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**“A Slip of the Reader and Not the Reed:  
(Infinitive Absolutes with Divergent Finite Forms). Part II.”**

First Published in:  
*Jewish Bible Quarterly* 26/2 (1998), 93-100.

anyone. The glory of the Lord is manifest in creating and evoking as a poetic image a being that carries both transcendent grandeur and voracious evil. The ambiguity gives us yet another perception of the grand scope of God's world and the checks and balances He built into it.

Further, the dichotomy of the image teaches us the principle of potentiality and limitation. It gives greater meaning and poignancy to that remarkable piece of realism in the Friday night prayer at the table before Kiddush: "Privilege us to receive Sabbaths amid abundant gladness, amid wealth and honor, and amid fewness of sins"<sup>9</sup> --- not "without sin" (an impossibility), but "fewness of sins" (an ever-present reality).

Potentiality is ever leavened with pride, and sin will always be threatening to burst forth, like the rapacious nature of the eagle, God's own symbol for power, kingship, and fatherliness. The eagle symbolizes a kind of spiritual death and spiritual resurrection. In the ultimate judgment, we are, metaphorically, all eagles.

This concludes one suggested homiletical climax to the *darshanut* on the ambiguity of eagles. Certainly, the meanings and the significance of the eagle as poetic symbol have not been exhausted. It may be hoped that each reader now feels inspired that he can and should delve into the embedded meanings of poetic images in Tanakh without fear. It is an activity for everyone that renders spiritual, religious, and intellectual satisfaction. Try it!

## NOTES

1. All biblical translations, except where noted, are *Tanakh: A New Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).
2. Adele Berlin, *Biblical Poetry through Medieval Jewish Eyes* (Bloomington: 1991) p. 82. n. 16.
3. Nechama Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot, Part I*, (tr. Aryeh Newman) (Jerusalem: 1983) pp. 292ff.
4. See Ramban on this verse. The parallel injunction in Deuteronomy 14.12 is much less damning.
5. Some Bible scholars have argued that "eagle" is a mistranslation of נשר, that it should be "vulture" and that עיט is "eagle." Others have argued exactly the reverse. In this paper, it makes not an iota of difference. It is how the word נשר is used that concerns us. The JPS translation of 1916 confronts the difficulty of the נשר being nearly divine in one place and a bloody abomination in another: When the נשר is good, it is translated as "eagle"; when bad, as in Leviticus 11 and Job 39, for example, it is "vulture"! Connotation is all. In the 1985 version, it is "eagle" throughout.
6. The *Midrash Panim le-Esther* is a compilation of stories from older sources, redacted not before the 12th century (*Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol 16: col. 1515). The translation of the passage is from Louis Ginsberg, ed. and tr., *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: 1947) vol. IV, p. 409.
7. How distressingly modern all this sounds, like a speech in Nuremberg in 1938.
8. See E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: 1967) p.211.
9. R. Nossou Scherman, tr. *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur* (New York: 1984) p. 357.

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## A SLIP OF THE READER AND NOT THE REED

### Part II

SCOTT B. NOEGEL

In Part I (*JBQ* XXVI:1, January 1998) we considered two ambiguous infinitive absolutes in Isaiah 28:28 and in Jeremiah 8:13. A third example of the blending of different roots in an *infinitivus absolutus* construction can be found in Jeremiah 42:10. Ten days after some Judeans pleaded with Jeremiah to inquire of The Lord whether they should remain in Judah or go to Egypt the prophet returned proclaiming: 'If you remain [שׁוּב תִּשְׁבוּ] in this land, I will build you and not overthrow, I will plant you, and not uproot, for I regret the punishment I have brought upon you.'

Once again we find a finite form and an infinitive absolute derived from different roots; the former from יָשַׁב [dwell, inhabit] and the latter from שָׁב [turn, return]. If the infinitive absolute were derived from יָשַׁב we would expect to find it as יִשָּׁב (cf. I Sam. 20:5).

