

Notes on 2 Kings 9:36-37

Gary A. Rendsburg

Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J., U.S.A.

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Abstract:

This article address several issues relevant to 2 Kgs 9:36-37. The most crucial of these is that the first word in v. 37, Ketiv וְהִיתָ / Qeri וְהִיָּתָה, should stand, contra the recent proposal by Jerome Walsh to read the noun ‘ruin, destruction’ here.

Keywords:

Masoretic Text, Israelian Hebrew, repetition with variation

In a recent contribution to this journal, Jerome Walsh called attention to several issues relevant to the first word of 2 Kgs 9:37: Ketiv והית / Qeri וְהִיְתָה.¹ We will address this matter below, though first we take the opportunity to discuss a side issue raised by Walsh in his article.

1. The three statements concerning the dogs who will eat Jezebel

הַכְּלָבִים יֹאכְלוּ אֶת־אִיזָבֵל בְּחַל יִזְרְעֵאל: 2 Kgs 9:36

The dogs will eat Jezebel in the rampart of Jezreel.

וְאֶת־אִיזָבֵל יֹאכְלוּ הַכְּלָבִים בְּחַלְק יִזְרְעֵאל 2 Kgs 9:10

And Jezebel, the dogs will eat in the field of Jezreel.

בְּחַלְק יִזְרְעֵאל יֹאכְלוּ הַכְּלָבִים אֶת־בֶּשֶׂר אִיזָבֵל: 2 Kgs 9:37

In the field of Jezreel the dogs will eat the flesh of Jezebel.

The first of these verses records the words prophesied by Elijah at the end of the story of Naboth's vineyard. The second of these verses records the words uttered by Elisha's assistant-prophet during his anointing of Jehu to be king over Israel. The third iteration records

¹ Jerome T. Walsh, "On היה in 2 Kings 9:37", *VT* 60 (2010), pp. 152-153.

Jehu's words upon his learning that naught was left of Jezebel to bury, save her skull and portions of her limbs.

As Walsh noted, "Jehu's replacement of Elijah's *ḥēl* with *ḥēleq* has exercised the ingenuity of commentators. Most attribute the single letter's difference to a sloppy copyist, though they disagree whether the copyist dropped [citation of James Montgomery] or added [citation of Otto Eissfeldt]. . . . Note that the discrepancy was already present in the prophetic commission Jehu received in 9:10" (p. 152, n. 1).

The solution to this issue is not emendation of a presumed poorly transmitted text, but rather attention to the stylistic device of repetition with variation.² During the process of creating or editing

² For earlier studies on the subject, see Shamir Yona, "Stylistic and Syntactic Variants in Repeated Texts in the Bible" (in Hebrew), in Michael Heltzer and Meir Malul (eds.), *T^eshûrôt LaAvishur: Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East, in Hebrew and Semitic Languages; Festschrift Presented to Prof. Yitzhak Avishur on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday* (Tel-Aviv, 2004), pp. 225-232; Shamir Yona, "Repetition

their compositions, the ancient Israelite literati rejected banal verbatim repetition and instead endeavored as much as possible to demonstrate their linguistic virtuosity. The three verses cited above are a prime example.

Note the different word orders, ranging from a) subject-verb-object-location, to b) object-verb-subject-location, to c) location-verb-subject-object. Moreover, in the first iteration, the location is given as *בְּחֵל יִזְרְעָאֵל* ‘in the rampart of Jezreel’, while in the other two

and Variation in Biblical Texts”, *Ugarit-Forschungen* 37 (2005), pp. 729-740; Gary A. Rendsburg, “Variation in Biblical Hebrew Prose and Poetry”, in Maxine L. Grossman (ed.), *Built by Wisdom, Established by Understanding: Essays on Biblical and Near Eastern Literature in Honor of Adele Berlin* (Bethesda, Md., 2013), pp. 197-226; and Gary A. Rendsburg, “Repetition with Variation in Legal-Cultic Texts of the Torah”, in Edward L. Greenstein, Mayer Gruber, Peter Machinist, and Shamir Yona (eds.), *Marbeh Hokma: Studies in Honor of Victor Avigdor Hurowitz* (Winona Lake, Ind., forthcoming), pp. 433-461.

it is given as בְּחֵלֶק יִזְרְעֵאל ‘in the field of Jezreel’.³ Finally, in the first two cases, the object is listed simply as אִיזָבֵל ‘Jezebel’, while in the third instance the term בֶּשֶׂר אִיזָבֵל ‘the flesh of Jezebel’ appears most suitably (given what remained of her corpse, now mainly carcass). The result is three different wordings of what is essentially the same prophetic statement. No emendation required, just a recognition of what the ancient Israelite master wordsmiths were capable of achieving.

