TWO RELATED ARAMEANS
A Difficult Reading in the Passover Haggadah

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When examining a composite work of antiquity, two problems often arise: one is establishing the correct text and ascertaining its background which bears on its meaning; the other is identifying the individual components of the text and seeing how they are connected. The Passover Haggadah, made up of material from various eras, from late antiquity to our own day, contains two passages which illustrate both of these difficulties. These passages are "A wandering Aramean was my father" and "Go forth and learn..."

The earliest reference to the recitation of "A wandering Aramean was my father", as part of the Passover liturgy, is the Mishnah: "He begins with disgrace and ends with glory; and he expounds from A wandering Aramean was my father until he finishes the entire section." (Deut. 26.3ff). This midrashic treatment of the text of Deut. 26.3ff reflects the theme of "he begins with disgrace and ends with glory," for it contains both elements in a striking fashion. The "disgrace" is that the Patriarch Jacob was the wandering Aramean who went down into Egypt, and whose family was subsequently enslaved; the "glory" begins with God bringing his children out of slavery to freedom, bringing them to the Promised Land, and culminating with their enjoyment of the bounty of the land. This theme in the midrash has been recognized by both medieval and modern commentators. David Weiss Halivni

1) E. D. Goldschmidt, The Passover Haggadah, Its Sources and History (Hebrew) Jerusalem, 1960, p. 120.
2) M. Pes. X.4.
3) E.g. among the medieval commentators Ha-Meiri, Bet Habehira to Pes. p. 99; Abarbanel, Commentary to Deut. 26.3; R. Simon, b. Zemah, Ye'en Shemu'ah 43a/b.
disagrees). He argues that ‘and expounds etc.’ v’doresh does not serve as an explanation of ‘he begins with disgrace and ends with glory.’ He bases his argument on two points: first, that the term doresh is not used in the Mishnah as an explanation of the foregoing, and second, by pointing to two Amoraim who explain ‘What is ‘with disgrace’?’ either by ‘Originally our fathers were idolaters’ or ‘We were slaves’ (TB Pes. 116a). He suggests that ‘He begins with disgrace and ends with glory’ is the answer which a father is to give to a son who has limited mental capacity.

HALIVNI’s comments are cogent, but they do not preclude the possibility that, although the midrash was not the response of a father to a child of limited intelligence, it still does contain, by design, the theme of ‘disgrace and glory.’ It is intended to be a separate recitation with the same import, but for a different purpose.

A basic question is why the Mishnah specifies this passage from Deut. 26.3 to be recited and expounded as part of the Passover liturgy. It seems to be more appropriate to Shavuot than to Passover since it is the pilgrim’s recitation when bringing his first fruits to the Sanctuary on the festival of Shavuot. It is not sufficient to point to references to slavery, oppression and deliverance which it contains, for there are numerous other passages containing the same subject matter. GOLDSCHMIDT correctly suggests that the midrash, required by the Mishnah, must have been an established one, for it is not reasonable to expect the average Jew to create one on his own; this would require special expertise. He goes on to say, however, that Deut. 26.3ff was chosen because it was familiar to all Jews since it was the standard recitation when one brings the first fruits. This is not convincing. It is probable that it was not familiar to all Jews. There were urbanites who did not engage in agriculture and hence did not have to bring the first fruits. There were Jews of the Diaspora who might well have been farmers.

5) Ibid. p. 60. See also HALIVNI’s comment in Hadoar 9 Nisan, 1969, pp. 345ff.
6) GOLDSCHMIDT, loc. cit.
7) Ibid. This is also argued by L. FINKELSTEIN, “The Oldest Midrash: Pre-Rabbinic Ideals and Teachings in the Passover Haggadah”, HTR 31 (1938), 294, who cites Deut. 26.5a and M. Bikkurim I.1 for support.