

Biblical Hebrew *rb*, “to go surety,” and Its Nominal Forms

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Two nouns, *rbh* and *rbwn*, are derived from Biblical Hebrew *rb*, “to go surety.” Although they are both rarely attested in the Hebrew Bible, their meanings appear to be quite clear. The former, *rbh*, is attested in Prov. 17:18 which reads *dm hsr lb twq^c kp rb rbh lyny r^chw*. This verse is to be rendered as follows: “A man without common sense goes surety, guaranteeing in the presence of his fellow.” Although the difficulty of rendering the parallel clauses of the Hebrew into English blurs the original, there can be no doubt that *rbh* means “suretyship.”¹ This is assured by its parallelism to the suretyship hand-gesture in the first hemistich and is further corroborated by the rendering of the Versions.

However, it is questionable whether the graphemes *rbtm* attested in 1 Sam. 17:18, *w^t rbtm tqh*, are to be connected with *rbh*² in Prov. 17:18.³ The former clause has been translated “and take their pledge” (*JPS*), but a satisfactory explanation of the

1 On “surety, pledge” in the Hebrew Bible—which occurs only in non-legal literature—see B. L. Eichler in P. Achtemeier, ed., *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco, 1985), 571–72.

2 Note that according to the sage R. Joseph (TB *Shabbat* 56a and parallels) *rbh* in this usage is to be associated with *rb*, “to mix,” while according to Ibn Janah (*Sepher Haschoraschim*, ed. W. Bacher [Berlin, 1896], 383) it is to be connected to *rb*, “to be sweet.”

3 Contrast the following midrash found in the *Tanḥuma* (ed. S. Buber [Vilna, 1883; reprinted Jerusalem, 1964], 1:208):

*mr ysy ldwd bnw hry hsc^c lqyyw wtw hrbwt sl zqynk sc^crb t bnymyn myd byw sn^cmr nky
rc^crbnw l^c lk whw^c wtw mrbwtw sn^cmr w^ct hyk tpqwd lslwm w^ct rwbtm tqh w^cyn rwbtm l^c
rbwt mh sh dwd hlk wqyyw t hrbwt whrg t glyt (mr) l(w) hq(dwš) b(rwk) h(w^c) hyyk kšm
šntu t npšk l šwl šhw^c mšb^clw sl bnymn kšm sc^csh yhw^cdh zqynk l bnymn sn^cmr w^cth yšb n^c bdk
thi hn^cr bd l^cdw^cny kk ny nwt^cn byt hmqdš bgbwlk wgbwl bnymyn*

Said Jesse to David his son: “Behold it is time to fulfill that suretyship of your forefather who went surety for Benjamin on behalf of his father, as it is written ‘I will go surety for him’ [Gen. 43:9], therefore go and release him from his suretyship, as it is written ‘bring greetings to your brothers w^ct rwbtm tqh [1 Sam. 18:18]’—for the meaning of *rwbtm* is “suretyship.” What did David do? He went and fulfilled the suretyship and slew Goliath. The Holy One blessed be He said to him: “I swear that, just as you gave your life for Saul who is from the tribe of Benjamin, just as your forefather Judah did for Benjamin, as it is written “Therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord” [Gen. 44:33], I shall put the Temple within your tribal holdings and within the holdings of Benjamin.”

meaning of such a statement in this narrative has yet to be advanced.⁴ L. Krinetski,⁵ in a recent treatment of the story, shed no new light on the problem despite his opinion that *ʿrbh* “ist nicht die ‘Lohnung’, der ‘Sold’, sondern das ‘Pfand’, das die Ausführung eines Auftrage bezeugt.”⁶ Indeed, the Versions offer no support to the rendering of *ʿrbh* by “pledge.” Thus Targum Jonathan renders the clause *wyt ʿybhwn ʿtyt*,⁷ “and bring their report,” while the Peshitta translates *wsbrthwn ʿyt ʿly*, “and bring their tidings to me.” The Greek merely transliterates the obscure term.⁸ S. R. Driver therefore sought to reconcile the difficulties of the text by translating “‘and take their pledge’, i.e., bring back some token of their welfare.”⁹ However, his attempt sheds no new light on the problem and the crux remains as enigmatic as ever.

