

JEREMIAH 51:55 — VERSIONS AND SEMANTICS

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The purpose of this article is to present an additional instance where the ancient versions furnish semantic clues for better understanding of the Hebrew text.

Verse 55 forms part of a strophe (vv. 54–56) describing the attack on Babylon by the despoilers on the day of Yhwh's judgment. The three vv. indeed form one integral unit. V. 54 begins this unit with a description of the wailing voice coming out of Babylon, v. 55 provides the reasons for this terrible voice, and the next verse further explains the reasons for the prophetic proclamations in the two preceding verses.

Despite its fluency, the strophe is not free from exegetical difficulties. V. 55 in particular poses several problems.

MT reads:

כִּי שָׁדַד יִהְיֶה אֶת בָּבֶל וְאָבַד מִמֶּנָּה קוֹל גְּדוּל
וְהָמוּ גְלִיָּהֶם כְּמַיִם רַבִּים נִתַּן שְׂאוֹן קוֹלָם.

The first half of the verse consists of two complementary clauses, depicting the future action of God. In the first, the participle שָׁדַד is employed and Babylon is the object; in the second, the perfect consecutive וְאָבַד appears and the object is קוֹל גְּדוּל. By pointing the verb וְאָבַד in the *pi'el* rather than in the *qal*, the MT clearly understands קוֹל as the object¹. Yet, it is unusual for קוֹל to be the object of the verb אָבַד in such a context. אָבַד may occur as a transitive verb when conjugated in the *pi'el* or *hiph'il*. In either of the two conjugations, it means 'to destroy, to exterminate'², and may take both

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1 Some Hebrew mss. have וְאָבַד in the *qal*. Cp. J. B. De-Rossi, "*Variae Lectiones Veteris Testamenti*", III (Parmae 1786), 124.

2 Cp. Brown, Driver, Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford 1966), 1–2; L. Koehler, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*, (Leiden 1958), 2–3; S. E. Loewenstamm & J. Blau, *Thesaurus of the Language of the Bible*, I, (Jerusalem 1957), 7–9.

אָבַד in the *pi'el*: 2 Ki. 13:7; 21:3; Jer. 12:17; 15:7; Ez. 6:3; Lam. 2:9.

אָבַד in the *Hiph'il*: Num. 24:19; Deut. 7:24; 9:3; Jer. 1:10; 25:10; 31:28; 46:8; Ez. 25:7; 30:13; 32:13; Ob. 8; Mich. 5:9; Zeph. 2:5.

the animate and the inanimate as objects. But with קול as an object, אבד occurs only once, in Jer. 25:10, not in the *pi'el* but in the *hiph'il*, expressing the idea of God causing the voices to cease³. A similar interpretation was offered also for v. 55, but it does not agree with the second part of the verse.

This second half beginning with והמו, may be described as a syndetic circumstantial clause. It contains two shorter clauses connected asyndetically⁴. Both clauses apparently should describe the same thing, namely the source of terrible noise. Otherwise the unity to the entire description would be broken⁵. The main difficulty is caused by the 3.m. plr. possessive pronoun of גליהם, for it cannot be applied to the 'mighty voice', nor is it suitable for Babylon, although grammatically possible, for this would not be in line with the rest of the description, where Babylon is systematically referred to in the 3.f.sgl.

Both medieval and modern exegetes tried to tackle this problem without convincing results. The main effort was directed towards finding a suitable reference for the pronoun mentioned, since such a solution would pave the way towards understanding the entire verse. Some scholars suggested that 'their waves' refer to the despoilers⁶. But Rudolph has pointed out that such a suggestion presupposes either an antecedent (in v. 53) or a subsequent noun (in v. 56) too far removed from the noun⁷. One might add that having 'the waves' refer to 'the despoilers' would not only break the flow of the description, but would be out of context.

Some moderns⁸ emend גליהם to גליה on the basis of Aquila (A), Symmachus (Sym) and the Hexapla reading τὰ κύματα αὐτῆς. The antecedent of גליה would, then, be Babylon. While such an emendation would solve the gram-

3 For a similar idea expressed with the verb שבת cp. Jer. 7:34; 16:9.

4 For a different syntactical analysis of v. 55b' see W. Rudolph, *Jeremia* (HAT, XII), 3rd ed., (Tübingen 1968), 314-315.

