

PHYSIOLOGICAL AND PHILOLOGICAL
NOTES TO PSALM 137*

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ABSTRACT

In the first part of this article the authors discuss the physiology behind Ps 137:5-6, arguing that the poet describes a cerebro-vascular accident, or stroke, localized in the left side of the brain. Such a pathology results typically in paralysis of the right side of the body and speech deficits such as aphasia or apraxia. The psalmist utilized the metaphor of the stroke victim to evoke the emotional ties of exilic Israel to its capital city. In the second part of the article, various philological points are addressed: (1) the key word *tiškah* in v. 5 is cognate with Arabic *ksh*, "lame, crippled, paralyzed" (with metathesis), in keeping with the physiology described; (2) the 2fsg pronominal suffix *-ki* in v. 6 is an Israelian Hebrew feature resurfacing in an exilic poem due to the reunion of northern and southern exiles in Mesopotamia in the sixth century BCE; (3) *tōlālēnū* in v. 3 derives from the root *tl*, which in Arabic means "bind and drag away" (IV form); this rare verb was chosen due to its assonance with *tālmū*, "we hanged," in v. 2; and (4) attention is called to the comment of David Qimḥi that the hand/tongue usage in vv. 5-6 rehearses the lyre/song combination in vv. 2-3.

I. PHYSIOLOGY

Ps 137:5-6 is one of the most famous passages in the Bible:

אם אשכחך ירושלם תשכח ימיני תדבק לשוני לחכי

The New Jewish Publication Society Version (NJPSV) translates the verses as follows:

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither;
let my tongue stick to my palate.

* This paper represents the joint effort of a biblicist (G. A. R.) and a physiotherapist specializing in neurological disorders (S. L. R.). For assistance on the speech disorders discussed below, we are indebted to our friend Marjorie Kaufman. For assistance on some of the Egyptological matters raised in this article, we are indebted to Edmund S. Meltzer.

The translation “wither” for the root *škh* is an improvement over older English renderings, such as “forget her cunning” (JPSV). Nevertheless, we believe that this translation is also inaccurate and that there is room for still further improvement. As will be argued below, the root *škh* in this passage means “to be paralyzed.” Arguments in favor of this translation are forthcoming from both physiological and philological evidence. The former will be presented first in this section; the latter will be discussed in the second section of this article.

The condition reflected in this passage is that of a cerebrovascular accident (CVA), commonly known as a stroke, localized in the left side of the brain. A CVA is a form of cerebral vascular disease, defined as an abnormality of the brain resulting from a pathological condition of the blood vessels. This condition can arise from a lesion of the vessel wall, from an occlusion of the vessel by thrombus or embolus, from a rupturing of the vessel resulting in hemorrhage, or from several less common causes. The brain must have a constant and adequate supply of oxygenated blood to ensure function. If brain tissue is deprived of blood, ischemic necrosis or infarction will occur, frequently resulting in a CVA.

The CVA, or stroke, is characterized by a sudden, nonconvulsive focal neurological deficit. This deficit is dependent on both the location and the size of the infarct or hemorrhage. The classic sign of a stroke is contralateral hemiplegia, i.e., paralysis of half the body opposite to the side of the lesion. In addition, other manifestations may arise, the most germane of which are speech deficits, such as aphasia (a disturbance in the ability to produce language) and apraxia (a disturbance in the physical ability to speak). In order to better understand the pathology and its relationship to Ps 137:5–6, a brief basic introduction to neuroanatomy is needed.

The central nervous system is comprised of the spinal cord and the brain. The brain is divided into three regions: hindbrain, midbrain, and forebrain. The forebrain is comprised mostly of the cerebral cortex, the familiar gray convoluted surface of the brain, composed of multiple layers of interconnected neurons. This is the most highly developed and expansive section of the human brain. The forebrain is divided into two halves or cerebral hemispheres. Each of these hemispheres is further divided into four lobes: frontal, temporal, parietal, and occipital. Each lobe serves a differ-

ent sensory or motor function. In the rear of the frontal lobe is the primary motor area or “motor strip,” that is, the area from which isolated motor functions arise and from which specific movements of parts of the body are controlled.

The nerve pathways that begin in the motor strip of the left frontal lobe pass through the various parts of the brain, and at the medulla, or brain stem, cross over to the right side of the spinal cord. From these pathways, nerves originate to control the right side of the body. The converse also occurs, that is, through the same process the motor strip of the right frontal lobe is ultimately responsible for the movement of the left side of the body.¹

In Ps 137 the poet describes an individual whose right hand is paralyzed. This paralysis, we suggest, is due to a central nervous system dysfunction resulting from a CVA in the left side of the brain.

