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Perhaps no other type of wordplay in the Hebrew Bible is as rare as atbash [אתבש], 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 (מש), the third (ג) for the antepenultimate (ת) and so on. Though the rabbis of the talmudic and medieval periods recognized atbash as a legitimate literary device, to date only three or possibly four sure instances of atbash have been discovered.

Professor Noegel exploits the use of computer technology and finds nine hitherto undiscovered examples of atbash in the book of Jeremiah. In his first of a series of three articles, he suggested two such atbash terms. In this article he explores five more.

Jeremiah 22:10 — נֶבֶן

Do not weep for the dead; and do not lament [תִּבָּחֶר] for him. Weep [בָּחַר] rather for him who is leaving, for he shall never come to see the land of his birth!

The prophet’s three-time repetition of the root נב [weep] signals its importance. Reading the words formed from the root נב as atbash, we get נָבַל וַחֲלָשׁ and נָבַל וַחֲלָשׁ — I will unsheathe [my sword] and he surely has unsheathed [his sword], respectively.

Commentators note little here other than who might be the object of the lament. It is of interest that Rashi suggests a relationship of lex talionis between this verse and Jeremiah 36:30 wherein we find a play on the word “sword” [חרב]: I will expose his corpse to heat [חרב] by day and cold by night.

Contextually these atbash also make sense. They refer us back to the Lord’s message of doom in 22:7: I will appoint destroyers against you, each with his weapons [לָיָן]. In I Samuel 21:9 we find the expression לָיָן ‘וַצָּלָל [also my sword, and also my weapons] which directly connects with רַבִּים צָלָל. The atbash on נָבַל in Jeremiah 22:10 gains support when we add to this the frequent association of וַחֲלָשׁ with וַחֲלָשׁ (e.g., Num. 22:23, Jud. 8:10, II Sam. 24:9, et al.).

Further, as Jeremiah 23:16-20 clarifies, the prophet advocates peaceful resistance. He wants the rulers of Jerusalem to perform acts of peace and not profit (22:17), and to avoid confrontation with Babylon. If they do not, Jeremiah warns, they will suffer from the sword [חרב] (cf. Jer. 21:7, 21:8, 22:7), and come to ruin [חורב] (Jer. 22:5). The frequent repetition of the word נב in this chapter and the play on וַחֲלָשׁ in connection with a Babylonian reprisal underscores the importance of the atbash on נב [weeping] in 22:10-12. We are not to weep for the righteous King Josiah who was slain in battle at Megiddo (II Kg. 23:29-30), but rather for “he who goes”; namely, the evil King Jehoahaz, who will eventually be exiled to Egypt by Pharaoh Necho (II Kg. 23:31-33).

If we, along with the concensus of modern scholars, accept these two personages as the objects of weeping in Jeremiah 23:10, then we must ask why we should not weep for a good king, but weep for an evil one. This problem is solved if we read the three appearances of נב as atbash. The message is that one should not “unsheathe the sword” in battle (as Josiah did) and die, but rather “unsheathe the sword” against Jehoahaz, who has repeated the evil of his ancestors (II Kg. 23:32), and live. The prophet’s inverted message again describes a soon-to-be inverted power struggle.

Jeremiah 25:20-26 — כַּלֹּל

These verses list the nations for whom the Lord promises His wrath. Included in this roster are the kings of the Philistines, Tyrians, Sidonians, Arabians,

1. The moderns differ from the ancients in this regard. Rashi sees the “dead” as a reference to Jehoiakim. Radak reads the verse as a restriction on how much one should mourn for the dead and cites Mo‘ed Qatan 27b as support. Cf., Driver, The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, p. 128; Thompson, The Book of Jeremiah, p. 476 who see the “dead” as Josiah.

2. This might explain why Jeremiah uses Jehoahaz’s private name שלם [lit.: he is at peace] in 22:11.
Elamites, and a host of others to whom the Lord addresses His woeful word with the repeated phrase all the kings of ... In Hebrew, this construct phrase is שְׁלֹשׁ כְּלָלִים [he will destroy them] from דָּבָשׁ.

Commentators with reference to the last line containing the atbash on יִשְׂרָאֵל (25:26) have been noted in my first article on ATBASH (JBG, vol. XXIV-2, p. 83). Regarding the list of nations, Bright avers that the section has suffered some expansion. Outside of its syntactical difficulties, the passage has elicited few comments.