While Rashi and the commentaries *Metsudat Zion* and *Metsudat David* show less concern for the verse, Radak notes the peculiarity and asserts that we should read it as if from יָשַׁב. The moderns mostly gloss over the construction<sup>1</sup> or see in it a scribal error.<sup>2</sup> An exception is W. Holladay, who views the phrase as a type of wordplay meaning "if you change your mind and stay in this land."<sup>3</sup>

Though Holladay is undoubtedly correct here, we may expand upon his astute observation by noting that like the ambiguous infinitive constructions above, Jeremiah 42:10 also serves a referential function. For example, we are reminded of the finite form תִּשְׁבוּ in Jeremiah's words in 42:13-15a:

'But if you say, "We will not stay [נִשְׁבַּב] in this land" -- thus disobeying the Lord your God-if you say, "No! We will go to the land of Egypt. . . there we will stay [נִשְׁבַּב]." Then hear the word of the Lord, O remnant of Judah!'

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Moreover, the target of the Lord's wrath, יְשֵׁבֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם [the inhabitants of Jerusalem] (42:18), also recalls the finite verb in שׁוּב תִּשְׁבוּ [return] (42:10), we hear it echoed soon afterwards in The Lord's conditional prophecy in 42:12: 'I will dispose him [the king of Babylon] to be merciful to you; he shall show you mercy and bring you back [וְהִשִּׁיב] to your land.'<sup>4</sup> Later, after Jeremiah finishes his prophecy, we are told that his hearers did not obey his words but instead took all those who had returned [שָׁבוּ] and fled to Egypt (43:5).

The ambiguity of שׁוּב תִּשְׁבוּ in 42:10 is quite meaningful when we keep in mind the conditional nature of The Lord's promise in Jeremiah 42. As W. Holladay notes:

the change on [The Lord's] part is dependent on the change on the part of the people. In the present instance [The Lord] cannot call back the fall of Jerusalem, but he can shift the fortunes of the people from evil to good.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, though they renege on their word, as 42:6 tells us, the people originally had promised to accept The Lord's decree whether for good or for bad [אִם טוֹב וְאִם רָע]. This explains The Lord's ambiguous response in 42:10. Its interpretation, like the people's future, hinges on a decision, one which involves both a correct divining of The Lord's word and obedience to that word. God's message, therefore, forces the people to listen closely and to decide; hence Jeremiah's exhortation immediately afterwards: 'then hear the word of The Lord, O remnant of Judah' (42:15)!

#### ZEPHANIAH 1:2

We turn now to a fourth ambiguous infinitive absolute, in Zephaniah 1:2. It is very similar to that found in Jeremiah 8:13. Here Zephaniah opens his prophecy with the words: אָסַף אָסַף כָּל מַעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה which commentators usually render 'I will make an end to everything from the face of the earth'.<sup>6</sup> Discussing options for explaining the anomaly, Adele Berlin concludes:

It seems more plausible that on occasion one may find an infinitive absolute plus finite verb from two different but related roots, especially defective roots. . . The effect produces greater assonance, an important feature in prophetic speech, without sacrificing meaning.<sup>7</sup>

I believe that Berlin is correct here. Moreover, Zephaniah, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, employed the two roots side by side in order to prophesy with a polysemous punch.<sup>8</sup> The context and imagery of Zephaniah's speech support this. The meaning "sweep away" for the expression אָסַף אָסַף is bolstered by the twice repeated use of the root סָרַח in v. 3: 'I will sweep away [אָסַף] man and beast; I will sweep away [אָסַף] the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea.' The reader, who accepts the meaning "sweep away," finds reassurance soon afterwards when God pronounces His doom: 'And I will cut off [וְהִכָּרְתִּי] mankind from the face of the earth.' The similarity in phraseology serves to reinforce the connection to 1:2. Note how the predicate *mankind from the face of the earth* appears in both the opening line and the end of v. 3 and acts as a kind of inclusio.<sup>9</sup>

The examples of infinitive mixing in Isaiah and Jeremiah have demonstrated that both meanings projected by the construction are relevant to the prophecy. Therefore, we should expect in Zephaniah some reference to the secondary meaning projected by אָסַף אָסַף namely "I will gather."

