

JOURNAL OF NORTHWEST SEMITIC LANGUAGES

VOLUME 39/1

2013

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A NEW ATTESTATION OF THE CANAANITE H STEM IN THE AMARNA LETTERS: NA-RI-I[Q] (EA 88:36)

ABSTRACT

The problematic verbal form in the Amarna letter 88:36 should be read na-ri-i[q], derived from the common Semitic root R.Y.Q (“to be empty”), and parsed as first pers. pl. yaqtul of the Canaanite H causative stem. This form constitutes an important piece of historical evidence in favour of the vowel pattern /a-i/ in the prefix conjugation of the H stem in Early Canaanite.

In many respects, Amarna letter no. 88 is an epitome of the correspondence of Rib-Hadda of Byblos. It is replete with recurring themes and expressions that characterize the Byblian epistles, such as the hostility of ‘Abdi-Aširta against Gubla, the loyalty of the city to the pharaoh despite difficulties and temptation to defect and join the ‘Apiru, and finally, the repeated requests for chariots and troops to guard the town. Among these well understood statements made by Rib-Hadda, there is one, in lines 34-39, which still defies comprehensive interpretation due to the apparent singularity of its content in combination with issues related to transliteration. The main problem concerns the last word in line 36. It has eluded interpretation because of the uncertainty of the reading: the sign in final position is visible only in part, and proposed readings of the word are difficult to parse. The only published copy of the tablet has, at the end of line 36, the signs *na* and *ri*, followed by two partial horizontal wedges (Bezold & Budge 1892:39). These wedges cannot be interpreted with certainty as any sign but their position does not exclude considering them as part of the sign IG. Indeed, Knudtzon transliterates the word in question as na-r[i]-i[k] (Knudtzon 1915:420). He translates the passage as “und es sehn[t] si[ch] die Stadt darnach” and derives the verbal form from the verb *narāku* which is listed in the glossary of his edition as “*narāku* I₁ sich sehnen?” with the unique attestation in EA 88:36. The same glossary suggests an alternative interpretation of the verb *na-ri-ik* as the N stative of the well-know verb *arāku* “to be long” (Knudtzon 1915:1482). However, the verb *narāku*, suggested by Knudtzon, is a ghost-word, absent from major Akkadian dictionaries and without obvious Semitic cognates. It is precisely this lack of comparative evidence, compounded by a syntactic difficulty, which brings Youngblood to reject Knudtzon’s

interpretation. As Youngblood rightly remarks, the word “city” (URU) cannot be the subject of *na-ri-ik* if it is parsed as 3rd pers. sing. masc. stative, because the word “city” is always constructed as feminine in Rib-Hadda’s correspondence. Youngblood, however, does not propose his own explanation of the verb, opts not to restore the form, and leaves it without translation (Youngblood 1961:318). Moran provides some useful insights but is unable to suggest how the verb should be parsed. He states that the final sign can be either IG or ŠU but seems to favour the first alternative as he transliterates the word as *na-re-eq*, tentatively derived from the verb *rêqu*, and translates: “we will distance ourselves from the city for him” (Moran 1992:161, note 12). Although Moran’s parsing and translation are unsatisfactory, he is on the right track in his contextual interpretation of the passage. He observes correctly that the verb must be an expression for surrendering Byblos and that it is perhaps the 1st pers. pl. (Moran 1992:161). The difficulty of the passage is not resolved in other recent translations. Liverani proposes a contextual rendition without further remarks: “la città sarà persa (?) per lui” (Liverani 1998:180). Cochavi-Rainey (2005:130) translates the passage “ואם הוא (עבדאשרת) יכבוש את העיר לעצמו”. This translation, probably based on a different reading of the signs, is difficult to evaluate since the author does not explain her choices. Finally, another proposal is advanced by Rainey, who transliterates and translates the passage as follows: *šá-ni-tam a-wi- / la yu-šé-bi-la be-li a-na ĪR-š[u!]* / *ki-ma ar-ḫi-iš a-na MAŠKÍM! ù na-<ša>-ri >U[RU]< / URU.KI a-na ša-šu*: “Furthermore, may my lord send a man to h[is] servant in a hurry as commissioner(!) and (to) guard the city for him” (Rainey 1996:II:183). Rainey’s interpretation derives from gratuitous emendations and assumes an unusual division of a word between two lines (*a-wi- / la*). Hence, his proposal must be discarded.

Although scholarly efforts have not led to a definitive interpretation of the passage, several points should be accepted: (1) the signs that form the problematic verb must read NA-RI-I[G]; (2) the verb should refer to the city’s surrender; (3) the word “city” cannot be the subject of the verb, unless a restoration is proposed; (4) the verb is perhaps 1st pers. pl.

