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 רָמִי אָבֵר אֱלֹהִים at the beginning of the declaration of the first-fruits (Deut 26:5) have puzzled exegetes since ancient times. Who is the אֱלֹהִים ‘Aramean’, and who is אָבֵר ‘my father’? What is the meaning of רָמִי? 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 רָמִי אָבֵר אֱלֹהִים that is today considered its plain sense (אָבֵר = subject; רָמִי אֱלֹהִים = 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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Rashbam (12th century), but, in fact, it was proposed a generation earlier by R. Judah Ibn Bal'am. In his commentary to Hos 12:13, 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 Qimhi (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 (dbwél) . . . , let him drink and forget his poverty (wvyr),” as evidence that dba could be used in the sense of ‘destitute’ 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, on the other hand, identified the ‘father’ with Abraham, taking our phrase to mean ‘a wandering (= emigrant) Aramean was my father’ on the
The “Aramean” of Deuteronomy 26:5: Peshat and Derash

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

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 Σωρίαν ἀπεβαλεν ὁ πατήρ μου ’my father abandoned Syria’ (LXX) and שְׂבַכֶּם ’my father was taken to Aram’ (Peshitta), featuring references to migration based more on the meaning of ורדת and he went down to Egypt8 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 יַבְדָע or יִבְדָע. According to Mendelssohn’s Biur, יִבְדָע refers to Abraham and Jacob together, since “all the patriarchs together were called יִבְדָע, on account of their being . . . the root of the family and the nation.”11 We may add that the generic use of the singular is well attested in the Bible,12 and examples of יִבְדָע 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 15:2.13

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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).”


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


12. Moses Mendelssohn, מִלְּלֵי הַשָּׁמֵשׁ (Berlin: Heinemann, 1833) 5.143.


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

S. D. Luzzatto\textsuperscript{15} expanded the referent of אָבִּי 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 אָבִּי 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 émigrés or fugitives\textsuperscript{16} from Aram, and all of them went down to Egypt rather than perish from hunger.\textsuperscript{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 אָבִּי makes the aforementioned solution more compelling.

\textit{Derash}

Onqelos translates ארִמְי אָבִּי אֵילֵי in accordance with a very widespread derashah: לָבָן הָאָרָמִי וַתְּמָצֵּא מָארֶב יָכֹל אָבִּי ‘Laban the Aramean sought to destroy my father (= Jacob).’ The second half\textsuperscript{18} of the following comment in Sipre Deut. 26:5 gives the same interpretation: אָרִמְי אוֹרֵב מַלְכּוּ שְׁלָא רוֹד אָבִּי. It teaches that our father Jacob went down to Aram for no other purpose than to perish, and (nevertheless,?) (Scripture) accounts it to Laban the Aramean as though he destroyed him.\textsuperscript{20} Many other targumim and midrashim, as well as the Passover