Language function also is centered in the left hemisphere of the brain. Accordingly, as mentioned above, a stroke on that side also may result in aphasia or apraxia, thus affecting the ability to speak. We believe that the second half of our passage, specifically the words *תדבק לשוני לחכי*, refers to either of these disorders.²

Those who suffer from aphasia, specifically the type known as Broca’s aphasia, are deficient in language function. That is to say, the brain, specifically the region known as Broca’s area in the frontal lobe of the left hemisphere, has been affected, resulting in halting speech, or difficulty in producing words. In such instances, however, there is no physical impairment to the parts of the mouth that produce speech. If Ps 137:6 refers to aphasia, specifically Broca’s aphasia, the reference to the tongue is a poetic metaphor for the inability to produce language—not a reference to a specific motor dysfunction.

Alternatively, the condition reflected in the words *תדבק לשוני לחכי* could refer to apraxia, i.e., to actual motor deficits affecting speech output. Apraxia results when the CVA affects certain other

¹ For further details on the neurology involved, see R. D. Adams and M. Victor, *Principles of Neurology* (New York, 1985); S. P. Springer and G. Deutsch, *Left Brain, Right Brain* (San Francisco, 1981); and J. C. Eccles, *The Understanding of the Brain* (New York, 1977).

² For more information on the following discussion concerning aphasia and apraxia, see R. H. Brookshire, *An Introduction to Aphasia* (Minneapolis, 1978), as well as the sources cited in the preceding footnote.

parts of the brain, not necessarily Broca's area. (Nevertheless, some in the medical field subsume apraxia under the term Broca's aphasia, although the majority of sources seem to distinguish the two pathologies.) In cases of apraxia, muscles in the lower part of the face may be weakened. The tongue, in particular, may deviate to the right side of the mouth, and it will be slow and awkward when required to produce rapid movements, such as those necessitated by speech. Admittedly, the specific instance of the tongue cleaving to the palate does not match the above description perfectly. On the other hand, one can easily imagine a poet describing apraxia with the words *תִּרְבֵּק לִשְׁוֵי לַחֲכִי*.

In short, as stated at the outset, we interpret the words of Ps 137:5–6 as a reference to a stroke in the left side of the brain, resulting in paralysis of the right hand, and a concomitant case of Broca's aphasia or apraxia with a specific deficit in tongue movement.

Today many patients affected by this pathology continue to live normal lives, due to modern medicine in general and rehabilitation medicine in particular. But for our interpretation of Ps 137:5–6 to be correct, we must demonstrate that in antiquity stroke victims survived CVA's, and that they were present in ancient society so that a poet could refer to them metaphorically. Sufficient evidence, albeit indirect, exists to suggest that such is indeed the case.

As far as we are aware, there are no specific references in ancient Near Eastern literature to CVA's.³ There is, however, some indirect evidence from Egypt.⁴ The Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus is filled

³ We cite here, however, the statement of E. B. Krumbhaar, *Clio Medica: Pathology* (New York, 1937), p. 6: "Thompson and Sudhoff show that these peoples [i.e., Mesopotamians] had fairly good concepts of gonorrhoea, pediculosis, scabies, paralysis, epilepsy, and similar diseases." We have checked his reference to R. C. Thompson, "Assyrian Medical Texts," *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine, Section of the History of Medicine* 17 (1923–24): 1–34 and 19 (1925–26): 29–78, but we have found no reference there to strokes in particular, nor to paralysis in general. Krumbhaar also cited K. Sudhoff, "Klassiker der Medizin," *Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin* (1927), but in none of the issues of that journal for 1927 or for any other year does such an article appear. Accordingly, we are unable to check the information purportedly put forward by Sudhoff.

⁴ The only possible direct reference is the tomb inscription recording the death of Weshptah, vizier, chief judge, and chief architect of Neferirkere (Fifth Dynasty). Unfortunately, however, the inscription is badly fragmented and we are unable to identify the specific pathology that caused his death. A stroke is possible, but any

with all sorts of diagnoses of neurological (cranial and spinal) injuries which were much more severe than the average stroke.⁵ If these individuals did not suffer immediate death—in many cases the text goes on to describe the treatment indicated—it stands to reason that stroke victims also survived. One report (case 8) is of special interest because “the surgeon, for the first time in the history of science, has noted the effect of the cranial injury on the lower limbs *with reference to the side of the skull which has received the injury*. In other words, the ancient Egyptian surgeon has begun observations on the localization of functions in the brain.”⁶ True, in this particular instance a *contre-coup* took place, i.e., the paralysis occurred on the same side as the injury to the skull. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the connection is made between cerebral injury and paralytic symptoms.

The first specific references to CVA's or strokes in ancient literature appear in the works of Aretaeus of Cappadocia (ca. second century CE). In his classic volumes, *On the Causes and Signs of Acute and Chronic Diseases*, and *On the Treatment of Acute and Chronic Diseases*, Aretaeus discussed at length cerebral paralysis and observed that in a cerebral lesion the opposite side of the body is affected. Furthermore, the basics of physiotherapy are found in his recommendations for treatment.⁷

Now since it can be established that in the second century CE stroke victims survived their events and were the subject of medical investigation, it seems reasonable to assume that the same was true seven hundred years earlier,⁸ especially given the wide range of

number of other causes are equally possible. For the text, see J. H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt* (Chicago, 1906), 1:111–113.

