

MISCELLANEOUS  
BIBLICAL STUDIES

CHAPTER SIX

ARABIC COGNATES  
HELP TO CLARIFY  
JEREMIAH 2:34b

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VI  
ARABIC COGNATES HELP TO  
CLARIFY JEREMIAH 2:34b

The first clue for the correct interpretation of Jer 2:34b comes from the textual variants in Isa 61:3, which reads in the MT and the Septuagint as follows:

וְקָרָא לָהֶם אֵילֵי הַצֶּדֶק מִטַּע יְהוָה לְהַתְפַּאֵר

that they might be called *oaks* of righteousness,  
the planting of Yahweh that he may be glorified

καὶ κληθήσονται γενεὰ δικαιοσύνης  
φύτευμα κυρίου εἰς δόξαν

and they shall be called *generations* of righteousness,  
the planting of the Lord for glory.

The MT אֵילֵי (rendered “trees” or “oaks” or “terebinths” in standard translations) became in Greek the plural of γενεά “family, race, generation, clan, offspring” (Liddell and Scott 342; Arndt and Gingrich 153). The Greek translators were obviously aware of that אלה/איל which was the cognate of Arabic آل (°al/°ill) and ايلة (°ilat) meaning “a man’s family, i.e., his relations or kinfolk; or nearer, or nearest, relations by descent from the same father or ancestor; . . . household, followers; those who bear a relation, as members to a head” (Lane 1863: 127–128).<sup>1</sup>

Although آل/ايلة (= אלה/איל) was cited in Castell’s *Lexicon Heptaglotton* (1669: 58, 115) as “*populus, asseclae, affines, familia, domestici*”) the Arabic cognate آل/ايلة (= אלה/איל) has dropped out of subsequent lexicons. Although rarely found in the literature, it probably appears in the name אֵלִיאֵל (Ελιηλ/Αλιηλ) in I Chron 11:46–47, meaning the

same as the אֱלֹהִים (Eλλιαβ) in II Sam 11:3 and the עֲמִיאל (Aμιηλ) in I Chron 3:5—all meaning “God is my kinsman”—which are much like רְעוּיָאֵל (Ραγουηλ) “God is my kinsman” and אַחִיָּה / אֲבִיָּה “Yahweh is my brother/ father.”<sup>2</sup>

Although rare, this אֱלֵה in Isa 61:3 is not a *hapax legomenon*, for it appears in Jer 2:34, עַל-כָּל-אֱלֵה “against every family-member”(contra MT עַל-כָּל-אֱלֹהֵה). Also, it was most likely used by Jesus when he asked Peter, “Do you love me more than kith-and-kin?” (John 21:15), which when translated into Greek became mistakenly ἀγαπᾷς με πλεον τουτων; “do you love me more than these?”<sup>3</sup>

The second clue for the correct interpretation of Jer 2:34b comes from the Arabic verb ختر (*ḥatarā*) “he acted, or behaved, towards him with the foulest perfidy, treachery, or unfaithfulness; or with deceit, guile, or circumvention in a bad or corrupt manner”; and the noun خاتر (*ḥātir<sup>un</sup>*) “one who acts, or behaves, with perfidy, treachery, or unfaithfulness, deceit, guile, or circumvention” (Lane (1865: 701). The Hebrew cognate of this word is חָתַר, stem II, found in the noun מְחַתְּרֵת in Jer 2:34b, which has been interpreted up until now as a noun from חָתַר, stem I, “to dig (into houses),” which appears in Exodus 22:2, אִם-בְּמִחְתְּרֵת יִמְצָא הַגֵּנֵב, וְהָכָה וּמָת אִין לוֹ דָּמַיִם, “If the thief is caught while breaking in, and is struck so that he dies, there will be no blood-guiltiness on his account” (NAS, NAU).

The text and varied translations of Jer 2:34 are as follows:

## Jeremiah 2:34

גַּם בְּכַנְפֵיךָ נִמְצְאוּ דַם נַפְשֹׁת אֲבִיּוֹנִים נְקִיִּים  
 לֹא־בַמְחִתְרֹת מִצְאָתִים כִּי עַל־כָּל־אֱלֹהִים:

JPS

Also in thy skirts is found the blood of the souls  
 of the innocent poor;  
 thou didst not find them breaking in; yet for all these things

KJV

Also in thy skirts is found the blood of the souls  
 of the poor innocents:  
 I have not found it by secret search, but upon all these.

Septuagint

καὶ ἐν ταῖς χερσίν σου εὐρέθησαν αἵματα ψυχῶν ἀθώων  
 οὐκ ἐν διορύγμασιν εὗρον αὐτούς ἀλλ' ἐπὶ πάσῃ δρυί

and in thine hands has been found the blood  
 of innocent souls;

I have not found them in holes, but on every oak.

