

## THE PRAYER OF JABEZ

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### INTRODUCTION

Sara Japhet (1993: 110) noted concerning the now popular “Prayer of Jabez”<sup>1</sup> in I Chron 4:9–10, that

The language of the prayer is difficult, a fact which is not brought out by the translation. The details are too technical for a full discussion here [i.e., in *her* commentary] but the point should be noted.

In this study many of the technical details alluded to by Japhet are fully noted in order to recover the original meaning of Jabez’s prayer. There are only thirty-five words in the Hebrew text of I Chron 4:9–10, including the name “Jabez” which occurs three times. Six other words appear twice; thus, the number of different words is but twenty-seven. Because the name “Israel” is a compound, there are actually twenty-eight Hebrew lexemes in these verses; and lexicographers have already recognized that twenty-four of these lexemes have Arabic cognates. A by-product of this study is an increase in the number of known Arabic cognates to the Hebrew lexemes in the Jabez pericope from twenty-four to twenty-six. In addition, corrections to the interpretation of three other Hebrew words are proposed in light of alternative cognates.

Modifying the derivation and interpretation of five of the twenty-eight Hebrew lexemes in these verses has support from interpretations found in the Aramaic *Targum of Chronicles*. But, at the same time, the alternative translations proposed in this study radically reshape the brief Jabez tradition

from that found in the Targum, Talmud, and contemporary Christian exegesis. The differences between the Hebrew text in of I Chron 4:9–10 and the Greek, Syriac, and Latin versions are quite conspicuous and require an explanation. My translation of the “Prayer of Jabez” follows the citation of the Hebrew text, versions, and the Targum—all of which is introductory to the critical exegesis presented here.

### I Chronicles 4:9–10

וַיְהִי יַעֲבֵץ נִכְבָּד מֵאַחָיו  
וַאֲמוֹ קָרְאָהּ שְׁמוֹ יַעֲבֵץ לֵאמֹר כִּי יִלְדֹתִי בְּעֶצֶב:  
וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲבֵץ לֵאלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר  
אִם־בְּרַךְ תְּבָרַכְנִי וְהָרַבִּית אֶת־גְּבוּלִי  
וְהִיְתָה יַדְךָ עִמִּי וְעָשִׂיתָ מְרֻעָה לְבִלְתִּי עֲצָבִי  
וַיָּבֹא אֱלֹהִים אֶת אֲשֶׁר־שָׂאֵל:

### New Revised Standard Version

Jabez was honored more than his brothers;  
and his mother named him Jabez, saying,  
“Because I bore him in pain.”

Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying,  
“O that you would bless me and enlarge my border,  
and that your hand might be with me,  
and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!”  
And God granted what he asked.

### Septuagint

καὶ ἦν Ἰγαβῆς ἔνδοξος ὑπὲρ τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς αὐτοῦ  
καὶ ἡ μήτηρ ἐκάλεσεν τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰγαβῆς  
λέγουσα ἔτεκον ὡς γαβῆς  
καὶ ἐπεκαλέσατο Ἰγαβῆς τὸν θεὸν Ἰσραὴλ λέγων

ἐὰν εὐλογῶν εὐλογήσῃς με καὶ πληθύνῃς τὰ ὄριά μου  
καὶ ἦ ἡ χεὶρ σου μετ' ἐμοῦ  
καὶ ποιήσεις γνῶσιν τοῦ μὴ ταπεινώσαί με  
καὶ ἐπήγαγεν ὁ θεὸς πάντα ὅσα ἠτήσατο

**Thomson's Septuagint**

Igabes indeed was the most honourable of his brethren;  
Now his mother had called his name Igabes, saying,  
I have brought him forth *Os-gabes* [with sorrow].<sup>2</sup>  
And Igabes called on the God of Israel and said,  
If thou wilt bless me with blessings, and enlarge my borders,  
let Thy hand be with me,  
and give me knowledge that I may not debase myself  
Accordingly God gave him all that he asked.

**Peshitta**

ܡܫܝܚ ܕܒܢܝ ܝܫܪܐܳܝܳܝܳܠ ܕܝܫܝܒ ܕܝܫܝܒ ܕܝܫܝܒ ܕܝܫܝܒ  
ܕܝܫܝܒ ܕܝܫܝܒ ܕܝܫܝܒ ܕܝܫܝܒ ܕܝܫܝܒ ܕܝܫܝܒ  
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**Lamsa's Peshitta (modified)**

And one of them was dear to his father and to his mother,  
so they called his name My Eye. And they said to him,  
The Lord shall surely bless you and enlarge your terri-  
tory, and his hand shall be with you and shall deliver you  
from evil, that it may not have power over you, and he  
shall grant you that which you request of him.

**Vulgate**

*Fuit autem Iabes inclitus prae fratribus suis et mater eius vocavit nomen illius Iabes dicens quia peperit eum in*

## PRAYER OF JABEZ

*dolore invocavit vero Iabes Deum Israhel dicens si benedicens benedixeris mihi et dilataveris terminos meos et fuerit manus tua mecum et feceris me a malitia non opprimi et praestitit Deus quae precatus est.*

## Douay Rheims

And Jabez was more honourable than any of his brethren, and his mother called his name Jabez, saying: Because I bore him with sorrow. And Jabez called upon the God of Israel, saying: If blessing thou wilt bless me, and wilt enlarge my borders, and thy hand be with me, and thou save me from being oppressed by evil. And God granted him the things he prayed for.

