

# THE MEANINGS OF *AKH*

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It is well known that biblical words which function grammatically as prepositions, conjunctions, or (abstract) pronouns frequently have several diverse meanings.<sup>1</sup> In this paper we examine the multiple meanings of the biblical word "*akh*." More specifically, we show the utility of translating *akh* as "*probably*," "*most of*," and "*nevertheless*."

## PROBABLY

We begin by presenting four different translations of *akh* in Genesis 44:28:

1. JPS<sup>2</sup>: "*And I said: Alas, he was torn by a beast!*"
2. Gesenius<sup>3</sup>: "*And I said: Certainly he was torn by a beast!*"
3. Radak (literally interpreted)<sup>4</sup>: "*And I said: Perhaps he was torn by a beast!*"
4. Radak (broadly interpreted): "*And I said: Probably he was torn by a beast!*"

To clarify the reason for two citations from Radak, we review the exact citation: "And there are [translations of *akh*] with meanings [like] *ulay* which means *perhaps*." However, there is no biblical Hebrew word for the concept *probably* which, like *perhaps*, has connotations of doubt. Furthermore, the examples below show that *probably* fits this and other verses better than *perhaps*. Therefore, we have listed a broad interpretation of Radak's "nuances [like] *ulay*," and consider the possibility that he was referring to the concept *probably* rather than *perhaps*.

To choose between these four competing translations of Genesis 44:28, we use the criteria of climax, reasonableness, and usage.

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JEWISH BIBLE QUARTERLY

## CLIMAX

Genesis 44:28 quotes two distinct statements about Joseph's disappearance:

1. "*He is akh torn by a beast.*"
2. "*I have not seen him since.*"

If we translate *akh* as *probably* or *possibly*, then Genesis 44:28 exhibits climax. However, if we translate *akh* as *certainly* we have an anti-climax. The first statement ("*He is certainly torn by a beast*") is definitive and final. Therefore, the following statement ("*I have not seen him since*") detracts from the finality of the first statement.

This suggests that *possibly* or *probably* are preferable translations to *certainly*.

## REASONABLENESS

We are clearly told in Genesis 37:34-36 that:

1. *Jacob rent his garments* [over Joseph's death]
2. *placed sackcloth on his loins*
3. *mourned many years*
4. *refused to be comforted*

These citations justify the following inferences on the translation of Genesis 44:28:

1. It would be unreasonable to translate *perhaps torn by a beast*.
2. One could reasonably take the excessive mourning to support the interpretation *certainly torn by a beast*.
3. One could equally reasonably take the refusal to be comforted, as a sign of wishful doubt, justifying the translation *probably torn by a beast*.

These points suggests that *certainly* or *probably* are preferable translations.

## USAGE

Consider the following verses with *akh* translated as *probably* rather than *perhaps* or *certainly*.

1. *Benjamin . . . struck . . . dead 30 . . . men; . . . They thought, 'They are probably being routed before us as in the previous fighting'* (Jud. 20:39).
2. *When . . . he saw Eliab, he thought 'Probably, the Lord's anointed stands before Him'* (I Sam. 16:6).

Context shows that the translation *probably* is preferable to *perhaps*. If

casualties are reported at the beginning of a battle (Jud. 20:39), or if someone is tall and prepossessing (I Sam. 16:7), then it is discreet to qualify the obvious conclusion with *probably* rather than *certainly*.<sup>5</sup> While it is not possible to prove that the author's intended usage was *probably* and not *certainly*, it seems reasonable to suppose so.

In summary, the above considerations justify using *probably* as a translation of *akh*.

#### NEVERTHELESS

Radak lists "*but*" as a translation of *akh*:

And there are [translations where *akh* is used] instead of *but*. [For example]. . . *When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod, and he dies there and then, he must be avenged; but if he [the slave] survives a day or two he [the master] . . . is not to be avenged* (Ex. 21:20-21) . . . . All the above and similar examples should be translated as *but* and I have already explained it.

