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A Re-examination of D-H-M in the Meṣad Ḥashavyahu Ostracon (KAI 200)

Abstract

Although the contents of the 7th-century BCE letter found on ostraca fragments at Meṣad Ḥashavyahu are relatively well understood, the proposed interpretation of one word has been too quickly accepted and should be challenged. This is the interpretation of תדהם, in line 14, as a form of דום, which is said to mean ‘be silent’. The association with דום is not a foregone conclusion, however, and a survey of the biblical corpus demonstrates that a connection between II-ה and II-ו roots is exceptional rather than the norm. Furthermore, the existence of the root דום is itself uncertain, and the claim that it means ‘be silent’ is questionable rather than established. Finally, the only biblical use of the root דדהם, in Jeremiah 14:9, seems to have similar connotations and should be used to help interpret דדהם in the letter.

Keywords

Meṣad Ḥashavyahu ostracon; hapax legomenon; byforms; weak roots; be silent

Introduction

The very interesting 7th-century BCE letter found on ostraca fragments at Meṣad Ḥashavyahu is now relatively well understood, although discussions regarding its genre and the identity of the speaker continue. It is thought to contain the appeal of a worker (possibly a tenant farmer) to a higher official, with a request that the official help him by returning the garment that had been taken from him by a certain Ḥashavyahu, to whom he owed something he had failed to deliver. It is generally assumed that the speaker dictated his request to a trained scribe.

Despite advances in understanding the setting and intention of this document, at least one proposed interpretation was too quickly accepted yet remains largely unchallenged. This is the interpretation of the word תדהם as a form of דום, said to mean ‘be silent’. The association with דום is tenuous at best, however, and both the existence of the root and its proposed meaning are not as certain as commonly accepted in the literature.
The last three lines of text are broken, but in line 12 of 14 the speaker seems to promise to repay the governor (ואם לא לשר Phụ), assuming completion of the verb on the next line as לו. The next line contains very little that is legible, but the speaker seems to request mercy (ואם לא לשרتوجيه), probably meaning restoration of the garment. The final line (14) is reconstructed in KAI as: [something..]. suggesting the conclusion to his request is: ‘(and he)ar the (word of) your (se)rvant, and do not let him go’.

in Jeremiah 14:9

דהם is a root attested only once in Biblical Hebrew. It appears in Jeremiah 14, which describes the impacts of a drought on both humans and animals. Verses 7–9 record the people’s plea to God for deliverance along with their confession of sin. They address God as the ‘hope of Israel’, its ‘saviour in time of trouble’, and then with two rhetorical questions challenge him to act (vv. 8b–9a):

למה תהיה כגר הארץ כארח נדהם:
למה תהיה כאיש נדהם גבור לא יוכל להושיע

(‘Why should you be as a foreigner in the land, or as a traveller who turns aside to spend the night? Why should you be as a man נדהם, like a mighty warrior who is not able to deliver?’).

דהם, a Niphal participle from דהם, is defined in BDB as ‘astonish, astound’, in HALOT as ‘astounded, confused’, in DCH as ‘be astonished, dumbfounded’, and in Ges. 18th edn as ‘bestürzt sein’ (‘be upset, dismayed, confused, stunned’). Biblical translations tend to use the words above and close synonyms, though with significant variation: ‘confused’, ‘overcome’, ‘dismayed’, ‘stunned’, and ‘frightened’. This tradition of interpretation may go back as far as Qimḥi, who glosses דהם, commenting that his father explained it as

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5 Jewish Publication Society.
6 New American Standard Bible; Traduction œcuménique: ébranlé.
7 New Jewish Publication Society Translation; Louis Segond: stupéfait; Einheitsübersetzung: ratloser.
8 Schlachter: erschrockener.
related to Arabic *dhm*, suggesting someone ‘whose mind has been clouded or impaired by sickness’, or someone who is surprised.

The LXX’s ὤπνῶν, ‘sleeping’, suggests it might have been translating as if from * נדֵד*, or perhaps נד, נד, while the Vulgate has *vagus*, ‘wandering’ (perhaps from a perceived connection to נד or נד). The Targum unsurprisingly shifts the implied criticism away from God and directs it towards the people instead: ‘Why does your anger fall upon us, and we are as wanderers and abandoned? You are a strong man able to deliver, and your presence is amongst us’. It is possible that the idea of wandering in the Targum (מטלטלין), as with the Vulgate, came from a perception of the root נד in the Hebrew; if not, it could reflect an exegetical tradition. The Peshitta translates not with a question, but a command: ‘do not be like a weak man, or like a man who is unable to save’.

Since in Jer. 14:9 the description of an איש נדהם is parallel to, or glossed by, the following phrase ‘a mighty man unable to save’, the meaning of נדהם is in some way be related to the inability to save or deliver, and possibly, if related to the description in the previous verse, associated with one who is a sojourning stranger (ארח, גר). The participle נדהם could thus refer to one who is confused or astounded and therefore unable to deliver, or to one who is idle, inactive, uninvolved or in any other way rendered useless for helping.

