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ISAIAH 28:10, 13: A WARRANT FOR PROOF-TEXTING?

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## ISAIAH 28:10, 13: A WARRANT FOR PROOF-TEXTING?

### Introduction

Proof-texting is the use of isolated texts from a larger document in an attempt to establish a position in a polemical encounter. In Biblical studies, this has been one of the most over-used forms of establishing a theological position by preachers, teachers, and laymen alike. It is an appeal to certain passages to justify a point of doctrine notwithstanding the context of the passage being cited. It often results in absurd conclusions such that “theologian A claims to have a more ‘biblical’ theology than theologian B, based upon counting up verse in parentheses (on a random page from each work) and claiming to have three times as many.”<sup>1</sup> Such treatment of textual data is not only unfair to the text but also detrimental to the scholarship itself. Yet no matter how futile the practice is, proof-texting is a widely used method of “interpreting” the Scriptures, even in Adventist theological history. William Miller espoused the idea of using only the Bible and a concordance to arrive at a particular Bible truth. He taught how Scriptures interpret itself by bringing together all the texts on the subject and examining every word to form a theory without contradiction nor error.<sup>2</sup> The idea is that

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<sup>1</sup> J. Reese, “Pitfalls of Proof-Texting,” *BTB* 13 (1983): 121-23.

<sup>2</sup> I. C. Wellcome, *History of the Second Advent Message and Mission, Doctrine and People* (Yarmouth, ME: Author, 1874), 44-46.

words or phrases anywhere in the Bible are best defined by examining other usages elsewhere.

This methodology incorrectly assumes that (1) the various writers of the Bible used the same linguistic registry, (2) translations of the Bible are precise and accurate, and (3) there are no possible definitions outside of the biblical and contemporary lexicons. In an attempt at a defense for *dicta probanta* (proof-texts), Allen and Swain<sup>3</sup> summed up the most pointed criticisms against the practice into three general objections. First, it does not give due honor to the specific context. Second, it insists on attributing unwarranted meaning to biblical language in doing theology, disregarding hermeneutics. Third, its tendency to favor readings that support one's doctrinal interests. In response, they illustrate how certain Pauline passages do fall under such criticism and in no wise err in doing so.

In response to the first criticism, Paul used Lev 26:12, Isa 52:11, and 2 Sam 7:14 as proofs that “we are the temple of the living God” in 2 Cor 6:16–18 without providing any literary or historical context of these OT texts. In response to the second, in Gal 3:6, 8, Paul identifies “the promised Spirit” with “the blessing of Abraham” (v. 14), which alludes to Gen 12:3 and 15:6. This is a clear instance of an OT terminology, *i.e.* blessing of Abraham bears theological propositions despite its lack of an explicit inclusion. And in response to the third, Hebrews 1 is a collection of poems from Psalms that point to “a

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<sup>3</sup> R. M. Allen and Scott R. Swain. "In Defense of Proof-Texting." *JETS* 54.3 (2011): 589-606.

single doctrinal theme, the Messiah's divine sonship," despite the fact that it is not "the main theological focus, if it is a focus at all" in the texts in Psalms.<sup>4</sup>

Having considered this, those who employ this method often quotes Isa 28:10; 13 to support their methods, particularly, the phrase, "For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little" (KJV). This is taken to mean that understanding the Scripture is to be done by taking tiny bits of texts from one verse and connecting it to another similar verse, regardless of the context. Such method treats the entire Bible not as a literary library, but some kind of a divine Magic 8 Ball where a shake of the diviner will randomly point to an answer. While the use of concordances helps in uncovering meanings, they are to be done when the two texts are clearly speaking of the same ideas, or that one text quotes another, as in the case of NT quotations of the OT. The singular focus of this paper is to examine the phrase in Isa 28:10, 13 through contextual and literary considerations to determine whether it is a proof for the legitimacy of proof-texting.

### **Contextual Considerations**

The Bible is a literary composition, and as such, the reader must always see the bigger picture in every text, in every line, and in every passage.<sup>5</sup> The text in question is part of the prophet Isaiah's rebuke of Ephraim, which is Israel,<sup>6</sup> both against the people

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 597.

