

## NOTES ON ISAIAH 36-37

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The narrative chapters 36-39 in the prophetic book Isaiah are composed of a dual story about the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib in the days of Hezekiah in 36:1-22 and 37:1-38, both introduced by the opening-signal **וַיְהִי**<sup>1</sup>, and two elaborations in 38:1-22 and 39:1-8, both initially marked by respectively the elaboration-signal **בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם** and **בַּעַת הַהוּא**.

Although the Isaiah-exegesis is mainly concentrated on the parallelity between Isaiah and the Books of Kings/Chronicles,<sup>2</sup> the text itself already raises many questions of concern to the exegete. In this article, I would like, from a text-linguistic point of view (especially text-syntactic and text-semantic), to shed a new light on some of these for Isa 36-37, supported by some text-critical observations.

The first problematic verse is Isa 36:5. The meaning of this verse is far from undisputed. This interpretation-problem is caused by the controversial verbal form **אָמַרְתִּי** (first person), instead of which many exegetes<sup>3</sup> like to read **אָמַרְתָּ** (second person).<sup>4</sup> The question, whose direct speech is introduced by this verbal form, however, has to be discovered from the context. In the speech **אֲדַבְרֶנּוּ שְׂפָתַיִם עִצָּה**

<sup>1</sup> See: W. SCHNEIDER, Und es begab sich ... Anfänge von Erzählungen im Biblischen Hebräisch, *BN* 70 (1993) 62-67-68, 76-78.

<sup>2</sup> Generally, the tradition of the Book of Kings/Chronicles is considered to be older than the Isaian tradition. On the basis of the Hebrew characteristics of the text in the Book of Isaiah, I however believe it is the other way round.

<sup>3</sup> For instance: G. BRUNET, *Essai sur l'Isaïe de l'histoire. Étude de quelques textes notamment dans Isa. VII, VIII & XXII*, Paris 1975; O. KAISER, Die Verkündigung des Propheten Jesaja im Jahre 701, *ZAW* 81 (1969) 308; ID., *Der Prophet Jesaja. Kapitel 13-39* (ATD 18), Göttingen 1973, 293: "sinnlose Lesart"; H. WILDBERGER, *Jesaja. Kapitel 28-39* (BKAT X/3), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1982, 1378. Other exegetes leave undecided who is speaking in verse 5, as M.A. SWEENEY, *Isaiah 1-39* (fotl 16), Grand Rapids — Cambridge 1996, 466.

<sup>4</sup> Possibly on the basis of a harmonisation with 2 Ki 18:20, Qumran reads the verbal form **אָמַרְתָּ**. The Vulgate, too, seems to read a second person, although the translation of this verse is paraphrasing: *aut quo consilio vel fortitudine rebellare disponis*. The Septuagint contains a paraphrase as well. The translation **אָמַרְתָּ** by the Pešitta can be interpreted both as a second person and as a first person. D. BARTHÉLEMY, *Critique textuelle de l'Ancien Testament* (OBO 50/2), Fribourg — Göttingen 1986, 248 is inclined to read a second person as well.

וּגְבוּרָה לְמַלְחָמָה, the nominal phrase דְּבַר־שִׁפְתָיִם forms a negative expression<sup>5</sup>, strengthened by the particle אֵין<sup>6</sup>. This means that, because it is not plausible that Hezekiah repudiates his own attitude, the perspective from which the situation is considered, is located in Assur. The reading of the first person, therefore, is correct.<sup>7</sup>

The meaning of the verb עָרַב *hitpa'el* in 36:8 (הָוֵעָרַב) is controversial.<sup>8</sup> Usually, *to bet* is translated.<sup>9</sup> Some dictionaries create the interpretation *to bet* especially for this text.<sup>10</sup> A lot of text-semantic disadvantages, however, adhere to this translation: what is the betting issue and what will the party losing the bet, do in return?<sup>11</sup> *In concreto*: does the bet concern the question whether Jerusalem has a cavalry, or is the cavalry the stake of the bet?<sup>12</sup>