The famous Eighteenth-Dynasty stela showing a man with a withered leg and a crutch most likely portrays a case of infantile paralysis, and not a stroke. See D. Brothwell and A. T. Sandison, eds., *Diseases in Antiquity* (Springfield, IL, 1967), pp. 124, 600.

⁵ J. H. Breasted, *The Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus* (Chicago, 1930).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁷ For a brief introduction to Aretaeus, see A. Castiglioni, *A History of Medicine*, trans. E. B. Krumbhaar (New York, 1941), p. 215.

⁸ A hint in this direction is the presence of references to aphasia in Greek medical texts from at least ca. 400 BCE (the Hippocratic corpus). But since aphasia can result from conditions other than a stroke, caution is advised here. Nonetheless, note the statement of A. L. Benton and R. J. Joynt, “Early Descriptions of Aphasia,” *Archives of Neurology* 3 (1960): 205–222, in particular p. 206: “There is no doubt

other paralytic conditions reflected in the Edwin Smith Papyrus from a much earlier period. Thus, while it is true that we do not have specific references to strokes in medical texts from Egypt and Mesopotamia, we do possess a literary reference to this pathology, namely, Ps 137:5–6. Quite clearly, the ancient Jewish poet utilized the stroke victim to evoke the emotional ties of exilic Israel to its capital city. Furthermore, as R. Westbrook stated, if a point “is to be explained by a metaphor drawing upon the everyday life of the audience, then that metaphor, to be effective, must reflect accurately the reality known to the audience.”⁹

It is possible that the above discussion is not new to a certain segment of the educated public. Thus, John C. Marshall, a British neuropsychologist, has already noted that Ps 137:5–6 describes “a cerebrovascular accident—a stroke.”¹⁰ But inasmuch as professional works on biblical studies have not taken note of the reference to a stroke in this famous passage,¹¹ we trust that our readers will find it helpful to have the evidence at their disposal.¹²

II. PHILOLOGY

1. As is well known, older translations of the Bible rendered the word *tiškah* in v. 5 as “forget” (from the root *škh*),¹³ and con-

that the physicians of the Hippocratic School observed aphasic or aphasia-like manifestations in patients with cerebral disease or dysfunction. So must have generations of physicians before them.”

⁹ R. Westbrook, “Adultery in Ancient Near Eastern Law,” *RB* 97 (1990): 577, in a discussion of Hosea’s use of the divorce metaphor in Hos 2:4–22.

¹⁰ J. C. Marshall, review of *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, by Oliver Sachs, *The New York Times Book Review*, March 2, 1986, p. 3.

¹¹ The only exception known to us, incorporating our oral suggestion, is M. I. Gruber, “Hebrew *da’ābôn nefeš*, ‘Dryness of Throat’: From Symptom to Literary Convention,” *VT* 37 (1987): 369, n. 18. None of the many Psalms commentaries consulted connects our passage with any pathology, nor is it referred to in the very comprehensive work by J. Preuss, *Biblich-talmudische Medizin* (Berlin, 1911).

¹² For another recent treatment of a biblical text in which physiology plays a major role, see A. Wolters, “Untying the King’s Knots: Physiology and Wordplay in Daniel 5,” *JBL* 110 (1991): 117–122. Also, M. L. Barré (“The Meaning of *pršdn* in Judges iii 22,” *VT* 41 [1991]: 1–11) cited the (negative) evidence of physiology to conclude that the oft-stated claim “that a stab-wound in the abdominal area, such as Ehud inflicted upon Eglon, would have resulted in a sudden involuntary ejection of excrement,” is in fact incorrect (see in particular p. 8).

¹³ Not only older works, but even recent treatments occasionally still use “forget.” See, e.g., U. Kellermann, “Psalm 137,” *ZAW* 90 (1978): 44–45.

comitantly supplied an understood direct object for the verb such as “its cunning.” In the light of Ugaritic *ṭkḥ*, with the suggested meaning of “wilt, droop,”¹⁴ scholars began to associate *tiškah* with the root *ṭkḥ*, suggesting “wither” or the like for Ps 137:5.¹⁵ This trend is also reflected in recent translations of the Bible, as in the NJPSV.

