The “Shield” of Abraham?

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Genesis xv, which contains an account of Yahweh’s covenant with Abraham, opens with the Heilsorakel: ʾal tiraʾ ʿabram ʾanoki magen lak ʾekarka harbeh meʾod, which the Revised Standard Version translates: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great”.

The term magen (ʿabram) with which we are here primarily concerned, may be interpreted in a number of ways. Alt suggested in 1929 in his article “Der Gott der Väter”¹ that it might be one of the designations of a patriarchal deity, along with ʿabir yaʿaqob² and paḥad yiṣḥaq.³ Actually, he was quite hesitant about the possibility of postulating magen ʿabram as the name of Abraham’s personal deity.⁴

Several objections may be raised against the plausibility of this interpretation. Whereas Jacob swears by the God of his father, paḥad yiṣḥaq (while the designation ʿabir yaʿaqob occurs in connection with the blessing on Joseph), Abraham is addressed directly in Gn. xv 1. Further, purely formal considerations tend to argue against this being the divine disclosure of a new name, as in Gn xvii 1 and xxxv 11: ʾani ʾel šadday. Use of the phrase ʾelohey ʿabraham ʿabika weʾlohey yiṣḥaq (Gn. xxviii 13) does not prove one way or the other as to whether there was a special designation for Abraham’s personal deity.

If magen is not likely to be a designation for Abraham’s God, let us consider the traditional interpretation, viz. that God declares that He is “a shield” to

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¹ Re-published in Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israëls I, München 1953, pp. 1-78.
² Mentioned in the blessing of Jacob, Gn. xlix 24; also in Ps. cxxxi 2, 5; Is. lx 16, while ʿabir yiṣraʾel occurs in Is. 1 24.
³ By whom Jacob is reported to have sworn when he made a covenant with Laban, Gn. xxxi 42, 53.
⁴ He suggests that in Gn. xv 1 we may have a Kultstiftungssage for the God of Abraham, and that the divine address contains a reference to the lost personal name of Abraham’s God: magen ʿabraham. (Kleine Schriften, op. cit., p. 67, note 4).
Abraham.\textsuperscript{5} Von Rad remarks that this expression “derives from the language of the cult”.\textsuperscript{6} Indeed, many psalms refer to Israel’s God as a “shield”, that is, a weapon of warfare furnishing protection.\textsuperscript{7} This is how the MT seems to have understood magen. The context then would be that Abraham was admonished not to fear (a typical introductory phrase for a Heilsorakel), for God is his “shield”, who had kept him from danger as in the raid described in Gn. xiv.

A third interpretation, which holds that mgn in xv 1 is a verbal form (as in xiv 20) to be vocalized mogen has not received the attention it deserves.\textsuperscript{8} This view derives support from a consideration of the keywords which occur in xiv 20-xv 3.\textsuperscript{9} Firstly, we note that the verbs natan and laqaḥ occur several times (four and three times, respectively).\textsuperscript{10}

What is still more important is that the root mgn, used in Melchizedek’s blessing: baruk ʾel ʾelyon ʾašer-miggen šaryka beyadka, xiv 20, appears again in xv 1: also in poetry. In xiv 20 it clearly means “to deliver up, to give”.\textsuperscript{11} Might it not also mean this in xv 1? Then the oracle in xv 1 may be seen as a spiritual “heightening” of xiv 20: it is important that God should “give” Abraham’s enemies into his hand, but far superior is the “very great reward” which God is about to give Abraham by virtue of the covenant. This would also bring the

\textsuperscript{5} This interpretation is accepted by Skinner, \textit{A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis}, Edinburgh 1956\textsuperscript{2}, p. 278; Von Rad, \textit{Genesis}, Philadelphia 1961, p. 178; Gunkel, \textit{Genesis}, Göttingen 1964\textsuperscript{6}, p. 179, believes that this oracle presupposes a specific condition (\textit{Sitz im Leben}) in which Abraham needed a shield for protection.


\textsuperscript{7} See e.g. Ps. iii 4; xviii 3; xxviii 7, \textit{et al.} Kaiser who affirms that most of the Psalms in which magen occurs deal with Yahweh’s help to the king, raises the question of whether the designation of Yahweh as a shield could be found already in pre-royal times, in the tradition of the holy war. (“Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung von Genesis 15”, \textit{ZAW} 70, 1958, p. 113).

\textsuperscript{8} It was suggested by Winckler, \textit{Forschungen} III, p. 411, quoted by Gunkel, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 179; also by Jeremias, \textit{Das AT im Lichte des Alten Orients} Leipzig 1966\textsuperscript{2}, p. 351, and Ehrlich, \textit{Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel}, Leipzig 1908, pp. 57 f.

\textsuperscript{9} The importance of keywords (which he terms \textit{Leitworte}), as an aid to exegesis, has been emphasized especially by Buber, in Buber & Rosenzweig, \textit{Die Schrift und Ihre Verdeutschung}, Berlin 1936, pp. 211 ff.

\textsuperscript{10} Abraham gave Melchizedek a tithe (xiv 20). The king of Sodom said: \textit{Give} me the people, but \textit{take} the goods for yourself (21). Abraham had sworn not to \textit{take} anything from the king of Sodom (24). Let Aner, Eshkol and Mamre \textit{take} their share (24). Abraham said to Yahweh: What wilt thou \textit{give} me? (xv 2). Thou hast not \textit{given} me offspring (xv 3).—That these keywords are present in both chapters is perhaps the more remarkable in view of the evident “editorial joining” in xv 1 in the phrase ‘aḥar haddebarim haʾelleh.

\textsuperscript{11} Mgn is a poetic motif-word for “to give” (Jeremias, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 351). In Hos. xi 8 the verbs ntn and mgn occur in parallel stichs.