

ARU ARU: An Echo of Hebrew Psalm 137 in John 19:15

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Abstract: The Koine double word shout, ARON ARON, of the Jews in John 19:15 aurally, prosodically, and thematically recalls the Hebrew double word shout, ARU ARU, of the Edomites in Psalm 137:7. Contextual examination of the center of John’s Passion Narrative alongside Psalm 137 reveals other textual echoes amid an interlaced sequence of doubled words and John’s unique HEBRAISTI, encompassing Pilate’s handing Jesus over to the Jews, Jesus’ crucifixion between two others, and the dispute over Pilate’s inscription. The word doubling and the inscription languages play on a repeated trope of Jesus plus two others that turns out to be an important member of the structural backbone of John’s Passion and Empty Tomb narratives.

In John’s account of Jesus’s trial before Pilate, the hostile *Ioudaioi* finally overpower Pilate’s reluctance to execute Jesus with their angry shout in John 19:15, “Away, Away! Crucify him”, whereupon the governor immediately hands Jesus over to be crucified. The first part of this Johannine shout bears uncanny similarity to the shout of another crowd of bystanders, the hostile Edomites who in Ps 137:7 cried “Strip, Strip! Down to her foundation!” to the Babylonian destroyers plundering fair Jerusalem. Although John’s shout is in Koine Greek and the Psalmist’s cry is in Hebrew, the opening phrases are nearly phonetically identical:

Table 1

	Greek and Hebrew	Phonetic transliteration
John 19:15	ἄρον ἄρον, σταύρωσον αὐτόν (NA ²⁸)	á.ron á.ron, staú.rō.son au.tón
Psalm 137:7	עָרוּ עָרוּ עַד הַיְסוּד בָּהּ (BHS)	á.ru á.ru., ád ha.yə.sód báh

Aron Aron / Aru Aru

These opening shouts obviously sound alike, as both are two-syllable words with stress accent on the first syllable, closely matched in rhyme and rhythm. The two phrases are both in direct speech, and also match grammatically as second-person imperative verbs. Syntactically, both verbs have missing but implied subject and object. Contextually, both imperatives are shouted by a group of hostile bystanders (the *Ioudaioi*, the *b’ney-Edom*) who are urging the death and destruction of innocent victims (Jesus, the Judeans) by the ruthless predators of the day (Romans, Babylonians). This all begins to look like an artful mimesis of Psalm 137.

“Crucify him” / “on the willow-trees we hung our lyres”

The second part of the shout of the *Ioudaioi* in Jn 19:15 finds a match in the closing phrase of Psalm 137:2. There the mourning Judeans remember that “upon the willow-trees we hung our lyres”. Significantly, the Hebrew verb “hang” (תלה < תלינו, LXX κρεμάνυσμι) in association with a “tree” also functions as an equivalent for “impale” or “crucify”, as shown by its use in Esther 7:9, 8:7, as well as Deuteronomy 21:22, which Paul quotes in Galatians 3:13. The Pauline citation is likely not involved in John’s link with Psalm 137, but it does confirm the possibility of a linguistic connection of Psalm 137 with Jesus’ crucifixion in early Christian thought:

Table 2

Deut 21:22	Psalm 137(136):2	Galatians 3:13	John 19:15
וְעָלְתָהוּ עַל־עֵץ	עַל־עֲרָבִים ... תְּלִינֵנוּ		
καὶ κρεμάσητε αὐτὸν ἐπὶ ξύλου (LXX)	ἐπὶ ταῖς ἰτέαις ... ἐκρεμάσαμεν (LXX)	ὁ κρεμάμενος ἐπὶ ξύλου (NA ²⁸)	... σταύρωσον αὐτόν (NA ²⁸)
“you shall hang him upon a tree”	“upon the willow-trees (our lyres) we hung”	“he who is hanged upon a tree”	“... Crucify him!”

Body parts “In the middle”

Adding additional subtlety, John may also be echoing other segments of Psalm 137:2, following here more closely on the LXX translation of “upon the willow-trees in her midst (ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῆς), we hung our lyres (τὰ ὄργανα ἡμῶν)”. John uses the first lexical in 19:18 to describe Jesus crucifixion/hanging “in the middle” (μέσον) of the two criminals. While leaving the literal physicality unstated, John’s readers know that it was Jesus “body”, his hands and his feet/legs that were fastened to the cross/tree. This would require a “backward reading” of ὄργανα in LXX Psalm 136:2 as “body part” (LSJ, p.1245, ὄργανον 2.b, “of the body and its different parts”, with specific citations of hands and feet). Note that John is not above mixing metaphors. He sets up a metaphor field in his parable of the sheepfold in 10:1-6, which he then famously *mixes* in his subsequent elaborations of Jesus as *door* in 10:7-10, and then as *shepherd* in 10:11-18.