At first glance, one might conclude that the word “wither” defines rather well one of the symptoms of hemiplegia discussed above. However, caution is advised here, since the meaning of Ugaritic *ṭkḥ* is still uncertain. In truth, it is used only as a verb with celestial subjects, *šmm*, “heavens,” in *UT* 67:1:4, 30 (*CTA* 5; *KTU* 1.5), and *yrḥ*, “moon,” in *UT* 77:4 (*CTA* 24; *KTU* 1.24). It appears again in *UT* 132:1, 2 (*CTA* 11; *KTU* 1.11), but unfortunately the text is broken, and the subjects in these two instances cannot be determined.¹⁶

Accordingly, as attractive a solution as connection with Ugaritic *ṭkḥ* may be, in light of the questions that remain regarding the exact meaning of the word, and the fact that a closer physiological-philological match is at hand, we prefer an alternative approach.¹⁷ We believe it preferable to return to the solution of I. Eitan,

¹⁴ S. Segert, *A Basic Grammar of the Ugaritic Language* (Berkeley, 1984), p. 204. But other scholars are less sure as to the meaning of this word; see, e.g., C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome, 1967), p. 502.

¹⁵ The first to make the identification was W. F. Albright, “Anath and the Dragon,” *BASOR* 84 (1941): 15, n. 3. See also J. H. Patton, *Canaanite Parallels in the Book of Psalms* (Baltimore, 1944), pp. 25–26; M. J. Dahood, *Psalms* (Garden City, NY, 1970), 3:271; and D. N. Freedman, “The Structure of Psalm 137,” in H. Goedicke, ed., *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright* (Baltimore, 1971), pp. 195–96 (reprinted in D. N. Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy* [Winona Lake, 1980], pp. 311–312).

¹⁶ However, the context appears to be sexual intercourse. See the translation offered by C. H. Gordon, “Poetic Legends and Myths from Ugarit,” *Berytus* 25 (1977): 126; and for a general discussion, see J. C. de Moor, “Ugaritic *ṭkḥ* and South Arabian *mṭkḥ*,” *VT* 14 (1964): 371–372.

¹⁷ In rejecting the equation of Hebrew *škh* = Ugaritic *ṭkḥ* in Ps 137:5, we do not pass judgment on other biblical passages where this interpretation has been posited. However, we are in general agreement with the treatment by O. Loretz, *Die Psalmen, II: Beitrag der Ugarit-Texte zum Verständnis von Kolometrie und Textologie der Psalmen, Psalm 90–150* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1979), pp. 443–447. See also J. J. Stamm, ed., *Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament* (Leiden, 1990), 4:1381–1382, where the entry “שכח II” appears with a question mark.

who more than sixty years ago connected *tiškaḥ* in v. 5 with the Arabic root *kšḥ*, "lame, crippled, paralysed,"¹⁸ a meaning perfectly matched to the symptoms of hemiplegia.

We differ from Eitan on a minor point. To account for the difference between Hebrew *škḥ* and Arabic *kšḥ*, Eitan suggested that the Masoretic text originally read תכשח ימיני, "may my right hand become paralyzed," and that when this rare and eventually archaic word was lost, a copyist switched the letters to yield תשכח, through attraction with תשכחך. This remains a possibility, but since metathesis is a very common phenomenon in linguistics, it is preferable simply to assume that the Hebrew and Arabic roots are a metathetic pair. Of course, we cannot determine which of the roots is original; either *kšḥ* or *škḥ* is possible. Moreover, each language has a homonym that could have served as the catalyst for the metathesis. If *kšḥ* is the original root, then perhaps Hebrew *škḥ*, "forget," attracted *kšḥ* to metathesize.¹⁹ Similarly, if *škḥ* (=Arabic *škḥ*) is the original root, then perhaps Arabic *kšḥ*, "sweep," attracted *škḥ* to metathesize.

Regardless of how Hebrew developed the homonyms *škḥ*, "forget," and *škḥ*, "lame, crippled, paralyzed," the exilic poet capitalized on the presence of this pair in the language to produce one of the most excellent wordplays in all of biblical literature.²⁰

2. The use of the 2fsg pronominal suffix *-kî* in *ʿim lô ʿezk^erēkî*, "if I do not remember you," in v. 6, is typically labeled either an Aramaism²¹ or an archaic Canaanite usage.²² Neither of these appellations is truly accurate.

The history of the form is as follows. Although absolute proof is lacking, one will assume that the proto-Semitic morpheme *-kî* was

¹⁸ I. Eitan, "An Identification of *tiškaḥ yēmīnī*, Ps 137:5," *JBL* 47 (1928): 193–195. See also J. Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1968), p. 336.

¹⁹ Further complicating matters is the existence of a Hebrew root *kḥš* "grow lean" (e.g., Ps 109:24), of similar meaning to our root *škḥ*. But we do not introduce this factor into the discussion.

²⁰ Barr, *Comparative Philology*, pp. 48, 152.

²¹ M. Wagner, *Die lexikalischen und grammatikalischen Aramaismen im alttestamentlichen Hebräisch* (Berlin, 1966), p. 130, and the literature cited there.