2. *The expansion of the original prophecy in v. 37*

The entire verse reads as follows:

[וְהָיְתָה] (וְהָיְתָה) נִבְלֵת אִיזָבֵל כְּדָמֶן עַל-פְּנֵי הַשָּׂדֶה בְּחֵלֶק יִזְרְעֵאל
אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יֵאמְרוּ זֹאת אִיזָבֵל:

normally rendered as:

³ For חֵלֶק meaning ‘field’, see Gary A. Rendsburg, *Israelian Hebrew in the Book of Kings* (Bethesda, Md., 2002), pp. 111-112.

And the carcass of Jezebel shall be like dung on the surface on the ground, in the field of Jezreel, so that none will (be able to) say, ‘This is Jezebel’.⁴

Walsh objects to this understanding on two grounds: “First, it entails emendation of the consonantal text, and even a venerable emendation like the Qere is subject to challenge if a plausible reading of the consonantal text can be suggested. Second, by construing וְהִיתָּ that way it implies that 9:37 continues Jehu’s citation of Elijah’s prophecy; yet there is nothing in 1 Kings 21 that corresponds to this verse” (p. 153).

⁴ Translation mine (here and throughout this article). The verse is similarly understood by all translations (ancient and modern) which I have consulted, including the Septuagint; Targum Yonatan; RSV; NIV; NJPSV; Robert Alter, *Ancient Israel: The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings* (New York, 2013), p. 777; and Everett Fox, *The Early Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings* (New York, 2014), p. 159.

We will return to the first point below (see §3), but first a comment on the second point. This would not be the only case in the Bible where a statement heard by one person (in this case by Jehu from Elijah's assistant-prophet, with the original prophecy going back to Elijah) is expanded by said person. In his monograph on the subject, with the felicitous title *Telling and Retelling*, George Savran presented eighteen examples of such expansions within the narrative corpus of Genesis through Kings presented therein.⁵ True, most of these are more minor lengthenings of the original quotation, but there are several instances with important additions to the original speech (perhaps most famously with the first such case in the Bible, Gen 3:3, with Eve's words to the snake).⁶ The case of 2 Kgs 9:37, with Jehu's amplifying what had been reported to him, would be one more instance of this widespread literary device.

⁵ George W. Savran, *Telling and Retelling: Quotation in Biblical Literature* (Bloomington, Ind., 1988), pp. 32-33.

⁶ Even if, in this case, and to be technical, only Adam, and not Eve, heard the divine command in Gen 2:17.

Recognition of this technique, accordingly, resolves “the considerable discrepancy between Jehu’s citation and the original prophecy” (p. 153).

3. *The first word of 2 Kgs 9:37: Ketiv והית / Qeri והִיתָה*

Now to the first word of the verse: The Ketiv form is simply the regional dialectal form הית (I leave out the initial *waw* here for the nonce), which would have been vocalized *hayat* in ancient Israel.⁷

While the paradigm 3rd feminine singular *qatal* of IIIy verbs in Standard Biblical Hebrew (SBH) is represented by forms such as היתה (Gen 1:2, etc.), ראתה (Gen 38:14, etc.), עשתה (Ruth 2:19, etc.), בנתה (Prov 9:1, 14:1), etc., the dialectical form ending in *-at* also appears.

⁷ In Masoretic Hebrew, the /a/ vowel emerged as *qameṣ* [ɔ] though both for the sake of convenience and in order to represent the Iron Age realization, I will refer to the ending herein as *-at*.

In addition, one notes that this usage is standard in Aramaic⁸ and in Mishnaic Hebrew,⁹ and it also appears in Moabite.¹⁰

⁸ Rainer Degen, *Altaramäische Grammatik* (Wiesbaden, 1969), p. 76; Franz Rosenthal, *A Grammar of Biblical Aramaic* (Wiesbaden, 1974), pp. 51, 66; and Stanislav Segert, *Altaramäische Grammatik* (Leipzig, 1975), p. 247.

⁹ For the most detailed study, see Moshe Bar-Asher, “Ha-Nisteret ba-‘Avar be-Po‘ale *lamed-yod* / *lamed-’aleph* bi-Lšon ha-Tanna’im”, *Meḥqare Talmud* 2 (E. S. Rosenthal Memorial Volume) (1993), pp. 39-84; reprinted in Moshe Bar-Asher, *Meḥqarim bi-Lšon Ḥakamim*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 2009), vol. 2, pp. 71-111. For briefer statements, see M. H. Segal, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Oxford, 1927), pp. 91-92; Moshe Zvi Segal, *Diqduq Lešon ha-Mišna* (Tel-Aviv, 1936), p. 152; Gideon Haneman, *Torat ha-Šurot šel Lešon ha-Mišna ‘al pi Mesorat Ketav-Yad Parma (de Rossi 138)* (Tel-Aviv, 1980), pp. 342-343; Eduard Yehezkel Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Jerusalem/Leiden, 1982), p. 128; Miguel Pérez-Fernández, *An Introductory Grammar of Rabbinic Hebrew*, trans. John Elwolde

(Leiden, 1999), p. 115; and Moshe Bar-Asher, “Mishnaic Hebrew and Biblical Hebrew”, *Materia giudaica* 12/1-2 (2007), p. 64; reprinted in Moshe Bar-Asher, *Studies in Classical Hebrew*, ed. Aaron Koller (Studia Judaica 71; Berlin, 2014), p. 384.

