

Syntax and Rhetorical Analysis in the Hashavyahu Ostrakon

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The following remarks pertain to some of the main clauses in the Metzad Hashavyahu Ostrakon. The style and syntax of this Hebrew letter have often puzzled the commentators. Although it is recognized as being in *Y^hūdīt*, i.e., Judean Hebrew, the message has often seemed to scholars to be worded according to the emotional outburst of the offended worker and perhaps even transmitted by a neophyte scribe. In fact, the composition of this text is a beautifully balanced rhetorical exposition that can only be appreciated if the relationship between its main and subordinate clauses be understood. As Westbrook¹ and Dobbs-Allsopp² have demonstrated, the text is a plea, perhaps an extrajudicial petition. However, I am inclined to feel that the petitioner has a legitimate claim, viz., that his garment was taken unjustly. As will be seen below, he repeatedly insists that he has fulfilled his quota; so the official was unjust in punishing him as if his output were deficient.

It is the purpose of this note to point out the pertinent clausal relationships which express the petitioner's meaning. The status of certain components within the sentences, such as extraposition (*casus pendens*) will also be explicated since they, too, are essential to the proper understanding of the text.

The text and restorations of the inscription are basically those established by Sh. Ahituv in his recent collection of inscriptions;³ the text as it stands there with its restorations is adopted with the exception of line 12, where Dobbs-Allsopp's readings are incorporated as giving a much better sense.⁴ Issues of orthography or paleography are incidental to our purpose and mentioned here only as clarification of the clause interpretation. The Hebrew text in modern script and its translation are as follows:

ישמע אדני . השר
את דבר עבדה . עבדך
קצר . היה . עבדך . בח
צר אסמ . ויקצר עבדך
ויכל ואסמ כיממ . לפני שב

1. R. Westbrook, *Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Law*. Cahiers de la Revue Biblique 26 (Paris, 1988), 30–35.

2. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "The Genre of the Mešad Ḥashavyahu Ostrakon," *BASOR* 295 (1994), 49–55.

3. Sh. Ahituv, *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions; from the Period of the First Commonwealth and the Beginning of the Second Commonwealth* (Hebrew, Philistine, Edomite, Moabite, Ammonite and the Bil'am Inscription) (Jerusalem, 1992), 98–99 and the photograph on 97 [in Hebrew].

4. Dobbs-Allsopp, "The Genre," 52–53.

ת כאשר כל [ע]בדכ את קצר וא
 סמ כיממ ויבא הושעיהו בנ שב
 י . ויקח . את בגד עבדכ כאשר כלת
 את קצרי זה יממ לקח את בגד עבדכ
 וכל אחי . יענו . לי הקצרמ אתי בחמ .
 [ה]ש[מש] אחי . יענו . לי אמנ נקתי מא
 [שמ . והוא גזל את] בגדי ואמ לא . לשר להש
 [ב את בגד] עב[דכ ותת]נ אלו רח
 [ממ והש]כת את [בגד ע]בדכ ולא תדהמנ
 [י]

May my lord, the governor, listen to the word of his servant! As for your servant, your servant was harvesting in Ḥaṣar ʿAsam; and your servant harvested and measured (it) and stored (it) in the granary as always before the Sabbath.

When your [se]rvant had measured (his) harvest and stored in the granary as always, then came Hōšaʿ-yāhū son of Šōḥay and he took your servant's garment. It was when I had measured my harvest as always, that he took your servant's garment! And all of my brothers (i.e., fellows) will answer for me, those who harvest with me in the heat of [the] su[n]. My fellows will answer for me, "It is true! I am innocent of gu[ilt and he confiscated] my garment." And surely it is for the governor to re[turn the] garment of [your/his] ser[vant. So gran]t him merc[y in that you retu]rn the [garment of] your [ser]vant and do not confound m[e. . . .]!