²² Dahood, *Psalms* 3:272; and Freedman, "The Structure of Psalm 137," p. 195 = *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy*, p. 311.

the norm in second-millennium Northwest Semitic, including Ugaritic (the orthography, of course, indicates only *-k*).²³ For the first-millennium dialects, the suffix *-kî* is attested in Aramaic, and we can be reasonably sure that this form was continued in Phoenician. It appears as *-ky* in Imperial Aramaic²⁴ (examples may be found in *BMAP* 9²⁵ and in Cowley 8²⁶), and in Qumran Aramaic (*Genesis Apocryphon* 19:19, 20 [bis]²⁷). Moreover, although many of the later dialects attest *-k* or *-yk*,²⁸ it is still used, perhaps vestigially, in Syriac.²⁹ For Phoenician, we can point to a Punic spelling with *-ky*.³⁰ In Biblical Hebrew (BH), as is well known, the standard form becomes *-ēk*, but occasionally the form *-kî* occurs.

A look at the distribution of *-kî* in BH indicates that this form was retained in Israelian Hebrew (IH), the dialect or dialect bundle spoken in the northern and Transjordanian regions of the country.³¹ The form occurs four times in the Elisha cycle: 2 Kgs 4:2K, 4:3K, 4:7K (bis). Not only is Elisha a northern prophet, but his home may be further localized to the territory of Gilead.³² The

²³ Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, pp. 36, 149.

²⁴ S. Segert, *Altaramäische Grammatik* (Leipzig, 1975), pp. 170–171; P. Leander, *Laut- und Formenlehre des Ägyptisch-aramäischen* (Göteborg, 1928), pp. 27–32.

²⁵ E. G. Kraeling, *The Brooklyn Museum Aramaic Papyri* (New Haven, 1953), p. 238.

²⁶ A. E. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford, 1923), p. 22.

²⁷ J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Genesis Apocryphon of Qumran Cave I* (Rome, 1971), p. 15; B. Jongeling, C. J. Labuschagne, and A. S. van der Woude, *Aramaic Texts from Qumran* (Leiden, 1976), p. 91, n. 20.

²⁸ E. Y. Kutscher, *Mehqarim ba-ʿAramit ha-Gelilit* (Jerusalem, 1969), p. 22 = E. Y. Kutscher, *Studies in Galilean Aramaic* (Ramat Gan, 1976), p. 31; D. M. Golomb, *A Grammar of Targum Neofiti* (Chico, CA, 1985), pp. 48–49, 51–52.

²⁹ C. Brockelmann, *Syrische Grammatik* (Leipzig, 1960), p. 49; T. Nöldeke, *Compendious Syriac Grammar* (London, 1904), p. 46.

³⁰ J. Friedrich and W. Röllig, *Phönizisch-punische Grammatik* (Rome, 1970), p. 47; and S. Segert, *A Grammar of Phoenician and Punic* (Munich, 1976), p. 96. The only form attested is suffixed to a noun, but one will assume that the pronominal suffix following a verb was the same.

³¹ On IH, see G. A. Rendsburg, "The Northern Origin of 'The Last Words of David' (2 Sam 23:1–7)," *Biblica* 69 (1988): 113–121; idem., "Additional Notes on 'The Last Words of David' (2 Sam 23:1–7)," *Biblica* 70 (1989): 403–408; idem., *Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms* (Atlanta, 1990); idem., "The Northern Origin of Nehemiah 9," *Biblica* 72 (1991): 348–366.

³² G. A. Rendsburg, "A Reconstruction of Moabite-Israelite History," *JANES* 13 (1981): 67–73, especially p. 71.

suffix *-kî* also occurs in other northern texts: Song 2:13K, Ps 116:7 (bis), 116:19. Song of Songs is a book whose northern affinities have long been noticed,³³ and Psalm 116 shows a significant concentration of other IH features to label it a northern poem.³⁴

Another example of 2fsg pronominal suffix *-kî* occurs in Jer 11:15, a passage that requires special comment. Although many scholars have argued for Aramaic influence in the language of this book, recent study suggests other possibilities. My own research into regional dialects of ancient Hebrew has revealed that Jeremiah includes an inordinate number of northern features. While it is true that Jeremiah was a Judahite prophet and that the action takes place almost wholly in Jerusalem, he hailed from Anatoth in the territory of Benjamin, slightly north of Jerusalem. My investigations indicate that the dialect of Benjamin was significantly different from that of Judah and Jerusalem. This conclusion is based not only on the IH traits of Jeremiah, but also on a similarly high number of IH traits in the stories of Saul in 1 Samuel.³⁵

Additional attestations of 2fsg pronominal suffix *-kî* are Ps 103:3 (bis), 103:4 (bis), 103:5, 135:9. Both Psalms 103 and 135 are post-exilic compositions,³⁶ so it is feasible that Aramaic influence is responsible for the appearance of *-kî* in these poems (see below).

