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"A Slip of the Reader and Not the Reed:
(Infinitive Absolutes with Divergent Finite Forms). Part I."

A SLIP OF THE READER AND NOT THE REED

Part I

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The Bible is full of anomalous grammatical forms and exegetes have grappled with them for centuries. While some peculiarities can be explained by deference to dialectical and archaistic poetic factors, others defy explanation. Witness, for example, four instances in which an infinitive absolute derived from one root accompanies a finite form derived from another: Isaiah 28:28, Jeremiah 8:13, 42:10, and Zephaniah 1:2.[1]

ISAIAH 28:28-29

In Isaiah 28:23-29, the prophet continues a harangue in parabolic form[2] against the priests and leaders of Jerusalem, thundering:

> Give diligent ear to my words, attend carefully to what I say.
> Does he who plows to sow, plow all the time, breaking up and furrowing his land?
> When he has smoothed its surface, does he not rather broadcast black cumin and scatter cumin, or set wheat in a row, barley in a strip, and emmer in a patch?
> For He teaches him the right manner, his God instructs him.
>
> So, too, black cumin is not threshed with a threshing board, nor is the wheel of the threshing sledge rolled over cumin; but black cumin is beaten out with a stick, and cumin with a rod.
>
> It is cereal that is crushed. For even if he threshes it thoroughly [אדוש ידושנו], and the wheel of his sledge and his horses overwhelm it, he does not crush it.

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> That too, is ordered by The Lord of Hosts; His counsel is unfathomable, His wisdom marvelous.

Isaiah's agricultural images come to focus in verse 28, where the meaning of his previous references hinges on resolve. His listeners, after hearing the words *it is cereal that is crushed*, now anticipate the information required to interpret the parable. Yet, it is at this crucial juncture that the prophet confounds his audience by adding *threshes it thoroughly* [אדוש ידושנו].

Efforts to interpret this stich have been thwarted by the inability to choose a common root for both the infinitive absolute and the finite verb. While the former appears to derive from the Aramaic אדש [be quiet, silent][3] the latter demands that we interpret it as "thresh, crush," i.e., from דוש.[4] The medievals, e.g., Ibn Ezra, Rashi, Radak, and David Altschuler (*Metsudat Zion*) all took אדוש as a form of דוש plus prothstetic *aleph*. F. Delitzsch saw the form as a by-form of דוש with emphatic lengthening.[5] Delitzsch is followed by E. Young, P. Auvray, O. Kaiser, A. Hakam, and J. Oswalt[6] who either suggest emendation or defer to the form חדש in 1 Q Isaiah-A.[7]

Other commentators have removed the problem altogether either by eliminating the form[8] or by emending the infinitive to דוש[9] but the lack of versional and manuscript support makes this an unsatisfactory enterprise.[10] Less radical are the attempts by Barth,[11] who sees the form as analogous to the Aramaic *'af'el* infinitive pattern, and E. Hammershaimb, who views אדוש as nominal in form but functioning as an infinitive.[12] Nevertheless, the presence of an Aramaic root אדש meaning "be silent" suggests that Isaiah employed two distinct roots.[13]

Clearly, to emend the text is drastic and fails to explain the anomaly, and to explain the *crux* by way of a grammatical solution leaves one unconvinced. Moreover, the existence of two distinct roots begs the question: Why not see in the infinitive construction both דוש and אדש? After all, both "crushing" and "hushing" fit the text's context; the former by way of agricultural threshing (cf. vv. 24-28) and the latter by way of Isaiah's repeated exhortation to listen without interruption (vv. 14, 19, 23). In addition, the form's juxtaposition with דוש, used unambiguously as "crush" in the previous verse, makes Isaiah's ambiguous infinitival construction appear all the more intentional. Why get the form correct in one verse and not in the next?

Moreover, we may explain both forms of Isaiah's ambiguous wit by appealing to the oracle's context. It is clear that the targets of Isaiah's jabs are Jerusalem's priests and rulers (28:7) and that they are accused of drunkenness (vv. 7-8) and of babbling like babies (vv. 9-10). We may see in the linguistic ambiguities, therefore, the imitation of inebriated slur. Indeed, Isaiah explicitly states that as a consequence of their stupors his oracle also will be indistinct (v. 11).

Additional support for seeing the infinitival construction as alluding to silence comes from his previous statement in 28:24. Immediately after demanding full attention (v. 23), Isaiah delivers an amphibologic[14] line: הכל היום יחרש החרש לזרע לורע (28:24). Though exegetes usually translate the verse *does he who plows to sow, plow all the time...?*, one also can read it *does he who is silent for strength, silent all the time?* Both חרש and זרע are polysemous (possess more than one meaning), the former suggesting "plow" and "be silent, dumb" and the latter "seed" and "strength." The polysemy forces Isaiah's audience to pause and consider the meaning of his words.[15] And though the remaining oracle suggests that we interpret the line as a reference to plowing, the point at which we expect to discover the parable's interpretation, namely at 28:28 with   אדוש ידושנו rehearses the ambiguity of 28:24 by suggesting both "crushing" and "silence."