<sup>5</sup> V. P. Long, "Reading the Old Testament as Literature," in *Interpreting the Old Testament: A Guide for Exegesis*, ed. Craig C. Broyles (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Ephraim is the second son of Joseph blessed by Jacob (Gen 41:52). The tribe of Ephraim is a figurative term to refer to the kingdom of Israel in the North as opposed to the

and the priests who neglected service and worship to God.<sup>7</sup> At the beginning of the chapter, Isaiah has already set the tone and the theme of the passage—the dire situation of the city and its inhabitants and the timeliness for its judgement. Rendered in its poetic form:

Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim,  
Whose glorious beauty [is] a fading flower,  
Which [are] on the head of the fat valleys  
Of them that are overcome with wine. (Isa 28:1, KJV)

This initial verse gives its genre: poetry. Goldingay considers chapters 28-33 of Isaiah as comprising “a series of ’Ohs’ for the people of God (all of similar length) and ultimately for their would-be destroyer.”<sup>8</sup> The first of this series is for the drunken leadership exemplified by the priests of Ephraim and condemned in Isa 28:1-29, in which the verses in question properly belong.

It is therefore important to see the structure of this entire passage in order to put the verses in question in its proper context. Below is a summative division of the entire chapter.

- |         |   |
|---------|---|
| vv. 1-4 | The threat against Ephraim’s drunkenness                        |
| vv. 5-6 | The encouragement of the remnants who maintain faithfulness     |
| vv. 7-8 | The identification of the destroyer of the leaders—strong drink |

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kingdom of Judah in the south. Isaiah is rebuking the kingdom of Israel for turning away from the precepts of God.

<sup>7</sup> N. Mastnjak, “Judah’s Covenant with Assyria in Isaiah 28,” *VT* 64 (2014): 465-483.

<sup>8</sup> J. Goldingay, “Introduction to Chapters 28-33.” *Isaiah* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 151.

- vv. 9-13      The effect of the destroyer to the people—inauspiciousness to learn
- vv. 14-16    The call to hear the word of the Lord
- vv. 17-22    The consequence of the people’s unrepentance
- vv. 22-29    The threat that God will not deal with indifference forever

From this structure, verses 9-13 appears in the center of the discourse against Ephraim. Here, Isaiah was pointing out the effects of “strong drink” that the priests and the prophets both partake—their judgment is shrouded so they cannot discern the teachings of God. These verses are also specifically addressed to the leaders, as referred to in verse 6 (“him who sits in judgment”), and not necessarily to ordinary people.<sup>9</sup>

The division also allow important elements of the passage to be revealed. First, it is in the form of poetry, and thus the stringing of words and phrases are oftentimes for euphonic purposes rather than semantics. The notion of euphony is an important concept to clarify the meaning of the text. Suffice it to say, the context of Isa 28:9-13 already sets the parameters in which a proper exegesis can be made. Secondly, the book of Isaiah is an intensified “vision of God's sweeping program for a repentant and faithful Israel.... God pardons and cleanses them from their sins and gives them a new heart, puts His Spirit within them, and causes them to walk in His statute.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, it is not a book of instructions on how to read and understand a religious text, *i.e.* the Bible, but a revelation of God’s glorious plan for His people. Against this backdrop, the verses in this study

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> R. M. Davidson “Interpreting Old Testament Prophecy,” in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2006), 194.

must be seen as part of God's dealing with Israel. Third, the immediate context of Isa 28:1-28 shows that the intention of the writer is rebuke, not instruction. This means that far from giving specific instructions on what Israel ought to do, as the case in other prophetic writings in the OT,<sup>11</sup> this passage is a rebuke to the leaders of the nation for what they failed to do. Finally, the phrase "For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little" is not a directive on how the people must respond to God's call but a description of how, despite God teaching them knowledge, Israel still cannot learn because of drunkenness.

### **A Note on the Structure of the Pericope**

Looking at the structure of the pericope will allow a fuller understanding and appreciation of the written texts. Biblical texts are not isolated verbal amalgams, such as the collection of sayings of sages from various cultures. On the contrary, the Bible is a library full of literary works with all their respective literary traditions. It is already shown that Isa 28:9-13 plays a central role in the entire chapter in that it presents the people the result of their drunkenness. In looking at the five verses in question, the structure is thus given:

- line 1* To whom would He teach knowledge? Those just weaned from milk?
- 2 Order on order, order on order, Line on line, line on line, A little here, a little there
- 3 He will speak through stammering lips and a foreign tongue

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Isa 48 is a more direct instruction on how Israel should respond to the call of Yahweh.

