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Eliezer of Damascus

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LIKE a puzzle that by its very difficulty challenges a new trial again and again, so the Eliezer-passage in Gen. 15² compels one to seek a solution that will be really worth while. In the attempts that have been made thus far one point in the solution has been clearly recognized: that **הוּא הַדַּמְשֵׁק** "i.e. Damascus" is an explanatory gloss on the difficult and unintelligible **בְּרֵךְ-הַמֶּשֶׁק**. A reader who tried to elucidate this phrase wrote in the margin the note "i.e. Damascus." The very construction shows that **הוּא הַדַּמְשֵׁק** is a secondary element, for "Damascus Eliezer" is meaningless, and the reading of the Targum and of the Syriac Version "Eliezer the Damascene" is so evidently in the nature of a guess that we need not seriously consider the probability of its representing the original text.¹

The second point in the solution is the recognition that the meaning of **מֶשֶׁק** is entirely unknown and that the translation "acquisition, possession" is a pure conjecture based on the context² and on the analogy of **בְּמֶשֶׁק**. Now, **בְּמֶשֶׁק** also occurs only once, Zeph. 2^a, where it is usually translated "possession." But its meaning is altogether dubious and the translation "possession" is nothing but a conjecture. To build one conjecture on another conjecture is, however, not the way that leads to certainty; and especially if the correctness of the first conjecture is open to doubt.

That even the old Hebrews did not know what **מֶשֶׁק**

¹ אליעזר ברמשק or אליעזר הדמשקי

² The parallel narrative in vs. 3 had **בְּרֵכְתִי יִרְשׂ אֹתִי** "a son of my household will be mine heir," so it was conjectured that **בְּרֵכְתִי מֶשֶׁק** meant "the son of acquisition (= he who is to acquire, the heir of)"; cf. BDB.

meant is shown by the explanatory gloss, "i.e. Damascus," which is obviously wrong. This makes it certain that there must be some textual corruption in מִשְׁקָה which antedates not only the Massoretic text and the Hebrew text of LXX, but also this earliest attempt at explanation. It is vain therefore to look for external help.

But what could possibly have stood there originally? The context and the beginning of the verse are quite clear. Jahve promised Abram "exceeding great reward," whereupon Abram said, "O Lord Jahve, what wilt Thou give me, seeing I am childless. . . ." We should expect Abram now to voice his longing for a son. And I think the original text did indeed contain this, for if but two consonants, כ and ש, are transposed, the following text results:

MT.	ובנמשקביתי
	ובנמבקשתי
i.e.	ובנים בקשתי

"O Lord Jahve, what wilt Thou give me, seeing I go childless *and have craved sons?*"

It was but a very slight textual mistake at first, but after the transposition had been made and the resultant text had been divided off into three words it became unintelligible and called forth an interpretative statement, which when incorporated into the text added to the confusion so that it finally seemed hopeless to disentangle the knot.

But now אליעזר stands altogether alone and unconnected with the rest of the sentence! It is noteworthy that Eliezer is mentioned only here, nowhere else. The other sources do not know him at all. This is certainly strange and raises the suspicion whether his name here in Gen. 15² belongs to the original text, or whether there is not also in אליעזר a textual corruption. Immediately there suggests itself the division of אליעזר into אֱלִי עֹזֵר, *My God, help!* But in view of the emphasis on the offspring וְרֵעִי of Abram in vs. 5 it seems most likely that the text read originally for

אליעזר
אין לי ורע

I have no offspring.

This is exactly in line not only with the preceding but also with the continuation in vs. 5, for vv. 3. 4 belong to the other document. A single reading will show this: Jahve told Abram, "thy reward shall be exceeding great. And Abram said, O Lord Jahve, what wilt Thou give me, seeing I go childless *and have craved sons?* *I have no offspring!* And He brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to count them: and He said unto him, So shall *thine offspring* be."

It may be urged against this emendation that it makes Abram say the same thing twice, "I go childless" and "I have no offspring." But this depends entirely on the tone in which the sentence is read. It is a moving appeal in the tone of supplication and therefore in meaning equivalent to "give me offspring" וְתֵן לִי וְרֵעַ, but it expresses this more delicately and pathetically.