

Quenching Tears: A Note on 2 Kings 22:17 and 19

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Abstract

The verbal forms תִּבְכֶּה and וְתִבְכֶּה in 2 Kgs 22:17 and 19 exhibit metathesis. This metathesis represents the reversal that Josiah's weeping accomplishes by momentarily delaying Judah's judgment.

Keywords

metathesis – כבה – בכה – puns – wordplays

Isaac Kalimi's recent monograph illustrates that the transposition of the same consonants in juxtaposed words can be an intentional literary feature (i.e., metathesis) in the Hebrew Bible.¹ One purpose of intentional metathesis is to demonstrate reversal.² In Isa 61:3, YHWH replaces the ashes on the heads of the mourning exiles with a turban (פָּאֵר תַּחַת אֲפֹרַת "a turban instead of ashes").³ The metathesis of consonants and vowels between the lexemes אֲפֹרַת "dust" and פָּאֵר "turban" represents a change in Judah's future situation.⁴ Additionally,

1 See Kalimi, *Metathesis in the Hebrew Bible*. Cf. idem, "Literary-Stylistic Metathesis in the Hebrew Bible."

2 For metathesis portraying reversal, see Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 246.

3 Kalimi, *Metathesis in the Hebrew Bible*, 72, 132, and 160. Regarding Isa 61:3, Kalimi writes, "Here, the reversal of letters serves to highlight the reversal of sense in the juxtaposed words" (160). For a similar analysis, see Goldingay, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 304, and Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56–66*, 226.

4 Normally, *šewa* (realised as a rushed "a" sound similar to *pataḥ* and especially *ḥatef pataḥ*) and *segol* (an "e" sound) represent different sounds. When *šewa* appears before a guttural,

the palindrome תַּחַת linking these two lexemes highlights the ease with which YHWH reverses Judah's exile.⁵ YHWH reverses Judah's situation as exemplified through the prophet's use of metathesis and a palindrome.⁶

A similar example in Isa 40:4 reads:

כָּל־גֵּיאַ יִנְשֵׂא
וְכָל־הַר וְגִבְעָה יִשְׁפֹּלוּ
וְהָיָה הָעֵקֶב לְמִישׁוֹר
וְהָרְכָסִים לְבִקְעָה:

Every valley will be raised up
And every mountain and hill brought low
And a heel depression will become a plain
And the rough places will become a valley.

The term הָעֵקֶב “the heel depression” or “ridge” is a reverse anagram of the lexeme בִּקְעָה “valley.”⁷ They are mirror images of each other (i.e., ב-ק-ע-ה and ה-ע-ק-ב). The metathesis between the forms הָעֵקֶב and בִּקְעָה signals the change in circumstances which YHWH will accomplish for the returnees from Babylon.⁸ The other element in each of these lines in Isa 40:4 (i.e., לְמִישׁוֹר in the

however, it represents a short vowel of the same quality as the vowel under the guttural. See Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, §8a n. 4, and Khan, “Shewa: Pre-Modern Hebrew,” 3:544. Therefore, the *šewa* in פָּאֵר and *segol* in אָפֶר would be pronounced more similarly than normal in these phrases, though still perhaps not identically.

- 5 The importance of the palindrome תַּחַת within this phrase has not been properly emphasised. For example, Goldingay (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 304) and Kalimi (*Metathesis in the Hebrew Bible*, 72, 132, and 160) do not even transliterate the preposition תַּחַת in their discussion of Isa 61:3.
- 6 The lexeme אָפֶר “bandage” (1 Kgs 20:38 and 41) may also be part of the reversal between אָפֶר and פָּאֵר in Isa 61:3. If so, then YHWH is removing both אָפֶר “dust” and אָפֶר “bandage” from the exiles’ heads in order to put a פָּאֵר “turban” upon it. Additionally, the context of Isa 61:3 describes Judah returning from the Euphrates River (פְּרָת) with lexemes having the consonants פ and ר (i.e., פָּאֵר and אָפֶר). The reversal described may additionally include the noun פְּרִית which the Judahite exiles cross in order to flourish (פָּרַה “to bear fruit”) in a new situation.
- 7 For the gloss “heel depression” for הָעֵקֶב, see Berlin, “Isaiah 40:4.” It is also possible that the term means “ridge” and thus denotes a high point instead of a low one. See Goldingay and Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 77. For anagrammic paronomasia, see Noegel, “Paronomasia,” 3:26.
- 8 See Kalimi, *Metathesis in the Hebrew Bible*, 56–57. Also see, Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 240. Watson says, “Here the letters of עֵקֶב (found only here, so perhaps invented by the poet for his purpose) are transposed to form בִּקְעָה, of opposite meaning (and gender).” A play on the name יַעֲקֹב is operable as well in Isa 40:4. See Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 55. Berlin suggests

c line and וְהִרְכַּסִּים in the d line) also have similar consonants which appear in reverse order (i.e., מ-ש-ר and ר-ס-מ) as noted by Goldingay and Payne.⁹ The author of Isa 40:4 uses several connections in this verse, including chiasmus and metathesis, to denote the contextual meaning.¹⁰

