

Who or What Is Argov? A Philological Survey of a Difficult Lexeme

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Introduction

This paper explores the Biblical Hebrew lexeme *argov* (אַרְגֹּב, often transliterated as *Argob*) and its proposed meanings. It offers a critical survey of the various explanations of this term proffered to date by various rabbinic exegetes, lexicographers, and Bible scholars. A wide range of sources have understood *argov* variously as either a common noun (that bears semantic meaning) or a proper noun (i.e., the name of a place and/or person). After laying out these explanations and how they fit with the contexts in which *argov* occurs in the Bible, this paper offers a discussion of how Biblical Hebrew deals with givenness, and whether the presence of the definite article supports any of the approaches taken to understanding the meaning of *argov*.

The lexeme in question appears five times in the Bible, and, for reasons soon to be clear, it should not be assumed that it means the same thing in all five occurrences. The first time that *argov* appears in the Bible is in the Deuteronomic retelling of the Jews' conquest of the Trans-Jordan kingdom of Og.¹ Within that context, the Bible states:

And we captured all of his [Og's] cities at that time, there was no city that we did not take from them, sixty cities—the entire strip of argov—the kingdom of Og in the Bashan. (Deut. 3:4)

The word appears twice more in the same chapter when giving more details of the Jews' conquest:

And the remainder of the Gilead and the entire Bashan, the kingdom of Og, I did give to half of the tribe of Manasseh—the entire strip of the argov [ha-argov], of the entire Bashan, that is called “land of

¹ Some of the literature alludes to the problem of why *argov* does not appear in Num. 31:41 when Jair's conquest is first mentioned, but this question has not been extensively treated and will not be addressed in this paper.

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Refaim.” Jair, son of Manasseh, took the entire strip of argov until the Geshurite and the Maacathite border, and he called them—the Bashan [cities]—after his own name “Havot Jair”... (Deut. 3:13–14)

It is important to note that in the first of these latter two appearances, the word *argov* is prefixed with the definite article (“the”), represented by the letter *hey*. This fact will prove important in our forthcoming analysis of the meaning of *argov*.

The remaining two instances of *argov* in the Bible are both in Kings. The first of those occurs in a list that details King Solomon’s royal officials and their jurisdiction. One of the regional commissioners listed there was:

Ben-Geber in Ramoth Gilead, to him was [given charge of] Havot Jair ben Manasseh that is in the Gilead, to him was [given charge of] the strip of argov that is in the Bashan—sixty great cities... (I Kings 4:13)

These first four occurrences of *argov* in the Bible are all in reference to the same Trans-Jordan location, and the word clearly serves as a noun designating a particular area or territory. The central question with which this paper deals is whether the noun *argov* is a *common* noun that bears a semantic meaning in reference to a general, non-specific person, place, thing, or idea, or is a *proper* noun (in this case, the given name of a person or place). In English, proper nouns are differentiated from common nouns by the use of capitalization—consider the difference between “the rocky mountains” (common-noun phrase) and “the Rocky Mountains” (proper-noun phrase), but in Hebrew, no such norm exists. This paper will attempt to adduce answers to the question by presenting various explanations of *argov* and using philological approaches to justify or call into question those multi-faced explanations.

The term *argov* appears once more in the Bible. Regarding Pekaḥ ben Remaliah’s successful coup to overthrow Pekaḥiah ben Menaḥem, king of Israel, the Bible reads:

And Pekaḥ son of Remaliah, his [Pekaḥiah’s] captain, conspired against him, and smote him in Samaria, in the palace of the king’s house, with argov and with *ba-arieb* [literally, “the lion”]; and with him were fifty men from the Gileadites; and he [Pekaḥ] slew him [Pekaḥiah], and reigned in his stead. (II Kings 15:25)

The meaning of *argov* in this context is more obscure and has been the subject of much discussion.² One pertinent question that this paper addresses is whether the word *argov* in this context is related to the other four instances of the word *argov* in the Bible. A separate question that this paper deals with mirrors the question related to the other *argov*; that is, whether *argov* in this particular passage ought to be understood as a common noun or a proper noun. Answering both of these questions requires proffering plausible explications of the verse that account for the meaning of *argov* as well as its counterpart *ha-ariel*.

Argov and Regev

While Hebrew roots and etymologies are often studied and analyzed in linguistic and lexicographical studies, the exact etymology and root of *argov* remain unclear, and there is no consensus among scholars regarding its etymon. It is indeed considered one of the uncertain or obscure words in the Hebrew Bible in terms of its meaning and etymology. In the next few sections, we will treat the word *argov* that appears in Deuteronomy and I Kings, surveying the various ways that this word has been explained over the ages. Subsequently, we will deal separately with the word *argov* in II Kings and the multiple ways that that lexeme has been explained.

The lexeme *argov* as it appears all five times in the Bible is spelled with four letters.³ As I have demonstrated elsewhere, there is a strong tendency

² Before suggesting his own original explanation, N. Na'aman, "Rezin of Damascus and the Land of Gilead," *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* vol. 111:2 (1995), p. 107 writes "Scholarly attempts to interpret the four enigmatic words... have not [been] met with general acceptance." The meaning of "with *argov* and with *ha-ariel*" is so confounding to some scholars, that Bible critics have suggested simply deleting it from the text of that verse, see S. Yeivin, "*Argov ve-ha-Ariel*" in B. Z. Luria (ed.), *Zer le-Gevurot: Kovetz Mehkarim be-Mikra, be-Yediat ha-Aretz, be-Lashon, u-ve-Safrut Talmudit mugash le-Reb Zalman Shazar* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer Publishers, 1973), p. 158 and D. J. A. Clines (ed.), *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol. 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993), p. 370. See also P. A. Viviano, "Argob and Arie" in D. N. Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1 (Yale University Press, 1992), p. 376. Nonetheless, this author maintains that deleting or relocating words from their original context due to challenges in deciphering their intended meaning and relevance represents an uncritical escape from rigorous scholarly inquiry. It not only runs counter to this author's religious sensibilities, but is also philologically unsound.

³ Although in the classical Masoretic Text (MT), *argov* is always spelled deficient (i.e., without the penultimate *vav*), in some early Ashkenazic Masoretic codices, when it appears in Deut. 3:14, it is spelled plene as אַרְגֹּב, see J. S. Penkower,

among traditional Hebrew grammarians to view ostensibly-Hebrew words in the Bible that have a four-letter root as foreign loanwords, and not native Hebrew words.⁴

In light of this, it is cogent to argue that the source of *argov*, whose etymological root appears to be quadriliteral, is a language other than Hebrew, and scholars should therefore look to adjacent languages for clues as to its exact meaning and/or origins.

Nonetheless, save for one possible appearance in an Ugaritic text (discussed below), as far as this author knows, *argov* does not appear in any other ancient text outside of the Bible, neither as a *proper* name (of a person or place) or as a *common* noun. Without further epigraphical evidence or additional textual references, it is challenging to definitively pin down the precise meaning of the word, and perhaps it is this dearth of resources that led rabbinic philologists to look internally to Hebrew for cognates of *argov*.

An important school of Hebrew grammarians and lexicographers understand that oftentimes the letter *aleph* will appear in the initial position of a word, but does not function as a radical that is *integral* to the root, but rather as an extra letter *added* to the root. Mirsky traces recognition of this morphological phenomenon to the early Hebrew grammarian Menahem Ibn Saruk (circa. 920–970).⁵

Examples of this phenomenon include the Biblical Hebrew noun *z'roa* (“arm”)—inflections of which appear over ninety times in the Bible—and its cognate *ez'roa* (“arm”), which appears only twice (Jer. 32:21, Job 31:22). Similarly, the Biblical Hebrew noun *t'mol* (“yesterday”)—inflections of which appear over twenty times in the Bible—and its cognate *et'mol* (“yesterday”), which appears a mere five times. In both cases, while each pair of words are semantically equivalent, the latter words are spelled with an initial *aleph*, while the former are spelled sans the initial *aleph*. Thus, the addition of an initial *aleph* in Biblical Hebrew words is not unheard of, and this paradigm may prove useful in helping pinpoint the meaning and/or etymology of *argov*.

“The Text of the Pentateuch in the Masoretic Codices Written by Early Ashkenazi Sages in the 10th–12th Centuries,” *Sbnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 17 (2007), p. 18.