4 Order on order, order on order, Line on line, line on line, A little here, a little there

These four lines outline the pericope which is a kind of synthetic parallelism where the rhetorical question (erotesis) in line 1 is given emphasis by the phrase by mimicking the sound of “those just weaned from milk.” Likewise, line 3’s reference to the stammering lips and unintelligible sound is responded to by the phrase. It is also worth noting here that the *tsav la tsav* line is repeated. In both instances, the timing is significant because it places itself as the response of the people to Yahweh’s words. The author is contrasting the highly intellectual language of the Lord in His attempt to win the leaders back, as in verses 5 and 6, and the rubbish response that the leaders can only muster at that point of their drunkenness as in verses 7 and 8.

While this is not an exhaustive discussion on the context of Isaiah 28, it suffices to provide a jump-off point for the present essay to assert that the *tsav la tsav* line should be understood in its contextual and poetic properties. This is integral to the analysis of the line as merely cacophonous that seeks to create an effect rather than impart a meaning.

### **Literary Considerations**

The grammar of the text plays an important part in the present study, and the specific words used in the focused phrase would elucidate the meaning of this poetic line. A. van Selms has written an adept exegesis on these particular verses and at the onset he stated that vv. 9-13 is a literary division that starts with a *s<sup>e</sup>tûmā* and ends with a *p<sup>e</sup>tûhā*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> A. Van Selms, “Isaiah 28:9-13: An Attempt to Give a New Interpretation,” ZAW 85 (1973): 332.



The section begins with vv. 9 and 10. These two opening verses form a “motivated interrogative sentence” whereby a rhetorical question is motivated by the answer succeeding it. In other words, it is a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*. Verse 10, then, is a statement that makes the questions in v. 9 as absurd<sup>13</sup>—“them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from breasts,” which describes no less than the babies, cannot be taught knowledge nor can they understand doctrines. This is the absurd conclusion. Verse 10 is then the motivation for this absurdity. What does it mean? The answer is best explained when the text is read in the original language:

צוֹ לְצֹו צוֹ לְצֹו קוֹ לְקוֹ קוֹ לְקוֹ זְעִיר זְעִיר שָׁם

*Tsav la-Tsav, Tsav la-Tsav; Kav la-Kav, Kav la-Kav; ze-Eir sham ze-Eir sham*

Order on order, line on line, a little here, little there

The alliteration and internal rhyming that Isaiah used in this line is not only brilliant for its form but tremendously effective to the listeners. This whole line in Hebrew is a series of monosyllabic mumblings similar to what babies do, and Isaiah adapted himself to the way his audience would speak, being likened to babies themselves. This understanding is supported by the following verse when the prophet said that “with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people” (v. 11). The reference to “stammering lips” cannot be mistaken here when verse 10, and 13a for that matter, is read in the original language.

This phrase was extensively discussed by William W. Hallo of the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in 1958. His studies on Ugaritic abecedaries reveal that Isaiah’s phrase is an example of a much larger tradition of Semitic abecedaries or

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

“baby talk” for which “the sounds may be called significant or signifiers, for they do the signaling.”<sup>14</sup> The words chosen for such an abecedary are not more important than the sound they contribute to the whole form. Much like a nursery rhyme, then, the reader must not put insurmountable amount of meaning to each morpheme without properly attributing the selection of such morpheme to its phonemical properties. In Isa 28: 10 and 13a, the choice of the words *tsav*, *kav*, and *zeir* may in themselves be meaningful but such meaning is overshadowed by the sound they make. Therefore, the author, when making an abecedary, is not making a semantic assertion of any kind.

Verses 11 and 12 are equally crucial in understanding the phrase. The reference to “another tongue” is seen as a prophetic prediction that the nation of Israel will lose its teacher standing before Yahweh and that the Gentiles, whom they were supposed to teach in the first place, will be called upon to speak to them regarding the truth. In his comparison of this two verses to 1 Cor 14:20-22, David Lanier contends that the “another tongue” refers to “the unbelievers in Isaiah's day were Israelites who had defiantly rejected God's covenant rest in order to forge illegitimate alliances politically and spiritually.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, in this pronouncement, Isaiah was prophesying judgment upon the people of God and their leaders.

Verse 13 is divided in two parts: *a* is a repetition of the phrase in verse 10 and *b* is the effect if such a moronic condition persists. This second part simply reveals the negative significance of the abecedary because when they (the religious leaders) continue

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<sup>14</sup> W. W. Hallo “Isaiah 28:9-13 and The Ugaritic Abecedaries,” *JBL* 77 (1958): 324.

