BIBLICAL PUNS

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This article reviews a variety of puns used in talmudic and midrashic biblical exegesis. Very roughly, the word "pun" refers to a literary technique of distortion of spoken or written texts to impart relevant secondary meaning. Note that this definition interprets pun broadly so as to include innuendoes, witticisms, quips, and paronomasias.[1]

Throughout this paper, we apply the "exception" and "alternate explanation" methods to a variety of puns, based on (a) spelling, (b) style, (c) phrasing and intonation, and (d) numerical and letter coincidences.

THE EXCEPTION METHOD

Example 1: David is mentioned about a dozen times in the opening chapters of I Kings. He is mostly referred to either as King David or David, Our Master. However, on his death bed he is simply referred to as "David" without any title. Rabbi Levi explained this deviation by citing the verse: *There is no dominion on the day of death*[2] (Eccl. 8:8).

We classify this midrash as a pun, since the rule of style requiring statement of titles when referring to kings is broken in order to impart relevant secondary meaning. Note that since the use of "David" in contrast to "King David" is an exception to a general rule of style, it is possible to regard this pun as intended by the biblical author, not as something read into the text by the reader[3]

We do not review all exceptions to the king-title rule, but instead indicate a few cases which can easily be explained: Thus in II Samuel 10, a foreign kingdom was showing disrespect for David and hence the title "king" is absent. Similarly in, II Samuel 12, the prophet Gad was criticizing David for committing the grave sin of adultery and hence the title "king" is absent.

Example 2: The following interesting pun is based on phrasing:

R. Nahman son of R. Hisda gave the following exposition. What is the

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meaning of the verse, *Thus saith the Lord to his anointed to Cyrus*, (Isa. 45:1) Now, was Cyrus the Messiah? Rather what it means is: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to the Messiah: I have a complaint on thy behalf against Cyrus. I said, *He shall build my house and gather my exiles*, and he [merely] said, *Whosoever there is among you of all his people, let him go up* (Ezra 1:2-3).[4]

In his commentary on the Talmud, Rashi, using a statistical observation states:

> The Talmud is reinterpreting the verse as follows:'*Thus saith the Lord to his anointed – King Messiah: concerning Cyrus who* . . . And the biblical cantillations prove this talmudic interpretation because throughout the Bible the *zarkah* cantillation[5] is always followed by a *segol* cantillation except for Isaiah 45:1 (where we have a *zarkah* but no *segol*) . . . the missing *segol* cantillation implies [by innuendo] a separation of *Cyrus* from *anointed* [And hence we don't read . . . *to his anointed, to Cyrus*. . . but rather read . . . *to his anointed: concerning Cyrus* . . .]

This talmudic passage is classified as a pun since the biblical text clearly states: *Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus*, but the cantillation punctuations distort the natural phrasing of the texts, and suggest the reinterpretation, *Thus says the Lord . . . concerning Cyrus*. We notice how Rashi defends the talmudic pun with a statistical observation on the exceptional cantillation in Isaiah 45:1.[6]

Example 3: Numbers 26:5-51 records the five dozen or so grandchildren of Jacob that went down with him to Egypt. The Bible links the name of each grandchild to a corresponding tribal branch. The method of linking is uniform: The Hebrew name is used with a prefix "*hey*" and a suffix "*yud*." Hence, for example, the grandchild Hanoch is associated with the tribal unit Ha-Hanochi. This rule applies to all five dozen children except one, "Yimnah." Rashi (Num. 26:5) commenting on the anomaly, states (slightly paraphrased):

> The purpose of adding the *hey* and *yud* to each name is to have the name of God, *Yud-Hey*, surround each tribal unit. However, the name Yimnah is already surrounded with a *yud* and a *hey*. Hence Yimnah's name is not changed.

Here again we see the use of the Exception Method.

Example 4: There are four biblical paragraphs commanding parents to teach their children about the Exodus. In two of these paragraphs parental answers are in response to questions the child asks. However Exodus 12:25-28 presents a question that is **said** [*ki tomru*] rather than **asked**. This exceptional style, saying a question, motivated the talmudic rabbis to classify the questioning child in this paragraph as a cynical child who rhetorically says his question.[7]

FULL-DEFICIENT SPELLING PUNS

The vowels "o" (as in "born" or "horn") and "u" (as in "bull" or "Zulu") are both marked in the Hebrew spelling by the letter "*vav*." On occasion, this letter is omitted, rendering the spelling deficient. We shall indicate the difference by writing a capital letter for the full spelling and a lower-case letter for the deficient spelling. Spelling fullness or deficiency is seen as hinting at either qualitative or numerical fullness or deficiency in people or processes.

