

RECYCLING PROPER NAMES INTO ZOONYMS AS A NEOLOGISATION DEVICE, 1: COINAGES BY ABRAMOWITSCH (1866, 1872)

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Recycling proper names into zoonyms as a neologisation device, 1: Coinages by Abramowitsch (1866, 1872)

Abstract: This study is devoted to a discussion of occurrences, in Modern and Israeli Hebrew zoonymy, of the neologisation device of taking a proper name (a place-name or a personal name), typically from the Hebrew Bible and remotivating it semantically (some call such reinterpretation *metanalysis*), so it would denote a particular zoological taxon. We consider in turn how the name for a station of the Exodus was remotivated by Abramowitsch's (1866) as a neologised Modern Hebrew name for the Wagtail (*Motacilla*), then his neologism for the waterfowl genus *Mergus* (by resorting to a biblical toponym, and involving metathesis). German *Olm* and the biblical toponym *Almon* were sources in Abramowitsch (1872), for naming in Modern Hebrew the olm (*Proteus anguinus*), a blind amphibian endemic to the subterranean waters of caves in Slovenia. Abraham's interlocutor Ephron provided the motivation (by interpreting it from a name for 'sand') for Abramowitsch's (1866) name for the Larks (*Alaudidae*).

Keywords: toponyms recycled as zoonyms (*Mergus*; Wagtail / *Motacilla*; *Olm* / *Proteus anguinus*), language modernisation, Modern Hebrew, Shalom Jacob Abramowitsch (Mendele Mokher Sfarim).

1. Introduction

The present study consists of two parts. It is devoted to a discussion of occurrences, in Modern and Israeli Hebrew zoonymy, of the neologisation device of taking a proper name (a place-name or a personal name), typically from the Hebrew Bible and remotivating it semantically (some call such reinterpretation *metanalysis*), so it would denote a particular zoological taxon. In Part I (see Table 1), we consider how this device was inaugurated, for Hebrew zoonymy, by Abramowitsch (1866, 1872).

Table 1. Structure of this article

1. Introduction
2. The name for a station of the Exodus remotivated by Abramowitsch's (1866) as a name for the Wagtail (<i>Motacilla</i>)
3. Abramowitsch's (1866) neologism for the waterfowl genus <i>Mergus</i> : A biblical toponym, and metathesis
4. German <i>Olm</i> and the biblical toponym <i>Almon</i> as sources of a zoonym in Abramowitsch (1872)
5. Abraham's interlocutor Ephron: Abramowitsch's (1866) name for the Larks (<i>Alaudidae</i>)
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2. The name for a station of the Exodus remotivated by Abramowitsch's (1866) as a name for the Wagtail (*Motacilla*)

When in his Hebrew-language *Natural History*, Abramowitsch (1862–1872) – who was later to become the famous novelist Mendele Mokher Sfarim – coined Hebrew names for animal taxa, this was a milestone to the development of Hebrew zoological terminology. In this article (see Table 1), we consider such instance of his “recycling” a proper name from the Hebrew Bible by remotivating it as a zoonym. Next, we consider how this device has been resorted to more recently, even in recently coined names for some prominent fossil taxa.

When Abramowitsch (1866) set to give the genus *Motacilla*, i.e., the wagtail, a Hebrew name, he was of more than one mind, and this resulted in his proposing more than one name indeed. In Israeli Hebrew, *Motacilla* is *nahāli'elí* (usually pronounced *nakhali'elí*), and *Motacilla alba* is *נַחְלִי'אֵלִי נָהַל* *nahāli'elí laván* (lit. ‘white wagtail’). Abramowitsch coined *נַחְלִי'אֵלִי* *nakhali'elí* and the semantic motivation was from waterstreams. But he actually recycled the name of one of the stations in the desert where the Children of Israel had stopped during the Exodus.

Moreover, the genus *Motacilla* was called *זִנְב־נוֹעַ* *znav-nóa'* by Abramowitsch (1866: 144). This is a compound, literally ‘tail of’ + ‘moving’. Cf. in Israeli Hebrew *קוֹלְנוֹעַ* /qol + no' / *kolnóa* ‘cinema’, literally ‘sound, motion’. This compound denotes either cinema in general, or more in particular (as its etymological sense indicates) the talkies, as opposed to the earlier compound *רֵאִינוֹעַ* /r'i + no' / *re'inóa* ‘silent cinema’, literally ‘vision, motion’. (There is no mention in *רֵאִינוֹעַ* of such films being silent, because that Modern Hebrew term was coined at a time when all films were silent, apart from somebody in the hall playing the piano.)

Reference to the tail is still found in one of the two names of the grey wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*) which the Academy of the Hebrew Language considers standard (according to its online database), namely, *nahāli'elí znavtán* *נַחְלִי'אֵלִי זִנְבָתָן* (literally, ‘wagtail with a conspicuous tail’) and *nahāli'elí afór* *נַחְלִי'אֵלִי אָפֹר* (literally, ‘grey/ashen wagtail’).