Quite different in meaning is the noun *ʿrbwn*. As will be demonstrated below, this is a Semitic vocable that can be said to have travelled a very long way. Attested in Biblical Hebrew where it is undoubtedly a cognate of, and semantically is to be equated with, Old Assyrian *erubbatum*, it is also found in the Aramaic documents from Elephantine.¹⁰ Through contacts between the Aegean world and that of Syro-Palestine, *ʿrbwn* was borrowed by the Greeks in whose literature and legal documents it is attested as *arrabōn* in a connotation alien to its Semitic origins.¹¹ Thence it is taken into Latin where *arrabo* has the by-forms *arrha* and *arra*. In French this Semitic vocable remains alive to this day in its Romanized form of *arrhes*. The journey of this vocable is not only in a direction away from its Semitic homeland but, interestingly enough, makes a “come-back” into Semitic. Thus the Hellenization of Syro-Palestine leads to the re-Semitization of Greek *arrabōn* as *ʿrbwn*, which is attested in Late Hebrew in its Greek connotation as well as in its original Semitic one. Syriac, under this Hellenistic influence, attests the vocable as *rhbwn*.¹² An investigation of many of the facets of the later peregrinations of the vocable *ʿrbwn* would lead far beyond the scope of this study. The discussion will therefore be limited to elucidating its meaning and use in Biblical Hebrew only.

4 According to H. M. Weil (“Gage et cautionnement dans la Bible,” *AHDO* 2 [1938], 214), *ʿrbh* is a kind of pledge that the brothers must send their father in return for the food that they have received from him. Weil compares Neh. 5:3 which, he believes, supports the idea of poor people offering pledges in return for food. However, the narrative in no way indicates that Jesse’s sons were at all impoverished, let alone that they would have to compensate their father for this present of food. As to Neh. 5:3, our own analysis of the verse shows his interpretation of it to be untenable. Note that Weil’s explanation is but a variant of the one set forth by Qimḥi (RADAQ).

5 “Ein Betrag zur Stilanalyse der Goliathperikope (1 Sam 17,1—18,5),” *Biblica* 54 (1973), 187–236.

6 *Ibid.*, 193.

7 Cf. Tg. Onq. on Gen. 37:2, where *wyb ʿyws ʿt dbtm rʿh ʿl ʿbyhm* is rendered *wʿytyw ʿyws ʿt ʿybhwn byš ʿPbwhwn*. In this connection, note the remarks of S. E. Loewenstamm (“*ʿbt = ʿrb?*” *Lešonēnu* 25 [1961], 113–14) in the course of his criticism of D. Leibel (“On *yʿbtwn*,” *Lešonēnu* 24 [1961], 253; see “*yʿbtwn-yʿrbwn*,” *Lešonēnu* 29 [1965], 222–25 for the latter’s reply [all in Hebrew]).

8 Cf. P. K. McCarter, Jr., *I Samuel* (Garden City, NY, 1980), 302.

9 *Notes on . . . Samuel*, 2nd rev. ed. (Oxford, 1913), 142; cf., e.g., H. W. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel* (London, 1964), 150.

10 See A. E. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford, 1923), 10:9, 13, 17; 42:5; 68, no. 10; cf. E. G. Kraeling, *The Brooklyn Museum Aramaic Papyri* (New Haven, 1953), 11:10. For the reading, see H. L. Ginsberg, “Notes on Some Old Aramaic Texts,” *JNES* 18 (1959), 148–49.

11 For a discussion of the form of Biblical Hebrew *ʿrbwn* in the light of Greek *arrabōn*, see A. Hurvitz, “*Achcharōn = Amqar(r)una = ʿeqrōn*,” *Lešonēnu* 33 (1968), 23.