We first find the meaning "gather" in 2:1: *Gather together; gather, O nation without shame*. Here, however, Zephaniah employs for "gather" the expression, וְקוֹשֵׁר וְקוֹשֵׁר a denominative from קָשׁ [straw, stubble]. According to Berlin,<sup>10</sup> Zephaniah selected his words to play on the sound of נִכְשָׁה [shame] and to provide a semantic association with the words "like chaff" [כַּלְכַּל] in the next line. I aver that it also was chosen to remind the reader of the previous allusion.

In 3:8 Zephaniah again rehearses the link between "sweeping away" and "gathering": 'But wait for me,' says The Lord, 'for the day when I arise as an accuser, when I decide to gather [מִשְׁפָּטִי לְאֹסֵף] nations, bring kingdoms together [לְקַבְּצֵנִי].' Note here how The Lord must perform an act of decision, an act which is mirrored in the word choice of 1:2; i.e., the choice of interpreting 1:2 as "gather" or "sweep away" is made by God in 3:8. Yet, here again, The Lord decides to gather the nations only for the purpose of pouring upon them His indignation and wrath (3:9). In case the reader missed the connection to 1:2, Zephaniah spices his prophecy with the root כָּרַח [cut off] (3:6, 3:7) which refers to וְהִכָּרְתִּי in 1:3.

When Zephaniah concludes his prophecy he again refers to "gathering" but this time in a positive sense, transforming the object of his wrath from the Judeans to the other nations.

*I will take away [אספתי] from you the woe over which you endured mockery. At that time I will make an end [עשה]<sup>11</sup> of all who afflicted you, I will rescue the lame and gather [אקבץ] the strayed; and I will exchange their disgrace for fame and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you [אביא] [home], and in that time I will gather you [קבצי אתכם]' (3:18b-20).*

Observe how Zephaniah concludes his prophecy with several references to the ambiguous use of *qaf qaf* in 1:2. First, in 3:18b God asserts that He will remove the hardship which the people endured. He does so by using the verb *qaf* [take away]. The act of "sweeping away" which the reader heard echoed subtly in 1:2 and which was clarified as the agent of God's wrath against Judah in 3:8-9 now appears unequivocal. It is an act which The Lord will perform against the nations. Zephaniah's use of the root *qaf* [gathering] twice in 3:19-20, and which he employed in synonymous parallelism with *qaf* [gather] in 3:8, also reminds the reader of 1:2. Like 1:3, it serves as a larger inclusio device for the entire group of prophecies. The words *qaf qaf* in 1:2 which naturally raised the question "Will God sweep us away or gather us together?" now achieve resolve.

#### JEREMIAH 48:9

Though scholars traditionally have not included Jeremiah 48:9 among the known examples of ambiguous infinitive absolutes,<sup>12</sup> it should be discussed in conjunction with them. In 48:9 Jeremiah proclaims calamity upon Moab: *תנן ציץ למואב כי נצא תצא*. The *crux* has opened the floodgates of interpretation. The medievals, e.g., Rashi (citing Menahem Ibn Saruk), Radak, and the commentaries *Metsudat Zion* and *Metsudat David*, all understand *נצא* as referring to "flying." Thus, in modern times, the Jewish Publication Society renders *Give wings to Moab, for she must go hence*. J. Bright, on the other hand,<sup>13</sup> following W. Moran,<sup>14</sup> gives *Provide [salt (?)] for Moab: She's destined for ruin*. M. Dahood,<sup>15</sup> who essentially agrees with Moran, translates *Put salt on*

*Moab, for shining she will surrender*. J. Thompson follows suit.<sup>16</sup> R. Carroll<sup>17</sup> cautiously notes that "wordplay or confusion may explain MT."

