

CLARIFYING MORE
BAFFLING
BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER FOUR

“WHAT KIND OF ARAMEAN
WAS JACOB?”

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IV

WHAT KIND OF ARAMEAN WAS JACOB? A CLUE FROM THE LANGUAGE OF ISHMAEL

In Tractate *Pesahim* 10:4 of the *Mishnah* (Danby, 1933: 150) instructions are given for the a son to ask his father on the eve of Passover, “Why is this night different from other nights?” The father then “begins with the disgrace and ends with the glory; and he expounds from *A wandering Aramean was my father* [Deut 26:5] . . . until he finished the whole section.” But in the traditional Passover Haggadah Deut 26:5 is translated as

An Aramean [sought to] destroy my forefather and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there with a small number of people and there he became a great mighty and numerous nation.

The *Midrash* for the Passover Haggadah interpreted and paraphrased Deut 26:5 to mean

Come and learn what Laban the Aramean sought to do to our father Jacob. For Pharaoh issued his edict against only the males, but Laban sought to uproot all, as it is said, “An Aramean would have destroyed my father, and he went down to Egypt and he became there a nation, great, mighty and populous.

Thus, the identity of the Aramean in this verse and the meaning of the modifier אֲבִיר, “wandering” or “would have destroyed” or something else, warrants further investigation.

MT DEUT 26:5

וְעָנִיתָ וְאָמַרְתָּ לְפָנַי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
אֲרָמִי אֲבִיר אָבִי

וַיִּדְרֹךְ מִצְרַיִם וַיֵּגֶר שָׁם בְּמִתֵּי מִעֹט
וַיְהִי־שָׁם לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל עֲצוּם וְרַב:

KJV

And thou shalt speak and say before the LORD thy God,
A Syrian **ready to perish** was my father,
and he went down into Egypt,
and sojourned there with a few,
and became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous.

LXX

ἀποκριθήσῃ καὶ ἐρεῖς ἔναντι κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ σου
Συρίαν ἀπέβαλεν ὁ πατήρ μου
καὶ κατέβη εἰς Αἴγυπτον καὶ παρώκησεν ἐκεῖ
ἐν ἀριθμῷ βραχεῖ καὶ ἐγένετο ἐκεῖ
εἰς ἔθνος μέγα καὶ πλῆθος πολὺ καὶ μέγα

BRENTON'S LXX

he shall answer and say before the Lord thy God,
My father **abandoned** Syria,
and went down into Egypt, and sojourned there
with a small number, and became there
a mighty nation and a great multitude

VULGATE

*et loqueris in conspectu Domini Dei tui
Syrus **persequebatur** patrem meum
qui descendit in Aegyptum et ibi peregrinatus est
in paucissimo numero crevitque
in gentem magnam et robustam et infinitae multitudinis*

DOUAY-RHEIMS

And thou shalt speak thus in the sight of the Lord thy God:
 The Syrian **pursued** my father,
 who went down into Egypt, and sojourned there
 in a very small number, and grew
 into a nation great and strong and of an infinite multitude.

LAMSA'S PESHITTA

And you shall speak and say before the Lord your God:
 My father **was led** to Aram
 (אֲבִי אֶרְדָּה מִצְרַיִם)
 (*lē'aram 'ethdēber 'ăbî*)
 and he went down into Egypt,
 and sojourned there for a short time,
 and there he became a nation
 great, mighty, and populous.

