

CLARIFYING
BAFFLING
BIBLICAL PASSAGES

INTRODUCTION

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In the thirty-five chapters of this study nine emendations are proposed which involve the confusion of a ך and a ך or the confusion of a ך (= כ) and a ך (= ך), or the like. More serious scribal problems were encountered in Ezekiel 13 and 28, requiring the rearrangement of many verses and/or words or phrases within each chapter, similar to the proposed rearrangement of verses in Judges 5 (see note 1, above) and in Zechariah 3–4 (see Chapter XXII, below).

In comparison to the nine proposed emendations in the fifty-five verses which are the foci in the following chapters, fifty-five Hebrew words rarely appearing in the extant Hebrew literature—and consequently not cited in the current Hebrew lexicons—have been recovered. In addition, nineteen nuances of words currently in our Hebrew lexicons need to be added to the recognized definitions. Fifty-eight of these rediscovered words or nuances have well attested Arabic cognates.

James Barr (1968), in *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament*, included an “Index of Examples” (pages 320–337) in which he cited three hundred-thirty-four selected philological proposals made by numerous scholars. Of these proposals one hundred sixty-five were based upon Arabic cognates. John Kaltner (1996), in *The Use of Arabic in Biblical Hebrew Lexicography*, provided another list (pages 119–120) of sixty Arabic cognates to which other scholars have appealed in order to clarify baffling biblical passages. The seventy plus proposed definitions of Hebrew words made in the following chapters in this study should be added to the lists cited by Barr and Kaltner and become candidates for inclusion in subsequent ventures in Hebrew lexicography.

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The baffling biblical passages needing clarification start in *Chapter I* with Gen 3:14 and Isa 65:25, which deal with the serpent's being cursed to eat *dust*. But it is common knowledge that serpents, snakes, and reptiles are carnivores—which makes the curse meaningless. However, the Hebrew עפר, which can mean “dust,” is a homograph of several other words which, according to their with Arabic cognates, realistically correspond to the staple of a serpent's diet. By enlarging the lexicon of Biblical Hebrew to include עפר “small animal” and עפר “small herbage,” the cognates of the Arabic غفر (*gifar*) and غفر (*gafar*), the curse of Gen 3:14 corresponds to reality; and Isa 65:25 envisions that time when reptiles will become herbivores.

The roots of Eph 5:22 “wives, be subject to your husbands” go back to Gen 3:16, “your desire shall be for your husband and *he shall rule over you* (מִשָּׁל־בְּךָ).” However, Hebrew משל, which is discussed in *Chapter II*, is a homograph of two verbs, one meaning “to be similar” and one meaning “to rule.” The traditions about men “ruling over” women may reflect a gender-biased selection of the lexical options made by male interpreters, rather than an unbiased effort to reflect the intention of the author of the Eden narrative who wrote about the sorrow that would come equally/similarly to Adam and Eve.

In *Chapter III*, the disparaging announcement to Hagar in Gen 16:10–12 that Ishmael would be a פרא אדם “wild ass of a man” is scrutinized, and a number of alternative translations of אדם and פרא are proposed which transform the text into a multi-layered laudatory affirmation of Ishmael.

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The name change of Abram to Abraham is the focus of *Chapter IV*. Three meanings of *Abram* are cited, followed by two distinctive definitions of *Abraham*—with an element of truth in all five definitions as they relate to the patriarch. A closing comment deals with the change of *Sarai*'s name to *Sarah* which makes *Sarah* a parallel of *Abraham*, both of which refer to their offspring becoming numerous.

The assertion in Exo 4:24 that God wanted to kill Moses on the first night of his return to Egypt to lead the Hebrews out of bondage is examined in *Chapter V*. Traditional interpretations are reviewed but they are of little benefit. Clarification comes only by recognizing the verb **המיתו** is a homograph which can mean (1) “to make him die,” or (2) “to bond a relationship with him.” Unfortunately, tradition settled on the first of these definitions and ignored the second. Similarly, **וירך** is a homograph of verbs meaning (1) “to withdraw” or (2) “to become bonded in marriage, to be united in purpose.” This second definition has been missed by commentators and Hebrew lexicographers. Once the second definition of these two homographs comes into focus, contextually appropriate statements emerge, and the baffling statements disappear.

The notorious Azazel mentioned only in Lev 16:8, 10, and 26 receives attention in *Chapter VI*. Azazel has been identified as (1) a noun meaning “sending away” (Septuagint), (2) a compound noun “hard and rough” (Talmud), (3) a place name for a rocky precipice (Targum), or (4) the name of a demon or a demoted deity (the favored interpretation of recent commentators). Philological evidence is provided to support the traditions in the Talmud and Targum that Azazel is a place name rather than a demon's name.

