

BRIEF COMMUNICATION

*Kabbîr in Biblical Hebrew: Evidence for Style-Switching and Addressee-Switching in the Hebrew Bible**

The word *kabbîr* “strong, mighty” appears in the Bible in ten passages, four times in Isaiah and six times in Job. The word in particular and the root in general appear much more frequently in Aramaic. This fact leads to the conclusion that *kabbîr* was not part of the standard Hebrew lexicon. Instead, it was used by the authors of Job and Isaiah to add to the effects of style-switching and addressee-switching.

The word *kabbîr* “strong, mighty” appears in the Bible in the following passages: Isa 10:13, 16:14, 17:12, 28:2, Job 8:2, 15:10, 31:25, 34:17, 34:24, 36:5. Because the root *kbr* is relatively common in Samalian,¹ Old Aramaic,² and Middle Aramaic,³ and yet rare in Biblical Hebrew (BH), one might be inclined to view *kabbîr* as an Aramaism in the Bible.⁴

Biblical scholars still are not agreed as to what constitutes an Aramaism.⁵ But as most use the term, namely, as a lexical or grammatical influence from Aramaic in Hebrew, in the case of *kabbîr* this is not a per-

fectly accurate appellation. Instead, the word *kabbîr* is used in the Bible for specific rhetorical purposes.

The examples in Job are part of a much larger picture of this book. A recent development in the field of Hebrew studies is the discovery of style-switching or code-switching. S. A. Kaufman noted that in a number of famous instances the speech of Transjordanians is tinged with unusual grammatical forms and rare lexical items, many of which typically are classified as Aramaisms.⁶ He undoubtedly is correct that in these texts “we have not to do with late language or foreign authors, but rather with the intentional stylistic representations of Trans-Jordanian speech on the part of Hebrew authors within Hebrew texts.”⁷ Among the key texts that Kaufman used to illustrate this point was the book of Job. I am in complete agreement with this approach, and I would posit the six-fold use of *kabbîr* in Job as

* I thank Stephen A. Kaufman and Peter Machinist for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

¹ Although subject to varying interpretation, *kbrt* occurs in Panamu 9 and *hkbr* occurs in Panamu 4.

² For references see C.-F. Jean and J. Hoftijzer, *Dictionnaire des inscriptions sémitiques de l'ouest* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), 114. See also the Tell Fakhariyeh inscription, line 8, on which see S. A. Kaufman, “Reflections on the Assyrian-Aramaic Bilingual from Tell Fakhariyeh,” *Maarav* 3 (1982): 165.

³ E. S. Drower and R. Macuch, *A Mandaic Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 195 (see also p. 202 for the verbal root *kbr*); R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879), vol. 1, col. 1672; J. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1903), 203.

⁴ Quite surprisingly, it is not listed as such in the two most comprehensive treatments of Aramaisms in BH: E. Kautzsch, *Die Aramaismen im Alten Testament* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1902); and M. Wagner, *Die lexikalischen und grammatikalischen Aramaismen im alttestamentliche Hebräisch* (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1966).

⁵ See the brief but still classic formulation by A. Hurvitz, “The Chronological Significance of ‘Aramaisms’ in Biblical Hebrew,” *IEJ* 18 (1968): 234–40.

⁶ Similar techniques are known from other literatures. See, e.g., F. C. Robinson, “Some Aspects of the Maldon Poet’s Artistry,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philosophy* 75 (1976): 25–28, on the Scandinavisms in the speech of the Vikings in the Old English poem “The Battle of Maldon.” I am indebted to my former student Ann Crook for bringing this example and this article to my attention.

⁷ S. A. Kaufman, “The Classification of the North West Semitic Dialects of the Biblical Period and Some Implications Thereof,” in *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Panel Sessions: Hebrew and Aramaic Languages) (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1988), 54–55. See also J. C. Greenfield, “Aramaic Studies and the Bible,” in *Congress Volume Vienna 1980* (SVT 32), ed. J. A. Emerton (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 129–30. For a brief, earlier statement, see N. H. Tur-Sinai, “^אAramit: Hashpa^א at ha-^אAramit ^אal ha-^אIvrit shel ha-Miqra^א,” *EM* 1 (1965): 593–94.

further evidence for the technique of style-switching in this composition.