Like the previous example, this atbash is underscored by its constant repetition. This atbash also is extra-special because it is exploits the middle four letters of the Hebrew alphabet. W. G. E. Watson has demonstrated that the same letters also appear frequently in Psalm 145 and are crucial to the psalm’s message. The same device is at work here in the form of a atbash-palindrome.

The atbash, which appears as “he will destroy them” in reference to the previous list of kings, takes on a different nuance when connected with לָשׁוּנִים [he will humble Babylon] in 25:26 permitting us to read לָשׁוּנִים בָּלָהְמִים מְלָלִים יִשְׂרָאֵל [he will humiliate Babylon] (from because does not fit grammatically). In essence, though the rabbis did not catch it, it is a double atbash.

As with the other atbash, this double atbash is bolstered by contextual references. We hear the root לָשׁוּנִים [destroy] several times in Jeremiah (e.g., 5:3, 9:15, 14:12, 16:4, etc.), often in association with Babylon and frequently in connection with the sword (מָשָׂא). It is no wonder, therefore, that just prior to these atbash Jeremiah equates the wrath of The Lord upon the kings of the nations with the peril of the sword (25:16).

As for the root לָשׁוּנִים [humiliate], observe how Jeremiah uses it previously in 20:11 in reference to the root לָשׁוּנִים לָשׁוּנִים [perpetual humiliation] which the Lord will inflict on the Babylonians! In effect, atbash in this passage equates destruction with the other nations and humiliation with Babylon. Such linguistic inversion again must be seen within the context of words and their power. Just as God is able to invert לָשׁוּנִים לָשׁוּנִים to לָשׁוּנִים בְּלָשׁוּנִים, so also can He bring “kings” to “shame” through his word.

Jeremiah 25:30 — יִשְׂרָאֵל

The Lord roars יִשְׂרָאֵל from on high, He makes His voice heard from His holy dwelling. He roars aloud יִשְׂרָאֵל over His earthly abode. He utters shouts like the grape-treaders, against all the dwellers on earth.

The repeated use of the root יִשְׂרָאֵל [roar] again flags its importance. The atbash of this word is בָּרָץ (cut into pieces) (cf. Gen 15:9-21) and for יִשְׂרָאֵל it is the pi’el infinitive absolute construction בָּרָץ בָּרָץ [He surely will cut (off)] (cf. Jer. 41:6, I Sam. 17:41).

The Targum renders יִשְׂרָאֵל with בְּלָשׁוּנִים [he destroys, finishes,] suggesting that at least one tradition saw in יִשְׂרָאֵל a veiled message of destruction. Metsudat David also connects the word with destruction: “he calls for a decree of desolation [הָיוּדְתֶּכֶת רָחִיב] upon Jerusalem.” Interestingly, the latter also hints at “cutting [off]” by way of פָּרָה (decrees (lit.: “cutting”)) and “sword” [קַרְבּוֹ] by way of מָשָׂא (destruction). Radak too sees here a reference to the “destruction” [מָשָׂא] of the Jerusalem Temple. Modern commentators have missed the atbash here, preferring instead to comment on the over-all meaning of the passage or its intertextual connections.

A lack of exegetical awareness of the device notwithstanding, intratextual references again support the atbash. Observe how Jeremiah reinforces the notion of “cutting [off]” by preparing the reader with: התפוצת ים מנהרי ככלי חמדה [I will break you in pieces and you shall fall like a precious weapon] (25:34). Like the previous example, this atbash also anticipates the final line of the prophecy: He delivers the wicked to the sword (Jer. 25:31).

In addition, 25:32 informs us that The Lord’s roar will come in the form of a tempest which when unleashed from the earth’s most “remote parts” [מַרְאֶכְתָּנְי אַרְזָיו].

3. Thompson, The Book of Jeremiah, p. 518 and Bright, Jeremiah, p. 161, note that if the “kings of” is a mistake for “the kings of יִשְׂרָאֵל,” as some suggest, then it too is an atbash for יִשְׂרָאֵל [Elam.]


5. See, e.g., Thompson, The Book of Jeremiah, p. 518.


8. The preposition יָד [as a weapon] (often translated “vessel”) has caused problems for translators. I take it to convey the image of a weapon dropped in defeat. The translation “vessel” makes no sense in the context of Jeremiah 25 which concerns The Lord’s battle against the nations.
will reach the "ends of the earth" [lit.: thigh], which frequently occurs with "sword" (e.g., Ex. 32:27, Jud. 3:16, Ps. 45:4, S.S. 3:8), describes the source of the storm. Similar is the twice-occurring expression "ends of" which derives from the verb [cut]. The therefore, informs us that The Lord's "roar" [lit.: thigh] will "cut off" [lit.: thigh] the wicked from on high.