And yet again, Abramowitsch also coined *הַאִיקָר* *ha'ikkár*, literally ‘the peasant, the farmer’ (Abramowitsch 1866: 132), this being creational phono-semantic matching (PSM:

see Zuckermann 2000, 2003) of German *Ackermännchen* or *Ackermännchen* 'Motacilla (alba), (white) wagtail'; cf. in the German dictionary of the Grimm brothers (Grimm and Grimm 1854, Vol.1, p. 174: *Ackermännchen*). *Ackermännchen* is not standard in German. Not only is it associated with none of the *Motacilla* species in Harriet Jørgensen's *Nomina Avium Europaeorum* (1958: 86–87) – each species has a standard German name, but that particular name does not appear – it is missing as well from the German index of Jørgensen (1958), even though sporadically the indices there list vernacular synonyms in the particular language of the index. This is unsurprising, as in the 19th century there still was strong variation among German regional language varieties, as well as dialects.¹ Note that German *Acker* means 'farmer's field', and the *Ackermann* is a 'man of the field', 'peasant', whereas literally, *Ackermännchen* is a diminutive of the latter, thus, 'little man of the field', 'little peasant', because that bird is found in the fields. Therefore, what we have here is not merely phono-semantic matching, but a semantic calque. The literal sense in Mendelev's Hebrew neologism is similar to the literal sense of the German bird name.

Fischler (1991: 24, no. 37, and 1991: 26, col. 1) noted that already Schönhak's Hebrew-language natural history (1841–1859), in his volume on zoology (1841), had introduced the Hebrew neologism *הַאִקָּר* *ha'ikkár*, as corresponding to the German term *Ackermännchen*, and actually Abramowitsch and Schönhak differed in that Abramowitsch transcribed that particular German compound in one word in the Hebrew script (according to the conventions of Yiddish spelling), whereas Schönhak did the same but wrote it as two words.

One comes across Abramowitsch (1866) mentioning a bird as *הַאִקָּר* *ha'ikkár*, in a passage without any further clue for identification of that bird (*ibid.*: 32, listed with two other birds), but in the entry in which he introduced that Hebrew name (Abramowitsch 1866: 132), he made that term play second fiddle to another neologism which he preferred to it. In fact, the headword is *נַחְלִי'אֵלִי הַמַּצוּי* *nakhali'elí hammatsúy*, literally, 'the common one-of-Nahaliel', where Nahaliel – whose name, in turn, literally means 'creek of G-d' – is one of the stations in the desert during the Exodus, in *Numbers* 21:19).

¹ For that matter, variation among the dialects of the Italo-Romance lingueme is quite strong in comparison to other European languages, and when it comes to bird names (and fish names) in particular, there is a multitude of synonyms. An authoritative trove of Italian regional names for birds is Arrigoni degli Oddi (1929). This was the source for the regional bird-name entries in Devoto and Oli's Italian dictionary (1968). The standard Italian name of the species *Motacilla alba* is *ballerina bianca* (where the literal sense of *ballerina* is 'dancer', f., and by semantic shift it is a standard vernacular name for the genus *Motacilla*). Devoto and Oli's dictionary (1968) has entries for the following regional names, which all denote the species *Motacilla alba*: *bavarinna*, *bavaròte*, *biàncola*, *buvarinna*, *codiàttola*, *codizingera*, *fratina*, *giancoa*, *paggiaëtta*, *Țgolância*. In the headwords of Devoto and Oli (1968), an initial *Ț* in a consonantal cluster stands for a voiced *s*.

Moreover, *guardapècore* (m., literally 'shepherd', 'guardian of sheep') denotes both *Motacilla alba* and *Motacilla flava*. Clearly that name is motivated by both those birds, and grazing sheep being found in the field at the same time. Besides, another regional name for *M. alba* is *ȚinȚella*, but *ȚenȚella* (also a regional name) denotes the species *Carduelis cannabina*, whereas *ȚinȚola* is a regional name for the species *Emberiza cia*. In the headwords of Devoto and Oli (1968), *Ț* stands for the voiced phonetic value [dz], which is one of the two phonetic values, voiced [dz] and unvoiced [ts], which the letter *z* can express in the Italian writing system.

Homiletical interpretations of names of three stations of the Exodus in the verse “And from Mattanah to Nahaliel, and from Nahaliel to Bamoth”, namely: “And from Mattanah [lit. ‘Gift’, interpreted as ‘Giving (of the Law)’] to Nahaliel [interpreted as ‘G-d is my heritage’ or ‘G-d gave me as heritage (the Law)’], and from Nahaliel to Bamoth [‘High Places’]” (*Numbers* 21:19), are found in the early rabbinic literature in the *Maxims of the Fathers* (i.e., *Avot*) 6:2, and in the *Babylonian Talmud* at ‘*Eruvin* 54a.²

That Hebrew headword, the neologism נַחְלִי'אֵלִי הַמַּצְוִי *nakhali'eli hammatsúy*, was followed by three transcribed German names in a parenthesis, the second of which is אַקְקֶרמַאנְנֶכֶן <q'q'rm'nkn> *Ackermännchen*. After indicating the scientific name *M. alba*, Abramowitsch begins the text of the entry by explaining (our translation):

The name of this bird, like the name of the other congeneric birds [literally: ‘like the name of the remaining conspecific ones’], is because it is its habit to reside in the proximity of water streams (נַחְלֵי מַיִם *nakhalei máyim*), and it is also called הָאֵקָר *ha'ikkár*, because it pecks (literally: ‘collects’) after the peasant (הָאֵקָר *ha'ikkár*) in the field, when he ploughs and digs his ground.