I propose that the verb at the end of *EA* 88:36 should be transliterated *na-ri-i[q]*, derived from the common Semitic root R.Y.Q (“to be empty”), and parsed as 1st pers. pl. *yaqtul* of the Canaanite H causative stem.¹ In its

1 A connection of *na-ri-i[q]* with the Akkadian verb *raqû* “to hide, conceal, remove”, especially with its meaning in the N stem “to run away” (CAD 14 [R]:175), is implausible because of the syntax of the passage under

epistolary context, the transliteration *na-ri-i[q]* produces the following translation: “we will leave the city empty for him.” Several considerations relating to both form and content support this interpretation.

First of all, the vowelizing of the verb *na-ri-i[q]* conforms to that of other examples of the Canaanite H stem in the Amarna letters. In fact, all known examples of the prefix conjugation of the H stem, in the Amarna letters, have /i/ as the second vowel.² The vowel /a/ in the prefix is attested, but some examples are difficult to interpret. The gloss *ti-mi-tu-na-nu* (EA 238:33) has the vowel /i/ in place of the expected /a/ or /u/. On the other hand, the gloss *ia-šī-ni* (EA 282:14) has the vowel /a/, spelled unambiguously with the sign IA, where one might expect **yu-šī-ni*, spelled with the sign PI. This sign is indeed used in *PI-qī-il-li-ni* (EA 245:39), leaving us uncertain as to whether the initial syllable is **yi-* **yu-* or **ya-*. Finally, two forms, *ya-aḥ-li-qú* (EA 254:9) and *ia-ri-im* (EA 186:77), point to the vowel /a/ in the prefix and to the vowel /i/ after the second radical.³ Thus, the parsing of *na-ri-i[q]* as the Canaanite H stem is plausible in light of other examples of this stem in the Amarna letters, even though the vowelizing of the prefix, in some cases, remains uncertain. Furthermore, the occurrence of the root R.Y.Q in the H stem does not surprise us considering its use in Biblical Hebrew. As a matter of fact, this root as verb is attested in the Hebrew Bible exclusively in the H stem (Even-Shoshan 2000:s.v. הריק). In addition to the phenomenon of identical stems, the particular meaning of the root R.Y.Q, as it occurs in

consideration. The derivation of *na-ri-i[q]* from the Akkadian *rēqu* “to withdraw, depart” (CAD 14 [R]:266-268), as suggested by Moran (1992:161), while semantically appropriate, is syntactically impossible. In fact, the verb *rēqu* is intransitive and thus cannot govern URU.KI which is left in this case without explanation. If one derives *na-ri-i[q]* from the Akkadian *rēqu*, one must still admit that it is constructed according to Canaanite morphology and syntax. This choice leads to a rather awkward understanding of the phrase as “we will depart the city for him”.

- 2 Two extant examples of the H stem in the suffix conjugation in the cuneiform sources from Canaan (*ḥi-iḥ-bi-e* in EA 256:7 and *ḥe-te-qú* in a Late Bronze Age letter from Hazor) have the vowel /e/ after the second radical. For a discussion of these forms see Sivan (1984:174-175); Rainey (1996:II:315); and Greenstein (2004).
- 3 For a discussion of these forms, see Sivan (1984:174-176) and Rainey (1996:II:190-194). Note that Moran transliterates the problematic form in EA 245:39 as *ia_g-qī-il-li-ni* (1992:299).

EA 88:36, finds its semantic parallel in the Hebrew Bible. This root occurs rarely, in Biblical Hebrew, in reference to physical emptiness, a meaning which is evident in Gen 37:24 and Judg 7:16. A figurative use of the root is noticeable in the adverb רִיקָם meaning “empty-handed” (Exod 3:21; Deut 15:13; Job 22:9). Also רִיק, the noun derived from the root R.Y.Q, refers not to physical emptiness but rather moral nothingness, vanity, and futile efforts (Pss 2:1, 4:3, 73:13; Job 39:16). The same ethical meaning is perceivable in the negative characterization of men as “empty” (Judg 9:4, 11:3; 2 Chr 13:7). However, one must conclude that the nominal forms of this root conserve a close, figurative relation to the concept of emptiness in reference to moral vanity. Conversely, the use of the verb shows a greater variety of idiomatic meanings. The literal meaning of the verb is observable in Gen 42:35: וַיְהִי הֵם מְרִיקִים שְׂקֵיהֶם “as they were emptying their sacks” and Jer 31:12: וְכִלְיוֹ יִרְקוּ “and they shall empty his vessels.” It can also describe the pouring-down of liquid substances (Zech 4:12; Song 1:3) or of rain (Eccl 11:3). The same image of pouring-down, in reference to a blessing, appears in Mal 3:10. The verb לְהַרְיק acquires also interesting idiomatic usages in the military realm where it refers to the preparation of troops and weapons as well as to their use. The most widespread idiom speaks about “emptying the sword” meaning “to unsheathe the sword” (Exod 15:9; Lev 26:33; Ezek 5:2.12, 12:14; 28:7, 30:11). In a similar vein, the verb לְהַרְיק refers to throwing a spear (Ps 35:3). The meaning of this verb in Gen 14:14 is the most distant from its literal meaning “to empty”, as it describes Abraham mustering his retainers that they might free Lot who was held captive by the four kings (Gen 14:1-16). In conclusion, the Hebrew Bible attests clearly to the basic meaning of the root R.Y.Q “empty” as well as to the variety of its derived, more idiomatic usages, especially in the verb. These two facts support the interpretation of *na-ri-i[q]* in EA 88:36 as having the basic meaning “to empty”, as well as its being used in a more semantically flexible manner, as is often the case with the same verb in the Hebrew Bible.⁴

