

The “Aramean” of Deuteronomy 26:5: *Peshat and Derash*

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“The ideal reader treats the book as full of significance. . . . Ultimately, the holistic interpreter is animated by a respect for his cultural heritage that takes the form of a prejudice in favor of the ancient biblical author-editors and their transmitters. He requires more than a theoretical cause before discounting and disintegrating their products.”¹ These are among the many methodological principles Moshe Greenberg attempted to impart to me as a student. May the Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He account it to him as if he had been successful.

The words ארמי אבד אבי at the beginning of the declaration of the first-fruits (Deut 26:5) have puzzled exegetes since ancient times. Who is the ארמי ‘Aramean’, and who is אבי ‘my father’? What is the meaning of אבד? What is the subject and what is the predicate of the clause? How is it connected to the clauses that follow it: “He went down to Egypt and sojourned there with meager numbers, but there he became a great, mighty, and populous nation”?

Peshat

The reading of ארמי אבד אבי that is today considered its plain sense (אבי = subject; ארמי אבד = predicate noun phrase) is usually thought to have made its first unambiguous appearance in the commentaries of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra and

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1. Moshe Greenberg, “The Vision of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 8–11: A Holistic Interpretation,” *The Divine Helmsman* (ed. J. L. Crenshaw and S. Sandmel; New York: Ktav, 1980) 149.

Rashbam (12th century), but, in fact, it was proposed a generation earlier by R. Judah Ibn Bal'am.² Ibn Bal'am took it to mean 'a perishing Aramean was my father', a reference to Jacob's wretched condition in Aram.³ In support of his interpretation of אבד, he cited Jer 50:6 and Ps 119:176 (see below), and for the theme of Israel's ascent from humble beginnings in Aram, he compared Hos 12:13–14.

Ibn Ezra and R. David Qimḥi⁴ (and others) followed Ibn Bal'am in identifying the "father" with Jacob, the former citing Prov 31:6–7, "give intoxicating drink to him who is perishing (לאורבד) . . . , let him drink and forget his poverty (רלוש)," as evidence that אבד could be used in the sense of 'desitute' and the latter citing Gen 31:40, "scorching heat consumed me by day and frost by night," as evidence of Jacob's suffering in Aram. Rashbam and R. Joseph Bekhor Shor,⁵ on the other hand, identified the 'father' with Abraham, taking our phrase to mean 'a wandering (= emigrant)⁶ Aramean was my father' on the

2. He presents it as a novel interpretation, superior to that of Onqelos and Saadia, here and in his commentary to Hos 12:13. At the same time, he hints at an innovative interpretation of *m. Pesah*. 10:4, according to which the sentence "He begins with the negative and ends with the positive" is explained by the immediately following sentence: "And he expounds from ארמי אבד אבי until he finishes the entire portion." See Samuel Poznanski, "The Arabic Commentary of Abu Zakariya Yahya (Judah ben Samuel) Ibn Bal'am on the Twelve Minor Prophets," *JQR* n.s. 15 (1924–25) 22–23; Ma'aravi Perez, פירוש לבמדבר ודברים (MA thesis, Bar-Ilan University, 1970) 60, 112, 182. (I am indebted to M. Linetsky for obtaining this thesis for our library and to Z. Erenyi for calling it to my attention.) For antecedents cited by Yefet b. 'Eli, see n. 24, below.

3. For Ibn Bal'am and his followers, the phrase ארמי אבד is indivisible: Jacob, the scion of a wealthy Hebrew family, lived the life of a wretched Aramean for twenty years. Contrast J. Van Seters (*Abraham in History and Tradition* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975] 33) and J. Gerald Janzen ("The 'Wandering Aramean' Reconsidered," *VT* 44 [1994] 359–75), who also take it to mean 'perishing' but see it as a reference to Jacob's condition in *Canaan* during the famine ('starving'), which led him to descend to Egypt. For other advocates of 'perishing, destitute', see M. A. Beek, "Das Problem des aramäischen Stammvaters (Deut. XXVI 5)," *OTS* 8 (1951) 199–200, 211.

4. R. Abraham Ibn Ezra, אבן עזרא אברהם לרבינו אברהם (ed. A. Weiser; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1976) 3.289; R. David Qimḥi, ספר השרשים (ed. J. H. R. Biesenthal and F. Lebrecht; Berlin: Bethge, 1847) 1, s.v. אבד.

5. Rashbam, פירוש התורה אשר כתב רשב"ם (ed. D. Rosin; Bratislava: Shottlender, 1881) 17–18 (Gen 20:13) 222; R. Joseph Bekhor Shor, על התורה, בכור שור על התורה (ed. Y. Nevo; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1994) 366.

6. Compare German *Auswanderer* 'emigrant'. Akkadian parallels favor a nuance closer to 'fugitive' or 'refugee'; see D. D. Luckenbill, "The 'Wandering Aramean,'" *AJSL* 36 (1920) 244–45; Alan R. Millard, "A Wandering Aramean," *JNES* 39 (1980) 153–55 and the studies cited there and in François Dreyfus, "L'Araméen voulait tuer mon père: L'actualisation de Dt 26,5 dans la tradition juive et la tradition chrétienne," in *De la Tôrah au Messie: Études d'exégèse et d'herméneutiques bibliques offertes à Henri Cazelles* (ed. M. Carrez, J. Doré, and P. Grelot; Paris: Desclée, 1981) 156 n. 4. *Papyrus Anastasi I*, from the end of the 13th century B.C.E., contains the verb אבד in a Canaanite sentence transcribed into hieratic syllabic script. According to some scholars, the sentence is a close parallel to Ps 119:176; see W. F. Albright, *The Vocalization of the Egyptian Syllabic Orthography* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1934) 33; *ANET*, 477; H-W. Fischer-Elfert, *Die satirische Streitschrift des Papyrus Anastasi I* (Ägyptologische Abhandlungen 44; Wiesbaden:

basis of Gen 12:1, “go forth from your land”; 20:13, “when God made me wander (התער) from my father’s house”; and (to prove תעה = אכר) Jer 50:6, “my people were lost (אכרות) sheep, their shepherds made them wander (התערום)”; and Ps 119:176, “I have wandered (תעיתי) like a lost sheep (אכר).”

