

ATBASH (אֲתַבֵּשׁ) IN JEREMIAH ITS LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE: PART 3

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The atbash is a rare type of wordplay in the Hebrew Bible. It is a cryptic writing technique in which the first letter [א] is used as a substitute for the last [ת], the second [ב] for the penultimate [ש], and so on. In the two previous articles, published in Vol. XXXV-2 and 3, the author suggested seven such atbash in the Book of Jeremiah. In this issue he examines the two final ones.

8. JEREMIAH 36:27 — כתב

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah after the king had burned the scroll containing the words that Baruch had written [כתב] at Jeremiah's dictation.

Scholars have commented on many facets of this section; e.g., the king's motivation for burning the scroll,¹ the first appearance of Baruch, and the sympathy of the king's courtiers towards Jeremiah,² but none has noted the presence of an *atbash*.

Though the word כתב [write] is common in the Hebrew Bible, it does not occur so frequently in connection with fire as it does here. As the *atbash* of כתב is לאש [for fire] we may see here a clever cryptogram. Moreover, the word אש [fire] does not appear in the pericope which reports Jeremiah's discovery of king Jehoiakim's act (36:27-32). Instead, Jeremiah alludes to its presence through the frequent use

1. See, e.g., Holladay, *Jeremiah*, pp. 259-260

2. See, e.g., Bright, *Jeremiah*, pp. 180-181.

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of שרף [burn] alongside כתב [write.] The word שם does occur two times in the previous section (36:23)³ in which the king burns the scroll, suggesting that it serves an anticipatory function there; i.e., to prepare the reader for the *atbash* in 36:27 (cf. *atbash* 5 above).

Some support for the *atbash* appears in the double accusative of 36:27: ... *after the king had burned the scroll [and] the words which Baruch had written ...* As Radaq observes, the king burns two objects here and not one. He then explains by reference to the Talmud, wherein it states that when one sees a Torah scroll burning “one must rend his garments twice, once for the scroll, and once for the writing” (Yerushalmi Talmud Mo’ed Qatan III, 83b, Babli 26a). While the comparison is apposite, it fails to explain the double accusative in Jeremiah 36:27. The dual object, I would posit, brings out the dual aspect of the *atbash* on /כתב/ לאש; i.e., no matter how you read כתב it comes out לאש.

Though we will never know exactly which of Jeremiah’s prophecies were burnt and rewritten, Rashi and Radaq believed both to be the Book of Lamentations. Interestingly, they connected it to Lamentations because of the acrostics which that book contains. Thus, Rashi states of Jeremiah: “I am the man in which every letter is tripled.”⁴ This connection between the *atbash* in Jeremiah 36:27 and the acrostics of Lamentations suggests a greater recognition of Jeremiah’s literary manipulation in late antiquity than is recorded for posterity.

Reinforcing this connection is the verb בער [burn, consume] in 36:22, שרף [burn] in 36:25, and the redundant use of שם in 36:24. As with the previous examples of *atbash*, the device is hinted at by the repetition of both the *atbash* word and other words which refer to it. Note also how, despite the king’s response, Jeremiah has Baruch draw up another scroll containing everything that was found in the burnt scroll plus more (36:32). Thus, Jeremiah’s cryptogram underscores the connection between Jehoiakin’s incendiary act and the Lord’s indestructable word. Here too, I hasten to add, a power struggle is evident.

3. It might have dropped out of 36:22 as well. Cf. LXX.

4. Leviticus Rabbah, Proem 28. 3:1.

9. JEREMIAH 48:2 — תלך

Moab's glory is no more; in Heshbon they have planned evil against her; 'Come let us make an end of her as a nation!' You too, O Madmen,⁵ shall be silenced; the sword is following you [תלך].

