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L^edabbēr baššeli (2 Sam. 3: 27) “to Talk Peace”

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I

1. The expression *l^edabbēr baššeli* occurs in the famous episode in 2 Samuel 3 when Joab cunningly traps Abner and kills him cold-bloodedly (v. 27). It is the single occurrence of this expression in the Hebrew Bible, and the word *š^eli* itself is a *hapax* the meaning and etymology of which are not definitely certain, although it has generally been related to the Hebrew root *šlh* (see further below).
2. Basically two interpretations for this expression, based on the general understanding of the context and its basic theme, are to be found in the various commentaries, both old and new:
 - 1) Most commentators understand the form *baššeli* in the sense “in peace, in quietude, privately”, meaning that Joab proposed that he and Abner move aside to some quiet place to discuss matters with no disturbance.¹ Scholars usually adduce here the usage of the verb *šlh*, of which *š^eli* is believed to be a derivative, in such verses as Ps 122:6-7; and cf. also Jer 12:1; Job 12:6; etc.

¹ See already the Aramaic Targum *b^ešēlāyā*³ and cf. S. R. Driver, *Note on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913) 250; M. Z. Segal, *The Books of Samuel* (Jerusalem: Kiriat-Sepher, 1971) 251 (in Hebrew); *HALAT* 1410f. and others.

2) Other scholars take their hint from the atmosphere of trickery and misleading that underlies Joab's move and suggest to interpret *baššelfi* in the sense "by trickery, misleadingly", like the use of *šlh* in 2 Kgs 4:28 *lô' tašleh ʔotî* "Don't mislead me."²

Some of the Jewish commentators (e.g., Rashi and others cited by Segal) make use of another meaning of the verb *šlh* in Aramaic and translate "through ignorance, inadvertently", referring to Abner who was careless regarding Joab's intentions.³ Still others (*M^ešûdat David*, *M^ešûdat Zion ad verse*) understand it in the sense of forgetfulness: Joab wanted to talk with Abner regarding those matters about which the king had forgotten to talk with him.

3. The focus has thus exclusively been placed on the *hapax š^elî* and on the form *baššelfi*. No commentator has considered the possibility to look into the whole expression *l^edabbēr baššelfi* and to weigh the possibility that we perhaps have here an idiomatic expression whose components are not to be separated. It is therefore the purpose of this short note to look into the hypothesis that *l^edabbēr baššelfi* is such an idiomatic expression that means "to talk peace", in the sense of formally negotiating and sealing a peace treaty. It is either comparable in meaning and function to the more familiar biblical expression *l^edabbēr šālôm* "talk peace",⁴ or it is a corruption of the latter. In

² And cf. *b. Sanh.* 49:1; see Segal, *op.cit.* for references.

³ Segal, *loc. cit.*

⁴ For this expression see the following verses: Jer 9:7; Zech 9:10; Ps 35:20; 85:9; 122:8. And compare the Akkadian equivalent phrase *dibbī kīnūtu ša sulummē dabābu* "to talk true words of peace" (see *CAD S 372b*). Cf. also the following expressions that convey the same or similar idea: *ʿāsā šālôm* "make peace" (*//* *kārat b^erīt* "seal a treaty" Josh 9:15), *qārā³ l^ešālôm* "propose peace" (Deut 20:10), as well as *dibrē šālôm* "words of peace" (Deut 2:26; Esth 9:30) and *b^erīt šālôm* "a peace pact/treaty" (Num 25:12; Isa 54:10; Ezek 34:25; 37:26). Finally, note also the expression *l^edabbēr*

the first case, one has to postulate the existence in biblical Hebrew of the word šēlî with the meaning “peace” and the like; and in the second case one should see in it a corrupt form of the word šālôm. In what follows I shall address the expression l^edabbēr baššēlî as it appears in the MT, attempting to explain its meaning in its context, without engaging in any text emendation options.

II

1. The hypothesis entertained here, that l^edabbēr baššēlî is an expression equivalent to the expression l^edabbēr šālôm in the sense of negotiating and sealing a peace agreement rests on the following observations:

1) The whole story of the meeting of Abner with David in 2 Samuel 3 is about an agreement negotiated between the two leaders, which culminated in a peace treaty between them.⁵ Most probably, and this claim will be substantiated below, one of the

ṭôbôt “to talk, negotiate friendship”, also from the vocabulary of treaty-making, for which see 2 Kgs 25:28 (= Jer 52:23); Jer 12:6, and compare it with the Akkadian equivalent ṭābūta dabābu/dubbubu. See *AHw* 1378; and see I. Höver-Johag, “טובֿ ṭôb; טובֿ ṭûb; טובֿ יֵטבֿ; *ThDOT* V (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 1986) 301f. And see the combination šālôm w^eṭôbâ (= Akk. *ṭubtu u sulummû*) in Deut 23:7; Jer 33:9; Ezra 9:12. For treaty terminology in the ANE see M. Weinfeld, “Covenant Terminology in the Ancient Near East and its Influence on the West”, *JAOS* 93 (1973) 190-199.

