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**“Atbash in Jeremiah and Its Literary Significance: Part 1.”**

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ATBASH (אתב"ש) IN JEREMIAH  
AND ITS LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE  
PART I

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Perhaps no other type of wordplay in the Hebrew Bible is as rare as *atbash* [אתב"ש], a cryptic writing technique in which the first letter of the alphabet (א) is used as a substitute for the last (ת), the second (ב) for the penultimate (ש), the third (ג) for the antepenultimate (ר), and so on.<sup>1</sup>

The writers of the Talmud and the medieval exegetes who followed them recognized *atbash* as a legitimate hermeneutical device,<sup>2</sup> but, despite centuries of study, the Hebrew Bible has yielded only three sure instances of this cryptic device: Jeremiah 25:26, 51:1, 51:41, and a possible fourth in I Kings 9:13.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, as I intend to demonstrate, *atbash* occurs more often than currently recognized and plays a specific literary role within its context. However, before offering additional examples and discussing their literary significance, it will be worthwhile to examine the cases of *atbash* discovered thus far.

1. See, e.g., Jack Sasson, "Word Play in the Old Testament," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) p. 969.

2. See, e.g., the discussions of the device and their talmudic references in Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, Texts and Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 18 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950) pp. 69, 73; Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961) pp. 100, 127, 135, 373, 381.

3. I leave out of this discussion the observation in Ta'anith III, 17a that תוגת [sorrow] in Proverbs 10:1 is an *atbash* for אפר [ash] because the latter is Aramaic, and thus it doubtless was not intended by the author. Also omitted is the discussion found in Sanhedrin 22a in which Rab explains the king's inability to interpret his dream (Dan 5:25) as due to the presence of an *atbash*. While the Talmud explains the king's inability, the biblical passage does not itself contain an *atbash*, merely a series of puns. See, Al Wolters, "The Riddle of the Scales in Daniel 5," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 57 (1991) pp. 155-177; Bill T. Arnold, "Wordplay and Narrative Technique in Daniel 5 and 6," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112/3 (1993) pp. 479-485..

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The first and perhaps most famous example of *atbash* occurs in Jeremiah 25:26, wherein God orders Jeremiah to give His cup of wrath to a list of nations. After pronouncing a lengthy promise of doom, He concludes: 'And last of all the king of שש shall drink.'

As Rashi (11th century), Kimhi (12th century), and the commentary *Metsudat David* (18th century) note, the name שש stands as an *atbash* for בבל [Babylon]. The Targum also translates the word בבל. (The LXX omits this verse.) Modern exegetes have grappled with the word שש in a variety of ways. However, the failure to find for שש a corresponding historical personage has left many commentators in favor of the *atbash* theory.<sup>4</sup> Thus, J. Bright comments:

Use of such a device points to the period prior to the fall of Babylon (539), for after that time no one would have troubled to refer to Babylon in so veiled a manner.<sup>5</sup>

E. W. Nicholson posits that "Sheshak was a genuine name for Babylon and need not therefore be understood as a cipher."<sup>6</sup> J. Thompson postulates: "It is a literary device, possibly insulting or with some other emotional overtones, but possibly, too, used by the Babylonians themselves."<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, in the voluminous Neo-Babylonian materials at one's disposal there is no mention of a שש. Moreover, one must question not only what evidence there is for Babylonian usage but also why Jeremiah does not refrain from employing the non-ciphered form בבל in other places, among them 24:1, 25:1. Indeed, in Jeremiah 51:41 the שש and בבל occur in the same curse! Therefore, the purpose of *atbash* could not have been to avoid royal repercussions, but rather it must lie elsewhere. It is here that the ancient belief in the power of words (especially God's) must be integrated into the analysis.