John Bright

Yes, there on the skirts of your robe  
 Is the lifeblood of innocent men  
 No burglars these, whom you caught red-handed, [ ]<sup>4</sup>

William Holladay

Indeed ((on your palms)) is found  
 ((blood)) of lives of the innocent [the poor;]  
 not in burglary did you find them —  
 (your yoke) certainly (becomes a curse).

William McKane

There is blood on your skirts  
 the blood of the innocent poor.  
 You did not catch them in the act of housebreaking.

One hundred years ago Julius Bewer published an article entitled “Critical Notes on Old Testament Passages,”<sup>5</sup> which dealt with seven texts, including Jer 2:34. His first words about this passage were, “The second half of this verse is difficult.” (Decades later D. R. Jones (1992: 94), echoed the same sentiment about Jer 2:34b with his initial words: “This is a *crux*.”) Bewer summarized the conclusions of Carl H. Cornill (1905), who did not translate the verse, and Bernard Duhm (1901) who understood the MT מִחֲתָרֹת concretely as “burglars” instead of abstractly as “burglary” and translated the half-verse as “Not with burglars have I found it, but upon all these,” i.e., all these well known people involved in “human sacrifices which were offered in connection with the nature-worship which the people practiced so zealously.” For Bewer, Duhm was “in the main on the right track” because “the reference cannot be to judicial murders,” but to sacrificial killings.<sup>6</sup>

Bewer’s own solution was to emend the MT בְּמִחְתָּרֹת “to the burglary” to בְּמִסְתָּרִים “in hidden places” and translated the half-verse as “Not in hidden places have I found it (the blood), but upon all these.” He offered this interpretation:

The murders have not been committed in secret, but openly; and the people declare in addition that they have brought no guilt on themselves thereby. Openly they carry the very traces of their crimes, of the sacrifices of children and slaves; they are not ashamed of them or afraid because of them; they think, on the contrary, that they deserve mercy and forgiveness on account of them.

D. R. Jones (1992: 94–95), as noted, found this verse to be a *crux*. For him the 2:24a seemed overloaded and he thought it plausible that אֲבִיוֹנִים “poor ones” was a gloss, “which has the effect of interpreting the bloodshed in terms of judicial

murder.”

As for Jer 2:34b, Jones was equally uncertain, stating, “But it seems right to translate [בְּמִחָתְרָת] ‘find them breaking in’ in light of the similar vocabulary in Exod 22:2.” He interpreted the MT מְצֹאתִים . . . לֹא as “I (Yahweh) did not find it (the blood).” Following the Septuagint, which read the MT אֱלֹה “these” as אֱלֹה “oak/terebinth,” Jones concluded that the verse as a whole can mean:

You have taken part in your illegitimate sacrifices and the evidence of the sacrificial blood is on your very clothes. It wasn’t as though I caught you housebreaking, when the law excuses violence in self-defence and the stains of blood would be understood. The blood you shed is to be seen on every oak where you practiced your profane cult.

W. L. Holladay (1986: 56, 110) followed the Septuagint’s ἐν ταῖς χερσί σου and the Peshitta’s כַּרְתִּיב (b<sup>o</sup>idaky) “on your hands” by reading בְּכַפֵּיךָ for the MT בְּכַנְפֵיךָ “on your skirts.” He also followed the Septuagint by omitting the MT אֲבִיוֹנִים “poor people,” and concurred with the Peshitta by reading the MT מְצֹאתִים as a second feminine singular rather than as a first singular as found in the Greek and Latin texts. The MT עַל-כָּל-אֱלֹה “on (or against) all these” was for Holladay an impossible phrase so he revocalized the text to read עֲלֶיךָ לְאֱלֹה “your yoke to a curse.” He noted that

The expression “your yoke” is found in v 20 to denote the yoke imposed upon you by Yahweh: and that yoke has to you become a curse. However, “your yoke” may also mean “the yoke you impose on others” (1 Kgs 12:4 offers both this subjective genitive, “his yoke [which he imposed on us],” and

an objective genitive, “our yoke [which we have endured]”) and that nuance is appropriate in the present context of social oppression.

But Holladay’s emendation and explanation is no more compelling than that of Bewer’s; and, as McKane (1986: 54) noted, Holladay’s earlier rendition (1975: 225) “indeed your yoke has become execrable” is unlikely to find much support.

McKane (1986: 49, 54) was content to comment in a note that the MT **עַל-כָּל-אֵלֶּה** “is unintelligible” and conjectured that “it appears to be a fragment which was part of a description or condemnation of Israel’s devotion to the fertility rites.” McKane followed Rashi and Kimchi in reading the **מְצֹאתִים** as “she found them,” contra the Septuagint and Peshitta which read it as “I found them”—preceded by the negative particle.