An additional argument in favour of a derivation of *na-ri-i[q]* from the root R.Y.Q comes from the distribution, in the Amarna letters, of forms derived from the adjective *rīqu* “empty” (EA 87:17; 102:12; 137:10, 21). Although it may be due to accident, this root occurs, in the letters from

4 Otherwise, the root is scantily attested in ancient North-West Semitic languages. It is not documented in Ugaritic, and occurs just a few times in Aramaic as an adjective with the meaning “void, vain.” See Hoftijzer & Jongeling (1995:1075).

Canaan, only in Rib-Hadda's correspondence (to which EA 88 belongs). While these few attestations hardly allow us to consider R.Y.Q a favourite root among the Byblian scribes, they nonetheless testify to its use in the local epistolary idiom.

Finally, the proposed parsing of *na-ri-i[q]* not only effects a smooth, grammatical translation of the passage in question, but moreover maintains the internal coherence of the epistle within a larger context. In EA 88:34-39, Rib-Hadda requests a speedy reply to his letter and threatens to strike a bargain with 'Abdi-Aširta: the abandonment of Gubla to 'Abdi-Aširta in exchange for safety, and another town in which to live and possibly to rule. Accepting the proposed parsing of *na-ri-i[q]*, EA 88:34-39 may be translated in the following manner: "Moreover, should my lord not have word brought to his servant by tablet, as soon as possible, then we will leave the city empty for him and I will request a town from him to stay in, and so I will stay alive" (*šá-ni-tam a-wa-<tam> la yu-šé-bi-la be-li a-na ĪR(!)-šu(!) ki-ma ar-ḫi-iš a-na DUB-pí ù na-ri-i[q] URU.KI a-na ša-šu ù er-r[i-i]š URU.KI iš-tu ša-šu a-na a-ša-bi-ia ú bal-<šá>-ti*).⁵

The proposed translation is supported also by the occurrence of two passages with a similar sense in two letters sent by Rib-Hadda prior to his dispatching EA 88.⁶ Their meaning is much clearer because the tablets, which are preserved in full, specifically make use of the verb *ezēbu* as an unambiguous reference to the abandonment of the city, a threat repeated in EA 88 with the problematic *na-ri-i[q]*. EA 83:44-51 is analogous to EA 88:34-39, in that the writer not only demands a response, but also threatens to abandon the city if the pharaoh fails to reply: "And so I write, 'If you do not tell him this, I will abandon the city and go off. Moreover, if you do not send word back to me, I will abandon the city and go off, together with the men who are loyal to me'" (Moran 1992:153). In EA 82:41-46, Rib-Hadda describes his own safety as a positive outcome of the city's abandonment, exactly as EA 88:34-39 does: "If within two months there are no archers, then I will abandon the city, go off, and my

5 One could object to this parsing and translation because of a sudden shift to the plural. The answer to this difficulty is anticipated already in Moran (1992:161). He rightly observes that the verb may refer to a joint action of Rib-Hadda and his fellow citizens. Moran also notes that the 1st pers. pl. occurs just a few lines earlier (EA 88:20).

6 Another similar passage is EA 126:44-47 in Rainey's rendition (Rainey 1996:1:56). See, however, objections to this translation in Moran (1992:206-207).

life will be safe while I do what I want to do” (Moran 1992:152). In light of the two passages cited above, it becomes clear that the content of EA 88:34-39 is by no means singular, but resembles previous threats that most probably went unanswered. Hence, the proposed parsing of *na-ri-i[q]* in EA 88:36 leads to a translation which is not only consistent with the content of the letter itself but also consonant with comparable passages in the Byblian correspondence.

To conclude, parsing *na-ri-i[q]* as 1st pers. pl. *yaqtul* of R.Y.Q in the Canaanite H stem not only elucidates an obscure passage of the Amarna letters but, more importantly, it provides the first piece of unambiguous evidence in favour of the vowel /a/ in the prefix conjugation of the Canaanite H stem in the Late Bronze Age. No less significant is another attestation of the vowel /i/ after the second radical in the prefix conjugation. This precious data must be taken into account in historical reconstructions of the vowels in the H stem in Ancient Hebrew (Blau 2010:234-236).

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