\textsuperscript{15} S. D. Luzzatto, \textit{hrwt yçcw j hçmj lòòdç çwryp} (ed. P. Schlesinger; Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1965) 550.
\textsuperscript{16} See n. 6 above, and the works cited there, esp. Millard, “Wandering Aramean,” 155. The verb ‘בָּלֵא’ is used four times in the story of Jacob’s departure from Aram with his family (Gen 31:20–22, 27).
\textsuperscript{17} See n. 3 above, and Gen 42:2, 43:8.
\textsuperscript{18} Maori (\textit{atfyçph μwgrt}, 178) accepts the claim of A. Geiger, D. Z. Hoffmann, and D. Goldschmidt that the \textit{peshat} interpretation is implicit already in the first half of the Sipre's comment; Dreyfus (“L’Araméen,” 149, 153, 157 n. 16) rejects it.
\textsuperscript{19} This is a \textit{qal} infinitive on the analogy of the imperfect (ארִמְי), as usual in Mishnaic Hebrew and, mutatis mutandis, Galilean Aramaic. Another initial-\textit{aleph} infinitive with this spelling variation is found in a reliable manuscript of the Mishna; see Gideon Haneman, \textit{יאכֶלהוּאכֶל} (Tel-Aviv: Tel-Aviv University, 1980) 228. Cf. already /wlkwy/wlkawy in the Temple Scroll.
\textsuperscript{20} Sipre Deut., \textit{μyrbd rps l[yrps} (ed. L. Finkelstein; Berlin: Jüdischer Kulturbund in Deutschland, 1939) 319, §301. In \textit{פֶּסֶר} (2 vols.; Berlin: Itskovski, 1909) 172 n. 5, D. Z. Hoffmann claims that the words מֵלֶת הָאָרֶבֶת מַלְכּוּ are a later addition to the Sipre, but S. Friedman (personal communication) rejects this claim.
Haggada, reflect this interpretation, 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 אבר 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, אבראמסנסרטאות; and add Midrash Psalms 30, cited below. The claim that the masoretic accents also reflect this interpretation seems reasonable; see M. Breuer, תמן וירבג אבראמסנסר (Jerusalem: Mikhala, 1982) 370; S. Kogut, מער וירבג אבראמסנסר (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. Seeligman'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 Haggadah through the centuries. As far as I know, it has not been noted that some late rabbinic sources solve the problem by making בלאן the subject not only of בלאה but also of בלאה. 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 (בלא).... And the name of the city was Dinhaba (דנבה).... When he went down to Egypt to be an advisor to Pharaoh, he advised him to say to himself, 'Let (דנבה) 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), בר is taken as intransitive, despite the fact that the "Aramean" is identified as Laban. This is accomplished by making בלאה (Jacob) the subject of בלאה and turning בלאה 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 'a ship perishes' from transitive (for example, מדרים את הולך 'they destroy the world'). Moreover, in *Sipre Deut.* 11:17, we find רבד in the *Qal* stem paraphrased by the intransitive participle עלה 'going into exile', 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'am and Ibn Ezra that some verbs in the *Qal* stem cannot take an object: והשמת חורום שכנון וחורום עתה נתמך עשה / אלאורי ואשbrates ... '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 ישב but עשה. This derasha rests on the assumption that since ישב, unlike ישב, is intransitive, את must be the preposition 'with' rather than the accusative marker.

Ibn Bal'am was no stranger to rabbinic hermeneutics—and indeed, he was known primarily as a halakist in his time—and yet he seems to have been genuinely puzzled by this interpretation, asking: “What necessity (דריעה) led to the ousting of רבד 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 רבד in the *Qal* stem rendered by the targumists as if they were transitive: Deut 32:28, עכマרא.setDate no ניר אוסף אוות = ניר אוסף אוות 'a people destroying counsel', and Ps 2:12, והובחון אוואת = אוואת דרכ 'and you shall destroy the way'. 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 רבד with a participle, for example, ב לפעולהمدכ 'sought to be the destroyer of' or בפעולהמדכ 'was seeking to destroy', instead of בפעולהמדכ 'sought to destroy'. We shall return to this point below (p. 136).

27. *Sipre Deut.*, 102, §43.
(2) R. Wolf Heidenheim, followed by R. Jacob Z. Mecklenburg, and many otheres,32 claimed that the rabbis did not interpret רֶבֶן as a Qal participle but rather, as the third masculine-singular perfect of a binyan Poel, the Hebrew counterpart33 of the Arabic 3d form (fāʿala). 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 בַּאֲשֵׁר and the Passover Haggada's paraphrase with בַּאֲשְׁר. Heidenheim's own description of the meaning of Arabic fāʿala—'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 fāʿala36 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, מדריךlemen (Rödelheim: Heidenheim, 1818–21)—the comment appears in the supercommentary on Rashi, הִדָּרָה, printed in that work; R. Jacob Z. Mecklenburg, הִדָּרָה יִבְּרָה (Frankfurt a/M: Kaufmann, 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 fāʿala 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 Kimhi's Hebrew Grammar (New York: Bloch, 1952) 105 n. 159, esp. Abraham de Balmes, מָהַד אָבָם (Venice, 1523) ב. מָּשָׁרְה, which surveys the debate, and add R. Moses Qimhi, מִלְּחַקָּל בְּשֵׁלֶל הָדוּשָׁה (Venice, 1546) ו. מָּשָׁרְה.

Poel but ignored them when it came time to interpret individual examples. A valiant attempt to practice what Ewald preached was made by Kautzsch, in his revision of Gesenius’ grammar, but even after excluding hollow and geminate verbs, 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, the only meaning for the 3d form given by Arab grammarians is mušāraka, implicit reciprocity. 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.” Even modern scholars who hold that the 3d form is primarily conative frequently recognize reciprocity as an optional secondary component of the meaning. 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 ǧalaba really means ‘attempt to overcome’, as Wright says it does, it is the conative of ǧalaba ‘overcome’—not of ǧallaba ‘cause to overcome’. The Arabic analogy, then, leads to the interpretation ‘attempt to perish together with’, rather than ‘attempt to destroy’.

