


Making Sense of Fragmentary Qumran Aramaic Texts: Two Case Studies on Contradictory Grammatical vs. Content or Genre Considerations

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ABSTRACT: Fragmentary ancient texts are notoriously difficult to interpret. In this article, I offer case studies on two short sections of Qumran Aramaic texts. Part 1 analyses the various possible syntactic parsings of 4Q242 1–3, 4 and assesses the extent to which they conform to the grammar of Qumran Aramaic. Based on this assessment, I present my interpretation of the line and offer a potential reconstruction for the end of the preceding line 3. Part 2 shows how methodological decisions of the modern editors of 4Q560 1 I, 3; 5 on the text's similarity to later Jewish incantations (or lack thereof) have yielded completely different interpretations. In this respect, I argue that the Aramaic is ambiguous, allowing for at least two different coherent readings.

KEYWORDS: Dead Sea Scrolls, Aramaic, 4Q242 *Prayer of Nabonid*, 4Q560 *Magical Text*, syntax, genre, incantation

Reading is a complex and multi-faceted mental task. It involves identifying letters, relating them to sounds, and interpreting these in accordance with the grammar of the language, i.e., deciding how the graphically represented strings of phonemes combine into words (and which words), and how these form sentences, and finally, a coherent text. Even under ideal circumstances—say, when all graphemes are discernible and the reader is a competent, perhaps even a native speaker of the written language—reading remains a demanding task, though constant training helps to perform it swiftly and successfully. Unfortunately, when it comes to Qumran Aramaic texts we, modern readers, are very far removed from these ideal circumstances across all stages of the reading process. The elementary task of identifying letters is often complicated by smears, stains, or broken letters, and our knowledge of the Qumran Aramaic grammar—and even more so the lexicon—is partial at best.¹

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¹ The deficiencies in our knowledge of the grammar are most evident in the syntax, where the small corpus size complicates such things as establishing word-order rules, at least for the rarer types of sentences, while also affecting the morphology; see e.g., E.M. Cook, “The Causative Internal Passive in Qumran Aramaic,” *AS* 8/1–2 (2010) 5–12. For a discussion on how the limited corpus size impacts our knowledge of the lexicon in particular, see E.M. Cook, “Qumran Aramaic, Corpus Linguistics, and Aramaic Retroversion,” *DSD* 21/3 (2014) 356–384, esp. 358–367.

To make matters worse, the ravages of time have, in most cases, left us with only fragments of the original compositions, with broken sentences and a lack of context being further impediments for the modern reader of the Qumran Aramaic texts. Any meaningful reading of such fragmentary texts involves hypothesising about the relationship, syntactic and content-wise, between the surviving words and what may have preceded and followed them. Filling in the gaps, i.e., forming an opinion about the parts of the original composition that were lost to time, is therefore an integral part of parsing, understanding, and translating fragmentary Qumran Aramaic texts. In a circular move that hopefully brings us closer to the long-lost historical truth, we take our clues from different fields: From our imperfect knowledge of the language and from what we understand to be the text's genre and general content, and perhaps its intention. Since we can only work with educated guesses, our understanding—even of the surviving bits of the text—is inevitably tentative, even if it is almost universally accepted or finds its way into a standard edition. It is imperative to remember the interpretative ambiguity of most strings of letters in fragmentary texts that do not lend themselves unequivocally to an interpretation as complete Qumran Aramaic sentences.

This article presents two case studies of specific parts of the *Prayer of Nabonid* (4Q242) and the so-called *Magical Text* (4Q560). In both cases, reconstructing the immediate and broader context of the preserved text is challenging as the grammar, genre, and content are not easily reconciled. The modern reader's choice of which hints to prioritize during reconstruction affects the reading of the preserved string of letters, which in turn affects the general interpretation of the text.

1. *Prayer of Nabonid* 4Q242 1–3, 4

The four fragments of 4Q242 contain less than eighty words (or parts of words) from a literary composition that centres on the Babylonian king Nabonid.² Here, I provide the combined (yet still fragmentary) text of fragments 1–3, lines 3–4, from the beginning of the work:³

כתיש הוית שנין שבע ומן [די] שוי א] 3
 וחטאי שבק לה גזר והוא יהודי מ] 4

2 For a general overview of the composition and material aspects of the scroll, see D. Machiela, *A Handbook of the Aramaic Scrolls from the Qumran Caves. Manuscripts, Language, and Scribal Practices* (STDJ 140; Leiden: Brill 2022) 256–259. R.G. Kratz, “Nabonid in Qumran,” *Babylon. Wissenskultur in Orient und Okzident* (eds. E. Cancik-Kirschbaum – M. van Ess – J. Marzahn) (Berlin: de Gruyter 2011) 253–720 offers a thorough synthesis of previous research and discusses the main textual and interpretational cruxes.