Neither of these identifications is without its problems. Abraham “went down to Egypt” (Gen 12:10) but did not become a great nation there; he spent time in Aram, but it is not clear that his birthplace, Ur of the Chaldees, was located there. Jacob lived in Aram for twenty years, but Genesis seems to go out of its way to stress that he was not an Aramean (see Gen 31:20, 47).⁷

It was presumably such problems that led, in antiquity, to the rejection of these ethnically problematic interpretations in favor of linguistically problematic ones. Thus, we find renderings like Συρίαν ἀπέβαλεν ὁ πατήρ μου ‘my father abandoned Syria’ (LXX) and לְאִמִּי אֶגְדָּו אֲבִי, ‘my father was taken to Aram’ (Peshiṭta), featuring references to migration based more on the meaning of וירד מצרימה ‘and he went down to Egypt’⁸ than on the meaning of the words allegedly being translated. The standard Jewish interpretation, dealt with below, is also a response to these problems.⁹

In the modern period, the same problems have led some to conclude that the original meaning of the verse contradicts the Genesis narratives.¹⁰ Others attempt to solve the problems by reinterpreting ארמי¹¹ or אבי. According to Mendelssohn’s *Biur*, אבי refers to Abraham and Jacob together, since “all the patriarchs together were called אב, on account of their being . . . the root of the family and the nation.”¹² We may add that the generic use of the singular is well attested in the Bible,¹³ and examples of אב meaning ‘ancestry, fathers’ are perhaps to be found in Exod 3:6 (“the God of your father[s]—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”) and 15:2.¹⁴

Harrassowitz, 1986) 198–99; James E. Hoch, *Semitic Words in Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 20–21.

7. See also Dreyfus, “L’Araméen,” 152, and the literature cited there. Ibn Ezra was well aware of the problem: “Let no one object: ‘How can he be called an Aramean?’ It is like ‘Ithra the Ishmaelite’ (1 Chr 2:17), who was an Israelite, for so it is written (2 Sam 17:25).”

8. Yeshayahu Maori, תרגום הפשיטתא לתורה והפרשנות היהודית הקדומה, (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1995) 274–76.

9. If the meaning ‘Gentile, heathen’ (attested for ארמי in Jewish and Christian dialects of Late Aramaic) developed early enough, the standard Jewish interpretation may have been a response to it, as well.

10. See Dreyfus, “L’Araméen,” 153.

11. See the nonethnic interpretations of Luckenbill, Mazar, and Van Seters, rejected by Millard, “Wandering Aramean,” 153–54, and those of Jacob and Junker cited by Beek, “Das Problem des aramäischen Stammvaters,” 202–3.

12. Moses Mendelssohn, באור רמבמ״ן, חומש מקור חיים, in (Berlin: Heinemann, 1833) 5.143.

13. P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1991) §135c.

14. See the commentary of Nachmanides to Exod 3:6.

S. D. Luzzatto¹⁵ expanded the referent of אבי further, to include all of the patriarchs. Luzzatto felt that his view was close to that of Rashbam, and he was probably right, for Bekhor Shor, who gives a fuller version of Rashbam's interpretation, indicates that it was Jacob who "went down to Egypt and sojourned there with meager numbers." Indeed, both Bekhor Shor and Luzzatto allude to 1 Chr 16:20, where all three patriarchs are described as wandering from nation to nation.

Can the referent of אבי be expanded still further to include Jacob's sons as well? All but one of the latter were born in Aram of Aramean mothers; Aramaic was presumably their native tongue. All of them were emigrés or fugitives¹⁶ from Aram, and all of them went down to Egypt rather than perish from hunger.¹⁷ The other capsule histories of Israelite origins mention their descent to Egypt together with their father (Josh 24:4) and even their children (Deut 10:22; cf. also Num 20:15). Thus, including them in the referent of אבי makes the aforementioned solution more compelling.

Derash

Onqelos translates אבי אבד ארמי in accordance with a very widespread *derasha*: לבן ארמאה בעא לאובדא ית אבא 'Laban the Aramean sought to destroy my father (= Jacob)'. The second half¹⁸ of the following comment in *Sipre Deut.* 26:5 gives the same interpretation: ארמי אבד אבי, מלמד שלא ירד אבינו יעקב לארם אלא על מנת לאבד/לאובד¹⁹ ומעלה על לבן הארמי כאילו איבדו (Scripture) accounts it to Laban the Aramean as though he destroyed him?²⁰ Many other *targumim* and *midrashim*, as well as the Passover

15. S. D. Luzzatto, פירוש שד"ל על חמשה חומשי תורה (ed. P. Schlesinger; Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1965) 550.

16. See n. 6 above, and the works cited there, esp. Millard, "Wandering Aramean," 155. The verb 'flee' is used four times in the story of Jacob's departure from Aram with his family (Gen 31:20–22, 27).

