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ATBASH (אתביש) IN JEREMIAH
AND ITS LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE: PART 2

SCOTT B. NOEGEL

Perhaps no other type of wordplay in the Hebrew Bible is as rare as atbash [אתביש], *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. 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 — בכה

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

The prophet's three-time repetition of the root בכה [weep] signals its importance. Reading the words formed from the root בכה as *atbash*, we get אשלף and שלף שלף — *I will unsheath* [my sword] and *he surely has unsheathed* [his sword], respectively.

Commentators note little here other than who might be the object of the lament.[1] It is of interest that Rashi suggests a relationship of *lex talionis* between

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.

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this verse and Jeremiah 36:30 wherein we find a play on the word "sword" [חרב]: *I will expose his corpse to heat* [חורב] *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* [כליו]. In I Samuel 21:9 we find the expression גם חרבי וגם כלי [*also my sword, and also my weapons*] which directly connects כלי with חרב. The *atbash* on שלף/בכה in Jeremiah 22:10 gains support when we add to this the frequent association of חרב with שלף (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[2] 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 [חרבה] (Jer. 22:5). The frequent repetition of the word חרב in this chapter and the play on חרבה in connection with a Babylonian reprisal underscores the importance of the *atbash* on בכה [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 בכה as *atbash*. The message is that one should not "unsheath the sword" in battle (as Josiah did) and die, but rather "unsheath 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 — כלה

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,

2. This might explain why Jeremiah uses Jehoahaz's private name שלם [lit.: he is at peace] in 22:11.

Elamites,[3] 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 מלכי which when read as an *atbash* is יכלם [he will destroy them] from כלה.

Commentators with reference to the last line containing the *atbash* on ששך (25:26) have been noted in my first article on *ATBASH* (*JBQ*, vol. XXIV-2, p. 83). Regarding the list of nations, Bright avers that the section has suffered some expansion.[4] Outside of its syntactical difficulties, the passage has elicited few comments.[5]

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.[6] 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 בבל/ששך in 25:26 permitting us to read מלך ששך as יכלם בבל [he will humiliate Babylon] (from כלם because כלה 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 כלה [destroy] several times in Jeremiah (e.g., 5:3, 9:15, 14:12, 16:4, et al.), often in association with Babylon and frequently in connection with the sword [חרב]. 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 כלם [humiliate], observe how Jeremiah uses it previously in 20:11 in reference to the כלמת עולם [perpetual humiliation] which the Lord will inflict on the Babylonians! In effect, *atbash* in this passage equates destruction [כלה] with the other nations and humiliation [כלם] with Babylon. Such lingual

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 זמכי," as some suggest, then it too is an *atbash* for עילם [Elam.] The lack of textual evidence, however, makes this mere speculation. The LXX omits this verse.

4. Bright, *Jeremiah*, pp. 162, 164.

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

6. Wilfred G. E. Watson, "Reversed Rootplay in Ps 145," *Biblica* 62 (1981), pp. 101-102.

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inversion again must be seen within the context of words and their power. Just as God is able to invert מלך to כלם, so also can He bring "kings" to "shame" through his word.

JEREMIAH 25:30 — שאג

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

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

The Targum renders ישאג with יכלי [he destroys, finishes,] suggesting that at least one tradition saw in שאג a veiled message of destruction. *Metsudat David* also connects the word with destruction: "he calls for a decree of desolation [גזירת חורבן] upon Jerusalem." Interestingly, the latter also hints at "cutting [off]" by way of גזירה [decree (lit.: "cutting")] and "sword" [חרב] by way of חורבן [destruction]. Radak too sees here a reference to the "destruction" [להחריב] 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.[7]

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: ותפוצותיכם ונפלתם ככלי חמדה *[(I will) break you in pieces and you shall fall like a precious weapon]* (25:34).[8] 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" [מירכתי ארץ],

7. See, e.g., Driver, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah*, p. 152, n. b; Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, p. 519; Bright, *Jeremiah*, p. 161.

8. The preposition כ in ככלי [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" [עד קצה הארץ]. This verse rehearses the connection between שאג and בתר by associating the Lord's storm with swords and cutting. See, for example, how the word ירך [lit.: thigh], which frequently occurs with חרב "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 קצה [cut]. The *atbash*, therefore, informs us that The Lord's "roar" [שאג] will "cut off" [בתר] 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.

I will make the men who violated My Covenant, who did not fulfill the terms of the Covenant which they made before Me, [like] the calf which they cut in two so as to pass between the halves [בתרין]. The officers of Judah and Jerusalem, the officials, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the halves [בתרי] of the calf shall be handed over to their enemies, to those who seek to kill them (Jer. 34:18-20).

Jeremiah's use of the *atbash* בתר/שאג 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 25:38 — סכו

Like a lion, He has gone forth from His lair [סכו]; the land has become a desolation. Because of the oppressive wrath, because of His fierce anger.

The *atbash* for סכו [His lair] is חלף [sweep over, pass over], a poetic verb used with storms (cf. Isa. 8:8, Job 4:15, Hab. 1:11). In Job 9:11 and 11:10 חלף refers to God's wrath. Thus, the *atbash* permits us to read Jeremiah 25:38: Like a lion He departs, He storms over; the land becomes a desolation.

