

NOTES AND COMMUNICATIONS

AN APPARENTLY REDUNDANT MT READING — JEREMIAH 1:18

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The MT phrase **וּלְעִמּוּד בְּרִזָּל** in Jer. 1:18 is reflected in most ancient VSS. T simply copies the Hebrew, and P has the basically same reading — **וּלְעִמּוּדָא דְּפְרִזְלָא**. V renders it *columnam feream*. Some Greek Mss., conveniently collated in Ziegler's apparatus, read *καὶ εἰς στύλων σιδήροῦ* which is the translation given by Aq. and Th. preceded by an asterisk. However, the main tradition of LXX has no trace of the Hebrew phrase. On the strength of this omission, commentators tend to delete it, some raising the additional objection that in the context the image of an 'iron pillar' is meaningless. Giesebrecht cautiously weighs the deletion of the words, since between the 'fortified city' and the 'copper wall', "die eiserne Säule etwas verloren steht".¹ Others, though, are decidedly more definite in this matter. Cornill states categorically: "**וּלְעִמּוּד בְּרִזָּל** fehlt LXX mit Recht, da man eine eiserne Säule nicht bekämpfen und überwinden kann".² His thoughts are echoed by Volz who decides that "das Wort ist des Sinnes wegen zu entfernen, denn ein Volk stürmt wohl gegen eine Burg oder eine Mauer, aber nicht gegen eine Säule".³ The list of rejectors of the MT phrase could be easily enlarged without, though, adding any new arguments. None seems to give any attention to the reasons which might have induced an editor to insert the phrase into the MT. Some scholars, on the other hand, tacitly retain the problematic expression. Thus, e.g. Ehrlich⁴ and Bright.⁵ Rudolph expressly defends its genuineness, but without detailed reasoning.⁶

The doubts about the originality of **וּלְעִמּוּד בְּרִזָּל** increase if one takes into account the following considerations: 1. the term is a hap. leg. in biblical

- 1 F. Giesebrecht, *Das Buch Jeremia*, GHAT (Goettingen 1907) 5; similarly A. W. Streane, *Jeremiah* (Cambridge 1913) 7.
- 2 C. H. Cornill, *Das Buch Jeremia* (Leipzig 1905) 11.
- 3 P. Volz, *Studien zum Text des Jeremia* (Leipzig 1920), p. 5; id. *Der Prophet Jeremia*², KAT (Leipzig 1928) 11.
- 4 A. B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel*, vol. 4 (Leipzig 1912) 235.
- 5 J. Bright, *Jeremiah*, AB (New York 1965) 6-7.
- 6 W. Rudolph, *Jeremia* HAT (Tuebingen 1947) 10.

literature in which, though, the somewhat similar expression עמוד נחשת is found which refers to the two pillars in front of the Temple (1 Ki. 7:15; 2 Ki. 25:13; Jer. 52:17). In some instances we find references to pillars made of more precious material, marble (Esth. 1:6), or silver (Cant. 3:10). Altogether, there is no doubt that in all the instances in which the term עמוד is used, it refers to an upright structure, a pillar, or a column. Such an image would indeed be out of place in the picture of a beleaguered walled city to which the prophet is likened. 2. Jer. 1:18–19 clearly is echoed in 15:20 which latter verse may be considered a ‘telescoped’ or contracted paraphrase of the former.⁷ Now, of the three elements which make up the beleaguered city picture in 1:18 — חומ(ו)ת נחשת, עמוד ברזל, עיר מבצר, only the first and the third are reflected in the contracted expression חמת נחשת בצורה found in 15:20. Although not mentioned by commentators, this could be taken further to weaken the originality of עמוד ברזל in 1:18. It would seem that the literary-stylistic objection, which arises from here, carries more weight than the linguistic-etymological consideration of scholars which reveals an apparent difficulty in the interpretation of the above passage. Some such uneasiness already may have induced the Greek translator to omit the phrase, if it was at all in his *Vorlage*.⁸

However, both types of queries can be answered by the equally valid methodological contention that the meaning of the word in the passage and in the image should be decided upon by literary standards, and not by etymology or even by the usual connotation of עמוד in biblical literature. Granting some margin of poetic licence to the biblical writer, the specific connotation of the term עמוד in this specific setting ultimately should be defined by comparison with parallel imagery. Such comparison shows that עמוד in the verse under review is used metaphorically in the special sense of ‘strength’, and that, if this is the case, the MT reading עמוד ברזל should be retained. Strength, especially with regard to a city, is often indicated in biblical writings by the basic triad: fortifications, walls, and gate-doors which can be secured with the aid of bars. Thus equipped were the cities which the Israelites encountered and conquered in Trans-Jordan in the period of the Conquest of Canaan: “fortified cities with high walls and gate-doors provided with bars” (Deut. 3:5; cp. further 2 Chron. 8:5; 14:6). When not intended specifically to secure the entrance gate of a fort, the bar of such a door normally was made of wood (Ex. 26:36;

7 The similarity was correctly observed by A. Ben David, *Parallels in the Bible* (Jerusalem 1972) 202.

8 The basic issue of G’s decidedly overall shorter text is of little relevance in decisions over a specific textual detail in which MT and G are divided.