An additional case of metathesis relating to reversal appears in 2 Kgs 22. Verses 17–19 read:

וּנְצַתָּהּ חֲמַתִּי בַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְלֹא תִכְבֶּה ... וְאֶל־מֶלֶךְ יְהוּדָה ... כֹּה תֹאמְרוּ אֵלָיו ... יַעַן
 רַדְד־לְכַבֶּה וְתִכְנַע מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה בְּשִׁמְעֶךָ אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי עַל־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְעַל־יִשְׁבָּיו לְהִיזֹת
 לְשִׁמָּה וְלִקְלָלָהּ וְתִקְרַע אֶת־בְּגָדֶיךָ וְתִבְכֶּה לְפָנַי וְגַם אֲנֹכִי שָׁמַעְתִּי וְנָאִם־יְהוָה

My wrath will burn against this place and not be quenched ... and to the king of Judah ... thus you will say to him ... because your heart was soft and you were humble before YHWH when you heard what I spoke concerning this place and its inhabitants to become a desolation and a curse, and you tore your garments and you wept before me—I, even I, heard—YHWH’s oracle.

In 2 Kgs 22:15–20, Huldah, the prophetess, responds to the messengers sent by King Josiah. She states that YHWH will punish Judah as written in the newly discovered book. YHWH’s wrath burns against Judah to the extent that it will never be quenched (תִּכְבֶּה in 2 Kgs 22:17). This is the only appearance of the verb כָּבַה “to be quenched” in the books of Kings.¹¹ Why does the author of 2 Kgs 22 use this rare verb which is a *hapax* in the book? I suggest that he intentionally utilises this verb to connect it to the verbal form וְתִבְכֶּה “you wept” in 2 Kgs 22:19.

Despite YHWH’s unquenchable anger his judgment will not come immediately against Judah because of Josiah’s weeping. Huldah says in 2 Kgs 22:19 that Josiah’s repentance orchestrates a moment of peace for Judah. Josiah’s repentance is described by several *wayyiqtol* second masculine singular forms

that the phrase לְמִישׁוֹר in Isa 40:4 may be an echo of both the names יַעֲקֹב and יִשְׂרָאֵל. See Berlin, “Isaiah 40:4,” 4.

9 See Goldingay and Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 77. For the similarity of sound between ס and ש in the Tiberian tradition, see Khan, “Tiberian Pronunciation Tradition,” 12. Both consonants are sibilants and their place of articulation (as with ט) is identical.

10 See Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 246. Watson says, “Chiasmus also denotes inversion of an existing state.”

11 The verb כָּבַה appears only twenty-four times in the Hebrew Bible. Outside of 2 Kgs 22:17 (par. 2 Chr 34:25), the verb כָּבַה describes YHWH’s anger also in Jer 7:20.

in 2 Kgs 22:19 (i.e., וַתִּכְנַע “you were humbled,” וַתִּקְרַע “you tore,” and וַתִּבְכֶּה “you wept”).

The text highlights Josiah's weeping (*wayyiqtol* of בכה in 2 Kgs 22:19), however, as the element in this list that results in the momentary reversal of Judah's destruction. While each of the verbal forms in 2 Kgs 22:19 are similar, the connection between וַתִּבְכֶּה and וַתִּכְנַע is striking. YHWH's anger, which is unstoppable (*yiqtol* of כבה in 2 Kgs 22:17), reverts at Josiah's weeping (*wayyiqtol* of בכה). The metathesis between the forms וַתִּכְנַע and וַתִּבְכֶּה reiterates the reversal.¹² The identical vowel pattern (i.e., *hireq, šewa, segol*) as well as the same consonants (i.e., כ, ה, ב, and ת) appearing in each form heighten the connection between these two.¹³