Targum<sup>3</sup>

והוה יעבץ [הוא עתניאל] יקיר [וחכים באוריתא]  
 יתיר מן אחוהי ואמיה קרת שמיה יעבץ ארום בצערא  
 ילדתיה: וצלי יעבץ לאלהא דישראל למימר  
 אין ברכא תברכנני בבניא ותסגני ית תחומי בתלמידיא  
 ותהי ירך עמי || במשקל ומטרא ותעביד לי חבריא  
 דכמתי מן בגלל דלא ירגזנני יצרא בישא ||  
 ואיתי יהוה ית מה דשאל:

Jabez, *who was Othinel*, was more honored *and expert in the Law* than his brothers; his mother had called his name Jabez, “for,” she said, “I gave birth *to him* in pain.” Jabez *prayed* to the God of Israel saying: “O that you might indeed bless me *with sons*,” and extend my territory *with disciples!* O that your hand might be with me *in debate*, and that you *might provide me with companions like myself*, so that *the evil inclination* may not provoke me. And *the Lord* brought about what he had asked for.

**McDaniel**

And Jabez was more *afflicted* than his brethren:  
 and his mother called his name Jabez (“*Preemie*”), saying,  
 “I *indeed* gave birth in sudden unexpected haste.”  
 And Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying,  
 “*Ah, Please!* would that  
     you truly bless me,  
     and increase my *people*,  
     and your hand be with me,  
     and that you keep (me) from sickness,  
     to *bring to naught* my sorrow.”  
 And God granted him that which he requested.

**THE DERIVATION OF “JABEZ”**

The claim by Zuck (2002: 114) that the name *Jabez* is meaningless is erroneous—though he may well be citing one Hebrew lexicon (*BDB*: 716) which stated that the meaning of Jabez’s name was now “unknown.” But Zuck is correct in disagreeing with Wilkinson’s statement (2000: 20): “In Hebrew the word Jabez means ‘pain.’ A literal rendering could read, ‘he causes (or will cause) pain.’”<sup>4</sup>

Everyone, however, is in agreement that the meaning of the Hebrew root עבץ, which appears in Jabez’s name, has been very problematic. Many commentators, not finding the root עבץ in their Hebrew lexicons, assumed that עבץ was (via a transposition of the ב and צ) a variant of עצב “sorrow, pain, labor.” A wordplay seemed obvious once the initial as-severative כי “indeed,” spoken by Jabez’s mother, was read as the conjunction כי “because.”<sup>5</sup> This *assumption* was, unfortunately, widely circulated as a *fact*.<sup>6</sup>

The translation of the name יַעֲבֵז in the Peshitta of Num 4:9 as ܚܘܢܐ (*ʿayny*) “My Eye”—rather than being transliterated as ܝܥܒܝܘܣ (*yaʿbeš*) as in 1Chron 2:55—appears also in the Arabic text of Brian Walton’s *London Polyglot* (1657: III: 637), which has عيني (*ʿaynay*) “My Eye.” It is obvious that the translators of the Syriac and Arabic texts did not consider the stem יַעֲבֵז to be meaningless nor a wordplay with עֲצַב “sorrow, pain” which appears twice in these two verses.<sup>7</sup>

Jastrow (1903: 1038) cited the use of the Aramaic יַעֲבֵז (with יַעֲבֵזָא as a variant) in the Targum of Num 31:22 and Ezek 27:12 for the Hebrew בְּדִיל “tin”; and Levy (1924: 609) cited the Aramaic יַעֲבֵז “*erblassen*, to blanche, to turn pale.” But neither of these definitions fits the context of I Chron 4:9; nor does the Ugaritic ʿbš “weapon” (Gordon 1965: 453; Driver 1971: 142). The definition cited in *KBS* (778) is more helpful for it links Hebrew יַעֲבֵז with the Arabic cognate عبط (*ʿabada*) “to hasten,” which appears in the *Genesis Apocryphon* spelled as ܠܥܒܐ (Fitzmyer 1966: 54, 113) and is related to the Old Aramaic ܠܥܒܐ “*hâte, aussitôt*, haste, immediately” (Jean and Hoftijzer 1965: 202).

But the most helpful information for derivation of the יַעֲבֵז of “Jabez” comes from the *Lexicon Heptaglotton* of Edmund Castell (1669: 2644). He cited the Arabic عيص (*ʿabiṣa*) which was omitted from the later Arabic lexicons of Lane (1883), Hava (1915), Dozy (1927), and Wehr (1979). Castell defined عيص (*ʿabiṣa*) as

1. *Lippitudine valde laboravit* (“to be sick with very sore eyes”)
2. *Quod fluit ex oculis* (“what flows from the eyes”)

3. *Cùm vir plorare vult, sed oculus lachrymas denegat.*  
 (“When a man wistfully begs but the tear drops do not come.”)
4. *Adventus repentinus* (“a sudden, unexpected appearance”).

With definitions 1, 2, and 3 in focus, the Syriac and Arabic translations of עַבְיָ as “My Eye” become explicable though not defensible. But it is the fourth definition which really fits the context of I Chron 4: 9–10. When the rare עַבְיָ, meaning “sudden appearance” and “haste,” appears in a birth narrative, it most likely refers to a premature birth of a child. Therefore, the name “Jabez” would, in colloquial speech, actually mean “Speedy” or “Preemie”—an appropriate name for a premature baby.<sup>8</sup> According to the Septuagint, what Jabez’s mother said was simply ἔτεκεν ὡς γαβῆς, “I have born very quickly.” Therefore, perhaps with a chuckle, she called him “*Gabēs*”/“Jabez,” i.e., “Speedy/Preemie.” This interpretation has a ring of authenticity; whereas the alleged wordplay with יַעֲבֵז “Jabez” and עֲצֹב “sorrow”—which has no support from the versions—may reflect a late pseudo-correction in the Hebrew text once the meaning of the rare (dialectal) עַבְיָ “a sudden, unexpected appearance” was lost. My translation, given above, follows the γαβῆς (= עַבְיָ) of the Septuagint.

