

Was Jerusalem's Fall Wonderful?

Frank W. Hardy

When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it? (Amos 3:6)

Introduction

In this note we refer to *tērēd* (Qal m2s ipv, Qal f3s), *tērad* (Qal f3s), *tēred* (Qal f3s), and *tōred* (Hiphil f3s). The root in each case is **yrd*, which has to do with downward motion. There are 12 such forms in the Old Testament. In one sense it is true that the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC was an act of God, accomplished for Him by the Babylonians, but calling the death and destruction involved in this event wonderful would be astoundingly callous.

Discussion

On one level the question is whether *wattērēd* in Lam 1:9 refers to something God does, or to something Jerusalem does. The motion referred to in this verb is performed by Jerusalem, not God. Jerusalem sinks appallingly when she first falls to, and is then destroyed by, the Babylonians.

For God to be the active Agent bringing about Jerusalem's fall in a syntactic sense the form *wattērēd* would need to be Hiphil, which conveys a causative idea. But in fact the conjugation is Qal. (Hiphil would be *tōred* with a different first vowel.) Also the gender is wrong. Words referring to God are grammatically masculine, whereas *wattērēd* in Lam 1:9 is feminine. Qal feminine does not provide a basis for applying this passage to God. What Lam 1:9 says is simply that Jerusalem falls – not that someone causes her to fall – although it is true that for reasons which go beyond the present discussion God works through Babylon to bring her down. Historically I don't deny God's part in all of this. But syntactically that information is not conveyed by *wattērēd*. It is syntax which occupies us here.

On a second level, the reason why all of this is important has to do, not with *wattērēd* itself, but with the word which immediately follows it. The form *p^llāʾīm* is from *pēleʿ*, which some say must always refer to God's "wonderful" acts or attributes. Lam 1:9 provides a counter-example.¹ Because the subject of *wattērēd* is not God, but Jerusalem, it follows that the word *p^llāʾīm* refers not to God's act of punishing Jerusalem, but to Jerusalem act of receiving punishment. Again, historically the result is all the same, but grammatically a distinction must be made. What we are talking about here is linguistic usage. Jerusalem's fall is "astounding" (NIV, NRS); she falls "appallingly" (TNK) (see below). It is a dreadful, horrible fall, brought about at least in part by the Babylonians.

Ultimately the reason for studying Lam 1:9 in this context has nothing to do with Jerusalem, or with Lamentations as such, but with a passage in Daniel. In Dan 12:6 we have the question, "How long will it be before these astonishing things [*happ^llāʾôt*] are fulfilled?" (NIV), or alternatively, "How long until

¹ It is not the only one. The root **pl^ʿ* appears 84 times in the Old Testament. In five cases it is used as a verb with the meaning "to fulfill," which is unrelated to the present inquiry. Of the remaining 79 examples, 66 are verbs and 13 are nouns. Of the 66 verbs, 59 refer to God and seven do not. Of the 13 nouns, 11 refer to God and – by my count – two do not. These are Lam 1:9 and Dan 12:6. So the proportion for nouns (11:2 = 84.6%) is similar to what we would expect if the only information we had about this root was its usage profile as a verb (59:7 = 89.4%). So when I suggest that two out of 13 nouns refer to things other than God, that is a reasonable proportion. I deal with these facts in a separate word search.

the end of these awful things [*happ^lā^ot*]?" (TNK). There are those who would argue that, if the things in question are a reference to something God does, then they cannot also be a reference to the work of the king of the North during the Middle Ages. Thus, the passage cannot refer to the period of the king's "astounding" deeds, but must refer to a future period during which God's own "wonderful" work is being manifested. This is a position that some have taken.

It will always be possible to ascribe to the Lord what He permits, but doing so will not always be consistent with the facts of syntax. If *wattēred* is grammatically feminine, a feminine rather than masculine subject performs the action. It is not the case that – in the language of the passage – a masculine God causes Jerusalem to fall. Instead a feminine Jerusalem falls for unspecified reasons. We know what the reasons were (Babylon conquered the city), and we can be sure that God allowed them to do it, but the reasons are unspecified in the sentence where the word occurs. The subject is feminine (not masculine) and the conjugation is Qal (not Hiphil).

Conclusion

From the above I conclude that in a minority of cases forms of *pēle'* have been used to describe things that are horribly bad rather than wonderfully good. The core meaning appears to be that something passes belief or is astounding for whatever. That's the point I'm making here. It doesn't always have to be for the same reason. No linguist would ever claim that a word can only be used in one way.

The fall of Jerusalem was not considered wonderful by anyone who experienced it and a negative sense is consistently conveyed in the translations. If the sense of Lam 1:9 is negative, then that passage provides a precedent outside of Daniel for seeing negative meaning in Dan 12:6. This information must be combined with the fact that in both of the other passages where Daniel uses the root **pl'* (8:24; 11:36) he does so in a negative sense. Thus Dan 12:6, interpreted negatively with reference to the astounding behavior of the king of the North, is consistent with his own usage elsewhere and with that of the writer of Lamentations in a similar context and timeframe.