Indeed, יפתח in the very next line also hints at a silent mouth now opening.[16] Moreover, the words חרש, כרת and פתח in this oracle also have allusive associations to engraving which further demonstrate the poet's sophistication.[17] These "buzz words" strengthen the oracle's ties both to the instruction which the Jerusalemite leaders were negligent in providing (28:9, 28:14) and the treaty (i.e., engraving) they have made with Death (28:15, 28:18).

JEREMIAH 8:11-14

Reinforcing the deliberateness of Isaiah's ambiguous infinitival construction is a similar situation in Jeremiah 8:11-14, part of a larger prophecy against the people of Judah.

> 'They offer healing offhand for the wounds of my people saying 'Peace' when there is no peace.
>
> 'They have acted shamefully, they have done abhorrent things; yet they do not feel shame, they cannot be made to blush. Assuredly, they shall fall among the falling, they shall stumble at the time of their doom,' said The Lord.

> 'I will make an end of them [אסף אסיפם] declares The Lord. No grapes left on the vine, no figs on the fig tree, the leaves all withered. Whatever I have given them is gone.'
>
> Why are we sitting by? Let us gather into the fortified cities and meet our doom there. For The Lord our God has doomed us, He has made us drink a bitter draft, because we sinned against The Lord.

Jeremiah's prophecy comes to a fever pitch in verse 13 with the words אסף אסיפם - typically translated as 'I will make an end of them.' As in the Isaiah passage above, we have an infinitive absolute and finite verb derived from disparate roots. The infinitive absolute comes from the root אסף [gather][18] while the finite form אסיפם derives from סוף [come to an end, cease].[19]

As with Isaiah 28:28, this passage has suffered from the treadmill of textual critics. J. A. Thompson proposes that we revocalize either as "gather" or as "destroy," but opts to translate "I would have gathered their harvest."[20] Without commenting further on the anomaly, J. Bright[21] also suggests that we revocalize either to mean "I will gather their harvest" or "I will thoroughly harvest them."[22] Such commentators assume a scribal error at work.

Yet, as demonstrated above in Isaiah 28:28, the blended infinitival construction is far from being a slip of the stylus. On the contrary, the prophet has chosen carefully his words to pique the ears of his listeners with ambiguity. Nevertheless, the medievals seem to have been on the right track. Kimhi and Radak noted that there are two roots involved, both with the sense of "final end." This suggests to W. McKane that "there is good reason to retain MT."[23] Thus, he translates: "I will gather them for final destruction."[24]

Support for the deliberateness of this usage also comes from the context and imagery of the prophecy which refer both to total destruction (8:12, 8:14), which parallels the meaning "make an end of," and to agriculture and viticulture (8:10, 8:13), which parallels the meaning "gather."[25] The gist of Jeremiah's one-liner is that the Lord will gather them for the purpose of destruction.

Just previous to the expression אסף אסיפם Jeremiah promises that the unjust scribes will *fall among the falling* and *stumble at the time of their doom* (8:12). His blast forces the listener to place his prophecy within a context of impending annihilation. This devastation is echoed in אסף אסיפם . Yet, after the ambiguous threat, Jeremiah adds that there will be *no grapes left on the vine, no figs on the*

fig tree, their leaves having withered (8:13). The competing contexts create a tension in meaning which the prophet doubtless intended.

The listener, who now must choose between the possible meanings for אסף אסיפם then is dealt another blow of ambiguity in verse 13, when the prophet quips: ואתן להם יעברום . This phrase has been deleted,[26] emended, and translated in various ways, usually to mean 'whatever I have given them has passed away,' or the like.[27] S. R. Driver translates the line 'I have appointed them those that shall pass over them.'[28] B. Duhm[29] on the other hand, sees in this stich a metathesis between the letters ע and ב to arrive at יבערום and renders it "they shall consume (or: devour) them." Similarly, G. R. Driver[30] reads the line: 'I would give them to be burned.' D. Aberbach[31] recommends that we read here a possible corruption of ואתן להם יער ערום ['I gave them a naked forest'] as it parallels the previous mention of withered leaves in the same line. Bright,[32] who is unable to offer any solution, regards the line "corrupt and untranslatable" and leaves it unrendered.

