Richard C. Steiner

There are, in fact, any number of midrashic Aramaisms scattered throughout rabbinic literature, without any special Aramaic context to trigger them. Occasionally, the interlingual nature of the exegesis is acknowledged, as in the rabbinic interpretations of (1) Exod 12:4, מָתַת, as 'you shall slaughter' instead of 'you shall apportion'; (2) Gen 15:9, רַךָ, as 'ox' instead of 'turtle-dove'; (3) Hos 8:10, רַךָ, as 'they recte' instead of 'they offer a harlot's wage'; and (4) Ps 136:13, הֵרִיבָ, as 'for the circumcised' instead of 'to pieces'. In each of these derashot, there is an explicit reference to Aramaic רַךָ אִישִׁי הָאָדָם לְכָלַּיִּים וְאָמְרוּ לוֹ פִּים וְלָהֶם מִכָּלָיִם.

The derashot considered here are part and parcel of the overall exegetical program of the rabbis, who were determined to ferret out every imaginable type of ambiguity in the biblical text: lexical and syntactic, homophonic and homographic, synchronic and diachronic, intralingual and interlingual. For them, each derasha of the omniscience of Scripture.

[References and footnotes]

68. For a small collection, see L. Zunz, Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden historisch entwickelt (Frankfurt: Kauffmann, 1892) 339 no. 6. See also R. C. Steiner, "Aramaic in rabbinic literature, without any special Aramaic context to trigger them."

69. Occasionally, the interlingual nature of the exegesis is acknowledged, as in the rabbinic interpretations of (1) Exod 12:4, מָתַת, as 'you shall slaughter' instead of 'you shall apportion'; (2) Gen 15:9, רַךָ, as 'ox' instead of 'turtle-dove'; (3) Hos 8:10, רַךָ, as 'they recte' instead of 'they offer a harlot's wage'; and (4) Ps 136:13, הֵרִיבָ, as 'for the circumcised' instead of 'to pieces'. In each of these derashot, there is an explicit reference to Aramaic רַךָ אִישִׁי הָאָדָם לְכָלַּיִּים וְאָמְרוּ לוֹ פִּים וְלָהֶם מִכָּלָיִם.

70. Mekilta, Pisha 3.

71. מָתַת, מִכָּלַּיִּים (Jerusalem: Meiron, 1972) 28a, 90.


73. Tibbona Bubas, Bialalah §12.


75. That is, the orthographic ambiguities inherent in the unpointed consonantal skeleton of the Masoretic Text. The most common are derashot substituting one vowel for another and ו for ו. In each of these derashot, there is an explicit reference to Aramaic רַךָ אִישִׁי הָאָדָם לְכָלַּיִּים וְאָמְרוּ לוֹ פִּים וְלָהֶם מִכָּלָיִם.

76. That is, derasha based on Midrashic Hebraic usage.

Author's note: This article is affectionately dedicated to my dear teacher and friend, Moshe Greenberg, in appreciation for his scholarly, pedagogic, and personal inspiration, although it is impossible fully to express my indebtedness to him. I am grateful to Martin Ostwell, Joseph Parel, Barry Eichler, and Tovi Abush for advice on several passages discussed here.


2. Neusner; D. Z. Hoffman; J. Skinner; R. Driver; A. Dillmann; U. Cassuto (at 5:1); G. von Rad; N. M. Sarna; M. Weinfeld, in Elamite Famiyil Vard 1 'in Peri el Hadad ... m'et S. L. Gartner, vol. 1: Saper Belevah (newly revised; Tel Aviv: S. L. Gordan, 1972) 26; Westermann (at 5:1); cf. Keil and Delitzsch.