Radak's statement ". . . and I have already explained it. . ." refers to the following passage:<sup>6</sup>

It [*but*] is a relational word that changes [meaning] in many contexts. One usage [of *but*] has a connotation of *not only is this [the preceding] true, but this [the following] is also true*. [Example of the first usage: *Both the preceding and the following are true*.] The translation [of *aval* as *but* in] . . . *Nevertheless, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son* (Gen. 17:19), means that God told Abraham . . . *I will give you a son by her* (Gen. 17:16) . . . *Abraham [then] said to God: 'Oh, that Ishmael might live by Your favor!'* (Gen. 17:18). - *God said*, [i.e. answered him: It is true that Ishmael will live and also this will be – that] *'Nevertheless, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son'* (Gen. 17:19).

The JPS translates "*akh*" as *but* in Exodus 21:20-21, and translates "*aval*" as *nevertheless* in Genesis 17:19. In the sequel, to emphasize that Radak regards *but* as meaning "the preceding is true and the following is also true," we will always translate *akh*, when it means *aval*, as *nevertheless*.

## "NEVERTHELESS" IN MULTI-VERSE SENTENCES

To explore fully the implications of the translation *nevertheless*, we present two translations of Exodus 31:13. By way of background, Exodus 30:17-31:11 includes several paragraphs on who should build the Tabernacle, what should be made, the proportions in which it should be made, and so forth. Exodus 31:12-13 then begins with, ". . . *Akh*, observe the Sabbaths . . . ." Here, Radak and the JPS translate *akh* as *nevertheless*: *Nevertheless, you must keep My Sabbaths*.

This rendering seems consistent with that of Rashi, who states, ". . . All [occurrences of] *Akh* . . . are limitations. [Hence this biblical verse with *akh* comes] to limit the Sabbath from the building of the Tabernacle." In other words, *even though* you are required to build the Tabernacle, *nevertheless*, you must still observe the Sabbath and consequently abstain from building the Tabernacle on the Sabbath.

Ramban disagrees:

. . . The limitations used by them [i.e. the Talmudic sages] always restrict the matter being commanded [discussed]. So if you apply the limitation [of *akh*] to the building of the Tabernacle, then [since the restriction of *akh* must apply to the matter being discussed – that is, the Sabbath – therefore] it would be permissible to build them [the Tabernacle utensils] on the Sabbath [since the *akh* would limit the Sabbath observance and hence allow leniency].

Ramban has a strong objection to Rashi and Radak. In fact, even though Radak explicitly translates Exodus 31:13 as given above, in a different passage he echoes Ramban's concern: "And there are [verses where *akh* is used] to affirm a matter. . . . Therefore, [*akh* is translated affirmatively in] these and similar passages [since *akh*] comes at the beginning of a sentence."

It follows that even though Radak and Ramban acknowledge that *akh* can be translated as *nevertheless*, they are still troubled by verses which begin with the word *akh*; in such cases it seems unreasonable to translate *akh* as *nevertheless* since that would require two contrasting clauses.

But this objection – that *akh* cannot simultaneously mean *nevertheless* and begin a sentence – is answered by the Radak's own examples. We have seen

above that he translates *akh* as *nevertheless* in the following multiverse sentence: *When a man strikes his slave, . . . and he dies . . . he must be avenged; nevertheless if he [the slave] survives a day or two he [the master] is not to be avenged* (Ex. 21:20-21). Here, although *akh* begins a verse, it occurs in the middle<sup>7</sup> of a sentence. Similarly, in his translation of Exodus 31:13 he allows the idea of *nevertheless* contrasting a succeeding sentence with a preceding paragraph.

This analysis suggests gathering passages containing *nevertheless* and classifying them according to where the contrasting elements of *nevertheless* occur. We identify four cases:

1. The two contrastive clauses occur explicitly and in the same verse. For example:

*Achish replied to David, 'I know; you are as acceptable to me as an Angel of God; nevertheless, the Philistine officers have decided that you must not march out with us to battle'* (1 Sam. 29:9).

*No work at all shall be done on them [the holidays]; nevertheless what every person is to eat – that alone – may be prepared for you* (Ex. 12:16).

2. The two contrastive clauses occur in consecutive verses:

The example from Exodus 21:20-21 was cited above. Another example is:

*Ephron. . . answered Abraham [to] all who entered the gate of his town, saying: 'No, my lord, hear me: I give you the field [for nothing]'; . . . Then Abraham . . . spoke to Ephron . . . 'Nevertheless, if only you would hear me out! Let me pay the price of the land'* (Gen. 23:13).