I believe that the solution to this *crux* lies somewhere between the proposals above. The *crux* remains a *crux* precisely because of its deliberately ambiguous ring. Like the phrase אסף אסיפם which suggests both "gathering" and "destroying," so too does יעברום hint both at "passing over" [עבר] and "destruction" [בער,עבר]. In addition, the root בער also can mean "gather, glean." Support for this comes both from Syriac and Ugaritic cognate evidence[33] and from the Bible. In Isaiah 3:14, for example, we find the root בער used in reference to vineyards. Its meaning "gather destructively" is demonstrated by its parallelism with גזלת העני [*that which was robbed from the poor*].[34]

Therefore, I prefer to see the expression ואתן להם יעברום as an allusion both to "gathering" and "destruction" and thus, as a rehearsal of the ambiguous אסף אסיפם in the same verse.[35] We have seen the rehearsal phenomenon in connection with this device above (cf. Isa. 28:24, 28:28). Note how Jeremiah is able to reinforce the ambiguity of both expressions by adding immediately afterwards: על מה אנחנו ישבים האספו ונבוא אל ערי המבצר ונדמה שם [*'Why are we sitting by? Let us gather into the fortified cities and meet our doom there'*] (8:14).

GLOSSARY

amphibolobic - a sentence that has more than one meaning

archaistic - an outdated usage which can appear deliberately for poetic purposes

calque - a borrowing by which a specialized meaning of a word in one language is transferred to another language by a literal translation

infinitival - a grammatical construction that uses the infinitive

parabolic - in the form of a parable

pericope - a unit of text

polysemous/polyseme - having more than one meaning/a word with more than one meaning

stich - a segment of a poetic line

NOTES

1. The expression היטיב חרה , which appears two times in Jon 4:9, has been left out of the discussion because the infinitive absolute serves an adverbial function. Nevertheless, it does show that at least adverbially, such forms were known.

2. For a further discussion of the pericope's intertextual characteristics and its relation to the genre known as משל see, Judah Aryeh Leiborik, "הנמשל מעבורת האיכר כישעיהו כח כג-כט ", Tarbiz 24 (1955) pp. 126-128.

3. E.g., Sanhedrin 7a: "טובים לדשמע ואדיש" ["Happy is the man who hears himself (abused) and is silent."] (Cf. also Qiddushin 61b). Jacob Levy, Neuhebraisches und Chaldaisches Worterbuch uber die Talmudim und Midraschim, Vol. 1 (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1876) p. 34, Abraham Ibn Shoshan, המלון החדש ,Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Kiryath Sefer, 1966) p. 29. M Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Press, 1989) p. 290, cites Sanh. 7a as an example of an *aphel* of דוש meaning "to be used to, not to mind." Whether the root is אדש or דוש it is clear that "be silent" can be conveyed by אדוש in Isaiah 28:28.

4. Thus, *HALAT*, pp. 17, 209; KB, pp. 15, 207; BDB, pp. 12, 190.

5. Frederich Delitzsch, *Prolegomena eines Neuen Hebraisch-Aramaischen Worterbuchs zum Alten Testament* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1886) p. 188.

6. Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1969) p. 300, n. 51; Paul Auvray, *Isaje 1-39* (Paris: Librarie Lecoffre, 1972) pp. 254-255; Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) p. 258; Amos Hakam, ספר ישעיהו , Vol 1 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1984) p. 269; John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986) p. 521, n. 5.

7. It is unclear to me why both Oswalt (p. 521, n. 5) and Young (p. 300, n. 51) see the Qumran חדש as evidence of דוש . One would expect דוש or הדוש but not חדוש [renew]. Might this be a corruption of a calque for חרש [be silent]?

8. See, e.g., T. K. Cheyne, *The Book of Isaiah* (The Sacred Books of the Old Testament, 10, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1899).

9. Arnold B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur Hebraischen Bibel* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1908).

10. See, e.g., Frederick E. Greenspan, *Hapax Legomena in Biblical Hebrew: A Study of the Phenomenon and Its Treatment Since Antiquity with Special Reference to Verbal Forms* (SBLDS 74; Chico, CA.: Scholars Press, 1984) p. 56, n. 46, 100.

11. Jakob Barth, *Die Nominalbildung in den Semitischen Sprachen* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1889) p. 73. Interestingly, he compares אדש to two other mixed infinitival forms discussed here (i.e., Jer 8:13, Zeph 1:2).

12. E. Hammershaimb, "On the So-called Infinitivus Absolutus in Hebrew," in David Winton Thomas and W. D. McHardy, eds., *Hebrew and Semitic Studies Presented to Godfrey Rolles Driver* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963) p. 85.