12 See, e.g., E. Sachau, *Syrisches Rechtsbücher* (Berlin, 1907–1908), 12, 64, 110, 158.

The vocable ʿrbwn was recognized by the Massoretes to be attested in the Hebrew Bible only in the narrative concerning Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38. There, as the story makes abundantly clear, ʿrbwn denotes an object of value given to assure that a promised action will in fact take place. Judah obtains a harlot's services from the disguised Tamar in return for a future payment of one kid. To insure that Judah (who, after enjoying Tamar's services, will stand in relation to her as a debtor to a creditor) will fulfill his debt, Tamar exacts from him the deposit of an ʿrbwn (v. 17). The latter consists of his signet seal upon its cord and his staff (v. 18) and is to be kept until the payment is received. As v. 20, in confirmation of v. 18, explicitly states, this ʿrbwn was to be returned to its donor upon payment of the outstanding debt. There can be no doubt, then, that the proper translation of ʿrbwn is “pledge.”¹³ As has long been recognized, Biblical Hebrew ʿrbwn is to be considered a cognate of, and semantically to be equated with, Old Assyrian *erubbatum*.¹⁴

Modern Biblical scholarship asserts that ʿrbwn is also attested in Job 17:3.¹⁵ The Massoretic text of this verse reads *šymh nʾ ʿrbny ʿmk my hwʾ lydy ytqʿ*. The meaning of the second hemistich is quite clear, and is to be rendered “who (else) shall go surety for me?”¹⁶ Given the regular parallelism of ʿrb and *ytqʿ kp*, it is hardly surprising that the Massoretes vocalized ʿorbēnī, “go surety for me.” However, it is immediately obvious that, with this reading, the remaining vocables of the stich seem to dangle without any apparent interrelationship. Various attempts have therefore sought to complete the idea of *šymh nʾ* by supplying a direct object which is said to be elliptically omitted.

The favorite vocable to make up this clause is the noun *yḏ*, “hand.” Thus N. H. Tur-Sinai renders, “Put out now (thine hand), make me thy guarantor!” He explains the meaning of this statement in the following words:¹⁷

V. 3 stems from a story of a man who offered to stand surety for his friend, only to desert him when the time came to implement his promise. . . . The first sentence quotes the words of the traitorous surety to his friend: “Hold out” your hand, so that I may thrust mine into it. “make me a surety with (i.e. for) you.” ʿrbny is thus correctly vocalized as *piʿel* in a causative sense. — The second stich tells us how the friend's actual behavior belies his promise: In time of need “who is he that will strike hands with me (as a guarantor)?”

It is, however, quite obvious that this forced interpretation is beset with difficulties. There is simply not the slightest evidence in the text to support this fanciful scenario.

13 Contrast H. M. Weil, *AHDO* 2 (1938), 212–13, who argues that Heb. ʿrbwn in Genesis 38 has the same meaning as Greek *arrabōn*, a sense that it only acquires under Hellenistic influence. As will be shown below, none of the features of Greek *arrabōn* that distinguish it from Semitic ʿrbwn are in evidence in this narrative.

14 Despite the efforts of B. Kienast, “Bemerkungen zum altassyrischen Pfandrecht,” *WO* 8 (1975–1976), 218–27, the exact legal function of the Old Assyrian *erubbatum* has not been defined precisely enough to distinguish it from other Old Assyrian idioms denoting real security. Chief among these are the noun *šapartum* and the idiom *X ina pān C(reditor) dagālum*. We are still unable to determine whether the creditor enjoyed the use of the *erubbatum* while the debt was outstanding or whether, in the case of an *erubbatum* consisting of movables, the pledge had to be returned to the debtor or its assessed value could be applied to the payment of the debt.

15 See, e.g., G. Fohrer, *Das Buch Hiob*, *KAT* 16 (Gütersloh, 1963), 279.

16 Cf., e.g., N. C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (Philadelphia, 1985), 276–77; J. G. Janzen, *Job* (Atlanta, 1985), 125.

17 *The Book of Job: A New Commentary*, rev. ed. (Jerusalem, 1967), 272–73.

Furthermore, no causative use of *rb*, "to go surety," is anywhere attested. Indeed even if one were to accept the notion that some direct object of *šymh n*¹⁸ had been elliptically omitted, one would still have to contend with the vocable *mk*, a preposition that is never attested in association with the verb *rb*.

It is for considerations such as these that some modern commentators follow the reading of the Peshitta, *šymh n mškny lwtk*, and vocalize the Massoretic *rbny* as a noun *erbōnî*, "my pledge."¹⁸ Although the syntax appears somewhat awkward at first glance, it must be noted that 1 Sam. 9:23 contains the very similar construction of *šym* + direct object + preposition *m*, the entire phrase clearly denoting "to put aside." Accordingly the stich under consideration is seemingly to be rendered: "Please put my pledge aside." Such a reading and rendering, however, are not without their problems.