On the otherhand, if the MT עֲצֹב is retained as the most authoratative text, there is good reason to anticipate that a mother, having had a sudden premature delivery would use the multilayered word עֲצֹב “labor, worry, pain, hardship, sorrow” when speaking about such a life threatening experience.<sup>9</sup> Just as the name Jacob means “Heel,” and Naomi named her sons Chilon “Diseased” and Mahlon “Sickly,”

there is little reason to be suspicious about Jabez's mother naming him "Speedy" or "Premie."<sup>10</sup> But, far from being a pejorative, יַעֲבִיץ "Premie" or "Speedy" could well have been a name of endearment, as well as a statement of fact.<sup>11</sup>

### JABEZ: HONORED OR AFFLICTED?

If יַעֲבִיץ means "Premie," then there are good reasons to challenge the traditions and translations which interpret the MT נִכְבָּד, a *Niph<sup>c</sup>al* (passive) participle, to mean "honored or honorable." Premature infants always—and many times their mothers also—must fight for their very lives and are constantly in great difficulty and distress, a burden to themselves and to others. Consequently, Jabez, as a premie, would have experience greater affliction and distress than his siblings (assuming they went full term), and he would have been a burden to his mother. Thus, the MT מֵאֶחָיו נִכְבָּד in this context would surely mean "he had been more afflicted than his brothers" rather than his having been more "honored" or more "honorable" than his brothers.

The lexeme כָּבַד "heavy, weighty" permitted polarized meanings, with the nouns כְּבוֹד "honor, glory" and כְּבִדּוֹת "heaviness, difficulty." The verb כָּבַד, in all its various forms, could mean either "to be honored" or "to be burdensome."<sup>12</sup> In contrast, the Syriac and Arabic cognates of כָּבַד did not permit such polarized meanings. The Syriac כַּבַּד (*kabed*) meant only "to move to wrath, to be angry" (Payne Smith 1903: 203); and the Arabic noun كَبَد (*kabad*) always meant "difficulty, distress, affliction, trouble," with the verb كَابَد (*kābada*) meaning "he endured, struggled or contended



with (difficulties).” Lane (1885: 2584) cited as an example *Sura* 90: 4 of the *Qurʿan*, “Verily, we have created man in difficulty (في كبد [fī kabadin]).<sup>13</sup>

Knoopers (2003: 339), aware of the polarized meanings of כבד noted,

It is also possible to translate ‘Jabez was heavier than his brothers.’ If one follows the latter interpretation, the introduction to the tale explains why the birth of Jabez caused his mother so much suffering.

This interpretation well accounts for why Jabez’s mother used the term עֲצָב “pain, labor” (4:9); but it does not explain why Jabez used עֲצָב with reference to himself (4:10).<sup>14</sup> Knoopers, following exegetical tradition, noted that עֲצָב “plays on the name of Jabez,” but he makes no reference to the meaning of Jabez’s name itself. But the meaning of the name Jabez is the key for understanding why there was עֲצָב “pain, labor” in the first place. Had Jabez been a big heavy (כָּבֵד) baby who caused pain for his mother, he could have been named something like *Ithchabed* (אֵית־כָּבֵד) “Fatty/Hefty,”<sup>15</sup> rather than יַעֲבִיץ “Speedy/Preemie.” Given the real meaning of Jabez’s name, as proposed here, it is much more likely that he was underweight at birth.

Traditions about Jabez in Talmudic literature indicate that in time Jabez became highly honored; but the כבד in I Chron 4:10, which compared him with his brothers, almost certainly spoke of his health problems as a child due to his premature birth. Jabez’s being *afflicted* in infancy preceded his being *honored* in maturity. Thus, a disability from birth may lie behind his request to be delivered from his מַרְעָה “sickness” and עֲצָב “pain.”<sup>16</sup>

## FIRST WORD IN JABEZ'S PRAYER

The problem with the first word spoken by Jabez in his prayer is summarized by Japhet (1993: 110), who stated

The prayer's opening *im* ('if') is the most common conditional lexeme and could imply an oath or a vow: 'if . . . then'. However, no apodosis follows. It is therefore an implied vow, or a case of the word *im* serving as a wish: 'Oh that . . .' (so RSV). For this last usage Gesenius cites four more instances, but only two of these (Ps. 139.19; Prov. 24.11) seem convincing (Gesenius §151e).

Actually, the optative particle אִם is the cognate of the Arabic أَيْم (*aymu*) and أَم (*ami*) appearing in the expression أَيْمُ اللَّهِ (*aymu lallahi*) "I swear by God." This expression is a variation of أَيْمُنُ اللَّهِ (*aymunu lallahi*). Along with the biblical examples of the optative אִם cited by Gesenius, these Arabic phrases provide additional commentary on Jabez's first word. The Arabic يَمِنُ (*yumina*) in form V means "he looked for a blessing," being a synonym of تَبَرَّكَ (*tabarraka*) (= בָּרַךְ) "he looked for a blessing, he was blessed."<sup>17</sup> The MT אִם-בָּרַךְ אֱתָבְרַכְנִי, "Ah, Please! Would that you truly bless me," is a perfect match with the Arabic cognates أَيْم (*aymu*) and تَبَرَّكَ (*tabarraka*), i.e., having the particle אִם initiate an entreaty or oath, which is then followed by the plea for a blessing (בָּרַךְ).