¹⁰ The relevant form is precisely the same as in 2 Kgs 9:37, to wit, Mesha Stele, line 12, הית. There has been considerable debate on the correct reading of the word, whether it should be read as הית or רית. For the former, see Andre Lemaire, “Notes d’épigraphie nord-ouest sémitique”, *Syria* 64 (1987), pp. 205-216, esp. 205-207); for the latter see Aaron Schade, “New Photographs Supporting the Reading *ryt* in Line 12 of the Mesha Inscription,” *IEJ* 55 (2005), pp. 205-208. Lemaire’s position is accepted by Shmuel Ahituv, *Echoes from the Past: Hebrew and Cognate Inscriptions from the Biblical Period*, trans. Anson F. Rainey (Jerusalem, 2008), p. 405. I myself have gone back and forth on the matter in my own publications; see Gary A. Rendsburg, “Hebrew Philological Notes (III)”, *Hebrew Studies* 43 (2002), p. 30 (with a nod to הית); and Gary A. Rendsburg, “ואשב” in

In the Bible, the dialectal forms of the 3rd feminine singular *qatal* of IIIy verbs appear in the following passages:¹¹

- a) Lev 25:31 וְעָשָׂתָּ ‘and she will produce’¹² (lit. ‘do’)
- b) Lev 26:34 וְהִרְצָתָּ ‘and she shall enjoy’
- c) 2 Kgs 9:37 (Kativ) וְהִיָּתָּ ‘and she will be’
- d) Jer 13:19 הִגְלָתָּ (2x) ‘she is exiled’
- e) Ezek 24:12 הִלָּאָתָּ ‘she has wearied herself’

The first and third instances appear in Israelian compositions. Our passage from 2 Kgs 9:37 is *prima facie* such a text, set in the north of Israel; while Jehu himself may have hailed from Ramoth-Gilead (see

Mesha Stele, Line 12”, *Maarav* 14 (2007), pp. 24-25 (with a nod to רִיָּת) – though I now am convinced that the correct reading is הִיָּתָּ.

¹¹ For earlier treatment, see Rendsburg, *Israelian Hebrew in the Book of Kings*, pp. 118-119.

¹² I have rendered the subject in each of these cases as ‘she’, to highlight the verbal morphology, though typically the subject is a previously expressed noun such as ‘the sixth year’ and ‘the land’ in the two Leviticus passages, respectively.

2 Kgs 9:1), close to Aramean territory. While there is nothing inherently northern about the jubilee pericope in Lev 25:8-24, these verses contain a clustering of Israelian Hebrew (IH) features.¹³

The two-fold usage in Jeremiah may be due to the prophet's Anathoth dialect, and/or may be an Aramaism, filtering into Hebrew at the end of the monarchic period.¹⁴ Similarly, the example in Ezekiel may be an Aramaism as well, given the date and location of this composition. In the latter case, another factor is present,

¹³ Gary A. Rendsburg, "Qeṭa' Šenat ha-Yovel (Vayyiqra' 25:8-24) ke-Ḥibbur Šefoni," *Meḥqarim be-Lashon* 11-12 (2008) = *Sefer ha-Yovel le-ʾAvi Hurvitz*, pp. 297-308.

¹⁴ See the detailed discussions in Colin Smith, "'With an Iron Pen and a Diamond Tip': Linguistic Peculiarities of the Book of Jeremiah" (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 2003), pp. 159-162; and Aaron Hornkohl, *Ancient Hebrew Periodization and the Language of the Book of Jeremiah: The Case for a Sixth-Century Date of Composition* (Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics 74; Leiden, 2013), pp. 120-125.

namely, the author's desire to use the form הִלְאָתָהּ 'she has wearied herself' *alliterationis causa*, in light of the three-fold presence of הִלְאָתָהּ 'her rust' in vv. 11-12.

This leaves only Lev 26:34 as an example within an SBH text, though once more we may appeal to alliteration as the reason for the author's use of the verb וְהִרְצָתָהּ 'and she shall enjoy', in light of תִּרְצָהּ 'she shall enjoy' earlier in the verse. The former constitutes the only Hiph'il form of the root ר-צ-ה *r-ṣ-h* 'want, desire, enjoy', thus further highlighting the author's attention to literary-linguistic detail.¹⁵ Moreover, the two aforementioned verbs comprise anagrams of each other, so there is a visual treat for the reader holding the written text.