If the same meaning is supplied in the ostracon, it fits well: the speaker desires that the official not be confused or idle, but that he act in order to ‘deliver’ him by returning to him his garment. In his initial publication on the ostracon in 1960, Joseph Naveh made similar observations: since in Jeremiah איש נדהם is the opposite of מושיע, לא תדהם in the letter must

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11 The Targum text is: למא יחול רוגזך עלנא ואנחנא מטלטלין ושביקין את גיבר יכיל למפרק ואת שכינתך ביננא

From Alexander Sp ber, *The Bible in Aramaic, III: The Latter Prophets according to Targum Jonathan* (Leiden 1992), 170. Robert Hayward translates: ‘Why does your anger hover over us when we are taken into exile and forsaken? You, O mighty One, are able to redeem, and as for you, your Shekhina is among us’, explaining in a note that this removal of anthropomorphism and emphasis on God’s power is a process of ‘converse translation’ (*The Targum of Jeremiah* [Aramaic Bible 12, Edinburgh 1987], 90, 91n.3).
12 The Peshitta text is: ﻓَرَضَ ﻟَا ﻓَرَضَ ﻒَرْضَ ﻋَلَّ ﻓَرْضَ ﻻ ﻓَعَلَّ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻓَعَلَّ ﻻ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ ـ ﻻ ﻻ

From Antonio Maria Ceriani (ed.), *A Facsimile Edition of the Peshitto Old Testament Based on Codex Ambrosianus (7a1)* (Piscataway, N.J. 2013), 331.
mean that ‘the reaper is requesting the governor to come to his aid’. Naveh translated ‘and be not helpless to save’, importing quite a bit of the Jeremianic context into the letter.

In their 1964 publication, however, J.D. Amusin and M.L. Heltzer proposed that דדם is a byform of דומים and that it therefore means ‘be silent’. They translated ‘and do not be speechless (or: unresponsive)’, explaining in a note: ‘the verb dhm is connected etymologically with the verb dwm (“to be silent”) and in its only occurrence (Jer. 14:9) means “to be speechless”’. They offered no justification for the claim that the two roots are related, nor for the suggested meaning in Jeremiah. Naveh subsequently reported their interpretation, though without offering any evaluative comment, and the same interpretation is then found in the work of many later scholars. André Lemaire, for example, also wrote that the root dhm is parallel to dwm, and he interpreted as: ‘and you will not be silent, please’. John Gibson was more cautious in associating the two roots, but still kept the idea of being silent, translating the reconstructed line 14: ‘(If you have paid attention to the complaint of) your servant, then you will not keep silence, but…’. Dennis Pardee concluded that the interpretation ‘be silent’ had ‘an acceptable sense’ despite the textual uncertainties. He retained the interpretation in his later handbook: ‘You must not remain si˺lent˺ [when your] / [servant is without his garment]’. Manfred Weippert also translated with the idea of being silent: ‘Und schweige do[ch] nicht!’ (‘and do not be silent!’), correctly identifying silence as referring to idleness and inactivity, and cautiously conceding: ‘For lack of anything better, the verb DHM must be explained as a byform of DUM, “be silent”’. Van Selms also associated the two roots, claiming that a middle waw is often replaced by a he, but he offered no explanation or examples to justify his claim.

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16 כתובות כנעניות ועבריתים [Canaanite and Hebrew inscriptions], *Leshonenu* 30 (1966), 30, 71.
17 He wrote: ‘“dhm”…est parallèle à la racine “dwm”, d’où le sense: “et tu ne te tairas pas, je t’en prie”‘.
18 ‘L’Ostracon de Meṣad Ḥashavyahu (Yavneh-Yam) replacé dans son context’, *Semitica* 21 (1971), 76.
22 *Jeremia*, 204n.7. His suggested translation as ‘be motionless’, however, is more likely for דום than ‘be silent’, assuming it is related to סומן (see below).
Other scholars have proposed different readings of the text. Frank Moore Cross read וֹלֶא תַדְחֹנו and translated ‘do not drive him away’ (דחה with 3ms energetic object suffix), portraying the petitioner as asking to be heard and not sent away. This interpretation was also followed by Shemaryahu Talmon and the 1962 edition of KAI, which has a note appraising Cross’s reading as very probable. It has also been argued for on the basis of contextual rather than palaeographic grounds: ‘our reaper seeks to appeal that his petition will not be officially rejected’. Another proposal, though not widely followed, was to read רָהֵן, emending it to derive from a non-attested root ירהן, with the suggested interpretation ‘hold captive’ based on an Arabic root.