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The statement that “the man Moses was more meek than any man on earth” (Num 12:3) is an embarrassment for those who would make Moses the author of everything in the Pentateuch. In *Chapter VII* this verse is reinterpreted in light of (1) **האיש** being a homograph for “the man” and for the verb “he was brought to despair,” and (2) in light of **עניו/ענו** being a homograph meaning either “to be meek/mild” or “to be distressed.” Interpreting the homographs according to the second definition of each word indicates that sibling rivalry made Moses “to *despair* and be *depressed*” more than anyone else on earth. It is a confession that could be made by Moses or about Moses with all due humility.

Chapter VIII addresses the tension between Deu 15:4, “there will be no poor among you” and Deu 15:11, “for the poor will never cease out of the land.” The only problematic word in these two phrases is **חדל** “to cease” because it is also a homograph of two other verbs—with Arabic cognates—meaning (a) “to treat unjustly,” (b) “to refuse to help.” The intended statement of Deu 15:11 was “the poor from the midst of the land must not be denied aid.” Alternative interpretations, which ignore or misinterpret the Arabic cognates of **חדל**, are in fairness also presented even though they fail to alleviate the tensions in the texts.

Without a doubt, Rahab of Jericho was a **זונה**. But “harlot” is only one of ten possible definitions of **זונה**. In *Chapter IX* all ten possibilities are presented and support is given for the understanding found in the Targum and in Josephus that Rahab was not a harlot but an inn-keeper. She provided her guests with “bed and breakfast”—not her bed.

The brief quotation in Jos 10: 7–15 from the “Book of the Wars of Yahweh,” coupled with Joshua’s call for the sun to

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“be still” and for the moon to “stand” are the focus of *Chapter X*. As the text now stands, Joshua’s command to the sun and moon came *after* the enemy had already been defeated thanks to deadly hail stones from heaven. An Arabic cognate suggests that Joshua’s commands to the sun and moon were made prior to his overnight march so that his troops could move in the stealth of a prolonged moonless night. He was granted not only a “blackout” but a solar eclipse as well—with the earth and moon continuously orbiting the sun which had never moved in the first place.

Although Huldah’s name can mean “ageless” and “unforgettable,” this prophetess, mentioned in II Kings 22:14 and II Chron 34:22, receives scant attention by the commentators. In *Chapter XI* the meanings of Huldah’s name, her status, function, and “residence” are examined. All the evidence supports the translation of the Septuagint in II Chron 22:14 that Huldah was “the (woman) guarding the commandments.” As the guardian of the oral tradition she was consulted by king and high priest to validate or discredit the integrity of a newly discovered Torah scroll.

While the prophetess Huldah was demeaned in tradition as the “weasel woman,” the Samaritan prophet Oded is all but ignored. In *Chapter XII* the account about Oded in II Chron 28:5–15 is studied, with the unbelievably high casualty figures of 120,000 dead and 200,000 captured being reinterpreted as 120 units killed and 200 bands captured. Phoenician and Arabic cognates suggest four definitions for Oded’s name which were probably recognized by his contemporaries: (1) *compassionate* (2) *aged* (3) *prophet*, and (4) *restorer*.

The brief study in *Chapter XIII* explores the etymology of the כֶּרְפָס “cotton” in Esther 1:6 and its relationship to similar

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sounding words in Greek which became associated with Joseph's famed tunic. The effort is made to determine how celery and parsley became symbolic reminders of Joseph's tunic when celebrating the Passover Seder.

Chapter XIV deals with three problematic words in Psalm 2:11b–12a. Seven of the ancient versions translated the three words four different ways. Modern translations are equally diverse, having everything from “kiss the Chosen One” to “kiss his feet.” The translations of Jerome and Symmachus, “worship in purity” find support from three Arabic cognates, with the only emendation being the reading of וּגְלִלוּ as וּגְלָלוּ and בַּר as בְּרִי, i.e., shifting a י from one word to another.

The puzzle addressed in *Chapter XV* concerns, in part, the five names in Prov 30:1 (RSV) for which there are no corresponding names in the Septuagint. The apparent names are better read as: (1) a passive participle, (2) a noun, (3) an active participle, (4) a three-element phrase, and (5) a verb. Arabic cognates provide the clues for defining six words in addition to the sixteen words in Prov 1:1–5 having previously recognized Arabic cognates.