Moreover, the root *kbr* is especially productive in Arabic,⁸ and the Arabic component in the language of the book of Job is also considerable.⁹ In an earlier article I suggested that two dialectal features in the book of Job—the prepositions ^ʿly, ^ʿly, ^ʿdy; and the prepositions *bēmō*, *lēmō*—were used to add an Arabian flavor to the diction of the characters.¹⁰ The same would be true of the author's employment of the word *kabbîr*. If it appears that I am arguing on the one hand for Aramaisms in Job and on the other hand for Arabisms in Job, let me again quote Kaufman in this regard: "the dialects of the early 'Arabs,' which by and large are what our authors are trying to replicate here, were much closer to Aramaic. . . . 'Arabs' in our earliest sources, as Eph'al has demonstrated, are the Beduin not only of northern Arabia, but of the entire Syrian Desert as well, well placed geographically to have an Aramaic or Aramaic-like language."¹¹ In short, my view, and Kaufman's too as I understand it, is that the denizens of the Syrian Desert in the first millennium B.C.E., that is, people like Job and his friends, spoke a language with strong links to both Aramaic and Arabic.¹²

At first glance, the four-fold presence of *kabbîr* in Isaiah appears to run counter to the above approach. But upon closer examination, it is revealed that in each instance Isaiah utilized the word *kabbîr* in sections where either style-switching or addressee-switching is

in effect. The former term was described above, in my citation of Kaufman. By the latter term, I intend the prophetic addresses to Israel's neighbors which are colored by the language or dialect of the addressee.¹³

In Isa 10:13 the prophet quotes the Assyrian king, so that style-switching is operative here.¹⁴ Given the widespread use of Aramaic in the Neo-Assyrian empire,¹⁵ Isaiah peppered the Assyrian king's orations with Aramaisms to represent his speech as foreign.¹⁶ In a masterful study, Peter Machinist demonstrated how Isaiah utilized the literary expressions of ancient Assyria in his portrayal of the king's rhetoric.¹⁷ To the evidence

¹³ I have treated this phenomenon in *Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1990), 13, though I did not introduce the term "addressee-switching" in the book. Many examples are to be found in the book, and a more systematic treatment of this technique with additional examples will appear in my "The Strata of Biblical Hebrew" (forthcoming).

In most cases where addressee-switching is used, there is a true addressee, i.e., the foreign nation actually is addressed. In some cases, the foreign nation is not spoken to directly; rather it is referred to only in third person. But I think the term addressee-switching will suffice for these instances as well. (Actually, of the examples to be discussed below from Isaiah, in most cases, if not all, the foreign nation is referred to in third person. But overall instances of addressee-switching appear in speeches aimed directly at the foreign nations.)

¹⁴ I accept the reading of the *Qere* here. The *Ketiv* has *kʿbyr*. In either case, the meaning is about the same. But only if the *Qere* is accepted is Isa 10:13 germane to our discussion.

¹⁵ See the following studies: H. Tadmor, "The Aramaization of Assyria: Aspects of Western Impact," in *Mesopotamien und seine Nachbarn*, vol. 2, ed. H. J. Nissen and J. Renger (XXV. Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, 1978) (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1982), 449–70; H. Tadmor, "Al Meqomah shel ha-ʿAramit be-Mamlekhet ʿAshur: Shalosh Heʿarot ʿal ʿAvlit shel Sargon," *Eretz-Israel* 20 (1989) [Yigael Yadin Volume]: 249–52; A. R. Millard, "Assyrians and Arameans," *Iraq* 45 (1983) [XXIX. Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, 1982]: 101–7; and F. M. Fales, *Aramaic Epigraphs on Clay Tablets of the Neo-Assyrian Period* (Studi Semitici, nuova serie, 2) (Rome: Università degli Studi "La Sapienza," 1986).

¹⁶ It should be noted, however, that the root *kbr* occurs also in Akkadian, with the basic meaning "fat, heavy, thick," and less frequently with the meaning "strong." See *CAD* 8 [K] (1971): 4–5; and *AHW* 1 (1965): 415.

¹⁷ P. Machinist, "Assyria and Its Image in the First Isaiah," *JAOS* 103 (1983): 719–37.

⁸ H. Wehr and J. M. Cowan, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Spoken Language Services, 1976), 809–11.

⁹ See most importantly A. Guillaume, "The Arabic Background of the Book of Job," in *Promise and Fulfilment: Essays Presented to S. H. Hooke*, ed. F. F. Bruce (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 106–27; and A. Guillaume, *Studies in the Book of Job* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968). At times Guillaume overargues his case, but many of his individual points are valid nonetheless.

¹⁰ G. A. Rendsburg, "Sabaic Notes to Hebrew Grammar," *Abr-Nahrain* 27 (1989): 106–19, esp. pp. 109–12.

¹¹ Kaufman, "Classification of the North West Semitic Dialects," 56, with reference to I. Eph'al, "'Ishmael' and 'Arab(s)': A Transformation of Ethnological Terms," *JNES* 35 (1976): 234.

