

History, Memory, Hebrew Scriptures

A Festschrift for Ehud Ben Zvi

edited by

IAN DOUGLAS WILSON and DIANA V. EDELMAN

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Menachem's Massacre of Tiphseh: At the Crossroads of Grammar and Memory (2 Kings 15:16)

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Memories of Defeats and Victories

Many nations, groups and communities have as part of their identity the collective memory of a heroic battle in the past.¹ The tales and traditions of these military events often are more heroic than historical. Although the stories are presented as history they do not present history—there is a high degree of malleability in memory (Loftus 1979; Ben Zvi 2003). Nevertheless, by members of the pertinent nation, group or community they are construed as ‘real history’; these events were foundational to their existence; they are believed and celebrated.

The history of humankind is full of historical memories of military defeats and victories that are important symbols for the acts in the present. On June 15th, 1389, about five kilometres northwest of modern-day Pristina, a battle took place between the Serbians led by Lazar Hrebeljanović and the invading army of the Ottoman Empire under Sultan Murad I. Although the battle ended undecided, the Serbian troops were so weakened that they no longer were able to defend their country. This lost battle has grown to be an important marker of Serbian national identity and was more than once used by Slobodan Milošević in his rhetoric against the Muslim Bosnians (Emmert 1990; Redep 1991; Judah 2000; Bieber 2002). Other examples of such battles are easily found: de Guldensporenslag (Battle of the Golden Spurs) near Courtrai in Flanders, 1302 (Lambert 2000); Battle of Agincourt, 1415 (Keegan 2011); Waterloo, 1815 (Keegan 2011; Corrigan 2014); the Battle at Chacabuco, 1817 (Harvey 2000); the Wounded Knee Massacre, 1890 (Gitlin 2011); Pearl Harbor, 1941 (Zimm 2011); and many others.

Author's note: With this small contribution, I would like to thank Ehud Ben Zvi for his academic friendship over the years.

1. On the concept of collective memory see basically Assmann 1992; along with the essays in Pennebaker, Paez, and Rimé 1997; and Brown, Kouri, and Hirst 2012.

In the Hebrew Bible, reflections are found of a foundational military event: the defeat of the Pharaonic army at the sea of reeds. I will not discuss here questions of the historicity of this memory or the inventedness of this tradition. What is more important is to note that the Exodus has been part of the cultural memory of Ancient Israel (Albertz 2001). At least two other formative military clashes can be mentioned: Judges 6–8 narrates the quarrels between the Israelites under Gideon with the Midianites. The victory over them became part of the collective memory as is witnessed by Isaiah (9:4):

For you have broken the yoke of his burden,
and the staff of his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor,
as on the day of Midian.

Another example is the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians as mentioned in 2 Kings 25, which led to the mnemonic tradition of the betrayal of Edom.² To this list, I would like to add a third example, to be found in 1 Kgs 16:17–19:

Then Omri and all Israel with him went up from Gibbethon, and they besieged Tirzah. And it came about, when Zimri saw that the city was taken, that he went into the citadel of the king's house and burned the king's house over him with fire, and died, because of his sins which he sinned, doing evil in the sight of YHWH, walking in the way of Jeroboam, and in his sin which he did, making Israel sin.³

This short remark narrates a dreadful event: the siege and capture of the city of Tirzah by the hands of Omri, king of Israel. In the next sections, I would like to argue that the memory of this defeat played a role in the collective memory of ancient Israel.

King Menachem

In this section, I would like to argue that a reference to this collective memory can be found in a note regarding the reign of Menachem, king of Israel. The biblical report on the deeds and doings of King Menachem in 2 Kings 15 has not received much scholarly attention, except for the remark on the payment of a heavy tribute to Pul, king of Assyria.⁴ Nevertheless, the text of 2 Kgs 15:16 contains an interesting exegetical problem. The NRSV renders this verse as follows:

2. See Obad 10–16; Ezek 25:12–14; 35:5–7; Ps 137; 1 Esdras 4:45–50. This tradition is continued in Rabbinic writings; see Kunin 1999; Tebes 2011.

3. See, e.g., Montgomery and Gehman 1951: 28–84; Gray 1977: 362–71; Cogan 2000: 413–14.

4. 2 Kgs 15:19–20. פִּיל is a shortened form for Tiglath-Pileser III. The tribute is most probably referred to in an inscription of this Assyrian king: TP III Stele IIIA:5. See Tadmor 1994: 106,

At that time Menachem sacked Tiphseh, all who were in it and its territory from Tirzah on; because they did not open it to him, he sacked it. He ripped open all the pregnant women in it.

Already the *versiones antiquae* were uncertain about the localities mentioned. תפסה is rendered with Θερσα in the LXX, Θαππυα in the LXX¹⁵ and with Thapsa in the Vulgate as in 1 Kgs 4:24 [Heb. 5:4]. The rendition in the LXX with Θερσα seems to be based on a confusion or identification of תפסה with תרצה. I will not enter here into a full text-critical discussion, but only note that the LXX—which renders תרצה in this verse also with Θερσα, and has Θερσαλα in 2 Kgs 15:14 for תרצה as the city of origin of Menachem—seems to imply that Menachem ruined his own hometown since it rendered תרצה with Θερσα.