It is commonly accepted that the ancients, in biblical Israel and in the Near East in general, believed words to be more than an extension of the spoken idea; they

4. See, e.g., S. R. Driver, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906) p. 151.

5. John Bright, *Jeremiah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 21) (New York: Doubleday, 1965) p. 161.

6. E. W. Nicholson, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) pp. 222-223.

7. See, e.g., J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980) p. 749.

possessed the substance and form of that idea. Thus, once spoken, words were capable of affecting the observable reality.<sup>8</sup> I. Rabinowitz remarks:

In the culture of ancient Israel . . . while words indeed did constitute the medium of interpersonal communication and expression, the words were not perceived and thought of as exchangeable symbols or representations of their sensible referents, but rather as *those referents themselves* — the palpable objects, the “real” and perceptible actions and events, the sensible relationships and interactions — in the *concentrated* form of words.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, if we are to understand the purpose of *atbash* in Jeremiah, we must first consider this ancient mindset. Thus, if words possess power and essence, *atbash* represents a reversal of that power and essence. As we shall see, *atbash* typically occurs in contexts in which power struggles take place.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it is fitting that God’s word be encoded in inverted language.<sup>11</sup> Just as God is able to create by fiat (Gen. 1-2), so also can His word bring about the destruction of an oppressor. The inversion of power is expressed with inverted language.

Another famous instance of *atbash* appears in Jeremiah 51:1: *Thus said the Lord: ‘See I am rousing a destructive wind against Babylon and the inhabitants of לב קמי.’* Here, the words לב קמי [heart of my enemy] are an *atbash* for כשדי [Chaldea]. The Targum too renders it כסדאי.

Most commentators accept the *atbash* here because of the difficulty of the text as it stands.<sup>12</sup> Nicholson, however, chooses a more radical approach, translating

8. See, e.g., Frederick L. Moriarty, “Word as Power in The Ancient Near East,” in H. N. Bream, et al., eds., *A Light Unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of J. M. Myers* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1974) pp. 345-362; and more recently Isaac Rabinowitz, *A Witness Forever: Ancient Israel’s Perception of Literature and the Resultant Hebrew Bible* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993). For an opposing, and in my opinion unconvincing, view, see A. Thiselton, “The Supposed Power in Words in the Biblical Writings,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 25 (1974) pp. 289-299.

9. Rabinowitz, p. 3. The emphases are original.

10. Compare Genesis 11:9 in which God confounds [בלל] the language of Babylon [בבל] by altering the letters of its name.

11. For the application of the ancient mindset regarding words to biblical and extra-biblical polysemy see Scott B. Noegel, *Janus Parallelism and Its Literary Significance in the Book of Job, with Excurses on the Device in Extra-Jobian and Other Ancient Near Eastern Literatures* (*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*, forthcoming).

12. See, e.g., Driver, p. 151, n. c.; Thompson, p. 764.

לב קמי as “Kambul,” which requires “changing one of the letters of the the two Hebrew words which it translates and then rearranging the letters.”<sup>13</sup> Bright posits:

Ciphers of this sort may have developed as clever marginal glosses . . . , perhaps designed to serve magical purposes, perhaps for reasons that escape us. But it is entirely possible that they began to be developed in the Exilic period as a means of protecting the writers. At least, such subterfuges make historical sense in the context of the Exile, but scarcely in a later period when the Babylonian empire had vanished.<sup>14</sup>

In my opinion, Bright’s suggestion here of magical purposes is closer to the mark. Note again how a power struggle is present in Jeremiah 51:1, and how it is expressed by inverting the letters of the enemy’s name.

The third known *atbash* is identical to that found in Jeremiah 25:26: *How has תשש been captured. The praise of the whole earth has been taken! How has Babylon become a horror to the nations (Jer. 51:41)! Commentators who accept the cipher in 25:26 typically see it at work in Jeremiah 51:41,<sup>15</sup> in agreement with the Targum and the Rabbis. (The LXX agains omits the line.)*

A fourth instance of *atbash* was suggested by C. H. Gordon, who opined that the proper name כבול in I Kings 9:13 also contained an *atbash* for לשפך meaning “worthless land.”<sup>16</sup> The text reports Hiram’s disappointment with Solomon’s gift of twenty cities:

*‘My brother,’ he said, ‘what sort of towns are these that you have given me?’ So they were named the land of כבול, as is still the case.*

For centuries, translators have puzzled over the meaning of כבול.<sup>17</sup> The Talmud (Shabbath 54a) offers both “sterility” and “chained.” Rashi and Kimhi suggest the latter, while G. Jones wavers between the two meanings.<sup>18</sup> J. Montgomery conjectures that it is another form of the Phoenician גבל [Byblos], but

13. Nicholson, p. 213.

14. Bright, p. 355.

15. See, e.g., Driver, p. 151; Thompson, p. 764; Bright, p. 358.

16. In an address presented at the Society of Biblical Literature (1973), mentioned by Sasson, “Wordplay in the Old Testament,” p. 969.

