

# BIBLICAL INTERPRETATIONS BASED ON PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF HEBREW LETTERS

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## INTRODUCTION

In this article we will examine a few examples of Biblical interpretation based on the physical characteristics of the appearance of the Hebrew letters involved. Most examples involve occurrences of anomalous orthography found in the Masoretic Text, such as letters of unusual size or two words written as one long word. However this method was applied to standard orthography as well.

While this manner of interpretation is very rare, it is grounded in a certain type of traditional homiletic exegesis. TB *Shabbat* 104a contains a long teaching involving homiletic interpretations of the forms of the Hebrew letters. “The Rabbis told R. Joshua b. Levi: Children have come to the house of study and said things the like of which was not said even in the days of Joshua the son of Nun...*gimmel dalet*, show kindness to the poor [*gemol dallim*]. Why is the foot of the *gimmel* stretched toward the *dalet*? Because it is fitting for the benevolent to run after [seek out] the poor. And why is the roof of the *dalet* stretched out toward the *gimmel*? Because he [the poor] must make himself available to him. And why is the face of the *dalet* turned away from the *gimmel*? Because he must give him [help] in secret, lest he be ashamed of him...” The teaching includes homiletic interpretations of the forms of a number of the Hebrew letters.

In this article we will focus on the classic commentaries, from the Talmud, midrash and Sages of the early Medieval Period.

## GENESIS 1:1 BEREISHIT

The most well known example of this type of teaching is found in *Genesis Rabbah* 1:10, “R. Yona in the name of R. Levi said: Why was the world created with the letter *bet*? Just as the *bet* is closed on all of its sides and opened in the front, so too you do not have permission to say, what is below, what is

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above, what is before, and what is after.” These are the areas of inquiry forbidden in Mishna *Chaggiga* 2:1, “Anyone who looks into four things would be better off if he had not come into this world: what is above, what is below, what is before, and what is after.” This teaching of R. Yona in the name of R. Levi also appears in TJ *Chaggiga* 2:1 and in *Pesikta Rabbati* 21, with slightly different wording. It is explicit that the teaching here is directly connected to the physical characteristics of the letter *bet*.

#### ESTHER 9:9 VAIZATA

Esther 9 gives a list of the ten sons of Haman, killed by Jews on the thirteenth of Adar. The first letter (*vav*) of the name of the last son on the list, Vaizata, is written oversized in scrolls today. This unusual way of writing his name is already noted in the Talmud, the only case of an unusually sized letter mentioned in the entire Talmud. TB *Megilla* 16b states: “R. Yochanan said: The *vav* of Vaizata must be lengthened like a boat-pole of the river Libruth. What is the reason? Because they were all strung on one pole.”<sup>1</sup>

The meaning of the teaching of R. Yochanan is not exactly clear. Some have interpreted the lengthening of the *vav* in terms of extending its pronunciation, others as making it longer and bigger than a standard *vav*. While both approaches are noted parenthetically in the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chayyim* 691:4), the more widespread interpretation is that it refers to the oversized writing of the letter.<sup>2</sup> A third approach is found in the Talmud commentaries of the Medieval Spanish sages Rabenu Nissim and Ritva. They both explain that the letter *vav* here should be written stretched out, meaning that it does not have the small overhanging head on top, but is instead written as a straight line.<sup>3</sup> This may also be the approach of Rashi, who explains that the *vav* should look like a “forche”, an Old French word, here apparently referring to the long straight handle of a pitchfork.<sup>4</sup>

How does a lengthened or straightened out *vav* indicate that “they were all strung on one pole”? The eleventh century sage Toviah ben Eliezer, in his work *Midrash Lekach Tov* explains that the reference is to Ezra 6:11 where the punishment for disobeying the decree of the Persian king is to have *a beam removed from his house, and he shall be impaled on it*. The unusually written *vav* is meant to represent the beam that the sons of Haman were all hanged on. This interpretation is not explicit in the Talmud, Rashi, Ritva or

Rabbenu Nissim, but it is reasonable that the simple understanding of their statements is that the long or stretched out *vav* graphically represents the large beam that they were all “strung on”.<sup>5</sup>

#### NEHEMIAH 2:13 BREACHED WALLS

The first half of the Book of Nehemiah is concerned with the building of the walls of Jerusalem which were destroyed by the Babylonians. When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem and performs a nocturnal inspection of the walls, we are told, *I surveyed the walls of Jerusalem that were breached, and its gates, consumed by fire* (Neh. 2:13). There is an orthographic anomaly in this verse, where the Hebrew words *hem prutzim* (*that were breached*), contain an open letter *mem* at the end of the word *hem*, rather than the final *mem*, always used when a *mem* is the last letter of a word. There is no other example in the Bible of a regular letter *mem* being used instead of its final form as the last letter of a word.<sup>6</sup>

Although as written the word appears to be *hemprutzim*, one word, it is read as two words, *hem prutzim*. It is an example of *kri u'ktiv*, when a word is read one way and written another. The Masoretes, in their notes to I Chronicles 27:12, listed 15 cases where two words are written as one, but still pronounced as two. Some are contractions, where a letter is dropped when the two words are combined,<sup>7</sup> but nine of the cases have no letters dropped.<sup>8</sup> The standard scholarly approach to this phenomenon is that the final forms of letters “gradually developed but were not used consistently,”<sup>9</sup> and that Neh. 2:13 is an example of a non-final form at the end of a word, a remnant of the older way of writing.<sup>10</sup>

Ibn Ezra explains that the word should be viewed as one long word,<sup>11</sup> but notes that the Masoretes decided that it should be two words. He explains that homiletically it was explained that the open *mem* was used as opposed to the expected final *mem*, which is closed, as an orthographic reference to the open and breached walls of Jerusalem. Radak also brings this interpretation in the context of his comments to Isaiah 9:6.<sup>12</sup> Thus the open *mem* functions as a graphic representation of the breached walls of Jerusalem.

