

MISCELLANEOUS
BIBLICAL STUDIES

CHAPTER NINETEEN

RESTORING THE ORIGINAL
VERSIFICATION OF ISAIAH 8

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RESTORING THE ORIGINAL VERSIFICATION OF ISAIAH 8

Isaiah 8:1

... קַח-לְךָ גְּלִיּוֹן גָּדוֹל וּכְתַב עָלָיו בְּחָרָט אֲנוֹשׁ

NAS, NAU

Take for yourself a large tablet
and write on it in ordinary letters

Septuagint

λαβὲ σεαυτῷ τόμον καινοῦ μεγάλου
καὶ γράψον εἰς αὐτὸν γραφίδι ἀνθρώπου . . .

Brenton (1844)

Take to thyself a volume of a great new book,
and write in it with a man's pen. . . .

Vulgate

sume tibi librum grandem et scribe in eo stilo hominis

Douay Rheims

Take thee a great book, and write in it with a man's pen.

Although the Septuagint (τόμον) and Vulgate (*librum*) translated גְּלִיּוֹן as a “book,” the Hebrew גְּלִיּוֹן, like the Syriac ܠܗܡܢܐ (*gilyûnâ*), meant a “writing tablet.” The singular אֲנוֹשׁ בְּחָרָט traditionally read as “with a man’s pen” has more recently been translated as a plural “in ordinary letters” (NAS, NAU, NAB) or “in common characters” (RSV, NRS). But the singular can be maintained by translating the חָרָט as “script,” with the modifier אֲנוֹשׁ “man” being translated as “familiar” in light of the Arabic cognate أنوس / أنيس (*anûs / anûs*) “familiar, friendly,” used with reference to a person or a thing (Lane

1863: 115; Wehr 1979: 38–39; Hava 1915: 15). The “writing tablet” and “familiar script” mentioned in 8:1 provide the clue for reestablishing the original versification of all of Isaiah 8.

The abrupt transitions from paragraph to paragraph in the contemporary translations of Isaiah 8 suggests that the original Hebrew text was first written on three small tablets rather than on a single scroll. On the face of tablet ONE the scribe wrote what are now vv. 1–4, and turning it over he wrote on the reverse side what followed sequentially in his source—texts which are now vv. 14–15. Then on the face of tablet TWO he wrote what came next in his source, which are now vv. 5–8. Then on the reverse side of tablet TWO he wrote what was next in his source—texts which are now verses 16–18. Similarly, on the face of tablet THREE he wrote what followed next in his source, which are now vv. 9–13. Then on the reverse side of tablet THREE he wrote what are now verses 19–22.

However, when the tablets were copied by a later scribe the verses were copied in a different sequence. After the text on the front of tablet ONE (vv. 1–4) was copied the scribe then copied the text on the front of tablet TWO (vv. 5–8), followed by the text on the front of tablet THREE (vv. 9–13). The three tablets were then turned over and in sequence the reverse of tablet ONE became vv. 14–15, the reverse of tablet TWO became vv. 16–18, and the reverse of tablet THREE became vv. 19–22. (The “O Immanuel” of 8:8 is definitely out of place and should be move to the end of 8:13.) If the conjectures presented here are on target, the original sequence of verses (cited below as verses A to V) in Isaiah 8 was probably as follows. (The three phrases cited in bold italics will be addressed in the remainder of this study.)¹

TABLET ONE

[A] 8:1 Then Yahweh said to me, “Take a large tablet and write upon it in common characters, ‘Belonging to Maher-shalalhashbaz.’” [B] 2 And I got reliable witnesses, Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah, to attest for me. [C] 3 And I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. Then Yahweh said to me, “Call his name Mahershalalhashbaz; [D] 4 for before the child knows how to cry ‘My father’ or ‘My mother,’ the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away before the king of Assyria.”

TABLET ONE REVERSE

[E] 14 And *he will become a sanctuary* and a stone of offense, and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. [F] 15 And many shall stumble thereon; they shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken.

TABLET TWO

[G] 5 Yahweh spoke to me again: [H] 6 “Because this people have refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently, and melt in fear before Rezin and the son of Remaliah; [I] 7 therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the River, mighty and many, the king of Assyria and all his glory; and it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks; [J] 8 and it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck; and its *outspread wings* will fill the breadth of your land.

TABLET TWO REVERSE

[K] 16 Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. [L] 17 I will wait for Yahweh, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him. [M] 18 Behold, I and the children whom Yahweh has given me

are signs and portents in Israel from Yahweh of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion.

TABLET THREE

[N] 9 *Be broken, you peoples*, and be dismayed; give ear, all you far countries; gird yourselves and be dismayed; gird yourselves and be dismayed. [O] 10 Take counsel together, but it will come to nought; speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us. [P] 11 For Yahweh spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying: [Q] 12 “Do not call an alliance all that this people call an alliance, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. [R] 13 But Yahweh of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.” (8:8 God is with us!)

TABLET THREE REVERSE

[S] 19 And when they say to you, “Consult the mediums and the wizards who chirp and mutter,” should not a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living? [T] 20 To the teaching and to the testimony! Surely for this word which they speak there is no dawn. [U] 21 They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry; and when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will curse their king and their God, and turn their faces upward; [V] 22 and they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness.