17. See n. 3 above, and Gen 42:2, 43:8.

18. Maori (תרגום הפשיטתא, 178) accepts the claim of A. Geiger, D. Z. Hoffmann, and D. Goldschmidt that the *peshat* interpretation is implicit already in the first half of the *Sipre's* comment; Dreyfus ("L'Araméen," 149, 153, 157 n. 16) rejects it.

19. This is a *qal* infinitive on the analogy of the imperfect (יאבד), as usual in Mishnaic Hebrew and, mutatis mutandis, Galilean Aramaic. Another initial-²*alep* infinitive with this spelling variation is לאבד/לאובד/לובד, found in a reliable manuscript of the Mishna; see Gideon Haneman, תורת הצורות של לשון המשנה (Tel-Aviv: Tel-Aviv University, 1980) 228. Cf. already יאכל/יאכלו in the *Temple Scroll*.

20. *Sipre Deut.*, ספרי על ספר דברים (ed. L. Finkelstein; Berlin: Jüdischer Kulturbund in Deutschland, 1939) 319, §301. In מדרש תנאים לספר דברים [2 vols.; Berlin: Itskovski, 1909] 172 n. 5), D. Z. Hoffmann claims that the words ומעלה על לבן הארמי כאילו איבדו are a later addition to the *Sipre*, but S. Friedman (personal communication) rejects this claim.

Haggada, reflect this interpretation,²¹ which is believed to have originated in the Hasmonean period.²²

This interpretation is far more midrashic than those of the LXX and Peshitta: in place of their extreme dependence on context, it exhibits supreme indifference to it.²³ And while it twists the meaning of fewer words than those interpretations, it nevertheless seems to stray quite far from the canons of Hebrew grammar. Most modern scholars accept the assumption of Ibn Bal'am and Ibn Ezra that Onqelos's rendering and the second half of the *Sipre's* comment are based on an ungrammatical interpretation of אֲבִד as a transitive *Qal* participle meaning 'destroyer, destroying'.²⁴

21. See Mauro Pesce, *Dio senza mediatori* (Brescia: Paideia, 1979) 123–24; S. T. Lachs, "Two Related Arameans: A Difficult Reading in the Passover Haggadah," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 17 (1986) 65–69; Dreyfus, "L'Araméen," 148–49 and Maori, תרגום הפשיטתא, and add *Midraš Psalms* 30, cited below. The claim that the masoretic accents also reflect this interpretation seems reasonable; see M. Breuer, טעמי המקרא בכ"א ספרים ובספרי אמ"ת (Jerusalem: Mikhlah, 1982) 370; S. Kogut, המקרא בין טעמים לפרשנות (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1994) 65. (I am indebted to M. Linetsky for the former reference and to J. Blau for the latter.) However, they are also compatible with the Peshitta's rendering.

22. See Louis Finkelstein, "The Oldest Midrash: Pre-Rabbinic Ideals and Teachings in the Passover Haggada," *HTR* 31 (1938) 299–300; and I. L. Seeligmann, *The Septuagint Version of Isaiah* (Leiden: Brill, 1948) 85–86. Seeligmann's argument that it equates Laban, the Aramean, with Antiochus Epiphanes, the Syrian ruler, is a great improvement over Finkelstein's geopolitical arguments, but both of these scholars ignore the genuine exegetical problems that led to the rejection of the *peshat* by exegetes of all periods. Seeligmann, for example, writes that the "sovereign contempt of the grammatical possibilities of the Hebrew text," shown by the *derasha*, "is quite unjustified by either historical or homiletic necessity."

23. As Ibn Ezra notes (cf. also Dreyfus, "L'Araméen," 159 n. 37), it is difficult to find any direct connection between Laban attempting to destroy Jacob and Jacob going down to Egypt. The search for such a connection has been a favorite pursuit of commentators on the Passover *Haggada* through the centuries. As far as I know, it has not been noted that some late rabbinic sources solve the problem by making אֲרַמִּי the subject not only of אָבַד but also of יָרַד. Thus *Tg. Ps.-J. Num.* 31:8 has Phinehas say to Balaam: "Are you not Laban the Aramean who sought to destroy Jacob our father and went down to Egypt to annihilate his offspring?" *Midr. Sekel Tob Gen.* 36:32 (cf. *Tg. Ps.-J. Num.* 22:5 and *Tg. 1 Chr.* 1:43) is similar: "In Edom, reigned Bela (בַּלְע). This is Balaam the sorcerer, who wanted to destroy (בַּלְע) the inheritance of the Lord, the offspring of his (own) daughters [= Leah and Rachel], as it is said, 'An Aramean [= Laban] wanted to destroy my father, and he went down to Egypt.' . . . And the name of the city was Dinhaba (דִּינְהָבָה). When he went down to Egypt to be an advisor to Pharaoh, he advised him to say to himself, 'Let (הִבְה) us deal shrewdly with them lest they increase.'" In other words, Laban (alias Balaam) continued his quest to destroy Jacob by going down to Egypt and joining forces with Pharaoh.

24. See, for example, Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: Beck, 1922–61) 4/2.644; Beek, "Das Problem des aramäischen Stammvaters," 194; contrast Kogut cited in n. 47 below. For a different formulation of the problem, see E. J. Revell, "Obed (Deut 26:5) and the Function of the Participle in MT," *Sefarad* 48 (1988) 197–205. It is interesting to note that, in the two interpretations reported by Yefet ben Eli (MS London 275, f. 3a–b), אָבַד is taken as intransitive, despite the fact that the "Aramean" is identified as Laban. This is accomplished by making אָבִי (= Jacob) the subject of אָבַד and turning אֲרַמִּי into a prepositional phrase: "with Laban, my father was destitute" or "at the hands of Laban (on Mt. Gilead), my father nearly perished."