5 This is the main reason for rejecting Rudolph's attempt to connect 55b with 56a. Furthermore, his suggestion entails an unnecessary emendation (an additional ו before נתן).

6 E. König, *Historisch-Comparative Syntax der Hebräischen Sprache*, (Leipzig 1897), § 346 q; Elliott Binns, *Jeremiah (Westminster Commentaries)*, (London 1919) *ad loc.*, and others.

7 Cp. also C. H. Cornill, *Das Buch Jeremia*, (Leipzig 1905), *ad loc.* Others think the word applies generally to the enemies. Cp. S. R. Driver, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah*, (London 1966); A. W. Streane, *Jeremiah (The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges)* (Cambridge 1913); H. Freedman, *Jeremiah (Soncino Books of the Bible)*, (London 1949); J. Bright, *Jeremiah (The Anchor Bible)*, (New York, 1965).

8 Cornill, *op. cit.*; P. Volz, *Studien zum Text des Jeremia* (Leipzig 1920), 340; *idem.*, *Der Prophet Jeremia (KAT)*, (Leipzig 1928); D. Rothstein, *Jeremia (Die Heilige Schrift des A.T.)*, (Tübingen 1922); J. A. Bewer, *The Book of Jeremiah (Harper's Annotated Bible)*, (New York 1952).

tical problems, it would still not diminish the semantic difficulties. Others⁹ have suggested more elaborate emendations which seem unnecessary and arbitrary.

Our analysis to the second half of the verse holds good as long as we read with the MT וְיָאֵשׁוּ in the passive (*niph'al*) and וְיָאֵשׁוּ in the construct. וְיָאֵשׁוּ is, then, one unit, *nomen regens* and *nomen rectum*, viewed as the subject of the passive verb. 'Their voice' remain ambiguous because of the suffix. It could apply to the spoilers, to the inhabitants of Babylon, or to the waves. Volz emends to וְיָאֵשׁוּ after the LXX, referring the term to the city, but he admits that the MT reading is also possible and thus makes his own emendation doubtful.

To sum up, the verse under review cannot be naturally and easily interpreted, mainly because of the difficulty in understanding the 'mighty voice'. A closer examination of the ancient versions may help in suggesting a solution for the above difficulties¹⁰.

The Septuagint (Jer 28:55) reads thus¹¹:

ὅτι ἐξωλέθρευσε κύριος τὴν Βαβυλῶνα καὶ ἀπόλεσεν ἀπ' αὐτῆς φωνὴν μεγάλην ἠχοῦσαν ὡς ὕδατα πολλά, ἔδωκεν εἰς ὄλεθρον φωνὴν αὐτῆς.

The first part of the verse is rendered faithfully, but the second one went through some changes: the noun וְיָאֵשׁוּ is omitted and the verb וְיָאֵשׁוּ is turned into a fem. participle describing the 'mighty voice'. Thus the grammatical difficulties disappear, but not the semantic ones.

The three, Aquila (A), Symmachus (Sym) and Theodotion (Th), preserve the syntax of the LXX with only slight modifications. A and Sym add the missing 'waves' but with the 3.fem.sgl. suffix τὰ κύματα αὐτῆς (sub $\cdot\dot{\times}\cdot$). Volz maintains that the scribe of the MT understood the original וְיָאֵשׁוּ as an abbreviation of וְיָאֵשׁוּ , but this is rather doubtful for it is difficult to presume that

9 B. Duhm, *Das Buch Jeremia (Kurzer Handkommentar zum A.T.)*, (Tübingen & Leipzig 1901); Cornill, *Die metrischen Stücke des Buches Jeremia*, (Leipzig 1901); F. Giesebrecht, *Jeremia, (Handkommentar zum A.T.)*, (Göttingen 1907); D. Arvid Bruno, *Jeremia — Eine rhythmische Untersuchung*, (Stockholm 1954).