(3) R. Meyuhas b. Elijah, a medieval exegete unknown to Heidenheim, was actually the first to analyze as a Poel perfect: “ʿObēd like ʿḥbēd, and it is a verb in the Poel form, as we wrote in Seper ha-Middōt.” 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 nötig.”

38. GKC §55. Kautzsch’s attempt was judged unsuccessful by Fleisch, Les verbes, 19: “L’examen des significations ne révèle pas une IIIe 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: “Diese Form muss nach jener Ansicht bei den Verben, deren 2. u. 3. Stammkonsonant 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.


44. Ibid.


connection with our problem, connection with our problem, connection with our problem, connection with our problem. The possibility that Onqelos and the Sipre interpreted ἀράμειον on the analogy of causatives like ἴησσον and δέξονται (1 Sam 21:3) cannot be ruled out, but I still do not find this explanation convincing.

(4) A. B. Ehrlich conjectured that Onqelos did not simply interpret our verb as being equivalent to the Piel perfect ἄπλω, 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 ἄπλω with an Aramaic Pael (אַפֶל; see Onqelos to Deut 12:2) rather than an אַפֶל (אַפֶל), 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, ἄβδη, and from the Sipre’s paraphrase of ἀράμειον with an Aramaic Pael in our verse, but a comparison with Deut 32:28 shows how misleading this evidence is. There, too, the Samaritan tradition has ἄβδη and the Sipre paraphrases of ἀράμειον with a Piel perfect, and yet this evidence hardly shows that the rendering ἄπλω in Onqelos reflects a variant reading tradition.

(5) L. Finkelstein’s claim that the compiler of the midrash in the Passover Haggada reads ἄραβ as אַרְפֶל 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 תַּחַיָּא אֵלֶּבֶר אֲלָמַס אָלַב or תַּחַיָּא אֵלֶּבֶר אֲלָמַס, which would signal such a revocalization. Nor do any of the traditional commentators interpret the midrash that way. Indeed, Hadar Zeqenim asks a question (אֲלָמַס אֲלָמַס) that presupposes the opposite view. And the version of the midrash in the Legah Tob has אֲלָמַס instead of אֲלָמַס.

47. Kogut, ἡμᾶς, 65. He too does not mention Meyuḥas.
49. Cited according to the transcription of Z. Ben-Hayyim, נֵבֶכי וּנְפָה נַשְּׁה שְׁמוֹנָה (Jerusalem: Academy of the Hebrew Language, 1961) 3/1.142; Dreyfus, “L’araméen.” 150; cf. also Pesce, Dio senza mediatori, 127 n. 84.
53. For examples of this type of derasha in the Sipre, see Samuel Waldberg, ὁποῖς ἀνθρώποι (Lemberg: Menkes, 1870) 44a–b. For examples in rabbinic literature that alter the binyan of a verb, see ibid., 32b (b. Shabb. 114a, 119b), 34b (b. Roš Haš. 3a), 36b (b. Soṭa 10a), 37a (b. Soṭa 38b, b. Qidd. 9a [bii]), 37b (b. B. Qam. 10b), 39a (b. Sanh. 54b, 89a), 47a (Gen. Rab. §19). C. Milderowsky (personal communication) points out additional examples in b. Sukk. 52a (יַעֲלָה-שלָ פָּסָר), b. Meg. 28a (מעשָּה-מְשָּעָר), b. B. Qam. 10b (יַעֲלָה-שְׁלָמָה), b. Ketub. 36a (יוֹסָרַת-יַעֲלָה יָרָבֵר).
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, סְפָר הָעֶדֶּשׁ הַדָּרֶשָה (Jerusalem: Tosafot Hashalem, 1989) 61. §11.
I propose a new solution: that the rabbis interpreted the word אבר as though it were Aramaic. In Aramaic, אבר is not a Qal participle with the meaning 'perishing, wandering' but rather, a third masculine-singular 'Apel perfect with the meaning 'he destroyed'. The initial א of the form is the marker of the binyan rather than the first radical; and the following א is a reflex not of *א but of *א, the root having been transferred from the initial-'alep class to the initial-ו class. The 'Apel of this verb occurs, in fact, in Onqeloos's rendering, indeed, were it not for the insertion of א (compare in the Passover Haggada), Onqeloos's rendering would have been '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 אבר 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.