“We hung” / “he gave him to them to be crucified”

As the “hanging on a tree” of Psalm 137:2 may function as an equivalent for “crucify”, John’s usage pattern of the lexeme σταυρόω (crucify) in his trial narrative invites analysis. Unlike the Synoptics, John has mentioned neither *cross* (σταυρός) nor *crucify* (σταυρόω) before his Passion Narrative, but now in 19:6-15, he uses the verb lexeme six times:

Table 3

Jn 19:6	the high-priests shouted “Crucify, crucify (σταύρωσον σταύρωσον)”, and Pilate mockingly replies “you take (λάβετε) and crucify (σταυρώσατε) him yourselves (ὕμεῖς), for I find no fault in him”
Jn 19:10	Pilate says to Jesus “I have authority to crucify (σταυρώσαι) you”
Jn 19:15	the <i>Ioudaioi</i> shout “Crucify (σταύρωσον) him”, and Pilate replies “shall I crucify (σταυρώσω) your king!”
Jn 19:16	Pilate “then therefore gave him over to <i>them</i> to be crucified” (τότε οὖν παρέδωκεν αὐτὸν αὐτοῖς ἵνα σταυρωθῆ), whereupon <i>they</i> “therefore took/received Jesus” (παρέλαβον οὖν τὸν Ἰησοῦν)

Interestingly, all six instances in 19:6-15 are in direct speech, three each by the *Ioudaioi* and Pilate. But now, John presents his climactic seventh σταυρόω in the most critical 16th verse, “therefore he gave-over him *to-them* to *be-crucified*, therefore they-took (παρέλαβον) Jesus.” Who are the “them” to whom Pilate gives Jesus, the “they” who then “take” Jesus away to be crucified? John has just let us hear Pilate say in 19:6 to the high-priests, “you *take* (λάβετε) him *yourselves* (ὕμεῖς) and *crucify* (σταυρώσατε) him”, using both the *crucify* and a cognate of the *take* found here in 19:16, while the redundant pronoun (ὕμεῖς) emphasizes the plural subject *you*. With this connection, John invites the identification of “them” and “they” of 19:16a-b with the high-priests of the *Ioudaioi* in 19:6.

John has artfully synchronized his seven-fold sequence of σταυρώω with two other seven-fold lexical sequences also climaxing in 19:16. First, the same third person plural pronoun is used solely in the dative case, “to-them” (αὐτοῖς), seven times in unbroken sequence in Pilate’s trial from 18:31 to 19:16. “To-them” in 18:31 directly continues the nominative “they” (αὐτοῖ) of 18:28 and accusative “them” (αὐτούς) of 18:29, both referencing the arrest and interrogation party of priests and Temple officers, who are all *Ioudaioi*, since 18:28 alerts us of their concern with Passover uncleanness, indicating the Roman cohort of 18:3 has exited. The exclusive identity of αὐτοῖς = *Ioudaioi* continues from 18:31 on through 18:38, 19:4, 19:5, 19:6, and 19:15 before ending in 19:16¹. Like the first six σταυρώω in direct speech, the first six αὐτοῖς are all pronomial objects of Pilate’s direct speech, and now the seventh of both sequences are bound together in narrative exposition in 19:16.