## JABEZ REQUESTED PEOPLE, NOT PROPERTY

At first glance Jabez's request, וְהִרְבִּיתָ אֶת-גְּבוּלֵי, "would that you increase/enlarge my territory/border," appears to have gone unanswered—despite the closing statement that

“God granted what he requested.” The only mention of a “territory” bearing Jabez’s name is in I Chron 2:55,

וּמִשְׁפַּחַת סֹפְרִים יָשְׁבוּ [יֹשְׁבֵי] יַעֲבִיז  
 תְּרַעְתֵּימָם שְׁמֹעַתֵּימָם שׁוֹכְתֵימָם  
 הֵמָּה הַקֵּינִים הַבָּאִים מִחַמַּת  
 אָבִי בֵּית־רֵכָב:

The families of the scribes that dwelt at Jabez:  
 the Tirathites, the Shimeathites, and the Sucathites.  
 These are the Kenites who came from Hammath,  
 the father of the house of Rechab.

Wherever the town or village of Jabez was located<sup>18</sup> it certainly could not have been large or enlarged. Consequently, interpreters have taken the גְּבוּלִי “my border/territory” to be symbolic or a metaphor, as Wilkinson (2000: 30) stated

From the context and the results of Jabez’s prayer, we can see that there was more to his request than a simple desire for more real estate. He wanted more influence, more responsibility, and more opportunity *to make a mark for the God of Israel*.

A clue to the precise meaning of the גְּבוּלִי spoken by Jabez comes from the Targum, which reads,

O that you might indeed bless me *with sons* (בבניא), and extend my territory *with disciples!* (בתלמידיא) O that your hand might be with me *in debate*, and that you *might provide me with companions* (חבריא) *like myself*.

Along with the תְּחוּמֵי “my borders,” the Targum delineated *sons*, *disciples*, and *companions*. A similar expansion of Jabez’s request appears in the Talmud (*Teruma* 16a) where Jabez prayed for an increase of *borders*, *pupils*, and *friends*.

In light of these expanded definitions of גְבוּל, it is obvious that the Targum translators and some of the rabbis who contributed to the Talmud were aware of a word גבל which was the cognate to the Arabic جبل (*jibill / jubull*), جيبيل (*jabîl*) “a company of men, a great company of men.”<sup>19</sup> According to Lane (1875: 376) the feminine جبلة (*jibillat*) signified the same as أمة (*ummat*) “a nation or people.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, a very reasonable conclusion is that Jabez prayed for an increase of his *people* (גְבוּל), not his *property* (גְבוּל).<sup>21</sup>

Support for this conclusion comes from the mention of town or village of Jabez in I Chron 2:55, cited above. This verse needs to be read as an integral component of the Jabez pericope.<sup>22</sup> I Chron 4:9–10, which interrupts the genealogical listing there, should probably be moved to follow I Chron 2:55, as the last verse of that chapter. Jabez prayed for a *community of kindred souls*, and God answered his prayer by creating in his hometown—which was named after him—a community of Kenite scribal families. And according to Jewish traditions, these quasi-Israelite<sup>23</sup> scribes, along with Jabez, became honored for their devotion to Torah and its transmission. Knoppers (2003: 315) noted that “recent studies have made progress in understanding the importance of households and larger kinship groups in economic matters.” I Chron 4:9 highlights the importance Jabez gave to kinfolk, family, and community in *religious* matters. If Jabez’s use of גְבוּל had any overtone of “real estate” it was really secondary.

#### A HINT OF JABEZ’S DIALECT

Curtis (1910: 108) noted well that the מְרַעָה וְעָשִׂיתָ of Jabez’s fourth request “is difficult to translate.” The verb

עשה “to do, to make” is translated a hundred different ways in the KJV, forty-three times by the verb “to keep,” which is the verb of choice for English translators. The Vulgate has *feceris* “to do”; but the Septuagint has the noun  $\gamma\nu\omega\sigma\iota\nu$  “knowledge,” indicating a *Vorlage* with an erroneous מרעה for the MT מרעה. It is the MT מרעה which is ambiguous.

If the מרעה is a noun with a preformative מ, it could be

- (1) מרעה “pasture,”
- (2) מרעה “one causing evil” (a feminine participle),
- (3) מרעה “female friend” (like מרע “a male friend”),
- (4) מרעה “place of friendship.”

If the initial מ is the preposition “from,” then רעה could be

- (5) רעה / רעה “shepherd/shepherdess,”
- (6) רעה “female companion,”
- (7) רעה “desire” (an Aramaic loanword),
- (8) רעה “evil, misery, distress” (from the stem רעע).

The Targum’s reading, “that you *might provide me with companions like myself*, so that *the evil inclination* may not provoke me,” is not a free paraphrase but a doublet for the MT מרעה. The Targum’s חברים “companions” is related to options (3) and (4) above, with מרעים “friends, companions” having been read for the MT מרעה. The Targum’s יצרא בישא “evil inclination” clearly reflects option (8).

But none of these obvious meanings would require the anomalous *dagesh* in the initial מ of מרעה, found even in the Leningrad and Aleppo codices. The *dagesh* doubles the מ, as if מרעה were to be read as ממרעה, with one מ for the

preposition “from” and the second **נ** being *the first letter of the stem*—not simply a nominal prefix on the stem **רעה**. If so, the root **מרע** would be a variant of **מִרַץ** “to be sick,” which is the cognate of Aramaic **מִרַע**, Syriac **ܡܪܥ** (*mēra<sup>c</sup>*), and Arabic **مرض** (*marīḍa*)—all meaning “to be sick” (*KBS* : 637).