Isaiah 8:14 [E]

וְהָיָה לְמִקְדָּשׁ וּלְאֶבֶן נִגְף וּלְצוּר מְכֻשָׁל
 לְשָׁנֵי בְתֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְפֶחַח וּלְמוֹקֵשׁ לְיוֹשְׁבֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם:

And he shall be for a sanctuary and for a stone of stumbling
 and for a rock of falling to both the houses of Israel,
 for a trap and for a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

According to the traditional sequence of verses Yahweh, who is mentioned 8:13, becomes in 8:14 “a sanctuary, a stumbling-stone, a rock to trip up the two Houses of Israel” (NJB). But with the revised versification it is *the king of Assyria*, mentioned in 8:4[D] who will become according to 8:14 [E], “a sanctuary, a stumbling-stone, a rock to trip up the two Houses of Israel.”

Either way 8:14 [E] is problematic in that Yahweh would be both a *sanctuary* (מִקְדָּשׁ) and a *stumbling-stone* (אֶבֶן נִגְנֵה) for Israel. On the other hand it is very unlikely that Isaiah predicted that the king of Assyria would become a *sanctuary* (מִקְדָּשׁ) for both houses of Israel. But once the MT לְמִקְדָּשׁ “for a sanctuary” is emended to לְמִקְרָשׁ (the preposition plus the *Hiph^cil* participle of קָרַשׁ) “for an oppressor,” this problem disappears. The lost lexeme קָרַשׁ is the cognate of the Arabic كَرَاث (*karāṭa*) “he oppressed, he afflicted” (Lane 1885: 2604).² The misreading of a ק as a ק³ appears also in

- 8:9 [J] where the MT רָעוּ was read by the Septuagint translators as רָעוּ meaning γνῶτε “know ye!” and
- 8:20 [T] where the MT שָׁחַר “dawn” appears in the Septuagint as δῶρα “gift, bribe” (= שָׁחַר “gift, bribe”) and in the Peshittta as שְׁחָדָא (*šūḥada*³) “bribe.”⁴

Isaiah 8:8 [J]

וְהָיָה מִשׁוֹת פְּנֵפוּי מְלֵא רֶחַב־אַרְצְךָ:

And its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land.

Septuagint

καὶ ἔσται ἡ παρεμβολὴ αὐτοῦ ὥστε πληρῶσαι τὸ πλάτος τῆς χώρας σου

and his camp shall fill the breadth of your land.

McDaniel

And it shall come to pass that the flooding
on both sides of (the river)
will fill the breadth of your land.⁵

R. E. Clements (1980: 97) noted that “The sudden transition to the imagery of a bird with outstretched wings is awkward and unanticipated. With most modern commentators it should be regarded as a later addition.” However, the original statement in 8:8 [J] probably made no mention of “wings.” The Hebrew כַּנְף has three different meanings. In addition to the well attested כַּנְף, stem I, “wing, extremity” (BDB 489; Jastrow 1903: 651) there is also כַּנְף, stem II, the cognate of כנף (*kanafa*), “to enclose, to fence in” and כנף (*kanif^{um}*) “enclosure, shelter” (Hava 1915: 667), and כַּנְף, stem III, the cognate of the Arabic كنف (*kanafa*) “on both sides, on the right and the left” (Lane 1893: 3004). The Vulgate’s *alarum* “wing” reflects כַּנְף, stem I, whereas the Septuagint’s παραβολη “encampment” reflects כַּנְף, stem II. In the context of Isaiah 8:7–8 [I–J], which speaks of an overflowing river, the best reading is, without a doubt, כַּנְף, stem III, “on both sides /on the right and left” of the river.

Isaiah 8:9 [N]

רְעוּ עַמִּים וְחַתּוּ וְהִאָּזְינוּ כָּל מְרַחֲקֵי-אָרֶץ
הִתְאָזְרוּ וְחַתּוּ הִתְאָזְרוּ וְחַתּוּ:

KJV

Associate yourselves, O ye people,
and ye shall be broken in pieces;
and give ear, all ye of far countries:

gird yourselves, and ye shall be broken in pieces;
gird yourselves, and ye shall be broken in pieces.

NIV, NIB

Raise the war cry, you nations, and be shattered!

Listen, all you distant lands.

Prepare for battle, and be shattered!

Prepare for battle, and be shattered!

Septuagint

γνῶτε ἔθνη καὶ ἠττᾶσθε

ἐπακούσατε ἕως ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς

ἰσχυρότερος ἠττᾶσθε

ἐὰν γὰρ πάλιν ἰσχύσητε πάλιν ἠττηθήσεσθε

Brenton (1844)

Know, ye Gentiles, and be conquered;
hearken ye, even to the extremity of the earth:
be conquered, after ye strengthened yourselves;
for even if ye should again strengthen yourselves,
ye shall again be conquered.

McDaniel

Band together, O peoples, and be dismayed!

Everyone from the ends of the earth listen!

Help each other—but be dismayed!