⁴ See R. C. Klein, *Lashon HaKodesh: History, Holiness, & Hebrew* (Mosaica Press, 2021), pp. 158–159, where I cite Ibn Ezra, Malbim, and *Meshekeh Hokehmah* to this effect.

⁵ H. Mirsky, “The School of Menahem Ben Saruq: Linguistic Studies,” *Mehkarim be-Lashon*, vols. 14–15 (2013), pp. 99–131.

In that spirit, Ibn Ezra (to Deut. 3:4) cites some commentators as identifying the initial *aleph* in *argov* as a prosthetic *aleph* that is extraneous to its core root. Accordingly, they explain the word *argov* as stemming from the trilateral $\sqrt{\text{רגב}}$. In doing so, Ibn Ezra explicitly relates the noun *argov* to the common noun *regev*, which appears in Job (21:33, 38:38).⁶ Clines defines *regev* as a “clump/clod” of earth, or “stone.”⁷ If *argov* is a cognate of *regev*, its meaning would relate to the same concept, ostensibly referring to a “rocky” or “rugged” locale. This understanding is adopted by Gesenius⁸ and other scholars.⁹

The weakness of this proposition is the absence of the term *argov* in Biblical Hebrew in a way that it clearly functions as a common noun.¹⁰ Because *argov* always appears in reference to the same place (save for the possible exception of II Kings 15:25, discussed below), who is to say that it has a semantic meaning related to *regev* beyond simply serving as a place-name?

⁶ More recently, Regev became a proper name, as the Israeli surname Regev has become popular and is borne by such public figures in contemporary Israel as Mark Regev (former Israeli ambassador to UK), Miri Regev (current Minister of Transportation), Maya Regev (one of the October 7th hostages who was released from Gaza), and Uri Regev (anti-Orthodox provocateur).

⁷ D. J. A. Clines (ed.), *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol. 7 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), p. 409. R. Shlomo Ibn Parḥon in S. Gottlieb-Stern (ed.), *Salomonis ben Abrahami Parchon Aragonensis Lexicon Hebraicum* (Pressburg, 1840), p. 62 likewise explains *regev* as “stones and mud in the riverbed.” Comparable explanations are attributable to Ibn Saruk, Ibn Janaḥ, and Kimḥi in J. Steinberg (ed.), *Yalkut ha-Shorashim* (Telzstone, Israel: Veromemanu Foundation, forthcoming).

⁸ S. P. Tregelles (ed.), *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), pp. 76, 755.

⁹ F. M. Cross & D. N. Freedman, “The Name of Ashdod,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, vol. 175 (1964), p. 49.

¹⁰ Some Bible scholars propose emending the MT of I Sam. 20:19 (based on their reading of the Septuagint there, which uses the Greek ἐργάβ) to contain the reconstructed common noun *ergav* (a supposed cognate of *argov* and *regev*) in the sense of “stone/rock,” see S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of Samuel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), pp. 167–168 and S. Klein, “Even ha-Azal” in Y. Klatzkin (ed.), *Encyclopedia Yisraelit*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Eshkol Publishers, 1929), p. 202. However, in this author’s opinion, altering the received text of the Bible (MT) solely on the basis of a singular variant encountered in the Septuagint translation evinces a presumptive disposition, potentially demonstrating a lack of due reverence toward the intrinsic sanctity and scholarly examination of the Hebrew Bible as it is. For a similar sentiment, see Y. Bassi (ed.), *Peirush Shadal la-Torah*, vol. 4 (Jerusalem: Carmel Publishers, 2015), pp. 200–201.

Nevertheless, there is ample support for the notion that the initial *aleph* of *argov* is indeed extraneous to its core root. The earliest support for this understanding may be gleaned from the Samaritan Bible's parallels to Deut. 3:4; 3:13–14, wherein the word *argov* is rendered as *rigova*—with the initial *aleph* dropped.¹¹ Similarly, Josephus in *The Antiquities of the Jews* (Book XIII Ch. 15:5) refers to a fortress named Ragaba in the Trans-Jordan region,¹² which scholars like Kohut¹³ and Hoffmann¹⁴ link to the Biblical *Argov*.¹⁵

Similarly, the Mishnah (*Menahot* 8:3) asserts that the second-best place from which quality olive oil may be harvested is Regev in the Trans-Jordan,¹⁶ which Kohut¹⁷ and Hoffmann¹⁸ again link to *Argov*.

Argov as a Common Noun

Targum Onkelos (to Deut. 3:4; 3:13–14), *Targum Neofiti*,¹⁹ and *Targum Jonathan* (to I King. 4:13) render the Hebrew lexeme *argov* as *trakbona*, while *Targum pseudo-Jonathan* (to Deut. 3:4; 3:13–14) renders it *tragona*.

In his super-commentary to *Targum Onkelos*, R. Nathan Marcus Adler (1803–1890) sees a parallel between the Targumic word *trakbona*, which he traces to the Greek term *trachyte* (a type of rock) and the Hebrew *argov* (related to the trilateral $\sqrt{\text{רגב}}$, in accordance with the above).²⁰ Similarly,

¹¹ See S. A. Kaufman, et al. *The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon* <<https://cal.huc.edu>>.

¹² W. Whiston (trans.), *The Works of Flavius Josephus* (William P. Nimmo & Company, 1865), p. 287.

¹³ A. Kohut, *Arukh ha-Shalem*, vol. 7 (Vienna, 1926), p. 251.

¹⁴ D. Z. Hoffmann, *Sefer Devarim Mejurash al yedei ha-Rav David Zvi Hoffmann* (Tel Aviv: Netzah, 1960), p. 55.

¹⁵ See also S. Ahituv, “Jair the Gileadite and Havoth-Jair,” *Beit Mikra: Journal for the Study of the Bible and Its World*, vol. 65:2 (2020), pp. 366–367.

¹⁶ Scholars identify the Mishnaic Regev with the village of Rajib/Rujib (in modern-day Syria); for example, see: N. Adler, *Netinah le-Ger*, vol. 5 (Vilna, 1874), p. 14a; C. R. Conder, “Notes by Captain Conder,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, vol. 17:4 (1885), p. 228; and C. R. Conder, “Notes on ‘Across Jordan’,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, vol. 18:2 (1886), p. 86.

¹⁷ A. Kohut (ibid.), p. 251.

¹⁸ D. Z. Hoffmann (ibid.), p. 55.

¹⁹ A. D. Macho (ed.), *Neophyti 1: Targum Palestinense MS de la Biblioteca Vaticana* (Madrid, Spain, 1968), pp. 31–32.

²⁰ N. Adler (ibid.), p. 14a.

Hoffmann asserts that the Targumim identified the Biblical *argov* with Trachonitis because the place-name's original Greek meaning is similar to what he presumes is the original meaning of the Hebrew *argov*.²¹

Indeed, the northern part of the Trans-Jordan region where Bashan was understood to have been located was called *Trachonitis* in Greco-Roman times.²² Trachonitis was an administrative district under the Ptolemaic kingdom, and was eventually awarded by the Roman emperor Augustus to Herod the Great in the first century BCE.²³ However, for our purposes, it may be prudent to set aside geographical considerations,²⁴ as some scholars have concluded that it is impossible to pin down the exact site of *argov* in contemporary times.²⁵

Rashi (to Deut. 3:4, II Kings 15:25) understands the Targumim as explaining that *argov* primarily refers to "the king's palace," and, by extension, refers to the entire kingdom (or region) in a metonymic sense.²⁶ This

²¹ D. Z. Hoffmann (ibid.), p. 55. For pushback against this assertion, see H. Hildesheimer, "Beiträge zur Erklärung einiger geographischer Bibelstellen" in S. Eppenstein, M. Hildesheimer, & J. Wohlgemuth (eds.), *Festschrift zum Siebzüßigsten Geburtstag David Hoffmann's* (Berlin: Louis Lamm, 1914), pp. 22–23.

²² S. Lowisohn, *Mehkerei Eretz* (Vienna, 1819), p. 13a and S. Lowisohn, *Eretz Kedumim* (Vilna, 1839), pp. 29–30.

²³ M. Berenbaum & F. Skolnik (eds.), "Trachonitis," in *Encyclopedia Judaica* 2nd ed., vol. 20 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), pp. 78–79.

