IV

THE MEANING OF ABRAM AND ABRAHAM

GENESIS 17:5

INTRODUCTION

No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.

The name אבָרֶם is commonly recognized as a compound of אב “father” and רם “exalted,” the latter of which is from רָם “to be high, exalted” (BDB 4). Hollow verbs like רָם often have a by-form in which a medial consonantal ה or מ appears in lieu of the vowel letters ה or ו, such as:

"shame" (Aramaic)
"long time, age" (Arabic)
"secrecy" (Exo 7:11)
"secrecy" (Jud 4:21)
"to circumcise"
"to exchange"
"light, fire” and “to shine”
"to rise” (Zech 14:10)
"to run" (Aramaic, Syriac)

Appreciation of these variants permits one to understand the commentators who equate the meaning of Abram and Abraham. For example, von Rad (1961: 194) concluded:
GENESIS 17:5

Here P [= Priestly writer] has certainly theologized a double tradition of the first patriarch’s name, for the name “Abraham” is linguistically nothing else than a “lengthening” of the simpler “Abram,” which means “my father [the god] is exalted.”

About the same time Speiser (1964: 124) stated:

Linguistically, the medial -ha- is a secondary extension in a manner which is common in Aramaic. The underlying formAbram and its doublet Abiram [Num 16:1] are best explained as “the (not ‘my’) father is exalted . . . .”

ABRAM / מִרְאֶם

Although “exalted” is one meaning of the בְּ of מִרְאֶם, it is not the only meaning. If the בְּ of מִרְאֶם is an epithet for God, rather than a patronym, then “exalted” is probably the preferred definition. But not every name with בְּ refers to God. Such names as מִקְבְּרֵה “my father gathered” and מִקְבְּרֵה “my father is a wanderer” or מִקְבְּרֵה “my father is a wall” are unlikely references to God. There is a good chance that the בְּ of מִרְאֶם referred to the patriarch himself, not to his father or ancestor or to God.

The Arabic cognate of מִרְאֶם could well be רָם (rām) “he went away, or departed: and he quit a place: and he ceased doing a thing” (Lane 1867: 1203–1204). If so, the name would be practically synonymous with מִקְבְּרֵה “my father is a wanderer.” If מִרְאֶם does mean “father departed,” it would be a very fitting name for someone who obeyed the command in Gen 12:1 מֵאָנָן אֶל כֹּל הָאֲדֹלָמִים וְאֶל כְּלָה הַבָּתיִים מֵאָנָן מִרְאֶם, “go from your country and your kindred and your father's house.” If “father departed” was the meaning of מִרְאֶם, the patriarch more than lived up to that name.
There is yet another possible derivation suggested by the Arabic cognate رَمِّ (raym) “excess, superiority” (Lane 1867: 1204), which occurs in the expression لِهذَا رِمْ عَلَى هَذَا (lihādā raym ʿalay haḏā) “this has superiority over this.” While Abraham may have been too modest to have appropriated the name “father is superior” for himself, his progeny certainly claimed this for him (and for themselves). But Israelites and Ishmaelites may not have been the only ones who laid claim to superiority through an ancestor. Skinner (1930: 292) noted, “The form مَرْفُ م is an abbreviation of مَرْفَة which occurs as a personal name not only in Heb. but also as that of an Ass. official (Abīrāmu) under Esarhad- don, B.C. 667 . . . .” Similarly, Millard (1992) recognized, “The name ‘Aburahana’ [= Abraham] is found in the Egyptian Execration Texts of the 19th century B.C. (m and n readily interchangeable in Egyptian transcriptions of Semitic names).”

**ABRAHAM / مَرْفُ م**

Just as Speiser disagreed with Skinner, as noted above, Skinner (1930: 292) disagreed with Delitzsch (1887: 292; 1888: II: 34), making the following observations about the مَرْفُ م of مَرْفُ م:

The nearest approach to P’s explanation would be found in the Ar. رُحْمَ = ‘copious number’ (from a √ descriptive of a fine drizzling rain: Lane, s.v.). De[ltzsch] thinks this the best explanation; but the etymology is far-fetched, and apart from the probable accidental correspondence with P’s interpretation the sense has no claim to be correct.”

However, the etymology is not as far-fetched as Skinner thought. Long before Delitzsch, Castell (1669: 3537) cited in his massive lexicon رُحَمَ (ruhām) “numerus copiosus” as the cognate of مَرْفُ م “a large number,” a definition also noted by
Lane (1867: 1171–1172). No commentator has yet to suggest that the הָרֵעַ of הָרֵעַ רְחָם is related to the Arabic رَحْمَ (rahâm) “a man weak in seeking, or searching, [to find what is best to be done;] who follows mere opinion.” But there would be an element of truth to such a derivation when it comes to Abraham’s indecisiveness in resolving the conflict between Sarah and Hagar.

Skinner’s objection to identifying רְחָם (ruhâm) stems from the fact that the word has to do primarily with a “drizzling and lasting rain” (= רְחָם [rihmat]), i.e., a lot of rain drops. However, opting for a “probable accidental correspondence” of רְחָם with רְחָם (ruhâm) was itself a far-fetched explanation. The innumerable drops of water in a drizzling rain are like the stars mentioned in Gen 15:5 (“look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them . . . so shall your descendants be”) or the sand mentioned in Gen 22:17 (“I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore”). Therefore, in my opinion, the identification by Castell and Delitzsch of רְחָם (ruhâm) appears to be correct.

CONCLUSIONS

Although some of the older commentators preferred to view Abram and Abraham as two different individuals whose traditions had been blended together—and more recent exegetes have argued that Abram and Abraham are simply dialectally different names for the same individual—the proposal in this study has been to treat the names as two distinctly different names for the same person. The meaning of Abram can have three different meanings: (1) “father is exalted,” (2) “father departed,” and (3) “father is superior.”
On the other hand, the name Abraham appears to have had two well-defined meanings—unless with some humor intended “father is a drip” is proffered as a third choice—namely, (1) “father is indecisive in making decisions,” or (2) “father is prolific.” When the names are interpreted as referring to the patriarch, there is an element of truth in all five. Although the name Abram (“father is exalted”) could be a reference to the exaltedness of God, it could have simply meant “the patriarch departed,” or “the patriarch was superior.” The name Abraham made no reference to God since it meant “the patriarch was indecisive” and/or “the patriarch was prolific.” The latter definition would have support from Sarai’s name having been changed to Sarah—if were vocalized as and read as the Akkadian cognate “she became great in number or quantity/many, numerous” (Lane 1863:335), as suggested by Gen. 17:15, “she will become nations.”

NOTES

1. See GKC 77f and BDB, sub voce.

2. Speiser also clarified the fact that “to exalt” and “to love” must not be confuse when comparing Akkadian names. In disagreement with Skinner (cited below) Speiser noted:

the supposed Akk. cognate Abam-rāmā is not to be ad-duced, since it is unrelated and means “love the father.” [rāmā = “to love”] . . . . The underlying concept was probably much the same as in a king’s assumption of a special throne name. The event marked a new era. Such notices are not to be confused with frequent word plays on original names; or P’s own paronomasia on Isaac (1964: 124, 127).