Besides this translation *to bet*, the interpretation *to associate oneself with* occurs as well. This meaning is supported by the *versiones*: the Septuagint translates  $\mu\epsilon\iota\chi\theta\eta\tau\epsilon\ \tau\acute{\omega}\varsigma\ \kappa\upsilon\rho\iota\acute{\omega}\varsigma\ \mu\omicron\upsilon$ , the Vulgate *et nunc trade te domino meo* and the Pešitta ,  $\text{ܘܥܪܒܘܢܝܐ ܕܥܡܟܘܢܝܐ}$ <sup>13</sup>. Because of this interpretation, a coherent text comes into being. Rab Šaqeh comes forward as a negotiator (assisted by a threatening army) and, therefore, should have some freedom to negotiate.<sup>14</sup> This ‘exchange’ comes up in verse 8. In the narrated situation, Rab Šaqeh’s action makes no sense to Hezekiah, if he cannot offer some ‘honourable’ capitulation to Hezekiah.<sup>15</sup> Rab Šaqeh, therefore, offers a position in the Assyrian army to Hezekiah. Condition, however, is that Hezekiah himself supplies the horsemen. This implies nothing less than inserting his own army into Assur’s army. Thus, the dismantlement of Jerusalem would be a fact. Rab Šaqeh urges: being part of an invincible army must be much more attractive and better than

<sup>5</sup> Confer: Ps 59:13; Prov 14:23.

<sup>6</sup> Confer: D.J.A. CLINES (ed.), *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, Vol. 1, Sheffield (1993) 238-239.

<sup>7</sup> See for this reading also the Targum that renders אֵין־רִיחֵי.

<sup>8</sup> The interpretation of the verb עָרַב in the Targum (אָרָעַרַב) has the same problems; confer: M. JASTROW, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, Philadelphia 1903 (reprint: New York 1985 = 1971) 1110.

<sup>9</sup> Thus: A. SCHOORS, *Jesaja* (BOT 9), Roermond 1972, 209; KAISER (1973) 293; WILDBERGER (1982) 1378. SWEENEY (1996) 461.466-467 speaks about a ‘contest’.

<sup>10</sup> Thus: KB, 732; HAL 3 (1983) 830. A meaning, especially devised for only one text, is suspicious, of course. G. GESENIUS, *Thesaurus philologicus criticus linguae Hebraeae et Chaldaeae Veteris Testamenti*, Lipsiae 2 (1840) 1603, who rightly — see henceforth — translates עָרַב with “contulit se cum aliquo in societatem”, unexpectedly describes Isa 36:8 with “certamen iniiit”. Confer also: F. DELITZSCH, *Biblischer Commentar über den Propheten Jesaja* (BC III/1), Leipzig 1879<sup>3</sup>, 356.

<sup>11</sup> See also: W. VON SODEN, *Hebräische Problemwörter*, UF 18 (1986) 341-342.

<sup>12</sup> WILDBERGER (1982) 1401 correctly remarks that, by the way, a cavalry is not a necessary army unit for a besieged city like Jerusalem.

<sup>13</sup> Confer the expression  $\text{ܘܥܪܒܘܢܝܐ ܕܥܡܟܘܢܝܐ}$ , mentioned by J. PAYNE SMITH, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary founded upon the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne Smith*, Oxford 1903 (= 1979), 143.

<sup>14</sup> Pace: VON SODEN (1986) 342 who interprets verse 8 as a “höhnisches Angebot”.

<sup>15</sup> Pace: KAISER (1973) 309.

being so weak that one will lose to even the smallest servant of Assur's king! Rab Šaqeh has a capitulation-proposal to the people on the wall in the offering as well, namely in 36:16: עֲשׂוּ אֶתִּי בְרִכָּה. In this verse, it is not necessary to translate the word בְּרִכָּה with *capitulation*, for the only time in the Hebrew bible.<sup>16</sup> Rab Šaqeh wishes to convince the people, not to deter them. For that purpose, he uses words, which are semantically close to Gen 12:1-3. However, the land which he promises to his audience, seems to be more beautiful than it in fact is (*confer*: Dt 33:28; Jer 5:17; Mi 4:4).

The mention of Tirhaqah in Isa 37:9 raises both historical and *literarkritische* questions. A number of exegetes considers this verse as a gloss or a secondary addition from the 'parallel' story in the Books of Kings.<sup>17</sup> In my view, the verse has a literary function in the story.

