

Some Old Testament Difficulties

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בְּבֵלִי—BABEL, Gen. 11:9. Most Bible students interpret this, according to the apparent context, as derived from the stem בָּלַל and therefore translate “confusion” (of tongues). The Hebrew language, however, does not know a derivation of that kind, and so the term *Volksetymologie*, popular etymology, has been adopted to “explain” the abnormality. Must we resort to this? In the case of people who had lived so many years in Babylonia, who spoke the language, carried this knowledge and tradition along with them (Abraham and his family) we do an injustice by appealing to a “popular etymology.” They must have known the difficulties involved. Concerning Moses, the inspired writer of Genesis, we read (Acts 7:22) that he was “learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians,” and this included a working knowledge of the Babylonian language, as we know from the Amarna letters.

As far as the Babylonian language is concerned there is no doubt as to the meaning and the derivation. Two signs are used, the one *Babu* for “gate,” and the other *Ilu* for “God.” The combination, then, is read *Babili*, which without any doubt means “gate of God.” This cannot be disputed, since this is the consistent way of writing the name, and only rarely does the name appear in syllables. We may take for granted that Abraham, at least, had occasion to read the name frequently in this form.

There is no use making difficulties where there are none. 1) Let us bear in mind that Abraham, as well as Moses, would read the words: “Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did *there* confound the language of all the earth: and *from thence* did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.” The weight undoubtedly rests on the words *there* and *thence*—which is a combination of the same word “there” and the preposition “from.” A reading of the Hebrew text brings this out more clearly. 2) Both Abraham and Moses, who knew and understood the Babylonian, furthermore read the text with this understanding: “Therefore is the name of it called Babel” i.e. the Gate of God. And why was it called the Gate of God? A gate is an entrance, and the Gate of God is the place where God enters upon the scene. In other words, the name Babel is an acknowledgment also on the part of the people themselves that here God Himself appeared in His majesty to perform this miracle of the confusion of tongues, to set at naught the proud purpose of men. 3) And what of the verb בָּלַל used in the same verse? Admitted that there is a play on like-sounding words here, this is not the only passage where the Hebrew employs this figure, nor is it necessary to suppose that the two like-sounding words are related in derivation or meaning. For the sake of effect the two words are chosen deliberately so that the divine author can give added weight and significance to the verse.

A striking analogy we find in the passage Gen. 28:17: “And he (Jacob) was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.... And he called the name of that place Bethel”—i.e. the house of God. But not the above apposition: “the gate of heaven.”

בֵּר in the expression נִשְׁקוּ-בֵּר, Ps. 2:12. All attempts at connecting this בֵּר with the Hebrew word for “son”—בֶּן—seem to shatter on the difficulty of deriving the two words etymologically from each other: the *r* from *n*, or vice-versa, and the *pathach* from *sere* or vice-versa. בֶּן belongs definitely to the Hebrew group, the בֵּר to the Assyrian-Babylonian-Aramaic group. Is it not better, after all, to recognize in the word בֵּר an Aramaic word that is very common in that language and easily related to the Babylonian or Assyrian *maru*, so commonly used for *son* there? This leads also to the recognition of a linguistic phenomenon that has been heeded possibly too little in the past: that the consonant *n* in the proximity of a *liquid* (*l, m, n, r*) easily is dissimulated to *b*. So מֵר becomes בֵּר, and not בֶּן to בֵּר. This seems likely also in the following example.

כַּרְמֶל. CARMEL. Usually explained as כָּרֶם plus אֵל, so that the meaning usually attached to the combination becomes “garden of god,” a very fertile spot. There may be some justification so far as the derived meaning is concerned, but again it seems difficult to account for the form, כָּרֶם plus אֵל to form כַּרְמֶל.

Referring to the above m—b development, I should like to suggest that the Hebrew כַּרְמֶל is the original of the Aramaic *karb:lah*, meaning “the comb of a rooster,” and call attention to the remarkable outline of this particular promontory as it juts out into the sea along the coastline. As it is pictured, nothing could be more striking than the resemblance of this mountain to a rooster’s comb, and it would be strange if this peculiarity were passed by so utterly. The feature of “fertility” as contained in the former meaning would then be secondary.