Modern dictionaries, reflecting these scholarly traditions, define the use of דחה in the ostracon variably as ‘be helpless’ (HALOT), ‘keep silent’ (DCH), and, with a question mark, ‘ruhig bleiben’ (‘remain quiet/still’, Ges. 18th edn).

The interpretation of דחה in the ostracon as ‘be silent’ has much to commend it semantically, as Hebrew and other ancient Semitic languages use the image of silence to indicate a lack of, or restraint from, expected action. The request ‘do not be silent’ could therefore be interpreted as ‘do not fail to act’, a point Weippert effectively illustrated for other non-biblical texts with examples from the Amarna letters. The philological grounds for this association, however, are not as defensible, for the following reasons: (1) the weak roots II-ה and II-ו do not commonly produce byforms; and (2) neither the existence nor the meaning of דום can be established with certainty.

1) Weak Roots II-ה and II-ו

Scholars claim a byform relationship for דחה דום without offering any justification or examples, although there is in fact very little evidence of a common byform relationship between II-ה and II-ו roots within biblical texts. In a survey of all biblical II-ה verbal roots, I found no clear II-ו verbal byform. There was only one very doubtful pair, which involved a

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27 I.N. Vinnikov, ‘О вновь открытой надписи к югу от Яффы’ [Regarding the newly discovered inscription to the south of Jaffa], Archiv Orientalní 33 (1965), 551–52.
28 HALOT, 214; DCH, 417; Ges. 18th edn, 243.
29 E.g., Hab. 1:13 (שוח); 1 Kgs 22:3 (שקיע); Ruth 3:18 (שק). See also the following footnote.
change in first root letter between \textit{sade} and \textit{zayin}: זר, which can mean ‘press’ or ‘squeeze’, among many other meanings, and זר, a denominative verb used only once to mean ‘press out oil’. These can hardly be called byforms, even if they might demonstrate a process of phonological and subsequent (limited) semantic contamination over time. No other biblical \textit{II- 발생} verbs had a semantically related \textit{II- 발생} byform.\footnote{In BDB ‘press down and out’ is the third definition for זר (266–67), in \textit{HALOT} ‘press closely’ is the first (267), in \textit{DCH} ‘squeeze, crush’ is the second (3:100), and in Ges. 18th edn ‘auswringen, ausdrücken’ is the first (298).}

Slightly more evidence is found when nominal forms are included, but here too the evidence is sparse and not entirely convincing. As part of a list of corresponding weak forms, Gesenius (GK §77 f) gives four examples of \textit{II- 발생}/\textit{II- 발생} forms: (1) \textit{מהל}, ‘circumcise’, and \textit{מלה}, (used only once as a passive participle in Isaiah 1:22, where it refers to the mixing or weakening of drink with water, and if semantically related to circumcision can only be in a figurative or derived way);\footnote{The \textit{II- 발생} roots in my survey were: אָבַב, אוֹל, בָּהַל, נָוָר, דָּמַם, דָּרָר, זָהָר, וֹדֵד, חָטֵם, מָחֵד, מָחַד, נַחַד, נְחֵד, נָחָד, דָּמַם, דָּרָר, זָהָר, וֹדֵד, חָטֵם, מָחֵד, מָחַד, נַחַד, נְחֵד, נָחָד. Even when there \textit{are} \textit{II- 발생} roots with corresponding first and third consonants, these do not have related meanings and therefore cannot be considered byforms.} (2) \textit{מְרֵא}, ‘exchange’ or ‘substitute’, and \textit{מְרַד}, \textit{מְרָד}, used predominantly as a piel meaning ‘hurry’, but in two verses as a qal with somewhat obscure meaning, perhaps ‘pay a purchase price’ [Exod. 22:15], or perhaps ‘exchange for’ or even ‘hurry after’ [Ps. 16:4]; (3) \textit{נָר}, not used as a verbal root but in the nominal form \textit{מנורה} ‘lampstand’, and \textit{נהר}, most often the noun ‘river’ or a verb meaning ‘flow, stream’, but in two or three verses meaning ‘shine, be radiant’ [Ps. 34:6; Isa. 60:5; possibly Jer. 31:12]; and (4) \textit{לטָעָמש}, ‘secret arts’ (Exod. 7:11 only; other references to ‘their secret arts’ in the same context are as \textit{לטָעָמש}: Exod. 7:22; 8:3, 14, and \textit{לט} (Ruth 3:7; 1 Sam. 18:22) or \textit{לאט} (Judg. 4:21), referring to ‘secrecy’ and, according to Gesenius, derived from \textit{לטָעָמש}.

In all these examples, one of the claimed byforms is extremely uncommon, and sometimes of uncertain meaning. In the case of \textit{זָהָר} and \textit{נהר}, a more common meaning is significantly different from the claimed byform.