²⁴ H. Hildesheimer (ibid.), p. 22 claims that the name *Trachonitis/Trachon* in Classical works like Josephus and Pliny is a general term for the entire Trans-Jordan region, and that the Targumim used it in that sense. M. Avi-Yonah, "Argob," in M. Berenbaum & F. Skolnik (eds.), *Encyclopedia Judaica* 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), p. 450 notes that Trachonitis refers to the basaltic highland desert that is now known as al-Lijā. He contends that the Targumic tradition is a later interpretation that is not in consonance with earlier sources, who understood Argob to be located in the northern Trans-Jordan region between Nahr al-Ruqād and Nahr al-'Alān. For more on the geographical aspects of *argov* and Trachonitis, see: J. McClintock & J. Strong (eds.), *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature: A, B* (Harper, 1867), pp. 387–388; J. McClintock & J. Strong (eds.) *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature: Su-Z* (Harper, 1881), pp. 509–510; H. O. Thompson, "Argob," in D. N. Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1 (Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 376–377; and R. S. Smith, "Trachonitis," in D. N. Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6 (Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 624–625.

²⁵ D. Z. Hoffmann (ibid.), p. 55 and G. L. Robinson, "The Ancient 'Circuit of Argob,'" *The Biblical World*, vol. 20:4 (1902), p. 254.

²⁶ Rashi explicitly bases his comments on what he derived from *Targum Sheini* (to Est. 1:3).

understanding of the Targumim is also accepted by the 11th-century exegete R. Toviah b. Eliezer,²⁷ the 12th-century school of R. Elazar Rokeah of Worms,²⁸ and the 13th-century exegete R. Bahya Ibn Halava.²⁹ It remains unclear whether these sources understood *argov* as a *common* word that itself means “palace,” or as a *proper* noun, that is, the name of the Bashanite king’s palace (along the lines of the word *Buckingham* in the noun phrase “Buckingham Palace”).

Although admittedly speculative, it is quite possible that the scholars who understood *argov* to mean “palace” based themselves on the similarity of *argov* to the Hebrew word *armon* (ארמון), which means “palace.” As is evident, the first two letters of both *argov* and *armon* are the same, and the last two letters of *argov* are equivalent to the last two letters of *armon* (in reverse order) when using the א"ל"ב cipher,³⁰ a mode already mentioned in the Talmud (TB *Shabbat* 104a).³¹

In any event, the fact that some scholars explain *argov* as meaning “palace” and that the Targumim even offer a translation of the lexeme, suggests that they understood *argov* as a translatable common noun, as

²⁷ *Midrash Lekah Tov / Pesikta Zutrata, Devarim* (Vilna, 1880), fol. 5a.

²⁸ J. Klugmann (ed.), *Peirush ha-Rokeah al ha-Torah*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Kadamonei Ashkenaz, 2009), p. 166. Curiously, that source also seems to associate the word *argov* with *regen*, but the relationship of that association to the explanation of *argov* as “palace” is not made clear.

²⁹ C. Chavel (ed.), *Rabbeinu Bahya al ha-Torah, Bamidbar–Devarim* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 2006), p. 262.

³⁰ It is not irrelevant to note that the only time that Rashi explicitly uses the א"ל"ב cipher in his commentary to the Bible or Talmud is in the context of a plot mentioned in Isaiah to overthrow the King of Judah and replace him with Pekah king of Israel. In that context, Isaiah states that the intended usurper was named Ben-Tabeel (Isa. 7:6), with Rashi commenting that Ben-Tabeel is a crypto-reference to Ben-Remaliah (using this cipher), the patronym of Pekah. This explanation of the name Ben-Tabeel is also found in *Bamidbar Rabbah* (§18:21) and is presented by R. Saadiah Gaon in Y. Ratzaby (ed.), *Saadya’s Translation and Commentary on Isaiah* (Kiryat Ono: Machon Moshe, 1994), p. 263. Cf. Ibn Ezra (to Isa. 7:6) who cites this explanation, but rejects it. In light of this, it is somewhat more plausible to claim that there might be some connection between this fact and the use of *argov* as a synonym of *armon* in connection to this very same person and his overthrowing machinations.

³¹ We find some precedent for this sort of word-parsing in Radak’s *Sefer Shorashim* (s.v. רטפ"ש), where he explains the four-letter word *rutfash* by taking the first half as written (*reish-tet*) and then applying the אהב"ש cipher to the second half (turning *רטפ"ש* into *רטוב*). A similar approach is also found in the *Maharsha* (to *Pesahim* 116b) in a different context.

opposed to a proper noun. Indeed, the early Christian scholars Eusebius (3rd–4th century) and Jerome (4th–5th century) quote the 2nd-century translator Symmachus as having rendered the Hebrew word *argov* in Greek as “circumference/measure,” which demonstrates that Symmachus also understood the word as a common noun, and not a proper noun/place-name.³²

Similarly, several Medieval Franco-German Jewish scholars, in their respective comments to Deut. 3:13, seem to explain that *argov* means “district,”³³ again demonstrating their view that *argov* is a common noun.³⁴ The Yemenite poet and exegete, R. Shalom Shabazi (1619–1720), likewise writes that the word *argov* means a “patch of land” that serves as a sort of no-man’s-land between the borders of two states.³⁵ This explanation demonstrates that Shabazi as well understood *argov* as a common noun.

R. Shmuel b. Meir (1085–1158), known as Rashbam, was a grandson of Rashi and is often associated with the French Tosafist movement. In his commentary to Deut. 3:4, Rashbam cryptically writes that the meaning of *argov* can be gleaned from its context, without further explaining what exactly he means. This comment implies that he understood *argov* to be a common noun, not a proper noun, because if *argov* were merely a place-name, then there is no semantic meaning to be gleaned from the context, nor is there any need for one.

Argov as a Personal Name

Ibn Ezra (to Deut. 3:4) cites anonymous commentators who explain that *Argov* is the name of a person who inherited the strip of land under discussion from his father. Likewise, R. Bahya (to Deut. 3:4) explains *Argov*

³² G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville (trans.), *The Onomasticon by Eusebius of Caesarea* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2003), p. 18.

³³ *Hadar Zekanim* (to Deut. 3:13), Y. M. Orlan (ed.), *Sefer ha-Gan* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 2009), p. 331; and Y. Nevo (ed.), *Peirushei R. Yosef Bekhor-Shor al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 2000), p. 312.

³⁴ The fact that they offer this comment on Deut. 3:13, instead of earlier on verse 3:4, suggests that perhaps one of their reasons for offering this explanation is the presence of the definite article (“the”) attached to the word *argov*, which is only true of 3:13, and not the earlier verse. See below for a discussion of how the presence of this definite article may affect the ways in which the term *argov* was understood.

³⁵ T. Bar-Maoz (ed.), *Midrash Hemdat Yamim al ha-Torah*, vol. 5 (Jerusalem: Keren Shabazi, 2014), pp. 443–444. Interestingly, though, Shabazi also cites the opinions that *Argov* is a personal name (there, pp. 50; 443).

as a personal name whose antecedent was either the government-appointed prefect of the strip of land in question, or was the landholder who inherited this strip from his father.³⁶ This basic understanding of *Argov* as primarily a personal name is also adopted by *Metzudat Zion* (to I Kings 4:13). According to all these scholars, the word *Argov* should be taken as a *proper* noun, and not as a *common* noun.

There is indeed some evidence of the personal name *Argb* in Ugaritic, although scholars are unsure of the name's etymology.³⁷ More importantly, as we shall see below, there is reason to understand *Argov* in II Kgs. 15:25 as a personal name, so it makes sense that *Argov* in the other places in the Bible might also be a personal name.

It is important to note that the identity or background of this person named *Argov* is not explicitly provided in the Biblical text. In this context, I am reminded of Ibn Ezra's comment (to Zech. 12:11) about us not knowing who Haddadrimon is. Even if Haddadrimon may have been well-known in Biblical times, in later times, who exactly he was has become less widely-known and more obscure. Something along those lines may have happened with *Argov* as well.