שם העוף הזה, כשם יתר בעלי מינו, הוא מפני שדרכו לשכון אצל
נחלי מים, ונקרא גם-כן הָאֵקָר, מאשר ילקט אחרי הָאֵקָר בשדה, בעת
יחרוש וישדד אדמתו.

Abramowitsch (1866) had begun p. 132 by stating:

² In the so-called Soncino edition of the *Babylonian Talmud* in English translation (edited by Isidore Epstein, 1935–1948), that talmudic passage is translated as follows (our brackets):

R. [=Rabbi] Mattana expounded: What is the purport of the Scriptural text: And from the wilderness to Mattanah? [(Numbers 21:18)] If a man allows himself to be treated as a wilderness on which everybody treads, his study will be retained by him, otherwise it will not. [Note of the translator: Mattanah, מַטָּנָה ‘gift’ from rt. [–root] נָתַן ‘to give’. The Torah [=Law] will be given to him as a gift and he will never forget it.]

R. Joseph had a grievance against Raba son of R. Joseph b. [ben = son of] Hama. When the eve of the Day of Atonement approached the latter thought, ‘I shall go and pacify him’ – Proceeding to R. Joseph’s house he found his attendant engaged in mixing for him a cup of wine. [Translator’s note: On account of its strength their wine had to be diluted in a certain proportion of water before it could be served.] ‘Give it to me’, Raba [Translator’s note: Who was an expert in the art of mixing.] said to him, ‘and I will mix it’. He gave it to him and the latter duly mixed it. As he [R. Joseph] tasted it, he remarked: ‘This mixing is like that of Raba son of R. Joseph b. Hama.’ [Translator’s note: R. Joseph who was blind and unaware of Raba’s presence.] ‘I am here’ the other answered. ‘Do not sit down upon your legs’, [Translator’s note: The Eastern custom of sitting with legs folded under the body.] R. Joseph said to him, ‘before you have explained to me these verses. What is the purport of the Scriptural text: And from the wilderness to Mattanah, and from Mattanah to Nahaliel, and from Nahaliel to Bamoth, and from Bamoth to the valley?’ [(Numbers 21:18ff)] – ‘If’, the other replied: ‘a man allows himself to be treated as the wilderness upon which everybody treads, the Torah will be given to him as a gift; and so soon as it is given to him as a gift, he will be the inheritance of God [Translator’s note: Nahaliel נַחְלִי'אֵל is read as נַחְלָלוֹ אֵל Our own remark: *Naḥaló Él* ‘the L-rd gave him as heritage’] as it says: And from Mattanah to Nahaliel; and as soon as he is the inheritance of God, he rises to greatness, since it says: And from Nahaliel to Bamoth. [Translator’s note: Bamoth בְּמוֹת signifying ‘heights’.] But if he is haughty, the Holy One, blessed be He, humbles him, as it says: And from Bamoth to the valley. [Translator’s note: Symbolic of a humble position.] If, however, he repents, the Holy One, blessed be He, raises him, as it says: Every valley shall be lifted up. [(Isaiah 40:4)]

This category will take care of the *nakhali'elim* **הַנְּחָלִי'אִלִּים** (*Bachstelzen*).³ With their tall legs they run quickly, and their long tail is always wagged in this and that direction.

הַמַּחֲלָקָה הַזֹּאת תַּכְלֹכַל בְּתוֹכָהּ אֶת הַנְּחָלִי'אִלִּים (בַּאֲכַשְׁטַעֲלִצֵּעַן)
בִּרְגִלֵיהֶם הַגְּבוּהוֹת הֵם מְמַהֲרִים לְרוּץ וְזִנְבָם הָאָרוּךְ מִתְנוּעָע תָּמִיד כֹּה וְכֹה

This wording **... מִתְנוּעָע וְזִנְבָם** “and their tail [...] moves” makes it clear why Abramowitsch (1866: 144) named the genus *Motacilla* in Hebrew by the compound **זִנְב־נוֹעַ** *znav-nóa'* (literally ‘tail of’ + ‘moving’).