⁵ See verses 12-13, 20 (telling about the covenant meal), 21, and also the triple mention of the form b^ešālôm “in peace” in vv. 21, 22, 23, which alludes to the peace treaty that has recently been concluded between the two leaders. For šālôm, a technical term from the treaty vocabulary, see the various expressions cited in n. 4 above. See *HALAT* 1395ff., esp. 1397f. sub “5. Frieden”; see Weinfeld, *JAOS* 93, pp. 191f. and *passim*.

main conditions or concessions on the part of David in his treaty with Abner was to appoint the latter to the post of the head of the army (šar haššābā⁶) in place of Joab.

2) An almost complete parallel to the episode in 2 Samuel 3 regarding the agreement between David and Abner occurs in 2 Sam 19:12ff., esp. v. 14, and 20:4-10, where David negotiates a treaty with Amasa son of Jether, the former general of Absalom (2 Sam 17:25). Here David promises Amasa in clear and loud voice to be his general in place of Joab (19:14). Amasa too, like Abner before him, was treacherously murdered by Joab who seems thus to have been worried about his post (20:9-10).

3) In both episodes Joab succeeds in misleading his victims and in putting their alertness to sleep. Since we are talking here of two tough and experienced war leaders, one must assume that there were very good reasons for them to bring down their shield and to be duped by Joab into their doom. It is my impression that both leaders, having already concluded a peace treaty with David, understood Joab's approach as broadcasting his intention to ratify that treaty — during which ceremony, it is to be noted, Joab had not been present — and to show his largesse toward his supplanters by settling their differences in concluding a peace pact between them.

4) This assumed proposed peace pact between Joab and his victims is clearly reflected in the Amasa episode in 2 Sam 20:9, in the words šālôm “peace” and ʔaḥ “treaty-partner (lit. brother)” addressed to Amasa — two clear technical treaty terms.⁶ It is also reflected in a third element in this encounter between Joab and Amasa, the ritual

⁶ For šālôm see n. 4 above; for ʔaḥ “brother” as a term expressing parity treaty relationships, see Num 20:14; 1 Kgs 9:13; 20:32; Amos 1:9 (berît ʔaḥîm “covenant of brotherhood”); and Zech 11:14 (ʔaḥ^awâ “brotherhood”) (cf. v. 10); and see for all Weinfeld, *op. cit.*, pp. 191ff. *passim*.

of kissing which Joab was allegedly about to perform.⁷ In a forthcoming article⁸ I discuss the kiss in the OT and I suggest that it functions in several of its occurrences⁹ in a formal and legal-technical, rather than emotional, sense.¹⁰ That is, the kiss in the mentioned episodes was a symbolic-formal act with some legal dispositive meaning, intended to bring about some legal change in the situation.¹¹ Such is, for example, the case when Samuel kisses Saul on the occasion of anointing him as king (1 Sam 10:1):

⁷ “...Joab took hold of Amasa’s beard as if to kiss him” (2 Sam 20:9).

⁸ M. Malul, “Toward the Ceremonial-Legal Background of Some Expressions in Biblical Hebrew”, in: S. Vargon, R. Kasher, A. Frish & J. Kugel (eds.), *Festschrift for M. Garsiel* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, in press; in Hebrew); cf. also “Idioms and Expressions in Biblical Hebrew Reflecting Acts and Ceremonies of Treaty-Making in Old Testament Times”, *Halvrit veAh,yoteha* (Jerusalem: Graphit, in print; in Hebrew).

⁹ See Gen 48:10; 27: 26-27; 1 Sam 10:1; 2 Sam 14:33; and perhaps also Exod 18:7; 1 Sam 20:41. See for a full discussion Malul in the studies mentioned in the previous note.

