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Jeremiah's Game

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Ancient authors loved to play with their compositions much more than we do today. In fact, it was much easier to manipulate words and structure in some ancient languages than it is in Modern English. Ancient writers even played games with the readers of their work. One such ancient Hebrew game is called *atbash*, and Jeremiah used it quite effectively.[1]

The game atbash was supposedly played in beginning Hebrew classes in order to test the pupils' knowledge of the 22-letter Hebrew "alphabet."[2] It is also a simple if not primitive method of encrypting information. In this game, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are lined up, the first half on one line and the second half on the line below, but in the reverse order. In Hebrew it looks like this:

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ

ת ש ר ק צ פ ע ס נ מ ל

In anglicized form it would be as follows:

a b g d h w z h t y k

t š r q s p ʿ s n m l

Thus the name comes from the first two and last two letters of the alphabet now lined up with each other and with vowels added, i.e., atbash. (The *š* character represents the phoneme /sh/.) To play the game, instead of using the letter of the alphabet that would normally be used, the letter above or below that letter is substituted for it. So, using the above transliteration, a sentence might read, "He's a real sty." *Sty,* using the atbash, would correlate to *ham*, giving the real thrust of the insult.

The game, of course, can only be played by people who know their alphabet and who therefore can read. I will point out the implications of this later.

Jeremiah uses an atbash in chapter 25, verse 26. The King James translation reads, "and the king of Sheshach shall drink after them."[3] The context concerns the fate of various kings and nations who oppose God's will. But the name "Sheshach" is otherwise unknown; no such place exists. The King James translators, knowing only that "Sheshach" was a place-name, simply rendered a transcription of the Hebrew *ššk*.

When the atbash key is applied to *ššk*, the result is *bbl*, the Hebrew name for Babylon. Jeremiah, therefore, had included the king of Babylon in his list

of kings and kingdoms that would eventually suffer the wrath of God, but he included it in a slightly encrypted form that he knew his Judean audience would understand. After all, what is the use of delivering a message that no one could understand?

The next atbash is a not-so-veiled threat directed at the kingdom of Babylon. In the King James translation, Jeremiah 51:1 reads, "Thus saith the Lord; Behold, I will raise up against Babylon, and against them that dwell in the midst of them that rise up against me, a destroying wind." Here Babylon is paralleled synonymously, in good Hebrew style, with "them that dwell in the midst of them." Literally, the Hebrew says, "and upon the dwellers of *lb qmy*." Because of the poetic parallel with Babylon, it is obvious that *lb qmy* is another way of saying Babylon. But *lb qmy* does not make sense in Hebrew, even though *lb* can mean "midst." Applying the atbash, the Hebrew reads, *kšdym*, which is the Hebrew word for Chaldeans, a synonym in Jeremiah's day for Babylonians. Thus, Jeremiah was actually saying, "Thus saith the Lord; Behold, I will raise up against Babylon and the inhabitants of Chaldea a destroying wind."

The King James of Jeremiah 51:41 also makes it clear that Jeremiah was not trying to avoid covertly offending the Babylonians. The verse reads, "How is Sheshach taken! and how is the praise of the whole earth surprised! how is Babylon become an astonishment among the nations!" Here, the atbash, *ššk* = *bbl* (the same as in the first example above), is clearly used in synonymous parallel with Babylon. Jeremiah could hardly have avoided any political consequences from such a charged statement. Could it be, rather, that Jeremiah's use of atbash, rather than being used as a veiled threat against Babylon, is a minor example of God giving to the people "many things which they cannot understand, because they desired it"? (Jacob 4:14).

The implications of Jeremiah's use of the game atbash are more than mildly interesting. First of all, the atbash works in Hebrew but not in Babylonian.[4] This means that the players Jeremiah tried to engage in his game were not Babylonians but a more local audience, probably a Hebrew-speaking audience. Second, whether his message to a Hebrew audience came in the form of a public discourse or in the form of written text, we must assume, with Jeremiah, that any use of an atbash

works only if his audience were somewhat literate. What might this say about literacy in Jeremiah's day? Was Jeremiah purposely speaking only to that small portion of the Jewish elite who were wholly literate? Or (and this is my opinion), because he knew that the majority of his audience was literate, was he trying to reach as broad an audience as he possibly could, a message to all the people of Judea?

If the latter is true, and there is mounting evidence that literacy was more widespread than had been previously thought, literacy in Jeremiah's day has implications for those passages in the Book of Mormon that suggest a similar level of literacy for Nephite culture. For example, in Alma 14:8, it would seem that "records" refers to multiple copies of the "holy scriptures." Multiple copies would seem to imply that more than a few people could read the "holy scriptures." This is clearly the case in Alma 33:2, where the prophet admonished the poorer class among the Zoramites to "search the scriptures." Unless the poorer Zoramites were literate, Alma's admonition to read their scriptures would have been at best a senseless challenge. But they were literate! As Alma said, "Do ye remember to have read what Zenos, the prophet of old," whose writings were on the brass plates, "has said concerning prayer or worship?" (Alma 33:3). If Jeremiah's use of atbash for a general Judean audience indicates a fairly broad level of literacy among Judeans, then Alma's admonition to the Zoramite poorer class to read their scriptures rings true.

The only frustrating aspect of finding atbash in the Hebrew Bible is that an atbash cannot survive translation into another language.[5] Thus, any atbash that might have been included on the small or large plates of Nephi and/or that made it into Mormon's abridgment would probably not have survived the translation into English. Too bad. ◆

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Notes

1. This article is heavily dependent on many sources. For a good discussion of atbash in Jeremiah, see Scott B. Noegel, "Atbash in Jeremiah and Its Literary Significance,

Part 1," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 24/2 (1996): 82–89; "Part 2," 24/3: 160–66; "Part 3," 24/4: 247–50. For earlier references to atbash, see John Bright, "Jeremiah," *Anchor Bible*, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 21:161; James Philip Hyatt, "Jeremiah," in George Arthur Buttrick et al., eds., *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1956), 5:1003; H.-F. Weiss, "Athbasch," in *Biblisch-historisches Handwörterbuch*, ed. Bo Reicke and Leonhard Rost, vol. 1, A–G (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1962), col. 145; and Wilhelm Rudolph, "Jeremía" (under 25:26, 51:1), *Handbuch zum Alten Testament*, ed. Otto Eissfeldt, vol. 12, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1968).

2. The Hebrew alphabet is not a true alphabet in that it does not contain any vowels, only consonants. The Greeks were the first to add vowels to an alphabet.

3. Bright translates, "And the king of 'Sheshak' (and you know who that is!) will drink last of all." "Jeremiah," 158.

4. In theory Jeremiah's atbash could work in other northwest Semitic languages. For example, the second example could work in Phoenician but would not function perfectly in Aramaic.

5. From English alone (or any other non-Semitic language) it would not be possible to figure out that *ššk* = *bbl*. It only works if you know Hebrew.