

Artikel

An Explanation of the Etymology of the Name Ammon in Genesis 19, Based on Evidence from Nabataean Aramaic and the Safaitic Arabian Dialect

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In Genesis 19:36–38 we encounter the story of Lot and his two daughters as an etymology for the names of the two regional nations: Ammon and Moab (*Moab*).¹ According to this story, these names originated with the names of the two boys who were products of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his two daughters. The narrator tells us that their mothers named them Moab and Ben-'ammi. However, explanations for their naming are missing in the Biblical story.

Ancient interpreters,² as well as modern ones, have attempted to draw a connection between the daughters' deeds and the names they gave to their sons. The name Moab was probably regarded as a folk etymology in which the element 'ab was understood as 'father' and, therefore, the first element was interpreted as a variation of the preposition *m/min* 'from.' The combination was consequently regarded as 'from a father,' signifying that the mother wanted to indicate that she had conceived with her own father.

It should be noted that some scholars have suggested that this 'interpretation' is stronger than it first appears. If the first element of the name was taken as the preposition 'm/min,' which expresses 'the origin,' we would have expected that the name would have been *Me'-'ab* due to the *Aleph* at the beginning of the word. However, if this is the case, the name *Mo'-'ab* can be explained as a variant of the

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¹ For a discussion about the background of this etymology, see Weisman 1992.

² See for example *Breshit Rabba*, (Theodor-Albeck edition), 51: 37–38. The exegetical midrash, quoted by the name of R. Eivo, can be understood only if we assume that he took Moab as 'from a father' and Ben-'ammi as 'the son of whoever was with me'. It means that he interpreted the word 'ammi as the preposition 'am which has the meaning of 'with', suffixed with a possessive pronoun. Regarding the preposition itself, in Hebrew it is 'im as well as in most of the Aramaic dialects. However in Syriac the preposition is 'am and in Western Aramaic we find it in Samaritan Aramaic (see Tal 2000, p. 642) as it is also in Samaritan Hebrew (see Ben-Hayyim 1977, p. 211) when it is not followed by a possessive pronoun. It might be the case that R. Eivo's interpretation reflects his own local dialect or his familiarity with other Aramaic dialects. If he neglected the vowels, it is possible that his explanation is based merely on the fact that the preposition 'im and the word 'ammi share the same consonants.

name *Me'-ob* because of the phonological phenomenon of $\bar{e}-\bar{o}$ interchange. This interchange has been noticed especially in names as an isogloss of the southern dialects of Palestine in general and of Moab in particular, since this phenomenon happens mostly with Moabite names.³

In the case of Ben-'ammi⁴ such a simple explanation is not apparent. While the first element *ben* can either mean 'son of' or 'member of' in its construct form, it is hard to understand the meaning of the second part 'ammi which is probably a combination of 'a noun+ 1st singular pronominal possessive suffix.'

The common meaning of the word 'am is 'people' in Biblical Hebrew. However there is no clear connection between the story of Lot and his daughters with 'people'. In order to find such a connection it was noted that in Semitic languages in general the meaning of the word 'am has to do with some sort of kinship⁵ and probably it was used to designate 'family relation' in general.

Furthermore, evidence for this meaning can be found in Hebrew itself.⁶ For example, in the context of the priestly regulation concerning contact with the dead the word 'am appears (Lev 21: 1, 4 and 15) and seems to mean some sort of family relation. In addition, the parallel between the two expressions *wayye'asep 'el 'ammayw* "was gathered to his people" (Gen 25, 8 *passim*) and *ne'espu 'el 'abotayw* "were gathered to their fathers" (Ju 2, 10), which are both used to express dying, supports this meaning in Hebrew. Accordingly, the personal name *Ben-'ammi* in the Lot story was understood as an indication that the boy was the son of his mother's relative.⁷

Despite this attempt to make sense of the name *Ben-'ammi*, it seems that the connection between this name and the narrative context of naming is still weak, especially in comparison with his cousin/brother's name. Therefore, I wish to explore whether other meanings of the word 'am in Semitic languages can help to solve the riddle behind this name.⁸

³ The first one to suggest this phonological explanation was Nestle 1896, p. 322–325. A longer discussion on this phonological interchange with more evidence and a phonetic explanation can be found in Morag 1958. Recently Elitzur 1996 has provided some new evidence to support the argument that this phenomenon was indeed related to the Moabite dialect.