Example 5: Genesis 23:8-17 describes how Abraham purchased a burial plot from a man named Ephron. Initially, Ephron offered the field as a gift, but in the end he accepted a full price from Abraham. His name occurs eight times in this chapter and seven out of the eight times is spelled fully as "EPHRON." However, at the crucial verse 16, where Ephron contradicts his public offer of a gift and requests full payment, Ephron is spelled deficiently as "EPHRoN," without the letter "*vav*." Rashi, echoing the Midrash, comments: "His named is spelled **deficiently** because he was a **deficient** person [since after offering the field for nothing he charged full price]."[9]

Example 6: In Deuteronomy 6:9, we read: *And you shall write them upon the doorposts* [MEZuZOTH] *of your house.* In this case, the "*vav*" of *mezuzoth* is missing. On this deficiency, Rashi, ibid., comments: "It is written defectively for only one *mezuzah* is necessary." Here, the deficient spelling hints at a numerical deficiency in the plurality of doorposts.[10]

Note the contrast that in Example 5 the spelling deficiency is qualitative and points to a deficiency in the person while in Example 6 the deficiency is quantitative and points to a deficiency in the number of doorposts.

Example 7: The following illustrates how a pun can evolve into a grammatical rule of style. The patriarch Jacob is mentioned about 350 times in the Bible. The

Hebrew is spelled deficiently as "YAAKoV" except for five verses where it is spelled fully "YAAKOV." While Leviticus 26 speaks about the punishments that will befall the Israelite people if they sin, Leviticus 26:42 states [despite their punishment] *Then will I remember My covenant with YAAKOV* [spelled fully]; *I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham* .... Rashi, ibid., states:

> Elijah [the prophet who heralds the redemption] is spelled deficiently, without a terminal *vav*, five times in Scripture while Jacob is spelled fully, with a middle *vav*, five times. This numerical liaison hints at a personal liaison between Elijah and Jacob, assuring us that Elijah will come to announce the redemption even if we sin.

This pun is clearly homiletic, since the pun ascribes a unity to the Bible, contradicting its development over several centuries, lands and authors. Consequently we suggest the following alternate explanation: Yaakov is spelled completely, hinting at a complete redemption. Just as his name is spelled fully, so too his descendants will one day be redeemed and be a full and complete nation. (A fuller discussion of the justification in using alternate explanations is presented in the next section).

Reviewing the suggested alternate explanation of this pun with the Exception Method, we find that the five exceptional verses with a full spelling of Yaakov do speak about redemption. Compare:

> *Thus said the Lord: 'I will restore the fortunes of Jacob's tents . . . the city shall be rebuilt . . . '* (Jer.30:18).

> *Thus said the Lord: 'As surely as I have established My covenant with day and night – the laws of heaven and earth – so I'll never reject the offspring of Jacob . . . Indeed, I will restore their fortunes and take them back in love'* (33:25-26).

> *'But you, Have no fear, My servant Jacob. Be not dismayed . . . I will deliver you from far away . . . from their land of captivity'* (46:27).

> *They* [idols and their worshipers] *are delusion . . . in their hour of doom, they shall perish. Not like these is the Portion of Jacob* [that is, Jacob shall be eternal] (51:18-19).

In this case the pun has evolved into a grammatical rule of style: "Use the de-

ficient spelling "YAAKoV" when referring to Jews in a state of exile but use
the full spelling "YAAKOV" in a context of redemption." [11]

ALTERNATE EXPLANATION

Example 8 Exodus 23:2 states, *you shall not give perverse testimony in a dis-
pute so as to pervert it in favor of the multitude.* The Hebrew word for "dispute"
is "*riv.*" When spelled deficiently [*RiV*] it can mean Rav [*rabbi*]. Hence the
midrashic pun on this verse, "Don't talk back to a rabbi [override a rabbinic de-
cision]." [12]

We classify this midrash as a pun since the spelling of the Hebrew word for
"dispute" is distorted in order to impart relevant secondary meaning. Using the
Exception Method we would classify this pun as homiletic; that is, not intended
by the author, but read into the text by the reader. Indeed, the Hebrew word for
"dispute" is spelled deficiently [*RiV*] four times in the Bible. [13] An examination
of these verses shows that the translation of "*riv*" as "dispute" is perfectly ac-
ceptable and normal without any need for exceptional translations. The sug-
gested translation of the exceptional spelling that "*RiV*" means "*rav/rabbi,*" can-
not be consistently applied to the other verses with this exceptional deficient
spelling. Note, there is no alternative explanation to this Rashi.