Most interesting is the fact that Jeremiah later employs Abraham's division of the calf (Gen. 15:9-21) as a metaphor for the Babylonian destruction of Judea.

Jeremiah's use of the atbash in 25:30, therefore, anticipates his later comparison, and if we remember the ancient mindset regarding words, The Lord's roar does not become that of a paper tiger, but rather it becomes a dangerous word prepared to cut asunder the unfaithful.

**JEREMIAH 34:14 — ויהי**

In the seventh year each of you must let go any fellow Hebrew who may be sold to you; when he has served you six years, you must set him free [lit.: thigh].

Commentaries note very little other than the odd switch from plural to singular address in 14a,15 or whence Jeremiah derives his material (i.e., Deut 15:1, 15:12).16 Nevertheless, the repetition of ויהי suggests that it should be scrutinized closely. As in the cases above, this repetition serves to mark the presence of an atbash; ויהי [free] becomes ויהי [their turning].

This atbash also finds rehearsal elsewhere in the chapter. In this case, the echo comes in the form of a synonym to the root בתי, namely יתשא: Lately you turned about [lit.: thigh] and did what is proper in My sight ... and but now you have turned thicket."11 The Targum reads מפרץ חיצים as כמעי [His fortress] adding: מפרץ חיצים as כמעי חיצים [from before the sword of the enemy, which is like an intoxicating wine.]12

However, when we recall the word's context dealing with the storm of The Lord and the previous connection between The Lord's lion-like roar [lit.: thigh] and His destruction [lit.: thigh], we find support for the atbash in this chapter by mentioning a "lion," which reminds us of ויהי ויהי [roar/cut]; "desolation" (25:36-38), which harks to מפרץ חיצים [kings of/destroy them]; and יתשא ויהי [the oppressor] (25:31-32), which recalls [Sheshak/Babylon] (cf. Jer. 50:16). Moreover, in addition to the literary sophistication of the atbash is the power which such linguistic inversions possessed for the ancients. God's lion-like dwelling becomes quite literally the storm on which He rides.
and have profaned My name (34:15-16). The root יָטַה, like יַטַּה, can mean "repent" and "backslide" (e.g., 1 Kg. 18:37 [hiph'if] and Ps. 71:21 [qal] where it appears along with יָטַה), suggesting that Jeremiah chose to emphasize the case of the freed slave in order to deliver an atbash. That elsewhere Jeremiah exploits the connection between the roots יָטַה and יָטַה for rhetorical purposes suggests that this is the case. Further, Jeremiah provided a clue to the atbash here by adding: But your fathers would not listen to Me, nor turn (יָטַה) their ear (34:14).

Moreover, shortly after his harangue in 34:18-20, Jeremiah compares the backsliders to the calf which Abraham divided into two pieces (בְּרֵיתוֹן) [Gen. 15:9-10, 17-21]. We have mentioned this pericope already in connection with the atbash in 25:30 [נַעֲרַיִן]. Jeremiah's comparison, therefore, is apt and provides for the reader an important clue for its decipherment by referring us (like many another atbash) to a previous atbash. The language of reversal again encapsulates the reversal which Jeremiah 34:14 describes: slaves are turned into free men.

Richard C. Steiner's article "The Two Sons of Neriah and the Two Editions of Jeremiah in the Light of Two Atbash Code-Words for Babylon," VT 46 (1996), 74-84 came to my attention only after my article went to press. Since he too discusses atbash in Jeremiah, a few brief remarks seem warranted. Steiner examines the atbash data with an eye toward uncovering the purpose of the repeated cipher sheshak/Babel, and concludes that concealment served to avoid political repercussions. As he remarks: "Only during the Neo-Babylonian period was there reason to disguise anti-Babylonian sentiments" (pp. 83-84). In the light of the newly uncovered examples of atbash discussed here, it is clear that Steiner's thesis requires modification, since these additional examples must be considered as well.

15. Though Radak also is correct in conjecturing that Jeremiah chose this case in order to stop the poorer classes, who were freed from their wealthier overlords and then re-enslaved, from defecting to the Babylonian side.


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