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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE EXCITED STALLIONS
OF JEREMIAH 5:8

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THE EXCITED STALLIONS OF JEREMIAH 5:8

INTRODUCTION

The first four words of Jer 5:8 include two of the easiest words to recognize in Hebrew (סוּסִים “horse” and הָיָה “to be, to become”) and two words, *hapax logomena*, which have not yet been properly identified (מִיֻּנִים “well-fed” [RSV] and מְשֻׁבִּים “lusty” [RSV]). Carroll (1986: 178), succinctly stated that Jer 5:8a is “a difficult line,” and McKane (1986: 119) noted that these two words “cannot be elucidated with any confidence, but the general meaning of the verse is not in doubt.” Holladay (1986: 174, 181) stated “M[asoretic] מִיֻּנִים has given steady difficulty; the Versions are of no help” and concluded, “The second attribute מְשֻׁבִּים is even more puzzling [than that of מִיֻּנִים].”

The Hebrew and Greek texts of Jer 5:8 and the varied ways they have been interpreted, including the translations proposed in this study, are as follows

סוּסִים מִיֻּנִים מְשֻׁבִּים הָיוּ

they were *as* fed horses in the morning

(MT 5:8a, KJV)

they were well-fed lusty stallions

(MT 5:8a, Jones, Carroll)

atrapped stallions from Meshech they have been

(MT 5:8a, Holladay)

they were stallions about to discharge semen
(MT 5:8a, McDaniel)

ἵπποι θηλυμανεῖς ἐγενήθησαν
(Septuagint 5:8a)

they became as wanton horses
(Septuagint 5:8a, Carroll)

they became horses mad about women
(Septuagint 5:8a, McKane)

they were stallions frenzied-by-females
(Septuagint 5:8a, McDaniel)

וַיִּשָּׂא לְשׂוֹן אַחַר רֵעֵהוּ וַיִּצְהַל

every one [each] neighed after his neighbour's wife
(MT 5:8b, KJV, ASV, NAS, NAU)

ἕκαστος ἐπὶ τὴν γυναῖκα
τοῦ πλησίον αὐτοῦ ἐχρεμέτιζον
(Septuagint 5:8b)

they neighed everyone for his neighbour's wife.
(Septuagint 5:8b, Thomson)

PROBLEMS

Jer 5:8b is as easy as 5:8a is difficult, and 5:8b can be dispensed with by the single observation that the verb צָהַל “to neigh, to cry shrilly,” occurs also in Jer 31:7 (where it is a synonym of שִׂמְחָה “joy” of people) and in 50:11 (where it is used with שִׂבְרֵי “bulls”). But 5:8a is a different story, as noted, with the spelling of the second word being uncertain. Commentators have noted the difference between the Occidental *Kethib* מִיִּנְיִם and the MT מִיִּנְיִם. Kennicott (1780: II: 96) also cited twelve manuscripts having the MT מִיִּנְיִם,

and two with the Occidental מוּזְנִים, along with eighteen other manuscripts reading either מִיּוּזְנִים (15 texts) or מוּוּזְנִים (2 texts) or מוּזְנִים (1 text).¹

Commentators and lexicographers have identified the stem of מִיּוּזְנִים to be זָן “to feed” or זָרַן “to be heavy,” resulting in the translations “well-fed” and “weighty.” The latter definition was thought to be a reference to the weight of the מְשָׁכִים, which supposedly meant “testicles” (see below), resulting in the following equation: “heavy testicles” = “being well hung” = “lusty.” Holladay (1986: 181), in disagreement with these interpretations appealed to the single use of זָן “to equip” in *Gittim* 67a to argue (in agreement with Jastrow’s “well provided” [1896: 217]) for “attracted stallions,” i.e., “well equipped stallions.” He denied that מִיּוּזְנִים had any sexual meaning.

SOLUTIONS

But there are other possibilities for the roots of מוּזְנִים / מִיּוּזְנִים than זָן and זָרַן—once it is remembered that the Arabic ذ (d) and ز (z), appear in Hebrew as a ז—and herein lies the solution to the crux of מוּזְנִים. The Arabic cognates of זָן include (1) ذنن (*dinîn*) “any sort of thin mucus or a thin fluid, . . . the seminal fluid of a stallion, and of an ass, and of a man that flows from the penis by reason of excessive appetite,” (2) زناني (*zunânay*) “mucus that falls from the nose of camels, a variant of ذناني (*dunânay*),” and (3) the verb ذن (*danna*) “it (what is termed ذنن [*dinîn*], or mucus or . . . seminal fluid) flowed” (Lane 1867: 979, 1255).²

By opting for the Occidental *kethib* מוֹזְנִים—disregarding the MT מוֹזְנִים and all the variants in Kennicott—a *Hoph'al* participle (*scriptio plene*, like the MT מוֹקְעִים “the ones hanged” in 2 Sam 21:13), can be recognized and translated as “ones whose seminal fluid has been made to flow.”