Commentary

עבדכ—"As for your servant." This is an extraposition, a *casus pendens* as proposed by Hoftijzer.⁵ Commentators have taken these words in various ways, e.g., "your servant is a harvester," or "your servant was harvesting" (cf. discussion of those views by Parker).⁶ But this leaves the ensuing verb, **היה**, at the head of a clause, something not normally done in ancient Hebrew. The suffix conjugation (wrongly called the Perfect) does not begin clauses. It is preceded by the conjunction, in which case it is carrying forward the meaning of the previous verb (usually in operative function after imperative and volitives, but cf. also Gen. 2:6), or else it is preceded by some component in the clause (subject, object, adverbial) or else by extraposition. The latter seems to be the only option in this case. Parker admits that Hoftijzer's *casus pendens* is grammatically correct but still prefers to see here a simple case of pleonasm.⁷

קצר היה עבדכ—"Your servant was harvesting in Ḥaṣar ʿAsam." This clause explains the status and activity of the plaintiff. Note that the participle, *qôṣēr*, is written without a *mater lectionis* but the grammatical form is beyond doubt. By taking the previous **עבדכ** as an extraposition, we can understand why the verb is a suffix conjugation form of the verb, **היה**. The preceding extraposition prevents the verb from coming at the head of the clause and thus it cannot be the narrative preterite **ויהי** and

5. J. Hoftijzer, "A Grammatical Note on the Yavne-Yam Ostrakon," in J. W. van Henten et al., eds., *Tradition and Re-Interpretation in Jewish and Early Christian Literature: Essays in Honor of Jürgen C. H. Lebram* (Leiden, 1986), 1–6.

6. S. B. Parker, *Studies in Scripture and Inscriptions. Comparative Studies on Narratives in Northwest Semitic Inscriptions and the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 16 and 147 n. 12.

7. Ibid., p. 147 n. 12.

has to be a form of the suffix conjugation! Instead of a resumptive pronoun, the repeated עבדכ fulfills this function. Cf. the translation above.

וּכְלָל . . . כָּל . . . כָּל—The orthography in line 6 is conclusive in favor of the root *KWL / KYL “to measure.” That is also the only meaning that really suits the context of the letter. The argument is over whether the plaintiff has fulfilled his quota or not. The root *KLY D stem, “to complete, finish,” is precluded by the absence of a mater lectionis on the form כָּל.⁸

For this verb, “to measure,” cf. Isa. 40:12:

מִי־מִדָּד בְּשַׁעְלוֹ מַיִם וְשָׁמַיִם בְּזֶרֶת תִּכְנֶן וְכָל בְּשָׁלֵשׁ
עֵפֶר הָאָרֶץ וְשָׁקָל בְּפֶלֶס הָרִים וּגְבֻעוֹת בְּמֵאזְנֵי

Who has measured the waters with the hollow of His hand, and gauged the skies with the (= his) span, and meted earth's dust with the measure, And weighed the mountains with the scale and the hills with a balance?

This passage describes Yahweh's measuring all of His creation just as Marduk is said to have measured the abyss in the Babylonian creation myth, *Enūma elīš* IV, 141–43:

šamē ibir ašrata ihīṭamma, uštamḥirma miḥrit apsi šubat Nudimmud, imšuhma bēlum ša apsi binūtūššu, ešgalla tamšilašu ukīn Ešarra, ešgalla Ešarra ša ibnū šamāmu

He crossed the heavens, he surveyed the sky, he made a counterpart to the abyss, the abode of Nudimmud, the lord measured the dimensions of the abyss, the great temple, Esharra, he established as its replica, the great temple, Esharra, which he created, in the sky.

The measuring assures the perfection of the creative act being performed. This is the point being made in the Isaiah passage cited above.

The presence of the act of measuring in both Isaiah 40 and *Enūma elīš* IV leads one to reconsider and re-render the well known passage, Gen. 2:1–2:

וַיְכַלּוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ וְכָל־צְבָאָם וַיְכַל אֱלֹהִים בַּיּוֹם
הַשְּׁבִיעִי מְלֶאכֶתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיִּשְׁבֹּת בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי
מְכַל־מְלֶאכֶתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה

The heaven and the earth were finished, and all their array, then on the seventh (LXX τῇ ἑκτῇ “the sixth”) day God **measured** the work that He done, and He desisted on the seventh day from all the work that He had done.

God **desisted** from all His work on the seventh day as is perfectly clear from the statement of the Israelite understanding of the creation process in Exod. 20:11:

כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת־יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ
אֶת־הַיָּם וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּם וַיִּנַּח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי

For in six days Yahweh made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and He **rested** on the seventh day.

8. Contra D. Pardee, *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Letters. A Study Edition* (Chico, Cal., 1982), 22.

Yahweh had already **finished** His work at the end of the sixth day. On the seventh day He rested. One thing He did do, however, He **measured** (וִיכַל) all of His creation as a demonstration of its perfection (just as Marduk did). Even if the LXX “sixth” day (supported by the Samaritan Pentateuch) be the correct reading, the meaning of the verb, “to measure,” still is strongly appealing in the light of the parallels.