<sup>15</sup> D. E. Lanier, “With Stammering Lips and Another Tongue: 1 Cor 14:20-22 and Isa 28:11-12,” *CTR* 5 (1991): 280.

on this path of unlearning they will “fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.” The first two descriptions point to the effect of intoxication, and the second two descriptions refer to the consequence of such an intoxicated state—their enemies will capture them. Verse 13b is then a clear indication that 13a is not meant to be taken as a positive way of hearing the words of God, nor is it a wise system of studying the scriptures.

### **The Line as Intentionally Cacophonous**

As previously stated, there is an overall poetic rhythm in ch. 28. While western poetry is characterized primarily by its measured meter and rhyme scheme, these two are not prominent in Hebrew poetry. Instead, the identification of a poem lies heavily on the structure such as parallelism or acronym. The former signals poetry in the text, especially in those passages where line divisions are not present, because the succeeding line(s) build up on the idea of the first, either by way of additional information, synonymous expressions, or contradictory statements.<sup>16</sup> An alphabetical acronym is also an overt indicator of poetry, such as in the book of Lamentations (except for ch. 4). Nevertheless, it is not without auditory devices. In fact, it seems that Hebrew poetry employs a lot of these even in narratives. For instance, in Num 24 and 25 there is a phonetic link in that the word *vayashav* (וַיָּשָׁב) in 24:25 and *vayeshev* (וַיֵּשֶׁב) in 25:1 are in alliteration, which is also in place in Gen 1:2's *tohu vabohu*. Such auditory elements are common even in prose because the distinction between prose and poetry in the Hebrew language is only “a

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<sup>16</sup> For a brief discussion of biblical poetry, see P. D. Miller, “Meter, Parallelism, and Tropes: The Search for Poetic Style.” *JSOT* 28 (1984): 99-106.

matter of degrees,”<sup>17</sup> and not necessarily a distinction in form. This is the reason that ch. 28, or the entire book of Isaiah for that matter, is considered poetic. What is the implication of reading Isa 28:9-13 as poetic? Simply that it must be understood according to how one understands poetry, especially biblical poetry—not in their literal meanings but in their intention and effect.

The line being investigated here is no exception to this. The *tsav la tsav* phrase is poetic on account of its context, structure, and auditory features—alliteration. Yet this is not simply an alliteration but the author went further. Isaiah is creating a cacophony when he repeated the three monosyllabic phrases, thus rendering them in pairs:

*tsav la tsav kav la kav zeir sham*  
*tsav la tsav kav la kav zeir sham*

Cacophony is an opposite to euphony, which is the use of words having pleasant and harmonious effects. Generally, the vowels, semi-vowels and the nasal consonants e.g. *l, m, n, r, y* are considered to be euphonic. Cacophony, on the other hand, uses combinations of consonants that require explosive delivery e.g., *p, b, d, g, k, ch-*, etc. and the fricatives or sounds that are produced by creating friction either in the labial, alveolar, or guttural places of articulation. The combination of the Hebrew phones *k, ts, z,* and *sh* found in the phrase in question therefore qualifies as a cacophony. This is true even when considering the earliest witnesses on their transliteration. For instance, Epiphanius renders it as “*saulasau saulasau, kaulakauk kaulakauk,*” which is very similar to Jerome, “*sau lasau, sau lasau, cau lacau, cau lacau.*”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Miller, “Meter, Parallelism, and Tropes,” 100.

<sup>18</sup> Selms, “An Attempt to Give a New Interpretation,” 335.

In like manner, we can also look at the LXX and their rendition of the line, θλίψιν ἐπὶ θλίψιν προσδέχου, ἐλπίδα ἐπ' ἐλπίδι, ἔτι μικρὸν ἔτι μικρὸν (*thlipsin epi thlipsin prosdechou, elpida ep' elpidi, eti mikron eti mikron*). Although the translation did not render the line in cacophony as in the original, it nevertheless tried to retain the rhythm and the rhyme. It is interesting here that the LXX omitted the repetitions. This repetition in the Hebrew text is not merely an adjunct to the intended effect, but heightens it such that the final reading is not only emphatic but loud and annoying. The intended effect of the line can therefore be summarized into three: (1) to mimic the sound of babies as a mockery to the leaders, (2) to produce a linguistic contrast between the Lord's statement to the people and the leader's response, and (3) to annoy and maybe disorient the listeners of the prophecy. As matter of fact, the third intended effect is given in v. 13, that the leaders "may go and stumble backward, be broken, snared, and taken captive" (NASB). The idea of sound as rendering disorientation to the enemies is not foreign to the Bible. We find this in Joshua's trumpet and shout that caused the fall of Jericho (Jos 6:20), or in Judg 7 when Gideon blew the trumpet and smashed several earthen vessels, and their enemies were so disoriented that they killed each other. In the same manner, the cacophony in Isa 28:10, 13 has the same effect on the people addressed.