3. The first contrastive clause refers to the theme of a preceding paragraph

The example of Exodus 31:13 was extensively discussed above. Another and complicated example is in Psalm 58. Verses 2-6 describe evil and the power of the mighty, followed by a prayer for their destruction in verses 7-10. Finally, verses 11-12 speak about the emotional relief of the oppressed.<sup>8</sup> Verse 12 concludes: *Men will say, Nevertheless, there is a reward for the righteous; Nevertheless, there is Divine justice on earth* (Ps. 58:12).

It is tempting (that is, grammatically simpler) to follow the views of Ramban and Radak and interpret the two occurrences of *akh* in Psalm 58:12 affirmatively. The JPS follows this in its translation: *Men will say, there is, then, a reward for the righteous; there is, indeed, Divine justice on earth.*

To respond to this suggested alternative translation note that "*indeed*," "*certainly*," "*then*," and "*nevertheless*" are similar semantically in that they all have affirmative connotations. They, however, differ in the syntactic requirements for their usage. *Indeed* and *certainly* are absolutely affirmative, while *then* and *nevertheless* are conditionally affirmative. That is, *then* and *nevertheless* are only affirmative in the presence of a possibly contradictory element. But if we accept this distinction then we immediately see that a major point of Psalm 58, taken as a whole, is that despite the success of the wicked, *nevertheless* they will be destroyed and there will be happiness and justice for the righteous.

4. The first contrastive clause is elliptical.<sup>9</sup>

A typical example is in Psalm 73:1-2: *A Psalm of Asaph*. [Although the Israelites have sinned] *nevertheless, God is good to Israel*. There is an almost identical example in Isaiah 63:8.

Ellipsis is a poetic tool that can have great emotional impact, since the reader is forced to participate with the poet by completing the thought. A classical biblical example would be: *If you [dare] mistreat them [orphans and widows] [then you know what will happen to you!]; Because if they cry out to Me then I will heed their outcry (Ex. 22:22).*<sup>10</sup>

MOST OF

A classic passage where *akh* seems to be translated as "*most of*" occurs in the following Midrash: ". . . *most of Noah . . . was left . . . in the ark (Gen. 7:23). Most of him was left, but part of him was missing – he lost a limb because the lion in the ark bit him (because Noah brought the lion's meal late one day).*"<sup>11</sup>

The suggested translation of *akh* as *most of* is consistent with the talmudic principle, brought down by Rashi, that "*akh* connotes limitation." Note that the application of *limitation* to the above verse is a general idea; the details of what is being limited (he lost a limb, blood or weight) is subjective and not intrinsic to the verse.

The above midrashic passage appears fanciful and homiletic. The reason for this appearance is that the translation *most of* is not standard – for example, it is not given by either Radak or Gesenius. Nevertheless, the idea that *akh* connotes limitation is explicitly stated in the Talmud, and the translation *most of* is consistent with this talmudic hypothesis and fits the verses to which it is applied.

Here, unlike other talmudic homiletic passages, the underlying principle that *akh* implies *limitation* is explicitly and frequently stated in the Talmud,<sup>12</sup> indicating that *most of* is an actual meaning of *akh*, not a homily.

Another typical example might be: "*Most of the land is to be apportioned by lot* (Num. 26:55). *Most of the land is apportioned by lot*; but the shares of Joshua and Caleb were fixed by decree."<sup>13</sup>

In applying the translation *most of* for *akh* we frequently have to make minor stylistic adjustments. Such minor adjustments do not detract from the main thesis that *akh* means *most of*. For example, in the following two verses *akh* is translated "*in most cases*":

1. *In most cases, he* [the blemished priest] *shall not enter behind the curtain* (Lev. 21:23) *In most cases* he may not enter; but blemished priests can enter the veil for purposes of repair.<sup>14</sup>

2. *In most cases, . . . you shall have the firstling of unclean animals redeemed* (Num. 18:15). *In most cases* you should redeem; but you need not redeem a firstling that has died.<sup>15</sup>

The translation *in most cases* would also apply nicely to the example from Numbers 26:55 cited above.

