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A Re-examination of *D-H-M* in the Meşad Ḥashavyahu Ostrakon (KAI 200)

Abstract

Although the contents of the 7th-century BCE letter found on ostraca fragments at Meşad 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 תדקם, 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 דקם, in Jeremiah 14:9, seems to have similar connotations and should be used to help interpret דקם in the letter.

Keywords

Meşad Ḥashavyahu ostrakon; *hapax legomenon*; byforms; weak roots; be silent

Introduction

The very interesting 7th-century BCE letter found on ostraca fragments at Meşad 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 תדקם 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 להשש), assuming completion of the verb on the next line as להשיב. The next line contains very little that is legible, but the speaker seems to request mercy (...אלו רח), probably meaning restoration of the garment. The final line (14) is reconstructed in *KAI* as: [..]ושמ[ע]ת את [דבר ע]בדך ולא תדהם נ[.],¹ suggesting the conclusion to his request is: ‘(and he)ar the (word of) your (se)rvant, and do not תדהם’.²

נדהם in Jeremiah 14:9

נדהם 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 כגור בארץ וכארה נטה ללון: למה תהיה כאיש נדהם כגבור 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?’).

נדהם, a Niphal participle from נדהם, 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’).³ Biblical translations tend to use the words above and close synonyms, though with significant variation: ‘confused’,⁴ ‘overcome’,⁵ ‘dismayed’,⁶ ‘stunned’,⁷ and ‘frightened’.⁸ This tradition of interpretation may go back as far as Qimḥi, who glosses נדהם as מבוהל, commenting that his father explained it as

¹ H. Donner and W. Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften (KAI)*, 5th edn (Wiesbaden 2002), 46.

² Although a plea would normally be formed with אל plus jussive, it is not impossible to interpret in the same way with a preceding לא (cf. Gen. 24:8; Deut. 13:1; 1 Kgs 2:6). Suzuki refers to examples in Num. 27:17; Pss 40:12 [Engl. 11]; 51:19 [Engl. 17] (Yoshihide Suzuki, ‘A Hebrew Ostrakon from Meşad Ḥashavyahu: A Form-critical Reinvestigation’, *Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute* [1982], 25); see also Dennis Pardee, ‘The Judicial Plea from Meşad Ḥashavyahu (Yavneh-Yam): A New Philological Study’, *Maarav* 1:1 (1978), 54.

³ *BDB*, 187; *HALOT*, 214; *DCH*, 2:417; Wilhelm Gesenius, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch* (18th edn), 243.

⁴ New Revised Standard Version, English Standard Version.

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’,⁹ or someone who is surprised.

The LXX’s ὑπνῶν, ‘sleeping’, suggests it might have been translating as if from נרדם, or perhaps נרם, while the Vulgate has *vagus*, ‘wandering’ (perhaps from a perceived connection to נוד).¹⁰ 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’.¹¹ It is possible that the idea of wandering in the Targum (מטלטלין), as with the Vulgate, came from a perception of the root נוד 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’.¹²

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 (גר, ארח). 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.¹³

נדהם in the Ostracon

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 נדהם is the opposite of מושיע, לא תדהם in the letter must

⁹ See William McKane, *Jeremiah* (Edinburgh 1986), 1:320–31. Lane defines دهم as referring to something happening suddenly, unexpectedly, or by surprise (E.W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, Book 1, Part 3 [London 1865], 925).

¹⁰ LXX text from Joseph Ziegler (ed.), *Septuaginta, XV: Jeremias, Baruch, Threni, Epistula Jeremiae* (Göttingen 2013), 219; Vulgate text from Robert Weber (ed.), *Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem* (Stuttgart 1994), 1186.

¹¹ The Targum text is: למא יחול רוגוך עלנא ואנחנא מטלטלין ושביקין את גיבר יכיל למפרק ואת שכינתך ביננא
From Alexander Sperber, *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: לא תדהם אפי גבא כפי נא אפי גבא ואל מןה לא מןה לחום
From Antonio Maria Ceriani (ed.), *A Facsimile Edition of the Peshitto Old Testament Based on Codex Ambrosianus (7a1)* (Piscataway, N.J. 2013), 331.