Though the verse is difficult,[9] the word סכו has caused some grief for translators. Driver renders it "His covert."[10] Thompson and Bright read it as "His

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9. Most difficult is how to treat 25:38c: מפני חרון היונה and the variant reading found in the LXX: μαχαιρας [sword].
10. Driver, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah*, p. 154.

thicket."[11] The Targum reads סכו as מכרכיה [His fortress] adding: מן קדם חרב סנאה דהיא כחמר מרויא [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 [שאג] and His destruction [בתר], we find support for the *atbash* חלף/סכו. The latter reinforces the former by referring us to the mention of The Lord's tempest in Jeremiah 25:32. Note also how this passage refers us to the previous three *atbash* in this chapter by mentioning a "lion," which reminds us of בתר/שאג [roar/cut]; "desolation" (25:36-38), which harks to יכלם/מלכי [kings of/destroy them]; and היונה [the oppressor] (25:31-32), which recalls בבל/ששך [Sheshak/Babylon] (cf. Jer. 50:16). Moreover, in addition to the literary sophistication of the *atbash* is the power which such lingual inversions possessed for the ancients. God's lion-like dwelling becomes quite literally the storm on which He rides.

JEREMIAH 34:14 — חפשי

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 [חפשי].

Commentaries note very little other than the odd switch from plural to singular address in 14a,[13] or whence Jeremiah derives his material (i.e., Deut 15:1, 15:12).[14] Nevertheless, the repetition of חפשי suggests that it should be scrutinized closely. As in the cases above, this repetition serves to mark the presence of an *atbash*; חפשי [free] becomes סובם [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 סבב, namely שוב: *Lately you turned about [תשבו] and did what is proper in My sight ... and but now you have turned*

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11. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, p. 519; Bright, *Jeremiah*, p. 160.
12. We also may read the latter half "as wet clay." Is this a reference to the *atbash* סינ/חמר in Jeremiah 18:2-4?
13. See, e.g., William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah Chapters 26-52* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 241.
14. See, e.g., Bright, *Jeremiah*, p. 222.

back [תשבו] *and have profaned My name* (34:15-16). The root סבב, like שוב, can mean "repent" and "backslide" (e.g., I Kg. 18:37 [*hiph'il*] and Ps. 71:21 [*kal*] where it appears along with תשוב), suggesting that Jeremiah chose to emphasize the case of the freed slave in order to deliver an *atbash*.[15] That elsewhere Jeremiah exploits the connection between the roots שוב and סבב for rhetorical purposes suggests that this is the case.[16] Further, Jeremiah provided a clue to the *atbash* here by adding: *But your fathers would not listen to Me, nor turn* [הטו] *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 [בתרין] (Gen. 15:9-10, 17-21). We have mentioned this pericope already in connection with the *atbash* in 25:30 [בתר/שאג]. 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 encapsules the reversal which Jeremiah 34:14 describes: slaves are turned into [סבב] 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.

16. See, Bernhard W. Anderson, "'The Lord Has Created Something New': A Stylistic Study of Jeremiah 31:15-22," in Leo G. Perdue and Brian W. Kovacs, eds., *A Prophet to the Nations: Essays on Jeremiah Studies* (Winona Lake, IN.: Eisenbrauns, 1984), pp. 367-380, especially 380.

BALAAM
SOME ASPECTS OF HIS CHARACTER

BENJAMIN GOODNICK

Frequent have been the calumny, scorn and venom heaped upon Balaam by our Jewish authorities — scholars, writers and commentators, up to the present, as an individual deserving eternal condemnation. He has been accused, for example, of self-aggrandizement, because he spoke of being offered a house full of gold and silver (Num. 22:18). He has been also charged with bestiality because he had his own she-ass who was accustomed to the ways of her master (Num. 22:30).

Indeed, the talmudic consensus (especially Sanhedrin 105a-106b) is that Balaam was completely evil. Everything he said or did was distorted to expose its blemish and negative intent. Rabbi Yohanan stated: "From every blessing of that wicked man one can learn his true intention." Rabbi Eleazar claims that Balaam never spoke the blessings; an angel was sent to mouth the words. Rabbi Abba bar Kahana says that, except for *Ma Tovu* — '*How fair are your tents, O Jacob ...*' (Num. 24:5) all the other blessings turned out to be curses. Yet it is remarkable that this one sentence, starting with these two words, was selected to adorn and initiate the morning service since gaonic times. On the other hand, just because the sentence stems from Balaam's recitation, Rabbi Shlomo Lurie (the Maharshal) was greatly opposed to giving it a place of prominence in the prayerbook.

However, we shall put aside such extra-biblical observations and attempt to use the text itself as a basis for understanding this person and his role in the world that surrounded him.

Let us now try to analyze his situation; what he did and how he was perceived. Note that nowhere is he described as a prophet, as were Moses and Abraham and the later prophets. Indeed, the biblical text titles him correctly; we read *Balaam, the son of Beor, the soothsayer* (Josh. 13:22). Basically, he was a self-promoting

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