3. Abramowitsch's (1866) neologism for the waterfowl genus *Mergus*: A biblical toponym, and metathesis

Of the three species found in nature in Europe, of the waterfowl genus *Mergus*⁴ (Jørgensen 1958: 20, §§104–106), *M. merganser* “is a large duck, of rivers and lakes of

³ In present-day German, *gelbe Bachstelze* is a synonym of the standard *Schafstelze*, whereas *graue Bachstelze* is a synonym of the standard *Gebirgstelze*, and *weiße Bachstelze* is a synonym of *Bachstelze*, period (Jørgensen 1958: 132). The subspecies *Motacilla alba alba* (the White Wagtail) is called *Bachstelze* in standard German, whereas it is the ‘European wagtail’ *Konipas bílý evropský* in Czech; cf. French *lavandière grise* and Italian *ballerina* (Jørgensen 1958: 86, §503).

The subspecies *Motacilla alba yarrellii* (the Pied Wagtail) is called *Trauerbachstelze* in standard German, whereas it is the ‘English wagtail’ *Konipas bílý anglický* in Czech; cf. French *bergeronnette de yarrell* and Italian *ballerina nera* (Jørgensen 1958: 86, §504). The species *Motacilla cinerea* is called *grey wagtail* in English, *Gebirgstelze* in standard German, *bergeronnette des ruisseaux* in French (cf. Abramowitsch's semantic motivation of **נְחָלִי'אִלִּי** *nakhali'eli* from waterstreams!), and *ballerina gialla* in Italian, which describes this species as being yellow (Jørgensen 1958: 87, §505).

The subspecies *Motacilla flava flava* is called *blue-headed wagtail* in British English, *yellow wagtail* in North American English, *Schafstelze* in standard German, *bergeronnette printanière* in French (by motivation from springtime), and in Italian *cutrettola gialla* (with motivation from the yellow body), whereas the Spanish name is *lavandera boyera alemana* (Jørgensen 1958: 86, §506).

The subspecies *Motacilla flava flavissima* is called *yellow wagtail* in British English, *Englische Schafstelze* in standard German, *bergeronnette flavéole* in French, *cutrettola testagialla* in Italian (by motivation from the yellow head), whereas the Spanish name is *lavandera boyera inglesa* (Jørgensen 1958: 86, §507).

The subspecies *Motacilla flava thunbergi* is called *grey-headed wagtail* in English, *Nordische Schafstelze* in standard German, *bergeronnette nordique* in French, *lavandera boyera escandinava* in Spanish, and in Italian *cutrettola caposcuuro* by motivation from its dark head (Jørgensen 1958: 86, §508).

The subspecies *Motacilla flava feldegg* is known as *black-headed wagtail* in English, *Maskenstelze* in German, *bergeronnette à tête noire* in French, *cutrettola capinera* in Italian, and *lavandera boyera balcánica* in Spanish (Jørgensen 1958: 86, §509).

The species *Motacilla citreola* is known as *yellow-headed wagtail* in English, *Zitronstelze* in German, *bergeronnette citrine* in French, *cutrettola testagialla orientale* in Italian, and *lavandera cetrina* in Spanish (Jørgensen 1958: 86, §510).

⁴ The genus *Mergus* belongs to the subfamily *Merginae* within the family *Anatidae* of the order *Anseriformes*.

forested areas of Europe, northern and central Asia, and North America. It eats fish and nests in holes in trees.”⁵ It is known in British English by the name *goosander* (but *merganser* or *common merganser* in North American English),⁶ *M. serrator* by the name *red-breasted merganser* (a name in use in both Britain and North America), and *M. albellus* by the English name *smew*.

In Israeli Hebrew, the red-breasted merganser is called מֶרְגוֹן בֵּינוֹנִי *mergón benoní* (literally, ‘middle merganser’), whereas the smew is called מֶרְגוֹן גַּמָּד *mergón gammád* (literally, ‘dwarf merganser’) and the goosander is called מֶרְגוֹן גָּדוֹל *mergón gadól* (literally, ‘large merganser’). *Mergus merganser* is shown in Figure 1.

Among European national languages, it is in Italian that the vernacular name most closely resembles the scientific name: in fact, whereas *Mergus albellus* is called *pesciola* (from its association with fish being its prey), *M. merganser* is known as *smargo maggiore*, and *M. serrator* as *smargo minore*.

Abramowitsch revives many obsolete biblical words, for example proposing the phonetic matching מִגְרוֹן *migrón* (Abramowitsch 1866: 413), as a Hebrew replacement for *Mergus* ‘diver (a kind of a water-fowl)’⁷ and thus revitalising the toponym Biblical Hebrew מִגְרוֹן [*mig’ron*], which appears in *Isaiah* 10:28.