## DANIEL 6:20 WAKING UP EARLY

Having seen three examples where the graphic appearance of a letter formed the basis of a homiletic interpretation, we will now turn to a case where this is not explicit.

The famous episode of Daniel in the lion's den is told in Daniel chapter 6. Daniel 6:20 recounts how King Darius arose early in the morning to see if Daniel survived his night in the lion's den, *Then, at the first light of dawn, the king arose and rushed to the lion's den.* The Aramaic word for *at the first light of dawn* used in the text is *bishparpara*. This word has a unique orthographic anomaly; it contains both a small letter *peh* (the first *peh* in the word) and a large letter *peh* (the second one in the word). There is no other case in the Masoretic Text of one word containing both a big and small version of the same letter.

The earliest interpretation given to this unusual way of writing this word is found in *Midrash Rabbi Akiva* on the big letters in the Bible. This work is part of a body of midrashic literature attributed to R. Akiva having to do with homiletic interpretations of the letters themselves, the crowns on the letters, and large and small sized letters. They have been dated to the late 800s, early 900s.<sup>13</sup>

In *Midrash Rabbi Akiva* on the big letters it is explained that the large *peh* in *bishparpara* indicates that Darius "did not act according to the custom of kings who get up at the third hour (of daylight)."<sup>14</sup> This refers to the statement of R. Yehoshua in the Mishna *Berakhot* 1:2 that the end time for the recital of the morning Shema is the third hour of daylight because that is when the princes get up. It is not entirely clear how this interpretation relies on the large letter *peh*. In fact, Rashi on this verse gives the same interpretation without referring to or relying on the large letter.

It may be that the orthography of the word itself is meant to visually represent getting up. Being that the first letter *peh* is written smaller than usual, the next letter *resh* is written normal size, and the following letter *peh* is written extra large, these middle three letters of the word appear to form a three level ascending step or staircase. This can be understood to graphically represent the rising out of bed of King Darius, the three steps corresponding to him getting up three hours earlier than other kings.

## CONCLUSION

We have seen a few examples of an unusual form of homiletic exegesis, based on the physical appearance of the letters in words in the Masoretic Text of the Bible. Although not widespread or particularly well known, awareness of this method of exegesis can aid us in understanding otherwise cryptic mid-rashic interpretations, particularly when the letters in question have anomalous orthographic elements.

## NOTES

1. A similar statement is found in *Masechet Soferim* 13:7 in the name of R. Zeira, but there no reason is given for why the letter *vav* should be stretched out.
2. See *Shaar Zion* note 14.
3. It may also mean that it extends above the line it is written on. See Yitzchak Razhabi, "Irregular Letters in the Torah", in vol. 29 of Menachem Kasher, *Torah Shelemah* (Jerusalem: Torah Shelemah Institute, 1992), p. 95. He gives examples of many unusual forms of the letter *vav* on pp. 143-144.
4. Moche Catane, *Recueil de Gloses* (Jerusalem: 1988), p. 82, entry 999.
5. R. Mordechai Jaffe (*Levush: Orach Chayyim* 691:4) explicitly writes that the elongated *vav* shows that "they were all hanged in one row, one above the other."
6. The Severus Scroll also has an open mem used at the end of a word in Deut. 3:20, C.D. Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible* (London: 1897), p. 419.
7. See for example, Exodus 4:2, Isaiah 3:15, Ezekiel 8:6 where the two letter word *mah* is contracted into a single letter *mem* in the beginning of the next word. The other examples of contractions are Genesis 30:11, Jer. 18:3, Psalms 10:10.
8. These cases are Deut. 33:2, Jer. 6:29, Psalms 55:16, Psalms 123:4, Job 38:1, Job 40:6, I Chron. 9:4, I Chron. 27:12, and Neh. 2:13, our case,
9. Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 210.
10. For other examples of textual variants "which presuppose the non-existence" of the final letters, see C.D. Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible* (London: 1897), pp. 163, 164.
11. See Zerach Warhaftig, "Devarim k'Pshutam: Notes to Tractate Megilla", *Sinai* vol. 114, Sivan 5754 (1994), p.171, who states that as one long word the word *hemprutzim* is meaningless, and it should have been *hameforatzim*, with the *vav* before the resh if it was one word.
12. That verse contains the opposite phenomenon, a final *mem* in the middle of the word *abundant* (*l'marbeh*). The verse is talking about Messianic times, *abundant authority and peace without limit*...Radak brings the interpretation that the closed *mem* represents the authority of the King Messiah which is sealed up until his coming, and until the walls of Jerusalem are repaired and sealed. This is repeated in the work *Midrash Ezra* by Shmuel Masnut, I. Lange and S. Schwartz, eds., (Jerusalem: Chevrat Mektizei Nirdamim, 1968), p. 139. See the introduction

there, pp. 4-6 regarding the identity of this rabbinic figure. He appears to be a student, or at least spiritual heir, of Radak.

13. See Shlomo Wertheimer, *Batei Midrashot – vol. 2* (Jerusalem: Ktav Yad vaSefer, 1989), pp. 333, 467.

14. Shlomo Wertheimer, *Batei Midrashot – vol. 2* (Jerusalem: Ktav Yad vaSefer, 1989), p. 487.