As Weinfeld notes, there is a similarity between our verse and Enuma Elish 11:16, "Amu begot his likeness (šumunša) Nudimmud (Ea)." What this passage might imply about Gen 5:3 is uncertain. Although it could mean that Nudimmud looked like Amu, the context does not favor this interpretation. Enuma Elish 11:12-20 contains a series of comparisons indicating whether successive generations of the gods were equal or superior to their predecessors. In this context, line 16 more likely means that Nudimmud was Amu's equal (cf. line 15, "Anu made Amu, his firstborn, equal [šumunša] to [his] equal"). For further discussion, see A. L. Oppenheim, "Mesopotamian Mythology," Or 41. 16 (1957) 28-9; for another view, see J. V. Kimmier-Wilson, "The Epic of Creation," in Documents from Old Testament Times (ed. D. Winton Thomas; New York: Harper and Row, 1901) 14.
wished to emphasize, the text would have underscored it by saying that ‘Adam begot a son in God’s likeness, after His image’ (bid’ma erōthu nēkānu), rather than ‘Adam begot a son in His likeness, after His image’. The wording of the text stresses Seth’s resemblance to Adam, not to God.

What is the point of stressing what Nachmanides seemed obvious? The third-generation Palestinian Amora R. Jeremiah b. Elazar inferred that begetting offspring in one’s own image was not inevitable, and that prior to his 130th year, Adam had in fact begotten children who did not resemble him:

All those years that the first man was under the ban (bēniddai, shunned by God) he begot spirits, bēd-demons, and Ill-demons, as it is said: “When Adam had lived for 130 years, he begot a son in his likeness, after his image.” This implies that until that time he begot offspring that were not after his image (b. Erub. 18b).

The inference that, as a consequence of God’s curse for having sinned in the Garden of Eden, Adam begot offspring unlike himself, namely spirits and demons, was fleshed out by R. David Qimron (Narbonne, Provence, 1160–1167). Quimron goes on to quote R. Jeremiah b. Elazar’s comment from b. Erub. 18b and then quotes the explanation of Sherira:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, cursed Adam and placed on him a sign such that his offspring did not resemble him, like women who bore (ve‘leddu) strange creatures such as those mentioned by our [Talmudic] rabbis (in b. Nid. 24b), “R. Judah, citing Samuel, stated: ‘If a woman aborted a fetus in the likeness (dimdu) of Lilith, its mother is unclean by reason of the birth [as stated in Leviticus 12], for it is a child though it has wings.’” And while the first man was under a curse he begot only strange creatures resembling bēd-demons and Ill-demons in the ugliness of their faces and backs, and they were evil spirits, just as Adam’s spirit was an evil spirit at the time he was accursed and there came forth from him evil spirits in which there is evil and no good. Similarly, it is people’s custom to call people of ugly likeness and evil people demons (bēdīn). But when the Holy One, Blessed be He, was pleased to remove the first man’s curse, he bore children who resembled him in comely appearance and good spirit, and that is what is meant when it is said: “He begot in his likeness after his image” (Gen 5:3).

What is behind the assumption that the opposite of begetting offspring who resemble their parents is begetting grotesque, malformed offspring? The answer is found in a curse formula that appears in Greek compacts. According to Aeschines, the members of the Delphic Amphictyony attacking Cirrhus in 590 B.C.E. swore that:

“If anyone should violate this, whether city, or private man, or tribe, let him be under the curse (empeiros) . . . that their land bear no fruit, nor may their wives bear children resembling their parents (genenetai othetēs), but monsters (te-rata), nor may the flocks beget offspring according to nature (kata phyton). . .”