Noteworthy is the Vulgate's accusative *patrem meum*, compared with the other translations which recognize the MT אֲבִי "my father" as a nominative. None of the versions understood the MT אֶבְרָא to mean "wandering." Nonetheless, most standard English translation read "a wandering Aramean was my father," including the RSV, NRS, NAB, NJB, NLT, NAS, NAU, NIB, and NIV. The KJV "ready to perish" has been followed by the ASV, NKJ, YLT, RWB, and appears paraphrased in *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* as "an Aramean on the point of death was my father."¹ Support for this interpretation of אֶבְרָא comes from the well attested Hebrew / Aramaic אֶבְרָא / אֶבְרָא and Syriac אֶבְרָא (*'ebad*)—all meaning "to perish, come to nought, to get lost" (KBS, 1994, I: 2; Payne-Smith, 1903: 2). It is surprising that the Peshitta did

not equate the Hebrew אָבַד with the Syriac ܐܒܕ (*ʿebad*) but rendered it by דָּבַר (*dēbar*) “to lead, to drive away, to go hither and thither,” as though the Syriac *Vorlage* read אָבַד² rather than אָבַד.³

Standard lexicons of Biblical Hebrew, including BDB, KBS, and DCH, have paid little attention to the Arabic cognates of אָבַד. Only in KBS is there a reference to Arabic اَبَد (*ʿabada*), stem 1, “to become wild” and stem 2, “to last forever,” whereas in BDB and DCH no Arabic cognates are cited. The meanings of the Arabic اَبَد (*ʿbd*) and its derivatives, as cited by Castell (1669: 6), Lane (1863: 4–5), and Wehr (1979:1) are quite diverse, including several verbs spelled اَبَد (*ʿabada*) with these various meanings:

1. “he remained, stayed, abode, or dwelt constantly, continually, or permanently without quitting,”
2. “he took fright and fled or ran away at random,”
3. “he became unsocial, unsociable, unfamiliar, or shy like a wild animal,”
4. “he became angry,”
5. “he was long distant from his home,”
6. “he was long in a state of celibacy . . . or little in need of or desirous of women.”

The different Arabic nouns which could be cognates of אָבַד include:

7. اَبَد (*ʿabad*) “time in an absolute sense, a long time that is unlimited, and extended space of time that is indivisible,”
8. اَلْاَبَد (*alʿabadu*) “the Everlasting, i.e., God,”

9. אִבֵּד (*ʿabid*) “an unsociable, unfamiliar, or shy person,”
10. אִבְדָּה (*ʿabidat*) “a calamity ever to be remembered . . . or a strange, abominable or evil thing,”
11. אִבֵּד (*ʿabid / ʿibid*) “a prolific person that breeds or brings forth plentifully.”

The verbs numbered above as 1, 4, and 6 and the nouns numbered 7, 8, and 10 definitely do not fit the context of Deut 26:5 and can be ruled out as possible cognates of the אֲבָד in this verse. But verbs numbered 2, 3, and 5, along with the noun numbered 10, could well be the cognates of the אֲבָד translated as “wandering” (RSV, NRS, etc.), or “fugitive” (Albright, 1940: 181), or “vagrant” (Mazar, 1962: 101), or “refugee” (Millard, 1980: 155). Basically, this makes אֲבָד a synonym of the גָּוַר “to sojourn,” which appears four words later in 26:5.

But, in light of the last six words of Deut 26:5, וַיְהִי־שָׁם לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל עָצוּם וְרָב, “and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous,” the Arabic cognate of the אֲבָד in 26:5 must surely be אִבֵּד (*ʿabid / ʿibid*) “prolific” (above, number 11). This definition fits the context perfectly. Psalm 105: 23–24, “then Israel came to Egypt; Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham; and he *increased* (וַיַּפֵּךְ = LXX ηὔξησεν) his people greatly and made them stronger than their foes,” provides a close parallel to Deut 26:5 and clearly identifies Jacob as the patriarch who went to Egypt. With twelve sons and at least one daughter Jacob well deserved to be called “a prolific Aramean”—not to mention that his progeny at the time of the exodus numbered six hundred thousand men, plus children (Exod 12:37). Not only was he *prolific* but he also

became *prodigious* (לְגוֹי גְדוֹל עֲצוּם וְרַב),⁴ for there is power in numbers! Contrary to the claim of Samuel R. Driver (1902: 289) that Jacob’s being identified as “a wandering Aramean” reflected an “intentional disparagement,” the statement אָבִי אֲרַמִּי אֲבִד אֲבִי—when properly interpreted as “a prolific Aramean was my father”—is quite laudatory.