17. For a possible location for the site see Zvi Gal, “Cabul: A Royal Gift Found,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 19 (1993), 39-44, 84.

18. G. H. Jones, *The New Century Bible Commentary: 1 and 2 Kings*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1984) p. 214.

translates כבול as "march-land."<sup>19</sup> H. Donner follows Montgomery's proposal.<sup>20</sup> J. Robinson suggests that we connect it with a modern-day location in the Galilee, yet renders it "sterile land."<sup>21</sup> Unconvinced by the identity of the modern toponym, Judah Qil concludes that its location is still unknown.<sup>22</sup> Gordon's solution that כבול is an *atbash* for לשפך "worthless land," therefore, puts to rest questions regarding its meaning and explains the Talmud's rendering "sterile land."

The difficulty locating examples of *atbash* has been a stumbling block to understanding the device. With only three or four examples for comparison, two of which are identical, it has been difficult to draw conclusions. Hence some consider the device to be pure scholarly fiction, or not original to Jeremiah's prophecy.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, with the help of computer technology an argument may be raised in favor of their deliberateness.

A few years ago I realized that if a computer program could create an *atbash* of an entire Hebrew text, then one could scan the finished *atbash*-version for words or phrases which make good Hebrew sense within the contexts of the pericopes which contain them.<sup>24</sup> I began with Jeremiah. As three examples were already known in that book, I thought my chances were good for finding more. What I discovered was that *atbash* was not restricted to a crux whose only solution was to read it as an *atbash* (e.g., "heart of my enemy" = כשדיים), nor to assumed onomastica like ששך, but was also employed with relative frequency with key nouns and verbs.

19. J. A. Montgomery and H. S. Gehman, *Kings*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951) p. 213.

20. Herbert Donner, "The Interdependence of Internal Affairs and Foreign Policy during the Davidic-Solomonic Period (with Special Regard to the Phoenician Coast)," in Tomoo Ishida, ed., *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon and Other Essays: Papers Read at the International Symposium for Biblical Studies, Tokyo, 5-7 December, 1979* (Tokyo: Yamakawa-Shuppansha, 1982) p. 207.

21. J. Robinson, *The First Book of Kings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972) p. 116.

22. Judah Qil, ספר מלכים (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1989) p. 204.

23. The latter view is held by Driver, p. 151, n. e.

24. I must thank Andrew Biewer of the Computer Science Department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee for his invaluable assistance in creating the computer program on which this study is based. The output of his program was a LaTeX formatted document which he then processed to produce the Hebrew.

To demonstrate, I now turn to nine hitherto unrecognized but potentially secure examples of *atbash* in the Book of Jeremiah.

1. Jer. 18:2-4 — חמר

'Go down to the house of a potter, and there I will impart My words to you.'  
So I went down to the house of a potter, and found him working at the wheel.  
And if the vessel he was making was spoiled, as happens to clay (חמר) in the potter's hands, he would make it into another vessel, such as the potter found fit to make.

This passage has evoked comments from a variety of angles. Usually noted are the use of metaphor and symbolism and whether the verse should be understood in a positive or negative light. Bright asserts:

[God] is the potter, and he can do with Israel as the potter does with the clay. But the point is not, as some think, that [God] will continue to work patiently with his people and, in spite of the fact that they may temporarily thwart him, will in the end make them the "vessel" that he intended them to be. This is to misunderstand vs. 4, the point of which is precisely that the clay *can* frustrate the potter's intention and cause him to change it . . . .<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, the passage's straightforward diction and uncomplicated grammar have led scholars to overlook the presence of an *atbash*, specifically on the word חמר [clay] whose *atbash* is סיג [backslide].<sup>26</sup> We find the word again in 18:6: *Just like clay [חמר] in the hands of a potter, so are you in My hands, O House of Israel!*<sup>27</sup> The sophistication of the prophet's message lies in that it simultaneously equates Israel both with "backsliding" and with the clay from which it was formed (cf. Isa 45:9, 64:7). The Targum's rendering [טינא] perhaps represents an attempt to render the *atbash* as it carries a nuance of "impure thought, lust" (cf. Sanhedrin 75a, Hagiga 15b). This plays both on the *atbash* חמר/סיג and on the use of יצר in Jeremiah 8:11 as "destructive inclination."