ואסמ—There is no biblical verb from this root; the noun, “granary,” occurs twice in the plural construct with second masculine pronominal suffix, אֶסְמִיךָ “your granaries” (Deut. 28:8; Prov. 3:10). The attested forms in this present text could be absolute infinitives,⁹ but they are most likely third person forms of the suffix conjugation, joined by the simple conjunction to the preceding verb. By this means the forms represent an action that is coeval with the measuring. One measured **in order to** store. The storing was not looked upon as an intended result in the process. An example of the suffix conjugation introduced by the simple conjunction to indicate a process coeval with the preceding verbs (in the *yaqtul* preterite form) is Gen. 15:5–6:

וַיֹּצֵא אוֹתוֹ הַחוּצָה וַיֹּאמֶר הִבֵּט-בָּא הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וּסְפֹר
הַכּוֹכָבִים אִם-תּוּכַל לִסְפֹּר אֹתָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ כֹּה יִהְיֶה
יָרְעֶךָ וְהָאֱמֹן בִּיהֶנָּה וַיַּחֲשֹׁבֶהָ לוֹ צִדְקָה

And He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” So he **believed** in Yahweh; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

לפני שבת—“before the Sabbath.” This temporal adverbial construction can be construed with the preceding sentence, and perhaps better so. There is no reason that we cannot translate it as we have except for a prejudice against the assumption that the Sabbath day of rest was observed during the First Temple period. But after all, if the Book of Deuteronomy was involved in the Josianic reform (the occurrence of which there is no valid reason to doubt), then that book includes the Decalogue with its injunction to keep the Sabbath. It has been objected that the absence of the definite article is an obstacle to this interpretation.¹⁰ However, the form without the article can follow a preposition and still be considered definite; e.g., Isa. 58:13: אִם-תִּשָּׁבַע מִשְׁבַּת רְגִלְךָ, “If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,” where not only the modern versions but also the LXX inserts the definite article in translation (ἀπὸ τῶν σαββάτων).

כאשר כל . . . ואסמ כיממ—“When your [se]rvant had measured (his) harvest and stored in the granary as always.” This a temporal clause introduced in tandem with two main clauses having narrative prefix preterite verbs joined syndetically by the conjunction (required by that narrative past tense form). The plaintiff has already explained that he did measure and store, so this repetition is not giving something new but rather something already understood. It is a given; it is a **topic** followed by the narrative clauses, which are **comment**. Therefore, in the compound sentence with the following narrative clauses, the temporal clause is not a part of the indepen-

9. F. M. Cross, “Epigraphic Notes on Hebrew Documents of the Eighth-Sixth Centuries B.C.: II. The Murabbaʿât Papyrus and the Letter Found Near Yavneh-Yam,” *BASOR* 165 (1962), 44, n. 43.

10. Pardee, *Handbook*, 22.

dent clause that has itself two verbal actions, ויבא . . . ויקח, “then he came . . . and he took. . . .” The purpose here is to carry the story forward to the next step: the overseer came and took away the worker’s garment.

לקח . . . (י) כאשר כלתי—“It was when I had measured my harvest as always, that he took your servants’s garment!” This time the temporal clause is a component **within** the verbal independent clause. As such it is **fronted**, placed before the verb it modifies. This is in order to make it the **comment** (logical predicate); it is the main point. That the overseer did take has already been established; that is no longer a new element, it is known. What is new in this clause is the **particular timing**. The verb לקח has to be in the suffix conjugation because it does not come at the head of its clause; furthermore, it is not the main point of the clause. To express the meaning of the plaintiff one has to resort to the English cleft sentence as in the translation above. The plaintiff wants the governor to know that it was **after** he had done his duty by measuring his produce and consigning it to the storehouse that the overseer committed this imperious act of confiscating his garment. Therefore, it is the temporal relationship between the action of circumstantial clause and the action of its main clause that is the real **comment**, the “logical predicate” of this compound sentence.

Parker has observed that repetition is a key feature of this text.¹¹ The petitioner repeats the key clauses once or twice, each time with only a slight change in wording. But what is fundamental to this message is the variations in clause syntax. The three modes explicated above are syntactic arrangements devised to lead up to the central claim of the petitioner: He had done his proper share of work, but, in spite of that, he was being punished. When the syntax and rhetoric of these clauses are properly understood, the text is imbued not only with intense emotion and deep pathos, but also impeccable logic.

11. Parker, *Studies*, p. 16.