DOUBLE ENTENDRE IN PSALM 59

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In a recent article, Paul Raabe examined a number of cases of double entendre, or what he calls “deliberate ambiguity,” in the Book of Psalms.1 Two of his instances come from Psalm 59.2 What is proposed here is that there is at least one more example of such double-meaning speech, intended by the poet, in the refrain in Pss 59:7 and 59:15.3

Psalm 59 contains two refrains, the first of which is found in vv. 7 and 15, and the second in vv. 10-11 and 18.4 It is the first of these refrains (vv. 7 and 15) that is under consideration here. The text and standard translation of v. 7 are as follows:

In the evening they return;
they howl like dogs;
they prowl about the city.

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3 There are other poetic devices in Psalm 59 besides deliberate ambiguity. An inclusio is formed by מָשַׁקְוּ in v. 2 and מָשַׁקְוּ ... מַשַׁקְוֻ in vv. 17-18. There are also three instances of talionic reversal: in vv. 2 and 12, the psalmist prays that “those who rise against me” (ךְַפַּחְתַּסְלֵם) God will “bring down” (וַּנֶּשֶׂךְ); the hostile “mighty” (יִזְיֵר) of v. 4 are confronted by God’s “might” in vv. 10 (דָּי) and 17-18 (נֶּשֶׂךְ ... מַשַׁקְוּ); the roaming around for food by predatory enemies (קְוָיִשׁ, v. 16) leads the psalmist to pray “Make them totter” (ךְַפַּחְתַּסְלֵם). Finally, there is a probable instance of hysteron-proteron in v. 5: “they charge (ךְַמְרֵסֶה), they form themselves in battle array” (ךְַפַּחְתַּסְלֵם); on this assimilated hitpolet with this meaning, see D. J. A. Clines, Dictionary of Classical Hebrew 4 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998] 376).
4 The presence of more than one refrain in a psalm is not unparalleled; Psalm 42–43 has three refrains (42:4d and 11d; 42:6, 12 and 43:5; 42:10 and 43:2), none of which is exactly repeated.
5 The simile בְּדִלְכָּל is taken as a collective: “As often with animal names, Hebrew uses the singular collective preceded by the definite article” (W. H. C. Propp, Exodus 1–18 [AB 2; New York: Doubleday, 1999] 591).
This line is repeated in v. 15, the only difference being the conjunction (ָבָּהָל).

Commentators and translators understand the simile כֹּלְעָה ("like dogs") as referring to enemies, either national enemies or (if Psalm 59 is a royal psalm) enemies of the king.6 The simile likens the enemies to an urban phenomenon, scavenging dogs roaming about a city in search of food (cf. 1 Kgs 14:11; 16:4; 21:24).

THE DOUBLE ENTENDRE IN THIS PSALM

The double entendre proposed here requires no change in the text, but rather a reunderstanding. First, the verb הבָּהָל (ָבָּהָל) is taken in its political sense, as “turn away,” i.e. be disloyal.7 This political sense of הבָּהָל is reinforced by the immediately preceding כֹּלְעָה ("all malicious traitors") in v. 6.8 Similarly in Jer 3:6-8, “faithless Israel” מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם (תָּשִׁיא) is twice paired with “her traitorous sister Judah” (תָּשִׁיא) מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם (תָּשִׁיא); and again in 3:11, note מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם מַלְשׁo

In the second colon, while the verb הבָּהָל (ָבָּהָל) can mean “howl,

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6 J. Botterweck, TDOT 7.156: “In the Psalms, the enemies כֹּלְעָה represent the enemies who oppress the individual worshipper. They, the band of the wicked (sometimes with demonic overtones) surround the faithful psalmist … like a pack of growling dogs on the prowl … they greedily beset the psalmist …” Among the many who consider Psalm 59 a royal psalm are S. Mowinckel, The Psalms in Israel’s Worship (New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) 1.226; J. H. Eaton, Kingship and the Psalms (SBT 32; London: SCM, 1976) 47; M. E. Tate, Psalms 51–100 (WBC 20; Dallas: Word, 1990) 95; G. Ravasi, Il libro dei Salmi 2 (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1986) 190; M. Dahood, Psalms II (AB 17; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968) 66–67. As will be seen below, I depart from Dahood’s understanding of “the nations” מַלְשׁוֹנָתָם, vv. 6 and 9) as foreign enemies and the “dogs” as domestic foes. I will argue that both nations and dogs refer to rebellious vassal states.

7 W. L. Holladay, The Root Šubh in the Old Testament (Leiden: Brill, 1958) 80: הבָּהָל as “withdraw (from God), become apostate”; “turn back (from good, the covenant, etc., to evil), become apostate”; and see pp. 134, 137, 151–52. Dahood (Psalms II, 69) derives הבָּהָל from הבָּהָל, a biform of הבָּהָל, meaning “reside, sit.” This analysis does not affect the point being made here. If Dahood is correct, then בבָּהָל from הבָּהָל II (“they reside”) is reread in the double entendre as derived from הבָּהָל I (“turn” politically).

8 On הבָּהָל as meaning “faithless (to a relationship),” see Pss 25:3; 78:57; Hos 5:7; Mal 2:11; S. Erlandsson, TDOT 1.470–73. According to C. A. and E. G. Briggs (The Book of Psalms 2 [ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1907] 156), הבָּהָל means treachery to covenant relationships.