3 The material reading of these two lines is not contested. I follow the official edition: J.J. Collins, “4QPrayer of Nabonidus ar,” *Qumran Cave 4.XVII. Parabiblical Texts, Part 3* (eds. G. Brooke et al.) (DJD 22; Oxford: Clarendon 1996) 83–93.

That line 4 is difficult to interpret is readily admitted by many, and various suggestions have been made over the years as to how the six preserved words combine into sentences.⁴ The only unambiguous syntactical break is marked by the conjunction <ו> 'and' in the string והוא יהודי.⁵ In other words, והוא יהודי 'and he is a Jew' is an independent sentence, which might originally have comprised more constituents, now lost to a lacuna. The syntactical parsing of the four preceding words is contested. The function of the conjunction <ו> in והטאי 'and my sin(s)' is ambiguous due to the preceding lacuna at the end of line 3. It could coordinate two noun phrases ('[something] and my sin(s)'), which would imply that והטאי was the last word of a sentence that is now lost (or perhaps mostly lost) along with the end of line 3.⁶ Alternatively, the conjunction could mark the beginning of a new sentence, in which והטאי would be the direct object. This sentence could either comprise all four remaining words, i.e., והטאי שבק לה גזר 'and my sin, a diviner remitted (it)'; or just three: 'and my sin, he remitted (it)'.⁷ The latter interpretation was adopted by John J. Collins in the official edition and is followed in almost all recent publications.⁸ Let us now examine it in more detail.⁹

Reading line 4]מ והוא יהודי מ as 'and as for my sin, he remitted it. A diviner – he was a Judaeen fr[om ...' has two advantages.¹⁰ On the lexical level, it interprets the two words שבק והטאי as a collocation that is also known from other Qumran Aramaic

4 See, e.g., the following overviews: F. García Martínez, "The Prayer of Nabonidus. A New Synthesis," *Qumran and Apocalyptic*, 2 ed. (STDJ 9; Leiden: Brill 1994) 116–136, esp. 125–126; Collins, "4QPrayer," 90–91; Kratz, "Nabonid in Qumran," 257–258; B. Pascut, "Jesus and the Jewish Diviner. The Use and Misuse of 4Q242," *Authoritative Texts and Reception History. Aspects and Approaches* (eds. D. Batovici – K. de Troyer) (BibInt 151; Leiden: Brill 2017) 141–153, esp. 144–148. A.D. Knight-Messenger, *The Place of the Court Tales in Early Jewish Literature. Form, Development, and Function* (Diss. McMaster University; Hamilton, Ontario 2022) 115, n. 229.

5 This is because <ו> 'and' cannot be interpreted as coordinating two noun phrases in this case.

6 Thus, e.g., J.T. Milik, "«Prière de Nabonide» et autres écrits d'un cycle de Daniel. Fragments araméens de Qumrân 4," *RB* 63 (1956) 407–415; K. Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer. Samt den Inschriften aus Palästina, dem Testament Levis aus der Kairoer Genisa, der Fastenrolle und den alten talmudischen Zitaten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1984–2004) I, 223, II, 139.

7 A. Dupont-Sommer, "Exorcismes et guérisons dans les écrits de Qoumrân," *Congress Volume Oxford 1959* (eds. G.W. Anderson et al.) (VTSup 7; Leiden: Brill 1960) 246–261 was the first to advocate the former reading, and P. Grelot, "La prière de Nabonide (4 Q Or Nab). Nouvel essai de restauration," *RevQ* 9 (1978) 483–495 established the latter.

8 Collins, "4QPrayer," 89; Kratz, "Nabonid in Qumran," 256; E. M. Cook, *Dictionary of Qumran Aramaic* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 2015) 81; Pascut, "Jesus and the Jewish Diviner," 149 (by implication); A.B. Perrin, "Symptoms and Symbols, Prayers and Portents. Diagnostic Physiognomy and the Diviner in the Aramaic Prayer of Nabonidus (4Q242)," *Science in Qumran Aramaic Texts* (ed. I. Fröhlich) (Ancient Cultures of Sciences and Knowledge 1; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2022) 43–64, esp. 45–46.

9 The respective arguments are often repeated in many different publications. The references provided are limited to recent representative studies.