Argov as a Proper Noun

R. David Kimḥi (1160–1235), also known as Radak, famously wrote *Sefer ha-Shorashim*, which is a lexicon that lists all the roots used in Biblical Hebrew and the words derived from them. In his glosses to Kimḥi's work, the Renaissance grammarian R. Eliyahu ha-Baḥur (1569–1549), also known as Elias Levita, expressly wonders why Kimḥi fails to list the word *argov* in his lexicon. More specifically, Levita asks why Kimḥi did not list the word *argov* under the four-letter ארגב or at least under the three-letter

³⁶ C. Chavel (ed.), *Rabbeinu Baḥya al ha-Torah, Bamidbar–Devarim* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 2006), p. 262.

³⁷ L. Koehler & W. Baumgartner (eds.), *The Hebrew Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Leiden/New York: Brill, 1994), p. 84 and W. G. E. Watson (ed.), *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015), p. 96. For the supposition that this Ugaritic personal name derives from the Ugaritic common noun *argb* for “eagle/bird,” see below. In private correspondence, Dr. Gary A. Rendsburg (of Rutgers University) contested the assumption that the Ugaritic *argb* is a personal name, instead preferring to explain it as simply a toponym used in the same sense as the Hebrew place-name *Argov* in the Bible. In this way, the Ugaritic lexeme *argb* is subject to a scholarly debate that somewhat echoes the Medieval debate about its apparent cognate in Hebrew.

√רגב.³⁸ Levita evidently understood *argov* as a common noun, but how did Kimḥi understand it?

In a recently-published manuscript, R. Shabtai Sofer of Przemyśl (late 16th century) defends Kimḥi by answering that he evidently understood the word *argov* as a personal name, not a common noun, and therefore Kimḥi did not feel the need to list the word (nor its root) in his *Sefer ha-Shorashim*, which only deals with lexical words.³⁹ This supposition is strongly supported by the fact that Kimḥi himself actually writes that *Argov* in II Kings 15:25 is a personal name (see below), so it does not stretch credibility to assume that he understood *Argov* in Deut. and I Kings in the same way.⁴⁰

Like Kimḥi, other early Hebrew lexicographers, such as Menahem Ibn Saruk (920–970), Yonah Ibn Janah (990–1050), and Shlomo Ibn Parḥon (12th-century author of *Mahberet be-Arukh*) also omit *argov* from their respective lexicons of Hebrew. Their silence implies that they too understand the word as a proper noun, not as a common noun. Additionally, the Septuagint and Vulgate always leave *argov* untranslated (Αργόβ/Argob), as do other, later translations of the Bible. All of this suggests that these lexicographers and translators viewed the term as an untranslatable *proper* noun, not as a *common* noun.

Nonetheless, even if these scholars understood *Argov* as a proper noun, it does not necessarily follow that they agreed with those who explained *Argov* as a personal name. Instead, it is quite possible that the scholars in question saw *Argov* as a proper place-name that directly referred to the region in question, rather than a personal name that referred to somebody who was somehow associated with said region.

In light of the supposition that *Argov* was a place-name, it can be argued that the two propositions that *argov* is a common noun (related to “clump/clod” or “palace”) and a proper noun (a place-name) are not mutually-exclusive. With little effort, they can easily be synthesized into a singular understanding. This is because linguists have recognized the fact that across languages it is common for common nouns to be transformed

³⁸ J. H. Biesenthal & F. Lebrecht (eds.), *Sefer ha-Shorashim* (Berlin, 1847), p. 424.

³⁹ Y. Satz, “*Sefer Haganab le-Radak be-Shorashim*” in *Nitei Na’anim*, vol. 3 (Lake-wood, NJ: Machon Mishnas Rabbi Aaron, 2002), p. 21.

⁴⁰ Kimḥi (to II Kgs. 15:25) and Biesenthal & Lebrecht, *Sefer ha-Shorashim*, p. 27.

into proper toponyms in place-names by the addition of the definite article, and then at a later stage for the definite article to be dropped.⁴¹

This paradigm may have been in play with the place-name Argov that originally bore a semantic meaning, but eventually solidified into a full-fledged proper name. In other words, the geographical space known as the “strip of (the) *Argov*” may have originally received its name from the common noun *argov*, but then became a proper noun, as evident by the use of the definite article prefix (*ha-*) in the word *ha-argov* in Deut. 3:13. When that name later became well-established and meaningful outside of the original semantic sense of the eponymous common noun, the definite article may have been deleted, so that in most places, the Bible refers to it as “strip of *Argov*,” actually omitting the definite article.

Argov and Ha-Arieh as Personal Names

After having presented the various ways of understanding *argov* in Deut. and I Kings, we now turn our attention to the word *argov* in II Kings 15:25. In the following sections, we will consider if and how the word *argov* in this passage is related to the word *argov* discussed above. We will also ask whether *argov* in this verse is a common noun or a proper noun. This question does not necessarily depend on how to categorize the word *argov* in Deut. and I Kings, and is therefore treated as a separate line of inquiry.

In the case of II Kings 15:25, since the word *argov* appears alongside the word *ha-ariel*, the commentators tend to explain the pair together, such that if one is a common noun or proper noun, so is the other. Because of this, the following sections will treat *argov* and its counterpart *ha-ariel* as a tandem.

Unlike in the earlier case of I Kings 4:13 (wherein *Targum Jonathan* rendered the Hebrew *argov* as *trakhona*), in II Kings 15:25, *Targum Jonathan* leaves the Hebrew word *argov* untranslated, thus ostensibly treating it as a proper noun, Argov. The same is true of the word *ha-ariel* that appears

⁴¹ See S. N. Lee, “The Use of the Definite Article in the Development of Some Biblical Toponyms,” *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 52:3 (2002), pp. 334–337. The theory that the definite article can be applied to place-names in Hebrew that are homonymous with common words was already proposed by S. Lowisohn, *Beth ha-Osef* (Prague, 1812), pp. 2–4; S. Lowisohn, *Mehkerei Eretz* (Vienna, 1819), pp. 29b–30b; and S. Lowisohn, *Eretz Kedumim* (Vilna, 1839), pp. 95, 125, who even discussed the same toponym treated in Lee’s study (Gilboa). See also Kimhi (to Jer. 48:41) and M. Strashun, *Mivhar Ketavim* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1969), pp. 245–246. Luzzatto also makes a similar point in Y. Bassi (ed.), *Peirush Shadal la-Torah*, vol. 5 (Jerusalem: Carmel Publishers, 2015), p. 43. See below for related discussions.

alongside *argov*, which Jonathan likewise leaves untranslated as *Arieh*, again seemingly understanding the term as a proper noun. Yeivin buttresses this supposition by noting that (as mentioned above) the Septuagint and Vulgate likewise always leave *argov* untranslated and, additionally, in this passage also leave *ba-ariel* untranslated (Αἰῶν/ Arieh).⁴²

Indeed, Kimḥi (to II Kings 15:25) explicitly interprets Argov and Arieh as proper nouns,⁴³ that is, the personal names⁴⁴ of two warriors⁴⁵ who aided Pekah's revolt.⁴⁶

Abarbanel (to II Kings 15:25) likewise explains that Argov and Arieh were warriors in the employ of Pekahiah as bodyguards of sorts, who were subdued and defeated by Pekah's co-conspirators. R. Moshe Tedeschi-Ashkenazi (1821–1898) in *Ho'il Moshe* (to II Kings 15:25) also prefers to explain that Argov and Arieh were on Pekahiah's side, and speculates that

⁴² S. Yeivin, *Zer le-Gevurot*, p. 157.

⁴³ In modern times, Argov has become a popular Israeli surname among families of both Ashkenazic and Sephardic origins. According to my genealogical research, many of those families originally used surnames that sounded similar to Argov (like Orkavi, Orgovi, Aglarov, Grabovsky, Ryb, Eisenberg, or Margovski), and were subsequently Hebraized to Argov.

⁴⁴ Although nowadays the name Arieh is a fairly prevalent Jewish given name, there is no evidence that it was used as a personal name in the Biblical Period. A. Beider, *A Dictionary of Ashkenazic Given Names: Their Origins, Structure, Pronunciation, and Migrations* (Bergenfield, NJ: Avotaynu, 2001), p. 277 finds evidence of the Jewish name Arye used in Germany in Medieval times, but argues that it only became popular later on as a calque of the Yiddish name Leib ("lion"). For more examples of Biblical given names derived from common Hebrew or Aramaic words for animals, see H. Levy, "Shemot Pratiim Sheulim mi-Shemot Baalei Haim Etzel ha-Yehudim," *Lesbonenu: A Journal for the Study of the Hebrew Language and Cognate Subjects*, vol. 3:3 (1933), pp. 265–272 and "Arieh, Deborah, ve-Tzvi — Shemot Chayot le-Vnei Adam" available online at: <<https://tinyurl.com/3jwb8s6n>>.

