have the same pronunciation and Hebrew consonants, and this is different from *keseh*. The transliteration is *ksoht*. Therefore, the double word form *b-keseh* has a grammatical limitation (infinitive construct) if *keseh* is to be a verb, and the verb *kasah* (to cover, Strong's number 3680) does not conform to this limitation. Thus *keseh* in Ps 81:3 is not this verb “to cover” because it has the wrong form – it is not the infinitive construct *ksoht*. In Ps 81:3 *keseh* is a noun, not a verb. Therefore, evidence from the Hebrew text of the Bible shows that *keseh* does not mean the verb “to cover”, Strong's number 3680.

To be thorough and satisfy my curiosity, I also looked up the name of the verb form of all 152 occurrences of *kasah* in PARSE_1 and PARSE_2 to see whether the use of the infinitive construct would be corroborated. It was. Pages 88-91 of BDB discusses the preposition *bh* in its various uses. Beginning at the bottom of page 90 under category V, it states, “Followed by an inf. c.” This is an abbreviation for “infinitive construct”, and hence this category of meaning includes a verb that follows *bh*. Some other meanings of
*bh* relate to the opposite order when a verb comes first and *bh* comes second (beyond the verb and not attached to the verb). Only category V pertains to *bh* and a verb following it. Thus BDB corroborates the grammar book by Harper. Thus *keseh* in Ps 81:3 cannot be the verb *kasah* (3680). This shows that the third suggested translation with the verb “to cover” is a grammatical impossibility due to the presence of the preposition *bh*.

[4] The Meaning of *keseh* in Psalm 81:3 is the noun “approximate full moon”

Aquila translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek c. 130 (note page 36 of Louis Ginzberg 1902), and this was quite literal in a word for word sense. This was about 60 years after the Temple was destroyed when Hebrew was still spoken in limited areas of greater Palestine. Aquila's early life was in a solely Greek speaking environment, but he later moved to Palestine where he studied Hebrew. In his translation from Hebrew, he was aided by leading Jewish scholars of his time (note F. C. Burkitt and Louis Ginzberg 1902). Only small portions of Aquila's translation have survived. On page 182 of Reider and Turner the Greek word *panseleenos* is given as Aquila's translation of *keseh* in Ps 81:3 and Prov 7:20. This Greek word appears on page 1299 of Liddell and Scott where the meaning is “full moon” or “time of full moon”. This Greek word also appears on page 1053 of Hatch and Redpath where Aquila's version is cited as the source in these two places. The full Greek text of Aquila's version of Ps 81:3 appears on page 232 of F. Field where the symbol for the translation by Aquila as well as the symbol for the later translation by Symmachus (c. 180) appear, showing that both translations agree. Aquila's Greek phrase including *panseleenos* is shown in Prov 7:20 on page 324 of F. Field. In summary, Aquila's translation from c. 130 made with the help of leading rabbinic scholars when Hebrew had not yet become a dead language shows that *keseh* means “full moon”. The translation by Symmachus from c. 130 agrees.

The Syriac language is an offshoot of first century Aramaic, and is thus a Semitic language with significant affinity to Hebrew. The Syriac translation from the Hebrew Bible was made c. 150-200 according to estimates made by Michael Weitzman 1998, page 258. The Peshitta text of Ps 81:3 written in Syriac script (listed as verse 4 in both the Hebrew text as well as the Syriac text) appears on page 126 of William E. Barnes 1904. On the second line of verse 4 the word at the right that is written in Syriac script is transliterated *vbks* (meaning “and in [the] kesa”) if one examines the chart of English, Hebrew, and Syriac letter equivalents given on page 10 of William Jennings 1926. (I made this transliteration based on this chart because I do not know Syriac script.) Thus the translators from the Hebrew into the Syriac from c. 150-200 used the Syriac word *kesa* for the Hebrew *keseh*. The same Syriac script for *kesa* in Ps 81:3 found on page 126 of William E. Barnes (noted above) also appears on page 220 of the Syriac dictionary by J. Payne Smith 1903. There Smith gives the meaning of the Syriac word “time of full
When Wilhelm Gesenius (1786-1842) expanded his commentary on selected Hebrew words after his acclaimed Hebrew lexicon was published, he named his expansion *Thesaurus*. He wrote this in Latin, and his second edition was published in 1835. On pages 698-699 of this work we find Gesenius's expanded discussion on *keseh*. My expanded translation from Gesenius's Latin text (yet omitting some Syriac script with its citations) concerning the Syriac word *kesa* is the following: “Isa Bar Ali, who wrote a Syriac lexicon before 900 CE, shows the Syriac word *ksh* to mean 'full moon' based upon clear contexts, e. g., 'the full moon on the night of the fourteenth'. In the Syriac Peshitta, the Syriac word *kesa* is used in I Ki 12:32 to refer to the fifteenth day of the month and in II Chr 7:10 to refer to the twenty-third day of the month, indicating that a variation from the middle of the month onward for eight days qualifies for *kesa* in Syriac. Barhebraeus and Ephraim Syrus also use the Syriac *kesa* to refer to the whole time of the full moon. In *Acta Martyrum* (a Syriac version of *Acts of the Martyrs*, c. 250 CE), 1:175, *kesa* is used opposite the new moon.” Gesenius also mentions that Aquila's translation into Greek and Jerome's translation into Latin, both from the Hebrew, also gives the meaning of *keseh* to be “full moon”. He concludes that *keseh* in Ps 81:3 and Prov 7:20 means (approximate) “full moon”. The Ugaritic, Akkadian, and Phoenician texts were not discovered until after Gesenius died. In summary, the Syriac translation of Ps 81:3 made c. 150-200 CE shows that its cognate Semitic word *kesa* for the Hebrew *keseh* means “(approximate) full moon”.

