

PSALM 29:7

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The phrase **קול ה' הצב להבות אש** in Ps 29:7 has been recently discussed in detail by my friend and colleague E. Greenstein.¹ A careful inquiry of this poetic expression and a thorough examination of its various interpretations led him to the conclusion that even as a metaphor the verb **הצב** does not make sense in this context, and should therefore be emended. He therefore proposed “to revive a suggestion made some time ago by the Briggs,”² namely to emend the MT as follows:

קול ה' חציו להבות אש — Hark! YHWH — his arrows are flames of fire

While the Briggs did not elaborate on their suggestion, Greenstein has backed it up with various illuminating examples from biblical and ancient Near Eastern sources, literary and iconographic. They all indicate that the arrow image in this context is “entirely consistent with biblical as well as wider ancient Near Eastern conventions.”³

I would like to offer two other alternative readings of this poetic line that have not yet been considered: the first (A) retains the MT, and the second (B) advocates a new reconstruction.

A. In Support of MT

In an attempt to refute the possibility of keeping unchanged the MT **הצב**, Greenstein discussed some interpretive options and rejected them all. If the common meaning of **הצב** (hew) is accepted here then, so goes the argument, “one is to posit a figurative usage” of the root. However “hewing fire like stone” is not only a unique metaphor in the Hebrew Bible, but “Psalm 29’s other images are far more literal, and none of its

¹E. L. Greenstein, “Yhwh’s Lightning in Psalm 29:7,” *Maarav* 8 (1992) 49-57.

²See C. A. Briggs and E. G. Briggs, *The Book of Psalms* (ICC; T&T Clark: Edinburgh, 1906) 1.256.

³Greenstein, “Yhwh’s Lightning, 56.

language is so, shall we say, creative.”⁴ He shows that the other approach, namely, to find a meaning of **חצב** other than ‘hewing’ “on the basis of internal and comparative philology is (also, Y. H.) unsatisfactory.”⁵

On the basis of the exegetical options discussed by Greenstein, his arguments seem to me impeccable and convincing. However, there is another exegetical option, which, to my mind, makes the metaphoric understanding of **חצב** (hewing) less “creative” and more plausible. My suggestion is to comprehend the verse as an elliptic sentence: **קול ה' חוצב [בסלעים] להבות אש** — “The voice of YHWH hews [rocks creating] flames of fire” — by hewing the rocks (with his voice) God makes fire.⁶ The reader’s attention is already directed to the elliptic character of our verse by three previous appearances of **קול ה'** in (non-verbal, hence ‘elliptic’) noun-clause sentences: **קול ה' על המים** (v. 3); **קול ה' בכח קול ה' בהדר** (v. 4). Gesenius, referring to the (pronominal) object indicates, that it “is very frequently omitted, when it can be easily supplied from the context.”⁷ I claim that a similar elliptic style obtains also in our case, where indeed the (indirect) object ‘rocks’ is “easily supplied from the context.”⁸ **חצב** is commonly related in the Hebrew Bible to rocks, stony soil, etc., and 21 of its 27 occurrences are in such a context.⁹ It is therefore sensible to assume its use without the (self evidently understood) object (rocks, stones). Hence, besides sentences with explicit two objects (or an object + locative adverb like **יִקַּב חֲצֵב בּוֹ**, Isa 5:2) we find elliptic sentences in which one element is only implied, such as **חֲצֵבָה [בְּאַבְנֵי/בְּסַלְעֵי]** (Prov 9:1); **חֲצֵבַת לֶךְ פֶּה [בְּאַבְנֵי/בְּסַלְעֵי] קָבֵר** (Isa 22:16). This might be our case, especially since we are dealing here with a poetic text, which by its very essence is syntactically more flexible. Thus **אש להבות אש** should be considered not as a direct object but rather as an implicit secondary object.

