

הַיֵּרֵאָה *yeri'â* – ‘Tent Covering’, not ‘Curtain’

Quotes are from NRSV unless indicated otherwise. Highlighting by underlining is mine.

I would like to argue that *yeri'â* should not be translated as ‘curtain’, but as ‘tent covering’.

The word occurs 54 times, starting in Ex 26:1. In most places, *yeri'â* refers to either the first (bottommost / innermost) **covering** of the Holy and Most Holy Place, which is made of linen (Ex 26:1ff. etc.), or to the second (from bottom / inside) **covering**, which is of goat hair (Ex 26:7 etc.).

There is a puzzling mismatch between the German and English dictionaries and translations. While Gesenius (17th ed.) glossed the word ‘Zelttuch / Zeltbehang’, and Gesenius / Donner (18th ed.) replaces the second gloss with the even clearer ‘Zeltbahn’, which is a piece of fabric that can be used in various ways in tentbuilding, the English edition BDB says ‘curtain’, which is a narrower definition. Similarly, while HALAT renders the word ‘Zeltdecke / Zelt’ [*liter.*: tent-blanket / tent], HALOT says ‘tent curtain / tent’. TWOT and the Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew also give ‘curtain’ as the primary gloss, even if in their descriptions they explain its use as one of the layers that serve to **cover** the Tabernacle. NIDOTTE, next to ‘curtain’, includes the more general ‘tent fabric’. Almost all English translations speak of “(tent) curtain”, whereas GECL uses the word ‘Zeltbahn’, i.e. a strip of canvas, and the German “Hoffnung für alle“ similarly speaks of ‘[eine] Bahn Zelttuch’.

The understanding as a *covering* rather than a *curtain* fits perfectly in other places too:

- Ps 104:2 “You stretch out [!] the heavens like a *yeri'â*”. This happens in horizontal direction of course, not vertically as with a curtain. There is no need to replace the concrete meaning “tent covering” with a looser one like “tent” either, as several common translations do.
- SoS 1:5 contains a comparison: “... like the tents of Kedar, like the *yeri'â* of Solomon”. Again, while that verse has some other problems, the meaning “tent covering” is not problematic.
- Isa 54:2 says: “Enlarge the site of your tent, and let the *yeri'â* of your habitations be stretched out [!]”. Again, “tent coverings” makes perfect sense, more than “(tent) curtains”, as several translations say.
- Jer 10:20 says: “... there is no one to spread my tent again, and to set up my curtains.” NET and TEV use “to hang (curtains)”. Contrast GECL: “Niemand ist da, der mein Zelt wieder aufbaut und die Zeltdecken darüberspannt” (= “... who stretches / spans the tent coverings over it”).

Thus, I see no place in which the meaning ‘curtain’ in the sense of a room-dividing, hanging cloth is required.

On top of this, Hebrew has several other words that could be used for such pieces of cloth: *māsāk*, e.g. in Ex 35:17 denotes the ones that serve as “entrance” to the courtyard and to the Holy Tent; *qela'*, as in Ex 27:9, is used of the courtyard’s enclosure; the *pārōket*, as in Ex 26:31, separates the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. But none of these words are used in the places under discussion.

The *Realia Handbook* (s. v. Goat hair cloth strips, § 3.15.2.3.6.3, p. 210), rightly concludes:

The word ‘curtain,’ which appears in many translations ..., is somewhat misleading, since these goat hair cloth strips covered both the top and the sides of the Tabernacle.

Cf. also the *Handbook* on Ex 26:1:

Ten curtains may be understood as “ten pieces” (TEV) or “ten sheets” (NAB, NJB). TAN has “ten strips of cloth.”

The *Handbook* on Jer 4:20 also mentions “a type of cover or awning which went over the tent itself” at least as a possibility.

Thus, something like ‘tent covering / tent roof / canvas / tarp / fly sheet’ seems to express better what the object is. It is still conceivable that, for the sake of expressing things simply, a word for ‘tent’ or ‘curtain’ could be used, if there is no suitable word for ‘tent covering’. But such a solution should be the last resort, not the assumed meaning.