⁴⁵ Some versions of R. Yosef Kara's commentary cite R. Menahem b. Helbo (an 11th-century French Tosafist) as explaining that Arieh was the name of a person—even though, as cited below, he himself explained Argov in this context as referring to the Trans-Jordanian region, see S. Eppenstein (ed.), *Peirushei R. Yosef Kara le-Neviim Rishonim* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1972), p. 158.

⁴⁶ This explanation is also found in a gloss to *Targum Jonathan* (there), see A. Sperber (ed.), *Kitvei ha-Kodesh be-Aramit*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1959), p. 305. As an aside, H. Kanievsky, *l-Mikhsesh Atik* (Bnei Brak, 1983), p. 41 cites such an explanation in the name of *Tosefta de-Targum*, which usually refers to the materials printed in R. Kasher, *Toseftot Targum le-Neviim* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1996). However, in this case the excerpt in question does not appear in that work.

the complete story of Pekah's rebellion and the role that Argov and Arieḥ played in it were recorded in the now-lost Chronicles of the Kings of Israel.

Malbim (to II Kings 15:25) offers a similar understanding, positing that Argov and Arieḥ were in the service of Pekahiah's palace, before suggesting that perhaps they were actually collaborators with Pekah's efforts.

According to this view that Argov was a personal name, there is no reason to associate Argov in II Kings with Argov in Deut. and I Kings, which referred to a certain place. But there is a parallel between the two, because some commentators understood the earlier Argov to be a personal name, and this later Argov is likewise explained as a personal name (albeit clearly in reference to a different person).

Argov and Ha-Arieḥ as Common Nouns

Rashi (II Kings 15:25) and R. Yosef Kara (there) explain that *argov* means "palace," and *ha-arieḥ* (literally, "the lion") refers to golden statues of lions that were housed in the palace. According to this, the Bible's report means to stress that Pekah not only assassinated his predecessor Pekahiah, but also destroyed his palace and its royal paraphernalia. With this understanding, Rashi remains in consonance with his own opinion, cited earlier, that views *argov* in Deut. and I Kings as a common noun. Essentially, Rashi extended his explanation of *argov* there to *argov* in II Kings, although he did not explicitly make that connection.

Based on Ugaritic readings, Geller suggests that *argov* ought to be understood as meaning "eagle," and the Bible was reporting that Pekah killed Pekahiah near the statues of the eagle and the lion.⁴⁷ Thus, he too understood *argov* as a common noun, but one seemingly unrelated to the word *argov* (in Deut. and I Kings) discussed earlier.

Argov as a Place or Military Unit

Another cluster of commentators explicitly links the word *argov* in II Kings 15:25 to the term *argov* in Deut. and I Kings in different ways. These

⁴⁷ M. J. Geller, "A New Translation for 2 Kings XV 25," *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 26:3 (1976), pp. 374–377. See also W. G. E. Watson, "Additional Names for Animals in the Ugaritic Texts," *Historiae*, vol. 4. (2007), p. 98 and E. J. Penttuc, *West Semitic Vocabulary in the Akkadian Texts from Emar* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001), p. 32. In private correspondence, Dr. Gonzalo Rubio (of Pennsylvania State University) argued that the Ugaritic given name *Argh* is actually a personal name derived from the name of an animal (i.e., "eagle" or "bird") in the same style as other Semitic names that are borrowed from words for animals (as mentioned above).

commentators include Medieval Jewish scholars, as well as modern rabbinic and academic scholars, who differ on exactly how mention of the geographic place discussed above fits the context of the story of Pekah and Pekahiah. These sources essentially view *argov* in II Kings as a proper noun that is not separate from *argov* in Deut. and I Kings.

In some versions of R. Yosef Kara's commentary, Kara cites the 11th-century French exegete R. Menahem b. Helbo as explaining that *argov* and *ba-arieh* both refer to the "strip of *Argov*," which was also (for some unknown reason) called "the [king's] lion."⁴⁸ Nonetheless, Kara fails to clarify exactly how mention of this geographical location fits into the context of Pekah's rebellion and Pekahiah's assassination.

R. Haim Dov Rabinowitz (1909–2001) postulates that if *argov* and *ba-arieh* were proper nouns, then there would have been no special need for the Bible to highlight the fact that two individuals bearing these names were killed alongside Pekahiah. Instead, Rabinowitz posits that *argov* refers to the exact place within the king's palace where Pekahiah was killed. Namely, Rabinowitz sees *argov* as the name of a special wing in Pekahiah's royal palace that was built (or perhaps sponsored?) by people from the Argov region in the Trans-Jordan.

Rabinowitz further explains that *ba-arieh* refers to a lion statue that symbolized the braveness and courage of Jewish fighters from the Argov region—which was located at the north-eastern border of the Kingdom of Israel—as those fighters essentially served as lookouts who protected the entire kingdom. According to Rabinowitz, the Bible specifically mentioned that Pekah killed Pekahiah in the *Argov* wing of the palace in order to stress that Pekah presented his rebellion against Pekahiah as a way of avenging the death of his landsman Shalum, the former king of Israel, who was assassinated by Pekahiah's father, Menahem (when Menahem usurped the throne). Thus, by invoking the name Argov in its account of Pekahiah's assassination, the Bible alluded to Pekah's connection to that Trans-Jordan region and his role in righting Menahem's assassination of Shalum.⁴⁹

Some modern Bible scholars have suggested that *argov* and *ba-arieh* were names of military units that were part of Pekahiah's royal guard. They conjecture that *argov* refers to the fact that members of this military

⁴⁸ S. Eppenstein (ed.), *Peirushei R. Yosef Kara le-Neviim Rishonim*, p. 158.

⁴⁹ C. D. Rabinowitz, *Da'at Sofrim, Melakhim* (Jerusalem/New York: Da'at Israel Society for Tanakh and Jewish History, undated), p. 178.

unit were natives of the *Argov* region in the Bashan,⁵⁰ while *ha-arieh* refers either to ferocious lion-like forces (who may have worn lion masks or bore a fearsome, leonine facial countenance,⁵¹ or to its members' origins in the tribal territory of Gad, because Moses compared Gad to a lion in Deut. 33:20.⁵²) Without further evidence that the practice of naming military units was followed in ancient times, it seems that these suppositions are anachronistic impositions of contemporary military conventions on the Biblical text, without any concrete textual or philological basis.

Other modern Bible scholars understand the word *ha-arieh* as a reference to Jair—as it is almost an anagram of his name—the Jewish warrior from the tribe of Manasseh who first conquered the region of Argov in the Mosaic Period.⁵³ Accordingly, it seems that II Kings 15:25 means to describe Pekaḥ as akin to Ben-Geber from the Solomonic Period, in that before he rebelled against the king and took his place, he was in charge of the *Argov* region, which was either coterminous with or geographically in the proximity of the sixty cities that *Jair* conquered.

Argov as a Title

Until now, we have seen commentators that explain Argov in II Kings 15:25 as either a personal name, a common noun, or a placename. However, Gersonides (to II Kings 15:25) seems to synthesize all three approaches in his original explanation.⁵⁴ He writes that *Argov* and *Arieḥ* refer to two specific warriors, but that *Argov* is actually a title borne by the official in charge of the geographical area known as Argov, and *Arieḥ* is an epithet applied to a warrior whose physical prowess resembles that of a “lion” (*arieḥ*).⁵⁵ In this way, Argov is like a proper noun (personal name)

⁵⁰ S. Yeivin, *Zer le-Geurot*, pp. 158–160 and Y. Kiel (ed.), *Da'at Mikra, Melakhim II* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1989), p. 659.

⁵¹ S. Yeivin (*ibid.*).

⁵² Y. Kiel (*ibid.*). It should be noted that Kiel could have also written that these soldiers were from the Tribe of Dan (which is likewise located in the northernmost part of the Holy Land), as Moses also compared that tribe to a lion cub (Deut. 33:22).

⁵³ H. O. Thompson, “Argob,” in D. N. Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1 (Yale University Press, 1992), p. 376 and G. Galil, “A New Look at the Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III,” *Biblica*, vol. 81:4 (2000), p. 512.