⁴ It should be noted that the name *Ben-'ammi* is found as a personal name in Ugarit as well, see Gordon 1965, p. 205 (text 308 line 14), 457.

⁵ In Arabic this is the regular word for paternal uncle. It has been suggested that we can find this meaning in the Balaam Text from Deir 'alla as well, See Hoftijzer and Van der Kooij 1976, p. 190. See also Hackett 1984, p. 133.

⁶ See Bustenai 1972, p. 255, following Liwer 1972, p. 236.

⁷ This is the common interpretation among modern commentators. See Luke 1975, p. 86, Davidson 1979, p. 79, Westermann 1985, p. 314, Mathews 2005, p. 245 *inter alia*.

⁸ An attempt to give an interpretation to this name which is more related to the story was made by Nestle 1896, p. 322–323. He has suggested, based on his book (Nestle 1876, see above n. 2), that since the word 'am has the meaning of 'paternal uncle', it might also mean 'father'. According to this suggestion, both names indicated the fact that the father of the boys was also the father of their mothers.

The meaning of the word 'am in Hebrew and its cognate in the Semitic languages has occupied many scholars in the past one and a half centuries.⁹ Much attention has been given to the variety of meanings that this word has in the different languages and many hypotheses have been suggested concerning its origin and its development. Among possible meanings one can find that this word denotes also "grandfather" or some sort of ancestor. The two main languages in which this meaning appears are the Nabataean Aramaic dialect and the North-Arabian Safaitic dialect. Later, in the third part of this paper I will discuss the evidence for this meaning of the word 'am.

Surprisingly, almost¹⁰ no one has mentioned this meaning of the word 'am in the context of the Genesis story. Accordingly, it can be suggested that the name *Ben-'ammi* indicates the fact that the boy born was the grandson of his own father. In light of this suggestion, it becomes clear that the two sisters named their sons in such a way because they were products of incest: one emphasized the fact that the father of the child was her father, and the other that Lot was the grandfather of his newborn son. Thus, the possessive suffix was taken as if the boy himself tells his origin.

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Gunkel has suggested regarding the background and the origin of this story that the story about Lot and his daughter as the origin of the nations Moab and Ammon was based on a Moabite-Ammonite myth, which later on was adapted to the Bible as part of the Abraham's story.¹¹ This suggestion was followed and developed by many other scholars and at the same time rejected by others.¹² One of the criticisms against this theory was that there are no linguistic elements in this story that can support the claim of Moabite-Ammonite background.¹³

Without taking any position in the debate whether such background exists or not, it should be noted that according to our suggestion there is linguistic evidence that can support the suggestion that this story has its origin in the Eastern side of the Jordan river.

It was already noted that the ē-ō interchange which helped to explain the etiology of the name Moab happened especially among Moabite's names. In regards of the interpretation of *Ben-'ammi* as "the son of my grandfather", one should remember that the meaning of the word 'am as grandfather was found in Nabataean Aramaic and the Safaitic Arabian dialect, both from a location close to Ammon and Moab.

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⁹ For a survey on this topic see Good 1983, pp. 3–12.

¹⁰ Clermont-Ganneau 1898 (see below n. 16) mentioned this "legendary story" when he first suggested that the word 'am can mean "grandfather." It seems that his idea was based on the fact that two names with the elements 'am and *ab* occur in the same story, but it seems that he failed to notice that this is actually a crucial point in interpreting the "legendary story" itself.

¹¹ See Gunkel 1910, p. 217–218.

¹² See Weisman 1992, n. 14.

¹³ See Weisman 1992, p. 45*.

In the rest of this paper I will discuss the evidence that the word *'am(m)* has the meaning of “grandfather” in Semitic.