### **Conclusions**

Isaiah 28:9-13 is not an isolated passage nor an independent treatise on how to study the Scriptures. Through contextual and linguistic analyses, this essay attempted to

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show that the meaning and intention of this passage has nothing to do with any exegetical approach. It is part of a larger poetic structure that aims to call upon Israel to repent of their evil ways, cease from polluting themselves with wine (literally and figuratively), and return to their faith in the God of their fathers who is very willing to “cause the weary to rest” (v. 12). Therefore, in the contextual study of the passage, there is nothing that warrants a positive recommendation from the prophet on how to go about studying the scriptures or heeding the word of God. The phrase, “here a little and there a little” is not a license to take a few words or phrases from all over the Bible and make a doctrine out of such. Rather, the context demonstrates that the phrase is a mockery against Ephraim’s religious leaders who, after having been taught the truths about God through precepts and lines.

The literary analysis indicated that the phrase that appeared in verses 10 and 13a is part of Isaiah’s stylistics to emphasize the brunt of his message audibly. This phrase, when read in its original rendition, is a cacophony. In several dynamic translations of the text, this is not even translated as a line but instead tried to explain its effect.<sup>19</sup> If the line were to be translated in English with the cacophony in mind, we would have something along the lines of “jot for jot jot for jot, dot for dot dot for dot, some here some there.” This translation is an attempt to produce the plosives in *d* and *t*, and the fricatives in *j*, *s*, and *th* sounds, while also maintaining alliteration in the *o* vowel. The meaning of jot, as in a tiny bit of writing, and dot, as a basic unit of measurement, also correspond to the meanings of *tsav* and *kav*, respectively. Yet the point is not to translate the meaning, but

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<sup>19</sup> The NET Bible translates it as “Indeed, they will hear meaningless gibberish, senseless babbling, a syllable here, a syllable there.”

the effect of the line, as the original intent of the author is to mock the religious leaders that they cannot learn from God anymore because of their drunkenness, and that like little children they would be taught the elementary things of God by others who did not have the truth like they did. In other words, regardless of what the meaning of the pertinent words are in the phrase, i.e. precept, law, order or doctrine, line or measuring stick, random syllables here and there,<sup>20</sup> the objective of this cacophony is to create an effect upon its original audience that would make them realize the futility of their condition. It is not meant to be an instruction on how they are to approach the Scripture. This poetic line has an intended effect, rather than an intended meaning.

The theological implication of this understanding is much deeper and meaningful than an incorrect application in support of proof-texting. This is a resounding reminder to the religious leaders of the church not to be intoxicated with the wine (doctrines and teachings) of the world that they would lose their ability to comprehend the call of God. Ellen G. White's numerous usage of the phrase<sup>21</sup> encourages the believers and the church leaders to teach those newcomers to the church biblical truths in the way that a child is taught, little by little where one teaching forms the basis of another, rather than a cursory instruction or an overloading of information.

The answer to the topic question is therefore in the negative; Isa 28:9-13 is not a basis for proof-texting. If at all, it is an implicit injunction against such manner of

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<sup>20</sup> Gene Rice, for example, discusses the proposed emendations on these terms in his analysis of the NEB translation of Isa 28:1-22. See Rice, Gene. 1973. "Isaiah 28:1-22 and the New English Bible." *The Journal of Religious Thought* 30, no. 2: 13-17.

<sup>21</sup> A search of this phrase in the EGW Research CD rendered 50 instances, all of which are not inconsistent with Isaiah's reference to how children learn. In fact, Ellen White often used the phrase in her counsels to parents on how to train their children in the truth.

exegesis because incontrovertible layers of doctrines, like bricks that support a building, build up God's truth. It is not found as isolated pieces scattered all over the scriptures that beg for the exegete to string together. The Torah, for instance, is an immaculate model of God's organized and systematized manner of teaching truth. That is how the church should attempt to understand truth—organized, systematized, holistic.