¹² From a slightly later period, i.e., from the first century B.C.E. through the fourth century C.E., we have the documentation of Safaitic, but from the early and mid-first millennium B.C.E. we possess no direct evidence of the linguistic situation of the area.

amassed by Machinist, the dimension of linguistic representation may now be added to produce an even more accurate depiction of the Assyrian monarch.¹⁸

In Isa 16:14 the prophet speaks God's words to Moab, so that addressee-switching is to be expected.¹⁹ Our knowledge of Moabite, of course, is limited, and the root *kbr* does not appear in the Mesha Stele or the few other Moabite remains in our possession. But if I may be permitted a bit of speculation, my hunch is that Moabite possessed the word *kabbîr* "strong, mighty." From a grammatical perspective, such as one based on the detailed study of W. R. Garr, it is noteworthy that Moabite is more closely related to Deir 'Alla and Aramaic than is Hebrew and other dialects of Canaanite.²⁰

Isa 17:12 occurs in the chapter devoted to the oracle addressed to Damascus, though admittedly it is not clear where the oracle ends. In any case, Isa 17:12 clearly refers to Assyria, where the great empire is referred to metaphorically as *mayim kabbîrîm* "mighty waters."²¹ Thus, whether Aramaic-speaking Damascus still is being addressed at this point, or whether simply Assyria is referred to here generically as a warning to all the nations of the west (Aram, Israel, etc.), again we may assume that the prophet purposefully employed the word *kabbîr* in an example of addressee-switching. Note that in standard Hebrew the phrase is *mayim rabbîm* (2 Sam 22:17, Jer 41:12, Ezek 1:24, Hab 3:15, Ps 18:17, 32:6, Song 8:7, etc.).²²

The final example is Isa 28:2, which to a certain extent is like the preceding instance. Here the northern kingdom of Israel is addressed, and the words *mayim kabbîrîm* once more refer to Assyria. It is now clear

¹⁸ On the possibility that Aramaic was the language through which Assyrian propaganda and literary expression reached Isaiah, see Machinist, "Assyria and Its Image in the First Isaiah," 733.

¹⁹ At least the majority of ch. 16 is addressed to Moab. This final verse may be addressed to Judah concerning Moab, but in either instance addressee-switching (as defined above and as discussed in note 13) is operative.

²⁰ W. R. Garr, *Dialect Geography in Syria-Palestine, 1000–586 B.C.E.* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 229–31.

²¹ On the topos of Assyria or its king as mighty waters or raging waters, see Machinist, "Assyria and its Image in the First Isaiah," 726–28 (with specific reference to our passage on p. 727, n. 48).

²² The phrase *mayim 'addîrîm* in Exod 15:10 may be an archaism. See also Ps 93:4 for *mayim rabbîm 'addîrîm*.

that the dialect of northern Israel was distinct from the dialect of southern Judah. The latter is the standard in the Bible, often called Standard Biblical Hebrew (SBH), but more accurately to be called Judahite Hebrew (JH). The former I prefer to call Israelian Hebrew (IH), one of whose characteristics is a considerable number of isoglosses with Aramaic.²³ Thus, it is perfectly possible that *kabbîr* was used in IH,²⁴ though not in JH. Alternatively, if *kabbîr* was not used in IH, then, as in Isa 17:12, Isaiah employed the term in this passage because it refers to Assyria. In either case, we have an example of addressee-switching at work.

To sum up, *kabbîr* "strong, mighty" was not part of the SBH or JH vocabulary. It is used in the Bible ten times, in each case as part of the techniques of style-switching or addressee-switching. In the six passages in Job and in Isa 10:13, the writers employed the word to color the speech of foreigners, either the Transjordanian characters of the book of Job or the king of Assyria in Isaiah 10. In Isa 16:14, 17:12, 28:2, addressee-switching is in effect, as Moab, Damascus (?), and Ephraim are addressed, and in the last two instances the might of Assyria is described.

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²³ See the numerous items collected in my *Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms*. See also my "The Northern Origin of 'The Last Words of David' (2 Sam 23,1–7)," *Biblica* 69 (1988): 113–21.

²⁴ Because the word *kabbîr* does not appear in later forms of Western Aramaic (Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, Samaritan Aramaic, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, etc.) nor in Mishnaic Hebrew (MH), one may doubt that it existed in IH. I state this a) because IH would presumably have more ties to Western Aramaic than to Eastern Aramaic, and b) because of the large number of features common to both IH and MH; see my "The Galilean Background of Mishnaic Hebrew," in *Studies on the Galilee in Late Antiquity*, ed. L. I. Levine (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, forthcoming). But lexemes come and go in dialects and languages, so it is still possible that IH (like Moabite [?]) possessed *kabbîr*, but that it disappeared from the western languages (Hebrew and Western Aramaic) at a later period. On the lack of *kabbîr* in Western Aramaic and MH, see E. Y. Kutscher, *Ha-Lashon ve-ha-Reqa' ha-Leshoni shel Megillat Yesha'yahu ha-Shlemah mi-Megillot Yam ha-Melaḥ* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1959), 185–86; and A. Hurvitz, "Observations on the Language of the Third Apocryphal Psalm from Qumran," *RQ* 5 (1965): 228–29, n. 8.