First, I would like to point to some indirect evidence. In the aforementioned parallel between the two expressions *wayye'asep 'el 'ammayw* and *ne'espū 'el 'abotayw* the substitution is actually between *'am* and *'ab*.¹⁴ By the same token, there is a parallel between the personal names with the element *'am* and those with the element *'ab*. For example, *'ammīel* and *'abiel*.¹⁵ This parallel, however, only suggests that the word *'am* probably expresses some sort of kinship.

Besides this indirect evidence, it seems that in some Semitic languages the word *'am* marks the kinship of some sort of close ancestor – “grandfather” or “greatgrandfather”. Clermont-Ganneau¹⁶ recognized the similarity between two Nabataean Aramaic inscriptions (CIS 2, 182, 354) in which the meaning of the word *'am* is “greatgrandfather”. This is an indication for the use of *'am* as a “great grandfather,” however it should be noted that in many languages the designations for kinship are sometimes the same as they are in the same direction (for example the word *'ab* itself in Biblical Hebrew usually means “father” but also “grandfather”¹⁷ and any other ancestor).

Not far from the Nabataean area, the word *'am* has many occurrences in the North-Arabian dialect of Safaitic. For many years there was no good example from which to determine the exact meaning of this word. The only way to discern its meaning was by mapping the other kinship designations, and ruling out what it was not. Since *'am* often appears in a list with *dd* and, clearly, they are not the same, whatever *dd* is, *'am* is not.

On the one hand, in all the colloquial Arabic dialects and in all the other ancient Southern and Northern Arabian dialects the word *'am* indicates paternal uncle and, therefore, it would be expected that this was the meaning also in the Safaitic language. On the other hand the word *dd* is not common in those dialects and in other Semitic Languages in which it has the meaning of ‘uncle’. Littmann was the first to suggest that *'am* means “grandfather”. He believed that he could find evidence for

¹⁴ Good 1983, p. 90–92, discussed the meaning of the expression *wayye'asep 'el 'ammayw*, and its cultural context. In this discussion he mentioned the option of taking *'am* in this context as “ancestor.” But he concluded: “Although this idea cannot be disproved, it has no support from Priestly use of *'ammim* and in fact no support from Hebrew use in general.” It should be noted that from this parallel the meaning of *'am* like *'ab* should be some sort of ancestor. This meaning occurs in Ugaritic as well, see Del Olmo Lete (2004), p. 163, and see there for a references for further literature.

¹⁵ See Nestle 1876, p. 187–188, n. 1. Later Noth 1927 in his study of kinship terminology regarding personal names has supported Nestle’s suggestion with strong evidence. See also Clermont-Ganneau 1898, p. 37. For more evidence regarding the element *'am* in Semitic personal names see Huffmon 1965, p. 196, Gröndahl 1967, p. 109 and Benz 1972, p. 379.

¹⁶ Clermont-Ganneau 1898, p. 372–376. This suggestion was supported later by another inscription. See Milik 1958, p. 227–228.

¹⁷ See for example, Genesis 32, 10.

the use of *dd* as a “paternal uncle.” As a result ‘*am* stands for another close degree of kinship, and most likely being “grandfather.”¹⁸

Ryckmans took the opposite view. He believed that *dd* had the special meaning in this dialect of “maternal grandfather,” and that ‘*am* had in this dialect the regular Arabic/Arabian meaning of “paternal uncle.” He has two arguments to support his opinion:

1. First, he gives a list of examples of the word *dd* in which he believes the meaning of “grandfather” is more compatible.¹⁹
2. In one Safaitic inscription there are four individuals which the author of the inscription describes as the ‘*mt*. Taking ‘*mt* as the feminine form of ‘*m*, this inscription is only understandable if it means “paternal aunt” and not “grandmother” since one can have four aunts but cannot have more than two grandmothers (assuming that the same word is used for both sides).²⁰

Aside from this evidence, Ryckmans still had to deal with Littmann’s argument that *dd* refers to an “uncle”. He does so in a not so compelling way.

