

CLARIFYING
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BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER FOUR

“THE MEANING OF
ABRAM AND ABRAHAM:
GENESIS 17:5”

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IV

THE MEANING OF ABRAM AND ABRAHAM GENESIS 17:5

INTRODUCTION

וְלֹא־יִקְרָא עוֹד אֶת־שְׁמֶךָ אַבְרָם
וְהָיָה שְׁמֶךָ אַבְרָהָם
כִּי אֲבִרְהָמוֹן גּוֹיִם נִתְּתִיךָ

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 אַבְרָם is commonly recognized as a compound of אָב “father” and רָם “exalted,” the latter of which is from רוּם “to be high, exalted” (BDB 4). Hollow verbs like רוּם often have a by-form in which a medial consonantal ה or א appears in lieu of the vowel letters ו or ׁ, such as:¹

בוֹשׁ	בָּהַת	“shame” (Aramaic)
דוּר	דָּהַר	“long time, age” (Arabic)
לוּט	לָהַט	“secrecy” (Exo 7:11)
לוּט	לָאֵט	“secrecy” (Jud 4:21)
מוּל	מָהַל	“to circumcise”
מוּר	מָהַר	“to exchange”
נוּר	נָהַר	“light, fire” and “to shine”
רוּם	רָאֵם	“to rise” (Zech 14:10)
רוּץ	רָהַץ	“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:

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 form *Abram* and its doublet *Abiram* [Num 16:1] are best explained as "the (not 'my') father is exalted"²

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

The Arabic cognate of אַבְרָם/אַבְרָם could well be رَام (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 אַבְרָם יִשָּׁג "my father is a wanderer." If אַבְרָם does mean "father departed," it would be a very fitting name for someone who obeyed the command in Gen 12:1 לְךָ־לְךָ־מֵאֶרְצְךָ־וּמִמּוֹלַדְתֶּךָ־וּמִבֵּית־אָבִיךָ, "go from your country and your kindred and your father's house." If "father departed" was the meaning of אַבְרָם, the patriarch more than lived up to that name.

There is yet another possible derivation suggested by the Arabic cognate ريم (*raym*) “excess, superiority” (Lane 1867: 1204), which occurs in the expression لهذا ريم على هذا (*lihaḏâ raym ‘alay haḏâ*) “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 אַבְרָם is an abbreviation of אַבְרָהָם . . . which occurs as a personal name not only in Heb. but also as that of an Ass. official (*Abîrâmu*) 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 interchange in Egyptian transcriptions of Semitic names).”

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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 אַבְרָם of אַבְרָהָם:

The nearest approach to P’s explanation would be found in the Ar. *ruhām* = ‘copious number’ (from a $\sqrt{\quad}$ descriptive of a fine drizzling rain: Lane, *s.v.*). De[litzsch] 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 رهام (*ruhâm*) “*numerus copiosus*” as the

cognate of אָרַב “a large number,” a definition also noted by Lane (1867: 1171–1172). No commentator has yet to suggest that the אָרַב of אָרַב אָרַב אָרַב is related to the Arabic رَهِيم (*rahûm*) “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 אָרַב with رَهِيم (*ruhâm*) stems from the fact that the word has to do primarily with a “drizzling and lasting rain” (= رَهْمَةٌ [*rihmat*]), i.e., a lot of rain drops. However, opting for a “probable accidental correspondence” of אָרַב with رَهِيم (*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 אָרַב with رَهِيم (*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 שרה were vocalized as שָׂרָה and read as the cognate of Arabic ثرى/ثرو (*tarrâ/ tarrî*) “she became great in number or quantity/ many, numerous” (Lane 1863:335), as suggested by Gen. 17:15, וְהָיְתָה לְגוֹיִם “she will become nations.”

NOTES

1. See GKC 77^f and BDB, *sub voce*.
2. Speiser also clarified the fact that רָם “to exalt” and רָחַם “to love” must not be confused 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* = רָחַם “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).