

## The Etymology of Totafot

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FOR MORE THAN TWO CENTURIES, THE Hebrews lived in the region of the Nile Delta, first as invited guests of the Pharaoh and, later, as slaves. During that time, the Hebrew and the Egyptian languages borrowed words from each other. More than three hundred words and expressions that are included in the Hebrew Bible, some intact and some in modified form, have been recognized by Egyptologists as Egyptian loan-words.(1)

Some words, borrowed intact from another language, may be given an equivalent pronunciation. The Englishman speaks of Paris but the Frenchman pronounces the word as Paree. The dialect spoken in Lower Egypt differed from the way some words were pronounced in Upper Egypt, so that an Israelite living in the region of the Delta would hear a word pronounced in the Memphite dialect, which differed from that of Thebes. For example, the letter written as "p" would be pronounced as "f" in the Delta.(2)

The word "totafot" appears for the first time in the Bible in Ex. 13:16. Its pronunciation was fixed by the Massorettes (6th -- 10th Century, C.E., rabbinic scholars), who inserted diacritical points in the text for vowel sounds. Both the Hebrew and ancient Egyptian written language were consonantal; the vowels were supplied by usage.(3) The Hebrew pronunciation of an Egyptian loan-word is a key as to how that word was spoken in Egyptian.

Totafot (hereinafter "the T word") has been interpreted as frontlets because, according to the Biblical text, it was to be worn "between the eyes." It was translated as phylacteries in Greek (amulets), and as tefillin (a post-Biblical, rabbinic word which connotes an aid in prayer). The etymology of the T word "is not clear," according to Cassuto;(4) it is regarded as an Egyptian loan-word according to Yahuda,(5) who offers no evidence to support that suggestion. Budge(6) states that no one seems to know the meaning of the word. Speiser says that, of the various etymologies that are proposed, none has been found satisfactory, but he makes the suggestion, which even he regards as "theoretical and speculative," that the origin of the T word will be found in Sumerian or Akkadian. He concludes that the word can never be altogether divested of mystery.(7)

Thus far, scholars have not been looking in the area from which a likely answer might be expected. All directional signs point to the Book of Exodus and to the impact of the culture and religion of Egypt on the Israelites.(8)

The T word is a coined word which had no prior existence before it appeared in Exodus. It is a dual-formed word known to grammarians as a reduplication -- where the sound of the first syllable is duplicated in the corresponding syllable of the added word. An example in English would be "hocus-pocus." The T word is Hebrew but the background is Egyptian. It would have been recognized at, or about, the time of the Exodus by

anyone familiar with both languages and with the religion and gods of Lower Egypt. The two elements of the T word are Thoth and Ptah, the names of the primary gods in the Memphis cosmogony. Thoth was sounded without change, whether written in Hebrew or in Egyptian.

In the last line and elsewhere in the Hieroglyphic section of the Rosetta Stone (in the British Museum), one can observe a square, a semi-circle, and a twisted rope -- a combination which expresses the name of a god whose name appears in Greek letters having the sound of Phot, in the Greek section of the text.

There is no sure way of knowing exactly how the vowel sound in Ptah was pronounced in Egypt, but the long O sound of the Hebraicized word is, doubtless, the way an Israelite in Goshen would have recognized it as the name of the chief god of Memphis. Moreover, in writing the word Ptah in Hebrew in its position in the T word, the rules of Hebrew grammar (as well as the Memphis dialect) would substitute the sound of f for the letter p. See Gen. 41:44, where the word "Pharaoh" appears twice, once with the dot in the first Hebrew letter for the hard sound of p and, again, without the dot, giving the first letter the sound of f.

Ptah (Phot) was regarded by Egyptians as the creator of the world: all the other lesser gods, including Thoth, were products of his divine will. Thoth was the god of learning and wisdom: he invented writing -- the "words of god." He was the scribe of the gods and the judge of right and wrong in the afterlife.(9)

In ancient Egypt, the practices of medicine and of magic were closely related. Healing often called for incantations, such as the spell for exorcising migraine. That incantation ends with:

I will make for you the magic amulet of the gods, their names being pronounced on this day inscribed on fine linen and placed on the forehead of the man.(10)