Similarly, at Platea in 479 B.C.E., the Greeks, before battle with the Persians, are reported to have sworn:


If I observe what is written in the oath ... my (land) shall bear fruits—if not, it shall be barren; and (if I observe the oath) the women shall bear children resembling the parents (en eolika geneiurin)—if not, they shall bear monsters (terata); and (if I observe the oath) the flocks shall bear resembling (eolikos) the flocks—if not, monsters (terata).}

In these curses, 'resembling' (eolikos) parents refers to physical resemblance, as it does in Aristotle's discussion of children looking like their parents.10 'Monsters' (terata) is used in the sense of anomalies, that is, congenitally malformed persons or animals, as the term is used by Plato and Aristotle in discussing such phenomena as humans producing offspring that resemble animals or animals of one species producing offspring that resemble another.11 Some other curses, instead of saying 'nor may their wives bear children resembling their parents, but monsters,' say that 'the women shall not give birth according to nature' (mēte... kate physin, the phrase used of flocks in the oath against Cirrhus), which means the same thing.12

In these blessings and curses, then, looking like one's parents does not mean bearing a close resemblance to them but looking human rather than inhuman. The curse formula resembles the comments of Jeremiah b. Elazar, Sherira, and


11. L.S.I, s.v. terrae. See Plato Cratylus 393b, 394c: Aristotle Generation of Animals 767b6, 5: 769b10, 30, 775a32, ete. The word is used to this sense in English derivatives, such as "abnormal," "the branch of medicine and of developmental biology which deals with congenital defects and abnormal formations." (L. Brown [ed.], The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991).)

12. See J. Pouilloux, Choix d'inscriptions grecques (Paris: Société d'Édition les Belles Lettres, 1960) no. 53, line 7; G. Dittenberger, Syllaba inscriptionum graecarum (4th ed.; Hildesheim: Olms, 1960) 1,775, no. 527, lines 835f: M. Curdunica, Inscriptiones vercines (Rome: La Libreria dello stato, 1942) 3,50, lines 24-25. For the usage, see Plato Cratylus 393b, who was the phrase to illustrate the concept of monsters: "I am not speaking of monsters (terata). ... If a bear, contrary to nature (para physin), should bring forth a calf ... or if any offspring that is not human should be born from a hystrix ...."

"He Begat a Son in His Likeness after His Image" (Genesis 5:3) 143

Qimri about Gen 5:3 in three respects: it describes a curse, comparable to the "ban" that Adam was under after his expulsion from Eden; it refers to children who do not resemble their parents; and it describes them as unnatural or grotesque. Although the exegetical traditions speak of spirits, not monsters, these two descriptions are not incompatible, since Esh- and Ill-demons were thought to be monstrous or grotesque in appearance.13 In fact, in b. Nak. 24b (cited by Sherira), one type of malformed fetus, which looks like a human with wings, is called a lītī (the feminine form of Ill-demon), and in the Babylonian birth-omen collection Summa Iṣbu, one type of malformed baby is called a lamām, the Sumerogram for a lamassatu- or lamassu-demon (Summa Iṣbu 2 67).14

Under these blessings and curses is the concern about severely malformed babies that is reflected in the attention given to the subject in ancient literature. Talmudic sources mention the birth of a two-headed human (b. Menah. 33a)15 and discuss hermaphrodites a number of times (e.g., m. Bik. 4; b. Bik. 2).16 Usually Talmudic sources deal with malformations when discussing the halakhic obligations of women after aborting a fetus, depending on whether the fetus had a human form (ṣaḥrat [hā]a‘adim) or looks like a lītī-demoness or, wholly or partly, like an animal (m. Nid. 3:2; m. Ker. 1:3; b. Nid. 22b-24b).17 Since the Talmud refers to these only as aborted fetuses rather than live births (probably because such serious malformations are more common in aborted fetuses than in live births), its discussion, and R. Sherira's citation of it, are not strictly

13. See, for example, the descriptions in midrashic texts of the Ill-demon Qeqeb's head resembles that of a calf, with a single horn emerging from his forehead, and he rolls like a jar or ball; he is covered with nails, hair, and eyes; and a single eye is set in his chest (Ovam. Rabb. 13:1; Lam. Rabb. 1:3 [ed. Rubner, p. 63]; Midr. Ps. 913 [ed. Rubner, p. 397]). Prazema, the Mesopotamian "king of the evil lītī-demons" has four wings, a grotesque face, long horns, lion's claws, bird's talons as hind feet, and a scorpion's sting (see W. G. Lambert, "Inscribed Puzuzu Heads from Babylon," Forschungen und Berichte [Berlin: Akademie, 1990] 12:421-1; H. W. Haussig [ed.], Wörterbuch der Mythologie, 1: Götter und Mythen im Vorderen Orient (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett 1965) 46).