Migrón מִגְרוֹן is a near-metathesis of *Mergus*. Moreover, it appears to adopt a procedure common in loanwords adopted in the Land of Israel into late Tannaic Hebrew (as

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_Merganser In further detail (*ibid.*):

It is 58–72 cm (23–28 in) long with a 78–97 cm (31–38 in) wingspan, and a weight of 0.9–2.1 kg (2.0–4.6 lb); males average slightly larger than females but with some overlap. Like other species in the genus *Mergus*, it has a crest of longer head feathers, but these usually lie smoothly rounded behind the head, not normally forming an erect crest. Adult males in breeding plumage are easily distinguished, the body white with a variable salmon-pink tinge, the head black with an iridescent green gloss, the rump and tail grey, and the wings largely white on the inner half, black on the outer half. Females, and males in “eclipse” (non-breeding plumage, July to October) are largely grey, with a reddish-brown head, white chin, and white secondary feathers on the wing. Juveniles (both sexes) are similar to adult females but also show a short black-edged white stripe between the eye and bill. The bill and legs are red to brownish-red, brightest on adult males, duldest on juveniles.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_Merganser explains: “There are three subspecies, differing in only minor detail”. They are: “*M. m. merganser* Linnaeus, 1758. Throughout northern Europe and northern Asia”; “*M. m. orientalis* Gould, 1845 (syn[onym] *M. m. comatus* Salvadori, 1895). Central Asian mountains. Slightly larger than *M. m. merganser*, with a slenderer bill”; and “*M. m. americanus* Cassin, 1852. North America. Bill broader-based than in than *M. m. merganser*, and a black bar crossing the white inner wing (visible in light) on males.”

⁶ In the 19th century, “John James Audubon called this bird ‘Buff-breasted Merganser’ in his book *The Birds of America*” (this quotation is from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_Merganser). Moreover, “these fish-feeding ducks have serrated edges to their bills to help them grip their prey; they are therefore often known as ‘sawbills.’” (*ibid.*).

⁷ Concerning diving on the part of birds of the species *Mergus merganser*, consider what http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_Merganser claims: “In most places, the Common Merganser is as much a salt-water as a fresh-water frequenter. In larger streams and rivers, they float down with the stream for a couple of miles, and either fly back again or more commonly fish their way back, diving incessantly the whole way.”

occurring in the Talmud and related literature), when the source language for most lexical borrowing was Greek, but sometimes Greek was merely a conduit, and the source language was Latin. Through Greek, a Latin suffix (such as *-us* which are confronted with in the scientific bird name *Mergus*) would become the Greek suffix *-on*, which in turn was reinterpreted as the Hebrew suffix *-on*. Discussing Greek and Latin loanwords in early rabbinic literature,⁸ Daniel Sperber remarked (2006: 630, fn. 10): “Note also *-ion* (or *-in*) terminations in Latin words, instead of *-ium*”.



Figure 1. A male of goosander (*Mergus merganser*) photographed by Tony Hisgett in Sandwell, West Midlands, England, on 5 January 2011. Image in the public domain.⁹

Actually, the present-day Israeli Hebrew standard term for the genus *Mergus* is *mergón* מֶרְגוֹן – or rather מֶרְגוֹן as the Academy of the Hebrew Language is generally keen that with loanwords such as this one, the dot inside the letter ג <g> will not be used, as this loanword should rather maintain its partial foreignness, so the full-blown rules of how to write the vowel diacritic marks as required by Hebrew grammar should not be applied. At any rate, the spelling in Dor (1965, s.v.) is מֶרְגוֹן not מֶרְגוֹן. In the 1950s, one could still find in print the compound בְּרוֹזְדָּגִים *barvaz-dagím* (literally, ‘duck of fish’) as denoting the genus *Mergus*.

⁸ Sperber (2006: 627) pointed out that “there are well over a thousand Greek words in rabbinic literature”.

⁹ At http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mergus_merganser_-_Sandwell_-_England_-_male-8.jpg Image licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license.

4. German *Olm* and the Biblical Toponym *Almon* as sources of a zoonym in Abramowitsch (1872)

German *Olm* denotes the olm or proteus (*Proteus anguinus*), and in English, by semantic calquing from southern Slavonic, there also exist the names *man-fish* or *human fish*.¹⁰ It is also called *white salamander*.¹¹

"The olm, or proteus (*Proteus anguinus*), is a blind amphibian endemic to the subterranean waters of caves of the Dinaric karst of Central and Southeastern Europe."¹² Being a blind creature¹³ living in caves, it is not easily accessible. See Figures 2 and 3.

The first written mention of the olm is in Janez Vajkard Valvasor's *The Glory of the Duchy of Carniola* (1689) as a baby dragon. Heavy rains of Slovenia would wash the olms up from their subterranean habitat, giving rise to the folklore belief that great dragons lived beneath the Earth's crust, and the olms were the undeveloped offspring of these mythical beasts. In *The Glory of the Duchy of Carniola*, Valvasor compiled the local Slovenian folk stories and pieced together the rich mythology of the creature and documented observations of the olm

¹⁰ Refer to the webpage entitled "Slovenian practice example: Human Fish (*Proteus anguinus*)", at http://camp.rrc-kp.si/praksa/proteus/index_en.htm Cf. the following: "The resemblance in color to that of white humans is the reason why the *Proteus* is called *human fish* in some languages. However, the olm's skin retains the ability to produce melanin. When exposed to light, it will gradually turn dark, and in some cases the larvae are also colored." (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olm>). "The eyes are regressed, but retain sensitivity to light. They lie deep below the dermis of the skin and are rarely visible except in some younger adults. Larvae have normal eyes, but development soon stops and they start regressing, finally atrophying after four months of development. The pineal body also has photoreceptive cells which, though regressed, retain visual pigment like the photoreceptive cells of the regressed eye. The pineal gland in *Proteus* probably possesses some control over the physiological processes. Behavioral experiments revealed that the skin itself is also sensitive to light" (*ibid.*).