Example 9 Genesis 9:12 states *This is the sign* [i.e., the rainbow] *that I* [God]
set for the covenant between Me and you [Noah] . . . *for the generations of the
world.* The Hebrew word for "generations" [*dorot*] occurs about four dozen
times in the Bible. In all but five instances it is spelled completely defective as
"*DoRoTH*" instead of "*DOROTH.*" [14]

> The Midrash Rabbah (Gen. 35:2) explains the deficient spelling as follows:
> Rabbi Yudan says, 'The verse says, *L 'DoRoTH* [deficiently spelled
> without <u>two</u> *vav*]'; hence two generations are excluded [Rabbi Yudan's
> point is that just as the Hebrew word is missing two letters so too the
> number of generations not needing the symbolic sign of the rainbow is
> two]. Rabbi Hizkiyah [presents an alternate set of two exceptions].

Rashi's explanation differs: "It [the Hebrew word for "generations"] is spelled
deficiently because there are generations that do not need the rainbow sign [be-
cause they are righteous]." The deficient spelling of the Hebrew word for gen-
erations hints at a numerical deficiency in the number of generations that need a

rainbow sign.

The *Yefay Toar*, a commentary on the Midrash Rabbah, explains Rashi's principle of alternate explanation:

> Rashi does not infer from the two missing *vav* that only two generations were exempt from the need for a rainbow sign. But rather Rashi's *derash* is on the general deficient spelling from which he infers that not all generations needed a rainbow sign. [Rashi follows] the general [exegetical] rule of all deficient spellings which hint at deficiency in meaning.

The *Yefay Toar* introduces here the basis for alternative explanation. The fundamental idea is to separate the midrashic form and content. If the form is homiletic but the content is basically sound, then the attempt at alternate explanation is justified.

Nonetheless, this explanation of Rashi is still clearly homiletic. Firstly, defective spelling of the Hebrew word for "generations" is normal, not an exception. Secondly, the suggested pun rule – that deficiency in the spelling of "generations" hints at a numerical deficiency in the generations – does not apply to other biblical references to generations. For example, the Bible expresses the obligation of many biblical commandments as being *for generations*; the clear intent of such laws is that all generations without exception are obligated to follow the laws. The spelling of the word in all these laws is completely defective.

We would therefore suggest a third explanation: The Bible uses the emphasis [do such and such] *for your generations* in about three dozen verses. However, Genesis 9:12 is the only verse that uses the phrase *for the generations of the world* rather than *for your generations*. The phrase **generations of the world** rather than *for your generations* emphasizes nuances: The rainbow sign applies to generations of the general world, not generations like yours that have religious leadership. It would then follow that the rainbow sign was only given to *generations of the* [general] *world* but not to generations with good leadership. The midrash then picked examples of other generations with good religious leaders such as King Hezekiah.

Example 10: The following example of Alternate Explanation shows why a midrashic author might prefer to take sound midrashic content and phrase it in a homiletic form.[15] Genesis 32:5 states, *I sojourned* [garti] *with Laban*. Rashi, ibid., paraphrased, comments:

When the letters for the Hebrew word for *dwelt* [*gimel-resh-tav-yud*]
are rearranged they spell *Tav-Resh-Yud-Gimel*, which is the Hebrew
acronym for 613, the number of biblical commandments. This shows
that Jacob observed all 613 biblical commandments while in the
house of Laban.

The pun as stated is homiletic. Soloveitchick, following the *Chizkuni*, modifies
the defense of the midrash showing it well founded and grammatical:

The Hebrew root *Y-SH-V*, connotes *residence* while the root *G-vav-R*
connotes *temporary sojourning*. The use of the term *sojourning* by a
person who married two women, lived in the town for 20 years and
worked for one of the established people there suggests a cultural
clash – Jacob was observant, Laban was not. This cultural clash made
Jacob feel like a sojourner.

Thus the substance of the midrash is sound although expressed in a homiletic
form. We can also defend Rashi's choice of a homiletic form: Readers are more
apt to remember a pun than an abstract grammatical distinction between syno-
nyms. Hence, Rashi's choice of homiletic form enhances memorability.