This interpretation makes the metaphors in our verse not so surprising or unique as to deny their literary plausibility. First, the combination of the three motifs comprising our metaphor — the voice of God, light (flames), and the verb **חצב** is found at least once again in the Hebrew Bible in Hosea’s words **עַל כֵּן חֲצַבְתִּי בְּנִבְיָאִים הִרְגַּתִּים**

⁴Ibid., 51.

⁵Ibid., 53.

⁶This use might be indirectly influenced by the phrase **נָתַן בְּקוֹל** (Jer 12:8; Ps 46:7; 68:34). See *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, § 119q.

⁷*Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, §117f.

⁸For an elliptic direct object which is “easily supplied from the context” see e.g. 2 Sam 10:17: **וַיַּעֲרֹכוּ אֲרָם [אֶת הַחֲצֵבָה] לְקִרְאֵת דָּוִד** “and Aram put [their army] in position against David.”

⁹E.g., Deut 6:11; 2 Kgs 12:13; Isa 5:2; Prov 9:1.

יִצָא (Hos 6:5).¹⁰ Hence, the voice of Yahweh, his words in this case, ‘hews,’ and comparing the voice of God (thunder) to a chisel, which by hewing rocks ignites sparks (=flames, or: the sparks that inflame the wood) is not a far fetched metaphor.¹¹ Fire or sparks as an effect of hewing hard stones (or even striking them against each other) such as flint or basalt, has always been a well-known phenomenon. This is possibly what stands behind the term אבני אש (fire stones, Ezek 28:14, 16) — hard stones which ignite sparks when struck against each other.

B. A New Reconstruction

However, being aware of the possibility that the reading suggested above is not free of doubts, I would like to propound also a new reconstruction of Ps 29:7.

(a) One of Greenstein’s arguments in favor of his revision is that it needs only a slight modification of the MT. This is definitely a sound methodological consideration and adopting this principle I suggest an even slighter emendation. Instead of חֲצוּי לַהֲבוֹת my proposal is חֶץ בַּלְהֲבוֹת — an arrow in flames.

Maintaining all the benefits of Greenstein’s reconstruction, mine has a clear methodological advantage: it does not oblige the modification of any consonants in the MT. The only change is the different division of the words,¹² when the *beth* of the problematic חצב is attached as a preposition to the noun להבות. This preposition thus serves “the idea of touching, striking against anything.”¹³

¹⁰Or, following the Septuagint καὶ τὸ κρίμα μου ὡς πῶς ἐξελεύσεται = ומשפטי כאור יצא. Harper emended to על כן הצבתים בנביאים, “Wherefore I have hewn them by the prophets.” So also Wolff, “Drum schlag ich drein durch propheten” (see W. R. Harper, *Amos and Hosea* [ICC; T. & T. Clark: Edinburgh, 1905] 285; H. P. Wolff, *Hosea* [BKAT; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965] 132; 135). This emendation is unnecessary. The MT in Hosea should be compared to Jeremiah’s description of the prophetic experience, which was possibly influenced by Hosea: הלא כה דברי כאש וכפטיש יפוצץ סלע “Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a sledgehammer which smashes a rock” (Jer 23:29). Here too, the three elements — hewing stones, God’s voice, and fire — are used, which reinforces our reading of Ps 29:7.

¹¹This is also attested by the fact that the ancient versions do not reflect any difficulty in translating the metaphor as it is. Thus, e.g., the Septuagint: φωνὴ κυρίου διακόπτοντος φλόγα πυρός. The phrase was used also in post-biblical Hebrew (See E. Ben-Iehuda, *Thesaurus Totius Hebraicitatis* [Tel-Aviv: La’am, 1948] 3.1702), and absorbed into Modern Hebrew (e.g. J. H. Brenner, *The Complete Works* [Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1956] 1.72 [Hebrew]). This might also attest to the deep-rooted, self-evident mental origin of the metaphor חצב להבות.

¹²For this phenomenon see E. Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 208-209; 252-253.

¹³Gesenius’ *Hebrew Grammar* § 119n.