¹¹ Nevertheless, there is a subspecies, defined in 1994, the Black Proteus (*Proteus anguinus parkelj*), which is dark brown, or black in color. It has a shorter head, shorter appendages, a tail shorter in proportion, electroreceptors less sensitive, and a longer body (34–35 vertebrae) than the White Proteus (*Proteus anguinus anguinus*), which only has 29–32 vertebrae. Whereas the White Proteus has regressed eyes, in the Black Proteus the eyes are: "Almost normally developed, although still small compared to other amphibians. Covered by a thin layer of transparent skin, no eyelids" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olm>).

¹² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olm> "It lives in the waters that flow underground through this extensive limestone region, including waters of the Soča river basin near Trieste, Italy, through to southern Slovenia, southwestern Croatia, and Herzegovina. The olm is the only species in the *Proteus* genus, the only European species of the Proteidae family, and the only cave-dwelling chordate found only in Europe. It is also occasionally called the 'human fish' by locals because of its skin color, similar to that of white people (translated literally from Slovene: *človeška ribica* and Croatian: *čovječja ribica*), as well as 'cave salamander' or 'white salamander.' In Slovenia, it is also known by the name *močeril*, which translates as 'the one that burrows into wetness.'" (*ibid.*).

¹³ "This animal is most notable for its adaptations to a life of complete darkness in its underground habitat. The olm's eyes are undeveloped, leaving it blind, while its other senses, particularly those of smell and hearing, are acutely developed. It also lacks any pigmentation in its skin. In contrast to most amphibians, the olm is entirely aquatic, and it eats, sleeps, and breeds underwater. It has three toes on its forelimbs, but two toes on its hind feet. It also exhibits neoteny, retaining larval characteristics like external gills into adulthood, like the American amphibians, the axolotl and the mudpuppy" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olm>).

as “Barely a span long, akin to a lizard, in short, a worm and vermin of which there are many hereabouts”.¹⁴

By error, on p. 259 in the entry corresponding to the olm¹⁵ in Vol. 3 (*Reptiles*, 1872) of Abramowitsch’s *Natural History* (1862–1872), this appears as a kind of fish¹⁶ in the form *Alm*, literally, ‘alpine pasture’.¹⁷ There is no doubt that reading *Alm* in that entry from the volume on reptiles in Abramowitsch’s *Natural History* is an error. “Alm fish” one can find in German, but it is in the context of the currently fashionably fly fishing in Austria on the river Alm.

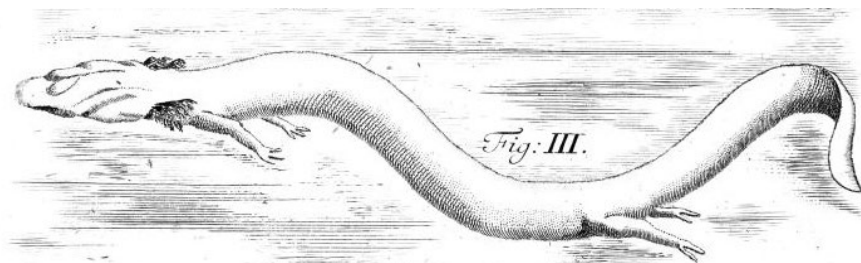


Figure 2. Sketch of an olm from p. 225 of Joseph Nicolaus Laurenti’s 1768 *Specimen Medicum, Exhibens Synopsis Reptilium Emendatam cum Experimentis circa Venena*.¹⁸

Bear in mind the spelling conventions of Yiddish: if transliterating from German, *Alm* is to be transcribed as אַלם but *Olm* is to be transcribed as אָלם (but on occasion in print, the diacritic mark for the vowel is omitted, and such omissions are indeed the norm in the transcriptions from German as found in Abramowitsch’s *Natural History*). Fischler (1991: 26) lists this word, without the vowel diacritic mark.

Also note the possibility of misreading in longhand the following:

¹⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olm>

¹⁵ That Abramowitsch took notice of the olm through his German sources arguably depends on the sustained interest in that animal during the 19th century: “The first researcher to retrieve a live olm was a physician and researcher from Idrija, G.A. Scopoli; he sent dead specimens and drawings to colleagues and collectors. Josephus Nicolaus Laurenti, though, was the first to briefly describe the olm in 1768 and give it the scientific name *Proteus anguinus*. It was not until the end of the century that Carl Franz Anton Ritter von Schreibers from the Naturhistorisches Museum of Vienna started to look into this animal’s anatomy. The specimens were sent to him by Žiga Zois. Schreibers presented his findings in 1801 to The Royal Society in London, and later also in Paris. Soon the olm started to gain wide recognition and attract significant attention, resulting in thousands of animals being sent to researchers and collectors worldwide.” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olm>).