10 Moreover, a psycholinguistic explanation can be provided for why contemporary readers favour this interpretation. Indeed, this is arguably preferable when reading the fragment (and not the original, complete text), since it interprets its first word as sentence-initial and thus constitutes a maximalist interpretation that leaves no loose ends, no syntactically unintegrated words (from the end of the preceding sentence).

texts and other Aramaic dialects.¹¹ On the level of the content (and the underlying theology), it avoids assigning the role of remitting sins to the diviner and rather reserves it to God, which fits what we know about the contemporaneous Jewish approach.¹² However, this interpretation presupposes two unusual and marked syntactical constructions whose grammatical problems and pragmatic implications are not always acknowledged and have not been discussed comprehensively. One set of difficulties revolves around the clause *והוא יהודי מן*. There is no doubt that this is a circumstantial nominal clause, i.e., a sentence that is syntactically independent but logically subordinate, which provides background information on the noun *גזר* ‘diviner’. The circumstantial clause is a marked construction that stresses the Jewish identity of the diviner, much more so than possible alternatives such as an attributive adjective (*גזר יהודי* ‘a Jewish diviner’) or a relative clause (*גזר די יהודי היה* ‘a diviner, who was a Jew’ or *גזר די מן בני יהודי* ‘a diviner, who was one of the Jews’). Since the information on the diviner’s Jewishness was hardly trivial with respect to a man performing such a function, and probably contrary to the reader’s expectations, the use of a marked construction is easily explained. However, not only is the construction marked, but it also constitutes a parenthetical phrase, i.e., the clause interrupts the sentence to which it is attached.¹³ The circumstantial clause follows the subject (*גזר*) and separates it from the rest of the main sentence (including the predicate) that is now lost in the lacuna at the end of the line. A circumstantial clause that is parenthetically inserted into its host sentence is highly unusual and unattested in Qumran Aramaic (and all its predecessors). Rather, circumstantial clauses usually follow the main clause to which they relate.¹⁴ This is not to say that the interpretation as parenthesis is impossible (parenthesis being disruptive by definition), but it should be stressed that the alternative, which takes the noun *גזר* as the subject of the preceding sentence (e.g., *והטאי שבק לה גזר*, ‘and my sin, a diviner remitted [it]’) is much more in line with what we know about the grammar of circumstantial clauses in Qumran Aramaic and other ancient Aramaic dialects.

11 E.g., Kratz, “Nabonid in Qumran,” 256; Pascut, “Jesus and the Jewish Diviner,” 144; H. Gzella, “שבק,” *ThWAT* IX, 740–742, esp. 742.

12 E.g., É. Puech, “La prière de Nabonide (4Q242),” *Targumic and Cognate Studies. Essays in Honour of Martin McNamara* (eds. K.J. Cathcart – M. Maher) (JSOTSup 230; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1996) 208–227, esp. 216–217; Pascut, “Jesus and the Jewish Diviner,” 146, 148–149. J.A. Fitzmyer, “The Aramaic Language and the Study of the New Testament,” *JBL* 99 (1980) 5–21, esp. 15–16 takes the middle ground by interpreting the diviner as a mediator for God’s forgiveness, a concept with New Testament parallels.

13 In modern translations, this is often made explicit by the use of dashes (e.g., Collins, “4QPrayer,” 89) or parentheses (e.g., Kratz, “Nabonid in Qumran,” 256).

14 For Qumran Aramaic: T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Qumran Aramaic* (ANESSup 38; Leuven: Peeters 2011) 255–256; for Biblical Aramaic: H. Bauer – P. Leander, *Grammatik des Biblisch-Aramäischen* (Halle a.d. Saale: Niemeyer 1927) 352–353; for Imperial Aramaic: T. Muraoka – B. Porten, *A Grammar of Egyptian Aramaic*, 2 ed. (HdO 1.32; Leiden: Brill 2003) 321–322; for Old Aramaic: R. Degen, *Altaramäische Grammatik der Inschriften des 10.–8. Jh. v. Chr.* (AKM 38; Wiesbaden: Steiner 1969) 128. The same is also true for Biblical Hebrew, with its larger corpus: T. Zewi, *Parenthesis in Biblical Hebrew* (Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics 50; Leiden: Brill 2007) 64–101.

The interpretation adopted by Collins in the official edition is unlikely in light of Qumran Aramaic language use.

A second set of difficulties revolves around the interpretation of the first three words לה והטאי שבק לה ‘and as for my sin, he remitted it’. Here, too, the interpretation implies a marked construction with the direct object in a sentence-initial position.¹⁵ It highlights the sin, which has not been mentioned before (but might be contextually implied). In this case, it is more difficult to offer a possible rationale for the marked construction, but foreshadowing would seem to be a good candidate. The sin is promoted to the sentence-initial position to stress its relevance for what is to follow.