Example 11: In the section on exceptions, we presented the *YAAKOV-YAAKoV*
example of Alternate Explanation in Example 7.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented two subjects: the Exception Method and the Alter-
nate Explanation Method. We have applied these two methods to analyze a vari-
ety of midrashic puns which distort biblical phrasing, spelling, and style. We
have seen a spectrum of intent levels in puns from homiletic, to intended, to
rules of style. We believe these methods will prove useful to other researchers,
commentators and readers.

NOTES

1 Throughout this paper we regard puns as simply another literary vehicle. This position on puns is
adopted by W. Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 3rd Ed. (London: Penguin in association with
Chatto and Windus, 1995); L. Heller, "Toward a General Typology of the Pun," in *Linguistic Per-
spectives on Literature*, M. Ching, M. Haley and R. Lunsford, Eds., (London: Routledge and Kegan
Paul, 1980) pp. 305-319 (The original article appeared in L. Heller, "Toward a General Typology of
the Pun," *Language and Style*, 7 (1974) pp. 271-282.)
2 Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 8.8.

3. Certain authors see puns as intended by the author and intrinsic to the text. At the other extreme are those authors who see puns as read into the text by the reader. See C. Bates, "The Point of Puns," *Modern Philology* 96 (1999) pp. 421-439; U. Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990); "Overinterpreting Texts" in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, U. Eco and S. Collini, Eds. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1992) pp. 45-46; G. Hartman, *Easy Pieces* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) pp. 145-150.

4. B.T. Megillah 12a, (Soncino translation, Judaica Press), cited in *Davka, Judaic Classics*, Version 3.0.6. The English biblical citations in this example follow the translations in the Soncino translation of the Talmud. Other English biblical citations in this paper use A. Berlin and M. Brettler, Eds., *The Jewish Study Bible Featuring the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). When a special point is being made we indicate deviance from the NJPS translation either through the use of footnotes or underlines. The spelling of full and deficiently spelled Hebrew words cited in this paper use the Davka Judaic Classics edition, version 3.0.6.

5. The Masoretic Text besides preserving consonants, vowels and words also preserves grammatical marks called cantillations. Most scholars understand these cantillations as indicating pauses and liaisons in the pronunciation of the biblical text (similar to the English comma, hyphen and semicolon).

6. We can verify Rashi's statistical argument by reviewing all occurrences of the *zarkah* cantillation: See J. Price, *Concordance of the Hebrew Accents in the Hebrew Bible* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen, 1996).

7. R. Hendel, "The Educational Pedagogy of the Four Sons," *Shofar*, 22 (2004) pp 94-106.

8. Genesis 23:8,10,10,13,14,16,16,17.

9. Genesis Rabbah, 58:7 (Also cited by Rashi).

10. See, however, the alternative explanation presented by the *Sifre*: The *Sifre* infers from the biblical phrase *the two doorposts* (Ex. 12:22-23) that the word *doorposts* by itself refers to one doorpost [i.e., any doorpost – and hence to refer to two doorposts requires the adjective two]. Note the exceptional verse Deuteronomy 11:20; it is spelled fully but nevertheless corresponds to a law (placing mezuzot on doorposts) that only applies to one doorpost.

11. A complete defense of this suggested grammatical rule would require analyzing the relevance, to redemption, of the 350 occurrences of *Yaakov* where it is spelled normally (i.e. deficiently). This analysis will not be done here.

12. The Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin, folio 18b. NJPS on Exodus 23:2-3 prefers the translation *mighty*. NJPS also lists the alternate translation *multitude*.

13. The other three occurrences of verses with a deficient spelling of *RiV* are: . . . *Lord God was summoning to dispute* [NJPS contend] *by fire* . . . (Amos 7:4), *I looked into the dispute* [NJPS case] *of the stranger* (Job 29:16), *Be vented rashly in a dispute* [NJPS quarrel] . . . *lest* [NJPS reads *think*] . . . *your fellow put you to shame* (Prov. 25:8). It should be clear that the translation of *riv* as *dispute* is normal without need of exceptional translations.

14. The Hebrew word for *generations* is spelled fully in Isaiah 51:9. It is spelled with a one letter deficiency at Judges 3:2, Isaiah 41:4, Job 42:16. It is spelled with a 2 letter deficiency only once, at Genesis 9:12.

15. R. Hendel, "Peshat and Derash: A New Intuitive and Analytic Approach," *Tradition*, 18 (1980) pp. 327-342.