Once **אֵלֶּה** “kith-and-kin, family relatives” and **חָתַר**, stem II, “to act treacherously” come into focus better options emerge for emending the text. Here is my restoration, with the changes highlighted in red:

גַּם בְּכַנְפֵיךָ נִמְצְאוּ דָם נַפְשׁוֹת אֲבִיוֹנִים  
 נִקְיִים **לְאִים** בְּחֻתְרָת  
 מְצֹאתִי **מִכִּים** עַל-כָּל-אֵלֶּה:

Also in your skirts is found the blood of the souls of the poor  
 —innocent ones exhausted by treachery—

I found those striking out against every family-member.

The MT **לֹא-בְמַחְתָּרָת** “innocent ones not in the burglary” becomes meaningful when the **בְּמַחְתָּרָת** of **בְּמַחְתָּרָת** are inverted and the consonant cluster **לֹאמבַּחְתָּרָת** is divided to read **לֹאם בַּחְתָּרָת**. The plural participle **לֹאם** (= **לְאִים**)

“exhausted ones” modifies the נְקִיִּים “innocent ones,” which initiates its own three word clause. The בַּחֲתָרַת is obviously the preposition בַּ attached to the noun חֲתָרַת “treachery.”

Similarly, the rather senseless MT מְצַאֲתִים כִּי, “I/she found them that,” makes sense when a final ם of מְצַאֲתִים is attached to the כִּי as an initial מ and a final ם is added to the restored מְצִי (restoring the *Hiph'el* plural participle מְצִי [of נָכַח “to smite”]). The words then become מְצַאֲתִי מְצִי “I found smiters / attackers.” The violence addressed in Jer 2:34 was all in the family. Despite the commandments in

- Deut 15:7, “If there is among you a poor man, one of your brethren (אָחִיךָ), in any of your towns within your land which Yahweh your God gives you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother (אָחִיךָ הָאֲבִיּוֹן),” and
- Zech 7:9–10, “Thus says Yahweh of hosts, ‘Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy each to his brother (אָחִי), do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor; and let none of you devise evil against his brother (אָחִי),’”

violent bloodshed, perfidy, and treachery were found among the *brethren* (אָחִים), the *relatives* (רְעִים), in every *family* (עֲמִית), and among the *kith-and-kin* (אֵלֶּה).

The Septuagint’s rendering of אֵילֵי Isa 61:3 as γενεαὶ “generations” was wrong but informative; and this translation in Isa 61:3 was the clue for identifying the אֵלֶּה in Jer 2:34 as the cognate of the Arabic ايلة (*ilat*) “kith-and-kin.” With the recovery of verb חָתַר, stem II, “to act treacherously,” the statements become contextually meaningful. Minor emendations, restoring לְאִים and מְצִי, complete the recovery.



## NOTES

1. It was a synonym of **أهل** (*ahl*) “the people of a house or dwelling, and of a town or village . . . and the family of a man, fellow members of one family or race, and of one religion” (Lane 1863: 121). Lane (127) noted that “By the **ال** (*al/ill*) of the Prophet are meant, according to some persons, His followers, whether relations or others: and his relations, whether followers or not . . . .” The noun appears in the *Qurʾan* (*Sura* 3:9, 8:54, 56) in reference to “the family of Pharaoh” (**أل فرعون** [*alu firʿawnu*]). The word survives in modern literary Arabic for “blood relationship, consanguinity, pact, covenant” (Wehr 1979: 27).

2. Compare the rare **עֲמִית** “relative, fellow, associate,” which occurs only in Zech 13:7 and eleven times in Leviticus (5:21, 18:20, 19:11, 19:15, 19:17, 24:19, 25:14, 25:15, 25:17).

3. See *Clarifying Baffling Biblical Passages*, Chapter 33 entitled, “Do you Love Me More than Kith-and-Kin?” (Click here to view online.)

4. Bright (1965: 13) translated the **כִּי עַל-כָּל-אֵלֶּה** as “But upon [or: “because of”] all these,” but concluded that “The colon cannot be translated.”

5. In *Old Testament and Semitic Studies in Memory of William Rainey Harper*, Volume 2: 207–226. R. F. Harper, F. Brown, and G. F. Moore, editors. Chicago, IL.: University of Chicago Press.

6. Note the sacrificial killings referred to in Jer 19:4–5,

Because they have forsaken me, and have estranged this place, and have burned incense in it unto other gods, that they knew not, they and their fathers and the kings of Judah; and have filled this place with the blood of innocents, and have built the high places of Baal, to burn their sons in the fire for burnt-offerings unto Baal; which I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into my mind.

Note also the warnings against judicial murder in

- Jer 26:15, “Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will bring innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants, for in truth the LORD sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears.”
- Jer 22:3 “Thus says the LORD: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.”
- Jer 22:17, “But you have eyes and heart only for your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence.”