Jabez’s use of **מרעה** instead of **מרצה** may well reflect his Kenite dialect. Thus, this ninth definition must be added to the eight interpretations of **מִרַעַה** noted above. It is possible, given the ambiguity of **מרעה**, to make Jabez pray for deliverance from (a) a troublesome woman, or (b) a female friend, or (c) desires in general, or (d) just evil in general. But his linking the **מִרַעַה** with **עֲצָבִי** “my suffering, pain” is sufficient reason for reading **מִרַעַה** as “sickness.” In so speaking, he provided the reader with another hint of his native dialect. (The first hint being his use of **אֵם** “Ah! Please!”—analogous to the **أيم** [*aymu*] and **أم** [*ami*] in Arabic, noted above.)

#### SEVERAL SCRIBAL ERRORS

The NKJ, surprisingly, has “that I may not cause pain” for the MT **לְבַלְתִּי עֲצָבִי**—as if the suffixed infinitive **עֲצָבִי** were the *Hiph<sup>c</sup>il* jussive **אֲעֲצִיב**. The KJV has “that it may not grieve me,” and it remains preferable, along with those translations which make the **י** suffix of **עֲצָבִי** possessive or objective. More problematic, though, are the translations of the Peshitta and Vulgate. The Syriac has **ܕܠܐ ܢܥܠܡܐ ܒܝܢܝܢܐ** (*dēla<sup>c</sup> neštalaḡ bak*) “that it may not have power over you.”

But Syriac ܥܠܕ (= שלט “to rule” = سلطان “Sultan”) cannot be a translation of עֲצַב; but it can be a translation of עָצַם “to be strong, to protect.” Thus, in the *Vorlage* used by the Syriac translators a ܒ was misread or written as a ܐ.<sup>24</sup>

The Vulgate translated the לְבַלְתִּי עֲצָבִי as *non opprimi* “not to be oppressed,” which became in the Douay Rheims “from being oppressed.” But *opprimo* cannot be a translation of עֲצַב; but it can be a translation of עָצַר “to press, squeeze, restrain, retain.” Thus, in the *Vorlage* used by the Latin translators a ܒ was misread or written as a ܦ.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The general consensus among modern commentators that the name יַעֲבֵז (Jabez) is a variant of עֲצַב “sorrow, pain” does not have the support of the versions. In the Peshitta, the עֲצַב spoken by Jabez’s mother was translated as ܥܝܢܐ “My Eye,” but the עֲצַב spoken by Jabez himself was translated as ܥܥܘܪܐ “overpower.” In the Vulgate, the עֲצַב spoken by Jabez’s mother became *dolore* “pain,” but the עֲצַב spoken by Jabez became *opprimi* “oppression.” Similarly, in the Targum, the עֲצַב of Jabez’s mother became ܥܥܘܪܐ “pain, grief,” but from Jabez’s lips it became ܝܪܓܙܢܢܝ “it may provoke me.” According to the transliteration used in the Septuagint, Jabez’s mother did *not* say עֲצַב “pain,” but עֲבֵז (= γαβης) —a word which was not meaningless to her or to the author of the Jabez vignette. But the עֲצַב spoken by Jabez became ܬܐܦܝܠܘܫܐ “to humiliate.”

Thanks primarily to the lexicon of Edmund Castell, the meaning of the Septuagint's  $\gamma\alpha\beta\eta\varsigma$  and the Hebrew  $\text{עֲבִיץ}$  has survived.<sup>25</sup> The meaning of Jabez's name and the source of his mother's sorrow comes from the fact that he was born prematurely. A disability from birth may well account for the sickness and sorrow Jabez prayed about in his maturity.

As interpreted in this study, Jabez was no land-grabber or nascent imperialist who coveted someone else's pasture land. The increase he desired was for  $\text{גְּבִילִים}$  "a great company of people," not  $\text{גְּבוּלִים}$  "borders" or "territory." He was an outsider praying to become an insider; and what he sought for himself he sought for his extended family and clan. According to I Chron 2:55 and 4:10, God answered Jabez's prayer, and as a result Jabez got a small town named after him where a lot of people from other clans congregated to perpetuate and propagate the Torah.

Along with  $\text{גְּבִילִים}$  "people," two other words were re-defined in light of alternative cognates, namely,  $\text{כָּבַד}$  "to be afflicted" and  $\text{מַרְעָה}$  (=  $\text{מַרְצָה}$ ) "sickness." The two Hebrew lexemes with Arabic cognates that need to be recognized in any new Hebrew lexicon are (1)  $\text{אָם}$  "Ah! Please!" the cognate of  $\text{أَم} / \text{أَيْم}$  ( $^{\circ}aymu / ^{\circ}ami$ ), and (2)  $\text{עֲבִיץ}$  the cognate of  $\text{عَبَس}$  ( $^{\circ}abiṣa$ ) "an unexpected sudden appearance."

With twenty-six of the twenty-eight Hebrew lexemes in the Jabez pericope having Arabic cognates, the argument can well be made that Jabez and his mother spoke in a southern (desert) dialect which differed from the dialect of Judah and Jerusalem, which would not likely have such a high ratio of words with Arabic cognates.