While the marked nature of the sentence-initial direct object is obvious, the syntax of the sentence is ambiguous, and two parsings have been offered. The exact function of לה is the crux of the sentence.¹⁶ Some have interpreted the word as a direct object marker with a pleonastic pronoun and, consequently, deemed it a *casus pendens* construction with the object dislocated and moved to sentence-initial position: ‘and my sin, he remitted it’.¹⁷ To evaluate this reading, it is helpful to contrast the use of the direct object marker <לה> with its Qumran Aramaic alternatives. For pronominalized objects, the synthetic construction with object suffixes is the default way of expressing the direct object of verbal forms other than participles. I could find only two examples in which the preposition <לה> with a pronoun designates a direct object.¹⁸ The construction in 1QapGen XIII, 16 probably results from attraction to the preceding participle, while the analytic construction in 1QapGen XIX, 19 enables fronting and thus serves a pragmatic purpose.¹⁹ None of these factors applies to 4Q242 1–3, 4. Parsing לה as a direct object marker not only assumes a rare analytic construction, it also presupposes an atypical function for it. Moreover, the choice of the direct object marker <לה>, not ת, is not intuitive for a verb that also takes dative complements (e.g., 11QtgJob XXXVIII, 2–3, with the same collocation).²⁰ The interpretation of לה as a direct object marker, and the whole sentence as a *casus pendens* construction, is somewhat unorthodox in light of what we know about Qumran Aramaic.

Others have opted for an alternative parsing of לה as a *dativus ethicus*, a co-agentive dative construction with a pronoun referring to the grammatical subject.²¹ This enables the sentence to be read without the *casus pendens* but with a fronted object retained: ‘my

15 E.g., Kratz, “Nabonid in Qumran,” 258.

16 I disregard the suggestion by E. Lipiński, “גור,” *ThWAT* IX, 162–166, esp. 165 to interpret לה שבק לה as a defective spelling of the eastern Aramaic *qtil lē* construction.

17 E.g., Grelot, “La prière de Nabonide,” 485; Collins, “4QPrayer,” 89; Kratz, “Nabonid in Qumran,” 256.

18 The two examples (4Q196 6,1; 11, 2) mentioned by Muraoka, *Grammar*, 213 are misclassified and the preposition rather expresses a dative relation. Muraoka, *Grammar*, 215 also provides three examples of the direct object marker ת with pronominal suffixes.

19 Muraoka, *Grammar*, 213 points to the function of the latter example. The very fragmentary 4Q201 14, 2 (H. Drawnel, *Qumran Cave 4. The Aramaic Books of Enoch*, 4Q201, 4Q202, 4Q204, 4Q205, 4Q206, 4Q207, 4Q212 [Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019] 131) could be a third attestation, also with a fronted object.

20 Cf., e.g., H. Gzella, “שבק,” *ThWQ* III, 833 for the dative complement.

21 E.g., Dupont-Sommer, “Exorcismes,” 259.

sin(s) he remitted'. The *dativus ethicus* reading fits the word order of the fragment, since this construction always follows the verb immediately.²² Yet, in Qumran Aramaic—as in other early Aramaic dialects—the *dativus ethicus* is employed mainly with verbs of motion and sometimes with stative verbs.²³ It is not used with transitive verbs such as שִׁבַּק.²⁴ Hence, the *dativus ethicus* reading can be easily disregarded. What implications should these grammatical considerations have for the interpretation of the fragmentary line 4? First, it is unlikely that these six words comprised two highly marked constructions with a disruptive syntax—a *casus pendens* in the first sentence, and a parenthetical sentence in the second. While it is impossible to avoid all grammatical oddities outlined above, the line's interpretation should (as far as possible) conform to common Qumran Aramaic usage. Arguably, this is best achieved by dividing the words into sentences as follows: מן והטאי שבק לה גזר והוא יהודי] and my sin. A diviner remitted it. And he was a Judaean fr[om ...] This reading dispenses with the *casus pendens*, parenthesis, and also the *dativus ethicus*. Of the grammatical problems discussed above, only the unusual analytical construction with the direct object marker לה (without an obvious pragmatic function) remains. Additionally, this reading implies the theological oddity of a diviner, and not God, remitting sins.²⁵

This grammatically plausible reading of line 4 also offers a starting point for speculating on possible reconstructions of the preceding lacuna at the end of line 3. I propose the following:

		3	כתיש הוית שנין שבע ומן [די] שוי א[להא עין עלי ועל צלתי
		4	והטאי שבק לה גזר והוא יהודי מן]
3	I was stricken for seven years. But after G[od] had considered [me, my prayer]		
4	and my sin (benevolently), a diviner remitted it, and he was a Jew fr[om]		