Using the ironic expression [מֶלֶךְ אַשּׁוּר] נִעְרִי,<sup>18</sup> Isaiah predicts the deliverance of Jerusalem by the Lord in Isa 37:6-7. This prediction contains three elements: the King of Assur will hear a rumour (וְשָׁמַע שְׁמוּעָה), he will return to his own country (וְיָשָׁב אֶל-אֶרְצוֹ) and he will be killed in his own country (וְהִפְלִיתוּ בְּחַרְבַּי בְּאֶרְצוֹ). The following verse 8 seems to be an implementation of this prophecy with the verbal forms וְיָשָׁב and שָׁמַע. Subject, however, is not the King of Assur, but Rab Šaqeh, who moreover does not return to Mesopotamia, but joins the royal army which, because of the capture of Lachish and the siege of Libnah, has drawn closer to Jerusalem. The actual implementation occurs successively in the verses 9 (וְיָשָׁמַע), 37 (בְּנִיגוּהָ<sup>19</sup>) and 38 (וְיָשָׁב וְיָשָׁב) and 38 (הִכְהוּ בְּחַרְבֵי).

Tirhaqah, therefore, has something to do with the predicted rumour. He pops up in the story quite suddenly and surprisingly and immediately disappears from it. In this way, Tirhaqah answers to that which has to be understood by a rumour. Who counted on Tirhaqah? Assur did not. Nevertheless, it sends a second mission to Jerusalem, but it avoids mentioning Tirhaqah, rating the rumour at its true value. Hezekiah and/or Jerusalem did not count on Tirhaqah. After all Tirhaqah as מֶלֶךְ כּוּשׁ is not simply the fulfilment of Isa 36:6.9, where Rab Šaqeh spoke about מְצַרִּים.

The suffix masculine plural to the word אֶרְצָם in verse 18 is controversial<sup>20</sup>: what is

<sup>16</sup> Pace: KB, 155; HAL 1 (1967) 154. See for a survey: WILDBERGER (1982) 1382-1383. The *versiones* do not translate *capitulation* either, but maintain the notion *blessing*: the Septuagint translates Εἰ βούλεσθε εὐλογεῖσθαι, the Vulgate *facite mecum benedictionem* and the Pešitta *בבנה גבר כוונתא*.

The Targum, however, translates שלמא.

<sup>17</sup> *Confer*: WILDBERGER (1982) 1376.

<sup>18</sup> Thus already: J.A. ALEXANDER, *Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah*, Vol. II, s.l. 1875<sup>2</sup> (= Grand rapids 1976), 55; DELITZSCH (1879) 360.

<sup>19</sup> This information does not form a tautology with the preceding *wayyiqtol*-form, because it indicates that Assur not only returns, but also does not come again any more.

<sup>20</sup> S. TALMON, A Case of Faulty Harmonization, *VT* 5 (1955) 207 explains אֶרְצָם from 2 Ki

the antecedent?

The phrase **אֶת־כָּל־הָאָרְצוֹת** cannot be the antecedent of the suffix to **אֲרָצָם**, because **אֲרָץ** is a feminine word.<sup>21</sup> The nearest masculine plural is **מַלְכֵי אַשּׁוּר**.<sup>22</sup> The expression **וְאֶת־אֲרָצָם**, therefore, has to be understood as a sarcastic remark about the enemy:<sup>23</sup> the Assyrian kings have placed all countries under a ban including their *own*.<sup>24</sup>

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19:17. WILDBERGER (1982) 1417 considers **וְאֶת־אֲרָצָם** as a gloss.

<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the Vulgate follows this solution with the translation *terras et regiones earum*. The Pešitta reads the words **אֶת־אֲרָצָם** into verse 19 so that they become the subject in that verse:

יִבְרַח מִלְּפָנֶיךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֲרָצָם וְרֵגְיוֹנֵיהֶן וְכָל־אֲרָצָם וְכָל־רֵגְיוֹנֵיהֶן וְכָל־אֲרָצָם וְכָל־רֵגְיוֹנֵיהֶן.

<sup>22</sup> Thus also the Targum **יְתֵי מַדִּינָתָא וִית אַרְעֵהוֹן** and the Septuagint γὰρ ἠρήμωσαν βασιλείς Ἀσσυρίων τὴν οἰκουμένην ὅλην καὶ τὴν χώραν αὐτῶν.

<sup>23</sup> This interpretation is only briefly mentioned by BARTHÉLEMY (1986) 253.

<sup>24</sup> I would like to thank Drs. Maurits J. Sinninghe Damsté (Amsterdam) for the correction of the English of this article.