⁵⁴ *Metzudat David* (to II Kgs. 15:25) offers an identical approach as an onomastic speculation of these warriors' respective given names, thus blending the explanations of Kimḥi and Gersonides.

⁵⁵ In a similar vein, Targum (to II Sam. 23:20, I Chron. 11:22) understands the word *arieḥ*, which cognates with the Hebrew word *ari/aryeh* (“lion”), to mean

in that it refers to a specific individual, but is also like a common noun because it is essentially a descriptor for somebody holding a political position and is yet also like a place-name because it refers to the leader of a specific geographic area.

If *argov* were a title, then one might have expected the Bible to refer to the individual in question as “the Argov,” using the definite article. However, in the context of II Kings 15:25, *argov* seems to be a proper noun, given its lack of the definite article. Nevertheless, this is not the only instance wherein the Bible treats an official title as though it were a personal name. Other examples include the titles Pharaoh, Rabshakeh,⁵⁶ and Tartan,⁵⁷ that are all treated in the Bible as proper nouns,⁵⁸ and therefore never prefaced with the definite article, yet remain, in fact, titles which are technically common nouns. These occurrences can be explained via what linguists like Fraurud call “proprification,” a phenomenon whereby a particular common noun recurs often enough in reference to a specific antecedent, that the common noun itself becomes a proper noun.⁵⁹

Argov’s Compound Root

At first, the late 13th century Syrian exegete R. Shet b. Yefet of Aleppo interprets the word *argov* in Deut. as “the king’s palace.” But afterwards, he offers an alternate explanation that sees *argov* as a portmanteau comprised of the words *arieh* (“lion”) and *gov* (“den”), essentially arguing that Og’s Bashanite domain was called “the lion’s den” (possibly on account of its impenetrability due to its king being a giant). He then adds that places perceived to be “awesome and fearsome” are often called after lions, concluding that this matter is very deep and esoteric.⁶⁰

R. Benzion Arie Leib Zisling (1844–1918) independently offers a similar theory to explain *argov* as a portmanteau of *arieh* and *gov*. In doing

“warrior,” possibly in allusion to the lion-like courage needed to be a successful warrior.

⁵⁶ R. D. Biggs, et al. (eds.), *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, vol. 15 (Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1999), pp. 252–254.

⁵⁷ R. D. Biggs, et al., (eds.), *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, vol. 18 (Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 2006), pp. 489–490.

⁵⁸ For an example of confusion between a proper name and a Persian title in Amoraic times, see also Rashi and *Tosafos* (to *Niddah* 25a).

⁵⁹ K. Fraurud, “Cognitive Ontology and NP Form” in J. K. Gundel & T. Fretheim (eds.), *Reference and Referent Accessibility* (John Benjamins Publishing, 1996), p. 81.

⁶⁰ M. Orfali (ed.), *The Hem’at ha-Hemdab Commentary on the Pentateuch* (Tel Aviv University Press, 2018), p. 380.

so, he presents a creative explanation that posits that the Bashanites in Og's kingdom would raise lions to be used in warfare, and because of this, the strip of land in question was called *Argov*—as though it were a lion's den that made it all the more difficult to conquer.

In the context of Pekah's revolt, R. Zisling explains that "Argov and the Lion" refer to a team consisting of a specific trainer who was adept at training combat lions (an *argov*), and an especially ferocious lion that was used for battle (*ba-arieh*), who joined forces as a duo to support Pekah's efforts.⁶¹ These two sources understand *argov* as a sort of common noun, and see no difference between *argov* in Deut. and I Kings and *argov* in II Kings.

Nonetheless, it should be stated that while there is historical evidence attesting to the use of animals in warfare in the Ancient Near East (such as dogs,⁶² horses, and elephants⁶³), the specific use of trained lions remains unsupported by historical records and scholarly research on ancient military practices.⁶⁴

Another explanation of the place-name *argov* is offered by the Italian Kabbalist R. Moshe David Valle (1697–1777). He sees *argov* as a portmanteau of the words *arig* ("weaving") and *gavu* ("they collected"), somehow using this to explain that the Jews "collected" this piece of land due to Og's wickedness.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Y. Raitbord, *Kehillat Yitzhak* (Vilna, 1900), fol. 71b–72b.

⁶² See E. S. Forster, "Dogs in Ancient Warfare," *Greece & Rome*, vol. 10:30 (1941), pp. 114–117; G. B. A. Fletcher, "Another Word on Dogs in Ancient Warfare," *Greece & Rome*, vol. 11:31 (1941), p. 34; and O. Rees, "Dogs of War, or Dogs in War? The Use of Dogs in Classical Greek Warfare," *Greece & Rome*, vol. 67:2 (2020), pp. 230–246.

⁶³ See R. Glover, "The Elephant in Ancient War," *The Classical Journal*, vol. 39:5 (1944), pp. 257–269 and P. Rance, "Elephants in Warfare in Late Antiquity," *Acta Antiqua*, vol. 43:3 (2003), pp. 355–384.

⁶⁴ A. Mayor, "Animals in Warfare" in G. L. Campbell (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life* (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 282–293 offers a detailed description of the various animals used in warfare during Classical times, and L. Battini, "Animals in War in Historical Mesopotamia," *Bulletin of the Ancient Near East: Archaeological, Historical and Societal Studies*, vol. 3:1 (2019), pp. 47–62 similarly offers a comprehensive study on the animals used in war in Ancient Mesopotamia. Neither of those surveys mention anything about the use of lions, hence there is no reason to think that lions were used in warfare in Biblical times.

⁶⁵ Y. Spinner (ed.), *Biur Mishnah Torah* (Jerusalem: Machon Pitchei Megadim, 1989), p. 24.

When explaining the account of Pekah's coup, R. Valle explains *argov* and *ba-arieb* as references to Pekahiah's bodyguards, whom the Bible reports Pekah was able to circumvent. In doing so, Valle parses the word *argov* as an acronym for *anashim resha'im gedolim be-hokhmah* ("wicked men [who are] great in wisdom"), and connects *ba-arieb* to *arieb* in reference to strong men who were courageous like "lions."⁶⁶ This esoteric explanation of *argov* is clearly within the realm of exegesis, and should not be taken as a literal elucidation of the term.

The Definite Article

According to conventional Hebrew grammar, the definite article (*ha-*, known to Hebrew grammarians as *hey ha-yedi'ah*) can only be applied to a common noun (in order to specify the person, place, thing, or idea in question from within the broader parent category to which it belongs), but not to a proper noun.⁶⁷

For example, if there were two men with the same first-name (e.g., Jacob) standing next to each other, it is considered grammatically correct in English to refer to one of those men with the definite article (e.g., "the Jacob standing on the right") in order to distinguish him from the other

⁶⁶ Y. Spinner (ed.), *Kisse Nakbon* (Jerusalem: Machon Pitchei Megadim, 1998), p. 271.

⁶⁷ Ibn Ezra (to Ex. 3:15) states the rule that a definite article cannot be applied to a proper noun. For example, he notes that although "wiseman" is *hakham* and "the wiseman" is *be-hakham* (Ecc. 2:14), never does one find the Bible saying "the Abraham" as *ba-Avraham* or "the Isaac" as *ba-Yitzhak*. He further notes that even though the author of Ecclesiastes identifies himself as *Kobelet* (Ecc. 1:1–2, 1:12, 7:27, 12:9–10), this word is actually a description of the genius to whom crowds "gathered" to listen, but it cannot be a proper name because in one instance, the author applies the definite article to himself as *ba-Kobelet* (Ecc. 12:8, see also Ibn Ezra ad loc.). Ibn Ezra repeats this rule: in N. Aloni (ed.), *Yesod Dikduk* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1984), p. 171; M. S. Goodman (ed.), *Sefer Moznaim* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 2016), pp. 90, 145; and M. S. Goodman (ed.), *Safah Berurah* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 2020), pp. 73–74. Although, the earlier grammarian Donash Ibn Labrat (920–990) maintains the view that the definite article *can* apply to proper names, Ibn Ezra in R. Schroter (ed.), *Sefer Teshuvot* (Breslau, 1866), pp. 29–30 and *Sefat Yeter* (Pressburg, 1838), p. 31, expressly objects to this opinion, in keeping with his aforementioned rule. Kimḥi in *Sefer Mikhlol* (Furth, 1793), fol. 48b–49a also cites Ibn Ezra's formulation of this rule. This grammatical rule and its apparent exceptions are also discussed by the Hebrew grammarian R. Zalman Henna (1687–1746) in *Binyan Shlomo* (Frankfurt on the Main, 1708), fol. 36b.

man. However, in conventional Hebrew, it would be considered grammatically incorrect to apply the definite article to a personal name (e.g., *ha-Yaakov ha-omed be-tzad yemin*).