14. B. V. Lifshitz, The Omen Series Summa Iṣbu (Locust Valley, N.Y.: Augustin, 1970) 52. See S. Lieberman, "‘F specific’ gphn," in Studies in Memory of Moses Scherer, 1874-1941 (Qebey middin‘il-zeker Moseh Schar) (ed. L. Ginzberg and A. Weiss; New York: Hétsi‘at Yaladot Zikhron Moseh Schar, 1941) 185. References to anomalous human births in post-Talmudic sources of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are cited by J. Jastrow, Jewish Medical Ethics (New York: Bloch, 1975) 379 = 194. The earliest explicit reference in Jewish sources is in b. Sanh. 67a: "women in their uncleanliness will give birth to monsters (prodigia)," part of a prediction of disasters. I know of no clear reference to the subject in the Bible. Mephibosheth's lameness, even if congenital, is not a birth defect of the same order. Exod 2:2, "When she saw that he was good," could mean that Moses' mother saw that he was normal, but the alternative was not necessarily a severe malformation.


16. Examples are fish, locusts, insects, creeping things, beasts, wild animals, birds, sea monsters (mehr), and snakes (sandit). In some cases the fetus has the body of a goat and the face of a human or vice versa, the face of a human but one eye of a beast; in other cases the fetus lacks or has extra bodily parts or has partly indistinguishable parts and features.
relevant to the subject. A Babylonian list of portents lists an incident when a woman gave birth to a child that "had tusks(?) like (those of) an elephant." The Babylonian omen series Summa Ibu lists the predictive significance of women giving birth to children with a wide variety of malformations, including excess eyes, heads, and limbs, animal-like and demon-like features, and other types of malformation like those of the fetuses mentioned in Tractate Midrash. 

The subject is also common in classical literature. Apart from the discussion by Aristotle and the reference by Plato, mentioned above, classical sources mention the birth of monsters that are half man and half beast, a pig with hawk's talons, as well as "hermaphrodites, two-headed animals and children, . . . excess limbs, misplaced body parts, missing limbs or other body parts, appearance like various animals . . . ."

Malformations of these sorts are unfortunately well known even in modern times. "There are human beings with one eye in the forehead, without nose, or with 'flippers' in place of limbs, . . . children covered by a scaly integument that . . . resembles that of a fish, . . . double-headed, four limbed creatures, . . . mouthless individuals." In 1991, surgeons in Tampa, Florida, performed plastic surgery on a baby who was born with Apert Syndrome. She had "a stovepipe-shaped head, bulging eyes, a concave face, gaping mouth and cleft palate. [Her] hands were grotesque mittens, two lumps of flesh with no fingers and only a stub of a thumb. A bone protruded from the bottoms of the infant's toesless, twisted feet." According to the story about the operation in The St. Petersburg [Florida] Times, "Apert is one of a cluster of syndromes that causes facial deformity and webbing of the hands and feet. It occurs once in every 160,000 births and afflicts all races and both genders." A year earlier, sur-