As already noted, מִשְׁכִּים is thought by some to mean “testicles,” a variant form of מִשְׁכָּה (appearing in Lev 21: 20), with the ש of the original מִשְׁכָּה having been elided and a מ prefixed for unknown reasons. Holladay (1986: 181) rejected this identification since “. . . the omission of the *’alep* is dubious.” He preferred instead Jastrow’s idea that מִשְׁכִּים is a gentilic plural meaning “the people of Meshech” (mentioned in Ezek 27:13–14). But Holladay ignored the gentilic plural element—while at the same time affirming that “*the Masoretic vocalization as well as the consonantal text will be correct* (italics mine)” —and settled for “atrapped stallions of Meshech,” concluding:

If this understanding is sound, the attributes of the stallions in this colon are not sexual; the sexual reference comes only in the second colon [of 5:8]. War horses become aroused and excited when ready for battle (compare 8:6); if this interpretation is correct, Jrm is associating martial excitement with sexual excitement.

But this suggestion is no more convincing than having the physiological condition of “weighty testicles” being interpreted as the equivalent of “dragging [the phallus],” which supposedly referred some sort of erotic activity of stallions.

“Attrapped stallions of Meshech” could be the translation were the Hebrew text emended to סוסי מִשְׁךְ הַמִּזְנִים.

Jeremiah’s מִשְׁכִּים, just like the מוֹזְנִים, can best be interpreted in light of an Arabic cognate, once it is remembered that in Hebrew and Arabic the ט and the ק may be interchangeable, like דַּקְק / דַּק (daq) and דַּכְּ / דַּכ (dak), both meaning “to crush” (BDB 194, 200; Jastrow 1903: 307, 319). Similarly, מִשְׁכִּים can be derived from the stem שָׁחַ which would be a cognate to the Arabic وَشَكَ (wašuka), which in form II means “to be quick, to hurry” and in form IV means “to be on the point of, or the verge of (doing something)” (Lane 1893: 3054; Wehr 1979: 1255). By repointing מִשְׁכִּים to מִשְׁחִים, the *Hoph^cal* participle of שָׁחַ can be restored (*scriptio defectiva*, like the מִעָרָה [= מוֹעָרָה] “wearied” in Dan. 9:21, which differs only in that it is a singular participle). As noted above, one of the redundant ו’s or י’s in the variants מוֹזְנִים and מוֹזְיִים could be a misplaced vowel letter intended for מִשְׁכִּים, to be read *scriptio plene* as מוֹשְׁכִים.

Another Arabic cognate helps to resolve the uncertainty surrounding the יִתְגַּדְּרוּ “assembled themselves by troops” (KJV) in Jer 5:7b, which supports the use of Arabic cognates in the above interpretation of Jer 5:8a. The Greek translators must have read יִתְגַּדְּרוּ and translated it as κατέλυον “they were lodging,” as though the stem was גָּוַר I “to sojourn,” which often comes in parallel with יָשַׁב “to dwell.”

The desiderated meaning of the יִתְגַּדְּרוּ / יִתְגַּדְּרוּ is found with גָּוַר stem IV which is the cognate of Arabic جَار/جور (*jaur/jâra*) “he declined or he deviated from the right course

. . . he acted wrongfully, unjustly, injuriously, or tyrannically” (Lane 1865: 483) and “to commit an outrage” and *جور* (*jaur*) “outrage, wanton deviation” (Wehr 1979: 173).

The confusion of *ד* and *ר* is so widely attested that the emendation of MT *וְהִתְגַּדְּרוּ* to *וְהִתְגַּדְּרוּ* is but a minor adjustment to the text.³ Jeremiah’s use of *בַּיִת זֹנָה* “brothel”—in light of the Arabic cognate *زون* (*zûn*) “an idol, and anything taken as a deity and worshiped beside God . . . a place in which idols are collected and set up” (Lane, 1867: 1273 and 1279)—could actually be a shrine to other gods.⁴ Either way, be it a brothel or a shrine, Jeremiah accused his audience of committing an outrage and deviating from the right course.

CONCLUSIONS

Once the Arabic cognates *ذن* (*danna*) and *وشك* (*wašuka*) are in focus the problematic MT *סוּסִים מְזֻנָּיִם מְשָׁבִים קִיּוֹ* can be read and translated as *סוּסִים מְזֻנָּיִם מְשָׁבִים קִיּוֹ* “they were stallions on the verge of discharging semen.” The Greek *ἵπποι θηλυμανεῖς ἐγενήθησαν* “they were stallions frenzied by females” was obviously an euphemistic alternative to the sexually graphic language of Jeremiah. At the risk of using a colloquialism, but following the pattern of the Septuagint, Jer 5:8 could be rendered euphemistically in English as “they were stallions on the verge of coming—every one neighing after his neighbor’s wife.”

NOTES

1. See Delitzsch (1920: 103–105 §103^{a b c}) for examples of the confusion of ך and ך. It seems likely that one of the redundant ך's and ך's in these variants was a misplaced vowel letter intended for the מושכיׁם to be read as מושכיׁם.

2. Note also ݢݢ (ḡannāʿu) used for a woman whose nostrils flow or “a woman whose menstrual discharge ceases not” (Lane 1867: 979c).

3. See Delitzsch (1920: 105–107 §104^{a b c}) for examples of the confusion of ך and ך.

4. Note Carroll's questions (1986: 179):

Is the community being condemned for its religious or sexual practices? Does the brothel (*bēt zōnāh*) refer to such houses of ill-repute used by prostitutes or to Canaanite places of worship? . . . The use of such metaphors invites these questions, but answering them is a difficult interpretative task.

The interpretative task, however, becomes much easier once all the lexical options are investigated, including cognates not listed in the standard lexicons of Biblical/Judean Hebrew.