Many have noted the wordplay between “Heshbon” [חשבון] and “planned” [חשבון] and between “Madmen” [מדמן] and “silenced” [תדמי].⁶ But no scholar has noticed the presence of an *atbash*, specifically on תלך [go, follow] which when reversed becomes אכל [devour].⁷ The association of חרבות [swords] and אכל elsewhere in the Bible (e.g., Deut. 32:42, II Sam. 2:26, etc.) suggests that we see an *atbash* at work here. Moreover, note how the poet has anticipated the *atbash* by putting the root כרת [cut] into the Moabites' mouths: ‘Come let us cut her off [נכריתנה] as a nation’ (48:2)!⁸

As with the previous examples of *atbash*, references to this *atbash* occur in the pericope which contains it. In Jeremiah 48 we find the root אכל rehearsed again in connection with Heshbon and Moab: *For fire went forth from Heshbon, a flame from the midst of Sihon, devouring [תאכל] the brow of Moab ...* (48:45). Note also that the *atbash*'s referent occurs at the end of the chapter (and the *atbash* at the beginning), suggesting that it was employed to bookend the prophecy as an *inclusio*.

In conclusion, while no one example is evidence enough to argue for the existence of *atbash* in Jeremiah, the cumulative weight of all the examples illustrates that *atbash* is a more widely used device in the Book of Jeremiah than presently recognized.

Furthermore, as the device occurs with repeated key nouns and verbs as well as personal names its purpose could not have been, as some have assumed, to

5. Might מדמן also be an *atbash* for יקיט “he will snap off”?

6. See, e.g., Rashi; Radaq; Altschuler's *Metsudat David*; Driver, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah*, p. 281, n. c; Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, pp. 702-703; Bright, *Jeremiah*, p. 319; Holladay, *Jeremiah*, p. 349.

7. One must question whether the Targum attempted to render the *atbash* by way of יהכון קטולי “the slayers of the sword shall go forth.”

8. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, p. 703, notes the use of the verb but merely points out its various nuances.

protect the author. In addition, the names which appear in *atbash* form often appear in non-*atbash* form elsewhere. Thus, its purpose must lie elsewhere, and though we cannot be certain, the fact that anagrams, *gematria*, and wordplays of all sorts appear frequently in magical texts suggests that the purpose of *atbash* in Jeremiah must be sought in the particular style of magical practice.⁹ In this regard, it is important to reiterate that each of the examples of *atbash* discussed above occurs in a context describing a power struggle, one which Jeremiah believes the Lord will overcome. Thus, just as the prophet's coded words must be revealed, so also must The Lord reveal His hidden will through His word. Because the Lord has not yet brought about His promised reversal at the time of Jeremiah's prophecy, the prophet has recorded God's word in an inverted form.

Finally, let me note that despite that the book of Jeremiah contains thousands of words, after inverting the text I have found only nine instances of *atbash*. Are they all intentional or are some coincidental? One would expect many more examples if the language naturally produced "good Hebrew sense" when converted into *atbash* form. Still, I find some of the examples more convincing than others and if I were to rank the complete list from most to least convincing they would appear in the following order: Jeremiah 25:26 (= Jer. 51:41), 51:1, 48:2, 25:20-26, 18:2-4, 25:30, 22:10, I Kings 9:13, Jeremiah 25:38, 20:8, 34:14, and 36:27.¹⁰ Nevertheless, I think it is worthwhile to present all the examples because future researchers may benefit from this work.

Finally, it also should be apparent that biblical scholars can profit greatly from the use of computers. That which lay hidden for centuries can be brought into the light with the push of a few buttons. It is my sincere hope that other biblical and ancient Near Eastern scholars will exploit the new technologies as they become available and apply them not only to the search for additional examples of *atbash* in other books (especially, e.g., in Proverbs, a wisdom book with an emphasis on חידות [riddles]). but also to their own research.

9. As observed already by Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie*. p. 63. See also, Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, pp. 74-75.

10. These are the key-words indicated in my list: ששך, לב קמי, תלך, מלכי, חמר, ישאג-שאג, ישאג, תבכו-בכו-בכו, סכו, מדי, חפשי, כתב.