At the heart of the *crux interpretum* is the infinitive absolute *נצא* which appears to derive from the root *נצא* [fly]<sup>18</sup> or its by-form *נצה* which also can mean "struggle, fall to ruins,"<sup>19</sup> and the finite form *נצת* which must derive from *נצא* [commonly "go out"]. The construction conveys at least three, and possibly four, senses: (1) You surely shall go out [to battle (struggle?)! (cf. 1 Sam. 11:3, Isa. 36:16). (2) You surely shall come to ruin (cf. Jer. 4:7). (3) You surely shall fly away. (4) She will go out shining.<sup>20</sup>

We find support from the first meaning just prior in 48:7 where Jeremiah proclaims: *Chemosh shall go forth [וַיֵּצֵא] to exile*. Perhaps this reference serves to set the reader up in order to play upon his or her expectation. The second meaning, "come to ruin," is suggested by the previous mention of desolation in 48:8: *the valley shall be devastated and the tableland laid waste* (cf. 48:3). These two references propose conflicting contexts for the expression *נצא תצא* in 48:9. As for the meaning "fly away," we hear of it later in the prophecy when Jeremiah associates Moab's demise with the fleeing of a dove: *Desert the cities and dwell in the crags. O inhabitants of Moab! Be like a dove that nests in the mouth of the [rock's] opening* (48:28). In fact, the comparison of Moabites with birds must have been proverbial. See, e.g., Isaiah 16:2: *Like fugitive birds, like nestlings driven away, Moab's villagers linger by the fords of Arnon*. Jeremiah also associates Moab's conquerer with a bird: *See, he soars like an eagle and spreads out his wings against Moab* (48:40). Finally, the meaning "go out shining," which is based on the Arabic and Ugaritic root *נצא*,<sup>21</sup> is suggested by association with "lost glory" [תחלת נואב]<sup>22</sup> in 48:2 and "treasures" in 48:7 (cf. Job 14:2). This networking of nexuses is reminiscent of the referential nature of the infinitive constructions in Isaiah 28:28, Jeremiah 8:13, and Zephaniah 1:2, and adds weight to the argument of its deliberateness.

#### ISAIAH 24:19

Another overlooked absolute infinitive construction utilizing two different roots occurs in Isaiah 24:19.

*The earth is breaking, breaking [רעה התרעעה],*

*the earth is crumbling, crumbling,*

*the earth is tottering, tottering.*

While the finite form in 19a derives from the geminate רעע [break, smash], the infinitive construct appears to be from רעה [pasture, tend, graze]. Nevertheless, the medievals, e.g., Rashi, Radak, Ibn Ezra, and the commentaries *Metsudat David*<sup>23</sup> and *Metsudat Zion*, as well as the moderns, e.g., Gray, Kaiser, Oswalt, and Hakam, treat the infinitive absolute as if derived from רעע [break, smash].<sup>24</sup>

Though the vocalization of the infinitive absolute is also odd, appearing as רעה and not as the expected רעה, the accentuation demands that we treat it as the infinitive absolutes של in Ruth 2:16 and קב in Numbers 23:25.<sup>25</sup> Still, if the *qal* infinitive absolute should be derived from the root רעע we would expect to find it as רעע and not as רעע (cf. פור from פור in the same verse); i.e., one can explain the letter ה only by appealing to another root, namely רעה.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, רעה is a compromise form evoking רעע as expected from רעע, but allowing us to see רעה as well. As with the other examples of anomalous infinitive absolutes above, we need not impose upon the usage a single linguistic derivation. Instead, as in Isaiah 28:28, the prophet has combined both רעה and רעע in order to deliver a polysemous message.