³³ S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (New York, 1906), pp. 448–449; Y. Avishur, *לויקה הסגנונית בין שיר השירים וספרות אונגריה*, *Beth Miqra* 59 (1974): 508–525; idem., *Stylistic Studies of Word-Pairs in Biblical and Ancient Semitic Literatures* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1984), p. 440. This opinion is cited approvingly by S. Morag, “On the Historical Validity of the Vocalization of the Hebrew Bible,” *JAOS* 94 (1974): 308; and with some qualifications by A. Hurvitz, *הלשון העברית בתקופה הפרסית*, in *Shivat Siyyon: Yeme Shilṭon Paras* (Jerusalem, 1983), pp. 217–218. See also the discussion in M. H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (Garden City, 1977), pp. 33–34, 362.

³⁴ Rendsburg, *Linguistic Evidence*, pp. 83–86.

³⁵ Numerous examples are collected in G. A. Rendsburg, “Morphological Evidence for Regional Dialects in Ancient Hebrew,” in W. Bodine, ed., *Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew* (Winona Lake, 1992), pp. 65–88. Moshe Bar-Asher of the Hebrew University informs me (oral communication) that he has conducted a detailed study of the language of Jeremiah and that he too finds numerous northern characteristics therein. Here we would refer to M. Bar-Asher, *אחדותה ההסתורית של הלשון העברית ומחקר לשון חכמים*, in M. Bar-Asher, ed., *Meḥqarim be-Lashon* (Jerusalem, 1985), pp. 93–94, where interconnections between Jeremiah and Mishnaic Hebrew are discussed. The latter represents a northern spoken variety of Hebrew; see G. A. Rendsburg, “The Galilean Background of Mishnaic Hebrew,” in L. Levine, ed., *The Galilee in Late Antiquity* (New York, 1992), pp. 225–240.

³⁶ On Psalm 103, see the detailed study of A. Hurvitz, *Beyn Lashon le-Lashon* (Jerusalem, 1972), pp. 107–152, with specific treatment of 2fsg pronominal suffix *-kî*

But since Psalm 137 is a product of the Exile, Aramaic influence may not be the best approach to *ʿezkerēkî* in v. 6. Aramaic influence over BH increases greatly in the post-exilic period, but not necessarily in the years of the Exile. In A. Hurvitz's words, "The critical point of contact between Hebrew and Aramaic is to be found, as is commonly recognized, *after the Babylonian exile* in the sixth century BC. *From the post-exilic period onwards*, one can readily detect in Hebrew numerous new expressions and linguistic innovations, many of which are due to either direct or indirect Aramaic influence."³⁷ One illustration may suffice. There are far fewer instances of Aramaic influence in the exilic chapters of Isaiah 40–55 than there are in the post-exilic chapters of Isaiah 56–66. The most famous example in the latter section is the word *kēʿehād*, "together," in Isa 65:25, clearly modeled after Aramaic *kaḥādāh* | *kaḥādā*³⁸, replacing standard BH *yaḥdāw* in Isa 11:6.³⁸

Moreover, another factor has to be taken into account, namely, that both exilic and post-exilic biblical compositions often reflect northern Hebrew influence. This finding was first put forward by C. H. Gordon,³⁹ and it was accepted by E. Y. Kutscher.⁴⁰ This phenomenon is due to the reunion of northern exiles and Judean exiles in Mesopotamia in the sixth century BCE. Moreover, stories such as those in 2 Chron 30 and Jer 41:4–5 imply that Israelians continued to dwell in their homeland after 721 BCE and were even loyal to Jerusalem.⁴¹ Through such minglings of northerners and southerners in the seventh through fifth centuries BCE, one understands how exilic and then post-exilic books sometimes admit northern grammatical features.⁴²

on pp. 116–119. Virtually all scholars view Psalm 135 as post-exilic, especially as it is constructed mainly from other biblical passages; see, e.g., A. Cohen, *The Psalms* (London, 1945), p. 441.

³⁷ A. Hurvitz, "The Chronological Significance of 'Aramaisms' in Biblical Hebrew," *IEJ* 18 (1968): 234 (emphasis added). See also Driver, *Introduction to the Literature*, p. 156, where the date of ca. 450 BCE is used as the watershed for increased Aramaic influence over Hebrew.

³⁸ Driver, *Introduction to the Literature*, p. 240.

³⁹ C. H. Gordon, "North Israelite Influence on Postexilic Hebrew," *IEJ* 5 (1955): 85–88.

⁴⁰ E. Y. Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Jerusalem, 1982), p. 55.

⁴¹ S. Japhet, "People and Land in the Restoration Period," in G. Strecker, ed., *Das Land Israel in biblischer Zeit* (Göttingen, 1983), pp. 103–125, especially p. 105. See also Rendsburg, "The Northern Origin of Nehemiah 9."

