

Language and Culture Show and Tell: Hebrew

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Wordplay in biblical Hebrew: The Atbash Cipher

In the Hebrew Bible we find several occurrences of coded language, the so-called *atbash* code. It is a simple code, whereby the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet (א) is substituted for the last (ת), the second letter (ב) for the second last (ש), and so forth:

א (ʾ)	↔	ת (t)
ב (b)	↔	ש (ś or sh)
ג (g)	↔	ך (r)
ד (d)	↔	ק (q)
ה (h)	↔	צ (ץ end of word; ṣ)
ו (w)	↔	פ (ף end of word; p)
ז (z)	↔	ע (ʿ)
ח (h)	↔	ס (s)
ט (t)	↔	נ (ן end of word; n)
י (y)	↔	מ (ם end of word; m)
כ (ך end of word; k)	↔	ל (l)

In the Hebrew Bible we find the *atbash* code in the Book of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 25.26; 51.1, 41). It is unclear whether the prophet Jeremiah resorted to this cipher out of fear of reprisals from his enemies or that he simply used it as a literary tool. Below I give you the biblical passages in English translation, and the word set in **bold** is also given in Hebrew. Now apply the *atbash* code

(as shown on the first page of this sheet) to these Hebrew words. Remember that Hebrew is written from right to left. Good luck! The answers are given upside down at the bottom of this sheet.

Jeremiah 25:26

[...] and all the kings of the north, near and far, one after the other, and all the kingdoms of the world which are on the face of the earth, and the king of **Sheshach** [...]

Who is this mysterious “king of Sheshach”? In Hebrew the word Sheshach is spelled with the following letters: ששח. If you apply the *atbash* code to these letters, what result do you get?

The answer is (do not forget to write from right to left): ____

Jeremiah 51:1

The Lord says, “Behold I will cause a destructive wind to blow against Babylon and the people who live in **Leb-qamai**”

What is meant with “Leb-qamai”? It is Hebrew for “the heart of my enemy”, yet this place name is not attested in ancient sources. If we apply the *atbash* code to the Hebrew letters לב קמ״י, we discover something interesting. What result do you get?

The answer is (do not forget to write from right to left): ____

Answers:
ששח = (b-b-l) Congratulations if you had the correct answer. You are a codebreaker in the making! If we apply the vowels to the letters, the word becomes *babel*, i.e. Babylon. The king of Sheshach is, in fact, the king of the Babylonian empire (the same cryptogram is employed in Jeremiah 51:41).
יגדל = (k-s-d-y-m) spelled with vowels as *kasdim*, is the Hebrew word for “Chaldea”. Well done! You have cracked the *atbash* code!