This reconstruction is roughly identical in length to the one offered in the official edition.²⁶ It incorporates Klaus Beyer's idea to read a temporal clause followed by the main sentence, which accounts nicely for the lack of a conjunction at the sentence break (שבק and not **ושבק).²⁷ In reconstructing the predicate and subject as שוי א[להא עין], I have modified

22 S.E. Fassberg, "The Ethical Dative in Aramaic," *AS* 16 (2018) 101–116, esp. 103.

23 Muraoka, *Grammar*, 223 ('centripetal lamed'); Fassberg, "Ethical Dative," 108, 109; R. Contini, "Considerazioni sul presunto dativo etico in aramaico pre-cristiano," *Études sémitiques et samaritaines offertes à Jean Margain* (eds. Ch.-B. Amphoux – A. Frey – U. Schattner-Rieser) (Lausanne: Zèbre 1998) 83–94, esp. 89–92.

24 The Qumran Aramaic collocation חזו לכון 'observe!' is rather a *dativus commodi* (Muraoka, *Grammar*, 223; *pace* Contini, "Considerazioni," 90), comparable to the German 'seht euch [direct object] an'. Fassberg, "Ethical Dative," 108 erroneously recorded the use of the *dativus ethicus* with the transitive verb $\sqrt{\text{tbr}}$ 'to break' in Christian Palestinian Aramaic (for $\sqrt{\text{twb}}$ 'to return', which is intransitive).

25 A similar reading (albeit with *casus pendens*) was recently proposed by Moshe J. Bernstein, Edward M. Cook, and Aaron Koller, *apud* A. Koller, "The Prayer of Nabonidus and Lost Books: Reconstructing the Aramaic Library of the Persian Period," *Mallephana Rabba. Aramaic Studies in Honor of Edward M. Cook* (eds. S.M. Coleman – A.D. Gross – A.W. Litke) (Perspectives on Linguistics and Ancient Languages 15; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias 2023) 161–177, esp. 169–170.

26 Collins, "4QPrayer," 88, following Grelot, "La prière de Nabonide," 485.

27 Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte*, II, 139.

Pierre Grelot's idea to reconstruct שׁוּי אַנְפִּין, a Targumic collocation that calques on Hebrew שׁם פְּנִים-בַּ and is also attested in Qumran Aramaic.²⁸ The negative connotation of the underlying Hebrew collocation makes this an unlikely candidate in the present context, which is why I reconstruct an equivalent of the Targumic rendering שׁוּי עֵין of the positive Hebrew counterpart שׁם עֵין (e.g., Gen 44:21; Jer 39:12; 40:4).²⁹ By necessity, this reconstruction remains hypothetical. It has no bearing on the syntactic parsing of the surviving words in line 4.

2. *Magical Text* 4Q560 1 I, 3; 5

The text of the fragmentary scroll 4Q560 is *sui generis* in the Qumran corpus. It uses collocations that are indicative of the genre of incantation or exorcism as we know it from Jewish sources from Late Antique Babylonia and Palestine.³⁰ Presumably, this scroll was a compendium that contained various magical texts for use by practitioners. While the genre of the texts is uncontested and the material reading is clear, the fragments contain words and sentences that are difficult to interpret. This particularly applies to fragment 1, column I, lines 2–5:³¹

2 [לילדתה מרדות ילדן פקר באיש ש] 2
 3 [עלל בבשרא לחלחיא דכרא וחלחלית נקבתא] 3
 4 [ברא עואן ופשע אשא ועריא ואשת לבב] 4
 5 [ה בשנא פרכ דכר ופכית נקבתא מחתא די] 5

The interpretation of these fragmentary lines, and particularly the individual words in lines 3 and 5, is far from self-evident. Indeed, the readings that have been suggested are contingent on the modern readers' decision on which hints to prioritize in establishing a coherent interpretation of the fragmentary text. The interpretations can be divided into two groups, according to the different weight the modern readers assign to cues from genre considerations. Let us start by sketching the line of reasoning in which genre considerations play a prominent role, as adopted by most editors.³²

²⁸ Grelot, "La prière de Nabonide," 485; Cook, *Dictionary*, 231.

²⁹ For שׁם פְּנִים-בַּ: W. Gesenius, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament*, 18 ed. (eds. D.R. Meyer – H. Donner) (Berlin: Springer 1987–2010) 1061 [*s.v.* פְּנִים I 1. g]: "im Zorn und strafweise". For שׁם עֵין: *ibidem*, 956 [*s.v.* עֵין I e]: "jemanden gnädig anschauen". Note that the Qumran Aramaic attestation of the collocation שׁוּי אַנְפִּין in 4Q556 1, 3 is followed by references to 'burning' and 'bad fire' in line 4 and 'captivity' in line 6, which fit the negative connotations of the corresponding Hebrew expression.

