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

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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.

ISAIAH 28:28-29

In Isaiah 28:23-29, the prophet continues a harangue in parabolic form 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 [שהָֽנַ֟֗נַח, 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 [שהָֽנַ֟֗נַח].

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 שלך [be quiet, silent]1 the latter demands that we interpret it as “thresh, crush,” i.e., from שלך.2 The medievals, e.g., Ibn Ezra, Rashi, Radak, and David Altschuler (Medusvat Zion) all took שלך as a form of שלך plus prosthetic aleph. F. Delitzsch saw the form as a by-form of שלך with emphatic lengthening.3 Delitzsch is followed by E. Young, P. Auvray, O. Kaiser, A. Hakam, and J. Oswalt4 who either suggest emendation or defer to the form שלך in 1 Q Isaiah-A.5

Other commentators have removed the problem altogether either by eliminating the form6 or by emending the infinitive to שלך but the lack of versional and manuscript support makes this an unsatisfactory enterprise.7 Less radical are the attempts by Barth,8 who sees the form as analogous to the Aramaic ‘a(d infinitive pattern, and E. Hammershaimb, who views שלך as nominal in form but functioning as an infinitive.9 Nevertheless, the presence of an Aramaic root שלך meaning “be silent” suggests that Isaiah employed two distinct roots.10

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 שלך and שלך? 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 שלך, 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 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 line: יָשֶׁר יָשֶׁר (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 יָשֶׁר and יָשֶׁר 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. 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 יָשֶׁר יָשֶׁר both renews in the very next line also hints at a silent mouth now opening. Moreover, the words יָשֶׁר, תָּהָן and יָשֶׁר in this oracle also have allusive associations to engraving which further demonstrate the poet’s sophistication. 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.

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"I will make an end of them [says the Lord] 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 יָשֶׁר יָשֶׁר - 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 יָשֶׁר [gather] while the finite form יָשֶׁר derives from יָשֶׁר (come to an end, cease).

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.” With commenting further on the anomaly, J. Bright also suggests that we revocalize either to mean "I will gather their harvest" or "I will thoroughly harvest them." 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 medievols 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." Thus, he translates: “I will gather them for final destruction.”

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.” The gist of Jeremiah’s one-liner is that the Lord will gather them for the purpose of destruction.

Just previous to the expression יָשֶׁר יָשֶׁר 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 יָשֶׁר יָשֶׁר. Yet, after the ambiguous threat, Jeremiah adds that there will be no grapes left on the vine, no figs on the
I reinforce the ambiguity of both expressions by adding immediately afterwards: "...I have appointed them those that shall pass over them."

The listener, who now must choose between the possible meanings for "gathering" and "destruction," is dealt another blow of ambiguity in verse 13, when the prophet quips: "Why are we sitting by? Let us gather into the fortified cities and meet our doom there." This phrase has been deleted, emended, and translated in various ways, usually to mean 'whatever I have given them has passed away,' or the like. S. R. Driver translates the line 'I have appointed them those that shall pass over them.' B. Duhm on the other hand, sees in this stich a metathesis between the letters י and ר to arrive at ירסות and renders it "they shall consume (or: devour) them." Similarly, G. R. Driver reads the line: 'I would give them to be burned.' D. Aberbach recommends that we read here a possible corruption of ירסות ירסות 'I gave them a naked forest' as it 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 ירסות ירסות which suggests both "gathering" and "destroying," so too does ירסות hint both at "passing over" [יבא] and "destruction" [ירש רב]. In addition, the root ירס also can mean "gather, glean." Support for this comes both from Syriac and Ugaritic cognate evidence and from the Bible. In Isaiah 3:14, for example, we find the root ירס ירס used in reference to vineyards. Its meaning "gathering destructively" is demonstrated by its parallelism with ירסה ירסה [that which was robbed from the poor].

Therefore, I prefer to see the expression ירסה ירסה as an allusion both to "gathering" and "destruction" and thus, as a rehearsal of the ambiguous ירסה ירסה in the same verse. 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 afterward:

"...and m, our doom their"..."...I have gathered their leaves having withered (8:13). The competing contexts create a tension in meaning which the prophet doubtless intended.

With this device above (cf. Isa. 28:24, 28:28), we have seen the rehearsal phenomenon in connection, parallelism with ירסה ירסה reference to vineyards. Its meaning "gathering destructively" is demonstrated by its "gathering" and "destruction" and thus, as a rehearsal of the ambiguous ירסה ירסה. In addition, the root ירס also can mean "gather, glean." (Rom the Bible. In Isaiah 3:14, for example, we find the root ירס ירס used in reference to vineyards. Its meaning "gathering destructively" is demonstrated by its parallelism with ירסה ירסה [that which was robbed from the poor].

According to the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature (New York: Judacan Press, 1989) p. 290, cites Sanh. 7a as an example of an aphel of ירס meaning "to be used to, not to mind." Whether the root is ירס or ירס it is clear that "be silent" can be conveyed by ירס in Isaiah 28:28.

The expression ירסה ירסה, 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.

For a further discussion of the pericope's intertextual characteristics and its relation to the genre known as see, Judah Aryeh Leiborik, "...I gave them a naked forest?"

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

FrederichDelitzsch, Prolegomena eines Neuen Hebräisch-Arabischen Worterbuches zum Alten Testament (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1886) p. 188.


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


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11. Jakiob Barth, *Die Nominalbildung in den Semitischen Sprachen* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1889) p. 73. Interestingly, he compares yeš to two other mixed infinitival forms discussed here (i.e., lər 8:13; Zeph 1:2).
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; Job 11:5, 32:20; Psalms 51:17, and in contexts involving riddles or word puzzles, etc., Psalms 38:14 and 49:5.
17. The use here of the root yeš, 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," JAV 10 (1986) p. 114.
18. HALAT, p. 71; KB, p. 71; BDB, p. 62.
19. HALAT, p. 71; KB, p. 71; BDB, p. 62.
22. The translation "In-gathering I shall destroy them" put forward by Michael Derouiche, *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 subtential. 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.

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