¹⁶ Cf. the following current statement, likening the swimming movements of the olm to those of an eel: “The olm swims by eel-like twisting of its body, assisted only slightly by its poorly developed legs. It is a predatory animal, feeding on small crabs, snails and occasionally insects. It does not chew its food, instead swallowing it whole” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olm>).

¹⁷ Perhaps cf. the lexical types *cave salamander* and *white salamander* denoting the olm, and cf. German *Salamander* for the “regular” salamander, English *salamander*.

¹⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Proteus_-_Laurenti.jpg

alm for *olm* or *Alm* for *Olm* or *am* for *om*
or *alm* for *olm* or *Alm* for *Olm* or *Alm* for *Olm*.

Abramowitsch matched *Olm* phonetically with עֵלְמוֹן (Abramowitsch 1872: 259)¹⁹ – this being Hebrew *ʿal'mōn*, in the usual Israeli pronunciation *almón* – which is a biblical toponym (*Joshua* 21:18), probably identical with עֵלְמֶת *ʿl'emet* (1 *Chronicles* 6:45).

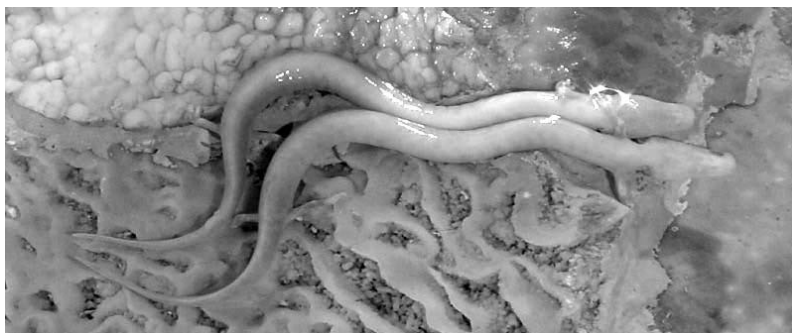


Figure 3. Two olms (*Proteus anguinus*), photographed in Postojna Cave, Slovenia,²⁰ in December 1999 by Boštjan Burger. Image in the public domain.²¹

Abramowitsch may have reckoned that whereas it would be irregular (albeit not unheard of) for a Hebrew noun in its lexematised form to end by a consonantal cluster (unlike some verbal inflected forms), thus precluding borrowing German *Alm* the way it is, adding the noun suffix *-on* would be straightforward. The existence of a proper name which is a homophone of *Alm* + *-on* made that coinage quite appealing to Abramowitsch. When he matched the biblical place-name (which he pronounced *álmōn* or *álmeín*) to the German zoonym *Olm*, clearly Abramowitsch was motivated by the sequence [ʔ...lm] found in both: the consonantal cluster [lm], and what to him was the initial glottal stop [ʔ]. The features of Hebrew nonconcatenative morphology are likely to have biased him towards disregarding the non-matching vowels.

Incidentally, consider English *alms* and German *Almosen* ‘alms’. Zuckermann (2003, Sec. 1.2.2.2) pointed out, in a list of misguided merry *étymologisants* who proposed Hebrew etymologies for terms from European languages, that as related by Avinery (1946: 135),

¹⁹ Abramowitsch probably did not think of the following, but in rabbinic Hebrew, “in ‘*olamó* (עוֹלָמוֹ) of [somebody]” means “during the lifespan of [that somebody]”. This is fitting, because olms enjoy exceptional longevity (according to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olm>): “Longevity is estimated at up to 58 years. A study published in *Biology Letters* estimated that they have a maximum lifespan of over 100 years and that the lifespan of an average adult is around 68.5 years. When compared to the longevity and body mass of other amphibians, olms are outliers, living longer than would be predicted from their size.”

²⁰ Known as *grotte di Postumia* in Italian.

²¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Proteus_anguinus_Postojnska_Jama_Slovenija.jpg

Rabbi Yitzḥak Lewinson and his disciples believed that the etymology of German *Almosen* ‘alms’ was from Hebrew מַזוֹן עַל ‘on food’ / Ḥal mazon/ (in Ashkenazic pronunciation it is uttered as *al mózein*), just as they derived German *Lieb* ‘love’ from Hebrew לֵב <lb> /lebb/ lev ‘heart’ (/libbi/ libbi ‘my heart’), and as they derived German *Orakel* ‘oracle’ from Hebrew אוֹר הַכֹּל /or ha+koll/ (or *hakkól* in Oriental Hebrew pronunciation, or *hakól* in Israeli Hebrew pronunciation), as indeed it used to be uttered in Hebrew Ashkenazic pronunciation as *oyr hákel*, i.e., ‘the light of everything’. They also claimed that the etymology of German *durch* ‘through’ is Hebrew דֶּרֶךְ *dérekḥ* ‘through’ (and as a noun, ‘road’); and so forth. As they say in Italian: *Se non è vera, è ben trovata*, “If it is untrue, it is well found (i.e., contrived, devised)”.