According to the two Andalusians, the interpretation is ungrammatical because **א-ב-ד** in the *Qal* stem is always intransitive. But this is such an obvious defect that it can hardly have escaped the authors of the *Sipre*, who, in their own usage, carefully distinguished intransitive **אובר** (for example, **ספינה אוברת** ‘a ship perishes’)²⁵ from transitive **מאבר** (for example, **מאברים את העולם** ‘they destroy the world’).²⁶ Moreover, in *Sipre Deut.* 11:17, we find **א-ב-ד** in the *Qal* stem paraphrased by the intransitive participle **גולה** ‘going into exile’;²⁷ precisely as in Rashbam’s comment to our verse. Finally, *Sipre Numbers* contains, in two places, a question about Deut 30:3 that reveals that the rabbis were no less aware than Ibn Bal^cam and Ibn Ezra that some verbs in the *Qal* stem cannot take an object: **וכשהם חוזרים שכינה חוזרת עמהם שנאמר ושב ה' אלהיך את-שבותך . . . ורחמך והשיב לא נאמר אלא ושב . . .** ‘and when they return, the *Shekhina* will return with them, as it says, “the Lord your God will return with (את) your captivity.” What it says is not **והשיב** but **ושב**.²⁸ This *derasha* rests on the assumption that since **שב**, unlike **השיב**, is intransitive, **את** must be the preposition ‘with’ rather than the accusative marker.

Ibn Bal^cam was no stranger to rabbinic hermeneutics²⁹—indeed, he was known primarily as a halakist in his time³⁰—and yet he seems to have been genuinely puzzled by this interpretation, asking: “What necessity (*darūra*) led to the ousting of **אבר** from its true usage?” Of the many discussions of this problem since the Middle Ages, five seem worthy of note.

(1) R. Judah Loewe (Maharal) of Prague, in his defense of the midrashic interpretation, noted other cases of **א-ב-ד** in the *Qal* stem rendered by the targumists as if they were transitive: Deut 32:28, **עם מאבדי עיצא = גוי אובר עצות** ‘a people destroying counsel’, and Ps 2:12, **ותהובדון אורחא = ותאברו דרך** ‘and you shall destroy the way’.³¹ Finding these parallels was a *tour de force*, but they do not shed as much light on our *derasha* as one might suppose, because the former renders a participle with a participle and the latter renders an imperfect with an imperfect. Accordingly, they fail to explain why Onqelos did not render the participle **אבר** with a participle, for example, **בעא למהוי מובר** ‘sought to be the destroyer of’ or **בעי לאוברא** ‘was seeking to destroy’, instead of **בעא לאוברא** ‘sought to destroy’. We shall return to this point below (p. 136).

25. *Sipre Deut.*, 416, §354.

26. *Sipre Deut.*, 376, §324.

27. *Sipre Deut.*, 102, §43.

28. *Sipre Num.*, **ספרי על ספר במדבר**, (ed. H. S. Horowitz; Leipzig: Gustav Fock, 1917) 83, §84; 223, §161.

29. Joshua Blau, “Ibn Bal^cam, Judah ben Samuel,” *EncJud* 8, col. 1156.

30. M. Goshen-Gottstein (ed.), **פירוש ר' יהודה אבן בלעם לספר ישעיהו** (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1992) v.

31. R. Judah Loewe, **ספר גבורות השם** (London: Hachinuch, 1954) chap. 54, p. 237; see also **גור אריה** to Deut 26:5.

(2) R. Wolf Heidenheim, followed by R. Jacob Z. Mecklenburg, and many others,³² claimed that the rabbis did not interpret אָבַד as a *Qal* participle but rather, as the third masculine-singular perfect of a *binyan Poel*, the Hebrew counterpart³³ of the Arabic 3d form (*fā^cala*). Verbs in that *binyan* are transitive, he argued, and have the same meaning as their Arabic counterpart. Many modern Arabists believe that the 3d form has a conative sense—‘attempt to, seek to’—which could not be closer to Onqelos’s rendering with בָּעָא ל־ and the Passover *Haggada*’s paraphrase with בִּקֵּשׁ ל־. Heidenheim’s own description of the meaning of Arabic *fā^cala*—‘seek constantly to’³⁴—adds an aspectual component that is not mentioned in any of the standard Arabic handbooks and that detracts somewhat from his argument.

Heidenheim’s theory is ingenious but problematic. There is not a shred of synchronic evidence that the Hebrew *Poel* stem had a conative sense. The classical grammarians who debated the existence of this stem³⁵ never mention such a sense, nor does Gesenius, whose comparison of the Hebrew *Poel* with the Arabic *fā^cala*³⁶ appeared a few years before Heidenheim’s. Heidenheim himself made no attempt to argue that any of the standard examples of his *binyan* have that meaning. The same is true of Ewald, who applied labels like *ziel-stamm* and *suche-stamm* (alongside *angriff-stamm* and *anpacke-stamm*) to the Hebrew

32. R. Wolf Heidenheim, מודע לבניה (Rödelheim: Heidenheim, 1818–21)—the comment appears in the supercommentary on Rashi, הבנת המקרא, printed in that work; R. Jacob Z. Mecklenburg, הכתב והקבלה (Frankfurt a/M: Kauffmann, 1880); see Dreyfus, “L’Araméen,” 151 and 159 n. 39.