18. CT 29 49:23; cited in CAD A/1 200a.
19. Aristotle's comment is relevant to Babylonian omens: when people say that an animal has the head of another animal, they do not mean it literally but are referring only to resemblance (Aristotle, Generation of Animals 769b, 14ff. [CL, pp. 417–19]). The malformations mentioned in Summa Ibu include: looking like a lion, wolf, dog, pig, ball, elephant, ass, ram, cat, snake, tortoise, bee, bird, tiger-like monster, the head of various animals, children with two heads, with animal-like eyes, face, ears, head, horns, or foot, or a single eye on the forehead; children with conjoined feet or more than two feet or with a beard or grey hair. Summa Ibu uses the verb 'give birth' (alihata) rather than 'miscarry' (al ihabat alabi). However, in some cases, where the women give birth to bodily parts, a, to, most have miscarriages in mind (see Leichty, Omen Series, p. 5).
20. Ibid., 14:46; Delort, Sterilités mystérieuses, Lieberman, "Tanantâ alâhi" q2:8; n. 11. See, for example, Herodotus I.84; Livy 41.51.13; Tacitus Annals 12.64; Scriptores Historiae Augustae, Antoninus Pius 9.3; Ammianus Marcellinus 10.12.19 (all cited by Lieberman).

"He Begot a Son in His Likeness after His Image" (Genesis 5:3) genous at the same hospital reconstructed the face of an 18-year-old boy who "had no nose. His right eye socket was just above his ear. A large hole in the bone of his forehead left his brain protected only by a flap of wrinkled skin." According to the chief surgeon, when the boy first arrived at the hospital, "he was what you call a monster." When he left, his mother said that he "does not look like an angel—be he human now." Reports of two-headed babies, though rare, appear regularly, one as recently as July 28, 1996, in Tijuana, Mexico.

The attention devoted to this subject in antiquity probably stems from at least two factors: such births were not only heart-breaking, but were regarded as portentous (hence their use as omens), and they were probably more frequent than they are today. According to E. V. Leichty:

[Wo]e can be quite certain that the rate of abnormal birth was much greater in ancient times. Women in the ancient Near East must have conceived much more often than modern women because of high infant mortality and the lack of any type of birth control. In addition, the lack of medicine and prenatal controls can be assumed to have resulted in a much higher proportion of miscarriages. Since the probability of anomalies is increased after the fifth or sixth pregnancy, this in itself would increase considerably the ratio of malformations to births.

To this we may add the likelihood that cases of Apert Syndrome, now the second most common craniosfacial deformity, were probably more common in ancient and polygamous societies, in which wives often died in childbirth and men remarried or continued to marry and father children in their older years, since "men in their 50s have more than 20 times the risk of fathering Apert's syndrome children than men in their 20s."
The resemblance of the Greek curses to the comments of R. Jeremiah b. Elazar, Sherira and Qimih is striking; it is, in fact, more striking than their resemblance to Gen 5:3 itself. As noted above, the rabbinic comments all refer to a curse or a ban, they refer to children who do not resemble their parents, and they describe them as unnatural or grotesque. These similarities make one wonder whether the curse motif of bearing monstrous offspring—known to me only from the Greek world, not from the Near East—had made its way to Palestine, with so many other aspects of Greek culture, by R. Jeremiah's time (cf. 2 Esdr 5:8, cited in n. 15), and from there to tenth-century Babylonia either as curses or in some expanded version of R. Jeremiah's comment. Their resemblance to Gen 5:3 itself is less explicit. Perhaps this is simply because the verse describes a normal birth; like the Greek blessing that is a counterpart of the curse, it need not spell out that this is a blessing or state that the normal birth is non-monstrous.