In *Chapter XVI* Qoheleth's chauvinism, as expressed in Eccles 7:26–28, comes under scrutiny. Once the relative pronoun אֲשֶׁר is recognized as the homograph of אֲשֶׁר “self-conceited,” Qoheleth's chauvinism is diminished to the point that he dislikes conceited women, not women in general.

Three of the ten words in the Hebrew of Song of Solomon 1:3—dealing with perfume—were misunderstood by the Septuagint translators and the Masoretes who pointed the Hebrew text. These three words are examined in *Chapter XVII*, where the case is made, in light of contextually appropriate Arabic cognates, for repointing one sibilant and modifying four

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vowels. The result of these changes brings sense to a statement about a scent.

A sexually explicit two-word Hebrew phrase is hidden in Jer 5:8a. There are five different spellings in the Hebrew manuscripts for one of the two words, and the etymology of both words has been uncertain until now. In *Chapter XVIII* these two words are identified with two Arabic cognates which, having slightly different pronunciations than their Hebrew counterparts, were overlooked in other studies of this phrase.

In *Chapter XIX* the enigmatic statement in Jer 31:21–22 about a reversal of sexual roles is examined. It has long been recognized that twenty-eight of the thirty-three lexemes in these two verses have Arabic cognates; but seven nuances of these Arabic cognates have been recognized only in Castell's Semitic Lexicon of 1669. Appeal to these nuances and an additional Arabic cognate brings clarity to the Septuagintal variants in these verses and the layered levels of meaning embedded in the Hebrew text.

To the surprise of the reader of Ezek 3:14, the “hand of the LORD” seemingly made Ezekiel “bitter” rather than ecstatic when the spirit/wind lifted him up and carried him to the Chebar River. In *Chapter XX* two Arabic cognates are introduced which permit this verse to be read as a simple statement about Ezekiel's mode of transport rather than being a statement about his emotional response or spiritual condition.

Ezek 13:17–23 has been a riddle for the best of commentators who have guessed about the meaning of “women sewing cushions to all armholes” or “pillows under every elbow?” In *Chapter XXI* the riddle is solved by recognizing that two oracles have been interwoven. Once the oracles are separated

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and the poetic lines are reordered, Ezekiel's denouncement of (1) false prophetesses and of (2) women administering first-aid in the ruins of Zion can be recovered. The exact meaning of six Hebrew words are clarified by Arabic cognates which leave no doubt that Ezekiel addressed women doing triage to save the wicked while the righteous were left to die.

Ezekiel 28 is even more disordered than Ezekiel 13. In *Chapter XXII* order is restored in Ezekiel 28 by a major reordering of the poetic lines, coupled with minimal emendation of several words—like reading הִיִּיתִי as *scriptio defectiva* for the customary הָיִיתִי “I was.” Thus, the King of Tyre asserted, “I was in Eden, the Garden of God,” rather than having, with the Masoretic text, Yahweh telling the King of Tyre through the prophet, “you were in Eden,” as if Yahweh were validating the king's claim of being a god.

In *Chapter XXIII* the statement in Joel 2:31 that “the moon will turn into *blood*” (לָדָם) is interpreted as meaning “the moon will turn to *darkness*,” with the Hebrew דָּם being a variant form of דָּהָם, the Arabic cognate of which means “it became black, dark.”

A résumé of the prophet Amos, gleaned from the book which bears his name, is examined in *Chapter XXIV*. One way of reading the résumé makes Amos a lowly herdsman and a dresser of sycamores; but another way of reading the same résumé would make him an affluent rancher, an investigator/examiner of what was happening in his world. He may even have affirmed, “I am indeed a prophet”

Zechariah's vision, as traditionally interpreted, of a wicked woman sitting in a covered basket (Zec 5:5–11) is examined in *Chapter XXV*. The interpretation made by Marenof in 1931, that the “basket” is actually a “shrine,” is revived and fully

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endorsed. The “woman” in the shrine is probably an image of a goddess.” Consequently, Zechariah’s vision was not about all women being wicked, but about idolatry in Jerusalem.

Eight texts from the Gospels are studied in *Chapters XXVI–XXXIII*. A reconstruction of the Hebrew *Vorlage* of a Gospel text, or an appeal to the *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* published by Shem Tob Ibn Shaprut (c. 1400), provides exegetical options unavailable when one is restricted to the Greek texts.

The “standing” of a star over Bethlehem, as stated in Matt 2:9, is the focus of *Chapter XXVI*. Syriac and Arabic cognates would permit the Hebrew עמד הכוכב to be translated as “the star stood” or “the star set.”