The Hebrew Preposition *min*

This absence of clarity in the *versiones antiquae* is—in my view—indicative of the complex syntax of the Hebrew verse. Especially the adverbial adjunct מתרצה is problematic. It is clear that this group of words amplifies the verb נכה 'to strike/defeat/subdue/destroy'.⁶ In what sense, however, is the given verb amplified? Phrased otherwise: How should one construe the preposition *min*? Generally, the preposition is seen as an expression of the partitive 'away/from'.⁷ This would imply that the subduing of the territory of Tiphseh⁸ started with a destruction of Menachem's hometown Tirzah.⁹ Dubovský nuanced this position by arguing that Tirzah was the place of departure of Menachem's campaign.¹⁰ A weak point in this interpretation is the fact that the partitive preposition *min* is generally combined

274–76; Loretz and Mayer 1990; Na'aman 1995: 38–40; Shea 1978: 43–49; Becking 1992: 2–5; Dubovský 2006, 2008: 3; Weippert 2010: 285–90; Bagg 2011: 213–27.

5. This reading is seen as the more original one by: Elliger 1930: 292; Montgomery and Gehman 1951: 449–50; Gray 1977: 622–23; Würthwein 1984: 178; Cogan and Tadmor 1988: 171; Na'aman 1995: 38; Schoors 1998: 20. If this were correct, the city could be identified with Tappuah, mentioned a few times in Joshua (12:17; 15:34, 53; 17:7, 8). See, however, the critical remarks by P. Dubovský (2013: 31–35).

6. מתרצה should not be connected with the name of the king; the distance is too great to render "Menachem the King, from Tirzah . . ."; see also the remarks by Dubovský (2013: 34–35).

7. See most recently Oren 2011.

8. The MT seems to refer to a city Tiphseh. The only known city named *Tiphseh in ancient documents was located at the Euphrates. If this were the Tiphseh mentioned in 2 Kings 15, then the text would contain a reflection of the ancient dream of a vast Israelite Empire—from the Brook of Egypt to the Euphrates river; see Haran 1967: 284–90. Since this city is not known in sources older than Xenophon (*Anabasis* 1.4.11.17), it is more probable that 2 Kings 15 refers to a city in the mountainous area of Northern Israel. T. R. Hobbs (1985: 197) argues that a location both on the banks of the Euphrates and in the Israelite hill-country is possible.

9. Thus: LXX (απο + gen.); DCH 5:689; Gray 1997: 622; Hobbs 1985: 88, 196; Cogan and Tadmor 1988: 169; Na'aman 1995: 38; Fritz 2003: 331; Sweeney 2007: 372; Clancy 2012: 290.

10. Dubovský 2013: 31–35.

with another preposition: ‘*ad* in the merism “from. . . to. . .”¹¹ With the verb נכה ‘to strike’, for example, this merism is attested at, e.g., Exod 9:25 and 1 Sam 22:19. Since the partitive preposition *min* is not combined with ‘*ad* in 2 Kgs 15:16, the Hebrew text does not communicate something like “Menachem smote the area from Tirza to Tiphshah.” The preposition *min* most probably had another force and function.

I therefore will explore two other possibilities. The preposition *min* can also be the expression of the comparative.¹² Next to that *min* could function as an indication of the reason for the act expressed by the main verb of a clause.¹³

The comparative meaning is generally found in combination with a noun¹⁴ or with descriptive verbs where the preposition occurs in a nominal clause.¹⁵ In the Hebrew Bible, however, a few examples can be found of verbs that express an act in combination with a comparative preposition *min*.¹⁶ A good example is Jer 16:12: “You, however, have done more evil than your fathers.” This brings me to a first alternative for the translation, in which I construe the preposition *min* in מתרצה in 2 Kgs 15:16 as an expression of comparison:

At that time Menachem ruined Tiphshah, with all its inhabitants and its territory more than Tirzah, since it did not open. He destroyed and ripped open all the pregnant women in it.

A second alternative is provoked by the syntactical possibility to construe *min* as having causal force. Various examples of this construction of the preposition can be found in the Hebrew Bible,¹⁷ for instance, in Nah 3:4: “Because of the many harlotries. . .” (. . . מרוב זנוני . . .).¹⁸ It should be noted, however, that *min* in this sense is never connected with a toponym, which would be an argument against construing מתרצה in 2 Kgs 15:16 as an expression of the cause for the military attack. There exists, however, one text in which a causal *min* is combined twice with a divine name, Jer 48:13: “Moab will be ashamed because of Chemosh (מכמוש) / As the House of Israel was ashamed because of Bethel, their confidence.”¹⁹ The syntagma “because of Chemosh” should be seen as an elliptic expression for something like “because of the evil they had done in the name of Chemosh.” The construal of *min* with a divine name opens, in my view, the possibility to connect the preposition

11. As has been proposed by K. Elliger (1930: 292); see also Würthwein 1984: 378.

12. *DCH* 5:340–41.