While there are many applications of this principle, one important ramification of this rule relates to understanding the lexemes *adam* and *ha-adam* in Gen. 1–5. Since it is assumed that only common nouns can receive the definite article in Hebrew and proper nouns cannot, then all instances of *ha-adam* should be translated as “man(kind)” — a sort of common noun — while only cases of *adam* sans the definite article should be understood in the sense of the proper name “Adam.”⁶⁸

The existence of this rule may have a bearing on the various understandings of the words *argov* and *ha-arieh* in the Bible. As noted in the introduction to this essay, in Deut. 3:13, the word *argov* appears with the definite article prefaced to it, *ha-argov*. If *argov* is taken as a common noun, then the presence of the definite article in the term “strip of the *argov*” complies with the grammatical rules about the definite article. However, if *argov* is understood as a proper noun — whether a geonym or a personal name — then the presence of the definite article on that word becomes problematic in light of the grammatical rules about when the definite article is appropriate.⁶⁹

A similar problem arises in accordance with those translators and exegetes (like *Targum Jonathan*, the Septuagint, the Vulgate, and Kimḥi) who understand the lexeme *ha-arieh* in II Kings 15:25 as a personal name. While the original Hebrew MT of that verse contains the definite article before

⁶⁸ Ibn Ezra (to Gen. 2:8, Ex. 3:15) comments that Adam is sometimes referred to as *ha-Adam* because of a “secret” (see Kimḥi to Gen. 2:8, who attempts to divulge the secret). Rabbi Nissim of Marseilles also discusses the difference between *Adam* and *ha-Adam* in light of the grammatical rule in question, see H. Kreisel (ed.), *Ma’ase Nissim* (Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 2000), p. 251. M. Almalech, “The Man Becomes Adam,” *Cross-Inter-Multi: Proceedings of the 13th World Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies* (2018), pp. 476–485, writes that all of this is only true of the original Hebrew Bible. However, in later translations of the Bible, even cases of *adam* are sometimes rendered “man(kind).” See there for a semiotic analysis of the underlying theologies that might lead to such translations (or possible mistranslations). Other traditional Jewish sources who treat the difference between *adam* and *ha-adam* in the opening chapters of Genesis include Abarbanel (to Gen. 5:1), Malbim (to Gen. 4:1), and responsa *Haṭam Sofer* (*Yoreh Deah* §336). See also R. Margolios, *Margoliot ha-Yam* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1958), pp. 29–30.

⁶⁹ In general, the definite article only applies to proper toponyms in the construct form to denote a gentilic. In the case of *argov*, the expected gentilic would be *ha-Argovi* — a term which never appears in the Bible.

the lexeme (*ba-*)*arieh*, the aforementioned sources dropped the definite article and left the name in question as simply *Arieḥ*. Essentially, the presence of the definite article creates a difficulty in justifying the view that *Arieḥ* is a personal name, so those translators and exegetes simply ignored it; even though it remains on the books.⁷⁰ On the other hand, if *arieh* is a common noun or title, then the definite article is entirely appropriate.

The question about *Argov* as a placename being prefaced with a definite article may be partially alleviated by appealing to the grammarians who wrote that there is an exception to this grammatical rule in the case of place-names.⁷¹ Moreover, R. Wolf Heidenheim (1757–1832) proposes that in Biblical Hebrew, place-names that are based on common nouns (or other content words that describe the place or an event that happened there) can sometimes be preceded by the definite article, even if place-names named after a person's given name cannot.⁷²

Nonetheless, if *Argov* and *Arieḥ* are understood as personal names, then the problematic presence of the definite article on those words remains acute.

The Definite Article on Proper Names

To partially resolve this question, we note that there is precedent in pre-grammatical rabbinic sources for the notion that the definite article *may* be applied to a person's given name—contra the view of the later Hebrew grammarians of the Medieval period. In at least five places, the rabbis expound on a Biblical word prefaced with the definite article as though the word was a personal name, which shows that the rabbis did not agree with the later grammarians who claimed that the definite article cannot precede a personal name:

- The Talmud (TB *Hullin* 5a) entertains the possibility that *ba-orvim* (I Kings 17:6)—which ostensibly means “the ravens”—actually

⁷⁰ As M. Strashun, *Minḥar Ketavim*, p. 246 convincingly notes, it is farfetched to argue that the *ba-* element of *ba-arieḥ* is part of the personal name.

⁷¹ For example, Kimḥi (to Josh. 7:2, Jud. 8:10) asserts that the definite article is appropriate on place-names, especially when needed to differentiate them from other places that have the exact same name. Interestingly, Rashbam (to Gen. 38:14) seems to reject such an exception to justify definite articles on place-names. Perhaps this is what led Rashbam to assuming that *argov* in Deuteronomy must be a common noun (as mentioned above).

⁷² W. Heidenheim, *Torat ba-Elohim* (Offenbach, 1797), fol. 127b–128a, also cited by R. Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (1785–1865) in *ba-Ktav ve-ha-Kabbalah* (to Gen. 12:8).

means “the [two men named] Orev.”⁷³ (The proper noun assuming a plural form is also problematic, but will not be discussed here.)

- The Talmud (TB *Bava Batra* 109b) interprets *ha-Levi* (Jud. 17:13)—which ostensibly means “the Levite”—as “the [man named] Levi.”⁷⁴

⁷³ R. Mordekhai Markel b. Yehiel Mikhel of Slavutsch (circa. 1730) suggests that proper names which also have meaning as content words can use the definite article squarely to differentiate them from their common noun use. Thus, in the case of Orev, since the personal name Orev (which appears in Jud. 7:25, 8:3) is orthographically identical to the common word *orev* (“raven”), the use of the definite article is appropriate. See R. Mordekhai Markel’s work *Dikdukei Rashi—Mira Dakbaya* (Bnei Brak: Mishor Books, 2000) which cites the general rule against the definite article on proper names (p. 13), but also cites the exception concerning proper names that are identical to common nouns (pp. 143–144). This understanding is also cited by Azulai in M. C. Greenfeld (ed.), *Drash le-Fi* (Brooklyn, NY: Balshon Printing, 1963), p. 106, and can also be used to justify the presence of the definite article in *ha-arieh* (because *arieh* is also a common word that means “lion”) and in *ha-argov* (if those who explain *argov* as a personal name also agree that it could be a common noun as well).

R. Yisrael Isserlin (1390–1460) in *Biurei Maharai* (Chernovtsy, 1856), fol. 1b was the first to note that this passage in the Talmud concerning *ha-orvim* seems contraindicative of the grammatical rule against the definite article on proper nouns. Later, R. Aharon Lewin (1879–1941) in his *ha-Drash ve-ha-Iyyun*, vol. 1 (Bilgoraj, 1928), p. 133 independently raises this question, without offering an answer. In a responsum addressed to R. Lewin, R. Dr. Yaakov Avigdor (1896–1967) in responsa *Avir Yaakov* vol. 1 (New York, 1949), pp. 14b–15a noted that other commentators have already problematized this Talmudic passage for the same reason, and he then cites R. Mordekhai Markel’s aforementioned answer.

⁷⁴ R. Yaakov Emden (in his glosses to TB *Bava Batra* 109b) notes that even though there is a general rule that the definite article cannot occur on a proper name, this and other cases are exceptions to that rule. Similarly, the Talmud (TB *Menahot* 62a) mentions a sage named “R. Jose b. ha-Meshullam,” and Emden (in his glosses there) comments that he is unsure whether to emend the patronym to read “Meshullam” by deleting the *ha-* element, or to leave the printed reading intact because the definite article can sometimes be applied to personal names. Interestingly, in a Halakhic analysis beyond the scope of this paper, Emden’s father R. Tzvi Ashkenazi (1656–1718) in responsa *Hakham Tzvi* (Amsterdam, 1712), fol. 32b asserts as an absolute rule that the definite article can only occur on a common noun, but not on a proper name.