33. Rare except with hollow and geminate verbs.

34. “. . . [W]e also find it in the Arabic language, in which it is the third *binyan*. And according to the testimony of their linguists, its principal use is to refer to the constancy of the yearning of the agent to this action to the point where he seeks it perpetually.” I am unable to determine the source of Heidenheim’s description. The idea that the Arabic 3d form has conative meaning is generally believed to have been first proposed in G. H. A. Ewald, *Grammatica critica linguae Arabicae* (Leipzig: Hahn, 1831–33) 97; see H. Fleisch, *Les verbes à allongement vocalique interne en sémitique* (Paris: Institut d’ethnologie, 1944) 58. Fleisch (pp. 47–58) shows that it was completely unknown to the Arab grammarians and even to de Sacy, whose Arabic grammar Ewald praised (despite what he considered to be its excessive reliance on the native grammarians) in the prefaces to vols. 1 and 2 of his own book. Heidenheim could not have taken the idea from Ewald, who was only seventeen and still a student when the passage cited above was published. Indeed, it was only gradually that Ewald moved toward the view that the Arabic *fā^cala* equals the Hebrew *Poel* as a *suche-stamm*. The idea is not very clear in his *Grammatica critica linguae Arabicae*, and it is completely absent in his *Kritische Grammatik der hebräischen Sprache* (Leipzig: Hahn, 1827) 206–7. It appears fully developed in his *Ausführliches Lehrbuch der hebräischen Sprache des alten Bundes* (8th ed.; Göttingen, 1870) 331–32, §125a.

35. See the works cited by William Chomsky, *David Kimḥi’s Hebrew Grammar* (New York: Bloch, 1952) 105 n. 159, esp. Abraham de Balme, מקנה אברם (Venice, 1523) ב, טפ., which surveys the debate, and add R. Moses Qimḥi, מהלך שבילי הרעת (Venice, 1546) ב, ג.

36. W. Gesenius, *Ausführliches grammatisch-kritisches Lehrgebäude der hebräischen Sprache mit Vergleichung der verwandten Dialekte* (Leipzig: Vogel, 1817) 250–52.

Poel but ignored them when it came time to interpret individual examples.³⁷ A valiant attempt to practice what Ewald preached was made by Kautzsch, in his revision of Gesenius' grammar,³⁸ but even after excluding hollow and geminate verbs,³⁹ he was unable to impose a conative sense on more than thirty percent of the examples of *Poel* that he cited.

On the Arabic side, there are also many problems with Heidenheim's theory. According to Fleisch,⁴⁰ the only meaning for the 3d form given by Arab grammarians is *mušāraka*, implicit reciprocity.⁴¹ In the words of Sibawaihi: "Know that when you say *fā'altuhu*, there comes from someone else to you the same as what goes from you to him."⁴² Even modern scholars who hold that the 3d form is primarily conative frequently recognize reciprocity as an optional secondary component of the meaning.⁴³ And yet it is hardly likely that Onqelos meant that Jacob and Laban were attempting to destroy each other! Moreover, if the 3d form is conative at all, it is conative with respect to the 1st form, not the 2d form. Thus, if *ġālabā* really means 'attempt to overcome', as Wright says it does, it is the conative of *ġālabā* 'overcome'—not of *ġallabā* 'cause to overcome'.⁴⁴ The Arabic analogy, then, leads to the interpretation 'attempt to perish'⁴⁵ or 'attempt to perish together with', rather than 'attempt to destroy'.

(3) R. Meyuḥas b. Elijah,⁴⁶ a medieval exegete unknown to Heidenheim, was actually the first to analyze אָבַר as a *Poel* perfect: "־ִׁׂ׃׃׃׃ like ־ִׁׂ׃׃׃׃, and it is a verb in the *Poel* form, as we wrote in *Seper ha-Middôt*." The causative interpretation of the *Poel* stem, recognized by Gesenius and cited by Kogut in

37. Ewald, *Ausführliches Lehrbuch*. Ewald's view was rejected by F. E. König, *Historisch-kritisches Lehrgebäude der hebräischen Sprache* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1881) 1.202: "Und für die Uebersetzung der obigen Stellen ist die Bedeutung des Einwirkungsstammes nicht gerade nöthig."

38. GKC¹ §55. Kautzsch's attempt was judged unsuccessful by Fleisch, *Les verbes*, 19: "L'examen des significations ne révèle pas une III^e forme, un Zielstamm comme le veut Kautzsch."

39. The need for this exclusion was cited as a weakness of Ewald's theory by König, *Historisch-kritisches Lehrgebäude*: "Dieselbe Form muss nach jener Ansicht bei den Verben, deren 2. u. 3. Stammconsonant gleich ist, anders als bei dem regelmässigen Verb erklärt werden."

40. Fleisch, *Les verbes*, 47–57; idem, *Traité de philologie arabe* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1979) 2.288–90.

41. Both the 3d and the 6th forms express reciprocity or participation, that is, A and B doing something with each other. The difference is that the 3d-form verb takes A as its subject and B as its object, while the 6th-form verb takes A and B as its subject.

42. H. Derenbourg (ed.), *Le Livre de Sibawaihi* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1885–89) 2.253, lines 13–14. I have followed Fleisch (*Les verbes*, 47) in omitting the last three words of the sentence.

43. E.g., W. Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language* (3d ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896) 1.32–33, §43.

44. Ibid.

45. Compare also Ethiopic *māsana* 'perish'; Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Classical Ethiopic* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1978) 225.