36:31).⁹ It could be drawn back from the inside, and also from the outside with the help of a key-like instrument which was inserted into an aperture in the door (Jud. 3:23–24). Where additional resistance was needed, the bar was manufactured of metal, predominantly copper or bronze. This appears to have been the standard in northern Transjordanian cities in the days of Solomon. Ben Geber, his district governor who resided in Ramot Gilead, was in charge of sixty large walled cities whose gates had been provided with copper or bronze bars — ערים גדולות חומה ובריח נחשת (1 Ki. 4:13) — so as to better withstand the impact of rams used by attackers to break down the gate-doors. Biblical literary imagery, amply seconded by archaeological evidence, informs us that in order to make the gate-doors even more resistant to battering rams, and to fire brands which sometimes were employed to burn them down, the wooden basic structures were covered with sheets of copper.¹⁰ In these instances, the bars were preferably made of iron, where this was available, since it is a much tougher metal than copper. Such fortifications were held impregnable by biblical writers who could not conceive of them being broken open in the natural course of events. Even mighty armies equipped with the best of war-machinery, like the one led by Cyrus the Great, would overcome such cities only with divine help: “I will march before you... gates of bronze I will break down and hack through iron bars” (Is. 45:2). The reading here ובריחי ברזל ... דלתות נחושת affords an exceedingly felicitous comparison with עמוד ברזל חומ(ו)ת נחשת in Jer. 1:18. This almost proverbial description of physical and technical strength was borrowed verbally by the author of Ps. 107:16 to portray by it Israel’s delivery from (Egyptian) bondage (ib. v. 13), thus giving evidence to the metaphorical employment of the basically realistic expression. A similar image is present in Job 40:18 where in the portrayal of the primaeval *behemoth* its bones are likened to tubes of bronze and its limbs to bars of iron. The underlying conception is that of a rod-like piece of metal which also could be used as the cross-bar of a yoke instead of the more usual piece of wood (Deut. 28:48; Jer. 28:13, 14).

In the light of this analysis, it can be reasonably assumed that what the coiner of the phrase עמוד ברזל in Jer. 1:18 had in mind when joining it with עיר מבצר and חמ(ו)ת נחשת was a hefty iron rod used as a bolt to fasten the heavy doors of a city gate, possibly of Jerusalem. Unlike a gate bolt of softer material such as is referred to in Jer. 51:30, and for that matter in Lam. 2:9

9 With this fact in mind, the LXX presumably rendered בריח in Jer. 49:31 βάλανος which usually translates אלה or אלהים (Gen. 35:8; Jud. 9:6; Is. 2:13; 6:13), i.e. a wooden item.

10 Cp. the convenient presentation of these matters in Y. Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Times* (Ramat Gan 1963).

(cp. vv. 5-8), the prophet rather is likened to an iron bar so that he will withstand the onslaughts of his adversaries like the iron wall which Ezekiel uses metaphorically (Ez. 4:3).

It is of interest that all the references in the Bible to rods of iron which served as door-bolts are found in comparatively late books — Jeremiah, Second Isaiah, Psalms (cp. further Ps. 2:9), and Job. While the manufacturing of iron implements was known in Palestine since the end of the second millennium B.C.E. at the latest, the material used for these purposes was wrought iron which is softer than bronze. Since the eighth century iron became common, and new processes of hardening made it a welcome substitute for bronze. The manufacturing of rods which could withstand the impact of great pressure such as is produced by battering rams, requires special skills which local craftsmen could have mastered only after considerable amount of experimenting. By Jeremiah's time this stage may have been already reached. However it is not improbable that Jeremiah thought of high-quality iron imported from the north (Jer. 15:12) — Phoenicia (Ez. 27:12, 13, 19) or Syria — where it was manufactured in biblical times, or further away from Anatolia where metallurgy was practised already at the beginning of the second millennium B.C.E.

In conclusion it may be said that the *עמוד ברזל* of Jer. 1:18, rendered "iron bolt", admirably fits the imagery employed in the verse and concurs with similar references to pillar-like iron rods in other, approximately contemporaneous, passages in biblical literature. The phrase under review most probably should be ascribed to the author of the passage, and therefore cannot be termed an "addition brève".¹¹ The fuller massoretic text should be retained, against the evidence of the shorter Greek rendition.

11 Cp. E. Tov, L'Incidence de la critique textuelle sur la critique littéraire dans le livre de Jérémie, RB LXXIX (1972) 195.