Also like the other examples, in Isaiah 24:19 we find internal references at work. The meaning "break" conveyed by the finite form התרעצה points us to the repeated mention of destruction (Isa. 24:12, 24:19-20) and entrapment (Isa. 24:17-18). רעה, on the other hand, connects us with Isaiah's metaphors used to describe that destruction. Note how the prophet refers to the imminent onslaught with agricultural and viticultural imagery. In 24:7 we hear that the *new wine sours and the vine languishes* and in 24:4 that *the earth is withered, sear; the world languishes, it is sear; the most exalted people on earth languish* (cf. Isa. 24:1-3). The Lord's vehicle for this devastation appears in 24:6: על כן אלא אכלה ארץ [On account (of this) a curse devours the earth]. Again, in 24:13, Isaiah likens the survivors to עוללת אם כלה בציר [gleanings when the vintage is over].

When we keep in mind that in addition to its meaning "graze," רעה also bears the negative connotation "devastate, crop, strip," the referential function of the infinitive absolute רעה in Isaiah 24:19 becomes even clearer. Compare, for example, Micah 5:5 in which we find רעע used to describe the sword [חרב] of Assur which threatens to devastate Israel. Psalm 80:14 also employs the

metaphor of a vine to describe Israel's annihilation [רעה] by its foes. In Jeremiah 6:9 the prophet utilizes viticultural imagery in what is clearly a military context. Those who remain after the enemy has struck are likened to gleaners: עולל יעוללו ככרן [let them glean over and over, as a vine] (cf. Jer 6:3-4). Therefore, unlike F. Delitzsch who saw the anomalous *infinitivus absolutus* in Isaiah 24:19 as a "slip of the pen,"<sup>27</sup> we should regard רעה התרעצה as a deliberate and sophisticated usage.

In sum, the evidence above demonstrates how wordplay, in this case, grammatical portmanteau, has governed the authors' choice of lexemes in Isaiah 24:19, 28:28, Jeremiah 8:13, 42:10, 48:9, and Zephaniah 1:2. They are mistakes made not by a reed, but by readers, and are quite meaningful when viewed in context. Such usages, though rare, have multiple benefits. They deliver the message concisely, force the listener to contemplate the meaning of the oracle, and provide for the listener important clues for interpreting the prophecy.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., S.R. Driver, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah* (London: C. Scribner's Son, 1906) p. 253; J.A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980) p. 664; Ernest W. Nicholson, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah: Chapters 26-52*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) p. 143; Menahem Bola, ספר ירמיהו (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1983) p. 1115.

<sup>2</sup> John Bright, *Jeremiah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965) p. 251.

<sup>3</sup> Holladay, *Jeremiah: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) p. 300. Cf. ושבתי in Psalm 23:6, which may play both on "sit" and "return."

<sup>4</sup> The consonantal text is ambiguous here as well suggesting an additional play. Cf. להשיב [bring] in Nehemiah 13:27 and ההשיב [let dwell] in Ezra 10:14.

<sup>5</sup> Holladay, *Jeremiah*, p. 300.

<sup>6</sup> The dictionaries read here "gather." See, e.g., *HALAT*, p. 71; KB, p. 71; BDB, p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> She also notes the examples examined here but does not discuss them. Adele Berlin, *Zephaniah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), p. 72. A similar mixing of these verbs occurs in Deuteronomy 32:23 and Numbers 16:26.

<sup>8</sup> Berlin was anticipated by O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, New International Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1990) p. 257, who saw the form as a combination of two roots juxtaposed for the sake of assonance. I would argue, however, that there are contextual and semiotic reasons as well as stylistic at work here.

<sup>9</sup> In agreement with Michael Deroche, "Contra Creation, Covenant, and Conquest," *Vetus Testamentum* 30 (1980) p. 282.

<sup>10</sup> Berlin, *Zephaniah* p. 95.

<sup>11</sup> The Targum adds here the root כלה [make an end of].

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 344, n.

<sup>13</sup> The only exception to my knowledge is Bala, ספר ירמיהו, pp. 113, n. 1, 1162.

<sup>14</sup> John Bright, *Jeremiah*, pp. 314, 320.

<sup>15</sup> W. L. Moran, "Ugaritic *sisuma* and Hebrew *sis*," *Biblica* 39 (1958), pp. 69-71. For evidence of sowing cities with salt see S. Gewirtz, "Jericho and Shechem: A Religio-Literary Aspect of City Destruction," *Vetus Testamentum* 13 (1963) pp. 52-62.