It is natural to wonder whether the biblical verse reflects, or is reacting to, a mythological theme. Does it aim to counter some myth according to which the first humans gave birth to malformed, monstrous offspring? Mesopotamian and Greek myths refer to monsters in primordial times, but they are born before the human race comes into existence.27 A Sumerian myth tells how, some time after Enki created humanity, he and Ninhmeh created eight humans with bodily defects (blind, crippled, incontinent, sexless, etc.). In the myth, however, they are not the offspring of humans, though they are obviously forerunners of various types of handicapped people who will be born to humans later.28 Seth, the son of the first couple, is not the antithesis of any of the above. Closer to what we are looking for is Oannes, the name used by Berossus for the first of the seven antediluvian sages—known as apkallu in Akkadian—who taught mankind the arts and sciences of civilization.29 According to Berossus, Oannes emerged from the Persian Gulf in the reign of the first human king. He had the body of a fish but had a human head growing beneath his fish-head and human feet growing from his fish-tail. In fact, cuneiform sources say that all seven of these sages were "pure pursa-fish of the sea."30 In the opinion of Anne D. Kilmer, anomalous births are "exactly the perception that lies behind the pursa-fishmen apkallu mythology which no doubt originated in folkloric speculations based on observations of fossil development."31 Scholars agree that one of these sages, probably Oannes, is the figure known as Adapa in Akkadian sources.32 Now in the older myth of Adapa, Adapa is described as the son of the god Ea (Adapa B, 12), but he is also said to be mortal (A, 4) and 'human offspring' (Zimmilitiu, D, 12). Conceivably, then, Genesis, with its naturalistic conception of the origins of civilization,33 is reacting to a tradition that civilization was founded by anomalous offspring of the first humans. However, nothing else is presently known of Adapa or of Seth to suggest that they are counterparts of each other and that Gen 5:3 is part of this reaction.34

In any case, it seems that the view of R. Jeremiah b. Elazar, Sherira, and Qimih may well be correct. The facts that "begetting children who resemble their parents" refers to normal rather than malformed, inhuman-looking offspring; that anomalous births were relatively more common in antiquity; and that the subject received considerable attention in ancient literature lead color to their view that Gen 5:3 means that Adam fathered a normal child with a human appearance. These facts do not support the further, aggadic, inference that Adam previously begot demons or monsters. But they also suggest, since birth anomalies were usually considered ominous, that the birth of a normal child to Adam was a sign of blessing, in fulfillment of God's blessing in v. 2.

27. In Hesiod's Theogony the offspring of Earth and Sky include the three Cyclopes who, though "in all other respects they were like gods (theoi ektos)," had one round eye in the middle of their foreheads, and three other sons who each had 100 arms and 50 heads (lines 139–52). In Enuma Eli!, Tiamat bears 11 monsters to battle Marduk, and Marduk himself has 4 eyes and 4 arms (1.95, 132–46). In Berossus's retelling of Enuma Eli!, these offspring of Marduk are called monster-like (teratos) "monsters"; they have 2 or 4 wings and 2 horns, one body, and 2 heads, and both male and female sexual organs; others are men with heads and legs or feet of animals, or as composite animals (S. M. Freeden, The Babylonian of Berossus [SANE 1/5; Malibu, Calif.: Undena, 1978] 14–15, for the Greek text, see T. Jacob, Die Fragmenten der griechischen Hesiod SC (Leiden: Brill, 1928) 169–71).


31. A. D. Kilmer, "The Mesopotamian Counterparts of the Biblical nippur, Perspectives on Language and Text: Essays and Poems in Honor of Francis I. Anderson's Sixtieth Birthday, July 27, 1983 (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenmann, 1987) 43 n. 14. The main point of Kilmer's article is to suggest that the apkallu are the counterparts of the nippur. If that were the case, one might argue that the point of Gen 5:3 is to contrast Seth with the nippur, but since there is no evidence that the nippur were thought of as culture founders, their identification with the apkallu is hard to sustain.


34. In postbiblical lore, Seth and his descendants do play a role analogous to that of the culture-bearing Babylonian apkallu, but that may well be due to the adoption of the motif from Berossus, whose work was known to Josephus (Ant. 1.93, etc.), See Josephus, Ant. 1.69–71, Gen. Rab. 26.5, and other sources cited by L. Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909–38) 1.121–22 and 5.149–50 n. 55. For the relationship between the Babylonian myth of the seven sages and Genesis 4 and 5, see W. W. Hallo, Origins: The Ancient Near Eastern Background of Some Modern Western Institutions (Leiden: Brill, 1996) 1–15.