For a discussion of whether the *ha-* element in the names *ha-katan* (Ezra 8:12), *ha-lopesh* (Neh. 3:13, 10:25), and other similar names in the Bible and rabbinic literature is a part of the personal name or an added definite article, see B. Epstein, *Mekor Barukh*, vol. 4 (Vilna, 1928), p. 2007; D. Katz (ed.), *Ohalei Shem: Al Hilkehot Shemot Gittin* (Brooklyn, 2017), pp. 326–327; A. Magid, *Bet Aharon*, vol.

- The Talmud (TB *Sanhedrin* 96a, *Niddah* 16b) interprets the word *ve-ha-layla* (Job 3:3)—which ostensibly means “and the night”—as “and the [angel named] Layla.”
- One opinion cited in the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* §64:9) interprets the noun phrase *va-ahuzat me-rei'eihu* (Gen. 26:26)—which ostensibly means “and the grouping of his friends”⁷⁵—as “and the [man named] Ahuzat Merei'eihu.”⁷⁶
- One opinion cited in the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* §58:4) interprets the placename *Kiryat Arba* (Gen. 23:2)—which ostensibly means “City of Four”—as “City of [the man named] Arba.”⁷⁷ Elsewhere in the Bible, that placename is given as *Kiryat ha-Arba* (Gen. 35:27, Neh. 11:25), with the definite article preceding the *Arba* element. According to the Midrash, this would mean that the definite article is being applied to a personal name (“City of the [man named] Arba”).⁷⁸

2 (New York, 1964), pp. 558–561; and *Bet Abaron*, vol. 11 (New York, 1978), pp. 400–401. See also R. Yaakov Emden’s *Lehem Shamayim* (to *Kiddushin* 4:5), as well as *Tiferet Yisrael* (*Kiddushin* 4:5 *Yakhin* §27) and *Gilyonei ha-Shas* (to TB *Kiddushin* 76a).

⁷⁵ This explanation is followed by the other opinion cited in the Midrash (there) and by Targum Onkelos (to Gen. 26:26), as well as Rashi (there) and Rashbam (there).

⁷⁶ A third approach explains Ahuzat as a personal name, but interprets *me-rei'eihu* as a prepositional phrase that means “from [among] his friends.” This approach is apparent in the Septuagint and Vulgate (to Gen. 26:26), as well as in Kimhi’s commentary (to Gen. 26:26).

⁷⁷ For an analysis of the other opinions in interpreting *Kiryat Arba*, see R. C. Klein, “Hebron by Another Name,” *Times of Israel Blog* (November 12, 2022), available online at: <<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/hebron-by-another-name/>>.

⁷⁸ Mizrahi (to Gen. 35:17) rejects the notion that the *Arba* element in the phrase *Kiryat ha-Arba* serves as the given name for the giant who founded or governed the city exactly because if *Arba* were a proper noun, it should not have been prefaced with the definite article (*ha-*). See also Maharsha (to TB *Erwin* 53a) who attempts to differentiate between *Kiryat Arba* and *Kiryat ha-Arba* because of this question. R. Yehudah Leib Shapira-Frankfurter (1743–1826) in *ha-Rekhasim la-Vikah* (Altona, 1815), p. fol. 33b suggests that even though grammatically-speaking it is inappropriate to prefix the definite article to a personal name, the Bible nonetheless sometimes does so—especially in the cases of *ha-Anak* (Num. 13:22; 13:28; Josh. 15:13; 15:14, 21:11; Jud. 1:20), *ha-Rafah* (II Sam. 21:16, 21:18) and *ha-Arba* — to stress something especially widely-known about a person (like their gigantism). Finally, see M. Strashun, *Mivhar Ketavim*, p. 246 who answers that *Arba* in *Kiryat ha-Arba* can refer to a person because according to the rabbis, the definite article can indeed occur on personal names.

In all five cases, the rabbis presume that the presence of the definite article does not preclude explaining the noun in question as a proper name.

In light of this evidence, R. Matityahu Strashun (1817–1885) characterizes those explanations that understand *ha-arieh* to refer to a person named Arieḥ as reflecting this rabbinic paradigm that rejects the conventional view of later Hebrew grammarians, and sees the definite article on proper names as entirely appropriate.⁷⁹

As Strashun notes, Kimḥi himself (to Ps. 9:1 and I Chron. 15:18)—who also explained Arieḥ as a personal name—already commented that the definite article can grammatically be applied to given names in some situations.⁸⁰ Similarly, we may extend Strashun’s answer to the case of *ha-argov* in Deut. 3:13 in accordance with those who interpret *Argov* as a personal name. Both of these understandings follow a non-grammatical rabbinic approach that allows for prefacing the definite article to a proper noun.⁸¹

Conclusion

Exploring the lexeme *argov* in the Hebrew Bible has presented us with a fascinating array of interpretations and perspectives. While the exact

⁷⁹ M. Strashun, *Minḥar Ketavim*, p. 245.

⁸⁰ M. Strashun, *Minḥar Ketavim*, p. 246. See also Biesenthal & Lebrecht (ibid.), pp. 176–177, wherein Kimḥi repeats this explanation in the name of his father, R. Yosef Kimḥi. The elder Kimḥi wrote about this in A. Berliner (ed.), *Sefer ha-Galui* (Berlin, 1887), pp. 9–10. There are more relevant sources in Kimḥi’s commentaries: Kimḥi (to Gen. 10:16, Ezek. 38:2) cites the apparent rule that the definite article cannot be applied to personal names, but elsewhere (to Gen. 35:27, II Sam. 24:16) agrees that there might be exceptions, especially for personal names that could also be read as descriptors. For more on the question of the definite article in Biblical Hebrew place-names and personal names, see M. Y. L. Babad, *Todat Moshe* (Brooklyn, NY, 1998), pp. 125–128.

⁸¹ It remains an open question as to when the rabbis’ interpretations of the Bible were intended to lie within the realm of the literal (*pshat*) and should therefore ostensibly be subject to the strictures of grammar, and when the rabbis were merely proffering homiletical, non-grammatical possibilities that were not intended to relay the literal meaning of the Biblical text. In light of this unanswerable question, it should be noted that to categorically derive the rabbis’ considered opinion on a grammatical issue from an exegetical interpretation may be overstating the case. Nonetheless, the trend in rabbinic literature that this paper has highlighted certainly points to the idea that they would have viewed it as legitimate to explain a word in the Bible in a way that the definite article would apply to a personal name.

meaning of *argov* remains debatable, this critical survey has shed light on the controversy surrounding its classification as a common noun or a proper noun, particularly concerning its potential reference to both a place and/or a person. Throughout this investigation, we have shown how scholars proposed various explanations based on linguistic, philological, and contextual analyses, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of *argov*'s possible meanings in the Bible.

The instances of *argov* in the context of the Israelite conquest of Bashan and Pekah's coup against Pekahiah have sparked intriguing discussions. The presence of the definite article on *argov* in the former context was also a point of interest, raising questions about its significance and potential implications for understanding the term.

As we considered potential connections between Argov the person in II Kings and Argov the region in Deuteronomy and I Kings, we must approach such speculations with caution, recognizing the lack of explicit clear Biblical evidence and historical documentation. While onomastics has shown that proper names can sometimes carry semantic meanings akin to common words or content words, the definitive link between the person named Argov and the geographical location or the common noun remains elusive.

Ultimately, this philological survey highlights the complexities and richness of the Hebrew language, wherein a single word like *argov* can carry multiple interpretations and open the door to a wide range of scholarly analyses. As we continue to explore and expand our knowledge of the Bible, it is crucial to remain open to new perspectives and insights.

In conclusion, the study of *argov* and its meaning in the Bible exemplifies the ongoing quest for knowledge and understanding in the field of Biblical scholarship. While some questions remain unanswered, the journey of exploration itself adds to our appreciation of the complexities of the Holy Language and the depth of the Biblical narrative. As we move forward, this research paves the way for future inquiries and discoveries that will undoubtedly contribute to our ever-deepening understanding of the Bible. By embracing the uncertainties and seeking knowledge with an open mind, we can look forward to unveiling more of the fascinating intricacies hidden within the Holy Texts of the Jewish People. ❧