#### CONCLUSION

In this article we have reviewed several passages where *akh* can be translated as *probably*, *nevertheless*, or *most of*. In this concluding section, we illustrate the inevitable ambiguity that arises when a word has such multiple meanings. A careful reading of Ramban on Exodus 31:13 shows that, following the Talmud,<sup>16</sup> he translates *akh* as *in most cases*: "*In most cases you will observe the Sabbath: In most cases*, but not if someone's life is in danger."

The Rashi-Ramban controversy can then be explained as a controversy on which meaning of *akh* to use in translation of Exodus 31:13. Rashi translates *akh* as *nevertheless* while Ramban translates *akh* as *usually*.

#### NOTES

1. For example, the biblical word *ki* can mean *if*, *when*, *perhaps*, *rather*, *because* and *that*. See Rashi on Genesis 18:15 and Genesis 24:33. Rashi here cites the Talmud: B.T., Rosh Hashana 3a.

2. A. Berlin and A. Brettler, eds, *The Jewish Study Bible Featuring the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Throughout this paper we have used this JPS translation except that the meaning of *akh* is replaced with the translation suggested in that

portion of the paper. Similarly, if JPS omits translation of *akh* (as happens in the citation of Judges 20:39 below) we have added the translation of *akh* suggested in that portion of the paper. To emphasize these emendations, italics or boldface are used for translations of *akh*.

3. W. Gesenius, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament: Including the Biblical Chaldee from the Latin*, trans. E. Robinson (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1844) Entry *Akh*.
4. D. Kimhe, *Sefer HaShorashim L'Radak*. (Berlin: F. Impresis G. Bethge, 1847) Entry *Akh*.
5. Some other verses where the translation *probably* fits better because of discretion are Judges 3:24 or Psalms 73:13
6. D. Kimhe, *Sefer HaShorashim L'Radak*. (Berlin: F. Impresis G. Bethge, 1847) Entry *Abl*.
7. Actually, the JPS translates Exodus 21:20-21 as two sentences; that is, it uses a period rather than a semicolon to separate the sentences. We have simply used the semicolon for purposes of emphasis. Proper English usage also allows sentences to begin with *nevertheless* (typically in situations where the contrast is between the preceding and the current sentence). The examples presented later in this section will thoroughly review four juxtaposition situations of clauses or sentences contrasted with *nevertheless*.
8. This suggested three-paragraph structure in verses 2-5, 7-10 and 11-12, is in fact mirrored by the JPS formatting.
9. A. Quinn, *Figures of Speech*. (Davis, California: Hermagoras Press, 1993) pp. 27-36. Quinn presents examples of ellipsis in words, phrases, clauses and whole sentences.
10. This translation follows Rashi, who explicitly emphasizes the emotional impact of ellipsis. On a technical note, Rashi translates *ki* as *if* (so that the first sentence has an elliptical conclusion); by contrast JPS translates *ki* as *when* and hence does not see ellipsis in this verse.
11. Rashi, *ibid*, who cites the Midrash Tanchuma on Noah. By contrast, Genesis Rabbah 32:11 mentions "he lost blood." Both translations are consistent with *akh* meaning *most of* which has a connotation of *limitation*. To illustrate this distinction between the general idea of *limitation* and the particular details of limitation we can offer an alternative (but less flashy) suggestion: Noah lost weight because of the conditions of the ark.
12. For example, a search on a Bar Ilan CD for the rule "*akh - halak*" reveals the following 13 examples: B.T.: *Erubin* 105a; *Pesahim* 5a, 71a; *Yoma* 85b; *Succah* 48a; *Baba Kama* 11b; *She'vuoth* 13a; *Abodah Zarah* 75b; *Menahoth* 37b; *Bekoroth* 5b, 15a; *Temurah* 25a; and *Kerithoth* 7a. Since *akh* occurs 42 times in the Torah these 13 examples (some in the same biblical verse) represent a significant proportion of occurrences. As illustrated below, this list could be supplemented by midrashic passages from the Sifra, Sifrei and Midrash Rabbah.
13. Sifrei cited by Rashi. The Sifrei brings Judges 1:20 and Joshua 19:50 for support (that Joshua and Caleb did not inherit by lot).
14. B.T. *Eruvin* 105a and Sifra
15. Sifrei.
16. B.T. *Yoma* 85b.