Jerome translated the Psalms from Hebrew into Latin c. 392 (page 233 of Charles Cooper 1950). Page 103 of J. M. Harden 1922 shows that his Latin translation of the Hebrew prepositional phrase *b-keseh* was *in medio mense*, which means “in the middle of the month”, and of course this is the general time of the full moon. Jerome did have a copy of Aquila's translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek because in his commentaries, he sometimes mentions how Aquila translated certain Hebrew words into Greek. Thus Jerome's translation of Ps 81:3 could have been partially influenced by Aquila. However, Jerome's primary goal was to produce his own translation based upon the knowledge of Hebrew that was imparted to him by various Jewish scholars.

Jewish scholars who taught Hebrew to Aquila c. 125 and to Jerome beginning c. 386 provide agreement that *keseh* means “approximate full moon”. The translation from the Hebrew Bible into the Syriac Peshitta c. 150 – 200 by scholars also corroborates this meaning. There is additional excavated evidence from the Phoenician and Akkadian (Semitic) languages, but this should be sufficient.

The NRSV translation of “full moon” for *keseh* implies that the feast day at the end of
this verse must either be the first day of Unleavened Bread or the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles, both of which occur on the 15th day of the month. Commentaries argue for both festival choices.

The vagueness of the Septuagint in both Ps 81:3 and Prov 7:20 shows that its translators were guessing about the meaning of keseh. When Jerome first translated the Psalms from the Septuagint into Latin c. 383 and then a second time a couple of years later (page 11 of Charles Callan 1949), he used the same vagueness as the Septuagint in Ps 81:3. Later, c. 392 (page 233 of Charles Cooper 1950), Jerome translated the Psalms from Hebrew to Latin, and, as discussed above, he gave a better translation from the Hebrew that disagreed with the vagueness of the Septuagint.

[5] Grammatical Structure of Ps 81:3 compared with other Psalms

Three verses from the Psalms will now be presented that have a sentence structure similar to Ps 81:3 to show that the reader need not insist that the full moon defines the new moon based upon the grammar of this verse. Hence it is permissible to add the word “and” to the translation in order to give the correct sense to the reader. In poetry, normally expected words may need to be supplied in translation. The sentence structure of Ps 81:3 has the following three characteristics:
(1) The Hebrew word for “and” does not exist in the verse.
(2) The Hebrew has two or more prepositional phrases with the same preposition.
(3) Only one verb occurs, and this precedes the prepositional phrases.

These characteristics apply to the following three verses, all translated according to YLT because it preserves the Hebrew sufficiently to note the grammar.

Ps 13:2. “Till when do I set counsels in my soul? Sorrow in my heart daily?” Here “soul” and “heart” are not identical. The phrases are not near synonyms.

Ps 50:9, “I take not from thy house a bullock, From thy folds he goats.” Here “thy house” and “thy folds” are not identical. The phrases are not near synonyms.

Ps 116:8, “For Thou hast delivered my soul from death, My eyes from tears, my feet from overthrowing.” Here “death”, “tears”, and “overflowing” are not identical. The phrases are not near synonyms.

These poetic examples show that the two prepositional phrases in Ps 81:3 need not be near synonyms on the basis of the grammar. This defeats the allegation that some people make that the biblical month begins with the full moon based on this verse.

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NRSV. *New Revised Standard Version*


YLT. *Young's Literal Translation of the Bible*, rev. ed. Robert Young. Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1898