46. R. Meyuḥas ben Elijah, פירוש על ספר דברים (ed. M. Katz; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1968) 159.

connection with our problem,⁴⁷ is certainly easier to defend than the conative interpretation. The possibility that Onqelos and the *Sipre* interpreted אֹכֵר on the analogy of causatives like קִוְּמֵם and יִרְדְּעֵתִי (1 Sam 21:3) cannot be ruled out, but I still do not find this explanation convincing.

(4) A. B. Ehrlich⁴⁸ conjectured that Onqelos did not simply interpret our verb as being equivalent to the *Piel* perfect אָכַר but actually read it that way. It is difficult to evaluate this claim in the absence of ancient manuscripts of Onqelos. Some manuscripts lead us to believe that Onqelos would have rendered a *Piel* form of א-כ-ד with an Aramaic *Paal* (לְאַכְרָא; see Onqelos to Deut 12:2) rather than an *Apel* (לְאַרְכְּרָא), but other, less consistent manuscripts do not.

Evidence for Ehrlich's hypothesis might be adduced from the traditional Samaritan reading of the word as a *Pi/ael* perfect, *abbad*,⁴⁹ and from the *Sipre*'s paraphrase of אֹכֵר with אִיכְר in our verse, but a comparison with Deut 32:28 shows how misleading this evidence is. There, too, the Samaritan tradition has *abbad*⁵⁰ and the *Sipre* paraphrases אֹכֵר with a *Piel* perfect,⁵¹ and yet this evidence hardly shows that the rendering מְאַכְרִי in Onqelos reflects a variant reading tradition.

(5) L. Finkelstein's claim that the compiler of the midrash in the Passover *Haggada* read אִיכְר⁵² sounds the same as Ehrlich's, but he may have been referring to a midrashic revocalization rather than a variant reading tradition. However, neither the *Sipre* nor the other versions of the midrash contains statements like אֵל תִּקְרִי אֹכֵר אֵלָּא אִיכְר⁵³ or כְּתִיב אִיכְר,⁵⁴ which would signal such a revocalization. Nor do any of the traditional commentators interpret the midrash that way. Indeed, *Hadar Zeqenim* asks a question (אִיכְר הִיָּה לוֹ לִוְמָר)⁵⁵ that presupposes the opposite view. And the version of the midrash in the *Leqah Tob* has אִיכְר instead of אִיכְרִי.

47. Kogut, *המקרא*, 65. He too does not mention *Meyuḥas*.

48. A. B. Ehrlich, *מקרא כפשוטו* (Berlin: Poppelauer, 1899) 360.

49. Cited according to the transcription of Z. Ben-Hayyim, *עברית וארמית נוסח שומרון* (Jerusalem: Academy of the Hebrew Language, 1961) 3/1.142; Dreyfus, "L'araméen," 150; cf. also Pesce, *Dio senza mediatori*, 127 n. 84.

50. Ben-Hayyim, *Hebrew and Aramaic*, 160.

51. *Sipre Deut.*, p. 372, §322: אִיכְר יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲצָה טוֹבָה.

52. Finkelstein, "The Oldest Midrash," 300.

53. For examples of this type of *derasha* in the *Sipre*, see Samuel Waldberg, *דרכי השינויים* (Lemberg: Menkes, 1870) 44a–b. For examples in rabbinic literature that alter the *binyan* of a verb, see *ibid.*, 32b (*b. Šabb.* 114a, 119b), 34b (*b. Roš Haš.* 3a), 36b (*b. Soṭa* 10a), 37a (*b. Soṭa* 38b, *b. Qidd.* 9a [bis]), 37b (*b. B. Qam.* 10b), 39a (*b. Sanh.* 54b, 89a), 47a (*Gen. Rab.* §19). C. Milikowsky (personal communication) points out additional examples in *b. Sukk.* 52a (יִשְׁלָמְךָ-יִשְׁלָמְךָ), *b. Meg.* 28a (יִשְׁלָמְךָ-יִשְׁלָמְךָ), *b. B. Qam.* 10b (יִשְׁלָמְךָ-יִשְׁלָמְךָ).

54. For examples of this type of *derasha* in the Talmud that alter the *binyan* of a verb, see *b. B. Qam.* 36a (*b. Ketub.* 69b), 37b (*b. Qidd.* 59b), 39b (*b. Mak.* 7b).

55. See Jacob Gellis, *תוספות השלם: הגדה של פסח* (Jerusalem: Tosafot Hashalem, 1989) 61, §11.

A New Solution

I propose a new solution: that the rabbis interpreted the word אֹכֵר as though it were Aramaic.⁵⁶ In Aramaic, אֹכֵר is not a *Qal* participle with the meaning ‘perishing, wandering’ but rather, a third masculine-singular *ʔApel* perfect with the meaning ‘he destroyed’.⁵⁷ The initial א of the form is the marker of the *binyan* rather than the first radical; and the following *ō* is a reflex not of **ā* but of **aw*,⁵⁸ the root having been transferred from the initial-*ʔalep* class to the initial-*waw* class.⁵⁹ The *ʔApel* of this verb occurs, in fact, in Onqelos’s rendering לבן ארמאה בעא לאוכרא ית אבא; indeed, were it not for the insertion of בעא (compare בקש in the Passover *Haggada*), Onqelos’s rendering would have been אֹכֵר ‘he destroyed’, and there would never have been any question about the source of the *derasha*.