10 The discussion has generally been restricted to examples from the Latter Prophets in order to avoid problems regarding translations of different parts of the Bible. The Vulgate is here omitted as it reflects the MT.

11 For quotations and references, volumes of the series "*Septuaginta — Vetus Testamentum Graecum*", Göttingen, were used: Is. (XIV, 1939), Jer. (XV, 1957), Ez. (XVI, 1952), and XII Prophets (XIII, 1943) were all edited by J. Ziegler. For Psalms the edition of A. Rahlfs in the same series (X, 1931) was used.

a Hebrew scribe would have chosen the perplexing reading גליהם instead of the more natural one, גליה.

Surprising is the rendering offered by Sym to the 'mighty voice': πλῆθος μέγα¹². This points to a different direction altogether, as will be shown later.

The Syriac translation¹³ renders our verse thus:

כָּל דְּבַר מְדַבֵּר לְבַב אֲמַר כְּנִי אֲנִי מְבַרֵּךְ מִלֵּךְ זֶכֶר אֱלֹהֵי
מְנַחֵם שְׂרָאִי דְּאֵוֹל מְלַמֵּם^{13a}.

Here the division of the verse is completely different. The 'mighty voice' is transferred into the second part of the verse and a new object is introduced into 55a: כְּנִי אֲנִי מְבַרֵּךְ. This addition constitutes an entirely new element, not to be found elsewhere. This phrase usually renders the recurring expression אדם ובהמה in descriptions of desolation and destruction, particularly in oracles against both Israel and the nations (cp. Ez. 14:17, 19 and especially Ez. 14:21; 29:8. Cp. also Jer. 33:10, 12; 50:3). This addition might, then, have resulted from an inner-Syriac phenomenon.

And the Targum Jonathan¹⁴:

אָרִי אֲבִיזוּ יוֹי יֵת בְּכָל וְאֲבִיד מִינָה מְשַׁרְקֵן סְגִיאָן וְיִתְפַּנְשׁוּן עֲלוּהֵי מְשַׁרְיֵת עֲמִמִּין
סְגִיאִין וִירִימוּן בְּאֵתֵי גוּשָׁא קְלָהוּן.

The Targum supplies us with yet another division of the verse. It is composed of three clauses, all starting with the consecutive perfect, and thus depicting a continuing action. But the most striking feature is the rendering of 'the mighty voice' by מְשַׁרְיֵן סְגִיאָן, thus coinciding with Sym. In the vast majority

12 πλῆθος is a common translation for המון. Cp. LXX: Is. 17:12; 31:4; 63:15; Jer. 10:13; 30:10 (MT 49:32); Ez. 26:13; 30:10, 15; 31:2; 32:32; 39:12 (11); Th: Is. 29:8; Ez. 7:12, 13; Th, Sym: Is. 29:5; 32:14; Ez. 7:11; 32:18. Cp. L. Rost, *Die Vorstufen von Kirche und Synagoge im Alten Testament*, (Stuttgart 1938), 112, n. 7.

13 *Biblia Sacra iuxta versionem simplicem quae dicitur Peschitta*, (Mosul 1887–1891), newly published 1951. Longer citations were compared with Codex Ambrosianus in A.M. Ceriani, *Translatio Syra Peschitto Veteris Testamenti ex Codice Ambrosiano*, 1876.

13a The expression דְּאֵוֹל מְלַמֵּם probably reflects the MT נתן קולם. (Cp. Is 17:12 for a similar translation to a different expression). However, it should be noted that also שאן is omitted here, though the Syriac idiom tolerates a translation including both קול and שאן (Cp. Is 13:4; 66:6).

14 A. Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic, III, The Latter Prophets — Targum Jonathan*, (Leiden 1962). The only variant which has bearing to our discussion is the one offered by the Rabbinic Bibles and Cod. Reuchlinianus מְשַׁרְיִין סְגִיאִין in the plural, but I think the singular of Sperber's text is preferable.

of cases, משריין translates קהל¹⁵, especially in military context¹⁶. (Cp. Jer. 31:8; 50:9; Ez. 16:40; 23:24; 26:7; 27:27, 34; 32:22, 23; 38:4, 7, 13, 15).