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" (ר SetValue='31' format='text')—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 (אבר 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 Armîlus," AJS Review 10 (1985) 161–62 n. 77.

57. Cf. y. Qidd. 3:12 64c, וה爾ח את חרובו והים נבר, 'and you destroyed the life of "that man"'. The form אבר can also be a first-person singular 'Apel 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 'א rather than 'ו.

58. It goes without saying that the rabbis did not consider the defective spelling of the א in biblical אבר an obstacle to interpreting it as derived from *א; compare the midrashic interpretation of biblical 'א תטרדוה' as 'ox' (< *אTau), cited below.


60. I owe this insight to S. Friedman (personal communication), who compares the midrash in y. Pea I.1 16b on Obad 9–10: קִבֵּל הַשָּׁמוֹשׁ וַתִּגְּדֵה אֱלֹהִים אֶל יִשְׂרָאֵל. 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, Haftaroth and Rashi's Commentary (London: Shapiro Valentine, 1934) 5.125.
The “Aramean” of Deuteronomy 26:5: Peshat and Derash

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?’ (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 *ymra ‘Aramean’. The Bible has a tendency to use Aramaisms in stories about Laban and other Arameans and in dialogue involving them. An Aramaizing reading of *dbEaO would be nothing more than an extension of this tendency to the midrashic realm.

As a matter of fact, forms not unlike the Aramaic *Åpel of -d- are attested in dialectal contexts in the Bible. In Isa 63:3, in a passage about Edom, we find a causative with prefixed -n instead of -l: אָלָלְךּ. In Hos 11:4, the form אָלָלךּ, according to Rabin, is, an example of Aramaic influence on the Hebrew of the Northern Kingdom: an initial-aleph verb treated as initial-waw in the Hé-stem. It is precisely these two features which characterize the midrashic analysis of *dbEaO 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 ראה מרקובת קרש is Aramaic, presumably on account of the word הָתַח “come” and then proceeds to give the word a second Aramaic interpretation on the midrashic level. The latter takes הָתַח as the Aramaic cognate of Hebrew יְתָה ‘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?’


64. C. Rabin, “The word is attested in Dan 3:32, 33; 6:28; it has the expected א corresponding to Hebrew א. In Galilean Aramaic, the emphatic ending is normally written with ה.”
There are, in fact, any number of midrashic Aramaisms scattered throughout rabbinic literature, without any special Aramean context to trigger them. Occasionally, the interlingual nature of the exegesis is acknowledged, as in the rabbinic interpretations of (1) Exod 12:4, וְשָׁלָה as ‘you shall slaughter’ instead of ‘you shall apportion’; (2) Gen 15:9, וְזַרֶה as ‘ox’ instead of ‘turtledove’; (3) Hos 8:10, וְנָשַׁבְתָּ as ‘they recite’ instead of ‘they offer a harlot’s wage’; and (4) Ps 136:13, וְגִלַּגְלַג as ‘for the circumcised’ instead of ‘to pieces’.

In each of these derashot, there is an explicit reference to Aramaic (יִשְׁמַר). 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, homophonical and homographic, synchronic and diachronic, intralingual and interlingual. For them, each derasha was quite literally a “search”—a search for new manifestations of the omnisignificance of Scripture.

68. For a small collection, see L. Zunz, Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden historisch entwickelt (Frankfurt: Kauffman, 1892) 339 note h. See also R. C. Steiner, Le zikron. 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 פָּשַׁת as ‘Moab, the basin of 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. Artziman; Amsterdam: Benjamin, 1987) 141–52. For the theological and historical background of the interlingual derasha and additional examples, see J. Fraenkel, יִשְׁמַר (Tel-Aviv: Modan, 1996) 115–18, and the literature cited there.

70. Mekidta, Pesha 3.
71. ב. ב. ב. 8a. I am indebted to S. Abramson for this example.
72. Tanhuma Baber, Bekolalah §12.
73. 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 (יִשְׁמַר) comes in the eleventh century, in al-Kitāb al-Mustamil of Abū l-Farāj Hārūn, but awareness of the phenomenon can be detected earlier, in Kītāb jāmi’ al-Alfāz of David ben Abraham al-Fāṣi and in the Masorah parva of Codex Leningrad B19a to 2 Sam 24:10; see Aharon Maman, הֶכֹּל מִלָּהּ לְכִפָּרִים (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.
74. 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 כ for כ. That is, derashot based on Mishnaic Hebrew usage.
Tehillah le-Moshe

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