Regarding the first group of evidence, Ryckmans has two sets of inscriptions from which he concluded that *dd* means “grandfather”. The first are inscriptions describing someone mourning for his father and his *dd*. Ryckmans believes that it is more reasonable that it would have been his grandfather. The second are inscriptions in which we find a genealogy of three generations and then the author mentions his *dd*. Ryckmans concludes that it refers to the last name mentioned before in the same line (the grandfather). As Prof. Macdonald has rightly pointed out to me, these are not strong arguments, since one can mourn for his father and his paternal uncle, just as he would for his father and his grandfather. Regarding the genealogical inscriptions, he said that simply because the author takes his genealogy to the third generation and then mentions his *dd*, does not necessarily mean that he is referring back to his grandfather.

Concerning the inscription with the four women described as ‘*amt*, there are two counterarguments. First, Good has correctly noted how cautious one should be in drawing conclusions about meaning of the masculine based on the meaning of the feminine form. In Syriac, for example, the word ‘*ammt*ⲥ is used for “paternal aunt” while *dⲁd*ⲥ is used for “paternal uncle”.²¹ In addition, regarding Ryckmans’ interpretation it should be noted that although one cannot have four grandmothers, one can definitely have four individuals as grandmothers and great-grandmothers.²²

Since this debate more inscriptions of Safaitic were published and Winnett and Harding have shown that in one of them the meaning of ‘*am* is clearly “grandfather” and “great-grandfather”:

¹⁸ Littmann 1904, p. 119, 160.

¹⁹ Ryckmans 1951, p. 384–388.

²⁰ Ryckmans 1953.

²¹ Good 1983, p. 33–34.

²² See for example, in the example in the following paragraph.

lʾjrm' l bn z'n' l bn 'lm bn [j'r]m' l bn d' b bn kn wwdj 'tr 'amh 'lm wjrm' l 'mh fqsf w' šy' h

“by Jaram'il son of zann'il son of 'ulaim son of Jaram'il son of Di'b son of Kaun. He found the inscription of his grandfather 'ulaim and of Jaram'il his great-grandfather and was sad, he and his companions”²³

This inscription along with the similar use of the noun 'am in another language, Nabataean Aramaic, in the same area, combined with the fact that the use of *dd* to mean “grandfather” is not found in any other Semitic languages support Littman's suggestion that the word 'am in this dialect should be interpreted as 'grandfather.' Moreover, it is not a problem that the Safaitic dialect differs in its lexicon from other Arabian dialects, making it closer to North-West Semitic. This is only one feature among others which the Safaitic dialect shares with North-West Semitic.²⁴

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Having established, by direct and indirect evidence, the use of 'am in the sense of “grandfather,” it is plausible to suggest that this particular meaning of this lexical item stands in the background of the biblical etiology of the name *Ammon*. In this way, the biblical narrator uses a story of insect between a father and his daughters to explain the names of their sons and, in turn, establishes the relationship between Ammon, Moab and the Israelites.

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²³ Winnet and Harding 1978, p. 269.

²⁴ See Macadonald, p. 420.

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Abstract

In Genesis 19:36–38 we encounter the story of Lot and his two daughters as an etymology for the names of the two regional nations: Ammon and Moab. According to this story, these names originated with the names of the two boys who were products of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his two daughters. The narrator tells us that their mothers named them Moab and Ben-‘ammi. However, explanations for their naming are missing in the Biblical story. While the name Moab could have been regarded as a folk etymology which means ‘from a father,’ signifying that the mother wanted to say that she had conceived with her own father, in the case of Ben-‘ammi such a simple explanation is not apparent.

The meaning of the word ‘am in Hebrew and its cognate in the Semitic languages has occupied many scholars in the past one and a half centuries. Among possible meanings one can find that this word denotes in Nabataean and Safaitic also “grandfather” or some sort of ancestor. Surprisingly, no one has mentioned this meaning of the word ‘am in the context of the Genesis story. Accordingly, it can be suggested that the name Ben-‘ammi indicates the fact that the boy born was the grandson of his own father. In light of this suggestion, it becomes clear that the two sisters named their sons in such a way because they were products of incest: one emphasized the fact that the father of the child was her father, and the other that Lot was the grandfather of his newborn son. Thus, the possessive suffix was taken as if the boy himself tells his origin. It will be suggested that, based on linguistic evidence, the consequences of this interpretation can also point to a foreign origin of this myth.