25. Bright, p. 125.

26. E.g., Psalms 53:4, 80:19, Proverbs 14:14 (all in *qal*), Jeremiah 38:22, 46:5 (both in *nif'al*). We also add that סיג can mean "dross" and that it occurs in reference to "silver vessels" (though not of clay) which often metaphorically represent the refined Israel (e.g., Isa. 1:22, 25).

27. As noted by Thompson, p. 431, n. 3, the LXX omits the word.

Perhaps Rashi had the *atbash* in mind when he called this passage "an inverted verse" [ומקרא מסורח הוא]. In this light it also is interesting to observe that Rashi saw the phrase 'and if the nation turns from its evil, about which I spoke' (18:8) as God's reference to the nation's עבירות [transgressions]. Thus, the *atbash* serves to underscore that just as Israel moved "backwards" in sin, so also is חמר "backwards" for סיג. If we recall the ancient belief in the power of words, Jeremiah's coded statement becomes all the more poignant.

## 2. Jer. 20:8 — מדי

*For every time [מדי] I speak, I must cry out, must shout, 'lawlessness and rapine!' For the word of the Lord causes me constant disgrace and contempt.*

The *atbash* for the compound preposition מדי [every time], reads: יקם [he will avenge]. With the *atbash* in mind we can translate with an eye toward parallelism: "For I cry out 'He will avenge'; I call out 'lawlessness and rapine!'"

The medievals, probably on the basis of the targumic expansion ארי בזמן, generally saw the word as equivalent to the interrogative מתי [how long?]. Modern translators rarely comment on מדי because it is fairly common.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, it is exploited for its *atbash* by the expert Jeremiah.

The *atbash* also makes sense contextually.<sup>29</sup> Note how the prophecy soon moves into a description of God's vengeance utilizing the root קום: 'All my [supposed] friends are waiting for me to stumble: 'Perhaps he can be entrapped, and we can prevail against him and take our vengeance on him [נקמתנו]' (20:10)! Note the thrice-repeated emphasis on the pronouns denoting "him" (i.e., Jeremiah) which signals a contrast; rather than God avenging the people (20:8), the people aim to avenge him (20:10). Interestingly, it is at this juncture that Jeremiah reverses his direction and faithfully proclaims: *But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior; therefore my persecutors shall stumble, they shall not prevail and not succeed* (20:11). Indeed, lest we missed the *atbash* and its reference imme-

28. See, e.g., Driver, p. 118; Thompson, p. 456; Bright, p. 132.

29. The LXX adds: "For I will laugh with my bitter speech." Does "sharp speech" (i.e., riddles) suggest a reference to the *atbash* here? Cf. e.g., *Odyssey* 4.406, *Iliad* 4.118, and LXX to Proverbs 5:4 where מרה [(more) bitter] parallels חרה [sharp words].

diately afterwards, we find Jeremiah praying: *O Lord of Hosts, You who test the righteous, who examine the heart and the mind, let me see Your retribution [נקמתך] upon them* (20:12). The message of Jeremiah's *atbash* again describes a soon-to-be reversed power struggle. Paraphrased we might read "let the frequency [מדי] of my prayers be transformed so as to avenge [יקם] them."<sup>30</sup>

## The ATBASH Principle (Code)

The Aleph-Bet	
Backward	Forward
ת	א
ש	ב
ר	ג
ק	ד
צ	ה
פ	ו
ע	ז
ס	ח
נ	ט
מ	י
ל	כ

30. A similar *atbash* may obtain in Jeremiah 48:27 with the expression מדי דבריך [how long your words], which as an *atbash* reads "he will avenge your words!"