³⁰ This was already noted by the first editors, D.L. Penney – M.O. Wise, "By the Power of Beelzebub. An Aramaic Incantation Formula from Qumran (4Q560)," *JBL* 113 (1994) 627–650, esp. 628. For a general overview of the composition and material aspects of the scroll, see Machiela, *Handbook*, 315–317.

³¹ I follow the official edition: É. Puech, "4QLivret magique ar," *Qumrân grotte 4.XXVII. Textes araméens, deuxième partie* (ed. É. Puech) (DJD 37; Oxford: Clarendon 2009) 291–302.

³² Penney – Wise, "By the Power of Beelzebub"; J. Naveh, "Fragments of an Aramaic Magic Book from Qumran," *IEJ* 48 (1998) 252–261; Puech, "4QLivret magique."

The phrases *דכר ופכית נקבתא* and *לחלחיא דכרא וחלחלית נקבתא* in lines 3 and 5 are the cruxes of this part of the text. Forms that can be parsed as the adjectives *דכר/דכרא* ‘(the) male’ and *נקבתא* ‘the female’ are easily recognizable in both lines. These have been interpreted as referring to pairs of male and female entities. Scholars have noted the resemblance between the heads of these phrases (*לחלחיא* and *חלחלית* in l. 3; *פרכ* and *פכית* in l. 5), linking it to the fact that pairs of male and female demons of the same kind are often named in Jewish magical texts from Late Antiquity, most notably in the Babylonian incantation bowls,³³ i.e., in later texts of the same genre as 4Q560. This reference to the phraseology of Late Antique magical texts underlies the prevalent interpretation of the phrases *לחלחיא דכרא ונקבתא* and *דכר ופכית נקבתא* in lines 3 and 5 as noun phrases that designate pairs of male and female demons. But in contradistinction to the Late Antique magical texts, the heads of the supposed noun phrases in 4Q560, are not identical. They only resemble each other. Hence, it is usually assumed that the spelling of at least one of the heads of each pair was corrupted, and various emendations have been proposed.³⁴ Joseph Naveh’s interpretation is representative of this approach, and it is arguably the most balanced (at least for lines 3 and 5) since it necessitates relatively few emendations. Naveh emends *לחלחיא* to *חלחלא* (l. 3) and *פכית* to *פרכית* (l. 5) and renders the pairs of noun phrases as ‘male and female poison’ and ‘male and female crushing’, respectively.³⁵ Once the connection with the Babylonian incantation bowls is firmly established, they are also adduced in order to explain the linguistic features of 4Q560 that do not easily align with Qumran Aramaic grammar, e.g., the otherwise extraordinary feminine nouns with the *-yt* ending, which would be morphologically construct in Qumran Aramaic.³⁶

Thus, this prevalent approach to 4Q560 takes a limited number of lexemes and collocations as a starting point and uses them to determine its genre. In a second step, comparable texts of the same genre (but half a millennium younger) inform the interpretation to such an extent that they warrant substantial emendations, yielding the various coherent readings that have been proposed. I have discussed them in some detail to emphasize the prominent role played by genre considerations and comparisons to later texts of the same genre in establishing these readings. Methodologically, the recourse to later texts in particular is, of course, external to 4Q560; it constitutes a conscious decision of the modern readers and one that significantly affects their reading of the text.

Let us now turn to the alternative interpretation. There is one editor of 4Q560 whose reading differs radically from the approach presented above. Instead of allowing the knowledge of later specimens of magical texts to influence, and in fact interfere with, the reading

33 E.g., Penney – Wise, “By the Power of Beelzebub,” 639; Naveh, “Fragments,” 258.

34 Penney – Wise, “By the Power of Beelzebub,” 631; Puech, “4QLivret magique,” 297, 299; Naveh, “Fragments,” 258–260. These emendations are informed by the different etymologies the editors assign to the respective forms. Cook, *Dictionary*, 84 (*s.v.* *חלחלי*) and 194 (*s.v.* *פרכ*) concisely presents the different hypotheses.