The other seven-fold sequence is of the leading word παραδίδωμι (“give-over, betray”), initiated at the beginning of the PN in 18:2, and continuing through 18:5, 18:30, 18:35, 18:36, and 19:11, before climaxing in 19:16. The closely associated παραλαμβάνω (“receive, take”) in 19:16 by the receiving *they*, reverses the ominous notice in the prologue, “to his own he came, and his own did *not receive* (οὐ παρέλαβον) him,” creating a bitterly ironic echo. John’s subtle transformation in 19:16 of his Synoptic precedents is elegant simplicity:

Table 4

Matt 27:26	“then he released <i>to-them</i> (αὐτοῖς) Barabbas, but Jesus he scourged and <i>gave-over</i> (παρέδωκεν) him to be crucified”
Mark 15:15	“Pilate... released <i>to-them</i> (αὐτοῖς) Barabbas, and he <i>gave-over</i> (παρέδωκεν) Jesus to be crucified”
Luke 23:25	“he released [Barabbas], but Jesus he <i>gave-over</i> (παρέδωκεν) to <i>their</i> (αὐτῶν) will”
John 19:16	“then therefore he <i>gave-over</i> (παρέδωκεν) him <i>to-them</i> (αὐτοῖς) to be crucified”

John’s intention is not hidden, his “to-them” (αὐτοῖς) does not *hing...in der Luft*.² He wants the reader to identify the *Ioudaioi* as the ones into whose custody Pilate gave Jesus, and who crucified him. In other words, using the words suggested by Psalm 137:2, “we (the *Ioudaioi*) hung” Jesus on “the tree”. The apparent contradiction with 19:23 will be considered below.

Hebraisti and Epizeuxis

The thesis here necessarily requires that John was aware of some measure of Hebrew psalmody in a spoken liturgical context, if not the written text itself. The echo of Hebrew Psalm 137:2 is, after all, most evident in aural reading. Whether or not Psalm 137 may have been used in contemporary Passover ritual, John frequently cites from the Hebrew/Greek Psalter in his Passion Narrative, Psalm 41:19 in 13:18, Psalm 22:19 in 19:24, and possibly Psalm 34:21 in 19:36, thus putting an allusion here to Psalm 137 well within possibility.

John uses *Hebraisti* (ἑβραϊστί) five times in his Gospel, three of which are in the immediate context of John 19:15: regarding *Gabbatha* (Γαββαθα) in 19:13b, *Golgotha* (Γολγοθα) in 19:17,

¹ The observations here augment and update the argument presented in my forthcoming article, “Them’ in John 19:16”, in *Alpha 2* (2020) 227-230.

² Angon Dauer, *Die Passionsgeschichte im Johannesevangelium* (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1972) 131.

and Pilate's inscription on the cross in 19:20.³ Inspection of the use in 19:13 and 19:17 now suggests that these instances of *Hebraisti* here on either side of 19:15 may point to a hidden *Hebrew* phrase encoded in the Koine text *in the middle*.

The alternating sequence of **Hebraisti** and *doubled words* is a phenomenon peculiar to John 19:

Table 5

19:13b	Ἑβραῖστί Γαββαθᾶ	in Hebrew, Gabbatha
19:15	ἄρον ἄρον σταύρωσον αὐτόν	Away, away; Crucify him (< Psalm 137:7)
19:17	Ἑβραῖστί Γολγοθᾶ	in Hebrew, Golgotha
19:18	ἐντεῦθεν καὶ ἐντεῦθεν	Here and Here (on this side and that)
19:20	γεγραμμένον Ἑβραῖστί, Ῥωμαῖστί, Ἑλλήνιστι	written in Hebrew, Roman, and Greek
19:22	ὃ γέγραφα γέγραφα	what I have written, I have written

Earlier in 19:6, the Jewish officers shouted “Crucify, crucify” (σταύρωσον σταύρωσον), likely modelled after the shouted epizeuxis of Luke 23:21 (σταυρου σταυρου αυτον). Here now, these three *Hebraisti* are associated with three sequential *places* where Jesus is physically confined: 1) in *Hebraisti Gabbatha* Jesus is judged, 2) in *Hebraisti Golgotha* he is executed, where 3) he is fastened to the *cross* upon which the *Hebraisti* inscription is affixed. 19:18 visualizes the place *where* (ὅπου) they crucified Jesus “in the middle” (μέσον) of *two* others, *here and here* (ἐντεῦθεν καὶ ἐντεῦθεν). The co-crucified are only *two others*, with no Synoptic “thief” or speech (Mark 15:27, Matt 27:38, Luke 23:33, 39-43). Removing those details reduces those two to animate props put in place with deictic stage directions, *here* and *here*,⁴ John focuses all attention on the bare geometric pattern of Jesus on a cross between two others. Now, consider the triad of 19:13b, 15, and 17 as a *figuration in literary space of the physical geometry of 19:18*:

Table 6

ὅπου αὐτόν ἐσταύρωσαν, καὶ μετ’ αὐτοῦ ἄλλους δύο, ἐντεῦθεν καὶ ἐντεῦθεν, μέσον δὲ τὸν Ἰησοῦν (19:18)		
ἐντεῦθεν	μέσον δὲ τὸν Ἰησοῦν	ἐντεῦθεν
εἰς τόπον λεγόμενον λιθόστρωτον <i>Ἑβραῖστί δὲ Γαββαθᾶ</i> (19:13b)	ἄρον ἄρον σταύρωσον αὐτόν (19:15)	εἰς τὸν λεγόμενον κρανίου τόπον ὃ λέγεται <i>Ἑβραῖστί Γολγοθᾶ</i> (19:17)

The *two others* of 19:13b and 17, *on either side* of 19:15, obviously make a very close aural match: *he.bra.i.stí - gab.ba.thá / he.bra.i.stí - gol.go.thá*. John has artfully elaborated the doubling in Aramaic and Greek of Mark 15:22, “the **place Golgotha**, which is translated **Place of**

³ John is the only canonical Gospel that uses the Ἑβραῖστί, Ῥωμαῖστί, or Ἑλλήνιστι lexemes.

⁴ This phrase is reminiscent of the Homeric combination ἔνθα καὶ (or ἦ) ἔνθα, appearing in the Iliad (17x) and the Odyssey (13x), usually taken as “hither and thither,” or “back and forth,” used, for example, to poetically connect Odysseus lying awake in his bed (Od 20.24, 26, 28) with Penelope lying awake in her bed (Od 19.524). John’s artistry completely escapes C.H. Dodd, who remarked in *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965) 121, “Mark’s is certainly the better Greek, and there seems no reason why a writer copying him should have altered it for the worse.”

the Skull" by adding a second matching *Hebrew* name. How fitting then, that the cry for crucifixion *between them* in 19:15 would emulate a *doubled* phrase from *Hebrew* Psalm 137.

"Jesus in the middle"

The figure of Jesus crucified with, or in the middle of, two others, distantly echoing the harps hung on trees "in the midst" in Psalm 137, here becomes a pattern replicated by author John throughout chapter 19 and even into chapter 20, ending only when the resurrected Jesus finally appears to Mary Magdalene. New non-Synoptic information is bolded in this table:

Table 7

18:2-3, 10-11	Two named disciples, Judas and Peter , are active in the arrest scene, <i>sequentially</i> one after the other
18:15-16	Simon Peter and another disciple follow Jesus and enter <i>sequentially</i> with him into the courtyard
18:12-14, 19-24	Jesus is <i>bound</i> and <i>taken</i> (ἔδησαν... ἤγαγον, ἀπέστειλεν... δεδεμένον) <i>sequentially</i> to two named high-priests, Annas and Caiaphas
19:1-3	Two <i>sequentially</i> beat Jesus, Pilate scourges and the soldiers slap him
19:18	Jesus is crucified in the middle of <i>two</i> others
19:26-27	Seeing his mother and beloved disciple standing beside him, Jesus <i>sequentially</i> says <i>to her</i> and then to him , "See your son/mother"
19:32-34	After sequentially breaking the leg of first one and then the other crucified man, a soldier pierces Jesus' side with his lance
19:34-45	The blood and water erupting from Jesus' pierced side are seen and attested by the soldier and the beloved disciple
19:38-40	Two named partisans Joseph and Nicodemus enter <i>sequentially</i> , and remove from the cross, anoint, and bury Jesus's body
20:3-9	The <i>two</i> (20:4), Peter and the other (beloved) disciple , enter the tomb <i>sequentially</i> where instead of Jesus' body they see <i>first</i> his burial wrappings and <i>then</i> his face-cloth, both <i>lying separately</i>
20:12	Mary Magdalene sees <i>two</i> angels sitting at the <i>head and feet</i> of the <i>empty space</i> where Jesus' body was <i>lying</i> (ἔκειτο, impf. as in 19:29)

John's distinctive presentation of *two* named disciples in the garden arrest, *two* disciples in the courtyard, *two* high-priests interrogating, *two* partisans who bury his body, and *two* disciples who enter his empty tomb, while seemingly contrary to Synoptic tradition, all clearly fit with the central pattern of Jesus plus *two* crucified with him *in sequence*. Even the listing in 19:20 of the *three* languages of Pilate's inscription may simply refigure the trope of *one* Jesus with *two* others, and this language trio might also connect with the personnel involved in the arrest back in 18:12, in reverse order: a Roman cohort of *Hellēnisti*-speaking mercenaries, commanded by a *Romaisti*-speaking tribune, accompanied by a squad of *Hebraisti*-speaking *Ioudaioi* temple police.