The five different traditions about Jesus’ statement concerning the placement of a lamp are examined in *Chapter XXVII*. The variations apparently stem from Hebrew or Aramaic *Vorlagen* having either סור or סיר or סיד or סוד or some combination of these which eventuated into doublets.

Chapter XXVIII, dealing with Matt 7:6 and its prohibition against “casting pearls before swine,” is the longest chapter in the book. The Hebrew and Aramaic reconstructions of this verse are easy enough to make, but the interpretation of the *unpointed* reconstructions is difficult, thanks to homographs which do not distinguish between “dogs” and “dog-keepers” or “swine” and “swineherds,” and the like. What appears in Greek to be a riddle of sorts was in Hebrew Jesus’ building a fence around the Torah and his Halakah.

Another of Jesus’ enigmatic statements, “Let the dead bury the dead” (Matt 8:22), is dealt with in *Chapter XXIX*. The repetition of νεκρὸς “dead” in the Greek reflects a Hebrew *Vorlage* with homographs, namely מתים “dead” and מתים “next-of-kin.” Jesus’ use of paronomasia, when misread as

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simple repetition transformed a common-sense word of advice to his disciple into a senseless riddle for the reader of Greek.

The report in Matt 10:34–36 that the “Prince of Peace” stated, “I have not come to bring peace but a sword,” is critically examined in *Chapter XXX*. If the Hebrew *Vorlage* for “peace” was שָׁלוֹם (*shalom*), it was a homograph used for three other words; and if חֶלֶף (*halif*) was in the *Vorlage* for “sword,” it was a homograph with thirteen other definitions. The homographs are spelled out and it may well have been that Jesus stated, “I have not come to bring the *end*, but a *change*.”

Chapter XXXI addresses the conflicting statements of Jesus (a) that loving one’s neighbor/kith-and-kin (Lev 19:18) is the second greatest commandment (Matt 22:39) and (b) if would-be disciples do not hate their family members they cannot become disciples (Luke 14:26). Evidence is presented that a Hebrew *Vorlage* having שָׂנֵא or שָׂנֵה could have been translated into Greek as either “hate” or “forsake”—or a number of other ways, depending on one’s choice of cognates and whether the ש is read as a שׁ or a שׂ.

In *Chapter XXXII* eight derivations of the names *Miriam* and *Mary* are presented and six definitions of *Magdalene* are cited. In dealing with the lexicons and literature on these three names, the meaning of ten other names in the Bible or in the Talmud are clarified through Arabic, Aramaic, Greek, Persian, and Syriac cognates or loanwords.

The Gospel of John concludes (21:15–23) with the final conversation between Jesus and Peter. In *Chapter XXXIII* this dialogue is analyzed, assuming Hebrew was the language of discourse. The reconstructed exchange between Jesus and Peter transforms the indefinite, “Do you love me more than

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these” into the definite, “do you love me more than kith-and-kin.” Peter’s response to Jesus’ thrice asking, “Do you love me?” was thrice an emphatic, “I cherish you!” Subtle nuances in Hebrew were lost when the conversation was translated into Greek.

The last two chapters deal with problems in extra-canonical literature. Chapter *XXXIV* addresses the crux in the Psalms of Solomon 2:26–27, which states that Pompey was “pierced through on the mountains of Egypt,” in disagreement with classical sources which tell of his being assassinated in a boat offshore in Egyptian waters. A Hebrew *Vorlage* with פֶּרֶי, recognized as the cognate of an Arabic word meaning “inlet,” misread as פֶּרֶי, can easily account for the errors in the Greek and Syriac texts of the Psalms of Solomon.

Chapter *XXXV*, like Chapter *XXXII*, deals primarily with the derivation of names. Arabic cognates of Hebrew פֶּרֶי suggest multiple layers of meaning for *Hasmonean*, including (a) *angry*, (b) *lion*, (c) *feared*, and (d) *held in awe*. Arabic cognates also contribute to clarifying (1) the title “Thracida” (“Banisher-of-the-Enemy”) given to Alexander Jannaeus, and (2) the reference in 4Q169 to “those seeking secession” (a phrase mistakenly rendered by some scholars as “the seekers of flattery”).

These introductory comments to the following thirty-five chapters contain over twenty references to Arabic cognates. The reader unacquainted with the prominence of Arabic cognates in Hebrew philological studies may benefit from a preliminary look at the *Addendum* in Chapter *XIX* (180–181) where, in a random selection of Jer31:21–22, twenty-eight of the thirty-three Hebrew lexemes cited in the Hebrew lexicons have well recognized Arabic cognates.