It should be noted that the proposed solution accounts not only for the targum’s choice of *binyan* but also for the tense that it and the *Sipre* use. The interpretation of אֹכֵר as a past-tense verb was of crucial importance for the *Sipre*, since it is only this tense that would justify its underlying assumption that our verse presents Laban’s intention to kill Jacob (at Mt. Gilead, according to Rashi) as though it had been realized.⁶⁰

A clear example of a *derasha*’s equating intention with deed based on a past-tense verb is found in *Mek. Exod. 12.28*, “‘And they did’ (ויעשו)—Did they (really) do (it) already (at this point)? (No), but as soon as they accepted the obligation to do (it), (Scripture) accounts it to them as though they had done (it)’. That the *derasha* on Deut 26:5 had a similar basis is clear from the similarity between the passage in the *Mekilta* and the following passage from

56. For the possibility of another bilingual pun underlying the rabbinic understanding of our verse (אֹכֵר interpreted as a Greek word), see David Berger, “Three Typological Themes in Early Jewish Messianism: Messiah Son of Joseph, Rabbinic Calculations, and the Figure of Armilus,” *AJS Review* 10 (1985) 161–62 n. 77.

57. Cf. y. *Qidd.* 3:12 64c, וְאוֹכֵרְתָא חַיִּין דְּהוּרָא גְבֵרָא, ‘and you destroyed the life of “that man”’. The form אֹכֵר can also be a first-person singular *ʔApel* imperfect with the meaning ‘I will destroy’, as in *Tg. Onq. Lev.* 23:30. In Jewish dialects of Aramaic, the first syllable of these forms is *ʔō* rather than *ʔaw*.

58. It goes without saying that the rabbis did not consider the defective spelling of the *ō* in biblical אֹכֵר an obstacle to interpreting it as derived from **aw*; compare the midrashic interpretation of biblical תֹּר ‘turtledove’ as ‘ox’ (< **tawr*), cited below.

59. Cf. G. Dalman, *Grammatik des jüdisch-palästinischen Aramäisch* (2d ed.; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1905) 298, 302; T. Nöldeke, *Compendious Syriac Grammar* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1904) 118, §174E.

60. I owe this insight to S. Friedman (personal communication), who compares the midrash in y. *Peʿa* I, 1 16b on Obad 9–10: מְחַמֵּס אֶחָיִךְ יַעֲקֹב: ‘Did he (really) kill him? (No), rather it teaches that he (= Esau) planned to kill him (= Jacob), and Scripture accounted it to him as if he had killed him’. Cf. also A. M. Silberman, *Chumash with Targum Onqelos, Haptharoth and Rashi’s Commentary* (London: Shapiro Valentine, 1934) 5.125.

Midraš Psalms 30:⁶¹ “R. Nehemiah says: ‘If an idolater planned to transgress, even though he did not do it, the Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He counts it as if he had done it, for so it says: “The Aramean destroyed my father.” Where did Laban destroy Jacob?⁶² (Nowhere), but since he planned to do it, Scripture accounts it to him as though he had done (it).’”

It is perhaps not fortuitous that the rabbis chose to read this particular verb as Aramaic; after all, it describes an activity of an אַרְמִי ‘Aramean’. The Bible has a tendency to use Aramaisms in stories about Laban and other Arameans and in dialogue involving them.⁶³ An Aramaizing reading of אַבְד אַבִּי would be nothing more than an extension of this tendency to the midrashic realm.

As a matter of fact, forms not unlike the Aramaic *ʾApel* of א-ב-ד are attested in dialectal contexts in the Bible. In Isa 63:3, in a passage about Edom, we find a causative with prefixed -א instead of -ה: אַגְאֲלְתִּי. In Hos 11:4, the form אַוְכִיל is, according to Rabin,⁶⁴ an example of Aramaic influence on the Hebrew of the Northern Kingdom: an initial-*ʾalep* verb treated as initial-*waw* in the H^P-stem. It is precisely these two features which characterize the midrashic analysis of אַבְד as an Aramaic causative.

This would not be the only word in Deuteronomy identified as Aramaic by the *Sipre*. *Sipre Deut.* 33:2 tells us that the phrase וְאַתָּה מֵרַבְּבַת קִדְשׁ is Aramaic, presumably on account of the word אַתָּה “come”⁶⁵ and then proceeds to give the word a second Aramaic interpretation on the midrashic level.⁶⁶ The latter takes אַתָּה as the Aramaic cognate of Hebrew אוֹת ‘sign’—a noun in the emphatic state instead of a verb.⁶⁷

61. Quoted here according to the Warsaw edition, p. 82a. Compare also Rashi’s comment to Deut 26:5, which contains an interpolation based on this passage.

