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

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ATBASH (א"ב"ש) IN JEREMIAH
AND ITS LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE
PART 1
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Perhaps no other type of wordplay in the Hebrew Bible is as rare as atbash (א"ב"ש), a cryptic writing technique in which the first letter of the alphabet (א) is used as a substitute for the last (י), the second (ב) for the penultimate (ך), the third (ג) for the antepenultimate (א), and so on.1

The writers of the Talmud and the medieval exegetes who followed them recognized atbash as a legitimate hermeneutical device,2 but, despite centuries of study, the Hebrew Bible has yielded only three sure instances of this cryptic device: Jeremiah 25:26, 51:1, 51:4, and a possible fourth in 1 Kings 9:13.3 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.

3. I leave out of this discussion the observation in Tan'uth III, 17a that תיבה [sorrow] in Proverbs 10:1 is an atbash for מ"תוב [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 5:23) 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. 479-483.

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assessed the substance and form of that idea. Thus, once spoken, words were
able to affect the observable reality.8 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.9

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.10 Therefore, it
is fitting that God’s word be encoded in inverted language.11 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 51:11: Thus said the
Lord: ‘See I am rousing a destructive wind against Babylon and the inhabitants
of בבל בל.’ Here, the words בבל בל [heart of my enemy] are an atbash for
בבל בל (Chaldea). The Targum too renders it בבל בל.

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

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. Tishelton, “The Supposed
9. Rabinowitz, p. 3. The emphases are original.
10. Compare Genesis 11:9 in which God confounds בבל בל the language of Babylon בבל בל 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
Excerpts on the Device in Extra-Jobian and Other Ancient Near Eastern Literatures (Journal for the

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יִבְלֶל קֶמֶר as “Kambul,” which requires “changing one of the letters of the the two
Hebrew words which it translates and then rearranging the letters.”13 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.14

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
בבל 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 51:41,15 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 בבל in I Kings 9:13 also contained an atbash for מבל meaning
“worthless land.”16 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 מבל, as is still the case.

For centuries, translators have puzzled over the meaning of מבל.17 The
Talmud (Shabbath 54a) offers both “sterility” and “chained.” Rashi and Kimhi
suggest the latter, while G. Jones wavering between the two meanings.18 J. Mont-
gomery conjectures that it is another form of the Phoenician מבל (Diblos), but

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,
17. For a possible location for the site see Zvi Gal, “Cabul: A Royal Gift Found,” Biblical
18. G. H. Jones, The New Century Bible Commentary: 1 and 2 Kings, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids:

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translates מְנָא as "march-land."19 H. Donner follows Montgomery's proposal.20
J. Robinson suggests that we connect it with a modern-day location in the Galilee,
yet renders it "sterile land."21 Unconvinced by the identity of the modern toponym,
Judah Qil concludes that its location is still unknown.22 Gordon's solution that מָנָא is an atbash for כְּסִי "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.23 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.24 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" = דְּמַעְדֵּד), nor to assumed onomastica like וָאָבָא, but was also employed with relative frequency with key nouns and verbs.

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 — מִיבָא

'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 (דֹּקִים) 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 . . . .35

Nevertheless, the passage's straightforward diction and uncomplicated grammar have led scholars to overlook the presence of an atbash, specifically on the word מִיבָא [clay] whose atbash is בֵּדָא [backslide].26 We find the word again in 18:6: Just like clay [מדח] in the hands of a potter, so are you in My hands, O House of Israel? 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 מַדָּח 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 בֵּדָא and on the use of בֵּדָא in Jeremiah 8:11 as "destructive inclination."

26. E.g., Psalms 53:3, 80:19, Proverbs 14:14 (all in qal), Jeremiah 38:22, 46:5 (both in nif'al). We also add that מַדָּח 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.

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.

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Perhaps Rashi had the *atbash* in mind when he called this passage “an inverted verse.” 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 transgressions. Thus, the *atbash* serves to underscore that just as Israel moved “backwards” in sin, so also is God’s “backwards” for רֶס. If we recall the ancient belief in the power of words, Jeremiah’s coded statement becomes all the more poignant.

2. Jer. 20:8—20

*For every time [*יִדְוָד*] 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 יִדְוָד [every time], reads: נָבָא [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 יִדְוָד נָבָא, generally saw the word as equivalent to the interrogative יִדְוָד [how long?]. Modern translators rarely comment on יִדְוָד because it is fairly common. Nevertheless, it is exploited for its *atbash* by the expert Jeremiah.

The *atbash* also makes sense contextually. Note how the prophecy soon moves into a description of God’s vengeance utilizing the root נָבָא: ‘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’ [18:10]! 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-

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28. See, e.g., Driver, p. 118; Thompson, p. 456; Bright, p. 123.

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 רֶס denotes (more) bitter parallels בְּרִית [sharp words].

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