⁴² Examples are cited in Rendsburg, *Linguistic Evidence*, pp. 40, 54, 70, 77, 87, 89.

In light of the foregoing analysis, we return now to the word ${}^2\text{ezk}^{\text{e}}\text{r}\bar{\text{e}}\text{k}\hat{\text{i}}$ in Ps 137:6. The 2fsg pronominal suffix $-\text{k}\hat{\text{i}}$ is not an archaic Canaanite survival, nor is it necessarily an Aramaism. Instead, the form is an IH feature that entered a poem authored by a Judean exile, after the reunion of northern and southern exiles in Mesopotamia.

To call it an archaic Canaanite survival is simply incorrect.⁴³ As indicated above, $-\text{k}\hat{\text{i}}$ was used throughout the first millennium in Canaanite dialects to the north of Judah, namely, IH and Phoenician. It resurfaces in a Judean exilic poem, not because somehow the form was remembered in Judahite Hebrew (JH), but rather because IH influence was at work.

To call this form an Aramaism is either inaccurate or overly simplistic.⁴⁴ It is more accurate to state that IH and Aramaic, as well as Phoenician, preserved a common feature in the use of $-\text{k}\hat{\text{i}}$, with an isogloss created separating these dialects from JH (=standard BH). It is hard to deny absolutely the possibility of Aramaic influence in Psalm 137, but an explanation based on internal Hebrew grounds is preferable to an approach based on an outside cause. In short, ${}^2\text{ezk}^{\text{e}}\text{r}\bar{\text{e}}\text{k}\hat{\text{i}}$ is a case of IH influence over an exilic composition.

This is not to deny that the presence of $-\text{k}\hat{\text{i}}$ in Imperial Aramaic had no influence whatsoever on $-\text{k}\hat{\text{i}}$ in post-exilic Hebrew. This remains the best explanation for the many examples of $-\text{k}\hat{\text{i}}$ in Qumran Hebrew⁴⁵ and perhaps for its appearance in Psalms 103 and 135 (see above).

3. The word $\text{t}\bar{\text{o}}\text{l}\bar{\text{a}}\text{l}\bar{\text{e}}\text{n}\hat{\text{u}}$ in v. 3 remains one of the most difficult cruces in the Bible. Both the JPSV and the NJPSV translate the term "our tormentors," though the latter adds the note "Meaning of Heb. uncertain." The proper solution to the elucidation of this word was devised by A. Guillaume, who related the Hebrew vocable to Arabic *till* in the fourth form meaning "bind and drag

⁴³ This was already recognized by Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, p. 79.

⁴⁴ On Aramaisms in BH, see the short though still classic formulation of the problem by Hurvitz, "The Chronological Significance of 'Aramaisms' in Biblical Hebrew," pp. 234–240.

⁴⁵ For examples and discussion, see E. Y. Kutscher, *Ha-Lashon we-ha-Reqa' ha-Leshoni shel Megillat Yehsha'yahu ha-Shelemah mi-Megillot Yam ha-Melah* (Jerusalem, 1959), pp. 158–161.

away.”⁴⁶ Guillaume based this interpretation on the parallelism between *tôlālênû* and *šôbênû*, “our captors,” and on the fact that in antiquity captives indeed were bound and dragged by their captors.

We would like to respond to Guillaume’s closing comment that “so far as I can recollect, no other word would suitably convey the psalmist’s meaning.”⁴⁷ Actually, there is another Hebrew word that comes to mind, and in fact it confirms Guillaume’s suggestion. The more expected word is the root *šhb*, “drag,” which is used both in Hebrew and in Moabite in reference to the treatment of captured people or things. The pertinent biblical passages are Jer 15:3, 49:20, and 50:45, where the threat of defeat and exile appears. More important for the present is the use of *šhb* in Moabite, where it appears twice in the Mesha Stele (MS), lines 11–12 (the *s* needs to be restored here) and line 18.

The full reading of the former attestation is as follows:

ואשב משם את אראל דודה וא[ס]חבה לפני כמש בקרית

which we would translate as follows:

I captured from there ^{רל}*dwdh*,
and I dragged it before Chemosh in Kerioth.

For our present purposes we do not venture a translation of ^{רל}*dwdh*. Suffice to say that most likely it is an object of some sort, and in any case the exact identification of this phrase is not germane to the point at hand.⁴⁸

The second attestation of *šhb* in Moabite is in the following passage, lines 17–18 (again with some reconstruction, specifically restoring the reading ^ת*kly*, though other possibilities also exist⁴⁹):

ואקח משם אנת כ[לי] יהוה ואסחב הם לפני כמש

I took from there the vessels of Yahweh,
and dragged them before Chemosh.

