

“Yisrael (=Yaakov) said to Yoseph: I will soon be dead. (At some later point), Elokim will be with you and return you to your ancestral land. I have given you an extra share (sh’khem) over your brothers, which I have taken from the Amorites with my sword and bow (b’charbi uv’kashti”).)

Yaakov’s claim to have taken the land, or at least part of it, by force is historically problematic: we are given no story of any such conquest in the Torah. For this reason, a tradition that is at least Talmudic (and appears in some variants of Targum Onkelos) suggests that the “sword and bow” referred to here are metaphorical.

(A second historical problem is that Amorites are not yet the enemy in Yaakov’s time, which leads to the likely anachronistic claim that Esav was called an Amorite because he performed deeds proscribed halakhically as “the deeds of Amorites”).)

But not for this reason alone. The Mekhilta of R. Shimon bar Yochai cites a long series of prooftexts to establish that it is not the word that conquers but rather G-d, and the Talmud (Bava Basra 123a) makes the same point with one stunningly apposite citation, Psalms 44:7 “For I should not trust in my bow, and my sword will not save me”. Psalms 44 overall makes the claim that weaponry is irrelevant to military success specifically in the context of the ancient conquest.

Nonetheless, Radak and Rashbam among others presume that Yaakov is referring to the later conquest of Israel. The grammatical problem with this is fairly easily solved, and it is not far-fetched for Yaakov to refer to his descendants’ sword as his own.

A different midrashic tradition, cited by Rashi, gives Yaakov credit for taking the city of Sh’khem (note the pun) specifically by force. In this story, Yaakov disapproved of his children’s act in massacring the inhabitants of Sh’khem, but successfully intimidated the Amorites from taking revenge against them.

This midrash responds, albeit not terribly convincingly, to a question not addressed at all, at least not explicitly, by the previous exegeses, namely why Yaakov mentions his “sword and bow” specifically here. We will now digress into an analysis of the various metaphoric interpretations of that phrase, but bear in mind that this question of contextual relevance may well be the ultimate arbiter of which reading is “peshat”.

One) sword = prayer (tefillah), bow = petition.

This interpretation is also built on a pun, namely b’kashti = bakashati.

Two) sword = legally defined good deeds (mitzvot), bow = good deeds that do not fall under a specifically defined legal rubric (maasim tovim).

The elements of a and b appear in various other combinations in other midrashim, but the two above appeal to me because they fit a beautiful interpretive scheme established by Meshekh Chokhmah. Meshekh Chokhmah argues that the sword requires far less aim (kivun) than the bow. Therefore, he suggests, the former refers to formulaic public prayer, for which intent (kavanah) is inessential (after the first three blessings. The specific type of kavanah referred to is controversial.), the latter to inserted private prayer. I think his point can be extended to cover formally defined versus freeform good deeds, with the proviso that fulfilling the requirement of proper aim with regard to freeform good deeds may necessitate good judgement as well as good intent.

Seforno, and an alternate provided by Rashi, claim that the weapon is intelligence and the enemy Esav.

I note in conclusion that my friend R. Yitzchak Blau, in the current issue of **Tradition**, argues that the metaphorical interpretations of this verse are deliberately anti militaristic, and that choosing between them and Rashbam et al may therefore be an ideological as well as exegetical decision. His argument is that they are reacting to the inappropriateness of boasting about military triumphs because war is inherently distasteful. I’m not sure he’s right about the motivation of the midrashim, which may be opposing taking the credit for victory rather than deprecating the victory. The assumption that Yaakov is boasting here seems to me interesting in its own right as it highlights the question raised above, namely the contextual relevance of this statement. I have not seen any satisfying approach to that question.