¹³ Adrianus van Selms associates it with the root דום and suggests translating ‘motionless’ (‘bewegingloos’). *Jeremia, Deel 1* (Nijkerk 1972), 204; quoted by P.-M. Bogaert, *Le Livre de Jérémie* (Leuven 1997), 299.

mean that ‘the reaper is requesting the governor to come to his aid’. Naveh translated ‘and be not helpless to save’,¹⁴ 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 דהח is a byform of דומ 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”’.¹⁵ 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,¹⁶ 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’.¹⁷ 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...’.¹⁸ Dennis Pardee concluded that the interpretation ‘be silent’ had ‘an acceptable sense’ despite the textual uncertainties.¹⁹ He retained the interpretation in his later handbook: ‘You must not remain si^lent’ [when your] / [servant is without his garment]’.²⁰ 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”’.²¹ 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.²²

¹⁴ ‘A Hebrew Letter from the Seventh Century B.C.’, *IEJ* 10:3 (1960), 134–35.

¹⁵ ‘The Inscription from Mešad Ḥashavyahu: Complaint of a Reaper of the Seventh Century B.C.’, *IEJ* 14 (1964), 150, 154.

¹⁶ כתובות כנעניות ועבריות [Canaanite and Hebrew inscriptions], *Leshonenu* 30 (1966), 30, 71.

¹⁷ He wrote: “‘dhm’...est parallèle à la racine “dwm”, d’où le sens: “et tu ne te tairas pas, je t’en prie”.

‘L’Ostracon de Mešad Ḥashavyahu (Yavneh-Yam) remplacé dans son context’, *Semitica* 21 (1971), 76.

¹⁸ *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions, I: Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions* (Oxford, 1971), 29. A note on p. 30 reads ‘if the base [DHM] is related to DWM, a meaning “keep silence”, “be put to silence” for the Niph. is not impossible and gives good sense’.

¹⁹ ‘The Judicial Plea’, 54.

²⁰ *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Letters* (Chico, Calif. 1982), 21.

²¹ ‘Faute de mieux muß das Verbum DHM als Nebenform zu DUM “schweigen” erklärt werden’. He also states: ‘Der Satz “und schweige do[ch] nicht!” bedeutet: “Bleibe nicht untätig!”’ (‘Die Petition eines Erntearbeiters aus Mešad Ḥašavyāhū und die Syntax althebräischer erzählender Prosa’, in Erhard Blum, Christian Macholz, and Ekkehard W. Stegemann [eds.], *Die Hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte: Festschrift für Rolf Rendtorff zum 65. Geburtstag* [Neukirchen-Vluyn 1990], 462n.33).

²² *Jeremia*, 204n.7. His suggested translation as ‘be motionless’, however, is more likely for דומ than ‘be silent’, assuming it is related to דמם (see below).

Other scholars have proposed different readings of the text. Frank Moore Cross read וּלֹא תִדְחֶנּוּ 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.²³ This interpretation was also followed by Shemaryahu Talmon²⁴ and the 1962 edition of *KAI*, which has a note appraising Cross’s reading as very probable.²⁵ 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’.²⁶ Another proposal, though not widely followed, was to read [י]תְרַהַנְנִי, emending it to derive from a non-attested root רָהַן, with the suggested interpretation ‘hold captive’ based on an Arabic root.²⁷

Modern dictionaries, reflecting these scholarly traditions, define the use of דָּחַם in the ostrakon variably as ‘be helpless’ (*HALOT*), ‘keep silent’ (*DCH*), and, with a question mark, ‘ruhig bleiben’ (‘remain quiet/still’, Ges. 18th edn).²⁸

The interpretation of דָּחַם in the ostrakon 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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 דָּחַם can be established with certainty.

1) Weak Roots II-ה and II-ו

Scholars claim a byform relationship for דָּחַם and דָּחַם 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

²³ ‘Epigraphic Notes on Hebrew Documents of the Eighth-Sixth Centuries B.C.: II. The Murabba ‘at Papyrus and the Letter Found near Yabneh-yam’, *BASOR* 165 (1962), 44–45.

²⁴ ‘The New Hebrew Letter from the Seventh Century B.C. in Historical Perspective’, *BASOR* 176 (1964), 36.

²⁵ H. Donner and W. Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften* (Wiesbaden, 1962–64), 201. Lines 13–14 are translated: ‘[das Gewand deines Dieners und zu erweis]en ihm *Gna* / [*de (/)* ...] deinen Diener und verstoße ihn nicht [...]’ (p. 199).

²⁶ Suzuki, ‘A Hebrew Ostrakon’, 25.

