PSALM 29:7

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The phrase כָּלַ֖ו הַצְּבָּא לְהֵבָ֖הַת אֶשׁ in Ps 29:7 has been recently discussed in detail by my friend and colleague E. Greenstein. A careful inquiry of this poetic expression and a thorough examination of its various interpretations led him to the conclusion that even as a metaphor the verb הצב does not make sense in this context, and should therefore be emended. He therefore proposed “to revive a suggestion made some time ago by the Briggs,” namely to emend the MT as follows:

כָּלָ֖ו הַצְּבָּא לְהֵבָ֖הַת אֶשׁ — Hark! YHWH — his arrows are flames of fire

While the Briggs did not elaborate on their suggestion, Greenstein has backed it up with various illuminating examples from biblical and ancient Near Eastern sources, literary and iconographic. They all indicate that the arrow image in this context is "entirely consistent with biblical as well as wider ancient Near Eastern conventions."3

I would like to offer two other alternative readings of this poetic line that have not yet been considered: the first (A) retains the MT, and the second (B) advocates a new reconstruction.

A. In Support of MT

In an attempt to refute the possibility of keeping unchanged the MT הצב, Greenstein discussed some interpretive options and rejected them all. If the common meaning of הצב (hew) is accepted here then, so goes the argument, “one is to posit a figurative usage” of the root. However “hewing fire like stone” is not only a unique metaphor in the Hebrew Bible, but “Psalm 29’s other images are far more literal, and none of its

3Greenstein, “Yhwh’s Lightning, 56.

language is so, shall we say, creative.” He shows that the other approach, namely, to find a meaning of הצבא other than ‘hewing’ “on the basis of internal and comparative philology is (also, Y. H.) unsatisfactory.”

On the basis of the exegetical options discussed by Greenstein, his arguments seem to me impeccable and convincing. However, there is another exegetical option, which, to my mind, makes the metaphoric understanding of הצבא (hewing) less “creative” and more plausible. My suggestion is to comprehend the verse as an elliptic sentence: "The voice of YHWH hews [rocks creating] flames of fire" — by hewing the rocks (with his voice) God makes fire. The reader’s attention is already directed to the elliptic character of our verse by three previous appearances of צבאו in (non-verbal, hence ‘elliptic’) noun-clause sentences: צבאו בן צבאו, בן צבאו (v. 3); צבאו בן צבאו, בן (v. 4). Gesenius, referring to the (pronominal) object indicates, that it “is very frequently omitted, when it can be easily supplied from the context.” I claim that a similar elliptic style obtains also in our case, where indeed the (indirect) object ‘rocks’ is “easily supplied from the context.” צבאו is commonly related in the Hebrew Bible to rocks, stony soil, etc., and 21 of its 27 occurrences are in such a context. It is therefore sensible to assume its use without the (self evidently understood) object (rocks, stones). Hence, besides sentences with explicit two objects (or an object + locative adverb like יגוס צבאו מ, Isa 5:2) we find elliptic sentences in which one element is only implied, such as צבאו בּאָבִי (Prov 9:1); צבאו בּוֹרוּס (Isa 22:16). This might be our case, especially since we are dealing here with a poetic text, which by its very essence is syntactically more flexible. Thus צבאו should be considered not as a direct object but rather as an implicit secondary object.

This interpretation makes the metaphors in our verse not so surprising or unique as to deny their literary plausibility. First, the combination of the three motifs comprising our metaphor — the voice of God, light (flames), and the verb הצבא is found at least once again in the Hebrew Bible in Hosea's words לעל כל צבאו בניಕים הרתים.
Hence, the voice of Yahweh, his words in this case, ‘hews,’ and comparing the voice of God (thunder) to a chisel, which by hewing rocks ignites sparks (=flames, or: the sparks that inflame the wood) is not a far fetched metaphor. Fire or sparks as an effect of hewing hard stones (or even striking them against each other) such as flint or basalt, has always been a well-known phenomenon. This is possibly what stands behind the term בנים אש (fire stones,” Ezek 28:14, 16) — hard stones which ignite sparks when struck against each other.

B. A New Reconstruction

However, being aware of the possibility that the reading suggested above is not free of doubts, I would like to propound also a new reconstruction of Ps 29:7.

(a) One of Greenstein’s arguments in favor of his revision is that it needs only a slight modification of the MT. This is definitely a sound methodological consideration and adopting this principle I suggest an even slighter emendation. Instead of行政机关 שלבעותי — an arrow in flames.

Maintaining all the benefits of Greenstein’s reconstruction, mine has a clear methodological advantage: it does not oblige the modification of any consonants in the MT. The only change is the different division of the words, when the beth of the problematic שעידי is attached as a preposition to the nounész לוחות. This preposition thus serves “the idea of touching, striking against anything.”