To sum up: it is obvious that the ancient versions found v. 55 quite difficult and perhaps even confusing. Yet an analysis of those translations together with some lexicographical considerations may lead to a proper understanding of our verse.

If we examine more closely the uses of קול in oracles of destruction, we find that it is frequently associated with the same metaphors. On the one hand, it is connected with the picture of enemies storming a city or a country (cf. Is. 13:4; 29:5–7; Jer. 47:3; Ez. 26:10), and is usually associated with המון, sometimes with שאון. On the other hand, in such depictions the metaphor of roaring waves, waters, or the sea is often repeated (cp. Is. 17:12–13; 60:5; Jer. 6:23; 47:2–3; 50:42; 51:42; Ez. 26:3, 19; Ps. 65:8; Dan. 11:10).

Yet another vital part of the description is the situation of the attacked inhabitants. Here also the 'voice' plays an important role (cp. Jer. 47:2; 48:3–4; 49:21; 50:22, 46). Thus קול has a double significance: the shouts uttered by the enemies and those uttered by the attacked. It is not surprising, then, that in such a context we often find combinations like קול המון and קול שאון¹⁷.

A more careful examination might point not only to a literary association, but to semantic affinities which might have served as a basis for the metaphors.

In Is. 31:4 and Ps. 42:5 המון stands in parallelism to קול. In such cases it has been generally assumed that קול and המון mean 'noise' or 'voice'. Yet it may very well be that the other sense of המון is intended, namely 'multitude', meaning that קול also carries the additional meaning of 'a multitude, from which an uproar emanates'.

It is worthwhile noting that in several instances, קהל appears in connection with crying aloud or praising in a loud voice (cp. Ps. 22:23, 26; 35:18; 40:10; 107:32; 149:1; Job 30:28 and perhaps Is. 52:8). Such usage might suggest that קהל is somehow associated with calling out in a loud voice. The semantic

15 For the Hebrew cp. Brown, Driver, Briggs..., 874; Koehler, *Lexicon...*, 829.

16 The same verb serves for translating other similar words as מחנה, חיל. Cp. Ez. 17:17 and 38:15 where the TJ is forced into paraphrasing because of restricted vocabulary. Note also the change from רבים רבים to עמים רבים. In a similar case (Jer. 47:2) הנה מים עלים is read in the TJ הנה עמים עלים. Cp. also LXX to Is. 13:4 where קול המון בהרים is translated קול עמים רבים בהרים. Such renderings might be based on biblical phraseology (cp. Jer. 6:22–23; 50:41–42; Ez. 26:3). Cp. further LXX to Is. 17:13.

17 In the Qumran Scrolls קול המון has become an idiomatic expression independent of the biblical metaphorical context although reminiscent of it (cp. 1 QM 1:11; 1 QH 2:16, 27; 3:13, 16).

approximation between קהל and קול seems to come from both directions.

Some scholars assert that the two words are cognate¹⁸, but few attempts were made to substantiate this opinion by a closer examination of the actual employment of those two words in various contexts.

The assumption that קול has an additional connotation, would not only cast new light on metaphorical combinations such as קול המון, קול שאון, but also may offer better understanding of our verse.

It was already pointed out that TJ and Sym translate קול גדול as קהל גדול or המון גדול. A similar situation is found in Jer. 11:16, where לקול המולה גדולה is rendered by TJ משרית עממין דתקיפין¹⁹. Both verses might serve to show that TJ preserves the original sense of קול in this context. Sym to the a.m. verse reads πρὸς φωνὴν πλῆθους τοῦ μεγάλου and thus may furnish another example for the connection between קול and המון²⁰.