⁴⁶ A. Guillaume, “The Meaning of תולל in Psalm 137:3,” *JBL* 75 (1956): 143–144.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁴⁸ For discussion, see G. L. Mattingly, “Moabite Religion and the Mesha^c Inscription,” in J. A. Dearman, ed., *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab* (Atlanta, 1989), pp. 236–237.

⁴⁹ See K. P. Jackson and J. A. Dearman, “The Text of the Mesha^c Inscription,” in J. A. Dearman, ed., *Studies in the Mesha Inscription*, p. 94, n. 5.

It is quite obvious that these two passages have much in common. Furthermore, the less ambiguous understanding of the second passage, combined with Ps 137:3 as interpreted by Guillaume, clears up an ambiguity in the first passage.

The ambiguity we refer to is the word **ואשב** in line 11. Most translations render the word "I brought back," treating the form as the hif^cil of the root *šwb*.⁵⁰ But since in Ps 137:3 the roots *šbh*, "capture" and *tl*, "drag" are parallel, we think it is much more likely that **ואשב**, when followed by **ואסתובה** in MS 11–12, is to be read "I captured." Consistently in MS the imperfect with *waw* imperfect of IIIy verbs appears in apocopated form,⁵¹ so that **ואשב** can just as easily be read "I captured" as it can be read "I brought back." This understanding of the word is borne out by the second passage cited above, where the verb *lqh*, "take," is used. Mesha took or captured Israelite cultic items and dragged them before Chemosh. The hif^cil of *šwb* typically means "restore," which would imply that the ^rl *dwdh* was something Moabite originally. Of course this cannot be correct, since this item was dragged ignobly before Chemosh. In sum, various lines of evidence converge to demonstrate that **ואשב** in MS 11 is to be translated "I captured."

To return to Guillaume's comment, quoted above, that "no other word would suitably convey the psalmist's meaning," it should be obvious that such is not the case. The verb *šhb* would be just as suitable, especially since, as we have just seen, it can follow the root *šbh* in Canaanite literary expression. Accordingly, it remains to point out why the poet did not select the verb *šhb* in Ps 137:3, but instead chose to use the exceedingly rare verb *tl*.⁵² The

⁵⁰ W. F. Albright, "Palestinian Inscriptions," in J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, 1969), p. 320; J. C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions, Volume I: Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions* (Oxford, 1971), p. 12; and K. P. Jackson, "The Language of the Mesha^c Inscription," in J. A. Dearman, ed., *Studies in the Mesha Inscription*, p. 98.

⁵¹ W. R. Garr, *Dialect Geography of Syria-Palestine, 1000–586 B.C.E.* (Philadelphia, 1985), p. 138.

⁵² Many would call this verb a *hapax legomenon*; so, e.g., Dahood, *Psalms*, 3:270. But according to the strict definition of the term utilized by other scholars, since the root *tl* occurs elsewhere with different meanings (see L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros* [Leiden, 1953], p. 1030), it is not listed in works such as H. R. (C.) Cohen, *Biblical Hapax Legomena in the Light of Akkadian and Ugaritic* (Missoula, 1978); and F. E. Greenspahn, *Hapax Legomena in Biblical Hebrew* (Chico, CA, 1984).

answer is quite obvious: by utilizing *tōlālēnū*, the poet created an excellent example of assonance with *tālīnū*, “we hanged,” in v. 2.

Finally, we wish only to add that the root *tll* is not restricted to just Hebrew and Arabic. It occurs also in the Jibbāli dialect of modern South Arabian. The most current dictionary of this dialect lists *tll*, “to drag a train behind one.”⁵³

4. We take this opportunity to call to the attention of scholars an excellent point made by David Qimḥi in his commentary on the Psalms. We do so especially as it relates to the foregoing discussions, and also because we have not found either Qimḥi’s point cited or the same point reached independently in the scholarly literature. The issue is quite simple: on the words תשכה ימיני and תרבק לשוני, Qimḥi noted that it is the hand that strings the lyre and the tongue that sings the song referred to earlier in the psalm in vv. 2–3.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the order is consistent: lyre/song: hand/tongue. In this day and age of renewed interest in medieval biblical commentaries and increased appreciation for the manner in which poems operate as a whole composition, we find this insight of Qimḥi’s worth bringing to the attention of contemporary readers.

⁵³ T. M. Johnstone, *Jibbāli Lexicon* (London, 1981), p. 270. Incidentally, the most common word for “drag” in all the Modern South Arabian dialects is the root *shb*. See Johnstone, *Jibbāli Lexicon*, p. 255; idem., *Harsūsi Lexicon* (London, 1977), p. 109; and idem., *Mehri Lexicon* (London, 1987), p. 344. The same is true of Arabic.

⁵⁴ The text may be found not only in editions of *Miqra’ot Gedolot*, but also in J. Baker and E. W. Nicholson, eds., *The Commentary of Rabbi David Kimḥi on Psalms CXX–CL* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 80–81.