35 Naveh, “Fragments,” 259.

36 Naveh, “Fragments,” 259.

of the Qumran text, Beyer offers an interpretation of the attested letters, irrespective of whether the result resembles Jewish incantation texts from Late Antiquity.³⁷

- 2 [וילדתה מרדות ילדן פקר באיש ש]
 3 [עלל בבשרא ל {ח} לחיא דכרא וחלחלית נקבתא
 4 [רא עואן ופשע אשא ועריה ואשת לבב
 5 [ה בשנא פרכ דכר ופכית נקבתא מחתורי]
- 2] and his/her girls, obstinacy of girls, evil shamelessness [
- 3] enters the body, in order to erase the penis and the innards of the female
- 4]... sin and wrongdoing, fever and chill, and coronal ague
- 5]... asleep he crushes a penis and the receptacle of the female. The digging into

To be fair, Beyer, too, assumes one scribal error: a dittography (לחלחיא for intended לחיא). This allows him to parse לחיא (l. 3) and פרכ (l. 5) as verbal forms, a D-stem (pa‘el) infinitive of the root √lhy and a G-stem (pa‘al) participle of the root √prk, respectively.³⁸ The following three words in each of the lines, דכרא וחלחלית נקבתא (l. 3) and דכר ופכית נקבתא (l. 5), are then read as coordinated noun phrases that function as direct objects of the verbal forms and designate the male and female reproductive organs, respectively. While the male organ is designated by the common lexeme דכר ‘penis’, the text—as read by Beyer—uses figurative language to refer to the female womb. The suggested etymologies of the two feminine nouns חלחלי and פכי point to a hollow space and a container, respectively, and the lexemes are employed in construct with the *nomen rectum* נקבתא ‘the female.’³⁹

While Beyer’s reading is not without problems, these do not pertain to the morphology and syntax of the text, but rather to the lexicon, making them arguably less serious than in the prevalent approach.⁴⁰ The lexical weak points of Beyer’s interpretation are as follows: the lexeme פכי and its root √pkk are unattested in Aramaic, and Beyer suggested a Hebrew etymology.⁴¹ Since numerous Hebrew loanwords are attested in Qumran Aramaic, including עואן and פשע in the preceding line 4, this is not an unreasonable hypothesis.⁴² Further, a Ugaritic cognate *bk* of Hebrew פך, and the possibility that the underlying root is onomatopoeic, would even warrant the speculation that the word was genuinely Aramaic, albeit unattested.⁴³ The other two issues pertain to the attestation of a particular form or usage alone: Neither the D-stem of √lhy nor the figurative use of חלחלי and פכי are attested elsewhere in Aramaic.⁴⁴ Yet, this lack of attestation of the particular form or usage

37 Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte*, II, 168.

38 Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte*, II, 427, 464.

39 Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte*, II, 397, 462.

40 In the latter, emendations or assuming unattested morphemes are necessary to achieve grammatical concord.

41 Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte*, II, 462.

42 C. Stadel, *Hebräismen in den aramäischen Texten vom Toten Meer* (Schriften der Hochschule für Jüdische Studien Heidelberg 11; Heidelberg: Winter 2008) 127–128 (overview of loanwords), 104 (loanwords in 4Q560).

43 For the cognate and onomatopoeic etymology, cf. Gesenius, *Handwörterbuch*, 1050 (s.v. פך).

44 The verbal root √lhy is attested in the G-stem in Syriac, and in an ambiguous form (G- or D-stem) in Imperial Aramaic, with the meaning ‘to delete, destroy, erase’, cf. Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte*, II, 427 (s.v. לחי);

does not render the interpretation impossible, since the synonymy or partial synonymy of the D- and G-stems of the same root are common throughout Aramaic, as is figurative language.

The main advantage of Beyer's interpretation has already been mentioned: It offers a grammatically coherent reading without necessitating numerous emendations or recourse to linguistic features from the later corpus of the Babylonian incantation bowls.⁴⁵ On the face of it, Beyer pays a price (in textual coherence) for the grammatical coherence of his reading. Indeed, while Beyer agrees with the basic supposition that the text belongs to the incantation genre, his reading is far less aligned with the Late Antique Jewish incantation texts than the prevalent interpretation (which has been explicitly informed by them). But does it actually yield a less coherent text, and not just one that is dissimilar to later Jewish incantations? Arguably, Beyer's reading offers advantages at the content and text levels as well. According to the prevalent interpretation, lines 3 to 5 all mention various ailments, but in different forms: In lines 3 and 5, one ailment is represented by a pair of male and female demons, respectively, whereas line 4 lists three different non-demonized kinds of fever.⁴⁶ Beyer's interpretation differs substantially as, according to his understanding, lines 3 and 5 mention body parts that are or could be affected by the disease, and only line 4 identifies the ailments themselves (and presumably their causes: 'sin and wrongdoing'). Hence, overall, the terminology of Beyer's reading is more unified. Moreover, since the affected body parts are identified as the male and female sexual organs, one can arguably connect lines 3 and 5 to the forms ילדתה and ילדן from line 2. If (*pace* Beyer) one or both of these words represent forms of the lexeme *yallādā* 'woman in childbed', line 2 can then be interpreted as referring to women afflicted by the diseases mentioned in line 4, due to the effects they have on the sexual organs (lines 3 and 5).⁴⁷ However, it is highly unlikely for a definite form of a lexeme (ילדתה) to be followed immediately by its indefinite counterpart (ילדן). The two forms probably represent different lexemes. Following the reading לילדתה established by Émile Puech, I suggest to parse this form as a D-stem infinitive with an object pronoun: 'to act as midwife for her, help her give birth.'⁴⁸ This would give us the following reading and interpretation:

S.A. Kaufman, *The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*, s.v. lhy vb., s.v. lhy adj., <https://cal.huc.edu/> [access: 29.02.2024] also offers a fine discussion of the etymological and semantic connection of the common Old to Qumran Aramaic adjective *lhy* 'bad wicked' to the verbal root $\sqrt{\text{lhy}}$ 'to erase, delete'.

45 Penney – Wise, "By the Power of Beelzebub," 631 suggested as many as six emendations. For 'Qumran-external' solutions to the morpho-syntactical problems with the nouns ending in *-yt*, cf. Naveh, "Fragments," 259; Puech, "4QLivret magique," 297, 299.

46 This is spelt out, e.g., by D. Hamidović, "Illness and Healing through Spell and Incantation in the Dead Sea Scrolls," *Demons and Illness from Antiquity to the Early-Modern Period* (eds. S. Bhayro – C. Rider) (Magical and Religious Literature of Late Antiquity 5; Leiden: Brill 2017) 97–110, esp. 99.

47 The interpretation 'woman in childbed' was already put forward by Penney – Wise, "By the Power of Beelzebub," 632 and has also been adopted by Puech, "4QLivret magique," 296. It is also possible that one of the occurrences of *yallādā* refers to 'midwives' rather than to 'women bearing a child'.

48 The defective spelling of the feminine ending of the infinitives of derived stems is attested elsewhere in the Qumran Aramaic corpus, Muraoka, *Grammar*, 143.

-]לילדתה מרדות ילדן פקר באיש ש] 2
]עלל בבשרא ל{ח} לחיא דכרא וחלחלית נקבתא 3
]ברא עואן ופשע אשא ועריא ואשת לבב 4
]ה בשנא פרכ דכר ופכית נקבתא מחתא די 5
- 2] to act as midwife for her. Obstnacy of girls, evil shamelessness [
 3] enters the body, in order to erase the penis and the innards of the female
 4]... sin and wrongdoing, fever and chill, and coronal ague
 5]... asleep he crushes a penis and the receptacle of the female. The digging into

While the text is of course highly fragmentary (which makes the reconstruction of sentence boundaries extremely difficult), the lexemes that survive in these four lines lend themselves to a coherent interpretation. The incantation addresses cases of fever (presumably identified with demonic forces, and ultimately caused by human sin) that affect the sexual organs and, subsequently, childbirth.

I readily admit that this interpretation is necessarily hypothetical, but this is true for the prevalent interpretation as well. In the end, the fragmentary nature of the text does not permit an unequivocal interpretation. Beyer's interpretation, which I have adapted and explained in this section, and the one adopted by most editors and aptly laid out by Puech in the official edition, both constitute valid and reasonable readings of this fragmentary text. Yet, they are completely different at the word level and in terms of the overall understanding. This difference hearkens back to a methodological decision of the modern reader: Naveh and Puech favour an interpretation that is aligned with genre conventions of comparable texts that postdate 4Q560 by half a millennium and resort to several emendations to achieve this. Beyer, on the other hand, favours a grammatically coherent interpretation of the attested strings of letters according to what we know about Qumran Aramaic, even though the resulting text is dissimilar to later specimens of the same genre. Since the different interpretations of 4Q560 are shaped considerably by the methodological decisions of the modern reader, both alternatives should be given due consideration by scholars studying the text in question. Naturally, the translation adopted by the editors of very fragmentary texts in the official edition can only reflect one of the interpretations. However, the fact that such an edition offers one interpretation does not absolve the reader from considering the alternative, or else we risk expounding a modern translation, and not the precious—albeit often frustratingly ambiguous—Aramaic original.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Thus, e.g., T. Guerra, "Writing Science, Writing Magic. Possible Functions for the Act of Writing; Scientific Knowledge Reflected in 4Q560," *Science in Qumran Aramaic Texts* (ed. I. Fröhlich) (Ancient Cultures of Sciences and Knowledge 1; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2022) 131–141, esp. 136–139. It is worth stressing that the potential problem lies with the user of the official edition. Puech's extensive commentary section ("4QLivret magique," 296–300) amply stresses the ambiguity of the Aramaic.

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