If the imagery of pledge and suretyship is to be understood, there must be parties to whom one can easily assign the roles of debtor and creditor, as well as surety. There can be no question that Job's position in this passage is that of a supplicant and debtor. This is undeniably true in the light of the second half of the verse with its explicit description of the suretyship hand-gesture. Job's creditor can be none other than YHWH, for it is He who has been exacting payment from Job.¹⁹ The role of potential surety can be played by no one except the friends, as Saadiah long ago recognized. For despite the generally held opinion that Eliphaz and company have no sympathy for Job, they, as Ginsberg has so convincingly shown,²⁰ are sincere comforters who at heart believe that Job is a decent man.

Having assigned the participants their roles according to the language of the metaphor, an attempt can be made to make some sense out of the verse as a whole. Central to this attempt is an understanding of the legal background on which the metaphor of this verse is based. Yet herein lies a problem: it would seem that in this verse Job is addressing two different persons, each with a separate, distinct role. It seems reasonable to assume that the first stich must be addressed to Job's creditor. The second stich, however, contains Job's plea for someone to go surety for him. This difficulty is generally explained away by directing Job's statement to YHWH so that Job seems to say "O God! be my pledge against Thyself! Who (else) will go surety for me?!"²¹ However, this interpretation violates not only the legal metaphor of the verse, but also the tenor of Job's attitude to YHWH. Indeed, in the light of Job's elaboration of YHWH's hostility to him in chapter 16, Job can hardly expect YHWH to reverse His attitude toward him on His own, as this alleged statement would imply. Furthermore, it is exceedingly strange to expect that a creditor, be he a mortal or a deity, should himself go surety for the very debt that is owed him. Such an action on the part of a creditor is tantamount to a remission of the debt, for in the event of the debtor's default, the surety is liable to make good the debt to the creditor; in this case this would amount to putting money from one's left pocket into one's right one! This

18 Cf., e.g., R. Gordis, *The Book of Job* (New York, 1978), 181.

19 As H. L. Ginsberg, "Job," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971), 10:116, so aptly paraphrased Job's complaint in 14:3, 16, 17, YHWH has been "jealously guarding Job's guilt as a usurer might guard the proofs of his debtor's indebtedness."

20 "Job the Patient and Job the Impatient," *VTS* 17 (1969), 100, 107-11.

21 See, e.g., J. Lévêque, *Job et son dieu: Essai d'exégèse et de théologie biblique* (Paris, 1970), 465-67. This interpretation was current among the medieval Jewish exegetes such as RASHI and Ibn Ezra.

interpretation is reduced to even greater absurdity when one bears in mind the surety's right of recourse against the defaulted debtor to claim from him the money he has paid the creditor; in this case the debtor would still be under obligation to the very same creditor-surety for the very same debt! It is therefore out of the question to assume that Job directs this statement to YHWH. Nor does it make any legal sense for Job to go surety for himself, as has been suggested.²²

Common legal practice does however envision that a surety may become a creditor. As just noted, this often occurs upon the debtor's default when the surety pays off the creditor; the surety's right of recourse against the debtor effectively transforms him into a creditor in regard to the debtor and his original loan. As we have demonstrated elsewhere in connection with the analysis of Prov. 20:16 (= Prov. 27:13),²³ it was not uncommon for a surety in risky ventures in the ancient Near East to make sure that a debtor had sufficient real security in order to protect him in the event of the debtor's default. What riskier venture can be imagined than siding with Job in his assertion of his freedom from indebtedness against YHWH, who is obviously claiming the opposite?! Therefore, Job pleads with Eliphaz and his friends not to side with YHWH and conventional wisdom but to accept his position and support him by going surety for him. To induce them and to secure their risk, Job offers a pledge. Thus he addresses the friends saying, "Please put aside my pledge! Who (else) will go surety for me?!"

22 Habel, *The Book of Job*, 277.

23 "Studies in Cuneiform Legal Terminology with Special Reference to West Semitic Parallels" (University Microfilms International 78-4361), 126-37.