13.. We may reason that Isaiah, too, borrowed the root from Aramaic. The prophets often drew upon their knowledge of Aramaic and other languages in order to achieve what some have called "style-switching." See, e.g., Stephen A. Kaufman, "The Classification of the North West Semitic Dialects of the Biblical Period and Some Implications Thereof," in *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Panel Session: Hebrew and Aramaic Languages (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1988) pp. 55-56; Gary A. Rendsburg "Linguistic Variation and the 'Foreign' Factor in the Hebrew Bible," in Shlomo Izre'el and Rina Drory, eds. *Language and Culture in the Near East*, Israel Oriental Studies 15 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996) pp. 177-190.

14. For additional biblical examples of amphibology see Edward L. Greenstein, "Wordplay, Hebrew," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. VI (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 969; Jack Sasson, "Word Play in the Old Testament," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the* Bible Supplement, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) p. 970.

15. For a similar observation regarding the ambiguity of Isaiah 28:25, see S. C. Thexton, "A Note on Isaiah XXVIII 25 and 28," *Vetus Testamentum* 82 (1952) pp. 81-83.

16. The verb is used in reference to the mouth in Ezra 21:72; Job 3:1, 33:2; Daniel 10:6; Isaiah 53:7; to lips in Job 11:5, 32:20; Psalms 51:17, and in contexts involving riddles or word puzzles, e.g., Psalms 38:14 and 49:5.

17. The use here of the root חרש , which also can mean "divine through magic" may represent a third level of play as it suits the context of "play on the language of divination." See, Baruch Halpern, "'The Excremental Vision': The Doomed Priests of Doom in Isaiah 28," *HAR* 10 (1986) p. 114.

18. *HALAT*, p. 71;KB, p. 71; BDB, p. 62.

19. *HALAT*, p. 71;KB, p. 71;BDB, p. 62

20. J.A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980) p. 301.

21. John Bright, *Jeremiah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 21 (Garden City, NY.: Doubleday, 1965) p. 61, n. 6. He also suggests a third and less likely possibility: "Gather their harvest !"

22. The translation "In-gathering I shall destroy them" put forward by Michael Derouche, "Contra Creation, Covenant, and Conquest" *Vetus Testamentum* 30 (1980) pp. 280-290, is unconvincing. While I do see Jeremiah 8:13 as a type of wordplay (see n. 25) and find some intertextual allusions in Jeremiah 7-8 (though not necessarily with Zephaniah 1:2-3 [cf. 282-283, n. 8], I feel they are subtextual. That is, they are not the primary message conveyed by the play on words. Therefore, the hint at "in-gathering" does not govern the translation.

23. William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah* Vol. 1, New International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986) p. 189.

24. McKane, p. 188.

25. Perhaps the *infinitivus absolutus* construction serves here as a hitherto unrecognized type of Janus parallelism. The term describes a literary device in which the middle stich of a tristich contains a pun which parallels in a polysemous way both the preceding and following stichs. See, e.g. , C.H. Gordon, "New Directions,"*Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 15 (1978), 59-66; Shalom Paul "Polysensuous Polyvalency in Poetic Parallelism," in M. Fishbane and E. Tov, eds. "Sha'arei Talmon," *Studies in the Bible, Qumran and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), pp. 147-163; see comprehensively my "Janus Parallelism in the Book of Job," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series, 203* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996). More on this literary device below.

26. See, e.g., McKane, p. 189.

27. See, e.g., P. Paul Jouon, "*Notes de critique textuelle*," *Melanges de la faculte orientale de l'Universite Saint Joseph* 4 (1910), p. 25.

28. S.R. Driver, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah* (London: C. Scribner's Sons, 1906) p. 50.

29. B. Duhm, *Das Buch Jeremia* (Tubingen, 1901) p. 90.

30. G.R. Driver, "Linguistic and Textual Problems: Jeremiah", *Jewish Quarterly Review* 28 (1937-38) p. 105.

31. D. Aberbach, "*w'tn lhm y'brwm* (Jeremiah VII 13): The Problem and Its Solution," *Vetus Testamentum* 27 (1977) pp. 99-101.

32. Bright, *Jeremiah*, p. 61.

33. On the basis of Syriac בער [seek out, collect, glean] BDB (pp. 128-129) suggests that this was the earlier meaning of the Hebrew בער. Payne-Smith, *A Compendius Syriac Dictionary*, p. 51. See also Ugaritic *b'r* "pillage," C.H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Analecta Orientalia, 38; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute) p. 375.

34. In addition see, Isaiah 5:5 where it also occurs in a viticultural context, and Exodus 22:4 where it occurs in the *pi'el* and *hiph'il* in reference to agricultural "feeding"and "grazing."

35. Perhaps this explains Rashi's rendering which catches both interpretations: '*All this shall befall them because I gave them statutes and they transgressed* [ועברו] *them* '