It is important to note that Jabez prayed to the "God of Israel," not to "Yahweh, my God." He was not from the



family of Jacob nor of the household of Israel. Consequently, in the popular theology articulated, for example, in Deut 32:9,

כִּי חֵלֶק יְהוָה עַמּוֹ יַעֲקֹב חֶבֶל נַחֲלָתוֹ

“Indeed, Yahweh’s portion is his people Jacob,  
Jacob is his allotted heritage.”<sup>26</sup>

Jabez and his kinfolk were not a part of the *blessed* people of Yahweh. As a non-Israelite, though, Jabez prayed emphatically (1) that Yahweh would bless him (as though he were an Israelite), (2) that Yahweh would increase his family and clan (as Yahweh had promised his ancestors, Abraham and Ishmael), and (3) that the hand of Yahweh would be with him as it was with the Israelites coming out of Egypt (Deut 4:34, “by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm . . . as Yahweh your God did for you in Egypt”). Jabez was pleading to be included in the household of faith, a part of the blessed people of the covenant. And as noted, according to I Chron 4:10, God answered Jabez’s prayer; and as a result Jabez and his people became quasi-Israelites with a town of their own and the freedom to embrace the Torah and copy the sacred texts. With Jabez and his kinfolk the covenant God made with Abraham, “In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (Gen 12:3), was partially realized.

But Jabez’s sickness threatened his personal status as a quasi-Israelite. In Deuteronomimic theology (Deut 28:20–22) sickness was a curse from God for violating the covenant. Jabez’s sickness threatened his acceptance and participation in Israel’s household of faith. In the Torah sickness was viewed as a punishment for sin. Death and destruction were the prescriptions written for sick sinners. This threat of death or expulsion from the blessed people of Yahweh was the

source of his עֲצָבָה/עֲצָבָה, his suffering, anxiety, and worry” —not the physical pain and discomfort of the illness itself.

Lastly, Jabez’s nameless mother needs to be rehabilitated *from* being viewed as a nasty woman, who placed a curse of suffering and pain on her helpless newborn when she named him Jabez, *to* a lovely lady with a sense of humor even when giving birth prematurely. Commentators need to remember that, according to the Septuagint text, Jabez’s mother never spoke of her pain or sorrow. What she said was simply ἔτεκεν ὡς γαβης, “I have born very quickly.” My translation on page 5 follows the γαβης (= עֲבָי) of the Septuagint, coupled with the definitions of this עֲבָי which survive in Castell’s lexicon of 1669 and the definition cited in the *KBS* lexicon of 1994.

## APPENDX

### JABEZ IN RABBINIC TEXTS

#### Babylonian Talmud: Temurah 16a

A Tanna taught: Othniel is the same as Jabez. He was called Othinel because God answered him, and Jabez because he counselled and fostered Torah in Israel. An what was his real name? Judah the brother of Simeon. And whence do we derive that God answered him — Since it says: *And Jabez called on the God of Israel saying, Oh that thou woudst bless me and enlarge my border, and that thine hand might be with me, and that thou wouldst keep me from evil that it may not drive me! And God granted him that which he requested. ‘Oh that thou wouldst bless me indeed’ with Torah; ‘and enlarge my border’ with pupils; ‘that thine hand might be with me’,*

that my studies may not be forgotten from my heart; *‘and that thou wouldst keep me from evil’*, that I may meet friends like myself; *‘that it may not grieve me’*, that the evil inclination may not have power over me so as to prevent me from studying: If thou doest so it is well, but if not, I shall go with ‘grief’ to the grave. Immediately, ‘God granted that which he requested.’ . . . This is the teaching of R. Nathan. R. Judah the Prince says: ‘If thou wouldst bless me indeed’, by multiplying and increasing; ‘and enlarge my border’, with sons and daughters. (Soncino Edition, 110–112)

**Babylonian Talmud: Yoma 80a**

The minimum required for penalties is fixed by laws [communicated] to Moses on Sinai. It was also taught thus: The minimum required for penalties are fixed by laws [communicated] to Moses on Sinai. Others say: The Court of Jabez fixed them . . . They were forgotten and then they [the Court of Jabez] commanded them anew. (Soncino Edition 390–391)

**Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrein 106a**

Jethro, who fled — his descendants were privileged to sit in the Hall of Hewn Stones, as it is written, And the families of the scribes which dwell at Jabez, the Tirathites, the Shemeathites, and Suchathites. These are the Kenites that came of Hemath, the father of the house of Rechab; whilst elsewhere it is written, And the children of the Kenite, Moses’ father in law, went up out of the city of palm trees. Jethro, who fled, merited that his descendants should sit in the Chamber of Hewn Stone, as it is said: And the families of scribes which dwelt at Jabez; the Tirathites, the Shimeathites, the Suchathites. These are the Kenites that came of Hammath, the

father of the house of Rechab; and it is written: And the children of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law etc. (Soncino Edition)

**Tosephtha Aboth of R. Nathan**  
**Chapter V, Mishnah A**

Said R. Jehudah: At the time when it became known that the Temple would be built on the boundaries of Judah and Benjamin, they had improved and separated the suburb of Jericho. And who ate its products all these years? The children of the Kenite, the father-in-law of Moses, as it is written [Numb. x. 32]: "It shall be, that the same goodness which the Lord may do unto us will we do unto thee." However, when the Temple was built, they vacated. And whence do we know that they were sustained by charity? They said: "When the Lord will reveal His Shekhina, He will reward Jethro and his children, as it is written [*ibid.* 29]: For the Lord hath spoken (to bring) good upon Israel." Said R. Simeon: They were prominent men and were proprietors of houses, fields, and vineyards. However, because of the work of the Lord they left everything and went away, as it is written [I Chron. iv. 23]: "There were the potters, and those that dwelt in plantations," etc. They dwelt with the king in his work. And where did they then go? To Jabez, to study the Torah, and thus have become a people of the Omnipotent. Jabez was a very good and righteous man: he was a truthful man and pious, and occupied himself with the study of the Law; therefore the pious went to a pious.