Help each other—but be dismayed!

The initial verb in 8:9 [J], רָעוּ, has been interpreted in five different ways:⁶

- רָעוּ here was read by the Septuagint translators as γῶנוῖ
“γνῶτε/know ye,” which was followed by the NAB
 (“know”) and NJB (“realise”).⁷

- רוע “shout,” including the ASV (“make an uproar”), NIB and NIV (“raise the war cry”).
- רָעָה, stem II, “associate,” including the KJV and WEB (“associate yourselves”), NRS (“band together”), DRA (“gather yourselves together”), YLT (“be friends”), and Targum Jonathan (אַתְּחַבְּרוּ).⁴
- רָעַע, stem II, “break,” including the NAS, NAU, RSV (“be broken”) and NKJ (“be shattered”).
- וּזְחַח (zû^cû) “tremble!” in the Peshittā reflects a *Vorlage* having רעדו for the MT רעו.

Once the imperative רעו in 8:9a is identified with רָעָה, stem II, “to associate with,” the repeated imperative הִתְאַזְרוּ, which follows in 8:9b, can be identified as a synonym coming from אָזַר, stem II, “to unite, to join forces,” rather than אָזַר, stem I, “to surround, to clothe, to gird.” The lexeme אָזַר, stem II, is the cognate of the Arabic أزر (*ʿazara*), which in form VI means “to help each other, to rally, to unite, to join forces” (Wehr 1979: 17). This is the basis of my translation given above. The רָעו “band together” and הִתְאַזְרוּ “join together” in 8:9 [N] are balanced by the עָצוּ עֵצָה “take counsel” in 8:10 [O] and the קָשְׂרָה “alliance” in 8:12 [Q]. The four words fit very well the context of the Syro-Ephramite coalition of Rezin and Remaliah and Ahaz’ alliance with Tiglath-Pileser (II Kings 16).⁸

The emendation of the MT לְמִקְדָּשׁ “for a sanctuary” in 8:14 [E] to לְמִקְרָשׁ “for an oppressor,” coupled with making “the king of Assyria” in 8:4 [D] the subject of the verb וְהָיָה

in 8:14 [E], removes any possibility that when Isaiah said

וְהָיָה לְאֶבֶן נִגְף וּלְצוּר מְכַשׁוּל לְשְׁנֵי בְתוּי יִשְׂרָאֵל

“he will become a stone of stumbling
and a rock of offense to both the houses of Israel”

that he was speaking about Yahweh. Quite to the contrary he was speaking about Tiglath-Pileser, the king of Assyria.

NOTES

1. Note my study entitled “Seven Problems in Isaiah 8:1–15,” which is Chapter XIII in *Clarifying More Baffling Biblical Passages*. [CLICK HERE](#) to view the full volume, or [HERE](#) to view only Chapter XIII. Isaiah’s pronouncements in chapters 8–12 are marked by haphazard transitions. In “A Reordering of the Verses in Isaiah 8:16–12:6 and 14:24–27 according to the Themes of Divine Judgment and Restoration” I propose the following sequence of verses: 8:16–23; 9: 16–21; 10:5–11; 10:27b–32; 11:14–15; 14:24–27; 10: 12–27a; 10:33–34; 11: 16; 9:1–7; 11:1–13; 12:1–6. Click [HERE](#) to view the texts in this sequence.

2. For the interchange of the כ and ק note the following stems: בָּקַר/בָּכַר “to rise early, morning,” רָקַק/רָקַךְ “to crush,” רָקַק/רָקַךְ “to be weak,” and תָּקַן/תָּכַן “to adjust, to arrange.”

3. Click [HERE](#) to view Friedrich Delitzsch, *Lese- und Schreibfehler im alten Testament*, 105–107, where numerous examples of the confusion of ק and כ are cited.

4. See Jastrow 1920: 1530 and Payne-Smith 1903: 570. Lamsa's translation (1957: 706) reads, "As for the law and the testimony, if they do not speak according to this word, it is because they do not receive a bribe for it."

5. Compare the text of *Targum Jonathan ben Uziel* and the translation of C. W. H. Pauli (1871):

וַיַּעֲרִי בְּאַרְעָא דְּבֵית יְהוּדָה
 כְּנַחַל מְגַבֵּר עַד יְרוּשָׁלַם יִמְטִי
 וַיְהִי עִם מְשָׁרְיָתָיָה
 מְלִי פְתָאֵי אַרְעָךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל:

And he shall pass through the land of the house of Judah
 as an overflowing torrent, unto Jerusalem shall he come;
 and the people of his army
 shall fill the breadth of thy land, O Israel.

Click [HERE](#) to view the Aramaic text in Walton's London Polyglott.

6. Note the statement of G. B. Gray (1912: 159) that the form of רעו cannot be satisfactorily explained. If the word meant "associate yourselves" it would require a reflexive conjugation. (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.)

7. Note in 8:12 the Septuagint's σκληρόν "difficult, hard," which reflects a misreading of the MT קשה as קשר.

8. Click [HERE](#) to view my study on the prophet Oded, who was a Samaritan hero and benefactor for the captured Judeans in the Syro-Ephraimite war.