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 (חָרַשׁ); 1 Kgs 22:3 (חָשָׁה); Ruth 3:18 (שָׁקַט). See also the following footnote.

³⁰ Weippert, ‘Die Petition’, 462n.33.

change in first root letter between *šade* and *zayin*: זור, which can mean ‘press’ or ‘squeeze’, among many other meanings, and צהר, a denominative verb used only once to mean ‘press out oil’.³¹ 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 II-ה verbs had a semantically related II-ו byform.³²

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 II-ה/II-ו forms: (1) מוּל, ‘circumcise’, and מַהֵל (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);³³ (2) מוּר, ‘exchange’ or ‘substitute’, and מַהֵר, 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) נוּר, not used as a verbal root but in the nominal form מְנוּרָה, ‘lampstand’, and נִהַר, 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) להִטִּים, ‘secret arts’ (Exod. 7:11 only; other references to ‘their secret arts’ in the same context are as לִטְיָהֵם: Exod. 7:22; 8:3, 14), and לֹט (Ruth 3:7; 1 Sam. 18:22) or לֹטֵט (Judg. 4:21), referring to ‘secrecy’ and, according to Gesenius, derived from לוֹט.

In all these examples, one of the claimed byforms is extremely uncommon, and sometimes of uncertain meaning. In the case of מַהֵר and נִהַר, a more common meaning is significantly different from the claimed byform.

In light of these observations, it seems extremely unlikely that II-ה and II-ו roots commonly produced byforms in the biblical period. In fact, a much greater number of II-ה and II-ו roots have clearly differentiated meanings, suggesting that a byform relationship should *not* be expected.³⁴ Even if the possibility cannot be excluded outright, it should

³¹ In BDB ‘press down and out’ is the third definition for זור (266–67), in *HALOT* ‘press closely’ is the first (267), in *DCH* ‘squeeze, crush’ is the second (3:100), and in Ges. 18th edn ‘auswringen, ausdrücken’ is the first (298).

³² The II-ה roots in my survey were: אהב, אהל, בהל, גהר, דהם, דהר, זהר, זהם, טהר, יב, יהד, כהה, כהן, להה, להט, להם, אהב, אהל, בהל, גהר, דהם, דהר, זהר, זהם, טהר, יב, יהד, כהה, כהן, להה, להט, להם. Even when there *are* II-ו roots with corresponding first and third consonants, these do not have related meanings and therefore cannot be considered byforms.

³³ The root מהל 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.

³⁴ Consider the following ten semantically unrelated II-ה/II-ו 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 *waw*:

certainly not be assumed as given as it has been for דהם and דום, 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 דמם.

A second problem is that even if דום *did* exist, it is unlikely that it would have meant 'be silent'. The Qal of דמם, with which it is closely associated in form, more often has the meaning 'be still' or 'cease'.³⁵ In the few places where דמם *does* mean 'be silent', it seems to derive from applying the meaning 'cease' to speech or noise (i.e., 'cease making noise').³⁶ If דום *did* exist as a byform of דמם, as the pointing seems to indicate, both would presumably have had similar meanings: 'cease', 'stop', 'hold still'.³⁷ Such a meaning could also suit the context of the ostrakon, 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 דומָה, referring to the land of the dead, or by contamination with דמם, 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-ה and II-ו roots in the biblical texts

(1) אהב (v. love) / אוב (n. medium, necromancer); (2) בהל (v. dismay/be dismayed) / בול (n. produce); (3) גהר (v. bend, crouch) / גור (v. sojourn, quarrel, be afraid); (4) זהר (v. warn/be warned) / זור (v. be a stranger, be loathsome, press down and out); (5) טהר (v. be pure) / טור (n. row); (6) כהן (v. serve as priest) / כון (v. be firm, established); (7) להט (v. flame) / לוט (v. wrap tightly); (8) נהם (v. growl, groan) / נום (v. slumber); (9) צהר (n. window/door/noon?; v. press out oil) / צור (v. confine, treat as enemy, fashion); (10) קהל (n. assembly) / קול (n. voice, sound).

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

³⁶ In my analysis, דמם 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 דמם 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 דמם 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 דום is strengthened, though not proven, by the Arabic cognate evidence, with *دوم* in Arabic meaning 'continue, last, endure, remain'. Arabic *داهم*, 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 זָהָם in the ostrakon text, therefore, should be sought not in the hypothetical זָרָם, 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.