"Therefore, the soldiers"

John seems to revert to Synoptic tradition attributing the crucifixion in 19:23 to the soldiers rather than the Jews. The construction there with both οὖν and ὅτε is, however, peculiar. The particles οὖν ("therefore") and ὅτε ("when") appear in the same verse only 11 times in the GNT,

all 11 in John.⁵ In all but here and 12:17, they appear together at the beginning of a sentence as “when, therefore” (ὅτε οὖν), and 19:23 contains the only instance where the noun with οὖν is also the subject of the verb appearing after the following ὅτε: “therefore the soldiers (οἱ οὖν στρατιῶται), when they-had-crucified him (ὅτε ἐσταύρωσαν αὐτὸν), they-took his garments (ἔλαβον τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ)....”

Allowing *the soldiers* and *crucified* to stand together leaves the question, why is “the soldiers” so boldly fronted in an atypical SVO manner? Now we see, working backward, a second Article+οὖν+Noun subject, part of another SVO construction, in 19:13a, “Pilate, therefore (ὁ οὖν Πιλάτος), when-he-heard these words (ἀκούσας τῶν λόγων τούτων), led Jesus out (ἤγαγεν ἔξω τὸν Ἰησοῦν)....” It is striking that the intensely connected 19:13b-22 *Hebraisti* segment discussed above is cradled so precisely between these twin Pilate and soldier constructions in 19:13a and 19:23. Looking further, this Article+οὖν+Noun pattern of subjects beginning SVO sentences is replicated and strategically distributed seven times in John’s PN, exclusively identifying the enemies of Jesus responsible for his suffering and death.⁶

Table 8

Jn 18:3	ὁ οὖν Ἰουδᾶς	then (the) Judas (Ἰουδᾶς, <i>Ioudas</i>)
Jn 18:12	ἡ οὖν σπεῖρα	then the cohort, the tribune, and the officers
Jn 18:19	ὁ οὖν ἀρχιερεὺς	then the high-priest
Jn 19:13	ὁ οὖν Πιλάτος	then (the) Pilate
Jn 19:23	οἱ οὖν στρατιῶται	then the soldiers
Jn 19:24	οἱ μὲν οὖν στρατιῶται	so, then the soldiers
Jn 19:31	οἱ οὖν Ἰουδαῖοι	then the Jews (Ἰουδαῖοι, <i>Ioudaioi</i>)

Now we see why John has moved his two *soldier* scenes away from their Synoptic position immediately before and after the crucifixion of 19:17-18, their abuse of Jesus with the crown of thorns and purple robe backward to 19:2-3, and their distribution of his garments forward to 19:23-25. Both before before (19:4-15) and after (19:19-22) Golgotha, John *distances the soldiers, both times handling Jesus’ clothing, away from his narrated crucifixion* by inserting dialogues of Pilate with *the Jews*. In light of the carefully structured nature of John’s PN now before us, it is impossible to imagine that leaving Jesus narratively alone with “them” on Golgotha in 19:16b-18 was a redactional accident. Rather, all is deliberately staged to lead readers to surmise, that *the Jews* were the real subject of the monoletic *they-crucified* in the awkward 19:23, and those crying *Aron Aron* are the same as those who *hung him on the middle tree*. Psalm 137 fits very well as background music for this centerpiece of John’s narrative.

Finally, we note the the finely tuned meshing of this dispersed οὖν–SVO sequence with the prior concentrated *Hebraisti*–Epizeuxis alternating sequence, where neither interferes with the other at their juncture, intersecting like well engineered gears. Such precision, along with the other features noted above, evidences, not journalistic reportage, but rather an intricately designed and carefully executed composition, almost a virtual script for the original Passion Play.

⁵ Those 11 are John 2:22, 4:45, 6:24, 12:17, 13:12, 13:31, 19:6, 19:8, 19:23, 19:30, are 21:15.

⁶ I first noted this sequence in the article “Judas Armed and Dangerous,” *Alpha* 1 (2017) 189-192.