¹⁵ I have surveyed the use of unusual forms for the purposes of alliteration in a series of recent publications, the most sustained of which is Gary A. Rendsburg, "Alliteration in the Exodus Narrative", in Chaim Cohen, et al. (eds.), *Birkat Shalom: Studies in the Bible, Ancient Near Eastern Literature, and Postbiblical Judaism Presented to Shalom M. Paul on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday* (Winona Lake, Ind., 2008), pp. 83-100.

In addition, the very form הֵיַת occurs in Siloam Tunnel inscription, line 3, due to the fact that the text was composed and inscribed by northern Israelite refugees who made their way to Jerusalem in advance of the Assyrian assault on their homeland.¹⁶

In light of all this, the Masoretic Text of 2 Kgs 9:37 reads perfectly fine as it stands. For reasons which cannot be determined, while the oral traditions continued to transmit the forms ending in *-at* in the five other cases in the Bible (counting Jer 13:19 as two separate instances), in the passage under consideration here – and only here – the Qeri reading *hayta* emerged, in line with SBH morphology. Be that as it may, the Ketiv serves as testimony to the older form *hayat*, constituting an IH feature within 2 Kings 9, a chapter replete with such elements.¹⁷

¹⁶ For the essential argument, see Gary A. Rendsburg and William M. Schniedewind, “The Siloam Tunnel Inscription: Historical and Linguistic Perspectives”, *IEJ* 60 (2010), pp. 188-203.

¹⁷ Rendsburg, *Israelian Hebrew in the Book of Kings*, pp. 111-119.

4. Another option: (וְהִיָּתָה) [וְהָיָתָה] as past tense verb

Now let us return to Walsh's comment that "there is nothing in 1 Kings 21 that corresponds to this verse", and hence the statement in 2 Kgs 9:37 should not be considered the continuation of the prophetic statement in the previous verse – even though we have addressed this issue above with reference to Savran's work. The first word of v. 37 still could be read as per the Masorah, Ketiv וְהָיָתָה / Qeri וְהִיָּתָה – not as *wəqatal* with future reference, but rather as *wə-* + *qatal* with past reference.¹⁸ This latter usage occurs sporadically in SBH: in the words of Jan Joosten, "There is simply a sprinkling of single cases occurring in the midst of good, classical narrative" (including a

¹⁸ I adopt here the different ways of indicating the two usages of homographic וְקָטַל, one for the future (*wəqatal*) and one for the past (*wə-* + *qatal*), as introduced into the scholarly literature by Jan Joosten, *The Verbal System of Biblical Hebrew: A New Synthesis Elaborated on the Basis of Classical Prose* (Jerusalem Biblical Studies 10; Jerusalem, 2012).

good number in Kings);¹⁹ and then with the passage of time, this verbal syntagma approaches standard usage in Late Biblical Hebrew. As Joosten further states, “It is in the nature of linguistic innovations to appear infrequently at first and to become more regular with time”.²⁰

Hence, if Walsh prefers not to view 2 Kgs 9:37 as the continuation of the prophetic statement, to my mind, he would be better served to adhere to the Masoretic reading – rather than introduce into the text the noun form הַיָּהָה / הַיָּהָה ‘ruin, destruction’ (in the construct form הַיָּהָה / הַיָּהָה), a lexeme which occurs elsewhere only in poetry (thus the chief proposal in his short note).

Let me be clear, I am not advocating this approach, especially because the latter part of v. 37 לֹא יֵאמְרוּ זֹאת אִיזְבֶּל ‘so that none will (be able to) say, “This is Jezebel”’, reads best when the entire verse is seen as the continuation of the oracle rehearsed in v. 36. But if one perceives a problem with v. 37 as the (non-)continuation of v.

¹⁹ Joosten, *The Verbal System of Biblical Hebrew*, p. 227.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 224-225.

36, then hopefully I have provided here an alternative to the one proposed by Walsh.

5. Conclusion

Converging lines of evidence demonstrate that the Masoretic reading of 2 Kgs 9:37 should stand. The Ketiv וְהִיא represents the IH form of the 3rd feminine singular *qatal* of IIIy verbs, known also from Aramaic, Moabite, and Mishnaic Hebrew (§3). Those responsible for the Qeri reading altered the verb to the SBH form, but it remains the verb nonetheless (§3-§4). Jehu's words in v. 37 should be understood as an expansion of the message which he received from Elisha's assistant-prophet in v. 10, in line with other instances of 'telling and retelling' found throughout the biblical narrative prose corpus (§2). The three different variations of the prophetic message itself (even without the expansion) serve to demonstrate the literary artistry which characterizes the creative work of the ancient Israelite authors (§1).