Nissan (2012) showed how easy it is to come up with such folk-etymologies; so much so, that one may claim Hebrew etymologies for several Japanese place names, terminology, or even Japanese short sentences from a book for teaching oneself Japanese (and *sayonara* after the order given in Hebrew to a magician who prevented Alexander the Great from marching eastwards enough as to conquer Japan); unless one playfully explains the origination of the names of some Italian cities or prefectures – or even the initial repeated word of a famous Japanese song (see below) – from Italian or its dialects (e.g., *Aomori* from *Aò, mori!* ‘Take this, die!’ in Rome’s dialect, which is what in *La Traviata* Tosca would have told Scarpia, the head of the police, when dispatching him, had she been a Roman proletarian instead of a singer).

5. Abraham’s interlocutor Ephron: Abramowitsch’s (1866) name for the Larks (*Alaudidae*)

Whereas French *alouette* is the general name for the larks, the type species being the skylark, *alouette des champs*, literally ‘lark of the fields’ (*Alauda arvensis*), in Modern Hebrew Abramowitsch (1866: 145, 427) – cf. Fischler (1990b: 20–21) – introduced for *Alaudidae* the name אֶפְרוֹנִי ‘*efroní*’ formed as a deadjectival noun through an adjective itself formed out of the personal name אֶפְרוֹן ‘*Efrón*’ for Ephron, the Hittite who sold his field with the cave of Machpelah²² to Abraham so he could bury there his wife Sarah (*Genesis* 23:10–17).

²² Literally, “the Cavern of Doubleness”. A clandestine exploration of the cave, years ago, was reported about in the Israeli information press. At the end of a first cavern, one has to crawl through a tunnel, and then a second cavern is reached, in which human remains were cumulated during centuries. This means that the corpse had to be pushed or pulled through the tunnel for the persons burying it to manage to take it to the second cavern. At any rate, what Abraham tells the Hittites appears to imply that the cavern was already in use for burial at the time he bought it.

The following is quoted from the *Babylonian Talmud*, tractate *Eruvin* 53a, in the Soncino English translation (Epstein 1935–1948, our {} braces enclosing a quotation from a note of theirs):

The cave of Machpelah. Rab and Samuel differ as to its meaning. One holds that the cave consisted of two chambers one within the other; and the other holds that it consisted of a lower and upper chamber. According to him who holds that the chambers were one above the other the term *machpelah* is well justified but according to him who holds that it consisted of two chambers one within the other, what could be the meaning of *machpelah*? That it had multiples of couples {because the root √kfl “signifies multiplication as well as doubling”}.

The reason for choosing that biblical character clearly was by interpreting his name by reference to עָפָר 'afár 'sand'.²³ This is apt because of both the habitat and the colour of the plumage.

Abramowitsch transcribed *Lerche* 'lark' from German as לערכע. As in German the skylark is called *Feldlerche* – which Abramowitsch (1866: 145) transcribed פעלדלערכע – as a semantic calque he named in Hebrew that species by the compound עֶפְרוֹנִי הַשָּׂדֶה 'efroní hasadé literally 'lark of the field'. The Academy of the Hebrew Language, according to the principle that a genus should have its own name, did not abolish עֶפְרוֹנִי הַשָּׂדֶה, but introduced as preferable the synonym זֶרַע הַשָּׂדֶה zar'it hasadé, with the name for the genus semantically motivated 'seed', the Hebrew noun for which is זֶרַע zé'ra'. Still, the Academy kept the name for the family *Alaudidae* being עֶפְרוֹנִיִּים 'efroniyyim.

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²³ Nissan instead recalls that when in the first year at primary school in Ramat-Gan his class was made to study *Genesis* and they learned about the Ephron episode (he was made to play the character Ephron at a school play consisting of the verbatim exchange between Abraham and Ephron, with the 'Hittites', i.e., the other pupils, sitting around and watching), he quipped that the name עֶפְרוֹן 'Efrón resembles עֶפְרוֹן 'iparón 'pencil'. This is because the two words are written the same, עֶפְרוֹן <'prwn>. One already had to have some grasp of either Hebrew spelling or (from speech) Hebrew nonconcatenative grammar to feel that those two words are similar. A pencil, of course, is prominent in the daily experience of pupils at primary school. Modern / Israeli Hebrew עֶפְרוֹן 'iparón 'pencil' was derived from עוֹפֶרֶת 'oféret '[the metal] lead'. Cf. German *Bleistift* 'pencil', literally 'lead point', because in the 16th century, graphite came to be mined and used for writing, and it was named 'black lead', even though graphite is unrelated to lead.

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