<sup>16</sup> Mitchell J. Dahood, "Northwest Semitic Philology and Job," in John L. McKenzie, ed., *The Bible in Current Catholic Thought*, Saint Mary's Theology Studies, 1 (Herder and Herder, 1962) p. 60.

<sup>17</sup> J. A. Thompson, *Jeremiah*. p. 704.

<sup>18</sup> Robert P. Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant: Prophecy in Jeremiah* (New York: Crossroads, 1981) p. 780.

<sup>19</sup> However, none of the dictionaries reads it this way. See, e.g., *HALAT*, p. 675; KB, p. 629; BDB, p. 661.

<sup>20</sup> *HALAT*, p. 675; KB, p. 629; BDB, p. 663.

<sup>21</sup> With Dahood, "Northwest Semitic Philology and Job", p. 60.

<sup>22</sup> Given in C.H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Analecta Orientalia, 38: Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute) p. 413.

<sup>23</sup> The root הלל also means "shine." Cf. Isaiah 13:10; Job 29:3, 31:26.

<sup>24</sup> Did D. Altschuler have in mind the device postulated here when he added: והוא משל על מרבית חצרות

<sup>25</sup> George B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah: I-XXXIX*, Vol. 1, International Critical Commentary, 18 (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1912) p. 421; Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) p. 189; John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986) p. 439, n. 15; Amos Hakam, *ספר ישעיהו* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1984) p. 255.

<sup>26</sup> With Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1890) p. 427.

<sup>27</sup> I am not convinced by the analogy which sometimes is drawn to רצה presumably "broken tooth," in Proverbs 25:19. Not only can רצה derive from רעה [injured] (cf. Gen. 44:5; Isa. 11:9, Prov. 4:16, 24:8), but also there is obviously wordplay active here. Note that רע [sorrowful] (cf. Deut. 15:10) appears in Proverbs 25:20 and that בגד means "treacherous" in 25:19 but "disrobe" in 24:20 (cf. Isaiah's similar punful use of בגד in our pericope [24:16]!).

<sup>28</sup> Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary*, p. 427.

## JOSEPH AND REVOLUTIONARY EGYPT

JONATHAN A. STEINBERG

Israel's sojourn in Egypt was not just a result of divine providence or national fate. A re-reading of the biblical narrative, along with other sources, suggests that Joseph's policies in conjunction with the historical circumstances set the stage for a political upheaval in Egypt and led to Israel's experience of slavery and redemption. Joseph's ascent to the position of vizier of Egypt and the Israelites' subsequent descent into slavery is one of the critical episodes of Jewish history, and its themes of bondage, injustice, stranger in a strange land, and miraculous deliverance have provided raw material for the Jewish people's collective psyche ever since. But the story also has a dark underside, and viewed from the end of the 20th century, Joseph's *realpolitik* and his policies and actions smack of more recent rulers who used their vast powers to the detriment of their subjects, and who paid a price as a result.

It is difficult if not impossible to piece together the story with historical accuracy after almost 4,000 years. Egyptian records and archaeological evidence are sketchy. But the Bible gives a full account of Joseph's career, and with an eye on material from other sources a plausible recreation of his time can be constructed. A likely chronology is that Joseph arrived in Egypt while it was under the control of the Hyksos, a people from Western Asia who conquered Egypt around 1700 BCE and ruled it for approximately 150 years. The theory of Hyksos dominion in the time of Joseph is only one of several possibilities, but in this article it is assumed to be the correct one.

Aided by the horse-drawn war-chariot, then a new military weapon, the Hyksos established an empire which included Canaan and Syria, with their capital city at Avaris in the Goshen area of the Nile delta. These "princes of the desert," as they termed themselves, accommodated themselves to the system of rule in Egypt and contributed to Egyptian culture. However, in line with the Egyptian

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