The author of 2 Kgs 22 additionally accentuates the morphological connection between these two verbal forms by using the non-apocopated *wayyiqtol* form of בכה in 2 Kgs 22:19 (i.e., וַתִּבְכֶּה). The *qal wayyiqtol* of the verb בכה appears elsewhere in the books of Kings in 2 Kgs 8:11; 13:14, and 20:3. In each of these cases, the *qal wayyiqtol* third masculine singular is apocopated (i.e., יִבְכֶּה in 2 Kgs 8:11; 13:14, and 20:3). The non-apocopated *wayyiqtol* of בכה in 2 Kgs 22:19 is conspicuously unique in Kings.¹⁴ The apocopated *wayyiqtol* form of בכה is more common in the Hebrew Bible, as expected from a III-ה verb, but the non-apocopated form also appears (e.g., וַתִּבְכֶּה in 1 Sam 1:7).¹⁵ While the apocopated

12 The metathesis present between these two verbs is reinforced in the surrounding verses. The consonants כ and ב are juxtaposed in the forms רִדְּ-לִבְבְּךָ “your heart was soft” in 2 Kgs 22:19 (cf. the chiasmic structure כ-ב-ב-כ in this phrase) and בְּכֹל “with all” in 2 Kgs 22:17 and 20. In the form בְּגָדֶיךָ “your garments” in 2 Kgs 22:19 the consonants ב and כ are not juxtaposed but appear together nonetheless. The consonants כ, ב, and ת appear together in the forms אֲבֹתֶיךָ “your fathers,” where they are juxtaposed, and קְבֹרֹתֶיךָ “your graves” in 2 Kgs 22:20. Also, the verbal form וַתִּכְנַע “you were humble” in 2 Kgs 22:19 recalls וַתִּכְנַע in 2 Kgs 22:17 as both have a ת prefix and the first radical of the root is כ (cf. וַתִּקְרַע in 2 Kgs 22:19). These consonantal connections strengthen the possibility that the author of 2 Kgs 22 intentionally describes Josiah's actions, especially וַתִּבְכֶּה, but also וַתִּכְנַע, and וַתִּקְרַע, in a way that recalls and reverses YHWH's attitude toward Judah (i.e., וַתִּכְנַע).

The *Leitmotiv* שמע “to hear” appears three times in 2 Kgs 22:18 and 19 (twice). It refers to Josiah's hearing and humbling himself in vv. 18 and 19. At the end of v. 19, however, it describes YHWH hearing Josiah's weeping. This repetition shows how YHWH responds to Josiah's actions. Josiah's actions momentarily reverse YHWH's plans for Judah.

13 This is a case of “assonantal paronomasia.” See Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 243.

14 See Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, §79m. They state that the long form of the *yiqtol* is frequent in Kings.

15 Regarding 1 Sam 1:7, see Robar, “*Wayyiqtol*,” 37–39. Robar suggests that the long form of the *wayyiqtol* of בכה signals that this verb is a *Leitmotiv* or discourse theme which connects 1 Sam 1 with the weeping for the almost lost tribe of Benjamin in Judg 19–21 (38).

form of the *qal wayyiqtol* of בכה would be expected in 2 Kgs 22:19 based on previous examples in Kings, the author of this text intentionally utilises the long form of the *wayyiqtol* to strengthen the orthographic connection with and the reversal of the verbal form תִּכְבֶּה in 2 Kgs 22:17. Indeed, the expected, apocopated form (i.e., וַתִּכְבֶּה) does appear in the parallel text in 2 Chr 34:27.¹⁶

The author of 2 Kgs 22 intentionally uses the non-apocopated form וַתִּכְבֶּה in 2 Kgs 22:19 to emphasis its connection with the verbal form תִּכְבֶּה in 2 Kgs 22:17. Josiah's actions temporarily delay YHWH's anger. 2 Kings 22:17–19 is another example of intentional literary metathesis. The metathesis between 2 Kgs 22:17 and 19 illustrates the reversal in the text.

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In general, Robar argues that the authors of the Hebrew Bible intentionally use the long form of *wayyiqtol* for the purpose of lexical disambiguation, to mark a narrative boundary, or to mark a *Leitmotiv* or discourse theme. For a similar discussion, see Robar, *Verb and The Paragraph*, 178–181. Assuming that the readers of the Hebrew text are already familiar with the story, Robar suggests that long verbal forms aid the informed and attentive reader to focus upon certain elements in the text.

- 16 The form תִּכְבֶּה appears in 2 Kgs 22:17 (par. 2 Chr 34:25). The author of 2 Chr 34 uses the apocopated *wayyiqtol* of בכה which slightly weakens the connection present in 2 Kgs 22 between the two verbal forms though it does not abrogate it.

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