10 Or, following the Septuagint καὶ τὸ κρίμα μου ἀκέταστο = ἀκέταστον. Harper emended to the metaphor καὶ τὸ κρίμα μου ἀκέταστον. Wherefore I have hewn them by the prophets.” So also Wolff, “Drum schlag ich drein durch propheten” (see W. R. Harper, Amos and Hosea [ICC; T & T. Clark: Edinburgh, 1905] 285; H. P. Wolff, Hosea [BKAT; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965] 132; 135). This emendation is unnecessary. The MT in Hosea should be compared to Jeremiah’s description of the prophetic experience, which was possibly influenced by Hosea: מְאֹד הָא יְהֹוָה דֶּרֶךְ אֶל מַעֲשֵׂה יַעֲשֵׂנִי בִּלְחֹ֨ז לְרֹאשׁ מַעֲשֶׂה יַעֲשֵׂנִי בִּלְחֹ֨ז. “Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a sledgehammer which smashes a rock” (Jer 23:29). Here too, the three elements — hewing stones, God’s voice, and fire — are used, which reinforces our reading of Ps 29:7.

11 This is also attested by the fact that the ancient versions do not reflect any difficulty in translating the metaphor as it is. Thus, e.g., the Septuagint: τὸ κρίμα μου ἀκέταστον. The phrase was used also in post-biblical Hebrew (See E. Ben-Lehuda, Thesaurus Totius Hebraitatis [Tel-Aviv: La’am, 1948] 3.1702), and absorbed into Modern Hebrew (e.g. J. H. Brenner, The Complete Works [Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1956] 1.72 [Hebrew]). This might also attest to the deep-rooted, self-evident mental origin of the metaphor שעידי לוחות.

12 For this phenomenon see E. Tov, Textual Criticism of the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 208-209; 252-253.

13 Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar § 119n.
This is a double metaphor depicting a storm: the arrow is an image for הָרָעָם viewed as a bolt of thunder penetrating flames of burning lightning. It might be compared with some other hymnic descriptions of a storm using the arrow image either in the singular form, like Zech 9:14, or in the plural form, like 2 Sam 22:15 ( bdsm or its variant זָנַי in Ps 18:15).

(b) According to both suggested emendations the verse should be considered a nominal sentence (the predicate being either זָנַי or צָהָר), which is quite common in Biblical Hebrew. However, Greenstein’s reconstruction involves another syntactic modification of the MT which is quite nonessential and seems less acceptable.

According to the MT syntax, expressed by the accentuation, הָרָעָם is to be considered one clause in which הָרָעָם is *nomen regens* and צָהָר is *nomen rectum*. Greenstein, on the other hand, suggests to consider הָרָעָם as an ‘incomplete sentence.’ A voice (is heard) and then the rest is considered a sentence “with casus pendens,” which is, as Greenstein admits “uncommon.” My reconstruction does not necessitate this syntactic change (in fact, it is required neither for Greenstein’s reconstruction). הָרָעָם is repeated as a subject four times in vv. 3-6, 8-9, and there is no reason whatsoever to change its syntactic status in verse 7. The MT syntax is also in accordance with poetic considerations. There is no doubt that ideologically and rhetorically YHWH is the only subject of Psalm 29. However, its consistent appearance as the syntactic subject as well comes only at the end. The name YHWH is repeated seventeen times in the hymn, and its syntactical dispersal creates an interesting pattern of 4 - 7 - 4 (but see above, note 16). The hymn opens with four phrases in which YHWH is the (indirect) object (vv. 1-2):

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14 This image is to be compared to Ps 77:19, בְּרַכְיָא בְּנֵלָא יָהָוָא בְּרַכְיָא.

15 In Ps 64:8 (in a different context) the ketib is in the singular צָהָר while the qeri is in the plural. In 2 Sam 22:15 the MT version is ishîyot (singular) וַיְשַׁלָּחֵהוּ בִּרְכַיּוֹ (plural) וַיְשַׁלָּחֵהוּ בִּרְכַיּוֹ. The parallel version in Ps 18:15 reads וַיְשַׁלָּחֵהוּ בִּרְכַיּוֹ instead of וַיְשַׁלָּחֵהוּ בִּרְכַיּוֹ. If the original written text was צָהָר, then both versions in 2 Sam 22 and Ps 18 might allude to a consistent singular version — וַיְשַׁלָּחֵהוּ בִּרְכַיּוֹ. Greenstein thinks that וַיְשַׁלָּחֵהוּ in Ps 29:7 “was originally written וַיְשַׁלָּחֵהוּ” (“Yhwh’s Lightning,” 56, n. 39).

16 The MT considers צָהָר in all its appearances in Psalm 29 as one phrase. Although the accentuation varies, צָהָר is either accented with a *conjectivus vel servus* (vv. 3; 4b mercia; 5, 8 munsach; 9 malphach) or not accented at all, using the malphach (vv. 4a; 7) to convey the concept of ‘one word’ (See: M. Medan, *Encyclopaedia Biblica* [Bialik institute, Jerusalem 1958] 3.403).

17 *Gersten’s Hebrew Grammar* §147.

18 However, this consistency is anticipated by two previous non-consecutive appearances of YHWH as a subject in vv. 3 and 5. For the poetic function of anticipation see, e.g., F. Polak, *Biblical Narrative — Aspects of Art and Design* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1994) 112 (Hebrew).
Then come seven phrases in which the name YHWH constitutes a *nomen rectum* (vv. 3-9):

Then, only in its last 4 appearances, YHWH becomes the syntactic subject:

This gradualness is breached if קֶרֶל is syntactically separated from הָדָו.

Hence, my preference is to adhere to the MT syntax *nomen regens + nomen rectum* which considers הָדָו קֶרֶל as one clause.