## NOTES

1. Bruce Wilkinson's small devotional bestseller, *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking through to the Blessed Life* ( Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2000) has sold over nine million copies in four years and has spun off multiple by-products. Reviews of this popular book have been mixed. This study does not focus on Wilkinson's book. A few reviews of Wilkinson's book are cited in the bibliography, including those of Clapp, Heath, Schultz, Zaleski, and Zuck.
2. The bracketed [with sorrow] is Thomson's interpretation of the  $\acute{\omega}\varsigma$   $\gamma\alpha\beta\eta\varsigma$ , which is meaningless in Greek, but an adequate transliteration of  $\text{יְעִבֵּי}$ , for the  $\gamma$  was commonly used to transliterate the  $\text{ע}$ . The intensifying  $\acute{\omega}\varsigma$  is the translation of the Hebrew  $\text{כִּי}$ . The important thing to note is that  $\gamma\alpha\beta\eta\varsigma$  transliterates the stem  $\text{עבִּי}$ , not  $\text{עצב}$ —suggesting that the Hebrew *Vorlage* used by the Septuagint translators had  $\text{עבִּי}$  rather than  $\text{עצב}$  “sorrow, pain.” The meaning of  $\text{עבִּי}$  was apparently unknown to the translators, therefore they simply transliterated the word, similar to the transliteration of the enigmatic  $\text{הַלֵּמוֹ}$ ,  $\text{מַרְהַרְוֹת}$ , and  $\text{מַרְוֹז}$  in Judges 5:22–23 (see McDaniel 2000: 25–26, 199–201).
3. For the Aramaic text see Sperber (1968, Vol. IV), and for the English translation see McIvor (1994).
4. If  $\text{יְעִבֵּי}$  is parsed as a *Hiph<sup>il</sup>*, it would have to be a jussive form expressing a wish, “would that he cause pain.” But the *a* vowel of the preformative  $\text{יְ}$  probably reflects the influence of the  $\text{ע}$ , which is almost always preceded by an *a* vowel.

5. Note that the Targum translated כִּי as אֲרָאִים “lo, behold.”

6. Another possible Arabic cognate of the Hebrew עֲצַב is عَصَب (*‘aṣaba*) “he bound, he drew (people) together,” which in form V means “they leagued, or collected themselves together,” with التَّعَصَّب (*‘tta‘aṣṣubu*) used in a religious context meaning a “zealot.” The feminine nouns of this stem are (1) عَصِيَّة (*‘uṣbat*) “a company of men who league together to defend one another . . . a company of devotees” and (2) عَصِيَّة (*‘aṣabat*) “a man’s people, or party, who league together for defense.” The adjective عَصِي (*‘aṣabi*) indicates “one who aids his people or party . . . or one zealous in the cause of a party” (Lane 1874: 2058–2059). However, an עֲצַב with any of these meanings would not fit the context of I Chron 4:9–10.

7. Advocates for a wordplay involving עֲבָי and עֲצַב need to consider also (1) the Arabic غَفَص (*ġafaṣa*) “he came suddenly, or unexpectedly” (Lane 1877: 2275; Hava 530) which would involve not only the transposition of the ב and צ, but the interchange of ב and פ as well; and (2) the Arabic عَضَب (*‘aḍaba*) “it rendered (him) weak or infirm: deprived him of the power of motion”; العَضَب (*‘al‘uḍ‘um*) “a state of the privation of the power of motion, and unsoundness, and lameness”; مَعْضُوب (*ma‘ḍūb‘um*) “weak, infirm, crippled, or deprived of the power of motion, by disease, or by a protracted disease” (Lane 1874: 2071). The first of these two cognates suggests a premature birth, and the second one suggests a birth defect which could have done permanent damage. See the next section for a more direct indication of Jabez’s premature birth.

8. Compare Clapp and Wright (2002: 31) who proffered the name “Ouch!” for Jabez because, in their opinion, there was a wordplay with עֶצֶב, and Jabez must have been a “heavy” (כִּבֵּד) baby at birth who caused his mother great pain.

9. See above, note 7. *KBS* II: 864 cited the Ethiopic cognate *‘as(a)ba* “to be in a bad way, to be in difficulties, to be in need.” For the trauma that a premature delivery can still cause consider the following death statistics for premature births in the USA in 2003, compiled from the National Vital Statistics Report, the National Center for Health Statistics, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (The bw in the chart below is the abbreviation for birthweight.):

856.8 deaths per	1,000 live births with bw	under 500g
313.0 deaths per	1,000 live births with bw	between 500–999g
59.4 deaths per	1,000 live births with bw	between 1,000–1,499g
246.9 deaths per	1,000 live births with bw	under 1,500g
27.6 deaths per	1,000 live births with bw	between 1,500–1,999g
11.4 deaths per	1,000 live births with bw	between 2,000–2,499g
59.4 deaths per	1,000 live births with bw	under 2,500g
2.5 deaths per	1,000 live births with bw	over 2,500g
4.5 deaths per	1,000 live births with bw	between 2,500–2,999g
2.3 deaths per	1,000 live births with bw	between 3,000–3,499g
1.7 deaths per	1,000 live births with bw	between 3,500–3,999g
1.6 deaths per	1,000 live births with bw	over 4,000g)
1.5 deaths per	1,000 live births with bw	between 4,000–4,499g
2.0 deaths per	1,000 live births with bw	between 4,500–4,999g
6.5 deaths per	1,000 live births with bw	over 5,000g.