The Syriac translations offer two further such instances. MT Neh 5:7 וְאֵתָן עָלֵיהֶם קְהֵלָה גְדוֹלָה is rendered by the Peshiṭta (5:8): ܡܢܗܘܢ ܒܢܝ ܡܠܟܐ. The Syriac version of the second Apocryphal Psalm, lines 22–23, runs thus²¹:

ܘܥܠܘܢ ܒܥܝܢܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܡܢܗܘܢ ܒܢܝ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܒܥܝܢܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ

whereas the recently rediscovered Hebrew text of the psalm reads²²:

מפתחי צדיקים נשמע קולה ומקהל חסידים זמרתה

The change from the Hebrew קהל into מלך in the Syriac²³ might be due to

18 W. Gesenius, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das A.T.*, Bearbeitet von Buhl, 17th ed., (Leipzig 1921) 705, 706; C. Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum*, 2nd ed., (Halle 1928), 650; H. Bauer, "Die Hebräischen Eigennamen als sprachliche Erkenntnisquelle", *ZAW* 48, 1930, 75; L. Rost, *Die Vorstufen...*, 5; M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi and the Midrashic Literature*, II, (New York 1950), 1322, 1327; S. Mandelkern, *Veteris Testamenti Concordantiae, post Margolinii et Gottsteinii editiones*, 9th ed., (Tel Aviv 1971), note on קהל; W. F. Albright, "The High Place in Ancient Palestine", *Supp. to VT*, IV 1957, 256; Koehler, *Lexicon...*, 829; J.L. Palache, *Semantic Notes on the Hebrew Lexicon*, (Leiden 1959), 66.

19 Cp. the midrash in Babli Menahoth 53b.

20 For opinions that the Hebrew המולה itself means 'multitude' cp. Koehler, *Lexicon*, 237; Loewenstamm & Blau, *Thesaurus*, II, 409.

21 The best text and commentary were published by M. Noth, "Die fünf Syrisch überlieferten apokryphen Psalmen", *ZAW* 48, 1930, 1–23. For those lines the same text is followed by W. Baars in *The Old Testament in Syriac according to the Peshiṭta Version*, pt. IV, facs. 6, Leiden 1972.

22 J. A. Sanders, The Psalms Scroll of Qumrân Cave 11, *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert of Jordan*, IV (Oxford 1965), 39, 64–65.

23 For arguments in favour of a Hebrew Vorlage for the Syriac text cp. J. Strugnell, "Notes on the text and Transmission of the Apocryphal Psalms 151, 154 and 155", *HTR* 59, 1966, 272. Cp. also P.W. Skehan's note, *CBQ* 27, 1965, 4.

a scribal error²⁴, but in light of the accumulating evidence, it may have resulted from a more intricate process, also involving semantical affinity.

The same Syriac text offers elsewhere another interesting example of a parallelism between קול and קהל²⁵. Moreover, the position of those two nouns suggests there a deliberate play on words.

Now, assuming that קול actually has the additional meaning of ‘crowd’, it could be understood as a collective noun which would ideally fit our verse. Neither גליהם nor והמו would any longer present a grammatical crux. The clause ואבד ממנה קול גדול would also be meaningful and relevant to the context in the proposed translation: “For the Lord spoileth Babylon, and destroyeth of her a great multitude, and their waves roar like many waters, the noise of their voice is uttered”.

24 Strugnell suggested an error deriving from a Hebrew phonetic writing, *art. cit.*, 275.

25 The first two lines of the same psalm read:

כפלא זוכא צבנס לאלמא כגוהא דשגלאא אצגרבא צאכפנא

Noth's retroversion: בקול גדול הללו אלהים בקהל הרבים השמיעו כבודו.

Those two lines were not preserved in the scroll. Following the semantic analysis proposed above, it is preferable, in my opinion, to adopt Noth's reconstruction (also mainly adopted by Sanders) and to reject the reading עדה הרבים as a rendering of גוהא דשגלאא, as was proposed by two scholars on exegetical grounds; cp. M. Delcor, “Cinq nouveaux psaumes Esséniens”? *RQ* I, 1958, 89; M. Philonenko, “L'origine Essénienne des cinq psaumes syriaques de David”, *Semitica* IX, 1959, 38–39. Although both renderings exist in the Peshiṭta's Psalter, there is a marked preference to translate קהל with גוהא (cp. Ps 22:25 (26); 35:18; 40:9, 11; 149:1) and עדה with בוגצא (cp. Ps 1:5; 22:17; 68:30 (31); 82:1; 106:17).