¹⁰ The kiss in the Bible has almost universally been interpreted as conveying an emotional sense, and M. Gruber in his study of various bodily gestures of communication in the Bible classifies it under “Gestures and Postures of Greeting and Affection” (the title of Ch. 5 of M. I. Gruber, *Nonverbal Communication in the Ancient Near East* [*Studia Pohl* 12; Rome: The Pontifical Institute, 1980] 320-347). And see also the discussion of the kiss and the verb *nāšaq* in the Bible by K.-M. Beyse, “נשק *nāšaq*; נשיקה *nēšiqâ*”, *ThDOT* X (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, U. K., 1999) 72-76, where he outlines the various usages into the following categories: 1) Expressions of Human Relationships ([a] Love. [b] Kinship. [c] Friendship). 2) Expressions of Veneration ([a] Secular. [b] Religious).

¹¹ For this definition of legal symbolic acts in the sources of the ANE, see M. Malul, *Studies in Mesopotamian Legal Symbolism* (*AOAT* 221; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988) 20-29.

“Samuel took a flask of oil and poured some on Saul’s head and kissed him, and said, ‘The Lord herewith anoints you ruler over his own people’”. The situation is manifestly formal and solemn. Samuel performs two acts: he kisses Saul and anoints him; and he recites a formula - a sort of *verba solemnia* that usually accompany such symbolic and formal rituals.¹² One should note that Saul is no relative of Samuel, and if kisses in the Bible are usually exchanged between close mates and relatives, one must conclude that in this case the kiss does not express affection or some other emotional sense, but rather it is part of the formal and solemn ceremony.

Joab then approaches Amasa with the accepted and known formalities of treaty-making,¹³ allegedly proposing to settle their differences by sealing a pact between them.

On the basis of this clear thematic parallelism between this episode and the former one with Abner, it is eminently probable that there too Joab applied the same tactic of misleading his victim by masquerading as a prospective treaty partner. *lʿdabbēr baššēlî* in this episode may then very well reflect or hint somehow at some formal and solemn words and other treaty formalities on the part of Joab which were interpreted as such by unwary Abner.

5) One final observation might add further support to the treaty setting suggested for this episode. Since *tôk haššaʿar* “the midst of the gate”¹⁴ into which Joab leads Abner perhaps refers to the open space between the city gates, the piazza where the assembly

¹² See for this Malul, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

¹³ The words *šālôm* “peace” and *ʔaḥî* “my brother”, declared probably as part of the *verba solemnia*, and the symbolic act of kissing.

¹⁴ 2 Sam 3:27; cf. also Jer 39:3 *šaʿar hattāwek* “the middle gate”.

and the town elders convene, and where all the legal and other transactions take place,¹⁵ I wonder whether its mention in this context also hints at the formal setting of treaty-making envisaged behind the episode. Joab then would have conducted unsuspecting Abner to the place where their formal pact would have allegedly been sealed. It is to be mentioned that the LXX translates this phrase to mean something like “to the *side* of the gate” (lit. “to the hip of the gate”), in accordance with its understanding that the midst of the gate could hardly have been the right place where the treacherous deed of Joab was about to take place.¹⁶ But if we follow the understanding that Joab used masquerading tactics to dupe his victim, “the midst of the gate” would fit perfectly his intention of putting Abner’s alertness to sleep. This, however, is not certain at all.

2. In sum, the phrase *l^edabbēr baššelfī* in 2 Sam 3:27 seems to be equivalent in its underlying meaning to such a technical expression from the vocabulary of treaty-making as *l^edabbēr šālôm*, and thus it too is to be identified as such a technical expression denoting “to talk peace” in the sense “to negotiate and seal a peace treaty”. These two expressions may then be either synonyms, in which case the *hapax* *š^elī* would be another word in biblical Hebrew denoting peace; or the word *š^elī* should be emended to *šālôm*. Since there is in biblical Hebrew the root *šlh* with its various derivatives,¹⁷ all denoting meanings from the semantic field of peace, quietude and the

¹⁵ See especially the vivid picture described in Ruth 4:1ff.; cf. 2 Sam 15:2ff.; Gen 23:10, 18; 34:20, 24; see Segal, *loc. cit.* (n. 1 above). In *b. Sanh.* 49:1 quoted above the Rabbis interpret Joab’s leading Abner “to the midst of the gate” as summoning him to court for a trial before the elders of the Sanhedrin for his murder of Asahel, Joab’s brother (2 Sam 2:18-23).

¹⁶ Cf. Driver, *loc. cit.* (n. 1 above).

¹⁷ *šālēw*, **šālû*, *šalwâ*, *š^elī*; see *HALAT* 1393a.

like, no emendation of the word š^elî is needed. It seems then that the common derivation of this word by most commentators from the root šlh is eminently possible.