Disorders related to prematurity and low birth weight caused 15.7% of deaths less than 1 year old in USA 1999.

Disorders related to prematurity and low birth weight caused 23.1% of deaths for neonates in USA 1999.

(See [www.wrongdiagnosis.com/p/premature\\_birth/deaths.htm](http://www.wrongdiagnosis.com/p/premature_birth/deaths.htm).)

10. The ך prefix of the name יַעֲבֵז is better read as preterite prefix rather than the prefix for the imperfect. For the preterite prefixed forms, see Moscati, 1964: 131–134.

11. Compare Curtis’s (1910: 107) statement, “His mother had given him a name of ill omen [“He causeth pain”], but he prayed that its significance might not be fulfilled and God granted his request.” This claim that the name Jabez was an ill omen has been reiterated by many, including Williamson (1982: 59), Tuell (2001: 28), and Heath (2002: 11) who concluded, “his name is represented as a kind of curse placed on him by his mother . . . a negative spiritual force is released upon Jabez in his mother’s naming him . . . he was born under a curse.”

12. See *BDB* 457–459; Jastrow 1903: 606–607, and *KBS* II: 455–456.

13. Compare the Syriac ܝܩܪ (*viqar*) with its polarized meanings (1) “to be heavy, oppressed, oppressive” and (2) to be honored, honorable, venerated” (Payne Smith 1903: 196–197).

14. Clapp and Wright (2002: 31), though had an answer to this question. They conjectured that “Jabez’s corpulent affliction continues into adulthood, meaning he needs increased amounts of food (and so more arable property) to sustain his girth and, in his anxious and hungry eyes, his very life.”

15. This artificial אֵית־כְּבֹד (with the Aramaic אֵית instead of the Hebrew יֵשׁ) is simply an attempt at a wordplay with the well-known Ichabod (אֵי־כְבוֹד) of I Sam 4:21.



16. See above, note 7. Jabez's **לַיָּבֶז** could mean he was infirm “weak, crippled, or deprived of the power of motion, by disease, or by a protracted disease.”

17. Lane 1863: 138; 1893: 3064; Wehr 1979: 48, 1299; Hava 1915: 904. For the Arabic **أَيْمُ اللَّهِ** (*‘aymu ‘allahi*) note also Castell 1669: 100 and 1615, “*juramentum per Dei nomen*”; and “**בְּרִכָּה**, *felicitas : prosperitas Benedictio : rerum copia, oppulentia . . . felix, prosper, fortunatas, 2, adjuravit, ad ajuramentum adegit eum petiit ve ab eo ut juraret.*”

18. Knoppers (2003: 316) succinctly stated, “The precise location of this town is unknown.”

19. Castell (1669: 474) also cited **جبل** (*jibill*), meaning “*hominum turba, multos, copiosus.*”

20. See *BDB* 52 and Jastrow 1903: 26–27 for **אִמְוָה** “people, nation, government, gentile.” For the Arabic **أُمَّة** (*‘ummat*) “a nation, people, race, tribe, distinct body, community, family, kinfolk,” see Lane (1863: 90) and the *Qur’an*, *Sura* 2: 213 [or 209 in some translations], “mankind were one community.”

21. For the confusion of the **י** and the **יָ**, see Delitzsch, 1920: 103–105, §103<sup>a-c</sup>.

22. Compare Myers (1965: 28) who simply conjectured, “This little pericope [4:9–10] is theological in meaning though it may have been intended as a comment on ii 55 where Jabez is a place name. . . This is a case of prayer without a vow, which may have fallen out.”

23. According to Judges 1:16 and 4:11, the Kenites/Qenites are the descendants of Hobab, the father-in-law of Moses, and are thereby distant relatives of the Israelites. See Knoopers (2003: 315–317) for a detailed discussion on I Chron 2:55. For the possibility that the Song of Deborah was written by the Kenite Jael in a Kenite dialect see McDaniel, *The Song of Deborah: Poetry in Dialect*, 208–209, 247–251, available at <http://www.palmer.edu/tmcdaniel/>.

24. For many other examples of the confusion of כ and כּ, see Delitzsch, 1920: 113–114, §114<sup>a-c</sup>.

25. Castell's lexicon was not widely available in the past, and, therefore, seldom consulted. A cross reference in *KBS* to Castell's definitions would have been helpful. The two folio volumes of Castell's Lexicon (consisting of 4,000 columns) have been scanned and put into 1,555 PDF files (totaling 2.2 gigabytes). Both volumes of the lexicon are now available online at <http://www.palmer.edu/tmcdaniel/> and can be made available on DVD. (Instructions for getting a DVD copy of the lexicon are given online.)

26. The name Jacob should be read with what precedes it and what follows it. Compare the “Israel : Jacob” in the Septuagint text of this verse,

καὶ ἐγενήθη μερὶς κυρίου λαὸς αὐτοῦ Ἰακωβ  
σχοίνισμα κληρονομίας αὐτοῦ Ἰσραηλ

And his people Jacob became the portion of the Lord,  
Israel was the line of his inheritance.

These words are echoed in Psa 135:4,

כִּי־יַעֲקֹב בְּחַר לֹו יְהוָה יִשְׂרָאֵל לְסִגְלָתוֹ

For Yahweh has chosen Jacob for himself,  
Israel as his own possession.

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