Recognition of Jacob’s having been prolific finds its parallel in the renaming of Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah. Franz Delitzsch (1887: 292; 1888: II: 34) identified the Arabic رَهَام (*ruhâm*) “a large number,” used in reference to the small drops of water in a drizzling rain,⁵ as the cognate of the אָרַם in the name *Abraham*. The innumerable rain drops are like the stars mentioned in Gen 15:5 and the sand mentioned in Gen 22:17. Similarly, the Arabic cognate related to the name *Sarah* is ثَرَى/ثَرُو (*tarrâ/tarî*) “to became great in number or quantity/ many, numerous” (Lane 1863:335), as interpreted in Gen 17:15, וְהִיְתָה לְגוֹיִם “she will become nations.”⁶

Thus, the names *Abraham* and *Sarah*, along with the epithet “prolific Aramean” given to Jacob, find their proper interpretation from clues provided by the language of Ishmael. Arabic lexicons have proven to be more helpful than rabbinic traditions in recovering the original meaning of *Abraham*, *Sarah*, and the epithet for Jacob the Aramean.

One line of rabbinic tradition (found in the Passover Haggadah) changed the participle אֲבִד into the verb אֲבִד “he destroyed,” with the subject of the verb being identified as Laban the Aramean—thereby creating a bit of pure fiction that Laban destroyed (or desired to destroy) all of Jacob, in contrast to the Pharaoh who wanted to kill only the male

children. In France the renown Rashi (1040–1105) accepted this fiction as a valid interpretation. In Spain, however, the distinguished Ibn Ezra (1089–1164) rejected the fiction because the text clearly stated that Jacob—far from being destroyed by Laban—went safely down to Egypt. Other rabbinic notables simply identified the lost or wandering Aramean of Deut 26:5 with Abraham. But, as noted above, Psalm 105: 23–24, “Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham; and he increased his people greatly,” supports the interpretation presented here that the MT אֲרַמִּי אֲבִד אֲבִי should be pointed as אֲרַמִּי אֲבִד אֲבִי⁷, meaning “my father was a prolific Aramean.”

NOTES

1. David J. A. Clines, ed. 1993. *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 383. (Cited as DCH.)
2. A by-form of הָפַךְ, which in the *hithpa'el* means “to turn this way and that way” (BDB 5, 246).
3. See Delitzsch (1920: 119 §131) for another example of a possible confusion of ך and ך in Psalm 15:5, where the MT תִּמְיֵד תִּוְּמִיךְ could be read as תִּמְיֵד .
4. In modern literary Arabic آبداء (*ābidat*) means a “prodigious event” (Wehr, 1979: 1).
5. Note the “*numerus copiosus*” in Castell’s lexicon (1669: 3537) and the “drizzling and lasting rain . . . consisting of small drops” in Lane’s lexicon (1867: 1171).

6. The Arabic ث ($t = th$) rather consistently appears in Hebrew cognates a שׁ and as a ת in Aramaic cognates. Therefore, given this proposed etymology, one would expect the name שְׂרַיָּה to have change to שְׂרָה. And it may well have been the change that was made—but one would never know it from the written text because pre-Masoretic spelling use the שׁ for both sounds, s and \check{s} ($= sh$). The distinction between s and \check{s} was not absolute, as is apparent from (1) the שְׂבַלְתָּ and סְבַלְתָּ story in Judges 12, and (2) the s and \check{s} variation between the Hebrew שֶׁמֶשׁ “sun” and its Arabic cognate شمس ($\check{s}ams$), though one would expect it to be سمس ($sams$). The Masoretic vocalization reflects the tradition adopted by most scholars that שְׂרָה is only an updated pronunciation and spelling of the archaic שְׂרַיָּה “princess.”

7. See GKC §84^e for the vocalization of this class of nouns.