In light of these observations, it seems extremely unlikely that \textit{II- 발생} and \textit{II- 발생} roots commonly produced byforms in the biblical period. In fact, a much greater number of \textit{II- 발생} and \textit{II- 발생} roots have clearly differentiated meanings, suggesting that a byform relationship should not be expected.\footnote{The root \textit{לטָעָמש} does come to be used for circumcision in later Hebrew, though this might be attributable to the influence of Aramaic. They do not overlap in biblical texts.} Even if the possibility cannot be excluded outright, it should

\footnote{Consider the following ten semantically unrelated \textit{II- 발생}/\textit{II- 발생} roots, both verbs (v.) and nouns (n.). I have excluded those used only once or only with uncertain meaning, and also those with a consonantal middle \textit{waw}:}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Ｚוֹר}, which can mean ‘press’ or ‘squeeze’, among many other meanings, and \textit{즈ָהָר}, a denominative verb used only once to mean ‘press out oil’.
  \item The \textit{II- 발생} roots in my survey were: אָבַב, אוֹל, בָּהַל, נָוָר, דָּמַם, דָּרָר, זָהָר, וֹדֵד, חָטֵם, מָחֵד, מָחַד, נַחַד, נְחֵד, נָחָד, דָּמַם, דָּרָר, זָהָר, וֹדֵד, חָטֵם, מָחֵד, מָחַד, נַחַד, נְחֵד, נָחָד. Even when there \textit{are} \textit{II- 발생} roots with corresponding first and third consonants, these do not have related meanings and therefore cannot be considered byforms.
  \item The root \textit{לטָעָמש} does come to be used for circumcision in later Hebrew, though this might be attributable to the influence of Aramaic. They do not overlap in biblical texts.
  \item Consider the following ten semantically unrelated \textit{II- 발생}/\textit{II- 발생} roots, both verbs (v.) and nouns (n.). I have excluded those used only once or only with uncertain meaning, and also those with a consonantal middle \textit{waw}:}
\end{itemize}
certainly not be assumed as given as it has been for דום, דהם, and especially not for a 7th-century text.

2) Existence and Meaning of דום

Another problem with the suggestion that דהם is a byform of דום is that the existence of דום itself is not at all certain in Biblical Hebrew, or at least it does not seem to be recognized by the Masoretes. All possible attestations of דום are pointed in such a way that they could also be from דהם.

A second problem is that even if דום did exist, it is unlikely that it would have meant ‘be silent’. The Qal of דם, with which it is closely associated in form, more often has the meaning ‘be still’ or ‘cease’. In the few places where does mean ‘be silent’, it seems to derive from applying the meaning ‘cease’ to speech or noise (i.e., ‘cease making noise’). If דום did exist as a byform of דם, as the pointing seems to indicate, both would presumably have had similar meanings: ‘cease’, ‘stop’, ‘hold still’. Such a meaning could also suit the context of the ostracon, with the command ‘do not hold still’ understood as another way of stating the request that the official act on behalf of the speaker. With good sense from the traditional meaning of דהם, however, there is no reason to rely on speculation.

Conclusion

There is very little evidence that Hebrew דום ever meant ‘be silent’. If it did, it was more likely by extension from the nominal form דהם, referring to the land of the dead, or by contamination with דהם, meaning ‘cease’, ‘be still’. The breadth of meanings for Semitic cognates of these roots precludes a definitive (recoverable) common Proto-Semitic semantic value. If anything, the very different meanings found in II-ו and II-ו roots in the biblical texts

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35 E.g., Josh. 10:12–13; 1 Sam. 14:9; Ps. 3:15; Jer. 47:6; Lam. 2:18.

36 In my analysis, דם unquestionably means ‘be silent’ in only 2 out of 30 references: Job 29:21 and Ps. 30:13 [Engl. 12]. It could possibly mean ‘be silent’ in another 7-8 verses, but these are difficult and the meaning uncertain, and in each could likewise refer to cessation of motion or commotion (Lev. 10:3; Isa. 23:2; Lam. 2:10; 3:28; Ezek. 24:17; Amos 5:13; Ps. 31:18 [Engl. 17]; and Ps. 4:5 [Engl. 4]). In 8 other verses דם refers to destruction, while in the remainder of verses it more clearly refers to cessation.

37 The possibility of these meanings being found in Hebrew דהם is strengthened, though not proven, by the Arabic cognate evidence, with הנ in Arabic meaning ‘continue, last, endure, remain’. Arabic הדמ, in contrast, refers to something happening suddenly, unexpectedly, or by surprise (Lane, Arabic-English Lexicon, 1.3: 925, 935–36).
confirm the uncertainty of a byform relationship. Elucidation of דָּם in the ostracon text, therefore, should be sought not in the hypothetical דָּם, but instead in the light of Jer. 14:9. In both texts the verb refers to a state of being that renders one unable to bring deliverance.