62. Buber’s edition reads: ‘Did Laban (really) destroy Jacob?’

63. See A. Hurvitz, “The Chronological Significance of ‘Aramaisms’ in Biblical Hebrew,” *IEJ* 18 (1968) 236–37 and the works by Baumgartner and Kutschler cited there in n. 14; J. C. Greenfield, “Aramaic Studies and the Bible,” in *Congress Volume: Vienna, 1980* (VTSup 32; ed. J. A. Emerton; Leiden: Brill, 1981) 129–30; S. A. Kaufman, “The Classification of the North West Semitic Dialects of the Biblical Period and Some Implications Thereof,” in *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, vol. 2: *Panel Sessions—Hebrew and Aramaic Languages* (ed. M. Bar-Asher; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988) 55; A. Hurvitz, ‘אַרְמַיִזְמִים: סוּגֵיית הַמְקָרָא: עֵבְרִית וְאַרְמִית בְּתִקְוַת הַמְקָרָא: עֵבְרִית וְאַרְמִית בְּתִקְוַת הַמְקָרָא’, in *מַחְקָרִים בְּלְשׁוֹן הָעִבְרִית וּבְלְשׁוֹנוֹת הַיְהוּדִים מוֹגְשִׁים לְשִׁלְמָה מוֹרֵג*, in *מַחְקָר הָעִבְרִית הַמְקָרָאית*” (ed. M. Bar-Asher; Jerusalem: Bialik, 1996) 87. Examples involving Laban include Gen 30:34, הֵן ‘yes’ rather than ‘behold’; 31:16, הִצִּיל ‘took back’ rather than ‘rescued’; 31:28 נָטַשְׁתָּ ‘you allowed’ rather than ‘you abandoned’ (as though Laban were mistranslating שָׁבַקְתָּ); and, of course, 31:47, גַּר שֶׁהָרֹתָּא.

64. C. Rabin, “לְשׁוֹנֵם שֶׁל עַמּוּם וְהוֹשֵׁעַ,” in *עֵינױנִים בְּסִפְרֵי תְּרִי-עֶשֶׂר* (ed. B. Z. Lurie; Jerusalem: Kiryat-Sepher, 1981) 125.

65. *Sipre Deut.*, p. 395, §343.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 398.

67. The word is attested in Dan 3:32, 33; 6:28; it has the expected *ā* corresponding to Hebrew *ō*. In Galilean Aramaic, the emphatic ending is normally written with *h*.

There are, in fact, any number of midrashic Aramaisms scattered throughout rabbinic literature, without any special Aramean context to trigger them.⁶⁸ Occasionally, the interlingual⁶⁹ nature of the exegesis is acknowledged, as in the rabbinic interpretations of (1) Exod 12:4, תכסר, as ‘you shall slaughter’ instead of ‘you shall apportion’;⁷⁰ (2) Gen 15:9, תר, as ‘ox’ instead of ‘turtle-dove’;⁷¹ (3) Hos 8:10, יתנו, as ‘they recite’ instead of ‘they offer a harlot’s wage’;⁷² and (4) Ps 136:13, לגורים, as ‘for the circumcised’ instead of ‘to pieces’.⁷³ In each of these *derashot*, there is an explicit reference to Aramaic (לשון ארמי/ארמית/סורסי).⁷⁴

The *derashot* considered here are part and parcel of the overall exegetical program of the rabbis, who were determined to ferret out every imaginable type of ambiguity in the biblical text: lexical and syntactic, homophonic and homographic,⁷⁵ synchronic and diachronic,⁷⁶ intralingual and interlingual. For them, each *derasha* was quite literally a “search”—a search for new manifestations of the omniscience of Scripture.

68. For a small collection, see L. Zunz, *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden historisch entwickelt* (Frankfurt: Kauffmann, 1892) 339 note *h*. See also R. C. Steiner, ‘המלים מואה ומאתיך’, *Tarbiz* 65 (1996) 33–37. We are speaking here about wordplays, that is, intentional deviations from *peshat*. It goes without saying that the interpretation of Hebrew words based on the uncritical use of Aramaic homophones sometimes resulted in unintentional deviations from *peshat*. A well-known example of this type is the mistranslation of ‘Moab is my hope’ instead of ‘Moab is my washbasin’ in LXX to Ps 60[59]:10 and 108[107]:10. For this and other examples, see J. Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) 54–55 and the references cited there.

69. For a discussion of the interaction of Aramaic and Hebrew in rabbinic texts, see Daniel Boyarin, “Bilingualism and Meaning in Rabbinic Literature: An Example,” in *Fucus: A Semitic/Afrasian Gathering in Remembrance of Albert Ehrman* (ed. Y. L. Arbeitman; Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1987) 141–52. For the theological and historical background of the interlingual *derasha* and additional examples, see J. Fraenkel, *דרכי האגדה והמדרש* (Tel-Aviv: Modan, 1996) 115–18, and the literature cited there.

70. *Mekilta*, *Pisha* 3.

71. פרקי דרבי אליעזר, מהדורה מדעית (Jerusalem: Makor, 1972) 28a, 93.

72. *b. B. Bat.* 8a. I am indebted to S. Abramson ז”ל for this example.

73. *Tanḥuma Buber*, *Bešallah* §12.

74. Unfortunately, none of these *derashot* involves Hebrew verbal forms with morphologically different Aramaic verbal homophones. The first explicit discussion of this type of interlingual homophony (e.g., שְׁלַח: Hebrew imperative but Aramaic perfect; אָמַר, יָדַע: Hebrew perfects but Aramaic participles) comes in the eleventh century, in *al-Kitāb al-Muštamil* of Abū l-Farāj Hārūn, but awareness of the phenomenon can be detected earlier, in *Kitāb jāmi‘ al-Alfāz* of David ben Abraham al-Fāsi and in the *Masorah parva* of *Codex Leningrad* B19a to 2 Sam 24:10; see Aharon Maman, *השוואת אוצר המלים של העברית לערבית ולארמית למן רס”ג ועד אבן ברון* (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 1984) 107, 240; A. Dotan, “De la Massora à la grammaire: Les débuts de la pensée grammaticale dans l’hébreu,” *JA* 278 (1990) 23.

75. That is, the orthographic ambiguities inherent in the unpointed consonantal skeleton of the Masoretic Text. The most common are *derashot* substituting one vowel for another and ש for שׁ.

76. That is, *derashot* based on Mishnaic Hebrew usage.

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