This is a double metaphor depicting a storm: the arrow is an image for קול ה' viewed as a bolt of thunder penetrating flames of burning lightning.¹⁴ It might be compared with some other hymnic descriptions of a storm using the arrow image either in the singular form, like Zech 9:14, or in the plural form, like 2 Sam 22:15 (חצים) or its variant חצייו in Ps 18: 15).¹⁵

(b) According to both suggested emendations the verse should be considered a nominal sentence (the predicate being either חצייו or חץ), which is quite common in Biblical Hebrew. However, Greenstein's reconstruction involves another syntactic modification of the MT which is quite nonessential and seems less acceptable.

According to the MT syntax, expressed by the accentuation,¹⁶ קול ה' is to be considered one clause in which קול is *nomen regens* and ה' is *nomen rectum*. Greenstein, on the other hand, suggests to consider קול as an 'incomplete sentence.'¹⁷ A voice (is heard) and then the rest is considered a sentence "with casus pendens," which is, as Greenstein admits "uncommon." My reconstruction does not necessitate this syntactic change (in fact, it is required neither for Greenstein's reconstruction). קול ה' is repeated as a subject four times in vv. 3-6, 8-9, and there is no reason whatsoever to change its syntactic status in verse 7. The MT syntax is also in accordance with poetic considerations. There is no doubt that ideologically and rhetorically YHWH is the only subject of Psalm 29. However, its consistent appearance as the syntactic subject as well comes only at the end.¹⁸ The name YHWH is repeated seventeen times in the hymn, and its syntactical dispersal creates an interesting pattern of 4 - 7 - 4 (but see above, note 16). The hymn opens with four phrases in which YHWH is the (indirect) object (vv.1-2):

¹⁴This image is to be compared to Ps 77:19 קול רעמך בגלגל האירו ברקים.

¹⁵In Ps 64:8 (in a different context) the *ketib* is in the singular חצו while the *qeri* is in the plural. In 2 Sam 22:15 the MT version is ויהמם (singular) ויפיצם ברק (plural) חצים. The parallel version in Ps 18:15 reads חצייו instead of חצים. If the original written text was חצו, then both versions in 2 Sam 22 and Ps 18 might allude to a consistent singular version — ישלח חצו ויפיצם ברק ויהמם. Greenstein thinks that חצייו in Ps 29:7 "was originally written חצו" ("Yhwh's Lightning," 56, n. 39).

¹⁶The MT considers קול ה' in all its appearances in Psalm 29 as one phrase. Although the accentuation varies, קול is either accentuated with a *conjunctivus vel servus* (vv. 3; 4b *mercha*; 5, 8 *munach*; 9 *mahpach*) or not accentuated at all, using the *makaph* (vv. 4a; 7) to convey the concept of 'one word' (See: M. Medan, *Encyclopaedia Biblica* [Bialik institute, Jerusalem 1958] 3.403).

¹⁷Gesenius' *Hebrew Grammar* §147.

¹⁸However, this consistency is anticipated by two previous non-consecutive appearances of YHWH as a subject in vv. 3 and 5. For the poetic function of anticipation see, e.g., F. Polak, *Biblical Narrative — Aspects of Art and Design* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1994) 112 (Hebrew).

הבו לה' בני אלים
הבו לה' כבוד ועז
הבו לה' כבוד שמו
השתחוו לה' בהדרת קדש

Then come seven phrases in which the name YHWH constitutes a *nomen rectum* (vv. 3-9):

קול ה' על המים...
קול ה' בכח
קול ה' בהדר
קול ה' שבר ארזים...
קול ה' חצב... (חץ ב...)
קול ה' יחיל מדבר...
קול ה' יחולל אילות

Then, only in its last 4 appearances, YHWH becomes the syntactic subject:

ה' למבול ישב
וישב ה' מלך לעולם
ה' עז לעמו יתן
ה' יברך את עמו בשלום

This gradualness is breached if קול is syntactically separated from יהוה .

Hence, my preference is to adhere to the MT syntax *nomen regens + nomen rectum* which considers ה' קול as one clause.