In Ex. 8:15, the Pharaoh's magicians could not duplicate the plague of lice, an act of creation. They declared that the plague was "the finger of God" and, therefore, beyond their power. The word ezba (finger) is an Egyptian loan-word, and the expression is Egyptian. The phrase "finger of Thoth" was current in magical texts. The next use in the Bible of the phrase, "finger of God," is at Ex. 31:18, where the tables of stone that were received by Moses on Mount Sinai are said to have been written "with the finger of God." The T word reflects both aspects of the Divine finger: the power of creation and the attributes of lawgiver and scribe. Ultimately, the Israelites came to regard the T word not merely as a figurative expression, but as an object having prophylactic properties. Had not God assured them that, if they kept His commandments, "I will put none of the diseases upon you which I put upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord who healeth thee?"(11) (Ex. 15:26). The same assurance was repeated about forty years later to a generation which had not participated in the Exodus. There was no longer any need to resort to the gods of Egypt for healing. Thenceforth, the object referred to by the T word

would supplant the spells and incantations. The Hebrews could rely exclusively on the one God of Israel.

The God of the Hebrews had fulfilled His prediction that He would execute judgment on those gods. (Ex. 15:16; Num. 33:4). He had humiliated them by the plagues, and showed that they were powerless at the Red Sea. The compound T word presented the ultimate indignity to the chief god, Ptah; it relegated him, the so-called creator of all things, including the lesser gods, to second place, following the name of his scribe, Thoth.

Like Humpty-Dumpty, the gods named in the T word had a great fall from which all of Pharaoh's horses and men could not rehabilitate them. As the Israelites emerged from the Red Sea and passed through Shur (wall:Egypt.), they carried with them the ironic T word by which the two primary gods of Memphis became, willy- nilly, an eternal symbol certifying to the supreme power and trueness of the God of Israel, and serving as a memorial of the Exodus.(12)

Although the theory of this paper seems attractive in the light of the given data, we should await the judgment of Egyptologists and experts in linguistics. Perhaps it may be found that the speculative stage in understanding the etymology of totafot has ended.(13)

#### NOTES

1. A.S. Yahuda, *The Language of the Pentateuch in its Relation to Egyptian* (London, 1933); T.O. Lamden, "Egyptian Loan Words in the Old Testament," *JAOS* (Journal of the American Oriental Society), vol. 73 (1953): 145-155.
2. H. Tattam, *The Grammar of the Egyptian Language* (London, 1963), pp. 106-108.
3. E.H. Hinks, *On the Numbers, Names, and Powers of the Letters of the Hieroglyphic Alphabet* (Royal Irish Academy, 1844), pp. 167-69.
4. U. Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Engl.ed.) (Jerusalem, 1967).
5. Cf. Yahuda, *Op. cit.*, p. 99, n.1.
6. Sir E.A. Wallis Budge, *Amulets and Superstitions* (London, 1930), p. 12.
7. E.A. Speiser, "TWTPT," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 48 (1957-58): 208-217.
8. The profound and pervasive Egyptian influence on the Hebrew Bible reached beyond the Pentateuch. Consider the connection between Proverbs 22:17 and 24:34 with the Teaching of Amem-em-ope (J.E. McFayden, "The Language of the Pentateuch in its Relation to Egyptian," *Expository Times*, vol. 41 |1929-1930~: 54-58).

9. Sir. E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead-Papyrus of Ani* (London, 1913), pp. 169-70 and 183-4; J. Kaster, *Wings of the Falcon* (N.Y., 1968), pp. 28, 103; and H. Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (N.Y., 1948), p. 71.

10. In ancient Egypt, the worshipper, or patient, wore a pectoral or headband inscribed with the name of the god that was being invoked (A.W. Shorter, *The Egyptian Gods* [London, 1937~, pp. 59, 74).

11. A.S. Yahuda, *The Accuracy of the Bible* (London, 1934).

12. In its few appearances in the Pentateuch, the T word is prefixed with the comparative preposition lamed, which should be taken as a reference to the Egyptian magical amulet (like a totafot), in the absence of any comparable Israelite religious artifact. For an example of a comparative lamed, see Ex. 4:16: "... you |Moses~ shall be to him |Aaron~ as a god." It seems probable that some visible object was worn by the Israelites as a literal observance of the commandment. See note 10.

13. We may not assume that the phylacteries in use today are precisely the same as their earliest form. Indeed, portions of several phylacteries found in Qumran (Dead Sea area) and dated earlier than the 2nd Century of the Common Era show variations in the writings that are included.

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