13. Waltke and O’Connor 1990: §11.2.11.d; Joüon and Muraoka 1991: §133d.

14. E.g., Song 5:10: “. . . more outstanding than 1,000”; see Waltke and O’Connor 1990: §14.4.d.

15. E.g., 2 Sam 1:23: “They were swifter than eagles; they were stronger than lions.”

16. *DCH* 5:340.

17. *DCH* 5:342–43.

18. As suggested by Dahood 1971: 395. See, e.g., Fabry 2006: 191; Christensen 2009: 339.

19. See Holladay 1989: 357.

with a toponym. Returning to 2 Kgs 15:16, the syntagma **מתרצה** 'because of Tirzah' could then be interpreted as an ellipsis for "what had been done to Tirzah," leading to the rendition: "At that time Menachem ruined Tiphseh, with all its inhabitants and its territory because of Tirzah, since it did not open. He destroyed and ripped open all the pregnant women in it." Both the comparative and the causal function of the preposition *min* lead to an interesting interpretation that certainly needs considering.

Some Exegetical Remarks

Before coming to a conclusion, a few exegetical remarks on 2 Kgs 15:16 must be made.

First, the NRSV renders the clause in which a cause for the military attack is given as follows: "because they did not open it to him." This rendition, present with some variation in many modern translations and some of the commentaries (e.g., Gray 1977: 622), is in line with the LXX: ὅτι οὐκ ἤνοιξαν αὐτῷ. In my view, however, the subject of the verbal form **פתח** 'he opened' is to be construed as a third person singular and hence would refer metonymically to the city of Tiphseh (see also Cogan and Tadmor 1988: 169; Na'aman 1995: 38).

Second, Albright (1931; see Fowler 1981; Cogan and Tadmor 1988: 171; Finkelstein 2011; Dubovský 2013: 38–40) correctly identified Tirzah with *tell el-Far'ah* northeast of Schechem and argued that the place formed a military stronghold to defend against enemies from the North (Damascus) and the East (the Ammonites).

Third, the pregnant women who were atrociously ripped open, killed by Menachem, were inhabitants of the city of Tiphseh. Comparative material from the ancient Near East makes clear that such awful deeds against pregnant women were part of the acts of violence in ancient warfare, at least in written reports and pictorial representations in which they were memorialized.²⁰

These remarks lead to the conclusion that the tradition in 2 Kgs 15:16 was connected to Tirzah, a well-known military and administrative centre from Israel's past, and that the language used to describe the destruction of Tiphseh is concordant with the ancient Near Eastern discourse on destruction. The fierce character of this language in 2 Kgs 15:16 corroborates the idea of a revenge for deeds in the past that were part of the collective memory.

At the Crossroads of Grammar and Memory

Above, I have argued that the adverbial adjunct **מתרצה** should be rendered either as "more than Tirzah," or as "because of Tirzah." This rendition implies that

20. On the character of this cruelty, see Cogan 1983; Kuhrt 2001; Richardson 2007; Dubovský 2009 (with interesting pictorial material from Ashurbanipal's North Palace).

the clause “Menachem hit Tiphseh. . .” would reflect an element in the collective memory of ancient Israel. In my view, this element is present in the short narrative of 1 Kgs 16:17–19, mentioned above. I will make a few remarks on this short narrative. The brute act ended the short reign of Zimri, who, during the seven days of his government, conspired against king Asa. Omri, the commander of the army of the Northern Kingdom, answered the infidelity with an immediate and harsh response, which certainly helped his own aspirations to the throne. Tirzah had been the capital city of Northern Israel from the time of Jeroboam I, or to say the same in relation to the narrative: from 1 Kgs 15:33 onward. The destruction of Tirzah and the transition of the administrative center to Samaria by the Omrides might have fuelled rivalry between various clans within the Northern Kingdom. In my view this capture was a negative element in the collective memory of the anti-Omride faction in the Northern Kingdom.

In other words, מִתְרַצָּה ‘more than Tirzah’ or ‘because of Tirzah’ refers back to the memory of a defeated group within the Northern Kingdom. The existence of rival factions within the Northern Kingdom cannot be proven historically but is hinted at by texts like 1 Kgs 16:21 and 2 Kgs 15:16. In conclusion, Menachem did not ruin his own hometown, nor did he start his campaign from there.²¹ His awful destruction of Tiphseh should be seen as an act of revenge for Omri’s deeds and doings.

Bringing memory and grammar together evokes a fresh look at 2 Kgs 15:16. I do not claim that my reading of the text offers a final solution to all its interpretative problems, but I hope that it will not go unnoticed.

21. Pace Dubovský 2013: 31–35.

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